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THE PORTFOLIO SCHOOL DISTRICTS PROJECT

Portfolio management is an emerging strategy in public education, one in which school districts manage a portfolio of diverse schools that are provided in many ways—including through traditional district operation, charter operators, and nonprofit organizations—and hold all schools accountable for performance. In 2009, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) launched the Portfolio School Districts Project to help state and local leaders understand practical issues related to the design and implementation of the portfolio school district strategy, and to support portfolio school districts in learning from one another.

A Different Vision of the School District

Traditional School Districts	Portfolio School Districts
Schools as permanent investments	Schools as contingent on performance
“One best system” of schooling	Differentiated system of schools
Government as sole provider	Diverse groups provide schools

Analysis of Portfolio District Practices

To understand how these broad ideas play out in practice, CRPE is studying an array of districts (Chicago, Denver, Hartford, New Orleans, New York City, and Washington, D.C.) that are implementing the portfolio strategy. The ongoing analysis looks at what these districts are doing on important fronts, including how they attract and retain talent, support school improvement, manage accountability, and re-balance their portfolios by opening and closing schools when needed. The work compares different localities’ approaches and adapts relevant lessons from outside sources such as foreign education systems and business.

The Portfolio Network

Participating districts currently include Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, Hartford, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, New Haven, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, Rochester, and Washington, D.C.

Connecting Portfolio Districts

In addition to fieldwork and reports from the study districts, CRPE has built a network of districts interested in portfolio management. This network brings together local leaders—mayors, foundation officers, superintendents, and school board members—who have adopted or are considering a portfolio management strategy. Like the strategy itself, the network is a problem-solving effort. Each city is constantly encountering barriers and developing solutions that others can learn from.

CRPE sponsors the following tools for supporting portfolio districts:

- **Semi-annual meetings of the portfolio network.** The majority of participants are involved in day-to-day portfolio implementation, resulting in content-rich and highly informative meetings.
- **Portfolio online community.** Outside of the network meetings, members collaborate and participate in online discussions and share resources around emerging issues.
- **Portfolio web-based handbook of problems and promising solutions.** Built around the needs of member districts, the handbook is a growing resource available to anyone interested in school and district performance management. It includes special analyses done by CRPE and synthesized best practice materials from member districts. (Under development)

The Portfolio School Districts Project is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Joyce Foundation.

TO VIEW REPORTS FROM THIS PROJECT, VISIT WWW.CRPE.ORG.

Introduction

Can public schools learn to embrace innovation and employ cutting edge technology to solve students' most persistent learning problems? Last year, New York City's Department of Education created the Innovation Zone (iZone) to try to accomplish just that. This report reflects the findings of a CRPE study of the iZone, its goals and challenges.

Over the next three years the iZone leaders hope to produce hundreds of schools in NYC that are based on dramatically new approaches to instruction. If all goes according to plan, the iZone schools will employ daily curricula and lesson plans that regularly adapt to individual student learning needs. Mastery, not just basic skill proficiency, will be the goal for every learner, and time and staffing will be reconfigured in ways that best meet student needs. John White, Deputy Chancellor of Talent, Labor, and Innovation put it this way: "We are trying to make achievement the constant and adults the variable."¹

The iZone was born out of frustration among NYC Department of Education (DOE) reformers who, after eight years of reforms known as "Children First," were only able to accomplish what they view as significant but incremental improvement. The Children First reforms prioritized principal leadership, empowerment, and accountability to enable schools to realign resources to improve students' performance. Annual progress reports and quality reviews, data-driven decisions, inquiry teams, professional development networks, and portfolio management of schools (closing low performers and working with providers to create a supply of new schools) were all tools the district employed to move schools forward.

The district believes it made steady gains with these strategies, but also that the trajectory of progress must increase significantly in the next phase of reform to bring about dramatic (and necessary) improvement in graduation, college attendance, and college completion.

Creating the iZone

To make more dramatic progress toward college readiness for all students, Deputy Chancellor John White says reformers decided they had to "unhinge assumptions" about the way New York City public school students are educated. At its center, the iZone assumes that schools must fundamentally change their structures to support students.

The iZone will ask schools to reinvent themselves to meet students' learning needs. Rather than asking one teacher to find ways to differentiate instruction for a classroom of 30 or so students with diverse skill levels and types of learning styles, the iZone will ask schools to change so that differentiation is a normal part of every lesson. Rather than prescribing a standardized approach to curriculum, staffing, school schedule, and testing, the iZone schools are supposed to explore and innovate with student-centered mastery designs that are characterized by the following five core principles:

- Performance Assessment & Mastery-Based Grading
- Personalized Learning Plans
- Multiple Learning Modalities (e.g., a combination of independent student work, small group instruction, one-on-one instruction, student collaborative activities, on-line instruction)
- New Staff and Student Roles
- Globally Competitive Standards

¹ All quotes in this paper are based on interviews conducted by the authors in New York City.

Table 1 describes the iZone theory of action. DOE believes that over the next three years upwards of 100 iZone schools can produce breakthrough results by harnessing technology, altering the use of staffing structures and time, adopting much more rigorous standards for student work, and creating highly personalized environments.

Table 1: iZone Schools Will Reimagine the Basis of Teaching and Learning

Traditional classroom-based model	Student-centered mastery model
Time, place, and pace of learning are constant.	Learning occurs wherever needed, at whatever pace is needed. Learning day is extended if necessary.
Standards are aligned to state testing systems, not empirically tied to college or career readiness.	Standards are tied to global expectations and requirements for college success.
Standard curriculum is used, with limited differentiation.	Curriculum is personalized to meet diverse learning needs.
Standardized tests are given for all at fixed intervals.	Assessments are used that adapt and measure progress toward mastery of standards.
Teacher role is generic.	Teacher roles are flexible to support personalization and productivity

Learning from past experience

The assumptions embedded in the iZone are ones that grew out of New York City’s past experimentation with small, progressive schools. Some of the city’s most successful schools have been those that created highly personalized learning environments by limiting their size so that adults could better connect with students and by developing engaging project-based curricula. A great number of such schools were created over the years and appear to have demonstrated some evidence of success.²

The core principles of the iZone were also inspired by some of the innovative instructional approaches that came about through NYCDOE’s recent partnerships with entrepreneurial school providers. One of the best known of those innovations is the School of One (see box on next page). School of One is a math program in which students spend their school time in various small group or individual stations engaged in virtual exercises with off-site tutors, peer-to-peer activities, or teacher-led instruction. Students are assigned to different stations and are given a personalized daily curriculum based on a computer algorithm, which is tailored to each student’s skill development needs and learning styles.

District officials are essentially making a big bet with the iZone that the attributes of School of One and related whole school designs will produce “college-ready” students, a goal the district has failed to reach for decades.

² Howard S. Bloom, Saskia Levy Thompson, and Rebecca Unterman, *Transforming the High School Experience: How New York City’s New Small Schools Are Boosting Student Achievement and Graduation Rates* (New York, NY: MDRC, June 2010), <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/560/overview.html>.

School of One

School of One was the brainchild of Joel Rose, a former Edison Schools executive who worked to develop an innovative math curriculum and instructional tool in partnership with Wireless Generation, an education technology firm. School of One was originally piloted as an afterschool program in 2010 and then was brought into an existing New York City school as its regular math program.

Instruction for all students takes place in one large room, roughly the size of three to four traditionally sized classrooms. Each class has about 150 students with five teachers and about three assistant teachers. The room is set up with different stations—round tables (or desks clustered together) or computer stations. Students are assigned to modules that have them engaged in virtual exercises with off-site tutors, peer-to-peer activities, or teacher led instruction.

A computer algorithm lies behind all of the instructional decisions for students. Every day the student is assigned to a station and module. These assignments are displayed on a screen as students enter the room. The computer algorithm determines the day's assignment based on daily updated information on the student's skills, lessons completed, and learning profile (whether they do better working on their own or with a teacher).

Teachers have some flexibility in how to present materials and activities they engaged in during their instructional period, but overall, this approach significantly reduces teacher control over lesson planning and curriculum content. Between 4:30 and 5:30 each night, the computer generates instructions for what lesson and module each teacher will be overseeing the next day. Teachers typically instruct a small group of 8-12 students who are working on the same lesson. To help teachers plan for the week, the computer provides a list of most likely upcoming lessons. Teachers receive specific lesson information and activities along with their teaching assignment. School staff prepare any required materials that go with the lessons.

At the end of each class period, students are assessed on their mastery of the lesson's content. Every skill area has a difficulty rating indicating how many days a student is expected to work on the skill before mastery. For example, a "par 3" skill is expected to take three days to master. When a student takes longer than par to complete a task they are alerted.

Once a student completes a skill they are awarded a point. A running tally of the student's points as well as a benchmark for where the student should be, point-wise, is made available to students everyday. This allows students to track their progress.

Early results give some reason to believe the School of One improved outcomes for students in its pilot year, but no rigorous study has been conducted yet. Rose and his partners are working out problems with the computer program as they arise and are trying to work with vendors to develop new technologies that will better integrate instruction. The program is poised to scale up to multiple sites, but Rose is wary of scaling too quickly and without strong partner schools.

Launching the iZone

The iZone is being implemented in phases. In the pilot phase, schools are innovating with discrete components of the iZone core principles (different uses of staffing and time, personalization, etc.).

There are 81 pilot schools in the initial launch of the iZone. All pilot schools applied for participation and will be involved in one of three types of school change. Thirty are testing specific instructional or organizational designs and are participating in a randomized controlled evaluation of these designs. These pilot ideas came mostly from private sector entrepreneurs and vendors of online courses, such as Pearson SuccessMakers and Time to Know.

A second group of schools is partnering with Generation Schools, a Brooklyn-based nonprofit organization, to implement new time and staffing configurations. A third group will be creating and implementing whole school models developed at the school site or by site leaders. For example, one high school developed a project-based learning curriculum that integrates technologies into learning projects and selectively incorporates virtual learning courses to teach basic skills.

The Department of Education selected the first generation of iZone schools based on their interest and readiness to adopt the new programs. Once in the iZone, schools receive funding to help implement new technologies or programs, implementation support from Department staff, and technical support from private vendors. In return, the schools participate in evaluation activities, which for many involve a random assignment of new programs by school and grade.

Examples of pilot iZone models

The following schools are innovating with different aspects of the core iZone principles:

Louis Armstrong School is an example of a first generation iZone school that is piloting a discrete technology program. It is a traditional elementary school with 1,500 students and strong instructional leadership. The school administration and staff have been moving toward the use of more virtual and computer-based technologies for a few years and joined the iZone to innovate with some specific online learning programs: Time to Know and Pearson SuccessMaker.

Time to Know and Pearson SuccessMaker are both curriculum and instructional programs. The basic model is large group, teacher-led instruction for introduction of concepts, then individual practice on the computer. As part of the instructional programs, teachers are provided daily lesson plans mapped to standards and have access to immediate evaluation feedback, data analysis, and the ability to see what students are doing at any time. The online lessons are meant to be engaging for the students and flexible, so that if students finish a lesson early they can go back and finish past work. Each class in the pilot has smart boards allowing teachers to display materials they have prepared in advance, use graphics and other engaging presentations, and keep an electronic record of the day's board work.

New American Academy (NAA) is a pilot iZone school that is implementing its own new whole school model. NAA is a Brooklyn-based elementary school started by a principal who was featured in the *New York Times* for turning around a violent New York middle school. NAA currently serves grades K-1, but will grow a grade every year to K-5. NAA is designed to promote teacher collaboration and systemic adult learning. Each grade level has 60 students with a team of four teachers assigned to each grade. Each team has one master teacher (who can earn up to \$120,000), one to two partner teachers (who earn between \$75,000

and \$105,000), and one to two relatively new teachers (who earn between \$50,000 and \$60,000). The teaching team sometimes divides up to teach small groups of 15-20 students and sometimes comes together as a whole group. All of the classroom activity takes place in one large, busy room with the four teachers working in tandem. This open classroom work is intended to promote peer shared expertise, collaboration, and mutual accountability.

The school has actively recruited students with special needs; currently 20 percent of NAA students have an IEP. Two of the four teachers in every class are special education certified. To ensure all students' needs are being met, teaching teams have an hour and a half of daily collaboration time in which they plan lessons, discuss students, and review student work. Each teacher is responsible for designing a lesson that the other teachers will later implement with students. Teachers will loop for five years with their students to promote teacher-student connections.

Unlike most of the other iZone schools, New American Academy currently uses no computer-based instruction. The model innovates with flexible staffing structures and different schedule configurations.

The iSchool opened in 2008 as part of the district's small high schools initiative and also represents a whole school model development effort. The iSchool was intended to be a model high school for the future: personalized, tech-savvy, globally connected, and project-based. Currently the school has grades 9–11. Maximum capacity will be about 450 students. In many ways a classic Coalition of Essential Schools high school, teachers conduct student advisories, require service learning projects, and design quarter-long projects that attempt to integrate multiple subject areas and content standards.

Regents preparation, which is considered to be more rote learning, is “outsourced” to online courses. Students can take customized language courses through Rosetta Stone and a variety of other online courses. Students take self-paced online regents test-prep classes. All online courses are backed by an in-person instructor. Because they off-load some of the instruction to virtual classes, teachers are freed up to develop and teach interdisciplinary modules. In addition they offer more traditional-style classes in literature, math, science lab, and the arts.

Online education allows the school to offer a range of courses that it otherwise could not because of its small size. Technology is also used actively in school project work. Students working on medieval history, for instance, might have a virtual lecture from a medieval scholar in England. To promote “learning everywhere,” the school has a remote desktop so students can access curriculum anywhere there is internet access.

The iZone Moving Forward

The NYC Department of Education has ambitious plans to develop and scale up school-wide changes. Within three years, DOE plans to have 100 schools participating in the iZone, developing whole school designs that include all five core principles.

The new whole school models will be developed via partnerships between schools, their school support network leaders, and innovation partners, including the following:

- **Generation Schools:** A Brooklyn-based nonprofit organization that expands the school day and year and reduces class size by redesigning the staffing structure and staggering teacher vacation schedules.³
- **Kunskapsskolan:** An organization that runs 23 independent schools in Sweden. The schools are designed to support diverse learning styles, goal-oriented learning, and teachers as personal tutors.⁴
- **Reinventing Schools Coalition (RISC):** A support organization founded by the former superintendent of a school district in Chugash, Alaska, which radically transformed its approach to schooling. The nonprofit sees its role as helping schools take risks in transitioning to a system fundamentally distinct from the grade-level, age-based, time-driven traditional approach to education.⁵
- **New Tech Network:** A school start-up and support organization whose network includes 62 schools nationwide. New Tech promotes project-based learning and the use of technology.⁶

The goal is not necessarily for iZone schools to directly replicate the innovation partners' designs. Instead, schools, network leaders, and these external partners are supposed to work together to design a model that draws from the partner's work, but makes sense for each school. The onus will be on the schools to adopt what works for them and, in turn, to help other schools adopt similar practices. District officials say they are looking to invest in schools that "are willing to innovate on behalf of the wider system."

Utilizing school networks within the district

Realizing that schools will need a structure for support and sharing experiences, NYCDOE is making the existing school support networks central to the iZone theory of action.

To implement the second phase of iZone, the district will recruit five school networks (resembling "mini-districts") that have schools committed to exploring new school designs. Each network will recruit an initial class of five "lab schools" and, in partnership with these schools, will select up to five innovation partners, which will have been vetted by a central review process. Together the network leaders, lab schools, and innovation partners will engage in a design and prototype process.

The network structure will be used again to scale up the new school designs. As illustrated in Figure 1, after the first year of implementation by the lab schools, a group of five affiliate schools in each network will take up the new school design and continue to test, refine, and adapt the model as they put it to work in their own schools. A year later, the now more refined model will be rolled out to the network's remaining schools, expanding the implementation up to 20 schools.

John White explained the essence of the strategy this way: "We're giving schools mission and partners and letting them go and then we'll test and codify." The theory is that by attracting the world's leading technology and school providers, schools will have access to unprecedented technological and conceptual supports.

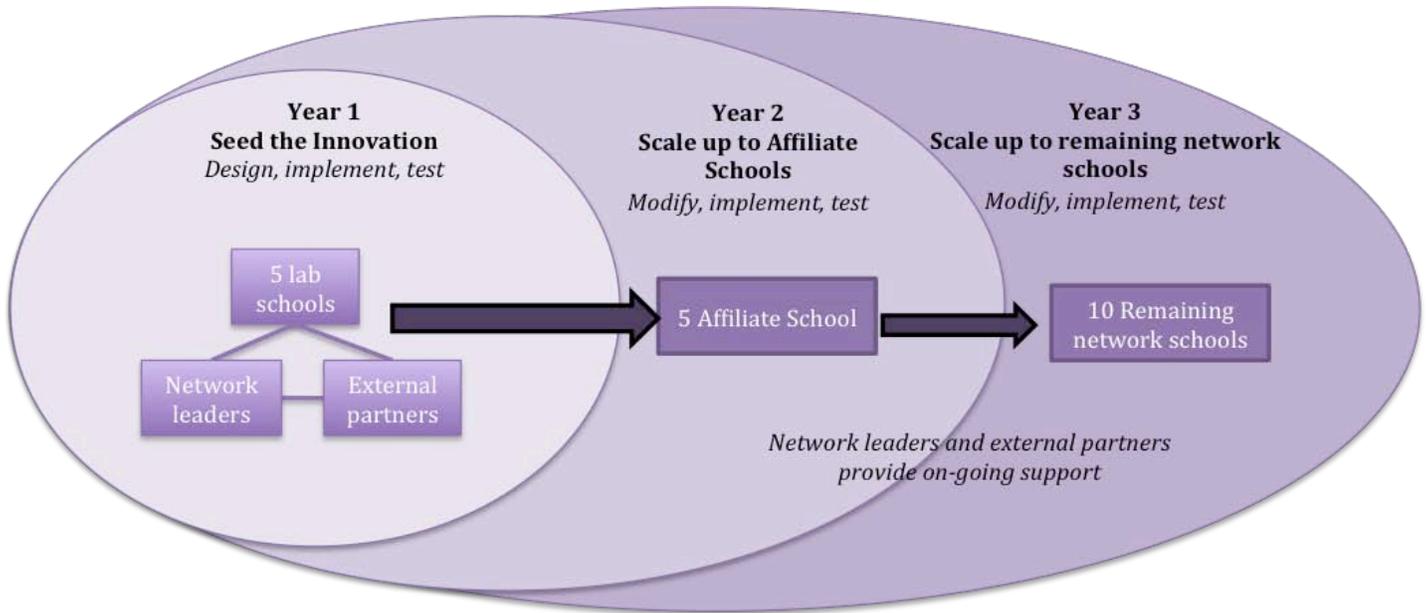
3 <http://www.generationschools.org/>.

4 <http://www.kunskapsskolan.se/foretaget/inenglish.4.1d32e45f86b8ae04c7fff213.html>.

5 <http://www.reinventionschools.org/about/a-risc-shared-vision-is/>.

6 http://www.newtechnetwork.org/newtech_schools.

Figure 1: Scaling-up Innovation in the iZone



The district will scale up to 100 schools by progressively bringing more networks into the iZone. Achieving that number of transformed schools in three years is a pace of change not typically seen in school districts. New York City is fast-tracking the iZone in part to meet goals set by Mayor Bloomberg’s administration, which will end in three years, and in part to meet recent Race to the Top goals. As Arthur VanderVeen, NYCDOE Chief of Research and Development, says, “We have three years and we need to achieve dramatic, large-scale change.”

VanderVeen describes the iZone as an organizational change effort rather than a traditional Research and Development model: “The iZone [in its second phase] is intentionally not an “R and D” model of prototype, test, scale. Our approach is to engage entities/networks in the vision and get them committed to that and they have the mechanisms to progressively move their schools toward that model.” He says the district believes principal and teacher “ownership and investment” in the iZone principles are critical to the project’s sustainability and scale.

The district is not seeking a faithful replication of a particular whole school model or instructional strategy in iZone schools—the approach to scale-up typically taken by charter management organizations (CMOs) and comprehensive school reform models. Instead, the district wants the iZone to be an environment in which good ideas that pursue the district’s core principles of student learning are explored, tested, and continuously adapted in implementing schools. According to VanderVeen, “We are actually embarking on a large-scale organizational change and have a vision about what that should look like.”

The department is actively soliciting external partners and entrepreneurs to work with schools and networks in the iZone. They want some partners that offer comprehensive models, some that can integrate different technology and personalization components, and some that offer discrete components to schools. The hope is to have a portfolio of partners in place in time to support the school design planning in early 2011.

The end game for the iZone: an innovative sub-system of NYC schools

Ultimately, district leaders hope to produce hundreds of schools that think of every child in terms of a personal educational plan and use the best technologies to help students follow these plans. District leaders say increased achievement, not cost savings, is the goal of the iZone, but they do hope schools in the iZone will be able to use teacher and student time more productively. VanderVeen says, “The iZone is founded on the assumption that the current role of the teacher is not effective. We are packing too much into the typical teacher’s role—instructional delivery, assessment, etc. The human capital question is something we are trying to solve.”

Table 2: Summary of Key Aspects of the iZone

	iZone Year 1: Pilot	iZone Years 2-4: Whole school change
Number of schools	81	An additional 100
Students served	13,000	An additional 16,000 (approx.)
Strategy	Some component testing, some whole school design development	All whole school designs
Total investment	\$7.2 million	\$50M or \$30M, depending on source

Challenges

As they move to take the iZone to scale, district officials face daunting challenges in promoting true innovation within the massive bureaucracy of New York City schools. Some of the problems are evident now; others are likely to emerge in the future. As one of the first districts in the country to try to scale up broad innovation, how NYC copes with the following challenges over the next few years will offer lessons for other districts who follow suit:

Inertia of the status quo

The iZone is purposefully designed to transform a large number of existing schools in addition to starting some new ones. Department officials are clear that they are not viewing the iZone as a turnaround strategy for low-performing schools. Instead, they want iZone principles to take schools that do reasonably well with high school graduation to a much higher level of performance, where college and career readiness is a focal point. But as Arthur VanderVeen recognizes, it will be an enormous challenge for existing schools to buy into the iZone principles and implement them well. “What we are proposing has radical implications for the way schools organize,” he says. “Moving schools to this is going to be hard.”

The department expects that their outside “partners,” the school management organizations and vendors working with the schools, will play a critical role in getting schools to shift their attitudes. Nonetheless, it will take significant time to get existing schools to fully buy in to the principles of highly differentiated instruction and adopt them effectively. “To get a school that already exists to reorient from the average student to something else will probably take three to four years,” says VanderVeen.

Past efforts to scale up effective programs and school designs in public education have been plagued by implementation problems. In district-run schools, efforts to scale up comprehensive school designs suffered from uneven implementation as school personnel often didn't fully understand or support the new program.⁷ Union contract rules and other system rigidities can prevent school leaders from convincing their staffs to adopt a new program. An assistant principal at one iZone school we visited remarked that the union contract prohibits him from telling his teachers what to focus on during their planning time and administrators are often not able to tie program implementation to teacher evaluations.

The district is also contemplating how parents will respond to these innovation initiatives and is working on outreach and communications plans. At some point, the district may get pushback from parents about the idea of having their children participate in unproven programs and may need to consider catch-up academic plans if certain programs are not effective.

Risk management and accountability

NYC school district leaders are taking risks with the iZone, implementing new models, committing deeply to a defined set of principles that challenge core assumptions about what a school should look like, and moving to scale very quickly. How and when they will know if they got the big bet right is a question district leaders will have to ask so that students are not subjected for too long to programs and schools that don't work.

A central premise of the iZone is that evidence will be the deciding factor in whether or not programs are taken to scale, and that evidence will inform a continuous improvement process within iZone networks. Roland Fryer at Harvard University is conducting a study of certain pilot iZone schools and some effort is being made to track the performance of all other pilot schools with pre- and post-tests. The department also conducted its own study of School of One's pilot cohort.

An evaluation plan for the second phase of iZone is under development. The iZone leaders say they will focus on monitoring implementation and feeding data to participating schools to inform implementation. They may, for example, evaluate discrete technology components (e.g., a specific tool for mapping instruction to performance-based outcomes) so that schools will have good information about which components are working and which are not, or provide data on teacher user-ratings of technology programs. The district plans to create annual review and revision cycles so that schools can adjust their implementation as they go. Measures might include community engagement, teacher capacity, organizational health, and other interim outcomes to assess annually whether iZone implementation is proceeding well.

The NYC Department of Education has a well-developed school accountability system that ranks schools according to test score improvement as well as absolute student proficiency rates. The goal will be for iZone schools to outperform schools with similar school populations. Officials anticipate the accountability model may need to be adjusted to measure the outcomes of iZone schools so that the schools are given some latitude to take reasonable risks without fear of landing on the district's school intervention list. To that end, NYCDOE's accountability office is starting a planning process to come up with some variations in the accountability system for iZone schools. Shael Suransky, former Chief Accountability Officer and now Chief Academic Officer, is considering using averaged performance results over multiple years instead of annual test score data and will likely use additional data (not just test scores) to inform accountability decisions. To avoid over-testing students who are participating in iZone programs, the district may sample students rather than test everyone.

⁷ Susan Bodilly et al., *Lessons from New American Schools' Scale Up Phase: Prospects for Bringing Designs to Multiple Schools* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1998), http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR942/index.html.

The challenge of assessing what works in the iZone innovations, spreading that knowledge to schools, and holding schools accountable for results is new ground for New York City and there is no road map in public education. School districts have not historically had strong capacity for research and development, and iZone leaders will be challenged to create it from scratch.

Effective research and development in the iZone may be especially tricky given NYCDOE's governance structure. Because the department has, over the last eight years, devolved a lot of autonomy to schools, the central office has very limited ability or desire to impose a particular model on a school and cannot prevent a school from adopting a model that hasn't worked particularly well elsewhere. To promote scale-up of effective models, then, iZone leaders instead need to rely on an individual school's incentive to recognize and avoid things that don't work. In addition, DOE is counting on the school support network to provide good information and support implementations, and on their accountability system to close schools that are failing. This creates a potential tension between traditional principles of "R and D" and notions of best practice and autonomy. The district can conduct robust evaluations, but at the end of the day they can only indirectly manage what is done in schools.

Paying for scale

The total investment NYC estimates it will need to support iZone implementation is enormous. iZone leaders project a budget of about \$50 million over three years to pay for central office costs and school supports, such as network supports, infrastructure upgrades, and contracts with vendors. A significant portion of scale-up will be funded via New York State's Race to the Top grant. The high costs are in part due to the number of students and schools in New York City schools and the intended scope of the project. Districts working with a smaller number of schools would obviously not face the same costs.

There is also some degree of cost involved in being the first district in the country to actively work with vendors to develop customized designs and products for their schools. The hope is that once they make this investment, other districts will be able to benefit from a more mature marketplace of technology platforms, high-quality online curricula, and other intellectual capital. The School of One system, for instance, is well poised to scale to a larger number of schools, but NYC and local foundations had to first invest in its development and testing.

In addition to the challenges discussed here, there have been already, and will likely continue to be, many technical hurdles to be solved, difficulties working with private sector providers, and many other problems inherent in fundamental system change. District iZone leaders know they are taking on risk with the program and hope their determination to problem solve as they go will manage those risks effectively and result in big payoffs for students.

Conclusion

“We feel we’ve squeezed all we can out of standard school organization models . . . If we can solve the logistical challenges, we think this can help schools reach a much higher bar.”

Arthur VanderVeen

The iZone represents a significant set of challenges and totally new ground for NYCDOE. But its champions believe the approach will produce breakthrough results that prior reforms could not. The iZone does not deconstruct past reforms; it leverages the district’s earlier empowerment and support reforms (networks) to push schools in a direction the district thinks will generate long-lasting and effective change.

But the iZone is different from the Children First reforms, where district leaders controlled the change: for example, district leaders redefined governance and gave schools autonomy; they built the accountability system; and they redesigned support and district-wide talent development. Instead, the iZone relies on creativity, ingenuity, and smarts from the school and network leaders. These iZone schools are not adopting boxed models, they are designing them; they are evaluating what works and what should happen in their schools. In the end, the success of the iZone may rest on whether the district has built strong enough foundations for talent development, support networks, and evaluation systems under Children First to allow iZone schools to lead the country in innovation.