Denver's Next Journey:
COMMUNICATING "GOOD SCHOOLS" TO FAMILIES

A+
Colorado
SHARPENING
PUBLIC
EDUCATION

2000 — Colorado passes law requiring the state to produce report cards (School Accountability Reports) for all schools

No Child Left Behind passes at the federal level, directing states to rate schools and create accountability systems — **2001**

2003 — DPS starts using early versions of performance frameworks in charter renewal processes

DPS first runs School Performance Framework (SPF) calculations — **2008**

2009 — DPS' SPF used for decision-making and public information for the first time

DPS releases a separate SPF for Alternative Education Campuses

Colorado Department of Education releases District and School Performance Frameworks, replacing earlier School Accountability Reports — **2010**

2012 — DPS SPF included in school enrollment materials for the first time

DPS releases a separate SPF for schools serving only early grades — **2014**

2015 — The Every Student Succeeds Act replaces NCLB at the federal level, broadening the information required in state school rating and accountability systems

No SPF released in DPS or Colorado given change in state assessment

DPS implements "Academic Gaps" threshold, where a school cannot receive the district's highest two ratings if there are gaps in academic outcomes between groups of students — **2017**

Denver's Next Journey: Communicating "Good Schools" to Families

This is the fourth of a multi-part series of briefs that analyze some of Denver's big bets across the last decade to improve education for all students. For more content visit apluscolorado.org/denvers-next-journey

How do families understand whether schools are serving students well? Whether it is a "good" school? How do district administrators prioritize scarce resources and support? How are systems held accountable for school improvement? Denver decided to take these perennial questions head on when the district developed a School Performance Framework (SPF) that debuted in 2008. It has since become one of the foremost tools used in making decisions within the district and communicating how schools are performing to families.

This brief explores how Denver has grappled with the challenge of understanding how schools are supporting students, and the evolution of measuring and communicating school quality to the community. Understanding what makes a "good" school is not a new exercise, and it has implications for schools, districts, and communities alike. Districts must prioritize resource allocation and schools must know what the expectations are of their school community. Families need ways to make their own decisions and to understand whether schools are living up to their expectations. In a world where reputation was driven mostly by word-of-mouth, Denver has tried to quantify these expectations of schools, and has used the SPF to allocate resources, to make decisions about how to intervene in low performing schools, as part of teacher and school leader compensation, and to communicate what makes a "good" school to families.

How to measure and communicate school quality remains highly relevant and we face a critical juncture: calls to alter, dramatically change or eliminate the School Performance Framework have gotten louder. A+ Colorado has actively sought changes to the SPF over the years including calling for higher expectations for the proportion of students mastering grade level content, and challenging the rigor of early literacy assessment expectations in 2017.[1,2] Most recently, A+ Colorado joined a coalition of twelve groups to call on the district to create a process to revise the SPF that includes voices and perspectives from across the city to ensure that measures of school quality are reflective of what families, educators, and administrators need. What has become increasingly clear is the need for the district to better reflect and communicate community expectations of school quality.

This brief focuses on what the SPF measures, and how it has impacted the experience of families and students interacting with the district. In grappling primarily with the SPF's use as a way to communicate school quality externally, this brief does not focus as heavily on how the SPF has driven program or talent management decisions.[3] As we begin the process of reimagining better schools for the next generation, it is critical to understand how we have made sense of school quality in the past: we need to know how we got to where we are, and what lessons can be learned as we move forward in understanding and communicating school quality.

The Early Days of Summative School Ratings

In April 2000 the Colorado General Assembly became one of the first states in the country to pass legislation to issue report cards for every school in Colorado. Senate Bill 00-186 cited a need to help the general assembly, parents and taxpayers identify schools that provide "students with an opportunity for a quality education in a safe learning environment" and to monitor school progress.[4] The following year Congress would reauthorize the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act in the form of No Child Left Behind, which required statewide accountability systems at an unprecedented scale with specific requirements about how academic achievement and progress were to be measured and evaluated.[5]

Both of these pieces of legislation were targeted at measuring and communicating school quality, and both had a focus on students' academic performance. The legislation governing Colorado's early report cards was prescriptive, and the report cards were particularly interesting in understanding conversations about the type of information legislators and communities found relevant. Grades were based solely on academic performance: they showed the proportion of students at each performance level on the state's academic assessment in reading, writing, and math, and on college entrance exams which were standardized, weighted and combined for a grade. While initially supposed to rate schools A-F, push back about the grades led instead to descriptive labels: "Excellent," "Average," "Low", "Unsatisfactory." Schools also received a grade for improvement based on how student performance compared to the previous year. While labeled "Academic Growth" this measured only improved point-in-time proficiency rates, not improvements in individual students' performance.

Yet the information provided on these report cards also went well beyond the academic. Report cards also included information about a school's safety and environment, such as information about program offerings like extracurriculars, reported discipline incidents and actions, attendance and dropout data. Financial data about district revenue sources including TABOR overrides, bonds, and mill levies; and spending on teachers, administration, facilities, operations, and materials made up a "taxpayers report" included on the report card. An "about our staff" section provided the number of teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, and counselors in each school, as well as information about teachers' qualifications and average salaries.

"If you haven't decided on the outcome — on what schools are for — then you won't know what to measure."

Mike Miles, Co-founder of Third Future Schools and former Superintendent of Dallas Independent School District

Example of 2004 Colorado School Accountability Report
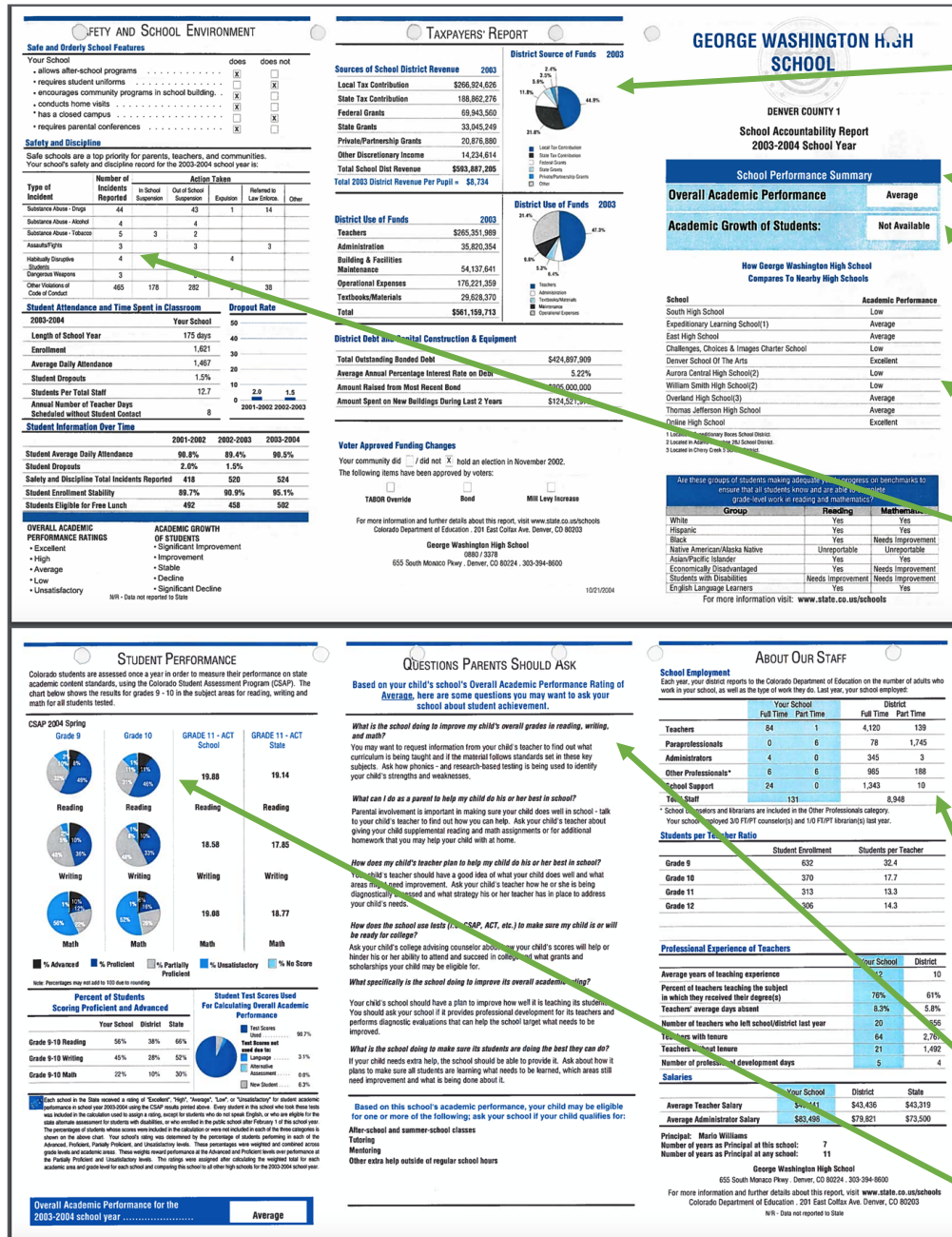
"Taxpayers report" provided information about the district's finances (not the school's), including whether voters approved more local funds.

"Overall Academic Performance" was based on the percent of students who were proficient on CSAP assessments.

"Academic Growth" measured the change in the percent of students who were proficient; it did not track cohorts.

Comparisons to nearby schools included all schools within 10 miles, even if schools were in other school districts

"Safety and Discipline" included types of behavioral incidents and the schools' disciplinary response to those incidents.

"About Our Staff" included information on the number of school counselors, staff-to-student ratios, and teachers' professional backgrounds.

"Questions parents should ask" provided a starting point for conversations between families and educators about the data.

Underlying data about school performance was visualized

While these reports were a building block for continued efforts at the state level and locally in Denver to understand how schools were impacting student learning, these reports fell short. The overall academic performance indicator was based solely on the percent of students proficient on state assessments of reading, writing, and math in select grades as the CSAP suite of assessments in each grade was still being built out. The "growth" measure looked at overall improvement in proficiency rates, but did not follow cohorts of students; the measure looked at change in proficiency rates from one third grade class to the next year's third grade class, rather than understanding improvements a third grade class saw next year while in fourth grade. These School Accountability Reports were published through 2009; in 2010, CDE released a new performance framework that drew heavily from Denver's locally created SPF.

The Language of School Ratings

There is a tension in rating schools between providing simple and clear language to summarize the data, and using language that is nuanced and communicates that it reflects only some information about a school. The language describing school outcomes has changed over the years:

- Colorado first assigned "A–F" school letter grades, mirroring grades that students might receive. Yet nearly immediate pushback changed the overall academic performance ratings to "Excellent","Average", "Low" and "Unsatisfactory," and academic growth ratings to "Improved", "Stable", and "Declined."

- Schools on DPS' SPF earn a "Distinguished," "Meets Expectations," "Accredited on Watch," "Accredited on Priority Watch," or "Accredited on Probation" rating. These are associated with stoplight colors, making a more understandable shorthand of Blue, Green, Yellow, Orange, and Red ratings respectively.

- In 2010, when CDE released its full School Performance Framework, rating language changed to: "Performance Plan," "Improvement Plan," "Priority Improvement Plan", and "Turnaround Plan." These are also associated with stoplight colors: Green, Yellow, Orange, and Red.

Developing A Local Report Card: A School Management Tool

The process of creating a local School Performance Framework was years in the making for Denver. While conversations first started under Jerry Wartgow's superintendency in the early 2000s and initial iterations of performance frameworks were used internally in DPS' charter renewal process, the SPF calculations were run district-wide for the first time in 2008 under Michael Bennet's tenure. The SPF was more fully implemented under Tom Boasberg when ratings were run for every school and the results were first published in 2009 and used in broader decision making.

When DPS created its SPF, the district was clear that it must include multiple measures to account for the shortcomings of the state's initial report cards. To better understand schools' efficacy, DPS looked at student progress over time, working with the state to develop the methodology of the Colorado Growth Model which compares a student's achievement to their academic peers to understand if they are mastering the same, more, or less academic content than other similar students across the state. The DPS SPF also included student achievement levels ("status"), and postsecondary readiness. The tool included measures around reenrollment, student engagement, and parent satisfaction.

Schools were assigned ratings based on the synthesis of these measures. While each rating has a descriptor of the school's performance like "Distinguished" or "Accredited on Watch", DPS uses stoplight colors as a shorthand to communicate ratings. (See the Language of School Ratings Sidebar.)

Initial purposes of the SPF were to:
- Provide educators (teachers, principals, staff, and leadership) and stakeholders a broad body of actionable evidence related to student/school performance to focus on increasing student achievement.

- Provide a basis for a system of school-based incentives and interventions.

- Provide information for teacher and principal compensation systems (used in determining some ProComp incentives including eligibility for school-wide bonuses around earning distinguished ratings or high growth.)

- Inform the School Accreditation Process with CDE as required by federal and state policy.[6]

These purposes, outlined in staff presentations to the Board show that the SPF at its core was created as a management tool. It was intended to support efforts at the school-level to improve student academic outcomes. It flowed into district-level decisions about programming and compensation. For example, decisions about charter renewals and replications incorporated SPF information, as did decisions about how to intervene in low-performing schools.

Using the SPF primarily as a management tool filled a very different objective than the early report cards from the state and as mandated by NCLB intended. Indeed, those report cards were designed around providing information to families as the primary goal. While not an initial goal of DPS' SPF, the tool was infused in community conversations, and its public significance grew as the district used the rating to communicate school quality to families and communities.

Broadening the Use of the School Performance Framework
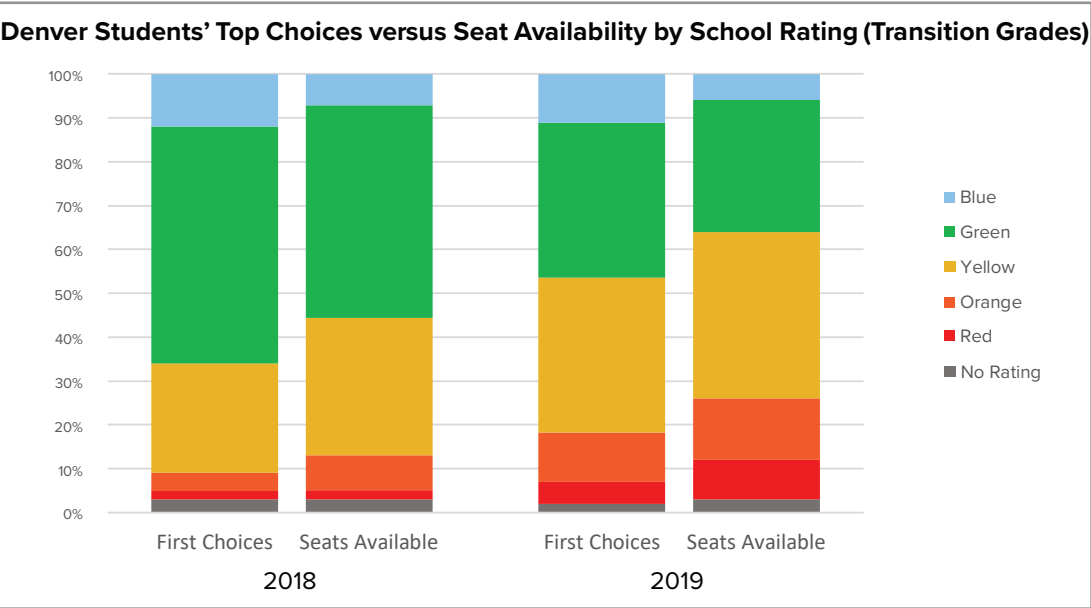
Community conversations and families' decision making

As the SPF was publicized it also started shaping public conversation, perception of schools, and enrollment decisions. SPF ratings were first incorporated in enrollment materials provided to families beginning in 2012. Though it is difficult to track back to behavior before the SPF was publicized, and to disentangle behaviors made through the current choice process, it is clear that some families are making decisions predicated on this information. As explored in Denver's Next Journey: School Choice, seats in higher rated schools are more likely to be filled during the unified enrollment process than lower rated schools. Additionally, more families select a Blue or Green school as their first choice school than there are available seats.[7]

Families using the SPF ratings has not been happenstance. Ratings are included in all enrollment guides and on School Finder. In 2017 the district created a new family-friendly report that relied more heavily on visuals and provided some explanations of the data to make them easier to use for families and community members. (See the Appendix for an example).

Additionally, in the fall of 2016 DPS started encouraging and made a big push for schools to host "community progress monitoring" meetings with families to discuss the school's performance including SPF results. Ensuring principals had conversations with their school community was an attempt to make the results relevant and meaningful, to reflect on publicly available information, to build a school culture around data sharing and use, and, at its best, to bring families into the process of continuous school improvement. These annual conversations continue.

Just the Facts:
More students request a Blue or Green school as their first choice than there are seats in Blue or Green schools.

Denver Students' Top Choices versus Seat Availability by School Rating (Transition Grades)

Legend: Blue, Green, Yellow, Orange, Red, No Rating

2018: First Choices, Seats Available
2019: First Choices, Seats Available

Finally, the SPF has been part of the Denver Plan 2020, the district's strategic plan that identifies the goals and strategies the district is pursuing. The primary goal of that plan when it was revised in 2014 is that 80% of students would be in Blue or Green rated schools. This publicly put a stake in the ground around improving schools—and the bar that would be used to measure success. Given that the district used the SPF in significant decisions about schools and as an agreed-upon bar for quality, community conversations are heavily influenced by and incorporate the rating system.

Setting decision rules

Results of the School Performance Framework became "higher stakes" as the district increasingly incorporated results into decisions about school closure and restart. Decisions around turnaround interventions, closure, and restart heavily incorporated SPF ratings to help identify schools and to determine the course of action. The importance of the SPF in making these decisions was codified in 2015 with the adoption of the School Performance Compact, which specified a "bright line," whereby all schools that had been red for two years, or a mix of orange and red for three years, would be subject to closure and/or restart. Though coupled with a process to conduct School Quality Reviews that included observations and a deeper understanding of what was happening in schools, the School Performance Compact had a clear reliance on the SPF as a key decision gate in disruptive school changes. (See Denver's Next Journey: School Improvement for more about the evolution of school turnaround strategies in DPS including the School Performance Compact).

What the SPF Measures

DPS produces three Frameworks annually, each with a unique set of measures. The vast majority of DPS schools are evaluated under the Traditional framework, and include measures of academic growth, academic achievement, postsecondary readiness, and student engagement and family satisfaction. Numerous measures underlie these lenses: to try and answer these complex questions DPS looks at multiple sources of data across two years.

In addition to the traditional schools framework, DPS produces a rating for Early Education schools working with only young learners, and a rating for Alternative Education Campuses, which are working with middle and/or high school students who are significantly behind their peers in the credits they've earned or are at risk of not graduating. The Early Education SPF includes results from an early childhood assessment, and information about student attendance and family satisfaction.

The SPF for Alternative schools differs from the traditional SPF and focuses on measures that are particularly important for their students like dropout recovery, credit accumulation, and high school completion rates. Rather than relying on the SAT as a measure of college and career readiness, all DPS AEC students are required to take a different assessment, MAP, which is used to gauge students' academic content mastery.

What is Measured? The Evolution of DPS' Traditional School Performance Framework

		2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Overall Design and Communication	**Design Principles and Implementation**	Focus on how schools are serving groups of students by including disaggregated data Reduce volatility by using two years of data per measure Initial calculations are released for informational purposes	SPF for decision-making and public information used for the first time AEC framework released	Standard setting changes from norm-referenced to criterion-referenced		SPF used in SchoolChoice materials for the first time
Academic Measures	**Growth Measures**	Median Growth Percentile in Reading, Writing, Math MGP compared to other schools Catch-up and Keep-up Growth AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) growth		Add growth in English Language Proficiency Growth in early reading (DRA) Early Reading Growth compared to similar schools		Shift from CELA to ACCESS to measure English Language Proficiency
	Achievement Status Measures	% students at benchmark in Reading, Writing Math and Science Compared to similar schools % Advanced Achievement Gaps English Language Proficiency Early reading proficiency				
High School-specific measures	**Postsecondary Readiness Growth**			YOY change in ACT YOY change in graduation rate YOY change in On-track to graduation YOY Change in AP and concurrent enrollment participation and pass rates		
	Postsecondary Readiness Status	ACT scores ACT compared to similar schools Graduation rate On-track to graduation AP, IB, Concurrent Enrollment participation and pass rates				
Non Academic Measures	**Student Engagement and Community Satisfaction**	Attendance rate Student Satisfaction Re-enrollment rate Parent survey response rate		Add bonus points for Center-based programs Add parent satisfaction Eliminated re-enrollment change measure		

What is Measured? The Evolution of DPS' Traditional School Performance Framework (continued)

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Overall Design and Communication	MS AECs graded separately from HS AECs for the first time	Early Education SPF released	No SPF released given changes in assessments	"Equity Indicator," which would later be called the "Academic Gaps Indicator" added for information only Push for schools to host "Community Progress Monitoring" meetings to discuss SPF with families	"Equity Indicator" threshold requirements implemented	
Academic Measures				~ 60% of growth and achievement measurement methods change given shift in assessments from CSAP/TCAP to CMAS PARCC Early literacy growth and achievement measures from READ Act assessments added	Increased weight of ACCESS on-track measure Increased weight of early literacy READ Act assessments	Weight of early literacy READ Act assessments decreased; intent to shift to "aimlines" more aligned with CMAS measures Bar to "meet expectations" on status measures raised; 50% of students must meet or exceed expectations on CMAS to get a green rating on the SPF status measure
High School-specific measures				YOY change in college remediation	Consolidation of AP, IB, and concurrent enrollment measures Measures change to reflect shift to PSAT and SAT HS assessments	College remediation measures revised, temporarily lowering the weight of PSR growth
				College remediation rates		
Non Academic Measures					Attendance measure revised	

Over time, adjustments have been made, and new measures added, particularly to the Traditional frameworks to better answer the questions DPS identified to see which schools are providing a quality education to all students. In including more measures, DPS has been responsive to trying to measure multiple aspects of student learning. DPS has intentionally added measures that encourage district and school administrators and staff to better understand how schools are serving different groups of students, and in particular have prioritized disaggregated data for students of color, emerging multilingual students, students eligible for free or reduced price lunch, and students with disabilities.

At times adding new measures has worked well to signal new information to communities. Yet other times it has not been as clear. For example, to better drive action towards the district's Denver Plan 2020 goal of ensuring 80% of DPS 3rd graders were meeting grade-level expectations, in 2017 DPS added new measures of early literacy achievement to the SPF, which greatly increased the weight of those measures yet the cut points on these assessments were not aligned with CMAS, resulting in a dramatic disconnect between what counted as meeting grade-level expectations. The

impact was a dramatic shift in the number of elementary schools that were rated "Green" that far outpaced other measures of learning in those schools. DPS adjusted the weights and created aimlines more aligned with state standards beginning in 2018, to be fully implemented in 2019.

A critical example of how DPS has provided new information to the community through the SPF is the addition of "Academic Gaps" as part of the score as a way to measure disparities between groups of students. This has been an important step in recognizing that student experience is not monolithic within schools. Originally known as the "Equity Indicator," and renamed the "Academic Gaps Indicator," DPS started to group specific measures in the SPF in a new way to better shine a light on how schools were serving students with different backgrounds. The "Academic Gaps Indicator" looks first at whether students of color, emerging multilingual students, students with disabilities, and students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch within a school are meeting the district-wide benchmarks in academics outcomes. Then the indicator measures within-school gaps like whether students of color and white students have similar academic outcomes. First introduced for information only in 2016, the indicator

"The conversations that we have with families are as, if not more important, than the SPF when we're helping them find a school for their children. Different families want different things in a school which cannot be encapsulated in one score."

Cara Eng, Managing Director of Operations, Rocky Mountain Prep

was given teeth in 2017; even if schools received a "Green" or "Blue" rating on the overall framework, they would not receive that rating if they failed to meet expectations on the academic gap indicator.

Across all iterations of the framework, even as DPS added and changed measures, a key design principle was retained: the SPF emphasizes growth. This was a key principle given the challenges of the early Colorado frameworks that rated schools based on their achievement and overall changes in that achievement year over year without regard to the progress that individual students were making. The DPS SPF uses two different types of growth measurements:

a median growth percentile, and a growth-to-standard measure (see sidebar on Measuring Student Academic Progress). While more reflective of the learning that has happened for students in a particular year, a growth percentile is also an unpredictable measure because it is based on how students performed in a given year relative to their academic peers across the state. Additionally, it has never been clear how much growth is "enough" for students to get closer to mastering grade level expectations if they are behind. While growth is critical to understanding how schools impact learning, it can also lead to a perceived disconnect between the SPF results and the underlying achievement of students.

Just the Facts:
The DPS SPF heavily weights academic growth measures.

DPS SPF Indicator Weights for Summative Ratings
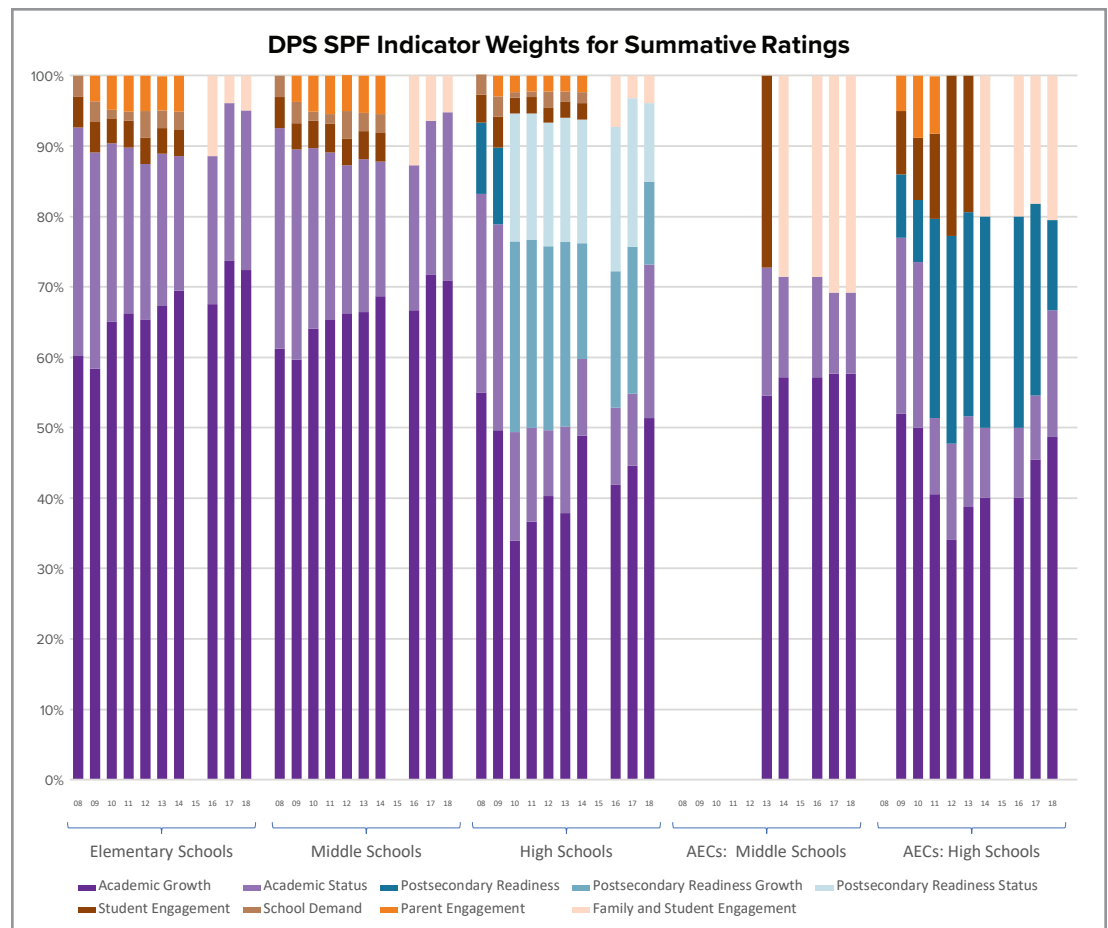
Measuring Student Academic Progress

"Growth", the idea of measuring the progress students are making in mastering academic content, offers a rich understanding of student learning beyond a point-in-time test score, which can often be more indicative of students' prior learning than learning within a given school year. Yet "growth" can be measured in multiple ways. A few key approaches to measure growth in Colorado include:

- **Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP):** No Child Left Behind set a goal that every student would reach proficiency in reading and in math within three years or by 10th grade, whichever came first, and states were required to measure whether students were making "adequate yearly progress" toward these goals. In Colorado, schools and districts were determined to have made adequate yearly progress if:

  - they met targets for the proportion of students who were proficient, or significant decreases in the proportion of students who were not proficient, and

  - For elementary schools, a certain percent of students were advanced in reading and math;

  - For high schools, the graduation rate met targets.

- **Colorado Growth Model (Median Growth Percentile):** To move away from the binary of whether or not schools and districts were making adequate yearly progress, Colorado developed a new measure of growth that compares how students perform in one year compared to students with similar past academic achievement ("academic peers"), measured by a student's growth percentile. The median student growth percentile in schools and districts indicates the average growth that students made in that school in a given year compared to other similar students across the state.

- **Growth to Standard:** The goal of this growth measure is to ensure students are on the way to meeting grade level expectations ("catch-up" growth) or continue to meet grade level expectations ("keep-up" growth). Colorado is in the midst of changing the methodology for this measure, with the goal of understanding whether students are making enough growth toward higher levels of academic mastery, or are making enough growth to maintain their level of academic mastery if they have already met grade level expectations.

What is not included in the SPF?

The Traditional SPF rating is one rolled-up score of around 50 indicators across two years. What could be missing? The SPF is oriented almost exclusively around academic measures. Although a central component of schools, academic outcomes are not necessarily representative of student experience, or holistic of all student learning. Indeed the measures included in the SPF shed little light on district goals of supporting the whole child such that they are engaged, challenged, and healthy.

This is not unique to the Denver School Performance Framework, or Colorado's for that matter, which is arguably even more narrowly focused on comparable academic measures. The desire to provide educators and communities broader information about schools and student learning is not new. For example, while Colorado's original school report card in the early 2000s was based nearly entirely on singular academic measures, the state was also clear that such information was not exhaustive of what communities need to know about schools and so included data about teachers, discipline, and spending.

More recently there are initiatives locally and across the country to broaden education systems' and the public's understanding of how schools are supporting students beyond academic measures. A notable example is the extensive work in the California CORE districts where eight districts came together to figure out new ways of measuring social-emotional learning and school culture and climate. Those districts are incorporating student-survey based measures into an accountability system around student growth mindset, self-efficacy, self-management, social awareness, climate of support for academic learning, school connectedness, sense of belonging, knowledge and fairness of discipline rules, and sense of safety.[8]

There are trade offs and deep debates about what is, or is not included in a school performance framework. For example, a "more is better" approach may better reflect how schools are supporting students. It also makes the tool significantly more complicated and can have the effect of muddying insights from the underlying information. Additionally, there are questions about what should be included in accountability frameworks and what is important public information. For example, mobility rates could be incredibly important pieces of information for educators and communities to know, and could shed light on how connected families are to schools. Conversely, if used in accountability it could disincentivize schools from serving students who are more mobile not because they are disconnected from the school but because their family is experiencing housing instability.

Ultimately, when a measure is included in an accountability framework there was a decision that it reflects important information about what we expect from schools. Not all schools are the same, nor are families' expectations and desires for a school monolithic. For one family, or for a particular school, it could be incredibly important that students access arts programming. Is that a community-wide value? Should we hold schools accountable for access to arts? These questions are reflected in the tension between ensuring an accountability system is comparable across schools and having an accountability system that is more relevant to a particular school or community. To this point the DPS SPF has focused by and large on a specific set of academic outcomes for students, and holds all schools up to the same set of measures.

What the SPF Tells Us: How have Denver schools performed over time and how equitable is Denver Public Schools?

Despite its challenges as a singular evaluation of school quality, the SPF remains a fundamental way to measure how equitable access to a quality education is being provided across DPS. If we look across the district now and over time, it is clear that enrollment in the district's highest rated schools is not equitable between different groups of students.

We know that student achievement has been slowly improving over time (see Denver's Next Journey: Start with the Facts); we see here that fewer and fewer students are in Red and Orange schools, but we are still far from 80% of students in Blue and Green Schools, the goal the district set out for itself in the Denver Plan 2020. As of 2018, only 42% of students are in Blue and Green schools.

Just the Facts:

The vast majority of students attend Yellow or Green schools. White students and students ineligible for free or reduced price lunch are more likely to enroll in Blue/Green schools than students of color and students eligible for free or reduced price lunch.

Denver Students in Schools by SPF Rating Over Time

*No SPF was calculated due to test change
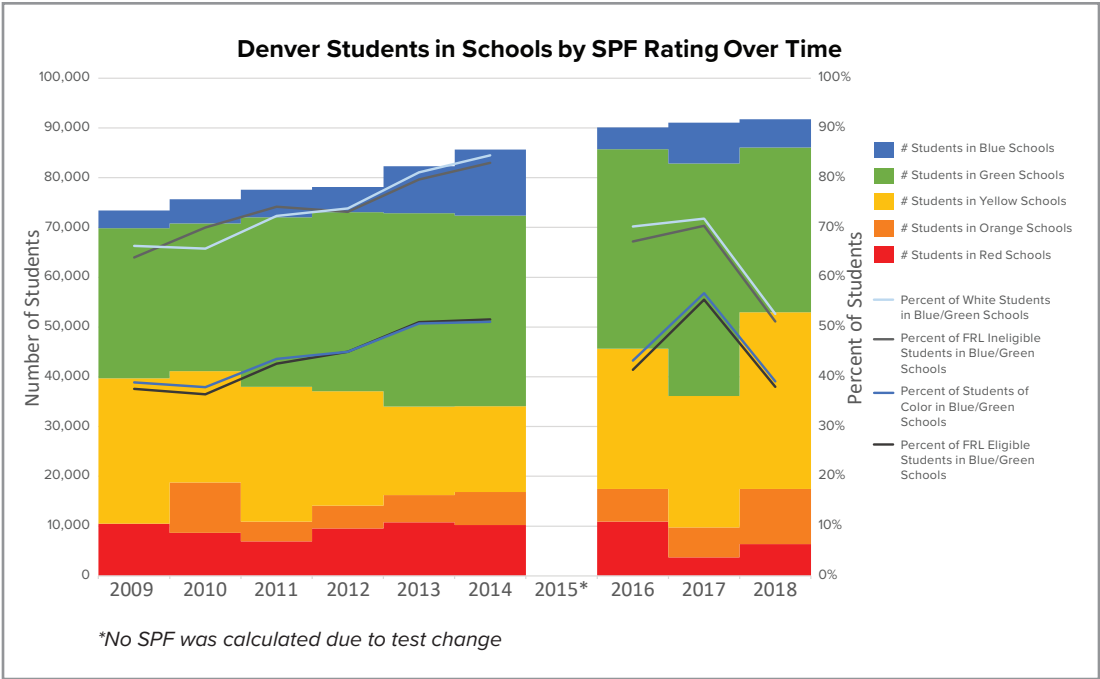
Access to Blue and Green schools has been inequitable and unequally dispersed across the city: 53% of white students, 36% of black students, and 39% of Latinx students are enrolled in Blue or Green schools in 2018.[9] 38% of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch access these schools compared to 51% of their peers who are not eligible for free or reduced price lunch.[10] Students who live in Near Northeast are most likely to enroll in Blue and Green schools, and students in Northwest and Central Denver are least likely to.

Just the Facts:
Access to Blue and Green schools is not equally distributed in regions across the city.

Percent of Students in Blue/Green Schools by Denver Region Over Time[11]

*No SPF was calculated due to test change
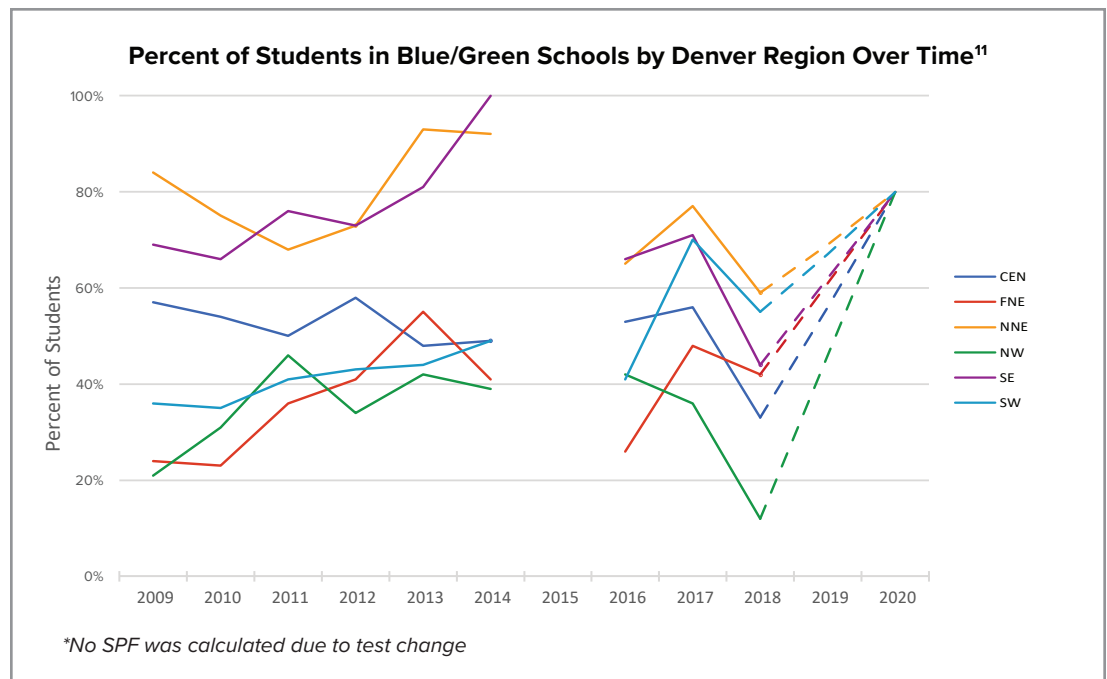
The DPS SPF: A Leader?

Denver was one of the first districts in the country to take on the creation of a school rating system, and much of DPS' work has been influential in other geographies. For example, DPS worked in conjunction with the Colorado Department of Education and the state's Technical Advisory Panel to develop a growth measure that looked beyond static increases in grade-level proficiency rates. The Colorado Growth Model that looks at the relative growth of students year to year has been adopted by 23 states as the growth measure they use to understand student learning.[12]

Additionally, when Colorado revised its performance frameworks for schools across the state, it drew heavily on the DPS model. For example, CDE also weighted growth more heavily than achievement, and incorporated postsecondary readiness indicators. The state frameworks also took a note from Denver and incorporated some disaggregated measures, first in growth and now in achievement and postsecondary readiness as well.

The state still has far fewer measures than does the DPS framework, puts relatively more weight on status than growth, and sets a lower bar than the Denver SPF. For example in 2018, 62% of Denver schools would have earned a "performance plan" rating under the Colorado SPF, that state's highest rating, compared to 42% who earned a "Green" or "Blue" rating on the DPS SPF. Indeed, DPS is the only district in the state that annually appeals the state's school ratings to lower a school's overall rating to bring it inline with the district's own assessment of quality. CDE's overall school ratings are also more tightly correlated with student demographics than Denver's SPF results are.

"I wish there was a way to level the playing field. Some families have time to go on multiple tours, know who to ask for information about the school. How do you get this type of information to more families?

Karen Mortimer, Parent Leader at Together Colorado

CDE and DPS publish SPFs. What's the difference?		
	CDE	**DPS**
Number of measures included	Elementary and Middle Schools: ~25 High Schools: ~50	Elementary Schools: 52 Middle Schools: 35 High Schools: 47
Timeframe of measures	One year, unless more needed to include data, per reporting rules	Multi-year
Use of disaggregated data	Status, Growth, and some PWR (Postsecondary Workforce Readiness) indicators include all students results and points for results disaggregated for FRPL eligible, SWD, ELLs, Students of Color, and Students previously identified for a READ Plan (ES ELA only)	Status, Growth, and PWR indicators include all students results and results disaggregated by FRPL eligible, SWD, ELLs, Students of Color, and students signficantly below grade level (ELA only) Disaggregated measures summarized in an "academic gaps indicator"
Weight of indicators	EM: 60% Growth; 40% Achievement Status HS: 40% Growth; 30% Achievement Status; 30% PWR	EM: ~70% Growth; ~25% Achievement; ~5% Parent and Student Engagement HS: ~50% Growth; ~20% Achievement; ~25% PWR; ~5% Parent and Student Engagement
How disagreements between school and rater are handled	Public request to reconsider process	Internal body of evidence and data dispute process
Percent of Denver schools with a high quality rating (2018)—all rated schools including AECs	62% (based on preliminary ratings)	42%

Looking to the Past, Present, and Future

Initially created as a school management tool used in resource allocation, school improvement strategies, and staff compensation, the School Performance Framework has become the primary way the district communicates school quality to families. As this shift happened there has been little access to the underlying data. There has been little engagement and education of families about what is actually included in the tool, and how changes have been made to the tool over time. The elevation of the SPF in district and community conversations has created greater focus and debate about the tool, and the tool is deeply meaningful in how communities understand schools. As the city discusses what the SPF might look like going forward, there are foundational debates about what the framework is, and the role it plays.

Essential Questions for Denver's Next Journey

- How should a School Performance Framework be used? For which decisions and which audiences? Should school accountability decisions be predicated on the same school ratings that are communicated to communities?

- Should the district have its own accountability system and/or School Performance Framework separate from the state?

- What information should Denver include in a School Performance Framework, and what information do communities want to access outside of an accountability system? How can we as a community understand what opportunities and programming students are accessing to support their learning and development? How can we understand the impact schools are having on students beyond academic outcomes?

- How does the Denver community want to resolve tradeoffs between complexity and inclusivity of information? Of comparability and relevance to different schools or community priorities? Of nuance in the underlying data and intuitiveness of a summative rating?

- What is the best way to shine a light on and address inequities across the district? What about inequities and different experiences for different students within schools?

- Should any of the SPF be connected to teacher evaluation or compensation?

- How can communities have a larger voice in the design and use of the School Performance Framework?

Acknowledgments

Endnotes

1   SPF Coalition. (2015, April 20). Series of Letters Regarding the Denver Public Schools' School Performance Framework [Letter written 2015 to Denver Public Schools]. Retrieved from *http://apluscolorado.org/reports/2014-2015-spf-letters/*

2   Schoales, V. (2017, October 19). Denver's Good But Is It That Good? [Web log post]. Retrieved from *http://apluscolorado.org/blog/denvers-good-but-is-it-that-good/*

3   For a deeper look at how the district has made decisions to intervene in low performing schools, and how the SPF influences these decisions, see Denver's Next Journey: School Improvement.

4   22, Colorado Revised Statutes §§ 107-7-601-36 (200). *https://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/images/olls/2000a_sl_107.pdf*

5   The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). (2010, December 06). Retrieved from *https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html*

6   Denver Public Schools Office of Accountability, Research, and Evaluation. (2010). 2010 School Performance Framework Results and Update on Denver Plan Goals (Rep.). Denver, C). Retrieved from *https://www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/files/89DMKY5BAD6D/$file/4.01 - 2010 SPF Presentation.pdf*

7   In 2019 during Round 1 of unified enrollment, 46% of students selected a Blue or Green school as their first choice, a decline from previous years; in 2018 66% of students selected a Blue or Green school as their first choice. A significant reason for this shift could be a drop in the availability of Blue and Green schools particularly at the high school level. Districtwide high schoolers saw low growth in 2018, reflected on the 2018 SPF ratings; only around 18% of high school seats were in Blue or Green schools in 2018. See http://apluscolorado.org/blog/denvers-2018-spf-recognizing-our-gaps/.

8   Toch, T., & Miller, R. (2019, January). CORE Lessons: Measuring the Social and Emotional Dimensions of Student Success (Rep.). Retrieved *https://www.future-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FutureEd-CORE-Report.pdf*

9   CDE October Count

10 DPS Enrollment Data

11 This regional analysis is based on where schools were located in 2018. Because the CEN region didn't exist as a planning region in DPS prior to 2017 some of these numbers are different from DPS' historical analyses. We've superimposed 2018 planning regions on all historical data to try to get a comparable understanding of how different regions of Denver have changed over time.

12 Data Quality Campaign. (2019, January 23). Different Growth Measures Tell Different Stories. Retrieved from *https://dataqualitycampaign.org/resource/growth-data-it-matters-and-its-complicated/*

Appendices

School Quality Coalition Letter, April 2, 2019

Denver Public Schools District Leadership & Board Members,

We are a coalition of community organizations that represent a wide variety of interests and perspectives in Denver. On some issues, we are very aligned and on others, we are in very different places. We believe Denver is at a unique moment in time to revisit important conversations around school quality.

We have come together because we are aligned on one thing: that Denver Public Schools should launch a community process to examine how we measure school quality in order to have a more comprehensive view of how we are preparing our students for life. We believe that we need to have clear and consistent signals to families and educators about school quality for all learners, and we believe it is time for Denver Public Schools to open a community dialogue on this critical issue.

For the past ten years, Denver Public Schools has led the country in transparent data about school performance. The School Performance Framework, while debated by many, was one of the first multiple measures tool to be utilized by a large school district. It includes state and local assessment information, student and parent surveys alongside college/career readiness information. However, in recent years, a variety of intersecting challenges have impeded the ability for the School Performance Framework to deliver on the clear signals to educators and families that are needed.

For a variety of reasons, there have been important reflections about the School Performance Framework (SPF). From constant internal revisions to a lack of public feedback in the tool itself, the past few years have seen swings in results and support. There are serious concerns about the extent to which the SPF has become the "be all, end all" for conversations about quality and equity in the system. This reduces the ability for discussions about school quality to be clear and focused, complicating families, students, administrators, and teachers' abilities to make meaningful use of the information. The SPF has struggled to signal real whole child indicators and induce creative school models. Potentially most consequentially, families and communities have not been brought to the design table in the past few years to substantively inform the SPF and DPS measures of school quality. All of these issues together leave room for cynicism, doubt and uneven agreement in how DPS currently measures school quality with negative implications for much of how DPS tries to tackle inequalities in the system. Yet it is very critical that we have measurement tools and resources so that families and communities can have real information about school quality.

We believe there is an opportunity for your leadership to take us to the next chapter in building a shared vision for how schools serve students, families and communities.

First, we are asking you to use the information that you collected from the Superintendent search to reflect on what our community sees as quality. This may require additional targeted conversations during Susana's entry plan. This can open up meaningful discussions about what school quality means to Denver families now and in the future along with how it should be measured and communicated. We feel like we are at a unique moment in time to use this feedback to show families and communities DPS can be responsive.

Second, we ask you to assemble a working group of community members and other experts to work to address the community feedback you've received to assess where we stand in monitoring school quality. This group will be charged with hearing and incorporating community perspectives, seeing where we DPS tools stand compared to the feedback, considering new possibilities, and making implementable recommendations to DPS on how the next generation of school quality measurement is conducted.

Lastly, we ask you to charge an existing or new district group to monitor and advise efforts on school quality measurement for over the long-term. This independent and representative group should work with DPS staff and the board to consider all potential adjustments and changes to policy and practice. Its membership should refresh periodically to maintain an ongoing and current perspective. This is critical to ensure school quality conversations live close to the community - not far away at the state level.

While we do not know what the exact technical composition of new ways to measure school quality will look like, we believe that these efforts can restore trust, generate better measures of quality, and keep co-created solutions and oversight close to the families and students of Denver. Most importantly, we believe it can create a collective vision for how we address the deep inequities in our school system.

The School Performance Framework, despite its shortcomings, has helped foster a culture in Denver where families ask important questions about school quality and the district makes decisions with public facing tools. We believe the time has come to build what is next for our collective future. It is our aspiration that these efforts yield a more expanded way of understanding how students are prepared for life and that the communities of Denver will have a direct role in showing us the way.

With respect,

Community Voice in School Quality Coalition

Note: If groups are interested in joining our coalition please e-mail: dom@faithbridgeco.org

Example of DPS' Family-Friendly School Performance Framework
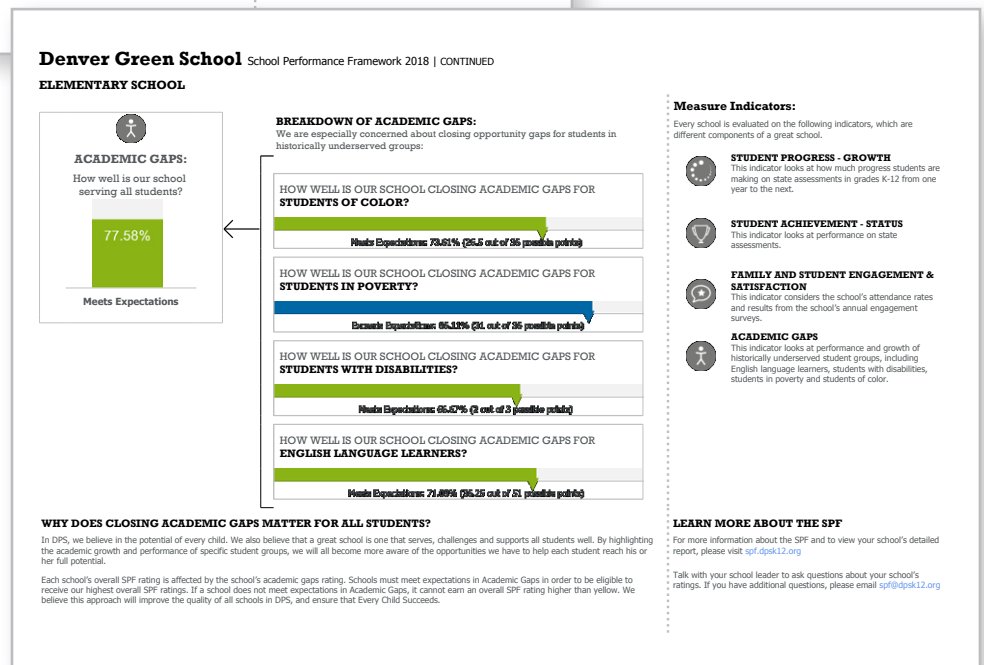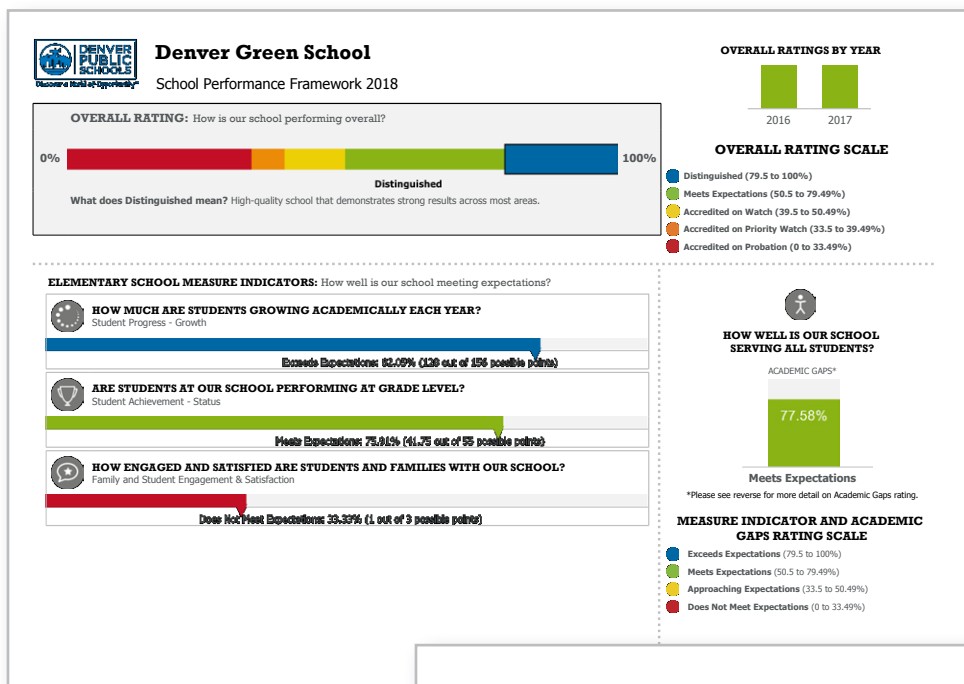
ABOUT A+ COLORADO

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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