School Autonomy

In portfolio districts, principals and teachers—the people who work with students everyday—can decide what and how to teach to bring out the best work in their students. The principal is the center of the portfolio strategy.

A portfolio district superintendent believes the most important figure in improving student achievement is the school leader, and that they should be given as much authority as possible to make the right decisions for their school—getting to choose who is part of their teaching and administrative team and having the budget and freedom to buy the curriculum and services they feel are right for the school. In exchange, principals need to work within their budget and be held accountable for results. Applying this freedom to all schools, not just charters or high-performing district schools, means that existing schools are strengthened, have a greater chance to do what they need to succeed with students, and can be held accountable for performance.

Autonomy is important for both principals and districts because it removes the district from the inherent conflict of telling schools what to do and then faulting them when it doesn’t go well. It also gives principals and teachers the freedom to do what they think is right for individual students, something that is very hard for the district to do well at the individual level.

EXAMPLE

School-Level Autonomy in Three Districts

1. In early 2002, New York City’s then-Chancellor Joel Klein started a pilot of school autonomy with a 60-school Empowerment Zone. Leading this small group of schools was a cohort of early adopting principals who were attracted to these ideas and ready to be held accountable for their work. Autonomy was eventually shared district-wide over the course of several years, which gave the district time to work with leaders who may not have had strong operational skills. It also gave some principals time to decide to stay or leave.

2. In New Orleans, where almost all schools are charters, schools have great autonomy; however, the small and still-declining number of remaining RSD-run schools has various levels of autonomy.

3. In Denver, roughly 30 innovation schools have waivers allowing them to control staff selection and dismissal. When combined with charters, these schools make up nearly half of Denver’s schools. Innovation schools are also able to control budget and pay, and Denver is considering more autonomy over curriculum for all schools. Currently, schools that apply for a waiver to use a different curriculum are almost always approved.
ELEMENTS OF A FULLY DEVELOPED PORTFOLIO IMPLEMENTATION ON AUTONOMY

- Common performance framework in place
- All schools control:
  - Staff selection and deselection
  - Budget
  - Pay
  - Curriculum choice
- Autonomies are defined through MOUs, performance contracts, or charters
- Schools are free to seek contractual waivers or exemptions

METRICS AND PROGRESS INDICATORS FOR DISTRICTS

Is the school district granting greater autonomy?
- Increasing % of principals identified as autonomous
- Increasing % of school-level expenditures discretionary to school
- Declining number of new staff placements made by direct placement

Are the principals are using autonomy?
- % of schools that choose own instructional support organization(s)
- % of schools selecting a curriculum other than the district curriculum
- % of schools with alternative pay structures
- % of principals trying new schedules and class configurations