

A REPORT BY
A+ COLORADO
MAY 2018

**START WITH
THE FACTS**
DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS
AT A CROSSROADS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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We are grateful to the educators and community members in our city, in the district, in schools, and in partnership, who have led Denver through over a decade of improvement.

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INTRODUCTION

It has been nearly five years since Denver Public Schools (DPS) has set the goals for its strategic plan, Denver Plan 2020. There has been much progress, and well deserved recognition, since major reform efforts started back in 2006. Around the city, families are confronted with more choices for schools than ever before. However, not all choices are as accessible to all families as some would want. Families and system leaders have to ask the hard questions around access and quality. To many it seems that we are at an inflection point.

This report highlights the need for bold vision-setting in Denver and an honest level-setting around our current options for kids. Current student performance, shifts in longstanding trends, and persistent inequities demand that Denver dig deeper into what is currently working, and is not working, for students. This may create a crisis of conscience; some strategies that the district has placed big bets on may not in fact be driving improved academic outcomes. It is possible that some strategies are being undermined by other entrenched parts of the system.

Serving one out of every ten Colorado students, Denver is a leader in our state and nationally. It is indeed time for Denver to reexamine its goals and strategies, and boldly lead. To engage in these conversations about where DPS and the Denver community should point the ship, it is critical to know where Denver students currently are, and the work that schools have cut out for them to ensure that every student meets community expectations.

With that, let's start with the facts.

THE MOUNTAIN TO CLIMB

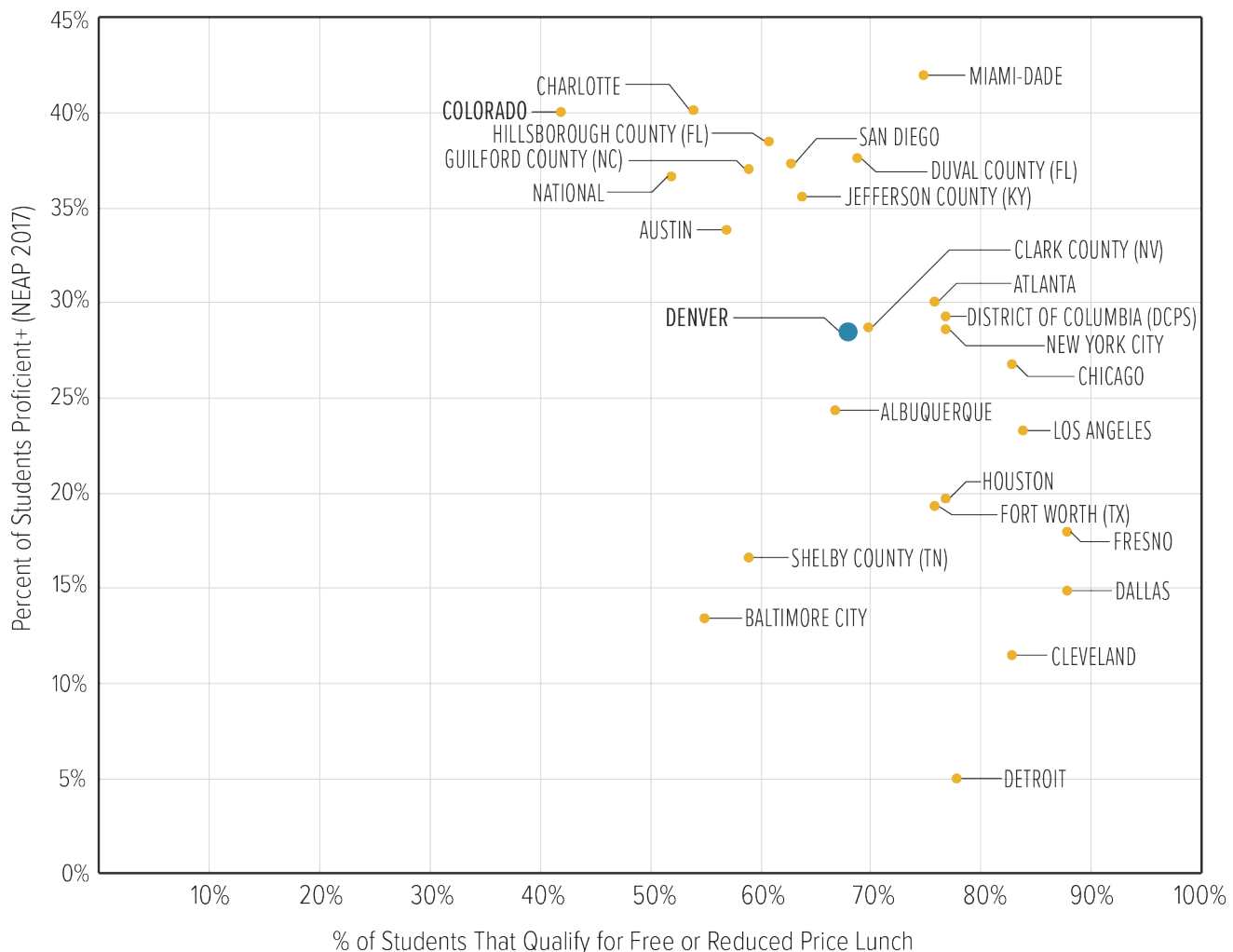
Denver Plan 2020 Beyond Our Reach?

Recent results from Denver's first ever participation in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), arguably the country's best cross state measure of educational achievement, reveal that compared to other large districts, Denver students perform in the middle of the pack (Figure 1). It also reinforces that there are large

gaps between students from different backgrounds. More affluent students in Denver perform better than students from more similar socioeconomic backgrounds in other states, and students from low-income families perform worse in Denver than other low-income students do in other geographies (Figure 2).

This look at student achievement in school systems nationally is critical; participating in NAEP is an important first step in monitoring how Denver students compare to

Figure 1. Denver's 4th Grade Reading NAEP Scores: Middle of the Pack



A+ Analysis of NAEP results from the National Center for Education Statistics. Demographic data compiled from publicly available sources.

Figure 2a-c. NAEP 2017: 4th Grade Math Scores by Geography

Figure 2a. Students Not Eligible for Free or Reduced Price Lunch			Figure 2b. Students Eligible for Free or Reduced Price Lunch			Figure 2c. Largest Gaps in Proficiency Eligible vs. Ineligible		
TUDA RANK	GEOGRAPHY	% OF STUDENTS PROFICIENT +	TUDA RANK	GEOGRAPHY	% OF STUDENTS PROFICIENT +	TUDA RANK	GEOGRAPHY	GAP (% POINTS)
1	ATLANTA	77%	1	MIAMI-DADE	39%	1	ATLANTA	65%
2	DIST. OF COLUMBIA (DCPS)	72%	2	DUVAL COUNTY (FL)	33%	2	DIST. OF COLUMBIA (DCPS)	54%
3	AUSTIN	71%	3	HILLBOROUGH COUNTY (FL)	31%	3	AUSTIN	45%
4	DUVAL COUNTY (FL)	64%	4	DALLAS	30%	3	DENVER	45%
4	SAN DIEGO	64%	5	CHARLOTTE	29%	5	SAN DIEGO	40%
6	CHICAGO	62%	6	GUILFORD COUNTY (NC)	28%	6	ALBUQUERQUE	39%
6	HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY (FL)	62%	7	AUSTIN	26%	6	CHICAGO	39%
8	CHARLOTTE	59%	8	NATIONAL	25%	6	JEFFERSON COUNTY (KY)	36%
8	JEFFERSON COUNTY (KY)	59%	8	HOUSTON	25%	9	COLORADO	34%
8	MIAMI-DADE	59%	10	BOSTON	24%	10	NATIONAL	32%
11	DENVER	58%	10	SAN DIEGO	24%	10	MILWAUKEE	32%
12	NATIONAL	57%	12	COLORADO	23%	12	DUVAL COUNTY (FL)	31%
12	COLORADO	57%	12	CHICAGO	23%	12	HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY (FL)	31%
12	ALBUQUERQUE	57%	12	JEFFERSON COUNTY (KY)	23%	12	HOUSTON	31%
15	HOUSTON	56%	12	NEW YORK CITY	23%	15	CHARLOTTE	30%
16	GUILFORD COUNTY (NC)	55%	16	CLARK COUNTY (NV)	22%	15	CLARK COUNTY (NV)	30%
17	CLARK COUNTY (NV)	52%	16	FORT WORTH (TX)	22%	17	FRESNO	29%
18	BOSTON	50%	18	ALBUQUERQUE	18%	18	GUILFORD COUNTY (NC)	27%
19	FORT WORTH (TX)	48%	18	DIST. OF COLUMBIA (DCPS)	18%	19	BOSTON	26%
20	FRESNO	43%	20	LOS ANGELES	15%	19	FORT WORTH (TX)	26%
20	MILWAUKEE	43%	21	FRESNO	14%	21	PHILADELPHIA	23%
22	NEW YORK CITY	41%	22	DENVER	13%	22	LOS ANGELES	20%
23	LOS ANGELES	35%	22	SHELBY COUNTY (TN)	13%	22	MIAMI-DADE	20%
24	PHILADELPHIA	32%	24	ATLANTA	12%	24	SHELBY COUNTY (TN)	19%
24	SHELBY COUNTY (TN)	32%	25	BALTIMORE CITY	11%	25	NEW YORK CITY	18%
26	BALTIMORE CITY	23%	25	MILWAUKEE	11%	26	BALTIMORE CITY	12%
27	DETROIT	6%	27	CLEVELAND	9%	27	DETROIT	2%
-	CLEVELAND	-	27	PHILADELPHIA	9%	-	CLEVELAND	-
-	DALLAS	-	29	DETROIT	4%	-	DALLAS	-

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

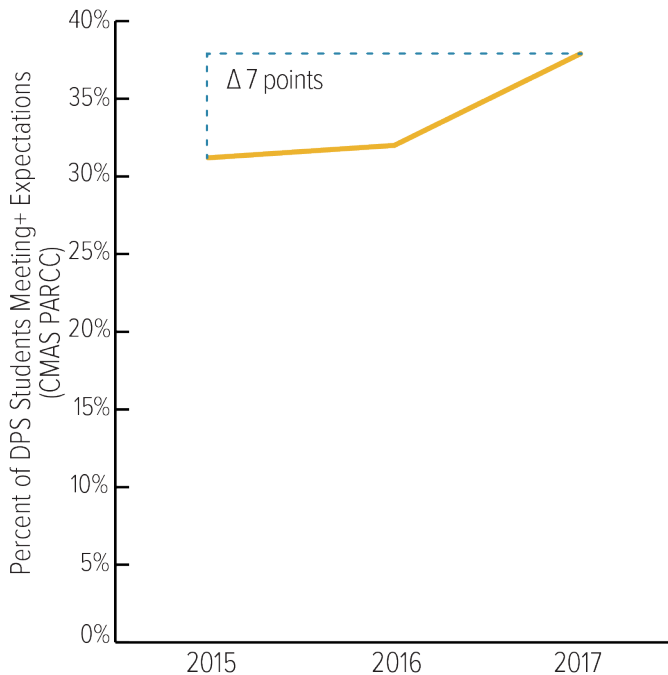
their peers across the country. Denver students deserve a school system that will support them to access not only the opportunities that our growing city and state have to offer, but also opportunities nationally and globally in an increasingly mobile and interconnected economy.

While the NAEP measures may be new to Denver, the imperative of ensuring students master academic content is, of course, an ingrained value in our city. In 2014 Denver Public Schools (DPS) set out a series of goals for itself as

a district, challenging schools and the community to rally around the need to accelerate student achievement such that every student in Denver succeeds. The Denver Plan 2020 outlined a series of strategies to improve learning outcomes for students. And while the district has made progress, in 2018 it is clear that many of the goals the district set remain elusive.

For example, DPS has made progress toward its goal of ensuring 3rd graders are reading at grade

Figure 3. DPS Third Grade Students that Meet or Exceed Expectations in English Language Arts



Source: Data provided by Denver Public Schools

level. The goal has remained the same despite a shift in state standards and a different assessment. Accordingly, the percentage of students meeting grade level expectations dropped in 2015. As such, a 7-point increase over two years is important, and means that 375 more third graders met expectations in 2017 than did in 2015 (Figure 3). Previous A+ reports have also highlighted that these outcomes in Denver are far closer to performance across the rest of the state than they were in the previous decade when the measurement tool was different. Yet, looking at the most recent data from 2017 and recent improvement rates, achieving the Denver Plan early literacy goals would take over a decade for all students, and three decades for Latinx students, black students, and students from low-income families (Figure 4).

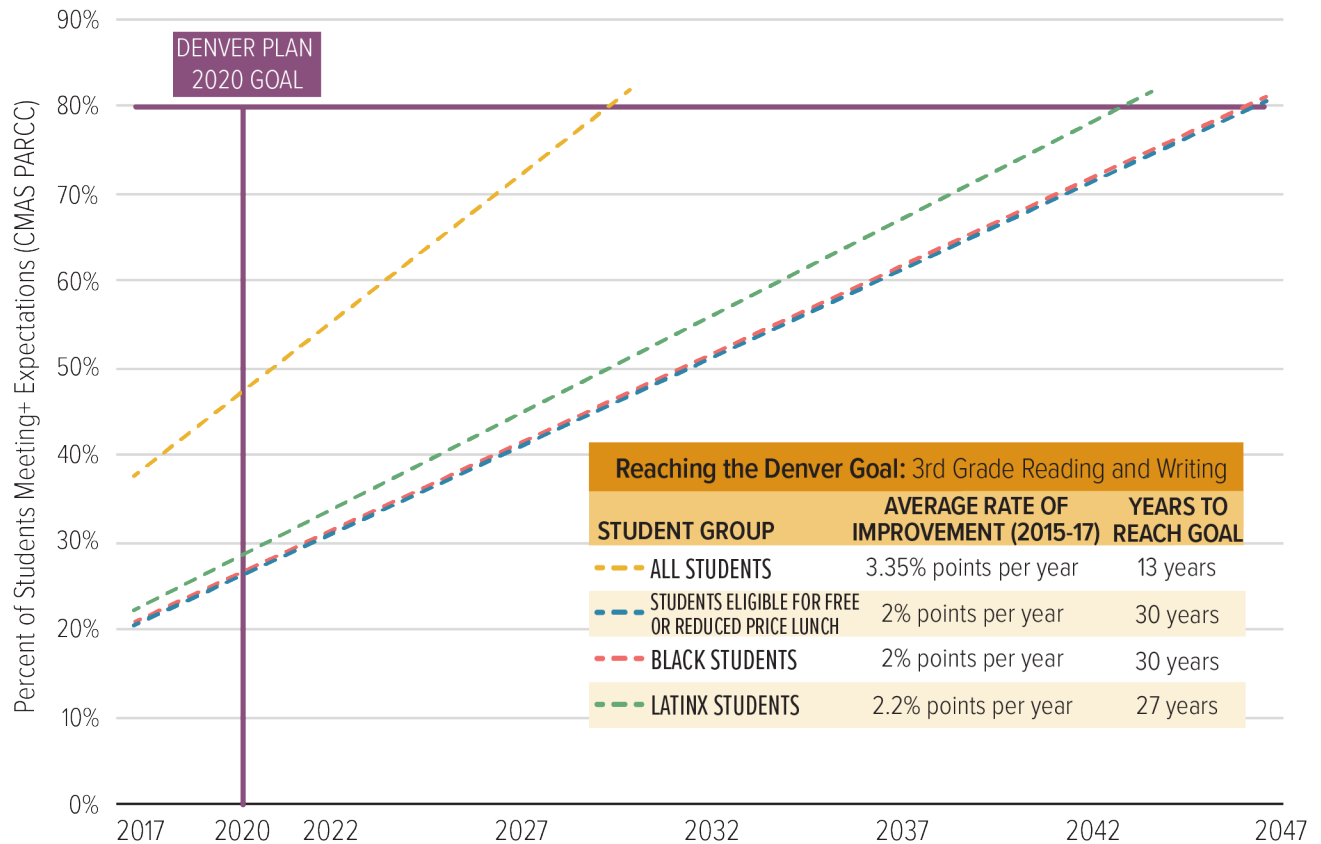
Other Denver Plan goals also remain out of reach. At current course and speed, it will be another 15 years until 90% of black and Latinx students graduate on-time. At the current rate of progress, the current Denver Plan could barely be achieved by 2030 let alone 2020. The DPS School Board and senior leadership deserve credit for setting audacious goals but also must be held accountable to falling short of achieving those goals.

This is not to be defeatist, or to gloss over the truly important improvements that have happened in Denver. Instead it is to highlight the immense work still to be done. These data points show that an excellent education continues to be out of reach for far too many Denver students.

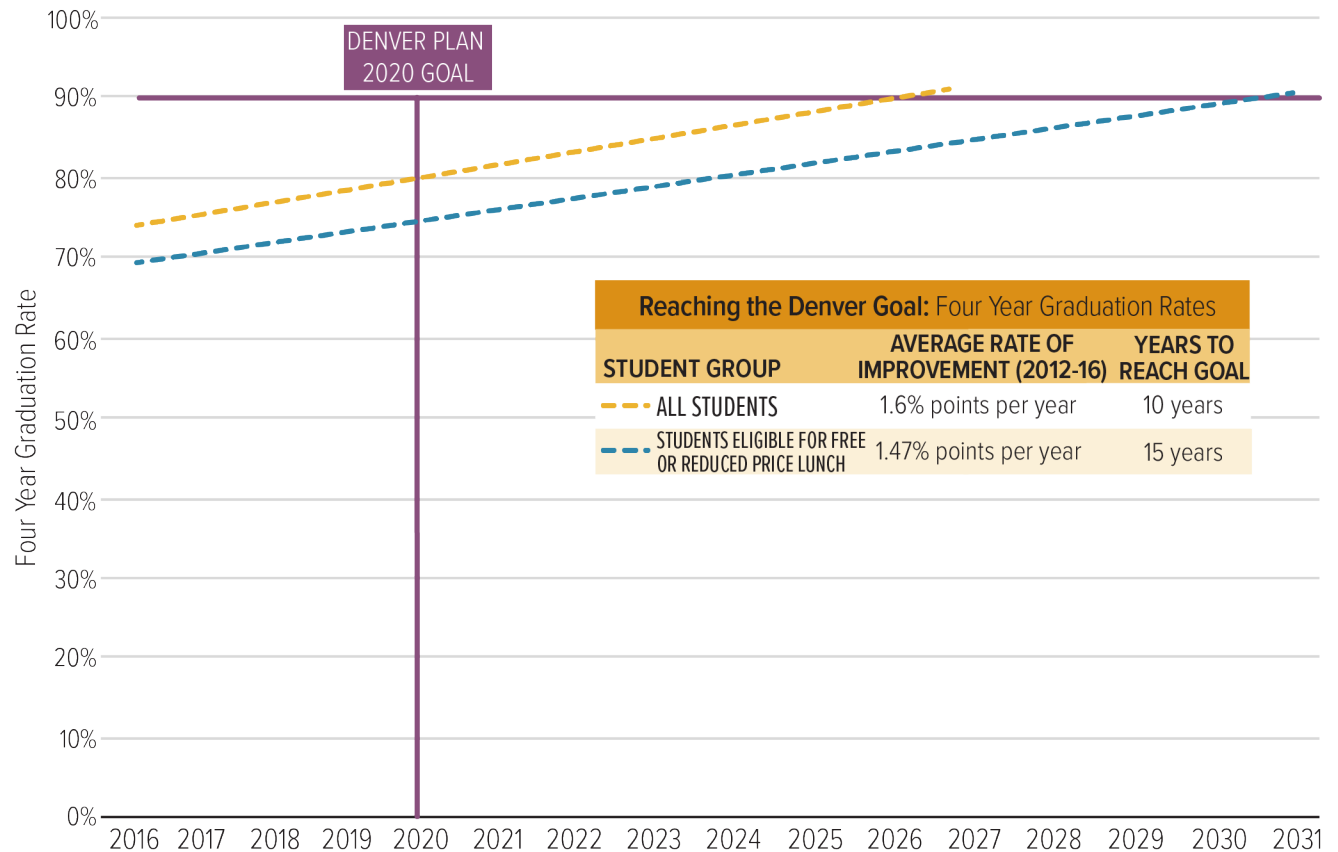
What does it mean for the Denver Plan to be so far out of reach? While some critics would count this as a failure, the evidence suggests there has been remarkable progress. The DPS School Board, district, community leaders, teachers, families, and students must join together in a conversation to level-set on this hard reality about current progress and begin planning for the next Denver Plan cycle. As the district and city approach a potential Denver Plan 2025, we will need to learn even more about the students and families we are serving to meet their needs most effectively.

Policy and Practice Considerations

- How will the district proactively address unequal progress between student groups to ensure all students are supported to meet new goals?
- What are the internal policy barriers that are limiting the rate of change?
- Will DPS share disaggregated data with internal and external partners so bright spots can be held up and learned from to promote system level change?
- As DPS considers new goals, how will it account for these observed rates of progress and also imbue a new plan with urgency?

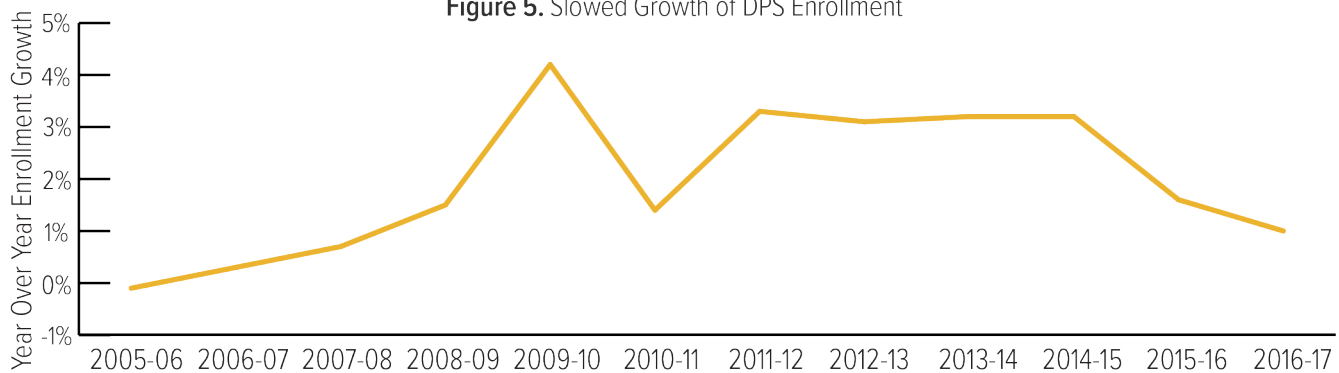
Figure 4a. Meeting the Denver Goal: 80% of DPS Third-Graders At or Above Grade Level in Reading and Writing

A+ Analysis based on data from Denver Public Schools

Figure 4b. Meeting the Denver Goal: Four-Year Graduation Rate of 90% for Students Who Start 9th Grade in DPS

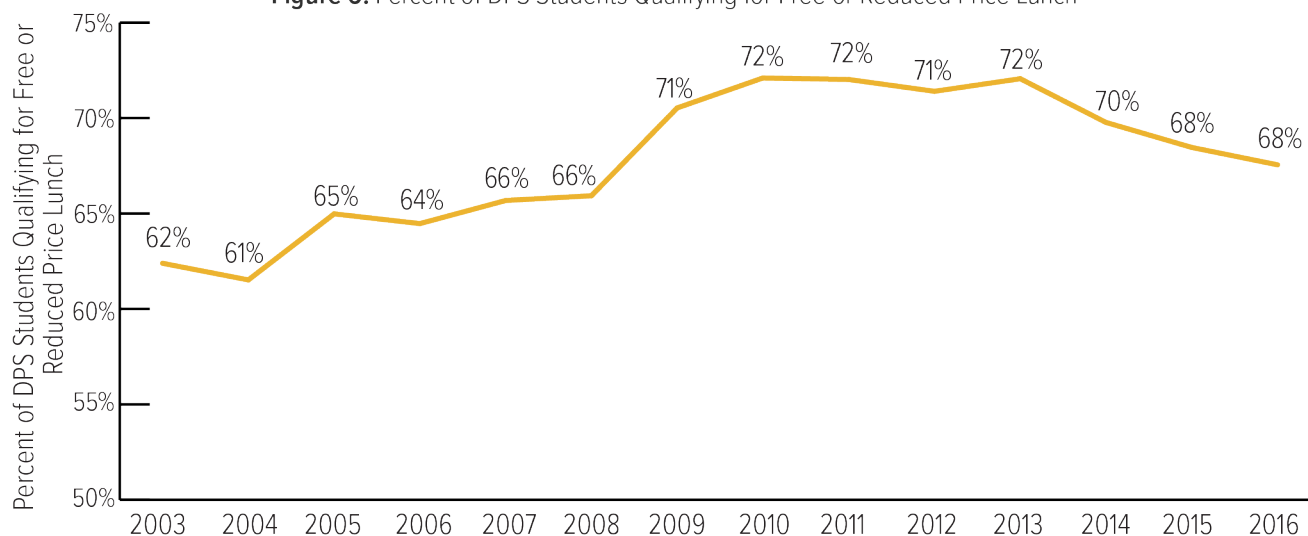
A+ Analysis based on data from Denver Public Schools

Figure 5. Slowed Growth of DPS Enrollment



Source: A+ Analysis of Colorado Department of Education Data

Figure 6. Percent of DPS Students Qualifying for Free or Reduced Price Lunch



Source: Colorado Department of Education Data

DPS Students: Past, Present, and Future

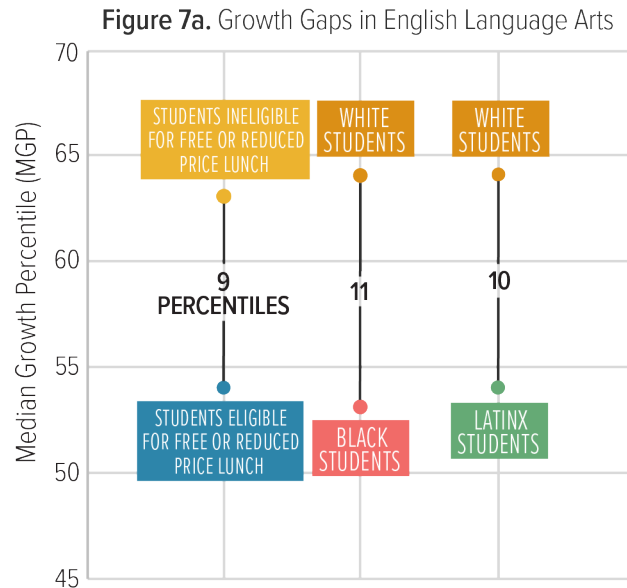
DPS is experiencing new apprehensions around student enrollment. Enrollment growth has started to slow after six years of a nearly steady increase in the number of students enrolling in DPS. This trend is forecasted not only to continue, but for the first time in well over a decade, DPS is expected to see enrollment declines in the coming years, impacting southwest, central, and parts of far northeast Denver in particular (Figure 5).⁴

In addition, for years the rate of students in Denver Public Schools who qualified for free or reduced price lunch was increasing (Figure 6). A noticeable increase happened in 2008, perhaps due to the roll out of student-based budgeting when schools may have been more likely to help families fill out the paperwork to prove eligibility because the school received additional dollars to support students living in poverty. Perhaps it reflected increased need as the recession took hold in Denver. Now, both the rate and number of students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch has started to decline.

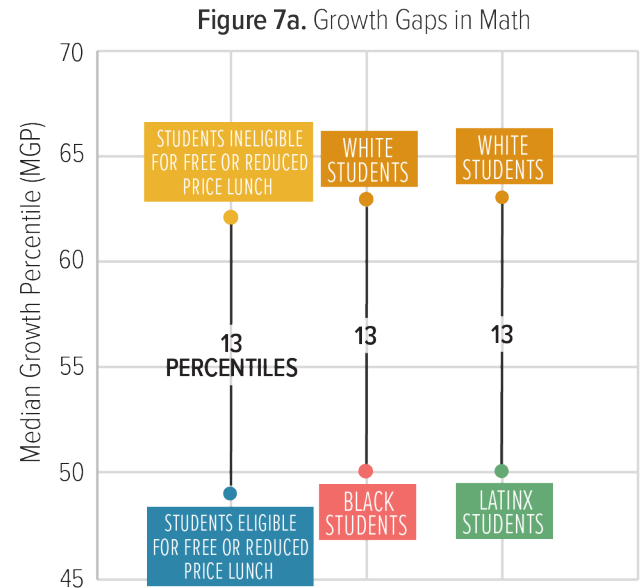
Taken together, these demographic changes portend a shift in DPS. It could stall revenue growth. It could result in smaller schools, which could challenge the feasibility of student-based budgeting as schools lose economies of scale. It could mean reductions in employees and rethinking how to staff classrooms and school and central support. It could mean schools could close.

Policy and Practice Questions

- How will DPS support schools with declining enrollment? When is a school too small to be financially feasible? How will resources be allocated across the district as demographics shift?
- Will DPS launch a comprehensive, proactive, and clear outreach strategy to let families know about demographic or enrollment shifts and their implications?
- How will DPS empower the community to evaluate and make tradeoffs in schools with declining enrollment?

Figure 7. Growth Gaps in English Language Arts and Math (2017)

Source: Colorado Department of Education Data



Persistent Opportunity Gaps

Denver has some of the largest gaps in learning between different groups of students in the state and the nation. When comparing how much students learned relative to their academic peers across the state, white students, Asian students, multiracial students, and more affluent students in Denver mastered more content compared to their academic peers than did black students, Latinx students, Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students, American Indian students, and students from low-income families (Figure 7).

Additionally, though students in all racial groups saw increases in the students meeting grade level expectations in English Language Arts, it has happened faster for white students, Asian students, Native Hawaiian students, and multiracial students than it has for Denver's American Indian students, black students, and Latinx students (Figure 8a).

This trend has been even starker in Math, where the rates of students meeting grade level expectations improved three points for black students and Latinx students over three years, and between 5.5 and 6.5 points for other student groups (Figure 8b).

Underscoring the importance of looking at data through multiple lenses, are the trends in improvement for students from different family socioeconomic backgrounds. Students from low-income and more affluent families saw improvements in terms of the how many students were meeting or exceeding expectations in English Language Arts. Though the gaps are massive, DPS saw

greater improvement in the rate at which students from low-income families were meeting expectations than students from wealthier families (Figure 9).

Let's be clear: due to lasting legacies and continued structural racism, it has become all too common for policymakers and the public alike to conflate race and socioeconomic status. It is always worth reminding ourselves that this conflation is misleading, and worse dangerous. The data shows that, despite gaps in their overall performance, DPS has by at least one measure helped improve achievement at similar rates for students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, but has seen increases in achievement that were much higher for some students with certain racial or ethnic identities. This echoes multiple calls across the past several years including the Bailey Report that the district must tackle issues of institutional racism head on.¹ Race continues to be a pervasive force in determining the opportunities that Denver students are afforded.

Policy and Practice Questions

- How can the district better support students from different cultural and racial backgrounds? Does the district have a common understanding of culturally responsive instruction and is it differentiated for students from different backgrounds and with different learning needs?
- How is the district attracting, retaining, and supporting staff who identify as black, Latinx, Native American, Asian, and/or multiracial?

Figure 8a. Percent of DPS Students That Meet or Exceed Grade Level Expectations in CMAS English Language Arts by Race and Ethnicity

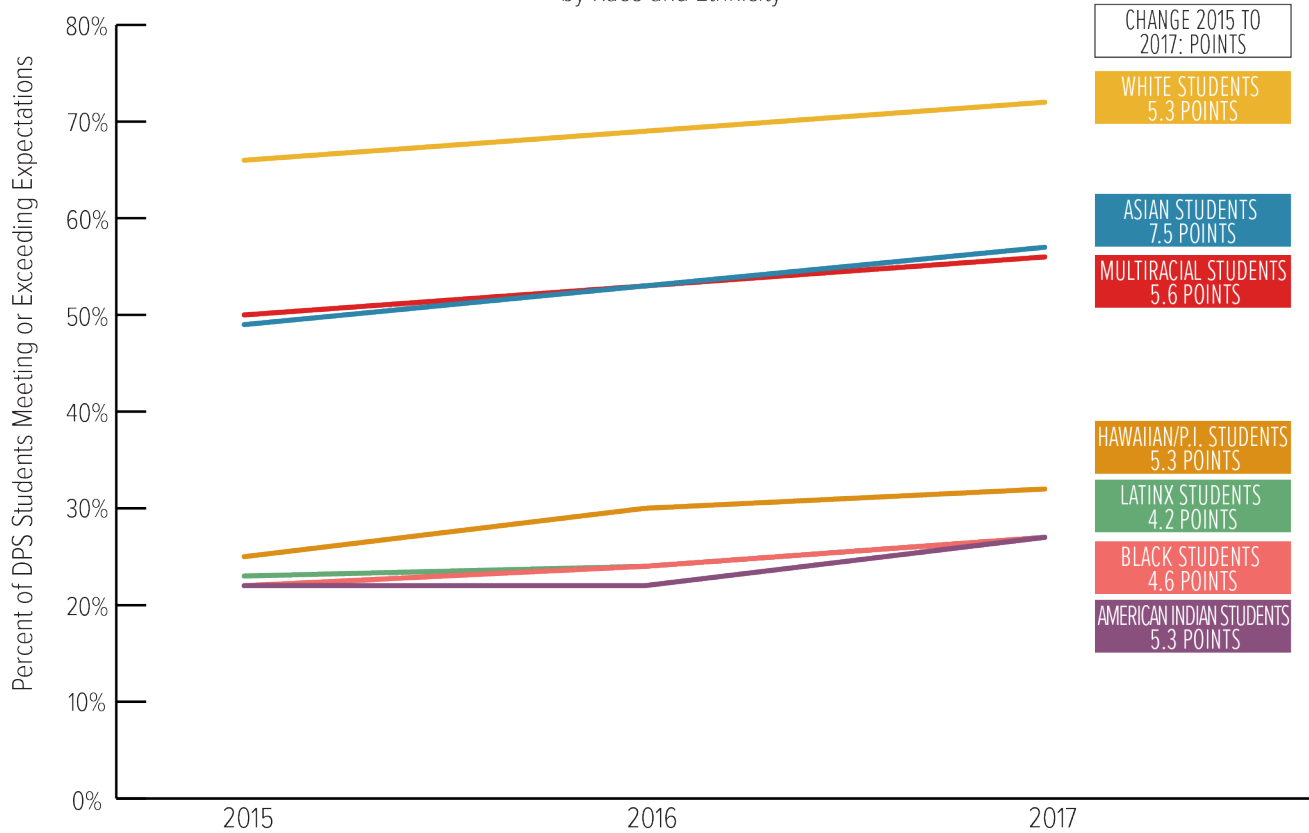


Figure 8b. Percent of DPS Students That Meet or Exceed Grade Level Expectations in CMAS Math

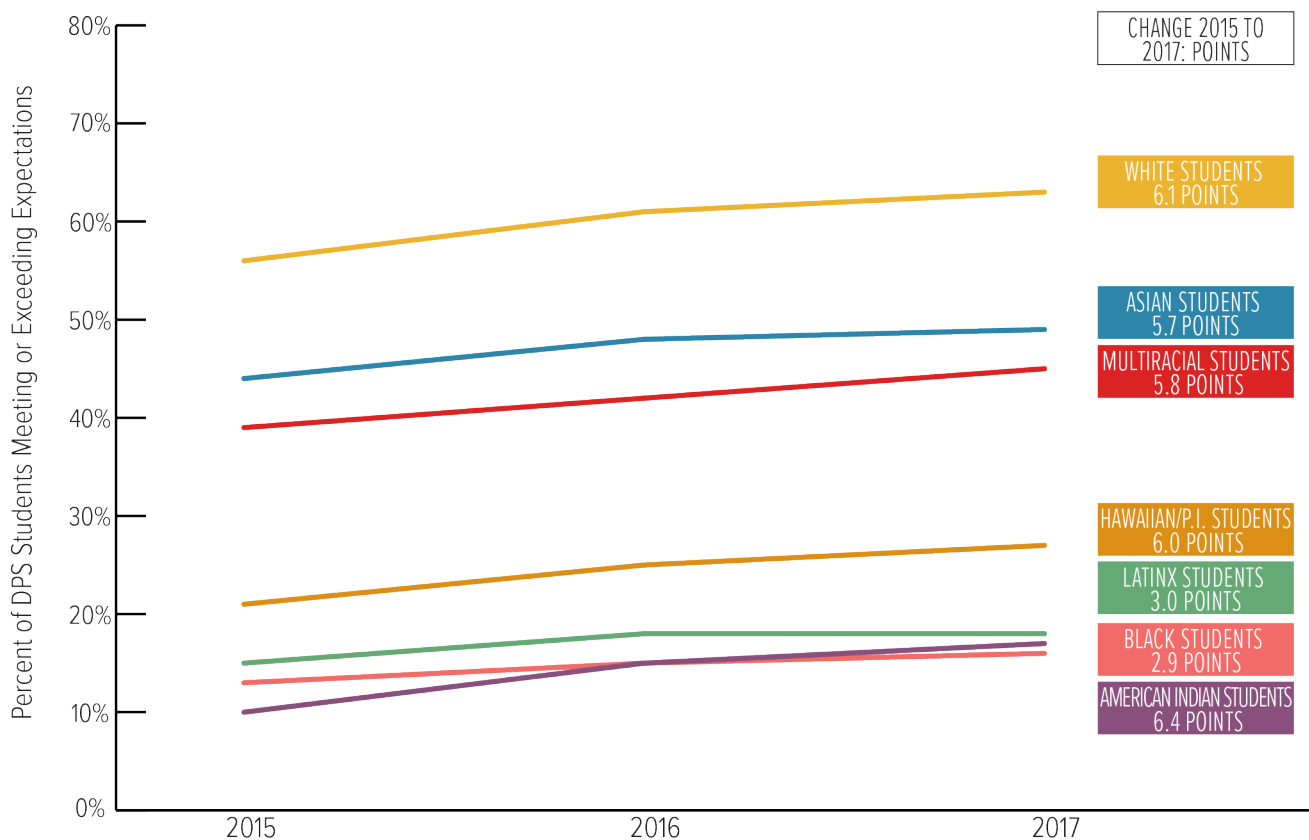
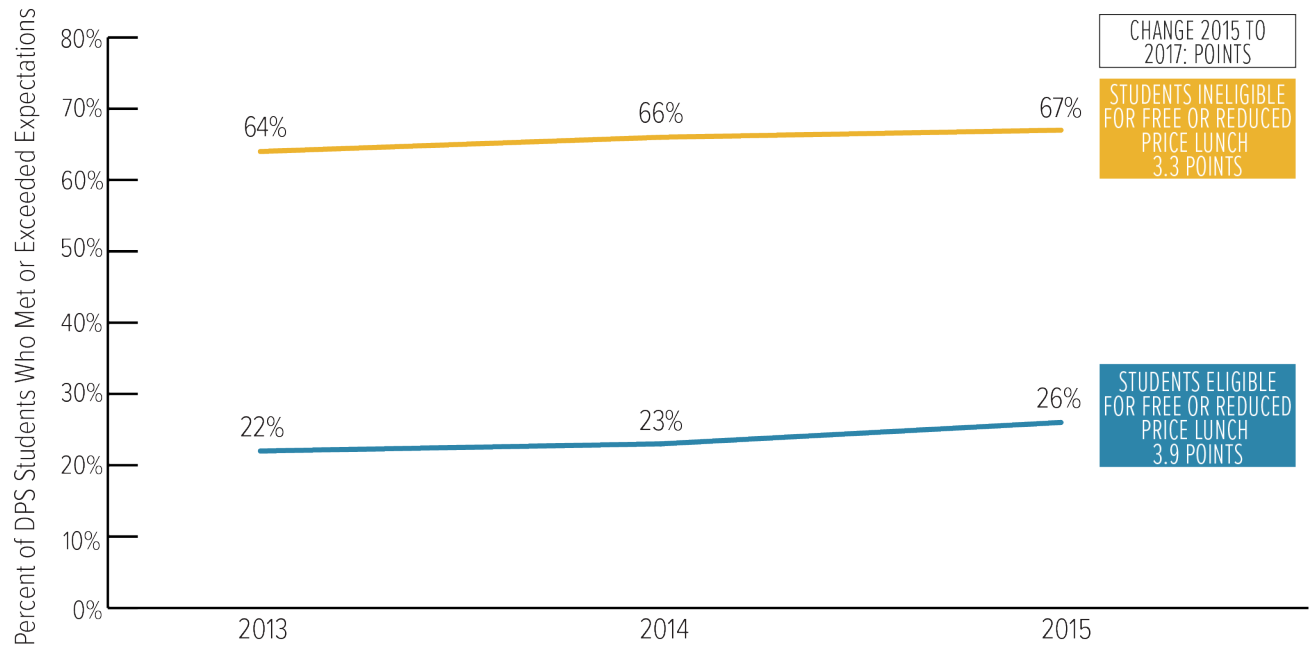


Figure 9. Change in Percent of DPS Students Who Meet or Exceed Expectations in CMAS English Language Arts

Source: Data provided by Denver Public Schools

Changing Expectations for Graduates

What are the long-term outcomes that Denver, as a community, wants for its students? Denver and Colorado are in the midst of a massive shift in how students graduate from high school and demonstrate competency. The class of 2021 will be the first class subject to Colorado's new graduation requirements where students must show college or career readiness in English and in Math.

Depending on how these requirements are implemented, there could be a big impact in the number of students who are eligible for a high school diploma. For example, one of the ways in which students can demonstrate college or career readiness is through the SAT. In 2017 half of students met the benchmark in Evidence-Based Reading and Writing, and one in three met the benchmark for

Math. Some schools are better supporting students to reach those benchmarks than others, yet as Figure 10 shows, many are not, particularly for low income students or students of color.

Further, it is clear that access to advanced coursework is not equitable: though white students made up 19% of DPS high school students, 37% of AP exams were taken by white students. 46% of tests were taken by Latinx students though they made up 58% of the high school population, and 8% were taken by black students, who made up 15% of all high school students. DPS deserves credit for increasing the AP passing rate across all groups. But as Figure 11 shows (and other tests mirror), white students continue to pass at higher rates.²

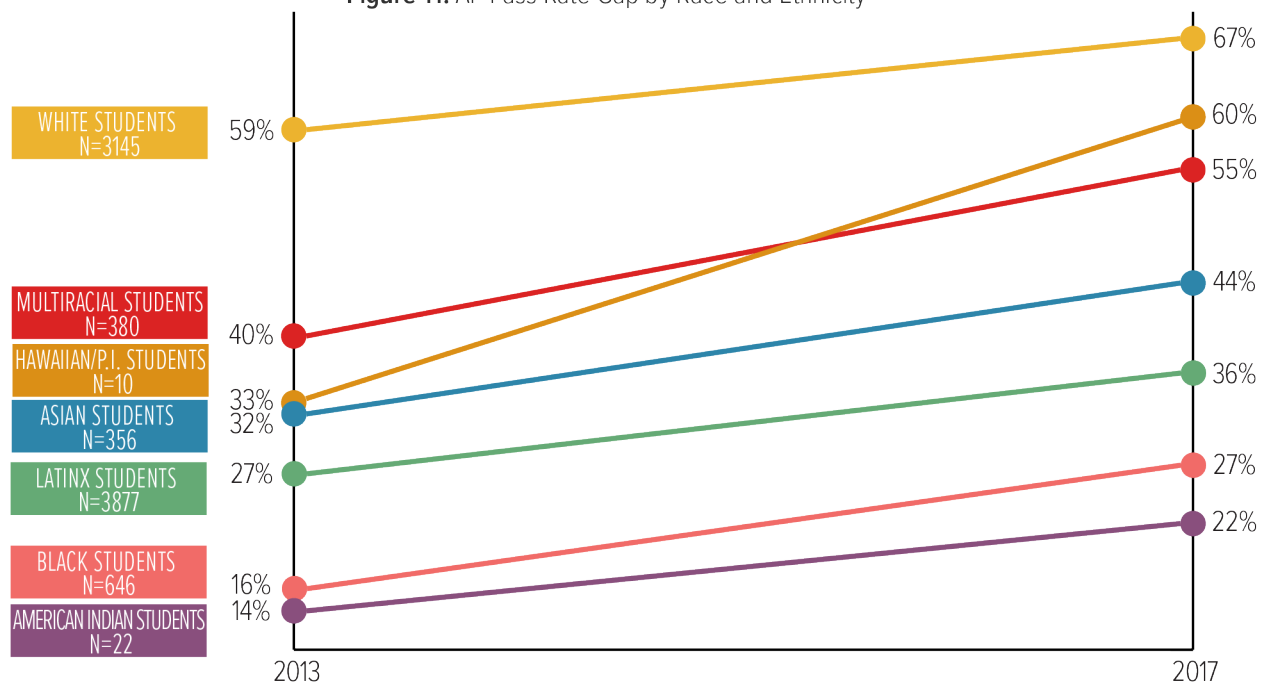
Across the district, the number of concurrent enrollment courses taken by DPS students increased, and the pass

Figure 10. SAT 2017: Is the Average DPS Student Meeting Colorado Graduation Benchmarks?

	NUMBER OF DPS SCHOOLS WITH VALID SCORES FOR STUDENT GROUP	% OF SCHOOLS WHERE THE AVERAGE STUDENT MEETS EVIDENCE-BASED READING AND WRITING BENCHMARK	% OF SCHOOLS WHERE THE AVERAGE STUDENT MEETS MATH BENCHMARK
LATINX STUDENTS	39	33%	10%
BLACK STUDENTS	11	36%	27%
WHITE STUDENTS	8	88%	88%
FREE OR REDUCED PRICE LUNCH ELIGIBLE	37	30%	8%
NOT FREE OR REDUCED PRICE LUNCH ELIGIBLE	22	64%	45%

Source: A+ Analysis of Colorado Department of Education Data

Figure 11. AP Pass Rate Gap by Race and Ethnicity



Source: DPS Boarddocs

rate of those courses inched up slightly from 85% to 86%. Yet the number of DPS students who took those classes actually decreased, which could mean that some students have deeper access to concurrent enrollment courses, but this opportunity is not being broadened.³

Taken together this data raises a number of observations. One is that access and mastery of advanced coursework is not equally available or supported across the district and to all groups of students. Another is that the menu of options for students to demonstrate college and career readiness are not equal in rigor. Students should absolutely have multiple pathways to demonstrate competency, but it is critical that the district work to create equally rigorous diplomas such that all students are set up with a meaningful credential that reflects that they learned what they should have during their time in the K-12 system. And it's essential this credential be a meaningful ticket to a life of opportunity.

Policy and Practice Questions

- How will the district ensure high schools meet the higher graduation expectations?
- How can the district and schools ensure that there are multiple pathways for students to demonstrate college or career readiness that do not compromise on rigor or lower expectations for some students?
- What will the change in graduation requirements mean for students? How will schools support students to meet expectations and ensure they earn their diploma? How will the district ensure families are engaged in this dramatic change?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Now that we've started with the facts, A+ Colorado recommends a set of six strategies to help Denver.

1. Denver must lead a new strategic planning process to establish a Denver Plan 2025.

Given that the current plan is both far out of reach and soon to expire, A+ recommends district-level conversations must begin soon to start a family and community engagement process for the next version of the plan. The new plan should be bold but feasible and include strong strategic indicators to guide the progress.

A+ also encourages the district to be clear about what it will start, stop and continue. Only through ending what isn't working, targeting current successful programs for expansion, and being selective about new initiatives, will the district focus and move beyond a "kitchen sink" approach.

2. Prioritize diversity in the portfolio of schools.

Students have the right to be in the learning environment that works best for them and is the right fit. A part of this means that every student should reasonably have access to different school models, and different programmatic offerings. In *Unequal Choices*, published contemporaneously to this report, we include a breakthrough analysis that considers diversity of options and access to those options. We detail specific recommendations in that report which include ideas on how to measure demand, showcase exemplars and promote access.

3. Urgently addressing opportunity gaps.

The incredible acceleration of performance by white and affluent students at breakaway speed from peers of color should alarm every policymaker who cares about opportunity gaps. DPS often signals this is a major priority but students are still being left behind.

A+ recommends that we need an "Apollo-like" effort with creative and dramatic investment to solve this problem. Denver should convene a national summit of experts and policymakers to evaluate the current data and propose a

series of appropriate solutions for the district to consider in the next version of the planning. DPS should be open to this process as a way to push their own thinking and create political will for a massive push to eliminate opportunity gaps.

4. Denver must develop a new School Performance Framework.

As this report shows, student achievement and long term student success—particularly for different groups of students—is much lower than DPS' School Performance Framework, where 60% of schools are green or blue, would indicate.

We recommend the district develop SPF 2.0, which prioritizes communicating how schools are serving different groups of students, shifting the focus from a performance management tool to a community information tool. DPS should deeply engage a variety of partners and national experts, with the goal of a SPF 2.0 going live in Fall 2019.

5. Communities must be empowered to shape the conversation about what schools work for students.

As DPS considers the next phase of their improvement strategy, they must to prioritize authentic community engagement across the city. The question "How are schools in your community? Are they meeting your needs?" should be asked persistently to the families of Denver. The district must prioritize community feedback to co-create solutions as much as possible.

6. Teachers and school leaders must be supported to meet the needs of diverse students.

A+ is excited about the national discourse and action to address teacher needs. We believe deeply that teachers and leaders must be compensated appropriately for their time and work. At this point, they are not. We urge Denver to continue its national leadership role in teacher pay.

We remain concerned that teachers of color have been very clear about not being supported by the district—

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and there is no way DPS will meet the needs of diverse students without a representative teaching force. DPS has made strides in race and equity training and promoting home visits to interrupt implicit/explicit bias. DPS must double-down on these endeavors and show progress on increasing the numbers of teachers of color in the classroom.

Conclusion

Denver Public Schools faces new challenges, opportunities and higher expectations. With these changes comes the need to reevaluate the current course and set new goals.

We look forward to a renewed conversation about what the community and district expect of our schools. We hope facts about where Denver public education is, what is working, what is not, and what is yet to be done, can inspire bold action from the district. Our students depend on big ideas, inspired by both hope and compassion, and implemented with honesty and urgency.

END NOTES

- 1 Bailey, Dr. Sharon R. *An Examination of Student and Educator Experiences in Denver Public Schools through the Voices of African-American Teachers and Administrators*. PDF. Denver Public Schools, Culture, Equity and Leadership Team, 2016.
- 2 “BOE Focus on Achievement: 2016-2017 Results: READ Act, CMAS, PSAT/SAT, AP & Concurrent Enrollment.” Denver Public Schools Board of Education Boarddocs. September 7, 2017. Accessed March 3, 2018. [https://www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/files/AQYSBB71CD5C/\\$file/BOE FOA Session 09072017 FINAL.pdf](https://www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/files/AQYSBB71CD5C/$file/BOE%20FOA%20Session%2009072017%20FINAL.pdf).
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Planning and Analysis. *Denver Public Schools Strategic Regional Analysis: Fall 2017*. PDF. Denver Public Schools, 2017.



ABOUT A+ COLORADO

The mission of A+ Colorado is to sharpen public education by building public will and advocating for the changes necessary to dramatically increase student achievement in schools and districts in Colorado. We are an independent, nonpartisan 501(c)(3) organization working to bring the power of data and research to challenge ourselves, educators and policymakers to rethink public education.

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