Texas Innovation Schools:

A Pathway to Success for Autonomous Schools in Texas

James S. Liebman

With Jamie Alter, Sarah Begeman, Zahreen Ghaznavi, Adi Goldiner,
Jill Grossman and Chris Wilds
Columbia University

CPRL
**Columbia University Center for
Public Research and Leadership**

RAISE
YOUR HAND TEXAS

Texas Innovation Schools:

A Pathway to Success for Autonomous Schools in Texas

I. Introduction: The "Shared Learning" Model of Autonomous Schools

Texas policymakers are faced with a conundrum: how to ensure accountability for student outcomes while at the same time creating the conditions to allow the state's public schools to innovate to better meet the needs of students. A focus solely on accountability has led to a top-down, compliance-driven system, and many districts have predictably responded with similarly restrictive approaches to managing their campuses without producing significantly improved outcomes for their students.

Decades ago, in his classic study of why American high schools fail, respected education scholar Ted Sizer documented the following phenomenon: If you run a school like an old-fashioned factory, where the principal, teachers and students are hemmed in an on all sides by dozens of rigid one-size-fits-all rules and structures, "You will get uneven goods."[1]

This is currently the case with Texas' public schools. Although many of its schools and districts achieve impressive results, the state's low-income students and English language learners are not performing well.[2] Fourth graders who do not qualify for free or reduced-price lunch are twice as likely to be proficient in math as those who do.[3] Texas students are making less progress than their counterparts in the nation's other large states,

including California, Florida, Massachusetts and New York.[4] The state lags in international comparisons of school systems' competitiveness in the modern economy and was outperformed in math by 21—and in reading by 16—of the 65 developed and developing nations that participated in a recent international study.[5]

It is not just the numbers that suggest the importance of addressing the challenges Texas public education faces. Many employers in the state report that its high school graduates are not prepared to succeed in the workforce, and economic development experts fear that Texas' public education system is an obstacle to its ability to continue attracting business and investment.[6]

Now imagine a public school system in which each school's principal, teachers and community are motivated and empowered to make all the decisions necessary to meet the particular needs of their unique set of students. Envision principals with the flexibility to build and develop an effective staff. Imagine educators provided with all the tools and data they need to innovate curricula and instructional materials, determine what works for each of their students and adjust and improve instruction every day.

In a powerful study of 442 schools in eight large U.S. school districts, UCLA Professor William Ouchi discovered that the schools just imagined were the ones most likely to succeed at improving outcomes for students. These schools have three traits:[7]

1. **Autonomy:** School leaders have extensive freedom over budgeting, staffing, curriculum and scheduling.

2. **Accountability:** Student results are transparent to educators, parents and the public alike and motivate action to improve student learning.

3. **Active Learning and Support:** Educators receive structured support in using their autonomies to innovate. They also receive the guidance they need to actively react to rich information about which innovations work for which children to improve the success of *all* children.

Although many school systems have attempted to grant autonomy to school leaders over the last two decades, only some have experienced consistent and sustained improvements in student outcomes.[8] Those that have succeeded have used *all three* of the levers identified in Ouchi's research: autonomy, accountability for results and active adult and student learning.

This Shared Learning model of accountable autonomy and active, data-rich adult learning and innovation offers Texas an opportunity to balance accountability with the autonomy and structural supports needed to allow innovation in Texas public schools for the benefit of all students—one need not be sacrificed for the other. It is clear that the current Texas model with its overreliance on compliance-driven systems is not producing the desired result.

Relying on the available research, this report points the way toward a different path forward for Texas public education: a statewide embrace of Shared Learning in which autonomous, accountable and actively enabled educators collaboratively innovate and then assess and adjust their results to achieve sustained improvements in student learning.

The report's analysis of Shared Learning is divided into the following sections:

- Section I provides an introduction to the report and the three concepts behind the Shared Learning model.

- Section II lays out the overarching logic that unifies different combinations of school-level autonomy, accountability and active data-rich learning that states, districts and schools elsewhere in the U.S. and Canada have used to generate and sustain improved student outcomes, and provides a guide for the state of Texas and its districts and schools to use in selecting among available approaches to autonomy, accountability and active learning.

- Section III turns next to a detailed review of school systems that appear to be succeeding, describes the particular combination of autonomy, accountability and active learning and support that each system uses and highlights evidence that these forms of Shared Learning are improving student results.

- Section IV offers recommendations for how the state, school districts and schools can craft and implement comprehensive and effective Shared Learning strategies of their own.

IV. Recommendations

The descriptions of the model states and districts refrenced reveal multiple options among which states and districts may choose when implementing Shared Learning. Drawing upon the most consistent and promising practices in use in the model sites, this section distills a number of recommendations for Texas to consider as it moves toward a Shared Learning system of autonomous schools. The recommendations suggest steps to be taken at the state, district and campus level.

State Steps:

- Rather than immediately granting autonomy to all Texas schools, adopt a more nuanced strategy at first, to generate a rich set of informative experiences from which future policymakers can learn.

- To trigger the necessary learning, consider an approach that frees districts choosing to opt in, and schools those districts identify, from a specified list of key legal and policy restrictions in exchange for the districts' agreement to develop and implement plans that encompass the District Steps laid out below.

- In deciding which mandates to lift and which to relax, survey state law, district superintendents and principals to identify state rules and policies restricting autonomy, particularly over budgeting, staffing, curriculum and scheduling, and selectively release districts and schools from those mandates.

- Restructure state education office operations to limit compliance-oriented actions and augment targeted service provision to districts and schools to improve their use of autonomy.

- Facilitate active learning statewide through working networks of districts and schools facing similar challenges and developing allied innovations.

In taking these steps, Texas may choose to use existing state mechanisms, like the District Charter Authorization in Senate Bill 2 (2013), to facilitate district creation of autonomous schools. Under Senate Bill 2, the board of trustees of a district can vote to authorize a "district charter" – a traditional or specialty school in the district is granted charter-like autonomy.[73] If the state decides to go this route, it should consider adopting legislation or guidance to encourage the creation of active learning structures in district charters to enable them to realize the full benefits of a Shared Learning system.

Alternatively, the state might consider developing a formal district application process like the one Kentucky uses. Such a process requires the development of the application and guidance documents for districts, dissemination of information about the application process and the creation of a rubric to evaluate applications. States may also consider providing targeted technical assistance to applicant districts, either in-house or through an external partner.

The state must also determine the types of autonomy to grant to schools in the areas of budgeting, staffing, curriculum and scheduling. To inform this decision, central office staff may survey law, district superintendents and principals to identify state rules and policies restricting autonomy. In support of decisions about the specific areas over which the state may grant schools greater autonomy, **Appendix C** summarizes state-level mandates in Texas in each of the four areas listed above that limit schools' freedom.

In addition to granting autonomy, the state should maintain or enhance its accountability system and the transparent and timely data it provides to districts and schools. It should also develop its own strategies and systems to promote active learning, innovation and the sharing of effective practices across districts in the state.

District Steps:

- Survey school principals to identify district rules and policies restricting autonomy.

- Develop a district-wide plan for using autonomy from state and district policies, together with accountability and active learning, to improve results; identify schools that will benefit from that autonomy; and invoke new and existing state mechanisms, such as District Charter Authorization, to extend the autonomy to those schools.

- Consider adopting more rigorous and diagnostic accountability measures aligning to and augmenting the state system, such as district-wide interim assessments, surveys and qualitative external reviews of how well schools use their autonomy to identify and implement improvement strategies.

- Reorganize the central office to replace top-down regulatory and compliance-oriented operations with a service ethic that respects and enhances schools' use of autonomy.

- Support active learning within and between schools through training, transition of district personnel from supervisory to facilitative roles, and the development of model protocols for collaborative problem solving by teams of educators and networks of schools and for other forms of active learning.

As these recommendations suggest, districts have a key role to play in increasing schools' autonomy by developing plans for releasing schools from many, strategically selected district-level mandates. Districts should be asked or encouraged to explain in their plans how they will reorganize central offices to limit mandates, replace a regulatory and compliance focus with a service ethic and support schools' use of autonomy.

Districts also should consider adopting additional accountability structures through which they can monitor and support schools' progress and intervene as necessary when schools demonstrate consistently low performance.

Most importantly, however, districts must play a key role in developing systems promoting active learning within and across schools, including by organizing schools into networks or allowing them to opt into networks themselves. Network teams should then facilitate strategic planning, data use, inquiry teams and other efforts to accelerate student learning.

Campus-level Steps:

- Together with educators and families, develop a school-wide strategy for using autonomy from state and district policies and active learning to improve results, and share that strategy with district leaders.

- Engage educators in the instructional leadership of the school, including through collaborative problem solving by teams of educators.

- Use state- and district-support mechanisms to facilitate and extend instructional innovation.

- Co-develop and share effective practices with other educators within the school and with other schools in the district and statewide.

Efforts by individual schools are, of course, central to the success of a Shared Learning system. Schools seeking autonomy should develop comprehensive plans for how they will use autonomy to best respond to the needs of their particular campus. With district support, schools also should distribute instructional leadership from principals to empowered faculty, facilitate data-based collaboration and problem-solving among teachers and school leaders and otherwise promote innovation, active learning and sharing of effective practices.

Appendix D provides one example of how a state might implement a state-to-district approach as described above and one example of how a district might take advantage of this state-to-district approach. These examples are provided for illustrative purposes only.

V. Conclusion

All children deserve to attend schools where educators can respond to their learning needs. School leaders and their staff can make sure that happens – but only if they are given the freedom to do so. In fact, research suggests this kind of school-level freedom or autonomy is critical to increasing student achievement. States and districts have made efforts to grant more autonomy to school leaders with little evidence of sustained success. The evidence from these models of autonomy reveals that autonomy, while critical, is not sufficient by itself to create sustained school improvement for *all* children.

Systems of continuous active adult and student learning, along with school-level autonomy around staffing, budgeting, curriculum and scheduling and strong measures of accountability will ensure instruction is continuously improving to meet the needs and bring about the success of all children. This three-part system, termed Shared Learning, could help improve student outcomes and learning environments in schools and districts across Texas. Districts and states in different regions of the country have already put Shared Learning in place and have seen improved student achievement and graduation rates.

Just as there is no one right way to educate an entire district of students, there is no one-size-fits-all model for implementing a Shared Learning system. While based on certain fundamental principles, the system requires states, districts and schools to work together to create structures that fit local needs – officials at each level of the education system have a part to play in making this system a success. This paper presents a menu of options for state officials, district superintendents and school staff on how they can implement a system of autonomy, accountability and active learning designed to increase achievement for all students. Students in Shared Learning systems in other states and districts are succeeding – the children of Texas should be given the same opportunity.