



Portfolio School Districts Project

Reforming Districts Through Choice, Autonomy, Equity, and Accountability

An Overview of the Voluntary Public School Choice Directors Meeting

Betheny Gross and Robin Lake

May 2011

center on **reinventing** public education

The following papers were presented at the Voluntary Public School Choice Project Directors Conference on February 26-27, 2011, in Washington, D.C. They are available to download at the Voluntary Public School Choice website as well as at www.crpe.org.

- **Special Needs and Choice Districts**, *by Robin Lake and Betheny Gross*
- **One Implementer's Reflections on School Choice Design: A Policy and Practical Look at School Choice Design in Urban Schools**, *by Tom DeWire*
- **Informing Families about School Choices**, *by Paul Teske*
- **Sharing Public Resources: How Portfolio Districts Use Facilities as Strategic Assets**, *by Parker Baxter*
- **Yep, the Southeast Is Going To Have the Best Schools in the United States. The Nation's First Regional School Reform Accelerator and Why We Need It**, *by Matt Candler*

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School Choice Directors Meeting*

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THE PORTFOLIO SCHOOL DISTRICTS PROJECT

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

A Different Vision of the School District

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

Analysis of Portfolio District Practices

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

The Portfolio Network

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

Connecting Portfolio Districts

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

CRPE sponsors the following tools for supporting portfolio districts:

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

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TO VIEW REPORTS FROM THIS PROJECT, VISIT WWW.CRPE.ORG.

INTRODUCTION

Americans have been debating school choice for decades. In the midst of this debate, the number of families able to choose their children's schools has grown steadily. Families able to move from one locality to the next or pay private school tuition could always choose; but now choice is becoming a reality for families who depend on free public schooling and who are unable to relocate.

Choice is expanding in many ways, via charter schools, voucher and tuition tax credit programs, magnet and specialty schools, and, in a growing number of localities, district- or state-wide open enrollment plans. The 2001 reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* as amended has also caused many localities to close low-performing schools and create new public schools for children who previously had no options. To date more than 20 big cities—including New York, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Chicago, D.C., and Philadelphia—have moved toward creating *portfolio districts* that provide families an array of school choices (district-managed traditional and magnet schools as well as charter and contract schools), judge schools on the basis of performance, close persistently low-performing schools, and seek capable leaders and providers for new schools.

Public school choice is not the pure market-based choice envisioned by Friedman, in which schools compete for students and families choose schools with little or no governmental oversight of the process. Public school choice is *managed choice*, constructed and overseen by government in an effort to prevent discrimination, false claims, stranding of students in ineffective schools, and unfair competition.

As public school choice expands, especially when it becomes available to all students in entire districts, it gives rise to two kinds of important design and management issues. The first is access: families that are supposed to get choices must in fact have access to them. That means families must be able to make informed choices, have their admission applications treated fairly, and have reasonable access to transportation from home to the chosen school. The second set of issues is oversight: public officials must make sure that no family is left without a choice among quality schools, that schools represent themselves accurately, that schools unable to teach children effectively are removed from the set of those available, and that schools among which families can choose have equitable access to adequate resources needed to attract capable staff and offer quality instruction in safe facilities.

Confronting the design and management issues that public school choice presents requires school districts to operate in new ways. School districts were designed to assign students and monitor compliance, not deal with parent choice, school-level autonomy, and performance-based accountability. There is, however, a growing base of experience with public school choice, and some localities have gone a long way toward solving problems that still vex others. Though the sum of existing knowledge might not be enough to resolve all the issues raised by public school choice, pooling of available knowledge can lead to improvement of choice programs everywhere.

THE VOLUNTARY PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE PROJECT DIRECTORS CONFERENCE

In February 2011, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) convened a conference to help districts implementing school choice under the U.S. Department of Education’s Voluntary Public School Choice program. The conference, sponsored by the Department of Education, provided grantees access to the most current knowledge from district and charter leaders and school choice researchers on how to effectively implement public school choice.

The conference focused on the most pressing issues faced by localities committed to public school choice. Panelists addressed how choice districts can

- actively manage the supply of schools in the district,
- make careful decisions about the allocation of resources across these now independent schools,
- build fair and transparent enrollment systems,
- effectively communicate to all parents about their choices, and
- invoke creative solutions to ensure that students with special needs are well served in these diverse schools.

This paper summarizes the two-day conversation and lessons participants took away from the discussion. Essays by some of the panelists examine each of these five issue areas in greater detail, and are available at the Voluntary Public School Choice website.

Managing the Supply of Schools

“Operating high-quality schools is like having a good marriage: Everyone says they want it and plans to do it, but it only works about half the time. No one sets out to launch a crappy school, just like no one sets out to have a crappy marriage, but it happens. It is not enough to want high-quality schools, you need a detailed and well-thought-out plan to make it happen.”

PATRICK WOLF
PROFESSOR AND 21ST CENTURY ENDOWED CHAIR IN SCHOOL CHOICE
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

There is little point to offering families a choice of bad schools. The first order of business for a district that wants to offer choice is to build a supply of *high-quality* schools. Panelists Matt Candler of 4.0 Schools, Alex Medler from the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, and Sherri Futch-James from Miami-Dade Schools laid out four key elements of forming and supporting high-quality schools:

- *Establish relationships with local communities to understand their needs and gain their partnership for new programs.* One of the less discussed but ultimately crucial ways in which districts can support the success of new schools is to ensure that there will be demand for the school and its programs. Districts should think like matchmakers, connecting new school leaders to the communities that best suit their programs. As these new school leaders develop plans and prepare to open their school, they should spend time in communities to understand what families need and want from their schools. Early relationships with local families will help build support for new programs and be a useful resource as founders develop programs and raise external funding for the school.
- *Recruit high-quality talent and develop new leadership teams (not just principals) with a focus on school management and operations as well as instructional leadership.* Good leadership keeps new schools moving forward. However, leading a new autonomous

Developing a team of leaders with diverse skills will better ensure that the new school has highly capable individuals overseeing the disparate range of leadership responsibilities.

Panelist Profile: 4.0 Schools Building High-Quality Schools for the Southeast

4.0 Schools is an effort to create large numbers of high-quality new schools in the Southeast U.S. The new organization will incubate leadership teams for a year on a “model, coach, and fade” philosophy, helping to launch schools and providing technical assistance and quality control through the schools’ third year of operation. CEO Matt Candler said that 4.0 Schools is intent on working closely with Southeast communities that want new schools and want reform. Candler wants the new 4.0 schools to be a natural outgrowth of their “local ecosystems,” meeting community needs and feeling homegrown.

school, whether a new magnet, district, or charter school, requires an expansive range of skills, including financial and organizational management, human resource development, and public relations, as well as instructional and curricular development. Relying on a single leader to found a new school may not be sound. Futch-James, who supports new magnet programs in her district, explained that developing a team of leaders with diverse skills will better ensure that the new school has highly capable individuals overseeing the disparate range of leadership responsibilities.

- *Provide intensive support to leadership teams during the first three years of start up.* Many schools fail and never recover from the start-up years. Recruiting teachers, recruiting families, securing funding, establishing facilities, and launching programs and systems are just a few of the challenges that await new school leaders. Everyone in the building is stretched to the limit during this time. Although there

is some debate as to how long start-up teams require intensive support—some say three years while others say at least five—leadership teams undoubtedly need outside support. The challenge for districts and other new school developers is to provide this support without overwhelming the autonomy of the new school.

- *Manage the supply of schools by holding low-performing schools accountable for performance, closing the lowest performing, and fostering the expansion and replication of successful programs.* Getting schools up and running is just the beginning for districts that oversee independent schools. By giving schools autonomy over their programs, budgets, and personnel, districts limit their sphere of influence over their schools. This constraint makes it more important for them to leverage accountability tools to regulate the quality of schools in the district.

Districts need to establish robust accountability systems that apply to all of the schools (including charter schools) that operate within the district; they need to be willing to make tough calls by closing schools that fail to perform; and they need to find ways to expand and replicate successful schools.

Once a district becomes proficient in opening new high-quality schools, giving them the ability to respond quickly to changing local demand, panelists recommended that districts overcome traditional silos between offices that oversee magnet, charter, and neighborhood schools. The district should instead focusing on creating alternatives for families in neighborhoods that are not being served, and taking bold action to close persistently failing schools.

Allocating Resources Across Schools

“Viewing choice as an opportunity and not a competition means changing the way the district thinks about resources.”

PARKER BAXTER
FORMER DIRECTOR OF CHARTER SCHOOLS
DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Few issues are more contentious than the distribution of resources in districts, especially when some of those resources are shared with charter or other non-traditional district schools. In a system with managed choice, however, public resources are shared with all public schools. By reimagining the distribution of resources and provision of large-scale services without regard to whether a school is a district school, a magnet school, or a charter school, districts may find that sharing resources can promote greater resource equity and unify a diverse community of public schools. Panelists Parker Baxter, formerly with Denver Public Schools, Neerav Kingsland of New Schools for New Orleans, and

Courtney Paulding-Zelaya of KIPP Houston discussed the resource needs of autonomous schools and how districts can reframe their approach to providing schools with the resources they need.

Sharing resources can promote greater resource equity and unify a diverse community of public schools.

Parker Baxter explained that providing facilities for district-authorized charter schools and new autonomous schools opened a fierce debate over who those buildings were intended to serve. Denver Public Schools contends that public school *students* are entitled to resources regardless of the type of public school in which they are enrolled. Viewing resources from the student level might make it easier to see how resources should be shared across individual schools, but doing so requires districts to reframe how they allocate financial and building resources, and consider new ways to provide services that benefit from economies of scale yet maintain flexibility.

Panelist Profile: Partners in Rebuilding Schools for New Orleans

Instead of resurrecting the previous but historically low-performing school system after Hurricane Katrina, the Recovery School District (RSD) decided to build a portfolio of independent but accountable schools for the city. This effort would include a large number of new charter schools founded and supported by non-district organizations. In 2006, the nonprofit organization New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO) formed to help found and support these new charter schools. NSNO targets system-wide improvements by recruiting and developing talent, starting and supporting new charter schools, and advocating for high-quality schools in New Orleans. New Orleans students have profited tremendously from the RSD's partnerships with organizations like NSNO. Neerav Kingsland, chief strategy officer for NSNO, reports that the percentage of New Orleans students enrolled in underperforming schools dropped from 62% to 17% and the achievement gap between New Orleans students and the rest of the state was cut almost in half between 2005 and 2010.

A school funding model that allocates dollars to schools based on the number and type of students enrolled and moves those dollars with the student implicitly ties resources to individual students. When combined with school choice, which lets parents “vote with their feet,” this approach to school funding forces schools of all types to pay attention to each student in the school or risk losing the funding students bring with them.

Building space, particularly in urban districts with tight real estate markets, is often thought to belong to the schools that historically occupied these spaces. Shared space arrangements, especially when they are with charter or magnet schools that may not exclusively serve neighborhood children, are frequently met with fierce opposition. Districts, however, give space to magnet schools and often invest in uniquely configured space to serve the schools’ specialization. Denver and New Orleans opt to provide district-owned space to charter schools. By providing all schools, including charter and magnet schools, with equal resources, districts have more leverage to ask their schools to take more responsibility for serving students with special needs and participate in district-wide enrollment systems.

Finally, districts with large numbers of schools of choice need to decide which traditional district functions are best performed at scale and how schools can share in the cost of these services. Some functions that benefit from economies of scale, like data collection

and enrollment services, may best remain centrally controlled. Other functions, like professional development or transportation, may be sorted out by giving schools the freedom to decide if they want to pool resources.

Creating Fair and Transparent Assignment Systems

“If [district] reforms come up against political opposition, weak assignment strategies create an environment that gives the opposition ammunition.”

NEIL DOROSIN
FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
INSTITUTE FOR INNOVATION IN PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE

Parents’ perception of district choice reform will be shaped by their experience and success with navigating the student enrollment and assignment process. If parents cannot trust the enrollment process, if they cannot navigate the system, if some parents find a way to subvert the system, if too many students end up in their lowest preferred schools—then the choice system and likely any other reforms the district is implementing along with choice will be undercut.

The goals for a student assignment system must be

- transparent—parents understand how matches are made;
- fair—the system cannot be manipulated; and
- efficient—the system is cost effective for the district to run and for parents to participate.

Assignment systems, particularly in large districts, are complicated. Panelists Tom DeWire from Baltimore City Public Schools, and Neil Dorosin of the Institute for Innovation in Public School Choice explained that these assignment systems require districts to make a myriad of decisions about how students will be assigned to schools. These decisions must then be translated into a complex computer program.

Panelist Profile:

Designing New Choice Systems

Despite our best intentions, student enrollment systems rarely produce efficient, equitable, and transparent results. The nonprofit Institute for Innovation in Public School Choice (IIPSC) supports districts and their partners as they improve their enrollment and choice processes, always adhering to each district’s particular goals. Neil Dorosin, founder and executive director of IIPSC, explained that his organization guides districts through a series of values questions like:

- *Do you want a single or separate process for charters and district schools?*
- *How will you assign students when there are more applicants than seats at a school?*
- *Will students receive a single “best” offer or will they receive multiple offers?*

He went on to say, “there are hundreds of such questions that need to be answered and none of the questions can be taken in isolation.” But when considered with care and incorporated smartly into an assignment algorithm, the enrollment system can be far more efficient and reliable, and can support other reforms in the school district.

To begin the redesign process, DeWire suggested that districts should first consider what the district values by answering these questions:

- Do you value neighborhood schools enough to give a geographic preference to students? What are other important preferences?
- Do you want to maintain some special admission or audition schools?
- Do you want to “engineer” schools to approximate a specific economic distribution of students?
- Do you want to preserve historic feeder patterns?
- Are you concerned about students crossing gang territories?

Responding to each of these questions alone is challenging, but in reality the answer to one will often have consequences for another. For example, if the district prioritizes neighborhood schools and offers a geographic preference it may not be possible to create economically representative schools. Figuring out priorities is essential but will undoubtedly trigger debate in the district and community.

Neil Dorosin, who has helped several large urban districts to design new student assignment systems, identified four more streams of work districts must coordinate once they have pinned down their values:

1. Operations—How will the assignment process work?
2. Technology—What is the technical algorithm that will match students to schools?
3. Communications—How will the district help parents make smart choices?
4. Accountability—How will we assess whether the system is working?

Figuring out priorities is essential but will undoubtedly trigger debate in the district and community.

No system will be perfect out of the gate. Adjustments will be necessary in every aspect of the assignment system, from valued preferences to the strategies for communicating about the system. A good assignment system, however, will provide districts with a wealth of data on the quality of the matches as well as the demand for schools. This information can be used regularly to improve not only the assignment system but also the district’s school offerings.

Communicating to Parents about Choice

“School choice will not work for every student until we have information systems in place.”

KEVIN MCCASKILL
DIRECTOR OF SCHOOL DESIGN
HARTFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In a choice district information about schools is a precious currency, but it is not naturally distributed evenly. Often the district's lowest-income parents face the greatest barriers in their access to information. As panelist Paul Teske, an expert in parent choice, explained, upper-income families have been practicing choice for a very long time with their residential choices and access to private schools. Low-income families have little or no experience comparing schools and choosing among them. Moreover, low-income families, especially those who are recent immigrants, often do not have social connections in communities with information about schools, they lack access to online resources—where most districts post their enrollment and school information—and many families confront language barriers.

As important as it is to disseminate information to all families, it is also important to remember the role that district policies play in parents' choicest.

Teske and fellow panelists Kevin McCaskill from Hartford Public Schools, and Robert Lewis from the New York City Department of Education explained that to equalize the information gaps, districts will need to gain a deep knowledge of their communities and use this knowledge to reach out to these communities.

Parents need information about the enrollment and assignment process. They need information on a school's instructional approach and whether it will be a good fit for their child. They need information on the performance of schools, especially graduation rates and college attendance rates.

Simple efforts to provide materials and communications in multiple languages and access to online resources are useful but limited in their effect. More important will be efforts to build partnerships with community organizations, provide enrollment offices in neighborhoods, enlist parents to assist other parents in school choice decisions, and develop a thoughtful, community-centered marketing strategy to build excitement around school enrollment.

As important as it is to disseminate information to all families, it is also important to remember the role that district policies play in parents' choices. Districts may find that parents, despite extensive efforts to provide clear and ample information, still make choices that seem misguided or inequitable. In this case districts need to look to remove other barriers to effective choice. Do families have access to affordable transportation services that will enable their children to attend schools outside the neighborhood? Do

Panelist Profile: Reaching Parents in Hartford Public Schools

Hartford, a choice district in the sixth poorest city in the U.S., rolled out an intensive parent information initiative that uses many public and social organizations and spaces to reach its parents. As Kevin McCaskill said, "We hit the streets, we are in the community centers and libraries disseminating information. We enhanced our website." Hartford instituted a choice advisory committee to oversee the choice process from the parent perspective. They made sure any parent calling about enrollment reaches an individual who can answer their questions and they opened school computer labs in the evening so parents could research schools and complete their enrollment application. McCaskill summed up the goal of this initiative as making sure all parents have good information.

the enrollment deadlines occur so early in the year that highly mobile or new families cannot reasonably participate in the enrollment process and lotteries? And finally, are there enough high-quality schools for families to access easily?

Serving Students with Special Needs

“If we are in a place where we can’t serve someone well because we can’t serve everyone in the same way, we may need to rethink our priorities.”

PAUL O’NEILL
EDISON LEARNING INSTITUTE

Schools that successfully serve language minority students, students with disabilities, or students returning after a spell of dropping out offer encouraging examples of what is possible in public education. These cases are all too rare, however. When districts give parents school choice and encourage schools to pursue a focused mission, they

When districts give parents school choice and encourage schools to pursue a focused mission, they create an opportunity to better serve the system’s neediest students.

create an opportunity to better serve

the system’s neediest students. But choice also creates complications that have to be resolved when a district is serious about ensuring that all students’ needs are being met. Panelists Robin Lake from the Center on Reinventing Public Education, educational law expert Paul O’Neill, and Parker Baxter discussed these complications and how laws, regulations, and incentives need to change to better serve students with special needs in choice schools.

Students with special needs, by federal law, are entitled to a “free and appropriate education” in the public school system. However, district choice systems often are not designed to provide the financial incentives or supports that schools need to serve these students well. For example, when Denver Public Schools examined why local charter schools did not serve a comparable share of the severely disabled student population as traditional district schools, they learned that charter schools did not receive enough resources to house and serve these students well. As a result, the district partnered with a charter school to fund and support a program for severely disabled students. Now these students have access to the city’s charter schools and the charter schools are participating more fully in serving the complete range of students with special needs.

Panelist Profile: Denver District and Charter Schools Partner to Provide Programs to Students with Special Needs

Charter schools are often criticized for not serving an equal share of students with special needs as district public schools. When Denver Public Schools examined this complaint in their district, they found that district and charter schools served an equal portion of the city’s students with special needs. However, the charter schools did not serve as many severely disabled students. As Parker Baxter explained, “There were structural reasons why this happened.” The most important reason was that the state funding allocation to charter schools was not enough to support the expensive pull-out program these students require. To remedy the situation, the district took the same amount of money it devotes to its consolidated “center programs” that serve severely disabled students in a handful of district schools to set up and operate a center program in a charter school. The new program is designed to serve multi-intensive students in a charter school.

Structural tensions that arise from school specialization, the locus of responsibility for providing special education, and accountability to students with special needs are just a few of the challenges that districts implementing choice need to think through. Going forward, it is clear that resolving the complicated structural issues that stand in the way of serving students with special needs will require non-traditional solutions. If Denver had mandated that all charter schools serve a certain percent of severely disabled, as sometimes happens when districts spot inequities in services across schools, they would have doomed the charter schools to financial instability and likely left students in substandard programs.

A particularly vexing issue for choice districts is that schools of choice, especially magnet and charter schools, often specialize on a particular mission or instructional strategy in order to serve one type of students especially well. For example, some schools of choice focus on students with a particular disability category, such as autism spectrum disorders. Critics, however, take issue with this specialization on a couple of counts. Some advocacy groups question whether specialized schools run counter to the concept behind “least restrictive environment,” where students with disabilities are supposed to be included in educational opportunities with a broad range of students. Other advocates contend that such a specialized school is inappropriate because it cannot serve a spectrum of student needs. Districts that embrace managed choice must confront what it means to ensure equitable access for all students within a system of unique and autonomous schools.

Accountability for special education remains highly focused on the activities that go into a child’s educational experiences—their classroom composition, aides, modifications, and services—but there remains little accountability for outcomes from these students.

The locus of responsibility for special education poses yet another challenge to choice districts. LEAs (local education agencies) have, by statute, been responsible for ensuring special education services. When an LEA is a school district, this standard makes sense. We can reasonably expect a district to provide a complement of special services. When an LEA is a small charter school, this expectation seems less reasonable. When this small independent charter school operates in a

community with many other schools, as nearly all charter schools do, it may not even be in the best interest of the child to insist that these small schools house multiple specialized programs. Instead it may be better to explore ways that services can be coordinated and shared across multiple schools. LEAs, whether districts, individual schools, or consortiums of schools, may also need to coordinate services and share responsibility for serving all students within a community.

Finally, the education community may also need to revisit how it defines a high-quality program for students with special needs and the regulatory approach used to ensure access for all students. At the federal and state level, and in districts and schools, accountability for special education remains highly focused on the activities that go into a child's educational experiences—their classroom composition, aides, modifications, and services—but there remains little accountability for outcomes from these students. Perhaps as a result, districts are not often willing to allow school leaders and teachers to explore new approaches to meeting students' special needs and often fail to consider the performance of students with special needs when assessing school quality.

CONCLUSIONS

Joel Klein, former Chancellor of the New York City Schools and a leading proponent of choice district reforms, once explained that his goal was to “build a system of great schools instead of a great school system.” Aiming at a “system of great schools” emphasizes the individual school and the need to make every school great. It also recognizes the need for effective government oversight. High-quality funding, regulatory, and accountability systems and many other structures are needed to ensure an equitable and effective public education system. Choice districts, whether creating choice with charter schools, magnet schools, autonomous district schools, or some combination of these, all face the challenge of optimizing a balance of choice, autonomy, equity, and accountability.

In the course of the two-day conference on Voluntary Public School Choice, panelists and conference participants offered three overarching lessons on how to make this balance work:

- ***Embracing choice means letting go of some control—in good times and bad.*** Whether it is giving school leaders more opportunity to shape their schools’ education programs or giving parents more opportunity to select schools for their children, district leaders need to accept that they will have less direct control over school-level actions. While letting go of these crucial decisions may seem reasonable, even desirable, when schools are high performing and parents are happily and effectively exercising their choices, it is much harder when schools are low performing and it appears that parents are not making “good” choices. The instinct is to step in and take control of a low-performing school, requiring the school to adopt a specific curriculum, pedagogy, or personnel strategy. It is much harder to support the local leaders as they execute their own improvement responses while standing by with firm consequences should the improvement efforts fall short. When low-income communities opt into underperforming schools, the instinct is to remove school choice. The harder response is to maintain choice but to remedy information deficits or uneven school quality so that all parents can make effective choices.
- ***Choice districts must commit to long-term problem solving.*** Districts that commit to choice will need to apply new thinking in nearly all aspects of their work. Traditional models of centralized professional development will have to give way to new models that respond to the diversity of schools. Central office staff will have to develop novel

incentives and regulatory structures to ensure autonomous schools serve a wide range of student needs without compromising their ability to pursue focused missions. Traditional funding strategies that earmark most of a school's dollars will need to shift toward those that give school leaders enough budget discretion to make substantive changes in their schools. Districts will need to experiment with parent information and engagement strategies that respond to all of a city's divergent communities.

Districts should also expect choice to be a process of trial and error. Even with great planning, some new initiatives and strategies will need to be scrapped completely; others will need modification. Being honest about successes and failures, sharing this information with the community, and, most importantly, keeping school principals and teachers involved in new solutions and plans for changes is essential.

- ***Choice involving charter operators requires hard negotiation and compromise.*** To form a seamless system of charter and district schools, districts may want charter school operators to observe district-wide enrollment preferences, participate in the district enrollment system, offer special needs programs in their buildings, and participate in local accountability systems. Charter and other external operators, however, may feel this level of cooperation encroaches on their autonomy and flexibility, forcing some very tough negotiations. If the district is the charter school authorizer, districts may have some leverage with charter schools. When the district is not the authorizer, they may need to leverage facilities and support to strengthen their ties with charter schools.

Today more than 20 large and mid-sized school districts, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Denver, Hartford, New Orleans, and Baltimore, are embracing choice and autonomy in their districts. The lessons presented here are just a handful of what can be gleaned from these districts. District leaders ready to move their districts toward choice should learn from these leading examples but, more importantly, they must also be prepared to learn from their own experiences.

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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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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.