

Creating 'Portfolios of Schools'

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The intense nationwide focus on high schools is a most welcome sign. Clearly, more attention is being paid to the challenge of changing the institution we rely on to produce capable and confident young adults who are able to participate effectively in postsecondary education and training, secure economically stable and personally rewarding employment, and engage actively as democratic citizens.

If we are serious in our desire for a just and equitable society, the real question is how to create entire systems of high schools where excellence is the product of everyday practice.

It is particularly urgent that urban high schools be reformed, and in 2000, the Carnegie Corporation of New York launched a national initiative, Schools for a New Society, to help urban communities redesign their high schools. The seven cities involved are engaged in an exceedingly difficult task: They are trying to change one of the most enduring institutions in American education at a time when political uncertainty, deep budget cuts, and changing accountability requirements challenge their efforts at every turn.

More important, they are trying to accomplish something that America has never attempted: creating systems of high schools committed to enabling every student to succeed. We all know some individual high schools that are successful in educating most students. But if we are serious in our desire for a just and equitable society, the real question is how to create in each of our communities entire systems where excellence is the product of everyday practice and where high schools prepare all students—especially those who have been poorly served—for postsecondary education and training, employment, and citizenship.

In these seven communities, what is emerging is a deliberate mix of different kinds of high schools that we call “portfolios of schools.” To be sure, most school districts have several types of high schools, including magnet schools and alternatives for students at risk of dropping out. More recently, the mix has expanded to include new small schools, large schools divided into multiple learning communities, and charter schools.

These are important steps toward building the systems of high schools we need. 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 universal choice as a central lever for district change. Key elements of this portfolio approach are emerging in the seven cities with which we are working.

In our vision, all schools in the portfolio share two essential characteristics. First, all have a clear focus that serves to galvanize teachers' and students' work. One school might have an applied concentration, like health sciences, while another might offer a specific approach to learning, such as experiential education. Second, all schools in the portfolio are driven by the same high expectations for students' learning, and provide both a rigorous, standards-based, college-preparatory curriculum and the academic and social supports students need to meet these high expectations. In this way, the portfolio provides multiple pathways to success, organized around a core set of standards and instructional practices.

While choice is a central mechanism, the portfolio approach is not an unregulated free market. Students choose from among a range of high schools based on their own interests, needs, and ambitions. While schools can be operated by a variety of providers, careful accountability and some degree of managed choice are critical elements of the model. And to be effective, the portfolio of schools must not be allowed to become a new form of tracking that narrows the opportunities available for students. A continual review of student-assignment and -performance data is an essential component of the portfolio's management.

Four core values guide a portfolio-of-schools approach: excellence, equity, diversity, and choice. These values, in turn, shape the operational commitments that allow us to implement the portfolio. The cities involved in the Schools for a New Society initiative and others are beginning to put these commitments into place.

- The school district commits to playing the central role in creating, managing, and sustaining a system of individually excellent public high schools and guaranteeing all students access to these schools. In Sacramento, Calif., the district leadership divided large high schools into small learning communities, started four new small schools as independent charters, and granted an independent charter to a community-based organization to divide a large high school into six small schools.
- The district, through its portfolio, commits to promoting diversity—of students and programs—both within and between schools. Each school includes a mix of students, providing all of them with academically challenging work as well as the supports needed to succeed. At the same time, the different schools in the portfolio include multiple options that address the full range of students' learning styles, interests, needs, and aspirations.

Providence, R.I., has matched its school options to students' diverse interests and learning needs by creating small schools. These include a newcomer academy, an ungraded school where students progress through demonstrated mastery, a school focused on international studies, and another school built around health sciences and technology. Providence also is working to divide its large high schools into small learning communities organized around curricular themes.

- The district, through its portfolio, commits to serving a diverse constituency of students, from those who are able to accelerate their learning to those who are disconnected from school. Boston is considering a flexible promotion policy that would allow students to progress through high school as they complete course requirements, rather than moving from grade to grade. It also has created a small school for older adolescents who have not yet earned a high school diploma. Our best chance for harnessing the creative powers of this approach and reducing its risks lies in anchoring the development of a portfolio of schools in the core values of diversity, choice, equity, and excellence.

- The district, through its portfolio, commits to applying universal standards of excellence across schools and to providing supports that enable teachers and students to reach these standards. Chattanooga, Tenn., is creating a “single path” to graduation. The school board adopted a policy eliminating a two-track diploma and is supporting schools in implementing the change by expanding the use of literacy coaches to increase reading skills for all students.

- The district, through its portfolio, commits to providing equitable choice and making such a system operational. Districts manage student choices by developing a sufficient supply of excellent options to enable all students to find a place in at least one of their top choices. Districts also must take action to close schools that do not serve students well and to work closely with community organizations and institutions to help guide students’ and families’ decisions. They also should eliminate ways that advantaged families circumvent the student-allocation process. In New York City, the district tries to accomplish these goals through programming that assigns students to schools, taking into consideration their choices and the schools’ racial, ethnic, gender, and academic composition.

- The district, through its portfolio, commits to engaging community groups and young people in the portfolio-development and -management process. Worcester, Mass., began its process of high school redesign by engaging cultural groups, community-based organizations, youth-serving organizations, and ethnic-minority communities, along with businesses and higher education institutions. The community has maintained its involvement through a citizens’ coalition, and each of the small learning communities in Worcester high schools has formed a community advisory committee to produce a formal process for community engagement.

A portfolio of schools may well involve some difficult trade-offs. For example, abandoning one-size-fits-all policies and replacing them with ones that can respond effectively to a diverse and dynamic mix of school formats and governance arrangements will likely increase the complexity of delivering operational supports. It also may create new opportunities for the application of unequal political power to gain educational advantages.

Implementing a portfolio of schools requires careful and watchful management and the steady collection and use of data to ensure that inequities do not re-emerge. It

also requires that districts—together with community partners—take on some unfamiliar roles. In particular, districts and their partners will have to create a pipeline of new schools to meet changing needs; design and manage a transparent and equitable guidance and admissions process; build the capacity of schools to excel for all students; and provide operational supports to schools.

We believe the portfolio approaches now emerging in urban districts offer benefits that outweigh their risks. Our best chance for harnessing the creative powers of this approach and reducing its risks lies in anchoring the development of a portfolio of high schools in the core values of diversity, choice, equity, and excellence. In doing so, we must take continuing care to ensure that these values—as well as the voices of young people and of the community—consistently inform our notions of what a portfolio should accomplish, the kinds of schools it should include, how that mix should be determined, and how we should judge their—and our—success or failure.

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