

The Friction of Scale: Lessons from Scaling Up Innovation in Three School Districts

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Introduction

Too many students, especially those furthest from opportunity, continue to experience an education system that [produces mediocre results](#). Incremental, one-off improvements have not been enough to change this trajectory. School districts¹ that seek to dramatically improve student outcomes must instead pursue deep changes that reach every classroom.

Historically, a path to this kind of change has been [decentralization](#): giving individual schools the autonomy to design their own approaches to improvement. This was the theory behind efforts like the [New American Schools](#) and [site-based decision-making](#) initiatives of [the 1990s](#) and, more recently, [the portfolio model](#) that CRPE originated and encouraged districts to test. These approaches recognized that schools, as opposed to districts or states, are closest to students and are often best positioned to identify and solve their own problems. But in practice, these approaches ran into a persistent obstacle: district policies and central office systems were [built for uniformity](#) and [not designed to flex](#) around a wide range of school-level practices. Decentralized innovation frequently collided with centralized bureaucracy.

A second path to deep, innovative changes takes the opposite approach: rather than allowing many different solutions to bloom, districts select a single, innovative program and [scale it systemwide](#). Because every school implements the same model, this approach avoids the coordination challenges that come with accommodating multiple, divergent approaches to improvement. In theory, it should be more compatible with how central offices already operate.

We studied this second path to understand whether and how districts can achieve deep change by scaling a single, districtwide innovation. In an earlier phase of this [study](#), CRPE followed 11 districts that were piloting “Bold Idea” innovations designed to dramatically improve students’ learning experiences. In the second phase of this study, we followed three of those districts for two additional years as they moved from piloting to scaling (see the sidebar on the next page for additional details).

Our findings challenge the assumption that scaling a single model sidesteps barriers to reform. After three years of studying these districts that were the “most ready” of their larger pilot group to scale districtwide innovation, none of them reached the level of scale they set out to achieve. Each district’s Bold Idea changed substantially along the way, becoming less ambitious than originally designed. We found that scaling surfaces its own version of the problem that undid decentralized reform: As an innovation spreads to more schools and classrooms and touches more parts of the district’s system, it runs into policies and practices that were never built to accommodate something new. In other words, even in cases where districts are initiating and designing their own innovations, they are running into bureaucratic friction—the cumulative resistance that district policies, procedures, norms, and competing priorities exert on an initiative as it moves from a pilot into full contact with the district’s day-to-day operations. Compounding this friction, districts also

1. In this report, we use the term “districts” to refer to both traditional districts and charter management organizations (CMOs).

encountered capacity gaps among teachers implementing the Bold Idea; these gaps required sustained training before they could take on new work.

Nonetheless, these districts were able to reach modest levels of scale, and their experiences are instructive for other districts that want to scale up innovative approaches. Leaders in these three districts spent financial and political resources to confront capacity constraints and friction. That spending brought partial progress, but it came at the cost of the Bold Ideas themselves, which had to be pared down to survive across a broader range of teachers and schools, as well as other district policies and priorities. Three conditions helped leaders make progress: an instructional vision closely aligned with the Bold Idea, data systems that surfaced pain points and tracked leading indicators, and a skilled central office champion willing to spend political capital on behalf of the Bold Idea.

The lesson is not that districts chose the wrong strategy when scaling their Bold Ideas, but that no strategy can fully avoid bureaucratic friction. Districts, state leaders, and funders should anticipate that friction and plan for how to minimize and navigate it through steps such as assessing likely barriers before scaling, piloting in protected “innovation zones,” and investing in the instructional vision, data systems, and central office champions that make friction easier to manage. But navigating friction only goes so far. As districts confront [prolonged pandemic recovery](#), [budget shortfalls](#), and [sweeping advancements in technology](#), they must become less bureaucratic, unyielding, and compliance-focused and more oriented toward experimentation, flexible policy, and cross-departmental coordination.

The lesson is not that districts chose the wrong strategy when scaling their Bold Ideas, but that no strategy can fully avoid bureaucratic friction.

Methodology: Can districts create deep change by scaling a Bold Idea?

To answer this question, CRPE, together with the Walton Family Foundation, launched the Innovative School Systems Grant (ISSG), an in-depth examination of three districts that are pursuing bold, systemwide change. Phase I of this project took place during the 2023-24 school year and included 11 school systems piloting a Bold Idea initiative. They each received \$136K in funding. We selected three of the Phase I districts to advance to Phase II based on their “Bold Idea” initiative and several readiness criteria. They received an additional \$1.125M each, as well as sustained support and resources, to scale the Bold Ideas to at least 25% of their district.

What is a “Bold Idea?”

In this study, we intentionally did not prescribe the type of initiative districts could pursue, believing instead that local leaders have the best sense of what could work in their own contexts. Most districts proposed novel, homegrown initiatives. To assess “boldness,” we looked for initiatives that were a significant departure from the status quo, addressed a systemwide issue by reimagining students’ time and learning experiences, and leveraged community, industry, and parent assets in new ways. Each

Bold Idea needed to offer a lasting, innovative solution to post-pandemic student needs, attempt something different from what had been tried before, and place historically marginalized learners at the center of the solution.

How did we assess district “readiness?”

We selected the three districts in this study because they had (1) demonstrated strong pilots and (2) already had a number of evidence-backed conditions for success in place. Evidence of successful piloting included: early evidence of impact, evidence that districts had adapted their pilot in response to emerging feedback, and a coherent plan for scaling the Bold Idea beyond pilot sites (spreading to multiple schools and reaching at least 25% of the district’s student population). All three districts had run a pilot long enough to collect data and make an informed decision about whether to continue. Conditions for success included: strong alignment between state policy context and the Bold Idea and other district priorities; engaged leadership and stakeholders who could sustain the initiative through potential turnover, paired with an initiative lead who had the authority to drive implementation across departments; and sufficient resourcing and planning, including a plan for sustaining funding beyond the initial seed period and a clear succession plan for key leadership roles.

How much support did each district receive?

Each Phase II district received \$1.125 million in funding over three years, along with a cohort experience, technical assistance, and coaching. All three districts also attended three in-person convenings and two virtual convenings, received additional funds for technical assistance, and received support to build customized data dashboards.²

What did we study?

Over the three years of the project, we followed how each district piloted and then scaled its Bold Idea. The study was designed to answer three central questions:

- Did districts pilot and scale their Bold Ideas?
- How did the pilot and scaling of each Bold Idea unfold?
- What factors shaped the pilots and scaling?

To answer these questions, the research team conducted annual site visits and interviewed key leaders throughout the course of the study. In total, we conducted 131 semi-structured interviews and focus groups and more than 115 hours of classroom and meeting observation across six site visits. We interviewed central office leaders, coaches, principals, and teachers, often more than once during this phase of the study. To assess scaling progress, we drew on Coburn’s four dimensions of scale (spread, depth, ownership, and sustainability) to track how each Bold Idea evolved on each dimension over time. Our data was primarily qualitative but supplemented by quantitative measures such as attendance, engagement, satisfaction, and achievement, where available. See the Appendix for a full description of our research methods.

2. CRPE staff attended convenings and connected sites with various technical assistance providers but did not deliver coaching or other support.

What were the Bold Ideas?

We refer to the districts anonymously (District A, B, and C) throughout this report to keep the focus on cross-site themes; the accompanying **case studies** provide detail on each district's specific context and scaling journey.

- **District A:** This district wanted to build on lessons from an earlier extended learning time pilot at its elementary schools. They sought to adapt select days each month to include dedicated blocks of personalized learning time that could be used for extended Tier 2 intervention, enrichment projects, and extra recess. This is a school-level change effort: at each participating elementary school, every teacher in every grade is adopting the model. The district started with five schools, with the goal of eventually spreading to all elementary schools.
- **District B:** This district wanted to implement competency-based assessments and authentic learning experiences that connect to the district's Graduate Profile competencies. This is a districtwide effort, aiming to change instruction and assessment for every teacher in every school, while intentionally allowing school leaders to determine the depth of implementation.
- **District C:** This district sought to expand an AI-enabled platform, co-developed with an external software vendor, that compiles and synthesizes student-level data into one personalized learning tool. This was a districtwide effort, but school-level participation was initially optional: principals had discretion over which features their school adopted. One feature, a student goal-setting module, was adopted districtwide for all third graders.

1. Districts struggled to meaningfully scale their Bold Ideas on an ambitious timeline.

Three years into this study, which tracked one year of piloting and two years of scaling up, the picture is clear: **none of the three districts achieved the scale they set out to reach.**

While all three districts achieved some measure of scale by spreading their Bold Idea beyond the schools, classrooms, or teachers involved in the original pilot, none reached the level of scale they had proposed at the outset.

Districts A and B achieved modest scale but fell well short of their original projections. For example, District A initially intended to scale its Bold Idea to 20 elementary schools. Only seven schools implemented the Bold Idea in the first year of scaling; four of those seven schools did not continue participating in the second year, and other schools took their place. Only three schools consistently implemented the Bold Idea for all of Phase II. However, the district does plan to scale part of the Bold Idea to all elementary schools in 2027.

District B started with the goal to create a new performance-based assessment system, but over time, they limited the scope. Teachers had to implement at least two "Authentic Learning experiences," defined as instruction and assessment grounded in content and tasks that connect to students' lives, per year. As of June 2026, District

C's scaling of their Bold Idea has stalled, and they are pivoting their efforts towards an entirely new approach.

In Districts A and B, among those who did participate in the Bold Idea, buy-in was generally high. One teacher's comment reflected what we heard repeatedly: "I 100% did not want to change. I'm glad I did. [The Bold Idea has] made a huge difference in how my classroom is." In District B, we observed evangelists for the Bold Idea in positions throughout the district, including central office staff, principals, instructional coaches, and teachers. The vast majority conveyed a deep understanding of the Bold Idea, encouraged their peers, and fundamentally redesigned their instructional approaches. Building buy-in remained a challenge in District C throughout the study, primarily due to difficulties with the technology at the core of the Bold Idea.

Importantly, while we selected the districts with clear levers of support in place, including steady leadership, a vision for innovation, and community-sourced and -supported ideas, these criteria were not enough to ensure scaling up over the three years of this study. Further, whether these initiatives will continue, deepen, or fade once formal study and support end remains an open question. Districts are still determining whether they have adequate financial resources or staffing to sustain the initiatives.

2. Moving from the exception to the norm exposed Bold Ideas to increasingly complex district barriers.

When we looked at the data behind why each district only made modest progress in scaling (and subsequently had to modify their Bold Ideas), we found that expanding a Bold Idea beyond pilot classrooms or schools exposed it to increasingly complex district barriers, including capacity limits, competing initiatives, and rigid district policies.³

During [the pilot phase](#), we found that Bold Ideas could often operate as exceptions to how the district normally did business. A handful of schools or classrooms could pilot new instructional approaches, adopt new assessment practices, or use a new AI-powered tool without requiring the district to change its underlying policies or systems. But scaling meant abandoning this "policy by exception" approach. To reach more schools and more students, districts had to confront the actual policies and instructional systems (e.g., assessment practices, professional learning) that the pilot had simply worked around. What had been a manageable, contained exception became a systemwide policy problem in all three districts. One leader described these challenges as a "learning curve for the district leadership team... [We had to] go slow to go fast."

As they entered the scaling stage, district leaders anticipated some additional barriers, such as principal and teacher buy-in, and were ready with plans to address them. But as the Bold Idea scaled, so did the size of the problems. During scaling, leaders encountered issues that were much more complex and entrenched than those they experienced during their pilots. Each district encountered similar barriers,

3. Likely because we selected districts based on how well their Bold Idea fit with their state's policy context, we observed relatively few state-level policy barriers.

to varying degrees:

Teacher and principal capacity limits. The people-intensive work of building skills and know-how among a small group of teachers and principals during a pilot looked very different once districts needed to undertake this work with dozens or hundreds of staff. They encountered two distinct problems. First, districts learned that many teachers lacked the instructional capacity to implement the Bold Idea successfully. Districts A and B found that many teachers, especially novice teachers, lacked what one administrator described as the “pedagogical floor” (i.e., facility with state standards and classroom management skills) to implement features of the Bold Idea. These teachers required basic instructional coaching before they could move on to the relatively more advanced instructional approaches the Bold Idea demanded. One coach noted that it was difficult for teachers to learn about the fundamentals of instruction and the Bold Idea at once. “I think our biggest challenge as a school is having so many teachers who are brand new or are in teaching programs while they’re teaching... if [they’re] learning standards and learning classroom management and learning engagement strategies and learning... it gets really difficult to try to implement that all at the same time.” Principals faced a parallel gap: many had to undergo their own training on the Bold Idea before they had the instructional knowledge to lead their schools through the change and to coach and evaluate teachers on their implementation.

Second, districts found that their existing training approaches were not up to the task. For example, District C used instructional coaches to train teachers and principals on the Bold Idea’s key attributes, as well as provide personalized support. But as the initiative scaled, these coaches were spread across more schools, and spent the majority of their time setting up the technology to support the Bold Idea amidst increasingly skeptical staff and families. One coach shared, “So, honestly, I would say 40% of my day is one-on-one conversations with teachers or PLC teams about what’s going on in the platform, what’s wrong, what’s right. Let me see what’s going weird on your thing. Let me show you how to submit a ticket for that. And just really addressing the need.”

Competing initiatives and siloization. As Bold Ideas grew, they increasingly bumped up against other district priorities and departments that hadn’t been built to coordinate with new instructional approaches. Districts A and B were simultaneously implementing state-mandated high-quality instructional materials (HQIMs) as they were scaling the Bold Idea. In District A, central office departments operated as independent “silos,” which led to competing priorities. One department was working to implement HQIMs and a “managed instruction” model, an instructional approach that focuses on consistent instruction across classrooms through prescribed lessons, standardized pacing calendars, and systematic monitoring, while another department pushed to scale up the Bold Idea. As a result, staff across offices struggled to determine “who makes the call on something.” In District B, several principals viewed the Bold Idea and HQIMs as separate and competing initiatives, choosing to focus on the required HQIM before engaging with the Bold Idea.

Existing policy. State and district policies designed around traditional structures (seat time, grading, accountability metrics based primarily on standardized test

scores) often did not bend to accommodate a fundamentally different model. District A followed a strict pacing and assessment schedule that left no room for alternative lessons, and novice teachers relied heavily on scripted instructional materials. In District B, existing principal and teacher evaluation structures did not prioritize the key elements of the Bold Idea, so resistant or reluctant staff had no incentive to adopt it. Similarly, in District C, conflicts with existing policies manifested at the school level—some staff remained loyal to previously implemented tools and processes instead of switching to the technology in the Bold Idea. This meant that district staff had to operate and support two sets of tools. And across all three districts, the specter of state testing and accountability ratings made educators feel “pressured” and hesitant to try new practices, for fear that the practices would lower test scores.

Competing initiatives and priorities, siloization, and existing policy and red tape all created what one leader called “bureaucratic friction,” slowing and harming implementation. This kind of friction is not any one person’s or department’s opposition, but the cumulative resistance that district policies, procedures, norms, and competing priorities exert on an initiative as it moves from a contained pilot into full contact with the district’s day-to-day operations. Both bureaucratic friction and teachers’ instructional capacity were challenges in all three districts as they moved from piloting to scaling.

3. Confronting capacity limits and bureaucratic friction outstripped districts’ financial and political resources.

To make the progress they did, districts could not work around bureaucratic friction and instructional capacity; they instead had to invest money and political capital to confront these barriers head-on. Financial resources went primarily toward coaching and professional learning to build capacity among a much larger and more inexperienced group of teachers and principals than the original pilot required. Political resources went toward easing the bureaucratic friction the Bold Idea encountered, requiring leaders to spend down their credibility and relationships in sustained negotiation across central office departments.

Financial resources: funding for coaching and professional learning. What was affordable to sustain for a pilot cohort became substantially more expensive at scale, in particular for staff training, as noted above. Early in the scaling stage, Districts A and B identified the same underlying issue: many teachers lacked basic classroom management skills and a firm grasp of state standards, which were both necessary before teachers could take ownership of the Bold Ideas. Closing this capacity gap needed to happen before many teachers could move on to learning the Bold Idea, and doing so required real money. To address these gaps, both districts had to redirect some of the internal instructional coaching and external technical assistance (TA) resources meant to help support the implementation of the Bold Idea, using these supports to instead “backfill” foundational support for novice teachers. External TA was expensive, but in both districts proved to be a particularly valuable use of these funds: it trained and supported teachers on the basic components of the Bold Idea, helped build central office capacity, and helped districts refine the

innovation itself. But they were unable to fully transfer this expertise to internal coaches: all districts were still reliant on external supports at the end of the study. District C also spent significant financial resources on both software development (the district didn't have this capacity in-house) and deploying coaches to schools to support the Bold Idea. But, as noted above, the coaches mostly ended up troubleshooting technology problems instead of supporting implementation, and leaders wondered about the sustainability of the coaching positions. That drift from their intended purpose left these positions exposed, and when the district experienced a financial crisis, they were ultimately cut.

Political capital: competing initiatives and other district policies. Aligning the Bold Idea with other departments and initiatives to minimize friction took political capital. In District A, the team leading the Bold Idea spent significant time building relationships with the Teaching and Learning department to align the HQIM-based managed instruction approach with the Bold Idea's focus on personalized learning. Because both initiatives were stated priorities for the district and one couldn't subsume the other, this required real-time data, feedback from teachers, ongoing communication, and compromise from both departments. It was the kind of sustained relational investment that doesn't show up on a budget line but is no less finite a resource. As one leader described, "If we actually want this to be sustainable and scalable, we need to bring [other central office departments] to the table... We've been very intentional from the beginning, collaborating... pressing, and communicating the urgency of [the Bold Idea]."

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District B spent its political capital differently. Leaders found that their existing, off-the-shelf evaluation tools didn't capture many of the key instructional practices the Bold Idea called for, making it challenging to provide actionable feedback for teachers. To close that gap, the district negotiated an expansion of principal evaluation to include goals explicitly tied to the initiative, and, over two years, developed, piloted, and refined a new teacher observation tool to support teacher growth in the Bold Idea. A district leader described, "We're redoing our principal [evaluation] process ... and metrics will [include elements of the Bold Idea]. So it's all now going to be intertwined in the expectation for their leadership."

In all three districts, leveraging financial and political capital reduced barriers, but did not resolve them. On the finance side, all three districts used a portion of their grant funding to pay for external coaching, and it remains unclear how they will sustain these partnerships now that grant funding has ended. In one district, the financial resources required to keep addressing these barriers ultimately proved too great, and the district terminated its initiative. On the political capital side, Districts A and B were successful in working through some friction, as noted above, but other challenges remain that continue to slow scale-up progress. The compromises they made also meant intentionally paring down their Bold Ideas.

4. Districts intentionally pared down their Bold Ideas to navigate capacity constraints and bureaucratic friction.

In each district, relying on financial and political resources to address these barriers was only partially successful. Leaders also had to pare down their Bold Ideas to a smaller set of core elements. They did this for two reasons:

1. The Bold Idea needed to be easier for teachers with less instructional capacity to adopt, and
2. Restrictive district policies required narrowing the Bold Idea to align with other central office initiatives and agendas.

This process marked a shift from designing and scaling up the Bold Idea to identifying which parts of the original design were most essential and most broadly applicable. It also often meant letting go of the elements that had made the initiative distinctive or rigorous in its pilot stage.

As a result, each district's Bold Idea changed substantially from its original design, and in the changes moved the initiatives closer toward traditional student learning. While study participants across districts repeatedly called this “improving rigor,” it actually produced initiatives that were less ambitious and less innovative, and more explicitly focused on student academics.

Over the course of the study, District A narrowed its Bold Idea from one that included social-emotional and project-based learning, plus time for academic interventions and tutoring, to focus almost exclusively on academic intervention. Academic interventions were the most feasible to execute and most closely matched teacher and principal pain points. They were also the least “anxiety-inducing,” as one leader described. This narrowing involved the evolution of both the programmatic elements (e.g., the frequency and timing of the intervention, the level of student choice, the involvement of “specials” teachers) and “the why” underlying the project, shifting from personalization and SEL support to extra time for Tier 2 instruction.

District B initially aimed to build an assessment system based entirely on performance assessments that were relevant to students' interests and vetted for rigor, but shifted to a narrower goal. Over time, leaders had recognized there was too much variation in instruction and that instruction overall lacked rigor. They concluded that they needed a clearer, tighter definition of the Bold Idea, which departed less from traditional instruction than originally envisioned. The district also moved away from allowing multiple entry points and approaches. In the end, this meant having most teachers introduce just one or two lessons per year that used more authentic techniques such as performance assessments.

District C started with a vision for a personalized learning platform that would compile and synthesize multiple sources of student-level data. But over time, it expanded the platform to include four unrelated functions, only one of which was connected to student learning. Rather than paring down its Bold Idea, the district added features in response to external pressures, such as price changes from third-party vendors. As the initiative moved further from its original vision, school-level usage fell off. This, combined with rising costs, pushed the district to terminate development.

Paring down the Bold Ideas was necessary to keep them alive, but in some cases, this brought them into closer alignment with established understandings of student learning success. The same narrowing of scope that made the Bold Ideas more scalable also made them less bold, a tradeoff that districts could not fully escape even after committing substantial money and political capital.

The same narrowing of scope that made the Bold Ideas more scalable also made them less bold.

5. Certain supports helped lessen friction.

Across the three districts, scaling a Bold Idea meant confronting barriers, and doing so required expending significant political and financial resources and narrowing the program's scope. The following conditions helped district leaders manage all of this efficiently:

An instructional vision that aligns with the Bold Idea. Bold Ideas scaled more successfully when they connected to a broader district vision for instruction. That connection helped leaders pare down the Bold Idea intentionally. It signaled which elements were non-negotiable and which could flex, giving leaders a principled basis for narrowing scope rather than cutting arbitrarily. It aligned Bold Idea resources and support with instructionally sound interventions and TA, so under-capacity teachers could better lead quality learning experiences for students. It also helped justify the political and financial resources leaders needed to expend, since the initiative read as core to the district's mission rather than as a standalone project competing for attention. Where leaders lacked this connective vision, they had no anchor for either task and struggled to know what to protect, what to cut, or how to make the case for continued investment.

Data systems that reveal pain points, support adjustments, and demonstrate impact. Districts that made progress relied on data to guide resource allocation and scope decisions. Survey data that surfaced teacher and principal pain points helped leaders see where to pare down implementation demands before they caused burnout or resistance. Systematically collected observation data helped leaders identify which parts of the Bold Idea or its associated professional development needed to be simplified versus preserved. Leading indicators, such as student and teacher attendance and formative assessment scores, helped leaders make the case to constituents that the resources being expended were paying off.

A central office champion with the skill, will, and dynamism to fight for the Bold Idea. Scaling required someone with the ability to expend political capital to persuade resistant staff, amass resources, and defend the Bold Idea's core innovations against the pressure to water it down. Champions in each district used these skills as siloization and turf battles emerged across departments and campuses, and as hard decisions needed to be made about the future of the Bold Ideas.

Implications

This study set out to explore whether districts, selected for their levels of “readiness,” can create deep change by scaling a bold, innovative idea. In theory, this approach should have sidestepped the coordination challenges that undid earlier decentralized reforms such as the portfolio model (which promotes a diversity of school-level approaches). Since every school within each district was implementing the same model, districts wouldn’t need to accommodate a patchwork of divergent approaches.

That is not what we found. After three years, none of the three districts reached the level of scale they set out to achieve or managed to sustain a truly “bold” idea. This happened not because the initiatives ran into resistance at the school level (two of the initiatives enjoyed high levels of buy-in among participants), but because scaling surfaced its own version of the problems that undid decentralized reform. As the innovation spread to more schools and classrooms, it ran into capacity challenges and bureaucratic friction. To reach the scale they achieved, districts had to pour significant financial and political resources into shifting elements within their purview, such as pacing calendars, evaluation systems, and staff training, even as they had to sacrifice much of what made their Bold Idea innovative in the first place.

These findings echo a broader body of research on why district reform efforts stall, including CRPE’s prior work. The recommendations below focus less on which single reform strategy to pursue and more on the underlying organizational capacity that any strategy needs in order to succeed.

Don’t just pour resources into addressing friction; build new district systems and structures instead.

Instead of expending resources into only partially addressing friction, districts must address the underlying problem: making their organizations less bureaucratic, unyielding, and focused on compliance. Prior research suggests that the first steps should include:

- **Prioritizing experimentation.** Superintendents and other district leaders should provide central office staff with political cover and [psychological safety](#) to try (and possibly fail with) new ideas. They will also need “[slack](#)” time and resources to put towards experimentation, and new skills to do so. One approach is rapid cycles of inquiry, or [Plan-Do-Study-Act](#) (PDSA) cycles, where central office administrators can test and iterate on new ideas in weeks or months rather than waiting years to find out what worked. SEAs can support this by reducing compliance requirements and elevating additional measures of school quality beyond state test scores.
- **Promoting flexibility, not uniformity.** Rather than mandating uniform practice everywhere, district leaders should identify a small set of things that genuinely need to stay centralized, like shared curriculum or assessment standards, and then [give schools and staff real latitude](#) in how they meet those standards. Simultaneously, districts and SEAs should conduct regular audits of existing rules and compliance reporting to determine whether these remain necessary to achieve their goals. They should also consider “[innovation zones](#)” or waivers

and allowances for specially designated schools to pilot and scale ideas more quickly. External technical assistance providers can help district leaders develop frameworks to decide what belongs in the centralized core and what can vary by school and train staff to conduct regular audits.

- **Breaking down departmental silos.** Creating deep change cuts across central office departments, including curriculum and instruction, technology, HR, and operations. Because district bureaucracies are [organized to keep departments separate](#), district leaders will need to create deliberate structures (cross-functional teams, shared goals, joint accountability) that force departments to coordinate, rather than operate in parallel with competing priorities.

Take tactical steps to minimize friction.

While districts work toward these larger structural changes, this study also points to concrete steps that districts, technical assistance providers, and funders can take in the meantime to minimize and navigate friction as it arises.

- **Assess policy and capacity liabilities before scaling.** Before embarking on any district innovation, district leaders, funders, and other advocates for district change should assess local policies, district capacities, and competing priorities that could cause friction. Friction is highly specific to district context and to the demands of different innovative changes, so leaders will need to ask, “Which of the pilot challenges are likely to grow as we scale?” In the districts we studied, the challenges were HQIM requirements and a novice teaching corps, but in other districts, they may be rigid collective bargaining agreements, slow procurement processes, or incompatible technology systems. In cases where teacher capacity is a critical shortcoming, instructional leaders should work with coaches (internal or external) to create a coaching plan that ensures all teachers have the necessary capacity to engage with the district innovation.
- **Don’t require total uniformity.** Pushing a Bold Idea into classrooms or schools where it wasn’t a good fit created friction. Instead, districts should assess each school for fit, or invite only interested schools to participate, rather than pursuing total uniformity. This hybrid model, neither one-size-fits-all nor a patchwork of fully distinctive school-level strategies, lets districts support schools that benefit from a standard approach while remaining open to variation elsewhere.
- **Help leaders manage the politics of change.** Executive coaches and technical assistance providers should support district leaders in understanding how to amass and deploy the political resources necessary to negotiate bureaucracy change, not just the technical or instructional resources needed. Some leaders may also need support to build consensus among central office and school-level staff.
- **Plan for a longer time horizon.** The three districts in this study, arguably among the most ready and well-resourced, still struggled to scale within three years. Planning for a realistic timeline includes drafting succession plans for if or when key leaders move on, and finding recurring funding streams.

Invest in the key elements that made scaling possible.

- ***Develop a clear instructional vision.*** A strong vision helps organize school and classroom implementation and guides leaders in assessing the most critical aspects of the initiative when hard choices about scope are unavoidable.
- ***Build up instead of paring down.*** Watering down an initiative to make it easier to scale can undercut its value. Instead, district leaders should consider a staged approach where elements of the Bold Idea are added on as the system flexes, rather than stripped away after encountering friction.
- ***Build data systems that track implementation, feedback, and outcomes in real time.*** As district leaders articulate their clear instructional vision, they need to build an aligned data system that collects relevant, timely data and enables real-time analysis and feedback for district leaders, principals, instructional coaches, and teachers.
- ***Enlist a central office champion with the skill and authority to spend political capital.*** While cross-functional leadership is essential to reducing bureaucratic friction, any systemic innovation also requires clear ownership to continually push the work forward. Districts may choose to repurpose existing roles or hire a new lead for the initiative, which would require resource allocation.

This study confirms a hard truth: school districts, as currently built, are not designed for innovation. Restructuring for that purpose is a major commitment, one that will require sustained investment from state agencies and funders alike. But as districts face prolonged pandemic recovery, tightening budgets, and rapid advances in technology, the case for making that investment now is stronger than it has been in years.

Methodology Appendix

We designed this study to answer the question: *Can districts create deep change by designing, piloting, and scaling a bold, innovative idea?* In this brief and accompanying case studies, we report on Phase II of the study, which followed three districts from June 2024 to June 2026 as they worked to scale their Bold Idea. We reported on their experiences in Phase I in [an earlier brief](#). In this appendix, we detail the grant process, research methods, and limitations of this study.

Grant Process

In Phase I of this project, we identified 11 districts based on their “readiness” for deep, innovative change using [five main criteria drawn from research](#) on district innovation and scaling up.

Readiness Criteria

1. To what extent does the district’s Bold Idea address a clear problem and have a theory about how the initiative will address that problem?
2. To what extent does the district’s Bold Idea align with state- and district-level policies and systems?
To what extent do district leadership and community stakeholders support the Bold Idea?
3. To what extent does the Bold Idea have a lead with authority to support the pilot and scale up? Does the Bold Idea have adequate resources?
4. To what extent does the district have an implementation plan that supports the design, pilot, and scale of the Bold Idea?

We selected the three Phase II districts from the 11 districts in Phase I based on the strongest evidence of successful piloting. This included leadership continuity and central office support, early evidence of impact, evidence that the district had adapted and evolved the pilot based on feedback, and a coherent plan for scaling the Bold Idea beyond its pilot sites.

We reviewed six applications from Phase I districts and selected the following districts for Phase II:

District/CMO	Locale	Enrollment Details (2023-2024)
Aldine Independent School District	Greater Houston, TX area	80 schools 56,000 students 98% students of color 87% students in poverty
Bullitt County Public Schools	Greater Louisville, KY area	25 schools 12,846 students 14% students of color 49% students in poverty
Mesquite Independent School District	Greater Dallas-Fort Worth, TX area	50 schools 36,650 students 89% students of color 80% students in poverty

The grant provided each Phase II district with \$1.125 million along with a cohort experience and technical assistance, both of which were designed to support their scale-up efforts.

Research Methods

In this study, we utilized a [longitudinal case study](#) design. Tracking districts over multiple years allowed us to see the evolution of their Bold Ideas from pilot to scaling up, track implementation progress in schools and within central offices, and look for impacts on student learning experiences. Three main research questions guided our work:

1. Did districts pilot and scale their Bold Ideas?
2. How did the pilot and scaling of each Bold Idea unfold?
3. What factors shaped the pilots and scaling?

Data Collection

We answered these questions primarily using qualitative data, supplemented by district-supplied quantitative data on the implementation of each district's Bold Idea.

For the qualitative data, we conducted interviews with district- and school-level staff and observed classrooms and professional learning during site visits. Over the course of Phase II, we conducted 131 semi-structured interviews and focus groups, both in-person and virtually—36 in Aldine, 47 in Bullitt County, and 48 in Mesquite.¹

In each district, we interviewed central office leaders, external coaches, and technical assistance (TA) providers supporting the Bold Idea multiple times over the course of the study. We also interviewed or conducted focus groups with principals, instructional coaches, and teachers in most of each district's schools implementing the Bold Idea during our site visits. Interview and focus group topics included progress in scaling the Bold Idea, perceptions of the initiative among staff and students, the barriers they encountered, and the supports that helped districts navigate them.

We collected observation data during six site visits (one per district, per year) totaling more than 115 hours of classroom and meeting observations, roughly 20 hours per visit. During observations, we visited schools participating in the Bold Idea initiatives, where we observed classrooms, interviewed school-level staff and external technical assistance providers and other coaches, and conducted focus groups as permitted. We also observed Bold Idea teams and other district leaders during three one-and-a-half-day cohort meetings, one hosted by each of the participating districts. During these meetings, we observed district leaders discussing their implementation progress, challenges, and how they were navigating challenges.

1. During Phase I we conducted 71 interviews, primarily with district leaders in charge of their Bold Idea initiatives, and conducted 44 hours of observations. These data inform the background sections of the supplementary case studies.

Analytic Approach

Our analytic approach combined inductive and deductive coding to answer each of our main research questions. To answer our first research question (*Did districts pilot and scale their Bold Ideas?*), we deductively coded our data using Coburn's [four dimensions of scale](#) (spread, depth, ownership, and sustainability). To assess scaling progress in each district during the course of the study, we used the following definitions:

Dimension of Scale	Low	Medium	High
Spread: Reach across classrooms and schools	Confined to a small number of pilot schools/classrooms	Reaches the intended share of schools/classrooms, but adoption is inconsistent	Present across the majority of schools/classrooms, with consistent engagement
Depth: Change to day-to-day instructional practice	Few, if any, teachers report changes in practice	Some teachers report changing regular practice; district data suggest improvements in student outcomes	Most/all participating teachers report changes to practice; district data show improvements in student outcomes
Ownership: Shift from original champions to broader staff	Central office support concentrated with Bold Idea leads and key advocates; few school-level staff show investment	Central office support is expanding, but still dependent on Bold Idea leads and key advocates; most school-level staff show investment	Central office broadly supports Bold Idea; all participating school-level staff show investment
Sustainability: Internal capacity to maintain without external support	Heavily dependent on external funding and/or TA	Building internal capacity, but still relies on external funding or TA for support of key functions	Capacity and funding are fully internal

To answer our second research question (*How did the pilot and scaling of each Bold Idea unfold?*), we coded our data inductively for key events and contextual details over our two years of study. To take advantage of the longitudinal nature of the project, we created timelines for each district and mapped how key events related to each other, and then layered in interview and observation data. Researchers collaborated at all stages of the analytic process to ensure consistency in coding and the conclusions we were drawing.

To answer our third research question (*What factors shaped the pilots and scaling?*), we coded our data deductively using codes drawn from existing research on scaling up and common implementation barriers. We then analyzed these across sites to identify cross-cutting patterns.

Because we drew on multiple interviewees, roles, and data sources within each district, we were able to triangulate findings across sources and pressure-test our emerging conclusions. We also conducted annual “member check” conversations with the Bold Idea leads in each district, during which we shared our early findings and elicited their feedback.

We also drew on quantitative measures of scale and leading indicators of improvement in student learning experiences, such as attendance, engagement, satisfaction, and achievement, where available.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, our sample consists of three districts selected specifically for their readiness to scale a Bold Idea. Their experiences are likely different from those of districts that have not demonstrated the same degree of readiness, which limits how broadly these findings can be generalized. Second, this study began at a moment when districts had access to significant COVID-19 recovery funding, as well as substantial funding from this project. The vast majority of districts no longer have access to these kinds of flexible resources, so their experiences with piloting and scaling Bold Ideas will likely look different. Third, this project took place over three years, a substantial engagement by research standards. But as we note in the main report, this was not sufficient time to fully assess the sustainability of the Bold Ideas in two of the districts. As a result, our data on the longer-term impact of the Bold Ideas on student outcomes remains limited. Finally, our selection of districts with Bold Ideas aligned with state-level policy; however, the two districts located in Texas did not allow us to fully explore the role of state-level policy context in shaping either district’s pilot and scaling experience.

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All conclusions expressed reflect those of the authors, and any errors or omissions are theirs alone.

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The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) is a research organization at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation, where transformative ideas are rigorously examined and tested, and research informs action. Since 1993, we have remained independent of any single ideology while holding firmly to our core belief that public education is a goal—to prepare every child for citizenship, economic independence, and personal fulfillment—and not a particular set of institutions. From that foundation, we study what it will take for public education to meet every student's needs and use those insights to inform meaningful changes in policy and practice. Learn more about our work at crpe.org.

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