



Denver School Performance by School Board Member Districts: Results and Trends

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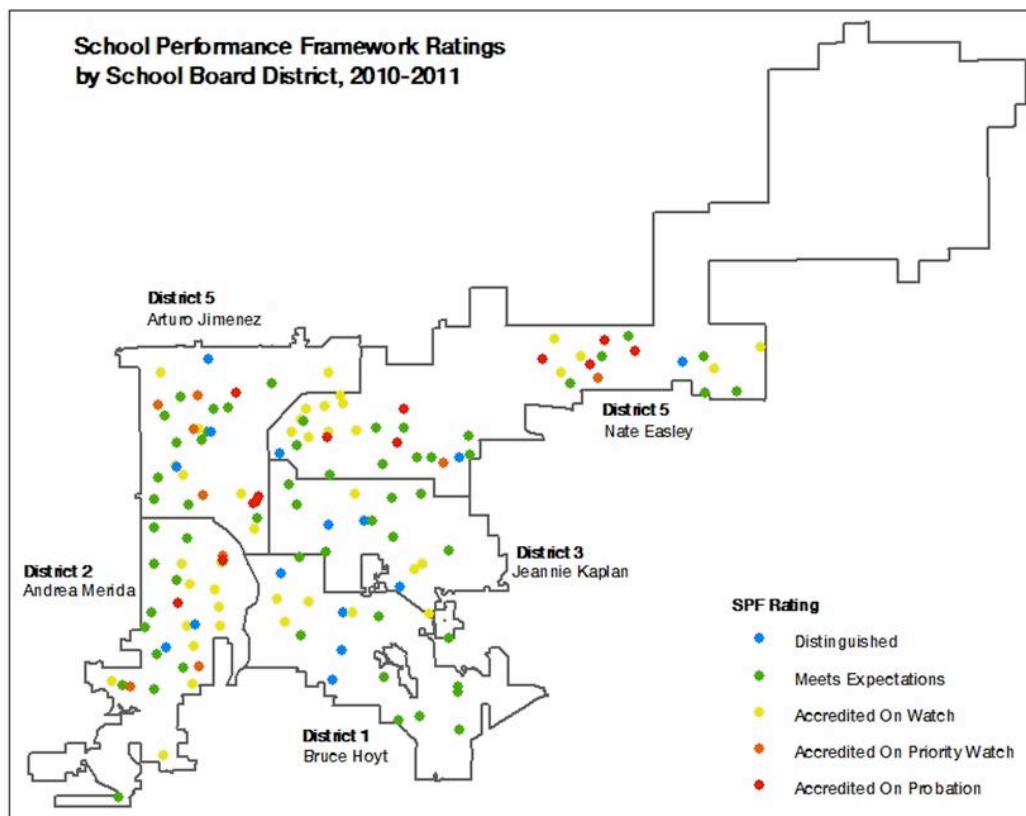
The inevitable and early progression into the Denver Public Schools board election season means that this year the political jousting began in advance of the release of the 2011 School Performance Framework (SPF) – DPS’s the annual ranking of every public school in the city.

The election and the SPF were thus often juxtaposed in news reports – however they were rarely, if ever, connected. But they should be – it is school board policy that often determines specific practice, and those practices make real differences in the types of schools we have, where in the city they are located, and which students they serve.

In our role as an active group of Denver community leaders, A+ Denver decided that this comparison, particularly in an election year, should be more explicit. To do so, we added the five school board member districts to the SPF to track public school performance – in absolute numbers, academic performance, and student demographics. There are also two elected at-large members on the school board, whom this report does not address.

We discovered a number of surprising trends, at both the overall district and board member level, which shed additional light on our schools and students. We publish this report in the hope that it will provide voters (and even candidates) with additional information and context for both the upcoming election, and for guiding future DPS policy.

DPS Board Member District Map



Is Demography Destiny?

The assumption that one's zip code determines the quality of one's public schools is an often-repeated educational truism. And while the student demographics appear to still influence educational outcomes in many schools, within each member district are a number of schools that are proving that low-income students can achieve at high levels under the right circumstances. Below are some examples of trends you will find when looking at each member district individually:

- Although two member districts (1-SE and 3-Central) have no students in the bottom two school categories, after 5th grade, they also have no students in the top category. These member districts are dominated by excellent elementary schools; however their middle and high schools are often fairly good, but all too rarely great.
- The relationship between affluent neighborhoods and high performing schools is most prominent in the elementary school years. In the highest category of “distinguished” schools on the SPF, nine are traditional schools which have neighborhood-based admissions (one must live within the school's boundary area to attend). Eight of these nine schools serve elementary grades; and the ninth is a K-8. However, there are no neighborhood-admissions middle or high schools in this top realm. While affluent neighborhoods have an influence on school performance, it diminishes in the later years, as schools get larger, more students and families make school choices to meet their needs often further from home and catchment areas grow larger.
- The six distinguished schools that serve students in grades 6-12 are all open-enrollment charter schools, and all of these are located in the city's three least affluent districts (2-SW, 4-NE, and 5-NW). One has a better chance of attending a distinguished school in grades 6-12 if one is willing to leave Denver's more affluent neighborhoods.
- The member district (2-SW) with the most challenging demographics – an FRL population of 87% and an ELL population of 47% -- does not have the highest percentage of students in the cities' worst two school categories – it ranks third from bottom. Indeed, some of the education reform policies (school turnarounds, school closures and new schools) have helped increase school performance and reduced the overall impact of challenging demographics.
- Almost all the education reform efforts to introduce charter and innovation schools have taken place in the three member Districts with the most challenging demographics (2-SW, 4-NE, 5-NW). The more affluent regions remain largely unaffected by school openings and closings – despite having considerable challenges, particularly in the middle and high school years.
- The two member districts (4-NE and 5-NW) with the highest percentages of students in the two lowest category schools have vastly different strategies and attitudes towards education reform policies. District 4-NE has been actively supporting a district-wide improvement strategy that has included new innovation, charter and

more dramatic turnaround schools while district 5-NW has experienced increased controversy around new schools and turnarounds, with fewer changes taking place. While it is too early to see the impact of their respective actions, these districts – and their respective board members -- have similar challenges but divergent prescriptions.

The School Performance Framework

The School Performance Framework is used to evaluate school performance on multiple levels. The primary metric is academic, based on a weighting of academic growth and proficiency. In addition, the SPF measures overall organizational strength of each school through non-academic metrics including student engagement, a school's re-enrollment rate, and parent satisfaction. All of these metrics are added together to create a score of 0 to 100, and then grouped into specific categories (additional information on the SPF is available on [this section](#) of the DPS website).

Schools are rated in five categories, each of which is color-coded. From highest to lowest, the categories are “distinguished” (blue, 79-100 points), “meets expectations” (green, 51-78 points); “on watch” (yellow, 40-50 points); “on priority watch” (orange, 34-39 points), and “on probation” (red, 0-33 points). This particular nomenclature is, to put it mildly, distracting and obtuse, and this report often defaults to the simpler (and not much less descriptive) color codes. It should also be noted that the “meets expectations” (green) category has an enormous range in quality of schools: for example, schools having only 64% of students reading at grade level are in the same category as those with 91%. Given this, it is important to recall that within each SPF category – and in particular with green schools – there can be a wide range of performance.

The SPF provides not just performance measurement, but demographic data. Using enrollment for each school on count day (in this case, October 1, 2010), it charts each school by the percentage of students in four categories: Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL), Minorities, English Language Learners (ELL), and Special Education students (SPED). We include a graph of the FRL, ELL, and SPED demographics of each member district, with a comparison to the overall DPS average.

A Tale of Very Different Districts

What is both surprising and commonplace is the vast difference in size, performance, and demographics by individual member district.

First is size. The current DPS Board member district boundaries have not been altered since after the 1990 census data. Denver has changed dramatically since then, with the development and subsequent population growth in Stapleton, Lowry and Green Valley Ranch. At the same time, more static and aging populations – with less school-aged children – remain in SE and central Denver. As the member districts have not been re-calibrated even as demographics shifted, the difference in size is easily explained, but the raw numbers still surprise. The smallest district (3-Central) oversees about 8,500

kids (11%) across 15 schools – the largest (4-NE) is almost three times bigger, with over 25,200 kids (34%) kids and 41 schools.

There is also remarkable – and related – variation in school performance. The two smallest member districts (1-SE and 3-Central) have zero (yes, *zero*) students in the bottom two school performance categories: “probation” (red), and “priority watch” (orange). These two member districts comprise 25% of Denver public school students, and not a single child attends one of the cities worst two category schools. At the same time, these two member districts combine for 57% - over twice their proportionate share -- of the students in Denver’s highest school category of “distinguished” (blue).

In contrast, the other three member districts (2-SW, 4-NE and 5-NW) comprise 75% of students, and 100% of the students in Denver’s worst two category schools. They also represent just 43% of students in the highest category schools – a fraction of their proportionate share.

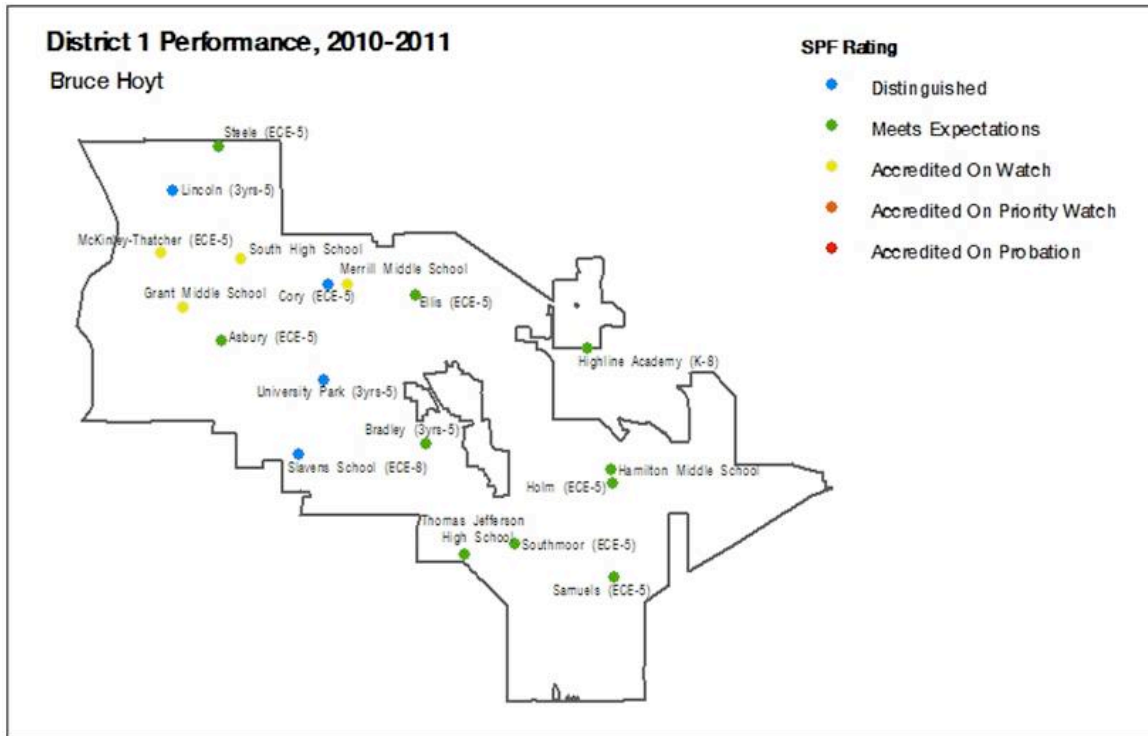
The demographics of each district, also unsurprisingly, are reflective of housing patterns and neighborhood composition. The two smallest member districts are the most affluent and have the smallest percentages of kids in the lowest category schools. The three larger members districts are far closer or above the overall DPS averages in specific demographics.

The percentage of Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) students -- a measure of poverty – in each member district varies from a high of 87% to a low of 52%. The percentage of English Language Learners (ELL) is also highly inconsistent, from 21% to 47%. However the percentage of Special Education students (SPED) is much less divergent, ranging from 10% to 12%. District averages are 73% FRL, 34% ELL, and 11% SPED.

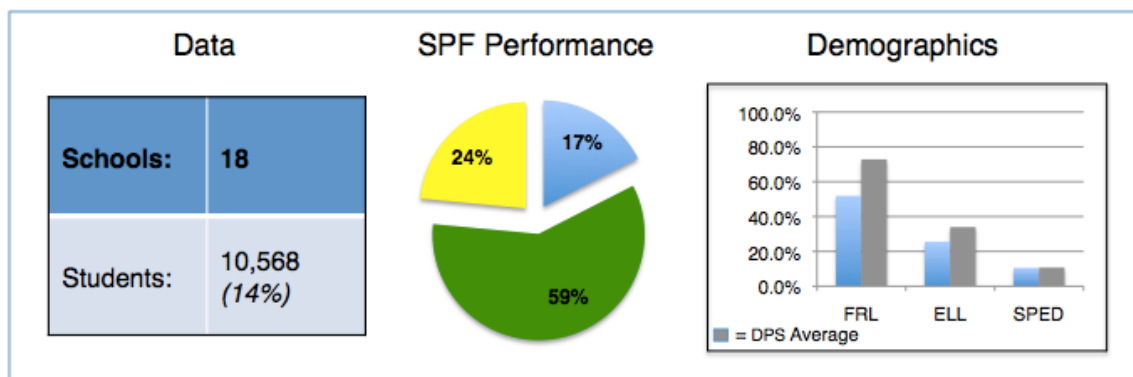
To truly understand what is happening within Denver’s public school system, we need to look in detail at each member district. Following is a brief discussion of each region of the city by DPS Board member, accompanied by data from the School Performance Framework.

A+ Denver is an independent, non-partisan 501(c)(3) organization and does not make political endorsements. A+ Denver is committed to reporting the facts and best practices supporting educational achievement for all of Denver’s students. The data from this report is all publicly available and taken from the Colorado Department of Education and Denver Public Schools websites. Readers should look for reports from A+ Denver in the coming months regarding DPS’s overall performance, innovation schools and school turnaround efforts.

DISTRICT ONE-SE (Member: Bruce Hoyt)



Summary: There is less to say about District 1 than other areas: the region has seen little action from school reform, with just one charter school and no innovation or turnaround schools. Its performance, relative to the rest of the city, is high, however there are significant challenges in the later years, which are not being well addressed by current school options.



District One has 18 schools with just over 10,500 kids (14% of DPS). Seventeen percent of students are in “distinguished” (blue) schools, and a further almost 60% are in the second-highest category of “meets expectations” (green). While about a quarter of students are in “on watch” (yellow) schools, this region has no schools in the lowest

two SPF categories. The demographics reflect the areas relative affluence, with an average of 51% FRL, 26% ELL, and 11% SPED – all lower than DPS averages.

However, District 1’s appeal lessens as its kids grow older: although over 95% of students in elementary schools are in the top two school categories, in middle school this percentage drops to 52%, and by high school it falls to less than half (44%).

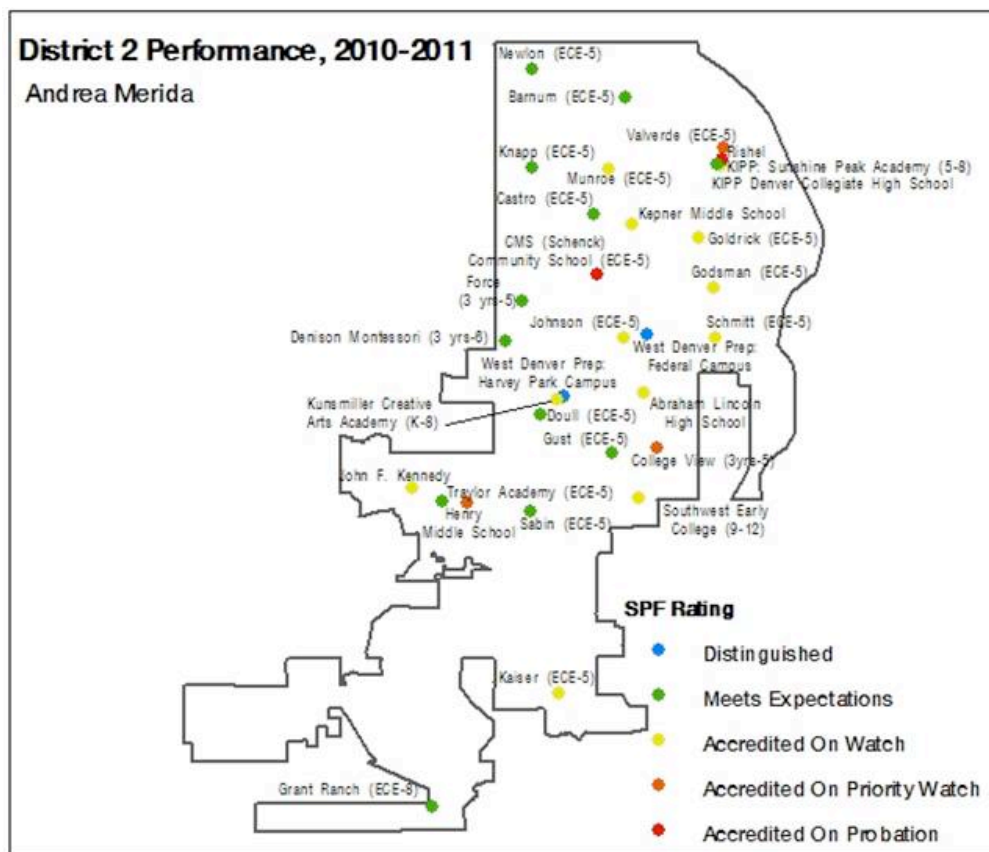
DISTRICT 1: STUDENT COUNT						
	Elem	K-8	Middle	6-12	High	ALL
Distinguished (Blue)	1,306	543				1,849
Meets Expectations (Green)	3,683	504	977		1,070	6,234
On Watch (Yellow)	223		903		1,359	2,485
On Priority Watch (Orange)						-
On Probation (Red)						-

Elementary Level: There are four “distinguished” (blue) schools in District 1: three elementary schools, and one K-8 School. Seven additional elementary schools were in the large second-highest (green) category of “meets expectations” One other elementary school is in the “on watch” (yellow) category. In addition, there are two K-8 schools, one each in the top two categories.

Middle School Level: Reflecting the city overall, District 1 begins to struggle further in the middle school years. Of the three middle schools, one is green, and two are yellow. Also serving the middle school years are the two K-8 schools (one green and one yellow).

High School Level: High school is also challenged, with one high school in the green category, and one in yellow. Particularly troubling is the latter, South High, which has 1,359 students – or 74% as many students as all four of District 1’s distinguished elementary schools combined. In spite of this district’s affluence, in 2010 South High was only able to graduate 62% of their corresponding 9th grade class, and of those that graduated only 32% were prepared for college level work without remediation.

DISTRICT TWO-SW (Member: Andrea Merida)

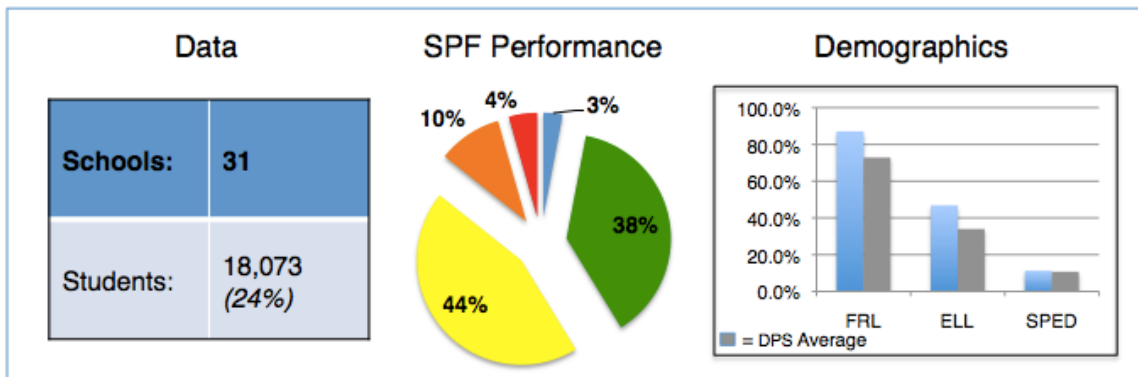


Summary: District 2 has seen considerable activity due to education reform, including the phase-out or closing of low-performing schools, and the introduction of several new schools, most of which are outperforming DPS averages. The region has a total of five charter schools, of which two are blue, one is green, and two are yellow. No charter schools are in the bottom two categories. Some of the worst performing schools in the region have been closed or are being phased out: Richel has just 125 students enrolled as it is being closed; and Kunsmiller has undergone a redesign (which lifted it off the bottom, but not as far as supporters hoped, as it only rose to yellow status this year, and fewer than 50% of its students are reading at grade level).

The above-average performance of the areas charter schools and the closure of poorly-performing traditional schools has resulted in a considerable shift in school quality: a similar SPF from a few years earlier would have shown no distinguished schools at all. The inclusion of charter schools (such as West Denver Prep and KIPP) have dramatically changed the mix of school performance – particularly in the middle school years.

In addition, there have also been other significant changes, with the vast improvement of schools like Lincoln High School -- although this school continues to struggle overall,

with only 52% graduating and of those only 21% are ready for college without remediation. District 2 has made considerable progress but there remains numerous challenges ahead, as 14% of its students remain in the two lowest performing school categories.



District 2 has over 18,000 kids (24% of DPS) across thirty-one schools. Only three percent of students are in distinguished schools, while 14% are in the bottom two school categories. District 2 has arguably the most challenging demographics in any region, with 87% FRL students, 47% ELL and 11% SPED – equal or higher than the respective DPS averages.

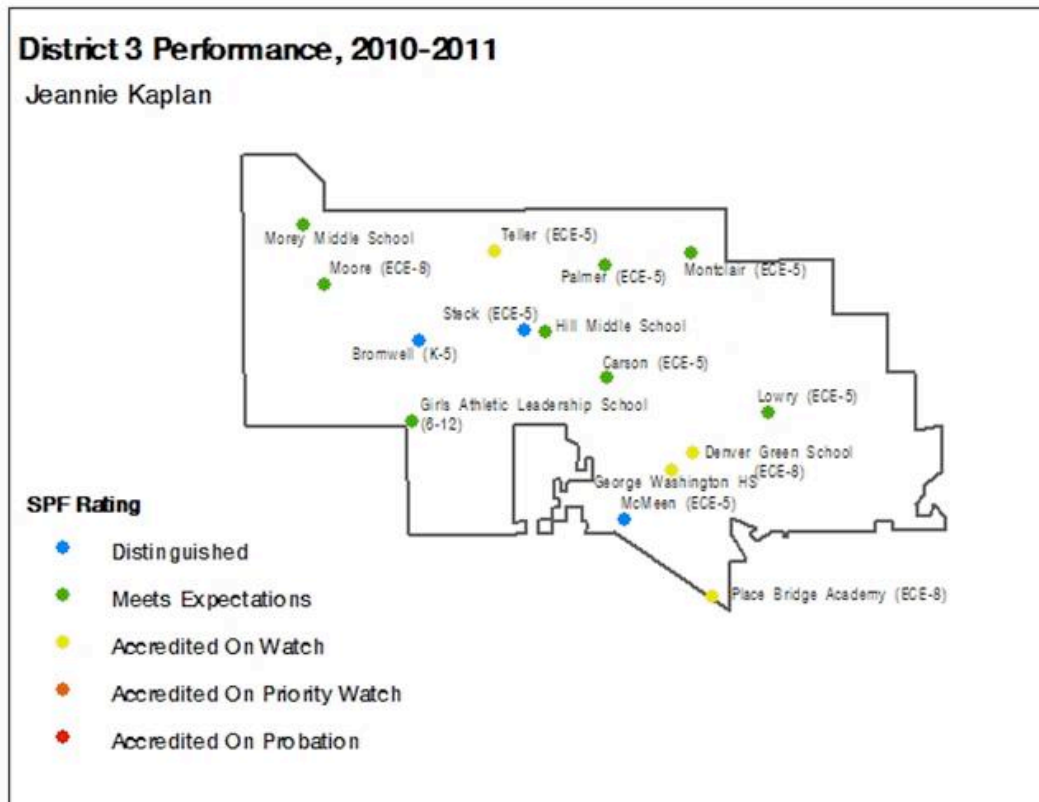
DISTRICT 2: STUDENT COUNT						
	Elem	K-8	Middle	6-12	High	ALL
Distinguished (Blue)			540			540
Meets Expectations (Green)	5,783	1,132				6,915
On Watch (Yellow)	2,787	653	1,106		3,489	8,035
On Priority Watch (Orange)	840		948			1,788
On Probation (Red)	670		125			795

Elementary Level: Reflecting its larger and younger proportions of Denver’s kids, District 2 has 18 elementary schools. These vary by quality, with 10 “meets expectations” schools (green); six in “on watch” schools (yellow), two “priority watch” schools (orange), and one school “on probation” (red) There are an additional three K-8 schools: two green, and one yellow.

Middle School Level: Middle schools in District 2 are divergent. Two – both West Denver Prep charter schools -- are the only distinguished schools in the region. However, besides these two there is one school each in yellow, orange, and red status.

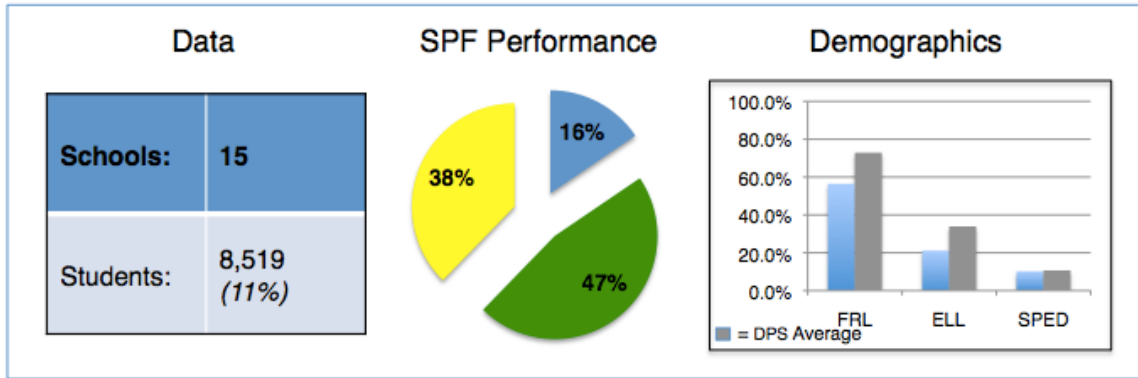
High School Level: High schools in District 2 are solidly mid-table, with all three squarely in the yellow level. These include the region’s two largest schools – Kennedy and Lincoln High Schools -- which together comprise about 2,950 students.

DISTRICT THREE (Member: Jeanne Kaplan)



Summary: Education reform has been quiet in District 3. The region had its first charter school (GALS) open this fall, and it did well, coming in as the fifth highest ranked school in the region. Two other schools at the center of reform efforts – Place Bridge and the Green School – fared somewhat worse, both in the yellow category and among the four worst performing schools in the region.

Despite the relatively favorable demographics, District 3 (much like District 1) does less well than anticipated in the later years, and its single school serving grades 9-12 (George Washington High School) sits solidly in “on watch” (yellow) status, with over 1,600 students. GW also has a magnet IB program, and if one were to subtract the magnet students attending from out of boundary, it would slip further down the SPF rankings into one of the bottom two categories.



District 3 is the smallest member district with about 8,500 students (11% of DPS) across 15 schools. Sixteen percent of its students are in “distinguished” schools, almost half (47%) in “meets expectations” schools. Just over a third (38%) are in “on watch” schools, however no students are in the bottom two school categories. District Three has 57% FRL students, 21% ELL and 10% SPED.

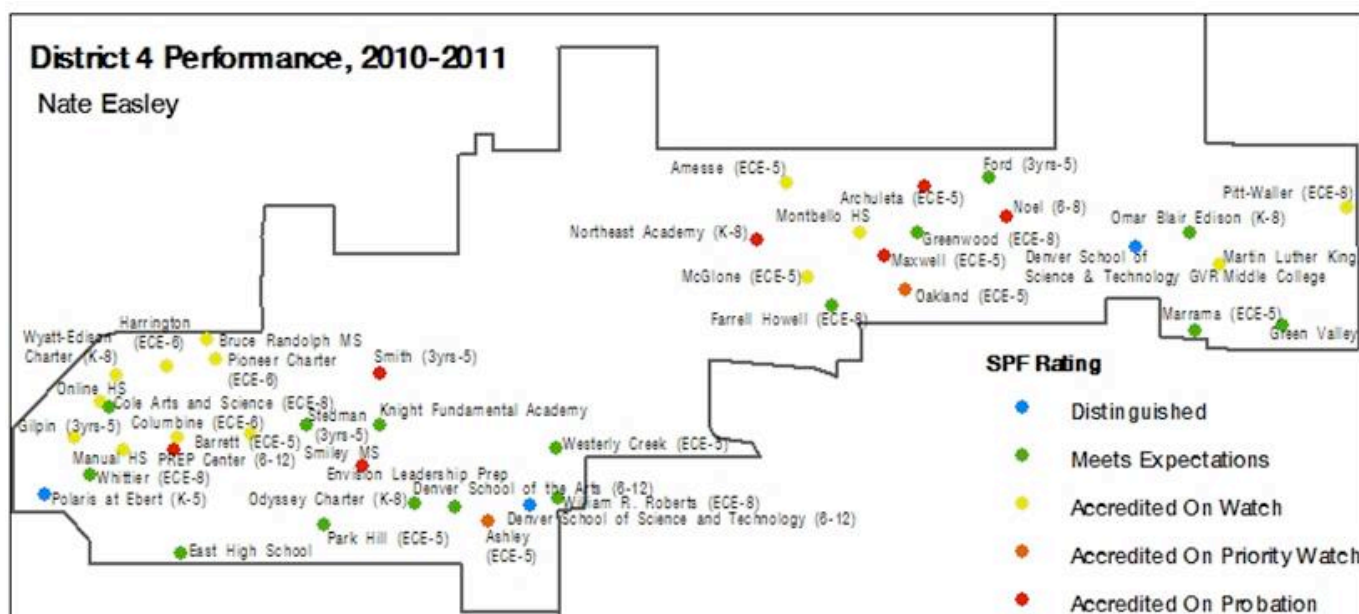
DISTRICT 3: STUDENT COUNT						
	Elem	K-8	Middle	6-12	High	ALL
Distinguished (Blue)	1,324					1,324
Meets Expectations (Green)	1,760	465	1,759			3,984
On Watch (Yellow)	425	1,180			1,606	3,211
On Priority Watch (Orange)						-
On Probation (Red)						-

Elementary Level: District 3 has a mixed record in the elementary level, with their three distinguished schools (all elementary), four in green status, and one in yellow. There are three additional K-8 schools, two in green and one in yellow.

Middle School Level: There are three middle schools in District 3, all in green status. One of these is the region’s only charter school (GALS), which just completed its first year.

High School Level: High school is the least attractive part of District 3, as the single high school in the region – George Washington – was the second lowest ranked school in the region. With over 1,600 students, it has more students than the three distinguished elementary schools combined. George Washington had one of the highest graduation rates in Denver at 80%, but now only 40% of their graduates were prepared for college without remediation. This is a significant challenge for a district with such relative affluence.

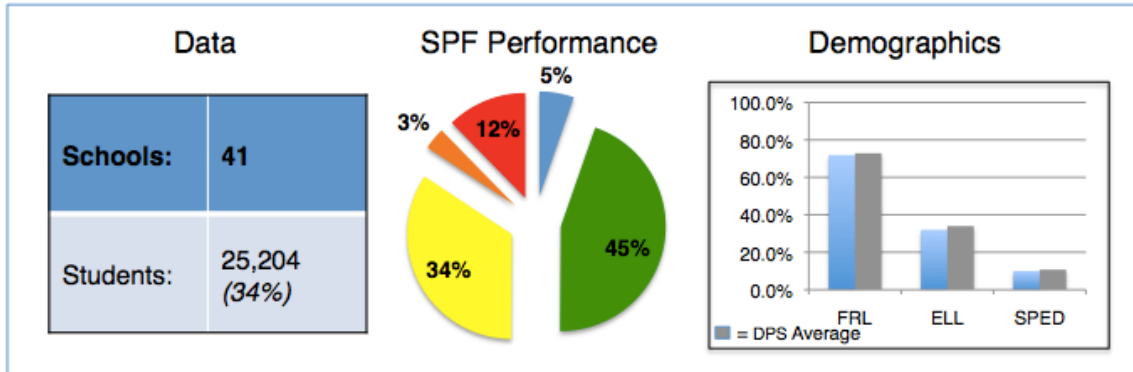
DISTRICT FOUR (Member: Nate Easley)



Summary: Perhaps unsurprisingly given the size of District 4, there is considerable variety in school demographics and performance. The region has seen a considerable influence of education reform, including high-profile innovation schools Manual and Bruce Randolph, and successful campuses from the DSST charter network. However, District 4 still has significant challenges.

More than one in every four students in elementary school is in a “priority watch” (orange) or “probation” (red) school – an educational hole from which it is hard to dig out. District 4 benefits from Denver’s best comprehensive neighborhood-admissions high school (East High), as well as both the magnet Denver School of the Arts, and DSST Charter Schools. This combination of different choices makes high school the only level where there are more District 1 students in the top two school categories than in the bottom three.

District 4 has been the most aggressive region on education reform in the past year, as the Far Northeast turnaround plan resulted in 11 new schools (some charter and some innovation), all of which opened this past fall after contentious discussion. This transformation – at an unprecedented scale for DPS – will bear watching.



District 4 is the largest region, with over 25,200 kids (34% of DPS) across forty-one schools. Only five percent of students are in distinguished schools, while 16% of students are in the bottom two school categories (higher than the graph due to rounding). District 4 has 72% FRL students, 32% ELL and 10% SPED – all just under DPS averages.

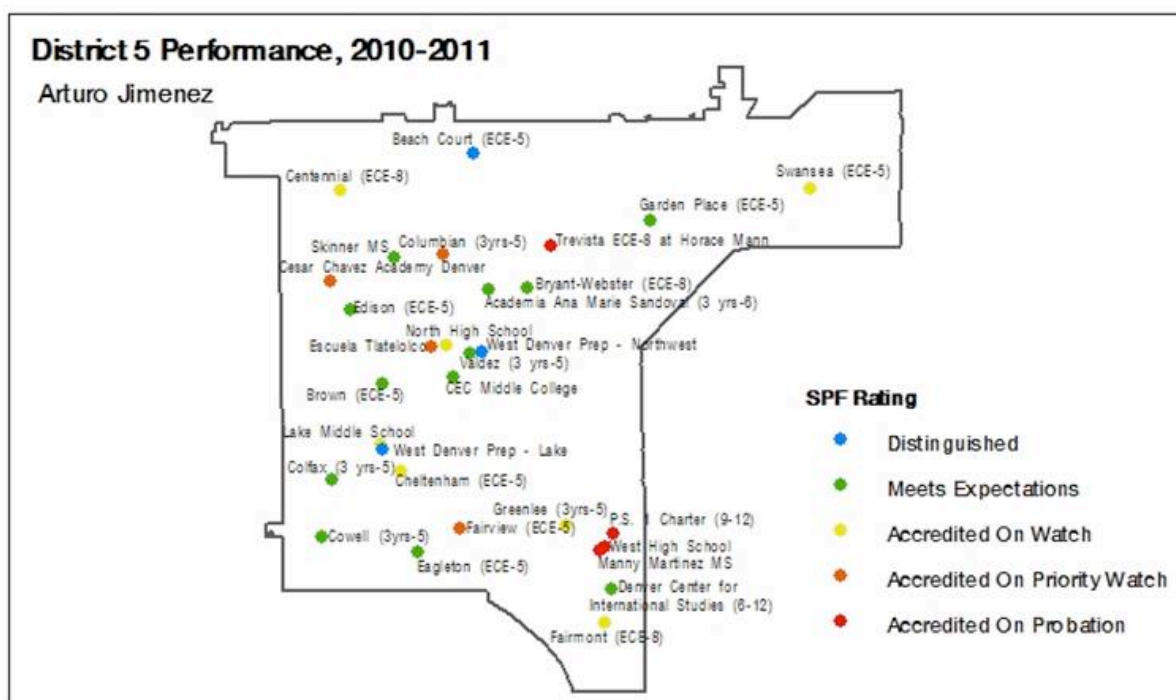
DISTRICT 4: STUDENT COUNT						
	Elem	K-8	Middle	6-12	High	ALL
Distinguished (Blue)	329		141	874		1,344
Meets Expectations (Green)	3,664	4,377		1,043	2,199	11,283
On Watch (Yellow)	2,672	1,649	274	2,135	1,894	8,624
On Priority Watch (Orange)	851					851
On Probation (Red)	1,650	416	679	357		3,102

Elementary Level: District 4’s only distinguished elementary school is Polaris, a city-wide magnet program with highly selective admissions that probably serves the lowest number of the region’s residents. Seven more elementary schools are green, seven are yellow, two more orange, and two red. District 4 has somewhat more success with K-8 schools, of which 7 are green, two are yellow, and one is red.

Middle School Level: The region’s overall performance in middle school is boosted by the inclusion of two high-performing DSST charter schools: the 6-12 school at Stapleton, and the middle school at Green Valley Ranch. Both are distinguished schools. There are two other middle schools in District 5, one each in yellow and red categories. In addition, there are four other 6-12 programs, one green, two yellow, and one red.

High School Level: In addition to the 6-12 programs, District 4 has three other high schools: one in green, and two in yellow categories.

DISTRICT FIVE (Member: Arturo Jimenez)



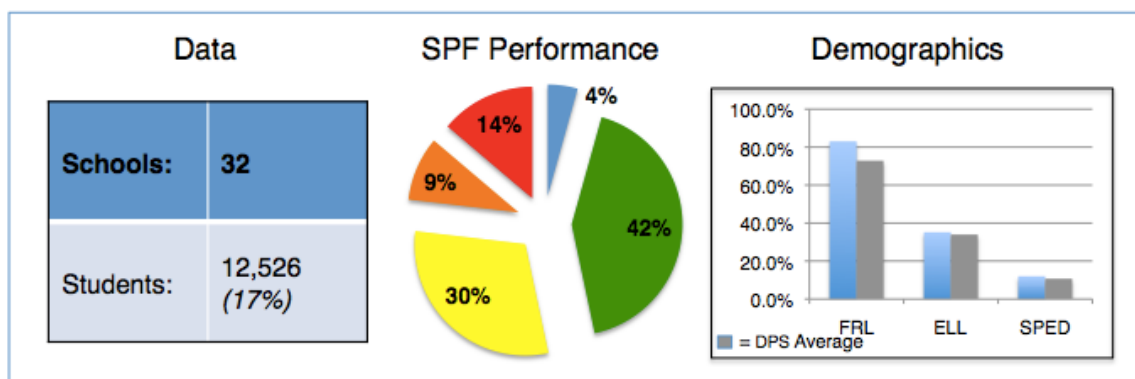
Summary: District 5 is arguably the worst performing region in the city, as nearly 1 in every four students attend a school in the bottom two categories (orange and red), while just 1 in every 25 attend a distinguished (blue) school. With the exception of North High School, which has gone through a series of transformations none of which could in any way be labeled successful, efforts around education reform have been relatively late to the region.

The initial forays into reform have been mixed, as the redesign of Trevista has been a severe disappointment, evident in its inclusion in the “probation” (red) category. In addition, one of the city’s oldest charter schools, (PS1) and one of the newest (Manny Martinez) have both done poorly and are in the process of closure.

More recent education reform efforts have helped, particularly the inclusion of two West Denver Prep (WDP) campuses – both of which placed in the distinguished (blue) category -- as well as innovation status for Valdez Elementary, which received “meets expectations” (green) status. District 5 is also fortunate to have Beach Court elementary which remains unique as the only district-managed school serving a large percentage of low-income students that has been a distinguished school for a number of years.

Fully 70 percent of the region’s elementary students attend the top two category schools. However, this is the only level where there are more students in the top two categories than in the bottom three. By high school, that percentage drops to just 21%.

The deeply mixed record of both redesign and charter schools may be part of the region’s distinct distrust of further education reform efforts. Last year, the debate around the redesign of Lake Middle School and the inclusion of new WDP charter models divided the community. Early indications are that these efforts have positive benefits, although their successes have not been uniform.



District 5 has over 12,500 kids (17% of DPS) across thirty-two schools. It has 4% of students in distinguished schools, and 23% of its students in the bottom two category schools. District 5 students are 83% FRL, 35% ELL and 12% SPED – somewhat higher than DPS averages.

DISTRICT 5: STUDENT COUNT							
	Elem	K-12	K-8	Mid	6-12	High	ALL
Distinguished (Blue)	354			193			547
Meets Expectations (Green)	3,446		459	349	643	400	5,297
On Watch (Yellow)	1,053		957	516		820	3,783
On Priority Watch (Orange)	621	129	415				1,165
On Probation (Red)			637	224	147	726	1,734

Elementary Level: Elementary schools in District 5 are better than anticipated, given the regions overall ranking. District 5 has one (Beech Court) of only two distinguished elementary schools with RFL populations above the DPS average. In addition there are eight green schools, one yellow school, and two orange schools. Add the five K-8 schools -- one green, two yellow, one orange and one red – as well as the city’s only K-12 school, and there are considerable choices.

Middle School Level: Middles schools have the widest variety, with two charter schools in the distinguished category, one in green, two in yellow, and one charter in red.

High School Level: There are four high schools in District 5: a magnet school (CEC) in green, and two other schools in yellow, and one high school in red. Haunted by the notable unsuccessful redesigns at North High, there is no open-enrollment high school in the region in either of the top two school categories.