



Defining and Organizing for School Autonomy

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School Autonomy In A Portfolio Strategy

Districts adopt the portfolio strategy for three reasons: their current mix of schools is not meeting the needs of many children; a single form of schooling is too limiting to meet all students' needs; and all schools, even those that are performing well, are constrained by rules in ways that limit their ability to serve children effectively.

In a portfolio strategy, schools need to be free to pursue distinctive approaches to instruction and student services. That means they should not be forced by district policies to make the same uses of time, money, staff, instructional methods, technology, facilities, professional development resources, or outside partnerships as other schools.

Autonomy cannot be absolute: Schools that commit to provide a particular instructional model and climate (e.g., STEM-based instruction, KIPP) must do so. Schools must focus on instruction and show results, and those that don't can be replaced or transformed. Money must be used for instruction, not for individuals to make a profit. Charter schools must abide by their agreements and MOUs.¹

Under a portfolio strategy, accountability balances autonomy. Because schools can control their climate and instructional program, they can be held accountable for whether students learn. The district's primary role is performance assessment and portfolio management: it identifies high-performing schools and either expands them or starts more schools like them. The district also identifies schools in which children are consistently learning a lot less than similar children elsewhere, and it makes sure those students have alternatives in existing or new schools.

Traditional districts are built to tightly constrain school leaders' discretion and to subject many decisions made by school leaders to review and possible reversal. For example, school leaders in some districts can choose teacher applicants other than the most senior qualified person, but this must be approved by the union and can lead to extensive negotiations and possible reversal. Under such circumstances, schools are not truly autonomous.

For school autonomy to be real, decisions made by school leaders must stick, i.e., not be reversed or delayed by external parties. Table 1 shows the ways in which school autonomy can be defined positively (in terms of school leaders' freedoms) and negatively (as limitations on parties outside the school).

1. Some districts will enter some sort of agreement with every school, in order to assure a rich portfolio of options for students. In addition to the specific terms of their charters and MOUs, schools must practice fair admissions (often via a district-run lottery process), offer serious help to struggling students, and find ways of serving students with special needs. School leaders must also keep records on uses of public funds and avoid diverting public funds to personal uses. No school should be free to opt out of the district's performance-based accountability system.

Introducing Autonomy to a Formerly Traditional District

Most portfolio districts start by granting a relatively small number of schools full autonomy and increasing the number each year. In this way, autonomy can become universal over about five years. The first schools to become autonomous are those with the most ambitious and capable leadership. Other principals are offered a few months' on-the-job training and opportunities to shadow principals of autonomous schools, and then offered autonomy themselves. Ultimately, school leaders who cannot be trusted with autonomy must be replaced, and school communities that would fall apart under autonomy must be reorganized or chartered out.

Some districts might also provide a limited range of autonomy at first, and then expand schools' freedom of action over time. This is not easy to do because, as shown in Table 1, many of the autonomies are linked. For example, a school cannot make tradeoffs between teacher salaries and other expenditures if it has no control over selection of its teaching staff.

Table 1. Freedoms That Make Up School Autonomy

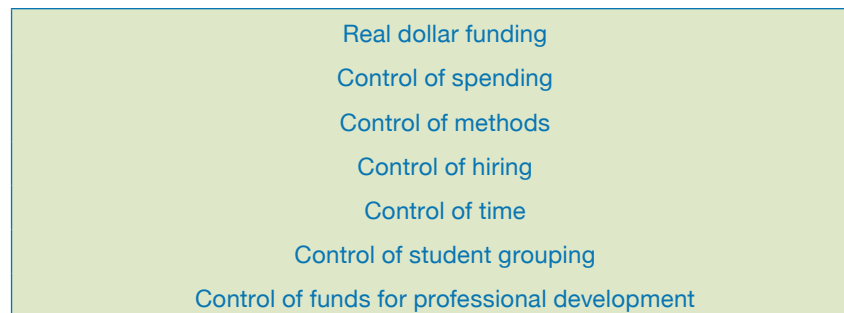
Areas of autonomy	Positive statement of school freedom	Negative statement: what others may not do
Receives dollars, not assets purchased by others	School receives real dollars based on enrollment	District may not purchase items and pretend they are in the school's budget
Control of spending	School sets its own priorities on spending for staff, technology, facilities, and other purposes	District may not require schools to spend minimum or maximum amounts on any item
Control of methods	School free to adapt instruction and climate management to needs, abilities of children and teachers	District may not require a school to use a particular instructional "package"
Control of teacher hiring	School can hire any state-qualified teacher for a vacancy ²	Neither the union nor the district may review, delay, or comment
Control of teacher pay	School can offer distinctive pay and benefit packages	District may not require a school to follow a fixed salary scale
Control of staff configuration and work assignments	School may decide to hire any combination of teachers and other workers needed to provide its instructional program, and to assign duties and hours subject only to state labor laws	Neither the district nor the union may review
Control of firing	School may decide not to renew any teacher not covered by an applicable collective bargaining agreement (CBA) and may eliminate any teaching, administrative, or service job	Neither the district nor union may review a firing decision except as covered under an applicable CBA. Teachers covered by general state labor law
Control of funds for and decisions about professional development	School may decide what forms of professional development to offer, whom to hire, when to offer it, or whether to release teachers from other duties	Neither district nor union may set requirements or review school-level choices
Freedom over student grouping	School not constrained on class sizes	Neither district nor union may review
Control of use of time	School may operate on days and hours of its choosing and require teacher attendance up to limits set by state labor law	Neither district nor union may review
Freedom to purchase academic support services	School may purchase advice and training from any source it chooses	District may advise and provide information on provider track records but may not block or delay
Freedom to purchase non-academic support services	School may purchase facilities, transportation, IT, or back-office services from any source it chooses	District may advise and provide information on provider track records but may not block or delay

2. A state-qualified teacher is certified, alternatively certified, or in a defined process toward certification.

Autonomies can be segmented between basic and advanced. The basic autonomies are those without which a school really cannot be considered in control of its instructional programs and services to students. Box 1 identifies these basic autonomies, which should be considered non-negotiables: unless a school gets all of them, it will ultimately find barriers in the way of many actions it is supposedly free to take. Together, these freedoms allow schools to differ from one another and permit individual schools to keep the promises they make to parents about what children will experience in their schools.

Without any one of these freedoms, a school would be severely handicapped. For example, a school that could not choose professional development services would be forced to spend teacher time and dollars on low-priority activities.

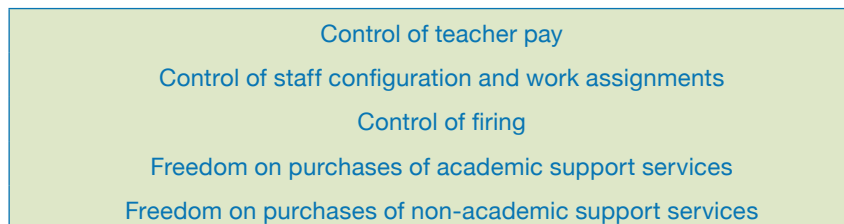
Box 1. Basic Autonomies



Though they would represent a huge step forward in most school districts, the autonomies in Box 1 can still be compromised. For example, a school that had hiring authority but could not fire a low-performing or recalcitrant teacher could have its unity and productivity undermined from within. Similarly, a school that could decide not to participate in the district's professional development programs but was not free to hire other vendors could be stymied in efforts to improve teaching and learning.

Box 2 identifies advanced autonomies that ensure that the school is fully in charge of itself and can be fairly held accountable for student learning. Why would districts withhold these autonomies? The only answer is political: groups that oppose school autonomy might not oppose a limited grant of autonomy, hoping to erode it in practice.

Box 2. Advanced Autonomies That Allow Schools To Be Distinctive, Innovative, Problem Solvers



Some schools will take full advantage of these autonomies immediately, while others will take longer to learn all the ways these autonomies can be used on behalf of students. When schools have money to buy the teacher training and instructional support services they truly need, a demand for new forms of assistance will arise. Schools will ultimately realize all the advantages of autonomy when a diverse supply of vendors of professional development, data and analytic services, improvement advice, and nonacademic services becomes available.

Selecting Schools for Autonomy

Many portfolio district leaders want to pilot-test autonomy with a limited number of schools, in order to learn what preparation other schools will need and to adjust central office functions so they do not undermine promised freedoms.

What schools should get autonomy first? Many instinctively answer “the highest-performing schools.” But this answer can be wrong for some high-performing schools that have found ways to operate well within the existing structure of rules and controls. It can also leave out schools that are not currently among the highest performing but have leaders and staff who could unite to make good use of new freedoms.

These groups of schools could make up a first pilot:

- High-performing schools whose leaders want autonomy
- Magnet and special-purpose schools that already have some freedoms
- Schools whose leaders volunteer for autonomy
- Schools with able leaders who would be strengthened by autonomy
- Schools with new leaders, especially individuals who have led autonomous schools elsewhere
- Low-performing schools whose staffs and leaders think autonomy will help them avoid closure

District leaders can be surprised at how large a group of schools can be assembled for a pilot.

After the pilot is identified, district leaders need to identify a second class of candidate schools to be made autonomous a year later. Schools that newly meet any of the criteria above and schools whose leaders have been given the opportunity to learn about financial management and shadow autonomous principals should be in this group.

By the third year, most district schools should fit into one of the categories above. Leaders who are not ready for autonomy after three years should be replaced as soon as possible with newly trained principals or autonomy-experienced principals recruited from other districts, charters, or private schools.

By the fifth year, a group of “hard to lead” schools could remain. These schools might be internally divided, have difficulty recruiting good teachers, or be shunned by all but the least-demanding parents. These schools need to be re-staffed and made autonomous immediately or assigned to charter operators.

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