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# Between Public and Private

Politics, Governance,  
and the New Portfolio Models  
for Urban School Reform

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## Where's the Management in Portfolio Management?

*Conceptualizing the Role of Urban School  
District Central Offices in Implementation*

*Meredith I. Honig and Michael DeArmond*

Portfolio management reforms aim to strengthen urban schools district-wide in part by fundamentally changing how school district central offices participate in school improvement. For the better part of the twentieth century, for example, urban school district central offices have treated schools as relatively permanent investments, primarily maintaining and otherwise working with the schools they had and not opening and closing schools to help leverage school improvement. Portfolio management reforms by contrast call on school district central offices to oversee and support a dynamic system of schools—helping schools build their capacity for improvement, closing those that underperform, and opening new ones in their place. School improvement approaches for decades have involved the participation of external support providers in reform processes but mainly in marginal ways; under portfolio management reforms, school district central offices are to proactively encourage outside organizations

not only to provide support for schools, but also to operate entire schools and networks of schools.

Educational research suggests the potential of these reforms mainly by negative example—instances in which school districts' central offices have not operated in the ways portfolio management reforms demand. Such results have been so common that some reformers have begun to question whether or not district central offices *should* play central roles in educational improvement efforts and to suggest that educational systems might better realize the goals of portfolio management reforms by intentionally limiting central office participation.

This chapter starts from a fundamentally different assumption, motivated in part by the designs of many portfolio management initiatives: namely, educational systems that are serious about taking a portfolio management approach must engage their central offices in their ongoing implementation. After all, research and experience have shown that school improvement under various reform banners typically does not penetrate more than a subset of district schools absent support from school district central offices for broader implementation.<sup>1</sup> The promotion of differentiated schools through other policy mechanisms has depended substantially on staff throughout central offices changing various central office policies and practices to enable schools to deviate from standard operating procedures.<sup>2</sup> Such policies and practices are nearly impossible to predict a priori and typically involve the launching of schools by local leaders and central office administrators mining schools' experience to identify policy and practice changes that might enable implementation.<sup>3</sup> Many portfolio management reform designs seem to reflect these important roles for central offices and call on them to engage in particular activities as part of implementation, as described later.

Ultimately, time will tell whether or not district central offices are up to the demands of portfolio management reforms. In the meantime, given past experience, reformers, researchers, and others might do well to clarify what more specifically portfolio management reforms demand of central offices and what it might look like if central offices were taking on those demands. This chapter addresses these issues central to the implementation of portfolio management reforms. We examine: What specific demands do portfolio management reforms place on school district central offices? What do central offices in urban school districts do when they

do participate in implementation in the ways the reform designs intend? What conditions help or hinder them in the process? What are the implications for education policy and practice?

Given the limited research base on the implementation of portfolio management initiatives, we addressed these questions using research on the design of these initiatives, as elaborated in the case chapters, and research on the participation of school district central offices in other reform strategies with similar design features as those of portfolio management reforms.

Our review of research on the design of portfolio management initiatives suggests that portfolio management places three key demands on district central offices: first, these initiatives ask central offices to engage in capacity-building partnerships with groups inside and outside of the district focused on improving performance and expanding high-quality schooling options; second, they ask central offices to use evidence of school performance to support improvement efforts and to hold schools accountable for performance; and third, they ask central offices to manage the strategic closure of schools with chronic performance problems. Our review of the broader literature on district central offices suggests that meeting these three demands will likely require substantial changes. In particular, we argue that meeting these demands will require central offices in many urban school districts to fundamentally change their day-to-day work practices, especially the ways in which they interact with schools and outside organizations. Given the deep and broad scope of these changes, portfolio management reforms are likely to struggle with implementation if central offices relegate responsibility for these initiatives to a single office or set of staff and do not create formal and informal systems throughout the central office to support implementation. We describe these changes and derive selected implications for the research and practice of portfolio management reforms.

#### **DEMANDS ON SCHOOL DISTRICT CENTRAL OFFICES AND EXPERIENCE TO DATE**

As the other chapters in this volume suggest, the designs of portfolio management reforms vary across the country and call for numerous changes at the school level. However, the early initiatives place three common demands

on school district central offices to support implementation. Unless central offices meet these demands—either with their own staff or through strategic partnerships with outside organizations—portfolio management reforms are unlikely to be fully implemented, let alone successful in meeting school improvement goals.

For one, these initiatives call on school district central offices to cultivate relationships with schools and outside groups to support the creation of high-quality and differentiated schools districtwide. Unlike some school-choice initiatives of previous decades (e.g., charter schools and vouchers), portfolio management initiatives do not rely solely or even mainly on the market or student/family demand to drive change. Instead, these initiatives seem to proceed from the assumption that school district central offices have key leadership roles to play in strategically shaping school supply—in helping schools and outside school providers build their capacity for designing and implementing high-quality school options in their districts. We call these relationships “performance partnerships” to emphasize their focus on central offices working to support schools and outside agencies in building their capacity for producing demonstrable improvements in school performance rather than, for example, traditional top-down regulatory relationships that emphasize unilateral monitoring of procedural compliance.

For instance, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) New Schools Office identifies as one of its main goals the creation and support of

quality schools through a comprehensive approach that recruits high-quality school operators, evaluates school proposals through a rigorous request for proposals (RFP), supports approved schools through planning, incubation, school opening, and school operation, and ensures accountability through regular monitoring of multiple measures of success.<sup>4</sup>

In the School District of Philadelphia, the district’s Imagine 2014 strategic plan calls on the central office to “train, provide resources, and support the district’s highest performing schools to operate more autonomously from the District and/or to replicate their work as successful school choice models.”<sup>5</sup> In New Orleans, early proposals for the post-Katrina recovery also describe a model in which the “various entities can operate schools and the central office plays a strategic role—delegating much authority to

schools but retaining system wide consistency in key areas.” (See Levin, chapter 8, this volume.)

Two, central offices must develop, or already have in place, accountability systems to support the new performance management system. Such accountability systems would produce timely data relevant to gauging student learning in a system with approaches to teaching and learning at least somewhat differentiated across schools. For example, in the New York City Department of Education, the Office of Accountability has launched a major initiative to develop and oversee the implementation of four different accountability tools designed to assess school performance and inform support and accountability decisions: progress reports, which assign letter grades to schools based mainly on student test gains; quality reviews, which use on-the-ground observations to produce qualitative assessments of individual school strengths and weaknesses; periodic assessments in math and reading, which aim to inform instruction without formal penalties for poor performance; and the Achievement Reporting and Innovation System (ARIS), which provides various customized reports on student performance trends over time. In addition, under its Children First Intensive program, senior achievement and technology integration facilitators from the department’s Office of Accountability work with external support organizations to provide professional development to schools on how to use these accountability tools to shape improvement efforts.<sup>6</sup>

Third, the designs of portfolio management initiatives assume that central offices will actually close schools that do not meet their performance targets. For example, the original design of CPS’s Renaissance 2010 initiative explicitly, at least initially, called for the closure of low-performing schools. (See Menefee-Libey, chapter 3, this volume.) Similarly, written descriptions of the School District of Philadelphia’s Imagine 2014 plan describe “a system of schools in which great schools are rewarded and replicated and failing schools are closed or transformed.”<sup>7</sup> Philadelphia’s initiative calls on the district to “renew or cancel agreements [e.g., earned-autonomy agreements] or contracts [for charters and contractors] with schools based on performance data. Internal and external turnaround partners must meet District targets annually for three consecutive years to ensure a second contract.”<sup>8</sup> Descriptions of consequences for low-performing New York City Public

Schools similarly specify that “over time, school organizations receiving an overall grade of F are likely to be closed.”<sup>9</sup>

What does research teach about the experience of central offices in meeting such demands? The emerging literature on portfolio management reforms mainly consists of descriptive case studies, such as those in this volume, and some extended analyses, both focused on the design of such initiatives and some information about early implementation dynamics. These pieces tend to identify key formal structures within school district central offices and formal agreements with outside groups as essential to central offices implementing portfolio management reforms.<sup>10</sup> For example, Hill and his colleagues suggest that central offices create new units to manage relationships with schools and outside organizations involved with their portfolios, revise employment contracts for teachers, create innovative school facilities agreements (for example, leasing commercial space to house schools), and invest in longitudinal data systems that can measure school and student performance gains. The case studies in this volume describe districts that have put in place many of these ideas. As Bulkley, Christman, and Gold (chapter 5 in this volume) describe, Philadelphia has recently created an Office of Charter, Partnership and New Schools to expand and support school-choice options in the district. In CPS, the New Schools Office plays a similar role.<sup>11</sup> In the New York City Department of Education, the chancellor created an Office of Portfolio Planning to assess the need for new schools in various communities, to work with potential school providers to develop new school plans, and to oversee the district’s new school proposal process.

The case study accounts also show that districts are making significant investments in information technology to help generate and manage student performance data. For instance, Bulkley, Christman, and Gold (chapter 5 in this volume) describe how Philadelphia invested in the SchoolNet information system to manage student performance data, making it accessible not only to educators but also to families in the system. More recently, SchoolNet has also become a repository for resources on instruction and curriculum. Other examples include New York City’s ARIS system and Chicago’s recent initiatives to ensure the integrity of its various data systems.<sup>12</sup>

To enhance capacity for new schools and better enable school closures, some of the case districts are beginning to revise the formal policies and

procedures governing human resources to enable teachers to flow into and out of schools based on local needs, including the need to close certain buildings, rather than seniority preference and job guarantees. For instance, in 2005, New York City Public Schools renegotiated its teachers’ contract to: (1) allow schools to hire teachers regardless of seniority; (2) end the “bumping” process in which a more senior teacher could unilaterally claim a more junior teacher’s position; and (3) require “excessed” teachers (those who lost their positions for a variety of reasons, including enrollment declines or school closures) to apply for vacancies instead of being assigned to them.<sup>13</sup> New York is also aggressively using alternative certification programs such as Teach For America and its own Teaching Fellows program to bring new types of teachers into the system.<sup>14</sup> Through such changes, the school district central office aims to facilitate the relatively flexible hiring and firing and strategic deployment of teachers that portfolio management systems seem to demand.

The development of these formal structures—new offices, technologies, and policies—makes sense as key supports for the implementation of portfolio management systems. After all, portfolio management places demands on central offices that their formal infrastructures were not necessarily set up to handle. For instance, educational research across disciplines has long recounted how inefficient technologies and standard operating procedures within the human resource units of central offices, buttressed by teacher union contracts, can lead to long delays in hiring and firing teachers and otherwise hamper dynamic school openings and closures.<sup>15</sup> District data systems notoriously fail to produce timely relevant student performance data of the kind that portfolio reforms call for.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, many central offices interested in pursuing these reforms likely must make substantial investments in developing new data systems that can capture various levels of student, teacher, and school performance to help target supports and consequences at different levels.

At the same time, broader research on central office participation in ambitious change strategies suggests that while changes to these and other formal office structures are important, they alone are insufficient for enabling implementation. As Spillane and Honig have shown over a series of studies and policy cases, whether or not school district central offices participate productively in the implementation of education improvement

efforts depends substantially on what organizational sociologists call the *informal* structures within organizations like central offices—how central office administrators understand their work and policy demands, what they do day-to-day, and how they relate to schools.<sup>17</sup> These informal central office structures include, for example, how people within central office interact with and actually use the new offices and units, technologies, standard-operating procedures, and other new formal structures in ways that may be more or less consistent with policy goals. The importance of informal structures to implementation raises questions for portfolio management districts not simply about whether they have created central office subunits focused on implementation, but about what people within those offices actually do in practice to seed and support the creation of new, high-quality, and differentiated schools. Analyses of portfolio management reforms thus far have shed little light on these human dimensions of central office participation in implementation. Accordingly, we focus the rest of the chapter on the human dimension of reform in the central office.

#### **INFORMAL CENTRAL OFFICE STRUCTURES TO SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION OF PORTFOLIO MANAGEMENT**

To illuminate these human dimensions of central office participation in implementation of portfolio management and the importance of developing an empirical base on these dimensions, we reviewed literature on school district central offices that addresses what central office administrators do when they participate in reforms with demands at least partially similar to those of portfolio management reforms. More specifically, we asked: What does research teach about what central office administrators do day-to-day when they relate to schools and external organizations, use evidence to support school accountability, and productively close schools, all in ways consistent with portfolio management reforms? What conditions help or hinder them in engaging in such activities? We focused our review on a small but growing subset of empirical research on school district central offices that specifically reveals individual central office administrators' work practices and activities, as opposed to, for example, formal central office structures or broad overall district policy decisions.

In the sections that follow, we argue that when central office administrators engage in the demands associated with portfolio management, they participate in specific types of ongoing activities aimed at shaping the flow and substance of information and relationships between the central office and groups inside and outside the district. The administrators' productive participation in these activities seems to hinge on the availability of new formal structures and also on other kinds of social and institutional supports for their engagement in new, nontraditional roles and routines.

#### **New Performance Partnerships with Schools**

The research on school districts is replete with instances of central offices engaged in top-down regulatory relationships with schools, even under reforms that are ostensibly based on empowering schools.<sup>18</sup> However, a handful of studies reveal what central office administrators do when they engage in supportive, capacity-building partnerships with schools similar to the performance partnerships encouraged in the designs of portfolio management reforms.<sup>19</sup> These studies are beginning to show that such relationships depend not only on the creation of a new unit within the central office but on how specific, dedicated administrators work between the central office and schools to facilitate new roles and relationships between the two that support implementation. These individuals are sometimes called "boundary spanners" or "boundary crossers."<sup>20</sup>

Honig identified specific activities involved when central office administrators work as boundary spanners to help schools build their capacity for designing and implementing their own approaches to teaching and learning improvement, including designing new, small, autonomous schools.<sup>21</sup> First, boundary spanners enable implementation of such reforms when they bridge or link their central office and schools together in particular ways. Boundary spanners do this by engaging with other central office administrators to examine information from school sites to help spark and guide the development of policies and practices supportive of school designs and implementation. Such bridging work involves both searching for information about school goals and experiences and also translating that information for the central office to help inform district policies and practices.<sup>22</sup>

Bridging activities seem particularly important in the context of portfolio management, where a system of diverse, high-quality schools may conflict with current policies and practices and require central office administrators to facilitate myriad policy and practices to support the design and implementation of new, diverse schools. This finding also reinforces that productive development of policies and practices to support diverse, high-quality schools may involve some a priori policy and practice development. However, particularly given the diverse range of schools that districts intend to include in their portfolio, central office administrators will be unable to predict in advance the various policy and practice changes that those schools might need to grow and thrive.<sup>23</sup> In such complex environments, central office administrators must continuously learn about what is and is not working at particular schools and use that knowledge from experience to inform central office supports.<sup>24</sup>

Second, Honig found that boundary spanners' bridging activities help enable implementation when they help build central office administrators' knowledge and relationships with participating schools that promise to facilitate the future development of policies and practices supportive of implementation.<sup>25</sup> After all, the authority and resources necessary to implement a reform as complex as portfolio management rest not with one or two central office units, but instead, the necessary authority and resources are spread among various administrators throughout a central office. Engagement of these additional administrators in developing policies and practices supportive of implementation may hinge substantially on the extent to which they understand what portfolio management reforms demand and the implications for their own units. Such engagement may also depend on the extent to which these other administrators have relationships with individual schools and the boundary-spanning administrators that facilitate the trust often necessary to prompt coordinated action throughout complex organizations.

Third, boundary spanners' bridging activities may also enable implementation when the spanners communicate central office requirements to participating schools.<sup>26</sup> Such activities may be particularly essential in the case of portfolio management initiatives that aim in part to open up opportunities to design and run schools for people and organizations without traditional school system experience. As Honig found in the context

of new autonomous schools initiatives, the principals of some of these new nontraditional schools may not yet have essential knowledge of federal, state, and district policies fundamental to appropriate uses of public funds, even in a context that aims to prompt innovation. Boundary spanners may serve as main conduits of such information.

Boundary spanners also enable implementation by buffering or strategically limiting contact between central offices and participating schools. Buffering activities include working in coaching assistance relationships with schools to help build their capacity for high performance and thereby avoid central office intervention. Such activities also involve essentially vouching or covering for schools when they deviate from standard operation procedures or dip in their performance but otherwise seem to be on a trajectory toward improvement. In these ways, boundary spanners help create a space for schools, free of some outside interference, to enable implementation and, in some cases, innovation.<sup>27</sup> Such activities, too, seem particularly relevant to portfolio management reforms. As noted earlier, designs of these reforms seem to reflect the recognition that if central offices expect such reforms to help generate high-quality school options, central office administrators may need to engage with participating schools in hands-on assistance relationships to help build their capacity for results. Likewise, especially early in implementation when central office (as well as federal and state) policies and practices may not yet fully support the portfolio management schools, boundary spanners may enable implementation by standing between participating schools and such outside influences and helping schools pursue promising strategies not necessarily authorized (but also not explicitly prohibited) by such policies and practices.

These boundary-spanning activities are both helped and hindered by various resources and conditions, including the formal organizational structures of school district central offices.<sup>28</sup> For example, central offices tend to hire boundary spanners into new positions and subunits such as those formed to implement the portfolio management reforms. They also tend to hire into those positions and subunits people with little or nontraditional experience in education. Early in his tenure, New York City Chancellor Joel Klein, for example, replaced some of the school system's key management corps with people who had legal and financial backgrounds



rather than experience in schools. More generally, Hill and colleagues note the presence and prevalence of “MBAs, public policy experts, or educators with unconventional backgrounds, for example Teacher for America (TFA) alumni” in portfolio district leadership teams.<sup>30</sup>

By hiring noneducators and nontraditional educators, central office leaders hope to aid implementation by entrusting it mainly to new central office staff who are likely not to be hampered by old, long-standing central office routines that threaten to impede implementation. On the hierarchical margins of the central office, boundary spanners may find freedom for taking risks in their own work essential to enabling implementation. On the flip side, these strategies may also hamper boundary spanners’ participation in implementation. For example, their status as new nontraditional employees in hierarchically marginal positions means they do not necessarily have the positional power to effect some of the changes throughout the central office necessary for implementation and they may lack knowledge of long-standing policies and practices essential for changing them. As new employees in hierarchically marginal positions, they may lack the relationships and networks throughout the central office necessary for effective policy changes supportive of implementation.<sup>31</sup>

Honig’s studies suggest by negative example that boundary spanners might manage this paradox productively and otherwise support implementation if, among other things, they had available to them new models of central office practice consistent with reform demands. She also argues that relying mainly on boundary spanners to spearhead implementation of reforms that require involvement of all central office units is fundamentally limited; their work would be significantly aided by additional intensive efforts on the part of superintendents and other central office leaders to engage the whole office in reforming their work practices and relationships with schools in support of implementation.<sup>32</sup>

### New Performance Partnerships with External Organizations

What does research on school district central offices suggest administrators do when they forge relationships with outside organizations that seem associated with positive school outcomes—or at least with creating conditions theoretically conducive to such outcomes? To address this question, we turned to research on reforms that, like portfolio management, de-

mand that central offices engage in performance partnerships with various kinds of external organizations. This research includes studies that address school district central office engagement with charter schools and private school management organizations as well as nonprofit school reform support providers.

Overall, we find that when central offices engage with such organizations, especially organizations that take on key roles and responsibilities within the district system to support school improvement, central office administrators do not simply write contracts and monitor compliance. Rather, they participate in ongoing negotiations with members of the external organizations about the terms and focus of the relationships, even once formal contracts are in place. The contracts involved in educational improvement initiatives such as portfolio management are likely to be “incomplete contracts,” in part given the difficulty and the impracticality of crafting a contract that details all the activities of the contractor. Studies of contracting in social services more generally highlight that such open-ended contracts are unavoidable when dealing with complex services with multidimensional outcomes.<sup>33</sup> Such contracts are a far cry from the arm’s-length product-exchange relationships implied by some market-based contracting models.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, central office administrators in partnership with members of external organizations likely must continually assess the terms of the partnership and how to grow and change their relationships as implementation advances and conditions change.

Research on school district central offices provides some illustrations of these dynamic human dimensions in how central offices engage in relationships with outside organizations that seem to help them realize their school improvement goals. Supovitz, for example, described an ongoing and evolving partnership between Duval County Public Schools (DCPS) and the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE).<sup>35</sup> He showed how, over the course of four years, central office staff first moved away from purchasing instructional materials from NCEE and attempted to develop those materials in-house but then over time reverted to purchasing the materials from NCEE, though reserving the right to customize those materials at their discretion. Supovitz underscored the continuing and complex nature of these relationships when he observed that “when the thing that is outsourced is a service . . . then the outsourcer [in this

case, the district central office] needs to remain intimately involved because of the on-going nature of the transaction and the need for [it to be] . . . integrated with other resources."<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, central office administrators in Oakland Unified School District in California and a long-standing school reform support provider in Oakland (the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools, or BayCES), established an initial memorandum of understanding between themselves and Oakland Community Organizations that specified distinct roles and responsibilities for each party in the implementation of new, small, autonomous schools.<sup>37</sup> Over time, the relationships were far more dynamic than that. For instance, early in implementation when the central office had little internal capacity for such activities, BayCES designed and ran an incubator for new schools to help school design teams develop new, small, autonomous school designs. As central office staff developed the capacity to run the incubator, they became the primary people running it, and BayCES turned its attention to other areas of implementation. Honig and Ikemoto call such work on the part of external organizations "adaptive assistance," to capture its dynamic nature.<sup>38</sup>

Various conditions mediate the extent to which central offices and external organizations engage in such dynamic partnerships. For instance, in an effort to keep their relationships dynamic, central office administrators and members of outside organizations sometimes do not specify goals, roles, or responsibilities in a contract, and the absence of such starting or temporary agreements can frustrate the relationship.<sup>39</sup> As Bulkley, Christman, and Gold (see chapter 5 in this volume) and others note, in the early years of Philadelphia's portfolio management initiative, the central office and external partners did not have a clear agreement about their roles and responsibilities.<sup>40</sup> In part as a result, the various parties sometimes fell into outright conflicts over the terms of their relationship, particularly over the resources the central office was supposed to provide the diverse provider schools. Similarly, Rhim revealed how the state-appointed Board of Control in charge of restructuring Chester Upland School District in Pennsylvania set the stage for conflict when it decided to preserve that district's central office, even as it hired Edison Schools to take over most central office functions.<sup>41</sup> The central office and Edison continually clashed over issues such as who had access to particular forms of technology like the

district's Internet services and who controlled decisions about the hiring and firing of school personnel.

Partnerships can also be frustrated if central office administrators fall back on long-standing institutional patterns, such as command-and-control relationships with schools and outside groups, which run counter to portfolio management reform demands. The administrators participating in portfolio management reforms may be particularly susceptible to such conservative tendencies. As research on decision making outside education has long shown, when organizational actors face new, nontraditional demands coupled with high stakes for failure and limited or ambiguous feedback on their performance, they tend to pursue activities they believe they can carry out easily and well and that follow patterns of familiar practice, even if those activities do not promise to help them realize their new goals.<sup>42</sup> Honig found similar patterns among new central office administrators, even those with nontraditional backgrounds in new positions and units.<sup>43</sup> Though not directly supported empirically, the availability of role models and ongoing supports for alternative forms of central office administration may enable implementation.

#### Accountability Systems to Support Improved School Performance

As noted earlier, building the kinds of accountability systems that performance management reforms call for likely requires substantial investments in computer hardware and software and instruments for collecting school performance data. Beyond these formal structures, research on districts, like broad research on decision making in bureaucratic organizations, also emphasizes that the power of such systems for actually informing school improvement hinges substantially on how people interact with them, including how people use evidence from these systems to ground their actual decisions. This research suggests that such evidence-use processes involve the ongoing search for various forms of evidence and central office administrators' efforts to grapple with whether and how to incorporate that evidence into their decision making.

When central office administrators engage in evidence-based decision making, they intentionally or sometimes unintentionally search for information to ground their decisions. In the context of portfolio management reforms, the administrators might search for information about how

well schools are performing against objective performance measures. They might also gather evidence about school goals and strategies and what actually happens day-to-day in individual schools to help them understand why schools may be performing at certain levels and what kinds of supports might help them improve their performance. Recent studies of central offices suggest that the lessons central office administrators learn from their experience working with schools provide essential evidence for grounding administrators' efforts to improve the supports they provide to schools.<sup>44</sup>

As Honig and Coburn describe in a comprehensive research review, central office administrators routinely rely on "working knowledge," the knowledge teachers and other practitioners gather routinely as part of doing their work, to help them fill the sometimes substantial gaps in the information available through formal data systems.<sup>45</sup> Such knowledge includes information on individual students' strengths and weaknesses not captured by standardized tests as well as their prior knowledge of school conditions that might be helping or hindering student progress.<sup>46</sup> The importance of such evidence from experience or working knowledge to central office decisions suggests that emphases in some policy texts on building better student data systems address only part of the challenge central office administrators face when trying to use evidence to make decisions in portfolio management contexts.

Evidence use also involves central office administrators intentionally incorporating evidence into central office policies and practices.<sup>47</sup> Processes of social sense making are especially important to incorporation. That is, when administrators encounter information, its meaning is rarely self-evident, especially in complex social policy arenas such as education where school performance has multiple, complex root causes and influences. In such contexts, administrators and other decision makers must render information meaningful by grappling often with others about how to interpret particular pieces of information. For example, Coburn, Toure, and Yamashita revealed how district central office administrators all agreed that a particular school had low math scores, but they understood the same scores as stemming from different conditions and suggesting different remedies.<sup>48</sup> Drawing on decades of research on social cognition, Spillane and colleagues have shown how such dynamics are not fundamentally problematic but rather the unavoidable result of human cognitive pro-

cesses that involve decision makers filtering new knowledge in terms of their prior knowledge and understandings.<sup>49</sup> The work contexts and professional norms of different administrators also shape their interpretations.<sup>50</sup>

This line of research on incorporation processes reveals that leaders and others enable evidence use when they create opportunities for central office administrators to come together with their colleagues and others to make sense of various forms of evidence.<sup>51</sup> For example, Spillane and Thompson revealed, by negative example, that absent such opportunities for social sense making, administrators and other decision makers are particularly likely to fall back on their own individual frames and interpret new information as confirming their existing practices and worldviews.<sup>52</sup> This suggests that portfolio management reforms need to address the time and other resources central office administrators likely will need to workably with various forms of evidence in a portfolio management system.

#### Central Offices and the Strategic Closing of Schools

Compared to research on capacity-building partnerships and evidence use, research on central office administrators and school closure is relatively limited. Researchers have examined how school closures, including those imposed through reconstitution, affect community members, school personnel, and students.<sup>53</sup> However, central offices tend to appear in the background of these studies, if they appear at all. Despite these limitations, this literature does reveal that school-closure decisions tend to be politically and emotionally charged events that create particular challenges for central office administrators. Given the centrality of closures to portfolio management reforms, these challenges may be relevant to central office administrators implementing those reforms.

When schools close, teachers and administrators lose jobs and students experience disrupted routines. Researchers have argued that these consequences constitute costs that give the affected groups strong incentives to protest the closure process. These protests may become especially charged when closure decisions involve an overlay of racial politics. As an example of the latter, Menefee-Libey describes how some community groups in Chicago saw the closure of some schools under Renaissance 2010 "as less an education reform initiative than a power grab hostile to the interests of low-income people and communities of color." (See Menefee-Libey,

chapter 3, this volume.) For example, one advocacy group in Chicago, Parents United for Responsible Education (PURE), characterized CPS's school closures under Renaissance 2010 as "part of Mayor Daley's war on Chicago's low-income families."<sup>54</sup> During protests over closings at the Chicago Board of Education, community activists accused board members of educational treason for supporting school closure and of "messing with the stability in the community."<sup>55</sup> Levin, Daschbach, and Perry's (see chapter 6, this volume) account of New Orleans shows that closures can threaten "stability in the community," in part by threatening employment opportunities; when school closures and reform threaten the jobs of local teachers and school personnel, they argue, the stakes—and the potential for conflict—become even more intense. These conflicts arise even in places where coalitions may form to support the closure of low-performing schools.<sup>56</sup>

These findings suggest that school closures under portfolio management reforms may demand that central office administrators launch significant efforts to address and otherwise manage such tensions so they do not derail the reform and, where possible, so that they marshal support for the reform. Along these lines, New York State revised New York City's mayoral control legislation to require local hearings in communities before closing a school or making other structural changes (e.g., co-locating schools or moving sites).<sup>57</sup> In response, the district has designated central office administrators to oversee public hearings on each school identified for closure. During these hearings, the administrators explain the district's rationale for closing particular schools and provide opportunities for community members and others to respond. Still, these hearings are hardly peaceful events.<sup>58</sup> For example, according to an account of one hearing, when a central office administrator tried to speak, "boos cascaded across the auditorium."<sup>59</sup> "Closing a school," says Klein, "is worse than a root canal. You're disrupting people's lives."<sup>60</sup>

Given these challenges, central office administrators might decide to avoid the school closures that are part of the theory of action of portfolio management reforms. As the chapter on Chicago elaborates, Renaissance 2010 as originally designed called for school closures, but recently has shifted its emphasis from school closures to turning around schools, an approach in which students are allowed to remain in the same build-

ing and school staff are replaced.<sup>61</sup> Experience shows that school closures have been relatively rare in school districts and the charter school sector.<sup>62</sup>

Assuming that school closures should be a part of portfolio management reforms, how might central office administrators productively manage the conflicts and tensions that seem part and parcel of such efforts? Research on how central office administrators manage such political dynamics is limited. However, a small handful of studies, coupled with emerging policy analyses, suggest that such management is a profoundly human and social process calling for administrators to continuously forge coalitions, partnerships, and other relationships with various community members. For example, Malen revealed how the passage of a reconstitution policy in a Maryland school district hinged substantially on the superintendent and others striking various agreements and deals to bring different stakeholders on board with the initiative.<sup>63</sup> However, in part because the superintendent did not do similar legwork during implementation, unproductive conflict arose between the central office and various school and community groups in ways that stalled and ultimately squelched implementation.

Similarly, Kowal and Hassel argue that central office administrators can minimize community opposition to closures if they actively involve community members as advisers or collaborators in the process, either in the development of closure criteria or in closure decisions themselves (other researchers warn of the perils of community involvement in closures).<sup>64</sup> As part of recent school closure processes, some school districts have assigned school district central office staff to facilitate community engagements about school performance data to educate community and school members on low-school performance in their neighborhood and to seek their input on responses. When state law requires that schools be closed, central office administrators in some of those districts have strategically positioned themselves between the community and the state, working to help engage community members in the closure, providing opportunities for members to process the loss and participate in the development of next steps for improving educational opportunities for young people in their neighborhoods.

Such activities seem to reinforce the importance of administrators playing boundary-spanning roles as part of the closure process. For instance,

Kowol and Hassel argue that district central offices can minimize the conflict surrounding school closures by communicating clearly with school communities about the closure process, the rationale for particular cases of closure, and the plans for moving forward (e.g., how the district will transfer student records, help place students in new schools, and—if needed—liquidate the school's assets).<sup>65</sup> This recommendation echoes the importance of some of the bridging activities noted earlier, in which administrators communicate and sometimes translate complex information about closure decisions to the public.

Although there is little evidence about how district leaders might support the effective participation of the central office in school closures, some of the same supports mentioned earlier seem applicable. The central office administrators in the specialized boundary-spanning roles in implementation might be particularly well suited to managing the political conflicts noted earlier. Given the high profile of school closures, however, superintendents and other executive central office leaders can support those staff by participating centrally in the closure process and ensuring that all central office staff are on the same page and delivering the same message about which schools will close and why. When superintendents publicly override school closure decisions announced by other central office staff, they risk undermining the credibility of those staff and fueling tensions between them and the community members and school leaders they aim to support.<sup>66</sup>

### SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter, we started with the assumption that central offices have vital roles to play in the implementation of portfolio management systems. In virtually all districts, only the public system has the authority to open and close public schools in the ways that the portfolio management reforms demand. Furthermore, the kinds of intensive, ongoing policy development in support of school implementation assumed under portfolio management require substantial involvement by central office administrators, who must work those changes through the systems in which participating schools operate. However, meeting these demands poses significant challenges for school district central offices. Administrators may address those demands in part by developing particular formal structures such as

new units to manage the portfolio. However, informal structures within central offices—that is, how people within the central office go about their work—are arguably more consequential to implementation. For example, specialized units within central offices may or may not enable implementation, depending on what staff of those units actually do day-to-day and how they relate to schools and external organizations. In our discussion earlier, we have elaborated some basic work practices that seem consistent with demands of portfolio management.

This analysis has several implications for the practice and research of portfolio management. First, the work practices we begin to elaborate may provide a useful guide for practitioners interested in implementing portfolio management reforms. These work practices suggest, for example, that staff of dedicated portfolio management offices might think of themselves as boundary spanners working between the central office and schools and external organizations to improve the flow of information among those organizations and otherwise to help build all participants' capacity for seeding and supporting high-performing schools. Those boundary spanners or perhaps other central office administrators should anticipate significant conflict around school closures and develop processes appropriate to their communities for mediating those conflicts in productive ways.

But boundary spanners cannot go it alone. Their work is fundamentally contingent on the engagement of other central office administrators in other central office units that interface with schools. Other administrators in units related to finances, human resources, and facilities, for example, oversee resources and have authority to change policies that may help or hinder the implementation of individual schools in a portfolio. Their participation in implementation becomes especially important if those schools are realizing the promise of portfolio management reform designs and taking innovative (or at least nontraditional or uncommon approaches) to school improvement that do not fit neatly into existing central office resource-allocation or policy patterns. The second implication for practitioners then is that central offices may not participate productively in implementation if they relegate implementation just to a dedicated unit or if they treat portfolio management as a discrete program, rather than as a more fundamental cross-cutting approach to rethinking how schooling happens in whole district systems.

For researchers, our review suggests the importance of extending the descriptions provided in the current wave of portfolio management case studies to include more detailed analysis of implementation dynamics, particularly within central offices. Such research demands looking in depth at the day-to-day work of central office administrators in portfolio management districts as they support, assess, and hold schools accountable. Potentially productive questions to anchor that research include: In those settings, which central office administrators actually participate in implementation? What work practices do those people engage in? With what results? Do those work practices seem to help enable implementation, or are there ways they frustrate implementation? In sum, as these fundamental questions suggest, the main implication of this chapter for both research and practice is that both arenas need to pay more careful attention to the participation of school district central offices in portfolio management as fundamental to supporting and understanding how that reform unfolds.

## 8

## A Framework for Designing Governance in Choice and Portfolio Districts

### *Three Economic Criteria*

*Henry M. Levin*

Traditionally, school districts developed enrollment policies for their schools by setting attendance boundaries for most students according to their neighborhoods of residence. Some larger school districts provided a few schools that focused on specialized subjects such as the sciences, performing arts, or academic giftedness, allowing students to compete for places. And students with moderate or severe disabilities were typically assigned to schools with at least some specialized capacities to address their needs. In the latter part of the twentieth century, some urban school districts established choice options among a limited number of magnet schools across diverse neighborhoods, mainly to reduce the racial concentration associated with student segregation in neighborhood schools.

Starting in the 1990s, the United States witnessed a major shift from school assignment by attendance area to an increase in school choice based on parents' selection of schools for their children from a portfolio of

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#### Chapter 8

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5. For example, see D. Simon, "More New Orleans Schools to Convert to Charter Status," *Times Picayune*, December 22, 2008, [http://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2008/12/more\\_schools\\_to\\_join\\_new\\_orlea.html](http://www.nola.com/news/index.ssf/2008/12/more_schools_to_join_new_orlea.html); K. G. Newmark and V. De Rugg, "Hope After Katrina," *Education Next* 6, no. 4 (2006): 13–21.
6. Although an earlier version of this paper focused on a "pure choice" district of charter schools, this chapter takes into consideration some of the important challenges associated with managing a portfolio of suppliers.
7. R. Haveman and B. Wolfe, "Schooling and Economic Well-Being: The Role of Non-market Effects," *Journal of Human Resources* 19, no. 3 (1984): 377–407; D. M. Cutler and A. Lleras-Muney, "Education and Health: Evaluating Theories and Evidence," in *Making America Healthier: Social and Economic Policy as Health Policy*, eds. R. F. Schoeni, J. S. House, G. A. Kaplan, and H. Pollack (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008), 29–60.
8. A. Guttman, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); J. Dewey, *Education and Democracy* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).