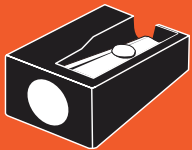


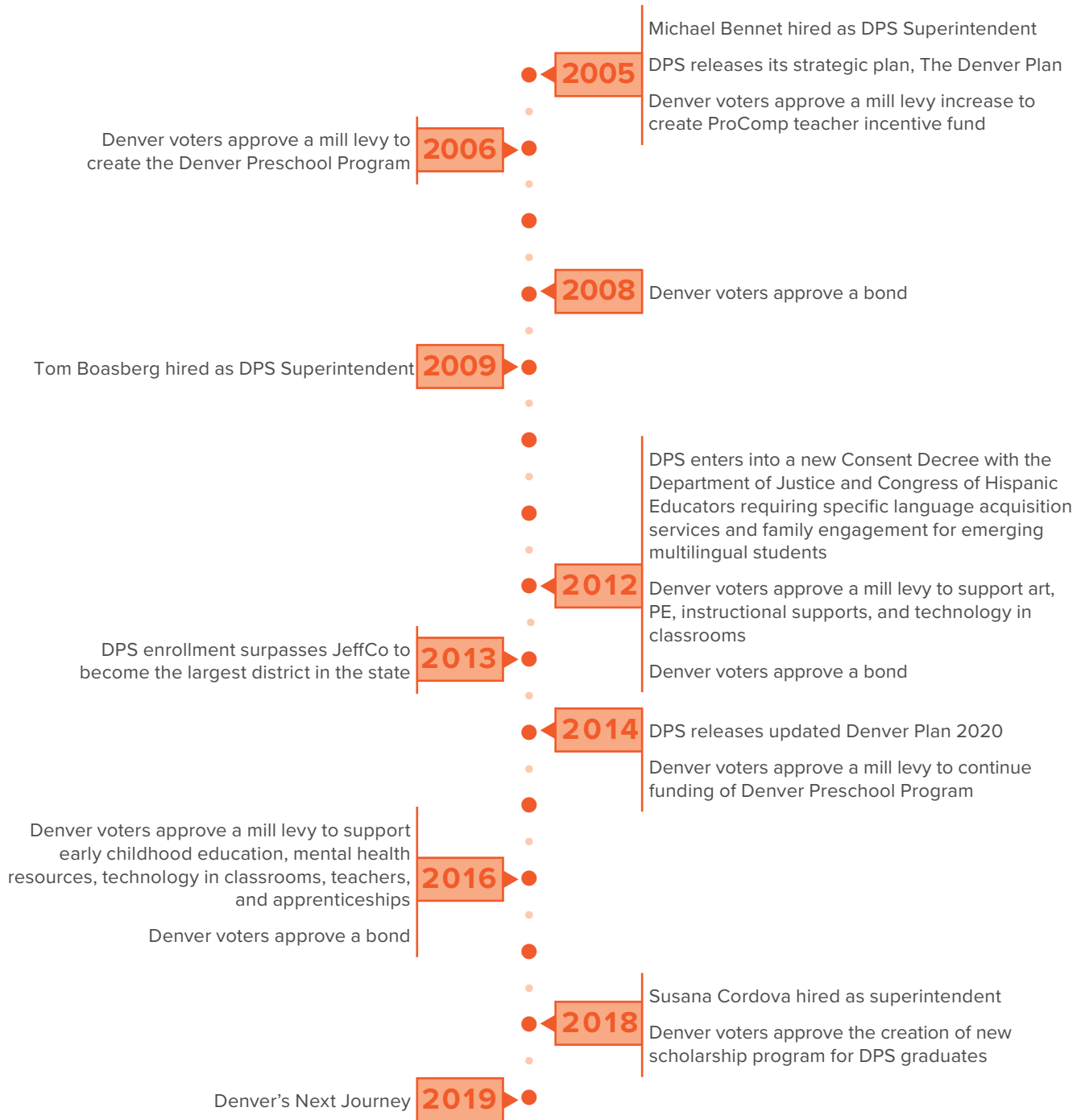
DENVER'S NEXT JOURNEY: START WITH THE FACTS

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Denver's Next Journey: Start with the Facts

2019 brings a new start to the largest district serving Colorado's students, Denver Public Schools. For the first time in over a decade, the district looks toward new leadership in Superintendent Susana Cordova to chart a course to provide an excellent education to every student in the city. This leadership transition is an opportunity to deeply examine the district's past and current path, understand what is and is not working, for whom, and where.

Having a common understanding of where the district has been is critical in developing a future vision and strategy for Denver, students, and their families. Over the course of the spring, A+ Colorado will release a series of issue briefs exploring the past, present, and future of a few key strategies the district has pursued to fundamentally broaden access to quality schools and raise academic outcomes for students in a district that once ranked as one of the worst in the state. These briefs are by no means exhaustive of strategies the district has deployed; yet they do represent some of the district's biggest bets and largest investments. In these briefs we highlight both the past and present states of various strategies (the "what"), as well as explore the relationship between different strategies and equitable outcomes and experiences for students, and how different strategies have or have not fundamentally changed the ways in which families and students engage with the education system.

In a national public discourse where facts play second fiddle to spectacle, we intend these briefs to provide a knowledge basis to conversations about what strategies are making a difference for students, and where there must be course-corrections when those strategies are not fulfilling their promises. It is our hope that, coupled with institutional knowledge, community feedback surfaced during the superintendent hiring process and proposed, deeper process of Engage Denver, these briefs provide a fact-based foundation for conversations about the direction of the district.

A+ Colorado has a history in the city of pressure-testing district strategies, supporting those that are making a difference for students and calling for changes when they are not. We are the first to admit we have not always gotten it right. Yet we deeply believe in our commitment to providing information to the Denver community to sharpen the conversation about public education. With that, **let's start with the facts.**

Denver's Changing Student Population

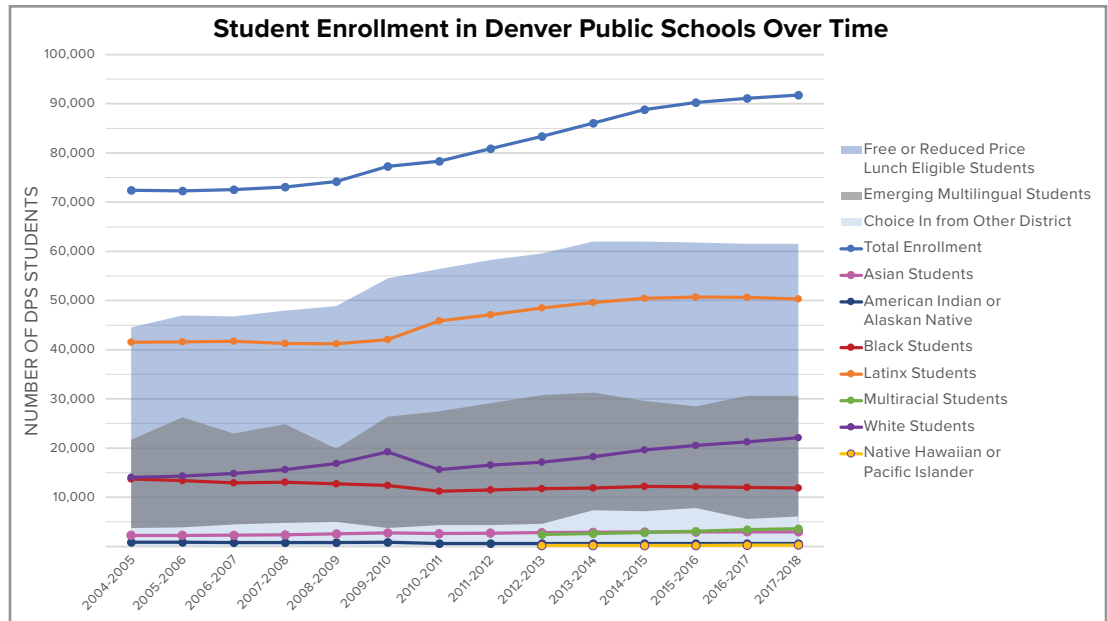
A result of more children living in Denver, and more students who live in and outside of the city attending DPS schools, Denver has enjoyed a period of sustained enrollment growth. Since 2004, nearly an additional 20,000 students attend DPS schools; 7% of students in Denver schools live outside of the district. This dynamic has meant that the district has opened new schools including district-run and charter schools to serve the growing number of students. It also means that student needs have been dynamic across time and in different parts of the city as they have experienced changes.

This dynamic of enrollment growth is changing. Instead, the district is facing enrollment stagnation or declining enrollment save for a few neighborhoods. For example, Montbello is forecast to have the largest decline in students attending DPS schools between 2018 and 2023 while its next-door neighbors Stapleton and Gateway will see some of the city's only increasing enrollment.¹ This will have large implications for schools who are dependent on enrollment for funding, and for schools and communities as they work together to target programming to student needs.

A part of a larger dynamic of change in the city, much of the city's development focuses on higher density units that yield fewer students than single family units, and rising housing costs impact families and their ability to stay in Denver. This also portends changes to the student population served by DPS: after a rise in the number and rate of students eligible for free and reduced price lunch from 2008 to 2014 (coinciding with student-based budgeting policy changes that potentially incentivized schools to help families fill out the paperwork, and the economic recession), fewer students in DPS are now qualifying for the subsidy. Additionally, while the number of total students in the district increased by 10% 2012 to 2017, the number of white students increased 29%. These changes aside, the district continues to serve a student population that is 76% students of color, where 67% of students qualify for free or reduced price lunch, and where 33% are emerging multilingual students. Contextualizing the outcomes of the district's biggest improvement efforts with the unique and changing demographics across Denver, is critical to better understanding where progress has been unequal.

Just the Facts:

While DPS grew rapidly between 2008 and 2016, growth is slowing and demographics are changing.



“DPS has not figured out how to educate the students they have. It is not nurturing a love of learning. It is not allowing students or teachers to thrive. The next level MUST address economics of families and how best to overcome poverty as a precursor to learning.”

–Jeannie Kaplan, Former DPS School Board Member

Improved, Yet Inequitable Academic Outcomes

At the beginning of the 2000s DPS sat at the bottom of districts in the state in terms of student achievement. In 2005 on the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP), the state academic assessment at the time, fewer than 30% of DPS students were proficient compared to over 50% of all Colorado students. Yet achievement rose dramatically over the next decade: by 2014, 47% DPS students were proficient in Math, also inching DPS student achievement into the 25th percentile of all districts in the state, a significant improvement from 2005 when the district was in the 7th percentile relative to all districts in the state.

When the state assessment switched to measure student achievement of higher content standards in English Language Arts and Math, DPS student achievement was much closer to the state average; despite higher standards, DPS has nearly closed the gap between average student achievement in Colorado and average student achievement in the district. This is dramatic and, by some methods, represents some of the most significant academic growth in terms of students meeting grade level expectations of any large district in the country.²

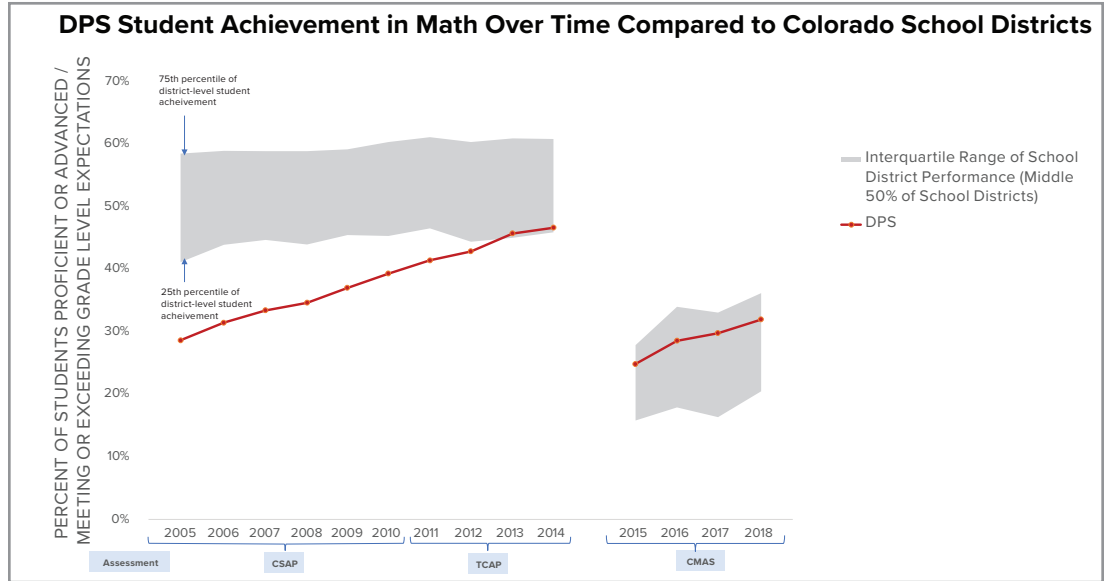
And yet while this growth has been dramatic, it has been far from equitable, meaning that improved outcomes have been experienced by some groups of students more so than others. Most groups of students in DPS have seen improvement in the rate of students meeting grade level expectations. In particular, focusing in on recent student achievement in Math as measured by CMAS, the rate at which Asian students met grade level expectations increased 4 percentage points; the rate for Latinx students and the rate for black students increased 5 points, and the rate for white students and multiracial students increased 8 points. Because the number of students who identify as American Indian or Native Alaskan are much smaller than other groups of students, the rate at which students have met grade level expectations has fluctuated, but these changes have not been significant, meaning outcomes have remained relatively stable for these students.

“DPS is failing system wide, to address equity gaps.”

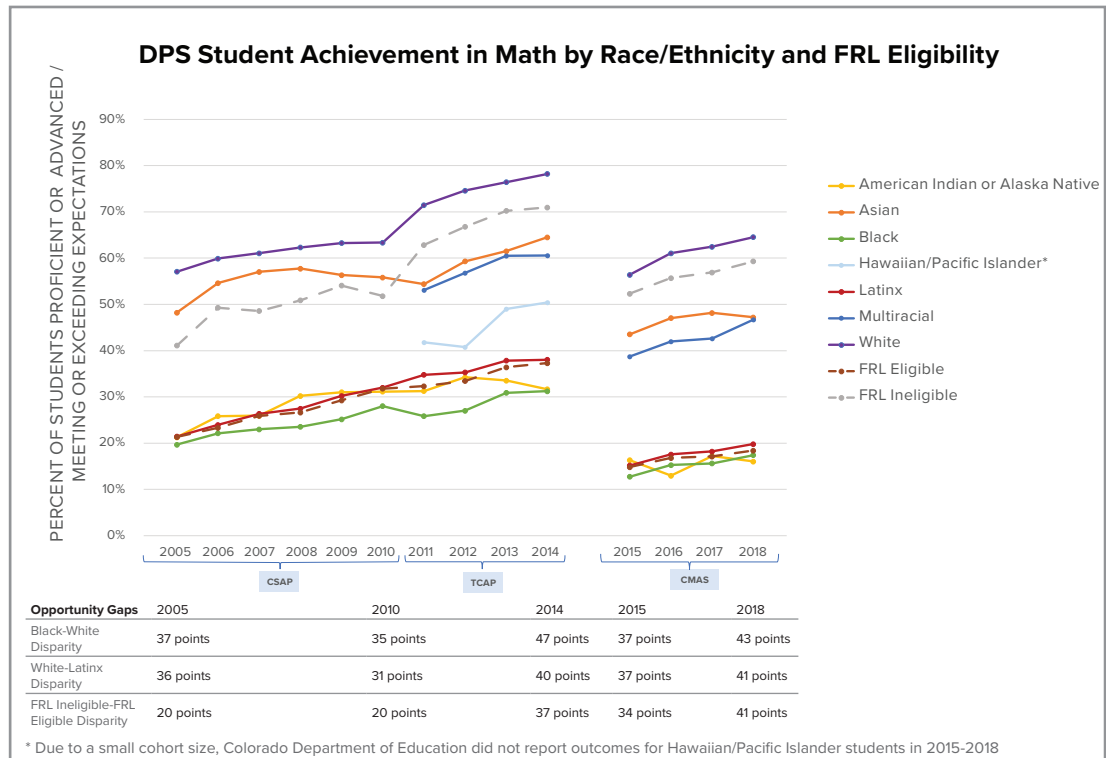
—Landri Taylor, Former DPS School Board Member

Just the Facts:

Compared to other districts, student performance in DPS improved from nearly the worst in the state to above average.



Just the Facts: *While all groups of students have seen improved academic achievement, those improvements have not been equitable leading to widening disparities.*

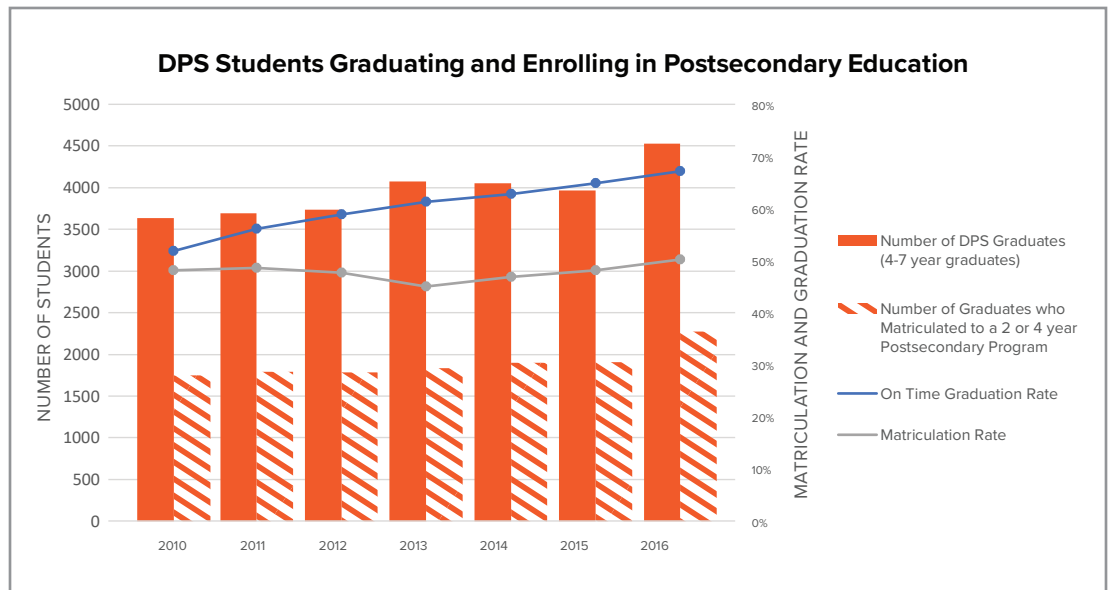


The fact that more students across racial and ethnic groups are meeting grade level expectations is critical. It is also imperative to understand that improvement is happening faster for white students and for affluent students than for students of color and for students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch. These uneven and unequal improvements have led to widening disparities between groups of students: the gap in 2018 between white student and Latinx student math achievement was 45 percentage points, and 48 points between white and black students. Accelerating academic improvements for every group of students and eliminating these gaps in terms of academic opportunities are the most important imperatives for the district going forward.

Improvements in academic outcomes have been coupled with improvements in preparing students for life after their time in K-12 education system. Students are more likely to find gainful employment and earn a higher wage with each subsequent level of education, making both high school graduation and college matriculation and completion critical measures of how schools are serving students. Since 2010 when the state changed how the graduation rate was calculated to better track students throughout high school, more DPS students have been graduating, and the four-year graduation rate has steadily increased. Other than a dip in 2013, the matriculation rate of DPS students to technical, two-year, and four-year degrees has remained at 50%. As the district contemplates and pursues its next path, it must do so with an eye to setting students up for success after their time in DPS.

Just the Facts:

More students are graduating from DPS and at a higher rate, yet matriculation rates have remained stable.



Looking to the Past, Present, and Future

The facts, including the reality of student body changes and of student academic outcomes, affirm that Denver's recent history and current experience is marked by change. In the coming months we will explore some of DPS' major initiatives and whether those strategies have resulted in equitable outcomes for students and how families and communities were engaged along the way. These briefs will dig into the history, experience, and the data, raising significant questions about what has worked, and how the district may need to shift direction to respond to learnings and changes.

The issues raised in these briefs are not exhaustive of the large scale initiatives DPS launched across the past 15 years. But they have fundamentally changed how students are served and how students and families experience DPS. We believe that by looking at each of these strategies through both an equity and engagement lens, we will surface serious questions and insights about how the strategies could more effectively move forward. On top of that, we asked hundreds of Denver leaders their thoughts on these topics and created a survey that anyone could submit on our website. It is our hope that through creating an opening for additional insight, we will learn how our broader system is approaching these issues.

Addressing Low-Performing Schools: What has the district pursued to target resources and improve learning in the schools with the lowest academic outcomes which are disproportionately filled with students of

color? What have been the outcomes of those efforts? How have families been engaged in that process?

School Choice: What are the systems the district has created that enable students and families to choose what school they attend? How have these structures impacted equitable access to quality schools? To different school options? How are different groups participating in choice?

Educators: What are the strategies the district has pursued to support educators, and what is the impact on the teaching force? How are educators effectively partnering with families across the city?

Measuring and Communicating School Quality: How has the district sought to identify schools in need of support and high quality schools? How has that impacted educator, student, and community expectations and experiences of schools? Are families able to clearly understand important questions around school quality?

School Flexibility: How has the district devolved decision-making to the school-level? How has that impacted district structure, schools, and financing? How has it supported student achievement, and responsiveness to school community needs?

With a common understanding of the facts about student population changes and students' academic performance, with a common knowledge of the history of many big bets Denver Public Schools has made in the past, and with rich, deep community dialogue, Denver can set a vision for its **next journey**.

Essential Questions for The Next Journey:

- How will declining enrollment impact schools and school communities? Are there “capacity floors” that will necessitate action?
- How will the district build on academic improvements, supporting more students to meet grade level expectations in more content areas?
- How will the district address academic inequities, and better support students of color to reach the same levels of academic achievement as their white peers? How will the district better support students from low-income families to reach the same levels of academic achievement as their more affluent peers?
- How will the district support more students to access, and successfully complete degree programs after high school?
- How will the district engage communities to answer these questions and co-create solutions?

“I think DPS is doing their best, but in the face of a legacy so many complex issues, things are far from perfect. There is obviously great effort to increase equity, but probably better ways to do it, which is why I am grateful for how many passionate people we have in our city working to work with and hold DPS accountable to a higher excellence for the children that need it most.

—James Roy, Executive Director, Park Hill Collective Impact

Endnotes

- 1 Denver Public Schools. *Strategic Regional Analysis* (Fall 2018)
[https://www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/files/B7JNGL5F60F5/\\$file/SRA%202018%20Final%20-%202012.14.2018%20-%20203.pdf](https://www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/files/B7JNGL5F60F5/$file/SRA%202018%20Final%20-%202012.14.2018%20-%20203.pdf)
- 2 Education Resource Strategies Inc. Denver Public Schools: Leveraging System Transformation to Improve Student Results (March 2017)
https://www.dpsk12.org/wpcontent/uploads/DPS_ERSreport_march17.pdf



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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