

Vignette: The role of Innovation and Autonomy in Continuous Improvement, June 9, 2022

It is comforting to see the earnest efforts underway to refresh the strategic plan for Denver Public Schools. As the pandemic moves to the rear-view mirror, leadership is conducting the outreach needed to build interest and support for a revised strategic plan. The effort is happening against the backdrop of School District statements declaring that DPS is in the business of continuous improvement. The District is optimistic about its ability to achieve equity improvements that have proved to be elusive for decades. At the same time, topics that played a central role in the past (innovation and autonomy) are treated gingerly.

A recent publication (*DPS Weekly*) announced that “the results we desire are within our reach . . . if only we overcome defensiveness as individuals and an organization.” The publication said that defensiveness presents itself in many different ways, but in every case defensiveness follows the same two-part script. The first part of the script is “deny the problem”. The second part of the script is “cover up the denial”.

In March, 2022, the DPS Board of Education adopted a new Executive Limitations policy that bars the Superintendent from bringing to the Board for approval an application from an innovation school requesting a waiver of certain obligations. In particular, the new policy stipulates that waiver requests that the Board will consider for approval in the future will only be those that ensure that teachers in the school making the request are covered by the contract that was negotiated by the collective bargaining agent for the teachers’ (Denver Classroom Teachers Association). Effectively, the adoption of this policy altered a pattern that had been in place in Denver Public Schools for over a decade. Education law in the State of Colorado allowed innovation schools to arise and operate outside the confines of the collectively bargained teacher agreement as long as a majority of the teachers on staff in the school support those conditions. Innovation schools that had applied for and secured waivers had enjoyed wide latitude and autonomy from certain DPS protocols. These protocols involved start and end time for school, whether or not staff in a school must attend District-sponsored professional development, etc.

In response to the action of the School Board, on May 11, 2022 the Colorado legislature passed Senate Bill 22-197 which provides an avenue of relief for any innovative school that disagrees with the decision of a local school board (for instance, with respect to the approval or denial of waiver requests). The avenue of relief is the introduction of an objective third party to oversee a dispute resolution process. If signed into law by the Governor, a provision within SB 22-197 calls for the findings of the dispute resolution process to be sent to the State Board of Education for review. At its discretion, the State Board may issue a non-binding opinion to the local Board of Education. What is unclear is what becomes of the State Board opinion if the local School Board is not swayed by the State Board opinion.

Curiously, where site based flexibility has been a mainstay of the DPS Theory of Action for almost a decade, discussions about the content and direction of the next generation strategic plan are surprisingly reserved with respect to the role of flexibility, autonomy, and creativity as an engine of

transformation. Chiefly, in the run-up to a refreshed strategic plan, discussions about flexibility and site autonomy have largely been restricted to calls for creation of a guide to clarify who makes which decisions.

Why are after-action reviews commonplace in some fields (medicine, the military, and graduate schools of business that rely on case studies), yet rare in a field like K12 where the focus is squarely on learning? Importantly, how open is DPS to convening executive-level leaders to engage in after-action reviews?

In the age of COVID, the popular press is awash in publications that extoll the value of adaptability as a new-found dimension of intelligence. Writers like Adam Grant (author of *Think Again*) make the case that versatility and the ability to shift perspective are of heightened value in today's world. At times like this, it is puzzling that concepts like flexibility, innovation and site autonomy that played a central role in the DPS Theory of Action in the past would be a taboo topic in discussions about the next gen strategic plan. Where innovation and autonomy were central to the DPS theory of action in the years leading to 2022, consideration of the topics is oddly muted during discussion on the shape of a next-gen strategic plan.

In the name of continuous improvement, medical doctors subject themselves to withering professional scrutiny following difficult procedures. Are there lessons that K12 leaders could glean by dissecting the events surrounding the recent shift in District direction with respect to innovation and site autonomy?

If School District leadership took the opportunity to consider this, structured conversations about the topics could conceivably surface insights that may help the District plot its future course. If leadership moved in this direction, these structured conversations could follow a script that looks like this (below).

Take five minutes to gather your thoughts. Address the following questions. Then turn to your neighbors and compare notes. Find as much consensus as you can. Be ready to report out to the whole group.

1. What is the central issue?
2. What factors are worth consideration (and why)?
3. What should guide the actions of School District leaders?
4. Are there go-forward options that are worthy of consideration?
5. What constitutes a successful resolution (and why)?
6. When it comes to public deliberations, are there - or should there be - boundaries on behavior?
7. What has been missing from the conversation that ought to have a place in discussions?
8. What lesson or lessons can or should we take from this?