THIS SCHOOL

WORKS FOR ME

Creating choices to boost achievement

AN IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE FOR SCHOOL DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS

BILL & MELINDA GATES *foundation*

MANAGING HIGH SCHOOL PORTFOLIOS

This series of guides is designed to help school district leaders address one of the toughest challenges in American education: dropout rates of 30 percent nationwide, 50 percent in many big cities, and 60 percent or more in the lowest-performing schools.

The good news is that several large urban districts, intent on raising graduation rates and increasing college readiness, have been strategically addressing these challenges for the past several years. By better understanding the needs of their students, district leaders have created a mix of school designs and programs—a portfolio of educational options. This series shares their strategies, offers advice, and provides practical tools to help leaders break down this seemingly intractable crisis into a series of more manageable steps.

The approaches documented in these guides are promising and have some evidence of success. But the efforts remain a work in progress whose long-term impact will not be known for several more years.

The first guide in the series *(Leadership Guide)*, an overview for decisionmakers, describes in abbreviated form how districts can:

- pinpoint how students are progressing and which students, by name, are most likely to struggle in school and drop out
- introduce some high-leverage strategies to get students back on track for a diploma
- identify the mix of school choices and programs that will prepare more students for colleges and careers

The second guide *(Implementation Guide)* offers a more detailed examination of the six key questions that districts are addressing:

- How are your students progressing—and which are struggling?
- What kind of school choices do you provide to meet diverse student needs—and how well are those schools and programs performing?
- How will you manage a change process, inviting multiple stakeholders inside and outside the system to make the kinds of changes that the data suggest are needed?
- How can you strengthen your portfolio of options?
- How will you provide support to schools?
- What policy changes are needed?

The third guide *(Analyst Guide)* includes tools for data analysts to drill down into the data and use their findings to arm school leaders with actionable information (online only).

These guides build on the first phase of education work of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—helping districts build a portfolio of smaller, theme-based schools. They respond to multiple requests from policymakers and educators who asked us to share what we have learned in a form that they can use in their own communities. Information is drawn from Atlanta, Boston, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Chicago, Dallas, Portland, and New York City and their partnerships with the Bridgespan Group, Boston Consulting Group, McKinsey & Company, Education Resource Strategies, and The Parthenon Group.

Based on lessons learned from this phase, the foundation is now focused on three areas in which we are uniquely positioned to make a large-scale impact:

- supporting the development and implementation of college-readiness standards, as well as tools for students and teachers to implement them
- empowering excellent teachers
- finding innovative ways to support the next generation of school models

In light of the proposed criteria for education stimulus funding through the U.S. Department of Education's *Race to the Top*, the advice offered in these guides is particularly relevant and timely for any district committed to establishing data systems to track student achievement, turning around low-performing schools, and developing the right mix of offerings for each and every one of its students—and the thousands of others who share the dream of a better life.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The guides are intended to be just that—guides, not instruction manuals. You will have your own answers to the questions found here and can browse quickly through whole sections to learn how your experience matches that of other districts. Likewise, you can approach this work in a different sequence, beginning with building community support for change or assessing the effectiveness of the mix of schools and programs you have now.

LEARNING FROM OTHER SCHOOL LEADERS

Leaders in some large urban districts have taken the lead in trying to solve the dropout crisis. They are tracking students through high school, monitoring their progress in earning credits, and investing in strategies that are having some success. They are offering different options for students who take a day job to support their families, students who have given up on schools with bell schedules, and students who are older than most of the others in their classrooms. New small schools in **New York, Boston,** and **Chicago** and Achievement Academies in Chicago have increased graduation rates. Targeted recuperative programs in New York and Chicago have had greater success with students who were off track to graduate than large comprehensive schools. And every district addressed in these guides has been able to identify "beat-the-odds" schools that are outperforming their peers.

These districts have learned that:

- many students who drop out fall off track in 9th grade, often earlier
- about 25 percent of students who eventually drop out start 9th grade on track for a diploma but then lose ground, dispelling the common assumption that they arrive from middle school already far behind
- a few key indicators are very good predictors of who will not graduate
- credit accumulation is a better predictor of dropouts than other factors that are often believed to be predictive, such as ethnicity and special education
- school and program options other than the comprehensive high school, with a different structure and culture, can significantly improve graduation rates

This guide describes how to apply what these districts have learned.

SIX KEY QUESTIONS

- Which students are progressing? Which are most likely to struggle and drop out?
- What kind of school choices do you provide to meet diverse student needs—and how well are those schools and programs performing?
- How will you manage a change process, bringing along multiple stakeholders inside and outside the system to make the kinds of changes that the data suggest are needed?
- How can you create a portfolio of options?
- How will you support schools?
- What policy changes are needed?

Addressing these questions will provide a roadmap for helping to transform more of your high schools into gateways of opportunity for the thousands of students who are counting on, and deserving of, better educational options.

CONDITIONS THAT SUPPORT CHANGE

You'll get farther faster if the following four conditions are present in your district.

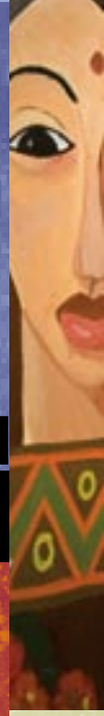
Urgency for change. "Some kids just don't want to be in school." "You should focus on the kids that want to learn and forget about those who just want to make trouble." "Our school is working really well for most of the children." Whatever the change being proposed, some will defend the status quo. District leaders must make the case to address the dropout problem—a case so powerful and convincing that it cannot be ignored. Using data to illustrate the magnitude of the problem and student stories that confound the cynics and naysayers will help create a consensus that doing what it takes to keep students in school will benefit everyone.

Courage and authority to make decisions. Close failing schools, hold staff accountable for high standards, and expand options for students that include community programs or charter schools. District leaders need the political will and power to make controversial decisions such as these.

Focus and prioritization. Every urban leader in America understands the difficulty of staying focused in a system with multiple moving parts, competing agendas, and daily crises of varying proportions. Setting priorities and establishing a sequence of action steps will be critical to maintain focus, communicate to stakeholders, and keep everyone on board.

Reliable data systems. Tracking progress of students and schools and evaluating results demand not only a system for collecting comprehensive data but the analytic capacity to translate data into clear, relevant, and useful information for decisionmaking.

1. FIND OUT WHICH STUDENTS ARE STRUGGLING



THE IDEA

Ensuring that more students graduate requires a commitment to a series of manageable, focused, actionable steps—starting with understanding whether your students are progressing, which students are off track, and why they fall off track. Data tools help create an early warning system to determine which groups of students are more likely to drop out, the size of those groups, and the names of the students in those groups.

For some districts, four indicators identified the majority of future dropouts:

- age 15 or older entering 9th grade
- absent more than 10 days of fall semester of 9th grade
- failed two or more courses fall semester of 9th grade
- fewer than five credits or failed two or more courses spring semester of 9th grade

KNOWLEDGE BASE

At risk and off track. Students who are *at risk* of dropping out can be identified in 8th grade or early 9th grade by their school performance, behavior, and demographic characteristics:

School Performance

- low to failing grades in core courses in 8th grade
- poor standardized test scores in 8th grade
- credits earned in first year of high school
- course failures in first year of high school

Behavior

- consistent absenteeism

Demographics

- special education student
- English language learner (ELL)
- age at entry

DATA REQUIREMENTS

To undertake this analysis, you'll need:

- a database of individual student records that includes demographics, grades, test scores, attendance, and other behavior records
- capacity to create cohorts of students and conduct cross-sectional analyses to determine what indicators are most likely to be predictors in your district

Defining What Data Are Needed and Making a Request

Gathering data can take significant amounts of time, so spending time at the beginning of the project and requesting all the data you may conceivably need can save time later on.

Type of Data	Example Fields	
Student Identification and Demographics	■ Student ID ■ Gender ■ Birth date ■ ELL status	■ Free/Reduced-price lunch ■ Home ZIP code ■ Ethnicity ■ SPED status
Enrollment Status	■ Date of entry to schools ■ Completion/ Withdrawal	■ School enrolled ■ Date of exit from schools
Academic Performance	■ Course numbers ■ Course absences ■ Credits earned	■ Course grades ■ Course tardies ■ Standardized test results
Student Behavior	■ Attendance	■ Discipline record
District Information	■ Complete list of schools	■ School type for each school

The risk of dropping out is compounded by multiple risk indicators. When students are frustrated by a lack of academic progress, for instance, they often skip school or are suspended for behavior issues.

Many students who fail to graduate fall *off track* in their first year of high school. A student missing up to two credits by the end of 9th grade is considered *early off track,* while one lacking three to six credits is already *severely off track.* It is hard for the latter students to catch up and often too easy to drop out without being noticed.

Severely off-track students can be further described by comparing age and credits earned: young and far from graduating (such as 16- or 17-year-olds who are two or more years away from graduation), old and far from graduating (18 or older and two or more years away), and old and closer to graduating (18 or older but possibly graduating within one year). Categorizing students in such a way and tracking the numbers of students in these categories brings a stronger focus to the problem and allows you to target your interventions.

ELL students and those qualifying for special education services represent a disproportionate number of off-track students.

ACTION STEPS

Answer three big questions.

- Which indicators best predict who will not graduate?
- Who is on track, at each grade level, to graduate?
- Who is at risk, off track, and likely to fail? Knowing these students by name and knowing where they go to school will be key to intervening on their behalf.

Answer the first question by analyzing recent history to learn which indicators are the strongest predictors of future dropouts. Then use these indicators to segment current students into groups and target interventions more effectively.

Analyze recent history.

Indicators that predict dropouts. Use the most recent graduating class (or classes) for which you have good data.

Collect all the data about this class that could determine whether students are at risk of failing and/or off track: demographic data such as ethnicity, achievement data such as credits earned, and behavior data such as attendance. Start your data collection with 8th grade and continue through the graduating class.

Segment students by all the indicators that might predict future dropouts. At a minimum, segment by these indicators:

- age 15 or older entering high school
- absent more than 10 days of fall semester
- failed two or more courses fall semester
- fewer than five credits or failed two or more courses spring semester

Some students will be in more than one group, e.g., an ELL student could be in a group of males, minority males, students who failed two or more courses, and students with high absenteeism.

Predictive and comprehensive indicators. First, calculate the percentage of students in each group who ultimately drop out, e.g., the percentage of students with high absenteeism who drop out. Second, calculate what percentage of the total number of dropouts each group represents.

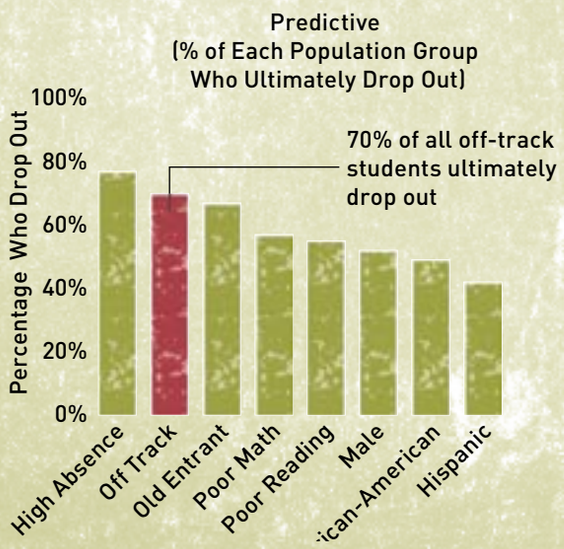
The charts below illustrate the insights such an analysis can yield. Seventy percent of students who were off track in credits eventually dropped out of school. Of the total dropouts in the class, 82 percent were off track in credits. These analyses can help target efforts to the majority of current students who are likely to drop out. This example suggests a district should monitor students who are off track but also pay attention to students with high absenteeism and those who are older when entering 9th grade.

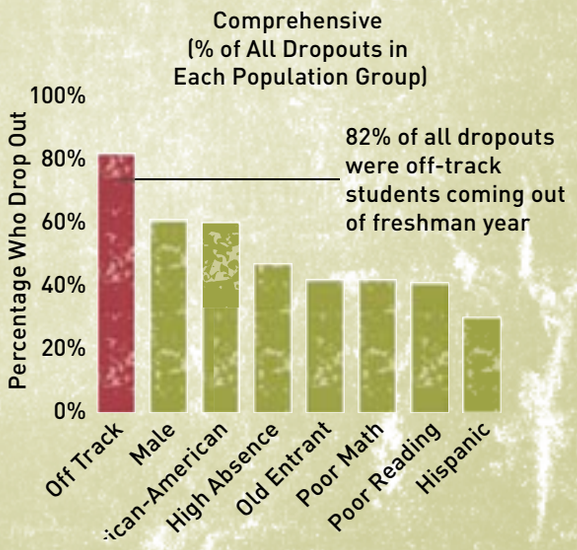
Using Predictive and Comprehensive Indicators To Identify At-Risk Students

KEY DEFINITIONS

Predictive means the percentage of a population group that drops out of high school.

Comprehensive means the percentage of all dropouts that belong to a population group.





Use what you have learned with current students.

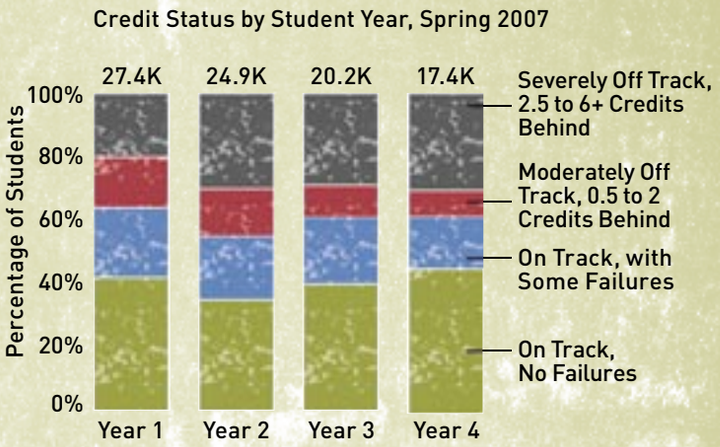
Create cohorts of students that reflect the indicators of most interest, beginning with your current 8th grade class, and track the progress of this group. In the example at right, a district is tracking students by credits earned. Students who are 2.5 to 6 credits behind are severely off track—it is essential to know who they are and what kinds of interventions, if any, are available to them. Note that 20 percent of 9th graders are already severely off track at the end of Year 1, and 30 percent of 10th graders are in the same predicament by Year 2. They are unlikely to graduate without more focused attention and support.

Link indicators to create further breakdowns of the data and gain more insights. The chart below shows the results of linking on-track performance with two other characteristics: performance on an 8th grade English test and the student's age when entering high school. A key finding: 24 percent of students now off track entered 9th grade on track and at the expected age, which suggests that they are losing ground in high school.

Deng is a likely dropout who could have been identified early, given that he struggled to learn English in 8th grade and missed school often to babysit his brothers. Now he is severely off track—17 years old, with just half the credits he needs to graduate.

Where Are the Bulk of Off-Track Students?

This chart shows where off-track students are in terms of credits as they progress toward graduation. Address moderately off-track students before they drop out of the system.



Identifying At-Risk Students

Although the majority of students who fall off track during high school enter high school with significant, predictable challenges, a large group of students enters on-age and nominally prepared but still struggles.

Percentage of All Students Who Are Off Track

8th Grade English Test Score	Age at High School Entry: Over Expected Age (15+)	Age at High School Entry: At Expected Age (13–14)
Proficient or Above	**5% of Off Track** (3,000 students) enter high school **overage** but with **sufficient literacy skills**	*Least challenged entering high school:* **24% of Off Track** (16,000 students) enter high school **on-age** with **sufficient literacy skills**
Below Proficient	*Most challenged entering high school:* **19% of Off Track** (12,000 students) enter high school **overage** and with **literacy challenges**	**52% of Off Track** (34,000 students) enter high school **on-age** with **literacy challenges**

EVIDENCE/INSIGHTS

Different districts have come to rely on different indicators, based on their analyses. In **New York City,** a key indicator combines two characteristics: students who are "overage and under-credited." In **Chicago,** age at entry into high school is a key indicator; only 27 percent of students who were 15 or older when they started 9th grade graduated. **Portland** found that close to half of its eventual dropouts were "early strugglers," based on 8th grade tests and/or 9th grade course failures.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg looked closely at its dropout rate and cohort graduation rate in 2006 and knew the numbers were too high and must be wrong: Students were being lost in the data. With a significantly more robust data management system, the district now monitors significant declines in achievement combined with increases in absences, a combination that results in a much higher likelihood of dropping out.

2. FIND OUT WHICH SCHOOLS AND PROGRAMS ARE STRUGGLING

THE IDEA

Some schools do a better job than others in helping students navigate their way to a diploma and postsecondary education. Just as you need to segment your students, you need to segment your schools. Some schools and programs might be strong all around, meeting or exceeding your graduation targets for all student groups and ensuring that students are college ready. Some might succeed with certain student groups but not with others. With good data, you can share the practices of the high performers and deal proactively with struggling schools.

ACTION STEPS

Determine a graduation rate threshold.

Decide whether to use four, five, or six years after entering high school as the "deadline" for earning a diploma. Then establish a threshold graduation rate to compare school performance. Schools below the threshold require special attention and perhaps drastic intervention. Threshold is not the same as the desired rate, since every district wants 100 percent of its students to graduate. However, setting a shorter-term threshold at 50 percent, 60 percent, or 70 percent is more realistic. A district can implement changes over time and work first with the schools that need the most attention, rather than trying to deal with all schools at once.

After cheering his school's basketball team to a victory over a cross-town rival, Deng met a friend from that school to collect on a bet they'd made on the game. "No problem, Deng," said his friend, paying up. "Our school wins the most scholarships, your school wins the most championships."

Chart the Current Mix of School Models and Programs

While many districts currently offer a variety of options, these are not generally tailored for specific students.

	Neighborhood School		Career	Selective Enrollment	Charter	Magnet	Small
	Small Learning Community (SLC)	Non-SLC, Comprehensive					
Description	■ Attendance-area comprehensive program ■ Schools-within-a-school ■ Fewer than 400 seats each ■ Often thematic in focus	Traditional high school	■ College-prep curriculum and career-focused education by field	■ Meets needs of most academically advanced ■ Rigorous curriculum, mainly Honors and AP	■ Operates independently of board ■ Accountable for student academic achievement	■ Curriculum centered on a specific subject area or theme	■ 600 or fewer students ■ May have theme/ subject focus ■ Freshmen organized into Freshmen Academy
Admission Requirements	Priority for in-boundary		Random lottery	Entrance exam	Random lottery	Random lottery	Priority for in-boundary
Attendance Boundaries	Yes		No	No	No	No	Yes
Number of Schools	15	26	10	8	18	9	21
Average School Size	400/SLC (approx. 4 SLCs ea.)	1,500	1,400	1,300	500	600	300
Enrollment (Percentage of Total)*	57%		13%	10%	8%	5%	5%

** Total does not equal 100 percent; does not include all schools.*

Determine the track record of schools and programs.

Chart graduation rates. Start by charting the graduation rate for each high school compared to the threshold goal. Identify the feeder middle school(s) for each high school. Answer these questions:

- Are our schools successful in graduating students who enter proficient at 9th grade?
- What percentage of high schools have graduation rates below 50 percent (or another threshold you set)? Which schools?
- Are some of our middle schools more successful in preparing students for high school?

Compare schools with similar students but different performance. Answer this question:

- Are some schools more successful than other schools?

  For instance, in the example below, graduation rates between "beat-the-odds" and low-performing schools vary significantly.

Compare school performance on various indicators. Use the key dropout predictors to analyze how different schools compare in serving students with one or more of those characteristics. The previous chapter showcased off-track students who started 9th grade in good shape. In this phase of your work, identify which schools those students attend. Are some schools better than others with this population?

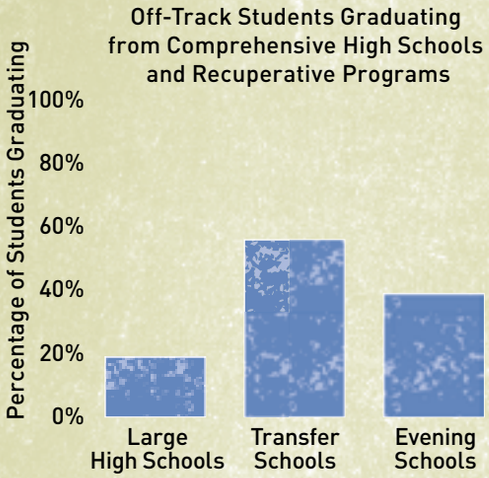
How Are Schools Performing?

Identifying schools with similar compositions and divergent performance provides the opportunity for best-practice sharing.

	Medium-Size High Schools	New Small High Schools	Large Comprehensive High Schools
Beat-the-Odds Schools	***HS #1*** ■ 816 students ■ 65% Low Achievement ■ 34% Overage at Entry ■ 83% 4-Yr Grad Rate	***HS #3*** ■ 385 students ■ 69% Low Achievement ■ 23% Overage at Entry ■ 88% 4-Yr Grad Rate	***HS #5*** ■ 3,126 students ■ 73% Low Achievement ■ 45% Overage at Entry ■ 66% 4-Yr Grad Rate
Underperforming Schools	***HS #2*** ■ 807 students ■ 72% Low Achievement ■ 35% Overage at Entry ■ 42% 4-Yr Grad Rate	***HS #4*** ■ 370 students ■ 64% Low Achievement ■ 33% Overage at Entry ■ 54% 4-Yr Grad Rate	***HS #6*** ■ 2,716 students ■ 76% Low Achievement ■ 51% Overage at Entry ■ 35% 4-Yr Grad Rate
	41% point gap in graduation rates	**34% point gap in graduation rates**	**31% point gap in graduation rates**

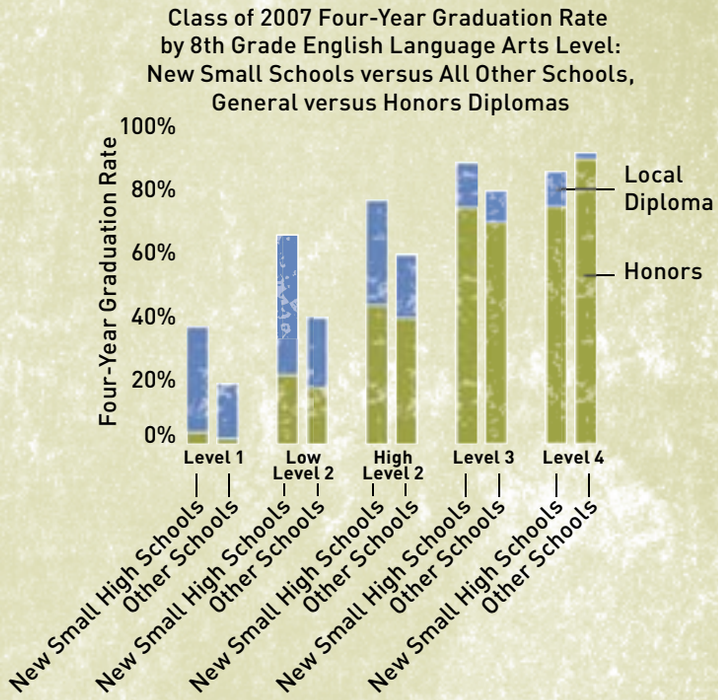
How Do Existing Schools and Programs Align to Specific Student Needs?

In the example below, a district determined which schools and programs do a better job of graduating students who are off track.



Effect of School Structure on Specific Students

In the example below, a district used student performance on the 8th grade English language arts test as a predictor of future success and examined schools' success in graduating students who entered with different achievement levels.



EVIDENCE/INSIGHTS

New York City found that about 80 percent of its off-track students were in general high schools, rather than in programs designed to serve these students, such as Transfer Schools and Evening Schools, which had much higher graduation rates. **Boston** learned that the majority of students who were at risk or off track were enrolled disproportionately across the district's largest comprehensive high schools.

3. MANAGE A CHANGE PROCESS

THE IDEA

Closing schools, changing school accountability measures, redefining enrollment procedures, or rethinking how you will reallocate funds—these are among the most complex and controversial decisions a district can make. Unless you can make a case with good data and bring key stakeholders along every step of the way, it will be difficult to launch your efforts and even more difficult to sustain them.

KNOWLEDGE BASE

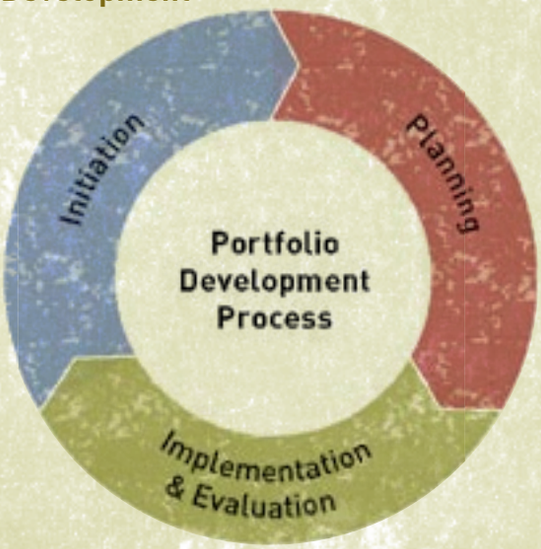
Engaging internal and external stakeholders is a change process that can be segmented into three phases: building the base and making the case (initiation), planning, and implementation and evaluation.

Outcome indicators, such as graduation rates and enrollment in college, reveal whether you have met your long-term goals.

Leading indicators, such as improvements in attendance rates and increases in credits earned, measure progress along the way.

Process indicators delineate implementation steps, such as student and school segmentation completed, new school models identified, and additional seats created for existing programs.

Change Management Is an Iterative Process That Supports the Broader Execution of Portfolio Development



Initiation

1. **Build the case and prepare for change**
   - Gather facts and make a case for reform
   - Identify and engage key stakeholders
   - Hone vision and define success
   - Ensure capacity to execute
   - Anticipate barriers to success

Planning

2. **Create a detailed implementation plan**
   - Define expected outcomes
   - Define key activities and required resources
   - Define quality implementation steps
   - Develop a detailed plan

Implementation & Evaluation

3. **Monitor and evaluate implementation**
   - Execute implementation plan
   - Measure changes in culture and behavior
   - Adjust for mid-course corrections
   - Evaluate implementation, ongoing management, and outcomes

Concerned that her son might drop out, Deng's mother goes to an evening meeting at his school where district leaders talk about plans to close the school and open a new one with a new principal and teachers in a nearby neighborhood. She does not know what to think about this idea, but she is relieved to learn that Deng now can take courses at the local community college and that his school also will be offering a broad range of internships with local companies and neighborhood groups.

ACTION STEPS

Reach out and make the case for change.

Identify and engage key stakeholders. Engaging carefully targeted stakeholders in ongoing discussions and decisions will build a base of champions for your efforts. Which stakeholders are most critical to engage? What benefits and challenges will different stakeholders bring to the process? At what point should different stakeholders be engaged? Which existing district-stakeholder relationships are strong? Where do relationships need to be bolstered?

Likely stakeholders include:

- administrators and central office staff
- community organizations and groups
- school leaders
- teachers
- teachers' union
- students
- parents and families
- local and state businesses/business leaders
- local and state elected officials
- higher education leaders

Engagement opportunities include summits, focus groups, town hall meetings, dinners, and more intimate meetings with key opinion leaders.

Use data to make the case. Stakeholders will need both a wake-up call (data and stories that show the magnitude of the challenge) and hope (examples of schools and programs that are beating the odds). This might be a good place to introduce simple dashboards to communicate the data, using outcomes such as graduation and college enrollment rates as well as leading indicators such as absenteeism and course-taking.

Spreadsheets and PowerPoint slides alone are not enough. You will need to tell compelling stories by putting names and faces to the numbers. Whenever possible, localize the information. Parents and students, in particular, will want to see school-specific information, not just districtwide averages.

Define success and spell out the clear benefits of the proposed changes. This will help clarify reform goals, validate specific actions, and motivate stakeholders to move ahead with you. For example, as a result of the proposed changes, school leaders may get more decisionmaking autonomy, teachers will learn how to mine student performance data to strengthen their instruction, parents will better understand key educational milestones, and students will have more school choices that make learning more engaging and relevant. And all stakeholders will benefit from the ultimate goal of the proposed changes: more students prepared for college, careers, and life.

Identify potential obstacles. Discussions with stakeholders will be key to surfacing barriers in attitudes, policies, politics, precedents, practices, and programs. Anticipating barriers at the front end can help districts proactively overcome them. For instance, to combat the internal naysayers, recruit and cultivate accomplished principals and teachers who embrace the new vision and are willing to speak out. To ensure that the strategies mix top-down with bottom-up, listen closely to parents, students, and naysayers, and be willing to incorporate their advice into your strategies. Regularly "close the loop" with key stakeholders so that they can see their fingerprints on the plans. A key challenge may be to convince stakeholders that college readiness for all is a feasible goal; many do not believe it.

Develop a detailed action plan.

Clearly defined outcome indicators provide the basis for action and focused interventions. Involving stakeholders in defining the measurements you will use to hold schools accountable will help them understand why difficult steps (such as school closings) might be needed. Ask your stakeholders to help answer questions such as:

- What specific student outcomes will we measure? Graduation rates? Four-year, five-year, six-year? State assessment scores? College enrollment, persistence, and success rates? Employer satisfaction?
- What results are feasible given the current situation?
- What happens if targets are not reached?

Reaching agreement on leading indicators also is important so that all stakeholders can see if schools are making steady progress. Common indicators include:

- improved attendance rates
- increased credit accumulation
- improved grades in core courses such as Algebra 1
- increased student and parent satisfaction

Create a comprehensive strategy, including key operations and communications activities, budget considerations, and timelines. Answer these questions:

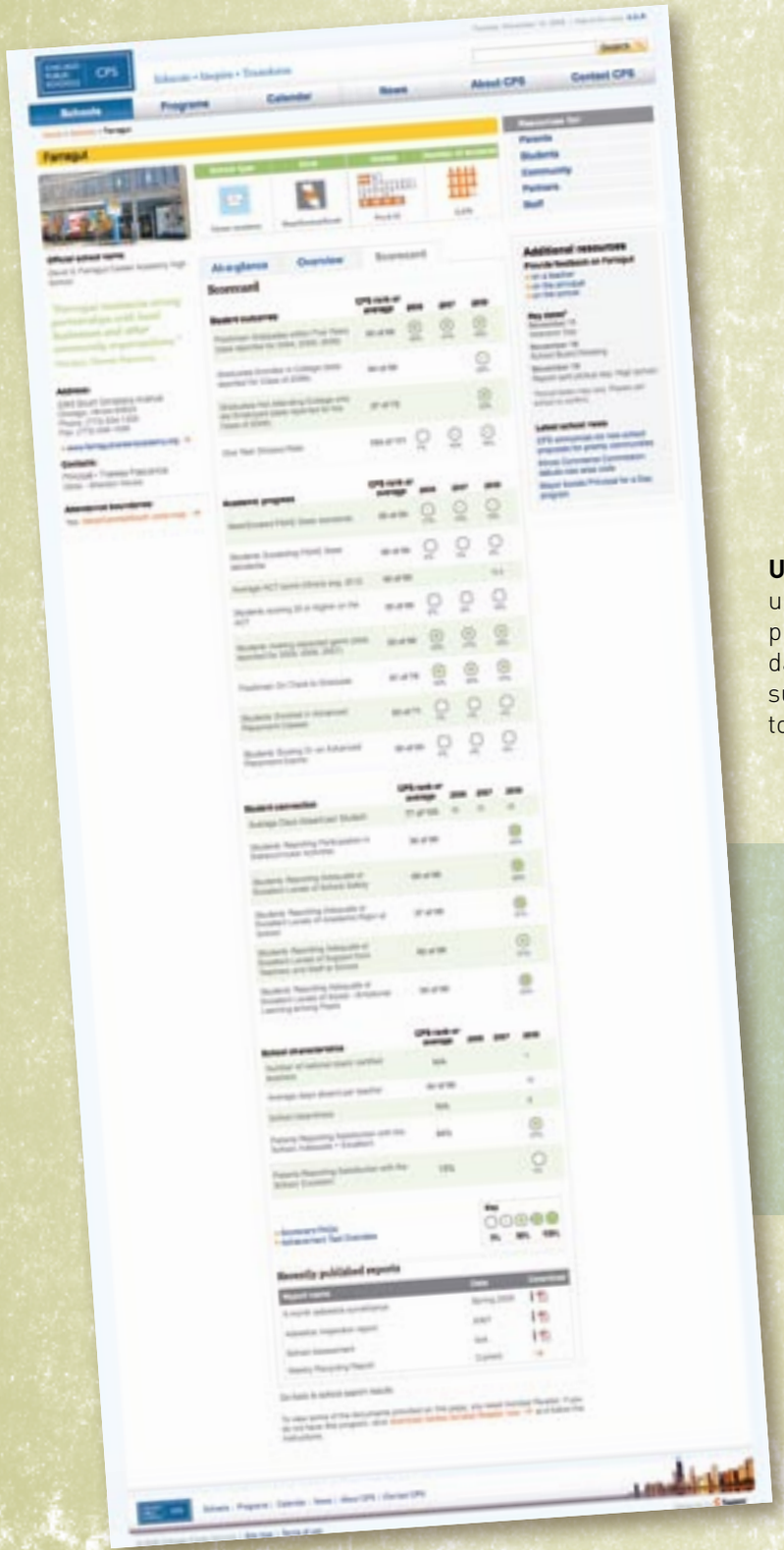
- What high-level activities are required to develop and implement an effective portfolio strategy? What operational considerations (facilities, staffing, school models, etc.) need to be addressed?
- Who will execute/be held accountable for strategy definition and execution? What individual capacity exists to do so? How should individuals prioritize portfolio development vis-à-vis other activities?
- Where district capacity is limited, what external partners could potentially provide support?
- What is the role of different central office departments and what cross-functional teams/relationships are needed?
- What financial resources are needed? From what sources are funds available? What contingencies are required to account for potential funding losses (from internal or external sources)?
- How will the plan and related responsibilities be communicated to both internal and external stakeholders (press release, superintendent directive, etc.)?

Using Outcome and Leading Indicators

Districts will want to establish targets for both outcome indicators, such as graduation rates, and leading indicators, such as attendance rates and grades.

Outcome Indicator	Target	Leading Indicator	Target
Graduation rate	Five-year: 70%	Attendance rates	One-year: 10% increase
State assessment scores	Five-year: 15% increase	Increased credit accumulation	One-year: 10% more students on track
Enrollment in college	Five-year: 75%	Improved grades in core courses	One-year: 20% reduction in failing grades

- How will the expanded portfolio be managed and sustained? How will portfolio operations be monitored beyond implementation and by whom?
- What differentiated funding is required for steady state portfolio management (versus implementation)?



Implement and evaluate.

Conduct regular progress reviews to make mid-course corrections. Answer questions such as these:

- What is the status of implementation?
- What do outcome indicators reveal? What corrective actions are required?
- What do leading indicators reveal? What corrective actions are required?
- How well are school models—individually and collectively—working to meet student needs?
- Are all schools meeting a minimum threshold of high-quality standards?
- How can the system improve?
- What best practices should be uniform and disseminated within the portfolio of schools?
- Are results aligned with target interim and overall portfolio strategy goals?
- How have other district efforts affected the portfolio strategy? Which efforts, if any, should be reprioritized given portfolio outcomes (and based on what criteria)?

Use dashboards to share data. Dashboards deliver updates on all indicators (outcome, leading, and process) to all relevant stakeholders. Customize the data to the interests and needs of each user but make sure the information is interconnected to allow users to drill down for more detail.

Sample Dashboard from Chicago

Chicago Public Schools produces dashboards like this, providing at-a-glance information about performance and trends on issues such as student outcomes, academic progress, and the extent to which students are engaged and connected.

EVIDENCE/INSIGHTS

Following a yearlong study of a 13-campus high school portfolio that included insights from thousands of teachers, principals, students, parents, and community members, **Portland** Public Schools announced a plan in June 2009 to close at least two high schools, redraw attendance boundaries, create strong neighborhood schools, and limit transfers to other schools.

In **Atlanta,** a superintendent with a reputation for change garnered support from the community and philanthropic organizations to focus on improving middle and high schools. The message: This is a 12-year journey and each graduating class would get better as change began to take hold. The district's use of data that documented improvements fueled confidence in those who were hesitant to enroll children in the district or provide resources for improvements.

As a first step in implementing a strategic plan, **Dallas** developed a start-up timeline, identifying concurrent activities to create a district transformation office, develop a detailed plan, launch a communications campaign, and raise funds to support the effort (see table below).

Proposed Major Activities in Dallas over the Next Six to Nine Months

	April–June	July–December
Establishing the Management Structure	■ Establish district transformation office with clear charter for managing the transformation ■ Recruit/appoint head of transformation office ■ Assign implementation "workstreams" to district and non-district owners	■ Establish dedicated teams for each implementation workstream ■ Hold formal kickoff meeting for transformation team ■ Develop meeting cadence and reporting templates
Developing the Detailed Plan	■ Identify major "modules" for each implementation workstream ■ Revise/update cost estimates based on agreed upon workstreams	■ Develop charters for all workstreams, including deliverables and milestones; identify "early wins" ■ Kickoff individual workstreams ■ Develop consolidated monthly work plan across all workstreams
Running the Campaign	■ Develop and launch an internal communications campaign ■ Develop and launch an external communications campaign—collaboratively prepare public documents	■ Establish and communicate internal and external accountability metrics/milestones ■ Develop formal internal and external mechanisms to report progress of transformation and collect input/feedback
Raising the Funds	■ Outline funding requirements in a manner that facilitates fundraising (i.e., by workstream) ■ Develop and segment target list of funders ■ Develop communications document specifically tailored to existing and potential funders ■ Develop reporting templates to track progress of fundraising campaign	■ Assess opportunity to fund various recommendations via reallocation of existing funds ■ Continue execution of fundraising effort until complete ■ Provide consistent update to existing and potential funders on status of transformation efforts and fundraising campaign
Starting Early Implementation	■ Set the stage for early implementation	■ Begin executing the detailed plans ■ Ensure momentum builds by delivering the identified, targeted "early wins" ■ Kickoff monthly process to ensure transparency relative to milestones, raise and resolve obstacles, etc.

4. KEEP MORE STUDENTS ON TRACK BY STRENGTHENING THE MIX OF OPTIONS

THE IDEA

The data will provide the necessary wake-up call that "business as usual" is not producing the results you want and that students deserve. But how will you act on the information? What levels of support will you provide schools, based on their performance? Which schools need to be closed? What choices will you offer to make it more likely that students find a school or program that works for them? To what extent will you need to engage outside partners? What is affordable? Where will you get the biggest returns on investment? Answers to these questions will provide a roadmap for action.

KNOWLEDGE BASE

Preventive options, such as new small schools and programs that help students recover credits immediately after 9th grade, can avoid more costly investments in programs that bring students back into school once they have left.

Intervention options keep students in comprehensive schools but put targeted supports in place to help them recover early.

Recuperative options, often in separate schools, provide intensive, targeted options to re-engage students and accelerate completion of graduation requirements.

Re-enrollment and re-engagement options create programs for finding and persuading dropouts to re-enroll.

Cost avoidance is a calculation of savings that occurs when students leave one school to attend another. If the old school remains open, there may be only partial cost avoidance because the fixed cost of operating the school remains. If the school closes, there is total cost avoidance equal to the cost of operating the old school.

ACTION STEPS

Use the data gathered to group schools by performance.

Each district may define performance differently and use a different combination of quantitative and qualitative growth and absolute performance metrics. The example below illustrates metrics used to group schools into four categories.

Four Categories of Schools

Good-to-Great Schools	■ Almost all students are high-performing and attend postsecondary institutions ■ Leadership and teaching staff are largely regarded as effective; initiatives have contributed to continued success ■ Meets or exceeds federal/local/state accountability standards
Inconsistent Schools	■ Many students perform well and attend postsecondary institutions ■ Leadership has been somewhat successful with reform efforts and is understood to be capable of making change ■ Inconsistently meets accountability standards, including possible underperformance with certain student groups (e.g., special education)
Struggling Schools	■ Low performance on state assessments and few students attend or graduate from postsecondary education ■ Leadership has been relatively unsuccessful in implementing reform ■ Initial failure to meet federal/state/local accountability standards
Failing Schools	■ Consistent low performance and almost no students attend or graduate from postsecondary education ■ Leadership has attempted many targeted initiatives that have not gained traction and/or failed outright ■ Consistent failure to meet federal/state/local accountability standards

Determine how to support Good-to-Great Schools, Inconsistent Schools, and Struggling Schools.

Support should vary and increase when performance slips. For example, Struggling Schools would receive additional coaches and rigorous programs, as well as be eligible for supplemental grants.

Differentiated Interventions

	Good-to-Great Schools	Inconsistent Schools	Struggling Schools
	Standard district supports	***Standard district supports plus ...***	***Targeted supports plus ...***
People	■ Participate in small networks of schools ■ Provide access to district/partner sponsored professional development and trainings ■ Provide access to various tools and rubrics to assess teacher performance growth ■ Provide opportunities to attend relevant conferences ■ Support schools in quest for effective school leaders and teachers	■ Provide coaching and in-depth professional development to target areas of weakness ■ Provide opportunities to attend relevant conferences ■ Target placement of/hiring of teachers with skills or experience that can address gaps	■ Devote substantial resources to support poorly performing schools, including more intensive coaching and in-depth professional development ■ Bring in comprehensive school reform partner to develop school leaders and teachers (e.g., America's Choice, IRRE) ■ Give schools priority for hiring and placing teachers ■ Provide targeted support for any building-level strategy processes
Program	■ Provide access to additional formative and standardized assessments, in addition to district-mandated assessments ■ Increase proactive and strategic focus on student outcomes ■ Provide access to instructional guides and curriculum ■ Provide access to tailored delivery models ■ Provide and/or support integrated postsecondary awareness programs	■ Provide data coaching to translate assessment data into improved practice ■ Provide in-depth support in specific challenge areas (e.g., ELL students) ■ Develop improved instructional model to address weaknesses	■ Provide regular central office support to help school leaders understand how to apply assessment results to inform instructional strategy ■ Prioritize schools for robust, pilot instructional programs ■ Assist schools with credit retrieval programs and/or after-school and summer-school programs
Money	■ Provide bonuses based on high performance	■ Encourage schools to apply for private or government grants	■ Prioritize schools for supplemental grants (i.e., Quality Education Investment Act)

Deng had almost convinced his mother that he should drop out of school and just try to find a job when a friend told him about a school that offered credit recovery classes. He was intrigued by what sounded like a way to catch up quickly in courses he had come close to passing.

Close failing schools.

Consider school/teacher capacity, community support, and state of facilities. Closing schools, or converting schools by closing and reopening them, is a necessary option for schools that are historically and intractably underperforming. There is no justification for keeping these schools open. Key factors to evaluate include:

School/teacher capacity

- Which schools have a professional culture that does not support faculty collaboration and student personalization?
- Which schools have a high degree of faculty dissatisfaction?
- Which schools have a consistently high rate of teacher turnover?

Community support

- Which schools have community and postsecondary partnerships that can be leveraged for student benefit more effectively through small schools?
- Which schools/programs are consistently under-selected by parents?
- Which schools have a constituency that is likely to resist change to traditional school structures and rituals?
- Which schools have been deemed unsafe or failing by parents and community?

Facilities considerations

- Which schools are underused or have inefficient space?
- Which schools have existing layouts that support specific school models (e.g., small schools or schools with themes such as science)?
- Which schools are in need of capital upgrades?

Develop a strategy for closing/replacing schools. A key decision is whether to roll out schools year by year, adding one grade at a time, or immediately, converting all grades into a new school at once. Each option has advantages and disadvantages. Regardless of the option selected, stakeholders must understand the basis for the decision.

Weighing the Advantages and Drawbacks

Some argue that a phased-in approach for adding new grades is preferable to converting all grades into a school at once.

	Ownership of Reform	Student Experience	Labor Relations	Community Relations	Capacity/Resources
Year-by-Year Approach					
Advantage	■ Provides time to correct misconceptions about reform and need for change ■ Allows data sharing on student outcomes that prompt change ■ Provides time to engage in conversation around need for change	■ Allows current students to finish program of study and "graduate" from "old" school	■ Impacts fewer staff members at one time ■ Provides time for staff to make decisions about staying or transferring ■ Provides time to address union issues and avoid grievances	■ Allows time to engage and organize community partners' involvement in the design of new schools and to engage parents of prospective students	■ Less taxing on organization providing support: capacity building can occur over time
Drawback	■ Takes longer to get critical mass of faculty aligned with new direction	■ Old and new students may experience "us versus them" mentality	■ Allows more time for resistance to grow ■ May establish "us versus them" mentality	■ Does not address urgency displayed by community; long transition period	■ May be more expensive, with duplicate leadership ■ School may be very resource intensive
Immediate Approach					
Advantage	■ Ensures critical mass of staff knows about fundamental changes	■ Ensures every student is part of the experience	■ Staff who remain may become more supportive once they experience benefits	■ Gives community sense of movement, of addressing current situation	■ Sharply defined capacity building tasks
Drawback	■ May not provide ample time for skeptical staff	■ Existing students may not be supportive ■ May negatively impact incoming students	■ Can lead to compromised relationships between district and union	■ Less time to build community engagement and organize ■ Tremendous shock to the system	■ Dramatic "moment" of change requires significant capacity building in a short time ■ Requires additional support to ensure "newness" ■ More challenging to make necessary change in job description, staff roles, and facilities

Modify the mix of school choices and programs to match the needs of your students.

It is extremely important to look at all possible groups of students in a school. Even Good-to-Great Schools may not be serving some students who could benefit from tutoring, mentoring, or credit recovery programs. Eighth grade mentoring programs and 9th grade transition and orientation programs may keep some at-risk students on track. Some moderately off-track students may benefit from credit recovery, dual enrollment, and more flexible scheduling, while others may require more intensive support. Severely off-track students almost certainly will require a different kind of program, often in separate schools with extensive non-academic supports. Understand that school choices should reflect district needs, internal capacity, and availability of partners.

Matching Schools/Programs to Student Needs

<table>
<tr><th rowspan="2">Sample Student Populations</th><th>On Track/At Risk</th><th>Moderately Off Track</th><th colspan="2">Severely Off Track</th></tr>
<tr><th>Prevention</th><th>Intervention</th><th>Recuperation</th><th>Re-Engagement/ Re-Enrollment</th></tr>
<tr><td>Program Priority</td><td>Prevent students from falling off track across all schools</td><td>Use high school performance indicators to intervene with early off-track students before they fall severely off track</td><td>Provide intensive, targeted options to re-engage students and accelerate completion of graduation requirements</td><td>Target drop-out populations for re-enrollment; required solutions for target population are consistent with recuperative options</td></tr>
<tr><td>Sample Program Options</td><td rowspan="2">■ Freshman orientation and summer transition programs
■ Student advocacy programs
■ 9th grade transition programs
■ 8th grade mentoring
■ Career prep</td><td>■ Traditional school supports (tutoring, counselors, after-school programs)
■ Dual enrollment</td><td colspan="2">■ GED preparation classes
■ Robust student outreach programs</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">■ Rescheduling (e.g., offer Semester 1 Algebra in Semester 2 for students who failed in Semester 1)
■ Credit recovery programs (summer school, evening school)</td><td></td></tr>
</table>

Plan along multiple dimensions: people, time, money, and program. Both the opening of new schools and the conversion of existing schools require planning along multiple dimensions—people, time, money, and program. Conversions may offer less of an opportunity to rethink these key dimensions with a clean slate—more dramatic changes are likely with closure and reopening. Cross-functional planning teams can help manage the range of decisions that need to be made, while external partners can supply fresh thinking (especially in the case of conversions).

People

- Student admissions: What types of students will the school target/serve? How will students gain admission to the school?
- Staffing plan: What skill sets and job functions will be necessary to meet student needs? Recuperative options often require more intensive staffing for both classroom and intensive student supports.

Time

- School day and year: How should the school day and year be organized? What flexibility is required for scheduling student coursework? Summer school and/or a year-round option may help keep students more engaged and accelerate their progress. In recuperative options, course scheduling should reflect subjects in which students are farthest behind.

Money

- Budget level: What level of resources is needed to support student needs? Does this fit within budget constraints? What can partners offer?
- Resource allocation: How should the budget be divided across different categories of spending (administration, teachers, support staff, professional development, materials, etc.)? Severely off-track students usually require more resources, but community partners may be able to offer additional funds and skill sets.

Program

- Instructional model: What system will the school adopt for delivering instruction and assessing student performance? Allowing students to pass courses based on demonstrated competency, not seat time, will help them progress faster.
- Wrap-around supports: What kinds of holistic support are necessary to ensure student success? Off-track students can require intensive youth development supports, such as mental health counseling.

Determine how much various options will cost. Resource availability will shape portfolio decisions. You will want to align resources based on student and school need, prioritize resources to programs that most effectively turn dollars into graduates, and organize people and time in ways that facilitate high performance.

Start by answering these questions:

- What resources are currently allocated to which students and schools? Are the allocations equitable?
- What additional investments are needed?
- What are the expected returns on those investments?

Work closely with the budget office to determine baseline total costs for existing general high schools. Break down baseline funding into variable costs that move with the student if he/she leaves a school and fixed costs that do not move if the school does not close. Calculate the incremental cost of new options depending on whether the new option will exist in tandem with other schools or will replace an old school.

Calculating Return-on-Investment

A return-on-investment analysis can help calculate the impact of different options, determine the incremental cost of each graduate, and determine if new options are affordable without closing other schools.

	Small Autonomous School	Comparison Group (Under-Performing General High Schools)
Number of incoming students (assumption)	100 students	100 students
Average length of stay in high school	3.84 years	3.35 years
Five-year graduation rate	73%	47%
Approximate Cost per Pupil per Year	**$11,120**	**$9,000**
Total cohort cost	$4.27MM (= 100 students x 3.84 years x $11,120)	$3.02MM (= 100 students x 3.35 years x $9,000)
Student outcomes	64 graduates	41 graduates
	12 transfers	12 transfers
	16 dropouts	43 dropouts
	7 still active after five years	4 still active after five years
Cost per Graduate	**$66,591**	**$73,160**

The table below illustrates how to calculate cost avoidance: the savings that occur when students leave one school to attend another.

Potential "cost avoidance" of new schools	$9,000 per pupil (with closures)
	$3,000 per pupil (no closures)
Total incremental cost	$1.25 MM (with closures)
	$3.26MM (no closures)
New graduates	23 graduates
Incremental Cost per New Graduate	**$55K (with closures)**
	$143K (no closures)

EVIDENCE/INSIGHTS

Chicago has closed low-performing high schools and created small autonomous schools, Achievement Academies for students who have not met the promotion criteria to enter high school, and a 9th grade transition program to keep students from falling off track.

Atlanta is transforming its middle and high schools in three waves, beginning with the lowest-performing schools. When the first group of schools finished planning and began implementation, the next group began to plan. Now the first wave is working on sustainability, the second has begun implementation, and the third is planning for implementation.

5. DETERMINE HOW TO SUPPORT SCHOOLS

THE IDEA

Management and administration of schools is already complex. Adding a lot of moving parts—creating new programs or adding seats in existing programs, closing and reopening schools, converting schools—results in even more complexity and, potentially, more problems. Decide how to structure central office to provide support, who is responsible for what decisions (districts versus school), what other structures can help provide support (internal networks), and whether you need partners to help.

KNOWLEDGE BASE

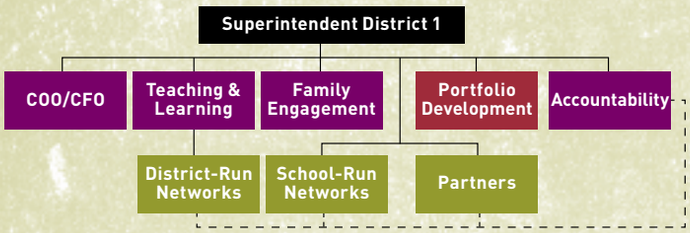
There is no one right model for organizing central office to support schools. Many districts separate the responsibilities for portfolio development and school supervision. Portfolio development might be a separate administrative office or included in the job description of a team of administrators whose responsibilities include closing schools, developing new schools, identifying suitable outside partners (as needed), and implementing new programs—in short, creating a stronger set of school choices. The office or team moves schools from start-up to stability and from stability to success. The lead person in the administrative office typically reports directly to the superintendent, while the team may report to different members of the superintendent's cabinet.

Administrators in the Office of High Schools or Secondary School Administrators have responsibility for evaluating school leadership and performance and providing support in areas such as instructional design and budgeting. As a district's focus shifts from developing a portfolio of school options to supervising and supporting those options, organizational structures likely will change.

Options for Organizations: One Size Does Not Fit All

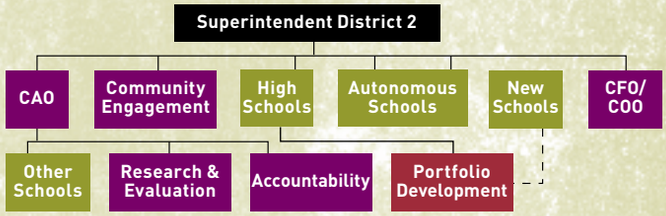
As a district's focus shifts from portfolio development to portfolio management, organizational structures and capacities should be re-evaluated within the context of potentially different needs and priorities.

District 1: Large Urban



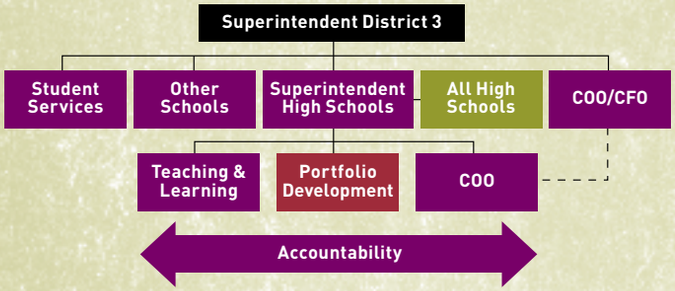
- Portfolio development reports directly to the superintendent
- New and existing schools managed together, although new schools receive specialized supports

District 2: Large Urban



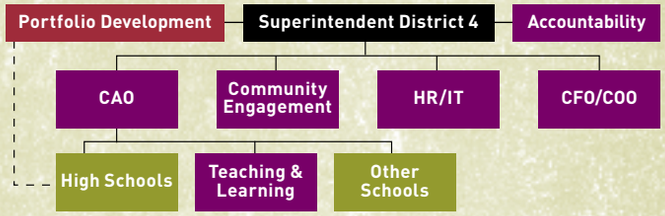
- Portfolio development office embedded within school management office but has a discrete function
- Autonomous and new schools managed separately from other district schools

District 3: Medium Urban



- Centralized approach to portfolio development maintains explicit focus on high school transformation
- All high schools managed together

District 4: Medium Urban



- Central office reorganized to place targeted focus on innovation and development of new school options
- All high schools managed together, but portfolio development office specifically supports new and conversion schools

ACTION STEPS

Determine what organizational changes may be needed.

Strategic planing will help you address several key questions about how best to launch new schools and programs and how to support them once they are in place. The following table describes a number of the key questions and considerations.

Key Decisions and Considerations

	Decisions	Considerations
Operations and Oversight	■ Where should the function of new school development reside: in the same office from which all schools are managed or separate from existing schools? ■ Who decides the number and types of schools in the portfolio? ■ Who controls the operational logistics of school closures and/or restructuring? ■ Who is accountable for new school implementation? ■ How will choice, facilities, and scheduling be decided?	■ District size, geography, and student demographics ■ How different decisionmaking processes may affect consensus building, support, and timing ■ Internal district capacity for portfolio development ■ External partnership options ■ Local context (i.e., history of neighborhood schools versus open choice) ■ Demands of portfolio/reform initiatives and district's relative capacity to execute successfully
School Treatment	■ Will resource allocations and staffing patterns be differentiated for new schools? For how long? ■ Will new schools operate under a different accountability framework? For how long? ■ Will new schools have different levels of autonomy than existing schools? Will this change over time?	■ Availability of fiscal (and other) resources ■ Staff and leadership capacity ■ Accountability metrics (value-add versus snapshot) ■ School leadership autonomy from central office
Transition	■ When and how should the district transition new schools to existing school networks (i.e., when is the "incubation period" over)?	■ Number of new schools created annually ■ Design of existing school networks ■ Current landscape of local/national partners

Networks foster collaboration and oversight.

Networks of schools and programs facilitate collaboration and the sharing of best practices, provide common metrics and accountability standards for districts to evaluate school leadership, and help monitor day-to-day implementation of strategic priorities. Networks should be small enough to ensure that each school receives sufficient attention and resources. The following table describes several options for organizing networks, with accompanying rationales.

Options for Organizing Networks

	How Are Schools Grouped?	What Is the Rationale? Challenges?
School Type	■ Schools managed in groups of similar school types, including autonomous, charter, small, exam, general schools, common programmatic focus, etc.	■ Facilitates network leader expertise with a specific and intentional school model/type ■ Potentially limits opportunities for collaboration with different models
School Grade Focus	■ Elementary, middle, and high schools are separated into distinct networks by grade levels	■ Facilitates network leader expertise in given school and grade levels ■ Helps create more opportunities for sharing of best practices and challenges; promotes collaboration given similar content and focus of schools
School Performance	■ Underperforming schools clustered together ■ Underperforming schools partnered with beat-the-odds schools	■ Allows districts to target schools that are underperforming and target strategic resources toward those schools ■ Creates networks of schools in which collaborative learning with beat-the-odds schools helps address areas of underperformance
Self-Affiliated	■ Schools have the freedom to organize their own networks (e.g., based on choice)	■ Allows school leaders to partner with others who are doing similar work/share common values ■ May force underperforming schools into networks with a disproportionate number of underperforming schools
Geographic	■ Geographic grouping, regardless of school type, grade focus, etc.	■ Allows regional or assistant superintendents easier access to schools in a defined area ■ Generally used in districts that are geographically decentralized and/or have significant scale

Determine who will make decisions on key functions in the organization.

Key functions within the organization, from teaching and learning to budgeting, are affected by how much autonomy the district gives to schools and school leaders. The following table illustrates the benefits of "tight" versus "loose" control by central office.

Tight versus Loose Central Office Control

	Tight Central Control	Loose Central Control
Teaching and Learning	■ Central management of curriculum and professional development; central delivery and administration of programs directly to schools ■ Ensures districtwide fidelity of implementation	■ Central coordination and facilitation of program choices is available, but school leadership decides which programs best fit school and student needs ■ District programs are marketed to schools as a potential "purchase" option for school leadership
Accountability	■ Significant central office accountability for school-level outcomes, given its role in determining school-level programming; school leaders cannot be held solely responsible for student outcomes given limited decisionmaking authority	■ School-level outcomes inform district decisions about school closures and restructuring (e.g., school accountability based on clearly defined performance metrics and what school leadership does to meet performance standards)
Human Resources	■ Large, centralized pool of school teachers and personnel used to staff schools via significant central office involvement ■ Weak school leaders supported by central office control of major hiring decisions	■ School leaders have significant authority to hire school-level personnel; however, central office is responsible for recruiting and training capable school leaders who are skilled in making autonomous school-level decisions
Budgeting	■ Centrally defined and managed funding formulas are highly prescriptive about school-level use of funds (e.g., limited school-based authority to reallocate funds for other priorities)	■ School-level funding is maximized for flexibility, giving school leadership the authority to use funds as needed ■ Optional central office supports help school leaders understand fund allocation strategies

Approaches to Decisionmaking

Districts in this study have different approaches to decisionmaking for their school portfolios. How does your district compare?

	People			Time	Money	Program		Accountability
	HR—Staffing	*Professional Development*	*Staff Evalution*	*Schedule*	*Budget*	*Curriculum/ Instruction*	*Student Support*	*School Evaluation*
New York City—Chancellor's District (1996–2002)	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	N/A
New York City—(2002–present)	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲	●
Chicago—Partnership Turnaround	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	●
Chicago—Internal Turnaround	N/A	●	●	●	●	●	●	N/A
Boston—Superintendent's Schools	N/A	●	N/A	●	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Miami—School Improvement Zone	N/A	▲	N/A	●	N/A	●	●	N/A
Charlotte-Mecklenburg—Achievement Zone	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

● District/Cluster Leadership Decides ■ Partner Decides ▲ Principal Decides **N/A** No Change in Authority/Status Quo

Determine how to build or improve skills in key areas.

To expand and manage a portfolio of school options, districts must have knowledge and skills in several areas: segmenting students and schools by performance, developing and replicating innovative models, developing and managing partnerships, managing evaluations and accountability, providing operational and management support, overseeing implementation, and communicating at the front end and throughout the process. Most districts handle these responsibilities with a mix of in-house staff and external support.

Decide whether you need help from an external partner.

External partners can provide valuable support for portfolio development, mainly by filling in gaps in school district capacity. School management organizations, charters, and community-based organizations can provide comprehensive technical assistance and whole school models, and they typically have significant control over implementation and ongoing school operations. Examples include the Academy for Urban School Leadership, Edison, Mastery, Green Dot, America's Choice, and the Institute for Student Achievement.

Other partners provide targeted supports in areas such as curriculum, academic support, and intervention; student support services (guidance and behavioral counseling, health, vocational training, etc.); and functional supports (information technology, human resources, finance, and operations/facilities). Examples include The New Teacher Project, Renaissance School Services, and textbook publishers.

Once school-model decisions have been made, districts should decide how to develop and operate the schools.

The table below details four options for operating schools: district operated, charters or contracts with school management organizations, partnerships with school reform organizations for design and implementation, and partnerships with community organizations.

Different options will work better for different districts depending on the political environment, availability of partners, and financial and human capacity. Districts may decide to use many different approaches to open and manage a portfolio of options.

Four Options for Operating Schools

"Inside" Option	"Outside" Option	District-Intermediary Partnership Option	School-Community Partnership Option
Designed and implemented by district	***Designed and implemented by charter or contract***	***Designed and implemented jointly by district and school reform organization(s)***	***Designed and implemented jointly by district and community organization(s)***
Traditional option for district reforms	Partnership designed by charter or contract	Partnership with school reform organization to co-plan and assist in implementation	Districts may act alone or in partnership with school reform organization and invite local community organizations (e.g., local educational foundations) to be involved in school start-up process
Often uses design teams that represent a range of stakeholders in the district	Outside organization (e.g., charter management organization [CMO]) undertakes all aspects of school design and implementation, including staff hiring and curriculum development	Often funded with foundation or private dollars	Community design teams may have one lead or multiple organizational partners
Resulting school(s) is/are operated by the district	Partner/CMO is held accountable to either the state or the district	Co-design request for proposal for new schools and coach design teams and new staff in development	May act as fiscal agent for foundation funding

Benefits of external partners include:

- Leadership: organizational flexibility to hire qualified management talent at competitive salaries, especially in areas where a district's core capabilities are lacking
- Expertise: ability to leverage experiences from other districts, inform and enhance best practices, and avoid pitfalls and ineffective strategies
- Alternative funding: access to private or nontraditional funding streams, supports start-up of innovative schools and programs
- Greater ability to customize: flexibility in providing customized services and supports to schools based on individualized needs
- Advocacy: long-term "external" support and advocacy of portfolio development initiatives plus ongoing development of external capacity for the field

Partners Have Achieved Varying Degrees of Authority with Clear Advantages and Tradeoffs

People and money are hardest to control and also the two most critical conditions over which districts want authority.

People (staff and leadership hiring): No authority ← Influence over → Complete authority ■ America's Choice ■ Renaissance Schools ■ Textbook publishers ■ New Visions ■ American Institutes for Research (AIR) ■ First Things First (FTF) ■ Institute for Student Achievement (ISA) ■ Talent Development ■ New Teacher Project ■ Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) ■ Edison ■ Mastery ■ Urban Assembly ■ Green Dot	Although staff and leadership buy-in is critical, some Reform Support Organizations (RSOs) and School Support Organizations (SSOs) do not want complete authority given the highly sensitive and political nature of staff changes Allowing staff to "opt out" over time can be as effective as having full authority, but the change process is much slower Ability to change staff does not mean the ability to attract staff
Money (budgeting and additional funding): No authority ← Influence over → Complete authority ■ AIR ■ FTF ■ ISA ■ New Teacher Project ■ New Visions ■ Talent Development ■ Textbook publishers ■ America's Choice ■ Renaissance Schools ■ AUSL ■ Edison ■ Mastery ■ Urban Assembly ■ Green Dot	Additional funding is necessary to the extent that resources are available to implement reform (for capital intensive ramp-up, adding staff, extending the day, etc.) Influencers sometimes feel they can help districts and principals reallocate money toward reform, even without explicit authority Without budgetary flexibility, resources may not be allocated efficiently
Time (extended time and flexibility of scheduling): No authority ← Influence over → Complete authority ■ AIR ■ Renaissance Schools ■ New Teacher Project ■ Textbook publishers ■ America's Choice ■ FTF ■ New Visions ■ Talent Development ■ AUSL ■ Edison ■ ISA ■ Mastery ■ Urban Assembly ■ Green Dot	Even if full authority for additional time is not granted, RSOs typically demand that districts exercise their authority to meet the RSOs' needs, given that time is a critical requirement for most reform models Scheduling flexibility is easier to attain than other conditions, although nonacademic constraints (athletics, etc.) can sometimes make it difficult
Program (curriculum and instruction): No authority ← Influence over → Complete authority ■ AIR ■ New Teacher Project ■ Renaissance Schools ■ FTF ■ ISA ■ New Visions ■ Talent Development ■ America's Choice ■ AUSL ■ Edison ■ Mastery ■ Textbook publishers ■ Urban Assembly ■ Green Dot	Influence of curriculum or instruction tends to be the easiest condition to attain ■ School Support Organization (SSO) ■ Reform Support Organization (RSO) ■ School Management Organization (SMO)

Challenges of external partners include:

- Match between district's and partner's expertise: often insufficient expertise or capacity to address portfolio expansion goals; work requires partners with highly skilled leadership teams and operational experience
- Challenge of hiring consultants: district must present compelling case to hire external support
- Sustainability: significant private fundraising needed for ongoing operations available only in the start-up stages of strategy or portfolio development; districts may need to spend major political capital at the front end, which may not be sustainable after the initial burst of work
- Accountability: ongoing need to manage accountability for implementation and outcomes; close and productive district-partner relationship often difficult to achieve

No matter which partners are selected, districts must provide them with sufficient autonomy to implement their model, provide "air cover" to navigate the system, clearly spell out roles and responsibilities, and describe how schools will transition to sustainability if and when partners leave.

EVIDENCE/INSIGHTS

Although **Atlanta** has an Office of High Schools, the district set an expectation that all departments in the district would own the work of school transformation—an opportunity to use cross-functional teams to ensure the success of the initiative. When an initial plan proved to be too aggressive, the district adjusted the timeline to provide more opportunity for schools to plan and to build in time to sustain changes. The district has developed a protocol to increase the capacity of all staff to use data effectively, one that offers "a standardized method for a professional learning community to unpack, analyze, discuss, and develop action plans using appropriate data resources."

Deng earned two credits in English and one in math through his credit recovery classes. He wasn't even a junior yet, but he wasn't ready to give up—and he was curious about what was going to happen next at his school. He was especially interested to learn more about the many new people who were coming in to give students like him some extra counseling and support.

6. SUPPORT SCHOOLS AND PROGRAMS BY CHANGING POLICIES

THE IDEA

Creating a more effective portfolio of schools will require policies in at least three areas: accountability, funding, and student placement/school choices. Students and their families deserve more comprehensive and transparent information about how well their local schools are performing. Armed with this information, they need clarity about the extent of their choices. And they need to be ensured of their fair share of resources, no matter which school they select.

KNOWLEDGE BASE

Absolute performance is the percentage of students graduating and the percentage meeting state standards—the most common measures.

Growth measures, which examine improvement over a period of time, compensate for students who start far behind their peers and give credit for schools that move students a year or more ahead in learning each school year. School A may have higher test scores overall (absolute performance), but School B may be doing a better job moving students from below-basic performance to proficient.

Peer indexing compares how schools perform on an expected outcome. The expected outcome is developed for each student segment, using variables such as test scores and absenteeism, demographics such as age or ethnicity, and programs such as special education or ELL. School A may have a higher graduation rate than School B and School C, but School B is graduating more students than expected for its population, and School C is graduating fewer than expected.

ACTION STEPS

Accountability: Determine which measures you will use.

Consider expanding the definition of school success. Multiple measures of performance create a more complete picture of school success.

Consider using different measures of success for off-track students. Five- or six-year graduation rates may be more realistic for evaluating schools with the highest concentrations of off-track students. Such flexibility encourages schools to continue working with the students who need them most. Moreover, graduation standards that measure competency, not seat time, may help accelerate student learning and provide students who are a few credits short an alternative to a GED. An extended timeline for graduation ensures that schools are not "punished" for working with off-track students. A key challenge: ensuring that differentiated standards do not become lower standards.

Although many principals previously would not have wanted to recruit or accept students such as Deng because of his performance, the new funding policy creates several funding incentives that make him more attractive: extra funds because he's severely off track, an ELL student, and an NCLB transfer.

Funding: Decide what criteria will be used to fund schools.

Ensure that resources are allocated equitably. Holding schools to the same high standards becomes problematic if some arbitrarily receive more funding than others. New York City, for example, found that some schools with similar student populations were receiving millions of dollars more a year, based largely on a series of political deals made over the years.

Provide a clear rationale for any differences in funding. Districts should acknowledge that the programmatic needs of specific student groups may require differential funding. Differences in per-pupil funding could be based on student needs (poverty, special education, off track, etc.), organizational costs (high school, school model, extended day or year), or strategic investments (more for early grades, Year 1 start-up in a new school, etc.). The key is to be strategic, intentional, and transparent.

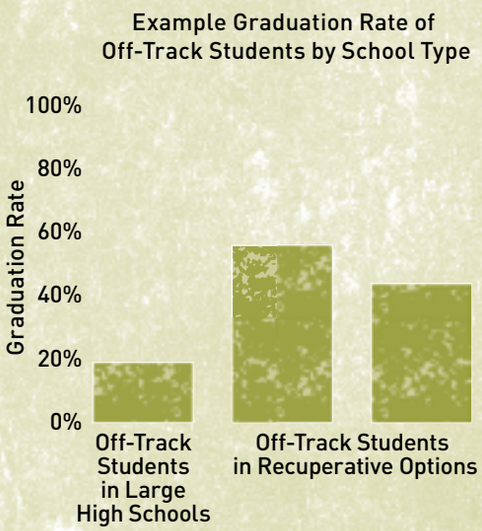
A key decision is whether to tie differential funding to students (if the student moves to another school, so does the funding) or to the school based on a staffing formula that accounts for the number of students and the variety of programs (e.g., school models for off-track students may have a higher counselor-to-student ratio).

Choices: Ensure that students can take advantage of their expanded choices.

A portfolio strategy works only when students and their families can make informed choices about the options that best address their needs and interests. Choice promotes engagement (students and families actively participate in the selection process), equity (students are not limited to a single, potentially low-performing school based on where they live), and competition (with schools vying to attract students and resources). Informed choice, especially for students who need recuperative options, can dramatically improve outcomes.

Informed Choice Can Help Dramatically Improve Outcomes

In districts with quality offerings, off-track students have better outcomes in intentional models that provide additional academic and social supports within a school district to accelerate learning.



Key Questions about Choice

Decisions about transportation, admissions, enrollment, and transfers all need to be factored into choice policies, which can be extremely complex.

	Breadth	Admissions	Assignment
Considerations	■ Is the district geographically spread out, making it unrealistic for students to travel across the district? ■ Will transportation or mass transit access be provided? ■ If choice is limited, is there an appropriate mix of schools based on performance and school model? ■ Does the political environment allow for unlimited choice? ■ Is there communications and outreach infrastructure to support informed choice decisions?	■ How much control do principals want to exert over admissions? ■ How great will efforts be to limit principal control? ■ Do admissions policies across the portfolio preclude certain students (e.g., special education, ELL) from accessing choice schools?	■ Do assignment priorities align with or contradict strategic goals? ■ Does the district have the capacity to centralize student assignment? ■ Should wait lists be created? ■ Will thresholds be challenged by the community or in the courts? ■ How often should a student be allowed to transfer? What exceptions should be considered? ■ When, if ever, should a district overrule student choice when placing a student in a school?

INSIGHTS/EVIDENCE

Districts evaluated as part of this project have taken several steps to strengthen their policies on accountability, funding, and choice.

Accountability. Charlotte-Mecklenburg matches student performance to teachers and, using a value-added model, looks at one year's growth in each school year. Staff layoffs are based on performance, not tenure.

Funding. Several large urban districts, including **New York City, Baltimore, San Francisco,** and **Houston,** have adopted weighted student funding formulas to help allocate resources to their neediest students.

Choice. New York City has totally open enrollment for all high school students as a means to boost equity. On the other hand, **Portland** has proposed eliminating open enrollment for high school students because the current policy increases segregation by race, family income, disability status, and first language.

In **Atlanta,** students entering Carver High School, a school in the first group of school transformations, were offered a choice of four programs: early college, arts, technology, and science. Early data suggest that choice has made a difference, with the first group of schools outperforming schools in other phases of transformation.

Information for this report is drawn from Atlanta, Boston, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Chicago, Dallas, Portland, and New York City and their partnerships with the Bridgespan Group, Boston Consulting Group, McKinsey & Company, Education Resource Strategies, and The Parthenon Group.

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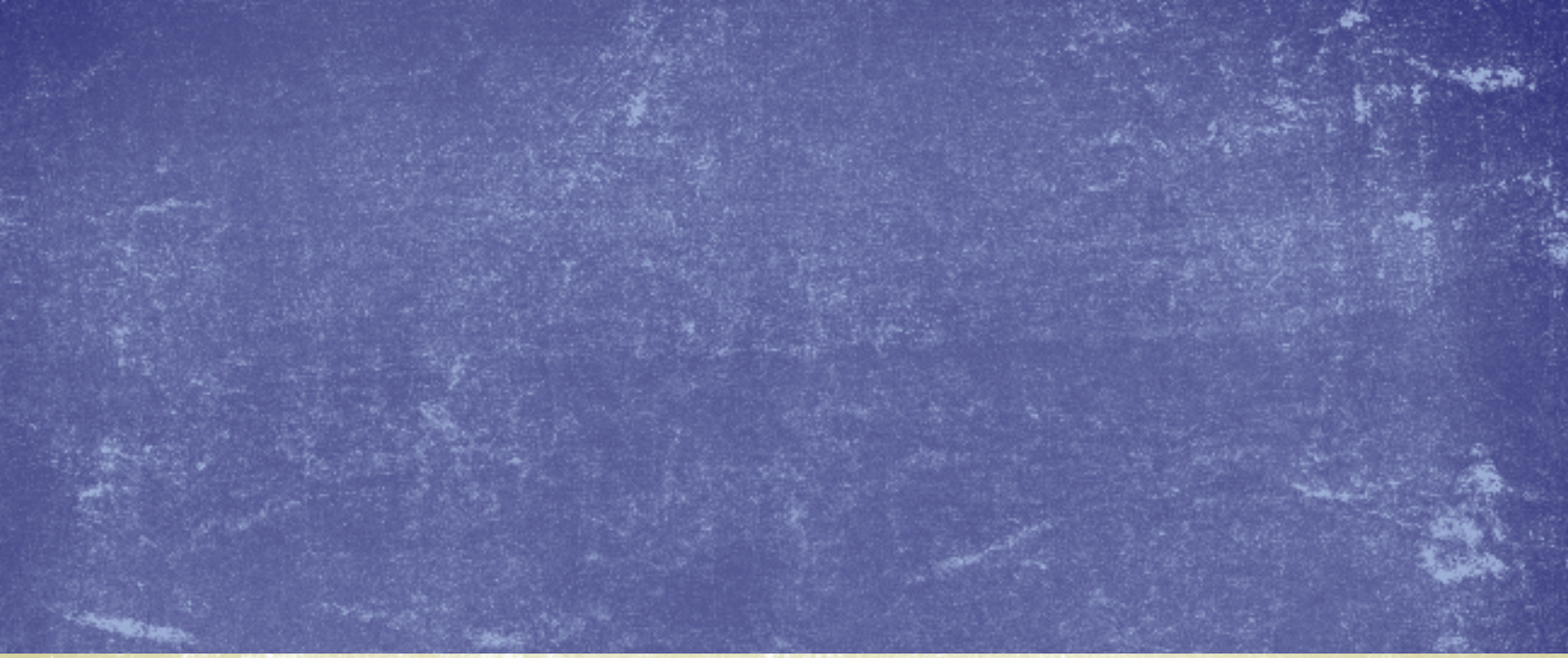

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