



To: Denver Public Schools: Susana Cordova, Superintendent; Lauren Dunn, Chief of Staff

From: A+ Colorado: Van Schoales, President

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Subject: Community Feedback on the Major Questions, Challenges, and Opportunities Facing Denver Public Schools

[Table of Contents](#)

[Eliminating Academic Inequities](#)

[Questions](#)

[Challenges](#)

[Opportunities](#)

[Community Partnership in School Improvement](#)

[Questions](#)

[Challenges](#)

[Opportunities](#)

[Choice in a Gentrifying City](#)

[Questions](#)

[Challenges](#)

[Opportunities](#)

[Communicating "Good Schools" to Families](#)

[Questions](#)

[Challenges](#)

[Opportunities](#)

[Appendix: Fact Sheets provided to Attendees](#)

On June 11, A+ Colorado hosted a forum, bringing together experts, community members, teachers, and families to discuss the greatest questions, challenges, and opportunities facing Denver Public Schools. Attendees participated in one of four sessions on a unique investment made by DPS over the past decade to take stock of where we've been and what lays ahead. The sessions covered the following topics: 1. Eliminating Academic Inequities 2. Community Partnership in School Improvement 3. Choice in a Gentrifying City and 4. Communicating "Good" Schools: to Families. During each session attendees wrote down comments about each topic. Attendees also "voted" on which comments resonated the most. The comments are all presented below and represent a wide array of opinions held by different members of the community.

Eliminating Academic Inequities

This conversation was led by Pastor Vernon Jones Jr. (Faithbridge), Christine DeLeon (Moonshot edVentures), and Shawn Smith (DSST). The “essential question” proposed was, “How will the district address academic inequities, and better support students of color or students from low-income families to reach the same levels of academic achievement as their peers?” This question was immediately problematized by the group. The better question that was decided on was, “How will the district ensure that schools [and systems] are maximizing student potential for all students?”

This finetuning of the question raised many important questions, potential opportunities, and challenges to be aware of moving forward. The first was a consensus that prioritizing addressing academic gaps had to be an *explicit priority and stated goal* of schools and education systems. This re-orientation led to a discussion of myriad potential policies to help improve students maximizing their potential including: hiring diverse teachers, ensure that teachers are trained around racial biases and culturally-responsive competencies, pairing strong school culture that values education with quality instruction, designing schools to address inequity with a year 0 and system-wide redesign. All of these policy proposals require a deep interrogation of our collective history in Denver and as a nation, and power structures, including having students as active partners in defining success.

Attendee Comments:

Questions

How do we redefine success so that the bar for achievement is not defined by whiteness? - 3 votes

It IS an issue of critical race. How do we teach and change the mindsets of majority white teachers? - 2 votes

Do we have a race problem or student achievement problem? - 2 votes

How to recruit minority teachers like charters are able to? - 1 vote

Do parents know this data? If they do what's their reaction? If we offer better options will students be able to reach their potential?

How are we measuring equity? We use the words “equity” and “opportunity” but can “opportunity” be a measure of equity and vice versa?

How segregated are DPS schools by race? How has this changed over time?

How should we define benchmarking in education (not schools, not students, but education)?

Why do we not have ideological diversity, nationality diversity, global diversity in this conversation?

What does partnership across different districts, organizations, communities, and networks look like? How do we push against the idea of "one right way"?

Can cultural competency be taught? If so, does anything we have now actually do it?

So, we keep saying that the system isn't broken but functioning as designed then what is worth keeping from the system as it exists?

How do we measure success?

Is there achievement without disposition? If yes, what is in place at those classes/schools? If no, what is the process of codifying a learning trajectory for folks currently teaching?

Challenges

White fragility - 4 votes

Does the SPF represent what we value? (By which schools are closed?) - 3 votes

Just the way the system was designed, like it's not just the k-12 system, it's the whole damn thing. - 1 vote

Money- zero sum budgeting, give more to 1 school = less for another. Budgeting based on how much we've got- not how much we need to educate ALL kids. - 1 vote

This is not the dominant narrative. We have not engaged the broader community in this discussion. - 1 vote

"You can't fix the plantation" - 1 vote

Big ship -- too many folks profiting.

Pulling out the differences between race and class.

Making sure every classroom is made up of 1/3 lower SES, 1/3 Middle SES, 1/3 Upper SES.

SPF designed to reward strategies that prioritize short term gains over long term best practices.

The conversation locks.

The dialogue is cyclical and not expansive. We need to look at assets, human dynamics, change and history, not just race, income and americanism.

Opportunities

Year 0 DPS- we take the time to redesign (everyone gets a year 0) - 9 votes

Lead for and intentionally support for schools in ensuring all schools receive instruction for grade level - 2 votes

How can the district build a culturally sensitive staffing and team efforts to equip our school leaders/staff to impact students in inclusive efforts. - 2 votes

Making sure that every school has a comprehensive school counseling program at the 250 student to 1 counselor ratio - 1 vote

Can we solve/almost solve racial bias through training? How can we promote inclusivity? - 1 vote

Moonshot fellows polling > 70% teachers of color - 1 vote

Awareness of the inequity problem has gone way up - build on that - 1 vote

Reframe the essential question and purpose of schools to be about maximizing each students' potential and not about comparing to whites. Then go to strengths-based....bias, racism, all the isms prevent us from seeing the unique gifts in our students and staff on the margins.

Reframe from academic gaps to academic barriers -- they were intentionally created.

That people are ready for and demanding change, even if we aren't sure what that means.

Engage business they have a stake in these outcomes. Not only for employees but also for understanding customers.

Bringing in the "right" people AND helping/supporting those already in place.

Community Partnership in School Improvement

Questions around the role of community partnership were a recurring theme across *Denver's Next Journey* research topics and were overwhelmingly selected as key areas of inquiry for our Denver's Next Journey event. For this session, we offered the guiding question, "How can the district undertake turnaround and improvement efforts in partnership with communities?" Kristin Barnes DPS Parent and Chair of the District Accountability Committee and Dom Barrera, Director of Advocacy for FaithBridge guided this conversation as panelists.

The conversation centered around the experiences of families in low-rated schools, how competing efforts seemed to be at play as the district tried both to offer families the option to choice in to higher rated schools which in turn could make it harder to improve the school as dwindling enrollment stretches school resources thin. Session attendees were eager to find a solution for how families can become better engaged in the school improvement process and how they can be incentivized to stay during those efforts.

Touching on opportunities, there was general consensus that the DPS home visit program has been beneficial in strengthening relationships between families and schools and that the continued expansion of this program can further serve to build school and community connection, hopefully leading to more community engagement in school improvement efforts as well as schools better prepared to serve their communities.

Attendee Comments:

Questions

How are schools meeting parents where they are at? - 3 votes

Our parent panelist (Kirstin Barnes) spoke about being "under the gun" when the school was red. How do we want our parents to feel when they are in a red school? - 1 vote

Where is the power? Who decides SPF Inputs and how can parents/community have decision making power in choosing the inputs and messaging the output to families? - 1 Vote.

What do these figures look like when AECs are included in the data?

Challenges

Common language around "high quality" - 8 votes

Parents whose resources are so limited (including time) that they cannot get involved in a PTO or other organizations that can help improve a school. - 3 votes

Lack of aligned district strategy: shifting resources to support, incoherent approaches, challenging board policy. - 2 votes

Lack of representation in school

Opportunities

Community led and co-created measures of success - 8 votes

Young professionals looking to gain experience in their field by working with a local school in a field-related capacity - 3 votes

Link up. Sync “qualstar” ECE rating tool with Denver SPF

If the school has pre-k and it is doing well -- communicate that to parents of preK re: potential for growth in student performance.

Seek effective partnerships with relevant advice and bandwidth to really help two generation types of opportunities.

Incentivize/promise/codify parent involvement in UIPs, SPF inputs and messaging outputs.

Provide support for families/school communities to have a voice and dig in to support improvements.

Choice in a Gentrifying City

The conversation among the three panelists, James Roy (Park Hill Collective Impact), Anna Nicotera (Basis Policy Research) and Pam Martinez (Padres y Jovenes Unidos) began the essential question “can the Denver community and district better understand the relationship between community changes including gentrification, unified enrollment systems, and school access?” There was consensus that the district and community can do far more to better understanding what is happening in different neighborhoods and proactively respond to demographic shifts in all parts of the city. There was fairly strong agreement that far more can be done to support racial and socio-economic integrated schools. There also was strong agreement that more can and should be done to coordinate with the City of Denver regarding housing and development plans to ensure more neighborhoods and schools are integrated. While

some of the panelists thought that choice has accelerated segregation in particular parts of Denver, other panelists believed that choice with set aside seats for low-income families could reduce the school segregation in Denver.

Attendee Comments:

Questions

What conversations should the district be having with city planners, communities, developers? - 4 votes

Can DPS put pressure on/work together with the city to work on anti-displacement strategies? - 2 votes

What role can DPS play against gentrification? How could choice help kids stay at their gentrifying school if they can't afford to live in the neighborhood? - 1 vote

How/what supports can we provide for families to be able to attend the schools in the neighborhoods where they're getting pushed out of? -1 vote

What's the wish list for city officials? More targeted neighborhood investments in affordable housing? Transportation? - 1 vote

How can collaboration between schools continue given more of a scarcity mindset?

How do we continue diversifying schools without losing the representation of the community?

How can we use empty buildings/space to add more quality seats?

Has choice contributed to gentrification?

How do we make sure all remaining schools are high quality?

How do the successful programs found at the U-Prep's become duplicated in other high FRL schools? Especially traditional schools.

How do families convey to district and school leaders that we value diversity?

How often do they update the enrollment zones? What factors do they use?

Do neighborhood schools enrollment reflect community demographics?

Why does RiNo have East HS as their home school? Developers? Influence?

How do we grapple with the consequences of school choice and act proactively when school choice is state law?

How can schools/educators/curriculum be more understanding/aware/responsive to the out of school challenges youth face in rapidly gentrifying areas?

2% decline in terms of income in Denver? Wow. I thought the decreasing affordability was leading to an increase in median income.

Question on Figure 3 - Would the 12% move to Cherry Creek? OR would they stick around and pressure DPS to make the school better?

Just the facts clarification question: So if students did attend their neighborhood boundary school, then more would be assigned to Red or Orange schools?

Figure 2: why did 27% not choose a green or blue school?

Challenges

How do we deal with the tension between the values of a) wanting integrated schools and b) wanting to preserve a racial identity of a community - 4 votes

As schools gentrify, how do we hold space- both literal seats and voice for families who traditionally have less power and privilege? - 3 votes

Choice without transportation isn't choice. DPS needs to provide free, easily accessible transportation. -1 vote

Declining enrollment cannot be a reason to stall progress toward each family having access to a high quality school. -1 vote

How to have choice without driving school segregation. - 1 vote

Why not weight choice at blue and green schools to give low-income students a better chance at getting in?

Can we imagine a world in which every school in every neighborhood is high performing in terms of academics, parent involvement, and school community?

Building community understanding among families from very different backgrounds with different life experiences.

Loss of the community of a “neighborhood” school.

How to help kids whose families are homeless.

Schools emptying out on west side of district.

The choice system is far more convoluted than people realize. FRL priorities tend not to work for several bureaucratic reasons.

DPS has little to no control over housing.

DPS hasn't invested in a robust transportation system - as communities are displaced, how can we preserve school communities with transportation?

Segregation increase? Transportation. Employees of color also to serve and lead students.

How to deal with decreasing child enrollment.

Theory that unified choice is causing segregation.

Opportunities

Could we create a unified enrollment system that prioritizes integrations? Could the district use FACE to help parents make smart choices for the schools? - 6 votes

True school integration with diverse groups, SES, race, ethnicity, language, and power access. - 3 Votes

Focused effort on integrated planning for schools and affordable housing. - 2 votes

To focus on what works for “differently wired” students what works for *them* (IEPs) will help all kids!

Working toward enrollment preferences in all areas of city.

Transportation, strategic investments and supports at the schools including neighborhood schools, hire more teachers and leaders of color!

Having a more comprehensive vision for an integrated city.

Finding ways to think about and anticipate the intersections between education and housing.

Communicating “Good Schools” to Families

This session focused on how the district does -- and can -- evaluate and communicate school quality. To start the conversation we offered a guiding question: How can the district convey the quality of schools to the community? Three panelists provided their experience and perspective: Laura Lefkowitz (former DPS School Board member; currently involved with Park Hill Neighbors for Educational Equity); Mike Miles (former Superintendent Harrison School District and Dallas Independent School District; CEO, Third Future Schools); Ariel Smith (Co-Founder, Transform Education Now).

The conversation touched on three primary themes: what is and should be measured to evaluate schools; what and how information is meaningful to families; and how evaluation impacts the system, students and families. There was thoughtful discussion about what should be measured. Some conversants were primarily interested in measuring the quality of inputs and resources available in schools including staffing and financial resources. Others were clear that academic outcomes for students should remain a priority in any sort of evaluation, and that was a priority of many families. Panelists and participants discussed how “school quality” should be connected to a shared understanding of the purpose of schools.

What became clear is that “school quality” is a broad and encompassing subject, that meant different things to different people. Participants raised questions around how the district could, through conversations, better help families identify what was most important to them in schools. This seemed particularly important in helping families navigate school choice, and other participants also raised the issue that it was important in helping families understand how their current school was supporting their student and the broader school community. The group discussed how access to information about schools could be incredibly empowering for families, but that is highly inequitable; people were interested in how DPS could “even the playing field” in terms of ability to understand, navigate, and leverage different sources of information about schools including school tours.

The conversation also touched on how the current SPF impacted students and schools. Participants discussed how the uniformity of the evaluation system could limit schools' ability to be unique and offer different learning experiences to students. There was also a question of how ratings funneled students to “Blue” and “Green” schools, and what that meant both for the real and perceived choices students have, what it has meant for schools that are lower performing, and how it has intersected with patterns of gentrification in the city, and increased racial and socio-economic segregation between schools.

Attendee Comments:

Questions

Are we willing to open the book on which assessments to use in SPF? What non-standardized test outcomes do we want to see in students? - 6 votes

How are we addressing “equity” in terms of students' personal stories - 2 votes

How can community partners support personal connections with families so it is not reliant on DPS staff and static materials like enrollment guides and school finders? - 2 votes

What are the assumptions that drive the data we are collecting now about students and schools? How are we trying to answer this? - 2 votes

Why is there no parent/community demand for quality schools? - 1 vote

To prepare students for the future we need focus on cognitive and metacognitive skills. Are we open to creating a tool that reflects this? - 1 vote

How do we create opportunities to reflect and act in community on the purpose of education and schools?

Who is missing from this conversation that should be a part?

What are the universal inputs we need to consider to create equity across the district?

How can families see the result of family survey more easily? (The DPS family survey results feel buried)

What other districts represent schools more holistically?

Challenges

Measurement: Quality inputs can be measured and it's hard. Get weights right on outcomes (too heavy). This will be a fight - 2 votes

A current massive challenge is understanding deep school design because of external (district, state, federal) forces that drive structure to produce the outcomes based on assumed values on tests - 1 vote

How can we measure “other aspects of schooling” (whole child, electives, social/emotional learning, etc.), or do we need to measure these? - 1 vote

District takes responsibility for all students achieving proficiency - 1 vote

Different people define “good schools” severely differently.

Reconciling parents’ desires with high student achievement outcomes.

Information provided to parents is not *robust enough*. Parents want whole child information, etc.

Building data understand of how summative measures connect to their specific student without 20 charts/clicks in a tool.

How to use communications tools to nudge families towards visits so they don’t act based on a website instead of an in-person experience?

Should the framework represent a “floor” and know that schools might offer many things, but all schools meet this threshold?

Having “communicating” in more than written form -- having a commitment to equity in how this is messaged.

Families need to understand what it means when their student is behind/failing. How can this be better communicated?

We are currently telling families schools are good or bad based on a tool that does not represent schools accurately.

Opportunities

We can make to SPF responsive to next generation skills, whole child measures, AND measure standards-based achievement - 8 votes

Include outcomes related to social-emotional learning on the SPF or at least report out on them. - 3 votes

Have 2 SPFs - one for parents that measures what is important for them and one for central office to use for decision making. - 2 votes

How can other important factors to parents/students be shared if not through the SPF itself -then through also sharing: safety and social emotional success - 1 vote

Build a volunteer base to sit with families to answer questions and navigate the process using existing tools to at least maximize the use of those -1 vote

The DPS SPF revamp! - 1 vote

We need to include student voice in these discussion when we talk about what a good school looks like.

Using reenvisioned framework to bring community voice on a national level into the convo as SPF is reset.

Creative solution with intersectional partners (housing, transportation, etc.)

Create an easy to use system that will give families digestible data on student outcomes & model.

Can we create choice counselors to talk families through the choice process? Either volunteer or paid?

Families have ideas for what they want their schools to look like and we need to involve them in determining what a good school looks like.

As we focus more on competencies, we have an opportunity to shift our focus to what needs intentionality in the future.

Create personalized choice tool like autotrader where you put in the criteria you are looking for and individualized information about a student.

Opportunity to get DPS away from color-coded "scarlet letter" system.

Define the purpose of schools - prepare students: academically, to be good citizens (civically engaged), for the world of work. Define the vision of a Graduate.

Research base for what makes quality school is strong. Inputs, outputs, and outcomes all matter.

Incorporate performance-based assessment into outcomes to balance the bluntness of standardized tests (and bias in them)

Appendix: Fact Sheets provided to Attendees

Some of the comments refer to specific figures. These are in reference to the fact sheets provided to the attendees. Click below to see the relevant fact sheet for each session.

[Eliminating Academic Inequities Fact Sheet](#)

[Community Partnership in School Improvement Fact Sheet](#)

[Choice in a Gentrifying City Fact Sheet](#)

[Communicating "Good Schools" to Families](#)