



Portfolio School Districts Project

Eliminating the Achievement Gap:

A White Paper on How Charter Schools Can Help District Leaders

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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 (Chicago, Denver, Hartford, New Orleans, New York City, and Washington, D.C.) 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 re-balance 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 currently include Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, Hartford, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, New Haven, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, Rochester, and Washington, D.C.

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)

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“Large urban systems are anachronistic. The modern superintendent’s job is to create the best portfolio of schools.”

SIGNATORY, BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION DISTRICT-CHARTER COMPACT

We are at an inflection point in American public education. Nationally, there is significantly more awareness that a staggering achievement gap exists between minority and white students, that the gap is unjust, and that it is constraining our country—economically, socially, and politically. What we have not yet admitted is that intense political pressures, labor contracts, and other forces prevent urban superintendents from closing those gaps. In this paper we argue that partnerships with high-performing charter schools and charter networks can help superintendents overcome those dynamics.

Increasingly, superintendents are acting as portfolio managers, partnering with charter schools whose only mission is to serve high-needs students, overseeing those partners’ progress, closing down schools that do not work, and creating more that do work. Instead of seeing charter schools as competitors, district leaders who act as portfolio managers can leverage high-performing charter schools and networks to transform struggling district schools and close the achievement gap. Superintendents who are successful in creating the political will for this more radical transformation will create lasting, positive change in their districts.

Why is it hard for existing districts to close the achievement gap? What are district leaders finding when they look outside the traditional system for gap-closing solutions? And how are new schools able to do what traditional schools have not? This paper examines these questions by drawing from the experiences of high-performing charter school networks that are reaching the type of scale to support district transformation efforts, such as Aspire Public Schools, Yes Prep, and Mastery Charter Schools, or that are designed to operate in multiple regions, such as Rocketship Education, Uncommon Schools, and KIPP.

Why School Districts Struggle to Improve Their Toughest Schools

Though there are increasing examples of effective school turnarounds in many districts, nearly all districts are faced with a grim and frustrating reality: whatever they do, they cannot seem to bring about system-wide and dramatic urban school improvement. Significant new federal, local, and private financial investments and intense school improvement efforts typically yield little more than incremental improvement.¹ Many

1. T. Loveless, *The 2009 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well Are American Students Learning?* The Brookings Institution, http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2010/0317_education_loveless.aspx.

urban areas are like San Jose,² where only 25 percent of Hispanic students show proficiency rates in English Language Arts, as compared to approximately 75 percent of middle-income, white students.

So why is it that we have made so little progress on educating disadvantaged students to high standards when we know it is possible? The answer is that political realities and limited resources lead school districts to pursue diffuse improvement efforts. The toughest schools are unable to make the staffing changes or muster enough school-level support to overcome the demographic challenges that their students bring; the best schools get enough enhancements to satisfy their powerful parents. Aside from generic staff development workshops, schools whose performance is neither great nor disastrous are basically ignored. As Eric Nadelstern, formerly of NYC DOE, has said, low-performing and under-achieving schools need highly committed and effective teaching teams that districts simply cannot mandate or prescribe.

A Better Way: Strategic Portfolio Management

More than two-dozen school districts supported by the Center on Reinventing Public Education's Portfolio District Network and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's district-charter compact initiative are now partnering with high-performing charter schools to replace or transform their chronically low-performing schools and to share effective practices.³ In New York City, New Orleans, Denver, Los Angeles, and many other urban districts, charter schools are no longer seen as a threat to district effectiveness. Indeed, they are becoming an integral part of those districts' reform strategies.⁴ These districts are working very hard to negotiate new flexibilities with unions, states, and federal entities, and some changes may eventually come to pass. But they also believe that time is too short to ask students to wait for adults to work out their differences. Using charter schools to replace the worst-performing schools provides proof points that show what can be done in high-poverty schools and creates pressure on teachers unions to agree to charter-like flexibilities in more schools.

Superintendents and board members who follow a portfolio district strategy are more concerned about meeting students' needs than whether the schools are called district or charter schools. They view the central office's job as surveying and addressing the

2. See for example, National Assessment of Educational Progress, *Urban District Assessment*, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/dst2009/2010459.pdf>.

3. P. Hill et al., *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, October 2009), http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/download/csr_files/pub_psd_interim_oct09.pdf.

4. F. Hess, "Straight Up Conversation: Gates's Shalvey on District-Charter 'Compact' Initiative," *Education Next*, 12/8/2010, <http://educationnext.org/straight-up-conversation-gatess-shalvey-on-district-charter-compact-initiative/>.

city's educational needs, closing schools that are not working, opening new schools that will be effective, allocating resources equitably, and ensuring that special needs are met. Portfolio districts strive to change a public school system that, as Joel Klein put it, for too long has operated for the benefit of adults, not children.

Why Public Charter Schools as Part of a Portfolio?

The charter sector has matured and evolved since the first charter school opened in 1991. Along with a growing number of successful stand-alone charters, there are now a growing number of high-performing charter school networks with replicable academic models and consistent, compelling student performance. For example, Aspire Public Schools now serves over 10,000 students across 30 schools. Most of the strategies employed by high-performing charter schools are extremely difficult to implement at a school or district without the flexibility that a charter school law provides.

Many successful nonprofit charter networks focus on serving the most underserved students in the country. These charter networks are demonstrating impressive and consistent academic performance. For example, Rocketship Education in San Jose has proficiency rates at its first two schools of over 80 percent in English Language Arts and over 90 percent in Math, even though it serves low-income students (more than 75 percent of whom qualify for free/reduced-price meals). The academic performance of Rocketship's students is on par with the highest-performing school districts in California. In 2009-2010, Rocketship Mateo Sheedy scored 925 on California's Academic Performance Indicator (API), outperforming several elementary schools in Silicon Valley's Palo Alto Unified School District.

Rocketship schools use a unique combination of online learning labs, intensive tutoring, and deep investments in effective teachers and principals to meet the learning needs of students in poverty. Like other high-performing networks, its schools feature an intense focus on school culture and parent involvement, more classroom time for students, intensive use of assessment and diagnostics, and dedicated focus on staff development.⁵ Many traditional district schools, lacking the flexibility that charter status confers, struggle to offer these benefits in a coherent and effective fashion.

Focus on school culture and parent involvement: Teachers and staff at most top-performing charter schools spend considerable hours outside the “traditional” academic

5. See for example, D. Whitman, *Sweating the Small Stuff: Inner-City Schools and the New Paternalism* (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2008); J. Mathews, *Work Hard; Be Nice: How Two Inspired Teachers Created the Most Promising Schools in America* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2009).

school day (and school year) to build a culture of empowered and involved students and parents. At Success Charter Network, for example, families receive the cell phone number and email address of every adult in the building and can expect to receive a response to their questions and concerns in less than 24 hours. Instead of selling coupon books, families are asked to get involved by reading a book every night to their child—Success students have read over 1 million books. At YES Prep, students must be accepted into a four-year college in order to graduate and families receive intense education and support, including college tours, a senior summit, and college application and enrollment support. Nothing prevents traditional public schools from taking on similar community involvement efforts, but it is much more difficult if parents are assigned to a school and teachers and principals do not view deep parent engagement as an essential part of their job descriptions.

Extended day: At West Denver Prep, students and teachers are at school from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and have a longer school year, ensuring students receive 25 percent more instruction compared to neighboring schools. The longer school day and year affords many benefits for charter school students, including increased time for small-group instruction, remediation, and acceleration; however, a longer day would violate union work rules in a traditional district school. Some traditional district schools have tried to extend the school day under federal turnaround grants (School Improvement Grants), but such efforts don't pay off unless they are tied to a broader student intervention strategy. Longer school days, in themselves, will not help close the achievement gap. Extended time must be coupled, as it is in high-performing charter schools, with more effective teaching and urgency to address learning deficits.

Ongoing diagnostics and interventions: Targeted academic interventions allow charter networks to provide intensive tutoring and other supports for students falling behind. At Aspire, teachers use a sophisticated online assessment platform to access detailed student data, identify learning gaps, and diagnose root causes. Teachers use the data to offer individualized, targeted instruction during the school day and identify struggling students for additional interventions.

Intensive professional development: At Mastery Charter Schools, every school has a full-time Academic Dean and Teacher Coach who focus on coaching and mentoring teachers. New teachers receive three weeks of professional development plus a clearly defined set of Instructional Standards supported by guidebooks and video vignettes. Teachers receive at least seven formal and informal written observations each year in addition to frequent walkthroughs from expert instructors. Instructional leaders work with teachers by videotaping their classroom teaching, engaging in joint planning and joint teaching,

and even by using real-time coaching and feedback (via microphone and earbuds) to help teachers overcome entrenched habits. Teachers are promoted and compensated based on demonstrated mastery of effective instructional practices, student achievement growth, and adherence to the organization's values. In addition, staff members are eligible for performance bonuses based on school-wide success. Connecting teacher retention and compensation with performance is extremely rare in traditional district schools, in which pay is lockstep and less than 1 percent of all tenured teachers are terminated.

The kinds of commitments and flexibilities highlighted above are very difficult to negotiate within non-charter settings. Even in cases like Central Falls Senior High School, the lowest-performing school in Rhode Island, where teachers agreed to longer days and after-school tutoring for an additional stipend on top of their hourly pay,⁶ it remains to be seen whether district leaders will be able to get those teachers to create the kind of missionary focus, entrepreneurial spirit, and team orientation exhibited in high-performing charter schools.

Getting Started on Portfolio Management

In order to set the culture of a district for strategic portfolio management, several steps need to be taken:

1. Acknowledge the problem. Recognize that the district has a significant achievement gap between low- and upper-income students. Typically, neither school board members nor many other important community constituents have focused on the size and persistence of the gap. Presenting school test scores and using data to illustrate the problem is essential to create the political will and momentum necessary for a move to strategic portfolio management.
2. Agree that we have to try new things and that the same solution isn't always right for every school. Once the problem has been identified, typically a myriad of old solutions will be discussed and considered. It is important to take these one at a time and provide fact-based evidence on the success (or failure) of these methods nationally for the last thirty years. As support for old solutions falls, create a committee of community and educational leaders ready to champion the new solution: strategic portfolio management. This should be seen as a "campaign" to build community leader support. We would advise using high-caliber consultants to help with both campaign and communications work, because a successful campaign is critical for driving change.

6. K. Zezima, "Going Back to School: Fired Staff Is Rehired," *New York Times*, May 17, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/18/education/18school.html>.

3. Be transparent about the status of each school. Distinguish schools that must be redeveloped from those that will get some time to improve and those that should be left alone. Spend the time to make sure community members know that schools in the district actually have vastly different outcomes.
4. Set realistic, achievable goals for when the achievement gap should be eliminated, based on the magnitude of the problem. Typically, people are very impatient to solve the problem once it is well understood. This creates leverage for a much more rapid move to strategic portfolio management.
5. Use high-performing charter schools and charter networks as part of the overall turnaround solution. Create the political will for charter networks by engaging community leaders from within and outside the education system. Develop a plan for how and where charter schools will be deployed (especially to help serve students in the most troubled schools). Keep reminding constituents why and how this is the best approach (even at this point, people will go back to wanting to try the other turnaround strategies, such as replacing school staffs). Keep communicating with constituents how and why other strategies have failed. Take key community leaders to see high-performing schools in action.
6. Create a measurable framework for evaluating success. Your victory and victory for students will depend on how the transformation is perceived. Setting clear, quantifiable measurements for success are important. We recommend that a goal of 80 percent proficiency in both math and literacy is set for every school in the district. New schools that are able to achieve this goal within three years of starting should be considered a success.
7. Engage in discussions with external charter networks to bring them to town after a careful review of qualifications and capacity. For example, Rocketship's regional expansion model calls for the creation of eight schools serving 4,000 students. Districts can help reduce the political and economic risks for charter schools by offering multiple charters up front, access to district facilities, equitable funding, and clear and stable performance agreements.
8. In return for shared resources, require that charter schools also share responsibility by serving students with special needs, participating in fair admissions processes, and producing consistent results. Clear, up-front agreements and meaningful district oversight processes are essential.
9. Measure your portfolio results, celebrate victories, and own up to failures. Rigorously keep networks focused on your city by paying attention to the network's academic

results and maintaining ongoing dialogue with both regional directors and national management teams.

10. Once networks have been deployed to replace or turn around the most troubled schools, the superintendent can focus time on their middle- and upper-income schools while managing partnerships with external providers.

Conclusion

Arguably, the job of the urban superintendent has never been harder. There is unprecedented recognition that the achievement gap is unacceptable. At the same time, in most states, there is less money now than in past years. School board members and superintendents who are serious about addressing performance problems that have plagued districts for decades cannot afford to pass by proven solutions for students simply because they are called charter schools. As Yolie Flores, an LAUSD board member, said, her job is to protect students, not institutions.⁷

To be clear, we are not asserting here that charter schools are necessarily the whole answer. Not all charter school networks have proven they can scale consistently to other communities. It is also clear that some schools will respond well to district-run interventions, such as replacing a school principal, and may not be appropriate candidates for turning over to the charter sector. But district leaders should pay attention to what many urban districts are learning: that districts can partner with charters to create a powerful tool for closing the achievement gap.

7. Discussion with author.

About the Authors

Robin Lake is Associate Director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, where she specializes in charter school research and policy development that focuses on effective accountability policies, scale and supply, and school district use of chartering as a reform strategy. Ms. Lake is also Executive Director of the Center's National Charter School Research Project, which was established in 2004 by a consortium of funders in an effort to improve the balance, rigor, and application of charter school research. Lake has authored numerous studies and technical assistance reports on charter schools. She is co-author, with Paul Hill, of *Charter Schools and Accountability in Public Education* (Brookings Press) and editor of *Unique School Serving Unique Students: Charter Schools and Children with Special Needs* and the annual report, *Hopes, Fears, & Reality: A Balanced Look at American Charter Schools*.

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The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) was founded in 1993 at the University of Washington. CRPE engages in independent research and policy analysis on a range of K–12 public education reform issues, including finance & productivity, human resources, governance, regulation, leadership, school choice, equity, and effectiveness.

CRPE's work is based on two premises: that public schools should be measured against the goal of educating all children well, and that current institutions too often fail to achieve this goal. Our research uses evidence from the field and lessons learned from other sectors to understand complicated problems and to design innovative and practical solutions for policymakers, elected officials, parents, educators, and community leaders.