



# DPS Overview and Background Statement for Superintendent Search 2020

DECEMBER 2020

## Who We Are

### A Diverse Community of Students

Denver Public Schools is a large, diverse urban school district with more than 92,000 students in 207 schools and over 14,000 employees.

We are very proud of our diversity and believe it is one of our greatest strengths. Students of color comprise the majority of DPS' ethnically and culturally rich student population, which includes 55% Latino, 13% African-American, 2% Asian, 0.4% Native American, 5% multi-ethnic and 24% white students. Sixty-seven percent of students come from families that qualify for free- and reduced-price lunch benefits, and 33% are identified as English language learners, with more than 160 languages spoken at home.

The district has welcomed an increasing number of immigrant and refugee families. The Board of Education and superintendent have taken strong action, in collaboration with the city of Denver, to ensure a safe and welcoming environment for all students, regardless of immigration status. We have codified our commitment to immigrant students in our [Safe and Welcoming School District](#) Resolution.

However, too many of our students of color still don't have the opportunity to be taught by someone who looks like them. Our goal of achieving a workforce that more closely reflects the demographics of our student population remains one of our district's top priorities.

### A Diverse Family of Schools

All of our public schools – both district-run and charter – have come together to commit to equity of opportunity, equity of responsibility and equity of accountability for all schools by participating in the Charter Council and Charter Roundtable, convened by DPS. DPS is both an operator and authorizer. DPS' family of schools model includes a broad and diverse mix of school types, sizes and structures, including:

- District-run schools, which serve three quarters of total students:

- **Innovation Schools:** Roughly a third of our district-run schools are innovation schools, where teachers, parents and school leaders come together on an innovation plan that meets the needs of their students and community.
- **Traditional Schools:** Just over half of our students are in traditional, district-run schools.
- Public charter schools, which serve a quarter of total students: Our Portfolio Management team works to ensure that all of our public schools play by the same enrollment rules, with an emphasis on access for and service to our highest-need students – our students with disabilities, English language learners, low-income and transient students.

DPS uses a unified choice system to manage enrollment for all schools in our family of schools, including charter schools. The district adopted a unified choice system after community organizations and parents pushed the district for more equitable access to DPS schools in 2011. The unified choice system also utilizes enrollment zones, in which district-run and charter schools all serve students within shared boundaries. We have seen enrollment zones promote greater socioeconomic integration throughout all the schools in some zones, like the Southeast Enrollment Zone.

### Our Budget Philosophy

We target resources in order to ensure that funds are invested based on the needs of our students and that we maximize funding at the school level. Those closest to students – our teachers, school leaders and communities – know how best to spend their dollars to meet their kids' needs, and they should have the flexibility to do so. We strive to ensure equity of resources in the 2016 and 2020 Bond and Mill Levies, where funds to schools for initiatives like mental health support were dispersed based on need at the school. The COVID 19 pandemic has also cut our state's budget, which has a significant impact on DPS, a challenge facing many school districts across the country. While we were able to pass a [Bond and Mill in 2020](#), DPS still faces ongoing structural debt, which will be a strategic priority for the district to address over the next few years. Living into our value of community engagement, we have enlisted stakeholder and citizen support through a new [Budget Advisory Committee](#). More about our budget philosophy, finance, and operations can be found on the [Budget Transparency site](#).

### The Board

Our [board](#) brings a broad range of experiences and identities. Together, we are DPS parents and alumni, educators, and community organizers. We include a faith leader, a state representative, and a former Lieutenant Governor. We are deeply connected to many local community organizations in Denver, but most importantly, we have an unrelenting commitment to ensuring Every Child Succeeds, the vision of our school district. To our board, success goes beyond test scores to include socio-emotional health and post-secondary readiness.

Recent board elections have diversified the educational philosophies present on our board. We are working toward a policy governance approach that is exemplified by a close working relationship between the board and the superintendent.

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## A Time of Transition

### The Denver 2020 Plan

Since 2005, and updated in 2010 and 2014, DPS followed a strategic plan known as the [The Denver Plan 2020](#). This included five overarching goals:

- Great schools in every neighborhood
- A foundation for success in school
- Close the opportunity gap
- Support for the whole child
- Ready for college and career

A new superintendent will join the board, as a governance team, to develop and execute a new strategic plan. While we previously initiated new strategic planning conversations with community partners, we [paused the process to focus on pandemic response](#).

### Progress Made

*According to the DPS Assessment, Reporting, and Data Support team*

- DPS has had the top academic growth among large Colorado school districts for each of the past four years
- 850 more of our youngest learners are entering kindergarten ready to learn because of increased access to early childhood education
- In 2018, DPS graduated approximately 2,100 more students than in 2006; and the number of African-American and Latino graduates nearly doubled during that time, from 1,706 to 3,407. Over that same time period, drop-out rates declined by 60%, with 2,200 fewer students dropping out in 2016-17 than did a decade ago.

### Crisis Priorities

After the COVID 19 pandemic made it necessary to shift all of our schools to remote learning in March 2020, we took the spring and summer to establish crisis priorities. The [Crisis Priorities](#) form the focus of our governance team and DPS for the 2019-2020 school year and through the end of the pandemic.

- Crisis Priority 1: The superintendent will address the health and safety needs of all students and employees, focusing on our most vulnerable students.
  - Crisis Priority 2: The superintendent will address the social-emotional and mental health needs of all students and employees, focusing on our most vulnerable students.
  - Crisis Priority 3: The superintendent will engage all students in learning and mitigate unfinished learning, focusing on our language learners, students with disabilities, students experiencing poverty, and students of color who have historically been marginalized and underserved.
  - Equity is a foundational cornerstone that each of these priorities builds upon.
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More information on the quarterly progress to the crisis priorities [can be found here](#).

## Strategic Planning

Below we outline publications that capture what we've heard from the Denver community since 2016 and resolutions we've passed:

- 2016: [“The Bailey Report”](#) : An Examination of Student & Educator Experiences in DPS Through the Voices of African-American Teachers and Administrators
- 2017: [Strengthening Neighborhoods Initiative Recommendation](#)
- 2018: [Superintendent Engagement Report](#)
- 2018: [African American Equity Task Force recommendation](#)
- 2019: [Black Excellence Resolution](#)
- 2019: [Portrait of a DPS Graduate](#)
- 2020: Resolution: [Resolution on Inclusion for LGBTQIA+](#)
- 2020: Dr. Antwan Jefferson and Dr. Plashan McCune report, [“Engagement Report: Family Decision-Making.”](#)
- 2020: Initial community feedback for the [DPS Denver Plan](#)
- 2019-2020: [Reimagine SPF survey feedback report](#)
- 2020: [Reimagine SPF committee recommendation report](#)
- 2020: [Denver School Leaders’ Association Resolution](#)
- 2020: [Reunification of West Campus Resolution](#)
- 2020: [Know Justice Know Peace Resolution](#)

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## Opportunities and Challenges Ahead

While the district has advanced progress and growth over the past decade as evidenced above, key challenges remain and must be addressed by the district, superintendent and board.

The next superintendent needs to possess the vision and leadership skills necessary to build on our successes to date and tackle the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, including:

- **Closing the Opportunity Gap:**
  - *Support for teachers and leaders:* We know that our most important factor in closing opportunity gaps is to attract, retain and develop our school leaders and teachers, especially in our highest-poverty schools. We must continue to support strong leadership development programs – of both school leaders and teacher leaders – and we are fully committed to investing in the growth and development of our educators.
  - *Institutional Racism and Other ‘-isms’:* We must confront through analysis, action, and anti-racism, how the district is dealing with race, culture and language diversity in addressing the opportunity gap that persists in order to improve the experience of teachers, students and families of color at DPS.
  - *English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities:* We will honor the district’s implementation of the Consent Decree, support dual language programs and the Seal of Biliteracy, and continue to ensure the protection and welcoming embrace for our immigrant and refugee students and families. We will also focus deeply on advancing the growth and support of our students with disabilities.

- **Stewardship During a Time of Declining Population of School-aged Children:** After years of dramatic enrollment growth, the city of Denver is beginning to experience a decline in the number of school-aged children, with gentrification affecting many areas of the city. We know how important it is to be proactive in the face of rising housing prices and gentrification in order to promote greater school integration and support our families and communities. We must conduct regional planning rooted in a deep understanding of our communities in order to address access to quality schools and aligned choice and transportation options. In addition, the COVID-pandemic has created structural debt due to a cut in state funding. We must also focus on financial stewardship and strong communication and change management strategies.
- **Investing Early:** While we have seen significant gains in early literacy among our students, we continue to have a large opportunity gap. We know how vitally important it is that we invest in our youngest students with a particular focus on ensuring that all our students learn to read confidently by third grade.
- **Preparing our Students for College and Career:** We aim for every student to graduate from high school ready for college and career, and must prepare them to meet the state’s newly developed graduation requirements. We are developing innovative approaches to better prepare our students for college and career, including early college models, expanded concurrent enrollment opportunities, and new apprenticeship roles through our CareerConnect program.
- **Community Engagement:** We will work meaningfully with communities across the city to inform, problem-solve, establish partnership and shared ownership of the district.
- **Checking Progress and Holding Ourselves Accountable:**
  - School Performance Compact (SPC): We are committed to reassessing and clarifying the objectives and tactics of the [School Performance Compact](#) policy, which governs how the district evaluates school performance and manages intervention strategies like turnaround and restart.
  - Quality School Measures: The [Reimagine School Performance Framework \(SPF\) committee](#) recommendations highlight a new way to examine school performance and accountability, measuring not only academic data but also other aspects of schooling such as students’ social and emotional well-being, and the climate and culture of schools. Through the work of this committee, we learned that our community also values a focus on school improvement and leveraging authentic partnerships with schools, the district, and the community to help schools improve and take a shared responsibility approach for supporting school improvement and success. As a result, we officially transitioned to the state performance framework in 2020, and are looking forward to exploring new ways to ensure educational equity in DPS.
  - Transparency: We want to continue to assure financial transparency through the publication of our budget transparency guidebook, which provides insight into the goals, values, and strategies that guide our financial decisions.
- **Supporting a Diverse Family of Schools:** We must support and encourage collaboration and learning across the district’s family of schools with the belief that “we are better together.” We must ensure the ongoing support and evaluation of the successful implementation of our charters and district-run schools, including our innovation schools and zones.
- **Recruiting and Retaining a High-quality and Diverse Workforce:** We must recruit, retain, and develop highly effective educators, with a particular emphasis on diversity, fair and equitable compensation, and the implementation of culturally-responsive education practices.

We thank Superintendent Susana Cordova for her dedication to DPS for the last 31 years. Her legacy as the first Latina superintendent and work to ensure equity is the central cornerstone of DPS will continue on to

benefit future generations of students and staff. We need the next superintendent to seize the extraordinary opportunity to take DPS to higher levels of equity, opportunity and success for our students and our community.

