

# Creating a Culture of Success: New School Development in Denver Public Schools

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# Introduction

## Denver Public Schools (DPS) is at a crossroads.

Despite well-intentioned district wide reform efforts, the majority of our city's students - largely low-income and minority students - are still not being adequately educated. Curriculum changes and new programs have surely benefitted some children and should not be abandoned. However, middle and high school students in particular have seen little benefit, and far too many are still trapped in low performing schools - schools that have been broken for decades.

## It is time to implement a fresh approach.

Chronically low performing schools should be closed so that an array of new, personalized schools can be born to provide students additional high quality learning environments. The structure, culture, and operations of Denver's lowest performing schools must change. No doubt that when DPS announces its intent to close schools, it will shake people's emotions and rattle their communities. But, it is a step that if handled with clear criteria, coupled with immense respect and support for affected families, could lead to dramatically increased opportunities for students.

Embedded in this challenge is a ripe opportunity – an opportunity for DPS, in partnership with the community – to transform the quality of education, school-by-school across our city so that it becomes the best urban school district in the nation. DPS should develop a process to open new, high performing schools that have increased flexibility to operate, but are held to higher standards – providing them the greatest opportunity to be successful. DPS also must redesign district operations and functions to support these new schools. Bringing new schools into the district will not only provide new options for families, but will also improve existing schools because they will be operating in a more successful atmosphere. ■

## Denver's children are going to school in a district where:

- Only *one* 8th grade Hispanic female out of 1,097 in DPS scored "advanced" on the science portion of the 2006 Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP);
- *Fifteen* of the Seventeen traditional DPS middle schools were rated low or unsatisfactory by the state based on the 2006 CSAP;
- Nearly 2,000 students dropped out of DPS middle and high schools in the 2006-2007 school year and;
- Over 20,000 students residing in Denver enrolled in non-DPS schools in search of better educational options.<sup>1</sup>



# No need to reinvent the wheel

**DPS is not alone.** Several urban school districts across the country have grappled with similar issues of low achievement, high drop-out rates, and declining enrollment. These districts have taken bold steps to close chronically low performing schools and replace them with new, higher performing schools (e.g. Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Oakland, New York City, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and San Diego to name a few).

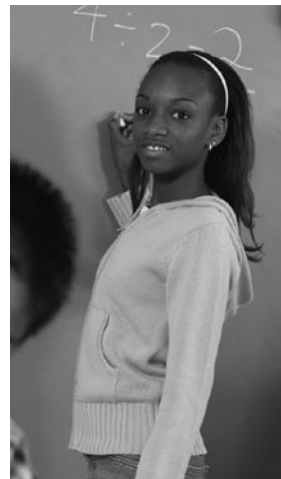
Creating new schools allows a new and refocused team of educators to create a culture of success, establish relationships with students, set high expectations, customize learning, attract the right mix of staff to schools and classrooms, be accountable for results, and keep parents and communities engaged.

This first report provides an initial scan of what selected trail-blazing school districts across the country are doing to foster new school development and provides key recommendations for DPS. The second, more detailed report due to be released next month, will look at three cities in depth -- Chicago, New York City, and Oakland -- to identify lessons learned to inform Denver's reform efforts. Both reports are based on information collected from published research and a series of phone interviews with key district leaders and operators of successful school networks. ■



“The educational problems we face in low-performing schools are fundamentally structural and systemic – not programmatic...without radically changing the context, [reforms] will prove unavailing.” –

*Starting Fresh: National Association of Charter School Authorizers*



# National overview

**Several cities have undergone new school reforms and Denver can learn from the successes and challenges of these districts before embarking on its own strategy for creating new schools.**

In New York, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein of the New York City (NYC) schools moved aggressively to open new smaller higher performing schools in the city because, as stated by one of this report's New York interviewees, "chronically low performing schools don't reinvent themselves." Since 2002, NYC has created 241 new small district schools, plus 38 new charter schools, with the majority being new secondary schools. All new schools must adhere to a set of common core principles: personalization, (schools with fewer than 600 students), rigorous academics, and community partnerships.

Experts on the cutting edge of the Renaissance 2010 ("Ren 10"), a Chicago new schools reform initiative launched in 2005, explain new school development as a way to increase the health of the public system - as compared to doing nothing and maintaining the status quo. Ren 10 has created 32 charter schools, 19 performance schools (district schools with increased flexibility to operate), and four contract schools.

→ The Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) has also paved the way in the new schools movement as a response to parents and community members who demanded better schools for their students. To date, OUSD has created 39 new small schools - with a target school size of between 300-500 students depending on the grades served. These new small schools are created around a common vision, have explicit theories of action about closing the achievement gap, and develop a clear plan for a culture of high, non-negotiable expectations for student achievement.

An early innovation on the new schools front was the 1995 creation of the Boston Pilot Schools - developed to promote a variety of high quality school choices for families. Pilot schools are unique in that they have autonomy over budget, staffing, governance, curriculum, and school year calendar to provide increased flexibility to best meet students' needs.<sup>2</sup> Pilot schools are exempt from district policies and mandates, including teacher union contract work rules (however, Pilot teachers can still receive union salaries and benefits).

"New schools provide a dynamic and evolving experience where it challenges everyone to raise the bar on expectations."

— Non-Profit Leader, Renaissance 2010



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# National overview

While many of these new school efforts are in their infancy, early indicators point to a handful of successful results:

- NYC's small schools are seeing higher attendance rates, higher grade promotion rates, increased high school graduation rates, and greater numbers of students applying to college.<sup>3</sup> Plus, graduation rates at 47 new small high schools that have opened in NYC since 2002 are substantially higher than the citywide average.<sup>4</sup>
- Early evidence from the Ren 10 initiative reveals that new charter schools are outperforming comparison neighborhood Chicago Public Schools. Since the performance and contract schools are so new, they have not yet been thoroughly evaluated.<sup>5</sup>
- A recent evaluation examining 39 of the new small schools in Oakland reveals that while the new small schools (compared to district schools) had fewer students who performed at "proficient" or "advanced" on the California state exams last year, new schools are significantly outperforming the schools they replaced and are showing positive results in attendance rates and high school graduation rates.<sup>6</sup> Plus, new schools are serving a much higher need population including a greater percentage of Latino students, free and reduced lunch students, and English language learner students as compared to the district.
- A 2006 Center for Collaborative Education report found that "when analyzing student-level data, Boston pilot schools are outperforming the district average on virtually every indicator of student engagement and achievement."<sup>7</sup> ■



## Types of new schools

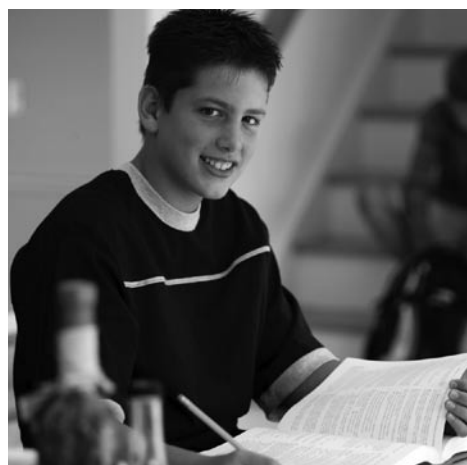
**Most districts across the country**, including Atlanta, New York and San Diego, in addition to the ones already highlighted, have targeted their new school development initiatives toward middle and high schools. For example, while aligning and providing intense curriculum and professional development support for the elementary schools in San Diego showed some promising results, a 2003 report from the district on high school reform argued that instructional reform alone “was not enough to improve student achievement among high school students: student engagement is an equally decisive factor. . . [there is a] critical need to reshape school structure and culture.”<sup>8</sup>

The types of new school structures created as part of these movements varies widely. Five levers of control around budget, leadership, faculty, curriculum/program, and time are often cited as being the most significant factors in establishing the operating conditions for new schools. Of the districts examined in this report, most have created conditions for a mix of new charter schools, traditional district schools, and a variety of unique school models with varying levels of flexibility and autonomy (e.g. Chicago’s Performance Schools). While early results in Chicago show charter schools outperforming comparison neighborhood schools, it is too premature to see which school structures are performing better than others. However, as earlier evidenced in looking at other cities, new schools generally – regardless of the exact structure – are outperforming existing district schools.

In most cities with new school development initiatives, new schools are created and started by an array of providers and operators including community groups, teachers, parents, labor unions, Charter (non-profit) Management Organizations (CMOs), Education (for-profit) Management Organizations (EMOs), and networks such as Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) and Expeditionary Learning (EL). This range of providers allows for increased school choice and customization of programming that is attractive for students and families. ■

“For over a decade, reformers have highlighted the flaws of comprehensive high schools: “they are too big, too impersonal, too fragmented, and too mindless to ensure that all students reach their full academic potential” –

*Campbell, DeArmond, and Taggart.*  
Urban School Reform: Lessons From San Diego



# Denver's opportunity – a call to action

**Because too many children in the Denver Public Schools lack access to a high quality school** – especially in the middle and high school years – DPS should aggressively pursue a strategy for creating new schools to ensure high quality educational options in every neighborhood. Fortunately, DPS has an adequate supply of facilities in which to create new schools, something that has not been the case in some of the other school districts (e.g., Chicago & New York City). The district can and should utilize space in its existing pool of facilities to creatively house new school options for Denver students.

Denver has the opportunity to design a new school development initiative for our students that builds on the lessons learned and expands on the initial successes of other districts. Based on the review of new school development efforts in other districts, the following recommendations provide a preliminary roadmap for DPS.

## Recommendations

### 1. OPEN AN OFFICE OF NEW SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT IN DPS

- ▶ **The director of this office should serve on the senior leadership team within DPS and be well resourced to be successful.** Immediately recruit and hire a nationally recognized leader who has extensive knowledge about new school development and create the environment needed to provide a variety of new successful schools. Nationally, similar initiatives have received substantial outside funding to help launch and support quality new schools. The funding community should provide early seed money to ensure a successful effort.
- ▶ **Immediately initiate a Request for Proposal (RFP) process that integrates many of the lessons learned in this and future reports.** To ensure a well-designed process this work should begin immediately – even if it means starting before a director is hired. The RFP process should begin soliciting applicants in early 2008 to ensure quality new schools to open in the fall of 2009 (see below).
- ▶ **Target fall 2009 for the opening of the first new schools.** By opening the first new schools in 2009, the district will have sufficient time to develop a thoughtful, well-designed application process, in collaboration with Denver's community. Successful school developers stressed the importance of having adequate time to plan for a new school opening. In most cases, hiring a school leader at least a year before the school opens is ideal so the new leader can work exclusively on developing the new school (e.g. recruiting and hiring a quality staff, designing the school, developing the curriculum, managing any facility-related needs, recruiting students, etc.). New school developers are clear that this work is nearly impossible to do well while having other responsibilities—such as leading an existing school while planning to open one new. *continued*

# Denver's opportunity – a call to action

## Recommendations

### 2. PROVIDE GREATER FLEXIBILITY FOR INCREASED ACCOUNTABILITY

- **New schools must have increased flexibility to operate.** New school developers and district leaders interviewed for this report emphasized the importance of having a certain level of autonomy over budget, staffing, program/curriculum, leadership, and use of time at the school level. School operators need flexibility to reach their vision. Plus, all stated that having access to a district facility is a tremendous advantage, even if that facility requires renovation and repairs.
- **New school operators and developers need to know up front the conditions of operation.** The Oakland Unified School District struggled in its early years of reform because it promised autonomies that were never delivered. It is important, especially to attracting certain groups or individuals that may open new schools, to clearly define from the onset of the reform what flexibility and autonomy new schools will be given.

### 3. ALLOW MULTIPLE PROVIDERS TO OPEN NEW SCHOOLS

- **An array of school providers will help expedite the expansion of DPS' supply of new schools and expand choice options for families.** Several new school developers interviewed stated they preferred to open one or two schools to begin with and then slowly expand – to ensure high quality schools. Therefore, allowing multiple providers will facilitate the opening of multiple schools at one time. Schools may be opened and run by various entities including: community groups, teachers, parents, labor unions, independent charter schools, CMOs, EMOs, and networks such as KIPP and EL. Additionally, allowing multiple providers to operate schools in DPS can lead to successful replication of schools, feeder networks that allow consistencies and coherence in curriculum and instructional strategies to exist across grade levels, and niche schools that can serve particular needs (e.g., alternative schools, schools proven successful with English Language Learners, etc.).

### 4. CREATE NEW SCHOOLS BASED ON A SET OF COMMON CORE PRINCIPLES

- **Common core principles create a framework for successful new schools.** New schools alone won't improve student achievement. Districts that have shown success with new school development provide common design characteristics that are required for new schools and that give students the best opportunity for success. In NYC for example, all new schools must be academically rigorous, personalized, and have community partnerships.

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# Denver's opportunity – a call to action

## Recommendations

### 5. CREATE A MEANINGFUL ROLE FOR THE COMMUNITY IN NEW SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

- **Authentic community partnerships and input are instrumental in creating successful new schools.** Districts that have new school development initiatives all emphasize the importance of community involvement and partnership in the creation of new schools. In Oakland the new schools movement was instigated by frustrated parents and community members that demanded better schools. In New York, new school developers are required as part of the approval process to partner with a community agency. As Denver is well aware, new schools will face an uphill battle if they lack meaningful community support and involvement.

### 6. DEVELOP A ROBUST SCHOOL LEADER AND EDUCATOR RECRUITMENT AND DEVELOPMENT PIPELINE

- **Partner with local and national organizations to develop a pipeline of school leaders for DPS.** District leaders cite outstanding school leadership and staff as key ingredients for successful new schools. One of the biggest challenges for new school developers is having an adequate supply of high quality people to run and staff new schools. DPS should partner with national organizations like Teach for America, The New Teacher Project, and New Leaders New Schools to help DPS build its capacity to develop outstanding staff. DPS should also support new school operators such as KIPP, Yes College Prep, Edison, and Envision schools that are creating their own educator development pipelines.

### 7. REDESIGN THE DISTRICT'S ROLE TO SUPPORT ALL SCHOOLS – INCLUDING NEW SCHOOLS

- **DPS should reform itself to better support new and existing schools.** Districts interviewed for this report said a key to successful new school redesign efforts was a concurrent redesign effort of the system. District leadership should reinvent the central office and administrative operations to dramatically change how the district focuses on and supports schools. The NYC district is maintaining the role of holding schools accountable for results, however, schools can choose whether or not to purchase services from the district or from a private provider (e.g. for Special Education, food services, professional development, payroll, etc.).

“Broken schools are a reflection of a broken district.” -

*NYC District Official*

- **New school creation needs to be well integrated into the broader district reform efforts.** Both New York City and Oakland have evolved their New School Development Offices into Offices of Portfolio Management. Along with schools that serve the city's students such as Transfer Schools, Career and Technical Education, English language learners schools are also housed within the new school development office and are held to the same accountability standards. This concept of portfolio management envisions a school district managing a diverse array of schools, some run by the district and others by independent organizations, each designed to meet the different needs of students.<sup>9</sup> ■

# Sources

<sup>1</sup>Hupfeld, Kelly (2007). "Traditional Middle Schools in the Denver Public School System – An Overview." Denver, CO: Public Sector Solutions (first 2 statistics); DPS research and planning department dropout data from the 2006-2007 school year; and Hubbard, Burt & Mitchell, Nancy. "Denver's public schools face a dilemma. Students are leaving." The Rocky Mountain News on the Web 13 Apr. 2007. 18 Sept. 2007 <http://www.rockymountainnews.com/drmn/education.com>.

<sup>2</sup>Description of the Boston Pilot Schools Network (2006). Boston., MA: Center for Collaborative Education [www.ccebos.org](http://www.ccebos.org).

<sup>3</sup>Huebner, Tracy (2005). "Rethinking High School: An Introduction to New York City's Experience." San Francisco, CA: WestEd. Huebner, Tracy (2006). "Rethinking High School: Inaugural Graduations at New York City's High Schools." San Francisco, CA: WestEd.

<sup>4</sup>Bosman, Julie. "Small Schools are Ahead in Graduation." New York Times on the Web 30th Jun., 2007. 18 Sept. 2007 <http://select.nytimes.com>.

<sup>5</sup>"Renaissance 2010, Charter and Performance Schools: Progress on the 2007 ISAT (preliminary data)." Chicago, IL: Office of New Schools, Chicago Public Schools.

<sup>6</sup>Strategic Measurement and Evaluation, Inc. (2007). "An Evaluation of the Oakland New Small School Initiative." A report for the Oakland Unified School District.

<sup>7</sup>Description of the Boston Pilot Schools Network (2006). Boston., MA: Center for Collaborative Education [www.ccebos.org](http://www.ccebos.org).

<sup>8</sup>Campbell, Christine; DeArmond, Michael; & Taggart, Sara (2005). "Toward a portfolio of schools: high school renewal." *In Urban School Reform: Lessons from San Diego* (Harvard Education Press). Boston.

<sup>9</sup>Hill, Paul T. (2006). "Put Learning First: A Portfolio approach to public schools." Washington, DC: Progressive Policy Institute.