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# Autonomy and School Improvement: What Do We Know and Where Do We Go From Here?

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## Abstract

New “autonomy initiatives” aim to increase schools’ decision-making authority as a strategy to leverage school improvement. These policies build on lessons of previous reforms such as site-based management in ways that bode well for their success. However, how are these policies actually faring in implementation? The authors addressed that question with a comprehensive research review. Findings reveal that these reforms are posting better results than previous efforts but, overall, results are still quite limited. The autonomy provisions of the policies generally go unimplemented. Accordingly, improved results for participating schools may stem from supports for implementation other than the promised autonomy.

## Keywords

autonomy, governance, policy implementation, site-based management, school district

Education policies that aim to increase school autonomy as a lever of school improvement have proliferated in urban districts nationwide. For example, over the past 5 to 10 years, Boston Public Schools, Chicago Public Schools

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(CPS), Los Angeles Unified School District, New York City Public Schools, and Oakland Unified School District (OUSD, CA), among others, have launched high-profile reform initiatives under such banners as “pilot schools,” “new, small, autonomous schools,” and “empowerment schools.” Although their details vary, these initiatives rest on a shared assumption that increasing schools’ “autonomy”—generally defined in policy designs as authority over key decisions about school improvement—will enable schools to develop and implement approaches to teaching and learning that better build on their strengths and address the needs of their students than if policy makers or others outside schools made those decisions. In turn, such initiatives will leverage improvements in student learning. Other initiatives provide schools with freedoms from some district policies *after* they have demonstrated high levels of achievement and sometimes as an incentive to spark improvement or as a reward for achievement (see, for example, performance management reforms). By contrast, the new autonomy initiatives aim to provide autonomy as a starting strategy for helping schools create conditions that might lead to improvement. Unlike charter school initiatives that seek to create some autonomous schools outside regular public school systems, the new autonomy initiatives promise to foster autonomy within traditional public schools. How are these efforts faring in practice? Given the significant public and private investments in these efforts, this question warrants careful attention.

To begin to address this question, we conducted a comprehensive review of research on the design and implementation of these initiatives. To focus that review, we first examined research on previous reforms that similarly focused on schools’ decision-making authority (e.g., school site-based management and decentralization) to help us identify distinctive features of the autonomy initiatives as a school improvement strategy. As we report in the Background section, this preliminary review revealed that the policy designs of autonomy initiatives differed from such past reforms in ways that suggest they might produce better school performance results. For example, research on school site-based management initiatives tended to show that those initiatives did not post positive school results in part because they overemphasized changing formal school governance structures without also prompting substantial direct investments in improving teaching and learning (David, 1989; Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990a, 1990b; Peterson, 1991; Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992). By contrast, the policies that authorize the contemporary autonomy initiatives explicitly focus not on new school governance structures but on how new school freedoms and other policy provisions might contribute to improvements in teaching and learning.

Our review of research on the implementation of the autonomy initiatives revealed that participating schools in fact have been posting some modestly improved results, particularly when compared with the performance of schools in site-based management initiatives. These results suggest that autonomy initiatives may be on a trajectory toward deeper improvements. However, these findings do not unequivocally support the claim that increasing schools' autonomy influences school outcomes. Though schools were promised autonomy in the policy designs, during implementation schools in only two districts actually experienced increased autonomy and the district that posted the greatest gains did not implement the autonomy provisions of the initiative. Accordingly, we argue that the improved results of some schools participating in these initiatives may stem from conditions other than increased autonomy. We conclude with implications for the research and practice of autonomy as an educational improvement strategy.

## **Background**

Education policies that promise schools "autonomy" or increased discretion over particular decisions are among the latest in a long line of educational reform strategies that aim to leverage school improvement in part by changing schools' decision-making authority. For example, new small autonomous schools initiatives in many urban and suburban school districts have invited school teams to develop whole school reform plans or entirely new public schools. The initiatives ask school teams to focus on providing excellent learning opportunities for all students and not to focus mainly on compliance with district and state rules regarding curriculum and instruction, budgets, human resources, facilities, or school calendar. In turn, policy makers promise to increase schools' autonomy or discretion in such areas to enable schools to implement their school improvement plans. Like decentralization and site-based management reforms of the past, these policies focus on increasing schools' decision-making authority as a lever of school improvement. However, the designs of these initiatives reflect lessons learned from the disappointing results of these and other past efforts to increase schools' decision-making authority. Such differences distinguish autonomy initiatives as a type of education policy approach and suggest that the autonomy initiatives may realize better school improvement results than the earlier initiatives.

To elaborate, in the 1960s and 1970s, school decentralization reforms generally sought to increase school and/or community control over schools (David, 1989). By the late 1980s, many districts turned to other reforms often

titled site-based management or site-based decision making. Although their details varied, these policies stemmed from at least one main common underlying assumption: if policy makers shifted authority for various school-related decisions from broader levels of government (e.g., from district central offices) to individual schools and school communities, then schools would better be able to meet their students' needs than if district central office administrators or other policy makers made those decisions (Malen et al., 1990b; Peterson, 1991; Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992).

However, research on these initiatives did not bear out this assumption (Cotton, 1992; David, 1989; Malen et al., 1990a, 1990b; Murphy & Beck, 1995; Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992). For example, from their review of nearly 200 documents, including 98 policy reports and 8 systematic evaluations about school site-based management initiatives, Malen et al. (1990a) concluded that "there is little evidence that school-based management improves student achievement" (p. 56; see also Briggs & Wohlstetter, 2003; Cotton, 1992; Malen et al., 1990b; Peterson, 1991; Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992).

Researchers generally cited at least one of the following three reasons for these limited school performance results which we elaborate below: a lack of focus on teaching and learning improvement both in the policy designs and on the part of participating schools during implementation; policy makers' inattention to building schools' capacity for using their new authority to realize improvements for students; and school district central office administrators' failure to play key support roles in implementation—particularly when it came to actually providing participating schools with new decision-making authority. The new autonomy initiatives, whether intentionally or not, reflect these lessons in their designs. Accordingly, we argue that these initiatives represent a new wave of reforms to increase schools' decision-making authority.

First, previous reforms as implemented—and often as originally designed—tended to focus marginally, at best, on teaching and learning improvement. For example, decentralization and site-based management initiatives generally emphasized changing the balance of authority between schools/communities and their district central offices or the creation of school-based governance councils as main outcomes in and of themselves, not necessarily as strategies for helping schools improve teaching and learning (e.g., Arterbury & Hord, 1991). The development and management of these governing bodies consumed significant amounts of school staffs' time in ways that detracted from their focus on teaching and learning matters (Cotton, 1992; Hall & Galluzzo, 1991; Hill & Bonan, 1992; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998; Malen et al., 1990a, 1990b). When they did focus on issues beyond their own processes, school site management teams by and large concentrated not on instruction but on

“tertiary activities” (Peterson, 1991, n.p.) such as student discipline, campus aesthetics, staff responsibilities, and the distribution of funds often from small discretionary budgets (Arterbury & Hord, 1991; Cotton, 1992; David, 1989; Ogawa & White, 1994; Peterson, 1991; Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992). These activities did not substantially alter or improve the quality of teaching in classrooms—let alone student learning outcomes—and they may have actually limited the time available for school staff to focus on instructional improvement (Cotton, 1992).

By contrast, the new autonomy initiatives emerged in the early 2000s in a context of heightened emphasis on the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms and schools’ achievement of high performance standards. Perhaps not surprisingly then, the policy designs of the new autonomy initiatives focus centrally on teaching and learning improvement and identify autonomy or new decision-making authority as one means to that end, not as an outcome in its own right. For instance, the application process for the New Century High Schools initiative in New York City, launched in 2002, invited school teams to map out not their strategy for school governance but for improving student learning outcomes as well as for realizing the initiatives’ focal ten principles of effective schools—six of which directly related to teaching and learning improvement (New Visions for Public Schools [NVPS], 2007; Rubenstein, Reisner, Coon, & Fabiano, 2005). The school district offered schools various autonomies to assist schools in implementing their teaching and learning improvement strategies (Foley, Klinge, & Reisner, 2007; NVPS, 2007; Rubenstein et al., 2005). The new small autonomous schools initiatives in Chicago, Oakland (CA), and other cities likewise invited schools to generate innovative approaches to teaching and learning improvement and offered new autonomy in areas such as human resources, curriculum and instruction, and budgets to help schools create conditions supportive of implementation (Little & Wing, 2003; Spote, Kahne, & Correa, 2004). As the Oakland school board policy authorizing this initiative stated, “The primary purpose of developing NSA [new small autonomous] schools is to raise student achievement and close the achievement gap for under-served students” (OUSD, 2000, p. 5).

To further reinforce their focus on teaching and learning improvement, some of these initiatives hold schools accountable for producing demonstrable improvements or risk losing their autonomy. For example, Boston’s Pilot Schools policy created a school quality review process whereby school district central office staff assess each participating school every 5 years. The assessment includes an internal self-study, an external review of student performance, and a school site visit, after which the external reviewers recommend the renewal or nonrenewal of the school’s status as a pilot school (Center for

Collaborative Education [CCE], 2006b). In Oakland, schools' continued participation in the initiative hinged on their achievement of student performance results (OUSD, 2000).

Second, implementation of the earlier reforms tended to falter in part because participating schools lacked the capacity to take on and make productive use of their new decision-making authority. As several reviews of school site-based management research concluded, principals, school site council members, and teachers all needed additional training in this regard but rarely received it (Briggs & Wohlstetter, 2003; Clune & White, 1988; Cotton, 1992; Malen et al., 1990b). For example, Ogawa and White (1994) found that for the most part, school site-based management policies "simply [made] . . . a general reference to the need for participants to understand the process of shared decision making" (p. 69). However, the policies rarely resulted in the actual allocation of time or other resources to help school staff build their capacity for convening and participating in site-based governance councils or for using their new authority in ways that promised to realize improved results for students (see also Clune & White, 1988; Malen et al., 1990a).

The designs of the new autonomy initiatives seem to anticipate school capacity as a main implementation impediment and promise targeted investments in building schools' capacity for implementation. For example, Oakland's 2000 new small autonomous schools policy required prospective school teams first to participate in the "Incubator"—a process designed to help them plan their school and identify the resources necessary for implementation (OUSD, 2000). Furthermore, selection criteria for school teams to participate in this initiative included teams' ready capacity to launch their school.

Third, school district central offices tended not to participate in supporting the implementation of decentralization, school site-based management, and similar prior initiatives (Arterbury & Hord, 1991; Ogawa & White, 1994). School district central offices often adhered closely to long-standing district norms supporting centralized or top-down authority and did not transfer the promised authority to schools (Malen et al., 1990b; Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992). District central offices also generally failed to provide time, funding, and other resource essential for implementation (Clune & White, 1988; Cotton, 1992; Malen et al., 1990b). Some district central offices bucked these trends and aimed to enable implementation mainly by allowing schools to apply for waivers or exemptions from some district policies as their main strategy for strengthening implementation (Wohlstetter, Smyer, & Mohrman, 1994). However, waivers generally removed barriers to implementation but did not necessarily result in the proactive provision of implementation supports (United States Department of Education, 1998).

By contrast, school district central offices appear in many contemporary autonomy policy designs as key participants in and enablers of implementation. For example, in CPS, the authorizing school board policy calls on the CPS district central office to actively support the implementation of the provisions of the policy including autonomy over budgets, curriculum and instruction, facilities, human resources, and schedule. Whereas many school site-based management initiatives of the 1990s stemmed from state policy, district central offices are the main designers of most of the new autonomy initiatives and cast themselves as key leaders in helping schools make productive use of their new autonomy (Honig, 2009a, 2009b). In this way, the autonomy initiatives depart from such previous reforms by not treating authority as a zero-sum game—a fixed resource held by either the central office or schools and as a resource that may increase for one only at the expense of the other’s authority. Instead, both central offices and schools have key roles to play in enabling implementation (Honig, Lorton, & Copland, 2009; see also Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990).

In sum, we argue that “autonomy initiatives” mark a new wave of reform approaches that use increases in schools’ decision-making authority to spur school improvement. At least three distinctive features mark this new wave: a central emphasis on teaching and learning, a focus on and investment in school capacity building, and the involvement of district central offices as key implementation supporters. Given that inattention to these features contributed to limited results of previous reforms, their inclusion in the designs of the new autonomy initiatives led us to hypothesize that the new autonomy initiatives might post better school improvement results than schools participating in the prior reforms. To what extent is the implementation of the autonomy initiatives bearing out this hypothesis? Are autonomy initiatives actually faring better than the previous reforms in terms of their outcomes for students and schools? What conditions may account for the results?

## **Method**

To address these questions, we conducted a comprehensive, integrative review of empirical research on autonomy initiatives. Our review proceeded in several phases. First, we scanned research on past reforms that likewise aimed to increase schools’ decision-making authority and policy documents on the more recent initiatives to identify the three distinguishing features of “autonomy initiatives” described above. We used that definition to focus our review.

Given the relative newness of these initiatives, we assumed that a limited number of studies would appear in peer-reviewed journals and that we would find the vast majority of empirical research in reports or conference papers. Accordingly, we relied on the ERIC and JSTOR databases for our searches of peer-reviewed journal sources, but we also examined the websites of agencies (e.g., The Chicago Consortium for School Research) that we knew had funding to evaluate or otherwise study these initiatives, websites of school districts implementing autonomy initiatives, and the online program for the American Educational Research Association's Annual Meetings for all years since its development in 2004.

In searching these sources, we first used the key words "autonomy" and "school." This initial search yielded almost 1,575 documents on a wide range of topics including teacher autonomy, school systems outside the United States, and theoretical or advocacy pieces as well as the object of our search. We sorted out documents unrelated to the formal policy initiatives of interest here or that did not present results from an empirical study. Given differences in authority structures across countries, we also decided to focus our review on studies conducted in U.S. school systems. This careful sorting process yielded 13 documents. We then searched those documents for the names of specific autonomy initiatives (e.g., Chicago High School Redesign Initiative) and conducted additional ERIC, JSTOR, and web searches for documentation from empirical studies of those initiatives. This process yielded an additional 37 documents.

As findings about the autonomy initiatives tended to be spread across multiple documents, we grouped all documents by initiative and considered those documents together as a set of evidence about the performance of the given autonomy initiative.<sup>1</sup> For example, our set on Oakland's (CA) new small autonomous schools included documents from two different externally generated evaluations (Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, 2002; Durant, 2004; Durant, Eng, & Naughton, 2003), reports of evaluations commissioned by the district (Little & Wing, 2003; Strategic Measurement, 2007; Vasudeva, Darling-Hammond, Newton, & Montgomery, 2009), and basic research studies on various aspects of the initiative such as the participation of community organizations (Gold, Simon, & Brown, 2002; Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2008) and the school district central office (Honig, 2002, 2003, 2009a, 2009b). We considered all these sources together as a set of evidence about implementation of this initiative and triangulated findings across studies.

In compiling our sets, we excluded non-peer-reviewed reports about particular initiatives generated from single organizations when we could not

triangulate their findings with reports of other organizations. For example, we had only one conference paper about the Belmont Zone of Choice initiative in Los Angeles, so we excluded that document from our review. Likewise, we had only one report of empirical findings about the High School Reform Initiative in Baltimore, Maryland. As we could not consider those findings alongside findings from another independent analysis, we excluded that report from our review. By contrast, we were concerned about the validity and reliability of findings from the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE) about Boston Pilot Schools in part because a main formal mission of CCE is to advocate for school autonomy, potentially biasing them toward positive research findings. Furthermore, their research generally relied on simple associations between school outcomes and school autonomy and not more rigorous procedures (e.g., control groups, robust theoretical causal models) for drawing such conclusions. Ultimately, we decided to include the CCE reports in our analysis, albeit with explicit caveats, because we were able to consider their findings alongside reports commissioned by another organization, The Boston Foundation. Table 1 lists the sources included in our final review grouped by the autonomy initiative each source referenced.

We then carefully read all documents in our final group of documents and coded them for information about initiative designs, empirical findings about student and school outcomes, and the process of implementation. We used the information about initiative designs to systematically check our claims about the distinctive features of autonomy initiative designs, deriving claims about the designs only if they fit all the initiatives. We drew our conclusions about student and school outcomes when we could verify them with studies that rested on adequate evidence appropriate to their claims (e.g., if they included controls for student and school characteristics rather than simple means comparisons when deriving claims about the impact of initiatives on student performance).

In forming our claims about implementation process, we reviewed all the studies for information about implementation. However, we reported only the information about implementation processes and mediating conditions that we found across at least three initiatives or that individual researchers had linked to outcomes using rigorous research methods. We also took care in our presentation of those findings to say that there *may be* an association between those processes and initiative outcomes rather than claiming that the processes in fact caused the outcomes.

Despite these careful steps to safeguard the quality of our analysis, our review has several limitations that we addressed in particular ways. For one,

**Table 1.** Review Sources

Initiative	Year	Source	Type
Boston Public Schools: Pilot Schools	2009	Abdulkadiroglu et al. (2009)	Report
	2001	Center for Collaborative Education (2001)	Report
	2004	Center for Collaborative Education (2004)	Report
	2006	Center for Collaborative Education (2006a)	Report
	2006	Center for Collaborative Education (2006b)	Report
	2007	Center for Collaborative Education (2007)	Report
	2000	Johnson and Landman (2000)	Journal article
	2010	Therriault, Gandhi, Casasanto, and Carney (2010)	Report
	2007	Tung and Ouimette (2007)	Conference paper
Chicago Public Schools: Chicago High School redesign initiative	2009	Honig (2009a)	Journal article
	2009	Honig (2009b)	Conference paper
	2005	Kahne, Sporte, and Easton (2005)	Journal article
	2006	Kahne, Sporte, and de la Torre (2006)	Report
	2003	Sporte, Correa, Kahne, and Easton (2003)	Report
	2004	Sporte, Kahne, and Correa (2004)	Report
	2010	Sporte and de la Torre (2010)	Report
	2008	Stevens (2008)	Report
	2006	Stevens and Kahne (2006)	Report
	2008	Stevens, Sporte, Stoelinga, and Bolz (2008)	Report
New York City Department of Education: Performance-driven budgeting	2002	Siegel and Fruchter (2002)	Report
	2000	Siegel, Zurer, and Fruchter (2000)	Report
	2003	Stiefel, Schwartz, Portas, and Kim (2003)	Journal article
New York City Department of Education: New Century High Schools	2007	Foley, Klinge, and Reisner (2007)	Report
	2007	New Visions for Public Schools (2007)	Report
	2006	Policy Studies Associates (2006)	Report
	2003	Reisner, Rubenstein, Johnson, and Fabiano (2003)	Report
	2005	Rubenstein, Reisner, Coon, and Fabiano (2005)	Report

(continued)

**Table 1. (continued)**

Initiative	Year	Source	Type
Oakland Unified School District (CA): New small autonomous schools	2008	Chambers, Shambaugh, Levin, Muraki, and Poland (2008)	Report
	2002	Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform (2002)	Report
	2004	Durant (2004)	Report
	2003	Durant, Eng, and Naughton (2003)	Report
	2002	Gold, Simon, and Brown (2002)	Report
	2002	Honig (2002)	Report
	2003	Honig (2003)	Report
	2009	Honig (2009a)	Journal article
	2009	Honig (2009b)	Conference paper
	2003	Little and Wing (2003)	Report
	2009	McLaughlin, Scott, Deschenes, Hopkins, and Newman (2009)	Book
	2008	Mediratta, Shah, and McAlister (2008)	Report
	2000	Oakland Unified School District (2000)	Policy document
	2003	Raywid, Schmerler, Phillips, and Smith (2003)	Book
	2007	Strategic Measurement (2007)	Report
2009	Vasudeva, Darling-Hammond, Newton, and Montgomery (2009)	Report	

given the nascent stage of the source research, we could not use “peer review” in all cases as a proxy for research quality. In our analysis, we emphasized the findings that appeared in peer-reviewed journal articles and reports especially when claims between peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed publications conflicted. We also triangulated claims across multiple authors and source organizations, when possible, and reported only those findings corroborated by multiple independent sources. We identify the source of findings in our discussion below as well as in Table 1 to allow readers to judge for themselves the merits of our claims. Also, we were able to triangulate claims about only five distinct initiatives across four school districts, a sample we considered too small to use as the basis for generalizations about most or all autonomy initiatives. Accordingly, we take care in our presentation of findings to limit the scope of our claims to the initiatives in our sample and not to draw inappropriate conclusions about autonomy as a school improvement strategy.

## Findings

Overall, as we elaborate in this section, we found that schools participating in the autonomy initiatives in certain systems posted some modest improvements in school performance. Specifically, researchers associated only one autonomy initiative with gains in standardized test scores, but in most of the districts (and all of the districts where researchers analyzed these results), attendance and graduation rates were better in participating versus nonparticipating schools. To the extent that progress along these indicators may set the stage for deeper improvements in school performance, these indicators, coupled with the improved test scores in the one district, suggest the autonomy initiatives may have been on a trajectory toward realizing deeper school improvements. However, these improvements did not necessarily stem from schools' increased autonomy. As our implementation analysis revealed, participating schools tended not to experience increases in their decision-making authority. Some central office staff appeared to be actively working to enable schools' autonomy but facing *systemic barriers* in the process. Therefore, we conclude that the modestly positive school results may have been fueled by other aspects of the autonomy initiatives including their emphasis on teaching and learning improvement and the provision of supports for building schools' capacity for such results.

### *Initiative Outcomes*

Schools participating in the autonomy initiatives (called, simply, "participating schools" below) have posted some improvements on standardized achievement tests in one district but inconclusive results in other systems. On the high end, according to multiple studies using different methods, Oakland's new small autonomous schools achieved statistically significant gains in standardized performance results—a striking result, given that more than one third of the districts' schools participated in the initiative at the time of the most recent study (Vasudeva et al., 2009). For example, one evaluation by Strategic Measurement (2007) used prediction models to determine whether participating schools accelerated student learning faster than other schools. This study reported that students in participating elementary and middle schools were more likely "to meet or exceed predicted scores on the California Standards Test (CST) in English and Language Arts" (Strategic Measurement, 2007, p. 77). A series of studies conducted early in the initiative compared school-wide averages on standardized tests and confirmed that on average, new small autonomous schools outperformed other schools (Durant, 2004;

Durant et al., 2003). A study conducted in 2008 used a value-added productivity analysis to compare student performance on the math and English/language arts portions of the CST at participating and nonparticipating schools. This study found that, on average, participating elementary and high schools were more “productive” than nonparticipating schools. The study also found that for each year a participating school was opened, students’ scores increased on the English and language arts and math portions of the CST by approximately 1% point (.024 and .022 standard unit scores, respectively) per year; these results mean that after 5 years, an average student “would be gaining 5 percentile points per year beyond what they would have gained in an older school [a nonparticipating school]” (Vasudeva et al., 2009, pp. 14-15). These results led the researchers to conclude that new small autonomous schools experienced a “substantial increase in productivity” (Vasudeva et al., 2009, p. 15) the longer they were open.

Analyses in other districts revealed far more inconclusive associations between participation in the autonomy initiatives and standardized achievement measures. For instance, in Boston CCE (2004, 2006a, 2007) conducted a simple comparison of mean standardized achievement scores between participating and nonparticipating schools. They concluded that students in participating schools performed better than students in nonparticipating schools. However, the more rigorous analysis by Abdulkadiroglu et al. (2009) compared participating schools with nonparticipating traditional schools and charter schools using two different methods: one that statistically controlled for student characteristics such as free and reduced-price lunch status and race and ethnicity and the other that involved a natural experiment whereby researchers compared students who won lotteries to gain access to participating schools and those who lost the lotteries and attended other public schools (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2009). The first analysis revealed that students in participating high schools scored slightly better than their counterparts in nonparticipating schools in English and language arts and math but the results from the natural experiment were not statistically significant. The study using statistical controls revealed that middle school students in participating schools “*may actually lose ground*” (p. 9, emphasis in original) compared with students in traditional schools. However, results from the natural experiment indicated no statistically significant performance differences for participating and nonparticipating middle schools.

Also, for example, in their examination of New York City’s performance-driven budgeting initiative, Stiefel, Schwartz, Portas, and Kim (2003) assessed associations between participation in the initiative and student achievement over four consecutive years using a fixed-effects model that controlled for

both student and school characteristics. They found small but statistically significant improvements for students in participating schools on fourth-grade reading and math achievement tests and fifth-grade reading tests but no effect on fifth-grade math. In Chicago, Kahne, Sporte, and de la Torre (2006) examined 11th-grade test scores on the Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE) comparing students at participating and nonparticipating schools and controlling for various background variables and adjusting for concentration effects. They found no difference in scores between participating and nonparticipating schools. Even after additional years of implementation, students in participating schools scored no differently than their counterparts in nonparticipating schools on the national achievement test (ACT) or the PSAE (Sporte & de la Torre, 2010).<sup>2</sup>

Arguably, we should not expect change strategies as complex as the autonomy initiatives to affect in standardized test scores in their early years. Rather, if the initiatives are working well, they might have positive effects along “leading indicators” such as attendance and graduation rates. Such indicators, if positive, suggest schools may be on a trajectory toward improving outcomes more directly related to student learning (Celio & Harvey, 2005; Foley et al., 2010). Accordingly, we also looked for evidence of potential leading indicators of student performance. We found that in all districts where researchers analyzed such outcomes, the autonomy initiatives were associated with statistically significant improvements in school attendance and graduation rates. Overall, these results suggest that the initiatives may have been on a positive trajectory toward improving other results.

All the initiatives from which researchers measured attendance posted improvements. For example, attendance at participating schools in Boston was significantly higher than at nonparticipating schools. These higher attendance rates translated into almost two extra days of instruction per year at the elementary level, a week of additional instruction in middle schools, and more than 2 weeks of additional instructional time in participating high schools (CCE, 2006b). Students in participating Chicago schools were absent 2 weeks less on average than students in nonparticipating schools (Sporte & de la Torre, 2010).

Students in participating schools in all districts where these rates were compared graduated at higher rates than their counterparts in nonparticipating schools. For example, in Boston, researchers compared graduation rates in participating and nonparticipating schools using procedures that controlled for student characteristics. They found significantly higher graduation rates for participating schools compared with nonparticipating schools (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2009). In Chicago, during the 2004-05 academic year, 57.2% of students

in participating schools graduated on time compared with 46.4% of students in similar but nonparticipating public schools—a statistically significant difference at the .05 level (Sporte & de la Torre, 2010). Participating schools “were consistently more effective at graduating their most vulnerable students than other CPS schools” (Sporte & de la Torre, 2010, p. 22). On-time graduation rates in New York City’s New Century High Schools were 78.2% in 2005-06 compared with 58.2% in all public high schools district wide and 60.6% in schools serving a similar population (NVPS, 2007). Likewise, participating schools in Oakland had graduation rates higher than those in the schools they replaced (Strategic Measurement, 2007). One high school’s graduation rate in 2005-06 was 92% compared with the graduation rate of 46% posted by the large comprehensive high school it replaced (Strategic Measurement, 2007).

In summary, only one district’s autonomy initiative posted gains in student performance on standardized achievement tests, but all of the initiatives with data available on attendance and graduation rates demonstrated significant improvements along those indicators. These results overall appear to be better than those of the previous reforms, but still limited. As noted above, research on site-based management and other previous reforms suggested that the limited results of those earlier initiatives stemmed in part from the initiatives’ incomplete implementation. Does a similar analysis hold true for the autonomy initiatives? What does research reveal about the experience of schools in implementation that may at least in part account for such results and otherwise help round out an analysis of autonomy initiatives as a school improvement strategy?

### *Implementation Processes*

We found that some of the improvements in the designs of the autonomy initiatives had actually been implemented in these districts, but to varying degrees and often incompletely. As we discuss in this subsection, schools participating in the autonomy initiatives seemed to be focusing on activities to improve teaching and learning, though the evidence did not indicate the extent to which such activities have penetrated classroom practice. All districts made capacity-building supports available to schools but the quality of those supports varied, especially relative to schools’ needs. Nonetheless, particularly when considered in light of their distinct absence in the context of the earlier initiatives, these conditions may have contributed to the relatively positive results of the autonomy initiatives in some systems.

Strikingly, for all initiatives, central office staff seemed to be engaged in supporting implementation. However, these administrators encountered challenges in realizing the autonomy provisions of the initiatives and, as a result, schools generally did not experience an increase in autonomy. Given the centrality of such discretion to the autonomy initiatives' change strategy, these results indicate that these autonomy initiatives were stalling in key aspects of implementation.

### *Schools' Focus on Teaching and Learning Improvement*

As noted above, the policies authorizing the autonomy initiatives and the guidelines for school applications across districts reinforced the importance of schools focusing their improvement efforts on strengthening teaching and learning. Evidence suggests that during implementation, participating schools generally did adopt this focus, though the studies did not reveal how deeply that focus penetrated actual classroom practice.

For example, the "request for applications" for participation in New York City's performance-driven budgeting initiative called on school applicants "to develop instructional improvement plans to meet student needs, and link school resources to those plans" (Siegel, Zurer, & Fruchter, 2000, p. vi). Applicants were required to develop systems for continuously revisiting their progress in implementing those plans and for revising and refining those plans based on various evidence of school performance. Two independent research teams substantiated that many schools put such systems in place. For example, researchers described how staff across participating schools routinely engaged with data and other evidence to identify struggling students. Some schools used that information to alter the mix of programs and practices within their schools to align with their improvement plans (Siegel et al., 2000; Siegel & Fruchter, 2002; Stiefel et al., 2003).

In further support of the claim that participating schools were focusing on teaching and learning improvement, most teachers participating in Oakland's new small autonomous schools reported in a survey that they agreed that "most organizational and instructional elements outlined in the original [school] design proposal are being implemented at their schools" (Strategic Measurement, 2007, p. 31). These elements included formal times for teacher collaboration and the development of a differentiated instructional approach to meet academic and cultural needs of a diverse student body. In Chicago, teachers in participating schools reported experiences that suggested they were focusing on improving teaching and learning, including significantly higher levels of collective responsibility for student achievement ( $p < .01$ )

than teachers in nonparticipating schools (Kahne et al., 2006). Juniors and first-time freshmen at participating schools were more likely than their counterparts in nonparticipating schools to report that their teachers held them to high academic expectations (Kahne et al., 2006; Kahne, Spote & Easton, 2005).

Overall, these findings suggest that participating schools have been focusing on teaching and learning improvement in the sense that they have been engaging in school improvement planning processes and that teachers report they have adopted such a focus. Such evidence does not substantiate the extent to which participating schools were actually improving classroom practice. Nonetheless, these results do suggest that particularly when compared with schools' participating in earlier site-based management and decentralization initiatives, participating schools were focusing implementation not mainly on the creation of decision-making structures but on processes within schools related to teaching and learning improvement.

### *Engagement With Capacity-Building Supports*

The designs of the autonomy initiatives called for building the capacity of schools to realize teaching and learning improvements. We found that during implementation, participating schools across districts did have access to and occasionally engaged in various capacity-building supports focused on teaching and learning. The influence of those supports may have been mediated by schools' readiness for implementation or their starting level of capacity.

For example, in Oakland where multiple research studies reported gains in student performance along various indicators, prospective school teams participated in the new small autonomous schools "Incubator." The Incubator, essentially a series of professional development sessions, led school design teams through a process of developing schools focused on the initiative's goals of high-quality teaching and learning and equity. Initially, the sessions of the Incubator focused on how to develop high-quality school designs. Over time, the Incubator sessions also emphasized the development of detailed implementation plans that spelled out how the school teams would put their teaching and learning strategies into practice and otherwise build their capacity for implementation (Honig, 2009a; Strategic Measurement, 2007, Vasudeva et al., 2009). Once the district selected schools to participate in the initiative, coaches connected to the Incubator worked on-site at participating schools to assist with implementation (Little & Wing, 2003).

School principals and central office administrators reported that the Incubator provided a major support for school design teams and many school respondents

associated their performance gains (as noted above) with their participation in the Incubator. Researchers' independent observations supported these claims (Honig, 2009a). For example, researchers attributed early school successes in "developing their school programs and focusing on rich and rigorous school designs" to support they received through the Incubator (Vasudeva et al., 2009, p. 50).

At least two independent researchers also argued that capacity for implementation of autonomy initiatives included close support relationships with community members. Absent such community support, schools risked running into such implementation roadblocks as residents protesting the creation of new schools in their neighborhoods or seeking to avoid the closing of long-standing schools for replacement by new small autonomous schools. These researchers revealed how a local community-organizing group in Oakland worked with some school design teams to help them engage their communities in their school planning and implementation processes in ways that may have been consequential to implementation (Gold et al., 2002; McLaughlin, Scott, Deschenes, Hopkins, & Newman, 2009; Mediratta et al., 2008).

In New York where performance results for schools participating in the New Century High Schools initiative were more mixed, schools also had access to intensive supports for building their capacity for implementation, but those supports may not have been consistently provided or of consistent high quality. Specifically, independent researchers concluded that the school reform support provider, NVPS, helped participating schools build their capacity for teaching and learning improvement through a process of "disciplined innovation." This process called on schools to continuously interrogate evidence of their progress to revise and refine their teaching and learning improvement approaches over time (Foley et al., 2007; Policy Studies Associates [PSA], 2006). NVPS also provided ongoing support to schools as issues arose. For instance, the first-year evaluation of the initiative indicated that instruction in participating high schools did not reflect the reform's goal of engaging students in personalized learning opportunities (PSA, 2006). In response, NVPS ran teacher trainings and summer workshops to help build school capacity in this area (NVPS, 2007). However, despite the availability of these supports, not all teachers reported that they were aware of the trainings and many did not attend. Teachers who participated in the trainings generally strongly agreed in surveys that they appreciated the extended time to collaborate with their peers (PSA, 2006; Reisner, Rubenstein, Johnson, & Fabiano, 2003).

Similarly, in Chicago where researchers picked up few differences in performance between participating and nonparticipating schools, multiple reports indicated that capacity-building supports were available to schools but that those supports were generally limited in their intensiveness and quality. The supports especially early in implementation consisted mainly of feedback to schools on their applications and occasional one-time workshops for schools and principals. Central office staff, school principals, and others involved with the participating schools generally reported that the supports were of limited quality and relevance to their particular implementation challenges (Honig, 2009a; Kahne, Sporte, & Easton, 2005; Sporte et al., 2004; Sporte, Correa, Kahne, & Easton, 2003). The limitations of such supports in Chicago may have been exacerbated by schools' lack of readiness for implementation, at least early in the initiative. As Honig (2009a) reported, the first schools to participate in the Chicago initiative had been selected based in part on their need for improvement rather than their readiness for implementation. Arguably then, such schools started implementation with far lower capacity than schools chosen for their ready capacity in implementation; the limited capacity-building supports the initiative provided for implementation may have fallen far short of their particularly high needs.

A similar dynamic may have been at play in the case of New York City's performance-driven budgeting initiative. Schools participating in that initiative received training in the new budgeting system and how to use their new budgeting authority to improve student outcomes. Researchers who observed these trainings and interviewed school staff concluded that such trainings did not adequately address the capacity needs of schools predominantly serving low-income students. The researchers pointed out that these schools tended to have staff with relatively limited knowledge and experience with reforms like performance-driven budgeting and also high staff turnover. Accordingly, these schools faced significant challenges in "establishing the core of experience necessary for effective planning and budgeting" which the basic training in using the new budget system did not effectively address (Siegel & Fruchter, 2002, p. iv).

### *Central Office Supports*

Across all systems chronicled in the research, school district central office administrators appeared as main participants in efforts to build schools' capacity for implementation, a distinct departure from their depiction in research on prior initiatives as absent in implementation or implementation impediments. For example, over time, the Oakland central office became the primary

executor of the Incubator that appeared so consequential to building participating schools' capacity in that district (Honig, 2009a). Similarly, central office staff in New York City helped schools to improve their capacity for school-wide planning and budgeting as part of the performance-based budgeting initiative (Siegel et al., 2000; Siegel & Fruchter, 2002). In CPS, a retired school administrator, hired back into the district as a central office administrator, coached school principals on their academic programs (Honig, 2009a). Differences in the quality of such supports might help explain the varied results of the initiatives across these systems, but limitations of the extant research precluded us from drawing such conclusions. These findings do suggest on a more basic level that central office administrators across districts with various performance results were engaging in implementation as school support providers.

Beyond helping with school capacity building, to what extent did central office staff members help schools realize the promised autonomy? Overall, our review suggests that central office staff in many districts worked to help expand schools' decision-making authority but in only two districts did they actually create such conditions.

Among the positive cases, Boston stood out in our sample not only for promising schools autonomy in the authorizing policy but also for creating central office systems that actually increased schools' autonomy during implementation (CCE, 2001; Raywid, Schmerler, Phillips, & Smith, 2003; Therriault, Gandhi, Casasanto, & Carney, 2010). Schools selected to participate in the Boston initiative as a group entered into a negotiated contract with Boston Public Schools which spelled out specific new freedoms the schools would have to implement in their improvement plans in return for performance along particular outcomes. An early evaluation described that, over time, the district budget office and a group of participating schools collaborated to create the "Fiscal Autonomy Committee" that worked to remove budget-related barriers to school autonomy (CCE, 2001). Through this collaboration, the district created a standard budget allotment for participating schools that increased their flexibility over spending decisions. This collaboration also resulted in a mechanism whereby participating schools could opt out of the district's nonessential services, recoup the funding they would have otherwise spent on those services, and use those funds at their discretion (CCE, 2001). CCE reported that on average, schools chose not to purchase district services; one school reported using the recouped funds to hire additional teachers and keep student-teacher ratios low (CCE, 2001, 2006b).

Likewise, in New York City, central office administrators created an entirely new budget allocation and financial management system for all schools that

researchers claimed enabled school-level budgeting and autonomy as part of their performance-based budgeting initiative (Siegel et al., 2000; Siegel & Fruchter, 2002). The new budgeting system allowed principals flexibility to “match dollars to needs” (Siegel & Fruchter, 2002, p. 68) by awarding nearly their entire budget allocation as unrestricted funds rather than as line items or specific positions. The creation of the new system also prompted central office administrators to change policies and practices in budgeting and accounting to support school decision making over budgets. For example, in response to the new budgeting system, the central purchasing department adjusted their procedures to allow schools to control their own purchasing (Siegel & Fruchter, 2002). Absent such cross-cutting changes in purchasing procedures in other districts, schools found that they had limited discretion in how they use their funds for purchases (Honig, 2009b).

However, accounts from the other initiatives in our sample suggested that although the autonomy initiatives likewise promised schools new freedom, those freedoms generally were not realized in practice. For example, the application for the Chicago initiative asked school planning teams to develop a design for their school that detailed how the school would use autonomies in specific areas to implement approaches that promised to produce increased test scores and higher graduation rates (Kahne et al., 2005; Spote et al., 2004). However, central office administrators in that system (beyond those in the office charged with helping to start the schools) generally reported that participating schools had the same decision-making authority as traditional schools and that they treated them as they did other schools in terms of their expectations that the schools follow district, state, and federal policy. The central office administrators who directly supervised and evaluated both participating and nonparticipating principals unanimously and independently reported that they believed the participating schools should and in practice generally did have *less* autonomy than other schools in part because of their low performance (Honig, 2009b).

In Oakland, schools interested in new autonomies had to apply for specific waivers of district policy, even though they had already been selected to participate in the new small autonomous schools initiative which promised autonomy. Such waiver processes were extremely cumbersome. For example, one waiver process demanded a school compose a 40-page waiver application that took considerable time and school resources to complete but that would be in effect only for one year (Honig, 2009a). In the first few years of implementation, only one school applied for a single waiver. In a comparative analysis of schools participating in the autonomy initiative and other schools selected to participate in a site-based management initiative

that was never actually implemented, Honig (2002, 2003) found that principals of the participating schools reportedly had less autonomy than the site-based management schools.

Researchers who studied the site-based management initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s generally argued that central offices appeared as significant curbs on implementation because central office leaders and staff lacked the political will to transfer the promised authority and, accordingly, they passively or proactively impeded implementation. By contrast, central office administrators in the research on the autonomy initiatives appeared to be engaged in various, sometimes extensive, activities to enable schools' autonomy not only in Boston and New York City but also in other districts. However, whereas in Boston and New York City central office administrators developed major new systems (e.g., of contracting with schools or budgeting for schools) to support the new autonomy, in the other districts, central office leaders tended to take a more piecemeal approach. In those other districts, leaders designated a single office to oversee implementation of the autonomy initiative and work schools' individual requests for new decision-making authority through the central office system. In the process, these central office staff typically encountered systemic barriers to putting policies and practice into place that fostered the new autonomies and they lacked the authority and perhaps, in some cases, the knowledge and other capacity to overcome those barriers.

For example, Honig (2009a) chronicled how leaders in Chicago and Oakland charged central office staff in dedicated offices with facilitating the implementation of the autonomy initiatives. The school board policy authorizing the initiative in each district promised participating schools new autonomy across specific areas such as human resources, budget, and curriculum and school boards approved slates of participating schools whose designs sometimes deviated from central office policies and practices. However, the authorizing policies did not address what school or central office staff should do in instances in which actually granting schools new freedoms conflicted with other central office policies and procedures.

In one such case, a school in Oakland wanted to exercise their autonomy over curriculum by not participating in the district-mandated reading program. Central office staff reported that in this and other examples in which the decisions of participating schools deviated from district policy, the policy authorizing the autonomy initiative did not override those other policies. As a result, they had to work with individual central office units to reconcile such conflicts. Such work proved time-consuming and challenging, particularly as many of the barriers to school autonomy stemmed not from single units or individual policies and procedures but from multiple interrelated rules stretched across different central office departments (Honig, 2009b; see also Raywid et al.,

2003). In addition, though the dedicated office had been charged with enabling implementation, staff of that office generally lacked authority and influence over the other central office units where policy and practice changes were necessarily to realizing the autonomy provisions. Honig found several instances of the central office administrators in the dedicated offices taking the initiative themselves to grant school principals permission to make certain decisions but far fewer examples of changes in central office policies and practices to realize the more systematic expansion of school discretion that the initiatives promised.

In sum, autonomy initiatives have not only been designed to reflect lessons learned from previous attempts to increase schools' decision making; in some respects, they have actually been implemented in ways that reflect those lessons. This analysis suggests some consistencies and possible patterns in implementation that may help account for their generally more positive trajectory than the previous initiatives. However, autonomy provisions of the policies in most systems continue to go unimplemented including those in the one district that posted gains on student achievement test scores. Accordingly, we argue that any improvements in participating schools likely stem from supports and conditions other than schools' ability to exercise new freedoms in support of school improvement.

## Conclusions and Implications

Our review establishes autonomy initiatives as a distinct departure from previous reforms that likewise focused on increasing schools' decision-making authority as a main strategy for school improvement. The initiatives in our review posted some modest gains in school performance measures, suggesting that they may have been on a trajectory toward more significant improvements. Improvements in the designs of the initiatives may partially account for these results. In particular, schools participating in the autonomy initiatives seem far more focused on teaching and learning improvement than, for example, schools that participated in site-based management initiatives of the past. Whereas past initiatives did not make significant investments in supports for building schools' capacity for implementation, the autonomy initiatives included such investments. Likewise, central office staff in most districts appeared to be working to actively support implementation.

However, the autonomy provisions of the autonomy initiatives—central to their underlying change strategy—had been implemented in the minority of participating districts. In the context of site-based management initiatives, researchers tied such limited results to central office staffs' unwillingness to

relinquish control to school. Studies of autonomy initiatives are beginning to reveal central office staff as willing and sometimes ardent supporters of new school autonomy but hampered by systemic barriers to school-level decision making. The challenges identified in the research included a reliance on often cumbersome waiver mechanisms for responding to schools' specific requests for new freedoms and the complexity of changing policies and practices across central office units to enable the new autonomy. The findings from Boston Pilot Schools and New York City's performance-based budgeting initiative, two initiatives that did confer at least some autonomy to schools, suggest that enabling the autonomy provisions may require major changes in basic central office systems and engagement by central office staff throughout central offices, not just in dedicated offices.

Overall, these findings suggest that the new autonomy initiatives may in fact mark an improvement over some previous efforts to increase schools' discretion over key decisions in their emphasis on teaching and learning, their attention to school capacity building, and the participation of central office administrators in implementation. However, autonomy seems to remain an elusive goal.

### *Implications for Research and Policy*

These findings have several implications for future research on educational policy, particularly research that examines decision making in educational systems as a lever of change. First, this review suggested that there may be a connection between the relatively positive outcomes of the autonomy initiatives and their particular design features including their teaching and learning and capacity-building focus. However, the extant research base allows us only to hypothesize about, rather than substantiate, this connection. Researchers moving forward could help build knowledge in this area by explicitly examining possible relationships between autonomy policy designs and outcomes.

In the process, future research should seek to uncover the various conditions, beyond the policy designs that may shape implementation and initiative outcomes as well as relationships among the conditions. Regarding the latter, the extant research suggests a possible relationship between school readiness and the effectiveness of capacity-building strategies. These findings lead us to hypothesize that these and other conditions may interact with one another to help explain how implementation unfolds. What is the broader ecology of conditions that matter to implementation and how, if at all, do those conditions interact with each other during implementation in ways consequential to initiative outcomes?

Future research on the conditions that shape implementation would also do well to explore how accountability demands for improved school performance may mediate implementation. A discussion of accountability was noticeably absent in the early research<sup>3</sup>, even though all the autonomy initiatives held participating schools accountable for results and even though participating schools operated within regular public school systems that placed accountability demands on all schools. Other research suggests that such accountability demands significantly shape school-level decisions and the process of policy implementation (e.g., Firestone & Shipps, 2005; Hamilton et al., 2007; Louis, Febey, & Schroeder, 2005; Marks & Nance, 2007). Future research would advance knowledge of the implementation dynamics of the autonomy initiatives with a fuller examination of accountability policy as a possible implementation mediator.

Fourth, the experience of the autonomy initiatives examined here has underscored the importance of central office administrators in enabling implementation, but mainly with negative examples. What does central office administrators' more productive or successful participation in implementation involve, especially when they actually support implementation of the initiatives' autonomy provisions? The experience of two districts suggests wholly new systems for school budgeting and for establishing agreements between schools and the central office may enable autonomy. More broadly, what does it take to put such systems in place? Even in the context of such systems, how do central office administrators support schools with implementation? Future research would significantly advance knowledge in this area by shining a direct light on central office administrators in implementation in districts where starting conditions suggest central office administrators might be successful in enabling autonomy.

Fifth, what happens in schools participating in autonomy initiatives over time? In our review, we claimed that the autonomy initiatives may have been on a trajectory toward realizing school improvements. But, were they? Longitudinal analyses of the outcomes of these efforts may or may not bear out that claim. Such analyses should also look inside classrooms to examine the extent to which schools actually use their designation as autonomous schools or their actual autonomy to affect changes in classroom practice. Such classroom-level changes will likely be important contributors to school improvement over time.

This review also raises a number of questions policy makers might productively consider when exploring or engaging in reform strategies that aim to increase schools' decision-making authority. First, how can we build on lessons learned from the early research on the autonomy initiatives and help schools focus on teaching and learning improvement as the ultimate goal of

the initiatives and how can we strategically invest in building schools' capacity for such results? In the process, how can we ensure that at the start of implementation participating schools are ready for implementation?

Second, how might we invest in building the capacity of our central office staff to support implementation? As noted above, the experience of both site-based management and the new autonomy initiatives reveals the importance of central office administrators in implementation. However, their productive participation may require professional development to help them build their capacity for the new work that implementation entails. If district leaders choose to establish distinct offices to oversee implementation, how can they ensure that those units have the authority necessary to effect changes throughout the central office system that might enable school autonomy?

In conclusion, unlike other research reviews that appear long after policy initiatives have matured and, in some cases, become defunct, our review comes relatively early in the implementation of the autonomy initiatives. We reveal how this early research suggests various specific ways researchers and policy makers alike can make early or mid-course corrections—in how they focus their research and in how they target their implementation efforts—to further explore the potential of autonomy as a school improvement strategy.

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### **Notes**

1. We found several reports and articles based on the national evaluation of the The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Small School Initiative (see, for example, Shear et al., 2008; Smeardon et al., 2003, 2004). Although these reports contained information about the implementation of new small autonomous schools initiatives in several districts, we did not include them in our analysis because the researchers aggregated their findings to the national level and we therefore could not use them to isolate the experiences of individual school districts.
2. We found no studies of New York City's New Century High Schools that examined student standardized test scores.
3. In one mention of accountability demands in the research, Siegel and Fruchter (2002) suggest but do not fully substantiate that accountability demands on schools prompted schools to focus on compliance at the expense of improvement.

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