

//JOHN WHITE & ADAM HAWF

A Playbook for a New Approach in New Orleans

The tragedy of Hurricane Katrina presented the opportunity for dedicated citizens to rebuild the physical and civic infrastructure of New Orleans with the support of an influx of people, ideas, and resources from around the world. The improvements of the last decade are manifest throughout the city, but nowhere more so than in the educational system. As a result of the hard work and collaboration among public education, business leadership, and community-based organizations, the city's schools are serving students dramatically better than they were before the storm. The public education model of today's New Orleans has garnered national acclaim not just for its initial results, but also for the inventiveness of its tenets and structure.

Many people have dedicated time to analyzing the actions, actors, and circumstances that enabled this sea change. They rightly credit the Louisiana state legislature and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education for creating and expanding the authority of the Recovery School District (RSD), and the creative people and organizations that emerged after the storm—Leslie Jacobs at BESE and Educate Now, Sarah Usdin and Neerav Kingsland at New Schools for New Orleans, and Caroline Roemer at the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools. But we should also give credit to an idea that informed the developments in New Orleans: the portfolio strategy articulated by Paul Hill and the Center on Reinventing Public Education.

The portfolio strategy has guided our work in New Orleans in part because it aligns with what we and others in New Orleans already believed: that parents should have a say in where their children attend school, educators should work in environments that give them the freedom to focus on the needs of children, and government should ensure equitable access to schools for all students and a minimum standard of performance for all schools.

Having observed these principles at work in New York City and in New Orleans in the years after Katrina, in 2011 we joined the administration of the RSD—at that time an improving district of traditional and charter public schools with significant promise but also significant gaps in achievement and equity. John came to New Orleans from New York City, where he had served as deputy chancellor and led efforts to turn around failing schools, develop new educational models, and launch new charter schools. Adam had returned to New Orleans months earlier to resume the work in schools that he had begun in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

We were motivated by the opportunity to continue the successful reforms in New Orleans and ensure that government struck the right balance of empowering schools and the social sector while also ensuring transparency and accountability to the public. Over the last three years, we have had the opportunity to further the portfolio strategy in New Orleans and throughout Louisiana, building on the trailblazing work of our predecessors at the RSD and the Louisiana Department of Education, superintendents Paul Pastorek and Paul Vallas. The results—both inspiring and humbling—are a testament to the strategy and a valuable case study for other cities.

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When Paul Hill first introduced the portfolio strategy two decades ago, the idea that governments should govern systems of education rather than operate schools seemed contentious to some and crazy to others. Today it is an important motif in American public policy, thanks in part to strong academic results in Denver, New Orleans, New York, and other cities. Hill articulated a clear set of beliefs and codified them into a cohesive framework. In doing so, he made the strategy comprehensible and compelling, especially to civic leaders often not engaged in a city’s educational system.

Whereas many strategies last only as long as a superintendent’s tenure, portfolio has persevered in almost every district in which it has taken root. It has changed how local leaders think about the role of government in public education. The spread of portfolio models has changed the national conversation by normalizing ideas about parental choice and who makes decisions in a school. In our own state, we are gratified to see this conversation spread from New Orleans to Baton Rouge, where Chris Meyer of New Schools Baton Rouge is working with faith and civic leaders to expand access to high-quality schools in the most underserved area of the city.

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CHANGING HOW PRACTITIONERS VIEW THE WORLD

In 1992, David Osborne and Ted Gaebler outlined in *Reinventing Government* how bureaucracy can impede innovation and how government is better suited to steering, rather than rowing, the boat. In *Reinventing Public Education*, Hill made a persuasive case for applying those principles to schooling. Over the last two decades, the team at CRPE has turned the portfolio concepts into a playbook for practitioners, transmitted and reinforced through their writings, conferences, and advising. By now, many people take the principles behind the portfolio strategy for granted.

CRPE has taught us that the district can do more by doing less, and challenged us to demand more for and from parents,

educators, and government. CRPE reminds us that parent choice is a right rather than a luxury, and a strategy to drive academic achievement rather than a political position. Government must work together with schools and the broader social sector to establish and enforce the rules and routines that make choice fair, transparent, and efficient.

CRPE has taught us that the operation of schools is not a birthright for the local district but a privilege one must earn and re-earn. We must use data to provide a fair, objective, and consistent cycle of performance-based accountability to determine who deserves this privilege.

CRPE brought to the mainstream the idea that school autonomy—where principals make decisions about staffing, curriculum, and use of time and resources—is something that enables success rather than just something school

leaders deserve because of having achieved success. Across the country, there are many examples of autonomy as a reward for compliance, collegiality, or good performance, and this autonomy is preferable to no autonomy at all. But our experience in Louisiana shows that a better system is one that gives schools autonomy as a contractual right of their existence, and holds them accountable for specific outcomes on a tight timeline.

Finally, CRPE reminds us that the work of educating our children should not be constrained to professional educators alone; non-educators, including disenfranchised and nontraditional stakeholders, have the right and responsibility to engage in public education. The portfolio strategy is effective because it invites the participation of parents, the business community, and others into the hard work of running schools and districts.

THE PORTFOLIO STRATEGY IN NEW ORLEANS

Over the last three years, we have deepened New Orleans' commitment to the portfolio strategy around three key elements:

- Government as the guarantor of equity
- The necessity of recruiting and supporting a diverse set of individuals and organizations

- Performance-based accountability for all schools

Above all, the portfolio strategy establishes an essential role for government as the portfolio manager and guarantor of equity for children. One way we put this into practice was through the implementation of a single application system for all schools: because a decentralized enrollment system made it difficult for low-income parents to seek seats in good schools for their children, we established a streamlined, transparent common enrollment system, called OneApp. Many of our most important policy changes, including a decision to centralize the expulsion process, have come directly from charter school leaders in New Orleans.

The portfolio strategy also fueled our efforts to recruit and develop a diverse pool of individuals and nonprofit organizations to govern, run, and support our schools. Through creative use of existing state and federal dollars, we have magnified the impact of the philanthropic capital dedicated to New Orleans and accelerated the pace of change throughout Louisiana. The effect of welcoming new talent to New Orleans has spilled over into other sectors of the economy—many of the young people called to New Orleans to teach now lead the broader revitalization of our city and state.

In New Orleans, the process for replacing struggling school

operators often caught parents and educators by surprise. In line with the portfolio strategy, we established a simple, clear default school closure framework, which the RSD, under the leadership of Superintendent Patrick Dobard, has worked to more clearly communicate to the public. We perform an annual process of closing schools that do not meet the bar, and government works with the nonprofit sector to facilitate the launch of new options and the expansion of schools and networks that are performing well. Our improvements in this arena owe no small debt to Chris Barbic and his team, our constant partners at the Tennessee Achievement School District.

Overall, New Orleans may be the most dramatic example of the portfolio strategy in action. In the year before Hurricane Katrina, the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) educated almost 90 percent of public school students in New Orleans. Today, more than 90 percent of public school students are in charter schools run by almost 50 organizations, while OPSB and the RSD operate only a handful of schools. The public at large has seized the opportunity for direct involvement in the creation and governance of our schools—today, more than 300 people serve on charter school boards in New Orleans.

These structural changes have enabled significant improvements

in the experience of students and parents. In the year before Katrina, 78 public schools met the definition of “failing;” today, only 9 do. New Orleans ranked 67th out of 68 Louisiana districts in 2005, and now it is 38th. Over that time, the proficiency rate for the public schools in New Orleans has increased from 35 percent to 63 percent.

No one is better poised than CRPE to partner with cities as they wrestle with these difficult governance questions.

Above all, the lesson of New Orleans is that people rise to the occasion. The citizens of New Orleans have played an invaluable role in changing the city’s educational landscape—the portfolio strategy challenges all of the major stakeholders in education to accept accountability for the future of our children. In New Orleans, educators make the most of autonomy, parents use school choice to the advantage of their children, and government achieves more by doing less. At the heart of all of these changes is a commitment to collaboration and continuous improvement. While the city’s educational system has made

significant gains in the nearly 10 years since Hurricane Katrina, we still have a lot of work to do.

CRPE AND THE FUTURE

New Orleans’ experiences shed light on the influence of the portfolio strategy and raise important questions about its future. How do we ensure that a performance-based accountability system works for the wide variety of schools a portfolio district is meant to comprise—including schools for students with profound special needs? How do we adapt the portfolio strategy for places like Cleveland and Detroit, which have underperforming charter sectors and fractured governance systems? Each city presents unique challenges that will continue to push CRPE and the portfolio strategy.

Every city needs a portfolio manager, governmental or otherwise, and a strong actor to guarantee equity for students and parents. This entity must ensure that autonomy and new schools lead to the sort of programmatic diversity that fulfills the original promise of portfolio: a set of schools that are as diverse as the needs of our learners. No one is better poised than CRPE to partner with cities as they wrestle with these difficult governance questions.

Finally, while CRPE has provided a road map for protecting schools and educators from the weaknesses and overreach of traditional

school systems, the next step is to protect the districts and district leaders from the state and from the bureaucracy rolling downhill from the federal government. Perhaps CRPE can help us to imagine a world in which the federal government plays a clear, limited, and relevant role in public education. That may sound utopian, but 20 years ago so did the portfolio strategy. //

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