



# Portfolio School Districts Project

## Baltimore and the Portfolio School District Strategy

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# THE PORTFOLIO SCHOOL DISTRICTS PROJECT

Portfolio management is an emerging strategy in public education, one in which school districts manage a portfolio of diverse schools that are provided in many ways—including through traditional district operation, charter operators, and nonprofit organizations—and hold all schools accountable for performance. In 2009, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) launched the Portfolio School Districts Project to help state and local leaders understand practical issues related to the design and implementation of the portfolio school district strategy, and to support portfolio school districts in learning from one another.

## A Different Vision of the School District

Traditional School Districts	Portfolio School Districts
Schools as permanent investments	Schools as contingent on performance
“One best system” of schooling	Differentiated system of schools
Government as sole provider	Diverse groups provide schools

## Analysis of Portfolio District Practices

To understand how these broad ideas play out in practice, CRPE is studying an array of districts (Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, Denver, Hartford, New Orleans, and New York City) that are implementing the portfolio strategy. The ongoing analysis looks at what these districts are doing on important fronts, including how they attract and retain talent, support school improvement, manage accountability, and rebalance their portfolios by opening and closing schools when needed. The work compares different localities’ approaches and adapts relevant lessons from outside sources such as foreign education systems and business.

### The Portfolio Network

Participating districts include Austin, Baltimore, Boston, Central Falls, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, District of Columbia, Hartford, Indianapolis, Jefferson Parish, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Nashville, New Haven, New Orleans, North Forest, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, Rochester, Spring Branch, and Tennessee Achievement School District.

### Connecting Portfolio Districts

In addition to fieldwork and reports from the study districts, CRPE has built a network of districts interested in portfolio management. This network brings together local leaders—mayors, foundation officers, superintendents, and school board members—who have adopted or are considering a portfolio management strategy. Like the strategy itself, the network is a problem-solving effort. Each city is constantly encountering barriers and developing solutions that others can learn from.

## CRPE sponsors the following tools for supporting portfolio districts:

- **Semi-annual meetings of the portfolio network.** The majority of participants are involved in day-to-day portfolio implementation, resulting in content-rich and highly informative meetings.
- **Portfolio online community.** Outside of the network meetings, members collaborate and participate in online discussions and share resources around emerging issues.
- **Portfolio web-based handbook of problems and promising solutions.** Built around the needs of member districts, the handbook is a growing resource available to anyone interested in school and district performance management. It includes special analyses done by CRPE and synthesized best practice materials from member districts. (Under development)

**The Portfolio School Districts Project is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Joyce Foundation.**

**TO VIEW REPORTS FROM THIS PROJECT, VISIT [WWW.CRPE.ORG](http://WWW.CRPE.ORG).**

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This report would not have been possible without the extraordinary generosity of interviewees, including school district department heads and other administrators, local foundation representatives, school principals, members of the local press covering education, a school board member, and CEO Dr. Andrés Alonso. All of those who were interviewed, including Dr. Alonso, graciously made time in extremely busy schedules to meet with us and respond to questions with full candor, sharing invaluable insights into their work. The depth and breadth of knowledge from foundation representatives was particularly beneficial as these interviewees described the complex historical context as well as the current status of the reforms.

We would also like to thank the reviewers and editors who contributed mightily to this report, including Paul Hill for his vast national district reform expertise, Laura Wheeldreyer for her Baltimore expertise, Christine Campbell for her portfolio school district expertise, and former Baltimore resident and Washington Post education writer Linda Perlstein for her editing expertise. And as always, many thanks to CRPE Communications Director and maven, Deb Britt, for making sure our work reaches those who can most benefit from it.

# INTRODUCTION

In November 2010, Baltimore’s Fund for Education Excellence and the Annie E. Casey Foundation approached the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) and requested a case study of the implementation of Baltimore City Public Schools’ (City Schools) portfolio strategy. These local foundations were interested in understanding how the district reform work, spearheaded by schools CEO Dr. Andrés Alonso, aligned with CRPE’s definition of the portfolio strategy. Through prior extensive field research, CRPE had a deep understanding of the implementation of the portfolio strategy in districts across the country, including those in Chicago, Denver, Hartford, New Orleans, New York, and Washington, D.C. The foundations were interested in learning how Baltimore’s work compared to the approaches taken in these other districts.

## The Portfolio School District: A Definition

School districts adopting the emerging strategy of portfolio management oversee and hold accountable a supply of diverse schools that are managed in many ways—including by charter operators, nonprofit organizations, and the district itself. Portfolio districts aim to provide parents with varied schools in every part of a city, create new options for groups of students who are not learning in existing schools, and continuously improve the overall quality and performance of the schools. They explicitly foster an environment to attract talent and support innovation and school improvement.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Under CEO Dr. Andrés Alonso, Baltimore City Public Schools has boldly embraced several components of the portfolio strategy. Baltimore should be considered a national example of a district that encourages and supports a robust diversity of school types and providers. District messaging to the community via its “Great Schools, Great Kids” campaign as well as its “Expanding Great Options” policy make it clear that high-quality schools are valued and that children are not to blame if they fail. The introduction of a higher level of accountability to schools via student-based budgeting and other policy levers has helped fuel a dramatic shift in district and school culture.

The district has also aggressively closed failing schools, engaged parents and community organizations (including by encouraging their input on new models of schools), spread principal autonomy to all schools, introduced pupil-based funding, and expanded citywide choice to middle school students. These district initiatives are aligned with key components of the portfolio strategy. As Dr. Alonso reminds anyone who asks, however, the “real hard work lies ahead.” Some of what he refers to relates to elements of the portfolio strategy that the district has struggled with or shown resistance to fully implementing.

Several other portfolio districts have outpaced City Schools in providing parents with accessible academic achievement data on schools. Middle and high school choice in Baltimore is handicapped by the district’s failure to make public a school report card that includes performance data. The city’s school choice fairs are very well attended, and the percentage of parents who actively choose a school, rather than sending their children where they are automatically assigned, continues to rise. However, the potential impact of school choice cannot be fully realized without giving parents easy access to critical pieces of information on their school options.

City Schools’ messaging and implementation of school-level autonomy and accountability, other key portfolio district elements, were also viewed as problematic in several case study interviews, including with principals and high-level district administrators. Administrators and principals share a perception that true school autonomy is reserved for school leaders who have “connections” or lead high-performing schools. The district has also failed to implement school-level accountability that is consistent across school types and over time. In general terms, principals understand that their schools

must perform or they will be closed. However, the details of what is expected and the consistency of those expectations regardless of the type of school have either not been fully developed or not been fully communicated to teachers and principals.

This report concludes with detailed recommendations covering three policy areas—school closure, autonomy, and accountability—that we believe are critical for City Schools if it hopes to more fully adopt a portfolio strategy.

In brief, these recommendations include:

### ***School closure***

- Develop a clear set of accountability metrics that drive school closure and charter revocation or non-renewal decisions
- Consistently and regularly communicate to schools and to the community how the district makes closure decisions
- Improve the timing of school closure announcements so that children in a school slated for closure can participate in the choice process
- Ensure enough high-quality seats to satisfy student need

### ***Autonomy***

- Keep consistent all messaging from all district offices regarding school-level autonomy

### ***Accountability***

- Better define and communicate expectations for schools
- Consider accountability systems that are outcome-focused and are open to any instructional methods provided they produce student achievement growth

While there are other presenting challenges, these three are tightly interwoven, and progress in resolving them would move the district dramatically ahead in its efforts to ensure a high-quality education for all of its students, as well as maintain its national reputation for embracing a bold and, to date, highly successful reform strategy.

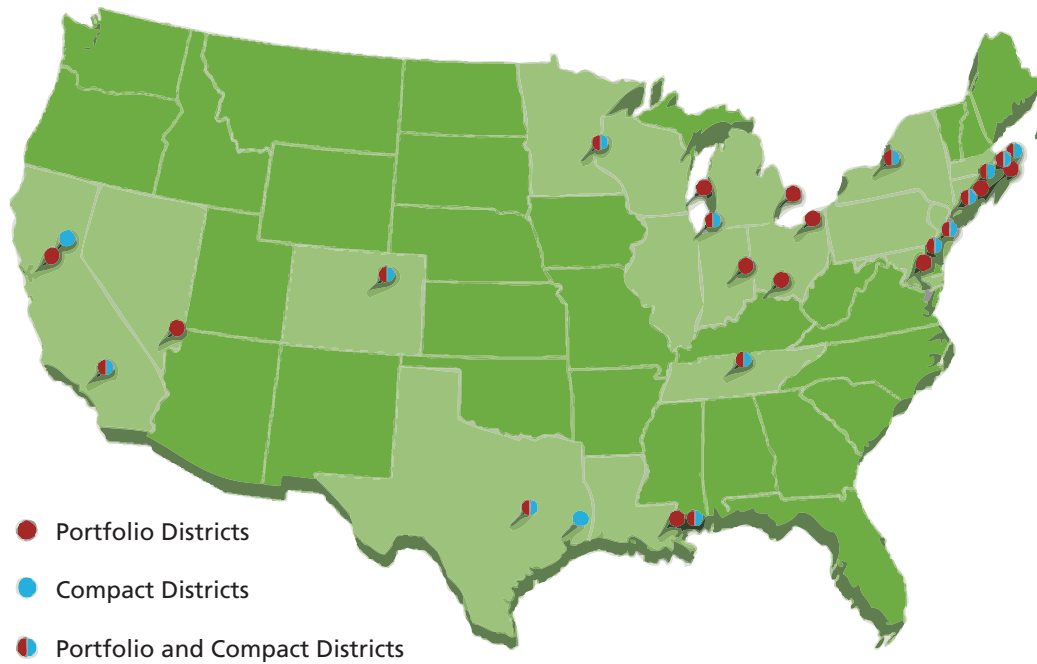
## METHODOLOGY

Over the course of three separate field visits in 2011, CRPE research analysts Sarah Yatsko and Cristina Sepe conducted a series of structured interviews with key players in Baltimore's reforms. Those interviewed included school system department heads and other district administrators, local foundation representatives, school principals, members of the local press covering education, a school board member, and CEO Dr. Andrés Alonso, who was interviewed twice.

Questions posed to interviewees covered the history of the district reform efforts as well as the current strategies and initiatives to raise student achievement. The goal of the interviews was to compare City Schools' reforms to CRPE's definition of the portfolio strategy, as well as assess how implementation mirrored or differed from approaches taken in several other major urban districts. The seven key components of the portfolio strategy (see text box on page 8) were used as a framework for interviews.



# PORTFOLIO SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN 2012<sup>1</sup>



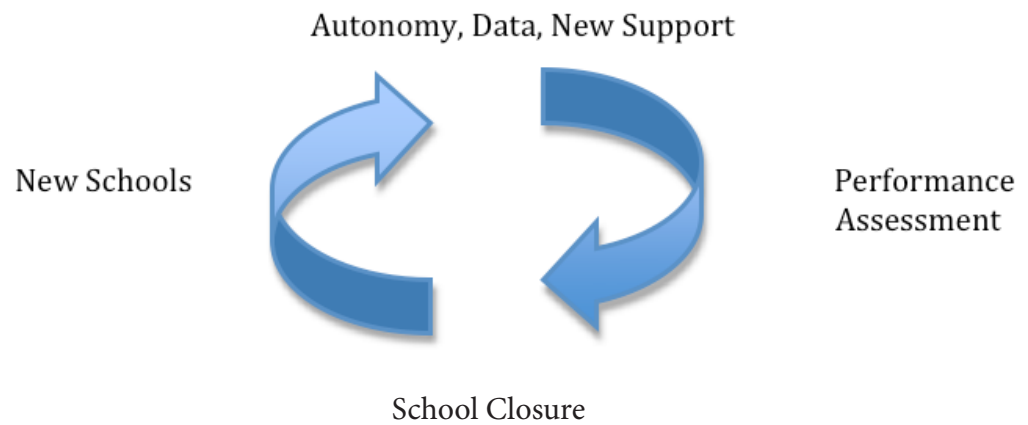
Most portfolio districts start with the same objective: ensuring that no child attends a school in which he or she is not likely to learn. Leading portfolio districts are committed to supporting existing schools that are succeeding with the children they serve, closing unproductive schools, and creating new ones similar to schools that have already proven to be effective. In order to identify unproductive schools, and also to help parents and administrators identify the kinds of schools that ought to be made available to as many students as possible, these districts have worked to build data systems that would allow assessment of schools by measuring the amount of learning attained each year by their students.

These efforts, working in tandem as illustrated in figure 1, are the core of the portfolio idea. The district seeks continuous improvement by providing autonomy, data, and new sources of support; assessing the performance of all schools; closing the lowest-performing schools; and creating new opportunities for students in the

1. Portfolio districts include: Austin, Baltimore, Boston, Central Falls, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, District of Columbia, Hartford, Indianapolis, Jefferson Parish, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Nashville, New Haven, New Orleans, North Forest, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, Rochester, Spring Branch, Tennessee Achievement School District.

least productive schools. This process continues indefinitely, so that the district is progressively less tolerant of unproductive schools. Schools—new and old—that were once considered “good enough” will ultimately experience pressure for continuous improvement.

**Figure 1.** Four Core Actions Lead to Continuous Improvement



None of the actions in figure 1 is unique to portfolio districts. Nearly all states and localities open new schools from time to time, assess school performance, and close schools that have lost enrollment or maintained chaotic environments in which students could not learn. What is new in portfolio districts is the determination to make these actions complement one another, and to adopt the continuous improvement process as the district’s core strategy. Closing schools accomplishes little unless linked to a strategy for creating new options for children and neighborhoods that have been poorly served, and both those actions need to be informed by real performance data, not just by hunches and political calculation.

In applying the portfolio idea to their entire districts, leaders in early adopting cities quickly learned that the four core actions as outlined here are necessary but not sufficient. Other actions must be taken and capacities developed to supplement them. Working from different contexts, districts have learned that a complete portfolio strategy has the seven key components listed in the text box on page 8.

## The Seven Components of the Portfolio District Strategy<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Good Options and Choices for All Families

- Opening of new schools based on parent/student/neighborhood need
- Opening of new schools with outside operators (e.g., charters)
- School choice for all families
- Coordination of enrollment and school information for families across sectors
- Aggressive recruitment of external new school providers
- Intentional development of internal new school providers
- Equity and access to charter and non-traditional schools for special education students and English Language Learners

### 2. School Autonomy

- Universal autonomy: all schools control staff selection and de-selection, budget, pay, and curriculum choice
- Freedom to seek waivers on contracts regarding use of time, teacher resources, and student grouping

### 3. Pupil-Based Funding for All Schools

- Pupil-based funding
- High proportion of district funds being sent to schools
- Common pricing of facilities and services across sectors
- School-level flexibility to pay for new models of teaching and organization (e.g., hybrid learning models)
- Plan in place for low-enrollment schools that cannot survive on pupil-based funding (e.g., plan closure and provide extra funding to see current cohort of students finish)

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2. For a detailed look at each of the individual components, including metrics for districts implementing these parts of the strategy, see [http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/view/csr\\_pubs/466](http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/view/csr_pubs/466).

#### 4. Talent-Seeking Strategy

- Recruitment of new principals and teachers to the district
- Intensive development of strong teachers and leaders from within the district
- Policies in place for using alternative pipelines to find/develop talent
- Performance-based teacher retention
- Contractual arrangements in place that free up schools to have performance-based teacher pay

#### 5. Sources of Support for Schools

- Schools free to choose support from diverse independent providers
- Strategy to intentionally attract and support diverse independent providers

#### 6. Performance-Based Accountability for Schools

- Data systems that allow measurement of annual student growth
- Accountability systems that compare schools on student growth, climate, and improvement
- Rich information systems to guide school self-assessment and planning
- Common student performance standards for all schools
- Publication of a school report card
- Closure of persistently low-performing district and charter schools

#### 7. Extensive Public Engagement

- Communication plan to convey information about reform strategy and progress (including need for school closures)
- Public criteria and schedule for school closings and openings
- Feedback loop for parents and community members to express concerns and receive response
- Partnerships and coalitions with key stakeholders

# FINDINGS ON PORTFOLIO IMPLEMENTATION

## Good Options and Choices for All Families

### *School choice for all families*

Citywide school choice for City Schools high school students has existed since 2005. It developed from a 2001 initiative, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and local foundations, to transform the city's large comprehensive high schools into small neighborhood schools.<sup>3</sup> In March 2010, within three years of his appointment as CEO, Dr. Andrés Alonso introduced choice for middle school students as well. To date, assignment to elementary schools continues to be by neighborhood. Some district interviewees indicated that motivated elementary school parents could request placement in elementary schools outside their neighborhood, but this is very rare. There are also elementary charter schools that are open to children from across the city. Several of these, including a Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) school, have waiting lists.

Interviewees said that the failure to implement citywide choice for all schools reflected the strong pull neighborhood schools continue to have on parents in Baltimore, as well as the lack of public school transportation. Middle and high school students commute by Maryland Transit Administration bus. Although plenty of progress still needs to be made, under Dr. Alonso's direction City Schools has improved elementary school options by closing and replacing failing schools and by strengthening others. Making the same headway in the city's middle schools has proven to be a much greater challenge. There is stark variation in quality at the middle school level across the city, and parents are left to compete for spaces in the few schools that, according to current performance indicators, will adequately prepare their children for high school.

### *Opening of new schools based on parent/student/neighborhood need*

Dr. Alonso aggressively closed several of City Schools' chronically poor-performing schools. In some cases, schools run by outside operators replaced the schools that had been closed. In other cases, the schools were vacated but the district held onto the empty buildings even without immediate plans to reopen them. This starkly contrasted with Dr. Alonso's predecessors, who had returned such buildings to the city. Dr. Alonso believed

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3. Becky Smerdon and Jennifer Cohen, *Baltimore City's High School Reform Initiative* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, December 2007).

that turning the buildings over equated to planning for failure, whereas retaining them reflected his expectation that district enrollment would increase.

There are still neighborhoods in the city whose children must travel to get a high-quality education. District administrators understand this and, compared to officials in some other cities, such as Philadelphia and Cleveland, have paid close attention to the needs of these neighborhoods and are acting to provide local and high-quality options via multiple sources.

***Opening of new schools with outside operators (e.g., charters)***

***Aggressive recruitment of new school providers***

***Intentional development of internal new school providers***

The diversity of school providers in Baltimore is impressive. A state law passed in 2003 allowed for the creation of charter schools in Maryland; since then, far more charter schools have opened in City Schools than in all other Maryland districts combined. Charter schools in Baltimore city are run by nationally recognized charter management organizations, such as KIPP, as well as by locally based nonprofit organizations. Both have brought some high-quality options to children, as evidenced by those schools far surpassing district averages on standardized state achievement tests.

Maryland state law grants City Schools the rare opportunity to oversee charters as an authorizer or holder of the charter. This equips the district with the power to deny charter school applications on merit, as well as to close down charter schools that fail to perform academically or have management or financial shortcomings. Dr. Alonso has revoked one charter since he was appointed, although the school continues to exist as a traditional public school operated by the district. Given the district's need for elementary seats, closing the school altogether was not an option. During the 2010-2011 school year, there were 30 charter schools authorized by City Schools, and by fall 2011 the total had risen to 33.

## An Important Note About Charter Schools in Baltimore

State law in Maryland requires that charter school teachers be employees of their local school districts and included in bargaining units. This requirement presents unique challenges to both the districts and the charter school operators. Two examples follow:

1. When a charter school determines that one of its teachers is not a good fit, it has the power to remove the teacher from the school. However, this removed teacher is then put in a district pool of teachers who need to be placed. If charter schools exercise the option to remove teachers—something they (and Dr. Alonso) see as critical for their success—the district still has to find placements for them. Even if the district fails to place the teachers, it must still continue to pay them. Compensating unplaced teachers has had a significant impact on an already highly restrictive district budget.

2. For charter school operators, like KIPP, who are used to the freedom to determine pay levels for teachers, unionization means following the district pay scale. As years pass and teachers remain in charter schools, their increased seniority translates into higher pay. The impact of the pay scale for teachers is greater for an operator-run school as these schools pay actual teacher salaries. In Baltimore, the traditional school pays the same district average salary for each teacher, regardless of seniority level. This means that as teachers in operator-run schools move up the pay scale as they gain experience, there is an immediate impact on the budget, whereas there is no such impact in a traditional district school. Charter schools in other cities can manage their staffing costs by delaying raises and deliberately mixing junior and senior teachers, but this is more difficult for many of Baltimore's charter schools for a few reasons. Many charter schools are stand-alone and not part of a charter management organization, which means that spreading staff experience levels across schools is not an option. Also, charter schools must comply with the teachers' collective bargaining agreement, which gives them less flexibility in hiring as compared with charter schools in other regions of the country where this is not the case. This may prove problematic in the long run, especially for the sole Baltimore charter school operator who does not have a whole district of schools—or even several other charter schools in a network—to offset the high cost of veteran teachers.

The school district and charter school organizations are not the only school providers in the city. Third-party operators also run “contract schools,” which, much like charter schools, have no admission requirements and serve students living across the city. As of September 2011, there were 20 contract schools in Baltimore, including 15 “transformation schools,” which serve grades six through twelve and focus on the challenging transition from middle school to high school. The district itself operates a variety of school types, from prestigious magnet schools with entrance criteria to Montessori models to transformation schools. “Innovation” high schools, which were created from the above referenced 2001 small-schools funding to break up large high schools, are also an option for secondary students.

### *Coordination of enrollment and school information for families across sectors*

City Schools has made a tremendous amount of progress in getting parents involved and actively participating in school choice. One district administrator estimated that attendance at the school choice fair has grown by about a third each year over the past several years, and venues have changed to accommodate the crowds. Almost all parents in the city actively choose their children’s school. However, they do not have easy access to school performance data. The “Choose Your School” handbook that parents are provided includes a one-page description of each school. In it, the schools themselves might describe their history, their approach to teaching and learning, or their program and course highlights. Extracurricular activities, enrollment, bus lines, and the bell schedule are also included. All this information is useful, but if parents want to know more about how well students are achieving, they have to look elsewhere.

Other portfolio districts across the country, including those in New York, Denver, and Hartford, have come to realize that better-informed parents can make better-informed school choice decisions. These districts, along with some non-portfolio districts, such as Seattle, have begun providing parents with school report cards. These simple and accessible documents, typically one to five pages, contain information on the academic success (or struggles) of the school. They may also show trends in performance over time, break down achievement by race or poverty, and contain data from climate surveys of teachers and students. Although City Schools tracks such data—in fact, its student survey data are more comprehensive than in most other districts—City Schools does not make this information easily available to parents in a school report card. The district currently lists the percentage of students choosing a school at 98 percent, up from 88 percent in 2006. Families are making those choices without easy access to student achievement data, however, in the absence of school report cards. In some other portfolio districts,



such as New York and Hartford, academic achievement data figure prominently in the information provided to parents as they make school choice decisions. Data from those districts and others, such as Denver and Boston, show that parents increasingly appear to be responding to academic performance. Research shows that low-income parents may be more likely to choose academically high-performing schools in districts with a longstanding policy of school choice.<sup>4</sup>

Other portfolio districts have used the report cards to help principals and teachers understand how their schools compare to others in the district. In New York's case, report cards are used to compare groups of cohort schools that have similar student populations. These apples-to-apples comparisons provide schools with valuable feedback on how they measure up and can help principals identify and reach out to peers in search of successful strategies.

City Schools has made progress in coordinating enrollment and making the process of applying to a school more accessible and less complicated. The district has changed the algorithm it uses to weigh parent choices, increasing fairness while reducing opportunities to game the system. However, there is still work to be done. Until very recently, it was not uncommon for parents to fill out multiple applications for multiple schools. If these parents scored high on more than one lottery, they would hold spots in more than one school and lock other children out of those spots or place them on waitlists. The result of one child holding multiple spots until finally making a choice means that other children will learn of an opening much later in the process, potentially too late if they have settled on the school that was their second or third choice. Understanding the inherent inefficiencies of this process, the district has moved to coordinate enrollment for all schools and school types into one process for parents, but it also allowed some schools to remain outside the process. So the original problem remains, although at a smaller scale.

***Equity and access to charter and non-traditional schools for special education students and English Language Learners***

In 1984, a lawsuit known as “Vaughn G” was filed on behalf of several City Schools students, accusing the school system of denying essential services to special education students. The court directed the district to consider the needs of special education students as early as possible in the process. The lawsuit was settled three years after Dr. Alonso's appointment and 26 years after it was filed. The judge who signed the settlement

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4. Paul Teske, Jody Fitzpatrick, and Gabriel Kaplan, “The Information Gap?” *Review of Policy Research* 23, no. 5 (2006): 969-81.

agreement believed that City Schools had fulfilled its obligation under the terms of the lawsuit and that the district's special education students were receiving appropriate services. The longevity of this lawsuit helped institutionalize the practice of considering the needs of special education students as new schools were created over time.

## School Autonomy

***Universal autonomy: All schools control staff selection and de-selection, budget, pay, and curriculum choice***

***Freedom to seek waivers on contracts regarding use of time, teacher resources, and student grouping***

Within a year of Dr. Alonso's appointment, many highly prescriptive directives from the district had been loosened, and more traditional district schools were getting some of the breathing room that previously only charter schools enjoyed. The district no longer was the sole provider of curriculum and professional development, and schools could choose models that best fit students and staff. Pupil-based funding gave principals control over spending decisions, although many struggled to acquire the skills needed to design budgets and set priorities.

Despite the progress, however, the "bounded autonomy" that Dr. Alonso granted schools falls short of the complete autonomy created by former New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein or even the autonomy introduced by former Hartford Superintendent Steven Adamowski that was granted to higher-performing schools. Dr. Alonso notes that the teachers union contract in Baltimore limits the freedom of schools, including charters, to decide how many teachers to hire and what to pay them. He also comes at this work believing that principals typically are reluctant to utilize the autonomies they already possess.<sup>5</sup>

Bounded autonomy is confusing for principals. During focus groups, principals expressed concerns that remnants of the old way of determining autonomy remained in place. Specifically, principals of schools with a history of high performance described skipping meetings and not responding to memos the district advertised as mandatory, filling in and submitting only those "required" reports they believed were relevant or beneficial for their schools, and so on. In contrast, new principals or those leading struggling schools

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5. Prior to his appointment in Baltimore, Dr. Alonso worked directly under then-chancellor Klein in New York. Early in his comprehensive district reform work, Klein decided that autonomy was to be granted to all schools, regardless of type or past performance. During interviews Dr. Alonso described a belief that the interdependencies of schools given the charter schools' inclusion in the collective bargaining agreement in Baltimore impacts the level of autonomy they can be afforded.

reported adhering to district directives more closely. These principals who saw their autonomy as restricted expressed frustration about the district demands put on their time and on their decision-making power within their own school. The principals in the high-performing schools expressed no such frustration.

This variation from school to school in how autonomy is understood and meted out creates a problem for City Schools. Other portfolio districts, such as New York and Hartford, have provided principals with full power to determine school budgets, hiring, and curriculum (although Hartford continues to limit autonomy for the lowest-performing third of its schools).

Though Dr. Alonso insists that his messaging around autonomy is consistent, some principals reported otherwise. It may be that the message is getting lost in translation by mid-level district personnel who interact directly with schools. Districts such as Los Angeles have had to closely track how middle managers communicate district policy. City Schools too needs to take a closer look at the differing messages principals are getting and ensure consistent communication from all district offices.

The autonomy that City Schools offers schools is limited in part by the incentives in place for schools to spend their money in particular ways. For example, schools are technically free to choose the curriculum that best fits their students, as long as they can carve out extra money in the budget to do so. If they choose to use the district curriculum, though, they pay nothing. The tight budget reality for City Schools has meant that nearly every traditional district school has opted to use the curriculum the district developed in-house. As detailed below, schools are also free to use vendors other than the central office for advice and professional development. But they have already paid for the central office's services.

It is not clear whether district leaders have created these strong incentives to use district services out of a conviction that they are better than any possible alternative, or out of a desire to avoid further cutting the central office budget. No matter which explanation applies, it is a fact that maintaining a large central office reduces the amount of money that can be distributed to schools under pupil-based funding. Thus, all schools are compelled to pay for central office services, whether or not they use them.

Bounded autonomy in Baltimore also impacted how mutual consent—the policy stating that both teacher and school must agree on a teacher placement—was introduced to schools. While mutual consent represented progress for schools and teachers, the district continued to influence teacher placement by offering incentives. New positions were

created for teachers who had been sitting in the unplaced pool. Dr. Alonso claims that this was a success in many cases—that after a year the schools did not want to give up these new people or positions. Dr. Alonso also believes he must restrict even charter schools as they recruit teachers for open positions. With the pool of unplaced teachers draining the district budget, charters are told they must fill openings from this group. These examples illustrate how the district continues to influence how schools are operated. Whether or not this works out for individual schools and students, it imposes greater limitations on autonomy than are evident in other major cities pursuing the portfolio strategy.

Even in the portfolio districts that have fully embraced school autonomy, it is evident that this freedom can never be total. Schools must teach in ways that prepare students for graduation and college. They can't always enroll the exact set of students they want or hire the exact set of teachers they want. Secondary schools must adapt to the knowledge and skill levels of the students that elementary schools send them. No city pursuing a portfolio strategy can eliminate these natural interdependencies. But other constraints, such as the ones Dr. Alonso cites, are not inevitable—they are created by choice.

## Pupil-Based Funding for All Schools

### *Pupil-based funding*

#### *High proportion of district funds being sent to schools*

#### *School-level flexibility to pay for new models of teaching and organization (e.g., hybrid learning models)*

#### *Plan in place for low-enrollment schools that cannot survive on pupil-based funding (e.g., plan closure and provide extra funding to see current cohort of students finish)*

Several portfolio districts employ pupil-based funding, a practice of allocating funds to a school based on the number and characteristics of enrolled students. Students who typically need more resources, such as English language learners and gifted students, are allotted a higher per-pupil rate by the district. This money is tied to the student and follows him or her from school to school. Dr. Alonso highly values the leverage provided by a policy of pupil-based funding, and he wasted little time implementing one in City Schools. In other districts, superintendents see the policy as an added measure of accountability. Schools that fail to attract students get less money, and are under scrutiny. Dr. Alonso credits the new policy with something he sees as even more important: a shift in district culture. Specifically, he believes that the district has evolved from one

where money was guaranteed, no matter what, to one where all students have “value.” Now, whether or not a school can attract students has a direct impact on its bottom line. Losing students—because they move, for example, or choose other schools, or drop out—comes with an actual cost in dollars. Losing or expelling high-needs students has a greater impact on the school’s bottom line than losing students without the added funding weights. This can accelerate the loss of teaching positions, something principals are highly motivated to avoid.

When schools lose students to suspensions and expulsions, they lose money too. So shifting how money is allocated to schools has changed the incentive system around serving higher-needs students. Prior to Dr. Alonso’s appointment, student suspensions and expulsions were common, and expectations for students were not consistently high. Dr. Alonso, who used to teach emotionally disturbed adolescents in the projects of Newark, New Jersey, changed Baltimore’s discipline and attendance policies and created partnerships with the police department to divert youth from lockup when possible. While these reforms are significant, Dr. Alonso also credits the shift to pupil-based funding with reshaping how principals and teachers view students. Prior to his arrival, the district was losing 2.5 percent of its student population every year, yet the schools kept getting more money. There was no disincentive to lose kids. Pupil-based funding reversed that. As Dr. Alonso puts it, “Now [students] have value. You lose them and you lose teachers.” Schools work much harder than they did in the past to keep students in the building. Over the last four years, school suspensions fell by a third and the dropout rate has been cut in half.

### ***Common pricing of facilities and services across sectors***

This strategic move to allocating resources to schools based on the number and type of students unearthed an important question City Schools must address going forward. As has been the case for other districts, grey areas remain around which district services schools receive as “free” district services and which ones they need to pay for. The charter school community in Baltimore has a particular interest in having this question answered, as they are less likely to benefit from in-kind help. To their credit, City Schools officials have admitted that these are questions they cannot answer and, with significant financial and logistical philanthropic contributions, they have found an outside consultant to help figure this out.

### ***Sharing of facilities and other select resources with non-district-run schools***

Baltimore has followed a progressive trend evident in districts across the country: encouraging and facilitating cross-pollination between charter schools and non-charter schools. Dr. Alonso has shown a level of openness and creativity that is rare for district superintendents in ensuring that charter schools are considered—and consider themselves—district schools. Funding for all schools is tight, so City Schools has little extra financial leverage to provide to charter schools. However, he offered to have the district co-sign with charter schools on loans to purchase facilities. This brings down the interest rate and represents a savings for charter schools without impacting the district's budget.

City Schools also applied for and was awarded a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to participate in its District-Charter Collaboration Compact. This award has provided \$100,000 and motivation for accelerating collaboration between charter and non-charter schools, and between charter organizations and school districts. As a forthcoming report by CRPE describes it, “In Baltimore, district and charter leaders view the opportunities of district–charter collaboration very similarly. Both want to address their main obstacles to working together—confusion around charter school autonomies and disagreements over funding. District and charter leaders hope that further collaboration will push system-wide improvements in the district, including more responsiveness to a diverse set of schools and clear performance metrics for all schools.

### **Talent-Seeking Strategy**

***Recruitment of new principals and teachers to the district***

***Policies in place for using alternative pipelines to find/develop talent***

***Intensive development of strong teachers and leaders from within the district***

***Performance-based teacher retention***

***Contractual arrangements in place that free up schools to have performance-based teacher pay***

Teach for America and the Baltimore City Teaching Residency program are two ways in which Baltimore allows for individuals without a degree from a college of education to become teachers and principals. Both pipelines infuse large numbers of new and

energetic teachers into the mix of experienced talent already teaching in Baltimore’s charter, transformation, contract, and traditional district schools.

The retention and hiring of school principals has been a much greater challenge than City Schools and Dr. Alonso anticipated when they began the district reform work. Dr. Alonso quickly understood that many principals had been far too accepting of chronically poor academic performance for far too long. He removed three-quarters of school principals. This was painful for all parties. In some cases principals had held positions for decades and were pillars in their local communities. In addition, it was unexpectedly difficult to fill the high number of vacancies with the necessary talent. New Leaders for New Schools, the nonprofit public school principal training program, helped fill some spots, and the district has nascent plans to create a privately funded in-district leadership academy similar to one that was created in Hartford by then-superintendent Adamowski. District leaders remain hopeful they will be able to better cultivate leaders equipped with the necessary skill set to lead a portfolio district school—leaders who are comfortable with autonomy, budgeting, marketing, and instructional leadership.

It is also important to highlight the groundbreaking contract that City Schools signed with the Baltimore Teachers’ Union (BTU). Negotiations between the union and district resulted in performance-based pay and retention, and the contract is generally more progressive than those in most school districts. It worked to the district’s advantage that the local teachers union was motivated to be seen as ahead of the curve and a national example. Marietta English, the BTU president, and Lorretta Johnson, the then-president of BTU’s paraprofessional union, were both described by interviewees as reasonable and effective negotiators. Johnson currently serves under Randi Weingarten as secretary-treasurer of the American Federation of Teachers.

To the local news media, the progressive teachers’ contract was a surprise. However, Dr. Alonso and district administrators under his direction had been cultivating relationships with the BTU for some time. As one district official put it, “The groundwork was there in that [Dr. Alonso] had established a partnership with the union way before we got to the negotiations table. And that partnership doesn’t mean that partnership is not filled with areas of contention, because they are. We don’t agree on many, many things, but we do have a mutually respectful approach in terms of how we agree, and sometimes agree to disagree, in the context of our work.”

The work is far from done; the devilish details of the contract, including some unresolved issues still up for discussion, continue to drain district time. The contract has also created

an unanticipated drain on district resources, as its impact ended up being far more costly than predicted. Protracted negotiations have exacerbated this. However, case study interviews confirmed that parties continue to approach ongoing negotiations with the same spirit of mutual respect. The new principals' union contract was ratified and voted on earlier this year and it replicates several key elements of the teachers' contract.

## Sources of Support for Schools

### *Schools free to seek support from diverse independent providers*

#### *Strategy to intentionally attract and support diverse independent providers*

Each portfolio district city has its own mix of independent providers. In Baltimore's case, there is a robust group of independent organizations that have stepped in to contract with the district to turn around failing schools as well as to start and manage entire schools. However, principals are not regularly tapping non-district sources for supports such as curriculum development, progress assessment, and professional development.

Baltimore schools use independent providers infrequently in part because there are fewer providers available than in some other portfolio districts, for example New York or New Orleans. However, in those cities district leaders and outside organizations worked to cultivate the creation of such providers. New York funded independent support organizations and encouraged schools to use them. In New Orleans, instead of building a large central office, the Recovery School District partnered with a key nonprofit, New Schools for New Orleans, to incubate independent assistance. Both localities regard a diverse supply of assistance organizations as key to innovation.

Baltimore has not taken the steps to encourage the development of this sort of marketplace. City Schools also continues to encourage the use of district services in some areas, such as curriculum, by offering the services for "free," while schools must pay for services provided by nonprofits. This creates a large disincentive for a school with a limited budget to pursue and pay for an outside contract, and is likely to standardize practice in ways that work against the continuous improvement objectives of the portfolio strategy. This also hampers autonomy by restricting choices principals make around key organizational decisions, such as what curriculum to use and who provides professional development. It is critically important to keep this in mind as the district embarks on a foundation-funded study to quantify district supports across school sectors. A costing-out of these supports must factor in how some schools choose to pay for services provided by nonprofit organizations while others accept the district's offerings given they incur no additional cost.



## Performance-Based Accountability for Schools

*Closure of persistently low-performing district and charter schools*

*Data systems that allow measurement of annual student growth*

*Rich information systems to guide school self-assessment and planning*

*Common student performance standards for all schools*

**Table 1. Impact of “Expanding Great Options” Policy, 2009-2012**

Year	Schools Closed	Schools Relocated	Schools Transformed	Schools Opened
<b>SY 2009-10</b>	7	5	0	8
<b>SY 2010-11</b>	5	4	7	5
<b>SY 2011-12</b>	1	0	6	0
<b>Totals</b>	13	9	13	13

SOURCE: CEO Dr. Andrés Alonso, “School Turnaround in Baltimore City Schools,” presentation at Princeton University, March 9, 2012

Since 2007, City Schools has reported closing 26 schools. In that time, one charter school’s charter has not been renewed. As has been the case for each portfolio district CRPE has studied, in Baltimore closing schools has at times been difficult and controversial—although reportedly less so for City Schools than in New York, Chicago, and New Orleans. As City Schools interviewees described, closures generating the strongest community opposition have tended to be elementary and middle schools with steady enrollment and long histories. For example, the district’s decision to close a stand-alone middle school with strong community backing located near a university campus was highly controversial. On the other hand, the district cites the closing of some schools, including the first school closed under Dr. Alonso, as relatively (although not completely) smooth. With that school, there was an understanding in the community that something needed to be done, so when the district stepped in to shut down the school midyear, there was only minor opposition from a small group of community members.

During interviews with principals, it was clear that they have read the increased closing of schools as a message that they are to be held accountable in a way they had not been in the past. Prior to 2007, closure decisions were largely based on building conditions or enrollment instead of academic achievement, school choice data, or school climate survey information. Dr. Alonso’s use of the latter criteria to inform decisions about closure marked a significant shift from the way things were done prior to his arrival.

Unfortunately, the message that performance drives closure may not be as clear as the district intends. In interviews, Dr. Alonso and some district administrators stressed the reliance on academic data in making school closure determinations. However, interviews with both principals and district administrators revealed a lack of consistent communication on the part of the district around the rationale for closing schools. There is some common understanding of how certain data are weighed. For example, City Schools stands out, even among portfolio districts, as a district that prioritizes data on choice and school climate surveys. Principals and some district administrators were under the impression that the reliance on choice and climate surveys is in lieu of, instead of in support of, the use of academic performance data. In contrast, other districts, such as Hartford, use academic performance as a nearly singular driver for closure decisions. As City Schools continues to close failing schools, it will inevitably turn to those with a level of community support higher than that of schools closed to date. The lack of a common understanding of what makes a quality school and what drives closure decisions may make the process appear arbitrary to these communities. Failing to provide a transparent school report card outlining how each school measures up against district priorities, and against each other, will open the district up to charges of playing politics and greatly complicate the closure process.

Interviews with City Schools administrators also highlighted the problematic timing of some school closing announcements. District officials struggled to address conflicting concerns over when to publicize their decision to close schools. If the announcements are made early in the year, parents would be notified in time to participate in the choice process, which would give them the best chance of finding schools for their children for the following year. However, the district was deeply concerned that early notification would lead to unacceptably low morale and performance by staff in the schools' final year. As a result, the district opted to announce several school closures late in the year, and after the choice deadline. This left parents and students of closed schools last in line and locked out of high-quality slots across the city. Hartford Public Schools struggled with this same issue, but prioritized the students' ability to participate in the choice process. Encouragingly, Hartford did not see any steep performance drop in the remaining seven or so months the soon-to-be closed schools continued to operate after the closure announcement.

*Accountability systems that compare schools on student growth, climate, and improvement*

City School's Office of Achievement and Accountability has been working on a School Accountability Framework since shortly after Dr. Alonso's arrival. This framework consists of a quantitative as well as a qualitative component. With the assistance of SchoolWorks, an education consulting company, the district has developed and begun to implement the qualitative assessment side, known as the School Effectiveness Review (SER). In the spring of 2011, as part of a pilot, 25 such reviews were conducted at selected district-run schools throughout the city by a team of district and SchoolWorks reviewers. Before the 2011-2012 school year ends, 24 operator-run schools will also have completed their SER.

During interviews to prepare for this report, the SER had just been introduced to schools. In focus groups, both charter and district-run school principals expressed a shared concern that the SER was overly prescriptive and could pose a threat to school autonomy. They understood that this tool would measure academic inputs, such as: Are teachers employing practices that are consistent with research on what constitutes high-quality instruction? How does the professional development look? The concern that the SER could constrain autonomy stemmed from the understanding that districts, including City Schools, have historically gathered this information in order to ensure instruction is consistent and aligned with district directives across schools.

More recent conversations (spring 2012) with outside consultants working with the district, as well as with charter school operators and principals, have revealed a significant reduction in the concerns over the SER. By all reports, schools across type and sector have come to see the review as an effective internal tool. The SERs, as schools have experienced them, have been tailored to each school and provide a principal with feedback on how well aligned practice is with the school's own stated goals and mission (rather than a district directive on how they should be going about their work). There are overarching best practices that apply to all schools, but they are broad enough and based on widely accepted research and practice. Using some broad markers for school effectiveness, the district argues, provides critical information beyond the quantitative measures (primarily standardized test scores) that the district can use when making decisions such as school closure.

As City Schools continues to work on its two-part School Accountability Framework, it has also made recent progress on a process for determining the renewal of operator school contracts, including charter and transformation schools. In late 2011, the district convened a working group of stakeholders to develop a renewal framework. Twice during

the working group's process, the district invited comment on a draft of the framework from the New and Charter School Advisory Board as well as all non-district school operators. The framework has been sorely needed, as without it some renewals have been postponed. This is still clearly a work in progress, and concerns have been raised around certain elements. For example, it includes a measurement of fidelity to charter, which some charter school operators view as beyond the scope of district concerns. However, in general, the process has been seen as inclusive and responsive to operator feedback.

Portfolio districts strive to hold all schools accountable, regardless of type or operator, as consistently as possible. To this end, City Schools has expressed a commitment to ensure that accountability tools could be applied to all schools regardless of grade level or operator type. The district has taken care to pilot the above evaluation tools in high-performing and struggling schools, as well as with charter and other outside operator schools and district-run schools. This is a highly encouraging sign.

Although City Schools has made tremendous progress in both its development of the general school evaluation as well as the outside operator renewal process, challenges remain. CRPE's research in portfolio districts finds that City School's challenges around school accountability are common and that they persist over time. There is an inherent tension in the work of school evaluation for a portfolio district. The district is well positioned to provide an evaluation "service" to a school with the objective of supporting a school's ability to achieve the goals it has set for itself. In Baltimore, some school principals have moved from their initial skepticism and now express appreciation for the insights gained via the SER. However, the evaluation serves another purpose. It provides the district with information about the internal workings of the school beyond test scores, graduation rates, and attendance. The constantly shifting line City Schools and all portfolio districts must draw and redraw separates an evaluation system that will both help schools and provide the district with the information it needs from one that schools will game to avoid closure or other district-imposed consequences. It is too early to know if schools in Baltimore will see the newly developed accountability systems as a useful tool that will help them get to where they want to be instructionally and school culture-wise or if they will see the tool as a prescriptive guide to how they should approach their work. City Schools has worked hard to ensure it is the former.

### ***Publication of a school report card***

In researching portfolio districts across the country, CRPE has learned that one particularly effective way for districts to keep schools and parents abreast of a school's

progress and performance is through the school report card. This idea is explored above in terms of its utility as a communication device for parents choosing schools. However, these documents are also useful tools for principals and teachers who want to see how their schools compare to others in the district. Report cards detail information on each school's current academic performance and growth, parent and school satisfaction rates, enrollment, and demographics.

New York City Department of Education's School Progress Report is one example of this practice. The document states, "Each school's Progress Report (1) measures student year-to-year progress, (2) compares the school to peer schools and (3) rewards success in moving all children forward, especially children with the greatest needs. Strong Progress Report results are the basis for monetary rewards for school leaders, and poor results are an important factor in determining whether schools require intensive support or intervention."<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, information provided in Baltimore's "Choose Your School" handbook is limited to the school's own description of its instructional approach, coupled with practical information for parents, such as bell times and bus lines.

## Extensive Public Engagement

*Communication plan to convey information about reform strategy and progress (including need for school closures)*

*Feedback loop for parents and community members to express concerns and receive responses*

*Partnerships and coalitions with key stakeholders*

*Public criteria and schedule for school closings and openings*

The approach City Schools has taken to increase parent engagement has been innovative and highly effective. City Schools has committed high-level positions within the district as well as resources to ensure parents and the greater Baltimore community are welcome partners in the district's work. Parents have been invited to participate in training modules designed to help them understand what 21<sup>st</sup>-century learning looks like. Piloted in districts including Chicago, the modules are designed to teach parents how to think through problems creatively. The training also introduces discipline tactics that double as teaching moments.

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6. For more information, see <http://schools.nyc.gov/community/planning/Support+and+Intervention.htm>.

There is a new sense of transparency both at the district level, thanks to Dr. Alonso, and at the school level, thanks to redesigned “school family councils.” Formerly known as “school improvement groups,” these committees are staffed by parents and community members. They report directly to the district CEO on the budget; according to a district official, there is regular and energetic participation at most school sites. A nearly identical approach was implemented in Hartford, which has enjoyed similar results. While principals in both cities complained that addressing parent council members’ concerns about school-level decisions was time-consuming, they conceded that the benefits outweighed the troubles. Former Hartford superintendent Adamowski saw parent engagement as a tool to increase sustainability for the reform work. He reasoned that once parents were engaged and could see the benefits of the changes, it would be much more difficult for future school boards or district administrators to take them away. Time will tell if this is true in both cities.

Interviews across all sectors in Baltimore reveal an extremely high level of confidence in Dr. Alonso’s ability to communicate the district’s goals effectively as it undertakes sweeping reforms. His ability to control a message is most impressive when he is responding to threats to his work. While conducting field visits for this case study, for instance, news broke of a potential cheating scandal at three of the city’s schools. Dr. Alonso’s response was swift, straight, and tough-talking. Cheating would not be tolerated, he explained to the media and in a video posted on the district website. Unlike several similar scandals across the country that were unveiled at about the same time, Baltimore’s never became a national story.

## CONCLUSIONS

Baltimore City Public Schools has reached a critical juncture in its attempts to improve city schools for children via a portfolio approach. The initial phase of the work began with the arrival of CEO Dr. Andrés Alonso, who adopted many of the same changes he helped implement in New York City under then-schools chancellor Joel Klein. (Dr. Alonso would be quick to point out that these efforts have been tailored for the Baltimore context.)

These sweeping changes have included the scaling back of central office staff; the closing of a large number of failing schools coupled with the opening of promising new schools; changes in school-level human capital made possible by groundbreaking negotiations with the local teachers union; a movement toward giving principals autonomy over their budgets, staff, and curriculum; a switch to pupil-based funding; and an embrace of charter schools as district schools. This has all been paired with strong rhetoric expressing the belief that *all* public school students, regardless of the type of school they attend, are “our kids.”

Principals, teachers, media, and even law enforcement, which has worked in partnership with the district on school safety issues, have said that the changes have fostered a new, district-wide culture of raised expectations. Several interviewees expressed the sentiment that the district and even the city have seen a ground-level shift toward the belief that all children are valued and believed to be capable of excelling academically.

Beyond the rhetoric, there has also been a marked improvement in academic achievement at City Schools. Between 2007 and 2011, third-grade and eighth-grade scores in reading and math have risen 21 percent and 28 percent, respectively. The dropout rate is currently 4 percent, which represents a 55 percent improvement over 2007 numbers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Below are recommendations covering three policy areas—school closure, autonomy, and accountability—each of which has reached a critical juncture as City Schools moves to more fully adopt a portfolio strategy. These recommendations all stem from a central concern. The reimagining of how a district is organized via the portfolio strategy must be based on the belief that the district does not corner the market on innovation or best practices. City Schools has taken great strides in this direction, but there is a persistent reluctance running through the administration to fully let go and trust schools and principals to make the right decisions for students.

### School Closure

- Develop a clear and transparent set of accountability metrics that drive school closure and charter revocation or non-renewal decisions
- Create a process that notifies schools they are being monitored
- Consistently and regularly communicate to schools and to the community how the district makes closure decisions
- Improve the timing of school closure announcements so that children in a school slated for closure can participate in the choice process
- Provide good solutions for student reassignment

As City Schools has entered its second and potentially much more difficult phase of the reforms, new challenges loom. Work to date has included closure and redesign of more than 20 schools. Surprisingly, these changes were less controversial than some district officials expected, especially compared to similar moves in other portfolio districts.

However, controversy may yet erupt, as the district plans to close the next tier of schools. The first rounds of closures and redesigns addressed the most unsafe and egregiously failing schools. Challenges lie ahead as the next rounds of schools may not be as dangerous but are failing nonetheless. Closing all low-performing schools at once is not an option since there are not enough high-performing seats available to replace them. City Schools will need to increase the supply and strategic location of good school options for children whose schools will be closed. Additionally, City Schools has yet to clearly articulate objective criteria that trigger a school for closure.



City Schools has put a tremendous amount of time and energy into developing school-level evaluations that incorporate multiple measures of success. Test scores, school choice, attendance, student surveys, and district classroom observations are all tracked. In the time since interviews were conducted for this report, City Schools has developed a rubric for charter renewal that they believe will be “consistent, predictable, fair, rigorous and transparent.”<sup>7</sup> Although the new rubric may clarify the renewal process, it remains unclear how the district uses data to make closure or charter revocation decisions. The district also could make more of this information available to principals and parents. As with other districts that have taken this approach, if schools understand what is expected of them, when closure decisions are made, everyone can see them coming.

The other aspect of this work that City Schools must improve is the timing of school closure announcements. The district has not figured out how to address two conflicting concerns: an early closure announcement allows a school’s students to participate in school choice, but it also puts those students at risk of spending nearly a full year in a school slated for closure. City Schools has made closure announcements after the choice deadline, which has been tremendously unfortunate for children attending those schools.

Lastly, even if closure announcements are made in time to allow families to participate in the school choice process, there must be enough quality seats to satisfy need. High school seats are ample, and the district has created several new options tailored to a variety of needs. Elementary schools are in high demand, however, and City Schools has had to time closures with openings. And middle school choice is particularly bleak, with students scrambling for spots in the few high-performing schools.

## Autonomy

- Provide schools with full autonomy—or consider a phase in of autonomy for those schools and principals who may not be ready
- Pair strong, highly autonomous principals with newer principals who are unsure how to fully utilize autonomy
- Plan a long-term strategy to develop principal training, in-district or via universities, that specifically builds the skills of autonomous leaders
- Keep consistent all messaging from all district offices regarding school-level autonomy
- Ensure that the district office serves, not controls, schools

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7. City Schools presentation entitled “Renewal Process and Rubric,” April 30, 2012.

Baltimore, like other districts pursuing a portfolio strategy, must strive to provide support to schools and avoid micromanaging them. A critical and often controversial step is for the district to release its hold over schools and trust principals to make decisions. Interviewees described an initial push of autonomy out to the schools following Dr. Alonso's arrival. There is evidence that the district has scaled this back, however, through its directives regarding teaching and learning and subsidies for schools that choose to use district services. Portfolio districts across the country share this dilemma—the services provided by the district may well be high-quality but diverse schools require diverse supports, and strong incentives for schools to use district services could reverse the trend toward diversification and innovation.

## Accountability

- Develop accountability systems that compare schools on student growth, school climate, and improvement
- Communicate expectations clearly to schools
- Adopt accountability systems that are outcome-focused and are open to any instructional methods, provided they produce student achievement growth

Another area that generates considerable confusion for principals in Baltimore, including those leading the district's highest-performing schools, is what the expectations are for schools. During field visits for this report, City Schools was piloting a complex school evaluation rubric. This tool attempts to evaluate teaching and learning by comparing a school's instructional approach, as observed by a district official during a few school visits, to a district-determined model of how teachers should teach. Rather than giving schools freedom to choose instructional approaches that match the needs of the students, as evidenced by their academic gains, the tool is judging whether the schools are faithful to certain methods. Even if the rubric is limited to basic and widely accepted best practices, it still limits the autonomy of principals and teachers and loses sight of the bottom line. City Schools may consider the approach taken in portfolio districts such as New York and Hartford, where accountability systems are outcome-focused and are open to any instructional methods, provided they produce student achievement growth.

## Center on Reinventing Public Education

*Improving education through transformative, evidence-based ideas*

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) is a policy research group dedicated to finding innovative, effective ways to transform our education system so that all students—especially disadvantaged children in urban districts—have equal access to quality public education. For two decades, CRPE has identified systemic and emerging problems in public education and offered evidence-based solutions informed by rigorous research and balanced analysis.

CRPE analyzes K-12 issues ranging from school choice and charter schools to finance, productivity, and leadership. Our work values evidence over posture and addresses hard truths head on. We search outside the traditional boundaries of education to find pragmatic, equitable, and promising approaches to address the complex challenges facing public education.