

Innovation Management Organizations and the Denver Public Schools: A Case Study

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On a sultry morning in mid-August 2016, Alex Magaña, dressed in summer costume of t-shirt and baggy shorts, stood in a long, dimly lighted hallway inside Kepner Middle School in southwest Denver. The usually gleaming linoleum floors were dusty and littered with tools and construction debris.

Magaña, executive principal of the new Beacon Network of schools, of which Kepner is a part, surveyed the scene around him. Construction workers in orange safety vests scurried to and fro, putting the finish touches on a \$500,000 renovation of the space that would be welcoming 146 sixth-graders in just a few short days. Teachers rushed in and out of their classrooms, eyes gleaming as they regarded the brightly colored, airy rooms that awaited them.

“It’s all coming together; fingers crossed,” Magaña said,” his tone a mix of relief and wonderment.

That Magaña would be standing in this place, at this time, watching the final pieces of a complex puzzle fall into place, seemed up in the air even a few short months earlier. But here he was, most of the frustrations and roadblocks of the past 18 months behind him. He was ready to do what he does best: Take a high-functioning team he painstakingly assembled and launch an innovative school to provide low-income, predominantly Latino students with a high-quality middle school education.

What Magaña, at the urging of the Denver Public Schools, is attempting at Kepner represents a new twist on school innovation and autonomy. Over the past few years, Magaña turned around the foundering Grant Beacon Middle School in south-central Denver, transforming it from a school mired in mediocrity and with a shrinking student population to a bold and successful experiment in turnaround.

The Grant Beacon model incorporated blended learning and extended learning time, anchored by a wide variety of after-school enrichment classes. Under Magaña’s leadership, Grant Beacon has caught the attention of media and education advocates from across the country. While Grant still has ample room for improvement, its achievement gains have outstripped those of many other DPS schools over the last several years.

How did this all come about?

Magaña and DPS leadership surveyed the landscape a couple of years ago and started wondering: if charter school management organizations can replicate successful models

with fidelity, why shouldn't a district-run public school with a distinctive model be able to do something similar? Why not create an IMO — an Innovative Management Organization — to replicate a successful school?

The idea sounded simple in theory. The reality was far more complex than anyone could have anticipated when conversations about replication started in the spring of 2014.

This case study will examine the promise and challenge of recreating the Grant Beacon model at Kepner Beacon Middle School. The author followed Magaña and his team throughout the 2015-16 school year as they worked to clear bureaucratic logjams and create conditions where replication would have a fair shot at success.

The replication effort faced particular challenges in the areas of scheduling and transportation, budgeting, and the degree of freedom to innovate that Magaña, as executive principal overseeing two schools, would have in hiring building leaders and other key staff.

There were also sticking points regarding the Kepner building, which the Beacon program will share with two charter schools and the phasing-out, “legacy Kepner” program. That program will serve seventh-and eighth-graders in 2016-17, while Kepner Beacon starts with only a class of 150 sixth-graders.

The planning year (‘year zero’ in DPS parlance) was ultimately a rewarding one for Magaña and his team, but frustrations abounded as the school district bureaucracy struggled to squeeze a new series of demands and customized requirements into existing systems designed for a different purpose. Employees in the central office were used to a standardized way of doing business with schools. In a district with 162 schools, that only makes sense: if each school required its own systems and structures, the central office would collapse under the weight of too many at times competing demands.

But when the district itself encourages bold innovation, and then seems to stymie its development, frustration results. That was the situation Magaña and his team faced during much of their ‘year zero.’

It's not that anyone in the central office opposed the Grant Beacon replication. It's just that the middle levels of the bureaucracy in particular neither knew much about it nor understood it. Kevin Croghan, one of Magaña's key deputies pointed out last spring:

“I don't think anyone in the district is not well intentioned. I think they just don't have a clue about this,” he said. “These are what I call failures of the frontier. They didn't know that a school would ever try to be in two buildings, so they didn't have a process in place. It's not like they were coming and saying 'no, you can't do that because we hate you.' It was more along the lines of 'no you can't do that because we don't have a system that could support what you're trying to do.’”

In some ways, these challenges are not new. From the outset, under Magaña's leadership, Grant Beacon broke the mold, and DPS often seemed to have to scramble to keep up.

A brief history

When Magaña came to Grant Beacon as assistant principal in 2008-09, the school was failing by anyone's definition. Enrollment had slumped to about 300 students from a high of almost twice that number. The school had only recently climbed from red, the lowest category on the district's five-point School Performance Framework (SPF), barely into yellow, and the third lowest. It was on the district's watch list for possible takeover.

“There were highly ineffective teachers, there were fighting and discipline issues, even some gang problems,” Magaña said one winter afternoon, sitting around a conference table in his cluttered office.

During Magaña's first year as assistant principal, his supervisor, principal Greta Martinez, went to her staff with a bold proposal: Since state tests, which determined school ratings, were focused on reading and math, Grant Beacon should dramatically reduce reading and math class sizes to no more than 20 students, even if that meant overloading social studies and science classes with 35-40 students.

The staff agreed. That year, for the first time, Grant Beacon, by the narrowest of margins, achieved green, or “meets expectations,” on the SPF.

Magaña became the Grant Beacon principal in January 2011, after Martinez received a promotion to the DPS central office. In that spring's state testing, the school's scores dipped slightly, but enough to push Grant Beacon back into the yellow, “on watch” category.

“I was devastated; everyone was devastated,” Magaña recalled. But he believed in the model of smaller math and reading classes, and was determined to stay the course. Then the other shoe dropped.

“(Denver Superintendent) Tom Boasberg called us in, I think it was February the following year, and told us that a high-performing, homegrown charter school network (DSST Public Schools) was going to be moving into our neighborhood. That was like a punch to the stomach. Already 80 percent of our kids were bused in, and it felt like the community was turning against us. I thought it would be really bad if we lost some of our top-performing students.”

Unsure what to do next, and worried about the school’s gains eroding, Magaña turned to one of his mentors in the district, who suggested that he apply for innovation status for Grant Beacon. Magaña had no idea what innovation status entailed, so he did some research. What he learned excited him.

Signed into law in 2008, Colorado’s Innovation Schools Act “provides a pathway for schools and districts to develop innovative practices, better meet the needs of individual students and allow more autonomy to make decisions at the school-level,” according to the Colorado Department of Education website. To date, 63 schools across Colorado have gained innovation status, 40 of them in Denver.

For Grant Beacon, Magaña learned, innovation status would mean getting waivers from certain provisions of the collective bargaining agreement as well as disentangling the school from some DPS red tape. “More freedom with people, time, and money,” as Magaña explained it.

In the fall of 2011, Magaña put together an innovation team of teachers, parents, and community members to devise a plan tailored to Grant Beacon’s needs. The team met throughout the school year. Team members designed a survey and sent it to thousands of parents and community members, including families who lived within Grant Beacon’s attendance boundaries but did not send their children to the school.

About a quarter of the people sent the surveys returned them, including a sizable number of families who had chosen not to send their kids to Grant Beacon. “What we heard loud and clear was that people wanted a school that was safe, that offered a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) curriculum, and enrichment activities, including music and art,” Magaña said.

Teachers and parents alike also expressed strong interest in extending the school day to make enrichment activities possible without compromising core academics.

The plan, supported by 97 percent of Grant Beacon teachers (“which means there was only one naysayer,” according to Magaña), was submitted to DPS in January 2012 and approved five months later.

As the 2012-13 school year began, Grant Beacon was a school transformed. Magaña had hoped for a major grant from the Walton Family Foundation to pay for new technology. When that grant did not come through, after a few moments of despair, “Then I said screw it, we have enough technology in the building to make this work.”

Innovation arrives, Grant Beacon soars

Under the direction of Kevin Croghan, a former social studies teacher promoted to blended learning director, the school dismantled its computer labs and moved technology into reading and math classrooms, and eventually into all classrooms. Each classroom has three technology stations, where students work in groups reshuffled each Monday based on Friday data results.

Each student at Grant Beacon is issued a Chromebook laptop, funded by a grant from Janus Funds. Students set goals and track their progress weekly using a free learning management system called Moodle and submit their work using Google Apps. Teachers use online tools to track student progress and write tests and quizzes aligned to Colorado Academic Standards and assessments.

The Grant Beacon school day is more than an hour longer than most Denver schools. Classes start at 7:35 a.m. and wrap up at 3:55 p.m. Monday through Thursday. Classes start at 10 a.m. on Friday, which allows time for teacher professional development. The extra five hours per week allow the school to offer more than 40 enrichment classes, including aerospace engineering, dance team, West African drumming, a girls-only conversation group, study hall, yoga, and 3-D art. Many enrichment classes are taught by community members.

Magaña has also been able to use budget flexibility that came with innovation status, along with additional funding from the district to support the extended day, to pay teachers stipends of several thousand dollars for the extra time they put in.

Finally, three data teams at Grant Beacon operate under one common hypothesis, said Valerie Svoboda, the school's data process manager:

"If we learn to collaboratively analyze student data in order to implement common instructional strategies, then we will be able to develop those common strategies and implement targeted interventions to improve student achievement for one team-wide Essential Learning Goal."

What this means, Svoboda said, is that each team sets a goal that it then implements across the school. Two of the goals are academic, one focused on literacy, the other math. The third goal focuses on culture and character.

Every staff member belongs to one of the teams. Teams meet Friday mornings, when school starts at 10 a.m. During those meetings, team members closely analyze student data. Teams fill out a detailed proficiency scale document on each student, which pinpoints where the student stands on achieving each academic standard.

Weekly meetings and sophisticated tools allow the teams "to very quickly give our teachers and students feedback so that they may set challenging but attainable goals," Svoboda said.

Last September, for example, a sixth-grader named José scored extremely low on the school's interim literacy assessment. Even the most basic concepts, like being able to describe the gist of a passage he had read, eluded him. To begin helping José develop this skill, his teacher designed a sheet where he had only to fill in blanks in a sentence describing the meaning of the passage. Once he was able to do that accurately, the teacher removed the "scaffolding" of the worksheet and asked José to describe the passage entirely in his own words.

On the interim assessment before the holiday break, José demonstrated mastery of the concept of gist. His next goal, which he was able to articulate to his teacher, was being able to summarize in more detail the content of a passage, article, or story. By the February interim assessment José had mastered the art of summarizing.

Grant's gains

Grant Beacon is now in its fourth year of innovation status and top DPS brass consider its focused mission and steady improvement a model for other district schools. Grant Beacon reentered the rank of green ('meets expectations') schools in its first year as an

innovation school. The following year, 2013-14, Grant Beacon's rating increased by 10 percentage points. Magaña is convinced that the school made another significant leap in 2014-15. But because of the change in state test from TCAP to PARCC, DPS did not issue SPFs last year.

The school's success has led to a steady growth in enrollment. It has bounced back from a low of about 300 students to over 450 in 2015-16. But neighborhood families still aren't sending their kids to Grant Beacon in large numbers. The neighborhood where Grant resides is affluent, but the school boundaries include low-income neighborhoods west of the school. If more affluent families sent their kids to Grant, it would be a racially and socio-economically integrated school. But, Magaña observed, "Some (affluent) families struggle with sending their kids to a diverse school."

Magaña sees autonomy gained through innovation status as a major driver of Grant Beacon's success. "We've been able to make significant changes to the school's curriculum, schedule, assessments," he said. And because teachers are unanimous in their support of the school's mission and model, "I don't have people filing grievances. Everyone buys in."

One challenge for Magaña and his team has been learning, along with the district, about what autonomies are available under the innovation law and how best to take advantage of them. These questions became significantly thornier once the replication process began.

Origins of the replication idea

The idea of replicating the Grant Beacon model first came up during a conversation between Magaña and Croghan during the annual Mile High Scholars awards ceremony in April 2013.

"I was shocked by the number of charter schools and their success, so I turned to Kevin and said 'if we don't do something we'll be out of a job. We need to replicate what we are doing successfully at Grant,'" Magaña recalled.

In the spring of 2014, Magaña submitted a draft renewal of Grant Beacon's innovation plan, which included the idea of replicating the program in another DPS school. Boasberg and Alyssa Whitehead-Bust — his deputy who oversaw all non-traditional district schools — immediately seized upon the idea. They suggested that a second campus modeled on Grant Beacon could open as early as August 2015, at the

chronically failing Kepner Middle School. Magaña was amenable to the idea, if he and the district could work out the details quickly.

“But I heard crickets through the summer and until September,” Magaña said. “Finally in September they got back to me and said yes, they wanted to do this, and they wanted to open the following August.”

Magaña said no. “In April I was willing to go for August 2015, but by September it felt too rushed,” he said. DPS agreed that a launch at Kepner for the 2016-17 school year would be acceptable. Another prospective Kepner tenant, STRIVE Prep, also raised objections about the accelerated timeline.

Croghan, for one, was relieved. “We said no, we need at least a full year zero. And thank goodness we did that because I have no idea how we would have gotten all this work done,” he said. “It would have been really bad implementation. It probably would have sunk the ship.”

Replication could not come soon enough for active parents in Southwest Denver, who had grown weary of Kepner’s desultory track record over many years. A succession of new principals and attempted programmatic reboots had failed to improve the school’s dismal performance.

The district’s desire to replicate the Grant Beacon model at Kepner was boosted by Padres y Jovenes Unidos, a community organizing group that had long been active in southwest Denver. Parents who belonged to the group began researching models and visiting schools in 2015, when it became clear that something was going to replace the existing Kepner program.

“Our parents looked at many schools — charters, neighborhoods schools, the gamut,” said Pam Martinez, Padres’ co-executive director. “They loved Grant Beacon. It was by far their favorite.”

Specifically, Martinez said, parents were enamored of Grant Beacon’s culture. “It was respectful, open, embracing,” she said. “They saw a level of comfort among the kids that they belonged there. It was so calm there.”

Kepner, by contrast, “was so screwed up,” Martinez said, adding that only parents without recourse sent their kids there.

Autonomy struggles: Governance

Once all parties agreed on launching Kepner Beacon in August 2016, Magaña and his team got to work planning the replication process. One immediate challenge they recognized was that the planning was a full-time job, yet each of the key people involved in the planning already had demanding full-time duties at Grant. Magaña, of course had Grant Beacon to run, though he had a capable assistant principal, Frank Gonzales, a long-time DPS administrator who had been a principal earlier in his career.

Croghan was the blended learning director for Grant Beacon, work he would continue while also leading the technology and professional development replication, which proved to be a massive job. And the third key member of the team, Kristin Alexander, Grant Beacon's director of operations and finance, would also be overseeing all the nuts and bolts logistical details of the replication.

Magaña hoped for some support from the DPS central office, but found that what the district considered helpful was more of a hindrance in some cases. "They sent us a laundry list of 400 items on a spreadsheet, things to consider" when planning replication, he said. The list covered a wide range of issues, from special education to community involvement. But it was too much of a catch-all list, too unfocused to be useful. "We cut it back to 150 items and then it was of some use," he said.

To help Magaña and his team wrap their minds around creating a successful, faithful replication, DPS hired a consultant with deep experience in the charter school sector to help with preliminary strategic planning. The consultant, Andrew Bray, met weekly with Magaña, and at times Croghan and Alexander through the early winter of 2016. During those meetings he gently pushed Magaña, who is somewhat cautious by nature, to advocate aggressively for more autonomy from district mandates.

One particular issue that Bray saw as a potential deal-killer was the extent to which Magaña had authority to hire building leaders for Grant and Kepner. He would become the "executive principal" overseeing both schools, but would need building leaders to run Grant and Kepner day to day. What their titles and salaries would be remained a bone of contention through September 2016 and these issues were unresolved as this report went to press.

DPS has a longstanding policy under which the superintendent makes all principal hiring decisions. In this case, however, if DPS was hoping to emulate the charter school model, Magaña needed more direct authority over so important a hiring decision, Bray

argued. Magaña agreed, but was not optimistic in the fall that he could prevail in this argument.

“I want to make sure the people I am prepping for these positions are picked. But I feel (DPS) is looking at this as a regular school principal hire,” he told Bray. “And this is a concern. It’s a show-stopper for me. I’d have a hard time moving forward. And that’s where it is going to get tricky. I can’t be forced into taking someone on that I don’t have any connection with and that I haven’t prepped over the course of a year.”

This issue, and several others, was complicated by the fact that Boasberg announced in the fall of 2015 that he would be taking a six-month sabbatical beginning January 1, 2016. At his recommendation, the school board appointed Susana Cordova as acting superintendent. Shortly thereafter, Alyssa Whitehead-Bust announced she was leaving the district.

The result was that the two senior administrators most knowledgeable about and supportive of the IMO concept would be out of the picture during the replication’s six most vital months. Gregg Gonzales, the instructional superintendent directly overseeing Grant Beacon, pledged to Magaña that he would run interference to the extent possible. Gonzales, who had been recruited by Whitehead-Bust, was in his first year at DPS, and with his mentor gone, his influence was limited. (He wound up leaving DPS as well for DSST late in the 2015-16 school year).

In February, Gonzales reported to Magaña that DPS senior leadership held firm in insisting that the Grant and Kepner school leader positions be filled through a competitive process. This isn’t what Magaña wanted to hear, and Gonzales agreed.

“My lens and their lens are just pretty different,” Gonzales said during a meeting in Magaña’s office. “Theirs is competition for the jobs, mine is a performance standard. We interview your candidate, and if that person meets the performance standard, good. If not, then you open it up to external. That is how many charters do it.”

Gonzales was joined at that meeting by Joe Amundsen, who headed the district’s Portfolio Management Team. Amundsen, who knew little about the IMO concept, attended the meeting to learn more, and to pass on his knowledge to acting superintendent Cordova, assistant superintendent Greta Martinez, and others, who also seemed to have limited knowledge of the concept.

Magaña was clearly frustrated by the lack of knowledge and support for the IMO among the senior leadership in Boasberg and Whitehead-Bust's absence. "I feel like we're sliding backwards just when we need to be accelerating," he told Amundsen.

Amundsen created a slide presentation, a sort of "IMO 101," which he showed to the senior leadership team the following week. The presentation provided historical context, rationale, and a proposed methodology for selecting IMO and building leaders.

Among the innovations highlighted in the presentation was the creation of an IMO Advisory Board that would provide counsel to Magaña. The board would consist of the two building leaders, one representative from each school's leadership team, one member of the network staff (Crogan, Alexander, etc.) two teachers from each school, one or two elected parents from each school, and two community business or "strategic nonprofit partners."

That meeting seemed to break the logjam, as the district's acting leaders became more familiar with the plan, and how it fit into Boasberg's larger ambitions to transform DPS into a more decentralized, portfolio district.

It took far longer than he would have liked, but ultimately, in May, Magaña was able to hire the two building leaders he wanted. For Grant, it was Michelle Saab, who in her five years at Grant had served as a community engagement specialist, dean of students, and now would be an assistant principal, but also the building leader under Magaña. Although she had never been a classroom teacher, her calm, steady presence made her a popular choice among the close-knit staff.

For Kepner, Magaña chose Dan Walsh, a dynamic young math teacher adept with data. Magaña saw in Walsh strong, natural leadership potential.

Hiring hurdles

Another administrative roadblock Magaña faced was teacher hiring for Kepner. At Grant, innovation status gave Magaña the freedom to hire on his own timeline, avoiding the often cumbersome and slow DPS human resources process. Under the state Innovation Schools Act, however, Kepner could not gain innovation status until the staff was in place and voted on becoming an innovation school. (The staff voted unanimously on Aug. 16, 2016 in favor of becoming an innovation school).

When Magaña put together his five-year plan and budget in 2013, he won approval for a novel idea: hiring the six-person, year one Kepner teaching staff a year in advance, to give those teachers a full school year at Grant, absorbing the culture, learning the systems and planning. DPS senior staff liked the idea and approved their five-year budget that included funds for those hires.

But as the summer of 2015 progressed, that bright idea was snuffed out by bureaucratic realities. First, Magaña could not get the human resources department to create account numbers for those positions, so he couldn't allocate funds for them. Then, he learned that because Kepner was not yet an innovation school, he couldn't hire early.

Presumably, DPS could have made an exception and allowed Kepner to hire early, regardless of innovation status. But bureaucracies being what they are, Magaña was told that he had to wait and hire on the same timeline as all other non-innovation schools. This meant it was well into the spring semester before the Kepner team for 2016-17 was in place. And innovation and charter schools had already hired some of the most promising job-seekers.

Croghan, in charge of professional development, bemoaned the fact that the original vision did not get realized. "It means I lose opportunities for early contact and engagement with our new staff," he said

The biggest downside to late hires, Croghan said, was its potential to stymie the transfer of the unique Grant Beacon culture to Kepner.

"You know what I think our culture is really rooted in?" Croghan asked. "It's the idea of innovation, it's the idea of being different, it's that idea of having autonomy and developing autonomy, and being excited to try new and different things. And how do you bottle that up? You can't just ship it over to Kepner. You have to develop it."

Magaña compensated in part for the impact late hiring had on culture-building by using budget flexibility to pay all Grant and Kepner teachers to return from summer break on Aug. 1, 2016, two weeks earlier than most other schools. Teachers from both schools participated in intensive professional development as one unit, in the Grant building.

"It has been a big success, really powerful," Magaña said at the end of the second week. "Our goal was to make all teachers in the Grant-Kepner IMO feel they were part of one team, and I think we succeeded in that."

Transportation and scheduling

Magaña also faced struggles related to transportation and scheduling. An essential component to the Grant Beacon model has been the late start on Fridays, which allow data teams to meet and plan how to differentiate instruction for students struggling to meet one or more academic standards. To replicate effectively at Kepner, the IMO leadership team wanted the two staffs to work together during those late-start Fridays.

But when Magaña opened discussions with the DPS transportation department in March, he hit a brick wall. Other schools already had late starts on Friday, and this meant no buses or drivers were available to bring students to Kepner for the 10 a.m. start.

Initially he got nowhere. Acting Superintendent Cordova expressed sympathy, but sided with the district transportation department.

“They wanted a late start day on a Friday and we just can't figure out the finances to make it work,” she said during an interview in May. “We can do it on a Tuesday, we can do it on a Thursday, we can do it on a Wednesday. We have cut our transportation team so much it's not like they're just sitting around thinking about ways to make it difficult. I have worked with Alex trying to figure out what solutions might work internally and I told him if he needs to look externally that's fine.”

Initially Magaña intended to contract with an outside vendor for Friday buses. But as the school year ended and Boasberg's return approached, DPS tweaked bus schedules so that Kepner could get DPS buses to support the late Friday start.

Budget confusion

Another major area of challenge for the replication effort was budget and finance. Soon after Magaña, Boasberg and Whitehead-Bust agreed that Kepner Beacon would launch in August 2016, Magaña and his team developed a five-year budget, which Boasberg approved.

One item in the budget for year zero was to hire the six-member year one Kepner teaching staff so they would have a full year to work with Grant teachers, learn the culture and plan, as detailed earlier in this report. When that didn't happen (see above), Magaña assumed all of those funds — well over \$200,000 — would carry forward to year one. When he received his Kepner budget for the 2016-17 school year, the carry

forward from the previous year was just \$5,000. As this report went to press, Magaña was still trying to track down the missing money.

Another large sum was missing as well, he said. The five-year budget called for this money to support the two most essential components of the Beacon program at Kepner: blended learning and enrichments. Magaña queried district officials and was told the district would honor the commitment, but had to figure out from where to draw the money.

“The district’s systems don’t talk to each other well and don’t support new schools,” Magaña said. “One of the problem is there are just too many people in the middle (of every decision) and that makes it hard.”

On the positive side, Magaña said, are economies of scale created even by a two-school network. Grant and Kepner each realized some budget savings because he, Croghan and Alexander only counted as a .5 employee at each school.

“The shared resources piece of the budget works well and will help a lot,” he said.

Construction stress

A final point of tension as Magaña and his team planned for replication was the renovation of the Kepner building to accommodate the Beacon program. It was a bit like three-dimensional chess, because not only did Magaña have to negotiate with the district to get what his school needed, he also had to work with the three other schools that would be using Kepner building. Magaña attended weekly meetings in the Kepner basement with representatives of Rocky Mountain Prep, STRIVE Prep, and Kepner legacy. Meetings were led by Chris Denmark, a DPS operations manager, who was acting as project manager for the overhaul of the Kepner facility.

While Denmark did his best to make the process run smoothly, the structure seemed nonsensical to Magaña. “If I was to do it all over again, I would be in charge of all aspects of our wing’s renovation, and the project manager would be working for me, instead of off to the side reporting to the district,” he said in mid-August. As he spoke, workers scrambled to finish painting and clean-up so the facility would be ready for students the following week.

Because of the cumbersome reporting structure, decisions took longer than they should have, deadlines got pushed back, and as the 2015-16 school year ended, Magaña and

others wondered how all the required work could possibly get done before the start of the new school year.

In the end, deadlines were almost met. Magaña had hoped to host a week-long sixth grade academy for his incoming Kepner Beacon students beginning Monday, August 15. But he had to cut it from five days to three because the building was not cleared of construction detritus and safe for students to enter that day.

Magaña also decided to hire his own contractor over the summer to paint halls and classrooms and do other small jobs, because he worried that otherwise the start of school could be in jeopardy. He paid for this work out of his school facilities budget. It was less than ideal, but it got the job done, he said.

Community response

From the Beacon network team's perspective, the community's excitement about the new school made all the hassles well worth the effort. Kepner Beacon needed to compete to recruit 150 sixth-graders to fill its inaugural class — the school is part of a DPS enrollment zone that includes several middle schools, including high-performing charters — and had no trouble doing so. An open house in the spring was attended by many of the incoming students and their parents.

And during the spring semester, when teams of Beacon network leaders visited elementary schools where large numbers of fifth-graders had signed up to come to Kepner, they were met with great enthusiasm.

On a sunny April afternoon, Magaña and Kepner principal-to-be Saab visited Goldrick Elementary School in southwest Denver. They had in tow Natalie and Adrian, two Grant Beacon eighth-graders who had attended Goldrick. The two teens lugged boxes of navy blue t-shirts with KBMS emblazoned across the chest in bold yellow. Each of Goldrick's 53 soon-to-be Kepner students got a shirt. Many donned them immediately.

Students sat bunched on carpeted floor of the school foyer and peppered Magaña and Saab with questions. How long are class periods? How much time do we get to move from one class to another? Are there sports teams?

"Our simple goal is to get you all ready for high school and college," Magaña told the group as the event wrapped up. "Be ready to do 30 minutes of reading and 30 minutes of math homework every night."

Padres y Jovenes Unidos members remain enthusiastic about the launch of Kepner Beacon. Pam Martinez said she has made it clear to Magaña that he will have the full support of the organization behind him as the school year begins.

“Our role is to support Kepner Beacon over the coming year,” she said. “I have told Alex that we will be supporting, and also watching and holding the school accountable, in a positive way.”

Looking ahead

On the cusp of the 2016-17 school year, Magaña exuded optimism that the replication would be a success. He had recently met with Superintendent Tom Boasberg, fresh off his six-month sabbatical. Magaña provided Boasberg with a somewhat sanitized version of the trials and tribulations he faced while Boasberg was away. Boasberg reaffirmed his strong support for the new school, and pledged to Magaña that he would clear any new bureaucratic roadblocks that might arise.

“He made it clear to me that he is deeply invested in this model,” Magaña said. “He assured me that I could come to him if I ever had any issues or needed anything.” In fact, Boasberg showed up for the first day of school on August 22, trailed by TV news crews, giving Magaña and Kepner some highly favorable publicity.

Still, Magaña acknowledged that a few issues still keep him up at night. First and foremost is whether the new Kepner teachers are fully prepared, given the delays in hiring that plagued the effort. “Do we truly have them adapted to the kids we’re working with?” he said. “What will that first day look like?”

On balance though, Magaña said he was more excited than concerned.

“There’s a strong sense of camaraderie that’s building across the two schools, he said. “And my network team and building leaders are really taking charge. Yeah, I think we are good to go.”

Recommendations

Based on the experiences of Magaña and his team as they worked to replicate the promising Grant Beacon model at Kepner, DPS could take several fairly simple and straightforward steps to help future replications run more smoothly:

- **Strengthen internal communications.** Problems in communicating the extent to which facilitating the replication of the Grant Beacon model was a priority for the district to middle management were exacerbated by Boasberg's sabbatical and Whitehead-Bust's departure. Still, it's clear that key people farther down the chain of command knew little about the Innovative Management Organization concept. District leadership should take steps to make sure its priorities are clearly communicated down the chain of command. Had this happened, many of the problems Magaña faced during the winter and spring could have been prevented.
- **Let innovators innovate.** It would not have been difficult for DPS administration to allow Magaña the hiring flexibility he was promised, which would have allowed him to hire his teaching staff a year early to build the Kepner culture and replicate Grant Beacon with fidelity. Unfortunately, leadership never overrode bureaucratic obstacles to the early hires. In the future, innovative leaders with a proven track record of improving their schools should be able to innovate in areas like teacher hiring, and top DPS leaders should clear the way for them.
- **“Flip” the culture.** In theory the DPS central office exists to serve the schools. Yet far too often, innovative leaders like Magaña grow frustrated by the seemingly incessant demands of mid-level managers in various departments that they attend meetings and perform compliance-driven tasks of dubious importance. DPS leadership needs to communicate clearly to middle management that they work to serve the schools, not the reverse.
- **Allow IMOs to make principal hiring decisions.** The DPS policy that the superintendent must approve all principal hires makes sense in most contexts. After all, the buck stops with the superintendent, and principals are arguably the most important hires a district makes. However, IMOs are a new and different kind of entity. The executive principal is, in effect, the CEO of the organization. Requiring the executive principal to cede this key decision to the superintendent undermines his/her authority and weakens his/her ability to execute a vision.