

Education reform that sticks

Ten years of “portfolio strategy” efforts reveal how to navigate politics and change K-12 public education

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The outcomes of our public education system are often grossly unequal, and efforts to change them on behalf of those left behind usually fail. Politics has killed initiatives from the right and from the left, from standardizing instruction throughout districts to site-based management. Failure to incorporate political thinking has ruined many plausible initiatives by state and federal officials, foundations, and even local reform leaders.

Public education depends on expertise, work, money, and cooperation from multiple actors who have different interests and beliefs. These lead to competition and negotiation—in other words, politics. No one actor, even one as powerful as a teachers union, parent group, foundation, mayor, or state superintendent of education, can make a significant change in schools all by themselves. Any one actor needs to gain and keep the support of multiple others, all of whom have their own agendas.

Failure to consider the politics of reform implementation and sustainability has doomed many promising K-12 school improvement initiatives.¹ [Backlashes](#) against “top-down” reforms devised by state officials and foundations—e.g., technology-assisted personalized instruction and test-based accountability—have led foundation leaders and policy analysts to question whether any ideas from outside the education profession have a chance of success. Others have concluded that the only ideas that can overcome the politics of implementation are those that bubble up from the “community”—e.g., teachers, parents, and local nonprofits.

¹ We are not the first to make this observation. Four years ago, a book edited by Jay Greene and Michael McShane, *Failure Up Close* (Rowman and Littlefield 2018), analyzed eight major education policy failures and blamed a “futile effort to evade politics.” Many failed programs “depended on the short-circuiting of regular democratic processes . . . The lack of democratic input and consent proved to be their undoing as they lacked contextual information to devise appropriate solutions and as practitioners and local policymakers failed to implement them (p. xvi).”

We write to challenge those conclusions. Yes, we agree that some reforms invented by foundation leaders or mandated by distant policy makers have treated parents and educators as if they were suspended in a vacuum and ready to move in the direction of any wind. Reform ideas must be sensitive to families' aspirations, but that does not mean they all need to be invented at the grassroots level. Schools are unlikely to change if the interests of stakeholder groups are left unchallenged, and schools can indeed change in response to ideas and incentives, including ones from policymakers, foundations, researchers, and businesses. Education leaders, including school superintendents who think their schools are not serving students well and need to change in ways that will be contested, can't ignore the interests and preferences of parents, educators, and other local actors. But, as we will show in this paper, no alignment of political forces is permanent, and there are things reformers can do to build support and weaken opposition so their ideas can last long enough to have a positive impact.

For 10 years, CRPE supported a [network](#) of cities² that adopted and made some progress implementing a complex, mutually reinforcing set of reforms called the portfolio strategy, which mixes new freedoms for existing schools with investment in both existing and new schools and expanded choices for families. We kept records on each locality based on interviews with key actors and tracking of district records, websites, and news stories through 2018. We then annually summarized each locality's status in terms of policies adopted, specific implementation steps taken, resources obtained and allocated, decisions to delay or soft-pedal part or all of the strategy, efforts to broaden support and sources of resistance, tactics of supporters and opponents, and events that stopped progress or led to the abandonment of the initiative.

We draw on this database for our current analysis, which takes an old-fashioned “scope of conflict” approach, after political scientist E. E. Schattschneider. He likened politics to a fight between two men in a street. If nobody intervenes, the stronger will win. But if the weaker fighter can get a bystander to join in on his side, the dynamic changes. Neither of the original combatants can control the results all by himself. As Schattschneider [wrote](#), the ultimate result depends less on the strength of the original fighters than on the behavior of the crowd. Bystanders can enter the fight for their own reasons that have little to do with what brought the original combatants to blows. As the number of people engaged grows, the issues at stake broaden to reflect the motives of all the current combatants. As actors hoping to enact or resist a particular policy recruit allies, the range of issues at stake grows.

This basic framework—how supporters and opponents of the portfolio strategy sought allies, what arguments and inducements they used, how the issues and stakes changed over time, and how advantage shifted from one side to the other—informs the analysis below.

2 Our database includes extensive interview records and semiannual self-reports on reform implementation since 2011 in Atlanta, Boston, Camden, Chicago, Cleveland, Denver, Houston, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Memphis, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, San Antonio, Tulsa, and Washington, D.C.

The portfolio strategy

The portfolio strategy aims to support system-wide continuous improvement by collectively managing different types of schools—including ones directly operated by the district, semi-autonomous schools created by the district, and chartered or contracted schools run by independent parties—while holding all schools, no matter how they are run, accountable for performance. Schools, not the district, are responsible for providing good instruction, and, as a result, must have freedom of action to adjust curriculum, time, talent, and money to meet student needs. Districts shift from acting as a sole provider of instruction and services to overseeing schools based on performance and helping schools access talent and support—whether inside or outside the district.

These ideas were operationalized in a [matrix of seven components](#), which CRPE used to track implementation of the portfolio strategy, via regular interviews with district and community actors. Those components included (1) good options and choices for all families, (2) school autonomy, (3) pupil-based funding for all schools, (4) talent-seeking strategy, (5) sources of support for schools, (6) performance-based accountability for schools, and (7) extensive public engagement.

The portfolio strategy incorporated reform ideas that have their origins outside the strategy, including expanding school choice for families, providing pupil-based funding to schools, reinventing teacher preparation and pipelines, and standards-based accountability for schools. What makes the strategy different is its effort to bring many reform ideas together into a mutually reinforcing package that addresses weaknesses that live in any one reform proposal or idea. It also means that leaders of the strategy could draw upon different bases of support to sustain the strategy over time, even though those actors were motivated by distinct interests.

We take advantage of the portfolio strategy's embrace of multiple reforms and initiatives in this analysis to understand how the design and phasing of new reform strategies can shape support, opposition, and whether initiatives are sustained over the long-term.

Our analysis shows wide variability in the implementation and durability of the portfolio strategy. What we learned about the politics of the portfolio strategy will help explain why it and other reform initiatives have struggled. It will also inform our thinking at the end of the paper about how initiators of broad reforms of the public school system—elected officials, philanthropies, and local community leaders—could factor in political realities as they plan and launch their own reform initiatives.

False starts and uneven implementation of the portfolio strategy

Even though a significant number of localities with struggling schools either formally adopted or took actions consistent with the portfolio strategy, an even greater number did not. City school systems' adoption of the strategy was often precipitated by a galvanizing event, the entrance of new (often nontraditional) leadership, or a major shift in education governance via state takeover or mayoral control. These

events helped to restructure local education politics such that traditional actors, like teachers unions and influential parent groups, were sidelined, creating a window of opportunity for new reform ideas to take root.

New Orleans provides an extreme example of this in practice. As Terry Moe has [explained](#), a devastating hurricane coupled with a state takeover had the practical effect of making the teachers union, once formidable, powerless. As schools reopened as charters, the city's teachers union was permanently weakened, creating space for reform leaders to advance their ideas with less opposition. The portfolio strategy survives to this day in no small part as a result.

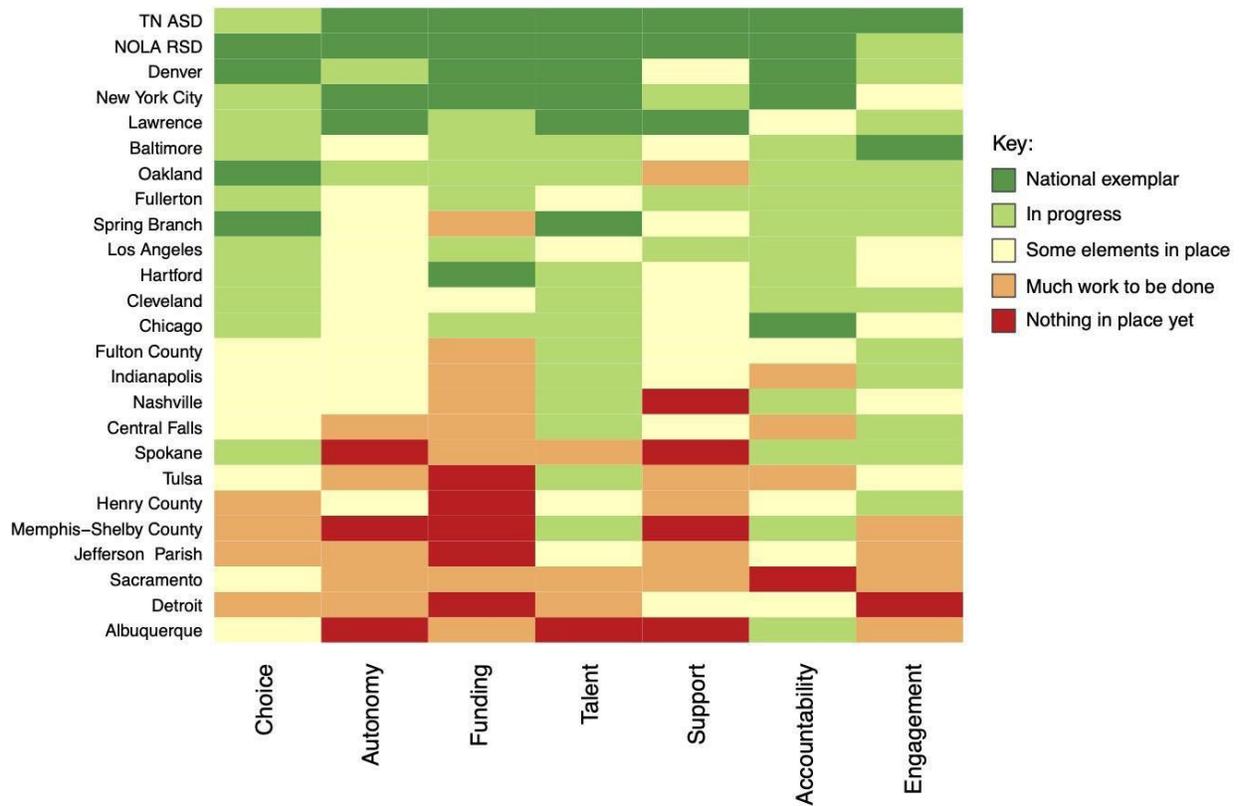
But outside New Orleans, the restructuring that enabled the portfolio strategy to take root was more often temporary. Just as a new superintendent or state takeover could fuel the adoption of the portfolio strategy, a change in leadership or end of state control could spell its demise. The most dramatic such reversal happened in New York City, where Mayor Bill de Blasio sought to recentralize the district, deemphasize performance-based accountability, and stop the development of new district and charter schools as soon as he succeeded Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

In some localities, even a little opposition was enough to grind portfolio strategy implementation to a halt. In Cincinnati, a single school board member succeeded in winning a positive vote on adopting the strategy, but the superintendent and other board members were lukewarm from the start, and union opposition was enough to end it. Other localities (e.g., Rochester, NY, Jefferson Parish, LA, and Sacramento, CA) abandoned the portfolio strategy promptly after reform superintendents, who had relied solely on the power of their office, took other jobs.

Of the 52 districts that participated in CRPE's portfolio network and nominally adopted the strategy at some time or another, few sustained it for more than a few years. Just eight made substantial progress in implementing the strategy—the Tennessee Achievement School District, Orleans Parish, Denver, Chicago, New York City, Cleveland, Indianapolis, and Lawrence, MA. Three of these made progress primarily under a state takeover and three under mayoral control. Just two—Denver and Indianapolis—sustained the strategy under an elected board through multiple leadership transitions.

Some components of the strategy were more likely to be implemented fully. Policies letting parents choose among existing schools, opening up talent pipelines, and reporting measures of academic achievement across schools saw more uptake and deep implementation (see Figure 1, reflecting districts' status in 2016). But cities were slow to put in place other parts of the strategy, particularly school control over hiring and spending, enrollment-based real-dollar funding of schools, and freeing up schools to select their own providers of teacher professional development and advice. Some elements of the strategy, such as performance-based closure of schools and sponsoring new alternatives that drew students and families from neighborhood schools, were embraced in only limited and temporary ways by the majority of cities studied.

Figure 1. Uneven implementation of the portfolio strategy



Based on data collected in 2016.

Since the time the foregoing chart was made, some cities stopped advancing their portfolio strategies and others (notably Denver and New Orleans) persevered. In addition, cities not in the graphic, such as Camden, San Antonio and Newark, moved quickly. But experience after 2016 does not undercut the message drawn here. In the rest of this paper, we examine why so many city school systems struggled to implement the portfolio strategy and why some elements sustained deeper implementation than others, and we identify lessons for would-be reformers who seek to find more success for their ideas in the future.

The value and limitations of elite support

Initiators of the portfolio strategy often built early alliances with local elites, including the business and philanthropic communities, local education and civic nonprofits, and elected leaders (city councilmembers, mayors, governors). Elites provided a critical well of support for early implementation of the portfolio strategy. Local and national foundations invested in building critical new capacities and initiatives that helped get the portfolio strategy off the ground and deepened its implementation. New quality school options (including charter schools), reforms to teacher recruitment, and efforts to build evidence would not have been possible without these early investments. The support of elected leaders and local nonprofits gave an air of

legitimacy to new reform ideas that could favorably sway the opinions of parents and the general public.

Though former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg was fully in charge of the schools starting in 2002, he worked with Chancellor Joel Klein to develop allies in the city, the state government, and foundations who would help execute on his vision for the city's schools. Together they built elite support for controversial changes to the city's school system, including school closures and central office restructuring. Elite supporters formed Learn NY, which included groups with close ties to the mayor, as well as charter school advocates and operators. Its membership included Geoffrey Canada, the social activist and leader of the Harlem Children's Zone, and [partnerships](#) with the Hispanic Federation, Black Equity Alliance, and Asian American Federation of New York.

When Oakland Superintendent Randy Ward was appointed in 2003, he immediately recognized that while the schools were in dire straits, Oakland had invaluable access to a robust local civic sector, fueled by strong traditions of citywide and neighborhood activism. Oakland also had major universities and nonprofits, as well as access to Silicon Valley wealth. Ward quickly formed a partnership with the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BAYCES), a local nonprofit with a track record of success helping existing schools and starting new ones. Many of the first new schools to open were managed by prominent community groups, which had direct ties to the families and neighborhoods reformers were trying to serve. Working with these established groups built support among parents and neighborhood activists who were skeptical of Ward as a state-appointed outsider.

Former Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson had been nominally in control of the schools since he took office in 2005. But he committed publicly to a portfolio reform strategy only in 2013, after he and local foundations had laid a great deal of groundwork. A large group of young African American and white professionals who had served on charter school boards provided a credible support base. This support base continued to grow as new school options gradually developed under Jackson's portfolio-based "Cleveland Plan."

Cleveland's experience illustrates the breadth of the term "elites." Though it can be equated with the old-time "city fathers," guardians of the city's business climate and economic base, elites now also include professionals and business owners, leaders of left-leaning philanthropies and cultural groups, and women as well as men. African American professionals are emerging as key elites in Detroit, D.C., and other cities, along with Cleveland. Pro-reform elites in Houston now include Hispanic citizens who would not have been prominent or influential a decade ago.

Reform leaders don't need unanimous support from local influentials, but losing elite support can be fatal. In Newark, the portfolio strategy lost its anchor when former Mayor Cory Booker focused his attention on a run for the Senate in 2013. Superintendent Cami Anderson and State Commissioner of Education Christopher Cerf, who led the strategy locally for a time, lacked ties to Newark and were left more politically isolated after Booker left the city for Washington.

While the support of elites can enable reformers to act aggressively on their agenda, it is rarely enough to counter the political conflicts that emerged in portfolio districts. Elites seldom have children in the public schools, so their concerns are more

general—such as the health of the city—and they can decide that education reform is less central to their interests than other initiatives. Compared to groups that depend on schools for their incomes, elites have weaker incentives to endure harsh conflict or make a stand against long odds.

Thus, in the long run, elite support is not a sufficient basis for a winning coalition. Elites can be early supporters and valuable opinion leaders, but reformers also need to build a coalition that is willing to support the initiative when threatened.

The allocation of benefits and burdens animates supporters and opponents

Any effort to reform public education involves reallocating benefits and burdens. Those who possess money, jobs, and influence will fight to keep it, even if that means undermining ideas that might improve schools.

Beneficiaries of the status quo are more likely to be organized and have strong reasons to defend their advantage. Moreover, they often have custom, precedent, and the power of incumbency on their side. Groups that stand to gain under a new initiative, in contrast, may be inactive, disorganized, or ill poised to mobilize in support of benefits that do not yet exist.

As a result, the allocation of benefits and burdens in any reform initiative can have major impacts on its politics and sustainability over time.³ Initiatives that embrace elements that impose large costs on existing beneficiaries will face major opposition, and because benefits often accrue slowly, supporters can be slow to mobilize.

Elements of the portfolio strategy that threatened the funding, jobs, and missions of traditional district central office units took existing resources or opportunities away from parents, teachers, and schools or threatened the power of traditional interests like teachers unions were less likely to be implemented in the following ways:

- Per-pupil based funding initiatives threatened teacher jobs and staff positions at schools that enrolled fewer students as well as costly, special programs that parents and teachers liked.
- School autonomy initiatives that sought to devolve decision-making over teacher hiring and termination threatened teachers unions and senior teachers who benefited from those decisions being bargained centrally.
- Efforts to enable schools to choose professional development and instructional supports from vendors other than the district central office threatened the jobs and budgets of units who previously operated as monopoly providers of services.

3 Paul Pierson, 1993, “When Effect Becomes Cause: Policy Feedback and Political Change,” *World Politics* 45(4): 595–628.

Table 1. The allocation of benefits and burdens shapes the politics of portfolio strategy implementation

Component	Groups that stand to lose	Groups that stand to gain
School choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents, teachers, principals in school communities that stand to lose enrollment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents, teachers, principals in school communities that stand to gain enrollment
Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Central office units built for standardization Teachers union, which loses control over the terms of teacher employment Parents and interest groups who want to advance initiatives and ideas in all schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents, teachers, and principals who favor distinctive schools
Pupil-based funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents, teachers, principals in schools that stand to lose funding Senior teachers Teachers unions Central office units that stand to lose funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents, teachers, principals in schools that stand to gain funding Vendors that stand to gain contracts
Talent strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers unions fearing loss of informal influence Central office units whose roles are changed Traditional pipelines and preparation programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New pipelines and teacher preparation programs
School support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Central office units 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vendors of school support Principals who desire access to more differentiated sources of support
Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents, teachers, principals who fear their schools will close, unsure about options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents looking for information on school performance, choices

Baltimore's [implementation of the portfolio strategy](#) shows how this often played out. Andres Alonso became CEO of the district in 2007 and worked to implement a new student-based funding formula that awarded funding to schools based on enrollment and student needs, while expanding principals' control over their school budgets and enhancing accountability for results. As part of implementation, the district eliminated nearly 500 central office positions, cutting staff by one-quarter and putting more than \$160 million into the schools—major wins in a district where many schools struggled to get access to basic supplies. But the reforms left 65 percent of education dollars locked up centrally, perpetuating the sense of resource scarcity and leaving the principal corps beleaguered in the face of growing sanctions for low performance. After Alonso's departure, district officials he had installed and the leaders of charters and some newly autonomous public schools tried to advance the portfolio strategy but could only, at best, defend progress already made after two years under a “centralizing” superintendent. Current Baltimore Superintendent Sonja Santeleses, an Alonso protégé, is again pursuing ideas regarding school differentiation and choices for families.

How district leaders came to implement specific elements of the strategy could strengthen opponents. School closings were big sources of opposition in cities that pursued them, and some portfolio leaders managed them more astutely than others. In New York City, schools were closed gradually so that those who wanted to stay in a school through its highest grade could do so, while families inclined to switch got better options. Memphis' Achievement School District (ASD), an agency able to close and open schools in the context of a broader portfolio initiative, closely linked the closing of one school with the opening of another in the same neighborhood. Parents and neighbors weighed in on the kind of new school they wanted, which determined what charter operator was hired to create the new school. In contrast, many Chicago schools were closed abruptly, and families were left on their own to find new placements, sometimes in unfriendly neighborhoods and schools no better than the ones they had left. This brought firestorms of protest from teachers, parents, and spokespersons for affected neighborhoods.

Charter school operators, normally close allies of portfolio reformers but with interests of their own, were sometimes troublesome bedfellows whose conduct sparked opposition. In New York City, Baltimore, and Oakland, charter schools were legally obligated to admit students only once each year, in September, while district-run schools had to take on the large numbers of new immigrants and students whose families moved frequently, often due to poverty. In Detroit and Philadelphia, charter schools refused to accept a unified lottery system that would have expanded school access for the most disadvantaged children. Such actions gave ammunition to [critics](#), who pointed out that charters wanted a full share of district funding but would not share all burdens.

THE CHALLENGE OF BUILDING POLITICAL SUPPORT WHEN MANY BENEFITS REMAIN INVISIBLE

Building support for new reforms isn't as straightforward as working to maximize the number of students and families helped by a school improvement strategy. That's because many reform benefits are not visible enough to motivate families and other actors to mobilize to protect new benefits when threatened by opponents or engage in other political action.⁴

Incremental gains in student achievement or modestly better teachers are not usually enough to motivate parents or other stakeholders to act when those benefits might be threatened by opponents.

The more visible and substantial the benefit, the more likely it will offer incentives for political organization. For this reason, new school options such as charter schools that opened under the portfolio strategy have proven to be among the most durable elements, even as other parts of the reforms were dismantled by opponents. In a powerful illustration, when New York Mayor Bill de Blasio threatened to penalize newly opened—and popular—charter schools, the sector mobilized 20,000 parents to march across the Brooklyn Bridge to defend their schools.

Events outside the district's control can also shape the allocation of benefits and burdens of the portfolio strategy. Increases in enrollment and funding, for example, can aid districts in reducing the costs of new reform initiatives on existing interests and allow them to build new schools and other capacities without closing schools or forcing staffing changes. Denver is an instructive example in this regard. When reform initiator Michael Bennet adopted the portfolio strategy, he hoped to stem the leakage of Denver students to other districts under Colorado's interdistrict "open choice" policy. Initial success brought new students and funding, which then fueled expansion of the portfolio strategy, including [65 new schools between 2009 and 2019](#). But enrollment growth doesn't last forever—Denver enrollment [peaked in 2019](#) just as anti-reform pressures were picking up locally. In a bellwether election in 2021, that was viewed as a referendum on the prior decade's reform.

Signs of [enrollment-related stress](#) are growing in Indianapolis, which, like Denver, sustained the portfolio strategy with support from an elected board. Whether the board and superintendent can navigate the "[sweeping changes](#)" proposed to manage fiscal stress and enrollment decline remains to be seen.

When superintendents motivated by their commitment to remaking their systems persevered despite the political costs, they did so at risk of their jobs, especially if lacking protection from a supportive board or state government. In Hartford, Superintendent Stephen Adamowski lost his political cover once Mayor Eddie Perez resigned due to corruption charges and quickly thereafter found himself under attack from the leftist Working Families Party. Adamowski, with a doctorate in education

4 Arnold AD. 1990. *The Logic of Congressional Action*. New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press

Morgan KJ, Campbell AL. 2011. *The Delegated Welfare State: Medicare, Markets, and the Governance of Social Policy*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press

and a resume that included a successful run as superintendent of Cincinnati's schools, resigned when a state agency found that he had not taken a course required for a superintendent's license in Connecticut. His successor, Christina Kishimoto, held the portfolio strategy together for two school years but ultimately resigned in 2014 due to conflict with the school board and teachers union, both under pressure from the Working Families Party. In Oakland, the local teachers union sought support from state labor organizations to demand the firing of state administrator Randy Ward. Feeling his own reelection threatened, the state superintendent pushed Ward out of the job.

More often, superintendents kept their jobs but simply got stuck, implementing reforms halfway, thereby weakening the potential benefits (and the supporters they could generate) while leaving opponents primed to fight.

National currents and actors can bolster both opponents and supporters

Implementation of the portfolio strategy is primarily a local function, but that doesn't mean national actors and narratives can't shape its politics. During the two decades during which we followed districts implementing the portfolio strategy, school reform issues rose to the top of the national policy agenda. A tidal wave of action led by states and the Obama Administration resulted in significant shifts to standards, testing, and accountability, as well as new investments in charter schools. These sweeping reforms first served to help the leaders we followed to advance the strategy. Later charges of overreach by foundations and Education Secretary Arne Duncan found traction, made national actors' support a liability, and weakened the position of local portfolio leaders.

National reform currents initially helped superintendents assemble the support they needed to get started. Often working in concert, state governors, state education chiefs, and the U.S. Department of Education embraced reform measures that sought to require annual performance assessments, hold schools accountable for performance, and enable charter schools to open and expand without consulting local boards. These efforts were incentivized and resourced via the Obama Administration's Race to the Top program, which [invested \\$4.35 billion in education innovation](#).

The portfolio strategy was helped by the wave of enthusiasm for the education reform efforts of this era. In Newark, New York City, Lawrence, and Baltimore, state action helped insulate local leaders from opposition and, in some cases, gave them power to act without consulting the local teachers union. In Denver, charter schools could be authorized by the local board or an independent state authorizer, and an application rejected locally could appeal to the state for approval.

But these national reform currents also became a liability as local opponents to the portfolio strategy began to build a national political strategy, led by influential figures such as Diane Ravitch and Carol Burris via the Network for Public Education.

This budding coalition soon gained local and national allies in liberal-leaning good government groups such as the League of Women Voters, noneducation unions such

as the SEIU, and social justice organizations such as the NAACP. Some critics, such as Diane Ravitch, [targeted](#) the portfolio strategy directly. But more often, coalition leaders attacked reform ideas that undergirded the portfolio strategy without naming it directly. For example, United Opt Out and Bad Ass Teachers helped to foment discord among parents and teachers about standards, testing, and test-based accountability.⁵ Civil rights groups splintered on support for charter schools, with the [NAACP](#) calling for a moratorium. Massachusetts voters, mostly in districts that had no charter schools, voted for a strict cap on new charters that limited the options of local reform leaders. Teachers unions in Denver, Los Angeles, Cleveland, and other cities enlisted parents in the most expensively staffed local schools to resist adoption of full pupil-based funding.

National leaders advanced narratives and arguments that helped widen the scope of conflict over the portfolio strategy from a small number of people and organizations who might have something to lose to a much larger group motivated by a broader array of ideas and interests. This movement tapped and helped ferment latent opposition among people who weren't directly impacted by the strategy but were receptive to arguments about the "privatization" of public institutions and the decline of labor unions.⁶ These efforts laid the groundwork for increasing partisan polarization over education reform issues, where liberal-leaning voters were more likely to view local reform efforts in partisan terms and support or oppose them based on cues sent by national advocates and organizations.

The centrist reform coalition was splintering before Donald Trump took office in 2017. But the polarization his election brought, and his Education Secretary Betsey DeVos's advocacy for privatization, silenced many pro-portfolio Democrats and forced elected officials to move left. By January 2021, when President Joseph Biden took office, national Democrats had returned to the kind of close connection with the teachers' unions that had prevailed before President Obama.

National opponents also tapped local examples and evidence to build narratives that could peel off would-be local supporters both locally and in other cities. This includes challenges related to serving [special education students](#) in charter schools (Minneapolis, D.C, New York, and New Orleans), the ways [testing](#) narrowed curriculum and hurt minority children (Boston, New York, Los Angeles, Spokane), how school closures forced kids to walk through dangerous gang-dominated [territory](#) (Chicago), how performance-based accountability forced principals and teachers to [cheat](#) on tests (Atlanta), the impact of charter schools on racial [segregation](#) (Minneapolis, New Orleans, and Philadelphia), how new autonomous district and charter schools [take](#) money away from traditional public schools (Boston, Nashville, Oakland, San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco), and how choice [weakened](#) neighborhoods (Chicago, New York, Denver, New Orleans, and Detroit). Local stories, whether in newspapers or advocacy websites, readily won national attention, with stories in *The Washington Post* (via reporter-columnist [Valerie Strauss](#)), *New York Times*, National Public Radio, and *The New Yorker*.

5 Saraisky and Pizmony-Levy (2020) find the [opt-out movement](#) was driven by social movement organizations with varying agendas whose opinions on how to improve schools often diverged from the general public.

6 This is consistent with the "interpretive effects" discussed by Patashnik and Zeigler. As they state, "changing perceptions may cause actors to become skeptical of the success or value of a policy [or] may fail to cause groups to alter their social identities in ways that strengthen constituency support."

None of these narratives involved sudden game-changing revelations, and [many](#) were strongly [rebutted](#) with data. But the opposition narratives gradually eroded support among weakly committed reformers and emboldened opponents. Sometimes, local reform leaders aided and abetted these efforts by failing to deal proactively with challenges emerging on the ground, as in New York City and Oakland, where charter school admission practices helped to ensure that the most vulnerable students and families would struggle to gain access. In Denver, early performance assessments of newly autonomous public schools were lukewarm, weakening local elite support for the portfolio strategy. More positive [results](#) that emerged a few years later came too late to stop an antireform school board's efforts to take away school control over budgets and choice of teachers.

Negative stories drawn from one locality strengthened opposition in places where no similar evidence was available. This was particularly true of school closings and instances of mismanagement or financial improprieties in newly autonomous district schools and local charters, as well as stories about how schools that were closed were first doomed by withdrawal of resources. Though these stories were generally local, a national [website](#) collected such claims, and opponents drew on it for warnings of “what could happen here.”

The portfolio strategy also became linked to national reform strategies that increased political conflict, often in partisan terms. For example, in New York, Denver, D.C., and Los Angeles, supporters of the portfolio strategy also came to embrace efforts to use student test scores to evaluate, reward, and punish individual teachers. Such efforts outraged unions and academics that considered tests to be unreliable and unfair measures of performance, especially for teachers of disadvantaged children. In Los Angeles, a published productivity ranking of all local teachers was blamed for one highly sympathetic individual's suicide. The resulting backlash against testing strengthened opposition to the portfolio strategy overall and its emphasis on performance-based accountability and aided the national movement against local school reform efforts.

Sustaining complex reform in a political environment

As difficult as it was for leaders in any locality to organize and start using a portfolio strategy, it was even more challenging to broaden and sustain it, so that all its elements could work together and the effects could play out long enough to make visible differences in student outcomes. These difficulties grew over time as reformers not only had to constantly expand and renew their bases of support but also deal with ever-stronger blocking coalitions.

Efforts by opposition groups to recruit new allies and raise money to challenge the strategy via school board elections, opposition research, and intervention by courts and investigative agencies increased over time. Reform leaders who used narrow windows of opportunity to make progress implementing the portfolio strategy could see their work vanish as elections put in place new boards, superintendents were forced out, or the political tides simply moved in directions that made continued implementation impossible.

In politics, both credits and liabilities build up. The portfolio strategy, like any reform, must persist over time, and its effects—specifically, the benefits to children—don't emerge quickly. It takes time for new schools to emerge, teaching and school conditions to get better, and kids to benefit. If strategy implementation advances to the point that increasing numbers of families and groups appreciably benefit, they can help to bolster the political support that sustains reform over time. On the other hand, if opponents can force delays and half measures, they can prevent the outcomes that build support and give voice to those whom the reform threatens.

This challenge is not unique to the portfolio strategy or to public education. Strategies that are rich enough to solve deeply embedded problems, whether in social services or the economy, must have multiple reinforcing parts and take some time to show results. As Patashnik and Zelizer show, complex reforms have an especially difficult time gaining political support if

- Enactment is divisive, so they have many critics and enemies working to undermine implementation;
- Opponents retain an institutional base from which to attack the reform;
- The reform requires government agencies to act differently but the people and routines attached to previous modes of action are still in place;
- The reform produces modest benefits for many people but imposes significant costs on a few;
- It takes a long time for new resources and capacities to emerge; and
- Opponents can take advantage of information distortions, changing perceptions, or conflicting social identities to build opposition.

Overcoming these factors is never straightforward, but anticipating them and putting in place strategies to overcome the counter-pressures is essential to sustaining new initiatives long enough to generate positive impact. The localities that sustained portfolio strategies the longest delivered interim reports of progress, usually (as in New York City, New Orleans, Chicago, Denver, Cleveland, and Indianapolis) in partnership with universities or nonprofits that tracked intermediate outcomes. These included parent and teacher surveys, analysis of the district's attractiveness to teachers, school climate studies, reports on distribution of highly qualified teachers and increased overall quality of the teaching force, and numbers of students in high-performing schools. In some cases, particularly Chicago and New Orleans, the research partners also identified emergent problems with the reforms which leaders were able to address, further sending the message that reform was alive and making a difference.

Lessons learned and implications for would-be reformers

In the remainder of this paper, we identify the key strategies superintendents and their supporters can leverage to build support and minimize opposition over time so their initiatives have a better chance at making a lasting impact.

Lesson 1: Local strategies never start with all the support they need to succeed. Leaders and their allies can never stop seeking new supporters and renewing the support of existing ones.

The successes and failures of the portfolio strategy show that building sustainable coalitions to support reform requires more than good ideas that can improve public schools over the long run. Reform leaders must act with intention to cultivate supporters early and often. They need to know their local communities and judge what kinds of appeals will matter to different groups. They also need to pace the rollout of reform and provide a steady stream of information to prove the plausibility of their claims, even if achieving the ultimate outcomes will take years.

Reform initiatives must also attend to both the quantity and quality of the benefits their strategies offer to would-be supporters in order to maintain support. Small, less visible benefits are less likely to support the sustaining benefits of constituency building compared to larger, more visible benefits.

Of the wide range of reform ideas encapsulated in the portfolio strategy, improving access to high-quality schools, whether via chartering or other mechanisms, has proven effective at building long-term political support. Evidence from portfolio cities suggests beneficiaries of new school options can mobilize to protect their benefits, even when the broader reform strategy is threatened. As a result, they remain a reservoir of potential support for the strategy.

Lesson 2: Reform strategies inevitably generate opposition. Reformers should expect and prepare for attacks and also be alert to unnecessary harms caused by their own actions.

Any initiative that has a chance to improve K-12 education is likely to disrupt a few apple carts. Reform leaders can't expect to achieve much if they avoid conflict and try to please everyone. But too often, new reform initiatives fail to carefully account for and act to mitigate potential negative impacts.

In portfolio cities, reform liabilities often accumulated and helped expand opposition to the strategy via botched school closures that offered families nothing better, school autonomy initiatives that held principals accountable for results without giving them the full freedom or funding needed to achieve better outcomes, and problematic oversight of charter schools that too often locked out most students and families from better options.

These challenges helped to convert would-be supporters to opponents and armed local and national advocates with examples and evidence that could be used to pressure local boards and superintendents to abandon the portfolio strategy.

Reformers should follow [President Obama's slogan](#) for foreign policy: "Don't do stupid sh*t." For K-12 reform, that implies not exacerbating conflict—e.g., by insulting parents who have sent children to inadequate schools, demonizing opponents,

posing for magazine covers with brooms for sweeping out bad teachers, closing schools without simultaneously providing better options for the students affected, or acting as if any new school would be automatically better than any existing district-run school.

Lessons 3: Reform initiatives need information strategies that document intermediate results, alert leaders to emergent problems, and actively counter hostile narratives.

Criticism needn't be fair to be effective. Opponents of new reform initiatives will work to frame counternarratives that discount evidence of improvement and elevate negative examples.

Reformers need to act as if they, not the other side, always have the burden of proof and actively counteract negative messages and examples from their opponents. Unfortunately, reformers and their funders and political sponsors often start out overconfident and don't make provisions for careful proof of results until the opposition is about to gain the upper hand. Ultimately, reform initiatives must prove themselves in terms of net benefits to children and the broader community. But results appear slowly, and they are never so obvious as to prevent opponents from denying their existence. Proving results requires careful measurement and sophisticated analysis; in a time when test scores are out of fashion, they are still indispensable as leading indicators.

Evidence needed to sustain a strategy doesn't just fall out of a tree. First Chicago, then New York City, and finally New Orleans benefited from university-based, foundation-funded independent research organizations dedicated to tracking reforms, drawing conclusions about effectiveness, and identifying emergent problems. The Chicago Consortium for Schools Research became one of the country's preeminent educational research institutions, and its ability both to build rigorous evidence of the reform's effects and to point out emergent problems and reproducible successes did a great deal to sustain it. New Orleans' and New York City's dedicated research centers are also important sources of clarity about both results and ideas about improving and sustaining reform implementation.

Lesson 4: Coalitions—whether supporting or opposing reform—are composed of actors with different interests. Bedfellows' actions can cause problems for both reformers and their opponents.

Alliances are necessary but don't come free of charge. Bedfellows bring their own agendas and can demand actions that are not at the core of the portfolio strategy. Meeting these demands can diffuse effort and make the core strategy vulnerable, e.g., to an ally's misjudgment or overstepping.

In most localities, groups that would have preferred a full unregulated voucher system supported the portfolio strategy because it at least opened new possibilities. But sometimes these allies made it clear that they hoped eventually to bring down the whole public school system, associating portfolio leaders with ideas that undercut moderates' support. In others, advocates for holding teachers accountable using student test scores helped fuel conflict with teachers unions and instigated a national campaign to oppose standardized tests, whether used for teacher evaluations or not.

In both examples, implementation of the portfolio strategy was undermined in some cities by its ties to unpopular initiatives, which helped reform opponents mobilize.

Effective coalition building will almost always necessitate a strange-bedfellows approach, but reform leaders must be cautious about the possibility of blame by association. They must also avoid having their agenda hijacked by friends with their own agendas. Opponents also have their internal divisions—e.g., between unions and teachers who want more say in selecting their colleagues and between pro-equity groups on the left and parents who want to protect privileged schools' funding and staffing advantages.

Lesson 5: Results appear only gradually, and most reform initiatives need to anticipate and prepare for leadership succession.

Initiatives requiring a decade or more to develop will need deep benches and plans for leadership succession. The portfolio strategies in Newark, New York City, New Orleans, Hartford, and Denver were all started by one leader (Anderson, Klein, Pastorek, Adamowski, and Bennet) but were passed on to others (Cerf, Walcott, White, Kishimoto, Dobard, and Boasberg) who had apprenticed themselves to the originator and fully understood the strategy and its next steps. This requires the original leader to take others into their confidence, try others out on important tasks, and give potential successors enough visibility to become credible. Joel Klein modeled this in New York City, not only preparing his own successor but mentoring others who then led portfolio strategies in New Haven, Newark, New Orleans, Camden, and Baltimore.

In other localities, the departure of the superintendent or other key leader spelled the end of an initiative that had made significant progress. This happened in Baltimore when Andres Alonso left for Harvard. In other localities, the portfolio strategy's initiators stayed in office but settled for fragmentary progress (e.g., in New Haven and Baltimore a “thin” teacher contract that nominally provided school leaders more freedom of action). These “wins” had few effects in practice but represented the end of portfolio strategy implementation.

Conclusion

These observations challenge the conventional wisdom that sustainable reforms can be built only upon the percolating up of good ideas and initiatives from below. Reform leaders are essential to knitting together fragile coalitions who may be motivated by different goals and aligning new programs and initiatives—and politically reinforcing them over time—so their benefits can accumulate.

Such work requires careful tending to coalitions and on-the-fly adaptation. Reform leaders can't wait until everyone is content. They need to get out ahead of community consensus, if only by putting new schools on the ground that can generate support from parents and neighbors. They also need to understand, as we show above, that some constituencies (e.g., teachers' unions) will oppose bold reform actions no matter what and therefore can't be mollified. Savvy reformers treat members of opposition groups fairly and recruit dissident members if they can. But the most they can hope to achieve are momentary truces, plus a belief on the part of third parties that the opponents, not the reformers, are unreasonable.

There is a “goldilocks” approach, but it's not simple. It amounts to moving ahead constantly, taking some technical and political risks yet avoiding unnecessary fights and collisions, while not doing harm to any students. What that means in practice depends on the local alignment of interest groups and emergent conditions, such as changes in enrollment and funding.

As this is written, the portfolio strategy is on hold in many cities for many reasons, including local stalemates but also because of Covid-19 pandemic school closures and the post-2020 election struggle over government legitimacy. But the portfolio strategy is definitely not on hold in Cleveland, where the new mayor has fully embraced his successor's portfolio-based Cleveland plan; in Indianapolis, where a coalition of the district superintendent, city government, minority leaders, and the Mind Trust are pressing an aggressive school autonomy initiative; in Camden, where departing state-appointed superintendent Paymon Rouhanifard left behind groups of parents and educators committed to sustaining his strategy of equitable funding, autonomy for existing schools, and new schools for the students most in need; or in Newark, where, after a turbulent state takeover, Mayor Ras Baraka and pro-charter groups took responsibility for sustaining [reforms](#) that both strengthened existing schools and created effective new charters.

The portfolio strategy's story is different in every city that has adopted it. But a basic pattern is common: enthusiasts started a reform they could not pull off without gaining new local support, and potential opponents, quickly recognizing the reform's threat to their interests, used a combination of blocking power and counter-organization to try to stifle it.

The political challenges are daunting but not insurmountable, at least in places where there is credible local leadership and a core—even a small core—of local supporters. Even then, however, the road is long and hard. Execution of a complex reform is more a protracted struggle than a clean in-and-out intervention. It is not a discrete project but a decades-long movement, whose supporters are committed to making changes to benefit those in need but understand that there will be many battles and they might lose some.

Seeing reform as a long-lived movement that must persist through times of retrenchment challenges the time horizons and career incentives of policymakers and foundation heads. State government initiatives need to be authorized and funded for the long haul. Foundation initiatives need to last more than three years and not be abandoned as soon as a new president or program officer takes office and wants to make their own mark. Foundations and state officials also need to expect setbacks, fund new local institutions to support reform, and anticipate the need to prove progress via rigorous outcomes studies. Reformers can't win by simply exchanging anecdotes and emotional stories with their opponents.

Can policymakers and funders adapt to these realities? Or are they too undisciplined to stay the course consistently enough for system-changing reforms like the portfolio strategy to work? Can local reformers, with or without help from foundations and government, stick with the hard work of building coalitions, defending gains made and ensuring leadership succession?

As our analysis shows, these things are difficult, but they are possible. They require degrees of patience, resilience, and foresight that most foundation and governmental sponsors of reform have not provided. Politics is a major challenge for any deep reform of public schools, but it is not an absolute barrier to progress.

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About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center affiliated with Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive.

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