



Center for Education Policy Analysis

SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO **DENVER**

Leading for Equity and Student Growth: Lessons from the Transformation of the Denver Public Schools

CEPA Practitioner Perspectives Series

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INTRODUCTION

Mounting evidence suggests that responses to the academic ravages of the pandemic are falling tragically short. Today’s educators urgently need solutions to a crisis in student learning. One place to look for inspiration is the story of what unfolded when the citizens of Denver rallied behind a broad, coherent effort to transform its public schools.

We had the privilege of leading that effort, which two recent university [studies](#) have called “among the most effective reform strategies in U.S. history.” The studies looked at both district-wide and individual student data and emphasized “that not only were the district’s reforms among the most comprehensive in American history, they were also among the most effective in size, scale and duration.”¹

We want to build on these studies and share our views on the forces responsible for the extraordinary gains made by students in the Denver Public Schools between 2005 and 2018. Why did these improvements happen, and what lessons can others draw from Denver’s experience to help chart the path forward in public education?

During our tenure, Denver Public Schools students made gains that “are among the largest ever observed in educational research,” University of Colorado Denver researchers found. Compared with students in similar Colorado districts, the researchers calculated in their first study that students enrolled in DPS during this time “received the equivalent of at least nine months and as much as 14 months of additional schooling.”² In their second study that looked at the data of individual students compared to similar students outside of Denver, the researchers found that students who were enrolled in DPS for the full length of the period studied (as opposed to only part of the time) “received the equivalent of at least 18 months (2 years) and as much as 27 months (3 years) of additional schooling”.³

The researchers describe many elements of the strategy that led to this extraordinary growth. At the center of our strategy was our focus on equity for Denver’s students. This focus on equity required transforming much more than systems and structures under our “family of schools” model. It meant rethinking our entire approach to engaging our community and supporting our educators. To truly put equity at the center, we needed to create a whole new ecosystem of urban education. We want to provide some additional depth and context from our perspectives as leaders of Denver’s schools during this time.

¹ Baxter, P., Nicotera, A., Panzer, J., Fuller, E., Ely, T., & Teske, P. (2022). The System-Level effects of Denver’s portfolio district strategy on student academic outcomes. Center for Education Policy Analysis, University of Colorado Denver School of Public Affairs.

² Baxter, P., et al. (2022).

³ Baxter, P., Nicotera, A., Stuit, D., Plotz, M., Ely, T., & Teske, P. (2024). Systemwide and intervention-specific effects of Denver’s portfolio district strategy on individual student achievement. Center for Education Policy Analysis, University of Colorado Denver School of Public Affairs.

FOCUSING ON PUBLIC WILL, SYSTEMS CHANGE AND EDUCATOR TALENT

Our goal through it all was to dramatically improve learning for Denver’s kids, with an overriding focus on Denver’s kids of color and kids in poverty. Our country’s legacy of discrimination and inequity has long denied millions of children and families the educational opportunities they deserve. This legacy has been embedded throughout long-standing practices and policies – in Denver as elsewhere in the country.

To change that, in our time as leaders of DPS we focused on three priorities that were tightly intertwined:

- **Public Will:** Deep engagement and close communication with our community to increase transparency and build the public understanding, political will and support needed for major change.
- **More Equitable Systems:** Dramatic changes to long-standing systems that disadvantaged the highest-needs students to create greater equity and opportunity for them.
- **Talent:** Above all, a clear focus on how to recruit, retain and develop talented educators to teach and lead in our highest-need schools.

The focus on talent was our top priority because changes to systems and structures work together with and depend entirely on the educators serving students in classrooms and schools. A clear focus on growing and supporting educators is vital if structural or governance reforms are to stand a chance of success.

That is probably the most important lesson of the Denver experience: Changing systems could remove structural barriers, but Denver Public Schools could only run as far and as fast as the talents of our teachers and school leaders would take us.

Of course, our strategy of embracing diverse school models under our family of schools model (which the studies categorize as a “portfolio model”) was a means of providing more options to families and students. But even our approach to welcome diverse school models was first and foremost a talent strategy. To attract and retain top talent in urban public schools, it only made sense to give educators more choice among the kinds of schools in which to teach and lead. Doing so allowed us to tap into educators’ hopes and latent creativity and empower them to lead in our schools.

Teachers aren't widgets, and neither are students. Other important factors in our reform recipe were attention to individual student needs, including a focus on improving social-emotional and mental-health supports as well as changes to school discipline policies that worked against keeping kids in school.

IMPROVING THE ARC OF STUDENT LEARNING

As the CU Denver researchers [reported](#), the reforms we led in Denver led to unprecedented gains for DPS students. Before 2007, DPS was among the bottom 10 districts in the state on standardized tests in English language arts and math, scoring at the 5th percentile among districts statewide.

By 2018-19, DPS was outperforming more than 100 of the nearly 180 school districts in the state, with ELA scores at the 60th percentile and math scores at the 63rd – even though the district educates the largest population of poor children and English language learners in Colorado.

The gains were driven by students of all races and income levels, including students with disabilities. In a district with 65 percent of students qualifying as low-income and over 75 percent students of color, the key to the large gains was improvement among the city's historically most underserved students.

DPS also cut its dropout rate during this time by more than two thirds and increased students' four-year graduation rate from 39 percent to more than 70 percent. Perhaps most significantly for our community's future, DPS more than doubled the number of students of color graduating and going to college every year.

And these gains were not a result of change in student demographics. During this period, DPS actually saw a slight rise in the proportion of students eligible for federally subsidized meals. The second of the two studies reinforces this point by looking at individual DPS students in comparison with students matched for demographic and academic characteristics in neighboring districts.

With dramatically better schools, DPS enjoyed the largest enrollment gains of any major American city during this period – a nearly 30 percent increase. Thanks to greater confidence in the quality of the city's public schools, Denver saw a 40 percent decrease in the number of its children attending private schools.

So how did we get there?

BOOSTING PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORT

In 2005, Denver Public Schools were some of the lowest performing in the state. Many thousands of Denver families sent their children to private schools or public schools outside the city, unwilling to entrust DPS with their kids.

Job one was to deepen community discussion and understanding about the state of education in Denver, the first step toward rallying support for much-needed change.

From the start, we were transparent with data and frank about the state of Denver's public schools. We engaged the Denver community in a lengthy and open dialogue. The conversations were heated and often difficult, given the depth of anger at the public schools for their historic failings and the differences in beliefs on how to best move forward.

Dozens and dozens of meetings with students, teachers, parents and community members resulted in the first Denver Plan of 2006 with detailed plans for change. Subsequent versions of the Denver Plan grew out of similarly deep engagement with the public.

The community demanded – and we agreed on the importance of – clear numerical goals on student outcomes that we shared regularly with the public. Transparency was essential to building a common resolve to give our students a better future and do what was needed to get them there.

Historically, DPS suffered from an approach to school reform that was more like a one-way phone call than communication involving genuine back and forth between the central office and individual schools. The central office would issue an edict, the edict often would be understood poorly or differently by each school, and schools were given no opportunities to offer feedback before another edict was on its way.

We knew that clear two-way communication with our teachers and principals was vital to drive change across our more than 150 schools. Instead of governance by edict, we strove to build better relationships with our schools by encouraging a much greater level of decision-making at the school level.

CONNECTING WITH SCHOOLS AND THE COMMUNITY

Every year we visited schools at least three or four times a week for open discussions with the entire faculty of each school. We started our days in schools meeting with leaders from around the district and visiting classrooms. We worked closely with our networks of principals so we could be sure we were all having a similar conversation about our kids and the district's future no matter where we met.

Just as we made sure to get out into the schools, our teachers played a vital role in strengthening the relationship between families and the classroom through our teacher-parent home visit program. Our teachers made thousands of house calls each year, setting the pace for the nation.

We also set up a number of two-way communication channels with DPS parents, including monthly Superintendent Parent Forums and Educa Radio, a DPS-created weekly Spanish language radio show on education.

We benefited greatly from the engagement of long-standing community groups and the establishment of the schools-focused community group A+ Denver, founded in 2006 under the leadership of former Denver mayors Federico Peña and Wellington Webb to deepen public understanding and build support for change.

None of our work would have been possible without the visionary and courageous school board members under whom we served. They drew from and helped build community support for change. Likewise, we had two mayors, John Hickenlooper and Michael Hancock, who put a high priority on education and were committed to partnering with the school district.

Denver's voters repeatedly gave us great financial support, including by supporting our bond and mill levy initiatives in 2008, 2012, and 2016 by very large margins.

Perhaps the most notable evidence of the Denver community's remarkable support for DPS was the creation and expansion of the freestanding Denver Preschool Program and the Denver Scholarship Fund. By voting to raise taxes to fund expanded access to preschool for our youngest learners and access to college for our high school graduates, Denver voters showed exceptional support for DPS's efforts to drive better educational opportunities for our city's young people.

Having helped build public understanding of the need for change, what did we focus on?

REFORMING BUDGETS TO PROMOTE EQUITY

To improve opportunities for our highest-need students, we needed to reinvent systems that had long mirrored and perpetuated inequities in society. This called for a set of pervasive, difficult and sustained changes. Each change mattered, but each mattered more as one of a series in a connected whole.

One key piece of these interconnected changes was in the way we funded our schools. Where you spend dollars matters. We live in a country where, on average, greater financial resources follow wealthier kids to their schools. That pattern only deepens educational gaps between low-income and affluent families. We needed to turn that on its head.

In DPS we replaced the district's opaque funding formula, which advantaged wealthier students to the disadvantage of poorer students, with a budget that funneled more resources to students with greater disadvantage. Under our new student-based budgeting model, dollars followed students to whichever school they attended. Each student in poverty, learning English, with disabilities, and/or at risk of dropping out was allocated significantly more dollars than students without these needs.

This meant a significant redistribution of funds from schools in our wealthier areas to those serving higher numbers of students in poverty. This budgeting model was student based, transparent, and driven by equity. And it provided both resources and incentives for schools to serve more high-needs students.

Also, when voters approved property tax increases to fund the district, we used the new funding to focus above all on our higher-need students. With the additional funds from these levies, we aimed to have at least four new dollars go to every student in poverty for every one dollar being allocated to students not in poverty. Again, those new funds traveled with the student to whatever school they attended and allowed the schools to offer additional interventions such as tutoring and social-emotional counseling. Likewise, we worked to target our bond funds for new construction in the poorer areas of the city that most needed new and upgraded facilities.

We used taxpayer-approved new funding to dramatically expand preschool slots to all our low-income families. In partnership with the taxpayer-funded Denver Preschool Program, DPS became the most significant provider of high-quality preschool in Colorado. Where previously only one in 10 low-income students had access to free, all-day preschool, we were able to offer it to all low-income 4-year-olds and many 3-year-olds as well. In the poorer areas of the city that had long lacked preschool facilities, we used bond money to build new, dedicated preschool campuses.

Likewise, we expanded support for English Language Learners (ELL) and significantly increased training for their teachers. For example, we offered summer programs in schools with high numbers of

ELLs and invested in high-quality native language instruction. As a result, Denver's ELL students over time began to significantly outperform their peers across Colorado.

In Denver, as in most districts, a higher proportion of more experienced teachers worked in affluent schools than in high-poverty schools. Thanks to the traditional pay scale, based on years of experience, the average pay per teacher in more affluent schools was higher than that of high-poverty schools. That ran directly counter to our goal of putting more resources into schools serving the highest-need students.

To help attract and retain top teachers to schools most affected by poverty, we did something almost no other district in America has done – increased salaries for teachers and principals working in high-poverty schools.

Teachers told us again and again that the pay differences mattered, and our data on teacher retention in high-poverty schools showed that. Teachers valued the extra pay – both financially and as a concrete expression of our values as a district.

INCREASING GRADUATION & COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

Beyond funding, we made major changes to long-held systems and practices that had resulted in low graduation rates, a high number of dropouts and low college access.

The results were striking: During this time, we reduced our dropout rate by two thirds and increased our four-year high school graduation rate by over 30 percentage points – from 39 percent to more than 70 percent. And with much stronger high schools that prepared students better academically, gave them greater support, and helped ensure they graduated, DPS more than doubled the number of students of color graduating and attending college every year.

We started by improving our social-emotional support for students and working to change our long-standing school discipline policies, which often seemed more designed to push kids out than keep them. We doubled the number of school social workers, counselors and school psychologists to ensure a consistent focus on students' social-emotional and mental health.

Working closely with community groups like Padres y Jóvenes Unidos and our African American Equity Task Force, we reshaped our discipline policies to focus on restorative justice and clearly

define conditions for suspensions and expulsions. We eliminated suspensions for our youngest students and substantially reduced them in middle and high school.

As a result, DPS students experienced an 80 percent decrease in expulsions and an over two-thirds reduction in out-of-school suspensions during our time. We also reached a landmark agreement with the Denver Police Department reshaping the role of officers in schools and dramatically reducing the number of police tickets issued to our young people.

To better serve our students most at risk of dropping out, we opened more than a dozen new innovation schools in all regions of the city targeted at our most at-risk students. These included students with significant emotional challenges, pregnant teens, new mothers, and students transitioning from the juvenile justice system. Traditional comprehensive high schools often did not effectively address the highly individualized needs of these students, and we needed to offer better alternatives.

By contrast, these new “multiple pathways” schools all had small student-teacher ratios and intensive social-emotional supports, and they differed based on the individual needs of the students. For example, we offered health care and day care at our school for students who were pregnant or had recently given birth. Some multiple pathways schools partnered with our strong vocational-technical schools on job training and internships. All these new multiple pathways schools were opened as innovation schools under state law in order to give the schools and their educators the flexibility they needed to meet the demands of the students they served.

We also worked hard to brighten the light at the end of the high school tunnel. For too many of our students, college seemed out of reach – and financially it often was. Collaborating with generous private donors who founded the Denver Scholarship Fund, we helped make college possible.

The DSF not only funded college scholarships for low-income students, it also provided college counseling support in “future centers” in our high schools. The Denver community saw the success of the DSF and later voted for a tax increase to use city sales tax dollars to help permanently fund college scholarships for Denver students.

These efforts to help students gain access to college were a significant factor in enabling us to send so many more of them on to higher education.

FAMILY OF SCHOOLS WITH EQUITY AS OUR NORTH STAR

Our goal was straightforward: to have great schools in every neighborhood that all benefited from the same opportunities, were subject to the same performance standards, and that served all kids.

We wanted all families to have choices of high-quality schools near their home. We did not believe that poor children should have to ride a bus to a more affluent area of town to attend a high-quality school.

We believed deeply that all our public schools should serve all kids, including English language learners, struggling students, and students with disabilities. We did not believe in selective admission or entry criteria for schools. We wanted to ensure that school choice was not effectively an exercise of social privilege.

While political debate in Denver and beyond often pitted district-run schools against charter schools, we did not believe in an either/or world. We wanted a both/and world of great district-run and great charter schools. This included district schools with charter-like flexibility known in Colorado as “innovation schools.”

That is why we thought of our mixed governance model as a family of interconnected and interdependent public schools. To make the model work across an entire city, we had to invent practices, rules and systems that would promote better opportunities for our highest-need students and ensure equity for students across governance models. One of the first steps in this was to call a much-needed truce in the charter wars by treating both district-run and charter schools equitably – in the interest of serving our students and families.

To ensure that schools were not held to different standards, we created one of the first school performance frameworks in the country. This framework emphasized how much academic progress our students made, regardless of the academic level at which they started the year.

This meant that every school, whether traditional or charter, had to be accountable to parents and the community in the same way. To underscore that student growth matters, it was vital for the district to measure and be transparent with those results.

The school performance framework meant there were no favorites or hiding of data. All schools, district-run or charter, were accountable to a common set of student growth expectations. When schools failed over multiple years and after multiple interventions to meet those expectations, they were closed – often replaced in the same building by new schools with fresh approaches. The study emphasizes how the

students attending these new schools on average saw significant improvements in their academic achievement.

The process to establish startup schools – to replace poorly performing schools or provide new schools in areas of the city with fast-growing numbers of children – was identical whether those new schools would be charter or district-run.

BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN CHARTER AND DISTRICT-RUN SCHOOLS

We committed to much stronger collaboration across district-run and charter schools to drive mutual benefit. For example, district and charter teachers visited each other's schools and joined in common learning cohorts to learn best practices in areas like special education and opportunities for English language learners.

We even had assistant principals in the district's principal residency program who served their year-long residencies at charter schools, working closely with top charter leaders before coming back to head district-run schools.

District and charter leaders met regularly, through our District-Charter Collaboration Council, to explore, shape and then readjust systems to drive greater system-wide equity.

From the start, we set out a clear statement of principles in our District-Charter Collaboration Compact. The compact stressed that in our family of public schools, all schools regardless of governance model would be treated equitably in terms of opportunity, responsibility and accountability.

Guided by the compact, we took the unusual step of ensuring that charters and district schools had the same responsibility to serve students with disabilities, including programs for children whose disabilities were severe. Regardless of governance model, schools would receive identical funding and district-level support for their students with disabilities and be held to the same performance standards.

One of our most consequential steps was to take a fresh approach to the fraught issues of attendance boundaries, school choice, and socioeconomic integration.

Traditionally, students have been assigned to district-run schools based on neighborhood boundaries, and district schools were required to enroll any students in their attendance zone who showed up. Charter schools, by contrast, generally served students whose families actively chose to attend, without giving preference to students who lived nearby.

Over time, this difference bred inequity as schools of choice typically served students with greater social capital than schools with a neighborhood boundary.

Our approach to this standoff was to erase this distinction and eliminate this inequity. We set up multiple-school enrollment zones in which all schools in the zones – both district-run and charter – served co-equally as attendance-boundary schools with the obligation to serve all students who chose to enroll from within the boundary.

Transportation was provided within the zones. No student was assigned to or enrolled by default into a school. Instead, all had to choose their schools.

The enrollment zones also aimed to promote greater demographic integration than was typically achieved with the traditional one-boundary, one-school approach. With broader boundaries, the zones helped offset the effect of segregated housing patterns by encompassing multiple neighborhoods, which when combined together provided for greater racial and economic diversity across larger geographic areas.

UNIFYING ENROLLMENT AND PLANNING FOR NEW SCHOOLS

To make it easier for families to find the right fit, we established a unified enrollment system allowing students to choose any public school in the district – charter or district-run – pursuant to the same rules, deadline and ranked-choice system.

Another equity-driven change was to require the district's enrollment office to supervise all student transfers and expulsions, and to manage all waitlists for individual schools, under a unified set of rules. This eliminated the ability for schools – directly or indirectly – to selectively enroll certain types of students.

Every year we made public the areas of town where school capacity was needed in our annual Strategic Regional Analysis, which detailed neighborhood-by-neighborhood housing, enrollment and demographic trends.

This helped us preview, often several years in advance, where we would need new schools, giving district and charter educators equal opportunity to prepare new school proposals. In our annual Call for Quality Schools, we detailed the criteria new school proposals needed to meet and the potential facilities available.

Where we needed additional capacity to meet growing enrollment, we provided school buildings – including schools newly built with bond money – to district-run and charter schools at the same cost per square foot. Those schools had the same obligations to serve as boundary schools, serving all students in their zones according to the same rules.

Through all these steps, we eased the perpetual district-charter conflict gripping so many communities and became a city where charters and district-run schools worked collaboratively in pursuit of the common goal of better serving our highest-need students.

It's important to note that while in Denver we intentionally included charter schools, our steps to drive equity would be equally valuable in a city with fewer charter schools or even one with only district-run schools.

UNEMPOWERING EDUCATORS & REWARDING TALENT

While structural changes were vital to addressing long-standing systemic inequities, we knew that the most important factor in our students' success were skilled educators at the school and classroom levels.

Years of DPS data showed that there was little to no difference in terms of year-over-year student growth, in the aggregate, across different governance models. It was talented teachers and leaders receiving high-quality support, coaching and professional development who delivered better schools and student performance.

Yet the traditional talent practices of K-12 public education had long failed to provide educators the support and learning they deserved. Over the course of years of conversations with DPS faculty, we

developed new and fundamentally different approaches to better support teachers and school leaders in their enormously complex and challenging jobs.

First, we wanted to ensure that educators had the autonomy and accountability that talented professionals seek. Traditionally, public school educators have little of either. They take commands from a central office with little chance to innovate and customize their approaches. And little accountability for performance exists – at the level of the individual or the school.

That is why we promoted greater autonomy and agency at the school level. We sought for each school leader to have as much control as possible over personnel decisions and the use of time and money in their schools. With the help of a change in state law, we ended the practice of forced placement of teachers into schools (a common school district practice in which principals are forced to accept district teachers whom they did not wish to hire).

Greater autonomy allowed educators to innovate and differentiate their approaches to best meet the needs of the students they served. We embraced the opportunity for schools to obtain innovation status under Colorado state law, allowing for waivers to collective bargaining rules and schedules while granting each school's faculty a voice and vote on the campus's policies and programs.

Importantly, educators had the opportunity to start brand-new schools through an intensive planning process spelled out in our Call for Quality Schools. The process included careful and detailed planning for new schools with support from the district's Office of School Reform and Innovation. Through this process, educators founded over 70 new schools in our city, which the report cites as an important factor in driving student growth.

BALANCING AUTONOMY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND DISTRICT EXPERTISE

In exchange for unusual empowerment, we held educators accountable for student progress through frequent reviews and the use of our school performance framework. These moves to enhance autonomy and accountability were at their core a talent strategy. They were less about beliefs in the virtues of a particular structure and more about recruiting and retaining talented educators.

One key part of our talent strategy was recognizing that skilled educators can be attracted by different models. While some might only want to work in traditional district-run schools, others were attracted by charters or innovation schools.

Even as we encouraged school-level autonomy, we believed in the role of district-level support for curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and special education — but only if it actually helped support our teachers and principals.

District-level expertise is essential to bring and spread best practices to not just a few schools but to all. To deliver quality at scale, all kinds of organizations – in the education sector and beyond – need to get the balance right between local autonomy and system-level learning and best practices.

To strengthen talent development, we put in place better pipelines for teacher leaders, school leaders, and principal supervisors. That included our principal residency program in which assistant principals spent a year in an intensive residency program at a school with a master principal.

We also took steps to expand traditional pipelines to attract more teachers and school leaders of color, including our paraprofessional-to-teacher and teacher residency programs.

Many of these initiatives sprang from our conviction that educators are simply spread too thin in our K-12 system. In virtually every other knowledge-intensive profession, teams of professionals have no more than five to eight members, so that team leaders can provide meaningful feedback more often and team members can better learn from each other. This allows them to adjust their practice to address complex challenges.

By contrast, in the K-12 world, we expect principals and their deputies to personally lead 20 to 40 teachers and support staff. We expect instructional superintendents who supervise those principals to “lead” as many as 20 schools.

Compounding this problem, almost no school districts provide substantial release time for school leaders and teachers simply to work with one another. People don’t have adequate time to collaborate meaningfully and learn the complex skills needed to become master educators.

UNLEASHING LEADERSHIP AMONG TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS

In Denver, we took a different approach. We created a new set of teacher leadership roles. These new roles meant that principals were no longer expected to be everyone's supervisor and pedagogical coach.

Instead, teachers could lift some of this responsibility from principals and share their own instructional expertise more broadly. Teacher leaders in this structure teach, coach and lead, working with teams of just five to eight other teachers.

For half of each day, we released teacher leaders from teaching students, allowing them to provide meaningful coaching and lead their teams to work more effectively together. For the other half of the day, teacher leaders remained in the classroom as master teachers.

Under this system, new teachers had better support, all teachers got regular feedback on their practice, and teacher leaders spread their knowledge and skills beyond their classrooms.

Teachers had the time together to really focus on the needs of Denver's kids. Our principals could focus where they are needed most – to lead strategically, work with their communities, and grow the leadership capabilities of their teacher leaders.

We also strengthened the leadership skills of our principal supervisors, known as instructional superintendents, and cut the number of schools they each supported from an average of roughly 20 to eight.

These smaller networks consisted of schools facing similar challenges, fostering collaboration among them. Because the veteran principals who served as instructional superintendents were not stretched so thin, each principal received much more frequent coaching from their instructional superintendent.

All of these steps led to a significant change in how teachers viewed their school leaders, as we went from 60 percent to 80 percent of our teachers rating their principals as effective or very effective in our annual anonymous leadership surveys. As a result, our educators reported greater satisfaction, and we saw less turnover.

LIGHTING THE PATHS TO EDUCATOR EXCELLENCE

What did all these changes mean for an educator serving in Denver?

They meant that as a young teacher, instead of being one of 30 teachers whom a principal had little time to coach individually, you were one of six teachers coached at least weekly by a teacher leader who worked in the same discipline as you. You worked closely with a handful of colleagues on a teacher team in a structure that encouraged the sharing of best practices and peer-to-peer learning.

As you grew in your teaching and desired a role to better share your expertise, you did not face the binary choice of teaching or leaving the classroom to lead. You could do both as a teacher leader. In that role, your school leaders would give you regular coaching and support.

Should you aspire to lead a school after growing as a teacher leader, you could choose a well-supported path. You could enroll in a leadership program directed by veteran DPS principals and serve as an assistant principal intern before becoming an assistant principal.

Then, after gaining experience as an assistant, you could do a year-long principal residency program under the tutelage of a respected principal before becoming a principal yourself. Once in that role, you would be one of five to eight principals supported by an instructional superintendent with the time and expertise to coach you.

All of this support and coaching would help you grow your skills while feeling supported professionally and emotionally.

Taken together, our strategies encouraged the retention of talented teachers and leaders. And they allowed Denver to earn a national reputation as a destination where such educators could make a real difference.

DENVER'S GAINS OFFER ENDURING LESSONS

We would be the first to say that our changes did not go far enough and that significantly more effort must go into ensuring that our highest-need students are served by our most talented, best-supported educators.

We would also be the first to acknowledge today's educators are facing even greater challenges today due in great part to the increase in mental health needs among students, the relentless barrage of social media twenty four hours a day, and the reality that students, teachers and families can no longer assume that our schools are safe.

Yet at a time when outcomes for historically underserved students seem to be stagnant or going backward in so many cities, it is crucial to reflect on what went right in Denver. Transcending the dogma of right and left in the charter wars was an important ingredient in our success, but as the studies and this paper detail, our family of schools model went far deeper than that.

While no one size fits all, we had the advantage of learning much from other districts' experiences. We believe the remarkable gains experienced by Denver's students offer important lessons for educators across the country who share our goal of improving educational opportunities and outcomes for students, families, and our nation.

We remain deeply grateful for the chance to work closely with Denver educators, whose tireless work and boundless care led to extraordinary academic improvements for kids. Neither of us has ever had the chance to work with anyone as dedicated and committed. They inspired us every day and still do.