

DPS Overview and Background Statement for Superintendent Search 2018

August 9, 2018

Who We Are

A Diverse Family of Students

Denver Public Schools is a large, diverse urban school district with more than 92,000 students in 207 schools and almost 12,000 employees.

We are very proud of our diversity and believe it is one of our greatest strengths. Students of color comprise the majority of DPS' ethnically- and culturally-rich student population, which includes 55% Latino, 13% African-American, 2% Asian, 0.4% Native American, 5% multi-ethnic and 24% white students. Sixty-seven percent of students come from families that qualify for free- and reduced-price lunch benefits, and 33% are identified as English language learners, with more than 160 languages spoken at home.

The district has welcomed an increasing number of immigrant and refugee families. The Board of Education and superintendent have taken strong action, in collaboration with Denver's mayor, to ensure a safe and welcoming environment for all students, regardless of immigration status.

While DPS has made real progress toward creating a diverse workforce of educators and school leaders, too many of our students of color still don't have the opportunity to be taught by someone who looks like them. Our goal of achieving a workforce that more closely reflects the demographics of our student population remains one of our district's top priorities.

A Diverse Family of Schools

DPS' family of schools model includes a broad and diverse mix of school types, sizes and structures, including:

- District-run schools serving three quarters of total students
 - Roughly a third of our district-run schools are innovation schools, where teachers, parents and school leaders come together on an innovation plan that meets the needs of their students and community; and
- Public charter schools serving a quarter of total students.

We have benefitted from a high level of collaboration and shared learning among all our family of schools. All of our public schools – both district-run and charter – have come together to commit to equity of opportunity, equity of responsibility and equity of accountability for all schools. And, all of our public schools play by the same enrollment rules, with an emphasis on access for and service to our highest-need students – our students with disabilities, English language learners, low-income and transient students.

A unified choice system is used to manage enrollment and ensure enrollment equity for all schools in our family of schools, including charter schools. The district adopted a unified choice system after community organizations and parents pushed the district for more equitable access to DPS schools in 2011. A key part of the choice system has been the creation of community enrollment zones, in which district-run and charter

schools all serve within shared boundaries, which are drawn to promote greater socioeconomic integration throughout all the schools in the zones.

Our Budget Philosophy

We target resources in order to ensure that funds are invested based on the needs of our students and that we maximize funding at the school level. We believe that those closest to our children – our teachers, school leaders and communities – know how best to spend their dollars to meet their kids’ needs, and they should have the flexibility to do so.

The Denver 2020 Plan

Equity is the driving force for everything we do in DPS, as we strive to attain the district’s five overarching goals:

- Great schools in every neighborhood
- A foundation for success in school
- Close the opportunity gap
- Support for the whole child
- Ready for college and career

These five goals are outlined in [The Denver Plan 2020](#) and were informed by an intentional and significant community engagement process that reached out to broad and diverse stakeholders. After 2020, we know that this work will continue with community voice informing the next iteration of the Denver Plan.

The Board

We are a diverse board; we have been DPS parents, and we have experience in the classroom, at the state capitol, with local community organizations and with the City and County of Denver. Most importantly, we have an unrelenting commitment to ensuring *every child succeeds*.

We believe in leadership driven by our [Shared Core Values](#) at every level of the district, informed by robust and authentic engagement of the community. We believe culture is as important as strategy; support goes hand in hand with accountability. The execution of our values and vision – *that every child succeeds* – drives the excellence and performance results that we relentlessly pursue as a district and community. We are committed to the early foundations for success through implementation of the [Early Literacy 2020 Strategic Plan](#), as well as key initiatives such as [Strengthening Neighborhoods](#) and the [African-American Equity Task Force](#).

We have a governance approach that is exemplified by a strong and close working relationship between the board and the superintendent. We have also built a strong senior leadership team that facilitates innovation in alignment with the board and community.

Progress Made

Since the inception of the Denver Plan in 2005-06, enrollment in DPS has grown by nearly 20,000 students, or 27%. DPS has had the top academic growth among large Colorado school districts for each of the past four years. This growth manifests itself in a significant narrowing of proficiency gaps with the state: in

2005, there was a 25% proficiency gap between DPS and the state in English Language Arts, and that gap is now down to 4%.

Our improvement efforts have spanned the entire K-12 system and beyond – from early childhood to career. Today, 850 more of our youngest learners are entering kindergarten ready to learn because of increased access to early childhood education. This past year, DPS graduated approximately 2,100 more students than in 2006; and the number of African-American and Latino graduates nearly doubled during that time, from 1,706 to 3,407. Over that same time period, drop-out rates declined by 60%, with 2,200 fewer students dropping out in 2016-17 than did a decade ago. Similarly, the out-of-school suspension rate has declined by 69% since 2007-08, meaning we are keeping more students in the classroom through graduation.

We have historically received strong support from our communities through the passage of bond and mill levies. This additional funding has been critical in an environment where Colorado’s education funding is among the lowest in the country.

Opportunities and Challenges Ahead

While the district has accomplished significant progress and growth over the past decade, key challenges remain and must be addressed by the district, superintendent and board in order to achieve [our vision and goals](#) as outlined in The Denver Plan 2020.

With 2020 quickly approaching, the next superintendent needs to possess the vision and leadership skills necessary to build on our successes to date and tackle the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, including:

- **Closing the Opportunity Gap:**
 - Support for teachers and leaders: We know that our most important factor in closing opportunity gaps is to attract, retain and develop our school leaders and teachers, especially in our highest-poverty schools. We must continue to support strong leadership development programs – of both school leaders and teacher leaders – and we are fully committed to investing in the growth and development of our educators.
 - Institutional Racism and Other-isms: We must tackle, head-on, how the district is dealing with race, culture and language diversity in addressing the opportunity gap that persists despite overall achievement gains, in order to improve the experience of teachers, students and families of color at DPS.
 - English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities: We will honor the district’s implementation of the Consent Decree, support dual language programs and the Seal of Biliteracy, and continue to ensure the protection and welcoming embrace for our immigrant and refugee students and families. We will also focus deeply on advancing the growth and support of our students with disabilities.
- **Investing Early**: While we have seen significant gains in early literacy among our students, we continue to have large gaps in achievement. We know how vitally important it is that we invest in our youngest students with a particular focus on ensuring that all our students learn to read confidently by third grade.

- **Preparing our Students for College and Career:** We aim for every student to graduate from high school ready for college and career and must prepare them to meet the state’s newly developed graduation requirements. We are developing innovative approaches to better prepare our students for college and career, including early college models, expanded concurrent enrollment opportunities, and new apprenticeship roles through our CareerConnect program.
- **Community Engagement:** We will work meaningfully with communities across the city to inform, problem-solve, establish partnership and shared ownership of the district.
- **Checking Progress and Holding Ourselves Accountable:**
 - School Performance Compact (SPC): We are committed to reassessing and clarifying the objectives and tactics of the School Performance Compact policy, which governs how the district evaluates school performance and manages intervention strategies like turnaround and restart.
 - School Performance Framework (SPF): It is also critical that we assess and re-evaluate the School Performance Framework as a tool for school improvement versus a tool for formative school evaluation and school choice, and that we evaluate the role of standardized testing in the SPF.
 - Transparency: We want to continue to assure financial transparency through the publication of our budget transparency guidebook that provides insight into the goals, values, and strategies that guide our financial decisions.
- **Supporting a Diverse Family of Schools:** We must support and encourage collaboration and learning across the district’s family of schools with the belief that “we are better together.” We must ensure the ongoing support and evaluation of the successful implementation of our charters and district-run schools, including our innovation schools and zones.
- **Stewardship During a Time of Declining Population of School-aged Children:** After years of dramatic enrollment growth, the city of Denver is beginning to experience a decline in the number of school-aged children, with gentrification affecting many areas of the city. We know how important it is to be proactive in the face of rising housing prices and gentrification in order to promote greater school integration and support our families and communities. We must conduct regional planning rooted in a deep understanding of our communities in order to address access to quality schools and aligned choice and transportation options. We must also focus on financial stewardship and strong communication and change management strategies.
- **Recruiting and Retaining a High-quality and Diverse Workforce:** We must recruit and retain highly-effective educators, with an emphasis on diversity, fair and equitable compensation, and the implementation of culturally-responsive education practices.

We thank Superintendent Tom Boasberg for a decade of innovation and performance. His leadership of Denver Public Schools has been a model for the nation. The next superintendent will have big shoes to fill and, at the same time, will have an extraordinary opportunity to take DPS to higher levels of equity, opportunity and success for our students and our community.