

Staking Out the Middle Ground

Policy Design for Autonomous Schools

Recommendations for Local Leaders

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More and more states are adopting policies that provide individual schools or sets of schools with greater flexibility and school-level decision-making rights over elements of the school's operation, such as budgeting, staffing, curriculum, calendar, or professional development. These so-called "autonomous schools" fall somewhere between traditional district and charter schools, and have important implications for how local leaders — in particular district leaders and school principals — approach their work. This brief provides local leaders with a set of recommendations to facilitate the implementation of an autonomous school policy in their communities. It is part of a larger body of work based on in-depth analysis of four states' autonomous school policies. The corresponding executive summary, full-length report, detailed state profiles, and recommendations for state policymakers can be found on [Bellwether's website](#).

Autonomous school policies vary widely from state to state. There are three components of how these policies are designed that can affect how district and school leaders experience them on the ground: school-based autonomy, governance structure, and accountability.

School Autonomy, Governance, and Accountability

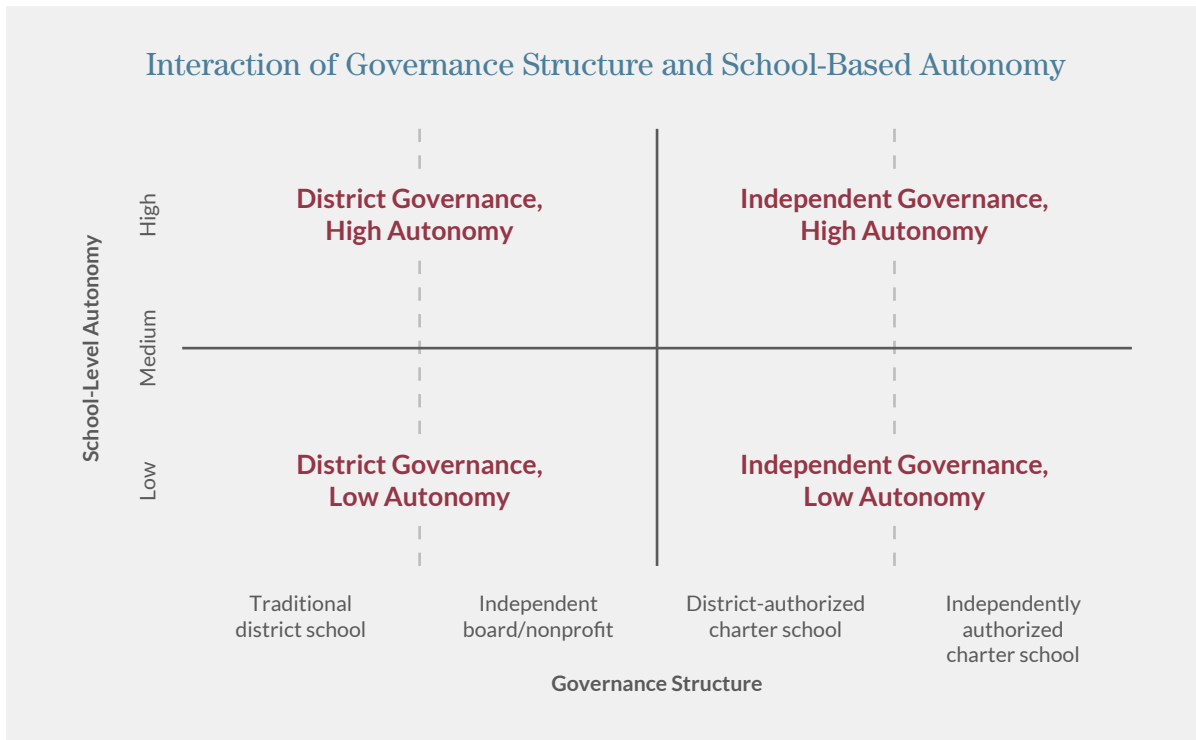
Governance structure and school-based autonomy are two core components of an autonomous school policy's design. Governance describes the degree to which a school or set of schools is or is not directly managed by and accountable to a school district. School-based autonomy considers the degree of decision-making authority that a school leader has over core elements of the school's model.

A school's governance model and school-based autonomies interact in ways that impact how a given school leader experiences autonomy on the ground. The 2x2 chart on the next page illustrates the four main categories created by the interaction of these two elements.



To view the accompanying executive summary, full-length report, detailed state profiles, and recommendations for state policymakers visit [Bellwether's website](#).

Interaction of Governance Structure and School-Based Autonomy



Accountability is the other half of the autonomy-for-accountability model. Compared to the charter sector, however, what accountability structures ought to be in place for autonomous schools is less clear, and policymakers have many factors to consider as they design an accountability structure. Regardless of what that structure is, district and school leaders can put in place structures that support autonomous schools in meeting their goals.

When designing a local approach to an autonomous school policy, local leaders should:

- **Develop a clear theory of action for how increased autonomy will help a school achieve its goals.** School leaders, with the support of district personnel, should work to develop a clear plan for how the autonomies they are using will help them achieve the goals they have for their school and students. Having a clear plan and theory of action will enable school and district leaders to measure and evaluate progress and make course corrections as necessary.
- **Ensure alignment between school-based autonomies and school goals.** In contexts where school districts are empowered to approve autonomous school plans, districts ought to have review processes in place that ensure tight alignment between a school's goals and the autonomies it is requesting. This will enable districts to conduct quality evaluations of schools' plans and progress over time.
- **Develop high-quality data collection, reporting, and analysis procedures.** Schools and districts need to develop good data policies and procedures to support both their own evaluation and continuous improvement and to facilitate the state's data collection and policy evaluation efforts.

Implementation

In addition to the three elements of policy design discussed above, the implementation of autonomous school policies has on-the-ground implications that district and school leaders should plan for. First and foremost, most traditional school leader preparation programs do not prepare candidates with the skills and mindsets necessary to run autonomous schools. Additional training and support will likely be necessary. In addition, district and school leaders need to consider whether and how they will share services, such as transportation, facilities maintenance, or food service.

As a result, local leaders should:

- **Provide support for school leaders and central office staff as decision-making shifts to the school level.** Both school and district leaders require different approaches to leadership and decision-making to effectively implement school autonomy. District leaders may want to consider creating a separate office to oversee and support autonomous schools, given their differing needs. District leaders should work to understand the skills and mindsets that currently exist at the district and school level, and develop training and support for staff to hone the skills necessary to successfully implement an autonomous school model, especially as district staff roles may shift as schools take on greater decision-making authority.
- **Be explicit about which services will and won't be shared between the district and its autonomous schools, and understand how the chosen approach will impact both entities.** While shared services between school districts and autonomous schools can be an incentive for participation in some contexts, it can also create challenges. District leaders should facilitate a thoughtful conversation about the extent to which autonomous schools will or will not have access to district services, such as food service, transportation, or facilities management.
- **Create opportunities for community input in autonomous schools.** Autonomous schools can provide school systems with an opportunity to engage community members in meaningful local control of schools. If this is a goal for local leaders, districts ought to develop systems, such as local school governance teams, that enable community members to work closely with school staff and district leaders in the creation and ongoing operation of autonomous schools.

The recommendations presented here can support high-quality local implementation of an autonomous school policy. For more detailed analysis, see the full-length report and other resources on our [website](#).