



Memorandum

To: Denver Public Schools Staff and Board of Education
From: A+ Denver
Subject: School Turnaround Recommendations
Date: June 23, 2015

The importance of identifying best turnaround practices, and the policies that support them, is critical, both in Denver, and across the country. In Denver, 20% of students are enrolled in orange and red schools: schools where, on average, nearly 90% of the students are low-income and students of color, and where proficiency levels are, on average, 16 percentage points lower than the district average. For example, only 27% of students are proficient in writing in the district's red and orange schools, compared to a district average of 44%. Changing the narrative at these chronically underperforming schools is absolutely necessary to reach the strategic goals outlined in the Denver Plan 2020.

These efforts become particularly important as the district shifts to a more decentralized model, allocating more resources and decision-making authority to the school level. This approach comes with both challenges and opportunities: DPS will be able to focus more attention and central resources on its lowest-performing schools, improving its ability to provide contextualized supports, while still enabling turnaround leaders to choose the educational programming, curriculum, and professional development best suited to the school. However, fundamentally changing the relationship between district and school now puts an even larger responsibility on the school leader. The district needs to rethink the supports it provides these leaders, and needs to ensure it has high quality candidates to lead the school across the turnaround process.

With this in mind, Denver Public Schools asked A+ Denver to host a series of consultancies with DPS and outside experts to review school turnaround best practices. We appreciate the time and thoughtfulness of the district and charter leaders, business leaders, and community members who joined this Turnaround Roundtable, who tackled questions like how should Denver approach the task of drastically improving student growth and outcomes at its lowest performing schools? How can district policies and practices support turnaround school leaders and their teams? How can policies promote operators with an ambition and ability to serve students in a turnaround environment?

Building on the insights and discussions of the Turnaround Roundtable, A+ Denver offers the following commentary, series of recommendations, and areas for further inquiry.

Policy Decisions and Recommendations

Zero Year Policy

A+ Denver applauds DPS for implementing a “zero year” policy, adjusting its decision-making timeframe to ensure all turnaround operators will have a year of planning ahead of opening. The premise for this policy shift is predicated on:

- a) Evidence of better success rates when turnaround school leaders have had a year of plan time ahead of opening, including DCIS at Fairmont and Ashley Elementary;
- b) Successes of charter operators who take advantage of a full year of planning before opening a new school, taking the time to train a new school leader in the educational program and specific neighborhood context, and to engage with and learn from the school community; and
- c) Feedback from Instructional Superintendents and former principals on the importance of planning and community engagement during the turnaround process.

A+ Denver recommends this policy be codified and adopted as an official policy by the Denver Board of Education. The formalization of the Zero Year policy will ensure all turnaround school operators, district or charter, will be afforded critical time to plan and engage the community.

To support this policy, the district should define the supports that students in a transition or “Zero Year” school should receive. Specifically, students could receive priority in the SchoolChoice enrollment process. Should students elect to stay in the closing school, they should receive additional instructional support that could include smaller class sizes, and small-group or 1:1 tutoring; additional support for arts and physical education; and after school academic programming.

Decision-Making Transparency

In response to several constituencies, including potential turnaround operators, community groups, and families calling for increased transparency during the district’s determination of turnaround school operators, A+ Denver supports the district and Board adoption of a policy that will define the district’s decision-making process for turnaround operator selection. The policy should clarify decision-making criteria to select turnaround operators, and enable turnaround school operators to define the educational program design including turnaround implementation approach-- whether it’s a phase-in or phase-in or replacement approach.

Turnaround Classification

A+ Denver also recommends the district tighten its definition of “turnaround.” Currently, “turnaround” can be used for schools that are potential turnaround candidates, those undergoing federally-defined turnaround interventions including transformation and replacement, and schools that experienced an intervention 3-5 years ago. These schools should all fall into different categories, as all need different supports and monitoring. The district should implement a taxonomy to better define the supports and interventions schools receive, and to better track data, practices, and outcomes.

Additionally, the District should define and reinforce the student supports available across this turnaround lifecycle. For example, increasing special education services and the availability of mental health professionals in schools can ensure students have the support needed to both improve achievement, and change the school culture.

Practice Recommendations

Turnaround success can only be driven so much at a district policy level; what happens on the ground at a school is the real lever for change. A+ Denver recommends the district reinforce school-level decisions and operations by 1) focusing on the school leaders deployed in turnaround schools, and 2) building the systems that will free capacity at the school-level so educators can prioritize and focus efforts effectively.

Leadership:

The district has created at least seven separate principal preparation pathways; however there is little attention on the development, recruitment, and selection of specifically turnaround school leaders. A+ Denver recommends the district start to bolster turnaround school leadership by:

- a. Rethinking the turnaround leadership structure. Turnaround leadership takes many forms, from the zero-year through sustained change. This leadership continuum should likely consist of three people: an interim school leader to ease transition between the previous school and the turnaround program; a turnaround school leader who has the energy and ability to implement culture and academic change within three years; and a sustaining leader focused on carrying forward the vision, and ensuring the culture and academic changes stick.
- b. Identifying the leadership competencies that are specific to successful turnaround leaders. Clarifying the expectations of turnaround leaders will enable the district to identify potential turnaround leaders earlier in their careers; identify and then support or create leadership development processes and experiences relevant to the turnaround context; and ensure better matching between school leaders and school contexts, particularly when those leaders lack turnaround experience.
- c. Developing a bench of turnaround leaders. After differentiating the leadership roles, expectations, and competencies required for turnaround leadership, A+ Denver believes the district should build a bench of leaders able to step into turnaround leadership positions, making the district more nimble and responsive to school community needs, and more able to respond to inevitable crises or unexpected leader turnover in turnaround schools.
- d. Rethinking leadership coaching. Turnaround leadership management must recognize the unique context and stressors that turnaround leaders experience. Throughout the Roundtable discussions, participants recognized both the professional and psychological needs turnaround leaders have, and A+ Denver recommends decoupling supervision and mentorship in the management of turnaround leaders. Specifically, turnaround leaders should have access to an evaluator, a mentor and EQ coach, and peer-to-peer networks.
- e. Helping leaders monitor progress. Given they have more autonomy over turnaround implementation, turnaround leaders should have continuous opportunities to understand how the school is performing and how their decisions are working. The district should provide both quantitative and qualitative monthly feedback to turnaround leaders in the first year. Culture is established within the first month or two of school, and early, frequent feedback loops are critical to help leaders and schools stay on track.

Systems and Capacity:

The Roundtable discussions consistently identified lack of capacity and systems as one of the key indicators of underperforming schools. To better support capacity at the school-level, A+ Denver recommends:

- a. Enhancing the district's core competency of building integral systems for school operations. Often basic systems, such as that to track attendance, report data to the district, communicate with families, or enforce basic discipline are absent. As such, turnaround leaders are responsible for developing and implementing these systems. A+ sees that the district has an opportunity to identify the necessary systems or processes all schools should have, and to provide schools with systems or processes to implement. Leaders can then "opt-in" to the district-developed solutions, helping cross-off limitless to-dos from leaders and teachers' lists, and freeing up time for important work like professional development, culture development, and community engagement.
- b. Helping school leaders prioritize and sequence efforts by encouraging them to plan on two time horizons. While leaders should have strategic long-term goals, short-term goals will help identify critical early wins. An example of an early win may be improvement of third-grade reading levels—it is tangible, isolated, and inspires focus. This would clearly contribute to a long-term goal of dramatically growing student achievement, and is a clear milestone to communicate to staff, families, and students.
- c. Ensuring incentives and processes reinforce prioritization. Specifically, principal and teacher evaluation processes should be flexible and should account for this prioritization. Evaluation should be more focused and stringent on the areas staff are focusing, and should be relaxed in secondary areas to ensure incentives are aligned to priorities.

Further Areas for Inquiry

Important questions were raised through the Roundtable conversations. The following are areas for further inquiry:

1. What is the right data for the district to evaluate turnaround success?
A+ Denver recommends the district conduct a more robust analysis of the practices that are most effective in driving successful turnarounds. Specifically, the district should look at turnaround outcomes by implementation timeline including trends over time, leader and teacher turnover rates during implementation, community engagement, prioritization and sequencing of tasks, and support structures provided to schools. This analysis should direct district selection of turnaround programs and operators, support of turnaround school leaders, and capacity and systems development.
2. What is the impact of turnaround interventions on displaced students and surrounding schools?
The Thomas Fordham Institute recently released a report *School Closures and Student Achievement: An Analysis of Ohio's Urban Districts and Charter Schools* looking at the impact of closing schools on displaced students. The study found that school closures in Ohio had significant positive impact on displaced students,

particularly when they land in higher-quality schools. Denver would benefit from a similar analysis to understand the impact of turnaround efforts on students in those turnaround schools, displaced students, and the impacts on other nearby schools, feeder patterns, and regional outcomes.

3. What is the right timeline and approach to community engagement during turnaround, particularly during the “Zero Year”?

Specifically, there is a question about when and how school committees should be involved in selecting a turnaround school leader or operator. Ideally, a turnaround school should be announced in November of the Minus 1 Year, and the leader or operator selected in Spring of the Minus 1 Year with the support of the school community to ensure the incoming turnaround leader has a full year of planning and community engagement during the Zero Year. However, it is clear there are constraints to such a timeline, given the lack of a turnaround leader or operator bench, current CSC decision-making processes, and general community confusion around the implications of turnaround interventions on a neighborhood or enrollment zone.

4. What supports should the district provide during “Zero Year”?

The Zero Year is fundamentally different from previous district approaches to turnaround schools, and it necessitates a different support structure. That is to say the district should rethink the supports it provides an interim leader who is tasked with paving the way for a leadership and programmatic transition, managing staff in an environment of professional ambiguity and tension, and supporting students who have been in an underperforming school.

5. How can the district better support school leaders in developing a cohesive school culture?

School culture, though arguably the most important driver of successful school turnarounds is incredibly ambiguous. As the district doubles down on its turnaround interventions, understanding the school cultures that are most effective in turnaround schools, and the processes and goals that drive them, is increasingly important.

6. How should the district prioritize effort across these recommendations?

The challenge and opportunity of turnaround is immense. The district should develop and publicly communicate a clear set of its priorities in pursuing turnaround interventions. Transparency will be key to the district’s success given the importance, historical outcomes, and new approaches to the turnaround work.

We look forward to hearing how DPS plans to address the recommendations and questions raised in this brief, and request a response from the district by September 1, 2015. We look forward to continuing to partner with the district to develop approaches to its lowest performing schools.

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