

# Denver, Colorado

15 MINUTE READ

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### Summary (2005-Present):

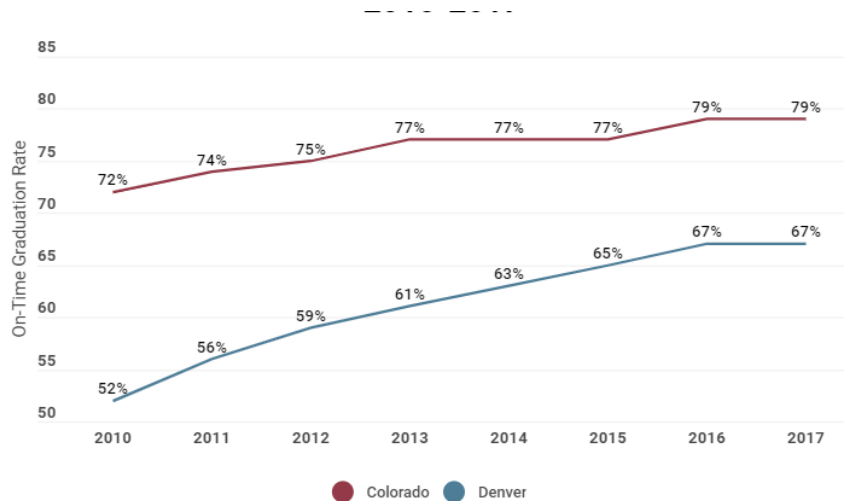
- Progress driven by consistent district leadership and elected school board
- Innovation zones and other models offer varying levels of school autonomy
- Reforms take place under local school board governance
- District authorizes and oversees wide variety of school types
- Equitable student funding and low central office costs mark departure from other cities

“What we are seeing is not a pretty picture. We are failing our kids.”

That’s the message about school performance that Allegra “Happy” Haynes recalls sharing with Denver parents at community meetings in the mid-2000s. The Denver native and longtime city councilwoman joined the Denver Public Schools (DPS) in 2005 to work on community engagement efforts. At the time, DPS had the lowest rate of academic growth among Colorado’s 10 largest districts, and roughly 30 percent of its school seats were empty.

But beginning in 2005, DPS implemented several strategies that led to major student achievement gains. Under consistent district leadership, DPS opened a variety of new schools providing more high-quality seats, became a model charter school authorizer, and developed a School Performance Framework (SPF) that holds all public schools in Denver to a common set of standards. And these changes have produced results: From 2007 to 2017, Denver’s four-year graduation rate rose from 39 percent to 67 percent, and student enrollment and test scores have risen over the past decade as well.

**Denver vs. Colorado On-Time Graduation Rates**  
**2010-2017**



Source: [Colorado Department of Education](#)

Yet Denver's education leaders will be the first to say the work is far from done. Even as they reflect on the district's progress, they are painfully aware of room for further improvement and lingering achievement gaps for low-income students and students of color.

While other cities have made educational progress under mayoral control or state-appointed emergency managers, Denver has implemented changes under an elected school board, offering a model to districts with local board governance. The district, which authorizes charter schools while continuing to operate district-run schools, also provides a model for charter-district collaboration.

In fact, school leaders and education experts from around the country regularly visit Denver to observe and learn. But DPS leaders hope these visitors will go home "not copying Denver but leapfrogging to the next level," says former DPS administrator Alyssa Whitehead-Bust. This self-critical comment is reflective of a district where good can always be better. Indeed, Denver's approach to improvement over the past decade reflects a recurring cycle of making tough decisions, evaluating results, and having the courage to change course where needed to advance progress for Denver's students.



Allegra "Happy" Haynes

This trajectory of improvement began in 2005, when the school board appointed Michael Bennet as superintendent. Then-Mayor John Hickenlooper encouraged Bennet, his chief of staff, to apply for the role. At the time, many big cities were choosing business leaders rather than longtime educators as superintendents. Denver's board selected Bennet over two more traditional candidates because they believed his expertise in business turnaround and debt restructuring would strengthen DPS academically and fiscally, as the district faced a \$400 million pension obligation gap.

Confident in his ability to bring about change in DPS, Bennet began his administration with a strong top-down leadership style. In his first-year community appearances, he often shared results from the previous year's DPS 10th-grade math test, where only 33 African American and 61 Latino students in the entire district passed. These results motivated him to take bold actions that sometimes resulted in tension between the community and district leadership. He closed Manual, the city's lowest-performing high school, over student protests and community objection. And he instituted a district-wide standardized curriculum, one so poorly matched to the needs of some high-poverty schools that it left many teachers frustrated and angry.

These early missteps demonstrated the need for clearer communication, particularly with the community, and the importance of having better options in place for students before taking a major step like closing a school. By his own admission, Bennet "learned quickly that nothing gets done through a command-and-control approach." He reflected in a 2011 Dallas News opinion piece that, after the early



mistakes, “We went through an extensive process of input and engagement that included changes and compromises. We worked hard to build an enduring coalition for reform, where everyone — parents, teachers and principals alike — held a stake in students’ success.”

When Bennet was appointed to the U.S. Senate in January 2009, his chief operating officer, Tom Boasberg, moved into the superintendent role, and these lessons carried over into the new administration. Boasberg focused the district on clearer communications, paid closer attention to community engagement, developed a more deliberate school closure model, and continued to add quality seats through a variety of innovative school models. Opening new, promising schools has been a central part of Denver’s story under both Bennet and Boasberg.

A growing population both necessitated and enabled rapid school creation. Between 2005 and 2018, enrollment increased by about 20,000 students, and DPS had a net growth of about 56 schools, making Denver one of the fastest-growing large urban districts in the country. This growth allowed DPS to open many new schools and facilities, and minimized opposition to charter schools, which are often resisted when they are perceived to take students — and funding — away from the district.

Denver's Family of Schools	
District-Run Schools	District-run traditional schools are public schools that are directly run and overseen by the district. They follow all state requirements and DPS Board of Education policies, without the ability to have waivers.
Innovation Schools	District-run innovation schools are district-managed public schools with a strategic plan that allows waivers to specific district policies, state statutes, and collective bargaining agreements with the goal of improving student outcomes and executing with excellence a specific model.
Innovation Zone	An innovation zone is a group of public innovation schools that share common interests and seek additional flexibility.
Charter Schools	DPS charter schools are public, independently operated schools. Each charter school board has a contract with the DPS Board of Education that outlines its operating terms, including performance goals, program elements, and required compliance with state and federal Requirements.
Innovation Management Organization	An IMO is a group of public schools that share a model and are overseen by an executive principal, with the ability to leverage their resources across school sites. Schools in an IMO may or may not possess innovation status.

Under Boasberg, the idea of good schools, regardless of type, gained strength in Denver, and the city now oversees a complex mix of direct-run traditional schools, charter schools, innovation schools, innovation zones, and innovation school management organizations. Of the district’s 200-plus schools, nearly half are traditional direct-run schools, with the other half split almost equally between charter and other models.

One of DPS’ most significant contributions to the field is the development of innovation zones. Schools in innovation zones are district schools, but they have a special governance arrangement with DPS that grants them more autonomy over their time and money, and it groups them with other schools with similar themes or aims. Innovation zones are governed by an independent nonprofit board and operate through a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with DPS that ensures their autonomy and keeps them accountable for improving their ratings on DPS’ SPF in three years, or they risk losing their zone status.

The first zone, the [Luminary Learning Network \(LLN\)](#), began with four school leaders of successful schools that desired even more autonomy than their “innovation school” status afforded them.

In June 2018, after eight additional schools signaled interest in starting or joining an innovation zone, five were approved. One school joined the LLN, and four others made up a new zone, the Northeast Denver Innovation Zone, which creates feeder patterns among its schools.

Barbara O’Brien, the DPS school board vice president, told [Chalkbeat](#), “I don’t know how these zones are going to end up performing over time, but the need to allow people to try their

hardest, to do the best they can and color outside the lines is a really important step.”

Two of the LLN’s architects, former DPS board member Mary Seawell and Empower Education’s Brett Alessi, offered three lessons that the creation of the network could provide to superintendents and board members interested in the approach. The first is that districts often aren’t taking full advantage of state laws that allow them to create innovation zones, such as those found in Colorado, Indiana, and Tennessee. The second is that nonprofit boards governing district schools can actually increase public input and school accountability. The last is that relationships matter. The school leaders, district leaders, and supporting partners relied on an ongoing dialogue to create the LLN, which wouldn’t have been possible without fostering trust and a shared desire to achieve better outcomes for students.

DPS wears different hats with different types of schools: It authorizes charter schools, provides services to innovation schools, and operates schools of its own. Denver leaders acknowledge a degree of tension inherent in these multiple roles. In particular, some critics perceive a conflict of interest in DPS serving as the sole authorizer for Denver charter schools while also operating district schools that compete with charters. Over time, DPS has used its authorizing role strategically to approve new charter schools that fill gaps or unmet needs in the district. But this also makes it difficult for operators to open schools that don’t align with what DPS leaders think the district needs.

The district has also put in place measures, such as firewalls between teams, to mitigate potential conflicts of interest. As the district has navigated this unprecedented mix of schools, a conscious effort was made to separate operating, authorizing, and evaluation roles. Brian Eschbacher, DPS’ former executive director of planning and enrollment services, remembers discussions in the DPS offices about this authorizer-operator conflict: “It was intentional [within DPS] to start to break things up and give people more independence. ... It gives us that separation, which I think is healthy.”

Yet having charter, innovation, and district-run schools under a common umbrella also brings benefits for both charter and traditional schools, as well as students and families. Unlike some cities where the operator and authorizer are separate agencies, DPS authorizes and operates schools, and its portfolio office evaluates all schools through the SPF. Denver is also able to offer centralized data to both schools and families, a common performance framework for all schools, a single city-wide strategic plan, and coordination of central services, things that don’t exist in more decentralized or bifurcated systems.

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Effective oversight of such a complex central office is critical, and DPS’ elected school board has successfully navigated its varied responsibilities for more than a decade. In other cities, elected boards sometimes create political struggles or slow down progress, but

responsibilities for more than a decade. In other cities, elected boards sometimes create political struggles or slow down progress, but Boasberg cultivated and sustained board support over his nearly decade-long tenure. Denver's elected board includes seven members: five elected by voters in five distinct regions or districts, and two elected at-large by voters citywide. While the number of board members supporting Boasberg's agenda fluctuated between four and seven over the course of his tenure, he always maintained support from a majority of members. And the combination of a proactive, reflective, longtime superintendent and years of interactive, thoughtful, and occasionally skeptical board support has been a key ingredient to DPS improvements.

The 2009 election of Nate Easley came at a pivotal moment in the board's evolution. A Denver native and DPS graduate with his own compelling education story, Easley was elected with the backing of the teachers' union, who hoped he could swing a reform-minded board to one tilted against Boasberg. Instead, Easley supported Boasberg's reform efforts: "I never said I cared about governance models. What I care about are kids learning to read, write, and do arithmetic." Easley's unexpected alliance with Boasberg early in the superintendent's tenure kept the board majority behind the latter's reform plans, providing latitude for Denver to open schools under a variety of governance structures. This underlines the importance of a superintendent's ability to cultivate strong alliances.

*"I never said I cared about governance models. What I care about are kids learning to read, write, and do arithmetic."*



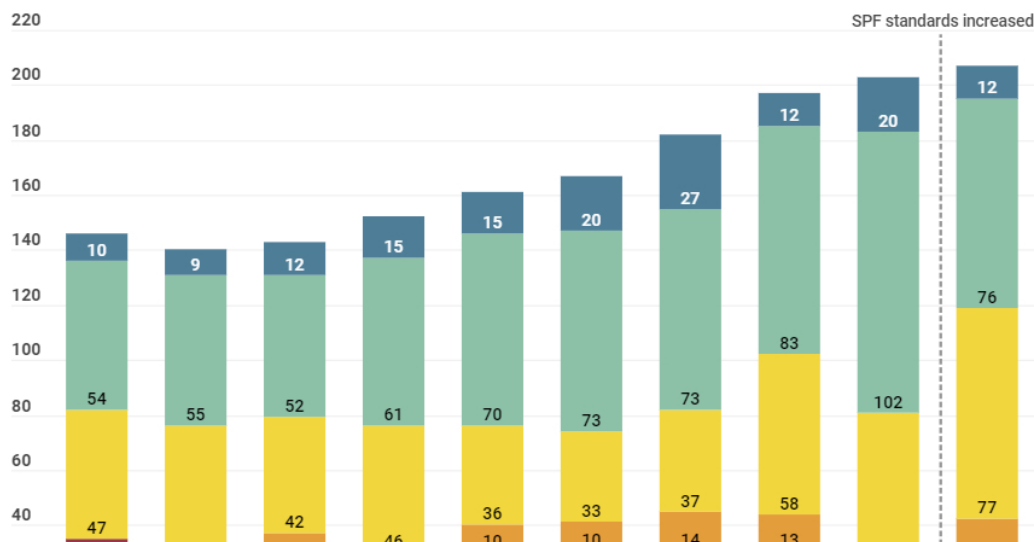
Nate Easley

Equally crucial to making this system work has been a school board agnostic to school type and committed to equitably funding all students wherever they choose to enroll. Haynes notes that board members base their decisions on this "very solid belief that we just want good schools." Former Board President Mary Seawell explains, "Can you run, operate, [and] sustain a successful school? If you take politics out of this conversation and look at performance, no one should really care what the governance type is."

The SPF is a huge part of how Denver equitably evaluates and rates a variety of school models operated and authorized by DPS. The SPF combines data on multiple factors, such as attendance, state test scores, and parent satisfaction, to arrive at an overall rating of individual school performance. It performs three functions: assisting parents in choosing schools, providing accountability to the district, and providing a performance management tool for schools. Van Schoales, CEO of A+ Colorado, a local education advocacy group, calls the SPF "game changing — the top thing in policy and practice DPS did over the last 10-15 years." He calls the SPF "consistent" and believes "it identifies, for the most part, good and not-so-good schools."

## Denver Public Schools School Performance Framework (SPF) Ratings

2011-2017







*Note: All frameworks represented; SPF was not published in 2015.*

*Source: Denver Public Schools*

Consistent with its iterative approach to improvement, DPS has revised the SPF over time. In 2017-2018, changes designed to more accurately reflect literacy targets and encourage good schools to close gaps for all student groups resulted in fewer “Distinguished” and “Meets Expectations” schools. Increasing expectations, in some cases above statewide standards, reflects the district’s desire to not settle for merely good enough.

And despite ongoing tweaks, some local stakeholders believe this good tool could still be better. Schoales, for example, believes the current version has too many indicators and needs to be simplified, while Haynes believes it should be made more accessible for parents who use it for school choice. Easley believes the SPF would be more equitable and objective if a third-party organization administered it. These varying prescriptions may reflect tensions between the SPF’s three goals, bringing into question how well the SPF currently serves each of these goals and which should be prioritized. Nonetheless, a central way to measure school quality is an important tool for the district and the board.

Of course, when a district evaluates the performance of its schools, some will not fare well. And central to DPS’ philosophy is that under-enrolled or chronically underperforming schools should be closed if no other interventions work. Though necessary at times, the closure of a school — especially a historic high school — is painful for everyone involved, including the people who make the unpopular decision.

The DPS board’s 2010 decision to close Montbello High School highlighted the complexity and difficulty of Denver’s performance-based model, and it also drew strong union and community opposition. Unlike the Manual closure, the Montbello decision involved months of meetings between the DPS board and stakeholders. Yet even with a plan in place for three smaller programs to replace the one comprehensive high school, community members protested the closure of a legacy school.

Seawell recalls the months of community conversations held prior to closing the school and crying students waving signs that read, “Please don’t close my school.” Students who wanted Montbello to remain open also readily acknowledged they had friends and family members who had dropped out — students whose needs were not being met. Seawell remembers the night of the closure vote: “I’ve never felt that way before, walking into a room and just being in total knots and also knowing the right thing to do.” Easley cites closing his alma mater as his “most difficult” decision as a school board member, but he adds he was committed to “vote [his] conviction that kids can learn.” After Easley’s closure vote, a community member initiated a recall vote designed to remove Easley. Although the effort failed, it highlighted the intensity of opposition to the closure among some community members.



Mary Seawell

The Montbello closure process incorporated lessons learned from the Manual closure but still reflected shortcomings that DPS continues to address. Montbello was replaced with three school programs: Collegiate Prep Academy, the Denver Center for International Studies, and the program for existing high school students who wanted to finish out their years at Montbello. Both Seawell and Easley still believe Montbello's closure was the correct decision, but in hindsight, Easley wishes a strong charter operator had been considered to replace Montbello. He notes that the board was reluctant to install a charter school and instead chose three programs, "which, for the most part, failed and continue to fail." With this outcome, the community lost trust in the process, and the board lost the goodwill they would have gained with better replacement choices.

Today, students in Northeast Denver can choose from 11 high schools: the three programs that replaced Montbello, five district-run schools, and three charter schools. Since the closure, graduation rates are up and college remediation rates are down, but community members have continued to push for a traditional comprehensive high school, in part to have the full array of amenities and extracurriculars, such as libraries, student clubs, and competitive athletic programs, that were available at Montbello. While some are skeptical about whether DPS has actually listened during months-long rounds of community forums, board member Jennifer Bacon acknowledged in a Chalkbeat piece that "we can't avoid these hard questions of 'where are we in the far northeast with our education?' This is not the best we can be."

The Montbello story illustrates the need for transparent, two-way communication with the community, responsiveness to community desires, and high-quality schooling options for the students of any school being closed. And continued community engagement is even more crucial as board elections in recent years have been more hotly contested.

After a decade of progress, DPS now faces a challenging crossroads. Due to a variety of demographic and economic factors, a decade-plus of rapid population growth has plateaued, and DPS predicts a system-wide, K-12 enrollment decrease of nearly 2 percent by 2021. As housing prices climb, lower-income families will struggle to move into the DPS system. Easley believes that "[DPS'] best and most loyal 'customers' are low-income kids, [and] when you start to push those families out and you introduce families that have real choice, not just within the public system, then it gets a little more complicated." Easley's concern highlights the complication of DPS maintaining or increasing quality options across school types in a city with declining enrollment. If Denver cannot maintain improved student achievement, it once again risks losing students to nearby districts or alternatives like private or in-home schools.

The desire to move from good to better to best continues to drive Denver education. In June 2018, DPS announced that the district would take a yearlong pause on closing low-performing schools, and in July, Boasberg announced his resignation, effective October 2018. He will be replaced by veteran Denver educator and administrator Dr. Ron Cabrera, who was unanimously approved to serve as interim by the Denver Board of Education while a national search for Boasberg's replacement continues. The leadership turnover and pause in strategy will require Denver to step back and evaluate its progress to date and determine a future course of action. Some worry that this pause could lead to weakening accountability, signaling a retreat from the district's current strategy. Others believe the pause on closures may result in an improved comprehensive process for continuous improvement.

Ideally, DPS will weather these changes, strengthening the relationship between the district and its families. As Denver continues to evolve, districts across the country will continue to follow its story, drawing from its successes, its mistakes, and its willingness to be self-critical in the best interests of students.

*Last updated on October 23, 2018*



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