

The Research Alliance for
New York City Schools



Summary
February 2011

High School Research Colloquium

*Learning from New York City's Portfolio Strategy:
How Policy and Practice Can Inform Research*

Summary of Key Themes

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools



NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development

© 2011 Research Alliance for New York City Schools. All rights reserved. You may make copies of and distribute this work for non-commercial educational and scholarly purposes. For any other uses, including the making of derivative works, permission must be obtained from RANYCS, unless fair use exceptions to copyright law apply.

Acknowledgements

The High School Research Colloquium was made possible by support from the Future of Children Journal and Education Research Section at Princeton University.



The Research Alliance for New York City Schools is supported by core funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Robertson Foundation.

This paper reflects interpretations of the Research Alliance. Readers should not infer any endorsement of the themes or interpretations on the part of the New York City Department of Education, ERS, The Future of Children, or the participants in the High School Research Colloquium.

Introduction

On November 18, 2010, the Research Alliance for New York City Schools, in partnership with the *Future of Children Journal*, hosted a research colloquium entitled “Learning from New York City’s Portfolio Strategy: How Policy and Practice can Inform Research.” Over the past eight years, the New York City Department of Education (DOE) has made substantial investments in improving the quality of its high schools, and is currently preparing the next phase of its high school “portfolio strategy” to improve student performance in the lowest performing high schools.¹ Given the breadth of the proposed portfolio reforms and the intended scale of their implementation, it seemed imperative that stakeholders convene to discuss the implementation and effectiveness of the portfolio strategy. To that end, this colloquium provided a unique opportunity for policymakers and practitioners to suggest how research could inform the ongoing high school reform process in New York City.

Attendees represented various sectors of the New York City education stakeholder community, including the Department of Education, the research community, community organizations, philanthropic institutions, and high school principals. The colloquium was organized around three different panels. The first presented a descriptive account of past, present, and future iterations of recent reforms and offered a comparative look at portfolio strategies in other urban school districts. The second panel examined current research on high school reform, with a particular focus on a single aspect of the portfolio strategy – the impact of new small schools over the last decade. The third panel was comprised of high school principals and provided a sense of both the challenges and opportunities of the portfolio strategy at the school level.

The purpose of this summary report is to highlight some of the key cross-cutting themes that emerged from the panel presentations and subsequent discussions. The event also generated a number of critical research questions – about external supports, accountability systems, and closing schools – that could help shape the work of the Research Alliance and other researchers examining New York City high school reform.

Emerging Themes and Questions for Research

The colloquium provided an open platform for various education stakeholders to discuss high school reform from their respective vantage points. The panelists generated broad ways of thinking about the impact of the high school portfolio strategy and speculated about the ways empirical researchers could help measure implementation, effectiveness, and costs. The following is a discussion of the most salient themes that emerged from the colloquium, including directions for future research.

¹ For an expanded description of the portfolio strategy, please see the background paper prepared for the colloquium, Research Alliance for New York City Schools, 2010. “Learning from the New York City Portfolio Strategy: How Policy and Practice Can Inform Research, Background Paper.”

http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/publications#2010ResearchColloquium

The roles of networks and external supports in turning around low-performing schools

The NYC reform strategy attempts to provide principals with greater local autonomy and empowerment. According to a research panelist² examining portfolio strategies nationwide, reform in New York City is based on the assumption that autonomy is the driver for positive change. As a result, today's principals are faced with new responsibilities and are required to engage in tasks not traditionally performed by principals, such as balancing budgets and making complex human resource decisions. At the same time, principals must comply with mandates from central administration regarding student and school performance. Though the system has devolved a great deal of authority to principals, some aspects of school governance are increasingly centralized.

Panelists noted this tension between local autonomy and central mandates. In response, some panelists posited that networks have become increasingly important as intermediaries between these levels of administration. They reasoned that since the role of this generation of principals has changed, so too has the level of support they require. The success of external supports, networks, and partnerships at assisting principals varies, and the factors associated with that success remain unclear. One panelist suggested that the effectiveness of a network is size-dependent, and that a network of 15-25 schools is optimal to support schools efficiently without losing the individual attention required by each school.

Implications for Research: Questions remain about how network support helps schools create conditions for success. How should we understand and evaluate the role of external supports in enhancing the capacity of individual schools to deliver high-quality education? How are networks important to the critical decisions schools are facing? To what extent do principals choose their own network or partners? How does network support translate into the everyday work of schools?

The impact of student composition on accountability and the breadth and depth of student performance measures

An important feature of the portfolio strategy is increased accountability. Schools are now evaluated on a number of different measures and with a variety of tools including Quality Reviews, NYC Learning Environment Surveys, and Progress Reports. The portfolio strategy also involves identifying and intervening with chronically low performing schools using one of several school turnaround strategies. These strategies include phasing out the underperforming school and reconstituting it by replacing the school's leader and up to half of its teaching staff.

Principal panelists raised concerns about the high stakes of these accountability standards, especially given the relationship between school performance and student composition. Principals argued that the high performance of some schools could be explained by selective admission policies, while the low performance of others could be explained by a concentration of high-needs students. Panelists discussed the possibility of creating more

² To ensure maximal information and perspective sharing, the Research Alliance agreed to maintain the anonymity of the sources of comments and perspectives provided during the colloquium

targeted incentives for schools to serve high-need students, thereby helping to mitigate the system-wide disparities. One participant said, “We need to get principals to demand the right to serve low-functioning students.” There was also a great deal of interest in expanding accountability measures beyond test scores and graduation rates to include post-secondary metrics that would capture college and career readiness. Other proposed measures of school performance included tracking the academic progress of over-aged, under-credited students, ELL students, special education students, and students classified as both ELL and special ed.

Implications for Research: Examining these issues may require that researchers look at the performance of certain student groups across the system in addition to their performance in individual schools. If high-needs students are concentrated in certain schools or community districts, are current metrics adequate to capture the inherent challenges these schools face? How can this group be more equitably distributed and better served across the system? What is the impact of selective admissions policies and what are the implications of student attrition in certain schools? How can the peer index be strengthened to capture whether peer schools are really comparable in terms of their student enrollment?

The costs and benefits of closing high schools for students, staff, and communities

The model for the DOE’s proposed turnaround process was developed and refined between 2003 and 2009 when 33 schools were either closed or scheduled for closure by the DOE. DOE primarily closed high schools that were located in poor neighborhoods and had graduation rates that were lower than 45 percent. For the most part, large underperforming high schools were closed through a gradual “phasing-out” process, in which schools graduated existing cohorts of students but did not enroll new cohorts of ninth grade students.

Colloquium participants raised questions about the specific criteria are used to identify schools for closure, the costs and effectiveness of closure, and the process of identifying the appropriate type of school or schools that replace the closing school. A more comprehensive closure plan might also consider what communities have at stake in their local schools outside of students’ academic growth in terms of health, safety, shelter, and a supportive community. While rigorous evidence is now available about the impact of the new small schools that have been created over the past eight years, little is known about the impact of closing the large comprehensive high schools they replaced.

Implications for Research: Research on high school closure would examine its impact on student achievement, the students’ experiences in both their pre- and post-closure school environments, and the potential costs and benefits of closing a high school. What criteria are used to identify schools for closure? What is the impact of closing a high school on students enrolled at the time the school is targeted for closure? What is the impact of closing a high school on students who would have been likely to enroll in the school had it remained open? What is the impact of closing a high school on teachers and local communities?

Factors that account for the success of new small schools

Since 2002, the DOE has opened over 200 smaller schools. New small schools developed gradually by enrolling an additional cohort of students each year. These new small schools frequently occupy a floor or wing in an old, large high school.

Researchers from both NYC and Chicago presented evidence on the success of new small schools. Evidence from a rigorous evaluation of New York City's small schools of choice (SSCs) showed that these new schools produce sizable improvements in students' performance and progress toward graduation. These strong effects and the implementation challenges highlighted by both the NYC and Chicago experiences calls for a deeper exploration of small schools and further exploration of the specific elements that contribute to their success. There was a collective call to "break apart the SSC package" by identifying which small schools have an impact and why. Participants proposed several specific features of small schools to study, including theme, types of support, leadership philosophy, and staff recruitment and training.

Implications for Research: What specific practices contribute to the success of small schools? What role does an effective learning environment play in the effectiveness of a school? Can differences in the estimated impacts of SSCs on student outcomes be accounted for by varying histories and operational approaches? In what ways does the operation of highly effective small schools differ from that of less effective small schools and large comprehensive high schools?

Wrap up

By bringing together leaders in education research, advocacy, policy and practice, the Research Alliance created a forum to explore what researchers currently know and do not know about high school reform and about portfolio strategies in particular. Further, we hoped to begin to design a collective research agenda that can help inform the next phase of the DOE's high school reform efforts. The high school research colloquium provided an opportunity to do both by challenging various stakeholders to raise key questions that could be explored empirically. The topics explored and research questions proposed here speak to our collective interests in serving New York City schools and students more effectively and equitably.

About

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools

Mission

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools is a non-partisan research center that is committed to conducting, supporting, and disseminating rigorous research for and about New York City Schools. Our research and dissemination activities aim to support the search for effective school improvement strategies and to build capacity in schools to implement those strategies so that all young people have access to a high quality education.

Governance Board

William G. Bowen, Co-Chair

President Emeritus, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

Kathryn S. Wylde, Co-Chair

President & Chief Executive Officer, Partnership for New York City

Luis Garden Acosta

Founder/President & Chief Executive Officer, El Puente

Mickey O. Levy

Chief Economist, Bank of America

Chung-Wha Hong

Executive Director, The New York Immigration Coalition

Ernest Logan

President, Council of School Supervisors and Administrators

Robert L. Hughes

President, New Visions for Public Schools

David W. McLaughlin, *ex-officio* member

Provost, New York University

Augusta Kappner

President Emeritus, Bank Street College of Education

Michael Mulgrew

President, United Federation of Teachers

Joel Klein, *ex-officio* member

Chancellor, New York City Department of Education

Executive Director

James J. Kemple
New York University



Steinhardt School of
Culture, Education, and Human Development

285 Mercer Street, 3rd Floor
New York, New York 10003-9502
(212)992-7697
research.alliance@nyu.edu
www.steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance