The Achievement School District

Lessons from Tennessee

PUBLIC IMPACT
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BY PUBLIC IMPACT

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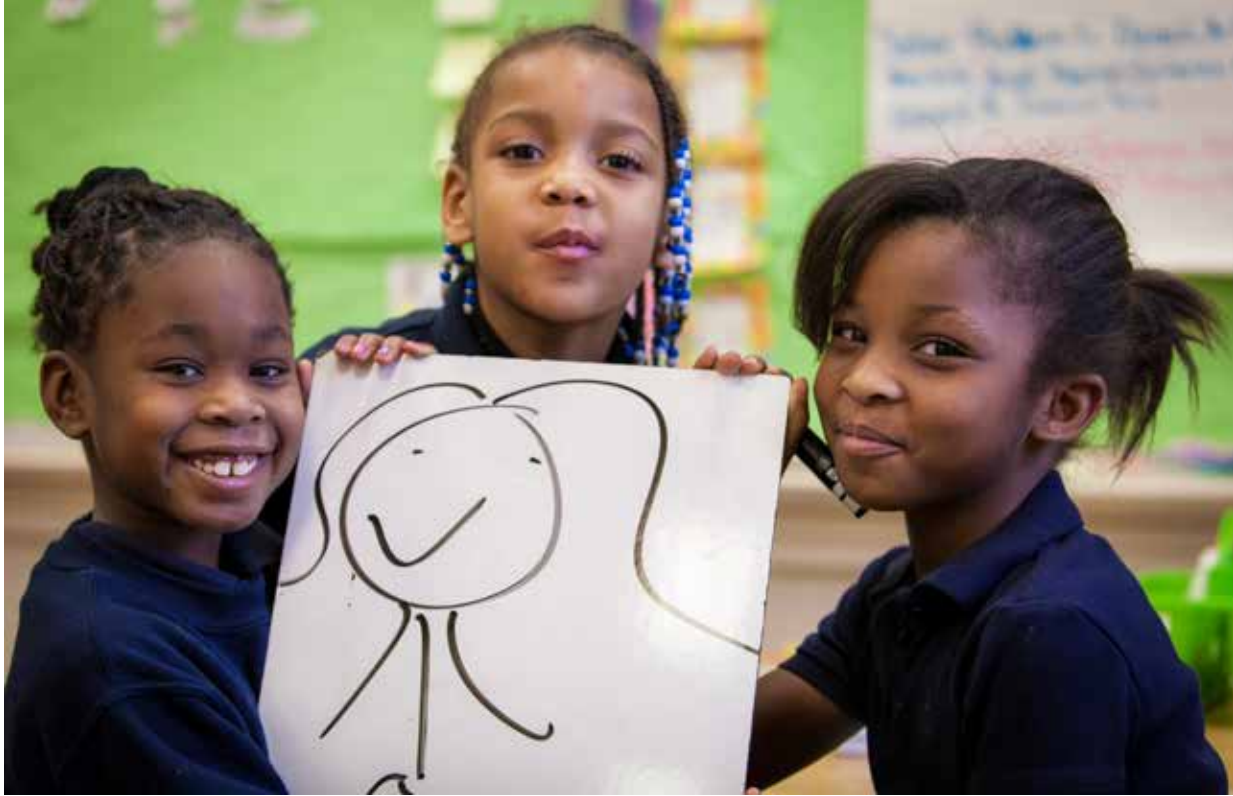
Executive Summary ·

Tennessee's successful bid in 2010 for a $500 million federal Race to the Top (RTTT) award accelerated the state's establishment of the Achievement School District (ASD), a statewide district intended to turn around the state's lowest-performing schools. Though modeled on Louisiana's Recovery School District (RSD), the ASD is forging its own path. With efforts focused in Memphis, which has the state's highest concentration of low-performing schools, the ASD is implementing strategies that contrast with the RSD in New Orleans in terms of scale, pace, and school choice. Whereas the RSD expanded to include most New Orleans schools after Hurricane Katrina, the ASD has taken a more staged approach in Memphis. And unlike New Orleans' all-choice charter school enrollment system, the ASD strategy preserves the traditional public school model of community-based, neighborhood schools. With different contexts driving their genesis and implementation, the ASD and RSD and other portfolio districts necessarily look different. State laws and implementation policies and practices should reflect these differences, as in the ASD and RSD.

This report aims to add to the growing body of knowledge regarding statewide turnaround dis-

tricts through the examination of ASD implementation in six areas:

1. **Public school governance.** Legislative adjustments made two years following the enactment of the ASD provided it with the autonomy and authority necessary to implement a statewide turnaround strategy, and informed a state-authorized district-level turnaround strategy. Collaboration coupled with competition has resulted in positive student outcomes for ASD schools and district-run turnaround schools in the Memphis Innovation Zone (iZone). The ASD's growing footprint in Memphis, along with the expansion of the iZone and district-authorized charter schools, has rapidly transformed Shelby County Schools, which encompasses Memphis, into an urban school district where nearly one-third of schools operate autonomously from the traditional district governance model.

2. **Schools and operators.** With a focus on ensuring high-quality school options for all students and universal access to high-quality schools realized through neighborhood-based enrollment, the ASD is betting that autonomous schools

will drive school improvement for the lowest-performing schools faster than traditional district efforts, and will show that charters can succeed with zoned enrollment. The ASD is relying on a diverse portfolio of local and national charter school operators to deliver high-quality school options within neighborhood-based school feeder patterns.

3. **Educator talent.** The ASD has worked to increase the retention of its most effective teachers and leaders in its Achievement Schools, which it runs directly, and to recruit local leaders and operators for its charter schools. But a growing market of charter, ASD, and iZone schools is taxing the talent supply. The ASD is partnering with Shelby County Schools and local funders to develop a citywide strategy for recruiting, training, and retaining effective teachers and leaders to ensure a long-term sustainable talent pipeline.

4. **Funding education reform.** Aligned support between local and national funders has enhanced the ASD's ability to carry out its work. The ASD has benefitted from partnerships between the state education agency and philanthropy to recruit charter operators and develop a sustainable talent pipeline.

5. **Equitable access to quality schools.** The ASD is relying on its increasingly diverse portfolio of neighborhood schools to ensure that all students, especially those with special needs, have equal access to high-quality school options. The ASD uses its authorizing authority to hold schools accountable for meeting the needs of all students.

6. **Community engagement and participation.** The ASD's strategy reflects a core belief that community engagement must start early and must be the joint responsibility of all levels—district, operator, and school—for turnaround efforts to gain traction and credibility. Hence the ASD conducted early efforts to build trust with families and community members of low-performing schools. The ASD works with operators to implement strategic community engagement, and it has aligned its neighborhood school selection process with its strategy for eliciting community engagement in the school selection and matching process.

With its focus on providing autonomy for school leaders and nonprofit organizations to run low-performing neighborhood schools, the ASD's long-term legacy will likely reflect most on whether charter schools are able to have the same kind of impact on student learning with zoned enrollment as they have in choice environments. Charters in the ASD show initial signs of success, but at only three years into implementation, the ASD's full impact here remains to be seen.

In the short term, the Tennessee experience illuminates other important lessons. First, because community contexts shape strategy and policy, portfolio districts each look different. Contextual differences have shaped state laws and implementation policies and practices in Tennessee and Louisiana that will likely yield different lessons on turnaround districts. Second, a sufficient and sustainable talent pipeline is critical to support the growth of high-quality school options. Alignment with community partners, particularly philanthropists, can help with recruiting, training, and retaining high-performing teachers and leaders. Further, the education and school leaders implementing change need clear, honest communication with the students, parents, and community members directly affected by the change. They must be clear about mission, goals, and outcomes to build trust with the communities they are trying to serve and affected communities need to be engaged and empowered to participate effectively in the change process. Finally, the Tennessee experience demonstrates how statewide districts can be used to affect district-led turnaround efforts as well. In Memphis, the ASD has helped elicit strong district efforts to address low-performing schools—demonstrating the power and potential of collaboration and competition between a statewide turnaround district and local districts.

As more statewide districts come into existence, the new path Tennessee has forged and continues to evolve suggests that every state may have a different story to tell.

Introduction ·

Public education in Tennessee reached a critical point in 2011. Abysmal student performance on the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)[1] had set the wheels in motion for education reform in Tennessee. The state ranked 41st nationally in fourth-grade reading, 46th in fourth-grade math, 39th in eighth-grade reading, and 42nd in eighth-grade math—despite state assessments showing proficiency rates close to 90 percent or better.[2] Consequently, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce gave Tennessee an "F" for Truth in Advertising about Student Proficiency in its 2007 state report card on educational effectiveness.[3] When the Obama administration announced the federal Race to the Top (RTTT) grant competition in 2009, Tennessee Governor Phil Bredesen recognized the opportunity to fuel education reform. Under his leadership, the state developed a comprehensive education reform plan focused on raising academic standards, improving teacher effectiveness, expanding high-quality charter school options, and turning around low-performing schools. Demonstrating the state's bipartisan commitment to reform, Tennessee's Republican legislature passed Democratic Governor Bredesen's First to the Top Act[4] on Janu-

ary 15, 2010, three days before the state submitted its RTTT application. The act enabled the state to execute the reform plan set forth in the application, including giving the state's education commissioner authority to establish the Achievement School District (ASD), a statewide district charged with turning around the state's lowest-performing schools. Accelerated by its $500 million RTTT award, Tennessee embarked on a path to comprehensive education reform. In 2012, the ASD took over its first cohort of failing schools.

Though modeled after Louisiana's Recovery School District (RSD), the ASD is forging its own path as a statewide turnaround district. In Louisiana, the devastation of Hurricane Katrina galvanized the political will and operating conditions for the RSD to assume control of more than a hundred academically unacceptable schools in New Orleans.[5] The RSD was an essential mechanism for state and local leaders to replace a system of failing schools in a mismanaged district with a new and better system of public schools.[6] In Tennessee, sheer resolve to turn around low student performance, close race-based achievement gaps, and address large inequalities in its school system,[7] boosted by

the state's RTTT award, is driving transformative changes to K–12 public education. In Memphis, part of Tennessee's largest school district with the highest concentration of very low-performing schools, labeled Priority schools (see Figure 1), the ASD is leading the way.
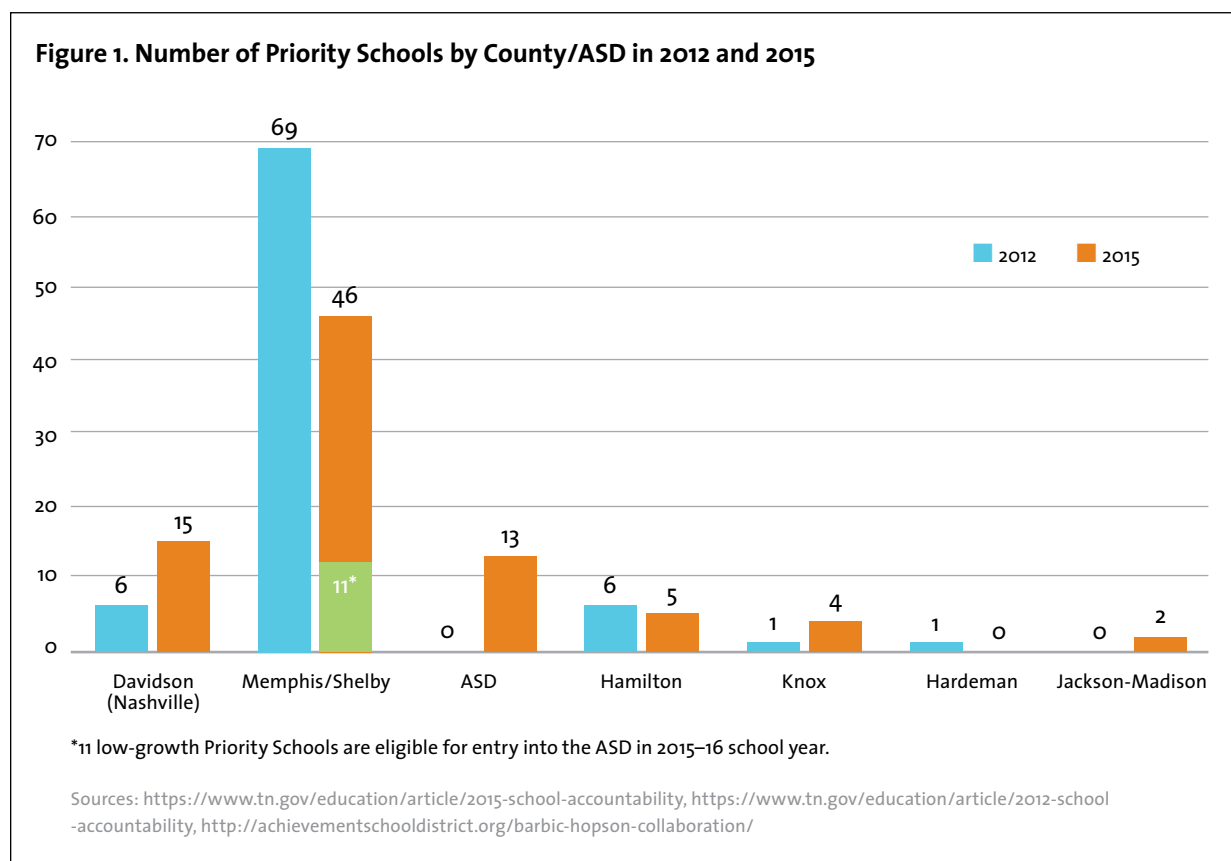
This report

Marking the 10-year anniversary of Katrina, New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO) recently released a retrospective report, *Ten Years in New Orleans: Public School Resurgence and the Path Ahead,*[8] examining the key trends and developments that resulted in the transformation of education in New Orleans, successes achieved, challenges ahead, and the critical role that the RSD played in redefining public education.

Other state legislatures have created statewide turnaround districts, including Michigan in 2011, Virginia in 2013, and Nevada in 2015, and others, including Texas, Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Missis-sippi, are considering them.[9] As this approach gains momentum, education reformers are taking stock of results to date and the road ahead.[10]

This report adds to the growing body of knowledge on statewide turnaround districts by examining the ways in which conditions intrinsic to Tennessee and particularly Memphis—where ASD efforts have been focused—informed and influenced the ASD's strategic decisions. Paralleling the recent NSNO report,[11] this report examines the ASD's decisions, implementation, and impact in six critical areas:

1. **Public school governance:** Focuses on how the ASD redefines the role of government to serve primarily as a regulator of educational outcomes and equity, empowering schools and educators to make decisions directly for their students, and the broader impact this has on school governance in Memphis schools.

2. **Schools and operators:** Highlights strategies and conditions that facilitated the rapid growth of charter schools and charter networks to

Figure 1. Number of Priority Schools by County/ASD in 2012 and 2015

*11 low-growth Priority Schools are eligible for entry into the ASD in 2015–16 school year.

Sources: https://www.tn.gov/education/article/2015-school-accountability, https://www.tn.gov/education/article/2012-school-accountability, http://achievementschooldistrict.org/barbic-hopson-collaboration/

turn around the lowest-performing schools in Memphis.

3. **Educator talent:** Describes the strategies that expand the pipeline of highly effective educators available to teach in Memphis' lowest-performing schools.

4. **Funding for education reforms:** Outlines how federal funds and philanthropic support have contributed to the reforms in the ASD and Memphis.

5. **Equitable access to quality schools:** Clarifies the strategies and conditions needed to ensure that the ASD reforms contribute to a public education system that serves all Memphis students well, particularly the most vulnerable.

6. **Community engagement and participation:** Reflects on challenges and successes in building demand and support for the transformation of public schools through the ASD.

The ASD today

The ASD's mission is to move the bottom 5 percent of Tennessee schools into the top 25 percent within five years,[12] while ensuring the high-quality operation and outcomes of ASD schools.[13] Through the ASD, the state commissioner of education has authority to remove "Priority" schools—those in the bottom 5 percent of all Tennessee schools—from the oversight of the local board of education, placing them in the ASD for a minimum of five years.[14] Although it can do this statewide, the ASD focused on Memphis because of its high concentration of Priority schools. In 2012, of the state's 85 Priority schools, 69 were in Memphis. By the 2014–15 school year, Memphis had 46 schools on the state's Priority status list[15] (see Figure 1, page 6).
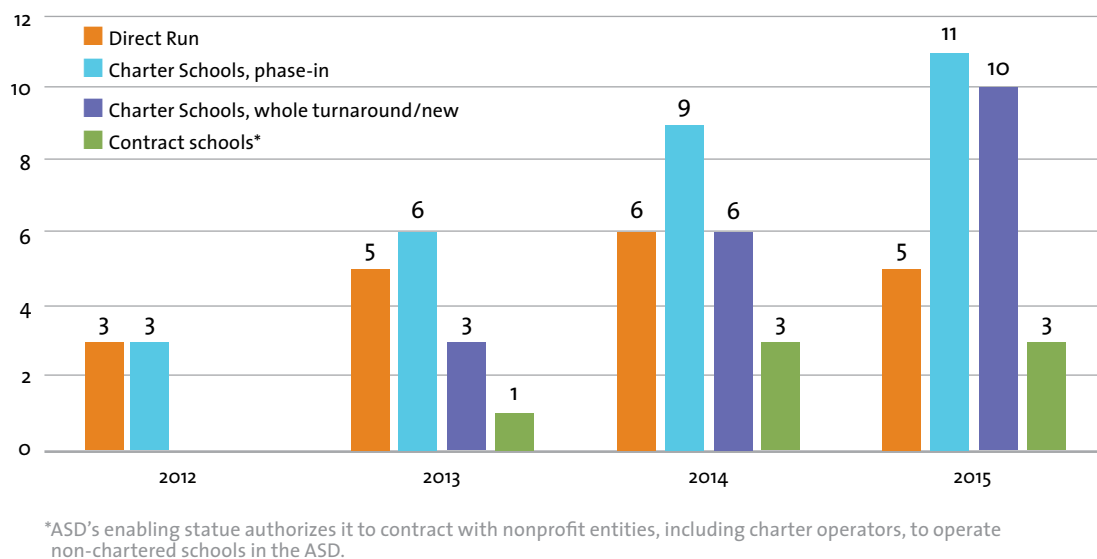
The ASD leadership team considers several factors in deciding which schools to pull into the ASD. First, 2015 legislation requires the ASD to exclude for one year any Priority school achieving the state's highest student growth ratings.[16] Among remaining eligible schools, the ASD's primary interest is that the needs of every Priority school are addressed somehow; for example, is the district planning its own intervention? The ASD also considers the Priority school's feeder pattern and the potential for scaled impact, and community input about the prospects and fit of charter operators interested in managing its neighborhood's schools.

In 2015–16, 29 ASD schools—27 in Memphis and two in Nashville—will serve more than 10,000 students [17] (see Figures 1 and 2, pages 6 and 8). ASD schools in Memphis are projected to serve 8 percent of the total Shelby County Schools enrollment.

Technically a division of the Tennessee Department of Education, the ASD operates like a local education agency (LEA),[18] and may directly operate schools, authorize charter schools, or contract with other nonprofit providers to run schools under its jurisdiction.[19] Both direct-run schools (or "Achievement Schools") and charter schools in the ASD operate autonomously and are held to the same expectations, but neither are independent LEAs. The ASD gives per-pupil allotments directly to schools, and helps broker services (transportation and food services, for example) for all ASD schools as requested

Figure 2. Number and Type of ASD Schools 2012–2015

Legend:
- Direct Run
- Charter Schools, phase-in
- Charter Schools, whole turnaround/new
- Contract schools*

2012: Direct Run 3, Charter Schools phase-in 3

2013: Direct Run 5, Charter Schools phase-in 6, Charter Schools whole turnaround/new 3, Contract schools 1

2014: Direct Run 6, Charter Schools phase-in 9, Charter Schools whole turnaround/new 6, Contract schools 3

2015: Direct Run 5, Charter Schools phase-in 11, Charter Schools whole turnaround/new 10, Contract schools 3

*ASD's enabling statue authorizes it to contract with nonprofit entities, including charter operators, to operate non-chartered schools in the ASD.

by operators. As of the 2015–16 school year, the ASD has five direct-run schools and 24 schools run by a variety of nonprofit operators (see Figure 2).

Data for the 2014–15 school year released by the ASD in July 2015 shows that ASD schools are making progress, though improvements in reading remains a statewide challenge.[20]

- Students in ASD elementary and middle schools made greater proficiency gains in science and math than their statewide peers.
- Neighborhood high schools averaged 10-point gains in English, but elementary and middle school student proficiency in reading mirrored a decline in proficiency statewide, down 1.5 points compared with the previous year.
- All ASD elementary and middle schools averaged the second-highest level of growth on the state's student growth scale; ASD schools in their second and third years of operation averaged the highest level of growth on the growth scale.

- Four out of five direct-run Achievement Schools achieved the highest level of growth on the state's student growth scale.
- Students in charter-operated neighborhood turnaround high schools—where operators take over all grades at once—averaged double-digit gains in Algebra and English, and made greater proficiency gains on end-of-course exams in five out of six tested subject areas[21] than their peers statewide.

Further, according to ASD analysis, the cumulative impact of ASD, iZone, and other school turnaround initiatives is translating into higher student achievement in Priority schools. Since the ASD began its interventions in 2012–13, the proficiency threshold for Priority school status in grades 3 through 8 has risen from 16.7 percent in 2012 to 26.0 percent in 2015—meaning that fewer than 1 in 6 students in Priority schools were on grade level in 2012, versus 1 in 4 students by 2015.[22]

Implementation and Early Lessons · · · · · · · · · · · ·

The ASD's implementation is midstream. Not yet five years into the work of turning around schools, it is too early to assess the ASD's full impact in Tennessee (particularly Memphis) or speculate about its legacy for other statewide districts. But the ASD is forging a path that clearly departs from the RSD's in some key areas, providing different lessons from its statewide turnaround district.

Public school governance

In the 10 years since Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans has redefined school governance by separating district governance and oversight from the work of directly operating schools.[23] The entirety of the ASD's legacy regarding school governance remains to be seen, but the current portfolio of Memphis public schools already reflects a very different governance structure than what was in place five years ago. In 2011–12, before the ASD took over its first cohort of schools, Memphis had just 25 district-authorized independent charter schools,[24] alongside 177 traditional district schools.[25] In 2015–16, public schools in Memphis operate under a diverse set of governance structures: Of the 205 public

schools in Shelby County, which includes Memphis (see "Shelby County Schools and the District iZone," page 13), 90 now operate under an alternative governance structure. This includes 45 charters authorized by Shelby County Schools, and 18 "Innovation Schools," which operate with significant autonomy but remain under district control.[26] The ASD authorizes 19 Memphis charter schools, and has five Memphis schools it runs directly plus three contract schools.[27] This significant shift in public school governance traces back to the ASD's establishment and key strategies and decisions of state and district leaders.

ASD implementation revealed authorities and autonomies necessary to turn around low-performing schools.

Beginning in 2011, legislation addressed two restrictions that hampered the ASD's effectiveness in its first two years: lack of chartering authority, and the requirement to follow state agency rules for hiring and procurement. Early implementation efforts revealed that the ASD needed more autonomy to effect the magnitude of change that state leaders sought. The ASD wanted to give leaders of low-

Perhaps because they were the first state-wide turnaround districts, the ASD and the RSD are often held in comparison. Because the ASD was modeled on the RSD, the two are similar in important ways. Both are rooted in legislation giving the state executive agency the authority to identify and operate low-performing schools.[1] Both Tennessee and Louisiana had set the improvement of educational options for students as urgent state-wide goals; both had strong accountability systems in place to identify and intervene in low-performing schools; both relied on growing their charter sectors to meet the need for high-quality school options. But some significant contextual differences led the ASD to blaze its own trail.

SCALE AND PACE. In New Orleans, the pace and scale of the RSD's work was driven by the need to re-open schools following the widespread devastation wrought by a natural disaster. Legislation enacted following Hurricane Katrina greatly expanded the RSD, immediately placing within the RSD 114 low-performing New Orleans schools.[2] The ASD has had time for staged implementation, allowing the district to add schools as it builds capacity to manage them.[3]

ALL-CHOICE SYSTEM VS. NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS. In New Orleans, post-Katrina conditions supported an all-choice enrollment system. Damage was uneven and the number and neighborhood of returning students unpredictable.[4] Furthermore, the RSD was philosophically committed to offering families choice in school selection. In New Orleans, students may apply to and attend any RSD school. In Memphis, ASD schools remain a system of neighborhood schools. The ASD's strategy is predicated on a zoned enrollment plan based on school feeder patterns—groups of elementary schools that feed a middle school, and middle schools that feed a high school. To support the zoned enrollment plan, the ASD attempts to pull in schools within feeder patterns. In the ASD, any student zoned for an ASD school may apply to any ASD school, but enrollment priority is given to students in the neighborhood zone. Leftover seats are allocated by lottery to students from outside the neighborhood zone. The ASD strategy therefore preserves the traditional public school model of community-based, neighborhood schools.

NOTES

1. The RSD was created by the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) pursuant to contentious legislation enacted in 2003 giving the BESE authority to take over chronically low-performing schools. The ASD was created by the Tennessee Commissioner of Education pursuant to legislation enacted in 2010 giving the commissioner authority to create a special statewide district to intervene in consistently failing schools.

2. Vaughan, D., et al. (2011). *Transforming public education in New Orleans: The Recovery School District*. New Orleans, LA: Tulane University's Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Educa-tion Initiatives. Retrieved from http://www.coweninstitute .com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/History-of-the-RSD -Report-2011.pdf

3. Malika Anderson interview, March 19, 2015.

4. Vaughan, D., et al. (2011). *Transforming public education in New Orleans: The Recovery School District*. New Orleans, LA: Tulane University's Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives. Retrieved from http://www.coweninstitute .com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/History-of-the-RSD -Report-2011.pdf

As a state administrative entity, the ASD quickly found that the systems and approval processes of a state-run entity hampered its ability to nimbly negotiate the day-to-day operational challenges of running schools. The U.S. Department of Education expected that the ASD would run some schools directly, and the ASD also wanted to demonstrate an immediate impact of the RTTT funds. Hence the ASD's first cohort of schools comprised three direct-run schools in Memphis' Frayser community, which has the highest concentration of Priority schools in Memphis. But the ASD needed the kinds of flexibilities exercised by local education agencies (LEAs) to respond quickly on staffing and financial matters. For instance, state budgeting processes prohibited the ASD from hiring staff as it selected schools into the ASD due to preset state caps on "position numbers." To improve the ASD's operational efficiency regarding direct-run schools, legislative amendments in 2012 gave it LEA-like authorities.[30] Technically, the ASD remains an "organizational unit" of the Tennessee Department of Education,[31] but it may receive and spend funds like an LEA and has the autonomy and authority of an LEA for procuring goods and services.[32]

The ASD prompted district-level efforts to give turnaround schools ASD-like autonomy.

During its first year of operation, the ASD recognized that it could not build the capacity to serve all 85 of the state's Priority schools in a satisfactory timeframe. The ASD's leadership championed legislation to give school districts ASD-like autonomies to conduct their own turnarounds of Priority schools.[33] In 2012, the Tennessee state legislature gave traditional districts authority to establish Innovation Zones ("iZones") and exercise a range of autonomies over financial, program, staffing, and time allocation decisions in the interest of accelerating turnarounds.[34] Of the five districts where ASD-eligible schools are located, Shelby County Schools, Metro Nashville Public Schools, and Hamilton County Schools (where Chattanooga is located) have implemented iZones (see "Shelby County Schools and the District iZone," page 13).

Shelby County Schools is authorizing new charter schools at an increasing rate, and the district

performing schools the autonomies that would enable them to identify and implement changes necessary to turn around their schools. Charter operators seemed best suited to that approach. Tennessee's charter sector was small, but included several high-quality operators in Memphis and Nashville.[28] The ASD needed time to recruit and match high-quality operators willing to take on turnaround schools, and allow them to hire staff and set up operations within the ASD. Further, while the ASD could contract with charter operators to conduct school turnarounds, it could not authorize "new start" schools. In Tennessee, only local school boards had that authority. Tennessee did not have a statewide charter authorizer to provide an alternative authorizer to local districts, which have no incentive to approve charters that are commonly perceived as competitors for district resources. That changed with 2011 legislation allowing the ASD to authorize new-start charter schools within the ASD.[29] The ASD effectively became a statewide charter authorizer, enhancing the state's ability to attract local and national charter operators to serve students zoned to Priority schools.

is committed to the iZone model. Multiple factors contributed to the growth of iZone and district-authorized charter schools—including substantive improvements to the Tennessee charter law, new sources of charter start-up funding, and federal School Improvement Grants (SIG) that facilitated the iZone model—but many policymakers and school leaders credit the ASD for putting pressure on the Shelby district to embrace reforms that provide a more rapid and dramatic response to under-performing schools.[35]

The ASD's commitment to district collaboration created reciprocal benefits for the ASD and the Memphis school district.

The ASD has built bridges with local districts and nurtured friendly competitive relationships.[36] Though placement of a Priority school into the ASD releases the local district from accountability for it, the ASD's example nevertheless pressures the local district to turn its schools around, so they don't get pulled into the ASD. The 2012 iZone legislation enables districts to more effectively address the needs of their low-performing schools, relieving pressure on the ASD to take on too many schools too quickly, so it can scale up at a measured pace with a focus on quality. Furthermore, school autonomies provided through the iZone model build the district's capacity to receive ASD schools when they return to Shelby County Schools' jurisdiction.

The ASD recognizes the strong results of Shelby County's iZone, and has attempted to work collaboratively with the district to ensure that as many Priority schools as possible are being served by either the ASD or the district's iZone. Before pulling schools into the ASD, the ASD consults with the district on its plans for Priority schools and considers whether schools will be addressed through the Shelby County iZone.[37] Legislation enacted in spring 2015 precludes placement in the ASD of Priority schools with the highest levels of student growth in the previous year, so only iZones may conduct turnarounds on these schools.[38] In 2015–16, Shelby County Schools has 46 Priority schools,[39] but will implement school improvement strategies in only 28 of them. Of the remaining 18, seven are excluded from ASD eligibility because of high student growth in 2014–15 (see Figure 1, page 6).

How will schools return to their home districts? That remains unclear. Questions persist regarding how the home district remains fiscally healthy as its footprint first shrinks when the ASD takes over failing schools, and then expands as some schools return to district governance. The New Orleans experience offers few lessons for Memphis on these questions, since the RSD took over its schools all at once, and policy puts the decision to return in the hands of the charter operators themselves rather than RSD leadership.

The district's fiscal health and stability have implications for how schools return to their home districts. ASD legislation specifies that direct-run Achievement Schools remain in the ASD for at least five years, and charter-operated schools for 10 years (the length of all charters).[40] The law also outlines criteria for when the state would begin planning for a school's transition and when the plan would be implemented.[41] But the original ASD legislation, subsequent amendments, and education agency administrative rules do not fully address what happens when schools return to their home districts.[42] For example, no regulation or state policy addresses whether schools will be required to retain ASD teaching staff.[43]

At this point, the Tennessee experience suggests that even with staged implementation, the statewide district's initial focus has been on getting off the ground. The state needs more time to monitor the pace of school improvement and determine an appropriate timeline and process for returning schools to the district. At the beginning of a long turnaround runway, it is difficult to anticipate the consequences to the local school, the statewide turnaround district, and individual turnaround schools. The ASD, Tennessee Department of Education, and local districts are, out of necessity, working through these issues together as they go along.

While the ASD was getting up and running, the former Memphis City Schools and Shelby County Schools (the district governing schools surrounding Memphis, Shelby's county seat) were engaged in a contentious merger. Property taxes from the county supported the city school district's budget, and the city served the majority of the students in the county. Moreover, Memphis City Schools served the overwhelming majority of minority, low-income, and low-performing students in the county, and as noted elsewhere in this report, had the highest concentration of schools in the state's bottom 5 percent. The merger was finalized in 2013. Cited as the largest and most complex school district merger in U.S. history, the new Shelby County Schools (SCS) combined 47,000 predominately white students in Shelby County with 103,000 predominately low-income, minority students in Memphis City Schools into the 14th-largest school district in the nation.[1] Following the merger, six municipal zones within Shelby County applied for and received independent school district status.[2]

Since most "Priority" schools were located in Memphis, the merger changed the governing body accountable for addressing these low-performing schools. Exercising the authority granted in 2012 legislation,

Shelby County Schools established an Innovation Zone ("iZone") to turn around low-performing schools. School leaders in the iZone had a range of autonomies over staffing, budgeting, calendar, and curriculum, and were encouraged to pilot innovative educational models intended to improve student outcomes. Seven Priority schools in Memphis comprised the first cohort of SCS iZone schools. The district added six more Memphis schools in 2013–14, and another four in 2014–15.[3] In 2015–16, the iZone will grow to 19 schools serving 9,413 students, or 8 percent of Shelby County's enrollment.

The first two cohorts of Shelby County iZone schools demonstrated significant improvements in student academic performance. Eleven of the 13 schools have shown proficiency gains in reading, math, and science —with double-digit gains in math and science.[4] Given the shared goals of the ASD and the Shelby County iZone to turn around the city's lowest-performing schools, the performance of iZone schools provides a natural comparison point for ASD school performance. And given the degree of coordination between the ASD and iZone to serve Priority schools in Memphis, the collective performance of both ASD and iZone schools reflects the overall progress of RTTT initiatives to turn around the lowest-performing schools in the state.

NOTES

1. Zubrzycki, J. (2014, Jan. 3). *"Rival strategies for running schools put Memphis in hot seat."* Education Week. Retrieved from http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/01/09/16 hotseat.h33.html?intc=EW-QC14-TOC

2. The districts comprising Arlington, Bartlett, Collierville, Germantown, Millington, and Lakeland operate in parallel with Shelby County Schools and give enrollment priority to in-district students but accept out-of-district students for open seats. Zubrzycki, J. (2014, May 15). *"Plans for municipal districts move forward with Shelby County's cooperation."* Chalkbeat Tennessee. Retrieved from http://tn.chalkbeat .org/2014/05/15/plans-for-municipal-districts-move-forward -with-shelby-countys-cooperation/#.VckK7PlViko

3. Shelby County Schools Newsroom. (2015, April 2015). *"iZone schools focus on transformation through excellence."* Retrieved from http://www.scsnewsroom.com/index .php/2014-07-14-14-18-16/our-educators/item/270-izone -schools-focus-on-transformation-through-excellence

4. Shelby County Schools Newsroom. (2015, April 2015). *"iZone schools focus on transformation."* Retrieved http:// www.scsnewsroom.com/index.php/2014-07-14-14-18-16 /our-educators/item/270-izone-schools-focus-on-transfor mation-through-excellence

Schools and operators

The ASD's charter strategy unfolded within the greater context of Tennessee's efforts to grow the charter sector, which was sparked by the state's 2010 First to the Top education reform legislation (see "Tennessee Fund and Tennessee Charter School Incubator," below).

Before the ASD was established, Tennessee had a fledgling charter sector, with only 21 charter schools in 2010, serving around 5,000 public school students, located mostly in Nashville and Memphis.[44]

As in New Orleans, the establishment of a state-wide turnaround district—a key element of the First to the Top legislation—contributed to the hastened growth of the charter sector in Memphis. With power to authorize charter schools, the ASD provided an alternative to local school boards and could strategically recruit charter operators. The ASD's chartering authority also created incentives for high-quality, locally based operators to expand as neighborhood charter schools. In Tennessee, the number of charter schools grew from 29 in 2010–11 to 98 in 2015–16, with 21 in the ASD.[45] In Memphis, the number of charter schools grew from 22 in 2010–11[46] to 64 in 2015–16.[47] From its establishment in 2011 to the 2015–16 school year, the ASD has authorized 14 charter school organizations, 10 of which have collectively opened 19 charter schools in Memphis that serve 7,500 students (see Figure 3 for a list, page 15).[48] The ASD's charter growth reflects several key strategies discussed on the following pages.

TENNESSEE FUND AND TENNESSEE CHARTER SCHOOL INCUBATOR

The combination of Tennessee's 2010 First to the Top legislation and federal Race to the Top grant dramatically improved conditions for charter school growth in Tennessee, and positioned the charter sector as a primary mechanism for increasing the number of high-quality education options in underserved Tennessee communities.

One significant part of the First to the Top/RTTT plan, developed in partnership with the Charter School Growth Fund, called for the creation of a charter school investment fund to support the development and growth of high-quality charter operators in Tennessee. The resulting Tennessee Fund, anchored by RTTT funds and supported by Memphis and Nashville funders who already championed charter growth and education, demonstrated the state's financial ability to support the expansion of charter operators in Tennessee and augmented the ASD's ability to attract and recruit high-quality operators. (A 2011 federal Investing in Innovations grant secured by the ASD in partnership with New Schools for New Orleans [NSNO] provided additional funds to attract and recruit charter operators to implement school turnarounds.)

Another key strategy embodied in the RTTT application built on the recent establishment of a state-wide charter school incubator founded by Nashville Mayor Karl Dean. By the time the RTTT grant was submitted, the Tennessee Charter School Incubator was already helping to launch two charter middle schools in Memphis, and it was working to cultivate other local educators as school operators and help them open new charter schools. The work of the Tennessee Charter School Incubator provided the ASD with a new tool for identifying local, high-performing charter operators who could start and grow charter networks within the ASD.

Together the Charter School Growth Fund and Incubator helped create a pipeline of high-quality operators the ASD could recruit to open schools.

Figure 3. Charter School Operators Authorized by the Achievement School District

National Operators**
- Aspire Public Schools
- Green Dot Public Schools
- Scholar Academies
- Rocketship*

Local Operators
- Capstone Education
- Gestalt Schools
- Frayser Community Schools
- Knowledge Academies*
- Freedom Prep Academy
- Promisce Academy
- LEAD Public Schools*
- Libertas School of Memphis
- KIPP: Nashville*
- KIPP: Memphis

*Operators authorized in Nashville. All other operators are authorized in Memphis.

**National operators were all new to Tennessee when authorized by the ASD.

The ASD tapped local and national sources of turnaround operators.

The ASD's top criteria for selecting charter operators is a proven record of high-quality performance, a robust and internally aligned plan for supporting a school turnaround, and the operator's capacity to implement the plan. Given that, the ASD initially prioritized high-quality charter operators who were already in Tennessee to run its schools. In 2012, the ASD selected three locally based operators with proven records of serving low-performing students to run the ASD's first cohort of charter schools—two in Memphis and one in Nashville. For the second and third cohorts of charter schools, the ASD focused on bringing in successful national charter management organizations (CMOs). Through relationships that both the Charter School

Growth Fund and ASD leadership had with national charter operators, the ASD recruited such national CMOs as Philadelphia-based Scholar Academies and California-based Aspire (see Figure 3).

A combination of favorable conditions helped high-performing charter operators to replicate in Tennessee. Tennessee's charter school growth funds (see "Tennessee Fund and Tennessee Charter School Incubator," page 14), coupled with the ASD's access to facilities, eliminated traditional obstacles to charter growth. Moreover, as discussed below, the ASD offered a unique opportunity for charters to demonstrate that with the right autonomies, schools serving neighborhood-based feeder patterns can be high-performing schools. The ASD attracted operators to show that charters can be equally effective in zoned enrollment settings.

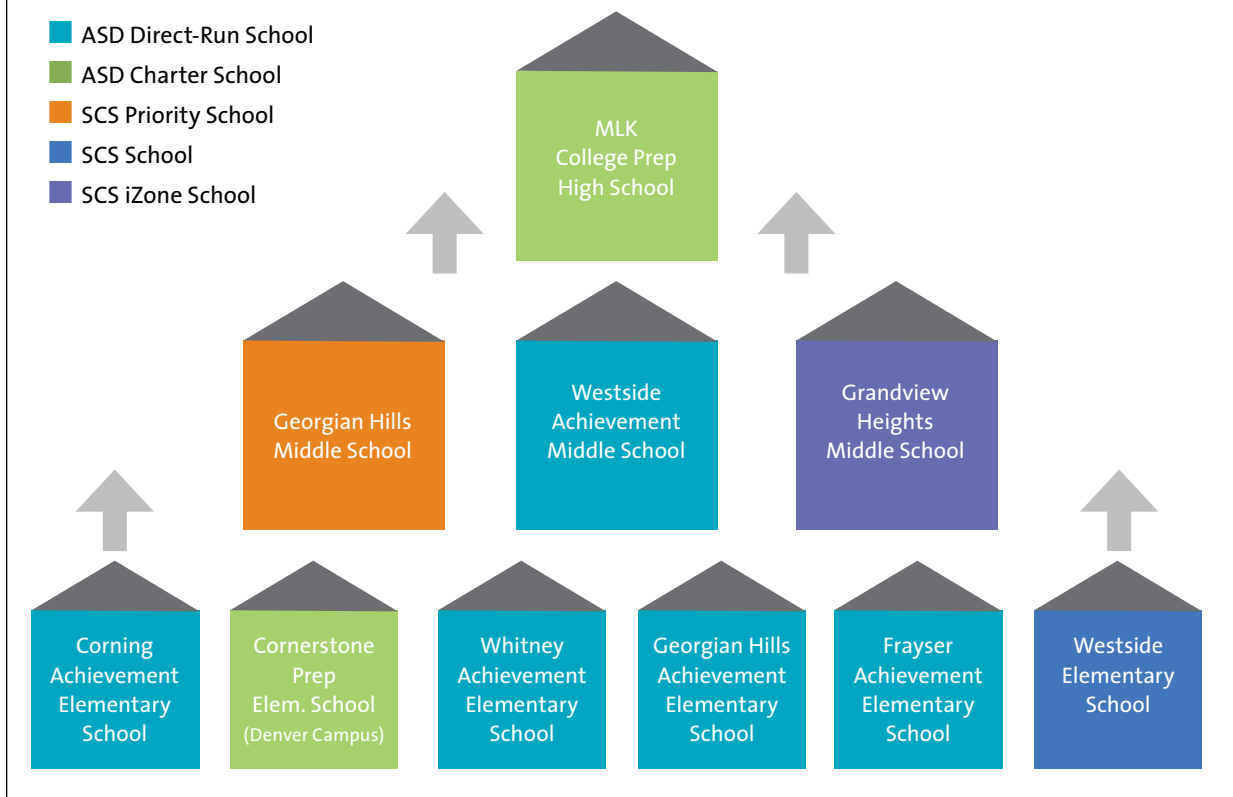## The ASD's selection and enrollment strategy is neighborhood focused.

The ASD's fundamental commitment to community underpins how it selects schools. Recognizing that schools in the bottom 5 percent tend to be clustered in communities, the ASD believes that educational outcomes within a community will improve if schools that feed into one another are simultaneously turned around. In other words, a high school will struggle to improve unless the middle schools that feed into it are transformed; and those middle schools will struggle unless the elementary schools that feed into it improve. For students to graduate from high school college- and career-ready, all schools within a feeder pattern must improve, not just individual schools. Hence, a philosophy that schools should be improved within feeder patterns helps guide the ASD's school selection. With its first cohort of schools, the ASD focused on Priority schools in an underperforming feeder pattern. In 2012, the ASD directly managed two elementary schools and the middle school their graduates attended in the Frayser community, a cluster of

Memphis neighborhoods with the highest number of ASD-eligible schools in the entire state. In subsequent years, the ASD has selected other schools within the Frayser feeder pattern for turnaround by charter operators (see Figure 4, page 17). In 2015–16, the ASD will serve nine feeder patterns in Memphis.

The ASD's commitment to neighborhood schools is also manifest through its zoned enrollment strategy. In the ASD, any student residing in an ASD school's zone is automatically eligible to attend, just as before the ASD's management of the school. Students in ASD enrollment zones may apply to attend any ASD school, but enrollment priority is given to students residing in the school's neighborhood zone. Leftover seats are allocated by lottery to students from outside the neighborhood zone. By prioritizing neighborhood students, the ASD and its charters are attempting to demonstrate that school autonomy, not student selection bias, drives academic excellence in great charter schools. The ASD maintains a commitment to choice, however. Legislation supported by the ASD and enacted in spring 2015 will open ASD charter enrollment to

Figure 4. Feeder Pattern in Memphis' Frayser Community

- ■ ASD Direct-Run School
- ■ ASD Charter School
- ■ SCS Priority School
- ■ SCS School
- ■ SCS iZone School

MLK College Prep High School

Georgian Hills Middle School

Westside Achievement Middle School

Grandview Heights Middle School

Corning Achievement Elementary School

Cornerstone Prep Elem. School (Denver Campus)

Whitney Achievement Elementary School

Georgian Hills Achievement Elementary School

Frayser Achievement Elementary School

Westside Elementary School

students residing outside ASD neighborhoods. But ASD charter schools cannot accept out-of-zone students until after an enrollment period giving preference to neighborhood students, and out-of-zone enrollment—limited to students who live in poverty, tested below proficient on annual state assessments in the previous year, or children of ASD teachers and staff—cannot exceed 25 percent of a school's population.[49]

The ASD's neighborhood focus yields several key benefits. First, it allows the ASD to meet urgent educational needs by immediately serving families where they are. Second, the neighborhood-based strategies increase the likelihood of continuity in education and minimal disruptions to families within neighborhoods. By using feeder patterns as a criterion for school selection, the ASD is increasing the likelihood that students enter middle school and high school on grade level, thereby increasing the likelihood of overall improved student outcomes for communities with historically low-performing schools. And even after ASD schools return to their home districts, students will attend neighborhood schools, again meaning minimal disruptions for families. The strategy also creates efficiencies for charter school operators, since they can focus efforts to build community relationships and achieve economies of scale with operational services such as transportation when schools are geographically proximate.

The ASD authorized a diverse mix of turnaround strategies and school models.

The state's RTTT plan emphasized turning around low-performing schools, and the state needed to demonstrate improvements for its highest-need students right away. So the ASD's strategy required identifying charter operators who were willing to do turnarounds, which it has succeeded in doing. Charter operators have employed both whole-school conversions (taking over all grades in a school at once) and phase-ins (growing one or more grades at a time) to turn around Priority schools (see Figure 4). Overall, the ASD has authorized more

whole-school turnarounds than phase-ins, a trend that may continue given Shelby County Schools' decision to stop allowing ASD operators to share with (or co-locate in) the Priority schools they are taking over beginning in 2015. In addition, YES Prep Public Schools' withdrawal from the ASD in 2015 suggests a growing Memphis preference for whole-school conversions: In spring 2015, months before YES Prep was to assume operations of Memphis' Airways Middle School, the CMO announced its decision to withdraw from the planned conversion, citing a lack of community support for the phase-in approach and its lack of experience with whole-school turnarounds.[50]

To meet a wide spectrum of student needs, the ASD is also focused on creating a diverse portfolio of high-quality school options. Beginning in 2014, it solicited charter operators to operate:[51]

- New alternative school models suitable for addressing the needs of expelled or suspended students and special education students, and for re-engaging student dropouts in Memphis.
- New innovative models that differ substantially from the highly structured model used by many high-performing schools, and involve a new or developing approach to educating students, such as blended learning.

The ASD opened its first neighborhood Montessori school in fall 2015. The ASD also opened its first two alternative schools operated by a national CMO, Pathways in Education, in Memphis in 2014.[52] Focused on helping at-risk youth obtain high school diplomas, Pathways offers year-round credit recovery classes to students in grades 7 to 12 and student dropouts.

The ASD's policies and practices are guided by feedback from charter operators.

In an effort to build and shape partnerships and collect feedback to inform turnarounds led by charter operators, the ASD and charter leaders within the ASD convened an Operator Advisory Council (OAC). Executive directors from about two-thirds of the charter operators in the ASD volunteer to represent the interests of all operators (for set terms) and sit on the council with top-level ASD staff. The OAC is co-chaired by an ASD staff member and a charter operator. The council identifies charter priorities at the beginning of each school year and organizes working groups around them. It invites other staff members of charter operators to serve on these working groups, expanding the opportunity for charter operators, their teachers and school leadership, to provide feedback on policies and practices that affect the operation of charter schools in the ASD. Initially the council met monthly, but now meets quarterly, with working groups meeting more frequently.

The ASD credits the OAC for much of the progress the ASD has made in its early years. The forum provided by the council has allowed operators and ASD leadership to address several challenges and develop sustainable solutions that the operators can champion and implement. For instance, the council approved an ASD charter operator fee before the state legislature codified it in spring 2015 (see "Funding Education Reform," page 21) and has established policies governing:

- Distribution of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) funds to operators: An allocation formula is based on five tiers of student need. The ASD allocates federal special education funds to operators based on the number of students with the highest needs, and operators pay for services for students in the lower tiers with other funds.
- Discipline of pre-K to third-graders: Expulsions are not permitted prior to fourth grade except under certain state-mandated circumstances.
- Redistribution of students of over-enrolled schools: Over-enrolled schools work with families to identify alternative ASD placements and coordinate student transportation; receiving schools pay transportation costs.

Educator talent

In Memphis, a growing market share of charter and ASD-operated schools are having a big impact on the demand for educator talent.

With less pressure to scale up quickly, compared to the RSD in New Orleans, the ASD has had addi-

tional time to recruit and develop teachers and leaders for ASD schools. But recognizing that effective leaders and teachers are essential in school turn-around environments,[53] the ASD has implemented key strategies to build a pipeline of teachers and leaders—including new and experienced educators from both local and national markets.

The ASD used its autonomy to find and develop talent for direct-run schools.

The ASD is directly responsible for recruiting and hiring staff in its direct-run Achievement Schools. At first, it was constrained by its organizational structure as a department within the state education department, subject to state systems and agency processes for approval of personnel and financial management decisions. The ASD successfully advocated for legislative changes that allowed it to exercise the authority and autonomy of an LEA, with flexibility to adapt its own budgeting, compensation, and performance management systems.[54] Once the ASD had the flexibility to establish its own policies for educator recruitment and hiring,

Achievement Schools had the ability to pursue several strategies to recruit teachers and leaders.

Teacher compensation model. Achievement Schools used performance pay and bonuses to attract high-performing teachers to direct-run schools. A new pay schedule adopted for the 2012–13 school year provided a significant increase in teacher salaries, separate from the cash bonuses that teachers in the best-performing schools can earn. Raises were also tied to student results and teacher classroom performance.

Professional development and coaching. Beginning in 2014–15, the ASD implemented two significant types of teacher supports that have helped increase the retention of teachers overall and especially the highest-performing teachers: coaching and professional development, and instructional supports. The ASD contracted with instructional coaches to help teachers improve classroom practices, and trained principals on developing opportunities for professional growth within school buildings and engaging and rewarding effective teachers.

The ASD also provided curriculum and assessment supports to increase the manageability of teachers' workloads.

Early data suggest that these professional development and support strategies have been effective. According to the ASD, it retained 54 percent of Achievement School teachers from 2013–14 to 2014–15; from 2014–15 to 2015–16, the retention rate increased to 70 percent, with the majority of teachers with the highest rating under Tennessee's teacher evaluation system staying in the classroom or advancing to teacher-leader positions.[55]

Hiring new teachers. The ASD also became more strategic in hiring new teacher candidates, recognizing that while many teacher candidates are highly mission-aligned with the ASD's work and purpose, they have unrealistic expectations about the challenges of working in a turnaround environment. Hence, the ASD has become intentional about providing candidates with authentic opportunities to observe classroom interactions and school culture, and targeting candidates who have worked in turnaround environments previously.

The ASD sought out local operators and leaders to run ASD schools.

The ASD focused on identifying and developing local educators to lead Achievement Schools. Cultivating local leaders served two purposes: It helped the ASD retain high performers, and it reinforced the message that dramatic change in Memphis schools was driven by both local citizens and a strong mandate from the state. Of the principals leading the ASD's five direct-run Achievement Schools, three were principals or assistant principals in Memphis schools, and two were Memphis residents working in the charter sector. For example, Debra Broughton, principal of Whitney Achievement Elementary School in the Frayser community, had served in school leadership roles in Memphis schools, including Westside Middle School in Frayser. The ASD offered her a one-year principal residency the year before she became principal at Whitney to help her hone her leadership capacities.

The ASD applied the same focus on known local leaders in considering charter operators to lead

schools. Just as leaders for Achievement Schools with ties to Memphis had an edge with affected communities, so too did high-quality charter operators already working in Tennessee.

Bobby White's experience in the Frayser community is an ideal example. White grew up in Memphis' Frayser community, attended Frayser High School, and returned to serve as principal at Frayser's Westside Middle School. After a brief stint as an ASD administrator, White joined the Tennessee Charter School Incubator's fellowship program, formed a CMO, Frayser Community Schools, and in 2013 took over operation of Frayser High School for the ASD. Because he is from Frayser and "understood the culture," the community has embraced him. "They know me and how much I care. My neighborhood connection absolutely helps me," White said.[56] Thomas Beazley, executive director of Promise Academy, whose ASD school is led by Patrick Washington, a former teacher and principal in Memphis schools, points to White and Washington as exemplars of "authentic and caring [leaders] with a clear vision and high expectations" of themselves and the school team. Beazley said White and Washington demonstrate that "it's the leader that makes the difference."[57]

The ASD also anticipates that local leadership will promote stability and consistency when schools are ready to leave the ASD. By hiring trusted school leaders and teachers known to parents and students, the ASD hopes to increase the odds that teachers will stay with schools when they return to their home district.

The ASD is working with partners to develop a citywide talent strategy in Memphis.

Prior to the ASD, Memphis and Nashville education reform leaders had worked to bring national talent organizations, including Teach For America, New Leaders for New Schools, and TNTP, to Tennessee to provide an initial pipeline of talent to support the growth of charter schools and help attract national CMOs to Tennessee. Locally based programs such as the Memphis Teacher Residency, a master's degree program that places participants in internships with mentors, also helped support the talent pipeline. But the rapid growth of the charter sector

and ASD schools elevated the need for further short- and long-term investments to create a scalable and sustainable talent pipeline in Tennessee, particularly for Priority schools.

In 2014, ASD and Shelby County Schools issued a joint call to action to Memphis political, philanthropic, and business leaders to establish Memphis as "Teacher Town USA," or the place where great teachers want to teach. The call to action was supported by a Memphis-based funder collaborative,[58] including a coalition of national philanthropists, committed to working with Shelby County Schools and the ASD to implement strategies to recruit effective teachers, develop local teacher talent, and retain high-performing teachers. Through a nonprofit and in partnership with the ASD and the district, the Teacher Town collaborative funds a portfolio of talent support organizations and community advocates working to develop the talent pipeline in Memphis for Priority schools. Strategic investments have helped attract new talent support organizations to Memphis and fund the expansion of promising practices already in place. The expansion of principal and teacher fellowship and training programs, such as the Ryan Fellowship, Relay, NAATE, and Teach Plus, bears evidence of the increasing impact of the Teacher Town strategy. The funding collaborative is also investing in communicating the Teacher Town brand; for example, Teacher Town funds Teach 901,[59] a website-based campaign that advertises teacher job openings in Memphis and promotes Memphis as a destination for teachers. Teacher Town's goal is to build a coordinated coalition of grassroots and grasstops partners that results in a supply of thousands of high-quality teachers and leaders for Memphis.

Funding education reform

Aligned support between local and national funders has enhanced the ASD's ability to carry out its work. To date, the ASD has not received direct state funding—beyond per-pupil funding that the ASD passes on directly to the schools—and has operated with the support of philanthropic and federal funds. (The ASD received $22 million of the state's RTTT grant and $6.8 million from the NSNO/ASD

Tennessee. Within the strictures of IRS advocacy regulations of private foundations, local philanthropy supported efforts to enact the state's charter authorization law, and later helped bring about changes in the law that improved the state's openness to charters. Local funders have also demonstrated effectiveness as conveners of philanthropy, teacher advocacy groups, and corporate and public partners.

As previously noted, the Tennessee philanthropic community, particularly funders in Memphis, helped recruit talent support groups, such as Teach For America, New Leaders for New Schools, and TNTP to Tennessee before the state won the federal RTTT grant competition. Since 2013, Memphis funders have coalesced around the development of a sustainable pipeline of high-quality teachers and leaders. Their collaboration on efforts to transform Memphis into "Teacher Town USA" reflects not just a pooling of funds, but investment in a comprehensive, citywide strategy to recruit, retain, and train national and local teacher and leader talent.

Philanthropic alignment of charter-related investments strengthened ASD capacity to recruit and authorize charters.

As noted earlier, Memphis and Nashville funders and foundations contributed significantly to the Tennessee Fund created by the state and the Charter School Growth Fund to support the development of local charter operators and expansion of high-quality operators in Tennessee. Of the $20 million in philanthropic contributions to the $30 million that the Charter School Growth Fund helped assemble for the Tennessee Fund, $7 million came from Memphis funders and $7 million from Nashville funders. Ultimately, these funds did not support all charter operators authorized to run schools in the ASD, but the availability of these funds did demonstrate the capacity in the state to support charter expansion. Several CMOs recruited by the ASD already operated schools in Memphis or Nashville with support from the Tennessee Fund. In the ASD, these funds permitted these CMOs to hire staff and plan for the new challenge of serving neighborhoods based on zoned enrollment.

i3 grant.) Spring 2015 legislation allows the ASD to collect an annual authorizer fee from operators of up to 3 percent of a charter school's per-pupil funding.[60] The ASD will begin collecting $200 per student in the 2015–16 school year, an amount that will generate funds to cover half of the ASD's current operating budget. Under the current budget, $200 per student would cover the entire operating budget if the ASD's student population included 18,000 to 20,000 students. (According to the ASD, its projected enrollment is 10,000 for 2015–16.) In the absence of state revenue, national foundations have provided critical funding for supports the ASD has needed to develop charter operators. The ASD will continue to rely on philanthropic support to bridge the funding gap between revenues generated by operator fees and the ASD's $5 million operating budget.

Funders have effectively advocated for and provided supports for charter growth.

Local funders in Memphis and Nashville have a long history of supporting charter school growth in

Equitable access to quality schools

The ASD neighborhood schools strategy is premised on the principle that all neighborhoods should have high-quality school options and that all students should have equal access to the high-quality schools in their neighborhoods. In Memphis, the ASD consults with the district when considering what schools it will pull in, to ensure that as many Priority schools as possible are being addressed through the district's iZone, the ASD, or school- or district-led school improvement efforts.

The ASD uses its authorizing authority to hold schools accountable for meeting the needs of all students.

As the authorizer of a portfolio of schools run by various operators, the ASD does not provide or co-ordinate services for schools within its jurisdiction. However, the ASD expects operators to meet the needs of all students and holds them accountable through two primary mechanisms: the operator application and school matching process, and the ASD School Performance Framework. Through the application evaluation process, the ASD vets operator plans to provide essential school functions and systematic student interventions and supports.[61] The School Performance Framework further identifies certain student and family rights that address operator obligations regarding equity and access, such as the right to school choice and equitable enrollment, and the right of special student populations to receive services.[62] Using a "trust and verify" approach, the ASD expects that charter operators are meeting certain accountability requirements[63]—for example, ensuring that students with disabilities are served and English language learners are identified, and that Priority school–zoned students are enrolled—and regularly conducts checks and reviews of compliance.

As a statewide district, the ASD necessarily delivers services differently than traditional districts. Given their autonomies, operators in the ASD are expected to meet the needs of their students. Operators have the option of working with the district to provide special placements for students with special needs. However, student outcomes and costs for services are attributed to the operator, reinforcing incentives for it to provide quality services at its schools.

The ASD has worked with the Operator Advisory Council to develop policies and practices that support equity and accountability. For example, ASD policies regarding the equitable allocation of special education funding and discipline of students in pre-K to third grade arose from consensus among operators serving on the OAC.

A 2014 report from the Tennessee Consortium on Research, Evaluation and Development at Vanderbilt University suggests that the ASD's neighborhood focus and accountability strategies are having their intended effect.[64] The study's findings showed that student mobility rates for ASD schools declined after they became part of the ASD. The study also found that ASD schools served a percentage of special education students slightly higher than Memphis non-Priority schools, but slightly lower than other Memphis Priority schools, though similar compared with Memphis iZone schools. Data provided by Shelby County Schools and the ASD for this report indicate that ASD and iZone schools served a higher percentage of students with disabilities than the district at large in the 2014–15 school year, with 18 percent of the ASD's students being special needs students, 12.5 percent in the iZone, and 11.6 percent in non-iZone Shelby County schools. Tracking student enrollment and retention data over time will yield more lessons about making strong schools accessible to all students in the neighborhoods served by the ASD.

Community engagement and participation

Since its inception, the ASD has been keenly aware of the importance of community support and worked to communicate with parents and students in the neighborhoods where it runs schools and to build authentic relationships with the broader school communities it serves. The ASD's community engagement strategy reflects a core belief that community engagement must start early, and must be the joint responsibility of all levels—district, operator, and school—for turnaround efforts to gain traction and credibility.

The ASD conducted early engagement of the Memphis community to build support for school turnaround.

Understanding that school turnarounds disrupt communities, the ASD attempted to sow the seeds of change well in advance of planned changes. Initially, the ASD dedicated staff to attend meetings, neighborhood events, and even canvas door-to-door to explain the ASD's mission and the investment that it and communities needed to make to improve failing schools. According to Bobby White, founder and CEO of Frayser Community Schools and Memphis native, that level of engagement was important—parents have to understand early in the process that their children attend Priority schools long before they receive notification that a new operator will be taking over.

The ASD is shifting from citywide to neighborhood-based community engagement to guide the school matching process.

With time tight from when the state Priority school list was announced in 2011 to the start of the 2011–12 school year, the ASD matched its first cohort of schools to charter operators in partnership with Shelby County Schools, which was then Memphis City Schools (see "Shelby County Schools and the District iZone," page 13). Beginning with the second cohort of charter schools, the ASD elected to engage the broader community in the process of selecting and matching charter operators to schools. The ASD convened a citywide Achievement Advisory Council in Memphis to make recommendations on school and charter operator matches. Comprising around 20 volunteer members from across the city,

the council received training on matters relevant to charter school operation, such as recognizing the characteristics of a high-quality school and understanding operator and school performance data. Charged with representing the interests of the Memphis community, the council made recommendations to the ASD on matching operators and schools. The process proved both valuable and contentious. While the council shared the ASD's commitment to engaging the community in decision-making, the council reflected citywide perspectives, and not necessarily the specific perspectives of families attending affected schools.

Recognizing the need to tailor its school matching community engagement process to its neighborhood-focused strategy, the ASD is shifting the organization of its community voice in the school matching process. In 2015–16, the ASD will convene neighborhood-based councils called Neighborhood Advisory Councils, composed primarily of parents with students enrolled at the schools eligible for ASD intervention but also including high school students, community leaders, and others with connections to affected schools. The ASD will convene one council for each neighborhood school feeder pattern to review the applications of charter operators interested in serving a school in the affected community. Intending to instill more direct representation of affected neighborhoods into the match process, the ASD believes the neighborhood councils will establish an effective mechanism for directly involving parents in decision-making and become a forum for deeper community engagement.

As the ASD has settled into operating more like an authorizer, it has come to rely on grassroots community advocacy groups to build community relationships and understanding. The ASD turns to supportive community advocacy groups to assist in alerting neighborhoods of schools eligible for ASD inclusion and to organize outreach to affected neighborhoods about the turnaround process.

The ASD encourages charter operators to build community support early.

The ASD recognizes that operators of its schools must also engage in the hard work of building com-

munity connections, rapport, and trust, especially given the ASD's zoned enrollment strategy.

The ASD has met with the same challenges that other state and district entities have encountered when new operators come in to lead school turnarounds. Parents and communities are often not well-informed about their school's performance and have formed attachments to the teachers and staff. A new operator taking over a school can threaten longstanding relationships between schools, families, and community members. Some early missteps helped the ASD appreciate the importance of operators and communities learning about each other before the school doors open.[65]

The ASD's zoned enrollment strategy intensifies the necessity of building community support. On the one hand, zoned enrollment allows charter operators to concentrate community outreach efforts in the neighborhoods where they will lead schools. Frayser Community Schools exemplifies how a community will embrace an operator that has effectively connected with it. On the other hand, it can concentrate opposition to new school operators. In 2014, Green Dot Public Schools suspended plans to assume operation of Memphis' Raleigh-Egypt High School in 2015–16 citing a lack of community support. At its first ASD school, Fairley High in Memphis, Green Dot had successfully engaged parents, staff, and community members when it took over the school in 2013. However, the CMO faced opposition from political and community leaders in the neighborhoods served by Raleigh-Egypt High School, who wanted to give a first-year principal the opportunity to turn the school around without ASD intervention.[66] Green Dot successfully matched with another ASD school, Wooddale Middle School, which opened in 2015–16. With plans to expand further in the ASD, Green Dot continues to build community relationships in anticipation of operating additional schools. In 2015, YES Prep Public Schools completely withdrew its Memphis operations, months before its anticipated takeover of Airways Middle School in Memphis, citing "inadequate community support" for its phase-in turnaround approach among its primary reasons.[67]

The ASD encourages operators to engage in community-building efforts before school matches

are made, and to mobilize its existing parent base when expanding into new schools to build support and understanding among families. As part of the ASD's new school matching process with Neighborhood Advisory Councils, charter operators in the ASD will conduct parent and stakeholder meetings and activities at the beginning of the school matching process in the fall, to learn about the needs of students and how they can tailor their models to best serve individual communities.[68]

Some operators have effectively gained the trust of the communities they serve. Local leaders tapped to run ASD schools, such as Patrick Washington, principal of Promise Academy (Spring Hill), have built upon existing relationships with the neighborhood community. Promise Academy's flagship school, Hollywood, opened in 2005 as a charter school authorized by Shelby County Schools. The second school opened in 2014 in a nearby neighborhood as a phase-in turnaround school in the ASD. The year before Promise Academy assumed operation of the school, Washington, a successful former teacher and principal in Memphis schools, held "office hours" to meet with parents, students, and other community leaders. These sessions and luncheons, dinners, and community gatherings such as "Dads and Donuts" provided an opportunity for Washington and other school leaders to answer questions about Promise Academy and address any commu-

nity concerns. "We believed it was important to saturate the community with information about our school, and we were completely transparent about our intentions, potential challenges, strategies, and plans to transform [the new ASD school] into a high-performing school," Washington said. Promise Academy continues to offer parents and stakeholders opportunities to provide feedback through surveys, individual meetings, "Principal Round Table" meetings and school cultural walk-throughs. These efforts have helped garner Promise Academy an A+ rating from 98 percent of respondents to its most recent parent survey.[69]

National operators have to work a little harder to overcome their "outsider" status, but they have also built meaningful relationships with the Memphis communities they serve. Aspire opened its first school in the ASD (and its first school outside California) in 2012–13, but started meeting with community leaders, advocates, parents, students, principals, and community groups in Memphis in fall 2011. Aspire also paid for some Memphis residents to visit its California schools to learn about the school, its model, and leaders prior to opening their first school in Tennessee. After Aspire was officially matched to operate Hanley Elementary School, school leaders worked with the district to plan parent meetings and events throughout the year before the school opened.[70]

Conclusions ∙∙

With its focus on ensuring high-quality schools that serve neighborhood communities, Tennessee's ASD is defining what it means to be a statewide turnaround district in its own way. While both Louisiana's RSD and Tennessee's ASD were established to improve low-performing schools and student outcomes, their genesis and implementation stories were driven by their different contexts. These portfolio districts will vary, and state laws and implementation policies and practices should reflect these differences.

Just a few years into its implementation, the Tennessee story remains one to watch. Memphis schools targeted for turnaround interventions in both the ASD and Shelby County's iZone are showing promising signs of improvement, but are still far behind the stated goal of performing in the top 25 percent of schools in the state. As a direct authorizer and operator of schools, and as an alternative school governance model, the ASD has helped effect these improvements. The ASD is motivating local districts to take more aggressive and innovative approaches to turning around chronically low-performing schools.

The true measure of ASD success will become clearer in the coming years as the portfolio of ASD schools matures and demonstrates a multiyear track record of student academic performance. The long-term legacy of the ASD will hinge on how public officials, school operators, philanthropic organizations, and community members navigate many of the topics covered in this report:

1. **Public school governance.** The Tennessee experience demonstrates how effectively statewide districts can be used to influence district-led turnaround efforts. In Memphis, the ASD must continue to serve as both a collaborator and competitor with Shelby County Schools to encourage district efforts to address low-performing schools. And Shelby County Schools must evolve its management and governance practices to effectively and sustainably serve as a portfolio manager of charter, iZone, and traditional schools while navigating the political and logistical challenges of incorporating some ASD schools back into the district.

2. **Schools and operators.** The ASD's long-term success will depend on its continuing collabo-

ration with high-quality operators and district-governed iZones, and on whether ASD charter schools are able to have the same kind of impact on student learning with zoned enrollment as they have in choice environments.

3. **Educator talent.** The ASD must work to expand the pipeline of exceptional educators, with ASD schools becoming highly effective at attracting, developing, and retaining talent, and by catalyzing continued investments in the workforce that increases the number of effective educators committed to working in disadvantaged communities.

4. **Equitable access to schools.** ASD schools must truly become neighborhood schools of choice, with high percentages of students enrolling in neighborhood ASD schools that are able to meet the needs of all students, including students with learning disabilities and other vulnerable student populations.

5. **Community engagement and participation.** Families and community members must have accurate and reliable information about the performance of public schools in order to productively participate in decisions about what organizations operate neighborhood schools. The process for soliciting input into the school matching process must continue to evolve so that families and communities develop a greater sense of trust and confidence about the role of a state entity in authorizing local public schools.

2010–2015 Achievement School District Milestones

2010

January 15
Tennessee legislature passes First to the Top Act

January 18
Tennessee submits Race to the Top (RTTT) application

April
U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) awards $500 million RTTT funding to Tennessee

August
Tennessee is awarded USDOE Investing in Innovation (i3) grant pursued in partnership with New Orleans; Tennessee receives $6.8 million to support charter-operated turnarounds

2011

May
Chris Barbic, former leader of YES Prep Public Schools, appointed as ASD superintendent

June
Public Chapter 466 allows ASD to authorize new-start charter operators in the ASD

August
Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) announces request for qualifications (RFQ) from organizations interested in opening charter schools in the ASD in the 2012–13 school year

November
ASD announces first three ASD-approved operators for school turnarounds: Gestalt Community Schools, LEAD Public Schools, and Capstone Education Group

2012

February
USDOE approves Tennessee ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act) waiver

May
Public Chapter 962 legislation gives ASD LEA-like autonomies and gives local education agencies (LEAs) authority to establish Innovation Zones (iZones)

August
First cohort of ASD schools opens: 3 direct-run Achievement Schools; 3 charter schools — of which 1 is charter school in Nashville and other 5 schools are in Memphis

August
Memphis City Schools selects seven schools for its proposed iZone

2013

August
Second cohort of ASD schools opens, bringing total ASD schools to 17 — 11 charter, 6 direct-run; 16 total in Memphis plus 1 charter school in Nashville

July
Memphis City Schools and Shelby County Schools merger finalized

2014

January
ASD open first alternative school, Pathways in Education, in Memphis

August
Third cohort of ASD schools opens, bringing total schools to 23 — 18 charter schools, 5 direct-run; 1 charter school in Nashville and 22 schools total in Memphis

2015

August — Fourth cohort of ASD schools opens with 1 in Nashville, 5 in Memphis, bringing total ASD schools to 29

ASD Schools, Cohorts 1–4

ASD School	Former School	ES MS High	Operator	Cohort	Opening Year	Model: New/ Whole-school turnaround/ Phase-in
Brick Church College Prep*	Brick Church MS	MS	LEAD	1	2012	Phase-in
Cornerstone Prep—Lester	Lester ES	ES	Capstone	1	2012	Phase-in
Humes Prep Academy	Humes MS	MS	Gestalt	1	2012	Phase-in
Corning Achievement	Corning ES	ES	ASD Direct-Run	1	2012	Turnaround
Frayser Achievement	Frayser ES	ES	ASD Direct-Run	1	2012	Turnaround
Westside Achievement	Westside MS	MS	ASD Direct-Run	1	2012	Turnaround
KIPP: Memphis Academy Elementary	Shannon ES	ES	KIPP Memphis	2	2013	Phase-in
KIPP: Memphis Prep Middle	Corry MS	MS	KIPP Memphis	2	2013	Phase-in
Aspire Hanley #1		MS	Aspire	2	2013	Turnaround
Aspire Hanley #2	Hanley ES	ES/MS	Aspire	2	2013	Turnaround
Klondike Prep Academy	Klondike ES	ES	Gestalt	2	2013	Phase-in
Grad Academy	South Side MS site	High	New Tech Network	2	2013	New
Georgian Hills Achievement	Georgian Hills ES	ES	ASD Direct-Run	2	2013	Turnaround
Whitney Achievement	Whitney ES	ES	ASD Direct-Run	2	2013	Turnaround
Fairley HS	Fairley High	High	Green Dot	3	2014	Turnaround
KIPP: Memphis University Middle School		MS	KIPP Memphis	3	2014	New
Aspire Coleman ES	Coleman ES	ES	Aspire	3	2014	Turnaround
MLK College Prep HS	Frayser High	High	Frayser Community Schools	3	2014	Turnaround
Freedom Prep	Westwood	ES	Freedom Prep	3	2014	Phase-in
Pathways in Education—Frayser		Alt MS/ High	Pathways in Education	3	2014	New
Pathways in Education—Whitehaven		Alt MS/ High	Pathways in Education	3	2014	New
Lester Prep	Lester MS	MS	Capstone	3	2014	Phase-in
Promise Spring Hill	Spring Hill ES	ES	Promise Academy	3	2014	Phase-in
Neelys Bend College Prep*	Neely's Bend MS	MS	LEAD	4	2015	Phase-in
Wooddale MS	Wooddale MS	MS	Green Dot	4	2015	Turnaround
KIPP: Memphis Prep Elementary		ES	KIPP Memphis	4	2015	New
Libertas School	Brookmeade ES	ES	Libertas	4	2015	Phase-in
Memphis Scholars	Florida-Kansas ES	ES	Scholar Academies	4	2015	Turnaround
Cornerstone Prep, Denver	Denver ES	ES	Capstone	4	2015	Turnaround

* Schools located in Nashville

NOTES

1. Tennessee ranked 41st nationally in fourth-grade reading, 46th in fourth-grade math, 39th in eighth-grade reading, and 42nd in eighth-grade math, despite state assessments showing proficiency rates close to 90 percent or better. Tennessee Race to the Top application, submitted to USDOE January 18, 2010

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10. In a three-part series, Nelson Smith examined the work of the three first statewide turnaround districts in Louisiana, Tennessee and Michigan. See Smith, N. (2013). *Redefining the school district in Tennessee.* Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Retrieved from http://edex.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/publication/pdfs/2013 0423-Redefining-the-School-District-in-Tennessee-FINAL_7.pdf; Smith, N. (2014). *Redefining the school district in Michigan.* Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Retrieved from http://edex.s3-us -west-2.amazonaws.com/publication/pdfs/Redefining-the -School-District-in-Michigan-FINAL.pdf; Smith, N. (2015). *Redefining the school district in America.* Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Retrieved from http://edex.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com /publication/pdfs/Redefining%20the%20School%20District% 20in%20America_Final.pdf

11. Public Impact: Holly, C., Field, T., Kim, J., & Hassel, B. C., and New Schools for New Orleans: Runyan-Shefa, M., Stone, M., and Zaunbrecher, D. (2015). *Ten years in New Orleans: Public school resurgence and the path ahead.* New Orleans, LA: New Schools for New Orleans. Retrieved from http://www.newschoolsfornewsorleans.org /wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Public-School-Resurgence-Full -Report-FINAL.pdf

12. Tennessee Race to the Top application, submitted to USDOE January 18, 2010.

13. Chris Barbic interview, March 19, 2015.

14. Alternatively, the commissioner may impose two other interventions for Priority schools: 1) placement in an LEA-run Innovation Zone; or 2) LEA adoption of a School Improvement Grant (SIG) intervention model or other LEA-led school improvement process approved by the commissioner. Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-602(b)(2)

15. Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-602(b)(1) requires the commissioner to re-evaluate schools for Priority status every three years.

16. Tn. Pub. Ch. 390 (2015)

17. Achievement School District. (2015, July). *"Building the possible: Year three results."* Retrieved from http://achievementschool district.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/ASD-3rd-Year-Results -Presentation.pdf

18. Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-614(d)(1)

19. Tenn. Code Ann. §§ 49-1-614(b) and 49-13-106 authorize the ASD to directly run schools, authorize charter schools, and contract with nonprofit entities to operate schools and provide services to students. Hence, contract schools are not ASD charter schools.

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22. Walker, L. (2015, Aug. 12). *"The ASD: A catalyst for dramatic improvement."* Achievement School District. Retrieved from http:// achievementschooldistrict.org/catalyst-for-dramatic -improvement/

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26. Shelby County Schools. (n.d.). "Schools with iZone program." Retrieved from http://www.scsk12.org/uf/webadmin/foundation /schools/?findschool=&level=&category=izone

27. Achievement School District. (n.d.). "Campuses." Retrieved from http://achievementschooldistrict.org/campuses/. Tenn. Code Ann. §§ 49-1-614(b) and 49-13-106 authorize the ASD to directly run schools, authorize charter schools, and contract with nonprofit entities to operate schools and provide services to students. Hence, contract schools are not ASD charter schools.

28. Center for Research on Education Outcomes. (2013). *National charter school study 2013.* Stanford University. Retrieved from http:// credo.stanford.edu/documents/NCSS%202013%20Final%20Draft.pdf

29. Tn. Pub. Ch. 466 (2012)

30. Tn. Pub. Ch. 962 (2012)

31. Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-614(a)

32. Tn. Pub. Ch. 962; Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-614(d)

33. Chris Barbic interview, August 14, 2015

34. Tn. Pub. Ch. 962 (2012)

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36. See Chris Barbic, ASD superintendent, and Dorsey Hopson, Shelby County Schools superintendent interview, May 29, 2015. Retrieved from http://video.memphisdailynews.com/2015/06/01/superintendents-chris-barbic-and-dorsey-hopson-compare-education-notes/; http://tn.chalkbeat.org/2015/04/21/charter-schools-scramble-for-students-in-memphis-as-options-grow-and-enrollment-dwindles/#.VdzFNflVhBd

37. Chris Barbic interview, August 14, 2015

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39. Tennessee Department of Education. (2015). "2015 school accountability." Retrieved from https://www.tn.gov/education/article/2015-school-accountability; Four of the Shelby County Priority schools on the 2014 Priority school list moved into the ASD for 2015–16: Wooddale Middle School, Brookmeade Elementary School, Denver Elementary School, and Florida-Kansas Elementary School.

40. Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-614(k).

41. Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-614(k)(1). Under the RTTT plan, after an ASD school made annual yearly progress (AYP) goals under NCLB for two consecutive years, the education commissioner would develop a transition plan to be implemented after the school made AYP for three consecutive years and be completed after the school made AYP for five consecutive years.

42. Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-1-614(k) provides that when a charter agreement with the ASD expires and a school returns to the LEA, the charter may be renewed upon the operator's submission of a renewal application to the LEA. Theoretically, the local school board could deny a renewal application and effectively close the charter and restart it on its own.

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48. Tennessee Charter School Center. (n.d.). "Inside charters." Retrieved from http://tnchartercenter.org/2015-16-tennessee-charter-schools-infographic/. The ASD has authorized four charter operators to operate schools in Nashville. Two operators, LEAD Public Schools and KIPP Nashville, each operate one school in the ASD; Knowledge Academies and Rocketship have not yet opened ASD schools in Nashville. The ASD authorized YES Prep Public Schools to operate schools in the ASD, but YES Prep subsequently withdrew its application. See discussions in "Schools and operators" and "Community engagement and participation" discussions.

49. Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-13-106(a)(3)(A) (2015).

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