



Key Takeaways: June 2018

Denver has been a leader in education reform and an early adopter of cross-sector collaboration. Over the past decade, the city has experienced improvement in school performance and rapid growth in student enrollment. However, in the past year Denver Public Schools has struggled to find its footing. Education leaders must continue to push themselves to tackle the tough issues that remain to continue to earn the trust of their community and to maintain their national reputation as a leader in education improvement. The district must increase equitable access to high-quality schools and deepen engagement with community and family groups.

Challenges Ahead

► Facing the challenges of a maturing portfolio district

Like other cities that have seen global improvement, Denver Public Schools (DPS) now faces the much harder task of reducing persistent achievement gaps and maintaining momentum to continue to improve the system. [Recent concerns](#) have grown around DPS' school performance ratings, [slowing](#) their new school RFP process, and putting a [pause](#) on school closures in 2018-19. The district can signal its commitment to closing achievement gaps and continuing system improvement by being more transparent about progress. Currently, DPS does not report any citywide sub-group performance rates, making it difficult for families, community members, or even education leaders to identify what gaps persist and what kind of progress the city is making. A revised [school performance framework](#) released in October 2017 includes an equity indicator that highlights performance gaps. But this overly complex rating system has come under fire for questionable results and the time is right to review and possibly create a new framework. Education leaders could also consider publishing regular equity reports similar to Washington, D.C.'s, which track student proficiency by student sub-group at the citywide, sector, and school levels. Tools like this can help to provide community members and organizations the resources to push for continued progress to meet student needs.

► Addressing equitable distribution of high-quality schools across the city

A 2017 CRPE report revealed an uneven distribution of [high-quality schools](#) across Denver, and analysis of 2013-14 data showed inequitable access to top-scoring elementary and middle schools. DPS, which authorizes the city's charter schools, uses current and projected enrollment data to identify where new seats are needed, but they should use it more consistently to drive adjustments in school supply. The district now has a process to encourage operator and school quality for new or restarted schools. DPS can build on these policies by leveraging its civic, nonprofit, and education leaders to identify barriers to strategic siting and work together to address issues—like lack of facilities—that hamper the process. To address the need for quality schools in low-enrollment areas, DPS can consider siting micro schools as extensions of existing high-quality charter or district schools, or forming partnerships with outlying districts so families can choose a high-quality school using inter-district choice.

► Improving communication with all families

DPS collects feedback through superintendent forums, a community engagement office, and nonprofit partners. But community members we interviewed in 2017 and 2018 said a perception persists that the district is not responsive to issues families have identified as priorities. Multiple interviewees also pointed to an inequity in engagement: in general, low-income families are not well-represented and some neighborhoods are more effective than others in advocating for themselves. The recently implemented [Strengthening Neighborhoods Initiative](#) is a good example of deeper engagement around issues that matter to families. District leaders should consider two additions to their current strategy. First, DPS should work to increase accessibility to and representation at forums and other events by coordinating meeting schedules through community organizations or schools and giving earlier notification of meetings. Second, the district can improve feedback by posting survey results and highlighting feedback that informed concrete changes. DPS can use current engagement strategies to identify changes that are most meaningful for families, especially families most impacted by low-performing schools. When community feedback cannot be incorporated, DPS should clearly explain the reasons through nonprofit partners or on the website.

Spotlights

As Denver Grows, DPS Works to Advance Socioeconomic Integration

For several years, Denver Public Schools and the city of Denver have seen rapid growth, but housing costs are increasing, too. As neighborhoods change, education leaders in Denver have taken steps to help make sure that emerging issues of gentrification and displacement don't mean that disadvantaged students are displaced from great school options as well. DPS has used [various controlled choice](#) strategies in the past to help integrate their schools, but as the city's demographics and populations continue to shift, DPS is moving forward with their [Strengthening Neighborhoods Initiative](#).

Through this initiative, a standing committee representative of city demographics advises and guides policy implementation related to issues around enrollment, transportation, choice, equity, community engagement, school openings and closings, and more—all in the interest of advancing socioeconomic integration and access as Denver changes. While the work of the 40-member committee is just beginning, this initiative is a proactive step toward work on a complex problem shared by many cities, using a method that incorporates the priorities of affected communities.

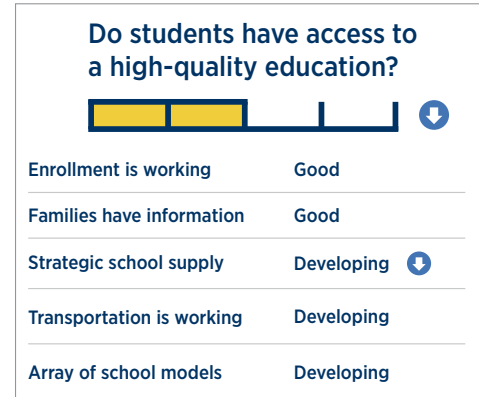
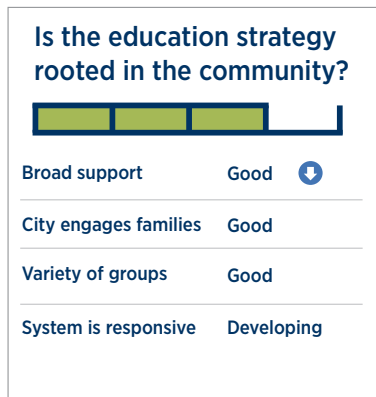
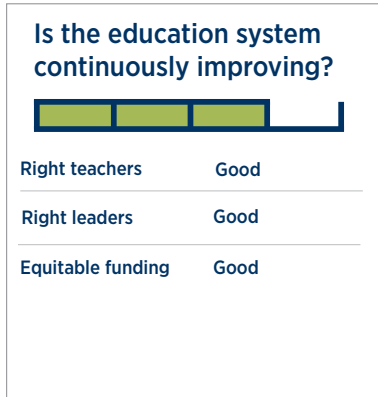
District's Talent Strategies Focus on Hard-to-Fill Positions and Retention

Denver Public Schools (DPS) is using data to identify and respond to specific gaps to ensure that all schools have teachers and leaders who are a good fit. DPS is developing strategic partnerships with special education, math, and Spanish departments at local universities to fill positions that are typically difficult to staff.

To address the gap between the demographics of the workforce and student populations, DPS has a three-prong strategy: establish new partnerships with historically black colleges and universities; participate in Make Your Mark, a citywide recruitment effort with the mayor's office and charter leaders; and use "stay interviews" to identify what supports teachers and leaders of color need from the district.

DPS identified a 20% teacher retention gap between the highest- and lowest-performing schools. The district is trying to retain effective teachers in the highest-needs schools by offering incentives of up to \$6,500. Using surveys, DPS identified what types of supports teachers working in low-performing schools want. Regional superintendents then work with principals to make school-specific changes, such as hiring more social workers.

System Reforms



Each indicator is scored with a rubric on a 4-point scale. We added the scores for the indicators to get an overall goal score. An arrow shows increase or decrease from the 2017 score.

Key Takeaways: System Reforms

Denver Public Schools (DPS) is strategic about using data to identify areas in need of improvement and develops sound, responsive policies. But the district should pay more attention to involving families and improving access to high-quality, good-fit schools.

Is the education system continuously improving?



Do schools have the resources they need? School improvement happens at the school level, but making sure resources are available requires sound, citywide policy. Having the right talent in a city is critical for schools to be able to provide students with a quality education. Schools should also have control over their budgets so they have the resources to address the needs of their student population.



Do schools have the kinds of teachers they need?

DPS uses a framework to screen initial applicants and then gives principals the opportunity to hire candidates that are the best fit for their schools. Overall, the applicant pool is judged to be high quality, but citywide, Denver still struggles to retain effective teachers in the lowest-performing schools and to find teachers of color who are representative of the communities they serve. DPS is expanding its popular teacher coaches program and giving coaches more training because of the positive student outcomes resulting from the coaching relationships. The mayor’s office, DPS, and charter leaders are working collaboratively to address these gaps across charter and district schools through programs like [Make Your Mark](#) to recruit more teachers of color, and pathway opportunities for former graduates, community members, or paraprofessionals.



Do schools have the kinds of leaders they need?

“Grow Your Own” pipelines, which recruit leaders from within schools, and teacher career pathways both provide DPS with a robust leadership applicant pool. Several nonprofits are tackling this challenge, including [Moonshot edVentures](#), which seeks out leaders of color interested in starting and leading schools, as well as through its “Talk-to-action” volunteer community that focuses on diversity and equity issues. Strategic vacancy planning is coupled with targeted recruitment to ensure every school begins the school year with a high-quality leader. DPS identified retaining and recruiting leaders of color as an area of focus and is currently conducting “stay interviews” to identify supports that will lead to a more inclusive school system. Cost of living is a barrier to attracting and keeping talented leaders.



Does funding equitably follow students?

DPS has a mature student-based allocation formula that has been steadily growing. At the last measurement in fiscal year 2017-18, DPS allocated 45% of district funds based on the educational needs of each student type.

Is the education strategy rooted in the community?



Is the whole community engaged? Education is a citywide endeavor. When families, community organizations, and city leaders have the opportunity to provide feedback and share in the vision, the strategy is more likely to be sustainable and meet the needs of all students. In this goal, we look at how well the city is doing with engaging key stakeholders.



Is there a strong and deep coalition of support for the education strategy?

The governor, mayor, and local funders have supported the superintendent’s educational strategy and the school board is often aligned when voting. However, recent moves by DPS around its complex school ratings that resulted in questionable outcomes, and its slowdown in addressing low-quality schools and opening new schools, have been perceived by some reform organizations as “backsliding” from earlier progress, leading to some concerns about Denver’s commitment to forward momentum.



Does the city engage families in educational decisions that impact them?

DPS has a rigorous vetting process for new schools that requires family input. The district vets new operators, but the community has the final vote. DPS implemented a new closure policy in 2017 that works to include community involvement more regularly than in the past, but this will be paused while the school board conducts a listening tour to better understand the community’s definitions of quality. The pause is a response to community reactions that some recent closures have still been perceived as too fast, poorly planned, and not transparent. Community members reported that while advocacy organizations are involved in school supply decisions, families are not yet being directly engaged, and there are gaps in information on what families want.



Are a variety of groups engaged in education?

Denver has a number of grassroots and grassstops organizations engaged in education, with several groups working to coordinate with parents and communities, such as [RISE Colorado](#) and [Stand for Children](#). DPS has grown the coalition that supports education to include local businesses and youth- and parent-led advocacy groups. However, some community members believe that more groups should be working with the families most impacted by low-performing schools. Community members reported in interviews that affluent parents have the tools and resources to ensure that DPS prioritizes their concerns, while lower-income families live in isolated pockets of the city with little organizational representation.



Does the education system respond to community feedback?

The Denver education system is generally responsive to families at the school level. For systemwide issues, however, DPS has traditionally relied on forums to inform families of initiatives and respond to community concerns, which lends itself to one-way communication. Some improvements are being made but community leaders reported that families don't perceive that education leaders are responsive to issues they raise, citing repeated requests for a comprehensive high school as an example. While DPS gathers data from the choice system to inform family demand, there is little process to identify what is missing that families might want. Interviewees indicate that the district lacks a feedback loop to communicate to families how their input has been incorporated or explain why it hasn't. DPS has made recent efforts toward more inclusive agenda-setting, through efforts like the [Strengthening Neighborhoods Initiative](#).

Do students have access to a high-quality education?



Do school choice and supply meet family needs? This goal addresses how well the city is doing with providing families access to quality schools. We look at what the city is doing to ensure quality schools are in every neighborhood, and how well the choice process is working for families who want to use it.



Is the enrollment process working for families?

In 2012 Denver adopted one of the nation's first unified enrollment systems to include all charter and district schools. An internal district report showed that about 8 in 10 families used the enrollment system in 2017 for a child going into Kindergarten, grade 6, or grade 9. This year, DPS moved the school search, information, and application tools online and pushed deadlines back to enable more families to access the system, and leaders report that participation rates have grown. DPS improves the enrollment process yearly, with current conversations focused on how they can hold seats for low-income students in quickly gentrifying neighborhoods. Despite improvements, community leaders report that the lottery system and preferences built into the algorithm still are not clear to families, and that eligibility for students with special needs is not clear, so work is still needed to build understanding. Among families surveyed in 2017, understanding which school a child was eligible to attend was more challenging for district families (24%) than for charter families (10%).



Do families have the information they need and know how to use it?

DPS produces [enrollment guides](#) that include all schools in the city and are available online and in print. The guides include school ratings, academic information, program offerings, curricular information, and ELL services. In interviews, community members reported that families, especially those with students with disabilities, do not always know how to use the information strategically or understand the different resources schools offer. About one in five families surveyed in 2017 said that finding enough information was a challenge during the application process. DPS recently opened a new regional engagement center in one of the hardest-to-serve areas to help support access and understanding of the enrollment process.



Is the city strategically managing its school portfolio?

As the sole authorizer of schools in Denver (district or charter), DPS has adopted transparent, data-informed school opening and closure policies. DPS uses enrollment maps to chart where quality schools are needed, projects seat availability five years in advance, and historically has invited new operators to meet needs through an [RFP process](#), though this has recently slowed. Vetting procedures identify high-quality operators that are good matches for the community. The district's complex School Performance Framework ratings came under attack by community organizations this year for producing questionable ratings. The [School Performance Compact](#) lists criteria for identifying persistently underperforming schools—both charter- and district-run—for restart, replacement, or closure. However, in June 2018 the school board announced that it will pause its closure actions for the 2018-19 school year while seeking community input on what school success should look like. Facility utilization is uneven across the city, so DPS may need to adjust procedures to address underenrollment in some schools. School quality also remains [uneven across the city](#), despite having good policies in place. About half of families surveyed in 2017 said they had a great deal or fair amount of confidence in the city to make sure every neighborhood has a good school.



Is transportation working for families?

Free transportation is provided via a circulator bus, [Success Express](#), to district, magnet, and most charter schools within certain enrollment zones. Students living outside these zones, however, are not guaranteed free public transportation to the school of their choice. In our 2017 survey, transportation was cited as a greater challenge for charter families (33%) than district families (25%). A [CRPE report](#) on transportation in Denver shows this burden disproportionately impacts low-income families living in isolated regions with a limited supply of high-quality schools. DPS is aware of these issues and is researching how they can improve access; a citywide transportation coalition is also working on the issue.



Does the school supply represent an array of models?

Of the charter and district schools that have opened, expanded, or restarted in Denver since 2014-15, about a fifth use a nontraditional instructional model. Community members report that giving preference to charter schools with proven track records makes it harder for smaller or newer models to emerge. Interviewees said that there was not enough variety to meet family needs, and that many of the more innovative school models have waiting lists. DPS has [recently slowed](#) processes to invite new school proposals, which makes it harder for new schools to open, but has also been expanding opportunities for schools to join "[innovation zones](#)," which may help diversify models. In 2017, 37% of surveyed families reported that finding a good-fit school was the greatest difficulty during the application process.

Data & Scoring

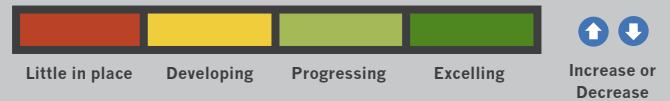
Where did we get this information?

- ▶ Interviews with district, charter, and community leaders
- ▶ Policy documents from district, charter, and state websites
- ▶ School data from each city
- ▶ A 400-parent survey administered in March, 2017 in Cleveland, Denver, Indianapolis, Memphis, New Orleans, Oakland, and Washington, D.C.

How did we score the system reforms and goals?

- ▶ Each indicator is scored with a rubric on a 4-point scale. We added the scores for the indicators to get an overall goal score. See the [Methodology & Resources](#) page for details.

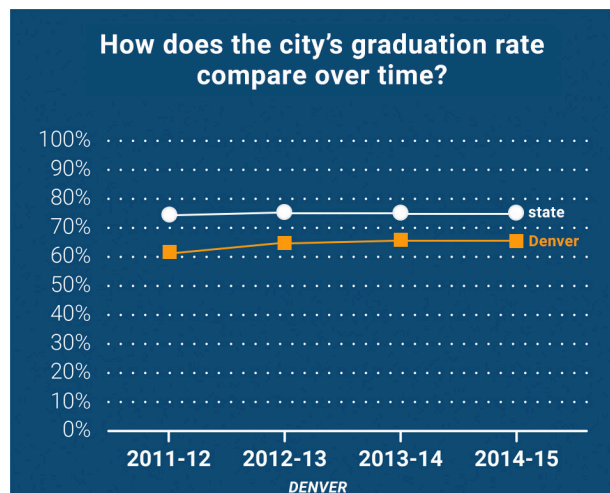
Score Levels



Key Takeaways: Student and School Outcomes

Citywide, school proficiency rates on state assessments have improved relative to the state, but outcome gains have been uneven. White students are more likely to enroll in top-scoring elementary and middle schools than in lower-performing schools, and they are overrepresented in advanced math coursework in high school. The city’s graduation rate remains 10 percentage points below the state’s.

Is the education system continuously improving?



- ▶ Between 2011-12 and 2014-15, the city’s graduation rate improved relative to the state’s, but in 2014-15 it was still below the state average.

*Data: Percent of first-time 9th grade students graduating in four years, citywide and statewide.
Source: EDfacts Initiative, U.S. Department of Education, Assessment and Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates Data, 2011-12 to 2014-15.*

How does the city's **math** performance compare to the state's over time?



Improvement
relative to state

DENVER

► Between 2011-12 and 2013-14, the math proficiency rate gap between the city and state was closing.

Data: The city's estimated gains in proficiency rates across elementary and middle schools, standardized at the state level and controlling for student demographics.

Source: Colorado State Board of Education, 2011-12 to 2013-14.

How does the city's **reading** performance compare to the state's over time?



Improvement
relative to state

DENVER

► Between 2011-12 and 2013-14, the reading proficiency rate gap between the city and state was closing.

Data: The city's estimated gains in proficiency rates across elementary and middle schools, standardized at the state level and controlling for student demographics.

Source: Colorado State Board of Education, 2011-12 to 2013-14.

Do students have access to a high-quality education?

Does every neighborhood have a school that provides a quality education to low-income students?

EEI SCORE: High [dark blue] [medium blue] [light blue] Low

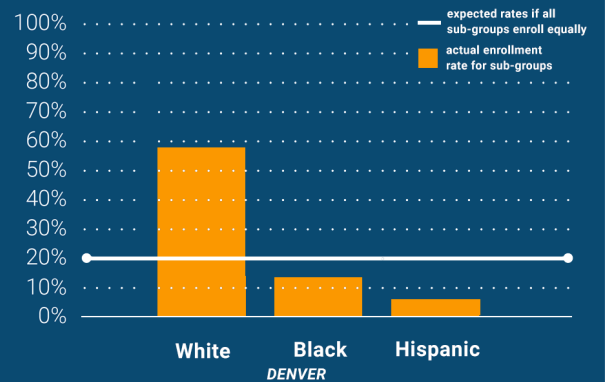


► The Education Equality Index (EEI) identifies how students from low-income families are performing in cities and schools across the country. See this interactive tool to explore individual school performance.

Data: The Education Equality Index (EEI) was supplied by Education Cities and GreatSchools. See their site for more detail.

Source: Colorado State Board of Education, 2010-11 to 2014-15; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2010-11 to 2014-15.

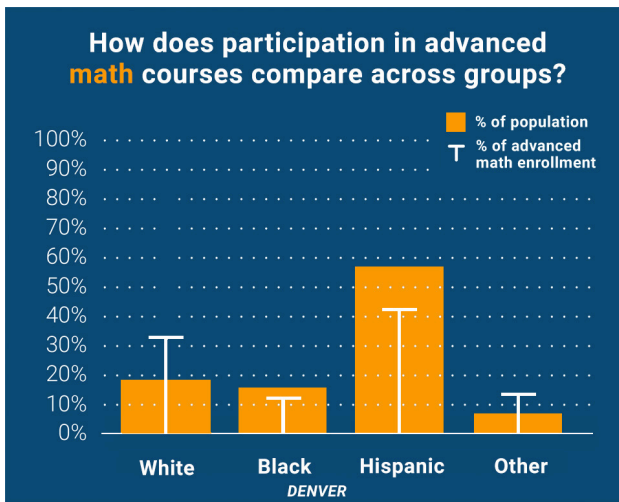
Are student sub-groups enrolling in top-scoring schools at the same rate?



► In 2013-14, 20% of students enrolled in the city's top-scoring schools. White students were enrolled in top-scoring schools at higher rates than they enrolled in medium- and low-scoring schools.

Data: This figure shows whether students are equitably enrolled in the city's top 20% performing schools, based on student proficiency in state reading assessments. Within a single student sub-group, we identify what percent is enrolled in top-, middle-, and low-performing schools. If the share of students enrolled in top-scoring schools citywide and the share of a particular sub-group are similar, this means that the sub-group is equally distributed across low-, middle-, and top-scoring schools.

Source: Colorado State Board of Education, 2010-11 to 2014-15; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2010-11 to 2014-15.



► In 2013-14, white students were enrolling in high school advanced math coursework at rates above their total high school enrollment, while Hispanic students were enrolling at rates below their total enrollment.

Data: Enrollment of students in math courses above Algebra II. Rates calculated by dividing the number of students enrolled in advanced math by the number of students in the school. Sub-group rates determined at the school level.

Source: U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection 2013-2014.

Data & Scoring

Where did we get this data?

- Publicly available state and federal data, making our results comparable and reproducible.
- The most up-to-date data available for all 18 cities at the time of our data collection. See [Methodology & Resources](#) for more information.

What makes the data citywide?

- We include all charter and district schools within the municipal boundary of a city.
- In Houston, Indianapolis, Memphis, New Orleans, and San Antonio we use school data from multiple districts within the municipal boundary.

About Denver

Denver Public Schools (DPS) has had consistent leadership since Tom Boasberg was appointed superintendent in 2009. In 2012, DPS adopted one of the nation’s first unified enrollment processes to include all charter and district schools in a city. DPS started offering Innovation Schools with autonomy in 2008. In 2016, the school board provided all district schools with flexibility over curriculum, assessment, and professional development. In 2014, the district started the Imaginarium to help principals create innovative school designs. In 2018, DPS invited schools to apply to join more autonomous “innovation zones.”

School Choice in the City

Students are guaranteed a seat at any school in their assigned enrollment zone, but can choose any school in another zone on a space-availability basis.

Governance Model

The Denver Board of Education oversees all district schools. DPS is the sole authorizer of all charter schools.

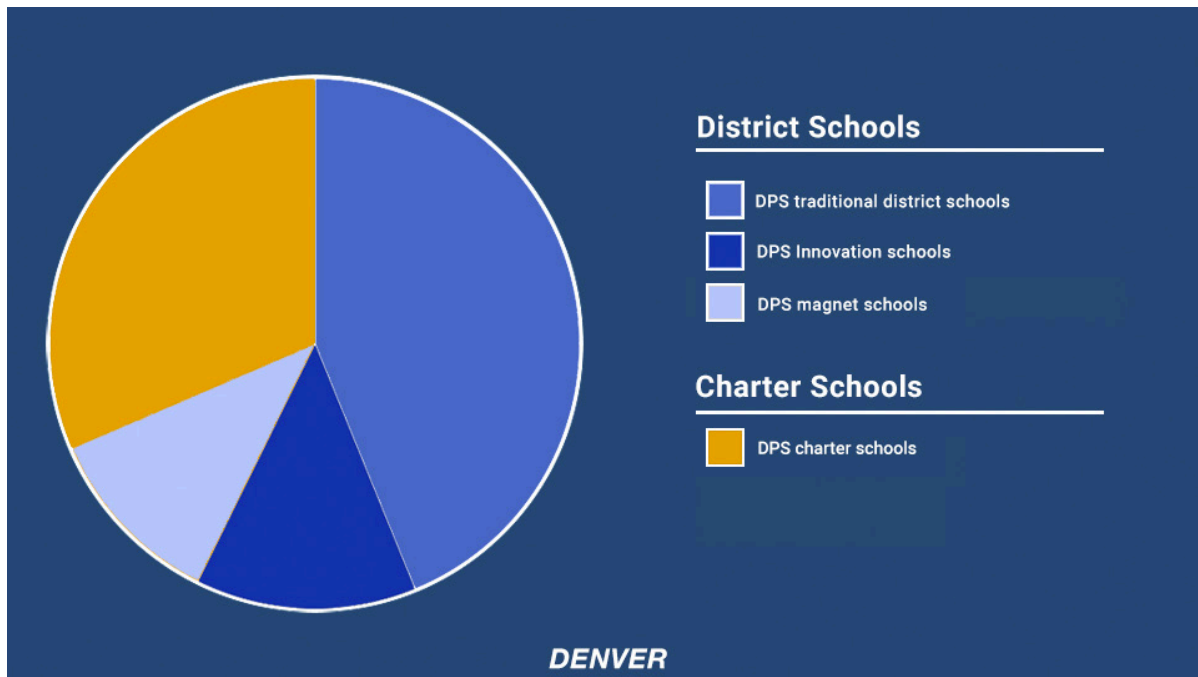
2017 District and Charter Student Body

Enrollment: 92,331 students

Race and ethnicity: 56% Hispanic, 23% white, 13% black, 8% other

Low-income: 67% free and reduced-price lunch

2017 School Composition



Source: Enrollment data from Denver Public Schools, 2016.
School data from researcher analysis of public records, 2016-17.

About This Project

The Citywide Education Progress Report looks at how a city is doing across three goals:

- The education system is continuously improving
- All students have access to a high-quality education
- The education strategy is rooted in the community

Across each goal we present indicators of what the cities are doing (what we call “system reforms”) and how they are doing (what we call “outcomes”).

Our city reports focus on education strategies for the 2017-18 school year. Our analyses reflect developments through June 2018. These are updates to our original reports from the 2016-17 school year.

To understand how well cities are doing, we used state and federal data to track school improvement, graduation rates, and student access to high-quality schools. Our student and school data cover the 2011-2012 to 2014-2015 school years. To understand city strategies and identify early progress, we relied on interviews, surveys, public documents, and news articles from 2014-2015 to the present. This analysis uses data for district and charter schools to look at all schools within municipal boundaries, rather than just one sector or district.

We cannot say that employing a certain strategy will lead to a particular result, or even whether a particular strategy is effective in these cities. But the reports can help us to see how a strategy is working, what problem areas remain, and which cities are seeing promising results.

The 18 cities in this study include Atlanta, Boston, Camden, Cleveland, Chicago, Denver, Houston, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Memphis, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, San Antonio, Tulsa, and Washington, D.C.

To learn more about the project, compare other cities, and read the cross-city analysis, visit:
research.crpe.org/projects/stepping-up



The Center on Reinventing Public Education is a research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell developing systemwide solutions for K–12 public education. Learn more about our work at crpe.org.