

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SCHOOL SYSTEM
20/20

IT TAKES A SYSTEM DENVER, COLORADO







Redesigning a District for Equity and Excellence



20/20 CASE STUDY
MAY 2017

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	
<p>Invest in leadership development at all levels</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Implement principal effectiveness measurements focused on promoting growth - Strengthen the principal pipeline - Support struggling schools to attract and retain high-performing principals • Establish school-based teacher leadership roles to support school-based professional growth and provide career opportunities
TEACHING REFORMS	
<p>Attract, develop, and retain high-performing teachers</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	
<p>Proactively manage a portfolio of district-run and charter schools</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	
<p>Provide high-quality, differentiated school support</p>   	<p>STANDARDS & INSTRUCTION:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in scope, sequence, curriculum, and assessments aligned with college- and career-ready standards <hr/> <p>SCHOOL SUPPORT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase flexibility for schools • Increase instructional superintendent support to principals, particularly in low-performing schools • Redesign school planning, staffing, and budgeting process <hr/> <p>SCHOOL DESIGN:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverage school design decisions to support teachers and students through more collaborative planning time and lower teacher loads in math and ELA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It Takes a System

Redesigning a District for Equity and Excellence

This case study uses the framework School System 20/20 to examine how Denver Public Schools is transforming its policies and structures to better align resources with student and teacher needs.

What Is School System 20/20?

ERS's 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. 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. The framework can help district leaders identify and prioritize the system changes that are necessary to improve student outcomes.

The School System 20/20 framework is made up of three parts:

- A **vision** of school system success, comprising seven key strategies that a district can use to initiate and support transformation (see charts on the last page and inside back cover).
- 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.

This case study explores Denver's experience through the School System 20/20 lens. It is the third in a series of case studies that explore how system transformation can create the enabling conditions for school and student success. The other case studies, [*Back from the Brink: A Case Study of Lawrence Public Schools*](#) and [*The Rewards of Perseverance: A Case Study of Aldine Independent School District \(AISD\)*](#), can be accessed at ERStrategies.org.

Denver: Redesigning a District for Equity and Excellence

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, redesigning each part of the system, and focusing on continuous improvement at all levels.

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. Between 2009 and 2013, DPS students improved faster than those at nearly all other large school districts, based on a national comparison of NAEP scores. This improvement occurred across all student subgroups: FRL and non-FRL students, white and non-white students, and students in charter schools as well as those in district-run schools. Notable achievements include:

- **Increased proficiency (see chart on following page)**

- Student proficiency increased from 24 percent to 47 percent in math and from 45 percent to 54 percent in ELA between 2004 and 2014.¹
- Proficiency increased across all subgroups during the same time period. Notably, ELA proficiency of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch increased from 31 percent to 44 percent, ELA proficiency of non-white students increased from 35 percent to 46 percent, and English language learners increased from 22 percent to 42 percent.
- From 2014 to 2016, DPS narrowed the proficiency gap with the rest of the state by nine percentage points, from 16 percentage points to five.

- **Improved graduation and dropout rates**

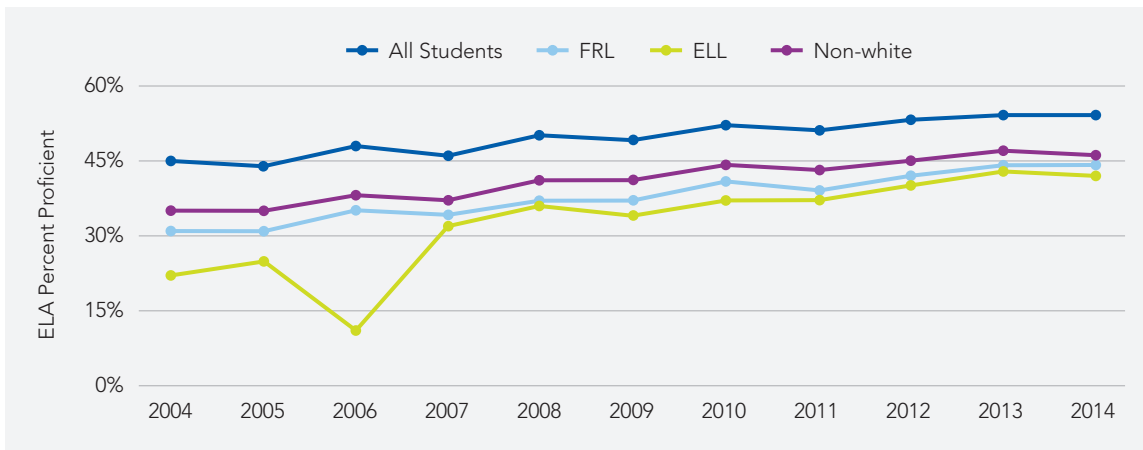
- The four-year graduation rate increased from 51.8 percent in 2010 to 67.2 percent in 2016.
- The dropout rate decreased from 6.4 percent to four percent.

- **Increased Advanced Placement exam scores**

- The number of students taking AP exams increased from 4,865 in 2012 to 7,233 in 2016.
- Students scoring three or higher on AP exams increased from 37.1 percent in 2012 to 44.5 percent in 2016.

1. In the 2014-15 school year, Colorado switched from the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) and Transitional Colorado Assessment Program (TCAP) to the more rigorous PARCC assessment, making direct comparisons between performance before and after 2014 difficult.

PERCENT OF DPS STUDENTS SCORING PROFICIENT OR ADVANCED IN ELA



Source: Colorado Department of Education, Denver Public Schools Student Enrollment and Performance Data <http://www.cde.state.co.us>

A Four-Pronged Approach

The DPS reform plan was based on a strong belief that high-quality teachers and school leaders, given the flexibility, support, and expertise they need, will make the best decisions for their schools and students. The role of the district is to create the conditions for schools to thrive. DPS transformation efforts focused on four key design elements that correspond to strategies within the School System 20/20 framework:

1. Invest in leadership development at all levels.

DPS created a culture of distributed leadership, continuous improvement, and shared ownership for student outcomes by:

- Assembling a strong district leadership team focused on continuous improvement of DPS
- Building a strong culture of shared values
- Increasing support and flexibility for principals and aspiring principals and strengthening the principal pipeline
- Establishing teacher leadership roles to support school-based professional growth and provide career opportunities

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

DPS built an integrated system to develop and evaluate teachers and to encourage continuous growth and career development, developed structures to enable collaborative professional learning, and created a compensation system that rewards professional growth and contribution.

Actions included:

- Implementing principal effectiveness measurements focused on promoting growth
- Implementing structures and processes to attract and retain more high-quality teachers in high-need schools
- Launching and evolving the DPS Professional Compensation System (ProComp)

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 increased school accountability and leveraged its charting authority by:

- Setting a high bar for school performance
- Rigorously managing a portfolio of schools by cultivating new, high-quality charter and district-run schools and closing or replacing chronic low performers
- Expanding choice and access to high-quality seats
- Leveling the playing field through student-based budgeting and school-level flexibility

4. Provide high-quality, differentiated school support.

DPS provided a variety of differentiated support to help school leaders implement strategic school designs and strong professional learning practices, including:

- Investing in scope, sequence, curriculum, and assessments aligned with college- and career-ready standards
- Increasing flexibility for schools
- Increasing instructional superintendent support to principals, particularly in low-performing schools
- Leveraging school design decisions to support teachers and students through more collaborative planning time and lower teacher loads in math and ELA

School System 20/20 Report Card: Denver Public Schools

This chart summarizes the results of the School System 20/20 assessment tools.

		SYSTEM CONDITIONS		PRACTICE AND RESOURCE USE	
		2010	2016	2010	2016
Standards & Instructional Resources	Standards				
	Formative Assessments				
Teaching	Defining/Measuring Effectiveness				
	Hiring & Assignment				
	Career Path & Compensation				
	Professional Growth				
School Design	School Culture				
	Individual Attention	N/A	N/A		
	Instructional Time				
	Teaching Effectiveness	N/A	N/A		
	Special Populations	N/A			
Leadership	Defining/Measuring Effectiveness				
	Hiring & Assignment				
	Career Path & Compensation				
	Professional Growth				
School Support	Integrated Data				
	School Support & Accountability				
	Service Quality & Efficiency	N/A	N/A		
	Turnaround				
	Capacity			N/A	N/A
	Flexibility			N/A	N/A
Funding & Portfolio	Equity				
	Portfolio				
	Transparency			N/A	N/A
Community Engagement	Community Resources				
	Family Engagement				
	Stakeholder Engagement			N/A	N/A

Lessons from Denver

As other districts look to undertake dramatic improvement in performance across all schools, the DPS experience underscores the importance of:

- 1. A long-term, 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 framework coincided with steady student performance improvement in district-run schools. Key to this approach was a clear and shared theory of action: school flexibility with strong accountability, 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.
- 2. A deliberate approach to equity, accountability, and portfolio management.** DPS has accelerated district performance growth through a deliberate approach to portfolio management coupled with its chartering authority. By embracing charters as one more tool for improving student outcomes and systematically opening high-performing schools regardless of operator, DPS increased high-quality seats while avoiding the unplanned underenrollment and performance degradation in district schools that too often accompanies charter growth.
- 3. A systemwide approach to human capital management.** Creating the conditions to help schools attract, develop, and retain high-performing teachers and leaders has been critical to school success in DPS. Although schools retain the authority to hire and assign teachers and other positions, these changes support individual schools and promote consistency in teacher and leader quality across the district.
- 4. Transition funding to spur innovation and support change.** Freeing up resources to fund systemic changes can be challenging. DPS leveraged one-time private foundation and government grants to help fund its transformation efforts. This gave it the freedom to demonstrate the impact of new approaches and use that evidence to build support to reallocate DPS resources and even add new tax revenue to sustain the programs longer term.
- 5. The challenge of transitioning 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 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.

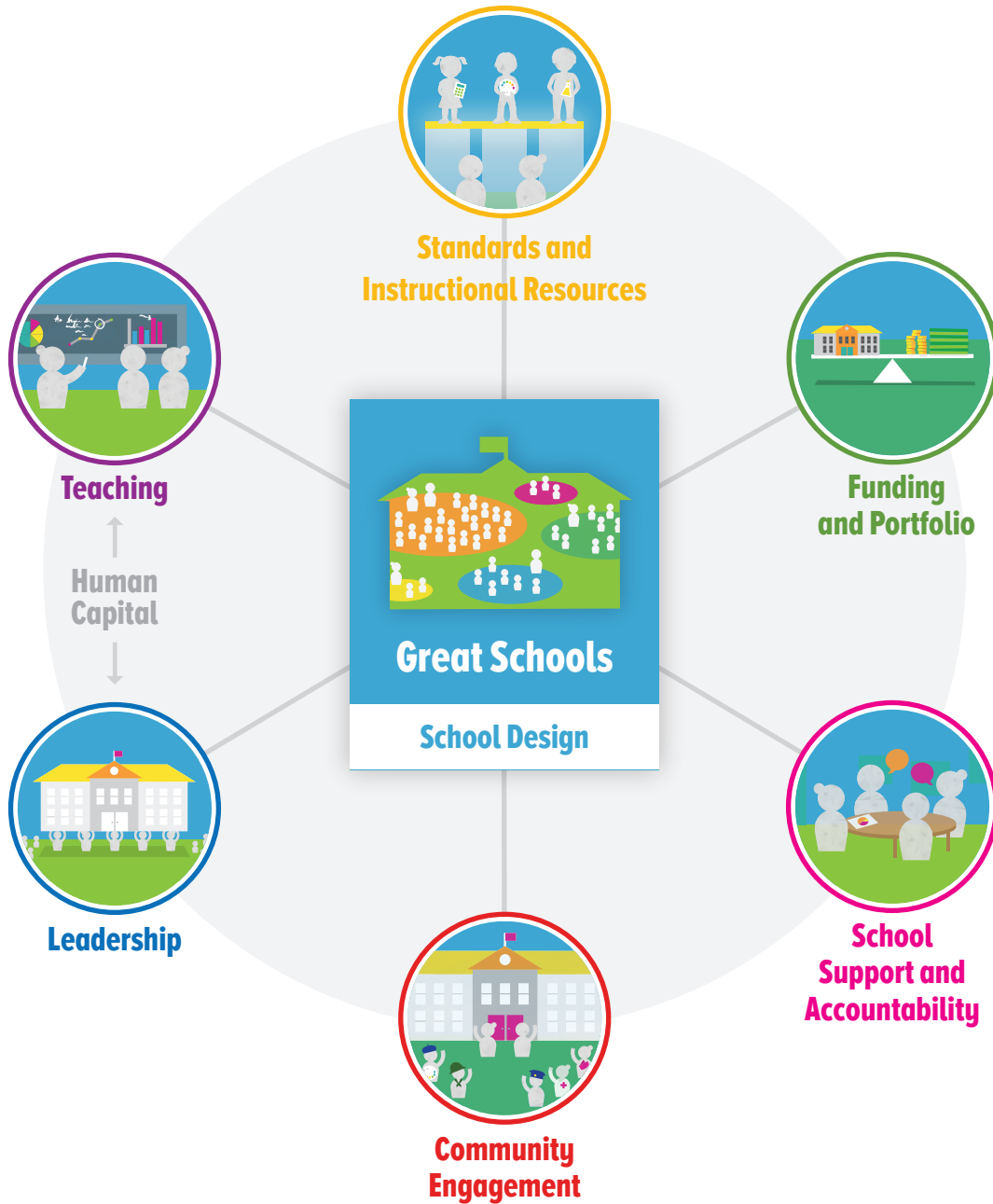


“Change takes time, coupled with a willingness to listen, learn, admit you’re wrong, and make changes as you go forward in the approach you’ve taken.”

— DPS Superintendent Tom Boasberg

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.



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

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.



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.