

An Overview of Common School Performance Frameworks

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In most cities today, school choice is the norm, not the exception. According to our [recent survey](#) of eight U.S. cities, 55 percent of parents said their child attends a school other than their neighborhood school. Students in cities are likely to have a choice between a wide array of district-run magnet and alternative schools, public charter schools, and private schools. Nationwide, 6 percent of all public school children attend a charter school and 13 percent of children in traditional public schools attend a school their parents chose rather than the one they were assigned to, according to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#).

Cities across the country continue to offer more public school options to their students. The number of charter schools [more than doubled in the past decade](#). And dozens of school districts are now employing a “[portfolio strategy](#),” expanding and diversifying school options while holding all schools, no matter the type, accountable for performance. Families living in the [Cleveland Metropolitan School District](#), for example, can send their children to a charter school, or a district school with a focus on digital art, architectural design, or environmental studies, or a neighborhood school with a traditional curriculum.

In the midst of this dramatically changing face of public education, the need for meaningful, comparable, and understandable measures of school performance has never been more urgent. Urban parents need information to help them make choices among a sometimes dizzying array of options. Schools need to be able to understand how their performance compares to other schools. And government agencies overseeing the city’s entire portfolio of schools need ways to make a wide range of decisions, including which schools should be expanded or replicated, receive targeted support, or be replaced.

Yet within most cities, district schools, charter networks, and independently operated charter schools provide different sets of performance information to different regulators and groups and are held to different performance standards and measures of quality. In Detroit, for instance, public schools are overseen by a dozen different charter oversight agencies, the Detroit Public School District, and the state-run Education Achievement Agency, all with their own methods of rating schools and holding them accountable. In Detroit, St. Louis, and Memphis the situation has become so confusing for families that local nonprofits and advocacy groups have begun publishing their own rating systems to inform parents and, in the case of Detroit, to ensure that low-performing schools are closed.

To address problems like these, some cities are developing new citywide performance systems that (1) provide consistent information to families and schools and (2) provide one tool to allow government agencies to make informed and fair school oversight decisions. These systems are referred to as Common School Performance Frameworks (CSPF) in this report; they also are sometimes called Unified Accountability Systems.

As part of the Center on Reinventing Public Education’s (CRPE) ongoing work to understand and support successful portfolio management and district-charter collaboration, this report is meant to be a resource for city leaders who are considering implementing or refining a CSPF across all schools, both district and charter. CRPE studied the experiences of six cities, including conducting interviews with district and charter leaders in Chicago, Los Angeles, Denver, and New Orleans¹ and working directly with leaders in Memphis and Sacramento to look more deeply at the process. See Table 1 for a description of 11 cities that currently, formerly, or will soon use various types of school performance reports. The goal was to document lessons about how these frameworks are developed and implemented to inform other cities.

1 The Louisiana Charter School Performance Compact was developed as a performance accountability tool for all charter schools authorized by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. This Charter School Performance Compact applies to [over 70 percent of students](#) in New Orleans as of this writing.

To gather the information presented here, CRPE contracted with researchers and practitioners who observed and supported two cities through their efforts to develop CSPFs. This guide includes two important resources:

Lessons from Chicago: Developing a Common School Performance Framework

This case study, written by Jessica Sutter of EdPro Consulting, describes Chicago's efforts in developing its School Quality Rating Policy. It is an illustration of one city's approach to a CSPF, including how it overcame common hurdles such as district-charter tensions and data limitations.

How to Develop a Common School Performance Framework

Laura Weeldreyer of UPD Consulting and David Stewart, founder of Tembo, Inc., prepared this practical how-to guide for cities at or just beyond the decision point to develop a CSPF. To prepare this report, Weeldreyer draws on her two decades of work in education, both as a high-level district administrator and as a consultant to districts and state education agencies. She also spent 10 months facilitating the creation of CSPF in a large city and has compiled insights and advice on how to create a framework with input from well-informed key stakeholders using reliable and available data that track progress toward agreed-upon goals. Stewart's contributions include some of the more technical aspects of choosing and defining metrics.

These resources are valuable for any "high-choice" city looking for ways to inform parent choice, government oversight, or strategies for portfolio management of the system of schools. They will deeply inform both the technical and political challenges involved in rethinking school accountability and provide specific guidance on how those challenges can be overcome.

They also provide important ideas and lessons to any city or state that is grappling with how to develop rich accountability measures under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). They offer essential guidance about which metrics cities commonly consider, including how they prioritize them and what political and technical considerations one should give to them.

What Is a Common School Performance Framework?

A CSPF is a tool for measuring the performance of an individual school, using a defined set of metrics that is common to schools across different agencies or governing bodies. CSPFs are shared between district-run schools, charter schools, contracted public schools, and charter networks within the same city or geographic area. The goal is to enable comparisons across and between all public schools in the area, regardless of who runs them.

CSPFs are specific to a region (typically a city), as opposed to a state school rating or accountability system. They allow a city to set their own priorities for how school quality is defined and measured that go beyond any state definitions or tests, and while state rating systems usually rely solely upon standard testing data, CSPFs commonly incorporate multiple metrics, including non-academic measures such as school climate.

Cities often provide families with common data to inform school choice and to provide transparency (for example, information in the Washington, D.C., [Equity Reports](#)). A CSPF goes further, providing an evaluative rating that is easy for parents and community members to digest. One important goal, although rarely achieved, is to ensure there are common

consequences where schools in the same ratings categories get the same treatment across sectors. For example, when any public school, district or charter, falls below an agreed upon performance standard, it is provided with support or intervention services, or it is replaced with a school that has been consistently rated as high performing and is ready to expand.

Despite these common goals, cities that have invested in fully developed CSPFs have all taken somewhat different approaches, as shown below.

The purpose of the tool. Cities vary to what extent they attach consequences to the CSPF. Some use the data simply to highlight successful schools, place informal pressure on low-performers, and inform parents. Most, however, use the framework to help officials decide:

- ▶ Which schools to target for additional support, intervention, or closure.
- ▶ Whether to allow charter schools to replicate or have access to district facilities.

For cities pursuing a portfolio management strategy, CSPFs are a key component to ensuring continuous improvement and equity across the city. Denver, for

example, uses its CSPF to determine where high-quality schools are located, which neighborhoods are in need of better options, which schools should be replicated, which schools are in need of intervention or support, and which schools should be closed.

The types of measures included in the tool.

Standardized test scores are almost always included, but cities differ in whether they emphasize proficiency or growth scores or in how they break scores down by different student populations or sub-groups. Most cities, however, also use other measures of quality, such as Advanced Placement enrollment rates, high school exit exams, and measures of college readiness such as SAT test performance. Beyond academics, cities also have decided to incorporate school climate that can be gleaned through measures including student attendance rates; teacher turnover; teacher, student, and/or parent surveys; or rates of use of discipline, including suspensions and expulsions.

Some cities, such as New Orleans and Los Angeles, intentionally use very few measures of performance to make it clear when schools will face state intervention and to ensure that parents can quickly and easily assess how a school is faring. With a large number of charter schools overseen by the state, the Louisiana Department of Education wanted a common way to measure school performance for all charter schools authorized by Louisiana's Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. Because of the unique nature of the New Orleans school system (a nearly all-charter school system), Louisiana made sure that the autonomy of charter schools was preserved in the process; the state intentionally kept metrics very simple and understandable, and it made sure not to infringe on schools' individual priorities. Denver, on the other hand, uses roughly 80 different metrics to create a comprehensive tool that allows school operators to evaluate performance using multiple measures yet can be streamlined to provide parents with the information they need to choose the best fit for their child.

The process for gathering stakeholder input and managing the political process. Every city studied for this report gathered input from school staff and others, but the process differed in each city. In Nashville, an alignment of frameworks across sectors evolved with little fanfare. Charter school authorizers, with the support of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), developed a strong performance framework that they then shared with the Metro-Nashville Public Schools. The district saw it as an improvement on what they had been using and decided to use parts of it themselves. In contrast,

those who led Chicago's CSPF efforts pointed to extensive public engagement, many focus groups, and lots of work to help schools understand and calculate their scores in advance of public release as key to successful implementation. The [case study](#) included in this report provides more detail on that process. In Baltimore, as the sole charter school authorizer, the district heavily engaged with the charter sector on the development of a performance framework that would be used to make charter renewal decisions. The end result in 2013 was a framework that was aligned, but not identical to the framework the district had simultaneously developed to hold traditional schools accountable. Yet charter school leaders still publically supported the new charter accountability tool, thankful to have provided input during its development.

Sacramento's effort to elicit broad input was easily the most comprehensive example studied, with tens of focus groups with schools and community members and with district officials making dozens of home visits to interview families in the city. The framework's design iterated throughout the process based on evolving feedback. But public engagement alone is not enough. Without the development of a plan for sustained momentum or buy-in from the incoming administration, the framework did not survive a transition of superintendents and other district administrative staff.

Similarly, in Memphis, even after a strong public engagement campaign and months of facilitated meetings between Shelby County Schools and the state's Achievement School District (ASD), the effort to create a CSPF was unsuccessful. Differences emerged over metrics and their weights and how schools, particularly the lowest-performing ones, would ultimately be represented in the framework. The ASD has since adopted their own aligned—although not identical—accountability frameworks and, as of this writing, continue to work through a broader engagement with the district.

The effort in Memphis illustrates how critical it is for those involved to maintain a high level of commitment throughout the development process. Luckily, a local community organization independently developed the [Memphis School Guide](#) for parents, a tool to compare all district and charter schools in the city, after sensing that the CSPF process could be derailed. Though not as robust as a full CSPF given limited publically available data that it draws upon, the Memphis School Guide does fill a gap by providing parents with easy access to public school performance and other information to support parent choice.

The technical decisions made about how to ensure that the tool is analytically sound and understandable. The process by which city leaders develop a performance management tool that will be used for high-stakes decisions such as charter renewal must be able to withstand criticism and challenge. For that reason, many decisions need to be made:

- ▶ What data sources to include?
- ▶ How to reconcile different data sources across district and charter systems or how to collect new kinds of data?

- ▶ How to weight different factors?
- ▶ Whether to roll up the different metrics into one summative “rating” or to present independent ratings for specific domains, such as school climate and academic achievement?

Each city studied had different preferences and approaches to these questions. The accompanying [guide](#) goes into depth about the tradeoffs involved in different approaches and examples of approaches used.

Avoiding Landmines

Any time performance data are compiled, presented, and especially when used for high stakes decisions, much can go wrong. Charter school leaders can resist being pulled into a system that they believe will limit their autonomies or that will impose a new set of performance standards that they did not originally agree on. District schools may fear that new consequences will be attached to the framework on top of current expectations. A variety of community leaders, union representatives, and others all may have very strongly held views about the “correct” measures of school quality.

CRPE’s research across all six cities offers some critical high-level lessons for avoiding landmines and making sure CSPFs can be effective long-term tools for school improvement throughout a city.

- 1. Carefully tend to politics and engagement to build long-term sustainability.** A CSPF can be rushed in implementation or forced on schools through dictates, (i.e., a district charter authorizer can unilaterally develop and enforce a CSPF) but there may be a significant price to pay in political backlash or simply a lack of commitment when those who pushed the idea move out of the city.

Those implementing a CSPF should pay close attention to the political context in their city and consider which individuals and organizations need to be involved in the process to improve the metrics and to ensure that there is a long-term commitment to its use. Having firm commitment from the superintendent and key charter leaders is essential and should be cultivated and managed appropriately.

Chicago CSPF leaders did extensive outreach throughout the city and across different types of schools. They sought general consensus on the goals and metrics, especially among school leaders. Thanks to this extensive engagement during all aspects of the process, implementation of the CSPF was smooth.

No one set of performance measures can address the specific needs or interests of every group, however. Both Chicago and Louisiana leaders made it clear that despite an extensive engagement process, it would be impossible to accommodate the preferences of every stakeholder.

As the accompanying [Chicago case study](#) notes, it’s wise to check in early with the people who have the ability to kill the effort to create a CSPF, know who is steadfastly in your corner, focus especially on the political system and its players, and know your base. It is impossible to engage too much given how much these schools have on the line.

- 2. Be realistic about the outcomes and metrics of the CSPF.** The process of developing a CSPF can easily take on a life of its own, resulting in a tool that attempts to be everything to everyone or that tries to provide data for every possible question. For that reason, clarity on the goals of the CSPF is critical to success. The risk of extensive engagement is that the tool becomes watered down, rendering it useless. It takes strong leadership to keep the process focused for a strong end result. Some cities did this by getting community input on a strawman tool, others took community feedback and developed a tool that would meet basic community concerns. Both resulted in solid tools because the purpose was clear.

Just as important, the metrics used in the CSPF must be realistic. It must be feasible to collect the data, both technically and politically. Los Angeles and Louisiana leaders found that simple metrics are easier to agree on and require little to no policy changes. Leaders in both places saw the CSPF as an opportunity to make a coherent story out of the extensive data that are already collected, rather than finding ways to collect new data. At any cost, be sure that school staff believe in the core assessment data. That will make or break efforts to implement a CSPF.

3. Be purposeful and focused. Throughout the process, it is important for leaders of the process to communicate clearly how the framework will be used and what outcomes are expected. This helps reduce arguments and uncertainty. Transparency and effective communication about how the community's values and priorities are being conveyed through the CSPF will support use and gain broader buy-in.

4. Be thoughtful and gradual on implementation.

Give schools time to adjust to the new system and develop respect for it. A CSPF is useless if it is not used for decision making, but decisions will not be politically sustainable if the framework is not seen as valid, reliable, and sensible. Some cities gave schools their data ahead of time so schools could see how they would rank or compare in the new system. Others allowed charter schools to opt in rather than being forced to take part in the new system. Still others offered a year of "safe harbor" before the new rankings took effect. Across all of these examples, time spent letting schools work with and understand the data was time extremely well spent. The new frameworks in most of these cities were generally viewed as better than the old systems. And because no rating is ever perfect, most cities solicited early feedback and committed to making iterations and improvements over time.

Conclusion

Through CRPE's research, we have found that CSPFs can be an essential tool for informed decision making, accountability, and parent information, but only if developed with diverse and strong buy-in and with a broad understanding of and commitment to how it will be used. The six cities referenced here (and many beyond those included here) shared a need to provide parents with reliable and consistent measures of school quality across all public schools. They also share difficult political tensions and the pernicious problem of how to sustain such efforts amidst leadership turnover and shifting priorities. So this work is not for the faint of heart and it is not a quick fix for either parent information gaps or holding

schools to high standards. In places that failed to fully implement the CSPF, the hurdles included changes in district leadership, stakeholder opposition, and poorly conducted community engagement. In those places that have continued to use a CSPF, there is an openness to iteration and a school board that has hired leaders who pledge to prioritize and preserve it.

As cities and states re-think their school accountability measures under ESSA, the observations and suggestions represented here provide direction to mitigate political opposition and build a tool that facilitates choice and is representative of the community's values.

Table 1: Cities or Regions That Are Using, Have Attempted, or Are Developing a CSPF

Name of Framework	Stage of Development	Features and Coverage of Framework	Purpose	Contact Information
CHICAGO				
School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP)	Complete; in use by Office of Accountability since the 2013-2014 school year.	Developed by Chicago Public Schools. Provides summative ratings for all CPS-run schools and all but one charter school.	Used for 5 purposes: parent information, identification of high-achieving schools, as a goal-setting framework, targeting assistance, guide Board decision making.	Office of Accountability sqrp@cps.edu
DENVER				
School Performance Framework (SPF)	Complete; in use since 2008.	Developed by Denver Public Schools. Over 80 metrics used. Rates all DPS-run schools and all charter schools.	Used for 5 purposes: diagnostic tool, performance transparency, district decision making, basis for accreditation, compensation decisions.	SPF, in the Academic and Innovation Office spf@dpsk12.org
LOS ANGELES				
School Performance Framework (SPF)	Complete; in use since Fall 2012.	Developed by Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) to apply to all LAUSD-run schools, and independent and affiliated charter schools.	Developed with the intention of making previously gathered data useful for schools. Used as a tool for school-level decision making, parent information, differentiated oversight of schools, charter renewal.	Division of Intensive Support and Intervention SchoolPerformanceFramework@lausd.net
LOUISIANA STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION				
Charter School Performance Compact (CSPC)	Complete; in use since the 2013-2014 school year.	The CSPC applies to all charter schools authorized by the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, including most schools in the Recovery School District.	Used as a tool for differentiated oversight of high- and low-performing schools, parent information, growth and renewal decisions.	Louisiana State Dept. of Education (877) 453-2721
MEMPHIS				
Common information system: Memphis School Guide	In development; in initial attempts, leaders were not able to create a fully aligned CSPF. Memphis is still working towards a full CSPF. A third-party group independently developed the Memphis School Guide parent information system, which is complete and in use.	Project was a collaborative effort between Shelby County Public Schools and the Achievement School District (ASD). Would have applied to all public schools in the city: traditional, charter, and ASD schools. Memphis School Guide was developed by a parent group and encompasses all Memphis public schools, both district and charter.	CSPF was intended to be a consistent way to measure school quality. The Memphis School Guide is a parent information system, to support school choice.	Memphis School Guide hello@memphischoolguide.org
SACRAMENTO				
Guide to Success	Incomplete; project was abandoned after leadership transition.	N/A	Intended to be used as an accountability tool.	N/A

Name of Framework	Stage of Development	Features and Coverage of Framework	Purpose	Contact Information
BALTIMORE*				
Two systems: One for charter schools (School Effectiveness Review), one for district schools	Both frameworks are complete, and recently adopted.	Baltimore City Public Schools houses the frameworks in the Office of Achievement and Accountability. The frameworks used for district and charter schools are closely aligned.	School Effectiveness Review is an aspect of all Baltimore charter schools' renewal process, and is a tool for differentiated oversight for all schools.	Achievement and Accountability Office (443) 984-2000
CLEVELAND*				
School Quality Guide	Development of common school profiles are complete, which include common academic metrics. First reports were in 2013.	The Cleveland Transformation Alliance , a public-private partnership, developed the School Quality Guide. The profiles are created for all Cleveland district schools and most charter schools.	The School Quality Guide is primarily a tool for parent and community information.	Cleveland Transformation Alliance (216) 592-2425
WASHINGTON, D.C.*				
Common information through the D.C. Equity Reports and the Learn D.C. website	No common school ratings across district and charter schools, but the Equity Reports are complete and have been in use since the 2012–2013 school year.	Developed collaboratively between the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, the DC Public Charter School Board, and the Deputy Mayor for Education. Reports are created for all D.C. district and charter schools.	The Equity Reports are used primarily for parent and community information.	Office of the State Superintendent of Education osse@dc.gov
NASHVILLE*				
Two systems: district (Academic Performance Framework) and charter	Both frameworks are complete. The Academic Performance Framework (APF) was adopted in 2013.	The APF was developed by Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) and is applied to all MNPS-run schools. MNPS has an aligned framework used to evaluate charter schools.	The APF is used as a tool for differentiated oversight of schools and support to schools as well as parent and community information.	Metro Nashville Public Schools FamilyInfo@mnps.org
TULSA*				
Tulsa Value-Added Reports	No common framework, but the district has worked with district-authorized charter schools to develop a framework for charter schools. Value-Added Reports are used for both district and charter schools.	Value-added school reports, developed by Tulsa Public Schools (TPS), are created for all district schools and district-authorized charter schools. There is interest in a CSPF, but it is not yet in development.	Value-added reports are used for informing district decision making, identifying best practices and low-performance.	Tulsa Public Schools valueadded@tulsaschools.org

*These cities were not part of CRPE's in-depth CSPF research.