

Are innovation schools like charter schools?

Yes. So-called innovation schools are given the “flexibility” of charters to waive regulations, labor agreements, and statutory requirements. Nonprofit or for-profit management companies often operate them.

This is why

Innovation schools were introduced as a middle ground between centralized, publicly governed district schools and independent charter schools governed by private boards. While many early models of these schools, such as “alternative” and “pilot” schools, stayed under the governance of democratically elected school boards, innovation schools are increasingly viewed by charter school proponents as opportunities to expand their industry privatization in general.

Innovation schools are a favorite of the right-wing, anti-public school policy machine. The idea is backed by organizations and individuals that advocate for charter schools and vouchers and undermine public education.

Wealthy funders of corporate reform and efforts to undermine teachers are vocal supporters of innovation schools. They see innovation schools as a way to expand the charter industry and gut teacher labor agreements.

The performance of innovation schools is mixed at best. Sometimes positive effects have occurred in the early years of new implementations, but typically these effects fade over time.

Innovation schools undermine democratic governance. Because these schools have autonomy from democratically elected school boards, they can lead to communities and parents’ disenfranchisement—especially parents of color.

Look at the facts

The American Legislative Exchange Council

(ALEC), a right-wing group of state legislators, business leaders, and think tank operatives who draft and share legislation for implementing libertarian principles in state government, promotes a model bill for states to establish innovation schools, zones, and districts. **The bill encourages states** to “create and manage a portfolio of schools,” and that are each free to enact their own innovations in governance.

New Schools Venture Fund, an **organization that funds charter school startups** and develops charter management organizations, is “hungry to hear” from individuals and organizations interested in founding innovation schools, which it believes are an alternative to “existing schools [that] were designed for a different time and purpose.”

Advocacy groups that promote charter schools and voucher programs, such as **ExcellInEd**, also **push for innovation schools**, zones, or districts as part of a “new landscape” of public education.

Organizations such as **the City Fund** and **Stand for Children**, and billionaires such as **Bill Gates** and the **Walton family** champion a **“portfolio” model of school governance** that increases the number of “autonomous” schools, including innovation schools and charters. These groups have poured hundreds of millions of dollars into state and local school board elections and nonprofit organizations to create “local demand” for the portfolio model in numerous states and cities. The City Fund’s website includes a **map of the cities** they “serve” and the local organizations that advocate for the portfolio model in those cities.

Denver was one of the first school districts to implement innovation schools. In the first two years of their implementation, the schools increased end-of-year standardized test scores in math, reading,



and writing. However, **these effects faded out** in the following year and then declined steeply in subsequent years.

Proponents of innovation schools say that because they are autonomous to school board governance, they will result in more equitable resources and learning opportunities for communities of color, but **research studies show** that when parents don't have equitable representation on local school boards, inequalities tend to persist.

Research questioning the assumption that autonomous schools competing in a system based on choice will lead to innovation has found the opposite is more apt to occur. Autonomy in an environment heavily reliant on competition and accountability can constrain innovation. Schools are more apt to duplicate what's mainstream and **stick with standardized instruction methods** rather than innovative practices.

WHAT PRIVATIZERS BELIEVE	WHAT WE BELIEVE
School districts should decentralize management to individual schools because it will bring decision-making closer to what parents in the school want.	Innovation schools are another top-down education reform idea that is being pushed onto local school communities by powerful outside special interests.
Innovation schools that are autonomous of school board governance are more apt to reflect families and students' needs and interests.	Schools are more than just units of management with autonomy over in-school functions. They have community-wide responsibility to provide equitable services and learning opportunities to all children and families.
Innovation schools are a proven strategy for school improvement that should be widely replicated.	School improvement strategies should be tied to regional- and community-based approaches to improving educational equity and learning opportunities, not to ideas invented in advocacy

Bottom Line

Innovation schools are charter schools without the charter, i.e., the contract agreement between the charter school and its authorizer. Like charters, they don't have the same accountability and transparency that public schools have.