



Grant Beacon Middle School, Year 2 Executive Summary

**A report on the second year of an Innovation Management Organization
in the Denver Public Schools**

GRANT BEACON MIDDLE SCHOOL, YEAR 2 (EXECUTIVE SUMMARY)

Since taking the helm of Denver Public Schools in 2009, Superintendent Tom Boasberg has accelerated the district's move toward decentralizing governance of individual schools. Today, DPS has more charter and innovation schools (117) than traditional district-run schools (104).

More recently, several school principals in Denver have stepped forward and formed the vanguard of a redoubled effort to move decision-making authority from the central office to the school building. Over the past couple of years, these bold school leaders have decided to push the envelope on autonomies available under state law as part of innovation school status.

One of those leaders is Alex Magaña, executive principal of the Beacon Network, Denver's – and almost certainly the nation's – first Innovation Management Organization (IMO). Magaña won permission from Boasberg to take the unique model he and his leadership team developed to transform Grant Beacon Middle School into a high performing school, and export it to Kepner Middle School in southwest Denver, a school mired in perpetual struggles.

The idea behind an IMO is simple: Just as charter schools benefit from being under a strong and consistent management structure – charter management organizations – so could innovation schools create economies of scale by replicating under a streamlined management team.

This report focuses on the first year of IMO implementation – its challenges and successes.

Magaña and his team judged the first year of replication a success. Both Kepner and Grant showed strong growth scores in at least some areas of state standardized tests administered in the spring of 2017.

But the year was a challenging one, and the challenges fell into two broad categories: external – primarily continued struggles with the DPS bureaucracy – and internal – replicating culture, student behavioral norms, and instructional approaches and philosophy – that had made Grant Beacon Middle School so successful.

EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

“I'll know things are starting to be different if central office people recognize my role as a network leader, which is different from a building principal, and I don't have to convince everyone that this is the way it is,” Magaña said late in 2016.

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Gaining that recognition proved to be an ongoing struggle. Getting new, IMO-specific positions created by the central office proved difficult. While these issues were ultimately resolved, they occupied an inordinate amount of Magaña's time.

And while Magaña felt he had more direct access to the top people in DPS, he still encountered frequent and deep frustrations dealing with the middle levels of the organization. He didn't understand why, as an IMO, he couldn't have the freedom to, for example, buy computers for his staff without going through the district purchasing department, which invariably slowed things down to a crawl.

INTERNAL CHALLENGES

Several non-negotiables had to be in place if Kepner Beacon was to be a true replication site. Instruction needed to focus on developing critical thinking skills in students. Character development had to be as front-and-center as academics. Personalization through blended learning (a mix of technology-based instructions and more direct, teacher-delivered instruction) had to be each teacher's primary focus. And Grant's robust extended day learning opportunities had to be established at Kepner as well.

To varying degrees, those four non-negotiables were present and evident at Kepner. But as Magaña and his two building leaders, Dan Walsh and Michelle Saab quickly learned, there were many other elements involved in a successful replication, not all of them as tangible and easily defined as those big four.

Walsh pointed out an inherent tension between the need for faithful replication and his and Saab's desire for each school to have its own identity and play to its own strengths and challenges.

Magaña pushed hard for faithful replication. "When you expand a restaurant the recipes have to be the same at both places, and there is a conflict of belief ranging from 'let teachers do whatever they want' to 'no, we have to be clear and consistent,'" he said.

RESULTS

When state test score results were released in the summer, Kepner Beacon has a 79.5 median growth percentile, exceeding the network's goal of 65, and far outstripping state averages.

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While Grant students generally scored higher on literacy tests than Kepner students, their median growth percentile dipped in 2017, falling short of the goal of 65 by one percentage point.

But sixth-graders at both schools topped 70 in median growth percentile. Magaña speculated that collaboration among teachers across the two schools benefitted both.

Math scores at both schools raised concerns. Kepner Beacon students scored extremely low, which was no big surprise. But Grant Beacon math scores, especially among eighth-graders, took a big hit as well, with the percentage of eighth-grade students scoring in the lowest quintile doubling over the previous year, from 15 to 30 percent.

In October, DPS released its School Performance Framework for the 2016-17 school year. The district's complex and frequently iterated metrics caused some controversy, in particular because many schools that had been rated red, the lowest category, moved up one or more classifications in these latest reports.

Still, the Beacon IMO had much of which to be proud. Both Grant Beacon and Kepner Beacon were rated green, the second highest category. What's more, they were in the top third of green-rated schools.

CONCLUSION

DPS is to be commended for its willingness to allow schools to operate under a variety of governance structures, and to adjust its policies and procedures to empower school leaders to innovate in meaningful ways. The district's increasingly stringent process for approving innovation status for schools has also led to steadily improving performance among innovation schools.

Still, while the gap that still exists between district leadership's intentions and the facts on the ground is narrowing, it remains substantial. The next two or three years should reveal whether the promise of true autonomy for innovation schools and networks is realized, or whether it turns out to be an unfulfilled dream.