Recommendations for State 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. The policies that shape the autonomy and accountability for these schools vary widely from one state to the next; there's no standard design and no standard definition of what an "autonomous school" is. This brief provides state-level policymakers with a starting point for designing autonomous school policies. It is part of a larger body of work based on in-depth analysis of four states' autonomous school policies. The accompanying executive summary, full-length report, detailed state profiles, and recommendations for local leaders can be found on Bellwether's website.

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Autonomous School Policy Design Framework

There are six key design elements that underlie autonomous school policies. The framework on the next page identifies those six elements and provides examples of common approaches to each. It illustrates the ways in which autonomous school policies can and do vary and can enable state leaders to understand the various permutations to consider in designing a policy to meet particular goals. Regardless of what that structure is, district and school leaders can put in place structures that support autonomous schools in meeting their goals.

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Autonomous School Policy Design Framework

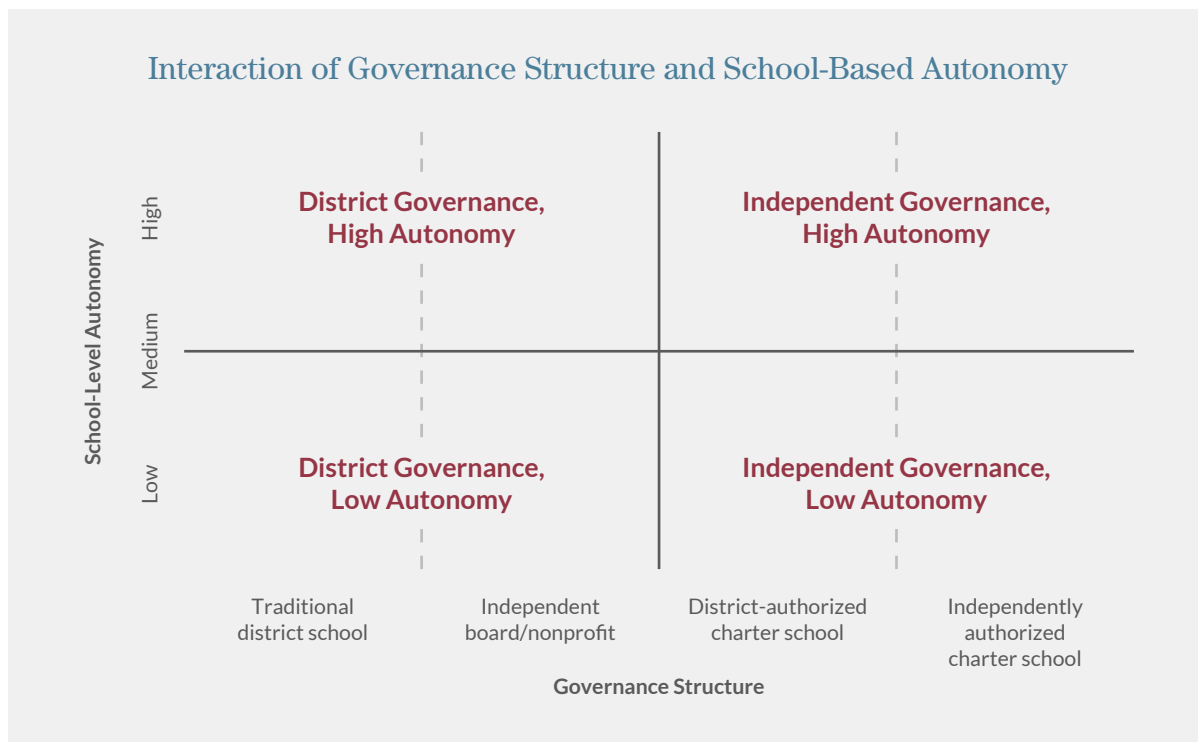| Dimension	Common Variations
Policy goals	Legislators may adopt autonomous school policies for a variety of reasons; many policies are designed to pursue several goals in tandem. Common goals for autonomous school policies include: • Improving student outcomes • Responding to competition from charter schools • Intervening in low-performing schools • Strengthening local control • Providing opportunities for innovation
School eligibility	State policies specify which schools are eligible for greater autonomy. School eligibility tends to align with the policy's goals; for example, if a key goal of the policy is to intervene in low-performing schools, legislators may decide that only low-performing schools are eligible to participate. Common school eligibility requirements include: • Low-performing schools only (typically those falling into the bottom set of schools per a given state's accountability system) • Schools implementing specific programs • All schools
Governance structure	Under some states' policies, autonomous schools remain fully part of the school district. Others allow for different governance arrangements. Common governance arrangements for autonomous schools include: • Autonomous schools remain part of the school district; no change in governance • Districts can delegate all, or certain elements of, decision-making authority to an independent board • Autonomous schools can operate as charter schools authorized by independent entities that remain tied to the district through memoranda of understanding (MOUs)
The type of policy flexibility available to schools	State laws outline which policies and regulations districts and state education agencies can waive for autonomous schools. Common approaches to determining which policies are waived for autonomous schools include: • All policies and regulations that are waived for charter schools are automatically waived for autonomous schools • State law outlines which policies are eligible for waivers; individual schools select which policies to waive (waivers may be automatic or require approval) • A district and third-party organization contract to enable policy flexibility in certain matters
How eligible schools access autonomy	State policies outline how schools can access autonomous status under a given policy. Common approaches include: • Schools meeting specified eligibility criteria are automatically granted autonomous status • Schools meeting specified eligibility criteria must apply for autonomous status to the local or state board • Districts opt in to certain autonomy models and confer autonomy to some or all schools in the jurisdiction
Accountability structures	The accountability in place for autonomous schools varies widely by state. Common accountability structures for autonomous schools include: • Autonomous schools are held to the same state accountability system as other district-run schools; there are no additional accountability measures in place • Autonomous schools have goals or expectations in addition to any statewide accountability system, and receive interventions for failing to meet those goals. These goals and interventions may be included in state law, or captured in a contract or MOU with the entity that approved the school's autonomous status (typically the state or district).

Recommendations

In-depth analysis of four states' autonomous school policies surfaced recommendations that fall into three broad categories: school autonomy and governance, school accountability, and implementation. Recommendations for state policymakers follow a brief discussion of the key takeaways in each category.

School Autonomy and Governance

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. School leaders consistently identify budget, staffing, and curriculum as critical elements to enable meaningful school-level autonomy.

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

Interaction of Governance Structure and School-Based Autonomy

	District Governance, High Autonomy	Independent Governance, High Autonomy
School-Level Autonomy (High/Medium/Low)	District Governance, Low Autonomy	Independent Governance, Low Autonomy

Governance Structure: Traditional district school — Independent board/nonprofit — District-authorized charter school — Independently authorized charter school

When considering school autonomy and governance structure in the policy design process, state leaders should:

- **Determine where on the 2x2 of governance structure and school-level autonomy schools need to be to meet the state's goals, and craft a policy accordingly.** There are a number of goals that a state might be pursuing by adopting an autonomous school policy (see "Autonomous School Policy Design Framework" above). The 2x2 provided above can help policymakers identify the right balance of autonomy and governance to support schools in meeting the policy's goals. For example, if the policy goal is to maximize local control, policymakers should consider policies closer to the upper right quadrant.

- **Develop policy parameters that enable greater budget, staffing, and curriculum flexibility at minimum.** School leaders consistently identify these autonomies as critical to executing school-level decision-making, so any autonomous policy ought to include these autonomies at a minimum.

School Accountability

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. The breadth of autonomous school policy designs complicates the development of accountability structures. For example, in some states, autonomy is an intervention for persistently low-performing schools; in those cases, what should accountability look like? Policymakers must consider carefully the purpose of the policy, the types of schools that are participating, and other accountability structures already in place in the state in order to craft an accountability system that supports schools in meeting the goals of the policy.

Moreover, states currently collect limited data on the implementation of their autonomous school policies, which limits both understanding of how districts and schools are using autonomy and any measure of impact on student learning.

When considering school accountability in the policy design process, state leaders should:

- **Develop accountability structures that are clearly tied to the policy's goals and the needs of participating schools.** Accountability for autonomous schools is not straightforward. Policymakers must create accountability systems that meet the different needs of participating schools. For example, a policy aimed at supporting turnarounds might need an accountability system that relies on growth and improvement metrics, while revocation of autonomy might be a meaningful accountability measure for a policy that provides autonomy as a "privilege" to high-performing schools.

- **Develop a system to collect and use data on the autonomies that schools are implementing and the results they are achieving.** Collecting and analyzing data on autonomous schools will help policymakers both evaluate individual schools and assess the efficacy of the policy overall. States should collect data on the number of schools participating in the policy, the type of autonomy they're implementing, and the degree of implementation, as well as student test scores, demographics, and other data relevant to the policy's goals (e.g., school culture data).

Implementation

In addition to considering the core design elements of autonomous school policies, policymakers should consider that most traditional school leader preparation programs do not prepare candidates with the skills and mindsets necessary to run autonomous schools.

When considering the implementation of autonomous school policies, state leaders should:

- **Provide resources for implementation.** Running an autonomous school requires different skills and knowledge than running a traditional public school. Many school and district leaders noted this as a pain point for implementing autonomous school policies. State leaders can help assuage this challenge by providing additional resources, such as funding or technical assistance, to support leaders as they embrace their new responsibilities.

These recommendations can support state-level policymakers to craft high-quality autonomous school policies. For more detailed analysis, see the full-length report and other resources on our website.