CONCEPTUAL STUDY

Beyond the Public-Private Nexus: A Framework for Examining School Partnership Governance in a Blended Capital Reality

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Abstract

Increasingly, school-based partnerships have been tied to education reform and the entrance of private capital into the PK-12 space, most prominently from a philanthropy sector that contributes nearly $60 billion annually to education causes. As a result, what may have been an at-will school-business partnership in the 1980s may today resemble an embedded multi-partner arrangement around professional development, teacher evaluation, or turnaround support. In this paper, a new framework is introduced to situate school-based collaborations in a contemporary context, notably acknowledging that schools today live in a new "blended capital" reality involving diverse sector influences, multiple sources of private and public funding, and therefore multiple measures of accountability.

Keywords: *school partnerships, education partnerships, neoliberal education, blended capital in education, education philanthropy*

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Introduction

The number of for-profit and nonprofit organizations working with and in schools has grown exponentially since the 1990s, due in large part to a dramatic increase in private capital entering the education space. As a result, today there are over 185,000 nonprofit organizations working in the PK-12 marketplace, many of which did not exist two decades ago (NCCS, 2014; Guidestar, 2019). While some offer supplementary services in areas like childcare, athletics, youth development, mindfulness, and mentoring, others are engaged in more embedded arrangements around curriculum, teacher evaluation, or turnaround support.

In this paper, we consider the evolving governance concerns at the school and district levels brought by the infusion of private capital in these partnerships, and we offer a conceptual framework for examining these arrangements moving forward. Specifically, we argue that the proliferation of investment and giving in the education sector, which in 2018 included over $1.4 billion in venture capital (Wan, 2018) and nearly $60 billion in philanthropic giving (Giving USA, 2018), respectively, is not only transforming how schools meet their students' academic and emotional needs (through new services and providers), it is also affecting how school and LEA leaders at all levels share power with these outside agencies. In practice, leaders are confronted with not only persistent issues that have faced partnerships for decades, but also emergent pressures brought by working with a new breed of autonomous players more deeply invested in the process. Added to age-old concerns around setting clear role expectations, shared objectives, and measurable outcomes with partners are deeper questions around policy, funding, and accountability – in other words, governance – between insiders and outsiders. In this new reality, the notion of private versus public or traditional versus reform operates in a gray space where no one group (or agency) provides all of the services, holds all of the control, or owns all of the risks. In terms of a marketplace, we are witnessing an opaque transformation of what constitutes "vendor" and "partner" at all levels of schooling. Therefore, a critical framework for understanding and researching school partnerships in the current context is needed.

A Foundation Laid for Blended Capital Partnerships in Public Schooling

The integration of external partners has become commonplace in sustainable-development urban strategies (Oliviera & Breda-Vázquez, 2012). Perhaps the most robust example of this is the Harlem Children's Zone, where a multitude of community partners embed in virtually all aspects of a student's life from birth to graduation. Integrated approaches like these are advantageous in regions that have historically been deprived of social services and innovation. Especially in these communities, clustering resources are seen as being socially innovative if they introduce changes in the "social landscape characterized by injustice, or if they contribute to the empowerment of local actors, particularly the underprivileged in public decisions" (Oliviera & Breda Vázquez, 2012 p. 24; Mouleaert, Martinelli, Swyngedouw and Gonzalez 2005). Trujillo, Hernandez, Jarrell, and Kissell (2014) suggest that third party programs are essential to overcoming implicit biases that produce inequitable outcomes along racial lines. Therefore, more than ever, educators must enter into alliances, networks, coalitions, consortia, virtual relationships, councils, federations, compact agencies or other arrangements that bind resources together.

A case can be made that policies emphasizing partnerships are nothing new; schools are merely turning, as they have in the past, to community partners and outside funders to buoy lagging resources or meet needs through comparative advantage. The difference, some would argue, is that partners of the past – say, the YMCA or the Boys and Girls Club – are being joined by a new breed of agencies focused on social impact, innovation, scale, and reform. Collaboration with outside partners has played a role in altering the organizational processes of schools and may explain the rising popularity in public-private partnerships as organizations across the spectrum look beyond sector boundaries to meet their own needs, and to learn from each other (Smith and Wohlstetter, 2006; Sagawa and Segal, 2000). According to Osborne and Gaebler (1992), "each of the three economic sectors – nonprofit, for-profit and public – possesses distinct strengths. From this perspective, public-private partnerships are motivated largely by a pursuit of the comparative advantages inherent to organizations in the other sectors" (p. 250). Reformers go even further, suggesting that schools lack the capacity to solve problems and improve their own performance (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2006) as public sector organizations are too often constrained by the political system rather than the economic system (Boyne, 2002). School leaders face constant disagreement between different constituent groups (Datnow, 2000) and struggle to institute change because educators hold a range of opinions on any reform agenda; thus, every effort is resisted by some contingent of school staff and faculty (Malone, 2011). External providers, on the other hand, are not subject to political authority and can act as agents for creativity, alternative thinking, and the introduction of new systems (Corcoran and Lawrence, 2003). This freedom can help site leaders stay focused on long-term policy mandates while external partners focus on instituting meaningful change in operations and teacher practice (Beabout, 2010).

Regardless of disposition or political party, government plays a key role in codifying partnerships. Since 2000, policies like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) or Race to the Top (RTT) and programs like My Brother's Keeper (MBK) have raised the profile of embedded partnerships by combining the government's resources with those of other impact investors through a concept known as "blended capital," a form of investment whereby public, private and philanthropic dollars are pooled for a common cause (Starr, 2012). Blended capital arrangements are envisioned as transformative partnerships between districts, nonprofit groups, higher education, or business (Adams, 2013). Similarly, the Investing in Innovation Grants (i3) instituted under the Obama administration introduced over a billion dollars directly into blended capital collaborations. Unlike its predecessors, i3 grants stated explicitly that grantees must have partnerships with the private sector that will provide matching funds.

Governance Concerns: Elites as the New Missionaries

Partnerships are most effective when collaborative efforts are seen as mutually beneficial (Hands, 2005). Historically, however, schools are not seen as equal contributors but rather the primary beneficiaries of most arrangements. Some argue this is the result of relationships founded under adverse circumstances that have placed schools at a major disadvantage, and where educators are seen as failing (Hoff, 2002). This is supported by early research on school-business partnerships that showed executives exerting control and exhibiting harsher tones as they sought to institute their values on school leaders (Trachtman, 1994). Today these concerns have taken on new meaning as educational leaders face pressures to improve schools with the looming threat of receivership by external providers or Lead Turnaround Partners (LTPs). Not surprisingly, the demand for some partnerships, especially those with LTPs, remains low among superintendents. The mantra from educators is that the burden of accountability (and blame) is placed on schools and districts while partners receive only credit for success. "School-improvement in districts and schools," Datnow (2000) notes, "is de facto a conflict-ridden process because power is distributed (usually unequally) among individuals, groups, and organizations possessing dissimilar education values and interests" (Kowalski, 2010, p. 76). Naturally, educational leaders balk at any relationship that would see them turn over their schools to an outside organization, even more so to relatively unproven ones with a mixed record of success (Corbett, 2011). While LTPs represent an extreme example of outside partnerships exerting control over schools, they offer a relevant microcosm of a changing schooling infrastructure where higher-stakes services are operated by private agencies.

There is little research on the power relations and the influence of the environments within which partnerships are implemented (Miraftab, 2004). Private sector firms approach local governments and their impoverished communities with the message of power-sharing, but once the process is in motion the interests of the community are often overwhelmed by those of the most powerful member of the partnership – the private sector firms (Miraftab, 2004, pg. 89). Some critics contend that, in this context, partnerships have less to do with altruism and more to do with access and power. Mazzoni's Arena Models (Fowler, 1994) and Elite Theory (Anfara & Mertz, 2006) assert that policy decisions, particularly in education, are being made outside of the public sphere. Decisions that appear to be made in the macro arena through voting or public pressure, for example, are actually being made by leadership elites through subcommittees, interest groups, or, more recently, foundations and giving. There is a growing chorus of critics expressing unease at the role of philanthropists as de facto policymakers who are circumventing democratic due process under the guise of collaboration. Kowalski et al. (2010) agree, speculating that state policymakers have, in counsel with business elites, relied on a political-coercive change strategy that has taken command of school reform from educators whom they viewed as incapable of acting independently to improve their own schools. Philanthropic organizations, in particular, act as "policy patrons" that use funding to influence educational reform and bolster support for private control and privatization of public goods (Heilig, 2019). Cuban (2004) argues that today, community elites are using the media to spread a message of "civic capacity" and "social capital" that is, at its core, inspired by business schools.

Examples of Elite Theory and Arena Models in the PK-12 space are becoming increasingly common. Take, for instance, the evolution of Barack Obama's My Brother's Keeper from a quasi-policy initiative with $400 million in private giving in 2014 to a behemoth foundation with more than $1 billion in assets by the time he left office. In explaining his reason for scaling MBK, President Obama stated the need to grow in order to serve more communities. "The foundation will channel corporate and individual donations to existing programs for minority youth, with an emphasis on local programs that can be replicated in other cities" (Goodwin, 2013). At least on the surface it appears this would be a worthwhile initiative irrespective of community context. However, below the surface it is not so simple as MBK, the Gates Foundation, and other intermediary organizations (Vasquez-Heilig, Brewer, Adamson, 2019) push for massive scale by blending private dollars with public positions of authority. Again, that is not to say that this initiative is not worthwhile, or that the mechanisms by which MBK distributes its funds are not democratic (many would argue they are); it is the precedent of morphing elite giving with national policy that needs a rigorous examination. One may agree with this president's priorities in public education, but will they agree with the next?

Viewed in this broader context, the modern school partnership landscape lies squarely at the intersection of educational policy, philanthropic and foundation giving, and a burgeoning nonprofit and education technology industry. These represent powerful interests that are influencing programs and practice in all-new ways. The introduction of blended capital, both in terms of dollars, or in terms of expertise, values, norms, or priorities, suggests this is more than a new era of partnerships; it is a paradigm shift facing school leaders brought by years of macroeconomic policy. For example, the current push to emphasize STEM programs, individualized learning, and other priorities may crowd out local initiatives to benefit industry, or more cynically, these are merely pet projects that are not rooted in empirical evidence. While creating a generation of coders may seem noble, we have not established whether this is the desire of parents, employers, or, better yet, the students in a particular community. One could argue that reduced class sizes, recruitment of more teachers of color, and providing robust mental health services, all empirically proven ways to improve urban schools, are more appropriate interventions. However, these voices get drowned out under the weight of powerful national organizations now working under a quasi-united front. Especially given the technology-based origins of these sources of funding, we must be vigilant that a new "tyranny of missionaries" (Abowitz, 2000) does not usurp the tenets of a supportive partnership between equals with genuinely converging interests.

Elusive Scale in a New (Private) Bureaucracy

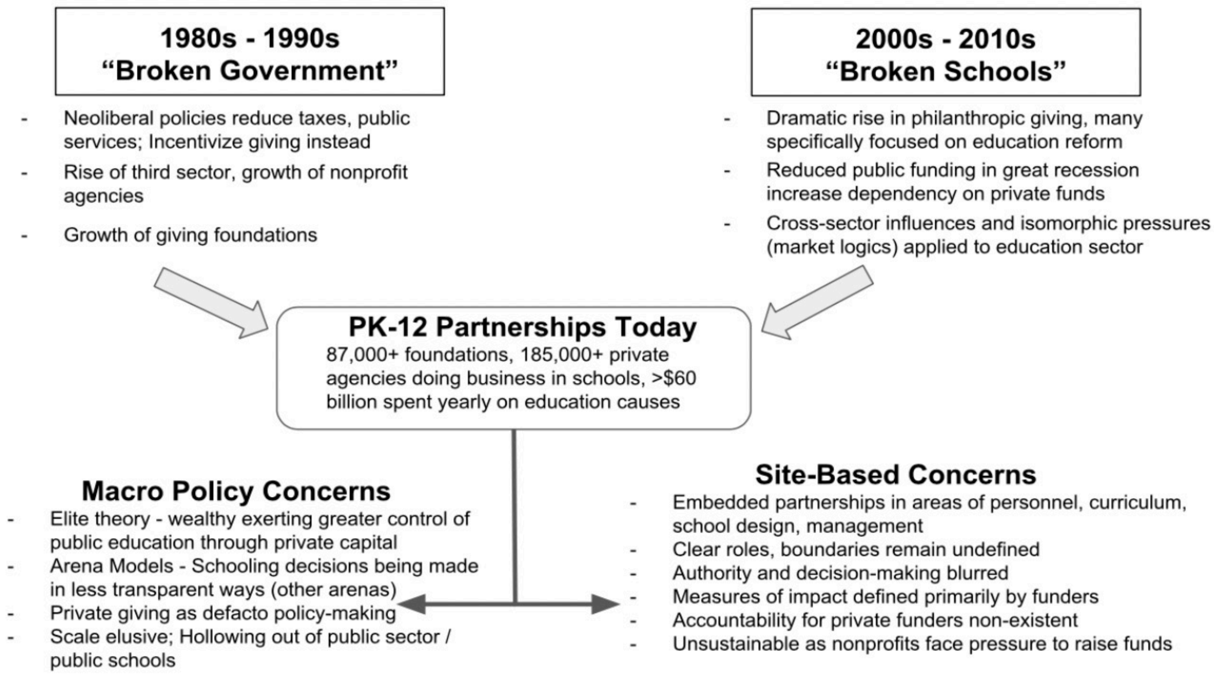
Determining who makes decisions in partnerships, how they are made, and how accountability is measured remains elusive. Yet, in recent years, there has been less emphasis on partnership governance in regards to nonprofits, particularly the engagement of citizens and a greater emphasis on reaching scale and efficiency (Rees, Mullins, and Bovaird, 2012). While the blended capital system is designed to build organizations to scale, the truth is few entities can match the reach and scope of public institutions, especially schools. Goldberg (2009) argues that for all its fanfare, popular prototypes in the nonprofit sector still only reach a small fraction of publicly funded initiatives. After 20 years of remarkable growth, he notes, the best case study for social innovation in education is still only reaching 3.3% of the total need it set out to meet (Goldberg, 2009, p.3). Interdependence theory tells a similar story. Salamon (1987) writes that demand for new services may initially induce private support, but it is questionable whether that alone is enough to drive nonprofit density in the long term. For example, in education the government may choose to engage with agencies providing services, such as funding outside tutoring agencies, rather than engaging in activities itself, like hiring more teachers. As a result of this "hollowing out" (Lecy and Van Slyke, 2012), there is less willingness in the long term by the government to offer services on the premise that private markets are better suited to fill voids (Miraftab, 2004). In time, both groups rely increasingly on scarce government monies as their key source of revenue to fulfill their respective mission (Milward and Provan 2000). In the end both the schools and agencies become dependent on even more limited public monies and less reliable private sector funds.

Seen through this lens, one could argue the new push for scale in PK-12 innovations is not replacing bureaucracy with local control or removing redundancies in the public sector (Cram, 2012), but rather replacing public with private control. Depending on the size of the agency, one monolith is merely replacing another. Many detractors see the introduction of innovation funded by philanthropy as a veiled shift toward privatization and singular agendas that leave many key stakeholders, e.g., parents, teachers, or principals, unable to compete for influence.

> Beneath the surface … a much more nuanced shift in administration and policy has gone virtually unnoticed…. Even if the public institution in your neighborhood, or the one that your child, niece, or nephew attends, is a public school in name, outside partners may be tasked with duties ranging from teaching to counseling. (Faraone, 2015, p.4)

These concerns emerged in the late 1990s but are finding new traction amongst anti-reformers. Leading critics, most notably former Assistant U.S. Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch, warn that we are yielding too much too soon to organizations with solutions that worked in one community but may not in another (Ravitch, 2011).

Illustration 1.0: Evolution of PK–12 Blended Capital Partnerships, Concerns



Anfara V.A. & Mertz (2006); Fowler, F.C. (1994); DiMaggio, P.J. & Powell, W.W. (1983); Howell, K. (2014); Sun, Frank, Peneul & Kim (2013); Starr (2102); NCCS (2014)

A Conceptual Framework for Examining Partnerships in a Blended Capital Reality

To better understand the nuances of these relationships, we are introducing a conceptual framework that places PK-12 partnerships within the construct of "blended capital." Blended capital captures the understanding that all educational practice demands resources. Historically, those resources have been provided by some form of public taxation, e.g., property taxes. As presented above, an increasing percentage of the "capital" used to fund educational practices, particularly those focused on innovation and system change, comes from independent courses such as corporations or philanthropic organizations. One purpose of this paper is to build a conceptual framework for how this blend of capital resources can be used to support the improvement of educational practice.

A core contention of this framework is that educational leaders and outside agencies working in schools represent distinct cultures and, in too many cases, competing entities to whom they are responsible. For example, it is fair to assume that both school leaders and partners are driven by localized objectives such as school improvement and meeting the needs of students. However, the former are influenced by expectations of elected school boards, presumably echoing the desires of constituents or state officials. In comparison, outside partners may be driven by a funder's expectations to bring programs to scale, or perhaps by meeting other measures of efficacy that are part of their respective industry, such as "social impact" or, increasingly, "replication of innovation." While both groups may share the espoused goal of improving student or school outcomes, there may exist other motivations driving their decision-making processes and, ultimately, the way each partner measures success, which may not be shared. We believe this is more than semantics. Parsing out these differences can highlight fears surrounding education reform in general and collaborations with outside agencies in particular. Therefore, this framework distinguishes these types of arrangements as distinct from traditional Public-Private Partnerships and School-Business Partnerships. Table 1.0 introduces the proposed framework.

Table 1.0: A Changing Partnership Landscape: Proposed Conceptual Framework

	Traditional Public- Private Partnerships (PPP)	School-Business Partnerships	**PK-12 Blended Capital Partnerships**
Players	School districts and LEAs, community agencies, higher education agencies, government agencies, legacy foundations	K-12 schools, businesses, municipal agencies	School districts and LEAs, individual schools, community agencies, government agencies, non-profit companies, for-profit companies, various types of foundations
Examples	K-12 School and YMCA partner to offer activities beyond-the-school-day; School district and university partner for professional development	K-12 School and IBM partner to offer internships and career pathway programs	K-12 School and talent agency partner to recruit, train and evaluate teachers; K-12 School and STEM curriculum providers offer embedded curricular program; Giving foundation provides matching funds for major statewide overhaul
Services	Supplementary Services; Physical Space; Turnaround Support; Professional Development	Sponsorships; Physical Space; Technology; Internships, Speakers	Supplementary Services, Curriculum and Program Development; Turnaround Support; Professional Development; Teacher Evaluation; Human Resources; Technology; Financial & Operations Expertise
Primary Funding Sources	Local, State, Federal Grants	Businesses grants; Direct corporate giving	Public Grants, Foundation Grants (community, family, corporate); Private Direct Giving; Arrangements requiring committed sources of matching funding
Outcome Priorities	Supports current school and partner objectives	Supports partner and school objectives	Supports current school and partner objectives; New services, Social innovation; Scaling ideas
Scale Objectives	Impacts immediate school, district & local community	Impacts business and school community	Impacts school, district & local community; Replication regionally or nationally
Accountability	Established by school or education agency through grant RFP or MOA	Established by school and/or partner loosely; rarely present	Established by multiple funders through philanthropic grant RFP; Increasingly, oversight through philanthropy
Obligation	At-will collaboration; Agreed upon by schools/LEAs and policy agencies	At-will collaboration	At-will collaboration by the funder; Depending on partnership, school or LEA participation is not voluntary

Examining Power and Resistance in Partnerships

Since we are focused on the use of capital resources, issues of power and control need to be addressed. For impact investors, including the government, partnerships operate in a sweet spot between business and public policy, making them more autonomous and uniquely appealing for growing programs to scale. At the school and district level, however, it is not so simple, as leaders must now attend to multiple, often conflicting, elements of feedback and interpret these messages collaboratively to guide practice (Riley, 2004). Specifically, many believe that K-12 leaders are relatively unfamiliar with the intricacies of managing school partnerships in general, leaving them even more unprepared to deal with the dynamics between powerful organizations in pursuit of radical change (Bennett & Thompson, 2011). Rees, Mullins, and Bovaird (2012a) contend that we must frame our understanding of partnerships in and with the third sector within a longer historical development and a wider picture of changes in the governance and organization of public service delivery.

While proposing a specific methodology is beyond the scope of this paper, we believe using the blended capital conceptual framework coupled with a micro ethnographic analysis of the relationship among partners that is focused on power dynamics may contribute to building a useful logic that is transferable from one partnership to another, and from one community to the next (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 200). Collectively, this may provide ecological validity (Braun & Clarke, 2013) for understanding school partnerships within a deeper theoretical context. This approach to understanding these relationships is grounded in the ethnographic works of Max Gluckman as described by Michael Burawoy (1991). They are particularly relevant for their emphasis in examining how different institutions interact with one another and how power is shared—or transferred—as those interactions take place. Max Gluckman's work on transforming interpretive case method may provide an appropriate application to this line of research (Burawoy, 1991). Gluckman started by examining micro instances of colonialism in villages, yet his research evolved from present villages and urban settings to the wider political and economic forces associated with colonialism. "Whereas in the original study of the bridge opening Gluckman had regarded the social situation as an expression of the wider society, many of his followers viewed the village, the strike, the tribal association as shaped by external forces" (Burawoy, 1991, p. 276). In the most literal sense, one could say that through neoliberal policies, a bridge has been opened between the PK–12 sector and the many other sectors now working in the space. "It is as if the whole lodges itself in each part in the form of a genetic code, which is uncovered through a process hermeneutic of interpretation" (Burawoy, 1991, p. 213).

We contend that public school systems are, increasingly, expansive blended capital ecosystems that are experiencing phenomena akin to colonialism, where powerful outside forces have entered previously uncharted territory, and where multiple agendas, perspectives, and power struggles are occurring in schools and districts. This is particularly true in historically under-resourced districts that are most vulnerable to externally driven reform efforts. Comparing the current educational climate to colonialism is not meant to be pejorative but to highlight the role of power differentials for understanding what is happening in a particular sector, the American public education system. Considering that educational policy decisions can dramatically affect employment, distribution of wealth, and democratic participation, one need not be a Marxist scholar to benefit from a reading of political economy perspectives this line of research is likely to bring.

Ethnographers point out that the environment is not an arena where laws are played out, "but a constellation of institutions located in time and space that shape the domination and resistance" (Burawoy, 1991, p. 282). Currently, there are a constellation of emergent players and funding forces exerting gravitational forces in new directions. As other researchers have done with villages in post-colonial periods or the opening up of Eastern Europe after the Cold War, this line of research would consider the interactions between school leaders and outside partners as microexpressions (Burawoy, 1991, p.213) of macroeconomic policy and a decentralizing infrastructure.

As such, we are suggesting that we need to think of public school districts, particularly those that are historically under-resourced, as targets for economic and cultural expansion for the owners of private capital. If the relationships between private capital and public capital are going to be effectively integrated in a manner that serves the needs of children, we propose that this framework for understanding blended capital will provide a guide for those seeking to use multi-sector partnership to improve the opportunities for all children.

Closing

In this paper, we contend that collaboration with organizations outside the school system has re-emerged as a significant element driving PK–12 reform. Beyond providing mere goods and services, the nearly 200,000 organizations now doing business in education can help solve many of the obstinate challenges facing our schools. The codification of policy and funding systems prioritizing partnerships with outside agencies is confirmation that schools, like other industries, must incorporate practices and stakeholder input through an elaborate system of co-production.

While acknowledging that decentralization, cross-sector collaboration, and blended capital is not a phenomenon specific to schooling, the literature highlights a historical record of the challenges school leaders face in effectively using blended capital to drive improvement in their schools (Cuban, 2004; Abowitz, 2000). Indeed, while the promise of harnessing community resources is undeniable, the fact remains that for decades, PK–12 partnerships have been beleaguered by problems ranging from ambiguous roles for external partners to inconsistent goals between school leaders and outside agencies. On a macro level, partnerships may represent expressions of neoliberal policy that see privatization as the pathway for school improvement. The model for a blended capital approach proposed in this paper , provides guidance for school leaders to manage collaborations with a new breed of partners that are focused on matters of curriculum, personnel, policy, and programming that systematically improves school performance. More research is needed to understand how school/LEA leaders and outside partners effectively engaged in blended capital arrangements that improve school performance , and what, if any, challenges to success may be manifesting at the school and district level. Without a clear understanding of the dynamics at play we could be undermining the intent of policies aimed at stimulating stronger community ties and social innovations in the education sector; at worst, we may be ignoring the development of a new "blended capital" PK-12 infrastructure that is redefining how we share authority and accountability between school leaders and outside agencies.

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