DENVER CITYWIDE EDUCATION PROGRESS REPORT

Key Takeaways

Denver is a leader in education reform and an early adopter of cross-sector collaboration. Over the past decade, the city has experienced improvement in school proficiency rates and rapid growth in student enrollment. However, education leaders must continue to push themselves to tackle the tough issues that remain. Denver Public Schools must increase equitable access to high-quality schools and deepen engagement with community and family groups.

Using Data to Get the Right Talent

Denver Public Schools (DPS) is using data to identify and respond to specific gaps to ensure that all schools have teachers and leaders who are a good fit.

DPS is developing strategic partnerships with special education, math, and Spanish departments at local universities to fill positions that are typically difficult to staff.

To address the gap between the demographics of the workforce and student populations, DPS has a three-prong strategy: establish new partnerships with historically black colleges and universities; participate in Make Your Mark, a citywide recruitment effort with the mayor’s office and charter leaders; and use “stay interviews” to identify what supports teachers and leaders of color need from the district.

DPS identified a 20% teacher retention gap between the highest- and lowest-performing schools. The district is trying to retain effective teachers in the highest-needs schools by offering incentives of up to $6,500. Using surveys, DPS identified what types of supports teachers working in low-performing schools want. Regional superintendents then work with principals to make school-specific changes, such as hiring more social workers.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

- **Being transparent about the challenges that remain**

  Like other cities that have seen global improvement, Denver now faces the much harder task of reducing persistent achievement gaps. Denver Public Schools (DPS) can signal this issue’s importance by being more transparent. Currently, DPS does not report any citywide sub-group performance rates, making it difficult for families, community members, or even education leaders to identify what gaps persist and what kind of progress the city is making. A new school performance framework released in October 2017 includes an equity indicator that highlights performance gaps. Education leaders could also consider publishing regular equity reports similar to Washington, D.C.’s, which track student proficiency by student sub-group at the citywide, sector, and school levels.

- **Addressing equitable distribution of high-quality schools across the city**

  A 2017 CRPE report revealed an uneven distribution of high-quality schools across Denver, and analysis of 2013-14 data showed inequitable access to top-scoring elementary and middle schools. DPS, which authorizes the city’s charter schools, uses current and projected enrollment data to identify where new seats are needed, but should use it more consistently to drive adjustments in school supply. The district now has a process to encourage operator and school quality for new or restarted schools. DPS can build on these policies by leveraging its strong coalition of civic, nonprofit, and education leaders to identify barriers to strategic siting and work together to address issues—like lack of facilities—that hamper the process. To address the need for quality schools in low-enrollment areas, the district can consider siting microschools as extensions of existing high-quality charter or district schools, or forming partnerships with outlying districts so families can choose a high-quality school using interdistrict choice.

- **Tapping into school-level autonomy to diversify school options**

  Since 2008, when the first Innovation Schools were granted waivers from district policies, DPS has provided some autonomy to district schools. To further that goal, in 2014 DPS created the Imaginarium, an innovation lab that helps school leaders and their staff create school designs to personalize student learning. A benefit of school-level autonomy is that schools can adjust their model to meet the needs of the students and families they serve. However, in a 400-parent survey conducted in spring 2017, 37% of families in Denver said that it is still challenging to find a school that is a good fit. Moving forward, DPS may want to work with school leaders to ensure that autonomies are clearly explained so families understand the variety available across the school system. DPS can use surveys to collect data about what models families most want, involve families in the design or selection of new schools, and work with leaders to ensure that the instructional, curricular, and programmatic variety pursued through autonomy meet the needs of the community.
Improving communication with all families

DPS collects feedback through superintendent forums, a community engagement office, and nonprofit partners. But community members we interviewed said a perception persists that the district is not responsive to issues families have identified as priorities. Multiple interviewees also pointed to an inequity in engagement: In general, low-income families are not well represented and some neighborhoods are more effective than others in advocating for themselves. District leaders should consider two additions to their current strategy. First, DPS should work to increase accessibility to and representation at forums and other events by coordinating meeting schedules through community organizations or schools and giving earlier notification of meetings. Second, the district can improve feedback by posting survey results and highlighting feedback that informed concrete changes. DPS can use current engagement strategies to identify changes that are most meaningful for families, especially families most impacted by low-performing schools. When community feedback cannot be incorporated, DPS should clearly explain the reasons through nonprofit partners or on the website.

Key Takeaways: Student & School Outcomes

Citywide, school proficiency rates on state assessments have improved relative to the state, but outcome gains have been uneven. White students are more likely to enroll in top-scoring elementary and middle schools than in lower-performing schools, and they are overrepresented in advanced math coursework in high school. The city’s graduation rate remains 10 percentage points below the state’s.

Is the education system continuously improving?

Between 2011-12 and 2014-15, the city’s graduation rate improved relative to the state’s, but in 2014-15 it was still below the state average.

Data: Percent of first-time 9th grade students graduating in four years, citywide and statewide.

Between 2011-12 and 2013-14, the math proficiency rate gap between the city and state was closing.

Data: The city’s estimated gains in proficiency rates across elementary and middle schools, standardized at the state level and controlling for student demographics.

Between 2011-12 and 2013-14, the reading proficiency rate gap between the city and state was closing.

Data: The city’s estimated gains in proficiency rates across elementary and middle schools, standardized at the state level and controlling for student demographics.

Do students have access to a high-quality education?

The Education Equality Index (EEI) identifies how students from low-income families are performing in cities and schools across the country. See this interactive tool to explore individual school performance.

Data: The Education Equality Index (EEI) was supplied by Education Cities and GreatSchools. See their site for more detail.

In 2013-14, 20% of students enrolled in the city’s top-scoring schools. White students were enrolled in top-scoring schools at higher rates than they enrolled in medium- and low-scoring schools.

Data: This figure shows whether students are equitably enrolled in the city’s top 20%, performing schools, based on student proficiency in state reading assessments. Within a single student sub-group, we identify what percent is enrolled in top-, middle-, and low-performing schools. If the share of students enrolled in top-scoring schools citywide and the share of a particular sub-group are similar, this means that the sub-group is equally distributed across low-, middle-, and top-scoring schools.
In 2013-14, white students were enrolling in high school advanced math coursework at rates above their total high school enrollment, while Hispanic students were enrolling at rates below their total enrollment.

Data: Enrollment of students in math courses above Algebra II. Rates calculated by dividing the number of students enrolled in advanced math by the number of students in the school. Sub-group rates determined at the school level.


Data & Scoring

Where did we get this data?

- Publicly available state and federal data, making our results comparable and reproducible.
- The most up-to-date data available for all 18 cities at the time of our data collection. See Methodology & Resources for more information.

What makes the data citywide?

- We include all charter and district schools within the municipal boundary of a city.
- In Houston, Indianapolis, Memphis, New Orleans, and San Antonio we use school data from multiple districts within the municipal boundary.

Key Takeaways: System Reforms

Denver Public Schools is strategic about using data to identify areas in need of improvement and develops sound, responsive policies. But more attention must be paid to involving families and improving access to high-quality, good-fit schools.

Is the education system continuously improving?

Good

Do schools have the resources they need? School improvement happens at the school level, but making sure resources are available requires sound, citywide policy. Having the right talent in a city is critical for schools to be able to provide students with a quality education. Schools should also have control over their budgets so they have the resources to address the needs of their student population.
Do schools have the kinds of teachers they need?

Denver Public Schools (DPS) started the 2016-17 school year with no teacher vacancies. DPS uses a framework to screen initial applicants and then gives principals the opportunity to hire the candidates that are the best fit for their schools. Citywide, however, Denver still struggles to retain effective teachers in the lowest-performing schools and to find teachers of color who are representative of the communities they serve. The mayor’s office, DPS, and charter leaders are working collaboratively to address these gaps across charter and district schools.

Do schools have the kinds of leaders they need?

“Grow Your Own” pipelines, which recruit leaders from within schools, and teacher career pathways both provide DPS with a robust leadership applicant pool. Strategic vacancy planning is coupled with targeted recruitment to ensure every school begins the school year with a high-quality leader. DPS identified retaining leaders of color as an area of focus and is currently conducting “stay interviews” to identify supports that will lead to a more inclusive school system.

Does funding equitably follow students?

DPS has a mature student-based allocation formula that has been steadily growing. At the last measurement in fiscal year 2013-14, DPS allocated 37.6% of district funds based on the educational needs of each student type. An updated analysis is underway.

Do students have access to a high-quality education?

Do school choice and supply meet family needs? This goal addresses how well the city is doing with providing families access to quality schools. We look at what the city is doing to ensure quality schools are in every neighborhood, and how well the choice process is working for families who want to use it.

Is the city being strategic about opening and closing schools?

As the sole authorizer of schools in Denver (district or charter), DPS has adopted transparent, data-informed school opening and closure policies. DPS uses enrollment maps to chart where quality schools are needed and projects seat availability five years in advance. Vetting procedures identify high-quality operators that are good matches for the community. A new School Performance Compact lists criteria for identifying persistently underperforming schools—both charter- and district-run—for restart, replacement, or closure. Facility utilization is uneven across the city, so DPS may need to adjust procedures to address underenrollment in some schools. School quality remains uneven across the city, despite having good policies in place. About half of surveyed families said they had a great deal or fair amount of confidence in the city to make sure every neighborhood has a good school.

Is the enrollment process working for families?

In 2012, Denver adopted one of the nation’s first unified enrollment systems to include all charter and district schools. An internal district report showed that about 8 in 10 families used the enrollment system in 2017 for a child going into kindergarten, grade 6, or grade 9. DPS improves the enrollment process yearly, with current conversations focused on how they can hold seats for low-income students in quickly gentrifying neighborhoods. Denver must
next help families better understand details of the process, like how the lottery works in regard to neighborhood and sibling preferences. Some community members report that eligibility of special education students is not clear. Among surveyed families, understanding which school a child was eligible to attend was more challenging for district school families (24%) than for charter families (10%).

Do families have the information they need and know how to use it?

DPS produces an enrollment guide that includes all schools in the city and is available online and in print. The guide includes academic information, program offerings, curricular information, and ELL services. In interviews, community members reported that families, especially those with special education students, do not always know how to use the information strategically or understand the different resources schools offer. About one in five surveyed families said that finding enough information was a challenge during the application process. DPS is implementing a new online tool for the 2018-19 school year that guides families to find, evaluate, and apply to schools.

Is transportation working for families?

Free transportation is provided via a circulator bus, Success Express, to district, magnet, and most charter schools within certain enrollment zones. Students living outside these zones, however, are not guaranteed free public transportation to the school of their choice. In our 400-parent survey, transportation was cited as a greater challenge for charter families (33%) than district families (25%). A CRPE report shows this burden disproportionately impacts low-income families living in isolated regions with a limited supply of high-quality schools. DPS is aware of these issues and is currently researching how they can improve access.

Does the school supply represent an array of models?

Of the charter and district schools that have opened, expanded, or restarted in Denver since 2014-15, about a fifth use a nontraditional instructional model. Community members report that giving preference to charter schools with proven track records makes it harder for smaller or newer models to emerge. About half of surveyed families say school programs vary between schools. However, 37% of surveyed families reported that finding a good-fit school was the greatest difficulty during the application process.

Is the whole community engaged?

Education is a citywide endeavor. When families, community organizations, and city leaders have the opportunity to provide feedback and share in the vision, the strategy is more likely to be sustainable and meet the needs of all students. In this goal, we look at how well the city is doing with engaging key stakeholders.

Is there a strong and deep coalition of support for the education strategy?

Denver’s education strategy enjoys strong alignment among local leaders. The governor, mayor, and local funders all support the superintendent’s educational strategy, and the school board is often aligned when voting. Denver partners with several nonprofits to improve community participation and support. However, interviewees within and outside the district reported concern that strong alignment of the board, superintendent, and other organizations has led to less influence by dissenting voices over time.
Does the city engage families in educational decisions that impact them?

DPS has a rigorous vetting process for new schools that requires family input. The district vets new operators, but the community has the final vote. New policies for closures also include community involvement with procedures to ensure a more regular process than in the past. These policies are still nascent, and there is some room for improvement. Community members report that while advocacy organizations are involved in school supply decisions, families are not yet being directly engaged. As DPS continues to adjust policies, it may need to ensure that closure announcements are more timely and transparent.

Are a variety of groups engaged in education?

Denver has a number of grasstops and grassroots organizations engaged in education. DPS has grown the coalition that supports education to include local businesses and youth- and parent-led advocacy groups. However, some community members believe that more groups should be working with the families most impacted by low-performing schools. Community members reported in interviews that affluent parents have the tools and resources to ensure that the district prioritizes their concerns, while lower-income families live in isolated pockets of the city with little organizational representation.

Does the education system respond to community feedback?

The Denver education system is generally responsive to families at the school level. For systemwide issues, however, DPS has traditionally relied on forums to inform families of initiatives and respond to community concerns, which lends itself to one-way communication. Some improvements are being made, but in community interviews, families perceive that education leaders have not always been responsive to issues they raise, citing repeated requests for a comprehensive high school as an example. DPS likely needs a better feedback loop to communicate to families how feedback has been incorporated or explain why it hasn’t. Community advocates reported that some families do not understand how sibling and neighborhood preferences work in the lottery process. Using surveys to identify these concrete but simple concerns and then addressing them would go a long way toward improving the system and building trust.

Data & Scoring

Where did we get this information?

- Interviews with district, charter, and community leaders
- Policy documents from district, charter, and state websites
- School data from each city
- A 400-parent survey administered in March, 2017 in Cleveland, Denver, Indianapolis, Memphis, New Orleans, Oakland, and Washington, D.C.

How did we score the system reforms and goals?

- Each indicator is scored with a rubric on a 4-point scale. We added the scores for the indicators to get an overall goal score. See the Methodology & Resources page for details.

Score Levels

- Little in place
- Developing
- Good
- Exemplar
About Denver

Denver Public Schools (DPS) has enjoyed consistent leadership since Tom Boasberg was appointed superintendent in 2009. In 2012, DPS adopted one of the nation's first unified enrollment processes to include all charter and district schools in a city. DPS started offering Innovation Schools with autonomy in 2008. In 2016, the school board provided all district schools with flexibility over curriculum, assessment, and professional development. In 2014, the district started the Imaginarium to help principals create innovative school designs.

School Choice in the City

Students are guaranteed a seat at any school in their assigned enrollment zone, but can choose any school in another zone on a space-availability basis.

Governance Model

The Denver Board of Education oversees all district schools. DPS is the sole authorizer of all charter schools.

Student Body

Enrollment: 92,331 students  
Race and ethnicity: 56% Hispanic, 23% white, 13% black, 8% other  
Low-income: 67% free and reduced-price lunch

School Composition

Source: Enrollment data from Denver Public Schools, 2016.  
School data from researcher analysis of public records, 2016-17.
About This Project

The Citywide Education Progress Report looks at how a city is doing across three goals:

- The education system is continuously improving
- All students have access to a high-quality education
- The education strategy is rooted in the community

Across each goal we present indicators of what the cities are doing (what we call “system reforms”) and how they are doing (what we call “outcomes”).

Our city reports focus on education strategies from the 2016-17 school year. Our analyses reflect developments through summer 2017. We will update the reports for the 2017-18 school year and publish them in summer 2018.

To understand how well cities are doing, we used state and federal data to track school improvement, graduation rates, and student access to high-quality schools. Our student and school data cover the 2011-2012 to 2014-2015 school years. To understand city strategies and identify early progress, we relied on interviews, surveys, public documents, and news articles from 2014-2015 to the present. This analysis uses data for district and charter schools to look at all schools within municipal boundaries, rather than just one sector or district.

We cannot say that employing a certain strategy will lead to a particular result, or even whether a particular strategy is effective in these cities. But the reports can help us to see how a strategy is working, what problem areas remain, and which cities are seeing promising results.

The 18 cities in this study include Atlanta, Boston, Camden, Cleveland, Chicago, Denver, Houston, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Memphis, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, San Antonio, Tulsa, and Washington, D.C.

To learn more about the project, compare other cities, and read the cross-city analysis, visit:

research.crpe.org/projects/stepping-up

The Center on Reinventing Public Education is a research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell developing systemwide solutions for K–12 public education. Learn more about our work at crpe.org.