Progress and promise with Baltimore’s portfolio reforms

Seattle, WA, June 14, 2012 - An analysis of reforms in the Baltimore City Public Schools finds that the district has come a long way in a short time in terms of improving student achievement, granting schools more autonomy, and creating an environment friendly to innovators and new school providers.

_Baltimore and the Portfolio School District Strategy_ lays out several ways in which the district’s reforms over the last five years, under the leadership of CEO Andrés Alonso, should serve as examples for other districts attempting a portfolio strategy. Sarah Yatsko, a research analyst at the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education, authored the report.

The “portfolio” strategy adopted by Baltimore and more than 25 other urban districts nationwide allows families to choose from a range of schools, some of which are run by the district and some of which are run by outside operators. No matter their organizational structure, the schools are part of a single system and are held accountable based on the same performance standards. Continuous improvement is a fundamental tenet of portfolio districts; schools that fail to improve are restructured or closed, and promising schools are opened in their place.

Baltimore City Public Schools have been among the leading portfolio districts in several areas:

- **Comprehensive school choice:** The district has moved from neighborhood-based assignments to a system where nearly all high school and middle school students actively choose their schools. Because the city is welcoming to outside providers, including charter schools, there is a wide range of choices.

- **Performance-based accountability:** Dr. Alonso wasted no time closing schools with chronically poor student outcomes—26 so far. Pupil-based funding, where dollars weighted based on student need follow students to the schools they attend, adds an extra layer of accountability, encouraging schools to attract and keep students.

- **Talent development strategy:** The district has developed a pipeline of new teachers through nontraditional programs, Teach for America and the Baltimore City Teaching Residency. Good relations with the teachers union enabled a progressive contract that includes performance-based pay.

- **Community engagement:** The city has made great strides in notifying families about school choice, refining the school selection system, communicating broad goals and specific policies, and energizing parent councils at the school level.

As the district moves into the next phase of portfolio reform, Yatsko writes, it should focus on the areas where it is in greatest danger of losing traction and getting stuck:

- The information provided to parents about individual schools lacks the student achievement data needed to make a truly informed choice.
- While the district has shifted many decisions about hiring, spending, curriculum, and professional development to the school level, principals report that autonomy is inconsistently granted across schools and school types. Also, the impact of autonomy is sometimes undermined by district policies—for example, principals may choose to pay for outside training providers, but because the district offers such services for free, it has become the de facto choice.
- The district has not communicated clearly enough the expectations and consequences of its accountability system; educators do not always have a clear understanding of what kind of student outcomes will result in district intervention or school closings.
- The school choice system is limited: elementary assignments are still mainly neighborhood-based, students from closed schools can’t always participate fully in the choice process, and there are too few successful middle schools to ensure that everyone has a good choice.

Baltimore has moved quickly and dramatically toward a system of schools that are varied, accountable, and desirable. Along the way, pass rates on tests have increased and the dropout rate has fallen. The district also appears poised to address some of the challenges listed above, which would ensure a more cohesive portfolio strategy, and move the district toward even better outcomes for its 84,000 students.

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The Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington Bothell engages in independent research and policy analysis on a range of K-12 public education reform issues, including choice & charters, finance & productivity, teachers, urban district reform, leadership, and state & federal reform.