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Growing Number of Districts Seek Bold Change With Portfolio Strategy

Over the past decade, leading districts around the country have pursued a strategy that profoundly changes the role of the school district and its relationship to schools.

New York City, New Orleans, Chicago, Denver, Baltimore, Hartford, and others have been creating diverse options for families in disadvantaged neighborhoods by opening new autonomous schools and giving existing schools more control of budgeting and hiring, as well as access to new sources of support. The districts hold these schools—both new and existing—to common performance standards. This approach has become known as the “portfolio strategy.”

These districts chose the portfolio strategy because they wanted dramatically better results for students. Determined leaders—such as Joel Klein in New York City, Michael Bennet and Tom Boasberg in Denver, Steven Adamowski in Hartford, Andrés Alonso in Baltimore, state officials in New Orleans—realized that they were not going to get breakthrough results using traditional approaches that had hardened into place over many decades. These leaders believed the only way they were going to see genuine improvement was to open the system to new ideas, talents, and community assets that formerly stood apart from public education.

The portfolio strategy is bold and disrupts long-held arrangements. Though opposition has cut short the tenures of some portfolio district leaders (e.g., D.C.’s Michelle Rhee), others are stepping up to take their places. New York City has become an incubator for portfolio district leadership. Today, New Orleans, Newark, Chicago, and Baltimore are all led by people mentored by former NYC Schools Chancellor Joel Klein.

What Is a Portfolio Strategy?

A portfolio strategy is a method of problem solving, not a program that can be bolted down and expected to work automatically. Instead, leaders pursuing the portfolio strategy identify neighborhoods and groups of children who lack good schooling options and find ways to create better alternatives. That can include asking outstanding principals and teachers to create new schools, or awarding charters to groups with good track records. Districts pursuing the portfolio strategy are indifferent about who runs a school (whether it is the district, a charter operator, or some other entity); but they seek continuous improvement, both in individual schools and in the city’s overall supply of public schools.

Portfolio district leaders know that everything will not work as planned the first time. They constantly assess what is and is not working. They track performance closely and make sure everyone in the system has access to good data. They try new approaches to get better results, add more of what works, eliminate what doesn’t, re-assess, and repeat.

The number of cities that find this strategy makes sense is increasing every year, with more than 20 major cities using all or parts of the strategy. These cities range in size and location from Los Angeles to Boston to Denver to Rochester.

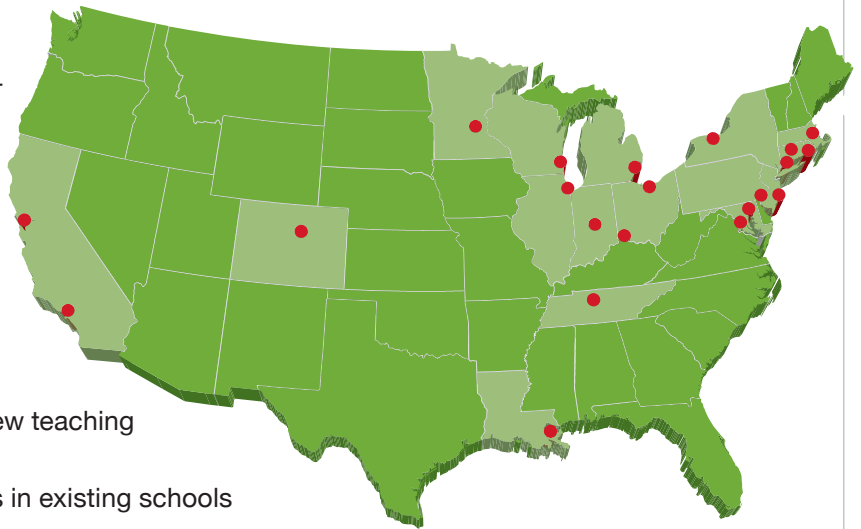
Portfolio School Districts in 2011

At the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), we have been studying the development of the portfolio strategy in New York City, Washington, D.C., New Orleans, Chicago, Denver, Hartford, and Baltimore for the past three years.¹

1. CRPE has also created a national network of current or aspiring portfolio districts, which includes Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, Hartford, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Nashville, New Haven, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, Rochester, The Rhode Island Mayoral Academy, and Washington, D.C.

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Our full report examining the progress and challenges faced by these districts will be published next year. We can, however, make an interim assessment now.



1. Portfolio districts support and oversee school improvement in new ways. Changes seen in portfolio districts include:

- A proactive approach towards attracting new teaching and management talent
- New opportunities/incentives for educators in existing schools
- More school-level control over hiring/budgets
- Funding that follows students, not programs
- New forms of support for schools brokered (but not provided) by the district central office
- Strict school-level accountability for performance, including closure

2. Charter schools have become essential parts of district portfolios.

City leaders recognize charter schools as key to pursuing the mission of offering better schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods. In fact, nine portfolio districts have stepped forward as leaders in making charter schools collaborators, not adversaries. Last year, district leaders from Denver, New York, Rochester, Hartford, New Orleans, Los Angeles, Baltimore, Minneapolis, and Nashville announced compacts with their local charter schools. These compacts spell out the ways in which each entity will support the work of the other, such as fair sharing of facilities or transparent achievement reporting. Likewise, as charter schools become a larger share of a city's portfolio, they must take on obligations of fair and open admissions, acceptance of new students mid-year, and service to children with special needs. District and charter leaders in New York, New Orleans, and Denver are grappling with these challenges today. The solutions they develop will likely guide practice nationwide.

3. Portfolio districts need to do more than just invite innovation: they must actively pursue it.

City leaders are recruiting educators and school operators, not only locally but also nationally. New York City has built an innovation zone (iZone) that has searched the world for new ideas on use of school time, staffing, and technology. In the next three years, as many as 200 New York City schools will be experimenting with innovative new instructional systems that transform student and teacher work. New York and Los Angeles were among the first districts to create sub-portfolios of schools designed to offer multiple pathways to graduation for students at risk of giving up on high school.

4. Controversy is common in portfolio districts.

School closings and changes in teacher hiring and assignment upset expectations of security and predictability. These disputes lead to opposition but they also spur new sources of support, especially among parents of children least likely to succeed in the former school arrangements. The clashes also expose the latent conflict between the interests of children and adults. Portfolio district leaders must constantly balance a sense of urgency with the political savvy to choose which political battles to engage in at any one time.

5. Portfolio districts are making progress.

Portfolio districts with longer track records are producing positive results. These include, for example, improvements in student test scores, high school graduation rates, and the quality and distribution of teachers in New York City. New Orleans is seeing improved school climates, student attendance, attainment, and test scores. These district leaders are encouraged by the results but press for continued improvements, as they are still not yet close to achieving the outcomes they want.

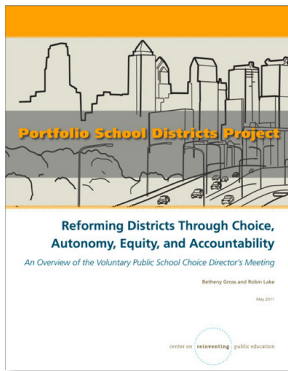
6. Portfolio strategies are hardy and are proving sustainable despite changes in leadership.

In recent months, New York City, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Chicago, Rochester, New Orleans, and Hartford have experienced leadership turnover but remain committed to the portfolio strategy. In some cases (e.g., Los Angeles and Chicago) the pace of change is likely to increase under the new leadership.

The Future

Continuous improvement, the essence of a portfolio strategy, is becoming the new normal in urban public education. Rather than taking a single shot in the dark, a portfolio strategy tries many plausible approaches to improving urban schools, keeps the best, and is always on the lookout for something better. It provokes opposition from groups who have done very well under the old system, and sometimes the opposition becomes strong enough to force a slowdown. But the logic of continuous improvement and the pressing need for it are evident in the growing movement of districts committing to this approach.

The *Portfolio School Districts Project* explores the strategies, implementation, and results in districts that have adopted a model of providing public education by multiple means. Learn more about the project and the Portfolio Network, and see our developing Online Handbook of resources for state and district leaders interested in designing and implementing a portfolio school district strategy, at www.crpe.org.



Reforming Districts Through Choice, Autonomy, Equity, and Accountability: An Overview of the Voluntary Public School Choice Directors Meeting

Betheny Gross and Robin Lake

www.crpe.org/publications/reforming-districts-through-choice-autonomy-equity-and-accountability-overview

In February 2011, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) convened a conference to help districts implementing school choice under the U.S. Department of Education's Voluntary Public School Choice program. The conference focused on the most pressing issues faced by localities committed to implementing public school choice and provided grantees access to the most current knowledge from a panel of district and charter leaders and school choice researchers. This paper summarizes the two-day conversation and lessons from the discussion.

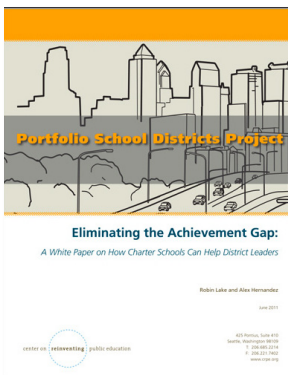
Eliminating the Achievement Gap:

A White Paper on How Charter Schools Can Help District Leaders

Robin Lake and Alex Hernandez

www.crpe.org/publications/eliminating-achievement-gap-white-paper-how-charter-schools-can-help-district-leaders

Why is it hard for districts to close the achievement gap? What are district leaders finding when they look outside the traditional system for solutions? How are new schools able to do what traditional schools have not? Increasingly, superintendents are acting as portfolio managers, partnering with charter schools, overseeing progress, closing down schools that do not work, and creating ones that do. District leaders who act as portfolio managers can leverage high-performing charter schools and networks to transform struggling district schools and close the achievement gap. This paper draws on the experiences of high-performing charter school networks that are reaching the type of scale to support district transformation efforts or are designed to operate in multiple regions, and outlines steps a district needs to take in order to initiate a portfolio management strategy.



On Recovery School Districts and Stronger State Education Agencies: Lessons from Louisiana

Paul Hill and Patrick Murphy

www.crpe.org/publications/recovery-school-districts-and-stronger-state-education-agencies-lessons-louisiana

In May 2011 state education agency representatives from three states attended a series of workshops and briefings organized by the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE). The sessions described the changes in Louisiana over the past six years, including the creation of the Recovery School District (RSD), the restructuring of the LDOE, and efforts to create a performance-based organizational culture in state and local education agencies. The discussion covered LDOE's school improvement goals, steps taken, and in some cases missteps made in the effort to dramatically turn around a large number of schools in a relatively short time and to prompt improvements in all schools across the state. This paper summarizes "takeaway points" from the Louisiana experience for those hoping to extract lessons for use elsewhere, and concludes with a "wish list" of further resources state leaders thought would help in their efforts to improve schools, districts, and state education agencies.

