Center for American Progress

Denver Public Schools, Denver, Colorado

Using a strategic approach to principal training to reach new heights

Total school buildings: 185

High schools: 35

Middle schools: 26

Elementary schools: 85

Early childhood centers: 3

K-8 buildings: 18

K-12 buildings: 4

6-12 buildings: 14

Total enrollment: 84,424 students

Hispanic: 58 percent

African American: 15 percent

White: 20 percent

Other: 7 percent

Economically disadvantaged: 72 percent[1]

Denver Public Schools, or DPS, is the fastest-growing large urban school district in the nation, comprising 185 total schools and serving almost 85,000 students; 58 percent of these students are Hispanic, and 72 percent of them qualify as economically disadvantaged.[2] In 2005, then-Denver Superintendent and current U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet (D-CO) launched an ambitious new reform strategy that he called "The Denver Plan," which was updated and revised in 2010 by current Superintendent Tom Boasberg. The Denver Plan serves as the district's vision and road map to achieve the goal of ensuring that all DPS students, regardless of ethnicity or income status, graduate from high school prepared for college or career; it therefore includes a strong focus on educator effectiveness. As part of The Denver Plan's continuous-improvement strategy, the district has sought to expand student choice by facilitating the creation of new schools through its Office of School Reform and Innovation, or OSRI.[3] Over the past several years, the district has opened 50 new schools, 37 of which are either charter or innovation schools.[4]

Also pursuant to the strategy of continuous improvement, the district provides "immediate and dramatic interventions to improve teaching and learning" at schools that are deemed chronically low performing.[5] The district has shut down 16 low-performing buildings since 2009, seven of which were charter schools and nine of which were traditional buildings.[6]

The district's efforts to rethink the way teachers and school leaders are evaluated dates back to 2010, when the district received a $10 million multiyear grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to design and build a comprehensive talent-management system for teacher effectiveness.[7] The district actively engaged teachers and school leaders via design teams and collaborated with union leaders to study options and make recommendations regarding instructional support. The teacher-evaluation system that had been in use in Denver was dichotomous, with teachers earning one of only two rankings: satisfactory or nonsatisfactory. Not surprisingly, 99 percent of the nonprobationary teachers in DPS were rated satisfactory.[8]

The design teams and collaborative union partnership resulted in a recommendation that DPS develop its own teacher-evaluation and growth system "aligned to a shared definition of effective teaching."[9] The recommendation was supportive of the broader strategy of "great people to drive better outcomes for our students," part of the district's 2010 update of The Denver Plan.[10] The recommendation was also in line with Colorado S.B. 10-191, which made sweeping changes in state requirements for teacher- and principal-evaluation systems. The bill was passed by both houses of the Colorado legislature and signed into law by then-Gov. Bill Ritter (D) in 2010. Among the more significant changes in the law was the requirement that half of teacher evaluations would be based on student-growth measures.[11]

The evaluation and professional-growth system that emerged in Denver is known as Leading Effective Academic Practice, commonly referred to as LEAP. In 2013, the district received a second $10 million grant from the Gates Foundation to aid in the full implementation of LEAP across the district.[12] In compliance with the new Colorado law, LEAP called for 50 percent of teacher evaluation to be based upon student-growth measures, which includes a mix of state and school measures. The district uses state assessments where they are available—notably, with literacy and math teachers. Under LEAP, all teachers are held accountable for school measures. Teacher-set student-learning objectives will be incorporated into the student-growth measure in the 2014-15 school year, allowing teachers and school leaders to incorporate student performance strategically into school- and teacher-created assessments.[13]

Per LEAP, the other 50 percent of teacher evaluation is based upon "professional practices." To support this portion of the evaluation plan, DPS developed the DPS Framework for Effective Teaching, which establishes a district-wide definition of what constitutes quality instruction. It consists of three domains, the first two of which— "Learning Environment" and "Instruction"—are assessed via classroom observation. These observations comprise 30 percent of the teacher evaluation, and under the LEAP system, teachers are observed multiple times, in a variety of ways, and by multiple observers. For a principal, there are three different types of observations: the full observation, which is 45 to 60 minutes in duration; the partial observation, which lasts 20 to

30 minutes; and the walk-through observation, which only lasts about 10 minutes. At a minimum, school leaders are expected to conduct at least two observations with each teacher whom they evaluate, and one of these observations must be a full observation.[14]

Quality observation and feedback is a core element of the LEAP plan. As DPS Senior Manager for LEAP Training & Systemization Sean Precious explains, "The best way to grow is to make sure that the feedback you're getting is ongoing and actionable."[15] Full observations, according to the LEAP handbook, must be followed by a "reflective feedback conversation" within 10 school days of the observation. Face-to-face meetings are not required for partial observations and walk-throughs, but they are recommended practice. In addition to the observation data collected by school leaders, peers twice annually observe teachers who have insufficient data or scored below a defined minimum during the previous year, as well as probationary teachers who are new to the district. Peer observers are bound by the same expectations regarding postobservation reflection conferences that apply to school leaders. All evaluators must input the data collected during their observations into the Schoolnet system.[16]

The third domain in the DPS Framework for Effective Teaching is "Professionalism," upon which teachers are assessed twice annually and which comprises another 10 percent of the overall evaluation. Teachers self-assess at midyear and again at the end of the year on their ability to understand student data, collaborate with colleagues and engage stakeholders, reflect on and take ownership of their own professional learning and development, and demonstrate and build capacity for leadership among colleagues and students. Principals also assess teachers twice annually on these professionalism indicators, though the midyear scores do not count toward the final LEAP rating. They also meet with each teacher at midyear to discuss preliminary ratings and to help the teacher focus on needed improvements before the end of the year.[17]

The final 10 percent of a teacher's evaluation is based upon student perception, which is measured by administering student surveys once annually in the fall semester.[18] The surveys are based upon the Tripod instrument developed by Ronald Ferguson of Harvard and revolve around three basic categories: how well the teacher facilitates student learning, how well the teacher supports students emotionally, and how well the teacher communicates to students high expectations for behavior and academic effort.[19] The surveys are administered early enough during the fall that the results can be used at midyear conferences between teachers and principals.[20]

LEAP complies with the spirit and letter of both the Race to the Top guidelines and Colorado S.B. 10-191 and is strategically aligned with the goals and objectives of The Denver Plan. But whether the new system will succeed in meaningfully distinguishing teacher performance will be largely based upon the levels of skill and fidelity with which school leaders implement the plan. Principals must have a deep understanding of the DPS Framework for Effective Teaching and be able to coach teachers to better perfor-

mance when necessary. They must also have adequate support and time-management skills to make such a system of targeted, specific, and ongoing feedback and evaluation sustainable. DPS has acknowledged and planned for this reality.

Every observer who will score teachers on the indicators is required to undergo training in which he or she "engages deeply" with the framework.[21] Depending on how much experience an observer has had with LEAP, the training may last from as little as four hours to two-and-a-half days. According to Precious, the district has trained more than 500 leaders on the framework, including principals, assistant principals, teacher leaders, and peer observers.[22] The trainings are offered monthly to ensure that all who may eventually observe or evaluate teachers have a shared understanding of the framework. The district contracted with an outside company to produce videos of instructional samples that were collaboratively normed and scored by a panel of experts. Following the training, all observers are required to rate the videos and come within one point of the correct score on 83 percent or more of the sample indicators in order to become LEAP certified. Those who fail to hit the mark on the video assessment get additional support, which may be in the form of co-observations with certified observers until they are able to pass the video assessment.[23]

Along with the Framework for Effective Teaching, the district developed the DPS School Leadership Framework, a shared definition of leadership practices that serve as the criteria for principal appraisal. Together, the district views the dual frameworks as "the foundation for ensuring that we have excellent teachers and school leaders to serve our students and fulfill our vision."[24] The DPS School Leadership Framework comprises leadership "expectations" around culture, equity, instruction, and human resources. Additionally, there are expectations around strategic, organizational, and community leadership. Principals self-assess and set goals in these areas and meet twice annually with their evaluators. During the midyear meeting, principals and evaluators collaboratively agree on target areas and plan for professional growth. Each principal must have a professional-growth plan in which target areas and goals are identified and professional-development plans are articulated. Additionally, principals are allowed to self-select into affinity groups of approximately 15 school leaders who have come together around a particular problem of practice. According to Precious, principals are "over the moon and through-the-roof satisfied" with this particular model of professional growth.[25]

In 2010, after receiving federal grant money, the district took steps to enhance the capacity of the central office to coach and support principals whose schools were underperforming. The district regrouped 20 of its lowest-performing buildings geographically into two clusters and appointed an instructional superintendent and a deputy instructional superintendent to supervise each cluster of schools. This effectively reduced the number of buildings and principals each supervisor was responsible for to five, which is significantly lower than the number that those who supervise principals are typically assigned.[26]

The feedback from principals within those 20 schools was so overwhelmingly positive that Patricia Slaughter, the assistant superintendent of elementary education at the time, decided to expand the model by hiring a deputy instructional superintendent to pair with the instructional superintendent in charge of the southwest cluster, which consisted of 17 buildings. Principals in the southwest cluster immediately noticed the greater level of access to and support from their direct supervisors—and the supervisors found that the arrangement led to an increased level of meaningful professional discourse and sharing of ideas from building to building.[27] The reorganization within the southwest cluster proved so popular that principals in other regional clusters began requesting similar changes, which the district facilitated by cutting other central-office staff considered less essential.[28]

In addition to supporting in-service principals in the aforementioned ways, DPS has also invested heavily in the leadership pipeline. In partnership with the University of Denver, the district supports two different programs that enable future leaders to earn both principal credentials and master's degrees: the Ritchie Program for School Leaders and the Executive Leadership for Successful Schools, or ELSS, program. Both cohorts are part of the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program in the Morgridge College of Education and are members of the George W. Bush Institute's Alliance to Reform Education Leadership. The Ritchie program features a paid internship in a Lead in Denver-approved school, and its classes are conducted in person. The ELSS program is a blended model that is partially online and has an unpaid internship.[29]

Also part of the AREL network of principal-preparation programs is the Get Smart Schools initiative in Denver. Get Smart Schools is a nonprofit organization that provides intensive summer training, ongoing day-long seminars on a monthly basis, executive coaching, opportunities for students to visit exemplary sites, and ongoing support after program completion. Students who complete the tuition-free program will be specifically prepared to "lead turn-around efforts, transform schools to innovation or open new schools in neighborhoods where there is a need."[30] DPS also works in concert with the University of Colorado, Denver, or UCD, which offers a blended online and in-person program that is specifically aligned with the DPS School Leadership Framework. Students in the UCD program can earn their principal certification as well as a master of arts or education specialist degree in administrative leadership and policy studies.[31]

Other unique programs designed to prepare DPS principals include Learn to Lead and the Residency for the Educational Development of DPS Intrapreneurs, or REDDI. Learn to Lead is DPS' own principal residency program and offers a one-year paid internship, during which the candidate is specifically groomed for a principalship.[32] REDDI allows future leaders to spend a year embedded in one of Denver's high-performing charter schools.[33] This program was developed through a partnership between the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation and OSRI, which is the entity within DPS that "cultivates, authorizes, launches, and oversees high-quality autonomous schools," including performance, innovation, and charter schools.[34]

Denver's approach to supporting building leadership within its system is dynamic and broad. Through investment in its teaching and leadership frameworks, systemic training of principals, increased central-office support for principals, and innovative partnerships and programs, DPS recognizes that principal leadership is key to improving teaching and learning. DPS is a national leader in terms of building principal capacity to support and improve instructional practices within school buildings, as well as preparing the next generation of leaders to do the important work at the instructional core.

Denver Public Schools School Leadership Framework
(Reproduced with the permission of DPS)

DPS School Leadership Framework

Revised 2013

DOMAIN	EXPECTATION		INDICATOR *(foundational indicators are in shaded boxes)*	KEY TO SYMBOLS
	CULTURE AND EQUITY LEADERSHIP	CEL 1	Leads for equity toward college and career readiness ✚★↑🌐	All indicators in the *School Leadership Framework* apply to all schools in the Denver Public Schools and represent our pledge to provide 21st century-focused, high-quality education for all students. The DPS Shared Values are represented in each indicator of this Framework and drive the full intention of the principal's work. Symbols have been incorporated into this document to emphasize key instructional values and practices that are effective for all learners and essential for particular groups of students.
		CEL 2	Leads for culture of empowerment, continuous improvement and celebration ✚🖥🌐	
	INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP	IL 1	Leads for high-quality, data-driven instruction by building the capacity of teachers to lead and perfect their craft ✚★⚡↑🖥🌐	✚ **Cultural Competency**—Addressing issues of equity through culturally responsive teaching strategies that are effective for all learners and essential for students of color (all classrooms)
		IL 2	Leads for the academic and social-emotional success of diverse* student populations ✚★⚡↑🌐	
'		IL 3	(ELA Program School Leaders): Leads for effective English Language Acquisition programming ✚★⚡	🌐 **Common Core** -- Strategies that represent the effective implementation of the Common Core State Standards
	HUMAN RESOURCE LEADERSHIP	HRL 1	Applies teacher and staff performance management systems in a way that ensures a culture of continuous improvement, support, and accountability ★↑	★ **English Language Learners (ELLs)**—Effective instructional strategies for all learners and essential for ELLs (all classrooms)
		HRL 2	Implements strong systems for identifying, recognizing, and distributing talent ✚★↑	⚡ **Spanish Native-Language Instruction**—Provision of essential Spanish native-language instruction (when observing Spanish native-language instruction)
	STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP	SL 1	Leads the school's vision, mission, and strategic goals to support college readiness for all students ✚★↑🌐	↑ **Students with Disabilities or Gifted and Talented**—Provision of essential supports for students with disabilities and students identified as gifted and talented (all classrooms)
		SL 2	Distributes leadership to inspire change in support of an empowered school culture ✚🖥	
	ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP	OL	Strategically aligns people, time, and money to drive student achievement ✚★⚡↑🌐	🖥 **Information Literacy and Technology**—Effective integration of technology and digital resources in classrooms (all classrooms) and the application of data to decision-making
	COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP	CL	Actively advocates for members of the school community and effectively engages family and community ✚🖥 🌐	

To access the e-document, please go to: www.leadindenver.com

Endnotes

1 Denver Public Schools, "Facts and Figures," available at http://www.dpsk12.org/communications/facts.html (last accessed March 2014).

2 Karen Auge, "Denver is the fastest growing large urban school district in the U.S.," *The Denver Post*, October 16, 2012, available at http://www.denverpost.com/ci_21779961/denver-is-fastest-growing-large-urban-school-district.

3 Denver Public Schools, "2010 Denver Plan" (2010), available at http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/Denver_%20.pdf.

4 Melanie Asmar, "Next month's elections could change the future of Denver Public Schools," *The Denver Westward News*, October 3, 2013, available at http://www.westword.com/2013-10-03/news/denver-public-schools-board-race/2/.

5 Denver Public Schools, "2010 Denver Plan."

6 Asmar, "Next month's elections could change the future of Denver Public Schools."

7 Sean Precious, phone interview with authors, December 17, 2013.

8 Denver Public Schools, "The Need for Reform," available at http://leap.dpsk12.org/DPS-Commitment/The-Need-for-Reform (last accessed June 2014).

9 Denver Public Schools, "2010 Denver Plan."

10 Ibid.

11 Colorado Revised Statutes, Section I, 22-9-102 (2010).

12 Zahira Torres, "Denver Public Schools gets $10 million dollar grant from Gates Foundation," *The Denver Post*, July 25, 2013, available at http://www.denverpost.com/ci_23726467/denver-public-schools-gets-10-million-grant-from.

13 LEAP, Denver Public Schools, and Denver Classroom Teachers Association, "LEAP Handbook, 2013—2014" (2013), available at http://leap.dpsk12.org/LEAP/media/Main/PDFs/2013-14-LEAP-Handbook_web_1.pdf.

14 Ibid.

15 Precious, phone interview with authors.

16 Ibid.

17 Denver Public Schools, "LEAP System: Professionalism," available at http://leap.dpsk12.org/LEAP-Components/Collaborative-Professionalism (last accessed January 2014).

18 Denver Public Schools, "Overview: The Foundation," available at http://leap.dpsk12.org/LEAP-Components/Overview (last accessed June 2014).

19 Personal communication from Karen Herbert, senior manager of student outcomes, Denver Public Schools, January 15, 2014.

20 Surveys were initially administered twice annually, once in the fall and again in the spring. The district discontinued the spring administration after data showed no significant difference in student perceptions from fall to spring. See ibid.

21 Precious, phone interview with authors.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Denver Public Schools, "The DPS School Leadership Framework," available at http://www.leadindenver.com/leadindenver/school-leadership-framework.html (last accessed January 2014).

25 Precious, phone interview with authors.

26 Jennifer Gill, "Make Room for the Principal Supervisors" (New York: The Wallace Foundation, 2013).

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Denver Public Schools, "University of Denver Morgridge College of Education," available at http://www.leadindenver.com/leadindenver/pathways-to-school-leadership/university-of-denver-morgridge-college-of-education-educational-leadership-policy-studies.html (last accessed January 2014).

30 Denver Public Schools, "Get Smart Schools," available at http://www.leadindenver.com/leadindenver/pathways-to-school-leadership/get-smart-schools-fellowship-program.html (last accessed January 2014).

31 Denver Public Schools, "School of Education & Human Development, University of Colorado, Denver," available at http://www.leadindenver.com/leadindenver/pathways-to-school-leadership/cu-denver-alps-principal-licensure-program.html (last accessed January 2014).

32 Denver Public Schools, "Learn to Lead," available at http://www.leadindenver.com/leadindenver/pathways-to-school-leadership/learn-to-lead-denver-principal-residency.html (last accessed January 2014).

33 Denver Public Schools, "REDDI," available at http://www.leadindenver.com/leadindenver/pathways-to-school-leadership/residency-for-the-educational-development-of-dps-intrapreneurs.html (last accessed January 2014). "Intrapreneurs" is a word used to describe those who practice what is typically described as "entrepreneurship" but do so within a larger organization.

34 Denver Public Schools, "Office of Innovation and School Reform," available at http://osri.dpsk12.org (last accessed January 2014).