Good Options and Choices for all Families

In portfolio districts, families have the freedom to attend their neighborhood school or choose one that best fits their child. Portfolio districts make sure there are good schools in every neighborhood, but they try to avoid mandating school assignments. They also give families useful information and support to make enrolling clear and simple. Portfolio districts approach school choice in two ways: 1) broadened student assignment policies, and 2) improving existing schools and opening new schools by chartering or replicating high-performing district schools.

Student Assignment Policies
A workable and fair school selection system is not easy to build, especially at the outset. Productive and unproductive schools are often unevenly distributed across a city, and some neighborhoods have few high-quality options. By allowing families to opt out, some schools will be under-enrolled. However, this is the beginning of the portfolio process of identifying weak schools, predicting whether improvements can happen with strong supports, and opening new schools or expanding strong schools in underserved areas.

More portfolio districts are tackling this challenge. Denver and New Orleans have begun coordinated enrollment across district and charter schools. New York City holds all-city school admissions lotteries at the same time for middle and high schools, so no school can gain an advantage by “jumping the gun,” and places all students simultaneously so that everyone has a known chance of gaining admission to the most popular schools. Hartford has its own long-established choice process, which tries to protect children whose parents do not express a choice, by entering them in lotteries automatically.

Improving Options for Students
School choice is not enough—districts need to ensure that an array of high-quality schools is available throughout the city. Portfolio districts create circumstances for existing schools to improve by giving schools autonomy and offering a menu of high-quality internal and external support services. The districts also open new schools to give families immediate access to schools with a solid instructional plan or a record of achievement. These new schools can be open and run by the district or by an outside provider, such as charter schools.

Denver has been able to identify which schools need attention and which schools are high-achieving by using accountability systems that rate school growth and achievement. Denver has replicated high-achieving, oversubscribed schools in underserved neighborhoods. New Orleans has increased the overall quality of schools and the numbers of children who are in them: in 2005, 75% attended academically unacceptable schools; in 2013, only 17% did.¹

HOW TO...

### Change Student Assignment Policies
- Eliminate policies that mandate school assignments
- Create student assignment systems that give students and families choices about where they go to school
- Develop effective communication channels to ensure parents have all the information they need to make the right choice for their child
- Urge families to consider schools known to be productive

### Improve Options for Students
- Provide autonomy and support for longer-term improvements in low-performing schools
- Coordinate neighborhood needs and preferences with creation of new schools
- Infuse promising new options in neighborhoods that have few high-quality options to start
- Open distinctive new district-run or charter schools, deliberately creating new options and sharpening the focus of these schools to compete for students

Good Options and Choices for all Families

Seven Components of a Portfolio Strategy

**Elements of a Fully Developed Portfolio Implementation on Good Options and Choices**

**On Choice**
- School choice for all families
- Equity and access to all schools for special education students and English language learners
- Coordination of enrollment and school information for families across sectors

**On Options**
- New schools opened based on family/student/neighborhood need
- Schools replaced based on performance outcomes
- New schools opened with outside operators
- Intentional development of new district schools or homegrown charter schools

**Metrics and Progress Indicators for Districts**

**Is the district creating a wide scope of choice?**
- Increasing % of seats in choice schools
- Increasing % of choice schools that are high-performing

**Is the district creating equitable opportunity and participation in choice?**
- Increasing % of students enrolling through choice systems
- Declining % (or number) of students enrolling after assignments
- Increasing equitable representation of high-needs students in high-performing choice schools
- Increasing equity in the ratio of high-performing seats to neighborhood students by geographic zone

**Is the choice system efficient?**
- Enrollment growth in high-performing schools outpaces growth of other schools
- Increasing positive correlation between demand and quality schools

**Are parents and students are satisfied with the range of school options and choices?**
- Improving parent satisfaction with schools
- Decline in number of mid-year transfers
- Increasing % of students enrolling in matched school
- Increasing % of students re-enrolling in matched school