

# It Takes a City: How the Portfolio Strategy Can Bring Schools, Districts, and Communities Together to Transform Special Education

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## About CRPE and the Portfolio Strategy

For more than 25 years CRPE has been one of the nation's leading sources for transformative, evidence-based ideas to improve public education. The centerpiece of these efforts has long been our work studying the [portfolio strategy](#) for citywide school improvement.

As more cities and states embrace the tenets of the portfolio strategy—giving educators the power to operate coherent schools that respond to community needs, giving families the ability to choose the schools their children attend, ensuring all schools are held accountable for continually improving outcomes, and creating systemwide conditions that protect the most vulnerable students and ensure schools have the resources to meet their students needs—CRPE is committed to serving as an intellectual hub for their efforts. We help school system and community leaders imagine new possibilities and learn from successful portfolio efforts, and we develop evidence-based solutions to help communities address emerging challenges.

## Making Progress Together to Improve Special Education

America's schools must improve outcomes in special education. Students with disabilities remain 25 percent less likely than their peers to graduate high school<sup>1</sup> despite the belief among researchers that 80 to 85 percent of students with disabilities<sup>2</sup> should be able to meet the same academic standards as their peers.

Some cities are making progress. By 2015, students with learning disabilities in Chicago were 18 percentage points more likely to graduate high school than they were a decade earlier, outpacing improvements in the city as a whole.<sup>3</sup> Researchers have found<sup>4</sup> students with disabilities in New Orleans are making significantly more academic gains than their peers statewide, and the [graduation gap has shrunk](#).

These encouraging data points suggest that districts embracing the portfolio strategy can lead to better outcomes for students with disabilities. But school autonomy, differentiated programs, and parental choice can pose unique problems for students with disabilities. In New Orleans, Washington, D.C., Chicago, and other cities that are showing academic gains, families of students with disabilities still express discontent with the overall quality of special education and say they struggle to navigate the complexities of the choice process.<sup>5</sup>

As Paul O’Neill observed:

“It may be difficult to align certain out-of-the-box models with special education mandates such as the right to not be excluded from a program, for which a student is otherwise qualified, solely on the basis of a disability, or for a student to be educated together with his or her nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate for his or her needs. It can be a challenge to ensure that students with disabilities are included and well served in all aspects of portfolio districts without undercutting the innovation driving these programs.”<sup>6</sup>

We convened leaders from cities around the country to explore ways that school districts can overcome these tensions and use the portfolio strategy to help cities improve education for students with disabilities—and ultimately for all students.

The goal of the meeting was to identify strategies that would improve outcomes for special populations—a group that includes English language learners, homeless students, students in foster care, those who are gifted and low-income, and those who have experienced trauma. The proceedings focused specifically on students with disabilities because these are students for whom public schools have especially significant legal obligations under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

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Portfolio managers must coordinate the development of new, differentiated programs that can better serve students with disabilities who require unique programming. Improving education opportunities for these students will produce systemic improvements that can help all students.

Our meeting raised some important questions portfolio leaders must tackle in their school systems, including:

- Which people and organizations are best positioned to provide, own, and lead the task of improving special education in decentralized systems?
- How can portfolio leaders encourage or require coordination among decentralized schools?
- Which special education functions should be centralized, and which should be left to schools?
- How can school systems effectively balance inclusion with specialization?

Drawing on their cities’ experience, participants defined the principles that will help cities rise to meet those challenges:

- Citywide leadership is required to improve special education. The right organization or governing body to take on this leadership role may vary by city.
- Portfolio leaders can drive citywide action by using data to shine a light on groups of students with unmet needs.
- Schools need the flexibility to solve problems around students’ unique needs. But citywide leaders can help drive adult learning to ensure problem-solving and innovation that builds on a foundation of quality teaching and evidence-based interventions.
- Parents benefit from having options, but they need help navigating the system and making sense of the options that exist. School system leaders must ensure that funding, facilities, and the local talent supply give schools the incentive to develop new programs for students with disabilities.

The portfolio strategy helps cities strike a balance between empowering schools and community organizations to develop new ways to serve students with disabilities, and ensuring their efforts cohere into a meaningful citywide strategy that results in better outcomes for every student.

## Framing the Challenge

### Who Owns This Issue?

Participants in our meeting agreed that, in their cities, it was not always clear which people or agencies were responsible for rallying schools and other organizations to the challenge of improving special education.

D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) have made improving outcomes for students with disabilities a part of their [strategic plan](#). But the school district is just one of many organizations responsible for public education in a city. The D.C. Public Charter School Board (DCPCSB) authorizes dozens of charter schools, which enroll nearly half the city’s students and, as local education agencies (LEAs), are required to serve students with disabilities under federal law. It is less clear how that priority will translate into action, or where dozens of charter management organizations and social service providers operating in the city fit in.

In cities with high charter school market shares, such as D.C., Oakland, and Detroit, “Students move back and forth across sectors,” one city leader said. “There is no single-sector solution.” This can create confusion among parents of children with disabilities. As one participant in our meeting worried, “The more people are in charge, with fewer boundaries, the harder it is. You don’t know who’s in charge.”

Schools can’t solve this challenge on their own. Accountability systems may not give them adequate incentives to create specialized programs for students with low-incidence disabilities or to serve students with less severe needs effectively rather than counsel them out—even if their legal status as an LEA technically obligates them to serve all students.

As one meeting participant stated, “[Saying] ‘We leave it up to the schools’ is overly simplistic. . . It’s easy to say to schools, ‘You’re an LEA, so therefore this is a solvable problem.’” It’s harder to ensure that a decentralized web of schools and providers is meeting the diverse needs of all students in a community.

If a city wants to get serious about improving special education, someone must guide the work—setting a common vision, convening a wide range of organizations to achieve it, ensuring follow-through and continuous improvement.

Which organization is best suited to take on this role may vary depending on the local context.

**School districts and municipal governments.** These local government organizations run public schools directly, serve as primary charter school authorizers, or both. They may seem like the obvious choice to lead a citywide strategy to improve special education, but there are potential drawbacks. Schools that struggle to serve students with disabilities may be unwilling to share their problems with an entity that also holds their charter. District-charter collaborations are inherently political, which may make it difficult to guide this work. [These efforts can succeed](#) only if both sides see that it is to their advantage to work together.

**Education champion organizations.** In many cities, dedicated champion organizations like [New Schools for New Orleans](#) or [The Mind Trust](#) in Indianapolis work to build buy-in for citywide improvement strategies. Improving special education may help drive improvement for other students, which can lead to better outcomes in the city as a whole. However, these entities may lack formal power to induce action in schools and districts.

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**Special education planning agencies.** California’s Special Education Local Planning Areas, or SELPAs, strike a balance between mandatory and voluntary participation in a citywide improvement effort. District schools are obligated to join a SELPA, but charter schools have a choice of which SELPA they join. This can create a safe space for problem solving, since a SELPA is not directly connected to an authorizer. In some cities, such as Los Angeles, the SELPA convenes charter schools and coordinates collaboration across schools. However, in other cities, such as Oakland, where charter schools have joined a SELPA separate from the local district, cross-sector collaboration may be more difficult to achieve.

**Dedicated coordinating bodies.** In New Orleans, a lawsuit by the Southern Poverty Law Center has spurred citywide interest in building capacity to comply with federal special education law, and some leaders have pushed for a broader focus on improving outcomes for marginalized students, including those with disabilities. These efforts are being coordinated by a citywide Special Education Council, which is co-chaired by a special educator and the leader of [New Pathways for New Orleans](#), a new nonprofit group established to improve services for students from special populations.

## Which Special Education Functions Should Be Centralized, and How?

In recent years, charter schools in New Orleans created a citywide coordinating group to manage student expulsions, and DCPS and local charter schools agreed, on a voluntary basis, to create shared enrollment and school report card systems that eased the choice process for families.

In both cases, charter schools and the district came together to solve a shared problem. The centralized systems they devised improved on previous situations where schools were left to develop their own systems for meting out discipline or reporting their performance to the public.

**Charter schools and the district came together to solve a shared problem.**

Creating dedicated programs for students with high-need, low-incidence disabilities may pose a similar collective-action challenge. In many cities, multiple districts and charter school networks bear legal responsibility for educating students with disabilities, but none are ensuring that the needs of every student are met.

As one nonprofit leader stated during our meeting, “No good deed goes unpunished.” If a school improves in serving a particular high-need population, word gets out among parents, and that school is swamped by demand. A portfolio manager—either the school district or a citywide agency—can encourage more good deeds by funding the expansion and replication of these programs, ensuring access to the facilities and talent supply they need, and identifying new programs that will meet the needs of a specific population.

## What Is the Best Way to Balance Inclusion with Specialization?

The limits of inclusion in special education causes some tension. Parents who participated in recent special education focus groups hosted by CRPE in New Orleans and Washington, D.C., shared stories about their children’s experiences learning alongside their peers in general education settings. Many of these experiences were negative.

Parents shared concerns about the quality of special educators, the inability of general educators to differentiate instruction and meet their child’s individualized needs, and schools’ differing views of what inclusion means and how to implement effective inclusive practices. These negative experiences lead parents to seek out more specialized programs and schools for their children, thinking these schools and programs can better meet their needs with more highly trained staff. For families, the choice between specialized programs and inclusion without quality is no choice at all.

From a portfolio manager’s perspective, it is important to gain an in-depth understanding of what drives parents’ dissatisfaction. Our focus groups may have uncovered a *programming* problem: districts must create more specialized programs for students with disabilities. They may have uncovered a *capacity* problem: districts face a shortage of qualified special educators, or knowledge among general educators to serve students with disabilities effectively in inclusive schools. D.C., New Orleans, and many other cities may face a combination of both.

Parent comments like those raised at our focus group should inform the actions of system leaders, but they also must be cross-referenced with insights from schools and from other community organizations that work with parents in special education so system leaders can understand the bigger picture of what systemic issues drive parents’ concerns. They must make sure they are solving the right problems.

## What Information and Support Do Parents Need?

School system leaders must ensure parents have support when choosing schools for their children, enrolling them, and advocating for their needs. They also must engage parents of children with disabilities, along with others in the community, in an open-ended way that helps surface problems that need solving.

**Improved information:** Parents of children with disabilities spend a significant amount of time advocating for and gathering information about their children’s needs.<sup>7</sup> When parents face an enrollment decision or consider a school move, they must invest even more time gathering information about various options and figuring out the enrollment process.

Although parents in our focus groups reported having access to some of the information they needed, it is still inadequate, hard to find, and difficult to interpret. It does not substitute for the “word of mouth” information they receive from other families.

In New Orleans, many parents focus on enrolling in a small number of schools rated “A” or “B” in the city’s school rating system—even though those schools may not have the capacity to serve some students with disabilities effectively, and some enroll them in relatively low proportions. A school rated “C” or “D” may do an excellent job serving students with disabilities, but enrolling there may carry a stigma.

Making more nuanced information readily accessible in a usable format can be difficult. Washington, D.C., recently created an improved [school report card system](#) that provides more information to parents, but special education information is sparse—in part because it is hard to capture on a website in a standardized way. Parents often want to know information that is not typically presented in school report cards, such as other families’ experiences.

During our meeting, one nonprofit leader from another large city said he suspected that most of the parents who do not use the city’s unified enrollment system have children with disabilities and might struggle to find the information they need to make an enrollment decision, or worry that a school they are assigned in the lottery will not have the capacity to properly serve their child, or wonder whether a new school will serve their child’s needs any better than their current school.

In other words, making the choice and enrollment process more friendly to families with children who require special education services may be intertwined with the challenges of improving school quality and program capacity.

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**Personalized support, beyond packaged information:** If there are practical limitations on school information that can be easily presented on a website, families of children with disabilities might stand to benefit from individual guidance provided by “navigator” organizations that help them identify schools that are likely to meet their needs. It is likely that individuals—other parents, staff in a district enrollment office, school counselors, social service providers—informally provide parents this assistance. Recognizing this relationship-based support with school enrollment is essential, and formally providing it to parents can make school enrollment easier on families. And over time, these navigators can help system leaders identify gaps in the services available to students with disabilities.

**A place to go:** In a decentralized school system, parents might not always know where to turn for help if they run into problems with a specific school, or during the enrollment process.<sup>8</sup> Parents in our recent special education focus groups reported difficulty finding organizations to support them in the choice-making and enrollment process. CRPE has found many organizations that help families with special education; however, an important challenge for school system leaders is connecting families to the appropriate resources. Families continue to turn to other families for support, either on social media or by networking in their neighborhoods—support that is critical for families of children with disabilities. That support is more effective if families also have the right resources.

## How Can School System Leaders Ensure Innovations Will Build on a Foundation of Best Practices?

Participants in our meeting raised a set of interrelated questions about the talent supply and the capacity of special educators in their cities.

How do we use the portfolio strategy to drive new instructional solutions, rather than re-create the old system piece by piece? How do we make sure innovation occurs on top of a foundation of best practices in schools? How do we recruit, train, and retain qualified special educators, or partner with organizations that can help strengthen the supply in our city? How do we equip general educators with the skills and tools to serve the diverse needs of their students? How do we come together to ensure improved outcomes for students with disabilities?

A decentralized school system requires coordination of the talent supply: special educators, general educators, and providers outside of schools who can support students. It also requires a space for collaboration where special educators can share best practices and innovate. A portfolio manager can help disseminate those practices to ensure innovation is solving new problems, rather than problems that have arisen from low-quality instruction.

## How Can Funding Systems Give Schools the Resources They Need and Create the Right Incentives?

Public school funding formulas often do not adequately cover the additional costs of specialized services for students with the most significant needs. Some formulas cap funding levels for special education and therefore incentivize schools to counsel out students with the greatest needs or, on the flip side, create weighted funding systems that risk incentivizing over-identification.

The families of students with these needs often have the most difficult time choosing among schools in a portfolio setting. Finding an appropriate fit, applying to, and enrolling in schools can be a daunting challenge, especially for low-income and non-English speaking families.

The Orleans Parish School Board and the Recovery School District overhauled the funding model for New Orleans public schools to ensure schools receive the resources to support students with

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moderate or high-need disabilities. Schools receive weighted funding for students with disabilities, and they can apply to state and local risk pools to help cover the cost of educating enrolled students with low-incidence disabilities. LAUSD has similarly created a model where schools have access to weighted grants and local assistance pools.

This model helps align funding with students' needs without creating an incentive to over-identify students with disabilities. However, it lacks a stable funding stream that allows schools to develop programs that may require investments in people with specific expertise or dedicated facilities for students with profound needs.

## Finding Paths Forward

Though participants at the meeting identified significant challenges and opportunities yet to be realized, they were optimistic that much progress can be made with new policies and investments—and that manageable changes can help lay a foundation for broader improvement.

**Start small.** Attainable wins can help build trust among different groups that play a role in special education in a decentralized school system while also effectively improving service to families. A data-sharing plan in D.C. demonstrates a small effort that makes a meaningful difference.

DCPS educates just over half of the students in the nation's capital, while nearly half are educated in charter schools. Each charter school network is its own LEA and is responsible for maintaining information about students' disabilities and the services they require. If a student transfers to a different LEA, a school might not gain access to that student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) until they arrive at school in the fall, making it difficult for the school to hire staff and contract with services to meet the student's needs.

D.C.'s Office of the State Superintendent of Education found a solution that DCPS and charter school organizations found agreeable. It [developed a data-sharing application](#) to help schools gain access in the spring to key information from IEPs, including students' disability categories and their needs and accommodations. This gives schools months of additional lead time to develop a plan for serving students with disabilities. While the governance structure in D.C. is unique, other cities could adopt similar strategies to share student information among districts and charter schools that serve overlapping student populations.

**Bring schools together to achieve economies of scale.** Some special education functions benefit from centralization, making it possible for small organizations to gain economies of scale in the same way large school districts hire service providers that are shared across schools. Districts can help autonomous schools accomplish this by hosting resource fairs with contracted service providers. Unrelated schools could also share professional development programs or enter shared contracts for therapy, nursing, and other student services.

These arrangements should be optional. Portfolio districts must balance shared support and school autonomy. Los Angeles, for example, allows charter schools to opt in to three different options for special education status. These range from the district assuming control of much of the charter schools' special education programming and legal liability for complying with special education law, to lighter-touch support where charter schools assume most of the legal liability and gain greater control of their special education funding. The differentiated levels of autonomy and centralization the district offers to charter schools could also be offered to district-run schools.

Districts should first develop a clear strategy that defines the role of the central office, rather than determining, function by function, what should be centralized and what should be left to schools. This will help establish trust and clarity between the district, individual schools, and other organizations while guarding against central office mission creep.

**Collect data and create transparency.** Communities may not know which schools are serving students with disabilities, how well, and in what proportions. D.C.'s Office of the State Superintendent of Education has, as a part of the [STAR Framework](#) in the DC School Report Card, made special education more transparent. This has helped set the groundwork for schools in D.C. to focus more on improving outcomes for students with disabilities. Parents

of students with disabilities may also require information about schools that is not captured by a traditional school report card. Portfolio managers must collect and share the data family and stakeholders need to make informed choices about special education.

Tracking and publishing enrollment and persistence data can help system leaders get a handle on “subterranean discipline.” Schools might nominally be open to all students and participate in centralized enrollment and expulsion systems that make it harder to kick out students with disabilities or other profound needs, or avoid enrolling them in the first place. But some schools may find ways to evade these systems, such as advising parents that their children are not an ideal fit for the school or mandating weekend study halls as a condition of attendance, or finding other ways to push parents to withdraw these students.

Monitoring and policing this behavior in a system of autonomous schools can be difficult. Authorizers can’t easily close a school for underenrolling or counseling out high-need students, but they can [shine a light](#) on which schools serve these students, in what proportions, and what outcomes they achieve. Grantmakers who support schools might act on data they see. Transparent data can also help bring schools to the table to solve problems collectively—as they did with centralized expulsions in New Orleans or unified enrollment in Washington, D.C.

One district official praised the “mythbusting quality of good data,” noting that “how people are feeling is not necessarily the same as what their data are saying.” But that same official described how arriving at seemingly simple data points such as dropout rates required weeks of excavation across multiple data systems. A “data czar” can ensure schools are formally reporting incidents that provide, as the district official explained, “common language and a common narrative about what the problems and solutions could be.” Entering a partnership with a university or research organization that can focus on monitoring trends could drive systemwide improvement.

**Create additional accountability levers.** The DCPCSB’s “secret shopper” program helps flag schools potentially engaging in subterranean tactics that lead to fewer students with disabilities enrolling in autonomous public schools of choice. Other mechanisms—such as ombudsman programs that give parents a single place to go with complaints about schools—can also help surface problems at individual schools. Creative accountability practices can help portfolio school systems understand how schools, as well as functions—such as unified enrollment systems—serve all parents, including parents of students with disabilities.

But while a focus on accountability is critical, the goal is to provide better ways to incentivize dramatically improved outcomes for students with disabilities. Portfolio managers should assess progress but also ask whether schools are following practices that are well-documented to be effective. And accountability systems should be flexible enough to allow for innovation—perhaps giving schools that agree to short-term pilot projects a temporary exemption from the standard district accountability framework.

Students with disabilities are often an afterthought in school accountability systems, but a focus on long-term outcomes, such as graduation, college persistence, and employment can help orient a citywide strategy toward improved education for these students. A partnership with a research organization can help the district track these outcomes.

**Look for ways to balance “all-means-all” with the need to specialize.** Representatives from districts with a high density of charter schools described a challenge of ensuring that the broad portfolio of schools can serve the full spectrum of disability types, including students with low-incidence disabilities who require costly services.

“Families all talk,” said one advocate who works with families. As a result, a small number of schools with specialized programs can get flooded with high-need students who overwhelm their capacity. The same advocate described how some charter schools want to serve these students well “from a moral perspective,” and may be legally constituted as

**A “data czar” can ensure schools are formally reporting incidents that provide “common language and a common narrative about what the problems and solutions could be.” - District official**

LEAs—meaning they have a federal legal obligation to serve every student who walks through their doors. But they may lack the capacity, the talent, or the funding to develop specialized programs for low-incidence disabilities. This tension exists in any decentralized public school system; a portfolio manager can help address this by ensuring that programs exist within the public school system to serve students with disabilities.

If a student requires specialized programming their school is not able to offer, the school can refer that student to another school—including, potentially, another public school in the city. [Charter schools in New Orleans have done this in some rare cases](#) to match students with highly specialized programs at other charter schools in the city. These arrangements are akin to private placements for students with disabilities, offering a potential model for portfolio school districts to create specialized settings within public school systems that can meet the needs of students who currently rely on finding those settings in private placements.

The manager of a portfolio district can encourage the creation of highly specialized programs by offering startup grants. At the same time, the portfolio manager can encourage “integrated specialization” where students participate in highly specialized programs housed on traditional campuses but also have opportunities to interact with peers who are enrolled in a general education program.

**Look beyond the schools.** Schools are only one part of the web of services students with disabilities require. They also need medical services, mental health counseling, therapy, and other social services. The [Seneca Family of Agencies](#) partners with public schools in California and Washington to offer counseling and other services that improve support for students and help educators focus on teaching and learning. In New Orleans, the nonprofit [New Pathways for New Orleans](#) helps to identify a continuum of services that students from special populations require.

Portfolio school districts should identify what their schools need, determine existing capacity among health and social-service providers in their communities, and serve as a hub connecting schools with these non-school providers that can help meet needs. They should also identify gaps that remain and work with coordinating entities to help fill them.

**Recognize that serving special populations well is more than a niche issue.** Improving education for the 85 to 90 percent of students with disabilities who can learn alongside their peers will necessarily lead to programmatic changes that can improve outcomes for other students—struggling readers, students suffering from trauma, students with disabilities that remain unidentified. This may also help schools increase their capacity over time to include students with more complex needs, and to increase the levels of inclusion without compromising on the quality of instruction.

Participants in our meeting repeatedly emphasized that, in many school systems, an inclusive definition of “special populations”—including students affected by trauma, those who are homeless or living in foster care, non-native English speakers—encompasses the majority of students. Students with disabilities represent a subset of these students that school districts have a legal obligation to serve well. But improving education for students with disabilities will improve outcomes in the system as a whole.

One special education leader drove this point home: “The bold and right long-term goal is we need to be thinking about meeting the needs of *every kid*.”

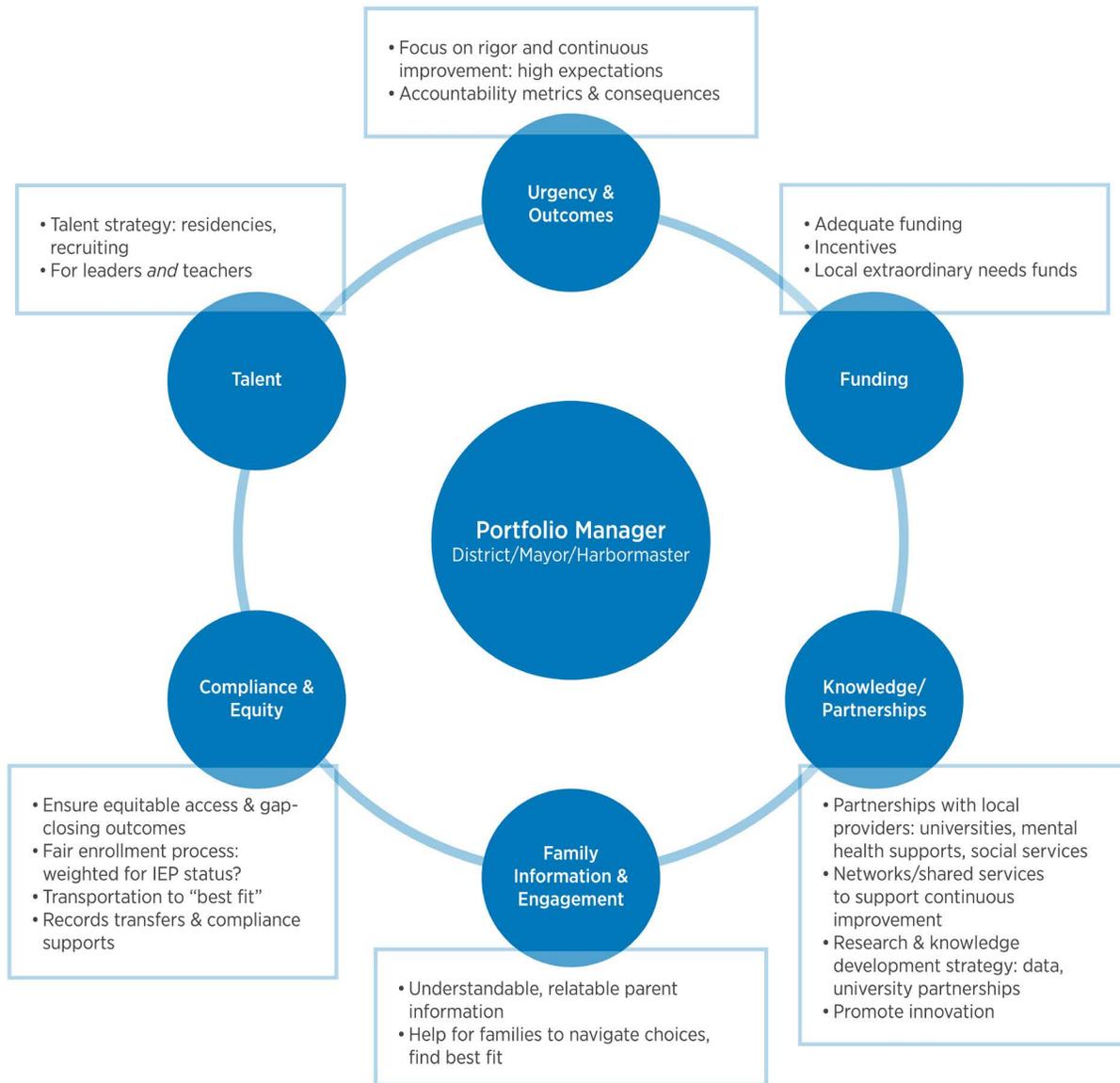
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## Conclusion

Delivering high-quality special education must involve every educator, in every school. Educators and community groups must have the flexibility to develop new solutions, but their efforts must build upon a foundation of quality and adherence to federal and state laws. Communities must have a supply of talented educators and the infrastructure to build the capacity of existing educators. Families must have the freedom to find programs that fit their children’s needs, and the information and support necessary to make good decisions. And someone must set a north star to guide these efforts, marshal them toward a common purpose, and ensure all families receive equitable services.

Every city needs an integrated strategy to improve special education: a strategy that acknowledges no central office has a monopoly on solutions, but provides the system-level supports necessary to make sure no child falls through the cracks. The levers of the portfolio strategy, long held up as a model for improving urban public education, are well-suited to this task.

This graphic sketches the different elements that are necessary to create such a strategy.



**State and local policymakers** must:

- *Provide adequate funding that accounts for students’ needs* and creates the right incentives.
- *Develop performance frameworks and school report cards* that are mindful of the information parents need, and the incentives they create for the schools.

**School system leaders** must:

- *Create a sense of urgency* around improving special education and set a clear north star to guide the efforts of diverse organizations across the city.
- *Ensure parents get help navigating* the process of identifying schools, enrolling their children, and advocating for their needs. System leaders must also empower organizations engaged in this work and consult with them regularly to better understand parents' needs.
- *Listen to parents and the organizations that work with them* to understand how they experience the system and what improvements are necessary.
- *Listen to schools* to identify systemwide challenges, such as talent supply, student mobility, and the difficulty of transferring IEP information across schools.
- *Partner with researchers* to understand what data they need to collect (or may already have) to shed light on systemwide challenges.

Districts need not perform all these functions themselves. Instead, they should focus on ensuring they are performed by the entity best positioned to execute them in their communities.

**Educators and school leaders** can:

- *Ensure special education is not a separate program* by giving their educators the knowledge, capacity, and support to meet students' diverse needs.
- *Engage parents* to understand how well their children with disabilities are being served in their school, whether their children feel included, and what additional supports may be necessary.
- *Partner with organizations outside school walls* to improve support for students with disabilities.
- *Collaborate with other schools* to solve shared problems, such as achieving economies of scale to partner efficiently with community health and counseling providers.

**Funders** including business leaders and philanthropic foundations at local and national levels, can:

- *Invest in infrastructure* that can enable systemwide improvement, including *technology* that supports data collection and information sharing, and *organizations* that help educators to collaborate, schools to form partnerships, or parents to navigate the process of choosing schools.
- *Support new public school models* that try innovative approaches to supporting the needs of complex learners or serving students with low-incidence disabilities.

Policies and legal compliance have driven much of the national conversation about special education since the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. But they are not sufficient to improve education for students with disabilities. The efforts of school leaders and classroom teachers matter too, but so do organizations and people outside the schools, from physical therapists to mental health counselors.

The portfolio strategy provides a powerful framework to ensure that systems, policies, and all the diverse organizations that shape the lives of children are working to prepare every child for the future. The strategy requires a continuous look at which student needs are going unmet, as well as a constant reassessment of how resources and approaches can be reimagined to ensure that every student—even those with the most complex needs—receive a powerful education. We hope this paper inspires more cities to consider how the portfolio strategy can leverage all of the assets of a city toward that goal.

## Endnotes

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## Acknowledgments

This brief is intended to distill the insights captured during a two-day meeting on May 28 and 29 at Seattle's Cedarbrook Lodge. Participants shared expertise and ideas on ways that cities pursuing innovation and opportunity via the portfolio strategy can fully meet the needs of students with unique needs. This brief aims to capture the highlights of the meeting, but is not a consensus statement from the proceedings.

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## About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S. Department of Education.