Research Report

Texas Innovation Schools:

A Pathway to Success for Autonomous Schools in Texas

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I. Introduction: The "Shared Learning" Model of Autonomous Schools

Texas policymakers are faced with a conundrum: how to ensure accountability for student outcomes while at the same time creating the conditions to allow the state's public schools to innovate to 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.

Decades ago, in his classic study of why American high schools fail, respected education scholar Ted Sizer documented the following phenomenon: If you run a school like an old-fashioned factory, where the principal, teachers and students are hemmed in an on all sides by dozens of rigid one-size-fits-all rules and structures, "You will get uneven goods."[1]

This is currently the case with Texas' public schools. Although many of its schools and districts achieve impressive results, the state's low-income students and English language learners are not performing well.[2] 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.[3] Texas students are making less progress than their counterparts in the nation's other large states,

including California, Florida, Massachusetts and New York.[4] The state lags in international comparisons of school systems' competitiveness in the modern economy and was outperformed in math by 21—and in reading by 16—of the 65 developed and developing nations that participated in a recent international study.[5]

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.[6]

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:[7]

1. **Autonomy:** School leaders have extensive freedom over budgeting, staffing, curriculum and scheduling.
2. **Accountability:** Student results are transparent to educators, parents and the public alike and motivate action to improve student learning.
3. **Active Learning and Support:** Educators receive structured support in using their autonomies to innovate. They also receive the guidance they need to actively react to rich information about which innovations work for which children to improve the success of *all* children.

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.[8] 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.

Relying on the available research, this report points the way toward a different path forward for Texas public education: a statewide embrace of Shared Learning in which autonomous, accountable and actively enabled educators collaboratively innovate and then assess and adjust their results to achieve sustained improvements in student learning.

The report's analysis of Shared Learning is divided into the following sections:

- Section I provides an introduction to the report and the three concepts behind the Shared Learning model.
- Section II lays out the overarching logic that unifies different combinations of school-level autonomy, accountability and active data-rich learning that states, districts and schools elsewhere in the U.S. and Canada have used to generate and sustain improved student outcomes, and provides a guide for the state of Texas and its districts and schools to use in selecting among available approaches to autonomy, accountability and active learning.

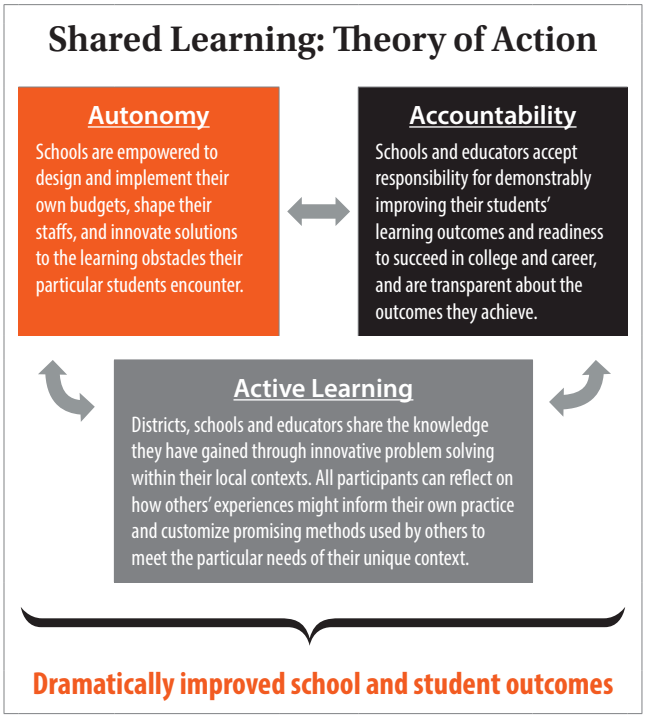
- Section III turns next to a detailed review of school systems that appear to be succeeding, describes the particular combination of autonomy, accountability and active learning and support that each system uses and highlights evidence that these forms of Shared Learning are improving student results.
- Section IV offers recommendations for how the state, school districts and schools can craft and implement comprehensive and effective Shared Learning strategies of their own.

II. The Crucial Role of Robust Autonomy, Accountability and Active Learning in Systematic Improvement of Schools

As an alternative to centralized, bureaucratic control of education, school districts across the U.S. have implemented various strategies for shifting decision-making to entities closer to students—including to parents, communities and schools. It turns out, however, that not all efforts to replace central mandates with local control are effective. Some forms of autonomy are not effective at all, and others enhance achievement only for some students while failing to sustain improved learning for many others, particularly poor and minority children.

Two simple lessons emerge from a comparison of successful and unsuccessful forms of school autonomy. First, autonomy at the school level must be robust and must extend to the most high-leverage activities in which schools engage, including budgeting, staffing, curriculum and scheduling. Second, while freedom from oppressive mandates is an important precondition for rapid improvement of student achievement, it alone is insufficient to improve outcomes consistently and equally across all students and schools. As the diagram illustrates, in order for autonomy to succeed, it requires two additional elements. One is *active learning and support*—tools and training to facilitate the effective exercise of school and educator autonomy and to promote data-driven planning, strategic innovation and collaborative analysis of results to improve schools.[9] The other is effective *accountability*—ways of motivating schools and their educators to embrace full responsibility for the demonstrated learning growth of all of their students and to use their autonomy toward that end.

Each of the three crucial components of effective Shared Learning approaches to autonomy is discussed below. The discussion draws heavily on existing research and on actions by several model states and school districts, which—as is described in detail in Part III of this report—have well-developed systems of autonomy that have generated promising results.



Autonomy: the "Four Freedoms"

When adopting a Shared Learning strategy, states and districts must first identify the areas in which schools should receive autonomy. For example, before vastly increasing the autonomy of its schools, the New York City Department of Education conducted a systematic analysis of district rules and regulations, directives and other policies to identify the many ways the district had impinged upon school flexibility in the past and steps that could be taken to remove or loosen those constraints.[10] Professor William Ouchi's study of the impact of autonomy in over 400 schools

in eight U.S. districts provides guidance on the areas over which flexibility is most important. Ouchi found that schools were most successful when they had the "Four Freedoms": autonomy over budgeting, staffing, curriculum and scheduling.[11] 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.[12]

Budget

Freedom over budgeting typically means that principals have discretion over at least a majority of their budget dollars. In New York, for example, schools empowered by the Children First initiative gained direct control over 85% of their budget, while pre-Children First schools had discretion over only 6.1%.[13] Similarly, Boston Pilot Schools control at least 75% of their budget, compared to the 27.8% controlled by traditional public schools.[14]

Areas Where Waivers Are Available						
State-Level Strategies	**Budgeting**	**Staffing**	**Curriculum**	**Scheduling**	**Professional Development**	**Promotion/ Graduation Requirements**
Colorado	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kentucky	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Massachusetts	✓	CBA*	✓	✓	✓	
Minnesota	✓	CBA*	✓	✓		
Ontario	✓	CBA*	✓			
Tennessee	✓	✓	✓	✓		
District-Level Strategies	**Budgeting**	**Staffing**	**Curriculum**	**Scheduling**	**Professional Development**	**Promotion/ Graduation Requirements**
Boston	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Denver	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
New York City	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Memphis	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Oakland	✓	CBA*	✓			

* *"CBA" refers to areas where autonomy was granted subject to the rules of an existing Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA). In some cases, state legislation gave state officials authority to grant districts or schools waivers from existing CBAs without having to renegotiate them.*

As the table above illustrates, the states and districts that provide the most promising autonomy models almost all grant schools flexibility over their budgets, staffing and curriculum and some extend flexibility to scheduling, professional development, and graduation and promotion policies.

School leaders who obtain budget control often receive this money through a budgeting formula tied to the number of students in each school, while giving a higher weight to students in some categories (for example, special education and English learners) that present more substantial instructional challenges.[15] Such formulas are meant to reduce inequities in funding and provide more flexibility with budget dollars than an approach tied, for

example, to staff positions or other inputs rather than to the needs of the children themselves. Often, school leaders are permitted to use this money to purchase central office services at their own discretion or to comparison shop for other providers.[16]

Notably, while many of these sites provide greater budgetary autonomy to schools over curriculum and instruction, some manage certain operational purchasing decisions in-house, because they believe central processing in this area is more efficient. In Boston, for example, Pilot Schools are not given a budgetary allocation for transportation or custodial services; these are provided and paid for centrally by the district.[17]

Staffing

Freedom over personnel decisions is granted by all of the model states and districts, with the extent of these freedoms often depending on the availability of waivers to the collective bargaining agreement.

In Colorado, for instance, Innovation Schools are encouraged to apply for state waivers from district policy and provisions of the collective bargaining agreement, so they can hire staff that align with their culture and mission and remove staff members who are not a good match. They can also apply for waivers that allow them to manage teacher evaluation and compensation, as long as they receive the approval of at least 60% of teachers and administrators in their school.[18]

Boston similarly provides full authority to Pilot Schools to hire and release teachers and staff and determine the composition of staff and job descriptions that best meets the needs of their students. Pilot Schools are not exempt from union contract work rules, however, such as union salary and benefits.

The one restriction on personnel selection that some Shared Learning sites impose relates to teacher quality. For example, Memphis Innovation Zone schools, which are some of the lowest performing schools in the state, must hire teachers with a composite score of at least 3 out of 5 on the statewide teacher evaluation system.[19] In addition to flexibility on hiring and firing, many of the model states and districts provide flexibility over teacher capacity building efforts, based on the belief that schools are in the best position to identify and address teachers' strengths and weaknesses.

Curriculum and Instruction

Each model site also offers freedom to utilize curricula, instructional materials and pedagogical practices other than ones mandated by the state or district, and most allow schools to develop formative and interim assessments that help educators monitor student progress and intervene when necessary.*[20] The Boston Pilot School initiative additionally permits schools to design and utilize competency-based performance assessments to inform promotion and graduation decisions.[21]

Schools have used waivers around curriculum in multiple ways depending on their instructional philosophy or mission. For example, some schools utilize waivers from curriculum mandates to institute project-based curricula that incorporate field experiences, while others utilize curriculum flexibility to integrate technology into core content instruction or to expand STEM offerings.[22]

Moreover, some autonomous schools have combined curricular, scheduling and staffing flexibility to craft unique instructional programs. For example, one Boston Pilot middle school offers blocks of integrated learning — one in English and social studies and one in math and science — each taught by a single teacher.[23] Another school in New York City serving over-age, under-credited youth allows students to progress through a customized online curriculum at their own pace and assesses students based on subject mastery rather than "seat time."[24]

* *Oakland was the only city with a restriction; it required that new small schools apply for curricular autonomy after their first year.*

Importantly, however, this curricular leeway does not extend to school accountability. All model sites require schools to meet state academic standards, participate in state tests and take part in other facets of state and district accountability systems such as rewards and consequences. All of the model sites also require services to special education students in keeping with federal legal mandates.

In some state-to-district autonomy sites, such as Kentucky, districts applying for Innovation Status are permitted but not required to give schools flexibility over curriculum. In these states, districts sometimes choose to standardize some elements of their curriculum and instruction or to treat the district curriculum as a default system from which individual schools may choose to deviate for good reasons shown. Districts adopt this approach for a number of reasons: to relieve schools from the burden of developing curricular and instructional materials; to pool resources to offer high quality materials and professional development; or to respond to high rates of student mobility in the district by assuring a roughly equivalent academic experience no matter which school children attend.

Scheduling

Finally, almost all model sites give schools freedom to deviate from the state or district annual calendar and from uniform weekly, daily and class schedules in order to enhance student learning.

Boston and Colorado encourage Innovation Schools to use creative strategies such as block scheduling (fewer, but longer instructional periods during the day), lengthened school days and extended school years to increase instructional time for students and planning and learning opportunities for teachers.[25]

Kentucky's Innovation law conceptualizes scheduling flexibilities as "expanded learning opportunities" and encourages schools to innovate regarding to both the times and places for learning to occur. An example is modified "seat time" rules that enable schools to increase the time students may spend taking advantage of distance learning opportunities and engaging in experiences outside the school building.[26]

Colorado is one of the few sites where data is available on how often Innovation Schools take advantage of particular freedoms; scheduling flexibility is at the top of the list. In 2013, 92% of the state's Innovation Schools requested and obtained waivers of rules governing the calendar and use of student and teacher time.[27]

Schools used this discretion in multiple ways. For example, Denver's Grant Beacon Middle School extended its school day by five hours a week, allowing it to provide students annually with 350 more hours of instruction in math, writing and reading than traditional Colorado middle schools. That same school expanded the school year by a week to allow time for a Summer Academy for all 6th graders and underperforming 7th and 8th graders.

Other schools created blocks for small group work or to lengthen the time available for continuous instruction of students with special needs. Innovation Schools in Colorado's Falcon School District used their flexibility to add extra time for professional development, teacher collaboration and parent teacher conferences — activities that otherwise would have occurred at the expense of student instructional time.[28]

State Innovation laws, like those in Colorado and Kentucky, that grant waivers from collective bargaining agreements where necessary to achieve the Four Freedoms, tend to maximize the effectiveness of scheduling autonomy.

In sites where no such waivers are available, schools have considerably less access to scheduling flexibility. For example, New York City's performance agreement

with autonomous schools allowed summer and extended day programming, but only as long as it was consistent with applicable contracts, union agreements, and laws and regulations, which often was not the case.[29]

Steps to avoid operational and financial limits on scheduling flexibility are also recommended. For example, the flexibility granted to Boston Pilot Schools to define the length of their school day was limited by a requirement that start and end times align with one of three district bus schedules.[30] Similarly, the New York City performance agreement required schools to cover additional transportation and other costs incurred as a result of changes in a school's daily and annual school calendar.[31]

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*. In the most successful schools, participants in this process support and benefit from one another's learning through collaborative problem-solving: rigorously reflecting together on instances in which children are not learning, and determining how their own innovations and promising methods developed elsewhere may be adapted to meet local needs.

At the state or district level, active learning and support often involves creating data systems to provide teachers with confidential, up-to-the-minute information on their students, or giving teachers ready, well-indexed access to promising practices developed elsewhere. Educational support centers may create protocols for selecting and qualitatively evaluating leaders based on their disposition and readiness to lead strategic change; train and facilitate collaborative educator teams at the grade or department level to improve curricular or instructional methods; and convene district or school leaders to collaboratively tackle common challenges using rigorous techniques for collaborative innovation.

Participants in the active learning process support and benefit from one another's learning through collaborative problem-solving.

An example of a system that coordinates active learning efforts at the state, district and campus levels is the Education Ministry for Ontario, Canada, whose students outperform those in other Canadian provinces and score at the top of international comparisons. Ontario's central ministry in 2003 created a Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) to support academic improvement at the district and elementary school level. The Secretariat is divided into seven regional teams staffed with experienced educators who provide differentiated support to district school boards and schools. Among other things, LNS has supported the creation of teacher teams within schools that evaluate data together and innovate solutions for learning gaps within their student bodies.[32]

"The only way to develop a shared mindset is through purposeful and continuous interaction and learning over a period of time."

— Michael Fullan, *University of Toronto*

Districts additionally may support active learning by organizing schools into networks. In New York City, for example, schools self-select into non-geographic networks, facilitated by staff trained to support schools in using their autonomy to improve. These networks provide instructional and operational support and promote the exchange of learning and effective practices between schools.[33] In Boston, autonomous Pilot Schools receive coaching, professional development services and research and evaluation supports from the non-profit Center for Collaborative Education (CCE). The CCE also organizes Pilot Schools into networks that meet to engage in study groups and leadership retreats.[34]

Active learning also occurs at the school level in both Ontario and New York City. There, most or all schools operate multiple "inquiry teams" of educators who are trained and regularly engage in a collaborative, data-driven process to identify instructional practices that are failing some children. Once these practices are identified, inquiry teams design and implement new strategies and then evaluate and revise the strategies as indicated by the data.[35]

Texas school districts are also 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.[36]
- **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.[37]
- **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.[38]
- **Waco ISD:** Curriculum experts at Waco's central office catalogue and share exemplary teacher lesson plans on the district's online system as a resource for struggling schools and teachers. The district also encourages collaboration across schools with a weekly meeting of all principals.[39]

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.

Accountability for student outcomes is a common feature of school systems in the United States today. In the context of systems of autonomous schools, however, accountability takes on increased importance and requires different forms.

The main use of accountability in these systems is not to dole out rewards and consequences but to motivate and coordinate innovations by empowered actors based on the known needs of students. Accountability also helps these actors diagnose why particular innovations work for some children and not for others, and how to improve their effectiveness.

Given these multiple goals of accountability, it is not surprising that Shared Learning states and districts prefer multiple measures of success. Some of these measures focus on outcomes such as proficiency levels on tests and graduation rates (sometimes called "lagging indicators"), while others focus on evidence of intermediate conditions that are known to be conducive to improved outcomes, such as strong school-level strategic planning, teacher leadership, parent involvement and student engagement (sometimes called "leading indicators").

For example, some Shared Learning districts supplement rating systems based on test scores and graduation rates with qualitative reviews of school campuses and data from parent and student surveys. Individual schools may choose to set targets for students above what is required by the state or to focus, as well, on measures of the kinds of academic and personal behaviors—for example, executive functioning, persistence and goal orientation—that are often prerequisites for improved scores, graduation rates and success in college.

In Texas, too, several school districts have developed their own evaluation and accountability systems to supplement the state system and more effectively motivate teachers to excel, encourage collaboration and serve as a practical tool to improve student and teacher learning and growth. Daniel Gohl, chief academic officer for the Houston Independent School District, described the goal of these diagnostic systems as "providing students and teachers the information in timely fashion to make decisions about when the student is on the right path and when something needs to change."[40]

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.

State, district and even school-level central offices must work hard to ensure that their actions and policies do not unnecessarily encumber school leaders' and educators' autonomy.

Freedom and Responsibility for Campus Leaders

Leaders of the model districts and states reviewed later in this paper emphasize two critical reasons why flexibility over budget, staffing, instruction and scheduling are important. First, such flexibilities attract a stronger pool of leaders who embrace responsibility for whether their schools succeed in return for control over how their schools succeed. Strong leaders are likely to have little interest in implementing someone else's generic and ill-suited strategy for success or in navigating around bureaucratic state and district red tape. By like token, states and districts have little justification for holding school leaders accountable for student outcomes unless they provide those leaders with control over the crucial budgetary, personnel, time and instructional levers that determine success.

Flexibilities attract a stronger pool of leaders who embrace responsibility for the control they have over how their schools succeed.

Both state and district leaders emphasize their obligation to determine an appropriate balance of local responsibility and operational flexibility with state- and district-level accountability measures and active learning support. Each of the model systems has struck this balance in a different way depending on its particular goals and local context.

Role of Central Office in Supporting Effective Use of Autonomy

The people providing central support must make the transition from "supervisor" to "facilitator"—from people granted authority to order others around to professionals whose authority must be earned every day by demonstrating the extent to which they help other educators enhance their own and their students' learning. Such facilitation focuses on the effective use of curricular, budgetary and operational autonomy; professional-to-professional reinforcement of the responsibility for student outcomes that underlies accountability systems; and active, collaborative learning. Put simply, central offices' primary purpose must change from monitoring compliance with mandates and policies to supporting autonomous schools in the effective use of their powers.

Central Office as Facilitator
Tennessee: In Tennessee, districts hosting autonomous turnaround schools are required by state law to create service-oriented units that support the needs of clusters of schools by, for example, assisting schools in engaging in strategic planning and implementing interventions.
Boston: In Boston, the district budget office created a "Fiscal Autonomy Committee," through which the central office and autonomous schools collaborated to remove budgetary obstacles to schools' use of autonomy. This committee decided to implement plans that increased schools' spending flexiblity and allowed schools to opt out of some district services using the funds saved from those services as they saw fit.
New York: In New York City, the central district office simplified procurement procedures and exempted leaders of autonomous schools from select reporting requirements and the need for pre-approval of the purchase of instructional materials.

III. Examples of Shared Learning in Action — Options for Its Use in Texas

This section examines several states and districts that have recently combined autonomy, accountability and shared learning into effective Shared Learning strategies. The examples given here are by no means exhaustive;* many other states and localities are implementing systems along the same lines. Study sites were selected for one or both of two reasons. First, there is promising evidence that the study site has significantly accelerated student learning as indicated by gains in test scores or high school graduation rates. Second, the study site exemplifies a different, thoughtful combination of the three components of Shared Learning so that, together, the examples provide a diverse menu of options for the state of Texas and its districts to consider. The evidence base for the statewide autonomy strategies is less well developed than for the district strategies because the former have been adopted more recently than the latter. **Appendix A** provides a summary of each of the sites discussed and the supporting evidence. **Appendix B** provides an outline of the components of state- and district-level strategies.

State-level Strategies

Several states across the country recently adopted legislation supporting Shared Learning strategies, on the belief states should free districts or schools from regulations, policies and administrative burdens inhibiting their ability to serve students. Such legislation spells out the mechanisms through which states, districts and schools can obtain autonomy and in some cases details the types of autonomies schools will receive. An examination of this legislation reveals states have taken at least four separate, although potentially overlapping, approaches.

State-to-school Autonomy

One state-level model, adopted by Colorado and Massachusetts, provides autonomy to *selected schools or groups of schools* with common affiliations, missions or geographic regions who *apply* for "Innovation" status. That designation grants the schools flexibility as to both state and district mandates.** In order to gain the Innovation designation, schools must develop a plan that describes the waivers they are requesting and how new flexibilities will be used to promote school-level improvement. At least a majority of the staff in a school as well as the relevant district (or a district committee) must approve the plan and, in Colorado, only the State Board of Education can grant ultimate authorization of waivers from state requirements. Innovation Status is authorized for a period of three years or more, after which Innovation Status may be revoked if innovation plans have not been well implemented or successful.

This strategy rests on the belief that the school is the critical unit of change, so improvement strategies must emerge at the school level. It also builds on the understanding that schools will inherently benefit from and take more ownership of a set of flexibilities they have requested and carefully planned for based on their particular needs and capacity. In addition, providing autonomy to a small set of schools that apply, and limiting the number of schools that will be accepted, allows states to manage the process of change effectively and build structures of support and accountability that deliberately use feedback on implementation and results to achieve success. This strategy also allows the state to examine innovative practices emerging across schools and thoughtfully scale up those that are successful.

* *Study sites include Boston, Denver, Colorado, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, Oakland, Ontario, and Tennessee.*
** *Districts can also apply for Innovation Status but none have taken advantage of this option.*

One potential drawback to this approach is that, although the state-to-school strategy requires schools to think deeply about how they will use Innovation Status, it does not require districts to take a strategic and thoughtful approach to how they will support this effort, including by providing the necessary accountability and facilitative structures enhancing the chances of success. As a result, there may be considerable differences in how districts in these states approach their interactions with Innovation Schools.

Colorado, for example, offers a number of different pathways to Innovation status: an individual campus can seek designation as an Innovation School; a group of campuses can seek designation as an Innovation School Zone either at their own initiative or that of the district; or a district can seek District of Innovation status once it has approved Innovation Schools or an Innovation School Zone.[41]

In a number of Colorado districts, only three schools or fewer applied for Innovation Status, and the district itself evidently has no deliberate Shared Learning strategy for transforming and supporting the exercise of autonomy, much less for using the strategy to improve a critical mass of local schools.

Colorado *Innovation Schools (2008-)*

- New or existing schools or groups of schools sharing common interests may apply to the state for Innovation Status.
- Applicants must describe the type of autonomy they are seeking and document support from at least half of their staff.
- State grants approval and reviews status every three years.
- There are 45 Innovation Schools statewide in 2013-14, most in the Denver district.

In contrast, Denver has taken an active stance and embraced the state's Innovation Initiative as a strategy for promoting district-wide improvements, using it to support 26 autonomous schools in the 2013-2014 school year. Specifically, the district has issued informal guidelines spelling out the types of applications it hopes to receive from new or existing schools seeking Innovation Status. Denver encourages its lowest-performing schools to apply for Innovation Status as a means of accomplishing school-level improvement.

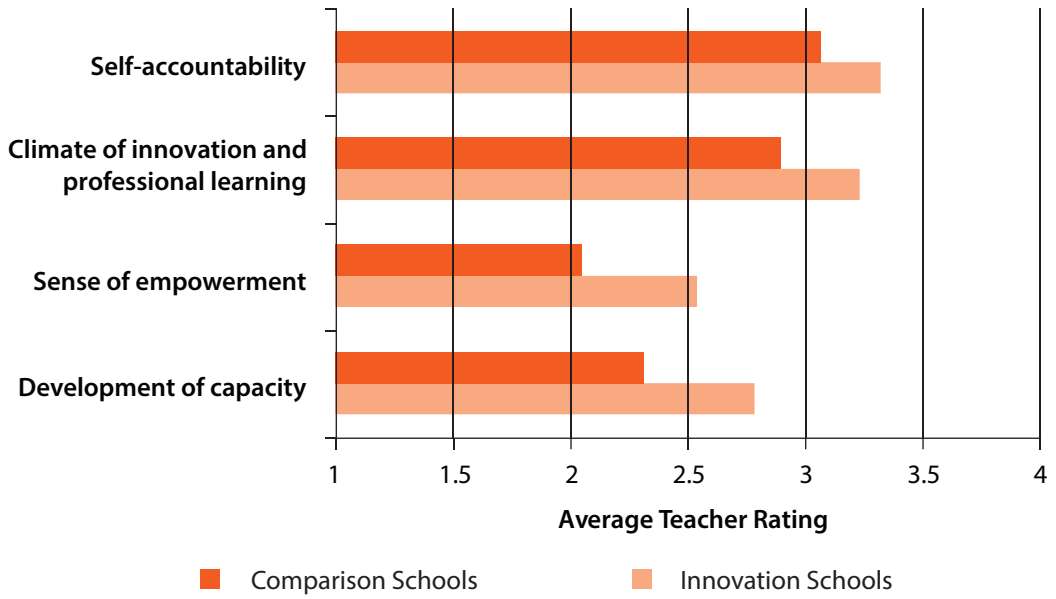
In addition, the district has taken a series of interconnected steps to support Innovation Schools. "Turnaround" Innovation Schools belong to one of two regional support networks, with four or five turnaround staff who work with district experts and outside partners to develop innovation plans, monitor progress and provide differentiated support. All other Innovation Schools are in a separate network that organizes professional development for leaders, facilitates peer-to-peer sharing of problems of practice and provides oversight and evaluation of principals.[42]

Denver also took steps to organize its central operations to support Innovation Schools' exercise of their new autonomies through the creation of an Office of School Reform and Innovation. The district also tracks Innovation Schools through its comprehensive accountability system, which uses a School Performance Framework to rate schools annually and determine rewards, interventions and school closure decisions.[43] Denver has augmented the state's grant of autonomies from statewide mandates with relief from district requirements and taken responsibility for the accountability and active learning components of a full-blown Shared Learning system.

As a result of Denver's strategic steps to use and augment Colorado's Innovation Schools initiative, the

city's Innovation Schools have seen some promising early indicators of success. Because Denver encourages turnaround schools to apply for Innovation Status, its Innovation Schools typically entered the process with school-level proficiency rates below the state average. After obtaining Innovation Status, however, the schools exhibited higher median growth in reading, writing and math scores than the state's median growth.[44]
In a 2013 report, teachers in Denver's Innovation Schools also rated themselves significantly higher than did educators in traditional Denver schools on important leading indicators of improved student results, including measures of decision-making ability, capacity, ownership, empowerment and ability to innovate.[45]

Denver Public Schools Teacher Ratings on Leading Indicators of School Performance, Innovation Schools Versus Comparison Schools (2012-13)



The graph provides results for Cohort 1 Innovation School teachers only (1=low agreement, 4 = high agreement) *

Given the evident importance of support structures beyond the school itself, states implementing a state-to-school approach should consider providing a state-managed network structure for schools. Texas, in particular, might want to take advantage of its existing regional Education Service Centers.

In addition to providing supportive networks, states might require participating schools to accept some degree of shared accountability for student outcomes. Such a strategy could provide network schools with incentives to engage in active learning efforts that benefit students across all campuses participating in the network. The state then could evaluate and, if necessary, withhold continued Innovation Status from networks in which collective results on the state's accountability system are below par.

* *Comparison Denver schools serve the same grades, have the same accountability rating, and have similar percentages of English Language Learners and students who qualify for Free and Reduced Price Lunch as Innovation Schools.*

State-to-district Autonomy

A different state-level strategy requires school districts to apply to the state for autonomy on behalf of schools the district selects for Innovation Status. In Kentucky, for example, districts applying for Innovation Status must describe what that status means for schools in their jurisdiction and the scope of autonomy from state and district-level mandates that will be offered, with a critical focus on how their initiatives will improve low-performing schools.

Minnesota has a similar state-to-district approach, but does not require the district to submit a formal application to the state. Instead, state legislation allows a school board to issue a request for site-governed school proposals. School communities then develop proposals, which must achieve approval from a majority of school staff, as well as from the district staff managing the request-for-proposal process.

The state-to-district strategy differs from the state-to-school approach in that it does not empower individual schools to define their own autonomy strategy. Instead, it requires districts to develop a district-wide plan for extending autonomy, holding schools accountable and supporting innovation.

For example, the Kentucky district application process asks districts to identify schools that will be given the option to receive specified autonomies, develop a set of concrete goals for student performance and describe how Innovation Status will help them meet these goals. Districts' applications must include a district innovation support plan, which explains the types of active learning structures the district will provide to increase the success of Innovation Schools as well as the changes the district will make in human and fiscal resources to support implementation of the innovation plan and further enhance local flexibility.[46]

Kentucky *Innovation Districts (2012-)*

- Districts interested in gaining more flexiblity for schools may submit an application to the state for Innovation Status.
- Applications describe how the district will use autonomy accompanied by active learning to generate improved student outcomes.
- Four districts received Innovation Status in 2013-14.

In 2012, in response to these guidelines, the Jefferson County (Louisville) Public Schools, the largest district in Kentucky, crafted a plan to designate 18 of its 160 schools as Innovation Schools. It also launched a competition inviting community-based innovators to submit proposals for new school designs and promised the winners they would receive additional autonomies and fiscal and technical supports from the district. In addition, the district developed a comprehensive plan to build capacity for strategic planning and improvement at Innovation Schools.

In this way, the state-to-district approach, if structured appropriately, may promote district-level strategic thinking and commitment to Shared Learning.

State-to-District Autonomy Limited to Very Low Performing Schools

A third state-level strategy focuses on improving the lowest-performing schools in the state. Tennessee encourages districts receiving federal School Improvement Grants to apply for Innovation Zone status as one strategy for meeting the state's goal of improving schools among the bottom 5% of performers statewide.

The rationale for "prescribing" autonomy for low-performing schools is the urgency of achieving sweeping change at failing schools, which in turn requires that their

leaders have the flexibility they need to diagnose the conditions that are holding the school back and begin innovating immediately and comprehensively.

Tennessee *Innovation Zones (2012-)*

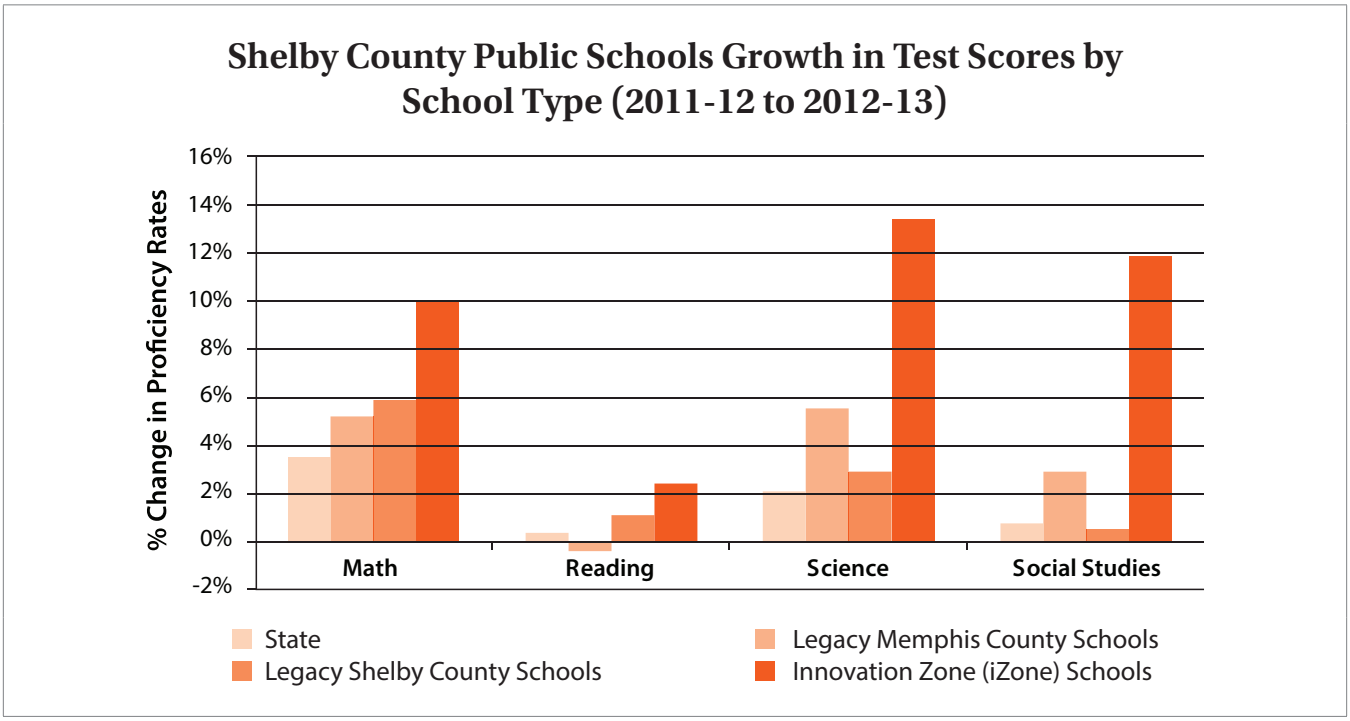
- Districts receiving School Improvement Grant funds may create Innovation Zones as one strategy for improving schools in the bottom 5% of performers statewide.
- Innovation Zones must establish a facilitation-oriented office to serve clusters of turnaround schools; monitor schools' performance; and provide technical assistance.

This belief is supported by several studies indicating, as researchers explained, "Systemic conditions in which schools function—including the extent of operational authority, supports and monitoring—are associated with positive school turnaround outcomes."[47] These studies reveal that the success of turnaround schools, like all others, is a combined function of autonomy, accountability and active learning.

Consistent with this finding, Tennessee's legislation not only explicitly identifies districts that must apply and schools that must receive autonomy and support, but also requires district Innovation Zones to implement specific structures for supporting and holding autonomous schools accountable.[48]

For instance, approved districts must establish a comprehensive, facilitation-oriented unit to serve clusters of turnaround schools; establish and monitor schools against goals and benchmarks for student achievement; and provide technical assistance directly or through external partners to assist school strategic planning, stakeholder engagement and execution of interventions.

Although Tennessee's strategy has operated for only a little over a year, Innovation Zone schools in the state's largest district—Shelby County (Memphis)—are already showing impressive learning growth, including some of the highest gains on reading and math tests in the state, and gains that are higher than those at comparable schools in the rest of the county.[49]



Memphis County Schools merged with the Shelby County Public Schools district in 2013.[50]

There is much to commend in a state-to-district approach like Tennessee's that is limited to very low-performing schools and requires districts to deliver broad autonomy, enforce accountability and provide networked learning support to build capacity at participating schools.

There are risks, as well. In particular, limiting autonomy to the lowest performing schools may discourage districts from developing comprehensive improvement strategies designed to raise the performance of all schools in the district. Such broader strategies are important, for example, for schools that are not quite in the bottom 5% of the state but nonetheless face serious difficulties and for schools in the middle and top of the performance spectrum that educate most of the state's students and may in many cases be achieving learning results below their full potential.

Shared Learning strategies limited to a small subset of schools also cannot take advantage of networking opportunities in which poor performing schools learn directly from better performing peers and in which the latter schools learn to be more thoughtful and explicit about their "secret sauce." Instead, limiting autonomy to low-performing schools may discourage collaboration and undermine support for extending autonomies, accountability and active learning beneficial to all students and schools.

Universal Statewide Autonomy

A final state strategy—which has been in effect longer than the others above and has the most compelling evidence of success—is to provide a host of autonomies to all schools without requiring applications from particular schools or districts. The province of Ontario, Canada, with roughly half the number of public school students as Texas, is the most comparable jurisdiction to implement universal autonomy.

Ontario awards significant decision-making flexibility to all schools, implements effective accountability structures and organizes and delivers active learning supports to assist districts in taking advantage of autonomy. The province provides universal autonomy over several critical areas, including curriculum, instruction and teacher hiring (though is limited in some areas by the teacher contract).[51]

Ontario *(2003-)*

- All schools receive decision-making autonomy.
- Regional teams headed by student achievement officers, school-to-school networks and collaborative inquiry structures provide capacity-building and support.

To hold schools and districts accountable, the education ministry sets standards and reading and math targets based on its province-wide tests,[52] and districts each year set their own local targets, which the province must approve.[53] The Ministry maintains a central system for collecting and managing student records, which it shares with schools and districts, and it supports districts in managing and utilizing data effectively. It has also worked with schools and districts to develop a self-assessment tool designed to ensure improvement planning is collaborative and uses a range of student data sources at the classroom, school and district levels.[54]

The centerpiece of the Ontario reform, however, is a series of active learning efforts designed to build district and school capacity to reach their goals. In order to support elementary schools in making instructional changes that generate academic improvement, the central Ministry created the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS), a central office staffed with experienced educators who provide differentiated support to districts and schools via seven regional teams. Among other things, LNS supports school efforts to create teacher teams whose members evaluate data together and design goals and interventions that address learning gaps within their student body.[55]

At the secondary school level, Ontario created Student Success Teams, comprised of principals, teachers and staff, which address the needs of disengaged students and design high-quality learning experiences for all students.[56] The province also has a program providing low-performing schools with differentiated levels of additional funding, resources and access to external expertise.

Ontario first implemented its province-wide Shared Learning system more than a decade ago and has seen impressive improvement in student outcomes ever since. The average province-wide pass rate for 3rd grade reading, math and writing exams rose to 70% in 2010 from 55% in 2003. The graduation rate rose during the same time period from 68% to 79%.[57] In addition, the number of low-performing elementary schools eligible for Ontario's turnaround program decreased nearly 90 percent from 800 to 87 schools.[58] Ontario has maintained its place near the top of the PISA scale. In 2009, Ontario performed second to Shanghai in PISA reading scores and was in the top 10 internationally for math achievement on the PISA test.[59]

District-level Strategies

Over the last decade, a number of school districts across the United States granted schools autonomy without the support of state legislation, creating what by now are mature systems of Shared Learning that have generated promising improvements in student results. In this section, we focus on districts large and diverse enough to be instructive for states considering how to combine autonomy, accountability and active learning, and particularly how to do so with the strong strategic support of districts committed to the Shared Learning approach.

District Selective Autonomy with External Support

Some districts provide autonomy to a selective group of schools. Since the mid-1990s, for instance, Boston has operated a system of empowered "Pilot Schools," which provided the more recent Massachusetts Innovation Initiative with a model mentioned above. Under Boston's program, new or existing schools may apply to the district for Pilot School status, a designation granting broad-ranging autonomies.

These schools have achieved some improvements. In a comparison of average scores on the state's MCAS test at Pilot and non-Pilot Schools, Pilot Schools performed better.[60] However, an analysis that more rigorously controlled for student characteristics found some positive results for elementary and high school students participating in Pilot Schools and decidedly mixed results for middle school students.[61] Pilot Schools also have consistently higher attendance rates at all grade levels than non-Pilot Schools (as a result, Pilot high school students, for example, receive an average of two weeks more instructional time than non-Pilot high school students),[62] and Pilot high schools have significantly higher graduation rates than non-Pilot Schools.[63]

Boston *Pilot Schools (1994-)*

- New or existing schools may apply for a set of district-defined autonomies, with the approval of two-thirds of the faculty.
- Pilot Schools are authorized for a period of up to five years and are held accountable through a school quality review.
- An external partner provides coaching and professional development services and facilitates cross-site lesson sharing.

Oakland, California similarly provided autonomy to a select group of schools through its New Small Autonomous Schools (NSAS) initiative begun in 2000. Oakland limited this program to new schools created by community stakeholders to provide small, innovative learning environments for students in the most impoverished and poorly served areas of the city.

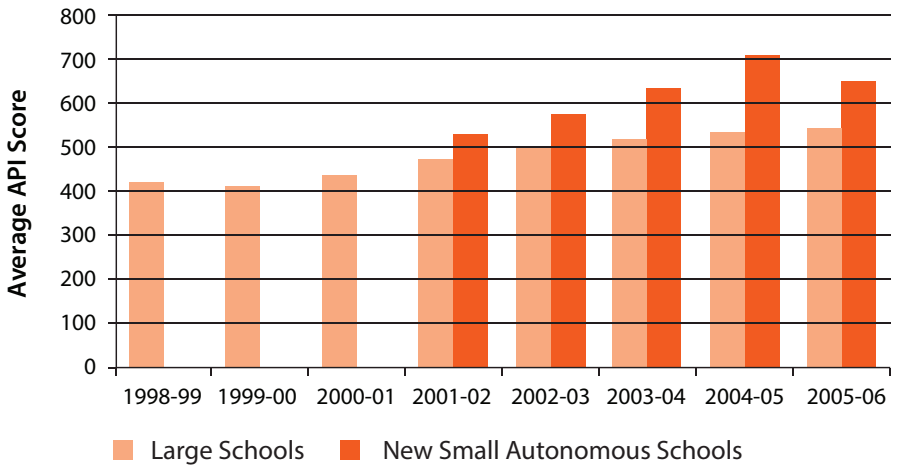
Although somewhat more limited than Boston's Pilot Schools in terms of the schools that could participate,

Oakland's NSAS schools also achieved improved student outcomes. A review of nearly 16 publications evaluating Oakland's autonomous high school initiative found participating students had significantly greater gains on the English and math portions of the California Standards Test compared to students in comparable schools[64] and Oakland's NSAS schools produced incrementally larger gains the more years they were open.[65] Not only were test score gains significant, but Oakland's NSAS high schools also had higher graduation rates than the schools they replaced.[66]

Oakland *New Small Autonomous Schools (2000-09)*

- Educators and community stakeholders applied to develop new small, autonomous schools.
- Two nonprofits developed professional learning communities for principals, provided coaching and worked with central office staff to incubate new schools.
- Schools were subject to state and district accountability requirements.
- The initiative grew to 45 schools in 2009, where it has remained since.

Oakland Unified School District Middle School Base API, Large Schools versus New Small Autonomous Schools (1999-2007)



California's Academic Performance Index (API) is an aggregate measure of a school's academic performance based on scores from math, reading, and social studies state exams. [*68]

Both districts' selective autonomy strategies initially provided critical active learning support to schools through a contracted external provider. Boston used the nonprofit Center for Collaborative Education (CCE) to coordinate services for schools including coaching, professional development, advocacy and research and evaluation supports. CCE also coordinated a network of Pilot Schools that met to collaborate in teacher-sharing conferences, leadership retreats and committees on fiscal autonomy. Oakland worked with the Bay Area Coalition of Effective Schools (BayCES) and Oakland Community Organizations, which developed professional

* *Calculations for API, an aggregate measure of schools' academic performance, may differ between years, so only within-year comparisons are valid. Scores range from 200 for the lowest-performing schools to 1000 for the highest-performing schools. California's performance target is 800.*

learning communities for principals, provided individual coaching for school leaders and helped the district to incubate new schools. After some years, however, both districts developed district-wide network structures with central office support to provide similar supports and permit sharing across all schools and have incorporated autonomous schools into those networks.

Boston and Oakland both developed accountability structures that measure the success of schools across the district. In Boston, for example, central office staff evaluate Pilot Schools through a school quality review (SQR) that includes an internal self-study and creation of a school portfolio, a three-day school site visit and an external review of student performance as reflected in the city's accountability system and otherwise. Schools implement an action plan based on the SQR, and the process may result in recommendations for the renewal or non-renewal of the school's status as a Pilot School.[68]

A selective autonomy strategy initiated with external support has multiple strengths. It allows the district to develop a strategic, targeted approach to providing schools with support through external providers that fill district capacity gaps. Also, the external partner's networking of all autonomous schools makes authentic active learning a real possibility. Over time, as in both Boston and Oakland, lessons learned from the external partner can be used to develop a district-wide, in-house support structure operating through networks that include both autonomous and traditional schools and permit the sharing of effective practices throughout the district. This evolution also diminishes—although it does not entirely avoid—the risk in selective-autonomy districts of a dual school system developing, with two sets of schools each with a different philosophy, different support structure (one based on facilitation, the other on supervision and compliance) and different mode of operation, and with little sharing of lessons learned across school types.

District Universal Autonomy with Strong Accountability

A different district strategy is to grant all schools autonomy, as the New York City school system did under the Children First initiative led by Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein. Starting in 2005, with a pilot of about two-dozen, mainly high-capacity schools volunteering to take part in an Autonomy Zone, the system reached universal autonomy across 1600 schools by 2007. When the initial set of schools all met demanding targets to which they had agreed in return for receiving substantial autonomies, the pilot was more than doubled in its second year with schools across the performance spectrum. After those schools posted similarly impressive results, the district decided to extend autonomy to all schools.

New York *Children First Initiative (2005-)*

- Universal autonomy across 1600 schools.
- Schools are subject to a rigorous accountability system consisting of school report cards, school quality reviews, and rewards and closure based on performance.
- All schools self-select into networks of 20-25 schools.
- Educators participate in collaborative data-based inquiry teams to drive school-level improvement.

The district engaged in a rigorous exercise to identify every mandate, down to the most modest of paperwork obligations, imposed on schools at the time. Such mandates were imposed not only by district and municipal policies but also as a function of how the district allocated state and federal funds and enforced other state and federal requirements. The district then undertook to reduce or eliminate every burden on a school's decision-making flexibility and every call on a principal's time not required by law and not necessary for the health and safety of children.

In exchange for this robust autonomy, each school agreed to accept responsibility for improving the learning outcomes of all of their students as measured by a strong accountability system that:

- Includes "lagging" measures of student achievement (test scores and graduation rates) and "leading" measures of conditions conducive to good outcomes (student attendance and average course-credit accumulation; parent-teacher-student surveys of learning conditions at each school; and a Quality Review of how well the school identified and strategically managed the process of meeting student needs);
- Heavily weights the average annual learning growth of *all* of the school's students and gives even more weight to growth by the school's, and especially the district's, initially *lowest-performing* students;
- Measures success based on how close each school comes to meeting or beating the best prior years' results among schools with students presenting the same level of challenges. This technique ensures schools (1) are never asked to accomplish more than recent experience in schools facing similar challenges has shown possible and (2) can all achieve high scores if they hit or beat mark and thus are not competing and are incentivized to collaborate; and
- Gives monetary rewards to effective schools and principals, replaces school leadership after two years of low performance and restructures or closes schools after four years of failure.

To help schools utilize their autonomy effectively, New York City:

- Opened a Leadership Academy to train new principals and assist experienced principals in using instructional, budgetary, personnel and operational autonomy effectively and in making informed data-based decisions to improve student and teacher performance (the Academy has since become a separate, nonprofit entity);
- Promotes "distributed leadership" by encouraging principals to share their own autonomies and the instructional direction of the school with equally empowered teachers;
- Invites all schools to self-select into networks of 20-25 schools facing similar challenges, and staffs networks with operational support personnel and facilitators trained to support schools in using their autonomy to improve without commanding obedience to their own or central mandates;[69]
- Creates a cadre of Senior Achievement Facilitators (later merged into the network staffs), that supports schools in developing "collaborative inquiry teams," or teams of educators that identify gaps in learning, design and implement change strategies and evaluate and revise the strategies based on measures of their success;[*70]
- Offers schools a choice among a robust package of interim assessments, which provide diagnostic information for use by inquiry teams and help educators customize lesson plans to student needs; and
- Operates a citywide data system giving teachers a daily picture of student and class performance, easy access to effective practices in use elsewhere in the city and social networking tools facilitating collaboration within and across schools.

Using this combination of universal autonomy, strong accountability and active learning strategies, New York City has achieved significant gains for students across the board. One particularly comprehensive and sophisticated

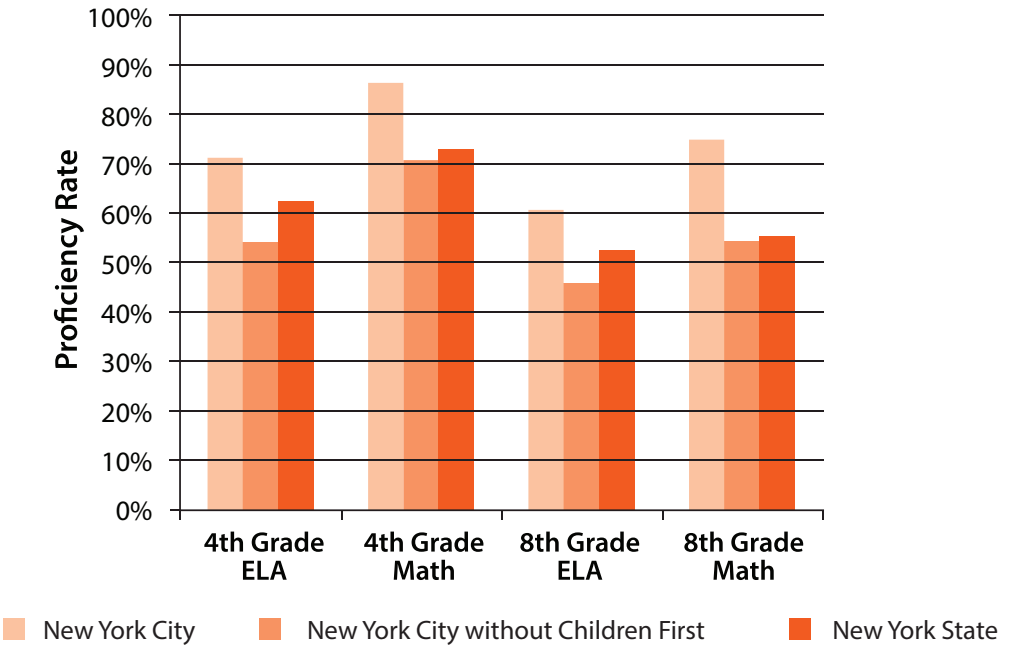
* *Incidentally, this approach also served as a way to foster internal accountability among educators in the school building.*

study found that schools operating under the Children First reforms realized significant improvements in reading and math proficiency rates in the fourth and eighth grades and on graduation rates. The study was careful to distinguish the improvements from the effects of past initiatives and trends in the district and current ones at the state and federal level.[71]

Between the 2002-03 and 2009-10 school years, the Children First initiative was associated with a 17% increase in fourth grade reading scores and a 16% increase in fourth grade math scores above what would have taken place if the reforms had not been in effect. The comparable figures for eighth graders were a 15% increase in reading scores and a 20% increase in math scores. In addition, high school graduation rates increased from about 50% (where they had been stuck for decades) to 69% by 2007.

Another recent analysis also shows consistently positive results. Specifically, before the Children First reforms in June 2002, fewer than half the city's students were considered "proficient" on state 4th and 8th grade math and English exams; by 2009, after the implementation of Children First reforms, more than 80% of 4th graders and more than 70% of 8th graders were proficient in math and, in English, almost 70% of 4th graders and 57% of 8th graders were proficient.[72]

NYC 2009 Proficiency Rate compared to NYC without Children First and NY State



Unlike selective autonomy at the district level, universal district-wide autonomy with strong accountability has the potential to generate school improvement across all schools within a jurisdiction. It can also enable the system to utilize a single support strategy for all schools that reinforces and celebrates autonomy and emphasizes facilitation over supervision and compliance.

The NYC Department of Education, for example, restructured its central offices to reorient staff members across the board toward serving schools, rather than treating them as objects of regulatory compliance, and implementing operational structures fluid enough to allow school innovation.

Central to the New York strategy was the transfer of substantial numbers of operation staff from the central bureaucracy to the network level where they could familiarize themselves with and serve the particular needs of just 20-25 schools. Prior to making this change, the district found it difficult to offer differentiated operational support to meet the complex needs of all schools. As a result, some schools with strong leaders and a proactive approach to obtaining operational support from distant central actors thrived, while other schools fared less well.

Based on New York's experience, it is clear that universal district-wide autonomy requires strong network structures and network leaders to customize operational support and facilitate active learning within and sharing of practices between schools.

While Shared Learning systems organized at the district level offer important lessons, they also have significant weaknesses in comparison to similar strategies operating at the state level. A district-level approach is less comprehensive because it does not include the state's commitment to release schools from often onerous *state-level* mandates. Nor does it enlist state-level support for the kinds of accountability measures, innovation, facilitation, active learning tools and protocols, and statewide sharing of lessons learned that most districts in the state—unlike a district with the size and capacity of New York City—cannot mobilize themselves.

As a result, exclusive reliance on district-level efforts will not result in improvements at statewide scale. Instead, the strategy will create pockets of innovation in one or two select districts with the capacity and entrepreneurial spirit to generate change. In the remainder of the state, districts are likely to operate according to—and students are likely to be stuck at learning levels typical of—the status quo.

IV. Recommendations

The descriptions of the model states and districts refrenced reveal multiple options among which states and districts may choose when implementing Shared Learning. Drawing upon the most consistent and promising practices in use in the model sites, this section distills a number of recommendations for Texas to consider as it moves toward a Shared Learning system of autonomous schools. The recommendations suggest steps to be taken at the state, district and campus level.

State Steps:

- Rather than immediately granting autonomy to all Texas schools, adopt a more nuanced strategy at first, to generate a rich set of informative experiences from which future policymakers can learn.
- To trigger the necessary learning, consider an approach that frees districts choosing 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.
- In deciding which mandates to lift and which to relax, 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 to improve their use of autonomy.
- Facilitate active learning statewide through working networks of districts and schools facing similar challenges and developing allied innovations.

In taking these steps, Texas may choose to use existing state mechanisms, like the District Charter Authorization in Senate Bill 2 (2013), to facilitate district creation of autonomous schools. Under Senate Bill 2, the board of trustees of a district can vote to authorize a "district charter" – a traditional or specialty school in the district is granted charter-like autonomy.[73] If the state decides to go this route, it should consider adopting legislation or guidance to encourage the creation of active learning structures in district charters to enable them to realize the full benefits of a Shared Learning system.

Alternatively, the state might consider developing a formal district application process like the one Kentucky uses. Such a process requires the development of the application and guidance documents for districts, dissemination of information about the application process and the creation of a rubric to evaluate applications. States may also consider providing targeted technical assistance to applicant districts, either in-house or through an external partner.

The state must also determine the types of autonomy to grant to schools in the areas of budgeting, staffing, curriculum and scheduling. To inform this decision, central office staff may survey law, district superintendents and principals to identify state rules and policies restricting autonomy. In support of decisions about the specific areas over which the state may grant schools greater autonomy, **Appendix C** summarizes state-level mandates in Texas in each of the four areas listed above that limit schools' freedom.

In addition to granting autonomy, the state should maintain or enhance its accountability system and the transparent and timely data it provides to districts and schools. It should also develop its own strategies and systems to promote active learning, innovation and the sharing of effective practices across districts in the state.

District Steps:

- 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 adopting more rigorous and diagnostic accountability measures aligning to and augmenting 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.
- Support active learning within and between schools through training, transition of district personnel from supervisory to facilitative roles, and the development of model protocols for collaborative problem solving by teams of educators and networks of schools and for other forms of active learning.

As these recommendations suggest, districts have a key role to play in increasing schools' autonomy by developing plans for releasing schools from many, strategically selected district-level mandates. Districts should be asked or encouraged to explain in their plans how they will reorganize central offices to limit mandates, replace a regulatory and compliance focus with a service ethic and support schools' use of autonomy.

Districts also should consider adopting additional accountability structures through which they can monitor and support schools' progress and intervene as necessary when schools demonstrate consistently low performance.

Most importantly, however, districts must play a key role in developing systems promoting active learning within and across schools, including by organizing schools into networks or allowing them to opt into networks themselves. Network teams should then facilitate strategic planning, data use, inquiry teams and other efforts to accelerate student learning.

Campus-level Steps:

- 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.

Efforts by individual schools are, of course, central to the success of a Shared Learning system. Schools seeking autonomy should develop comprehensive plans for how they will use autonomy to best respond to the needs of their particular campus. With district support, schools also should distribute instructional leadership from principals to empowered faculty, facilitate data-based collaboration and problem-solving among teachers and school leaders and otherwise promote innovation, active learning and sharing of effective practices.

Appendix D provides one example of how a state might implement a state-to-district approach as described above and one example of how a district might take advantage of this state-to-district approach. These examples are provided for illustrative purposes only.

V. Conclusion

All children deserve to attend schools where educators can respond to their learning needs. School leaders and their staff can make sure that happens – but only if they are given the freedom to do so. In fact, research suggests this kind of school-level freedom or autonomy is critical to increasing student achievement. States and districts have made efforts to grant more autonomy to school leaders with little evidence of sustained success. The evidence from these models of autonomy reveals that autonomy, while critical, is not sufficient by itself to create sustained school improvement for *all* children.

Systems of continuous active adult and student learning, along with school-level autonomy around staffing, budgeting, curriculum and scheduling and strong measures of accountability will ensure instruction is continuously improving to meet the needs and bring about the success of all children. This three-part system, termed Shared Learning, could help improve student outcomes and learning environments in schools and districts across Texas. Districts and states in different regions of the country have already put Shared Learning in place and have seen improved student achievement and graduation rates.

Just as there is no one right way to educate an entire district of students, there is no one-size-fits-all model for implementing a Shared Learning system. While based on certain fundamental principles, the system requires states, districts and schools to work together to create structures that fit local needs – officials at each level of the education system have a part to play in making this system a success. This paper presents a menu of options for state officials, district superintendents and school staff on how they can implement a system of autonomy, accountability and active learning designed to increase achievement for all students. Students in Shared Learning systems in other states and districts are succeeding – the children of Texas should be given the same opportunity.

Appendix A: Site Evidence Chart

BOSTON *Pilot Schools* BPS was one of the first to design an innovation zone strategy in 1994, when it launched a set of Pilot Schools, with the support of an external partner. Pilot Schools can be created in two ways: through an application to start a new school or through the conversion of an existing public school.	**EVALUATION** Students in Pilot Schools had higher average scores on the MCAS state test than students in traditional public schools;[74] but, in a more rigorous analysis that controlled for student characteristics, some positive effects of Pilot Schools on high school and elementary scores were accompanied by mixed results for middle school.[75] Pilot Schools had higher attendance rates than non-Pilot Schools (with two weeks of additional instructional time in high schools)[76] and significantly higher graduation rates than non-Pilot Schools.[77]
OAKLAND *New Small Autonomous Schools* In 2000, Oakland Unified School District began a small schools movement to bring small innovative learning environments with substantial school-based autonomy to the most impoverished and poorly served areas of the city, with the support of two external organizations. The initiative grew to 45 schools in 2009.	**EVALUATION** A review of several publications evaluating the Oakland initiative found participating students had significantly greater gains on the English and math portions of the California Standards Test compared to non-participating schools[78] and that these schools were able to produce incrementally larger gains the more years they were open.[79] They also had higher graduation rates than the schools they replaced.[80]
NEW YORK CITY *Children First* Through its Children First initiative, initiated in 2003, NYC provided all of its schools with autonomy based on the belief autonomy is a necessary condition for school-wide improvement.*[81]	**EVALUATION** Schools operating under the Children First reforms saw significant improvement in ELA and math proficiency rates in the fourth and eighth grades and on graduation rates over and above the continuing effects of prior reforms and trends the district would have seen regardless of Children First's implementation.[82]
ONTARIO In 2003, with the election of a new Premier, Ontario began to offer a host of autonomies to all of its schools with a focus on building professional capacity to drive results.	**EVALUATION** Ontario shows promising trends. The average passing rate for the province third grade reading, math and writing exams rose nearly 15 percentage points between 2003 and 2010, graduation rates rose nearly 11 percentage points,[83] and PISA scores ranked Ontario in the top two in reading and the top 10 in math in 2009.[84]

* *The collective bargaining agreement limited schools' flexibility around other personnel decisions like instructional time, termination, evaluation, promotion and pay.*

TENNESSEE *Innovation Zones* Beginning in Spring 2012, the TN Department of Education encouraged districts receiving School Improvement Grant funds to create innovation zones as one option for turning around their lowest performing schools. Districts with iZones must create a dedicated central service unit to support these schools.	**EVALUATION** After just one year of implementation, proficiency scores for the 13 Innovation Zone schools in Shelby County Schools (Memphis, TN) increased at a higher rate than the state in all four subjects, with major improvement in math, science and social studies.[85]
COLORADO *Innovation Schools* The Innovation Schools Act, created by state legislation in 2008, allows new or conversion schools and groups of schools to apply for varying levels of flexibility for the purpose of designing and implementing innovative practices meeting student needs.	**EVALUATION** Denver, the district with the most Innovation Schools in the state, encourages turnaround schools to apply for Innovation Status, so its Innovation Schools typically had school-level proficiency rates. However, these schools have exhibited higher median growth in reading, writing and math than the state's median growth.[86] Teachers in these schools also rated themselves significantly higher on important leading indicators of improved student results, including measures of decision-making ability, capacity, ownership, empowerment and ability to innovate.[87]
MASSACHUSETTS *Innovation Schools* The Innovation Schools initiative, created by state legislation in 2010, allows new or conversion schools and groups of schools to apply for varying levels of flexibility for the purpose of designing and implementing innovative practices meeting student needs.	**EVALUATION** This initiative is too new to make any conclusions about improvements in student outcomes.
KENTUCKY *Districts of Innovation* Legislation enacted in 2012 requires districts to submit applications to the state for Innovation Status describing how they will use innovation to drive district-wide improvement. Four districts received Innovation Status in the 2013-14 year.	**EVALUATION** This initiative is too new to make any conclusions about improvements in student outcomes.
MINNESOTA *Site-Governed Schools* State legislation enacted in 2009 allows a school board to issue a request for site-governed school proposals. The first site governed school opened in 2012.	**EVALUATION** This initiative is too new to make any conclusions about improvements in student outcomes.

Appendix B: State- and District-level Strategies

State-level Strategies		
Strategy	**Description**	**Examples**
State-to-school autonomy	Allows *schools* or a group of schools to submit an application to the state detailing the types of autonomy they want and how this autonomy will drive improvement.	Colorado
State-to-district autonomy	Allows *districts* only to submit an application to the state with a plan for extending autonomy to schools and supporting them in the use of autonomy. In one site, states allow districts to move forward with plans without an application process.	Kentucky Minnesota
State-to-district, low performing schools	Encourages *districts* with the lowest performing schools in the state to apply for extended autonomies for these schools and mandates use of particular support and accountability structures.	Tennessee
State universal autonomy	Provides a host of autonomies to all schools without requiring applications; state-built support structures facilitate capacity building and shared learning.	Ontario

District-level Strategies		
Strategy	**Description**	**Examples**
District selective autonomy with external support	Allows new and/or conversion schools to submit an application to the district for a set of district-determined autonomies. Schools are subject to state accountability requirements and also may have autonomy revoked based on a review every few years. Support is provided through external nonprofits.	Boston Oakland
District universal autonomy with strong accountability	Provides a host of autonomies to all schools without requiring applications. District-built network structures facilitate capacity building and shared learning and strong district-wide accountability structures supplement state level accountability.	New York City

Appendix C: Select Texas Education Rules and Policies

- Statutory provisions that may require state legislation to grant autonomy to districts.
- Statutory provisions that may be waived under Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 21.7061.

Area of Autonomy	Texas Statutory Provision	Summary of Texas Provision
Budget	N/A	In Texas, school budgeting is primarily handled at the district level.
Curriculum	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 28.002 (West) (Required Curriculum)	• Each district offering K-12 education must have a foundation curriculum that includes ELA, Math, Science, Social Studies and an enrichment curriculum that includes: languages other than English (if possible); health; physical education; fine arts; etc. • The State Board designates the proper curriculum for non K-12 districts. • Neither the state nor district can adopt common core standards. • The State Board of Education, with the direct participation of other stakeholders shall identify the essential knowledge and skills of each subject of the required curriculum that all students should be able to demonstrate and that will be used in evaluating instructional materials.
Curriculum	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 31.001 (West) (Free Instructional Materials)	• Instructional materials selected for use in public schools shall be furnished without cost to the students attending those schools except in cases where a student either fails to return or returns damaged materials.
Staffing	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 21.351 (West) (Recommended Appraisal Process and Performance Criteria)	• The commissioner, with input from teachers, shall adopt a recommended teacher evaluation process and criteria. The criteria must be based on observable, job-related behavior, including teachers' implementation of discipline management procedures and student performance. • There are restrictions regarding who can observe teachers (observer cannot be teacher from same campus unless otherwise impractical because of number of schools in district). • Evaluations must be detailed by category of professional skill, with separate ratings for each. • There shall be a conference between observer and teacher.

Staffing	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 21.352 (West) (Local Role)	• The District must provide adequate notice to teachers of the results of evaluations. • Districts may use the evaluation process developed by the commissioner or one developed by district and campus level committees as long as it contains requirements of the commissioner developed process and is adopted by the board of trustees. The board of trustees may accept or reject proposals but may not modify them. • Evaluations must be done once per school year. A teacher may be evaluated only once every five school years if she agrees in writing and the teacher's most recent evaluation rated her as at least proficient and did not identify any area of deficiency. • Teachers receive written copies of the appraisal and are entitled to a second appraisal by a different appraiser or to submit a written rebuttal that will be attached to the evaluation in the teacher's personnel file.
Staffing	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 21.002 (West) (Teacher Employment Contracts)	• Districts shall employ teachers, principals, librarian, nurses or school counselor under: a probationary contract, a continuing contract, or a term contract. (Requirement only for these employees). • Each board of trustees shall establish a policy designating specific positions of employment, or categories of positions based on considerations such as length of service, to which continuing contracts or term contracts apply.
Staffing	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 21.402 (West) (Minimum Salary Schedule for Certain Professional Staff)	• Districts must pay full-time teachers, librarians, nurses and school counselors no less than the minimum monthly salary (exception in subsection (f) of provision). • The formula for minimum monthly salary is outlined and defined in this provision.
Staffing	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 21.4511 (West) (Professional Development Activities for Teachers and Administrators)	• Commissioner may award grants to school districts and other institutions for establishing and providing technical assistance and professional development activities in the staff development training of public school teachers and administrators. • The training shall be related to implementing curriculum and instruction aligned with the foundation curriculum and standards for college readiness.

Staffing	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 21.211 (West) (Termination or Suspension)	• The board of trustees may terminate a term contract and discharge a teacher at any time for: (1) good cause as determined by the board; or (2) a financial exigency that requires a reduction in personnel. • For a good cause, as determined by the board, the board of trustees may suspend a teacher without pay for a period not to extend beyond the end of the school year: (1) pending discharge of the teacher; or (2) in lieu of terminating the teacher. • A teacher who is not discharged after being suspended without pay pending discharge is entitled to back pay for the period of suspension.
Staffing	Ann. § 21.156 (West) (Discharge or Suspension Without Pay Under Continuing Contract)	• A teacher employed under a continuing contract may be discharged at any time for good cause as determined by the board of trustees, good cause being the failure to meet the accepted standards of conduct for the profession as generally recognized and applied in similarly situated school districts in the state. • In lieu of discharge or pending discharge, a school district may suspend a teacher without pay for good cause for a period not to extend beyond the end of the current school year.
Staffing	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 21.103 (West) (Probationary Contract: Termination)	• Board of trustees of a district may terminate someone employed under a probationary contract at the end of the contract if they believe it is in the district's best interest. • The teacher must be given notice (exact procedural requirements of the notice outlined in this provision). • If the board fails to give notice they must employ the teacher under the same capacity for the following school year if the teacher has been employed by the district under a probationary contract for less than three consecutive school years; or employ the teacher under a continuing or term contract, according to district policy, if the teacher has been employed by the district under a probationary contract for three consecutive school years.
Staffing	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 21.003 (West) (Certification Required)	• Teachers, teacher interns and trainees, librarians, educational aides, administrators, educational diagnosticians and school counselors must be certified to be employed in the/a district. • Licensing requirements also for audiologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, etc. (with exceptions laid out in this provision).
Staffing	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 21.152 (West) (Continuing Contract)	• A continuing contract must be in writing and must include the terms of employment prescribed by this subchapter and any other appropriate provisions consistent with this subchapter.

Staffing	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 21.158 (West) (Under Continuing Contract)	• Before a teacher employed under a continuing contract may be discharged, suspended without pay, or released because of a necessary reduction of personnel, the board of trustees must notify the teacher in writing of the proposed action and the grounds for the action. • A teacher who is discharged or suspended without pay for actions related to the inability or failure of the teacher to perform assigned duties is entitled, as a matter of right, to a copy of each evaluation report or any other written memorandum that concerns the fitness or conduct of the teacher, by requesting in writing a copy of those documents.
Staffing	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 21.204 (West) (Term Contract)	• A term contract must be in writing and must include the terms of employment prescribed by this provision. Board of trustees can add provisions that are consistent with this provision. Each contract under this subchapter is subject to approval by the board of trustees. • Teacher shall be provided with copy of contract and may request other documents such as a copy of the board's employment policies. District must place employment policies on website if applicable. • A teacher does not have a property interest in a contract beyond its term.
Staffing	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 21.206 (West) (Notice of Contract Renewal or Nonrenewal)	• The board of trustees must give a teacher notice of intent to renew or not renew employment contract before the final 10 days of instruction for the school year (procedural requirements of notice laid out in the provision). • The board's failure to give the notice required within the time specified constitutes an election to employ the teacher in the same professional capacity for the following school year. • This section does not apply to a term contract with a superintendent.
Staffing	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 21.102 (West) (Probationary Contract)	• Teacher employed by the district for the first time or who has not been employed by the district for two consecutive school years (post-1967) shall be employed under a probationary contract. • A person who previously was employed as a teacher by a district and returns to district employment after at least a two-year lapse may be employed under a probationary contract. • If a person voluntarily accepts assignment that requires a different class of certificate than the class of certificate held by the person, he/she may be employed under a probationary contract. • A probationary period may not be for a term exceeding one school year. It may be renewed for two additional one-year periods (maximum three years, with exceptions set out in the provision).

Staffing	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 21.153 (West) (Conversion of Probationary Contract to Continuing Contract)	• A school district that employs a teacher under a probationary contract for the third or, if permitted, fourth consecutive year of service and that elects to employ the teacher in future years under a continuing contract shall notify the teacher in writing of the teacher's election to continuing contract status. Teacher must accept in writing within 30 days. • If the teacher fails to accept the contract within the period prescribed by Subsection (a), the teacher is considered to have refused to accept the contract.
Staffing	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 21.106 (West) (Return to Probationary Status)	• Instead of discharging a teacher, who is under a continuing contract, or terminating or not renewing a teacher's term contract, a school district and teacher may agree to return the teacher to a probationary contract after the teacher has received notice that the board of trustees has proposed discharge, termination, or renewal. They may also agree to probationary status upon the teacher receiving notice that the superintendent intends to recommend discharge, termination or renewal.
Staffing	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 21.0031 (West) (Failure to Obtain Certification; Contract Void)	• A probationary, continuing, or term contract is void if the employee doesn't hold a valid certification or permit issued by the State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC), fails to fulfill requirements to renew or extend probationary or emergency certification, or has the certificate revoked or suspended under Section 22.0831(f)(2). • District may terminate the employee, suspend the employee with or without pay, or keep the employee on for the remainder of the school year on an at-will basis. The district may not terminate or suspend an employee because the employee failed to renew or extend the employee's certificate or permit if the employee requests an extension from the SBEC within time and takes steps to renew. • No right to appeal for employee. Notice and hearing requirements don't apply. • This section doesn't apply to certified teachers assigned to teach subjects for which they are not certified.
Time/ Scheduling	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 25.081 (West) (Operation of Schools)	• Except as authorized under Subsection (b) of this section, Section 25.084, or Section 29.0821, for each school year each school district must operate so that the district provides for at least 180 days of instruction for students. • The commissioner may approve the instruction of students for fewer than the number of days required under Subsection (a) if disaster, flood, extreme weather conditions, fuel curtailment, or another calamity causes the closing of schools.

Time/ Scheduling	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 25.0811 (West) (First Day of Instruction)	• A school district may not begin instruction for students for a school year before the fourth Monday in August. • However, district can: 1) begin instruction for students for a school year before the fourth Monday in August if the district operates a year-round system; 2) begin instruction for students for a school year on or after the first Monday in August at a campus or at not more than 20 percent of the campuses in the district if: A) the district has a student enrollment of 190,000 or more; B) the district at the beginning of the school year provides, financed with local funds, days of instruction for students at the campus or at each of the multiple campuses, in addition to the minimum number of days of instruction required; C) the campus or each of the multiple campuses are undergoing comprehensive reform, as determined by the board of trustees of the district; and D) a majority of the students at the campus or at each of the multiple campuses are educationally disadvantaged. • Notwithstanding Subsection (a), a school district that does not offer each grade level from kindergarten through grade 12 and whose prospective or former students generally attend school in another state for the grade levels the district does not offer may start school on any date permitted under Subsection (a) or the law of the other state.
Time/ Scheduling	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 25.084 (West) (Year-Round System)	• A school district may operate its schools year-round on either a single-track or a multitrack calendar. If a school district adopts a year-round system, the district may modify: 1) the number of contract days of employees and the number of days of operation, including any time required for staff development, planning and preparation and continuing education, otherwise required by law; 2) testing dates, data reporting and related matters; 3) the date of the first day of instruction of the school year under Section 25.0811 for a school that was operating year-round for the 2000-2001 school year; and 4) a student's eligibility to participate in extracurricular activities when the student's calendar track is not in session. • The operation of schools year-round by a district does not affect the amount of state funds to which the district is entitled.
Time/ Scheduling	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 25.082 (West) (School Day; Pledges of Allegiance; Minute of Silence)	• A school day shall be at least seven hours each day. • Students at each campus shall be required to recite the Pledge of Allegiance once each school day. Flags shall be prominently displayed in each classroom although this isn't to be read as a requirement that districts or schools use federal, state, or local funds to acquire flags. Students shall be excused from reciting the pledge upon written request from a parent or guardian to the district. Districts shall provide for the observance of a minute of silence at each campus following the recitation of the pledges of allegiance. Teachers shall ensure that students don't act in a manner that interferes with other students' observation of the minute of silence.

Appendix D: Example of a State-To-District Approach

A state wishing to provide selective autonomy to schools may choose to invite districts to apply and select those demonstrating the most thoughtful approach to using autonomy to improve schools. The following method of implementing a state-to-district approach to granting autonomy provides one example, among many possible versions of this approach. It is provided here for illustrative purposes only.

Autonomies Granted and Not Granted by the State

Strive to grant schools in selected districts, and those districts themselves, autonomy from all relevant state mandates and regulations, with the exception of:

1. **Standards:** All districts and schools must align curriculum and local assessments to state standards.
2. **Accountability:** All districts and schools must participate in the state's accountability system, including mandated assessments.
3. **Labor Contracts/Due Process:** All districts and schools must abide by the state's laws regarding due process and educator contracts.
4. **Health and Safety Laws and Regulations:** All districts and schools must continue to abide by applicable state and local health and safety provisions.
5. **Special Education:** All districts and schools must continue to abide by applicable federal and state special education provisions.

Apart from the five categories listed above, release successful district applicants and their schools from mandates/policies in the four key autonomy areas below and encourage applicant districts to inventory their own mandates/policies and remove those interfering with schools' autonomy in the same four areas:

1. Budget
2. Curriculum/instruction
3. Schedule
4. Staffing (outside of contracts)

Contents of District Applications *(Including Explanations for Choices Made)*

Autonomy

1. Inventory of local mandates/polices limiting school autonomy and list of which areas the district proposes to grant autonomy, with particular focus on the four categories listed above
2. Categories of schools to which autonomy from state and district mandates/policies will be granted, which include, but are not limited to, the following (overlapping) options:
   a. All schools, or all but a small number of exceptions, or a small number of schools that formally opt out of autonomy for good reason
   b. All schools that apply for autonomy and meet criteria the district sets
   c. High-performing schools that "earn" autonomy because of high performance, plus low-performing schools given a combination of new leadership, staffing and autonomy as a turnaround strategy
   d. Pilot schools from various categories, with a plan for assessing results and extending autonomies to additional schools based on results

Accountability *(Encouraged but Not Required)*

Supplemental accountability measures for schools granted autonomy or for all schools, such as:

1. School reports listing state accountability measures (state test results and graduation rates) and locally selected supplemental measures
2. Supplemental measures may include such things as:
    a. Leading indicators of likely success in the future, such as results on parent/teacher/student learning-environment surveys; annual on-site qualitative reviews focused, for example, on how well schools use their autonomies to create improvement strategies and align programs and resources to them; and student and teacher attendance rates
    b. Intermediate and lagging indicators of success, such as performance on local interim assessments; how each elementary school's students perform in their first year of middle school, how each middle school's students perform in their first year of high school and how each high school's students perform in their first year of college or on the job market; accumulation of high school course credits; measures of college-readiness such as AP, IB and early college credits

Active Learning and School Support

1. Plan for realigning roles and responsibilities of central office and intermediate staff to replace supervisory with facilitative and service-oriented support for schools and school leaders, including, for example:
    a. An "Innovation Office" responsible for supporting exercise of school autonomy and coordinating interaction between schools and other central offices to maximize service to and minimize constraints on autonomous schools
    b. Support teams for networks of schools (selected based, e.g., common school contexts and challenges, strategic mentoring relationships between higher and lower-performing schools, on feeder patterns, or voluntary affiliation by schools) providing operational support (e.g., budget, HR, transportation) on demand by school leaders
    c. Tools developed by the central office for providing schools with information about and access to pre-qualified products and services to choose from
2. Strategies for promoting innovation and active learning within schools, including, for example:
    a. A "Leadership Academy" to train new and existing principals, assistant principals and master teachers to use available schools' autonomies to strategically identify student academic and related needs; develop concerted strategies for meeting those needs; translate strategies into budgets, curricula, plans for hiring and developing teachers, youth development programs, etc.; and assess the effectiveness of plans in place and adjust them accordingly
    b. Structures and training for distributed leadership within schools by teachers as well as administrators and for data-based decision-making (e.g., "data" or "inquiry" teams)
    c. Academic-improvement facilitators on support teams for networks of schools (see above) who support innovation and collaboration within schools
    d. Tools the central office provides to schools, such as data systems and a portfolio of interim and diagnostic assessments from which schools may choose

3. Strategies for promoting innovation and active learning between schools, including, for example:

   a. Steps to assure that innovations occurring at any given school are available to all schools that need them (e.g., heterogeneous networks of schools to facilitate sharing; use of qualitative review personnel to identify and spread innovations)

   b. Networks of schools with academic improvement facilitators to support collaboration among schools for purposes of innovation and sharing effective practices

   c. Tools the central office creates to collect and disseminate best practices (e.g., exemplary lesson plans; web-based instructional content, supports and collaboration tools)

Example of a Potentially Qualifying District Proposal:

District A is a K-12 system with a high proportion of low-income, ELL and high-mobility students. Most of its 20 schools are relatively low-performing, but a few of its schools are performing slightly above the state average. The district attributes its general low performance to a lack of capacity among school leaders and staff. To address this concern, the district office has traditionally opted to centralize decision-making in several critical areas. For example, the central office has mandated hiring for schools, promulgated a district-wide curriculum and organized mandatory professional development for teachers.

Existing methods, however, have not generated large gains in student improvement. In an effort to try something new that may improve student outcomes, the district has applied to be a part of the state's Innovation Zone. Districts in this Zone receive autonomy for their schools from state mandates in the areas of staffing, budgeting, scheduling and instruction. In their application, the district has specified a list of district-level mandates in those areas from which individual schools would be granted autonomy, including selection of instructional materials, professional development, school-based budgeting and school scheduling.

The district pilots a Shared Learning system with three of its lowest-performing and three of its higher-performing elementary schools, all of whose school leaders express interest in participating in the pilot through an application process with the district. In their applications, schools develop comprehensive plans for how they will use autonomy to best respond to the needs of their particular campus.

The district organizes these six schools into a network and assigns district staff with strong instructional and leadership expertise to provide targeted instructional and operational support and coaching to these schools. In addition, the network staff are charged with identifying, collecting and disseminating best practices and facilitating cross-school learning through monthly school leader meetings, subject-area teacher teams and inter-school visitations. The network staff also supports schools in creating inquiry teams, where teams of teachers engage in data-driven problem solving.

Appendix E: Active Learning Strategies

Active Learning Across Sites

Boston *Pilot Schools*

In Boston, autonomous Pilot Schools receive coaching, professional development services and research and evaluation supports from the nonprofit Center for Collaborative Education (CCE); the CCE also organized Pilot Schools into networks that met to engage in study groups and leadership retreats.[1]

New York City *Children First*

In New York City public schools, schools self-select into non-geographic networks, facilitated by staff trained to support schools in using their autonomy to improve. These networks provide instructional and operational support and promote the exchange of learning and best practices between schools.[2] Active learning also occurs at the school level, where schools operate multiple "inquiry teams" of educators who regularly engage in a collaborative, data-driven process to identify instructional needs, design and implement change strategies and evaluate and revise the strategies as indicated by the data.[3]

Ontario

Ontario's central ministry has created a Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) to coordinate academic improvement at the district and elementary school level. Divided into seven regional teams, each LNS is staffed with experienced educators who provide differentiated support to district school boards and schools. Among other things, LNS has supported school efforts to create teacher teams that evaluate data together and design school initiatives and goals that address learning gaps within their student body.[4]

Leander ISD

In Leander, the district hosts principal collaborative meetings several times a year during which school leaders visit one another's campuses to visit classrooms and learn about campus programs and initiatives.[5]

Spring Branch ISD

Spring Branch has 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 offer each other feedback.[6]

Waco ISD

Curriculum experts at Waco's central office catalogue and share exemplary teacher lesson plans on the district's online system. The district encourages struggling schools and teachers to use this system as a resource. The district also encourages networking across schools with a weekly meeting of all principals.[7]

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]

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