

Next Generation School Districts:

What Capacities Do Districts Need to Create and Sustain Schools That Are Ready to Deliver on Common Core?

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About This Report

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ABOUT THE CENTER ON REINVENTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

Through research and policy analysis, CRPE seeks ways to make public education more effective, especially for America's disadvantaged students. We help redesign governance, oversight, and dynamic education delivery systems to make it possible for great educators to do their best work with students and to create a wide range of high-quality public school options for families.

Our work emphasizes evidence over posture and confronts hard truths. We search outside the traditional boundaries of public education to find pragmatic, equitable, and promising approaches to address the complex challenges facing public education. Our goal is to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America's schools.

CRPE is a nonpartisan, self-sustaining organization affiliated with the University of Washington Bothell. Our work is funded through private philanthropic dollars, federal grants, and contracts.

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Foreword

Every sector of the U.S. economy is working on ways to deliver services in a more customized manner. In the near future, cancer treatment plans will be customized to each patient based on sophisticated genetic data and personal health histories. If all goes well, education is headed in the same direction. Personalized learning and globally benchmarked academic standards (a.k.a. Common Core) are the focus of most major school districts and charter school networks. Educators and parents know students must be better prepared to think deeply about complex problems and to have skills that are relevant for jobs that haven't yet been created.

Promising new school models are showing what's possible by:

- Creating adaptive daily learning plans.
- Using data to target interventions and learning opportunities for students.
- Redefining the role of teaching to focus on diagnostics and coaching rather than lecturing.
- Flexing staffing plans to meet the learning needs of students.
- Changing the definition of “school” so that students can access the best learning opportunities in their communities and globally.
- Developing, selecting, and assessing new technology-based tools to enable all of this.

But innovation in the classroom or even the school building only takes you so far. Without parallel changes in district-wide systems, efforts to support an academic sea change, like Common Core, are doomed to fail. Twenty-first century learning practices demand twenty-first century systems. Schools need to procure the best talent and tools to support their efforts and they need to be able to do so quickly. Gone should be the days when a simple request might take 12 months to implement. Gone should be the days when antiquated technology infrastructure and policies prevent schools from experimenting. Gone should be the days when a school design ends when the principal leaves. The district operating system is outdated and needs as much redesign as our schools.

In this series of white papers, we've taken a look at the problem of system redesign from a variety of perspectives:

Next Generation School Districts goes deep into the question of which system policies are most likely to get in the way of implementing personalized learning at scale. We work outward from the school to define the new capacities and functions districts need to develop. We make the case that districts are currently unwittingly hostile to school-level innovation. For that to change, they must aggressively work to change the incentives, policies, and structures so that they encourage and free up schools to innovate.

High school redesign is one of the most elusive reform challenges to date. *The Case for Coherent High Schools* explains why personalized high schools are hard to get and keep in a traditional school district, and shows how we can make them much more broadly available through changes in policy and philanthropic investments. Drawing from examples of successful and unsuccessful high school redesign efforts, we argue that stable leadership, school-level autonomy, and choice for both staff and families are necessary to support high school redesign at scale.

In *Redesigning the District Operating System* we look underneath the big structural questions to the inner workings of a school district. We describe a set of interlocking, mutually reinforcing

functions like procurement, contracting, data and IT policy, the general counsel's office, human resources, and the systems for employee and family engagement. We explain how this "operating system" impedes school-level initiative and problem solving and argue for a concerted effort to redesign these critical functions, which are too often ignored in school reform conversations.

There's a common theme that runs through each of these papers: Delivering twenty-first century learning experiences at scale will take much more than just inventing interesting new school designs. If we're serious about innovation, states and districts will need to tackle politically difficult subjects like union contracts, accountability policies, and school-level autonomies. We'll also need to tackle some pretty boring, but essential, implementation work to replace antiquated and risk-averse central office systems and habits with nimble and updated ones. In each of these papers, we provide examples of successes and recommendations for what school leaders can do, but the first step is recognizing the work ahead.

We know the values and practices necessary for school systems to achieve much greater levels of dynamism in their problem solving. It is in our power to make these changes; so far we have simply chosen not to.

At CRPE, we're dedicated to finding the bold, evidence-based ideas to support 1) excellent and equitable student and family choices, 2) coherent and innovative schools, and 3) dynamic systems of schools. These papers lay the groundwork for new ways of thinking about the intersection of these three important realms.

—Robin Lake, Director of CRPE

Introduction

The Common Core State Standards are expected to focus educators on new, higher standards, ensuring that students are exposed to the subject matter and skills that will prepare them for higher education and rewarding work. The standards have been lauded as a way to focus educators in every state on meeting empirically based, rigorous college entry requirements. Thus far, most of the discussion about preparing for the Common Core has centered on schools, teachers, and adjustments to instruction. Noticeably missing from the conversation has been how school districts, which have failed to meet other sets of learning standards in the past, can rise to the challenge of all that the new Common Core standards imply. This paper makes the case that they can, but that it will take a concerted effort to shift districts away from their compliance-based functions of the past and toward a dramatically different role of managing performance, procuring and supporting innovative new school designs, and pushing decision-making authority down to the school level.

In this paper, we first make the case that the Common Core standards cannot, on their own, result in better teaching and learning. To be successful, schools must have coherent and innovative instructional and staffing designs, new approaches to personalizing education, high-quality teachers, links to community partners, and several other key attributes.

We then argue that districts are currently designed to make it difficult for such schools to exist and replicate throughout a city. If districts are serious about making sure that they have not 2, but 20 or 200, schools that are capable of meeting Common Core's lofty aspirations, they will have to change the way they operate by developing new capacities and eliminating ineffective policies that impede innovation and strong school design.

We close with a preliminary analysis of what those new district capacities are. In the coming year, CRPE will expand and refine this list, based on our research in several districts. We will also present case studies and analyses on implementation lessons and implications for whether and how districts can rise to the challenge of Common Core.

The Common Core Is Necessary, but Not Sufficient

The academically challenging Common Core standards were developed in part as a response to the realization that the United States has begun to significantly lag behind other OECD countries in preparing our students for college and careers. This is particularly true for low-income and minority students. More rigorous standards may be especially important for disadvantaged students who are disproportionately likely to attend schools where subject matter coverage and performance expectations are weak.

Students are not likely to learn what they are not taught. But standards, though necessary, are not an effective reform all by themselves. For standards to have the desired effect on student learning, many important things need to happen at the school level. School leaders and teachers, particularly those responsible for disadvantaged students, must have the:

- Ability to learn about and access new and promising curricula, materials, and teaching methods.
- Capacity to diagnose and solve problems, adjust strategies, and be accountable for results.

- Freedom of action to pursue new ideas and continue improving instruction until all students meet standards.
- Incentives strong enough to motivate the search for better approaches and to overcome personal and organizational inertia.
- Incentives to collaborate so that student learning accumulates smoothly from one course to another and one year to another.¹

There are good reasons to believe that these factors will not come about without dramatic and intentional intervention and reform. In the early 1990s, states and districts invested a great deal in new standards and aligned materials, but few created requisite freedom of action or performance incentives for schools to adjust their practice. Nor did states give principals the necessary authority over teacher hiring for them to ensure that teaching content and pacing was consistent throughout their schools. Finally, a lack of performance accountability meant that disunified and ineffective schools had little incentive to change. This was particularly true in large cities serving mainly disadvantaged students. In many cities, district and school leaders thus concluded that the expectations were unrealistic and discouraging to disadvantaged students and their teachers.

New York City provides a case study of the standards movement before and after district-level changes to support implementation. New York had performance standards prior to the city's "Children First" initiative of the 2000s, but school-level autonomy and accountability were severely limited in the system until reforms that took place under Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein. Until the 2005–2006 school year, principals lacked authority over key staffing decisions. They were often forced to hire the most senior teacher, and more experienced teachers could bump novice teachers from their jobs without principal or staff input.² Prior to 2008, the system did not use a weighted student funding formula, which allocates a school's resources by student count and characteristics. Needy schools generally received more money per pupil (not accounting for staff salaries) through categorical funding, but these funds were constrained by specific purposes.³ Accountability was also lacking. Based on tests aligned to the standards, the state classified the lowest-performing schools as "school under registration review" (SURR), but before reforms under Bloomberg and Klein, only the very lowest-performing schools ever entered SURR status. As a result, most school-level personnel were not affected by this system.⁴

The Children First reforms greatly expanded school autonomy in hiring, budgeting, and curriculum decisions and concurrently increased accountability, closing schools that consistently demonstrated low student gains relative to their peers. While student outcomes in NYC's small schools of choice were uninspiring before Klein's reforms, recent analyses of NYC's small autonomous schools found that they have a positive effect on student achievement and graduate a larger share of students than high schools serving similar populations, even as graduation rates in comparison schools increase.⁵

Creating Redesign Proof Points for College- and Career-Ready Schools

Through its Opportunity by Design work, Carnegie Corporation of New York (Carnegie) has taken the initiative to create more “redesign proof points” that can lead to steady performance improvement for schools serving disadvantaged students. Based on the experience of the small schools in New York City, Carnegie hopes to create a cadre of new high schools that incorporate the following integrated principles to meet the demands of the Common Core. According to Carnegie, a high-performing secondary school:

- Has a clear **MISSION** and coherent **CULTURE**.
- Prioritizes **MASTERY OF RIGOROUS STANDARDS** aligned to college and career readiness.
- **PERSONALIZES STUDENT LEARNING** to meet student needs.
- Maintains an effective **HUMAN CAPITAL STRATEGY** aligned with school model and priorities.
- **DEVELOPS AND DEPLOYS COLLECTIVE STRENGTHS** of teachers and staff.
- Remains **POROUS AND CONNECTED**.
- Integrates **POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT** to optimize student engagement and effort.
- **EMPOWERS AND SUPPORTS STUDENTS** through key transitions into and beyond high school.
- Manages **SCHOOL OPERATIONS** efficiently and effectively.
- **CONTINUOUSLY IMPROVES** school operations and instructional model.⁶

These principles, grown out of the New York City Small Schools Initiative and emerging practices in the field, have produced strong results and are consistent with decades of research on the attributes of effective schools.

The principles are also being put into action outside of New York. The Denver Center for International Studies (DCIS) is one example of a district high school that is effectively preparing its students for college and career. For the last four years the school has graduated 100 percent of its seniors, all of whom matriculated in college. The school uses a series of three large-scale research projects based on students’ interests as one way to personalize learning. DCIS stresses that students live in a global society and partners with community groups like the Rotary Club, the Institute for International Education, the World by Road, and Namlo International to provide students with meaningful out-of-school experiences.⁷

Commonly lauded charter management organizations such as Aspire Public Schools and Summit Public Schools also exemplify the Carnegie principles. For over a decade, Summit and Aspire have operated with a tight focus on preparing students to attend and succeed in college. They are intentional about hiring for fit with their organizational mission and allocate significant resources to finding, onboarding, and developing individuals whose values and belief systems align with theirs (Aspire has developed a teacher residency program to ensure that their new teacher training aligns to school values). The organizations are deeply committed to students’ postsecondary success. Aspire uses the motto “college for certain” to clearly communicate its values to school communities. Summit tracks their graduates to and through college, using data on student obstacles and successes to adjust their practices.

Although Aspire and Summit have been successful with students for many years, they are now looking to serve their students even better by adopting blended learning, or the combined use of face-to-face and virtual instruction. Blended learning often uses adaptive software to personalize instruction so that students can navigate content at their own pace. It also frees teachers up to give more small-group or one-on-one instruction to students who are struggling or particularly advanced. In conjunction with online instruction, Summit and Aspire prepare students for college and career by emphasizing college-level writing, project-based learning, and noncognitive skills like perseverance and tenacity.

Recognizing that schools with these attributes don't just happen, but must be deliberately created and sustained, Carnegie has funded Opportunity by Design districts to: 1) launch new school design teams that will participate in a collaborative school design process; 2) design and open a portfolio of new high schools that integrate the Carnegie design elements; and 3) build capacity in districts to help them do this work in the longer term. Wave 1 Opportunity by Design districts included Cleveland, Philadelphia, New York City, and Denver.

Carnegie also funds Springpoint: Partners in School Design (SPSD), which provides intensive incubation support to school district design teams to seed and grow significant numbers of innovative new high schools and develop district capacity so that schools are ready for the rigor of the Common Core. Guided by the Carnegie principles, SPSD helps school design teams create unique models based on their students' needs. The hope is that SPSD's work with partner schools and districts will create proof points and models for others attempting to use innovative strategies to meet the challenges of the Common Core.

School Redesign Requires System Redesign

The Opportunity by Design schools, and others across the country that are preparing for Common Core implementation, cannot be successful in their efforts if the districts with whom they partner don't change the structures and practices to support coherent and dramatic school redesign.

Trying to launch new schools or transform schools into high-performing organizations is difficult because it requires working with many partners in a complex bureaucracy. And sometimes districts have created, wittingly or not, an environment that makes it next to impossible for redesigned schools to be successful.⁸ Limits on autonomy, control of staffing selection or de-selection, control of school budgets and curriculum, and a general tendency toward centralization and assimilation make being a "different" school a daily uphill struggle.

When districts have offered "charter-like" schools, as they have in Oakland, Chicago, and Boston, they often have not followed through with promised autonomies, or schools have not fully capitalized on their newfound freedoms. For example, "autonomous" schools in Oakland have had to complete waivers up to 40 pages long to exempt themselves from specific district-mandated reading programs.⁹ In Chicago, too, the creation of "autonomous" schools prompted few changes in central office policies and practices.¹⁰ Boston's pilot schools are granted many of the same freedoms as charter schools, but many have underutilized their autonomy. In particular, unlike charter schools, Boston's pilot schools have made very few adjustments to the length of the school day and year. Charter school students spend over 300 more hours in school than their pilot school counterparts. Time in school is one likely factor that has contributed to Boston pilot schools' failure to perform at the same level as Boston charter schools.¹¹

As a result of districts' unwillingness to loosen their grip and allow schools to move beyond the status quo, as well as the reluctance of many schools to take advantage of autonomy when it is granted, "charter-like" schools have not been very successful when that autonomy is not coupled by school and district capacity-building and redesign.

Districts Must Change in Order to Support Personalized Learning at Scale

The characteristics called for in Carnegie’s Opportunity by Design initiative represent what practitioners and researchers have learned over the past several decades about what makes some schools more effective than others, especially when it comes to serving disadvantaged students. There are examples of outstanding urban schools in almost every district, but they are usually few in number and their success tends to come and go with extraordinary school leadership.

Such schools are rare because many district structures and practices make it hard for strong schools to start up and sustain their focus over time. Schools can maintain clear missions, foci, and strategy only as long as strong principals can navigate or fight bureaucratic systems to do what makes sense for their students.

The challenge for Opportunity by Design districts—and for all districts that are serious about widespread innovation and personalized learning—is to transform the central office so that urban district schools don’t need to have superhero, maverick principals to be successful. Every school leader, not just the renegades, must see a path to coherently adopting the attributes that we know to be associated with highly effective schools.

As an exercise in understanding the impediments to school innovation without district innovation, consider the challenges of a typical urban district attempting to start a number of schools designed around the Carnegie principles that we outlined earlier.

The first challenge would be maintaining a clear mission, a coherent culture, and an effective human capital strategy aligned with the school model and priorities. The district work rules and assignment policies for teachers, aides, janitors, and maybe even principals would prevent school leaders from hiring people who agree on the mission and instructional strategy. Even if they could initially hire strategically, in many districts it would be a challenge to keep the staff intact over time. Successful principals are commonly transferred to other schools that desperately need to be turned around, leaving a trail of backsliding school performance in the wake of the principal’s departure.

Even before the school was up and running, the normal district approach to starting a new school would likely work against the school’s coherency and success. The typical school district starts new schools by asking a star principal to figure out how to run the school, rather than building a strong team and assessing its capacity to deliver on its promises. That principal may never have started a new school before and may have no experience with an innovative mission or structure. The district would likely feel compelled to rush the start-up process, rather than learning from charter school or other new school development experiences that indicate that school teams need at least a year of incubation and planning to fully develop detailed and coherent school plans.

In a typical district, families—who may or may not agree with the school’s mission—would be assigned to the school. Families that disagree with the school vision might resist implementation of the new model or demand a different approach. Slowly but surely, well-intentioned but diverse pressures could erode the new school’s strong internal purpose, leaving school culture and performance to hinge on the principal’s ability to “sell” the school’s vision to parents, students, and teachers.

Even after promising a fair amount of autonomy, most districts slowly begin to dictate new terms to schools, eroding their focus and coherence over time. Often that erosion comes in seemingly innocuous forms, like mandated district-wide professional development. Staff development needs for innovative schools are often unique. Some use specialized coaches, for example, to support

project-based learning that combines technology with teacher-led instruction. Teachers in these types of schools are quickly frustrated when told they must attend generic staff development programs.

Schools pursuing innovative strategies also need to have the ability to rapidly purchase from appropriate vendors as they attempt to customize learning needs. They must be able to pool all available funds to purchase technology and to make trade-offs between various staffing models and program priorities. In many large urban districts, however, procurement policies and timelines are neither quick nor flexible. Broadband access in many school buildings is weak or nonexistent, and available computer and other technologies are often badly outdated. New schools could easily find themselves waiting eighteen months to two years to purchase a technology that is then outdated by the time it arrives.¹²

In terms of organizational learning and improvement to support innovative schools, rarely do urban districts support short-cycle organizational learning and adjustment. Instead, district change tends to come through a slow bureaucratic chain, leaving teachers confused, fatigued, and distrustful of district policies.

The most innovative, mastery-based learning models push the envelope on old assumptions about teaching and learning. They challenge state or district seat-time requirements, which base course credits on instruction time, not mastery of content.¹³ They challenge our notions of how school accountability is measured. They even challenge our ideas about how teachers are evaluated. These schools need strong leaders to champion them, and the freedom to select from a range of high-quality providers and assistance (e.g., online learning programs), selecting tools that best meet their non-traditional needs.

The Opportunity by Design initiative argues that schools must be porous and connected with the community in order to develop and deploy collective student, teacher, family, and community strengths, to optimize student engagement and effort, and to empower and support students. Any district school has some capacity to employ these engagement strategies, but these strategies are much harder to pursue if schools don't have real autonomy. It's difficult to hire someone to manage community-based internships, for instance, if the school doesn't control its own budget, or to hire community leaders to teach coding classes if the teachers contract or state regulations dictate hiring practices or forbid alternative certification. It can be equally challenging for high schools that are truly redesigning themselves around radically personalized instruction to allow students to take courses from other high schools or even community colleges that can offer courses or expertise that the school can't offer.

Schools attempting to implement the Opportunity by Design principles will struggle mightily under the normal district modus operandi unless districts actively work to ensure that these schools are given the space and support to succeed. Although districts might create exceptions to the rule for a small number of schools, solving these problems at scale requires another level of commitment. It means finding ways to identify, sustain, and replicate success. It means clearing away hurdles to nimble school problem solving. Creating innovative, highly personalized schools ultimately has to be thought of as a challenge of scale.

What Do Districts Need to Do If They Are Serious About Creating Highly Personalized Schools?

There is reason to hope that states and cities will learn from the past and combine new standards adoption with complementary changes in policy and investments in capacity. Recent improvements in numerous large-city school systems illustrate how standards can lead to school quality and student performance improvements for disadvantaged children. These improvements—in New York City, New Orleans, Denver, and many other cities—have been driven by a coherent strategy to create new freedoms and performance incentives for schools while engaging new people and ideas, including charter school operators and diverse independent support organizations, in a more broadly defined public school system.¹⁴

Leaders in these cities embrace higher and better standards as a way to set appropriate goals for all students. In addition to standards, reforms in these cities have three active ingredients: ways to build school and teacher capacity, greater freedom to solve problems at the school level, and strong incentives to improve. These cities and other portfolio cities fully embrace freedom of action and performance incentives, giving schools control over hiring and budgets and making it clear that schools that can't move students ahead can be closed and replaced.

Recent experience in portfolio cities reveals something else about how standards, in combination with other reforms, can benefit disadvantaged students: schools serving the disadvantaged generally cannot improve as much as needed in a single leap. Steady improvement over time, whether created at the school level by teachers and leaders or by a school network or management organization, requires many cycles of testing and refining ideas, plus efforts to increase staff skills through training and turnover. This process needs to happen within the school and also at the district level, always trying to open a school with a promising model and using it to replace the most consistently low-performing schools.

To set the right conditions for creating significant numbers of Opportunity by Design schools, districts will first have to acknowledge their problems, and next, systemically attack structural barriers to change. This will take leadership and commitment at the executive levels and throughout the system to:

- Give schools autonomy over use of staff, time, money, and curriculum.
- Allow schools to adjust assessment and accountability systems.
- Remove central office hurdles to school-level solutions.
- Promote choice, information, and engagement for students, families, and staff.
- Develop diverse school supports.
- Identify, sustain, and replicate success.

GIVE SCHOOLS AUTONOMY OVER USE OF STAFF, TIME, MONEY, AND CURRICULUM. District leaders must understand that innovation cannot be dictated. It will only come from unleashing the imagination and talents of qualified school design teams. This means giving school leaders as much control as possible over hiring and evaluating their staff so that everyone in the building is fully committed to the new approach. It means giving them full control over their budget so school leaders can revise staffing structures and professional development, and make quick technology purchases to align with the school model without increasing overall costs. It means freeing the schools from directives related to curriculum and instruction, such as district-wide pacing guides, formative assessments, and textbook purchases, so that schools can be free to use online instructional materials and pace instruction to individual student progress.

ISSUES FOR DISTRICTS TO CONSIDER

- Can the schools hire teachers without regard to seniority? Will the schools have at least some freedom to set their own criteria for evaluating / removing teachers?
- Does the district fund schools on a per-pupil basis? Does the school get the full per-pupil expenditure, including federal and state categorical funding?
- Can schools control their own schedules? Can they extend the school day?
- Can schools experiment to allow staffing structures to flex with student needs?
- Can schools reprogram funds to buy technology or other services?
- Are there structures in place to protect innovative schools from re-regulation or interference from central office?
- Does the state allow for digital content to be purchased with instructional material budgets?
- Are there limits to class size and state-prescribed student-teacher ratios?
- Do schools have the ability to choose their own curricula and their own formative assessments?

ALLOW SCHOOLS TO ADJUST ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS. The accountability systems that many urban districts have in place may need to be rethought in support of Opportunity by Design schools. First, districts need to ensure that schools have the capacity to use formative assessments that are aligned with college-going standards and the Common Core to track whether students are mastering those standards before they take summative standardized tests. Learning management systems are a way to collect mastery data and track student progress and are an increasingly powerful tool for facilitating mobile, flexible, and project-based learning collaborations. Learning management systems can be provided centrally, but schools should have the option to operate their own if they wish.

Next, districts need to make sure that, whenever possible, they are tracking whether or not schools are making expected academic progress. In new schools and innovative new programs especially, it is important for districts to quickly identify whether a school's approach is working as planned and ensure that the school team receives rich feedback to adapt and improve quickly. If the school fails to improve in a pre-determined time period, the district must be willing to intervene without recentralizing control. This might mean giving the school clear indications that it is not on track

with expectations and will be closed unless outcomes dramatically change. Innovative school designs cannot become an excuse for random experimentation at the expense of student learning.

ISSUES FOR DISTRICTS TO CONSIDER

Are their assessment and accountability systems:

- Based on student gains?
- Aligned with the Common Core?
- Designed not to punish schools if ratings temporarily fall when Common Core assessments are introduced or when a school adopts an innovative new approach?
- Designed to consider gains in student persistence, credit accumulation, graduation?
- Designed to accommodate risk / innovation?
- Designed to intervene at pre-determined points if a school is persistently failing?

REMOVE CENTRAL OFFICE HURDLES TO SCHOOL-LEVEL SOLUTIONS. Schools pursuing truly innovative approaches will not prosper in rigid, bureaucratic district environments. They may need to quickly purchase technologies. They may need to partner with outside organizations. Because they will have more autonomy and control over their programs and funding, they may need to purchase individually priced services from the central office on an as-needed basis.

Other issues can be hiring, budget approvals, and other reviews that can delay implementation of school decisions, demands that principals attend meetings, or mandatory district-provided professional development that takes teachers out of school but doesn't address the school's needs. Most central offices are built to produce these kinds of demands and controls, and it will take more than just a statement of intent from district leaders for the central office to change.

Districts that are serious about Opportunity by Design schools also need to be serious about facilitating rapid-cycle procurement, providing schools with voluntary participation in district economies of scale (for example, district-wide technology purchases or staff development) and integrating external partners into schools and student education. A strong central office department leader can build relationships with other department heads and negotiate workarounds for a few schools, but anything more requires clear mandates from top officials and true central office restructuring. Another paper from CRPE names positive freedoms that districts must create and outlines what the central office has to stop doing.¹⁵

ISSUES FOR DISTRICTS TO CONSIDER

Do procurement processes:

- Allow schools to purchase supplies quickly and easily?
- Enable rapid prototyping and short-term trial contracts with emerging providers?

Do central offices:

- Allow schools to purchase services (professional development, etc.) in an a la carte fashion?

Are external partners able to:

- Work in schools during regular hours?
- Teach credit-earning courses? Do so online?
- Award credits without constraints on class size and seat-time?
- Attend regular school staff meetings?
- Have access to student records?
- Discuss individual student progress, remediation strategies with teachers?
- Facilitate school partnerships through dedicated central office supports and strategies?

PROMOTE CHOICE, INFORMATION, AND ENGAGEMENT FOR STUDENTS, FAMILIES, AND STAFF.

Opportunity by Design schools will be far more sustainable and focused if they are schools of choice—not assigned schools—for both students and staff. Districts will need to provide strong community outreach, educating families about their new school choices and school performance. They will also need to think carefully about where to locate new schools so that every neighborhood has access to high-quality schools. Because the new schools may be taking unfamiliar approaches to learning, the schools and the district should engage with families to help them understand why these approaches are promising and to get their feedback as the school models develop.

Similarly, when recruiting school leaders, districts should provide detailed information about the school vision, autonomies, and accountability. Strong school leaders, in turn, will convey this information to prospective teachers. Communicating honest information about a school's culture, expectations for students and staff, and job demands will help to build a like-minded school team.

Districts will also need to plan for how teacher and principal placement will work in the long-term. When the innovation initiative involves just a few schools, it will probably be easy to work out hiring agreements with the relevant unions. When there are more schools, however, there may need to be negotiated contract provisions that allow staff to apply to a particular school and be hired without regard to seniority. Assembling a staff that has fully bought into the mission and culture of the school is critical for fostering school coherence and a spirit of continuous improvement throughout the organization.

ISSUES FOR DISTRICTS TO CONSIDER

- Can families apply to the schools in an equitable manner (e.g., via lottery)?
- Are families part of a deep engagement process that provides good information and good choices?
- Are principals placed in schools according to their ability to further the school's existing mission?
- Must teachers apply for a position in the schools?

DEVELOP DIVERSE SCHOOL SUPPORTS. The pioneering nature of Opportunity by Design schools will create many challenges for school design teams. The teams will be trying to figure out how to design innovative schools without much of a roadmap, finding people who are well qualified to teach in new ways, and operating without a lot of direction from the central office. To support those efforts, districts will be tempted to build a large team of centralized supports and issue directives, but it will be nearly impossible to do so in a way that will meet every school's unique needs.

Instead, districts should focus on recruiting a high-quality talent pool, cultivating and working effectively with a network of outside support providers, and facilitating communication between schools using similar designs.

ISSUES FOR DISTRICTS TO CONSIDER

- Is there a pipeline of teachers prepared to work in the ways that the new schools need?
- Are there structures in place to help schools self-affiliate with similar schools and collaborate effectively?
- Do central office staff regularly identify school support needs and try to find outside providers who can help meet those needs?

IDENTIFY, SUSTAIN, AND REPLICATE SUCCESS. Any district that is serious about innovation will have to take a radically different approach to creating new schools. The traditional approach to new district schools is to select a principal (usually from the existing district principal corps), tell the principal what kind of school should be started (e.g., an International school) and then set that person loose to figure out how to build the school program and staff. That approach will not help districts to sustain and replicate the school, or to attract and develop school leaders and staff that have true ownership over the school's approach and a clear sense of purpose and mission.

Districts that want to develop innovative schools at scale will instead need to retool the central office to establish new capacities to develop, select, and oversee school design and operations teams. The operating principle must be that the design teams will have most of the expertise to create and run the school without a lot of hand-holding from the central office. Design teams of three to four people who will eventually work in the school should take on the job with the

expectation that they will be given the freedom to make decisions that they feel best promote student mastery, and be held accountable for results. There should be explicit plans for collecting knowledge about what works and about replicating successful schools.

ISSUES FOR DISTRICTS TO CONSIDER

- Is there a process and expertise to rigorously assess the quality of school design teams and proposals?
- Is there a mechanism in place to ensure that effective new schools will be replicated?
- Is there a knowledge management system to assess what works and to spread that knowledge to other schools?

Summary of How Districts Need to Change to Support College- and Career-Ready Schools

Carnegie Principles for college- and career-ready schools	Enabling conditions (what Common Core-ready schools need to be successful)	District capacities (what districts need to be able to do to support Common Core-ready schools)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a clear mission and coherent culture. • Prioritizes mastery of rigorous standards aligned to college and career readiness. • Personalizes student learning to meet student needs. • Maintains an effective human capital strategy aligned with school model and priorities. • Develops and deploys collective strengths of teachers and staff. • Remains porous and connected. • Integrates positive youth development to optimize student engagement and effort. • Empowers and supports students through key transitions into and beyond high school. • Manages school operations efficiently and effectively. • Continuously improves school operations and instructional model. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to assemble, manage, retain, and develop teachers and leaders. • Ability to select from a range of high-quality providers and assistance (e.g., online learning programs). • Access to timely and informative data on student performance and teaching effectiveness. • Control over budget allocations (e.g., may pool funds from different sources and trade off between salaries and other expenditures, including technology). • Time and support to incubate a coherent and effective design. • Students and families choose to enroll, are not assigned. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give schools autonomy over use of staff, time, money, and curriculum. • Allow schools to adjust assessment and accountability systems to provide school communities with rich data and to hold schools accountable for performance. • Remove central office hurdles to school-level solutions. • Promote student and family choice, information, and engagement. • Develop diverse school supports, including a strong talent pool, a network of high-quality support providers, and communication between schools. • Identify, sustain, and replicate success.

Conclusion

For schools to be ready to meet the challenges of the Common Core standards, they need the freedom to innovate. But school innovation is dependent on increased autonomy and school district innovation.

Despite the common barriers highlighted in this paper, in the past three years an unprecedented alignment of state education legislation, district boldness and persistence with problem-solving strategies, as well as an infusion of new talent from many sources, signals that school innovation is achievable. Districts can develop new ways of organizing themselves, devolving funds and authority to the school level and freeing schools to purchase support and services from a new market of providers. As important as the adoption of new policies are, districts must examine old structures and relinquish systems and cultures that are ineffective or are actively at cross-purposes with new visions and goals.

Districts still have a role to play, but that role needs to focus on providing the right incentives, supports, and regulatory environments to ensure school success. This is new territory for districts, and they need help re-envisioning and putting into practice new roles for the school board, superintendent, and central office. All these new roles focus on continuous improvement: creating conditions that support higher performance in existing schools, closing consistently ineffective schools, and creating new schools with promising approaches to instruction and student motivation.

The extent to which Opportunity by Design districts will succeed in creating new schools that are ready to meet the challenge of Common Core expectations is yet to be determined. If successful, these districts will provide a roadmap for others and a path to scaling up college- and career-ready high schools everywhere, showing districts how they can develop the capacity to transform their portfolio of schools, and helping them anticipate the costs that must be met and the capacities that must be built. If results are uneven, it will be important to know what caused some efforts to succeed while others failed. If urban districts fail overall to meet this urgent challenge, it will be critical to discuss and analyze what failure means for the future of urban school systems.

Endnotes

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