

Proving What's Possible

Shelby County (Memphis) Public Schools, Tennessee

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

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](#).

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.

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

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- 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 students are African American and 14 percent are Hispanic. Eight of 10 students come from economically disadvantaged homes.

The Road to Shelby County's Innovation Zone

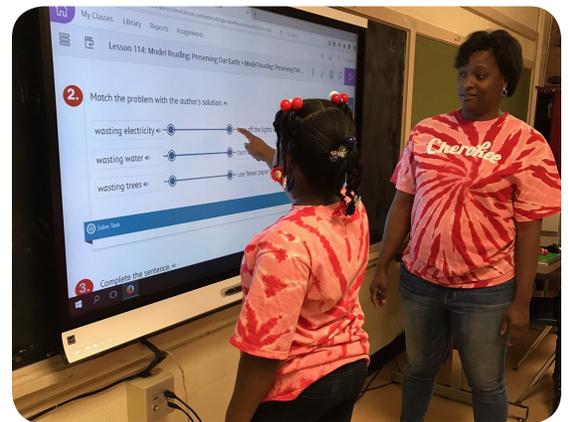
The path to establishing the iZone began in January 2010, when the Tennessee legislature passed its “First to the Top” legislation. This law called for the state’s commissioner of Education to identify Tennessee’s bottom 5 percent of schools and make them “priority schools” for significant intervention 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.



A student works at the board with her teacher at Cherokee Elementary School.

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.mleesmith.com/tca/49-01-0602.html>.

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

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.”

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 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.

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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

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.

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.

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

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 Public Schools.¹² The board’s unwavering commitment, meanwhile, has been instrumental in securing support from parents and the broader 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

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effective principals and teachers. While attrition rates are not high, the iZone schools are always on the lookout for turnaround leaders and teachers. “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 expanded to include supervising and supporting all of the district’s principals as well as overseeing teacher coaching, leadership development, and virtual schools.

At present, the iZone does not have plans to grow. For the time being, its goal is to

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.

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



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

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