Extensive Public Engagement

Districts need to know what families want and value, and districts need to show what they will deliver. This strategy brings a lot of changes to schools. It works best if it channels the needs and dreams of communities for their children, and translates those into new opportunities for families, teachers and school leaders.

Implementing a portfolio strategy can create enormous conflict. Co-locating schools in the same buildings; basing teacher evaluations in part on student achievement; recruiting teachers and administrators from new sources; weighting student funding and allocating it directly to schools; or closing down or replacing persistently low-performing schools are all controversial moves. The work is very difficult to sustain without broader buy-in from the community. Since the people most engaged in public education, particularly school employees and their unions, have reason to oppose many of these changes, portfolio district leaders need to seek out new sources of support. They must build an audience for public education reform among parents, who care a great deal, and with other audiences that have stakes in public education but have not always been fully engaged.

Portfolio district leaders, in general, have not managed to communicate the basics of the reform in ways people readily understand, nor have most cities gathered and shared data that might generate support. Portfolio districts are known for developing bold plans and launching them, all while hoping that the outcomes will be enough to convince people that it is a good idea. This, of course, is not how the public sector works. New initiatives, even those that eventually make important progress, seldom work so dramatically that their success is immediately evident or compelling enough to mitigate controversy. Portfolio district leaders must attend to community concerns and create opportunities for families and the community to help shape and invest in the work.

EXAMPLE

Public Engagement Lessons Learned the Hard Way

- **New York City** | Former Chancellor Joel Klein put in countless hours in churches and community meetings, but parents and educators still considered him remote and unresponsive. Nine years into the work, almost 75% of public school parents felt that things are about the same or worse even as graduation and achievement rates for all students steadily, and in some groups dramatically, increased.

- **New Orleans** | Recovery School District leaders shunned public meetings for a long time while they were working desperately to get new schools started. Many in New Orleans credit Paul Vallas and Paul Pastorek for fast action, but still condemn them for failing to consult.

- **Denver** | Support for the portfolio strategy constantly hangs on a one-vote margin on the school board. Superintendents Bennet and Boasberg have been strategic about public engagement, generating new sources of support, and learning the value of working quietly with key groups before rolling out big initiatives.
### Extensive Public Engagement

#### ELEMENTS OF A FULLY DEVELOPED PORTFOLIO IMPLEMENTATION ON PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

- Solicit ideas from families and communities about school and district decisions
- Partnerships and coalitions with key stakeholders
- Communication plan to convey information about reform strategy and progress (including strategic plan, implementation schedule, annual updates, and external progress review)
- Plan for helping district and school staff understand and support the strategy
- Feedback loop for families and community members to express concerns and receive response
- Public criteria and schedule for school closings and openings—make new options clear to families affected by closure

#### METRICS AND PROGRESS INDICATORS FOR DISTRICTS

**Is communication about the strategy effective?**
- Increasing % of parents that report understanding of the reform strategy; need for school closures; need for new schools; role of charter schools
- Increasing % of educators reporting a solid understanding of the district’s reform strategy
- Increasing % of community members who understand the district’s reform strategy

**Is the community satisfied with the strategy?**
- Increasing % of parents reporting high confidence in the district
- Increasing % of parents from closed schools satisfied with their new schools
- Increasing % of parents in new schools satisfied with their new schools
- Increasing number of community-based organizations formally engaged in district initiatives

**Is the district effectively communicating the impact of the strategy?**
- Increasing % of parents that understand the student outcome results of the reform
- Increasing % of school board members that understand the student outcome results of the reform
- Increasing % of community members that understand the student outcome results of the reform