

## Frequently Asked Questions about the Portfolio Strategy

### **What is the portfolio strategy? Why is it called “portfolio”?**

The portfolio strategy is a shift in local mindset and operations to create, empower, and manage a system of quality, autonomous schools run by educators, not a distant bureaucracy. By creating a diversity of schooling options, every family can find a school where their child can be motivated and successful. Every big city serves students who have different talents and life experiences.

Differentiation of schools is inevitable, but many school districts hold to the idea that there is one best approach. Portfolio makes diversity of schools a strategic principle and creates funding and regulatory conditions where many kinds of schools—including innovative schools with new approaches to instruction and student support—can be effective.

### **How does a “shift in mindset” play out in reality? What does a portfolio system look like?**

In a portfolio system, school leaders—not a central office—have freedom to create coherent models, with corresponding authority to hire staff, set budgets, and determine curriculum. A portfolio manager provides oversight, support, and coordination; the manager could be a refocused district central office. The portfolio strategy can be aligned with larger citywide efforts to improve outcomes for children and families across district and charter schools.

### **How did the portfolio strategy originate? How has it evolved?**

The portfolio strategy’s origins trace back to Paul Hill, Larry Pierce, and James Guthrie’s book, [Reinventing Public Education: How Contracting Can Transform America’s Schools](#). In essence, the authors wrote that school boards should contract for a “portfolio” of distinctive schools rather than directly operate a set of one-size-fits-all schools. School systems have built on this basic “contracting” concept to determine how school leadership teams can have control over their curriculum and budget while meeting performance goals, thus allowing schools to do what is right for students. Since 2009 CRPE has engaged many districts and portfolio systems in a knowledge-sharing network. The portfolio strategy has evolved to consider the specific role of charter schools, as well as a variety of civic groups interested in the welfare of families and children. The strategy also now recognizes the importance of public engagement and system supports to help parents navigate choice. We have crafted our [research agenda](#) to quickly identify and help the field address new challenges as school systems evolve.

### **What does “empowering” schools mean for students and educators? How are equity and access protected or enhanced for students?**

Much like an artist has a portfolio or collection of work, portfolio systems have a collection of schools that allow parents to find the best fit. The portfolio strategy moves decisions and resources to the school level—closer to students served. This empowers school principals to think differently about how to support teachers. And it empowers the school community—parents, teachers, and administrators alike—to think differently about how to meet the needs and interests of students. At the same time, the Portfolio Manager—a central office or school authorizer—ensures the system of schools is working for everyone. The Portfolio Manager provides oversight, helps incubate new school options, and may operate enrollment and transportation systems to ensure access.

## **Is having a portfolio strategy the same thing as having charter schools in a city? Will all schools be charter schools?**

The portfolio strategy calls for the creation, empowerment, and management of a variety of autonomous public schools, but it is agnostic about label. It is compatible with charter schools but not specifically driven by charter growth or expansion. In most portfolio systems both charter and district schools are empowered and supported. Almost all public schools are charter schools in New Orleans, but that tends to be the exception. In other cities, such as Chicago, the portfolio strategy primarily involves giving district-run neighborhood schools more autonomy over budgets, hiring, staffing models, and curriculum than traditional district models. These district schools exist alongside charter schools that may be independent, managed by the district, or part of a charter management organization. The exact split between district and charter schools varies and is determined by local preferences, the availability of strong charter operators, capacity, and policy considerations. It could even be the case that there are no charter schools in a city's portfolio system—but there would still be differentiation, autonomy, and family choice.

## **What types of instructional models are included in the portfolio strategy? What does an “autonomous” school look like in terms of curriculum and programs?**

Many schools look like a traditional neighborhood school. Other schools may have a particular focus or specialization similar to a magnet school. These schools could be focused on the arts, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math), or dual-language immersion. Schools may be based on classical, direct instruction, or they may be organized around personalized learning, with increased flexibility of how staff and student time is used during the school day. As part of the portfolio strategy, the central office or school authorizer lets schools determine their design or focus, while occasionally putting out requests for proposals to ensure a diverse supply of school options.

## **Who leads in the portfolio strategy? Who implements it? Is this a state or local initiative?**

The voices of civic leaders, school board members, educators, and parent advocates are important for setting a common vision for the portfolio strategy in their city or community. If school districts decide to transition to a portfolio system, the day-to-day work is often spearheaded by a superintendent or member of their cabinet with experience in change management. The portfolio strategy has been implemented in cities and communities with elected school boards (most common) or mayoral control. The portfolio strategy is generally a locally driven effort, although state legislation, such as seen in Cleveland, can help support the initiative.

## **What is the role for charter school authorizers? Why should cities with different authorizers ensure system-level coordination within a city?**

Local school boards are often already the authorizer of charter schools. The work to authorize, evaluate, and renew schools should be aligned with or run by the same central office that performs portfolio management on behalf of the school board. Non-district authorizers can also encourage charter schools to align efforts with that of the district, such as through a common enrollment system. Many cities have multiple authorizers that create a high-choice environment, but system-level coordination is needed to make sure those choices work for every student, including those with special needs. Our studies of [Detroit](#) and other places show that choice alone is not enough. The [Boston Compact](#), a collaboration between district and charter leaders, shows how district and state-authorized charters can work together. In Cleveland, district leaders, charter school leaders, local funders, and nonprofits pushed for the [Cleveland Plan](#)—state legislation that offers a potential example of state-district-charter collaboration.

### **How does a city avoid having “too many” schools?**

The principal concern in the portfolio strategy is whether schools are high quality. Schools of all sizes may be opened to meet this need. A portfolio manager should replace or consolidate schools that underperform. The question of how to determine the right placement of new school options, especially if enrollment is declining, has been raised in some cities but is a subject of ongoing debate and study. In the case of state, university, or nonprofit charter authorizers, these non-district authorizers can collaborate with a district’s central office to create a common school performance framework so all schools are held to the same standards, engage with community to ensure that new schools are responsive to local needs, and develop transparent displays of enrollment and demand data to inform strategy on school openings and consolidations.

### **Is the portfolio strategy “anti-district” or “pro-district”? Do neighborhood public schools have a place in the strategy?**

The portfolio strategy is neither anti-district nor pro-district. The strategy calls for a coordinated system of autonomous schools rather than creating an entirely new or separate system from existing public schools in a city. In many cities, a portfolio system could evolve by shifting the operations of a school district rather than replacing it altogether. Many parents and community members value the history and cultural significance of public schools in their neighborhoods. Additionally, many education reform strategies have been proposed and discussed over the last decade; some regulation of public education is inevitable in order to ensure accountability, equity, and quality. The portfolio strategy is a way to embrace local traditions while moving away from a “one-size-fits-all” approach to public education that could stifle innovation, choice, and performance.

### **Where has the portfolio strategy been implemented?**

The portfolio strategy has been pursued in places such as, but not limited to, Camden, New Jersey; Chicago; Cleveland; Denver; Grand Prairie, Texas; Indianapolis; New Orleans; Newark, New Jersey; Oakland; San Antonio; and Spring Branch ISD, Texas. Additionally, high-choice cities such as Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, Kansas City, Missouri; Los Angeles; Philadelphia; New York City; Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Washington, D.C. have elements of a portfolio strategy, even if district schools tend to be run more centrally.

### **What's the evidence for success of the portfolio strategy?**

Studies of high-performing schools across the private, district, and charter sectors have identified empowered school leaders and coherent school designs as key drivers of their success. The portfolio strategy is about creating the policy and system conditions and incentives that would allow high-performing schools to thrive. Sustained student improvement outcomes in [Chicago](#), [Denver](#), [Washington, D.C.](#), and [New York City](#), as well as promising early results in [Camden](#), [New Orleans](#), and [Indianapolis](#), suggest that the portfolio strategy has the potential to foster thriving schools at scale across a city, rather than just in pockets.

That said, causal studies of the strategy are complex endeavors: the portfolio strategy is more than a single idea. It involves many different policies and actors working together, and may entail different interventions in different cities depending on the local context. In an upcoming project, CRPE hopes to engage a panel of experts to develop a research agenda and program to identify how well the key policies associated with the portfolio strategy positively impact educator job satisfaction, public engagement, and student learning.

### **What’s the evidence for some of the components of the portfolio strategy?**

Some interventions commonly associated with the portfolio strategy have been studied but results vary depending on local context. The effect of charter school attendance looks different in different cities, but tends to be more positive at [nonprofit](#) charter schools in [urban](#) networks. In Chicago, charter high schools [helped improve a range of student outcomes](#). In [Denver](#) and [Boston](#), charter schools helped raise student achievement, but efforts to extend charter-like autonomy to district schools [did not](#). In Memphis, iZone schools that received charter-like autonomy [did improve outcomes](#), but results were not as positive in schools taken over by Tennessee’s Achievement School District. Concerted efforts to close low-performing public schools [have been shown to pay off](#), but only [when system leaders](#) ensure higher-quality school options are available. [In Denver](#), efforts to streamline access to the full range of autonomous schools through unified enrollment have reduced student-access gaps. In short, the research record on the impact of specific policies, and the interaction among different policies within cities, is often incomplete.

### **Which policies are essential/nonessential to the portfolio strategy? How many of the components must a city follow to be considered a “portfolio system”?**

The essence of a portfolio strategy is a commitment to diversity of schooling, level playing fields among schools, continuous improvement of the options available, and family choice. City or district leaders pursuing the portfolio strategy should ask: Do families have choices? Do schools have decision-making authority? Are we assessing school performance and quality? Are schools performing or improving? What actions—interventions or extra supports—do we take based on this data? How do we expand or replace schools to ensure that every neighborhood has a quality option? The answers may not be the same in every city or community but simply by asking the questions, the city or community would be using the portfolio strategy. For example, when considering whether families have choices, a city may decide it needs a unified enrollment system to ensure equitable access. But another city may decide that an open-enrollment fair or a select number of open-enrollment campuses is right for its communities. For more information, see the [seven components](#)—or focus areas—of a portfolio strategy

### **What stalls implementation or causes cities to walk away from the portfolio strategy?**

CRPE has studied common [sticking points](#) for the portfolio strategy. Many cities or communities that struggle with implementation have found they must pay more attention to building public support for the strategy and to dedicate resources to change management. The strategy requires the role of district central office departments and traditional school principals to change, often quite dramatically. Principals, for example, don’t usually have training in creating or managing budgets. Leadership changes, such as superintendent turnover, can stall progress. School boards can assist by adopting the strategy as its vision and hiring a superintendent to execute that vision. Community-based groups can also help provide education and support to families on navigating the system and holding schools accountable for results.

### **How do cities and communities start to implement the strategy? What resources can help districts and other stakeholders interested in the strategy?**

We worked with practitioners to develop the [Portfolio Strategy Toolkit](#). It is intended to support systems leaders in districts exploring or currently implementing the portfolio strategy. Developing a theory of action, assessing a system’s readiness, and identifying a city’s resources are key factors to moving from a traditional model to a portfolio model. CRPE can connect people to leaders in other cities implementing portfolio or refer organizations that provide technical assistance or consulting. For more information, please email [crpe@uw.edu](mailto:crpe@uw.edu).