Sources of Support for Schools

Schools need to be able to make use of the best ideas and materials available. Those things may come from the district, but they also might come from local organizations or from online providers. Portfolio districts help schools find these best ideas, training, or materials, and allow them to choose and purchase what they want within their budget.

Portfolio leaders do not view districts as the sole provider of schools or of services to schools. These leaders understand that the district central office is just one source of talent and ideas, and that charter schools have developed some very successful models that could better serve some students, and some of the charter school vendors may be a much better fit for some district-run schools. By allowing outside operators to run schools and by giving autonomy to all principals, including control over their budgets, school leaders can purchase the services they find most useful from vendors (including the district).

New Sources of School Operators

Portfolio districts invite groups of educators to run their own schools. Some of these groups might be found inside the district (e.g., groups of principals and teachers who have an idea for how they would work together if given the freedom to put their ideas into action). However, internal groups are not the only possible new school providers. To offer large numbers of new options, and to make sure children get the best possible new schools, leaders of portfolio districts look both inside and outside their districts.

New York City has given new freedom to groups of school employees and has relied on local nonprofit groups with relevant expertise. A good example is New Visions for Public Schools, a nonprofit organized to create new schools in low-income areas of New York City (20 years before Chancellor Klein came onto the scene). New York City, Louisiana’s Recovery School District, and Chicago’s Renaissance 2010 initiative were all built on existing nonprofits, encouraged formation of others, and recruited national school operators like KIPP, Achievement First, and Green Dot.

In seeking to open 100 new schools during its Renaissance 2010 initiative, Chicago sought to attract some “big name” national providers. However, the district mainly relied on established local organizations recruited and sponsored by an independent business-funded philanthropy, the Renaissance Schools Fund. Denver, Baltimore, and Hartford also sought to encourage new local school providers and attract established national groups. Their moderate but steady rates of new school formation has required philanthropic investment and creation of new schools’ offices in the district headquarters.

New Sources of Support for Schools

Creating a more diverse set of assistance organizations allows portfolio districts to reduce the size and change the role of the central office staff. Per-pupil funding increases and schools have the money to buy the specific support services they need, ranging from school-specific professional development, budgeting, HR, curriculum, assessment, and analysis.

The district central office shifts to play several important roles. The district can be instrumental in identifying unmet support needs and promoting the formation of needed providers, either by providing seed funds or working with nonprofits that do this (like New Schools for New Orleans). It can also place accountability on vendors by assessing their performance (e.g., performance gains of schools they work with; satisfaction surveys of schools that have used the services) and sharing that performance information with schools.

In New York City and Chicago, the range of options available to school leaders is enormous, from professional development providers set up by colleges and former leaders of central office units, to major multi-service operators that can provide everything from teacher and leadership training to board development, self-assessment tools, and overall management of entire schools.

Louisiana’s RSD leadership did not want to build a large, permanent central office. Former Superintendent Paul Vallas, hoping to rely heavily on independent providers, could find only a few locally. New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO), an independent nonprofit, took on the job of creating an infrastructure of school support organizations. It hoped to encourage new and existing organizations to offer services that autonomous schools need, from facilities maintenance and accounting to teacher training and advice on school improvement. NSNO seeded development of these organizations, which then covered their operating costs from school fees.
Providing Services to Schools: The Traditional District and the Portfolio District

**Traditional District**
- Large central office is sole provider of services and schooling
- Central office has expertise to help some schools improve instruction—but not all
- Schools that need something the central office can’t provide are out of luck
- Efforts to encourage school-based initiative are thwarted by rigidity of central office structure
- Schools are permanent institutions operated by district

**Portfolio District**
- Highly scaled-back and streamlined central office serves role as regulator of providers of schooling and of services to schools
- School leaders looking for support can buy services from district or from organizations, including colleges, businesses, and nonprofits
- District and outside operators provide teacher and leadership training, board development, curriculum, facilities maintenance, even overall school management
- Schools are held accountable for results and will be closed if they fail to perform

**ELEMENTS OF A FULLY DEVELOPED PORTFOLIO IMPLEMENTATION ON DIVERSE SOURCES OF SCHOOLS AND SUPPORT**

- Districts provide rich and timely information on student and school performance
- Schools are free to choose support from diverse independent providers
- Procurement policies enable schools to work with vendors, regardless of established district contracts
- Attract and develop a marketplace for independent providers
- Strategies to engage developers of new educational technologies

**METRICS AND PROGRESS INDICATORS FOR DISTRICTS**

- **Do schools have access to adequate support resources?**
  - Increasing % of principals satisfied with current support provider
  - Increasing % of principals reporting access to support providers that meet their school's needs
  - Increasing % of principals reporting adequate access to data to inform decision making

- **Are current school support providers are providing high-quality support?**
  - Increasing % of schools experiencing student growth after partnering with a support provider(s)
  - Increasing % of providers working with schools that experience growth after commencing support work