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DOUGLAS COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT The Impact of a World Class Education



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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1981, the U.S. Secretary of Education T. H. Bell appointed an eighteen member committee called the National Commission of Excellence in Education. The Commission was charged with producing a report on the quality of education in America. Twenty months later on April 26, 1983, President Ronald Reagan held a press conference in the State Dining Room of the White House and released the Commission's report titled, "A Nation at Risk." The report skewered public education in America and offered the chilling commentary that "if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war."¹

The number of academic options and innovative education policies are increasing across the country and in many districts.

The drastic assessment about America's education system reported by "A Nation at Risk" shifted the conversation in America about how to educate our youth and motivated the substantive reformation efforts and policies currently underway in the United States. Within a decade of the release of "A Nation at Risk," the American education system began to dramatically change. By 1993, eight states had created new public schools called Charter Schools where private operators enter into a charter or contract with a school district to operate autonomous public schools in exchange for increased academic achievement. Concurrently, Wisconsin had created vouchers for a limited number of low-income parents in Milwaukee to use public funds to pay for the tuition of their students to attend private schools. Vouchers and charters were quickly followed by steady increases in home-schooling and later online learning.

Currently more than 250,000 students nationwide receive vouchers² and over 2.2 million students attend 6,000 charter schools in 43 states including the District of Columbia.³ An estimated 2.9% of students are home schooled in America today⁴ and over a quarter of a million students are learning online.⁵ These numbers are substantive but they still represent a small percentage of the American student population.

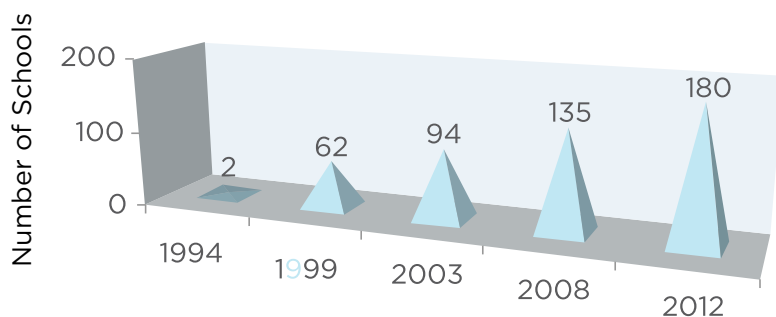
The number of academic options and innovative education policies are increasing across the country and in many districts. However, some states and districts, such as Colorado and Douglas County School District, are clearly setting the pace of educational change and transformation in the United States.

COLORADO

The state of Colorado is among the national leaders and pacesetters in educational change and transformation. As Colorado Children’s Campaign reported (2009), “[O]ver the last several decades, the state often has been ahead of the curve in implementing reforms like standards, accountability measures, and school choice.”⁶

Bipartisan education reform in Colorado largely began when Governor Roy Romer signed Colorado’s first Home Schooling law and the Post-Secondary Enrollment Options Act. The Enrollment Options Act allowed students who were juniors and seniors in high school to attend public and private colleges in Colorado and receive college and high school credit. In 1990, Colorado passed the Public School Choice Act, which “allowed students the option of transferring to other schools within and outside of their home school district...”⁷ The educational choice inherent in this act was expanded further three years later by the creation of charter schools in Colorado.

Coloradans have taken advantage of the school choice options available in the state. For instance, in the 2013-2014 school year, “it is estimated...that 13% of the total K-12 enrollment in the state”⁸ will be in Colorado charter schools, the highest enrollment in Colorado charter school history. According to the Kids Count in Colorado 2011, 15,249 students were educated online⁹ and 6,462 were taught at home.¹⁰



THE GROWTH OF CHARTER SCHOOLS IN COLORADO

Source: The State of Charter Schools, CO Dept. of Education. pg. 17 April 2013

Yet, as successful as Colorado has been in policy creation, Carolyn Woemper’s *Analysis of Stakeholder Perceptions of Education Reform in Colorado* reported that, “some innovations seem to die on contact with the institutional reality of school(s)”¹¹ and districts. Despite steady acceptance of school choice in Colorado, many districts within Colorado have struggled to implement the visionary statutes created by the last two decades of state legislators and the last four Governors. Furthermore, some school districts have been outright hostile toward extending choice and embracing accountability and standards. However, Woemper found that several districts have embraced innovation and parent demand despite understanding that “[a] proposed change to one part of the system may be met with resistance in another part of the system.”¹² Even the most innovative districts in Colorado “...face[s] [a] doubly daunting task: Confronting the systemic nature of the education system and adequately representing the public voice.”¹³

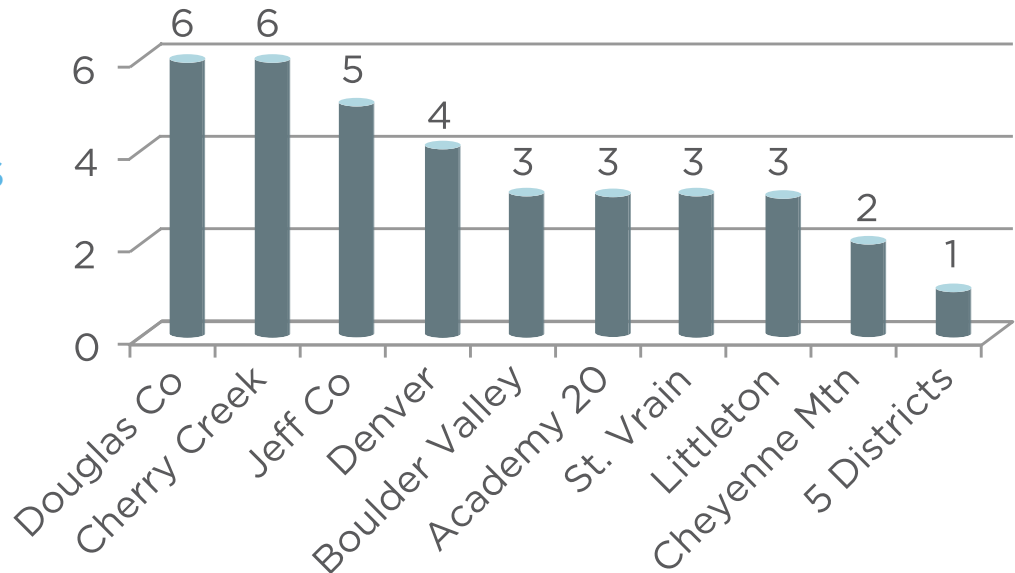
The Colorado districts that have been most successful have found that innovative efforts have to accommodate the unique needs and challenges of the district and the expectations of the parents. The needs and challenges of each district vary greatly as do the expectations of parents. Even districts with relatively high achievement scores, low academic gaps and middle class and wealthy families, must respond to the challenges and the expectations of parents with choice and innovative options. Douglas County is one such district.

DOUGLAS COUNTY

Douglas County School District (DCSD) is one of the top school districts in Colorado. In 2011, DCSD “ranked #1 in reading achievement in the [Denver] metro area”¹⁴ as evidenced by a wide spectrum of rating systems. Newsweek’s 2013 rankings of the nation’s best schools listed all six of DCSD high schools as among the top 40 in Colorado.¹⁵ According to go-to school check website, schooldigger.com, those top ranked DCSD high schools are fed by some of Colorado’s top middle and elementary schools.¹⁶ These high ratings are a result of DCSD schools performing at a high level on the Transitional Colorado Assessment Program (TCAP), formerly the Colorado Student Assessment Program. In 2012, DCSD scored the highest in the state in reading and was 13 percentage points above the state average on the entire test. The district’s composite score the last two years on the ACT is the highest it has ever been at 21.7, and 69% of the AP exams taken were college credit qualified.

THE GROWTH OF CHARTER SCHOOLS IN COLORADO

Source: America’s Best High Schools 13, Newsweek & The Daily Beast. May 2013



Whereas many districts with that type of relative success would be satisfied, DSCD has pursued a transformative effort to overturn a system it has seemingly mastered because it realized the current results are not preparing its graduates to compete in the global economy. According to DCSD Superintendent Elizabeth Fagen, the current system, even for high performing DCSD graduates, is “... geared toward outcomes suited more for the assembly lines of the Industrial Revolution rather than the economy of the future. [O]ur goal is to prepare our students to compete on the world stage for the college or career pathway of their choice.”¹⁷

Responsively, DCSD decided that the best way to prepare all students for college and career is to offer universal choice to the parents of the District beyond the traditional schools in the county. The District understood that even the best traditional schools in a wealthy and middle class district do not meet the learning needs of every student. It also realized that despite the comparative success of the district, every student deserves educational choices. DCSD recognized that the goal of a school district is to educate and prepare all students not just those who can navigate traditional educational offerings. Fagen explained, “[W]e know that students learn differently now, and we must employ new strategies to meet their needs and prepare them for the future workforce.”¹⁸

DCSD, which created the first charter school in Colorado in 1993 with Academy Charter School, is committed to building a world-class education and has designed a portfolio of options for parents to choose an educational opportunity that gives their child the best opportunity to succeed. According to a study by William L. Bainbridge and Steven M. Sundre on parent’s evaluations of schools, “Parents...want their children in an environment that allows their children to excel and develop confidence in their abilities...It is more important to parents that their children are successful than that the school earns the highest marks.”¹⁹

The concept of children being successful is reflected in DCSD's three major priorities: choice, a world-class education for every student, and system performance. Based on feedback about the priorities from parents and other members of the community, DCSD created 27 strategies to expand choice and build a world-class education for every student. The universal choice options include:

- **Neighborhood Schools** – Traditional schools have been empowered to explore different learning models and to transition if it is in the best interest of their students and community.
- **Charter Schools** – The district has redesigned the charter authorization process that approves new charter schools to ensure that only high quality charter school operators are enabled to open new schools. DCSD has also expanded its Request for Proposal by adding blended charters to the list of options within the district. The blended models encourage prepared, high quality charter applicants to strongly consider locations within the district where more seats are needed because of growth.
- **Choice Scholarship Program** – The program was created by the DCSD school board and is the first district authorized scholarship program in the country. The program provides parents up to 75% of per pupil revenue to be used at a qualifying private school, or the full amount of the tuition at the private school (whichever is less). Private schools can only be added to the eligibility list if they meet the rigorous expectations of all DCSD schools. The Choice Scholarship program is capped at 500 students.²⁰
- **Home Schooling** – The district has created a partnership with home-school parents and district staff to launch the DCSD Cloverleaf Home Education Program. The program offers a menu of choices for home education parents. The parents can sign up to attend educational materials fairs, check out materials for use at home and have their students attend classes and events at the Cloverleaf Center once a week or more.
- **Online** – DCSD offers several programs that combine academic and technological innovation by allowing students to participate in school online.²¹

Another component of creating a world-class education for students is the recruitment of highly effective teachers. This helps ensure that there are innovative changes and accountability within the school and in every classroom. Through such practices, “DCSD is engaged in creating a cutting-edge system performance framework that will not only measure student performance, but also measure the performance of teachers, schools, administrators and the district overall.”²² The district has recognized that the single greatest driver impacting a student is the effectiveness and quality of the teachers they encounter. Systemic reform is a critical complement to choice, determining which teachers, administrators and staff are “...effective and highly effective will have opportunities for pay increases and bonuses. Those who are not will receive feedback and training to improve their skills. Opportunities for professional development through coaching and training will, however, be available to all employees, ensuring that exemplary employees become models for others in their field.”²³

“[W]e know that students learn differently now, and we must employ new strategies to meet their needs and prepare them for the future workforce.”
—DCSD Superintendent Elizabeth Fagen

The new system performance framework that encompasses performance pay, professional development and training, is influenced by and works with the Balanced Assessment System that will measure growth on the most critical outcomes for students over time. The Balanced Assessment System which will also be used to measure outcomes for teachers, school leaders, staff and schools will enable DCSD to assess whether their students are acquiring the skills needed to participate in a global economy. Superintendent Fagen recently said, “Part of having a world-class education is having world-class outcomes focused on the right things—developing highly creative kids that can collaborate with people around the world; children that can communicate through writing, speaking and listening; and children that can think critically, who understand how to collect research and synthesize it, evaluate it, and come out with something new.”²⁴

FISCAL IMPACTS

Creating that new skill set for today's students should be the top priority for every district. While top companies have been very outspoken about the employees they need, US school systems have been slow to make the changes needed within the system to meet those needs. In *Transforming Education at the Local Level*, Kenny Harris found that the most successful companies "...want innovation, creativity, collaboration, communication and critical thinking"²⁶ from employees and our archaic system is producing students with the skill set commensurate with the era our current education system was created. In November 2012, the CBS program *60 Minutes* aired a segment that revealed three million jobs in America are vacant simply because the companies cannot find prospective workers with the right skill set.²⁶

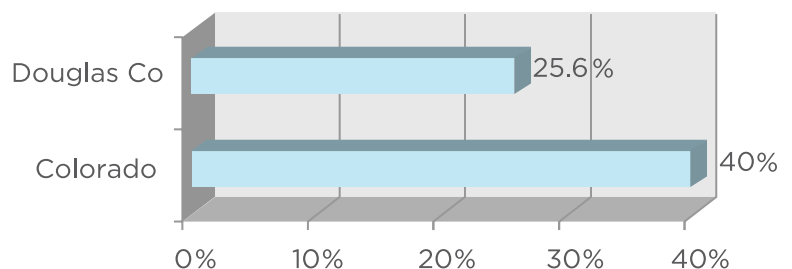
“...[t]he estimated cost associated with remedial course was approximately \$58 million...”

If those jobs were filled, the impact on the economy would be impressive. According to CNBC those three million jobs would, “...add about \$100 billion more annually to the US economy and lower the unemployment rate by more than a percentage point.”²⁷

Unfortunately, the lack of preparation is not only evident in the human resources of America's large companies and small businesses, but at our colleges and universities as well. In Colorado, 40% of students who entered the state's colleges and universities “...were either assessed as needing remediation or enrolled in a remedial course in at least one academic subject... [t]he estimated cost associated with remedial course was approximately \$58 million...\$39 million was billed in student tuition while the state's funding share was \$19 million.”²⁸ The impact of remedial education is more than the amount paid in college tuition for below college level courses because close to 50% of remedial students are likely to drop out of college without a degree. Colorado Succeeds and Grant Thornton explained in the *Business Case for Educational Reform* that, “[I]f Colorado's high schools graduated all of their students fully prepared for college, the Alliance for Education Excellence estimates that the state would save almost \$52.1 million a year in community college remediation costs and lost earnings.”²⁹ When students graduate from high school ready for college and earn a college degree, the impact on the state and national economies are tremendous since personal incomes and spending both increase. Additionally, state tax revenue also grows along with the gross state product to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars. The increase in revenue would enable investments towards the critical needs of the state, and a stronger economy along with an educated and skilled workforce, would drive companies to Colorado. As companies look to relocate their businesses many conduct research to identify workforce potential and the strength of local schools. These items also help with retention of companies by discouraging companies from leaving the state and taking employment opportunities with them.

PERCENTAGE OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES NEEDING REMEDIATION

Source: 2012 Legislative Report on Remedial Education, CO Dept. of Higher Education.

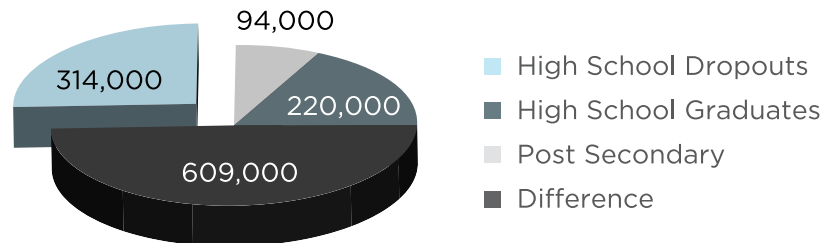


CONCLUSION

As the Business Case for Education Reform explained, “Colorado is on pace to create over 600,000 high-skilled, high-wage jobs between 2008 and 2018, but over the same period, will only produce half the educated workers needed to fill them.”³⁰ That scenario will continue to repeat itself for decades to come unless Colorado high schools adjust. DCSD has decided that it will adapt despite their relative success. Many will ask why a district that is upper middle class to wealthy in many parts, and graduates 87.4% of students would want to offer universal choice? However, DCSD has decided it can do better by giving all of its students a chance to succeed. DCSD has created a plan that “...prepares all students to compete on the world stage for any college or career pathway of their choice....”³¹

COLORADO HIGH-SKILL, HIGH WAGE JOB GAP

Source: Help Wanted Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018, Georgetown University, The Center on Education and Workforce, 2010



All children can learn and excel if the given the opportunity to choose the academic environment that works best for their learning styles. DCSD is creating those opportunities by adapting the choices available to parents and students and by utilizing new procedures to meet their educational needs and ready them for the future and for today.

“Game changer. Risk taker. Innovator. Collaborator. These are just a few of the desired traits sought by the nation’s largest employers. ‘Unfortunately, for the last 100 years the American education system has been geared toward outcomes suited more for the assembly lines of the Industrial Revolution rather than the economy of the future’.”³² The success of the American economy has been built on our ability to adapt, educate and prepare our students to lead and innovate. With the growing global economy and the increasing role of technology, the competition for American students is no longer just from fellow Americans but from students all over the world. To ensure our students are properly equipped with the new skills and traits many companies are looking for to compete globally and at home, we need school districts to give every student a chance to succeed. We need to use every available option and choice to make that opportunity real. Districts must also be creative in recruiting and retaining the best and brightest for its school leaders and teachers. Thus, they must fairly measure, review and reward teacher and school leader performance. DCSD’s innovation and commitment to give all students a world-class education by using all means necessary will ensure the continued success and greatness of Colorado and America.

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