



**Pathways of Public  
Innovation Status:**  
Success and Challenges  
of Public Innovation  
School Models

# Introduction

In the Metro Denver area and across the state, there are significant and persistent differences in the quality of education students receive and the levels of achievement they attain. These disparities most negatively impact low-income students and students of color. Efforts to improve outcomes for underserved students often concern themselves with weighing the benefits of the consistency and economies of scale afforded in bureaucracies against the customization and smaller, nimbler units of change made possible through increased autonomy. One side argues that it is not the rigidity and entrenchment of strong districts and unions that create a barrier to improved student outcomes, but rather that the problem is a lack of adequate funding for public education. The other side holds up autonomy as an absolute good in no need of qualifiers. Both sides use the urgency of equity as either an argument to secure more autonomy or to double down on the status quo – often without making a cogent case for what is required to create strong schools.

In a public education bureaucracy, there are almost always several largely inflexible layers between (even the most visionary) district leaders and educators working in schools. The charter school movement has been propelled in part by the belief that educators who work most closely with kids are in the best position to make decisions on their behalf. And a number of public charter schools have increased achievement for the students they serve. In many cases, charters have been laboratories of education innovation. However, because they operate largely independent of district structures, the ability of districts to extract and scale promising practices has been limited.

The Innovation Schools Act of 2008 created a governance vehicle within which district-run schools could explore innovation within a public education bureaucracy. Unlike charters, innovation schools remain district-run schools and their teachers and principals remain district employees. They provide the same services for special populations as traditional schools, and also follow the same enrollment practices. But unlike traditional, district-run schools, innovation schools are granted waivers to create systems of flexibility around things like time, talent and treasure in order to better meet the needs of their specific student populations.

Rose Community Foundation believes in providing a convening space for disparate groups to work with shared purpose toward common goals. The ***Pathways of Public Innovation Status: Successes and Challenges of Public Innovation School Models*** convening will bring together educators, community members, and policymakers for a half-day of shared learning about the most effective uses of this policy autonomy to date and for reflection about what will be required to power the potential of this work moving forward. Short, targeted breakout sessions, or “bursts,” will highlight some of the most effective ways innovation status is being implemented, as well as some of the greatest challenges leaders are facing. A number of burst sessions will be presented by schools in Denver Public

Schools (DPS) - the first and largest district of innovation in the state. Representatives working in Aurora Public Schools and Jefferson County Schools will lead burst sessions on family engagement and on making the transition from a charter to an innovation school.

## Background/Overview

The Innovation Schools Act of 2008 was created for the purpose of enabling schools to provide educational services tailored to meet the needs of specific student populations. The Act establishes a formal process that allows schools or groups of schools to petition their local school boards for waivers from district-level policies.

The designation of innovation status can be granted to an individual school, to an Innovation Management Organization (IMO), or to an innovation school zone. An innovation school is a single school whose innovation plan is implemented by a local school board. Similar to Charter Management Organizations, IMOs allow single innovation schools to replicate their models with fidelity. Like individual innovation schools, IMOs also report directly to local school boards. An innovation school zone is a group of schools that sequentially serve groups of students as they progress through elementary or secondary education or share common interests such as education focus or geographic location. Innovation zones are governed by an independent, nonprofit organization created specifically to coordinate and support work across schools in a specific zone. They are typically led by an Executive Director who reports to a nonprofit board. The nonprofit board in turn reports to the local school board.

In order to secure an innovation designation, a vision for the autonomies being sought must be reflected in an innovation plan or an innovation zone plan. As a prerequisite for plan approval, schools or groups of schools are required to secure support from teachers, administrators, and community stakeholders. Three years after a local school board approves an innovation plan or an innovation school zone plan, the local school board is required to measure progress against the plan. In the presence of inadequate progress, the local school board may revoke a school's innovation status or remove an underperforming school from an innovation zone.

Individual innovation schools, IMOs and innovation zones can choose to operate along a continuum of autonomy. There is a variety not only in the degree of autonomy schools seek, but also in the strategies that schools use innovation status to support. Innovation status has been used as both a turnaround strategy for failing schools as well as a tool to replicate some of the state's most successful models. Some schools have sought innovation status as a way to respond to a community's specifically-stated needs. Other groups have used innovation status explicitly as a vehicle to drive systems-level change.

For these reasons, a causal relationship between these policy autonomies and improved

student outcomes has thus far been difficult to establish. Nevertheless, there are encouraging signs that in the hands of strong leaders and in the context of earned autonomy, innovation status can serve as a fulcrum for both school-level innovation as well as systems-level improvements. A burst session at the convening, facilitated by A+ Colorado, will afford participants the opportunity to weigh in on what future policy and evaluation reports on innovation models might include.

## Time, Talent and Treasure

### Time

The most common set of waivers requested are those related to time. An innovation school or group of schools often request the authority to make decisions about how they will meet statutory minimum requirements related to pupil-teacher contact hours and school calendar days. Innovation status grants permission to establish school calendars that differ from the calendar established by the school's or group of school's authorizer. In many cases, schools or groups of schools with waivers related to school calendar and contact hours have extended their school day and school year in order to effectively implement the innovations outlined in their innovation plan or innovation zone plans. Those innovation schools that seek waivers from school calendar and contact hour requirements also tend to seek waivers from statutory requirements related to staff, professional development, professional learning communities, school data teams, and other forms of teacher collaboration. (CDE, 2018)

Grant Beacon Middle School (GBMS) has been a leader in the use of autonomies around time. The school day at GBMS is more than an hour longer than most Denver schools. The five extra hours a week has allowed for focused professional development and the ability to offer more than 40 enrichment classes including aerospace engineering, dance team, girls-only conversation groups, West-African drumming and 3D art.

GBMS successfully replicated their model to include Kepner Beacon and to form an IMO, Beacon Network Schools. Denver's Beacon Network Schools has been leveraging a Blended Learning Instructional approach since 2011. Following a philosophy of "leveraging computers to do what they do best, so teachers can do what they do best," this IMO started with the goal of creating more opportunities to differentiate lessons through the use of technology. Subsequently, their use of Blended Learning has led them down a "path to personalization" for their students. Beacon Network Schools will lead a burst session where participants will learn about some of the basic blended models they use and hear how this methodology has allowed them to more readily provide personalized instruction for their students.

One of the benefits of flexibility around time is the ability to engage community partners in new and deeper ways. For example, Crawford Elementary School in Aurora, part of the

Aurora ACTION Zone, partnered with community organizations to find ways to better meet the needs of their families. Together they were able to effectively expand the services of the school's welcome center. African Leadership Group will lead a burst session about their community engagement journey and district leaders will lead a burst session about how Aurora Public Schools used this successful model to rethink the ways in which the district does family and community engagement.

## Talent

Waivers related to personnel allow innovation schools to employ staff with flexibility on credentials, create their own personnel evaluation systems, set their own salary schedule, draft their own employee agreements, and prohibit teacher transfer. School leaders have sought to create their own hiring and termination policies in order to hire those that are the best fit for their school's mission and vision and to terminate staff when they are not meeting the specific performance expectations of the innovation school. Thus, many innovation schools have their staff employed on an at-will basis or replace probationary status with time-bound contracts (CDE, 2018). These schools have more flexibility to staff against specific needs such as trauma-informed care and those that have high populations of English language learners. One of the down-stream benefits to the requirement of advance teacher and administrator buy-in to get an innovation designation has been increased ownership of and commitment to the successful implementation of innovation plans.

Denver Green School (DSG) is one of the top performing schools in DPS, and in 2017 they had the highest median growth percentile in the state. DGS has used their autonomy around personnel to expand the traditional role of principal to include a broad, deeply invested group of teachers who would not historically participate in administrative decision making. A team of 12 make all leadership decisions using a consensus model.

DGS will lead a burst session on shared leadership which will demonstrate how schools can think differently about the role of school leadership in order to make it more sustainable. A DGS team will share the innovative ideas, structures and systems that have positively impacted their students' success.

More and more innovation schools are seeking to replicate their models through IMOs and innovation zones and replication means building a "bench of talent". The head of Beacon Network Schools will lead a burst session to discuss the talent development strategies needed to sustain executive principals, school leaders, and educators when a single innovation school expands to a network of schools.

## Treasure

With waivers from district budgetary policies, the district delegates more authority to oversee school budgets to the school or zone. In turn, the innovation school is permitted to make more budget decisions and align its spending with the school's specific initiatives.

Flexibilities with the school budget allow innovation schools to do such things as use actual rather than district averages for teacher salaries and reallocate funds to pay for new supports, positions, or resources. In addition, flexibility with school budgets allow innovation schools to engage in supplementary spending to support the innovations requested by schools, which such innovations often require. For example, if schools received the flexibility to change their calendar to create a longer school day or year, they may need additional funding to be able to compensate teachers for this extra time or to give teachers incentives and stipends for managing additional responsibilities. As another example, if a school converted to a blended learning model, budgetary flexibilities could allow the school to better meet technology needs. (CDE, 2018)

In 2016, the Luminary Learning Network (LLN) became the first innovation zone in Colorado. LLN was originally composed of four DPS schools: Ashley Elementary, Cole Arts & Sciences Academy, Denver Green Schools, and Creative Challenge Community. This year, DPS approved LLN's request to add Escuela Valdez, a dual-language elementary school, to the network.

LLN's work around budget autonomy has arguably yielded the greatest systemic change to date from the use of an innovation designation. Early on, they drove the district to create more transparency about how budgets are constructed and how programs are valued. They pushed the notion that schools could sharpen their focus on the unique needs of their students if they could be released from district trainings, services and policies for which they found little value. In so doing, they helped to drive the system to think at the school level by positioning schools as paying customers of DPS. The direct result of those efforts has been Student Based Budgeting Plus (SBB+). Through SBB+, schools with innovation status are given the ability to opt into or out of specific district services. In most cases, when leaders decline to participate in services, they receive the associated funds which they can use to forward the implementation of their vision. (Gottlieb, 2018)

## Moving Forward

Whether it is by sharing specific, school-level innovations or expanding the use of successful governance models, a community of practice has organically emerged among innovation school leaders.

The Free Horizon Montessori school in Jeffco Public Schools is the first charter school to make the transition to an innovation school. They will lead a burst session on the journey they took to create a great learning option for the students they were already serving, as well as a new community of students in the neighborhood where the school is now located. DPS recently approved the formation of another innovation zone, the Northeast Denver Innovation Zone (NDIZ). The four schools comprising NDIZ all follow the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum. The application of an IB model to successfully improve

outcomes for underserved students is an example of the ways in which some leaders are using existing strategies in an innovative context. As the prevalence of innovation schools continues to grow, our understanding of the most impactful strategies and models will mature. Discussions about the ways in which program alignment is required to drive both positive student outcomes and financial viability are already taking place.

Even though much has yet to be discovered about the potential of innovation schools, it is clear that they are already being used as vehicles to create agency, ownership and opportunity for educators to bring their best selves to the task of serving the students who need them most. As districts look to provide options that give leaders space and to make schools more responsive to student, family and community needs, innovation schools ought to be placed prominently on the menu.

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## About the Rose Community Foundation

Rose Community Foundation strives to enhance the quality of life of the Greater Denver community through leadership, grantmaking and donor engagement – stewarding philanthropic resources and investing in strategic and innovative solutions to enduring challenges and emerging issues. Since its founding in 1995, the Foundation has granted more than \$270 million to organizations and initiatives focused on Aging, Child and Family Development, Education, Health and Jewish Life in the seven-county Greater Denver area – recently adding a cross-programmatic community action overlay of support for nonprofit organizations serving immigrants, refugees and communities vulnerable to discrimination and hate crimes.

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