

Principal Autonomy: How Much is Too Much?

By Jim Eck with Bryan Goodwin

SCHOOL LEADERS NEED

a certain amount of latitude. Agreed. So, should districts focus on hiring great school leaders and stay out of their way, or should they guide improvement efforts all the way from the boardroom to the classroom?

Calls for greater school autonomy

In 2007, the American Institutes of Research and the Fordham Foundation released a report titled *The Autonomy Gap*, which argued that principals shoulder much of the burden of accountability systems but typically lack the authority to really improve student performance, especially when it comes to school staffing. The authors speculated that due to this lack of authority, principals who once aspired to become dynamic executives and change agents left the system to seek less frustrating leadership opportunities.

Recently, an elementary school in the Denver Public Schools system made waves by asking its local board and teachers union for waivers from district rules and collective bargaining agreements, so that the school's leadership team can have more control over personnel, budgeting, and scheduling. "We don't see this as radical," Greg Ahrnsbrak, physical education teacher and union representative at the school, told the *Denver Post*. "We see this as common sense. We want to be released from this bureaucratic entanglement that will allow us to do better."

Autonomy no guarantee of higher performance

While giving schools more control over budget and staffing decisions may seem like common sense, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation learned the hard way that school autonomy, in and of itself, is no guarantee for improved performance. After spending roughly \$1 billion to create small, autonomous schools, the Foundation learned that their efforts had generated mixed results, at best. "[One] thing I got wrong at the beginning was autonomy," the Foundation's former executive director Tom Vander Ark told *Education Week* in 2005. "I visited 100 great schools and made the observation that they were all small, autonomous, and assumed that was a path to school improvement. It turns out giving a failing school autonomy is a bad idea."

Guidance from research

McREL's research on district leadership helps answer the question about how much autonomy superintendents should give school leaders. Our 2006 meta-analysis of 27 studies of superintendent and district effectiveness, reported as *School District Leadership that Works* (Waters & Marzano, 2006), found a statistically significant relationship (an average effect-size correlation of 0.24) between effective district leadership and student achievement. It also demonstrated the importance of districts setting clear, "non-negotiable" goals for student achievement and classroom

instruction, closely monitoring those goals, and marshalling resources and board support to achieve them. While the study validated common assumptions about high-functioning districts, it also surfaced two perplexing and seemingly paradoxical findings.

One study we examined reported that building autonomy has a positive correlation of .28 with average student achievement in the district, indicating that an increase in building autonomy is associated with an increase in student achievement. Interestingly, that same study reported that site-based management had a negative correlation with student achievement of (-) .16, indicating that an *increase* in site-based management (which implies a higher degree of autonomy) is associated with a *decrease* in student achievement. Waters & Marzano concluded from this finding that effective superintendents provide principals with "defined autonomy." That is, they appear to set clear, non-negotiable goals for learning and instruction, yet provide school leadership teams with the responsibility and authority for determining how to meet those goals.

Defining autonomy in a purposeful community

In our research, of the six district-level leadership responsibilities that correlated with higher levels of student achievement, one related to how district leaders define school leaders' autonomy. As shown in

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Principal Autonomy (continued from p. 1)

Table 1, these 12 practices complement the salient features of purposeful community:

- *Purposes and outcomes that matter to all*
- *Agreed-upon processes*
- *Use of all tangible and intangible assets*
- *Collective efficacy*

Although we describe a purposeful community in the context of a school (see p. 6), this construct also applies to district communities. In fact, creating a purposeful community at the district level can help define autonomy for school leaders by providing them a context.

Accomplish purposes and produce outcomes that matter to all

Purposeful communities identify outcomes that can *only* be accomplished by its members

working together. McREL’s superintendent study found that effective district leaders establish clear goals for achievement and instruction and expect school leaders to ensure these goals are at the core of every school’s vision. District leaders also should clearly communicate that continuous improvement is not an optional activity for schools; rather, school leaders must ensure that their staff members understand the goals and carry out plans for achieving them.

Agreed-upon processes

At the district level, establishing agreed-upon processes for accomplishing shared goals means developing a shared vision of “defined autonomy” for school leaders. These agreements spell out what principals are responsible for and what district office personnel are responsible for. For example, district offices should develop clear

and coherent policies and procedures for recruitment, hiring, professional development, evaluation and even (or especially) remediation and dismissal. Such policies should not insert the district into personnel decisions the school makes; instead, the policies should prevent arbitrary and capricious practices. Principals have the responsibility to hire and fire, but they should do so within clearly defined criteria established across the district.

Use of all tangible and intangible assets

Assets include physical aspects, as well as those that are not physical, such as school climate and culture. The first bulleted practice on this list, “directing personnel operations to assure a stable yet improving and well-balanced work force,” (see Table 1) expresses the need for principals to allocate staff resources in a way that helps schools accomplish

Table 1. District practices that define autonomy for schools within the context of a purposeful community

Characteristics of purposeful communities	Associated district leadership practices
<i>Purposes and outcomes that matter to all</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring that schools have a clear mission focused on district goals • Committing to continuous improvement • Expecting principals to foster district achievement and instructional goals
<i>Agreed-upon processes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiring well-qualified teachers • Establishing a teacher evaluation program focused on district instructional goals as a priority for principals • Establishing strong agreed-upon principles which direct people’s actions • Developing a shared vision and understanding of “defined autonomy”
<i>Use of all available assets, both tangible and intangible</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directing personnel operations to assure a stable yet improving and well-balanced work force • Promoting innovation at the school-level within the context of district goals • Providing leadership for principals on ways to implement district goals
<i>Collective efficacy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining high expectations for school performance • Ensuring that schools provide all students an opportunity to learn

district goals while creating a culture of high expectations. This might mean having enough flexibility in staffing and budgeting to create a teacher-leader position to improve teaching and learning in order for the school to meet district goals. Or it might mean giving principals enough latitude to work with their school leadership teams to identify and implement new strategies for accomplishing the district's goals.

Collective efficacy

A strong sense of collective efficacy begins with the shared belief that all students can learn, and that belief guides the actions of all. Superintendents can support the development of collective efficacy by ensuring that conditions at each school nurture a sense that together, school staff members can take the necessary actions to achieve school and district goals. This is accomplished by setting challenging but achievable goals and expectations for schools and ensuring that schools have the resources and supports they need to provide all students with opportunities to learn.

A balancing act

Defining autonomy is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Veteran principals in high-achieving schools may need more degrees of freedom, while novice principals at struggling schools may need more guidance and tighter direction from the district.

It is a balancing act with districts being directive in some areas, such as establishing goals and expectations for achievement; setting a general course for continuous improvement; and defining high standards of performance for all personnel. At the same time, effective district leaders recognize that some actions are best left up to principals, such as evaluating personnel based on district-approved criteria; developing or removing staff as necessary to meet performance standards; and developing cultures of high expectations within their own schools. **CS**

References

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