Post-Pandemic Portfolio Schools

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Recommendations

1. *To help forestall post-pandemic enrollment declines in urban districts, states provide fiscal incentives to urban districts to encourage the introduction and extension of a district-wide system of portfolio schools offering a wide selection of options, which gives every student a choice of school. A range of options is especially needed at the middle and high school levels. The size and nature of state incentives must necessarily depend on state fiscal legacies and the political realities of the moment. But, crucially, the incentives must be made available only as districts implement their portfolio plans. And state policy makers need to retain the authority to withhold downstream funding if the portfolio plan is not adequately implemented.*

2. *Principals of portfolio schools be selected for their ability to provide strong leadership and be given the necessary preparation and autonomy that enable them to recruit staff and design a curriculum suitable to the school's traditions and aspirations.*

3. *District leaders monitor school performances with multiple measures of school effectiveness and support schools in need of technical and other assistance.*

4. *Portfolio schools should be combined with other choice opportunities, as discussed elsewhere.*[1]

Urban Schools in the Time of COVID-19

For an entire school year, millions of students have been asked to learn mainly—if not exclusively—online. Children sit—or don't sit—before computer screens, with glazed eyes, wandering minds, and attention distracted by background noise and music. Social isolation undermines the willingness to learn.

In the words of one Pennsylvania parent: "I've watched her go from a child that has loved school, thrived at school her entire life to one now, using her own words, who just doesn't care anymore."[2] Urban schools are the most likely to have remained closed to in-person instruction throughout the 2020–21 school year, and they are especially likely to have closed the school door to those in middle and high school.[3] Academic performance is falling. Absenteeism is rampant. Chronic absenteeism—missing 10 percent of the time or more—is raging. Midway into the 2020–21 school year, 40 percent of Boston's juniors and seniors were reported to be chronically absent.[4] Nearly every state is reporting enrollment declines.[5] When complete information becomes available, the declines are likely to be worse than currently reported, as many districts assume a student is enrolled unless evidence to the contrary is definitive. In New York City, students can "attend" school simply by pushing a button on a computer once a day.[6]

Urban districts are finding it difficult to focus on the needs of parents and children in good part because they are hamstrung by union demands that schools remain closed and threatened by strikes if they open. In Chicago, teachers went on strike to keep the schools closed, then finally agreed to open them for children in first and second grade. President Joe Biden, at the height of his honeymoon in office, promised to open the schools within one hundred days but then was persuaded by union pressures to declare a school open if a child could attend one day a week. The risk of spreading infections inside school buildings has been greatly exaggerated. Children and young people are much less likely than others to become infected, spread the infection, or become seriously ill if infected. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), only twelve of the first 68,998 US deaths from COVID-19 occurred among children under age fourteen.[7] Yet union leaders in many large cities are insisting that teacher salaries be paid in full but no one be asked to teach in person—unless ventilation systems are overhauled,[8] daily testing is required, and vaccination of teachers and other school employees is universal.[9]

✏1 Parents of color have always understood the challenges faced by their children in America's education system. The pandemic created another great awakening to spread that recognition across more communities. So now there is a broader reckoning for the US education system in need of vast changes.

—Christina Laster, director of policy and legislation, National Parents Union

✏1 Impacts on students are uneven. Some children have survived—even prospered—under the coaching of amazing teachers, home tutors, neighborhood learning pods, and capable, attentive parents. But for most urban students, the 2020–21 school year is marked by computer screen drudgery or worse. Research reports,[10] parent

surveys,[11] and statistical models[12] all portend grave losses in learning, physical fitness, social relationships, and emotional well-being. Students from low-income families are much less likely to be attending school in person than those from high-income families.[13]

Some families have switched to charter schools or the private sector, turned to homeschooling,[14] or moved to places where schools are open, as many parents are finding it possible to be equally productive at their work in a home environment as in the office.[15] One family even left the closed schools of California for open schools in Texas, never to return until the boys finish high school.[16]

Once the pandemic comes to an end, urban districts need to regain the confidence of families and students, to forestall the ongoing flight from the urban school, and to contain the power of unions. They can take a strong forward step in this direction by designing a portfolio model for their districts so that all schools become schools of choice. States should provide fiscal incentives to districts to encourage them to adopt and extend the portfolio approach to urban education. ✏$_2$ The portfolio approach described here is best combined with other choice reforms discussed elsewhere.[17] ✏$_3$

The Portfolio Model

✏$_4$ The portfolio model is quite the opposite of the cookie-cutter neighborhood school and comprehensive high school, which offer the same line of products to all students. Urban districts that adopt the portfolio model offer instead a range of choices that allows families to select the type of school they feel best suits the needs of the student. Just as painters show their artistic oeuvre in a portfolio for their customers to consider, so a portfolio district informs students and families of the array of schools and approaches among which students and families may choose. In a large urban district, these can be expected to vary widely, especially at the middle and high school levels. ✏$_5$ The range may include such distinctive school types as International Baccalaureate, Montessori, bilingual immersion, college preparation, performing arts, math and science, history, and archaeology (with attention to immediate surroundings). Schools may decide to emphasize career readiness by focusing on one

✏$_2$ Phoenix Union High School District is the antithesis of "cookie-cutter." We're a portfolio of twenty-plus high schools offering highly specialized options. Most neighborhood school districts that I have visited over the years do the same, offering IB [International Baccalaureate], Montessori, dual enrollment, dual language, bioscience, the arts, and beyond. A portfolio strategy can work for students and families, regardless of whether or not the district is unionized. And if you look closer at examples like Miami-Dade, Phoenix, San Antonio, and others, I think you'll find evidence that the urban district model has the potential to be the most innovative of all public education models. We should be asking questions about how to empower American school districts, not positioning portfolio models and other innovative school models as anti-union. Phoenix Union has seen our employee associations be true partners in this effort, and policy makers should be looking to examples of where this type of partnership has worked.

—Chad E. Gestson, superintendent, Phoenix Union High School District

✏$_3$ Early college high schools are getting traction in my local community and in communities around the country. We've seen local foundations make significant commitments to building more of these programmatic and school options. Business leaders, civic leaders, and postsecondary institutions are naming this as a top priority—and it's critical that school districts hear their voices and develop new models as part of their portfolio.

—Don Shalvey, CEO, San Joaquin A+

✏$_4$ There is a real push from communities across the country for schools to be better preparing students for jobs in health care, agriculture, education, and other industries that are a bridge to the future. Portfolio options can help address that stakeholder voice, particularly in communities where schools haven't always been so responsive. In my local community, I am hearing calls for new types of schools that will better prepare students for the workforce.

—Don Shalvey, CEO, San Joaquin A+

✏5 South Carolina is currently advancing legislation to amend state law to allow districts to have multiple "public schools of innovation." To date, such schools have been public-private partnerships, which is yet another approach that districts can consider when creating their portfolio of options for families. We hope that this legislation can become a model for the region, as it's another way to build community partnerships while providing families good choices.

—Melanie Barton, senior education advisor, governor of South Carolina

✏6 There shouldn't be all-or-nothing approaches to this work. Empowerment zones and other hybrid governance models should be embraced. There is no one-size-fits-all approach here—but rather space for continuous learning.

—James Peyser, Massachusetts secretary of education

✏7 States and districts have rightfully considered the possibility of partnering for school management rather than just the authority to hire/remove principals. The most important part of this work is the performance-based accountability and renewal systems to ensure that portfolio schools maintain their autonomy for a predictable period of time, with default extensions. The nitty-gritty details matter a lot more than the headlines you might read in the newspaper.

—James Peyser, Massachusetts secretary of education

✏8 The role of the central office must include managing and providing special education services, not only to ensure quality and compliance but also to address low-incidence populations and to mitigate equity concerns regarding specialized school designs that may not easily accommodate students with disabilities.

—James Peyser, Massachusetts secretary of education

or more occupations, such as nursing, office management, physical fitness and sports medicine, hospitality, mechanics, and computer science. Some schools may require entrance examinations to assure that students are adequately prepared to pursue the curriculum the school offers. All schools will be expected to serve students with special needs, but some may concentrate on providing services to those with specific types of physical or other disabilities.

✏6 Schools of choice need to have both clarity of purpose and the agency to pursue that mission. Principals must be given sufficient autonomy to articulate a mission consistent with the school's legacy and aspirations and control over instructional and pedagogical approaches, including the ability to allocate time and resources to ensure they are aligned with the school's mission. Principals must also have the authority to make decisions with respect to recruitment, evaluation, and retention of staff.

✏7 A portfolio district must have strong, competent leadership in the central office. The superintendent and key aides must have the capacity to identify, recruit, and supervise the preparation of principals with the requisite leadership qualities. They monitor schools and principals to ensure faithful, effective commitment to the schools' mission. ✏8 They track systematically the performance of schools and programs according to a wide variety of indicators of school effectiveness. They provide evaluation services to assist principals with the assessment of staff members. They intervene when it becomes clear that such is required. The central office also allocates resources across schools, keeping in mind the additional resources needed for special education, compensatory education, and English-language-learner programs. The district office also performs systemwide tasks, such as finance, collective bargaining negotiations, transportation, and admissions policies and procedures.

A Portfolio District in Practice

The school district serving Miami-Dade County, Florida, one of the five largest districts in the United States, illustrates the success with which the portfolio model can be implemented.[18] The district is one of the highest performing urban districts participating in the National Assessment of Educational Progress. It also outperforms all other urban districts in Florida on state assessments and has received numerous national awards. In 2019 the district proved its popularity

by obtaining in a referendum a tax increase that was used to finance a merit pay policy for teachers. Although it does not have every element of the proposed portfolio model, its features include the following:

1. Students may choose from among approximately 90 percent of all schools in the district. A single application form allows students to rank their choices of schools. Preference is given to siblings and those living near the school. Lotteries are used for oversubscribed schools. A small number of assigned neighborhood schools remain, but the district plans to expand continuously the number of choice schools.

2. Autonomous principals are selected by a strong, long-serving superintendent who places high emphasis on academic performance.

3. Principals allocate resources within their schools, and they recruit and evaluate their teachers and other school personnel. Bonuses are available for high performance.

4. Schools vary in their missions, providing middle and high school students with a wide range of options.

5. A centralized data collection system allows central office personnel to observe continuously the performance of schools on a multiplicity of metrics, such as performance levels, absenteeism, and cleanliness.

Key Features

As in Miami-Dade County, the portfolio model includes a common application procedure, lotteries to select students for oversubscribed schools, and a comprehensive transportation system.

Common application procedures A portfolio district provides an application form that allows students to rank their preferences among all schools, both district and charter. In Denver, for example, burdensome applications for each school were replaced by a single, streamlined school-enrollment procedure. A unified application system features one website, one deadline, and one form.[19] Common applications also serve as equity-enhancing tools that boost

participation by students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The development of common information systems and the provision of independent choice counselors further facilitate the exercise of choice. Once preferences have been indicated, a lottery is held for those schools that are oversubscribed.

Lotteries New York City, San Antonio, Texas, Indianapolis, and increasingly many other urban districts are already making use of lotteries for the allocation of students among district schools. New, sophisticated algorithms have been designed to limit the "gaming" that sophisticated parents have used to get an edge in the lottery process.[20] Lotteries are often used to give priority to siblings, those in need of special education, and those living closest to the school.

Comprehensive transportation Ease of access to a school is key to a family's choice of school, as it reduces an otherwise burdensome constraint on finding the best match between schools and underlying preferences of families. Transportation is costly and complicated, accounting for roughly 6 percent of school operating expenditures nationwide, a percentage that can be expected to rise in portfolio districts. In Boston, choice among a broad range of schools is combined with transportation policies that serve district, charter, and private sectors alike.[21] State fiscal support is needed to help cover the additional transportation costs in a portfolio district.

Portfolio theory The case for portfolio schools is bolstered by the following five considerations. They are especially pertinent at the middle school and high school level, where the pandemic seems to have accelerated chronic absenteeism and dropout rates.

1. Choice enhances student engagement by matching student interests and preferences to those of the school.[22] Offering an educational environment that suits a student is more urgent than ever as schools seek to reconnect with their students.

2. Schools take pride in the students who have chosen them. Each school has a strong incentive to keep its students and attract next year's incoming class by building and sustaining relationships with parents and communities.

3. Application rates to district schools provide central administrators with behavioral information about school

quality, which helps them identify problems that need to be addressed. Although schools are chosen for multiple reasons—distance, social respectability, athletic prowess, handsome buildings—persistently ineffective schools with noticeably declining enrollments signal a need for restructuring or closure.

4. A chosen school strengthens student and family commitment to the institution simply because it is not an assigned school.[23] A chosen product is valued in part because it is selected. For many, a brand, once chosen, becomes a treasured label to which a customer regularly returns—unless, of course, the brand proves seriously wanting. Specific attachments to a chosen institution are especially needed when students have become alienated from schooling in general.

5. ✏9 Decentralization of authority shifts power to families and individual teachers, who have a strong stake in meeting student needs. Bureaucratized, centralized administrative structures are prone to giving higher priority to the concerns of organized employees, as the pandemic experience has shown.

Portfolio Antecedents

✏10 Offering families a choice of school is not a new idea.[24] Some urban districts have offered a choice of school to at least some of their students from the very beginning of public education. Exam schools such as Stuyvesant in New York City, Latin in Boston, and Jefferson in Fairfax County, Virginia, have long traditions and enjoy national reputations for their high admission standards and the college readiness of their graduates.[25] ✏11 Districts also offer vocational schools that certify students as carpenters, electricians, beauticians, and auto mechanics. The Duke Ellington School for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC, prepares young people who aspire to a life in the theater or the opera house. But the most direct antecedent for the portfolio model is the magnet school, which is expected to be a school of such high quality that it would attract students of all backgrounds from across a large district.

Magnet schools were first introduced to facilitate racial integration after the backlash against compulsory busing erupted in the late 1960s. Magnet schools spread quickly after Congress initiated

✏9 There are many benefits to autonomous schools with accountability. Those benefits are often only fully realized when there is a strong partnership with teachers that actually allows for school-based decision making. This is usually a general agreement that both sides can embrace that puts students first.

—James Peyser, Massachusetts secretary of education

✏10 We are hearing from local superintendents that students are dropping out in higher numbers than ever before. This may mean that middle and high schools are in need of dramatic programmatic overhauls. The pandemic has exacerbated feelings of frustration. And the portfolio concept can provide room for innovation.

—Melanie Barton, senior education advisor, governor of South Carolina

✏11 Parents realize that the highest-quality school options are typically those that are the most sought after—often leaving parents of color on waitlists or jumping through additional hoops. So there is demand for more high-quality school choices, otherwise there wouldn't be such a struggle for the few options that exist. And when schools that offer high-quality education offer limited prospects of enrollment, then those schools have the feel of inequity. And when the feel of inequity seeps into the water for families, then it can start to feel like a deterrent from exploring school choice at all.

—Christina Laster, director of policy and legislation, National Parents Union

the Magnet Schools Assistance Program, which has remained in place ever since, allocating over $100 million annually to eligible schools.[26] As of 2017, 4 percent of all public schools, enrolling nearly 7 percent of all students, call themselves magnet schools.[27] Although magnet schools differ in many respects, they share an essential characteristic: students attend them only if they have chosen that school. To facilitate integration, magnets are usually situated in residentially integrated areas or near racially defined boundaries. Anticipating the portfolio model, the magnet school generally has a special focus, such as math and science, performing arts, or Montessori instruction. They often are given extra resources to pursue that mission and attract students from across the district. Most, but not all, evaluations find student performance at magnet schools to be, on average, higher than at nearby neighborhood schools.[28] Parents of children attending a magnet school are more satisfied than those whose children attend assigned district schools.[29] The magnet school has proven sufficiently attractive that many districts have borrowed its features to begin experimenting with approaches that approximate the portfolio model. In addition to those discussed elsewhere in this essay, these include Cleveland, Ohio; Newark, New Jersey; Oakland, California; and Grand Prairie, San Antonio, and Spring Branch in Texas. Other districts—Atlanta, Detroit, Kansas City, Missouri, Philadelphia, and Tulsa—provide parents with choices among schools but retain more authority within the central office.[30] Los Angeles, a large countywide school district, has created a smaller portfolio zone that has enhanced student performance at schools across the zone without increasing ethnic segregation.[31]

✏12 Even with all the federal stimulus funds now available to school districts, we are not seeing an automatic leap toward portfolio models. Additional funds alone won't be enough to spark local leaders to implement portfolio schools—it will also require partnership, learning, and capacity building.

—Melanie Barton, senior education advisor, governor of South Carolina

✏13 Any analysis of new school options cannot overlook just how important high school athletics are in American life. For many of our students, this is a central part of their school experience. This can be an asset—and we must build from it. To build a portfolio model, this must be part of the consideration.

—Melanie Barton, senior education advisor, governor of South Carolina

Resistance to Portfolio Schools

Despite the popularity of magnet schools and the success of the portfolio model in a few locales such as Miami-Dade County, Indianapolis,[32] and Camden, New Jersey,[33] few urban districts have the main features of the portfolio model at scale. ✏12 Cost considerations contribute to district reluctance to adopt the model, an important reason for offering state fiscal relief to portfolio districts. ✏13 But the challenges at the local level are primarily political. Central office administrators do not wish to relinquish power and authority to school-level personnel. Residents of affluent neighborhoods prefer to keep their local schools to themselves. The ethnic integration that may accompany a districtwide choice plan

stirs anxieties among some students and their parents. Influential senior teachers do not like principal autonomy that undercuts their right of precedence when new teaching opportunities become available. Teacher unions oppose decentralization of decision making that complicates the application of standardized procedures negotiated in collective bargaining agreements. School board members hesitate to create a system in which winners and losers can be readily identified. ✏14

✏15 For these and other reasons, districts seldom introduce the portfolio model unless they are faced with a major catastrophe or have suffered serious enrollment losses. In the wake of the Hurricane Katrina disaster, Louisiana introduced a comprehensive choice plan for New Orleans that included many charter schools and school choice within the district sector.[34] Denver, Los Angeles, and Washington, DC, turned toward the portfolio model after thousands of their students shifted from district schools to charters. Nor is the portfolio model secure once launched. Progress in student achievement in New Orleans has not prevented an increasingly vocal opposition from arising. New York City has threatened the viability of its popular exam schools by allocating admissions in 2021 by lottery without regard to student qualifications. In Denver, opponents to the portfolio model were elected to the school board, threatening to undo many of the changes that had been instituted.[35] The portfolio model, to succeed, requires sizeable state fiscal incentives that can offset the power of vested interests within the district.

Conclusion

✏16 Choice options in urban districts are especially urgent in the post-pandemic era, as they are especially vulnerable to enrollment decline. Urban districts were the most likely to close themselves to in-person learning during the pandemic,[36] and they are the places where chronic absenteeism and increasing dropout rates are already evident. In-person instruction has often been restricted to elementary grade students, leaving middle and high school students to less-effective online resources. Fortunately, urban districts are large enough to have the potential to provide parents and students with a range of options at middle and high schools, the educational levels where the introduction of alternative learning opportunities is now particularly urgent.

✏14 Most states are apprehensive to apply new models that require any fiscal impact on their budgets.

—Christina Laster, director of policy & legislation, National Parents Union

✏15 In Massachusetts, movement toward "portfolio models" has almost always come as a result of state intervention. This has been our history. Boston responded to the emergence of public charter schools by creating analogous "pilot" schools and lobbying for state-sponsored "in-district" charters. This has been healthy overall, but there are some drawbacks to ideas being launched via state intervention versus local action.

—James Peyser, Massachusetts secretary of education

✏16 Although whole-school autonomy may be difficult to achieve in the near term, it might be worth exploring the development of self-contained pathways for students, especially at the high school levels. It offers the potential to create coherent programs for cohorts of students who are pursuing a similar course of study, such as early college or STEM careers. By putting students and staff together within a pathway that they have both chosen, with heightened clarity around goals and expectations, it may be possible to dismantle some of the typical barriers that stand in the way of innovation, improvement, and accountability.

—James Peyser, Massachusetts secretary of education

✏17 Overhauling America's education system will not come from the goodwill of the state and local school districts, nor will it come from a collaborative spirit alone. It will require the type of sustained social and political pressure that has led to every civil rights victory of the last century. It will not happen quietly.

—Christina Laster, director of policy and legislation, National Parents Union

✏17 A successful portfolio district must combine local school autonomy that facilitates the development of meaningful choices for families and students with strong district leadership that monitors individual school performance and the capacity to reorganize or close schools when appropriate. Portfolio districts need clear backing from state officials. Locally generated political infections can kill the portfolio baby in the crib. That is all the more reason for state policy makers to provide fiscal incentives to develop and sustain a portfolio approach to urban education. Such incentives can jump-start local policy. They should also be offered on a continuing basis but without any guarantee that funding will continue unless local districts remain committed to an effective portfolio model. Properly designed to ensure long-term commitment to school choice within districts, state support for portfolio schools can provide a crucial counterweight to local resistance to school choice by those advantaged by neighborhood school policies, standardized bureaucratic procedures, and collective bargaining agreements.

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