

Executive Summary

DPS Blueprint: Towards a High-Performing District – New School Development and Beyond

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The Denver Public Schools (DPS) district has an opportunity to become the premier urban school district in the nation. But achieving this powerful vision is no small undertaking. Success will require the district administration, teachers, the teachers union and the greater Denver community to radically change the current way of doing business.

Numerous districts across the nation have embarked on efforts to advance student achievement. One of the primary strategies used by other districts to improve student achievement has been to create new, small schools. Turning around large, failing schools is extremely challenging and rarely successful. Emerging research suggests that the creation of new and personalized learning communities is a promising strategy to increase student achievement, on-time grade promotion, high school graduation and teacher satisfaction.



Five-Year School Development Plan for DPS

Building a reform strategy that brings high-quality new schools to Denver over the next five years can have a dramatic impact on the city's educational landscape.

A new schools strategy in DPS should be designed to retain students and families in DPS, attract students back to the district, and better serve high-need students who are academically unsuccessful and dropping out. Since a significant number of families choose to leave DPS during the middle and high school years, and since academic decline and dropout rates for remaining students skyrocket during this time, DPS should initially focus on schools serving students in grades 6-12.

Goal 1: The district needs to create an array of high-performing schools in DPS customized to serve student and family needs.

Close chronically low-performing schools.

A necessary but challenging part of developing a portfolio of customized high-performing schools involves closing chronically low-performing schools. By closing schools that continually fail to improve, students will no longer be trapped in schools that are academically unsuccessful, and financial and facility resources will be freed up to invest in new schools.

Articulate clear policy decisions for new schools.

The district needs to establish policies around the following areas, which should be in place prior to soliciting new school proposals:

- Common design elements to which all new schools must adhere.
- Clear operational flexibility upfront, in exchange for increased academic performance expectations.
- A meaningful role for the community in development of new schools.
- Enrollment policies that provide equal opportunities for all students to attend new schools.
- A process for attracting high-quality applicants with proven track records.
- A method for determining how DPS facilities will be made available for new school applicants.

Create a top-notch Request for Proposal (RFP) process.

Creating an array of high-performing schools in DPS must be anchored by a strong new schools development initiative. To do this, the district must establish a well-designed RFP process that attracts high-quality new school providers.

In order to determine whether a school is likely to be successful, evaluation of a new school proposal should focus on three broad areas: the education plan, the organizational plan and the financial plan.

Create an Office of Performance Schools.

New school development initiatives in other cities have almost always been supported by the creation of a new district office and a redesign of central district office services. As Denver moves down this path, it too must support new schools by opening an Office of Performance Schools.

Goal 2: The district needs to reinvent its operations and structure in order to support the development of new schools and the turnaround of promising existing schools.

Develop a portfolio management strategy.

Creating a portfolio of customized, high-performing schools requires a significant change in district operations and the management structure to support these new and transformed schools.

A portfolio management approach calls for developing a diverse array of schools, some run by the school district and others by independent organizations, each designed to meet the needs of students. The Board of Education would begin to focus much less on managing and controlling the individual school inputs and operations, and instead would focus on student achievement outcomes.

The district should also decentralize its functions to more effectively support the operations of all its schools. All current district services should be on the table for review in an effort to create greater efficiencies and support. However, decentralization needs to be combined with clear expectations and systems for holding schools accountable for results.

A hybrid approach to district operations could be considered. Services and support would be aligned and more centralized at the elementary level, while there would be greater choice, flexibility and decentralization at the secondary level.

A portfolio approach to new school development approach is powerful because it puts the focus on quality, rather than simply on demand.



Goal 3: The district needs to modernize the school staffing system from a process and compliance oriented approach to one that is flexible, customized, and focused on student academic results.

Recruit, train, and retain excellent teachers and principals to staff new and existing DPS schools.

District leaders around the nation cite outstanding school leadership and teaching staff as key ingredients for successful new and transformed schools. Incentives Denver may offer – such as the pro comp compensation system for teachers, the development of an attractive performance pay system for principals, flexible scheduling of the school day or greater opportunities for teachers to engage in school decision-making – will hopefully attract and retain the best and most capable education staff to DPS.

Amend the collective bargaining agreement and request state waivers to give more authority to principals over decisions about use of educational time during the school day and school year and building staffing needs.

Teachers unions provide important functions around salary and benefits for teachers, however, collective bargaining rules create barriers to reform that must be addressed. Contract language that is too prescriptive and limiting about how educational time is used hurts students.

The current collective bargaining agreement limits principals' authority to staff their schools in ways that further their mission and best meet the needs of students. If principals are expected to produce rigorous achievement results for struggling students, they must have more flexibility over how time is spent, how their resources are allocated and who works in their buildings.

Beyond Denver: A Metro Area Vision

The vision outlined in this blueprint has focused on DPS, but it is a strategy that can be applied to all Denver metro area districts and communities committed to providing a top-notch education to their students. With high mobility rates among families and arbitrary school district boundaries, there is an obligation and an opportunity to work across district, city and county lines to create a metro area network of high-performing schools that serve all students and families. This type of collaboration knows no limits and would certainly be a model partnership for the entire nation.

