

PRINCIPAL AUTONOMY IN CHICAGO

OVERVIEW

District principals in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) benefit from significantly more autonomy than principals in other large urban districts nationally and other public school districts in Illinois. A combination of state law and district practice empower CPS principals to make major decisions around many aspects of their schools, including budget, curriculum and scheduling. This authority, which enables principal leadership and impact, was recently cited by *The New York Times* as a contributing factor to the success of Chicago’s chronically under-funded schools.

Appendix A provides an outline of key autonomies, compares Chicago to other districts and offers insight into recent challenges. **This memo suggests that these budget, curriculum and scheduling autonomies represent a competitive advantage for CPS, and must be protected if we hope to attract, support and retain top principals.** For example, in recent focus groups with top-performing district principals, the ability to “manage resources with maximum flexibility,” particularly in times of resource constraint, was cited as a necessary component for principal satisfaction. Put simply, top principals rely on their flexibility to plan carefully for the future and to direct available resources to their highest-value needs.

Conversely, limits on flexibility, caused by either explicit policy decisions or lack of advance communication, were cited as contributing to principal dissatisfaction. Specifically, furlough days have interfered with principals’ professional development (PD) plans for their teams, and frozen non-personnel budget lines have severely impacted long-term planning, especially in schools with significant Title I funding and after-school investments.

One principal shared: *“My after-school PD money was impacted. I have teacher teams who needed that time. The furloughs, having to say no to my teachers, and the way everything was communicated to us, was the last straw for me.”*

This memo summarizes key existing autonomies, recent challenges to those autonomies and outlines some potential next steps to improve principal satisfaction for the 2017-18 school year.

AUTONOMIES AND CHALLENGES IN PRACTICE

While comparisons to other districts, as outlined in *Appendix A*, are helpful, the competitive advantage offered by these autonomies is best understood in practice. Since 2011, Chávez Elementary Principal Barton Dassinger has been able to fund an extended-day instructional program that leveraged an additional 60 minutes, four days per week. Barton credits the program with Chávez’s success: Chávez’s students, who are 95 percent Latino and 98 percent low-income, are now outperforming 90 percent of ALL students across the country in math, and have been doing so for four years.

To sustain that level of growth and to continue to raise expectations, Chávez continued its extended day even after the longer school day was introduced citywide. The program is fully staffed with Chávez teachers, who are paid the full collectively-bargained, extended-day rate. The resources to run this program total around \$200,000 for teacher salaries, but also required additional one-time startup expenses for technology costs. To make this program work, Barton and Chávez must continually make trade-offs, including not offering foreign language or homeroom/advisory time in exchange for the extended day focus on reading and math.

In addition, Barton budgets no additional money for recess coverage, so he and his assistant principals must take on this supervision directly. However, Barton has budgeted for a total of three clerks to cover Chávez and its two annexes, ensuring that teachers and parents have the help and support they need, when they need it, including during the extended day.

PRINCIPAL AUTONOMY IN CHICAGO

Barton is committed to serving low-income students, but Barton would be unable to make these trade-offs in another district. Instead, he would be confined to the regular school day, unable to invest in clerical support for his teachers and the community, and potentially forced to spend dollars on things like recess monitors. Barton stays in CPS, in part, because flexibility enables his success. Last-minute budget changes, especially those that limit flexibility, threaten Barton's continued success, and that of his students.

PROTECTING AUTONOMY IN CHALLENGING TIMES

CPS principals *can* be supported through a series of key actions and practices, even in a budget environment that continues to be difficult. Ideas surfaced in focus groups with principals include:

1. **Putting principals at the center of decision-making when possible.**

Most importantly, principals should be given additional flexibility in their buildings wherever possible. In addition, principals would appreciate the opportunity to weigh in on potential cuts to centralized services. In almost every budget conversation with principals, items like non-mandatory transportation and networks are raised for consideration. While those cuts may not actually be possible, transparently involving at least a few principals in the whole budget decision-making process will enable them to be stronger advocates and champions for the final proposal.

One principal commented that: *"We are not at the table. We need to be on committees and at department meetings. We can say with confidence how it will affect us. It is disheartening when your opinion is not valued."*

2. **Preserving autonomy when budget or scheduling changes are necessary.**

Principals should decide where dollars are allocated up front, and where cuts should be made when required. Limiting spend to certain types of positions (e.g. you may not buy more than one clerk) can unintentionally stand in the way of successful program implementation. What's more, limiting cuts or freezing specific budget lines forces principals to decrease spending in those areas, even if they are more critical than unaffected budget lines.

One principal said: *"We all understand that there is a budget crisis. The biggest issue [for me] was taking away PD days. The most important part of our job is to develop people in the building. That decision undermined us. We can work with less money but we can't do without time."*

3. **Providing realistic budgets in advance.**

Principals recognize the challenge of the current environment, but they have repeatedly said that they should have more time and be given more conservative budget numbers if at all possible. Late summer and/or ambitious projections only lead to complications and instability throughout the school year, distracting from principal and school priorities. Principals stressed their desire to know a realistic budget in advance, even in a worst-case scenario, noting that if circumstances actually improve, they would be happy to submit a revision rather than a cut.

One principal commented: *"I am okay with getting a lower budget now and then having to redo a budget later."*

PRINCIPAL AUTONOMY IN CHICAGO

GROWING AUTONOMIES WHERE POSSIBLE

In addition, CPS could take two next steps that would communicate continued investment in and commitment to principal leadership, even in the face of demanding budget and political circumstances. They are:

1. **Updating the CPS principal compensation system, incentivizing retention and high-need service.**

Many CPS principals have seen quite modest salary growth for some time now. Under the current system, principals technically gain raises each year. For financial reasons, these raises were frozen in 2010, when the budget situation first became challenging. Despite a three percent across-the-board raise in 2012 and a two percent raise in 2014, many principals make less than what their experience dictates. For example, there are principals who started the 2016-17 school year making around \$20,000 less than their experience would imply on the salary scale. These principals got a raise earlier this year, cutting the gap by up to 40 percent, but significant problems with the current system remain.

For a modest additional investment in leadership, a new principal compensation system could provide stronger retention incentives and include both performance-based elements and incentives to work in higher-need schools. While raises are challenging to justify in a resource-constrained environment, the negative impact of principal transition on students and schools is well-documented. CPS Talent has been facilitating a Working Group to discuss these issues, and could be prepared to roll out a new system in advance of the 2017-18 school year.

2. **Expanding and improving the Independent Schools Principals (ISP) Program.**

Since the Mayor announced the ISP Program in 2015, principals have placed a high value on the autonomy and recognition afforded them. Additionally, ISP principals have shared great enthusiasm and satisfaction with the peer evaluation system implemented at the beginning of the 2016-17 school year. Current participants believe that the independent nature of the program should be sustained and expanded to benefit more principals.

As the program expands, there are some opportunities for improvement: ISPs report experiencing gaps in communication and access to district support and fear getting overlooked for key information, especially around budget changes. An expansion of the ISP program, combined with a modest commitment of resources to support it, would likely be viewed very positively by CPS principals already in the program, and would help CPS to expand the program by an additional 30 or so schools in the year ahead.

CONCLUSION

In summary, CPS principals continue to achieve impressive results in very trying circumstances. The vast majority are deeply committed to the district and to their schools, but recent developments continue to challenge their satisfaction and ability to persist. To keep top principals, CPS should endeavor to support and grow principal authority wherever possible, provide principals with as much advance notice on key developments as is feasible, and look to execute one or two signature initiatives to communicate ongoing support for school-level leadership.

PRINCIPAL AUTONOMY IN CHICAGO

Appendix A: AUTONOMY SUMMARY AND COMPARISON

	Type of Autonomy	Reference Points	Recent Challenges
BUDGET	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 60% of the total operational budget is controlled by principals, and 85% of the average CPS principal’s budget is discretionary. ▪ Student-based funds, which account for 85% of the average school’s budget, are discretionary by CPS practice since the 2013-14 school year. ▪ Federal title dollars, which account for 15% of the average school’s budget, are discretionary by federal law. ▪ Under Student-Based Budgeting (SBB), CPS principals have great flexibility to create specific instructional and operational positions that are aligned to their own school needs. Under a quota system, that flexibility would likely be reduced, maybe significantly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ CPS currently distributes \$1.8B through the SBB formula: 39% of school-level spending and 32% of total district spending. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This is roughly in-line with other districts using an SBB approach: Baltimore: 39%; Boston: 40%; Cleveland: 39%; Denver: 38%; Houston: 42%. ▪ The average non-Chicago Illinois district has only five principals. Only around 50 districts have more than 10. ▪ In most of these districts, the superintendent develops a school budget, and individual principals can have limited discretion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Recent rounds of mid-year budget cuts have limited elements of this discretion, particularly for our most innovative schools. ▪ For example, freezing non-personnel lines, while understandable to avoid layoffs, adversely impacted principals who had planned ahead to use money on non-personnel needs like extended day programs.
Curriculum/Instructional Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ CPS principals generally choose the curriculum and related instructional materials for their schools, in partnership with the Local School Council. ▪ At times, CPS provides guidance or an “approved” list, but high-performing schools have almost always had full discretion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Many districts, including large urban and other Illinois districts, prescribe instructional materials that all principals must use. ▪ For example, Gwinnett County Public Schools outside Atlanta has one curriculum for all of its 139 schools. ▪ Locally, many suburban districts purchases all of their instructional materials centrally. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Recent budget cuts impact this area, too; principals have been forced to adjust teacher grade assignments (e.g. a great 7th grade math teacher may now have to teach 3rd grade). ▪ While CPS has not made a formal restriction of this autonomy, modifications have increased the time required to implement instructional plans (materials can take 6 months+ to procure). ▪ CPS district principals face fewer pre-approved vendors, and require more approvals than CPS charter principals and past practice. ▪ This is especially challenging in the context of personalized learning, where principals need the ability to purchase and utilize specialized software and equipment.

PRINCIPAL AUTONOMY IN CHICAGO

	Type of Autonomy	Reference Points	Recent Challenges
Scheduling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ By state law, CPS schools must meet state minute requirements for every subject. CPS offers recommended schedules, but principals ultimately decide how the school day is structured. ▪ By local practice, contract waiver rules allow innovative principals to extend or modify the structure of the school day to create shared planning time for teachers and professional development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Surrounding districts often impose standard schedules on all schools at a particular grade band. ▪ In some cases, principals in these schools lack the autonomy to modify the schedule without Board approval. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Recent contract changes pose challenges for principals attempting to create common planning time for teachers, especially at the elementary level. ▪ In addition, principals received communication from the Legal Department requiring them to give up their principal-directed time (during grade-level meetings) for the next 12 weeks in an effort to preserve teacher minutes lost from furlough days.