ppi radically pragmatic

# Black Minds Matter: What Should Our Leaders Do About Failing Schools?

DAVID OSBORNE

SEPTEMBER 2021

@ppi | @progressivepolicyinstitute | /progressive-policy-institute

# Black Minds Matter: What Should Our Leaders Do About Failing Schools?

DAVID OSBORNE

PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE

SEPTEMBER 2021

For much of the last two decades, beginning with the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002, our top political leaders have shown concern about children stuck in failing public schools. NCLB required districts to do something – not enough, but something – about those schools. Presidents George W. Bush and Obama both called education "the civil rights issue of our time."[1] And President Barrack Obama's Race to the Top and School Improvement Grants created incentives for states and districts to act.

Some states went further than others. New Jersey and Massachusetts took over entire school districts. Louisiana created a Recovery School District (RSD) to take failing schools from their districts and hand them to charter operators. Indiana passed a law allowing the state Department of Education to do the same. Tennessee, Michigan, North Carolina, and Nevada emulated Louisiana's RSD, to one degree or another.

Predictably, the bureaucracy fought back. School boards, district administrators, and teachers unions all objected. Adult jobs were at risk, after all, and adults vote, while children don't. In 2015 Congress backed down, replacing NCLB with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which, despite its name, significantly reduced the pressure on districts to do anything meaningful about failing schools.

As the teachers unions ramped up their pressure, Michigan killed off its takeover district, Georgia's governor tried to create a takeover district but was defeated at the polls, Nevada killed off its Achievement School District, and North Carolina's Innovative School District took over just one school. Just recently, the Indiana legislature repealed its legislation authorizing the state to take over failing schools.[2]

Yet millions of children still languish in low-performing schools, where they are less likely to develop the skills or habits necessary to get into college or the military or succeed in anything but low-paying jobs. Most of them are from low-income families, many of them Black or Brown.

This should be a national scandal. In the era of Black Lives Matter, it should be the civil rights issue of the day. But with the glare of publicity focused on other, equally appalling problems – on police officers who kill unarmed Blacks and legislatures that restrict voting rights – it is not. That's a tragedy, because Black minds matter, too.

If you are a governor, legislator, education commissioner, or district leader who wants to help low-income and minority children get a decent education, what can you do?
We still have far too many schools that fail their students year after year. Is increased "support" of

the kind suggested by ESSA enough to generate significantly better outcomes? Not often, according to the research data.[3]

Takeover districts with wholesale replacement of existing schools can work, but the political backlash they unleash makes elected leaders leery of them. In their absence, state leaders should do two things. First, make it painful for districts to let their worst schools stagnate, by closing them, handing them to nonprofit operators, or appointing a new school board. Experience shows that district leaders will scramble to avoid such outcomes. Second, give districts an attractive path to turn those schools around by encouraging them to create "innovation zones," in which schools have the flexibility they need to change, and ensuring that those schools are accountable for performance by appointing a zone oversight board that can replace them if they fail or help them replicate if they succeed. The zone board's job would be to do whatever it takes to turn the schools around: bring in new principals, replace all staff at the school, even bring in a proven outside operator, such as a charter management organization, to run the school. States should encourage this with a carrot: roughly $1,000 extra per pupil, per year, for zone schools, for the first three-to-five years.

An independent, appointed zone board, organized as a not-for-profit 501(c)3 organization, would ensure that when schools continue to struggle, something is done about it. Typically, when this happens, boards replace principals. If failure continues for several years, they should have the authority to replace entire schools, with new staffs or outside operators. Elected school boards have proven reluctant to replace schools, for fear of the blowback. Turnout at school board elections is often under 10%, which means a few hundred angry voters can defeat a board member.[4] And nothing creates angry voters quite like closing and replacing a familiar neighborhood school, even if it's doing a poor job.

We have learned, over the past three decades, that with few exceptions, real change will not occur unless it is driven by local leaders. Innovation zones are locally owned: They require approval by the elected school board, their members are usually prominent local civic, community, and philanthropic leaders, and some of the schools remain in the hands of local principals. The zones give local leaders a workable structure, and the carrot and stick give them an incentive to act. Such zones are succeeding in cities as diverse as Springfield, Massachusetts, South Bend, Indiana, Los Angeles, and several Texas cities: Waco, Ft. Worth, and Lubbock.

Other places are even using them to help a group of decent schools go from good to great.

Creating effective innovation zones is not necessarily easy. But after decades of trying different strategies to help children trapped in failing schools, it appears to be our best bet.

### What Has Not Worked

Between 1989 and 1995, New Jersey pioneered a new strategy to deal with districts full of failing schools: state takeover of school districts in Jersey City, Paterson and Newark. Since 1989, 29 states have passed legislation allowing such takeovers,[5] and at least 22 have tried it.[6] Most have not been very successful.[7] Only in cases where those appointed by the state have a clear improvement strategy and the political power to impose it has takeover yielded significant improvement.

Massachusetts had some success when it

helped Boston University take over Chelsea's school system in the late 1980s.[8] Almost 25 years later, the state took over the Lawrence schools and also produced significant improvement.[9] In contrast, New Jersey's takeover districts languished for decades. Only when the state embraced rapid expansion of charter schools as its strategy in Newark did that district begin to turn around. New Jersey then pursued the same strategy in Camden, with equally significant results.

But most takeovers come with no coherent strategy and achieve little. Legislators have neutered Ohio's takeover law, and in most states, the current political climate makes takeover a non-starter.

In 2003, Louisiana pioneered another approach. Its legislature created the Recovery School District (RSD), a statewide school district to take over failing schools and hand them to charter operators. After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, legislators in both parties voted to place more than 100 New Orleans public schools – all those performing below the state average – in the RSD. As I documented in *Reinventing America's Schools*, this strategy produced the most rapid improvement of any city in the nation.[10]

Governors and legislators in other states took note, and soon there were bills to emulate the RSD in a handful of other states. In Michigan, the governor created the Educational Achievement Authority in 2011, but he could never persuade the legislature to authorize it or fund it properly, so it remained small and unsuccessful, until the legislature killed it.[11] Virginia passed a bill creating an Opportunity Education Institute in 2013, but the courts ruled it unconstitutional, "because it was created by the general assembly rather than by the state board of education, and because it superseded local district control," as one analyst summed it up.[12] Nevada passed an Achievement School District in 2015, but it was underfunded and the Democrats abolished it as soon as they took control of the legislature in 2019. North Carolina passed a similar bill in 2016 but limited the new district to five schools, and by 2021 it had taken charge of only one school, amid considerable pushback from districts.[13] Georgia Governor Nathan Deal proposed an "Opportunity School District" and secured a two-thirds vote in the legislature to put it on the ballot as a constitutional amendment in 2016. But after an expensive campaign against it by the teachers unions, 60% of voters opposed it.[14]

The one robust effort to emulate the RSD occurred in Tennessee. In 2010, Tennessee's legislature created an Achievement School District (ASD), to take over the state's worst schools. The bill also allowed districts to create innovation zones for low-performing schools and grant them significant flexibilities. Because this strategy showed such promise in its early years, it is worth examining its experience in some detail.

### Tennessee's Achievement School District and Innovation Zones

Tennessee's strategy was particularly aggressive in Memphis. By 2016 the ASD had taken over 29 of Memphis's more than 150 district-operated schools. The ASD turned 23 of these schools over to charter operators, recruited from all over the country, and ran six itself.[15] Unlike Memphis's other charters, ASD charters were neighborhood schools, not schools of choice. Their students were among the poorest in the district, both in terms of finances and academic performance.

Meanwhile Shelby County Schools (SCS), Memphis' school district, had moved 21 schools

into an Innovation Zone, on its own initiative.[16] In its "iZone", as it quickly became known, the district lengthened the school day by an hour, using federal School Improvement Grant funds to pay for it. After that money ran out before the 2015-16 school year, the district turned to grants, donations, and its regular budget.

District leaders recruited their best principals to take over iZone schools and gave them the authority to hire staff, and those principals recruited the best teachers they knew.[17] Teachers could earn bonuses based on student performance, and their schools provided intensive support and coaching.[18] Principals were not constrained by union contracts, because Tennessee teachers no longer had collective bargaining rights. All teachers had to re-apply for their jobs once their school entered the iZone, a reality that led to hundreds of layoffs. But once a teacher was rehired and had tenure, firing was still difficult.

There were other limits on autonomy; iZone schools had only about half the autonomy a charter school enjoyed. Principals didn't control most of their budgets, for instance, and they could choose their own curricula and assessments only if their first-year test scores were above a certain threshold.[19]

But both the ASD and the iZone thrived in their first three years. ASD schools struggled during their first year with high student turnover and discipline issues, but later improved. Tennessee uses a Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) to measure student growth, which factors in students' socioeconomic status. It rates schools on a scale of one (slowest growth) to five (fastest). In 2015, second- and third-year ASD schools averaged level five, while first-year schools averaged level one.[20]

Innovation Zone schools showed faster academic growth than the ASD for their first two years, but in 2014-15 the ASD outpaced them.[21] By 2016, seven iZone schools had improved enough to jump off the "priority list" – the bottom 5% of schools in the state, by performance.[22] Unfortunately, those results came at the expense of district schools that lost talented principals and teachers to the iZone. Predictably, they showed declining performance.[23]

Still, the combination of the iZone and the ASD gave Memphis a more aggressive strategy to deal with its worst public schools than almost any other city. Of the 69 priority schools identified in Memphis in 2012, by 2016 only a handful had escaped some intervention: 28 had been taken over by the ASD, 21 had been moved into the iZone, and 13 had either been closed or consolidated with other schools.[24]

But taking over schools and closing schools generates fierce political resistance, and Memphis was no exception. As a result, according to Chris Barbic, the ASD's first superintendent, by 2015 Governor Bill Haslem had retreated from his initial support for such aggressive strategies. Disappointed, state Education Commissioner Kevin Huffman departed, and his successor, Candice McQueen, was more intent on mollifying superintendents and principals than taking over schools. Reading the tea leaves, Barbic left the ASD in early 2016.[25] The commissioner never allowed Barbic's replacement to follow through on ASD plans to spin off its direct-run schools into a new charter management organization,[26] nor to replace struggling ASD schools with stronger operators.[27] Nor did the state place any more failing schools in the ASD. Its performance stagnated – some ASD schools excelled, others lagged far behind. Within a few years, many in the state considered it a failure.

## THE ASD WAS NOT SET UP FOR SUCCESS

Over time, ASD schools in Memphis did not see as much academic growth as iZone schools (which had more funding), although growth slowed considerably in the iZone after the first two years.[28] Some ASD schools excelled, others struggled, and by 2018 and 2019, they averaged level one for academic growth, the lowest of five levels.[29] When compared to Louisiana's RSD, this performance was disappointing. What lessons can we learn from the ASD's experience that might be applied to innovation zones?

First, it moved too fast. Tennessee created the ASD as part of its successful effort to win a federal Race to the Top grant, but the urgency felt by federal and state officials pushed the ASD to do too much soon. Its first year in action (2012-2013) it took over six schools. The next year it took over 11. And the third year it took over eight.[30] 'We definitely tried to ramp up too much too fast," says Chris Barbic, the ASD's first superintendent. "I think doing it over again, if we didn't have the political pressure of the U.S. Department of Education breathing down our neck we would have moved slower."

To move fast enough to satisfy the federal department, the ASD had to operate six of the schools itself, rather than finding charter management organizations to run them. That was a second mistake. "I knew at the time that what we were doing was not going to be optimal," Barbic says. To hire staff for those six schools, he had to get the law changed, and by the time the amendment passed only three months remained before school opened. "We had to hire when all the good teachers had already been hired."

Authorizing charters and operating schools are very different challenges, and the ASD had to master both, very quickly. The RSD in Louisiana learned the same lesson, gradually handing off all its direct-run schools to charter operators. Barbic and his team planned to spin off their ASD-run schools as a new CMO in 2016, but after state Education Commissioner Kevin Huffman departed in 2015, the new commissioner quashed that.

The urgency to move fast also led many of the ASD charter operators to take over an entire student body, rather than one or two grades per year.[31] When a charter takes over a failing school, the first challenge is to change the culture — to get students focused on learning rather than acting out. That usually takes a year. It is far easier if a new operator can phase in — starting with the one or two youngest grades, while the old operator still runs the rest of the building, then adding a grade a year. When a new operator has to start with the entire school, the ingrained culture is often difficult to overcome.

Looking back, Barbic also feels he and his staff should have focused on building a pipeline of talented school leaders and teachers for a year or two before taking over any schools. He adds that they should have worked with the community, letting parents know why their schools were being taken over and what was going to happen, for a year or two before opening schools. Some African American teachers saw the ASD as a threat to their jobs, since Shelby County Schools (SCS) was not required to keep teachers the ASD schools did not retain, and they protested loudly.[32]

"Some view it as an attack on the African American middle class in Memphis," one Black SCS principal told me, because the school system was a major employer.

Until a new parents organization called The Memphis Lift got started in 2015, anti-ASD teachers dominated at community meetings. "It got pretty loud" in the fall of 2014, Barbic says. "The community meetings that we held, it was really teachers who were the loudest and the noisiest. Unfortunately, there weren't a lot of parents there to begin with, but the parents that were in the room were listening and were open."

"Every time they identified schools for takeover, folks would show up and protest, kicking and screaming," adds former SCS superintendent Dorsey Hopson. His advice to others: "I would say just spend more time on the front end, really engaging communities, getting to know communities, and developing authentic relationships with communities."

Built into the legislation creating the ASD was a decision to make its schools neighborhood schools, not schools of choice. Memphis is a very poor city, with 40,000 kids living in households with incomes of less than $10,000 a year, according to Hopson. ASD schools were in Memphis's poorest neighborhoods, which made it that much tougher to turn them around. They had high mobility and weak attendance: Many students didn't enroll until school had been underway for several weeks, and more than a third moved in or out during the school year — more than triple the average mobility in Tennessee charter schools.[33]

"I think when parents have agency and make decisions about where to send their kids," Barbic says, "you start the school from a different place in terms of buy-in and culture." In New Orleans, the RSD schools were all schools of choice. That drove schools to compete for students, says Douglas Harris, who founded Tulane University's Education Research Alliance, which has led the academic research on education in the city.

ASD schools were also underfunded. They received the same per-pupil amount as SCS district schools, about $8,700 per student per year, but less than iZone schools.[34] Their buildings were free, but unlike SCS schools,[35] they paid for maintenance and utilities. These were old buildings, Barbic says, and "the deferred maintenance on them was criminal."

In addition, 18% of ASD students had special needs, compared to 12% in SCS schools, but there was no extra money for those with severe needs. Traditional schools and charters authorized by SCS could turn to the district, which took advantage of economies of scale by bringing kids with severe disabilities together in "cluster programs." ASD schools had no such help.[36] One reported spending more than $1 million on special education but receiving only $66,000 a year.[37] The Tennessee Consortium on Research, Evaluation, and Development, a school improvement partnership between Vanderbilt University and the Tennessee Department of Education, concluded that special education diverted resources from ASD schools' core academic operations. "One leader anticipated that these costs would require them to eliminate the extra academic time they provided in summer programs and Saturday school," it reported.[38]

That problem continues. In 2019, Bob Nardo, who leads a charter organization called Libertas, told *Chalkbeat*: "We haven't had any movement on the underlying issue, which is simply this: The state created a district constituted exclusively of high poverty schools, which have a tremendously high concentration of severe special needs. They did that for the purposes of school turnaround, which was the right thing to do. But the level of funding we need to do this work has not been there."[39]

Underfunding also made it very hard for charter schools to attract and retain good teachers. Between 2012 and 2018, half of ASD teachers were new each year, on average.[40]

Racial dynamics created another uphill battle. Chris Barbic was a white, Houston transplant, while most families and teachers from the failing schools were Black. On top of that, many of the charter operators he recruited were from elsewhere, and though their school leaders were mostly Black, their regional leaders were white. "They didn't give Chris a chance to do what he does, only because he was a white man and he wasn't from Memphis," says Sarah Carpenter, the African American leader of a parents' organization called The Memphis Lift. "We have to get off this Black and white stuff and tell the truth. He tried like hell and they gave him hell, because he was a white man."

Finally, after both Huffman and Barbic departed, the ASD essentially quit functioning as an authorizer. It added no new schools, it never implemented its plans to replace its weakest schools with its strongest operators, and it never followed through on plans to create a system of choice.[41]

"If you look at New Orleans, one of the main sources of improvement here was the takeover process," says Douglas Harris. "Some charter operators that were initially brought in were not successful, and so the state turned those schools over to charter operators who were showing success. At least half of the improvement in New Orleans was just driven through that process."[42]

"The lesson is, you have to manage the portfolio," Barbic says. "No one has been managing that portfolio since I left. Some ASD schools should be closed."

But on one score, the ASD was a resounding success. During its early years, when it represented a threat to take failing schools away from districts, it acted as a catalyst for district improvement. Since most of the schools it took over were in Memphis, it had the most impact there.

Dorsey Hopson, who was SCS superintendent from 2013 until early 2019, explains why. All the urgency "allowed us to really push the iZone in a way we normally couldn't have," he says. "It was a big deal to say we were going to ask teachers to work longer hours for more pay. We were able to have principals and teachers wholesale removed from schools, and that would normally have created all kinds of problems, but it didn't."

Vincent Hunter, a high school principal the district tapped to run its new Whitehaven Empowerment Zone in 2016, illustrated the ASD's impact with a comment to parents and teachers: "If we sit back and do nothing and are not aggressive in our treatment, then now we become victims or potential victims of the Achievement School District." [43]

This pressure helped Tennessee improve a lot of its worst schools, most of them in Memphis. In 2012, the bottom 5% of Tennessee public schools performed so poorly that 16.7% or less of their students tested proficient. Memphis had 69 of those 83 schools. By the 2015-16 school year, the percentage proficient in the bottom 5% had risen to 26,[44] and more of those schools were in cities other than Memphis.[45] In 2015, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) found that none of the schools testing in the bottom 5% in Memphis (in reading and math) stayed there for three consecutive years. Of the 50 cities CRPE studied, New Orleans was the only other city that could make that claim.[46]

But the politics of taking over failing schools proved difficult, so Tennessee's governor backed off. Hence none of the states that set out to emulate Louisiana's RSD succeeded.

What was Louisiana's secret? New Orleans had a unique political advantage: Hurricane Katrina scattered those who would have fought the RSD. The hurricane destroyed the New Orleans teachers union, whose members were all laid off by the old district because it ran out of money. And for its first few years, the RSD's opposition was literally "out of town," living elsewhere. By the time many of them returned, the RSD had a running start and was making real progress. That progress gradually won most parents over, preventing its opponents from gaining enough traction to stop it.[47]

But no one would wish what happened to New Orleans on any other city. Leaders elsewhere who want to help children in failing schools must find another path. They have to find a way to convince local leaders and communities to embrace the necessary changes. This is a tall order, but it has been done.

## THE SOLUTION: A CARROT AND A STICK

Time and time again, the threat of losing schools to some form of state takeover (or to charter school competitors) has motivated mayors, school boards, and superintendents to embrace profound reforms. It has happened in Memphis, in Indianapolis and South Bend, Indiana, in Cleveland, in Springfield, Massachusetts, in San Antonio, Ft. Worth, and other Texas cities, and in a variety of other districts. If the stick is the threat of state takeover, the carrot has been state laws allowing districts to create some kind of innovation zone.

There are different versions of innovation schools in different cities, so let me be clear about my definition. I'm talking about a group (typically a dozen or less) of fairly autonomous district schools overseen by an appointed board, whose job it is to protect the schools' autonomy and hold them accountable for performance. (Note: Memphis's iZone did not have an appointed board, and it included well more than 12 schools. There are other zones that do not fit my definition, and most are less effective because they lack an independent board, in my opinion.)

In a few models, some or all of the schools are nonprofit organizations that employ their teachers and staff, but in most they remain district schools with district employees. Zone boards are usually organized as not-for-profit 501(c)3 organizations, and they employ small staffs to oversee the schools. If schools flounder, the staff tries to help. But if the school continues to fail for several years, the board's job is to replace it with a new leader and approach or a stronger operator. If a school shows rapid academic growth for several years, on the other hand, the board might ask it to start another school or replace a failing school.

In some states the teachers are covered by district collective bargaining agreements (CBAs), or by "thin contracts" they negotiate with the zone board, which allow the schools more flexibility and often grant extra pay for longer hours or years. But other states with zones, such as Texas and Tennessee, do not allow collective bargaining for school staff.

Zones have two big advantages over takeover districts like the ASD: the schools remain in the local district, and the zones preserve local ownership. As discussed above, the political backlash when a statewide district takes over failing schools is just too intense for most elected leaders. But when a state brokers a deal with the local school district that results in an innovation zone, local leaders are more likely to feel ownership of that initiative. "It has to be voluntary, driven by local leaders, or it won't work very well," says Chris Gabrieli, co-founder of the nonprofit Empower Schools, which has helped 10 different districts create innovation zones. "The stronger the base of local champions, the more likely the long-term success."

Innovation zones are fairly new, and the pandemic has interrupted standardized testing for the past two years, so there is not yet overwhelming evidence of success. Significant numbers of schools in Denver's and Springfield's zones are improving,[48] but zones in Texas and South Bend are still too young to evaluate. Based on past experience, however there are several other keys to the success of innovation zones.

***1. Meaningful autonomy.***

Innovation school leaders must be free to hire dedicated teachers and staff who are aligned with the vision and mission of their school. And if a few of them prove ineffective or damaging to morale, school leaders must have the power to let them go. (Often, in such cases,

the district guarantees them a job at another district school.) School leaders must also be able to control their own budgets, set their own schedules, shape the school's culture, control their approach to discipline, and define their own curricula and learning models, such as dual-language immersion, Montessori, project-based learning, or a STEM or performing arts focus.

It is best if state legislation grants full autonomy, rather than forcing schools or zones to negotiate for it with their district bureaucracies. Central office staff in districts usually limit these autonomies, which damages schools' ability to succeed as well as their morale. Soon frustrated school leaders and teachers depart. Without legislation, other state laws and district policies regarding school finance, collective bargaining, and the like will also limit autonomy. Only state legislation that supersedes those state and district rules can deliver full school autonomy.

***2. Real accountability for performance.***

Both zones and their schools should be held accountable through five-year performance agreements that spell out their expected results. These should include test scores (emphasizing academic growth rather than proficiency rates, since turnaround schools will have many students far behind grade level). But they also should include other factors, such as student engagement (measured through student and parent surveys), parental satisfaction, and for high schools, graduation rates and college-going and employment rates for graduates. (For more on measuring school quality, see *Reinventing America's Schools*, chapter 13.[49])

If schools fail to make adequate progress for several years, zone staff should help them find additional support during a probationary period. Zones usually have no more than a dozen schools, so their staff can often monitor the effectiveness of school leaders better than a district can. Springfield's Empowerment Zone Partnership typically gives principals two to three years to demonstrate adequate progress before it intervenes. In its first five years, the zone divided several schools into smaller schools, replicated three schools, launched six new school models, and replaced school operators or principals 11 times.[50]

***3. An independent zone board.***

Only a board independent of the elected district school board would make the kind of bold moves Springfield's zone board has. That is why the appointment of zone boards should be kept as far out of politics as possible. If zone boards feel they have to please the elected school board, they will be too afraid of political backlash to do what is necessary, in the long run. In Springfield, the state education commissioner appointed four board members; the other three were Springfield's mayor, superintendent, and a third chosen by the school board. (Six of the seven were from Springfield.[52]) Where districts create zones to stave off state takeovers or closures of their schools, this is a good model. Where districts create zones on their own, board appointments could be split between the superintendent, the school board, and the mayor or city manager. The state commissioner could be required to approve the appointments, to ensure that they are independent.

***4. Extra funding.***

Turning around failing schools is extremely difficult. When they are restarted or converted to autonomous zone schools, they should receive extra funding for at least the first three to five years. (Longer subsidies may be necessary or desirable in some cases.) In Memphis's iZone, schools have received about $600,000 extra per

year for as long as they stayed in the zone,[52] to fund longer school days, extra reading teachers, bonuses to attract and keep top school leaders and teachers, coaching to support them, more guidance counselors, and the like.[54]

***5. A variety of learning models.***

Most innovation zones are in urban areas, where families have geographic access to a variety of schools. Since different children come from different backgrounds, are interested in different things, learn differently, and even speak different languages, it makes sense to offer them different kinds of schools. There are literally dozens of models to choose from, with more being invented every year.

***6. Choice of zone schools.***

Not all zones provide choice to families, but if they don't, it will be hard to make a variety of learning models available. It makes no sense to assign children to STEM schools, dual-language immersion schools, Montessori schools, or performing arts schools. Instead, zones should let parents choose the school that best fits their child. When they have that option, both parents and students are likely to be more motivated. Zones should then allow the public dollars to follow families' choices, so schools will be driven to improve their offerings and outcomes. When schools have to compete for their students and funds, they pay more attention to what parents want and work harder to deliver it.

## DIFFERENT SCHOOL MODELS

Some districts use innovation schools and zones to create new learning models that are more effective at engaging and educating students. There are many examples already in existence, including the following.

***By Pedagogical Approach***

- Project-based education encourages active learning through projects, at times in the community outside of the school building.
- Community schools include "wrap-around" social services for students and families, such as health care, psychological counseling, and parent education.
- "No-excuses" schools usually have longer school days and years, high expectations, an incentive structure with clear rewards and punishments, and an unrelenting focus on college.
- Competency-based learning allows children to move on not when the teacher does or the calendar flips over but when they prove they have mastered particular content.
- Personalized learning or "blended learning" usually involves educational software to help students learn content at their own pace; it is often combined with competency-based learning.
- International Baccalaureate schools offer rigorous, exam-based curricula that help develop language abilities, international understanding, and critical thinking.
- Montessori schools group three grades together in each classroom and engage students in self-directed learning, at their own pace, for much of the day.
- Waldorf schools focus preschool through age six or seven on creative play and hands-on activities, elementary education

to age 14 on developing artistic expression and social abilities, and secondary education beginning at age 14 on developing critical reasoning and empathic understanding.[55]

- "Early-college" high schools engage motivated students in college-level work and allow them to earn as much as two years' worth of college credits, through dual-enrollment programs with colleges.
- Virtual, online schools let students take all courses online, often using educational software.
- Internship-heavy high schools, such as the Big Picture Learning schools, have all their students spend some time every week in internships at businesses, nonprofits, or government offices.
- Tutoring-intensive schools, such as Match Charter Schools in Boston, provide as much as two hours a day of tutoring to students.
- Peer learning schools involve students in teaching one another as a central part of the curriculum.
- Intensive writing schools use a curriculum in which students write every day, in multiple classes.
- A few charter schools blend home schooling with in-person learning, educating children in person for half the week but at home for the rest.

***By the Type of Children They Target:***

- Neighborhood schools.
- Schools for gifted students.
- Single-sex schools.
- Schools that offer increased support for English language learners.
- Schools for adults.
- Preschools.
- Schools with intense therapeutic help for children (and families) who need it.
- Schools for students with disabilities, some of which target a particular disability, such as autism, and some of which integrate regular students and those with disabilities.
- Schools that seek to preserve a cultural heritage, such as Afro-centric schools, Native American schools, and schools that stress traditional culture in Hawaii.
- High schools for those who have dropped out or are over-age.
- Alternative schools for "at-risk" kids: those who are chronically truant, coming back from the criminal justice system, or otherwise struggling.
- Residential schools for high-need students, such as SEED schools in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere.
- Schools for children who have experienced trauma or been in foster care, such as Monument Academy in Washington, D.C.
- Recovery schools for students with addictions.
- Schools for adults and their young children, such as Briya Public Charter School in Washington, D.C.

***By Particular Content Areas:***

- Bilingual immersion schools.
- Science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) schools, and STEAM schools, which add arts.
- Career and technical high schools, which prepare students for college or technical careers right out of high school.
- Arts-intensive schools.
- Drama-intensive schools.
- Military academies.
- Military and maritime academies.
- Athletics-intensive schools, such as Denver's Girls Athletic Leadership School.

Excerpted from *Reinventing America's Schools: Creating a 21st Century Education System*, by David Osborne.

***7. Central office buy-in.***

In some districts, superintendents who support innovation zones have not brought their bureaucracies along. The purchasing office, the transportation office, the curriculum and instruction office, and others end up refusing to honor zone autonomies, leading to continual frustration at the schools. Changing the mindset in the bureaucracy requires a huge cultural shift. Central office staffers often believe school leaders cannot be allowed to make certain decisions, because they can't be trusted or it will cost too much. Many are convinced they know best. They often resent "special privileges" given to innovation schools, which create more work for them, because they have one set of procedures for most schools, another for innovation schools. And often they have seen reforms come and go and learned from experience that "this too shall pass." So leaders have to work hard to convince them to buy in.[56] Some districts create a special team to support the zones by resolving barriers thrown up by the central office.

A few other lessons are obvious from the experience of the ASD (see the sidebar on pages six to eight):

- Don't try to do too much too fast. Even in New Orleans, the RSD only managed to convert five to six schools a year, and not all of them succeeded.
- Engage the community before you launch the zone, explaining what will happen and why it will lead to better schools for their children. Lead with the new schools, not the governance changes, and get parents excited about them.
- If your students are mostly children of color, recruit school leaders, teachers, and zone board members of color.
- Develop a talent pipeline of training programs for school leaders and teachers ahead of time, to funnel effective teachers and administrators into the zone.
- Let new school operators phase in turnaround schools one or two grades at a time, rather than all at once.

You can find many other lessons learned, implementation steps and model innovation school legislation in *The Third Way: A Guide to Implementing Innovation Schools*, by Tressa Pankovits and David Osborne.

## CONCLUSION

One way to help children trapped in failing schools is to give their families more choices – to help them find a better school. We can do that with public school choice systems, which now exist in many cities. We can also do it with private school choice options, through vouchers for low-income children. If we allow vouchers for all children, however, parents will add money to the voucher and buy the best school they can afford, and our education system will become as stratified by income as our housing markets. In my view, this abandonment of the goal of equal opportunity for all children would be a tragic mistake.

Unlike vouchers, public school choice systems make schools accountable to both parents and school or zone boards. Unfortunately, experience has shown that accountability to parents is not enough, because some families will never desert failing schools. In city after city where charter school authorizers have failed to hold their schools accountable for performance (in Michigan, for example), schools that are failing academically have survived. For some parents, having a safe, nurturing school is enough. That is why our leaders must do something about failing schools, even as they provide opportunities for families to choose other schools.

Experience has also proven that deliberate efforts to replace and/or turn around failing schools can succeed. It has happened at scale in a variety of cities: in New York City when Joel Klein was chancellor, in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, in Chicago when Arne Duncan was CEO, in Memphis under the ASD and iZone, in Los Angeles when Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa created the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, in Indianapolis with its Innovation Network Schools, in Springfield's Empowerment Zone Partnership, and in Camden's Renaissance Schools.

Now that we know it is possible, the task for state policymakers is simple. They must give districts a tool they can use, in the form of legislation to allow innovation zones, and incentives to use that tool. If they ignore this opportunity, they will sentence millions of poor children to inadequate educations that, for most, will result in lifetimes of poverty.

That is the true civil rights issue of our time.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Osborne, author of *Reinventing America's Schools: Creating a 21st Century Education System*, was until recently director of K-12 education work at the Progressive Policy Institute.

# Footnotes

Note: all quotations without endnotes are from interviews with the author.

1 Emma Brown, "Obama Also Called Education 'the Civil Rights Issue of Our Time,'" *The Washington Post*, February 28, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2017/live-updates/trump-white-house/real-time-fact-checking-and-analysis-of-trumps-address-to-congress/obama-also-called-education-the-civil-rights-issue-of-our-time/.

2 Emma Kate Fittes, "Indiana Lawmakers Passed Measures That Will Reshape Education," *Chalkbeat Indiana*, April 27, 2021, https://in.chalkbeat.org/2021/4/27/22405971/indiana-lawmakers-passed-measures-that-will-reshape-education-heres-what-you-should-know.

3 See, for instance, L. Dragoset, J. Thomas, M. Herrmann, J. Deke, S. James-Burdumy, C. Graczewski, A. Boyle, R. Upton, C. Tanenbaum, and J. Griffin, *School Improvement Grants: Implementation and Effectiveness (Final Report)*, Washington D.C.: US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, 2017, https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20174013/; and B. Schueler, C. Asher, K. Larned, S. Mehrotra, and C. Pollard, "Improving Low-Performing Schools: A Meta-Analysis of Impact Evaluation Studies," (EdWorkingPaper: 20-274), Annenberg Institute at Brown University, https://doi.org/10.26300/qxjk-yq91.

4 Terry M. Moe, "The Union Label on the Ballot Box," *Education Next* 6, No. 3 (Summer 2006), https://www.educationnext.org/the-union-label-on-the-ballot-box/.

5 Joseph O. Oluwole and Preston C. Green, III, "State Takeovers of School Districts: Race and the Equal Protection Clause," *Indiana Law Review*, Vol. 42, 2009, pp. 343-409, https://mckinneylaw.iu.edu/ilr/pdf/vol42p343.pdf.

6 Alan Greenblatt, "The Problem With School Takeovers," *Governing*, May 21, 2018, https://www.governing.com/archive/gov-school-takeovers-newark-new-jersey.html.

7 Kenneth K. Wong and Francis X. Shen, "Measuring the Effectiveness of City and State Takeover as a School Reform Strategy," *Peabody Journal of Education*, Vol. 78, No. 4, 2003, pp. 89-119, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1492958?seq=1.

8 Tania DeLusuriaga, "Chelsea Schools Hit Crossroads," *Boston Globe*, June 30, 2008, http://archive.boston.com/news/education/k_12/articles/2008/06/30/chelsea_schools_hit_crossroads/; and John Gehring, "Boston University-Chelsea Match Endures, *Education Week,* Nov. 23, 2004, https://www.edweek.org/leadership/boston-university-chelsea-match-endures/2004/11.

9 Beth E. Schueler, "School District Turnaround: Learning from Leadership in Lawrence, Massachusetts," Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston (Harvard Kennedy School, January 2018), https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/rappaport/files/thirdway%20v5.pdf; and Michael Jonas, "Oversight of Lawrence Schools Shifting to State-Appointed Board," *Commonwealth*, Nov. 15, 2017, https://commonwealthmagazine.org/education/oversight-lawrence-schools-shifting-state-appointed-board/.

10 David Osborne, *Reinventing America's Schools: Creating a 21st Century Education System*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2017; and Emily Langhorne and David Osborne, "Analysis: Is Chicago Really America's Fastest-Improving Urban School District? Why Claims Made by the NYT & Others Are Misleading," *The74*, Jan. 7, 2018, https://www.the74million.org/article/is-chicago-really-the-fastest-improving-urban-district-in-the-country-such-claims-made-by-the-new-york-times-and-others-are-misleading/

11 Osborne, *Reinventing America's Schools*, p. 331.

12 Nelson Smith, *Redefining the School District in America*, DC: Fordham Institute, June 2015, p. 23, https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/redefining-school-district-america.

13 NC Innovative School District website, http://innovativeschooldistrict.org/about/what-is-innovative-school-district/, accessed May 7, 2021.

14 Ty Tagami, "Voters Say 'No' To Opportunity School District," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, Nov. 9, 2016, https://www.ajc.com/news/local-education/voters-say-opportunity-school-district/QFf8J42kfmPGx8gVFhrVVL/.

15 Email from Chris Barbic, May 2021.

.

16 Erin McIntyre, "Memphis 'Innovation Zone' Schools See Turnaround Success," *Education Dive*, May 11, 2016, www.educationdive.com/news/memphis-innovation-zone-schools-see-turnaround-success/417615/.

17 Marta Aldrich, "Latest iZone Expansion Will Leave Few Memphis Priority Schools to Improve on Their Own," *Chalkbeat Tennessee*, Dec. 16, 2015, https://tn.chalkbeat.org/2015/12/16/21092500/latest-izone-expansion-will-leave-few-memphis-priority-schools-to-improve-on-their-own.

18 John Buntin, "Changing a Culture Inside and Out of School," *Governing*, Dec. 15, 2014, https://www.governing.com/archive/gov-memphis-school-culture-part-two.html.

19 Christine Campbell and Libuse Binder, In Depth Portfolio Assessment: *Shelby County Schools - Memphis, TN*, Bothell, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2014, https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/CRPEMemphisPortfolioAssessment.pdf.

20 John Buntin, "Assessing the Nation's Most Ambitious Education Reforms in Memphis, Tennessee," *Governing*, Aug. 25, 2015, https://www.governing.com/archive/gov-memphis-education-reform-part-four.html.

21 Malika Anderson, "Stay the Course with Achievement School District," *The Tennessean*, 11 Feb. 11, 2016, https://www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/2016/02/11/stay-course-achievement-school-district/80236970/.

22 McIntyre, "Memphis 'Innovation Zone' Schools See Turnaround Success."

23 Buntin, "Changing a Culture Inside and Out of School."

24 Laura Faith Kebede, "Here's What Happened to the Original 69 Priority Schools in Memphis," *Chalkbeat Tennessee,* June 6, 2016, http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/tn/2016/06/06/heres-what-happened-to-the-original-69-priority-schools-in-memphis/#.V1gbVsemUVf.

25 Material on Haslem, Huffman, McQueen, and Barbic: Interviews with Chris Barbic, Feb. and May, 2021.

26 These plans were articulated in "Building the Possible in TN: ASD 2015-17 Strategic Plan Summary," put out by the ASD in March 2015. See slide 24.

27 Interviews with Chris Barbic.

28 Lam Pham, Gary T. Henry, Adam Kho, and Ron Zimmer, *School Turnaround in Tennessee: Insights After Six Years of Reform*, Nashville: Tennessee Education Research Alliance, July 2019, https://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/TERA/files/School_Turnaround_After_Six_Years.pdf.

29 Caroline Bauman, "As Tennessee's Turnaround District Enters its Eighth School Year, Scores Remain Stubbornly Low," *Chalkbeat Tennessee,* Aug. 15, 2019, https://tn.chalkbeat.org/2019/8/15/21109287/as-tennessee-s-turnaround-district-enters-its-eighth-school-year-scores-remain-stubbornly-low.

30 Gary T. Henry, Adam Kho, and Ron Zimmer, "The Effects of School Turnaround in Tennessee's Achievement School District and Innovation Zones," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Vol. 39, No. 4, December 2017, pp. 670–696, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1158183.

31 Juli Kim, Tim Field, and Elaine Hargrave, *The Achievement School District: Lessons from Tennessee,* Chapel Hill: Public Impact and New Schools for New Orleans, 2015, https://publicimpact.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Achievement_School_District_Lessons_From_Tennesee-Public_Impact.pdf.

32 Interview with Chris Barbic, Jan. 2015.

33 Diane Massell, Joshua L. Glazer, and Matthew Malone, *"This Is the Big Leagues:" Charter-Led Turnaround in a Non-Charter World*, Nashville: Tennessee Consortium on Research, Evaluation & Development, Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, June 2016, pp. 11-12, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305210374_THIS_IS_THE_BIG_LEAGUES_CHARTER-LED_TURNAROUND_IN_A_NON-CHARTER_WORLD.

34 Chris Barbic, via email, Oct. 2016.

35 Kim, Field, and Hargrave, *The Achievement School District: Lessons from Tennessee,* p. 23.

36 Interview with Derwin Sisnett, CEO of Gestalt Community Schools, a charter operator, Jan. 2015; and Massell, Glazer, and Malone, *"This is the Big Leagues,"* pp. 16-17.

37 Massell, Glazer, and Malone, *"This is the Big Leagues,"* pp. 16-17.

38 Ibid.

39 Caroline Bauman, "Charter Leaders Call Special Education Funding for State-Run Schools a 'Band-Aid Solution,' Worry about Future," *Chalkbeat Tennessee*, Nov. 19, 2019, https://tn.chalkbeat.org/2019/11/19/21109281/charter-leaders-call-special-education-funding-for-state-run-schools-a-band-aid-solution-worry-about.

40 Pham, Henry, Kho, and Zimmer, *School Turnaround in Tennessee: Insights After Six Years of Reform*, p. 6.

41 Interviews with Chris Barbic, Feb. and May 2021. Those plans also appear in "Building the Possible in TN: ASD 2015-17 Strategic Plan Summary."

42 Caroline Bauman, "It's Been Six Years Since Tennessee Took Over Its First Low-Performing Schools. How Are They Doing?" *Chalkbeat Tennessee*, Aug. 22, 2018, https://tn.chalkbeat.org/2018/8/22/21105810/it-s-been-six-years-since-tennessee-took-over-its-first-low-performing-schools-how-are-they-doing.

43 Quoted in Laura Faith Kebede, "As Memphis Expands Its Efforts To Improve Schools, One Model Is About To Double in Size," *Chalkbeat Tennessee*, May 16, 2018, https://tn.chalkbeat.org/2018/5/16/21105416/as-memphis-expands-its-efforts-to-improve-schools-one-model-is-about-to-double-in-size.

44 Kim, Field, and Hargrave, *The Achievement School District: Lessons from Tennessee,* p. 8.

45 Marta W. Aldrich and Laura Faith Kebede, "Memphis Moves from Problem Child to Poster Child on Tennessee's New Schools Improvement List," *Chalkbeat Tennessee*, Sept. 21, 2018, https://tn.chalkbeat.org/2018/9/21/21105754/memphis-moves-from-problem-child-to-poster-child-on-tennessee-s-new-school-improvement-list.

46 Michael DeArmond et al., M*easuring Up: Educational Improvement and Opportunity in 50 Cities,* Bothell, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, Oct. 2015, https://www.crpe.org/publications/measuring-educational-improvement-and-opportunity-50-cities.

47 Osborne, *Reinventing America's Schools,* p. 60.

48 For information on Denver's first innovation zone, see https://www.empowerschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/LLN-2018-Results-vShare.pdf. For information on the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership, see https://www.empowerschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/SEZP-2019-Results_vshare.pdf.

49 Ibid., pp. 249-277.

50 Interview with Chris Gabrieli of Empower Schools and written communication from Gabrieli and Matt Brunell of the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership.

51 Eric B. Schnurer, *The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership,* DC: Progressive Policy Institute, 2017, https://www.progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Springfield-Empowerment-Paper.pdf; and email from Chris Gabrieli, May 2021.

52 Schnurer, *The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership,* p. 10.

53 Jennifer Pignolet, "11 In, 13 Out: Massive Reshuffling of IZone Schools Proposed for Shelby County Schools," *The Commercial Appeal,* Jan. 16, 2019. https://www.commercialappeal.com/story/news/education/2019/01/15/shelby-county-schools-innovation-zone-izone/2586516002/.

54 "We are 901: Shelby County Schools District Budget," (FY 2019- 2020), pp. 62-63.

55 For a useful discussion, see Wikipedia, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waldorf_education.

56 Tressa Pankovits and David Osborne, *The Third Way: A Guide to Implementing Innovation Schools,* Progressive Policy Institute, October 7, 2020, https://www.progressivepolicy.org/publication/the-third-way-a-guide-to-implementing-innovation-schools/.

ppi

The Progressive Policy Institute is a catalyst for policy innovation and political reform based in Washington, D.C. Its mission is to create radically pragmatic ideas for moving America beyond ideological and partisan deadlock.

Founded in 1989, PPI started as the intellectual home of the New Democrats and earned a reputation as President Bill Clinton's "idea mill." Many of its mold-breaking ideas have been translated into public policy and law and have influenced international efforts to modernize progressive politics.

Today, PPI is developing fresh proposals for stimulating U.S. economic innovation and growth; equipping all Americans with the skills and assets that social mobility in the knowledge economy requires; modernizing an overly bureaucratic and centralized public sector; and defending liberal democracy in a dangerous world.



PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE
1156 15th Street NW
Ste 400
Washington, D.C. 20005

**Tel** 202.525.3926
**Fax** 202.525.3941

info@ppionline.org
progressivepolicy.org