



THE END OF THE ONE BEST SYSTEM

In 1974, educational historian David Tyack observed that despite the decentralized nature of public schools in the US, school districts and schools across the country looked surprisingly similar. He argued that the American system of public education had taken on a standardized structure, which he coined the “One Best System.” Over many decades, core aspects of that system have endured, with local school districts led by publicly elected school boards that hire education professionals and directly operate schools under standardized policies and governance. Over the last few decades, however, the edges of that one best system have begun to fracture, and, especially in large urban systems, major chunks have broken away.

One important manifestation of this reconceptualization of districts is the portfolio management model (PMM).¹ PMMs move away from exclusive, direct district management of schools toward a system of schools operating under varied types of governance and with varying degrees of autonomy. Portfolio managers decide which schools warrant public support, including independent charter schools, various forms of autonomous schools, and traditional district-run schools. In theory, this approach enables schools to adapt practices to better serve students and holds schools accountable for achieving results.² While we do not advocate for or against the PMM idea, we believe that examining the design and enactment of

systems that embody this idea requires us to take seriously the theory of action suggested by its advocates.

At the heart of the PMM idea are five interlocking policy mechanisms: increased central office *planning* around what schools will operate within the system alongside performance-based *oversight* of those schools; broad-based *school choice*; an emphasis on increasing school-based *autonomy*; greater flexibility around *human capital* practices including hiring, retention, and compensation; and a more extensive set of *school support* organizations, from which schools can select options that meet their needs.

In this book, we dive deeply into these five mechanisms in order to understand how they are both designed and enacted in the evolving school systems of three cities—New Orleans, Denver, and Los Angeles—that have adopted either elements of PMM, or PMM in its entirety. We selected these cities because of the important ways in which they vary both in context and in their interpretations of the PMM approach. Doing so allows us to consider two critical issues about system change and public education. First, are systems incrementally evolving or fundamentally restructuring, and why are these transformations happening? Second, are these system changes leading to meaningful changes in school practice and a new set of norms and structures?

Examining these two issues requires looking at systems and schools from multiple angles and considering the distinct and sometimes competing goals being prioritized within them.³ Scholars have long argued that education and education policy promote multiple values and goals that are often contested and can come into conflict. The PMM is no exception. Proponents argue that the PMM provides parents with greater freedom to select schools that match their children's needs and greater access to quality schools in ways that are no longer dependent on where they live—advancing goals of liberty and equity. The model also assumes that greater flexibility for educators and choice for parents (arguably both elements of liberty) will lead to innovation, improved quality, and efficiency. Yet, as one can imagine, these goals are not always in sync; nor do stakeholders always agree on what they mean. For example, although portfolio managers may define quality based on student achievement, parents may favor other aspects of quality, such as the arts, or the value of building relationships with children and families in their local neighborhoods. Similarly, stakeholders

may hold differing views of equity. Some may understand it as equal distribution of resources, while others view it as a fair distribution (not necessarily equal or uniform), while still others may have a transformative view of equity as challenging oppression.⁴ And while the PMM could foster liberty, equity, and efficiency in complementary ways, too much autonomy could potentially threaten the rights and equitable access of students, or create inefficiencies previously avoided under the economies of scale of the traditional centralized system. While the portfolio model seeks to balance these competing values and tensions (for example, by providing centralized oversight to offer equity protections), achieving such balance is not guaranteed.

Given the historical stability of the “one best system,” it is important to understand both why we are now seeing system transformations and whether these transformations are leading to a new common set of structures and practices at a system and school level. Indeed, the study’s findings suggest different system trajectories that may lead away from a one best system altogether, with New Orleans largely abandoning the traditional central office, Denver seeking to balance autonomy and centralized authority, and Los Angeles splitting essentially into two distinct educational systems—one relying on traditional district authority and the other emphasizing school-based autonomy. While the study focuses on these cities, similar trajectories can be seen in high-profile districts such as New York City and Chicago, as well as less nationally recognized districts such as Spring Branch, Texas; Fulton County, Georgia; and Fullerton, California.

THE MORAL IMPERATIVE FOR IMPROVEMENT IN URBAN SYSTEMS

A variety of pressures may be contributing to the adoption of the portfolio approach. Urban districts educate a disproportionate share of students and particularly of students living in poverty in our country. The demographic profile of these students is also shifting, as more than half of all cities in the US are majority non-White, and the geographic reach of increasing diversity has spread.⁵ The struggles of urban schools and districts to provide high-quality education for all students are well-documented, with many facing low academic achievement along with large achievement gaps tied

to poverty and race/ethnicity, high levels of leader and teacher turnover, fewer certified teachers, and inequitable funding.⁶

The moral imperative for improving these systems has never been stronger. Yet years of budget cuts, declining enrollments, and dwindling public confidence have greatly complicated the task of reforming urban school systems. Critics argue that decades of education reforms have produced little in the way of concrete improvements for American students, particularly for those who have been the most traditionally underserved.⁷ In response, contemporary education reformers have suggested that the only way to truly improve urban public education is to fundamentally restructure public education systems so that they incorporate all the publicly funded education within a geographic region such as a city.⁸

Many reformers emphasize the governance of public education—that is, the political and legal processes by which formal institutions and actors make decisions that determine “who is responsible and accountable for what in the system.”⁹ As a result, a variety of new types of school systems are emerging, including turnaround districts, state and mayoral takeover districts, networked improvement communities, charter school networks, and portfolio districts.¹⁰ Often, these governance reforms aim to amend the traditional role of the school district by shifting management of schools away from locally elected school boards and the central offices they oversee and toward private organizations and charter schools. They fundamentally restructure practices commonly associated with the idea of a “best system,” including standardized district policies and procedures, collective bargaining between unions and administrators, considerable job security for teachers and staff, and centralized control over school operations. They also target the perceived inefficiencies and dysfunction of the traditional centralized, bureaucratic structure and practices of district central offices, which are assumed to squelch school-level innovation, entrepreneurship, motivation, and capacity to improve.¹¹

THE IDEA OF PORTFOLIO MANAGEMENT

While some school systems adopt the model comprehensively, others adopt particular PMM strategies more piecemeal. In many cases, the central authority (or authorities) overseeing a district is motivated to adopt some form of a PMM in response to an increasing number of students

in the district attending charter schools. Growing enrollment in charter schools forces local officials to grapple with how to incorporate charters into traditional public education while ensuring equity, solvency, and quality. Advocates offer the PMM approach as a primary solution to meet this challenge because it can allow central district actors to shape the set of charter schools in the district.

For systems adopting portfolio strategies, the transformation is often ongoing. Systems continue to evolve in important ways in response to sometimes conflicting pressures. On the one hand, support from foundations and entities such as the City Fund (founded in 2018 in part by the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, with initial funding reported at \$200 million) has brought substantial additional philanthropic support to school systems pursuing portfolio-type reforms.¹² On the other hand, pressures pushing back against portfolio management, especially as it involves charter schools, have led to protest and legislative change in some states. For example, teacher strikes in several California cities in 2019 coalesced around not only demands for better pay and working conditions, but also limits on charter school growth and portfolio management. Where these pressures will lead and whether they will shift systems toward being more similar or even more different are yet to be seen.

As a reform that is largely about governance, the PMM idea does not prescribe particular educational practices, such as curriculum or pedagogical strategies.¹³ Instead, it builds on a set of interlocking policy mechanisms that local actors can shape to particular contexts. Paul Hill, Christine Campbell, and Betheny Gross describe the concept of a portfolio as grounded in a market metaphor that links the role of the portfolio manager to that of the manager of a stock portfolio: the financial manager's "diverse investments" are akin to a portfolio manager's "new and promising school options"; a financial portfolio requires "constant review of performance," while a portfolio of schools needs "sophisticated accountability systems"; and, as a result of these performance reviews, the financial manager makes "strategic investment[s] and divestment[s]," while the portfolio manager will "expand successful programs, [and] intervene in or close unsuccessful programs."¹⁴ The central role of the portfolio manager makes the PMM distinct from a purely market system and retains a more substantial role for a government actor within the system.

In particular, the portfolio manager is charged with enacting and overseeing the five key mechanisms described at the beginning of this chapter:

- A clear and rigorous approach to the intertwined roles of *planning* and *oversight*. The portfolio manager identifies and addresses the needs of the community, including decisions around school providers' foci and location. Advocates see oversight as based on student and school performance against common metrics and on allowing portfolio managers to stay informed of schools' progress, to intervene quickly with struggling schools, and, if necessary, to take action such as closing schools, bringing in different school operators, or not renewing charter contracts.¹⁵ In response, schools are expected to do their work differently and more effectively, so that students learn more and/or differently than they had in the past.
- Widespread student *choice*. A family's ability to select from more than one schooling option for their children is intended to drive quality improvement through both market- and nonmarket-based pressures.¹⁶ On the market side, choice is expected to enhance competition for students, in turn creating incentives for schools to improve and decrease bureaucratic waste.¹⁷ This development of competition, as a complement to the nonmarket side (that is, planning by the portfolio manager), can give families better options to choose from, allow for stronger school-based communities with shared values, and increase parent satisfaction and engagement, and, in turn, student learning.¹⁸
- Increased *autonomy* to school sites and charter management organizations (CMOs) over key domains such as staffing, budget, governance, and curriculum and instruction. This autonomy is expected to foster the development of schools that are responsive to local contexts, staffed with committed personnel who share the schools' goals, and innovative in their practice.¹⁹ Combined with choice for families, these locally driven operations are then expected to lead to greater alignment between educational programs and services on the one hand and student needs on the other.²⁰
- The development of strong and appropriate *human capital*. The inclusion of alternative pipelines for education professionals and the removal of the restrictions of union contracts and district policies

are expected to enhance recruitment and retention of teachers and administrators who are effective and well matched to their schools' needs, and to provide administrators with increased flexibility to manage schools' and districts' most valuable resources—teachers and leaders—in ways that best meet the needs of students.²¹

- *School supports* for school-determined needs from multiple providers, perhaps including but going beyond the portfolio manager. Such efforts are believed to enhance school-based personnel's ability to deliver high-quality education and to productively respond to the increased autonomy and accountability through building the capacity of schools and staff.²²

As envisioned by advocates, such as Paul Hill at the Center on Reinventing Public Education and Neerav Kingsland of the City Fund, this comprehensive set of changes, used in concert and distinct from prior efforts, will yield more efficient and effective public education. In the ideal conception of a portfolio manager, systems adopt all five mechanisms. In practice, however, systems have moved in different ways along the path of each mechanism. For example, managers have sometimes provided autonomy for some schools but not others, or have increased choice but with limitations on what schools are available. Taken together, these variations render the portfolio model more of a set of ideas or strategies. When adopted in concert, these five mechanisms are intended to intersect to bring about improved outcomes for students. For example, the provision of enhanced autonomy for school operators, when combined with capacity-building supports and efforts to improve human capital, may lead to more substantive changes in practice—and thus to improvements in student outcomes—than the changes that emerge as a result of relying solely on autonomy.

These ideas, of course, are not entirely new. Some of these policy components are found in a range of approaches to reform, such as standards-based reform, performance-based accountability, charter schools, and efforts to improve the different aspects of human capital in schools by adopting new evaluation systems and changing the role of unions. Combining centralized planning with policy mechanisms used in other reforms creates not only the foundation for a different type of system but also the possibility that the interplay of all these moving parts may generate systems distinct from one another.

Above, we highlighted two big-picture questions we address throughout this book: Are systems incrementally evolving or fundamentally restructuring? Are these system changes leading to meaningful changes in school practice? In order to examine how school systems continue to evolve with the stated goal of better serving students, we must ask more specific questions about the nature of these systems:

- How are portfolio managers enacting these policy mechanisms? How are they balancing their responsibilities and multiple, potentially competing goals?
- Whose voices matter in these decisions? What are the roles of other actors, such as the community and organized labor?
- How do schools and families respond to and experience these policies? Are there differences based on school types, such as charter versus traditional public schools?
- How do the ways in which schools and systems operate connect to intermediate outcomes related to equity and achievement in schools?

While others have examined individual cities undergoing PMM-like change or the performance of students in portfolio districts, we know of no other effort to look both comparatively across multiple systems and deeply within such systems—from the central office to the classroom.²³

THREE DISTINCT SYSTEMS: NEW ORLEANS, DENVER, AND LOS ANGELES

Although experiencing common system-level change, New Orleans, Denver, and Los Angeles have very different school systems in terms of their nature, size, and demographics. As table 1.1 illustrates, the Los Angeles school system is significantly larger than those of the other two cities, both in geographic size and in the number of students and schools. While all three systems serve diverse and high-needs populations, the racial/ethnic backgrounds differ. In New Orleans and Los Angeles, the majority of students were African American (83 percent) and Latinx (74 percent), respectively. Denver's student population was more heterogeneous: half of the students were Latinx (55 percent), less than a quarter were White (23 percent), and the remaining students were either African American (13 percent) or Asian (3 percent).

TABLE 1.1 Characteristics of the school systems (2016–17)

	NEW ORLEANS	DENVER	LOS ANGELES
Geographic Size	170 square miles	155 square miles	710 square miles
Number of Schools	86	211	1,028
Types of schools	Charter (92%) TPS* (7%) Independent (1%)	Charter (27%) TPS (45%) Innovation (27%)	Charter (22%) TPS (57%) Autonomous (17%)
Number of Students	48,375	92,331	633,621
Free/Reduced Price Lunch	88%	67%	81%
Student Race/ Ethnicity	83% African Am. 8% White 9% Latinx/Other	55% Latinx 23% White 13% African Am. 3% Asian	74% Latinx 10% White 8% African Am. 6% Asian/Other
English Language Learners (ELL)	4%	37%	25%
Special Education	11%	10%	14%

* Traditional Public School

Data sources: New Orleans: Kate Babineau, Dave Hand, and Vincent Rossmeier, *The State of Public Education in New Orleans, 2016–17* (New Orleans: Cowen Institute, 2017), <https://tulane.app.box.com/s/ddngdxbtar9kkn21szyzi6gsplswqn3>.

Denver: “Facts & Figures: DPS by the Numbers,” Denver Public Schools, 2020, <https://www.dpsk12.org/about-dps/facts-figures>; and other sources of publicly available data from Denver Public Schools (DPS) and the Colorado Department of Education.

Los Angeles: “Fingertip Facts, 2016–17,” Los Angeles Unified School District, August 2016, https://achieve.lausd.net/cms/lib/CA01000043/Centricity/Domain/32/Fingertip%20Facts2016-17_FINAL.pdf; DataQuest, California Department of Education, d4.cde.ca.gov; and publicly available data from the California Department of Education.

Data come from the 2016–17 school year.

Note: These data are based on the years during which data were collected for this study. There have been some noteworthy changes since then, especially in New Orleans.

The types of schools operating in each city also differed considerably. Whereas almost all of New Orleans’ schools were charter, the share of charter schools was considerably smaller in the other two cities. Nevertheless, at the time of this study, Los Angeles included more charter schools in sheer numbers than any other city in the nation.²⁴ Furthermore, both Denver and Los Angeles operated both traditional schools and a variety of school models managed by the district central office but granted greater autonomy, adding further diversity to their portfolios. Moreover, as we discuss below, differences in the nature of state charter school and accountability

policies, and in the strength of state and local labor associations, contributed to the variation in school types and governance arrangements across the three sites. (See chapter 3 for more in-depth background information on each city and school system.)

In order to analyze these systems at different levels, we gathered extensive qualitative, survey, and administrative data, along with relevant documents, in the 2016–17 school year (see appendix A for details). We surveyed all school leaders in each system, receiving a total of 628 responses out of 1,286 surveyed. We also received survey responses from 1,927 teachers in 124 schools across the three systems, out of 3,590 surveys sent. At the system level, the qualitative data included seventy-six interviews of central office administrators, board members, civic organization leaders, state experts, and union representatives. School-level data centered on twenty-one school case studies, and included interviews of forty-one individuals in school leadership roles, ninety-three teachers, sixty-two parents, and fourteen individuals who supervised school principals. We supplemented these core data sources with documents such as media accounts, district and school websites, and existing research.

Although they have undergone a common shift in the governance of public schooling, the three cities at the center of the study differ in important ways. Distinct places, histories, and policies provide a critical backdrop, as they shape our understanding of how system change ultimately affected school practices. As we describe in more detail later in the book, the three cases underwent important transformations in the past two decades, and we characterize them as reflecting three distinct variations in the portfolio approach:

- *Managed market (New Orleans)*: a system in which virtually all schools were highly autonomous charter schools, governed by the state-run Recovery School District (RSD) and the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB). These central offices primarily served as gatekeepers in areas of enrollment and oversight of schools, as well as in areas needing centralization for policy or legal reasons, such as funding, expulsions, and special education.
- *Centralized portfolio (Denver)*: an integrated system overseeing traditional and nontraditional school options under a common policy framework, in which central office staff in Denver Public

Schools (DPS) took on a more expansive role while seeking to balance school-level autonomy with centralized control. Denver was notable for its explicit focus on developing a PMM that included autonomous “innovation” schools alongside charter and traditional schools, for its broad-scale shifts in union contracts, and for the overall collaborative and locally driven nature of the system.

- *Competing systems (Los Angeles)*: a centralized district that directly operated a set of district-run schools, including both traditional and autonomous schools, and oversaw a parallel system of charter schools, with little integration or interaction across the two sectors. Los Angeles had a polarized climate with sharp distinctions between those schools operated by the central office and charter schools. The district-managed schools were unionized, while most of the charter schools were not.

These varying demographic, organizational, and political conditions provided rich opportunities for exploring the implementation of portfolio reforms.

Later chapters dig deeply into the enactment of each of the five core PMM mechanisms at both the system and school levels. As an introduction, table 1.2 provides background on the design of these mechanisms and how they are intended to function at the system and school levels in each city.

TABLE 1.2 Comparison of enactment of portfolio management mechanisms

	NEW ORLEANS Managed Market	DENVER Centralized Portfolio	LOS ANGELES Competing Systems
Planning and Oversight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common expectations of all school types using performance framework with multiple measures in both RSD and OPSB • Extensive use of school closure by RSD • Annual review process to set priorities for charter applicants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common expectations of all school types using performance framework with multiple measures • Extensive use of school closure • Annual review process to set priorities for new schools—can be charter, innovation, or traditional public schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varied expectations with multiple accountability frameworks based on school type • Less use of high-stakes accountability tools • Some planning within district-run school types, only reactive to applications in charter sector

(continues)

TABLE 1.2 Comparison of enactment of portfolio management mechanisms, *continued*

	NEW ORLEANS Managed Market	DENVER Centralized Portfolio	LOS ANGELES Competing Systems
Choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall broad access through portfolio managers' work with EnrollNOLA • Broad sharing of comparable information on schools • Some limits on access due to geographic preferences or admissions requirements • Access enabled because transportation required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generally broad access through OneApp • Broad sharing of comparable information on schools • Some limits on access due to geographic preferences • Access limited through partial transportation availability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No common enrollment system; complex system within large district-run system; charters enroll on their own • Some common information for segments of district-run schools • Limited access as a result of complex processes, limited transportation, and geographic size
Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charters had extensive autonomy with some limits imposed by portfolio manager • Traditional public schools had charter-like autonomies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charters had extensive autonomy with some limits imposed by portfolio manager • Semiautonomous (Innovation) schools had extensive potential autonomy • Traditional public schools had guaranteed autonomy around educational programming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charters had extensive autonomy, minimal limits imposed by portfolio manager • Semiautonomous schools had a range of models with varied levels of autonomy • Traditional public schools had minimal formal autonomy
Human Capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School/network-based decisions for charters (except OPSB traditional public schools) • Outside organizations heavily involved on a school-by-school basis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnership orientation: DPS, private organizations, and autonomous schools collaborate • School/network-based decisions for charter and innovation schools, but they can adapt/adopt the district's teacher evaluation system (Leading Effective Academic Practice) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charter sector: school/network-based decisions with teachers in some schools represented by unions • District-run sector: top-down
School Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RSD and OPSB role in school capacity minimal (some OPSB supports for district-run schools) • Private organizations and charter networks are the central actors in providing capacity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Range of DPS supports for all schools; more extensive and mandated supports for traditional public schools • Partnerships between DPS and private organizations for some supports • Private organizations and charter networks are engaged actors in providing capacity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive LAUSD supports for district-run schools including through outside partners; very minimal supports for charters • Private organizations and charter networks are the central actors in providing charter schools with supports

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The chapters that follow first ground the study within the broader context and then turn to the five policy mechanisms, exploring them first individually and then in concert. Chapters 2 and 3 provide the foundation for our story. Chapter 2 delves into the empirical, theoretical, and conceptual foundations for the study, examining the role of school districts and central offices and change within those settings over time. The chapter connects this more historical view to the PMM theory of action, which connects the design of the policy changes to desired outcomes. Chapter 2 draws on principal-agent theory, which considers how those who determine organizational goals (the “principals”) seek to ensure and motivate those doing the work on the ground (the “agents”) through strategies such as monitoring and offering incentives.²⁵ Given the emphasis in this theory of action on structures and incentives for driving system change, the chapter also considers the value of research on policy implementation and organizational change. By highlighting the multitude of forces that can shape educational practices in both existing and new governance structures, such research challenges the assumptions of principal-agent theory that altering structures and incentives can lead to meaningful change.²⁶

Chapter 3 digs more deeply into each of the three cities at the center of the study, providing an overview of each state and local context and system of schools. This chapter also lays the foundation for understanding change within each city by looking at trends over time in areas including the number and type of publicly funded schools (such as traditional, magnet, or charter), student performance, and student demographics. Through attention to history, context, and politics, the chapter examines not just what the systems look like, but why they look as they do and why they vary in substantial ways that ultimately influence how the PMM idea is locally enacted. In all three cities, a history of racial politics and desegregation provided a backdrop to ongoing tensions between those seeking reform and historically marginalized communities.

The second section of the book digs deeply into the design and enactment of the policy mechanisms described above. Chapters 4 through 8 look at the three cities through the lenses of the five policy mechanisms that are foundational to the PMM idea: planning and oversight, student choice, school autonomy, human capital, and school support. Extensive

data allow us to trace each mechanism from the broad design of systems to the daily work of schools in each of the cities.

Chapter 4 examines planning and oversight of schools based on school performance, including decisions about what schools will operate and challenges involving issues of consistency, transparency, and fairness in high-stakes oversight. Chapter 5 explores issues of school choice, analyzing the different enrollment processes as well as school-level recruitment and marketing practices. Chapter 6 examines school-based autonomy, describing what autonomies were embedded in different school models and the level of reported autonomy for leaders and teachers between the different sectors. Chapter 7 considers issues of human capital, highlighting issues of retention and recruitment as well as the role of the teachers' unions in each system. Chapter 8 describes how schools received needed supports and the role of portfolio managers, CMOs, and outside organizations in providing those supports.

The final section steps back from the individual mechanisms to look at these systems as whole entities, revisiting the PMM theory of action and exploring how what we have learned can inform those who work within schools and systems as well as the policy makers who set the foundation for that work. Chapter 9 weaves together the different mechanisms in order to ask how, based on the theory of action, advocates of the PMM idea might expect systems to shape what happens in schools. The findings show that New Orleans, Denver, and (to a lesser extent) the charter system in Los Angeles are relatively well-aligned with the PMM mechanisms, while the district-run system in Los Angeles is less aligned. However, analysis of intermediate outcomes raises questions about the links between school improvement and the PMM mechanisms. Specifically, we identify two puzzling findings. First, despite the two systems being similarly aligned with the PMM ideal, teachers and leaders in New Orleans reported more positive intermediate outcomes on our surveys than those in Denver schools. Second, although the charter system in Los Angeles was far more aligned with the PMM ideal than the district-run system, reports from teachers and leaders in the two systems were relatively similar.

Finally, chapter 10 concludes the study by asking what we have learned about the PMM approach. We describe intersections of mechanisms within the model itself, and how one such intersection—between performance-based oversight, school-based autonomy, and varied school

supports—resulted in systems prioritizing some mechanisms over others. Our analysis points us to ways in which competing ideas about equity and quality, both core values in education, sometimes led to challenges between stakeholders. And, most importantly, our analysis identifies critical conditions shaping system change, including institutional and political pressures as well as local educational capacity and context.

CHALLENGING THE ONE BEST SYSTEM

This book shares the findings of a rigorous mixed-method study based on rich interview data and extensive surveys of school leaders and teachers, along with administrative data sets and documents from 2016–17. It tells the story of these three changing systems—New Orleans, Los Angeles, and Denver—and how the systems and schools within them are grappling with changes in the five policy mechanisms noted above. While all three cities varied in the design of their policy mechanisms and the context in which these were implemented, they nonetheless faced common struggles spurred by decentralization. At times, schools within each city also adopted common practices that, while seemingly misaligned with the assumptions of the PMM, served to maintain a school’s legitimacy in the current institutionalized context of public education, choice, and decentralization.

The challenge of how to govern schools to best develop high-quality, publicly funded education is one with which government has long grappled, and one which it will continue to face in years to come. By looking explicitly at the connections between governance and educational practice, this book sheds light on those linkages and helps illuminate the messy, complicated, and nuanced nature of educational system change. We find that the systems we studied are changing in fundamental ways, away from the one best system, and that these changes have resulted in important shifts in power and politics within the systems.

Yet, we also raise serious questions about the potential for this particular set of policy mechanisms—which emphasize incentives and structures over context and issues of the technical core of schooling (such as curriculum, pedagogy, and school organization)—to lead to sustained school improvement. Finally, we highlight implications for policy makers and system leaders interested in portfolio-style reform. These include: managing the tension between centralization and decentralization; explicitly focusing on

the role of community voice; considering the trade-off between quality, as defined by a common performance framework, and the potential for a diverse set of school options; acknowledging the potential challenges related to local conditions, including educational capacity and institutional pressures; and investing in the relationships needed to make any educational reform successful.