

WEAVING WEBS OF SUPPORT: UNCONVENTIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND THE SYSTEMS THEY NAVIGATE



By Steven Weiner

THE *Canopy*



INTRODUCTION

In many schools around the country, families and educators are working to design more inclusive, relevant, and joyous learning environments. Since 2018, the Canopy project has focused on identifying and cataloging hundreds of examples from diverse school communities. The project has rightly focused on new student learning experiences and highlighted the ways that educators and administrators shift practices inside schools. But to encourage and inform similar efforts in other communities, it would be equally useful to know if any support has come from outside these schools to help form, grow, and sustain their novel approaches to teaching and learning. After all, according to Scott Berkun, author of ***The Myths of Innovation***, innovation almost always depends on the insights and support of many others, despite the tendency to highlight the radical genius and heroic efforts of individuals.

Drawing on what Berkun calls the “myth of the lone inventor,” we wanted to know if Canopy schools are innovating on their own or if they are receiving help to forward their unique visions of education. The recent Canopy survey paints a complex picture. Most of the participating schools are public, so they’re connected in some way to larger public education systems. But only 29% of those schools indicated that they’re part of district or charter network innovation initiatives, and about half reported relationships with external providers. This suggests that while some schools are working more independently, others have important relationships that may be supporting their work. We sought to understand what those relationships looked like and what kind of benefits and challenges they present to innovative school leaders.

We interviewed leaders from six public (traditional district or charter) Canopy schools who are part of innovation initiatives outside of their schools. We sought leaders from a range of geographic and organizational contexts, from rural charters to urban public schools. What we learned helped illustrate—and complicate—findings from the survey.

What is the Canopy project?

The **Canopy project** is a collaborative research effort, stewarded by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) and Transcend, to build collective knowledge about more equitable and student-centered approaches in schools. The project first invites a diverse group of education organizations nationwide to nominate learning environments whose work they believe to be promising. Then, the project sends an annual survey to leaders from the nominated learning environments asking them to share more about their work and the practices they implement at a school-wide level.

Read more detail about Canopy project methodology [here](#).

Specifically, we learned that:

- Many innovative schools operate in and among multiple institutions and partnerships simultaneously. Seeking support from multiple sources can pay off, but it makes an innovative school leader's job more complex.
- Central offices can both help and hinder innovation — even both, simultaneously.
- Some schools are not just receiving system-level support — they are also providing it. By advocating for new policies, sharing new practices, and broadcasting their visions of schooling, these schools are catalysts for systems change.

Clearly, many innovative schools are not going it alone. But getting help from various sources comes with its own challenges. Leaders have to be expert weavers of resources, navigating systems with agility and determining how to bring a unique vision of schooling to life while keeping external evaluators happy. State and system leaders play key roles in ensuring that innovative schools have the freedom, capacity, and leadership support to sustain their work.

--- □ Innovative schools live at the intersection of multiple systems

Of the 251 schools that responded to Canopy surveys in 2023, 86% are public district or charter schools, a classification that by definition generally means they are part of a larger governing system that provides academic oversight as well as business services such as transportation and human resources assistance.¹

Yet the six school leaders we interviewed said their circumstances are far more complex than a simple “charter” or “public” school classification would suggest. Many of their schools have uncommon relationships with their district or charter network central offices, providing the schools with flexibilities and exemptions from standard policy. All of them also maintain formal relationships with other entities, such as technical assistance providers, higher education institutions, statewide district networks, foundations, and other nonprofit organizations. In each case, these relationships enable leaders to access a wider array of resources. These unique configurations also mean that school leaders are not just dealing with “the system,” but many systems at once.



¹ Some are single-site charter schools without a network “central office,” but the Canopy data do not specify how many.

Organizational and system snapshots of six innovative schools

The Workshop School is a high school in the School District of Philadelphia, run through a partnership with the nonprofit Workshop Learning, a nonprofit. The district's innovation network initiative allows a nonprofit organization to act as the school operator.

Solar Preparatory School for Girls is a K-8 school in the Dallas Independent School District. It was started as part of the district's Choice Schools initiative, which aims to develop a range of schools that focus on different student needs and content areas.

Cañon City High School is a district school in rural Colorado focused on career-connected learning. The school has advocated for changes to state and district policy that make it easier for students to get credit for work-based learning experiences.

Vista Grande Charter High School is a state-authorized charter school in Taos, New Mexico. It is affiliated with multiple organizations that provide mission-aligned curricular resources, professional development, and networking opportunities.

University High School is located on the University of Memphis campus in Tennessee. It is one of three lab schools run by the teaching college, but it's officially classified as a "partner" school with the local district, Shelby County Schools.

Salish Sea Elementary in Seattle is part of Impact Public Schools, a charter management organization that uses a centralized administrative model to operate four K-5 schools in Washington state.²

For example, two schools we spoke with are operating with a foot in two different institutions. University High School is a lab school run by the teachers college on the University of Memphis campus, and its staff are hired and managed by the university. Yet the school is also a partner school with the local district, Shelby County Schools. The affiliation enables the school to serve local neighborhood students, who get experienced teaching faculty as well as access to college courses that offer them dual credit in high school — opportunities not found

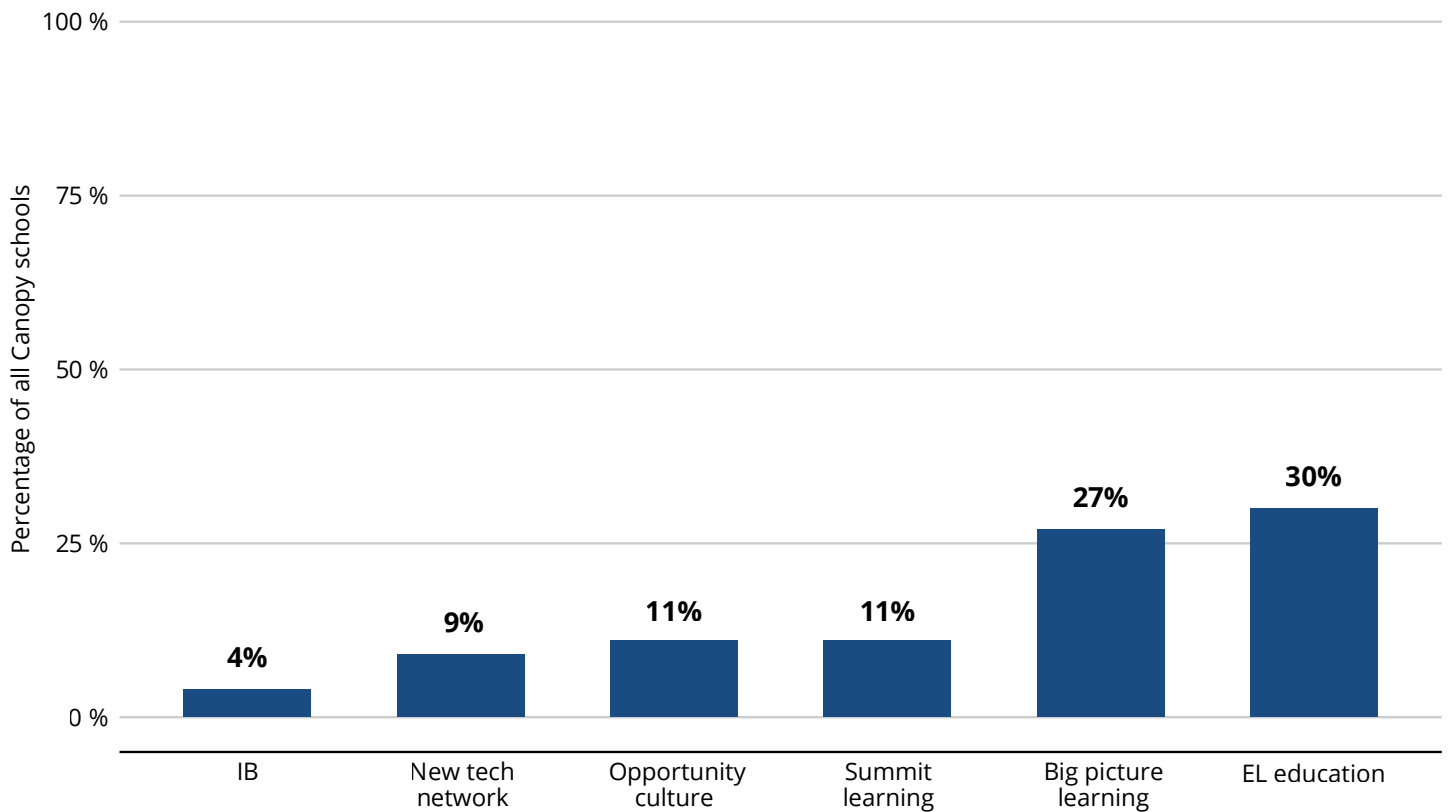
at other nearby district schools. In Philadelphia, the Workshop School is part of the School District of Philadelphia, but it's operated by the nonprofit Workshop Learning. The Workshop School's contract with the district stipulates the freedom to deviate from standard policies around hiring, staff pay, and graduation requirements. Leaders of both schools are clear that they are not charter schools, which would place them more squarely outside the jurisdiction of their districts' publicly elected school boards.

²Since the Canopy database includes three schools in the Impact Public Schools network, we spoke with one of the organization's co-CEOs who is closely connected to all the schools' work.

Despite operating under relatively conventional district governance structures, many Canopy schools look to outside organizations for resources to support their unique visions of schooling. Rather than building everything from scratch, these schools connect with established organizations that have already developed and fine-tuned the resources or materials they need, such as curriculum, teacher coaching and professional development, and relationships with other schools engaged in similar work. For instance, half of the 251 Canopy survey respondents reported implementing at least one of six well-known models for curriculum and school design.³ Big Picture Learning and EL Education were the most common models selected.

Prevalence of six popular educational models in Canopy schools

Percentages show the proportion of all Canopy schools that indicated they are using each model “somewhat” or “to a large extent.” The remainder selected “Not at all” or did not respond to the question.



³ Canopy project researchers chose these six based on what we understand to be broader prevalence, compared to newer or smaller-scale models.

These six model providers represent only a subset of the myriad external partners from which schools draw support. Isabelle St. Onge, principal of Vista Grande High School in Taos, New Mexico, described two other external organizations — the Green Schools National Network and the Center for Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning — as providing key supports to her school. Their resources help with school culture, teacher professional development, scheduling logistics, and facilities assessment, all integrated through the school's lens of sustainable and holistic student health.

School leaders also described the need to develop relationships with philanthropies to fund their work. Simon Hauger, founding principal of the Workshop School, noted that donors provided crucial support for his school's operations and also the district's innovation zone. In Texas, Solar Preparatory School for Girls has started its own dedicated foundation to supplement public funds. Leaders said that their private funders sometimes also offer resources like connections to peer networks and leadership coaching.

While engaging with multiple organizations yields tangible benefits, it also presents challenges for school leaders. Johnson, from University High School, was candid about the effort required to manage the expectations of two partnering institutions and to oversee the school's day-to-day operations. "It takes a lot of intentional work to crosscheck: What does the district want? What does the university want? How do I make sure I'm in compliance with all of those things and be true to our mission of doing things differently?" Johnson said. "Sometimes there's a strain to try to do both of those things well." At the same time, Johnson was clear that the university, the district, and the school's leaders were all aligned on the most important goal: for students and educators to be successful.

For Simon Hauger at The Workshop School, the advantages of navigating multiple systems are also worth the effort. While other innovative school leaders might have opted to branch off as a single-site charter or independent school, Hauger said it's essential to work at the intersection of a school district and a nonprofit. "Districts are the representation of public education. That's where the public funding is. They have the infrastructure to work for young people. They just need a lot of technical assistance in doing it better," he said. He also noted the partnership model ensures wider student access, because enrollment is open to students throughout the Philadelphia school district. "As soon as you create a special system, there's some selection bias," he said. "It's very difficult to maintain equal access for really marginalized populations."

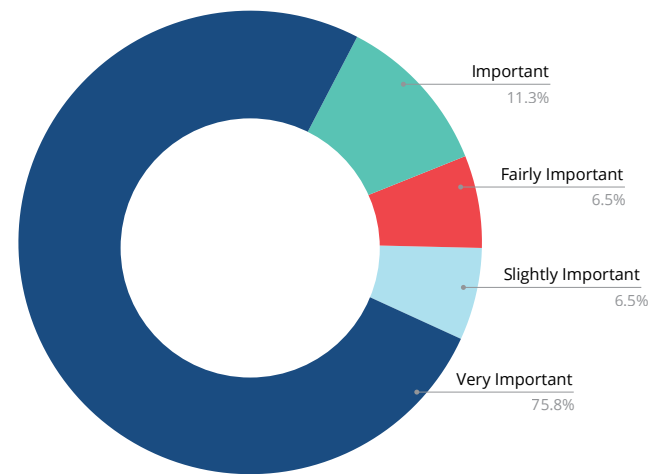
Working within a public school system, while complex and sometimes frustrating, often gives innovative schools the best chance to achieve their mission. Many leaders we spoke to talked about the benefits, as well as the downsides, of their relationships to the district and charter central offices that were trying to support their work.

Central offices can support innovation — and inhibit it

Canopy survey responses suggest that schools' central offices aren't particularly active in driving forward school-level innovation. Only 29% of Canopy's public school leaders reported being part of a system-wide innovation initiative in their school district or charter network.⁴ But when central offices do try to support innovation, survey data hint that they may have some success. Leaders who were part of system-wide innovation initiatives reported receiving more support from their central offices, such as capacity-building, public support for their work, curriculum, or funding. And they seemed to value the innovation initiatives they're a part of, since the vast majority reported that the initiative was "very important" for their innovation efforts.

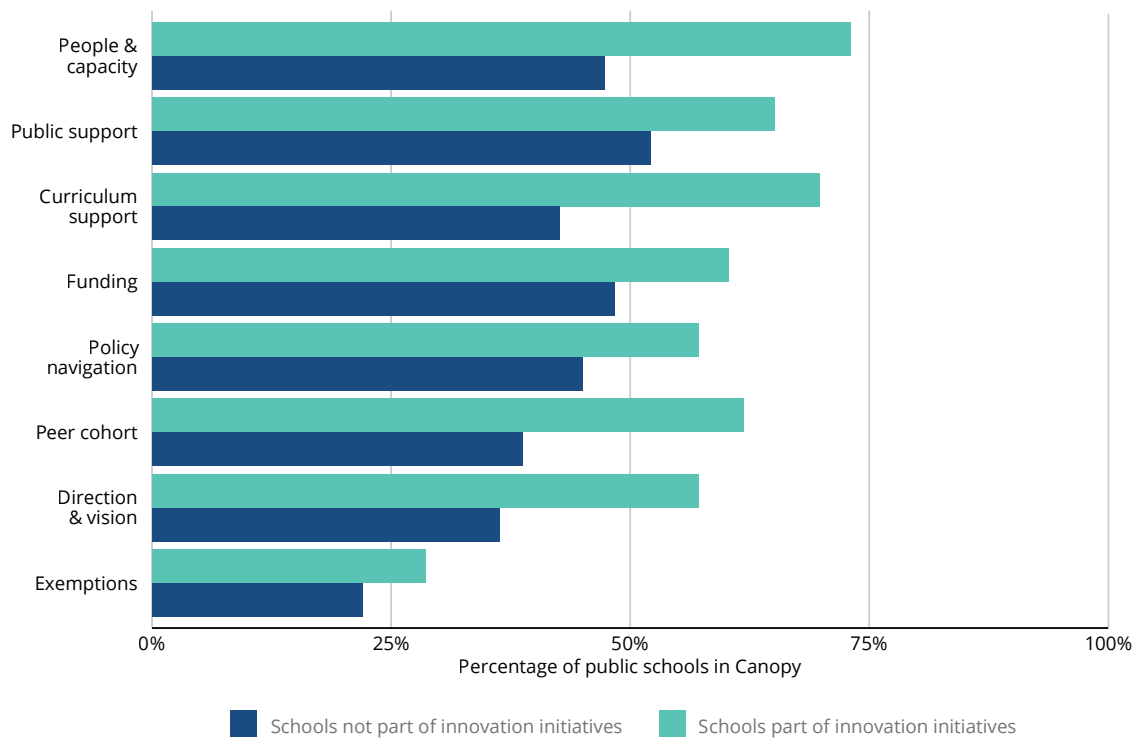
Schools say district/charter innovation initiatives are important to their work

Responses to "How important would you say this initiative is to the success of your learning environment's innovation work?" (N = 62)



Schools in district/charter innovation initiatives receive more central office support

Responses to "Does your central office provide any of the following related to your innovation work?" from schools that reported being part of system-wide innovation initiatives compared to those that did not.



⁴In response to the question "Is your learning environment part of a larger innovation initiative within your district or charter network?" 29% of school leaders responded "Yes," 58% responded "No," and 13% responded "Not sure." Leaders responding "Yes" were asked to describe the nature of their system-level initiative. Some responses described innovation initiatives that were outside their districts or charter networks (e.g., a national network organized by a provider), suggesting that the share of Canopy schools whose central administrative offices are actively prioritizing innovation could be even lower than 29%.

Our interviews probed whether, and how, central offices effectively support innovative schools. Leaders who reported being part of systemwide innovation initiatives said central office support was often critical for helping schools get started, connecting them to each other, and allowing them permission to innovate, but central office leadership changes and burdensome overhead made some school leaders' jobs much harder. To put it simply: Sometimes central office support can complicate or even undermine school-level innovation work, especially when supportive central office administrators leave their roles without putting in place policies or structures to ensure that support for the school will continue.

Central offices can help innovative schools get started...

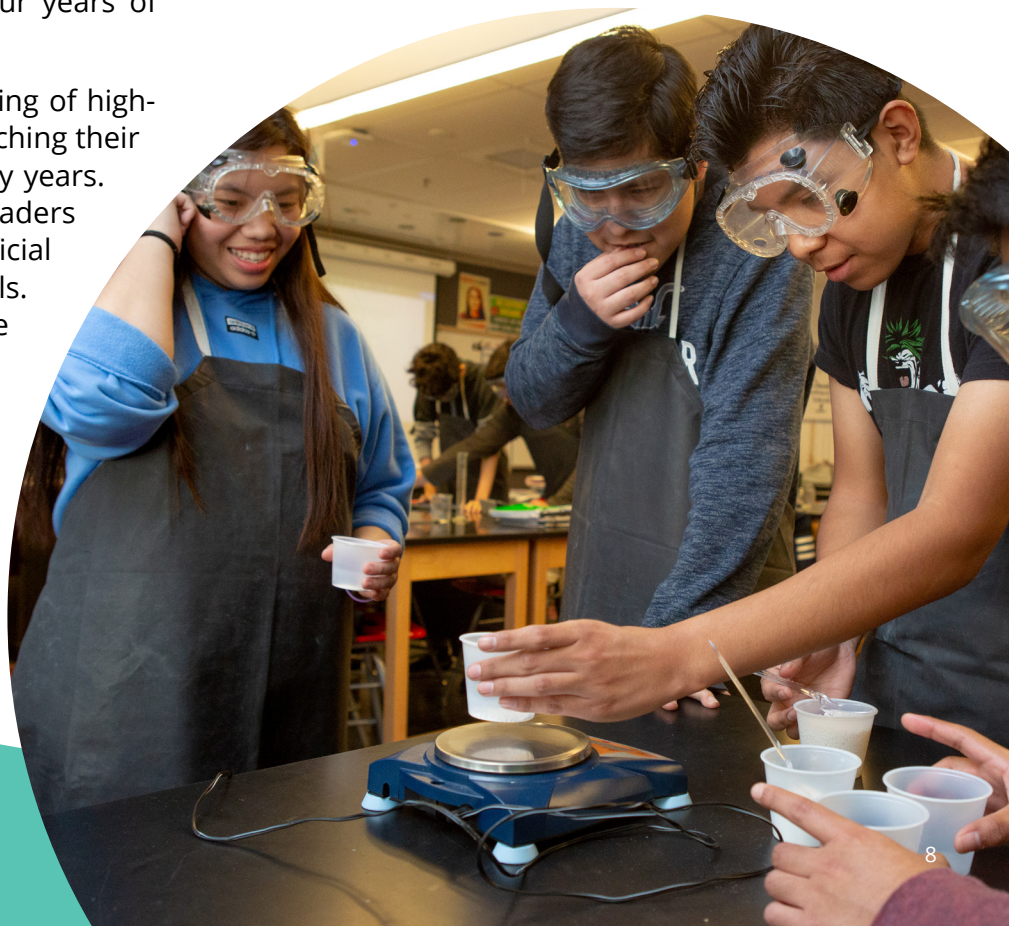
Principal Olivia Santos said her district supports the innovative work at Solar Preparatory School for Girls. Founded in 2016, Solar Prep was one of Dallas ISD's first "transformation schools," an initiative aimed at starting new schools that each addressed a different set of student needs or interests. According to Santos, the district put out a call to the community, asking, "Do you wanna build your dream school? Let's hear about it." School proposals that were approved for development received four years of start-up funding.

Other school leaders said that the backing of high-level administrators was crucial for launching their schools and sustaining them in the early years. This same sentiment was reported by leaders of schools in districts that did not have official start-up programs for innovative schools. Several leaders noted the importance of having buy-in from superintendents or chief executive officers who could advocate for the innovation efforts they wanted to pursue. Bill Summers, principal of Cañon City High School in Colorado, pointed out that his school's success was due in part to

having multiple central office leaders believe in his vision. "The superintendent has a lot to do with it. I'm on my second superintendent as a principal and both superintendents have been very forward thinking, forward-looking, and partners in change," he said.

... but leadership changes can put new schools at risk

Leadership changes are inevitable, and sometimes it means losing champions in the central office. When the Workshop School was founded in 2011 in Philadelphia, it had the then-superintendent's strong support. He promoted the school's vision and established a district innovation network to connect innovative school leaders. Since that superintendent left in 2018, however, the Workshop School's former principal, Simon Hauger, said the district curtailed some of the school's freedoms around admissions, leading to more students being placed there without fully buying into the school's unique vision of problem-based learning. If supportive district administrators don't hire like-minded successors and codify their support in policy and infrastructure, then innovative schools may be left in the lurch.



Central offices can provide support tailored to innovative schools' needs...

Now in its eighth year, Dallas ISD's "transformation schools" are not only up and running—they're getting their own customized support from the district. When the district reorganized its governance zones, it placed all the transformation schools, which are distributed around the district, in an administrative region of their own. "They are really focused on the viability of our schools, the direction that we're going, what needs to be kept on track with the rest of the district, and what we get certain autonomies for," said Santos, the principal of Solar Prep.

The district's newly formed Office of Transformation and Innovation organizes support for schools like Solar Prep. Santos said that administrators in the office will "brainstorm ideas for ... things that we deal with specifically that don't really apply to other campuses [in Dallas ISD]." Santos said the office can help schools determine if and how their chosen curriculum must align with the district, as well as bring in professional development for specific instructional approaches that innovative schools are using. The office also helps manage a host of logistical issues, like transportation, recruiting teachers with specialized expertise, and managing the student admissions lottery.

In some cases, an innovation-focused central office can offer even more integrated and comprehensive direction for teaching and learning. Jen Wickens, founder of the charter network Impact Public Schools, said her administration maintains a physical office on each of the small network's three campuses. Administrators design curriculum and professional development centrally, and teachers can customize elements of these to fit their school communities.⁵

School leaders with this kind of "wrap-around" operational and instructional support may be able to spend less time worrying about operational challenges and more on refining their core innovations around teaching strategies, school culture, and learning assessments.

...but administrative overhead can drain schools' resources

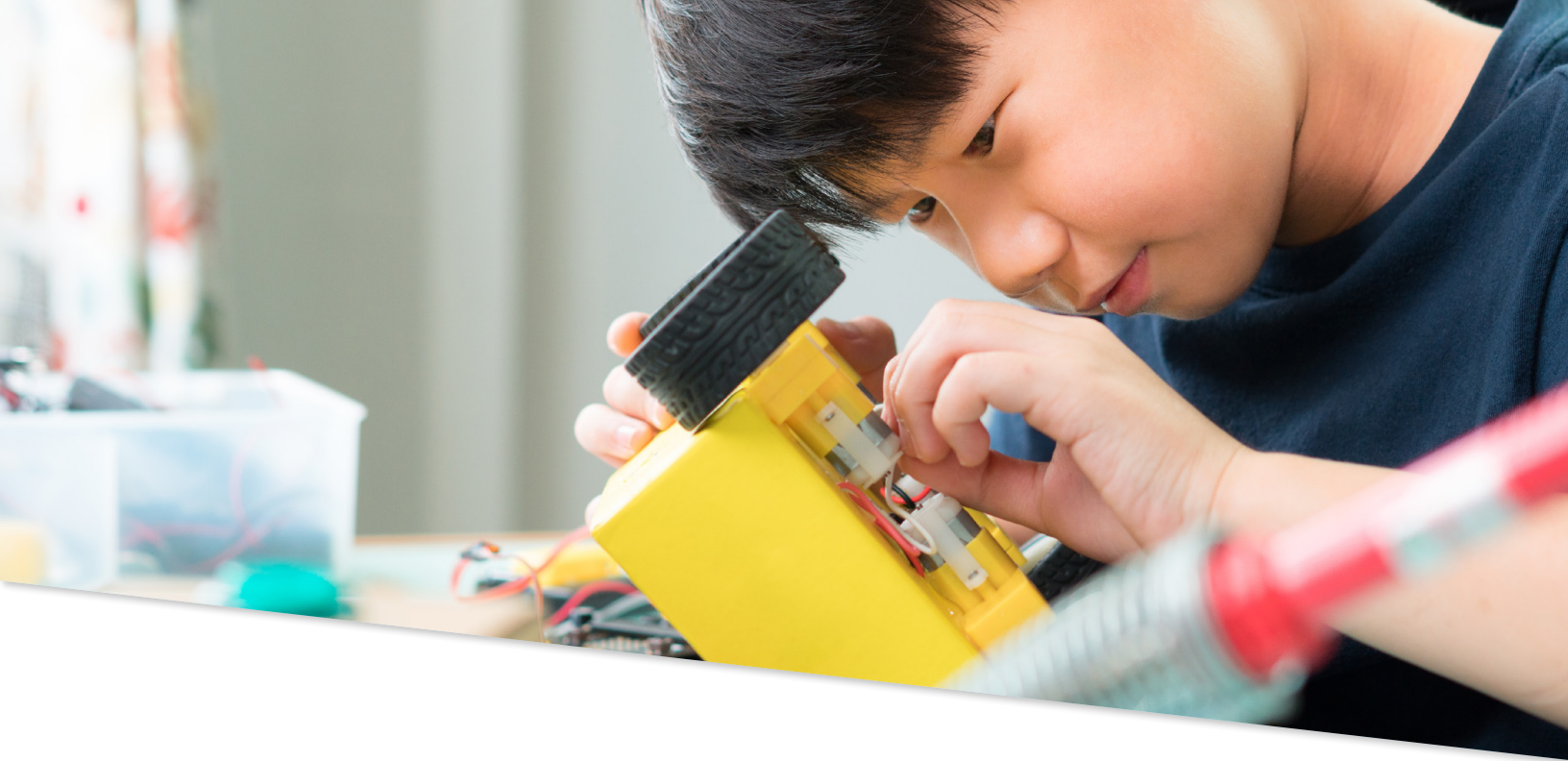
Central office support services can have downsides for innovative schools that don't see those services as mission-critical. Vista Grande High School, in New Mexico, recently shifted from being a district-authorized charter to a state-authorized charter. "It was very expensive to stay" with the district, said Isabelle St. Onge, Vista Grande's principal and founder. "They took 5% of all the federal monies in addition to 2% of our overall budget. That was a lot of money that didn't go directly to kids. It went to their indirect costs and business office." The money they save, St. Onge said, is now spent in ways that more directly serve the school's mission, such as funding their affiliation with the Green Schools National Network.

St. Onge's experience suggests there can be risks to relying on support services through central offices. In fact, the school leaders we spoke to suggested that a supportive, hands-on central office was the exception to the rule.

Central offices can allow for policy flexibility and school autonomy...

One of the most common themes in our interviews was the role central offices play in giving schools permission to deviate from standard district policies. For instance, in Cañon City High School, Summers described how his school board approved a major shift in the district's high school graduation policy to support students more quickly moving into career pathways. Rather than requiring students to attend high school for four years, Summers had argued that students should be allowed to graduate when they have attained graduation status, regardless of how many years they've been at the high school. With the support of central office administrators, Summers worked with the school board on making these policy changes. "That's a pretty significant change in philosophy for a rural school district," he said.

⁵As a charter network whose schools all use the same model, Impact Public Schools' "central office" has much more direct control over curriculum and instruction than any other school system our interviewees described.



In other cases, districts granted isolated exemptions from existing policy rather than making wholesale changes. Simon Hauger, former principal of the Workshop School, told us that a key element of support from the School District of Philadelphia has been the capacity to establish formal agreements that give the school flexibility with course offerings, graduation requirements, and staff hiring. “The thing that’s been most important for us is that there’s an avenue to create a contract [between] the school district [and] an outside partner,” he said.

...but gaining ‘permission to innovate’ can be a full-time job

Our interviews showed that navigating around restrictive policies and advocating for flexibility from rules is a large part of innovative school leaders’ jobs — likely larger than it would be in a conventional school. Summers, from Cañon City High School, said he’s found that his school board is “open to hearing why certain programs are good for kids and then changing their policies to allow it to happen at our school.” But getting to the point of making these changes took significant time and effort from both Summers and the district’s superintendent.

Reducing this additional workload was another reason that Isabelle St. Onge opted to make Vista Grande a state-authorized charter school. “Having to go to the [district school] board and ask permission was just time consuming and we were always running the risk they’d say no. Whereas as a state charter, we are our own [Local Education Agency] so... as long as I put it in the charter, I don’t have to worry about asking [the state Department of Education] permission to do something,” she said.

Central offices can connect innovative schools to each other

Central offices provide indirect support and “permission to innovate” by establishing innovation networks within their districts. These networks are often billed as ways for innovative schools to work together, share best practices, and collectively advocate for district support. This was the case for the Workshop School, which was a founding member of its district’s innovation network. In addition to the contractually granted autonomies his school receives, Hauger noted the importance of connecting with three other schools in the network. “We all know each other, learn from each other, and support each other,” he said.

--- □ Innovative schools don't just receive support — they also provide it

While system initiatives were often critical to enabling and fueling innovative work, we found that the motivation and vision for that work almost always resides at the school level. In fact, we found examples of schools not just receiving the benefits of system initiatives, but often being the catalyst for them by trying to spread innovation within their districts, networks, states, and beyond.

Cañon City High School principal Bill Summers thought that a push for innovation was never going to come from top-down governance and saw his involvement in advocating for state policy change as imperative. “If you wait for non-practitioners to become the north star, we'll all die and be long gone before that happens,” he said. “Sometimes you have to grab hold of those policy people and co-opt them into supporting what needs to happen on behalf of kids at the district level.”

Summers also noted that Cañon City High School was one of the model schools for the Homegrown Talent Initiative, a network of rural Colorado school districts that support career-connected learning. The initiative has not only helped districts learn from each other's innovations around career-connected learning, but also [amplified districts' advocacy](#) for changes to state policy around seat-time and graduation requirements.

Jen Wickens, founder of Impact Public Schools, also mentioned the importance of sharing their system's innovative work more broadly: “We really set out with a second part mission at Impact, which is making a broader impact on the public education system in Washington. And part of that is around building partnerships with districts and anyone who has a mission to close the opportunity gap.” Currently, Washington state has a cap on additional charter schools. While Impact Public Schools waits for permission to expand, Wickens has started to work with rural districts, who are open to their particular brand of project-based learning.

Our interviews suggested that the role of an innovative school leader is qualitatively different from that of a more traditional principal, and part of that difference lies in shaping the external conditions to support their school's innovations. In advocating for new freedoms, championing new policies, soliciting support from funders, participating in networks of like-minded educators and engaging with model providers, these leaders' efforts can result in benefits to not only their schools but to their districts, states, and beyond.

---□ Conclusion

Many schools attempting to innovate are not going it alone. Our interviews with six leaders suggest that schools simultaneously manage and seek out relationships with a range of external entities, including their districts or charter networks, technical assistance providers, foundations, national networks, and nonprofits.

Yet additional support comes with additional costs. Some schools receive ongoing operational and financial support from their central offices, which must be aligned with the school's mission to be the most helpful. While some central offices provide "permission to innovate" by removing policy roadblocks or helping to establish innovative schools, problems can occur later if policy flexibilities and central office buy-in falter. And the added work of identifying and integrating the most relevant and valuable resources from outside partners while negotiating political and bureaucratic hurdles falls to school leaders.

For more educational innovators to launch and sustain new programs, school system leaders and policymakers should consider the following recommendations:

First, grant school leaders autonomy to design and sustain unconventional approaches, and permission to deviate from existing standard policies. States and districts can both create policies that encourage educators to design and lead innovative schools, and give them freedom in areas like staffing, budget, curriculum, and instruction. At the district level, leaders can use a [System of Great Schools](#) model that defines quality and measures schools' progress without mandating standardized approaches to teaching, learning, and school operations. At the state level, policymakers can expand policy pathways that enable school-level innovation, both by allowing schools and districts to request exemption (i.e. waivers), and by writing flexibilities directly into state law. States should then promote awareness of those flexibilities, as Indiana has done with its [flexibility guide](#). States could even consider [state-wide school districts](#) that allow new learning models to emerge outside of traditional district structures.

Second, make sure schools have options for capacity-building and technical assistance outside of district and state boundaries. Some state- and district-level programs offer resources and support, such as Colorado's [School Transformation Network](#), but school system leaders shouldn't assume that support for implementing an innovative model must come from states or districts. Schools should have access to flexible funding and opportunities to join networks and engage with other external partners that support their missions. State education departments can support external partnerships that create school-level autonomy and support innovative models to emerge, such as in the [Springfield Empowerment Zone](#) in Massachusetts. A word of caution: while support from external partners is critical for schools, too many disparate supports can be detrimental. School and system leaders alike need freedom and judgment to prioritize investing resources in a coherent set of programs to support their work, rather than feeling the need to say yes to any help that comes their way.

Finally, to ensure innovations outlast leadership changes, district and CMO leaders need to embed authorization and support for innovation efforts within central office policy, structure, and culture. Cabinet-level positions, like chief innovation officers, and offices of transformation, like those in [Dallas ISD](#), [Aldine ISD](#), and [San Antonio ISD](#) can be intentionally designed to address the specific needs of innovative schools and prevent those schools from becoming deprioritized or siloed. These examples, all in Texas, demonstrate the potential value of initiatives like the state's [District of Innovation designation](#), which allows districts with a locally adopted Innovation Plan to be exempt from certain aspects of the state's education code and has helped to spur many of these structures into existence. District leaders who take up the mantle of supporting innovative schools would also benefit from coaching on how to advocate for innovation at the state level and become savvy to differences in innovative schools' needs compared to the needs of traditional schools.

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