

## **The Denver Post - guest commentary**

# **Blueprint for a high-performing school district**

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Denver School of the Arts. Denver School of Science and Technology. Dora Moore. Slavens. Odyssey. Hamilton. KIPP Sunshine Peak. Morey.

When Denver-area parents are looking for high-performing schools for their children in grades 6-12, any of these ought to be on the list.

These schools have solid student achievement, strong leadership, standout teachers and successful graduates.

Some are charters, some are traditional district schools and others fall somewhere in between. They are proof that it is possible to get a good public-school education in Denver.

Unfortunately, of the roughly 65 middle and high school options in DPS, these eight schools represent the only secondary schools that received high or excellent rankings on the recently released State Accountability Reports.

Denver has a unique opportunity to create outstanding schools. DPS recently opted to close several schools that have been chronic low performers. It has excess school building space that can be used to house new, higher-performing schools. And the greater Denver community is eager to support the district's efforts to expand the supply of great schools.

We applaud DPS's recent announcement to create new schools. Hopefully this effort will reflect the lessons learned and best practices seen in other cities that have blazed the trail in this arena. These best practices include the following steps:

- Increase operational flexibility for schools in exchange for greater academic performance expectations. Give schools authority to control school leadership, staff, budget, curriculum, assessments and school time in exchange for more stringent accountability expectations, such as performance agreements or contracts between the district and school sites. These standards should apply to all new schools and DPS should also provide a path to allow existing district schools that show signs of academic progress to opt into this new system.
- Determine the common design elements to which all new schools must adhere. Successful new schools articulate clear design principles that provide students with the greatest opportunity for success.

- Create a meaningful role for the community in development of new schools. Partnerships between schools and community leaders — both individuals and organizations — are instrumental in serving as a catalyst for school reform and sustaining long-term success.
- Attract high-quality applicants with proven track records. Provide incentives for local operators of successful schools to replicate their schools in other parts of the city, including start-up funding, use of district school facilities, and clear and flexible operating conditions.

In theory, it shouldn't matter if these new schools are district schools, charter schools, or some kind of hybrid. Creating an array of school choices is powerful because it puts the focus on quality. The premise is that what districts need most is more good schools.

However, because many successful school operators around the country have expressed reservations about expanding to new geographic regions, any school development strategy should encourage replication of thriving local models.

To dramatically increase student achievement and ensure that this reform doesn't just create pockets of excellence, Denver's new-schools strategy must also be about reinventing district operations to better support the initiation and development of high-achieving schools across the city.

This means changing the way school districts and teachers unions do business. Rather than districts controlling inputs around the educational program and school budgets, it should support schools and hold them accountable for results.

Similarly, while unions play an important role in advocating for better salaries and benefits for teachers, they too must begin to reform archaic policies around work rules that affect the use of teachers' time in addition to hiring, placement, firing and compensation structures that often conflict with modern school reform strategies.

Other urban districts like New York, Chicago, Oakland and New Orleans have tested and refined the process of creating new schools and changing systemic structures. Denver can leapfrog ahead and build on their experiences.

Denver and other metro-area districts should embrace the opportunity to create an array of high-performing schools customized to meet the needs of every student and family in ways that we know can work.

It took a 100-year hurricane and a catastrophic flood for the city of New Orleans to embrace school reform and begin to open new schools positioned to deliver successful outcomes. What it will take for Denver to do the same thing?

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