

## GROWING GREAT SCHOOLS IN EVERY NEIGHBORHOOD:

# THE PROMISE OF THE PORTFOLIO STRATEGY

BY CHRISTINE CAMPBELL

Policy Director at the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington Bothell

**A** dozen principals in Cleveland, Ohio, are the first wave of city principals empowered with new freedoms to hire staff, select curricula, and rework their budgets to allow them to make important tradeoffs in support of their students, such as longer school days or Saturday tutoring.

Up until last year, parents in Denver, Colorado, had to navigate sixty different application forms and timelines to choose schools for their children. Now, because of new collaboration between Denver Public Schools and city charter schools, parents simply rank their top choices on a single form for a single deadline that covers both district-run and charter schools.

What these school systems have in common with more than forty others across the country is their use of a portfolio strategy to manage their public schools. This strategy is open to offering the best options for families and to empowering principals to make decisions at their schools, which holds all schools accountable for performance and continually raising the bar on what is good enough. It's a new way of thinking about the role of today's public school systems.

### The portfolio strategy is made up of seven key, interdependent components:

[www.crpe.org/research/portfolio-strategy/seven-components](http://www.crpe.org/research/portfolio-strategy/seven-components)

1

#### Good options and choices for all families

Creating strong schools and giving families the freedom to choose their neighborhood school or other schools

2

#### School autonomy and empowerment

Giving principals control over their budgets, staffing, curricula, and calendars, and putting decisions in the hands of those closest to students

3

#### Pupil-based funding

Money follows students wherever they attend school, and more money moves from the district to the schools

4

#### Talent-seeking strategy

Aggressively seeking and keeping the best leaders, teachers, and district staff

5

#### New support for schools

Allowing schools to purchase the best support, materials, and training they can afford

6

#### Accountability

All of these freedoms are checked by holding all schools to similar accountability expectations

7

#### Engagement strategy

Involving parents, community, civic, and faith leaders in the work to know what the community wants and needs, reporting back to them about what's working and what's not, and making sure the work is grounded and sustained locally so that it carries on even when particular leaders leave



Districts that have been implementing the strategy for a while have seen impressive gains. In Denver, the district has reduced the number of low-performing schools (rated “on watch” or probation) from 53 percent in 2009 to 46 percent in 2012 and has added about 8,000 new “high-quality seats” to its total of 85,000. Denver is also the fastest-growing urban district in the country, not because of population growth, but because more parents are choosing public schools.

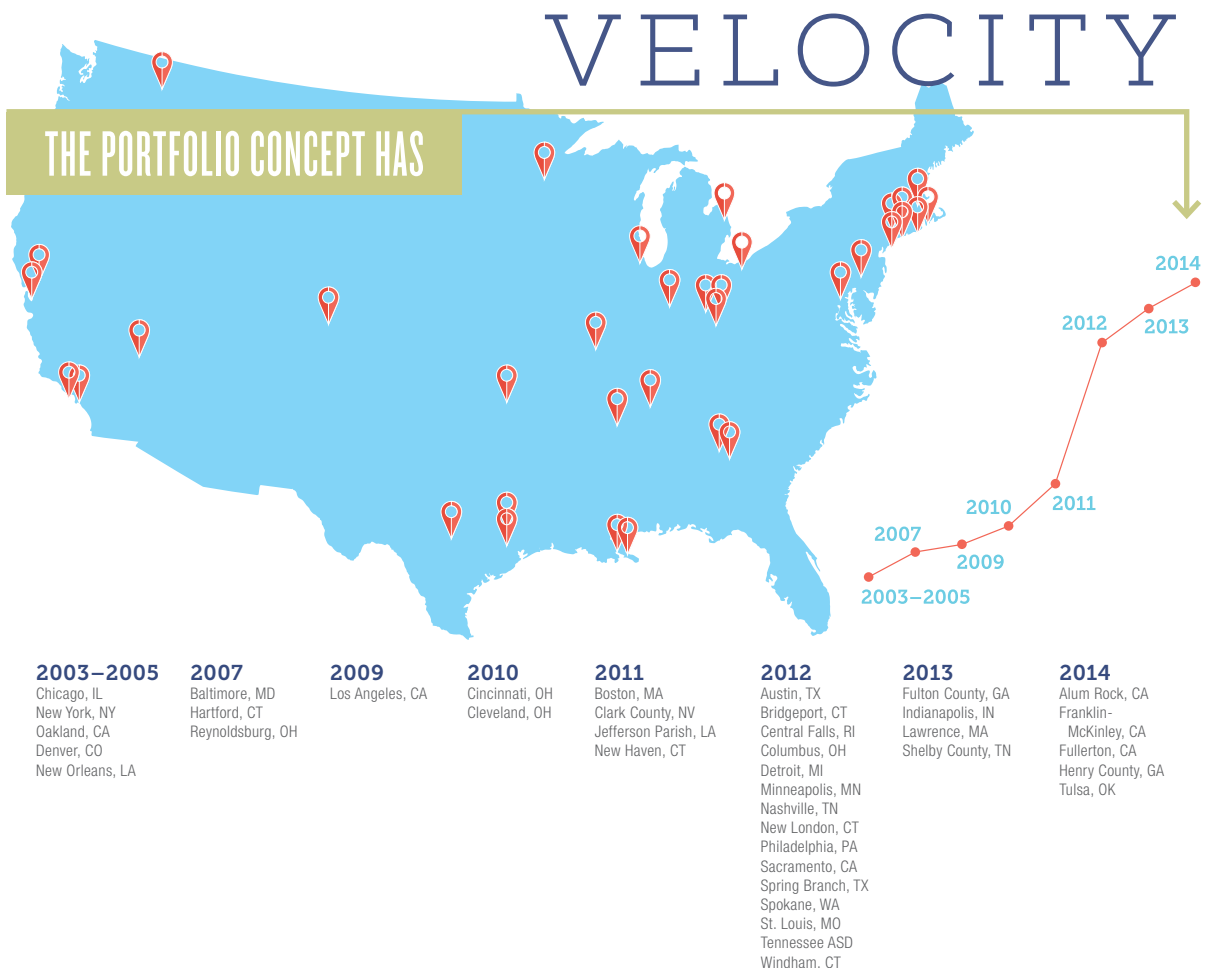
New York City, one of the earliest portfolio strategy adopters, has shown that committing to opening significant numbers of promising new schools, investing in teacher quality, getting strong teachers into high-poverty schools, and directing more funds out of central office to the school level pays off.

When New York City launched the strategy in 2003, less than half of its high school students graduated in four years. Ten years later, in 2013, nearly two-thirds did. Graduation numbers increased for students of all ethnicities, with the biggest growth happening for African American (from 40 percent to 60 percent) and Hispanic students (37 percent to 57 percent) at a time when the state test grew more challenging. The percentage of high school dropouts was subsequently halved from 22 percent in 2005 to 11 percent in 2012.

Though most of the early-adopting districts did so because they had tried many strategies but still felt “stuck” struggling with academic or financial crises, the portfolio strategy increasingly makes sense for other kinds of districts too. Recently, suburban districts that want to move

toward more personalized teaching and learning have realized that a one-size-fits all centralized system and curriculum make it difficult to try new and different things. Districts like Riverside, California, and Henry County, Georgia, are thinking about how to retool to give principals more autonomy and how to attract teaching talent that thrives under new models.

Though the strategy is challenging and not without conflict — it disrupts the status quo — more and more parents in New York City, Denver, and other portfolio cities are realizing they have a growing number of interesting and higher-performing school options to choose from, including their neighborhood schools. Also, more civic leaders are expressing support for a strategy that improves student outcomes and prepares students for college and careers.



The Center on Reinventing Public Education defines high-quality seats as schools where more than half of the students score above proficient on state tests.