IN-DEPTH PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

Shelby County Schools | Memphis, TN

JUNE 2014

CRPE

PORTFOLIO
SCHOOL DISTRICTS PROJECT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

About This Report

Acknowledgments

About the Authors

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About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

Through research and policy analysis, CRPE seeks ways to make public education more effective, especially for America's disadvantaged students. We help redesign governance, oversight, and dynamic education delivery systems to make it possible for great educators and programs to do their best work with students and to create a wide range of high-quality public school options for families.

Our work emphasizes evidence over posture and confronts hard truths. We search outside the traditional boundaries of public education to find pragmatic, equitable, and promising approaches to address the complex challenges facing public education. Our goal is to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America's schools.

CRPE is a self-sustaining organization affiliated with the University of Washington. Our work is funded through private philanthropic dollars, federal grants, and contracts.

Executive Summary

In 2011, the Memphis School Board voted to surrender the city's school charter to surrounding Shelby County Schools, a move meant to prevent the possible loss of important county funds. Several lawsuits later, a federal judge ruled that the two school districts would be governed by their 23-member combined boards for two years and would merge in July 2013.

The merger of these two systems—Memphis City Schools, with 103,000 students, and Shelby County Schools, with 47,000 students—resulted in the largest school district consolidation in American history. The merger has not been simple. The city and county systems served very different student populations and each had their own bureaucracies: in addition to different teacher contracts, "the county owned its yellow buses, the city relied on a contractor; and the two districts used different textbooks and different systems to evaluate teachers."[1]

Reacting to the merger decision, six incorporated municipalities within Shelby County have taken legal steps to create their own separate school districts in 2014. These districts could potentially enroll up to 50,000 of the newly unified district's students.

However, the new Shelby County Schools (SCS) has surprised many by not only surviving the merger of two unlike districts, but also positioning itself to become more than the sum of its parts. While just beginning to lay the groundwork, SCS has a number of promising elements already in place including new, respected leadership backed by a strong board, sustained efforts to attract high-quality teachers and principals, a promising pilot effort to turn around struggling schools (the Innovation Zone), a growing charter sector that includes some excellent schools and is interested in working with the district, and a philanthropic community committed to working on education.

Leading up to the merger, the former Memphis City Schools (MCS) was home to many low-performing schools and was known for its impenetrable district office. But it had also seen significant national investment in talent—attracting top teachers and principals from within and outside the Memphis area, and developing and evaluating incumbent teachers and leaders. The former MCS was also an early authorizer of some exemplary local charter schools. The former Shelby

ASD, I-Zone, and charter schools

The Tennessee Achievement School District (ASD) was created in 2010 as part of the state's win of the federal Race to the Top education reform competition. The legislation allowed the state to create a new district to take over the 5 percent lowest-performing schools in the state and allow them to be operated directly by the ASD or ASD-authorized charter schools. Current schools in the ASD come from the former Memphis City Schools and Nashville Public Schools.

The Shelby County Innovation Zone schools, or I-Zone schools, are a special subset of low-performing Shelby County schools that received additional funding through a federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) and special staffing autonomies that aim to boost student achievement.

District-authorized charter schools are charter schools that received permission from Shelby County Schools (SCS) to open and operate their schools. These schools negotiate with SCS for space and other resources as well as per-pupil allocations. To renew their contracts, they need to meet certain financial and achievement thresholds.

ASD-authorized charter schools are similar to district-authorized schools. The ASD reviews charter applicant proposals and authorizes contracts with charter schools. These schools also negotiate with the ASD for space and other resources and must meet certain financial and performance thresholds to renew their charters.

County Schools was known for better results for some students and for a more streamlined district office. It lagged on talent issues, however, and was a reluctant authorizer of charter schools. Racial issues in both Memphis and Shelby County are also an historical and ever-present fact.[2]

When MCS gave up its charter and asked to merge with SCS, many predicted that both districts would fail. Indeed, in the year leading up to the final 2013 merger, local and national media attention focused on rumors of conflicts and posturing on both sides.[3,4] But the merger also engaged many hardworking people from both districts who stretched beyond measure to create a new, unified district.

During that time, a Transition Planning Commission was given the task of laying out a path forward. The commission

1. Sam Dillon, "Merger of Memphis and County School Districts Revives Race and Class Challenges," *New York Times,* November 5, 2011.

2. Ibid.

3. Gabrielle Canon, "Memphis and Shelby County Schools Merger Prompts Battle Over Politics, Race and Money," *Huffington Post*, March 16, 2011, huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/15/memphis-shelby-county-schools-merger

4. Kontji Anthony, "Parents Question Leaders' Decisions in Merger," *wmctv.com*, May 1, 2013, wmctv.com/story/22135804/parents-question-leaders-decisions-in-merger

looked at other districts similar to the former MCS and Shelby County Schools, and at districts that were making student achievement and graduation gains. The commission's decision was to adopt a plan to seek Multiple Achievement Paths to success—referred to here as the portfolio strategy. The portfolio strategy is a governance model in which a district manages a portfolio of different school types, including some operated by charter school organizations, and all schools are held to the same performance expectations.[5]

A NEW ERA: MANAGING A UNIFIED DISTRICT

In an effort to better understand—and be transparent about—its strengths and weaknesses and where to focus efforts, SCS commissioned researchers from the University of Washington Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) in November 2013 to perform a critical review on the district in 2013, the first year of the newly merged district. SCS made available key district stakeholders for CRPE to interview and provided introductions to important external stakeholders. This report outlines CRPE's baseline measurement on where SCS stands in relation to the main components of the portfolio strategy. It provides suggestions for how SCS can seek progress over the next year, and track progress or decline at future intervals.

As the new Shelby County Schools turns the page as a unified district, it must take a comprehensive look at where things stand across an array of important areas, including the following:

• Is the district clear about what it believes in and its end goal?

• Have families and communities expressed what they value, and has the district heard?

• What is the state of school quality? Can all families access high-performing schools?

• Can teachers and school leaders get to work on what matters, or do bureaucratic and top-down systems and rules get in the way?

• Do schools get the funding they need in a way they can use?

• How will the district structure its central office to support a portfolio of schools that are located across the Achievement School District, the I-Zone, and the district-authorized charter schools?

• How will the district address the large number of low-performing schools it is responsible for?

• How will the new SCS district measure success?

The work ahead will be challenging. A host of variables are at play. Six towns have opted to "demerge" from SCS. What will this look like in terms of students leaving the system, and how will SCS downsize accordingly? Will SCS follow through on closing low-performing district and charter schools? Can SCS channel the influx of new charter schools so that high-quality providers serve the children and neighborhoods that most need them? And can all schools—district and charter—grow or find enough talent to significantly propel children forward?

NARROW WINDOW FOR DEMONSTRATING IMPROVEMENT

A new superintendent, Dorsey Hopson, is in place who understands the region and signals a willingness to do whatever it takes, and the school board is behind him. But SCS needs to quickly move past this merger and develop a plan that shows it values what its families value and start delivering on student achievement.

A collection of key voices interviewed for this report (district leaders and staff, and key players outside SCS) describe success in the next year this way:

• Improved student achievement across all schools.

• Increased, genuine freedom and empowerment for all schools.

• Everyone, from the board to regional superintendents to department staff to school teachers and leaders, talking about the SCS portfolio strategy and knowing what it means.

• All departments talking about how they serve schools, students, and families.

• The best district and charter schools collaborating and sharing best practices with all schools in the district.

• True cooperation across district and charter sectors, with leaders actively avoiding "us/them" language.

• Better options for all families and an easier way to navigate student enrollment.

• Accountability for schools that aren't performing.

• Accountability for district office departments and employees that aren't effectively serving schools and families.

5. The portfolio strategy, developed by the Center on Reinventing Public Education, is based on seven key components that create diverse options for families in all neighborhoods. The components include opening new high-performing, autonomous schools; giving all schools control of budgeting and hiring; and holding schools accountable to common performance standards. It is a continuous improvement strategy, with district leaders and educators constantly learning from the work and seeking better outcomes through innovation.

THE SEVEN KEY COMPONENTS OF THE PORTFOLIO STRATEGY:

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE SCS PORTFOLIO STRATEGY

In November 2013, SCS commissioned researchers from CRPE to conduct a rigorous qualitative analysis of SCS's internal processes and policies through a series of interviews of key stakeholders. CRPE is the portfolio strategy expert, having developed the strategy and studied various aspects of portfolio reform since 1993, and supporting districts with portfolio implementation since 2008.

RESEARCH METHODS

For this analysis, CRPE researchers worked with the SCS Chief of Strategy and Innovation to identify people in key roles and set up interviews with them in a district conference room. Over the course of several days in mid-November 2013, researchers met individually with and interviewed 21 key district leaders and department heads, school board members, foundation leaders, and district and charter school principals to get a sense of the work, the challenges, the expectations, and the respondents' take on what needs to happen next.

Interview questions were developed for each type of respondent. Broad questions were asked about plans, strategy, and expectations. Certain respondents, such as department heads, were asked specific questions pertaining to components of the portfolio strategy.

In addition, some general background research was done, including reviews of the Transition Planning Commission's Multiple Achievement Paths plan and news articles related to the merger.

WHERE SCS CURRENTLY STANDS: 2013 BENCHMARK SUMMARY

Below is a brief outline of the makeup of the joint SCS district, followed by a summary of how SCS is currently performing on the seven components of the portfolio strategy framework. A more complete analysis and comparison to districts across the country that are similarly engaged in implementing the portfolio strategy, including CRPE's recommendations for next steps to generate progress on the portfolio strategy in the year ahead, is provided in later sections of this report.

A Picture of the District by the Numbers

Shelby County School District 2013–14			
271 Total SCS district schools	**150,149** Total SCS district students	**9,738** Total SCS district teachers	**16,126** Total SCS district staff

Types of schools within SCS boundary 2013–14				
234 SCS district-run schools have: **137,048** Students (minus charters and Pre-K)	**13** SCS I-Zone schools have: **5,359** Students (231 in Pre-K)	**37** SCS-authorized charter schools have: **8,700** Students	**16** Total ASD schools (6 run by the ASD) have: **4,200** Students	**10** ASD-authorized charter schools (9 in Memphis, 1 in Nashville) have: **4,000** Students

In the former Shelby County School system, 57 percent of students were proficient or advanced in reading, 49 percent in math, 65 percent in science, and 88 percent in social studies.

In the former MCS system, 26 percent of students were proficient or advanced in reading, 23 percent in math, 24 percent in science, and 60 percent in social studies.

The ASD system of charter schools (which in Shelby County includes 16 of the lowest 5 percent of state schools) had 14 percent of students who were proficient or advanced in reading (a decline from the previous year), 20 percent in math, and 24 in science.

GOOD OPTIONS AND CHOICES FOR ALL FAMILIES

According to respondents, the greater Memphis area has a number of school choice options for families, though there are too few high-performing schools, and not enough information about school quality is available. Families find out about their options through word of mouth. This doesn't help them fully engage in decisionmaking based on factors like student achievement, on-time graduation, or even grasp an understanding of the differences in programs and school culture. SCS lacks data on whether schools are fairly serving all students, including students with special needs and English language learners. Families are not included or included late in district decisions about replacement schools. There is no strategy at the district level for combining the array of data about neighborhoods in order to make better decisions about school closures, mergers, and expansions, or to encourage the strategic siting of new charter schools.

Charter school respondents say they want to engage in productive ways. Though there is a lack of trust between charter school and district leaders on some procedural issues like how they might participate in a shared enrollment process, there is also respect, openness, and a readiness to try some initial collaborative actions, such as monthly meetings and developing some shared policies. The timing seems right for SCS to better engage with the state's ASD and local charter schools.

SCHOOL AUTONOMY/EMPOWERMENT

Respondents say that SCS school leaders have very little freedom. Some district leaders are concerned that principals are not ready to build budgets, hire their own staff, or choose a curriculum. But there is consensus that some principals surely are, and that one way to start would be to free up those leaders of high-performing schools. The I-Zone is proving to be a good pilot for how to do this, and SCS leaders are learning that the biggest barrier is changing the mindset at the district office. District departments are not in the habit of seeing and serving schools as customers. The combination of these two problems is leading to mounting frustration among principals that no one at the district has an answer when they call, and no one cares to solve problems when questions arise. Meanwhile, I-Zone school leaders have full control over hiring but a minimal amount of freedom when it comes to budget, and they feel they are ready to be fully empowered.

PUPIL-BASED FUNDING FOR ALL SCHOOLS

According to some respondents, SCS currently operates with school funding policies that are outdated and don't match current realities. The district uses a rigid school funding formula that hinders school leaders' ability to solve school-level problems in creative ways. The district has not prioritized increasing the dollars that schools control in their overall budgets. In addition, overspending may occur where district leaders are unable to price out services and gauge whether a service is too expensive, or could be procured more inexpensively outside the district. Lack of pricing structures also means the district cannot sell services to other nearby districts or to charter schools. The combined former school boards' inability to close a number of underenrolled schools means that scarce funds are drawn from other schools to subsidize weak programs. Additionally, shuttering school buildings is not a healthy strategy for the district or the city—maintaining unused, empty buildings is a drain on budgets and a blight on the city.

TALENT-SEEKING STRATEGY

The former MCS has spent the last few years building pipelines to an array of high-quality teacher and leader preparation programs and then hiring from these pipelines. However, many respondents worry that the current talent strategy is not robust enough to support the number of schools in the area that need strong teachers and leaders. Charter leaders also express concern about talent for their own schools. According to respondents, there are also concerns that importing too much outside talent, in a city that prizes local connections, will undermine the reform effort.

SCS offers a highly centralized system of teacher support that appears comprehensive. The sense is that the system is improving instruction, but there are no outcome measures to corroborate this. The teacher evaluation system is nascent, and has had early issues of overrating, but it appears to be accepted by teachers and principals, and efforts are under way to keep training principals to be better evaluators. University of Memphis is conducting a study of the relative effectiveness of the district's two coaching models and this will be released in fall 2014.

During the district merger, the combined former school boards passed a suite of human resource policies that give schools the ability to hire based on mutual consent. (In 2013, however, teachers whose positions were eliminated because of the merger were put into a hiring pool, and schools had to draw from this pool when they had openings to fill.) According to policy, when schools are faced with layoffs, they can base their decisions on performance.

SOURCES OF SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS

According to respondents, there is currently no flexibility in how resources, services, and programs are delivered to each school by the district office. It is next to impossible for a school to convince the district to make exceptions. District departments lack a sense of customer service toward schools, and they expect schools to conform to the norm. SCS is considering how to price out services and let schools decide whether to buy them back; operating central office services based on school demand will help to change responsiveness. The district office can play an important role in connecting school and talent needs to high-quality services and products (both district and external), but SCS is not yet capable of fulfilling this role.

PERFORMANCE-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY FOR SCHOOLS

The district has no school performance framework or criteria with which to compare all district and charter schools on important measures of growth, performance, student engagement, and long-term student success. It has no clear criteria for how school intervention decisions are made, apart from state or district interventions in the state's overall 5 percent lowest-performing schools. There is no school report card and the district does not produce an annual report on its progress. SCS has taken a passive approach to reporting on school success by relying on state and community partnerships to share school information. However, these sources of information are not targeted to families, are hard to find and not user-friendly, and don't measure district priorities.

EXTENSIVE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Communication within the former MCS was weak, and SCS continues to suffer from both the former MCS's reputation and the confusion caused by the merger. The district currently has no meaningful ways to hear from families or employees. Current SCS leaders have personal relationships throughout the community that they must continue to nurture and deliver results to. The former MCS attracted noteworthy investments from national and local funders in the past, but SCS will need to work to maintain these relationships going forward.

Currently, there is a widespread lack of understanding about the district's plan or strategy, and aside from the Transition Planning Commission's Multiple Achievement Paths plan (and many respondents wonder if this plan is still valid), people don't know what to expect. Families and the general public have low expectations that their questions will be answered or solutions found. Respondents say that the beginnings of stability in the district and the selection of a well-regarded, approachable local leader as superintendent have opened an important but narrow window toward clarifying the plan and reaching out to SCS's most important constituents—families and staff.

SHELBY COUNTY SCHOOLS UPDATE, MAY 2014

Shelby County Schools has been active in the months since CRPE researchers conducted interviews. While the report is an accurate reflection on where SCS stands in early 2014, there are some efforts underway that are important to note:

School empowerment: All central office departments have begun the work of building a menu of services with associated price points so that school leaders will have far greater budgetary empowerment. Further, the district is committed to ensuring mutual consent in hiring so that all school leaders hire their own team.

Pupil-based funding: SCS is currently working with the Edunomics Lab[6] to develop a pupil-based funding model with the goal of creating empowerment at the school level and allocating actual dollars to schools rather than to employees.

Talent-seeking strategy: SCS continues to build on its teacher and leadership initiative and is aggressively partnering with the Teacher Town USA initiative in Memphis to remain focused on attracting and retaining high-quality teachers and school leaders.

Performance-based accountability for schools: SCS is currently partnering with CRPE and UPD Consulting[7] to begin the process of creating a school performance framework so that all families with children in Memphis/Shelby County public schools have access to useful information on school performance.

Extensive public engagement: SCS has publicly presented a goal to more than double the rates of college and career readiness in its district. By December 1, 2014, SCS will have carried out an extensive public engagement process to ensure that they have heard from constituents and their ideas about how to best meet that goal, and will have created a strategic plan based on this public input.

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6. Edunomics Lab is a Georgetown University-based research center focused on exploring and modeling complex education finance decisions.

7. UPD Consulting is a Baltimore-based, public sector management consulting firm that helps public school districts, state education agencies, and local government agencies manage performance for better outcomes.

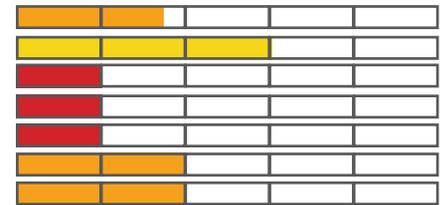# Snapshot Analysis of Shelby County Schools

LEGEND:

nothing in place yet	much work to be done	some elements in place	in progress	national exemplar

GOOD OPTIONS AND CHOICES FOR ALL FAMILIES — *much work to be done*

Item	Rating
School choice for all families	some elements in place
Equity and access to all schools for special education students and English language learners	nothing in place yet
Coordination of enrollment and school information for families across sectors	nothing in place yet
New schools opened based on family/student/neighborhood need	nothing in place yet
Schools replaced based on performance outcomes	nothing in place yet
New schools opened with outside operators	in progress
Intentional development of new district schools or homegrown charter schools	nothing in place yet

SCHOOL AUTONOMY — *much work to be done*

Item	Rating
All schools control staff selection and dismissal	some elements in place
All schools control budget	nothing in place yet
All schools control pay	nothing in place yet
All schools control curriculum choice	nothing in place yet
Autonomies are defined through MOUs, performance contracts, or charters	much work to be done
Schools free to seek contractual waivers or exemptions	much work to be done

PUPIL-BASED FUNDING FOR ALL SCHOOLS — *much work to be done*

Item	Rating
Funds follow students to educational options of their choice	much work to be done
High proportion of district funds sent to schools	nothing in place yet
Common prices set for facilities and central services across sectors	nothing in place yet
Plan in place for schools that cannot be sustained on student based allocation formula	much work to be done

TALENT-SEEKING STRATEGY — *in progress*
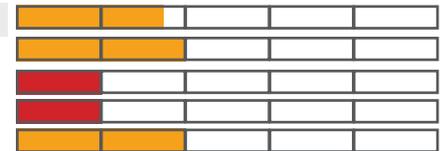
Item	Rating
Policies in place for using alternative pipelines to find/develop talent	national exemplar
Recruitment of new principals from proven pipelines	some elements in place
Recruitment of new teachers from proven pipelines	in progress
Intensive development of teachers and leaders	some elements in place
Performance-based evaluation system in place to recognize or remove teachers and leaders	in progress
Schools free to differentiate teacher pay and factor performance into layoff decisions	much work to be done
Innovative ways to extend the reach of strong teachers and leaders	some elements in place

SOURCES OF SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS — *much work to be done*

Item	Rating
Districts provide rich and timely information on student and school performance	nothing in place yet
Schools free to choose support from diverse independent providers	much work to be done
Procurement policies that enable schools to work with vendors, regardless of established district contracts	nothing in place yet
Attract and develop a marketplace for independent providers	nothing in place yet
Strategies to engage developers of new educational technologies	nothing in place yet

PERFORMANCE-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY FOR SCHOOLS — *nothing in place yet*

Item	Rating
Common school performance framework in place	nothing in place yet
Performance framework uses multiple measures: student performance, student progress, school climate, student engagement, equity and access, long-term student outcomes	nothing in place yet
Performance framework used as a significant factor in: school expansion, intervention, replacement/closure decisions	nothing in place yet
Publication of a school report card based on common performance framework	nothing in place yet
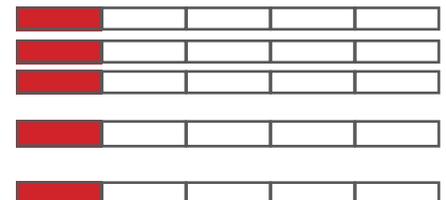
EXTENSIVE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT — *much work to be done*

Item	Rating
Solicit ideas from families and communities about school and district decisions	nothing in place yet
Partnerships and coalitions with key stakeholders	much work to be done
Communication plan to convey information about reform strategy (including strategic plan, implementation schedule, annual updates, and external progress review)	nothing in place yet
Plan for helping district and school staff understand and support the strategy	nothing in place yet
Feedback loop for families and community members to express concerns and receive response	nothing in place yet
Public criteria and schedule for school closings and openings—make new options clear to families affected by closure	nothing in place yet
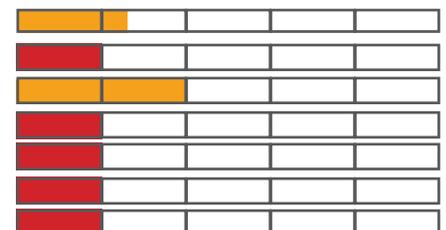
Good Options and Choices for All Families

DEFINING THE BENCHMARK | In portfolio districts, families have the freedom to choose either their neighborhood school or another school that is the best fit for their children. Successful portfolio districts make sure there are good schools in every neighborhood. These districts must also give families useful information and support to make the process of enrolling their children clear and simple.

ANALYZING SCS'S CURRENT POSITION:

ELEMENT | School choice for all families

Currently, SCS students are assigned to a neighborhood school. Families can opt out of the neighborhood school if there is room in a receiving school, but transportation is not provided for this choice. Separate from the district schools, there are more options for school choice through 37 district-authorized charter schools.

The Achievement School District (ASD), developed under Tennessee Race to the Top legislation to address the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools in the state ("priority schools"), also authorizes charters. The ASD currently has 16 schools run by seven operators: 9 charter schools that are managed by five operators in Memphis, 1 school in Nashville, and 6 ASD-operated autonomous schools. The ASD plans to turn around more schools in the SCS district in the next few years (some through authorized charters, some direct-run.) In 2014, the ASD expects their total in SCS to grow to 21 general education schools and 1 alternative education school. However, by state law, only children previously enrolled at or zoned to a low-performing priority school are eligible to attend—and guaranteed seats at—ASD schools.

Students receive transportation to their zoned SCS district schools if they live a certain distance from school. The district transportation policy allows charter schools to add transportation as an option for their students by using specific charter transportation funds held back at the district. District policy will not release these funds to charter schools to use for their own methods of transportation (e.g., bus passes, van purchases). Some charter schools don't participate in the district transportation plan because of the inconvenience of dealing with district-run buses, and this may mean that some students in underserved areas can't access choices beyond their zoned district school.

ELEMENT | Equity and access to all schools for special education students and English language learners

The district does not produce any public reports on the number or percent of special education students and English language learners attending each school, though they do have districtwide numbers. The most recent report of Memphis charter schools, from 2012, shows the charter schools to be serving fewer students with special education needs (8 percent) than the former MPS (14 percent) and fewer English language learners (<1 percent) than the former MPS (7 percent). The best guess is that district-authorized charter schools also don't serve the same kinds of special education needs. When it comes to severe behavioral challenges, charter schools openly rely on district schools with program specialties to enroll these students. ASD charter schools and ASD-run schools, however, admit all students, and these schools are experiencing the high costs of some children's needs and the schools' lack of capacity to serve and pay for those needs.

ELEMENT | Coordination of enrollment and school information for families across sectors

There is currently no coordinated enrollment across the district, district-chartered, and ASD-chartered schools. The district and ASD both express interest in coordinated enrollment; however, some of the higher-performing charter schools strongly believe in keeping control of this important function. Three reasons are cited:

1. They don't trust SCS or ASD to manage the enrollment system, and expect that SCS and ASD will be tempted to fill their own schools first, especially in an era of declining enrollment and an oversupply of schools.

2. They feel very strongly that they do the hard work of recruiting families and building parent engagement, and that the desire to attend their schools supports their brand and maintains their culture.

3. They are protective of their brand and feel they have been able to insulate themselves from the negative public perceptions of both the merger and the ASD. Joining with either might lump them in with these larger, more bureaucratic or threatening organizations.

However, when charter school respondents were asked whether having a third party operate the enrollment system might be a solution, there was universal interest.

Separate from the district, charter schools complained about uneven discipline and expulsion policies across charter schools, and teacher mobility midyear. All charter school respondents agreed that they would be interested in coordinating to establish some ground rules that they could agree to operate by.

A peripheral issue but of interest to the district is that only children attending priority schools can attend the ASD-replacement schools, which has meant that some of these schools are underenrolled when families make other choices. The ASD charter schools can't seek new students, even if these charters also operate other SCS-authorized charters that are over capacity.

There is a decided lack of information to help SCS families make enrollment choices. Even finding the names of the array of available schools is challenging. Separate enrollment timelines are also set by each organization.

ELEMENT | New schools opened based on family/student/neighborhood need

All respondents agreed that opening new schools based on enrollment needs is probably a good idea. However, while SCS is in the process of closing schools for underenrollment, new district-run schools will probably not be opening any time soon. The opportunity exists for I-Zone schools (low-performing district schools selected to receive extra funding and empowerment to work toward improved achievement) to confer with families in advance to develop programs of interest. I-Zone leaders have tried to connect with communities about what's working in their schools, what's not, and what they would like to see changed, but these efforts have been piecemeal, and it's not clear how well they have shaped the school programs.

Charter schools are proliferating, but the district currently has no regular review of programs, or suggested geographic needs for charter applicants to consider. Some charter schools do a lot of legwork to determine if they are welcome in a neighborhood. The ASD matches communities with schools, but there does not seem to be a deliberate effort across the board to reach out to communities to ask what they would like for their children.

ELEMENT | Schools replaced based on performance outcomes

SCS has not closed any district schools for performance reasons, though performance is one consideration when SCS decides which underenrolled schools to place on a closure list. The SCS Charter School Office had identified a charter school that was low-performing for several years and had prepared a case for closure, but when it came time for the former combined board to vote, they chose to keep it open.

ELEMENT | New schools opened with outside operators

In the last year, the district has opened nine charter schools (the W.E.B. DuBois Consortium of Charter Schools, Inc. sponsored eight of these schools). The district expects to open five more charter schools in 2014–15. The operators will be the W.E.B. DuBois Consortium, The Influence 1 Foundation, Memphis Rise Academy, Vision Preparatory Charter School, and the Olivet Sharing Corporation.

SCS has not been aggressive about recruiting charter operators. In the absence of recruitment, a homegrown charter sector has produced both high- and low-quality schools. The ASD has been very proactive in recruiting national charter operators, and SCS may benefit from the buzz created by the ASD toward attracting top national providers. Philosophically, the SCS Charter School Office is cautious about whether national providers are a good thing. They point to lackluster scores in the ASD-authorized charter schools, and to generic applications from national providers that show a lack of investment in Memphis (one application promised that students would "focus their study on the indigenous people of the Ohio River Valley"). Some SCS respondents also express a preference for homegrown charter relationships—both with the district and with area families.

As an authorizing office, the former MCS evolved in its views of charter schools, from at first reluctant and somewhat hostile, to the current SCS cordial-to-close working relationships with charters. The New Schools office is a legacy of the former MCS, and has faithfully followed all the compliance rules around authorizing. Though it has turned down charter applications in the past, its position has always been upheld as fair by the state in appeals processes. Some SCS respondents feel that there is reluctance to use this office to express specific programming needs that charters could fill, perhaps assuming that this would overstep their authority. The former SCS had a generally more hostile relationship with charters.

ELEMENT | Intentional development of new district schools or homegrown charter schools

In tandem to the arrival of the ASD, school districts across the state were also given the opportunity to develop an Innovation Zone (I-Zone). An I-Zone is a special group of schools identified on the priority schools list that the district itself, in agreement with the ASD, would turn around, using the federal School Improvement Grants (SIGs) to guide the effort. SCS has 13 I-Zone schools. In the 2012–13 school year, I-Zone schools in Shelby County had double-digit gains in reading, math, science, and social studies scores, outperforming all other I-Zones in Tennessee, including ASD schools. In 2013–14, five more schools will join the SCS I-Zone.

I-Zone schools are staffed based on the four SIG models (with different variations of former staff allowed to work in the school) and have more freedom to choose curriculum, assessments, and length of school days.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOOD OPTIONS AND CHOICES FOR ALL FAMILIES

Engage families sooner about real options and choices in "new" schools

SCS is in the process of taking over or turning around a set of chronically low-performing schools. These I-Zone schools are being given new freedoms, including the ability to present themselves as distinctive or having a different program or model. Rather than telling families in these schools what to expect, SCS might start asking families what they want. SCS can offer families a few strong options to choose from, and ask them more about what they hope for their children and what kind of school environment they would be excited to see in their neighborhood. The district should decide what issues on which they are open to hearing suggestions, and then engage the community for its input. Gestalt Schools, a homegrown SCS charter school, has done this effectively through on-the-ground community organizing; I-Zone schools could partner with Gestalt Schools to improve in this area.

Get smarter about the schools the district needs

The SCS Innovation, Planning, and Finance departments, along with the Charter Schools office, should work together to develop a school productivity grid (what a school costs to operate compared to how it performs). These results could be overlaid geographically to color-code schools by performance and grade level, identifying clusters of high- and low-performing schools and feeder patterns. Another important action would be to plot areas of overcrowding, over-siting, and empty but usable school facilities. It is very hard to be strategic without understanding what is needed and where it's needed. Even if charter schools can ultimately decide where they site and what they offer, they might find this district information compelling as they think about their program and location during the charter application process.

One possible solution is that schools slated as I-Zone schools could be operated as in-district charters, with all of the autonomies that current district charters enjoy. This would mitigate three problems currently faced by the district: competition for too few students, lack of intentionality in working with charters, and facility costs. Current high-quality charter providers, both with the ASD and with SCS, say that facilities are an important factor they consider when deciding which entity to work with. Creating in-district charters would allow SCS to turn around low-performing schools with proven providers, demonstrate that empowerment can be effective, provide the district a way to encourage specific charters in certain neighborhoods, and pave the way for more empowerment in other district schools.

The perception that money is being siphoned away from the district by charter schools would also be mitigated by this strategy through creating a better environment for collaboration between district and charter schools. According to state leaders, this action would make a significant statement that SCS views charters as a central part of its own work rather than as something that happens to SCS that they wish would go away.

Become strategic about scale-up of high-quality charter schools

SCS has not been strategic about encouraging the scale-up of high-performing local charter schools. KIPP has had a solid record of achievement in Memphis and started four schools with the new SCS district, but when they wanted to open more, they went with the ASD, who agreed to let them open six more schools under one charter rather than put them through a separate application process for each school over the next few years. SCS could be a more competitive authorizer by being more strategic and creative about the authorizing process.

Explore more collaboration with charter schools

Charter schools compete for district students, but they can also be beneficial partners by providing distinctive programming, serving students that SCS currently struggles to teach, attracting talent to the city, and operating as an example of school freedom that the district can strive to provide for traditional public schools. SCS can collaborate so that district-authorized charter test scores count as part of SCS district test scores.

Revive the idea of a district-charter compact

In late 2010, charter and former MCS leaders considered joining the cohort of cities working on collaboration compacts encouraged by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The work, however, did not get far because of uncertainty related to the beginning of the merger process. Both district and charter respondents believe it's time to reconsider working more formally together. An early win might be to work together on discipline and expulsion policies, or a common set of performance measures, where there seems to be a lot of interest in collaboration across sectors.

Research the concept of common enrollment procedures

Charter schools for the most part have not been interested in common enrollment. However, engaging a third party to operate this system makes participation more compelling. Charter schools see their issues in Shelby County as unique, but their concerns might be quelled by talking to a city that has worked through these challenges. Connecting with Denver Public Schools' Choice & Enrollment Services and an outspoken charter operator, and bringing them to Memphis for a day to talk to a convening of all Memphis area charter operators, might be very productive. Denver could explain the process they went through and how they dealt with issues similar to the ones Memphis-area charter schools are facing.

School Autonomy/Empowerment

DEFINING THE BENCHMARK | Portfolio districts allow principals and teachers—those who work most closely with kids every day—to decide how and what to teach to bring out the best in their students.

ANALYZING SCS'S CURRENT POSITION:

ELEMENT | All schools control staff selection and dismissal

In the spring of 2013, the combined former school boards passed a suite of human resource policies that affected hiring, layoffs, and dismissal. SCS schools are now able to hire based on mutual consent, base layoff decisions on performance, and dismiss teachers with low evaluation scores.

However, the rollout of these policies coincided with the July 2013 final merge of the city and county districts, and putting the human resource policies into practice will take some effort. During the merger, the district created a protected pool of teachers with the better scores of 3, 4, and 5 on the TEM teacher evaluation system and promised these teachers first rights to open positions. Additionally, once enrollment was finalized after the first month of school, the district's staffing model triggered some schools to lose or gain positions. So, while in theory, hiring is based on mutual consent, in the first year there were still occasions of forced placement.

Schools are now able to factor performance into retention decisions and can use evaluations after just one year for nontenured teachers. However, out of 8,960 teachers in 2012–13, just 112 teachers (1 percent) were dismissed or opted to retire or resign from the district in lieu of termination. It is still hard to remove tenured teachers based on low evaluations—the evaluations usually need to be coupled with disciplinary issues, and a "bad fit" would need to be coupled with both.

I-Zone schools follow SIG guidelines for removing leaders and staff and replacing them with specially recruited high-performing leaders who can build their own teams. SCS has 13 I-Zone schools with full hiring capability, with 5 more to join in 2014.

ELEMENT | All schools control budget

No SCS schools currently have control over their own budgets. I-Zone schools have an infusion of extra funds ($1.7 million over three years) through SIG; much of this is already accounted for in added salaries for the SIG-mandated longer school day. Beyond SIG, neither I-Zone schools nor traditional schools have any budget freedom. Leaders of high-performing schools have said they want this.

ELEMENT | All schools control pay
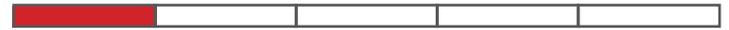
SCS schools currently cannot pay teachers extra for performance, or recruit for hard-to-staff subjects, or retain staff with higher offers. There is a new teacher career pathway that allows teachers who receive high evaluations to become leadership coaches and teacher leaders, and these positions come with an additional stipend of $3,000 to $5,000 annually.

ELEMENT | All schools control curriculum choice

The only SCS schools that can choose their own curriculum are charter schools and I-Zone schools. For I-Zone leaders, first-year test score success is linked to the ability to choose curriculum and assessments for their students. I-Zone school leaders interviewed strongly believe that the district's centralized curriculum and assessments held them back as leaders of traditional district schools.

ELEMENT | Autonomies are defined through memorandums of understanding (MOUs), performance contracts, or charters

There are board policies in place regarding new human resource policies, including mutual consent and performance-based layoffs. Regarding I-Zone policies, SCS wrote an application to the state to explain their strategy with these schools, which the school board also approved.

ELEMENT | Schools free to seek contractual waivers or exemptions

Schools can seek waivers through a process with board sign-off. It's unclear how many schools attempt to do this.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL AUTONOMY/ EMPOWERMENT

Begin to roll out empowerment with the help of principals

Recommendations for rolling out school empowerment are to start doing it immediately and iterate along the way. SCS may not be ready to hand over complete empowerment for all principals, but the I-Zone pilot suggests that strong school leaders are even more effective when they are not fighting the system to get what they need for their schools.

The district could use the I-Zone as a model, and move toward a Phase 2 of increased empowerment as something that other district leaders could opt into—in exchange for greater accountability. High-performing school leaders, school leaders with experience in charter schools, and anyone else willing to be held accountable could make up the Phase 3 cohort. The rollout plan should include informing all principals, recruiting those the district knows it wants involved, and engaging them in helping to develop a strong rollout plan.

For a practical how-to on rolling out school autonomy or empowerment, see the CRPE brief entitled Defining and Organizing School Autonomy. Many cities are granting principals varying degrees of empowerment, but New York City is a good example of a district that has already transitioned to completely empowered schools. Cleveland Metropolitan School District started rolling out a school autonomy pilot plan in 2013.

Set a date for all the schools in the district to be empowered in three to five years

The message to school leaders not in the empowerment pilot can be this: We will become a district of empowered leaders. You were not trained for this, but we will train you. If you don't want to do this, you have time to find another leadership position in another district. But in three (or five) years, all school leaders in SCS will have control over hiring, dismissal, curriculum, and budget—with the expectation that if decisions don't lead to improved student achievement and a positive climate, another leader will be waiting to take the helm.

Protect I-Zone schools from recentralization

I-Zone leaders need to be protected from forces designed to favor centralization. Each district department head needs to be able to describe how their department will support

A principal's story: The need for school empowerment

Being able to choose what works best for my school is critical. We need to get out of the mind-set of "one approach for all district schools." My school is different from a school that's only 10 blocks away. For example, I need to be able to choose the right formative assessment model, and the district needs to hold me accountable for that choice. Last year, I tried to initiate a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to purchase Pearson for my formative assessment. But the district has a binding contract with Discovery. So I went through the MOU process, and Pearson was going to do something different just for the I-Zone, on the server and everything, but then I ran into barriers with the Research department, the IT department, and the Contracts department. Needless to say, it was never resolved. So I was stuck with Discovery. But Discovery doesn't align with the current pacing guide. It's frustrating for teachers when they are giving a formative assessment, but it's actually a benchmark assessment on something they might cover the second semester. They see red! So I wanted something we could use based on what they had taught, and we ended up having to do a lot of in-house, internal assessment development.

So this year, I found another program, called MasteryConnect. I did the Webinar, had the money in my SIG grant, wrote it all up. But when it gets to Contract Services, I get a lot of push-back. "Why are we going to buy this program when we already have a districtwide one?" Then IT doesn't want to do the lift. I had to go to my supervisor and get his help, he had to go back and forth, and finally, it just got approved. But that was a month and a half and now we're behind, and lot of time was wasted trying to push it through.

After all the push-back, this principal learned through another principal that there was already an SCS school using this program. The district departments didn't know that they had already approved it somewhere else in the district.

autonomous schools and what they will do to cut through bureaucracy for these schools. I-Zone schools are the first wave of autonomous schools, and the superintendent, cabinet, and department heads need to make these schools' empowerment paramount.

It is also unclear what will happen to I-Zone schools as they improve. The state has left this decision entirely up to districts, though state leaders hope that these schools will grow their autonomies in an effort to become the top schools in the state.

Support mutual consent policies in all SCS schools

SCS has policies in place that allow for mutual consent. All school principals can hire the best teachers they can recruit for their schools. Some forced placement happened in this first year of the merger (2013–14), so SCS now needs to support school leaders and set the standard going forward that hiring is based only on mutual consent.

Pupil-Based Funding for All Schools

DEFINING THE BENCHMARK | In portfolio districts, funding is linked to each student—no matter where he or she goes to school—rather than to staff positions. More of the district's money heads directly to schools, and principals can make spending choices that best serve their students' needs.

ANALYZING SCS'S CURRENT POSITION:

ELEMENT | Funds follow students to educational options of their choice
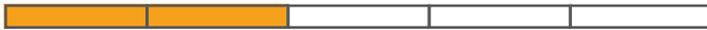
Currently, SCS allocates funds to schools based on a school staffing model. That is, school size triggers a predetermined number of teachers, assistant principals (AP), other staff, and a principal. The drawback to this model is that it locks schools into a rigid budget. The school leader has little or no flexible funds, and thus can't make allocations based on what is best for the school. For example, under the current school-staffing model, a principal does not have the power to choose to hire two literacy coaches instead of an AP to help improve high school literacy instruction.

ELEMENT | High proportion of district funds sent to schools

The proportion of SCS district funds that are assigned to schools versus district office staff could not be verified. One respondent offered a number somewhere between 30 and 50 percent. As the district moves toward a system of differentiated schools, it will want to seek out actual figures and set ambitious goals to increase this number. Some portfolio districts send close to 80 percent of total funds directly to schools and are aiming to increase that number annually.

ELEMENT | Common prices set for facilities and central services across sectors

There is currently no common pricing of services or goods across the district. District office departments, for the most part, can't say what their per-unit service costs are— essentially, how much it costs to provide their service. To make progress on other areas, such as budget empowerment or engaging the charter sector, it will be important to determine these costs. As schools move toward control of budgets, principals will get to choose which services they want to buy back from the district. This practice could also prove a source of revenue for SCS as the charter sector grows and municipal districts spin off: SCS has learned how

to provide some essential services at economies of scale that small districts and charters may want to buy.

Charter sector respondents expressed frustration over the district's facilities and services pricing. Though some say they would like to have SCS as their authorizer, the pricing issue has led some to choose the ASD when they scale up. A big concern for these respondents is rent costs: variable rents are charged to different charters, with the most politically savvy operators negotiating better deals with the district. Charter school respondents see empty school buildings in blighted neighborhoods and say that having charter schools move in at little or no cost would be a good thing for everyone. Though SCS reports that the costs for shuttering school buildings are low (roughly an initial $30,000 to decommission the building, and minimal annual costs after that), and that SCS earns some nominal rent, SCS might gain by collaborating with charter schools on free or inexpensive rent.

Additionally, SCS has leveled a 3 percent administrative service fee for charters that seems arbitrary to charter school operators, and some have chosen to opt out of these services.

ELEMENT | Plan in place for schools that cannot be sustained on student-based allocation formula

Currently, the district reviews building utilization rates and prepares a list of schools recommended for closure based on underenrollment and costly repair needs. In January 2013, the Transition Planning Commission recommended closure of up to 21 schools due to underenrollment. The estimated savings was about $20 million. The combined board voted to close only four schools. In April 2013, then-interim superintendent Dorsey Hopson suggested closing an additional 11 schools to save the unified district almost $5 million in the 2014–15 school year.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUPIL-BASED FUNDING FOR ALL SCHOOLS

Start by getting facts on what the SCS schools cost to operate

The first step to modernizing SCS finances is to get a baseline of what each school actually costs right now, including true salaries and any other central services they receive. Pricing out the cost of central services will help greatly in this process.

Then, taking the entire district budget into account, the recommendation is for the district and board to decide what a basic student should be allocated and what special weights and amounts should be added for students with additional needs (e.g., special education, poverty, English language learning). Next, every school should get their student-based budget—the sum of the number of students and their "weights"—totaled. These totals should be compared to the current school budgets. Some schools will be underfunded in comparison to other schools; some will be overfunded. This information will support the start of a necessary conversation about how to send fair budgets to district schools.

SCS has a lot of catch-up work to do in the finance area, but the good news is there are great resources available to help accomplish this work. Districts like Baltimore City Schools and Hartford Public Schools are good examples to look to. The Edunomics Lab, which pioneered helping districts understand and transition to student based allocations, can help to guide the process.

Prioritize moving centralized resources to schools

The district should set an ambitious bar for the proportion of district funds that is sent to schools. This will be one way to increase school budgets in an era of diminishing resources.

Close or merge underenrolled schools

As schools move toward operating on their true budgets, underenrolled schools will not be able to stay open. Some schools may be able to change up their program to attract more students, and they should be offered the freedom to do this (see the Recommendations for School Autonomy/Empowerment). But some schools will not be able to draw enough students, and SCS will need to help these schools either find another school to co-locate with, or close out.

Get to the bottom of district-authorized charter funding and facility questions

A great deal of bitterness was reported between the charter sector and SCS about financing and whether or not one side is getting shortchanged. A recommendation is for SCS to make an externally conducted cost study a top priority to see where the money and in-kind services tally out. Once the cost study is concluded, the question of charter access to free or reduced price facilities should be addressed. The timing seems right, as negotiations are currently going on in which some municipal districts in the process of de-merging from SCS may possibly lease their facilities from SCS for $1, and maintain them on their own. Charter leaders say that if they can get free or reasonable-cost facilities, they would gladly pay fees for administrative and other services that could be provided by the district.

Talent-Seeking Strategy

DEFINING THE BENCHMARK | Every city needs smart, compassionate, motivated, creative people working in schools and district offices. Portfolio districts have strategies to develop the strong people they already have and to seek new talent from a wide array of sources, including the best districts, charter schools, and training programs.

ANALYZING SCS'S CURRENT POSITION:

ELEMENT | Policies in place for using alternative pipelines to find and develop talent

SCS has benefited from early work in the former MCS to build out alternative talent pipelines. It now has contracts with Teach for America and New Leaders. SCS has a contract with TNTP for recruitment and retention, but some respondents wondered about duplication of efforts between TNTP and the district's Talent and Leadership departments, which will be important to address.

ELEMENT | Recruitment of new principals from proven pipelines

New Leaders has worked in Memphis since 2004, and its leaders currently lead roughly 30 schools out of 271 SCS schools.

ELEMENT | Recruitment of new teachers from proven pipelines
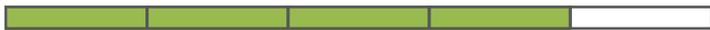
The Tennessee Higher Education Commission produces a report each year rating teacher preparation programs, and this report is put to use by SCS when considering partners for recruitment. Top performers in teacher preparation in 2013 were Teach for America and Memphis Teacher Residency. Approximately 375 (4 percent) of SCS's current 8,960 teachers come from these programs. In 2013, SCS hired 90 teachers from Teach for America.

ELEMENT | Intensive development of teachers and leaders

The district, with the help of significant external investment of more than $100 million from national and local philanthropic organizations, has built out a centralized teacher and leader effectiveness program that ties into its evaluation program. Every new and new-to-the-district teacher is paired with a teacher coach. Every Level 1 (low-rated) teacher is also paired with a teacher coach. Whether this pairing continues throughout the year is entirely up to the teacher. Strong teachers get the opportunity to become coaches and move up the career path. The University of Memphis is currently conducting research on the district's coaching methods and will release their findings in the fall of 2014.

ELEMENT | Performance-based evaluation system in place to recognize or remove teachers and leaders

The former MCS district was a leader in developing an evaluation and support tool called Teacher Effectiveness Measure (TEM), which later became the basis for the Tennessee teacher evaluation system that rates teachers and principals based in part on student performance: 50 percent of a teacher's or principal's evaluation is based on student achievement data (35 percent is based on student growth, and 15 percent is based on other measures of student achievement, such as graduation rates or college success). The remaining 50 percent of the evaluation is based on observations, student surveys, and teacher knowledge.

The former MCS first implemented the TEM three years ago, and SCS is now working through initial struggles with "rater drift:" patterns emerged where some principals regularly gave too-high ratings to teachers whose students underperformed. The Talent Department is working to train principals to rate more accurately through group rating scenarios and use of the cameras in the classrooms from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Measures of Effective Teaching study.

ELEMENT | Schools free to differentiate teacher pay and factor performance into layoff decisions

While SCS schools can't offer salary increases based on merit, highly effective teachers have the opportunity to move into coaching roles that have a stipend attached to them. Coaches can earn anywhere from $3,000 to $6,000 annually depending on their role and responsibilities.

Regarding reductions in force, new policies allow SCS principals to make layoff decisions based on TEM scores, and if several teachers have the same evaluation score, school "fit" can be a tiebreaker.

ELEMENT | Innovative ways to extend the reach of strong teachers and leaders

There are no current efforts toward getting more struggling students in front of the best teachers or sharing the work of the best teachers more widely across district classrooms. Strong teachers do have the opportunity to become coaches and assist other teachers. The same is true for principals; they may get tapped to run an I-Zone school, and they may mentor a number of emerging leaders, but there are no efforts to extend the talents of the strongest leaders across more schools. Any efforts to use technology to arrange classrooms differently and give more students access to strong teachers is hampered by the state's rigid teacher-to-student ratio laws. There are no waiver options that would allow a school to try new configurations.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TALENT-SEEKING STRATEGY

Increase recruitment for schools

An array of strategies is needed to address the expressed concern about having enough strong teachers and leaders to bring about the dramatic improvements needed in the district. Continuing to support average teachers, as well as recruiting the best talent out of Tennessee pipelines, is crucial. But more strategies are needed.

SCS has a brief honeymoon period in which to draw home talented Memphians currently or formerly teaching and leading in other places. Here are some ideas:

- Have the superintendent host recruitment events in cities to which Memphians migrate.

- Start a regional public relations campaign about the great opportunities in Memphis (great city, great district with new freedoms and urgency).

- Train every current principal in talent scouting and how to share important and meaningful early leadership opportunities with the crop of best teachers. New Leaders is doing a lot of work in Tennessee on these very issues. Get New Leaders to train SCS leaders.

- The best leaders grow up teaching in the best schools. Identify those schools and prioritize the mentoring of strong teachers who know what excellent schools look like.

Shore up district office positions with skilled hires and technical contracts

The same talent strategies should be put in place for district office and cabinet level/bench positions as for teachers and principals. Search top-notch local companies for employees with specific skill sets. Work with FedEx or other strong local organizations and use "loaned executives" for special projects or mentoring. Whenever possible, staff departments with a mix of knowledgeable district insiders and highly skilled local district outsiders. Consider contracting out highly specialized work that requires state-of-the-art talent (e.g., information technology, general counsel, human resource systems, accounting, real estate) and pairing these outside experts, where necessary, with a guide from inside the district.

Sources of Support for Schools

DEFINING THE BENCHMARK | Schools need to be able to make use of the best ideas, training, and materials available. In a portfolio district, support may come from the district but may also come from local organizations, online providers, or other sources. Portfolio districts help find the best resources and allow schools to purchase what they want within their budget.

ANALYZING SCS'S CURRENT POSITION:

ELEMENT | Districts provide rich and timely information on student and school performance

SCS provides schools with a formative assessment through a contract with Discovery Education, an interim assessment vendor. However, respondents say that some schools find this system not to be as useful as they'd like (e.g., Discovery's formative assessment assesses on concepts not yet taught). At least some schools would like more freedom to purchase more customizable tools.

ELEMENT | Schools free to choose support from diverse independent providers

SCS schools are not currently free to access resources from independent providers. I-Zone schools have some greater freedoms in that some of their additional SIG funds are technically available for them to spend as they choose. However, the I-Zone schools reportedly still find that established district systems and contracts get in the way of working with different providers.

ELEMENT | Procurement policies that enable schools to work with vendors, regardless of established district contracts

The practice of schools setting up new contracts is unusual and discouraged in SCS.

ELEMENT | Attract and develop a marketplace for independent providers

SCS is not ready to develop a marketplace of providers. The district office is still the main provider of services to schools, and it enters into contracts with vendors that gives schools little opportunity to access multiple providers of similar services.

ELEMENT | Strategies to engage developers of new educational technologies
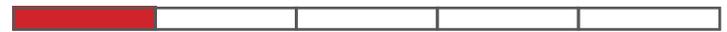
The SCS Innovation Department is in the process of starting conversations about what a personalized learning strategy might look like and who could assist in implementation, but there is nothing currently in place.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOURCES OF SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS

Begin to change the district office mind-set to that of "service broker"

The first step to improving district support to schools is to convey a clear and repeated message that the district office exists to serve schools and families. This message needs to come from the superintendent and cabinet, as well as department heads.

Start to measure district office progress and customer satisfaction

1. SCS needs to build out success metrics for each department and hold each department accountable. Departments should be able to demonstrate how they measure their support of schools and families, how they prove that their support increases student achievement in individual schools, and how they support the broader work of the portfolio strategy. The district should engage departments in thinking through their own set of benchmarks. Once the baseline and benchmarks are agreed on, the district must hold each department accountable via annual performance reviews. DC Public Schools did this work via SchoolStat, and can provide a good example of how to develop internal accountability.

2. SCS needs to hear from its schools how they feel about district office departments, and let these opinions drive decisions. The first step—ideally in Spring 2014—might be to create an online, anonymous survey to be sent to every school leader, in which leaders rate every district department on the services they provide and

what the school leaders wish they were getting. Survey results ideally would be shared widely, both internally and externally, and used as a guide to future decisions. For example, "Based on what schools tell us, we have decided to offer XX" or "we are no longer going to offer YY." New Jersey's state education office has been conducting similar surveys annually since 2012 and might provide a good example to work from.

Get smart on personalized learning

The district's Innovation Department should start to play the role of attracting and matching personalized learning supports to schools and steer clear of practices that simply supply technology add-ons. The Innovation Department can also learn more about what services and vendors the best-performing charter schools are currently using and make these resources available to district schools, or find ways for district schools to purchase professional development from these charter schools.

Performance-Based Accountability for Schools

DEFINING THE BENCHMARK | Schools need to be caring, cheerful, exciting places. They also much be places where children are challenged to learn and succeed. Schools must be able to show that all students are being engaged and prepared for the next grade, graduation, and beyond. Portfolio districts create a set of transparent performance measures for all schools in the district.

ANALYZING SCS'S CURRENT POSITION:

ELEMENT | **Common school performance framework in place (defined criteria used to measure school health)**

There is no common school performance framework in SCS or across district and charter schools. The district uses some state reports and measures for school performance and progress data.

PeopleFirst, a community-wide initiative of the public-private coalition Memphis Fast Forward, includes SCS superintendent Dorsey Hopson in its leadership. PeopleFirst has set targets for a range of school and college or career readiness measures, and it tracks county-level data and publishes a report card on progress. However, this report card is not widely known, nor is it used to measure individual schools.

ELEMENT | **Performance framework uses multiple measures:**

- **Student performance |** The district refers to the state student performance reports.

- **Student Progress |** The district refers to the state progress and growth reports.

- **Student engagement |** SCS collects information on student discipline and attendance, and twice-yearly conducts student Tripod surveys that measure observable practices in the classroom.

- **Equity and access |** There are no regular measures or reports that track across SCS district or charter schools to compare whether schools are evenly serving students with special needs (all types) or students for whom English is a second language. The state produces an annual report on charter schools that compares the charter sector and the district at large on service to these students, but there is nothing that compares one school to another.

- **Long-term student outcomes |** The district does not track students' college and career readiness, college acceptance, or persistence by school. The PeopleFirst report card has set county targets that include graduation rates, number of students taking the ACT, and college readiness scores. This report card also includes a benchmark of the number of people age 25 and older who complete various degrees.

ELEMENT | **Performance framework used as a significant factor in school expansion, intervention, replacement/closure decisions**

The existing performance and growth measures are not currently important factors in determining which schools to close. The state has set a performance threshold that triggers intervention for the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools. There are 69 of these Priority Schools in Shelby County, out of 271 SCS schools. Some are SCS I-Zone schools, and some are run by the ASD.

SCS has 33 schools that have earned the Reward School status for schools in the top 5 percent in the state for performance or progress or both. There are no efforts under way at SCS to expand or replicate its high-performing schools.

ELEMENT | **Publication of a school report card based on a common performance framework**

SCS has no district-developed school report card to show how schools are doing across important measures and to give families information to help guide their enrollment choices. PeopleFirst publishes an aggregated countywide set of measures.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PERFORMANCE-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY FOR SCHOOLS

Develop a common school performance framework

Laying the groundwork for a common performance framework is something that can happen fairly quickly. Many districts have models that can serve as customizable templates for SCS to reflect its own priorities. Baltimore has a good framework and uses it to make decisions. Denver does too.

Schools will need to be engaged in the development of an SCS performance framework. They need to agree that the measures used are the right ones, that they are fair, and that it makes sense to hold schools accountable for these measures. This is a really good opportunity to involve a group of teachers, leaders, and charter school leaders (who have expressed a readiness to join in).

Depending on whether SCS schools and district leaders think the PeopleFirst metrics are useful, it might make sense to include some of their broad measures in a school/district/community set of measures that people value.

Additionally, the ASD has developed a framework that they feel is robust. They are interested in sharing their framework and in helping to build out a charter/SCS set of measures.

Agree on measures and use them to make decisions

A performance framework is only useful if it is used. It must become the basis for school-related decisions including expansion, intervention, and closure/replacement. Until now, school openings and closures have appeared haphazard. It's unclear how the board decided to close 4 of the 21 schools on a list of underenrolled schools. And it's unclear whether

chronic low performance was a factor in those decisions. But it should be. I-Zone schools that do not improve will be taken over by the ASD, which means students will leave the district. Strong performance management means knowing when a school is not going to turn around and having better alternatives waiting in the wings.

Create a public report card for every school to include measures and information that matter in family and student decisions

Families need information to make good decisions about choosing schools, and about asking more of their schools. Some of the information in a performance framework might be useful, but additional measures may also be important to families, such as four-year graduation rates from high schools, dropout rates, rates of graduates attending and staying in college, teacher absences, or feelings among current families about a school's climate. Many cities have school report cards that could be used as a template,[8] but promoting these with families, schools, and community leaders will be crucial. It's important not to overload report cards, but rather to make them simple to understand and commit to producing them every year. Charter schools should be included and receive the same report card as well.

8. Some better examples include ones from Hartford, New York City and New Orleans.

Extensive Public Engagement

DEFINING THE BENCHMARK | Portfolio districts engage with families, educators, and communities to understand what they value and include those needs in district plans. Portfolio districts show what they will deliver, in terms of outcomes for students and new opportunities for families, teachers, and school leaders—and clearly communicate on their progress.

ANALYZING SCS'S CURRENT POSITION:

ELEMENT | Solicit ideas from families and communities about school and district decisions

SCS demonstrates no regular efforts to understand what families in Shelby County want and value in their school experience. Additionally, the district does not communicate information well with families or staff. A new communications director is working on improving the call center function of the district for both staff and families, and is preparing to build out a strategic plan on ways to listen and communicate from the district office. But the voice of the community is not currently sought or heeded except through board meetings and the media.

ELEMENT | Partnerships and coalitions with key stakeholders

SCS has been fortunate to have the long-standing support of local civic and philanthropic organizations, including coalitions of business and government leaders, and there seems to be a high level of engagement around education reform. The former MCS had remarkable national foundation support, with $92 million from the Gates Foundation and benefits from the state's win of Race to the Top funds. The former MCS also brings long relationships with strong talent partners including Teach for America and, more recently, the Memphis Teacher Residency. The current SCS superintendent and other key district leaders attended the former MCS schools and have strong and wide-reaching personal connections with grassroots community organizations and faith leaders.

ELEMENT | Communication plan to convey information about reform strategy (including strategic plan, implementation schedule, annual updates, and external progress review)

SCS lacks a plan to convey information, progress, or decisionmaking. There are no school report cards, and no clear criteria can be found for how important school decisions are to be made. Writing this report is part of the work toward the development of a strategic plan, but even a detailed and useful plan will not be written in a way that is meaningful to the general public. A separate, brief, and clear vision and plan will need to be written, then shared broadly and often.

ELEMENT | Plan for helping district and school staff understand and support the strategy

Internally, across the district, people struggle to articulate what the strategy is or how they fit into it. There is no published vision (letter or memo) or plan from the superintendent.

ELEMENT | Feedback loop for families and community members to express concerns and receive response

No regular or simple feedback loops exist except to call the school or district office to express a complaint.

ELEMENT | Public criteria and schedule for school closings and openings; make new options clear to families affected by closure

In early 2013, the Transition Planning Commission developed a list of 21 schools that were underenrolled or too expensive to repair and should be closed. The combined board voted to close 4 of those schools. Another 10 schools are slated for closure in 2014–15.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EXTENSIVE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

SCS has an opportunity to change its reputation from a closed and guarded organization to one that asks, listens, and communicates effectively.

Listen to families and tie district actions to families' values

Before undertaking more changes, SCS needs to know what people value so that it can combine those ideals with plans for school improvement. SCS could collect this information through multiple means (e.g., surveys, focus groups, community meetings). It could do this with a highly regarded community partner.

Once the information is gathered, it needs to be shared with families, staff, and the media. These opinions and values can become the reason behind all changes going forward, hard or simple, and can be included in how the board and superintendent communicate decisions. For example, "We heard from our families that . . . and so we are doing . . ." With improved student achievement as the default expectation, SCS can focus on delivering better results enhanced by community values.

Some SCS charter schools are national exemplars on how to do this well. SCS could talk to them about what they do, whether they might help, and how the district might do the same at scale or in neighborhoods that begin to add up to scale.

Develop a district plan

It will be critical to develop and circulate a clear district plan soon. Several important elements should be included:

- A formal plan that outlines a desired end goal and steps to get there (like the Cleveland Plan).

- A specific implementation schedule that ties work to dates and deliverables, shapes the goals of each district department, and serves as a public accountability tool for whether the district is on track.

- Annual plan updates:
  - An external annual report on quantitative evidence of progress (or lack) on important measures (e.g., growth, performance, percentage of students in high-quality schools or seats).
  - A "State of the District" annual meeting (like Hartford or Cleveland do) to share the annual report, highlight progress, and detail remedies for areas that aren't on track.

- An external review of progress:
  - In-depth assessment on strategy implementation to note whether all portfolio components are progressing.

Communicate more effectively with employees

Part of developing a district plan will be getting a clear picture on the goal and how each current or reorganized department works in service of that goal and in coordination with each other.

In addition, it will be important to create a new expectation of clarity of purpose, openness, and problem-solving within the district office, coming from the top down. This should include annual metrics for each department and employee.

It's important for district leaders to learn from other sectors about how to develop an internal culture with a voice that expresses respect for colleagues, highlights successes and innovations, encourages idea-sharing and creative problem-solving, and exudes the uniqueness of Memphis and its humor, history, and contributions.

Conclusion

In its first year as a unified district, Shelby County Schools has not only survived the many challenges the merger brought, it has used this opportunity to start focusing on better opportunities for students, a more financially sound district and, as this report illustrates, a more self-reflective, transparent organization. SCS is open to learning about itself and sharing these findings with the public. The next steps for SCS will require difficult but rewarding work, but the goals they strive for can be distilled as follows.

In terms of how families experience schools, SCS must engage families in the process of school turnarounds by finding out what they want and infusing those needs and values in school designs. While dealing with these immediate interventions, SCS should be planning the long-term strategy by getting smarter about the schools the district needs. Where are there neighborhoods with no viable options? Which schools are overcrowded? Mapping out these facts will help shape a healthy strategy for the future.

School improvement starts with strong leadership and empowerment to make decisions. Giving principals freedom over hiring (no more forced placement), budget, curriculum, and calendar will allow better school-level decisions. Of course, continued recruitment and rigorous hiring practices are critical for making sure leaders and teachers are skilled and making the most of the freedom they have been granted.

Often, schools are ready for the responsibility of empowerment before the central office is willing to transfer responsibility. It will take strong messages from the top leadership to begin to change the district office mindset to that of "service broker". One option is to start measuring district office progress on how departments are supporting schools and whether schools report they are satisfied.

SCS must begin to get a much better grasp of its finances. It needs facts on what SCS schools cost to operate and what the per-unit cost of district services is. It must prioritize the process of shifting current centralized resources to schools and it must begin to close or merge underenrolled schools. Numerous recurring questions remain surrounding district-authorized charter funding that need to be answered in order for district-charter relationships to move forward.

The freedoms over hiring, curriculum, and spending must be checked against performance. SCS needs to develop a set of measures that all its schools—both district-run and charters—are evaluated by. The schools need to be involved in the creation of this "performance framework" and agree to it—and then SCS must use this as the basis for making important scaling, intervention, or closure decisions. In addition, SCS must begin to publicly report annually on every school, including measures and information that matter to family and student decisions.

Lastly, SCS must continue to seek out family needs and values and include these important ideas in school and district decisions. SCS needs to develop a work plan that maps out where it wants to go, how that relates to what families say they want, and explain how it plans to get there. The plan needs to guide district work and show how it offers new opportunities for the growth of teachers, leaders, and other district staff.

SCS must deal with myriad procedural items resulting from the two-district merger, and the de-merger of six municipalities. It would be easy to become distracted from the core work of teaching and learning. This report can serve as a way for SCS and its communities to maintain a focus on core issues during the first year of implementation and beyond.