



Autonomous District Schools: Lessons From the Field on a Promising Strategy

Mary Wells & Tresha Ward
October 2019

Introduction

Districts around the country are increasingly experimenting with the design and launch of autonomous district schools as a way to increase innovative, high-quality school options; bring decision-making closer to students; retain talented leaders; and prevent students and families from leaving the district for charter schools.

Over the past several years, Bellwether has supported district administrators and school principals in 10 districts across the country to design and launch over a dozen autonomous district schools. In this report, we share a case study of one district using autonomous district schools as a part of its district improvement strategy: San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD) in south central Texas.

This document aims to inform education leaders — especially district administrators, school principals, and philanthropists — about a promising (but still largely unproven) education improvement strategy, the key steps in implementing this strategy, and what we have learned in supporting the early implementation of this work. We hope these lessons, and the [related tools we've developed](#), help districts considering this strategy make informed decisions and create the conditions to support these schools well.

Defining Autonomous District Schools

Autonomous district schools allow districts to utilize some of the same freedoms that public charter schools enjoy, enabling educators to innovate and make decisions that better serve students. These schools do not operate completely independently from the district. They remain part of the district and receive a range of services.

Context on San Antonio Independent School District's autonomous schools effort

San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD) has leveraged Texas' favorable policy environment and, specifically, Senate Bill (SB) 1882 (passed in 2017), which incentivizes districts to create innovative school models.

- This effort has broad support from the elected **school board** and **Superintendent Pedro Martinez**.
- The work is led by SAISD's **Office of Innovation**, which provides **supports** to aspiring autonomous school leaders and oversees the **authorization** process.
- SAISD has authorized **22 autonomous schools** as part of this effort over the past three years.
- SAISD created a program to provide **deep support to some of its most talented principals**, the Network Principal Initiative (NPI), to help design and launch these schools. The program has several goals, including **deepening student impact** through the creation of autonomous and accountable schools, **growing and retaining strong leaders**, and **bringing additional resources** to these campuses and the district through SB 1882.

Executive summary

In partnership with SAISD's Office of Innovation, Bellwether provided technical assistance, content expertise, and coaching to support the design and launch of these autonomous schools through the following phases:



Developing a vision and value proposition



Developing a robust stakeholder engagement approach



Drafting the application for authorization



Establishing a governance structure



Launching their school networks

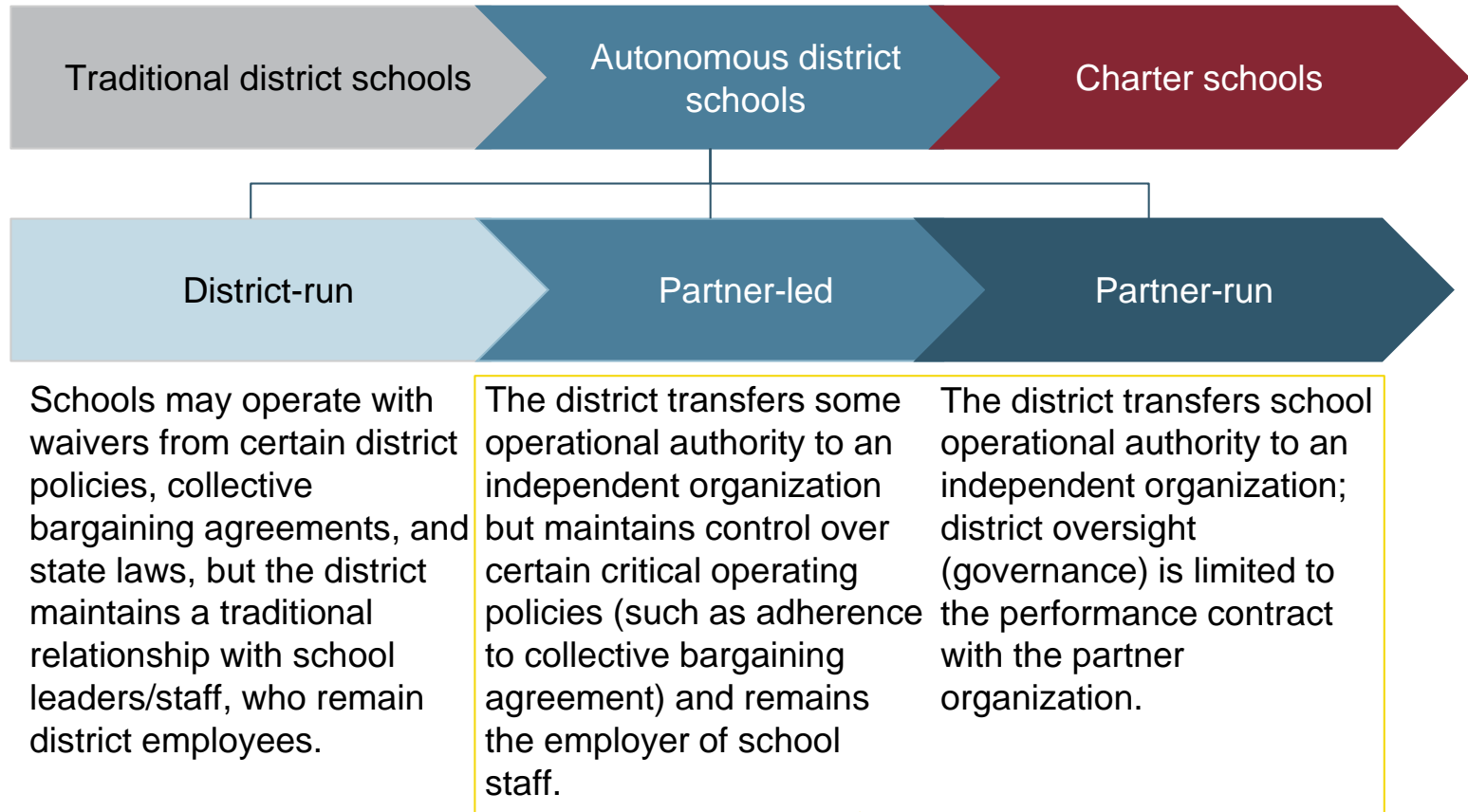
We offer five key lessons from our work with SAISD for districts considering autonomous schools as a strategy:

- 1 Build maximum **autonomy** into the application around the instructional program.
- 2 Ensure **leaders receive robust support** to shift mindsets and skills into this new role.
- 3 Empower a **central office team** to efficiently clear obstacles.
- 4 Invest in **extensive stakeholder engagement**.
- 5 Build leaders' capacity to **manage a governing board** (this is *far* outside leaders' experience, and they will need a lot of support to do this well).

Table of contents

Autonomous Schools Overview	page 6
Bellwether's Support of Autonomous Schools	page 10
San Antonio ISD's Autonomous Schools Strategy	page 11
Five Lessons Learned From Our Work	page 17
Conclusion	page 27

Autonomous district schools vary widely in the amount of autonomy they enjoy



Our materials focus on these two types of autonomous district schools, which typically require approval or “authorization” by the district and involve the creation of a separate governing board to oversee the school.

There are several reasons districts pursue autonomous schools

- Utilize the same freedoms that charters have enjoyed to grow a wide range of innovative school options in order to meet the diverse needs of students and families
- Bring programmatic decision-making closer to students, thereby improving student outcomes
- Retain students and families who might otherwise enroll in charter schools (thereby keeping enrollment and financial resources inside the district)
- Unleash the creativity and leadership potential within the large pool of diverse leaders within districts
- Expand the reach of talented leaders to more students and retain these leaders in the district

There are also several challenges that districts experience when launching and managing autonomous schools

Challenge	Risk
District does not invest in creating a strong authorization process	School quality is mixed
District under-invests in capacity-building for leaders of autonomous schools and networks	Schools are not unique/innovative
Central office (e.g., HR, operations) struggles to differentiate support for these schools	Red tape distracts leaders
Finance systems do not accommodate student-based budgeting, limiting budget control for autonomous schools	Too little autonomy to improve student outcomes
District leadership transitions and new leaders want to bring in new strategies	Autonomy erodes or contracts are not renewed

Three regions Bellwether has supported since 2018 on their autonomous schools models

Texas: A bet on leadership

In partnership with the Texas Education Agency, Bellwether supported previously successful leaders across eight districts in designing and launching autonomous school networks.

These leaders replicated successful instructional practices from their existing schools to their networks, either by launching new schools or by assuming leadership of lower-performing schools.

Denver: A bet on proven models

In partnership with Denver Public Schools and Empower Schools, Bellwether supported schools and district instructional leaders in applying the autonomous model strategy in a range of ways, including opening new schools that would replicate a proven school model, expanding successful models to turnaround schools, and strengthening the leadership and instructional practices of current leaders already leading networks of schools.

St. Louis: A bet on autonomy

In St. Louis, the district aimed to apply the autonomous school strategy as a lever for school turnaround, releasing failing schools from key district policies to encourage innovation and raise performance.

In this application, current school leaders and staff remain in place with greater empowerment to make school-based decisions. A key difference is the increased autonomy and accountability through a network model and governing board.

Since 2017, San Antonio has made autonomous schools a significant element of its district improvement effort

San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD)



- 49,000 students enrolled
- 90% Hispanic, 6% African American, and 2% white
- 91% low-income/free/reduced-priced lunch



- 18% students attend charter schools



- Under current accountability system, district rating would be “F” in 2016-17; was a “B” in 2018-19



- 22 schools operate under SB 1882, which incentivizes the authorization of in-district charters



Since 2018, Bellwether has supported SAISD leaders in launching autonomous school networks

To magnify the impact of high-performing school principals, SAISD used the autonomous school strategy to enable these leaders to form networks of two or more schools and elevated them into the role of network principal. In this position, principals bring successful practices to struggling campuses, positively impacting more students.

*“The network principal concept was first based on the principle that we can **take our best folks and entrust them with oversight of another campus.** If we then provide the right supports, we are **more likely to succeed** in the replication of these school models doing right by kids.”*

— Mohammed Choudhury, Chief Innovation Officer

One autonomous school



Impact: ~350-400 students






Network: Multiple autonomous schools



Impact: ~700+ students

The Network Principal Initiative within SAISD supports strong leaders to design and launch autonomous schools and networks

Goals of the Network Principal Initiative

-  1. **Deepen the impact for more students** by having the strongest principals start additional schools, take over leadership of a struggling campus while retaining leadership over their existing campuses, or come together to form a network where they work together.
-  2. **Create autonomous and accountable schools** through a chartering process, thereby ensuring that these talented educators have the ability to make the decisions they need to make to improve performance and serve students in the long term.
-  3. **Bring additional resources to these campuses and the district** through SB 1882 (the policy that enables and encourages districts to authorize highly autonomous schools).
-  4. **Build the leadership bench of talent within the district** by leveraging strong principals to develop others.
-  5. Provide **growth and retention opportunities for the highest-performing principals** by offering a new role that requires new skills.

Bellwether partnered with SAISD to support the Network Principal Initiative across six areas of planning and skill building

Area	Key Activities
Strategic Planning	Build a clear and compelling vision and strategic plan for the school or network, including vision, mission, value proposition, program model, autonomies, human capital strategy, and use of resources
Stakeholder Engagement	Engage teachers, administrators, parents, students, and other key constituencies in the planning and design process; seek input and ensure timely communications
Leadership	Build adaptive and technical leadership skills of leaders to fit autonomous school context, including shifting their use of time, leading through other leaders, setting culture, planning, goal setting, board management, and financial planning
Governance	Create a strong plan for governance, including a clearly defined board role, thoughtful board composition, plans for board onboarding and engagement, and measures of success
Partnership	Determine local requirements and regulations related to the oversight of autonomous schools, and identify or launch a qualifying partner organization with an aligned mission and values, and the capacity to support the school or network
Application Development & Authorization	Build a campus-based writing team and write the charter or innovation school application, as specified by your district's authorization process

High-level overview of SAISD's annual authorization process

District publishes call for autonomous school applicants

- Interested leaders submit letters of intent to submit an application for an autonomous district school

June-
August

Leaders develop the vision for their school or network and complete the application materials

- Leaders use the application components to codify core elements of their network
- Leaders garner stakeholder input and support on core elements

September-
January

Applications are reviewed for authorization

- Applications are reviewed by district leaders
- Leaders are presented to the board and answer questions about their application
- Board votes to approve or deny applications

February-
April

State approval

- After receiving local board approval, the Texas Education Agency reviews and approves or declines SB 1882 school status

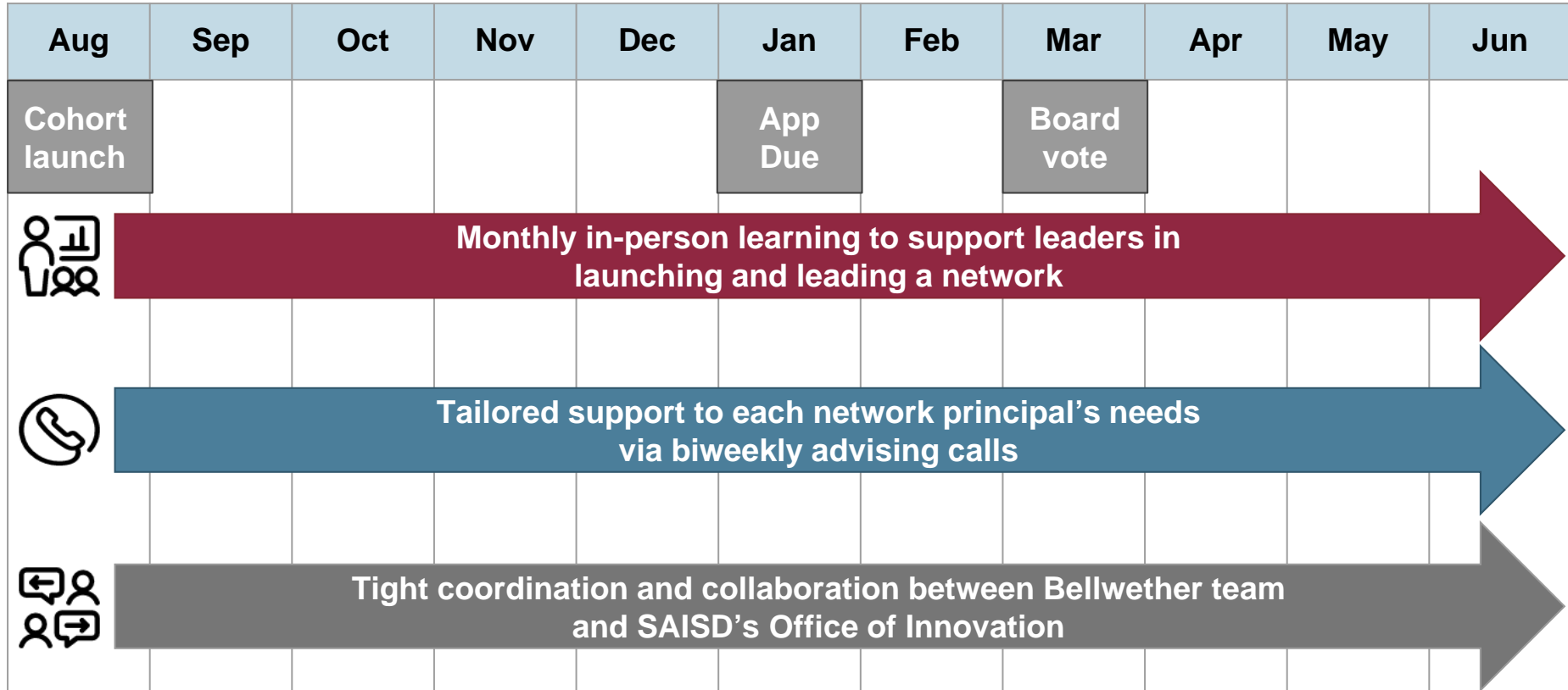
April-
June

Getting ready to launch

- Once applications are approved by the board, leaders begin executing their plan and getting ready to launch

May-
June

Bellwether supported a cohort of SAISD leaders through their application development, submission, and launch planning



Each learning module touches on the following key topics:

- Network Leadership
- Leader Development
- Network Design
- Stakeholder Engagement
- Plan Implementation and Authorization
- Governance and Nonprofit Partnership

We came away with five lessons from our work with SAISD about what it takes to launch successful autonomous schools

Autonomy	Build as much autonomy into the agreement as possible around functions closest to the classroom (e.g., staffing, materials, professional development, and use of time).
Talent	Talent is paramount — the role is very different from a typical campus principal role, so even fabulously talented leaders need a lot of support to build new skills and shift mindset. This role is not a good fit for everyone.
Central Support	Support for this work in the central office can be very targeted and can come from a very small team — but this team needs to have the power to efficiently clear obstacles (of which there will be many).
Engagement	Extensive stakeholder engagement can make the conversion of traditional district schools into autonomous schools a big win for the district, staff, and community — and lack of engagement can erode trust and lead to the need to rebuild.
Governance	Independent governance is a key to maintaining the autonomies that have been granted and driving quality outcomes, but for most district principals, managing a board is FAR outside their experience and they will need a lot of capacity-building to do this well.

Recent PPI research identified six areas of autonomy that are most important for driving stronger student outcomes

Area of Autonomy	Key Questions
Staffing	Do school leaders have the power to select and remove their teachers and other staff, and determine how to evaluate and pay them?
Learning model	Are the schools free to adopt different focuses (arts, STEM, etc.) and learning models, such as Montessori, blended learning, project-based, and dual-language immersion?
Curriculum	Are school leaders free to determine their own curricula, textbooks, software, and the like?
Budgeting	Can school leaders spend their resources to best serve students' needs, or are budget formulas determined by the central office?
School calendar and schedule	Are schools allowed to change the lengths and schedules of their school days and years?
Professional development	Do school leaders and staff decide what professional development they need, or does the central office decide that?

Each SAISD network principal pulled a variety of these levers as they launched their autonomous schools

Area of Autonomy	Initial Design Decisions by SAISD Network Principals
Staffing	Leaders developed new and shared positions using their autonomy and discretionary funds (e.g., network operations leader, supplemental classroom teachers).
Learning model	Schools implemented a variety of program models, including project-based learning, single gender focused, and STEAM.
Curriculum	Schools implemented a variety of curricula or invested in support for teachers in building their own curriculum aligned to their learning model.
Budgeting	While many budget formulas are determined by the central office, these schools have incremental funding from the state via SB 1882 and some discretionary funding from the district, approximately \$800-\$1000 per student.
School calendar and schedule	Most schools did not modify the length of the day or year, although one participating campus runs a year-round schedule; several schools reorganized time within the existing schedule to create more time for professional learning.
Professional development	Most leaders opted out of nearly all centrally driven professional development and provided their own aligned to their program priorities.

Leading an autonomous district school is not for everyone; leaders must have prerequisite skills and mindsets



Proven and ready for a challenge

Network leadership can be a useful strategy in retaining and stretching high-performing campus principals.

“I was looking for something new and was feeling this way before the network idea, and **this opportunity keeps me on my toes** still.” — Alejandra Barraza, High Scope network leader, SAISD



Trailblazers

For a new role like network principal, it is critical to enlist principals who are **willing to work through the complexity and ambiguity** of being the first to take that role.

“[Establishing a network is] very intrinsically motivating.” — Alejandra Barraza



Able to think strategically

“I enjoyed being able to take a step back from the day-to-day operational aspects of the campus to **be more strategic**, thinking about resources and across the two campuses. ... Just because we were **good principals doesn't mean we will be good network principals.**” — Brian Sparks, School Innovation Collaborative network leader, SAISD

To be successful in this new context, leaders of autonomous district schools need to develop new skills



Strong vision

Leaders need support crafting a clear vision for their network and communicating their vision in a clear and compelling way to stakeholders.

“The conversations about **how to create a network** and **what should be the focus and the vision of the network** were really helpful.” — Delia McLerran, YWLA network leader



Time reallocation

Leaders needed to quickly learn how to manage their time and priorities differently. They also needed to strengthen their ability to intentionally build leadership capacity.

“You need to be **comfortable letting go** of some of the things you **used to do** as a principal.” — Brian Sparks



Leader of leaders

Leaders of a network need to shift from **directly coaching and managing teachers** themselves to building their leadership teams capacity. **Leading through their leaders is a critical skill** they need to master.

Leaders of autonomous district schools will need several key supports to enable success



Training and coaching

Leaders need help to shift into their new role. Leaders found it helpful to receive **training from former network leaders** who were able to provide **practical coaching on the role**.

“The training was really powerful and **changed my thinking.**” — Delia McLerran



Tools and resources

Leaders found calendaring support and tools such as work plans helpful.

“It was helpful to have **examples, timelines, and the ability to ask questions.** I love when I could take something I received in a session **back to school.**” — Delia McLerran



Connections with other leaders

“It was valuable having the **opportunity to think and work with other network principals,** and share concerns with other people who are in similar situations and **be able to create those relationships.**”

— Alejandra Barraza

The district central office needs to support these leaders and their schools with a few key conditions



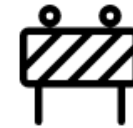
High-quality authorizing

One of the most **important functions** that a district must build is a rigorous **authorizing process** that ensures plans for autonomous schools are thorough and thoughtful, and that the leader and the board are highly capable.



Talent-spotting and support

Identifying leaders who have the **skills and mindset** to take on this work is crucial, but **resources are needed to support these leaders too**. Some districts can build a team to deliver support, but technical assistance providers may be needed in targeted areas as well.



Willingness and ability to remove barriers

Barriers will crop up in places both major and minor when **systems were designed for centralized school oversight**. Someone on the district team needs the **power** and the **problem-solving capability** to rapidly remove these barriers.

Effective stakeholder engagement is pivotal to how the new autonomous school is viewed by its constituents



Teacher planning team

“We included **the most skeptical teachers** on our writing team. When they saw what this opportunity was, and that **their ideas were valued** and used, they were totally on board. Plus, I didn’t need to write the whole application myself!”
— Alejandra Barraza

Systematic engagement planning

Stakeholder engagement **takes time** and must be treated as a **full initiative** with its own workplan. Leaders should plan for **key messages** that are **differentiated by stakeholder group** and **sequenced over time**.

Transparency

“When we didn’t know who our nonprofit partner was going to be, we just didn’t address it. Looking back, **I would have been more transparent** about what a nonprofit partner is and what we were looking for in that partner, even when we couldn’t say who it was.”
— Brian Sparks

Governance is critical to long-term success for autonomous schools but a very foreign concept for most principals

In “partner-led” and “partner-run” autonomous schools (see slide 6), an independent organization with its own board governs the schools. Instead of reporting to the district central office, the leader of the school or network reports to the independent board and must build and manage that board just as a nonprofit leader does.



Total lack of context

“When we addressed governance, **I did not know that we even needed to talk about it** — or even what it was. I was thinking, ‘**What does that even mean?!**’ It was like trying to teach me to fly a spacecraft, but I’ve never even seen one.” — Delia McLerran



Board recruitment and composition

Board members bring **leadership experience**, **community connection**, and **valuable expertise** to schools. Once formed, a high-quality board can help ensure **districts deliver on promises of autonomy** and ensure leaders focus on **student outcomes**.



Board and leader roles

Leaders and their boards need support to form and become high-functioning. Areas of need typically include **clarity of roles**, **strategy** development, **financial oversight** duties, board **processes**, and **regulatory requirements**.

An autonomous schools' initiatives will not get off the ground in the first place without support from the district's board



Inspiring vision

School board members need to be **aligned around a vision** they believe in.

“I believe in school-based autonomy. **Principals are in the best position to know what students need.** We must empower students, teachers, and principals.” — Steve Lecholop, SAISD board member



Transparency

School board members need to know that leaders are doing the stakeholder engagement work required to **build buy-in** so blowback will be minimal when they take a key vote.



Communication

There must be **clear and consistent communication**, and **a lot of it**. This is not often a strong point for districts.

“You must have a **persuasive and unified message** that is **frequently articulated**, all the time.” — Steve Lecholop

Conclusion

- Autonomous schools represent a **promising opportunity** for districts to increase innovative, high-quality school options; bring decision-making closer to students; retain talented leaders; and prevent students and families from leaving the district for charter school options.
- These schools **require new capabilities** within the **district central office** and a wide range of **capacity-building support for principals** moving into leadership positions in autonomous schools and networks.
- We believe that **only if** districts considering an autonomous schools initiative take note of the five lessons learned from our work with SAISD and **make these investments thoughtfully and well**, this promising strategy will **reach its potential** to improve education for our most underserved students.

A related resource, “Autonomous District Schools: Tools for Planning and Launching,” is available [here](#) for administrators and principals interested in planning and launching autonomous district schools or networks of schools.

About the authors



Mary K. Wells is a co-founder and managing partner at Bellwether Education Partners. Mary leads the Strategic Advising practice within Bellwether, which focuses on supporting education organizations with growth strategy, market assessment, business planning, organizational development, and implementation planning. Recent clients include Urban Teachers, The Achievement Network, Teach Plus, San Antonio ISD, Texas Education Agency, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Prior to launching Bellwether, Mary led STEM and new school investments for the Texas High School Project, where she was a founding team member. She oversaw a portfolio of grants focused on expanding access to high-quality college preparatory schools and improving the quality of math and science education in Texas. Before joining the Texas High School Project, Mary was a manager and consultant with Bain & Company, where she advised Fortune 500 companies on growth strategy, new business development, and post-merger integration issues. Mary is a first-generation college graduate and holds a bachelor's from Harvard University and a master's from the Stanford Graduate School of Business. She lives in Massachusetts with her husband, son, and daughter. Mary can be reached at mary@bellwethereducation.org.



Tresha Ward has 15 years of experience in education. In her role at Bellwether as academic strategy senior adviser, she has worked across pre-k through 12th grades and a variety of school models supporting leaders as they start up, scale, or improve their instructional programs. Prior to joining Bellwether in 2017, Tresha spent eight years in a number of leadership roles with the KIPP charter school network, including managing director of schools for KIPP NYC; where she focused on school turnaround; school leader development director for the KIPP Foundation; and founding school leader of KIPP Legacy Preparatory School. Tresha's areas of expertise include instructional leadership, school turnaround, talent development, and executive coaching. She attended Vanderbilt University for her bachelor's degree and Stanford University for her master's degree; she started her education career as a Teach For America Houston corps member in the Houston Independent School District. She currently lives in Brooklyn, New York, with her husband. Tresha can be reached at tresha.ward@bellwethereducation.org.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the many leaders who shared their experiences and expertise on launching autonomous schools and networks:

Brett Alessi, Lina Bankert, Alejandra Barraza, Mohammad Choudhury, Steve Lecholop, Delia McLerran, Sonya Mora, Dana Ray, Alyssa Schechter, Brian Sparks

Bellwether Education Partners would like to thank the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for its support of this publication. Any errors — and the views represented here — are the responsibility of the authors alone.