Portfolio district reform meets school turnaround

Early implementation findings from the Los Angeles Public School Choice Initiative

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Abstract

Purpose – Despite the popularity of school "turnaround" and "portfolio district" management as solutions to low performance, there has been limited research on these strategies. The purpose of this paper is to address this gap by exploring the strategic case of Los Angeles Unified School District's Public School Choice Initiative (PSCI) which combined both of these reforms. It examines how core mechanisms of change played out in schools and communities during the first two years of implementation.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws on a mixed methods study, combining data from surveys, case studies, leader interviews, observations, and document review. It is guided by a conceptual framework grounded in research on school turnaround and portfolio districts, along with the district's implicit theory of change.

Findings – The paper finds early success in attracting diverse stakeholder participation, supporting plan development, and ensuring transparency. However, data also indicate difficulty establishing understanding and buy-in, engaging parents and community, attracting sufficient supply of applicants, maintaining neutrality and the perception of fairness, and avoiding unintended consequences of competition – all of which weakened key mechanisms of change.

Research limitations/implications – Data from parent focus groups and school sites may not be representative of the entire population of parents and schools, and data come from a short period of time.

Practical implications – The paper finds that developing processes and procedures to support complex reform takes time and identifies roadblocks others may face when implementing school turnaround and portfolio management. The research suggests districts invest in ways to ensure neutrality and create a level playing field. It also indicates that leaders should anticipate challenges to engaging parents and community members, such as language and literacy barriers, and invest in the development of unbiased, high-quality information and opportunities that include sufficient time and support to ensure understanding.

Originality/value – This paper begins to fill a gap in research on popular reform strategies for improving low-performing schools.

Keywords United States of America, Educational administration, Educational innovation, Accountability, School reform, Governance, Policy, Turnaround, Portfolio district, Low-performing schools

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

School districts throughout the country are facing mounting accountability pressures to improve student achievement and turn around their lowest performing schools. More and more schools are failing to make adequate yearly progress targets under the

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Although waivers to ESEA and discussions about reauthorization of the policy are changing the specifics of accountability pressures, it is clear that federal policies will continue to hold districts accountable for student performance.

Many policy makers are proposing "turnaround" reforms to address the issue of chronic low performance. In particular, turning around the lowest performing 5 percent of schools is a priority for the Obama administration (Duncan, 2010). Unlike incremental school improvement, turnaround reforms expect changes such as replacing the principal and/or staff and providing increased flexibility from current policies to produce significant achievement gains in a very short period of time (usually with two to three years), followed by sustained improvement over the long run[1].

More than 20 major cities are currently implementing another innovative approach to help low-performing districts improve: the portfolio management model (Hill and Campbell, 2011). Unlike school-centered turnaround strategies, portfolio reforms treat the district as a key unit of change, encouraging districts to allow a diverse set of service providers to operate schools so the district can observe the performance of various educational approaches and make decisions about the future selection of school operators. Toward this end, districts take on a new role as "performance optimizer" and, periodically, remove the lowest performing providers and expand the operations of higher performing providers based on student outcomes (Bulkley, 2010; Lake and Hill, 2009). In this way, the portfolio management model sits at the intersection of several existing district improvement movements including market-based reform, standards-based reform, and context-aligned differentiation of schools (Bulkley, 2010).

To date, research on the implementation and effects of both turnaround and portfolio districts remains limited. This paper begins to address this gap by exploring the strategic case of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD)'s Public School Choice Initiative (PSCI), which combined both of these popular reforms and treated schools and the district as key units of change. Implemented for the first time in August 2009, PSCI allowed teams of internal and external stakeholders to compete to turn around the district's lowest performing "focus" schools (selected by LAUSD administrators based on a diverse set of performance indicators) and to operate newly constructed "relief" schools designated to ease overcrowding (built using funding from state and local bonds). The district's theory of change behind PSCI was that, with intensive supports and appropriate autonomies, a range of school providers would be able to turn around low-performing schools and increase student achievement. The ultimate goal of this district reform was to build a diverse portfolio of high-performing schools tailored to and supported by the local community.

This paper examines the early implementation of the PSCI reform, focussing on the ways in which the mechanisms of change – including competition, autonomy, parental engagement, plan development, and capacity building – played out in the earliest days of the reform. Specific knowledge about implementation is essential for understanding the mechanisms by which improved outcomes do or do not occur. We ask: How were the key mechanisms of change outlined in the district's vision of PSCI enacted? What were the early successes and challenges? What can be learned from these early lessons to inform future turnaround and portfolio management efforts? The focus is on the district and its partners' real-time efforts to implement the reform and how applicant teams and other stakeholders experienced the plan development and selection process.

In the remainder of this paper we first summarize the literature guiding our research, then describe the LAUSD initiative. Next we describe the study's conceptual

framework and methods and present answers to the research questions. We conclude with a set of implications for policy, practice, and research.

Research informing the study of turnaround and portfolio reform

In this section we briefly review three sets of literature guiding our research. First, we examine the broad literature on school reform, which lays the foundation for newer district- and school-level reform efforts. Next we review the current landscape of research regarding the efficacy and implementation of school turnaround and the portfolio management model.

School effectiveness and reform

In 1966, James Coleman's Equal Educational Opportunity Survey report found, among other things, that racial integration had not improved academic achievement in urban schools and that school resources had little effect on student achievement once controls for family background were included in the analyses. In response, researchers set about identifying characteristics correlated with student achievement within the context of urban schools. This body of research identifying characteristics of "effective schools" informed several subsequent school improvement efforts (Bliss *et al.*, 1991; Edmonds, 1979, 1982; Levine, 1990; Levine and Lezotte, 1990; Purkey and Smith, 1983). The identified characteristics, or correlates, include strong instructional leadership, safe and orderly environment, a clear and focussed mission, a climate of high expectations for students, and frequent monitoring of student progress, among others.

Building on the Effective Schools work, whole-school reform gained popularity as a means of improving student outcomes. Beginning in 1978, "School-Wide Programs" (SWP) allowed schools to use federal Title I funds for whole-school reform and support, rather than targeted services (the norm prior to this time). The characteristics of Effective Schools were embedded in this work and, as Turnbull *et al.* (1990) noted, Title I coordinators reported that 62 percent of SWP schools in their states implemented Effective Schools programs as a main feature of their SWP. While SWP schools made important gains in reducing curricular and instructional fragmentation common in the provision of Title I services, SWP realized only small gains in student achievement (Wong and Meyer, 1998).

Building on the recognition that past piecemeal reforms were ineffective, in the late 1980s and early 1990s many non-profit organizations, universities, and educators nationwide began developing and implementing specific whole-school reform models, such as the New American Schools and Success for All[2]. From 1998 to 2007 the federally funded Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) program helped scale-up these efforts by providing schools with funding to purchase services from external whole-school reform developers (Gross *et al.*, 2009). Selected programs were required to address the 11 essential elements of a whole-school reform model, several of which align with the Effective Schools correlates (US Department of Education, 1998). While broadly implemented, researchers found no early effect of the reform on student achievement. Studies of CSR effectiveness during the first five years of implementation showed no student achievement gains in CSR schools over comparison schools (Bifulco *et al.*, 2005; Orland *et al.*, 2008). A meta-analytic study by Borman *et al.* (2003), however, examines evidence around the effectiveness of specific models and suggests that CSR is more likely to have positive impacts after several years of implementation.

Many studies of whole-school reform have confirmed that high-quality implementation of externally developed models is key to positive effects on students

(e.g. Aladjem and Borman, 2006; Berman and McLaughlin, 1978; Crandall *et al.*, 1983; Datnow *et al.*, 2000; Stringfield *et al.*, 1997). Across studies, several factors were found to affect the quality of implementation, including: strong instructional leadership from the principal and support from districts and model developers (Aladjem and Borman, 2006; Berends *et al.*, 2002; Datnow *et al.*, 2003); capacity of teachers to implement the model, both in terms time and expertise (Berends *et al.*, 2002; Datnow *et al.*, 2003); strong professional development and training for teachers (Muncey and McQuillan, 1996; Nunnery, 1998); and teacher and administrator buy-in and support for the model (Berends *et al.*, 2002; Berman and McLaughlin, 1975; Borman *et al.*, 2000; Datnow and Stringfield, 2000; Nunnery, 1998). Research also indicates that district policies and context greatly shape the success of school-level implementation. For instance, researchers found that implementation of the New American Schools model was higher in districts with stable leadership, leaders who made the reform central to system improvement, and dedicated resources to support implementation (Berends *et al.*, 2002).

Turnaround reforms

In recent years, the urgency around whole-school improvement efforts has increased. In response, school turnaround was designed to improve conditions in consistently underperforming schools within a short-time period (often three years) by changing staffing, governance, support, and/or instruction (Herman *et al.*, 2008; Villavicencio and Grayman, 2012). School turnaround encompasses a range of improvement strategies, from the dramatic (e.g. school closure) to the modest (e.g. adding an external professional development provider).

To date, little evidence exists regarding the efficacy of school turnaround efforts. The US Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences What Works "practice guide" on school turnaround (2008) found no empirical studies of requisite rigor demonstrating intervention effects or identifying factors that lead to successful school turnaround (Herman *et al.*, 2008), although one recent study finds that turnaround reforms supported by the federal School Improvement Grants (SIG) program led to significant improvement in student achievement for students in California's lowest-performing schools (Dee, 2012).

The majority of the research on turnaround reforms discusses the implementation of such reforms. Case study research, for example, provides valuable insight on the implementation challenges of turnaround and common practices used by schools (e.g. Bondy *et al.*, 2005; Duke, 2006; Freiberg *et al.*, 1990; Center on Education Policy, 2008; Chenoweth, 2007; Herman *et al.*, 2008; Wang and Manning, 2000). Echoing the results from the Effective Schools research (Edmonds, 1979; Purkey and Smith, 1983), Duke (2006) summarized the key characteristics of successful school identified across multiple studies of school turnaround: prompt assistance to struggling students, teacher collaboration, data-driven decision making, effective school leadership and organizational structure, staff development, alignment of instruction with curriculum, regular assessments, high expectations, parental involvement, and adjustments to scheduling. Similarly, another report outlined two key lessons for school turnaround based on the experiences of eight California districts: long-term improvement requires district-level systematic changes in resource alignment and policy to support school turnaround, and turnaround efforts must be tailored to the school's particular conditions, context, and needs (Knudson *et al.*, 2011).

A few recent studies of the SIG program have described significant variation across states implementing SIG as well as several implementation challenges for states,

districts, and schools. Specifically, state education agencies – which must manage the competitive grant process, provide technical assistance to districts and schools, and monitor progress – experienced challenges in maintaining adequate staff capacity to support districts and schools through grant writing and implementation, as well as in effectively monitoring the progress and activities of districts and external partner organizations during grant renewal (Center on Education Policy, 2012; Lazarin, 2012; US Government Accountability Office, 2012). In addition, these studies registered stakeholder concern over the school's ability to quickly achieve significant gains in student performance and the sustainability of interventions upon completion of the grant (Center on Education Policy, 2012; US Government Accountability Office, 2012).

School reconstitution – one dramatic method of school turnaround mandating replacement of over 50 percent of staff together with other school improvement strategies – has garnered attention as a potentially effective method of school turnaround. Past studies identify serious challenges faced by districts in accessing an adequate supply of capable and committed staff and providing additional valued resources and support structures to bolster the capacity of these schools (Fraga *et al.*, 1998; Hess, 2003; Odden and Archibald, 2000; Rice and Croninger, 2005; Wong *et al.*, 1999). Recent studies of SIG-funded reconstitution find similar human capital challenges to implementation, such as finding individuals at the state and local level with the expertise and commitment to carry out major school improvement efforts (Center on Education Policy, 2012; US Government Accountability Office, 2012).

Given these common challenges, it is not surprising that research on the intermediate outcomes of reconstitution is mixed (Rice and Malen, 2010). For example, one study of six reconstituted schools finds relatively negative near-term outcomes of school restructuring, including high levels of teacher turnover with experienced teachers often being replaced by first-year and non-certificated teachers, and only marginal adjustments in classroom practice (Malen *et al.*, 2002; Malen and Rice, 2004; Rice and Malen, 2003, 2010).

The implementation findings discussed above suggest that PSCI may be a particularly promising version of school reform. PSCI includes various methods of turnaround, from reconstitution to transformation, and incorporates systemic district-level changes, investment in capacity building, and a context-specific reform in its design. In addition, PSCI requires applicant teams to highlight how they will foster many of the elements found to contribute to successful turnaround efforts and identified in the broader school reform literature, such as data-driven decision making, teacher collaboration, staff development, curricular alignment, and parental involvement.

Portfolio management
In contrast to school-centered turnaround, another approach to improving district-wide student performance is portfolio management. Unlike a pure market-based reform, in which parent and student school choice and exit determines schools' operational tenure, the portfolio model allows the district to determine which operators will be added or removed from the portfolio system (Henig, 2010). Research on the reform's effects on schools and students is limited both in quantity and in the ability to draw causal conclusions about impacts on student outcomes, and has shown mixed results. For example, studies in New York and Philadelphia yield inconsistent findings on portfolio reform effects on student achievement across analyses drawing on different assessments and grade-level groups (Fruchter and McAlister, 2008; Kemple, 2011; Mac Iver and Mac Iver, 2006). Research on Chicago's Renaissance 2010 reform has also found mixed

results; the district saw an increase in elementary and middle school student achievement, while high school students showed slower progress on measures such as graduation rates, ACT composite scores, absenteeism, and grade point average (Humphrey and Shields, 2009; Roderick *et al.*, 2006).

Studies of individual districts have demonstrated some of the difficult organizational changes and challenges resulting from a shift to portfolio management (Bulkley *et al.*, 2010; Christman *et al.*, 2006; Gyurko and Henig, 2010; Hill, 2011; Levin *et al.*, 2010; Menefee-Libey, 2010; O'Day *et al.*, 2011). This research emphasizes the importance of maintaining supply and adequate local capacity to sustain portfolio reforms and notes difficulties in engaging parents and the community in the reforms. For example Levin *et al.*'s (2010) study of the New Orleans portfolio reform noted challenges in providing parents with adequate information and distrust among parents about decentralization and the use of external providers. Much of the implementation research also explores central office restructuring and leadership (Honig and DeArmond, 2010) and redesign of supports to newly autonomous schools (Nadelstern, 2012; Robinson *et al.*, 2008). Studies indicate that district central offices occupy a pivotal role in strategic management of the portfolio and must ensure coordination of services (Levin, 2010). Lake and Hill (2009) describe the importance of creating new departments for performance management, ensuring diffusion of the reform to other district departments (e.g. Human Resources personnel must understand nuanced changes to staffing policies), and maintaining the precarious role of a neutral manager with no pre-determined operator preference.

As we will discuss in the next section, LAUSD's PSCI is a hybrid turnaround-portfolio reform strategy that is intended to incorporate many of the lessons learned from the extant literature on school reform, school turnaround, and portfolio management. PSCI serves as an important case study for understanding the implementation and efficacy of variants of these reforms, especially as this blending of reforms may serve as a model for other large urban districts striving to improve student achievement. The next two sections will outline LAUSD's PSCI and will highlight reform elements that the district believed would instigate dramatic change in its low-performing schools.

Background on LAUSD's PSCI

LAUSD operates 891 schools and authorizes 161 charter schools that serve approximately 670,000 students, nearly three-quarters of whom qualify for free- or reduced-price lunch and nearly one-third of whom are English language learners. English Language Arts scores reveal widespread failure in the system; 32 percent of third graders score below or far below basic on the California Standards Tests (CST) and by the seventh grade this increases to 44 percent. Statistics for math achievement paint a similar picture. Today, 322,000 students attend one of the more than 250 schools in Program Improvement (PI) Year 3 status or higher. Only 52 percent of students graduate on time from high school (authors' calculations).

PSCI built on decades of past reform efforts in Los Angeles, most notably a series of systemic reforms seeking to empower local actors and advance student achievement in the 1990s (Kerchner *et al.*, 2008). These reforms – the Los Angeles Educational Alliance for Restructuring Now and the Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project – shared many of the same ideas and levers of changes embraced by PSCI, including increased autonomy and accountability, capacity building, planning, and parent involvement (Kerchner *et al.*, 2008). However, while LAUSD had increasingly adopted non-traditional school options for families in the past, including charter schools and

magnet programs, PSCI's introduction of competition for the operation of district facilities represented a dramatic shift in district policy.

Adopted by the LAUSD Board of Education in August 2009, the Public School Choice resolution established the long-term goal of creating "diverse options for high quality educational environments, with excellent teaching and learning, for students' academic success" (Flores Aguilar, 2009, p. 1). Responding to the "chronic academic underperformance" of many district schools and the strong interest from parents and communities to "play a more active role" in "shaping and expanding the educational options" (Flores Aguilar, 2009, p. 1), the resolution invited:

[…] operational and instructional plans from internal and external stakeholders, such as school planning teams, local communities, pilot school operators, labor partners, charters, and others who are interested in collaborating with the District to operate the District's new schools and PI 3 + schools […] in an effort to create more schools of choice and educational options for the District's students and families (Flores Aguilar, 2009, p. 2)[3].

The initiative was not intended to be a typical "choice" program in which parents choose the school their child will attend. Rather, this process provided the community with the opportunity to participate in developing school plans. The ultimate "choice" in PSCI was made by the LAUSD Board[4].

Designed for gradual scale-up, PSCI involved annual rounds (or cohorts) of schools in the process with the intention that all low-performing public schools would be transformed into high performers. Participating schools were identified by LAUSD administrators based on PI status, Academic Performance Index level and growth scores, percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced on the CST, and dropout rates. In each round, teams applying for a PSCI school responded to a detailed Request for Proposal, submitting lengthy school plans that covered topics from curriculum and instruction to school organization to professional development and school operations. In addition, applicants were asked to select one of a set of governance models already in existence in the district. These models varied in the levels of autonomy schools had from district and/or union policies and over resource use. Figure 1 outlines the six governance options available to PSCI applicants and lists them in order of the least to the most autonomous.

Submitted applications underwent a multi-stage review, which in the first two rounds included: a panel of internal and external reviewers and a Superintendent's Review Panel, parent and community voting, and superintendent recommendations to the LAUSD Board, which voted on the final set of winning applicants. In February

Traditional	Expanded School-Based Management Model (ESBMM)	Network Partnership	Pilot	Dependent or Affiliated Charter	Independent Charter
• follow federal, state, and district guidelines but can acquire greater flexibility via waivers. School staff may request a waiver that exempts site staff from specified articles of the union collective bargaining agreement.	• operate with increased levels of collaboration and shared decision-making from local school actors	• promote partnerships between public schools and external partners and are run by a team of internal and external stakeholders with autonomy over budget, governance, curriculum, and professional development	• modeled after Boston's pilot schools, which operate under a "thin" union contract and have autonomy over budget, curriculum, governance, schedule and staffing	• some flexibility around curriculum, personnel, and governance	• Exempt from most state codes and district policies regarding curriculum, instruction, budget, and personnel

Figure 1.
Governance models currently operating in LAUSD

2010 the Board selected from among 100 school applications for the first cohort of participating schools (PSCI 1.0), which included 12 low-performing focus and 18 newly constructed relief schools (Table I). Internal teams were comprised of groups of teachers seeking increased site-based management, or combinations of teachers, parents, and/or administrators from the local school community. External teams included non-profit organizations; charter management organizations (CMOs); and partnerships between internal and external groups. In this first round of PSCI, the Board awarded 33 PSCI schools to internal teams, and also selected five teams proposing charter schools and three non-profit organization plans.

Identified in May 2010 and scheduled to open or reopen in fall of 2011, the second full cohort (PSCI 2.0) included ten relief and three focus sites. In March 2011, the Board selected from 48 proposals and approved a range of teams to operate these schools including 17 internal and seven charter teams. In addition, the Board identified two focus schools and one relief school that did not receive plans of sufficient quality during the PSCI process and chose to restructure the focus schools and return the relief school to the 3.0 round of PSCI rather than allow any of the applicants to operate the schools (see Table I).

In August 2010, the district and partners received nearly $5 million dollars in federal funds through the Investing in Innovation Fund (i3) grant competition and $1 million dollars in matching private funds, which are being used to bolster the support for the development and implementation of school plans and to develop new accountability processes for schools that are operating PSCI schools. Also, in early 2011, Superintendent Ramon Cortines stepped down and John Deasy took over the position. Despite these higher level changes, the central office staff in charge of PSCI has remained mostly consistent over the course of the initiative, as have the partner organizations brought together to support the district's implementation efforts under the i3 grant. Grant partners include Unite-LA, an affiliate organization of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, and the United Way of Greater Los Angeles. Unite-LA acts as the host organization for the non-profit Los Angeles School Development Institute (LASDI), which is co-directed by LAUSD, the local teachers' union (UTLA),

	PSCI 1.0	PSCI 1.5	PSCI 2.0	PSCI 2.5
Number of sites	30	2	13	1
(Relief/focus)	(18/12)	(2/0)	(10/3)	(0/1)
Number of schools	39	2	27	1
(Relief/focus)	(24/12)	(2/0)	(24/3)	(0/1)
Selected teams				
Traditional	15	2	3	0
ESBMM	8	0	2	0
Pilot	8	0	12	0
Network partner	3	0	1	0
Affiliated charter	0	0	0	0
Independent charter	5	0	7	0
Unknown (restructure)	0	0	2	1

Notes: The number of *schools* may be larger than the number of *sites* because campuses, particularly high schools, were broken into smaller schools. [a]Due to an accelerated construction schedule and further analysis of school data, two additional relief schools were added to PSCI in February 2010 comprising PSCI 1.5 and one additional focus school was added for PSCI 2.5. Throughout the paper, we count 1.0 and 1.5 schools together as the 1.0 cohort and 2.0 and 2.5 schools as the 2.0 cohort

Table I.
Number of schools in PSCI 1.0-2.0 and selected governance models[a]

and the local administrators' union (AALA) and offers technical assistance and consulting to internal design teams.

Conceptual framework

Our study design, data collection, and analysis were guided by a conceptual framework grounded in the research on school turnaround and portfolio districts, as well as the district's implicit "theory of change" that we deduced from our interviews and review of documents (Figure 2). The district's theory of change, illustrated in Figure 2, highlighted six key levers of change that, if implemented, were expected to lead to dramatic improvements in student performance. First, rigorous screening of school plans was intended to ensure high-quality school designs. Second, competition among a diverse set of applicant teams was believed to motivate applicants to enhance the quality of these plans and increase the potential for innovation. Third, granting school operators autonomy over key domains such as staffing, budget, governance, and curriculum and instruction was expected to foster the development of schools that met district needs, were responsive to local contexts and student needs, and were staffed with committed personnel who shared the schools' goals and priorities (e.g. Chubb and Moe, 1990; Edmonds, 1979).

Fourth, district oversight and accountability mechanisms were intended to motivate PSCI school staff to perform their best. By requiring schools to establish and achieve the goals outlined in their proposals, the district encouraged staff to continually assess and improve their performance. Through strong oversight and accountability the district could stay informed of PSCI schools' progress, intervene quickly with struggling schools and, if necessary, return schools to the PSCI process. Fifth, technical assistance and support from the district and its partners were expected to build applicant teams' capacity for developing and implementing high-quality plans. Finally, community and parent involvement in the selection, development, and implementation of school plans was intended to provide additional pressures and supports.
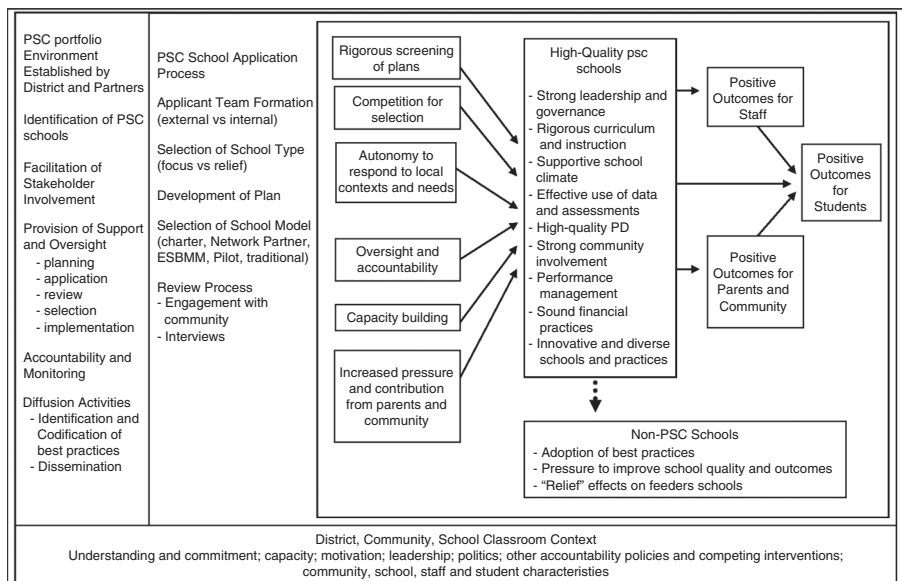
Figure 2.
Public school choice theory of change

These mechanisms were expected to yield a diverse set of high-quality learning environments (see Figure 2 for specific characteristics identified by LAUSD) and ultimately positive student outcomes. Student outcomes could result either directly or indirectly through effects on teachers and other school staff (e.g. retention of effective individuals, high job satisfaction) and parents and community members (e.g. high satisfaction with the school, strong sense of ownership). To the extent that the PSCI's effects spill over to non-PSCI schools – via pressure to implement reforms to avoid being selected into the Initiative in the future, the intentional, or natural spread of successful school models and ideas, or, in the case of relief schools, the alleviation of overcrowding – positive student outcomes were expected to translate into higher-quality schools overall.

Finally, it is understood that PSCI was embedded in a broader context that could influence its implementation and mediate its effects. Local human, physical and social capital were likely to affect the implementation of the core processes and quality of the work being done in PSCI schools (Berends *et al.*, 2002; Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Marsh, 2002; Massell, 1998; Spillane and Thompson, 1997). Local understanding and commitment to reform, school and district leadership and support, and the alignment of PSCI with existing policies would influence the extent to which local implementers carry out the reform (Corcoran *et al.*, 2001; Gamoran *et al.*, 1995; McLaughlin, 1987; Marsh *et al.*, 2008; Snipes *et al.*, 2002; Togneri and Anderson, 2003). Finally, structural variables, such as characteristics of community (e.g. political climate), the schools and classrooms (e.g. size, student-staff ratio), staff (e.g. level of experience), and students (e.g. income level) would likely mediate the initiative effects on various outcomes (e.g. Bryk *et al.*, 1993; Coleman *et al.*, 1966; Gamoran, 1987, 1992; Jencks *et al.*, 1972). This paper focusses primarily on the left two boxes and the levers of change. Although improved student outcomes is the ultimate goal, it cannot be reached unless the beginning steps of this process (plan development and selection) are well implemented and the key levers of change operate as intended. It is from this premise that we begin our inquiry.

Data and methods
The paper draws on results from the first year of a three-year mixed methods study, with particular focus on the second cohort of schools in 2010-2011 (PSCI 2.0). The decision to focus on the second cohort was purely pragmatic: the funding and start date of the study coincided with the second year of the initiative and thus real-time interviews and observations of the plan development and selection process were only possible for the second cohort of schools and beyond. Multiple data sources inform our analyses, including: surveys of participating design teams; school case studies; leader interviews; observations; and document review.

Surveys
In Spring 2011, we administered web-based surveys to one representative from all 45 PSCI 2.0 participating teams and received completed surveys from 36 teams for a response rate of 80 percent[5]. The survey asked about the plan writing process (team members, rationale for participation, support received), content of plans (governance model/waivers requested and rationale), and perceptions of PSCI (reported understanding of elements, opinions about process, and goals). Survey respondents were design team leaders (DTLs) identified from letters of intent submitted to LAUSD and included a mix of teachers, non-profit or charter school administrators, principals and school staff, and local district administrators (LAUSD is organized into eight geographic sub-districts). We conducted descriptive analyses of the survey data and

also compared responses of respondents from different types of teams (e.g. by governance model, membership, relief, or focus status). Throughout the paper we explicitly discuss only statistically significant differences. Given the small sample size we use the significance threshold of $p < 0.10$.

Case studies
Researchers conducted case studies of five PSCI 2.0 schools and the stakeholders involved in either developing proposals to operate those schools or belonging to the school community associated with the target schools. We chose schools to represent variation in school level (elementary, middle, high), type of school (relief or focus), and geographic location. For each school, we interviewed at least one member from all teams ($n = 11$; seven internal and four external teams) submitting applications, conducted parent focus groups ($n = 30$ parents total), observed site-specific meetings ($n = 27$), and reviewed documents such as print and social media coverage, school plans, and communications with stakeholders. All data collected were in near equal proportions across case study schools (e.g. we observed approximately five meetings per school).

Leader interviews, documents, and observations
Documents and interviews with LAUSD central office administrators and district partners ($n = 19$) provided us with information about the PSCI design and theory of change. To understand the nature of communication and technical assistance we observed 28 district meetings, including orientation sessions and workshops on school turnaround and various aspects of the school plan, and collected all relevant documents, such as agendas, powerpoints, and print and online communication.

Case study and leader interview notes and documents were coded along the dimensions of the conceptual framework and analyzed by individual school and across schools. We examined the results of all of these analyses to identify cross-school findings and themes. To enhance the internal validity and accuracy of findings we triangulated data from multiple sources, comparing interview data to documents and surveys whenever possible.

Study limitations
Three main issues limit the analyses. First, the scope of the initiative is quite large, and our resources are limited. Therefore, we were limited to a sample of five case study schools and were unable to gather representative data from all parents involved or expected to be involved in PSCI. Given these constraints, we acknowledge that our parent focus group and case study data may not be wholly representative of the entire population of school and parent participants[6]. Second, we draw on data from a very short period of time and do not yet have data on the actual implementation of the plans selected and the effects. However, the intent of this paper is to assess LAUSD and its partners' early implementation of the reform and to provide lessons for central offices embarking on turnaround and portfolio reform initiatives based on the LAUSD experience. Ongoing data collection will provide further insights into the rollout of PSCI and its longer-term effects. Third, as with the majority of survey research, our DTL surveys rely on perceptions (e.g. perceptions of understanding). To address this limitation we provide data from in-depth interviews to corroborate survey results.

Findings: early successes and challenges
Overall we find evidence of early successes in the implementation of PSCI, but also a number of challenges that brought into question some of the main assumptions of

PSCI. We organized these findings below by the contextual condition or lever of change that each bolsters or weakens.

Local understanding and commitment
As noted in our review of the literature, stakeholder involvement, understanding, and support are key conditions for successful implementation of any reform initiative (Bodily *et al.*, 2004; McLaughlin, 1987; McDermott, 2006; Marsh *et al.*, 2008; Sabatier and Mazmanian, 1979), particularly school reform. Without this basic support and understanding, individuals may be less inclined to work toward reform goals and to implement an initiative with fidelity. This is particularly true for PSCI and its theory of change: without buy-in and participation, key levers like competition and site-based autonomy would be difficult to implement. However, stakeholder understanding of and support for key aspects of PSCI were generally mixed.

   Stakeholder understanding. As with policy implementation generally, understanding is a pre-condition necessary for several of PSCI's core mechanisms of change. For example, if autonomy is going to drive change or innovation, stakeholders must be clear on what autonomies they are gaining when selecting a governance model. Similarly, if individuals eventually taking over schools are going to be motivated by accountability mechanisms, they need to understand the accountability metrics, consequences, and policies. However, our evidence suggests that not all stakeholders had a clear understanding of PSCI's core elements.

   Although the majority of DTLs reported on surveys that they understood what each governance model entails (86 percent reported mostly or completely understanding) and how schools were chosen to participate in PSCI (86 percent), fewer reported understanding key facets of the initiative, like the role of the Advisory Vote (57 percent) and how PSCI defines a high-quality plan (57 percent). Moreover, less than half reported understanding key aspects of accountability, such as how implementation would be monitored (49 percent reported mostly or completely understanding), how operators would be held accountable (43 percent) and consequences for PSCI schools not meeting goals over time (37 percent).

   Our cases similarly indicated weak understanding of several core elements of PSCI. "PSCI is very confusing for everybody," said one DTL. "Why is it called Public School Choice? It is a choice, the choice is the school board choosing which plan that they want to see implemented at the school site. So, it was created with a misnomer and then that just has continued." Others conveyed misunderstandings about various aspects of the initiative, most notably the autonomy-related mechanisms. Various models include different levels of autonomy related to staffing (i.e. independent charter schools have complete staffing autonomy, whereas traditional public schools are bound by the UTLA and AALA contracts, and other governance models fall in between) and scheduling (i.e. some models allow for increased school days and work hours, and others required schools to follow the UTLA contract in full), among other things. Several teams interviewed were unclear of the types of autonomy granted by each model.

   Several factors appeared to contribute to this mixed level of understanding. First, the short-time frame given to enact the Board resolution – just two months during the first round of PSCI – and the multiple changes to rules and processes throughout PSCI 1.0 and 2.0 may have played a role. Second, the district and its partners may have conveyed unclear and inconsistent messages about the initiative. "We haven't done a good job at communicating about PSCI," said former Superintendent Cortines, "People still see it as takeover rather than improvement and that bothers me." Third,

decision-making processes within LAUSD may have also exacerbated confusion. Although central office administrators within the Innovation and Charter Schools Division were responsible for day-to-day PSCI implementation, other district leaders – including the superintendent and Board members – had considerable latitude to make decisions that greatly altered the initiative and conflicted with prior decisions or rules laid out by administrators. As a result of the multiple decision makers involved in the processes, local teams and stakeholders may not have received consistent or clear answers or messages. As discussed later, the high-stakes nature of PSCI also may have created incentives to distort information, further contributing to misunderstanding and confusion.

Stakeholder support for PSCI. Consistent with past research (e.g. Berends *et al.*, 2002; Borman *et al.*, 2000; Datnow and Stringfield, 2000), support for the PSCI goals and theory of change appears to be another important pre-condition that district leaders and partners struggled to achieve. On the one hand, DTLs surveyed indicated fairly strong support for PSCI and key elements of the theory of change. The vast majority agreed that PSCI would increase high-quality education options in LAUSD and result in positive student outcomes (81 percent agreed or strongly agreed with these statements). More than half of DTLs also believed competition created by PSCI would lead to high-quality schools and outcomes for students (63 percent) and would motivate other non-PSCI schools to improve (56 percent).

In case study interviews with DTLs, however, respondents' views appeared to be more mixed. Some clearly endorsed PSCI and its key elements of change, particularly the competition lever. "It's an opportunity for the district to get a lot better very soon," said one DTL, "It's putting pressure on again, even just internal teams, to change the way they're doing things […] which is a great thing." A DTL from another school, similarly embraced competition as an effective motivator of change:

> So instead of just like "we've got to reopen that school, let's just slap together a proposal because it's paperwork," you get a group of motivated individuals who have to worry about a different group of motivated individuals producing the best possible plan that they honestly believe based on […] research will have the best outcome.

In contrast, other DTLs disagreed with PSCI and its core assumptions. Many interviewees reported that the competition detracted from a focus on improvement and would not result in more qualified school operators or school plans. Others characterized PSCI as "throwing money" at the problem. In addition, our case data suggest that parents and community members, a key stakeholder group, had weaker understanding of and support for the initiative.

Parent and community pressure and support
From the initiative's inception, parent and community engagement was considered a key lever for change. While parents and students did not directly choose their school of attendance, parent and community members were engaged and their feedback solicited to aid the superintendent in his plan selection decision. Consistent with previous research in portfolio districts (e.g. Bulkley *et al.*, 2010; Levin *et al.*, 2010) and whole school reform (e.g. Wang *et al.*, 1999), this proved to be a major challenge for the district and its partners in these initial rounds of PSCI.

Communication and engagement of parents and community members. For parents and communities to serve as both a source of support for and pressure on PSCI schools, they must not only participate but also understand the PSCI process, their role, and the content of options presented by applicant teams. Our data suggest that this did not

occur as hoped. First, the district and its partners struggled to get parents and community members to participate in PSCI. Attendance at district-sponsored community workshops was generally low with an average of 64 parents attending each meeting (out of school enrollments of 700-3,800) (Beltran *et al.*, 2011). In addition, a report from the League of Women Voters of Los Angeles (LWVLA) (2011) estimated that less than one percent of parents of students at the PSCI schools and feeder schools voted in the Advisory Vote. As Superintendent Deasy acknowledged, this vote tally "is not a reliable data point and in no way provides an adequate indication of what parents want for their school" (Deasy, 2011, p. 2).

Our case study data also indicate that parents and community members had weak levels of understanding about PSCI. For example, in focus groups, parents frequently reported not understanding the purposes of PSCI and/or conveyed misinformation about the initiative. One parent in a relief school explained, "They don't really explain why people [are] here; why the school has been put in this process." Many focus group participants – some of whom had just voted – also admitted to not comprehending the purpose of the Advisory Vote. When asked why they had come to the school that evening, one parent said "That's what I couldn't understand. What were we voting on?" At another school, a parent told us "The truth is that I didn't understand. There are three plans to vote on. We didn't choose any. I don't know if that'll affect the children or the others. I don't know." Finally, when asked about governance models, most parents focussed on the difference between charter and traditional schools and admitted to being unsure of the distinction. "The only thing I know about a charter school is [that it's] private," said one parent.

Language and literacy barriers. Observations and focus group data indicate that limited English proficiency and low levels of literacy among subsets of parents contributed to the low levels of understanding and engagement observed and weakened this as an effective lever of change. Although the district and its partners invested in translation services at nearly all meetings and translated printed materials, communication problems persisted. For example, a few parents reported that the language used in translation at meetings was academic in nature. "Usually we don't understand," one parent commented, "The language is too sophisticated." Similar concerns emerged at one voting center we observed, where some parents could not read the ballots or the executive summaries of the proposed plans due to low levels of literacy (a staff member read the materials out loud to them).

Quality of information. Some parents reported that information provided at meetings was too general. "I'm not thrilled with the information that was provided," said one parent. "I just think I need more information and that's why I'm sitting here in this position not knowing what to do." Others complained about a lack of un-biased sources of information. In fact, when asked where they would go for additional information about PSCI, one parent explained, "I asked the school where my son is enrolled about charter schools because I've heard that it's better. They couldn't give me an answer. She told me that I had to pay a small sum of money to have my son there and they were going to require that I spend more time in that school." As discussed later, the competitive pressures and reported "electioneering" also may have contributed to information inaccuracies and made it difficult for parents to ascertain the facts.

Structural and technical factors. Some of the structural arrangements of meetings and voting centers also may have contributed to confusion, limited access, and mistrust of information. Limited time also greatly affected the nature of communication and level of understanding. As Superintendent Deasy observed, with

few parents attending each meeting and often only attending one of a series of meetings offered, district leaders had very limited time to interact with each individual parent. He noted, "We found it challenging to go deeper in our conversations, as we often had a new group of parents at each meeting" (Deasy, 2011, p. 1). Similarly, a report from the non-profit Families In Schools (FIS) (2011) reported that "there are insufficient opportunities for parents to learn and comprehend complex information regarding school performance and school plans in order to make an informed decision" (Patterson and Cruz, 2011, p. 9).

In summary, the district and its partners struggled with executing the parent and community engagement strategies, and in particular the Advisory Vote. In fact, many district leaders and local media condemned the Advisory Vote as a failure (see, e.g. *Daily News*, 2011). District leaders similarly recognized that PSCI's community engagement efforts did not achieve its goals. As one Board member explained:

> A lot of parents were really engaged and involved, but so many were turned off […] they saw the politics, they saw the polarization, and they didn't like what they saw. […] We heard over and over again, they didn't understand the information, they were getting lied to, they felt manipulated, they didn't know who to believe.

We return to these issues again in a later section on the unintended consequences of competition.

Capacity building

Technical assistance and support provided to design teams during the plan writing process was an essential mechanism of change under the design of PSCI. The initiative relied on the development of high-quality school plans, written in part by non-traditional actors who may have been unaccustomed to plan writing. Our data indicate that LAUSD and partner organization LASDI successfully provided plan development support, though uneven provision of this support raised questions about the neutrality of the district and fairness of the process for some teams.

Support for the plan development process. Overall the district made significant progress towards establishing a wide range of standardized supports and services to assist teams with plan writing. It served as both direct service-provider and "broker" of individualized support through the new LASDI collaborative, a role commonly adopted by central offices implementing portfolio strategies (Bulkley *et al.*, 2010; Gyurko and Henig, 2010; Honig, 2009). Drawing on i3 grant resources, LASDI provided support via consultants and workshops, aiming to deliver targeted technical assistance and ongoing support to applicant teams that included both teacher and administrator representatives.

LAUSD also succeeded in providing direct technical assistance to design teams. Administrators within the Innovation and Charter School Division, with support from various other LAUSD departments, delivered a series of workshops and meetings to build understanding of PSCI and the RFP and develop deeper knowledge about multiple topics. More than three-quarters of the DTLs reported that they or a member of their team attended LAUSD and LASDI workshops and meetings, and the majority of DTLs reported receiving multiple supports and services, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Access to support. Early on, LASDI decided that they would only support teams that included both administrators and teachers – both of which are represented by the unions constituting two of the three partners directing LASDI. As one LASDI leader said, "When a school decides that they want LASDI's help, the directors go out and sit down with the principal and teacher teams. They're very adamant that they meet with

both teacher leader and principal and if they're not even willing to sit in a room, we don't go out." This decision excluded teams comprised solely of teachers, as well as external teams from receiving LASDI support. When interviewed, four of six LASDI-ineligible teams conveyed strong, negative opinions about the lack of access to these capacity-building resources. Referring to LASDI, one charter school team member explained, "We don't have an equivalent institution for our capacity. […] We don't have […] another technical assistance piece […] that the district's internal applicants are getting." Similarly, a DTL from a teacher-only team noted, "Considering that part of their grant money is to assist teachers in teacher-led reform, it is one of the most profound examples of hypocrisy I have seen recently." Several leaders within LAUSD similarly disagreed with this decision to omit support for teacher-led teams. "Everybody gets help," said one leader, "I don't care if it's a group of parents, they should get help." Survey data further substantiate this perception of unequal access to services. Overall, LASDI-ineligible teams reported accessing and receiving fewer services and supports than LASDI-eligible teams. For example, only 40 percent of LASDI-ineligible teams reported receiving help writing their plans as compared to 76 percent of LASDI-eligible teams. Similarly, only 53 percent of LASDI-ineligible teams received assistance understanding governance models, compared to 95 percent of LASDI-eligible teams (see Figure 3).

Local district support for eligible internal teams also varied greatly. Some local districts provided teams with research materials and example proposals to help with their development process. Some also paid for external consultants and editing support. In contrast, other teams reported receiving little to no support from their local district. In some cases, DTLs believed their local district used their resources to advance a favored team's chances of success. "They had already chosen a team," said one teacher-team DTL who reported receiving no support from the local district.

Screening of plans and competition for selection
Rigorous screening of plans and competition for selection are key mechanisms of change in the PSCI design. In fact, the district and partner organization leaders that we interviewed overwhelmingly emphasized the importance of competition – much more so than the other levers. In practice, the district saw mixed success in implementing these two levers of change.

Diversity of design team members. One goal of PSCI was to spur innovation by including non-traditional actors in the reform process. PSCI succeeded in engaging a host of actors in the design process. Most notably, teachers were reported to be active
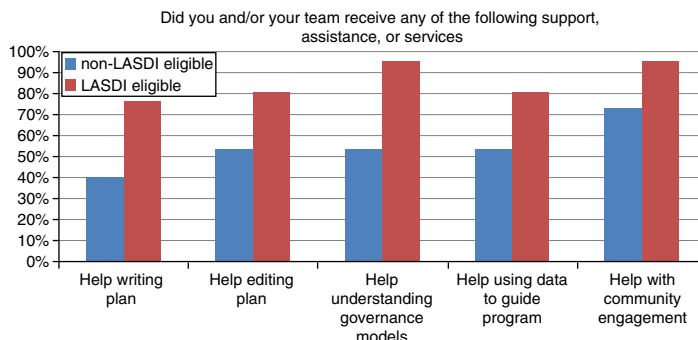
Figure 3.
Support design team leaders received, by LASDI eligibility

players in developing school plans. According to DTL surveys, 89 percent of design teams included at least one teacher and 42 percent of teams were led by a teacher. Also, 69 percent of DTLs ranked teachers as very highly involved in the plan development process. The majority of teams also reported involving at least one parent or community member, one certified personnel other than a teacher, or a non-principal school administrator. Others also reported including someone from a non-profit, CMO, or the teachers' union. On average, six types of stakeholders were involved on each design team. Past research indicates that many school reforms do not include input from such stakeholders (McLaughlin and Shields, 1986), making PSCI unique in the breadth of personnel roles involved in the reform.

Supply of applications. Although teams included many diverse and non-traditional actors, the supply of teams is an area of concern. The average number of proposals per school decreased from 2.6 in PSCI 1.0 to 1.8 in PSCI 2.0. Further, the number of schools receiving only one proposal increased from 11 percent in PSCI 1.0 to 36 percent in PSCI 2.0[7]. These findings weaken the competition lever of change under PSCI and indicate that PSCI may not provide a true "choice" for that particular community. One potential factor contributing to the decrease in supply of final applications is that LASDI consultants on occasion encouraged multiple applicant teams to collaborate and jointly submit a single proposal (e.g. when they observed teams proposing similar ideas). It is not clear from our data that these LASDI efforts entirely explain the observed decrease, but it may have affected these patterns.

Transparency of the process. The initial PSCI resolution called for "a transparent process for plans to be submitted, reviewed, and evaluated by internal staff and external stakeholders" (Flores Aguilar, 2009, p. 5). As intended, LAUSD leaders consistently shared information about the process with the public. From the outset, the district posted weekly updates on a designated PSCI web site. For each round of PSCI, the web site included copies of all letters of intent and final proposal submissions, along with detailed documentation of the review process, including reviewer comments and ratings, superintendent recommendations, and Advisory and final Board votes for each school. Meeting agendas, powerpoint slides, and other informational materials were also regularly posted on this web site. One i3 partner leader described the level of transparency as "unheard of" and "profoundly powerful." This partner noted, however, that allowing the public "to see the intra-district decision-making process" unfold weekly also led to "disorientation" and confusion, as discussed earlier.

Neutrality and fairness of review and selection. PSCI and portfolio models more generally assume that leaders will be neutral about the types of organizations or teams running schools and select operators based on quality and effectiveness (Hill and Campbell, 2011). Leaders are expected to support broad participation and competition so that the most innovative and highest quality ideas and plans emerge. Our data indicate, however, that not all district leaders and partners adhered to this assumption, which contributed to widespread perceptions that the process was unfair.

In fact, 69 percent of DTLs survey respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the PSCI plan review and selection process was fair to all applicants. In interviews, teams of all types commonly reported that the district had not created a "level playing field" and that certain teams had the "upper hand" with greater access to resources and support. Several internal teams reported that external teams had greater capacity to write plans due to full-time staff dedicated to grant writing and experience developing school charters. Conversely, external teams and some teacher-led teams believed that internal local district-supported teams had greater access to data and parents, and had

more support from LASDI, local districts, and UTLA. One independent charter DTL also decried a "double standard" for charter school applicants due to an additional 30-page supplemental application and a charter and complained about the level of scrutiny applied to them relative to internal teams.

Within most case schools, almost every design team believed they were at a disadvantage relative to their competitors. "[T]he process' was skewed toward the charter's favor," reported one internal team leader. A leader from the external charter team bidding on this same school similarly explained, "as far as not having a level playing field, [the local district] made calls constantly out to everyone and they [the internal team] had free access and we did not."

There was also the pervasive belief that politics interfered with the process. For example, six teams (across all five case study schools) mentioned that review panels and Board members were not adequately trained on how to judge the quality of school plans and that decisions were not guided by the rubric or an assessment of quality, but rather by political motivations or personal biases. Several individuals believed that Board members knew in advance who they were going to select and had strong preferences for preserving jobs, selecting internal teams, or even specific governance models. In one case, a Board member endorsed an internal applicant team before proposals had been submitted. Another DTL reported being pressured by a Board member to "drop out" of the process so that the preferred internal team could succeed. Even teams that ended up being selected by the Board expressed these views in our interviews (which were conducted prior to the final selection). The following DTL statements taken from our case studies provide a sampling of these sentiments:

It's coming down to who's on the Board […] just the politics of that, I think, are outweighing the value of the plans that were submitted.

At the end of the day, they want to protect district jobs. You know, if they had the option, they would be happy to select an in-district plan.

Overall, there was a widespread perception that the PSCI process was unfair and excessively politicized.

Unintended consequences of competition. The high stakes of the decision to award a team control over a school – in some cases leading to layoffs of entire staffs to allow for an external team to take over – heightened the intensity and emotion surrounding the plan development and selection process, and at times interfered with PSCI's intended focus on developing and selecting high-quality school plans. One focus school principal and DTL commented that, "this process really did a lot to divide the staff and it took a lot of people's hope away […] some of my teachers were saying, 'I've been doing all this work [as a teacher at a focus school] and what? You're going to take it away?'"

According to multiple case study respondents, the competition itself also took valuable time and attention away from designing their school and writing their plan. "We have to come to consensus ourselves [and decide] 'What is our goal?'," said one internal team leader, "That we have to spend time selling ourselves, pitching it […] just makes it all the more difficult." Many teams invested significant time and material resources on a variety of strategies to garner support for their plans – resources some teams would have preferred to devote to plan development. On surveys, more than three-quarter of DTLs reported that they contacted Board members, local districts, and teachers to encourage support; contacted parents/community members, mobilized parents to vote; and hosted community meetings. Some participants were critical of these activities. "It was supposed to be about collaboration," explained one internal

DTL, "But you create this extreme competition between these strong competitors, and no one wins […] If we put out a flyer […] or […] a door hanger, they'd [the other team] put out a hanger, a pin, and a button." One team indicated a willingness to tailor its plan to garner necessary support and votes, even if changes conflicted with their initial vision and philosophy of tailoring curricula to local needs. "If they are looking for a textbook-type of proposal," explained this DTL, "we will write that to impress the Board or review team."

Reports of "electioneering" further illustrate unintended consequences of competition. A report from FIS documented some of the negative behaviors occurring during the Advisory Vote in PSCI 2.0, including "23 reports of voter intimidation, disruption or electioneering at 11 sites" (Patterson and Cruz, 2011, p. 5). Based on these reports and 140 hours of observation by community volunteers at all 13 voting sites, FIS concluded that "electioneering continues to be a significant problem despite efforts by the LAUSD and the LWVLA to thwart such activities" (Patterson and Cruz, 2011, p. 9). The LWVLA volunteers also observed incidents of electioneering in the voting line and noted that some schools encouraged parents to vote by allowing them to substitute voting for mandatory volunteer hours.

Paradox and conflict within PSCI theory of change. These findings present a paradox in the enactment of PSCI and conflict among various levers of change. By design, the initiative embraced the importance of engaging stakeholders, particularly community members, and viewed this support and pressure as a critical mechanism for enhancing the quality of school plans and ultimately student learning. In this regard, time spent on external outreach could be viewed as appropriate, if not essential. Yet, the competition and high stakes of the final decision may have led participants to behave in ways that attracted support for their plans at the expense of quality. The widespread perceptions about fairness and politics also affected buy-in for the initiative and could have even greater long-term effects on participants' willingness to invest in the process or focus on the quality of educational programs presented in school plans.

Conclusions and implications

Our research indicates that the first two years of PSCI had many challenges and some successes. On the one hand PSCI leaders attracted diverse stakeholder participation within teams, scaffolded the plan development process with an array of supports from multiple organizations, and ensured transparency at each stage of the process. On the other hand, the scale and complexity of PSCI proved to be a formidable undertaking for district administrators and partners, fraught with challenges that weakened several of the key mechanisms of change. Most notably, leaders encountered difficulty establishing understanding and buy-in, communicating with and engaging parents and community members, attracting sufficient numbers of applicants for all schools, maintaining neutrality and the perception of fairness, and ensuring that competition did not interfere with other levers of change.

The district and its partners made efforts to address some of these challenges for the third round of PSCI. For example, the LA Chamber of Commerce planned to provide consultants and technical assistance to teams currently ineligible for LASDI support, including teacher – teams and external schools. The Board also replaced the Advisory Vote with a series of community engagement and feedback meetings in which parents, community members, and students develop a set of priorities for their school, evaluate plans against these criteria, and provide their recommendations to the superintendent and his panel for review. Further, Superintendent Deasy committed to clarifying

accountability mechanisms and declared that PSCI school progress would be formally evaluated during the third year of implementation.

Other modifications to the initiative occurred in 2011 following the appointment of Superintendent Deasy and the election of several new Board members and a new teachers' union president. Responding to Board and union pressure, Deasy made modifications to limit competition in PSCI in exchange for new opportunities for all schools to obtain autonomies related to district and union policy. Under a new Memorandum of Understanding, ratified by union members and approved by the Board in December 2011, external teams of charter operators and non-profits are only eligible to participate in PSCI if they agree to operate the school using district employees under the current collective bargaining agreement. In exchange, all district schools now have the option of adopting a governance model allowing for greater freedoms in the areas of curriculum and instruction, school scheduling, and staffing selection. These changes have decreased the emphasis on market-oriented reform mechanisms in PSCI by greatly bounding the scope of competition and have increased the importance of autonomy as a strategy for improvement.

In the coming years, it will be important to examine the implementation and effects of the reform with these policy changes. The will and capacity of district and partner leaders will be especially tested in PSCI 3.0 as the number of sites participating increases to 32 (15 relief and 17 focus sites) and as the new modifications are implemented. Of course, the ultimate test of the efficacy of PSCI lies in the years ahead. Our ongoing research aims to answer questions about the eventual outcomes of PSCI.

The results of this preliminary research nonetheless have several important implications for policy makers and practitioners outside of Los Angeles. First, our findings indicate that when implementing a portfolio model or managing school turnaround, districts need time to develop a multitude of new policies, processes, and practices. The misunderstandings and reported confusion our research uncovered suggest that more planning time may have improved the consistency of central office messages about the reform initiative. And while transparency is a worthy goal, it may come at a cost. The tradeoff between access to information and possible inconsistency has to be factored into the development process of any reform, particularly ones as complex as PSCI. Added time for planning prior to public dissemination of information and of the implementation process may avoid some of these communication problems. Moreover, districts will then need to adapt these policies, processes, and practices to their specific and often-changing local contexts, which requires complex negotiations with multiple stakeholders and decision makers. It is important that policies expecting fast results do not penalize districts for trying innovative and perhaps untested strategies and modifying them over time. The recent changes to PSCI also illustrate the potential instability of reforms that result from leadership change and financial distress. It will be interesting to observe over time whether persistent budgetary crises and leadership turnover impede other districts' efforts to sustain portfolio management, which by its nature threatens key interests of traditional political actors in district reform.

Second, many of the specific challenges encountered in LAUSD also speak to potential roadblocks for others seeking to implement turnaround and portfolio reforms. For example, nationally, some have raised questioned about system and city-wide capacity to take over failing schools. Research indicates that large CMOs did not "jump" at the opportunity to restart schools under the SIG program (Zehr, 2011). Some of these CMO operators admitted that the difficulty of improving an existing school compared to creating a new school that families have chosen to attend lessened the

appeal of the turnaround option. Our data on the decreasing supply of PSCI applications affirms that there may be justifiable concerns about the number of organizations interested, willing, and able to take on the turnaround challenge.

Another area of concern regarding school turnaround is the extent to which the federal government or other funding agencies should specify school models and strategies. One recent report, for example, urged the federal government to adopt a more "customized" approach to turnaround with fewer "prescriptive elements" (e.g. the requirement to remove the principal in all four federally approved SIG models) (Knudson *et al.*, 2011). While we do not dispute this recommendation for customization, our research nevertheless offers a cautionary illustration of the challenges involved in tailoring school improvement plans to individual communities. PSCI has, in some cases, exposed deep tensions between various stakeholder groups regarding educational goals, norms, and expectations.

Moreover, LAUSD's struggle with PSCI's community and parent engagement mechanism demonstrates that it is difficult to obtain input and achieve consensus about what strategies best fit a particular school community, and shows that the complexity increases as more stakeholders are involved in the decision-making process. Developing mechanisms that ensure effective parent and community engagement in the design and implementation of portfolio and turnaround reforms is a lingering challenge that deserves further attention in research and practice. Districts considering similar reforms should anticipate potential language and literacy issues and consider investing in the development of unbiased, high-quality information and engagement opportunities that include sufficient time and support to ensure understanding[8].

In addition, the Obama administration and other stakeholders have discussed the increased use of school turnaround as a reform and accountability strategy. Such legislation might require certain chronically low-performing schools and districts to undergo prescriptive turnaround reforms. However, our study indicates that it is important to establish a firm research base regarding which specific aspects of turnaround are likely to work, and under what conditions. The early LAUSD experience shows that it is not easy to turn around low-performing schools, and that stakeholder support and buy-in are essential for the successful implementation of such reforms.

Consistent with past research on district reform more generally (e.g. Garda, 2011; Gittell, 1994; Hess, 1999; Marshall *et al.*, 1985; Shipps *et al.*, 1999; Stone *et al.*, 2001), our research on PSCI also indicates that the implementation of portfolio and turnaround reforms is a deeply political undertaking. The threat of losing one's school or one's job (in the case of a charter school taking over) or of gaining more autonomy (in the case of a school adopting a governance model or waivers from district policies or collective bargaining provisions) creates high stakes and strong incentives for stakeholders to mobilize to protect their interests. Leaders planning to adopt such reforms should anticipate the highly charged nature of such endeavors and invest in ways to ensure neutrality (e.g. including independent monitoring of the process), counter-act potentially divisive practices and unintended consequences (e.g. disseminating unbiased information, countering misinformation, penalizing electioneering), and create a level playing field (e.g. providing equal access to technical assistance). Our ongoing research will continue to track the politics of implementation, paying particular attention to the ways in which the recent adaptations to "depoliticize" PSCI play out (e.g. amount of time teams spend lobbying, perceptions of fairness).

Clearly, more research on the implementation and eventual efficacy of both school turnaround and district portfolio reforms is necessary. The complexity of these

reforms suggests a need for deeper and more theoretically and empirically grounded analyses of the key mechanisms of change. Our ongoing research takes on this challenge by examining PSCI reform "levers" independently, including: the role of plan development and the relationship between plan quality, implementation, and outcomes; the varying levels of school autonomy and their association with school practices and outcomes; parent engagement in planning and implementation and its effects on school outcomes; and the nature and results of technical assistance and capacity building.

As these reform concepts grow in popularity, it will be important to build on the successes and challenges of other districts implementing portfolio and turnaround reforms across the country to inform policy decisions at the federal, state, and local levels. Such a research base is slowly growing (e.g. Bulkley *et al.*, 2010; Christman *et al.*, 2006; Gyurko and Henig, 2010; Hill, 2011; Levin *et al.*, 2010; Menefee-Libey, 2010; O'Day *et al.*, 2011). LAUSD's PSCI provides an excellent opportunity to study how one large urban school district initially implemented a hybrid portfolio-turnaround reform, learned from its challenges, and continuously adapted its policies to address the needs of its students. It remains to be seen if this strategy will be ultimately successful, both in terms of its continued implementation and its effects on student outcomes.

Notes

1. According to one definition, turnaround "is different from school improvement because it focuses on the most consistently underperforming schools and involves dramatic, transformative change" (Calkins *et al.*, 2007, p. 10). Under federal guidelines for SIG funds, "turnaround" is one of four school improvement models with specific parameters: replace principal, rehire no more than half of school staff, and grant new principal sufficient flexibility to implement a comprehensive approach to improve student outcomes (US Department of Education, 2010). Throughout this paper we refer to turnaround in the broader conception of dramatic improvement for chronically low-performing schools.

2. There is considerable research on many of these individual models: for example, seven years of RAND research on the New American Schools model (Berends *et al.*, 2002; Glennan, 1998) and extensive studies of Success for All (Datnow *et al.*, 2003; Slavin *et al.*, 1994; Stringfield *et al.*, 1997).

3. "PI 3 + schools" are those that fail to achieve AYP targets for four or more consecutive years. In California, all Title I funded schools that do not make AYP for two consecutive years or more are identified for PI – often referred to nationally as "In Need of Improvement" – under ESEA.

4. LAUSD has implemented changes to the intervention in each consecutive cohort of the reform. We discuss some of these changes in the conclusion. However, the focus of this paper is on the first and second cohorts of PSCI, and we discuss the intervention as implemented at that time.

5. We received 37 total responses. Since some teams wrote plans for multiple schools, we asked a different team member to respond for each school. In one case, a team leader responded based on experience at a site other than the one requested, so we dropped this response from our analysis. Non-responders did not differ systematically from responders or the overall population of PSCI 2.0 teams on observable characteristics.

6. We made every effort to ensure participation of multiple sub-groups of stakeholders in our interviews and focus groups and had interpreters at all parent focus groups.

7. We report the ratios of number of proposals relative to schools rather than sites because some participating campuses were broken into smaller schools. PSCI required separate proposals for each school and these proposals were reviewed and voted on by school not site.

8. Our ongoing research will draw on democratic theory (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996; Pateman, 1970) and extant literature on civic and parent engagement (Bryk *et al.*, 2010;

Epstein and Dauber, 1991; Furstenberg *et al.*, 1999; Lareau, 1989; Muller, 1993) to examine the PSCI shift from formal voting to community meetings and its effects on participation and quality of involvement.

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