

April 11, 2017



Dear Colorado State Board of Education Member,

A+ Colorado is a research and advocacy organization that conducts education research to build public will and advocate for the changes necessary to dramatically increase student achievement in schools and districts in Colorado.

Our newest report, *Start With the Facts: Aurora Public Schools 2017*, showed the district has entered its fifth year of stagnant student achievement, as measured by state standardized tests, high school graduation rates, and ACT scores. 2017-2018 is Aurora Public Schools' last school year to show it can improve before this body must take action in intervene on behalf of Aurora's students and families. The report finds:

- While graduation rates in Aurora have increased, only one in four high school graduates enroll in college and half of all APS students who go to college have to take remedial courses. This indicates that APS high schools are not preparing their graduates for college-level work.
- Opportunities to attend a top performing school in Aurora are not evenly distributed across the district. All of the top performing APS schools are in the Southeastern quadrant of the district.
- In APS, Black students, Latinx students, Multiracial students, and students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch have median growth percentiles below 50 meaning that they have made less growth than more than half their academic peers. Low income students and students of color in APS are falling behind their academic peers across the state.

A+ Colorado offers these four policy recommendations to increase student achievement across the district, and it was a follow-up report to the 2015 publication, *If Not Now: Transforming Aurora Public Schools from Failing to Great*.

Improvement Strategies Rooted in Best Practices and Informed by Communities

School turnaround is a difficult process that requires engagement at all levels, from the highest levels of district leadership to the specific classrooms, students, and families in turnaround schools across the district. Many schools in Aurora are in need of dramatic improvement which will require fundamental changes. For example, Aurora Central High School's innovation plan is **poorly constructed** which gets in the way of effective implementation and improvements in student achievement. Furthermore, without the support and investment of the community, change cannot take root. APS needs to communicate with families, teachers, school leaders, community members, and district staff and develop a

clear blueprint for turnaround that respects these different perspectives. School turnaround strategies should result in improvements in student achievement within the first year or two. High quality turnaround plans require a commitment to best practice, strong leadership, and clear accountability from the district to ensure that plans are implemented and that school leaders are being held to high standards for success. Students depend on plans to be enacted with fidelity, and they cannot wait through periods of poor implementation. Your decision to support Aurora Central's innovation status as a turnaround plan puts you in a position to push aggressively for its proper implementation and immediate results for students.

Family Friendly Rating System and Data Sharing

The purpose of publicly available data is twofold: to inform people about the current state of affairs and to inspire improvements based on that knowledge. Families and communities should be able to access data about school quality, their student's performance relative to other students in the district and the state, and an understanding of the performance of the district in which they live. It is not enough to have this data shared through Colorado Department of Education tools, which are not always easily navigable; the district and school should be consistently and intelligibly communicating with families about the quality of their schools. APS already has a robust data collection and analysis team that can incorporate school climate surveys and planning reports into CDE's school performance frameworks. The infrastructure already exists to make data useful to families in APS, it's time to act.

Create New High-Quality Schools

The district must fully commit to a new school strategy that prioritizes getting students into high quality schools as soon as possible. Ultimately, it is easier for a school to start from scratch than to turn a chronically low performing school around. There is no one perfect school model. A district needs a number of distinct, high quality models to both give families choice for their child's education and give the district more options and opportunities for scaling best practices. The district cannot be reactive to new schools development, instead, it should create clear district policies for new school development and authorizing. Additionally, the district should equitably share bond and mill funds with all public schools, including innovation and charter schools.

Updated Strategic Plan

Aurora Public Schools' strategic plan needs a thorough revision. APS 2020 is a simple plan: every student will have a plan for their future, the skills to implement their plan, and credentials that open doors. By zeroing in on workforce readiness, the plan's measures do not adequately enumerate how improvement will happen. The current strategic plan clearly communicates the

value of postsecondary and workforce readiness, but those goals must be complemented by a more robust set of metrics and benchmarks that make it clear to all stakeholders that Aurora's kids are getting the education they need to be successful. A strategic plan should communicate clear priorities and expectations to the community so that schools and districts can be held accountable to student achievement outcomes. Aurora could look at strategic plans from districts like Harrison 2 or Denver to see examples of strategic plans that provide a roadmap for improvement with metrics that can directly be related back to student achievement and postsecondary/workforce readiness.

Improving Aurora Public Schools is vital to the nearly 40,000 students served. We believe that these recommendations would support APS as it goes through the process of improving the educational opportunities offered to students in all corners of the district. Strong support for these district-level changes from the State Board can help to avoid painful and disruptive interventions the Board may need to implement if the district fails to take action this year.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Van Schoales', written in a cursive style.

Van Schoales
CEO, A+ Colorado