SCHOOL SYSTEM 20/20

IT TAKES A SYSTEM
DENVER, COLORADO

Redesigning a District for Equity and Excellence

SCHOOL SYSTEM
20/20

What Is School System 20/20?

ERS' School System 20/20 is a framework to guide district transformation so that every school succeeds for every student *because* of the system—not in spite of it. This framework can help district leaders identify and prioritize the system changes that are necessary to improve student outcomes. This case study explores Denver's experience through the School System 20/20 lens.
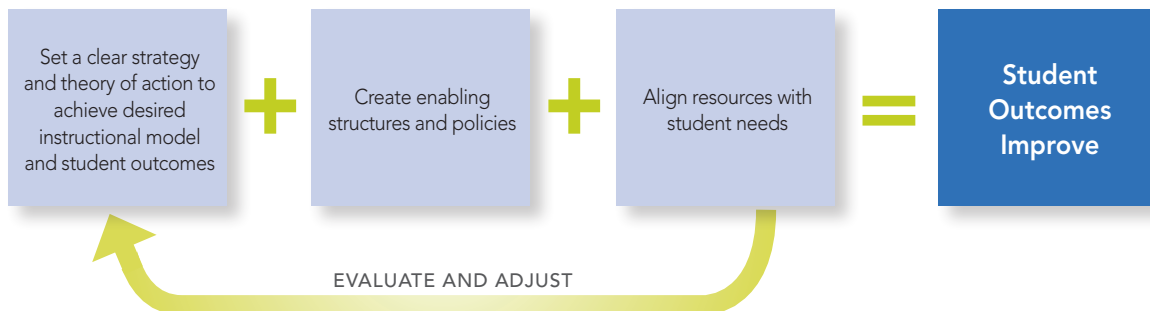
The School System 20/20 framework is made up of three parts:

- **A vision** of school system success, comprising seven key areas of transformation (as described on the following page)

- **A diagnostic** that includes qualitative and quantitative assessments to help districts measure and track their progress in creating the conditions that promote practices and resource use to support excellent instruction

- **A process** for reviewing those assessments, and collaboratively identifying changes to system conditions and practices that will lead to improved student performance

School System 20/20 is based on our years of experience working with a diverse array of school systems, our extensive collection of data from those districts, and published research on what works best for students.

When we engage with districts using School System 20/20, it serves as a data-informed, holistic framework for strategic planning, one that helps districts rebuild their school systems from the inside out. No two school systems that take the School System 20/20 approach will look alike. But each will be the kind of district that sets a clear strategy and theory of action, is willing to transform "legacy" structures and policies, chooses strategies to better align resources to student needs, and continuously evaluates and adjusts. We believe this process will lead to improving outcomes for every child, in every school.

The Strategic District Transformation Process

| Set a clear strategy and theory of action to achieve desired instructional model and student outcomes | **+** | Create enabling structures and policies | **+** | Align resources with student needs | **=** | **Student Outcomes Improve** |

EVALUATE AND ADJUST

SCHOOL SYSTEM
20/20

From this:	To this:

STANDARDS & INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCES
Inconsistent standards that don't prepare kids to think critically, creatively, or collaboratively.

College- and career-ready standards aligned with rigorous curricula, assessments, and other instructional resources to achieve them.

TEACHING
Isolated job, limited opportunities for growth or teaming, and career and compensation paths unconnected to performance or contribution.

Strategic hiring and assignment to schools; support and time for team collaboration and professional learning; career path and compensation to enable growth and reward contribution.

SCHOOL DESIGN
A one-size-fits-all learning environment with rigid schedules and class sizes that don't accommodate different learning needs.

Schools with restructured roles, teams, and schedules that enable personalized time and attention, teacher collaboration, and professional learning.

LEADERSHIP
Limited autonomy, flexibility, and support that do little to develop and promote strong leadership.

Leadership roles with clear goals, accountability, and career paths, and the flexibility and support to achieve results.

SCHOOL SUPPORT
A central office focused on compliance and oversight rather than productive partnerships with schools.

A central office that is a service and strategy partner, leveraging data to increase efficiency and identify best practices.

FUNDING & PORTFOLIO
Wide funding variances across schools, even after adjusting for differences in student needs.

Systems that allocate resources equitably, according to need. A mix of school sizes, locations, and programming that balances choice, equitable access, and cost.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
Schools struggling to deliver learning outcomes on their own, without a systematic approach to partnering.

Partnerships with families, community institutions, youth service organizations, and online instructors to serve students' needs.

"Change takes time, coupled with a willingness to listen, learn, admit you're wrong, and make changes as you go forward in the approach you've taken."

— Superintendent Tom Boasberg
Denver Public Schools

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Denver Reforms at a Glance

Over the last decade, Denver Public Schools deliberately redesigned each part of the system and focused on continuous improvement at all levels to create the conditions that enable all students to succeed.

LEADERSHIP REFORMS

Invest in leadership development at all levels

- Assemble a strong district leadership team focused on continuous improvement
- Build a strong culture of shared values
- Increase support and flexibility for principals and aspiring principals
  - Implement principal effectiveness measurements focused on promoting growth
  - Strengthen the principal pipeline
  - Support struggling schools to attract and retain high-performing principals
- Establish teacher leadership roles to support school-based professional growth and provide career opportunities

TEACHING REFORMS

Attract, develop, and retain high-performing teachers

- Implement teacher effectiveness measurements focused on promoting growth
- Implement structures and processes to attract and retain more high-quality teachers in high-need schools
- Launch and evolve the DPS Professional Compensation (ProComp) system for teachers

FUNDING & PORTFOLIO REFORMS

Proactively manage a portfolio of district-run and charter schools

- Set a high bar for school performance
- Rigorously manage portfolio of schools by cultivating new, high-quality schools and closing or replacing chronic low performers
- Expand choice and access to high-quality seats
- Level the playing field through student-based budgeting and school-level flexibility

SCHOOL SUPPORT REFORMS

Provide high-quality, differentiated school support

STANDARDS & INSTRUCTION:

- Invest in scope, sequence, curriculum, and assessments aligned with college- and career-ready standards

SCHOOL SUPPORT:

- Increase flexibility for schools
- Increase instructional superintendent support to principals, particularly in low-performing schools
- Redesign school planning, staffing, and budgeting process

SCHOOL DESIGN:

- Leverage school design decisions to support teachers and students through more collaborative planning time and lower teacher loads in math and ELA

It Takes a System

Redesigning a District for Equity and Excellence

Districts across the country are struggling to balance excellence with equity, higher standards with increasing student needs, and charter school growth with district goals. Denver Public Schools (DPS) provides an inspiring example of the power of a long-term, integrated approach to district transformation. Over the last decade, DPS became one of the fastest-improving large districts in the country—achieving significant improvement across all student subgroups. It accomplished this by taking on big changes, deliberately redesigning each part of the system, and focusing on continuous improvement at all levels.[1] Unlike many city districts, DPS included charter and innovation schools as integral parts of its "system" and its improvement strategy. "Change takes time," says DPS Superintendent Tom Boasberg, "coupled with a willingness to listen, learn, admit you're wrong, and make changes as you go forward in the approach you've taken."[2] Denver's journey demonstrates how much progress a school system can make when it strategically balances urgent action with the time required to do it right.

The results speak for themselves. Between 2009 and 2013, DPS students improved faster than those in nearly all other large school districts in the country, based on national comparative data out of the Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis of NAEP scores.[3] In 2009, average DPS student performance was a year and a half behind expected grade level achievement. By 2013, that gap was reduced by a full year. This improvement occurred across all student subgroups: students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) and non-FRL students, white and non-white students, and students in charter schools and district-run schools.

**CHANGE IN DENVER'S AVERAGE GRADE EQUIVALENT UNITS IN ELA[4]**

2009-2013, Districts serving more than 25,000 students
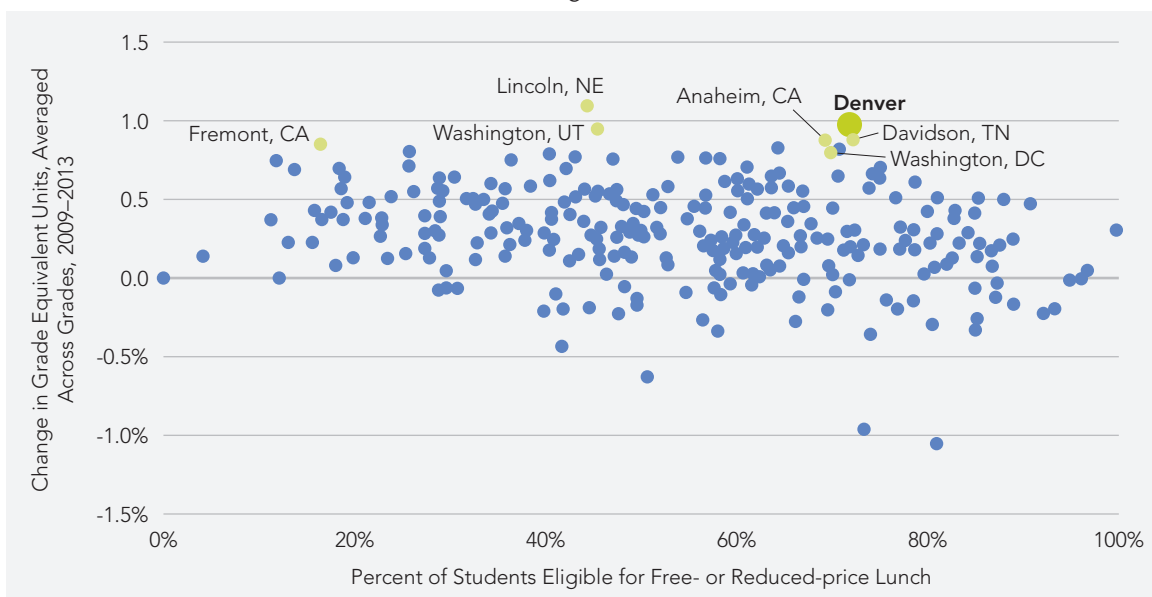
Between 2004 and 2014, DPS student proficiency increased from 24 percent to 47 percent in math and 45 percent to 54 percent in ELA. In the 2014-15 school year, Colorado transitioned from the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) and Transitional Colorado Assessment Program (TCAP) to the more rigorous PARCC assessment. This change makes it difficult to analyze performance trends after 2014, but there are strong indications that performance in DPS continued its upward trajectory. DPS narrowed the proficiency gap with the rest of the state from 16 percentage points in 2014—the year before transitioning to the more rigorous college- and career-ready standards and PARCC exam—to only 5 percentage points in 2016. The Colorado Growth Model evaluates and ranks districts based on the rate of growth in academic achievement; the district improved from the bottom quartile of districts in the state to the fiftieth percentile by 2016.[5] Other indicators improved as well: the four-year graduation rate increased from 51.8 percent in 2010 to 67.2 percent in 2016, the dropout rate decreased from 6.4 percent to 4 percent, and the percent of students scoring three or higher on Advanced Placement exams increased from 37.1 percent in 2012 to 44.5 percent in 2016.[6]

PERCENT OF DPS AND COLORADO STUDENTS PROFICIENT & ADVANCED

CSAP/TCAP Reading to PARCC ELA
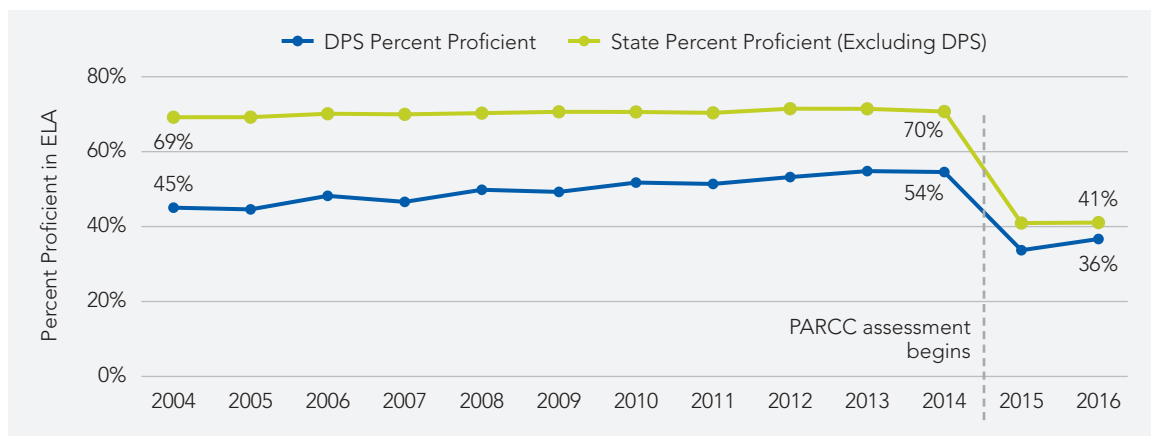
Source: Colorado Department of Education, Achievement Precentile Rank Reports.

The Denver Story

Reform efforts in DPS began over a decade ago, but by 2010 only 52 percent of DPS students scored proficient or above on the Colorado State Assessment Program (CSAP) standardized test. A growing student population with expanding needs added to the challenge. By 2014, 31 percent of the district's students were English language learners (ELL), and 72 percent of students were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (FRL).

DPS created a path for long-term, systemwide improvement and lasting change that set it apart from other urban districts. District leaders embraced the time required to think, gather input and ownership from those who would be affected, and communicate changes. DPS's transformation centered on four key elements:

1. Invest in leadership development at all levels

2. Attract, develop, and retain high-performing teachers

3. Proactively manage a portfolio of district-run and charter schools

4. Provide high-quality, differentiated school support

Theory of Action

DPS's theory of action was driven by a strong belief that high-quality teachers and school leaders who have the flexibilities, supports, and expertise they need will make the best decisions for their schools and students. Therefore, the role of the district is to create the conditions for schools to thrive. DPS redefined the role of the district to one that simultaneously gives schools flexibility and develops the system-level structures, policies, and processes that will increase the odds of all schools achieving success in an urgent timeframe. This approach contrasts with the most extreme definitions of "autonomy" or "portfolio" districts, which advocate for the elimination or drastic reduction of the role of the district.

Despite these impressive gains, DPS leaders are the first to point out that their work is far from over. Overall, proficiency rates are still well short of the district's 2020 goal of 80 percent overall proficiency (which was set under the previous CMAS assessment), and because all subgroups of students improved, achievement gaps have not yet narrowed.[7] However, the district continues its pursuit of equity *and* excellence by improving the redesigned processes and structures that it has put in place and expanding the quality of school options, especially in the highest-need neighborhoods of the city.

This case study examines the strategies DPS pursued within the four key design elements of DPS's transformation, focused primarily on the time between the 2009-10 and 2015-16 school years, to understand the success these strategies created and highlight areas for continued work.

Understanding DPS Through the Lens of School System 20/20

DPS leadership evolved its transformation strategy over more than a decade. In this case study, we use the ERS School System 20/20 framework as a lens to measure and comprehensively describe the specific ways it changed the system-level conditions that enable and require great schools and how it supported schools to improve practice.

The School System 20/20 framework provides a common language that helps education leaders understand and compare the variety of ways that districts pursue system-level reforms over time and achieve improved student results. In our first case study, "Back from the Brink: A Case Study of Lawrence Public Schools," we applied the School System 20/20 lens to understand how a chronically low-performing district made encouraging progress in just four years. In our second case study, "The Rewards of Perseverance," we explored how Aldine Independent School District drove student change by combining a clear vision, stable leadership, and deliberate evolution in response to change.

Denver presents a different story in a different context—but one that is equally inspiring and particularly timely given the challenges that urban school systems currently face across the country. ERS has partnered with DPS over the past 10 years around its redesign, focusing on quantifying resource use and redesigning the processes and structures that determine the allocation of resources in System 20/20 focus areas, such as funding systems, school design, and spending on teachers.

As we have done for every System 20/20 case study, we we analyzed interviews of Denver district and school leaders, teachers, and others involved in the reform effort, and analyzed the district's policies and actual resource-use practices through the lens of our diagnostic assessment. Using School System 20/20's seven areas of transformation as a guide, we identified four key elements that characterize Denver's transformation:

1. **Invest in leadership development at all levels.** DPS created a culture of distributed leadership, continuous improvement, and shared ownership for student outcomes by increasing support for principals and aspiring principals; establishing school-based teacher leadership roles; and building a strong central leadership team from both within and outside of DPS.

2. **Attract, develop, and retain high-performing teachers.** DPS built an integrated system to assess and develop teachers to encourage continuous growth and career development, developed structures to encourage collaborative professional learning, and created a compensation system that rewards professional growth and contribution.

3. **Proactively manage a portfolio of district-run and charter schools.** DPS accelerated overall district performance growth by increasing access to high-quality schools. The district pursued this goal by implementing student-based budgeting, expanding school choice, leveraging its chartering authority to open high-quality district-run and charter schools, and administering a rigorous school accountability system.

4. **Provide high-quality, differentiated school support.** DPS provided a variety of differentiated supports to help school leaders implement strategic school designs and strong professional learning practices, including increased flexibilities and support in the school planning process.

Leadership: Invest in Leadership Development at All Levels

DPS's focus on human capital is grounded in the belief that recruiting, retaining, and continuously developing the right people across the district is critical for success.[8] The central office and school leaders worked collaboratively to create a culture of distributed leadership by giving school leaders, teacher leaders, and teachers working with students every day the support they needed to take ownership for student outcomes. DPS emphasized the development of strong leaders at all levels of the district and defined a variety of career paths for teachers that leverage each employee's strengths and experience, increase support for aspiring principals, and give the option of remaining in the classroom full- or part-time.

SUMMARY OF LEADERSHIP ACTIONS

	From this:	To this:	DPS Actions
LEADERSHIP	Limited autonomy, flexibility, and support that do little to develop and promote strong leadership.	Leadership roles with clear goals, accountability, and career paths, and the flexibility and support to achieve results.	• Assemble a strong district leadership team focused on continuous improvement. • Build a strong culture of shared values. • Increase support and flexibility for principals and aspiring principals. • Establish teacher leadership roles to support school-based professional growth and provide career opportunities.

Leadership

☑ **Assemble a strong district leadership team focused on continuous improvement.**

From the beginning of his tenure, Superintendent Boasberg and his team sought out "best in class" contributors, brought them into the district, and found the best position for each person over time. The team tapped people from a variety of backgrounds, including DPS veterans, and outsiders from government, charter schools, and the private sector, to build strong, stable leadership at all levels. It also took advantage of a variety of innovative external leadership development programs, including the Broad Fellowship and Education Pioneers, to identify individuals with a passion for education and strong analytic skills. Team members moved fluidly among roles and departments, breaking down silos

and promoting a culture of high standards, data-driven continuous improvement, and collaboration in which "the healthy exchange of differing ideas ultimately builds a stronger organization."[9]

A testament to this approach is the ability of team members to fill leadership voids. In 2016, Superintendent Boasberg took a sabbatical that coincided with the departure of Chief Academic and Innovation Officer Alyssa Whitehead-Bust. DPS maintained momentum and continued to improve outcomes for students under the leadership of Interim Superintendent Susana Cordova.

☑ Build a strong culture of shared values.

District leaders in DPS recognized the importance of shared values and culture throughout the entire district. While the seeds were planted through the careful selection of the leadership team, the team then took the time to engage all levels of DPS in weighing in on those values. "We brought over a thousand educators together for an entire day to choose what the shared core values of the Denver Public Schools really are," described Superintendent Boasberg.[10] "It was a remarkable day … [The group] voted on six shared core values, which are Students First, Integrity, Equity, Collaboration, Accountability, and Fun."

The district encouraged its values-driven culture in hiring and decision-making. The district embedded this focus on values and culture into the employee recruiting and onboarding efforts. At the leadership level, Superintendent Boasberg explained, "[We ask] how is this decision consistent with our values? … We do a lot of development for our leaders on how to be values-based leaders—how to be out in front on difficult decisions. We talk about how to share a vision of who you are and what you care about and what your values are in a way that most people respect."[11]

☑ Increase support and flexibility for principals and aspiring principals.

DPS recognized the pivotal role that high-performing principals play in school culture and performance, so the school system implemented a series of changes to support principals and aspiring principals and enhance its principal pipeline.

○ **Implement principal effectiveness measurements focused on promoting growth.** The district designed a system to establish clear expectations, align and differentiate supports against these expectations, and use them to evaluate and develop school leaders. The LEAD system was designed in 2012 and 2013 to help new school leaders grow from their role as first-year assistant principals into highly effective principals. LEAD held leaders accountable for student success and their impact on teacher practice by evaluating leaders on student growth and professional practice. Instructional superintendents reviewed LEAD results to identify strengths and areas for growth, and then used that information to guide their conversations with principals and to determine how often to make visits. Results from the annual principals' survey were encouraging. In 2016, principal survey responses reflected positive experiences in this process: 82 percent of principals agreed or strongly agreed that their supervisor "ensures that I receive feedback and coaching that

improve my job performance," and 86 percent agreed or strongly agreed that their supervisor "monitors my progress against my goals throughout the year."[12] DPS continued to evolve the rubric used for LEAD to track the skill development progression expected of school leaders from first-year assistant principals to successful veteran principals and to more fully capture distributed leadership and measure the skills of principals as "leaders of leaders."

○ **Strengthen the principal pipeline.** Since 2009, DPS has expanded programs to build a principal pipeline.[13] The first of these was the Ritchie program, which began in 2003 and was run in collaboration with the University of Denver's Morgridge College of Education, which offered a one-year internship and coursework to aspiring principals.[14] Based on the success of this program, DPS developed several other programs with high standards for participation designed to ensure diversity in the pipeline and provide leadership training opportunities to aspiring principals that would develop them into the type of leaders DPS needed. Once hired, new principals and assistant principals received ongoing personalized professional development and guidance on instructional leadership through the New Leader Academy, under the umbrella of the Denver Lead Today (DLT) program run by the district.[15]

○ **Support struggling schools to attract and retain high-performing principals.** DPS took several actions to work with existing leaders to ensure that the highest-need schools could attract and retain the school leaders they needed. This included an annual identification of expected principal vacancies across the district and the current principals or assistant principals who could fill them. Once identified, the district held conversations with these leaders to encourage them to apply. In 2016, DPS implemented a policy that gave principals in high-need schools additional pay based on the number of years they stayed in that school.[16] In the 2006-17 school year, the district changed practices for the following year hiring cycle to stagger open positions so that the highest priority positions are posted first, ensuring that they have the best selection of candidates.

☑ Establish teacher leadership roles to support school-based professional growth and provide career opportunities.

In 2011, DPS recognized that the teacher growth and performance system LEAP (explained further in next section), in addition to other programs and responsibilities, placed an unsustainable burden on principals, and that assistant principal positions alone were not enough to support increasing demands on time. In addition, the district wanted to provide more support to teachers from peers who had a close relationship with them and their students. A $30 million grant from the Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) of the U.S. Education Department enabled the district to build upon LEAP to support more distributed leadership within schools by piloting teacher leadership positions in a limited number of schools in 2012.[17]

Results of the pilot were convincing–90 percent of teachers perceived their teacher leaders as effective or highly effective.[18] Based on this positive data, DPS expanded the pilot into the Teacher Leadership & Collaboration (TLC) model, whereby schools receive district funding for teacher leadership roles. Unlike many other teacher leader models, the TLC model aims at changing the entire way schools are organized, grouping teachers into teams in which the teacher team lead shares accountability with the principal for group performance and development. High-need schools received more funding to implement these teaching teams, and all schools customized the TLC model and organized teachers into teams in ways that best fit the school context. The team lead and senior team lead roles represent a significant investment of resources behind the firm belief that teachers benefit from working in small teams with the goal of approximately one senior team lead for every six to eight teachers. Principals select team leads through a formal application and review process. The team leads are then responsible for coaching and developing their teams through collaborative planning time, observation and feedback sessions, and co-teaching. Boasberg describes the program as a "strong investment in capacity building for our team leads at the district level" while it shifts the principal's primary role from "a 'leader of teachers' to a 'leader of leaders.'"[20]

Examples of these roles include senior team leads, who spend half the day teaching in the classroom and half the day leading a team of teachers with customized support that includes one-on-one coaching, observations, feedback, and daily team planning/collaboration time, and new teacher ambassadors, who carry a full teaching load but also take on logistical and cohort support for new teachers.[21] While the district funded teacher leadership roles for every school, schools determined how to best leverage the roles, organize teams, and determine who fills the roles.
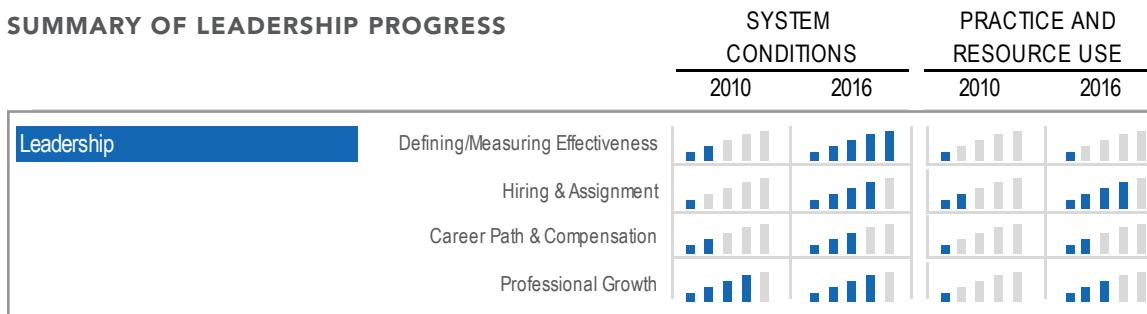
By the 2017-18 school year, 93 percent of the district's non-alternative schools will be implementing the teacher leader model. The implementation of the model is left up to schools and it therefore varies; however, leading indicators across the district are promising, especially for those teachers who have been on a teacher-led team for the longest. Teachers reported they receive more feedback to improve and greater confidence in their team leads; team leads and principals indicated they like the role and think it is benefitting teachers.

Leadership Results and Growth Opportunities

DPS significantly improved enabling conditions through the introduction of the LEAD system and changes in compensation and support for principals and the teacher leadership program. It is also beginning to see improvements in practice and resource use, though these changes are more modest to date because the system level changes are so recent. The 2016-17 school year expansion of teacher leadership roles and increase in in-school principal retention rates are not reflected in 2015-16 results. This chart summarizes the significant progress made by DPS between the 2009-10 and 2015-16 school years as reflected by the School System 20/20 assessment tools.

SUMMARY OF LEADERSHIP PROGRESS

		SYSTEM CONDITIONS		PRACTICE AND RESOURCE USE	
		2010	2016	2010	2016
Leadership	Defining/Measuring Effectiveness				
	Hiring & Assignment				
	Career Path & Compensation				
	Professional Growth				

Moving Forward

DPS's focus on principal support and development provides a strong foundation for moving forward. The district can continue to encourage its highest-performing leaders to move to and remain in DPS's highest-need schools. As it continues to expand its teacher leadership program, it will be important for schools to learn from each other about the most effective ways to leverage these roles to support the vision of the school and accelerate student success.

- **Expand efforts to attract and retain high performers in high-need, low-performing schools.**
  Attracting, developing, and retaining high-quality leaders in DPS's highest-need schools is critical to closing achievement gaps and continuing to improve performance. While DPS has made significant progress in this area, it should explore ways to continue its momentum in this area, such as:

  - Expand support available to school leaders in high-need, low-performing schools, focused on developing their understanding of the flexibilities afforded them by the central office and encouraging them to take advantage of resources made available by the central office to maximize the ways in which people, time, and money are organized to support teachers and students.[22]

  - Revisit the annual planning, budgeting, hiring, and scheduling cycle to ensure integration across all areas of the process.

- **Leverage teacher leader success to expand roles, especially in high-need schools.**
  DPS can continue to identify best practices and share these across schools to maximize the value of their teacher leadership investment, and maintain high satisfaction with the program.

Teaching: Attract, Develop, and Retain High-Performing Teachers

DPS created a strategic human capital system that integrated its individual components so each supported the other and made decisions with an eye toward ensuring that new reforms could reasonably be sustained over time. For example, when DPS changed teacher compensation to professionalize the treatment of teachers and recognize their contributions, the district also focused on accountability and support for continuous improvement in teacher practice. When it increased the time required of principals to coach and develop teachers (as well as conduct meaningful teacher evaluations), the district added teacher leader positions to free principal time and provide teachers with more frequent coaching.

SUMMARY OF TEACHING ACTIONS

	From this:	To this:	DPS Actions
TEACHING	Isolated job, limited opportunities for growth or teaming, and career and compensation paths unconnected to performance or contribution.	Strategic hiring and assignment to schools; support and time for team collaboration and professional learning; career path and compensation to enable growth and reward contribution.	• Implement teacher effectiveness measurements focused on promoting growth. • Implement structures and processes to attract and retain more high-quality teachers in high-need schools. • Launch and evolve the DPS Professional Compensation (ProComp) system for teachers.

Teaching

☑ Implement teacher effectiveness measurements focused on promoting growth.

In spring 2010, the Colorado legislature passed Senate Bill 191, a law that "changes the way all educators (principals/assistant principals, teachers, and specialized service professionals) will be evaluated in Colorado, with the ultimate goal of continuously supporting educators' professional growth and, in turn, accelerating student results."[23] In response, DPS worked closely with the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) to develop a new teacher growth and performance system built on the expectation that teachers and leaders will develop and grow over the course of their careers. To balance that expectation, the district took on the responsibility of providing high-quality

tools to support teachers in this growth. The Leading Effective Academic Practice (LEAP) teacher growth and performance system was piloted in the 2010-11 school year and fully implemented in 2013-14. It provided a rigorous, comprehensive structure to evaluate teachers based on a combination of principal observations, peer observations, student perception, and student growth. The work with DCTA on LEAP created a shared definition for high-quality teaching to be updated regularly to reflect new standards and evolving understandings of effective practice. LEAP places teachers into four performance categories that the district uses to encourage the career development of high-performing teachers, support struggling teachers, and when necessary, manage out chronically low-performing teachers. When implemented faithfully, principals match teachers with needed supports. Given the need for ongoing, consistent, and high-quality feedback for teachers to ensure ongoing professional growth, DPS launched teacher leadership roles to provide growth opportunities for teachers, provide additional teacher feedback and help principals carve out the time required to conduct more observations. By the 2017-18 school year, 93 percent of district-run schools will have teacher leadership positions.

In a 2016 survey, 85 percent of teachers and 92 percent of principals agreed that "in my school we use LEAP results to align professional learning to each teacher's strength and growth areas," and 69 percent of teachers and 96 percent of principals believed that LEAP contributed to improving teaching at their school. Additionally, LEAP improved the district's ability to keep its best teachers and improve or exit underperforming teachers. In 2016, over 90 percent of teachers evaluated as "distinguished" stayed with the district, while 36 percent of the relatively few teachers rated below "effective" left the district, with many of those remaining being early career teachers who, research shows, will likely improve over time. This is one of the highest differentials in teacher retention between high and low performers that ERS has observed.[24] As part of the implementation of SB 191 in 2013, teachers who demonstrated three consecutive years of effective ratings on LEAP earned non-probationary status.[25] Teachers can return to probationary status after two consecutive years of ineffective ratings. Furthermore, when separated from the entire teaching population, the strategic retention rate for non-probationary teachers remains high.[26]

"In a 2016 survey, 85 percent of teachers and 92 percent of principals agreed that "in my school we use LEAP results to align professional learning to each teacher's strength and growth areas," and 69 percent of teachers and 96 percent of principals believed that "LEAP will contribute to improving teaching at their school."

PERCENTAGE POINT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN RETENTION OF TEACHERS RATED BELOW EFFECTIVE VS. RATED ABOVE EFFECTIVE IN 2016
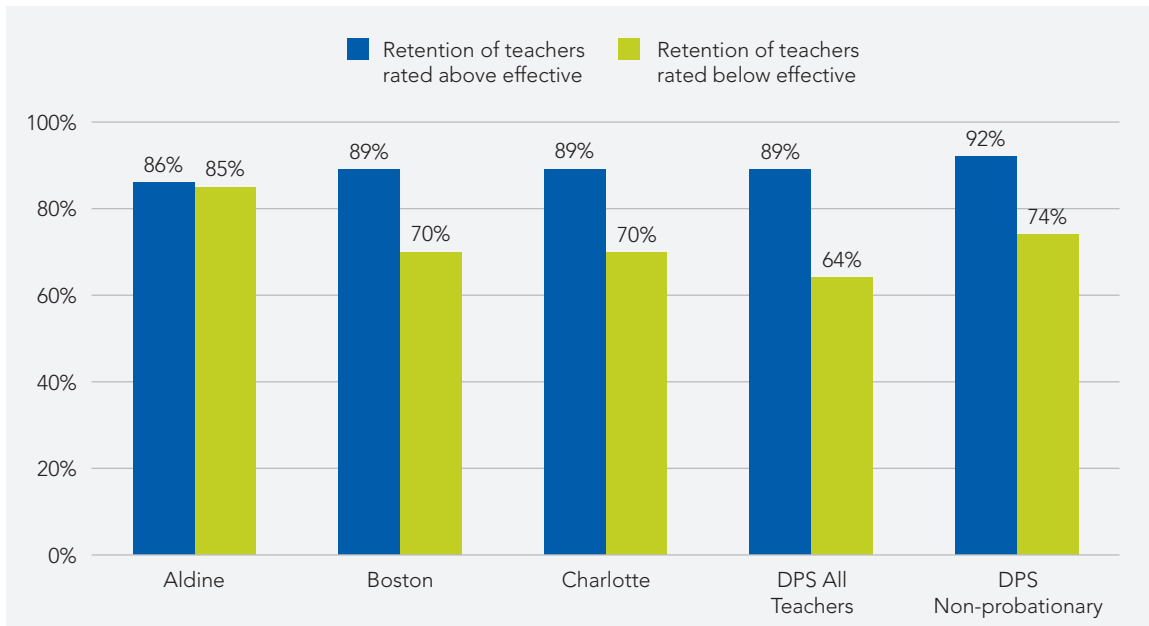
☑ **Implement structures and processes to attract and retain more high-quality teachers in high-need schools.**

Although the district improved its ability to attract and retain high-performing talent, retention rates in high-need, low-performing schools remained low. In the lowest-performing quartile of schools, 35 percent of teachers are novices and 54 percent leave the school after two years. In contrast, at the highest-performing quartile of schools, 20 percent of teachers are novices and 36 percent leave the school within two years. In 2014, the superintendent convened 20 of the strongest teachers in the district to form the Teacher Retention Task Force to develop strategies for retaining great teachers in the highest-need schools.[27] Based on the group's feedback, DPS undertook actions to ensure that highly effective teachers choose to teach, and remain, in challenging schools.

1. **Increase support for the social and emotional needs of students.** Supporting the Whole Child is one of the five goals of the Denver 20/20 plan, aimed toward closing the achievement gap and preparing all students for college and career success.[28] Teacher survey data suggested that while teachers in high-needs schools believed in this goal, they found it overwhelming to attend to without extra help. The city of Denver passed a "mill levy" in 2016 that provided

additional funding for DPS with the largest investment aimed toward increasing social and emotional support for students in the highest-needs schools.[29] This increased support not only will help students, but will also allow more time for teachers to focus on academic instruction.

2. **Support teacher growth by expanding the teacher leader program.** High-needs schools received additional teacher leader positions, allowing teacher-led teams to be much smaller than those in lower-need schools. These smaller groups enabled team leaders to provide teachers—especially the novice teachers—more support and feedback**.**

3. **Attract highly effective teachers through the following strategies:**

• **Offer incentive payments to teachers.** DPS's Professional Compensation System (ProComp) includes a $2,500 annual incentive for teachers teaching in "hard-to-serve schools," and the district launched a pair of incentives for working—and staying—in the district's "highest-priority schools" in 2015; together, these highest-priority incentives can equal up to $4,000 per year. As of 2016, ProComp also includes a $5,000 annual payment for working in high-performing/high-growth schools, making high-need schools less relatively attractive to teachers. DPS and the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) are working to address this mismatch for the next evolution of ProComp.

• **Replace forced placements with mutual consent.** In accordance with Colorado's Senate Bill 191, the district revised its staffing rules and processes to eliminate forced placements and ensure that all instructional positions are filled by mutual consent. This means that, regardless of a teacher's seniority, the school leadership and the teacher must agree that the school placement works well.[30] It also gives principals more control and increases their hiring flexibility, ensuring that assignments match teachers' skills and interests to school and student needs.

• **Remove bureaucratic barriers to early hiring.** The district moved up internal timelines to enable principals to post and hire externally by March, getting closer to the strategic practice identified by ERS of filling 90 percent of positions at least three months before the beginning of the school year. Schools with state innovation status could begin their hiring process in December, but DPS is looking at how to help schools take full advantage of these changes.

☑ Launch and evolve the DPS Professional Compensation System (ProComp) for teachers.

When it was created in 2005, education scholars heralded ProComp as one of the most innovative compensation systems in the country. It was designed to demonstrate the district's commitment to teachers, professionalizing their role and rewarding them for growth and contribution. Voters approved a mill levy that enabled DPS to raise tax revenue to increase compensation for teachers by demonstrating that the new ProComp system better aligned teacher compensation with teacher, school, and district goals.[31] Rather than determining pay through "steps" (years of experience)
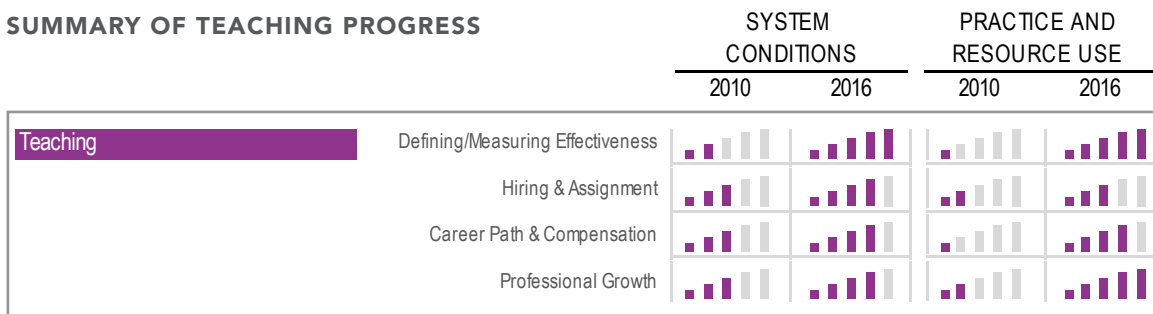
and "lanes" (educational attainment), teachers could build their base salaries and receive one-time incentives through a variety of factors.[32] ProComp rewarded teachers for continuous improvement in their practice measured through professional development, student learning objectives, and school-wide student results. It also provided additional incentives for working in high-need schools and hard-to-fill positions.

In 2008, DPS agreed to update ProComp with the DCTA, adjusting the incentives and stipend amounts, and redefining what is included in base pay. While ProComp was on the leading edge of teacher compensation when it was first introduced, numerous reports found inconclusive results on Procomp's ability to impact student performance based on the combination of changes in district conditions and priorities, the local labor market, and the evolution of the teaching role in DPS.[33] The district is currently partnering with the DCTA to update ProComp to better reflect current needs.

Teaching Results and Growth Opportunities

While DPS's enabling system conditions for improving teaching effectiveness were already strong in 2009, the district evolved them further through the introduction of LEAP and TLC, and was then able to drive improvement in practice through a deliberate, collaborative, and data-driven approach to identifying and expanding promising practices. The chart below summarizes progress made by DPS from 2009-10 to 2015-16 as reflected by the School System 20/20 assessment tool.

SUMMARY OF TEACHING PROGRESS

		SYSTEM CONDITIONS		PRACTICE AND RESOURCE USE	
		2010	2016	2010	2016
Teaching	Defining/Measuring Effectiveness				
	Hiring & Assignment				
	Career Path & Compensation				
	Professional Growth				

Moving Forward

DPS designed a robust teacher growth and performance system to monitor progress and encourage growth. The district also continues to work to place high-quality teachers in the highest-need schools. Moving forward, there are two key areas where DPS can focus to build on this strong foundation:

- **Continue to leverage teacher growth and performance systems and professional learning structures to improve teacher effectiveness.**
  Like teachers across the country, teachers in DPS are adjusting their instructional practices to align with the new, more rigorous college- and career-ready standards and to develop approaches to help students transition to new ways of learning. The LEAP and LEAD evaluation systems, coupled with DPS's investment in school-based teacher leaders, provides a strong foundation for this work. DPS can leverage information obtained through teacher and leader evaluations and observations to target support and professional learning opportunities and to identify high performers within and across schools who can help colleagues in their areas of strength.

- **Expand efforts to attract and retain high performers in high-need schools.**
  Attracting, developing, and retaining high-quality teachers in DPS's highest-need schools is critical to closing achievement gaps and continuing to improve performance. DPS should explore ways to expand efforts in this area, including:

  ○ Attract and retain more high-performing school leaders, as research suggests this has a powerful impact on teacher retention (see page 9).

  ○ Provide more hiring flexibility to school leaders.

  ○ Redefine, align, and expand financial and career incentives while limiting incentives in lower-need schools.[34]

Funding & Portfolio: Proactively Manage a Portfolio of District-run and Charter Schools

For many years, Denver's district transformation efforts have targeted increasing equity and excellence by working to provide all students access to high-quality seats that meet their needs. And since 2009, the percent of students in high-quality seats—defined as students in schools in the top two categories of the district's School Performance Framework—has increased by approximately 9,000 seats up to 49 percent in 2016.

Prior to 2009, the district pursued two key strategies to promote this goal: school choice and student-based budgeting coupled with school-level flexibility. Student-based budgeting sought to empower school leaders to make the needed changes to improve performance, while school choice gave all parents access to schools that met their needs. More recently, this has evolved to an actively managed portfolio approach that focused on holding schools accountable, ultimately closing schools that do not meet the needs of the community and opening new ones that are better positioned to meet those needs.

DPS pulled these levers to increase the number of high-quality seats in the district and move toward the right mix of schools to meet the needs of a growing student population with expanding needs. The district built systems to define school success and hold schools accountable. This led to replacing chronically underperforming schools with new ones, including charters; enabling school choice for students and families with an emphasis on ensuring high-quality choices in all neighborhoods; and funding each school per student and school needs.

SUMMARY OF FUNDING & PORTFOLIO ACTIONS

	From this:	To this:	DPS Actions
FUNDING & PORTFOLIO	Wide funding variances across schools, even after adjusting for differences in student needs.	Systems that allocate resources equitably, according to need. A mix of school sizes, locations, and programming that balances choice, equitable access, and cost.	• Set a high bar for school performance. • Rigorously manage portfolio of schools by cultivating new, high-quality schools and closing or replacing chronic low performers. • Expand choice and access to high-quality seats. • Level the playing field through student-based budgeting and school-level flexibility.

While the role of charter schools in Denver has been widely documented, it is important to understand how its structure is a key factor in DPS's drive toward equity and excellence.[35] DPS holds sole chartering authority in the district. If changes in enrollment and student needs dictate the need for a new school, or chronic underperformance suggests an existing school should be closed, DPS has the authority to request proposals for new schools and to select the proposal that it believes will best meet the needs of the students, the community, and the district.

Importantly, and differently than in some districts, DPS developed a selection process that is data-driven, includes broad stakeholder input, is designed to be non-political, and is agnostic as to whether that school is a charter or district-run school. This process has enabled Denver to bring new approaches and talent into the system, placing schools exactly where in the city it needs capacity and for which populations of students. In this way, charters have helped DPS accomplish its goals, rather than operating in competition with the district.

Equity and School Accountability Actions

☑ Set a high bar for school performance.

DPS developed a school performance framework (SPF) in 2008 to assess both district-run and charter schools against a common set of criteria to regularly monitor progress and get information on how it can help schools meet their potential. The SPF comprehensively rates how schools perform at a fixed point in time (status) and how they performed over a period of time (growth) on student achievement in the following areas: student progress over time, parent and student engagement and satisfaction, equity, post-secondary readiness, and post-secondary readiness.[36] Based on the SPF evaluation, the district gives each school one of five ratings based on a color-coded "stoplight" system.[37] "High-quality seats" are defined as seats in schools rated in the top two categories. Prior to 2008, school performance was measured in an ad hoc manner. In 2016, the district used SPF not only to determine school support, but also as a key criterion for school closure/replacement that is common across both charter- and district-run schools.

In addition to defining performance, the district used these ratings to provide differentiated support for schools. For example, schools rated *Accredited on Priority Watch (Orange)*—the second-to-lowest designation—receive support that might include additional money, more staff, or partnerships with nonprofits. Schools rated in the lowest designation, *Accredited on Probation (Red)*, receive intensive support to help the school make the dramatic changes its students need to succeed. In some cases, if performance has been persistently low, DPS may make changes to academic programs or school staff. The Board of Education may also determine that it needs to restart the school with a model that will better meet the needs of students and the community.

☑ **Rigorously manage portfolio of schools by cultivating new, high-quality schools and closing or replacing chronic low performers.**

In addition to building the SPF, Denver gave it teeth. Denver actively oversees the performance of schools with consequences for those that underperform. Chronic underperformance, particularly when interventions were fruitless, can lead to to school closures. Of the 160 schools that were open in the 2009-10 school year, 27 were replaced by 2016, and 83 new schools opened to replace closed schools and accommodate enrollment growth.

A DISTRICT-WIDE APPROACH TO OPENING AND CLOSING SCHOOLS

In the case of chronic underperformance, the district may choose to close the school and select the best proposal for a replacement, whether district- or charter-operated. As laid out in the Denver Plan 2020, DPS is implementing a plan to "expand high-quality school choices in all communities through differentiated supports for existing schools, new school strategies, turnaround efforts and strong accountability systems" through its School Performance Compact and Tiered Support Framework. The two systems are intended to establish consistent, transparent, and data driven criteria decisions about school support and accountability.[38] The Tiered Support Framework, rolled out in the 2012-13 school year, identifies struggling schools and provides them with the additional customized support. While the hope is that all schools have the capacity to improve, DPS approved the School Performance Compact effective for the 2015-16 school year, which designates a set of schools for closure or restart to safeguard student access to high-quality schools. Schools are designated for closure based on three criteria: 1) a record of persistent low performance, based on three years of the district's school performance framework (SPF) ratings. 2) Student growth indicators on the district's SPF in the bottom three performance categories. 3) A school quality review that indicates failure to meet expectations on most indicators. While school closure is disruptive, evidence suggests that students who re-enroll in a higher-performing school ultimately increase in performance.[39] Denver has used the opening of new schools as an opportunity to expand the number of high-quality seats across the district, and between 2009-10 and 2015-16, the district created 9,000 more high-quality seats.

DPS is the primary chartering authority for Denver, which means it has the authority to call for, review, and accept proposals for new charter schools. The district is also the primary authority that holds charter schools accountable for student outcomes. DPS has created more than 7,500 new charter school seats since the 2009-10 school year, by either replacing chronically underperforming schools or building new schools to meet the demand of a growing and diverse student population. In addition to rigorous and transparent district oversight, charter school operators are holding themselves to a high standard. Several charters in Denver chose to slow expansion or close schools based on their own concerns regarding student performance.

District-run turnarounds were less successful than new district-run and new charter schools, but the district is adapting its approach to try to replicate successful models from other district schools. Previously, the district focused on implementing new models and supports for turnaround schools. The district has more recently pivoted to focus on sharing lessons learned from successful schools and replicating successful models.

A coordinated citywide approach to school portfolio management can pay off financially and avoids stranding students in declining schools for multiple years. Such an approach avoids the challenge of extra capacity that can sometimes be created if a charter school that is authorized independently opens near one or more existing district-run schools. Students may choose to leave the district-run schools, but often only a few students from each grade in each school each year do so. The result is that, over time, the district-run schools become underutilized, but with many of the same fixed costs. Students and staff remaining in those schools face declining funding, financial instability, and often a smaller portion of dollars going toward instruction.

The result of this combined focus on accountability, support, and portfolio management has been an increase in the number of high-quality seats. In 2016, the district updated the school performance framework in response to the transition to the PARCC test and to raise the bar for a "high-quality seat." It laid out a set of criteria applicable to charters and district-run schools to determine when schools should close, added a new equity indicator to help accelerate the performance of ELL

PERCENT OF STUDENTS IN HIGH-QUALITY SEATS BY YEAR AND REGION

	Southeast	Far Northeast	Northwest	Near Northeast	Southeast
	88%	82%	77%	61%	43%
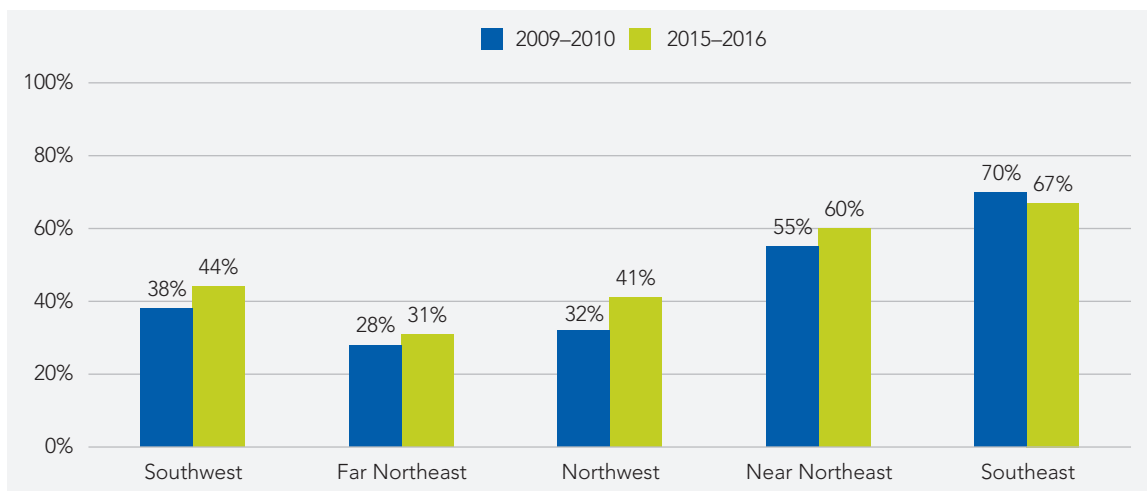
PERCENT OF STUDENTS ELIGIBLE FOR FREE- OR REDUCED-PRICE LUNCH, 2015-16

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students and those living in poverty, increased the number of measures that focus on early literacy, and combined several measures to make it easier for families to understand how their school is performing. The change in SPF ratings makes it significantly harder for schools to meet the "high-quality" standard. Yet even under this higher standard, the number of students in high-quality seats increased by approximately 10,000 (7 percentage points) between 2009-10 and 2015-16. Proportional to the number of seats in the region, the largest growth in high-quality seats occurred in the most underserved regions from 2009-10 to 2015-16.

While it is encouraging that the number of high-quality seats has improved in the highest-need neighborhoods, there are still striking differences in quality across regions, making equity of access an important focus for DPS.

☑ Expand choice and access to high-quality seats.

In addition to trying to increase high-quality seats across the district, particularly in higher-need regions, DPS focused on leveraging school choice and access so that all students have more ability to reach the best schools the district can provide.

Prior to 2011, the DPS enrollment process required families to find information, manage different applications and due dates, sit entrance exams or auditions for some schools, arrange private transportation, and participate in the enrollment process seven months before the beginning of the school year.[40] IFamilies were assigned to a specific school based on their home address. The movement to zones in 2012 meant students were guaranteed a seat not in one specific school but among schools in their geographic zone, which may include charter schools.

While a unified enrollment system improved access, it still required parents to be proactive and advocate for their students, and DPS leadership felt there were opportunities to do better. The district has continued to implement a series of changes and supports to the system designed to help make it easier for the highest-need students to access the best school through six actions:
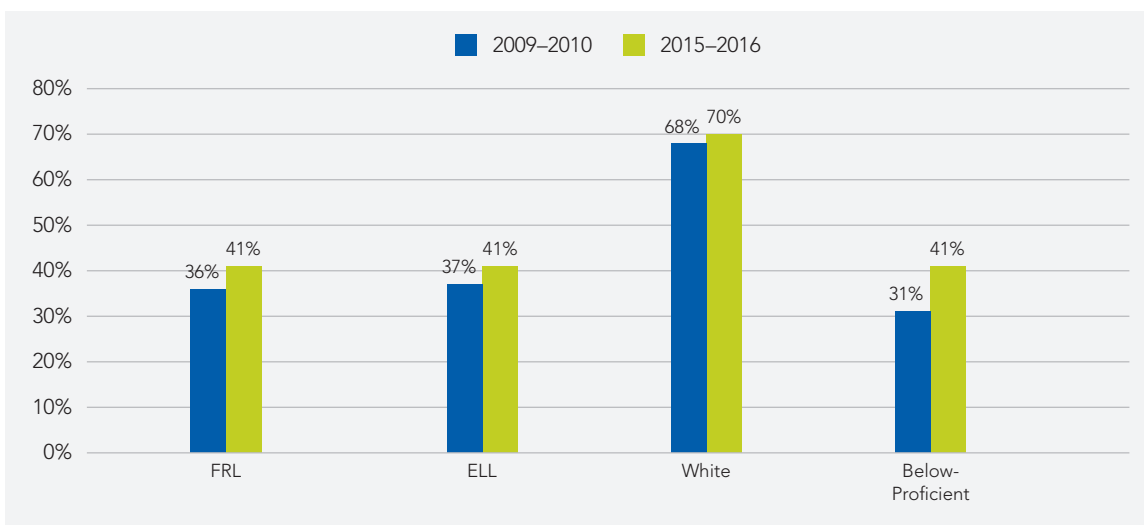
1. **Set expectations around equity.** Enrollment equity rules were put in place among district-run and charter schools pertaining to services for students with severe disabilities and ELLs and common expulsion/transfer policy.

2. **Create a universal enrollment system.** DPS launched the "SchoolChoice" unified enrollment system in 2012 to manage the enrollment process for all district-run and charter schools, including waitlists. In addition, choice fairs—one of the common ways families gather more information on schools in DPS—include both district-run and charter schools.

3. **Eliminate test-based entrance to schools.** Some schools in DPS offer specialized programs, but none base admittance on test scores.

4. **Provide transportation.** Transportation is provided more frequently within geographic regions.

5. Implement enrollment zones to increase participation in the choice process. Enrollment zones were rolled out across the district to remove barriers to participation and to encourage all families to join in the school choice process. When there is more than one neighborhood school in an enrollment zone, students are guaranteed a seat in at least one of the neighborhood schools. This policy replaced the old one, which guaranteed all students a seat in their specific neighborhood school, because many students who lived near the lowest-performing schools were not taking advantage of the option to access higher-quality schools. Now, a high percentage of families get their first choice, and virtually all families get one of their top three choices. Many charter schools are included in enrollment zones and are subject to the same enrollment criteria as district-run schools.

6. Plan for families who are unable to enroll in advance. Seats are reserved across the district for students who enroll late—either before the start of school but after the first round of the school choice process or during the school year. These students are often low-income, lower performing, and more likely to have other special learning needs.

It is difficult to measure accurately the exact impact of these changes, especially with the recent changes to the School Performance Framework rating system. However, there are strong indications that access has improved for the highest-need students. While access to high quality schools for higher need students still lags their lower need counterparts, the percentage of FRL, ELL, non-white and struggling students in high quality seats has increased since 2010 (even with the new, higher standard for "high performing."
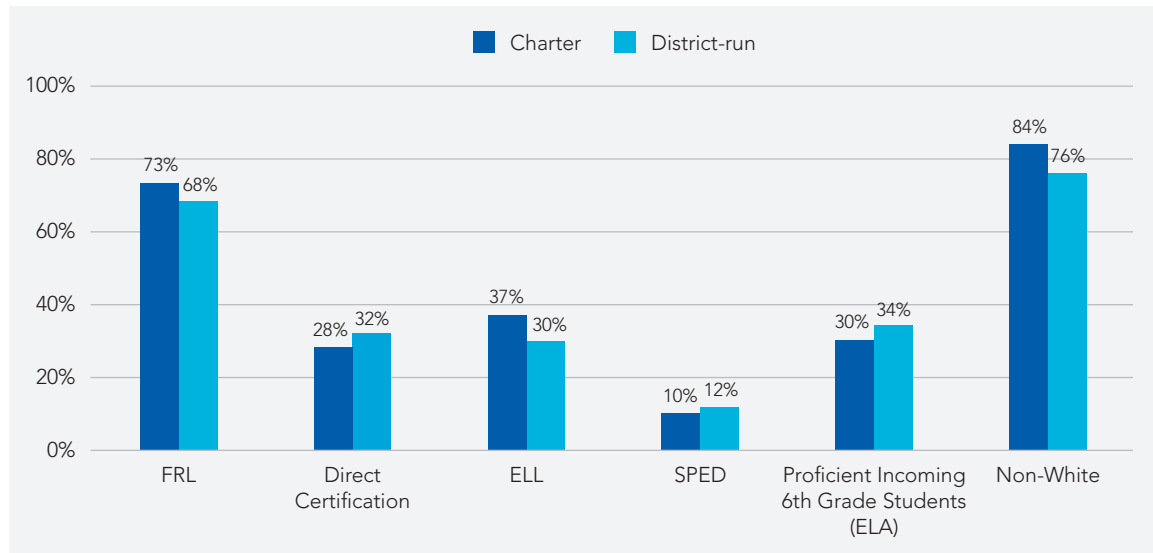
PERCENT OF STUDENTS IN HIGH-QUALITY SEATS , 2009-10 VS. 2015-16

Legend: ■ 2009–2010 ■ 2015–2016

	FRL	ELL	White	Below-Proficient
2009–2010	36%	37%	68%	31%
2015–2016	41%	41%	70%	41%

In addition, unlike in many urban districts, charter and district-run schools serve populations of very similar needs across most measures.

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS 2015-16 SCHOOL YEAR
Comparison of Charter and District-run Schools

Chart legend: ■ Charter ■ District-run

Category	Charter	District-run
FRL	73%	68%
Direct Certification	28%	32%
ELL	37%	30%
SPED	10%	12%
Proficient Incoming 6th Grade Students (ELA)	30%	34%
Non-White	84%	76%

☑ Level the playing field through student-based budgeting and school-level flexibility.

The district introduced weighted student funding (WSF), a term for student-based budgeting, in 2008-09 as a key strategy to level the funding playing field between charter and district-run schools. Under WSF, all district-run and charter schools receive funding that is directly tied to the specific needs of their students. In the 2009-10 school year, DPS provided additional funding for students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. Over time, DPS has worked to better understand the extent to which the funding system is truly targeting the needs of students and schools. Since 2009-10, one of the most notable additions to the WSF formula was additional funding for ELL students. The district included this expansion in response to an ERS analysis that showed these students were consistently underperforming and that the most successful delivery models were costly. The district also introduced a weight for direct certified (DC) students (an alternative measure of economic disadvantage). For example, the 2016 mill levy override was weighted 4:1 for FRL to non-FRL students in most areas, and 6:4:1 for DC:FRL:Non-FRL students for whole-child supports.

DPS leadership recognized that maximizing the impact of a WSF model required ensuring that schools had the flexibility to use the funding they receive in ways that are most aligned with student and school needs. To provide a truly level playing field, DPS has taken a two-pronged approach to expand flexibilities for district-run schools.

Within traditional district structures, Denver schools enjoy more school-level flexibility than any other district ERS has studied in our School System 20/20 work. DPS expanded school flexibilities around staffing, hiring, and scheduling, offering more freedom to school leaders and teachers to innovate and meet the needs of their students. These flexibilities took significant work to implement—even something that might sound simple, like enabling schools to opt out of custodial services, required renegotiating multiple contracts, setting prices, and creating new accountability systems. The result is a significant piece of the district's theory of action.
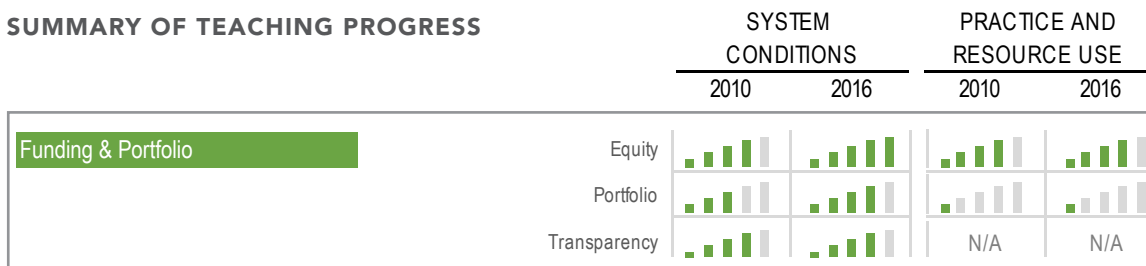
DPS also has taken full advantage of a state law that allows schools to apply for innovation status and, through this status, be freed from state laws, collective bargaining provisions, and district rules such as school staffing ratios, teacher licensure requirements, and scheduling. Beginning in 2008, the district encouraged schools to apply for this status and set up a department dedicated to supporting them, share best practices, and navigate or eliminate constraining state, collective bargaining, or district rules and red tape.[41]

The district's approach gives flexibility to schools and places the role of the district in service of schools and their pursuit to provide an excellent education to all students. These efforts helped create greater equity, because funding is determined by the needs of the student population, increased transparency for how schools use their resources, and increased school leader flexibility and responsibility for those dollars.

Funding and Portfolio Results and Growth Opportunities

Denver's Weighted Student Funding system has created high levels of funding equity and transparency among district-run schools and across district-run and charter schools. Its aggressive approach to portfolio management has created some of the most favorable enabling conditions in any district that we've studied. This chart summarizes progress made by DPS from 2009-10 to 2015-16 as reflected by the School System 20/20 assessment tool.

SUMMARY OF TEACHING PROGRESS		SYSTEM CONDITIONS		PRACTICE AND RESOURCE USE	
		2010	2016	2010	2016
Funding & Portfolio	Equity				
	Portfolio				
	Transparency			N/A	N/A

Moving Forward

As enrollment growth slows and demographics continue to shift in DPS, aggressively managing student access and the mix of schools to increase equity and excellence will become even more important. Specifically, DPS should seek to:

- **Continue to actively manage its portfolio, focusing on regions with fewer high-quality seats.** While the number of high-quality seats in higher-need neighborhoods has increased, there are still larger gaps in quality options among regions of the city. DPS can continue to actively support underperforming schools in these regions and investigate options for replicating successful district-run or charter models to the highest-need areas.

- **Continue work to improve access and maintain access where demographics are shifting toward lower need.** Demographics in Denver continue to shift, with higher-income families returning to the city. In regions where demographics are shifting to lower-need populations, DPS has an opportunity to increase diversity and equity of enrollment. The district can do this through protecting and expanding enrollment spots for higher-need students in lower-need neighborhoods and continuing to seek opportunities to help high-need students and families access those spots.

School Support: Provide High-quality, Differentiated School Support

Empowering school leaders through increased flexibility and decision-making was central to DPS's theory of action. District leaders believed, even early on, that freeing schools and holding them accountable would generate results. And in some cases, this is exactly what happened. But over time, analysis of data revealed wide variation in whether and how well principals were using their flexibilities to adapt structures, schedules, and staffing to meet student needs, resulting in wide variation in performance.

Translating the system conditions of flexibility into change at the school level while honoring school leader decision-making authority has required a tricky balancing act. The district has increased school-level flexibility so school leadership teams can determine how to meet these expectations and student needs on their own. Based on the wide variation in results, district leaders invested in creating high-quality central supports that were available to schools that needed and wanted them. The district also served as an information hub to connect schools to each other's shared insights and best practices.

For example, DPS recruited teams of teachers from across schools to work with central staff to develop a curriculum aligned with college- and career-ready standards for schools, but individual schools can use a different one if they can demonstrate that it is equally or more effective. And the district strives to provide a high level of support to all schools that is customized to their needs and is increased for the lowest-performing schools.

SUMMARY OF SCHOOL SUPPORT ACTIONS

	From this:	To this:	DPS Actions
STANDARDS & INSTRUCTION	Inconsistent standards that don't prepare kids to think critically, creatively, or collaboratively.	College- and career-ready standards aligned with rigorous curricula, assessments, and other instructional resources to achieve them.	• Invest in scope, sequence, curriculum, and assessments aligned with college- and career-ready standards.

	From this:	To this:	DPS Actions
SCHOOL SUPPORT	A central office focused on compliance and oversight rather than productive partnerships with schools.	A central office that is a service and strategy partner, leveraging data to increase efficiency and identify best practices.	• Increase flexibility for schools. • Increase instructional superintendent support to principals, particularly in low-performing schools. • Redesign school planning, staffing, and budgeting processes.

	From this:	To this:	DPS Actions
SCHOOL DESIGN	A one-size-fits-all learning environment with rigid schedules and class sizes that don't accommodate different learning needs.	Schools with restructured roles, teams, and schedules that enable personalized time and attention, teacher collaboration, and professional learning.	• Leverage school design decisions to support teachers and students through more collaborative planning time and lower teacher loads in math and ELA.

Standards and Instruction Actions

☑ **Invest in scope, sequence, curriculum, and assessments aligned with college- and career-ready standards**

The state of Colorado adopted college- and career-ready standards (CCRS) in 2010, and students took the college- and career-ready standards-aligned PARCC assessment for the first time in Spring 2016. In preparation for this transition, district academic staff invested in high-quality instructional resources for teachers and schools. Between the 2009-10 and 2015-16 school years, the district invested heavily in first developing a scope and sequence that aligned with college- and career-ready standards, and then followed up with the rollout of curricula and formative assessments aligned with these standards. This effort also included an expansion of professional learning to center around teaching the new standards for the years prior to transitioning to the new assessments. The district aimed to develop materials and supports of such high quality that schools would want to use them; however, in the spirit of autonomy, schools could use an alternative curriculum if they provided evidence of effectiveness and if the curriculum was paired with a comprehensive professional development plan to support teacher adoption.

District leaders used data to help school leaders measure and understand their level of readiness for college- and career-ready standards. DPS developed a school-level survey that became the inspiration for a tool that was later developed and distributed by the Aspen Institute called "Core Ready Schools"—an assessment that summarized the results of teacher surveys to provide insight to individual schools and offer school-to-school comparisons. District leaders used it not for accountability purposes, but rather to support principals in thinking about what they needed to do and to promote great conversations between principals and their instructional supervisors.

As has happened across the country, test scores dipped with the introduction of the new PARCC assessment. However, as a testament to the strong, strategic preparation for the new standards and assessment, DPS's drop in proficiency was 11 percentage points smaller than the state's. Furthermore, in comparison to other Colorado districts, DPS's median growth percentile increased from below the 20th percentile before transitioning to PARCC in math and ELA to the 50th percentile by 2016.[42]

School Support Actions

Denver's theory of action is to empower school leaders to make the best decisions for their schools, and then to provide high-quality resources and supports to schools that want or need them. To do this, DPS has not only worked to increase school-level flexibilities, but it has also organized to ensure consistent growth and spread learning across schools. As discussed throughout this case study, DPS has put a wide variety of supports and resources for schools in place—so many, in fact, that it runs

the risk of feeling fragmented and overwhelming to the principals and school teams that are trying to take advantage of them. To help address this challenge, DPS made several structural changes designed to better integrate central office support with school needs and decision-making.

POWER OF DATA TO INFORM CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Data-based decision-making was a central piece of the district's drive for continuous improvement. It permeated every level of the system, from teacher teams' analysis of student data to inform their instruction and lesson plans to district leadership's use of performance and accountability data to drive school support and, in extreme cases, school closure decisions. The central support offices modeled the use of data for continuous improvement by reporting performance on key service delivery items and conducting and sharing a detailed "customer" survey that covers each central department. This reliance on data was a powerful tool to engage stakeholders and create transparency, and to help defuse speculation that politics and bias play a part in decision-making. Leaders felt more confident that they were investing limited resources in the most critical areas and can leverage data to inform continuous improvement in programs already in place. Beyond the Department of Accountability, Research, and Evaluation, many of the district's departments devoted analytic roles to collecting and analyzing data to drive continuous improvement. For example, the human capital analytics group reported and analyzed data on teacher retention to understand where the best teachers come from, who is leaving and staying, and how to provide better support. The enrollment and planning office analyzed the correlation between the percent of students eligible for FRL and the percent of direct certified students to better understand whether the district's student-weighted funding formula was truly capturing the needs of schools.

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✅ Increase flexibility for schools.

A key first step in enabling strategic school-level decision-making is providing schools with authority over major resource decisions, including hiring, staffing, and assignments and scheduling. While charter schools across the country, including those in DPS, have significant flexibility in these areas, the district extended these flexibilities to district-run schools. Supported by the introduction of student-based budgeting, district-run schools have flexibility over how they spend their budget, including class size and staffing decisions. Between the 2009-10 and 2015-16 school years, DPS increased flexibility in other areas, including taking steps to ensure that schools can hire teachers whose skills and expertise match school and student needs, allowing schools to vary special education service and instructional models[43]; and the ability to vary teacher teams, assignments, and schedules to provide time for collaboration and match resources with student needs. The length of the school day and school year is determined through the DCTA collective bargaining agreement, although

innovation schools can extend the day if the faculty votes to approve it. Within the existing school day, however, school leaders have flexibility over the bell schedules. Through this effort, DPS district-run schools have more flexibility than schools in most other districts we have studied, setting the stage for DPS schools to better match their resources to their teacher and student needs. But analysis of school-level resource use showed district leaders that schools are not yet consistently using this flexibility to adjust resources to meet the needs of students. For example, there does not appear to be systematic differentiation of instructional time or group size based on student learning needs.

☑ **Increase instructional superintendent support to principals, particularly in low-performing schools.**

Instructional superintendents play a big role in principal professional development and serve as the main conduit of information between the district and principals. The district invested resources to reduce the case load of instructional superintendents from 25 principals to 8 to ensure the instructional superintendents understood the school context, developed a relationship with their principals, and had the capacity to provide timely support to principals. The change took DPS from one of the highest spans of control to one of the lowest among comparison districts. The district decreased the ratio even further—to 4—for instructional superintendents who supported principals in turnaround schools. The district neutralized the impact this change had on the budget with the shift from a few supervisors with large support teams to more supervisors with smaller teams. The district also improved its system for identifying areas of instructional need in each school, which includes an effective model for evaluating whether school practices reflect a clear understanding of student need and the skills and capacity of school-based staff.

INSTRUCTIONAL SUPERINTENDENT SPAN OF CONTROL
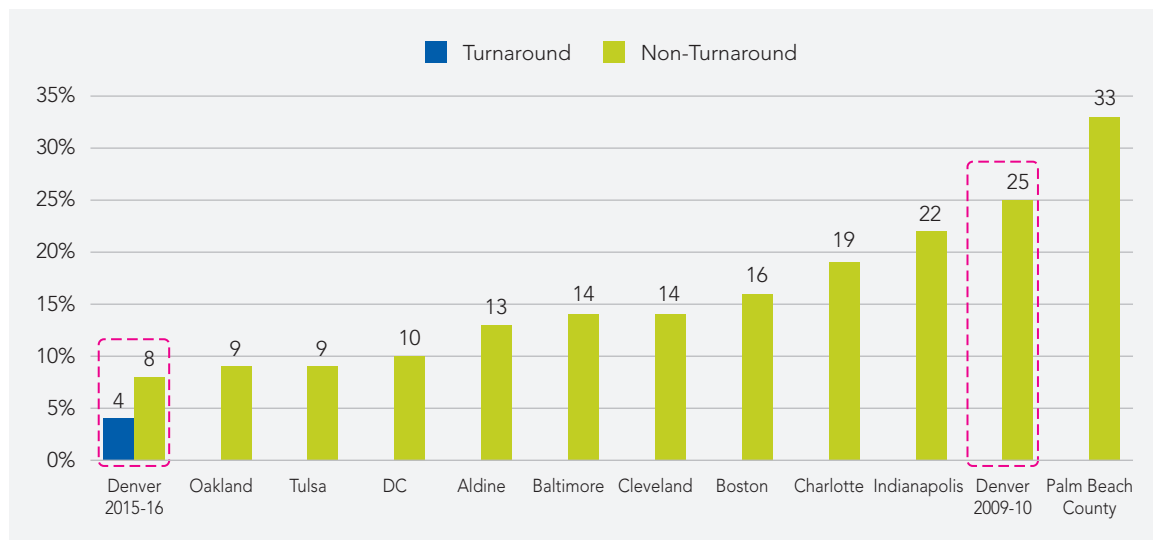
☑ **Redesign school planning, staffing, and budgeting processes.**

As DPS has moved to provide more flexibility to schools, it has also worked to ensure that the annual planning process allows schools to take advantage of this flexibility. Previously, the timing of key district-level decisions was out of sync with the optimal timing for making those decisions in schools. For example, due to the collective bargaining agreement, schools were unable to begin hiring until later in the year, and schools didn't receive their entire allocation at one time, decreasing their ability to plan resource use holistically.

Over time, the district adjusted timelines and processes to facilitate a strategic annual planning process. Once the timelines and structures were in place, DPS moved on to focus on ensuring that the processes also were connected and principals were supported in making those decisions. For example, rather than independent decisions about the number of teacher leaders, whom to staff in those roles, and how their schedule is set, DPS encouraged principals to think about which teams would benefit most from a teacher leader, what teachers were best able to take on those roles, how much time they need to work together, and what schedules would facilitate that best. Instructional supervisors guided these conversations, and both the Budget and HR departments redesigned roles to assign each school a "partner" charged with supporting integrated decision-making.

School Design Actions

The goal of school leader flexibility and support in DPS was to encourage and empower principals to meet the unique needs of their students and teachers through a process DPS calls "strategic school design." Strategic schools begin with an understanding of student and teacher needs, a strong vision for student and teacher success, and a set of strategies to enact the vision. Then, resources—people, time, technology, and money—are organized around those strategies. Consistent with their theory of action, district leaders aimed to create conditions across the system that would enable schools to create strong designs without dictating what those designs would be. In 2012, they set up a small group of leaders who ran the Department of Strategic School Design. This team provided multiple pathways for schools to engage in strategic school design, ranging from high-touch "consulting" supports that helped leaders redesign their schools, to low-touch supports such as book studies to build foundational knowledge in strategic school design practices. In the hopes of spurring innovative thinking and practice, the Department of Strategic School Design allowed schools to apply for innovation status. When applying, schools would apply for specific increases in flexibility based on their innovation goals. DPS created a district innovation lab called the Imaginarium to stimulate districtwide transformative innovation at the school-level. The Imaginarium worked in tandem with the Department of Strategic School Design; it received increased support from the district to serve as an incubator for innovative practices that could be disseminated out to schools across the district.

By 2016, the district was still working to connect the innovations developed through schools with innovation status or through the Imaginarium with the rest of the district.

☑ Leverage school design decisions to support teachers and students through more collaborative planning time and lower teacher loads in math and ELA

Professional Learning

DPS has implemented or is working to implement many of the conditions that enable powerful professional learning in schools: aligned curricula, assessments, and instructional tools; expert support from school and teacher leaders; growth-oriented feedback systems; and sufficient time dedicated for teacher collaboration.[44] Translating these conditions into improved instruction plays out at the school level through teacher teaming, leadership roles, the structure of time, and the processes and routines that surround the use of time. As shared above, the span of review for schools and teachers was decreased so that their capacity for quality observations, feedback, and lead-team collaboration and learning time could increase. While the exact implementation varies by school, the LEAP evaluation rubric created a strong foundation of standards for teacher evaluation that were consistent across the district, intended to measure teacher performance in ways that can inform growth and development. The intent of this foundation is to ensure that teachers receive meaningful, growth-oriented feedback. Research indicates that high-quality curricula and formative assessments are important ingredients in instructional improvement, but for them to take root, it is critical that teachers have sufficient collaborative planning time, on the order of 90 minutes a week, and additional regular days during the year to engage with the new materials and use the formative assessments to improve instruction.[45] School leaders do have the flexibility to restructure school schedules to create more time for teacher teams, but the practice is not yet universal.

"Strategic schools begin with an understanding of student and teacher needs, a strong vision for student and teacher success, and a set of strategies to enact the vision. Then, resources—people, time, technology, and money—are organized around those strategies."

Strategic Assignment and Support

Being deliberate about teacher assignment and support is another way to support the growth and development of teachers. Despite the significant investment and trust in LEAP, most principals are not using it as a resource to inform teacher assignments. For example, when they identify teachers who are particularly effective at teaching struggling students, they are not systematically engaging them to work with these students, nor are they providing new or struggling teachers with fewer preparations, smaller classes, or support from a mentor. Only 46 percent of principals reported they used LEAP data when making their teaching assignments. This is particularly important in high-needs schools, where, as we mentioned above, teacher turnover has resulted in large numbers of novice teachers. In 2016-17, DPS explored opportunities to help these schools provide their new teachers with additional support through additional teacher leadership positions and other strategies.

Personalized Student Learning

Like organizing to support the learning needs of teachers, high-performing schools also systematically structure time and attention to organizing resources to support the individual needs of students. While it's difficult to look at district-wide data around school-level decisions, there is evidence that some strategies are being widely adopted. For example, teacher loads (the total number of students a teacher is responsible for teaching at a given time) have decreased over the past five years, allowing teachers to form stronger relationships with students. On the other hand, it appears that schools are not consistently varying time and group sizes to target the needs of specific students.
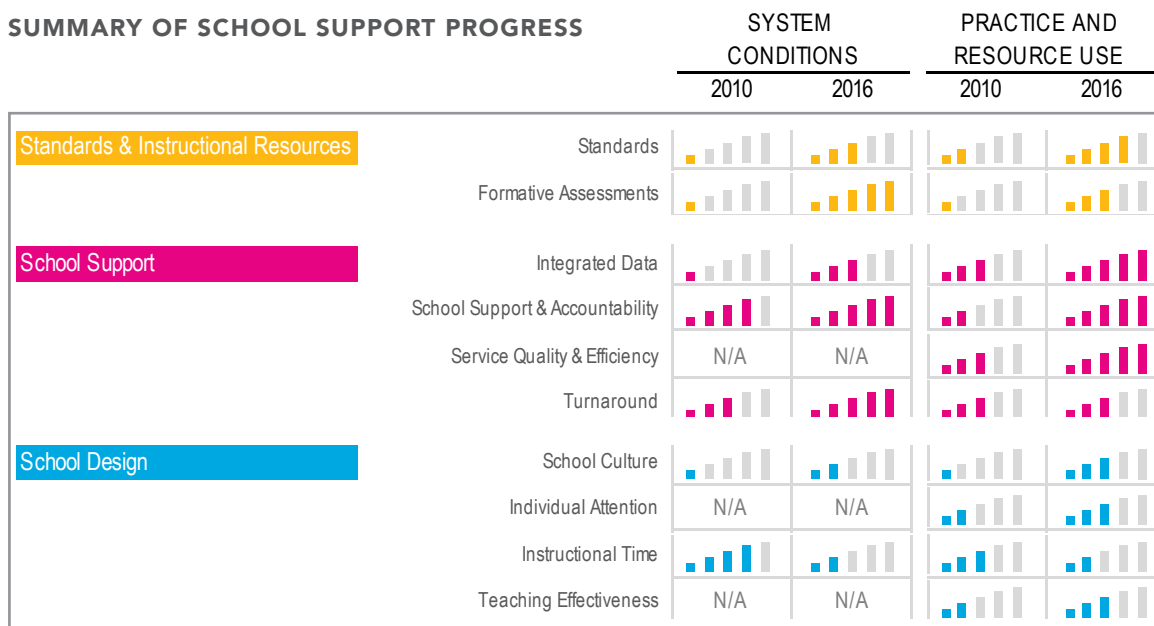
PERCENTAGE OF BELOW-PROFICIENT STUDENTS SPENDING MORE THAN 1.5 PERIODS IN MATH AND ELA OVER THE COURSE OF THE YEAR
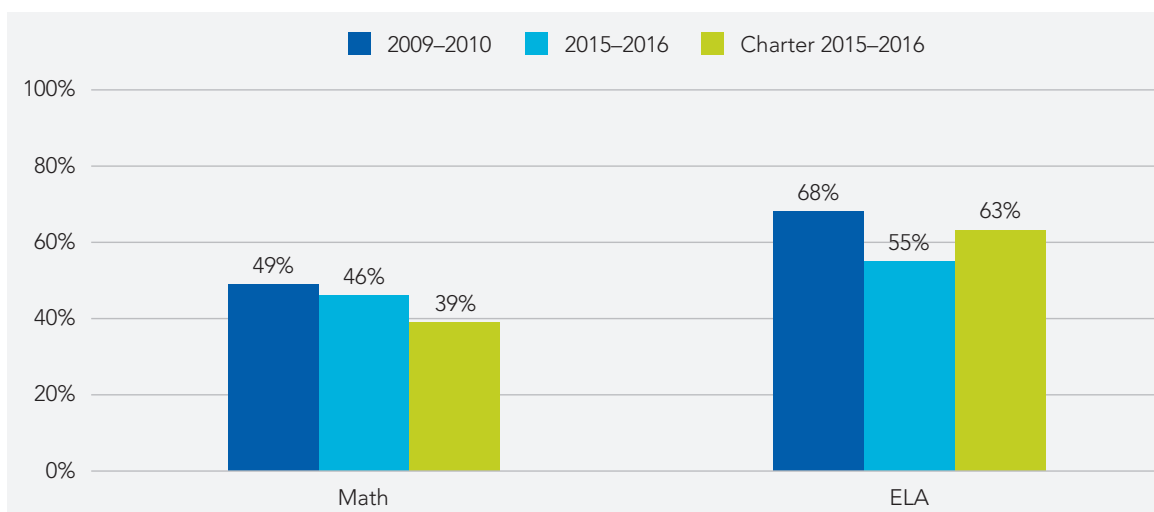
School Support and School Design Results and Growth Opportunities

DPS's actions in the areas of curriculum, instruction, and school support created strong enabling conditions for schools to create strategic school designs that align the use of people, time, and money with student needs. These changes are translating into changes in practice at the school level, particularly in the areas of curriculum, instruction, and school culture.[46] Additionally, the district made significant strides in climate through leadership training in school culture and the district's shared values, reflected in the positive results of the annual teacher's survey. However, there is still variation across schools in the implementation of more structural changes, including the effective use of collaborative planning time and the differentiation of time and attention based on student needs. The chart below summarizes the significant progress made by DPS between the 2009-10 and 2015-16 school years as reflected by the School System 20/20 assessment tools.

SUMMARY OF SCHOOL SUPPORT PROGRESS

	SYSTEM CONDITIONS		PRACTICE AND RESOURCE USE	
	2010	2016	2010	2016
Standards & Instructional Resources				
Standards				
Formative Assessments				
School Support				
Integrated Data				
School Support & Accountability				
Service Quality & Efficiency	N/A	N/A		
Turnaround				
School Design				
School Culture				
Individual Attention	N/A	N/A		
Instructional Time				
Teaching Effectiveness	N/A	N/A		

Moving Forward

It is not surprising that such sweeping changes to school support structures take time to translate into changes in designs at individual schools, especially in an autonomy-driven district like DPS. But to drive the most improvement for the most students, DPS can help schools that need it to make these changes by:
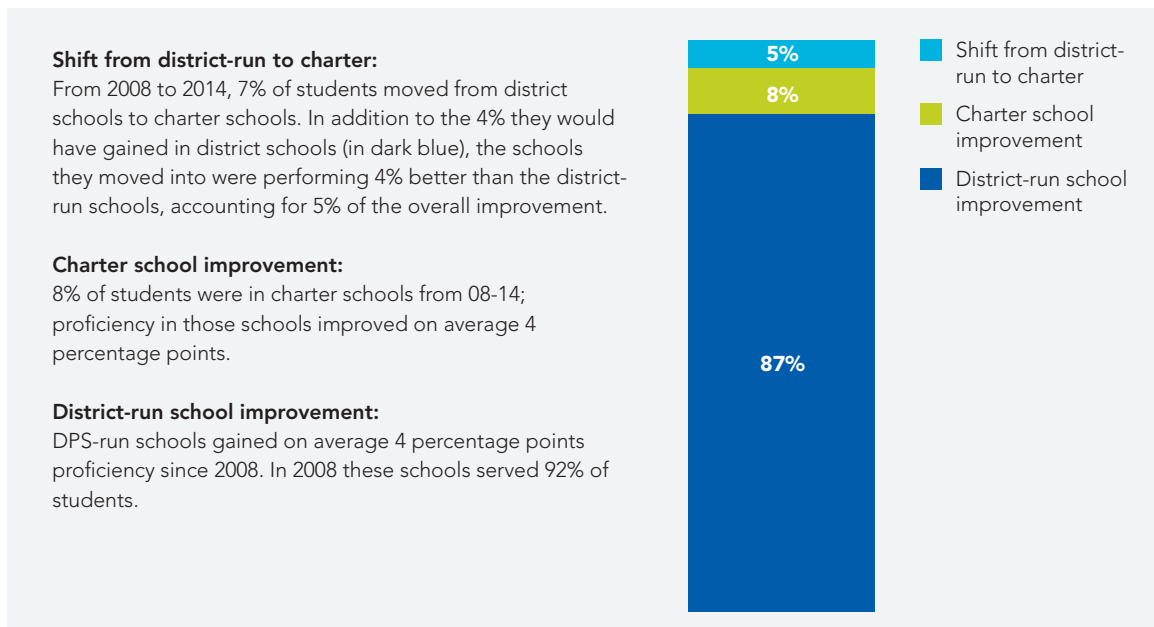
- **Continuing to provide support for schools and teachers in making the instructional shifts required by the new college- and career-ready standards**, including rollout of new assessments, evolution of curriculum and instructional materials, and professional learning support.

- **Continuing to improve support for school leaders around strategic school design.** DPS can help school leaders understand the value of personalizing student learning and creating strong professional learning cultures and practices. Further, the district can help them to identify and implement strategies to achieve these goals. This support can come in the form of sharing best practices across district-run schools, charter schools, and national exemplars; providing data to support decision making in a timely manner; and building the capacity of instructional supervisors and school leaders around strategic school-design processes and principles.

- **Continuing to evolve the school planning and budgeting timeline and process to allow time for innovative, multi-year planning.** DPS has already made significant changes to integrate district and school budgeting, planning, and hiring timelines and processes, and it can continue to look for opportunities to improve integration and support schools in taking full advantage of new timelines and other resources.

Denver's District Design Lessons

From 2009-10 to 2015-16, Denver Public Schools relentlessly worked to redesign almost every facet of the system to improve outcomes for all students. Though much has been written about the impact of DPS's welcoming approach to charters, digging deeper reveals that this broad and systematic approach has driven steady improvement across both district-run and charter schools, across all student subgroups, and across all geographic regions. The chart below breaks down DPS's overall proficiency improvement in ELA from 2008 to 2014—a 4.4 percentage point increase, from 49.6 percent to 54 percent—among improvement in district-run school performance, improvement in charter school performance, and improvement due to students moving from district-run to charter schools.

PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT IN ELA BY TYPE OF SCHOOL, 2008-2014

Shift from district-run to charter:
From 2008 to 2014, 7% of students moved from district schools to charter schools. In addition to the 4% they would have gained in district schools (in dark blue), the schools they moved into were performing 4% better than the district-run schools, accounting for 5% of the overall improvement.

Charter school improvement:
8% of students were in charter schools from 08-14; proficiency in those schools improved on average 4 percentage points.

District-run school improvement:
DPS-run schools gained on average 4 percentage points proficiency since 2008. In 2008 these schools served 92% of students.

- 5% — Shift from district-run to charter
- 8% — Charter school improvement
- 87% — District-run school improvement

Denver invested in collecting and using data to identify and refine successful strategies, to engage stakeholders to thoughtfully design and implement change, and to make all the pieces fit together and work for all student subgroups and the community of Denver. As other districts look to undertake dramatic improvement in performance across all schools, they can learn five powerful lessons from Denver Public Schools about the importance of a:

1. **Long-term and integrated approach to system redesign.** DPS's systematic creation of the enabling structures and conditions for high-quality schools across all areas of the School System 20/20 diagnostic coincided with steady student performance improvement in district-run schools, and should drive continued improvement in the future. Key to this approach was a clear and shared theory of action—school flexibility with a strong accountability system, supported by district systems and structures focused on building strong teachers and school and district leaders, continuous improvement of instructional practice, and equitable student access and school funding. DPS also benefited from stable leadership and a strong culture in the central office. DPS has invested and continues to invest systematically and consistently in engaging teachers, students, families, and other stakeholders in the Denver community.

2. **Deliberate approach to equity, accountability, and portfolio management.** DPS has accelerated overall district performance growth through a deliberate approach to portfolio management coupled with its chartering authority. By embracing charters as one more tool in the toolkit for improving student outcomes and systematically opening high-performing schools regardless of operator, both to absorb enrollment growth and to replace chronically underperforming schools, DPS not only has increased high-quality seats, but it also has done it while avoiding the unplanned under-enrollment and performance degradation in district schools that too often accompanies charter growth. DPS also had the advantage of undertaking this work during a period of overall enrollment growth in the city, which sets it apart from many struggling urban districts. But its aggressive approach to creating more high-quality options for students may have helped create this advantageous situation by attracting more affluent families to stay in city schools or move back into city boundaries to attend them.

3. **Systemwide approach to human capital management.** DPS's work to create the conditions to help schools attract, develop, and retain high-performing teachers and leaders has been critical to school success. The LEAP and LEAD systems have increased rigor and consistency across the district and provided a foundation to help teachers leverage strengths and address growth opportunities; the ProComp system, despite its current challenges, has succeeded in attracting and retaining high performers; and funding and support for teacher leadership roles and collaborative planning time are helping schools and teachers to organize teams around continuous improvement in instructional practice. Although schools retain the authority to hire and assign teachers and other positions, these changes both support individual schools and promote consistency in teacher and leader quality across the district.

4. **Transition funding to spur innovation and support change.** It can often be difficult for budget-constrained districts to free enough resources to invest in systemic changes. DPS leveraged one-time private foundation and government grants to help fund its transformation efforts. This gave it freedom to demonstrate the impact of new approaches—such as the teacher leader initiative initially funded by a federal TIF grant—and use that evidence to build support to reallocate DPS resources and even add new tax revenue to sustain the programs longer term.

5. **Transition from system-level conditions to school-level practice.** Translating strong enabling conditions into school-level changes in practice and resource use requires active support to build capacity and change behaviors, especially in a district so committed to school-level autonomy. Like many districts seeking to empower school leaders, DPS is still working to find the right mix of autonomy and support and to redefine traditional central office roles away from traditional compliance roles toward service providers and thought partners. In addition, DPS has been thoughtful about which areas are most important to hold "tight" district-wide (e.g., keeping curriculum and instruction consistent across the district, which is important because of school transitions, student mobility, and the investment required to transition to the new standards), which are most important to delegate completely to schools (e.g., hiring decisions), and which require differentiated support depending on school capacity and student needs (e.g., school-design support). Finally, DPS continues to work to identify and improve structures and processes that are most important to school success (e.g., evolving the teacher compensation system to help schools attract and retain high performers).

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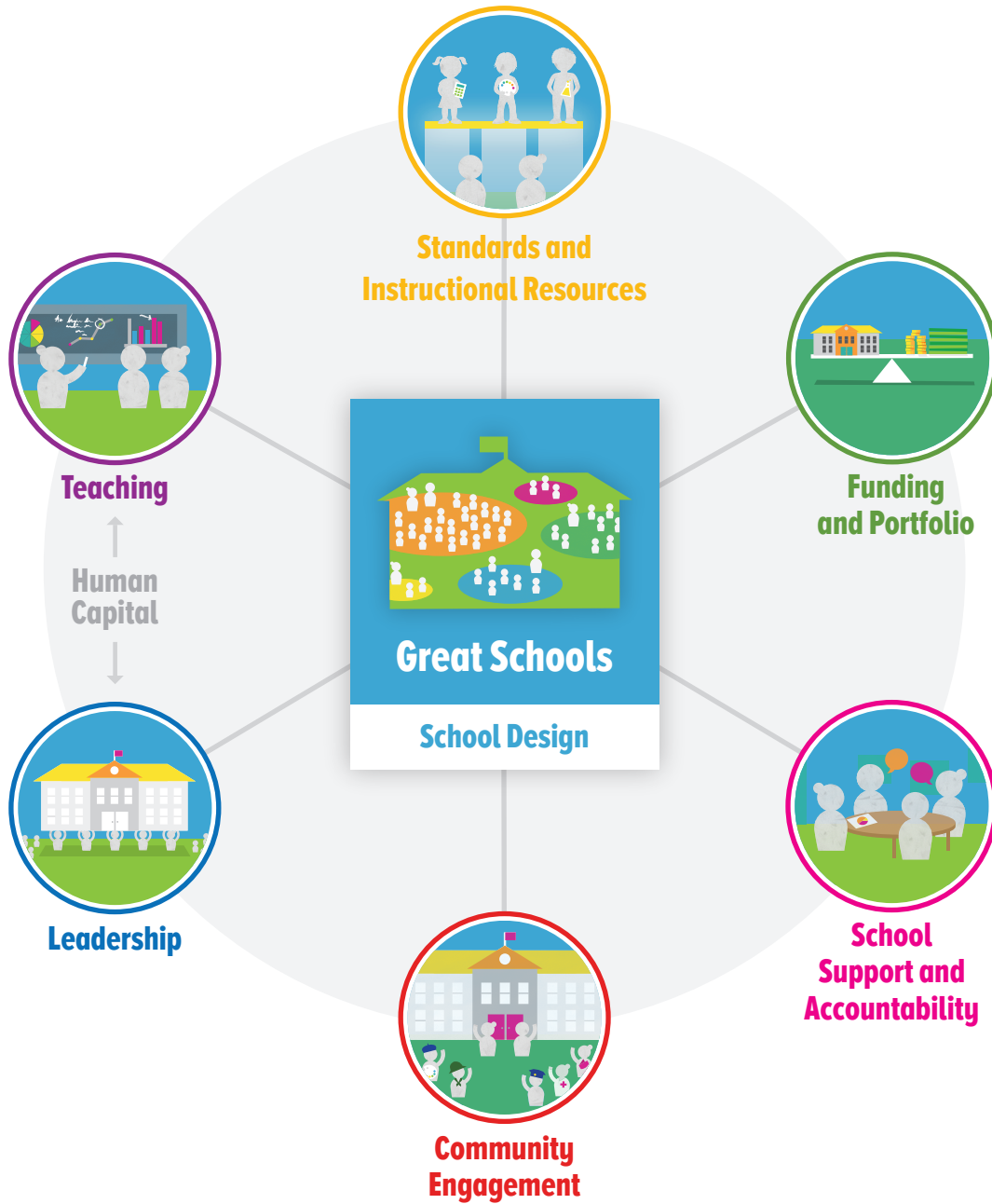19. Denver Public Schools. Teacher Leadership and Collaboration: About Us. http://teacherleader.dpsk12.org/about-us/.

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The School System 20/20 Vision

For this case study, we analyze Denver's progress through the School System 20/20 Diagnostic. It serves as the lens through which ERS measures system improvement.

Standards and Instructional Resources

Teaching

Human Capital

Leadership

Great Schools
School Design

Funding and Portfolio

School Support and Accountability

Community Engagement

For the complete report on Denver and other School System 20/20 publications, go to **ERStrategies.org/system2020.**

Education Resource Strategies (ERS) is a non-profit organization dedicated to transforming how urban school systems organize resources—people, time, and money—so that every school succeeds for every student.

The **School System 20/20** assessment tools help district leaders understand whether their district policies, structures, and practices create the conditions for improving student performance at scale and how well their resources are aligned with the areas most critical to improving student outcomes.