

THIS SCHOOL

WORKS FOR ME

Creating choices to boost achievement



**A GUIDE FOR AMERICA'S
SCHOOL LEADERS**

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*) describes in abbreviated form how district leaders and decisionmakers 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.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

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.

On Track to Graduation **2**

What You Need To Know—and Do

- 1. Find Out Which Students Are Struggling** **4**
- 2. Find Out Which Schools and Programs Are Struggling** **6**
- 3. Manage a Change Process** **8**
- 4. Keep More Students On Track by Strengthening the Mix of Options** **10**
- 5. Determine How To Support Schools** **14**
- 6. Support Schools and Programs by Changing Policies** **18**

Moving Forward **20**

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.

ON TRACK TO

GRADUATION

The gowned student with a mortarboard pinned to her hair hands a card to the principal, whispers *Laura Hnevska* in his ear, and strides across the stage to accept a high school diploma as her name is called.

We could increase the number of students making that proud walk across the stage if we didn't have to ask them their names. Indeed, it would help if we knew them by name much earlier than graduation day—from the day they start high school, not the day they leave.

It may be too much to expect you to know the name of every student in your district. But it is not too much to expect that more students will earn diplomas and, as a result, have a greater opportunity to succeed in college, careers, and life.

Doing so will require you to:

- know your students (who is on track and not) and know which schools and programs work best for them
- close chronically failing schools
- open new schools and programs that do a better job of helping students who are struggling or already have dropped out

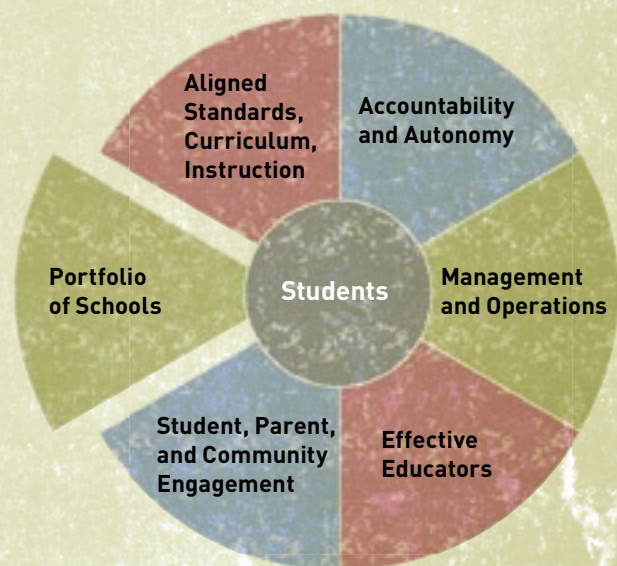
In the process, you will need to take the lead in helping teachers, principals, parents, policymakers, and other stakeholders understand why these innovations are needed.

A strategy to expand your portfolio of educational options is not sufficient by itself to transform high schools. You undoubtedly are working on many other strategies, including higher standards, more engaging curriculum and instruction, improved teacher evaluation and support, stakeholder engagement, cost-effective operating systems, and accountability systems that offer the appropriate mix of rewards and consequences.

But a portfolio approach should be an essential component of any district's effort to increase graduation rates and college readiness. While research confirms that the one-size-fits-all model of the large comprehensive high school does not serve the learning needs of many students, creating schools without uniform standards can have the unintended effect of creating a differentiated set of expectations. The approaches described in the following pages provide the best of both worlds: common, challenging goals for all students combined with maximum flexibility for them to get there.

A CLOSER LOOK

Developing a Portfolio Is One Aspect of Comprehensive School Reform





I imagined myself in a huge place with thousands of students and being this very small person looking for people in the building. It is a horrible feeling. You feel lost and scared.

- ROSA

LEARNING FROM TURNAROUND MODELS

Some large urban districts offer models of what is possible. New small schools in **Atlanta, Boston, Chicago,** and **New York,** and high schools in **Charlotte-Mecklenburg's** Achievement Zone have improved student achievement. Targeted "recuperative" programs in **New York, Boston,** and **Chicago** have had greater success with students who are off track to graduation 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.

Although not every intervention has been successful, all of these districts have been willing to shake up an unacceptable status quo and are using data to pilot new approaches for boosting graduation rates. In doing so, they have pioneered many of the "turn-around" strategies that have shown the most promise and are being considered for scale nationwide.

These districts have learned that:

- most 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 also are 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

Note: Throughout the guide we are using student quotes from *The Schools We Need* and *Central High School*, published by What Kids Can Do.

ARE YOU READY?

Some districts will be more prepared than others to implement the advice that follows. Answering these three questions will help you determine your district's readiness:

- Do you have the right data infrastructure and analytic capacity to pinpoint your challenges?
- Are you willing to take bold steps, including closing dysfunctional schools, opening new ones, and forming partnerships with external partners, if necessary?
- Are you committed to the change process required to create a mix of school options that builds broad-based understanding and buy-in?

If your district has many of these conditions for success in place, the *Implementation Guide* provides a step-by-step approach for identifying which students are succeeding and how to begin the process of high school transformation. The *Analyst Guide* describes the kinds of analyses that will generate the data needed for decisionmaking. If your district needs more time or resources to pursue comprehensive reforms, these guides will help you prioritize more limited interventions that can help students in the short term and set the stage for future improvements.

Regardless of where your district falls along the spectrum of reform readiness, these guides can help focus your efforts and, in the process, ensure that more students in your district make that successful walk across the stage.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW —AND DO

1.

FIND OUT WHICH

STUDENTS ARE STRUGGLING

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. Was *Laura* on track as a freshman? Why did *Maria* drop out before 9th grade? Could you have predicted that *Deng* would never make it to 10th grade? Without information like this, districts are flying blind. With this information, you are in a much stronger position to provide proactive solutions, school by school, student by student. You'll use data tools to segment students: determining which groups are more likely to drop out, the size of those groups, and the names of the students in those groups.

ADVICE

You need to answer these three questions:

1. Who is on track, at each grade level, to graduate?
2. Who is off track, struggling, and likely to fail? *Maria? Deng? Jerome?* Knowing these students by name and knowing where they go to school now will be key to intervening on their behalf.
3. Which indicators best predict who is on track or not? Who is at risk of dropping out? Who is off track and likely to drop out?

Create an early warning system using risk and off-track indicators.

- Use *risk indicators*—low to failing grades in core courses, poor standardized test scores, absenteeism or misbehavior, special education or English proficiency status, and age entering high school—as early as 8th grade to predict who is likely to fall off track.

- Use *off-track indicators* to monitor credits earned and course failures beginning in 9th grade. You might be able to help younger students who are slightly off track with targeted supports in existing schools. On the other hand, overage students with very few credits likely will need new “recuperative” programs, often located in separate schools, to accelerate their progress.
- The appearance of these indicators in combination should set off alarms in your schools: *Deng* failed English and math in middle school and rarely attends school on Friday. Before *Deng*'s first day of high school, his principal and school team should identify which teachers to assign and what supports would be helpful. Without an intervention, he will soon become a dropout statistic.

4



When your teachers know your name,
you are under more pressure to do well.
-ALBERTO

INSIGHTS/EVIDENCE

Some districts have found analyses such as these to be eye opening. For instance, **Boston, Chicago, and Portland** learned that 75 percent of eventual dropouts could be identified using one of these indicators: age at entry to high school, 8th and/or 9th grade performance, and late entrants (students who join the class in 10th grade or later).

New York City discovered that more than 140,000 students had dropped out or were off track.

Boston found that 93 percent of its eventual dropouts fell into five distinct off-track categories, each requiring a different recuperative approach.

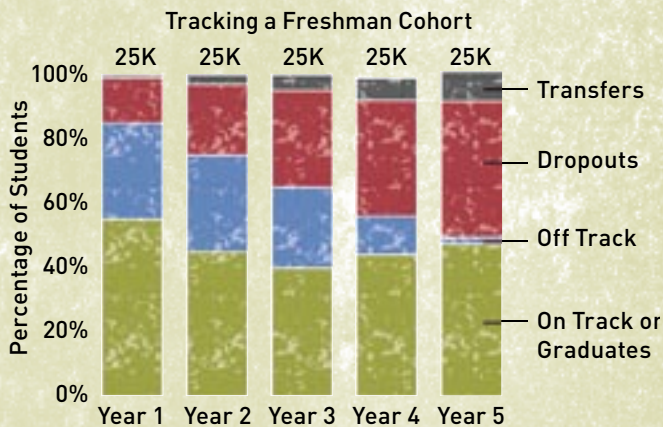
Chicago learned that age at entry is a key indicator. Only 27 percent of students who were 15 or older when they started 9th grade graduated—and they made up 42 percent of all eventual dropouts.

Portland found that 47 percent of its eventual dropouts were “early strugglers,” based on 8th grade tests and/or 9th grade course failures.

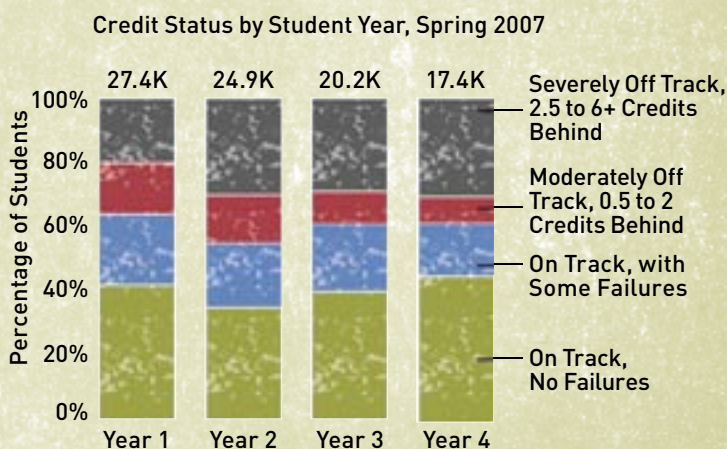
Charlotte-Mecklenburg discovered that students attending 12 low-performing schools were missing three weeks of instruction in a given year. Students were absent twice as many days as the district average, and teachers were missing twice as many days as the district average.

A CLOSER LOOK

Insights from some of the analyses may not be surprising, such as information gleaned from this chart that most students who fail to graduate fall off track by the end of 9th grade (Year 1).



Other analyses reveal more, such as this chart that shows where off-track students are in terms of credits as they progress toward graduation.



2.

FIND OUT WHICH **SCHOOLS AND PROGRAMS ARE STRUGGLING**

Some schools do a better job than others of helping students navigate their way to a diploma. 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 preparing graduates to enroll in college. 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.

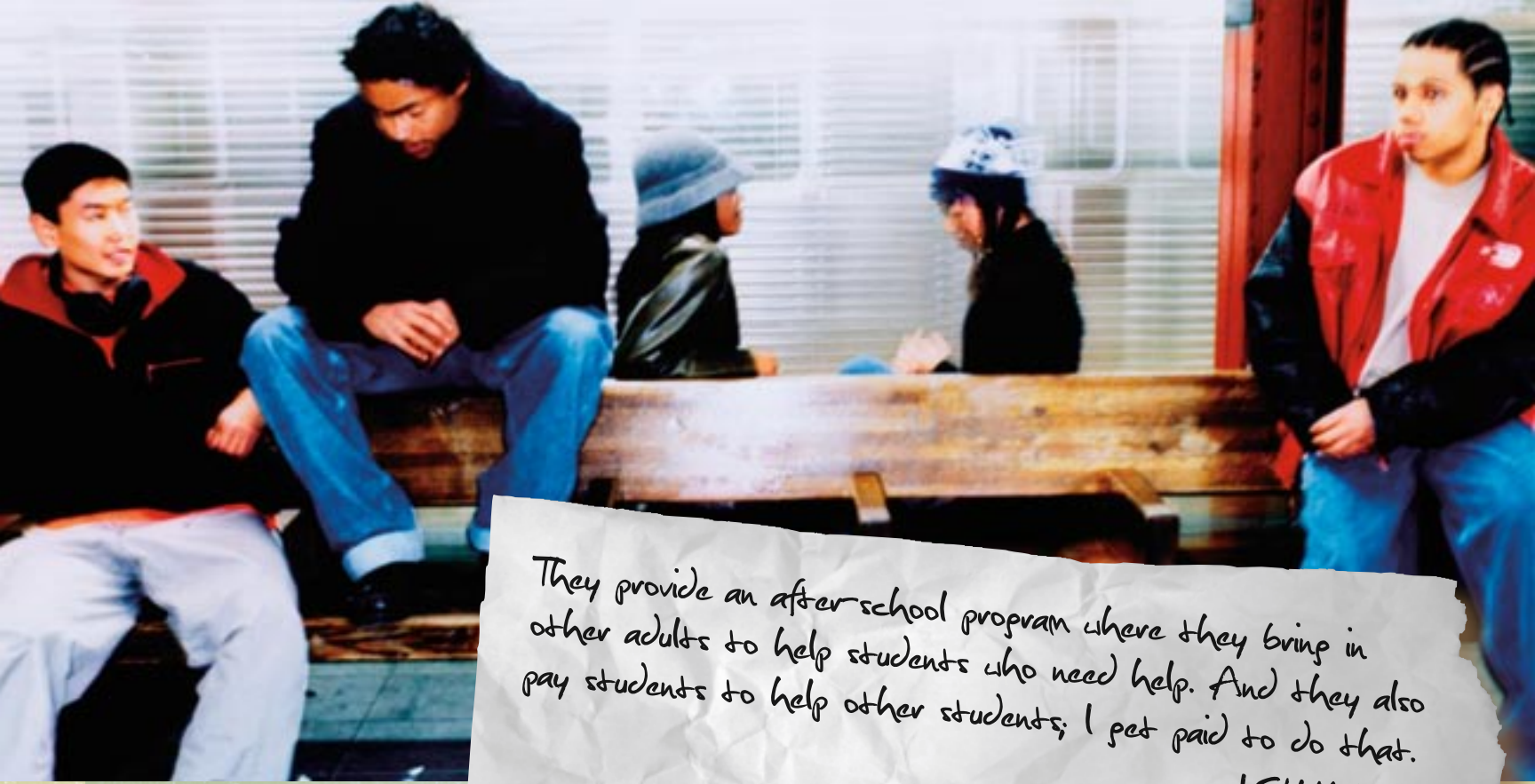
ADVICE

You need to answer these key questions:

1. What is your current mix of school choices and programs? In addition to comprehensive high schools, do you have charter schools? Magnet schools? Career academies? Specialized schools with selective enrollment? Evening schools? GED programs? Credit recovery programs?
2. Which schools and programs are particularly weak, with graduation rates of less than 50 percent?
3. Which schools and programs are successful in graduating students who enter proficient at 9th grade?
4. Do you need a broader mix of schools and programs to meet the needs of students who are at risk of dropping out when they enter 9th grade and those who become off track in high school?

Offer program options for students who are at risk of failing or falling off track, such as:

- Prevention programs—such as 8th grade mentoring, summer transition programs, and small schools—can keep at-risk students from falling off track.
- After-school, credit recovery, or other intervention programs can help students who fall behind in credits get back on track.
- Recuperative programs and schools, such as New York City's Transfer Schools and Young Adult Borough Centers, are needed for students who are far behind yet still in school.
- Re-engagement/re-enrollment programs serve students who have dropped out in a variety of settings that are more appealing than the large high school and often involve support from community organizations.



They provide an after-school program where they bring in other adults to help students who need help. And they also pay students to help other students; I get paid to do that.
 - ISHMAEL

INSIGHTS/EVIDENCE

In comparing schools with similar demographics and achievement levels, one district found differences in four-year graduation rates of up to 41 percent.

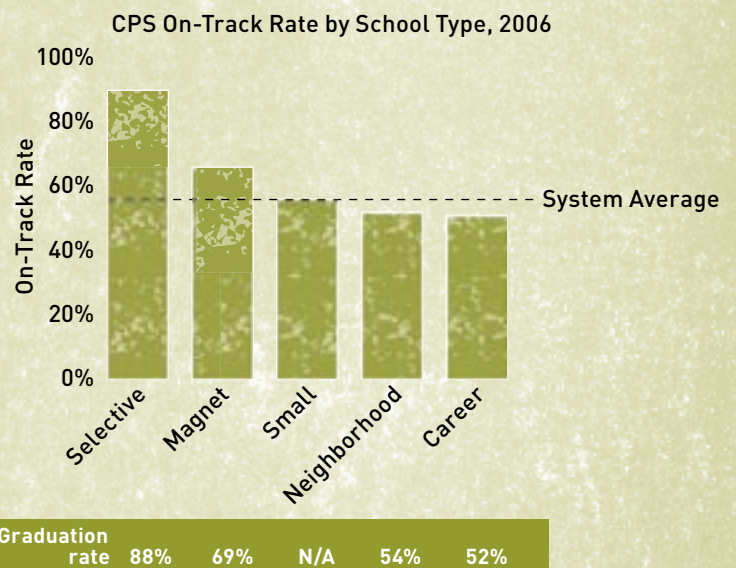
One analysis revealed that school size and student concentration have reasonably predictable effects on student performance. For instance, graduation rates likely will decrease by 2 percentage points in schools with a 500-student increase in enrollment, 5 percent more students with low 8th grade test scores, 5 percent more students who are over 15 when entering 9th grade, or 6 percent more students who were ever in a self-contained special education classroom.

New York City found that about 80 percent of its off-track students were in general high schools, rather than being transferred to specialized schools, which had much higher graduation rates.

Atlanta's data management system, On Track to Graduation, monitors indicators such as student attendance, discipline record, and interim benchmark assessments by teacher, school, and aggregates of schools. The first cohort to graduate from a small school within Carver High School had a 94 percent graduation rate in 2009, compared with the school's rate of 36 percent in 2004.

A CLOSER LOOK

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) found a 36 percentage-point difference in graduation rates between selective high schools and career high schools.



3.

MANAGE A

CHANGE

PROCESS

Armed with a more precise understanding of student and school performance, you will need to reach out to key stakeholders. 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 bring key stakeholders along every step of the way, it will be difficult to launch your efforts and even more difficult to sustain them.

ADVICE

Get started by reaching out and making the case for change.

- Identify key stakeholders from the district (administrators, teachers, students) and community (parents, business and civic leaders, youth service providers, community organizations). Engaging them in discussions and decisions will build a base of champions for your efforts.
- Make the case for change based on the data you have analyzed—and tell a compelling story by putting names and faces to the numbers.
- Define success and spell out the clear benefits of the proposed changes, which will help clarify reform goals, validate specific actions, and motivate stakeholders to move ahead with you.
- Identify potential obstacles—your discussions with stakeholders will be key to surfacing barriers in attitudes, policies, politics, precedence, practices, and programs.

Develop a detailed action plan, using specific measures of progress and success.

- Determine the evidence needed to measure success. You'll want to be able to show progress along the way as well as improvement long term.
 - Outcome indicators that measure your end goal include graduation rates and college enrollment rates.
 - Leading indicators include many of the components of your early warning system: attendance; the percentage of students on track to graduate; the percentage of students failing specific classes, such as Algebra 1; and percentage increases in enrollment in credit recovery programs.
- Create a comprehensive strategy, including key operations and communications activities, budget considerations, and timelines.

Implement, evaluate, and adjust.

- Closely monitor the leading indicators to ensure that the strategies are being implemented as planned.
- Use regular progress reviews to maintain a relentless focus on implementation and identify and address potential barriers.





INSIGHTS/EVIDENCE

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 public appearances and on the district’s web site, the superintendent said the plan was intended “to set students up for success by delivering greater equity and consistency in our educational program, new opportunities for students with different interests or learning styles, and learning environments that foster strong relationships between teachers and students.”

An editorial in Portland’s *The Oregonian* described the plan as “ambitious,” one that “shows real promise as long as the district tackles equity problems by lifting up, not pushing down.”

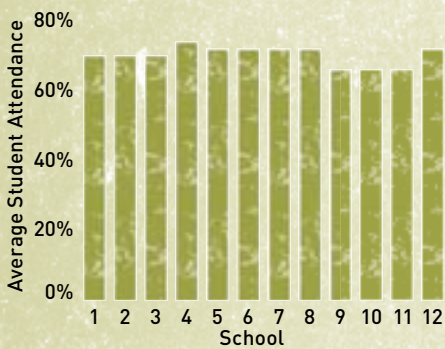
The problem is that we need to be aware of changes before. Do not let the plan be made just by adults. We need to know what is going to happen, to agree on what is going on. Let us help decide. Let us approve.
-ZORANYI

A CLOSER LOOK

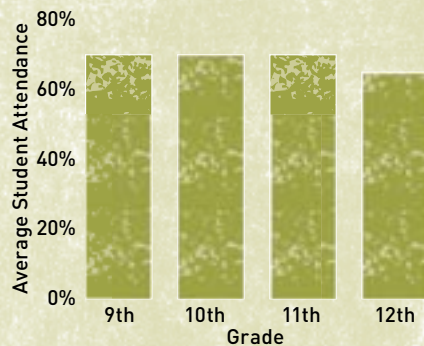
Use leading indicators, such as the examples below, to measure interim results.

Use outcome indicators, such as the examples below, to determine long-term success.

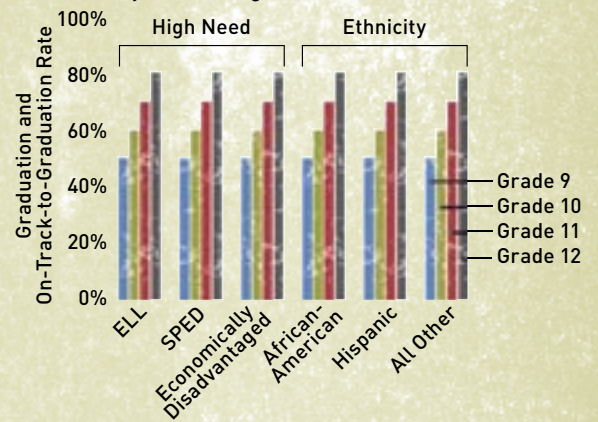
Student Attendance Rates by Campus, Six-Week Review Period



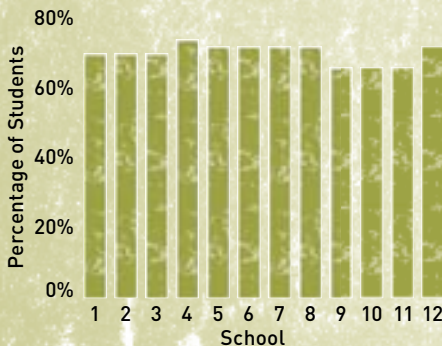
Student Attendance Rates by Grade, Six-Week Review Period



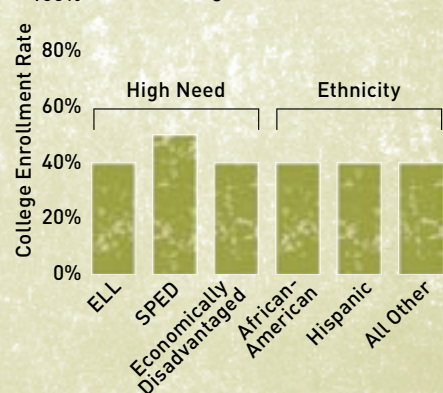
Graduation and On-Track-to-Graduation Rate by Student Segment, Academic Year



Percentage of Students Missing More Than 20 Percent of Days, Six-Week Review Period



College Enrollment Rate by Student Segment, Academic Year



4

KEEP MORE STUDENTS ON TRACK BY **STRENGTHENING THE MIX OF OPTIONS**

The data will provide the necessary wake-up call that “business as usual” is not producing the results that you want and students deserve. But how will you act on the information? What specific changes make the most sense? Will you be willing to close failing schools? 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? Answers to these questions will provide a roadmap for action.

ADVICE

Use the data gathered to segment schools by student performance, school leadership, and school performance in meeting accountability standards.

- In *Good-to-Great Schools*, everyone is succeeding—students are high achievers, leaders and teachers are well regarded, and the school meets or exceeds state and federal accountability standards. Many but not most students in *Inconsistent Schools* are high performing, and the school meets some accountability standards but not others. In *Struggling Schools*, most students perform poorly on state assessments, and the school fails to meet any accountability standards. *Failing Schools* have consistently low student performance and persistent failing grades for the school as well.

Set a standard of support for Good-to-Great, Inconsistent, and Struggling Schools and amplify that support when performance slips.

- Good-to-Great Schools might qualify for bonuses based on high performance. Inconsistent Schools might receive coaching support and professional development to target areas of weakness, as well as be encouraged to apply for private or government grants. Struggling Schools would have more intensive coaching and a school reform partner to work with school leaders and teachers.

Close Failing Schools.

- Closing schools is a necessary option for schools that are historically and intractably underperforming. The school may reopen in the same building, even with the same name, but with new leadership and new staff and, in some instances, as four small schools under one roof. In identifying schools for closure, student and school performance data provide the basis for a first-round analysis. In these schools, typically no students attend or graduate from a postsecondary program. In addition, leaders in these schools have attempted many targeted initiatives that have either failed outright or not gained traction, and federal/state/local accountability standards have not prompted meaningful change. There is no justification for keeping these schools open.





In the school I went to before, they just give you grades on your report card. In a small school they give you comments, how you can improve. It makes me have my next goal [be] to do that thing, to get a better grade.

-LORI

INSIGHTS/EVIDENCE

New York City has closed, reopened, or created nearly 200 schools as part of its high school reform, and they are achieving graduation rates nearly 20 points higher than the city average and “twice the rate of the schools they replaced ... even though these schools have a higher-than-average percentage of English language learners and students with disabilities compared to other schools in the city.” (*Graduating America*, Everyone Graduates Center and Jobs for the Future, 2009)

New York also has significantly expanded options for off-track students by creating multiple pathways to graduation: Transfer Schools (small, full-time high schools for younger off-track students), Young Adult Borough Centers (credit recovery programs offered in the evenings for older students), and Enhanced GED programs (for 18–20-year-olds who choose to pursue a GED credential instead of a high school diploma).

Chicago has closed low-performing high schools and created Achievement Academies and small autonomous schools, as well as a 9th grade transition program to keep students from falling off track.

Atlanta has opened two single-gender academies that initially served 6th graders and is continuing to add a grade each year through high school. The district intends to transform all of its schools, beginning with the lowest performing, and it is testing three strategies: starting with a defined cohort at 9th grade and allowing the school to grow, starting schools with 9th and 10th graders and growing to 12th, and creating small learning communities with themes within larger schools.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg has created an Achievement Zone for the 12 lowest-performing schools in the district, lowering class size in those schools, and it has opened Midwood High School to serve students from all over the district who did not pass the end-of-grade test at 8th grade.

In quantitative research reported in *On the Front Lines of Schools* (Civic Enterprises, 2009), more than three-fourths of teachers and principals supported what researchers described as alternative learning environments as a way to reduce the dropout rate. In focus groups, “educators felt these environments would provide at-risk students more choices in finding a school that was more relevant to their lives and goals.”

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

- Even Good-to-Great Schools may not be serving some segments of students who could benefit from tutoring, mentoring, or credit recovery programs, which is why it is extremely important to look at all possible student segments in a school.
- 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.
- Significantly off-track students almost certainly will require a different kind of program, often in separate schools with extensive non-academic supports.

CHOICES TO MAKE


- Identify a strategy for closing, replacing, and transforming schools. Some districts phase in new schools by adding a grade level each year, while others use a “big bang” approach, converting all grades at once. Another approach is to reopen the school with an entirely different staff, either one year at a time or for 9th–12th grades.
- Decide what the school will look like: students, staffing plan, supports, instructional program, school day and year, and resource allocations. A planning team with varying perspectives can be helpful in identifying and managing the many decisions that are required in designing a school.
- Determine if the district will run the schools, contract with an external school partner, consider a charter, partner with local community organizations to help meet students’ nonacademic needs—or use a mix of these management options.



A CLOSER LOOK

Different needs call for a mix of school choices and programs.

	At Risk	Early Off Track	Moderately to Severely Off Track	
Strategy	<i>Prevention</i>	<i>Intervention</i>	<i>Recuperation</i>	<i>Re-Engagement/ Re-Enrollment</i>
Programs	8th grade mentoring	Tutoring	GED preparation programs	
	Student advocacy programs	Counselors	Student outreach	
	Freshmen orientation and summer transition	After-school programs		Programs to encourage students to re-enroll
	9th grade transition programs	Dual enrollment		
	Career preparation	Course scheduling, e.g., offering Algebra 1 second semester for those who failed first semester		
		Credit recovery programs		
School Options	Improve comprehensive high schools	Targeted supports in student’s home school	Separate buildings with different models	
	Create: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Small schools ■ Theme schools ■ Small learning communities ■ Transition schools ■ Alternative schools 		Create: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Virtual schools ■ Evening schools 	



So when a teacher or administrator communicates that they actually understand our struggles, what we are going through, then that makes us want to work together.

-SHANE



DETERMINE HOW TO

SUPPORT SCHOOLS

As you broaden your portfolio of options, you likely will have to transform how you are providing centralized support for these efforts. At a minimum, you will want to establish a separate unit—with the necessary authority—to lead and oversee your turnaround efforts. Such an office will provide the necessary focus, resources, and expertise to help your innovations take hold, even if the efforts might be invisible to students like *Jerome* and *Maria*.

ADVICE

Determine what organizational changes will be needed to support the expansion of your school portfolio.

- Several districts have created an administrative office or designated a team to oversee closing schools, developing new schools, identifying suitable outside partners (as needed), and implementing new programs—in short, to oversee creating a stronger set of school choices. The job description includes moving 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.
- In many districts, the portfolio development office is separate and distinct from an office for high schools, or an administrator for secondary schools, which has responsibility for evaluating school leadership and performance and providing support in areas such as instructional design and budgeting.

Clearly define roles, responsibilities, and expectations.

- How much autonomy will schools have? How tightly will you manage curriculum, instruction, and professional development? What methodology will you use to allocate funds to schools? Will new schools get differentiated resources? Will they have different levels of accountability? If so, for how long? How will the office of portfolio development (or similar mechanism) interact with facilities, human resources, enrollment, and other key departments?
- Who decides on the number and types of schools in the portfolio? Who controls the operational logistics of school closures and/or restructuring? Who is accountable for implementation? To what extent will you develop networks or clusters of schools to supplement central office support? When do new schools get transitioned to existing school networks? That is, when does their incubation period end?

Build capacity.

- To expand and manage your portfolio, you will need to build or improve your expertise in several key areas: data and analysis, innovation, replication of successful programs and practices, partnerships, evaluation and accountability, operations and logistical support, project management and implementation support, and stakeholder engagement/communications. Districts often increase their internal capacity through external partnerships, which bring both advantages and disadvantages.



It is just bad because our reputation was based on "back then." Maybe the school was bad back then—but it is changing now. We are becoming smarter, our test scores are going up.

-DALIDA

INSIGHTS/EVIDENCE

After introducing a number of initiatives to improve student achievement, from managed instruction to the designation of schools for an Achievement Zone (12 low-performing schools), **Charlotte-Mecklenburg** is giving principals more authority to make decisions. Within five years, all principals are expected to achieve the distinction of managing their schools with “freedom and flexibility,” and those who do not will be terminated. The district has provided extensive professional development to build capacity in data-driven decisionmaking, performance management, and building of professional learning communities.

With grant funding, the district hired an executive director to oversee the implementation of a data management system specifically within the Achievement Zone. The new position of data analyst has been added at each high school.

CHOICES TO MAKE

External partners can help shoulder the workload and provide expertise where it is missing in areas such as implementing curriculum and instruction in existing schools or managing the nonacademic side of the house—financial, technical, human resources, and legal functions. Because they have experience from other districts and can transfer lessons learned, outside partners often are better able to customize services and can tap private funding sources to support their reform efforts.

However, you may have to invest too many resources to bring the partner up to speed on the unique structure, culture, and operations of a school system. While start-up schools may be able to secure funding, sustaining the effort requires ongoing and often arduous fundraising. Equally challenging is determining what yardstick will be used to measure the success of these partnerships and how much improvement is sufficient to warrant continuing the arrangement.

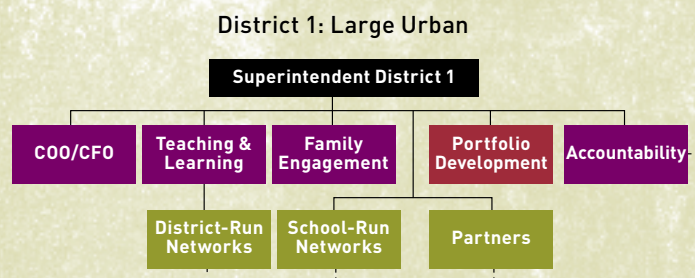




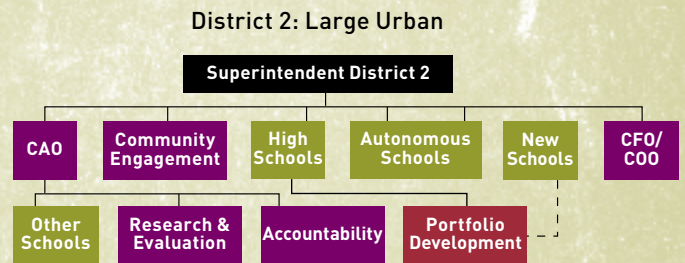
A CLOSER LOOK

While there are different approaches to managing a district's portfolio, many of the districts studied separated portfolio development and school supervision.

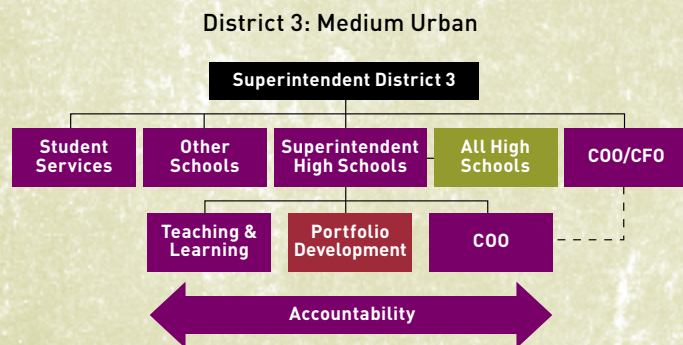
Options for Organization: One Size Does Not Fit All



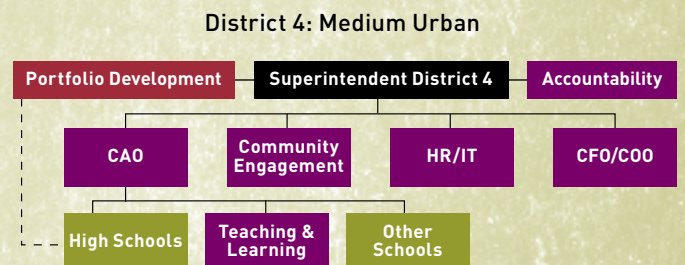
- Portfolio development reports directly to the superintendent
- New and existing schools managed together, although new schools receive specialized supports



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

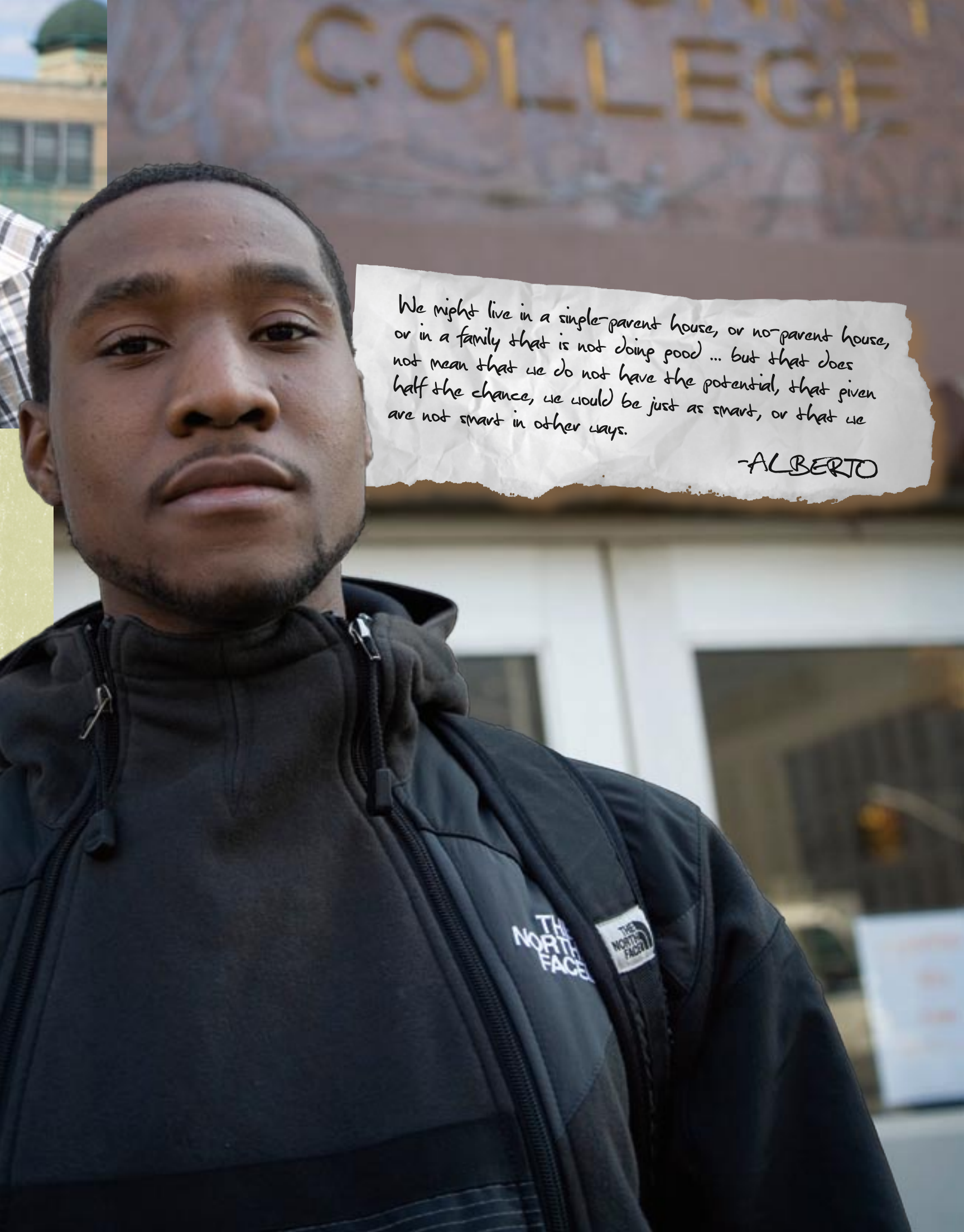


- Centralized approach to portfolio development maintains explicit focus on high school transformation
- All high schools managed together



- 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

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.



We might live in a single-parent house, or no-parent house, or in a family that is not doing good ... but that does not mean that we do not have the potential, that given half the chance, we would be just as smart, or that we are not smart in other ways.

-ALBERTO



SUPPORT SCHOOLS AND PROGRAMS BY

CHANGING POLICIES

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. They need to be ensured of their fair share of resources, no matter which school they select. And they need clarity about the extent of their choices.

ADVICE

Determine what measures you will use to hold schools accountable. Use multiple measures of performance, such as absolute performance, growth, and peer indexing, to create a more complete picture of school success.

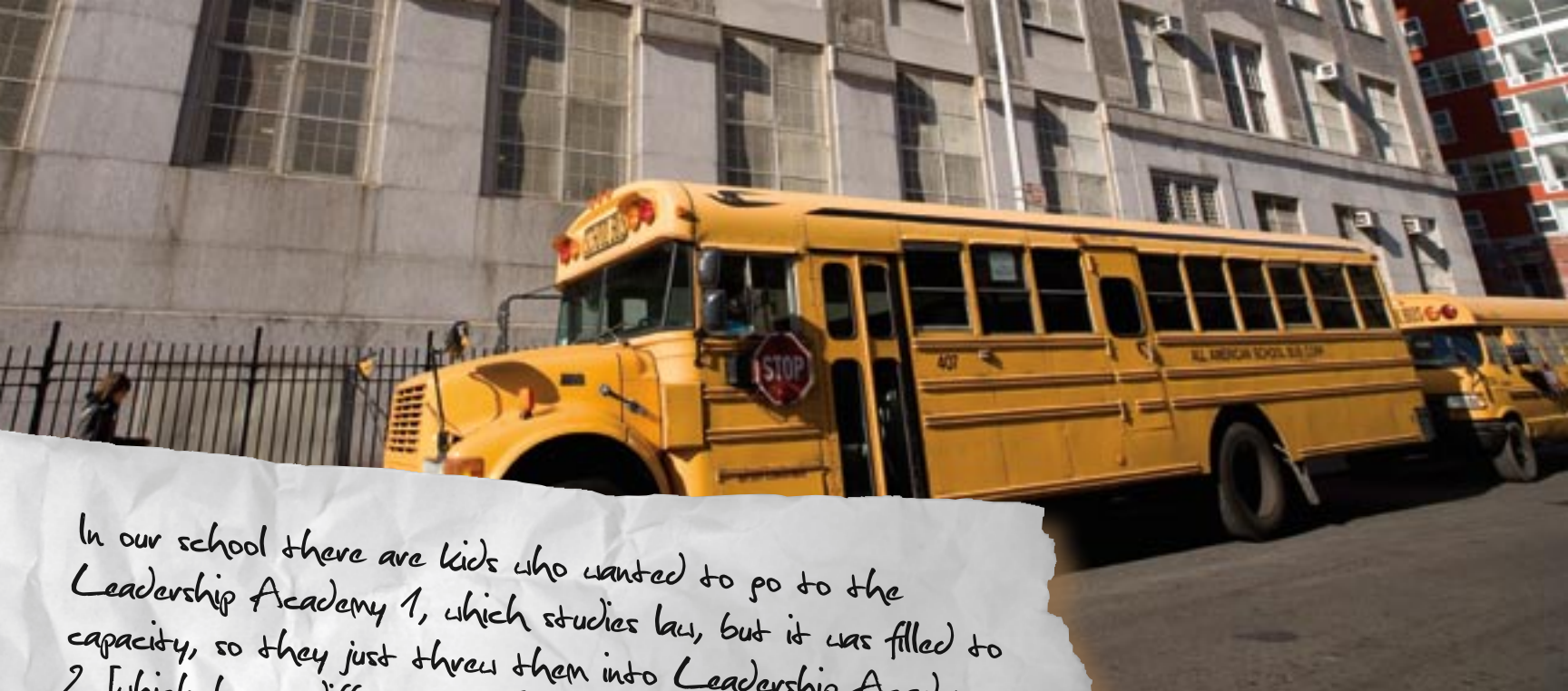
- *Absolute performance*—the percentage of students graduating, the percentage meeting state standards—is the measure that is most familiar because it is most often used.
- *Growth measures*, which measure improvement over a period of time, compensate for students who start far behind their peers and give credit for schools that move them 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* shows how schools perform compared to 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 English language learners. School A may have a higher graduation rate compared with 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.

Decide what criteria will be used to fund schools.

- School funding can be *arbitrary* based on precedent and favoritism, *equal* based on a per-pupil and per-staff basis, or *equitable* based on the needs of the individual students in each school. Allocating resources with a weighted student formula acknowledges that it takes more resources to support an English language learner, a developmentally delayed freshman, or a severely off-track, would-be senior.
- Consistent approaches to funding level the playing field and allow more accurate comparisons of schools.

Decide how much choice students will have.

- A portfolio strategy will not work unless students can choose from a broad menu of intentional school options. Choice promotes *engagement*, as students and families become active participants in choosing schools; *equity*, because students are not limited to a single school by geography; and *competition*, with schools compelled to offer a program students will buy in to.
- Remembering that a student may choose schools that work for his friends but not for him, your policies should address whether the district can override a choice to make a different placement.



In our school there are kids who wanted to go to the Leadership Academy 1, which studies law, but it was filled to capacity, so they just threw them into Leadership Academy 2 [which has a different focus]. For them it was way off topic. It was not their interest. They had no other choice.

-JOSHUA

INSIGHTS/EVIDENCE

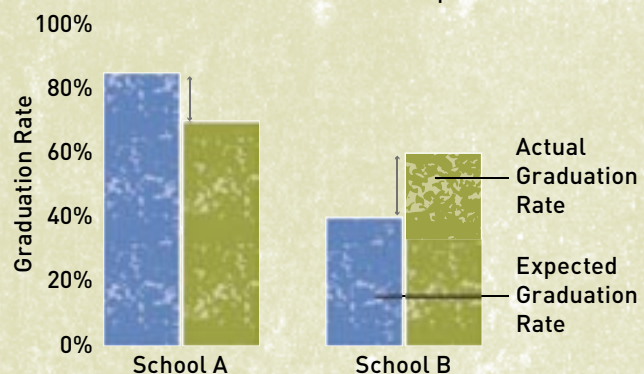
New York City has totally open enrollment for all high school students as a means to boost equity. On the other hand, **Portland** has proposed eliminating open enrollment for high school students because the current policy increases segregation by race, family income, disability status, and first language.

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.

A CLOSER LOOK

While School A is outperforming School B in absolute terms, School B is overperforming relative to expectations.

Actual versus Expected Graduation Rate of Two Sample Schools



Although School A has a higher actual graduation rate than School B ...

... School B is graduating students well above its expected rate ...

... while School A is graduating students below its expected rate.

Level of over-/underperformance: -15% +20%

To learn more about how to calculate expected performance, see the Analyst Guide.

MOVING
FORWARD

START HERE:

1. **Identify a team** to review and discuss the *Implementation Guide*— and include a data analyst on the team.
2. **Assess the capacity** of the system to capture essential data elements and conduct the analyses found in the *Analyst Guide*.
3. **Have the team recommend** the feasibility of initiating or broadening a portfolio of schools.

Even if you cannot do everything, you can do some things. Simply answering four basic questions will help you pinpoint the scope of your challenge and target your interventions more effectively:

1. Which high schools have graduation rates below 50 percent, and what percentage of your students are enrolled there?
2. What percentage of students who drop out start high school on track to graduate?
3. Are specific student groups particularly at risk of dropping out?
4. Which programs have a better track record of helping students who are significantly off track or already have dropped out?

Answering these questions does not require a high-level analysis or extensive resources. But it does require focus and a willingness to act on what you learn ... starting now.

Remember *Laura*, proudly walking across the stage to receive her diploma? The reality is that she turned 18 before finishing 9th grade. Because many students had similar struggles, the school system opened a credit recovery night school that allowed Laura and her peers to work during the day at a paid internship provided by a business partner. That experience provided the extra motivation she needed. A local community-based organization offered intensive counseling and medical support. And a young person whose future was limited became a success.

How many *Lauras* are in your community? What are you doing to create a lifeline for them?



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.

Resources

Robert Balfanz, Cheryl Almeida, Adria Steinberg, Janet Santos, and Joanna Hornig Fox. *Graduating America: Meeting the Challenge of Low Graduation-Rate High Schools*. July 2009.

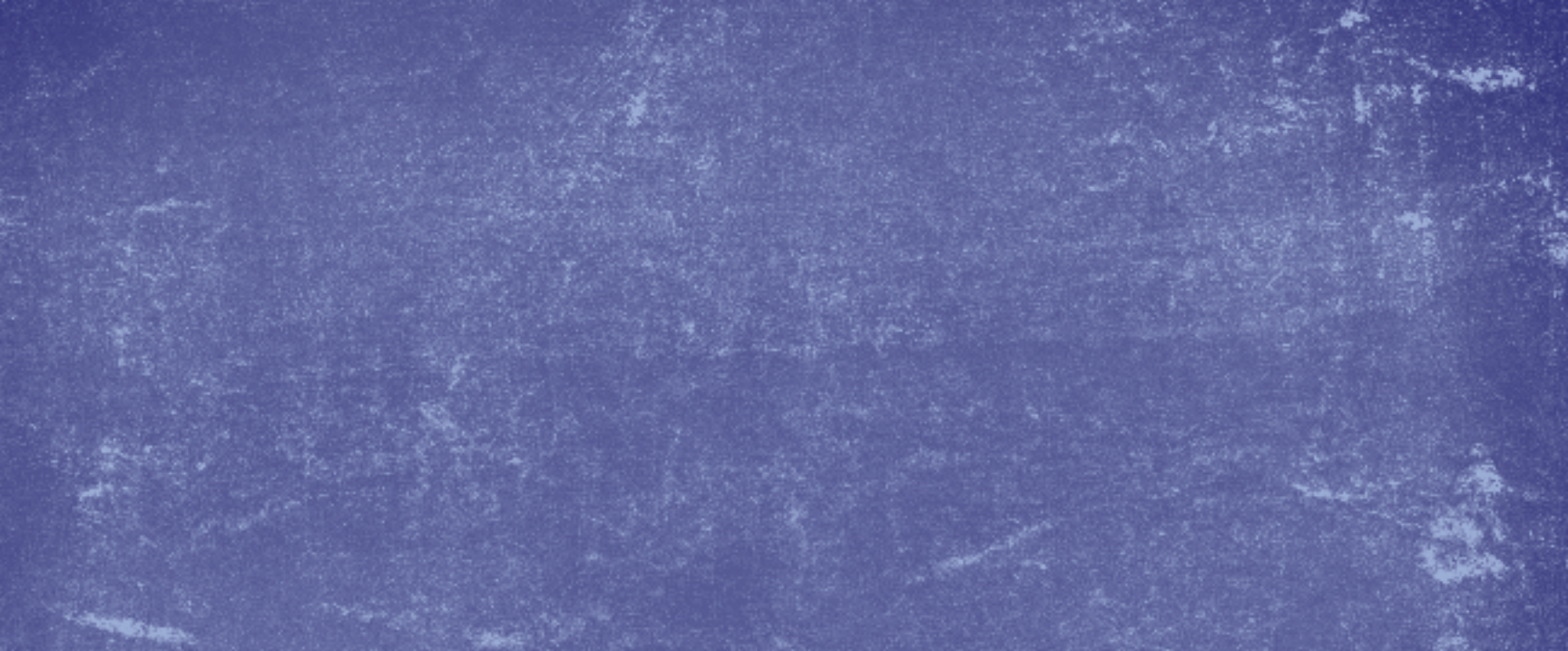
John M. Bridgeland, John J. Dilulio, Jr., and Robert Balfanz. *On the Front Lines of Schools: Perspectives of Teachers and Principals on the High School Dropout Problem*. Civic Enterprises. June 2009.

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By Design, Not Default: Optimizing District Spending on Small High Schools. Education Resource Strategies. April 2009.

Craig Jerald. *Identifying Potential Dropouts: Key Lessons for Building an Early Warning Data System*. A white paper prepared for Moving Forward: High Standards and High Graduation Rates, a joint project of Achieve and Jobs for the Future. June 2006.

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