



## Urban School Decentralization and the Growth of “Portfolio Districts”

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June 2010

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• Suggested Citation:

Saltman, K..J. (2010). *Urban School Decentralization and the Growth of “Portfolio Districts.”* Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved [date] from <http://epicpolicy.org/publication/portfolio-districts>.

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One of a series of Policy Briefs made possible in part by funding from the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice.

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# Urban School Decentralization and the Growth of “Portfolio Districts”

Kenneth J. Saltman, DePaul University

## *Executive Summary*

In the latter half of the past decade, school districts in several large cities, including New York, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and post-Katrina New Orleans, have implemented an urban school decentralization model generally known as “portfolio districts.” Others, including those in Denver and Cleveland, are following suit in what appears to be a growing trend. The portfolio strategy has become increasingly prominent in educational policy circles, think tank and philanthropy literature, and education news reporting. As CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, Arne Duncan embraced the portfolio district model. His appointment as U.S. Secretary of Education suggests the Obama administration also supports the approach. The premise of the portfolio strategy is that if superintendents build portfolios of schools that encompass a variety of educational approaches offered by different vendors, then over time school districts will weed out under-performing approaches and vendors; as a result, more children will have more opportunities for academic success. This brief examines the available evidence for the viability of this premise and the proposals that flow from it.

The portfolio district approach merges four strategies: 1) decentralization; 2) charter school expansion; 3) reconstituting/closing “failing” schools; and 4) test-based accountability. Additionally, portfolio district restructuring often involves firing an underperforming school’s staff in its entirety, whether or not the school is reconstituted as a charter school. In this model, the portfolio district is conceptualized as a circuit of “continuous improvement.” Schools are assessed based on test scores; if their scores are low, they are subject to being closed and reopened as charters. The replacement charters are subsequently subject to test-based assessment and, if scores remain disappointing, to possible closure and replacement by still other contractors. The portfolio district concept implements what has been since the 1990’s discussed in educational policy literature as market-based “creative destruction” or “churn.”<sup>1</sup> This perspective considers public schools to be comparable to private enterprise, with competition a key element to success. Just as businesses that cannot turn sufficient profit, schools that cannot produce test scores higher than competitors’ must be “allowed” to “go out of business.” The appeal of the portfolio district strategy is that it appears to offer an approach sufficiently radical to address longstanding and intractable problems in public schools.

Although the strategy is being advocated by some policy centers, implemented by some large urban districts, and promoted by the education reforms proposed as part of the Obama administration’s Race to the Top initiative, no peer-reviewed

studies of portfolio districts exist, meaning that no reliable empirical evidence about portfolio effects is available that supports either the implementation or rejection of the portfolio district reform model. Nor is such evidence likely to be forthcoming. Even advocates acknowledge the enormous difficulty of designing credible empirical studies to determine how the portfolio approach affects student achievement and other outcomes. There are anecdotal reports of achievement gains in one portfolio district, New Orleans. The New Orleans results, however, have been subjected to serious challenge. Extrapolation of research on the constituent elements of the model is not helpful because of the complex interactions of these elements within the portfolio model. Moreover, even when the constituent elements are considered as a way to predict the likely success of the model, no evidence is found to suggest that it will produce gains in either achievement or fiscal efficiency. Finally, the policy writing of supporters of the portfolio model suggests that the approach is expensive to implement and may have negative effects on student achievement.

In light of these considerations, it is recommended that policymakers and administrators use caution in considering the portfolio district approach. It is also highly recommended that before adopting such a strategy, decision makers ask the following questions.

- What credible evidence do we have, or can we obtain, that suggests the portfolio model offers advantages compared to other reform models? What would those advantages be, when might they be expected to materialize, and how might they be documented?
- If constituent elements of the model (such as charter schools and test-based accountability) have not produced advantages outside of portfolio systems, what is the rationale for expecting improved outcomes as part of a portfolio system?
- What funding will be needed for startup, and where will it come from?
- What funding will be necessary for maintenance of the model? Where will continuation funds come from if startup funds expire and are not renewed?
- How will the cost/benefit ratio of the model be determined?
- What potential political and social conflicts seem possible? How will concerns of dissenting constituents be addressed?

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## *Introduction*

### **Current Trends**

In the latter half of the past decade, school districts in several large cities, including New York, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and post-Katrina New Orleans, have implemented a new model of urban school decentralization often called “portfolio districts.” Others, including those in Denver and Cleveland, are following suit in what appears to be a growing trend. The portfolio strategy has become increasingly prominent in educational policy circles, think tank and philanthropy literature, and education news reporting. The appointment of Chicago Public Schools CEO Arne Duncan as U. S. Secretary of Education suggests administration support for the concept.<sup>2</sup> Duncan embraced such decentralization in Chicago in the form of Renaissance 2010 and continues promoting its elements in such national policy as Race to the Top and in proposed revisions to the No Child Left Behind legislation. The premise supporting portfolio districts is that if education vendors compete on the basis of proposed innovations, with a school superintendent monitoring activities, children will receive greater opportunity for academic success. This brief examines the available evidence for the viability of this premise and the proposals (for example, making all schools in a district charter schools) that flow from it.

A number of urban districts have embraced or are considering adopting the portfolio model. National policy also favors the idea. However, there have been no substantive studies of the portfolio district approach. The only relevant research to date has been on its constituent elements, which include 1) decentralization; 2) charter school expansion; 3) reconstituting/closing “failing” schools; and 4) test-based accountability.<sup>3</sup> As detailed below, the available scholarly peer-reviewed evidence on these various constituent elements shows no effect or negative effects on student achievement and on educational costs.

The published policy literature advocating implementation of the portfolio model and its elements most often makes assertions without providing credible evidence for its claims. For example, all of the relevant six articles available from the scholarly database Academic Search Premiere write favorably of the portfolio model, but none of them either constitute or reference careful empirical study reviewed by a community of policy scholars. Much of such advocacy writing published about the portfolio model and its constituent elements is generated by authors housed in or connected to policy think tanks that tend to have political and policy agendas. Lacking to date are studies by independent scholars who are con-

cerned with accurate information rather than with a result supporting a preconceived policy agenda.<sup>4</sup> In terms of advocacy publications, a single market-oriented think tank, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), seems to have cornered the market on promoting the implementation of the portfolio model. While CRPE describes itself as conducting independent research, it generally advocates a number of market-oriented approaches to school reform (pay for performance, charters, choice), publishes the most outspoken advocates of imagining public schooling as a private consumable (Paul Hill, Jane Hannaway, Eric Hanushek), and shares researchers with the market-oriented think tank The Urban Institute.<sup>5</sup>

Some readers may be surprised to learn that there is a scarcity of research on portfolio districts or such constituent elements as closures because there is an abundance of policy literature, published especially by think tanks. But as noted above, little of this literature has been peer reviewed, little has been based in empirical study, and much has been challenged.<sup>6</sup> So while the elements of the portfolio model are much discussed, in reality we know very little that is based in empirical evidence and that has been reviewed by a community of scholars.<sup>7</sup>

If we ask the question as to why the portfolio model has been implemented without the support of such evidence, there are at least three possible answers: 1) advocacy literature is being accepted as evidence; 2) the constituent elements of the portfolio approach appear to add up to reasonable model because they each appear to be supported by credible evidence; 3) some advocates assume that evidence is not necessary because the public system has “failed” and now it is time to give radical experiments a chance.

### **Early Forms of Decentralization: Administrative and Community Control**

It is important to understand that the portfolio model differs radically from the district “decentralization” reforms of the 1980’s. Writing in the journal *Urban Education* in 1991, Wolkstetter and McCurdy characterized the earlier decentralization trends as follows: “Cloaked in many terms—restructuring, school-based management, shared decision making—school decentralization shifts formal decision making from the central administration to a smaller decision-making arena—the school. Decentralized schools alter the educational power structure by empowering school personnel, community groups, or both to make decisions about budgets, personnel, and programs.”<sup>8</sup>

In the early 1990s, school decentralization generally took one of two forms. One was administrative decentralization, which moved the power to make some decisions from a district’s central administration to smaller units within the district. In this form, decision-making authority moved downward while accountability remained at the top with the central administration and the board of education. A typical example was School Based Management (SBM)/Shared Decision Making (SDM), implemented in Miami in 1987-88. SDM involved “allow[ing] teachers and principals to develop their own system for the total management of their individual schools, with minimum direction from higher authority.”<sup>9</sup>

A second form of decentralization, community control, shifted both decision-making and accountability for outcomes to the local community, including citizens and other non-education specialists. One example occurred in Chicago in 1988, after Chicago was singled out as the worst urban school district in the nation by then Secretary of Education William Bennett and after an unusual coalition of business people and parents lobbied the state legislature for dramatic change. This community-controlled decentralization was implemented with mixed results.<sup>10</sup>

In both administrative and community control versions of decentralization, teachers, local administrators, and teachers' unions had varying degrees of decision making authority, with community control adding community representatives to the mix. Administrative control is approached differently in the portfolio model.

### **The New Decentralization: Portfolio Districts**

As in the case of administrative decentralization, portfolio districts shift administrative decision making to local educational units while central administration retains accountability for educational outcomes. A significant difference is that the portfolio approach shifts control downward—not to schools or units of schools administered collaboratively by local administrators, teachers, communities, and unions, but instead by largely moving control to educational contractors. These include for-profit and non-profit charter school operators, educational management organizations, or charter management organizations.<sup>11</sup>

Administrative and community control decentralization peaked in popularity in the late 1980s, by which time 14 states had adopted some form of decentralization. By the early to mid-1990s disenchantment with the approach had begun to set in and the push for state takeover of failing districts or placing those districts under direct mayoral control began.<sup>12</sup> The portfolio model combines an emphasis on highly concentrated control at the top of the district with downward delegation to contractors who are expected to demonstrate high performance in return for relative autonomy. The four large urban districts that have implemented the portfolio model have district heads who report either to a mayor who has taken control of the district or, in the case of New Orleans, to a state that has seized control of the district from the city. The top-down retention of administrative control is far more extensive than in older forms of decentralization, and the downward delegation of administrative control goes to different parties—that is, to contractors.<sup>13</sup>

This portfolio approach draws on the metaphor of stock investment. The district superintendent is imagined as a stock investor who has a portfolio of investments (schools). The superintendent creates a portfolio of contractors and subsequently holds the investments that “perform” (in terms of student achievement) and ends the contracts (or sells) those investments that “don’t perform.” The approach merges four radical restructuring ideas<sup>14</sup>: 1) decentralization; 2) charter school expansion; 3) school closures with charter replacements; and 4) accountability, largely through testing.<sup>15</sup> The portfolio district is imagined as a cir-

cuit of continuous improvement in which schools are assessed based on test scores. If scores are low, schools are subject to possible closure (or mass firings) and to being reopened as charters. If the charters subsequently fail to show desired improvements, they in turn are subject to possible closure and replacement by still other contractors. The portfolio district concept puts into place what has been increasingly discussed in educational policy literature as market-based “creative destruction” or “churn.”<sup>16</sup>

This perspective considers public schools to be comparable to private enterprise, with competition a key element to success. Like businesses that cannot turn sufficient profit, schools that cannot produce test scores higher than competitors’ must be “allowed” to “go out of business.” This metaphor persists in education policy despite frequent observations that the correspondence between enterprise and education is highly questionable at best. It assumes markets to be competitive rather than monopolistic, and it presumes government regulation to be at odds with markets. In reality, certain industries (entertainment, defense, telecommunications, transportation, agriculture, for example) are monopolistic with significant barriers to entry, while the private sector may rely on the public sector, government intervention, or both for survival (recent government subsidy and regulation of the financial and automotive industries to save them from collapse, for example). In addition, unlike industry, public education cannot control its “raw materials”—that is, its students. Despite these difficulties, the metaphor persists and this reasoning drives the portfolio model.

## ***Review of Research***

### **Methods**

Given the prominence of the portfolio model, it is important to understand what evidence supports the approach, especially in the two areas of particular interest in policy discussions, student achievement and cost. Both achievement as measured by standardized tests and cost are highly contested measures of educational value, but the issue of how best to measure school improvement is beyond the scope of this work. Therefore, this discussion does not address assumptions or debates about the value of measuring educational quality in either or both of these terms.<sup>17</sup>

The following review is based on a search of the Academic Search Premier database, incorporating all available sub-databases.<sup>18</sup>

### **Evidence and the Portfolio District Approach**

While there is a large body of educational policy research on decentralization, nearly all of this research takes up earlier versions of decentralization that emphasize either local administrative or community control. There have been no peer-reviewed scholarly studies of the portfolio model. Nor have there been non-

peer-reviewed empirical studies of it. Instead, available literature offers suggestions and strategies for implementation as well as arguments for the approach and cautions about potential pitfalls.

While studies of earlier approaches to decentralizing school districts do exist, they offer little help in comprehending the potential effects of portfolio districts because the delegation of power to contractors differs so strikingly from earlier delegation to school personnel, organizations and communities. Much more relevant to evaluation of the portfolio model might be existing studies of the effects of public school privatization through contracting with for-profit or non-profit providers. However, these studies would not account for other elements of portfolio district approach and their impact on such contracting. That is, the portfolio approach merges contracting with several other major reform strategies, including charter school expansion, school closures with charter replacements, and test-based accountability. Because these diverse strands are so intertwined in portfolio districts, earlier studies focused primarily on the shift of authority can offer little or no information about whether the approach will do what its proponents hope: raise student achievement scores, decrease costs, or both.

In theory, it might be possible to evaluate elements of the portfolio district model in isolation and then speculate as to their combined effects. However, this prospect is problematic because each element will likely affect the others, rendering individual assessment of each element difficult or impossible. For example, the strategy of charter school development has been studied independently, yielding mixed to slightly negative effects on student achievement.<sup>19</sup> However, when charters are implemented in a mix of strategies that might include school closures, mass firings, test-based assessment and possibly special funding, it becomes virtually impossible to measure the effectiveness of the charter component. The portfolio district created in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina is a case in point.<sup>20</sup>

When the New Orleans public schools were closed and networks of charter schools subsequently opened there, a large number of students had been displaced by the storm. In addition, a large sum of money was put into the charter schools created in the new Recovery School District (RSD). Much of that money came from large philanthropic organizations, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Broad Foundation. Assessing the effectiveness of the RSD charters relative to the schools they replaced would require somehow:

- accounting for the displacement of students due to the storm;
- accounting for the resulting racial and class demographic shifts; and,
- accounting for the infusion of money into the RSD charters by grant givers and government.

A more meaningful interpretation would also need to take into account the history of public disinvestment in the district and professional class white flight that resulted in the worst-funded public school district in the nation prior to the storm. Claims about improvements yielded by RSD charters are currently hotly contested and as yet unsubstantiated by peer-reviewed research. Paul Vallas, who heads the RSD, and Paul Pastorek, the state superintendent, laud student achievement gains in RSD schools and are expanding the RSD throughout Louisiana by requiring principals to sign memorandums of understanding that their schools are

subject to test-based accountability and potential closure, chartering or other restructuring. However, Thomas Robichaux of the Orleans Parish School Board contends that while achievement scores in the RSD schools have risen, RSD gains have lagged relative to the Orleans Parish schools, despite the fact that RSD schools enjoy roughly twice the per-pupil infusion of money.<sup>21</sup>

The difficulties of assessing the impact of individual elements of the portfolio district approach suggest that the best and possibly the only way to know whether the strategy achieves its aims is to evaluate it as a whole. As discussed below, even the most outspoken proponents of the portfolio approach offer the post-Katrina New Orleans example as a demonstration of how difficult it is to measure achievement gains in the portfolio approach. As noted above, while no peer-reviewed studies of the portfolio district approach in its entirety have appeared, a search of relevant literature did yield six articles on the topic.<sup>22</sup> None of these, however, sheds any light on the question of whether improvements in achievement or cost have been realized. The lack of evidence has not deterred proponents from issuing reports and arguments offering both promises and warnings. Most of these publications are very brief (a single paragraph to three pages) promotions for the portfolio idea, unsupported by evidence.

Unique to the literature, but also unsupported by peer-reviewed scholarly empirical evidence, is an October 2009 report issued by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) at the University of Washington, whose advocacy efforts are mentioned above. Titled *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*, the report advocates portfolio district development and implementation: “To telegraph this report’s message: the portfolio idea has great promise, but making it work requires a great deal of time, money, and political capital applied over many years. No locality is likely to benefit by adopting it temporarily as a ‘flavor of the month’ or by cherry picking some parts of it and leaving other parts unimplemented.”<sup>23</sup> However, the report informs readers that, “it is too soon to make a bottom-line assessment of the effects of the portfolio idea on student achievement, but [this report] suggests how such an assessment can (and in what ways it should not) be done.”<sup>24</sup> This interim report is to be followed in 2011 by a fuller report on performance, but the interim report warns that it is likely to be impossible in the future to evaluate whether the portfolio district approach has been successful:

It is unlikely, however, that we can ever give a simple answer to the question, “Have the cities that adopted a portfolio strategy benefited from it?” This is so for several reasons, including that districts started in different places and moved at different paces toward full implementation ... Everyone will want to judge the portfolio approach according to whether students learned more or less than before. But this will be easier said than done. Crude juxtapositions—like comparing city students’ average gains to average gains statewide—leave too many differentiating factors (e.g. immigration, transiency, family disruptions) uncontrolled.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the report promotes the portfolio district strategy even as it acknowledges it may be impossible ever to demonstrate clear benefits from it.

CRPE's interim report also notes the difficulty of assessing individual components of the portfolio as an indirect measurement of its overall potential: "A piecemeal approach—for example, calculating gain scores for students who attended new schools and comparing them to gains in the rest of the district—could easily produce misleading results."<sup>26</sup> In addition, CRPE warns against overly optimistic expectations: "Though new schools are at the core of a portfolio strategy, success in every case should not be expected. There is a risk of failure in creating new schools, even if they imitate existing successful schools. Nor is it clear how long it should take for new schools to reach their full potential with respect to student performance."<sup>27</sup>

Thus CRPE, the staunchest advocate for portfolio districts, offers several cautions about the portfolio strategy—including some about measuring achievement, making it difficult to understand the rationale for its undaunted support of the approach. On the one hand, the report clearly states that CRPE considers student achievement the most important measure of improvement:

Thus, the bottom-line question is whether districtwide gain scores have improved continuously over time, not only for students on average but also for poor and minority students formerly assigned to schools with very average gains. These questions could be answered districtwide, for different levels of schooling, or for different demographic groups.<sup>28</sup>

Yet on the other hand, in the very next sentence, the report acknowledges that this is "a very difficult analysis, given the need to follow large numbers of students over several years, and to take full account of changes in neighborhood and school demographic competition." Even more surprising than this observation that it is doubtful whether the stipulated criteria for success can be reliably measured is the observation that no reliable empirical evidence exists to support the strategy nonetheless being promoted: "Despite the claims of proponents and critics alike, *no existing study can be considered definitive* because none has used this form of analysis" (emphasis added).<sup>29</sup> The CRPE report goes on to propose other ways to assess the value and success of the portfolio approach, including "observing changes in the schools available, their distribution among neighborhoods, ability of poor and minority children to get into their first choices of schools, teacher turnover and the numbers of teachers applying for jobs in schools serving low-income and minority neighborhoods, etc."<sup>30</sup> Thus, having stated that the measure of success must be achievement gains, the report notes that no definitive evidence exists to support the expectation of gains and that no way to measure gains attributable to the portfolio approach is on the horizon. Despite this apparently significant difficulty, CRPE persists in its advocacy, simply suggesting a menu of indirect measures of portfolio success.

While no comprehensive scholarly study of the portfolio district approach has been undertaken, some partial assessments of student achievement and costs

have been made in two of the four large urban districts implementing the strategy. In Chicago, the *Chicago Tribune* analyzed state student test data for Renaissance 2010 schools and found that “Scores from the elementary schools created under Renaissance 2010 are nearly identical to the city average, and scores at the re-made high schools are below the already abysmal city average.”<sup>31</sup> The article continues with other concerns about Chicago’s portfolio approach. “The moribund test scores follow other less than enthusiastic findings about Renaissance 2010—that displaced students ended up mostly in other low-performing schools and that mass closings led to youth violence as rival gang members ended up in the same classrooms. Together, they suggest the initiative hasn’t lived up to its promise by this, its target year.”<sup>32</sup>

Three other partial studies of Renaissance 2010 have appeared. One<sup>33</sup> was funded by the Renaissance Schools Fund, the funding arm of Renaissance 2010, which has raised \$50 million to spend on the portfolio approach. Thus far RSF has awarded \$30 million to 63 new schools. The RSF-funded report conducted by SRI found that “children in the fund-supported schools had low academic performance and posted test score gains identical to students in nearby neighborhood schools.”<sup>34</sup> This evaluation does not account for other effects of the school closure dimension of the portfolio approach. The Chicago Consortium on School Research at the University of Chicago studied the effects of the Renaissance 2010 closures, finding that “students from closed schools landed, for the most part, at campuses that were just as bad and then progressed at the same predictably low levels.”<sup>35</sup> It also found that students from closed schools who then attended higher-performing schools experienced a positive impact in terms of academic progress—but these were in the minority.

Despite inconclusive or negative results, Ron Huberman, the successor CEO to Arne Duncan in Chicago, has made clear that he will expand the initiative. Renaissance 2010 was initiated by the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago (a century-old organization representing Chicago corporations), which commissioned corporate consultant A.T. Kearney to write the school plan. Mayor Daley, who has control over Chicago Public Schools, has championed the approach as well, framing the discussion in such familiar metaphorical market terms as “competition,” “choice,” and public-private partnerships. Although Huberman’s administration has not yet issued a study, he “said he has crunched the numbers and about one-third of the new schools are outperforming their neighborhood counterparts; one-third are identical in performance; the rest do worse.”<sup>36</sup> The difficulties of evaluating the portfolio approach in Chicago is heightened by the ways that school closures were done, with closings based not only on alleged test scores but also on claims about building under-utilization. Critics of the school closures have alleged uneven criteria and have suggested that the pattern of school closures and chartering aligned with urban gentrification plans.

In New Orleans’ RSD, partial evidence is less clear than in Chicago. Six scholarly peer-reviewed articles had appeared as of March 5, 2010, but none included achievement data or cost data. As noted above, student achievement outcomes and relative costs are vigorously debated. Defenders of the RSD point to the Stanford CREDO study<sup>37</sup> of charters nationwide, which shows charters faring on par to worse

than traditional public schools in student achievement, but which showed Louisiana charters faring better than traditional public schools. Critics of the study have questioned its methodology and selective use of data as well as the potential effects of unequal financial investments in charter versus non-charter schools.<sup>38</sup>

CPRE's interim report, discussed above, also addressed costs of portfolio implementation. It reported that the four large urban districts continued to pay for "salaries, other instructional costs, and facilities rent and maintenance" while philanthropy provided funds for innovation.<sup>39</sup> The amounts and uses of philanthropic funds differed in the districts, with some supporting charter management organizations, some supporting test-based database tracking projects, some funding an effort to encourage teachers to give up tenure for higher salaries or pay for performance, and some funding the creation of an independent research institution.

While the exact amounts of money spent on portfolio district initiatives are not known, CRPE estimates that

The amounts available have been significant, by some accounts as high as \$200 million in New York City, half that amount in Chicago, and over \$50 million in New Orleans. Philanthropic contributions to D.C. have been smaller to date, in part because the district has barely started to build external support organizations and in part because foundations are waiting to fulfill their pledges to the new teacher salary scheme.<sup>40</sup>

This dependence upon philanthropic funding for innovation generates uncertainty about future costs and future financing in portfolio districts. CRPE hopes that a future report will be able to answer this critical question: "can the new support organizations, once established, operate on fees received from schools and the district, or will they require continued foundation funding?"<sup>41</sup>

This question about future funding raises other as yet unanswered questions about whether philanthropic foundations will have the resources and the will to continue portfolio funding, whether districts will have the resources and the will to replace any withdrawn foundation funding, or whether some as yet unidentified source of funding will be found to cover any future gap. Other complexities regarding foundation financing involve the uses of private foundation funds to "leverage" public spending in directions that may be at odds with the public will and public interest. In particular, the large "venture philanthropies"—Gates, Broad, and Walton—have been successful at using publicly subsidized foundation wealth strategically to influence elements of privatization-oriented portfolio reform, including charter school expansion, vouchers, "neovouchers" or publicly funded tax credits for private tuition, linkage of teacher pay to test-based achievement, and school turnaround and closure efforts.<sup>42</sup> Whether public policy is best driven by private wealth is a critical question, although it is beyond the scope of this work.

## Evidence and Constituent Elements of Portfolio District Approach

The proponents of the portfolio district approach at the Center for Reinventing Public Education make a strong case that the complexity of the portfolio approach makes it difficult to evaluate, and that it should not be evaluated or implemented piecemeal. Yet, legislators, administrators and other decision makers may be tempted to ignore such cautions if there were evidence that one or several elements of the approach had demonstrated effectiveness. It may therefore be useful to demonstrate that even if it were reasonable to evaluate the approach in terms of the promise of its constituent elements, there still is no evidence available to support its implementation.

As noted above, studies of earlier decentralization efforts are of little value because the portfolio model differs radically from earlier approaches. A meaningful study would need to focus on how shifting control to boards of contractors affected student achievement and administrative cost, but no evidence exists on this topic. Also lacking is evidence on the effects of contracting when merged with more concentrated superintendent control under mayoral or state takeover. Therefore, the only constituent elements of the portfolio approach that have been rigorously studied are charter schools, school closures and turnarounds, and test-based accountability.

Studies of charter school affects on achievement show mixed to negative results in comparison to traditional public schools, and they offer no information on comparative costs.<sup>43</sup> Of 93 peer-reviewed scholarly articles available on school closures, none offer empirical evidence regarding their effects on student achievement or cost; five available peer-reviewed studies of turnarounds also offer no information on these criteria. The impact of test-based accountability can be evaluated based on the successes or failures of No Child Left Behind. Between 2008 and 2010, 53 peer-reviewed articles available in full text form were published on “No Child Left Behind” and “Student Achievement.”<sup>44</sup> Of the 53, the vast majority raised methodological, theoretical, and practical problems with this experiment in test-based accountability. None frame NCLB as demonstrating the effectiveness of test-based accountability, although some do retain hope for the concept. Available evidence suggests, however, that on the whole NCLB has failed to raise student achievement or to close the racial “achievement gap.”<sup>45</sup> The literature also reflects concerns about cost because federal funding allocated was insufficient to fund the testing agenda—and even the insufficient amount promised was never fully provided.<sup>46</sup>

**Table 1. Summary of Scholarly Peer-Reviewed Evidence Available on Portfolio District Approach**

	Student Achievement	Cost
<i>New York</i>	Data unavailable	Data unavailable
<i>Chicago</i>	Data unavailable	Data unavailable
<i>New Orleans</i>	Data unavailable	Data unavailable
<i>Washington, D.C.</i>	Data unavailable	Data unavailable

Based on searches on Academic Search Premiere as of 3/6/10.

**Table 2. Summary of Scholarly Peer-Reviewed Evidence Available on Constituent Elements of Portfolio District Approach**

	<b>Student Achievement</b>	<b>Cost</b>
<i>Portfolio Decentralization</i>	Data unavailable	Data unavailable
<i>Charter School Creation</i>	Mixed to Negative Evidence	Data unavailable
<i>School Closure</i>	Data unavailable	Data unavailable
<i>Test-based Accountability</i> <sup>47</sup>	Negative Evidence	Data unavailable
<i>School Turnarounds</i>	Data unavailable	Data unavailable
<i>Teacher Pay for Test Performance</i>	Data unavailable	Data unavailable

Based on searches of peer-reviewed scholarly articles on Academic Search Premiere as of 3/6/10.

**Table 3. Evidence Available on Portfolio District Approach Based in Proponents’ Claims**

	<b>Student Achievement</b>	<b>Costs in Addition to Regular District Funding</b>
<i>New York</i>	Data unavailable	\$200 million
<i>Chicago</i>	Data unavailable	\$100 million
<i>New Orleans</i>	Data unavailable	\$50 million (minimum)
<i>Washington, D.C.</i>	Data unavailable	Data unavailable

Based on the report “Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report” Center on Reinventing Public Education.<sup>48</sup>

## *Discussion and Analysis*

### **Lacking Evidence, the Lessons of Experience**

As indicated above, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that the portfolio approach will deliver the achievement gains that advocates like CRPE consider its “bottom-line” benefit. Proponents acknowledge that definitive measures of student achievement that can account for the complexity of the proposed radical changes do not exist. Rather than predicting that such analytic tools can and will be developed, CRPE encourages alternative, indirect means of measuring success. Moreover, it counsels patience in awaiting positive results: “Friends and enemies of the portfolio approach will seize on quick results, but their claims can serve political ends, not render balanced judgment of a complex and long-term strategy.”<sup>49</sup>

Administrators and legislators ought to be aware of just how significant the problems with achievement measurement in portfolio districts are—as even

advocates acknowledge. No evidence exists to suggest student achievement gains can be expected; no expectation exists for the development of analytic tools capable of measuring the portfolio approach's effect on achievement, its central promise. This situation presents administrators and legislators with the difficult task of justifying "reform" with no supporting achievement evidence and no foreseeable possibility of such evidence. Add to this unknown and currently unknowable information on student achievement, the clearer picture of high financial costs, effects of those high costs on other public expenditures, uncertainties for future funding, political fallout, and the potential adverse effect of the reform on other tried and true educational reforms (reduced class size, for example, or comprehensive social support programs linked to educational reforms, as in the Harlem Children's Zone), and in sum, the portfolio district approach looks like a recipe for high risk and no clear reward. Experience to date offers reason to expect such negative complications.

As discussed above, existing portfolio implementation has been expensive, and future financial support for it is uncertain. Large philanthropies such as Gates and Broad, known as "venture philanthropies," have provided substantive funding, understanding schooling as "private consumable service" that "promotes business remedies, reforms, and assumptions."<sup>50</sup> Although educational philanthropy accounts for just a fraction of educational spending in the U.S., its institutions have recently acquired disproportionate influence and control over educational policy and practice.<sup>51</sup> While such philanthropies provide seed money to promote what they term "reform," if the federal government were to encourage continuation of the seeded portfolio approaches, the impact on district funding could be enormous. Even the Center for Reinventing Public Education suggests that a problem with the portfolio approach is that philanthropic support can dry up. However, they do not explore how such philanthropically supported initiatives as teacher bonus pay (Washington, D.C.), research institutes (New York City), or ancillary support for charter development, when suddenly defunded by the philanthropies, may require districts to choose between core operations expenditures and portfolio initiatives.<sup>52</sup> It is worth considering that districts might be forced to move limited resources away from such areas as teacher pay, physical site, maintenance, and materials and into infrastructure for various portfolio initiatives. This scenario is especially likely because short-run federal stimulus money supporting teacher salaries from 2009 is running out even as states and districts face budget shortfalls at levels not seen for decades.

Social and political strife also seem likely complications in portfolio districts, as has been seen in Chicago and New Orleans, and more recently in the Providence incident discussed above. Social conflict in Chicago made international news when neighborhood gang lines were disregarded in the closing and opening of schools under Renaissance 2010. This corporate-instituted portfolio plan in the mayor-controlled district resulted in Fenger High School opening with 100% new faculty and students imported from various closed neighborhood schools. As a result, the school's teachers, staff, and administrators lacked crucial knowledge of the community and the students to prevent a melee that resulted in

the much publicized death of student Derrion Albert, widely watched on the Web. George Schmidt of *Substance News* wrote,

But more than most other gang induced murders in Chicago—and affecting the public schools—the murder of Derrion Albert is the result not only of the city’s massive drug gang problem, but of the Chicago Board of Education’s policies of “New Schools” and “School Turnaround.” By closing Calumet, Engelwood, and Carver high schools—and forcing the most challenging students from those schools into Fenger and nearby schools—Mayor Daley and Chicago schools officials appointed by him guaranteed that Fenger would “fail.” When Fenger failed, Daley’s school board voted to fire all of Fenger’s teachers and force a program called “turnaround” on Fenger. The destabilization resulted in chaos in September 2009.<sup>53</sup>

Such intentional instability (churn, creative destruction) is central to the portfolio model. Urban districts may benefit most, however, from thoughtful and planned efforts to create stability and to nurture social attachments in order to strengthen communities that are already destabilized by a historical legacy of disinvestment, racialized poverty, and violence. Geoffrey Canada’s Harlem Children’s Zone is, for example, a highly publicized example of a comprehensive, community-based development project that incorporates efforts at public and private supports for development throughout the lifespan.

In addition, and in direct contrast to earlier decentralization efforts that moved control into the hands of local school personnel, the portfolio model embeds as strategy mass firings and the exclusion of teachers, community members, and unions from local administrative processes. Associated complications include the effects of de-unionization on teacher work conditions, hiring of certified (and uncertified) teachers, and retention of experienced teachers. The practical effects of such significant and potentially disruptive changes in portfolio districts are unstudied, although difficulties of staffing poor schools with qualified teachers are already well known.<sup>54</sup>

### **What Is Driving Portfolio District Approach?**

The closure of traditional public schools and the opening of charter schools are central elements of the portfolio district approach. Therefore, it may make sense to understand the portfolio strategy less as an initiative for decentralization and more as an initiative for privatization. In fact, advocates of the portfolio district strategy, including the Center on Reinventing Public Education, the venture philanthropies, and the Secretary of Education, support portfolio approaches because they put in place privatized choice schemes that allegedly introduce “market discipline” in the form of competition and choice.<sup>55</sup> While the contentious issue of privatization is, like the question of private control of education

in a democracy, beyond the scope of this work, those considering the portfolio approach might consider the possibility that at least some of the enthusiasm for portfolio districts may be vested in their ability to promote a privatization agenda. Despite widespread enthusiasm for privatization, the evidence does not suggest that for-profit or non-profit private schools outperform traditional public schools in terms of student achievement, as illustrated by Philadelphia's ambitious experiment with varied providers.<sup>56</sup>

To return to the portfolio approach on its own terms, without reference to the possibility of other agendas, the justification for it seems to rest on metaphorical business images that substitute for evidence. As discussed above, a key portfolio metaphor casts the district head as a manager buying and selling investments (schools and contractors) based on their profitability (achievement scores). This seems a less-than-compelling rationale, since no stock investor wants to create a portfolio of investments without evidence of future earnings growth or other evidence of increases in stock value. However, and to put it bluntly, non-profit and for-profit charters and the other "investments" available to districts look no better—and perhaps worse—"investments" than traditional public schools. There is no evidence that the strategies of turning over school after school (churn, or creative destruction) or of making public schools compete with contractors will enhance achievement. While the available evidence on charter schools may not be a reliable indicator of their performance in complex portfolio districts, it is difficult to comprehend how the added stresses and instabilities of closing and opening schools creates an advantage for a charter system. To date, evidence suggests that on the whole charters perform no better than, and sometimes even worse than, traditional public schools.<sup>57</sup> It is unclear why portfolio advocates would expect better results in a portfolio system.

A second prominent metaphor is that the "government monopoly" of public schooling has "failed," and now it is time to "give the market a chance." This accusation is selectively applied. U.S. schools score on par with other industrialized nations in international comparisons,<sup>58</sup> despite having a uniquely local and unequal funding structure, meaning that the U.S. is on par despite inadequate public investment in urban districts. This picture is misleading, in that there is strong evidence that in relatively affluent communities, public investment in traditional public schools can and does result in excellence, including excellence in test scores.<sup>59</sup> In the nation's top public schools, per-pupil spending is often several times higher than in the nation's large urban districts, where it is well known that children experience multiple academic disadvantages due to poverty.<sup>60</sup> When declarations of the "failure of public education" are made by advocates of choice and privatization, inevitably these declarations are targeted at urban districts, which are predominantly non-white and predominantly poor. In this sense, tinkering with unproven, unstudied, market-oriented experiments appears as an attempt at avoiding equalizing conditions in the most heavily invested-in public schools attended by largely professional class whites and in the historically disinvested-in urban public schools. As Dorothy Shipps suggests, the history of business-led reform to public schooling in the United States over the course of the twentieth century has proven that "giving the market a chance" has resulted in present in-

equalities.<sup>61</sup> One can only speculate as to the potential positive effects of equalizing funding and resources so that all schools receive investment at the level of the most successful schools.

Evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, the perception that American public schools are an unmitigated disaster has fostered the idea it is worthwhile to try anything, including the most radical experiments, to improve U.S. public education. With discussions so dominated by business metaphors, “free market” methods have appeared particularly attractive, including teacher pay for grades (pay for performance) and contracted school management (contracting out). What is more, the business paradigm requires numerically measurable progress, so that test-based achievement comes to completely dominate pedagogy and curriculum. This kind of “bottom line” perspective not only elevates test scores to the highest educational value, but also may result in crowding out traditional ways of thinking about and defining education as an intellectual endeavor that involves investigation, debate, and deliberation. A concern with students’ ability to think more deeply is replaced by a concern with how to produce higher test scores.

With no positive evidence for either portfolio district approach or any of its constituent elements, and negative evidence for some elements, one is inclined to invoke Hippocrates dictum of “First, do no harm” to those considering implementing these radical approaches.

### ***Recommendations***

Although the portfolio model is advocated by some policy centers, implemented in some large urban districts, and appears to be supported by the Obama administration, no peer-reviewed studies of portfolio districts exist, meaning that no reliable empirical evidence about portfolio effects is available to support either the implementation or rejection of the portfolio district model. Nor is such evidence likely to be forthcoming, since even advocates acknowledge the enormous difficulty of designing credible empirical studies to determine how the portfolio approach impacts student achievement and other outcomes. One portfolio district, New Orleans, has produced anecdotal reports of achievement gains. The New Orleans results have, however, been subjected to serious challenge. In addition, available piecemeal evidence and literature from the supporters of the model suggest that the approach is expensive to implement and has unknown to negative effects on student achievement. Finally, extrapolation of research on constituent elements is unreliable, given complex interactions within a portfolio model; even there, however, no evidence is available to that the portfolio model will produce gains in achievement or fiscal efficiency.

In light of these considerations, it is recommended that legislators and administrators use great caution in considering the portfolio district approach. It is also highly recommended that before adopting such a strategy, decision makers ask the following questions.

- What credible evidence do we have, or can we obtain, that suggests advantages for the portfolio model? What would those advantages be,

when might they be expected to materialize, and how might they be documented?

- If constituent elements of the model (such as charter schools and test-based accountability) have not produced advantages outside of portfolio systems, what is the rationale for expecting improved outcomes as part of a portfolio system?
- What funding will be needed for startup, and where will it come from?
- What funding will be necessary for maintenance of the model? Where will continuation funds come from if startup funds expire and are not renewed?
- What potential political and social conflicts seem possible? How will concerns of dissenting constituents be addressed?
- How will the cost/benefit ratio of the model be determined?

## Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> For a recent celebration of “churn” or “creative destruction,” see Smarick, A. (2010). The Turnaround Fallacy. *Education Next* 10 (1). Smarick suggests that public schools should be thought of as private businesses competing against one another and further suggests that the “advantage” of charter schools is that they can be easily closed and replaced with other privatized solutions.

In the context of the portfolio district model see Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 1: “In a portfolio district, schools are not assumed to be permanent but contingent... A portfolio district is built for continuous improvement via expansion and imitation of the highest-performing schools, closure and replacement of the lowest-performing, and constant search for new ideas.”

<sup>2</sup> The Obama administration’s documents for Race to the Top and its *A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act* employ the portfolio approach and its constituent elements as detailed here, although these documents do not explicitly use the language of “portfolio districts” in doing so. See, for example, pages 10 and 12 of the *Blueprint*, which clearly advocates the strategies and method of the portfolio district approach.

<sup>3</sup> Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Non-peer-reviewed reports that advocate for portfolio districts but do not contain empirical evidence and are not based in scholarly study include:

Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington.

Cavanna, A., Olchefske, J., & Fleischman, S. (2006, May). The Potential of the Portfolio Approach. *Educational Leadership*, 63 (8), 89-91

Brodie, J. M. (2009, Oct. 8). Study: Portfolio districts ‘promising works in progress.’ *Education Daily*, 42 (173), 1-3.

There are no peer-reviewed empirical studies that do or do not advocate for portfolio districts.

<sup>5</sup> As the CRPE website ([http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/print/csr\\_docs/home.htm](http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/print/csr_docs/home.htm)) states, the public schools often “fail to achieve this goal” of educating all students well. The goal of improving public education is not found in strengthening the public aspects but making the public system look more like a private system through a number of means including competition, choice, and corporate style management.

<sup>6</sup> A good illustration of the plethora of advocacy publications but a paucity of careful study is evident in the case of charter school research. In a new book by educational historian and former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch [Ravitch, D. (2010). *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*. Boston: Beacon], she describes “the data wars” over charters between 2003 and 2009. She cites 11 major studies (pp. 138-143) that comprise the core of the data war. Yet, if one looks at scholarship on “charter schools” in this span of time on Academic Search Premier with all databases selected, 20,157 articles can be accessed. Limiting the search to “charter schools” and “student achievement” results in 412 publications in that span of time. These hundreds of publications do not include much of what is put out on the Internet by charter support organizations, think tanks, and philanthropic organizations that comprise part of the charter movement. The point not to be missed is that of the vast abundance of information on the constitutive elements of the portfolio model, precious little is based in quality, scholarly, empirically based and peer-reviewed work.

<sup>7</sup> It is important to note here that empirical studies of the elements of portfolio district reform begin with theoretical assumptions and values. In pointing out the lack of empirically based study of the portfolio model and its elements, I do not intend to suggest that empirical studies are inherently superior to other kinds of policy scholarship or to suggest that “numbers speak for themselves.” Empirical studies begin with particular framing assumptions that require adequate theorization. Good, empirically based scholarship in the social sciences sufficiently theorizes the researcher’s assumptions. The historical tendency towards radical objec-

tivism, which brackets out the researcher's subjective position and its influence on the framing assumptions of the study, is referred to as "positivism." Positivism has been thoroughly criticized in education.

See for example, Giroux, H.A. (1983). *Theory and Resistance in Education*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

<sup>8</sup> Wohlstetter, P. & McCurdy, K. (1991). The Link Between School Decentralization and School Politics. *Urban Education* 25 (4), January, 391-414.

<sup>9</sup> Wohlstetter, P. & McCurdy, K. (1991). The Link Between School Decentralization and School Politics. *Urban Education* 25 (4), January, 391-414.

Grosskopf, S. & Moutray, C. (2001). Evaluating Performance in Chicago Public High Schools in the Wake of Decentralization. *Economics of Education Review* 20, 1-14.

<sup>11</sup> A crucial difference between the "old" and "new" decentralization involves the shift away from teacher autonomy particularly under chartering. On the emphasis of teacher autonomy under the "old" decentralization, see, for example, White, P. A.(1992, Spring). Teacher Empowerment Under "Ideal" School Site Autonomy. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 14 (1), 69-82.

The de-unionizing effects of chartering in particular as well as the rise of outcomes based and test-based forms of accountability result in a shift away from teacher autonomy that makes the "new" decentralization nearly diametrically opposed to the "old" in terms of teacher control.

<sup>12</sup> See Henig, J.R. & Rich, W.C. (eds.) (2003). *Mayors in the Middle: Politics, Race, and Mayoral Control of Urban Schools*.

See also Grosskopf, S. & Moutray, C. (2001). Evaluating Performance in Chicago Public High Schools in the Wake of Decentralization. *Economics of Education Review* 20, 1-14.

<sup>13</sup> William G. Ouchi [Ouchi, W.G. (2006, March-April). Power to the Principals: Decentralization in Three Large School Districts. *Organization Science* 17 (2), 298-307] contends that the crucial determination for the success of decentralization is principal control over spending. His study claims to show student achievement improvements in principal-strong decentralization merged with school autonomy over "staffing, scheduling, and teaching methods" and leaving "instructional decisions to the schools and then audit them carefully." His study involves Edmonton, Alberta, Houston and Seattle.

The portfolio district model emphasizes mayoral or state takeover capitalizing on crisis or disaster to initiate the model and then "the portfolio idea is put into action by unconventional leadership teams led by lawyers, MBAs, public policy experts, or educators with unconventional backgrounds, for example Teach for America alumni. These actors are often recruited from lucrative careers elsewhere; they don't appear on the lists assembled by headhunters who serve traditional local school boards." In Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 8.

The strong principal control emphasized by Ouchi and to which he attributes his good results is not explicitly a part of the Mayoral/State/Leadership team control emphasized by the Center on Reinventing Public Education.

<sup>14</sup> Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington.

<sup>15</sup> Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 6.

<sup>16</sup> The idea of taking advantage of disaster for radical market based educational experimentation predated Hurricane Katrina in 2005 but that disaster was seized upon in mass media and policy circles to call for a radical market based experiment in educational rebuilding. Paul Hill, who is the leading author advocating portfolio districts and its strategy of creative destruction, also authored an influential report with Jane Hannaway that called for refusing to rebuild the New Orleans public schools and instead putting in place privatized educational schemes.

See Hill P. & Hannaway, J. (2006, January). *The Future of Public Education in New Orleans*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. Retrieved May 26, 2010, from [http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/900913\\_public\\_education.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/900913_public_education.pdf)

I critically detail this post-Katrina history in Saltman, K.J. (2007). *Capitalizing on Disaster: Taking and Breaking Public Schools*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers. See chapter one, Silver Linings and Golden Opportunities. This is also taken up by Naomi Klein in Klein, N. (2007). *The Shock Doctrine*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

<sup>17</sup> This author has raised a number of questions and problems with these two ways of assessing educational value in a number of publications. For the purposes of this brief the only question is whether evidence is available on the terms of their proponents and in terms of the same dominant implementation concerns of student achievement and cost.

<sup>18</sup> Academic Search Premiere searches were conducted on terms included in Tables 1, 2, and 3. Search for “Portfolio School District” returns three articles, none of which offer evidence on academic achievement or cost. “Portfolio District” returns three relevant articles, none of which have evidence. “Portfolio School” returns three relevant articles that overlap with the other searches but do not contain evidence. None of these searches yield any scholarly peer-reviewed studies. An Academic Search Premiere search on “Charter Schools” and “Cost” found 8 peer-reviewed journal articles between 2002-2009, but none contained studies of cost comparisons between charters and traditional public schools. An Academic Search Premiere search on “No Child Left Behind” and “Student Achievement” found 53 scholarly peer-reviewed articles with full text available. While several articles pointed to the failure of NCLB to achieve what it was designed to achieve, namely raising student achievement or decreasing the so-called “achievement gap” between white students and racial minority students, the majority of studies pointed to a number of methodological, theoretical, and practical problems with high-stakes-test-based forms of accountability. None of these studies could be understood as framing NCLB as successful in terms of its aims. Searches for Table 1 included cross referencing city and district names with variations on portfolio district and also cross-searching “student achievement” and “cost” with these variations. Search terms for Table 2 are listed in the table.

<sup>19</sup> The majority of studies of charter school effects on academic achievement show on par to negative effects in comparison with traditional public schools. Two of the most extensive and significant studies were the 2004 NAEP results as analyzed by Martin Carnoy and colleagues [Carnoy, M., Jacobsen, R., Mishel, L., & Rothstein, R. (2005). *The Charter School Dust Up: Examining the Evidence on Enrollment and Achievement*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute] and the Stanford CREDO study of 2009 [available at [http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE\\_CHOICE\\_CREDO.pdf](http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf)], *Disparities in charter school resources—the influence of state policy and community*.

Other studies include:

Bodine, E., Fuller, B., González, M., Huerta, L., Naughton, S., Park, S., & Teh, L.W. (2008, January). TITLE . *Journal of Education Policy*, 23 (1), 1-33.

Finnigan, K., Adelman, N., Anderson, L., Cotton, L., Donnelly, M.B., & Price, T. (2004). *Evaluation of the Public Charter Schools Program: Final evaluation report*. Washington, DC: US Department of Education.

Ladd, H.F. & Bifulco, R.P. (2004). *The impacts of charter schools on student achievement: Evidence from North Carolina*. Working Paper SAN04-01. Durham, NC: Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy, Duke University.

Nelson, F.H., Rosenberg, B., & Van Meter, N. (2004). *Charter school achievement on the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress*. Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers.

What Works Clearinghouse (2010) *WWC Quick Review of the Report “Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States.”* Washington, DC: Author.

Center for Research on Education Outcomes. (June 2009). *Multiple choice: Charter school performance in 16 states*. Stanford, CA: Author.

<sup>20</sup> Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 46.

The authors of the report write, “It is unlikely, however, that we can ever give a simple answer to the question, ‘Have the cities that adopted a portfolio strategy benefited from it?’ This is so for several reasons, including that districts started in different places and moved at different paces toward full implementation. For example, in 2005 and 2006, New Orleans had no alternative to opening schools in partnership with independent providers. If only in the sense that the portfolio approach let the state provide schools where none existed, the approach must be counted as a success. In the other cities, where children could find schools to attend before the district adopted the portfolio approach, no such judgment is possible.”(46)

While I agree with the difficulties of measuring the portfolio district approach, it is difficult to see how the authors nonetheless both argue for test-based accountability and call for implementing the model without this evidence. Moreover, the claim in this quote that New Orleans “had no alternative to opening schools in partnership with independent providers” somehow neglects to mention that immediately after Katrina, Paul Hill played an active role in advocating to administrators and legislators that the New Orleans schools not be rebuilt and that instead the system be privatized. See Hill P. & Hannaway, J. (2006, January). *The Future of Public Education in New Orleans*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. Retrieved May 26, 2010, from [http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/900913\\_public\\_education.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/900913_public_education.pdf).

For an elaborate analysis of how the market-oriented think tanks used the natural disaster in the gulf coast to further a longstanding privatization agenda for charters, vouchers, and no-bid contracting, see Chapter One, *Silver Linings and Golden Opportunities*, in Saltman, K.J. (2007). *Capitalizing on Disaster: Taking and Breaking Public Schools*.

For additional evidence regarding post-Katrina New Orleans see Bulkley, K.E. (2010). *Review of “Fix the city schools: Moving all schools to charter-like autonomy.”* Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved May 26, 2010, from <http://epicpolicy.org/thinktank/review-fix-city-schools>.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Bulkley, K.E. (2010). *Review of “Fix the city schools: Moving all schools to charter-like autonomy.”* Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved May 26, 2010, from <http://epicpolicy.org/thinktank/review-fix-city-schools>.

Miron, G. & Applegate, B. (2009). *Review of “Multiple choice: Charter school performance in 16 states.”* Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved April 2, 2010, from <http://epicpolicy.org/thinktank/review-multiple-choice>.

On Louisiana see also Senator Thomas Robichaux (2009, Oct. 19) “Louisiana Schools Improved, But Who is Responsible?” *Bayou Buzz*, available at: [http://www.bayoubuzz.com/News/Louisiana/Government/Louisiana\\_Schools\\_Improved\\_But\\_Who\\_Is\\_Responsible\\_9670.asp](http://www.bayoubuzz.com/News/Louisiana/Government/Louisiana_Schools_Improved_But_Who_Is_Responsible_9670.asp)

See also Sullivan, E. & Morgan, D. (2010). *Pushed Out: Harsh Discipline in Louisiana Schools Denies the Right to Education*. New York and New Orleans: National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, & Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children, which raises important issues regarding RSD public and charter school pushouts and the implications for claims about performance.

See also the important work on New Orleans and Louisiana by Kristen Buras.

<sup>22</sup> Academic Search Premiere search for “Portfolio School District” returns three articles none of these offer evidence on academic achievement or cost. “Portfolio District” returns three relevant articles none of which have evidence. “Portfolio School” returns three relevant articles that overlap with the other searches but which do not contain evidence. None of these searches yield any scholarly peer-reviewed studies. Non-peer-reviewed reports that advocate for portfolio districts but do not contain evidence include:

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- Cavanna, A., Olchefske, J., & Fleischman, S. (2006, May). The Potential of the Portfolio Approach. *Educational Leadership*, 63 (8), 89-91.
- Brodie, J. M. (2009, Oct. 8). Study: Portfolio districts ‘promising works in progress.’ *Education Daily*, 42 (173), 1-3.
- <sup>23</sup>Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 10.
- <sup>24</sup>Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 9.
- <sup>25</sup>Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 46.
- <sup>26</sup>Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington.
- <sup>27</sup>Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 47
- <sup>28</sup>Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington.
- <sup>29</sup>Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington.
- <sup>30</sup>Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 47-48.
- <sup>31</sup>Banchero, S. (2010, Jan. 17) “Daley School Plan Fails to Make Grade” *Chicago Tribune*, 1.
- <sup>32</sup>Banchero, S. (2010, Jan. 17) “Daley School Plan Fails to Make Grade” *Chicago Tribune*, 1.
- <sup>33</sup>Humphrey, D., Young, V., Bosetti, K., Cassidy, L., Rivera, E., Wang, H., & Wechsler, M. (2009). *Renaissance Schools Fund-supported Schools: Early Outcomes, Challenges, and Opportunities*. Menlo Park: SRI International. Retrieved May 26, 2010, from [http://policyweb.sri.com/cep/publications/RSF\\_FINAL\\_April\\_15v2.pdf](http://policyweb.sri.com/cep/publications/RSF_FINAL_April_15v2.pdf).
- <sup>34</sup>Banchero, S. (2010, Jan. 17) “Daley School Plan Fails to Make Grade” *Chicago Tribune*, 1.
- <sup>35</sup>Banchero, S. (2010, Jan. 17) “Daley School Plan Fails to Make Grade” *Chicago Tribune*, 1.
- <sup>36</sup>Banchero, S. (2010, Jan. 17) “Daley School Plan Fails to Make Grade” *Chicago Tribune*, 1.
- <sup>37</sup>The Stanford CREDO study *Disparities in charter school resources—The influence of state policy and community* is available at: [http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE\\_CHOICE\\_CREDO.pdf](http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf).
- <sup>38</sup>See for example, Miron, G. & Applegate, B. (2009). *Review of “Multiple choice: Charter school performance in 16 states.”* Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved April 2, 2010, from <http://epicpolicy.org/thinktank/review-multiple-choice>.
- On Louisiana see also Senator Thomas Robichaux (2009, Oct. 19) “Louisiana Schools Improved, But Who is Responsible?” *Bayou Buzz*, available at: [http://www.bayoubuzz.com/News/Louisiana/Government/Louisiana\\_Schools\\_Improved\\_But\\_Who\\_Is\\_Responsible\\_9670.asp](http://www.bayoubuzz.com/News/Louisiana/Government/Louisiana_Schools_Improved_But_Who_Is_Responsible_9670.asp).
- <sup>39</sup>Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 39.
- <sup>40</sup>Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 39.
- <sup>41</sup>Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 40.

- <sup>42</sup> See Saltman, K.J. (2010). *The Gift of Education: Public Education and Venture Philanthropy* New York: PalgraveMacmillan.
- <sup>43</sup> An Academic Search Premiere search on “Charter Schools” and “Cost” found 8 peer-reviewed journal articles between 2002-2009, but none of these contained study of cost comparisons between charters and traditional public schools.
- <sup>44</sup> An Academic Search Premiere search on “No Child Left Behind” and “Student Achievement” found 53 scholarly peer-reviewed articles with full text available. While several articles pointed to the failure of NCLB to achieve what it was designed to achieve, namely raising student achievement or decreasing the so-called “achievement gap” between white students and racial minority students, the majority of studies pointed to a number of methodological, theoretical, and practical problems with high stakes test-based forms of accountability. None of these studies could be understood as framing NCLB as successful in terms of its aims. For an overview of the failure of NCLB with regard to fulfilling its student achievement aspirations and a helpful review of literature on this, see, for example,
- Shirvani, H. (2009). Does the No Child Left Behind Act Leave Some Children Behind? *International Journal of Learning* 16 (3) 49-57.
- <sup>45</sup> The idea of a racial/ethnic “achievement gap” is problematic in much the same way as that of “student achievement.” An achievement gap presupposes that knowledge deemed universally valuable is being insufficiently distributed equitably. This framing of knowledge has no place for local knowledge and student experience as the basis for comprehending how students’ lived experiences in and outside of school are generated in part through broader social, political, economic, and cultural forces and formations. Such insights bear on a number of important matters, such as the broader purposes of public schooling and student motivation and agency. While a number of traditions, such as Deweyan reconstruction, critical pedagogy, and culturally relevant pedagogy, take this up, the current trend towards numerical test-based outputs presume that the goal is the “enforcement” of the right knowledge ordained by those who know best. This is a view of knowledge that is dogmatic and at odds with how knowledge is conceived at the highest levels of academic learning, in which dialogue, rational exchange, and peer review are central.
- <sup>46</sup> Shirvani, H. (2009). Does the No Child Left Behind Act Leave Some Children Behind? *International Journal of Learning* 16 (3) 49-57.
- <sup>47</sup> The closest wide-scale experiment in test-based accountability has been the No Child Left Behind law.
- <sup>48</sup> Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington.
- <sup>49</sup> Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, p. 48.
- <sup>50</sup> See Saltman, K.J. (2010). *The Gift of Education: Public Education and Venture Philanthropy* New York: PalgraveMacmillan, 1.
- <sup>51</sup> See Saltman, K.J. (2010). *The Gift of Education: Public Education and Venture Philanthropy* New York: PalgraveMacmillan, 1.
- <sup>52</sup> For a number of projects initiated in the four major portfolio districts see Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, 31. For the discussion of philanthropic support see 39-40.
- <sup>53</sup> Available at <http://www.pdailinois.org/site/node/398>.
- <sup>54</sup> See, for example, Blair, J., Hoff, D.J., Keller, B. & Manzo, K.K. (2002, March). Teacher distribution hurts poor schools, AASA warns. *Education Week*, 21(25), 18. Retrieved April 17, 2010, from Research Library Core. (Document ID: 110600608).
- <sup>55</sup> I take up the privatization efforts of the venture philanthropists in education and the Obama education policy in See Saltman, K.J. (2010). *The Gift of Education: Public Education and Venture Philanthropy* New York: PalgraveMacmillan.

That book discusses Secretary of Education Duncan's market-based call for seeing groups of schools as a portfolio. Speaking at the Renaissance Schools Fund "Free to Choose, Free to Succeed: The New Market in Public Education" event, then-CEO of Chicago Public Schools Duncan opened the event by prematurely and unjustifiably celebrating the portfolio district approach in Chicago's Renaissance 2010 and generally.

The Center for Reinventing Public Education Interim Report [Hill, P., Campbell, C., & Menefee-Libey, D. (2009). *Portfolio School Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report*. Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington], championing the implementation of portfolio districts on the basis of low public school achievement scores, concludes by stating that, while it will not be possible to definitively measure student achievement gains following implementation, the expansion of "choice" is a way to measure success (47-48). Thus, test scores according to CRPE should be used to justify implementing market-based choice schemes, but not to measure the effects of such implementations. Perhaps this is a growing trend of policy experts changing the rules when losing the game, as Charles Murray of the American Enterprise Institute recently put forward a similar assertion that now that privatized voucher schemes are in place and are not faring well in test-based achievement, we should change the criterion by which they are judged. (When young children do this kind of maneuver while playing games, they know that they are not being fair to opponents even if they need to be reminded by adults. Policy scholars should not have to be reminded.) See

Murray, C. (2010, May 4). Op-Ed: Why Charter Schools Fail the Test. *The New York Times*. Retrieved May 4, 2010, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/05/opinion/05murray.html>

56 Byrnes, V. (2009). Getting a feel for the market: The use of privatized school management in Philadelphia. *American Journal of Education*, 115, 437-455.

Peterson, P. E., & Chingos, M. M. (2009). *Impact of for-profit and nonprofit management on student achievement: The Philadelphia intervention 2002-2008* (Working Paper PEPG 09-02). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Program on Education Policy and Governance.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Bracey, G., (2005). *Charter schools' performance and accountability: A disconnect*. Tempe: Education Policy Studies Laboratory. Retrieved April 17, 2010, from <http://www.epicpolicy.org/files/EPSSL-0505-113-EPRU-exec.pdf>.

<sup>58</sup> See the Program for International Student Assessment available at <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pisa>.

<sup>59</sup> Berliner, D.C. & Biddle, B.J. (1999, January). The awful alliance of the media and public-school critics. *The Education Digest*, 64(5), 4-10. Retrieved April 17, 2010, from Research Library Core. (Document ID: 38003652).

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Berliner, D. C. (2009). *Poverty and potential: Out-of-school factors and school success*. Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved April 17, 2010, from <http://epicpolicy.org/publication/poverty-and-potential>, or Jonathan Kozol's extensive works.

<sup>61</sup> Shipps, D. (2006) *School Reform, Corporate Style: Chicago 1880-2000*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.