

Honorable Members of the Board of Education
Denver Public Schools
1860 Lincoln Street
Denver, CO 80203

October 21, 2014

Dear Denver Board of Education Members,

We are writing to ask you to revise the School Performance Framework (SPF) criteria and thresholds so district staff, parents, and the general public have a clearer understanding of the definition of a quality school. Denver was a national leader in establishing the SPF nearly a decade ago. It is now time to reflect upon the purpose and design of the SPF in order to guide the district toward greater improvement.

The Denver Plan 2020 aims to have eighty percent of all DPS students in every neighborhood attend a blue or green school by the end of the decade. Our concern is not with this laudable goal, but with the way that blue or green schools are defined. It is critical that the district send a strong signal about what constitutes a quality school.

A quality school should truly live up to high expectations; that is, they should be places where most students are on grade level and are becoming prepared for postsecondary options. However, our blue and green schools are missing this mark. In setting the bar too low for schools, the current rating system gives parents the wrong message, indicating that schools are high quality when, in fact, most students have little chance of meeting the state's standards.

Furthermore, descriptors of performance levels such as "accredited on probation" would be more helpful to parents if they were translated into language that is more easily understood by parents and the community. The SPF must be understandable to families so they can make informed decisions about which school will best meet their child's needs. While SPF performance descriptors like "Accredited on Priority Watch" or "Accredited on Probation" do have negative connotations, as do the colors yellow, red, and orange, the descriptors themselves need clearer and more precise language to ensure families can understand the true quality of a school.

We think it is necessary for the district to facilitate a deep conversation about the purpose and design of the SPF. Our specific criticisms of the current SPF include:

Academic status expectations are too low, especially for elementary schools:

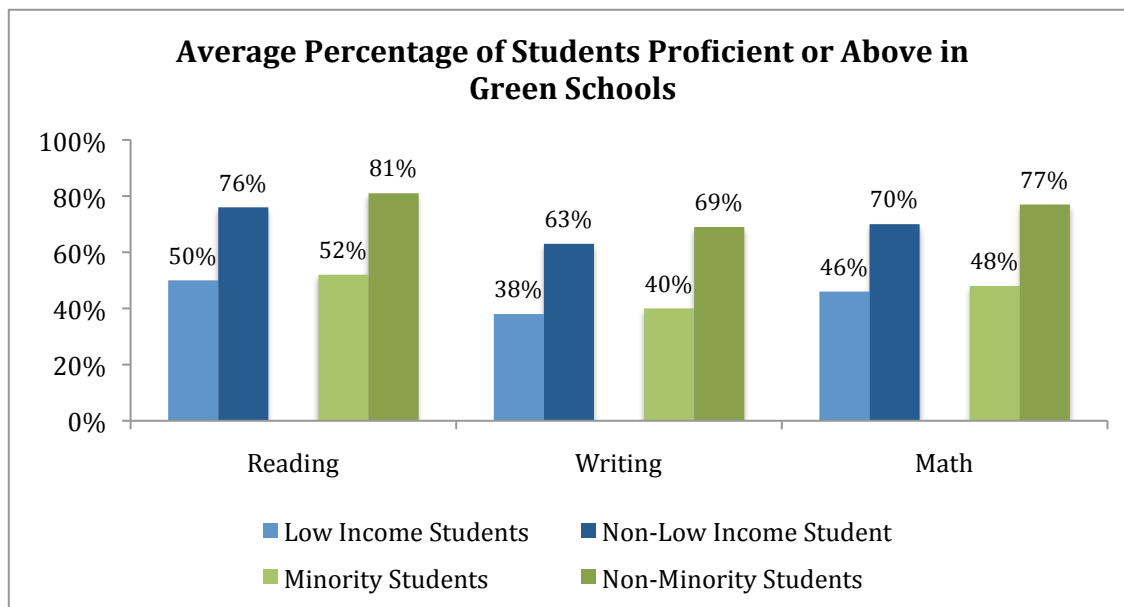
We agree it is critical to improve the percentage of third graders reading at grade level across the district; in fact, this should be the *primary* goal for Denver. It should follow then that green elementary schools, which are by definition meeting expectations, should have 80% of their students at grade level—particularly in reading. However, the current rating system does not come close to meeting this bar. There are green elementary schools that have fewer than one in five students at or above proficiency, and other green schools have only obtained

3% of the SPF status points. Other grade levels also have expectations far too low; for example, the current SPF gives 100% of the SPF points for those high schools that have 20% math proficiency.

Average Third-Grade Green School Proficiency %			
	Reading	Writing	Math
All Green Elementary Schools	48%	45%	51%
Green Elementary Schools with highest (top quartile) low-income student population	41%	30%	44%

“High performance” is inconsistent within schools:

It is critical to better define success for those communities that continue to be at the losing end of the widening achievement gap. At “high performing schools” the current performance by low-income and minority students—and progress in closing the achievement gap—is unacceptable. This performance should not be defined as meeting expectations. The chart below highlights the achievement-gap within our green schools. Our focus needs to be on raising the scores of our low-income and minority students so that they too are achieving the academic performance promised them in a high quality school.



Growth overshadows proficiency:

In too strongly weighting academic growth relative to academic proficiency, the current School Performance Framework provides a false positive about what is a good school. There are a growing number of schools that are reaching the green or blue SPF level, but still have a great distance to go in terms of having most students at proficiency. We agree that high schools should be praised for making progress, but the message to school staff, parents, and the community should not be that this is sufficient. Many of these schools must continue to make dramatic growth (often at higher rates of improvement than is the current standard) in

order to get students on a successful path. The system's signal that they are green is likely to slow, not increase growth, as it will lead to complacency with the status quo.

It is our more vulnerable students who pay for this conflation of improvement and success, as schools that are labeled "green" that have high growth but do not meet proficiency expectations tend to have higher proportions of low-income, ELL, and minority students than do green schools that meet proficiency expectations.

It is critical that DPS not complicate the message to families that "high performing schools" are actually that—high performing, rather than simply on a path toward high performance. Some green schools are on a strong path to proficiency while others are on a path to proficiency but will never get there. Students need to be in schools that actually produce learning—as measured by proficiency metrics.

Ultimately, it is our hope that this letter provides an opportunity for Denver Public Schools to set clearer expectations for our schools and send a powerful signal about what constitutes a quality school. We are committed to engaging with you and the district staff as to how to best improve performance and accountability in the district, and we look forward to working with you in this first step of better defining our north star.

We ask that the district start a process to address these concerns by the end of November or earlier. We also ask the Board to acknowledge receipt of this letter with its plan to follow up on these suggestions.

Sincerely,

A+ Denver
Colorado Succeeds
Denver Alliance for Public Education
DSST Public Schools
Donnell-Kay Foundation
Gates Family Foundation
Jeannie Kaplan, Former DPS Board Member

Latinos for Education Reform
Padres & Jóvenes Unidos
Rocky Mountain Prep
Stand for Children Colorado
Teach for America Colorado
Together Colorado
University Preparatory School



Denver Public Schools

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF ACADEMIC AND INNOVATION OFFICER

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SPF Advocacy Coalition c/o Van Schoales
A+ Denver
1390 Lawrence Street, Suite 200
Denver, CO 80204

April 9, 2015

Dear Community Partners,

Thank you for your continued advocacy on behalf of the students of the Denver Public Schools. In March, DPS announced changes that will go into effect for the 2015 School Performance Framework (SPF). As such, we are writing to inform you of the rationale and substance of the changes, and to outline how the changes align to the recommendations of your coalition.

As a coalition, you recommended that DPS consider the following:

- Use parent-friendly language for the school level ratings on the SPF;
- Increase the weight on status and raise the bar for earning points to achieve a green or blue status rating on the SPF;
- Increase the emphasis on raising the scores of low-income students and students of color (gap closing measures).

Before describing the 2015 SPF changes, it's important to consider the current assessment and data landscape as a basis for the district's decision making for next year's SPF.

Assessment Transition

- Roughly 60 percent of measures are changing due to the state assessment transition.
- The official release of the 2015 SPF will be later than usual due to the late release of CMAS status data (Oct. 2015) and late or no release of growth data (Feb. 2016). In other words, the public SPF reflecting 2014-15 data is likely to be released in early 2016.
- CDE is no longer including "No Scores" in district and school proficiency rates reported in July.
- DPS and CDE are collaborating to determine appropriateness of using growth between TCAP and CMAS for an accountability measure.

Given the changing assessment landscape and anticipated delays in availability of data for the 2015 SPF, DPS has decided to phase in changes to the SPF, implementing a number of important temporary and long-term changes for 2015, and communicating now a number of additional changes for the 2016 SPF and beyond. The changes align well with the coalition's recommendations, and we thank you for your thought partnership and advocacy on behalf of high expectations for Denver youth.

In summary, delayed timelines and uncertainty associated with CMAS test results, along with potential changes to state testing requirements, limit our ability to apply long-term changes to the SPF in 2015.

2015 SPF Changes

In the near term, DPS is implementing several changes at the measure level to increase alignment with the Denver Plan 2020 goals and to evaluate school performance more accurately. While some measures will be adjusted, others will be removed temporarily to accommodate the shift from TCAP to CMAS. In addition, since DPS will not lower the cut points for status measures for next year, this will result in higher expectations for school performance on the 2015 SPF due to the increased rigor associated with the CMAS. College remediation measures will also formally count for high schools. Finally, DPS will remove temporarily the overall school SPF rating for next year and instead will produce spotlight reports showing results in growth, status, engagement and satisfaction, and academic achievement gaps. We will also continue to highlight the performance of various subgroups on the SPF reports (see the attached sample report of a school's 2015 SPF).

2016 SPF Changes

In 2016, the measures temporarily removed will be reinstated, as will the overall rating system for schools. We will continue to explore opportunities for communicating school ratings in parent-friendly language. In addition, DPS will increase the relative weight of the status indicator (e.g., shift the status-to-growth ratio in elementary schools from 3:1 to 3:2), apply conditions to ensure schools earning an overall rating of Green or Blue are performing well on both status and growth, and review the expectations set through cut points across measures to ensure alignment to Denver Plan 2020 goals. The district is also exploring ways to better emphasize the importance of equity and closing opportunity and achievement gaps. This could be accomplished through raising individual cut points on a variety of measures, adding equity conditions that ensure that all Green or Blue schools meet certain thresholds for closing gaps, or adding specific equity indicators to the SPF.

Finally, a small working group of the Board and senior leadership team is reviewing the SPF through the lens of the accountability and performance principles developed by the Board this year. This review will allow us to re-assess the SPF's alignment to Denver Plan goals, as well as its ability to communicate transparently and simply to families and the community the quality and health of a given school. Our goal is to communicate specific changes for the 2016 SPF prior to the start of the 2015-16 school year.

We believe that phasing in these changes over two years provides us the best opportunity to stabilize the SPF during a time when the assessment landscape is shifting. We remain committed to using the SPF as our leading tool for school improvement, performance transparency, accountability and district wide systems. At the same time, we recognize that strong communication with our families and school communities during this transition period is critical to ensure understanding of school performance at the neighborhood, regional and district level.

To learn more about the 2015 SPF changes and the recently developed performance and accountability principles, [read this DPS Board of Education presentation](#).

Sincerely,



Alyssa Whitehead-Bust
Chief Academic and Innovation Officer

Denver Public Schools

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A+ Denver

1390 Lawrence Street, Suite 200 Denver, CO 80204

December 17, 2014

Dear A+ Denver:

Thank you for your recommendations for updating the School Performance Framework (SPF) and for taking the time to submit a letter to the Denver Board of Education. We appreciate the thoughtful work that A+ Denver and your community advisors did on this project, and we agree that the SPF is a powerful and groundbreaking tool for assessing the performance of schools. As you know, it has been closely replicated by the State of Colorado and others. We also agree that it needs to be updated to align with the new Denver Plan 2020 goals and changes in the educational landscape.

One point you raise in your letter is around performance gaps within schools. While more can be done, we have already made changes to the SPF that was published earlier this fall. These changes show to parents and the community the performance gaps between groups of students in our schools. We also show how different groups of students perform against their peers district-wide. An example is here:

<http://spf.dpsk12.org/documents/current/425%20-%20Stoplight%20Scorecard.pdf>

We are contemplating additional changes to the SPF. Since the creation of the SPF 8 years ago, we have seen the expansion of accountability systems in DPS and at the state level for principals, teachers, and other staff. We are also managing significant shifts in expectations for our students and will likely see in the coming year equally significant changes in what it takes to earn a high school diploma.

Within this context and with the aggressive goals of the Denver Plan 2020 in mind, we believe strongly that we need to think holistically about all our accountability systems. Each system needs to be sending the same signals if we are going to achieve Denver Plan 2020 goals. This work is being guided by the following questions:

- Are all these systems (for schools, teachers, principals, support teams) calibrated to student achievement?
- How can we make sure that these systems are aligned to each other?

- How should we balance current achievement (proficiency) with improvement (growth)?
- How do we make sure these systems are simple and clear to those who are affected by them, especially parents?

Currently, the two of us are working with senior staff to address these questions and expect that there could be changes for the 2015 SPF. We will make a public report to the board at the January or February board meeting.

Thank you again for your recommendations.

Sincerely,

Barbara O'Brien
Denver Board of Education, At-Large

Anne Bye Rowe
Denver Board of Education, District 1

A+ and Partners' Response to DPS

Denver Public Schools
1860 Lincoln Street
Denver, CO 80203

April 20, 2015

Dear Denver Board of Education members and the Chief Academic and Innovation Officer at Denver Public Schools:

A+ Denver and our coalition partners received your letter, dated April 9th, outlining the proposed changes to the School Performance Framework (SPF) and responding to the questions raised by A+ Denver and a coalition of co-signers in October of 2014.

In the initial letter from A+ and partners, the following points were made in regard to the SPF:

1. The district should send a strong signal about what constitutes a quality school by defining Green or Blue schools as places most students are at grade level or on a clear trajectory to get there.
2. The SPF should be understandable for parents. Specifically, we recommended descriptors, such as "accredited on probation," were changed to straightforward terms.
3. A more rigorous rating system is necessary to establish the bar set by the Denver Plan 2020.
4. Achievement gaps ought to be taken into account when determining school performance.
5. Growth is weighted too heavily compared to status because, ultimately, status is a better measure for college-readiness than growth.

DPS' response outlined changes in the following areas, most to be rolled out in 2016 as the change in tests presents technical difficulties in 2015:

1. It will become more difficult to become a Green or Blue school: "DPS will not lower the cut points for status measures for next year; this will result in higher expectations for school performance on the 2015 SPF due to the increased rigor associated with the CMAS."
2. DPS will incorporate college-readiness more substantially into the SPF by including remediation measures in the SPF: "College remediation measures will also formally count for high schools."
3. DPS will show achievement gap data in the SPF: "We will also continue to highlight the performance of various subgroups on the SPF reports (see the attached sample report of a school's 2015 SPF)."
4. DPS will weigh status more heavily, compared to growth, than in the past: "DPS will increase the relative weight of the status indicator (e.g., shift the status-to-growth ratio in elementary schools from 3:1 to 3:2), apply conditions to ensure schools earning an overall rating of Green or Blue are performing well on both status and growth, and review the expectations set through cut points across measures to ensure alignment to Denver Plan 2020 goals."

5. DPS is determining how to hold schools accountable for closing achievement gaps: "The district is also exploring ways to better emphasize the importance of equity and closing opportunity and achievement gaps. This could be accomplished through raising individual cut points on a variety of measures, adding equity conditions that ensure that all Green or Blue schools meet certain thresholds for closing gaps, or adding specific equity indicators to the SPF."
6. DPS is committed to continuous improvement: "Finally, a small working group of the Board and senior leadership team is reviewing the SPF through the lens of the accountability and performance principles developed by the Board this year. This review will allow us to reassess the SPF's alignment to Denver Plan goals, as well as its ability to communicate transparently and simply to families and the community the quality and health of a given school. Our goal is to communicate specific changes for the 2016 SPF prior to the start of the 2015-16 school year."

A+ Denver and our partners believe that the SPF changes you've outlined will mean better outcomes for students. We are particularly encouraged by the proposed 2016 shift toward more heavily weighing status over growth; inclusion of equity measures in the SPF; and effectively higher expectations to become a Green or Blue school.

However, we have a few remaining questions. These include:

- Despite the technical challenges of determining growth scores from new test data, how will the district ensure families have access to proficiency data and a revised SPF ahead of the first choice window for the 2016-17 school year?
- How can communication about school quality be improved for parents so they can easily understand a school's rating, and, simultaneously, are able to find information about how that rating was calculated?
- What are the specific goals and strategies proposed for clarifying school performance information for parents?
- Are the growth targets incorporated into the SPF sufficient to result in proficiency targets as outlined in the strategic plan?
- How will equity measures be incorporated into the school's actual rating?
- How can we ensure equity measures will appropriately incentivize schools to improve the performance of all students?
- What is meant by "your commitment to reviewing the SPF through performance principles"? What are the performance principles, and who is being held accountable for them?
- Regarding the inclusion of college readiness, how will remediation information be included and weighted?
- What timeline should be expected for these improvements?

A+ Denver and our partners applaud DPS's responsiveness to this coalition's input. We understand both the need to maintain clear, consistent expectations for schools and to build a responsive evaluation tool. DPS' willingness to reshape the tool to better align with the vision outlined in the new Denver Plan is commendable. Ultimately, the changes you have put forward will go a long way

toward accurately communicating school performance, and setting appropriate standards for schools.

Thank you for your partnership, and we look forward to continuing this dialogue.

Sincerely,

A+ Denver
Colorado Succeeds
Denver Alliance for Public Education
DSST Public Schools
Donnell-Kay Foundation
Dr. Sharon Bailey, Former DPS Board Member
Gates Family Foundation
Jeannie Kaplan, Former DPS Board Member
Latinos for Education Reform
Michelle Moss, Former DPS Board Member
Padres & Jóvenes Unidos
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Teach for America - Colorado
Together Colorado
University Preparatory School

