



THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL AUTONOMY AND SKILLED SCHOOL LEADERSHIP ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT: LESSONS FROM OTHER STATES

Executive Summary

Researchers, education agency officials, teachers, and parents have widely acknowledged that greater autonomy at the school site can help school leadership teams, staff and educators develop and implement programs and interventions that best serve the specific needs of their students and improve education outcomes.¹ This policy brief reviews the ways in which Nevada is looking to expand site-based school autonomy in schools, and summarizes models implemented in several states around the country.

In 2015, Nevada Legislature provided for greater autonomy at the school site by implementing Autonomous Schools (Senate Bill 92), the Nevada Achievement School District (NV ASD), which allows for the conversion of underperforming schools to charter schools (Assembly Bill 448), and the Reorganization of Clark County School District (Assembly Bill 394). In response to community concern following the initial implementation of ASD, the Nevada Department of Education recently introduced an amendment to legislation currently being considered to revise the ASD that contains new regulations to further expand the types of autonomy a school can obtain. These regulations also give parents a stronger voice in the decision-making process at their children's school. Under the proposed amendment, parents at a school can petition to join the ASD. In addition, parents at a low-performing school can also choose whether to become an A+ School or a charter school within the ASD.² These models of autonomous schools reinforce the state's priorities under the federal Every Student Succeeds Acts (ESSA) law – specifically, addressing low performing schools and developing strong school leaders.³

Nevada education officials developed these three pathways—Autonomous Schools, charter conversion, and A+ schools—using best practices from other states and school districts that have been particularly effective in devolving more autonomy to school site leadership teams. In addition, there are significant accountability measures in place at all three types of autonomous schools that can help inform and guide practices at the school site to drive student achievement. Moreover, failure to meet student achievement goals can result in consequences, including school closure or other interventions.

Recommendations

We applaud the efforts of the Nevada Department of Education (NDE) and school districts to employ evidence-based best practices in creating thoughtful school improvement systems. By increasing autonomy over core decisions—including staffing, curriculum, and financial resources, the proposed regulations for the ASD will facilitate meaningful change for school communities and student outcomes. Based on the experiences of other states and school districts, the Guinn Center offers the following recommendations, which decision-makers may want to consider.

1. Train and grow strong school leaders. Famed Stanford education researcher Dr. Eric A. Hanushek concluded that a strong school leader has as much impact on a student's success as any single teacher in a classroom.⁴ The consensus among stakeholders and policy experts interviewed by the Guinn Center is that a strong school leader largely determines the success of any intervention. The Shelby County Innovation Zone (iZone) administration in Tennessee has been particularly strategic in identifying the

principal of a school and selecting the leader based on the specific needs of the school. Nevada education officials and decision-makers should strengthen school leadership pipeline programs and create monetary incentives for principals and other members of school leadership teams to receive professional development geared toward autonomy, especially in underperforming schools. Principals in iZone Schools are given the authority to hire teachers, fire teachers, and choose curriculum. The principals credited the latter of these responsibilities with the increase in student performance once a school joined the iZone.

This type of training takes time. In Indianapolis, district officials have implemented a pilot year for a school autonomy model so that administrators can redress any flaws of the program before rolling out system-wide school autonomy. Decision-makers, agency officials, and advocacy groups should offer programs, trainings, and incentives to all school leaders so that Nevada can continue to strengthen its pipeline of school leaders capable of running schools with greater autonomy.⁵ Efforts on this front are already underway in Nevada. As part of its alignment with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the Nevada Department of Education used an \$8 million Title I grant to offer professional development to principals at underperforming schools.⁶

2. Develop a streamlined system for school autonomy and increase the number of schools and districts that follow the Autonomous Schools model. Like Boston Public Schools, Nevada has proposed the creation of multiple levels of school autonomy. Should the Nevada Legislature approve proposed amendments in the 2017 79th Legislative Session, NDE will remain responsible for performance compacts, charter conversions (both through selection and parent petition), neighborhood schools, Autonomous Schools, and A+ Schools. These are in addition to the more decentralized decision-making model at school sites following the Clark County School District reconfiguration. While the concept of autonomy can lead to positive outcomes, stakeholders can become frustrated when the system is too complicated. As a 2014 study of the Boston System concluded, “Despite the popular and academic success of more autonomous schools, however, researchers found the current approach to autonomy to be overly complex and lacking an overall strategic vision.”⁷

Moving forward, NDE should explore ways to streamline the multiple models of autonomous schools into a more simplified structure that maximizes control over funding and decision-making at the school site. Currently, NDE holds all schools under contracts with the NV ASD to the same standards for meeting student performance targets. The goal for schools with NV ASD contracts is to reach three stars in three years.⁸ NDE should develop a common performance-based accountability framework across all types of autonomous schools offered through school districts across the state, particularly those in Clark County, to ensure that schools and school leaders are meeting performance targets.

3. Empower parents to lead school-wide improvement plans. Principals, teachers, and parents at schools with performance compacts and contracts, as part of the Achievement School District, should be given trainings on how to manage the school so that they can transition to become an autonomous school at the end of their performance compact. One study recommends providing training to all school leaders, including parent councils, to be able to manage resources effectively. State and local education agencies should continue to hold schools accountable, but the principal and local school council (comprised of parents, teachers, staff, and community members) should conduct management at the school site. Maximizing site-based control can maximize the impact of interventions at the school site.

4. Coalesce around a statewide, shared vision for school improvement. Currently, the systems for site-based school improvement in Nevada appear as separate, fragmented entities with some school districts and NDE operating seemingly competing systems. Research indicates that varying levels of autonomy can result in system-wide inequities. School communities, school districts, and the Department of Education should work together to provide governance and oversight to all schools, as is the case in New Orleans. By working together toward a shared, consolidated vision of achievement, autonomy, and accountability, Nevada can create meaningful opportunities for student success for all students, particularly those in our highest-need schools.

In short, these models of autonomous schools offered in Nevada are aligned with and reinforce the state's priorities under the federal Every Student Succeeds Acts (ESSA) law. These priorities include "identifying and improving our lowest-performing schools" and "developing great school leaders."⁹ Additionally, autonomous schools also align with the Guinn Center's principals of education reform (see Appendix A). Regarding Principles One and Three, giving school sites more autonomy over decisions that affect the student's educational journey can help improve academic outcomes. Regarding Principle Two, greater autonomy at the school site also acknowledges that our school leadership teams are professionals by entrusting them with control over the decisions that impact their student's success.

Further, autonomous schools are simply one option in a basket of options (e.g., Zoom Schools, Victory Schools) that local education agency officials, school leadership teams, staff, teachers, and parents can use to improve underperforming schools. Local communities should continue to engage with educators to explore the different options and evaluate which model might best serve the specific needs of the students in their communities.





THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL AUTONOMY AND SKILLED SCHOOL LEADERSHIP ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT: LESSONS FROM OTHER STATES

Introduction

Many promising education initiatives were launched during the 2015 legislative session under Governor Brian Sandoval's ambitious and unprecedented \$800 million investment in Nevada K-12 public education. The goal of this education package, which will be expanded and improved upon through the 2017-2019 biennium, is to build the infrastructure for a New Nevada, characterized by a diversified economy in high growth sectors and a skilled workforce, thereby ensuring that "generations to come" will have access to high quality, 21st-century jobs.¹⁰

Implementing effective school programs and interventions to align student achievement with the economic needs of the future across the state can be challenging for two reasons. First, Nevada has a lengthy track record of underwhelming education outcomes for students. In 2016, only 73.6 percent of twelfth graders graduated from high school.¹¹ Only 44.9 percent of third graders were proficient in math, and only 46.0 percent were proficient in reading.¹² The Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2016 Kids Count Data Rankings placed Nevada 49th out of the 50 states in education.¹³ A second challenge is that Nevada students have diverse needs and interests, some of which require greater resources to address. Two-thirds of students in the state are students of color, and nearly half, 48.9 percent, are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch.¹⁴

Researchers, state and local education agencies, teachers, and parents have widely acknowledged that greater autonomy at the school site can help school leadership teams, staff, and parents develop and implement programs and interventions that best serve the specific needs of their students and improve education outcomes, particularly in underperforming schools.¹⁵ Decision-makers, practitioners, and education advocates around the country recognize that the most effective programs and interventions should elevate school-based decision-making because this allows teachers, students, and families to identify and implement strategies most responsive to the unique needs of each school community. Site-based decision-making enables the overall system to adapt, respond, and scale success in a more efficient way.

Acknowledging the educational advantages and potential to transform underperforming schools, Nevada has undertaken several efforts to decentralize decision-making authority to the school site. In 2007, the Nevada Legislature authorized implementation of empowerment schools (Nevada Revised Statute (NRS) 386.730).¹⁶ Under the empowerment school model, parents and community members became part of an empowerment team at each school, which assisted in the development of a plan and budget for the school (NRS 386.730). The empowerment model was discontinued due to limited funding and to a reduction in the scope of autonomy originally granted to school leadership teams. There is also statutory authority (NRS 386.4154) for school boards to create school councils as part of a model of school-based decision making. In 2015, the Nevada Legislature passed Assembly Bill 394 (Reorganization of Clark County School District), which resulted in the implementation of school organizational teams (SOTs) that can inform instructional programming.

Passed in 2015, Senate Bill 92 (Autonomous Schools) grants school leaders, who are found to be highly effective, certain flexibilities to accomplish school improvement goals. On April 27, 2017, the Nevada Department of Education announced that Principal John Haynal has been approved to run the State's first Autonomous Schools, which include three elementary schools in Clark County School District.¹⁷

The Nevada Legislature also passed Assembly Bill 448 in 2015, which authorizes the Achievement School District (ASD) to convert underperforming schools across the state into charter schools.¹⁸ The growth of public charter schools in Nevada and around the country also underscores the desire of teachers, parents, and communities to more closely locate decisions about instructional programming and curriculum at the school site. In Clark County School District (CCSD), Autonomous Schools and schools in the ASD programs receive more control over curriculum and instructional programming decisions than what is prescribed for all semi-autonomous schools under Assembly Bill (AB) 469, the regulations to reorganize CCSD.¹⁹

Following heightened concern and input from communities and education stakeholders, the Legislature introduced Senate Bill 430 during the 79th Legislative Session to revise ASD, as originally implemented in 2015.²⁰ Recently, the Nevada Department of Education introduced a conceptual amendment that contains new regulations for ASD that seek to support strong school leadership, increase parent involvement, and promote school autonomy.²¹

The scope and intent of the proposed amendment provides a distinct pathway to fully autonomous schools that differs from SB 92. Specifically, the amendment introduces the notion of A+ Schools, which strengthen the central ideas of the reorganization of the CCCSD by granting schools decision-making power over all Distributive School Account funds, personnel costs, operations, and curriculum.

The Guinn Center acknowledges that the Achievement Charters, Autonomous Schools, and A+ Schools are not the single solution to all challenges facing Nevada's education system.¹ However, the Achievement Charters, Autonomous Schools, and A+ Schools, as models of intervention in underperforming schools, create opportunities for parents and school leadership teams to activate levers for meaningful change at their schools. These changes can be implemented at the most localized level that enable school leadership teams to adapt, respond, and innovate in ways that best support the specific needs of the students. School leaders and parents across the state can pursue one of three options (*see Table 1.*)

New models of autonomous schools are among a host of reforms and legislation that can help elevate student achievement. They, like many others, are grounded in models from other states that have demonstrated success in improving outcomes for students. Moreover, autonomous school models align with the state's priorities under the federal Every Student Succeeds Acts (ESSA) law.²² Two of the main priorities for Nevada's ESSA plan are addressing low performing schools and developing strong school leaders.²³ Specifically, school districts in Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, and Tennessee have launched efforts to transfer greater autonomy to the school site. In this policy brief, the Guinn Center highlights some of these interventions in other states that have helped improved student achievement, and offers a set of recommendations that Nevada's policy makers may want to take under advisement.

¹ For more information, see Guinn Center Report, "*No Silver Bullet: Models of Intervention in Underperforming Schools*" (forthcoming).

Table 1: Types of Autonomous Schools in Nevada

School Type	Structure	Management	Degree of Autonomy
Charter Conversion	State sponsor, local independent governance	Principal and local board	100 percent control of all funds; hire licensed staff and authority to exit staff; make all programmatic decisions; make all operational decisions in accordance with Nevada law; opportunity to purchase local district services for key operational functions.
Autonomous Schools	State designation, district governance	Board of Trustees	All direct allocated DSA funds; personnel hiring based available pool and authority to exit staff; determine instruction approach, calendar, allocation of staff resources; use district funds for staff recruitment/ retention; use district policy and services for all non-program related activities and actions
A+ School	State sponsor, school-level management	Principal and local school council (parent board)	Local school council has decision-making authorities; 100 percent control of all funds; hire licensed staff and authority to exit staff; make all programmatic decisions; make all operational decisions in accordance with Nevada law; opportunity to purchase local district services for key operational functions.

Background

This section will provide a brief overview of the three pathways (*see table 1*) currently available in Nevada through which a school can become autonomous.

Charter Conversion

Under Assembly Bill 448 (2015), the Achievement School District is authorized to convert underperforming schools across the state into charter schools.²⁴ Elementary and middle schools that are eligible for conversion are identified as Priority Schools, which are among the bottom 5 percent of Title I schools based on performance, and/or among the bottom 5 percent of all schools on the 2016 Smarter Balanced Proficiency Results. High schools are eligible for conversion if they have a four-year graduation rate of less than 60 percent.²⁵ These underperforming schools are then placed on the Nevada Rising Stars Schools List.²⁶ Up to six Rising Star schools can be converted to a charter school for up to six years each year and operate as an Achievement Charter school. During those six years, the school is operated by a charter management organization or leadership team that provides curriculum and support services aimed at increasing student achievement. After those six years, the Achievement Charter school, provided it has shown adequate achievement, can remain in the ASD, remain a charter under a different authorizer, or convert back to a public school in the district.²⁷

The ASD currently offers several other methods to support struggling schools. First, existing charter schools may voluntarily join the ASD. The ASD also created Fresh Start charter schools, which are neighborhood schools that serve as an alternative option for students in addition to their existing school for which they are zoned. In Fall 2017, Andre Agassi College Preparatory Academy, formerly a district-sponsored charter, will reopen under new management as a part of the Democracy Prep charter network, and Futuro Academy will open as a Fresh Start School in East Las Vegas.²⁸

Finally, school districts in Nevada may elect to partner with the Nevada Department of Education to create a performance compact, which is a three-year agreement for a Rising Star School that was ultimately not chosen for charter conversion. The performance compact identifies a plan for improvement and articulates clear annual targets for the school.

Any schools – either a charter or a school with performance compacts – that have a contract with the ASD and NDE are required to provide an annual report that discusses whether the school is meeting student achievement goals, as well as any relevant information about the school's finance and parent engagement plan. Failure to provide requisite information and/or failure to meet student achievement targets can result in the loss of the school's contract with the ASD.²⁹ Currently, the NDE holds the all schools under contracts with the NV ASD to the same standards for meeting student performance targets.³⁰ For a charter school, this could mean the school may close. This policy is a milestone measure for charter school accountability in Nevada.³¹

Autonomous Schools

In 2015, the Nevada Legislature passed Senate Bill 92, which grants highly effective school leaders autonomy over specific responsibilities to accomplish school improvement goals.³² These Autonomous Schools are granted significantly more autonomy than traditional district schools, which is meant to improve academic outcomes for students at the school. Specifically, Autonomous Schools have control over all non-personnel funds, curriculum, school calendar, and allocation of staff resources. Staff is selected from the local district pool, and principals have the authority to exit staff. These Autonomous Schools are held accountable by the board of trustees of the local school district and through a performance compact with the Nevada Department of Education, and they may also use district funds for the recruitment and retention of staff. They also rely on the school district for other services not related to the academic programming.

Autonomous Schools are accountable to their local school district, which means that they must provide to the district the same student performance, financial, and other information required by traditional public schools. There are two ways in which a school can become an Autonomous School:

1. NDE can designate a public school as an autonomous school if it determines, as a result of an external evaluation, that the principal of the public school has the ability to provide such leadership, with or without additional professional development.
2. The board of trustees of the school district in which the public school is located, the superintendent of the school district in which the public school is located, or the principal of the public school can request the Department consider designating the public school as an Autonomous School.³³

In April 2017, Principal John Haynal received authorization to lead the state's first cohort of Autonomous Schools, which include three elementary schools in Clark County School District.³⁴

A+ Schools

To strengthen the impact of the ASD in Nevada, the Nevada Department of Education has recently proposed a conceptual amendment to Senate Bill 430, under consideration in the 2017 Legislative Session, that would create A+ schools.³⁵ A+ Schools are part of the ASD, but would remain traditional

public schools instead of becoming a charter school, if that is the expressed preference of the parents. The local district serves as the agency of record for the school, and the school has the option to purchase operational services from the district. A+ Schools are granted full autonomy to make decisions separate and distinct from host district policies and practices and would be overseen by a local school council. School leadership teams at A+ Schools would work with an independent administrator to establish a school improvement plan, and initiate improvements to the school, including selection of a principal. These schools would have a six-year contract with the same accountability and oversight as an Achievement Charter school.

A+ Schools are granted even greater autonomy than Autonomous Schools because they are given control over all funding, curriculum, and staffing decisions. In addition, A+ Schools can petition the State Board of Education if they believe any current statutory requirements would negatively impact their ability to fulfill the terms of their contract with the ASD. A+ schools would undergo an annual review from the ASD, during which they would be expected to provide an explanation of whether they have met their prescribed student performance compacts, a description of the evidence-based practices used to support student achievement, a financial audit, and a description of parent engagement and its impact.³⁶

The expanded autonomy granted to A+ schools comes with significant consequences if a school fails to meet the student performance contract goals or fails to provide any of the required information to the ASD. In that case, school can have its contract with the ASD revoked or terminated.³⁷

Other Amendments

In addition to creating A+ Schools, the NDE amendments include language that would give parents the authority to petition to receive an intervention at their children's school, including a school improvement plan or becoming an ASD charter school or A+ School.³⁸ In 2013, Nevada Senator Aaron Ford (D-Las Vegas) introduced SB311, which would have allowed parents/guardians to submit a petition for the conversion of the school to an empowerment school or for the conversion of an empowerment school to a charter school.³⁹ This type of petition is already in place in a number of other states, including California, Connecticut, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, Ohio, and Texas.

In 2010, California became the first state to establish such a law, known as the California Parent Empowerment Act.⁴⁰ Thus far, it is the only state in which parents have exercised their right to submit a petition.⁴¹ This law allows the parents at a school that is not making adequate growth to petition to become any one of the following:

- A turnaround school, with school leaders receiving autonomy over curriculum and personnel;
- A transformation school, which implements some sort of small-scale, site-based intervention;
- A school closure, which shuts down the school and redistributes students to higher-performing schools in the district; or
- A restart model, in which the school closes and reopens under the operation of a charter management organization (CMO).⁴²

Thus far, there has been limited success of the parent trigger law in California in leading to restarts.⁴³ Only four schools in the state have received one of the interventions prescribed in the law, while five

additional schools have used the power of a petition to negotiate for improvements at their children's schools.⁴⁴ For example, the parents at one school in south Los Angeles used the power of a completed petition to negotiate a plan with the Los Angeles Unified School District for the school to receive an additional \$300,000 toward programs and personnel positions that would improve scholastic achievement, behavior, and safety at the school.⁴⁵

Models in Other States

States around the country have experimented with models of intervention in underperforming schools that transfer greater autonomy to the school site. In the pages below, we highlight several of these interventions that have improved student success and identify some practices that education officials in Nevada are already implementing and may want to consider expanding further.

Table 2: Summary of Findings

School Program	Description	Degree of Autonomy	Lesson
Shelby County iZone	Principals are empowered to make all key decisions about a school (budget, curriculum, personnel, etc.)	Budget, staffing, curriculum	Invest in developing school site leaders; provide evidence-based, professional development for school leadership teams
Boston Public School Autonomous Schools	Autonomy led to higher test scores across the district, and parents preferred autonomous schools. 2014 research of existing programs encouraged the district to make it easier for schools to obtain autonomy.	Varies, with principals and parents preferring more autonomy	Develop autonomy framework with accountability measures to implement autonomy across more schools; provide incentives for school leadership teams
Indianapolis Public Schools	A pilot program for school autonomy will soon be implemented district-wide.	Staffing, curriculum, some budget	Ensure accountability is consistent across all autonomous schools; provide information so parents can make informed choice
Louisiana Recovery School District	The Orleans Parish School Board will soon become the authorizer for all schools in the district, but they will retain their autonomy.	Budget, staffing, curriculum, use of district services	Strengthen collaboration between state and local education agencies and charter management organizations; encourage an support parents.

I. Shelby County Innovation Zone: Strong School-Site Leadership Can Drive Positive Outcomes

The Shelby County School District's Innovation Zone (iZone) was established in 2011 as part of Tennessee's overall Race to the Top initiative. As a model for intervention in underperforming urban school districts, the iZone is often considered among the most successful. The iZone targets schools in the bottom 5 percent statewide and seeks to elevate them to the top 25 percent.⁴⁶ To accomplish this, the iZone concentrates its efforts on: (1) empowered effective principals, (2) high performing teachers, (3) an extended learning day, and (4) iZone district support team, which consists of curriculum coaches, data analysts, instructional support managers, and instructional leadership directors that work with teachers, principals, and students to develop specific, site-based plans to improve outcomes.⁴⁷ The 21

schools in the iZone receive an extra \$600,000 per year to support these four pillars of the intervention.⁴⁸

As mentioned, one of the cornerstones of the iZone is to empower effective principals to serve as the lead decision-makers for their schools.⁴⁹ The Guinn Center conducted interviews with more than a dozen thought leaders, educators, advocates, and policy-makers with knowledge of the iZone. Shelby County School District officials, as well other stakeholders, credited school leadership as the key to the iZone's success. In an interview with *ChalkBeat*, Sharon Griffin, the former iZone regional superintendent and current chief of schools for Shelby County, explained that principal selection was very specific to the needs of a school to ensure that the principal has the skills to address the deficits and challenges of the student population.⁵⁰

Principals are also given complete (100 percent) control over the hiring and firing of teachers at their school.⁵¹ School principals in Shelby County Schools have the authority to dismiss teachers based on performance.⁵² Administrators and teachers evaluations include student achievement data, which accounts for 50 percent of the overall evaluation: 35 percent is based on student growth and 15 percent is based on other measures of student achievement, such as graduation rates or college success.⁵³ The school district uses a performance-based accountability framework in schools to ensure that school improvement measures are effective.⁵⁴

Principals at iZone schools are also given the authority to make decisions about the curriculum for their schools. A third-party portfolio assessment of Shelby County Schools found a direct link between curriculum choice and the improvement in test scores at iZone schools in 2013-2014. Several iZone principals interviewed for the assessment said that the district's centralized curriculum and assessments held them back as leaders of traditional district schools.⁵⁵

As a result of these practices that emphasize site-based decision-making under strong school leadership, iZone schools have been the most successful model in Tennessee for recruiting and retaining high performing teachers at low-performing schools. The rate at which teachers left iZone schools within the first three years of employment was 35 percent, 22 percent lower than the turnover rate at Tennessee Achievement School District charter schools. Schools in the iZone were also successful in Tennessee in replacing teachers with highly effective teachers, with new hires earning more points in effectiveness on the statewide evaluations than those at other low-performing schools.⁵⁶

Providing professional development and support to iZone teachers has also been critical to the intervention's success. The iZone has been particularly successful in growing its talent to reach the highest level of effectiveness in the statewide teacher evaluation system. Teachers who taught at iZone schools between 2012 and 2015 had higher evaluation scores than other teachers in the state. By 2015, for every three teachers in the iZone, two were considered high performing.⁵⁷ A survey conducted by Shelby County Schools found that the additional support and professional development teachers at iZone schools receive is the leading factor driving higher rates of retention.⁵⁸

Researchers note that the iZone school leadership model has been more successful in helping move schools toward increased student achievement. An analysis of Memphis iZone schools revealed that they were having a statistically significant positive effect on student achievement in math, reading, and science. Overall, they found that iZone schools are having "substantively meaningful effects on student

achievement across all subjects.”⁵⁹ Researchers concluded that iZone students were better off than they had been prior to being given greater autonomy.⁶⁰

Lessons for Nevada

The school autonomy employed by the iZone closely mirrors Nevada’s Autonomous Schools (SB 92), ASD charters, and A+ Schools. Principals, in conjunction with parental leadership boards, are given more control over budgetary, curriculum, and personnel decisions at their schools. In Clark County School District (CCSD), schools in these programs receive more control over these areas beyond what is prescribed for all semi-autonomous schools under AB 469, the regulations to reorganize CCSD.⁶¹ Autonomous school principals and school teams have direct control over all non-personnel funds from the State Distributive School Account (DSA), and A+ School and Achievement Charter principals and school teams have control over 100 percent of all funds. All three models enable principals to make curriculum and program decisions, and they are also able to exercise a range of control over hiring and replacing staff.

Invest in developing school site leaders: The iZone model of intervention contains two important lessons for Nevada. First, the success of the schools is attributed to having strong site-based leadership that can be responsive to the school’s needs through curriculum and personnel selections. This kind of site-level responsiveness is something parents and local school boards that are pursuing an ASD model (e.g. charter conversion, A+ Schools) should consider when selecting a leader for their school. The three types of autonomous school systems in Nevada move the choice of principal selection (or to keep the current principal, in the case of Autonomous Schools) to the local level, with school organizations teams, local parent councils, or local charter school boards leading the decisions-making process. This model allows for greater input from the local school community about school leadership. Local school communities should work in partnership with the ASD—and school districts, as needed—to identify appropriate school leaders that possess the skills needed to address the school’s needs. Nevada has already begun some of this work. As part of its alignment with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the Department of Education used an \$8 million Title I grant to offer professional development to principals at underperforming schools.⁶²

Provide evidence-based, professional development for school leadership teams: Second, more broadly, NDE and local school boards should consider offering evidence-based, strategic professional development and training to ensure that all school leaders are properly trained and equipped to be able to offer this same level of in-depth responsiveness to the unique needs of the schools and communities they serve. The consensus among stakeholders and policy experts interviewed by the Guinn Center is that that a strong school leader largely determines the success of any intervention. The Shelby County iZone administration has been particularly strategic in identifying the principal of a school selecting the education leader based on the specific needs of the school. Education officials and decision-makers should strengthen school leadership pipeline programs and create monetary incentives for principals and other members of school leadership teams to receive professional development specifically geared toward leadership in underperforming schools.

This recommendation aligns with the new Nevada ESSA plan, which comports with federal law requiring greater alignment between meeting school needs using “highly effective, evidence-based interventions

and strategies,” and with NDE’s disbursement of School Improvement Grant funds (Title I, 1003a), which will prioritize “big bets around school leadership development, data informed decision-making, and support for low performing schools.”⁶³

II. Boston Public Schools Autonomous Schools: Autonomy Can Solve Challenges for School Leaders

Since Boston Public Schools (BPS) began giving more autonomy to school site leadership teams, there has been an increase in test scores across the district.⁶⁴ The proficiency rates for all students in reading and math on state standardized tests increased between 2008 and 2013, years when the district significantly increased the number of autonomous schools from 24 of 129 schools to 44 of 129 schools. In 2013, 67 percent of sixth grade at autonomous schools earned scores of proficient or better on state standardized tests, a 24 percent higher rate of proficiency than sixth graders attending traditional BPS schools. Across all grade levels, the student growth percentiles at autonomous schools were higher than tradition, non-autonomous schools.⁶⁵

Autonomous schools are also extremely popular with parents. Families were twice as likely to list an autonomous school as a first choice preference for their school-aged children.⁶⁶ In addition, autonomous schools report having about half as many discipline referrals than traditional public schools.⁶⁷

Like Nevada, Boston Public Schools (BPS) offers multiple levels of school autonomy. A 2014 study found that nearly one-third of students in the school district attended some sort of autonomous school.⁶⁸ As with the iZone, effective principal leadership was correlated with greater rates of growth and academic improvement in autonomous schools.⁶⁹ For BPS principals whose schools had lower levels of autonomy, they were able to find ways to work around the confines of limited autonomy to foster academic achievement for students. For example, one high school with limited autonomy offers school leadership roles to teachers that have helped improved teacher performance, engagement, and retention. These roles have included leading professional learning communities and serving on the school council. While researchers applauded these efforts, they ultimately concluded that it would be more beneficial for principals to have greater flexibility, especially over staffing and curriculum. Evidence of these benefits is apparent in the more autonomous schools, where principals have created programs such as a teacher-led professional development institute that offers trainings for the school’s teachers that is specifically tailored to the needs of the school.

For the district’s autonomous schools, a common accountability and quality framework was used to ensure that the schools were managing resources and programs effectively. BPS uses this information and information from the traditional (non-autonomous) schools to make decisions about school closures and/or replace principals.

Moreover, researchers noted, “There remain a number of opportunities in other areas where expanded flexibility at a school level could have a substantial impact on school operations and ultimately the success of students.”⁷⁰ To maximize impact, the study’s authors made the following recommendations:

1. Extend maximum flexibility to all district schools, and encourage any school that is ready and has capacity to pursue adoption of an autonomous schools model,

2. Cultivate and support leaders and leadership teams to effectively use their flexibilities to make wise resource decisions that enable school and student improvement, and
3. Further construct and implement a school accountability model for all district schools that emphasizes effective practice and student success, with clear supports and consequences based on school performance.⁷¹

The BPS model has also been responsive to challenges, especially the district's high rate of principal turnover and the high rate at which principals have exited the district. More than 60 principals had less than two years of experience at the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year.⁷² To address the frustrations of principals and to support those new to the role, BPS implemented peer executive coaching, offered incentives to principals, and renewed contracts based on performance.⁷³

Lessons for Nevada

Develop autonomy framework with accountability measures to implement autonomy across more schools: Reflections on BPS are similar to those for the Shelby County iZone. With strong, talented leadership in place, greater autonomy at the school site can foster improved student academic achievement. Resources and trainings should be directed toward principals and aspiring principals to increase their capacity to lead an autonomous school. NDE's prioritization of School Improvement Grants (Title I, 1003a funds) will help direct resources to effective trainings and programs that can develop capable principal leaders. This will help ensure that Nevada has a pipeline of capable leaders to run autonomous schools around the State. Nevada should expand the number of autonomous school sites accordingly.

Provide incentives for school leadership teams: Another strength of the Boston model is that there are clear rewards and consequences for school leadership under the autonomous model. Principals are rewarded for good performance and can be fired for poor performance. The newly proposed ASD amendments provide opportunities for local school councils to replace a principal. The Nevada ASD may want to consider adding performance-based incentives to retain the best principals.

III. Indianapolis Public Schools: Building Out Autonomy

Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) district officials offer the following explanation for its decision to phase-in school autonomy district-wide: "We recognize that there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to student achievement; each school is filled with talented teachers that have various innovative approaches to engage students. By empowering principals to make most or all decisions at the school level, our central office supports will fulfill our mission of supporting school needs."⁷⁴ In 2016, the school district began a pilot program for selected schools to employ varying levels of school autonomy. In 2017, they will move to a district-wide program, in which all schools in the district will have autonomy over their budgets, curriculum, and operations.

While undertaking this transition to autonomy, IPS has simultaneously partnered with the state to implement Innovation Schools, which include the following options for a school:

- Launch as a new Innovation School

- Launch as an Innovation Charter School
- Restart an existing chronically underperforming school as an Innovation School
- Convert an existing high-performing school as an Innovation School.⁷⁵

Regardless of which path of varying autonomy an existing school might pursue, it is still held accountable for agreed-upon student outcomes created in partnership with the school district.

The school district has been using Innovation Schools and Innovation Charter Schools on a smaller scale for nearly ten years. During that time, IPS has reported increases in student proficiency rates. The innovation charter schools also had the highest gains in math and reading of any type of school, including those in the suburban areas.⁷⁶

Lessons for Nevada

Ensure accountability is consistent across all autonomous schools: Nevada should move forward with its plan to offer schools varying degrees of autonomy at school sites. And like the Innovation Network in Indianapolis, school communities, particularly parents, should be given a choice about how decisions are made at the school site. The Nevada Department of Education should ensure the level of accountability is consistent across all types of autonomous schools, and should work collaboratively with school districts to identify and evaluate performance metrics related to improved student achievement.

Provide information so parents can make informed choices: State and local education agencies and education advocates must ensure that school communities and school leadership teams have complete information on the full range of interventions currently available and have access to the range of support necessary to pursue the appropriate intervention strategies designed to improve student success. Information about options should be transparent, accessible, in native languages, and clear.

IV. Louisiana Recovery School District: A Shared Vision with the Local School District

Following the devastation from Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Louisiana transferred 100 low-performing schools in New Orleans to the Recovery School District (RSD), a state-run entity that, like the Nevada Achievement School District, converts chronically failing public schools into charter schools.⁷⁷ In New Orleans, 49 RSD charter schools served 27,500 students, roughly 56 percent of the total K-12 public school enrollment in 2015-2016.⁷⁸ In New Orleans, 84 percent of students are economically disadvantaged.

In 2011, 44 percent of schools in the RSD were among the bottom 5 percent in the state. By 2016, that number had decreased to just 17 percent. In 2011, only 13 percent of RSD schools received an A, B, or C letter grade for performance, but by 2016, 47 percent of schools earned that grade.⁷⁹ Year-over year, student proficiency data for the RSD has demonstrated improvement in the proficiency rates on standardized tests.⁸⁰ In 2010, the RSD observed the greatest increase in student achievement data, rising 11 percent on the state school performance framework. For 2015-2016, six RSD schools received school performance scores on the statewide framework that were greater than the state score.⁸¹

In recent years, there has been increased collaboration between the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) and the Recovery School District (RSD). In fact, in August 2016, the districts announced that all New Orleans-based RSD schools would move under OPSB jurisdiction by the start of the 2018-2019 school year.⁸² Nine RSD schools have voluntarily decided to rejoin the local school district for the 2017-2018 school year, one year ahead of the Unification Plan mandate.⁸³ Under this change, schools will retain their autonomy, site-based decision-making power, and 98 percent of all funds, and the school district will maintain oversight.

The collaboration between the school district and the RSD has led to improved outcomes for students in at-risk populations. In 2016, African-American students, students with disabilities, and English Language Learners in New Orleans schools had greater proficiency rates in math and reading statewide-standardized assessments and higher graduation rates than the statewide averages.⁸⁴

Lessons for Nevada

Strengthen collaboration between state and local education agencies and charter management organizations: The fall 2016 ASD charter conversion selection process in Nevada revealed significant tensions between the Nevada Department of Education and local school districts, particularly Clark County School District, where the majority of potential schools were located.⁸⁵ The amendments recently proposed by NDE seek to “articulate a shared obligation among the Department and Districts to be responsive to parents.”⁸⁶ The regulations for Autonomous Schools (Senate Bill 92) demonstrate a shared obligation between a school district and NDE to create the best school environment for students. Going forward, NDE and school districts should strengthen collaboration and should share best practices among the various efforts across the state to create student outcomes. The Achievement Charters and A+ Schools are opportunities to learn about best practices that Districts can choose to scale across their schools.

Encourage and support parents: Ultimately, interventions to improve underperforming schools should strengthen community- and school-based decision-making at the school site and encourage and support parental involvement. There are already systems in place that give parents at local schools a voice in decision-making for a school. Section 28 of the proposed AB469 that effectively translates the Regulations to Reorganize the Clark County School District into statute describes the responsibilities of the School Organizational Team (SOT) and states that the SOT shall “provide assistance and advice to the principal of the local school precinct regarding the development of the plan of operation for the local school precinct.”⁸⁷ Schools can leverage their SOTs to implement school improvement plans. To do this, SOTs should be provided information about the full range of interventions currently available (e.g., Turnaround Grant authorized through SB 515 Section 24,⁸⁸ 1003a School Improvement Funds,⁸⁹ Achievement School District migration, and ASD performance compacts) and have an opportunity to pursue appropriate intervention strategies. Increased collaboration among the different managers of educational service delivery options will likely create more equitable means of school improvement across the state, as the best practices and services will become available to all schools.

Recommendations

We applaud the efforts of the Nevada Department of Education and school districts to employ evidence-based best practices in creating thoughtful school improvement systems. By increasing autonomy over core decisions—including staffing, curriculum, and financial resources, the proposed amendments to the ASD will facilitate meaningful change for school communities and student outcomes. Based on the experiences of other states and school districts, the Guinn Center offers the following recommendations, which decision-makers may want to consider.

1. Train and grow strong school leaders. Famed Stanford education researcher Dr. Eric A. Hanushek stated that a strong school leader has as much impact on a student's success as any singular teacher in a classroom.⁹⁰ The consensus among stakeholders and policy experts interviewed by the Guinn Center is that a strong school leader largely determines the success of any intervention. The Shelby County Innovation Zone (iZone) administration in Tennessee has been particularly strategic in identifying the principal of a school and selecting the leader based on the specific needs of the school. Education officials and decision-makers should strengthen school leadership pipeline programs and create monetary incentives for principals and other members of school leadership teams to receive professional development geared toward leadership and autonomy, especially in underperforming schools. Principals in iZone Schools are given the authority to hire teachers, fire teachers, and choose curriculum. The principals credited the latter of these responsibilities with the increase in student performance once a school joined the iZone.

This type of training takes time. In Indianapolis, district officials have implemented a pilot year for a school autonomy model so that administrators can redress any flaws of the program before rolling out system-wide school autonomy. Decision-makers, agency officials, and advocacy groups should offer programs, trainings, and incentives to all school leaders so that Nevada can continue to strengthen its pipeline of school leaders capable of running schools with greater autonomy.⁹¹ Efforts on this front are already underway in Nevada. As part of its alignment with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the Department of Education used an \$8 million Title I grant to offer professional development to principals at underperforming schools.⁹²

2. Develop a streamlined system for school autonomy and increase the number of schools and districts that follow the Autonomous Schools model. Like Boston Public Schools, Nevada has proposed the creation of multiple levels of school autonomy. Should the Nevada Legislature approve proposed amendments in the 2017 79th Legislative Session, NDE will remain responsible for performance compacts, charter conversions (both through selection and parent petition), neighborhood schools, Autonomous Schools, and A+ Schools. These are in addition to the more decentralized decision-making model at school sites following the Clark County School District reconfiguration. While the concept of autonomy can lead to positive outcomes, stakeholders can become frustrated when the system is too complicated. As a 2014 study of the Boston System concluded, “Despite the popular and academic success of more autonomous schools, however, researchers found the current approach to autonomy to be overly complex and lacking an overall strategic vision.”⁹³

Moving forward, NDE should explore ways to streamline the multiple models of autonomous schools into a more simplified structure that maximizes control over funding and decision-making at the school

site. Currently, NDE holds all schools under contracts with the NV ASD to the same standards for meeting student performance targets.⁹⁴ NDE should develop a common performance-based accountability framework across all types of autonomous schools offered through school districts across the state, particularly those in Clark County, to ensure that schools and school leaders are meeting performance targets.

3. Empower parents to lead school-wide improvement plans. Principals, teachers, and parents at schools with performance compacts and contracts, as part of the Achievement School District, should be given trainings on how to manage the school so that they can transition to become an autonomous school at the end of their performance compact. One study recommends providing training to all school leaders, including parent councils, to be able to manage resources effectively. State and local education agencies should continue to hold schools accountable, but the principal and local school council (comprised of parents, teachers, staff, and community members) should conduct management at the school site. Maximizing site-based control can maximize the impact of interventions at the school site.

4. Coalesce around a statewide, shared vision for school improvement. Currently, the systems for site-based school improvement in Nevada appear as separate, fragmented entities with some school districts and NDE operating seemingly competing systems. Research indicates that varying levels of autonomy can result in system-wide inequities. School communities, school districts, and the Department of Education should work together to provide governance and oversight to all schools, as is the case in New Orleans. By working together toward a shared, consolidated vision of achievement, autonomy, and accountability, Nevada can create meaningful opportunities for student success for all students, particularly those in our highest-need schools.

To conclude, these models of autonomous schools offered in Nevada are aligned with and reinforce the state's priorities under the federal Every Student Succeeds Acts (ESSA) law, which seek to improve our lowest-performing schools and develop great school leadership teams. Further, autonomous schools are simply one option in a basket of options (e.g., Zoom Schools, Victory Schools) that local education agency officials, school leadership teams, staff, teachers, and parents can use to improve underperforming schools. Local communities should continue to engage with educators to explore the different options and evaluate which model might best serve the specific needs of the students in their communities.





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The Kenny C. Guinn Center for Policy Priorities is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, bipartisan, independent research center focused on providing fact-based, relevant, and well-reasoned analysis of critical policy issues facing Nevada and the Intermountain West. The Guinn Center engages policy-makers, experts, and the public with innovative, data-driven research and analysis to advance policy solutions, inform the public debate, and expand public engagement.

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Appendix

The Guinn Center has developed a series of guiding principles to help inform policy decisions to underscore all efforts to improve education in the state:

1. **Every child deserves the opportunity to love school and learn in school.** State leaders and policy makers should establish policies and direct resources in a way that elevates the educational journey (the experience and access of our children and families) to the level of educational outcomes (e.g., college and career readiness) in order to better align the system to a broadened definition of student success.
2. **Teachers and principals have the greatest impact on the learning and experience of children in school.** Policies should be established and resourced allocated in a way that elevates the teaching profession. Teachers, principals, and those who support students' success should be compensated as professionals, treated as professionals, and held to the high expectations that our students deserve.
3. **Decisions should be made closest to the point of impact.** Policies about resource allocation and key decision-making rights should remain at the school site. By moving key decisions closer to our teachers, students, and families, we distribute leadership, set strategy responsive to the unique needs of each school community, and enable our system to adapt, respond, and scale up success in a more efficient way.
4. **Public education is a system of interconnected, interrelated components.** The overall education ecosystem should be integrated, vertically aligned, responsive, and able to adapt to meet the evolving needs of those within the educational ecosystem. Systems thinking allows decision makers to move beyond entrenched interests to collective progress. Policy makers must put a premium on outcomes and equity and be more open and adaptive in how to achieve those outcomes.

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