



Performance Management in Portfolio School Districts

a report from the
Doing School Choice Right Project
and the
National Charter School Research Project

Robin J. Lake and Paul T. Hill

August 2009

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WASHINGTON
BOTHELL

center on  public education

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About the Doing School Choice Right Project

The Doing School Choice Right project explores the practical challenges of implementing school choice programs and develops thoughtful designs to address key issues. The project's goal is to help state and local leaders handle issues whose resolution can determine whether school choice helps or harms children, especially low-income children in big cities.

This project grew from the key findings of the National Working Commission on Choice in K–12 Education. The Lynde and Harry Bradley, Annie E. Casey, and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundations have provided funding.

About the National Charter School Research Project

The National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) brings rigor, evidence, and balance to the national charter school debate. NCSRP seeks to facilitate the fair assessment of the value-added effects of U.S. charter schools and provide the charter school and broader public education communities with research and information for ongoing improvement. NCSRP was established at the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education in 2004, with support from a consortium of foundations.

About the Providing Public Oversight Initiative

Charter schools and other publicly funded schools of choice need just the right kind of public oversight: enough to ensure that they provide good instruction, but not so much as to quash innovation or discourage competent groups from offering to run schools.

What is required for performance-based oversight of publicly funded schools run under different auspices? How can school districts oversee public schools in multiple ways?

This initiative will identify practices that school districts can use to run some schools directly and to sponsor some schools of choice under charter school laws or performance contracts. Researchers will try to show districts how they can oversee schools in different ways—by running them directly, by chartering, by contracting or licensing—while insisting on the same performance standards for all.

The initiative is conducted jointly by the Doing School Choice Right Project and the National Charter School Research Project, in partnership with Public Impact, and with funding from the Lynde and Harry Bradley, Annie E. Casey, and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundations.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

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.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful for the contributions many people made to this report: Bryan Hassel, Julie Kowal, and Lucy Steiner of Public Impact; and Stephen Page, Kate Destler, Lydia Rainey, and Meaghan Squires of CRPE. We are indebted to Julie Angeley, Deb Britt, James Harvey, and Sam Sperry, who helped the authors wrestle this report into shape.

The Providing Public Oversight Initiative was funded by the Lynde and Harry Bradley, Annie E. Casey, and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundations, as part of the Doing School Choice Right Project and the National Charter School Research Project. Our thanks to these funders for their generous support of this work. The opinions expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the institutions with which they are affiliated. The authors bear all responsibility for any errors, omissions, or mistakes in facts or judgment.

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PREFACE

Many school districts are experiencing a fundamental change in their mission and status. Before the standards-based reform movement of the 1990s, a school district's job was to provide a school for every student. Schools had to be decently staffed and organized, but it was assumed that significant numbers of students would not do well, and that many would quit before earning a high school diploma.

Standards-based reform introduced a new idea: that a school district's job was to do whatever it took to prepare every child for successful entry into higher education and gainful employment. It was not enough for a district simply to provide a school in a decent building staffed by trained teachers and administrators. The district's job was to provide *effective* instruction. Schools and other instructional programs were to be judged on their results, not on their staffing or formal structure. Districts were to be judged on whether the schools, and other programs they provided, worked.

The importance of this change was not immediately apparent. States and school districts thought they could get the results needed out of existing schools and programs, if only incumbent teachers had access to well-organized instructional materials and were trained to use them. However, in the 1990s it became clear that materials and training, though valuable, were not enough to produce the desired student learning results, especially for poor and disadvantaged students. Despite some detectable increases in average student achievement, very large numbers of low-income and minority children—approaching 50 percent in some large urban districts—were not learning what they needed to complete high school, enter career-ladder jobs, or enter higher education without extensive remediation.

In other words, in this new context of effective instruction and delivering results, school districts were not doing their job, at least not very well.

School districts continued trying to raise student achievement, but most were limited by commitments to specific schools, personnel, and methods. Some districts (e.g., San Diego) made profound and partly effective changes in curriculum and methods, but they too were left with schools that did not improve and groups of children who still lagged far behind.

The federal *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) put districts under further pressure, as it threatened withholding of funds from districts that continued assigning students to low-performing schools. Though much about NCLB is controversial, there is widespread agreement that it has caused school districts to look much harder for new ways of raising student achievement for disadvantaged children.

Moreover, other entities have come forward to claim that they could do a better job than school districts of bringing all students up to high standards of learning. In metropolitan areas, school districts soon faced competition, from charter schools, online virtual schools, and private schools. Many districts experienced loss of enrollment and corresponding declines in funding.

In turn, this has led many districts to try new ways of providing instruction. Some are experimenting with creating new schools that use innovative instructional methods, including longer and more instructionally intense days, offering their own online virtual schools, and organizing tutoring and summer instruction. Districts like Chicago, New York, Hartford, Cincinnati, the Louisiana Recovery District, District of Columbia, and Denver also are fighting fire with fire, creating their own new charter and contract schools to maintain overall enrollment and provide options for families dissatisfied with existing district schools.

Despite their differences in approach, these districts are all working to adapt to the change in their mission. All understand that what was once fixed—commitment to a specific set of schools, programs, and job descriptions—is now contingent, and what was once left to chance—whether students learn—is now what they must accomplish one way or another. The heads of major districts are all in problem-solving mode, taking plausible first steps but expecting to be led by evidence.

This new mission requires that school districts do something they were not originally designed to do, i.e., manage for performance. How can district leaders know whether a given school or initiative is likely to succeed or fail? On what basis can they decide whether to shore up a struggling school or abandon it? What can they do to make sure students are not made worse off by changing or closing a school? How can they make sure they always have options other than simply keeping children in a school or program in which they are not learning to high standards?

This project set out to help district leaders and charter school authorizers understand the challenges of performance-based oversight in K–12 education, to identify key capacities that must be developed, and to take necessary first steps toward re-missioning

their organizations. This report is a product of three years' work, consisting of several small related projects. The report integrates the results to provide examples and ideas about how school districts can hold all publicly funded schools, no matter who staffs and operates them, accountable to the same standards of performance. We use the term *portfolio district* to refer to any district that is trying to match diverse provision of schools with common accountability.

INTRODUCTION

The search continues for effective ways to educate disadvantaged children in big cities. Different cities have tried varied approaches—intensive work on the professional skills of teachers and administrators in Boston, standardized approaches to instruction in San Diego, and extensive use of vouchers and chartering in Washington, D.C., and Milwaukee.

While each has made a slight difference, it is clear that no single approach is likely to work for all the students and schools in a large urban district. Districts need to provide different forms of instruction for some students than for others. In neighborhoods where few students make normal academic progress, districts need to provide more intensive instructional programs and experiment with new combinations of teaching and support services. Districts also need to improve the teaching force and make sure disadvantaged students get access to excellent teachers.

Though some school districts have shown flexibility, government and education sector leaders in some cities have become convinced that they must look outside the traditional boundaries of the district for new ideas, talent, and learning opportunities. While also trying to strengthen existing public schools, leaders in several cities, including New York, Chicago, New Orleans, and the District of Columbia, have adopted a *portfolio strategy*.

The essence of a portfolio strategy is the provision of public education by multiple means. Districts pursuing a portfolio strategy (portfolio districts) sponsor some schools operated by district employees in the traditional way, and others operated by independent organizations and run under new rules. Though portfolio strategies differ depending on local circumstances, most share several, if not all, of the following characteristics:¹

- Concentration of dollars and decisionmaking at the school level;
- Free movement of money, students, and educators from less to more productive schools and instructional programs;
- Strategic use of educationally relevant community resources;

1. See Paul T. Hill, *Put Learning First: A Portfolio Approach to Public Schools* (Washington, DC: Progressive Policy Institute, 2006).

- Rewards to educators for high performance;
- Openness to promising ideas, people, and organizations, whether they belong to the school district or exist in independent organizations; and
- An environment of support for both new and existing schools.

A school district following a portfolio strategy can continue operating some schools in the traditional way, but it can also gain the ability to offer students instructional and student service designs that district-run schools either cannot or will not. Leaders implementing a portfolio strategy are not simply letting a thousand flowers bloom. All ultimately hope to create a process of continuous improvement, by which the educational opportunities available to students and families are always adapting to emerging needs and evidence about what works.²

A portfolio strategy requires that school districts do two things they were not originally designed to do: first, judge the performance of individual schools and decide whether they are effective enough to warrant continuing to spend the public's money—and the time of the community's children—on them; and second, to assess the entire set of schools available locally to determine whether a different mix of schools might serve the community better.

District and community leaders in cities adopting a portfolio strategy (presently including New York, Chicago, New Orleans, Denver, Philadelphia, Hartford, and the District of Columbia, among others) must search for answers to questions that have seldom been asked in American public education:

- How do we know whether a given school or initiative is likely to succeed or fail?
- When do we shore up a struggling school or abandon it?
- How do we avoid being stuck with no option other than to continue supporting a school in which children are not learning?
- How do we make sure students are not hurt by closing a school or replacing one school provider with another?

This paper is the first to offer answers to these questions. The authors hoped to mine the experiences of other organizations that have developed the capacity to oversee diverse

2. For an explanation about links between portfolio strategies, accountability, new uses of funds, and continuous improvement, see Paul T. Hill, Marguerite Roza, and James Harvey, *Facing the Future: Financing Productive Schools* (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2008).

portfolios of service providers, and to apply lessons learned to the challenges districts face as they adopt portfolio-based strategies. While acknowledging that public education is unique in many ways, the project tried to use the practices evident in other organizations as sources of ideas, and it applies them to education cautiously.

Subsequent papers, based on a recently funded national study of districts pursuing portfolio strategies, will provide detailed examples of data systems, analytical methods, and decisionmaking processes. These papers will be available in late 2010.

OUR METHODS

This project set out to help district leaders and charter school authorizers understand the challenges of performance-based oversight in K–12 education, identify key capacities that must be developed, and take necessary first steps toward re-missioning their organizations.

We hoped to mine the experiences of other organizations that have developed the capacity for performance-oversight, to provide an advance look at the challenges school districts are likely to face. While acknowledging that public education is unique in many ways, our project tries to use the practices evident in other organizations as sources of ideas, but it applies them to education cautiously.

We started by examining the experience of businesses and government agencies that rely on independent providers to produce mission-critical goods and services. These organizations manage for performance, deciding whether to perform key tasks internally or via independent providers, and asking whether current arrangements are the most productive possible. They closely monitor performance of all providers, both internal and external. They intervene when any provider’s performance is lagging, and maintain the option of shifting business to another provider.³

Most of these organizations deliberately keep internal and external suppliers in competition with one another. Government organizations in transportation, health, environmental protection, and national security (and, in foreign countries, education ministries) obtain key services and products from contractors. Businesses like auto and aircraft manufacturers also contract out highly technical engineering and production tasks. Though none of these organizations is public education, they must all grapple with the challenges of performance-based oversight.

We also studied charter school authorizers, agencies (districts, state departments of education, universities, etc.) that sponsor, oversee, and either cancel or sustain schools based on their performance.

3. This report summarizes a set of papers produced by the **Providing Public Oversight Initiative** and past CRPE research on performance management. The papers are listed in the Appendix and are available at www.crpe.org.

In this paper we present findings of three kinds:

- First, how performance management changes the meaning of accountability in any setting, whether education, government, or business;
- Second, what performance management means in the context of K–12 education, and what functions school districts and charter authorizers must be prepared to perform; and
- Third, what performance management implies for the staffing and technical capacities of school districts and charter authorizers.

THE MEANING OF ACCOUNTABILITY

In many organizations, both public and private, accountability has traditionally been seen as a grab bag of techniques for praising, shaming, or threatening employees in order to motivate effort. If those techniques did not achieve the desired effect, managers were at a loss. Little could be done to change arrangements that were traditional, held in place by complicated due-process provisions spelled out in contracts, or built-in responses to government requirements. Employees were not guaranteed jobs, but it was easier to reassign them than to go through the complex procedures required for termination. Administrative and operating units were assumed to be permanent: they might get a new program or a few new staff members, but there was little thought of replacing them.

Changes in business competition in everything from automobiles to office equipment put new premiums on productivity, especially in the past two decades. At the same time, in Britain, voter dissatisfaction with government led Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair to emphasize responsiveness and cost-effectiveness in public services. New Zealand embarked on a similar effort to infuse a “new public management” throughout its government sector. Parts of the U.S. public sector followed suit under the broad label “reinventing government.” As Elaine Kamarck, policy director for former Vice President Al Gore, notes, government was being forced out of its routines and concern with procedure before results, and into becoming entrepreneurial.⁴

These trends have implications for accountability, both in business and government. Kamarck’s colleague Joseph Donahue draws the distinction between the new “intensive accountability,” which focuses on whether organizations and individuals produce specified results, and the more traditional “extensive accountability,” under which organizations and individuals were expected to serve so many masters and observe so many rules that they could not be rewarded or penalized on the basis of one result.⁵

4. Elaine Kamarck, “The End of Government as We Know It,” in *Market-Based Governance: Supply Side, Demand Side, Upside, and Downside*, ed. John D. Donahue and Joseph S. Nye (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press and Visions of Governance in the 21st Century, 2002), 227–63.

5. John D. Donahue, “Market-Based Governance and the Architecture of Accountability,” in *ibid.*, 3–7.

The new accountability described by Kamarck and Donahue represents a very different way of thinking about evidence, responsibility, and consequences for success and failure. Table 1 outlines the major features distinguishing the “old accountability” from the “new accountability” that is rapidly being put into place, in both the public and private sectors.

Table 1. Accountability: Old Versus New

	OLD	NEW
Goal of an accountability system	Express concern	Get higher performance
Place of the accountability function in an organization	Backwater	The primary leadership function performed by CEO and board
Role of measurement	Shine spotlight	Identify cases requiring closer examination
Type of measurement	Testing	Multiple measures, both leading and long-term, to measure performance
Active ingredient (assumptions about what will bring about change)	Exhortation, assistance	Intervention: assistance or new options
Forms of assistance available	Standard training and tools for all, centrally chosen and delivered	Tailored assistance, targeted to those with greatest needs and highest likelihood of improvement
Consequences for employees	None except injured pride	Chances to perform better; threats of being replaced
Options available to system leadership	Exhortation, assistance; repeat	Assist, switch providers, develop new providers
Conditions under which a unit (school) is closed or replaced	Financial problems and scandals	Low performance, failure to improve with help, existence of a better option
System leaders' ability to develop new human resources, school options	Very little	Significant, a core task
Who is ultimately responsible for results	Everyone = no one	CEO

Under the old accountability, measurement and reporting were ends in themselves. It was hoped that testing and publication of the results might energize workers or excite customers (in education: parents) enough to express their desires sharply. Under the new accountability, performance data links to action: providing help to a struggling person or organization, but conditionally, with the expectation that it will lead to higher performance.

Under the old accountability, specialized offices with few links to top management accumulated and analyzed data and made reports. Accountability was a technical function best left to statisticians and other analysts. Top management was informed about good news so it could take credit for promising developments. Under the new approach, accountability is the function of top managers who are responsible for the performance of the whole organization and all its units. Data and analysis are kept in plain view—and used whether or not they provide good news.

Under the old accountability, performance measurements were not of great consequence, so rough approximations—numbers of services delivered, customer satisfaction, and test scores (in the case of education)—were good enough. Under the new accountability, such rough measures remain important, but they are viewed only as a starting point in understanding how an organization (for example, an automobile manufacturer, a state agency, a bank, a social service organization, or a school) is performing. Measures of short- and long-term consequences for customers and beneficiaries are also considered, as are measures of organizational health (staff stability, complaint rates, balanced scorecards). Such measures help to quickly identify businesses, government agencies, and schools that are in trouble, before the clients and beneficiaries of these entities suffer serious harm. Persistently low performance measures (for example, rejected parts from a supplier, failures in child welfare, or student test scores) trigger more complex assessments, including visits by professional diagnostic teams to develop plans of action.

Under the old accountability, struggling units could expect top management to pour in assistance resources indefinitely. In organizations practicing the new accountability, assistance is limited in both scope and duration. Practices common under the old accountability, of distributing resources for assistance equally across all units and providing the same thing to every unit, make no sense under the new accountability. Assistance is a special resource, not a right. Units that receive help also understand that it can be a bit of a two-edged sword and will not go on forever—if the unit does not improve after assistance is provided, it might be eliminated.

Under the new accountability, district leaders don't say, "We have tried and tried but the people to whom we assigned the task just can't do it, so we can do no more." That would amount to abdicating responsibility. Leaders are not doing their jobs if they deprive their organization of options by protecting programs, employees, or units whether they produce or not.

Under the old accountability, leaders did the best they could within the boundaries of their organizations. The new accountability ultimately depends on developing options for improving or replacing units whose product is important to the success of the whole organization. Responsible officials need not only measure performance, but also must look for better ways of doing things. Are competitors doing better than we are in a particular situation? Are there people and units internal to the organization or elsewhere that could produce better outcomes or the same outcomes more efficiently? Under the old accountability, no unit was closed or abandoned unless it grossly mismanaged money or operated in a way that caused outrage and embarrassment.

Under the new accountability, leaders develop options, including human resources as well as new methods, technologies, and product lines. They must always ask whether new training or incentives would raise performance, and whether better people are available from other sources. Top leaders can decide to go after a new labor supply to lower costs or pursue people with different skill sets. Top officials also need to be willing to reassign tasks, cancel and replace programs, bring in alternative providers (even by buying competitors), replace staff, and make tradeoffs between employees and technology. They cannot give those options away.

A saying often heard in organizations practicing the old accountability was, “Everyone must do better; we are all accountable.” This is a hortatory statement, creating diffuse and abstract responsibilities, without any meaningful consequences, and is therefore hard to distinguish from its contrary, “No one is accountable.”

The new accountability requires that someone remain responsible to improve performance in any way possible, and that subordinate units experience consequences appropriate to their performance, both positive and negative. The new accountability requires that someone remain in charge, not of dictating what every unit will do, but of constantly assessing performance and looking for better alternatives.

The sort of accountability described as the new model above is a late arrival in public education, but it is here. Under the new accountability, individuals and organizations legally responsible to ensure every child gets an effective education—governors, local school board members, and superintendents—must search for options until they find what works. In localities that are moving toward portfolio-based strategies in education (for example, New York, New Orleans, Chicago), this role is played by the superintendent and supported by a central office with a new mission to track performance and constantly work to develop options. Other public sector organizations committed to doing whatever

it takes to get high performance (for example, Britain's community clinics and hospital emergency rooms,⁶ or Armed Services units that find contractors to produce high-tech defense systems) create similar arrangements.

6. Michael Barber, *Instruction to Deliver: Tony Blair, the Public Services and the Challenge of Achieving Targets* (London: Methuen Publishing Ltd, 2007).

THE NEW ACCOUNTABILITY IN K–12 EDUCATION

What does this mean for education? As the new accountability emerges in public education, we believe that school districts must be rebuilt on new premises:

- Concern for performance above all else;
- Expectation that some school closings are necessary and desirable;
- Neutrality about who runs a school;
- Determination never to be left without an option;
- Constant search for—and investment in—new school providers and better ways to use time and money;
- Assistance via networking and partnerships; and
- Monitoring that is transparent and predictable but not mechanical.

This section explains these premises and shows what new functions they imply for school districts committed to portfolio-based strategies.

Preoccupation with Performance

Relentless focus on performance is hard to sustain in any organization and very rare in public education. It is probably not for lack of good intentions. School districts and schools have broad missions, including managing budgets and facilities, following state and federal regulations, and solving the daily crises involved in caring for students, all of which make it hard to maintain focus on academic performance. On top of that, group pressures often cause districts to water down performance expectations and consequences. School districts that hope to overcome these pressures can do several things to stay focused on results:

- *Organize around new core competencies.* These are: first, making sure that there is an appropriate mix of learning opportunities for children with diverse needs; second, assuring that all schools have the capacity to improve and sustain performance; third, appropriately measuring whether or not each school is performing to its full capacity; and fourth, making sure that

low performance is not tolerated and high performance is prioritized. While districts still need to fulfill other functions besides those listed above, central office middle managers need to know how to prioritize their work and what kinds of issues should be fast-tracked through bureaucratic processes.

- ***Outsource support functions.*** Partnerships with local technical assistance providers, facilities maintenance organizations, principal and teacher training programs, university researchers, and others can greatly help by allowing districts to offload non-core school support functions and remain focused on the agency's core mission: monitoring school academic progress and enforcing consequences for schools that fail to meet standards.
- ***Set achievable but ambitious performance expectations based on student academic achievement.*** There is a lesson here for districts from charter authorizers. They have learned that all elements of their contractual relationship with schools must be imbued with a message that there is a very high performance bar and not every school will be able to get over that bar. That message comes through in the beginning, when district leaders are screening proposals from new schools; during ongoing monitoring and reporting; and again during high-stakes assessments that can lead to school continuation or closure. Clarity and consistency are the keys for reinforcing a message of rigor and high expectations during these stages. A portfolio district must send the message that it will not excuse low performance, even if educators work hard and parents are satisfied.
- ***Send a clear message to current and prospective schools that performance will drive every high-stakes decision.*** Districts are not focused on performance if they keep schools open that fail to perform, or allow new schools to open that do not have a solid plan and proven capacity to educate students effectively. Difficult decisions such as whether to close a mediocre school that has strong local community backing are where districts prove whether they are serious about a portfolio strategy.

Compared to other organizations that work through third-party providers, charter school authorizers are much more likely to report anguish in abandoning a provider (canceling a charter) whose leaders had taken advice but failed to improve. Some charter authorizers treated fairness to providers as an end in itself, unlike leaders in other public and private organizations who consider fairness to providers as one consideration among many, while performance is the binding constraint.

The initial process of contracting with a school (i.e., selecting providers and writing accountability agreements) offers the most leverage for establishing a culture of continuous improvement at the school level. Papers in our series address the technical aspects of effective screening and oversight practices, but a few principles stand out.

First, portfolio districts must not let political pressures or other factors compromise high standards for approving new schools. Many districts (for example, the former D.C. district board) have allowed weak groups to open schools simply because it was politically difficult to turn them down.

Second, districts should approve proposals only from those schools that have clear internal governance arrangements—including school heads whose powers are clear and strong governing boards, in the case of charter schools. A good instructional plan is not enough; someone must be sufficiently in charge of delivering on promises made in the school's proposal.

School Closings as a Necessary Evil

Portfolio districts must weigh the costs and likely results of trying to improve existing schools versus assigning schools to highly qualified new providers. Inevitably, districts find themselves forced to close at least some of their schools, or at least to transfer responsibility for running some schools from one group of adults to another.

Closure decisions are often highly contentious, with community protests and lobbying to keep even highly dysfunctional schools open. The process goes considerably more smoothly when it is driven by clear criteria and when it is shown that children will get new and better learning opportunities. Low performance, demographic changes, and financial difficulties in a district can all be grounds for school closures. Despite the pain, school closure is often both necessary and beneficial, and it should not be avoided.

There are as many negative as positive examples of school closures. A recent round of school closures in Seattle, Washington, for example, was long overdue. The district had been losing enrollment and avoiding school closures for a number of years. When financial pressures forced district leaders to consolidate enrollment, community members at the affected schools came out in force to derail the process. A subsequent effort went more smoothly when the district more clearly outlined closure criteria and involved community leaders in the process. But overall, the process was cause for great resentment throughout the community. The resentment had many sources: anger over the initial

top-down plan; community activism resisting the closure of weak schools, even though several were running at 50 percent of capacity; a hopelessly divided and dysfunctional school board; performance taking a back seat to financial considerations; and the lack of an overall improvement strategy for schools that remained open but still struggled. Practically every board member up for re-election was driven from office.

Because conflict is all but certain, traditional school boards close schools as rarely as possible. On the other hand, districts that consider school closing a normal part of the search for higher performance can gain control over the political process, by defining performance expectations, making consequences of failure clear in advance, and making sure they have attractive new options to offer families and neighborhoods whose schools are closed.

Most charter authorizers we interviewed indicated that they have experienced protest from school personnel and families attending schools being considered for closure, but that the broader community did not get involved. This may be because charter schools have typically not been around long enough to be considered traditional community assets, but charter authorizers generally believe that clarity in expectation and consequence—plus reliable and consistent follow-through on those expectations—go a long way toward inoculating oversight agencies from lethal community relations.

School districts, too, have learned valuable lessons about shuttering schools. In Pittsburgh, school district leaders closed a large number of schools, even more than financially necessary, as a way to stimulate new approaches and fresh ideas. Oakland school officials now view school closure as a normal continuous improvement process that should occur every year.

Neutrality about Who Runs a School

Remaining neutral about who runs a school (district employees, nonprofits, for-profits) opens possibilities for innovation and sends a message that student performance matters. Districts that are serious about portfolio-based strategies cannot say, “We value student achievement over everything else” without also making it clear that all plausible options for who manages schools will be considered. A fundamental premise in public and private portfolio management is that optimal performance is unlikely to come from the same service providers that have been producing inadequate results.

Seeking new providers does not always lead to better results, but it makes better results possible. It creates possibilities for competition and innovation, more aggressive improvement efforts in existing schools, and recruitment of employees (for example, teachers) from new sources. New providers may bring different attitudes and beliefs about what kinds of student achievement are possible. When districts announce a willingness to consider outside providers they also send a strong message to district employees that schools are not guaranteed a right to exist if they are not performing.

When choosing a provider (including deciding whether to rely on internal employees or contract out), portfolio managers in business and government are always under pressure to favor internal groups, fudge a little to compensate losers in past decisions with a win today, and protect jobs. (That these pressures are strong even in areas where use of multiple providers is well established is evident from the recent argument over whether the Air Force should hire Boeing or the European firm Airbus to manufacture tanker aircraft.) Leaders must deal with these pressures realistically: their only defense against political pressure is to base decisions on clear criteria and data.

Smart portfolio managers in both the public and private sectors maintain a neutral attitude about providers well after they outsource work. Private providers working on contract should understand that if they fail to deliver promised results, the work can be taken in-house again or contracted to another organization. The important message is that results will trump any particular organizational arrangement as the criterion for contracts and renewals. This is obviously not an easy message for school districts to deliver. There are significant political ramifications to using potentially non-unionized outside providers and skepticism from the general public about the motives of for-profit providers. Leaders pursuing portfolio strategies must navigate those political minefields.

Chicago's Renaissance 2010 initiative openly solicited nonprofit and for-profit charter school and contract providers to replace failing schools. Highly controversial at its inception, Renaissance 2010 was strongly opposed by many Chicago community groups and the teachers union. These groups argued that private providers would "displace thousands of union workers" and replace district schools with "unproven" charter schools. Civic and district leaders, however, made a strong case for expanding the supply of new school providers. Advocates for Renaissance 2010 invested months of work with communities to allay fears and make their case. Ultimately, the district moved forward despite some remaining community opposition and assumed that the success or failure of the initiative would prove its worth. Renaissance 2010 was designed to start 100 new schools, some run as charter schools, some as contract schools, and some as district schools with enhanced autonomies.*

* AFT, "Chicagoans mobilize against Renaissance 2010," *American Teacher*, March 2005; http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_teacher/mar05/news_trends.htm

Preservation of Options

All choices are relative: it is easier to close a weak school if the alternative is known. Despite the advantages of making school closures a normal element of school oversight, closures are sometimes an extremely painful process for the families and staff members in the school. For that reason alone, the decision to shutter a school should never be made lightly.

Some charter school authorizers who oversee schools across many districts have an added concern when considering whether or not to close a school: in many cases, the school is a higher performing or safer school than the other public schools in the neighborhood. Knowing that a closure decision is likely to make many students worse off is one of the most painful choices for oversight agencies. Charter authorizers have dealt with this problem in different ways, but most feel that it is not appropriate to keep a school open that is not living up to high expectations just because other schools have gotten a free pass by another oversight entity. The State University of New York (SUNY), for example, faced such a situation with the Reisenbach School in New York City. When families at the school protested the closure for lack of a good alternative, SUNY held to its standards but worked with New York City school officials to ensure that the students were placed in the best schools possible.

Recent business news illustrates the different approaches a practitioner of the new accountability can take. Boeing intervened massively in the work of one subcontractor that was behind in making key components for the new 787 jetliner, transferring technology and stationing Boeing engineers in the contractor's facility. It also purchased another struggling subcontractor to bring its equipment and workforce in-house so internal experts could direct their work. Additionally, it decided to leave one lagging contractor alone, concluding that its work had been slowed by technical factors that neither the contractor nor Boeing could control.

School districts with responsibility for all or the majority of public schools within a geographic region have an advantage in this situation. They can ensure that all schools are held firmly to similarly high standards and they can actively recruit a cadre of new schools to replace failing ones. For example, Chicago under the Renaissance 2010 initiative has formed partnerships with private funders, incubating a number of new school providers and recruiting national providers to replace failing public schools. New York is looking to create choice zones, where students in a given neighborhood will have access to a number of high-quality public school options. Having alternatives at the ready makes the ethical choices surrounding closure easier for oversight agencies and may eventually reduce political opposition when communities understand that the demise of a given school is not going to force families into unsafe or dysfunctional alternatives.

Investment in and Search for New Options

Oversight agencies need to be determined to increase their own options by investing in people who can start and run effective schools. Besides easing the pain of school closings, investing in creating or finding new school providers (including local sources like teacher groups, colleges, and youth-oriented nonprofits, as well as national school providers) is smart for a number of other reasons. It puts all existing schools on notice that they are replaceable and so should always work to perform up to their highest capacities. It also allows district leaders to match community needs to provider strengths. For example, if a district knows there is demand and need for a school that is effective with English Language Learners, Special Education inclusion, or African American boys, it can actively recruit educators, including current district employees who have track records of effectively serving those student populations, to start new schools.

A search for new options is essential if the district is committed to continuous improvement.⁷ Unless it is willing to lower its sights by accepting the best that current schools and programs can deliver, a district must be prepared to look for new school providers and for resources that can upgrade many existing schools. For some districts this can mean looking for new course materials, technology-based instruction to compensate for teaching force weaknesses, online schools or other alternative delivery methods for students who might otherwise drop out, ways of purchasing services from teaching professionals who do not have conventional certificates (for example, music teachers), and contracts with colleges and universities to provide advanced courses. It can also mean experimenting with new ways of employing teachers, for example, as employees of professional services contractors.

Districts should know that the free market will not always create the range of local providers that is needed. A number of tactics have been used by charter authorizers, and private firms have encouraged a ready supply of providers by reducing risks, uncertainty, and barriers to entry. Examples in education include increases in funding, access to facilities, free technical assistance, human resource training, and other resources to facilitate new school development. Less obvious approaches require some creative thinking from school or city leaders, such as clarifying and reducing regulatory requirements, actively soliciting and supporting especially promising potential providers, and risk sharing with providers, for example in special education.

Emphasis on Partnerships and Networking over Direct Assistance

All schools need some external assistance, but traditional district central offices are not always the best source of technical assistance. Districts following a portfolio approach cannot expect schools to be entirely self-sufficient, but they often find that external partners and assistance providers are more flexible and adaptive sources of help than central bureaucracies.

In a portfolio district, schools need assistance with a range of issues, including finding facilities, recruiting a strong labor pool, training teachers in new skills, overhauling weak courses, serving special-needs students, developing high-functioning governing boards, and many other issues. Ignoring support needs and assuming that it is the school's job to find any help it might need is unrealistic.

7. On continuous improvement and how districts can seek it, see Hill, Roza, and Harvey, *Facing the Future*.

That said, portfolio districts do not try to provide all forms of assistance themselves, for two reasons: First, there is the practical consideration. Many school districts simply lack the necessary expertise and personnel. New schools need support from people who understand the challenges of starting a new organization and who have real expertise in dealing with the complexities of school-based budgeting and nonprofit governance. Traditional central offices rarely include people with these skills.

Second, there is a real danger that by providing a lot of direct support to schools, districts risk blurring the lines of responsibility and accountability. If a failing school has been given a lot of support from the district, it is difficult for district personnel to remain objective about the school's performance. A high stakes decision about potential closure or restructuring could be clouded by personal sympathies or the sunk costs of prior technical support efforts. On the other hand, schools may come to view district help as a series of veiled directives and come to resent district personnel or blame school problems on the oversight agency.

Districts following portfolio strategies can avoid these problems in large part by doing what many charter authorizers have done: leveraging help from third party organizations. Such public-private partnerships take many forms. Some oversight bodies (for example, the D.C. Public Charter School Board) offer a great deal of support themselves but rely on private organizations to provide services for which the agency lacks expertise or which it worries could compromise its objectivity. Others (for example, Chicago Public Schools) rely primarily on third parties to provide school support; the oversight body only provides help related to core oversight functions, such accountability and compliance.

There are clear advantages to using third parties, but there are also problems: outsourcing requires monitoring and quality control. For example, there is a risk that schools will get uneven support or mixed messages when several parties are involved in support. This may be particularly true if one of the provider organizations lacks the capacity to fully do its job.

Good coordination and relationships between support providers and oversight agencies can minimize such problems. District leaders can ask for representation on an assistance provider's board, as is the case with New York City's Center for Charter School Excellence. Districts can also avoid relying too heavily on any one group by entering into relationships with more than one assistance provider. Whatever arrangements are made, it is safe to assume that some investment will be needed to help local partners build their capacities to take on school support roles.

Predictable but Not Mechanical Monitoring

The real power of district oversight of a portfolio of schools comes from transparency. Schools have to know specifically what results are expected of them, how these will be measured, and what can happen if results fall short. “What can happen” can include grants of more time, offers of help, or more drastic actions like re-staffing, consolidation, and closure. But all possibilities, and criteria for how they will be reached, must be explicit.

Transparent contracts and risk-sharing agreements can go a long way toward sustaining a healthy partnership. Districts that rely on their states’ charter laws to start new schools have a ready-made opportunity to create contracts that specify not only the grounds on which schools will be assessed, but also schools’ obligations to provide information to and cooperate with monitoring. Though it is possible to commission new schools via general administrative procedures or handshake agreements, lack of explicitness can create ambiguity and hamper oversight. Literature on private firms’ management of external providers emphasizes the importance of deeply thought-through contracts, which not only establish both parties’ rights and duties but also anticipate contingencies, like changes in neighborhood population or the need for expensive building repairs. Finally, contracts should say how the two parties will work out unanticipated problems. Such “relational contracts” work well when districts view agreements with schools as two-way partnerships in which each party depends on the success of the other.⁸ It also is helpful for leaders of portfolio districts to create plenty of informal opportunities to get to know applicants and understand their capacities, goals, and strategies before entering into partnerships.

Without clarity about what will be measured and what results matter most, schools can always argue that they are doing well in other ways; that they need more time to meet performance expectations; or that the oversight agency should provide help to improve. Opportunities to make such arguments are limited, however, if the district has a clear record of acting in specific ways in particular situations.

Charter authorizers have learned the importance of setting clear expectations. Most of the authorizers we studied stress the importance of making sure there are as few surprises as possible in the monitoring and oversight process. They generally advocate that regulatory violations or performance struggles should be subject to predictable consequences. For example, SUNY’s intervention process is fairly automatic and tailored to different types

8. See K. Lambright, A. Amorkhayan, and J. Kim, *Do Relationships Matter? Comparing the Performance of Relational and Classic Contracts*, Appam 2008, <https://www.appam.org/conferences/fall/dc2009/papers-submitted.asp>.

of problems. Building code violations, for instance, trigger a letter from SUNY officials followed by increasing sanctions until the problem is corrected. Performance problems are handled more personally, but still on a distinct timeline.

That is not to say that portfolio management can be a completely objective or impersonal endeavor. In fact, managing public school performance may require much more involvement, flexibility, and judgment than traditional school oversight. At every stage of the process, from selecting schools to closing low performers, relationships and judgment matter. Professional judgment must go into the screening and selection process to ensure that providers are likely to be successful. Some flexibility and risk-taking is required if a district expects to see some level of experimentation and innovation in its school portfolio.

In sectors other than public education, portfolio managers differ on how closely they monitor providers. Some watch closely and express strong preferences about how providers do their jobs. Others prefer to encourage providers to follow their own methods and innovate when possible. Leaders in different organizations also differ on how quick they are to “pull the plug” on a struggling provider. Some fire and replace independent providers quickly; others are slow to abandon a contractor or internal unit. These differences reflect organizations’ preferred strategies, but they are also driven by practicalities: leaders are quicker to intervene when there are known technical solutions to a problem but providers are not using them. Leaders are much quicker to fire and replace providers when good alternatives are readily available, than when providers have hard-to-find capacities.

As new schools mature, it is important for district leaders to learn about major problems with a school’s performance or organizational viability before these affect student welfare, but schools will likely try to conceal problems from authorizers. Experienced charter authorizers consequently try to develop trusting relationships with school leaders so that leaders will be upfront about problems and seek advice about their resolution.

When district leaders do learn about problems at a school, obvious solutions are seldom at hand. Leaders may learn from parent and teacher reports that a school has become chaotic and suspect that weak leadership is at fault. If the school’s managers are in denial that there is a problem, then district leaders must decide if and how to intervene. Many charter authorizers treat this kind of situation lightly, believing that they should only respond if the weak leadership begins to affect academic performance. Even those who are quicker to intercede acknowledge that the situation needs to be handled with care

so as not to undermine the authority of school management and its internal problem-solving capacity.

School closure or reconstitution requires managing other risks and negotiating challenging personnel issues. Carrying out a closure decision means working with the broader community to minimize opposition. District leaders who conclude they must close a school may wish to salvage potential school assets, such as key personnel, facilities, or educational programs that can serve students well when the school is restructured or put under new management.

PUTTING THE PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE

Even if school district leaders accept management of a portfolio of schools as their central mission, they will find it challenging. School districts now have very different jobs, including allocating staff and resources and running centralized programs in ways that crowd out school-level decisionmaking and accountability. District leaders must both develop the capacity for portfolio management and divest themselves of functions that may distract from the core oversight mission.

The good news for school districts is that they control a great deal of money that can be reallocated to build new capacities. In larger districts, central office services consume as much as 40 percent of all expenditures. Though diligent portfolio oversight is not cheap, it is unlikely to cost as much as current central office operations.⁹

This section describes the capacities that school districts must build (or develop in partnership with community organizations), and then estimates what they cost.

Based on the experiences of the organizations we have studied, school districts need to develop five sets of resources:

- Specialized offices dedicated to portfolio oversight;
- Data, analytical, and other technical support for assessing individual school performance;
- Procedures and criteria for deciding whether to sustain, assist, or close schools;
- Funds and criteria for investment in screening and development of new school options; and
- Public engagement strategies to ensure that parents and taxpayers know how results will be assessed in schools, what the consequences of poor performance will be, and why the “new accountability” is required.

9. Charter authorizers have a different problem. They don't need to divest other functions and dispose of administrative units whose work undermines school-level accountability. But they do need to create capacity for a demanding set of oversight tasks, without assured access to the funds needed. Charter authorizers have small budgets which, depending on state law, are either allocated to them directly or assembled by taxing the schools they oversee. Thus, charter schools face the same needs to build capacity as school districts, but often without the funds to do the job.

Specialized Offices

Management of a diverse portfolio of schools does not mix well with the traditional functions of school districts. Traditional central office units devoted to curriculum, instruction, and professional development are built on the premise that the district mandates and provides everything, and that the job of school leaders is to execute decisions made at a higher level. Even human resource offices are built to allocate teachers to schools according to rules set by collective bargaining agreements, not to create the best possible pool of teachers from which schools can choose. If one of these traditional units is made responsible for portfolio management, it is unlikely to have the singleness of purpose required or the necessary freedom of action.

Corporate leaders recognize that portfolio management is a totally new way of doing business. They house the function close to themselves, and normally cut back or eliminate offices that were built on the old model of centralized control. In business, portfolio management is understood as a mixture of devolution and centralization. Operating units like factories and distribution centers get more freedom of action but corporate leadership closely monitors their performance. The firm's CEO and COO want to make key judgments about performance and remedial action, so they build dedicated staff units to keep them personally informed. Central office units that once exercised controlling functions are seen as sources of confusion about what is expected of operating units and who will judge their results. So corporate leaders either disband or take line authority away from central office units that were built for compliance.

Chicago's charter school office illustrates similar principles. Though it was once housed in a central office bureau that had many incompatible functions, then-superintendent Paul Vallas and Mayor Richard Daley quickly elevated it to independent status. This clarified the duties of office founder Greg Richmond and eliminated friction with control-oriented administrators and competing demands on Richmond's time. It also ensured that top city and district leaders got unfiltered information and advice about school authorizations and closings.

Other districts have buried their charter oversight offices in bureaus with competing responsibilities. Despite Oakland's commitment to a portfolio strategy, for example, its charter school office started out as a poorly staffed backwater. State administrators, recognizing that charters were marginalized and that many central office units were

reasserting bureaucratic control of schools, made the office independent, raised its status, and greatly upgraded its staff and other resources.

A district portfolio management office needs to have just one mission—control of its own staff and money so that they can't be reassigned elsewhere—and direct access to the school superintendent or the CEO.¹⁰ Its recommendations about school openings and closings can't be filtered through people concerned about other issues. Such an office needs a leader who understands the broad educational, financial, legal, and political contexts in which schools operate, and who has the ability to buffer schools from bureaucratic district or state officials who may try to over-regulate them. It follows that staffing such an office presents a new career in public education. It is not a good line of work for recycled central office staff members. Experienced principals (from regular, charter, or private schools) might be good candidates, and so too might staff members from charter management organizations (CMOs).

Technical Supports

A district portfolio management office needs guaranteed access to data about schools' financial health and performance. That means oversight offices must be able to track how money is allocated among schools and programs, what courses and other instructional experiences students receive, and what students learn. These data must be real, not (as is too often the case with costs) imputed to schools and programs based on average cost accounting, which can mask real teacher salary expenditures at the school level. Performance data must also be kept in a way that allows the oversight office to link individual students to classrooms and schools, and track individual student growth over time. Suitable databases can be used to identify schools (and even teachers) that are highly productive or unproductive, and can help officials responsible for portfolio-based oversight focus their attention on schools that need help or replacement.

Performance data might include student course passing rates, student persistence, credit accumulation, and students' ability to pass courses at the next higher level of education. Such multiple performance measures can enrich portfolio management. Because they cannot all be assembled into one scale or cut-score, district leaders will clearly need to use judgment on how to combine measures and on which indicators merit the greatest attention.

10. Both the New York City and D.C. public school systems have created portfolio management units with the attributes described here.

But raw performance information is not everything. Advances in performance measurement theory point toward the need to take account of factors outside an organization's control in creating fair and achievable performance goals.¹¹ District leaders should be able to identify special challenges (for example, loss of a neighborhood's employment base, or influx of a new group of highly challenging students) and take them into account in judging school performance.

District leaders also need leading indicators that might identify a school that is about to run into trouble, before achievement declines precipitously. Such indicators represent opportunities to press for improvement before students are hurt. Some charter authorizers have become very adept at identifying warning signs of a school headed for trouble.¹² James Guenner at Central Michigan University's Charter Schools Office believes that the best oversight systems are those that combine multiple sources of data (performance, fiscal, and organizational). He argues that one source of data alone rarely reveals a problem in time for it to be fixed, but often several sources together tell a story of a school on the decline. Charter authorizers also rely heavily on trust and open relationships between school leaders and oversight staff so that schools are encouraged to reveal problems and seek help before they become insurmountable.

Portfolio districts must have the same data for all students and all schools that they oversee, whether they are run by the district itself, or by independent organizations under charter, contract, magnet, pilot, or licensing agreements. Inconsistent data prevents portfolio managers from fully understanding which schools perform better than others and which are headed for, or are in, trouble. The current practice of school districts' excluding charters and other quasi-independent schools from their databases and testing programs is inconsistent with a portfolio strategy.

Beyond data, districts pursuing portfolio strategies need analytical routines to compare schools with one another over a period of two or more years. Denver Public Schools, for example, is developing a dashboard that will allow district officials to quickly identify how schools compare to each other on multiple measures. Denver arrays all its schools, including charters, on a number of two-dimensional graphics. On each graphic, the vertical dimension is absolute performance level (for example, school-wide average test

11. See Burt S. Barnow and Carolyn J. Heinrich, *One Standard Fits All? The Pros and Cons of Performance Standard Adjustments*, La Follette School Working Paper # 2008-023 (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 2008).

12. See Robin Lake and Meghan Squires, *Tough Calls: Identifying and Addressing School-Level Problems*, NCSRP Working Paper #2008-7 (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2008) for discussion of which leading indicators charter authorizers have found to be most useful.

scores in math) while the horizontal dimension is schools' rate of performance gain on the same measure. The superintendent and top district leaders can look at graphics on several tested subjects, course completion, dropouts, student and teacher absenteeism, teacher turnover, and several other metrics, all providing both absolute levels and rates of gain. This way, it is not hard to identify schools that are improving on key measures, and others that are consistently in the lower left-hand corner (low absolute performance, low gain) on all measures.¹³ Central Michigan University uses a similar system to analyze which schools are most at risk of failure by triangulating several data points.

Such systems must be sophisticated enough to factor in student and neighborhood characteristics, so a school's gain scores and other outcomes can be compared with those of schools in similar situations. Analysis can also identify schools whose absolute performance is falling if not yet unacceptable.

Few districts (or states) have the capacity to do such analysis. Independent analytical organizations, based at universities or nonprofit think tanks, can often perform the needed analysis more efficiently and reliably than in-house district staff. Independent organizations are also less subject to political interference from board members or district officials who want to block the use of troubling results. Such analytic partnerships (like the long-standing partnership between the Consortium for Chicago School Research and the Chicago Public Schools) have real advantages but must be pursued thoughtfully and with close collaboration between the partners to ensure that oversight agencies have real time access to data and relevant analysis. Larger districts have a greater capacity to develop or contract for services needed to support a portfolio strategy. Smaller districts might need to turn to the state for such analyses or they might contract with think tanks or universities to provide them.

Finally, district officials responsible for portfolio management need the capacity to investigate particular schools, to understand sudden drops in performance or assess the likelihood that current leadership and staff can create the changes needed to improve school performance. The skills needed for these tasks are different from those needed for data analysis. A portfolio district needs to employ people with both sets of skills or contract with organizations (such as SchoolWorks) that can provide that expertise. Most charter authorizers view regular school site visits as a critical tool, not only for identifying problems that rise to the level of requiring some intervention on their part, but also as a healthy way for schools to get critical feedback about how to improve.

13. See DPS website, <http://www.dpsk12.org/>.

Though sophisticated portfolio managers must study complex data matrixes, they do not always act on hard data alone. They need to consider the direction of change in a school, and give new leaders sufficient time to prove themselves. Most charter school authorizers, for instance, have multi-year accountability plans with schools that outline the academic goals, and a three- to five-year schedule for assessing whether schools are meeting those goals. This plan allows them to give a school time to improve before deciding whether or not to renew the school's charter. The same principles, timelines, and accountability agreements could be applied to traditionally run schools in portfolio districts.

Portfolio Management Procedures and Criteria

District portfolio management organizations need procedures of several kinds. They need disciplined mechanisms for eliciting and evaluating proposals for new schools, deciding how to allocate scarce resources for school improvement, and “pulling the plug” on a school that consistently fails to educate its students. All these activities should be carried on continuously, so that the district never finds itself with a backlog of bad schools that must all be fixed or closed at once, or without options for children in troubled schools.

Chicago and New Orleans have created disciplined processes for seeking proposals to run new schools and for evaluating the quality of those proposals. These involve a standard request for proposals (RFP) that states the district's interest in new schools, priorities for groups of students and neighborhoods to be served, preferences (if any) for instructional methods, and clear criteria that will be used to judge proposals. The RFP also makes clear the financial arrangements offered—on what basis a new school will be paid, how much money is provided for each student enrolled, how much money is kept back for district administration, what charges will be imposed for special education and other services, and whether facilities will be provided.

Chicago's charter school office also reaches out to potential school providers, holding meetings to explain the review process, discussing potential proposals and advising prospects on their apparent strengths and weaknesses, and linking groups to sources of assistance, for example on financial management. Outreach like this is an essential function for agencies that need to build a supply of quality providers, but oversight personnel need to be careful in such a role. Outreach and advice cannot be seen as an indicator that applicant groups receiving such assistance will receive any preference during the review process. To avoid this problem, agencies must either be careful to manage expectations among those that receive help, or they should contract out applicant recruitment and support.

In addition to a good RFP, a portfolio district also needs a rigorous and predictable proposal review process. It should be clear what criteria are used to judge proposals and how final decisions to authorize new schools will be made. If, as is likely the case, final decisions will depend on a superintendent's or mayor's balancing of many factors, it should be clear that published criteria will determine the slate of finalists considered, not the final choices. Politics should never trump high standards of quality. Diligent screening can help district leaders avoid problems later, but the screening efforts must be carefully designed and supported with technical assistance to ensure that the bar is not set so high that it discourages promising but undercapitalized providers.¹⁴

In keeping with the strategic, as opposed to uniform, role of central authorities under the new accountability, a portfolio management office will need to balance its resources for intervention with the numbers of schools that need help, as well as allocate assistance to schools where resources will likely have the greatest effect. This cannot be reduced to a formula or standard procedure, but it must be thought through strategically, in light of competing needs and resource limitations.

If the portfolio management office is able to tap into independent assistance networks—nonprofit turn-around organizations, local and multi-district alliances of like-minded schools—it is likely to have far more assistance options than could be available from district staff. In Britain, for example, the Specialist Schools Trust, an oversight organization that works under contract with the Ministry of Education, maintains a small staff of experts who act as brokers, not assistance providers. They identify schools in need of help and often connect them with leaders of similar schools who have experience solving the same problems.

14. See Meghan Squires and Lydia Rainey, *Finding a Balance: How Application and Authorization Policies Impact School Supply*, NCSRP Working Paper #2008-4 (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2008) for discussion of the challenges involved in getting this balance right and the technicalities of an effective screening process. Dean Millot has also suggested that selection processes would become more predictable—and more attractive to quality school providers—if the reasons for ratings of proposals were published and used, to some degree, as precedents in future reviews.

Under California State Administrator Randolph Ward, Oakland considered cutting back its central office to financial accountability and oversight functions only. Reasoning that a diverse set of schools would need more varied forms of assistance than any one bureaucracy could provide, Ward proposed hiring one or more independent organizations to offer assistance to Oakland schools. He also intended to cut central office spending drastically and use the money to help schools pay for the forms of help they needed. Schools would be free to purchase help from any source. The district's designated assistance organizations would have the first opportunity to meet a school's need, but the school would ultimately be free to take its money elsewhere. Ward hoped this would encourage development of a highly responsive assistance organization, while maintaining the option of jettisoning providers that schools did not find helpful. This plan was abandoned when Ward lost the support of the State Superintendent and was forced to take a job elsewhere.

Justification for actions—whether they involve sustaining a school, investing scarce resources in it, or closing and replacing it—must be made clear and stated publicly (for the sake of transparency). That maintains the portfolio district's reputation for competence and balance, and helps people in schools anticipate what might happen to them. Making sure to close one or more schools every year (or on some other regular timeline) until all schools reach high standards makes a portfolio district credible, sends a signal that decisions can't be reversed by pressure, and encourages innovation by ensuring opportunities for new providers.

Investment in School Supply

Perhaps the strongest message from our government and business case studies was that a district pursuing a portfolio strategy must consistently invest in developing new options for itself. An organization focused on performance can't put all its eggs in one basket. It might have a preference for relying on providers within its own organization or might have stable relationships with a few external suppliers, but in any case it must also ask: "Is this the best we can do? How do we make sure we aren't stuck without options when problems occur or competitors become more capable?"

Scanning for innovative ideas and promising providers is a new job for school districts, which have traditionally looked inward for talent and ideas while displaying little interest in what is done by other districts or private and charter schools. But it is not a particularly complicated task. A portfolio district could learn a great deal about options elsewhere simply by assigning a staff person half-time or hiring a contractor to review new school

ideas in nearby districts or sister districts nationwide, and then assessing whether those approaches might work for the district itself. State departments of education could greatly help their smaller districts by assembling information about promising school providers.

Innovative ideas are likely to emerge more rapidly, however, if districts actively invest in new school development and reduce barriers for promising providers. Grants to encourage groups of teachers or education-related nonprofits to develop plans for new schools could accelerate the formation of options. Chicago, New York, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and Indianapolis have all made substantial investments of this kind. Investments of even a few hundred thousand dollars per year, whether out of the district budget or from philanthropy, could facilitate implementation of a portfolio strategy by guaranteeing availability of options.

Other tactics may be even more powerful for attracting qualified national school providers: reducing risk and barriers to entry by offering equitable per-pupil revenues, creating predictable political leadership, developing high-quality teacher and leadership training, and including fair and stable risk management provisions in the contracts.¹⁵ Districts can also stimulate provider interest by being reasonably aggressive about new school growth. Large numbers of schools starting at once in one city can create their own economies of scale and send a signal that a locale is serious about long-term new school growth.

Smaller districts (and non-district charter authorizers) are unlikely to have enough money, or attract enough philanthropic support, to sponsor such activities. State departments of education that wish to encourage districts to adopt portfolio strategies might need to work on behalf of smaller school districts by investing in new providers, creating a growth-friendly state regulatory environment, and developing information clearinghouses through which districts can learn of potential new providers. Smaller districts and charter authorizers can also join voluntary networks (for example, the state charter school association) to help identify potential new school providers.

A number of high-profile districts (for example, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, New Orleans, and New York) have relied heavily on a provider recruitment strategy. That is, they have asked proven national charter school provider networks to open schools in

15. See Stephen Page and Katharine Destler, *Buying Smart in Thin Markets: District Tactics to Improve the Quality and Quantity of Autonomous Schools*, NCSR Working Paper #2008-3 (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2008).

their cities. It may be difficult, however, for other cities to follow suit. Most of the well-regarded national nonprofit providers (such as KIPP, Aspire, Achievement First) are committed to regional growth strategies and are unwilling to start new schools outside of their target locations. Many for-profit management companies (such as Edison Schools) have scaled back on growth plans in order to focus on quality control, and others simply lack a good track record of being able to consistently replicate their schools and assure high quality.

For those reasons, smaller cities may have to look inward to develop the capacities of local entrepreneurs. Indianapolis is a good model for how a small city can grow its own school providers. In addition, there are several resources available for those contemplating how to build a strong local supply of schools, including investments in facilities, school incubators, and attractive regulatory and funding structures.¹⁶

Regardless of whether a district plans to rely on national school managers or local entrepreneurs, a solid human resource strategy is a necessary support for strong new schools. This is especially true for leadership supply. Charters and other new schools need leaders who can manage complicated budgets, interpret achievement data, recruit and evaluate teachers, and perform other tasks that traditional leadership preparation programs do not cover. Some districts have partnered with national organizations such as New Leaders for New Schools to provide training. But such programs are not available everywhere and cannot train all the leaders needed in a portfolio district. Districts should also begin conversations with local business and management schools to see if new programs can be built to appropriately support the leadership needs of schools.

Public Engagement

Unlike some of the private companies we studied, decisions about schools are unavoidably public in that they affect children, families, neighborhoods, jobs, and the use of public dollars. Portfolio districts (and charter authorizers) need to build political support, explain their actions, and consider the interests of all concerned. Lack of attention to, or a mishandling of, public engagement can quickly derail the most carefully designed portfolio strategy.

16. See, for example, Paul T. Hill and James Harvey, eds., *Making School Reform Work: New Partnerships for Real Change* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004). See also: Abigail Winger, *Stimulating the Supply and Building the Capacity of New Schools and School Developers* (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2000).

However, districts cannot reap the full benefits of a portfolio strategy if they take only those actions that everyone likes. Americans have learned to protest decisions made about schools and can be counted on to do so, whatever the merits of a proposed action.

Even in districts where the general public or parents are convinced that public schools generally are not working as effectively as they might, many people think the school in their own neighborhood is quite acceptable. When districts begin starting new schools and closing or replacing their weakest performers, the public is likely to question the need for change and parents may be uncomfortable with reforms that teachers object to. A public outcry, often led by union advocates, is to be expected.

It is critical, then, for a district to be proactive about communications to be sure that critical elements of the portfolio strategy are clearly understood: who supports the new plan; why it is needed; what the new system will look like; how the reform will be evaluated; and how citizens' concerns or questions can be heard. At minimum, districts should hire a highly qualified communications director, invest in a sophisticated PR strategy (possibly supported by an outside firm), and work hard to build support among community organizations and respected community leaders to counter opposition.

District leaders must build and maintain reputations for competency, openness, and putting children first. If they do those things they can survive protests by displaced employees, community leaders, or parents who object to closure or provider replacement of a school in their neighborhood. District leaders need to publish and stick to explicit closure criteria, and be prepared to show why one school might be closed and another left open. When presenting the decision to close a school, district leaders should go out of their way to explain the action, instead of rushing it through or expecting that no one will demand an explanation.

As part of its Renaissance 2010 initiative, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) developed school closure guidelines through a year-long process of community discussions. The specific considerations for closing a particular school—including even the percentage of students who must be failing in a particular school—came out of these community conversations. Starting in 2005, CPS gathered input by meeting with a range of community groups (local unions, religious and community groups, and elected officials) to gather their input on the closure criteria. The district posted a survey on its website to solicit a broad range of responses. And the district convened neighborhood focus groups where parents, community residents, elected officials, and others could voice their opinions. Based on this input, the district released significantly redesigned—and by some accounts much improved—criteria in 2006 to guide the district's future closure decisions.

Transparency and a focus on performance quiets opposition. Full public disclosure of achievement data and closure criteria is an important aspect of public engagement. So is building and publicizing the agency's decisionmaking record over time. As Greg Richmond, founder of the Chicago charter office and head of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) has said, "It is much easier to close a school when you can say, 'the current case should not be surprising, we always close schools when their problems get to a given level.'"¹⁷ As Richmond explains, displaced teachers and some parents almost always complain, even if the school to be closed was obviously ineffective, but if the portfolio management office has a reputation for knowing what it is doing and sticking with decisions, protests become less severe. Neighbors complained loudly when the first Chicago schools were closed, but once it was clear a decision could not be overturned no matter how provocative or outrageous the tactics, protests became much briefer and less emotional.

To explain the necessary school closings in Pittsburgh in 2005, the superintendent recognized the looming deficit and explained how school closures could contribute to the district's overall financial health. But he also focused the public's attention on the opportunity for improving student achievement, and how families could expect to benefit from the process. In the Pittsburgh Public Schools "Right-Sizing Plan," the district explained that the closures were:

Based on an in-depth analysis of student achievement data as well as each school's performance in helping students grow academically. This analysis, performed by RAND Corporation, a well-respected, independent consulting firm, marks the first time student and school performance data, rather than building size, politics, or other factors, have been the primary means in determining which schools to close and how to reorganize the District's assets.¹⁸

To enhance this written message, district leaders met with community groups in each of the neighborhoods where schools were to be closed. The public were invited to share their opinions but were offered no guarantee that they would ultimately influence the district's decision. District officials publicly apologized and took responsibility for the district's history of uneven educational quality, and promised to provide a new type of school for their children. There was of course opposition to the closures in Pittsburgh. But the district reportedly met with much less resistance than was expected, and the closures were carried out across the district in less than two years.¹⁹

17. Personal conversation with author.

18. Pittsburgh Public Schools (2005). *Important Information on the Pittsburgh Public Schools Right-Sizing Plan* (public announcement). Available at <http://www.pps.k12.pa.us/14311071716911330/lib/14311071716911330/suptsletter3-06.pdf>.

19. Pittsburgh Public Schools, Press release, 2007.

The process itself matters. One dilemma evident in our studies is whether to announce a school closing at the last minute or far in advance. Charter authorizers attached to school districts fear that staff and parents will flee once a school closure notice is issued. However, last minute action can also set off panic among parents and teachers who must scramble for space in other schools. This is where oversight judgment must come into play and where actions should be well considered and well informed.

Oakland's state-appointed district leaders decided to issue closure notices a full academic year in advance, and to identify schools to which parents might transfer their children at any time. By this method Oakland blunted opposition and also reduced the numbers of students who had to be placed when a school was finally closed.

A smooth closing process (physically closing the school and transferring students) not only goes a long way toward softening public protest, but is important for protecting student interests. Our working paper series outlines specific steps districts have used to avoid legal and procedural pitfalls during school closures.²⁰ At the top of the list for many agencies is lining up a plan for moving students into decent schools without losing seat time or student records.

Pairing closures with openings blunts concerns. Oakland's practice illustrates another important principle of public engagement. They made sure parents would never ask, "Will there be a place for my child?" Closures were always paired with announcements about new schools opening nearby, and lists of higher-performing schools with vacancies. To follow this principle, districts with no school vacancies would always have to pair a school closing with the simultaneous opening of a school big enough to accommodate all displaced students. High school closures are especially complex and may require additional student supports and possibly a multi-year phase out to ensure that the process does not jeopardize graduations.

As an element of the portfolio strategy, public engagement need not include elaborate presentations or protracted consultative processes. But it does require that district leadership do its job openly, consistently, in a timely manner, and with respectful attention to parents' need to understand the options available to their children.

20. Julie Kowal and Bryan Hassel, *Closing Troubled Schools*, NCSRP Working Paper #2008-8 (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2008).

HOW DISTRICTS CAN BUILD NEEDED CAPACITIES

Table 2 lists the functions that a portfolio district must perform. It also illustrates the organizational arrangements, human resource requirements, and likely costs of implementation. The columns on organizational arrangements and human resources are derived from our studies of business and government; the financing estimates are ours, based on simple staffing tables and prevailing salaries for people with comparable skills.

Though these staffing requirements are relatively small in light of the size of large-district central offices, they probably exceed the capacities of districts with 5,000 pupils or fewer. Such districts could join with others to create pooled portfolio management capacities, or rely on their state departments of education for key data management and analysis tasks.

Though the costs of maintaining these capacities should fit well within the budgets of larger school districts, creating them can require extraordinary one-time investments in systems building and staff training. State appropriations and philanthropy are the most likely sources for such capacity-building investments. Cities interested in building such systems can save significant money and avoid potential missteps by replicating or adapting systems and practices in agencies that have already built them.

As we have suggested above, districts committed to portfolio strategies will need to eliminate many existing central office structures, to avoid mixed signals about whether schools will be judged on performance or compliance. Those savings could pay the operating costs of portfolio oversight once a basic capacity has been built.

Table 2. Organizational and Human Resource Requirements and Costs of Portfolio Management

	ORGANIZATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS	HUMAN RESOURCES	FINANCING
Proposal assessment and approval	Special unit with direct access to superintendent or CEO	Office head with political, legal, school expertise; 1 additional former principal/15 schools	\$250,000 for basic office staffing plus \$15,000/school in the district
Tracking school performance	Special unit with access to full financial and performance data	1–3 analysts to maintain data and analyze school performance	Minimum \$100,000 with addition of \$100,000 for every 10,000 students
Identifying schools for intervention or closure	Dedicated analytical organization or contractor	1–3 analysts for all but the largest districts	Included in above cost of special performance unit
Allocating assistance resources	At discretion of the special unit head	Office head and former principals listed above; consultants and contractors	Average \$10,000/school with amount allocated varying from \$0–\$100,000
Deciding which schools to close, and closing them	Core function of the special portfolio management unit, reviewed by superintendent	Special unit head and staff, with contracts for legal, PR assistance	Added cost of about \$50,000/school closed
Developing new providers	Deputy office head or contractor, reporting directly to special unit head	Former principal or CMO leaders	\$125,000 in salary plus investment funds of \$150,000 for every 20 schools
Attracting quality teachers	Deputy office head or contractor responsible to track flow of teachers and identify new school providers and sources of assistance	Former teacher educator, principal, or union head plus research assistant	\$150,000 in salary plus travel and advertising budget
Opening new schools	One full-time staff member or contractor assigned to help schools in their first year	One former principal	\$150,000 for salary and small contingency fund (\$100,000)
Public engagement	Communications contractor or staff member	One full time journalist or PR specialist	\$200,000
Totals		8 minimum	\$1.2 million for district under 20,000 students; up to \$40 million for district of 1 million students

Although table 2 provides some guidance for developing central office functions for a portfolio district, districts will differ on:

- How much support they wish to provide schools vs. how much they hope schools will develop their own problem-solving capacities;
- How proactive they wish to be about stimulating a supply of educational providers vs. a “take whoever comes” approach;
- How much tolerance they have for risk. Preventive screening and monitoring may reduce the risk of embarrassing school controversies or failures, but may also serve to discourage innovation and certain types of providers.

Table 2 also shows that a district can decide whether to perform all oversight functions in its central office or via contracting. Contracting can allow the district access to experienced people who do not want to work as public employees, or whose skills the market values above civil service pay scales. Contractors are also disposable if district leaders discover better ways to do particular jobs. The choice between hiring and contracting should depend on local circumstances—what kinds of skills are available and where.

How to Get Started

It may take three to five years for districts to develop the full set of capacities to fully implement a portfolio strategy. District leaders can, however, create a task force of district employees that performs key functions until a full portfolio management office is created. This task force needs to be led by a senior administrator or attorney, well known to the school board, who reports directly to the superintendent. The task force head should be able to tap individuals from the district’s legal, human resources, financial, facilities, and testing and measurement offices for temporary assignment. Local business and philanthropy leaders should also be recruited for the task force.

Table 3 lists the first steps that must be taken to implement a portfolio strategy. The RFPs, criteria, and other resources developed by the task force will ultimately become core district assets. District leaders can also start with examples of materials, procedures, and lessons learned (for example, the importance of transparent accountability policies) by charter authorizers from publications on the website of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA).²¹

21. <http://www.qualitycharters.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3358>.

Table 3. Districts' First Steps Toward Portfolio-Based Management

FIRST STEPS	
Building community support	Create a communications plan, starting with a clear and compelling reason for people to support the broad strategy.
Assessing and approving proposals for new schools	Develop RFPs, approval criteria, and proposal. Review processes based on NACSA materials.
Tracking school performance	Merge all student, financial, school, and teacher databases using unique student identifiers.
Identifying schools for intervention or closure	Analyze school value-added based on same student year-to-year data. Create ratings of school health based on dashboard. ²²
Allocating assistance resources	Combine available professional development and substitute pay budgets and assign them to the portfolio management unit.
Deciding which schools to close, and closing them	Draft school closure criteria. Simulate closure decisions and assess for plausibility. Draft assistance criteria. Simulate and amend until only the middle half of district schools are identified for assistance.
Developing new providers	Publish RFP and review criteria for new schools. Conduct outreach workshops.
Attracting quality teachers and school leaders	Assess current teaching force. Ask which sources of teachers and leaders (for example, education schools) produce superior or inferior results.
Opening new schools	Create timeline for approval, funding, housing, and opening new schools. Approve only a few schools in first year to hone process, and then ramp up approvals to meet demand.

22. See, for example, Mary Beth Celio and James Harvey, *Buried Treasure: Developing a Management Guide from Mountains of School Data* (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2005).

CONCLUSION

A portfolio strategy fundamentally changes a school district's mission.²³ Districts have been constructed to control money, satisfy the regulatory and record-keeping demands of external funders, and implement laws and contracts. As a recent CRPE report on school finance shows, districts were never built to optimize performance or to search for options that would stress the status quo.²⁴

Districts are now experiencing unprecedented pressure to perform. In addition to competition for students and escalating demands from the state and local governments, districts also face the near certainty of stagnant or declining purchasing power. At least until the economy recovers from the late-2008 market collapse, school districts, like virtually all other public and private enterprises, must figure out how to do better with at best no new money. Though the portfolio management arrangements we have sketched will cost money, they will cost far less than the expensive central office organizations that large districts now maintain. A portfolio strategy transforms the role of district central offices and makes most current central office functions unnecessary. Another reason for eliminating and redirecting the funds controlled by outdated compliance-oriented central office units is that they can only create confusion about what is expected of schools.

Districts struggling to do better with less have little choice but to adopt forms of portfolio management, and work hard to see how much they can accomplish. That means adopting the tenets of the new accountability, which seeks improved performance by any means possible.

Like any other organization forced to change its mission, a portfolio district will make mistakes and suffer internal strife. Long-established routines and entitlements will be upset. The alternative, however, is worse. In today's competitive environment, stagnant organizations do not survive.

As public agencies in other countries and businesses worldwide have found, vertically integrated bureaucracies are not always good at solving unfamiliar problems or responding

23. See William L. Boyd, Charles Taylor Kerchner, and Mark Blyth, *The Transformation of Great American School Districts: How Big Cities Are Reshaping Public Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2008).

24. Hill, Roza, and Harvey, *Facing the Future*.

to tough competition. Traditional school districts are not the only way to organize the education of large numbers of children—charter schools, virtual schools, and home schools all demonstrate this. Charter school funding, statewide open enrollment schemes, statewide and national cyber schools, and the new tuition tax credit laws encourage challengers of all sorts. This report should help school district leaders throughout the country see how they can control their own futures.

APPENDIX:

“MANAGING SCHOOL PERFORMANCE” WORKING PAPER SERIES

This collection of working papers provides research-based practical guidance for charter school authorizers and district leaders interested in cultivating a portfolio of schools. By examining a range of oversight practices, these papers focus on different critical aspects of authorizing and overseeing schools, such as building supply and selecting applicants, managing performance and providing support, and intervening in and closing failing schools. Developed through CRPE’s “Providing Public Oversight” research initiative, conducted jointly by the Doing School Choice Right Project and the National Charter School Research Project, in partnership with Public Impact.

Working Group Members include:

- Paul Hill
- Robin Lake
- Bryan Hassel
- Stephen Page
- Julie Kowal
- Lucy Steiner
- Katharine Destler
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Appendix Table 1. Managing School Performance: A Working Paper Series

TOPIC	WORKING PAPER
Understanding authorizer approaches	Contrasting Approaches to Charter School Oversight NCSRP Working Paper #2008-2 <i>Katharine Destler</i>
Developing school supply	Buying Smart in Thin Markets: District Tactics to Improve the Quality and Quantity of Autonomous Schools NCSRP Working Paper #2008-3 <i>Stephen Page and Katharine Destler</i>
Screening and selecting applicants	Finding a Balance: How Application and Authorization Policies Impact School Supply NCSRP Working Paper #2008-4 <i>Meghan Squires and Lydia Rainey</i>
Managing third party partnerships	Working With Private Partners to Manage the Market: Collaborative Approaches to Charter School Oversight NCSRP Working Paper #2008-5 <i>Katharine Destler</i>
Learning from other countries	Quality Improvement and Performance Management in Schools: Lessons from Abroad NCSRP Working Paper #2008-6 <i>Ashley E. Jochim and Katharine Destler</i>
Addressing performance problems	Tough Calls: Identifying and Addressing School-Level Problems NCSRP Working Paper #2008-7 <i>Robin Lake and Meghan Squires</i>
Closing schools	Closing Troubled Schools NCSRP Working Paper #2008-8 <i>Julie Kowal and Bryan Hassel, Public Impact</i>
Alternatives to school closure	Salvaging Assets: Considering Alternatives to School Closure NCSRP Working Paper #2008-9 <i>Lucy Steiner and Bryan Hassel, Public Impact</i>



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The Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington Bothell engages in research and analysis aimed at developing focused, effective, and accountable schools and the systems that support them. The Center, established in 1993, seeks to inform community leaders, policymakers, school and school system leaders, and the research community.