Are City Schools Becoming Monolithic?
Analyzing the Diversity of Options in Denver, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C.

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Introduction

School districts in America have long provided a set of typical or traditional public schools, with a smaller set of specialized schools for families to choose from, such as magnet or alternative schools. Today, school choice is growing in cities with the addition of charter schools, and more district leaders are adopting a portfolio approach to schooling: giving district schools autonomy over their design and delivery, and giving families choices among these schools. The hope has been that with these freedoms district and charter schools would offer interesting and innovative approaches to learning and that families would find a "great fit" for their children. But due to a host of reasons, including accountability pressures, teacher inexperience, large concentrations of students in need of remediation, and too little engagement with the communities being served, community advocates and choice observers have become concerned that instead of many more new and interesting options, the field of choices in some cities offers only marginal variety: traditional public schools and "no excuses" college-prep charter schools. Rather than expanding options, they worry, have they actually narrowed?

Given these concerns, and the importance of providing distinct options for an effective choice system, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) set out to examine just how diverse, or homogenous, three cities' portfolios of schools really are. A 2015 national review of charter schools found that about 50 percent of the reviewed sample displayed some version of curricular or pedagogical specialization, as opposed to a generalized curriculum.[1] The same year, a review found that in New Orleans, where half of the city's schools identified as college-prep oriented, schools also varied widely across several other dimensions, including school structures, specialized curriculum focus, and enrichment programming.[2]

To build on this research, CRPE analyzed the portfolio of options in Denver, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C.—three cities that offer both district-run schools and charter schools run by multiple operators. We examined the publicly available data that a family might use to make decisions, including parent guides and school and district websites. Using these sources, we gathered information on the educational programs in district and charter schools to identify schools' overarching curricular foci, instructional approaches, and extra programmatic offerings.[3]

What we found is that in each of these cities—and likely others—there is more diversity in school models and educational approaches than one might think. For instance:

- Career-focused high schools are almost as prevalent as general college-prep high schools.

- Even college-prep schools differ on important dimensions—for example, offering a student-centered instructional approach.

- Charter schools, which some critique as singularly focused on core academics, offer a surprising diversity of enrichment activities, especially music and athletics.

- Many schools mention an emphasis on social-emotional skills.

However, many schools, especially at the K–8 level, do a poor job of differentiating themselves and making clear their distinct offerings. In fact, the information they provide to parents and the general public illuminates almost nothing about how they approach teaching, learning, or school culture;

even parents who seek out information may conclude that their options aren't all that varied. Without a better understanding of what schools provide, it is impossible for communities to know if their schools are offering what students really need, and impossible for families to make good decisions about which schools are best for their children.

To meet the full potential of a portfolio system, cities must do a better job of assessing what kinds of variety in schooling matters most to families, and engage communities in shaping the portfolio of options. And cities must close the gap between reality and perception by vastly improving the quality and availability of public information about school offerings. This report is meant as a starting point to raise questions, prompt deeper conversations in communities about what the right mix of schools might look like, how to get there, and how to keep assessing that mix over time.

We based this report on what we found in publicly available information about schools' program offerings. Our data were compiled between July and December 2016 based on the information available during that period. It is important to note that the available options in these cities may be different than what is reported by these information sources, and what is available today may be different from what we found in the data in 2016, as the portfolio in these cities is dynamic. Also, we chose to study schools as opposed to number of seats within schools as our unit of measure. We did this to capture the variety of models districts and charter authorizers were offering. It may mean, however, that where we find a high number of a certain school type, if it is a small school or specialized program, it might only educate a small number of students. City-based researchers will want to study student access to schools as a next step in understanding whether students can truly choose from a wide and quality mix of schools.

THREE CITIES, THREE DIFFERENT PORTFOLIOS:
Denver, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C.

Portfolio cities combine the benefits of school autonomy, parent choice, and accountability to provide local families with what is meant to be a rich, high-quality array of schools that respond to local interests and needs. Chartering schools has become a key mechanism through which these three cities have sought to improve the quality and diversity of schools, though they vary in how they developed and manage their portfolio options.

Distribution of School Types Across Three Portfolio Cities

City	Total number of schools	Total K-12 enrollment (2015-2016)	Total schools serving K-8	Total schools serving 9-12	Total traditional schools (share of total)	Total charter schools (share of total)
Denver	218	90,234	158	60	156 (72%)	62 (28%)
New Orleans	86	46,478	61	25	7 (8%)	79 (92%)
Washington, D.C.	222	87,344	168	54	113 (51%)	110 (49%)

Source note: Data for total public K–12 enrollment are from each city's state education agency website: Colorado Department of Education, Pupil Membership District Data, Pupil Membership Trend Data (District Level); District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education, SY 2015-16 General Education Final Enrollment; Louisiana Department of Education, Enrollment Counts, Oct 2015 Multi stats (total by LEA).

The portfolio in Washington, D.C., is almost evenly split between charter schools and district-run schools. District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) is the local education agency (LEA) overseeing the city's district-run schools. The charter sector is overseen by an independent charter board, DC Public Charter School Board (DCPCSB), which is overseen by the mayor. Each charter school is its own LEA, and DCPS and DCPCSB share an application system, known as My School DC, in which almost all schools participate. Each LEA enrolls students independently, and their enrollment processes, procedures, and deadlines vary. While DCPS and the DCPCSB independently oversee their respective schools, they share data and a citywide student information system for enrollment, contribute data to a common report detailing student discipline and mobility data, and at times work strategically on other overlapping policy concerns.

Charter schools comprise 28 percent of all public schools in Denver, compared to 49 percent in D.C. Unlike DCPS, Denver Public Schools (DPS) is the city's charter authorizer, and as such it manages the city's entire portfolio of public schools.

New Orleans' public schools are predominantly charter schools authorized by the state and overseen by the Recovery School District (RSD). At the time of data collection, only a handful of schools were overseen by the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) as direct-run or as OPSB-authorized charter schools. Beginning in 2018, all schools previously overseen by the RSD will be authorized by OPSB.

Portfolio of Options in Three Cities: More Diversity Than Some Think

We gathered publicly available data on nearly every charter and district-run public school in Denver, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C., using the parent guides and websites that have been created by schools, districts, and partner organizations to help families make informed choices.[4] The guides tend to include basic information, such as hours and location, and more detailed information about academics and extracurricular activities. For each school, we examined its stated mission, any references to academic foci and curriculum, enrichment programming, language programs, and on-site social services.[5] We classified schools along three major domains where research shows what parents care about and that tend to be identifiable through publicly available information.[6] They are:

1. **Curricular focus** (what schools teach)

2. **Pedagogical approach** (how schools teach)

3. **Enrichment offerings** (including elective courses and extracurricular activities)

Parents also consider a school's approach to discipline, behavior, and social-emotional growth, but these factors are less readily available through public information.

For more detail on our methodology for identifying and applying classifications, see Appendix A.
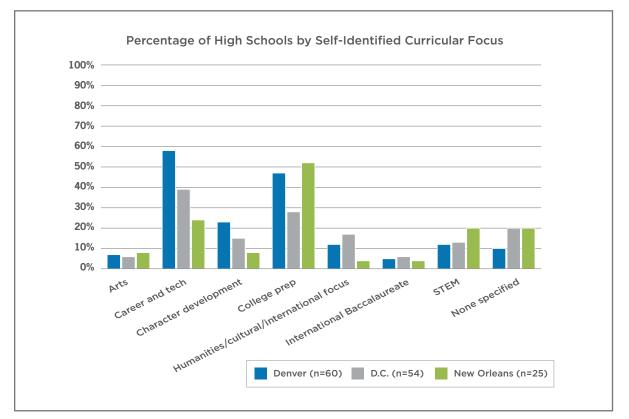
On the whole, schools in Denver, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C., describe themselves as providing a range of curriculum foci, instructional approaches, and enrichment options that give students opportunities to explore their interests and let schools reflect the interests of their communities.[7] In particular, a few areas of diverse options stand out in high school curriculum, enrichment offerings (even in charter schools), and newly emerging non-academic areas like social-emotional learning.

Curriculum

Finding: Nearly as many high schools report offering career pathways as report offering college-prep.

We identified seven curriculum foci for both the K–8 and high school levels that occur across the three cities (the distribution of curricular foci is shown for high schools in Figure 1 and for K–8 schools in Figure 2). As many would expect, we found a large share of college-prep schools in both the high school and K–8 portfolios in these cities, as well as a variety of offerings in STEM (science, technology, engineering, math), arts, and the humanities.

FIGURE 1.

College and Career-Technical Preparation Predominate in High Schools

Percentage of High Schools by Self-Identified Curricular Focus

Denver (n=60) — D.C. (n=54) — New Orleans (n=25)

Note: the categories are not mutually exclusive (e.g., a school could be both arts and college-prep), except for "none specified." Therefore, the percentages of schools in each category do not total 100.

Dual enrollment programs (where students can earn both high school and college credits simultaneously) and Advanced Placement courses are also prevalent, especially in Denver and New Orleans.[8] In Denver, for example, 75 percent of high schools report allowing students to enroll in college classes through the state's concurrent enrollment program. Seventy-two percent of high schools offer Advanced Placement courses. In New Orleans, 56 percent and 76 percent report providing dual enrollment or Advanced Placement courses, respectively. In D.C., however, dual enrollment and AP classes were only reported as available in 7 percent and 31 percent of high schools, respectively.

Amid this college-bound orientation, career and tech programs are still surprisingly well represented in the high school portfolios. In D.C., nearly 40 percent of high schools appear to have a career and technical focus; in Denver, nearly 60 percent do. The majority of D.C. schools offering this focus are operated by the school district (94 percent), not charter schools; in Denver, the share of schools reporting a career and technical path is roughly even between traditional and charter schools. Relative to Denver and D.C., a smaller share of New Orleans schools—just 24 percent—report providing a career and technical focus.[9]
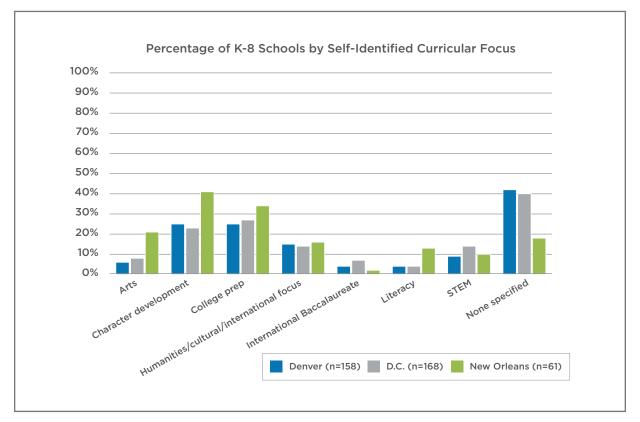
The relatively low number in New Orleans likely reflects a recent trend to eliminate standalone technical schools and make career and technical training accessible to more students—including the college-bound—by embedding it as one pathway in an otherwise college-prep curriculum. Beginning in 2014, Louisiana students seeking a career diploma had the option of accessing a regional network for support in crafting a career-focused curriculum as well as professional externship

experiences. Since these programs are operated through regional networks and students from any school can participate, they are not necessarily attributed to a school. Similarly, most career and technical schools in Denver and D.C. embed a career and technical pathway in their more traditional curriculum.[10] To be sure, these embedded tracks are less comprehensive than a college-prep curriculum, in that all students are not expected to participate in them.

One-third of Denver's high schools and one-fifth of D.C.'s high schools mention an alternative approach. Generally, these schools keep enrollment very low and provide highly personalized programs for students who have struggled in more traditional schools or are facing serious personal challenges, such as pregnancy, homelessness, and incarceration. All of these schools describe prioritizing social and emotional development in addition to academic remediation and acceleration. Some of these programs have a strong emphasis on career preparation, though many report providing students with a wide range of opportunities, including college preparation.[11]

We found it interesting that in comparison to high schools, which showed a prevalence of curricular themes, a significant portion of K–8 schools did not mention a specific curricular focus (see Figure 2). This was especially noticeable in Denver and D.C., where we categorized 42 percent and 40 percent of K-8 schools, respectively, as "non-specified."

FIGURE 2. **A Significant Portion of K–8 Schools, Particularly in Denver and D.C., Do Not Specify a Curricular Focus**

Percentage of K-8 Schools by Self-Identified Curricular Focus

Legend: Denver (n=158), D.C. (n=168), New Orleans (n=61)

Note: the categories are not mutually exclusive (e.g., a school could be both arts and college-prep), except for "none specified." Therefore, the percentages of schools in each category do not total 100.

Instructional Approach

Finding: Schools report a wide range of instructional approaches, though many don't communicate this effectively.
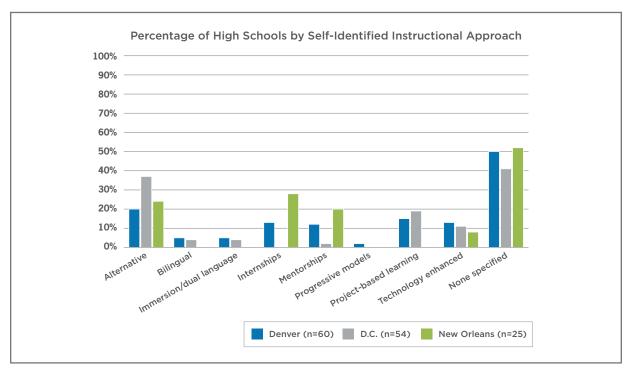
Parent surveys and focus groups conducted in recent years show that instructional approach is an important concern for families when choosing schools and is one reason why they move their child from a school later. Their child's success in school may hinge on finding the right model—for example, a less structured instructional model rather than a highly structured one.[12]

From our review of school descriptions and mission statements, we attempted to classify schools according to their apparent instructional philosophy. Overall, we identified eight main instructional approaches at the high school level (see Figure 3) and seven at the K–8 level (see Figure 4). We found a wide range, including progressive, project-based, and language immersion/dual-language approaches.

But this variety was apparent only in a relatively small number of schools. Information about instructional approaches was missing from many school descriptions, potentially leaving families ill informed. In the three cities, between 58 and 64 percent of K–8 schools and between 41 and 52 percent of high schools fail to provide any explicit information on their instructional approaches.
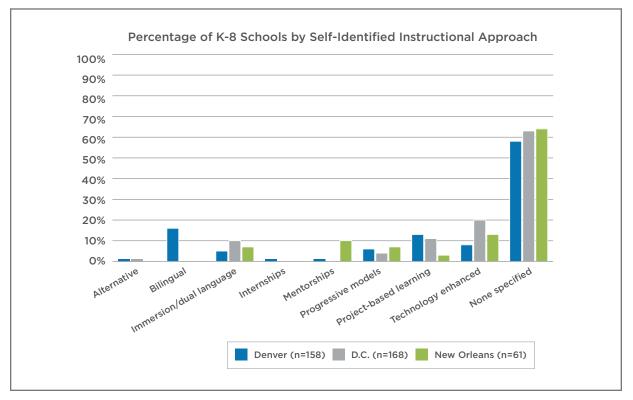
It is hard to know what this lack of information really means. For example, it could be that the instructional approach at a school defies specification because each teacher determines their own approach. It could also mean that the school employs the traditional approach of teacher as lecturer, delivering instruction to students—which perhaps goes without saying. The lack of specification itself doesn't necessarily imply poor teaching or that school leaders and staff are unclear about how they teach. It does, however, mean that parents have no way of knowing what the instructional experience will look like for their child when they are choosing a school.

FIGURE 3. **High Schools in Each of the Cities' Portfolios Offer Variation in Instructional Approach**

Percentage of High Schools by Self-Identified Instructional Approach

Legend: Denver (n=60), D.C. (n=54), New Orleans (n=25)

Categories: Alternative, Bilingual, Immersion/dual language, Internships, Mentorships, Progressive models, Project-based learning, Technology enhanced, None specified

Note: the categories are not mutually exclusive (e.g., a school could offer a bilingual program and project-based learning), except for "none specified." Therefore, the percentages of schools in each category do not total 100.

Percentage of K-8 Schools by Self-Identified Instructional Approach

Legend: Denver (n=158) | D.C. (n=168) | New Orleans (n=61)

Note: The categories are not mutually exclusive (e.g., a school could offer a bilingual program and project-based learning except for "none specified." Therefore, the percentages of schools in each category do not total 100.

Some college-prep schools describe using a specific instructional approach. For example, we looked at how many schools describing a college-prep curriculum also described using a more "student-centered" approach—such as progressive or project-based instruction that treats the student as an active instigator of learning, rather than as a passive recipient of the teacher's instruction. As shown in Table 1, we found that about one-third of college-prep high schools in Denver and D.C. and one-quarter in New Orleans described using a student-centered instructional approach. At the K–8 level, about one-quarter of Denver's and New Orleans' college-prep schools described using a student-centered approach, while only a small fraction of D.C.'s college-prep schools did.[13] These results suggest that a few of the college-prep schools are trying to step away from traditional teacher-driven instruction.

TABLE 1.	Number of Schools That Self-Identified as Offering a College-Prep Curriculum and a Student-Centered Instructional Approach			
City	Number of self-identified college-prep K–8 schools	Number of self-identified college-prep K–8 schools with a student-centered instructional approach	Number of self-identified college-prep high schools	Number of self-identified college-prep high schools with a student-centered instructional approach
Denver	40	12	28	6
New Orleans	21	5	13	2
Washington, D.C.	46	6	15	6

Note: The student-centered instructional approach category includes schools that identified as offering a progressive (e.g., Montessori), project-based, and/or technology-enhanced instructional approach.

Enrichment

Finding: *All schools, including charter schools, report offering many important enrichment activities.*

The school portfolios in all three cities offer a range of enrichment opportunities: before- and after-school tutoring, debate, and robotics are the most prominent enrichment opportunities across the three cities. Sports and performing, visual, and musical arts are also common. In Denver and D.C., where the portfolio is split across district and charter schools, both types of schools offer enrichment opportunities. Figure 5 shows the array of enrichment offerings reported in high schools across cities.

FIGURE 5.	Enrichment Offerings Provide Opportunities for Learning Beyond Core Subjects in High School

Percentage of High Schools by Self-Identified Enrichment or Elective Offerings

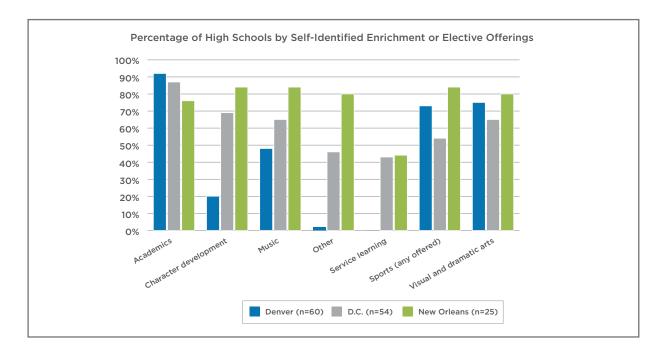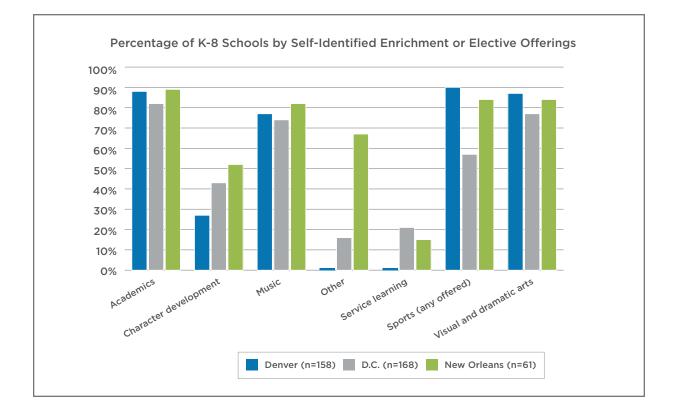Denver (n=60)   D.C. (n=54)   New Orleans (n=25)

Table 2 shows that reported enrichment opportunities in Denver's high schools have strong parity across the sectors in several areas. In D.C., although a large share of charter high schools report that they offer enrichment opportunities, the opportunities are less common than in the city's district high schools.

TABLE 2. Enrichment Opportunities in Charter and District High Schools

Enrichment Activity	Denver (n=60)		New Orleans (n=25)		Washington, D.C. (n=54)	
	Percentage of charter high schools (n=19)	Percentage of district high schools (n=41)	Percentage of charter high schools (n=21)	Percentage of district high schools (n=4)	Percentage of charter high schools (n=31)	Percentage of district high schools (n=23)
Academics	89%	93%	86%	25%	81%	96%
Character development	42	10	86	75	68	70
Music	47	49	86	75	55	78
Other	5	0	81	75	42	52
Service learning	0	0	52	0	45	39
Sports (any offered)	79	71	86	75	45	65
Visual and dramatic arts	84	71	81	75	55	78

Figure 6 shows the array of enrichment offerings reported in K–8 schools across cities and Table 3 breaks them down by sectors. Table 3 shows that reported visual and performing arts opportunities are less common in K–8 charter schools than in district schools. Sports opportunities are reported less often in D.C.'s K–8 charter schools.

FIGURE 6. **Enrichment Offerings Provide Opportunities for Learning Beyond Core Subjects in K–8**

Percentage of K-8 Schools by Self-Identified Enrichment or Elective Offerings

Denver (n=158) ■ D.C. (n=168) ■ New Orleans (n=61)

TABLE 3. Enrichment Opportunities in K–8 Charter and District Schools

Enrichment activity	Denver (n=158)		New Orleans (n=61)		Washington, D.C. (n=168)	
	Percentage of K–8 charter schools (n=36)	Percentage of K–8 district schools (n=122)	Percentage of K–8 charter schools (n=58)	Percentage of K–8 district schools (n=3)	Percentage of K–8 charter schools (n=78)	Percentage of K–8 district schools (n=90)
Academics	89%	88%	90%	67%	64%	97%
Character development	61	16	52	67	32	52
Music	58	83	81	100	55	90
Other	3	<1	67	57	15	70
Service learning	0	<1	14	33	24	18
Sports (any offered)	94	89	85	67	18	90
Visual and dramatic arts	75	91	86	67	53	98

Enrichment programs are one way to infuse community interests into schools. For example, marching band has significant cultural roots in New Orleans. In that city, music opportunities are available in 82 percent of the city's K–8 schools and 84 percent of its high schools, most of which are charter schools. In fact, most of the schools make explicit mention of their New Orleans-style marching bands.

Two notable gaps in expected school enrichment offerings raise questions about what data are being collected and reported about schools at the city level. First, relative to the other two cities, D.C. high schools appear much less likely to offer sports programs. Several explanations for this are possible. There was no consolidated data source on school characteristics, so we relied heavily on school websites, where we suspect extracurricular offerings were less consistently reported. It may be that schools in D.C. don't offer sports as frequently because the constrained and expensive real estate market may make finding or building facilities with fields and gym space very difficult, or that sports tend to be provided by local community organizations rather than schools. Also, many D.C. high schools are very small and some are under enrolled, which can make it hard to form sports teams.

In Denver, it appears that only a small number of schools provide service learning opportunities compared to the rates in D.C. and New Orleans. It is possible that the public data tool, the Great Schools Enrollment Guide, did not ask explicitly about these offerings like the parent guide in New Orleans did. In the cases of sports in D.C. and service learning in Denver and indeed across the array of enrichment offerings in each of the three cities, the results should be interpreted with some caution; schools may be offering more opportunities than reported or not offering them at all.

Social-Emotional Learning

Finding: *Many schools mention an emphasis on social-emotional skills.*

Parents and educators alike express concern about students' non-academic development. Realizing that academic training alone will not be enough for children to develop the confidence, resilience, creativity, and agency they will need to thrive as adults, educators are integrating social-emotional learning into their goals for students and their approaches to teaching and learning.[14]

Many schools, particularly in New Orleans and D.C., offer optional enrichment programs (either during the day or through after-school programs) to advance character development in students. In these cities, nearly half or more of all K–8 and high schools offer enrichment programs oriented toward character development, including Girls on the Run, Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, mentoring partnerships with local organizations, and peer mediation or youth advocacy councils. In New Orleans, some of these additions came after families and advocacy groups organized and pushed for trauma-informed approaches in addition to lawsuits and consent decrees. In Denver, many schools mentioned adopting the districtwide restorative justice approach, as well as other schoolwide efforts to promote character. Our research captured these emphases through the "character or social-emotional development" curricular focus.

Traditionally, social-emotional and character development has been the domain of after-school and/or enrichment providers. However, our analysis of curricular foci demonstrated that some schools have made character development a prominent feature of their school and have implemented a specific curriculum or program for all students during the school day (see Table 4). These programs are most common in K–8 schools (between 23 and 41 percent across the three cities), but a small number of high schools in each city also report a specific character development curriculum focus (between 8 and 23 percent across the three cities). Some of the curricula mentioned included programs such as the 4Rs; Competent Kids, Caring Communities; Tools of the Mind; Yale's RULER; or locally developed programs. For example, the KIPP network developed their own program that explicitly focuses on character development at all levels of schooling.

City	Percentage of K–8 schools	Percentage of high schools
Denver	25%	23%
New Orleans	41	8
Washington, D.C.	23	15

In addition, certain instructional approaches, such as progressive approaches, Montessori, and project-based learning, have long incorporated the social development of students. We also found several alternative school models in Denver and New Orleans that provide students identified as at-risk with highly personalized programs emphasizing social-emotional development alongside academic development. But, as we found in visits to a small number of schools in each of these cities, even teachers in more traditional settings (such as college-prep schools) are starting to integrate similar principles into their instruction that call on students to take more ownership in directing their learning.

However, this focus may not be apparent to those seeking information through school guides and websites. These schools may make broad references to developing "leaders," "values," or "character" but otherwise offer few details on how they integrate non-academic goals into their programs.

As the principles and strategies around social-emotional learning become more rooted in our educational models, schools may become more specific in describing these goals and their approach to reaching them. In the meantime, cities interested in fostering a portfolio rich with schools committed to social-emotional learning may need to communicate directly with those schools to determine where and how they are incorporating non-academic goals into their programs and to encourage them to be proactive in describing this.

Student Discipline and School Culture

Finding: Current publicly available information provides a limited view into how schools approach student behavior and discipline issues.

Focus group conversations reveal that parents are concerned about how schools approach student behavior, school culture, and safety. Specifically, parents have varied, often strong, opinions about the rigidity of schools' approach to managing student behavior. Some parents take issue with highly specific and strict environments (often referred to as "no excuses" schools), while other parents appreciate them and seek them out. No matter their preference, all parents face the reality that it is very difficult to find out what a school's approach to behavior and discipline is from the information they are provided.

Parent guides do not provide a platform for schools to articulate their approach to student behavior and discipline. A small number of schools in each city offer glimpses of their approach in their mission statements—but they are very vague and provide no information about how the school fosters such an environment. For example, one mission statement reads, "We are committed to providing students a safe, challenging and joyful environment to learn and grow." Another mentions a

"rigorous but supportive learning environment." These statements are representative of the extent to which any of the public information makes references to the behavioral model, structure, or culture of the school.

In the end, parents are left to make inferences, largely based on the reputation of local charter school networks or anecdotes from other parents. D.C. parents may gain some clarity from the School Equity Reports published by the D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education, which provide parents with information on schools' suspension, expulsion, and attrition rates disaggregated by student group.[15]

The public data also offer only limited detail on schools' strategies for meeting the unique learning needs of students. Many schools mention "meeting all students' needs." But with the exception of alternative high schools, the public data rarely provide detail on the specific approaches to teaching and learning that enable them to do so. This is of particular concern for parents of children with special needs or parents of children learning English, who our parent survey reveals are more likely to have difficulty finding the information they need to make a school choice.[16]

Looking Forward: Building a Community-Driven Supply Strategy

In general, this analysis shows that the portfolio of school offerings is much more diverse than many perceive. But there are some key areas cities should focus on in the near term to provide families with even more diverse choices.

First, K–8 schools display limited diversity in their instructional approach, even as many distinctive instructional approaches are being used successfully. For example, many K–8 schools are using data and small student groupings to better personalize instruction. Cities should encourage schools to describe their instructional approach and should ask schools to adopt a schoolwide approach if they don't have one.

Second, though many schools describe efforts to focus on more than academic goals, families are showing growing interest in instruction that gives equal priority to academic development and social-emotional development. Cities should conduct research and development around social-emotional learning approaches to learn more about how effective these programs are and think about scaling those that are most effective.

Finally, cities have an opportunity to better engage their communities in shaping the diversity of their portfolio of schools. The public data are a reasonable place to start benchmarking the programmatic diversity of a city's portfolio. However, this does not suffice if a city wants to strategically manage the supply of schools for programmatic diversity. In that case, the city might benefit from tailored data collection that provides information on community interests, more detailed information on the non-academic dimensions of schools, and consistent information across schools. One approach might include the following steps.

1. **Survey families and education leaders to identify which program variation matters.** An important concern when strategically managing the supply of schools in a city is providing a portfolio of schools that meets the local interests and needs of families. Cities might begin their efforts with a series of focus groups and surveys to understand what kind of programs parents, educational leaders, and community leaders want to have in their city. What schools do educators feel would serve the learning needs of local students? What programs reflect the interests and aspirations of parents? What enrichment opportunities are needed to round out the non-academic experiences available to students? What programs will set students up for jobs and careers in future local job markets? Specific interests may vary geographically within a city.

2. **Use the data about school demand to drive the work.** Many cities now have rich data about which programs are high in demand but low in supply. Through enrollment systems, cities know this about their schools, and they should share this information more broadly.

3. **Conduct a needs assessment of models and their geographic locations.** In some cities, very clear dividing lines exist that are geographically based but socio-economically and racially driven: certain neighborhoods may have limited STEM programs, no dual-language programs, and no selective high schools or dual enrollment programs. Other areas may not have even one charter school.

4. **Create tailored data collection on school programs.** A central organization could tailor a short interview protocol that asks leaders from each school how they offer the approaches that the community has said it wants. While time-consuming, this would yield a much more accurate database of the school programs in the city. A multi-year cycle to update the database (for example, 25 percent of schools updated each year), along with entries for new schools and deletions of closing schools, could keep the information relatively current with modest effort. A deeper investigation might also include some effort to obtain information from each school's parents.

5. **Revise parent guides to reflect community interests.** Incorporating the results from the surveys and tailored data collection into existing information tools can help cities ensure that the information parents are looking for is available and accessible. Current tools have important details on programmatic offerings; sometimes they include performance outcomes. But parents have told us that they also want information on what happens in schools and are looking for specific features.

6.   **Schedule a supply update cycle to account for evolving needs and preferences.** Community interests are not static; it will be important to update expectations as the city and its portfolio of schools evolves. Each year, cities should assess their portfolio of schools against the survey of needs, and they should also periodically conduct the survey itself to evaluate whether community interests have changed.

Conclusion

In Denver, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C.—and likely other cities—there is more diversity in schools' educational approach than one might think. We found as many schools report offering a career theme as report offering college-prep. All cities boasted a spectrum of curriculum foci and instructional approaches. Schools, even charter schools, are providing important enrichment activities that not only offer varied experiences but build connections to local communities. And a growing number of schools say they emphasize social-emotional skills.

There are still avenues for improvement in these portfolios and in the information that schools provide to families. The degree to which a school does or does not focus on areas meaningful to parents—like school culture, personalized instruction, and attention to social-emotional development—is often impossible to discern from the publicly available data. Cities must improve the collection and dissemination of the kind of information that is important to families as they choose schools. To make meaningful progress, they must also engage parents and communities more broadly to understand which diverse options matter to them. By moving intentionally toward clarity and transparency, cities will enable families to make more informed choices from a rich array of options to find the best school for their child.

Appendix A. Methodology: How We Classified and Identified Focus Areas

Our sample included 218 schools in Denver, 86 in New Orleans, and 222 in D.C. We used the following data sources to analyze offerings at those schools:

Denver	New Orleans	Washington, D.C.
Great Schools Enrollment Guide (DPS)	New Orleans Parent Guide (local nonprofit partner)	My School DC School Finder
District SchoolMatch website	Individual school websites	DCPS School Profiles
Individual school websites		DC Public Charter School Board school profiles
		LearnDC school profiles
		Individual school websites

Within each domain—pedagogy, curriculum, and enrichment—we identified several sub-domains. For example, the pedagogical approach category contains subcategories such as progressive (e.g., Waldorf, Montessori, Reggio Emilia), blended learning, and dual-language or language immersion. Curriculum subcategories include science, technology, engineering and math (STEM); arts; and International Baccalaureate. We did not consider subcategories to be mutually exclusive; for example, a school could be categorized as both STEM and arts, or as both blended learning and language immersion, if it considered itself to be so. As much as possible, we tried to find two pieces of evidence in publicly available information to back up our designations (e.g., the arts focus being mentioned in the mission statement and in programmatic descriptions).

To be sure, schools vary substantially in the quality and fidelity with which they implement programs. The analysis should be interpreted as the *intended* portfolio of programmatic options.

Classifying Curricular Focus

We applied a curriculum designation to a school if there was evidence that it was an essential component of the school's program and that the great majority of, if not all, students experienced that aspect of the school. For example, we labeled a school as "Arts" if we found evidence that arts were infused throughout the curriculum for most students, but not if the school merely offered arts among many standalone classes or as elective activities, even if the school self-identified as having an arts focus.

We made one exception to this rule about universality. We identified schools as having a career and technical curriculum focus when we noted that the school offered students the opportunity to complete a career pathway that included curriculum crafted around a vocation or professional

interest and opportunities for field-embedded experiences. We chose to note them even though they may not reach all students in the school because they are of wide interest to educational observers. Further, we chose not to move them to "Enrichment" because these programs define large parts of enrolled students' educational program, including the classes they take and, to some extent, the instructional approach they experience.

Curriculum Categories and Definitions

Arts integration (music, theater, studio, visual, performing, etc.)	Schools that offer arts activities as a component of the curriculum that ALL students receive—for example, beyond what is required by the district and/or state, or purely as electives. Arts may be a core curricular component, or integrated into core subjects. This category includes application-only schools and those described as arts magnet schools.
Career and Technical Education Models (CTE, high school only)	Schools that include a program, curriculum, or pathway dedicated to preparing students for a career, including job-embedded experiences and technical training. In some cases, students exit the program with a technical or associate's degree. In Denver, we tagged all schools housing a Career Connect program.
Character or social-emotional development	Schools that focus on character or social-emotional development and implement a special curriculum or set of activities explicitly designed to build character and/or social-emotional skills. Curricula may be commercial (e.g., 4Rs; Competent Kids, Caring Communities; Tools of the Mind; RULER, etc.) or locally developed. We applied this category to schools that implemented these types of offerings during the school day with all students.
College-prep	College-prep schools that explicitly identify college as the goal for all students and offer an academic curriculum that emphasizes core subjects and prepares students for college admissions and coursework. At the K–8 level, we expanded the definition to include schools that explicitly identify preparing students for a college-prep high school and similarly focus on core academic subjects to prepare students for secondary level work.
Humanities/cultural or international focus (literature, social studies, philosophy, law, language, etc.)	Schools with a special focus on humanities and/or culture(s) of the world. They may offer some or all instruction in languages other than English to students other than non-native English speakers.
International Baccalaureate (IB)	Schools that offer the International Baccalaureate (IB) program are accredited by the IB organization. The program is comprehensive and focuses on developing skills in four areas: intellectual, personal, emotional, and social. There are primary and secondary levels of the program.
Literacy (K–8 only)	Schools that have a specific focus on teaching literacy and make it the center of the school's overall curriculum.
STEM (science, technology, engineering, math)	Schools that have a special focus on STEM subjects. They may describe themselves as magnet schools.

Classifying Instructional Approaches

We labeled a school as having a particular instructional approach if that approach was explicitly stated and appeared to be applied schoolwide.[17] We made one exception to this rule with regard to how we labeled schools as offering mentorships or internships. Many schools mentioned partnerships with mentoring organizations, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, but the majority of the adult-student interactions appeared to take place after school or on an elective basis. Other schools—mostly alternative schools offering wraparound services to students—included mentorship and a relationship with a caring adult as a key component of a student's experience. Schools in the latter category received a designation for "Mentorship" under instructional approach, while schools in the former category had this aspect captured in the "Character" subcategory of enrichment. Our approach to internships was similar to the career and technical curricular designation: it is possible that schools mentioning internships did not offer that possibility to all students or expect all students to complete an internship, but because this can be an important part of a student's experience for those who participate, we applied that designation.

Instructional Categories and Definitions

Alternative (predominantly high schools)	Alternative schools or programs that are designed for or serve a majority of students with unique needs (e.g., behavior, mental health, homeless, incarcerated, pregnancy), whose needs are not met in a traditional learning environment, who have dropped out or are at risk of dropping out, or who have aged out of the traditional public school system. These schools tend to feature highly personalized engagements with students and emphasize social and personal growth.
Bilingual	In bilingual programs, non-native English speakers are taught in their native language while they are learning English, usually in early grades.
Immersion/Dual language	An instructional model that provides content-based instruction to students in two languages where the goal is for the students, over a number of years of participation in the program, to become proficient and literate in both languages.
Internships	All or most students are expected to participate in internships as part of the school's focus on career prep.
Mentorships	Schools pair students with mentors to help them build their life and academic skills with a focus on portfolio-building for higher education.
Progressive	Progressive approaches are categorized by a strong focus on being student-directed, including Montessori, Waldorf, and Reggio Emilia.
Project-based learning	Students learn primarily through "hands on," "learning by doing" experiences (e.g., field trips, offsite study) or projects rather than through direct instruction. This category also includes experiential and expeditionary learning schools.
Technology-enhanced	Schools that implement blended, personalized, or online learning. Blended learning means that a student learns at least in part through delivery of content and instruction via digital/online media with some element of student control over time, place, path, or pace. Personalized learning also incorporates some student control over time, place, path, pace, and learning modality, but may or may not incorporate use of technology.

Classifying Enrichment Activities

All additional offerings are activities that schools offer for students to opt into rather than as a required element. Because of the multitude of possibilities of what schools offer as electives or extracurricular activities, the subcategories in this area are rather broad compared to the more specific subcategories of pedagogical approach and curricular focus. For example, the broad subcategory of "Arts" includes visual arts, theater, graphic design, and more.

We recommend some caution in interpreting the enrichment activities, as these may, in part, reflect the reporting mechanisms used in the cities. For example, parent guides in both Denver and New Orleans ask schools to indicate which extracurricular or enrichment programs they have on campus by using a designated list, with the option to add others. We suspect that what schools in those cities say they offer is in part constrained by the list provided. For instance, few schools in Denver report the availability of service learning projects, but service learning is not an extracurricular or enrichment activity listed in the Denver parent guide. In D.C., these are self-identified by schools on the MySchoolDC profiles which can result in wide-ranging interpretation.

Enrichment Categories and Definitions

Academic	Characterized by being closely tied to the direct development or use of academic skills (e.g., Science and/or Math Olympiad, debate, school newspaper).
Character or social-emotional development	Includes schools that mentioned focusing on social-emotional development through implementation of a special curriculum or set of activities explicitly designed to build character and/or social-emotional skills in some students (e.g., electives) and/or during out of school time. Curricula may be commercial (e.g., 4Rs; Competent Kids, Caring Communities; Tools of the Mind; RULER, etc) or locally developed.
Music	Provides an opportunity to learn and experience music and musical performing arts (e.g., band, chorus, orchestra).
Other	We created this category for all extracurricular or elective offerings that did not fit into any of the other categories (e.g., anime club, cooking club, chess team).
Service (community service, service learning)	Includes volunteerism-oriented activities or programs that engage students in the local or global community (e.g., community garden, Key Club).
Sports	Includes sports teams (e.g., soccer, volleyball) as well as other athletic activities (e.g., yoga, martial arts).
Visual and theatrical arts	Provides an opportunity for students to experience or create visual and performing arts non-inclusive of musical performing arts (e.g., drama, graphic design).

Endnotes

1. Michael Q. McShane and Jenn Hatfield, *Measuring Diversity in Charter School Offerings* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 2015).

2. Paula Arce-Trigatti, et al., *Is There Choice in School Choice?* (New Orleans, LA: Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, 2016).

3. We visited 11 schools to examine disparities between the public descriptions and the activities in the schools. We attempted to also examine approaches to behavior and discipline, but there was little public information on these approaches.

4. We excluded any school that served only students outside the K–12 grade span (e.g., pre-kindergartners or adults).

5. We also tried to identify signals of the school's approach to discipline and behavior. Specifically, we looked for any references to specific discipline approaches (e.g., restorative justice or Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports). However, we found only a handful of schools that make reference to their discipline models and, therefore, do not include that information in this report.

6. CRPE's research on parents' experience with unified enrollment systems found that parents typically consider the school's curriculum and instructional approach in addition to the school's overall performance when making school choices. See Betheny Gross, Michael DeArmond, and Patrick Denice, *Common Enrollment, Parents, and School Choice: Early Evidence from Denver and New Orleans* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2015). Also, an analysis of applicant data from New Orleans found that parents, particularly those with low incomes, show a preference for schools offering extracurricular sports and band. See Douglas N. Harris and Matthew F. Larsen, *What Schools Do Families Want (And Why)?* (New Orleans, LA: Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, 2015).

7. The demographic composition of the school is another dimension of diversity in school options that communities may request. The range of schools in this category includes those with a stated mission to serve a certain student body (e.g., single-gender focus, ethnocentric focus, students with special needs) as well as schools designed to serve a student body reflecting a range of ethnic and economic backgrounds. Information on this dimension of schools was not readily available in the public data but may be available by examining the priorities built into each of the city's central enrollment systems.

8. We did not identify these programs as a curriculum focus since schools typically do not enroll all their students in AP or dual enrollment, and participating students often take select courses through these programs. However, these programs allow students to earn college credits in high school and indicate a college-going orientation or opportunity.

9. A few Denver and D.C. career and technical schools focus on providing job training and career certifications (often to students identified as at risk). These schools are more likely to be devoted exclusively to career preparation or are providing that support to a large number of the school's students.

10. For example, students in Denver have access to the district-supported Career Connect program, which is available at 29 schools (both district and charter) throughout the city, several of which also describe themselves as using a schoolwide college-prep curriculum. These programs offer specializations in several career areas, and students take a career-based curriculum with the potential for externships.

11. Alternative schools have seen mixed success over the years, with research showing that success depends on establishing a strong community within the school, providing learning opportunities that are engaging and relevant to students, and establishing an environment in which students develop agency in school operations.

12. Ashley Jochim, et al., *How Parents Experience Public School Choice* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2014). Christine Campbell, et al., *Unifying Enrollment in Camden: How Families Experienced the New Enrollment System* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2016).

13. Specifically, 9, 5, and 3 college-prep high schools in Denver, D.C., and New Orleans, respectively, described using a student-centered instructional approach. At the K–8 level, 11, 7, and 5 college-prep schools in Denver, D.C., and New Orleans, respectively, described using a student-centered approach.

14. See Camille A. Farrington, et al., (2012). *Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners: The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2012); Joseph A. Durlak, et al., "The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions," *Child Development* 82, no. 1 (Jan. – Feb. 2011), 405–432; Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York, NY: Random House, 2006).

15. It is difficult to know exactly how to interpret differences in these data. For example, a school may have a very strict discipline model but a policy that bars suspension. Another school might have a very loose discipline model and a disruptive environment that is managed through frequent suspensions.

16. Jochim, et. al, *How Parents Experience Public School Choice*.

17. If a school mentioned piloting a particular approach, such as blended learning, we applied that designation, assuming a high likelihood that the program would eventually be implemented schoolwide.

About This Report

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Through research and policy analysis, CRPE seeks ways to make public education more effective, especially for America's disadvantaged students. We help redesign governance, oversight, and dynamic education delivery systems to make it possible for great educators to do their best work with students and to create a wide range of high-quality public school options for families. Our work emphasizes evidence over posture and confronts hard truths. We search outside the traditional boundaries of public education to find pragmatic, equitable, and promising approaches to address the complex challenges facing public education. Our goal is to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America's schools. CRPE is a nonpartisan, self-sustaining organization affiliated with the University of Washington Bothell. Our work is funded through philanthropy, federal grants, and contracts.

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