



## Literature Review: Portfolio of Schools

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### I. Introduction

High schools in the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) have grown in number, from 38 in 2003 to 59 in 2007. The development of new schools has resulted in a wider variety of high school options that differ from one another in size, admissions policy, theme, and the involvement of outside partners. The SDP has a system of high school choice, whereby eighth grade students have the option of applying to particular high schools instead of being assigned to their neighborhood high school. The School Reform Commission's (SRC's) Declaration of Education states that: "All Philadelphia students will have access to school choice options that include high quality public, privately managed and charter schools" (Next Step Associates 2006:45). Due to its diversity of high school options, Philadelphia has been identified by some observers outside the city as pursuing a "portfolio" of high schools (e.g., see Hill 2006; Robelen 2006; Simmons 2007). In fact, some observers have conflated Philadelphia's diverse provider model, wherein some schools are managed by outside partners, with the portfolio model (e.g., see Hill 2006; Davidson 2005).

In 2007, a now former chief academic officer stated that the SDP's goal "is to create a portfolio of options" for high schools, but our interviews with several other central office administrators suggest that the language of the portfolio model is not universally shared. While the SDP shares an understanding that it is employing a diverse provider model, there has been no district-wide policy statement on creating a portfolio model of high schools.

In 2006, Research for Action (RFA) began documenting the SDP's Secondary Education Movement Phase II (SEM II) high school planning process. This examination of the literature on the portfolio model of schools is in part intended to provide information to the SEM II planning team, including the SDP and its partners.

This paper will define the portfolio model and identify its key values. We will then describe four fundamental components of the model's implementation. In conclusion, we outline some relevant policy decisions that need to be made by districts if they pursue a portfolio of high schools.

*Defining the Portfolio Model of Schools*

The portfolio model of school management is a district-wide approach to high school reform. Schools in a district's portfolio represent a diversity of organizational formats, pedagogical approaches, and governance structures. A district focuses on managing the portfolio as a strategy for creating a district-wide system of individually excellent schools that will prepare all students for college and careers (Warren & Hernandez 2005; Hill 2006; Feist et al. 2007). High schools in a portfolio might have different sizes, program configurations, and thematic emphases (Allen et al. 2007). Furthermore,

*“A portfolio of schools is more than a mix of schools among which students choose. It is a strategy for creating an entire system of excellent high schools that uses managed universal choice as a central lever for district change”* (Warren & Hernandez 2005:5).

The portfolio model is considered particularly appropriate for high schools as opposed to elementary or middle schools (Campbell et al. 2005:156). The model has primarily been adopted in large urban districts as a district-wide approach to high school reform.

The portfolio model also served as the foundation for a multi-city high school reform effort called the *Schools for a New Society* initiative, funded by Carnegie Corporation and the Gates Foundation (Carnegie 2004). Seven cities participated in this initiative and each designed a portfolio of high schools: Boston, Chattanooga/Hamilton County (TN), Houston, Providence, Sacramento, and Worcester (MA). The Annenberg Institute of School Reform recommends the portfolio strategy as a promising path to district-wide reform (Feist et al. 2007). Baltimore, Chicago, New York, Oakland, San Francisco, and Seattle have also been identified as pursuing a portfolio approach to high school reform (Warren & Hernandez 2005; Robelen 2006; Cavanna et al. 2007).

## II. Key Values of the Portfolio Approach

The literature on the portfolio model of high schools emphasizes the importance of a district being *intentional* about pursuing and implementing such a model. There are four values that are identified as key to the model: **excellence, diversity, choice, and equity** (Warren & Hernandez 2005; Feist 2007).

*Excellence:* Advocates of the portfolio model suggest that high schools today need to prepare students for *both* careers and college. Therefore,

*“Whatever their focus or format, every school within the portfolio must be designed to help students meet rigorous academic standards and to prepare students for postsecondary education and/or professional training”* (Warren & Hernandez 2005).

*Diversity:* A portfolio of schools is designed to meet a range of individual preferences and learning styles within a diverse student population. The array of programs under the portfolio model is seen as a means to increase student engagement in learning. Diversity of instruction is also intended to increase teacher engagement by giving teachers more control over classroom activities and curricula.

*Choice:* Another goal of the portfolio model is to give students the opportunity to choose their high school based on their own interests and aspirations. The intended outcome is “that students will feel engaged by their school work, see its relevance to their future, be more committed to participating in the school as a community, and strive to achieve academically” (Warren & Hernandez 2005:7-8). For a system of choice to work, the choices must be good choices (Ancess & Allen 2006). Thus, the district must have “a sufficient supply of excellent options so that all students can find a place in at least one of their top choices” (Warren & Hernandez 2005:9).

*Equity:* In a portfolio, students should be matched with high schools in a fair and unbiased manner to assure that all students

receive an excellent education. Advocates of the model argue that it “is a promising way” to challenge the “not-so-soft bigotry of the opportunity gap that feeds and fuels the stubborn disparities in achievement” (Feist et al. 2007:9). However, the literature also recognizes that a portfolio can potentially undermine equity if the diversity of programs and curricular themes is used to justify differential academic standards. To prevent this, the model must incorporate district monitoring and feedback strategies that keep systemic inequalities—particularly of class and race—from re-emerging (Warren & Hernandez 2005).

Equity is also a key intended outcome of the model. High expectations for all students, combined with a unique program at each high school are designed to engage students and teachers, and to result in “multiple paths to success, organized around a common core set of standards and instructional practices” (Feist et al. 2007:9).

### III. Implementing a Portfolio

The implementation of the portfolio model of high schools begins with four components: 1) developing a district-wide vision for the portfolio; 2) developing district capacity to actively manage a portfolio of high schools; 3) developing school choice policies that are consistent with the district-wide vision; and 4) managing partnerships and collaborating with partners to carry out the previous three steps.

#### 1. District-Wide Vision

The literature notes that to implement a portfolio, everyone in the system must do their job in new ways that emphasize “flexibility of means and clarity of ends” (Cavanna et al. 2006: 3). The approach also requires a high level of coordination between the district and its partners, and between multiple offices within a district. Thus, commitment to a portfolio must be district-wide, and include broad-based support from partners, school communities, residential communities, and the business

community in order to be sustainable and successful over time.

#### 2. Active Management of a Portfolio

A defining feature of the portfolio model is that it is actively managed at the district level (Warren & Hernandez 2005; Taggart 2005; Hill 2006).

*‘Portfolio management’ . . . implies that the district, led by the school board and informed by the community, intentionally manages (and revises) a set of schooling options in response to a variety of forces, most importantly evidence of student and school performance.*  
(Taggart 2005:4-5)

District leaders become portfolio managers who oversee performance agreements with schools and groups of schools (Hill 2006). It is the responsibility of the district and its governing body to “closely manage their community’s portfolio of educational service offerings, divesting less productive schools and adding more promising ones” (Hill 2006:2).

- *Research and Evaluation:* While at Carnegie Corporation, Constancia Warren and Mindy Hernandez advised that, “A continual review of student and teacher assignment and student-performance data is an essential component of maintaining a balanced and effective portfolio” (Warren & Hernandez 2005:6-7). The district’s central office, with the help of its partners, must assess the extent to which students’ and families’ preferences are being met by the current range of high school options. Relevant data would include demographic information on which students are being matched with their top choices compared with which students—and how many students—are being assigned to a high school “by default.” For example, in Philadelphia in 2006, and again in 2007, approximately 13,000 students applied to start ninth grade at a high school other than

their zoned neighborhood school.<sup>1</sup> Among these applicants, in both years, 51% were not accepted to any school to which they applied; 29% were admitted to only one high school; and 20% were admitted to more than one high school (Neild et al. 2008). These data, along with data on school performance, would be shared, reviewed, and discussed internally *and* externally, with partners and the broader community of parents, students, and residents.

- *Facilities and Capital Improvements:* In a portfolio, data on school performance and “school choice” patterns are used to make decisions about which schools need extra support, and which schools ought to be closed due to poor performance and/or under-enrollment. These data would also be used to inform decisions about what types of new high schools need to be “in the pipeline” to replace poorly performing schools (Warren & Hernandez 2005). Under a portfolio system of high schools, the district has a responsibility to ensure that the choices of schools meet the interests and needs of the community and the students. Thus, “Leaders must carefully plan their school locations and curriculum, target low-income students appropriately, and communicate with all stakeholders” (Gates Foundation 2004:13). For example, small high schools or high schools with particular pedagogical or curricular themes might be added in response to input from parents, students, and the community.

- *Student Placement:* In a portfolio, the district establishes a policy of “open access” and guarantees all students access to excellent public schools by designing and managing the guidance and admissions process to provide fair access to the schools in the portfolio (Feist et al. 2007:9). Allen et al. (2007) recommend that a district’s central office establish explicit criteria to govern the school application and selection

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<sup>1</sup> In 2006, 13,005 students applied to start high school in the SDP, including 10,684 who attended 8<sup>th</sup> grade in the SDP, and 2,321 who attended 8<sup>th</sup> grade outside the District. In 2007, a total of 12,786 eighth graders applied to a high school in the SDP other than their zoned school.

process to ensure equity. Warren and Hernandez caution, “To be effective, the portfolio of schools must *not* be allowed to become a new form of tracking that narrows rather than expands the opportunities available for students” (2005:6). Again, excellence and equity are key.

- *Human Resources & Finance:* Excellence and equity are also achieved through the equitable distribution of resources, especially teacher quality, amongst the schools (Feist et al. 2007). Because each school is different and has unique needs, it is particularly challenging for a district with a portfolio to equitably distribute resources. Hill (2006) recommends that schools in a portfolio receive a per-pupil funding allocation, rather than prescribed resources and staff. Another potential challenge to equitable resource distribution is that schools that have partnerships with financially strong institutions may have access to greater resources than schools that do not. However, the literature on the portfolio model does not explicitly address this concern.

- *Curriculum & Instruction:* In order to implement a portfolio of schools, it is recommended that a district “apply universal standards of excellence across schools and provide supports to enable teachers and students to reach those standards” (Feist et al. 2007:9). Policy and practice are guided by a notion of excellence that emphasizes high expectations of both students and staff. Additional indicators of excellence include equitable access to rigorous coursework and to the supports needed to succeed (Feist et al. 2007). The literature on the portfolio model emphasizes the importance of improving instruction *and* improving conditions for teaching and learning. As evidenced in its *Schools for a New Society* initiative, Carnegie Corporation believes that conditions for teaching and learning will be improved by fostering personalized learning environments in schools, developing professional learning communities among teachers, raising

graduation requirements for students, holding all schools accountable to high standards, and encouraging and supporting partnerships between businesses, universities, parents, student groups, and community organizations (Carnegie 2004).

Personalized learning is also valued in a portfolio as a means to greater student engagement. In the *Schools for a New Society* initiative, small learning communities and small schools were established to personalize the student learning experience. The initiative also included personalized supports for students via one-on-one meetings with adult advocates (usually teachers) who supported them throughout their four years of high school (Carnegie 2004). Another way schools can personalize their students' learning experiences is through partnerships with civic and community organizations. In San Diego, for example, a partnership with AVID (Advancement via Individual Determination—a fourth through twelfth grade system to prepare students in “the academic middle” for college) provides students with intensive tutoring, activities to build good note-taking and study skills, motivational sessions that encourage students to pursue leadership activities, and access to college and scholarship information (Carnegie 2004).

Additionally, although a portfolio can coexist with managed instruction, the portfolio model emphasizes innovation and choice as central levers of improvement (Simmons 2007). In a portfolio—just as with other high school reform efforts—individual districts make decisions about how to balance managed instruction with a performance/empowerment strategy. Robelen (2006) notes: “Even those who embrace the concept differ on exactly what a portfolio should look like. The Gates Foundation, for instance, touts the idea of marrying the new choices to aligned instructional strategies across a district, while some believe that schools need curricular autonomy to drive innovation”

(Robelen 2006). Indeed, Allen et al. (2007) suggest that giving schools autonomy over hiring, budget, governance, time and/or curriculum can strengthen new schools in a portfolio. Although not speaking to the idea of a portfolio specifically, Supovitz argues that managed instruction and performance strategies can—and ought to be—synthesized into a “learning for teaching” approach. In this synthesized approach, district-wide goals for instructional quality co-exist with structured opportunities for all in the system (central administrators, principals, teachers, and students) to “explore the implications of the guiding vision for their own work and practice” (Supovitz 2006:225).

### 3. Developing a School Choice Policy

A key decision when developing a portfolio of high schools is what kind of choice system to have. This decision should be based on a district's aims and intended outcomes. Advocates of the portfolio model call for a system of universal choice (Warren & Hernandez 2005; Feist 2007), meaning that all students in the system have access to a range of choices. This typically means that all schools become “schools of choice” among which students and their families must actively choose. A universal system of school choice contrasts with an “option demand” system, as currently exists in Philadelphia. Here, a student has the option of choosing up to five preferred schools but is assigned to a residentially zoned school if a transfer request is not made, or if he or she is not offered a space at any of the requested schools. (Students may be turned down by the high school(s) of their choice if they do not meet the admissions criteria or if there is not adequate space.) While most advocates of the portfolio model do not explicitly address the question of special admissions schools, the American Institutes of Research (AIR) offers a rubric that districts can use to evaluate the effectiveness of their portfolio. It asserts that in the “best” version of the portfolio model, “every student has the ability to choose any school (subject to space availability) and transportation is

provided to [at least] several school options.”<sup>2</sup> Advocates of the portfolio model agree that implementing this approach requires equitable distribution of students and social capital throughout schools (Feist et al. 2007).

The literature on the portfolio model acknowledges that giving students and their families the ability to choose “freely” any school they wish can result in stratification by socioeconomic status and racial identity (Gates, 2004). This could happen for a number of reasons. First, previous research has shown that individuals of higher socioeconomic status have access to social and professional networks that offer extensive, often firsthand, information about schooling options. On the other hand, parents of lower-socioeconomic status frequently rely on formal avenues (such as the newspaper and school brochures) that provide less detailed and/or candid information about the quality of school options (Schneider et al. 1997). Second, as West (2006) points out, while school choice is said to give families greater control over where their children attend school, in the end, after families indicate their school preferences, it is the *schools* that choose the students—often selectively. Third, parents’ own class prejudice is a factor. Research by Holme (2002) suggests that upper-income parents’ conception of a high quality school is one that enrolls few lower-income students.

These issues present a challenge for any district pursuing a portfolio of high schools: how to increase student engagement and meet the interests of diverse constituents without creating a school choice process which merely justifies inequities—a process that could now be rationalized by claims that students (and their parents) “voluntarily” choose their schools. At a minimum, a choice system requires that information on all school options be made accessible and available to all students and their families.

<sup>2</sup> See item 3.1 in the AIR rubric titled “Attributes of a High Performing ‘Portfolio Model’ District (American Institutes of Research 2004).

(Feist et al. 2007:3). For example, New York City’s District 4 had an outreach program and an information center to help parents make their choices (Marschall 2000). The depth of information in a district’s *Directory of High Schools* is also important. Information on student outcomes at individual schools can help parents and students make informed decisions (Evans 2007).

Some cities have attempted to address these challenges by adopting controlled choice plans. In cities such as Montclair, NJ, Cambridge, MA, and San Francisco, CA, the district makes an effort to give students their top choices of schools but also makes school assignment decisions with an eye to socioeconomic diversity within each school.<sup>3</sup> There are also some district programs (e.g., Educational Options in New York City) that are designed to ensure diversity of academic performance within each high school when assigning students to schools (Evans 2007). Yet even some of these programs reserve the “best choices” for certain students. For example, Educational Options guarantees students who score in the top 2% on their 7th grade standardized reading exam access to their first choice school (Evans 2007).

Deciding what type of choice plan to pursue must be a key part of developing a district-wide vision that is consistent with the values of the district, its partners, and the community. Excellence, equity, diversity, and choice must all be considered when developing a portfolio.

#### 4. Managing Partnerships

Partnerships with external organizations, including businesses, universities, community organizations, and educational management organizations, are increasingly viewed as important to district-wide reform models. The portfolio model is no exception. Simmons (2007) suggests that in

<sup>3</sup> Cambridge, MA, uses a controlled choice plan only for its elementary schools, as there is only one high school in that district.

Philadelphia, “the multiple provider and portfolio approach appears to be less a product of explicit district redesign than an additional lever for school support and intervention” (194). Whatever the goal, partnerships need to be used strategically. Researchers and advisors at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform recommend that districts—and particularly the district leader—must “balance these multiple working relationships with the vision and direction of the district” (Register & Thompson 2007:23).

Partnerships are viewed as essential for linking the goals and expectations of the city and its communities with the schools. Feist et al. (2007) argue that, in order to achieve “success for all students,” districts will develop a working partnership with the community to: 1) intentionally create a portfolio of excellent high schools; 2) redesign the way the district operates to lead and support these schools; 3) leverage community contributions to expanding learning opportunities for youth; and 4) engage youth both in their own learning and in the reform effort (Feist et al. 2007:3).

There is much work involved at the district level in starting, maintaining, and ending partnerships. Simmons points to two challenges stemming from reliance on external partners, cautioning that, “The push to attach partners to individual schools. . . can quickly strip communities of available assets and deny scarce resources to others” (Simmons 2007:202). In addition, the assignment of organizations as partners to individual schools may undermine the ability of schools and partners to share knowledge, tools, and strategies across schools or community organizations because the resources of each partner are shared with particular schools rather than with a network of collaborating schools (Simmons 2007). The use of partners and providers therefore has the potential to exacerbate inequities.

A key aspect of the portfolio model is that districts will close schools that are not serving students well. However, providers become part of the fabric of the District, and closing schools may also mean severing a

relationship with a provider who has considerable resources and influence. As Gold et al. point out, “Public sector reliance on a small number of private sector partners can undermine the public sector’s ability to find providers to meet changing needs or to dismiss a contractor for underperformance” (Gold et al. 2006:189-190). Challenges may also arise with ending partnerships, particularly when such partnerships involve financial or contractual ties.

Extensive use of partners does not mean that districts lessen their own responsibilities. Rather, a district must build capacity to manage providers and partners. It is the district that remains accountable for student performance at all its schools. The district must therefore implement standards to assure positive results. Even with a strategic use of partnerships, therefore, the district needs to maintain enough decision-making power to actively manage a portfolio of high schools.

## V. Concluding Comments

The portfolio model of school management is a district-wide approach to high school reform that uses a diversity of organizational formats, educational approaches, and governance to create a district-wide system of individually excellent schools that prepare all students for college and careers. Four key values are central to this approach: excellence, equity, diversity, and choice.

At the district level, implementation of a portfolio involves developing a district-wide vision; actively managing a portfolio of high schools; collaborating with partners; and developing school choice policies that are consistent with the district-wide vision. Districts that decide to pursue a portfolio must address key policy issues as they develop their vision. These policy questions include:

- What kind of choice system will we develop?
- What is the role of outside partners, and who will have decision-making power to initiate or terminate

partnerships? How will partnerships be managed?

- What are the criteria for closing schools, and who makes the decisions about which schools to close? Who makes decisions about opening new schools or transitioning current schools into new structures?

Regarding the current array of high school options in Philadelphia, one might conclude, as have some outside observers, that Philadelphia is developing a portfolio of high schools. However, a diversity of schooling options is only a partial definition of what makes up a portfolio of schools.

In a portfolio, choice must be regulated and managed to ensure equity and excellence across all schools. At the same time, portfolios often involve strategic partnerships. Finally, developing a portfolio must be intentional if it is to be successful at assuring that the range of options do not further entrench inequity and tracking.

While the portfolio model is being pursued in a number of cities, to date there have been no large-scale studies of the effectiveness of the portfolio approach in systematically improving high schools (Cavanna et al. 2006). While the portfolio model of high schools may be a viable strategy for district-wide secondary reform, it is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

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