



School District Innovation Zones

A New Wave of District-led Efforts to Improve Economic Mobility

By Nithin Iyengar, Kate Lewis-LaMonica, and Mike Perigo

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Educators, policy makers, and philanthropists have worked for years to improve the substandard quality of education provided many low-income students, one of the most effective ways to put disadvantaged kids on a pathway of upward economic mobility. But well-meaning reform efforts aimed at turning around failing schools largely disappoint.

More than \$3.5 billion in federal School Improvement Grants awarded in 2010 “had no impact on math or reading test scores, high school graduation, or college enrollment,” concluded an independent 2017 research report.¹ Similarly, the vast majority of district-led efforts to improve low-performing schools have been equally unsuccessful.²

None of this comes as a surprise. It’s widely understood that school districts face significant barriers to designing and implementing sustained improvements in chronically underperforming schools. In particular, the size and complexity of urban districts pose daunting challenges to advance significant reform efforts, despite glaring need. Many students—especially low-income students and students of color—fall years behind in reading and math. Principals and teachers grow fatigued by repeated—mostly unsuccessful—improvement efforts. Money also is a problem. Cash-strapped districts in recent years have relied heavily on federal grants to fund turnaround strategies, but that source has diminished over time. As a result, many district leaders feel stymied when it comes to delivering meaningful improvement. Instead, district improvement efforts often focus on modest goals, well below the standard required for social mobility and rarely include strategies to meaningfully improve student outcomes.

A new wave of district-led “innovation zones” holds promise to overcome these challenges and deliver significant improvements in student outcomes. These zones provide a subset of district schools with control over staffing, curriculum, and budgeting. State laws and contractual agreements often guarantee the autonomy that can sustain the zone despite potential changes in district leadership. Nonprofits typically operate the schools and are held accountable to the school district for significant improvement in student outcomes.

The experiences of five school districts that are vanguards of this new wave of innovation zones—[Chicago](#); [Denver](#); [Indianapolis](#); [Memphis, TN](#); and [Springfield, MA](#)—are the subject of this report.³ These innovation zones reveal certain design features that place a focus on improving teaching and learning over multiple years—the heart of any successful turnaround effort.

1 Lisa Dragoset, et. al., *School Improvement Grants: Implementation and Effectiveness*, US Department of Education, January 2017.

2 Richard D. Kahlenberg, “Turnaround Schools that Work: Moving Beyond Separate but Equal,” *The Century Foundation*, November 12, 2009.

3 We restrict our attention to district-driven efforts to improve low-performing schools via innovation zones that provide school-level autonomy to enable improvement in a subset of district schools. Our focus is specifically on initiatives designed and either led by or overseen by districts. As a result, we exclude efforts such as charter schools under the provisions of the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program and state turnaround efforts. These efforts have been well surveyed by others, including Stephanie Aragon and Emily Workman in “Emerging state turnaround strategies” published by the Education Commission of the States, 2015, <http://www.ecs.org/ec-content/uploads/12139.pdf> and Jon Rybka in “The promise of restarting schools” published by the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, August 25, 2015, <https://www.msdf.org/blog/2015/08/the-promise-restarting-schools/>.

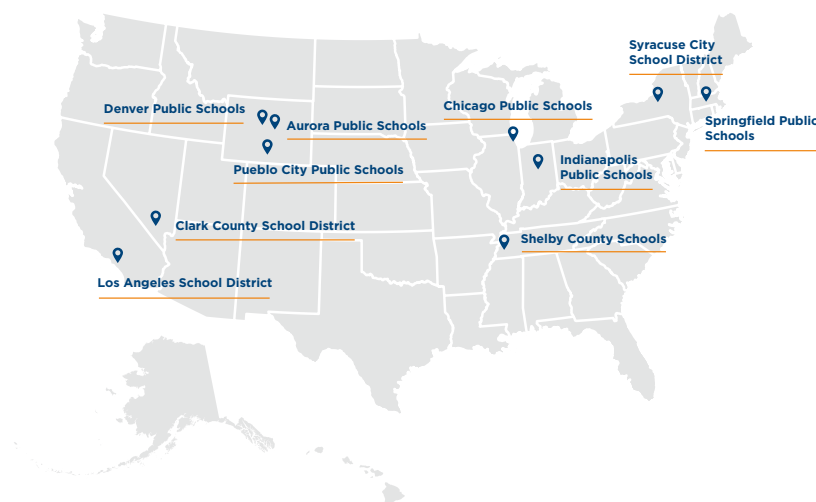
A Growing and Varied Landscape of Innovation Zones Across the Country

Interest in innovation zones has picked up in recent years as legislatures in several states, including Colorado, Indiana, and Tennessee, have given school districts the authority to grant schools varying degrees of freedom from school district and state policies.⁴ As of 2017, innovation zones served over 63,000 students in at least 108 schools in nine districts.⁵ Multiple philanthropists across the country have made multimillion dollar investments to help school districts implement such innovation zones.

Yet, not all innovation zones are the same. Our research identified three primary types: district-led, third-party led, and autonomous improvement zones. Each type takes a different approach to reach the same goal—improving student outcomes for a subset of schools by providing guaranteed school-based autonomy in return for higher expectations and accountability for performance.

District-led innovation zones

Historically, innovation zones created and led by the school district have been the most common. In these zones, the school district selects a group of low-performing schools and gives them specific autonomy over staffing, curriculum, and budgeting. Often, state law or school board policy grants school districts the authority to exempt schools from local and state regulations. School boards and district leadership, in turn, hold the innovation zone schools accountable for improving student outcomes—often by holding school leaders accountable for a higher degree of student progress. If the schools do not achieve sufficient progress, the autonomy may be revoked or the principal may be removed.



4 An overview of the state-level policy created in Colorado, Indiana, and Tennessee can be found as part of the Denver, Indianapolis, and Memphis profiles, respectively.

5 Based on data pulled from district websites and National Center for Education Statistics in May 2017. This analysis highlights select districts, as indicated on the map that are leading efforts to provide school-level autonomy to enable improvement in a subset of district schools. It focuses on initiatives designed and either led-by or overseen by districts, and does not include all standalone innovation schools that may exist across the country.

The innovation zone is typically led by a senior-level zone administrator responsible for overall strategy and empowered to select principals committed to implementing successful turnaround practices. The principals pick their teaching staff and work with them to shape the instructional program. School districts support the costs of teacher professional development tailored to specific needs and teaching supports, such as coaches or added time to the school day.

Third-party led innovation zones

A few school districts have recently taken a different approach by bringing in a nonprofit organization to operate low-performing schools. Such arrangements typically entail a change in state law. School districts enter into a contractual agreement with the nonprofit to operate a select group of low-performing schools. Third-party operators are guaranteed autonomy in staffing, scheduling, curriculum, and budget, and they are contractually accountable to the school board for improving student outcomes. Renewable contracts typically run for several years but may be cancelled for failure to produce agreed-upon results.

Autonomous improvement zones

A few districts have created state-enabled innovation zones that allow any school to request operational autonomy whether or not they are low-performing. A group of autonomous schools can come together to form a zone managed by a nonprofit organization under a contractual agreement with the school board. The nonprofit is responsible for developing the instructional program, as well as staffing and budgeting. Renewable contracts typically run for several years but may be cancelled for failure to produce agreed-upon results.

Examples of District-Led Innovation Zones:

- **Shelby County Schools Innovation Zone, Tennessee**
- **Syracuse Innovation Zone, New York**
- **Aurora ACTION Zone, Colorado**
- **Pueblo City Schools Innovation Zone, Colorado**
- **Clark County School District Turnaround Zone, Nevada**

Examples of Third-Party Led Innovation Zones:

- **Chicago** (Chicago Public Schools contracting with the Academy for Urban School Leadership)
- **Springfield, Massachusetts** (Springfield Public Schools contracting with Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership)
- **Los Angeles** (Los Angeles Unified School District contracting with the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools)

Examples of Autonomous Improvement Zones:

- **Denver** (Denver Public Schools contracting with Luminary Learning Network)
- **Indianapolis** (Indianapolis Public Schools contracting with Phalen Leadership Academies)

Key Features of Five Innovation Zones

The table summarizes key features of the five innovation zones described in this report.

	Shelby County Schools	Chicago Public Schools	Denver Public Schools	Indianapolis Public Schools ⁶	Springfield Public Schools
Third-party partners (as appropriate)	District-led innovation zone	Academy for Urban School Leadership	Luminary Learning Network	Phalen Leadership Academies	Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership
Number of schools and students	21 schools (K-12) serving 10,000 students	31 schools (Pre-K-12) serving 17,000 students	4 schools (Pre-K-8) serving ~2000 students	2 schools (K-6) serving ~800 students	10 schools (6-12) serving 4,400 students
Goals for outcome improvement	Schools improve from the bottom 5% of the state to the top 25% of the state.	Schools move from the lowest performing in Chicago to the highest performing in Chicago.	Schools improve at least one performance band on the Denver Public Schools' performance framework.	Improve student performance to "beat the district, beat the state," and 80% of students perform at or above grade-level.	Schools achieve a median student growth percentile of 50 in both ELA and math, a goal that will require at least one year's worth of academic progress.
Enabling policy context	State legislation allows districts to create innovation zones.	State legislation provides for "enhanced powers over financial, managerial, and educational matters." Chicago Public Schools identifies specific agreements for contract schools.	State legislation provides a pathway for individual schools to receive specific autonomy and for a set of such schools to become a formalized "zone" led by the district or a third-party.	State legislation provides the authority to create Innovation Network Schools.	None, although schools that continue to be low-performing would be subject to state takeover.
School-level autonomy	Operational autonomy is created by district policy and can be modified by the superintendent.	Operational autonomy is codified in contractual agreement between AUSL at the Chicago Public School board.	Operational autonomy is codified in a contractual agreement between the Luminary Learning Network and Denver Public Schools board.	Operational autonomy is codified in a contractual agreement between the Phalen Leadership Academies and Indianapolis Public Schools board.	Operational autonomy is codified in a contractual agreement between the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership and the Springfield Public Schools board.
Schools organized into feeder patterns	Yes	Partially; 3 neighborhoods across Chicago	No	Starting in elementary school with the potential to expand to middle school	Yes

6 To date, there are 15 innovation schools in Indianapolis that will serve approximately 7,500 students at full capacity. For this paper, we profile the first operator of these innovation schools—Phalen Leadership Academies.

Promising Outcomes to Date for This New Wave of Innovation Zones

Of the innovation zones profiled in this report, two have been under way for long enough to provide student outcomes data. In 2012, the Shelby County Schools (including Memphis) launched an innovation zone (iZone) that today serves more than 10,000 students in 21 K-12 schools. Through 2016, students have demonstrated growth of at least 6 percentage points per year for the past five years—nearly three times the rate of other Shelby County schools. Elementary schools have performed at an even higher rate—showing almost 8 percent annual growth in aggregate proficiency rates from 2012 to 2015. Seven of the 21 schools in the iZone are on a path to be in the top quarter of all schools across the state within the next few years.

In Chicago, the Academy of Urban School Leadership (AUSL) launched its first turnaround school in 2006, and today operates a third-party innovation zone that includes 31 pre-K-12 schools serving 17,000 students. Students in AUSL elementary schools—despite a far lower starting point—are nearing or better than the national average as measured by the NWEA MAP assessment.⁷ At the same time, student growth on reading and math assessments have outpaced the district average, with 46 percent of AUSL schools now in the top 10 percent of schools in Chicago.

Beyond academic improvement, innovation zones profiled in this report often have broad support from teachers, parents, and students. They do not face heavy public resistance that, at times, besieges charter schools or state takeovers in predominantly African-American or Latino communities. Such resistance often stems from reform efforts that are led by administrators and teachers regarded as outsiders. By contrast, innovation zones often retain district administrators and teachers of color with deep roots in their community. Families and community stakeholders appreciate that innovation schools remain under district control and often retain the original name, colors, and mascot of the school—even if operated by a third-party.

As welcome as they are, encouraging results should be placed in context. While the innovation zones we profile outshine most prior turnaround efforts, they also have a long way to go to demonstrate the kind of sustainable progress it takes to help put low-income students on the academic path that leads to upward social mobility.

Design Features That Create a Framework for Success

Success may well hinge on how well innovation zones execute on five design features, which together create a framework for improving teaching and learning. While these features don't guarantee success, they put it within reach. And they set this new wave of innovation zones apart from the vast majority of prior unsuccessful turnaround efforts. Promising zones: 1) set ambitious goals; 2) guarantee autonomy; 3) improve teaching and learning; 4) follow the students; and 5) are sustainable, scalable, and built to last.

7 Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) is a global nonprofit educational services organization known for its flagship assessment, Measures of Academic Progress (MAP).

Set ambitious goals

Promising innovation zones commit to and hold schools accountable for ambitious goals that signal the magnitude of improvement required in teaching and learning. Rather than settle for incremental improvement, such as moving off a list of low-performing schools, they typically aim to accelerate student learning to be in the top quartile or higher of schools in the state. Innovation zones hold schools accountable for such performance via contractual agreements or principal evaluations. It takes ambitious goals to put students on the path to social mobility.

The Shelby County Schools iZone set the ambitious goal of transforming schools in the bottom 5 percent of the state to the top 25 percent within seven years. This goal anchored the priorities of the iZone by signaling the significant improvement required. “To reach top quartile status, our students will need to achieve double-digit proficiency gains each year for multiple years,” explained Sharon Griffin, chief of schools for Shelby County Schools. Using this goal to keep the spotlight on student achievement, Griffin and iZone principals established year-by-year goals for each school. Principals are evaluated each year on their progress.

Guarantee autonomy

Innovation zones provide zone leaders and principals with the flexibility to select teachers best able to lead classroom improvement, add time to the school day, tailor professional development and other supports for teachers, and allocate financial resources as necessary to support the improvement effort. This autonomy was created through different means in the five cities we profile, some through state laws, and in other cases through district policy. A critical common feature, however, is the durability of the autonomy provided through board policy and performance contracts. Turnaround work requires multiple years for success during which schools need to be insulated from changes in leadership. Durable autonomy distinguishes innovations zones from most turnaround efforts and creates a critical enabler for putting teaching and learning front and center.

Each district profiled in this report has pursued a different approach to guarantee autonomy. In Indianapolis, the state legislature in 2014 passed a law that gave Indianapolis Public Schools authority to create Innovation Network Schools. Such schools operate with the autonomy to make decisions about all aspects of their school—academic and operational—but they are held accountable by the school district for agreed upon student outcomes. Schools are managed by nonprofit organizations that are under contract with the school district. The contractual agreement between the school board and the nonprofit organization guarantees such autonomy and stipulates clear expectations for student outcomes.

In some cities, as long as the nonprofit continues to meet expectations for student outcomes, the contract automatically renews and can only be terminated by mutual agreement from both parties. As Aleesia Johnson, innovation officer at Indianapolis Public Schools explained: “Our Innovation Network Schools have the autonomy to make choices to improve teaching and learning even if our board and superintendent change. Those autonomies are guaranteed by an agreement and enforced by state law.”

In Springfield, the school district and Empower Schools, a Boston-based nonprofit that had demonstrated success in turnaround efforts elsewhere, created the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP). In 2011, the Springfield Public Schools faced mounting pressure to improve low-performing middle schools or risk being taken over by the state of Massachusetts. Realizing the need to do more, Superintendent Dan Warwick began conversations with Empower Schools to create a new and unique partnership between Springfield Public Schools, the local teachers' union, Empower Schools, and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. As Superintendent Warwick explained, "What we were doing before was not working for these schools, and we needed to try something that would work."

Together these partners created the SEZP as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit led by a seven-member governing board comprised of local and state appointees, including the mayor, superintendent, and CEO of Empower Schools. Unlike Indianapolis, no state law existed to create such autonomy. Rather, Empower worked alongside Springfield Public Schools and the state of Massachusetts to create an agreement that balanced autonomy with accountability. The SEZP is set up to operate under a five-year renewable agreement with Springfield Public Schools to provide managerial and operational services to the schools in the designated zone. The agreement can be terminated during the five-year term for multiple reasons, including failure to meet goals in its state-approved turnaround plan. If the SEZP delivers on its outcome goals, the contract will automatically renew in 2020. In the long-term, the contract can be canceled if the state and district mutually agree to end the effort. "There's no plan to do so, and the Zone will be there until the district and state agree to end it," said Brett Alessi, cofounder and managing director of Empower Schools.

Improve teaching and learning

A large proportion of students in low-performing schools live in high-poverty communities where student achievement lags national averages and social mobility remains elusive. Closing the gap requires significant improvements in teaching and learning.

Many school improvement efforts focus on resetting school culture by establishing new norms with staff, students, and families; implementing policies to improve the behavioral climate; and repairing or sprucing up the physical space. While such efforts are important and can set a foundation for subsequent improvements in teaching and learning, they do not directly address academic improvement. Nor does autonomy alone distinguish innovation zones. It's how they use it that counts.

The most promising innovation zones use autonomy to improve teaching and learning in two ways. First, they provide a significant infusion of teachers who are better prepared to succeed in low-performing schools. They accomplish this by providing financial incentives for well-prepared teachers, or by recruiting from teacher residencies or other teacher preparation programs. Second, innovation zones provide ongoing instructional supports and professional learning opportunities that elevate teachers' daily work with students and improve teaching and learning.

Hiring top-notch teachers was a priority for Principal Agnes Aleobua as she prepared to convert School #103 in Indianapolis to Phalen Leadership Academy School #103. Aleobua

released 53 of the elementary school's teachers and hired 42 new staff members. The new teachers had demonstrated prior success in turnaround settings and, importantly, believed that students could achieve 1.5 years of academic growth per year. "We needed to hit the ground running, and we wanted teachers who shared that ambition and could back it up in the classroom," said Earl Martin Phalen, founder of Phalen Leadership Academies.

Similarly, the Academy for Urban School Leadership in Chicago takes advantage of its own high-quality teacher residency program to fill 40–60 percent of the positions in its turnaround schools. While selecting quality teachers provides a good foundation, it's just the first step. "Our hypothesis when we started was that we'd prepare teachers to be successful in low-performing schools and that would be enough to jumpstart the culture and sustain outcomes," said Don Feinstein, executive director of AUSL. "We were disappointed that this wasn't the case."

AUSL realized that teachers needed ongoing support, so it codified its approach to improving instruction in the "AUSL Way for Teaching and Learning." "We have established milestones and benchmarks at those points in a student's pre-K-12 experience that matter most to the American dream: kindergarten readiness, third-grade reading, eighth-grade math, ninth-grade high school readiness, graduation from high school ready for college and post-secondary completion," explained Feinstein.

AUSL recently partnered with the Achievement Network, a Boston-based nonprofit that uses data and standards to improve teaching, to provide its teachers with assessments that measure progress relative its benchmarks. In addition, AUSL teachers receive regular job-embedded coaching that enables them to work together to identify what students are learning, how specific teacher actions might be improved, and how such improvements might be observed and assessed. "It's all about talent," said Feinstein. "If you don't have the right people, in the right positions, doing the right work, and getting better over time, you won't get the results."

Follow the students

In the past, reform initiatives often targeted a single school or two. But low-performing schools often reside in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty that include an entire K-12 feeder pattern. Within these schools, academic deficiencies accumulate year after year, and students may be multiple grade levels off-track by the time they reach high school. Consequently, innovation zones aim to include an entire K-12 set of schools, recognizing the benefit of starting as early as possible to reduce the academic gaps that otherwise follow students into high schools.

The most promising innovation zones aim to include all, or most, schools in a K-12 feeder pattern. By focusing on a set of schools in the same community, students receive consecutive years of intensive, high-quality instruction, allowing them to "pick up steam" as they progress to and through high school. In the difficult work of school turnarounds, this strategy increases the odds of preparing students for success in college and career.

The Shelby County Schools iZone, for example, started with elementary and middle schools. "To reach our goal of top 25 percent, we knew that we had to start early on," said Chief of Schools Griffin. "By the time students get to high school, they are too far behind

to get them college and career ready.” Over time, improvement in elementary and middle schools would put students on better academic footing to succeed in high school. The iZone operated multiple elementary and middle schools for several years before taking over its first turnaround high school. Today, Griffin notes that “all of our elementary iZone students can complete a K-12 feeder pattern in an iZone school,” providing students with up to 13 years of high-quality instruction.

In Indianapolis, the Phalen Leadership Academies started with a single Innovation Network elementary school in 2015, then added another the following year. For school year 2017-18, it will add a middle school. “We cannot send our students to a failing middle school; it would undo all the progress we’ve made to date,” said Phalen, the founder. While Phalen does not plan to operate a turnaround high school, he expects to partner with a charter high school or turnaround operator to ensure that all Phalen Leadership Academies students have a high-quality high school to attend.

Are sustainable, scalable, and built to last

The most promising innovation zones plan for sustainability and scalability in a number of ways. First and foremost, they secure a multiyear school board policy or contractual commitment that lives on even if with a change in superintendents. Second, zones explore avenues for dependable federal and state funding that goes directly to the innovation zone, not to the school district. Third, zones design a lean operation that focuses on essential needs that can be sustained by the school district. Finally, zones start small with the expectation of growing over time as early efforts translate to successful improvement of student outcomes.

Typically, the start-up phase requires financial resources beyond what school districts can provide. Federal innovation grant money may be available, but such funding is more uncertain today than in recent years. Philanthropists may step up, but they typically want to place a time limit on their funding. Over the long run, dependence on one-time federal or philanthropic funding has the potential to limit an innovation zone’s sustainability and scalability.

The Denver Public Schools’ new innovation zone, the Luminary Learning Network (LLN), required an infusion of foundation money to get started, but it expects to sustain itself with the allocation it receives from the district once the funding runs out. The contractual agreement between LLN and the Denver Board of Education is designed to last “as long as we continue to make progress and meet our accountability goals,” said Jessica Roberts, LLN’s executive director.

Four donors—the Gates Family Foundation, the Fox Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, and the Rose Community Foundation—helped to launch the LLN and support initial costs. These costs included those associated with the Center for Teaching Quality (a nonprofit organization based in North Carolina that supports teacher-led professional learning), and support from Empower Schools to design and launch the zone. In addition, the donors’ contributions covered support for establishing the LLN as an independent

nonprofit, and setting up the legal as well as operational structures of the LLN. Denver Public Schools provides the zone with \$6,800 in annual per pupil funding, in addition to \$450 or more per student in lieu of shared services provided by the district if LLN schools decline those services.

The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership has a contractual agreement with the school board to operate 10 schools currently with 4,400 students for five years. The agreement can be terminated only if SEZP does not deliver stipulated student outcomes or if the district and state of Massachusetts mutually agree to terminate the zone. Otherwise the agreement renews for another five years.

The contract channels a proportionate share of the school district's federal and state funds directly to the empowerment zone and pays the zone a management fee for each school. The district retains a minimal amount for oversight of federal funding and provision of custodial and facilities services. SEZP's lean operational design includes a "chief support partner"—a nonprofit organization that helps and coaches principals, coordinates professional learning opportunities across the zone, and provides support to track student and school-level progress. Although SEZP required philanthropic funding to launch the zone, after year three, the ongoing per pupil funding and the management fee from Springfield Public Schools are expected to cover the cost of operating the schools and sustaining the SEZP.

A Promising Turnaround Strategy Worth Watching

The new wave of innovation zones stand out from prior turnaround efforts in the autonomy they grant to school leaders, and in their dedication to using that flexibility to sharply improve teaching and advance classroom learning. These zones have the potential to break the long, largely disappointing record tallied by prior school turnaround efforts. If these bold efforts at reform yield significant advances in student learning, other school districts will have reason to follow suit.



Mike Perigo is a partner with The Bridgespan Group, working in the San Francisco office. He leads the firm's Education practice. You may reach him at Mike.Perigo@bridgespan.org.



Nithin Iyengar is a manager in Bridgespan's San Francisco office. Since joining Bridgespan, he has worked extensively on K-12 education. You may reach him at Nithin.Iyengar@bridgespan.org.



Kate Lewis-LaMonica is a case team leader in Bridgespan's San Francisco office. You may reach her at Kate.Lewis-LaMonica@bridgespan.org.

Appendix: Profiles of District Innovation Zones

In the Appendix of this report, we provide deeper profiles of five school districts that are vanguards of this new wave of innovation zones:

1. [Chicago](#)
2. [Denver](#)
3. [Indianapolis](#)
4. [Memphis, Tennessee](#)
5. [Springfield, Massachusetts](#)

We highlight in these profiles how each zone holds promise to overcome the challenges of turning around failing schools and to deliver significant improvements in student outcomes.

The AUSL Way: Moving from “Good” to “Truly Excellent”

In 2006, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) selected the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL)—known then as an innovative teacher-training program—to manage Sherman Elementary, one of the lowest-performing schools in the city. Ten years later, Sherman had improved to Level 1+, the district’s highest rating.

AUSL now manages a network of 31 neighborhood schools serving nearly 17,000 students, 92.5 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Under AUSL’s leadership, two-thirds of those schools have moved from the district’s lowest rating to Level 1 or Level 1+, with many approaching the national average for math and English language arts proficiency rates—a tribute to AUSL’s unique approach to transforming low-performing schools into schools of excellence.

The Road to Chicago’s Contract Schools

In 1987, US Secretary of Education William Bennett proclaimed Chicago’s public schools to be the worst in the nation.¹ The system has been on a mission ever since to move to the head of the class in urban school reform. That is no small task for the nation’s third-largest school district, with 652 schools, nearly 20,000 teachers, and some 400,000 students—80 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

A year after Bennett’s unsettling assessment of Chicago’s schools, the Illinois General Assembly passed a school reform act that authorized Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley to take control of the city’s schools. Soon thereafter, the district’s CEO embarked on a campaign to raise standards for student achievement and impose more accountability on schools. In 1995, the legislature upped the challenge by approving the Chicago School Reform Amendatory Act. The act empowered the mayor to appoint a five-member Reform Board of Trustees—replacing the Board of Education—that embarked upon comprehensive reform measures including opening new charter schools and closing underperforming schools.²

1 “About,” Chicago Board of Education, <http://www.cpsboe.org/about>.

2 Stuart Luppescu, Elaine M. Allensworth, Paul Moore, Marisa de la Torre, James Murphy, with Sanja Jagesic, “Trends in Chicago’s Schools across Three Eras of Reform: Summary of Key Findings,” Consortium on Chicago School Research, September 2011.

Early successes with charter schools set the stage in June of 2004 for Mayor Daley and the school district's then-CEO Arne Duncan to announce the Renaissance 2010 initiative, a plan to create 100 high-quality schools by 2010.³ The initiative called for a combination of charter schools, independently operated contract schools, and CPS-run small schools. Daley explains the bold move this way: "Despite our best efforts and the hard work of teachers, principals, parents and students, some schools have consistently underperformed. We must face the reality that—for schools that have consistently underperformed—it's time to start over." The *Chicago Tribune* called Renaissance 2010 the "most ambitious effort in a decade to remake the nation's third-largest school system."⁴

The district grounded the Renaissance 2010 initiative in a basic principle: "autonomy in exchange for accountability." Renaissance schools would operate with control over staffing, curriculum, length of school day and year, and budgets, but would be held accountable by a standard set of metrics set out in a five-year performance agreement.

“[Renaissance 2010] is the most ambitious effort in a decade to remake the nation's third-largest school system.”

TIM KNOWLES, DIRECTOR OF CENTER OF URBAN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
(FROM THE *CHICAGO TRIBUNE*)

This initiative paved the way for CPS to test a new reform model: "contract turnaround schools" managed by independent nonprofits under a performance agreement with the district. Unlike charter schools, contract schools remained under the jurisdiction of the school district. The model guaranteed the schools broad autonomy for the duration of their five-year contracts, and teachers would remain part of the Chicago Teachers Union.

Today, nonprofits interested in operating a contract school in Chicago apply to the Office of New Schools. Proposals are evaluated against five criteria: 1) high standards, rigorous curriculum, and powerful instruction; 2) systems of support that meet student needs; 3) engaged and empowered families and community; 4) committed and effective teachers, leaders, and staff; and 5) sound fiscal, operational, and accountability systems. Once the Office of New Schools approves a nonprofit, it is eligible to take over a low-performing school, pending an open hearing and vote of approval by the Chicago Board of Education, restored by the legislature in 1999.⁵

The Academy for Urban School Leadership Pioneers Contract Schools

Nine years before the Renaissance 2010 initiative, venture capitalist Martin Koldyke funded the launch of the Academy for Urban School Leadership, a nonprofit with the goal of providing CPS with high-quality teachers prepared to succeed within the demanding conditions of failing urban schools. Donald Feinstein, a long-time CPS educator, joined as

3 "Renaissance 2010," Chicago Public Schools, <http://www.cps.edu/PROGRAMS/DISTRICTINITIATIVES/Pages/Renaissance2010.aspx>.

4 Tracy Dell'Angela and Gary Washburn, "Daley set to remake troubled schools," *Chicago Tribune*, June 25, 2004, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2004-06-25/news/0406250358_1_contract-schools-chicago-public-schools-schools-in-recent-years.

5 "About," Chicago Board of Education.

executive director—a position he continues to hold. In the fall of 2001, AUSL opened the school system’s first contract school, The Chicago Academy, which also was the system’s first school-based teacher preparation program. AUSL found space for it in a former junior college building constructed in 1934. The academy started with pre-kindergarten through fourth grade and grew to include four more grade levels in three years. (Chicago’s elementary schools include grades pre-K–8.)

For teachers in training, the academy offered the Chicago Teacher Residency, a full-time, year-long urban teacher training program loosely modeled after medical residencies for doctors. Pairs of teacher residents work with a regular classroom teacher and also take courses to earn a master’s degree and teacher certification. AUSL quickly won acclaim for its success in training highly effective teachers for the city’s public schools but struggled to achieve large-scale impact. As Feinstein explains: “When we began to graduate teachers out of the program, our hypothesis was that we’d place two to three well-prepared teachers in low-performing schools, and that would be a catalyst for change. That turned out not to be the case.”⁶

In 2006, after graduating almost 200 teachers from its residency program, AUSL made a significant shift and expanded its operations into managing turnaround schools. At the school system’s request, AUSL signed a contract to manage Sherman Elementary, one of the lowest-performing schools in the city. The school, the first contract turnaround school in Chicago, reopened in the fall of 2006 as the Sherman School of Excellence with a new staff, many of whom were graduates of AUSL’s teacher residency program. AUSL’s theory of action was simple: it sought to combine its teacher training residency with a school turnaround strategy to dramatically improve student achievement.

According to Michael Whitmore, who joined AUSL in 2007 as the director of the Chicago Teacher Residency and was appointed to managing director of teaching and learning in 2014, taking on school turnarounds prompted some changes in the teacher residency training model.⁷ Specifically, the challenge of turnaround required the program to better prepare teachers to succeed in some of the most challenging settings in Chicago. Mentors and residents began using [Charlotte Danielson’s Framework for Teaching](#), a research-based guide to improving teaching skills, as its source for a common language for discussing teacher practice. As a foundational text for teaching basic pedagogical and classroom management strategies, they adopted Doug Lemov’s book *Teach Like a Champion*.⁸

Designing and Implementing AUSL’s School Transformation Approach

AUSL’s approach embraces whole-school transformation. That means starting with upgrading the school buildings and furnishings. The school district works with AUSL on renovations and bears the costs. More importantly, transformation means appointing a

6 Bridgespan interview with Don Feinstein, February 9, 2017.

7 Bridgespan interview with Michael Whitmore, February 9, 2017.

8 Maureen Kelleher, “AUSL leads in teacher prep, not just turn-arounds,” *The Chicago Reporter*, January 9, 2016, <http://chicagoreporter.com/ausl-leads-in-teacher-prep-not-just-turn-arounds/>.

new principal and replacing the teaching staff. “It’s all about talent,” Feinstein says. “If you don’t have the right people, in the right positions, doing the right work, you won’t get the results.” Up to 60 percent of AUSL’s new hires are graduates of the Chicago Teacher Residency program, a vital talent pipeline for AUSL-managed schools. The program has graduated over 1,000 residents since 2001, 75 percent of whom continue to work in education five years after receiving their degrees. The remainder of the teaching staff comes from the ranks of experienced teachers eager to take on the special challenges of urban school transformation. AUSL believes that the entire staff must be invested in the school’s turnaround mission for it to succeed. To plan for a school’s smooth transition to turnaround status, the principal and staff meet frequently over the summer preceding the start of the turnaround effort.⁹

Principals and teachers need a way to “buffer and mitigate” the negative effects of high-poverty neighborhoods on student achievement.

Parent and community support is an important part of success for turnaround schools and the driving force behind AUSL’s parent and community outreach efforts. Understandably, parents may question why AUSL has been awarded a contract by the district to manage a school and why it is necessary to reconstitute

the staff. However, after parents see their school reestablished with a positive school culture and a climate of high expectations for their children, many become some of AUSL’s greatest champions. In the months before officially taking over, the new principal will meet with community groups and host public forums, including picnics and school tours, for parents and community members to ask questions and voice recommendations for improving the school.

Once school opens, teachers receive ongoing coaching to improve their classroom practices. Induction and instructional coaches address the specific needs of teachers at early-stage turnaround schools. These coaches typically work with teachers at several schools. Later-stage schools typically have a coach on staff for full-time teacher support. In addition to the development support provided by coaches, content coordinators assist teachers and principals in specific content areas.

AUSL recognizes that excellence in staffing is necessary, but not sufficient, for achieving its ambitious goals. Principals and teachers need a way to “buffer and mitigate” the negative effects of high-poverty neighborhoods on student achievement. Building on research from prior turnaround efforts, as well as from its own experience, AUSL has codified a model called PASSAGE that provides a framework for day-to-day activity in turnaround schools. New principals and all school staff learn about the PASSAGE framework and use it to guide their detailed planning. Core elements of the PASSAGE framework consists of:¹⁰

- Positive School Culture—Creating a safe and orderly school and classroom environment and establishing effective recruitment, attendance, and discipline policies

9 “Academy for Urban School Leadership Profile,” Employee Relations Strategies, <https://www.erstrategies.org/cms/files/1486-ausl-case-study.pdf>.

10 “Framework,” Academy for Urban School Leadership, https://www.isbe.net/Documents/ausl_lead.pdf.

- Action against Adversity—Engaging parents and community partners and providing proactive social supports that meet student needs
- Setting Goals and Getting It Done—Creating and working towards aggressive, transparent goals for schools, teams, and individuals
- Shared Responsibility for Achievement—Creating strong school-level leadership teams and pursuing relentless efforts to recruit, retain, and motivate high-quality staff
- Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum—Providing a college-prep K-12 curriculum and an aligned assessment system that identifies student needs and supports improved instruction
- Engaging and Personalized Instruction—Providing teachers with focused professional development that ensures teacher effectiveness via the deliberate use of the Danielson framework and signature strategies for improvement

Schools receive support for implementing elements of PASSAGE. For example, to support “Positive School Culture,” AUSL provides “school environment” and “classroom environment” checklists that set common expectations across schools. In addition to providing academic support, AUSL seeks to create a classroom environment that supports students’ emotional well-being. For example, AUSL identifies and facilitates partnerships with external entities to provide services such as counseling and family life-skills programs, or engage social work interns to reach a greater number of students experiencing some sort of trauma.

From its beginning, AUSL recognized the difficulty of improving high schools and knew it had to start in elementary schools and follow its students forward. As a result, AUSL managed four elementary (pre-K-8) schools before taking on its first turnaround high school in 2008. In the following years, as it managed more schools, AUSL started to develop a feeder pattern strategy, in which AUSL “fed” students who graduated from an AUSL elementary school into an AUSL high school. This approach helped to increase the likelihood that incoming freshman would enter an AUSL high school learning at grade level. AUSL now has two successful feeder programs, one on the South Side of the city and the other on the West Side. More than 50 percent of ninth graders at these two AUSL high schools come from elementary schools that AUSL manages.

Such an ambitious approach to turning around low-performing schools requires funding beyond what the district normally furnishes. CPS provides the schools managed by AUSL with annual operational funding per pupil equivalent to that provided to all district schools. In addition to these resources, AUSL receives a management fee of approximately \$420 per student to support school management services for the duration of its five-year contracts. AUSL also turns to federal and state grants, foundations, and individual donors to fund annual added costs for teacher induction and instructional coaches, mentor teachers, and curricular enhancements.

Moving from “Good” to “Truly Excellent”

AUSL recently took a step back to assess its performance. Its leadership recognized that, although AUSL had made tremendous progress in stabilizing its schools—with increased attendance rates, decreased suspensions, and improvements in test scores—its performance was “good” but not “great,” and not yet of the standard required to prepare students for college and career success. AUSL had made progress on some—but not all—of the elements of PASSAGE. In sum, the challenge facing AUSL was how to go from “good” to “truly excellent.”

AUSL returned to its theory of action to improve its approach to both its teacher residency and professional learning programs. With a growing portfolio of schools in the past few years, it has further developed its approach to data-driven instruction with a clearly defined instructional approach, “The AUSL Way of Teaching and Learning.”

AUSL realigned the organization to better support the goal of preparing all students for college and career by establishing ambitious goals at key points in students’ pre-K-12 trajectory (e.g., third grade reading, fifth grade math, eighth grade readiness for high school, college- and career-ready graduation from high school). It deepened and made consistent across the Chicago Teacher Residency and its turnaround schools the use of a developmental rubric—modeled after the framework for teaching and learning developed by Charlotte Danielson—for supporting teacher feedback and coaching and establishing standards for effective instructional practice. In partnership with the Achievement Network, an education nonprofit based in Boston, AUSL also adopted standardized interim assessments to advance instructional improvement.

AUSL also established a network, called engage AUSL, to support teachers in using curricular resources. Recognizing the critical role that professional learning plays in instructional improvement, AUSL strengthened the collaborative planning in teacher teams, data review and reflection, re-teaching, and small group instruction. Finally, to support such efforts, AUSL established clear and consistent roles across all schools for those providing professional support to teachers and principals

Progress to Date and Path Forward

Schools in the AUSL network have delivered positive results. Performance data from 2015–2016 show that 21 of 31 schools, or 68 percent, received a Chicago School Quality Rating of 1 or 1+ on the district’s five-point scale, compared with 62 percent for all Chicago public schools. Three-quarters of the AUSL schools scored in “good standing,” meaning they met or exceeded the district’s minimum performance standards, a jump from just 41 percent two years earlier. (Only 10 percent had scored in “good standing” prior to AUSL taking over management.)

Beyond aggregated measures of school-level performance, individual student performance has steadily improved. Between 2013 and 2016, math and reading attainment for students in grades two through eight advanced annually, based on MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) subject matter assessments. The percentage of students reading at or above grade level grew from 29 percent to 44 percent. And the percentage of students

at or above grade level in math grew from 30 percent to 43 percent. Such successes in the elementary schools and emerging signs of growth in high school are translating into success in college aspirations and admissions: in 2016, 99 percent of AUSL's graduating classes applied to college and 97 percent gained acceptance.

“If you talk to districts across the country, they all say the same thing—that they want to move low-performing schools out of the bottom quartile...We want to move our schools to the top quartile, and we want to move student improvement in parallel.”

DONALD FEINSTEIN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, AUSL

Having enjoyed these successes, AUSL continues to face challenges. Overall student results continue to fall short of the aspiration that all AUSL students graduate college-ready from high school. While overall student outcomes have increased at a rate that is outpacing the district, performance on the NWEA MAP remains below what is required for students to be successful in college.

AUSL's high schools combat a revolving door syndrome, with 50 percent or more of students transitioning in and out of Orr and Phillips high schools each year. Exacerbating the situation, some AUSL students come from a low-performing CPS elementary school and arrive at high school far below grade level and behind students from AUSL's own elementary schools.

Despite these challenges, AUSL remains undeterred, and its ambitions remain high. AUSL aims for its schools to be the highest-rated in the district. In that regard, its goals are markedly different from those in other turnarounds in Chicago and across the country. “If you talk to districts across the country, they all say the same thing—that they want to move low-performing schools out of the bottom quartile,” says Feinstein. “We want to move our schools to the top quartile, and we want to move student improvement in parallel.”¹¹ That means annual student achievement growth that outpaces the national average and increases at a minimum of one year of growth per school year until the achievement gap is closed.

AUSL's ultimate goal is to prepare students for social and economic mobility: as Feinstein explains, “Our children come in very far below grade level, yet our goal is to prepare them so they have a shot at the American Dream.”

From Innovation Schools to an Innovation Zone in Denver, Colorado

The Denver Public Schools (DPS) approved creation of the Luminary Learning Network (LLN), the district's first innovation zone, to build on past progress rather than to catalyze a turnaround effort.

Previously, the district had designated the four elementary schools that make up the network as innovation schools, and each improved student outcomes under that designation. Nonetheless, leaders of the four schools requested innovation zone status to gain increased autonomy to tailor instruction to each school's needs.

"If you want something you've never had, you have to do something you've never done," said Susana Cordova, then-acting superintendent of DPS.¹

The Context

Since its founding in 1858, Denver has grown on the strength of the mining, transportation, ranching, and energy industries. It also has been, historically, a source of innovative thinking in all of those areas, as well as in the field of education. Consider Emily Griffith, a Denver schoolteacher who in 1916 opened a school that offered language and vocational courses during the day and into the evening to make education accessible to what we would now call nontraditional learners.

So perhaps it is no surprise that DPS became one of the first public school districts in the nation to explore the idea of creating innovation zones of autonomously operated schools to improve student outcomes. A district of 199 schools serving 92,331 students,

“If you want something you’ve never had, you have to do something you’ve never done.”

SUSANA CORDOVA, FORMER ACTING
SUPERINTENDENT, DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

DPS empowers individual school leaders and leadership teams with the authority to make school-level decisions on behalf of their students.

Like two other innovation zones profiled in this report (Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership in Springfield, MA, and Phalen

Leadership Academies in Indianapolis), LLN is in its early stages and does not yet have a record of proven success. Nonetheless, the innovation zone structure in Denver creates a powerful set of conditions for fostering success, making it worth consideration for other districts and for funders seeking opportunities to support initiatives designed to help more students receive a high-quality education.

1 "State Approves Joining Four Schools into First DPS Innovation Zone," Luminary Learning Network, June 9, 2016, <http://www.lldenver.org/news/state-approves-joining-four-schools-first-dps-innovation-zone>.

Setting the Stage for an Innovation Zone

Colorado formalized its efforts to empower school leaders in 2008 with the passage of the Innovation Schools Act. The Act's core purpose is to give individual schools and districts additional flexibility in decision making to better meet student needs.

Specifically, the Act allows a public school to submit an innovation plan (designed to improve student performance) to its local board of education for approval. If the board approves it, the innovation plan and associated waiver requests are then submitted to the Colorado Board of Education for approval. For the majority of innovation schools, local district superintendents retain overall responsibility and the districts retain control over school management decisions.

DPS had significant input into the Act and was quick to leverage the autonomy it provided. Today, the district has 47 innovation schools serving approximately 20,000 students (20 percent of its total enrollment). To support these schools, DPS expanded its support role of the Portfolio Management Team to cover not just charter schools but all alternative school structures, including innovation schools, innovation zones, and instructional management organizations. The 10-member Portfolio Management Team works with each school to renew its designation as an innovation school every two to three years and to hold schools accountable for high standards of performance. This team also supports schools that wish to receive innovation school status.

In addition to enabling school-level autonomy, the Innovation Schools Act provided the potential for districts to authorize or establish innovation zones—groups of innovation schools with shared characteristics that could use new autonomy and governance models to improve student outcomes. Specifically, the Act allowed for innovations in governance for sets of schools. LLN, a third-party nonprofit, was the first to make use of this provision in the Act, proposing to DPS a governance design for an innovation zone. The proposal called for LLN to establish a board of directors composed of a broad set of stakeholders including district leaders, zone leaders, and individuals representing community interests.

For schools to take advantage of the Innovation Schools Act, DPS created an application process for zone schools. Specifically, DPS's application process—which included the option for a third-party organization to seek approval to manage the zone—requires identifying the common interests uniting the schools in a proposed zone; the specific ways in which schools, through inclusion in the zone, will be able to benefit students compared with schools that work alone; and evidence of support from parents as well as teachers and other school staff.

Once creation of an innovation zone has been approved by DPS, schools in the zone—as provided for in the Innovation Schools Act—may be granted even greater autonomy than is afforded to individual innovation schools. While individual



Students having fun at the Denver Green School.

Photo: Denver Green School

innovation schools have greater control relative to other district schools over staffing, the length of the school day, and the length of school year, schools in an innovation zone can negotiate other terms directly with DPS. For example, LLN was granted:

- A separate governance and operational structure that is contractually accountable to the Denver Board of Education and affords comprehensive autonomy in areas including staffing, curriculum, and professional development
- Greatly increased budget flexibility, in that schools in LLN can receive control over a larger portion of the state/federal allocation of per pupil funding than traditional innovation schools have. (The district still withholds funds to cover expenses for items such as state/federal compliance, building maintenance, etc.)
- The ability to create economies of scale and use financial resources more effectively, in a manner similar to charter management organizations
- A framework for collectively pushing for greater autonomy from district-wide practices and initiatives than may be consistent with LLN's innovation school and zone plans.

Creating the Luminary Learning Network

Four schools in Denver (Ashley Elementary School, Cole Arts & Science Academy, Denver Green School, and Creativity Challenge Community) already had innovation status but believed they needed additional autonomy to reach the next level of improvement for their students. Since the district managed the schools, it continued to be involved in some staffing, professional development, and curriculum decisions. “Innovation status was not enough to accelerate teaching and learning in our schools,” said Jessica Roberts, LLN’s executive director.² In 2015, these four innovation schools, with the support of several philanthropic organizations, decided to apply for zone status. To support the development of this zone, the Denver Board of Education encouraged district staff to work with these schools and LLN leaders to develop a plan for an autonomous zone.

Nobody assumed at the outset that the best path for these schools to attain the autonomy necessary to accelerate learning led to becoming a “zone.” In partnership with Mary Seawell, senior vice president of education at the Gates Family Foundation, leaders of the four schools gathered in a series of meetings to discuss the school structure they envisioned; solicit input from parents, community members, and other stakeholders; and develop the best course of action. Seawell, a former DPS board chair, also worked with the school leaders to engage the Portfolio Management Team and the Colorado Department of Education to determine the best way to achieve the autonomy they sought. They rejected the option of each school becoming a charter school. “Our parents, families, and teachers wanted to remain in the district—and so we had to think about another way,” said Seawell.³

The Gates Family Foundation enlisted Empower Schools, a nonprofit organization with expertise developing innovative zone models in Massachusetts, to colead the zone design process and provide strategic advisory support and technical assistance to the schools.

2 Bridgespan interview with Jessica Roberts, January 23, 2017.

3 Bridgespan interview with Mary Seawell, April 12, 2017.

After months of discussion and negotiations, the district, the Gates Family Foundation, and the four schools decided to pursue innovation zone status. The Denver Board of Education approved the zone's application in April 2016, and the Colorado Board of Education granted final approval in June 2016.

Designing the Luminary Learning Network to Support Its Schools

LLN is an independent nonprofit governed by a board composed of school leaders, a Denver Board of Education member, a DPS employee, and community members. It operates through a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with DPS that ensures autonomy, provides accountability for both individual school and zone performance, and delineates the role of LLN and DPS in regard to managing LLN schools. This memorandum guarantees autonomy for the LLN. "If the district decides to stop pursuing innovation zones, our MOU ensures that we remain an innovation zone and keep our freedoms for at least three years, at which point we could appeal to the Denver Board of Education to continue," said Roberts, the executive director.

The Denver Board of Education plays a vital role for the zone, approving its renewal as a zone every three years, authorizing schools to enter the zone, and determining if schools should exit it. Roberts is the leader of the zone itself; she manages a lean central team consisting of two staff members; these two staffers divide their time between coaching and supporting school leaders and teachers and maintaining a collaborative relationship with DPS. The staff members are currently contractual partners (rather than employees) so that, "We may remain nimble and employ the best experts as our needs evolve," said Roberts.

School leaders in LLN have authority over staffing, curriculum, professional development, length and use of the school day, etc. Furthermore, zone principals are not required to attend district network meetings or to meet with DPS principal supervisors, known as instructional superintendents, for the purposes of professional development. Instead, principals receive targeted coaching and professional development, provided by third-party coaches whom principals select based on their individual needs. "Those [DPS meetings] were great opportunities, some of which aligned to what I needed and others not so much," said Zachary Rahn, principal at Ashley Elementary School. "But now I feel my coach and I are in charge of my development. It's much more tailored to what I need as a professional."⁴

In addition, LLN schools have greater budget flexibility than do other district schools and traditional innovation schools. Each of the four schools in the zone has discretion over how to spend approximately \$6,800 in annual per pupil funding. The schools in the zone also receive an additional \$450 or more per student (compared with traditional innovation schools) in lieu of shared services provided by the district if LLN schools decline those services.

4 Melanie Asmar, "Denver Public Schools wants to give more autonomy to more schools through expanding 'innovation zone' experiment," *Chalkbeat*, December 13, 2016, <http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/co/2016/12/13/denver-public-schools-wants-to-give-more-autonomy-to-more-schools-through-expanding-innovation-zone-experiment/>.

In exchange for this autonomy, DPS holds LLN schools accountable for continued progress on the district’s School Performance Framework (SPF), which takes into account measures such as student achievement, student attendance, and financial health to classify schools within a five-tier ranking system. As part of the LLN’s MOU with the district, DPS expects the two zone schools that currently have third-tier status to move up a tier over the next three years, and the two schools that already rank in the top levels must identify and make progress in a specific area of growth. If schools do not improve, DPS can elect to dissolve the zone.

Progress to Date and Path Forward

During the 2016–2017 school year, each of the four schools in the LLN made significant use of its autonomy. Denver Green School, for example, has increased work hours for its school psychologist. Ashley Elementary School has hired an additional part-time special education instructor. The nurse at Creative Challenge Community now works three days a week, up from one. The Cole Arts & Sciences Academy has hired a full-time substitute teacher who can be deployed as needed and develop knowledge about the school and its students in the process.

The LLN team, in partnership with the Center for Teaching Quality, a nonprofit organization based in North Carolina that supports teacher-led professional learning, is also revising professional development support for teachers to ensure that it is immediately relevant to their work. As Roberts put it, “We saw the zone as an opportunity to create more authentic, teacher-led ‘PD’ that is directly tailored to what teachers want and more closely tied to classroom practice.”⁵

The LLN team is continuously seeking new ways to improve and build on what it is learning, often asking, “What zone design will best serve our students in the future, and how can we realize it?” In that spirit, the team is building LLN’s capacity to gather and analyze student data and make use of what it learns from that analysis. For example, zone leaders recognize the need to help teachers and school leaders develop the capability to do “deep dives” into test results.

Philanthropy has had (and continues to have) a catalytic role in these efforts. Four donors—the Gates Family Foundation, the Fox Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, and the Rose Community Foundation—helped to launch LLN and supported its initial costs, including those associated with the Center for Teaching Quality, zone design and launch support from Empower Schools, and support for establishing LLN as an independent nonprofit. A number of funders have also expressed interest in demonstrating the potential of an alternative public school governance structure for improving the broader district.

LLN leaders say that, over time, they would like to add four to six more schools to the zone. However, they recognize that there may be limits to how much the zone can expand without overextending itself or disturbing delicate balances. For example, Roberts has

5 Bridgespan interview with Jessica Roberts, January 23, 2017.

expressed concern about LLN’s current structure being able to provide coaching to a greater number of school leaders. At present, she is confident that LLN’s funding model, wherein each school provides a small percentage of its budget to cover LLN overhead, is both financially sustainable and effective.

Meanwhile, LLN leaders are putting healthy pressure on DPS to better support all schools and develop more innovation zones. Roberts sees a need for many more types of zones, including zones for specific school models such as Montessori, zones to support specific feeder patterns, and, potentially, zones for turnaround schools. “We are really pushing DPS to think differently about how they fund schools and how they push more money to schools,” said Roberts. “Superintendent [Tom] Boasberg refers to us as his ‘troublemakers’—and that’s a good thing.”

Innovation Network Schools in Indianapolis: Phalen Leadership Academies Take the Lead

Indianapolis is emerging as a potential leader in public education reform. The city's 40-plus mayor-sponsored charter schools serve more than a third of students living within the boundaries of the city's largest school district. And its 15 Innovation Network Schools, managed by third-party nonprofits like Phalen Leadership Academies, take advantage of an extraordinary level of autonomy in their quest to improve student achievement.

The Context

Public schools in Indiana get grades of their own each year on an "A" to "F" scale. Student performance on the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress-Plus (ISTEP+) tests influence a school's grade, in addition to other factors such as the rate at which students improve.

Lewis Ferebee, who became superintendent of Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) in September of 2013, wants all 68 schools in his district to earn an "A" and has confidence in their potential to do so—even though 42 percent of the schools in IPS were "F" by the state in 2016.

Ferebee's next step: figuring out what each individual school needs in order to help its students succeed. IPS believes that many of the relevant insights come out of the schools

“We cannot address the challenges of 21st century education demands with antiquated thinking.”

LEWIS FEREBEE, SUPERINTENDENT, INDIANAPOLIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

themselves rather than from a central office that is several degrees of separation away from students. That is why the district has championed its Innovation Network Schools. These schools, for the most part, operate under contract with a nonprofit organization or management team and outside of the

district's collective bargaining agreement. The contract empowers school leaders with the freedom and autonomy associated with charter schools. However, these schools retain some features of a traditional district school (for example, they use district facilities) and, importantly, are accountable to IPS for their performance.

In a letter to the editor of *The Indianapolis Star* dated October 30, 2016, Ferebee wrote: “We cannot address the challenges of 21st century education demands with antiquated thinking.”¹ The Innovation Network Schools approach represents a bold step forward in governance.

1 Lewis Ferebee, “IPS leader critical of political group's allegations,” *The Indianapolis Star*, October 31, 2016, <http://www.indystar.com/story/opinion/readers/2016/10/31/ips-leader-critical-political-groups-allegations/93041942/>.

Indianapolis Paves the Way for Innovation Network Schools

In 2014 the Indiana legislature, with support from Superintendent Ferebee and the Office of the Mayor in Indianapolis, passed a law granting IPS the authority to create Innovation Network Schools. Under the legislation, school districts may grant “innovation schools” the authority to make decisions about all aspects of their schools—both academic and operational—and hold them accountable for agreed-upon student outcomes.

The new law reflected Ferebee’s conviction—supported by the Indianapolis Board of School Commissioners—that the leaders of struggling schools must have as much control as possible over resources, staffing, curriculum, and other factors that affect teaching and learning in their schools.

The legislation created four pathways for IPS schools to become Innovation Network Schools:

- Start Up: Create an Innovation Network school from scratch
- Transform: Make over an existing charter school into an Innovation Network School
- Reboot: The school board designates a struggling or failing district school as an Innovation Network School in partnership with an outside operator
- Convert: An existing IPS school, at any level of performance, applies for Innovation Network status

To date, IPS has relied primarily on the third option—restarting failing schools as innovation schools—to turn around low-performing schools. The IPS Office of Innovation, led by Aleesia Johnson, plays a central role in selecting IPS schools for restart. To do so, Johnson and her team utilize a process and set of criteria that were formalized during the 2016–2017 school year and will first be implemented in 2017–18. First, the Office of Innovation team looks at all IPS elementary schools in the bottom quartile of the district (based on state ISTEP results). The team homes in on those that are also demonstrating low performance growth and conducts a site visit in which district staff members collect qualitative data by interviewing teachers, students, and families. Based on this review, the Office of Innovation makes a recommendation to the school board about which schools need restarting.

After designating a school for restart, the Office of Innovation selects an outside partner (a nonprofit organization) to operate it. To date, the majority of partners (14 of 15 operators of Innovation Network Schools) have been selected with support from The Mind Trust, an Indianapolis nonprofit founded in 2006 by former Mayor Bart Peterson and David Harris, a policy advisor. They modeled the organization as a kind of venture capital investor for the city’s charter schools and education-focused nonprofits. When Indiana lawmakers enabled Innovation Network Schools in 2014, The Mind Trust quickly stepped up to partner with IPS and the mayor’s office to launch an Innovation School Fellowship.

Working in close partnership with the IPS Office of Innovation, The Mind Trust selects promising school operators and provides a one- to two-year salary to develop a school model for an Innovation Network School. At the end of the fellowship, these potential

operators go through an application and selection process mirroring those used by the Indianapolis mayor’s office for screening charter operators. Operators that meet the screening criteria move into a vetting process involving input from the school(s) they would serve. Ultimately, if an operator moves successfully through the entire process, the Office of Innovation submits the application to the Indianapolis Board of School Commissioners for approval; if it is approved, the operator signs a five-year contract. Typically, operating partner contracts are finalized in January so that the operator can prepare to take control of the school the following fall.

Restart schools are neighborhood schools, drawing students from within neighborhood boundaries set by the district. Many operate free of charge in IPS buildings, with free utilities and custodial and maintenance services. In general, state law exempts Innovation Network Schools from the same laws and regulations from which charters are exempt. Their operators have broad autonomy including control over hiring/firing of faculty and staff, school design, and the timing, length, and organization of the school day. IPS does not employ the school’s principal and teachers; they work for the operator, which can retain or replace them at the operator’s discretion.

The operator also has a great deal of control over the school’s budget. Most of the funding the state provides for students at an Innovation Network School simply flows through the district. By the terms of their contracts with the district, operators receive the full state per-pupil allocation for the children their schools serve. In 2016–2017, the state provided an average \$6,731 per student. By contrast, per pupil support for other district schools came to about \$5,955 after deduction for central office expenses.²

In exchange for this level of control, IPS holds the school operator contractually accountable for academic and operational performance—often at a standard higher than that for district schools. Outcomes in an operator contract might include, for example, a target for the percentage of students proficient on state assessments after three years, and the contract’s continued economic feasibility. Each school sets year-by-year state proficiency targets in partnership with the IPS Director of Principal Development, and monitors progress accordingly. All innovation schools present progress reports twice a year to the school board.

If either the operator or the district fails to fulfill the terms of their contract, either party can terminate the contract or refuse to renew it; otherwise, the district cannot interfere with the school’s autonomy.



Small group instruction, every day for every scholar, is a key part of the Phalen model.

Photo: Phalen Leadership Academies

2 Dylan Peers McCoy, “Indianapolis Public Schools Board OKs 2 More Innovation’ Schools In Effort To Reshape District,” WFYI Indianapolis, March 18, 2016, <http://www.wfyi.org/news/articles/indianapolis-public-schools-board-oks-2-more-innovation-schools-in-effort-to-reshape-district>.

Phalen Leadership Academies Pioneers “Restart” Innovation Schools

The first operator approved by the IPS Office of Innovation to restart a failing school as an Innovation Network School was the George and Veronica Phalen Leadership Academies (PLA). Founded in 2012, PLA currently operates two charter schools and two Innovation Network Schools in Indianapolis and manages one charter school in Gary, IN. Its first school, the George and Veronica Phalen Leadership Academy (GVPLA), currently serves grades K–6 and will grow to eventually serve students in grades K–8. The majority of the students attending the school are African American and qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. At the end of its second year, all of the third graders at GVPLA passed the state’s IREAD exam, and the school consistently outperforms other district schools in English language arts and mathematics.

The district matched PLA with the Francis Scott Key Elementary School (IPS #103) early in 2015. The Francis Scott Key Elementary School had historically been one of the lowest-performing schools in the state, and the lowest-performing in IPS, with fewer than 10 percent of its students passing state standardized tests. It is located in the low-income Far Eastside neighborhood of Indianapolis, and nearly all of its students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. As PLA’s founder and CEO, Earl Martin Phalen, described the school’s

“With the creation of the state law, we were now positioned to do the work that The Mind Trust has been wanting to do for years, working collaboratively with the district to provide great leaders with high autonomies to create great schools”

BRANDON BROWN, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT OF
EDUCATION INNOVATION, THE MIND TRUST

situation, “Students were far below grade-level—some of our sixth graders struggled to write their names.”³

PLA could take on the restart, in part because of its experience with other schools in Indianapolis, and in part because of the support of The Mind Trust. Phalen won funding as a fellow shortly after The Mind Trust created the Innovation School Fellowship in 2014. He received an annual stipend and benefits as well as numerous supports for developing the

school model that would eventually be used at Francis Scott Key. These supports included opportunities to visit and learn from leading schools across the country, personalized leadership development, and extensive coaching and feedback from experts on his school design and opening processes.

“With the creation of the state law, we were now positioned to do the work that The Mind Trust has been wanting to do for years, working collaboratively with the district to provide great leaders with high autonomies to create great schools,” said Brandon Brown, senior vice president of Education Innovation at The Mind Trust. “Shortly after, we created the fellowship program to provide school leaders the planning time they needed. It wasn’t clear that IPS had the resources internally to do this work on their own, and we were excited to collaborate with them.”⁴

3 Bridgespan interview with Earl Martin Phalen, January 17, 2017.

4 Bridgespan interview with Brandon Brown, April 11, 2017.

Designing and Implementing PLA's Approach for the Francis Scott Key Elementary School

Earl Martin Phalen's goal for each of the schools PLA operates is direct: "Beat the district, beat the state."⁵ More specifically, PLA aims to achieve 25 percent gains on state standardized tests in math and reading within five years of the start of its work in a given school.

To that end, and in accordance with its contract with IPS, PLA sets milestones for each school at the outset and then tracks progress. For example, the organization set the following milestones for the Francis Scott Key School: After establishing a more effective learning culture in Year 1, it aims to achieve a 10 percent increase (relative to results prior to PLA assuming control) in ISTEP Math and English/Language Arts in Year 2, and a 5 percent increase on those measures in Years 3 through 5.

These goals were front and center in the minds of both Phalen and Principal Agnes Aleobua as they prepared to reopen the Francis Scott Key as Phalen Leadership Academy at School #103 (PLA @ 103). They started by releasing the 53 teachers and hiring 42 new ones—teachers who had demonstrated prior success in turnaround settings and, importantly, who believed that students could achieve 1.5 years of academic growth per year.

To enable this model, Phalen and Aleobua also expanded the school's instructional capacity, hiring a teaching assistant for every classroom and two reading and math interventionists to lead small group instruction in the building.

These critical additions to the staff roster allowed PLA to implement an evidence-based instructional model that uses whole group, small group, one-on-one, and computer-based instruction to create a personalized learning experience. Within this system, students are regrouped on a daily basis, based on their performance data, to ensure that the instruction they receive meets their own explicit needs in real time. To support teacher improvement, PLA offered professional development in the months and weeks leading up to the school's opening, training teachers on the curriculum and the organization's approach to behavioral management, and beginning to build the strong team culture that is critical to turnaround work. PLA is also piloting and refining a systematic approach to continuous improvement. As of this writing, almost all PLA schools conduct weekly assessments in grammar, vocabulary, reading, and math.

Recognizing the importance of signaling a culture change and new standards of learning and performance to students and families, Phalen and Aleobua oversaw renovation of the building. Before the school year began, the school received new carpeting, paint, and desks, among other improvements. At the beginning of the year, PLA @ 103's teachers called each of their students' homes to learn more about the interests, hopes, needs, and concerns of both students and their families.

5 Bridgespan interview with Earl Martin Phalen, January 17, 2017.

Phalen and his leadership team did not consider contact with students and families a “one-and-done.” Rather, they believe that family involvement crucially aids turnaround efforts. Every four weeks, families receive a progress report detailing their student’s progress and requesting a signature to acknowledge that a parent or guardian has reviewed the report. (To date, more than 80 percent of parents and guardians have consistently signed and returned these reports.) PLA has also adopted the All Pro Dad program, an initiative for increasing fathers’ involvement in their children’s lives that utilizes a curriculum developed by Tony Dungy, the first black NFL head coach to win the Super Bowl when the Indianapolis Colts beat the Chicago Bears for the 2006 season.

Innovation, of course, comes with a price tag. Phalen has brought in nearly \$2 million in federal and philanthropic aid to pay for training, staff, and building upgrades at PLA @ 103. IPS provided start-up money, including about \$428,000 for “preoperational” expenses such as software licenses and hardware, in addition to the school’s per-pupil allocation.

Progress to Date and Path Forward

After one full year of operation, PLA @ 103 had promising results. Sixty-one percent of the students in third grade passed the state’s standardized reading test, up from 30 percent the year before. These results are encouraging because they signal momentum, even though student performance declined 5 percent on ISTEP math tests and improved only marginally (1 percent) on English language arts testing. They also reflect the achievement of more students: Enrollment at PLA @ 103 increased from 325 students in 2014–2015 to 400 in 2016–2017, a jump of more than 20 percent.

Having set the course at PLA @ 103, and Earl Martin Phalen expects increasingly positive results next year. Meanwhile, he plans to expand. For the 2016–2017 school year, PLA added a second Innovation Network School, Phalen Leadership Academy at School #93 (PLA @ 93). Next school year, it plans to add a middle school to serve students graduating from its two elementary schools.

With future plans to operate even more schools, PLA aims to build the kind of infrastructure it needs to implement a consistent model and provide reliable and consistent supports across its schools. Currently, PLA develops and oversees strategy for its schools, and manages non-instructional services such as payroll, finance, and HR, so that school leaders can focus on leading instructional improvement in their school buildings. Phalen and other PLA leaders would like to improve the organization’s capacity for recruiting and developing principals and teachers, enhancing its academic program, and coaching and supporting school leaders.

Phalen’s plans to increase PLA’s network by two schools per year over time, through a combination of innovation schools and charter schools, assuming he can sustain enough revenue to cover costs.

The Mind Trust—and its funders—remain an important partner to IPS in attracting and developing a pipeline of talented leaders for innovation schools. For his part, Phalen does not expect to take on the challenges of high school turnaround: “It’s a different animal

“Our biggest fear is what happens at the end of five years [when our contract comes up for renewal]. If the board changes or the district changes its view and becomes hostile about our contract . . . it’s a big fear. But our assumption is that if we keep doing our job, the school will be there for a long time.”

EARL MARTIN PHALEN, FOUNDER AND CEO,
PHALEN LEADERSHIP ACADEMIES

changes or the district changes its view and becomes hostile about our contract . . . it’s a big fear. But our assumption is that if we keep doing our job, the school will be there for a long time.”⁷

that requires a different approach,” he says.⁶ As a result, he is in the early stages of exploring partnerships with high-performing high schools in IPS to create a feeder pattern for PLA students when they complete middle school.

Sustaining this work will require ongoing political commitment from both the school board and city leadership, as well as the financial resources for building an organization. As Phalen has noted: “Our biggest fear is what happens at the end of five years [when our contract comes up for renewal]. If the board

6 Bridgespan interview with Earl Martin Phalen, January 17, 2017.

7 Ibid.

Proving What's Possible: Shelby County (Memphis) Public Schools, Tennessee

In 2012, Memphis City Schools (which merged with surrounding Shelby County Public Schools the following year) launched the iZone to turn around underperforming schools. At the time, 69 of the 85 lowest-performing schools in the state of Tennessee were located in Memphis. Unlike the majority of district-led efforts to turnaround schools, the iZone in Memphis has produced strong results, gaining national attention in the process.

Asked to characterize the iZone's primary strength, Shelby County Chief of Schools Sharon Griffin put it this way in a May 2016 interview with *Chalkbeat*: "First I have to say it's attitude. You've got to believe. And if you don't believe it's possible, chances are you're probably right. I have an unwavering belief that this is possible."¹ For the past five years, Griffin has been proving the possible for schools historically ranked at the bottom in her state.

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SHELBY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Context

Memphis, with roughly 655,000 residents, is one of the largest cities in Tennessee. Located on the banks of the Mississippi, it has long been a hub of commerce and today is home to three Fortune 500 companies: FedEx, International Paper, and AutoZone. It is also the home of founders and pioneers of various American musical genres, including soul and blues. In 2013, the Shelby County and Memphis school districts merged in what was described at the time as largest and most complex school district merger in US history.² Today, Shelby County Public Schools comprise the nation's 21st-largest school district,³ serving just over 100,000 students and employing 6,800 teachers across 207 schools. Three-quarters of the students are African American and 14 percent are Hispanic. Eight of 10 students come from economically disadvantaged homes.

1 Laura Faith Kebede, "iZone chief Sharon Griffin on fixing Memphis' most challenging schools," *Chalkbeat*, May, 2, 2016, <http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/tn/2016/05/02/izone-chief-sharon-griffin-on-fixing-memphis-most-challenging-schools/>.

2 Juli Kim, Tim Field, and Elaine Hargrave, "The Achievement School District: Lessons from Tennessee," *Public Impact*, <http://achievementschooldistrict.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/The-Achievement-School-District-Lessons-from-Tennessee-UPDATE.pdf>.

3 "Largest School Districts in America," *Niche*, <https://www.niche.com/k12/rankings/public-school-districts/largest-enrollment/>.

The Road to Shelby County's Innovation Zone

The path to establishing the iZone began in January 2010, when the Tennessee legislature passed its “First to the Top” legislation. This law called for the state’s commissioner of Education to identify Tennessee’s bottom 5 percent of schools and make them “priority schools” for significant intervention and turnaround. (The bottom 5 percent consisted of 85 schools, 69 of which were in Memphis.) The state law also created a state-run Achievement School District (ASD) to take over and turn around these “priority schools.” In 2012, the ASD took over five Memphis schools; today it oversees 31, of which 23 are run by charter management organizations.⁴ Schools assigned to the ASD are removed from the Shelby County Board of Education’s oversight and placed under the supervision of the ASD for a minimum of five years.

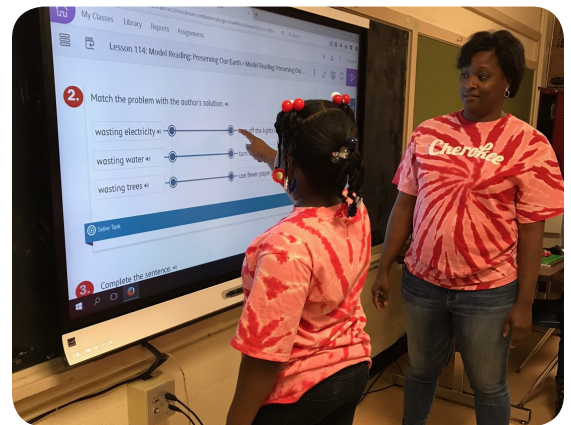
Facing mounting pressure from parents and community leaders, and declining enrollment, as a result of the ASD’s takeover of Memphis schools, the Memphis City Schools Board of Education exercised a provision of the First to the Top legislation to create an “innovation zone” to turn around “priority schools” within Memphis. Unlike the ASD schools, innovation zone schools remain under the jurisdiction of the local school board. Memphis’ iZone launched with seven schools in 2012-13, and when Memphis City Schools merged with Shelby County Public Schools, the iZone continued to grow. Today it includes 23 schools and over 10,000 students.

State law gave school districts broad leeway for establishing and staffing autonomous innovation zones, with innovation zone offices responsible for identifying leaders for each school under their purview. It also gave schools in an innovation zone “maximum autonomy over financial, programmatic, and staffing decisions.”⁵

Designing and Implementing the Shelby County Innovation Zone

The school board appointed Sharon Griffin, a Memphis native and charismatic former teacher and principal in the district, regional superintendent of the iZone in 2012. Griffin set an ambitious goal for the iZone modeled after that of the ASD: to move schools from the bottom 5 percent in the state to the top 25 percent.

From her previous experience as a successful turnaround principal, Griffin knew that improving low-performing schools starts with changing teaching and learning: “If we



A student at Cherokee Elementary School working on a lesson.

Photo: Cherokee Elementary School

4 “Memphis School Guide,” Achievement School District, <http://achievementschooldistrict.org/memphis-school-guide/>.

5 “2016 Tennessee Code, Title 49 – Education,” <http://search.mlesmith.com/tca/49-01-0602.html>.

“If we become more intentional about targeted support of our educators and give them the resources needed for success, we will see a drastic turnaround in student achievement.”

DR. SHARON GRIFFIN, CHIEF OF SCHOOLS,
SHELBY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

become more intentional about targeted support of our educators and give them the resources needed for success, we will see a drastic turnaround in student achievement.”⁶ Griffin started by selecting principals for the schools in the iZone. Using a rigorous selection model and interview process informed by those used in the School Turnaround Program at University of Virginia Darden School of Business, Griffin and her team selected

principals who understood the challenges of turnaround, had demonstrated prior effectiveness, and had the potential to deliver top 25 percent results.

iZone principals have the autonomy to hire their own staff. To be considered, teachers must have reached a baseline level of “effectiveness,” as measured by the district’s teacher evaluation system. As an incentive to join the iZone, teachers receive a \$1,000 signing bonus and can receive another \$1,000 bonus for meeting district performance benchmarks. This ensures that when an iZone school opens, students enter a school led by a high-quality principal and staffed with teachers who have both the will and baseline skill to provide high-quality teaching and learning. This initial focus on staffing has helped to fuel recruiting efforts for future iZone schools; as Griffin has noted, “Principals have jumped at the chance to hire their entire team and determine their own strategy. This has attracted the best principals.”⁷

Griffin recognized that this initial infusion of high-performing teachers and leaders could accelerate outcomes for the first year, but that ongoing investments in staff effectiveness would be necessary: “Even our best teachers need to improve if we want to get to top 25 percent status,” she said. As a result, the iZone prioritizes ongoing instructional supports and professional learning opportunities to continue to improve teaching and learning. Teachers work with a team of 20 content coaches in literacy, math, science, and social studies. For the first few years, the coaching model focused on those teachers who received the lowest effectiveness rating but has since been revamped to provide coaching to all teachers. The iZone also created new, non-evaluative roles for high-performing teachers to mentor and support other teachers. “Sometimes, you just really need a shoulder to cry on,” Griffin said. “But we don’t stop there. Our content coaches can say, ‘Let me show you how to fix it. Let me show you how to get it right.’”⁸ Teachers also rely on data to improve. Every six weeks, school leaders share and review data on both academic and operational performance. In these meetings, principals identify specific challenges and invite discussion of possible solutions.

The intense focus on teaching and learning also affects the length of the school day. iZone students attend school for an extra hour each school day, which equates to 23 additional

6 Laura Faith Kebede, “Turnaround leader Sharon Griffin promoted to chief of schools in Memphis,” *Chalkbeat*, January 4, 2017, <http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/tn/2017/01/04/turnaround-leader-sharon-griffin-promoted-to-chief-of-schools-in-memphis/>.

7 Bridgespan interview with Sharon Griffin, July 16, 2016.

8 Kebede, “iZone chief Sharon Griffin on fixing Memphis’ most challenging schools.”

school days a year. “High schools hated this at first,” Griffin noted. “But when you think back to schools that are underperforming, why wouldn’t you want to keep the best principals and the best teachers in front of our neediest children for an extra hour a school day?”

iZone leaders use a school-quality framework to measure progress toward the ambitious goal of elevating schools to the top quartile statewide and to inform periodic discussions with principals. The iZone uses this framework to identify schools in need of improvement. Failure to make adequate progress has consequences: Griffin replaced seven iZone principals during the iZone’s first four years of operations.⁹

School leaders reasoned that students would have a much better chance of entering high school at or near grade level if they had graduated from iZone elementary and middle schools. They therefore decided to launch the iZone with only elementary and middle schools, before expanding to high schools. By so doing, they could create feeder patterns providing students with several consecutive years in an iZone school before entering high school. The iZone added its first high schools in the 2016-17 school year, making it possible for the first time for every student entering the iZone in kindergarten to graduate from an iZone high school.

Financing the iZone requires extra resources. During its start-up years, federal School Improvement Grants helped to pay for teacher signing and retention bonuses, the extended-day compensation, and coaches. The Shelby County district has since been able to reallocate funding to cover the added costs of the iZone. In addition, philanthropists have stepped up to support and sustain the iZone. While deeply committed to improving education outcomes in low-performing schools, funders in Memphis initially took a wait-and-see approach to the district-led turnaround effort, knowing the disappointing history of turnaround efforts elsewhere. However, as the iZone delivered results and the school district made commitments to sustain it, these funders made a significant financial commitment—\$14 million over three years—to support its ongoing operation and expansion.

Progress to Date and the Path Forward

Three years after launch, an outside evaluation of the iZone produced encouraging findings. A Vanderbilt University report found that “iZone schools are having positive, statistically significant, and substantively meaningful effects on student achievement across all subjects.”¹⁰ Specifically, iZone schools delivered growth in proficiency of 6 percentage points per year—three times the rate of Shelby County Public Schools’ non-priority schools. Elementary schools have had even more impressive performance, showing an average growth in proficiency rates of 8 percentage points per year.

9 Bridgespan interview with Sharon Griffin, June 27, 2017.

10 Ron Zimmer, Adam Kho, Gary Henry, and Samantha Viano, “Evaluation of the Effect of Tennessee’s Achievement School District on Student Test Scores,” Tennessee Consortium on Research, Evaluation, and Development, Vanderbilt Peabody College, December 2015.

As the iZone entered its fifth year of operation in 2016–17, leaders set about rebranding the initiative from a “fix-it” zone to a long-term education improvement model. “We’re no longer just taking underperforming schools. We’ve taken them, but we’re also making sure that all of our students are reading on grade level and above,” Griffin explained.¹¹

“We’re no longer just taking underperforming schools. We’ve taken them, but we’re also making sure that all of our students are reading on grade level and above.”

DR. SHARON GRIFFIN, CHIEF OF SCHOOLS,
SHELBY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

community. The governing model, which leaves the schools under district jurisdiction, also plays an important role in winning community support. “Remaining under district governance has been critical to our success with teachers, parents, and the community,” said Griffin. “We’re not seen as outsiders to Memphis.”¹³

Support from the board and community deepened as iZone schools showed significant improvement in student achievement. “The best way to build board support has been that we were successful—especially in light of increasing pressure from the ASD,” said Leon. At the same time, the iZone faces ongoing challenges. “The iZone has proven that you can take schools out of the bottom 5 percent with structural changes and strategic staffing,” said Griffin. “Our challenge is how to use autonomies to get to top 25 percent.” To meet that challenge, Griffin continues to place a premium on recruiting and retaining highly effective principals and teachers. While attrition rates are not high, the iZone schools are

“The best way to build board support has been that we were successful—especially in light of increasing pressure from the ASD.”

BRAD LEON, CHIEF OF STRATEGY AND
PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT, SHELBY COUNTY
SCHOOLS

expanded to include supervising and supporting all of the district’s principals as well as overseeing teacher coaching, leadership development, and virtual schools.

From the beginning, the iZone has enjoyed support from the Shelby County Board of Education. “The board’s willingness to empower the iZone...has been essential in sustaining our work,” said Brad Leon, chief of strategy and performance management for Shelby County Schools.¹² The board’s unwavering commitment, meanwhile, has been instrumental in securing support from parents and the broader

community. “Leadership and talent has been a focus of ours, and it remains the most difficult thing to get right,” said Griffin.¹⁴

In January 2017, the school board demonstrated its confidence in Griffin by promoting her to the newly created position of chief of schools, the district’s number-two post. She will continue to oversee the iZone, and her role has been

11 Laura Faith Kebede, “Griffin hiring more top leaders for expanding iZone,” *Chalkbeat*, March 10, 2016, <http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/tn/2016/03/10/griffin-hiring-more-top-leaders-for-expanding-izone/>.

12 Bridgespan interview with Brad Leon, June 23, 2016.

13 Bridgespan interview with Sharon Griffin, June 27, 2017.

14 Bridgespan interview with Sharon Griffin, July 16, 2016.

At present, the iZone does not have plans to grow. For the time being, its goal is to deliver top 25 percent results for its schools and students and be an ardent steward of the financial resources the district and local philanthropists have provided. Shelby County Public Schools are exploring how to scale the lessons learned to other Memphis schools, especially those ranked by the state in the bottom 10–20 percent. “If you listen in board meetings and talk to people in the district, they want to make all the schools iZone schools,” said Griffin. “That’s not the answer. We need to look at what has worked and why and try to scale those features to the broader district.”¹⁵

15 Bridgespan interview with Sharon Griffin, June 27, 2017.

Built to Last: The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership, Springfield, Massachusetts

The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership, formed in 2014, demonstrates a collaborative approach to turning around low-performing schools. The state, the Springfield Public Schools (SPS), and the teachers union formed a voluntary partnership that aims to dramatically improve outcomes in a cluster of the district’s middle schools.

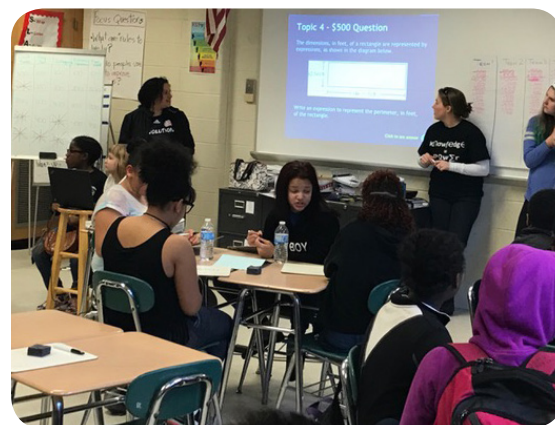
The partners designed the zone with sustainability and accountability in mind. Schools have guaranteed autonomy and a renewable contract with the school district that creates a sustainable funding plan and sets clear accountability goals. As SPS Superintendent Daniel Warwick explained: “What we were doing before was not working for these schools and we needed try something different. We wanted schools to have flexibility and accountability but we needed to do it in partnership with the state, union, and community. And we did.”¹

The Context

Although located in the Northeast, Springfield, MA, has many of the characteristics of a Rust Belt city. It was the birthplace of the automotive industry in the United States and, at one time, a hub of precision manufacturing. But for many years now, the city has been struggling to regain its economic footing. Springfield today is one of the largest cities in Massachusetts with a 2014 population of 153,991.

Springfield also is home the second-largest school district in New England, with approximately 26,000 students, about 4,000 employees, and nearly 60 schools. The district has the state’s second-highest percentage (87.3 percent) of students receiving free- and reduced-price lunches.

In recent years, the school district has produced some of the lowest academic outcomes in the state. But that picture is changing, due to the innovative efforts of the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP), a collaboration of the SPS, the Springfield Education Association (SEA), and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.



The seventh grade students at Empowerment Academies match wits.

Photo: Empowerment Academies 2017

1 Bridgespan interview with Daniel Warwick, August 4, 2016.

The Road to the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership

SPS's journey toward establishing an innovation zone essentially began in 2011, when the state identified three of its middle schools—Chestnut, Kennedy, and Kiley— as underperforming, “Level 4” schools.² Overall student performance at these schools placed the schools in the bottom 4 percent of schools across the state. On receiving a Level 4 designation, the three middle schools entered into a three-year, state-mandated turnaround period.

The district, led by Warwick, responded with a number of reforms to better support these schools. For example, during the turnaround effort, the district split one school into three, creating smaller learning communities. It also assigned school leaders with track records of success to deal with the challenge. Although on some measures student performance improved at a higher rate than the state average, the pace of improvement fell short of shaking the Level 4 designation by 2014. That year three more Springfield middle schools slipped into Level 4: Duggan, Forest Park, and Van Sickle.

Warwick and members of the Springfield School Committee—the locally elected school board—knew they had to take drastic action. The schools designated Level 4 serve about 80 percent of the district's middle school students. Slipping another notch to Level 5—the lowest performance tier in the state system—would risk state takeover. (Massachusetts had already shown its willingness to exercise this authority. In 2012, it appointed a receiver to manage the 13,000-student Lawrence school district.) Springfield school leaders vowed they would not let that happen.

To that end, Warwick contacted Chris Gabrieli, chairman and CEO of Empower Schools, a Boston-based nonprofit, to discuss the possibility of collaborating. Empower Schools had a successful track record in turning around underperforming schools in Lawrence and Salem, MA. Warwick hoped it could do the same in Springfield.

Designing the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership

Warwick's initial conversations with Gabrieli moved quickly to include the local teachers union, the school board, state leaders, and members of the community. Out of those conversations emerged the SEZP. Specifically, SPS agreed to work with Empower Schools to launch and manage an in-district innovation zone that would oversee all of Springfield's Level 4 middle schools (which now numbered nine, since several of the schools had been split into multiple academies). These schools, serving approximately 4,000 middle school students across the city, made up the empowerment zone. To oversee the initiative, Warwick and Empower established SEZP as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit led by a seven-member governing board composed of local and state appointees, including Springfield's mayor, Warwick, and Gabrieli (who would serve as chair). The plan called for SEZP to employ a small staff to provide direct support to the schools. For the short term, the district and Empower signed a no-cost contract, backed with philanthropic grants, that engaged Empower to provide strategic advisory services and manage initial implementation.

2 All Massachusetts districts and schools with sufficient data are classified into one of five accountability and assistance levels, with the highest performing in Level 1 and lowest performing in Level 5”, Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/accountability.aspx.

The school committee set SEZP up to operate under a five-year renewable agreement granting the organization managerial and operational autonomy to the schools in the designated “zone.” In exchange for these freedoms, schools in the zone committed to reaching a median student growth percentile (SGP) of 50 in both English language arts (ELA) and math. That means at least one year’s worth of academic progress at all grade levels in schools that had consistently fallen far short of this mark.³ SPS can terminate the agreement during the five-year term for a number of reasons, including failure to meet multiple goals in the turnaround plans submitted by the schools to the state. If SEZP delivers on those goals, the school board will renew the agreement in 2020. In the long term, the contract can be cancelled if the state and district mutually agree to end the effort.

As part of the agreement, the school committee gave SEZP schools autonomy in several areas. For example, SEZP has authority to select, compensate, evaluate, and dismiss principals. Educators at each school—primarily principals working with teacher-elected Teacher Leadership Teams—have discretion over working conditions, curriculum, scheduling, and professional development. Teachers approved these autonomies in their new collective bargaining agreement.

SEZP schools also have considerable control over site-level budgets, use district buildings, and receive all state and local funding connected with SEZP students. However, SEZP pays some of that money to the district to cover a set of mandatory services such as payroll and facilities maintenance. The district cannot charge more than 16.5 percent of state and district revenue for these services. In addition, each school in the zone has the option to buy additional services, such as special education services and curriculum support, from the district à la carte at a per-pupil cost.

Excited by the potential of SEZP—and wary of state takeover—the Springfield School Committee approved SEZP’s plan in a 6-1 vote. Separately, the SEA took a key step to secure autonomy for zone schools by negotiating a contract that included: increased teacher salaries; lengthened school days and school years, with additional time for teacher professional development; a teacher career ladder that revised traditional teacher compensation and created roles for teacher leaders; and the flexibility for individual schools to set working conditions and further expand the school day or year with



Students work together on assignments during class time.

Photo: Empowerment Academies 2016

3 The student growth percentile (SGP) compares a student’s score on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) with the scores of all students in the state at that grade level who received similar MCAS scores in prior years. SGPs range from 1 to 99, with 50 being average; higher numbers represent higher growth and lower numbers represent lower growth. An SGP of 75, for example, means the student’s progress is higher than 75 percent and lower than 25 percent of the students in the state with similar prior test scores. School and district growth percentiles represent the growth of the median, or middle, student in the school or district. For additional information, visit <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/growth/>.

fair compensation for teachers. SEZP must abide by state law for teachers with tenure, requiring most schools to complete a time-consuming process to dismiss a tenured teacher. Nonetheless, the contract, approved by 92 percent of the teachers at the affected schools, also provides the SEZP with added discretion over teacher recruiting, hiring, and evaluation processes.

Warwick's comments on the agreement with the teachers' union reflect its magnitude: "We needed something radically different to have the time and flexibility to make radical change...Working with the State Secretary of Education and Chris Gabrieli at Empower Schools, we sat down with teachers to convince them that this proactive action was better than schools being 'charterized,' which would force the union out altogether...We came to the table together. In 40 years, I have not seen a collective bargaining agreement with so few cumbersome restrictions."⁴

Supporting Schools and School Leaders to Accelerate Outcomes

Empower Schools helped to design the zone, forging relationships with key partners to provide schools with autonomy in exchange for increased accountability for improving student outcomes. Yet Empower's Cofounder and Managing Director Brett Alessi knew that autonomy alone would not improve student learning. "Autonomy is a resource that can unlock improved outcomes," Alessi said, "but only if schools and leaders have the support they need."⁵

Accordingly, SEZP focused initially on staffing, relying in part on the nonprofit TNTP, formerly known as The New Teacher Project, an organization dedicated to ensuring that poor and minority students get equal access to effective teachers. SEZP worked with TNTP to recruit and place highly qualified teachers in its schools. As Warwick reflected: "These have been the hardest schools for teacher recruitment and retention...With the support of TNTP, we opened schools completely staffed with highly qualified teachers.

“We needed something radically different to have the time and flexibility to make radical change...We came to the table together. In 40 years, I have not seen a collective bargaining agreement with so few cumbersome restrictions.”

DANIEL WARWICK, SUPERINTENDENT, SPRINGFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

At the end of the day there's nothing more important than putting a quality teacher in front of kids."⁶ Before SEZP, schools in the zone typically started the year with many unfilled positions staffed by long-term substitutes. In the first two years of SEZP's work, however, schools opened with less than 1 percent of positions vacant or filled in that way.

Concurrently, SEZP began to adapt Empower Schools' collaborative approach to teaching and learning—piloted in the Lawrence and

4 Bridgespan interview with Daniel Warwick, August 4, 2016.

5 Bridgespan interview with Brett Alessi, June 20, 2017.

6 Bridgespan interview with Daniel Warwick, August 4, 2016.

Salem school districts—to Springfield. Teachers at each zone school elected a Teacher Leadership Team to create that school’s operational plan. Each plan includes specific student achievement goals and is updated annually, pending approval by the SEZP board.

To help with implementation of its operational plan, zone schools worked with a “chief support partner,” a nonprofit that provides coaching. For example, chief support partners—including TNTP and The Achievement Network, an education nonprofit based in Boston—helped school leaders coach teachers more effectively, furnished school leaders themselves with individual coaching and support, and provided coaching for Teacher Leadership Teams.

Empower—and later the SEZP team—also coordinated professional development support across the zone, including a monthly professional learning community meeting for principals. Every other month, Empower staff and SEZP leaders visit each school to track qualitative measures of progress and provide feedback and support to school leadership. School leaders also participate in a regular review of data, such as interim assessment results, attendance, and discipline figures, to ensure that appropriate progress is being made towards the zone’s ambitious goals. Finally, the partnership has taken steps to help students and support teachers in specific content areas. For example, the SEZP has created “Empowerment Academies,” intensive, opt-in programs held during school vacations. These academies are staffed by top teachers who provide focused small-group math support to students. More than 500 students attended these academies in the 2016-17 school year.

For the schools in need of the most help, SEZP has pursued more intensive approaches. In 2016, for example, it contracted with the UP Education Network, a nonprofit education management organization that had partnered with Empower in Lawrence and operates some of the highest-performing schools in terms of student growth, in Massachusetts. In Springfield, UP Education Network operated Kennedy Middle School, hiring a new principal as part of that process.

SEZP also launched the “Founders Fellow” initiative in 2016 to recruit leaders to found, design, and lead new middle school models that will phase in grades beginning with sixth grade. Two Founders Fellows launched sixth-grade programs during the 2016-17 school year and are planning to include seventh graders in 2017-18.

Finally, to ensure continuity and consistency in the turnaround effort overall, members of the Empower team have provided ongoing strategic and operational support, including coaching school leaders and teachers in developing their school operational plans and budgets, helping school leaders select their chief support partners, and helping SEZP schools and the district work effectively together. Toward the end of the 2016-17 school year, the SEZP board hired two co-executive directors and began building a small SEZP team as Empower decreased its direct support.

Progress to Date and the Path Forward

The SEZP demonstrated progress in its first year. The Massachusetts Composite Performance Index shows the extent to which students are progressing towards proficiency. Based on tests conducted in the spring of 2016, the zone schools' performance on this metric increased to 70.3 percent in ELA (from the previous year's 68.2 percent) and to 53 percent in math (from 51 percent).

SEZP continues to make the kinds of contextual changes necessary for ensuring an environment in which improvements in student learning and educational outcomes can become the norm over the long term.

At the same time, the zone schools have room for improvement on a different measurement scale: median SGP, a measure of change in student achievement over time. SEZP set an initial two-year goal of having a median SGP of 50 in both ELA and math. After one year of operation, the median SPG for SEZP-managed schools was 38 in ELA, up only a point from 37 in 2015. In math, the SEZP-managed schools achieved a median SPG of 30, down from 36 in 2015.

SEZP responded to these results by broadening the role of the most successful chief support partner and making significant changes at three of the schools with the weakest performance outcomes—contracting with UP Education Network to manage one of these schools and placing Founders Fellows at the other two. In the 2016–17 school year, the nine schools managed by SEZP realized notable progress in school culture and climate, suggesting that SEZP's approach is beginning to establish the norms in Zone schools that are critical to academic progress. With this foundation in place, SEZP hopes for significant academic improvement over the next two years.

SEZP continues to make the kinds of contextual changes necessary for ensuring an environment in which improvements in student learning and educational outcomes can become the norm over the long term. Recognizing that data analysis and effective use of data are core needs, the partnership is exploring ways to build these capacities, including adding a position dedicated to that purpose. It also continues to invest in the instructional supports that proved most effective in its first two years of work, while eliminating efforts that did not pan out, and continually seeks new and better ways to support teachers and leaders.

Superintendent Warwick expresses optimism about SEZP's progress and believes that the organization will provide benefits to the district as a whole. Based on the promise of new practices piloted by the district in zone schools, other schools have now been granted additional budget flexibility for extended learning time and additional control over their professional development calendars. Warwick is committed to scaling "what works" to the broader district. For example, SPS now follows the zone's lead by moving up its hiring timeline and, in its latest contract, the district dramatically increased teacher compensation.

“We’ve charted a new course for the district, and we feel that this path forward will turn around our schools to become great schools.”

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At the same time, the teachers union and School Committee have shown an interest in continuing to grow the zone. Springfield has already expanded the zone to include its first high school, the High School of Commerce. The teachers’ union leader testified in support of the move and the School Committee approved the expansion by a vote of 6-1.

While Empower Schools and its partners in the SEPZ have not yet met the Zone’s performance goals, they remain excited and convinced of the promise in their approach. As Warwick put it, “We’ve charted a new course for the district, and we feel that this path forward will turn around our schools to become great schools.”⁷

7 Bridgespan interview with Daniel Warwick, August 4, 2016.

THE BRIDGESPAN GROUP

BOSTON 2 Copley Place, 7th Floor, Suite 3700B, Boston, MA 02116, USA. Tel: 617.572.2833

MUMBAI Bridgespan India Private Limited (registered address) 1086 Regus, Level 1, Trade Centre, Bandra Kurla Complex, Bandra East, Mumbai, Maharashtra, 400051, India. Tel: +91.22.6628.9624

NEW YORK 112 West 34th St., Ste. 1510, New York, NY 10120, USA. Tel: 646.562.8900

SAN FRANCISCO 88 Kearny Street, Suite 200, San Francisco, CA 94108, USA. Tel: 415.627.4500



www.bridgespan.org

contact@bridgespan.org

contactindia@bridgespan.org