Reinventing America’s Schools: Lessons from Denver

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Industrial Era Public Systems

- Centralized bureaucracies
- Hierarchical management
- Control through rules & regulations
- Standardized services
- Command-and-control methods
- Public monopolies
Public Education Was No Exception

• 19th century: informal systems, with some public schools, some private, some combinations, and few rules

• 20th century:
  • Centrally run school districts; everyone an employee
  • Hierarchical decision-making; central office controls school budgets, hiring, etc.
  • Attend school you are assigned to; no choices
  • All schools teach roughly same thing in same grade; students march through based mostly on age
  • Control through rules; eg. teacher tenure
  • No one measures school or teacher performance
  • If schools perform poorly, there are no consequences (for the adults)
Then the World Changed…

… and a 21st century operating system began to emerge:

• A network: schools independent of authorizers

• Operating authority decentralized to the schools

• Control through fewer rules, more accountability for results

• Different schools for different kids

• Parents have choice and dollars follow children, so parents have leverage

• No monopoly: schools compete for students
Denver is a Leader in Making This Transition

It has gone farthest of any district with an elected school board:

• Replaced 48 failing schools and opened more than 70 new schools (of 223 total) since 2005

• At least 40 of the new schools have been charters, which educate 18.3% of students

• 38 of the new schools have been Innovation Schools—with heightened autonomy—which educate 19.3%

• New “Innovation Zone,” a nonprofit with four innovation schools and its own board, to increase autonomy

• Both charters & DPS-operated schools participate in a computerized enrollment system, with full choice
A Bit of Background on Denver

- High growth: 25% increase in students since 2007

**Denver Student Demographics**
Percent of Students, Selected Demographic Measures

- **White**: 22.6%
- **African-American**: 13.8%
- **Hispanic**: 56.0%
- **Low Income**: 70.0%
- **English Language Learners**: 32.0%
Reform Always Creates Political Challenges

- In 2009, the teachers union ran a slate and won a 4-3 majority
- But one member of the slate turned out to be a reformer, flipping the majority
- For 4 years, reform was controversial and board meetings often lasted until the wee hours
- Two things turned the tide:
  - Results
  - National funding for strong reform candidates
- Today majority is 7-0 for reform
Results:

• Four-year graduation rates have risen from 39% in 2007 to 65% in 2015
  – 72% for those who entered DPS high schools in 9\textsuperscript{th} grade

• 15 percentage point increase in students scoring at or above grade level in reading, writing, and math, from 33% to 48%, 2005 to 2014 (new PARCC test in 2015)

• DPS has more than doubled the number of students taking and passing Advanced Placement courses
  – Passage rate is up to 43 percent.

• ACT scores have risen from 16 to 18.3 since 2007 (more than twice as fast as the state average)
But the Achievement Gap Has Widened:

_Denver Outpaces State on Test Score Improvement For All Races_

Percent Scoring Proficient or Advanced, 2005-2014

Colorado: White Hispanic African-American
Denver: White Hispanic African-American

% Proficient/Advanced

Denver’s Leap Forward On PARCC Tests, 2015
Percentile Ranking of Denver Schools vs. All Colorado Schools on Standardized Tests, 2013-2015

- **Elementary ELA**
  - TCAP 2013 Percentile: 15.1%
  - TCAP 2014 Percentile: 16.7%
  - PARCC 2015 Percentile: 42.4%

- **Elementary Math**
  - TCAP 2013 Percentile: 17.2%
  - TCAP 2014 Percentile: 18.7%
  - PARCC 2015 Percentile: 48.9%

- **Middle School ELA**
  - TCAP 2013 Percentile: 14.6%
  - TCAP 2014 Percentile: 17.5%
  - PARCC 2015 Percentile: 51.4%

- **Middle School Math**
  - TCAP 2013 Percentile: 32.4%
  - TCAP 2014 Percentile: 39.1%
  - PARCC 2015 Percentile: 65.4%
Where Has Denver’s Growth Come From?

- DPS-operated elementary schools have made significant improvement, but almost all the growth among secondary schools has been in charters.
  - Denver’s charter sector is unusually concentrated at the secondary level: 16 elementary schools vs. 39 secondary schools
Charter and DPS-Operated Elementary Schools Perform About the Same in English Language Arts

Statewide School Percentile Rankings on 2015 PARCC ELA Tests vs. Poverty Levels at Each Elementary School

- **Charter**
- **Innovation**
- **Traditional**

This school ranks at the 59th percentile in ELA, while 75% of its students are below the poverty level.

Poverty Level: % of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch
Charter Schools Underperform DPS-Operated Elementary Schools in Math
Statewide School Percentile Rankings on 2015 PARCC Math Tests vs. Poverty Levels at Each Elementary School

This school ranks at the 57th percentile in Math, while 29% of its students are below the poverty level.

Poverty Level: % of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch
Charter Schools Outperform DPS-Operated Middle Schools in English Language Arts
Statewide School Percentile Rankings on 2015 PARCC ELA Tests vs. Poverty Levels at Each Middle School

This school ranks at the 44th percentile in ELA, while 58% of its students are below the poverty level.
Charter Schools Outperform DPS-Operated Middle Schools in Math
Statewide School Percentile Rankings on 2015 PARCC Math Tests vs. Poverty Levels at Each Middle School

Math Percentile

This school ranks at the 90th percentile in math, while 55% of its students are below the poverty level.
Charter Schools Outperform DPS-Operated High Schools At Similar Poverty Levels
Comparing Average 2015 ACT Scores vs. Poverty Levels at Each High School

**ACT Score**

- **Charter**
- **Innovation**
- **Traditional**

This school had an average ACT score of 19, while 50% of its students are below the poverty level.

**Poverty Level**: % of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch
Lessons from Denver’s Success

1. DPS should continue to replace failing secondary schools with charter schools operated by successful charter networks—as it plans to do

   – Perhaps it’s time to recruit high performing charter networks from other states?
Lessons from Denver’s Success--2

2. Denver’s Innovation Schools have not outperformed other DPS-operated schools, on average.

Why have charters outperformed them?

– More autonomy
– More accountability: failing charters are closed
– More entrepreneurial energy & vision

So Denver is creating an “Innovation Zone,” with its own nonprofit board, to create charter-like autonomy

– The goal: charter performance without charter politics
Other Remaining Challenges in Denver

1. Ensure there are adequate facilities for new charters

2. Tame the “district monster:” create real autonomy for all schools

3. Align DPS staff around the portfolio/21st century strategy

4. Double down on the development & recruitment of strong school leaders
Will Denver’s 21st Century Strategies Work Elsewhere?

- They already are!

- New Orleans now has 93% of its students in charters, and for the past decade it has been the fastest improving city in the country.
  

- Washington D.C. has 45% of its students in charters, and on NAEP, it has been the fastest improving state on the last two tests (2013 & 2015).
  

- According to Stanford’s CREDO, urban charters outperform traditional schools, nationally, by significant margins.
Why Is the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century Model Superior?

- Authority is decentralized: the people who run the schools make the key operational decisions.
- Customers can choose between different school models.
- Schools are accountable to their customers (parents).
- Schools face consequences: those that succeed grow and replicate; those that fail are closed.
- The authorizer focuses on steering, not rowing, and is politically free to choose the best schools and close failing schools.
- Within a competitive marketplace, children have equal opportunity and equal financial resources.
Political Strategy: Lessons from Denver

• Create a respected catalyst for reform

• Build a broad coalition, including minority and low-income organizations

• Create positive examples of success

• Use performance data to communicate the need for change

• Seek community input before making changes
Political Strategy: Lessons from Denver

• Treat all school types—charter, traditional, and others—with an even hand

• Get serious about winning school board elections

• Be strategic about the pace of reform

• Don’t back down because you only have a 4-3 majority on the board

• Ensure consistency of leadership over time