RESEARCH FOR ACTION

Supporting and scaling school innovations: Learnings from national research
August 2023

This paper shares learnings about ***what school innovation is, how it can be supported by leaders of districts, partnering organizations, and schools,*** and ***how innovative approaches to teaching and learning can be shared and scaled***.

Learnings are drawn from a study conducted by Research for Action focusing on 11 districts and nonprofits[1] across the country that have received attention for their efforts to foster and support school innovation. Specifically, findings reported in this paper were informed by a literature review, a landscape scan of over 65 sources, and interviews with over 30 district and nonprofit leaders; school leaders and founders; and innovation experts.

The paper is organized into sections about conceptions and critical components of innovation, system-level supports for innovative practices, and considerations regarding sharing and scaling effective innovations. ***The goal of sharing these learnings is to help school and school-system leaders make data-informed decisions to define, support, share, and scale innovative teaching and learning practices[2] that facilitate equitable learning experiences for young people***.

In appendices, we share additional information about the methodology used in this study, as well as learnings related to demonstrating and measuring success in innovative schools.

---

[1] We use the term "nonprofits" as a shorthand for organizations that supported innovative schools and functioned at least partially independently of a school district (though more than one of these entities straddled an inside/outside position with respect to the partnering school district). Most of these entities were nonprofit organizations, and some identified as networks, but we avoided the term network to prevent confusion between independent networks and within-district networks.

[2] "Innovative teaching and learning practices" in the larger study that informs this paper were conceptualized as innovations granted to schools through autonomies provided by governing districts/nonprofits. Autonomies included flexibilities from standard operating procedures/regulations/mandates with the goal of fostering innovation in teaching and learning practices. Common autonomies among districts and nonprofits included those related to length and schedule of school days; professional development; principal supervision; and curriculum and assessment (e.g., waivers from standardized assessments and an alternate focus on performance-based assessments).

DRAFT—NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

Characteristics of Districts/Nonprofits Featured in this Research

Sites informing the learnings shared in this paper were districts/nonprofits in which innovative schools:

- were typically participants in Title 1 and National School Lunch programs
- tended to be located in large urban areas with diverse student populations
- were granted autonomies (e.g., in student assessment, professional development, student scheduling) to facilitate innovative approaches to teaching and learning (e.g., competency-based learning approaches)
- varied in terms of grade levels served; governance structures and models of innovation; and motivations for pursuing innovation (e.g., offering unique alternatives to charter schools; addressing needs to personalize learning and enhance workforce readiness among students; transforming "underperforming" schools)

Sample Innovative Teaching and Learning Practices

Examples of innovative teaching and learning practices occurring in classrooms and schools included:

- competency-, inquiry-, and project-based learning opportunities for students
- authentic assessments of student learning, including through performance-based assessments, student portfolios, and students' presentations/defenses of their work
- opportunities for "real-world learning" through internships and other experiential learning experiences
- a focus on social-emotional well-being, strong relationships, restorative cultures, and unique advisory models
- the use of technology to facilitate professional learning opportunities for teachers and personalized learning experiences for students
- resources (e.g., a state-of-the-art maker space) to facilitate learning in the areas of art (including film and photography), computer science, engineering, and auto work
- unique pathways to graduation/specializations that students choose
- highly individualized schedules for students; schedule blocks that facilitate interdisciplinary student work
- teachers serving as facilitators and in other capacities that differed from traditional norms around teacher roles

Conceptions and Critical Components of Innovation

Interviewees emphasized that innovative practices differ from the traditional school practices of a given context. Because teaching and learning are context-specific, what constitutes innovation in one setting may be the norm in another. The specific needs and conditions of a school community drive this variation, leading to a diversity of innovative practices. This range of conceptions of innovation is a theme echoed in published literature, which highlights that definitions of school innovation vary widely and that "a range of ideas, devices, and practices…are commonly attached to the term" (Nichols, 2022, p. 1).

While conceptions of innovation may vary from one site to the next, **a shared conception of innovation among stakeholders (and not just a few) in a given school community is critical**. One interviewee cautioned that lack of shared vision will prove a "fatal flaw." Ultimately, successful efforts to innovate are organized around a vision articulated at the school level and understood and supported at the network/district level.

Innovative practices are effectively implemented with the support of innovative school governance, which includes not only autonomies but also tailored resources to develop and strengthen the practices. Such practices are rooted in communities in that they are responsive to local contexts and needs. Innovative schools position families as key collaborators and decision-makers. They also prioritize student agency and autonomy, providing opportunities for students' interests to drive learning opportunities. In this way, one interviewee explained, "innovation is moving closer to the students."

Innovative practices also center real-world learning and prepare students to forge post-secondary pathways. One respondent posed questions to highlight this key component of innovation: "*What is it [young people] are able to do when they leave? What are the kinds of dispositions and the kinds of attitudes and the kinds of opportunities that are available to them*?" Another explained,

> *The most innovative practices in schools are those that allow young people to experience the real world in a way that allows them to see their future and get prepared for their future, which could either mean engaging directly in college pathways and bridging directly to college as the next phase, or engaging, understanding really what the world of work looks like and beginning to explore and touchpoint what that means. In order to do that kind of innovation, I think you really need to think differently about how time is used, where learning takes place, what the role of the teacher is.*

Respondents saw equity as an important factor—and even the driving purpose—for innovation. In the words of one respondent, "*it really is about practices that ultimately close opportunity achievement gaps for young people…And if we believe in equity, we believe that young people deserve what they need at the right time in order for them to really thrive and do well in school and academically achieve and prepare for college, career, and life*." It is critical for stakeholders to proactively define equity and ensure that innovative teaching and learning practices support equitable student outcomes (and avoid unintended consequences that exacerbate inequities).

While each district or nonprofit's approach to working towards equity looked different, **leaders provided several examples of design principles, structures, or practices that they believed played a role in addressing opportunity or achievement gaps**, including diagnosing the needs of the community before choosing a strategy, personalizing learning for students, leveraging autonomies to secure high-quality teachers and change testing schedules, and setting a college-going culture for all students in innovative schools.

System-Level Supports for Innovation

The system-level supports and conditions described in this section can facilitate school innovation and address some commonly cited barriers to innovation. We grouped findings around these supports and conditions into four overarching categories: ***Shared visions and knowledge of autonomies; Strong district/nonprofit commitments to innovative schools and distribution of power; Tailored supports for schools and educators; and Commitments of financial resources and other backing.*** We discuss each of these elements in more detail below.

1. Shared visions and knowledge of autonomies

Clearly articulated visions and missions related to innovation: At the level of each innovative *school*, there needs to be a clearly articulated mission and vision for how to accomplish that mission. Supports from district or nonprofit leaders can help school leaders to define and realize their theory of change. At the *district/nonprofit* level, it is crucial to have a shared vision of innovation. This is not to say that schools should pursue the same innovative goals or drivers of change—interviewees leading innovative initiatives emphasized that one size does not fit all—but rather that there is clarity about a larger theory of action that articulates inputs, outcomes, and the roles of schools and a district/nonprofit in innovation.

Shared knowledge and understandings of schools' autonomies: Interviewees emphasized the importance of districts, school leaders, and teachers having shared knowledge and understandings of schools' autonomies—of what is and is not allowable according to the flexibilities schools are granted. One district leader described "complaints from school leaders that there's a lack of knowledge about their flexibilities at the central office level," and reported that having an expert at the district with detailed knowledge of schools' autonomies is a promising practice to mitigate that challenge. In another interview, district leaders spoke of creating a practical manual to clarify schools' autonomies for all relevant parties, including teachers' unions and districts' school support staff.

2. Strong district/nonprofit commitments to innovative schools and distribution of power

Consistency in district-level commitment to innovation: School innovation is challenged when district-level staff supportive of innovation leave their positions or when innovation-related offices dissolve. A strong finding across data sources was the need for consistency in a central office's commitment to innovation. Respondents spoke about strategies that can diffuse commitments to innovation throughout a district and mitigate challenges related to turnover, including:

- Having an individual at the top of a district who empowered their second-tier staff to make changes that supported innovative schools (e.g., to grant flexibilities).
- the "development of structures within the central office" to support regional district-level leadership (e.g., individuals leading supports for schools grouped in regions)[3] in understanding innovation as it was being enacted and schools' specific autonomies

---

[3] On the topic of regional groupings of schools within district networks: two district leaders noted that grouping schools by geography for supports/oversight did not facilitate innovation. According to these leaders, regional district networks focused on accountability and compliance to mandates rather than on supporting schools' flexibilities and autonomies.

- leaders of partnering nonprofits building relationships with district staff beyond top-tier leaders, to share detailed information about innovative models, secure protection for autonomies, and generally garner widespread support for innovation.
- visits from central office staff (including Superintendents) to innovative schools, to demonstrate districts' commitments to learning about and supporting innovation.

District orientation that fosters school-level empowerment: Districts should support innovative schools in defining and accomplishing their goals, but (in the words of a district leader) should also "get out of the way" or "leave schools alone" so that schools are empowered to work toward those goals. The district leader advocated that a central office should be extremely clear about what a district's non-negotiables are ("defining what are the expectations…[and saying] I'll hold you accountable at certain times of the year"), but beyond that, that they should "let schools go…Stop holding tight to everything. There's too much work to be done. The need for central authority to be balanced by substantive school-level empowerment was echoed across data sources (e.g., see White & Noble, 2020).

Protection of innovation through advocacy and support from a nonprofit outside (or partially outside) a district: Many interviewees spoke about the roles that partnering nonprofits can play in advocating for and protecting the work of innovative schools. Nonprofit partners can campaign for schools' autonomies, help them to secure waivers, and push for changes to district or state policies when needed. In the words of one nonprofit leader, their organization serves as "a middle ground where we can both be deeply a part of the district and actually realize the flexibilities that we've been told we can create." Interviewees noted that it was helpful when nonprofits were very knowledgeable about districts and their operations, and when they built strong relationships with district staff.

Interviewees described other supports nonprofits provided to innovative schools, including thought partnership; leadership coaching; professional development for teachers, leaders, and other staff; school and school leader oversight; resources related to finances, space, time, and materials; data collection and analysis; and the securing of policy changes for students and teachers.

Shared leadership, decision-making power, and responsibility: Interviewees spoke about distributing leadership from a district or nonprofit to schools: of "putting the folks who are closest to the work in charge," ensuring that school leaders are empowered to make decisions and giving them opportunities to collaborate as a group to make decisions pertaining to their schools and to the relevant governing body (e.g., nonprofit) as a whole. At the school level, distributing decision-making power and leadership to teachers and staff also facilitates innovation (see Dibbon & Pollock, 2007). Sharing leadership around innovative practices and associated professional development increases buy-in, eases principals' workloads, and ensures that innovation is sustained if school leaders leave their positions. An interviewee from one nonprofit reported that "as much as possible, teachers at the schools are leading and facilitating [professional learning] experiences" and that, in general, "our teachers are the ones who are leading our schools."

3. Tailored supports for schools and educators

Differentiation of supports and resources to meet schools' individual needs: Innovative schools' models and needs vary widely, and these schools require differentiated supports. As there are no "one-size-fits-all solutions" that districts and partnering nonprofits can provide, they must carve out time and opportunities to listen to and take stock of individual schools' needs and respond to them. Such

responsiveness is very difficult in a large district, according to a district leader, but it is ultimately necessary to support school innovation. A nonprofit leader noted that it was possible for their organization to be highly responsive thanks to the reasonable number of schools they supported (under ten), and that this allowed them to offer strong "customer service" to schools and ensure that leaders typically did not wait long for answers to questions or requests for support.

Positions, offices, or partners that support innovation: District personnel or offices, nonprofit staff, or other groups that can serve as vital supports for school leaders engaging in innovation include:

- **An innovation-focused office** or portfolio office within a district, and/or a **chief/facilitator of innovation in the central office** to support innovative schools, connect schools to partners, and facilitate the sharing of learnings
- **A liaison between innovative schools and regional district networks** who can help ensure schools can access autonomies
- **An expert in school innovation at the district** who "knows innovation plans very deeply and the flexibilities that schools have"; **a legal expert** familiar with state laws granting autonomies
- **A grant writer at the district** to bring in external funding to support innovative schools' efforts
- **An innovation advisory council** that includes school and nonprofit leaders, to advise on high-level policy decisions
- **Institutions of Higher Education, technology-focused partners, and other external organizations** (beyond the kinds of partnering nonprofits mentioned above), to provide supports and resources around teacher pipelines, professional learning opportunities, and the integration of technology into innovative schools

Support, development, and supervision of school leaders: Data across sources emphasized the importance of substantive supports for principals of innovative schools. Coaching supports were mentioned as particularly helpful mechanisms in supporting school leaders. Nonprofits and districts can provide resources to help principals implement instructional strategies, engage in thought partnership, articulate and realize their visions for their schools, and avoid burnout and focus on systems change long-term. Leaders of some partnering nonprofits saw their ability to supervise principals as integral to innovation and systems change work, given that school leaders are key drivers of educational change. Interviews and literature also emphasized the importance of fostering trusting relationships between district/nonprofit and school leaders, as a means of facilitating innovative policies (see Lawson et al., 2017).

Robust professional learning opportunities for educators: It is critical to allocate time, space, and other resources to facilitate adult learning opportunities, including professional development for teachers—the group directly in charge of fostering innovative learning experiences for students (see Dee, Henkin, & Pell, 2002; Dibbon & Pollock, 2007; Taliaferro, 2005). One district leader noted that the importance of providing space for teachers to enhance their instructional practices and pedagogies in ways that facilitate innovation is often overlooked, but that adult learning is a fundamental driver of change that requires the investment of resources. Other interviewees emphasized the importance of school leaders being able to provide professional learning opportunities tailored for their schools. Promising practices in professional development included a district hub where teachers came together to collaborate across schools; professional learning opportunities that nonprofits provided around innovative instruction, assessment, and school culture; and a nonprofit with school oversight responsibilities that secured a number of professional development days in the yearly calendar that far exceeded the number for other local schools.

4. Commitments of financial resources and other backing

Financial supports and budget flexibilities: Interviewees discussed funding as an important element of support for school innovation. Nonprofits and other partners, including philanthropic organizations, can bring financial resources to schools to facilitate mission-driven opportunities (e.g., related to experiential learning for students) and secure materials that support innovation (see Zavadsky, 2011). One nonprofit leader emphasized that their own organization had long-term funding that helped them support schools consistently and sustainably. Leaders also reported that autonomy with budgets can support innovation, including when it functions to facilitate staff hiring. Landscape scan data offered examples of how schools and districts capitalized on flexibilities to hire for unique positions, including project managers, coordinators, and instructional coaches focused on school innovations. In an interview, a district leader stated that principals need flexibility with budgets and procurement to help serve the "hardest to serve" students in innovative ways and to make operations processes less time consuming.

Support from teachers' unions: In at least four interviews, respondents spoke about the roles teachers' unions can play in innovation, from hindering innovation as presently enacted to supporting it. One district leader noted that teachers' unions can facilitate or create barriers to teacher professional learning needed for school innovation. A leader from another district described that their teachers' union takes the position that autonomies result in teachers' rights being waived, and that the union opposes innovation as implemented in the district. However, one nonprofit leader from another site praised union-backed policies that facilitated flexibilities for a district's schools (including flexibilities around scheduling).

Sharing and Scaling Innovations

Interviewees identified several strategies and practices that facilitated the sharing and scaling of innovative practices. While the districts and nonprofits featured in this research all looked different in terms of size, structure, and approach, several interviewees suggested their sites had had long-term success with scaling their practices and models. In some cases, nonprofits have expanded nationally and even globally. Leaders discussed two important practices that allow for scaling—sharing and strategizing.

Sharing models and practices: Nonprofit and district leaders saw the opportunity for school leaders and teachers to share their models and practices with their peers as a major strategy for scaling, both within their context and beyond. They saw value in sharing because it provides the opportunity for other teachers, schools, districts, or nonprofits to see that an innovation is effective before attempting to implement it in their own context. In the case of districts, innovations within one school or nonprofit can eventually lead to actual policy changes at the district level and become incorporated into the district budget. The impetus for sharing can come from the innovative school/program (piloting the innovation) and other schools/programs (seeking to learn about the innovation). The impetus to share can also come from the practitioner level or the leadership level.

Several leaders who have seen success with scaling highlighted that sharing was included in the design of the model. However, in some instances where sharing was not initially seen as the goal, adjustments were made to the design to create more opportunities for sharing. Interview and landscape scan data offered examples of districts and nonprofits implementing specific programs and practices to facilitate sharing, such as professional development opportunities for teachers and conferences or convenings that brought schools together to work collaboratively on strategies and impact.

Strategic and intentional approaches: Leaders noted the necessity of intentional strategizing in order to scale effectively and spoke about several thoughtful approaches they used for the planning, design, and implementation of the innovations.

One idea the leaders shared spoke to the importance of considering the context when scaling, as innovative schools and practices are not one-size-fits-all or "cookie cutter." Interviewees felt that the success of an innovation depends on several different factors, such as the neighborhood or regional location, the community, and the student population. Literature also suggested that innovations are successful when they start with local, small-scale changes (Goatley & Johnston, 2013) before scaling up (Taliaferro, 2005).

One leader spoke to the need to apply a strategic approach when testing innovations that are outside of the district's practices or policies, to avoid running into any restrictions when attempting to scale the innovation to the district level:

> …an example is we have a very small number of waivers from district policy that are significantly smaller than what say charter schools have… And they are intentionally small in number because we want our learning to be scalable for traditional district schools like ours. And we have found that the scale of learning of what has come out of charter schools is not as applicable because of certain things like freedom from collective bargaining and say budgeting. So, the larger point there is first we intentionally want the majority of district restrictions and bureaucracy to be in place because if we are operating under so many of the same conditions as traditional schools, then what we learn and innovate on that's proven effective is then easily scalable by the district without much change.

District and nonprofit leaders also offered specific examples of how they strategically build and leverage roles, tools, programs, partnerships, and other resources to support scaling. These examples include utilizing a data dashboard that would typically be used very traditionally to instead share stories of success; providing opportunities for educators to improve their practice and share with others through the network's graduate school of education; and ensuring that innovations they intend to scale fit within the district budget, so that they can eventually be taken out of the nonprofit's budget and moved into the district's. Interview and landscape data spoke to the idea of putting a spotlight on the innovations (through word of mouth, newsletters, publications, and visits to demonstration sites), and letting others "catch on" to the innovations first pursued by a "coalition of the willing." This was positioned as a more effective way of scaling than "forcing" widespread adoption, as other schools, networks, or districts buy in voluntarily after seeing the success of the innovations. One leader felt strongly that in addition to giving innovations the spotlight, they should simultaneously be protected, so that the attention does not lead to the innovations being "destroyed."

Conclusion and Next Steps/Future Research

The districts and nonprofits featured in this report were distinct from one another in important ways (e.g., size, governance models, conceptions of innovation). Yet in spite of this variation, the data from this study pointed to many crosscutting findings related to critical components of innovation; system-level supports and conditions that can facilitate; and considerations related to sharing and scaling promising innovative practices.

Sources spoke to the importance of stakeholders having a shared vision of innovation, rooting it in community needs, and distributing leadership of the innovation (e.g., to teachers). Supports for innovative practices include consistency in district-level commitment to innovation, a district orientation that fosters

school-level empowerment, and differentiation of supports and resources to meet schools' individual needs. Respondents also spoke of the need for robust professional learning opportunities for educators to facilitate innovation, as well as the importance of leadership development in supporting innovative practices, given principals' roles as key drivers of innovation. Interviewees from nonprofits offered examples of their organizations' roles in protecting and advocating for innovative schools. External partners for schools engaging in innovation were positioned as critical, including because some offered financial support and other key resources to facilitate innovative practices. Interviewees emphasized the importance of taking thoughtful, strategic approaches to scaling innovative practices, as a means to facilitate sustainable change.

Research participants also emphasized that in fundamental ways, school innovation can serve as a means for providing equitable educational opportunities. Additional research is needed to explore how schools engaging in innovative teaching and learning practices are meeting the unique needs of different learners through the design of their models.

Select References

Bradley, K., & Hernández, L. E. (2019). Big Picture Learning: Spreading Relationships, Relevance, and Rigor One Student at a Time. Deeper Learning Networks Series. Learning Policy Institute.

Dee, J. R., Henkin, A. B., & Pell, S. W. J. (2002). Support for innovation in site-based-managed schools: Developing a climate for change. *Educational Research Quarterly, 25*(4), 36.

Dibbon, D. C., & Pollock, K. (2007). The nature of change and innovation in five innovative schools. *The Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal, 12*(1), 25-28.

Fine, M., & Pryiomka, K. (2020). *Assessing College Readiness through Authentic Student Work: How the City University of New York and the New York Performance Standards Consortium Are Collaborating toward Equity*. Learning Policy Institute.

Goatley, V. J., & Johnston, P. (2013). Innovation, research, and policy: Evolutions in classroom teaching. *Language Arts, 91*(2), 94-104.

Lawson, H. A., Durand, F. T., Wilcox, K. C., Gregory, K. M., Schiller, K. S., & Zuckerman, S. J. (2017). The role of district and school leaders' trust and communications in the simultaneous implementation of innovative policies. *Journal of School Leadership, 27*(1), 31-67.

Mehta, J., & Fine, S. (2012). Teaching Differently…Learning Deeply. *Phi Delta Kappan, 94*(2), 31–35.

Nichols, T. P. (2022). *Building the innovation school: infrastructures for equity in today's classrooms*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Taliaferro, R. (2005). Service-learning leadership and implementation in three middle schools. the story of an innovation in the school district of Philadelphia: A qualitative study. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh

White, T., & Noble, A. (2020). *Rethinking "Innovation Schools": Strengths and Limitations of Autonomy-Based School Improvement Plans in Contexts of Widening Racial Inequality*. National Education Policy Center.

Zavadsky, H. (2011). Creating and scaling innovative school models through strategic partnerships. *The Foundation Review, 3*(3), 45-53.

Appendix A: Methodology

Data sources

Data sources for this research included published literature on school innovation, publicly available information about districts and nonprofits (e.g., district and nonprofit websites, district- and nonprofit-specific reports, and demographic data on schools and districts from the National Center for Education Statistics), background interviews and advisory panel discussions with school innovation experts and leaders, interviews with district/nonprofit leaders, and artifacts about school innovation shared by interviewees.

Identification of districts and nonprofits

To address the research goals, we constructed a purposive sample of focal districts and nonprofits (see footnote above about defining "nonprofits"). We focused on eleven initiatives from these districts and nonprofits, including through the process detailed below.

The research team developed an initial set of selection criteria informed by multiple sources, including expert guidance from district-level leaders and a study advisory panel (consisting of district and school leaders, as well as leaders of nonprofits that partner with innovative schools), and our review of published literature and publicly available resources. Researchers then developed a list of potential focal districts and a matrix of information about those sites. The team synthesized information from over 65 sources (such as reports and websites) to populate the matrix with data including sites' size, structure of school innovation, and system-level supports and challenges around innovation. We assessed each site in the matrix against selection criteria related to *characteristics of innovation*, *size/demographics*, and *recommendation status*, prioritizing sites that met all criteria.

Interview sampling and limitations

The research team identified potential interviewees at focal districts and nonprofits through the landscape scan and expert recommendations. We sampled strategically to garner the perspectives of at least one high-level current or former leader per site (e.g., superintendent; district or nonprofit leader overseeing aspects of school innovation) who could speak to system-level supports for innovation. **The scope of this research did not allow for robust triangulation of themes within sites (i.e., did not allow for interviewing multiple district/nonprofit leaders and school leaders per site and triangulating interview data with outcomes data to paint a full picture of the supports for and promise of school innovation in that site)**. Rather, the findings are based on publicly available data as well as a limited number of interviews per site (generally one to two). Interviews reflect individual district/nonprofit leaders' perspectives on support for school innovations in their contexts. A more in-depth study of each context would likely reveal other perspectives on innovation. In addition, the context of each innovation site is distinct. While we focus on crosscutting learnings from sites, we caution that care should be taken in considering the extent to which learnings from focal sites might apply to any particular school system context.

Data Collection

Interviewees (N=31) participated in virtual interviews, typically lasting one hour. The research team developed a semi-structured interview protocol based on research questions and input from background interviewees and advisory panel members. The team then adapted the protocol for each interview based on contextual details gathered about sites through landscape scan research. Participants were asked for their permission to be audio-recorded, and transcripts were generated from the recordings. RFA did not provide financial incentives to participants.

During or after interviews, a subset of participants emailed the research team artifacts related to school innovation in their contexts. To collect data on student demographics, the research team compiled lists of schools for each focal district initiative and nonprofit. Using federal identifiers for each school, the team collected data from National Center for Education Statistics sources and then analyzed the data as described below.

Data Analysis

RFA researchers coded and thematically analyzed data from interview transcripts. To prepare transcripts for coding, researchers lightly cleaned them and uploaded them to Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software program. The research team developed a list of codes to apply to data; codes were closely aligned to research questions and informed by early themes researchers heard emerging in interviews.

Researchers coded sample transcripts and then met to refine codes and code definitions and ensure inter-rater reliability. Once all transcripts were coded, data was exported by individual code. Researchers conducted analysis through a structured, two-stage memo-writing process for each code. Memos presented strong findings within thematic areas while also addressing variations, contradictions, and nuances in data. Findings underwent an internal quality assurance process focused on protecting participants' confidentiality while offering some insight into where perspectives emerged from.

Analysts supplemented memo findings with findings from the literature review, the matrix of landscape scan data, a set of summaries of individual districts/nonprofits based on the matrix, and artifacts from districts and nonprofits. Where relevant in this memo, we point out areas in which literature and landscape scan data reinforced interview findings, and areas in which they added unique themes that did not emerge as strong findings in interviews.

Quantitative data collected from the National Center for Education Statistics was analyzed descriptively to contextualize how districts and nonprofits compared to one another. Data on sites and their student populations were tabulated and summarized by school network.

Appendix B: Additional Learnings Related to Demonstrating and Measuring Success in Innovative Schools

Traditional metrics are commonly used to assess the outcomes of students in innovative schools, as well as the success of those schools. However, some view these metrics as inadequate measures for capturing the outcomes of innovative work.

When asked about how the success of innovative schools is measured, respondents often noted that **they are held accountable to traditional metrics by their districts and states**. District and nonprofit leaders reported using traditional metrics such as standardized test scores and graduation rates to consider the success of innovative schools. In some cases, innovative schools are held accountable to traditional performance metrics as a way to earn and retain their innovative status, with the expectation that innovative schools will outperform traditional district schools.

For some respondents, **traditional measures of success are lacking in the degree to which they can portray holistic stories of schools and their impact on students' learning and experiences**. Standardized test scores were positioned by some as an ineffective measure of student or school success. This can be particularly true for innovative schools, as the increased uniformity in practice that often results from high-stakes testing runs counter to the expectation that innovative schools be granted greater autonomies. A couple of respondents spoke of shifting their focus and approach when considering measures used by their districts to allow for more nuance, such as by paying increased attention to survey data and measures of student wellness. As one nonprofit leader explained, they are "not ignoring the same things that the district is measuring for its own success," but "are thinking about them a little differently. Instead of external accountability, it's internal accountability to the student." This can mean shifting focus to longer term outcomes, with three respondents proposing more emphasis on college completion rates and students' postsecondary transitions rather than high school graduation rates alone.

Even as traditional metrics of success remain prominent, in a few interviews district and nonprofit leaders discussed how their networks have supplemented these metrics with their own measures of success. While variable in their design, these **innovative measures have been built to align with the visions and goals of their networks**. A couple of respondents spoke about the importance of shifting to longer-term outcomes, such as wages and college graduation rates, which indicate students' well-being after high school graduation. One nonprofit offers tools on its website that demonstrate how it frames and assesses the success of its schools, including an implementation framework for school change, an overview of its school review process, and tools for monitoring progress and tracking outcomes. An interviewee described assessing their schools across multiple dimensions, including equity, academic progress and engagement, and human resources, that together can tell the story of a school's success. Another pointed to staff and community buy-in over time as an indicator of the success of a given school model.