

# Denver's Public Schools: Reforms, Challenges, and the Future

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Our city faces a major challenge. Our public schools do not perform adequately. Denver's student population has changed over time, with larger proportions of students faced with factors such as poverty and limited English language skills. These challenges appear in almost all urban school systems in America. Nevertheless, they do not change the requirements facing citizens in the 21st century. To thrive as a city, all of Denver's young people need to receive a world-class education that prepares them for success as adults. Currently, far too few students in Denver get such an education. Persistent and wide gaps in achievement exist between students of different backgrounds. Few perform at grade level, and as they get older, more and more students fall below grade level. While students do make academic growth from year to year, almost none improve fast enough to rise back up to grade level if they ever fall behind. Additionally, only about one-half of the city's 9th graders finish high school in four years.

To its credit, Denver is pursuing a variety of complex and far-reaching education reforms. But anyone can launch a bold new reform. Success with such dramatic reform requires education leaders who can articulate and implement a vision, sustain the effort to achieve it, and build wide-spread support to protect their hard-won progress. And, most important, the schools need to demonstrate significant academic progress as reforms move forward.

Overcoming challenges, implementing these reforms, and achieving bold goals for the children and youth in our city's public schools will require a well-informed and engaged citizenry. The public's role is not simple either. Reforms do take time; persistence is required to see them through. At the same time we must maintain a sense of urgency and refuse to tolerate ongoing failure. The people of Denver should expect significant progress now, and should insist that current reforms are continually evaluated and the lessons learned are used to adjust and strengthen efforts. We must also prepare for the long term and recognize that we have a difficult road ahead. The community must focus on the needs of today's children, be vigilant about high academic expectations for all of them, ask hard questions about what has been achieved, and insist on continuing and accelerating progress.

We present this first annual report at a pivotal time in the evolution of the city and its school system — a time when the challenges are daunting, but energy, effort, and hope run high. Our intent is to provide information and communicate the status of education reform in Denver. The report gives an objective look at the history and progress of Denver Public Schools (DPS) and examines three high-profile reforms underway.

It is possible that our city could become one of the best places in the nation to raise and educate young people. But to get there, Denver's civic leaders, local organizations, business interests, and community members need to work together to track progress in a more public way. Significant political will is needed in the months and years ahead to fully implement these reforms to strengthen instruction, revamp teacher pay, and ensure improved school performance and innovation. Public support will be needed to rework the system in ways that will put student learning first.

Better data, more public engagement during important policy discussions, and greater clarity about where we want to be in the future — none of these seem impossible to achieve. The key is that the people of Denver step forward in a whole new way. We hope you will join us in taking those next steps.

Colorado Children's Campaign

A+ Denver

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## Introduction

Denver is currently in the national education spotlight, largely because of its willingness to try a unique combination of major education reforms not seen in other large urban school districts. While individual components of Denver's reform agenda appear elsewhere, the full range of activity and the particular mix of initiatives stand out. While many observers hold these reforms in high regard, a steep road lies ahead.

Current student results are unacceptable by all measures. Denver Public Schools (DPS) has prescribed goals for student achievement that go beyond what most large urban school districts accomplish, but which still fail to attain international standards. At the same time, major state-level reforms are under development and federal education policy will likely shift in the next few years under the new administration. Given the changes ahead,



the time is right to reflect on the history of Denver's schools, to examine the education results for students in the district, and to trace the reform paths that local leaders have chosen. Then, working together in the months and years ahead, the district, along with community and civic leaders, can engage the public to help accelerate the progress of reform. To do so will require that all actors become better informed about DPS reforms and take part in helping to track and achieve high-priority goals.

Accelerating progress requires a clear picture of where DPS stands today. This report's first section, History and Context of Education Reform, highlights the critical junctures in federal, state, and local education policy and presents the history and policy environment within which DPS operates. The second section, Performance and Accountability, describes demographic changes that have taken place in DPS in recent decades, and reviews trends in student achievement and academic growth.

It is not enough, however, to know past and present outcomes. The reform efforts examined in Current Major Reforms in Denver Public Schools, the third section, are systemic efforts to re-orient existing structures and programs in support of student achievement goals. Each reform has its own research base that informs the design strategies, degree of implementation, and evolution over time. The three major DPS reforms are profiled and include:

- **The Denver Plan** — A collection of strategies adopted in 2006 based on practices that other U.S. school districts have successfully used to improve instruction.
- **ProComp** — A teacher incentive-pay program that is the result of collaboration between the district and the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) and part of a larger effort to strategically strengthen teacher quality in the district. The effort is intended to ensure that the most effective teachers are working where they are most needed, and that pay incentives support the district's student achievement objectives.
- **New Schools, Performance and Innovation** — This effort supports the creation of new schools and provides options for restructuring schools. Charter schools and district-managed schools are part of the reform, which offers varying degrees of school autonomy and accountability to enable school leaders and educators to better serve students.

If fully implemented as envisioned, these reforms could transform all the education system's functions, from accountability to school governance to funding. Most important, they should improve student achievement

in Denver. This combination of reforms has many pieces and layers and, over time, Denver will face several challenges in this endeavor.

- First, the district must determine how to fully implement and succeed at its chosen reforms;
- Second, the district needs to demonstrate significant, meaningful, and ongoing progress and show the public that things are getting better and that further efforts in the same direction are warranted; and
- Third, the community must learn enough about the progress of the efforts to know whether to resist the temptation to abandon reforms, or that a change of course is needed.

This report does not attempt to address all the reform activities in the district. Denver has important efforts underway to expand preschool and provide college scholarships to high school graduates, for example. This document also does not propose answers or make recommendations; it is intended to be a snapshot in time. Before they are complete, DPS's current reforms will require significant and repeated mid-course corrections and adjustments, strategic use of resources, and an enduring commitment. Maintaining public support through these changes will require transparency and new systems of accountability that candidly communicate to many audiences the record of implementation — including both achievements and failures.

When results do not match aspirations, the community must reject any sense of satisfaction with the current outcomes or calls for unending patience. Each child has just one childhood. The need for improving education is urgent and compelling. This urgency must be balanced with perseverance. But persevering to overcome a challenge is different than enduring the unacceptable.



There will be transitions in leadership and personnel before Denver enjoys the public schools its children deserve. The community and its leaders should not allow these changes to delay or derail progress. During transitions, the community should consider the goals it hopes to achieve, ask how well Denver is doing at reaching those goals, and explore how reforms can be strengthened to improve the chances of success and accelerate progress.

Many lessons can be learned from the history and implementation of today's reforms, and Denver community members should ask many questions. A central challenge for both the school district and the community is how to track and report on progress. Tracking

progress will require that the city ask whether the district's goals are aiming high enough, are clear enough, and are meaningful enough to drive improvement.

To achieve great things, leaders must also be visionaries. Often, school district leaders decide how to do their best given the resources they have. Denver's families are asking for more for their children. If the district can identify truly world-class objectives, i.e., "stretch goals," and if it can also identify a viable set of strategies to achieve those goals, involve the community in deliberations about how to select and craft strategies, and make progress toward credible benchmarks along the way, then the people of Denver are likely to respond by delivering the resources it will take to build a world-class system. That trajectory will depend on a combination of vision, transparency, communication, expertise, efficacy, and collaboration amongst all stakeholders.

This report is intended to inform and engage the community as it determines how to support its public schools and accelerate reform so that Denver will one day have the schools it deserves.

# I. History and Context of Education Reform

To understand the current state of public schools in Denver it is important to examine the events leading up to this point in time. The following chart provides a picture of the evolution of federal, state, and local education strategies over the years beginning in the 1970s, noting transitions in leadership as well as key policy actions and major reform efforts.

**Figure I. History and Context of Denver’s Education Reform, 1970-2000**

	1970s	1980-1984	1985-1989	1990-1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
<b>United States</b>	Presidents Nixon, Ford, Carter / Secretary of Education Hufstedler	President Reagan / Secretaries Bell, Bennett, Cavazos		President G.H.W. Bush / Secretary Alexander	President Clinton / Secretary Riley				
<b>U.S. Policy &amp; Context</b>	U.S. Supreme Court orders DPS desegregation	A Nation At Risk, 50-state rankings		1,000 Points of Light Campaign	Goals 2000				
<b>Colorado</b>	Governors Love, Vanderhoof, and Lamm / Commissioners Coon, Woodington, and Frazier		(1987) Governor Romer / Commissioners Randall, Laughlin (interim), and Maloney				Governor Owens / Commissioner Maloney		
<b>Colorado Policy &amp; Context</b>			• 1988 School Finance Act	• 1993 Open Enrollment, Charter Schools and Model State Standards • 1994 School Finance Act			• CSAP tests begin • Colorado Accreditation Act		
<b>DPS</b>	Superintendents Johnson and Kishkunas	Superintendents Brzeinski, Carle, and Stenmark (Acting)	Superintendents Scamman, Baileyn (Acting), and Koepe	Superintendents Denis and Moskowitz	Superintendent Moskowitz		Superintendents Johnson (Interim), and Zullinger		Superintendent. Seick (Interim)
<b>DPS Policy &amp; Context</b>	• DPS establishes busing for desegregation • Metro Organizations for People established		• Colorado Children’s Campaign established	• Collaborative Decision Making (CDM) teams established • Citizens for Quality Schools formed • Week-long 1994 DCTA teacher strike	Return to neighborhood schools and end of busing for desegregation			• ProComp pilot program begins	

## National and Federal Context, 1970–2000

The most visible and vexing national education policy concern in the 1970s was unequal opportunity based on student race and ethnicity and the struggles surrounding court-ordered remedies, such as busing students to integrate schools. By the 1980s, the push to desegregate schools faded as the demographic mix of students in city school districts changed and national leaders shifted their attention to student achievement and school system results. Performance rankings were posted to encourage (or embarrass) the 50 states and larger districts to improve performance. In the final decade of the century, the federal Goals 2000 program spurred states to set academic standards that all students should meet, and to build systems of accountability based on student assessments.

## Colorado State Context, 1970–2000

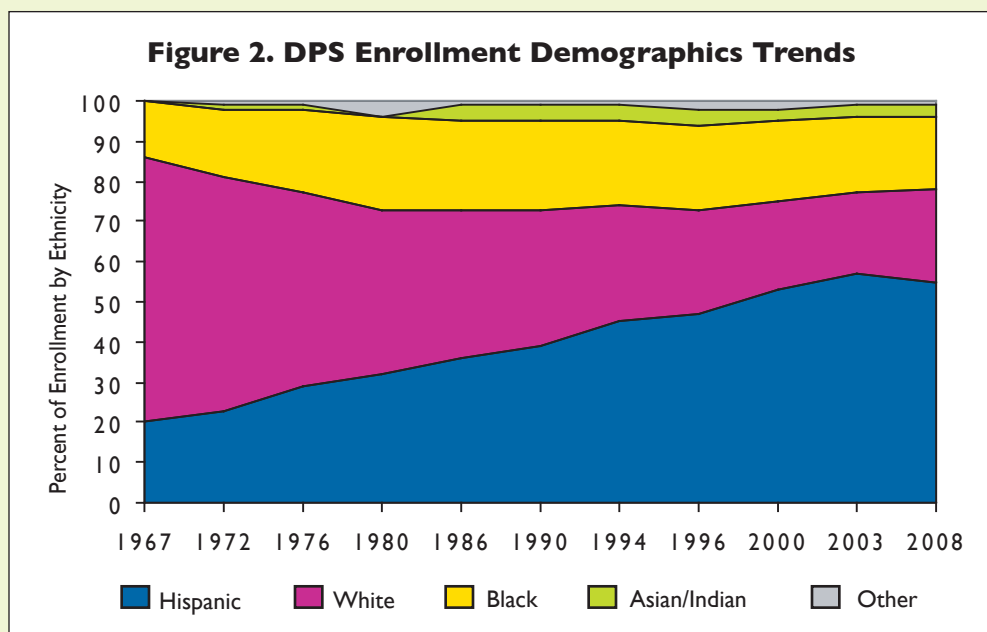
Over those same 30 years, Colorado education policy also saw dramatic change. A strong state tradition of local district control continued, but state policy leaders put in place new systems to address education finance equity and accountability. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, state lawmakers created a new and more equal school funding system, required open enrollment inside and outside district boundaries, established the framework for the creation of charter schools, and set model state academic standards. In keeping with the national trend in the late 1990s, state leaders set up a system of student assessments, the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP), and a new system for accrediting schools and districts to ensure performance standards were met.

## Denver Public Schools and Community Context, 1970–2000

Two high-profile changes in DPS emerged between 1970 and 2000. As courts ordered racial desegregation, the student demographics shifted. Middle class and white families departed and a higher percentage of the district's students came from low-income families and needed special programs. As seen in the chart on enrollment trends (Figure 2), historically disadvantaged minority populations — Hispanic and African-American students — became the majority in DPS. To meet the court orders for racial balance, DPS paired schools from different parts of the city so that students attended schools in their own neighborhood for a few years, but also were bused to their paired school for a few years. When the federal court order was lifted in 1995 and the district's busing ended, DPS schools saw greater ethnic and socioeconomic segregation than ever before (Lee 2006).

DPS enrollment has shifted from a majority of white students (purple) in the late 1960s to a majority of Hispanic students (blue) by the turn of the century. That trend began to reverse somewhat in the last few years, but the percentage of black students (yellow) has stayed fairly stable since 1980. DPS has also seen an increase in the small minority of Asian/Pacific Islander/American Indian (green) and students of other or mixed races (grey) enrolled (Lee 2006; CDE 2003 and 2008).

The city of Denver has a diverse child population. The public school enrollment is more challenged by poverty, and has a higher proportion of children of color than the city's population. If Denver's public schools can successfully serve all the city's families, the schools would have an opportunity to achieve a level of integration along lines of race, ethnicity, and income that is relatively rare in large American school districts.



In the 1990s DPS experienced sweeping governance changes. As part of resolving a teacher contract dispute, Collaborative Decision Making (CDM) teams were formed at every school, designed to give teachers, parents, and community members a forum for influencing school policies and limited authority over instructional programming. While CDMs enhanced school autonomy, the issues schools could truly control were limited. The move reflected a popular belief at the time — that schools were hampered by central bureaucracy and, if more control shifted to each school, reforms would be more likely to succeed. At the same time, statewide open enrollment and the growing number of charter schools gave families more school choices.

Leadership turnover disrupted DPS in the late 1990s, making it difficult to adopt or sustain reforms. Despite a divisive teacher strike in 1994, by the end of the 20th century the district labor-management relationships had become less adversarial and more cooperative, as evidenced by a collaborative pilot pay-for-performance program that would in time become ProComp.

**Figure 3. History and Context of Denver’s Education Reform, 2001-2009**

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
<b>United States</b>	President G.W. Bush / Secretary Paige				President G.W. Bush / Secretary Spellings				President Obama / Secretary Duncan
<b>U.S. Policy &amp; Context</b>	No Child Left Behind								
<b>Colorado</b>	Governor Owens / Commissioner Maloney						Governor Ritter / Commissioner Jones		
<b>Colorado Policy &amp; Context</b>	School Accountability Reports	• Schools Rated on CSAP Growth • Colorado ACT					• P-20 Educ Coordinating Council	• CAP4K=21st Century Skills	• CSAP Growth approved for NCLB use
<b>DPS</b>	Superintendent Wartgow				Superintendent Bennet				Superintendent Boasberg
<b>DPS Policy &amp; Context</b>			• DPS Literacy Program		• ProComp funded	• A+ Denver established • The Denver Plan • Denver Scholarship Foundation		• Office of New Schools • School Performance Framework	

**National and Federal Context, 2001–2009**

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 marked a new national sense of purpose and provided new rules for states accepting federal education funds. Although states have constitutional authority over education, federal funds for disadvantaged students and other programs were now tied to compliance with NCLB. The law reflected an education policy consensus, called standards-based reform, that began to emerge in the late 20th century. The central concept was that all students, if given good instruction in a safe and supportive school environment, could meet high standards regardless of their family conditions or other potentially limiting factors. The NCLB law required annual public reporting of student test scores and other results for all major student subgroups (based on ethnicity and income, language, and special education status). Now, schools and districts have to meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals for each subgroup. Schools that fail to meet AYP face an escalating series of interventions, including the mandatory provision of public school choice, after-school tutoring, and, eventually, restructuring. Denver, which has the state’s highest number of struggling schools, faced these sanctions more often than any other Colorado district. The reauthorization of NCLB awaits congressional action at this writing.

## Colorado State Context, 2001–2009

State academic standards, the CSAP tests, and the beginnings of a statewide accountability system were in place before NCLB. School Accountability Reports (SARs) — public reports on student performance in each school and district — were first issued in 2001. Colorado added the requirement of ACT testing for all 11th graders in 2002, and student results on that college admissions test were added to the SARs reports. But by 2008, Colorado policy leaders grew concerned that state standards were not high enough to ensure that students who met them would have the knowledge and skills to succeed in the 21st century. The governor established a P-20 Coordinating Council, and the legislature approved the Colorado Achievement Plan for Kids (CAP4K) to set new standards for school, college, and/or work readiness, and to streamline the state’s accountability systems by 2010 to align all the various components to higher standards.

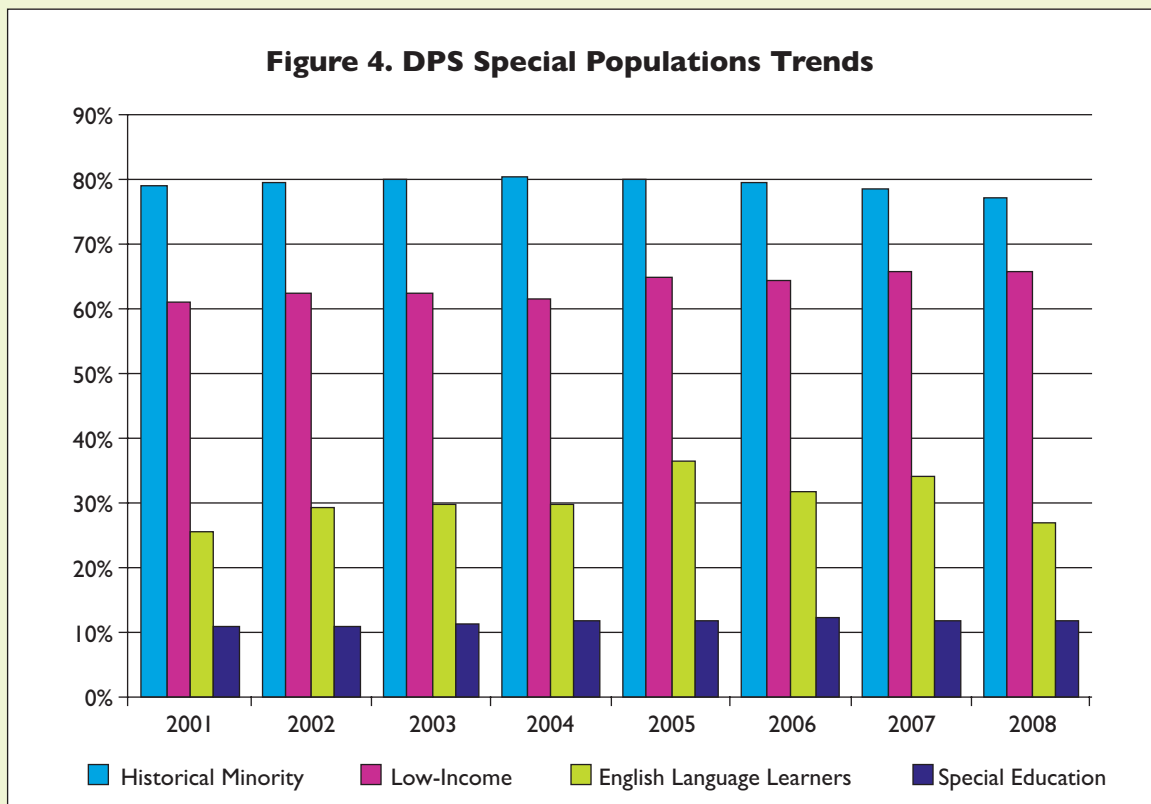
Major demographic changes slowed in Denver’s public schools by 2001, but continued to have implications for district-wide enrollment. The number of students from disadvantaged groups — or who needed special services — increased slightly every year until the middle of the decade.

By 2005, more than 80 percent of DPS students were from historically minority groups: Hispanic, African American, Asian, or American Indian.

English language learners made up more than one-third (36 percent) of total DPS enrollment.

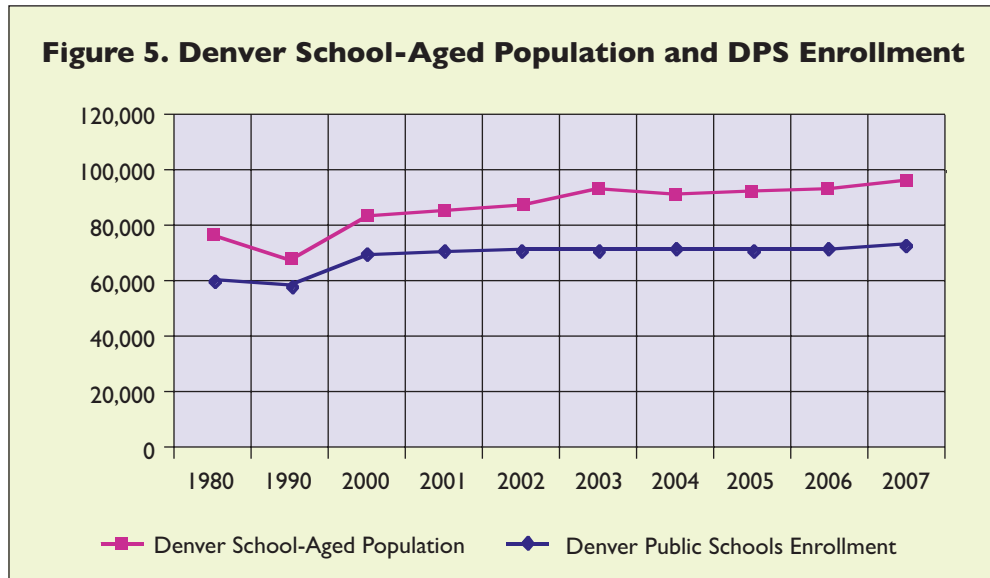
Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of DPS students were from low-income families (eligible for free and reduced-price lunch).

A relatively steady 10 to 12 percent of students in DPS were in special education services (CDE 2008).



## Denver Public Schools and Community Context, 2001–2009
















By the turn of the century, the City and County of Denver and the entire metro area were experiencing steady population growth. Likewise, after a few years of minor increase, in 2007 DPS enrollment began to grow more significantly, fueled by the growing Denver Preschool Program and charter school expansion. Enrollment, however, did not keep pace with the increased population of children ages 5-17 in Denver (Figure 5).



## II. Performance and Accountability

A school district's performance is measured through state testing and accountability. Responsibility for public education lies at the state level. This state authority over schools is then delegated to local districts, which are responsible for operating the public schools. In Colorado, this delegation is explicitly included in the state constitution. Thus, federal policies and local policies both rely heavily on state-defined measures of quality

**Figure 6. The DPS Performance Dashboard**

Performance indicator	DPS current results	Achievement gaps*	Trends over time	Compared within Colo.	Compared nationally
<b>High School Graduation Rates</b>	 About half graduate in four years	 Subgroup gaps of more than 15 percentage points	 Slow improvement with recent setbacks	 Gaps of 20 percentage points, trails comparable districts	 In bottom third of sampled city districts
<b>ACT</b>	 Scores do not approach benchmarks	N/A - no data	 Strong gains in short time period	 Well below state averages, but near comparable districts	N/A - not all students take ACT tests in other states
<b>CSAP</b>	 Majority of students not proficient	 Large gaps in scores between subgroups	 Improvement in most grades and subjects	 Lower scores, but faster growth	N/A - CSAP is used only in Colorado
<b>School Ratings</b>	 Most schools miss federal, state and local targets	N/A - gaps are incorporated in the rating systems	 Some schools improved/some failing schools closed**	 Constitutes large share of state's low performers	N/A - federal system based on unique state measures

Red = performance is unacceptable (e.g., too many students do not graduate from high school)  
 Yellow = average performance (e.g. ACT rates comparable to other Colorado city districts)  
 Green = strong performance (e.g., the CSAP score trends are quite positive)

\* Achievement gap means significant differences in performance between student subgroups (based on ethnicity, low-income families, English language ability, special education placement)  
 \*\* Closing the schools that cannot improve is better than keeping them open with continued poor performance

(Anderson and Palaich 2007). Colorado's system is in transition as state leaders review and make plans to revise it in the next few years under the 2008 CAP4K reforms.

The current system began when the state established subject-area content standards in 1993 — describing what students should know and be able to do — and, by 1999, had new state exams for students and an accreditation system to hold districts accountable for meeting standards. Districts use the state's standards as a guide to set their own local standards, and sign contracts with the state regarding the progress schools will make to meet student achievement goals.

A more recent state development is a data system that reports student progress on the CSAPs over time instead of a static one-year picture of classroom performance. The move toward this system that measures student growth instead of just annual scores was recently approved by the U.S. Department of Education for reporting Colorado's results under NCLB.

## Performance of Denver's Public Schools

The DPS Performance Dashboard (Figure 6) shows the project team's assessment of DPS results at a glance. Overall, student performance is improving in DPS, but is still very low on virtually all measures — when compared to the district's own expectations, to Colorado averages, to demographically similar districts in the state, and to other urban districts in the United States. The indicators of performance include high school graduation rates, ACT scores, CSAP proficiency rates and student growth on CSAPs, and school performance ratings.

### High School Graduation Rates

A national measure shows the percentage of students who earn a high school diploma within four years. It is important to note that graduation requirements vary from state to state, and national numbers lag a few years behind what might be available directly from the states. Despite these complexities, a regular high school diploma has similar meaning for students across the country, and it is useful to know how

## Comparing performance data across districts, states, and countries

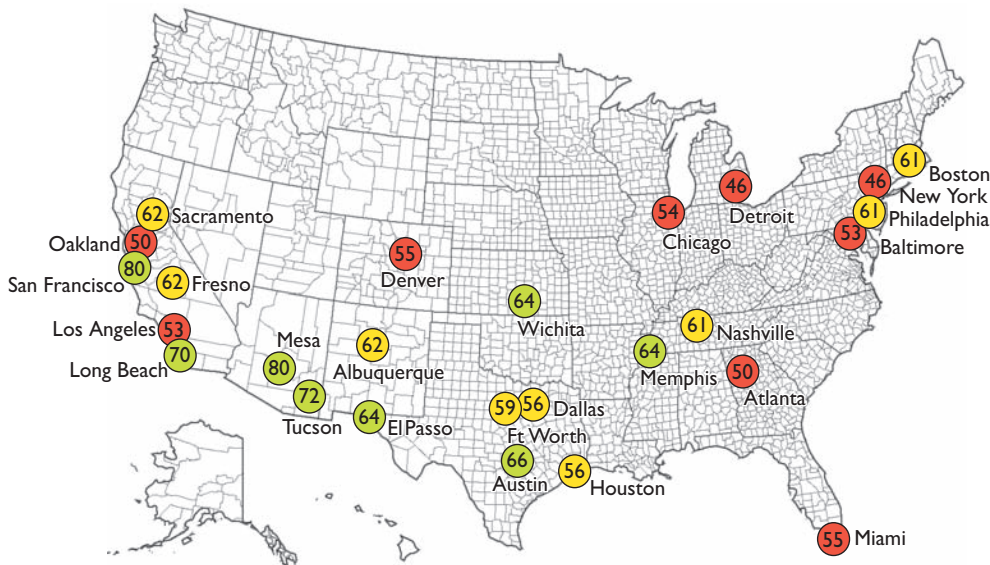
School performance numbers are more meaningful to everyone when results can be compared across settings. Yet, few such comparisons are perfect because every location faces a different set of circumstances, mix of student needs, and degree of community support. The comparisons are provided here to give context and meaning to the performance numbers.

Within Colorado, the student results include Denver and the state as a whole. In addition, results from three Colorado districts are profiled for comparison: Aurora Public Schools (Adams-Arapahoe 28J) in the Denver metropolitan area, and the districts serving the smaller Front Range cities of Greeley and Pueblo. Although each city is unique, these comparison districts all have student demographics relatively similar to Denver's — at least half the enrollment is minority, more than half are eligible for free and reduced-rate lunch, and the districts serve at least 15,000 students.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to make direct comparisons to other nations. Denver's students will eventually be competing not just with graduates of other districts or states, but with people around the globe. To be truly competitive, Denver needs to aspire to become internationally competitive. The current system of state assessments and accountability systems, and Denver's own goals, do not make such direct comparisons easy, but as the state revisits its standards and assessments, Denver could help Colorado develop internationally relevant goals, standards, and assessments.

DPS graduation rates compare with other big city school districts. The map in Figure 7 shows the high school graduation rates of students earning a regular diploma within four years (not including GEDs) in large urban districts across the nation.\*

**Figure 7. High School Graduation Rates of Large American School Districts, 2004-2005**



San Francisco CA	80
Mesa AZ	80
Tucson AZ	72
Long Beach CA	70
Austin TX	66
El Paso TX	64
Wichita KS	64
Memphis TN	64
Sacramento CA	62
Albuquerque NM	62
Fresno CA	62
Boston MA	61
Philadelphia PA	61
Nashville TN	61
Ft Worth TX	59
Houston	56
Dallas TX	56
Miami FL	55
<b>Denver CO</b>	<b>55</b>
Chicago IL	54
Los Angeles CA	53
Baltimore MD	53
Oakland CA	50
Atlanta GA	50
New York City NY	46
Detroit MI	46

\*These are the 2004-05 graduation rates for the 100 largest districts in the U.S., which are also among the top 50 cities in size. Excluded are those where the percentage of students in poverty is much lower than DPS. Also excluded is Jefferson County, Ky., for which NCES did not have graduation data (NCES 2008; Census MSA 2007). The approach mapped above uses nationally comparable data to make cross-district estimates. State methods of calculating and reporting graduation rates vary and have also been in flux, making direct comparison of each state's official graduation rates for its member districts inaccurate.

In three years of statewide data (Figure 8), Denver's graduation rate has decreased about 3 percent, and remains below the other districts and the state average.

**Figure 8. DPS and Comparable Districts' Graduation Rates, 2006 - 2008**

High School Graduation in Four Years	2006	2007	2008	Percent Change 2006 to 2008
<b>COLORADO</b>	74.1	75.0	<b>73.9</b>	-0.2
AURORA	61.8	58.4	<b>56.4</b>	-5.4
DENVER	51.7	52.0	<b>48.6</b>	-3.1
GREELEY	71.4	69.7	<b>65.7</b>	-5.7
PUEBLO	58.4	67.7	<b>67.5</b>	9.1

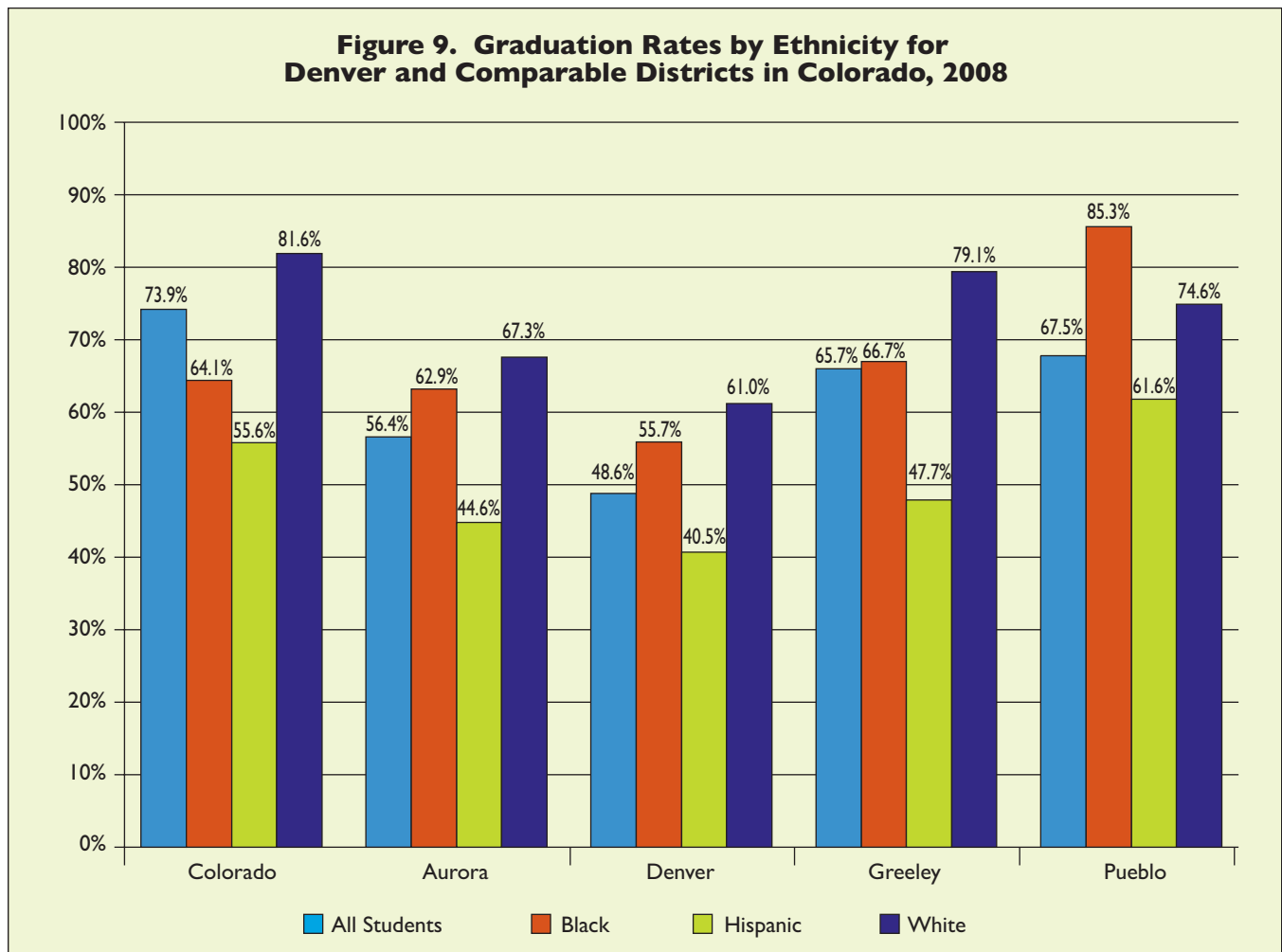
Denver was in the bottom third of cities for average high school graduation rates according to the U.S. Department of Education. But, there are other ways to measure graduation rates. In a recent study measuring graduation rates by adding up the rates by which students pass from one grade to the next, Denver ranked 19th out of the 50 largest districts, with a 58.6-percent graduation rate (Swanson 2009).

In addition to variation in national studies, the state's official numbers are also evolving. Colorado approved a new standardized approach to calculating graduation rates

in 2006, and it now reports graduation rates based on the percentage of students who make it from the 9th grade to on-time graduation within four years (Figure 8). The higher state standard will take some time to fully implement, and DPS results may go down as students previously assumed to have transferred and graduated elsewhere are now more accurately counted as non-graduates.

Regardless of variation from year to year, or between various national studies of states, a single conclusion remains: About half of DPS's students do not graduate on time. This means that dramatic progress is needed to ensure all Denver's young people are prepared for a bright future.

In the two years of statewide data that are available (Figure 8), Denver's rates inched up in 2007, but are well below the state average and that of comparable districts (CDE 2006 and 2007).

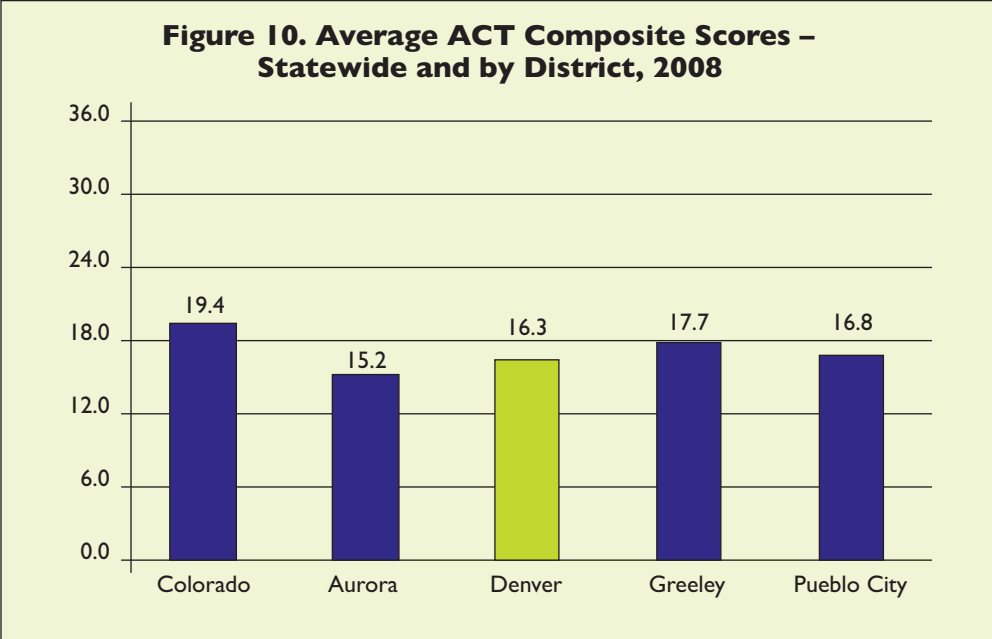


As shown in Figure 9, Colorado's high school graduation rates vary greatly across ethnic subgroups (blue bars). This is true as well in DPS (green bars) and in the comparable districts in the state (CDE 2007). However, the DPS average high school graduation rates for all major ethnic subgroups were lower than the comparison districts.

### ACT Test Results

Since 2002, Colorado has required all 11th graders to take the ACT, a college readiness exam. The ACT is administered nationally, but Colorado is one of only a few states that require all high school juniors to take it. Students scoring at or above a benchmark level are considered by ACT to have a high probability of success in

corresponding college courses (the benchmarks vary by subject, but are between 18 and 22 out of a possible score of 36). Student results in 2008 are shown in Figure 10 for the state, Denver, and the three other Colorado districts chosen for comparison.



The ACT results are a composite score that includes English composition, mathematics, science, and social studies. On the subject matter tests, Colorado’s average score for English composition (not shown) was 18.6, which exceeded the ACT benchmark of 18, while Denver and the comparable districts fell short of that mark (CDE 2008). Similar patterns can be seen in the other ACT subjects. On the ACT subject tests for math and reading, the average 2008 scores for the state and for all four districts were below the college benchmark. Both Greeley and Pueblo outscored DPS on all three subject tests, while average scores in Aurora were lower (CDE 2008). The scores on these subject tests have been fairly stable over time, with the state average and all four of the districts averaging below the college readiness benchmarks, and math scores averaging well below the benchmark. The DPS trend on these subject tests over time is up slightly; after starting out at the bottom among the comparison districts in all three subjects, Denver made significant gains in 2005 relative to the other districts, surpassing Aurora and closing in on Pueblo by 2008.

**CSAP Results and Trends**

The Colorado State Assessment Program (CSAP), the state’s annual student achievement test, is the core of Colorado’s accountability system and the state’s tool to implement the federal NCLB requirements. The overall CSAP scores show how many students meet the state’s standard. Students are ranked in four levels based on their scores: advanced, proficient, partially proficient, and unsatisfactory. Only proficient and advanced scores are deemed to have met the state standard, although the state has historically used partially proficient as an indicator of meeting state standards for the purposes of reporting for federal programs.

The trends shown in students’ CSAP scores (Figures 11, 12, 14, and 15) are for grades 3-10 in reading and mathematics. In addition, sample scores from two grades considered benchmarks for reading and math

compare Denver with Colorado and other districts (Figures 13 and 16). The benchmark grades in which student performance is assessed by national and international exams include:

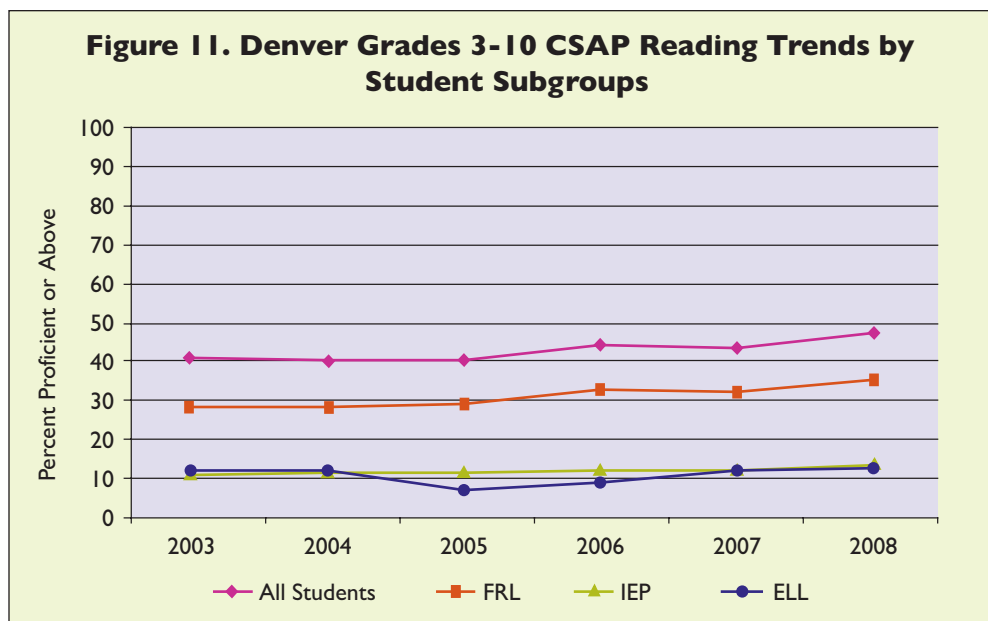
- **Grade 4 Reading.** The ability to read well by that grade level is essential to a student’s future school success (Anderson 1985).
- **Grade 8 Math.** Performance in math in middle school is an indicator of whether students will complete high school and go on to college (Achieve 2004).

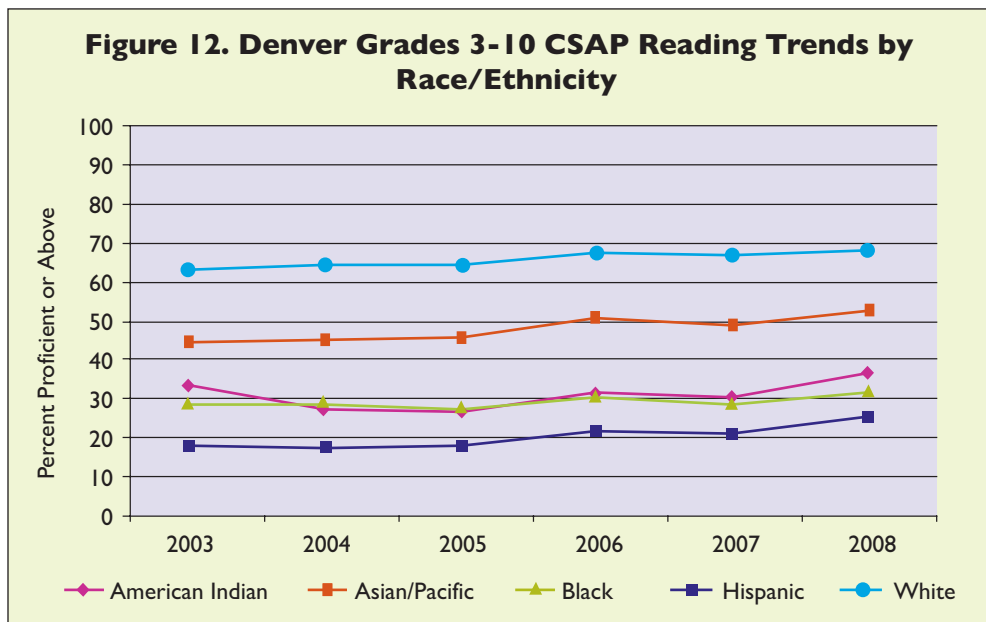
Overall, Denver trails the state average in all subjects by about 20 percentage points. Students from low-income families receiving free or reduced-price lunch (FRL), or who are still learning English (ELL) or receiving special education services (IEP), scored well below the average for all students. Given Denver’s demographics, improved performance of students in the FRL and ELL subgroups is critical to improving average scores. The achievement gaps by ethnicity that are evident in high school graduation rates also appear in every subject on the CSAP. Asian and white students score much higher than American Indian, black, and Hispanic students.

### Reading

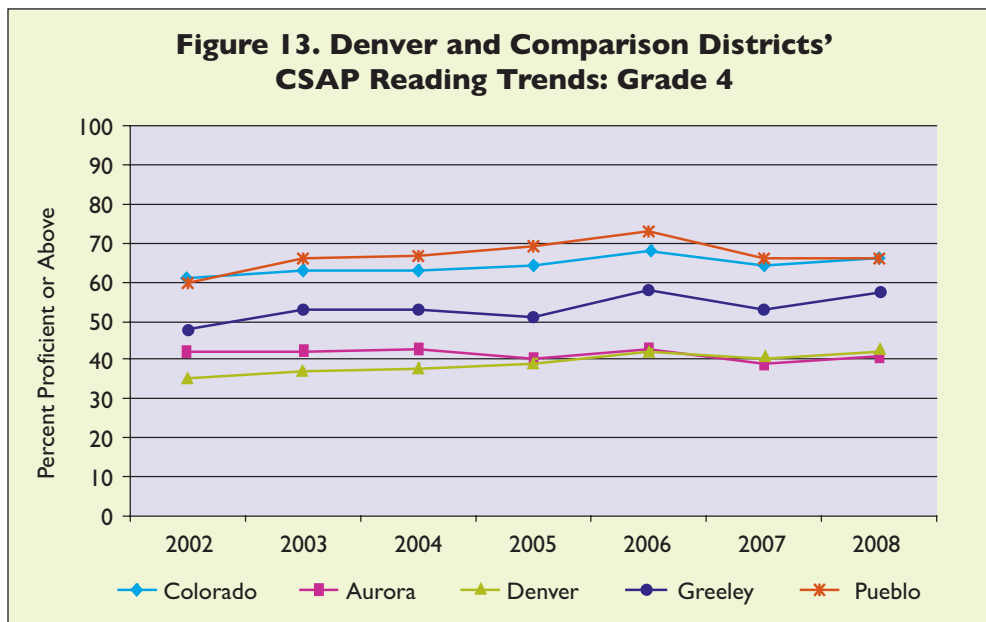
Denver’s reading scores on the CSAP demonstrate characteristics similar to other subjects. The most important fact is that far too many students in DPS are not proficient in reading. Overall, fewer than 50 percent of DPS students are proficient readers in grades 3 through 10. Students in particular groups, such as those from low-income families, with disabilities, or with limited English proficiency, do much worse. Roughly one-third of children who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch perform at proficient or advanced, and about one in seven students with disabilities or limited English proficiency reach the state standard in reading (Figure 11).

Recent trends are more positive, but this progress is not enough to solve Denver’s problems any time soon. Reading scores in DPS are up in recent years, although they are still significantly lower than the Colorado average. However, Denver’s rate of increase is among the fastest in the state. In 2003, DPS students scored about 25 points lower than the state. That gap is now about 20 percentage points, with Denver students catching up slightly faster in the 10th grade than other grades. Despite progress, at this rate it will still take 20 more years to eliminate the gap — and that assumes the rest of the state does not improve during those two decades. Reading trends indicate that the average reading score for all DPS students is up over time, due in large part to the steadily increasing scores of the low-income students (see the FRL group in Figure 11). Scores for IEP and ELL students are essentially flat.





Persistent achievement gaps among students of different ethnic backgrounds exist in all of the academic subjects (Figure 12). Both DPS and the state have made progress toward increasing scores for all groups and narrowing the achievement gap in reading. By 2008, white students in DPS had virtually caught up to the overall average for reading in Colorado.

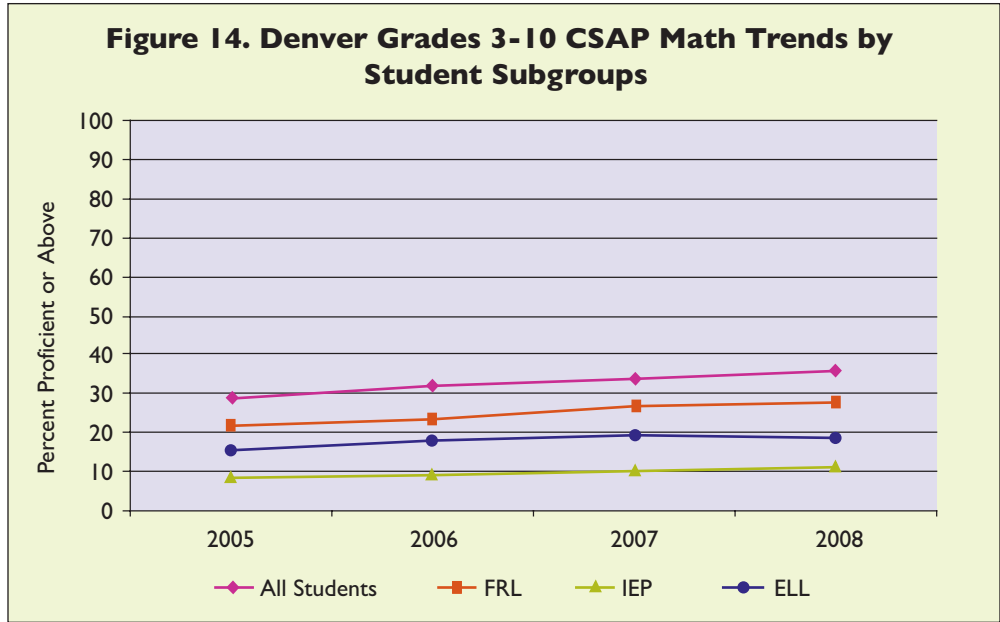


A seven-year trend for Grade 4 reading for Colorado, DPS, and the three other urban districts can be seen in Figure 13. Until 2007, DPS trailed all three districts in 4th grade reading, but rose slightly above Aurora in 2008. Pueblo posted scores higher than the state average until 2008.

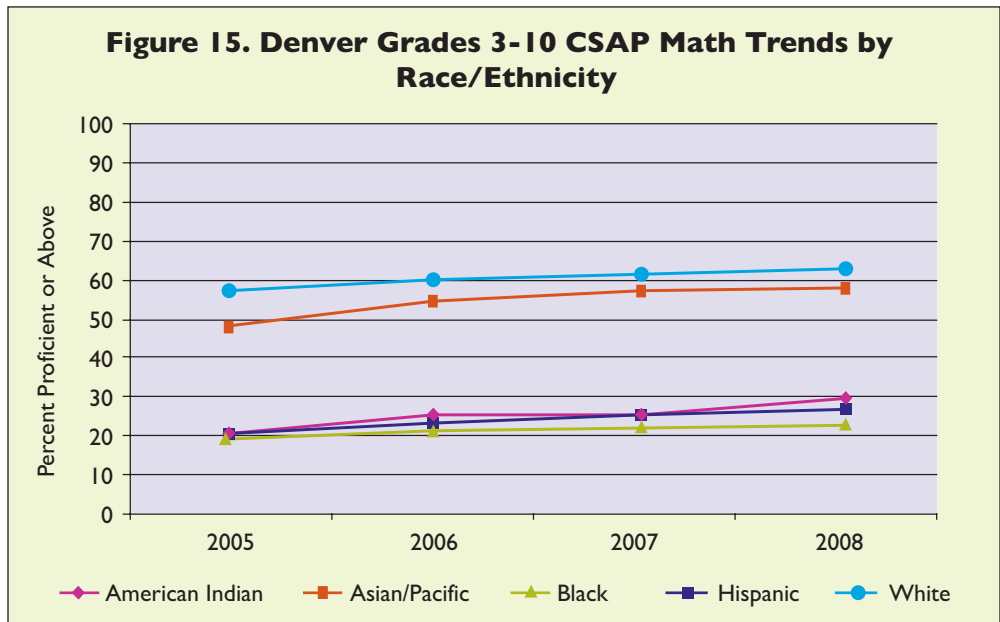
### Mathematics

Average DPS mathematics scores on CSAP are lower and have increased more slowly than its scores in reading. In mathematics, roughly two-thirds of students do not reach the state standard for proficiency. Compared with Colorado averages, Denver students in grades 3-10 were more than 20 percentage points lower in 2005, but they

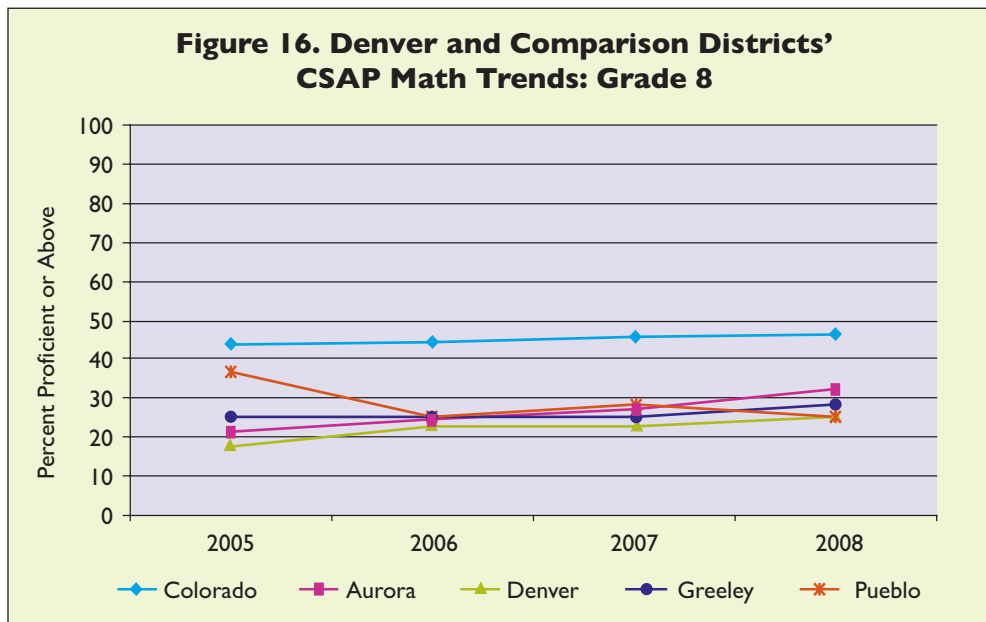
have made progress since then. While Denver's 10th graders are closer to the state average than in the other grades, in general the percent of students reaching the state standard in math in later grades is very low. As in reading, Denver's progress in math is not fast enough to close gaps between Denver and the rest of the state soon.



The average math scores in Denver rose six percentage points over the last four years, reaching nearly 35 percent proficient (Figure 14). Students with an IEP reaching proficiency rose two percent between 2005 and 2008, while less than 20 percent of ELL students were proficient on the most recent math CSAP. The FRL student scores were up by more than 5 percentage points over the four years.



The ethnic achievement gap is larger for math than for reading. Nearly 35 percentage points separate the scores of white and Hispanic students, with an even larger gap between white and black students (Figure 15). Colorado has similar gaps, but the results for Denver's Hispanic students are rising at a faster pace than those across the state to help close the gap.



Denver’s average math scores fall well below the state averages, with small but steady gains over four years. The comparison districts scored higher on average than DPS over time, but Denver students posted steady increases in recent years and, in 2008, matched Pueblo (where scores fell significantly over the same time period).

## Student Growth on CSAP

Colorado has a decade of experience with reporting the “status” of student achievement on the CSAP (e.g., how 4th graders do in math in a given year and comparing those scores to 4th graders who take the same test in the next year). Recent advances in the ways that student scores are tracked and interpreted allow the state to report student “growth.” The state can now compare each student’s CSAP scores over consecutive years and determine how much progress individual students and groups have made over time. The information can be used to show whether and how much Denver students are improving from year to year compared to Colorado averages, and if they are “catching up” to the state average.

Observers should be cautious not to use reports of growth to excuse low overall performance. Even typical growth, in which a student improves over the course of a school year, can be misleading. The measures of typical growth are based on the growth of all students in the state that had a similar baseline of performance. The total amount of student growth correlates closely to the absolute level of performance — meaning students who score unsatisfactory generally make less progress each year than students who score proficient or advanced. Thus, students who score unsatisfactory, but make typical growth, are making less growth than the students who scored advanced, but were also described as making typical growth for students at that performance level. Students who score unsatisfactory or partially proficient in one year will need to achieve growth that is considerably greater than the “typical” growth of other low-performing students if they are ever going to catch up with students that score proficient or advanced.

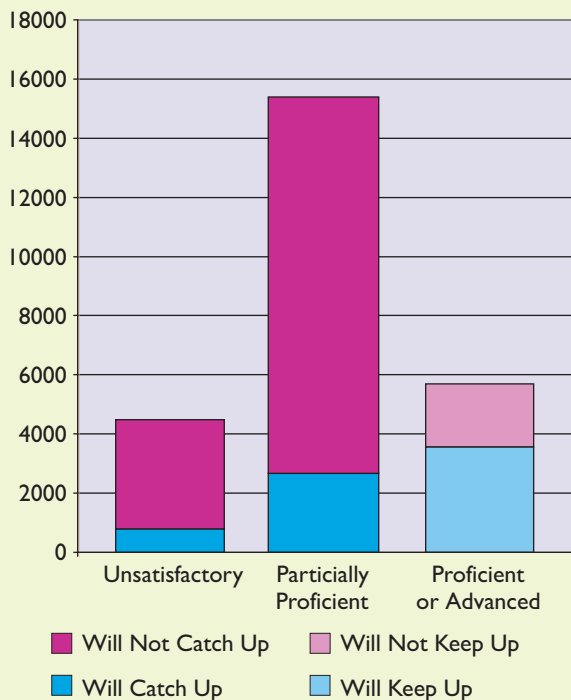
Despite these cautions, the introduction of growth as a measurement provides powerful new tools to study student performance. The state can now predict the likelihood that a student who scores below proficient will catch up and become proficient within three years, as well as predict the likelihood that a student who is already proficient will continue making enough growth to keep up with proficient students. Unfortunately, the vast majority of students who score partially proficient, and almost all students who score unsatisfactory, do not make enough progress to catch up within three years. As Figure 17 indicates, statewide, only about one in 10

students who score unsatisfactory in reading will achieve proficiency within three years or by the 10th grade; and only 3 percent of students who score unsatisfactory in math will reach proficiency within three years or by the 10th grade. The CDE does not yet release district- or school-level data for such rates, but there is little reason to expect that Denver’s catch-up rates are significantly higher than the state average.

**Figure 17. Percent of Students Performing at Unsatisfactory or Partially Proficient Levels that “Catch Up” to Proficient Students within Three Years or by the 10<sup>th</sup> Grade (Statewide)**

Starting and Ending Performance Levels and Subject	Grade						
	All Grades	4 <sup>th</sup> Grade	5 <sup>th</sup> Grade	6 <sup>th</sup> Grade	7 <sup>th</sup> Grade	8 <sup>th</sup> Grade	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Unsatisfactory to Proficient – Reading	10.7%	17.0%	11.0%	10.4%	9.2%	13.5%	8.4%
Unsatisfactory to Proficient – Writing	6.0%	11.2%	9.7%	4.7%	4.0%	2.9%	1.8%
Unsatisfactory to Proficient – Math	3.0%	11.7%	6.8%	5.7%	3.1%	1.8%	1.5%
Partially Proficient to Proficient – Reading	39.9%	41.2%	45.1%	40.4%	37.9%	49.6%	43.5%
Partially Proficient to Proficient – Writing	28.0%	38.8%	42.3%	31.3%	24.3%	22.5%	22.3%
Partially Proficient to Proficient – Math	18.2%	34.8%	24.8%	24.8%	21.2%	13.2%	8.6%

**Figure 18. Estimated Number of Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Students Reaching or Maintaining Proficiency Within Three Years, 2008**



Few students who score below proficient later catch up to the students who are proficient. This failure to recover from low achievement underscores the urgency of Denver’s challenges with student performance. Given the fact that DPS growth rates among low-performing students are close to state averages, we can estimate that, unless something dramatic changes, roughly one student in 50 that scores unsatisfactory in math in the 8th or 9th grade will turn around his or her performance enough to achieve proficiency by the 10th grade. Only one in 20 students scoring unsatisfactory in writing in 6th and 7th grade will achieve proficiency by the 10th grade.

Currently, once students fall behind grade level in Denver, they rarely catch up. And even those who are performing at grade level now are at risk of falling behind. Figure 18 shows the estimated number of free and reduced-price lunch students scoring below proficient (i.e., unsatisfactory or partially proficient) on the 2008 writing assessment who will reach proficiency within three years. Estimations are based on state-level growth projections generated from the Colorado Growth Model. More than 19,000 DPS students scored below proficient on the writing assessment in 2008, with approximately 3,400 estimated to reach proficiency within three years. A majority of students

projected to reach proficiency previously scored partially proficient on the assessment; only a small number of students that scored unsatisfactory are expected to reach proficiency. Additionally, the graph indicates that about 40 percent of DPS students that score at or above proficient on the writing assessment will not keep up, meaning they are predicted to fall below proficient within three years or by the 10th grade.

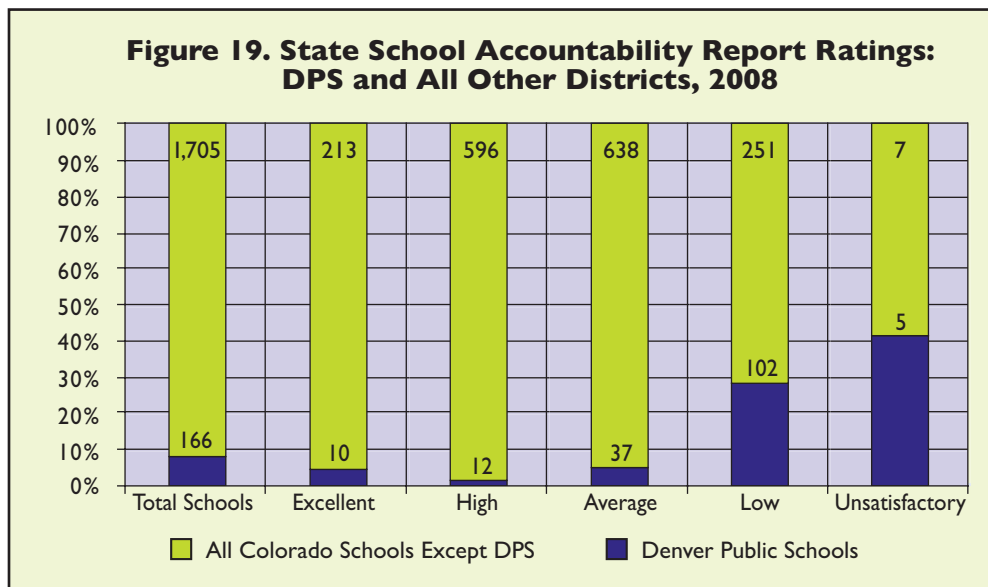
## Colorado’s School Accountability Reports

In Colorado, school performance is rated for several different purposes using CSAP scores. These include federal requirements, the state accreditation system, and School Accountability Reports (SARs). Recent legislation began the process of consolidating these three systems into one approach to rating schools. Until the new system is implemented, a variety of school ratings are available.

The NCLB requirements for schools are addressed as part of Colorado’s system of accountability. Under NCLB’s set of requirements, DPS does not meet the federal expectation of Annual Yearly Progress (AYP).

Annually, the state issues a SAR for each school. On this measure, a school is rated excellent, high, average, low, or unsatisfactory based largely on CSAP scores. Although DPS constitutes less than 10 percent of all schools in the state, it has a disproportionate share of schools in the lowest categories, accounting for 29 percent of Colorado’s low-performing schools and 42 percent of the unsatisfactory schools in the state (CDE 2008b).

On the state SAR ratings, nearly two-thirds of DPS schools rank in the low or unsatisfactory categories. Denver’s rate of school failure is far greater than the rest of the state, where approximately one-quarter of Colorado’s schools receive a low or unsatisfactory rating. Figure 19 shows the ratings of Denver’s and Colorado’s schools in each category in 2008. Five of 12 unsatisfactory schools are in DPS.



## DPS School Performance Framework

Using student performance information from the federal and state accountability framework outlined above, local districts make the difficult decisions about closing schools and opening new ones. In DPS, these decisions are guided by a relatively new instrument called the School Performance Framework (SPF), which is used to track how well each school in DPS is performing. Although all of DPS’s schools are state accredited, the district has

closed a number of schools in recent years due to low performance and/or low enrollment. As Figure 20 shows, fewer than half of DPS schools meet the district’s current expectations (DPS 2008b). Despite this progress, it is not clear that Denver has determined how to effectively manage the process of closing either charter schools or district-managed schools when necessary.

**Figure 20. DPS School Performance Ratings, 2008**

DPS School Performance Framework 2008	Number of Schools	Percent of Schools
Total	146	100.0%
Distinguished	10	6.8%
Meets Expectations	52	35.6%
Accredited on Watch	49	33.6%
Accredited on Probation	35	24.0%

**DPS’s Five-Year Goals**

The Denver Board of Education has set performance goals for the next five years that require a very fast pace of improvement (DPS February 17, 2009). For example, it aims to:

- Decrease the percent of students scoring unsatisfactory on CSAPs by 3.5 percent per year;
- Increase the percent of ELL student proficiency by 3.5 percent per year;
- Increase high school graduation rates by 5 percent per year, from about one-half of all students graduating in 2007, to 85 percent in 2013; and
- Increase the percent of students scoring 20 or more on the ACT by 3.5 percent per year.

While reaching the goals will be an enormous test for the district, many national analysts applaud DPS for setting such high targets that aim for rapid improvement (CGCS 2009). In fact, reaching Denver’s goals will require significant improvement and sustained progress that, to date, is rare in America’s urban school districts. And while an 85-percent graduation rate, for example, may not seem to be a high goal, given the trends of the past it will take an extraordinary effort to bring the rate up by nearly 30 percent in five years. The reforms profiled in the next section may help Denver pursue these high goals.

There is a potential impetus in spelling out and reporting on goals in a public way, especially if the Denver community can be confident it is hearing the whole story. To encourage the type of ongoing, informed community engagement that might allow every student to succeed, DPS needs to be clearer about the metrics behind its goals and report more regularly on the benchmarks of progress. Communicating and achieving these goals may require charting a slower course at first toward difficult goals, rather than assuming a smooth line of progress. In addition, the goals could better reflect international standards that Denver’s students need to be truly competitive.

Given the scale of the challenge and the demand for accelerated progress, the district needs clear timelines with leading indicators of success, and a road map to the strategies that are being pursued to achieve these goals. Regular and systematic evaluations of major reform strands will also help guide adjustments and explain progress. With these sorts of tools, the community can better understand whether goals are being met, what is helping to move progress forward, and what the district plans to do as next steps.

# III. Current Major Reforms in Denver Public Schools

*The system of schooling in the United States rejects change in much the same way that the human body fights transplants.*

— Hill and Harvey, 2008

Every urban school district has a unique history and its own distinct performance trends, yet it is surprisingly rare for certain basic district practices to vary from one city to the next. For example, teachers are almost always paid on a single negotiated salary schedule that rewards teachers based on their level of education and years of service in the district. Also across the nation, district rules for schools are usually the same regardless of achievement. And, in most districts throughout the country, new instructional programs are instituted or dropped based on the ebb and flow of funding and the succession of superintendents, and without much ability to incorporate new knowledge gained into future program decisions.

Denver’s approach to reform breaks with these tendencies. Three current reforms in DPS have the potential to genuinely change the game, and all three are playing out at the same time on the same field. Even though they evolved in different ways, they are compatible and reinforce one another. Each is home-grown, but informed by best practices elsewhere.

The three reform efforts in DPS include:

**The Denver Plan** – Resulting from a deliberate process of study and outreach to stakeholder groups by a new DPS administration, The Denver Plan combines metrics, resources, and staff re-allocation toward the plan’s priorities of improved instruction and achievement.

**ProComp** – Started in 1999 as a small pilot program of union and district collaboration, ProComp is a new approach to how teachers are paid. The performance-pay plan is designed based on strategies that research shows have the potential for improving instruction and raising student performance.

**Figure 2I. Aspects of Denver’s Major Education Reforms**

	<b>The Denver Plan</b>	<b>ProComp</b>	<b>New Schools, Performance and Innovation</b>
<b>Accountability</b>	Quality Improvement – School staff accountable for implementing core curriculum and processes	Teacher Professionalization – All new and participating veteran teachers are paid based on performance and assignments to low-performing schools	Regulated Market – Schools recruited, opened, and closed based on identified needs, performance, and enrollment trends
<b>Finance</b>	Core funding reoriented in support of goals	Voters approved new funding; shift of incentives based on performance, assignments, and increased salaries in earlier years of career	Funding generated by enrollment and increasing amounts controlled at the school rather than administrative office
<b>School Choice and Governance</b>	Managed instruction, and supporting materials and infrastructure	Teachers choose assignments that can lead to higher earnings	High quality, diverse mix of schools with varying degrees of autonomy

**New Schools, Performance and Innovation** – A new DPS framework for better managing the district’s portfolio of high-quality school offerings, the New Schools, Performance and Innovation reform guides district decisions to close low-performing schools and recruit and open new ones. The approach provides a mix of schools that enjoy varying degrees of autonomy subject to district accountability. Schools achieve freedom or get greater scrutiny through several mechanisms that apply to charters, innovation schools, contract schools, and district-run schools.

A national task force convened in 2003 highlighted five new models of accountability (ECS 2003). Denver’s major reforms employ three of the five models:




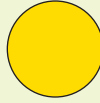




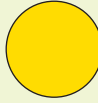


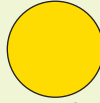
- The Denver Plan employs a “quality improvement” model by adopting practices successful elsewhere, tracking progress, and adjusting strategies for better results.
- ProComp emphasizes the “professionalization” of staff — especially teachers — by rewarding needed skills and knowledge and their willingness to take on difficult assignments, and it strives to increase compensation for teachers during the early years of their careers. This effort to address the extraordinary backloading of a teacher’s lifetime earnings to the final decade of his or her career stands in contrast to the traditional approach that rewards long tenure, but contributes to greater teacher attrition in the early years and almost no attrition among more senior teachers.
- The New Schools, Performance and Innovation reform is a “regulated market” model that provides incentives and interventions for improving existing schools, but also encourages development of new schools and allows for the closure of schools that don’t improve.

The two other emerging accountability models identified by the task force — one that operates through stronger and more direct “community involvement,” and the other via greater attention to “high school transitions” — are, so far, not as influential in Denver (Armstrong 2004).

The dashboard in Figure 22 assesses DPS’s three signature reforms in terms of:

- The original research base and track record of success before it was adopted in Denver;
- The extent to which DPS has implemented the reform;
- Indications of commitment to the reform from Denver’s leadership; and
- The quality and quantity of evidence that show positive results for the reform in DPS.

**Figure 22. Dashboard of Major DPS Reforms**

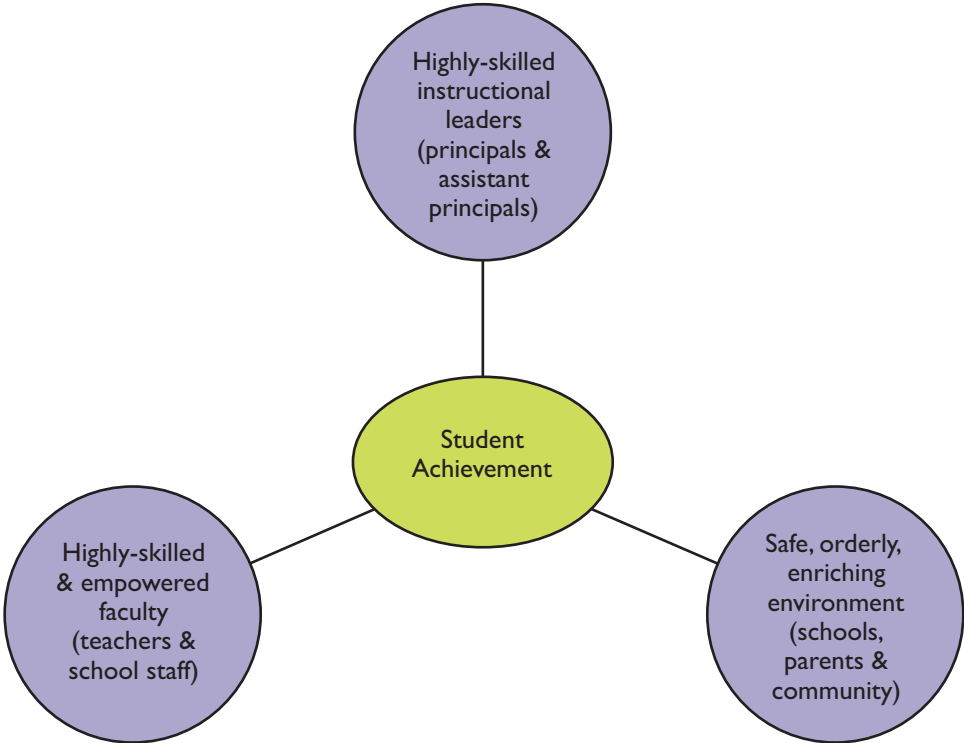
	Research base	Implementation	District commitment	Evidence of results
<b>The Denver Plan</b>	 Practices from successful districts	 Steady progress on implementation	 Strong school board support	 Positive, but not conclusive results
<b>ProComp</b>	 Mixed evidence on performance pay	 Fully implemented	 Clear and sustained support	 Positive 1st-year evaluation
<b>New Schools, Performance and Innovation</b>	 Charters and new schools promising; challenges in replication and quality control	 Request-for-Proposal process for new schools, New Schools office	 Use of the School Performance Framework to open/close schools; growing sector of schools	 Awaiting higher achievement in general amid individual school-level successes and failures
Green = strong performance    Yellow = average performance    Red = unacceptable performance				

The following sections profile the theories, origins, and evolution over time of each of these three major DPS reforms.

### The Denver Plan

In 2006, the DPS Board of Education adopted a central framework of strategies to manage instruction in Denver’s public schools. The collection of programs and priorities was called The Denver Plan and it drew on three strategies found in a number of more successful urban schools and districts. The plan aimed to put tools and skills in the hands of school-level staff and administrators so that they could improve instruction and ensure a climate of achievement. The district is currently revising the plan and expects to release preliminary ideas for what the next version will look like in the fall of 2009.

Figure 23. The Denver Plan



The plan grew from the 2005 hiring of Michael Bennet, a non-traditional superintendent. Bennet had little background in education, but close ties to Denver’s city government where he served as Mayor Hickenlooper’s chief of staff. Reasoning that there was no need to reinvent the wheel, the DPS Board of Education and new leadership team studied strategies that had been successful in other urban districts and schools (Snipes et al. 2002). They surveyed the country for effective approaches that would complement the current and desired practices in DPS. At the same time, the district convened hundreds of staff, teachers, principals, community members, and other stakeholders to discuss the plan.

Rather than a major change in direction, the plan set high-priority goals and aligned existing programs and district assets to better support those goals. DPS brought in new resources and staff to fill gaps. For example, a core

idea was that better student results in large urban districts require a multi-pronged, but “laser-like” focus, on student achievement (DPS 2006). DPS hired a new chief academic officer with urban district experience to address that priority.

Strategies of The Denver Plan included stronger support for core curriculum, benchmark assessments and analysis, and professional support for teachers and leadership training (CGCS 2006). Detailed components and objectives of the plan reflected DPS leadership’s outreach and inquiry into research-based practices.

Research on successful school systems in recent years has emphasized the importance of basing decisions on data and evidence of student achievement (Supovitz and Klein 2003). From the start, the intent was that The Denver Plan would be a living document. DPS proposed to rigorously track progress, starting with a draft “balanced scorecard” (DPS 11/17/05). The basic footprint of the scorecard can be seen in the district’s new School Performance Framework (SPF) — a public report on every DPS school that serves as a central school evaluation and decision-making tool.

In 2007, the A+ Denver subcommittee reviewed The Denver Plan. It termed the plan a “credible framework for reform,” with the caveat that the district remain “responsive to results reflected in data and in practice, as well as the input of various stakeholder groups” and that the plan “is adjusted accordingly.” A+ Denver also recommended that DPS establish a process to measure the effectiveness of The Denver Plan, figure out how to communicate the plan effectively to the public so that it might have greater impact, and spell out how the plan will be revised and updated (A+ Denver 2008).

The district contracted with the Council of Great City Schools (CGCS) to assess The Denver Plan’s progress. CGCS used teams of urban experts and practitioners to provide feedback to the DPS Board of Education. Its first report found that short-term trends on the spring 2004-2005 CSAP scores provided initial evidence of the plan’s success (CGCS 2006), a finding confirmed by the group’s second evaluation conducted in the fall of 2008. In its more recent report, the analysts at CGCS underscored the need for

### **The Denver Plan – Goals and Components**

Goal 1: Our children will learn from a highly skilled faculty in every school that is empowered by robust professional development and timely assessment data.

- Establish high and common expectations for all students (e.g., graduation requirements, standards-based report card)
- Implement a common, standards-based curriculum
- Publish planning and pacing guides for teachers
- Conduct frequent benchmark assessments
- Build capacity among teachers through robust professional development

Goal 2: Highly trained principals and assistant principals will serve as instructional leaders of the faculty in DPS schools.

- Build capacity among principals through robust professional development focused exclusively on academic achievement (e.g., Leadership Institute; monthly PD; Superintendent/CAO meetings)
- Establish new job expectations for the principal role
- Revise the school improvement planning process

Goal 3: Collaboration among the Denver community and all DPS stakeholders will support our children in a safe, orderly, and enriching environment in every school and classroom.

- Develop individual school plans for an intentional school culture
- Implement strategies for increased parent engagement
- Pair secondary students with adult mentors
- Leverage resources in the community by expanding partnerships
- Expand enrichment programming for students
- Expand city/agency partnerships

(DPS 2007)

the district to accelerate progress to meet its goals, while offering praise for the progress that had been made in implementing a common curriculum and stronger literacy program, and improving its data and school intervention systems. Recommendations were provided for continued implementation and improvement (CGCS 2009).

The near-term future of The Denver Plan is reasonably secure and, at this writing, a new draft updating the plan is under development. The current DPS Board of Education remains unanimous in its support and moved quickly to promote Tom Boasberg, the district's chief operating officer, a supporter of the reforms, to superintendent when the post was vacated in early 2009.

Recent changes in federal law — in particular the stimulus funding available for education now being distributed — could enable additional work under The Denver Plan. Significant resources are available for the next few years that DPS could use to further improve instruction and expand professional development. Other pools of funding are available to turnaround struggling schools, and the next few years could see targeted funding for improving several pieces of reform that are part of The Denver Plan. These resources could also support DPS's additional reform efforts — new and innovative schools, and the management of human capital.

An important task for the community is to compare what happens on the ground with what is written on paper as the plans are implemented. Like many complex reforms, there may be elements of the earlier plans that are no longer deemed appropriate or that evolve into new forms. However, any changes should be made consciously to maximize the overall impact, and not by default because plans were not followed.

## **ProComp: The Strategic Management of Human Capital**

Denver is recognized as a national leader in teacher compensation. DPS is using an approach that stands in contrast to traditional approaches that are not based on research, yet are remarkably consistent in most large districts. Compensation is just one part of the management of human capital. Ideally, districts would have a variety of mechanisms in place that create incentives and systems to allow them to truly manage their resources to achieve desired outcomes. The goals of such a system would include:

- Recruiting and retaining the most effective teachers;
- Evaluating teacher performance so that decisions regarding professional development, retention, compensation, and placement all help the district achieve its goals; and
- Placing teachers in specific jobs so that the most effective teachers are working where they are most needed — generally with the hardest to teach students and in the subjects that most need attention.

Nearly all U.S. public school teachers work in districts with a salary schedule in which pay is based on years of experience and education level — neither of which is strongly tied to student learning (Podgursky and Springer 2006). Overwhelming, research shows teachers have more influence on student learning than any other school-based factor, and a school district with challenging performance goals needs to provide its teachers with incentives to meet these goals (Odden and Wallace 2007).

So far, the evidence behind performance-pay plans is as mixed as the different approaches. The Center for Performance Incentives at Vanderbilt found a few studies that met methodological rigor tests, and these studies found positive or mixed results on performance pay. It is clear that performance awards do affect behavior in teaching and in other fields, but program design problems are frequent. Prior to Denver's ProComp, the research base on efforts in other districts revealed many problems that resulted in incentivizing the wrong behaviors, e.g., boosting competitiveness when more cooperation was needed (Cannon 2007).

ProComp came about in a different fashion than The Denver Plan and evolved over a much longer period of time. The idea of paying teachers for performance was led by a four-person team of DPS and Denver Classroom Teachers' Association (DCTA) representatives. It operated with the financial and moral support of the city's civic and philanthropic leaders. Denver's Pay-for-Performance Pilot began as an initiative tested in 16 DPS schools from 1999-2003.

The Community Training and Assistance Center (CTAC) studied and evaluated the pilot program, providing a mid-point analysis in 2001 and conclusions published in 2004. The researchers identified the program's impact on student achievement, the impact of various objectives selected for implementation by teachers, perspectives of the participants, and institutional factors that influenced results. A central finding was that the more difficult the goals and objectives selected by teachers, the higher their student gains (CTAC 2004).

Researchers also found that “the focus on student achievement and a teacher’s contribution to such achievement can be a major trigger for change — if the initiative also addresses the district factors that shape the schools.” In other words, unproductive district conditions present when the pilot began improved as trust grew and a track record emerged for collaboratively and directly solving problems as they arose (CTAC 2004).

In 2003-2004, a DPS-DCTA Joint Task Force on Teacher Compensation comprised of administrators, teachers, and local citizens was created. It received support from philanthropists, as well as outside technical assistance,



and examined the evaluations. This task force made the final decisions regarding the design and cost of the ProComp system, with assistance from national experts such as Augenblick, Palaich and Associates (APA). The plan was approved by the DPS Board of Education in February 2004 and by the DCTA members in March 2004. In November 2005, the voters of Denver approved a mill levy of \$25 million per year to fund the new compensation system (Gonring et al. 2008).

In the original pilot design, teachers themselves had a choice of two principal-approved objectives they would meet to receive the incentive pay. Allowing teachers to choose objectives carried over from the pilot program to become a part of the full-scale plan, while district priorities are the main focus of most of ProComp’s components and elements. Existing DPS teachers had (and still have) the choice to join ProComp, whereas all new hires after 2006-2007

are automatically in the plan. By November 2008, two-thirds of Denver’s teachers were participating (ProComp Teacher Compensation Trust 2008).

Several factors boosted the prospects for full implementation of Denver’s new pay plan that suggest what it takes to put a systemic reform of this type in place:

- The district and teachers union had to come together to make it happen, a possibility that seemed remote during the 1994 teachers’ strike;
- Public and private supporters of performance pay supported the pilot and evaluation and kept it in the spotlight, making it difficult for the players to easily walk away;
- Relatively high DPS teacher attrition and evidence that it contributes to low school performance (Paone 2008) helped to fuel interest in pay for performance; and
- The public campaign for community approval and funding gave ProComp a stable base of financial support for the future.

The first-year evaluation of ProComp found a modest but positive connection to higher student scores, although the researchers stressed the preliminary nature of the study (Wiley et al. 2008). Shortly afterwards the first DCTA contract negotiation following implementation of the new pay plan was successfully concluded. ProComp provisions held center stage, but the two sides were able to come to agreement on a new contract that strengthened the focus on DPS’ goals.

The program includes a variety of mechanisms. These include market incentives of additional pay for teachers serving in schools that are difficult to serve or positions that have historically been hard to staff (e.g., special education, math, science). There are incentives for student growth that emphasize school-wide academic growth and also include incentives for academic growth at the classroom level. There are also pay increases for demonstrated increases in teacher knowledge and skills and receipt of satisfactory teacher evaluations.

The contract included a raise in pay for all teachers, and a significant increase in starting teachers' salaries. The new agreement also upped the incentives for teachers in hard-to-staff schools and subjects from 3 percent to 6.4 percent of base pay, and provided similar bonus dollars for teachers whose schools exceed expectations or show high growth on CSAP scores. A compounding pay increase for professional development now applies only to teachers with less than 15 years in the system (Brown and Chait 2008; DPS 2008-2009).

According to the district, the revised system significantly increases the proportions of an average teacher's salary that will be affected by the elements of ProComp, including increases in the amount tied to the teachers' decisions to serve in hard-to-staff positions or schools and to performance. And, a larger proportion of a teacher's lifetime earnings has been shifted to earlier years in their careers, although the vast majority of lifetime compensation still comes in a teacher's final years.

It is difficult to determine precisely the impact of these changes on average teachers' salaries, as the eventual amounts to be spent on various components will depend on the actions of individual teachers as they respond to these new incentives. It also remains to be seen whether once teachers act on these intended incentives, the approach will yield the desired increases in student achievement that are the core motivation for the entire approach. Such information is unreasonable to expect at this stage.



Despite progress on ProComp, DPS and the DCTA have more work ahead to create a system that will achieve all the current goals around improving teacher quality. Many of these changes require action at the state or federal level, which are outside the control of Denver's leaders. For example, the state's system of licensing teachers is limited, basically operating with a "pass/fail" dichotomy designed to retain those who pass and terminate those who fail. As a result, districts only rarely use that system to identify and remove teachers. The approach undermines any district's efforts to establish a more finely grained approach to evaluating and managing staff.

A national report on teacher evaluation policies from The New Teachers Project (Weisberg et al. 2009) found the typical school district and collective bargaining approach is to treat teachers as "interchangeable widgets," and fails to distinguish good from mediocre performance. Looking across 12 districts in four states, including Denver, the researchers found:

- All teachers are rated good or great
- Novice teachers get no special attention
- Professional development is inadequate
- Excellence goes unrecognized
- Poor performance is not addressed

Only three districts had collective bargaining agreements that fundamentally altered at least one core practice: Cincinnati considers teacher performance in hiring and placement decisions; Toledo factors performance into decisions about tenure; and in Denver teacher performance is a core part of compensation. But even in the practices in which Denver stood out among the 12 districts in the study, the progress was minimal. For example, of five districts in the study that used an either-or state system to evaluate teacher performance (in which the ratings are only satisfactory or unsatisfactory), Denver gave unsatisfactory ratings to the highest percentage of teachers. Still, the difference was nothing to brag about. Denver found 1.4 percent of its teachers to be unsatisfactory, whereas two districts gave that rating to 0.3 percent of their teachers, and two districts could find no teachers who were unsatisfactory.

Denver's pension system has been a barrier to making changes in the investment in the teaching profession. Recent legislative changes may allow the district to further adjust the allocation of resources so that more money is available to compensate teachers earlier in their careers. It is too early to say how these changes will affect the district's human resources management, but the initial steps are encouraging.

The new federal stimulus funding already coming to the state, and additional competitions for federal funding that are expected in the coming months, include an interest in improving teacher quality and in more equitably distributing the most effective teachers to serve the students who could benefit most from their expertise. As a national leader, Denver should seize these opportunities and gain resources to enhance its efforts around teacher quality.

ProComp is deepening the evidence base nationally about whether and how performance pay for teachers improves student learning. However, the tentative nature of the one-year evaluation means that the jury will be out until a longer track record can be examined. The district needs more solid data and evidence of student impact in the next evaluation due in 2010. Confidence in the continuation of ProComp is high among district leaders, and the effort enjoys strong support from local and national proponents of pay-for-performance programs. Meanwhile, the larger system used by the district and codified in the DPS-DCTA collective bargaining agreement to manage human resources has not yet caught up to the progress of ProComp, and a variety of additional changes, inside and outside of Denver, may be necessary to achieve the objectives of the ProComp reform effort.

## **New Schools, Performance and Innovation**

The DPS New School Development Plan adopted in November 2007 signaled a new direction in Denver's school policies, but the roots run much deeper and its potential impact in the future is large. The reform encourages innovation by creating mechanisms that schools can use to gain autonomy over important elements of school management. This includes how schools use time and resources, select and allocate staff, and design curriculum. The autonomy allows a school to adopt a coherent approach and is accompanied by accountability for performance that tracks student growth and achievement.

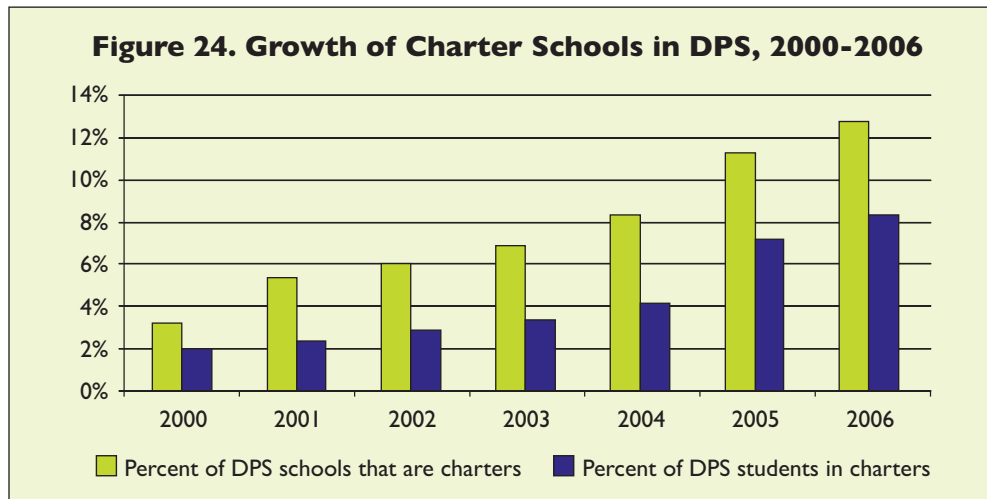
The most visible element of this approach is the charter school sector in Denver. The mechanisms used to manage charter schools are increasingly being used to solicit and oversee schools that are not charters, as the autonomy and accountability of charters become viable in other settings. Other approaches include "innovation schools" that can be created under state legislation passed in 2008, contract schools, and district-managed schools that are involved in various efforts to turnaround performance.

The variety of schools seeking autonomy and the tools used to manage this portfolio offer opportunities and challenges. These schools share autonomy and accountability, but they differ in many important ways and the results vary between schools. Observers frequently try to determine whether charters or other innovative schools, as a group, out-perform traditional schools, but there is more variation within each group than there is between the different approaches. A more helpful task is to determine which of these innovative schools are succeeding and which are failing, and find ways to replicate success, minimize or close failures, and manage the process. The challenges include measuring how well these schools are performing; intervening when schools struggle — including closing schools that are not serving students well, and recruiting new schools to serve neighborhoods and groups of students that the district has identified as needing better options.

Funding from the federal stimulus funds may provide opportunities to support new schools and the restructuring of existing schools. The state has allocated close to \$40 million to spend over the next few years on improving low-performing schools, and Denver regularly has a high proportion of the schools that require such intervention. The district's increasingly pro-active approach toward managing its school options and using a varied approach to turning around schools could benefit from this infusion of resources.

Denver's charter school sector continues to generate interest among families. National studies attribute the popularity of charter schools to their autonomy, and their ability to create and sustain innovative practices

and adapt quickly to the needs of students and parents (Reich 2008). Studies have also found that by actively choosing a school, students and parents are able to exercise a basic liberty that will cause them to become more connected to and invested in the school (Gordon 2008). Despite the lack of clear evidence that, on average, academic achievement is higher in charters than traditional public schools, some charters — including several in the Denver area — perform dramatically better than comparison schools (Rand 2009). Furthermore, parents strongly favor having the choices open to them (Teske 2007).



Nationally, creating and nurturing new school choices is not familiar territory for urban school districts. In Denver, school choice is a given because the state has been a leader in creating options since open enrollment passed in the 1980s. Colorado was also among the first states to pass a charter school law. While DPS initially fought charter schools, by 2000 the district’s attitude shifted as the new schools attracted a noticeable and growing share of students in Denver. As Figure 24 shows, by 2006, more than 12 percent of DPS schools were charters, and more than 8 percent of DPS students attended charter schools (CDE 2008).

Denver’s Board of Education built into its 2007 slate of reforms a system-wide approach that is meant to guide the approval of more new high-quality schools, especially at the secondary level, and to establish a public and disciplined way of closing failing schools (DPS 2007). The reform strategy included the establishment of an Office of New Schools within DPS (which has subsequently been renamed), and a robust application and request for proposals (RFP) process for district-run schools and charter schools. The district has hired a director for the Office of New Schools that opened in 2008, and in a move that signals DPS has gained a reputation for developing quality school offerings, the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) selected the district as its first network partner, providing a full-time advisor and other resources for three years — a \$1 million investment. Taken together, these mechanisms signal district support for the development of a range of diverse school options intended to meet the needs of students, neighborhoods, and the district as a whole.

In Colorado, a district’s decision to reject a charter application or to revoke a charter can be appealed to the State Board of Education. DPS lost an appeal in a previous effort to close a charter school that served at-risk students. The subsequent efforts to create systems to manage transparent frameworks of student performance, and the partnering with experts in national best practices in charter oversight, are likely to strengthen the district’s hand in future appeals to the State Board of Education.

Denver’s reforms draw on the experiences of other districts with a longer track record of managing schools that are deliberately different from one another, such as New York City, Boston, and Chicago (Anderson and Zeibarth 2006). Described by analysts in recent years as “innovation zones” and a “portfolio of schools” approach, the reform seeks to organize schools and programs in a way that more explicitly meets the needs of a diverse student population (Hill 2006). The DPS version of reform is unusual because it seeks to create a relatively

level playing field, with new school development opportunities offered not just to charter school designers, but also to those who would design a DPS-managed school.

The criteria for school closures in the past was less clearly spelled out, contributing to a few highly visible cases that resulted in long and loud public backlash. An A+ Denver subcommittee developed an initial set of criteria for the district and Board to use when considering which schools to close. Subsequently, the district developed the School Performance Framework, which uses closure as an ultimate sanction for poorly performing schools of all types, including charter schools.

On the face of it, closing schools that are low-performing and only opening schools with promise of being high-performing should make a difference toward reaching district goals. However, one of the most politically difficult jobs any school board has to tackle is closing existing schools, even when low-performance is chronic.

Through the use of a framework that applies to all schools and includes demand as a factor, charter schools in Denver can play an increasing role in keeping DPS enrollment up by attracting families that might otherwise consider leaving or remaining outside the district. At the same time, district-managed schools that exhibit high quality could compete effectively and on a level field with Denver's charters.

The New Schools, Performance and Innovation reform reflects an opportunity in the future for DPS to increase enrollment, which is a sign that families recognize a quality system. Increased enrollment also brings in new funding.

Implementation of the reform could allow the district to draw more families into its schools, tapping the combined outmigration of students enrolled in other districts, the 15 percent or so of students in private schools, and the homeschool population to see real enrollment growth (CDE 2008). Denver gains and loses students across district boundaries through open enrollment (Figure 25). More DPS students are lost to Jefferson and Douglas County school districts than any others in the metropolitan area (CDE 2008c).

**Figure 25. Interdistrict Choice In and Out of Denver from Surrounding Districts, 2008**

District name	Enrolled into DPS	Enrolled out of DPS	Net change for DPS
Aurora	1,135	575	+560
Cherry Creek	732	376	+356
Douglas County	83	1,221	-1,138
Englewood	141	332	-191
Jefferson County	1,041	2,197	-1,156
Littleton	91	653	-562
Sheridan	78	390	-312

### DPS School Performance Framework – Indicators and Measures

Is the educational program a success?

- Student progress over time – growth (on Annual Yearly Progress, School Accountability Reports, CSAP catch-up and keep-up, continuously enrolled)
- Student achievement level – status (met Annual Yearly Progress, School Accountability Reports rating, CSAP proficient/compared to similar schools/advanced, achievement gaps, meet standards on other state tests such as DRA/EDL/CELA)
- Post-secondary readiness (ACT, graduation rate, on track to graduate, taking and passing tests such as Advanced Placement/Postsecondary Enrollment Options)\*
- Student engagement and satisfaction (attendance, student survey and response rate)

Is the organization effective and well-run?

- School demand (re-enrollment rate, enrollment change)
- Parent and community engagement\*\*

\*College acceptance rates to be included beginning in 9/09

\*\*Parent satisfaction and response rates to be included beginning in 9/09

If DPS could significantly boost student achievement across all of its school options it might attract students from the entire metropolitan area to the district and fill its empty seats (Knous-Dolan and Anderson 2007). Denver has potential advantages over other Colorado districts when it comes to creating and balancing choices (e.g., a large potential metropolitan population concentrated in a relatively small geographic area). To capitalize on those advantages, DPS could draw many students away from private schools, homeschooling, or other districts, but it would need tantalizing and demonstrably high-quality school options to accomplish it (DPS 5/22/08). This also creates an opportunity to create more individual schools that embody the city's diversity.

The new marketplace created by school choice presents an opportunity for the district to serve a larger proportion of children in the city, or even the region. But it also creates financial and political challenges as the district must come to “own” the charter schools it oversees and to count the students in charter schools truly as DPS students. Ongoing efforts to ensure that schools pursuing autonomy operate with structures other than charter status — such as contract or as an innovation school — while effectively falling under the umbrella of DPS, demand new management systems.

## IV. A New Future for Reform in Denver Public Schools

The DPS reforms each face significant challenges, but show promise in different ways. It is not yet clear, however, whether all of their components will interact productively. For example, how will the centralized and managed aspects of The Denver Plan fit with the underlying support for a portfolio of schools with very diverse characteristics? It is still too soon to tell, but certainly DPS deserves credit for its willingness to tackle so much all at once.

Any praise for reform is balanced by a sobering assessment of the outcomes the district currently achieves. Denver's schools are not performing adequately. Overall performance is unacceptable on all measures and appalling gaps in achievement separate children of different backgrounds and needs. Even positive signs of improvement in student test scores and graduation rates, as well as higher relative student growth, all reflect too little progress coming far too slowly.

The entire Denver community has a major stake in the implementation and results of these reforms and in tracking student achievement. But the public, including community and business leaders, has not always been as engaged as it needs to be in the future. As the public enters these discussions, the following observations should be central:

- **Student performance has to go up** – Before success can be claimed for any reform effort, student achievement must rise. The fact that DPS fares poorly in terms of current student results is the heart of the matter.
- **Good data helps** – The state and the district have a growing set of tools they can use to evaluate students and schools. The deliberations that will come regarding educational progress and merits of Denver's reforms should be based on this data, and not driven by interests, opinions, or political expediency.
- **Evaluation and adjustment are part of progress** – The fact that DPS has contracted to regularly audit The Denver Plan, that ProComp has its own evaluation component, and that the New Schools reforms have the support of an independent outside agency, NACSA, are major steps forward. The district and its partners need to build this culture of evaluation, data, and reflection if they are to leverage the outside feedback and make changes based on identifiable lessons.
- **Transparency and greater public engagement are assets, not threats** – Data on the performance and evaluations of these programs need to be widely distributed and presented in clear and accessible language. Public engagement should be responsible and informed. And, it needs to be seen by the system leaders as a mechanism to improve and accelerate reform, rather than a necessary evil conducted to silence or side-step critics.
- **Accountability must address all levels and elements of the system** – A comprehensible baseline against which to measure progress could help to initiate important community conversations. The standards, goals, and progress should be coherent, aligned, and applied.

A great deal of effort awaits people throughout the city of Denver. Each group of constituents has a role to play. Students must do the work required to learn; parents must expect, nourish, and support their children's work; educators and their associations, school leaders, and other education professionals must identify and implement effective strategies; and elected and hired leaders must provide the vision and direction that moves everything forward.

The preceding pages have outlined a great deal of the activity taking place in Denver’s public schools and district offices. But the rest of the community — the people who live and work in Denver — must also be engaged in the progress of their schools. This report is intended as both an information resource with data that people should consider, as well as a call to action for the community. People throughout the city will have to play a significant role in the district’s reform efforts in the future and they should be prepared to do so for quite some time. This analysis is intended to provide the background information that the public can use to consider the recent progress and future direction of reform in Denver’s public schools.

To engage the public effectively, the district cannot unveil extensive new reforms every few years. The process will need to be continuously reiterated, with ideas and strategies shared earlier in the process. The public deserves to know the supporting research and the data. And, as the community becomes better informed and more widely engaged, the district will have to begin sharing options, rather than final plans, for moving forward. The public schools are, after all, public.

DPS is engaged in many reforms and is making progress. The community must now step up and reform itself and its behavior as well. A fully engaged community may not make reform efforts progress more smoothly, but in the long-run, it may help them succeed.

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