



State of Our Schools: School Governance in Central Indianapolis

Over 60% of IPS-area public school students attend charter or innovation network schools, and that percentage continues to increase each year. Conversely, the district faces deepening enrollment and financial challenges, raising questions about its sustainability. The Indianapolis Local Education Alliance (ILEA) marks a once-in-a-generation moment to reimagine education for 46,000 Central Indianapolis public school students and forge a sustainable system.

MOST SCHOOLS IN CENTRAL INDIANAPOLIS

operate under a highly decentralized structure. The growth of school options has created more opportunities for students, and it also presents opportunities to rethink school and system governance so that all students can excel.

* Current Challenge: Fragmented School Governance

Indianapolis has four different types of public school governance within IPS boundaries:

- 1. IPS-operated schools:** Fully controlled by the IPS Board and Superintendent.
- 2. Innovation network schools (non-charter):** IPS-affiliated schools with contractual autonomy over staffing, pay,

and curriculum that are overseen by nonprofit boards and are accountable to the IPS Board.

3. Innovation network charter

schools: IPS-affiliated schools with autonomy over staffing, pay, and curriculum that are overseen by nonprofit boards and accountable to a charter authorizer.

4. Independent charter schools:

Authorized by the Mayor's Office, Indiana Charter School Board, or universities, and overseen by nonprofit boards. No affiliation with IPS.

This multi-layered governance creates different levels of accountability, oversight, and system strategy.

WHAT IS SCHOOL GOVERNANCE?

School governance involves the body responsible for making decisions at the school level, including resource allocation, staffing, and policies. Within IPS boundaries, different types of schools, such as IPS-operated, public charter, and innovation network schools, operate under distinct governance structures, which may include a central district office or a nonprofit board of directors.

WHAT IS SYSTEM GOVERNANCE?

System governance refers to the body responsible for financial management, accountability, facilities, and overall resource allocation across a system of schools.



Multiple external studies (scan the QR code the bottom of the page to learn more) show that Indianapolis schools with nonprofit governance, as seen in public charter and innovation network schools, consistently achieve stronger academic results and **reduce achievement gaps** (scan the QR code the bottom of the page to learn more), particularly for students of color and low-income students.

* **Current Challenge:** **System-Level Governance Issues**

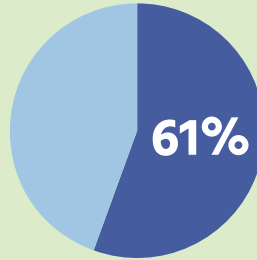
IPS' Board of Commissioners is locally elected and holds authority over IPS-operated schools and some innovation schools. Three independent authorizers retain the power to approve or close charter and most innovation schools, leading to different accountability standards.

While decentralization is important to ensure one bad actor does not control the entire system, Indianapolis' current system makes standard accountability measures and coordinated system-level strategies more complicated to execute with fidelity.

* **ILEA members have three primary system governance pathways to consider:**

- **Full Mayoral Control:** The Mayor appoints all members of the IPS board and all public schools (including charter and innovation schools) operate under its authority. Could risk instability if a future mayor or board impedes progress.
- **Hybrid Governance:** The IPS board is made up of mayoral-appointed and elected seats. At least two authorizers continue to independently authorize charter schools. Common systems for enrollment and accountability are implemented across system governance types.

IN THE 2025–2026 SCHOOL YEAR, 61% of students who attend public schools within and near IPS boundaries attend a CHARTER OR INNOVATION NETWORK SCHOOL.



- **Status Quo (Decentralized):** Maintain the current system governance structure of an elected IPS board and several charter authorizers with no common accountability system.

* **Why would the ILEA consider school and system governance changes?**

In 2025–2026, 61% of students attending public schools within or near IPS boundaries are attending public charter and innovation network schools, which are not directly managed by IPS. This percentage has steadily grown over the last few school years. During the 2019–2020 school year, 51% of IPS boundary public school students attended a charter or innovation network school.

House Enrolled Act 1515 (2025) requires the ILEA to design a facilities and transportation plan and provides the

option to recommend a governance structure for a collaborative school system. By including system governance, Indiana's lawmakers gave local education stakeholders an opportunity to consider how our systems of schools can be more collaborative and efficient, while also improving quality and access for all students. The ILEA should consider how political shifts and family demand for educational models impact their recommendations.

* **How have other cities tried to address school and system governance challenges?**

Cities around the country take different approaches to school system governance: from mayoral control in cities like New York City and Chicago, to state control in post-Katrina New Orleans and Newark, to locally-elected boards like Denver and Indianapolis. Each model offers different trade-offs. Mayoral and state control can drive rapid improvement, but risk community disengagement. Locally elected boards may foster trust, but often lack stability or sustained results.

While there is no perfect model, Indianapolis can learn from peer cities to design a governance system that drives continuous improvement and better outcomes for students while respecting local context and civic engagement.



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