



# From Innovation Schools to an Innovation Zone in Denver, Colorado

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This article is part of a Bridgespan Group research project that focuses on a new wave of district-led “innovation zones” that holds promise to overcome the challenges of turning around failing schools and deliver significant improvements in student outcomes. This new wave provides a subset of district schools with control over staffing, curriculum, and budgeting. Such autonomy often is guaranteed by a contractual agreement and enabled by state law that can sustain the zone despite potential changes in district leadership. The schools are sometimes operated by a nonprofit that is held accountable to the school district for significant improvement in student outcomes.

Our research highlights the experiences of five school districts that are vanguards of this new wave of innovation zones—Chicago; Denver; Indianapolis; Memphis, TN; and Springfield, MA.

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. Specifically promising innovation zones:

- Set ambitious goals
- Guarantee autonomy
- Improve teaching and learning
- Follow the students
- Are sustainable, scalable, and built to last

The article that follows looks in detail at one of the school districts profiled in the Bridgespan report [A New Wave of District Innovation Zones: A Promising Means of Increasing Rates of Economic Mobility](#).

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.<sup>1</sup>

## 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, DPS empowers individual school leaders and leadership teams with the authority to

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SUPERINTENDENT, DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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.

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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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

The Gates Family Foundation enlisted Empower Schools, a nonprofit organization with expertise developing innovative zone models in Massachusetts, to colead the zone design

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

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

process and provide strategic advisory support and technical assistance to the schools. 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."<sup>4</sup>

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.

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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.”<sup>5</sup>

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

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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.”



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