



Memorandum

To: Denver Public Schools Staff and Board of Education
From: A+ Denver and Donnell-Kay Foundation
Subject: School Leadership Recommendations
Date: June 2015

School leadership is a critical lever to impact students; numerous studies highlight the importance of school leadership, finding that behind teaching, [school leaders have the largest impact on student learning](#), that effective leaders can [raise student achievement](#), and that school leaders [greatly influence instruction and classroom practices](#). School leaders set the course for the school, establish priorities, oversee teachers, handle operations, and are responsible for all students within the school. This role has only become more complicated and challenging with the advent of new teacher evaluation systems, student-based budgeting, and an ever increasing focus on educational outcomes—especially for our highest-need students.

The need for effective school principals is even greater as DPS moves in the direction of a more decentralized district management structure. As schools become more autonomous and now have to “opt in” to district services, principals need to not only be instructional leaders but CEOs to manage the school’s priorities. This will make an already challenging job that much more important, and it is critical school leaders are able to understand tradeoffs, prioritize, and establish focus for their team.

DPS Superintendent Boasberg asked A+ Denver in November 2014 to facilitate a series of roundtable discussions with DPS senior staff and outside experts to provide feedback on DPS’ approach to having great principals in every building. A+ Denver, joined by the Donnell-Kay Foundation, hosted a series of five meetings to discuss how to improve and better support school leaders in Denver Public Schools. The School Leadership Roundtable, consisting of leaders in education, businesses, and community groups, served as a forum to provide feedback on DPS’ current practices, processes, and challenges in supporting school leadership.

We would like to thank Denver Public Schools for recognizing the importance of this work, and asking us to convene a diverse group of thought-leaders to help inform the district’s approach to school leadership. To that end, we owe a great debt to the participants of the School Leadership Roundtable. This group gave time and real thoughtfulness while engaging with the district on key challenges, providing both a sounding board and explicit recommendations on district policies and processes. The recommendations included in this document are heavily informed by the conversations and insights of the Roundtable.

Building on these conversations, A+ Denver and Donnell-Kay recommend the following strategies aimed at helping the Denver Public Schools define a best-in-class leadership management system.

1. Differentiate school leadership positions by school type. DPS' current approach to school leadership is largely agnostic to school context. That is to say that preparation processes, leadership competencies, and evaluation are standardized across all schools. A+ Denver and Donnell-Kay recommend creating a system that would better define the leadership needs within each school, and aligning competencies, selection, and supports to match each school context. To implement this strategy, the district should:

- a) Develop a methodology to understand the leadership needs at different kinds of schools. The district should be able to answer questions like, which leaders or leadership competencies performed particularly well in an elementary context? How are these leaders different from high performers in secondary schools? In turnaround schools? Innovation schools? Multiple Pathways schools? Schools with high ELL populations? New schools?
- b) Implement competency models that align to these differentiated leadership models. DPS' current School Leadership Framework, which guides selection and evaluation of principals, has 11 competencies, each with over 15 observable behaviors, setting unreachable expectations without the formal ability to prioritize tasks based on school context. Streamlining the Framework, and aligning leadership competencies with the specific needs of a school will help the district better "match" leaders to schools, support the prioritization of leader actions by school needs, and ensure principals are fairly evaluated.
- c) Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of principal preparation pathways. DPS has invested significant time and resources to expand its seven different leadership development programs. While this has expanded the capacity of the district's ability to develop identified future leaders, there is little understanding or analysis of which programs focus on which leadership skills, which best prepare leaders for specific contexts, or which develop leaders most likely to stay in their role.

2. Build regular and predictable forecasts for current, near-term, and long-term leadership needs.

We have observed that DPS' principal placement processes are often piecemeal. DPS is often unprepared to deal with changes in school leadership with no formal principal bench and few schools with succession plans for principal replacement. A+ Denver and Donnell-Kay recommend building a more robust pipeline of qualified candidates by creating a more systematic and disciplined succession planning process through:

- a) Better planning for principal hiring and replacement. Because there is a shortage of great school leaders, DPS has moved principals between schools, to different school levels and different school contexts, sometimes leading to a "rob Peter to pay Paul" situation among schools. There are encouraging examples of DPS taking top-notch leaders and having them oversee multiple schools – potentially decreasing the need for such large numbers of leaders. Nonetheless, DPS should develop, consistently refresh, and communicate succession plans for differentiated school types to mitigate the instability and confusion communities experience during principal turnover.

- b) Creating a bench of leaders. DPS’ current pipeline and pool of high quality available leaders is too small given annual needs of 25-35 new leaders. A+ Denver and Donnell-Kay recommend creating a larger pool of leader candidates for each school leader opening to ensure the district is able to find high quality leaders with the right skills to match school needs. A few examples of actions to consider include:
 - Instructional superintendents might be re-designated to provide the bench for school leadership, serving as ready candidates for open hard-to-hire positions, rather than as permanent managers of current principals.
 - Alongside growing leadership, there should also be a robust recruitment effort by both the district and community that attracts the best and brightest leadership talent to Denver.
- c) Embedding leadership development into day-to-day work. DPS’ teacher leadership model holds promise in ensuring future leader candidates have opportunities to build and hone leadership skills across their career. As such, the district should focus on implementation, ensuring teacher leaders are given the right purview and authority, have consistent support and feedback on their leadership skills, and are able to continue to grow along a multi-stage career trajectory.
- d) Ensuring current leaders support aspiring leaders. The key to a successful teacher leadership model will be ensuring current leaders are able to support and manage these leadership teams. This will also require that principal candidates be ONLY paired with proven leaders and successful schools— aspiring leaders should not be placed if there is not a strong leader to mentor them.
- e) Holding current school leaders and instructional superintendents accountable for identifying the next cadre of leaders within their schools. Current leaders should be responsible for hiring and recognizing teachers with high leadership potential, identifying candidates for leadership preparation programs, and creating a culture of support amongst adults. The district’s understanding of the leadership pipeline and succession plans can be more readily refreshed, flexible, and robust, with this enhanced on-the-ground view.

3. Manage for school leader burnout

Leader turnover continues to be a challenge for Denver Public Schools, particularly in its hardest-to-serve and turnaround schools. A Chalkbeat analysis found that 25% of Denver schools had three or more leaders during 2010-2014. Much of this turnover is driven by the sheer work and expectations of leaders in schools that need to show the greatest improvement. This turnover not only creates instability, but is also a huge cost: typical principal pipeline training costs hover around \$75,000 per person. To improve leader retention A+ Denver and Donnell-Kay recommend the following approaches:

- a) Define expectations. It is unclear to us whether the district has a vision of the tenure they expect of leaders, and how expectations may fluctuate based on school needs and individual career aspirations. “Serial turnaround” leaders and leadership teams are other approaches being tried in other cities as ways to get schools back on track before bringing in longer-term permanent leadership. Other cities like D.C. are using contracts to specify tenure expectations, improving stability and predictability for both the district and leader.

- b) Rethink mentorship and coaching relationships. The district should decouple management and coaching, ensuring aspiring and new leaders have access to a cohort for peer-to-peer support, strong leadership examples and mentors in similar school contexts, and social-emotional support. The district should be responsible for identifying strong coaches and mentors, which it could do by curating a pool of advisors of successful local and external school leaders. To improve the matching process between new and mentor leaders, the district could empower leaders to opt-in to support networks and mentorship relationships.
- c) Establish systems to help leaders prioritize efforts. For example, we recommend leveraging principal evaluation to ensure leaders focus on a streamlined set of behaviors, helping leaders decide what not to do. Particularly for new school leaders, the ability to focus efforts is critical to establish a strong school culture and create the building blocks for future sustained success.
- d) Restructure the role for sustainability. Ideas for further consideration include: offering principal sabbaticals to alleviate burnout, creating leadership teams to avoid stress falling on an individual, and increasing compensation and support to communicate that leadership is a top district priority.
- e) Focus on continued development of leaders. DPS currently emphasizes leadership development, as evidenced by the proliferation of pathway programs. There has been a recent effort to ensure quality continuous learning opportunities that are differentiated. Leaders should be supported as they opt-in to quality learning opportunities.

Though DPS leadership has recognized the importance of its school leaders to achieving its goals by naming it as a key strategy in the Denver Plan 2020. A+ Denver and the Donnell-Kay Foundation urge DPS, in partnership with community members, to create a comprehensive school leadership plan that includes a clear theory of change, concrete strategies, goals, and milestones. This will help uncover the gaps in current and future leadership, monitor leadership needs and outcomes, and build strategic partners.

We appreciate the time and consideration DPS staff and Board members give to this set of recommendations. We request the district respond to this memo by September 1, 2015 with its current work and plans to address the set of recommendations. We look forward to continuing to engage with the district on this critical work of improving principal training, recruitment, selection and support.

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