

# Start with the facts 2013



## Progress Report: Adequate is not enough

### A letter from the CEO

Dear reader:

Denver Public Schools is making progress on achievement across all income levels and ethnicities. While we are encouraged by the trends, this brief is intended to illuminate areas where we still have the most work to do and where progress has been uneven or slow.

We know that 100% of students in DPS won't reach proficiency overnight. However, we must find ways to accelerate change because at the current rate, it will take approximately forty years for all poor students to reach grade level. In the meantime, hundreds of thousands of kids will drop out of high school or fall

too far behind academically to catch up.

To quicken the pace of progress, A+ calls on the DPS Board of Education and administration to engage in a rigorous and transparent audit of which programs, initiatives, school models, and supports actually produce gains—and which do not. We believe that such a probe would allow the district to eliminate those programs that are the least effective while doubling down resources on those that do work, thus accelerating gains. While we support making room for new programs and trying new ideas, all programs must be validated.

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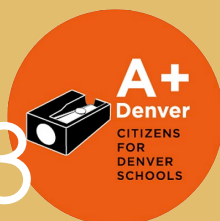
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We strongly believe that the district is moving in the right direction, but it must be more focused on understanding what really is working and shift resources accordingly.

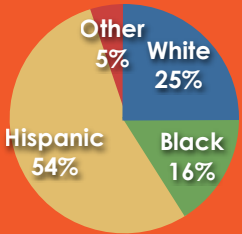
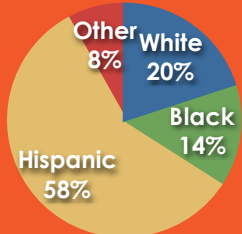
Sincerely,

About Us

# 2013



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. Learn more at [www.aplusdenver.org](http://www.aplusdenver.org)

Quick DPS Facts	Readiness	Proficiency	Demographic Shift
<p><b>185</b> schools</p> <p><b>84,424</b> students in 2013 compared to 78,352 in 2009</p> <p><b>72 percent</b> of students qualified for free/reduced meals in 2012-13, up from 70 percent in 2009</p>	<p><b>7 percent</b> more low-income and non-low income middle school students reached grade level in reading from 2009-13</p> <p><b>16</b> has been the average ACT score for low-income students in DPS for the past four years while non-low income students have improved from 20 to 21. A score of 21 indicates college readiness, according to ACT benchmarks</p>	<p><b>91 percent</b> of kids in the 10 worst performing schools in DPS are low-income</p> <p><b>7.4 percent</b> more poor students reached proficiency across subjects compared to 13.7 percent for non-poor high school students</p>	<p><b>2009</b></p>  <p><b>2013</b></p> 



### Introduction

Denver Public Schools has caught the eye of national observers. Public Impact, the Center for Reinventing Public Education, and the Aspen Institute have all publicly acknowledged the district's gains—including double digit improvements in graduation rates and steadily increasing student achievement over a six year period. A slew of national foundations (such as Bill & Melinda Gates, Wallace, Hewlett, Broad, and Dell) have also invested in initiatives ranging from teacher evaluations to leadership academies. Compared to many other urban districts like Chicago and Los Angeles—where politics and flawed implementation have impeded progress—Denver appears to have cracked part of the code.

However, we believe that the key to making further progress is acknowledging that many of the statistics that are used as proof of our success are based on districtwide averages. For example, the average graduation rate has increased; the average ACT score has gone up; and the average percentage of students proficient in reading, writing, and math has increased. These are all improvements worth celebrating.

Yet the full story is much more complicated. Overall, both low-income and non-low income students are making progress in most areas. However, low-income are making very little or no progress. For example, low-income students scored an average of 16 on the ACT from 2009 to 2013 while non-low income students

improved from 20 to 21. While the percentage of AP tests taken has increased from about 3,500 (in 2009) to about 5,500 (2013), a third of those tests are taken at a single school—by mostly non-low income kids.

Low-income students in DPS continue to attend the worst schools, comprising 91 percent of enrollment in the 10 lowest performing schools in DPS. More than half have already fallen off the college track by 5th grade. By their junior year in high school, only one in five is prepared for college. Most low-income students enter the district unprepared to succeed, falling farther and farther behind their wealthier peers the longer they stay in failing schools.

There are also a handful of schools—many of them new schools—where both poor and non-poor kids are doing very well. The district has closed many of the worst schools, which may be part of the reason that the percentage of low-income students has risen in the district's top schools. (At the elementary level, for example, 42 percent of kids at the top nine schools are low-income now. In 2009, only 27 percent were low-income.) The problems that seem to be persisting are that gains among low-income kids are much slower than those of non-low income kids, and several of the worst schools (which serve many of the district's poorest kids) may be getting worse.

**Gains among low-income kids are slower than those of non-low income kids, and several of the lowest-performing schools may be getting worse.**

Based on five year trends, 100 percent of all low-income kids will be proficient by the year 2054 while 100 percent of all non-low income kids will be proficient by 2025.



### Persistent Challenges

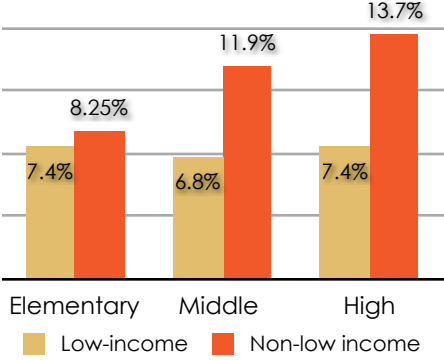
Overall, DPS students have shown more academic growth than the rest of the state over the past few years. Yet the gap between low-income students and non-low income students in proficiency and college-readiness continues to increase.

**Proficiency:** Each year, academic gaps between low and non-low income kids grow wider. Over the past five years, the percentage of non-poor high school students proficient across subjects increased by 13.7 percent, compared to 7.4 percent for poor students.

Starting out below grade level in early grades has negative implications over time, and it is important to increase the rate of improvement for low-income students. A 2011 national, longitudinal study of nearly 4,000 students found “those who don’t read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to leave school without a diploma than proficient readers.”<sup>1</sup> Only 46 percent of low-income elementary kids in Denver are proficient or advanced in reading. However, there is some good news on this front. Over the past five years, reading skills improved faster among poor elementary students (9.2 percent moved into the proficient or advanced category) compared to non-poor students (7.5 percent moved into the proficient or advanced category). The story is slightly different for middle school students. A look at the four lowest performing middle schools on the SPF showed that all but one performed worse from 2009 to 2013. From 2009 to 2013, the average increase in reading scores was about seven percent for all middle school students, but there are significant lags in math growth. Low-income students’ scores only increased half as much as those of non-low income students in math (6.7 percent compared to 12.4 percent). This is concerning as the gap widens in high school: just 17 percent of low-income high schoolers are proficient in math, with gains that are half that of their higher income peers’ scores.

### Almost equal gain among low-income and non-low income at the elementary level across all subjects.

Figure 2: Gains in percentage student proficiency



**College readiness:** The American College Test (ACT) and Advanced Placement classes (college level classes taken in high school) can serve as proxies for college readiness. The ACT is the stronger predictor, but AP pass rates also indicate whether students are prepared for college-level material.

While the district's average on the ACT has improved from 17.1 to 18.1 between 2009 and 2013, most of the improvement has been driven by non-low income students.

Non-low income students have improved from 20 to 21 the past four years while low-income students have consistently scored a 16. As shown in Figure 1 on this page, some of the schools

Figure 1: ACT gains driven by green and blue schools

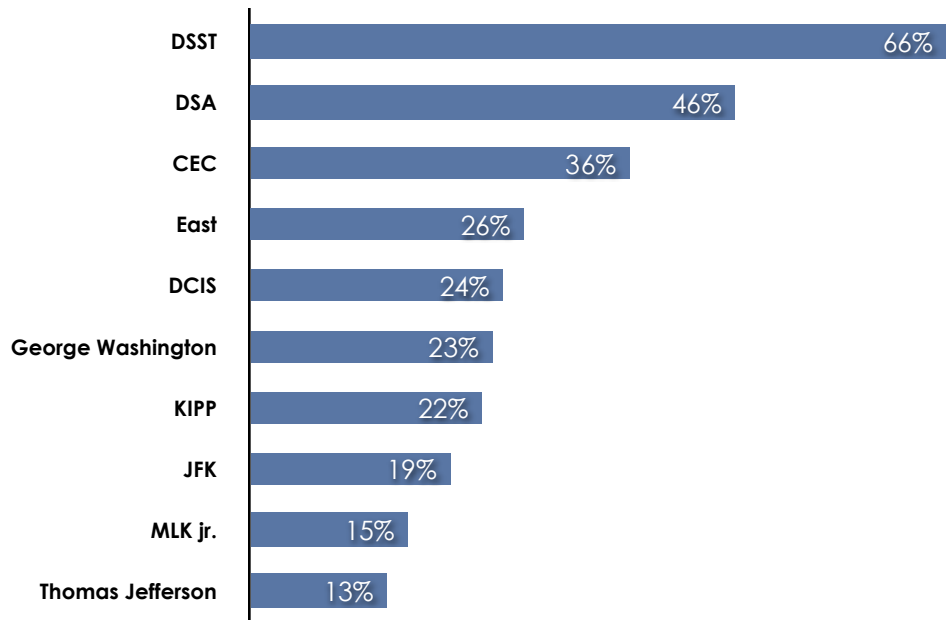
ACT changes over time	2009	2013	Δ
DCIS	18.23	20.8	2.57
East	19.58	21.8	2.22
North	14.98	16.3	1.32
DSA	22.5	23.8	1.3
CEC	18 (2010)	19.1	1.1
DSST	23.84	24.7	0.86
Abraham Lincoln	14.8	15.6	0.8
Bruce Randolph H.S. (6-12)	14.48	15.2	0.72
George Washington	20.3	21.0	0.7
South	15.74	16.4	0.66
Montbello H.S. (phasing out)	14.7	15.1	0.4
West H.S. (phasing out)	14.6	15.0	0.4
John Kennedy	17.17	17.5	0.33
Thomas Jefferson	18.24	18.2	-0
Martin Luther King Early College	17.43	17.1	-0.3
Manual H.S.	16 (2010)	15.7	-1.3
Southwest Early College	17.93	16.1	-1.83

North is the only yellow, orange, or red school to show more than one point of progress.

Figure 3: AP gains driven by green and blue schools			
AP Pass Rates	2010	2013	Δ
KIPP Denver Collegiate	20% (2011)	40%	20%
DCIS	25%	42%	17%
North	21%	37%	16%
DSST: Stapleton	65%	78%	13%
DSA	47%	57%	10%
Martin Luther King Early College	10%	14%	4%
Lincoln	20%	23%	3%
East	56%	59%	3%
West H.S.	17%	19%	2%
South	29%	30%	1%
Montbello H.S.	8%	8%	0%
Thomas Jefferson	29%	28%	-1%
George Washington	27%	23%	-4%
Bruce Randolph H.S. (6-12)	23%	19%	-4%
John Kennedy	38%	17%	-21%



Figure 4: Top 10 high schools for low-income kids scoring 21+ on ACT



already doing relatively well on ACT improved, but most of the schools that started out with low scores have improved very little, if at all.

The schools that saw the highest ACT gains between 2009 and 2013 were Denver Center for International Studies, Denver School of the Arts, East High School, North High School, and Denver School of Science and Technology. Except for North High School, these are schools that have relatively low percentages of low-income students and which were doing fairly well to begin with. On the other hand, ACT scores in most of the district's lower performing schools stayed flat or declined in 2013, as shown in the table on page three.

This is a reflection of the fact that most of the low-income students in DPS continue to score well below the ACT college ready cut-point (21) and the cut-point that predicts success at a four-year Colorado college (23). Of the 2,370 low-income kids that took the ACT, just 14 percent scored a 21 or better. As we have mentioned in past reports, 15 is approximately the equivalent of the score required by the military to start Basic Training. Forty percent of low-income kids in Denver continue to miss this low bar. Figure 4 shows the 10 schools in Denver where the highest percentage of low-income kids score 21+ on the ACT.

**Advanced Placement** pass rates are another measure of whether kids are successful, indicating academic rigor and college-readiness. Overall, there has been improvement between 2009 and 2013. Pass rates went from 33.6 percent to 39.6 percent (returning to where they had been pre-2009 when fewer students took exam. Note that the national pass rate for high school juniors is 59.96 percent). The number of kids taking the tests also rose sharply through a

concerted effort at the district and at many high schools (from 3,500 tests in 2009 to 5,500 in 2013). Here again, higher performing schools have seen the most improvement (KIPP and North are exceptions). Meanwhile, schools that already had low pass rates—such as Kennedy, Bruce Randolph, and Thomas Jefferson—showed declines.

A full third of total tests are taken at a single high school: East. Of that third, only 10 percent of the tests were taken by low-income kids. Sixty-seven tests were passed by low-income students at East compared to 906 tests by non-low income students. The reality is that 57 percent of AP tests in the district are taken by non-low income students, even though just 30 percent of the district does not qualify for free or reduced price meals. Twenty-five percent of the tests throughout the district are passed by low-income students.

Except for DSST-Stapleton, the pass rate for low-income kids is below 50 percent at every school. At 78 percent, DSST has the highest AP test pass rate overall and highest percentage of low-income students (65 percent). Fifty-five tests were passed by low-income students at DSST compared to 165 tests by non-low income students.

In volume, the schools where the highest numbers of tests were passed by low-income students were Lincoln (104) and East (67). The highest pass rates among low-income students were at DSST(65%), DSA(49%), and KIPP(42%). The lowest pass rates were West (0%), Manual (1%), Montbello (8%), and CEC (8%).

While the number of kids taking and passing tests may be increasing, it's important to understand that this does not necessarily mean that rigor and readiness is rising equally among all kids.

# Key Secondary Facts

Since 2009 (and before), DPS has shown marked improvement in graduation rates, increasing rigor in the classroom, raising achievement, and closing failing schools.

## Graduation

**62.8 percent**

of Latino females graduated on time last year. In 2009-10, 52.4 percent graduated

**2,013**

students dropped out of DPS in the 2011-12 school year

**17**

low-income DPS students go on to the top colleges every year on average

## College-bound

**1 out of 7**

DPS students who enrolled in a top 100 college is low-income

**369**

DPS students went to top 100 colleges from 2010 to 2012

**70 percent**

of low-income first year college students at top 100 colleges return for year two

## Remediation

**60.4 percent**

of students who matriculated to college in 2011 require remediation compared to 62.5 percent in 2009

**5 DPS schools**

have remediation rates more than 75 percent

**25 percent**

of passed AP tests were taken by low-income students

## College Selectivity

For the first time, we were able to look at where kids went to college after graduating from DPS. In the past, we have been able to see whether they went in state or out-of-state, but beyond that, details have been spotty. College going information has become more precise because a unique student identifier now tracks students from kindergarten through college.

The college a student goes to matters nearly as much as whether they go to college at all. For example, retention rates at top schools among low-income students are very similar to these of non-low income students. Nearly 70 percent of low-income kids attending a top college stay for a

second year—10 percentage points more than non-low income students.

Attending a higher tier college can also benefit low-income kids because they frequently offer support or resources for students struggling academically or financially.

**Where did they go?** DPS sent a total of 369 kids to the top 100 colleges (as defined by US News) over the past three years. Of these students, 52 (14 percent) were low-income (an average of 17 per year). A quarter of the low-income kids going to the best colleges in the country came from one high school: DSST. None came from North, Bruce Randolph, Manual, or Lincoln.

Here we see the gap that began in elementary school playing out. There are many ways that a better education will lead to better outcomes for kids, but the quality of the college the student attends is one that can have the most direct impact on the rest of his or her life.<sup>2</sup> It's clear that there are financial and logistical hurdles to attending top schools, but there is evidence that poor students admitted to top schools are just as likely to enroll as non-poor students.<sup>3</sup>

Even though there is a large disparity between where low-income and non-low income kids go on to college, that gap is narrower in DPS than it is in the rest of the state. In Colorado, your chances of attending a top college are one in 20 if you are low-income, but in DPS they are one in seven. While DPS outcompetes the state in sending more low-income students to top colleges, access to equal opportunity is still far away for too many.

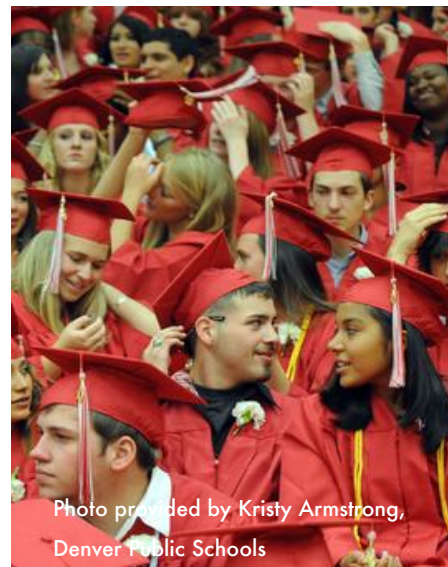
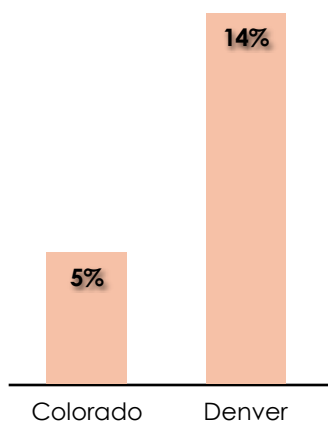


Photo provided by Kristy Armstrong, Denver Public Schools

**Figure 5: Low-income student enrollment in top tier colleges as a percentage of total enrollment**



1. Murphy, Anne. "Why Third Grade Is So Important: The 'Matthew Effect.'" TIME. <http://ideas.time.com/2012/09/26/why-third-grade-is-so-important-the-matthew-effect/#ixzz2kerH2JCG>.

2. Lavelle, Loius. "College ROI: What We Found." Bloomberg BusinessWeek. <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-04-09/college-roi-what-we-found>.

3. Radford, Alexandria. "No Point in Applying: Why Poor Students Are Missing at Top Colleges." The Atlantic. <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/09/no-point-in-applying-why-poor-students-are-missing-at-top-colleges/279699/>.

**Where a student goes to college matters just as much as if they go to college at all.**



**Figure 6: The graduation rate improved at many high-poverty schools**

School	2009	2012	Δ
Lincoln	46%	66%	21%
Montbello	49%	65%	16%
North	53%	53%	0%
SW Early Coll.	20%	32%	12%
West	47%	62%	15%

## Positive News

Schools at the bottom of the spectrum face persistent challenges. Yet, graduation and college-going rates are improving.

**Proficiency:** Across all grades and income levels, there have been strides made in achievement. While most of the gains have been from non-low income students, the district is getting better at educating low-income students. The biggest gain for low-income students was at the elementary level: nine percent more low-income students are reading at grade level in 2013 compared to 2009. Nine percent moved into the "proficient or advanced" category compared to 7.5 percent for non-low income students. Math at the high school level is showing improvements as well; eight percent more low-income students are proficient at math at the high school level. While we are far from having all students performing at grade level, we are moving in the right direction.

**Graduation:** Last year, 2,013 students (more than one-third) did not graduate from high school in DPS, receive GEDs, or get certificates. About half of males didn't graduate on time. Yet graduation is an area where we have seen the most change among both low-income and non-low income kids. Graduation rates in DPS have

gone up swiftly. Between 2009-10 and 2011-12, the four-year DPS on-time graduation rate rose from 51.8 to 58.8 percent. The completion rate, which includes GED and non-diploma certificate earners, rose from 56.8 percent to 62.8 percent. The largest gains were among Hispanic females and the smallest gains were among black males. Though we still have work to do, rates of improvement are strong at many high poverty schools. More students are going on to college, but remediation remains high. Two-thirds of students still require remediation once they start college (a two point drop from 2009).

## Conclusion

DPS has come a long way in 10 years and has progressed even more in the past five. We applaud the strong leadership of the board and administration, as well as the hard work of teachers and students. Quality ECE is a necessary ingredient for making progress, but it will not lead to college or work-ready graduates without steeper improvements in elementary, middle, and high school. We publish this assessment not to chastise those working hard for kids but as a reminder that we must be more thoughtful and effective at making and determining what does and does not work so we can accelerate progress.

### A+ Denver

The success of A+ Denver depends on members and friends. Members are nominated and invited to join the organization by our Board of Directors. We seek members that are proven leaders in the community who will work with us to advocate on behalf of Denver's students.

Many of our members started out as friends. A+ friends receive newsletters and invitations to events. We hope you will join us today. Please email [admin@aplusdenver.org](mailto:admin@aplusdenver.org) to join our mailing list or to learn more about becoming involved.

A special thanks to Peter Huidekoper for his contributions to this report!

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