Getting Started on School Autonomy

Christine Campbell
July 2013
Working With Several Assumptions

• Strong leaders can succeed in any system, but they must swim upstream, deal with inefficiencies and it turns off a group of people you’d rather have interested.

• Autonomy provides freedom to make good (and bad) decisions. The role of the district is to buttress principals and protect students.

• The whole point of autonomy is improved schools and student prospects, not just autonomy for autonomy’s sake.
Autonomy

• Based on findings from interviews with autonomy architects in:
  – New York City DOE
  – Louisiana RSD
  – Tennessee ASD
1. Need a Commitment From the Top

- Superintendent/CEO
- School board
- Cabinet/Department heads
  - Staff in Budget, HR, Facilities may resist
2. Clear Message for All About Autonomy

• Why principal/school autonomy?
  – Assumptions that principals know best for their schools, central office must find best leaders, protect from distractions, hold them accountable

• How will things change?
  – Clearly define autonomies and ensure nothing will hinder or block them
  – Major changes at central office
  – Clear vision of what this new principal looks like so principals know what to aim for

• What protections will be in place?
  – For principals just starting
  – For students in autonomous schools
3. New People, New Skills Lead This Work

- Need capable, experienced, rogue, entrepreneurial, successful principal in charge at central office
- Could come from the charter sector
- Able to choose staff to support the work
4. New Reporting Structure, New Mandates

- Restructure with managers similar to the “entrepreneurial principal” in charge, comfortable with risk taking
  - Intermediate roles in the district will not want to devolve power to principals.
    - Had power in old system and won’t support principals in the ways they need supporting.
    - Also won’t fire the principals who are not performing.
- Must be a buffer, “red phone,” prevent CO from communicating (emails and meetings), get help
5. Grid your principals

Assessing principal possibilities

- +
  mediocre, can be great

+ +
  great, great

- -
  not great, not great

+ -
  great, won't make it
6. Compete or Pilot It

- Recruit enthusiastic volunteers
  - High performing schools
  - Magnet and special purpose schools
  - Schools whose leaders volunteer
  - Able leaders who would be strengthened by autonomy
  - Schools with new leaders, especially individuals who have led autonomous schools elsewhere
  - Low performing schools whose staffs and leaders think autonomy will help them avoid closure

- Start it off to the side, gradually shift resources until it is the way all schools are run
7. Worry About Your Pipeline...

- Do you know where your best principals come from? Find out.
- Be ready to tap your best principals not working in schools
- Turn your best principals into talent scouts
- Develop your own preparation, get waivers from the state
- Send cohorts out to strong training, e.g. Rice University’s Education Entrepreneur training
8. ...AND Don’t Avoid the Hard Decisions

• Not all principals will make it
  – Some will prefer to retire
  – Some already struggle and will not survive

• Use “the grid” to understand where your principals are

• Immediately get to work on the “-,-” category – open up those slots.
9. Prepare to Support Those in the Middle

- Can’t hire/fire your way out of this
- Principals have been poorly trained in prep, and learned different survival skills under old system – they need help with budgets, talent management, data, etc.
- Best support may come from outside central office. Find it or develop it.
- Evaluate what’s working and what isn’t—focus on outcomes. Iterate/rapid prototype. Don’t wait to fix things.
10. Autonomy only works with clear and real accountability

• Districts need a clear accountability system.
  – Performance framework for all schools
  – Clear goals for all schools

• Performance contract that makes clear what principals must accomplish, AND follows through.

• Cycle of responsibility and expectations will attract a new kind of leader.
Important:
Please scan your worksheet with a CRPE staffer before leaving the session!

1. Fill out your session worksheet in your district group.
2. Scan your worksheet with a CRPE staffer.

We are capturing the work so we can further assist in implementation. Some of your district worksheets may be used to inform district narratives on CRPE's website.