

Staking Out the Middle Ground

Policy Design for Autonomous Schools

Executive Summary



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Executive Summary

The American education system has oscillated between centralization and decentralization since the first public schools opened in the early 19th century.¹ The modern push toward greater decentralization traces its roots to the late 1980s,² following the recommendations of several prominent national reports that called for greater school-level decision-making as part of a comprehensive effort to create a more professional working environment for teachers and to improve school performance.³ States' early efforts at decentralization allowed schools to apply for waivers from a narrow set of policies, such as teacher certification requirements or the length of the school year.⁴

In 1992, the first charter school opened, creating a new sector of public schools based on an explicit autonomy-for-accountability exchange. Traditional districts, meanwhile, have also taken steps toward deregulation and greater school-based decision-making. The 2001 authorization of the federal No Child Left Behind Act demonstrates the traction of this policy trend: NCLB pushed states to establish "site-based management" policies in an effort to ensure the engagement of school communities in decision-making processes affecting their schools and students.

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Although the terminology and policy approaches may have shifted over time, the concept of school-based decision-making, or school autonomy, has stuck. Autonomy is often viewed as a strong lever to improve student outcomes. The underlying theory of action asserts that those closest to the students, school leaders and teachers, ought to have authority over decisions that most affect students because their firsthand knowledge and understanding of their students and their needs uniquely situates them to make choices that best meet those needs. If students' specific needs are better met, their outcomes should improve.⁵

Today's version of school autonomy is characterized by state-level policies that provide opportunities for schools and districts to gain flexibility from state and local laws, policies, and/or regulations. The autonomous schools operating under these policies occupy the middle ground between traditional district schools and charter schools. They're granted greater autonomy over school-level decisions such as budget, staffing, or curriculum. They may also operate under different governance structures that provide greater separation between the schools and the district compared to traditional district schools. Currently 24 states have policies in place that allow for the creation of autonomous schools.⁶ Some places that have implemented autonomous school policies have seen promising trends in student achievement at the same time (see sidebar on page 23 of the [full-length report](#)). However, many policies are too new to show conclusive results, and they are inherently challenging to evaluate because of the complexity of the policies themselves.

Policymakers and researchers often talk about "autonomous schools" as if there's a single, agreed-upon definition of what that means. In reality, there's no standard design for autonomous school policies, and school autonomy can mean a lot of different things. The policies that states have enacted vary widely in terms of their goals, the parameters of the flexibility that they provide, and the structure of accountability that's in place for autonomous schools. As a result, autonomous schools operate under very different contours of autonomy and accountability from one state or district to the next. In some states, for example, autonomy is only available to schools meeting certain performance thresholds. In others, any school is eligible to apply to become an autonomous school. Some states explicitly name the policies from which all autonomous schools are exempt, while others allow school leaders to pick and choose among a range of policies to waive. It's a diverse and complex policy landscape, and there's very little research on the effectiveness of different design choices.

This report aims to define the range of state and district policy structures that enable school autonomy and accountability and identify common themes in how they are being implemented, so that decision-makers have a stronger understanding of how states

and districts are evolving in their approaches to school autonomy and accountability. It's based on our in-depth analysis of autonomous school policies in four states where policies are representative of structures commonly in place across the country: Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, and Massachusetts. We reviewed state laws and regulations and district policies, and interviewed dozens of state, district, and school leaders to develop a deep understanding of the design of each state's autonomous school policies and how they're being implemented on the ground, including an understanding of successes and challenges along the way.

To help make sense of the complexity and variability of the policy structures in play, we begin with a framework in Table 1 that identifies six key dimensions along which autonomous school policies vary and common design approaches to each. We then offer a summary of nine key findings and corresponding considerations for state and local leaders.

The full-length report, detailed profiles of each of the four states included in our analysis, and briefs for state and local leaders can be accessed on our [website](#).

Table 1

Autonomous School Policy Design Framework

Dimension	Common Variations
Policy goals	<p>Legislators may adopt autonomous school policies for a variety of reasons; many policies are designed to pursue several goals in tandem. Common goals for autonomous school policies include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving student outcomes • Responding to competition from charter schools • Intervening in low-performing schools • Strengthening local control • Providing opportunities for innovation
School eligibility	<p>State policies specify which schools are eligible for greater autonomy. School eligibility tends to align with the policy's goals; for example, if a key goal of the policy is to intervene in low-performing schools, legislators may decide that only low-performing schools are eligible to participate. Common school eligibility requirements include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low-performing schools only (typically those falling into the bottom set of schools per a given state's accountability system) • Schools implementing specific programs⁷ • All schools⁸
Governance structure	<p>Under some states' policies, autonomous schools remain fully part of the school district. Others allow for different governance arrangements. Common governance arrangements for autonomous schools include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autonomous schools remain part of the school district; no change in governance • Districts can delegate all, or certain elements of, decision-making authority to an independent board⁹ • Autonomous schools can operate as charter schools authorized by independent entities that remain tied to the district through memoranda of understanding (MOUs)¹⁰
The type of policy flexibility available to schools	<p>State laws outline which policies and regulations districts and state education agencies can waive for autonomous schools. Common approaches to determining which policies are waived for autonomous schools include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All policies and regulations that are waived for charter schools are automatically waived for autonomous schools • State law outlines which policies are eligible for waivers; individual schools select which policies to waive (waivers may be automatic or require approval) • A district and third-party organization contract to enable policy flexibility in certain matters
How eligible schools access autonomy	<p>State policies outline how schools can access autonomous status under a given policy. Common approaches include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools meeting specified eligibility criteria are automatically granted autonomous status • Schools meeting specified eligibility criteria must apply for autonomous status to the local or state board • Districts opt in to certain autonomy models and confer autonomy to some or all schools in the jurisdiction
Accountability structures	<p>The accountability in place for autonomous schools varies widely by state. Common accountability structures for autonomous schools include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autonomous schools are held to the same state accountability system as other district-run schools; there are no additional accountability measures in place • Autonomous schools have goals or expectations in addition to any statewide accountability system, and receive interventions for failing to meet those goals. These goals and interventions may be included in state law, or captured in a contract or MOU with the entity that approved the school's autonomous status (typically the state or district).

This framework illustrates the ways in which autonomous school policies can and do vary and can enable stakeholders to understand the various permutations to consider in designing a policy to meet particular goals. In addition to this framework, our research surfaced nine key findings related to autonomous school policy design and implementation. These findings are organized into three categories with corresponding considerations for policymakers.

School Autonomy and Governance

There's no one-size-fits-all approach to autonomy.

Flexibility from specific state and/or district laws, policies, and regulations forms the basis of autonomous school policy design decisions. However, there's no one-size-fits-all approach to autonomy across the states in our sample. Rather, the states have adopted a number of different autonomous school policies, each with different contours related to autonomy.

Finding 1: Variance in governance structure determines the degree of independence from the district.

Governance structure describes the degree to which a school or set of schools is or is not directly managed by and accountable to a school district. Governance structure varies along a spectrum illustrated in Figure 1.



Finding 2: Variance in school-based autonomy determines the degree to which school leaders hold decision-making authority over a school’s program and operations.

The degree of school-based autonomy considers the degree of decision-making authority that a principal or other school leaders have over core elements of their school’s model, such as budgeting, staffing, curriculum, or professional development. Generally speaking, school-based autonomy can be low, medium, or high, as outlined in Figure 2. A low level of autonomy means that district leaders make nearly all operational and instructional decisions on behalf of schools; school leaders act primarily as managers implementing those decisions. A medium level of autonomy means that school leaders are empowered to make decisions over a defined subset of operational and instructional elements, but district leaders retain some centralized decision-making authority (e.g., maintaining standard school calendars or centralizing curriculum decisions). A high level of autonomy means that school leaders act as CEOs, making nearly all operational and instructional decisions for their schools.



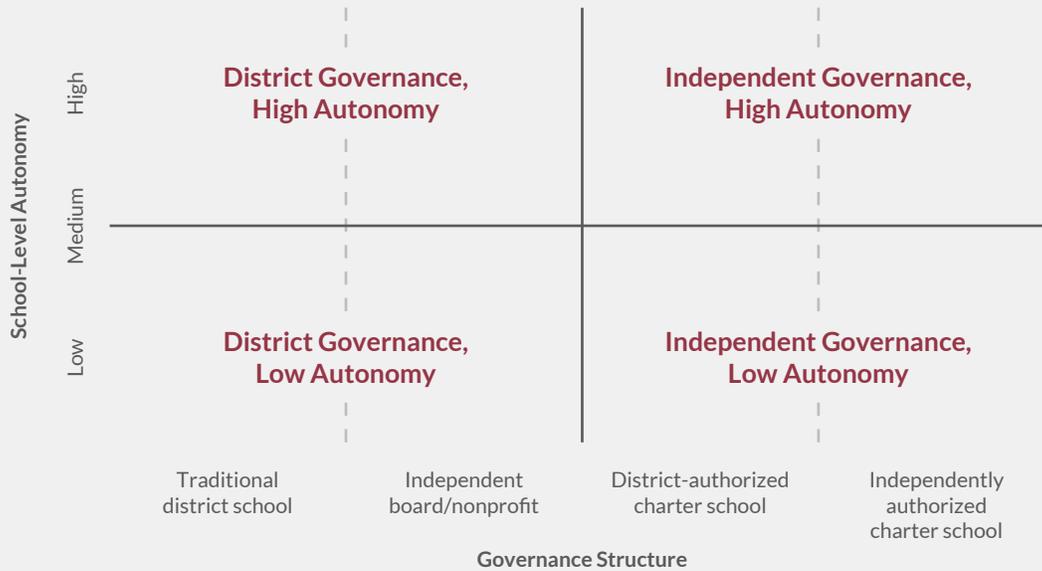
Finding 3: Governance structure and school-level autonomy interact in ways that shape how school leaders experience flexibility.

Governance structure and school-based autonomy often vary together, but they don't always.

Governance structure and school-based autonomy often vary together, but they don't always. Schools' governance structures can provide a low level of independence from the district, but the district may still provide a high degree of school-based autonomy. Schools can also govern themselves more independently from the district, but ultimately have a lower degree of school-based autonomy than traditional district schools. Figure 3 illustrates the four main categories created by the interaction of governance structure and school-based autonomy.

Figure 3

Interaction of Governance Structure and School-Based Autonomy



Finding 4: State, district, and school leaders identify budget, staffing, and curriculum as critical elements for enabling meaningful school-level autonomy.

Budget, staffing, and curriculum are the three major buckets of decision-making authority that have the greatest impact on school leaders' ability to make decisions in the best interest of their students.

School leaders from all four states identified budget, staffing, and curriculum as the three major buckets of decision-making authority that have the greatest impact on their ability to make decisions in the best interest of their students. Budget flexibility enables principals to purchase additional resources and supplies for their students and teachers, but it also allows them to be creative in solving problems. Staffing autonomy includes a number of elements, such as having the ability to hire the type of staff a principal needs to execute her school's programmatic vision or to dismiss teachers and staff who are not meeting expectations. Finally, school leaders indicate that having the ability to choose the curricular materials that their students use is another crucial element of being able to leverage autonomy to pursue a specific vision for their schools.

School Autonomy and Governance

Recommendations for State and Local Leaders

State Leaders

- **Determine where on the 2x2 of governance structure and school-level autonomy schools need to be to meet the state’s goals, and craft a policy accordingly.** There are a number of goals that a state might be pursuing by adopting an autonomous school policy. The 2x2 provided in Figure 3 can help policymakers identify the right balance of autonomy and governance to enable their states’ autonomous schools to meet the policy’s goals.
- **At a minimum, develop policy parameters that enable greater budget, staffing, and curriculum flexibility.** School leaders consistently identify these autonomies as critical to executing school-level decision-making, so any autonomous policy ought to include these autonomies at a minimum.

Local Leaders

- **Develop a clear theory of action for how increased autonomy will help a school achieve its goals.** School leaders, with the support of district personnel, should work to develop a clear plan for how the autonomies they are using will help them achieve their goals for their school and students. Having a clear plan and theory of action will enable school and district leaders to apply flexibility with intention and measure and evaluate progress to support course corrections as necessary.

While the charter theory of action encompasses a relatively straightforward approach to accountability, the breadth of autonomous school policy designs complicates the design of accountability structures.

School Accountability

Accountability is the other half of the autonomy-for-accountability bargain. While the charter theory of action encompasses a relatively straightforward approach to accountability – in strong charter sectors, schools that fail to meet the expectations outlined in their contracts face increasing interventions up to and including closure – the breadth of autonomous school policy designs complicates the design of accountability structures. Determining whether autonomy is “working,” and thus whether a school ought to be subject to interventions, isn’t straightforward. The variety of policy goals, coupled with a lack of data, make it challenging for policymakers to hold autonomous schools accountable, or even clearly define accountability structures consistent with policy design elements.

Finding 5: The breadth of autonomous school policy designs complicates the development and implementation of appropriate accountability structures.

Designing accountability structures for autonomous schools is not as clear-cut as it is for charter schools. For example, in some states, autonomy is an intervention for persistently low-performing schools; in those cases, what should accountability look like? Policymakers must consider carefully the purpose of the policy, the types of schools that are participating, and other accountability structures already in place in the state in order to craft an accountability system that supports autonomous schools in meeting the goals of the policy.

Finding 6: States collect limited data on the implementation of their autonomous school policies, which limits both understanding of how districts and schools are using autonomy and any measure of impact on student learning.

Developing a structure that holds autonomous schools accountable for meeting their goals requires having a nuanced understanding of the level of autonomy and decision-making authority a school leader has over various elements of her school, the degree of fidelity with which that autonomy is being implemented, and the extent to which those elements are related to student outcomes (or any other goals an autonomous school has in place). Gathering this information requires robust data collection policies and sophisticated data analysis procedures. Only then can policymakers begin to determine when and how to intervene in a struggling autonomous school.

School Accountability

Recommendations for State and Local Leaders

State Leaders

- **Develop accountability structures that are clearly tied to the policy’s goals and the needs of participating schools.** Accountability for autonomous schools is not straightforward. Policymakers must create accountability systems that meet the different needs of participating schools. For example, a policy aimed at supporting turnarounds might need an accountability system that relies on growth and improvement metrics, while revocation of autonomy might be a meaningful accountability measure for a policy that provides autonomy as a “privilege” to high-performing schools.
- **Develop a system to collect and use data on the autonomies that schools are implementing and the results they are achieving.** Collecting and analyzing data on autonomous schools will help schools, districts, and policymakers both evaluate individual schools’ performance and assess the efficacy of the policy overall. States should collect data on the number of schools participating in the policy, the type of autonomy they’re implementing, and the degree of implementation, as well as student test scores, demographics, and other data relevant to the policy’s goals (e.g., school culture data).

Local Leaders

- **Ensure alignment between school-based autonomies and school goals.** In contexts where school districts are empowered to approve autonomous school plans, districts need review processes that ensure tight alignment between a school’s goals and the autonomies it is requesting. This will enable districts to conduct quality evaluations of schools’ plans and progress over time.
- **Develop high-quality data collection, reporting, and analysis procedures.** Schools and districts need to develop good data policies and procedures to support their own evaluation and continuous improvement and to facilitate the state’s data collection and policy evaluation efforts.

Implementation

The findings related to policy design discussed above can help policymakers think through key considerations during the policy design process. But policymakers' work does not end with designing the autonomy and accountability facets of the policy. Our research surfaced several other factors related to on-the-ground implementation that policymakers should consider as they craft autonomous school policies and that local leaders must consider in their implementation.

Finding 7: Most traditional school leader preparation programs do not prepare candidates with the skills and mindsets necessary to run autonomous schools.

Effectively leveraging autonomy as a school leader requires different skills and mindsets compared to leading a traditional district school.

Effectively leveraging autonomy as a school leader requires different skills and mindsets compared to leading a traditional district school. Leaders must have not only a proven track record of quality school leadership, but they must also be up for a new challenge, ready to try new things, able to work through complexity and ambiguity, and willing to think strategically about their goals for their students and their schools and how to achieve them.¹¹ Most traditional school leader preparation programs do not train school leaders in these skills and mindsets; as a result, school leaders may need additional training and support as they take on a new role.

Finding 8: Shared services between school districts and autonomous schools can be an incentive for some leaders and operators, but can also create additional challenges.

School districts typically provide a number of services for their traditional schools, including enrollment, facilities maintenance, food service, and transportation. They often provide the same services for autonomous schools, but they don't always. Some districts have opted for arrangements that allow autonomous schools to purchase their own services, either from the district or from independent vendors. These various arrangements can have pros and cons for autonomous schools. In some cases, shared services boost the efficient provision of necessary infrastructure, but in others, centralizing these functions can unintentionally constrain the ability of schools to exercise autonomies critical to their vision. As a result, whether and how the district and its autonomous schools will share services ought to be a critical discussion point.

Finding 9: Autonomous school policies can be an avenue for creating community buy-in and support for local schools.

Many of the leaders we spoke with indicated that delegating decision-making authority to the most local entity possible — the school — can help reestablish community support for and input in the local education system. Some autonomous school policies require approval or input from teachers and community members before autonomous status can be granted.

Implementation

Recommendations for State and Local Leaders

State Leaders

- **Provide resources for implementation.** Running an autonomous school requires different skills and knowledge than running a traditional public school. Many school and district leaders noted this as a pain point for implementing autonomous school policies. State leaders can help mitigate this challenge by providing additional resources, such as funding or technical assistance, to support leaders as they embrace their new responsibilities.

Local Leaders

- **Provide support for school leaders and central office staff as decision-making shifts to the school level.** Both school and district leaders require different approaches to leadership and decision-making to effectively implement school autonomy. District leaders may want to consider creating a separate office to oversee and support autonomous schools, given their differing needs. District leaders should work to understand the skills and mindsets that currently exist at the district and school level, and develop training and support for staff to hone the skills necessary to successfully implement an autonomous school model, especially since district staff roles may shift as schools take on greater decision-making authority.
- **Be explicit about which services will and won't be shared between the district and its autonomous schools, and understand how the chosen approach will impact both entities.** While shared services between school districts and autonomous schools can be an incentive for participation in some contexts, it can also create challenges. District leaders should facilitate a thoughtful conversation about the extent to which autonomous schools will or will not have access to district services, such as food service, transportation, or facilities management.
- **Create opportunities for community input in autonomous schools.** Autonomous schools can provide school systems with an opportunity to engage community members in meaningful local control of schools. If this is a goal for local leaders, districts ought to develop structures, such as local school governance teams, that enable community members to work closely with school staff and district leaders in the creation and ongoing operation of autonomous schools.

School autonomy has a long history, and these policies continue to proliferate, whether as a tool for turnaround, a mechanism for strengthening local control, or as a means of providing district schools with similar flexibility to charter schools with which they compete for students. With the success of high-quality charter schools and some promising examples of autonomous district schools, it is likely that an increasing number of states and districts will adopt and implement autonomous school policies.

We hope that a stronger understanding of key policy design elements along with insight into how these policy design decisions play out will help leaders, authorizers, and advocates better understand the challenges and opportunities of these policies to enable strong policy design and implementation support in pursuit of them.

Endnotes

- 1 Jane Hannaway and Martin Carnoy, *Decentralization and School Improvement: Can We Fulfill the Promise?* § 2 (New Brunswick, NJ: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 1993), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED359627.pdf>.
- 2 Jennifer Dounay, "Site-Based Decisionmaking: State-Level Policies," Education Commission of the States, April 2005, <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/61/13/6113.pdf>.
- 3 "A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century. The Report of the Task Force on Teaching as a Profession," Carnegie Corp. of New York, NY, May 1986, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED268120>.
- 4 Susan Fuhrman and Richard Elmore, *Ruling Out Rules: The Evolution of Deregulation in State Education Policy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, March 1995), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED383057.pdf>.
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- 6 "State Progress Toward Next Generation Learning: A National Landscape," Foundation for Excellence in Education, June 2019, <https://www.excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ExcelinEd.Innovation.NextGenerationLearning.NationalLandscape.Report.pdf>.
- 7 Some states provide greater autonomy for schools that are implementing certain programs. Florida law, for example, provides for "innovation schools of technology." Eligible schools are granted flexibility from specific state statutes and rules. To be eligible, schools must adopt and implement a blended learning education program. See: Florida Statutes § 1002.451 (2019), http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?mode=View%20Statutes&SubMenu=1&App_mode=Display_Statute&Search_String=1002.451&URL=1000-1099/1002/Sections/1002.451.html.
- 8 In states where all schools are eligible, there is typically still an application process through which the school leaders must develop a plan that explains how the school will use greater autonomy to improve student outcomes.
- 9 These arrangements vary by state. In some places, the district cedes full governance control over the schools to an independent board; in others, the district cedes only partial decision-making rights to an independent board. The exact contours of these arrangements are typically drawn up in contracts or MOUs between the board and district.
- 10 In Indiana, for example, many of the innovation schools operating in Indianapolis are charter schools, authorized by the mayor's office or another independent authorizing entity. However, through an MOU with the district, these schools can access certain district services such as transportation or facilities. The students in these schools are counted as part of the district's enrollment, and their test scores contribute to the district's overall performance.
- 11 Mary Wells and Tresha Ward, "Autonomous District Schools: Lessons from the Field on a Promising Strategy," Bellwether Education Partners, October 29, 2019, <https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/autonomous-district-schools-lessons-field-promising-strategy>.

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Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.

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