



Portfolio School Districts in Transition: Steering Through Uncharted Waters

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The first portfolio school districts began a decade ago, and now the strategy is the comprehensive vision at the heart of almost 30 districts across the country.

The portfolio strategy transforms the role of a school district from a vertically integrated monopoly provider to a sponsor of a diverse set of schools staffed by the best people and operated by the best organizations available. The portfolio strategy is indifferent to who runs schools. It is by design open to new ideas and new uses of technology. City leaders who have adopted the strategy commit to continuous improvement, to provide the best possible learning opportunities for every student.

This reform strategy was first adopted in leading education reform cities like New York City and New Orleans, and it is spreading in slightly different forms to districts as different as Denver, Cleveland, and Jefferson Parish, Louisiana. In many cities, core portfolio ideas like school autonomy, family choice, and replacement of failing schools were first limited to just a subset of schools, but these principles are now being applied districtwide.

In July 2012, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) hosted its seventh semiannual Portfolio School District Network meeting. Sixteen district teams—made up of superintendents, chief operations officers, chief academic officers, chief financial officers, portfolio officers, and school board members—met in Seattle to work through the challenging issues of portfolio district transition.

Jefferson Parish Superintendent James Meza launched the meeting with an account of his efforts to remake that district. A formerly retired state leader and seasoned educator, he came back into service as an interim superintendent and, by his estimation, is doing some of the most significant work of his career. By placing student needs at the forefront of all staffing and budgeting decisions, he cut 200 jobs in the central office, laid off excess teachers, removed low-performing principals, started creating new schools for the children most in need of better options, and reorganized the district as a portfolio district. He did this all with a supportive, elected board. Jefferson Parrish is the “new” portfolio district—not in crisis, not controlled by a mayor, not reliant on special imported talent or investments, and working in concert with an elected board and teachers unions.

With districts like Jefferson Parish in mind, attendees focused on the transition from a traditional district model to a portfolio strategy. Sessions covered how districts can remake their central offices to support a district-wide portfolio of schools; move toward student-based allocations; communicate strategic change to central office employees, principals, and teachers; import best practices from successful charter schools; and more.

As much as the sessions answered some questions, they also raised new ones. No blueprint exists for portfolio strategy implementation—districts undertaking this strategy today must assume calculated risks, make unpopular but necessary cuts, and challenge long-held assumptions about who runs schools and what schools look like. The growth of district-charter collaboration in many portfolio cities is a vivid example of districts moving into new territory. The ultimate test for all these changes is whether they improve student outcomes.

To assist these vanguard districts as they keep moving forward, CRPE has evolved from generating the portfolio idea to developing an in-depth understanding of districts' needs. CRPE's newly redesigned website hosts tools like CRPE's [Portfolio Implementation Snapshots](#), which provide districts with a gauge of their progress on the [7 key components](#), and offers access to key resources shared by portfolio districts. Based on a survey and interviews conducted in spring 2012, CRPE is also differentiating its support to address the challenges portfolio leaders face:

- Building awareness and understanding within districts, as well as within their communities
- Designing and implementing a complete portfolio strategy
- Providing evidence on whether students are better off because of the changes

CRPE is quickly developing new supports and services and engaging with districts and foundations to help broaden and sustain this work. New options include the [Portfolio 101 Leadership Training](#) (launching October 23-25 in Cleveland), to which districts can send boards, leadership teams, and others to learn the basics of the strategy and ask critical questions, and the Portfolio Officers Institute, to grow and support the people who must implement these complex ideas. CRPE's Portfolio District Data Consortium will collect and analyze benchmark data on student, school, and program performance to compare across sites. And CRPE will continue to convene the growing Portfolio School District Network twice a year, connecting leaders to new ideas and to each other.

Summaries that capture important takeaways from the Seattle meeting sessions can be found [here](#), along with the agenda, PowerPoints, and pre-reading materials.

Learn more about the [Portfolio School District Network](#) and the [7 Components of a Portfolio Strategy](#).