
SCHOOL REDESIGN

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION FORM

Please tell us about your organization and its accomplishments, and how your organization can help the students of Colorado reach their potential by completing the following form.

Instructions

- Please submit your organization's response electronically to: **PartnerRFI@cde.state.co.us** by **Friday, February 23, 2018 at 5:00 PM MST**. Late responses may be accepted or rejected by CDE at its sole discretion.
- Please address all of the questions in this application for your organization type. You may exceed the length of the boxes in the form – the PDF form will automatically add a scroll button within the box. However, please strive to keep answers concise.
- You may submit additional attachments that are directly relevant and provide additional support or evidence for the responses in the RFI form.
- If there are any questions about the RFI process or the PDF form, please address those to Brenda Bautsch at Bautsch_b@cde.state.co.us.

Public Posting and Release of Information

- CDE will publicly post the responses that sufficiently address all of the questions listed in the RFI and provide concrete evidence of improving student outcomes in low-performing schools on CDE's public website for schools and other interested parties to access the information: <http://www.cde.state.co.us/accountability/performance>
- This information will be posted no later than March 23, 2018.
- Further, all information submitted in response to this RFI (inclusive of submissions that are not posted on CDE's website) are subject to public release through the Colorado Open Records Act, CRS § 24-72-200.1, et seq.

Additional Information on the RFI Process

- In the event that a response is incomplete, missing information or needs additional evidence, CDE at its sole discretion may reach out to the respondent for more information or a resubmission, or CDE may elect not to include the response on its publicly posted list.
- This Request for Information will be re-opened annually to allow for additions to the public list of providers.
- If a provider is added to CDE's public list through this RFI process and needs to make changes to the posted information, please contact Brenda Bautsch at Bautsch_b@cde.state.co.us.

Background

1) Organization name: _____

2) Organization contact person and contact email and phone number:

3) How would you classify your organization? You may check more than one category:

- ☐ Charter network, charter management organization or charter school
- ☐ Turnaround leader development provider
- ☐ Management organization or non-profit network.

4) Describe what geographical regions in Colorado you would prefer to work in:

5) Please complete the following online form to select which school districts your organization is willing and able to engage with: <https://goo.gl/forms/8gceFV5PVEVnQZ0e2>

If applying as a *management partner or non-profit network* please complete the following questions:

1) Please list which of the following roles your organization can serve (check all that apply).

See Table 1 above for a description of the roles listed below.

- ☐ Whole system
- ☐ Instructional transformation
- ☐ Talent development
- ☐ Culture shift
- ☐ Turnaround leadership
- ☐ Other: _____

2) How will you differentiate your services to meet the unique needs of schools and districts in Colorado, especially those with historically underserved students?

- 3) When considering partnering with a school or district that you have not partnered with before, what would be the key aspects or conditions of an agreement you would need to have in place with the district (or authorizer) in order to make your school successful?

- 4) Describe your experience working with other third party providers to support coherent school and district improvement.

Evidence of Track Record of Improved Student and School Outcomes (ALL respondents)

- 1) Please illustrate your organization's track record in dramatically improving schools or districts and radically increasing outcomes for targeted groups of students. Include a description of the criteria and the data that you use to determine the impact of your work. Please highlight the context and location of where this work has occurred. Formal research studies are preferred, if available.

References

For management partners and turnaround leader development providers, please include the name and contact information for the last three schools or districts your organization contracted with. These schools or districts will be contacted by CDE staff for references.

For charter school networks, CMOs and individual charter schools who are submitting information, please list three references that could speak to your capacity to support successful student outcomes in a turnaround environment, including a current authorizer of one of your schools.

Reference # 1:

Reference # 2:

Reference # 3:



The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership

Eric B. Schnurer
January 2017



About the author

Eric B. Schnurer has served in all three branches of the federal government and for numerous state governments, as a speechwriter, policy advisor, prosecutor, general counsel, and chief of staff – and has worked in the private sector as a journalist, professor, business executive, and social entrepreneur. Today, he is president and CEO of a policy consulting firm advising members of Congress, governors, mayors and other officials across the country; a regular contributor on the future of government and public policy for several national and international publications; an adjunct professor of policy at various universities; and a fellow at the Progressive Policy Institute.

Mr. Schnurer is founder and president of Public Works LLC, one of the leading firms specializing in improving government management, policy, and efficiency, including strategic planning with public agencies and the executive branch at the highest levels. Public Works has worked with both state agencies and governors' offices around the country successfully to develop and implement innovative solutions to challenging problems. The firm uniquely functions as an on-going policy office and strategic planners for governors, agency heads, and other chief executives and has served as a policy office for several governors on an on-going, consulting basis. Public Works' education practice has conducted efficiency reviews of school districts in West Virginia, South Carolina, Louisiana and Texas, the state education system in West Virginia and New Mexico, and the higher ed system in Iowa; the firm has also advised the P-20 councils in Arizona and West Virginia and the California State University system on coordination and lifelong learning issues, and helped design early learning programs in Colorado and Washington State, among other projects.

The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership

JANUARY 2017

Eric B. Schnurer

INTRODUCTION

Springfield, Massachusetts, is where the United States' one wholly indigenous sport – basketball – was invented. It may soon be known for a completely different innovation.

The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP) is an attempt to create within the public schools the conditions that make charter schools successful, without the poisonous politics that often accompany expanding charters. The school district has contracted with a nonprofit board, a 501(c)3 organization, to oversee struggling middle schools. That board, which acts as a buffer between schools and district management, has empowered nine schools with autonomy and accountability, while bringing in an outside school management organization to run one of them.

These schools – and, in fact, the Zone as a whole – remain part of the public school district, drawing on it for a range of shared services. The teachers in the Zone are unionized; indeed, the union voted for these reforms. But the existing and new principals at the reins are being given authority to choose their own teaching teams, propound a vision for their school, and restructure the school day, curriculum, and budget to achieve it. While teachers cannot be

dismissed at will, principals do receive support to help underperforming teachers improve where possible and to remove them where necessary. And there are real consequences – for principals and teachers alike – for school failure.

The zone launched in 2015 with nine schools, and, after the first year, the worst-performing school was replaced by an outside organization. Meanwhile, at two other schools, the zone recruited new principals – veterans of charter schools – to launch new schools, starting with the 6th grade and growing a grade per year. They were given the opportunity to hire new staffs and design entirely new programs.

Springfield's is one of a small number of similar efforts around the country to create serious autonomy and accountability conditions in district schools. Proponents, in fact, see Springfield's experiment as neither watered-down charters nor charterized public schools, but rather as a "Third Way" that tries to capture

the best of both worlds. In the Springfield model, charter operators and union workforces don't just coexist but cooperate; neighborhood schools attract innovative leaders and teachers instead of families having to go in search of them elsewhere; and educators working in a traditional district with an elected board and collective bargaining agreements nevertheless enjoy some of the freedoms and responsibilities charters experience.

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It's too early to say anything about the results here. But if these "autonomy zone" models work, they could provide districts all across the country with a road map to create high-quality results without the brutal battles that often accompany charters themselves.



I. THE PATH TO EMPOWERMENT SCHOOL TAKEOVER IN MASSACHUSETTS

Massachusetts has long prided itself on its educational opportunities. It was the site of the nation's first public school, has long been home to some of the world's greatest universities, and possesses one of the most highly-educated populations in the country.

Almost a quarter-century ago, the Massachusetts legislature passed the Education Reform Act of 1993, whose main pillars were standards and high-stakes testing; inter-district public school choice; charter schools; and more equal state financing for rich and poor districts – an ideological *mélange* sometimes called “the grand bargain.” Over the ensuing two decades, Massachusetts emerged as a leader in K-12 educational quality.

Nonetheless, the results of the 1993 act proved uneven, with heavily minority districts lagging achievement in the state's other districts by widening margins.¹ The 2010 Achievement Gap Act (AGA) was intended to address this situation, classifying all schools into five categories. Schools ranked as “Level 4,” underperforming, are now required to produce three-year turnaround plans and receive some authority to make changes in the district's collective bargaining agreement (CBA). “Level 5” – chronically underperforming – is reserved for those schools that fail to improve adequately. It is essentially a death sentence, leading to state takeover, ouster of the management, and abrogation of the CBA.

The AGA led in 2011 to state takeover of the Lawrence School District, the state's poorest and lowest-performing. The Lawrence schools were placed in receivership, at the request of the mayor but over the strident opposition of

most local political leaders. The receiver, a former Boston school principal, worked with the teachers union but hired a local charter operator, Community Day, and UP Education Network, a Boston-based nonprofit that focuses on “restarting” failing schools, to take over three of Lawrence's low-performing schools.

Scott Given, a former principal of the Excel Academy charter school in Boston, founded UP in 2010. As a principal he had wondered, “How do we take the exciting practices in charter schools and bring them to the [traditional] public education sector?” So he left his job to attend Harvard Business School and develop a business plan. “I knew we needed two things,” he says. “A legislative structure that allowed us to keep all the students in the school but the flexibility to make changes within the school, and, secondly, the political will. We knew that anything we did would be disruptive of the status quo, and so we would need powerful political actors to make this cultural change within the schools.”

When the AGA passed, it created these conditions. Boston Mayor Thomas Menino and the city's school superintendent approached Given to transform a failing school into an in-district charter, with its own board separate from the Boston School Committee. (In Massachusetts, school boards are called “school committees.”)

The state has since taken over two districts in the central part of the state – Holyoke and Southbridge – and several individual schools. “Every district wants to avoid the state putting the entire district, or any one of its schools, into Level 5 receivership,” Given explains, “because it's loss of local control. It's a black mark on the leadership.”

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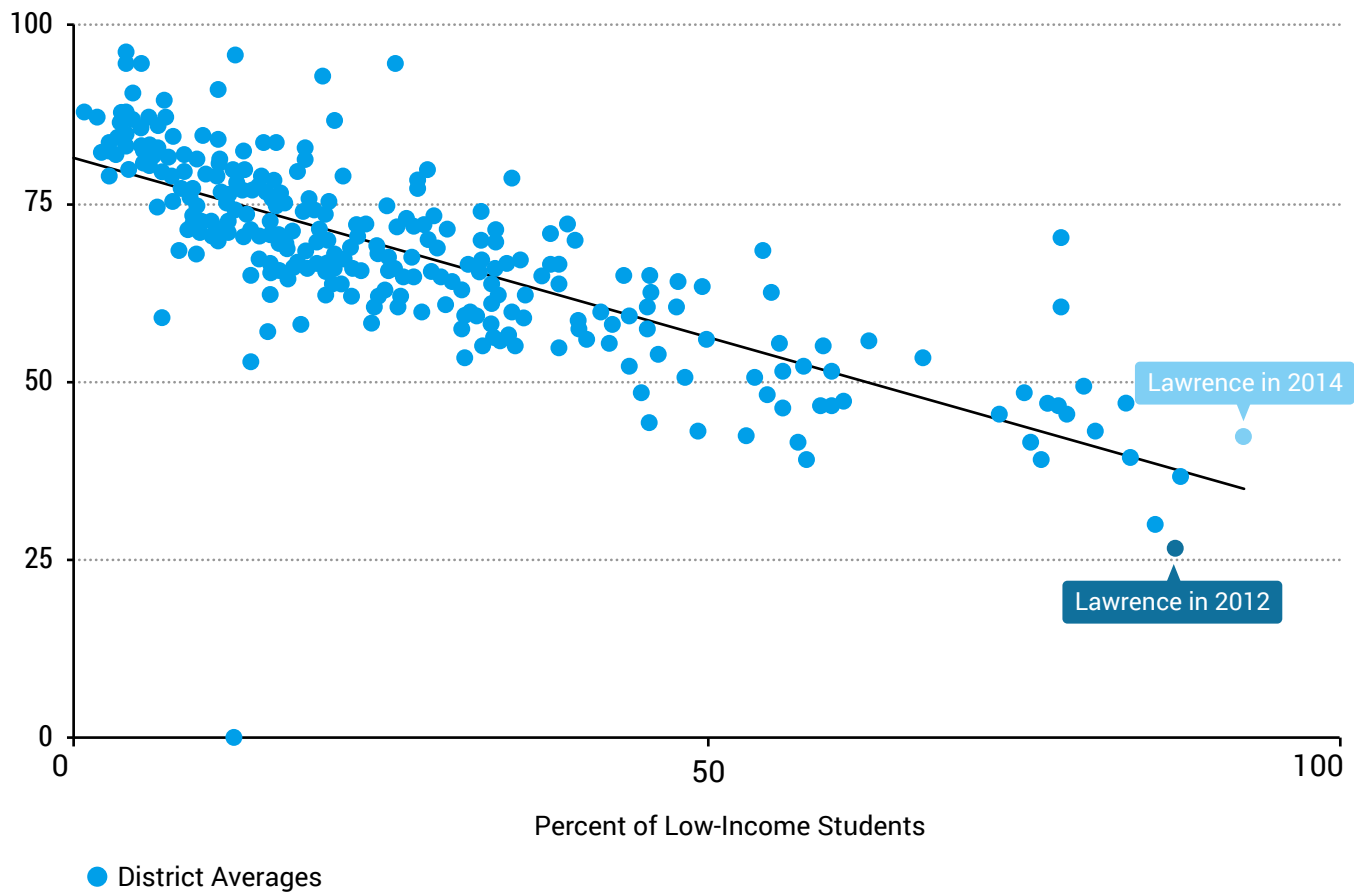
As the state prepared to take over the Lawrence schools, "Virtually all the [local] energy went into, 'How can we derail this decision by the commissioner?'" adds Massachusetts Commissioner of Education Mitchell Chester. But, after a year, a new paradigm began to gel: "Mayors and others began asking, 'What can we do to avoid the state taking us over and convince you we are making progress?'"

In 2010, there had been 35 schools designated as underperforming under the AGA. After three years, approximately one-third had made significant progress, and another third or so had made some progress but not enough to be released from oversight. "The remaining eight to ten," says Chester, "were still of concern." Three of them were middle schools in Springfield.

Meanwhile, the state intervention in Lawrence began to show impressive results. As you can see from Figure 1, Lawrence moved significantly above its expected performance levels, given its demographics, between 2012 and 2014.



FIGURE 1: Average % Proficient and Advanced by District in MA



Source: Empower Schools, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu>

As Table 1 shows, in Year 1 of turnaround, math proficiency rates increased by 10 percentage points, and, by Year 2, the median student growth percentile had increased by nine points in English Language Arts (ELA) and by 17 points in math. The most recent data show that graduation rates have increased to 72 percent

from 52 percent in the year before receivership. The number of Level 1 schools (those that are meeting state performance targets) has increased from two in 2012-13 to 10. Four years into the Lawrence reforms, 46 percent of Lawrence students attend a Level 1 or Level 2 school, compared to only 12 percent originally.

TABLE 1: Progress in Lawrence*

SCHOOL YEAR	NOTE	GRADUATION RATE	NUMBER OF LEVEL 1 SCHOOLS	NUMBER OF LEVEL 4 SCHOOLS	% OF STUDENTS SCORING PROFICIENT AND ADVANCED		SGP		CPI	
					ELA	MATH	ELA	MATH	ELA	MATH
2010–11	Year that DESE makes decision about LPS receivership	52.3	na	na	41	28	45	39	72.4	60
2011–12	Baseline year. Turnaround plan created, approved. Acceleration Academies happen just before MCAS testing	60.6	na	na	41	28	43	40	71.4	59.7
2012–13	First full year of Receivership and first year that MA uses “school levels”	61.3	2	6	41	38	47	57	71.7	66.6
2013–14	Second year of data	66.9	4	9	44	41	52	57	72.9	69.1
2014–15	Third year of data	71.8	6	9	45	44	49	53	72.6	69.9
2015–16	Fourth year of data (also a transition from MCAS to PARCC)		10	4	36	39	51	49	74.3	71.3
2016–17	Present year – no data yet									

* Students are categorized based on test scores in two areas – English Language Arts (“ELA”) and mathematics – into four categories: “Advanced,” “Proficient,” Needs Improvement,” or “Warning/Failing.” The designation “% P + A” indicates what percentage of students fall in the top two categories – Proficient (P) and Advanced (A).

A 100-point index that assigns 100, 75, 50, 25, or 0 points to each student participating in MCAS and MCAS-Alt tests based on their performance. The total points assigned to each student are added together and the sum is divided by the total number of students assessed. The result is a number between 0 and 100, which constitutes a district, school or group’s CPI for that subject and student group. The CPI is a measure of the extent to which students are progressing toward proficiency (a CPI of 100) in ELA and mathematics.

A student growth percentile (SGP) reflects how students have performed on tests compared to other students with the same scores in recent years. A student falls either below, at, or above the median of that group. A score of 30 means she scored better than only 30 percent of the peer group.

HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL

Lawrence and Holyoke, objects of the first state takeovers, are two of the three poorest school districts in the state, with the highest concentrations of minority students and the lowest performance on statewide tests.

Springfield is the third. Its school district, the state's second largest, is also the second poorest in the state, with 87.3 percent of its students living in low-income families.²

Like almost all the main actors in the unfolding drama, Tim Collins, the local teachers union chief, grew up in Springfield. His father, a union laborer, had served as Springfield city treasurer and head of the School Committee; his brother, a former Springfield Public Schools (SPS) teacher and principal, is now vice chair of the School Committee. "Our human resource pool out here is nothing like the human resource pool in the Greater Boston area," Collins muses. "But we face the same kind of challenges," including poverty, opioid use, an overburdened criminal justice system, and significant numbers of non-English speakers. "It's not an easy environment to be a teacher."

Springfield Public Schools (SPS) Superintendent Daniel J. Warwick has also spent his entire life in Springfield – 40 years of it in the city's school system, as a substitute teacher, teacher, special education supervisor, principal, and, eventually, superintendent. The district had worked hard to improve its middle schools, he says. "We'd had success turning around some low-performing schools, but not the middle schools, so it was clear we had to do something different." Warwick had already begun thinking about what that might be: He had initiated talks with UP Education Network about coming in to run one of the troubled schools; a local foundation was

backing charters in town; and Teach for America had arrived in the city to partner with SPS.

Meanwhile Chester called in Chris Gabrieli, a biotech entrepreneur in his first career, who had previously run unsuccessfully for public office, including the 2006 Democratic gubernatorial primary against Deval Patrick, who had gone on to win the governorship. A child of immigrants, Gabrieli had turned his family's small business into a successful, publicly-traded healthcare software company, and then became partner at a leading global venture capital firm, where he was named one of *Forbes* Magazine's top 100 venture capital investors. With an appreciation for the difference that education can make in a child's life, he had turned to a second career in education policy, forming the non-profit National Center on Time and Learning in 2000 to advocate for a longer school day. He based his runs for public office largely on the issue of education and began to teach as a part-time lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. After his 2006 campaign, he co-authored a book, *Time to Learn: How a New School Schedule is Making Smarter Kids, Happier Parents, and Safer Neighborhoods*.

With an appreciation for the difference education can make in a child's life, he had turned to a second career in education policy, forming the nonprofit National Center on Time and Learning in 2000 to advocate for a longer school day.

Chester and Gabrieli had worked together on expanding learning time in schools. They got to know each other better when Gabrieli and Empower Schools co-founder Brett Alessi helped design and launch the Lawrence takeover. In

Lawrence, Gabrieli says, Jeff Riley, the former Boston principal brought in to turn the district around, “made it the non-takeover takeover. He did everything he could to reduce the ‘takeover-ness’” – in particular, collaborating with the unions, even though he didn’t legally need to do so. “So I said, ‘Let’s do more of this.’ And the Commissioner was intrigued by the idea of doing this voluntarily.”

“My sense is, it lit his passion for this kind of change,” says Chester. Just as importantly, Gabrieli knew Springfield: Springfield’s city government had been placed in state receivership in 2007, to stave off bankruptcy. Governor Patrick had appointed a state Finance Control Board and put in charge the man he had defeated in the gubernatorial primary, Chris Gabrieli. Chester now told Gabrieli that, if he were interested, he should “pick up the phone and call Springfield, and see if they want to do something like this.” Gabrieli called Warwick “and he went in a day from ‘what are you talking about?’ to talking to people in Lawrence and checking this out, to seeing this as something positive.”

“We came up with the idea that this could be really useful for a cluster of schools, not just an individual school,” Gabrieli adds. The three Springfield middle schools in the worst shape would be the initial targets, with three more nearly as challenged included as well. This drew in more than 80% of all of the middle schoolers in Springfield – a big enough group to drive large scale impact on the whole system if it worked. Gabrieli asked that his group and Springfield be given some time to put together an alternative plan before the takeover decision occurred. “We gave them a month,” Chester says.

From two prior interventions – the one in

Lawrence and the municipal takeover of Springfield– Gabrieli knew the value of local cooperation. Chester had seen a state takeover when he served for a time in the Philadelphia school district. In that case, the takeover board consisted of three state-appointed members and two appointed by the mayor. Chester thought that served as a good model and decided to utilize it in Springfield. He and Gabrieli crafted a zone board of strong local voices, but with a majority – four of seven – appointed by the state. Gabrieli pitched Chester on some of the specific state appointees – “real reformers,” he says, “six of the seven from Springfield. The mayor, superintendent, and chair of the school board are members of this new board, so they are all in on this.” Gabrieli chairs the board.

This drew in more than 80 percent of all of the middle schoolers in Springfield – a big enough group to drive large-scale impact on the whole system if it worked.

Both Chester and Gabrieli also “were very interested in public/private partnership,” Gabrieli adds, so the idea for a new alternative to outright takeover – an independently-managed board – began to take shape. “We have to have open meetings,” Gabrieli notes, “but we’re a nonprofit.” The zone hired two full-time staff, while Gabrieli’s Empower Schools has dedicated three staff full time to Springfield, funded by their national supporters, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. “The Zone is doing this with almost all local public money,” Gabrieli adds. “We’ve raised and spent only \$1.5 million extra.”

The Empowerment Zone board members I spoke with agreed that Springfield’s unique model is working better than the traditional state takeover, because:

- local officials participated in setting up this structure, thereby creating more cooperation and avoiding time spent on negatives, and
- it brings in a multiplicity of actors and stimulates more innovation than a state takeover would.

"It's the mix," Chester commented, "having a state and local governance structure, and one that wasn't imposed on the city but was agreed to."

The extent and nature of "agreement" is still a matter of some dispute, though.

The state, in fact, told officials in Springfield, "These are our conditions for change," Chester says. If city and school district officials – as well as the local union – didn't agree to the terms, a more traditional state takeover of the local schools would ensue. "Sure, they could say, 'The commissioner had a gun to our head,'" Chester concedes. "But they agreed to it. Inertia is a powerful force. And without something to disrupt things, we're never going to get to effective change."

Local officials, including Tim Collins, the union chief, generally agree that having a gun to their heads made the decision easier. "We wouldn't have wanted this, to be honest," says Kate Fenton, the district's chief instructional officer. "But the alternative was far worse."

Superintendent Warwick presents it more positively: "I had worked with Lawrence and could see the success, so [the model] was attractive to me.... I knew Chris's work, I felt he had contacts he could bring to Springfield that we couldn't get otherwise." Gun to the head? "Eh, I don't look at it that way. Frankly, we had tried everything under the traditional way, and clearly

we needed to do something differently. We were failing these kids, so I was excited to try this."

However congenial the initial arrangements were, the key ultimately would be getting the School Committee and the teachers union to agree to this new-fangled approach.

The School Committee was being asked to delegate authority over the schools in the zone, but they preferred that to a state takeover. And most of the teachers, including the union leaders, liked the possibility of greater teacher autonomy, as well as a number of additional features: customized professional development and support, more time for planning and collaboration, and increased salaries for increased time commitments.

The key ultimately would be getting the School Committee and the teachers union to agree to this new-fangled approach.

Superintendent Warwick called Collins, the union chief, and told him, "We couldn't negotiate like we usually did." He had two arguments: a carrot and a stick.

"We needed more hours [from teachers] or we wouldn't get the results we want for these kids, but we're willing to pay more money for it," he told Collins. And then the stick: "Otherwise, I think the commissioner will" take over the six schools and charterize them.

Under the new contract, which just covers the zone schools, teachers are required to work a minimum of 1,500 hours per school year – considerably more than what teachers outside of the Zone work. For schools that expand teacher time even more, up to a maximum of 1,850 hours, the district offered \$1,000-\$2,000

more per teacher per year. “The key thing was that we upped the pay-scale,” says Warwick. “We didn’t simply ‘stipend’ the extra time – we increased the whole pay scale significantly, and I think that proved appealing to teachers.”

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In Warwick’s view, the extra pay has been crucial. When the city faced fiscal crisis, it was placed under a state control board. That board had imposed a pay freeze on teachers. According to Warwick, “we lost 1,800 of our best teachers.” Raising pay under the empowerment program “stabilized staff” and stopped the hemorrhaging of teachers. In fact, the district experienced lower summer turnover than usual, which Warwick attributed to “interest in the zone,” particularly the fact that the new pay-scale was also weighted more heavily to first-year teachers, so that many more “stuck around.”

For Gabrieli, the key was not the increased pay levels but rather the rest of the contract, which implemented the same pay structure negotiated in Lawrence: compensation based in part on performance, not just seniority or degrees attained. “As a former principal,” Warwick says, “it would have been my ideal contract.” For many teachers, exactly the same could be said. In addition to more money for longer hours, they got extra time for planning, for professional development, and for kids who were behind. For instance, part of the deal was the addition of a math academy during what



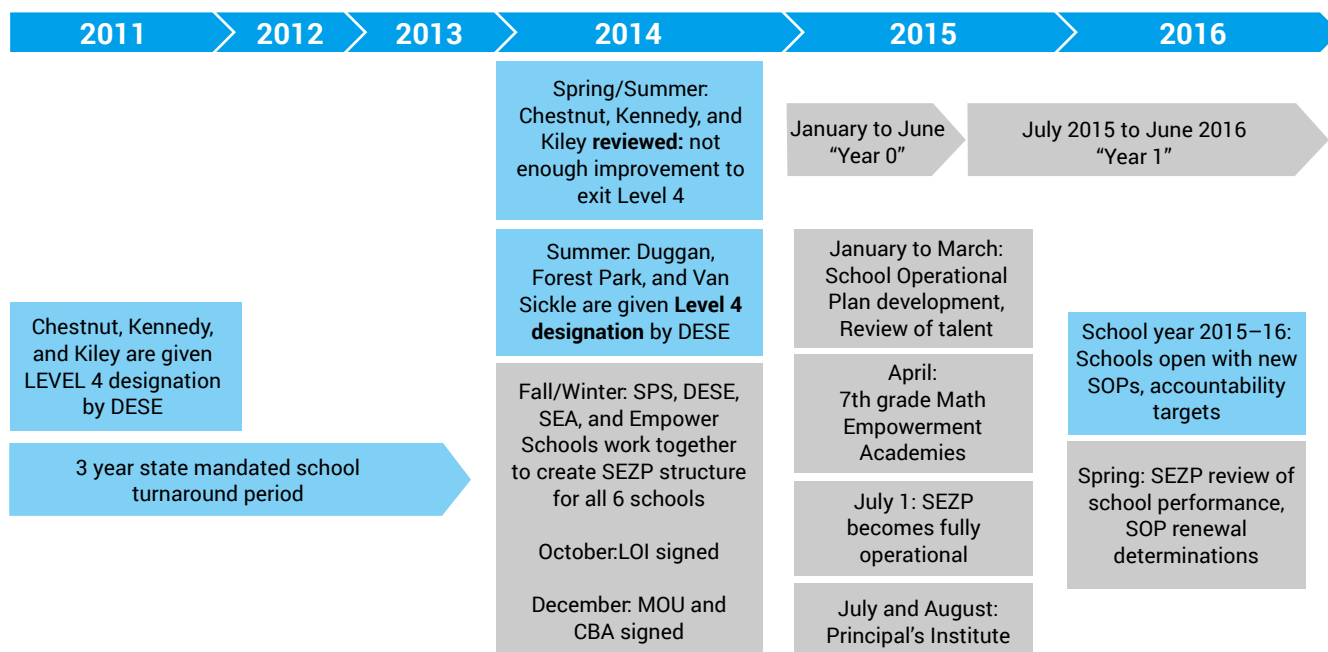
otherwise would be school-year vacation time. The bargain also gave them more input into how the schools were run.

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The school committee voted 6-1 in favor of the Empowerment Zone, and 92 percent of the teachers at the eight schools that would become part of the zone voted in favor of a new, streamlined contract.

“This is the most peaceful takeover substitute in America,” Gabrieli says.

FIGURE 2: Timeline of Events (2011–2016)



Blue boxes above represent school accountability check points, grey boxes represent Empowerment Zone operations.

Source: Empower Schools.

AUTONOMY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The Empowerment Zone provides principals with more flexible relationships both downward, with teachers, and upward, with central office administration. Chris Sutton, principal at M. Marcus Kiley Middle School, says, "I told my staff that what we were doing wasn't working, so we had to do something different. We had to think outside the box. But, if you're part of a system and you try to do something different, you get pushback. Now I don't have to worry about pushback from the district."

Other principals agreed: Instead of dealing with a complicated district bureaucracy involving multiple approvals, now all principals require for their plans is approval by the SEZP Board. "Communication is important between principals and the board. They have been very good in this model", says Sutton.

That's because the board understands that principals and their teachers need to make the operational decisions at their schools, Gabrieli says. "We don't know the answers, and that's something new for people in education policy to say. Our theory is: The people closest to the kids will have the best ideas about what to do."

One of the crucial elements is the mandatory institution of teacher leadership teams, which provide a "teacher's voice" in running the school. Four teachers elected by their colleagues and one appointed by the principal meet each month to act as the voice of the school's teachers. Each spring they work with the principal to develop a School Operational Plan for the coming school year; principals must agree with these plans or the dispute goes to the SEZP Board. So far, all principals and their teams have come to full agreement, so the board has simply ratified their plans.

"This is not a top-down model," insists Tom Mazza, principal of Forest Park Middle School. "This is a side-to-side model, and that's why this works."

Each spring they work with the principal to develop a School Operational Plan for the coming school year; principals must agree with these plans or the dispute goes to the SEZP Board.

"It's not one-size-fits-all," adds his deputy principal, Ervin Santiago. "That gets the teachers involved. And that gets teacher buy-in."

A group of teachers at Forest Park reflects the same view. "When you have teachers' voices heard, you have more buy-in," one says. "And that can only help the students."

"We're on our own," adds Mazza. "That has enhanced our closeness, enhanced our culture." The teachers agree: not having to answer to the district for everything has opened them up to new teaching resources and options, they say.

The teachers union chief, Tim Collins, also welcomes this autonomy – particularly the extent that authority was pushed downward to teachers. As Collins puts it, "Our schools in this city that are successful are those that have leaders who are successful at distributed leadership," in "empowering the people who actually have the responsibility. The key is, when people believe their voice is being heard and they can see their concerns in the solutions being implemented, that's when you see the needle start to move."

Mike Calvanese, the principal at John J. Duggan Academy, echoes this point. "Part of it is, get teacher ownership over the program," he says.

"The people who are implementing something have to buy into it."

But empowerment can't just provide autonomy in a vacuum. Autonomy to do what you want – whether in running the school or running an individual classroom – has to mean accountability for the decisions you make with that autonomy. These are two sides of the same coin. Accountability isn't just a punitive concept, as it's often presented; it's also an empowering one. In most public schools, principals and teachers don't feel (and aren't) accountable, because the key decisions – budget, personnel, curriculum, schedule – are made downtown. In the Empowerment Zone, adults in the school decide those matters. Actors outside the school are no longer much of a constraint. But that also means they are no longer much of an excuse. Principals and teachers bear, and must accept, the responsibility.

In most public schools, principals and teachers don't feel (and aren't) accountable, because the key decisions – budget, personnel, curriculum, schedule – are made downtown.

"That's the way it should be," says Calvanese. "If you had the prior [school] leaders here they'd probably say, 'Yeah, but we didn't have autonomy.' That's why I like this model: If you have autonomy, you can't point fingers." He tells his teachers, "If we don't fix it, we're going to have charters in here, or we're going to be taken over."

"What I like about autonomy," adds Ashley Martin, a Springfield assistant principal who assumed the principalship of the new UP Academy this school year, "is it makes

people – it makes me – tap into responsibility, because you have to own decisions.” Combining autonomy with accountability “shakes people out of their feeling that they’re at the bottom, they’re ‘the victim.’”

What exactly does accountability mean?

Ultimately, it means you’re rewarded for success and penalized for failure. As we’ve already seen, the teachers’ contract bases compensation not only on seniority or automatic “step” increases but on teaching evaluations, student outcomes, and the assumption of added responsibilities. But what about consequences for failure?

All principals were clear from the start: They were to meet the performance goals or face the consequences. And sure enough, not all schools thrived. “Some schools went south,” one principal says. “There was a lot of pushback from the union [at those schools], and that fed into it.”

One zone school was replaced after the first school year by UP Education Network. At two more schools, new principals were brought in to start new programs, beginning with sixth grade, that will replace the existing schools within two years. In all three cases, the new principals could hire their own staffs.

So everyone knows that new leaders or outside, private management could replace traditional public school principals at other schools – if necessary all of them, eventually. “We are agnostic about who can do the best job,” says Alessi, Gabrieli’s Empower Schools co-founder.

Scott Given, UP’s founder, describes his model as a school “restart.” The school’s existing teachers are invited to apply but not guaranteed a job. In fact, “We typically only rehire one or two

out of a staff of sixty,” he says. “We work hard to find the best teachers and leaders we can.” When they took over their first school in Boston, they had 4,000 applicants.

“The [teaching] talent is the crucial part of it,” says Anna Breen, principal of RISE at Van Sickle Academy, recruited to start a school over by phasing in one grade at a time. Breen is a 17-year veteran of the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) network of schools; she led KIPP’s flagship Massachusetts school in Lynn to the top 15 percent in the state despite a largely poor and Latino population. “I don’t believe there is any way you can take the same teachers and turn around the school,” she says. “You have to have the ability to hire your own staff.”

Nevertheless, principals in the established schools in the zone not starting from scratch do not have the ability simply to clean house. They have to follow normal state law for teachers with tenure, which allows them to fire for “inefficiency, incompetency, incapacity, conduct unbecoming a teacher, insubordination or failure on the part of the teacher to satisfy teacher performance standards...or other just cause.” That process is time consuming and lengthy, and local unions often contest it. But the zone does give principals support, so they have more capacity to run a thorough and fair dismissal process.

Tom Mazza, the principal at Forest Park, noted that “the difference is the level of support Empowerment provides us” in helping underperforming teachers write improvement plans to move them to higher performance – or providing the documentation necessary to get rid of them when they don’t. “I’ve non-renewed eleven teachers in two years here,” he says. “Teachers know,” as a result, that his

sole objective is to “put the best teaching corps before the students.”

But at least one zone principal, Daisy Roman-Davis, principal of the Van Sickle International Baccalaureate Middle School, would “like empowerment schools to have more autonomy in firing.” Some teachers have asked for transfers or resigned since she took over. “I’m okay with that,” she says. “The ones who are staying know what our vision is for moving forward.”

Tenured teachers who transfer or are moved out when an outside operator like UP comes in are guaranteed pay but cannot be forced on any other school, cannot be sent outside the zone, and cannot “bump” less senior teachers in the zone. This is in stark contrast to what has happened in the past. One of the turnaround models instituted as part of the 2010 state law required districts to remove 50 percent of the

teachers at underperforming schools if they wanted state turnaround money. Springfield moved them elsewhere, and “we have data that shows that where the preponderance of them landed – those were our next Level 4 schools,” says Pat Roach, the district’s Chief Finance and Operations Officer.

One of the turnaround models instituted as part of the 2010 state law required districts to remove 50 percent of the teachers at underperforming schools if they wanted state turnaround money.

The challenge of managing tenured teachers guaranteed ongoing pay falls to the zone’s management, which has been able so far to solve the dilemma either by finding a voluntary placement at another school or working to find new directions for the teachers. As Gabrieli notes, this limits the rate at which schools can be “restarted.”

BUDGET AUTONOMY

Mazza cites three elements “crucial to empowerment.” As noted above, one is teacher voice in running the school; closely related to that is “curricular flexibility.” But, says, Mazza, “First and foremost is the budget autonomy. With budget autonomy, I was able to hire a reading coach for every team in the building. It’s like Fantasy Football – you get to build your own team.” In the past, Mazza says, he had discretion over how to spend approximately \$350,000 of the school’s budget; now, he has control of – and responsibility for – the entire \$8.7 million operation. “That allowed me to choose: ‘I really don’t need those services – so what can I use that money for?’ Every decision counts here.”

The district keeps only 1 percent of federal funding, for the grant-writing overhead needed



to bring in those federal funds. It is allowed to retain up to 16.5 percent of the state funding for “non-optional services” – collective or legacy costs such as building maintenance, transportation, utilities, and the human resources department. The district calculates those costs, and, for year one, set their “price” at only 15.5 percent of per-student funding. That fell to 14 percent for the current school year – which “shows the good faith of the District,” according to Matt Matera, Empower Schools’ program director in charge of the zone. Matera calls this “a ‘high-integrity’ move by the district. It’s one of the best indicators of what good partners the district has been in this.”

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The zone keeps about 4 percent of the overall funding to pay its lean staff and cover overhead. The school receives the remainder of the funds and can use them as it sees fit: to hire additional teachers, counselors, or educational specialists or to purchase equipment or “optional services” like professional development. They can buy such services from the district or from other providers. “That required them to put together a cost for every item, but they did it,” says Calvanese. “I’ve got to hand it to them.”

Zone schools have “complete freedom to spend dollars how they want,” adds Warwick, but “many are buying central services because they’re pretty good.” He cites professional development for teachers as one example. Nevertheless, “it’s a competitive environment – [district] people

realize the services have to be good to get the schools to buy them.”

“When I was in a charter, we were always pitted against the district,” adds Ashley Martin, the UP Academy principal. “With this, it’s cooperative and communal – so much better.”

But there’s one problem everyone in Springfield seems to recognize about budget autonomy: “staff aren’t used to so much autonomy,” in Warwick’s words. “The strong ones are okay. The weaker ones, not so much.”

For example, says Collins, “No-one puts subs in the budget – so, if someone is out sick, collaboration time goes.”

“You can’t just give people responsibility for details they’ve never dealt with,” says Martin. To make things easier, the district’s business office is giving principals a menu of options to choose from, but, for those unaccustomed to doing the purchasing, there is a learning curve.

This leads to an important consideration in any autonomy zone: It turns out that management of a school requires a lot of, well, management. “Managing 100 people can be exhausting,” one principal observes.

To help, the zone allows each school to choose its own “support partner,” a nonprofit that helps and coaches principals. “It used to be the case that someone was brought over to contract, and I had to work with them,” says Sutton. Now he can choose. This approach – allowing each school to make its own decisions and providing assistance in doing so – allows for experimentation, communication about what works and what doesn’t, and, as result, learning and adaptation, he says.

"I've done turnaround, and you can't do it alone," adds Martin. "I'm so glad I have a team to support me. It was smart to pair schools with outside support partners."

"I don't know how I was a principal before empowerment," Mazza chimes in. "This is the future of education – it's the way it should be everywhere."

II. A MODEL FOR ELSEWHERE?

The Springfield Empowerment Zone launched its second school year in August 2016. It's too early to draw conclusions about whether it represents a model for school reform elsewhere. But it raises a number of questions worth considering as the experiment continues.

DOES IT WORK?

The most important question for any proposed educational reform is whether it improves educational outcomes for students. The first-year test scores under the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership, just reported last month, were mixed. As Gabrieli himself wrote to interested parties, they "both reflect modest gains and highlight continued challenges." The tables below show the performance of each zone school on two scores: composite performance index (CPI) and student growth percentile (SGP).

TABLE 2: School Year 2014-15 and 2015-16 SGP by School in ELA and Math

SCHOOL	ELA		MATH	
	SY 2014-15	SY 2015-16	SY 2014-15	SY 2015-16
CHESTNUT NORTH	24	22	29	34
CHESTNUT SOUTH	23	38	22	27
CHESTNUT TAG	33.5	40	30.5	31
DUGGAN	40	43	41	42
FOREST PARK	52	45	51.0	34
KILEY	34	43	39	35
KENNEDY	24	29	22	22
VAN SICKLE ACADEMY	41	24	39	13
VAN SICKLE IB		32		24
SEZP	37.0	38.0	36.0	30.0

TABLE 3: School Year 2014-15 and 2015-16 CPI by School in ELA and Math

SCHOOL	ELA		MATH	
	SY 2014-15	SY 2015-16	SY 2014-15	SY 2015-16
CHESTNUT NORTH	52.1	51.7	33.5	41.5
CHESTNUT SOUTH	52.5	65.5	36.4	44.3
CHESTNUT TAG	87.2	87.8	76.8	81.4
DUGGAN	74.6	73.7	56.6	58.8
FOREST PARK	75.4	74.1	59.0	58.1
KILEY	69.6	71.6	55.1	56.0
KENNEDY	55.8	60.0	40.9	39.5
VAN SICKLE ACADEMY	73.6	64.2	52.0	39.9
VAN SICKLE IB		75.6		52.5
SEZP	68.2	70.3	51.0	53.2

In writing to the zone board, Gabrieli summed up the data this way: “On three of the state’s primary measures, including percentage of students meeting standards, composite performance index (CPI), and student growth percentile (SGP), the majority of our schools show modest improvement over the previous year. However, [after one year] none of our schools reached our two-year goal of 50 median SGP in both English Language Arts (ELA) and math.”

But he also stressed the changes the zone is making: “We placed two new promising leaders and an operator at three of our most challenged schools and are increasing the use of the school supports found to be most effective in year one.”³

“They’re not what I would have wanted to see in year one,” Gabrieli concedes in conversation. “Still, these are tough schools at the bottom of the heap, so any gains are good. But I have very high expectations for year two.”

WILL IT LAST?

When I met with him, Tim Collins, the local union leader, said to me, “People wonder, is this just another new thing that’s going to change again? Because, in this city, we did use to have the Flavor of the Month.”

This is a valid concern anywhere. Advocates may well ask: Can this experiment survive changes in leadership at the state, local, or zone levels to achieve success? And, if it does succeed, will it then go away, leaving the system to return to its prior state? Past efforts to create “autonomous schools” in other cities have often been neutered over time. This is one of the biggest questions about autonomy zones: Can they withstand the bureaucracy’s tendency to resent special privileges given to a few and take them away at the first opportunity?

In the short term, the zone concept is locked in place. As a legal entity, the zone has a contract with SPS for five years, renewable based on achievement of the performance targets established in each school’s turnaround plan approved by the state. In the longer term, too, it can be cancelled only if both the district and the state agree to abandon the effort. “There’s no schedule or commitment to ‘return’ the schools,” says Gabrieli. “The Zone exists until the district and the state jointly agree to kill it.”

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“The idea,” says Gabrieli’s colleague, Sarah Toce, “is that autonomy is necessary for schools in turnaround mode – as they all are

right now – but also for schools to maintain their performance. That means that the zone governance will continue to grant these schools autonomy and protect that autonomy until it is proven that autonomy isn’t working.”

At the moment, the zone appears to lack any significant opposition. Gabrieli’s team responded to my repeated requests to identify opponents by insisting there aren’t any. One can search the press reports in vain for any consistent criticism. Both teachers and school board members approved the new contract by overwhelming margins; I encountered only mild criticism from groups of teachers at two of the schools.

Both teachers and school board members approved the new contract by overwhelming margins.

But, if the zone board continues to replace schools with outside operators, which reject more teachers, will the union balk? And will that result in the zone paying so many “excessed” teachers that the model becomes either unscalable or unsustainable? And will that then induce the Springfield School Committee to try to take back schools’ autonomy to hire and fire – or over operations more generally?

“The two biggest constraints” on school reform, cautions the district’s CFO, Pat Roach, “are the union contract and the School Committee, who are elected officials who view their constituency as being adults.”

Gabrieli isn’t worried about the union, because the zone empowers teachers in a way the union has long wanted. As for the School Committee, the fact that it retains its historic control over the vast majority of Springfield schools is, to Gabrieli, the “one thing that makes this more tenable: it’s only 16 percent of the kids. For

84 percent of the kids, the School Committee can still meet, the district can still do its thing. Maybe this is applicable to more schools down the road, but right now this isn't a threat to anybody."

If the Empowerment Zone expanded, however – became not a "zone" but an entire system – it would profoundly change the role of the School Committee and central administration, diminishing their power over operational decisions at schools. If that happens, Warwick says, his role "will have to be more of a facilitator, less that of a dictator. Sure, you're giving up power in a sense – but what we were doing wasn't working."

As education reform expert David Osborne observes, the School Committee and superintendent "would have to steer, not row. And that would be far more effective. When superintendents have to row – operate schools – they typically don't have time to steer." Will school boards and superintendents be willing to make that shift?

DOES SPRINGFIELD REPRESENT A THIRD – AND BETTER – WAY?

Massachusetts already has some experience with semi-autonomous schools. As in the rest of the country, the results have been mixed. In Boston, where most of the initial experimentation has occurred, charter schools have outperformed the traditional public schools by leaps and bounds, but a variety of semi-autonomous models have not fared as well.⁴

Around the country, most autonomy zone experiments have also disappointed. The most notable exceptions are Los Angeles and Memphis. In Memphis, "innovation schools" have succeeded in part by taking the best principals and teachers out of other schools – many of

which have then declined in performance.⁵ More promising is Los Angeles, where former Mayor Anthony Villaraigosa created the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools in 2007: a nonprofit organization with a five-year, renewable agreement with the school district. Since then, two other nonprofits have signed partnership deals, and there are about 30 network partner schools – all of which began as turnaround schools. At least two of the networks have impressive results. New versions of autonomy zone have sprung up in Denver and Indianapolis over the past two years, with their own nonprofit boards designed to ensure school autonomy. But all-charter models such as New Orleans and Washington D.C.'s Public Charter School Board have produced far better results than most semi-autonomous schools.

But all-charter models such as New Orleans and Washington D.C.'s Public Charter School Board have produced far better results than most semi-autonomous schools.

Where does the Springfield experiment stand in relation to these other models? As in Memphis, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, and Denver, Springfield's model was brought into being not by state fiat but through voluntary, if grudging, agreement of local leaders.⁷ As in Los Angeles, Indianapolis, and Denver's new zone, schools report to a nonprofit board, not the district, so they have greater autonomy than many such models and a buffer against micromanagement by the district. (The latter two models have even more autonomy, because their schools are not unionized.) As in Memphis, where "innovation schools" were given significantly more money, increased funding was also an important part of the equation in Springfield.



Where Springfield really stands out is in making schools accountable for their performance. In Memphis, innovation schools can be taken over by the state's Achievement School District and handed over to charter operators if they fail, but none have yet. And in Denver, the school board is on record supporting the same accountability for its innovation schools as for charters, but it has not yet closed any of them. Nor have Boston's or Los Angeles's pilot and partnership schools had to deal yet with the threat of replacement. Boston's own "turnaround schools" come closest to Springfield's in accountability: Of the dozen first identified in 2010, two have been closed. But even that pales beside Springfield, which

replaced the leadership and many teachers in three of its nine schools after one year. That kind of accountability should light a fire under all the other principals and teachers in the zone.

Where Springfield really stands out is in making schools accountable for their performance.

Springfield differs from true charters in several ways. First, since all zone schools remain in the union, though under a separate contract from the rest of Springfield's schools, the union retains significant political leverage. Second, tenured teachers have fairly secure jobs; standard state procedures protect them.

Third, parents don't get to choose their schools, as some (but not all) do in other autonomy zones. Choice gives schools an advantage, because students' parents – having made an active choice – tend to be more committed. The schools also have more freedom to create unique, innovative programs to meet the needs of their students, since no one is forced to attend. On the other hand, Gabrieli argues, choice brings complexity and transportation costs, and many parents just want a good school in their neighborhood.

The schools also have more freedom to create unique, innovative programs to meet the needs of their students, since no one is forced to attend.

In sum, Springfield has created the conditions for adoption of an autonomy zone system in a cooperative and virtually universally-supportive environment; placed that system under a nonprofit board to ensure true accountability and to insulate it from central district control; and provided needed supports and incentives for performance. And, unlike most other models, Springfield's zone has proven that it will create serious consequences for school failure.

Springfield has created the conditions for adoption of an autonomy zone in a cooperative and virtually universally-supportive environment.

CAN – AND WILL – IT BE REPLICATED?

The importance of the Springfield model comes down, ultimately, to whether other SPS schools and other districts will embrace it. Warwick's Chief Instructional Officer, Fenton, points out that Warwick has already taken steps in this direction with his other schools. "The Superintendent would say it's 'earned

autonomy,'" Fenton says. The district has given more budget control to non-Zone schools, funding for extended learning time if they wish, and expanded release time for teachers to engage in the planning and collaboration, from four days per year to seven.

"Some of the autonomies we've given to the Zone principals, we're trying to give out to the other schools," says Warwick. "Everything we find here that works, we're going to try to cascade out to the rest of the system."

"Our theory of change," Alessi adds, is that "other principals will want to get into the Zone." Zone principals point to at least one other Springfield principal, Kristen Hughes at the White Street School – not part of the zone – who has "stood up to" the central administration to do her own thing and demand a similar sort of autonomy. Not only has she succeeded – making her original school the only Massachusetts school to leap, during her tenure, from Level 4 to Level 1 status – but Warwick has entrusted her with the unique responsibility of running another school simultaneously.

And SPS recently approved transferring the High School of Commerce, a struggling high school, into the Zone next year. Teachers' union leader Tim Collins testified in favor of the transfer, the School Committee voted for it (again, 6-1), and even Mayor Domenic Sarno, a Commerce graduate, supported it as a member of the Zone Board, expressing his belief that this was the best path for his own alma mater.

So the model is spreading in Springfield. Gabrieli believes it can be useful in many places. "I look at it as a governance structure that enables things to happen that wouldn't otherwise," he says. He sees what he calls three "use cases":

- Driving change in low-performing schools where “something has to happen.”
- The opposite, and “equally interesting,” case of places – like Denver – that have high-performing schools “that want the same authority as charters.”
- Places that are launching new schools and want new design models such as blended learning for them. “We’re starting to see more interest in that,” Gabrieli says.

In all cases, though, Gabrieli sees the model as a partnership arrived at from both sides. “Everyone has to come together to make it work,” adds Warwick. Do you need a hammer – the threat of takeover – to do that? “Well, if others see it works, hopefully they’ll choose to go this way voluntarily.”

“I was hoping these would become proof points,” adds Chester – “that other districts would consider these changes without the threat of state receivership. Hopefully, there’s a tipping point. We’re not there yet.”

“Everyone has to come together to make it work.”

Denver school officials visited Springfield and are emulating it with their own zone, consisting of four schools and a nonprofit board that has a three-year agreement with the Denver school board. Principals of “innovation schools” that were frustrated with only partial autonomy initiated it and sought out Gabrieli’s organization, because of its work in Springfield. And another challenged Massachusetts school district – in New Bedford – has voted to explore the same model for three of its middle schools, without any state pressure to do so.⁸

Gabrieli believes the Empowerment experiment will work – and that it will spread voluntarily because of that success. Only time will tell if he is right. But, if he is, Springfield will add another important invention to its list – right after basketball.

Endnotes

All quotations not attributed in an endnote are from interviews with the author.

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Linking State and Local
School Improvement

The “City of Firsts” Charts a New Path on Turnaround

Ashley Jochim and Alice Opalka

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OUR APPROACH TO STUDYING THE SPRINGFIELD EMPOWERMENT ZONE PARTNERSHIP (SEZP)

This report is based on a case study of SEZP. In early 2016, we set out to understand the key characteristics of Springfield’s turnaround strategy, with a special focus on the advantages and disadvantages compared to other state and local turnaround approaches. Over the course of nine months, we interviewed a dozen officials involved in the design and implementation of SEZP, including state and district administrators, a group of principals working in the SEZP, leaders of a parent advocacy organization and the local teachers union, and representatives from Empower Schools, the Massachusetts nonprofit that helped support the creation of SEZP. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. We also reviewed key documents and student achievement data and tracked media coverage. While this assessment provided us a rich array of information about how SEZP was designed and implemented, we cannot say how it has shaped key instructional practices in schools, which ultimately is the linchpin of any turnaround strategy.

Introduction

In 2014, Springfield Public Schools (SPS) needed a change. The district, located in the western Massachusetts city of Springfield, had tried just about every strategy in the turnaround playbook to improve a set of struggling middle schools. But these efforts failed to generate the desired improvement in student outcomes and left the district at increasing risk of state intervention. District Superintendent Daniel Warwick observed, “We tried everything we could do at the district level [to improve these schools]... We were looking for something different.”

Springfield isn’t isolated in its effort to improve struggling schools. In recent years, state and district superintendents around the country have turned toward an increasingly diverse array of turnaround strategies and sought to tap capacity in the private and nonprofit sectors. This has included special state-run turnaround districts like Tennessee’s Achievement School District, reconstitution efforts like those in the federal School Improvement Grants program, and state takeovers of low-performing school districts in New Jersey and Massachusetts. But success with these efforts has proven uneven at best, and they usually generate significant political pushback.¹

In 2015, Springfield charted a new path. Drawing inspiration from national efforts to infuse schools with enhanced autonomy and accountability, the district voluntarily ceded operational control of six middle school campuses to the newly formed Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP), an independent nonprofit charged with overseeing the turnaround effort. SEZP offered principals freedom from district rules in exchange for increased accountability for results. These changes, along with a new collective bargaining agreement for teachers working in SEZP and new supports for students and principals, represent a marked departure from Springfield’s previous efforts. Their work also stands out among other turnaround experiments being hashed out in legislatures, state education agencies, and district central offices.

In 2016, we set out to understand how SEZP changed the way schools are resourced, staffed, and overseen and how this approach compares to more conventional turnaround strategies such as reconstitution, charter schools, and state-initiated turnarounds. Readers interested in how SEZP was created should read Eric Schnurer’s report on this topic.²

It is too early to tell whether SEZP will improve outcomes for students, but the model fills a gap for state and district leaders wary of growing conflict over charter schools and state takeovers and looking for new ways to instill transformative improvements in low-performing schools. SEZP offers a “middle way” between previous options: providing more local participation and less controversy compared to either state takeovers or chartering, and committing more deeply than conventional district-led turnarounds to school autonomy, tailored support, and choice of talent. However, all turnaround strategies involve tradeoffs, and SEZP, in offering more compromise and stakeholder involvement, may provide fewer opportunities to carry out the politically difficult changes to schools that some believe will spur good results. And, whether its leaders can make good on their intentions of infusing schools with greater urgency, capacity, and accountability for results depends in large part on the actions they take down the road. Regardless of what happens, Springfield has proven that innovations in local governance can offer new ways for states and districts to come together to support school improvement.

The Origins of SEZP

The history of Springfield, Massachusetts, reads like a classic American story. Like so many cities in the nation's industrial heartland, Springfield was formerly a manufacturing hub, home to Smith & Wesson as well as bicycle, automobile, and motorcycle factories. Like other cities, Springfield's economy struggled in the wake of declines in American manufacturing.³ As the industrial base left, so did the white middle class; by 2010 almost 40 percent of the city's residents were Latino, compared to less than 10 percent in 1980, and more than a quarter lived in poverty.⁴

But the city also had unlikely assets—namely, a history of pushing the boundaries of what's possible. The first gasoline-powered car and American English dictionary (Merriam-Webster) had their origins in Springfield. This track record garnered its nickname: “City of Firsts.”

QUICK FACTS ON SPRINGFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Like other urban districts, Springfield has struggled to adjust to rapid changes in the demographics of the students it serves. As of the 2015–2016 school year, 67 percent of the district's 29,000 students qualified as low income and 16 percent were English language learners, both of which reflect much higher rates than the average in Massachusetts.⁵

The district includes a total of 58 schools:

- 33 elementary schools
- 14 middle schools, 9 of which are part of the SEZP (including two 6th grade academies)
- 11 high schools, one of which will join the SEZP in the 2017–2018 school year⁶

Innovations often have their roots in false starts and growing pressure. For Springfield, the district was in search of a new turnaround solution after years of failed efforts to improve a set of struggling middle schools. And it was under growing pressure as a result of Massachusetts' tough accountability framework, which authorizes the state commissioner to take over schools and districts that fail to improve.⁷

Three of the district's middle schools became at risk of state intervention in 2011 when their performance put them in the bottom 5 percent of schools statewide. The district received additional funding to support a turnaround plan through Massachusetts' School Redesign Grants and was granted exceptions from Springfield's collective bargaining agreement for teachers to extend class time.⁸ By 2013, the schools were still struggling and the district sought to jumpstart improvement by partnering with Roland Fryer's EdLabs, a turnaround consulting group that supports school leaders to lengthen their school day, strengthen teacher hiring and professional development, and enhance school culture.⁹ But by 2014, the schools remained stuck in the bottom 5 percent, and the progress of three more middle schools had stalled enough to put them at risk of state intervention, too.

As described by Eric Schnurer of the Progressive Policy Institute in a 2017 report, these conditions created a window of opportunity for Springfield.¹⁰ The district worked with partners in the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and Empower Schools, a Bay State nonprofit focused on supporting new approaches to district governance, to create SEZP, an independent entity that would oversee and support the turnaround effort. And in late 2014 the local school committee, Massachusetts' version of a school board, voted to voluntarily cede its oversight and operational control of six middle schools to SEZP, a number that later grew to nine as smaller “academies” were created from the larger campuses. The move legally devolved much of the district's authority over the schools to a new nonprofit board charged with overseeing the turnaround effort.¹¹

The Building Blocks of SEZP

SEZP brought together both a package of reforms aimed at generating improvement and a new governance model that gives schools much greater freedom to change without needing to ask permission or fear regulatory second-guessing. These pieces work together: bold approaches to turnaround can stall out when confronted with rules and bureaucracy that undermine implementation. Likewise, changes to the rules and structures that surround schools mean little in the absence of new strategies to improve instruction.

SEZP as Turnaround

SEZP brought together both a package of reforms aimed at generating improvement and a new governance model that gives schools much greater freedom to change without needing to ask permission or fear regulatory second-guessing.

SEZP launched a set of turnaround strategies that aimed to improve the capacity of schools to be effective. Schools were granted enhanced autonomy over their operations in return for greater accountability for results. These efforts were buttressed by work to improve teacher and leadership pipelines and offer more tailored support for staff.

As others have observed, teacher and principal capacity is the linchpin of any turnaround effort.¹² Embracing a “build on the best” talent strategy, SEZP launched primarily with existing teachers and principals while actively working to improve schools’ access to effective teachers and leaders.¹³

The six original middle schools initially retained their existing principals and approximately 80 percent of their teachers.¹⁴

Increased school autonomy

With the creation of SEZP, principals and teachers gained increased authority over their budgets, hiring, school schedule, curriculum, and approaches to teacher professional development. This reflected SEZP leaders’ belief that schools are the “unit of success” and that school leadership teams are better poised to know which people and programs are worth investing in.

This autonomy is captured in three ways. First, schools gained substantial control over their budgets with 80 percent of state per-pupil funding and all federal funds under the discretion of school leadership teams.¹⁵ This meant that schools were no longer required to purchase centrally provided supports, and now had financial flexibility to invest in new curriculum, hire additional staff, or contract with external support providers. Second, schools gained autonomy over key elements of their operations, including the use of time, staff, and materials. School leadership teams gained the freedom to extend their school day—which all did—as well as to adopt new programs for students and staff. Third, with a new collective bargaining agreement in place for SEZP schools, principals gained additional flexibility over staffing, including mutual-consent hiring, an option to provide stipends to teachers who assume additional responsibilities, and enhanced dismissal authority. Principals and district stakeholders in Springfield praised SEZP’s commitment to providing schools with more autonomy. As one principal told us, “We have choices that we didn’t have before... I don’t have to look over my shoulder to make a choice.”

The new collective bargaining agreement between SPS and the Springfield Education Association was critical to providing SEZP schools with additional staffing and operational flexibility.

The new collective bargaining agreement between SPS and the Springfield Education Association (SEA) was critical to providing SEZP schools with additional staffing and operational flexibility. The contract, based on Lawrence Public Schools landmark agreement with teachers, eliminated centralized bargaining over working conditions, which often limits the use of time and school-level staff.¹⁶ Now, teacher leadership teams negotiate with school principals directly over working conditions, which become formalized in schools' operational plans. SPS union head Timothy Collins acknowledged that the threat of state intervention helped motivate a search for a new

collective bargaining agreement, but he also praised the contract for “democratizing” the decision-making process in schools and providing teachers a greater voice in the turnaround plan. The SEZP board decides all disputes between teacher leadership teams and principals; thus far, none have arisen.

Strengthening school leadership

Principals have generally welcomed these changes. As one principal told us, “The model...fuels me to want to do this work.... If people are telling you what to do... why even do the job? What are you there for?” But some principals have struggled under the weight of the rapidly shifting responsibilities. Principals and other officials told us that principals were learning how to manage budgets, design new programs, and make sure teachers felt included, all while trying to drive improvement in student outcomes—no small task.

Anticipating some of these challenges, SEZP sought to bolster school leadership capacity by directly funding a group of national partners to work with school-level teams as they designed and implemented their plans. Principals were paired with a “chief support partner,” such as the National Center on Time and Learning (which SEZP board chair Chris Gabrieli founded) or the Achievement Network, to receive hands-on support as they transitioned into new roles.

But capacity-building can only do so much. SEZP's leadership espouses high expectations for schools, and all school leaders currently operate on one-year contracts, though the board is working toward longer extensions as principals accelerate improvement. Principal replacements are viewed holistically; the board considers both weaknesses in current leadership as well as opportunities to bring in fresh talent.

To build a school leadership pipeline for SEZP, Empower Schools supported the launch of the “Founders Fellow” program in 2016. The program aims to identify promising leaders and support them with a one-year planning grant to develop a new school model. The first cohort of the program brought two new principals to SEZP—both veteran charter leaders—who launched 6th grade programs in two existing SEZP middle schools in the 2016–2017 school year. These programs will grow to serve 7th and 8th graders over the next two years, eventually replacing the former middle school programs.

SEZP has also sought to strategically grow existing staff into more demanding leadership positions. In the 2015–2016 school year, the board supported a current assistant principal to attend the National Principals Academy at Relay Graduate School of Education, an effort they hope will help to prepare him for future leadership opportunities in SEZP.

The SEZP board must approve all leadership replacements. In addition to bringing in new principals for two schools, the board approved UP Education Network, a nonprofit operator focused on in-district turnarounds, to take over the management of a third school which had struggled more than other SEZP schools. The SEZP board unanimously approved all three replacements.

Principals told us that the accountability pressures created a cultural sea change in the schools. As one principal said, “Districts have a hard time making people feel accountable. [SEZP] helped to bring fresh urgency to Springfield.”

Building a teacher pipeline

Springfield, like other districts in western Massachusetts, has also faced challenges around recruiting new teachers. In partnership with Holyoke Public Schools, another district in western Massachusetts, DESE, and a collection of charter schools working in the region, SEZP launched Teach Western Massachusetts in an effort to enhance teacher recruitment and effectiveness in SEZP schools. The project, supported by TNTP, offered principals a collaborative recruitment campaign as well as help with the hiring process. Participating schools coordinate internet job postings, engage in university and community outreach, and hold in-person and virtual recruitment events, with the aim of making better use of limited recruitment resources. Schools also partner to share staffing best practices and tools. SEZP used the recruitment campaign to tout leadership opportunities for teachers, which include working as teacher leaders to help design schools' operational plans. In the 2015–2016 school year, all SEZP schools opened fully staffed, compared to dozens of positions left open in previous years.

Tailoring school supports

SEZP also refashioned how schools receive support with a focus on “the right supports, not one size fits all.”¹⁷ School leadership teams can opt in to district-provided supports around curriculum and professional development, which some do. But they can also choose external assistance providers. The SEZP board arranges for national partners to provide principals and their leadership teams with academic and operational support as they transition to autonomy, and allocates funding for “Empowerment Academies” that provide high-dose tutoring for at-risk students. The district continues to support schools through a set of “non-discretionary services” that schools must purchase, including facilities, maintenance, transportation, and human resources processing. These expenditures are capped at 16.5 percent of the state allocation to schools, though to date, the district has come in under that mark, returning the savings to SEZP.

SEZP as Governance

Many districts around the country are trying to infuse traditional public schools with flexibility and a culture of continuous improvement, but attaining these goals is made difficult by the need to substantially shift the role of the district central office, as well as to support school principals as they pivot into new roles.¹⁸ Traditionally, school districts are charged with both holding schools accountable for results and managing the many details of their operations. As others have observed, performing these oversight and operational roles simultaneously can create conflicts of interest, as when a district-mandated improvement initiative fails.¹⁹

SEZP’s board has opted to delegate operational control to the schools and focus their work on oversight of school principals and their operational plans. The arrangement offers a new angle on what it means for districts to “steer not row.”

Like other districts, Springfield manages most school-level programs and dollars centrally and principals possess little control over their budgets, curriculum, or staff. By legally devolving the district’s role in oversight and operation of the schools, SEZP offered Springfield a way to circumvent centrally provided initiatives. SEZP is the legally designated “in-district” receiver for all nine middle schools and empowered to make operational decisions. However, SEZP’s board has opted to delegate operational control to the schools and focus their work on oversight of school principals and their operational plans. In this way, the arrangement offers a new angle on what it means for districts to “steer not row.”²⁰

The SEZP board oversees the schools, coordinates support, and acts as a liaison between schools and the district. SEZP’s relationship with the district is legally governed by a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between SPS and DESE, which limits the role of the district by codifying financial and operational autonomies. The SEZP board is funded with 4 percent of the state per-pupil aid that SEZP schools receive and one-time planning grants of \$1.2 million from the state and from philanthropy.

The new collective bargaining agreement was critical to providing SEZP schools with additional staffing and operational flexibility. It provides principals with more control over hiring and dismissal of teachers and offers a way to extend learning time and retain effective staff by using stipends and bonuses instead of universal salary increases. In turn, teachers bought into a plan that offered them a greater voice in school operations and new opportunities for leadership.

Together, these three elements—independent oversight, the MOU, and the new collective bargaining agreement—established new governance for the schools and set the conditions for autonomy and accountability (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. New Governance Sets the Conditions for Autonomy, Accountability

FEATURE	CHARACTERISTICS
SEZP Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7-person nonprofit board responsible for most regulatory and operational issues affecting schools. • 4 members are appointed by DESE (5-year terms); 3 are Springfield representatives (superintendent, vice chair of the local school committee, mayor or designee). • Board oversees SEZP schools, sets achievement targets, and holds principals accountable for continuous improvement. • Board distributes state/federal funds to SEZP schools; 4% is kept for overhead and third-party supports.
Memorandum of Understanding (DESE + SPS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEZP receives 84% of state per-pupil allocation and all federal funds. • All schools receive a facility. • Limits role of district central office to non-discretionary services. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Services required from SPS (funded via 16.5% of state per-pupil funds): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▲ HR, facilities, transportation, food service, finance ■ Optional SPS services: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▲ Custodial, academic supports (Special Ed, ELL, curriculum, PD), IT, etc.)²¹ • Unresolved disputes are referred to the Commissioner of DESE. • Schools remain in SEZP indefinitely, subject to performance-based renewal every five years.
Collective Bargaining Agreement (SEA + SPS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New agreement between the Springfield Education Association and SPS for all SEZP schools. • All teachers remain employees of SPS and members of bargaining unit. • All working conditions for teachers (e.g., school schedule, programming) are set between teacher leadership teams and each school's principal. • Disputes settled via non-binding mediation, and the SEZP board has the final say. • Teachers working more than 1,540 hours per year receive stipends. • Principals have mutual-consent hiring authority and control promotion and assignment. • Principals have dismissal authority to full extent of law.²² • Career ladder-based compensation and additional stipends are available at principal's discretion. • Agreement good through June 30, 2018.

These changes enabled the turnaround strategies embraced by SEZP to take root. And with a broader base of membership on the SEZP board compared to the local school committee, principal evaluations and dismissals could be conducted with fewer political risks, a stronger eye toward outcomes, and better access to qualified replacements than is typical in most urban districts.

The collaborative approach was instrumental to getting SEZP off the ground and instilling the effort with, as one official told us, “good karma.”

Importantly, these changes preserved a role for the district and local school committee. The SEZP board includes the mayor of Springfield, the vice chair of the local school committee, and the district superintendent, as well as four members appointed by DESE. Everyone we talked with agreed that the collaborative approach was instrumental to getting SEZP off the ground and instilling the effort with, as one official told us, “good karma.”

All innovations in governance ultimately hinge on leadership. We cannot say how aggressively the SEZP board will act in the future when it comes to replacing ineffective leaders, or whether principals themselves will shy away from difficult choices around staffing and changes to instruction. SEZP has provided a mechanism for making these decisions, but committing to them depends on the will and capacity of those empowered to act.

A “Middle Way” Between Previous Turnaround Options

SEZP has emerged in a field hungry for new solutions to the challenge of turnarounds. Across the country, state and district superintendents face mounting pressure to take dramatic actions to improve outcomes for students stuck in persistently low-performing schools.

The merits of any turnaround solution are often framed in terms of their impacts on students. The small but growing evidence base on turnaround strategies can point to some successes and some failures, but no reliable scale across state and district contexts.²³

This lack of scalable strategies is due in no small part to the fact that all approaches to turnaround hinge on good implementation. Any effort to make schools more effective relies on the people working within schools to raise expectations for students, increase the rigor and quality of instruction, and build strong school cultures. All the turnaround approaches reviewed in this study, including district-led turnaround, reconstitution, charter schools, state-led turnaround, and SEZP itself provide mechanisms for enabling these things to happen but no guarantees that they will happen.

All turnaround strategies must also wrestle with a basic fact of politics: any proposal that takes a treasured benefit or tradition away is likely to generate conflict and be subject to renegotiation over the long-term. For those who believe that turnaround requires substantial changes to how schools are staffed and organized, conflict is an inevitable but necessary part of ensuring that all children can benefit from effective schools. And yet, conflict can be the death knell of any turnaround effort if the strategy lacks a strong base of political support. Thus, the likely political and substantive impacts must be weighed when judging the advantages and disadvantages of any turnaround solution.

SEZP’s architects sought to carve a path forward on turnaround that borrows parts of alternative strategies while avoiding their points of contention.

Current approaches to turnaround face a variety of challenges (see Table 2). They can be rendered ineffective by the lack of capacity in districts and states to put in place effective incentives, flexibilities, and supports; undermined by political controversies over issues like charter schools, takeovers, and collective bargaining; and destabilized by strong pressures for community oversight. SEZP’s architects, led by Empower Schools, Superintendent Warwick, and DESE, sought to carve

a path forward on turnaround that borrows parts of alternative strategies while avoiding their points of contention. But all turnaround strategies involve tradeoffs; the SEZP, in offering more compromise and stakeholder involvement, may provide fewer opportunities to put in place the kinds of strategies some argue are necessary to ensure good results.

SEZP’s creation grew out of the failures of a district-led turnaround effort at the middle school level, even as Springfield was succeeding in several elementary schools. Like other urban districts, the opportunities for a game-changing turnaround strategy were limited by existing rules around finance, human capital, and oversight. As Superintendent Warwick observed, “There hasn’t been any answer to move these schools forward in the present [district] construct.” SEZP offered a way to re-engineer how schools were staffed, overseen, and resourced without tackling the far broader and more ambitious effort of reforming an entire district from top to bottom. And it connected the district with external partners who could offer ideas, support, and other resources. But like all governance interventions, SEZP’s independent structure could make these changes vulnerable to renegotiation in the future should any of the parties to the agreement change their support.²⁴

TABLE 2.

Strengths and Weaknesses of SEZP Compared to Conventional Turnaround Strategies

TURNAROUND STRATEGY	WEAKNESSES COMPARED TO SEZP	STRENGTHS COMPARED TO SEZP
District-led turnaround: Working with existing staff, schools receive direction and support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> District may lack capacity to provide flexibility, support, and oversight. Traditional CBA may limit implementation of turnaround strategies (e.g., use of time, retaining effective teachers). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Less potential for conflict with parents, staff, union, and school board. No “exit strategy” required.
Reconstitution: District replaces principals and/or teachers, and new staff are charged with re-missioning the school and improving outcomes for students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> District may lack capacity to provide flexibility, support, and oversight. Traditional CBA may limit implementation of turnaround strategies (e.g., use of time, retaining effective teachers). May generate unproductive staff turnover. More potential for conflict with parents, staff, union, and school board. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No “exit strategy” required. More opportunities to replace ineffective teachers. “Fresh start” may ease turnaround challenge.
Chartering: District reconstitutes school as a charter school, which typically replaces all staff.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May result in enrollment changes and student displacement. May put financial pressure on district due to enrollment losses. Demands cross-sector coordination to preserve equity. More potential for conflict with parents, staff, union, and school board. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Autonomy, accountability codified via charter. Easier to recruit operators for new schools compared to turnarounds.
State-initiated turnaround: State assumes enhanced oversight of school or district operations, may result in changes to district administration and school staff.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demands substantial state capacity. Provides less voice for locals. Less sustainable. More potential for conflict with parents, staff, union, and school board. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More leverage to put in place controversial changes to school and district practice.

Source: Author analysis of key strengths and weaknesses of SEZP compared to conventional turnaround strategies. Note that in all cases, the limits of any given strategy depend on conditions in a given state/district. Even controversial strategies can be associated with less conflict under some circumstances. Thus, this assessment only suggests where potential liabilities may emerge.

Skeptics of traditional district-led turnaround efforts point to the baggage of working with existing staff to improve their practice, and the challenges of transforming school culture. Reconstitution aims to avoid these issues by starting fresh with new leadership and teachers who can coalesce around new expectations for students. But these efforts have been plagued by controversy; they often involve mass firings of educators and upheaval for families, who are caught up in the disruption that sometimes comes with changes to school culture and staff. SEZP's "build on the best" strategy focused on targeted replacements and improved support rather than wholesale dismissals of staff. This meant that SEZP had fewer opportunities to replace ineffective teachers, possibly making the changes to schools' missions and cultures more incremental than could be achieved with a "fresh start" approach to turnaround.

"I think the answer in Massachusetts can't be a charter for everything. . . We had great support [from the local school committee] for the initiative as something different than charter[s]."

- Superintendent Daniel Warwick

The state and district could have turned to charter schools to fill the gaps in capacity and changed the conditions under which the schools operated, as many cities have done. But there was little appetite in Springfield for doing so given the state's cap on charter school growth, the uneven performance of local charter schools, and the fear of losing funding and collective bargaining rights for teachers. Nor was it clear that there was a significant supply of willing, proven operators who could work in a turnaround context.²⁵ As Superintendent Warwick remarked, "I think the answer in Massachusetts can't be a charter for everything... We had great support [from the local school committee] for the initiative as something different than charter[s]."

SEZP's designers deliberately sought to borrow elements of chartering, including enhanced autonomy and accountability for school leaders. But they preserved key family- and staff-facing elements of the district such as neighborhood-based assignment, district-provided transportation to schools, and collective bargaining for teachers, which are often lost when districts authorize new schools through chartering authority. Whether SEZP's modifications to a traditional charter model dilute the impact of the strategy remains to be seen. But for the designers of SEZP it offered a way to embrace key elements of charter schools without igniting the controversy that comes with them.

State-initiated turnarounds play an increasingly important role in the turnaround landscape. These range from softer-touch efforts that aim to provide enhanced oversight and support to more disruptive options that engage states in the direct management of low-performing schools or districts. State-initiated turnarounds typically demand significant investments of political and technical capacity and almost always generate controversy as parents, community members, the teachers union, and the school board fight efforts by states to assume larger roles in local public schools. But states are sometimes better positioned politically to pursue disruptive and controversial changes to local school systems.

SEZP offered a way to embrace key elements of charter schools without igniting the controversy that comes with them.

The threat of state intervention in Springfield helped motivate the parties to search for an alternative turnaround strategy, but SEZP offered a far less controversial approach compared to a state takeover. As one principal remarked, "One thing unique about the [SEZP] is that it's a real partnership between the school committee, the state, and community stakeholders... It has also created more investment and partnership with the district." By ensuring that local officials retained a voice in the schools, SEZP also made sure those officials have a stake in their success. As Chris Gabrieli, CEO of Empower Schools and the SEZP board chair, told us, "Nobody wins if it fails."

Looking Toward the Future

Like all reforms, SEZP is dependent on the goodwill and capacity of state policymakers, leaders in the district, and educators who work in schools. Good results aren't guaranteed, but Springfield's approach to improvement has important advantages, including integration into the rest of the district's ongoing problem-solving efforts. In October 2016, the turnaround strategy got a vote of confidence from the local school committee when they added a struggling high school to SEZP.

State monitoring reports suggest the first year of SEZP's operation produced some improvements in school climate as well as in the quality of instruction and academic interventions—the first steps toward generating improved academic outcomes for students. With only one year of data on student achievement trends, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the success of the turnaround effort, but results thus far have been mixed (see Table 3). Six of the nine schools made progress in accelerating growth in English language arts and/or math, the key metrics that the SEZP board has focused on over the past year, but progress in three others remains stalled.²⁶

TABLE 3. Results for Student Growth Are Mixed After the First Year of the SEZP Strategy*

SCHOOL	ELA (PERCENTILE)		MATHEMATICS (PERCENTILE)	
	2014–2015	2015–2016	2014–2015	2015–2016
Chestnut North	24.0	22.0	29.0	34.0
Chestnut South	23.0	37.5	22.0	27.0
Chestnut T&G	33.5	40.0	30.5	31.0
Kennedy	24.0	29.0	22.0	22.0
Kiley	34.0	43.0	39.0	35.0
Duggan	40.0	44.0	41.0	42.0
Forest Park	52.0	45.0	51.0	34.0
Van Sickle IB	41.0	32.0	39	24.0
Van Sickle Academy		24.0		13.0

* Shaded boxes indicate progress over prior year.

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015 and 2016 Accountability Data, School-Level Reports. Student growth percentiles measure how achievement for a group of students has grown or changed over time. The state benchmark for SGPs is 50, the historical statewide median.

Time will tell whether SEZP's leaders can make good on the early strategies they have articulated. Our conversations with principals suggest that renewed urgency for improvement has accompanied the change in governance. Whether Springfield can retain this focus in the years to come, especially when they involve difficult changes to school leadership, remains to be seen.

There is no guarantee that the reforms put in place as part of SEZP's creation will be sustained through a leadership transition or pressure to return full control to the local school committee.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for SEZP will come when local leaders inevitably transition into new roles. A new superintendent, union head, or school committee could attempt to undermine the partnership that brought SEZP into being. And lessons from other reform efforts suggest that pressure to return schools to the sole oversight of locally elected boards will be strong. There is no guarantee that the reforms put in place as part of SEZP's creation will be sustained through a leadership transition or pressure to return full control to the local school committee.

Even if the Springfield reforms succeed, replication of the model in other districts and states may be difficult. SEZP wouldn't have been created if not for a superintendent who was willing to seek help and partner in something new, a union that was open to negotiation and compromise, a state chief who was willing to act if local reforms stalled out, and a novel nonprofit organization that was built to support innovations in governance.

It is also possible that taking a subset of schools out of direct control of the district will stall progress on Springfield's broader improvement strategy. It remains to be seen whether ideas piloted in SEZP become rooted more broadly in Springfield.

Skeptics of arrangements like SEZP's point to the inherent limits of working with traditional K–12 stakeholders such as unions and district superintendents. By design, their involvement means that the turnaround strategies pursued will be a product of political compromise. But the reality of education governance in states and cities, which rely in one way or another on democratically elected leaders, means that those who want to improve schools must always balance their desire to work on behalf of children with the need to work effectively alongside adults. Springfield has sought to balance these demands by articulating a strategy that changes how schools are overseen and resourced while carefully seeking stakeholder buy-in and support. Whether the compromise-driven solutions pursued result in a watered-down turnaround strategy or instead a politically sustainable path toward improvement will become evident in the years to come.

Districts that embrace the spirit of SEZP's emphasis on empowered educators and accountability for results must develop turnaround approaches that can deliver on those goals. Innovation zones are growing in popularity and grounded in many of the same ideas as SEZP. But these initiatives frequently do little to change schools' access to flexibility, talent, and support. As a result, they run aground when confronted with entrenched central office initiatives that tie up resources and limit flexibility. Unlike these efforts, Springfield has legally and financially committed to providing schools with the autonomy SEZP's designers believe will spur good results.

Perhaps the most promising part of Springfield's story is that it represents a community coming together on the question of struggling schools. In an era of growing political conflict and frustration with top-down, outsider-driven reforms, Springfield may provide a path forward that avoids many of these points of contention. The real test, however, will be in whether the reforms result in dramatically improved and sustained outcomes for students.

Endnotes

- 1 Ashley Jochim, *Measures of Last Resort: Assessing Strategies for State-Initiated Turnaround* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2016).
- 2 Eric Schnurer, *The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership* (Washington, DC: Progressive Policy Institute, 2017).
- 3 Paul N. Foster, et al., *A Demographic and Economic Analysis of the City of Springfield* (Springfield, MA: Regional Information Center, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, 2006).
- 4 “Census 2000, 1990 Socio-Demographic Trends,” Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services, accessed April 7, 2017.
- 5 “School and District Profiles” (Springfield), Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, accessed April 7, 2017.
- 6 “Schools in our District,” Springfield Public Schools, accessed April 7, 2017.
- 7 In Massachusetts, all schools and districts are rated on a scale of 1 to 5 by their effectiveness in closing gaps and accelerating improvement in student achievement. Schools and districts that receive a “Level 5” rating are eligible for state receivership. In the case of “Level 4” schools, the district is required to collaborate with the Massachusetts DESE to develop and implement a three-year school redesign plan. For more information, see “Framework for School Accountability and Assistance,” Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, August 2012.
- 8 Schnurer, *The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership*.
- 9 Carolyn Robbins, “Springfield turnaround school mastermind Harvard EdLabs ends partnership with city,” MassLive.com, July 10, 2014.
- 10 Schnurer, *The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership*.
- 11 Legally, the board acts as a nonprofit in-district “receiver” for the schools, which is allowed according to the Massachusetts Achievement Gap Act of 2010.
- 12 Anthony Bryk, et al., *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
- 13 Empower Schools, *Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership: Overview, Strategy, and Implementation*, (Boston, MA: Empower Schools, 2016).
- 14 Historically, new hires in the SEZP’s schools have ranged between approximately 16 and 18 percent of all teachers. Per the terms of the MOU, SEZP is liable for the costs of any teachers displaced who cannot find a position elsewhere. Through its two years of operation, just one displaced teacher has not secured a position and SEZP board bears the associated salary costs.
- 15 It is worth noting that this is the highest rate of budgetary autonomy that we have observed in any urban district.
- 16 See “Lawrence Public Schools Tentative Collective Bargaining Agreement,” Lawrence Teachers’ Union, accessed April 7, 2017; and “Agreement Between The Springfield Education Association and The Springfield School Committee for the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership Schools,” Springfield Education Association, accessed April 7, 2017.
- 17 Empower Schools, *Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership: Overview, Strategy, and Implementation*, (Boston, MA: Empower Schools, 2016).
- 18 Betheny Gross and Ashley Jochim, *Incomplete Reform in Baltimore* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2016).
- 19 David Osborne and Will Marshall, “To Reduce Inequality, Reinvent Public Schools.” Political memo sent to United States presidential candidates from the Progressive Policy Institute, March 9, 2016.

- 20 David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1992).
- 21 Costs for any out-of-district placements are borne by the district. The district also provides liability insurance for all SEZP schools in the same fashion it does for other SPS schools.
- 22 Under Massachusetts state law, teachers awarded “professional status” or tenure cannot be dismissed without just cause and removal requires a hearing. Lower standards of proof apply for “Level 4” schools, a status all SEZP schools currently possess.
- 23 Supporters of charter schools can point to evidence of improved effectiveness and scale over time. But there remains substantial heterogeneity in their results across state and district contexts with implementation factors (e.g., authorizing, philanthropic support, and availability of high quality providers) enabling or inhibiting the effectiveness of the sector.
- 24 The MOU between DESE and SPS has a five-year term and is auto-renewed as long as SEZP schools meet performance benchmarks. In that sense, institutional stability is high. However, politics can put pressure on policymakers to revise (or renege) on their agreements. Thus, all institutions are premised on sustainable political support for their existence.
- 25 Charter schools play into the turnaround context in two ways. One possibility is to leverage charter schools as a strategy for growing the number of quality seats in a city. This enables individual students to gain access to better educational opportunities, but it does little to address the instructional challenges in the city’s lowest-achieving schools. The second possibility leverages charter schools to manage whole-school turnaround in a neighborhood school context, sometimes via a restart where the operator phases in one grade at a time. This is the strategy used in Tennessee’s Achievement School District. Very few of the nation’s charter schools operate in the latter context.
- 26 We can’t attribute the progress or lack thereof to the reform strategies put in place under SEZP as these data do not account for changes in school demographics.

About This Report

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About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

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Disruptive Innovation in an Urban School District: Denver's Luminary Learning Network

Alan Gottlieb – Write. Edit. Think. LLC



ABOUT THIS STUDY

In early 2015, a group of principals from Denver Public Schools approached the Gates Family Foundation for technical and strategic guidance in their quest to gain more autonomy over decision-making, finances, and operation of their innovation schools. The Foundation had long been a supporter of independent charter schools as a strategy for improving student outcomes, but hadn't invested significantly in district schools. Recognizing the opportunity for the Foundation and others to learn from the process of exploring new models for governance and investment, Senior Vice President for Education Mary Seawell asked Colorado-based journalist Alan Gottlieb to cover, in real time, the unfolding events that are chronicled in this case study.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Gottlieb is a writer, editor, communications consultant, and nonprofit entrepreneur with 20 years of experience in education policy and education journalism. He is co-founder of Chalkbeat – a national news nonprofit focused on pre-K–12 education, policy and practice – and winner of a Heartland Regional Emmy Award for his part in producing “Standing in the Gap,” a four-part documentary examining segregation in Denver Public Schools 20 years after the end of court-ordered busing. From 1988 to 1997, Gottlieb was a reporter with The Denver Post, whose work focused primarily on urban social issues, including public housing, homelessness, and, from 1995 to 1997, Denver Public Schools. His coverage of DPS earned several regional journalism awards. From 1997 to 2007, Gottlieb served as education program officer at The Piton Foundation in Denver, focusing much of his work on issues of educational equity and socio-economic school integration.

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And two people who helped create the conditions for the LLN years before: Alyssa Whitehead-Bust, who led the creation of many of the district's most heralded reforms, and Rob Stein, former principal at Manual High School, one of the first innovation schools in DPS.

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FOREWORD

By David Osborne

In many cities, charter schools overseen by strong authorizers are dramatically outperforming traditional public schools. This is true in New Orleans, Washington, D.C., Boston, New York, Newark, Camden, Indianapolis, Memphis, Denver, and other cities.¹

The success of these charters appears to stem from a number of factors, including their genuine autonomy to create innovative school models that meet the needs of their particular students and their genuine accountability for performance: they close if they fail and expand or replicate if they succeed.

The outstanding performance of these urban charter schools has led many districts to experiment with methods to emulate charter conditions for their own schools. Few have gone about it in exactly the same way, and some cities even have several different models of “charter-lite” schools within one district. Indianapolis has probably gone the furthest toward charter-like conditions; its “innovation network schools” are not-for-profit organizations with their own boards, with five-to-seven year performance contracts with the district, and their employees work for the nonprofit, not the district.²

Denver has created “innovation schools” since 2008, when the state legislature passed the Innovation Schools Act. Staff at these schools are still district employees, but almost all have opted out of the collective bargaining agreement. The innovation schools have experienced increased but partial autonomy and accountability, and that half-way status has led to widespread frustration. Principals and teachers have been frustrated when the district refuses to honor the autonomy promised in their innovation plans, whether to purchase what they need, opt out of required district meetings, or manage their own professional development. And school board members have been frustrated that innovation schools have not, on average, performed better than traditional public schools, at least through 2015.³ (There is some evidence that they began to outperform in 2016.)

Those frustrations led a group of principals to propose an improvement on the model: an “innovation zone,” with broader autonomy, and run by an independent non-profit with its own board of directors. After protracted negotiations, district leaders agreed to let the four schools involved opt out of many district meetings and some central services and receive the funds instead, some of which they could use as they chose. The board of this “Luminary Learning Network,” as its members named it, doesn’t authorize the schools, but it can replace principals. In turn, those principals expect the board to protect them from district micromanagement.

Alan Gottlieb’s paper does an excellent job of describing the process by which the LLN came to be, as well as its first year of experience. It leaves us with some important questions, the answers to which will probably determine if the zone produces the improved outcomes its founders promise.



¹ *Urban Charter School Study: Report on 41 Regions, 2015* (Stanford, CA: Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2015); and David Osborne, *Reinventing America's Schools: Creating a 21st Century Education System* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

² Osborne, *Reinventing America's Schools*, pp. 202-210.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 179-181.



- 1 Will the LLN schools get the degree of autonomy they need to create excellent schools: control over their budgets, their hiring, promotion, firing, and pay scales, as well as the freedom to craft unique educational models?
- 2 Will the schools be held accountable for student learning? Will they be replaced by better operators if students are falling behind, and will they be encouraged to replicate if their students are racing ahead? Consequences like this create urgency on the part of all employees to overcome obstacles and improve student learning; hence they appear to be a critical difference between strong and weak charter sectors.
- 3 If and when an LLN school is closed or replaced for poor performance, will the political backlash be strong enough to inhibit future action by the LLN and DPS boards? Since the LLN schools are still staffed by DPS employees, will the backlash involve more than one school, spreading through the LLN and then to other DPS schools? If so, it could threaten the re-election of DPS board members, the surest way to force them to back away from real accountability for schools. Or will the LLN be more like the charter sector, where one operator may protest a closing, but competing school operators look at it as an opportunity to get another building?
- 4 Do the LLN schools exist in an environment with enough parental choice to allow them to differentiate their school models in ways that meet the needs of hard-to-reach students? If they want to adopt a particular model – whether expeditionary learning or dual language immersion or Montessori or STEM – will parents who feel that model doesn't suit their children have other options that satisfy them? Or will they resist such changes, because they lack other good options?
- 5 Finally, will innovation zone status prove an advantage in recruiting the talent necessary to succeed in urban schools?

The answers to these questions will determine a great deal about the future of the innovation zone experiment in Denver.

David Osborne is the author or co-author of several books on public sector reform, including Reinventing Government. His latest is Reinventing America's Schools: Creating a 21st Century School System, which includes a chapter on Denver. He directs a project on the same topic at the Progressive Policy Institute.



Colorado's first independently run innovation zone of public schools was born on April 28, 2016⁴, when the Denver Public Schools (DPS) board of education gave its unanimous blessing to the creation of a unique network of district schools empowered to operate with many of the freedoms normally reserved for charter schools.



The road to establishing the Luminary Learning Network (LLN) was not always smooth, and the process required significant give and take between the LLN and DPS – a district already known nationally for its efforts to ensure families and students have access to a robust array of public school choices. Over the past decade, DPS had moved toward a “portfolio model,” ceding a growing proportion of its school management to charter school networks, and allowing an increasing number of district schools to gain autonomies through innovation status.⁵

With this as a backdrop, some within the district questioned why the new zone was necessary. But when a small cadre of DPS principals stepped forward in the spring of 2015 to request more freedom from district constraints, school board members sensed an opportunity to move DPS in a new direction.

“We have made a strong statement that more flexibility and autonomy is the direction we want to move,” DPS Board President Anne Rowe told the principals in an October 2015 meeting. “Implementing that at scale is incredibly messy, and is presenting huge challenges. I see this as an opportunity for us to learn about what I believe are the systems changes we need to be thinking about to be successful.”

The theory was that – unbound from the district and its many required trainings, meetings, central services, and policies – LLN schools could sharpen their focus on the unique needs of their students, buying back only those district services they deemed most crucial. This role reversal – where zone schools would become paying customers of DPS central services – was fundamental to the design.



“We have made a strong statement that more flexibility and autonomy is the direction we want to move. Implementing that at scale is incredibly messy, and is presenting huge challenges. I see this as an opportunity for us to learn about what I believe are the systems changes we need to be thinking about to be successful.”

— Anne Rowe, DPS Board President

⁴ The Colorado State Board of Education ratified the DPS board decision two months later.

⁵ See Page 9 for a graphic depicting the overall governance structure of Denver Public Schools, and Page 27 for a chart detailing various school types and key features.



"The traditional governance model of the school district – where the district is the governing entity responsible for setting all the practices, systems, and rules for all public schools, and then also is the operator of the majority of public schools – is one that has a lot of conflict in it...so it is worthwhile to think about other governance models that could allow for more continuity and more permanence, that are less subject to political vicissitudes, and that can generate innovation and quality."

– Tom Boasberg, DPS Superintendent



What's more, the LLN's envisioned structure would create a nonprofit organization whose board and lean staff would help the zone schools innovate, protect their autonomy, and hold the school leaders accountable for the performance of their schools. Given the uneven pace of change and improvement in many of the district's own internally-run innovation schools, the school board was eager to grant the LLN schools greater autonomy in exchange for greater accountability and, board members hoped, stronger results.

The idea of 'zones' – groups of schools within districts where the rules are different – has been tried in a number of places nationally, from New York City in the 1990s to the current Memphis iZone, a sweeping turnaround effort prompted by state takeover. More recently, the local school board in Springfield, Mass., pioneered a new, "third way" governance model aimed at protecting school-based autonomies by willingly ceding control of a cluster of struggling schools to a newly formed nonprofit with a majority of independent board members.

But there were also potential pitfalls, many of them unknowable. How would the LLN's schools provide services they had decided not to take from the district? How would the district become more responsive to a

subset of schools while continuing to serve all students? What would the management structure of the LLN look like, and who would sit atop that structure?

Through negotiations that led to the board's approval of the LLN, many of those questions have been answered – at least on paper. And by the end of the 2016-17 school year, the LLN had begun to emerge as an organization that was showing the larger school district that there were viable new ways of doing business.

Principals could spend the lion's share of their time in their buildings, rather than being pulled off-campus for meetings or competing priorities multiple times per week. They could receive personalized, highly relevant coaching from hand-picked, top-flight educators, and separately receive rigorous evaluations from a team led by the LLN executive director. School leaders could also use their newfound budget flexibility to staff their schools in ways that better served their student populations.

Teachers from very different schools could organize to form a council that would design professional development strands focused on issues most relevant to teachers in the LLN. Cross-campus trainings and social gatherings could help build stronger professional networks for teachers.



Perhaps most important, by the end of its first year in operation the LLN showed signs of changing the larger district in fundamental ways. In 2017-18, DPS rolled out budgeting flexibilities pioneered by the LLN to a handful of the district's innovation schools, and announced that all district innovation schools would receive these flexibilities the following school year.

Superintendent Tom Boasberg said the LLN and future innovation zones could potentially help DPS resolve an internal tension that plagues most school districts.

"The traditional governance model of the school district – where the district is the governing entity responsible for setting all the practices, systems, and rules for all public schools, and then also is the operator of the majority of public schools – is one that has a lot of conflict in it," Boasberg said. "So it is worthwhile to think about other governance models that could allow for more continuity and more permanence, that are less subject to political vicissitudes, and that can generate innovation and quality."

Despite that strong endorsement, real tensions remained between the LLN and DPS senior leadership throughout the innovation zone's genesis and into the first year of operation, with the school board at times serving as mediator.

Perhaps a degree of friction is unavoidable when disruptive change is afoot. Perhaps that friction can even be productive in the long run, and lead to better outcomes for kids. This report examines the often-difficult process of creating something new — a new system of DPS schools no longer managed or operated by the school district, yet still intricately tied to it through employment, authorization, and accountability.



An Idea Takes Shape

Denver Public Schools is no stranger to innovation. The district's transformation toward a portfolio system of school management began under Michael Bennet (DPS Superintendent from 2005 to 2008, now a U.S. Senator) and has deepened since Boasberg (Bennet's deputy superintendent and lifelong friend) took the helm in 2009. Leveraging a 2008 state law known as the Innovation Schools Act, DPS moved quickly and aggressively to grant schools innovation status, motivated by the idea that having waivers from certain state, district, and collective bargaining mandates could unshackle schools to improve student outcomes.

Between the law's passage and the end of the 2010-11 school year, 20 DPS schools gained innovation status – and as of the 2017-18 school year, the district is home to 49 innovation schools (including the four LLN schools).

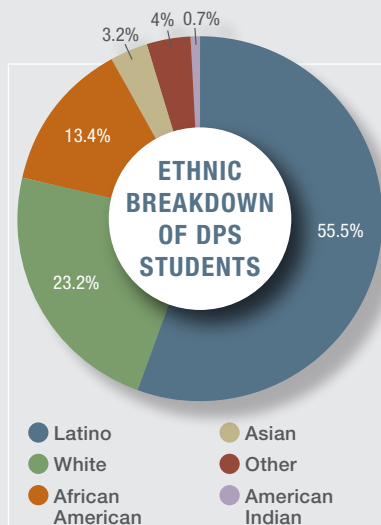
Simultaneously, DPS bucked the national trend of big-city district ambivalence toward charter schools by actively facilitating their growth. The district allowed charters to share district buildings with district-run schools, and leased district facilities to charters at cost. Then, in 2012 DPS created a first-in-the-nation common enrollment system that allows parents to use a single form to apply to all schools, whether district-run or charter. Through these actions, the school board and Boasberg have demonstrated their belief that governance structure takes a back seat to student outcomes. If achieving a major boost in student learning means giving over a growing proportion of its operations and management to charters and innovation schools, so be it.

QUICK FACTS

DENVER'S PORTFOLIO OF SCHOOLS

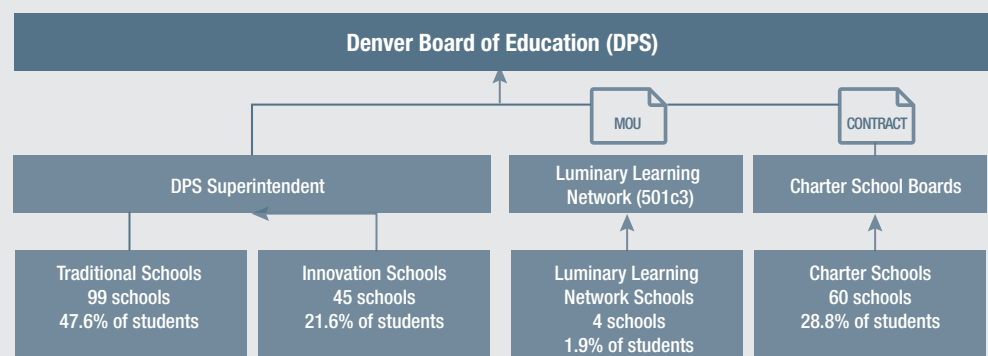


As of the 2016-17 school year, 67.3% percent of Denver Public Schools' 92,331 students qualified for free or reduced lunch (an indicator of poverty) and 36.8% percent were English language learners. Both of these figures reflect much higher rates than Colorado as a whole (42.1% free/reduced lunch and 14.3% English language learners). The racial and ethnic makeup of DPS' students is as follows:



As of the 2017-18 school year, the district includes a total of 208 schools:

- 99 traditional district schools
- 45 district innovation schools, which are run by the district but receive waivers from some state and district rules
- 4 Luminary Learning Network innovation zone schools, which remain DPS schools but are governed by an independent nonprofit board authorized by the DPS board
- 60 charter schools, which are authorized by the DPS board but independently governed





As DPS school board president from 2011 to 2013, Mary Seawell had become a strong believer in the power of decentralized school authority to improve student outcomes. While she supported the district's embrace of innovation schools, over time she observed that the autonomies granted to schools through their innovation plans were at times not respected or adhered to by central office personnel. She believed schools needed the autonomy to do things differently.

At the same time, Seawell observed that the district's process for authorizing innovation schools was far weaker than its charter school authorizing practices. This meant that some innovation schools were performing worse than schools without the additional autonomy. She worked with Alyssa Whitehead-Bust, then DPS' Chief Academic and Innovation Officer, to strengthen the innovation school authorizing process. "New school work should be the same, regardless of governance type – charter, innovation, or traditionally district-run," Whitehead-Bust summarized.

Meanwhile, by 2015 many innovation school leaders were chafing at what they perceived as a tightening of district oversight. From their perspectives, DPS had pulled back some of the freedoms that had been granted through their innovation plans. Two of these principals, Zach Rahn and Frank Coyne, reached out to Seawell – who by then had become Senior Vice President for Education at the Gates Family Foundation (GFF), a thought partner and funder operating in Denver's school reform space.

In a meeting that also included two DPS board members, Rahn and Coyne provided examples of what they saw as the DPS administration's compliance mindset. Most onerous, they said, were new expectations that the innovation school principals must attend certain district meetings, regardless of whether those meetings were in their view relevant or helpful to those charting different courses from the majority of DPS schools.

Under the previous structure, Rahn said, innovation schools could get away with skipping the occasional meeting of this sort, or even several meetings. "This year it is very different," he said. "The message is, 'You'd better be there, in your seat, every time.'"

In addition, some innovation school leaders were especially unhappy that DPS had taken a few of the innovation schools – which previously had been grouped together under one mission-aligned supervisor – and had spread them, along with traditionally district-managed schools, under several instructional superintendents.

DPS leaders said that the intent of these requirements and practices was both to help the school leaders grow professionally and also to foster more innovation throughout the district. However the principals reported that the unintended result was to undermine their autonomy and ability to add value to one another as network of similarly innovative leaders.

GFF hosted several meetings to allow Rahn, Coyne, and other school leaders the space to think through and further define what could best enable them to accelerate student achievement in their schools.

The outcome of those meetings was a letter to Boasberg signed by 17 innovation school leaders, asking the superintendent to involve them more directly in decisions about how their schools would be supervised. The letter also requested nine specific autonomies for a network of innovation schools, including the freedom



*"New school work should
(have the same level of rigor),
regardless of governance type —
charter, innovation, or traditionally
district-run."*

— Alyssa Whitehead-Bust,
former DPS Chief Academic and Innovation Officer

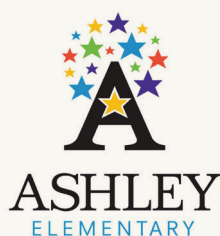


to hire their own network leader, receive a greater share of per-pupil funding, create their own human resources and teacher hiring systems, and form an “accountability committee” that would take on many governance roles for the zone.

The letter prompted a meeting with the district's senior leadership, who sought to address the principals' concerns within the district's existing management structure.

For four principals, however, the original goal of ensuring autonomy had given way to a new vision for a radically different system under which to operate their schools. These leaders forged ahead with plans to build an autonomous innovation zone: Rahn, from Ashley Elementary School; Coyne, from Denver Green School; Jennifer Jackson, principal of Cole Arts and Science Academy; and Julia Shepherd, principal of Creativity Challenge Community (C3) elementary school.

LUMINARY LEARNING NETWORK: SCHOOL PROFILES



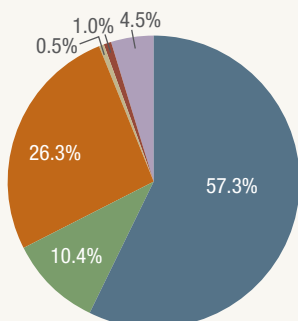
ECE – 5th Grade

Zach Rahn, Principal

Ashley Elementary is an Early Childhood Education (ECE)-5 school with an extended school day. Ashley utilizes one-to-one technology to deliver rigorous instruction to a diverse group of students, the majority of whom are students of color. Four out of five Ashley students are eligible for the free and reduced lunch program.

2016-17 Enrollment: 403 students

KEY ● Hispanic/Latino ● White ● African American ● Asian/Pacific Islander ● Multiple Races ● American Indian



English Language Acquisition: 42.7%

Special Education: 9.9%

Free and Reduced Lunch: 82.9%



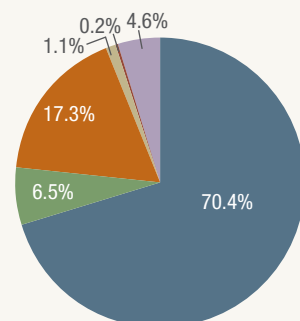
ECE – 5th Grade

Jennifer Jackson, Principal

Cole Arts & Science Academy is an ECE-5 school with a focus on the arts, science, and literacy. Cole uses restorative practices to address behavioral issues. The majority of students are students of color, and nine out of 10 students are eligible for the free and reduced lunch program. Cole serves the highest-need population of students in the LLN.

2016-17 Enrollment: 527 students

KEY ● Hispanic/Latino ● White ● African American ● Asian/Pacific Islander ● Multiple Races ● American Indian



English Language Acquisition: 46.9%

Special Education: 15.2%

Free and Reduced Lunch: 89.9%



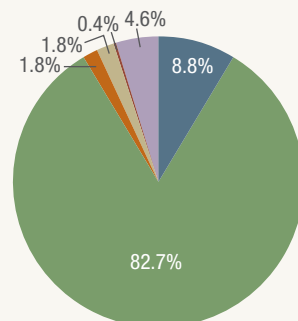
K – 5th Grade

Julia Shepherd, Principal

Creativity Challenge Community is a small K-5 school that leverages unique community partnerships. The school has a small student-to-teacher ratio, and students take ownership of the school's culture. Few students are students of color, and the majority of families are higher-income.

2016-17 Enrollment: 283 students

KEY ● Hispanic/Latino ● White ● African American ● Asian/Pacific Islander ● Multiple Races ● American Indian



English Language Acquisition: 2.5%

Special Education: 5.3%

Free and Reduced Lunch: 9.5%



Denver Green School
Denver Public Schools

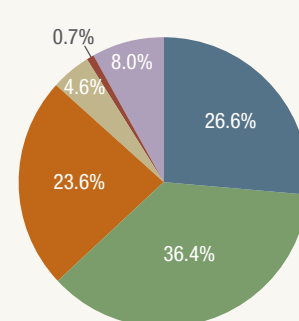
ECE – 8th Grade

Frank Coyne, Principal

Denver Green School is an ECE-8 school with a focus on sustainability. The school utilizes a distributed leadership model, with three “lead partners” sharing the role of school leader, and a staff group that makes decisions about the school by consensus. Two-thirds of students are students of color, and two-thirds of students are eligible for the free and reduced lunch program.

2016-17 Enrollment: 538 students

KEY ● Hispanic/Latino ● White ● African American ● Asian/Pacific Islander ● Multiple Races ● American Indian



English Language Acquisition: 24.9%

Special Education: 12.8%

Free and Reduced Lunch: 64.5%



"Many of the school leaders felt exposed and worried that they might be putting their jobs and careers at risk if they pushed the district too far. We saw an opportunity to help connect the dots between the situation we were observing here in Denver, and a new type of governance structure that other cities are using to push more autonomy and accountability to school leaders."

— Mary Seawell, Vice President for Education, Gates Family Foundation



To provide the four school leaders with context and a learning network, Seawell introduced them to work in other innovation zones around the country, including the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership created by Boston-based nonprofit Empower Schools. The Springfield model pioneered several key features to address sustained autonomy for schools, including the creation of an independent nonprofit to manage zone schools, and a contract with the district that allocates most decision-making authority and per-pupil resources to zone schools. Through the involvement of third-parties like GFF and Empower, the DPS school leaders also gained political cover in situations where their interests and those of their bosses diverged.

"Many of the school leaders felt exposed and worried that they might be putting their jobs and careers at risk if they pushed the district too far," Seawell said. "We saw an opportunity to help connect the dots between the situation we were observing here in Denver, and a new type of governance structure that other cities are using to push more autonomy and accountability to school leaders."

GFF also provided seed funding for the project, and Seawell and Empower Schools co-founder Brett Alessi led the design process, offered strategic guidance, and provided technical assistance.



After months of research and discussion, the school leaders met with Boasberg to share their vision for a path forward, which they hoped would:

- **Create an independent, third-party entity** – a lightly staffed nonprofit organization – to provide day-to-day support for network schools;
- **Entrust the new nonprofit's board** – to include representatives from the district, the schools, and the community – with ensuring accountability, including authority to hire and fire principals;
- **Outline all other roles and responsibilities in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)**, which would be hammered out in collaboration with district leaders, with the bulk of educational authority ceded to the network and its schools.

Boasberg expressed support for the zone concept and pledged to get behind it, but he said that the idea of placing school principals and DPS representatives on the nonprofit's board could pose a raft of potential conflicts of interest. Further negotiations would be necessary to address these and other details.

Meanwhile, momentum for the zone was gaining steam. In December 2015, the school board unanimously passed a resolution signaling the expectation that DPS staff should work with the zone's proponents to develop a formal, detailed plan well outside the "business-as-usual" approach.

"The Board encourages the consideration of significant innovations in governance, finance, and administration," the resolution read in part. And, to make it clear the schools would bear additional responsibilities as well, the resolution went on to say: "The zone must meet the highest levels of accountability for creating high-performing schools within the zone."



A month later, Boasberg departed with his family for a six-month sabbatical in Argentina, and the board, at Boasberg's urging, appointed Chief of Schools Susana Cordova as acting superintendent.

Boasberg's absence proved a complicating factor at times, as leaders from the district, the schools, GFF, and Empower began negotiating in earnest.

"We had to get enough of the parameters of what Tom was comfortable with upfront," Cordova said. "I had to be really transparent around, 'You're just going to have to trust that the team is doing the right work, and in the right way.'"

Boasberg accepted that, Cordova said. So with green lights from Boasberg and school board, the LLN team and DPS senior staff were ready to begin the hard work of developing the governance, accountability, and finance structures for the innovation zone.

The Devil in the Details: Governance and Accountability

Details about how the LLN innovation zone would be governed led to some of the most difficult-to-resolve disagreements. Viewed broadly, school leaders and their champions wanted to squeeze as much sustainable autonomy as possible out of the negotiations. From their perspective, this meant placing governing authority in a third-party, not-for-profit entity – the Luminary Learning Network – to protect the schools from changes within the district.

District officials felt uncomfortable with this arrangement, fearing it could create a litigious environment. At a February 2016 meeting, DPS General Counsel Jerome DeHerrera tried to persuade LLN representatives that instead of creating a third-party organization, LLN could be "a DPS entity."

Ultimately, however, the two parties agreed to enter into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and service contract to accompany the three-year innovation zone plan, with the understanding that the documents would require review and approval by both the district and the State Board of Education.



LUMINARY LEARNING NETWORK SETS NEW CONDITIONS FOR AUTONOMY, ACCOUNTABILITY

Below are the LLN's key features; an expanded chart comparing the LLN to the other types of DPS schools – traditional, innovation, and charter – is provided on Page 27.

Legal Structure	The LLN is an independent 501(c)(3) organization whose relationship to DPS and LLN schools is articulated in an MOU approved by the DPS Board of Trustees and an innovation zone application approved by the CO State Board of Education.
Governance	The DPS board delegated operational and management authority of the LLN schools to the LLN board. The nine-member LLN board is comprised of five community members, two LLN school leaders, and two DPS representatives. The LLN leaders and DPS representatives are restricted from voting on some issues, as described in the LLN's Conflict of Interest Policy.
Authorization	DPS staff developed an ad-hoc authorization process to create the LLN, and the DPS board voted unanimously to authorize the LLN's innovation plan for a three-year term starting in 2016-17. Future groups of schools with common interests that would like to join the LLN or apply to be a separate DPS Innovation Zone will undergo an authorization process managed by district staff. The DPS board must approve any new school joining an innovation zone. The DPS board may revoke innovation status of the LLN or any of its schools at any time for poor performance. There is no appeals process to the Colorado Board of Education for not approving or renewing an innovation zone.
Budgeting and District Services	In addition to DPS' standard school-based budgeting (SBB) allocation, LLN schools may opt out of an additional set of district services (including professional development, curriculum, and the support of instructional superintendents) in exchange for corresponding per-pupil funds. This funding structure has come to be known within the LLN and the district as SBB+.
Principal Accountability	All LLN faculty and staff members remain employees of DPS. Decisions about principal hiring and firing are made by the LLN board. If the DPS superintendent objects, the issue may be elevated to the DPS board.
School Accountability	LLN schools commit to move up one rating band on DPS' School Performance Framework (SPF) within three years, or, in the case of schools starting in green and blue bands, maintain an SPF score of 70 percent or above. The DPS board may decide not to renew the Innovation Zone after three years. There is no state appeal process.



Under the MOU, the LLN would be established as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, “whose sole purpose is to support the Innovation Zone” schools. The LLN board would be made up of nine people: five community representatives, two school leaders, and two district leaders – “possibly” some combination of school board members and the superintendent. And, significantly, the LLN board would work to resolve disputes between the schools and the district, sending disagreements to the DPS school board only when resolution proved impossible.

The LLN would also serve as a watchdog, protecting school autonomies from policy changes at DPS. Finally, it would hold schools accountable for results, and have the ability to make changes, should one or more of the schools underperform.

Another major sticking point was the LLN leaders’ desire to ensure that hiring, supervising, retaining, and firing principals was the role of the LLN, not of the superintendent and central office staff. This desire ran counter to a longstanding DPS policy that clearly places full authority over all personnel decisions with the superintendent.

At an April 2016 meeting attended by the full DPS senior leadership team, DPS leaders made it clear that the district could not live with a policy that cut the superintendent out of the loop, which is how they interpreted the LLN’s proposal.

Cordova said that the school leaders and the LLN advisers seemed unduly concerned about school autonomy over issues like principal hiring. “It’s really a non-issue, because in 99.9 percent of cases, school communities and the superintendent come down on the same side when making principal hiring decisions,” she said. “I just don’t think it’s actually a valid fear that a group of people with an agreed upon set of values and principles come to conclusions that are dramatically different.”

Ultimately, the two parties resolved the dispute by including language in the plan that ensured the LLN would have authority over the schools, without specifically contradicting DPS policy. It reads:

“The LLN shall have the authority to decide all matters of administrative or supervisory detail in connection with the operation and maintenance of (zone schools) as long as these matters are not in conflict with the law or with DPS Board of Education policy. The LLN shall have the freedom to create an administrative structure for supervision and accountability throughout the zone. LLN shall have the authority to decide all matters of administrative or supervisory detail in connection with the operation and maintenance of the zone.”

Underlying each of these disagreements was an issue of basic control. School leaders, GFF, and Empower wanted freedom for the schools to chart their own course. This included choosing which – if any – district-mandated meetings and professional development sessions to attend, which district services to purchase, and whom to hire to staff and lead the schools. Ideally, this would mean that the LLN board would be able to sign off on these decisions without having to circle back to DPS officials or the Denver school board.

On the other side, while DPS agreed that the schools should have freedom to choose which district practices they wanted to be part of, officials initially insisted that they still would have to adhere to any district policies they hadn’t specifically waived out of in their individual innovation school plans or the zone’s plan.

District officials wanted the schools to inform the district which practices from which they wanted to opt out. The LLN team insisted that this approach be flipped: schools would by default opt out of everything that was optional, and would let the district know if they desired to opt in to any DPS practices.





In many ways this disagreement got to the heart of what true autonomy meant to the school leaders.

"From a school leader perspective, what is beautiful about the zone – and why the contractual relationship and independent governance is essential – is that urban education in general struggles to get out from in front of itself," said principal Rahn. "We get a list each week of hundreds of to-dos (from the district), half of which have no impact on the operations of my school on a daily basis. So the idea here is if we are outside of those (mandates), we can create systems and focus our goals and priorities and energy on the things that are going to matter to kids at our schools."

Still, letting go of its control over these things was a struggle for DPS. As late as April 22 – six days before the school board's vote to approve the innovation zone plan and MOU – district staff inserted into a draft MOU a clause that would have significantly narrowed the district practices from which the zone schools would be exempt. In the final negotiation session before the board vote, that clause was removed.

From board president Rowe's perspective, the disruptive change this could potentially cause was one of the main attractions of the experiment.

The shift in mindset necessary to change this dynamic "will take time," Rowe said. "We will make mistakes. We need to learn from those mistakes and react nimbly" rather than being afraid to experiment. "Being disruptive without being destructive is the idea, and that can be a fine line," she said.

The MOU approved by the school board April 28 contained the following language:

"Consistent with their status as Innovation Schools and their Zone Plan and based on their commitment to accept strong accountability for improved school performance, the (zone schools) will be exempt from District meetings, initiatives, practices and requirements unless such practices or requirements are adopted to ensure compliance with applicable, non-waived, legal obligations, or in cases when the BOE determines that the practice or requirement applies to all District schools and has not been subject to waiver."

All parties seemed to agree that LLN schools should accept strong accountability in exchange for increased autonomy. Rowe said the LLN needs to demonstrate "significant improvement in student outcomes, including engagement, attendance – the whole picture. And LLN schools need to be leading the way in attracting and retaining talent." The plan articulated each school's commitment to moving up one performance band on the district's five-band School Performance Framework within the first three years of the zone's existence, with the ultimate goal of reaching the highest level – blue, or "distinguished" – or, in the case of schools starting in green and blue bands, maintain an SPF score of 70 percent or above.

As the zone launched, Ashley was in the second-lowest performance category (orange, or "accredited on priority watch"), Cole was in the middle category (yellow, or "accredited on watch"), and Denver Green School was one level higher (green, or "meets expectations"). C3 was already in the top-performance category (blue, or "distinguished") – one of just 11 Denver schools to achieve "blue" status in 2016.

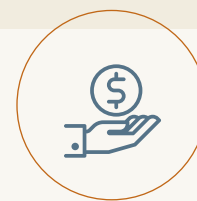


"From a school leader perspective, what is beautiful about the zone – and why the contractual relationship and independent governance is essential – is that urban education in general struggles to get out from in front of itself."

— Zach Rahn, Principal, Ashley Elementary



The Devil in the Details: Finance



One surprising realization that emerged during finance negotiations was how difficult it is for the district to separate expenses from individual departments and express them in terms of per pupil spending, since many expenditures are interdependent and targeted to support certain schools. So many central departments provide services to schools and stake claims to pieces of the funding, that the total gets whittled down significantly before it reaches schools and classrooms.

As part of the financial work for the LLN, DPS broke down how many dollars in per pupil revenue went to specific programs and initiatives under each district department.

Between 35 and 40 percent of a school's budget is not under the direct control of the principal, though only about 5 percent is held back for "central office administrative costs."

Mark Ferrandino, DPS' chief financial officer, said that while it is technically accurate that "between 35 and 40 percent" of a school's budget is not "under the direct control of the principal," only about 5 percent is held back for "central office administrative costs." The rest goes to centrally administered programs for school-based expenditures, such as transportation, facilities maintenance, athletics, and special education center programs. But the district had never unbundled some of these costs in this way before.

Ferrandino laid out two broad options for funding the zone schools. One, which he openly favored, involved taking the standard DPS student-based budgeting (SBB) model – providing each school with its share of per-pupil operating revenue, "weighted" with extra funds for students requiring special services – and then adding back any funds tied to district services from which LLN schools decided to opt out. This came to be known as SBB+.

The second option was a charter funding model, under which schools receive 100 percent of per-pupil revenue, minus roughly 3 percent to cover "documented central administrative costs" as allowed by state law.

Initially, the LLN team favored charter-like funding, because DPS charter schools receive the lion's share of per pupil revenue and then buy back select services they want or need from the district – a model that also resonated philosophically with the independently run LLN. But Ferrandino said trying to implement something similar without the guidance of state statute would be onerously complex. It would require starting from the assumption that schools would get all their per-pupil funding, he said. Then a team would have to comb through every program to determine what fees could be charged to the schools to fund services.

During meetings with the LLN team, Ferrandino cited two complicating factors as examples. First, unlike district schools, Colorado charter schools do not receive extra "weighted" funding for students who require additional services, including gifted and talented students, and students eligible for free and reduced lunch – so nor would the zone schools, if they decided to go with a charter funding model.

Second, while DPS fully funds full-day kindergarten in district-run schools, charter schools receive only what the state provides – 58 percent, plus a bit of the district's mill levy override funding – a special property tax approved by district voters – for each kindergarten student. Again, the net result would still fall significantly short for zone schools under the charter funding model.

Moreover, there was a strong consensus among DPS senior staff that if LLN schools wished to remain in the DPS fold, then they needed to subscribe to the district's deep commitment to equity by helping to fund some initiatives and programs that benefited the district as a whole. The LLN school leaders found this argument persuasive. They believed it supported a shared value of what it means to be a district school and differentiated them from charter schools.

After analyzing these variables, the LLN team decided to go with the SBB+ funding model. And there was another compelling reason to go with SBB+: "If part of what we're trying to do is ultimately change the way schools are funded in DPS, it makes sense to start with their standard funding formula. It's potentially more transformational for the system," Seawell said.



But deciding on the model did not yield instant agreement between the two parties. Like all Colorado districts, DPS was facing a crunch caused by a tight state budget and various quirks in the state constitution that make school finance arcane and convoluted. Pains-taking, line item-by-line item negotiations ensued, during which LLN representatives and DPS officials debated which services should be mandatory – and therefore paid for by LLN schools – and which they could forego, capturing dollars for their schools.

Negotiations continued through much of the spring of 2016. In the end, LLN schools were granted increased flexibility over instructional services provided by the district. Assuming all optional services were declined, Ashley ended up with a \$126,205 budget premium, Cole \$158,420, Denver Green School \$96,314, and C3 \$170,377. While it was not as much financial autonomy as the LLN team believed the schools should get, it was a good starting place for the LLN's first year, and both sides agreed to re-visit during launch with the benefit of more time.

A last sticking point was language in the MOU concerning how and when DPS could decide that providing LLN schools with a pro-rata payback for declined services would increase costs to the district or reduce money available to non-zone schools. This question, district leaders felt, hit at the heart of DPS' commitment to equity.

"Part of our role is to ensure that 100-plus other schools aren't getting a raw deal because you guys are getting a deal you feel good about," Chief Operating Officer David Suppes told zone representatives. "We take this very seriously."

The LLN team argued that the language DPS was proposing for the MOU was too broad, and would give the district almost complete latitude to decide when not to provide LLN schools with additional funding to compensate for services they decided not to use.

In the end, DPS softened the MOU's language, but the district still has a great deal of discretion in deciding when to allocate or withhold funds:

"The District shall provide to the (zone schools) their pro-rata share of funds associated with District services to which they have opted-out, if such pro-rata share can reasonably be calculated and implemented, and if the withdrawal of such funds will not result in a long term measurable increase in cost to the District nor a long term measurable reduction in the funding available to other schools within the District."

Some zone leaders worried that DPS could potentially use this language to undermine the LLN's main purpose: to act as a disruptive force that pushes the district into new ways of operating.

Negotiating this deal with the LLN's four schools was relatively easy. But should additional schools join the innovation zone, or should new zones form, DPS will face some tough, existential decisions, Ferrandino said.

"I was very clear with the board: Doing it for these four schools is fine, but if we're to take this to scale we would have to talk about the tradeoffs," he said.



For example, the two sides agreed that LLN schools should continue to pay into district-wide athletic programs, even though as elementary schools they did not benefit from athletics. This decision was significant, because it exemplified the LLN leaders' recognition that they were part of the larger district system of schools and should support certain district initiatives even if their own school did not receive a direct benefit. Allowing individual schools to opt out of these types of shared services would create a potential equity issue that all sides agreed was untenable.

On the other hand, the LLN was allowed to opt out of contributing to more discretionary district programs such as the *imaginarium*, DPS' innovation center. "Eventually, if you get enough schools in the zone, *imaginarium* might not be able to exist," Ferrandino said.

The board will have to demonstrate a willingness to think clearly and make tough decisions down the road, Ferrandino said. "The question for the board is: Do they want to move fast on this, or do they see this truly as a pilot that they are going to allow to move forward for three years with no other schools allowed to enter? The board still struggles with this. In the same conversation I have heard them come down in different places, because they are still trying to figure this out."

Board member Barbara O'Brien said in the summer of 2016 that she had been "forthright" with all parties that she doesn't see any wisdom in expanding the zone until three years have passed and the board can evaluate whether the innovation zone has borne fruit in the form of markedly improved student achievement.

"Do kids learn more, and faster?" O'Brien said. "That's the key question. If not, why would we expand it? What is the point of autonomy for autonomy's sake? On the other hand, if they can demonstrate real impact, isn't that enough reason to restructure the district?"

Board president Rowe agreed that the LLN could be the camel's nose under the tent. "We are going to learn a lot," she said. "In 10 years will we have 10 zones? Or will all schools start from a place of autonomy? I don't know what it will look like. What I do know is that if we keep the structures and systems in place that we have now, and everyone just works harder – if that's possible – we'll continue to have only incremental progress. And that's not why any of us are here."



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— Barbara O'Brien, DPS Board Member



Launching the Luminary Learning Network

After a summer spent determining how to best exercise new autonomies and deploy additional funds, the four Luminary Learning Network schools started the 2016-17 school year having made several notable changes to their allocation of both financial and human resources.

All four schools leveraged SBB+ resources to fund additional personnel to support each school's unique needs. For example, Denver Green School brought in a supporting staff member to help the school implement restorative practices – which address student misbehavior with conflict resolution rather than punishment – while Cole Arts and Science Academy brought in paraprofessionals for math and literacy intervention. Several schools purchased specific instructional supports and contracted with outside experts to assist with implementation. Ashley Elementary purchased supplementary online math curriculum and secured the assistance of a mathematician to train teachers, while C3 brought in additional nursing services, as well as instructional support for students who had fallen behind.

Each school leader also identified two to three high-impact strategies aimed at improving student achievement, along with goals and corresponding plans for implementation. Executive coaches, chosen by the school leaders at the beginning of the year, spent up to 10 hours a month with each school leader, providing consistent, rigorous, and specific feedback aimed at supporting leaders to achieve their goals.

LLN SCHOOL	ADDITIONAL FUNDING USED FOR:
Ashley Elementary	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Additional Special Ed paraprofessional• Additional paraprofessional for intervention• Stipends for teachers working extra hours to support clubs and tutoring
Cole Arts & Science Academy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Additional Special Ed paraprofessional• In-house guest teacher (basically a permanent sub)
Creativity Challenge Community (C3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Additional nursing services for students with health needs• Additional paraprofessionals for intervention
Denver Green School	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increased hours with a school psychologist• Additional paraprofessionals for intervention and restorative justice• Stipends for teachers working in August to write curriculum
<i>All schools also invested in professional development specific to their school models.</i>	

Simultaneously, the LLN partners got to work setting up the new nonprofit – building the board and hiring a network director to support schools and serve as a liaison to the district. The board was intentionally constructed so that the community members comprised the majority. Seawell became board chair, joined by four additional community members, two LLN school leaders, one DPS board member, and one representative of DPS senior staff, designated by Boasberg. The LLN board also established a conflict of interest policy, where the LLN principals must recuse themselves from discussions on hiring, firing, or evaluation of school leaders.

Even as the school year was just getting started, the four school leaders said they noticed a huge increase in the amount of time they were able to spend in their buildings, without being pulled away for district-mandated meetings. That alone was making a big difference, they said.

"I am most impactful when in my building," Cole Principal Jennifer Jackson told LLN board members at a fall retreat. "I high-five kids every day. I do lunch duty. I walk into classrooms. All of that matters. And amazingly enough, this is the first time I've been out of my building all year."

In October, the LLN board hired Jessica Roberts, who came to the LLN from YES Prep, a nationally recognized network of high-performing charter high schools in Houston. She had worked there in increasingly senior positions in the finance and accounting department. But she had also been a middle school math teacher for five years, and had started a non-profit providing after school opportunities for under-resourced youth.





Based on input from LLN school leaders and teachers, Roberts developed a school review process. School leaders are held accountable for gains in student achievement, but also receive targeted feedback from a team of respected peers – including leaders from other zone schools and executive coaches – following twice-yearly formal site visits. Meanwhile, the primary responsibility for evaluating the school leaders' job performance falls to the LLN executive director. This structure intentionally separates coaching and evaluation, distinguishing it from the DPS management structure, whereas in most cases instructional superintendents usually fill both roles of coach and evaluator.

DPS Superintendent Boasberg said the LLN's school review process was one of the strongest features of the new innovation zone. "The peer-to-peer school review process is really worth learning from," he said at the end of year one. "It is a thoughtful and innovative new practice, and where these practices prove successful, the (DPS) board can learn from them and scale them."

Cole Principal Jackson said the six-member team that reviewed her school in October was both frank and constructive.

"Everyone who came gave feedback because they deeply want Cole to get better and love the school," Jackson said. "It was the most honest outside perspective we've ever had. That level of ripping off the Band-Aid is extremely painful, but I trusted the team running (the review). So I could say, 'These are all the areas we need support in,' and they're going to give that support – and in six months, I'm not going to get fired."

Work to build out internal structures for teacher development was also underway. The LLN convened a Teacher Advisory Council made up of 13 teachers from all four LLN schools "to provide structures and supports to educate the whole child, by creating more action-oriented, collaborative, teacher-driven professional learning opportunities, while holding the zone accountable to the community," as Cole teacher and council member Nathan Hoston described it.

The teacher council is intended to serve as a bridge from school to school and from teachers to the LLN board.

An issue not yet resolved is when, whether, and by how many schools the LLN should expand. Throughout the 2016-17 school year, Roberts fielded calls and emails from DPS schools interested in joining the innovation zone.

Interest was so strong that the LLN hosted an informational meeting in late September, attended by more than a half-dozen DPS principals, as well as Boasberg. But when Roberts began following up with those principals, she discovered that some were concerned that applying to enter the zone might alienate the superintendent and their supervisors.

Three of the interested leaders were already or were seeking to become executive principals, who lead more than one school. They joined DPS officials, LLN board members, and Empower Schools staff members on a site visit to the Springfield Empowerment Zone. When they returned, Boasberg reached out to them and, in response to their concerns, offered access to the same SBB+ funding and the option to consider forming their own networks or innovation zones.

Those three school leaders decided to accept the district's offer and not to apply to join the LLN.

Ultimately, the LLN received just two applications to join the network in 2017-18. One school was denied, after a joint LLN and DPS review of the school's readiness for entry. The second school passed muster with both the LLN board and DPS portfolio office. On the last day of the school year, however, the school's teachers voted down the move into the LLN.

Under state law, without teacher approval, a school cannot join an innovation zone.

"The beauty of the LLN is that schools have to opt in. The design is supposed to be empowering to teachers and school leaders," Seawell said. "If that isn't present from the start, then it's a bad fit all around. We see this as the process working as it should."



"Everyone who came gave feedback because they deeply want Cole to get better and love the school. It was the most honest outside perspective we've ever had."

— Jennifer Jackson, Principal, Cole Arts and Science Academy











Year One Results

In August 2017, the Colorado Department of Education released results from the previous year's Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS) tests, and in October DPS released its School Performance Framework (SPF) ratings – color-coded scorecards intended to show at-a-glance how each school is performing.

Since the SPF is the tool the district will use to determine whether the board should re-authorize the LLN schools, results on the framework were significant: Three of the four LLN schools met their three-year performance goals in year one.

LUMINARY LEARNING NETWORK YEAR ONE – PERFORMANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

	SPF MEASURE Percentage Points Earned and Rating		PERFORMANCE RATINGS
	2016 (PRIOR TO LLN)	2017	
 ASHLEY ELEMENTARY	34.40%	 45.49% YEAR ONE CHANGE 11.09%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ACADEMIC GAPS ● ACADEMIC STUDENT GROWTH ● PERFORMANCE AT GRADE LEVEL ● STUDENT/FAMILY SATISFACTION
 Denver Green School Denver Public Schools	46.67%	 41.12% YEAR ONE CHANGE -5.55%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ACADEMIC GAPS ● ACADEMIC STUDENT GROWTH ● PERFORMANCE AT GRADE LEVEL ● STUDENT/FAMILY SATISFACTION
 Challenge Community Creativity	84.07%	 86.31% YEAR ONE CHANGE 2.24%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ACADEMIC GAPS ● ACADEMIC STUDENT GROWTH ● PERFORMANCE AT GRADE LEVEL ● STUDENT/FAMILY SATISFACTION
 Denver Green School Denver Public Schools	61.68%	 73.66% YEAR ONE CHANGE 11.98%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ACADEMIC GAPS ● ACADEMIC STUDENT GROWTH ● PERFORMANCE AT GRADE LEVEL ● STUDENT/FAMILY SATISFACTION

WHAT DOES DPS' SCHOOL PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORK (SPF) MEASURE?

Academic Gaps

How effectively a school is serving students regardless of background, ethnicity or ability.

Academic Student Growth

How much progress students show on state assessments from one year to the next.

Performance at Grade Level






How well students perform on state assessments in a given year.

Student/Family Satisfaction

How much progress students show on state assessments from one year to the next.

Based on how many points a school earns in each area of the School Performance Framework (SPF), each Denver school receives one of five ratings.

2017 PERCENTAGE POINTS EARNED

	DISTINGUISHED >79.5%
	MEETS EXPECTATIONS 50.5%–79.5%
	ACCREDITED ON WATCH 39.5%–50.5%
	ACCREDITED ON PRIORITY WATCH 23.5%–39.5%
	ACCREDITED ON PROBATION <33.5%

NOTE: A school can only earn a green or blue on the overall SPF if it earns a green or a blue on the Academic Gaps component.



The Denver Green School made the biggest gains over the previous year on the SPF – climbing nearly 12 percentage points in overall performance within the “green” category. C3’s performance rose slightly within the highest “blue” band, and Ashley Elementary climbed up to the yellow category from orange. Only Cole slipped on the number of SPF points earned, though its SPF rating of yellow held steady.

Close observers of DPS suggest that SPF results should be viewed with a critical eye, however, because the 2017 SPF formula changed substantially from the previous year. For example, in 2017 the SPF metrics weighted district-administered early literacy tests more heavily than in prior years, which helped boost ratings in many schools.





State standardized test results painted more of a mixed picture, but revealed enough bright spots to encourage network leaders.

Denver Green School and C3 posted strong results, both in terms of achievement status – a snapshot of students meeting or exceeding expectations at a fixed point in time – and growth – student progress on test scores compared to a cohort of students with similar characteristics.

In English Language Arts, Denver Green School’s results were particularly impressive, because low-income students, English language learners, and students of color posted high rates of growth.

“A huge part of the improvement they are seeing is the data feedback loop they have – they use their own interim assessments and are consistently and constantly looking at student data and responding to that data in how they differentiate instruction,” the LLN’s Roberts said.

COLORADO MEASURES OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS (CMAS) OUTCOMES – 2016-2017

		CMAS Standards Meets or Exceeds Expectations		Median Growth Percentile	
		2016	2017	2016	2017
 ASHLEY ELEMENTARY	ELA	19%	↓ 18%	45.0	↓ 36.0
	MATH	5%	↑ 12%	42.0	↓ 32.0
 COLE ELEMENTARY	ELA	20%	↑ 21%	60.0	↓ 49.0
	MATH	12%	↓ 6%	35.0	↓ 17.0
 C3	ELA	70%	↔ 70%	84.0	↓ 65.0
	MATH	57%	↑ 62%	79.0	↑ 87.0
 DENVER GREEN SCHOOL <small>Denver Public Schools</small>	ELA	46%	↑ 59%	70.0	↑ 81.0
	MATH	29%	↑ 32%	57.0	↑ 60.0

STATUS VS. GROWTH

Educators refer to “status” and “growth” when talking about how schools are serving their students.

- Status refers to how a school is doing at a single, fixed point in time.
- Growth refers to how a school is doing over a period of time (often two years).
- Median Growth Percentile is an indicator that compares student growth rates in schools with similar demographics. Schools with growth rates above 50 are performing above their peers, while those with rates below 50 are performing below their peers.



C3 posted extraordinarily high math growth scores, and high percentages of students continued to meet or exceed expectations in both math and ELA.

Ashley students performed similarly to 2016, with most students showing growth and status scores significantly lower than state averages. However, Roberts sees cause for hope in strong results from a new early literacy curriculum implemented during 2016-17. Grades K-2 don't take CMAS tests, but Roberts said that given the youngest students' response to the new curriculum, she expects to see improved scores next year.

Cole's growth and status started and ended below district averages. Roberts said significant changes in how teachers collaborate, as well as deep training on dealing with students in trauma, should make 2017-18 a better year.

With the LLN on a three-year authorization cycle, it's important to note that during the first year of operation, the network and schools were truly flying the plane while building it. The network lacked an executive director throughout its 2016-17 planning and budgeting periods, until Roberts came onboard more than halfway through the first semester.

Roberts said that she and the LLN board expect all four schools to improve on the SPF and the CMAS in the 2017-18 school year, with LLN support systems fully in place.





Remaining Questions and Opportunities

As the end of the LLN's first school year drew near, the organization's board invited DPS board members and Boasberg to join them for a reflection session. What had everyone learned, what had worked well, what needed shoring up, and what questions still lingered?

Many of those questions have been addressed in this report. But attendees made a few additional points worth noting.

The LLN is modeling a powerful form of shared leadership in its schools. Kartal Jaquette, one of Denver Green School's lead partners, observed that autonomy leads to empowerment and empowerment leads to the confidence necessary to distribute leadership among more people in an organization.

In the context of the LLN and the Green School, he said, that translated into "really valuing teacher voice." Leaders at DGS now feel "empowered, trusted, responsible, and accountable," and that has been passed on to teachers.

"That's a really powerful place for an educator to be, rather than feeling like a pawn in a chess game or a cog in a wheel," Jaquette said. "They feel they are true players in this game."

School leaders also said it would be hard to imagine a principal joining the LLN who wasn't willing to take substantial risks.

"It needs to be inherent in a leader's DNA to be entrepreneurial and a risk-taker," the Green School's Coyne said. "That really should be part of any good school leader, but certainly for someone who could work in an innovation school or zone."

DPS human resources chief Debbie Hearty, who sits on the LLN board, said it is clearer in the LLN than in DPS as a whole "who is sitting at the center" of various processes. School leaders are driving the site review process, and teachers are driving the teacher council, she said. "It's something important for us (the district) to reflect on."

DPS board president Rowe said the LLN has begun to demonstrate that existing in a small, tight-knit organization makes it easier for schools to "be nimble enough to make adjustments for your kids. And that's really hard to do in a district with 90,000 students."

Indeed, since the establishment of the LLN, the idea of leveraging zones as a way to increase autonomy is spreading with energy – between DPS schools expressing interest in joining the LLN, and the district itself actively seeking to prepare school leaders to replicate successful school models and create new networks.

To help prepare the field, the Gates Family Foundation and Empower Schools have joined forces with Bellwether Education and The Laura and John Arnold Foundation to develop EdLead Denver – a first-of-its-kind, six-month fellowship aimed at helping leaders from all sectors – traditional, innovation, charter – learn from each other and develop concrete plans to create, expand or support clusters of schools.

The first cohort started work in November 2017, and leaders are expected to develop action plans by Spring 2018 and begin implementation in the 2018-19 school year. Principal Frank Coyne of Denver Green School, the LLN's highest growth school, is a member of the EdLead cohort and has plans to replicate the successful campus. And as this report is being published, DPS is finalizing its official "Call for New Quality



"It needs to be inherent in a leader's DNA to be entrepreneurial and a risk-taker...that really should be part of any good school leader, but certainly for someone who could work in an innovation school or zone."

— Frank Coyne, Principal, Denver Green School



Innovation Zones”, which will set the parameters for additional schools looking to form new innovation zones in the district. This would be the first time nationwide that a traditional district has issued such an opportunity to school leaders.

The LLN's impact on the central administration is becoming clearer as well. There is some evidence that the zone has achieved its goal of pushing district systems to be more responsive to schools' needs. DPS staff are in the process of determining what services are provided by which district departments, and how to set associated fees.

In fall 2017, the DPS leadership team announced its intent to expand the SBB+ funding model to the three executive principals who lead multiple schools in 2017-18, and possibly to all innovation schools the following year. Details about the DPS 2018-19 budget are still under consideration as this report goes to print.

Yet challenges remain for the LLN and the district. The LLN requires new systems and modes of operating – whether financial, procedural, or philosophical – and much work exists to define these new systems. While the LLN agreed to employ the SBB+ funding model, the two sides did not agree on just how ‘plus’ the + would be. The LLN must both collaborate with the district and nudge it toward developing necessary conditions for school-based autonomy and innovation. Balancing these sometimes conflicting roles will be an ongoing challenge for the LLN, and its relationship with DPS leaders.

The LLN's compliance obligations to the district require almost daily communication between Roberts and senior DPS leadership. The friction this creates is illustrative of the tension of the LLN being a part of the district in some ways, yet independent in others.

“Thoughtfully and effectively managing such a fundamental shift in the role of school-based decision-making naturally takes time and the ability to continually adapt,” said Empower Schools' Alessi.

“I think that is part of the reason why it's so important for the district and zone to forge a strong partnership and a deep level of trust. Only if everyone agrees on the goals, can it be a win for everyone involved,” he said.

Major questions facing the LLN, and its relationship with DPS, include:

- **Can the LLN continue to learn, adapt, and resist settling into a mode of operating similar to that of school districts?**
- **Can the district adapt sufficiently to meet the LLN's needs? Will the district devolve sufficient autonomy over finances and operations to allow schools significant control of their academic programs, operations, and staffing?**
- **Can the LLN's teacher council craft meaningful, relevant professional development that helps teachers become more effective, pushing beyond the traditional “sit and get” delivery of content to a more engaging format?**
- **Will the LLN schools significantly move the needle for their students? Will results on standardized assessments demonstrate increased proficiency and growth by year three?**
- **When will the LLN grow? What will this growth look like? Will other zones be formed? Will the new EdLead Denver fellowship help prepare more school leaders for the opportunity?**
- **How will the district balance its dual role as a school operator and authorizer?**

DPS board member O'Brien said she used to wonder if the LLN could move DPS in meaningful ways – but that over time, she has been pleasantly surprised.

“There's so much on the plate for DPS, there tends to be a default back to just moving things along instead of wrestling them into some new form or new pathway,” she said. “I believe the LLN is helping the district buck this trend, and driving meaningful, systemic changes in DPS as a whole. It has just taken a while.”

DPS Board Member Mike Johnson – who was unseated in the 2017 election, facing vocal opposition to the district's reform agenda – said he, too, is optimistic that paths forged by the LLN can spark fundamental change within DPS – which is one of its primary goals.

“Because of the LLN, we are substantially farther along in the overall process of giving schools in DPS more control over their budgets and what happens in their buildings,” Johnson said. “And in the long run that is incredibly important, because better decisions get made by people closer to problems and because they are then more committed to carrying out those decisions.

“So we need to keep this in context as just one of many things going on in DPS, all aimed at bringing an institution that was created in the early 20th century into the 21st century.”



APPENDIX A

Timeline: Innovation Spreads from Schools to a Zone, and Beyond

2008	As DPS Superintendent, Michael Bennet is instrumental in passing Colorado's Innovation Schools Act.
2009	Tom Boasberg, Bennet's deputy superintendent and lifelong friend, takes the helm as superintendent of DPS – where he remains to this day.
2010-11	By this end of the school year, 20 DPS schools have gained innovation status.
2011	As DPS Board President, Mary Seawell works with then-innovation schools chief Alyssa Whitehead-Bust to lead district adoption of stronger policy for authorizing and protecting autonomy of innovation schools.
2012	DPS creates a first-in-the-nation common enrollment system that allows parents to use a single form to apply to all schools, whether district-run or charter.
SPRING 2015	A group of DPS innovation school principals steps forward to request more autonomy; Gates Family Foundation hosts collaborative meetings and site visits to other innovation zones.
DECEMBER 2015	DPS school board unanimously passes a resolution directing district staff to work with four innovation school principals to develop a formal, detailed plan to create an innovation zone.
JANUARY 2016	Superintendent Tom Boasberg departs for a six-month sabbatical; Chief of Schools Susana Cordova is appointed as acting superintendent.
EARLY 2016	Cordova and DPS senior staff meet frequently with Luminary Learning Network leaders to negotiate MOU to establish governance, accountability, finance and other important details to create the LLN innovation zone.
APRIL 28 2016	The DPS Board of Education votes unanimously to create the LLN, to launch in the 2016-17 school year with four schools.
SPRING/SUMMER 2016	LLN schools determine how to best exercise new autonomies and deploy additional funds to meet the needs of their students.
FALL 2016	Four LLN schools start the 2016-17 school year with significant changes to their allocation of both financial and human resources.
OCTOBER 2016	The LLN board hires Jessica Roberts as its Executive Director.
SPRING 2017	Ending its first year, the LLN has begun to demonstrate viable new ways of doing business – notably, a new funding model that provides more budget control to principals, and an innovative peer-to-peer school review process that provides actionable feedback to leaders and teachers in zone schools.
2017-18	DPS rolls out budgeting flexibilities pioneered by the LLN to a handful of the district's innovation schools, and announces its intention to offer similar flexibilities to all innovation schools the following school year.
OCTOBER 2017	Student achievement and school outcome data from the LLN's first year indicate that three of the four LLN schools are on an upward trend, with two LLN schools having charted significant growth (more than 11 percentage points higher than the previous year on DPS's School Performance Framework).
NOVEMBER 2017	First cohort of school leaders join EdLead Denver, a pilot project aimed at helping leaders from all sectors – traditional, innovation, charter – learn from each other and develop concrete plans to create, expand or support clusters of schools.
DECEMBER 2017	DPS prepares to issue a "Call for New Quality Innovation Zones," outlining potential benefits, challenges, and requirements for groups of innovation schools seeking to launch new zones in August 2019



APPENDIX B

Denver Public Schools Portfolio: School Types and Key Features

	DPS TRADITIONAL SCHOOLS	DPS INNOVATION SCHOOLS	LLN NETWORK SCHOOLS	DPS CHARTER SCHOOLS
NUMBER OF SCHOOLS (2017-2018)	99	45	4	60
PERCENTAGE OF DPS STUDENTS	47.6%	21.6%	1.9%	28.8%
GOVERNANCE	School leaders report to instructional superintendents (principal managers) who ultimately report to the superintendent.	<p>The LLN is an independent 501(c)(3) organization whose relationship to DPS and LLN schools is articulated in an MOU and service contract approved by the DPS Board of Education, and an innovation zone plan approved by the DPS board and the Colorado State Board of Education.</p> <p>The DPS board delegated operational and management authority of the LLN schools to the LLN board. The nine-member LLN board is comprised of five community members, two LLN school leaders, and two DPS representatives. The LLN leaders and DPS representatives are restricted from voting on some issues, as described in the LLN's Conflict of Interest Policy.¹</p>	<p>Charter schools are independent 501(c)(3) organizations governed by boards of community members.</p> <p>Charter schools operate under a charter with the DPS board. Charter operators also have contracts with DPS which are approved and renewed during authorization and renewal.</p>	
AUTHORIZATION	<p>The district issues a “Call for New Quality Schools”² articulating the district’s need for new and expanded school programs; schools submit applications; district staff carry out a quality review process; and the DPS board approves or denies the authorization in a public vote.</p> <p>The DPS board also determines the term of authorization, although innovation schools must receive three-year terms as codified in the 2008 Innovation Schools Act.</p> <p>All DPS schools are subject to authorization renewal and may be renewed by the DPS board for a board-determined term or denied renewal in a public vote. The DPS board may vote to revoke innovation status.</p> <p>The Colorado Board of Education must also vote to approve a school becoming an innovation school.</p>	<p>District staff developed an ad-hoc authorization process to create the LLN, and the DPS board voted unanimously to authorize the LLN’s innovation plan for a three-year term starting in 2016-17.</p> <p>Future groups of innovation schools with common interests that would like to apply to be an Innovation Zone will undergo an authorization process managed by district staff. The DPS board must approve any new school joining an innovation zone.</p> <p>The DPS board may revoke innovation status of the zone or any of its schools at any time for poor performance. There is no appeals process to the Colorado Board of Education for not approving or renewing an innovation zone.</p>	<p>DPS is the exclusive authorizer of charter schools within the district’s boundaries.³</p> <p>The process is the same as for district schools: Charter operators may submit applications in response to the district’s “Call for New Quality Schools”, DPS staff carry out a quality review process, and the DPS board approves or denies the authorization in a public vote.</p> <p>The DPS board also determines the term of charter authorization, which can vary from one to five years.</p>	
FACILITIES	Authorized schools compete for placement in a district facility under DPS’ Facility Allocation Policy. Placements are determined by the DPS board in a public vote. If there are no available facilities, charter schools must find and pay for their own facilities.			



APPENDIX B

Denver Public Schools Portfolio: School Types and Key Features *(continued)*

	DPS TRADITIONAL SCHOOLS	DPS INNOVATION SCHOOLS	LLN NETWORK SCHOOLS	DPS CHARTER SCHOOLS
PRINCIPAL ACCOUNTABILITY	Decisions about principal hiring and firing are made by instructional superintendents.	Decisions about principal hiring and firing are made by the LLN board. If the DPS superintendent objects, the issue may be elevated to the DPS board.	Decisions about principal hiring and firing are made by the LLN board. If the DPS superintendent objects, the issue may be elevated to the DPS board.	Decisions about principal hiring and firing are made by the charter school board.
SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY	Schools receive yearly ratings on DPS' School Performance Framework (SPF) ⁴ , a report card rating how well a particular school supports student growth and achievement on standardized tests and how well it serves students and families. The DPS board reviews each school against the School Performance Compact (SPC) ⁵ ; the most persistently low-performing schools are designated for restart or closure.	In addition to receiving yearly SPF ratings and yearly SPC reviews, LLN schools commit to move up one rating band on the SPF within three years, or, in the case of schools starting in green and blue bands, maintain an SPF score of 70 percent or above.. The DPS board may decide not to renew the Innovation Zone after three years. There is no state appeal process.	In addition to receiving yearly SPF ratings and yearly SPC reviews, LLN schools commit to move up one rating band on the SPF within three years, or, in the case of schools starting in green and blue bands, maintain an SPF score of 70 percent or above.. The DPS board may decide not to renew the Innovation Zone after three years. There is no state appeal process.	Same as district schools, charter schools receive yearly SPF ratings and the DPS board uses the SPC to evaluate each school for possible closure. If DPS votes to close a charter, the school may appeal the decision to the State Board of Education which may overturn the decision.
BUDGETING AND DISTRICT SERVICES	Schools receive funding allocations through the district's student-based budget (SBB) formula, which weights per-pupil revenue with extra dollars to support special populations (including students from low-income homes and English language learners). Under the SBB formula, principals have discretion over about 60-65 percent of their school's budget, while the district holds back about 5 percent for central administrative costs and 30-35 percent for district-administered school-based programs such as transportation, facilities maintenance, athletics, and special education center programs.	In addition to the SBB allocation, Luminary Learning Network schools may opt out of an additional set of district services (including professional development, curriculum, and the support of instructional superintendents) in exchange for corresponding per-pupil funds. This funding structure has come to be known within the LLN and the district as SBB+.	In addition to the SBB allocation, Luminary Learning Network schools may opt out of an additional set of district services (including professional development, curriculum, and the support of instructional superintendents) in exchange for corresponding per-pupil funds. This funding structure has come to be known within the LLN and the district as SBB+.	Schools receive state per-pupil revenues through DPS. Under Colorado's Charter Schools Act, the authorizer may retain up to 5 percent of per-pupil revenue for documented central administrative costs associated with the oversight of the charter school. DPS charter schools may buy back certain district services a la carte (like facility use, maintenance, security, and other services). DPS charters also receive a per-pupil share of local mill levy revenues. ⁶
ENROLLMENT	All schools participate in the district's unified choice and enrollment system. This system is managed centrally, and the district determines school enrollment through an algorithm that maximizes the number of students and families placed in their top-choice schools. Students who do not participate in choice are guaranteed a spot in a neighborhood school. District-managed magnet schools, such as the Denver School of the Arts, set additional criteria for entry for DPS students interested in attending.			

⁴ The School Performance Framework (SPF) is a report card rating how well a particular school supports student growth and achievement on standardized tests and how well it serves students and families. There are five rating bands – blue being the highest, followed by green, yellow, orange and red.

⁵ The School Performance Compact (SPC) is a DPS board adopted policy to identify and designate for restart or closure the most persistently low-performing schools.

⁶ Currently, districts are not required to share mill levy revenues. However, in May 2017 the Colorado legislature passed a bill requiring all school districts to develop a plan to equitably share mill levy revenues by the 2019-20 school year.



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