

Learning from School-Level Autonomy

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A recent [AJC article](#) highlighted another Southern city's interest in learning about APS efforts to increase school-level autonomy. While visiting Hollis Innovation Academy this week, leaders from Charleston remarked on what we at redefinED atlanta believe to be true - student outcomes improve and good schools become great when school leaders are given the trust, freedom, flexibility, and support to make the changes that they feel are necessary for their students, and when they are held accountable for their results. They know their schools best.

We are grateful to see evidence of Atlanta Public Schools recognizing the role that autonomy plays in promoting student success and high-quality public schools. In the case of Hollis Innovation Academy, the school leader, by design, has the most flexibility (among traditional school leaders) to make the necessary changes in her school to support the specific needs of her community. This plays out in school outcomes at Hollis as the school's CCRPI scores [increased by 18.9 points](#) in just one year (from the 2016-17 to the 2017-18 school year). Using the most recent CCRPI scores, Hollis continues to improve and has moved out of the "F" rating in its 3rd year of operation. In addition, schools like Barack and Michelle Obama have a dynamic principal who has more autonomy and has been making some of the biggest gains in the district as well. Can you imagine what might be possible if more school leaders had expanded flexibility, autonomy and, yes, accountability to make the improvements their schools need? How quickly might student outcomes start to shift and our community begin reaping the benefits of an equitably educated generation? I hope that our system responds to these ideas and continues to iterate and improve.

Is APS a model yet? I would say no. But are there things to learn from? Absolutely. We see signs in Hollis Innovation Academy, the first example of a traditional neighborhood school flexing the autonomy to best serve their students and community. The real question is how far are we willing to go to ensure that our schools and our school leaders can operate successfully with the freedom needed to make the best decisions in response to their students and families, and to be held accountable to drive results necessary to open the doors to choice filled lives. The true measure will be when we can say definitively that consistent, and meaningful student outcomes are occurring and that these outcomes are lasting beyond any one superintendent or any one school board tenure. Time will tell if the district is willing to expand existing autonomies, innovate around new types, and scale beyond the walls of Hollis to other traditional schools in APS. We know that policies and positive examples exist and significant progress is being made around the country. Can Atlanta implement them fast enough and widely enough to sustain change and, in time, truly become a model for other cities?