

Start with the Facts 2014

at the base of a climb

SEPTEMBER 2014
DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS
PROGRESS REPORT
BY A+ DENVER



DEAR READER:

Each year, A+ Denver produces a brief summary about the state of DPS. Last year, we highlighted the persisting achievement gap between low-income and non-low income students. Despite district gains on TCAP and ACT testing and increased graduation rates, low-income children did not improve as quickly as non-low income students. In the district's lowest performing schools last year, almost nine out of ten students were low-income.

As another school year begins, we reflect on the progress students have made since our last report. Composite ACT scores inched upward from 18.1 to 18.4, and 2013-14 saw the most graduates to date: 3,621 students. However, there are many challenges still facing the district and many students who are failing to make it to grade level.

Stagnant growth in TCAP scores is a chronic issue for the district. On average, since 2005, TCAP scores across math, writing, and reading have only increased about 1.6% per year. The revision of the [Denver Plan](#) demonstrates DPS'

refocus on increasing academic standards and scaling up access to quality schools in every neighborhood. But if we are to meet the goals set out in this new plan, we have to jump-start learning and close the gaps for our low-income and non-white students. Community support and a willingness to try new strategies and phase out ineffective strategies is crucial in achieving this. We also must address the serious shortage of quality principals and leadership within many of our schools. DPS must do more to recruit, train, empower and retain great school leaders and teachers.

Action is urgent. More and more children are falling behind and may never catch up. The fight for this starts with knowing the facts. As you read over this report, we hope you are inspired to push the district to make the tough decisions, cutting ineffective programs and reinforcing our weak school leadership pipeline.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, likely belonging to the author of the report.

QUICK FACTS

This year:

- With 87,382 students, Denver Public Schools is the largest school district in the state.
- Only about half of Denver's minority students are performing on grade level across all subjects.
- Only one in four low-income students is proficient across all subjects.
- The achievement gap between low-income and non-low income students is almost 40 percentage points across all subjects.

Since last year:

- Academic achievement for all students improved one percentage point on average.
- The district's average composite ACT score increased from 18.1 to 18.4.
- AP pass rates declined by 0.6% between 2013 and 2014, with the largest drops in arts and sciences. AP participation rose by more than 300 students.
- Low-income students have made no improvement on TCAP on average since last year.

Over the past five years:

- Overall achievement has improved by about seven percentage points.
- African-American and Latino students' reading scores have improved 0.3 and four percentage points, respectively.

Over the past 10 years:

- The percent of all students scoring proficient or advanced on all subjects has increased 15 percentage points.

NEXT YEAR LATINO AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN WILL COMPROMISE SEVENTY-ONE PERCENT OF THE DISTRICT. THESE STUDENTS FACE AN ACHIEVEMENT GAP OF ABOUT 42 PERCENTAGE POINTS COMPARED TO WHITE STUDENTS. HOW DO WE CLOSE THIS GAP?

88 100 7,986 1
36% 33.5
42 232
98

A CLOSER LOOK

"SUBSTANTIVE GAPS REMAIN AND ARE GROWING IN BOTH STATUS AND GROWTH."

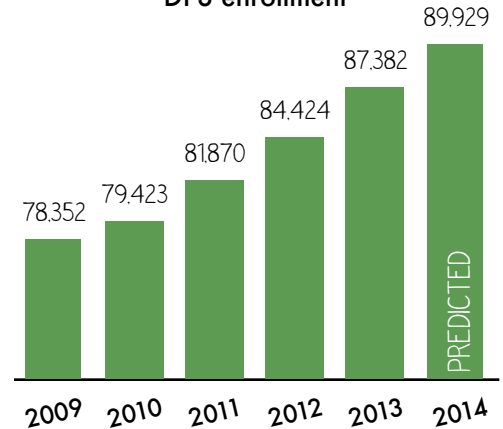
—SUPERINTENDENT TOM BOASBERG

Growing Enrollment and Unchanged Demographics

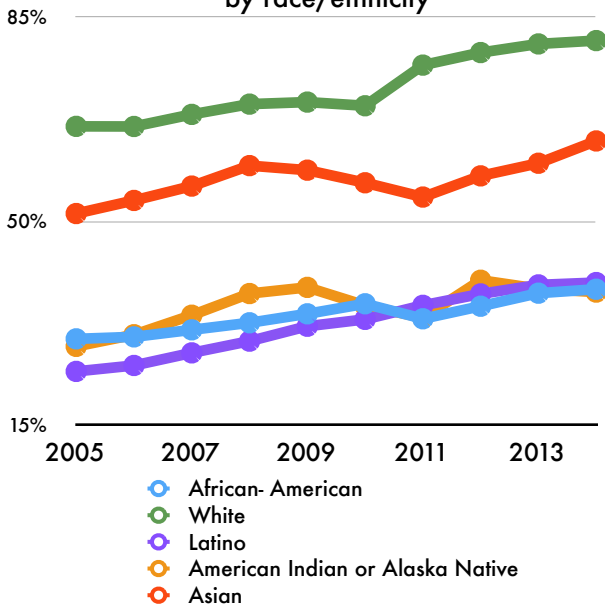
DPS has increased over recent years, gaining about 9,000 students (11% growth) in the last four years. According to DPS, the rapid growth can be attributed to factors including development in Northeast and Far Northeast, the capture of more school-age students in Denver (82% in 2014 compared to 76% in 2000), and charter sector growth. Charters accounted for 70% of enrollment growth.¹

DPS' demographics are nearly identical to last year. Low-income students make up about 72% of the population, a figure that has not changed in the past four years. The racial and ethnic populations of students are also relatively unchanged. The percentage of white students has slowly decreased as more Latino families move into Denver. Currently, Latino students make up the biggest portion of students at almost 58% of the population; white, African-American, and Asian students make up 21%, 14%, and 3% of the student body, respectively.

DPS enrollment



Proficiency across subjects over time by race/ethnicity



Slow Academic Progress

Overall, academic achievement has been on the rise over the past decade. The percentage of students scoring at or above grade level in reading, writing, and math has increased 15 percentage points (from 33% to 48%), far faster than the state average. However, this only amounts to about 1%-2% of academic growth a year. And while our elementary schools are showing great strides, we have schools all along the pipeline that are failing our students. One out of three 10th graders is writing at grade level, and only one out of five is proficient in math. These statistics are even more stark when we look at scores by income and race/ethnicity.

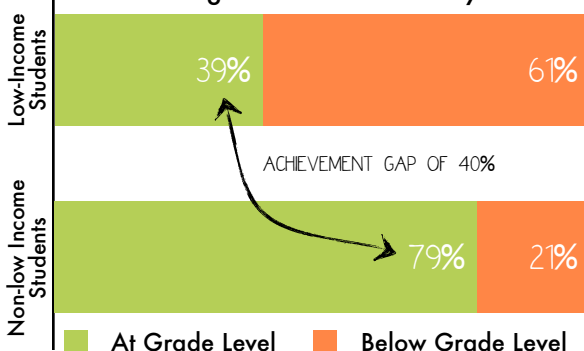
Visible Academic Achievement Gaps

ICAP Scores

A wide achievement gap exists both in Denver and (as far as we can tell) in almost every other urban city between low-income children and non-low income children. In the last decade, the difference between low-income children and non-low income children testing at grade level has grown from 30% to 40%. The radical disparity between scores is due to in part to low-income students' slower improvement than that of their non-low income peers; non-low income students gained 4.28 percentage points while disadvantaged students gained less than one percentage point this past year.

THE EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT GAP IS DEFINED AS THE "DISPARITY IN ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE BETWEEN GROUPS OF STUDENTS."²

Students at grade level in 2014 by income



While academic growth between 2013 and 2014 was relatively flat across all races and ethnicities, the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students is a serious issue. Over the past five years, African-American and Latino students have gained approximately 2.5 and 6 percentage points, respectively, across all subjects, compared to an 11 percentage point gain by their white peers. With a 42% difference in proficiency rates for Latino and African-American students compared to white students, this slow growth perpetuates the gap rather than closes it.

College-readiness

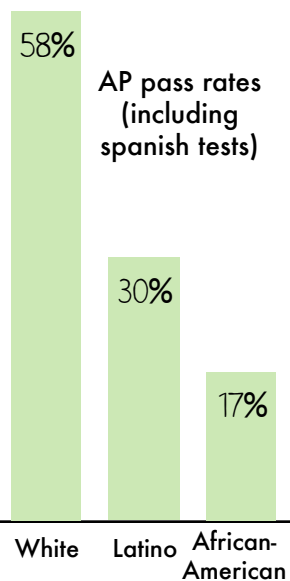
ACT, AP, and graduation trends tell a similar story. A majority of DPS students fail to earn the ACT's college-readiness benchmark score, 21. The average ACT score for a low-income student is 16; for a non-low-income student, the average is 21. For both African-American and Latino students, the average score is also a 16, while white students average a 23. Graduation rates among Latino and African-American students are 58% and 64%, respectively, compared to a rate of 74% for white students.

Overall, there were more AP courses taken; however, AP pass rates dropped about one-half percentage point across Denver. The vast majority of the AP tests passed in low-income schools continue to be Spanish language and literature tests. In the three schools with the highest population of low-income students, the total tests passed in non-Spanish subjects was 228, a 12% pass rate. Including Spanish tests, the pass rate was 29%. In the three schools with the lowest number of low-income students, the total pass rate was 56%—excluding the Spanish tests, the pass rate was 55%. When looking across the district, Latino AP pass rates with Spanish tests was only 30%. Excluding Spanish tests, the pass rate drops to 17%. White students' AP pass rates only drop one percentage point when excluding Spanish test, from 58% to 57%. Clearly, low-income and Latino students are under performing in advanced classes.

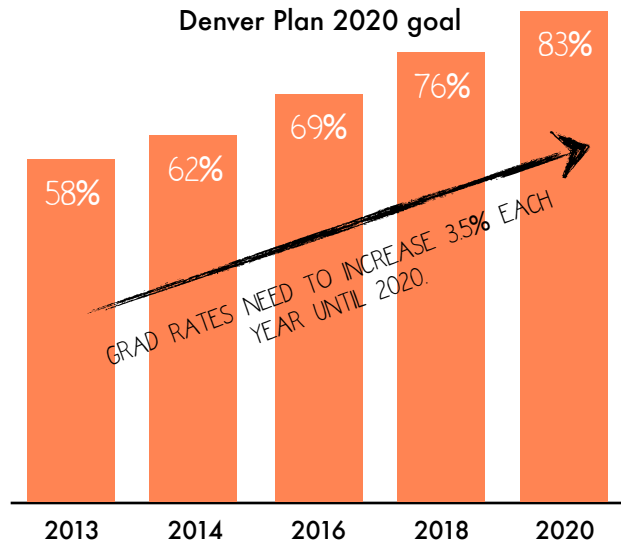
The Role of Charter Schools

About 20% of DPS schools are charter schools. There has been a steady increase in the number of students attending charter schools in the district, and enrollment grew by about 14% since last year. Charter school influence has not gone unnoticed, and much has been written about [district achievement being driven by charters](#) over the past several years. In many cases in Denver, charters have lived up to this expectation. However, charter school performance runs the spectrum of achievement, and some schools have failed to continue their growth in achievement in recent years.

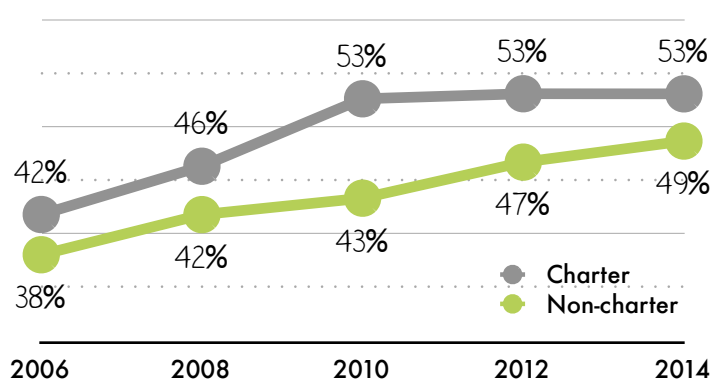
On average, achievement is slightly higher at charters than non-charters. And while the sector saw a dip in scores last year, charters are still serving minority and low-income students better than non-charter schools. In 2014, DPS charters had 13% and 9% more African-American and Latino students, respectively, at grade level than district-run schools. White students fared about the same at both school types. Low-income students also fared better at charter schools—charters saw almost 10% more of their low-income students at grade level than non-charter schools. Non-low income students actually performed worse at charter schools in 2014 compared to district-run schools.



Projected graduation rate for Latino and African-American students to reach Denver Plan 2020 goal

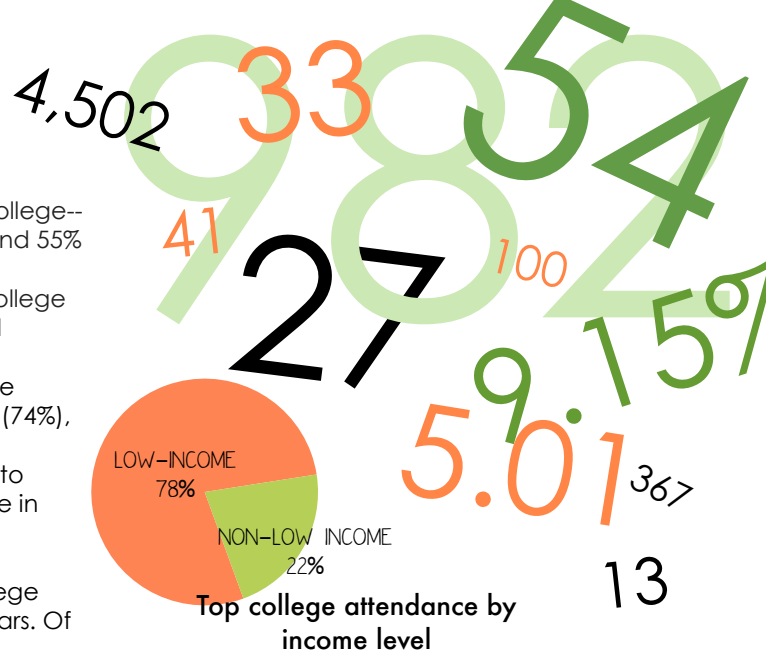


Achievement over time by charter and non-charter



QUICK FACTS ABOUT DPS COLLEGE-GOERS

- Over the past three years, about 48% of DPS graduates enrolled in college--about 5,333 students. Forty-five percent were low-income students and 55% were non-low income students.
- DPS high schools that sent the largest percentage of graduates to college from 2009 to 2012: DSST (82%), DCIS (78%), East (70%), DSA (70%), and George Washington (67%).
- DPS high schools that sent the largest percentage of their low-income graduates to college from 2009 to 2012: DSST (84%), DCIS (77%), DSA (74%), CEC Middle College (66%), and MLK Early College (64.5%).
- Only one in ten low-income students who went to college was likely to attend one of the top 150 colleges across America compared to one in four non-low income college-goers. Seventy-two percent of the DPS student population is low-income.
- Community College of Denver was the most popular choice for college attendance in Colorado by DPS college-goers over the last three years. Of the 917 students who enrolled, 62% were low-income students.



→ LOOK OUT FOR OUR UPCOMING REPORT ABOUT COLLEGE ATTENDANCE AND RETENTION!

CONCLUSION

DPS has come a long way in the past few years. Graduation rates and other measures of success have continued to move upward, and there is evidence that parents are using student achievement information to make decisions about where to send their children to school. Yet, the opportunities for further improvement are clear.

The narrowing of the Denver Plan to five goals reflects the district's efforts to target these challenges and create a more workable agenda. In this new plan, the DPS Board and leadership have prioritized: (1) **teaching** (implementation of standards, using data to drive instruction, and further differentiating instruction); (2) **leadership** (including growth opportunities through LEAP and Lead in Denver); and (3) **culture** (creating a consistent DPS culture focused on shared core values).

The plan also lays out 2020 targets, including:

- About 80% of students in the district will attend blue or green schools.
- About 80% of students will be writing and reading on grade level by third grade.
- Over 90% of students will graduate on time, including a 25% increase among African-American and Latino students.

- The number of students graduating college-ready (measured by ACT scores) will double.

These targets are ambitious, and a steep tilt in the trajectory of improvement is required, including a 5% annual increase in 3rd grade literacy. Yet, each one is necessary to fulfill the promise of opportunity for Denver's kids.

This is a start, and we believe these are the right priorities for the district to focus on. The question is whether or not the district's tactics are the right ones and how will we know they are working. We need to examine their plan to get and retain great teachers and principals. We encourage DPS and the public to be aggressive in the areas of new schools, transforming schools and re-thinking the leadership pipeline. Bold change is needed to reach the goals set forth this summer. We pledge to hold the district responsible for the targets set forth in the Denver Plan and call for the Denver community to do the same.

We applaud the DPS board and staff for making the hard decisions to implement this plan and laying groundwork for the next push in making DPS the best district in the country.

Thank you for taking the time to read this report and for your commitment to public education.



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ABOUT US

A+ Denver is an independent, non-partisan 501(c)(3) organization working to bring the power of Denver's citizens to bear on school reform. Our mission is to harness the power of civic leadership to build public will and advocate for the changes necessary to dramatically increase student achievement in public education in Denver. A+ focuses on the intersection of policy, practice, and politics—building support for changes that put the interests of students over those of adults.

Want to learn more? Visit us at www.aplusdenver.org.

1. "2013-14 October Count & the 2014-15 District Enrollment Projection." (2013). DPS. <http://planning.dpsk12.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/2014-15-overall-district-projection.pdf>
2. "Achievement Gap." (2011). EdWeek. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/achievement-gap/>
3. Please note all data was collected from DPS and CDE.