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Thank you for your request for **research on whether increased school autonomy contributes to school improvement and increased student achievement. Ask A REL** is a collaborative reference desk service provided by the 10 regional educational laboratories (REL) that, by design, functions much in the same way as a technical reference library. It provides references, referrals, and brief responses in the form of citations on research-based education questions.

**Please note that REL Southwest has not done an evaluation of the resources themselves but offers this list to you for your information only.**

## BACKGROUND

“In a portfolio strategy, schools need to be free to pursue distinctive approaches to instruction and student services. That means they should not be forced by district policies to make the same uses of time, money, staff, instructional methods, technology, facilities, professional development resources, or outside partnerships as other schools.

Under a portfolio strategy, accountability balances autonomy. Because schools can control their climate and instructional program, they can be held accountable for whether students learn. The district’s primary role is performance assessment and portfolio management.”<sup>1</sup>

“A portfolio district superintendent believes the most important figure in improving student achievement is the school leader, and that they should be given as much authority as possible to make the right decisions for their school—getting to choose who is part of their teaching and administrative team and having the budget and freedom to buy the curriculum and services they feel are right for the school. In exchange, principals need to work within their budget and be held accountable for results. Applying this freedom to all schools, not just charters or high-performing district schools, means that existing schools are strengthened, have a greater chance to do what they need to succeed with students, and can be held accountable for performance.

Autonomy is important for both principals and districts because it removes the district from the inherent conflict of telling schools what to do and then faulting them when it doesn’t go well. It also gives principals and teachers the freedom to do what they think is right for individual students, something that is very hard for the district to do well at the individual level.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hill, P. (2013). Defining and organizing for school autonomy. CRPE: Reinventing Public Education. <http://www.crpe.org/publications/defining-and-organizing-school-autonomy>.

<sup>2</sup> “School Autonomy.” [http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/Portfolio\\_components\\_2.pdf](http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/Portfolio_components_2.pdf).

Following an established REL Southwest protocol, we conducted a search for research reports, websites, as well as descriptive briefs on whether increased school autonomy contributes to school improvement and increased student achievement. **We searched the references in the response from the most commonly used resources of research, but they are not comprehensive and other relevant references and resources may exist.** The sources included federally funded organizations, additional research institutions, educational databases, and general Internet searches using Google and Bing. See the methods section at the end of this Ask A REL for additional information on how we identified the following sources.

## QUESTION

**Portfolio Districts—Does increased school autonomy contribute to school improvement and increased student achievement?**

## SOURCES

Honig, M. I. & Rainey, L. R. (2012). Autonomy and school improvement: What do we know and where do we go from here? *Educational Policy*, 26(3), 465-495.  
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ970618>

*From the ERIC 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. (Contains 3 notes and 1 table.)”

Jaquith, A. (2015). Site-based leadership for improving instruction. *Educational Forum*, 79(1), 12-23. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1049380>

*From the ERIC abstract:* “This article argues that a principal's actions can create site-based conditions that can grow a staff's capacity to improve instruction, depending on how a principal conceives of, organizes, and structures learning opportunities for teachers. The article analyzes the leadership of one principal as an example of how leaders can develop instructional capacity to improve teaching and learning. A conceptual framework is presented that defines instructional capacity and offers an approach for its development.”

Mayer, A. & LeChasseur, K. (2013). Caught in the middle: Urban principals' attempts to achieve school autonomy and devolve decision-making. *Journal of Urban Learning, Teaching, and Research*, 9, 32-41. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1027014>

*From the ERIC abstract:* “Based on two years of extensive data collection in four urban elementary schools, this paper examines the role of principals in the implementation of the Together Initiative (TI), a school reform model for schools labeled low-performing per state accountability standards. The reform model aims to increase school autonomy from district mandates and devolve decision-making to include teachers, parents, and community members. The differences in the manner in which principals implemented TI appear to be influenced by the level of support at the district level, as well as principals' own commitment to the tenets of the initiative. Balancing devolved school leadership with district relationships requires reimagining the boundaries between responsibilities of the principalship, teaching, and administration.”

Steinberg, M. P. (2014). Does greater autonomy improve school performance? Evidence from a regression discontinuity analysis in Chicago. *Education Finance and Policy*, 9(1), 1-35. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1016286>

*From the ERIC abstract:* “School districts throughout the United States are increasingly providing greater autonomy to local public (non-charter) school principals. In 2005-06, Chicago Public Schools initiated the Autonomous Management and Performance Schools program, granting academic, programmatic, and operational freedoms to select principals. This paper provides evidence on how school leaders used their new autonomy and its impact on school performance. Findings suggest that principals were more likely to exercise autonomy over the school budget and curricular/instructional strategies than over professional development and the school's calendar/schedule. Utilizing regression discontinuity methods, I find that receipt of greater autonomy had no statistically significant impact on a school's average math or reading achievement after two years of autonomy. I do find evidence that autonomy positively affected reading proficiency rates at the end of the second year of autonomy. These findings are particularly relevant for policy makers considering the provision of greater school-based autonomy in their local school districts.”

Steinberg, M. P. & Cox, A. B. (2017). School autonomy and district support: How principals respond to a tiered autonomy initiative in Philadelphia public schools. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 16(1), 130-165. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1128666>

*From the ERIC abstract:* “A tiered autonomy policy was recently implemented in Philadelphia, where select principals were granted autonomy to manage school operations while others were promised greater district support to improve school functioning. This article provides evidence on how principals used their autonomy and the extent of district support for non-autonomous principals. Principals granted greater autonomy were more likely to change teacher professional development and curriculum and instructional strategies, while principals with longer tenures and more leadership training were more likely to implement organizational changes. Non-autonomous principals reported a misalignment between school and district priorities and limited district support for improving school functioning.”

Weiner, J. M. & Woulfin, S. L. (2017). Controlled autonomy: Novice principals' schema for district control and school autonomy. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 55(3), 334-350. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1135426>

*From the ERIC abstract:* “Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to gain insights into how a group of novice principals, all in schools that deployed principles of autonomy as mechanisms for improvement, conceptualized what the authors label "controlled autonomy"--a condition in which school leaders are expected to both make site-based decisions and be accountable to district oversight. The study aims to support more effective interactions between school and district leaders around controlled autonomy to increase performance. Design/methodology/approach: Using schema as a framework to guide the inquiry, this paper uses qualitative methods and interviewing in particular to explore the questions of interest. Seven novice principals were each interviewed three times over the year each interview lasting approximately one hour (n=21). Data were analyzed thematically using both inductive and deductive coding techniques. Findings: Findings show that principals tended to group potential district supports into four categories: operations, instruction, advocacy, and vision and their perceptions regarding the balance between their and the district's control over activities in each category was dynamic, varied and dependent on views relating to issues as broad as values alignment to perceptions of bureaucratic efficiency. Research limitations/implications: Because of the small sample size and methodological approach, it may be inappropriate to generalize the findings across all controlled autonomy contexts. Further research in additional settings is encouraged to support the proposed findings. Practical implications: This paper has a number of implications for districts and school leaders. Among these is the need for districts to better articulate the parameters of controlled autonomy and for school leaders to receive more and more effective training and support to effectively utilize autonomy as a mechanism for reform. Originality/value: This work fills a gap in the research regarding on how principals conceptualize controlled autonomy or, more specifically, how they view what school autonomy should look like relative to district control and is this paper's focus. It also provides insights into practice and potential means to enhance a growing, but so far unevenly implemented and under performing reform initiative (i.e. controlled autonomy).”

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

French, D., Hawley Miles, K., & Nathan, L. (2014). *The path forward: School autonomy and its implications for the future of Boston's public schools*. Understanding Boston. Boston, MA: Prepared by Education Resource Strategies and Center for Collaborative Education for the Boston Foundation.  
<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED559444>

*From the ERIC abstract:* “Boston Public Schools is at a crossroads. Nearly one-third of the system's schools operate under one of several "autonomy" structures, where school leaders have increased flexibility regarding staffing and other resources, and choice data indicate parents are far more likely to prefer these schools over so-called "traditional" schools. This paper explores the question of how Boston Public Schools can strengthen and support autonomy and accountability across its portfolio to promote innovation for equity and high performance. The findings and recommendations draw on

detailed investigations of how five other urban school systems are navigating many of the same challenges that Boston faces today. The paper divides the research into six chapters. Chapter One: Introduction; Chapter Two: Methodology and Approach; Chapter Three: Findings from Boston; Chapter Four: Findings from Peer Districts; Chapter Five: A Proposed Path Forward; and Chapter Six: Conclusion. The paper also includes nineteen appendices: (1) Growth of Autonomous Schools in the Boston Public Schools; (2) Growth of Boston Student Population; 1990-2012, (3) Members of BPS Cross-Functional Working Group; (4) Boston Public Schools and Related Staff Interviewed for the Research; (5) Current Boston Public Schools School-Based Autonomies; (6) Growth in Scores by School Type and Subject; (7) Case Studies of BPS "Top Quadrant Schools"; (8) Case Studies of Peer Districts; (9) Members of the Advisory Group; (10) Student Choice and Assignment by School Type; (11) Flexibilities Available through School Site Council Waivers; (12) BPS Principal Survey Results--Preferred Autonomies; (13) School-by-School Demographic and Incoming Proficiency Data, SY2013-2014; (14) Extended Learning Time Analysis; (15) Time in School for Commonwealth Charters vs. BPS; (16) Teacher Demographics and Compensation Across School Types; (17) School Leader Experience, by School Type; (18) BPS Principal Survey Results--Evaluation of District Services, and (19) BPS Teacher Survey. NOTE: This source was not peer reviewed." NOTE: This source was not peer reviewed.

Muhammad, B. D. (2009). Does site-based management increase student achievement? Online Submission. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED505985>

*From the ERIC abstract:* "The purpose of this review of literature is to determine if the literature suggests that site-based management increase student achievement. Original research findings done on 19 Michigan Title I schools using the Bureaucracy Theory, Systems Theory, and Human Resource Development Theory was reviewed. Also, qualitative studies on superintendents and principal's perceptions using organizational learning theory was reviewed, and non-experimental, descriptive research designs that compiled survey results from teachers and administrators were reviewed. The review also looked at data collected from leaders of school reform in the 21st century. The review of literature suggests that site-based management can increase student achievement if it is implemented properly. However, the literature points out that most schools districts are not fully implementing all of the core parts of site-based management as it should be, and thus are not seeing the amount of gains in student achievement that is possible. Core parts found in the literature that must be implemented are leadership, vision, support, information, communication, and power. These core parts should be done in a climate of ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and inquiry in order for site-based management to work at improving student achievement." NOTE: This source was not peer reviewed.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2011). School autonomy and accountability: Are they related to student performance? PISA in focus. No. 9. OECD Publishing (NJ1). <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED526796>

*From the ERIC abstract:* "In recent years, many schools have grown into more autonomous organisations and have become more accountable to students, parents and the public at large for their outcomes. PISA results suggest that, when autonomy



and accountability are intelligently combined, they tend to be associated with better student performance. In countries where schools have greater autonomy over what is taught and how students are assessed, students tend to perform better. In countries where schools account for their results by posting achievement data publicly, schools that enjoy greater autonomy in resource allocation tend to show better student performance than those with less autonomy. In countries where there are no such accountability arrangements, schools with greater autonomy in resource allocation tend to perform worse.” NOTE: This source was not peer reviewed.

Walker, K. (2012). Site-based management. Research Brief. *Education Partnerships, Inc.* <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED538465>

*From the ERIC abstract:* “In the literature, site-based management was defined as authority for decisions on programs is in the hands of those who are directly affected and it involves all stakeholders (students, parents, teachers, principal, superintendent, Board of Education, and community members). It is not seen as a means to an end, but as an on-going process to encourage growth in a school's programs and curriculum to promote and improve student achievement. Research has not been abundant on the effects of student improvement. However, research has indicated that a sense of professional fulfillment from teachers has highly contributed to improved school culture, climate, and collegiality. What clearly emerged from the research was that the elements of successful site-based management programs must: (1) concentrate on improving student achievement; (2) be systemic; (3) have autonomy at the local site; (4) have a high level of involvement from all stakeholders; (5) have clear alignment of the vision and goals to the given academic standards; (6) have the power to make meaningful decisions; and (7) have a prevalent culture of shared-decision making at the site. Components that should be in place when planning and implementing site-based management and some pitfalls of which to be aware are listed in this paper. (Contains 4 online resources.)” NOTE: This source was not peer-reviewed.

### **Website with relevant publications**

The Center on Reinventing Public Education—<http://www.crpe.org/>

*From the website:* “The Center on Reinventing Public Education is a research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell developing systemwide solutions for K–12 public education.” At the site page below, relevant articles are posted as well.

School Autonomy—<http://www.crpe.org/portfolio/components/school-autonomy> “In a portfolio district the most important figure in improving student achievement is the school leader. School leaders should be given as much authority as possible to make the right decisions for their school: choosing who is part of their teaching and administrative teams, and having control over their budget and freedom to buy the services their school needs. In exchange school leaders must work within their budget and be held accountable for results.”

- [Portfolio components 2.pdf](#)
- [schoolautonomy.pdf](#)

## METHODS

### Keywords and Search Strings Used in the Searches

School autonomy; School autonomy and student achievement; Principal autonomy; Site-based management on student outcomes

### Search of Databases and Websites

- Institute of Education Sciences (IES) website (<http://www.ies.ed.gov>) and IES sources: Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Program, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), National Center for Education Research (NCER), What Works Clearinghouse (WWC)
- ERIC database ([www.eric.ed.gov](http://www.eric.ed.gov))
- Google Scholar ([scholar.google.com](http://scholar.google.com))
- Google ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com))
- Bing ([www.bing.com](http://www.bing.com))

### Criteria for Inclusion

REL Southwest selected resources that provide research on whether increased school autonomy contributes to school improvement and increased student achievement. When REL Southwest staff reviewed resources, we considered – among other things – three factors:

1. Date of Publication: The most current information (primarily published from 2010 to the present) is included.
2. Source and Funder of the Report/Brief/Article: Priority was given to publications written in relevant, peer-reviewed journals or reports or produced by well-known research organizations.
3. Methodology: sources include reported studies, literature reviews and policy reports.

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