2018

# School Autonomy in Action

A Case Study of Two Massachusetts Innovation Schools

Leveraging autonomy to strengthen teacher collaboration and community engagement, two Massachusetts innovation schools created powerful, child-centered learning environments. With staff united by a relentless focus on supporting the whole child, the Winter Hill Community Innovation School in Somerville, MA and the Paul Revere Innovation School in Revere, MA underwent rapid school improvement by supporting students' social, emotional, and intellectual needs.

High student growth scores. Low teacher turnover. Positive school climate. Strong community participation. The winners of the 2017 Pozen Prize for Innovative Schools excel in attending to the social, emotional, and intellectual needs of all students in the richly diverse communities they serve.

Their approach?: Leveraging the flexibilities granted by their innovation status to build community-wide investment. By empowering teachers, families, students, and community partners, both schools have built collaborative learning environments that experiment with teaching and learning practices and are defined by a shared responsibility for student success.

At the Winter Hill Community Innovation School (Somerville), the winner of the 2017 Pozen Prize, students hail from 27 different countries with newcomers regularly arriving from all over the world. The school is a hub for the district's autism program and Sheltered English Immersion program. The Winter Hill has used its autonomies to build opportunities for collaboration, advance inclusion, and strengthen educator capacity to respond to students' non-academic needs.

The Paul Revere Innovation School (Revere), the runner-up for the 2017 Pozen Prize, became the Commonwealth's first innovation school when it converted to innovation status in 2010. Teachers and families were involved in crafting the school's initial innovation plan, and both groups continue to share ongoing responsibility for measuring, adjusting, and refreshing innovative practices. School leaders actively support parent, community, and teacher leadership, an approach that has led to community-wide investment in the school and its students.

## ABOUT THE POZEN PRIZE FOR INNOVATIVE SCHOOLS

Since 2014, the annual Pozen Prize for Innovative Schools has recognized a Boston-area innovation, pilot, or charter school that has made significant gains in student performance. The prize was created by Boston Foundation donors Robert and Elizabeth Pozen to honor high-performing schools that have varying degrees of autonomy over school-based decisions on teaching and learning. These autonomies allow schools to experiment with innovative models, programs, and practices. Robert is a former executive of Fidelity Investments and MFS Investment Management, who now serves as a Senior Lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management and a Senior Research Fellow at the Brookings Institution. Elizabeth is a retired psychotherapist who is now focusing on her career as a figurative artist.

## Innovation School Autonomies

The state-led innovation schools initiative began in 2010 as a strategy to close achievement and opportunity gaps in Massachusetts schools. While remaining part of their local school district, innovation schools are given autonomy from several district-level decisions, allowing them to implement creative strategies designed to strengthen student achievement. The graphic on the right provides an overview of the six autonomies available to innovation schools. Both the Winter Hill and Paul Revere schools opted against a school-based budget but included the other five flexibilities within their innovation plans. While this case study highlights ways in which each school used all five autonomies, it focuses on the effects of scheduling autonomy in creating a collaborative school culture—the factor these schools cited as critical to their success.

Working in collaboration with The Boston Foundation, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy produced this case study to describe how the Winter Hill and Paul Revere schools used school-based decision-making to accelerate student learning. The case study begins with an exploration of the foundational elements and guiding principles that characterize both schools' innovation plans, before describing the unique ways that each school put these principles into action.

## Methodology

In analyzing the relationship between autonomy and school improvement, the Rennie Center began with a review of existing literature. Scholarly research on the topic of school autonomy highlighted a set of research-based practices that the Rennie Center team sought to examine in schools. These practices informed the development of a research protocol, which allowed the team to capture standardized information during site visits at each school. Information presented in this case study reflects findings from interviews and focus groups with students, parents, teachers, administrators, and governing board members at the Winter Hill and Paul Revere schools.

### INNOVATION SCHOOLS HAVE THE AUTONOMY TO

Choose a **curriculum** that best serves the student population

Develop school-specific **policies and procedures**

Set a **school schedule** that maximizes instruction and enrichment

Set school-specific **staffing** procedures to attract and retain right-fit teachers

Create a **budget** aligned to school-specific needs and priories

Create a school-specific **professional development** approach

# About the Winter Hill Community Innovation School

Somerville, Massachusetts
Principal Chad Mazza

Located in the heart of a residential Somerville neighborhood, the streets surrounding the Winter Hill school are quiet on a weekday morning. A mural of four interlocking hands, a visual reminder of the school's community focus, greets visitors outside the front door. Inside the lobby, the halls are bustling. Students greet each other as staff usher them to class.

Learning at the Winter Hill is active and participatory. In the corner of the school library, a young student is reading aloud with confidence. She doesn't have to worry if she struggles to pronounce challenging words, since her reading partner, a service dog named Bonnie, is an expert listener. The black lab's active participation in this school community, where she supports a staff member with a disability, embodies the school's creative determination to address the individual needs of each learner. At the Winter Hill, staff use a range of approaches to ensure that learning is meaningful, engaging, and appropriately challenging for every student.
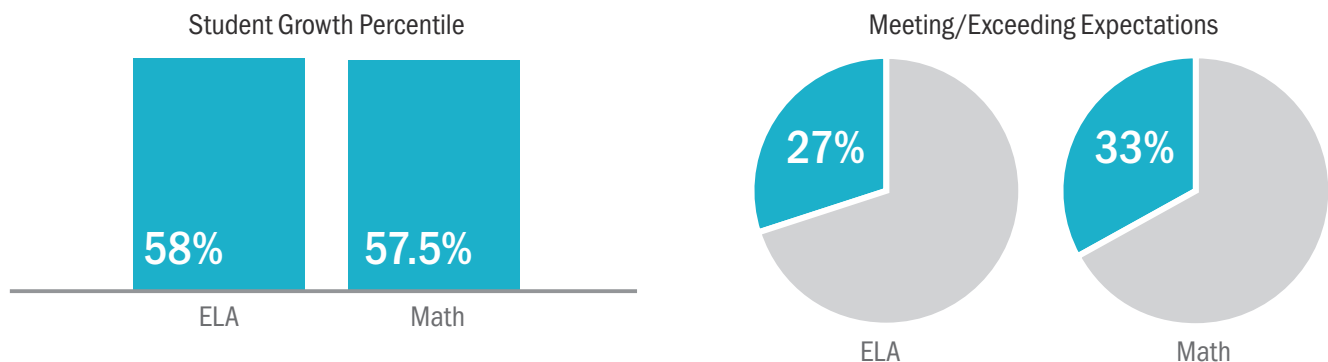
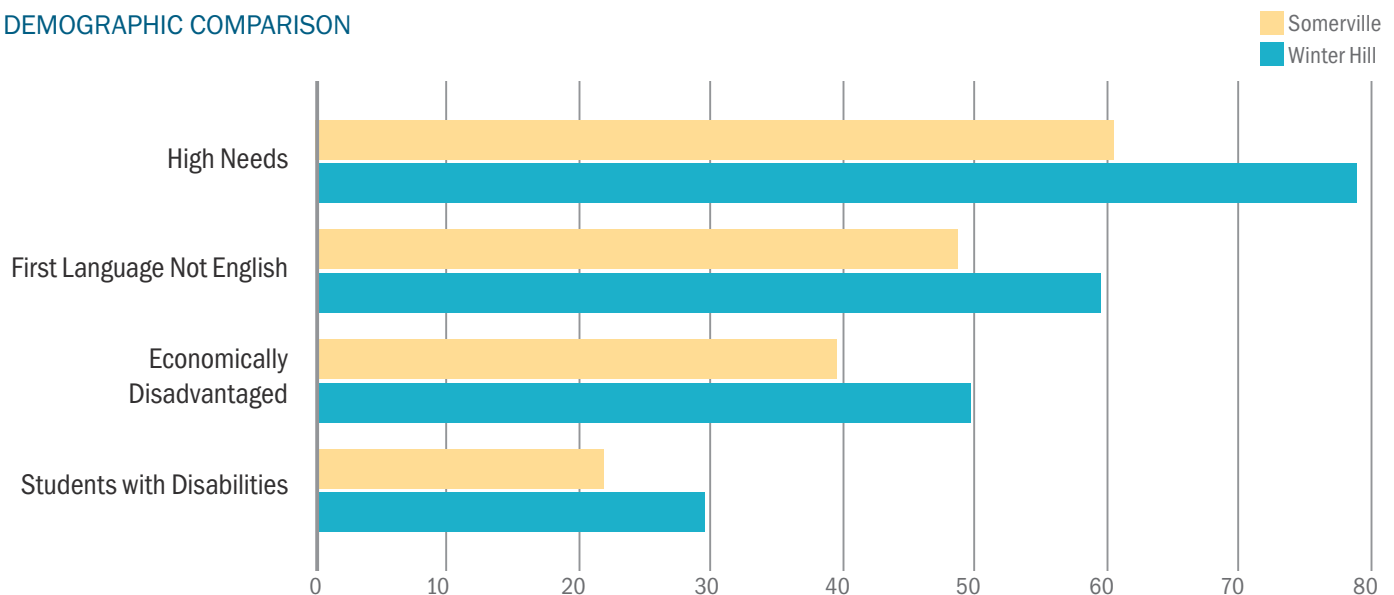### DATA SPOTLIGHT

459 students

Grades Prekindergarten–8

Year school entered innovation status: 2013

Attendance rate: 96%

## 2017 MCAS, ALL GRADES

Student Growth Percentile

ELA 58%  Math 57.5%

Meeting/Exceeding Expectations

ELA 27%  Math 33%

## DEMOGRAPHIC COMPARISON

Somerville
Winter Hill



High Needs
First Language Not English
Economically Disadvantaged
Students with Disabilities

0  10  20  30  40  50  60  70  80
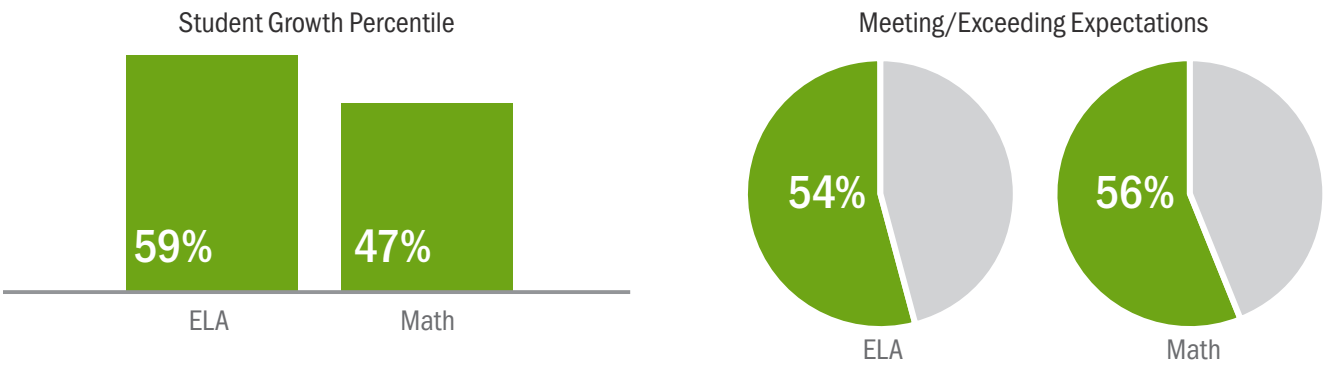
# About the Paul Revere Innovation School

Revere, Massachusetts
Principal Barbara Kelly

Just six miles from downtown Boston, in the diverse city of Revere, the Paul Revere campus sits adjacent to a large playing field. It's not yet 8:00 am on a cold December morning, and the grass is covered with frost. Staff wait outside the school doors, enthusiastically greeting each student, parent, and volunteer who enters the school.
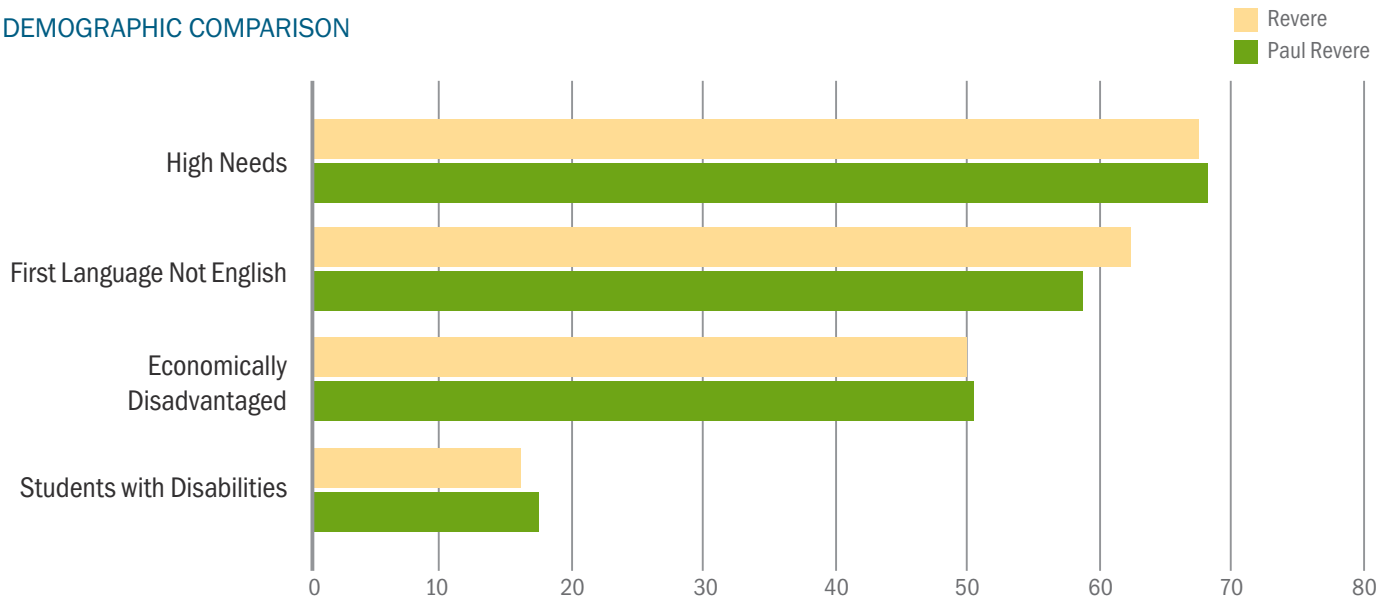
Inside the building, students are wrapping up morning enrichment clubs ahead of the official start of the school day at 8:10 am. Leaving origami, computer, imaginative play, and workout clubs, students are chatty and energized. As the hallways quiet and students enter their classrooms, the bulletin boards outside each door tell the story of the student experience. Math-related artwork, poems in creative shapes, and thank you letters to Paul Revere volunteers are proudly displayed on each wall. Paul Revere staff and school leaders actively engage students, families, and community members in school operations. The school's strong partnerships benefit students' in school and out of school learning.

## 2017 MCAS, ALL GRADES

### Student Growth Percentile



ELA 59%  Math 47%

### Meeting/Exceeding Expectations



ELA 54%  Math 56%

## DEMOGRAPHIC COMPARISON

Legend: Revere, Paul Revere



- High Needs
- First Language Not English
- Economically Disadvantaged
- Students with Disabilities

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80
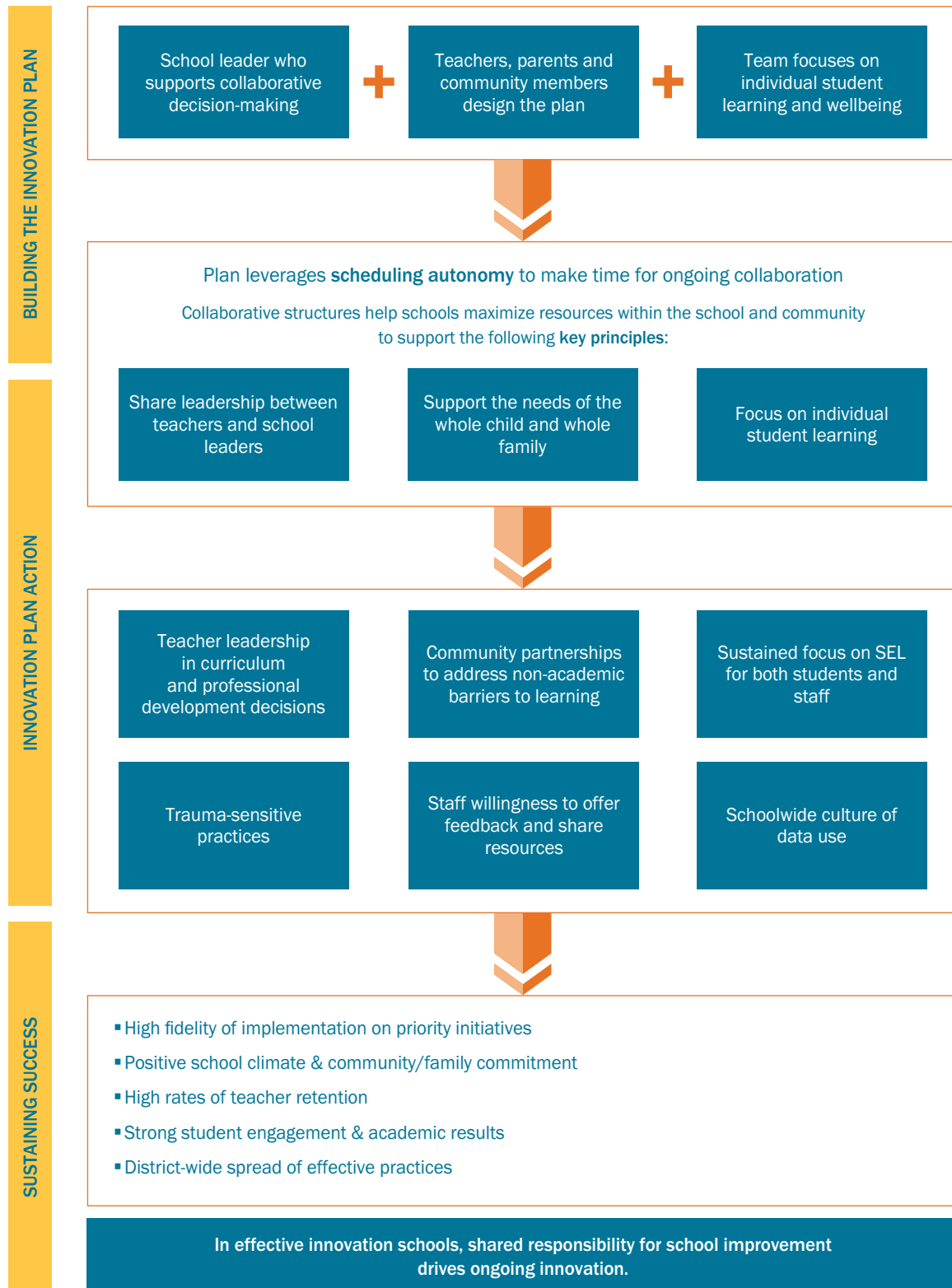
# From Autonomy to Outcomes: A Framework

This case study examines three distinct phases in each school's story, beginning with the foundational elements that supported **building each innovation plan**, followed by key principles that allowed each school to put the **innovation plan into action**, and concluding with the promising practices that each school will build upon to **sustain success**. Illustrated in this framework and described in the pages that follow, the collaborative structures that both schools implemented during their innovation planning process were critical to their later success.

## BUILDING THE INNOVATION PLAN

| School leader who supports collaborative decision-making | **+** | Teachers, parents and community members design the plan | **+** | Team focuses on individual student learning and wellbeing |
|---|---|---|---|---|

Plan leverages **scheduling autonomy** to make time for ongoing collaboration

Collaborative structures help schools maximize resources within the school and community to support the following **key principles:**

| Share leadership between teachers and school leaders | Support the needs of the whole child and whole family | Focus on individual student learning |
|---|---|---|

## INNOVATION PLAN ACTION

| Teacher leadership in curriculum and professional development decisions | Community partnerships to address non-academic barriers to learning | Sustained focus on SEL for both students and staff |
|---|---|---|
| Trauma-sensitive practices | Staff willingness to offer feedback and share resources | Schoolwide culture of data use |

## SUSTAINING SUCCESS

- High fidelity of implementation on priority initiatives
- Positive school climate & community/family commitment
- High rates of teacher retention
- Strong student engagement & academic results
- District-wide spread of effective practices

**In effective innovation schools, shared responsibility for school improvement drives ongoing innovation.**

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# Building the Innovation Plan
*The foundation for transformation at the Winter Hill and Paul Revere schools*

The innovation plans developed by Winter Hill and Paul Revere teams are united in their guiding beliefs, priority initiatives, and commitment to collaboration. At both schools, these foundational elements had a significant impact on the ways in which staff leveraged the autonomies granted by innovation status.

## AT THE **PAUL REVERE**

The Paul Revere's commitment to collaboration, which continues to serve as a primary driver of the school's innovative practices, was evident before the innovation planning process began. With the support of former superintendent Paul Dakin, Paul Revere teachers voted to apply for innovation status. The teacher's first mission?: selecting the principal who would collaborate with them to build the innovation plan.

After hiring principal Barbara Kelly, the school formed a design team, which included teachers, parents, community members, and the newly hired principal. The team was responsible for determining the way in which the school would use the autonomies granted by innovation status, and for communicating with students, parents, district administration, and union leadership at each phase of the process. The team's student-centered focus coupled with the school's commitment to shared decision-making set the Paul Revere up for success.

## AT THE **WINTER HILL**

In the year before the Winter Hill applied for innovation status, the school was struggling with poor academic outcomes. District administration and union leadership proposed the option of innovation status to Winter Hill staff as a means to give the school more autonomy to serve the individual needs of the student body. Principal Chad Mazza joined the Winter Hill school six months into a year-long planning process led by teachers to collaboratively design an innovation plan. The school's commitment to providing a holistic education that responds to the academic and non-academic needs of every student guided the Winter Hill's initial innovation plan, and continues to guide school-level decision-making.

## Guiding Beliefs

Winter Hill and Paul Revere staff recognize and celebrate students' diverse strengths, backgrounds, and experiences. While specific school improvement strategies vary across these schools, both schools focused on opportunities to individualize instruction and promote engaging, rigorous, and relevant learning experiences for every child. In re-examining school policies, professional development plans, curriculum choices, staffing decisions, and the school schedule, staff at both schools have been guided by a **focus on the individual** and a shared **commitment to elevating community ownership** over the school experience.

## Priority Initiatives

In determining how to use their autonomy, both the Winter Hill and the Paul Revere schools decided to focus on students' social-emotional needs first. This decision was guided by a philosophy that a positive school culture and caring school environment would create the conditions for students to reach their greatest learning potential and for staff to reach their greatest teaching potential.

Given their autonomous status, innovation schools can set their own teaching and learning policies to align with school-level priorities. This may include selecting curricula or schoolwide programming that is separate from the district approach. Staff at the Winter Hill and Paul Revere schools decided to prioritize **whole-child and whole-family supports** within their innovation plans. Although most research on school autonomy has focused on the effectiveness of "no excuses" school philosophies, which typically involve high behavioral and academic expectations alongside a strict disciplinary code, the Winter Hill and Paul Revere schools' decision to prioritize whole-child learning needs has been a particularly effective strategy for these two schools.[1]

### SPOTLIGHT ON WORKPLACE CULTURE

Staff experiences at both schools echo what research has shown about the dynamics of high-performing teams across a range of industries. In examining workplace creativity and innovation, recent studies have highlighted the critical role of psychological safety, which is the concept that individuals can take risks, admit errors, ask for support, and voice dissent without fear of negative repercussions. Research has shown that psychological safety, which begins with high-quality staff relationships, leads to a learner mindset among staff.[2] Staff at both schools, united by a shared vision, treated as professionals, and encouraged to innovate in the service of student learning, illustrate this finding in their daily work. Principals and teachers at the Winter Hill and Paul Revere noted that **the ongoing work required to sustain effective teamwork would not be possible without school-level scheduling autonomy.**

# Commitment to Collaboration

School leaders recognized that they would need to capitalize upon the collective insights and energy of the entire school community to deliver whole child supports. In developing their respective innovation plans, both schools **made strategic use of scheduling autonomy** to create time for ongoing staff collaboration. Time and space for regular idea-sharing and problem-solving among educators allows the Winter Hill and Paul Revere teams to maximize their full set of innovation school autonomies.

Formal collaborative structures engaging teachers, school leaders, and community members were essential to initial innovation plan development, and have been instrumental to school improvement as each school put their innovation plan into action. Both schools prioritized the shared ownership of strategies for exercising autonomies granted by innovation status, allowing them to act upon their commitment to individualized supports for every child and family.

# The Innovation Plan in Action

*Key Principles for School Improvement*

In aiming for school improvement, both schools were guided by the following key principles:

1. Share leadership between teachers and school leaders;

2. Support the needs of the whole child and whole family; and

3. Focus on students' individual learning

Despite these shared principles, the Winter Hill and Paul Revere teams each implemented their plans in unique ways. The following section describes similarities and differences in each school's approach to shared leadership, whole child and whole family supports, and individualized instruction.

## KEY PRINCIPLE 1

## Share leadership between teachers and school leaders

School-level decision-making has led to a culture of shared ownership at the Winter Hill and Paul Revere schools. This collaborative culture is facilitated by ongoing opportunities for staff collaboration during the school day, made possible by scheduling autonomy. In ongoing decisions about how to use school-level autonomies, principals Chad Mazza and Barbara Kelly actively involve teachers in curriculum, professional development, and school policy decisions. Teachers, parents, students, and community members have a voice in who is hired and which initiatives are prioritized at the Winter Hill and Paul Revere schools. Staff input leads to a high level of investment in the success of priority initiatives. As a result, both schools benefit from high fidelity of implementation when new initiatives are put into action.

At both schools, teacher input guided the decision to implement a social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum in classrooms. Both schools selected programs that have helped students manage emotions, build empathy, strengthen social skills, and solve problems. Teacher leadership of both the curriculum selection and implementation processes has led to strong implementation in both schools. Teachers, who were empowered through the selection process, are committed to the success of the program they chose.

**A Welcoming Culture in Action.** In developing their innovation plan, staff focused on building a school culture that includes all students. United by a shared belief that every student can achieve at high levels, staff agree that their role is to constantly think of new ways to meet the needs of diverse learners and to ensure that every student feels welcome when they enter the school. To facilitate this culture, Principal Chad Mazza lets teachers know that he is always open to proposals for ways to improve the Winter Hill community. Teachers use collaborative time to consider new ideas to bring to their principal. As new students immigrating from countries around the world arrive at the Winter Hill throughout the school year, teachers and students share responsibility for immediately welcoming them into the community. In addition to staff efforts, students are actively involved in promoting the notion of classroom communities, with opportunities for peer collaboration and a focus on project-based learning.

> "If you bring an idea to Chad, he'll back you up. Our motto is that any idea that will help students is worth a try."
> *Winter Hill teacher*

**Creating Schoolwide Plans to Meet Student Learning Needs.** Principal Chad Mazza engages every teacher, administrator, and paraprofessional in developing the school's inclusion plan, a schoolwide statement of how the school community will support rigorous learning for students with a range of disabilities and language needs in the general education classroom. The collaborative structures—afforded by scheduling autonomy—have fostered teachers' ability to contribute to, and in essence drive, this process. Teachers and leaders agree that the whole community is willing to invest time and energy to expand inclusion because they helped shape the initiative, see the value in it, and have a voice in improving inclusion for future students.

**Supporting Teacher Leadership.** If you visit the Paul Revere on a Wednesday afternoon, the entire faculty will be engaged in staff-led professional development. Students enjoy half-day Wednesdays, while their teachers conduct rigorous student data reviews, incubate school innovations, and plan schoolwide activities. These weekly schoolwide meetings, which facilitate an ongoing, collaborative review of student data, were a key component of the Paul Revere's initial innovation plan. Teachers whose students experience success in a particular area share strategies with their

## SPOTLIGHT ON LABOR MANAGEMENT COLLABORATION IN REVERE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Revere has a long history of collaborative decision-making between labor (i.e., the Revere Teachers Association) and management (i.e., Revere Public Schools leadership). District-wide labor management collaboration has left the Paul Revere well-positioned to harness the power of school-based autonomies offered as part of innovation school status—especially scheduling autonomy. Teachers and administrators agreed upon shifts in contractual time, allowing for recurring Wednesday professional development, without changing the existing Revere Teachers Association contract. Where professional development was previously condensed into less-frequent, longer-duration sessions, the principal and teachers decided that staff would benefit from regularly scheduled, shorter-duration professional development. The existing district-wide culture of shared leadership in Revere Public Schools prepared teachers and leaders at the Paul Revere for successful collaboration regarding central provisions in the school's innovation plan.

colleagues, and staff collaborate to develop re-teaching plans when they identify areas of need through student data. These meetings also provide the opportunity for leaders—both school leaders and teacher-leaders—to communicate with the entire faculty, strengthening the sense of community by ensuring that all members of the team hear the same information at the same time about important issues like school improvement priorities.

**Empowering Staff and Students.** Paul Revere staff describe the school as a family. Teachers are actively involved in the hiring process for new teachers, a model that enables the school to hire those who will succeed in the Paul Revere's collaborative environment. Staff agree that teacher empowerment has a strong link to student empowerment: teachers at the Paul Revere view themselves as facilitators of student learning, and they share a belief that students serve as valuable instructors for their peers. Through the Fluency Buddies program, older students help their younger peers strengthen their reading skills. This includes 4th and 5th graders collecting data to monitor younger students' reading fluency progress, supporting a culture where everyone is both a teacher and a learner.

## Different School Schedules, One Focus: Maximizing Teacher Collaboration

At both the Winter Hill and Paul Revere schools, collaborative structures for educators have been critical to school success. Despite this similarity, the way in which school schedules support collaboration is different across the two schools. The Winter Hill has emphasized structures that support strong grade-level collaboration, whereas the Paul Revere uses Wednesday whole-school professional development sessions to support schoolwide collaboration, which includes time for grade-level planning.

### COLLABORATIVE STRUCTURES

| AT THE **WINTER HILL** | AT THE **PAUL REVERE** |
| --- | --- |
| • Cross-team grade-level common planning time<br>• Monthly inclusion meetings | • 2 hours of whole-school PD every Wednesday<br>• SMART goals shared by grade level<br>• Peer observations for staff |

# Support the Needs of the Whole Child and Whole Family

Educators at the Winter Hill and Paul Revere acknowledge that SEL skills, including self-management, perseverance, and critical thinking, set the foundation for academic and personal success. Serving a diverse population of students, many of whom have experienced trauma and poverty, staff have focused on providing non-academic supports not only to students, but also to their families.

Non-academic supports have not focused solely on students. Staff at both schools recognize that strengthening SEL skills among adults is critical in creating a professional work culture. At the Winter Hill, the principal sent all staff to a mindfulness training, guided by a foundational belief that teachers must value self-care rituals in order to meet the academic, and social-emotional needs of their students. Some teachers have since extended mindfulness practices to their classrooms. Staff at the Paul Revere implemented Leading Together, an SEL program for teachers. Paul Revere staff also have a Morale Pals program, which strengthens staff collegiality through the exchange of small gifts throughout the school year. Coupled with a school environment that provides opportunities for ongoing SEL skill development, these supports help each child arrive at school each day ready to learn, and every educator ready to support students. As described in the text below, curriculum and scheduling autonomies strengthened both schools' ability to deliver these supports.

## AT THE **WINTER HILL**

**Minimizing the Impacts of Poverty on Learning.** The Winter Hill serves a large population of students from low-income families, who rely on school breakfast and lunch to ensure they are ready to learn. Recognizing that these students struggle with food insecurity when not at school, the Winter Hill implemented the Somerville Backpack Program. The program sends students home with two breakfasts, two lunches, snacks, and fruit every Friday afternoon. The Winter Hill was among the first three schools in the district to implement the program, which now serves nine Somerville schools. The school was also the first in its district to pilot a "breakfast in the classroom" program, providing every student with a free nutritious meal at the beginning of the school day.

The Winter Hill's commitment to the whole family extends beyond nutrition. The school implemented a dress code so that students' focus on learning is optimized and peer pressure around name-brand clothing is minimized. Students selected the color choices for the dress code, and both students and parents were involved in putting on a fashion show to showcase dress code options. As the dress code was implemented, the school helped families identify several low-cost options to meet the guidelines and provided financial support to families in need.

**Creating a Positive School Culture.** When Winter Hill staff identified healthy social-emotional development as a schoolwide priority, they went to students to build a plan. After creating an annual survey to assess students' self-worth, engagement, and purpose, teachers and students partnered to strengthen a sense of belonging schoolwide. Students planned events to celebrate the rich cultural diversity of their school community, while teachers focused on promoting a caring learning environment for every child.
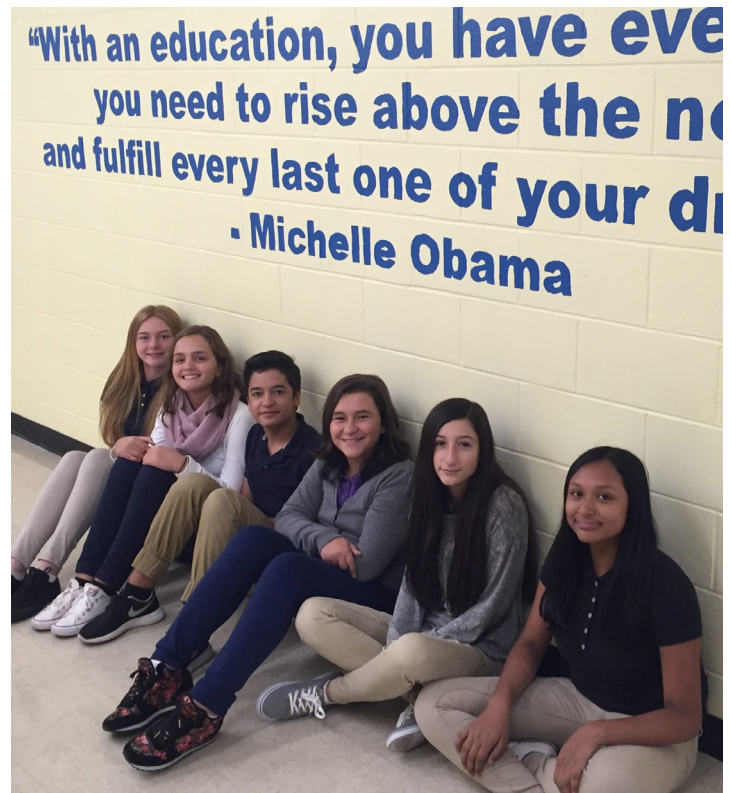
After Winter Hill staff selected the Responsive Classroom SEL curriculum, Principal Chad Mazza recognized that effective implementation required a community-wide effort. He sent a team of teachers, parents, and community members who have a leadership role at the school to a rigorous Responsive Classroom training, equipping these individuals to support their colleagues throughout the implementation period. The training helped staff establish high academic and behavioral expectations during the first six weeks of school and develop consistent classroom routines schoolwide. Staff across the building are currently working on using consistent language to reinforce positive behavior.

**Responding to Trauma.** Winter Hill staff recognize that some students, particularly those who have experienced trauma, require support beyond the standard schoolwide programming. The school employs a social worker who develops intervention plans for students with behavioral health needs. These plans often engage students' families, connecting them to community resources. This counselor also uses a restorative justice program to help students identify the root cause of problematic behavior and resolve peer conflicts. These initiatives complement each other, providing a schoolwide model for respect and behavior, as well as options for providing more significant supports to selected students who need them.



"With an education, you have eve you need to rise above the n and fulfill every last one of your d - Michelle Obama

### AT THE **PAUL REVERE**

**Developing Community Partnerships.** The Paul Revere's governing board, a leadership team required as part of the school's innovation status, consists of staff, parents, and community members. Each board member has an equal say in school policy decisions. As a result of the board's inclusivity, the Paul Revere is well-equipped to respond to students' non-academic barriers to learning. In providing school leadership roles for community representatives, the Paul Revere has strengthened its commitment to school as family. A parent proposed a school uniform policy to enhance a sense of belonging across the student body. Recognizing that food insecurity prevented some students from focusing on their learning, the school worked with the Greater Boston Food Bank to provide a food pantry for students and families. A partnership with local nonprofit Cradles to Crayons ensures that students with limited financial resources have all the supplies they need to succeed in school.

> "This school makes sure that teachers' needs are met so we can be fully present with our kids."
> *Paul Revere teacher*

**Prioritizing Enrichment.** Staff, parents, and students agree that teacher-led enrichment clubs are a hallmark of the Paul Revere experience. Paul Revere staff know that not every family has the financial resources to send a child to dance class or soccer camp. Leveraging the school's scheduling autonomy, teachers shifted their schedules to create optional before- and after-school enrichment clubs without detracting from classroom time. By the time school begins at 8:10 am, students at the Paul Revere have already engaged in imaginative play, practiced their public speaking skills, or mastered a new yoga pose. These teacher-led clubs reinforce the sense of community at the Paul Revere and build authentic relationships, as teachers share their hobbies and passions with students and students develop friendships across grade levels.

## Different Approaches, Same Goal: Supporting Social Emotional Learning

The SEL approaches selected by the Paul Revere and Winter Hill schools share the same goal: help students develop SEL skills, including empathy, problem solving, and the ability to manage emotions, to ensure learning is more accessible. Despite this shared goal, there are important differences between the schools' SEL models. Responsive

Classroom, which is used by the Winter Hill, is an approach to teaching that focuses on a set of practices and strategies woven throughout the school day. Open Circle, which is used by the Paul Revere, includes a curriculum with grade-differentiated lessons on SEL topics, which take place twice weekly in every classroom. In addition to these SEL models, each school has additional services that strengthen their ability to educate the whole child. At the Winter Hill, this includes the Student Aspirations Team, a group of student leaders who sponsor school culture initiatives and provide input on school policy decisions. At the Paul Revere, this includes a Parent University which strengthens parents' knowledge about how to support their children in school. Other unique services are listed in the table below.

| AT THE **WINTER HILL** | EDUCATING THE WHOLE CHILD | AT THE **PAUL REVERE** |
|---|---|---|
| ▪ Responsive Classroom SEL curriculum<br>▪ Student Aspirations Team encourages student voice<br>▪ Monthly parent workshops<br>▪ School-based social worker | | ▪ Open Circle SEL curriculum<br>▪ Leading Together staff SEL curriculum<br>▪ Counseling partnership with South Shore Mental Health<br>▪ Parent University, grade-level parent breakfasts |

## KEY PRINCIPLE 3

# Focus on students' individual learning

Like many highly effective schools, the Winter Hill and Paul Revere schools have a strong culture of data use that helps to individualize academic instruction and support in classrooms.[3] However, teachers are not isolated in their classrooms as they work to meet the unique learning needs of each student. Collaborative structures have made it possible for staff at both schools to harness the power of a data-rich culture, enabling educators to share resources and strategies that will help individual students reach their potential. Staffing autonomy has contributed to both schools' ability to maintain this work culture. By engaging a broad-based team for hiring and making staffing decisions with careful purpose, each school ensures that new teachers will adapt well to the collaborative environment.

### AT THE **WINTER HILL**

**Staffing Decisions to Expand Inclusion.** The Winter Hill is home to Somerville's citywide autism program in grades K-8, along with a Sheltered English Immersion Program in grades 6-8. Winter Hill staff agree that every student, regardless of age, ability, or background, has a meaningful role to play in shaping the school community. This philosophy is embodied in the Winter Hill's approach to inclusion for students with disabilities and English learners. Staff and school leaders agree that a student sitting in a general education classroom, without the tools to access the curriculum, is not meaningful inclusion. With the flexibility provided by innovation status, the team took a deliberate approach to scaling inclusionary practices schoolwide.

When two staff members retired, school leaders used staffing autonomy to convert two teacher positions to inclusion specialists. These specialists partner with classroom teachers to create individualized plans that allow students with more severe disabilities or language needs to access the general education curriculum. The school is currently prioritizing inclusion practices on a child-by-child basis, examining the services that are provided through a pull-out model and identifying ways to offer these services within the general education classroom. With the support of

inclusion specialists, the team allots time for monthly inclusion meetings, which allow staff to collaboratively address challenges and share effective practices to support every student. These meetings have strengthened communication across roles and grade levels. For example, teachers and inclusion specialists use Google docs to share lessons and assessments in advance, ensuring alignment between special education and general education.

**Individualizing Instruction.** Targeted support at the Winter Hill is not restricted to students with the most significant needs. During teacher-led meetings, staff use academic assessment data to examine the needs of students at varying proficiency levels. In analyzing assessment results, staff make plans to 1) enrich instruction for those who are exceeding expectations; 2) determine specific areas for growth that will push those meeting expectations to a higher level of proficiency; and 3) identify interventions and re-teaching strategies for those struggling in a particular area.

Winter Hill teachers note that grade-level common planning time has supported their ability to act on student data. By reviewing data in a collaborative manner, staff share strategies for improvement and identify common challenges that can be addressed through school- or classroom-wide interventions. This approach ensures that learning is rigorous and relevant for every student.

**Elevating the Role of Interventionists.** Staff at the Paul Revere recognize that a range of social-emotional and/or academic needs can result in a student's need for a higher level of individualized support. Interventionists, who work within the classroom to provide targeted support to struggling students, play a key role at the school. Staff regularly engage in collaborative data review to identify students who need support. Teachers create data posters using student photos, providing a visual reminder that the focus of the data review is to identify each student's unique strengths and challenges. When data shows a need for additional support, classroom teachers and interventionists work together to identify the root cause of the challenge and develop a plan to support the child. Interventionists host breakfast meetings with parents, noting that effective intervention plans rely on a partnership between students, staff, and families.

**Ensuring Right-Fit Classroom Assignments.** As summer approaches, the Paul Revere team gathers to determine classroom assignments for the upcoming school year. Teachers fill out a worksheet for each of their current students that describes every aspect of the child's social-emotional, physical, and academic development. This worksheet is attached to archived worksheets from each grade level, presenting a holistic picture of each students' career at the Paul Revere. This assignment process, which was created by Paul Revere teachers, helps staff partner across grade levels to determine classroom assignments that will provide the right match between students and teachers. Staff noted that these purposeful assignments set students up for success at the beginning of each school year.

> "If the data shows that my students are struggling with a math concept, and another teachers' data shows that her kids have mastered it, I'll ask her to show me the lesson. It's a professional atmosphere. We're not afraid to ask each other for help."
>
> *Paul Revere teacher*

## Different Instructional Models, One Goal: Strengthening Inclusion for Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners

While the Winter Hill and Paul Revere schools both have a deep commitment to inclusion, specific practices differ across the two schools. The Winter Hill is currently engaged in a whole-staff effort to enhance inclusion practices at the classroom level, which has driven the school's recent academic, SEL, enrichment, operational, and professional development decisions. The Paul Revere uses a co-teaching model, in which a special educator and a general educator share the same classroom and work together to deliver instruction to all students. This model supports the school's ability to fully include students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

AT THE **WINTER HILL**

- Hired 2 additional inclusion specialists
- Engaged entire staff to develop school-level plan to expand inclusion for students with disabilities and English Learners

INCLUSIONARY PRACTICES

AT THE **PAUL REVERE**

- Small learning groups in grades K-2
- Full inclusion co-teaching class grades 2-5

# Celebrating, spreading, and sustaining success

The best representation of school success comes from the reflections of Winter Hill and Paul Revere students, whose commitment to their school, engagement in their learning, and dedication to their classmates exemplifies the caring and collaborative environments that both schools have created. In addition to sharing student perspectives, this section describes the way in which school innovations have spread across each district and the key role of teacher leadership in sustaining innovation.

## The Student Perspective

Students at the Winter Hill reflected that they go to school in a special place, where they feel known and their teachers like teaching them. When asked what makes their school special, Winter Hill students reflected on the diversity of their classmates, noting that they get to learn with people from all over the world every day. Students talked about the many ways their school helps them set goals, manage stress, and handle conflicts. As one student noted, "Teachers expect you to try your best, and they tell you that they want to help you."

"At the Winter Hill, it becomes a habit to treat people with respect. Teachers treat you with respect and they tell you to treat other students with respect."

*Winter Hill student, grade 8*

Paul Revere 4th and 5th graders talked about the many ways that their families are involved in their school. Through a holiday fair, a Halloween costume contest, performances throughout the year, and visits to the school's food pantry as beneficiaries or volunteers, family members are involved in many facets of the school experience. Students notice their teachers' ability to provide them with appropriate learning challenges, and they are grateful that learning is collaborative in their school.

## The Spread of Effective Practices
*The impact of the Winter Hill and Paul Revere schools extends well beyond their local school districts*

Though staff at both schools acknowledge that their practices have impacted schools within and outside their districts, teachers are most proud of the students they graduate. As one teacher noted, "What we're really trying to do here is to develop good citizens. Good people who can have a positive impact on their community."

Somerville Superintendent Mary Skipper sees the school's inclusion plan as a model for other schools, and noted that the Winter Hill's approach to serving students with autism informs programming across the district. She also highlighted the school's decision to include school climate surveys in its improvement plan as a model that other schools have followed. The superintendent noted that Winter Hill staff are willing to try anything that will strengthen student learning, a mindset that spurs ongoing innovation.

AT THE **PAUL REVERE**

As the first innovation school in Massachusetts, the Paul Revere has welcomed visitors from districts across the Commonwealth who are seeking to apply for innovation status, strengthen SEL programming, or elevate the role of teacher leaders. Many Paul Revere innovations, including the school uniform policy and the holistic approach to classroom placement, have been adopted district-wide. School staff are committed to sharing effective strategies, as well as adopting proven practices from other schools, in an effort to accelerate learning for every Revere student.

## Innovation at Work

The Winter Hill and Paul Revere schools have focused on building internal capacity to innovate in the service of student learning. Having empowered teachers, parents, and students to take leadership roles in school operations, both schools are well-positioned to draw upon the resources of the entire community as they seek to sustain innovation. Staff at both the Paul Revere and Winter Hill schools plan to build upon existing structures and seek community-wide input as they continue to test creative approaches to deepen learning for every student.

> "Whenever a topic is easy, the teacher gives me a more advanced topic. We also get to help other kids in our class. We have a tutoring club with first graders learning English to help them learn to read."
>
> *Paul Revere student, grade 5*

## DISCUSSION

The success of the Winter Hill and Paul Revere schools, achieved through collaboration and community partnership, raises interesting questions for educators and school leaders hoping to catalyze change in their own schools. The questions below are intended to prompt dialogue about key learnings from Winter Hill and Paul Revere experiences.

1. Both schools profiled in this case study use collaborative structures to sustain school improvement and innovation. What are the lessons learned about the value of teamwork in building a culture of innovation?

2. In deciding where to prioritize innovation efforts, both schools made whole child and whole family supports their top priority. Why do you think teachers decided to emphasize whole child and whole family supports? How would you describe the links between whole child/family supports and the schools' focus on a welcoming culture?

3. At both the Winter Hill and Paul Revere, teachers were involved in hiring their current principal, and will continue to do so in the future. If you were a teacher at either of these schools, what qualities would you seek out in a leader? What are the characteristics of teacher culture that you would try to sustain?

4. Experiences at the Winter Hill and Paul Revere illustrate the importance of creating a teacher work culture which endorses the experimentation inherent in innovation. What can be learned from these schools about the foundational elements that support psychological safety? What barriers do schools face in strengthening a work culture that supports collaboration, creativity, and risk-taking?

5. While the Winter Hill and Paul Revere schools share similar areas of focus, each school built and implemented their innovation plan in different ways. What can be learned from the different approaches across these two schools?

## Endnotes

1 Angrist, Joshua D., Parag A. Pathak, and Christopher R. Walters. 2013. "Explaining Charter School Effectiveness." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics,* 5 (4): 1-27.

2 Carmeli, A., Brueller, D., & Dutton, J. (2009). Learning behaviors in the workplace: The role of high-quality interpersonal relationships and psychological safety. Systems Research and Behavioral Science, 26, 81-98.

3 Supovitz, Jonathan A. and Klein, Valerie. (2003). Mapping a Course for Improved Student Learning: How Innovative Schools Systematically Use Student Performance Data to Guide Improvement. *CPRE Research Reports.*

## About the Rennie Center

The Rennie Center's mission is to improve public education through well-informed decision-making based on deep knowledge and evidence of effective policymaking and practice. As Massachusetts' preeminent voice in public education reform, we create open spaces for educators and policymakers to consider evidence, discuss cutting-edge issues, and develop new approaches to advance student learning and achievement. Through our staunch commitment to independent, non-partisan research and constructive conversations, we work to promote an education system that provides every child with the opportunity to be successful in school and in life. For more information, please visit www.renniecenter.org.