

PERSONALIZED LEARNING POLICY PLAY #6: CULTIVATE A PORTFOLIO OF PROVIDERS

CONTEXT

In an effort to increase the supply of quality school options that meet families' varied needs, some districts have adopted a "portfolio" approach. Under this model, a school district does not operate all the schools in the district directly. Instead, it cultivates and manages a portfolio of schools that includes both schools run directly by the district and charter schools run by independent nonprofit operators. Parents can choose among the different types of schools in the portfolio. Although the schools are run by a variety of organizations, they are all public schools accountable to the same performance and student learning expectations. Low-performing schools—whether district-run or charters—may be closed for poor performance, in which case their students could select among other schools in the portfolio, or the district may recruit a new provider to replace the closed school.

Over the past decade, several districts, including Denver, Chicago, and New York City, have adopted a portfolio approach. These districts have cultivated a range of traditional public, charter, and innovative district-run options (such as small schools and magnet schools) in response to students' and families' needs.

PLAY IN ACTION

Districts should consider adopting a portfolio approach to increase the supply of personalized learning options for students. These districts would actively cultivate the supply of personalized learning models and providers within their portfolios, much as existing portfolio districts recruit or support replication of charter models to fill gaps and meet identified needs. District portfolios could include a variety of models, from high-quality third-party providers to homegrown personalized learning models, as well as both whole school models and those that support personalized learning in a particular subject area or grade level. A diverse set of

models would increase the range of options available to students and families, while ensuring all schools remain accountable for their performance.

Districts with a portfolio mind-set would also ensure that schools implementing these personalized learning models would be able to gain increased autonomy and flexibility for implementation. This approach could create an attractive option for existing district schools that need increased autonomy to implement innovative models but do not have the capacity to take on the financial and management responsibilities of being a charter school.

Denver Public Schools was an early adopter of the portfolio strategy. Within the DPS system, a school may be one of three types: district-run, charter, or innovation—a school adopting innovative practices, including a personalized learning model. Rocky Mountain Prep, a charter elementary school that is part of DPS’s portfolio, takes advantage of the flexibility it receives from state and local policies to implement a blended learning model whereby students rotate among whole group lessons with a teacher, independent work, small group guided practice, and online learning using a computer or tablet. The school assesses student progress every six weeks and gives teachers the data and feedback they need to make instructional decisions about individual students. Because innovation schools are granted autonomy from many state regulations, similar to the autonomy

that charter schools receive, they also have increased flexibility to make significant changes to their curriculum and personnel (see Play No. 11).

In Ohio, the Reynoldsburg City School District successfully adopted the portfolio strategy by minimizing the oversight role of central district administration and granting school leaders increased autonomy over program design and instructional offerings. Reynoldsburg’s strategy has enabled some schools to implement personalized learning models. The district’s one high school now has four theme-based academies, including eSTEM Academy, which focuses on STEM education. eSTEM Academy partners with Udacity to give students access to statistics, physics, and computer science massive open online courses. Hannah Ashton Middle School, also in Reynoldsburg, launched a blended learning pilot in collaboration with several providers, including Edmodo, Compass Learning, Achieve3000, and Virtual Nerd. Through partnerships with outside providers, the district has increased the variety of educational offerings available to students.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Successful implementation of a portfolio approach for personalized learning involves three key components:

First, districts must put in place mechanisms to grant increased autonomy for personalized learning models within the portfolio.

These mechanisms can include the charter authorizing process and a separate process to grant increased autonomy to existing district schools. To provide increased autonomy to existing schools, districts must define the types of autonomy that schools may receive, as well as the conditions schools must meet to qualify for them. During the application process, school leaders should clearly explain their vision for personalized learning, as well as how increased autonomy would facilitate the implementation of their personalized learning model. Districts could extend this approach to include schools seeking autonomy to implement other innovation strategies designed to increase student achievement.

Second, districts must establish an accountability mechanism to measure the performance of all schools in the portfolio—including traditional district, charter, and autonomous personalized learning schools. A performance evaluation framework will allow districts to assess the quality of providers in the portfolio. Denver Public Schools, for instance, has established a common School Performance Framework to assess all three types of schools—district-run, charter, and innovation—in its portfolio. Low-performing schools are subject to increased district supervision and decreased autonomy over school planning and instruction; in cases of sustained and significant low performance, they may be closed and replaced by another school or provider.

Finally, schools need a strategy to actively recruit and cultivate the supply of personalized learning models in the district. This approach should include strategies to partner with third-party providers that can support schools as they design and implement personalized learning models, as well as assistance for schools developing their own models. Districts can help schools working with external partners by actively recruiting providers with a successful track record, as well as by carefully vetting potential partners. Districts could cultivate the creation of homegrown models by providing financial resources and centralized capacity to support schools in designing and implementing personalized learning models.

While districts must take the lead in creating portfolio models, states can support this approach by allowing districts to apply for waivers of state policies on behalf of schools within their portfolios. A more ambitious approach would be to create a formal “portfolio district” designation that would allow districts to grant schools in their portfolio flexibility from specific state, as well as district, policies, contingent upon performance.

CONTACT FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Paul Hill, Center for Reinventing Public Education: crpe@u.washington.edu

RESEARCH AND RESOURCES

The **Center for Reinventing Public Education** has several resources related to the **portfolio strategy** at: <http://www.crpe.org/research/portfolio-strategy>

Joe Siedlecki describes **seven actions** that districts must take to establish a **portfolio model** at: <http://www.msdf.org/blog/2012/11/portfolio-schools-a-comprehensive-approach-to-district-improvement/>

Robin Lake and Paul Hill discuss the **capacities that districts must develop** to implement a portfolio strategy at: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED532895.pdf>

Independence Institute wrote a report on the **rise of blended learning in Colorado**. The report is available at: <http://education.i2i.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/IP-5-13-Kafer-Blended-Learning-Web.pdf>

A profile of **Reynoldsburg City School District**, in Ohio, can be found at: <http://edexcellence.net/ohio-policy/gadfly/2013/april-8/limitless.html>

Learn more about **organizations partnering with Reynoldsburg** City School District at: <http://gettingsmart.com/2013/02/reynoldsburg-schools-attracting-rave-reviews/>

More information on **eSTEM Academy**, in Ohio, is available at: <http://gettingsmart.com/2013/01/re-imagining-high-school-with-moocs/>

A profile of **Hannah Ashton Middle School**, in Ohio, is available at: <http://www.christenseninstitute.org/hannah-ashton-middle-school/>

A discussion of **oversight and accountability in portfolio districts** can be found at: <http://www.msdf.org/blog/2013/10/wild-west-or-responsible-oversight-portfolio-school-districts/>

Learn about **Denver's School Performance Framework** at: <http://spf.dpsk12.org/>