

## The Denver Post - perspective

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### New schools, stronger leaders, more autonomy

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If we want different results, we can't do what we have always done.

The Colorado Student Assessment Program results for Denver Public Schools released Aug. 1 revealed that scores were largely flat or had declined as compared to the previous year. Think about this: the highest rate of proficient students in 10th-grade math in the nine largest DPS high schools was 28 percent. The lowest proficiency was 3 percent. That means that out of these 3,247 10th-grade students, 2,832 were unable to perform basic math skills.



*Manual High School Principal Rob Stein, center, talks with volunteers in a hallway at the school on Aug. 9. More than 650 volunteers descended on Manual for the final day of a Hands on Schools project organized by Metro Volunteers in Denver. Manual is reopening Monday after being closed for a year by district officials frustrated with the school's chronic low academic performance and dropping enrollment. (Post / Craig F. Walker)*

In response to this year's CSAP results, Board President Theresa Peña said: "We can't go through another year and have the results we had ... the results, quite honestly, are unacceptable. We are not educating kids like we should."

When parents, students, the community, foundations, the superintendent, and the Board of Education all recognize that the current way of doing business inside DPS isn't working - and won't work - it's time for change. Major changes.

In an April Rocky Mountain News op-ed, "A Vision for a 21st Century School System," Superintendent Michael Bennet and the Board of Education noted, "It is hard to admit, but it is abundantly clear that we will fail the vast majority of children in Denver if we try

to run our schools the same old way. The evidence in Denver and from big-city school districts across the country is undeniable. Operating an urban school district in the 21st century based on a century-old configuration will result in failure for too many children. It is long past time to admit this."

The district is right to continue its focus on improving teaching and learning and not wholly abandon the new academic programs in place, but this alone is insufficient. It's like adding a new story on a house with a broken foundation: it makes living there better in the short term, but in the end, it's not enough to keep the whole enterprise from collapsing. And as the above statistics and comments reflect, DPS is already crumbling from the bottom up. While we know that the interaction between teachers and students is the single most important factor in student achievement, it is clear that those interactions must be supported by optimal school operating conditions that allow for student success.

To turn around what many consider to be a "failed urban district," DPS must provide radical solutions that include support for an array of high quality school choices for families, a corps of excellent school principals given the ability to lead, and increased school autonomy in exchange for greater accountability.

This was, in fact, the theory behind the closure and reopening of Manual High School. Principal Rob Stein will begin this fall semester with new teachers, a new group of ninth-graders, a renewed campus and a focus and culture that seeks to put students' needs and achievement above all adult needs. It's a grand experiment by the district to see if it can provide traditional schools with enough autonomy, decision-making authority and freedom from regulation to perform at the same levels as, for example, the Denver School of Science and Technology or West Denver Preparatory Academy.

Whether the district has given Stein and his staff enough flexibility to create and implement a school that attains the highest achievement possible for a wide variety of students remains to be seen.

While it is clear that a handful of failing, low-enrollment schools can and should be closed this fall, it is unwise to close more schools without providing parents and kids with high quality school choices. This point was clearly made by the A+ Citizens Committee: Every potentially displaced student must have a better option than the school they were attending, before those schools can be closed. In many cases, this will require new schools to be opened first.

Thus, the district's top priority must be to open new, small (500 student), high-performing schools. Given the lack of capacity within the district to do this, the DPS should turn to outside vendors, as have New York City, Chicago and New Orleans. Further, DPS needs to create an Office of New School Development whose first task would be to create a process for the application, review and approval of all new schools - including charters, contract and redesigned district schools. By taking the lead in creating this process, the district will create a portfolio of high-performing, small schools based on successful school models that serve the needs of all students. In the fall of 2008, DPS could open

two or three new, small schools. Then in 2009, five to 10 new schools. And in 2010, 10 to 30 new schools. This is how the district must chip away at the proficiency problem.

If the district fails to solicit and encourage outside entities to provide new schools, we will, in Superintendent Bennet's own words, "fail the vast majority of children in Denver if we try to run our schools the same old way."

Second, hire the best principals from both inside and outside the district. DPS must provide significant resources for the ongoing development and training of promising school leaders and create a robust pipeline of exceptional school leaders. High-performing schools have strong principals who develop school cultures focused on achievement, while given the flexibility to lead.

Third, DPS must give these new schools and their leaders the keys to success by providing autonomy over staff hiring, firing, direct teacher placement, budget and curriculum - in exchange for increased performance and accountability. Plus, they must allow for more student time spent in the classroom, including the ability to have longer days, longer years, Saturday classes and after-school tutoring. Most important, new schools need the opportunity to start one grade at a time (as Manual, West Denver Prep, KIPP and Denver School of Science and Technology have) in order to build a strong school culture focused on academic achievement and high expectations for all students.

These conditions can come about through a new, "thin" district/teacher union contract or school/autonomy zone waivers, but the majority in the parental, business and foundation communities is clear: The status quo of poor school culture, working conditions and operating conditions is not working and must be changed.

Students, teachers, principals, parents, business leaders, foundations, and the greater Denver community must support the district as it enacts real and meaningful change. As a district and as a community, we need to say, "We can do better."

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