



The **Research Alliance** for
New York City Schools



NOT FOR CITATION OR DISTRIBUTION

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

Sponsored by:

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools, New York University
and

The Future of Children Journal and the Education Research Section at Princeton University

Overview¹

This colloquium has its roots in the commitment of the Research Alliance for New York City Schools to conducting rigorous research that helps inform the development, implementation and evaluation of the New York City Department of Education’s (DOE) efforts to provide all students with a quality high school education. Currently, the DOE is preparing to begin its next phase of its high school “portfolio strategy” to improve student performance in the lowest performing high schools. Given the breadth of the proposed portfolio reforms, and the intended scale of their implementation, it is imperative that stakeholders convene to discuss how to best help the DOE evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of the portfolio strategy. This is the central objective of the colloquium: to draw on the expertise of practitioners, researchers and policymakers to inform the research that we will collectively produce related to these imminent reforms. To facilitate these conversations, we present a brief overview of the recent history of New York City portfolio reforms, introduce a conceptual framework of the portfolio approach to high school reform, and identify a few potential research topics and questions related to the strategy’s objectives. In doing so, we hope to begin the colloquium with a common conceptual orientation to the portfolio strategy and to prompt participants to consider the role that they and we, the Research Alliance, might play in providing the DOE with constructive feedback about the implementation and effectiveness of these reforms.

Background: NYC High School Reforms During the Children First Era

Over the past eight years, with support from private foundations, the federal government, and state and local resources, the DOE has made substantial investments in improving the quality of its high schools. Over this time period, the DOE has employed numerous strategies for improving high school performance, including: phasing out persistently low-achieving, large comprehensive high schools and replacing them with smaller schools; creating a choice-based high school application and student assignment process; opening multiple pathways to graduation and post-secondary professional opportunities; enhancing graduation requirements; providing schools with increased autonomy over decisions regarding their budgets and sources of support; and employing a wide range of intermediary organizations to guide high school creation and improvement efforts.

These reforms have reshaped the landscape of NYC high schools. In the 2008-09 school year, there were approximately 425 schools serving high school students in 32 districts and five boroughs (See Table 1). This is in contrast to the mere 224 schools that existed in 2002.² The DOE closed over 20 large underperforming high schools and opened over 200 smaller schools

¹ This paper provides background for the Research Alliance for New York City Schools’ Colloquium *Learning from New York City’s Portfolio Strategy: How policy and practice can inform research*. As such, the paper reflects the Research Alliance interpretation of recent and current policy of the New York City Department of Education (DOE). This paper is neither endorsed by the DOE nor should it be interpreted as an official account of DOE policies and frameworks.

² Based on a Research Alliance calculation using JForm data from the DOE, <http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/data/stats/Register/default.htm>.

since 2002. The 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 under-performing high schools were closed through a gradual “phasing-out” process, in which schools graduated existing cohorts of students but did not enroll new, entering cohorts of ninth grade students. New small schools, which the DOE was opening simultaneously, developed gradually by enrolling an additional cohort of students each year. These new small schools frequently occupied a floor or wing in an old, large high school. During this same period, the DOE created a number of high schools and high school-based programs to address the needs of over-aged and under-credited students, many of whom may have otherwise dropped out. These schools and programs, commonly referred to as multiple pathways, included transfer schools, Young Adult Borough Centers (YABCs) and GED programs. By design, transfer schools are small, academically rigorous, full-time high schools designed to re-engage students who are off-track or have dropped out of traditional NYC high schools. In order to attend a transfer school, students must have been previously enrolled in an NYC public high school for at least one year and have amassed too few credits to qualify for grade-level promotion; students typically enter transfer schools at age 16 to 17 with fewer than 10 credits.

By comparison, YABCs are intended to be small, community-based programs that offer evening academic programs to students who have been in high school for at least four years and have attained a minimum of 17 credits. YABCs are designed to meet the needs of high school students whose adult responsibilities make it difficult for them to attend school during the day. Finally, GED programs limit enrollment to students who are 18-years-old or older, with exceptions granted on a case-by-case basis. These programs are designed to help students attain their GED and to prepare them for successful post-secondary education. There is some evidence that these reforms, in combination with those implemented across NYC elementary and middle schools, have begun to pay off:

- After remaining nearly flat for well over a decade, NYC’s graduation rates have increased by 12.5 percentage points, from 46.5 percent for the class of 2005 to 59 percent for the class of 2009.
- Including students who finished their requirements in the summer of 2009, the 2009 graduation rate is at an all time high of 63 percent.
- In 2009, more students met the stringent criteria for a Regents diploma, which requires higher scores on the State end-of-course exams. Specifically, 44.6 percent of the class of 2009 earned a Regent’s or Advanced Regent’s diploma, compared with 30 percent of the class of 2005.³

At the same time, however, graduation rates for other urban districts in New York State have also been rising, suggesting that some of the improvement in the City’s graduation rates is likely

³ Based on the New York State method for the calculation of the graduation rate. According to the NYCDOE, NY State defines graduates as those students earning either a Local or Regents diploma. These figures exclude those earning either a special education (IEP) diploma or GED, which are included in the city’s traditional calculation (see Tables 2 and 3).

See: http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/Reports/Data/Graduation/GRAD_RATES_2009_HIGHLIGHTS.pdf.

to be an artifact of other federal or state policies and reforms. In a recent study, Kemple (forthcoming) attempted to account for these and other external factors in order to isolate the effect of reforms that were specific to NYC during the Children First era (2003-2010). This analysis yields evidence that Children First reforms did produce improvements in graduation rates. Graduation rates for NYC outpaced those of the estimated counterfactual; however, the difference in graduation rates was statistically significant only for the class of 2009 (a seven percentage point difference). See Tables 2 and 3 for more information about graduation rates in New York City over the past several years.

A number of recent studies (e.g. Fancsali et al., 2010 and Foley, 2010) examine specific NYC high school reform initiatives, such as creating new small schools or providing new opportunities for training school leaders. In their study of the impact of the NYC small schools of choice (SSC), Bloom, Thompson, and Unterman (2010) found significant positive effects on four measures: the two components of the ninth grade on-track indicator (whether students earned 10 or more credits and whether they failed more than one semester of a core subject), total credits earned towards graduation, and regular attendance rate (90 percent or higher). The findings from this study indicated that, by the end of the first year, target SSC enrollees had earned an average of 11.3 credits, compared to the 10.4 credits earned by their control group counterparts. Fourth-year findings indicated that SSCs increase overall graduation rates by 6.8 percentage points, from 61.9 percent for control-group counterparts to 68.7 percent for target SSC enrollees.

The reform efforts that brought about these changes do not, at least from the outside, seem to have been implemented as part of a cohesive strategy. Rather, it appears that a combination of public monies and support from external partners were directed at a range of loosely connected programs aimed at helping NYC high school students who were at risk of academic failure. The DOE intends for its next phase of portfolio reform to be built on a more coherent and efficient strategy, which will incorporate and build upon many of the core interventions and supports that have been developed over the past eight years. Thus, researchers will have a unique opportunity to study the implementation and effectiveness of the strategy over the next five years.

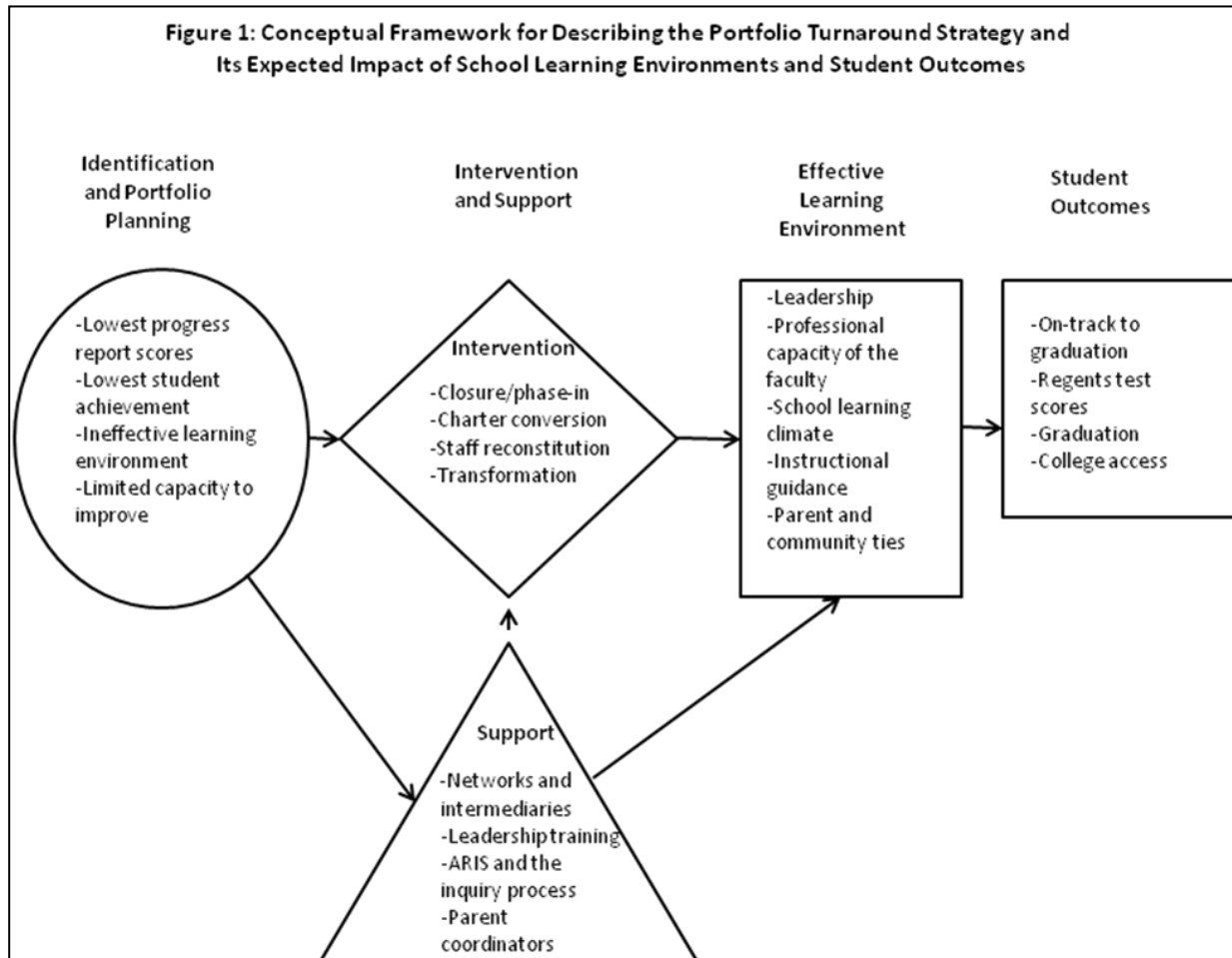
At the advent of implementing the next phase of its high school reforms, the DOE faces both opportunities and challenges. The DOE has the political and financial support of the federal government and of other urban educators committed to pursuing similar reform efforts (Hill et al., 2009). However, the DOE faces a much more challenging economic context, which could place limitations on upcoming reforms. Private funding is not as readily available as it was in the past, and the enactment of new state and local laws regulating high school closure – which call for greater public engagement in the process – makes it more difficult to close failing high schools. These circumstances prompted Hill and his co-authors to wonder, “Can portfolio implementation be sustained after the events that originally precipitated the reform have long passed and the originators...leave the scene?” (Hill et al. 2009, p41).

The Portfolio Strategy

The DOE's portfolio strategy attempts to *identify* the City's lowest performing schools, *intervene* with different school turnaround strategies, and then *support* these interventions with a wide range of external and internal partnerships and resources. The ultimate goal of the portfolio strategy is to improve critical outcomes for the City's high school students. Since 2002 the graduation rate has increased on average about 2 percentage points a year. If the reforms continue to be successful, then the graduation rate for the class of 2015 would be nearly 75 percent, a considerable goal for any urban school district in the United States.

Implicit in the portfolio strategy's overarching goal is the assumption that improvements in various aspects of under-performing high school's learning environments will have direct, beneficial effects on important student outcomes. For the purposes of our discussion in the colloquium, we frame the central goal of the portfolio turnaround strategy as building the capacity to improve school learning environments.

Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework that attempts to capture the core elements of the portfolio strategy. While the figure is a simplification of the portfolio strategy, we present it here as a heuristic for understanding the portfolio's components and processes and, more importantly, to highlight key areas for potential research, which we will discuss during the colloquium. We should note that this model, like the DOE's portfolio strategy in general, is similar to reform efforts in other urban districts, such as Chicago, New Orleans and Philadelphia.



The process of identifying chronically low performing schools involves an examination of achievement patterns and the quality of various aspects of the learning environment over time. The DOE is currently developing the means for identifying persistently low-performing schools. During the next stage of the process, the DOE will attempt to determine what type of intervention strategy is best suited for each school and community. The anticipated intervention strategies include the following: phasing out the under-performing school and phasing in a new one in its place; transforming the school, which might involve hiring additional instructional supports, such as master teachers; reconstitution, which involves the more drastic step of replacing the school's leader and up to half of its teaching staff; and charter reconstitution, which involves the conversion of the failing school into a charter school with a new principal and teaching staff. The processes of identification and intervention will continue to be buttressed by a system of supports, including internal networks and external intermediaries, access to leadership training programs, implementing school inquiry teams to support instruction through analyzing student performance data, and systems to enhance parent and community ties to the school.

This model does not address the wider political and institutional context in which this large-scale, urban school reform effort will take place. The portfolio strategy presents a number of potential political challenges, from increasing the privatization of education and allied services to the growing role of school choice and its potential to disrupt ties between schools and local communities. In addition, the strategy presents a number of system-wide institutional challenges for the DOE, such as the need to create new roles for district central offices in managing school reform. All of these issues are important and should be documented and studied throughout the implementation of the portfolio strategy. However, in keeping with the Research Alliance's mission to use rigorous methods to conduct applied research, our intention is to focus our efforts on investigating topics that best lend themselves to empirical analyses.

Building Evidence to Inform Policy and Practice

Over the next five years, the Research Alliance proposes to undertake a series of studies aimed at understanding the challenges of implementing the portfolio strategy and evaluating its effectiveness at improving graduation rates and preparing students for post-secondary education and work.

We anticipate that the following questions will be at the center of these inquiries:

- What process does the DOE use to identify the persistently under-performing schools that will be subject to the various portfolio intervention strategies?
- How is the best intervention strategy determined for a given school? How are the needs of the community the school serves assessed during the identification process? How is the process of identification matched with the intervention strategy – are the chosen interventions intended to address the deficits evident in the schools they are replacing/turning around?

- How does the DOE match the needs of the school/community with particular supports?
- How do different interventions vary in their impact on schools' learning environments? To what extent do interventions affect what the Consortium on Chicago School Research refers to as the five "Essential Supports": school leadership, parent-community-school ties, professional capacity, student-centered learning climate and instructional guidance?
- How sustainable are portfolio turnaround strategies? What are the start-up and steady-state costs associated with each turnaround intervention?

Conclusion: Next Steps

By bringing together leaders in education research, advocacy, policy and practice for the *Learning from New York City's portfolio reform strategy* colloquium, the Research Alliance aims to provide an opportunity to explore what we currently do and do not know about high school reform. Further, we hope to begin to define a collective research agenda that can help inform the next phase of the DOE's high school reform efforts. More specifically, during this colloquium, we hope to accomplish the following goals:

1. Better understand implementation of DOE portfolio reforms and assess ways to measure their effectiveness.
2. Build an interconnected, citywide network of researchers, policymakers and advocacy workers that will help inform our research agenda in the area of high schools and preparation for post-secondary education and work.
3. Develop partnerships with researchers committed to applied research using rigorous methods that help inform practice.

To address these questions and goals, we have invited approximately 50 researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders to discuss the issue of high school reform in three panel sessions. In the first panel, presenters will discuss the past, present and future of the portfolio strategy in NYC and other urban districts across the country. The second panel will examine current research on high school reform, with a particular focus on a single aspect of the portfolio strategy – the impact of new small high schools. This panel will also attempt to identify gaps in the existing research where we and others can make contributions to the knowledge base. Through the views of school leaders, the third panel will give us a sense of how the portfolio strategy has played out at the ground level thus far, key challenges school leaders continue to face, and the areas where additional support may be needed.

Appendix

Table 1

Changes in the Number of Schools Serving Students in High School Grades Over Time

School Type by Grade Span	School Year							
	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09
Grades 9-12	191	218	254	290	307	312	324	348
Grades 6-12	32	30	30	54	65	65	68	75
Grades K-12	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	2
District 79^a	26	25	22	16	5	13	5	7
Total Schools	224	249	285	346	373	379	394	425

Research Alliance for New York City Schools

Source: Enrollment information is based on the Research Alliance for New York City Schools calculations, using school level enrollment data retrieved from New York City Department of Education(DOE) J-form enrollment file (Downloaded in 2009). <http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/data/stats/Register/default.htm>.

Notes: ^a District 79 schools on this table are Alternative schools with high school grades

Research Alliance for New York City Schools

Table 2

Enrollment and Graduation Patterns for Students in High School Grades
Average Enrollment by School Type

School Type by Grade Span	School Year							
	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09
Grades 9-12	1,413	1,256	1,136	1,007	958	926	885	809
Grade 9	490	439	392	345	313	286	263	230
Grade 10	408	356	325	278	269	259	242	217
Grade 11	228	206	184	173	164	167	165	157
Grade 12	197	177	163	148	148	148	149	142
Grades 6-12	847	817	754	608	582	548	539	536
Grade 9	158	153	139	115	111	107	101	94
Grade 10	33	41	41	63	70	81	84	81
Grade 11	25	31	31	43	44	57	66	63
Grade 12	17	16	19	37	36	41	51	56
Grades K-12	1,166	1,187	1,205	921	1,233	1,060	1,168	1,303
Grade 9	105	116	112	94	121	80	134	155
Grade 10	110	111	107	85	113	85	82	130
Grade 11	101	98	97	56	104	86	82	80
Grade 12	94	85	88	52	101	78	79	80
District 79^a	314	310	297	356	812	477	422	208
Grade 9	34	29	37	24	25	35	50	24
Grade 10	168	157	130	69	161	67	88	48
Grade 11	27	32	32	46	223	60	6	3
Grade 12	6	9	7	2	0	2	4	2
Total Schools	224	249	285	346	373	379	394	425

Source: Enrollment information is based on the Research Alliance for New York City Schools calculations, using school level enrollment data retrieved from New York City Department of Education(DOE) J-form enrollment file (Downloaded in 2009). <http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/data/stats/Register/default.htm>.

Notes: ^a District 79 schools on this table are Alternative schools with high school grades

Research Alliance for New York City Schools

Table 3

Enrollment and Graduation Patterns for Students in High School Grades
Total Enrollment by School Type

School Type by Grade Span	School Year							
	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09
Grades 9-12	269,806	273,913	288,427	292,069	289,223	289,018	286,641	281,369
Grade 9	93,551	95,769	99,539	99,937	94,546	89,353	85,352	80,030
Grade 10	78,011	77,513	82,493	80,641	81,211	80,776	78,516	75,542
Grade 11	43,473	44,988	46,849	50,273	49,403	52,270	53,355	54,725
Grade 12	37,681	38,543	41,466	42,780	44,787	46,207	48,298	49,351
Grades 6-12	27,103	24,520	22,631	32,854	37,816	35,605	36,657	40,219
Grade 9	5,045	4,578	4,174	6,205	7,241	6,934	6,892	7,014
Grade 10	1,045	1,223	1,240	3,427	4,568	5,241	5,686	6,043
Grade 11	789	922	916	2,296	2,858	3,729	4,484	4,750
Grade 12	536	494	577	2,023	2,364	2,673	3,484	4,164
Grades K-12	1,166	1,187	1,205	1,842	1,233	2,120	2,335	2,606
Grade 9	105	116	112	187	121	160	267	310
Grade 10	110	111	107	169	113	170	163	260
Grade 11	101	98	97	111	104	171	164	160
Grade 12	94	85	88	104	101	155	157	160
District 79^a	8,159	7,747	6,537	5,698	4,058	6,202	2,110	1,454
Grade 9	895	726	822	387	123	455	249	169
Grade 10	4,362	3,916	2,858	1,098	807	871	438	335
Grade 11	696	790	709	734	1,113	786	31	24
Grade 12	145	236	145	29	1	25	21	14
Total Schools	224	249	285	346	373	379	394	425

Source: Enrollment information is based on the Research Alliance for New York City Schools calculations, using school level enrollment data retrieved from New York City Department of Education(DOE) J-form enrollment file (Downloaded in 2009). <http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/data/stats/Register/default.htm>.

***Notes:** ^a District 79 schools on this table are Alternative schools with high school grades

References

- Bloom, H. S., Thompson, S. L., & Unterman, R. (2010). *Transforming the high school experience: How New York City's new small schools are boosting student achievement and graduation rates* New York: MDRC.
- Fancsali, C., Jaffe-Walter, R., Mitchell-McKnight, V., Nevarez, N., Orellana, E., & Rose, L. W. (2010). *Small high schools at work: A case study of six Gates-funded schools in New York City* New York: Academy for Educational Development Center for Schools and Community Services.
- Foley, E. (2010). *Approaches of Bill & Melinda Gates foundation-funded intermediary organizations to structuring and supporting small high schools in New York City* Washington, D.C.: Policy Studies Associates, Inc.
- Hill, P., Campbell, C., Menefee-Libey, D., Dusseault, B., DeArmond, M., & Gross, B. (2009). *Portfolio school districts for big cities: An interim report* Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education.
- Kemple, J. J. (Forthcoming). Children first and student outcomes: 2003-2010. In J. O'Day (Ed.), *The New York City reform retrospective*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.