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# Crafting an Innovation School:

## Findings from Denver's first eight Innovation schools

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## Executive Summary

Beginning in 2010, The Evaluation Center in the School of Education and Human Development, at the University of Colorado Denver, was contracted through a collaborative effort by Denver Public Schools (DPS), Colorado Education Association (CEA), A+ Denver, and the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) to provide external evaluation services to study the Innovation schools in Denver.

This is the final report for year 1 of the evaluation, which covers the 2010-11 school year. The purpose of this report is to provide preliminary data about the Innovation schools that will help DPS and its partners understand the changes that have occurred since schools gained Innovation status, what is working well, and what challenges they are facing. The results are designed to be formative in nature, which will provide stakeholders with information that can be used to inform decision-making, and to help improve and support Innovation schools.

### Methods

The evaluation is based on a mixed-method framework which incorporates multiple sources of data. Data collection was framed around the Five Essential Supports for School Improvement, which have been found to be critical in school reform efforts by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, & Luppescu, 2006), and which include school structures, professional practice, and school cultures.

**Interviews** - Between May and June of 2011 seven of the eight Innovation schools opted to participate in interviews. A total of seven interviews were conducted with principals, thirteen with teachers, and six with parents.

**Climate surveys** - Between May and June of 2011, teachers at all eight of the Innovation schools were invited to participate in a survey to measure aspects of the climate and culture of the school. The total response rate across all teachers was 55% (n=347 of 626).

**Innovation Plans** – An analysis of the Innovation plans submitted by schools was used to clarify other data collected, and to gain an understanding of what waivers each school had requested as part of the Innovation process.

**Achievement data** – Existing data regarding student achievement on the CSAP was obtained from the Data Lab on the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) website. This data included the percent of students scoring proficient or advanced in each subject, and median growth percentiles.

**Human resources data** – DPS provided evaluators with human resources files for 08-09 and 09-10 which included information about teacher and principal staffing, experience, and degrees earned.

### Findings

**Innovation schools did not tend to look drastically different than other schools.** Most principals reported that they have taken the approach of deliberately moving slowly with the implementation of their Innovation plan. It was clear that principals felt they could make more substantial changes given

the waivers they have from district, state, and union policies; some principals were considering additional changes in the coming years. Given the flexibility that Innovation schools have, it is possible that they will begin to implement more numerous and substantive changes in the future. However, there remains the question of what it means for a school to be “innovative”, and what expectations exist (from the district and the schools themselves) around what an Innovation school looks like, and how it may differ or not from its previous practices and from other DPS schools.

**The four major issues driving schools to seek Innovation status were: budget, schedule, workforce management, and level of control.** These were also the areas in which respondents said they saw the most obvious changes following Innovation status. It was somewhat remarkable that principals did not raise issues around curriculum and instruction as a key reason for seeking Innovation, though they did note that flexibility in these other four areas allowed them to make shifts related to instruction. The changes schools made which had the most potential to impact instruction had to do with teacher planning time, teacher PD, funds for additional academic and enrichment activities, schedule changes, and workforce management (e.g., hiring, opting out of direct placement). Given that there was such a consistent set of core drivers for all schools seeking Innovation status, this suggests there may be key areas where principals feel that district constraints are most burdensome. Principals appeared to view these issues as key levers in their management of the school; eliminating or reducing constraints in these areas at other DPS schools could potentially improve principals’ perceptions about their ability to make decisions and manage their schools. At this point there is no evidence from this study to support or refute the idea that autonomy in these areas will improve school outcomes, but removing constraints in these areas clearly improved the staff and community sense of autonomy and ownership in the Innovation schools.

**Principals are relatively happy with the support they have received from DPS. They found that support improved after the formation of the Office of School Reform and Innovation (OSRI).** A number of principals noted that in the early years of Innovation schools there had been challenges getting basic services from the district (particularly around HR and budget) because of a lack of understanding in central office. Departments did not know how to deal with the needs of Innovation schools, which differed from the traditional ways of doing things. Principals said that more recently, there had been a shift towards having dedicated central office liaisons in these departments who were knowledgeable about the Innovation schools and better prepared to assist. OSRI was cited by principals as a key force in helping the district better align systems of support for Innovation schools, though some principals felt that the high turnover of OSRI staff had impeded the unit’s effectiveness.

**Innovation led to an increase in both real and perceived control over the schools by principals, teachers, and parents.** This increased control was viewed as a major positive by these groups, who expressed a sense of greater ownership of their schools. There was a general sense of increased empowerment around decisions including resources, workforce, and instruction. One specific change that was appreciated by many respondents was the enhanced agility to make rapid decisions at the school level, without having to wait for approval of the decision by various central office entities.

**Having control over the workforce was a significant change in Innovation schools, from the hiring process to one-year contracts.** The Innovation schools have made substantive changes in the way that

they deal with their workforce. One major change was around hiring, including changes to timelines and the interview process. Schools were particularly pleased about opting out of direct placements; respondents were very negative about direct placement because they felt it led to schools having teachers who were not a good fit with the school's culture, philosophy, or rigor. Innovation schools tended to use one-year contracts with their teachers, and most respondents were happy with this. Parents and principals particularly liked the idea that they had a chance to determine if the teacher was a good fit before committing to them longer term.

**Innovation schools have experienced high rates of mobility among teachers and principals. Their teachers tend to be somewhat less experienced and are less likely to have master's degrees than teachers in comparable schools.** Although the data available for this evaluation did not allow us to draw strong conclusions about the effect that Innovation has on a school's workforce, these findings suggest that Innovation schools may have unique needs around developing and maintaining their teacher (and principal) workforce.

**Innovation schools tended to have overall positive cultures. Schools which had less positive cultures had experienced problems with the principal, principal turnover, and often lacked a clear vision for the school.** In general, schools tended to be either high or low on all culture indicators. This suggests that different elements of school climate are highly intertwined, and problems in one area are likely to spill over into discontent in others. The interview data suggested that principal leadership was a key element, and that when the principal did not adequately support staff, or created an atmosphere of mistrust or negativity, climate indicators at the school tended to be more negative. Interestingly, the lack of a clear strategic vision was also present in schools which scored lowest on climate measures. Having a strong principal in whom the teachers and parents have trust, who is able to articulate a clear vision and align structures around that, seems to be an important element in the climate of schools.

**With high principal turnover at the Innovation schools, there has been some confusion about the role of the district in choosing a new principal.** Three of the Innovation schools have changed principals since they gained Innovation status, and this change was associated with difficulties and discontent at the schools. One theme which emerged in these schools was: What is the role of the district and the school in choosing a new principal? There appears to be a lack of clarity around which entity will make the final choice. Going forward, it will be important for the district to clarify the process of principal hiring, and the role that staff, community, and district have in choosing a new administrator.

**Most of the Innovation schools were working on alignment across grades and subjects. Schools saw this work as critical, but the process was not necessarily effective at all schools.** Innovation schools were dedicating considerable amounts of time to engaging teachers in work around creating better vertical and horizontal articulation. The work tended to focus on understanding what on-standard or on-grade work looked like. However, in several schools respondents felt the time dedicated to articulation was poorly used. This was generally associated with a lack of articulated goals or expectations, or a lack of structure to help move teachers towards the goals (since this left the onus on them to push the process forward). The prevalence of these articulation activities across schools raises the question of what support DPS provides to all district schools around operationalizing the standards, and helping teachers understand what on-standard and on-grade work looks like in various subjects.



**There was a lack of clarity around the boundaries of autonomy in Innovation schools – what flexibility they have, and what regulations they are still subject to.** This theme emerged in various ways from principals and teachers and was centered on the idea that the district has not adopted a clear vision of what Innovation schools are and what they should be able to do. This has resulted in some frustration for school staff, who at times felt they had to battle for autonomies they thought they were entitled to under Innovation status, or led to confusion around district requirements. With the formation of OSRI, the district may now be better positioned to define the district’s understandings around Innovation schools. However, it was clear that principals believed the district has a distance to go in defining and understanding Innovation schools. It may be very useful for DPS to consider outlining the expectations the district has for Innovation schools in a transparent way, including the autonomies Innovation schools enjoy as well as the boundaries they must still adhere to.

**There are not yet clear trends to help us understand how Innovation will affect student achievement.** Prior to gaining Innovation status, many of the Innovation schools were already trending up in terms of the percent of students proficient and advanced, and most also had median growth percentiles above the state average of 50%.

**Important questions remain about Innovation schools, and the district’s role in supporting them.**

These questions are not only important in relation to the Innovation schools themselves, but are also critical for the district as a whole as more schools gain Innovation status. Specific questions the district should consider include:

- Has DPS had a conversation around what it means to be ‘innovative’? Are there particular expectations for what an Innovation school looks like and how it may differ or not from its previous practices, and from other DPS schools?
- What does success look like for an Innovation school? Is it only about student achievement? Are there other factors that should be considered? (e.g., teacher satisfaction, parent involvement, student perceptions).
- What are some cost implications (both in terms of additional costs or loss of economy of scale) as schools opt out of traditional district structures? What is the cost to the district and schools?
- How can the district best support Innovation schools as their practices diverge from district offerings (e.g., around curricula, assessment, professional development, leadership, etc.)?
- How is monitoring data about the Innovation schools used? What types of metrics are considered in the monitoring of Innovation schools (e.g., teacher satisfaction, parent involvement, teacher mobility, principal turnover, etc.)? How is this information used?
- What supports does the district provide to assist Innovation schools who are struggling with various issues (e.g., principal leadership, collaboration and planning, articulation, trust, etc.)?
- The Innovation Schools Act requires a 3 year review of each school’s Innovation status. What will be considered as part of this review? Under what circumstances would the district take action with regards to a school’s Innovation status? Do issues like climate, student achievement, mobility, instruction, etc. play a role? If so, how? If not, why not?



## Overview

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Beginning in 2010, The Evaluation Center in the School of Education and Human Development, at the University of Colorado Denver, was contracted through a collaborative effort by Denver Public Schools (DPS), Colorado Education Association (CEA), A+ Denver, and Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) to provide external evaluation services to study the Innovation schools in Denver.

This is the final report for year 1 of the evaluation, which covers the 2010-11 school year. The purpose of this report is to provide preliminary data about the Innovation schools that will help DPS and its partners understand the changes that have occurred since schools gained Innovation status, what is working well, and what challenges they are facing. The results are designed to be formative in nature, which will provide stakeholders with information that can be used to inform decision-making, and to help improve and support Innovation schools.

**Evaluation Framework:** The evaluation of the Innovation schools initiative is grounded in current school reform theory and responsive to the plans submitted by the schools for becoming Innovation schools. Specifically, data collection was framed around factors which were determined to be important in school reform by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). The framework for the evaluation is summarized in Exhibit 1.

### Exhibit 1. Evaluation framework



A basic summary of what is included in each of these components is provided below. These concepts were used to frame the data collection protocols, and serve as organizing heuristics for this report.

1. **Improve school structures** refers to changes in the way schools use time, engage in hiring, assess students, practice inclusive leadership, conduct personnel evaluations, and manage resources.

2. **Improve professional practice** includes initiatives aimed at increasing teacher and principal effectiveness such as professional development, coaching, enhanced curricula, and qualifications for teachers and school leaders.
3. **Improve school culture** refers to plans that enhance teacher, principal, and collective school efficacy beliefs; mutual trust among teachers, school administrators, parents and students; and the degree of academic emphasis within the school.
4. **Improve student learning** is the central goal and stated purpose for Innovation schools and, therefore, is the anchor of the evaluation.

## Evaluation questions

The general evaluation questions addressed by this report are:

1. What changes did schools make after gaining Innovation status? Why did they choose those particular changes?
2. What is happening in Innovation schools in terms of school structures, professional practice, and school culture?
3. What successes are Innovation schools experiencing? What challenges are they facing?
4. What does the workforce in Innovation schools look like?
5. What does the achievement of students in Innovation schools look like?

## Methods

The evaluation is based on a mixed-method framework which incorporates multiple sources of data. The details of each data source are described below:

**Interviews** - Between May and June of 2011 all eight of the Innovation schools were invited to participate in interviews,<sup>1</sup> and seven schools opted to participate. At each school, interviews were conducted separately with the principal, two teachers, and a parent. A full set of interviews were conducted at six of the participating schools; at the seventh school the principal declined to provide a parent contact and only one teacher participated. A total of seven interviews were conducted with principals, thirteen with teachers, and six with parents. The interviews used a semi-structured protocol framed around the Five Essential Supports for School Improvement, which have been found to be critical in school reform efforts by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, & Luppescu, 2006).<sup>2</sup> Interviews lasted about one hour. Qualitative analyses of the interviews used NVivo

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<sup>1</sup> There are seven schools which have Innovation status: Cole, Denver Green, Montclair, Manual, MLK Early College, Valdez, and Whittier. Bruce Randolph is an autonomous school which shares very similar freedoms to Innovation schools, so stakeholders chose to include this school under the umbrella of this study. For brevity, the term “Innovation” is used inclusively with reference to Bruce Randolph.

<sup>2</sup> The interview protocols can be found in Appendix A, Appendix B, and Appendix C.

qualitative analysis software; analysis was framed around the categories of the Five Essential Supports, but also took into account emergent themes and issues that arose from interviews.

**Climate surveys** - Between May and June of 2011, teachers at all eight of the Innovation schools were invited to participate in a survey to measure aspects of the climate and culture of the school. The surveys measured trust in the principal, trust in colleagues, trust in clients, organizational citizenship, collegial leadership, teacher professionalism, academic press, and community engagement. The response rates for each school ranged from 43% of teachers to 65% of teachers, with an average response rate of 57%. Across all schools, the total response rate was 55% of invited teachers (n=347 of 626). The specific surveys used were:

*Trust* – trust in principal, trust in colleagues, trust in clients (Hoy, 2003).

*Organizational Citizenship*<sup>3</sup> – (Tschannen-Moran)

*School Climate*<sup>4</sup> – incorporating “Collegial Leadership”, “Teacher Professionalism”, “Academic Press” and “Community Engagement” (Tschannen-Moran)

**Innovation Plans** – An analysis of the Innovation plans submitted by schools was used to clarify other data collected, and to gain an understanding of what waivers each school had requested as part of the Innovation process.

**Achievement data** – Existing data regarding student achievement on the CSAP was obtained from the Data Lab on the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) website. This data was used to create a preliminary analysis of achievement trends in the Innovation schools across time. Data used was that defined by CDE as “included in district calculations”, which confines the student population to students who were in the district or school by October 1 of that academic year. According to CDE, these numbers should match the proficiency numbers on the State Performance Framework and the growth numbers from the Colorado Growth Model, but may differ slightly from official CSAP reporting because students who came to the school later than October 1 are not included in calculations.<sup>5</sup>

**Human resources data** – DPS provided evaluators with human resources files for 08-09 and 09-10 which included information about teacher and principal staffing, experience, and degrees earned.

## Comparison Group

In order to better understand the changes that are occurring at Innovation schools, a comparison group of five schools was selected from among regular DPS schools. These schools represent a stratified sample based on free/reduced lunch rates, school performance framework categories, and ELL population (used as a tie-breaking variable for schools similar on the other categories).<sup>6</sup> These schools were invited to participate in the climate surveys, and principals were also invited to participate in interviews. Two of the principals completed interviews. At the other schools the evaluation team had

<sup>3</sup> Available from <http://wmpeople.wm.edu/asset/index/mxtsch/ocomr>

<sup>4</sup> Available from <http://wmpeople.wm.edu/asset/index/mxtsch/scioc>

<sup>5</sup> Frequently asked questions on this data can be found here: <http://www.schoolview.org/DataLabFAQ.asp>

<sup>6</sup> A full description of the sampling procedure can be found in Appendix D.

considerable trouble getting responses from the principals. One principal was non-responsive to our requests for an interview. At the other two schools we eventually obtained commitments from the principals to participate, but in both cases the principals did not respond to further attempts to set up an interview, and we were therefore unable to complete these interviews. For year two of this study, the evaluation team will revisit how to better engage these comparison schools. Because they do not benefit directly from the study, it is often challenging to engage comparison group schools. This report incorporates results from the comparison group with regards to the climate surveys and academic achievement results.

### **Additional Notes**

For the sake of clarity and anonymity the pronoun 'she' is used for all discussions, regardless of the respondent's actual gender. Quotes were selected to be representative of themes from the data. Quotes are reported in respondent's own words to the extent possible, but errors of grammar or spelling may have been corrected so as not to detract from the content. This report uses the term 'school' as a shorthand way of representing the actions or perceptions of the school staff.

To the greatest extent possible, schools have been de-identified in this data reporting. As part of the interview and survey data collection, individuals were promised confidentiality in order to provide a safe space for them to voice their opinions. Where school names are reported, the information attached to them is publicly available and therefore not considered to be confidential (e.g., the contents of their Innovation plan, school schedules, school achievement scores).

## How different are Innovation schools?

As of July 2011, there were 3 schools that began as Innovation schools in the 09-10 school year, 4 schools that began Innovation status in the 10-11 school year, and one school that had autonomy since 08-09 (as shown in Exhibit 2 below).<sup>7</sup> The result of this is that 6 of the 7 schools where interviews were conducted were in their first or second year of implementing Innovation.

**Exhibit 2. Year of Innovation status for study schools**

School Name	First full year of Innovation Status
Bruce Randolph	08-09
Cole	09-10
Montclair	09-10
Manual	09-10
MLK	10-11
Valdez	10-11
Whittier	10-11
Denver Green <sup>8</sup>	10-11

In thinking about Innovation schools, it is worth considering what it actually means to be ‘innovative’. The word ‘innovative’ is defined by dictionary.com as: “using or showing new methods, ideas, etc”. But whether a school may be labeled by a third party as being ‘innovative’ is a very subjective matter depending on how innovation is defined. The Innovation Schools Act of 2008 outlines innovation in terms of a school having,

*“a high degree of autonomy in implementing curriculum, making personnel decisions, organizing the school day, determining the most effective use of resources, and generally organizing the delivery of high-quality educational services, thereby empowering each public school to tailor its services most effectively and efficiently to meet the needs of the population of students it serves.” (General Assembly of the State of Colorado, 2008)*

There is nothing in the Statute which suggests that Innovation schools have to look substantively different from other schools. Instead, the Statute focuses on how Innovation status shifts control over key decision-making from the district to the school; in theory, an Innovation school could continue to engage in exactly the same practices as prior to gaining Innovation status, but the school would have the autonomy to make decisions rather than being subject to district requirements. However, for many people the word ‘innovation’ tends to connote circumstances which are different from the ordinary,

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Randolph received autonomy in February of 2008, which meant it was able to begin implementation of most changes in the 2008-2009 school year.

<sup>8</sup> Denver Green was a new school in this year. All other Innovation schools previously existed.

which may lead observers to expect that Innovation schools would look substantively different in some way than other schools in DPS.

During interviews, school staff seemed to share the Statute’s emphasis on Innovation as a way of focusing control at the local level. Respondents tended to believe that Innovation status allowed them to make decisions about how to structure their schools in ways they believed would benefit students, and provided more school-based control over how things were done with regard to personnel, resources, and instruction. However, respondents tended to characterize the changes which had occurred as part of Innovation status as smaller changes designed to improve the lives of staff and students, in comparison to engaging in completely new or different structures or practices. Indeed, interviews at the seven Innovation schools suggested that at least on the surface, the majority of these schools had not made significant departures from their practice prior to Innovation. The one exception to this is Denver Green, a new school that opened with Innovation status; this school has more practices seldom seen in the mainstream (such as a school garden and chicken coop, integrated standards around environmental awareness, and a partner-based leadership model). To a large extent, Innovation schools are very similar to DPS schools in terms of the curricula they use, their calendars, and their instructional time.

To the extent that Innovation schools choose to change their practices in a way which makes them substantively different from other DPS schools, this may occur over a longer period of time rather than immediately. It seems likely that existing schools may approach the change process slowly as they work to shift practices and attitudes within their schools.

## **Becoming an Innovation school**

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In order to understand more about Innovation schools, principals were asked to describe the major reasons that the school chose to apply for Innovation status. All respondents (principals, teachers, parents) were also asked about the major changes the school had made since they were granted Innovation status.

The main reasons that principals gave for seeking Innovation status were markedly similar in all schools. The reasons they described were: budget, scheduling, workforce management, and increased level of control. Interestingly, these were also the most salient concepts brought up across respondent groups when they described the changes which had occurred in their schools since Innovation.<sup>9</sup> Respondents were quite clear that without Innovation status their school would not have been able to make the changes it did in each of these areas. Because they were so central to the school’s reasons for becoming an Innovation school, a brief description of the impetus behind the change is described here; however

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<sup>9</sup> Because Denver Green was a new school it did not make sense to ask about ‘changes’ since Innovation. Instead, respondents were asked to discuss the major practices in the school. This information is incorporated into the discussion of changes as appropriate, in order to maintain confidentiality of respondents.



later discussion provides more in depth descriptions of what actually changed, as well as the successes and challenges associated with those changes.

## **Budget**

Budget was a major issue which came up around Innovation schools. All seven principals mentioned budget autonomy as a key reason they had pursued Innovation status. It was also mentioned as a change after Innovation by 13 respondents at all 7 schools. The general sentiment among principals was that they wanted to have greater control over how the school's money was spent. In particular, two principals felt that prior to Innovation they were required to use their school budget in ways that were not well-aligned with what they wanted for their school. One principal used the example of having tens of thousands of dollars from the district each year to purchase textbooks, even though she felt it was more important for her school to have updated technology or to pay for teacher professional development. The most salient issues around budget for parents and teachers was related to having control over how the budget is used, so that they were able to make decisions about what the school wanted to prioritize their spending on (e.g., choosing to fund certain types of programs, paying teachers for extra work, supplies, services).

## **Scheduling**

All seven principals mentioned that a reason they wanted Innovation status was in order to have more control over their school schedule or calendar. This was also frequently mentioned as one of the major changes which the school made once it gained Innovation status (12 people at 7 schools). Schools tended to make calendar/schedule changes which would provide additional collaboration or planning time for teachers (e.g., banking time each day to use towards PD days), though a few made schedule changes to provide students with additional opportunities to receive assistance, or to provide additional time to pursue project-based learning. Increasing students' core instructional day was not a focus for the Innovation schools. Several principals noted that they had to consider the ramifications for parents and teachers in making substantive changes to their school's schedule, i.e., changing non-pupil contact days, creating early release days, or adding time to the daily schedule.

## **Workforce management**

All seven principals stated that an important reason for seeking Innovation status was to gain more autonomy over the management of their workforce, specifically related to hiring and dismissal processes. Ideas around the management of the workforce were mentioned by many respondents as an area in which there was a major change after Innovation (14 people at 7 schools, including 6 principals, 4 teachers, 4 parents).

**Direct placement.** Six of the principals specifically stated they were very pleased that as leaders of Innovation schools they did not have to deal with direct placements. The overall sentiment among principals was that they should have the autonomy to decide who was on their teaching staff because it enabled them to hire people who were philosophically aligned with their school vision, and to pick the

employees they felt were best qualified. Principals believed that direct placement impeded their ability to do this.

**Control over the hiring process.** The idea of having control over the timing and nature of the hiring process was a major issue for five principals, who said it was beneficial that they did not have to adhere to specific timelines when hiring new staff. In particular, principals talked about being able to get the right person for the job – being able to hire ‘who they want, when they want’.

## Level of control

A prevalent theme among principals, teachers, and parents was the concept of control. Specifically, respondents spoke about how, following Innovation status, the school staff and community had more control over the operations of the school. Nearly all of the respondents mentioned the concept in some way (24 of 26; 92%), and most had something positive to say about it. It was clear that respondents felt that the school’s Innovation status directly resulted in increased control.

One issue of control mentioned by principals as a key reason for wanting Innovation status was the increased agility around decision making. Six principals said they wanted to seek Innovation status in order to be free from what they perceived to be bureaucratic red tape and unnecessary roadblocks to make the changes they felt were needed in their schools.

*“But I also think systemically, we were running into roadblocks where I always have to go to human resources, get their approval and when you try to do that, you got the run around at times... Everything had to be approved by somebody.”*

One principal said that she did not feel the red tape was intentional but rather that policies intended to help school leaders and their staff sometimes ended up getting in the way of expedient decision-making.

Several principals noted that, with Innovation status, they were able to make decisions much more quickly; in some cases because there were fewer ‘middle men’ involved, and in other cases because they were empowered to make decisions without having to get approval from the district’s administration. Principals also noted that they liked having the flexibility to make decisions when it felt necessary, rather than waiting for the district to make a decision and implement the changes (e.g., around assessments, instruction, intervention programs, etc).

This concept of control was also mentioned by parents and teachers. In general, parents tended to feel that they had an increased level of voice in decision-making after Innovation. A number of respondents (both teachers and parents) talked about how Innovation gave teachers more control over the instruction in their classrooms); the general idea from both parents and teachers was that teachers, as one parent put it, *“have a little more ownership over their profession.”*

The crux of what respondents had to say about control boiled down to one simple idea – there was both a real and perceived increase in the control that the principal, teachers, and parents had over what happened at their school. This intangible component was important, and was mentioned by a number of respondents; as one principal put it, *“The way that people feel about their ownership of the school... there’s just a sense of ownership and of more empowerment of our teachers and of our parents.”*

When respondents had negative comments about the concept of control (n=12 respondents mentioned a negative), they tended to focus on the lack of clarity about what flexibilities Innovation schools have, and what district regulations they were still subject to. For example, in one school a teacher said there was a lack of clarity around the rights of Innovation schools, such as their ability to change curriculum or to opt out of certain district testing – *"We get kind of mixed signals about what we need to listen to DPS about and what we can do on our own"*. In another example, a misunderstanding of how district requirements applied to Innovation schools led to confusion among teachers at one school who did not realize that they were subject to district rules about ELA certification. At another school, a respondent reported that the district told the school retroactively that they would need to pay for the costs created by their schedule change (e.g., transportation), which the school did not anticipate. At another school, several respondents expressed frustration around what they perceived to be less autonomy through Innovation than they had anticipated.

Overall, having additional control over their schools was very positively viewed by principals, teachers, and parents. They valued their ability to make decisions about how to use school resources, who to have on staff, and what kinds of changes the school should make. However, challenges remained for schools in understanding what autonomies they actually were able to wield, and how district regulations applied to them.

## Process of Applying for Innovation

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**General response to Innovation.** At the five schools where parents were asked about their reactions to the Innovation application, all five parents indicated that they viewed Innovation favorably at the time of application. One parent said that she believed in Innovation in part because she trusted the principal, and two additional parents mentioned that they felt favorably about Innovation because they perceived that it would afford their school more freedom. As one parent put it,

*"I've always thought it was a good thing. The word 'Innovation' sounds like a good thing, right, like we can be innovative. And anything that cuts down on red tape or bureaucracy of a very large school district like DPS I think is a good thing."*

**Communication with Parents.** As schools applied for Innovation status, one step of the process was to communicate this to parents. The degree to which schools did so varied. At three of the five schools where parents discussed this topic, parents had been invited to attend informational meetings about the Innovation process. One school chose to hold meetings for parents to learn about Innovation from administrators, and also provided forums where parents could discuss their opinions amongst themselves (without school staff present). However, in some cases, parents received much less information about the process or implications of Innovation status. At two schools, parents did not think that meetings were held. One parent reasoned that this was probably because the changes requested in the Innovation application were not seen as drastic, saying *"They weren't contemplating any huge*

*changes that would be visible to parents. So I think it didn't feel as necessary to try to capture the broader parent feedback...."* The other parent noted that she would have appreciated more communication, saying that she felt that the school had asked parents to voice support at a board meeting without necessarily fully briefing them on the topic or the process. Interviewees from two schools mentioned that some parents were very involved in the Innovation process, sitting on the committee or being "heavily involved" in the school's process. A few parents mentioned that they thought schools may have sent home information regarding Innovation.

As part of this program evaluation, a survey was conducted in late 2010 to assess perceptions from persons who had participated on school planning teams as part of the Innovation application process. This document is entitled "*DPS Innovation School Survey of Planning Team Members – October 2010*" and provides more detailed perceptions about the planning process, including lessons learned and suggestions for schools who wish to apply for Innovation status in the future.

## **Implementation of Innovation plan**

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As part of their application for Innovation status, school staff were required to submit to the district a detailed plan about what they intended to implement if their schools were granted Innovation status. In order to better understand the extent to which the school staff has been able to implement the plans submitted, principals and teachers were asked to reflect on the extent of implementation. Not all respondents clearly characterized their response in terms of the extent of implementation, so the data related to this question is based on those respondents who chose to answer the question in a way that could be characterized as a direct answer to the question. There were three principals and three teachers (representing four different schools) who clearly characterized the Innovation plan at their school as being fully implemented. At an additional two schools, there was one teacher at each school who felt the school's Innovation plan had been partially implemented; both of these teachers noted that their schools were in the early stages of Innovation and so had not yet made substantive changes.

Principals and teachers (6 and 4 respectively) were eager to mention plans for the future and changes their school had not yet implemented. Principals tended to indicate that they were still in a learning cycle of trying things and seeing how they worked; some noted that they were starting to make changes slowly rather than all at once – "*We want to be smart about what we do, not move in haste. We are learning from our mistakes.*" Several principals commented that the waivers they received as part of Innovation status afforded them considerable autonomy to make substantive or broad changes, but that they had not yet taken full advantage of this independence; several principals did say that they were considering various changes for the coming years. The four teachers who commented on their school's future plans shared the view that change was incremental, and the implementation of changes was moving forward slowly.

It is worth noting that there was one school where both teacher interviewees said that there had been substantive departures from the Innovation plan. One teacher felt the district had changed the rules so

they could not enact one of their key ideas, while another said that a core component of the Innovation plan had been modified into something different when it was actually implemented. Although in the latter case the teacher did not feel negatively about the implemented program, she pointed out that this had not been what was envisioned when the committee created the Innovation plan. This teacher also said that the original Innovation plan contained some good ideas which had not yet been implemented, and that, because the school staff was not regularly revisiting the plan, these ideas may be forgotten.

## Support from DPS

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Principals were asked to reflect on the support that they received from DPS as an Innovation school. Most were quite positive about the support they received, and particularly noted that support had improved considerably over the last year with the creation of the Office of School Reform and Innovation (OSRI). Principals talked both about the availability of support, and also the freedom that Innovation status gave them to opt out of supports. Several principals (n=4) noted that they liked being able to opt out of certain supports (e.g., principal PD, PD for their teachers, etc.) that did not suit their needs. In general, principals felt that when DPS offered services and supports that they needed then they were happy to use them; as one principal put it, *“If they [the district] are offering what we need then we’ll take advantage of it.”* However, principals noted that if district-provided services were not in line with their needs, then they would use their Innovation status to meet their needs in other ways.

### Principal views of supports

**Central office.** All the principals commented on the services that they received from the DPS central office; most principals were quite satisfied with the level of support. One principal noted that the Innovation schools have access to all the supports of regular schools, but have the option of whether to use these supports. Another principal liked having less direct support because she felt it offered her more flexibility in making decisions at her school. A few principals stated that they felt several DPS departments had been very helpful, and that some departments were starting to adopt a more ‘customer-focused’ orientation since Innovation schools are not required to use their services. According to one principal, several district departments were actively working to meet the needs of the Innovation Schools; she summarized the changing attitude of these departments as,

*“What is it you need? How do we meet your needs? You guys are important to us, and we want to keep you as a customer.”*

In particular, three principals noted that having a single point of contact for issues in Human Resources and budget was very helpful. Two of these principals noted that in the last year the district had done a good job aligning these functions for Innovation schools, and pointed out that previously they were very frustrated with services in HR and budget because these units did not seem to know how to deal with Innovation schools.

*"In the past, we had about five people that we had to go through because nobody knew the answers..."*

**Office of School Reform and Innovation (OSRI).** Five principals specifically mentioned the role of the OSRI. Principals felt this office was a good support because it had helped align systems in a way that was supportive of the Innovation schools. This was an important change for principals, many of whom noted that in previous years there was little support or alignment of central office services with the needs of Innovation schools, which left them feeling as though they were largely on their own. A few principals noted that OSRI had become an advocate for Innovation schools within the district's administration, which helped them get the services and decisions they needed. Overall, principals seemed to believe that OSRI had substantially improved services to Innovation schools. However, two principals also noted that OSRI had suffered from heavy staff turnover and that this impeded the office's ability to be wholly effective. One principal noted an inherent tension she felt existed in OSRI:

*"One time they explained to us that they were 50% on our side and 50% on the district's side so it made it really hard for them to do [anything], they don't want to rock the boat too much, which I completely disagreed with and I let them know. If your job is to be the [Office of] School Reform and Innovation, then that's your job. It's not to do status quo 50% of the time."*

**Innovation Network.** There were four principals who specifically mentioned the Innovation Network as a good support because it was a chance for them to dialogue with their colleagues in the Innovation schools, and provided content specifically relevant to the needs of Innovation schools.

## **Needed supports**

In general, the Innovation principals felt that they were well supported and had few additional requests for support services; the small number of issues which were raised by principals are presented here.

- One principal mentioned that she would like to see an analysis across Innovation schools in terms of what they are doing and how that is working for them (e.g., if another school hired a nurse, how did that work? What's been working for schools around scheduling?). She felt this was a role that OSRI could play since the office was in a position of being able to see across all the Innovation schools.
- One principal noted that her school could benefit from having DPS' assistance in navigating the privatization of services such as facilities, psychologists, and social workers. She said that she did not adequately understand the issues around privatizing these positions, and felt that support from the district in the form of a legal analyst/consultant could help Innovation schools navigate such decisions. Although principles in other schools did not necessarily mention this as a direct area of need, several principals did mention a similar issue. After principals transitioned to managing their own budgets they needed someone more highly skilled to assist; several principals had hired office managers to fill this need.

## School structures

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### Leadership and Decision-Making

One issue which was examined in the Innovation schools was the structure around leadership and how decision-making was handled. Given the increased control that Innovation schools have over how the school is run, respondents were asked to reflect on their ability to influence decisions and what opportunities they had to engage in decision-making. Since the principal is a key figure in the decisions made at a school, this evaluation also examined the role of the principal.

All schools had a principal leader with a background in education. Although principals described themselves as being the instructional leaders for the school, they also noted having substantial roles around management. Principals did not note any major changes in their role from prior to and after Innovation, though a few principals noted that the administrative functions sometimes became more complex after gaining Innovation status because they were now dealing with the complexities of budgets (e.g., actual salaries), and decisions about vendors, etc.

At two schools, teachers noted that they felt they had more opportunities to participate in decision-making after innovation. All schools had some sort of committee(s) with teacher and parent representation, though the amount of representatives from these groups tended to differ somewhat across schools. At several schools respondents felt there were very active parent groups.

### Budget

A key reason that schools pursued Innovation status, and which was very salient to respondents as a change since Innovation, was that of budget. Principals talked about several different ways that they use their budget autonomy since obtaining Innovation status. One way that two principals chose to use the flexibility was by paying actual salaries, which allowed them to keep the difference between what the district budgeted for teachers at their school and what the school actually paid out in salaries. The schools that chose to go this route had engaged in financial analyses and discovered that because of the cost of salaries in their workforce they could pay out less than they were budgeted by the district, leaving additional money to use for other things. Three principals said they redistributed their money in order to purchase positions they felt were critical to their school (e.g., content area facilitators, office managers, reading intervention coaches). At two schools the principals said they used their flexible budget to pay teachers for a longer day or for taking on additional activities (e.g., tutoring, special events, enrichment). There were also three principals who mentioned that as Innovation schools they had the option to purchase certain DPS services from private vendors (e.g., food services, custodial) in order to save money, and at least one principal was seriously considering this as a cost-saving measure. Two principals commented that the regulations on the use of school money were still restrictive, but that this is a result of federal and/or state guidelines. Two principals also noted that in a smaller school they found that having budget autonomy did not necessarily translate into them being able to find much extra money.

The most salient issues around budget for parents and teachers had to do with having control over how the budget is used – being able to make decisions about how the school wanted to prioritize their spending (e.g., choosing to fund certain types of programs, paying teachers for extra work, supplies, services). A teacher characterized the general sentiment around budget by saying *“the fact that we have more control over our budget is huge”*. Parents spoke positively about the improved sense of school ownership over the budget, and particularly how committees in the school (on which they often sat) were in a better position to make choices about budget allocation once the school gained Innovation status. One parent said that after Innovation, school staff and the community were actually able to have conversations about how to use the budget in a way they felt would be most effective.

## **Schedule**

A number of schools made changes to their schedules after gaining Innovation status. Four schools increased the length of the day. One additional school was considering lengthening the day in the future, while another was discussing starting the school year earlier for teachers in order to provide additional planning time at the beginning of the year. One principal said that the idea of a longer day did not appeal to the staff, and that they were instead focusing on better utilizing the time they have now.

The changes schools made to their schedules tended to focus on creating additional collaboration and planning time for teachers. Three schools created time for teacher collaboration or professional development either by providing teachers with additional planning/meeting time during the day, or by banking the time and creating non-contact times where teachers could collaborate. Principals emphasized that this extra time was critical for teachers. Schools often used the banked time to create either half or full days of pupil non-contact; some schools combined DPS half days into a full day. Various respondents had somewhat mixed feelings on half days; while some principals and teachers did not like half days because they felt the time was difficult to use well, other schools used Innovation status to add half days to their calendar (and this seemed to be working for them).

There was no clear focus among the Innovation schools around increasing the instructional time for students. Some principals indicated that they would like to increase instructional time for students at some point, whereas other principals were unsure that this would necessarily be beneficial. There was only one school which explicitly indicated that they had used their longer day to increase student instructional time; the other schools who had increased the length of their days used this time for teacher development or collaboration.

Three principals mentioned that changing schedules was challenging, since they had to take into consideration the lives of teachers and parents, and determine how the change balanced with the challenges it may cause to these groups (e.g., longer working hours, having children get out early, siblings at different schools who have different schedules, etc.).



## Workforce

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One of the major themes which came up in the Innovation schools was the changes that had been made to the workforce. This was one of the major reasons that principals cited for choosing to pursue Innovation status, as they wanted additional control over staffing and dismissal processes at their school. The Innovation schools had waivers from DCTA, state, and DPS policies which gave them considerably more flexibility around hiring and firing their teachers and principals.

### Hiring decisions

In general, both principal and teacher respondents were very positive about the changes in hiring which had occurred at their school since Innovation. These changes tended to include shifts in both when and how hiring occurred, and included hiring outside of normal schedules and timelines, and modifying the interview process to better identify teachers who were a good 'fit'.

Innovation school staff were pleased that they did not have to adhere to set timelines for hiring new teachers. Several respondents mentioned that when they had vacancies in the past they had been forced to adhere to a specific schedule for filling the position (based on the union contract and state statutes), which left them feeling like they lacked control over the process. Being able to hire when vacancies became available increased the sense of control, and one principal felt she was better able to get the 'cream of the crop' teachers by hiring them earlier in the year. One principal did note that the changes to the hiring process increased the amount of time she needed to dedicate to it.

At several schools, respondents talked about how they had revamped their hiring process to be more rigorous. One principal talked about how her schools had made the hiring process more broad and realistic by incorporating activities such as observing the candidate teach a class, and a rigorous interview process in a bid to avoid "*paper tigers*". This allowed the interview committee to see the teacher in action rather than basing their decision on a resume alone. Respondents noted that prior to gaining Innovation status schools had been constrained in their ability to change the interview process. In several schools, respondents mentioned that during the interview process the selection committee was very transparent with the candidate about what it means to work in an Innovation school in terms of contracts and expectations, because (as one principal said) they see this as a potential "*deal-breaker*" for some candidates. The changes that schools made to the hiring process after gaining Innovation status tended to be focused on selecting teachers who were a good fit for the school, both philosophically (in that they believed in the school's approach and vision) and academically.

Some Innovation schools were still struggling with components around hiring. At one school, attempts to let the district assist them in filling vacancies around support personnel led to long vacancies in these positions, and staff members who were not a good fit for the school. Another school had a respondent who noted that the district had not always been cooperative with the school's attempts to hire "*off-schedule*", and felt that the district wanted Innovation schools to postpone hiring until the district had taken yearly actions (such as closing schools and reducing teacher workforces), with the apparent intention being that these teachers could then have the possibility of being hired at the Innovation

school. In this case the school went ahead and engaged in early hiring, but the teacher was frustrated that there had been a battle with the district on the issue.

Although most respondents were very positive about the changes that had been made around hiring, the revised hiring processes used by Innovation schools were not entirely without concern. At one school the teachers expressed frustration with how the principal had handled hiring of some teachers, forcing them to go through an intensive hiring process even though the teachers were well known to the school's staff.

Interestingly, some of the major hiring issues which emerged at the Innovation schools had to do with the principal role. There are three schools which have experienced principal changes since they gained Innovation status. At two schools, respondents discussed the processes which had occurred in their search for a new principal. At one school the staff selected a new principal candidate after a wide search, believing that through their Innovation status they had autonomy to choose their principal. However, the district did not agree with the school's chosen candidate. Because the school and district were unable to come to any agreement, the school requested the appointment of an interim principal for a year. This situation resulted in concern and uncertainties among staff, and among other Innovation school staff who expressed confusion over the district's role in principal selection. Another school referenced this incident when they discussed their own search for a new principal, noting that they had been told to give the district several choices of candidates, even though the school was very clear on which candidate they wanted. These issues raise questions about what autonomies the Innovation schools have in their choice and hiring of a new principal, and the role that the district plays.

## **Direct placements**

The issue of direct placements struck a chord with principals and teachers alike. The major concerns raised around direct placements were: whether teachers placed in the school were aligned with the culture, philosophy, and vision of the school, and whether these teachers met the schools' expectations around rigorous instruction. Three principals said that in the past they felt that direct placement teachers had negatively impacted the culture of their schools, because these teachers were not necessarily aligned with the school's philosophy and vision.

*"We found that every year, we were getting direct placements, and they were just wreaking havoc in our practices because we really value consistency at [our school] and building relationships and we weren't getting those kind of people." (Principal)*

*"...everyone should mention [direct placement] because no one wants it. I mean it doesn't necessarily mean that the teacher's a bad person, but the philosophies may not jive...It is destructive, very destructive." (Principal)*

The overall sentiment among principals was that the school should have the autonomy to decide who is on the teaching staff. Principals valued autonomy in hiring because they felt it enabled them to hire people who were philosophically aligned with their school vision, and to pick the employees they felt

were best qualified. Principals believed that direct placement impeded their ability to do this, and were very pleased that Innovation status allowed them to not participate in direct placement.

Some respondents saw direct placements as destructive to the school community, and felt that it did not serve the best interests of the students. Two teachers discussed the idea that students could not afford a 'bad' teacher, so schools were obligated to make sure that their staff members were of the highest quality possible. Two teachers directly referenced the concept of DPS "rolling lemons" as a way of expressing their dislike of direct placements, and concerns about the quality of teachers who were placed in schools through this process. The general consensus was that schools did not want to accept direct placements because they wanted to have control over the choice of staff that came to their school.

*"And we found that because of the nature of this teaching environment and its difficulty level, we saw a lot of turnover that way. So it was best for us to hire the teachers that we thought were best to be in the classrooms here. And that's something that we got from [Innovation]." (Teacher)*

## Dismissal

Though principals sometimes alluded to the fact that with power over hiring came discretion over dismissal, their discussions of workforce management focused much more on the process of hiring and opting out of direct placements. However, the issue of dismissal appeared to be a much more salient issue for parents, three of whom mentioned that they liked the school's ability to let a teacher go who was not a good fit.

## One-year contracts

One major change at many of the Innovation schools is that teachers who are new to the school may be given one year contracts, as opposed to being covered by the DCTA contract. This was mentioned by a variety of respondents (n=6) across four schools, and the general consensus was that this change was positive. Two parents in particular were happy that if a teacher was not a good fit at the school, the school did not have to keep them. As they described it,

*"...just knowing that if there's a new teacher that would come to the school that there would be a dating period before we'd be married to any one teacher." (Parent)*

*"I think that gives some kind of a measure of comfort when you have someone new coming into the building. That is a good thing to feel that you're not going to be stuck with a teacher that is a square peg, round hole at the school." (Parent)*

Both a parent and a teacher noted that they felt the one year contracts increased teacher accountability,

*"I think it raised the bar for the teachers, it raised them for themselves, "I'm going to be accountable." (Parent)*

*“I feel you ought to do your job and do your job well and if you don’t, you shouldn’t be allowed a job.” (Teacher)*

The sentiment among most respondents who mentioned the one year contracts was that teachers who were performing well would be retained at the school.

Interestingly, one teacher and one principal brought up some questions about how one year contracts may affect teacher rights. Both raised the question of what checks and balances exist around dismissal in an Innovation school. The teacher expressed concern about whether teachers who are on one year contracts will feel comfortable speaking up or dissenting with the administration or their colleagues, since they may be concerned that such behavior would keep them from being rehired. This teacher also brought up the question of what will drive the principal’s choice of who to rehire – teachers who are most effective, or teachers who are less expensive? One principal also raised a question about the principal’s position being imbued with so much power over hiring and dismissal. The principal noted that although principals try to remain unbiased, emotions or certain circumstances can sometimes color their decisions about staff. She suggested that there should be appropriate checks and balances in place to help ensure that staffing decisions at the school are fair.

## **Staff turnover**

**Teacher.** At two schools respondents mentioned that staff who did not want to be at an Innovation school left when the school gained that status. At three schools teachers reported high teacher turnover, and felt it was a problem; at two of these schools the teachers suggested that the turnover was related to teachers not feeling challenged or needing more help, while at the third school the turnover appeared to be related to issues in the teachers’ personal lives. At another school, a teacher talked about the challenge that schools face when they fill positions with novice teachers; because these individual may decide not to stay in the profession long term, they contributed to turnover at the school. In general, respondents seemed to feel that high teacher turnover was problematic.<sup>10</sup> At one school, the parent and principal noted that the school’s low teacher turnover was something they considered to be a positive, with the parent saying that it was important for *“maintaining a climate and culture for having all the teachers on the same page”*.

**Principal.** One issue that came up a number of times was that of principal turnover. Three of the Innovation schools have lost their principals since they gained Innovation status. Concerns about principal turnover were somewhat varied among the six respondents who mentioned this issue. One parent noted that during the process of applying for Innovation the Board of Education panel raised concerns about what would happen if the principal left; this parent pointed out that her school’s principal had a very strong following among parents and teachers, and she felt that Innovation was very strongly connected to the principal’s presence. The parent said that if the principal left,

*“I don’t know how that Innovation status would work or if we would even want someone else to sort of have that power because it does take it away from the central district. It’s*

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<sup>10</sup> An analyses of actual teacher mobility is presented in the section entitled “Teacher mobility” on page 23.

*great because we trust and generally agree with what [the principal is] doing. But what happens if someone comes in there where we don't agree with what they're doing?"*

This theme was echoed by a parent at another Innovation school which had changed principals. The parent noted that during the change of principal there were concerns from teachers and parents which were not addressed, and felt that the change was a “*major setback*” to what they were doing through Innovation. She noted that there seemed to be some disconnect between staff and the new principal, and that the atmosphere at the school was “*stressed*”.

### **Attractive to certain types of teachers**

There were two parents and a principal who made comments suggesting that Innovation schools are more attractive to certain types of teachers. There were also two teachers at different schools who said that they were attracted to their current schools because of what the school was doing. In both cases this had to do with the school doing something that was ‘outside of the box’ but which was aligned with the teacher’s philosophy or area of interest.

### **Union**

The Union itself was not a major topic that came up during interviews. The few respondents who mentioned the Union directly (4 respondents across 4 schools), generally made comments focused on their frustrations about components of the contract which they felt impeded schools’ abilities to structure their school in the way they felt was needed. Major union-related topics included direct placements, and restrictions on the use of teacher time (such as length of work day, restrictions on use of planning time, amount of time set aside for PD).

Schools had somewhat different experiences with the duality of union membership and Innovation status. At one school the principal specifically noted that the majority of the teachers were still union members, and that they are given more planning time than required by the Union contract. At another school, the staff reported that they had struggled to communicate with the Union when they were planning for the Innovation application; the principal also noted that with some non-teaching staff they were still trying to communicate the message about what it means to be an Innovation school, saying, “*we’re not about unions and contracts and all of that.*” Interestingly, at two schools the respondents specifically noted that seeking waivers from union contracts was not initially an important reason for seeking Innovation status. There was only one teacher who noted that teachers at her school had been concerned that “*all the union rules for us were thrown out the door, that we didn’t have protection*”. She said that teachers now seemed less concerned.

Although it was only mentioned by one respondent, one teacher made a pointed observation about her perception of what had happened during the school’s application process for Innovation status which is worth considering:

*“We felt that Innovation just meant Innovation in how you teach, the retention piece, philosophies of teaching, limiting classroom sizes. We felt that was innovative. But as we*

*were going through the process, it seemed to be more important to people within the district that innovative meant teacher reform. So that was an interesting learning experience for us as well.”*

## **Ongoing learning - Professional development**

Professional development (PD) occurs, in some form, at every school. Three of the principals interviewed were very positive about their ability to choose the PD that would most benefit their school. One of these principals described this autonomy related to professional development by saying,

*“I don’t have to follow the district’s professional development because it doesn’t fit what we’re doing. And so we do our own thing, and I take the money from that and use it to make sure it fits what we’re doing, what our vision of the school is.”*

Principals at five of the Innovation schools explicitly said that they were the primary decision-makers regarding choice of PD; two principals chose PD based on their own observations and one used data from the LEAP process to inform decisions. At the remaining two schools, facilitators selected PD topics after considering several factors. Teachers and principals at three schools said that teachers themselves had some choice in PD; at some schools teacher input was sought about their PD needs, while other schools offered several strands of PD and teachers had the choice of what to attend. At five of the seven schools, at least one of the teacher interviewees indicated that they did not know, or were not certain, about how professional development choices were made.

## **Teacher Evaluation**

Of the seven Innovation schools where principals were interviewed, two reported creating their own teacher evaluation systems, while the other five schools were using the traditional DPS system. In the two schools with their own evaluation systems, one had created a system very different from that used in DPS, while the other used a modified version of the DPS system. In the future, the former school planned to continue using its unique evaluation system, while the latter school planned to create a new system that incorporated elements of LEAP. The five schools which had been using the traditional DPS system planned to transition to some form of LEAP. Three of these schools did not explicitly say that they would make any adaptations to the LEAP system; two others said that they did plan to make adaptations to LEAP so that it would not be “cumbersome” and to ensure that it was in line with the school’s instructional philosophy.

The majority of Innovation schools chose not to concentrate on modifying their teacher evaluation systems. One principal said that the reason she wanted to use LEAP in her school was that, “*I think the new LEAP tool is exactly what we need...so why try to reinvent the wheel?*” She also went on to stress the importance of choosing which aspects of the school to innovate,

*“I think it’s priorities. I can’t do everything, and I don’t want to be a manager. If I were to do that, I would spend an incredible amount of time working with teachers about this evaluation.”*

Interviews did not reveal any systemic concerns about teacher evaluation in the Innovation schools, though there were two schools in which teachers brought up some concerns about their current evaluation system. One teacher felt that teachers at her school had only received a summative end-of-year evaluation, rather than any on-going evaluation during the year. In another school, a teacher felt that the school's self-developed evaluation criteria were not all closely focused on instructional characteristics of the teacher, and that teachers had not been aware of all the criteria they were going to be judged on ahead of time.

## Profile of the teacher workforce

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In order to better understand the Innovation schools, an analysis was conducted of the teacher and principal workforce at the schools. This analysis should be considered preliminary, as it only includes two years of data from DPS human resources. The available data provided the opportunity to create a snapshot of the workforce in the Innovation schools, and to compare the workforce between the years of 08-09 and 09-10, but additional years of data are necessary to accurately assess any changes in the workforce which may result from Innovation.

For analyses of trends across time, we must take into account the year that the school gained Innovation status (since it is during or after this year that we would expect effects of Innovation to occur). To this end, schools are broken into three groups:

- **Innovation cohort 08-09:** this cohort consists of only one school, Bruce Randolph, which began gained autonomy in this year. That this 'cohort' represents only one school should be kept in mind when reviewing the data.
- **Innovation cohort 09-10:** this cohort consists of three schools, Montclair, Manual, and Cole, which began Innovation status in this year.
- **Innovation cohort 10-11:** this cohort consists of data for three schools, Whittier, Valdez, and MLK. Denver Green also began Innovation status in this year, but because it was a new school HR data was not available at the time of this data request.
- **Comparison:** This group includes 5 schools selected by stratified random sample to represent similar schools to those which have Innovation status.

It is important to note that trend analyses between 08-09 and 09-10 represent different timepoints in the life of the Innovation schools, which need to be considered when interpreting trends across time:

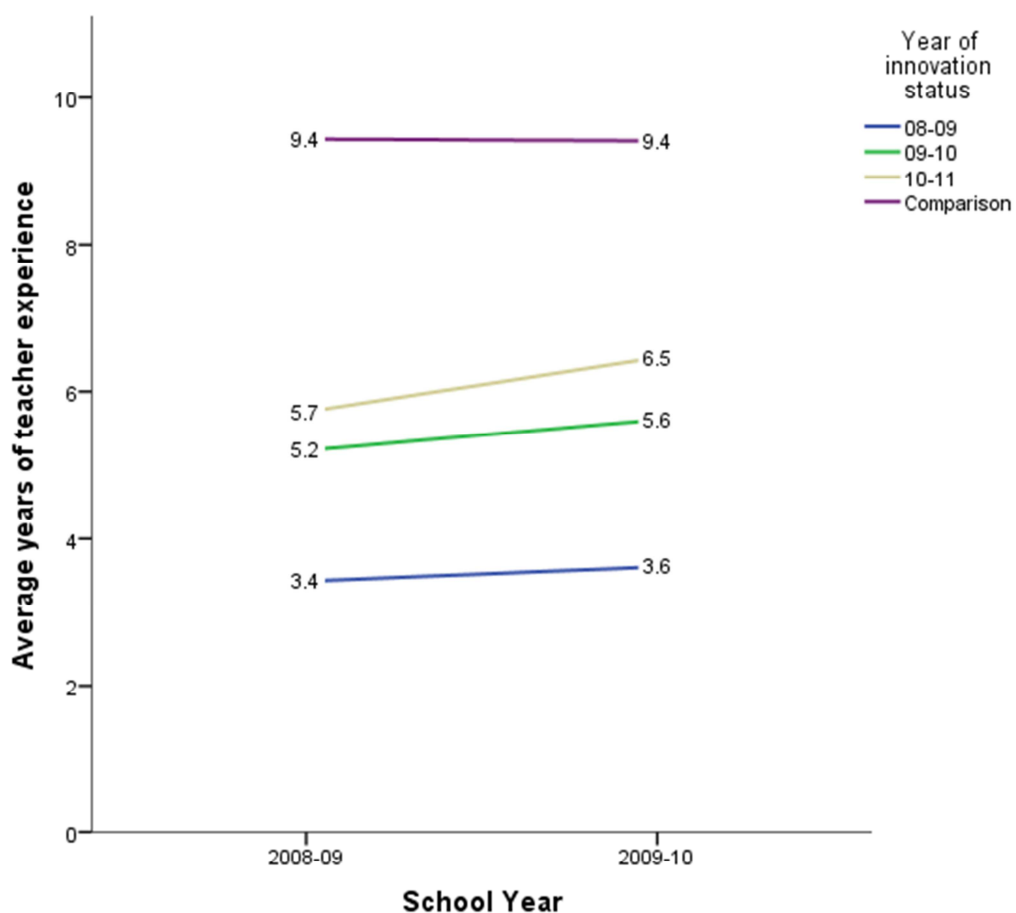
- for the 08-09 Innovation cohort this represents the first year of Innovation status, as well as one year post-Innovation
- for the 09-10 Innovation cohort this represents one pre-Innovation timepoint, and the first year of Innovation status

- for the 10-11 Innovation cohort this represents two pre-Innovation timepoints.

## Teacher experience

Teacher experience was based on DPS files from human resources (based on the DPS variable indicating total teacher experience, including both DPS and elsewhere). In general, teachers in Innovation schools were somewhat less experienced (by about 3 years) than their counterparts in the comparison schools. Teacher experience increased between the two years for all three Innovation cohorts, though it remained constant in the comparison schools.<sup>11</sup> Trends across time are relatively consistent regardless of Innovation cohort, suggesting that at least across these limited timepoints we are not able to identify any patterns in teacher experience that would suggest substantive change due to Innovation status. This information is displayed in Exhibit 3.

Exhibit 3. Average teacher experience<sup>12</sup>



<sup>11</sup> If there was no change of the teachers who were in a school, given that the two timepoints represented in the HR data are one year apart, we would expect to see an increase in teacher experience of approximately one year across the two timepoints included here.

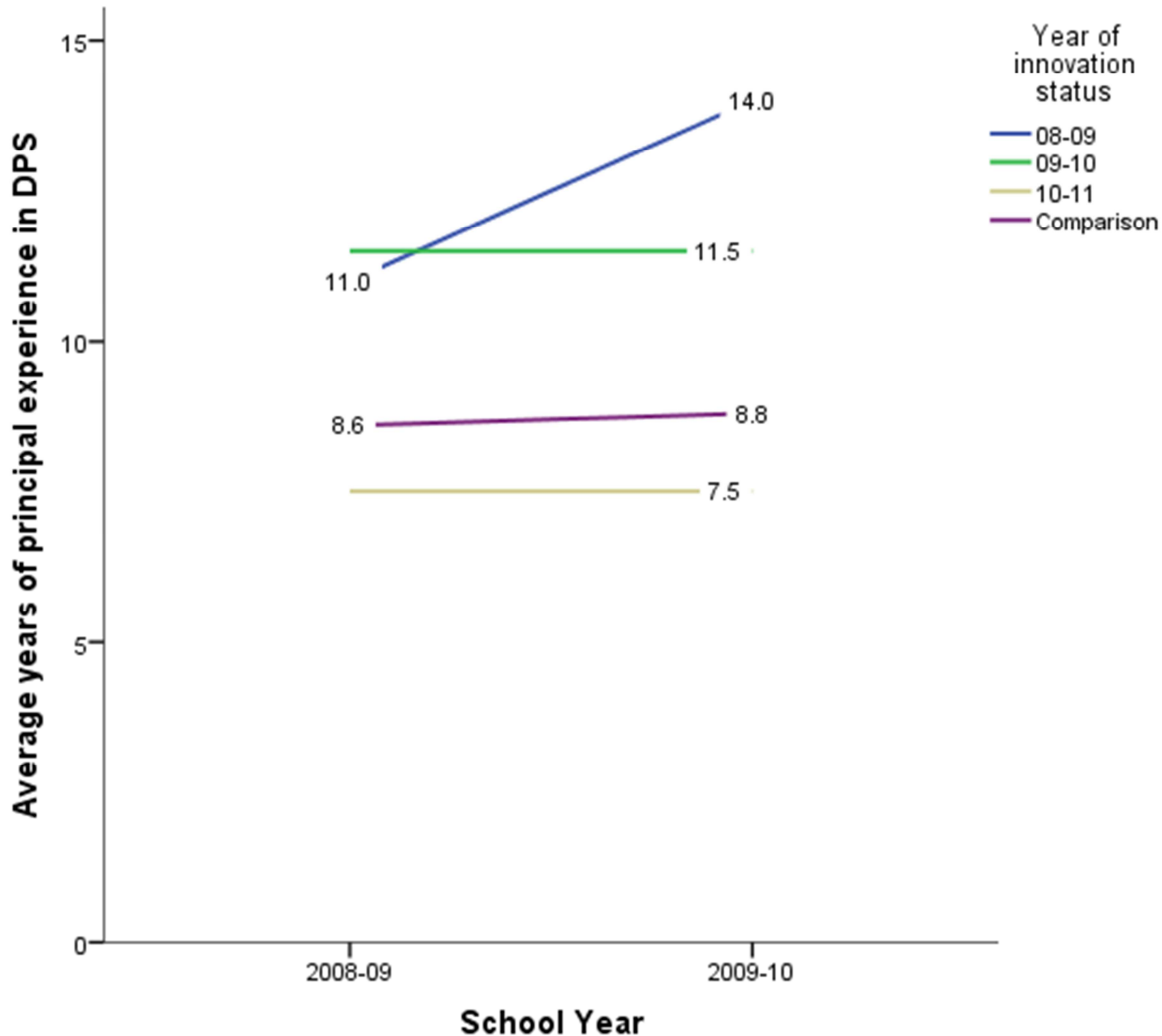
<sup>12</sup> Teacher experience was calculated based on HR files from DPS. The variables used are those which show the experience of teachers in DPS. Total teacher experience was also considered, but the substantive patterns were the same and are not presented here.



## Principal experience

There were fairly substantive differences between the three cohorts in terms of principal experience, as can be seen in Exhibit 4.

Exhibit 4. Principal experience

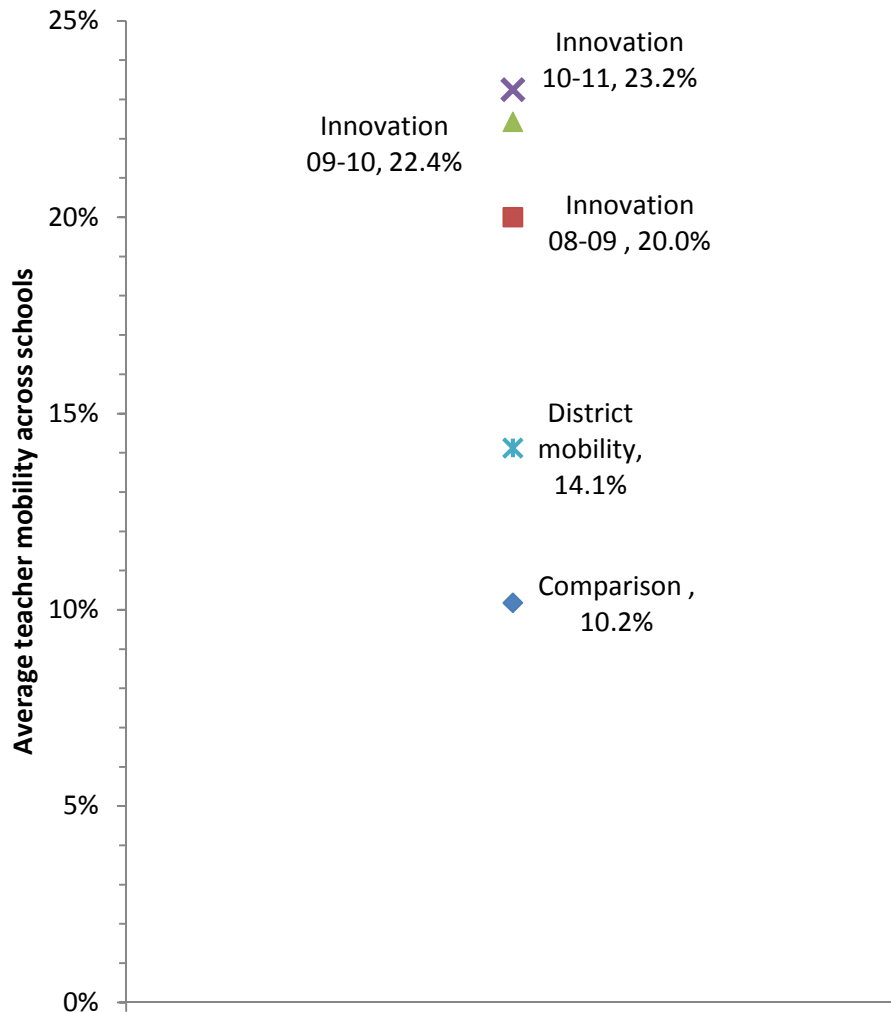


## Teacher mobility

The mobility rates for teachers could only be calculated for a single timepoint – between the years 08-09 and 09-10. Mobility rates were calculated at the level of the school as an unweighted average (rather than the level of the teacher) because this provides a better sense of teacher mobility at the school level. Mobility was defined as the number of teachers in one year who were no longer in the school the next (regardless of the reason they left the school, whether they stayed in DPS, or whether they went to another district). This provides a measure of the overall teacher turnover in a school between two years.

In general, teacher mobility in the Innovation schools was quite high both in an absolute sense and in relation to the comparison schools. All three cohorts of Innovation schools had mobility of over 20%, while the mobility rate in the comparison schools was 10.2%. Without other years of mobility data it is difficult to conclude anything about how this compares to prior trends, but the teacher turnover at these schools is quite substantial, with 1 in 5 teachers not returning the next year. In comparison, it is worth noting that the DPS average mobility rate for this time period was 14.1%.<sup>13</sup>

**Exhibit 5. Average teacher mobility rates between 08-09 and 09-10**



It would be worth conducting additional analyses on teacher mobility in these schools for two major reasons:

- a) Given that this data represents a pre-Innovation timepoint for the Innovation 10-11 cohort, this suggests that mobility at this group of schools may have been relatively high even before they achieved Innovation status. It is possible that Innovation schools in general have experienced

<sup>13</sup> From the CDE website, <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/rv2009StaffDatalinks.htm>

trends of high teacher mobility in the past. Since schools with high levels of teacher mobility may need a different set of supports (e.g., teacher professional development), it would be worth understanding teacher mobility in Innovation schools in the past, and monitoring them into the future.

- b) By adding additional years of data to this analysis we can better understand whether Innovation schools experience any increase or decrease in mobility after Innovation status (e.g., during interviews, a few respondents noted that some teachers chose to leave after Innovation). This would also help to answer questions of whether Innovation schools continue to experience similar levels of teacher mobility as they did prior to Innovation, or whether they are able to decrease this as they move forward.

### **Principal mobility**

There are 3 of 8 Innovation schools (37.5%) which have experienced principal turnover since they received Innovation status. Between the 07-08 and 08-09 school years, DPS experienced a principal turnover rate of 21.3%, and between 08-09 and 09-10 had a principal turnover rate of 15.8%.<sup>14</sup> Given the apparently high turnover rate of principals in the Innovation schools, it would be judicious to monitor this issue closely.

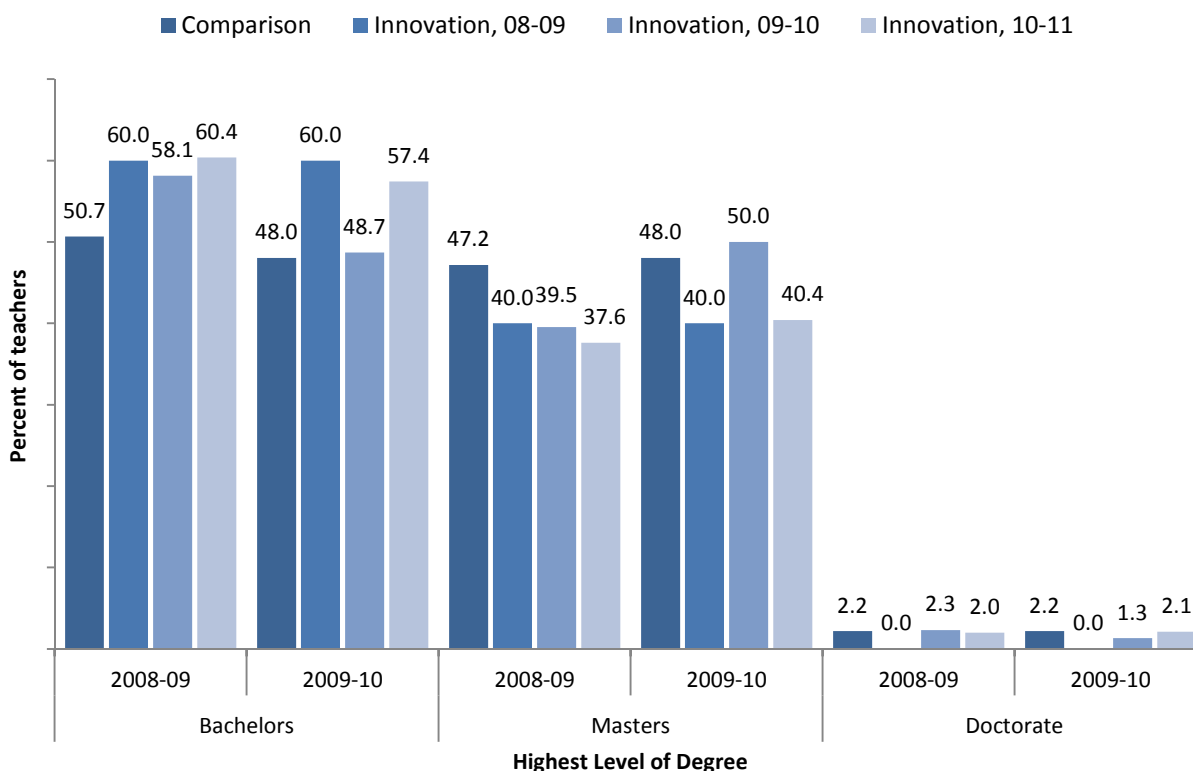
### **Teacher education**

By assessing the highest degrees that teacher have earned, we can examine another aspect of the type of workforce in the Innovation schools. The highest degree was calculated across all teachers in the Innovation schools, by summing the number of unique teachers who had each type of degree; each teacher is counted only once. As can be seen in Exhibit 6, the teachers in Innovation schools tended to have more Bachelor's degrees as their highest degree earned and fewer Master's degrees than their counterparts in the comparison schools in both 08-09 and 09-10.

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<sup>14</sup> From the CDE website, <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/rv2009StaffDatalinks.htm> and <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/rv2008StaffDatalinks.htm>

**Exhibit 6. Teachers’ highest degree earned<sup>15</sup>**



## Workforce overall

Although the amount of data available for this evaluation did not provide a strong basis on which to draw conclusions about the effect that Innovation status has on the teacher workforce, several important findings emerged.

- Innovation schools appeared to experience high rates of teacher mobility, with approximately 1 in 5 teachers not returning in the second year.
- Innovation schools appeared to experience high rates of principal mobility, with three out of eight Innovation schools having changed principals since they gained Innovation status.
- Teachers in the majority of Innovation schools tended to have between 5-7 years of teaching experience, which was approximately 3 years less than teachers in the comparison schools.
- Teacher in Innovation schools were more likely to have a bachelor’s degree as their highest degree than teachers in comparison schools, who were somewhat more likely to hold a master’s as their highest degree.

These findings suggest that Innovation schools may have specific needs around supporting their developing teacher workforce. It would be useful to put this finding into the context of how Innovation

<sup>15</sup> From DPS HR files.

schools compare to all other DPS schools in terms of teacher experience, mobility, and degree attainment, as this which would give a better idea of how ‘typical’ the Innovation schools are in DPS.

## School culture

School culture was assessed both through interviews and through surveys of teachers.<sup>16</sup> These measures tapped into concepts around four major areas: teacher perceptions of the principal, teacher perceptions of their work and colleagues, teacher perceptions of the school, and teacher perceptions of parents and students. For the sake of brevity, the eight scales are collectively referred to as ‘climate’ measures. A brief description of each measure is provided below.

### Exhibit 7. Brief descriptions of climate surveys

Type of Scale	Description
<b>Teacher perceptions of the principal</b>	<p><i>Collegial leadership</i> – extent to which the principal is supportive and egalitarian. Principal makes expectations clear and creates explicit standards of performance.</p> <p><i>Faculty trust in the principal</i> – extent to which teachers feel the principal is acting in the teachers’ best interests, is competent, and can be relied upon.</p>
<b>Teacher perceptions of their work and colleagues</b>	<p><i>Teacher professionalism</i><sup>17</sup> – extent to which teachers describe behavior characterized by commitment to students and engagement in the task of teaching. Respectful and cooperative professional interactions.</p> <p><i>Organizational citizenship</i> – extent to which teachers go “above and beyond” minimum requirements, engaging in the life of the school. Show respect for their organization by volunteering, and coming to school activities on time.</p> <p><i>Faculty trust in colleagues</i> – extent to which teachers believe their colleagues can be relied on, do their jobs well, and look out for one another.</p>

<sup>16</sup> At one Innovation school there is climate survey data, but no interview data, as this school chose not to participate in interviews. Their survey data is included where appropriate.

<sup>17</sup> This title is in no way used in a way meant to convey a judgment of teachers. It is the name of the scale as conceptualized by the authors and therefore is retained here.

Type of Scale	Description
<b>Teacher perceptions of the school</b>	<p><i>Academic press</i> – extent to which the school is driven by a quest for excellence, with rigorous but achievable goals set for students. Students work hard.</p> <p><i>Community engagement</i> – extent to which the school has created a constructive relationship with the community. Degree to which parents and community are engaged in the school.</p>
<b>Teacher perceptions of parents and students</b>	<p><i>Faculty trust in clients</i> – extent to which teachers believe that students and parents can be counted on, and have trusting relationships with the teachers.</p>

## General culture

The information from surveys and interviews was very consistent for most of the Innovation schools. There was only one school which received low ratings on the survey but where the interviews painted a more positive picture; in this case, additional analyses were conducted on the qualitative data in order to better understand the nature of the disconnect.

In order to gain an initial assessment from the climate surveys, a score on each climate measure was calculated for each school by combining across the responses of all teachers at that school. The scores were then transformed into standardized scores (with a mean of 500 and a standard deviation of 100) based on the norms reported in the initial validation study for these scales.<sup>18</sup> This provided comparability across all eight measures, and also created an opportunity to categorize the schools based on how they related to the average from the normed sample. On each measure, schools were divided into three categories; those which fell within 0.5 standard deviations on either side of the mean (M=500) were classified as ‘average’. Those which fell more than 0.5 standard deviations above or below the mean were classified as ‘above average’ or ‘below average’ respectively. This provides a general picture of how schools are performing relative to one another. However, in interpreting these results it is important to keep in mind schools’ average scores on the scales; schools may have a very high mean score on the scale and still be rated as ‘average’ because other schools also have high scores. A designation of ‘average’ does not necessarily imply that the school is not performing very well in that area, but rather denotes that the school is similar to most other schools in that area.

As can be seen below, the mean on each scale is relatively high. There is no school (Innovation or comparison) at which the mean value on a scale is below the midpoint. On average, teachers have relatively positive views of their schools.

<sup>18</sup> Specific scoring information including reverse coding of variables and methods for standardization can be found on the website of the scale authors, for the [trust surveys](#) and for [school climate measures](#).

**Exhibit 8. Climate scale means – across Innovation schools**

Scale Name	Comparison Schools (n=5)				Innovation Schools (n=8)			
	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Academic Press*	3.58	0.26	3.31	3.94	3.79	0.46	3.24	4.35
Collegial Leadership*	3.68	0.42	3.24	4.21	3.91	0.59	3.05	4.7
Community Engagement*	3.38	0.32	2.86	3.74	3.89	0.57	3.11	4.62
Organizational Citizenship Behavior*	3.50	0.12	3.37	3.68	3.63	0.22	3.37	4.02
Teacher Professionalism*	4.03	0.39	3.54	4.43	4.19	0.35	3.74	4.85
Trust in Clients**	3.62	0.37	3.35	4.25	4.01	0.72	3.19	5.38
Trust in Colleagues**	4.43	0.57	3.68	5.03	4.63	0.54	3.75	5.56
Trust in Principal**	4.27	0.74	3.45	5.11	4.5	0.84	3.2	5.49

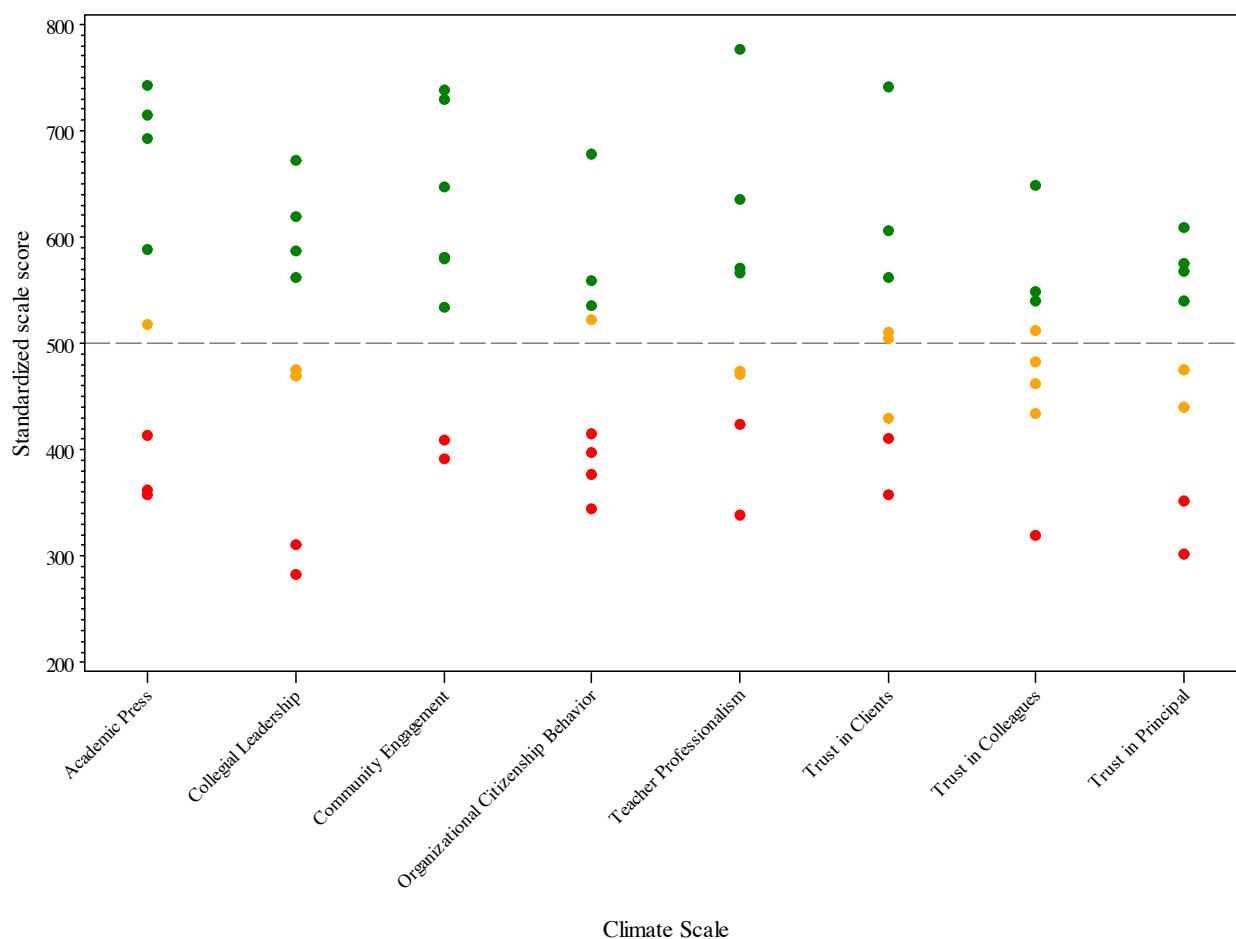
\*5 point scale; never (1), rarely, sometimes, often, very frequently (5).

\*\*6 point scale; strongly disagree (1) to agree (6).

Despite the relatively high mean scores across the scales, considerable variability exists between Innovation schools. By considering the standardized scores we are able to determine the extent to which Innovation schools fall above or below the mean (based on the normative sample). Exhibit 9 below shows standardized scores on each scale for each of the eight Innovation schools. Scores are color coded to indicate whether they are above average (green), average (orange), or below average (red). From this chart we can see that there is a considerable amount of variation between schools, and that schools fall both above and below the mean.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Remember that this is the mean of the normative sample, not the mean for the Innovation schools, so in theory all the schools could fall either above or below the normative mean.

**Exhibit 9. Ratings for Innovation schools across the 8 climate measures**



Note: Each dot represents the score for a school on that particular climate measure.

In order to gain a better understanding of the profile of school climate for a given school, the table below provides the results by school for each of the climate measures (in the interests of confidentiality, school names are not reported). At a glance we can see that schools tend to have ratings which cluster towards one end of the scale (high or low), though there are a number of schools which have more mixed indicators. However, measures which are ‘above average’ are essentially never found with measures which are ‘below average’ (with one exception which can be seen below), suggesting that the climate at a school tends to lean either more negative or more positive, rather than having very disparate ratings of separate indicators.



**Exhibit 10. School profiles on climate measures**

	Academic Press	Collegial Leadership	Community Engagement	Organizational Citizenship Behavior	Teacher Professionalism	Trust in Clients	Trust in Colleagues	Trust in Principal
School A	Above Average	Above Average	Above Average	Above Average	Above Average	Above Average	Above Average	Above Average
School B	Above Average	Above Average	Above Average	Average	Above Average	Above Average	Average	Average
School C	Above Average	Above Average	Above Average	Average	Above Average	Above Average	Average	Above Average
School D	Above Average	Above Average	Above Average	Above Average	Above Average	Average	Average	Above Average
School E	Below Average	Average	Above Average	Below Average	Below Average	Average	Below Average	Average
School F	Average	Average	Average	Below Average	Average	Below Average	Average	Below Average
School G	Below Average	Below Average	Below Average	Below Average	Average	Below Average	Average	Below Average
School H	Below Average	Below Average	Below Average	Below Average	Below Average	Below Average	Below Average	Below Average

In the table we can see that there are a group of four schools (A, B, C, D) where at least five indicators are ‘above average’, and which score ‘average’ on the remaining indicators. There are two schools (E and F) where at least 6 of the 8 indicators are ‘below average’, and none of the indicators were ‘above average’. By considering these schools which fall at the high and low ends of the scale, we can analyze the qualitative data with an eye to understanding what might explain the differences in culture at these schools. Hopefully this would provide insight into the types of structures and practices which could help a school develop a more positive culture. Exhibit 11 provides a summary of this information.

**Exhibit 11. Comparison of schools scoring at the top and bottom of climate measures**

	Highest scoring schools	Lowest scoring schools
<b>Parent relationships and involvement</b>	Tended to have multiple opportunities and methods for parents to be involved. Some schools had opportunities for parents to interact directly with the principal in a more informal way. Principal was viewed as accessible to parents. Parents were included in some way in the decision-making process. Most of these schools also had parent committees which were trying hard to reach out to their parent constituents, though they	Very different between the two schools. At one school the principal describes parent involvement as “non-existent” though the school has a community outreach person. The new principal at the other school seems to have relatively positive relationships with parents, who are comfortable talking to her; has an active community liaison and encourages volunteering at the school.

	Highest scoring schools	Lowest scoring schools
	sometimes struggled to bring in enough parents as they wanted or certain types of parents (e.g., non-English speaking), and parents did not always feel they received adequate communication.	
<b>Principal leadership</b>	<p>These schools were characterized by principals who teachers described very positively. Teachers felt well supported by the principal. There was a sense that the school knew where it was going, and that everyone was on board and working towards the realization of that vision. Teachers and parents expressed considerable trust in these principals. Principals are often characterized as “strong” motivators, people that the staff and community “follow”.</p>	<p>Very different between schools. At one school, there were considerable issues of trust between the principal and teachers. The principal promoted an open-door policy, but mostly engaged with teachers through accountability and evaluation procedures. At the other school, negative comments were mostly associated with the previous principal. There were concerns that decisions had been made unilaterally, and staff did not always agree with the decisions. Teachers expressed concerns having appropriate ‘checks and balances’ on Innovation principals. Teachers seemed hopeful about the new principal.</p>
<b>Teachers and instruction</b>	<p>Tended to have staff and parents who talked about the great relationships between teachers. Teachers are described as working from the same philosophy and vision, and discuss collaborating regularly and in a positive way. This does not mean everyone is always on the same page; they may disagree on some aspects of what is best for students (e.g., instructional models, minimum standards of learning).</p> <p>These schools are characterized by very clear visions of instruction. Although the programs among schools are vastly different, each of the instructional programs has a very clear underlying philosophy and focus.</p>	<p>Schools were struggling with their vision and/or alignment. Teachers are motivated to help students, but lack structures and vision to help them get there. Alignment activities are occurring, but these have proved to be only moderately successful. There are issues with a lack of expectations about outcomes of alignment activities, or issues of getting bogged down in the details. One school has begun trying to articulate a clearer vision, and put supports in place to improve alignment.</p> <p>Teachers perceive a lack of support structures, or a lack of a supportive professional learning community. One school is getting more positive reviews about the new principal, but previously teachers did not feel supported.</p>

In considering these results, it is important to keep in mind that these schools did not necessarily have negative ratings on the climate scales overall, but that the ratings were lower relative to other Innovation schools. One common characteristic between two of the schools scoring the lowest (and one of the schools with mixed indicators) was that they had relatively recent leadership changes. In two of the schools, the lower ratings on principal leadership were associated with negative interview comments about the principal. In one school this was related to teacher perceptions that the principal did not support the development of teachers, and mainly interacted with teachers around accountability functions such as teacher evaluations. In the other school, there were complaints about staff not being praised, and hearing only the negative. However, at this school the teachers seemed more hopeful about the new principal, who they feel is working to gain faculty trust and is viewed as more caring than the previous administrator. In two schools teachers raised concerns about the principal making unilateral decisions without much input from the staff, which created discontent. One teacher spoke of the way that Innovation creates a space where principals have fewer restrictions on decisions, but noted that the flip side is that this is that there are fewer 'checks and balances'.

Another important thing to note is that simply having structures in place was not sufficient to ensure that they resulted in meaningful or effective uses of time, or that intended improvements occurred. Even schools which had low scores on parental engagement often had parental liaisons, and were able to discuss numerous activities the school engaged in with parents. Similarly, all schools had structures in place to facilitate teacher collaboration, though in some schools teachers talked about how this time was poorly used, and how a lack of expectations resulted in teachers not understanding what they were supposed to accomplish. Although it may seem obvious that having a certain structure may be *necessary* but not *sufficient*, it is easy to overlook quality in favor of simply checking off that a given structure is 'in place' at a school. In order to truly understand what is occurring in schools, it is critical to consider both the existence of the structure as well as how it is (or is not) contributing to positive school change.

### **Teachers perceptions of support**

At five of the schools, teachers reported that they generally felt supported by the principal. At two schools, teachers had more mixed opinions about the support they received. In one school this appeared to be mostly due to concerns around the previous principal, and the teachers felt more supported by the new principal. At the other school, the issue was with the current principal and the lack of structures in place to support teachers professionally; teachers said that they did not receive feedback from the principal except through the teacher evaluation process, and that mentoring structures existed on paper but not in practice. One teacher described the issue in this way,

*"I don't think we have systems in place where it's really structured so that teachers are supporting teachers. It's like if you need help, you go find it, which is helpful. But again I would imagine a successful school or organization is one where structures are built in."  
(Teacher)*

At two schools, teachers mentioned the concept of being supported by the principal in a way that made them feel personally 'cared' about, which they saw as important.

*"I feel really supported by them...I have seen a wide range of leadership, and this is the first administration that I feel like actually cares about me as a person and making sure that I'm taken care of that way as well as a teacher." (Teacher)*

At three schools, teachers mentioned the idea that the staff worked together, and that they supported one another; as one teacher put it, *"it's an amazing network of support again because again there's a shared sense of accountability."* There were also four schools at which teachers said that they felt the school's parent group provided support to the school and/or teachers.

## **Parent/community engagement**

Respondents at six of the seven schools described partnerships with at least one external community group. Schools tended to work with a variety of organizations. Although most partnerships were focused at the level of the student, a few focused on providing resources, support or professional development at the school or teacher level. In many cases, the school leveraged a partnership to obtain additional services for students which they were not otherwise able to provide (e.g., college information, mental health, recreation activities). The partner organizations also differed in their area of focus; some were more related to academics, while others were more related to enrichment, health, etc. Some examples of the type or organizations which Innovation schools partner with are listed below:

- Metro Organization for People
- YMCA
- Goodwill Industries of Denver
- Denver Health
- Young Men of Promise
- Summer Scholars
- Earthforce
- Cloud Institute

Many of the schools also had an active parent or community organization which helped to fundraise for the school, provide volunteer services around individualized instruction, and to provide enrichment opportunities for students (e.g., ice cream social, field trips, outside speakers).

## **Student learning**

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A key concept underpinning the Innovation Schools Act is that the greater flexibility afforded to Innovation schools will allow them to better serve their unique population of students, and that this will ultimately lead to improved student achievement (General Assembly of the State of Colorado, 2008). Of primary interest, therefore, is to understand how the Innovation schools approach instruction, particularly with reference to how this changed after they gained Innovation status. Interestingly, interviews suggested that schools had not necessarily made major shifts in the way that they engaged in instruction. Several areas related to instruction and enrichment are discussed below.

### **Use of DPS curricula**

Almost all of the Innovation schools (six out of seven) are using DPS curricula for their core. Only one school is using curricula that are completely different from DPS. Several schools noted that because of Innovation status they are able to supplement or modify the curricula, and they do not have to follow the district's order or pacing. Teachers and principals were very happy about having the flexibility to make these kinds of modifications, and liked that Innovation status gave them autonomy over exactly what they choose to teach students and in what order. Two schools which currently use DPS curricula said that in the near future they plan on reviewing the curricula to determine if they want to continue using it.

### **Focus on supports around basic skills**

Schools used a combination of strategies to address underperforming students. Two schools used a double-period block of English and math for lower achieving students. One of these schools also implemented a 30 minute skills class, while at another the principal taught an additional literacy class every day. There were two schools where respondents talked about the role of parent and community volunteers in working with students, such as tutoring students (e.g., practicing vocabulary with them outside of class, or working in class to provide individualized attention), or providing lessons in a particular content area. Schools used various strategies (e.g., double-block periods, additional skills classes) to add additional time in their day for core subjects such as math and literacy.

### **Common Expectations for Students - Alignment**

When respondents were asked about the extent to which the school had common expectations for students, a central concept which emerged at six schools was the idea of alignment. These schools were engaged in processes of clarifying the content and skills which students were expected to know at each grade level, and teachers were engaged in developing common understandings of what student work looked like when it met the standard and/or was on grade level. To varying degrees, the schools tended to be involved in alignment work both horizontally (within grade levels) and vertically (across grade levels). This work generally took place during structured planning/collaboration times between teachers.

Some comments from respondents highlight why the issue of alignment was seen as important to these schools, and why some schools were dedicating considerable amounts of time and energy to the endeavor. At one school the principal noted that she had initially presumed that alignment was something teachers would already have worked out, but discovered that this was not the case. A common theme at several other schools was the idea that although most teachers were going in the same general direction, questions remained about what ‘success’ looked like at each grade level, which led teachers to work on understanding what a given standard looks like in practice. One teacher pointed out that *“standards-based is a catch all phrase”* and that everyone operates under their own understandings of what it means, which can lead to problems. At several schools, teachers talked about there being a lack of understanding about what other teachers in the school were doing, and felt that it would be helpful to know what strategies their colleagues were employing. In a related comment, one principal raised what she saw as a *“disconnect”* between the fact that students were meeting the standards of work set by the school, but that they were not doing well on standardized tests. This could suggest a difference between how teachers at the school conceptualize the standards their students have to meet, and the standards which are reflected on the standardized tests.

An equally important theme was that although almost every school was engaging in vertical and horizontal collaboration and alignment activities, the existence of the structures alone was not enough to ensure that this collaboration or alignment was necessarily viewed as effective. At three schools the teachers noted that they felt the collaboration time was poorly used, there were not clearly articulated goals or expectations, or that the administration did not provide clear expectations or structures to ensure that the work got done (leaving the onus on the teachers to try and make things happen). At another school the teachers said that they had begun collaborating around alignment, but that the focus had been lost with a recent leadership change.

Although each school is unique and will necessitate some degree of work around horizontal and vertical alignment depending on their curricula and focus, the major focus on this at the majority of Innovation schools was somewhat troubling. Of particular concern was the implication that most schools were fairly early in the process of creating this alignment, and one school said that they had not yet tackled vertical articulation. The prevalence of this theme raises the critical question of how DPS supports all schools around operationalizing the standards and helping teachers understand what on-standard and on-grade work looks like in each subject. Though it is to be expected that teachers at every school will discuss articulation and develop expectations for their students, there seems to be a high potential for duplication of effort between schools as every school creates its own conceptualization of the standards. It also seems problematic that different schools may come to substantively different conclusions about what on-grade level work looks like. This may be particularly challenging if expectations end up being set lower for some populations of students; as a teacher in one school pointed out, teachers of high achieving students in her school tended to have somewhat different ideas about what constituted basic work compared to other teachers whose classes were comprised of lower achieving students. A final consideration is that in some schools, teachers are using a considerable amount of their structured collaboration time for this work, and there is a question of whether this time could be more usefully dedicated to discussions of their students’ work, sharing of instructional strategies, etc. An important conversation should be had around the role of districts and schools in

developing articulation across and between grade levels, and what tools already exist which teachers can capitalize on.<sup>20</sup>

## Extent to which students are challenged

There was a somewhat diverse set of views from respondents about the level of challenge that Innovation schools provide their students. In general, respondents tended to say that their school was providing students with adequate academic challenge. There was one school where the parent was very explicit that her children were challenged in all classes, not just those focusing on academic subjects. In another school, a teacher lauded the school's implementation of AP classes, noting that this proved that students at that school could both take and pass these rigorous classes. This general sense that the Innovation schools provide adequate challenge to their students was supported by the rating on the Academic Press climate measure, where all Innovation schools scored above the midpoint of the scale (see Exhibit 8 on page 29). However, there was also considerable variation on the survey with regards to the level of academic press reported by teachers, with a full standard deviation difference between the scores of the highest and lowest rated schools. This suggests that teachers in some Innovation schools do not perceive as strong an academic press as teachers in other Innovation schools.

Interview responses highlighted some areas where respondents felt schools could do a better job of challenging students. Generally, comments about challenging students focused on schools offering students opportunities for differentiated work; if students were excelling then they were pushed forward and challenged, and if they were struggling they were given support and intervention. However, even at a school where both the teachers and the parent said they felt the school offered students adequate challenge, two respondents also admitted that the school promoted a culture of 'coddling' students with opportunities for success by giving them essentially endless opportunities to make a passing grade (such as turning in homework late, etc). Both respondents said that students needed to be given less hand-holding and face more consequences when they did not live up to expectations, since this was what would be expected of them in the real world. A teacher at this school said that she felt significant pressure from administrators to ensure that students passed.

A parent at one school questioned that she never saw her student with homework, though she was unsure of whether this was simply because her student finished it all during the day or whether the teachers were not assigning it. At another school a parent said that there were some issues around teachers not knowing their students' prior knowledge in the early grades, with the result that the teacher spent a lot of time on basic skills that students already knew. Respondents at another school said they were struggling with how to push all their students forward so that they could ultimately do away with tiered class structures (i.e., students placed into classes based on their achievement level).

Overall, it is probably a positive thing that even at schools which are showing growth, respondents are asking the question of how they can do better, and where they can continue to best challenge and serve

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<sup>20</sup> For example, as part of the new Colorado State Standards the Colorado Department of Education has produced a number of tools to assist schools in articulation activities both within and across grade levels, as well as subjects. These can be found at: <http://www.cde.state.co.us/sitoolkit/>.

their students. However, at some schools the concerns raised in interviews offer a glimpse into school cultures or structures which may be less beneficial to students.

## **Enrichment opportunities**

A number of different enrichment opportunities (both academic and extracurricular) were available to students at Innovation schools. Many of these were opportunities which had already existed prior to Innovation status, but some schools had capitalized on their Innovation status in order to offer their students opportunities which they had not been able to integrate prior to Innovation. For example, one high school had used Innovation status to change their schedule to integrate a college readiness seminar into the school day. In previous years an external agency had come in to do a one-class long seminar on college-going, and the school felt it was critical to make this a regular part of instruction to help promote a college-going culture.

In terms of academic enrichment, there were two schools which decreased offerings around electives after they gained Innovation status. One school cut all traditional electives such as music and drama in order to create additional time for core instruction, while at the other school the principal characterized their elective offerings as “*shallow*”. Three other schools used tutoring programs to extend the academic day by providing students with assistance around skills and homework. One school offered an additional elective program after school for which students could earn credit for participating in various subjects such as art or dance. A parent also noted that at her school they had shallow offerings around athletics, because the school chose to focus their resources on academics.

Most of the Innovation schools engage in enrichment through activities such as the celebration of cultural events, and by having students participate in activities such as rafting, skiing, yoga, travel clubs, etc. At two schools the respondents talked about how these types of enrichment activities were built into the students’ daily schedule in a purposeful way. At one of these schools enrichment was meshed with academics, where students were able to select a topic they were interested in and engage with it in various ways (e.g., lectures, research, projects) during regularly scheduled times.

Many of the Innovation schools have some sort of community involvement which helps provide additional academic and extracurricular enrichment. At one school the students are involved in community organizing activities, and the school even provides an internship coordinator to find students appropriate placements in the community. At another school the students were given opportunities to go to the capitol to discuss a legislative bill, and engage in service learning. Two schools have community-based projects related to growing and using food. There were four Innovation schools where respondents specifically mentioned some type of enrichment activity that was related to their community.

## **Assessment**

All the Innovation schools had what appeared to be relatively comprehensive systems of assessment; these included both formative and summative assessments, and formal and informal methods of measuring student learning.



### ***Changes to the assessment system after Innovation***

Innovation status potentially provides schools with some autonomy around their assessment system, since they do not necessarily have to use the district-provided assessments.<sup>21</sup> Three schools described having engaged in a dialogue about whether they wanted to change the assessments they used. After some consideration, one school decided that they were satisfied with the district-provided assessments and therefore did not want to engage in an “*arbitrary expenditure*” to buy a different assessment system. This school noted that they intended to create some of their own assessments in the summer of 2011 that will be aligned to grade level. Another school considered making their own interim assessments, but the principal said the teachers expressed concern that they would not cover everything students were supposed to learn, and so opted not to. A third school noted that they had engaged in a school-wide conversation about their assessment system, asking a number of questions such as,

*“What do we really want our kids to know? And what’s an assessment system? What are some tools that are going to do that for us?”*

After having that dialogue, the school determined that they were impressed with the district’s new assessment system, though the principal noted they may tweak it to meet their needs if necessary. For the future, this school is considering developing their own assessments that match their program more closely. One school did adopt (in addition to their other assessments) a computer-based formative assessment tool to help provide them with real-time data on student skills.

Overall, none of the Innovation schools engaged in a wholesale overhaul of their assessment system. Most schools were generally happy with the assessments provided by the district. Schools’ greatest concerns seemed to revolve around the extent to which the assessments tapped into what they wanted their students to know; this was a particularly salient issue at schools which had incorporated additional standards or programs of instruction.

### ***Formative assessments***

Respondents at all schools described numerous formative assessments that they used with students. These assessments included more formalized components such as tests and quizzes (both teacher made and from the curriculum), as well as less formal methods such as questioning students, reviewing student work samples, and exit slips. Teachers described regularly using formative data to determine student groupings, to assess what they needed to reteach, and to monitor student learning.

### ***Standardized assessments***

Respondents at all schools described numerous standardized assessments<sup>22</sup> that they used with students. Examples of the assessments mentioned included: CSAP, SRI, MAZE, ACUITY, DRA, AIMSWeb,

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<sup>21</sup> Innovation schools are still required to use assessments such as CSAP which are related to school and district accountability.

<sup>22</sup> The term “standardized” is used here to include those assessments which may be formative or benchmarks (as opposed to summative), but which are not directly tied to curricula and which have external norms.

ACT, AccuPlacer, STAR, DIBELS, EDL. Several respondents mentioned that standardized tests were often more useful for rating the school, or at the beginning of the year for grouping students, than they were for informing instruction during the course of the year. Teachers tended to use benchmark, interim, or teacher-created tests for informing them about student learning during the course of the school year.

### **Views on assessment**

A few respondents noted that they felt that students were tested too much, or that there was too much of a focus on high stakes tests. As one teacher explained,

*"We have had some small discussions that our kids are over-tested, that we should throw something out, benchmarks or something. But there's too much. And our kids are DRA'd and they're CSAP'd and benchmarked and STAR tested...."*

Although most principals and teachers agreed that formative data was useful and important, some also pointed out that there were issues in schools around teachers understanding how to interpret the data, and in knowing how to use data to inform their instruction. At one school the principal said they had made a point of choosing assessment as their major PD focus for the next school year because the leadership saw a need for teachers to understand it better. At another school, a teacher said that although tracking student learning against standards made sense in principle, she felt that the teachers lacked an understanding of what exactly they were trying to track and how to do that.

*"I felt like it was good in theory. Again I felt like we sped up the important part. So we said, "We should be tracking standards and using standards tracker." And everyone said, "Yes, yes, yes." But then we didn't slow down to talk about what are the standards? What does it mean to track them? Are we using good assessments to track them? Like the real nuts and bolts – it's like we jumped past that to 'the world is cut and dry and quantitative and this is what it means and everyone should have it look like this'. I think especially with English, social sciences and there's a lot of confusion. What does it really mean to track a kid's mastery of writing a thesis statement? And how do you level that? It's not as cut and dry as the kid knows the quadratic formula. So I think we're going there, but we weren't slowing down to talk about how you really would assess... [each of] the benchmarks from the standard."*

### **Use of data**

There was only one school at which the principal characterized the school as still *"building out the system"* around using data. Respondents at six schools talked about various ways they utilized data. At four of the schools, data was used for grouping or re-grouping students during the year, either within classes, or for determining their placement into skills or double-dose classes. At two schools respondents mentioned that data was used as part of discussions by 'data teams', as the basis of discussions between teachers, or with coaches/facilitators. Teachers were most likely to talk about two major uses of data: assessing what students had learned so that they could see what needed to be retaught, or using assessment results to group or tier students for instruction.

Two schools raised issues about the district's role in assessment at Innovation schools. In one school, a respondent complained that the staff thought they would have flexibility around opting out of district assessments, but that the district had told them they had to use the assessments. At another school the principal felt it would be more useful for the district to take the approach of saying that if the school wanted the assessments then they could purchase them, rather than the default expectation being that schools would use the assessments unless they explained to the central office why they did not want to.

## School achievement results

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Given how short a time the schools in this study have had Innovation status, it is too early to determine the effect that Innovation is having on student achievement. However, in the interests of beginning to explore general performance trends in the Innovation schools, results are presented here for school performance on the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP). *It would be premature to draw judgments about the success of the Innovation schools based upon this information.*

The two questions we seek to address through these analyses are:

- What is the trajectory of CSAP scores in the Innovation schools?
- How does performance look like in Innovation schools, and how does this compare to other schools?

We begin with a descriptive analysis of CSAP trends in math, reading, and writing from 03-04 to 10-11. Not all schools have data for all years; schools in the Innovation 09-10 cohort all have data back to 2009, Manual has data back to 2008, and Montclair has data since 2004. In other cohorts, all schools have data for all years back to 2004 except for Denver Green, which was a new school in 10-11. By using as many years of data as possible we are able to establish trends in achievement, allowing us to draw better conclusions about changes in the Innovation schools. The three graphs below show the percent of students scoring proficient/advanced in math, reading, and writing. Trends were examined at two levels. First, schools were divided into cohorts based on when they gained Innovation status, and trends were examined at the level of individual schools to determine whether there appeared to be any improvements in outcomes following Innovation status. Second, the average outcomes for each cohort of Innovation schools were assessed by creating an unweighted average across schools to determine the average percent of students who were proficient/advanced at Innovation schools.<sup>23</sup> These trends were examined to determine whether, as a group, Innovation schools were seeing improvements in student outcomes. The main groups which are examined in this analysis are:

**Innovation 08-09:** Bruce Randolph began autonomous status in 08-09, and since it was the only school beginning Innovation in this year, it represents a cohort of one.

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<sup>23</sup> Averaging across schools rather than students provides a representation of how schools are performing, but because it is unweighted this is not the same as the total percentage of proficient/advanced students in these schools.

**Innovation 09-10:** Three schools began Innovation status in 09-10, Manual, Cole, and Montclair.

**Innovation 10-11:** Four schools began Innovation status in 10-11, Valdez, Whittier, Denver Green,<sup>24</sup> and Martin Luther King Early College. Analyses which include trends exclude Denver Green, since this school has only one year of data.

**Comparison:** This group includes 5 schools selected by stratified random sample to represent similar schools to those who have Innovation status.

Depending on when they started, Innovation schools have CSAP data for 3, 2, or 1 year post-Innovation status. When assessing CSAP scores, it is also worth considering the implementation data which was discussed extensively in earlier portions of this report. The majority of Innovation schools report having made generally smaller changes at this point in time, which should be kept in mind when developing expectations around changes in CSAP scores.

If Innovation status has a positive effect on CSAP scores then we would expect to see a ‘bump’ or increased rate of improvement after schools gain Innovation status. To bolster the conclusion that this is due to Innovation status and not to other factors, we assess whether several criteria are satisfied: 1) the increase occurs after Innovation status, 2) the slope of the increase is different than that prior to Innovation, and 3) the same increase does not occur in comparison schools (and/or the district at large). Given the gradual implementation of changes in the Innovation schools, it is unclear whether there may be a ‘lag’ effect between the school gaining Innovation status and an improvement in CSAP scores, or what the duration of such an effect might be.

The graphs below show CSAP scores for the three cohorts of Innovation schools. There are three important things to remember in interpreting these analyses:

- Innovation 08-09 cohort only consists of Bruce Randolph
- Denver Green is excluded from trend analyses – because they only have one year of data we cannot construct a trend
- Data is reported only for years where all schools in the cohort have data

## Percent of students scoring proficient/advanced

In 2010-11, across all Innovation schools the unweighted average of students proficient/advanced in math was 34.4%, proficient/advanced in reading was 42.2%, and proficient/advanced in writing was 29.0%. However, there was variability between the Innovation cohorts, as well as substantial variability between schools. Of particular note is that these overall results are somewhat inflated by the inclusion of Denver Green in the 2011 estimates, because this school scored quite high relative to other Innovation schools in all three subject areas.

Visual inspection of the graphs gives a sense of trends across time. The results are broken out by Innovation cohort below, and graphs for the individual schools are presented in Appendix E (note that

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<sup>24</sup> Denver Green is a newly opened school in 10-11, and therefore do not have data for prior years.

Denver Green is excluded from the trends analysis). In general, all cohorts of Innovation schools and the comparison schools tend to be seeing improvements in performance across time, though math tends to have improved more rapidly than writing or reading. However, there is no clear change in scores associated with the year that schools gain Innovation status. For many of the schools who have post-Innovation data, increases after gaining Innovation status appear to be a continuation of a positive trend which existed prior to Innovation. The schools in the Innovation 09-10 cohort tend to have experienced somewhat faster growth than other schools (particularly in writing and math), though examination of the individual school graphs suggests that the steeper growth trend in this cohort tends to be largely driven by improvements at Montclair (though Cole and Manual have also experienced improvement). (See Appendix E for the results broken out by individual schools).

**Exhibit 12. Math CSAP results – percent of students proficient/advanced**

**Percent Proficient/Advanced in Math**

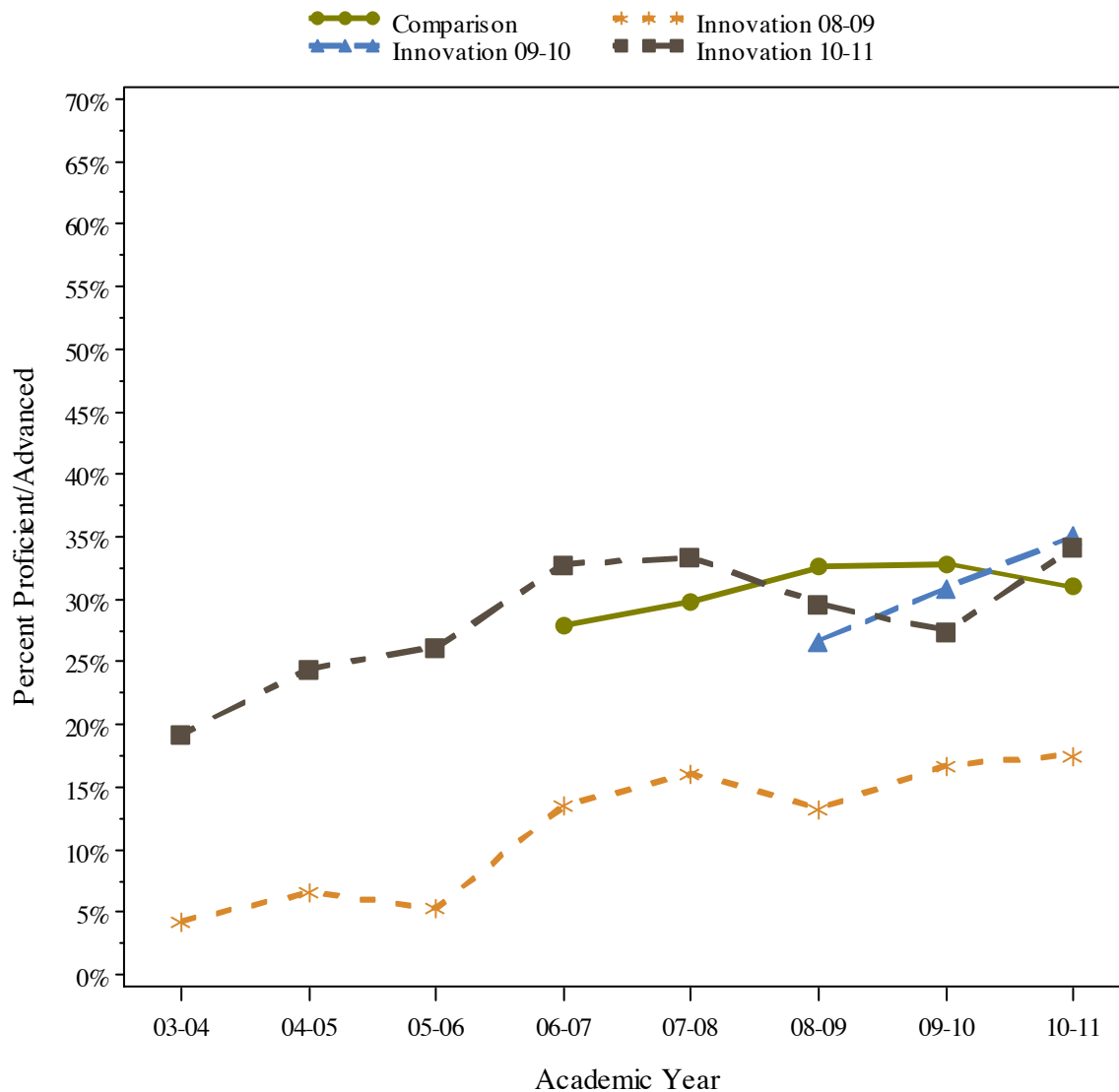
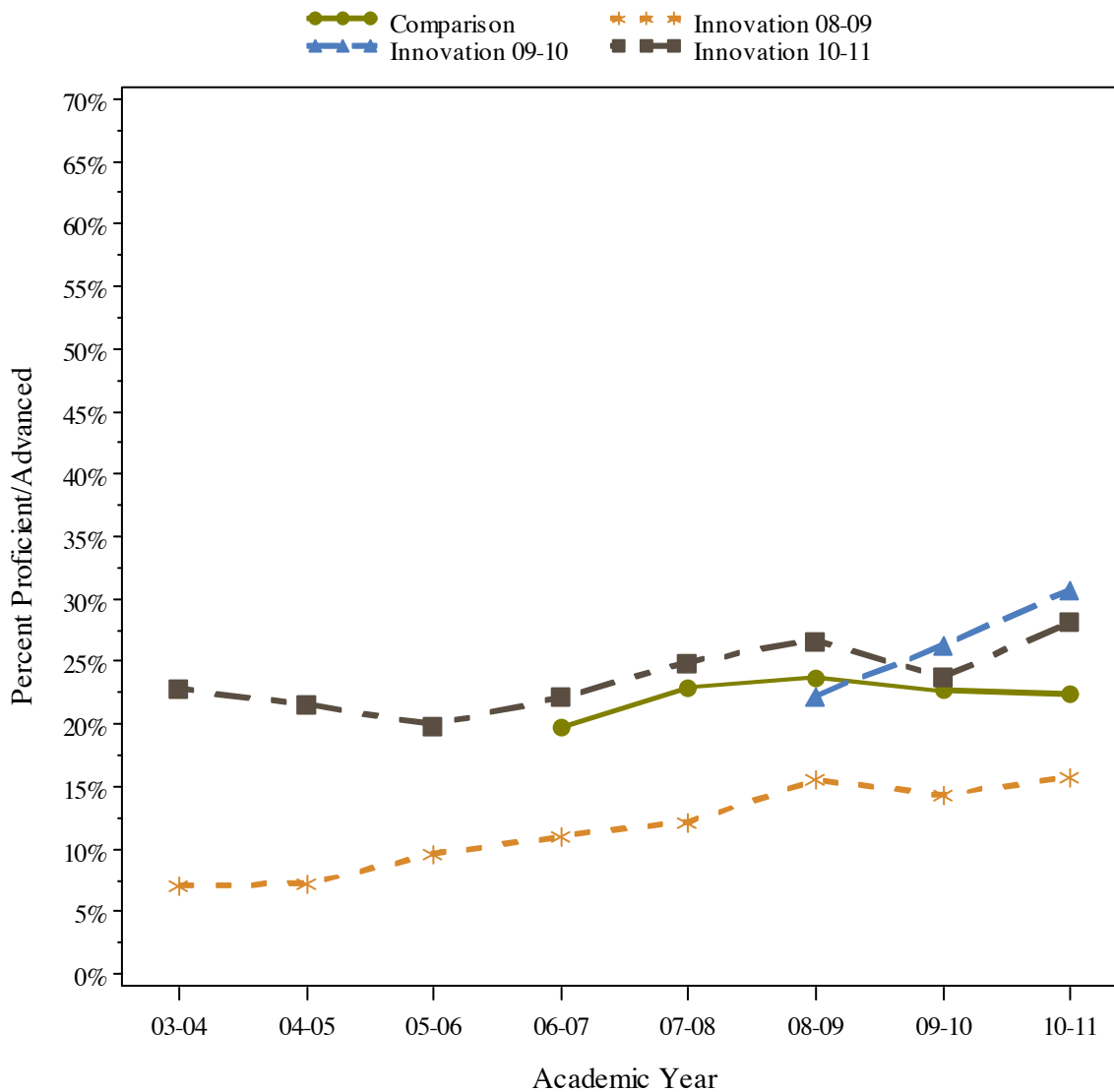
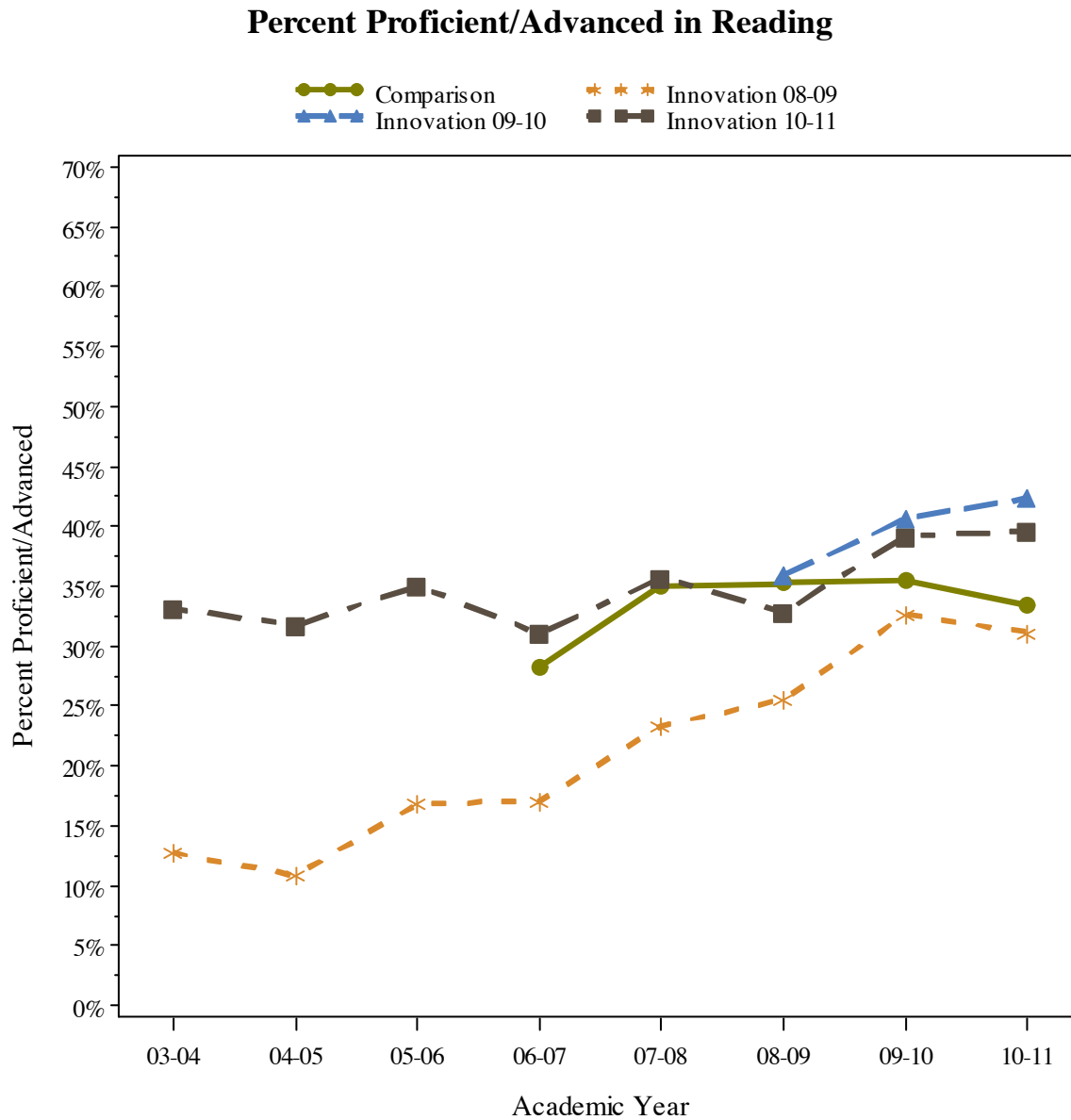


Exhibit 13. Writing CSAP results – percent of students proficient/advanced

### Percent Proficient/Advanced in Writing



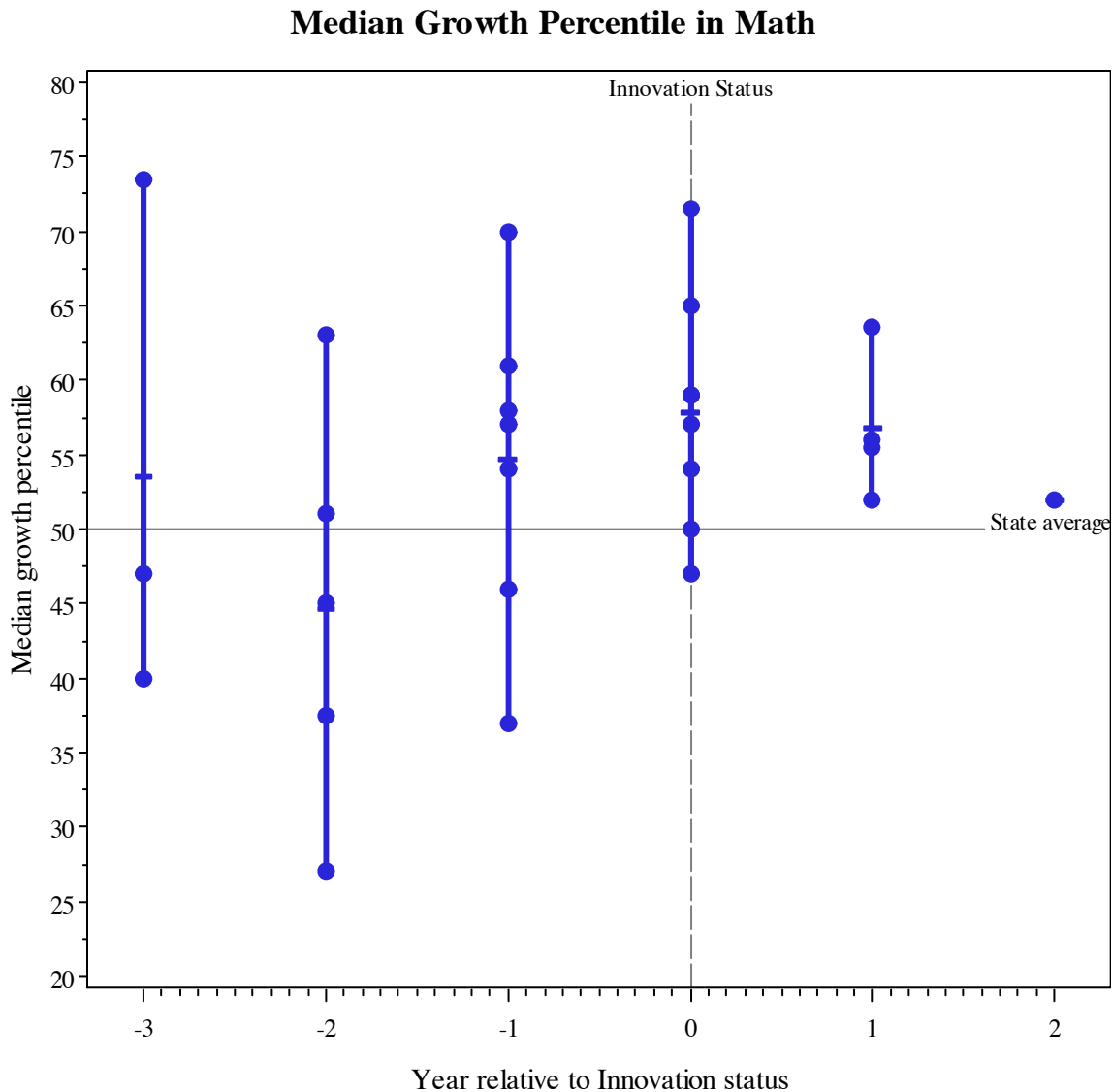
**Exhibit 14. Reading CSAP results – percent of students proficient/advanced**



### Median Growth Percentiles

If we consider Median Growth Percentiles (MGP), Innovation schools tend to be scoring above the state average of 50%. However, additional analyses that take into account Innovation start date indicate that many schools in these cohorts were experiencing growth above 50% MGP prior to beginning of Innovation. As can be seen below in Exhibit 15, Exhibit 16, and Exhibit 17, even prior to gaining Innovation status many of the growth measures fall above the state average in many subjects. The horizontal axis represents the year relative to when the school gained Innovation status (which is represented as year 0), and each dot represents a school’s MGP for that timepoint.

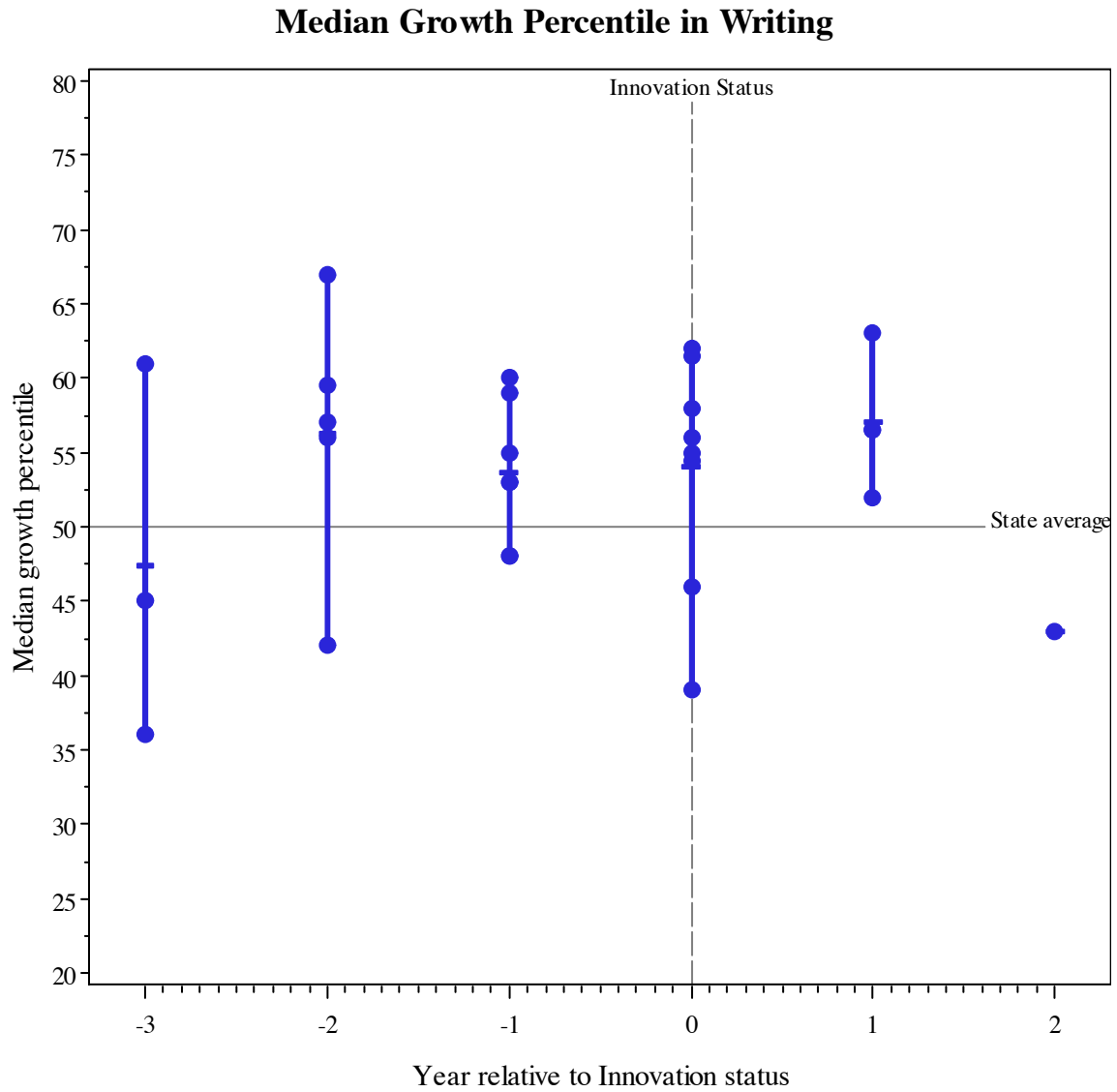
Exhibit 15. Median Growth Percentile in Math



Note: each dot represents one school

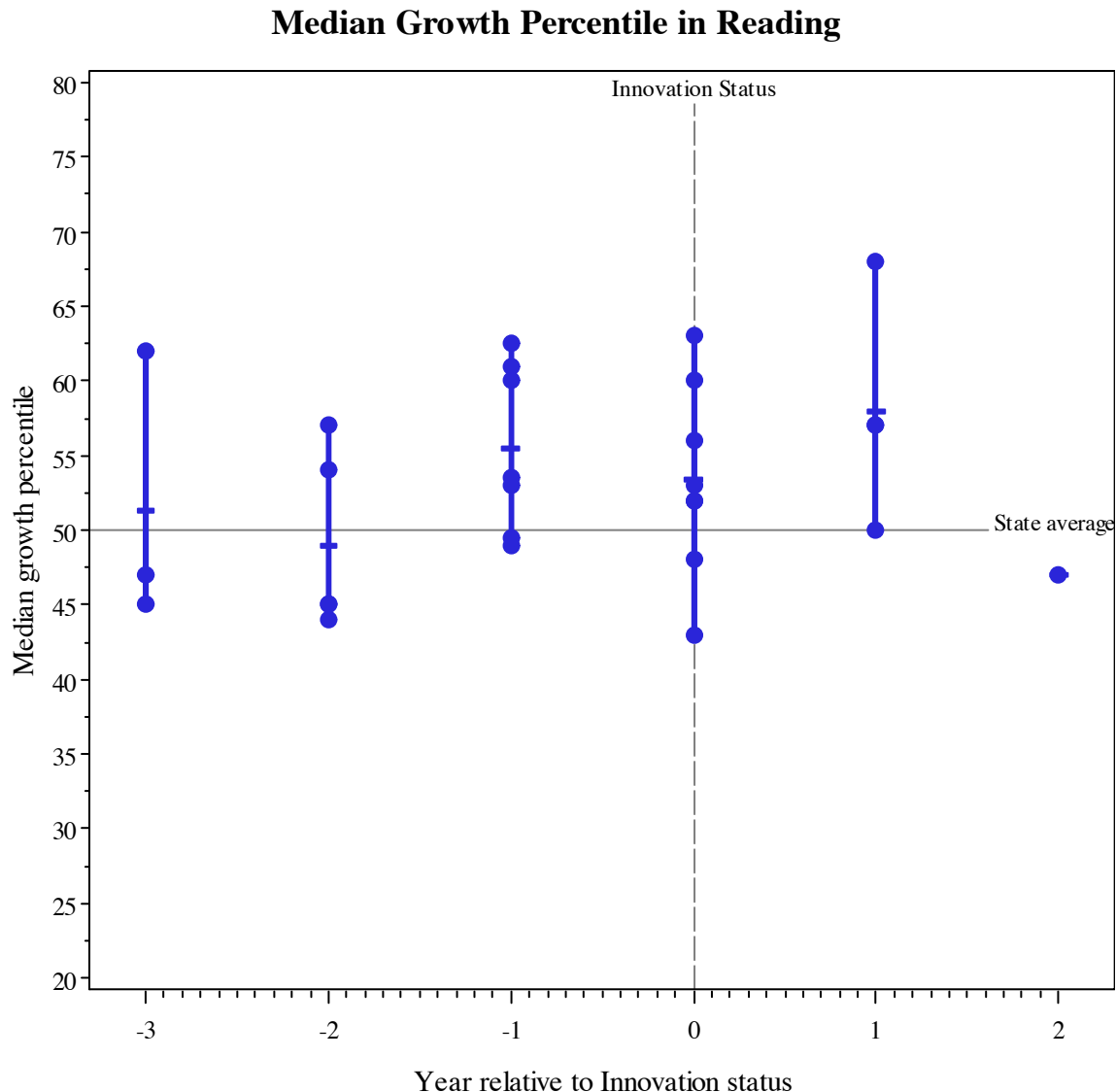


Exhibit 16. Median Growth Percentile in Writing



Note: each dot represents one school

Exhibit 17. Median Growth Percentile in Reading



Note: each dot represents one school

### Achievement overall

At present, there is insufficient data to establish post-Innovation status trends in CSAP in terms of proficiency levels or median growth percentiles. What we can determine is that many of the Innovation schools were already improving prior to Innovation, and many have continued improving since. The levels of achievement and improvement differ somewhat across the three subject areas of math, reading, and writing, and also differ between individual schools. An important question around achievement is what is expected from Innovation schools in terms of their rate of growth, as well as

their absolute levels of achievement. For example, if an Innovation school continues to improve at the same rate as before Innovation, would this be considered successful? By clarifying some of the expectations related to growth and attainment, both schools and the district will be better positioned to draw conclusions about school achievement.

## District's vision for Innovation schools

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There were a number of comments by principals and teachers which suggested they did not feel the district has developed a clear understanding of Innovation schools, particularly in terms of what was negotiable and what was not under Innovation status. This has created some frustrations because staff reported their schools have had to fight battles with the district for autonomies they felt entitled to as an Innovation school. As one teacher said,

*“one of the other frustrations with it is that where the district says, “Okay. Now you’re Innovative status so you get to do all these things and make all these choices.” And then we keep going back and hearing, “Well, but the district says you don’t have a choice about this one, and you don’t have a choice about this one”...it seems to come with sort of hidden strings”*

A few principals noted that the district seemed to be moving in the direction of starting to develop a clearer understanding around Innovation schools, and that some district departments were doing a good job of providing services when the requests were outside of what they were used to doing. However, principals seemed to feel that Innovation was not well understood by the district as a whole or by individual departments. A particularly interesting and important issue raised by one principal was whether DPS had developed a long term plan for what Innovation schools should look like and how they would be supported by the district. As more schools obtain Innovation status, the questions raised by this principal will become increasingly important for the district.

*“But I don’t think [the concept of Innovation has] been thought through...what is that going to look like 10 years from now? What is that going to look like 5 years from now? What are our overall intentions as this group starts to push on the system? And then how do we support this group in order to do that?”*

The core of this issue revolves around frustrations that school staff have about the lack of clarity regarding what autonomies Innovation schools have, and the boundaries of autonomy. Some principals felt there were inadequate supports for Innovation schools at the district level – the result of departments not being prepared to deal with the ‘out of the box’ requests that Innovation schools make (e.g., with regards to budget, hiring, or facilities). Although principals felt there was a general trend of the district improving and aligning its supports for Innovation schools, this was still a key issue for principals at the time of these interviews.

## What we've learned so far

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**Innovation schools did not tend to look drastically different than other schools.** Most principals reported that they have taken the approach of deliberately moving slowly with the implementation of their Innovation plan. It was clear that principals felt they could make more substantial changes given the waivers they have from district, state, and union policies; some principals were considering additional changes in the coming years. Given the flexibility that Innovation schools have, it is possible that they will begin to implement more numerous and substantive changes in the future. However, there remains the question of what it means for a school to be “innovative”, and what expectations exist (from the district and the schools themselves) around what an Innovation school looks like, and how it may differ or not from its previous practices and from other DPS schools.

**Schools were moving slowly in the implementation of their Innovation plans, but the vast majority appeared to be adhering to the plans they set out.** There was only one school where staff expressed concern that what had been implemented in the school was not quite in line with what had been envisioned in the Innovation plan.

**The four major issues driving schools to seek Innovation status were: budget, schedule, workforce management, and level of control.** These were also the areas in which respondents said they saw the most obvious changes following Innovation status. It was somewhat remarkable that principals did not raise issues around curriculum and instruction as a key reason for seeking Innovation, though they did note that flexibility in these other four areas allowed them to make shifts related to instruction. The changes schools made which had the most potential to impact instruction had to do with teacher planning time, teacher PD, funds for additional academic and enrichment activities, schedule changes, and workforce management (e.g., hiring, opting out of direct placement). Given that there was such a consistent set of core drivers for all schools seeking Innovation status, this suggests there may be key areas where principals feel that district constraints are most burdensome. Principals appeared to view these issues as key levers in their management of the school; eliminating or reducing constraints in these areas at other DPS schools could potentially improve principals' perceptions about their ability to make decisions and manage their schools. At this point there is no evidence from this study to support or refute the idea that autonomy in these areas will improve school outcomes, but removing constraints in these areas clearly improved the staff and community sense of autonomy and ownership in the Innovation schools.

**Principals are relatively happy with the support they have received from DPS. They found that support improved after the formation of the Office of School Reform and Innovation (OSRI).** A number of principals noted that in the early years of Innovation schools there had been challenges getting basic services from the district (particularly around HR and budget) because of a lack of understanding in central office. Departments did not know how to deal with the needs of Innovation schools, which differed from the traditional ways of doing things. Principals said that more recently, there had been a shift towards having dedicated central office liaisons in these departments who were knowledgeable about the Innovation schools and better prepared to assist. OSRI was cited by principals as a key force in

helping the district better align systems of support for Innovation schools, though some principals felt that the high turnover of OSRI staff had impeded the unit's effectiveness.

**Innovation led to an increase in both real and perceived control over the schools by principals, teachers, and parents.** This increased control was viewed as a major positive by these groups, who expressed a sense of greater ownership of their schools. There was a general sense of increased empowerment around decisions including resources, workforce, and instruction. One specific change that was appreciated by many respondents was the enhanced agility to make rapid decisions at the school level, without having to wait for approval of the decision by various central office entities.

**Having control over the workforce was a significant change in Innovation schools, from the hiring process to one-year contracts.** The Innovation schools have made substantive changes in the way that they deal with their workforce. One major change was around hiring, including changes to timelines and being able to revamp their interview process to include a wider variety of components (e.g., classroom observations of candidates). Schools were particularly pleased that they were able to opt out of direct placements; respondents were very negative about direct placement because they felt it led to schools having teachers who were not a good fit with the school's culture, philosophy, or rigor. Innovation schools tended to use one-year contracts with their teachers, and most respondents were happy with this. Parents and principals particularly liked the idea that they had a chance to determine if the teacher was a good fit before committing to them longer term. It was notable that Innovation principals focused on hiring and opting out of direct placement, and were much less likely to discuss their increased authority around dismissing teachers.

**The presence of a structure in a school did not necessarily mean it was being used effectively.** This came up in several domains including structures for collaboration and planning time, the use of collaboration time for alignment activities, and professional development time. For all structures, schools would benefit from having clear goals and outcomes (particularly for longer time periods such as across a school year), and then tracking the extent to which they are progressing towards their aims. Evidence of progress could include teacher perceptions, as well as tangible results such as the development of articulation documents, scoring rubrics, or other products.

**Innovation schools have experienced high rates of mobility among teachers and principals. Their teachers tend to be somewhat less experienced and are less likely to have master's degrees than teachers in comparable schools.** Although the data available for this evaluation did not allow us to draw strong conclusions about the effect that Innovation has on a school's workforce, these findings suggest that Innovation schools may have unique needs around developing and maintaining their teacher (and principal) workforce.

**Innovation schools tended to have positive cultures overall. Schools which had less positive cultures had experienced problems with the principal, principal turnover, and often lacked a clear vision for the school.** One interesting finding from this evaluation was that schools tended to be either high or low on all culture indicators (including measures of teacher collegiality, principal leadership, parent and student relationships, and academic press). Although we do not yet fully understand which elements of climate may drive the others, what we can conclude is that different elements of school climate are highly intertwined, and problems in one climate element are very likely to spill over into discontent in

other elements. The interview data suggested that principal leadership was a key element, and that when the principal did not adequately support staff, or created an atmosphere of mistrust or negativity, climate indicators at the school tended to be more negative. Interestingly, the lack of a clear strategic vision was also present in schools which scored lowest on climate measures; this may be a result of teachers feeling uncertain about where they are going or how to get there, even as they struggle to do the best for their students. Teachers in all schools described a strong commitment to their students. Having a strong principal in whom the teachers and parents have trust, who is able to articulate a clear vision and align structures around that, seems to be an important element in the climate of schools.

**With high principal turnover at the Innovation schools, there has been some confusion about the role of the district in choosing a new principal.** Three of the Innovation schools have changed principals since they gained Innovation status, and this change tended to be associated with difficulties and discontent at the schools. One theme which emerged in these schools was: what is the role of the district and the school in choosing a new principal? There appears to be a lack of clarity around which entity will make the final choice. Going forward, it will be important for the district to clarify the process of principal hiring, and the role that staff, community, and district have in choosing a new administrator.

**Most of the Innovation schools were working on alignment across grades and subjects. Schools saw this work as critical, but the process was not necessarily effective at all schools.** A considerable amount of time was being spent by the Innovation schools to engage teachers in discussions of articulation, and to create standards for what was considered by the school to be on-standard or on-grade work. In general, both administrators and teachers felt that this work was important in order to create more consistency around instruction, both horizontally and vertically. However, in several schools respondents felt the time dedicated to articulation was not necessarily effective because it was poorly used, there was a lack of articulated goals or expectations, or there was a lack of structure to help move teachers towards the goals (which left the onus on them to push the process forward). The prevalence of these articulation activities across schools also raises the question of what support DPS provides to all district schools around operationalizing the standards, and helping teachers understand what on-standard and on-grade work looks like in various subjects.

**There was a lack of clarity around the boundaries of autonomy in Innovation schools – what flexibility they have, and what regulations they are still subject to.** This theme emerged in various ways from principals and teachers and was centered on the idea that the district has not adopted a clear vision of what Innovation schools are and what they should be able to do. This has led to frustration for school staff, who sometimes felt they had to battle for autonomies they thought they were entitled to under Innovation status (e.g., facilities changes, hiring/dismissal decisions, use of assessments), and has led to other confusion (e.g., district requirements that Innovation teachers have to meet, such as ELA certification; responsibility for costs associated with schedule changes). With the formation of OSRI, the district may now be better positioned to help define the district's understandings around Innovation schools. However, it was clear that principals believed the district has a distance to go in defining and understanding Innovation schools. It may be very useful for DPS to consider outlining the expectations the district has for Innovation schools in a transparent way, including the autonomies Innovation schools enjoy as well as the boundaries they still must adhere to. The district may also want to consider the best

ways of creating feedback loops so that Innovation schools can learn from one another (including disseminating lessons learned and exemplar practices on a regular basis), and so that schools who are considering an application for Innovation status can learn from those who have gone before.

**There are not yet clear trends to help us understand how Innovation will affect student achievement.**

Many of the Innovation schools were already trending up in terms of the percent of students proficient and advanced, and most also had median growth percentiles above the state average of 50%.

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## Balancing Innovation and district support

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An important question for DPS is how best to support the Innovation schools as they become increasingly decentralized. Although to a large extent the Innovation schools are currently using district curricula and assessments, many principals have suggested that their future plans involve moving towards different curricula, engaging in major modification of existing curricula, exploring alternative assessments, developing in-house assessments aligned with instructional programs, etc. In addition to instruction and assessment, the Innovation schools can also choose to do things differently around infrastructure (e.g., transportation, facilities, food) and other services (e.g., nursing, mental health, special education). This presents the district with a considerable challenge in thinking about how to support the Innovation schools in the future, as they become increasingly diverse. This issue will only increase in importance as more schools gain Innovation status.

Some of the important questions for the district to consider are:

- What are some of the cost implications (both in terms of additional costs or loss of economy of scale) as schools opt out of traditional district structures? What is the cost to the district and to individual schools?
- How can the district best support Innovation schools as their practices diverge from district offerings (e.g., around curricula, assessment, professional development, leadership, etc.)?
- What are the implications for the district as Innovation schools make schedule adjustments that may impact issues like transportation, security, janitorial, engineering, etc.?<sup>25</sup>

These kinds of questions should form the basis of a district conversation around the implications of having multiple school models within what has historically been a centralized district structure. Such decentralization challenges conventional notions of how to provide support, and likely demands fundamentally different ways of thinking about the types of support structures the district has traditionally provided.

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<sup>25</sup> Often, schools require the presence of certain personnel when the building is open. So, depending on whether Innovation schools are open additional hours/days during the week or summer, there may be cost implications for keeping personnel in the building, heating/cooling, food, etc.

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## Additional reflection questions

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In addition to the findings detailed above, a number of questions arose in the course of the evaluation which may or may not have already been addressed by the district. These are presented here as issues the district should consider:

- Has DPS had a conversation around what it means to be ‘innovative’? Are there particular expectations for what an Innovation school looks like and how it may differ or not from its previous practices, and from other DPS schools?
- What does success look like for an Innovation school? Is it only about student achievement? Are there other factors that should be considered (e.g., teacher satisfaction, parent involvement, student perceptions)?
- How is monitoring data about the Innovation schools used? What types of metrics are considered in the monitoring of Innovation schools (e.g., teacher satisfaction, parent involvement, teacher mobility, principal turnover, etc.)?
- What supports does the district provide to assist Innovation schools who are struggling with various issues – e.g., principal leadership, challenges with collaboration and planning, challenges with articulation, negative climate, etc.?
- The Innovation Schools Act requires a 3 year review of each school’s Innovation status.<sup>26</sup> What will be considered as part of this review? Under what circumstances would the district take action with regards to a school’s Innovation status? Do issues like climate, student achievement, mobility, instruction, etc. play a role? If so, how? If not, why not?
- What mechanisms are in place for ensuring that there are appropriate ‘checks and balances’ with regards to staff hiring and dismissal in Innovation schools?
- What is the role of school staff, community, and district in selecting a new Principal for an Innovation school? What is the expectation for how this principal will adhere to the school’s Innovation plan?

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<sup>26</sup> See part 22-32.5-110 of the Innovation Schools Act.



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## Appendix A. Parent/community member interview protocol

### Innovation Schools – Spring 2011

#### Interview Protocol for Parent / Community Member

*Thank you for meeting with me today. As part of our program evaluation for the Innovation Schools, we want to learn a little bit about what your school is doing. Specifically, we are looking at what Innovation Schools do and how this is different from what they would be able to do without Innovation status. We are not evaluating the school staff or programs; instead, we are looking at the possible impact of schools becoming Innovation Schools. We have secured district approval for this evaluation study.*

*Your comments will be confidential and will be summarized in our report to DPS and its partners. We will not use any names in the report which would make you identifiable.*

*I will be sure we are finished by (\_\_\_\_\_set time). With your permission, I would like to digitally record our conversation. Is it ok for me to record? Do you have any questions before we begin?*

#### Background

1. What is the nature of your association with this school?
  - a. How long have you been associated with this school?
2. Were you involved in the planning committee when this school applied for Innovation status?
3. What were your feelings when you first heard the school staff and administration were applying for this school to become an Innovation school?
  - a. How do you feel about this change today?

#### Overview of Innovation changes

4. What were the biggest changes you saw in this school after it received Innovation status?

*[probe for specifics of what the school did before versus what they are doing now]*

#### Interaction with community

5. When the staff and administration of this school decided to apply for Innovation status, how well did they explain this decision to parents and community members?

- a. Do you feel that parents and community members were adequately involved in the decision-making process about becoming an Innovation school?
6. What kinds of opportunities do parents and community members have to be involved in the school?
  - a. Do you feel that parents/community members have enough opportunities to be involved with the school?
  - b. What kinds of opportunities do parents and community members have to provide input into decisions made at the school? Are these adequate?
7. Do you feel like there is good communication about what is going on at the school?

**Instruction**

8. What key programs and strategies are being implemented in this school that you believe will help students be successful?
  - a. What is working particularly well?
  - b. What is not working so well?
9. Are there any unique opportunities that students have at this school that you believe they would not necessarily have at other schools?
  - a. If yes, when did these opportunities begin; prior to or after the school received Innovation status?
10. How well do you feel this school is meeting student needs?

**Climate**

11. How would you describe the climate of the school?
12. How would you describe the relationships at this school between:
  - a. Principal and teachers
  - b. Teachers and teachers
  - c. Teachers and students
  - d. Teachers and parents/community members

- e. Principal and parents/community members

**Workforce**

- 13. What are your thoughts about the principal's leadership of this school?
- 14. What are your thoughts about teachers at this school?
  - a. Do you think most/all provide enough assistance for students?
  - b. Do you think most/all provide challenging work for students?

**Additional comments**

- 15. Is there anything additional you would like to comment on about Innovation schools?

## Appendix B. Principal interview protocol

### Innovation Schools – Spring 2011

#### Interview Protocol for Principals

*Thank you for meeting with me today. As part of our program evaluation for the Innovation Schools, we want to learn a little bit about what your school is doing. Specifically, we are looking at what Innovation Schools do and how this is different from what they would be able to do without Innovation status. We are not evaluating you or your programs; instead, we are looking at the possible impact of schools becoming Innovation Schools. We have secured district approval for this evaluation study.*

*Your comments will be confidential and will be summarized in our report to DPS and its partners. We will not use school, principal, or teacher names in the report.*

*I will be sure we are finished by (\_\_\_\_\_set time). With your permission, I would like to digitally record our conversation. Is it ok for me to record? Do you have any questions before we begin?*

#### Background

16. How long have you been a principal at this school?
17. What was your education and career path to becoming a principal? *(e.g., type of training program, previous administrative experience, previous school experience)*

#### Overview of Innovation changes

18. Why did your school decide to seek Innovation status?
19. What were the biggest changes that you made after receiving Innovation status? *[Probe for specifics of what the school did before versus what they are doing now]*
  - a. Would you have been able to do these things without Innovation status? *[probe for specifically what would/would not have been possible]*
20. Why did you choose these particular innovations?
21. To what extent have you been able to implement your Innovation plan?
  - a. What changes are working particularly well?
  - b. What have you found most challenging?

### Support

22. As an Innovation school, what support do you get from DPS?
  - c. How useful is this support?
  - d. What support do you need that you are not currently getting, if any?
23. Do you have any other significant partnerships (e.g., with outside organizations)? If so, how are they supporting you?

### Instruction

24. How would you describe your school's instructional approach?
  - a. How well do you feel this approach is working?
  - b. What are the benefits of this approach?
  - c. What are the challenges of this approach?
25. As a school, how do you work towards high quality instruction?
  - a. How do teachers work together to support high quality instruction?  
*[Possible examples: grade level meetings, vertical teaming, common planning time, peer observations, aligning curricula to standards, developing student assessments, developing learning goals]*

### Structure

26. Does your school have a longer school day and/or school year?
  - a. If yes, how do you achieve this? (e.g., extended class periods, after-school programming, summer programs)
  - a. How important do you feel this extended time is?

### Assessment

27. What information do you use to know whether students are learning?
  - a. How is this information used at the school level to inform next steps or needs?

**Workforce**

28. How would you describe your role as principal?
  - b. What are the major areas on which you focus your attention? (e.g., instruction, teacher development, organizational management, etc.)
  - c. How does your role differ from what it did prior to Innovation Status? *[If principal is new: what made you decide to join this particular school?]*
29. How do teachers participate in school decisions or leadership, if at all?
30. How do you select and hire teachers and other leaders for the school?
  - a. How does this differ from what you did prior to Innovation Status?
31. How do you determine what the needs of your teachers are in terms of professional development?
  - a. How do you address these development needs? *[Probe for specific example]*
32. What does your teacher evaluation system look like?
  - a. How does it compare to the DPS system?

**Additional comments**

33. Is there anything additional you'd like to comment on about being an Innovation School?

## Appendix C. Teacher interview protocol

### Innovation Schools – Spring 2011

#### Interview Protocol for Teachers

*Thank you for meeting with me today. As part of our program evaluation for the Innovation Schools, we want to learn a little bit about what your school is doing. Specifically, we are looking at what Innovation Schools do and how this is different from what they would be able to do without Innovation status. We are not evaluating you or your programs; instead, we are looking at the possible impact of schools becoming Innovation Schools. We have secured district approval for this evaluation study.*

*Your comments will be confidential and will be summarized in our report to DPS and its partners. We will not use school, principal, or teacher names in the report.*

*I will be sure we are finished by (\_\_\_\_\_set time). With your permission, I would like to digitally record our conversation. Is it ok for me to record? Do you have any questions before we begin?*

#### Background

34. How long have you been a teacher at this school?
35. What subject and grade level do you currently teach?
36. What was your prior experience?
  - a. Have you taught at other schools in DPS or outside of DPS?
  - b. What subjects and grade levels have you taught?

#### Overview of Innovation changes

37. What were the biggest changes in this school after it received Innovation status? [*probe for specifics of what the school did before versus what they are doing now*]
38. To what extent has the school been able to implement its Innovation plan?
  - c. What is working particularly well?
  - d. What has been most challenging?
39. What do you think are the key things this school is doing which will help your students be successful?



**Support**

40. How well supported do you feel by:

- a. The principal
- b. Other teachers

*[Probe: What in particular do they do / not do that makes you feel supported or not?]*

**Instruction**

41. How would you describe your school's instructional approach?

- a. How well do you feel this approach is working?
- b. What are the benefits of this approach?
- c. What are the challenges of this approach?

42. As a school, how do you work towards high quality instruction?

- a. How do teachers work together to support high quality instruction?

*[Possible examples: grade level meetings, vertical teaming, common planning time, peer observations, aligning curricula to standards, developing student assessments, developing learning goals]*

43. To what extent do you feel that staff at this school have a common focus in terms of what needs to be taught and performance expectations for students?

- a. Is there a common understanding among teachers of how their instruction fits into the larger picture of instruction at the school?

44. What is the principal's role in supporting instructional improvement, if any?

**Assessment**

45. What information do you use to know whether students are learning?

- a. How is this information used to inform instruction?

### **Workforce**

46. How do teachers participate in school decisions or leadership, if at all?
47. How does the school determine what professional development to offer teachers?
  - a. How well does this PD meet your needs?
  - b. What support do you need that you're not getting, if any?
48. Why did you decide to stay (or join) after this school gained Innovation status?
49. What does your teacher evaluation system look like?
  - a. How fair do you feel the system is?
  - b. How does it compare to the DPS system? *[if applicable to this teacher]*

### **Additional comments**

50. Is there anything additional you'd like to comment on about being an Innovation School?

## Appendix D. Sampling procedure for comparison schools

### Method - Selection of Comparison Schools

#### STEP 1: Academic Levels

To select other Denver Public Schools (DPS) for comparison to the Innovation Schools, evaluators first sorted the schools into three groups based on the academic level of students served. A preliminary review of possible schools showed that there were no comparable 6-12 schools although there were middle schools with similar demographics. To include students in the high school grades, evaluators decided to search for a middle school and high school within the same feeder system to replicate the population of 6-12 schools. The resulting groups are shown in Exhibit One.

#### Exhibit One: Grouping and Goals for Comparison School Selection

Innovation Schools	Level	Goal – To identify
Montclair	Elementary	One or more comparison elementary schools
Valdez	Elementary	
Denver Green	Elementary	
Cole	K – 8	One comparison K- 8 school
Whittier	K – 8	
Bruce Randolph	6 – 12	Two comparison schools – one middle school and one high school within a feeder system
MLK Early College	6 – 12	
Manual	High School	

#### STEP 2: Free/Reduced Lunch Rates

For each group, all other DPS schools were sorted by academic level. Within those groups, schools were sorted by the rate of free/reduced lunch (FRL) at those schools. Schools with FRL rates within +/- 10 percentage points of the average of the Innovation Schools at that level were considered as potential comparison schools.

#### STEP 3: School Performance Framework

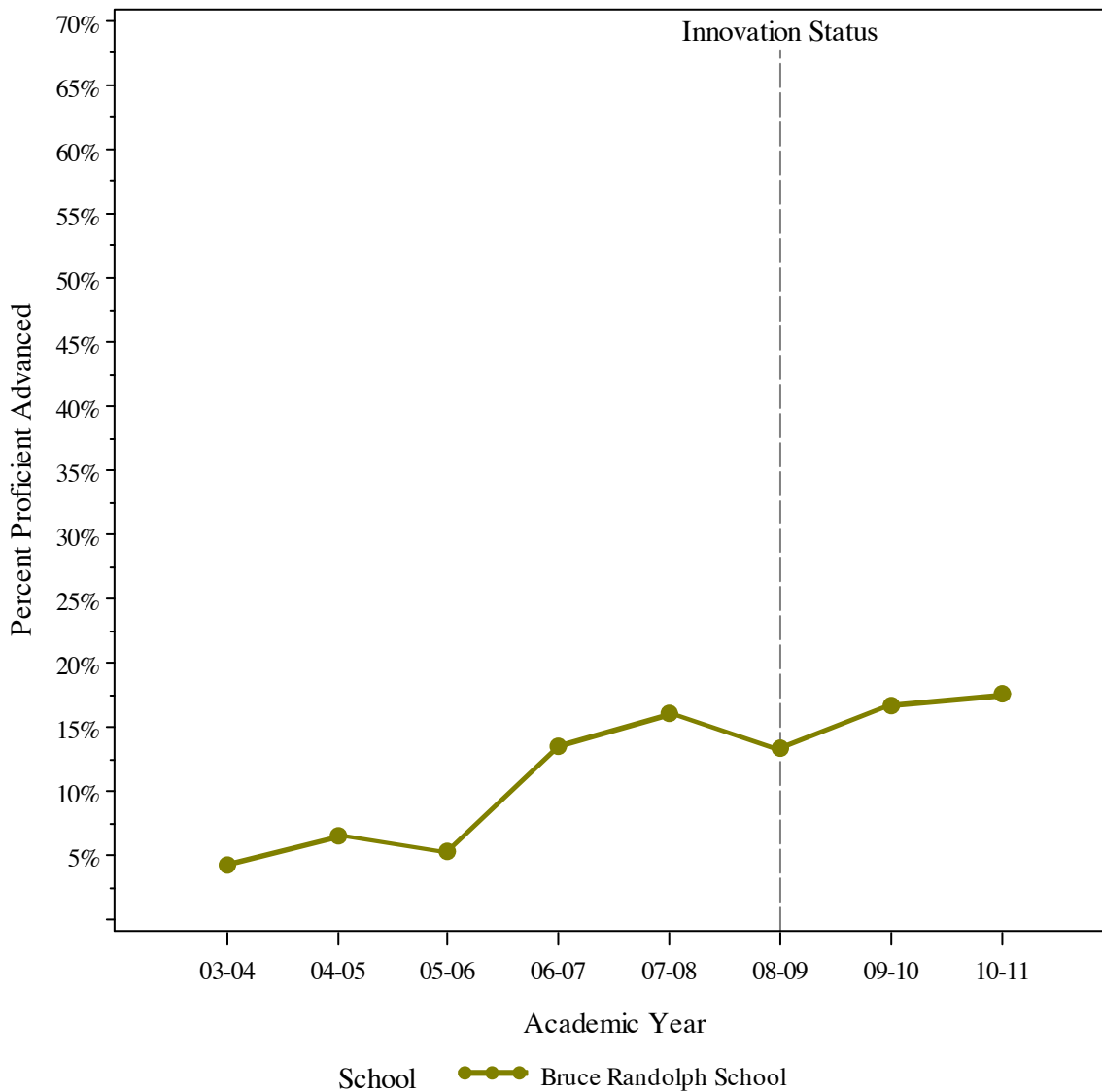
For all potential comparison schools, the School Performance Framework rating (SPF) was identified. Schools were then matched to be consistent with the SPF rating assigned to the Innovation Schools.

#### STEP 4: Tie- Breaker

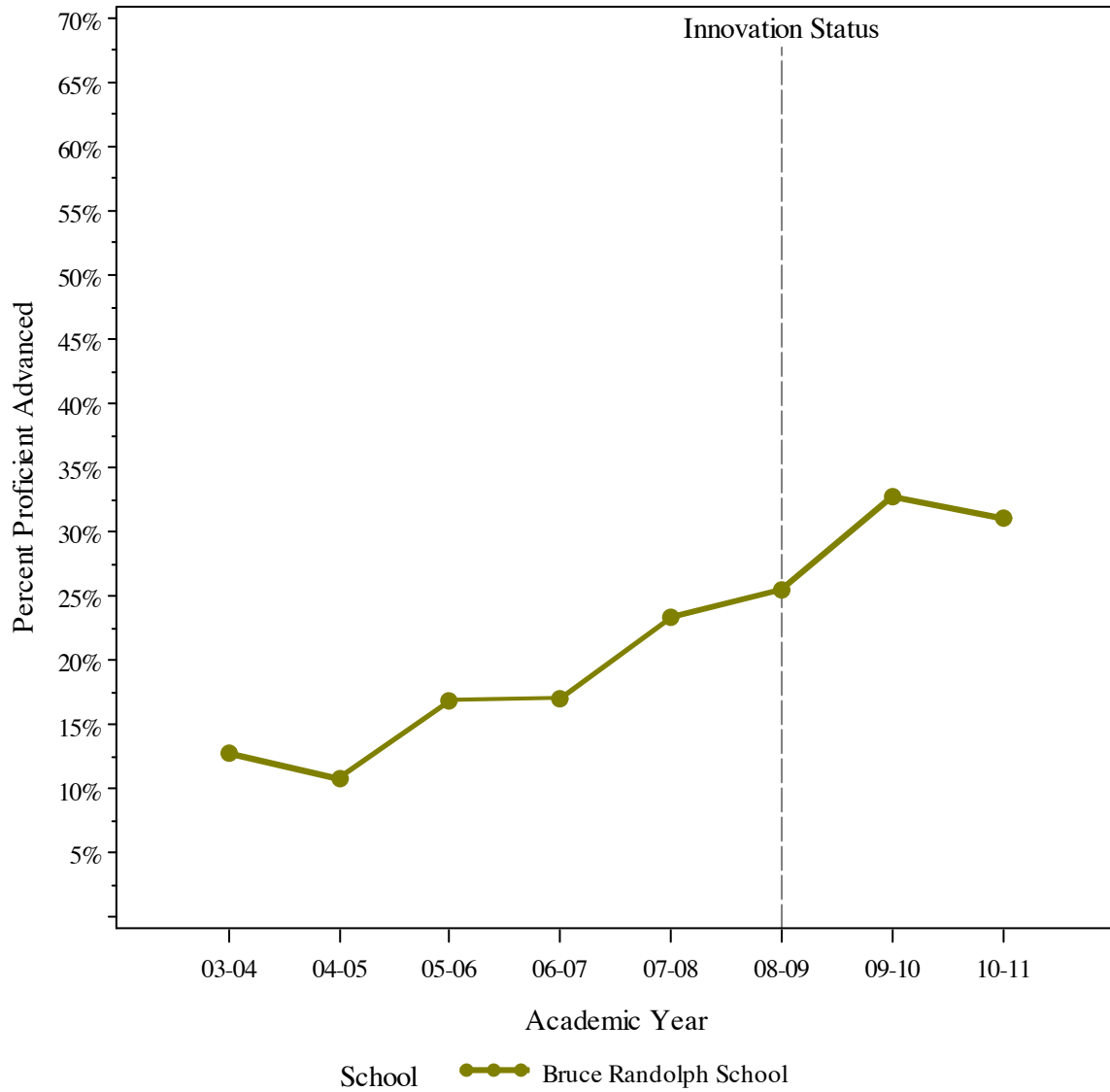
Using this process, schools were selected at the K- 8 and middle/high school levels. However, two elementary schools were still potential comparison schools. To decide between the two elementary schools, the percentage of English Language Learners was examined, and that with the closest percentage was selected for inclusion in the comparison group.

## Appendix E. CSAP graphs – Individual schools

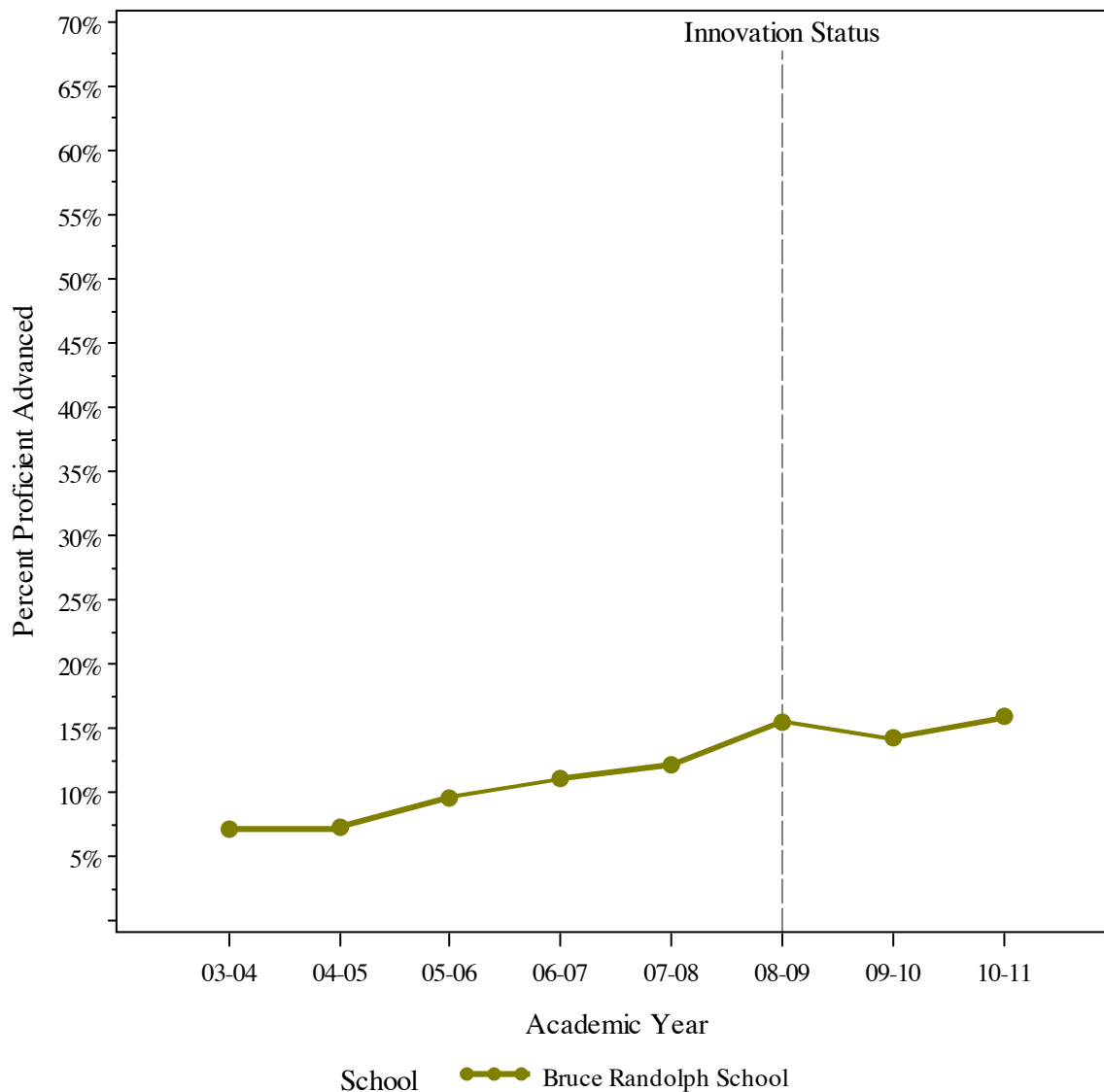
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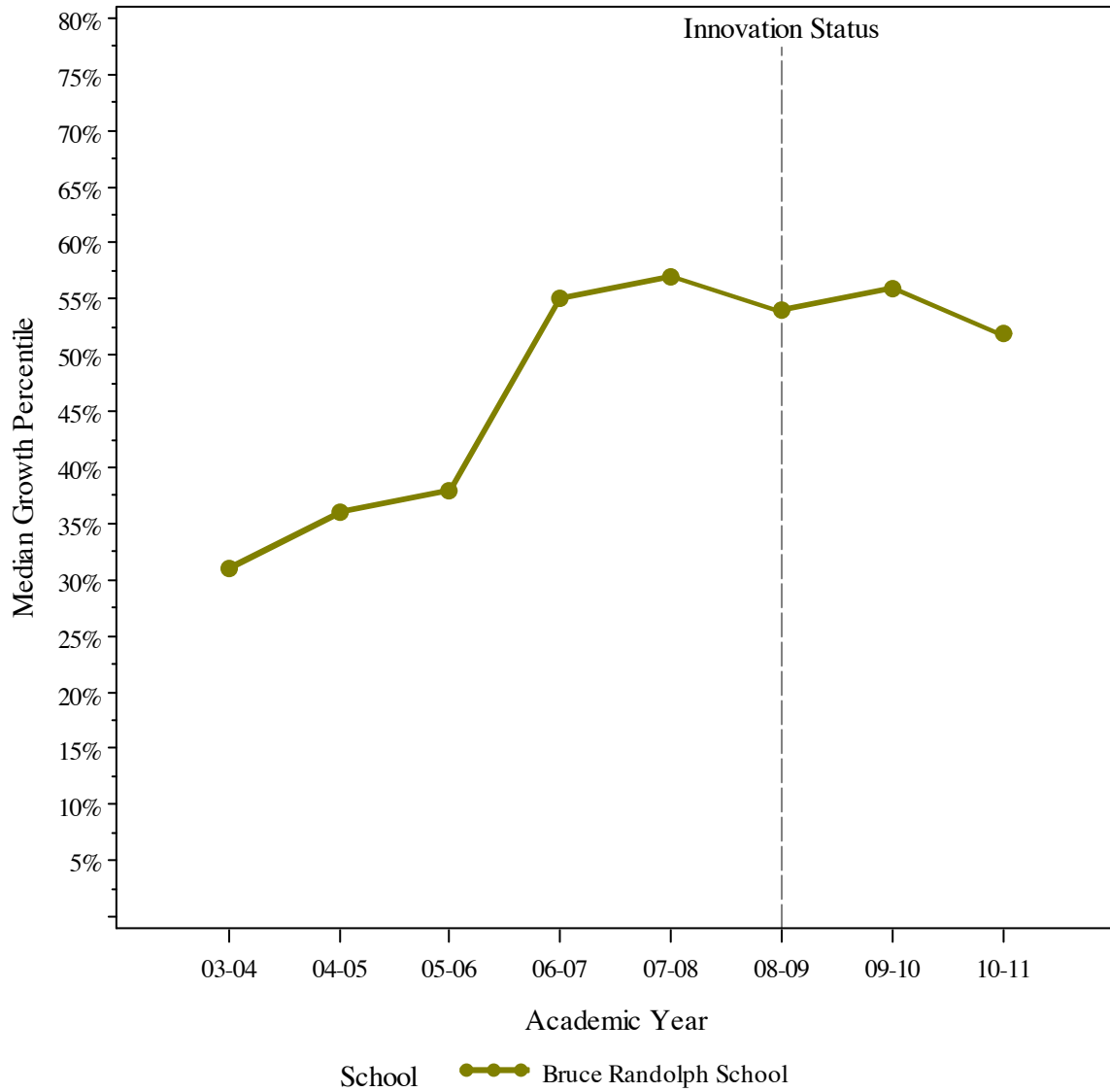
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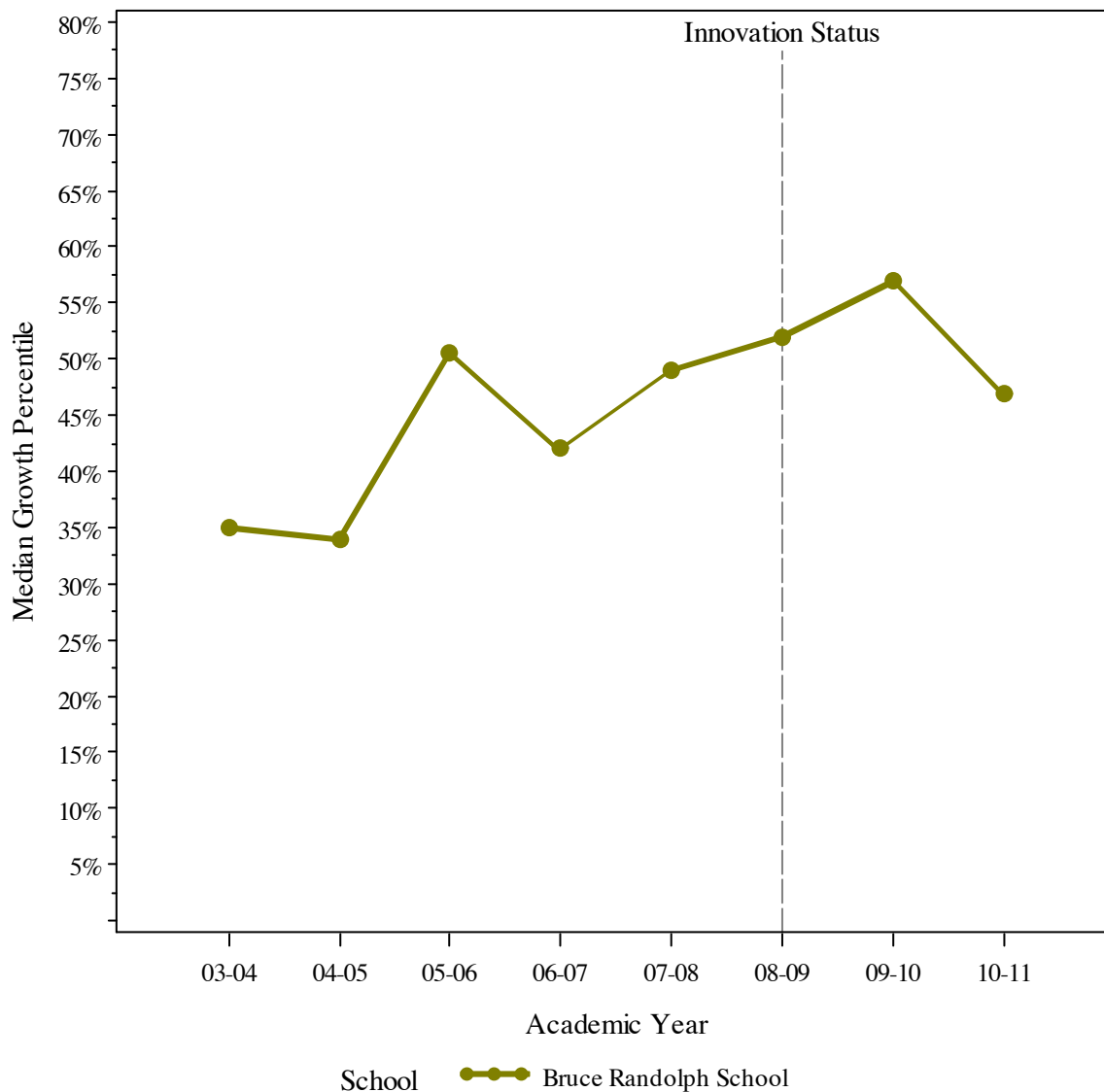
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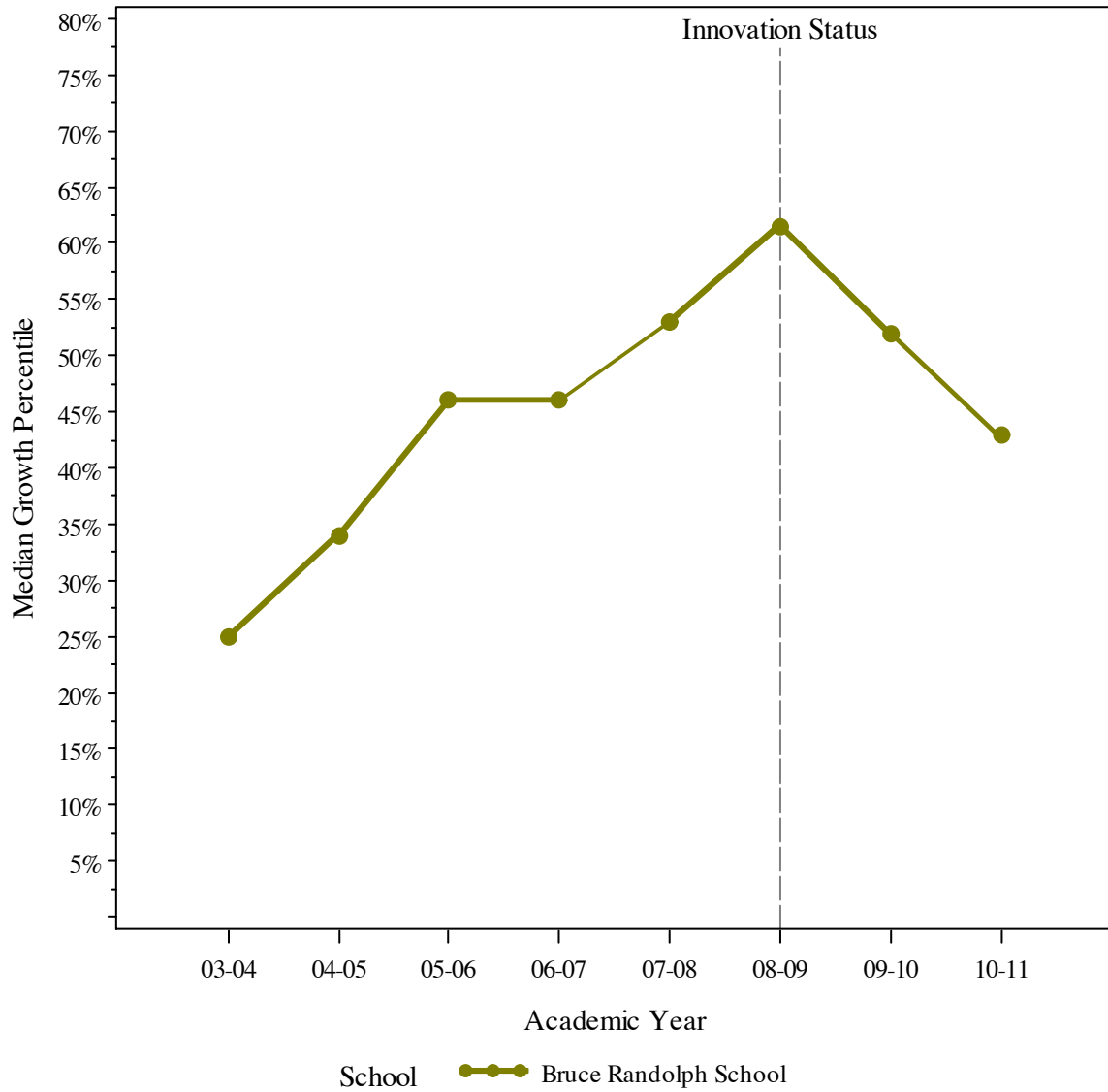


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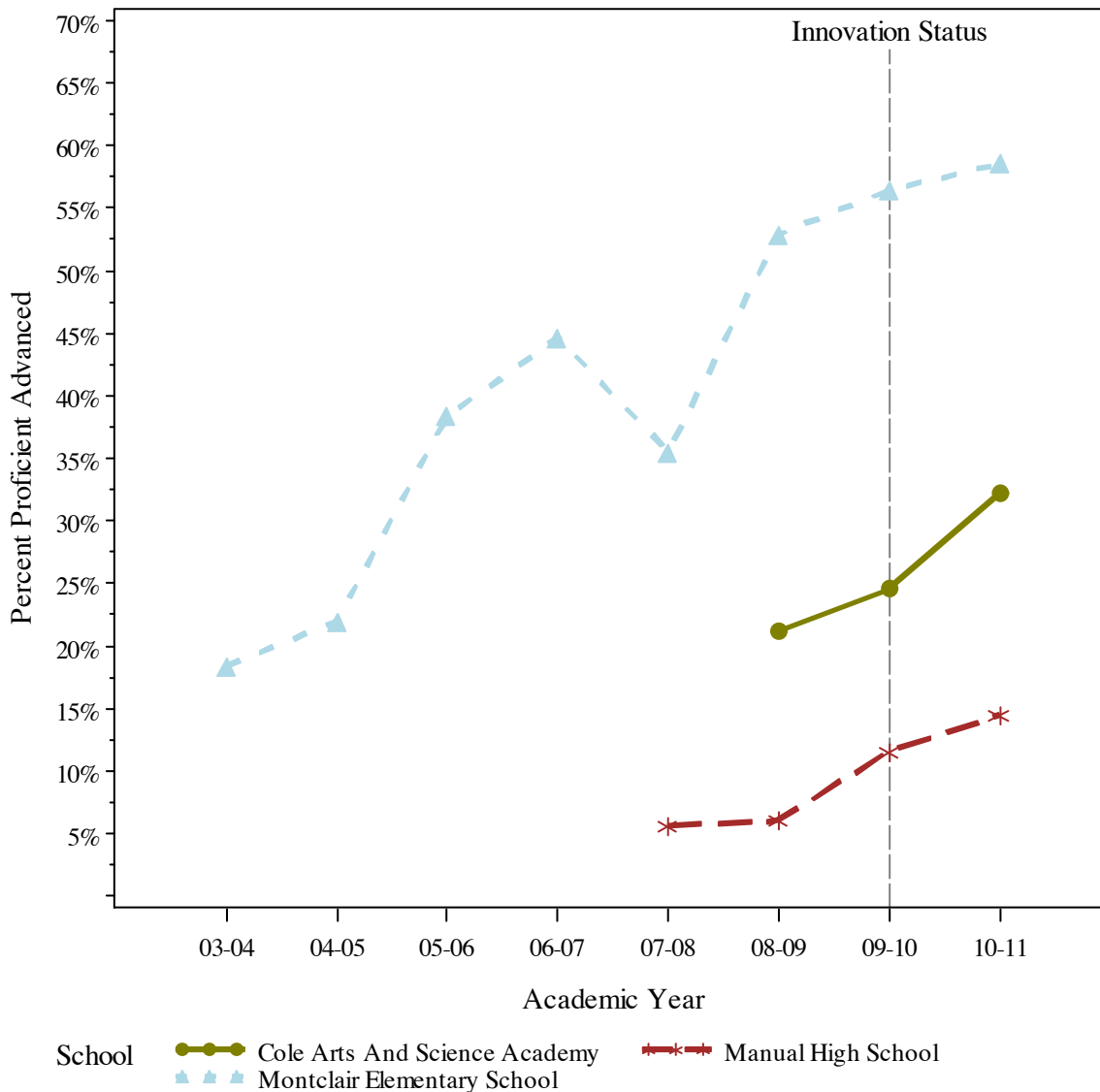




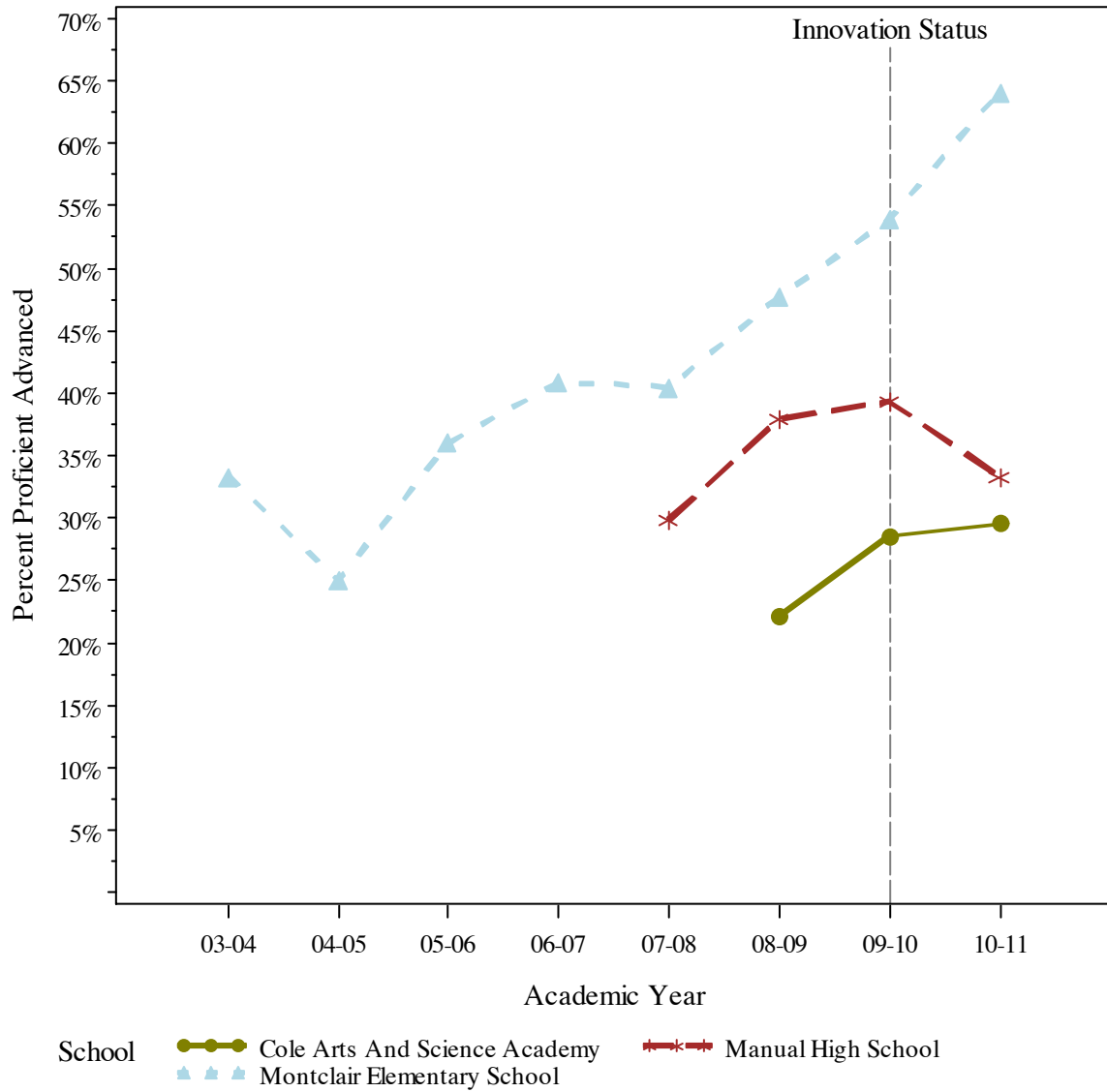
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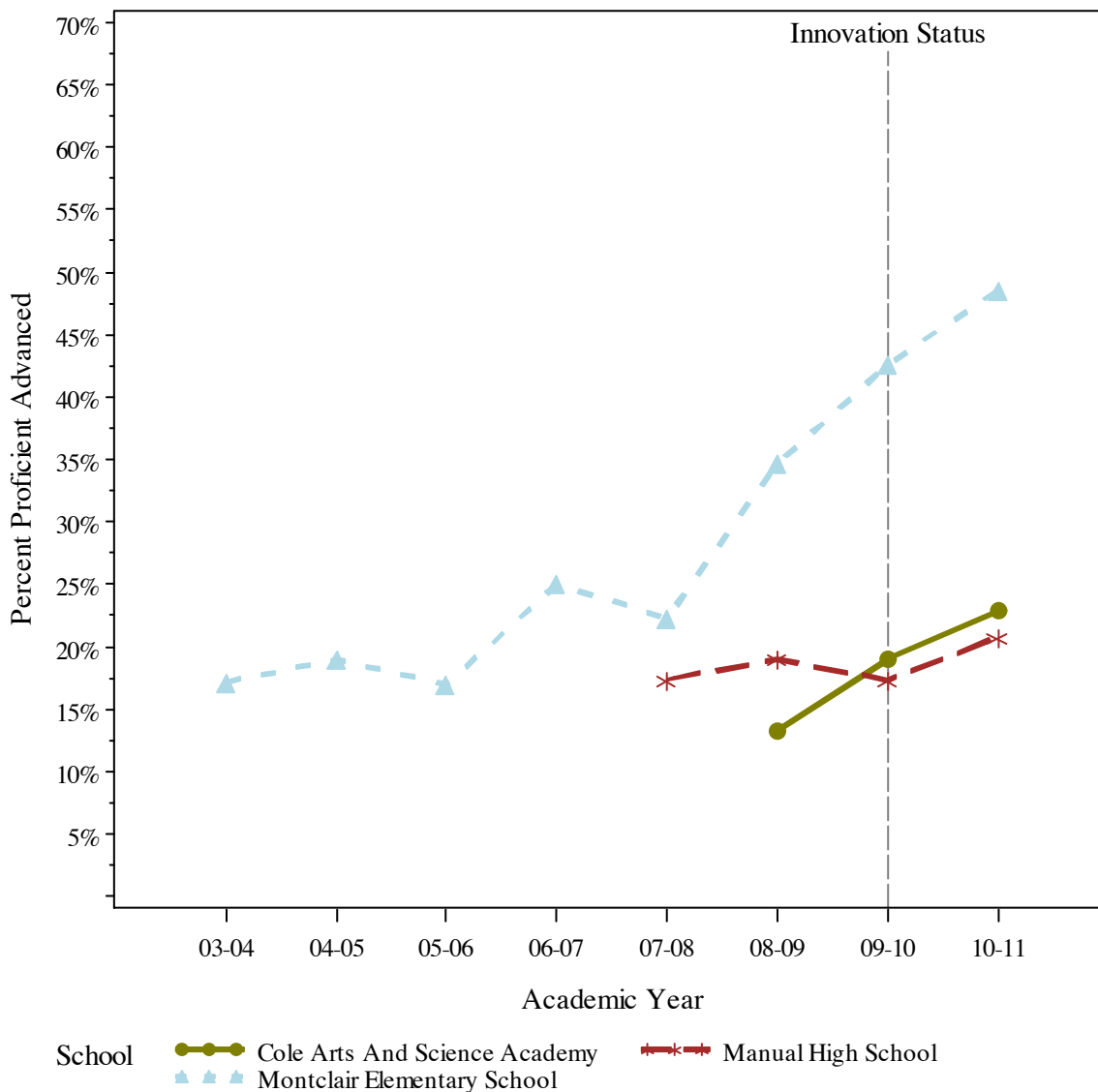
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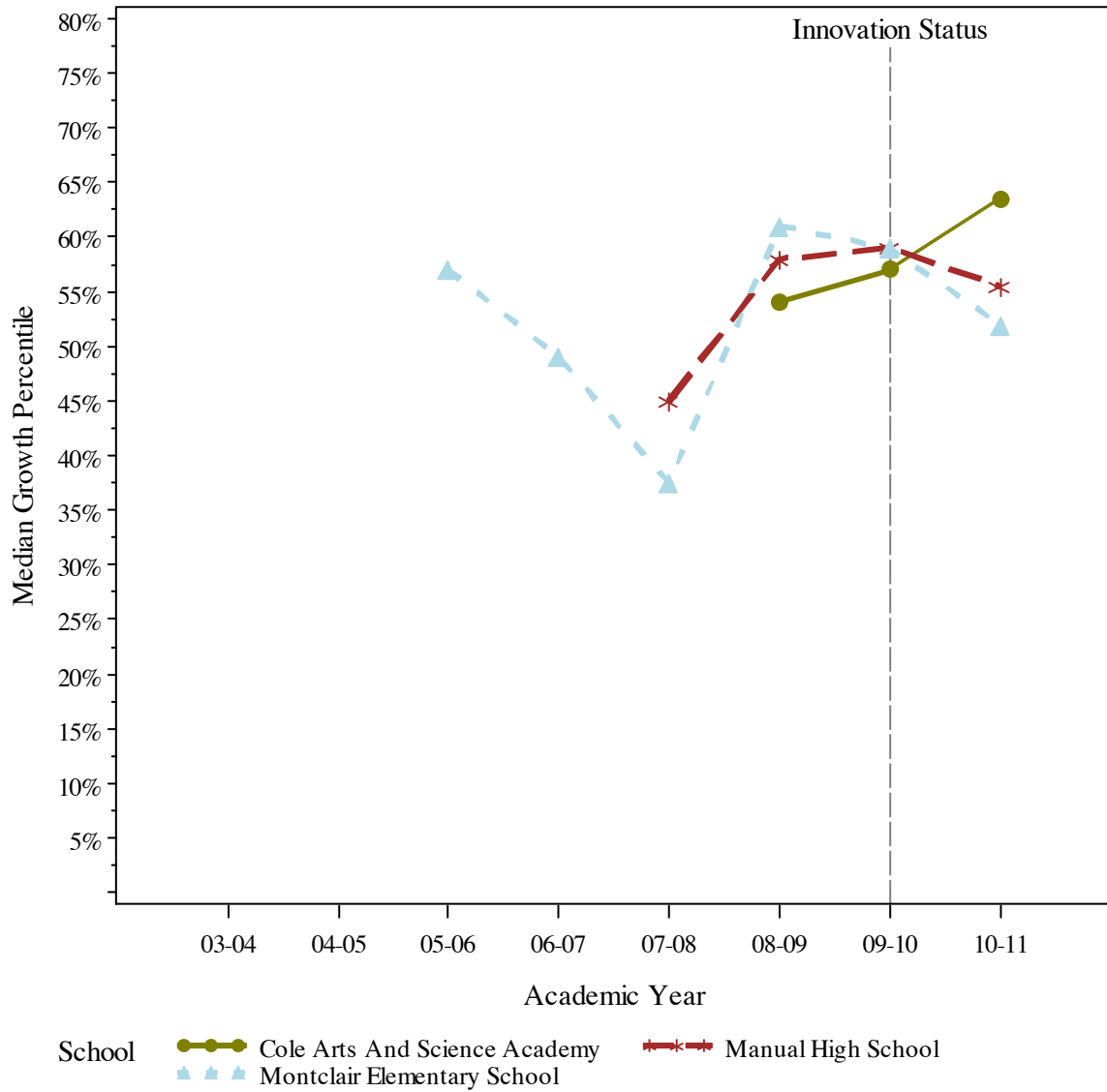
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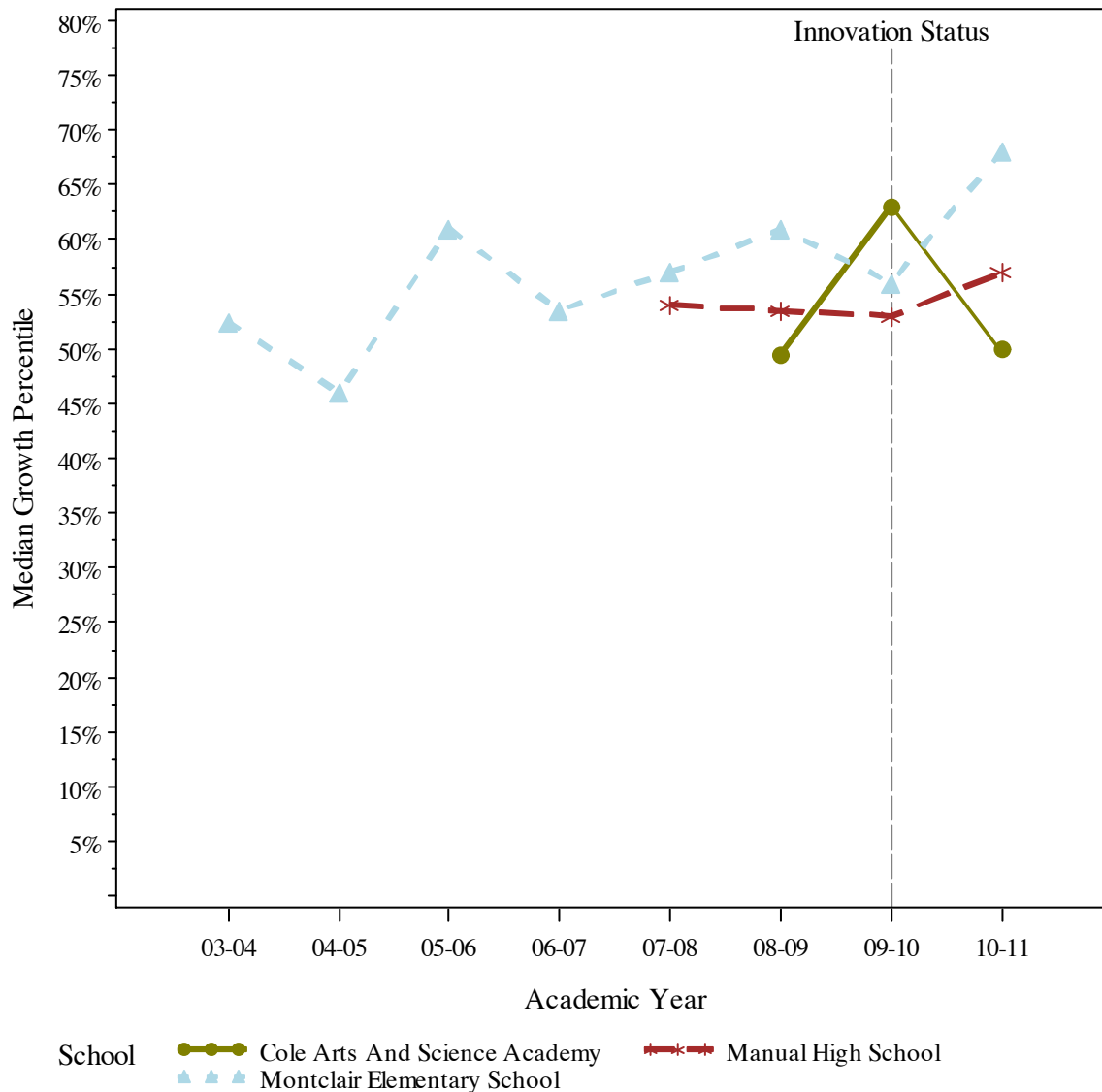
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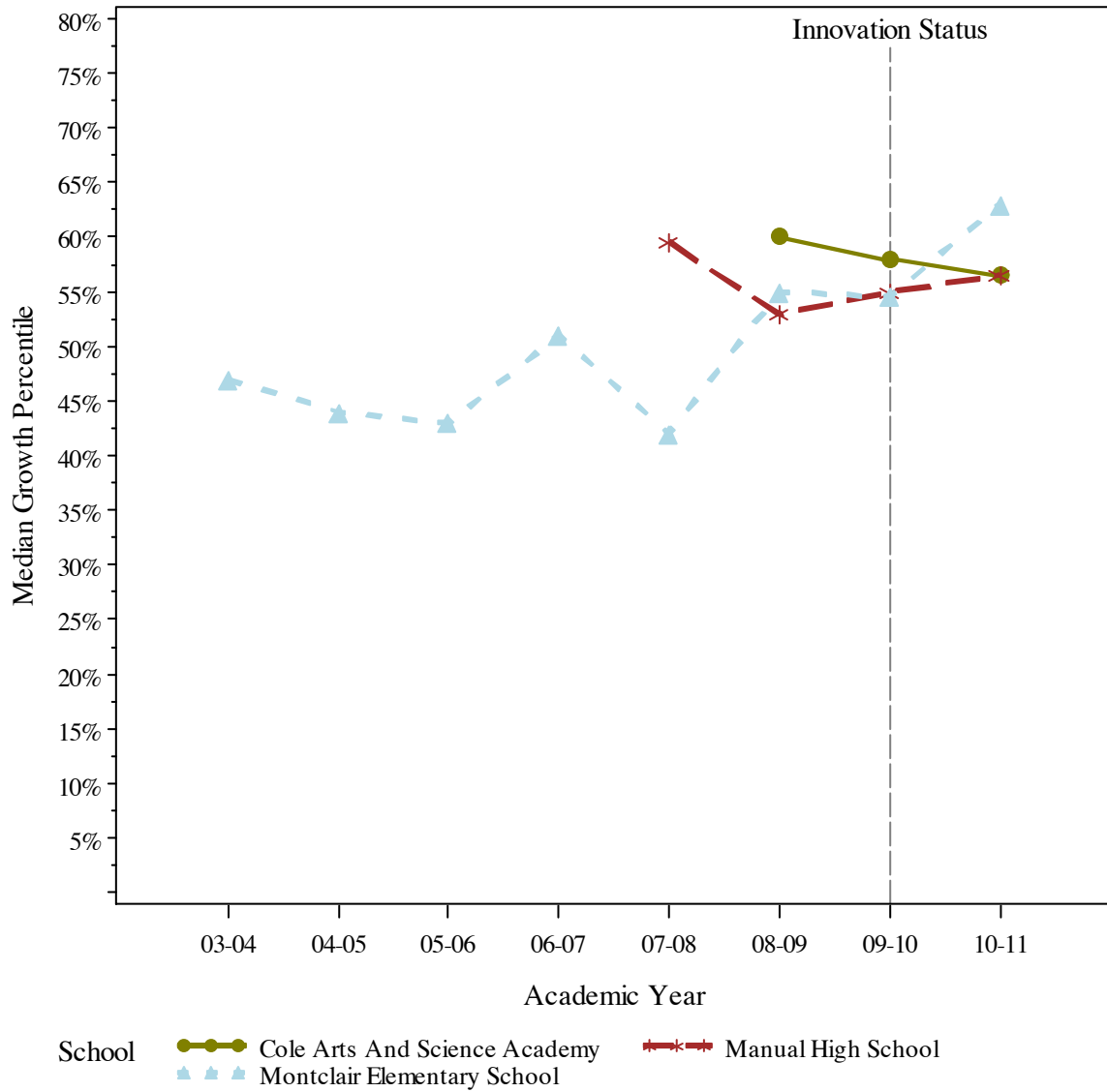
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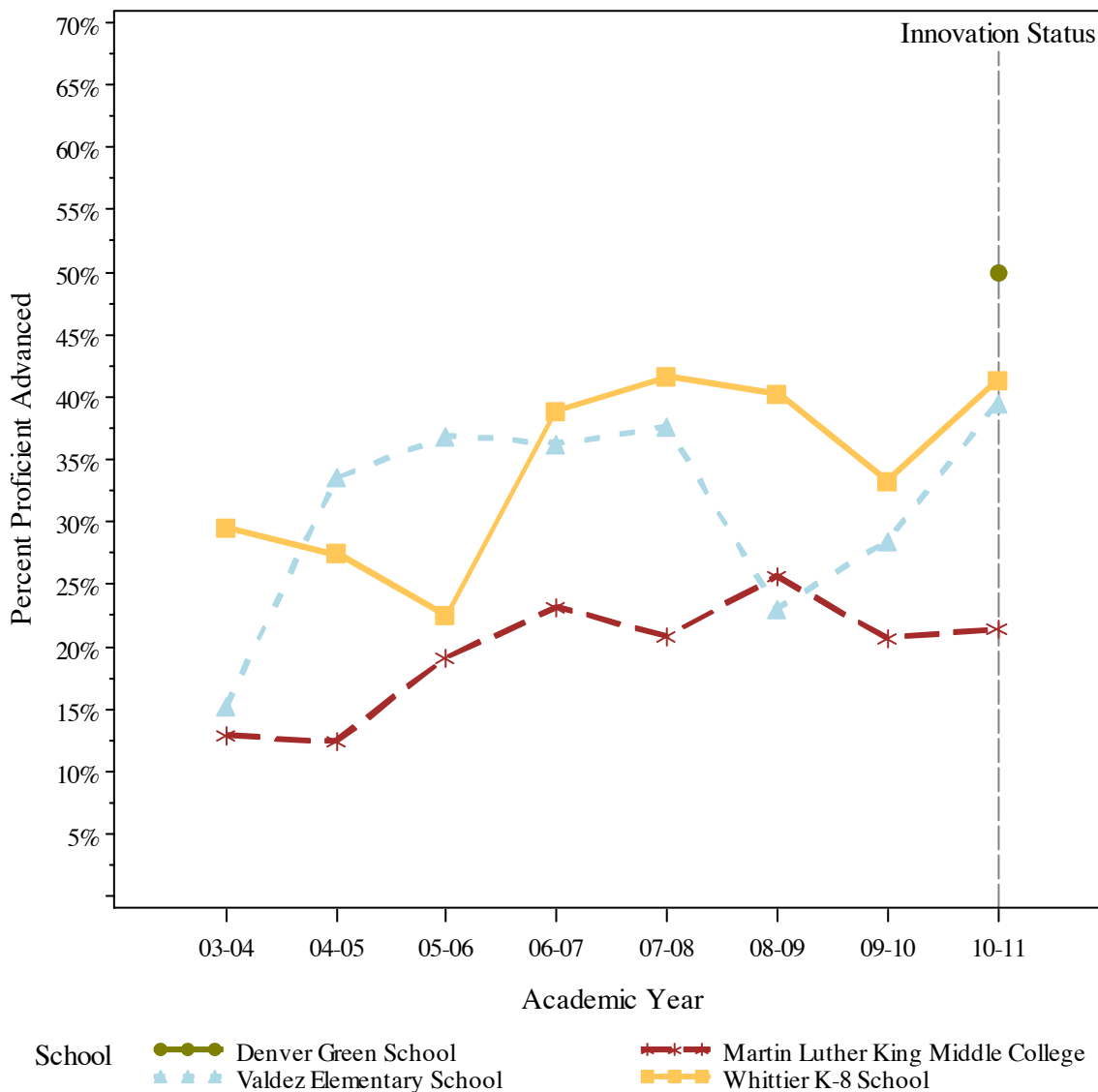
### Median Growth Percentile in Reading



### Median Growth Percentile in Writing

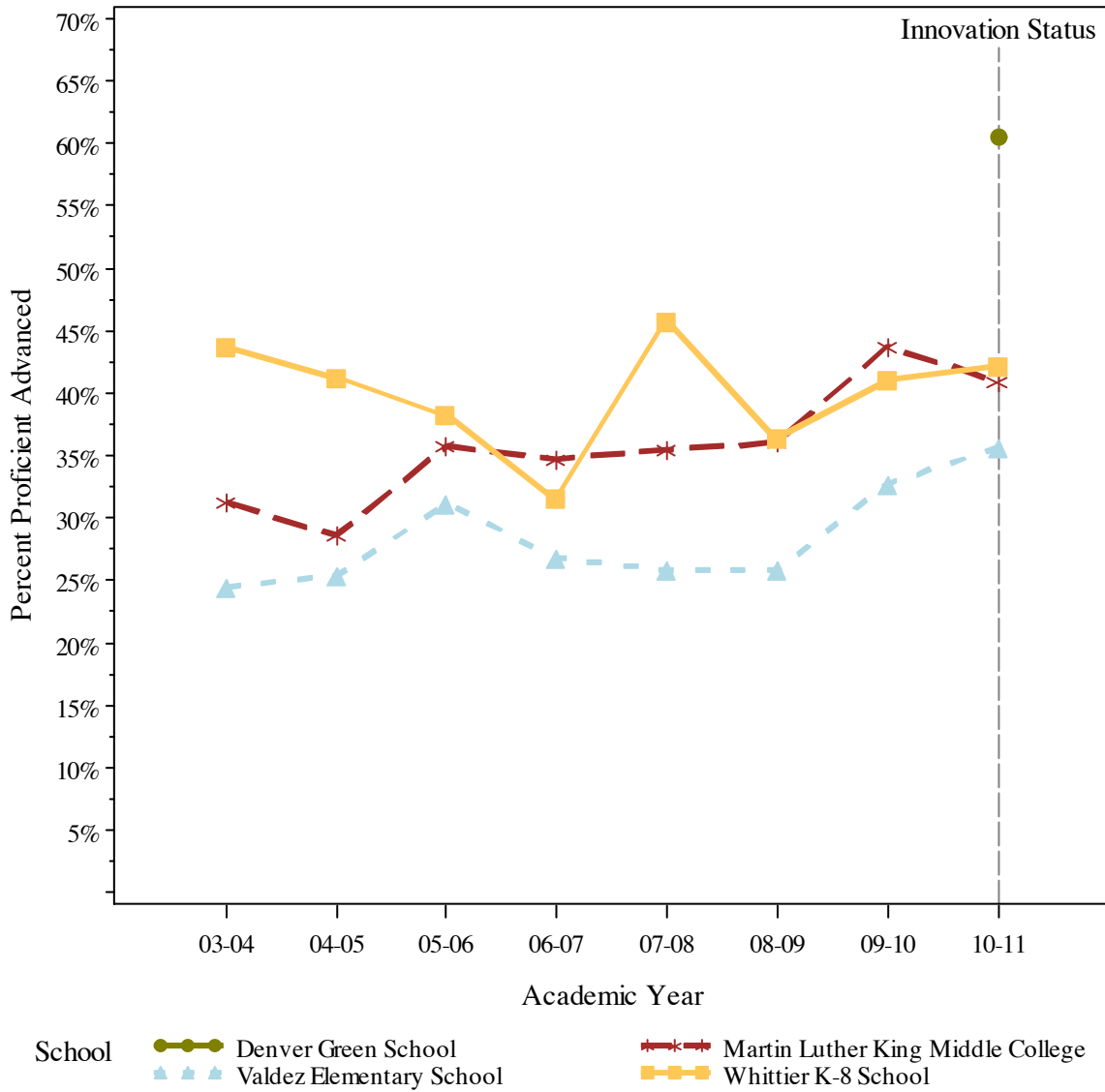


### Percent Proficient/Advanced in Math

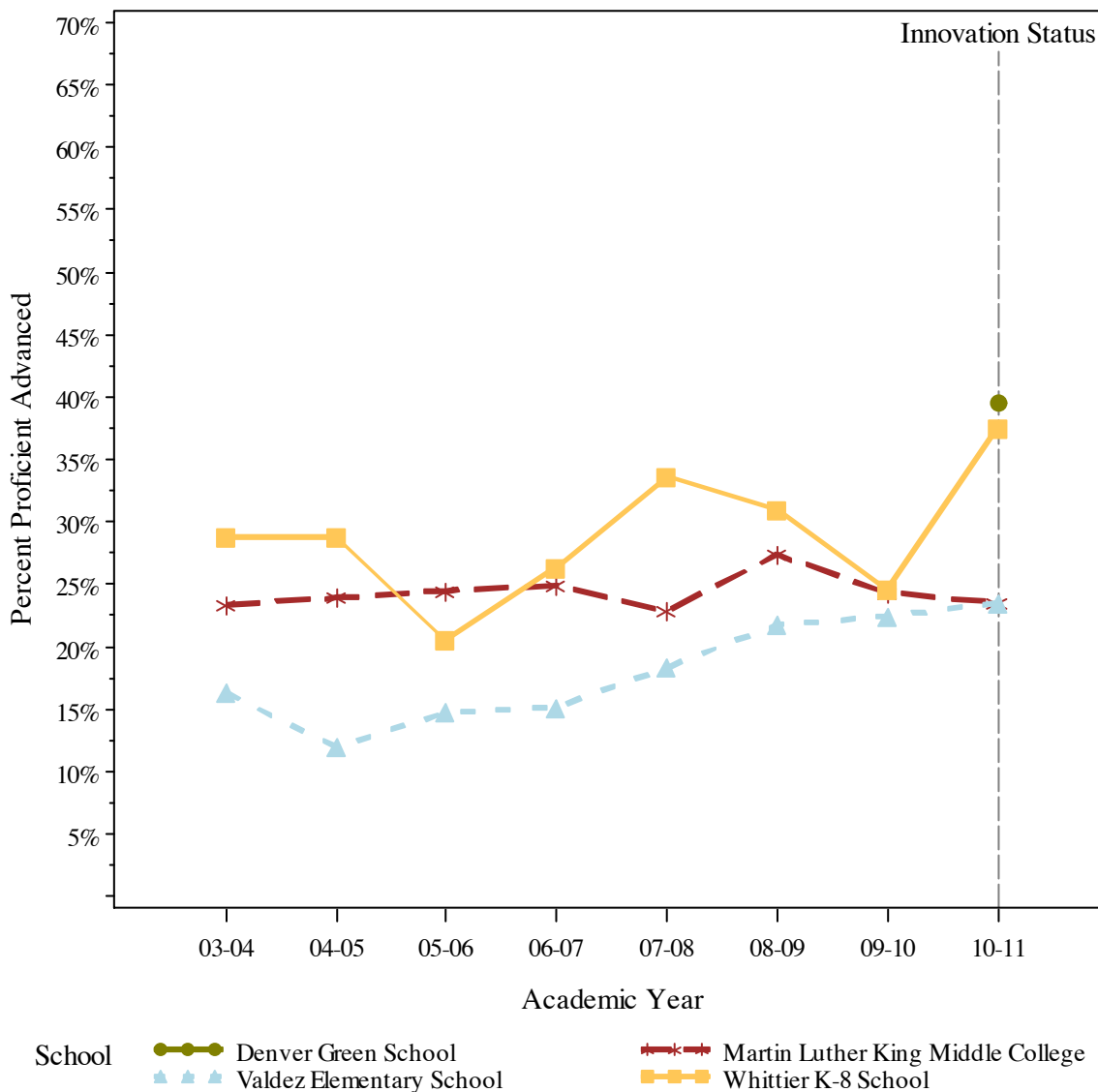




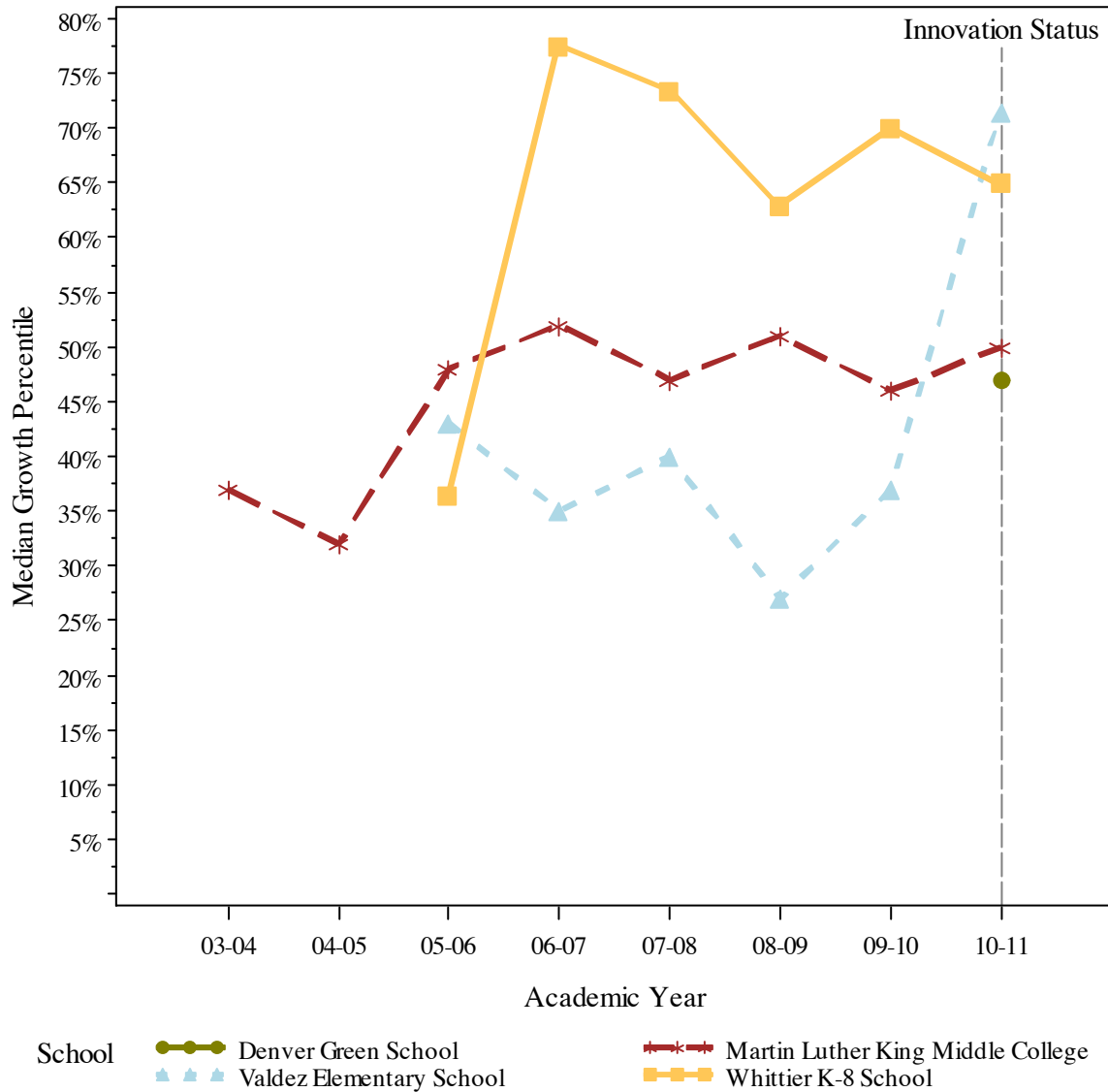
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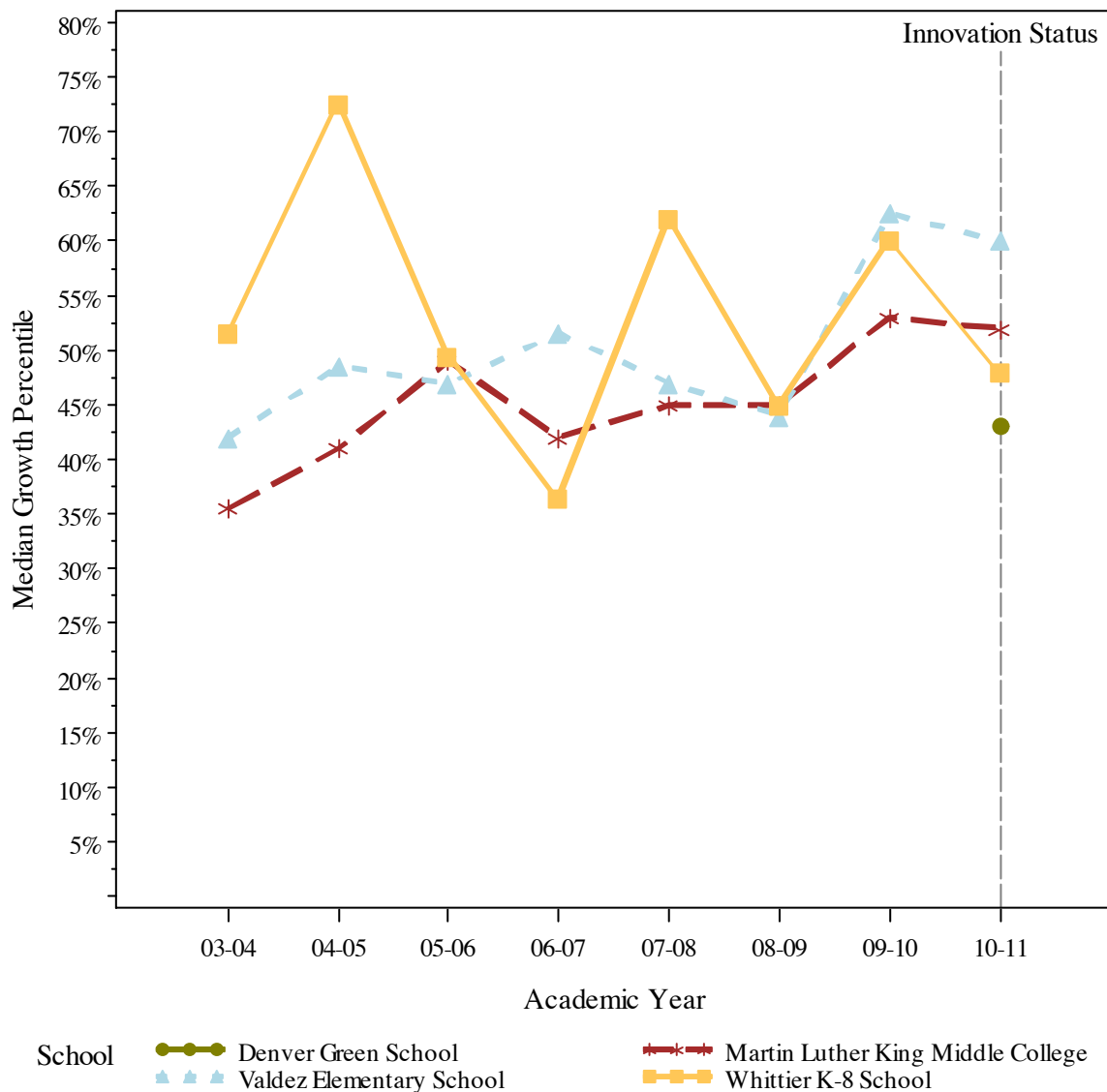
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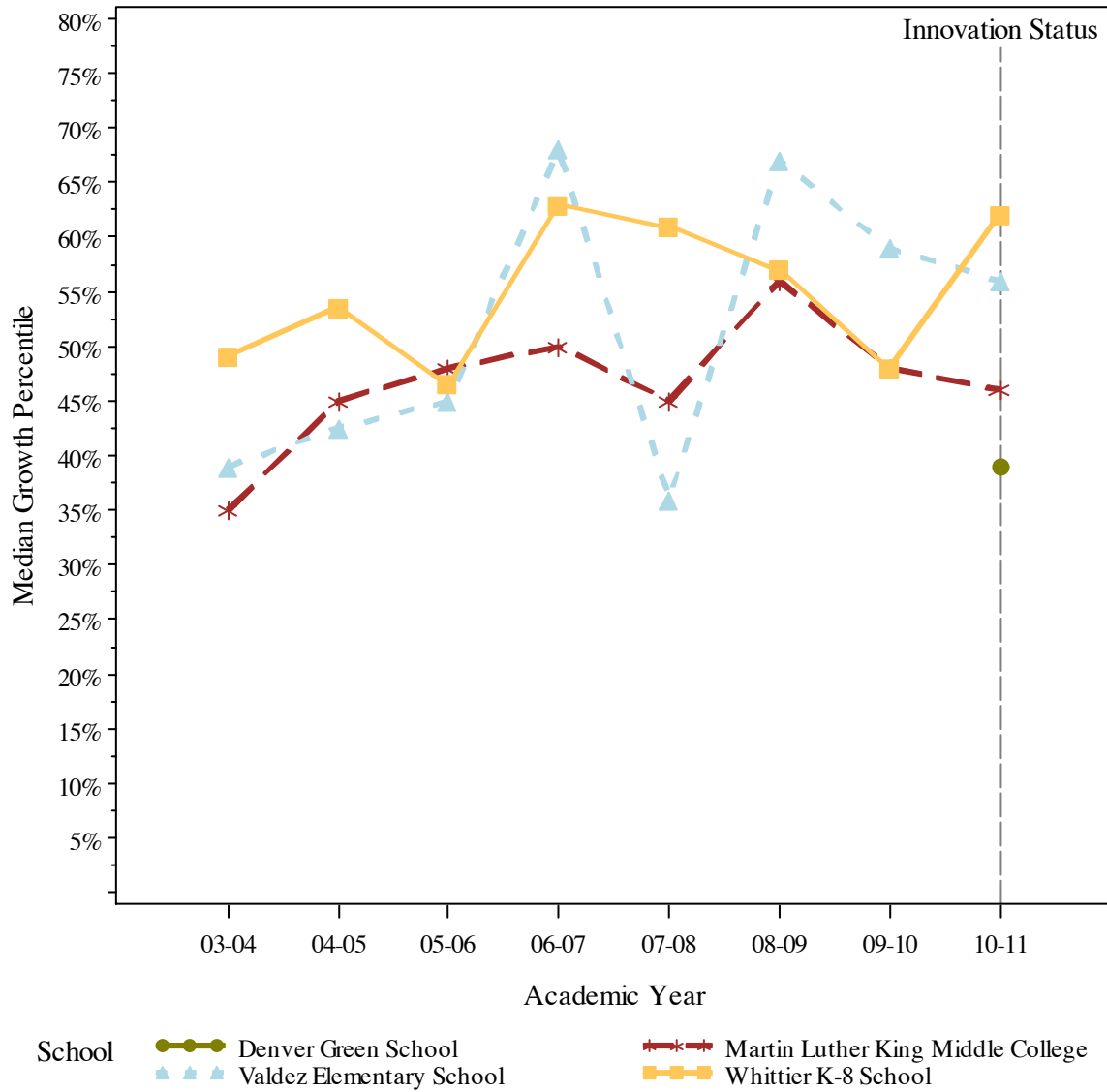
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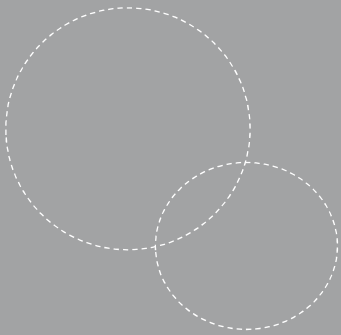
### Median Growth Percentile in Reading



### Median Growth Percentile in Writing







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