

Denver Public School

Revising the *Denver Plan 2020*

Interviews with 22 Denver-Area Thought Leaders

A recent study by the Stanford-based *Center for Research on Education Outcomes* (CREDO) finds that students in the Denver Public Schools make more progress on standardized tests than the state average, regardless of whether they attend a traditional district-run school, a district-run innovation school, or an independent charter school. “The pattern of performance is consistent,” said Macke Raymond, *Center* director. The study looks at academic growth data across three years, controlling for differences in student population.

The study zooms in on black and Hispanic students, students from low-income families, students learning English as a second language, and those receiving special education. In each, DPS students made more progress in reading and math than the state average for the groups. Raymond was struck by the progress of black and Hispanic students who make up two-thirds of Denver’s 93,000 students. “Honestly, we just don’t see that across the country,” she said.

The study did not address what is arguably the most persistent issue plaguing the district: the wide test score gaps between, for example, white students and students of color, or students living in poverty and those who are not.

Across the board, DPS students making above-average progress, study shows
Melanie Asmar, Chalkbeat Colorado, August 14, 2019

“Our schools must be places where every student is affirmed for who they are, while being challenged to excel. We must lean into the hard work of eliminating barriers, providing the right resources and ensuring all students, particularly African American and Latinx students, have the teachers and leaders who care about them and push them to succeed. We must break the historical patterns of systemic inequity and educational racism that have resulted in far too few black, brown and low-income children succeeding at high levels. We can do this if we focus our resources, energy and talent on leveling the playing field for our most vulnerable students.”

Susana Cordova
Superintendent, Denver Public Schools

Interviews with 22 Denver-Area Thought Leaders Executive Summary (May 28, 2020)

This executive summary presents the results of 22 structured interviews conducted on behalf of the Denver Public Schools (DPS) by Dr. Ken Turner, an independent contractor based in Carson City, Nevada. Interviews began March 1 and ended April 10, 2020. This presents context, purpose, sources, methods, state of play, factors affecting decision-making, and findings. It includes recommendations.

Context: For nearly two decades, DPS has used the *Denver Plan* to identify where it is going, how to get there, and how to gauge progress. This planning paid off. Since the inception of the first *Denver Plan*, overall District performance has generally trended upward. The foundation for the District approach to improvement rests on three cornerstones: Equity; Instructional Excellence; and Collaborative Teamwork. Studies like those conducted by Stanford's *Center for Research on Education Outcomes* illustrate a relatively rare occurrence in large urban school districts; a rising tide lifts all boats. While the *CREDO* study illustrates that improved system performance in DPS had a salutary effect on a wide range of subgroups, at the same time, starting gate differences separating these subgroups did not narrow appreciably. The performance of low-income students and students of color has improved in the last two decades in Denver, yet gaps separating subgroups have seen only incremental improvement. In recognition of this, DPS greeted early January 2020 signaling its intent to make a districtwide equity framework the centerpiece of its next-generation *Denver Plan*.

Purpose: The intent of the thought leader interviews was to inform the work of a team that the Superintendent charged with proposing goals, measures, strategies, and theory of action for a revised *Denver Plan*. The interviews would elicit respondent views on DPS systems, structures, and processes, with a core focus on informing and advancing educational equity, system performance, and student well-being. The interviews focused on a central question. How can DPS better prepare all students to thrive, especially low-income students and students of color who have historically faced more barriers, had access to fewer opportunities, and have not yet been as academically successful – as a group -- as their classmates? The interviews were not intended to be a comprehensive evaluation of DPS functioning. The expressed aim was to identify areas DPS could focus on to improve equity while simultaneously advancing the effectiveness and efficiency of educational programming and operational services.

Sources: Ten of those who were interviewed came from the ranks of District staff. One was a school building leader. One was a middle manager from the central office. Eight were District leaders and cabinet-level staff. Others who participated represented academia, philanthropy, the business community, and city government. Elected officials also participated.

Methods: Individuals who participated in the interviews were approved by the DPS Superintendent. Interviews lasted 45 minutes, involved 20 questions, and were not recorded. However, the contractor kept notes in the form of a running record of each conversation. Once completed, interview notes were transcribed, and each response was coded. Themes were identified. Remarks that addressed similar themes were aggregated, and representative statements were identified for each theme. When possible, results were tabulated to quantify responses. Graphs were created.

State of Play: The interviews took place at an important juncture for DPS. Beginning in January and continuing through April, a virus outbreak swept the nation and prompted organizations to rethink strategy and operations. DPS was not immune. From individuals to institutions, every corner of our country was affected. As February gave way to March and then to April, the outbreak eclipsed everything in importance. When the effects of the virus hit close to home, priorities shifted. DPS leadership juggled dual obligations; preserve health and safety on one hand and fulfill legal responsibilities to educate all children on the other. Throughout the U.S., leaders at all levels wrestled with the duty of government; maximize the good and protect the vulnerable (Reinhold Niebuhr, 1943). As the spread approached epic proportions, concern grew about the effects falling unevenly on the population. At moments like this, equity concerns are not idle matters. While District leaders were focused on equity in the learning arena, health-related considerations understandably took precedence. History shows that the equity-related concerns of District leaders were well-founded. From our nation's past, we know cataclysmic viruses have had a corrosive effect on equity.

“As it happened 102 years ago with the 1918 Pandemic, the [current scourge] will almost certainly disproportionately punish the poor—not only by arresting the longest recovery since the Great Recession, but also by specifically targeting those sectors where workers are most vulnerable and have the least protection . . . The effects of the current pandemic will remain with us for generations, [and at its worst] may supercharge inequality in the short term.” (Derek Thompson, “The Coronavirus Will Be a Catastrophe for the Poor”, *The Atlantic*, March 20, 2020)

The contagion presented a risk to public health and safety of paramount importance. In response, DPS shuffled the deck on priorities. Short term decisions were taken to mitigate the effects (distance learning replaced in-person schooling) and slow the spread (social distancing) in order to ease the near-term strain on Denver's public health care system. At the same time, there was a recognition that these measures did not alter the prospect that -- for at least 12 months and possibly longer -- risks associated with the virus would continue to be present. A longer-term assessment of the impact of the outbreak is not now available (or even knowable) but will predictably include shifting district resources to account for constraints on the number of individuals who can meet face-to-face at one place. District resources are already being shifted to bolster a virtual learning platform that allows education to continue in a way that preserves health and safety. While the outbreak hasn't absolved DPS of a duty to educate all children, especially vulnerable populations like students of color, those from financially-insecure families, and those with individualized educational plans, it has put front and center a new pair of questions.

At a policy and governance level, how does a virus alter the way DPS fulfills its duty to advance educational equity?

In a world where social distancing is normalized, what does equity look like at the level of student and teacher?

Factors Affecting Decision-Making: The past shows us how leaders have responded in the face of overwhelming instability. At the close of WWII, George Marshall delivered an address that called for rebuilding European nations ravaged by war. Known as the Marshall Plan, it earned him a Nobel Prize.

Marshall described the destruction of Europe as a grave problem of such complexity that it was difficult for common people to grasp. He described the deterioration of economic, social, and political institutions. From loss of life to the destruction of families and the dislocation of entire sectors of the economy, the scale of destabilization was beyond the ability of an individual to fully comprehend.

He described disruption that engulfed all aspects of national economies. It affected commercial ties, shipping, courts, schools, banks, insurance, food supply, and companies large and small. So serious was the challenge, Marshall said, that trade and exchange among nations (the basis of civilization itself) was threatened with breakdown. He argued that governments were forced to act in ways that threatened to exhaust the funds of entire countries. The situation was so serious it had the potential to snowball and engulf other nations unless substantial additional help was immediately provided.

He called for action that would begin to restore the confidence of people in their economic future and the economic future of their nations. The demoralizing effect was reflected in growing desperation.

Marshall argued that it was logical for the U.S. to do what it could to assist in the return of normal economic health to crumbling European nations. He argued we are all together in a small boat, and a leak anywhere threatens us all. Without hope and prospects for recovery, he argued, there could be no political stability. He argued for policy directed against hunger, poverty, desperation, and chaos. Its purpose should be the revival of all aspects of a working economy in a way that re-established the political and social conditions that free institutions need to exist.

The plan should be to provide a cure rather than ease pain. Assistance must not be piecemeal. Political passion and prejudice should have no part. Because it was virtually impossible to grasp the significance of the situation, the future depended on proper judgment. He argued the future hangs on identifying the most-important factors. What are the sufferings? What is needed? What can best be done? What must be done? How are the most vulnerable protected from further harm?

This framing helps explain the DPS decision to focus on ensuring safety and health first and then on advancing learning. Involving various constituencies in a democratic fashion has its rightful place, except when there is an overwhelming danger of harm to lives. When the fire alarm rings in a school, we don't hold a focus group to decide what the best response is; we heed the decision of those who tell us the best way to exit a building. The outbreak did not divert the attention of DPS from its concern with equity; instead it shifted the focus of those equity-related concerns from the learning realm to the health and safety arena.

Like every other big city school district, five months into the 2020 year, DPS is deeply engaged in the daily stream of decisions about how to adapt programming in response to the virus. At this point, one question that emerged from the interviews with thought leaders is worthy of note.

Is equity in a district school system like DPS a means, a purpose, or an effect?

As an example, integration (or efforts to de-segregate) represents a means; that is, it is how a district system of public education can promote and advance excellence for every member of a community.

The purpose of integration within a school district is to maximize talent, not to reinforce the advantage of some over others.

A well-functioning system of public education leads to the desired effect. That is a free, just, and prosperous society, one where all young people exit public school prepared to make a home, a life, and a future.

A K12 system interested in earning the moniker “The Equity District” would have a declared definition of equity and some insight into whether equity is a destination, a vehicle, or a journey.

Findings: Uncertainty surrounds why DPS finds it hard to improve equity-wise. When the thought leaders who were interviewed were asked why performance gaps have persisted in DPS, they each weighed in with a theory of the case. All speculated about why and how DPS finds itself wrestling with this question now.

1. Scaling

This is a scaling challenge. We should do more of the same, just do it better than in the past. One thought leader expressed this during an interview.

What we still have as a challenge is scaling systems. It is not about one thing; it is about many things. There is the excellence in instructional strategies. It is about working across lines of difference. It is about believing all kids can be successful. It is about knowing when and how to “solve for” the one child in front of you. The ceiling just moves up and all get better, but the gaps don't close. We do see pockets of dramatic growth, but more importantly, when we see dramatic growth it isn't sustained. There isn't a problem we haven't solved somewhere in DPS; the problem is that we have not solved it throughout DPS.

2. Vision and Focus

This is chiefly a matter of splintered focus. Those with this view illustrate the point by saying the District lacks a common definition for equity. There are too many priorities. DPS educators make matters too complex. All of this means it is difficult to tightly focus. Several thought leaders addressed this during interviews.

We need a coherent vision. Such a vision would make it possible for people to say, this is what DPS is and stands for

The challenge we all face is whether the vision we create really is something that helps students, especially those needing the most help.

It isn't just up to [the Superintendent] to push for equity. For 10 years in DPS, I didn't see a goal to move toward equity. For 10 years, I didn't see a lot of people training on inclusive practices. DPS still lacks a common definition of equity.

The vision should be more inspiring.

We have too many priorities right now.

The main blind spot is being overwhelmed by complexity. There are so many things on the DPS agenda, it is hard to focus.

We "over-process" things. We really make things (too) complicated.

We complicate things too much. The art of being smart is can I take a complex thing and make it simple enough so all can get it? Make stuff simple yet effective. That is the challenge.

3. Misalignment

This is primarily a misalignment challenge. Equity interests will be better served if we better align to the factors that really make a difference in the classroom. One thought leader addressed this during an interview.

We don't keep the main thing, the main thing. At the end of the day we do a lot of stuff. But is it the right stuff? It doesn't always feel like it is the right stuff.

4. Self-Scrutiny and Fresh Thinking

The big challenge is this. The system we have is perfectly designed to get us the results we have. Thinking that got us here will not get us to the next level. Earnest efforts have not yielded the results we seek. So, fresh approaches are needed. The success the District has had over the last 20 years makes it difficult to leave behind approaches that have delivered in the past. Several thought leaders addressed this during interviews.

We have to interrogate our blind spots.

We are our own blind spot. We don't know what we don't know. We're not really open to anything that looks at it differently than it is now.

We do need to look at our policies and practices that have given us the system and the inequity we have now. I remember an LA Times story about big challenges there. How could improvement in equity happen with the failed policies that created the problem?

It is the question we are all asking about vision. What do we now do with the answers we hear from those we speak to? Do we continue to deny the problem and then coverup the denial? Or do we take a serious look at ourselves and our practices?

We have to shake ourselves. Education need not work the same way it always has. If one thing is hitting us now (with the virus), it is how we can -- and we need to -- change.

Without completing a root cause analysis, how can we know what to change?

Has the district really done a root cause analysis; if it did, what did it find?

The blind spot will be an unquestioning commitment to (and sense of) "the right way" that things have to be done. I don't know how to get the staff in our schools to overcome the fear of looking inward, of really questioning what we do and whether it is successful or appropriate.

While reforms have happened in DPS, most have not affected the side of town where our economically-disadvantaged students and families are found.

5. Site Autonomy Impairs Comparability Making It Difficult for Sites to Learn from Each Other

With so much variability site-to-site, it is difficult for schools to learn from each other. DPS characterizes itself as a learning organization that is committed to equity, yet schools have so much flexibility they lack the data needed to engage in the deep learning required to overcome inequity and its causes. The District focus on autonomy means that there are few common yardsticks or programs across all schools. This impedes the ability to engage in continuous improvement. Several thought leaders addressed this during interviews.

Be sure you have data so you can compare how one school is doing compared to the rest. Without that, you can't learn from each other. That is more important than you realize.

We need data that is comparable school to school so we can see how schools do relative to others and so schools can learn from each other.

There is so much autonomy there is no comparability school to school; as a result. that doesn't allow us to learn from each other at all.

6. Access to Rigor

The essential challenge is that too few black, brown, and low-income students have access to rigorous expectations, rigorous curriculum, rigorous instruction, and rigorous experiences. Students facing a steep climb don't have access to the runway that leads to college. Several thought leaders addressed this during interviews.

I know it seems simple. Make sure every student has access to rigorous coursework. But it's not so simple. This is so important.

The most important barriers are lack of access to rigorous instruction, rigorous curriculum, rigorous expectations, and rigorous enrichment.

Holding adults accountable to make sure young people have access and attainment of rigorous grade-level coursework. We haven't done this.

7. Inconsistent and Ineffective Use of Culturally Responsive Educational Practices

Culturally responsive educational practices are inadequately understood and ineffectively practiced (and supervised) by licensed educators, especially principals and those who supervise principals. It is noteworthy that black and brown students constitute the majority of those enrolled in DPS schools yet culturally responsive education is provided on an opt-in basis to licensed educators. A couple of thought leaders addressed this during interviews.

There are certain things where we need to put a stake in the ground [like culturally responsive education]. We all need to be on the same page on this when it comes to equity.

Who gets to say, "I don't need to do that equity stuff?" But in DPS we told people you all need to train on this. Then we said you have choices and so now you have people who aren't doing it. Most people in Denver think DPS works pretty well for those with power, sure. But we gave people too many choices and now we have too many who are defiant.

8. Tyranny of Half-Measures

Fenwick English coined the phrase to describe how reform efforts flounder when "all in" commitment is lacking. Achieving the equity gains that DPS seeks is contingent on all staff members authentically joining the effort to acquire the knowledge, skills, and mindset that are needed. As one thought leader observed during an interview.

"Don't kid yourself. Own your truth. You can't achieve equity by taking a module here or there or online. This is a "hands-on journey" and it's going to take a while. You can't have "drive-by equity". We think if we take a module here or there, we're done with that. Not so.

9. Adaptive Change versus Technical Change

The learning that is required to be successful with young people is adaptive. One thought leader described this during an interview.

We have to integrate this work so it permeates and affects everything we do. We have to envision what we want to see. Then we need to adjust the curriculum to make it so. This involves adaptive change. People don't necessarily have the knowledge and skill they need to make this leap. We have to recognize this, and we have to manage this change with that reality in mind.

10. Targeted Universalism

The central challenge here is the unfulfilled promise of an approach (targeted universalism) that is a leading candidate to be the organizing principle for the district-wide equity framework for DPS.

Targeted universalism worked in DPS with English learners, but it has not yet been used as effectively with African American and black students. Several thought leaders addressed this in interviews.

We need proven and targeted strategies that work for each student and each subgroup.

We have been successful when we used targeted interventions for particular student groups (like English learners), but we have not been successful in finding and providing targeted interventions for our African American and black children.

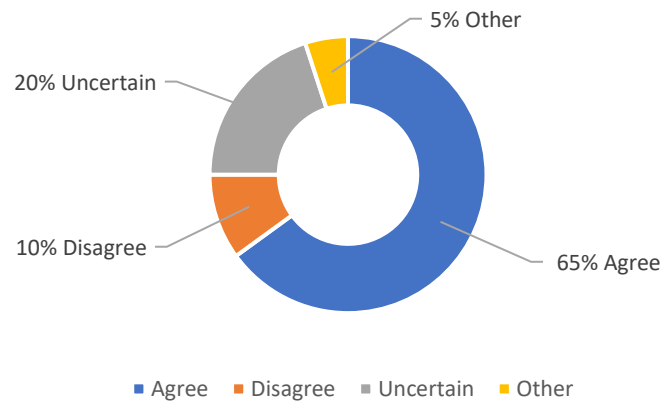
Targeted universalism is needed to achieve and ensure equity.

We don't want kids to feel they are somehow "less than". Our approach to achieving equity begins with realizing that kids all start in different place in life so one size doesn't fit all.

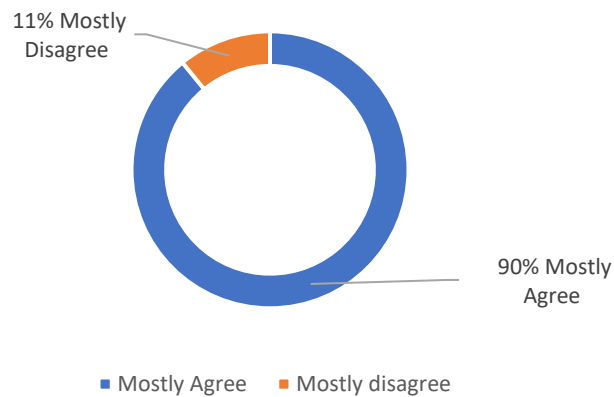
Graphic Results (see next page)

Charts showing responses from the thought leader interviews (May 10, 2020)

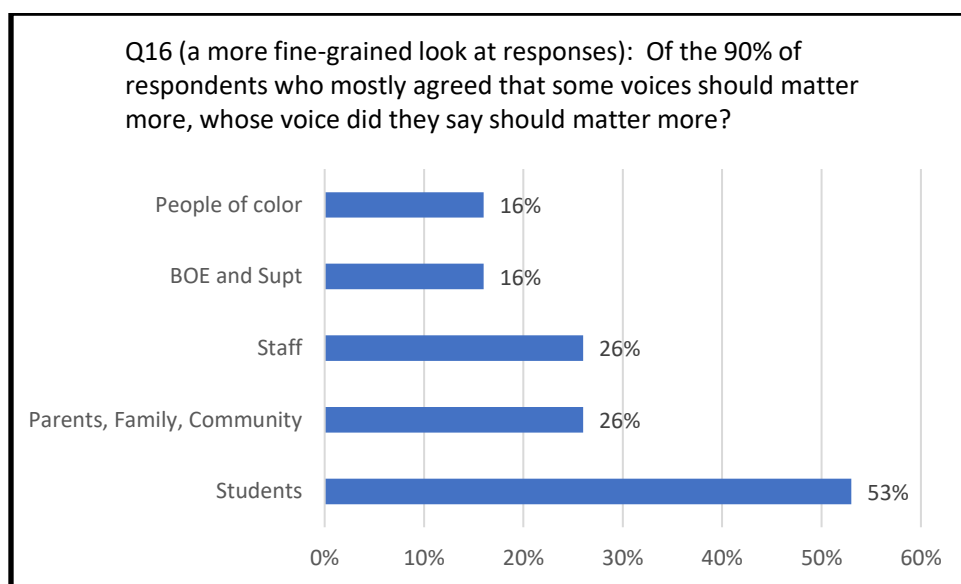
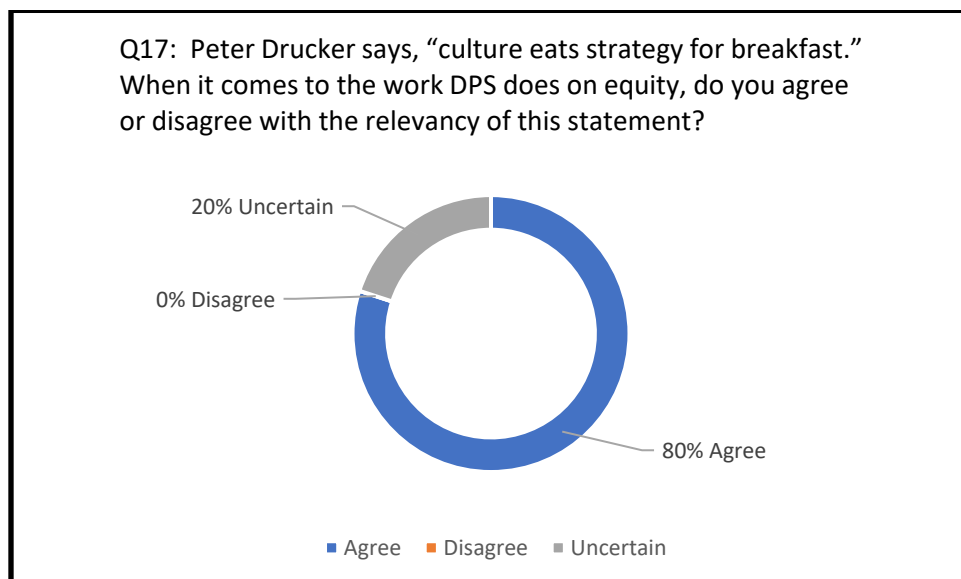
Q12: School principals are independent operators, focused on innovation, school as unit of change, and “just make it happen for kids.” Tension exists between autonomy and accountability



Q16: Do you mostly agree or mostly disagree with the following statement, “some voices matter more, or they should?” (percentage total exceeds 100 due to rounding)



Charts showing responses from the thought leader interviews (continued)



The first chart in this series displays results from Question 12 of the interview. Here, about two-thirds (65 percent) of thought leaders who were interviewed indicated they agreed with the statement that principals in DPS are largely independent operators.

The second figure in the series presents results from Question 16. It illustrates that 90 percent of thought leaders who were interviewed mostly agree with the statement that “some voices matter more, or they should.”

The third chart in the series displays results from Question 17 shows that 80 percent of thought leaders who were interviewed agree with the statement that “culture eats strategy for breakfast.”

The final chart provides a closer look at thought leader responses to Question 16 of the interview. The display provides more-detailed information about the 90 percent of thought leaders who mostly agreed with the statement that “some voices matter more, or they should.” Caution is urged when interpreting these results. Because respondents could choose more than one respondent group, the cumulative total exceeds 100 percent. More than half (53 percent) of those replying said “students.” A little more than a fourth (26 percent) of thought leaders who mostly agreed that some voices matter more (or should) identified “parents, family and community” in their reply. Likewise, about a fourth (26 percent) said that the voices that should matter more are those of “staff.” A little less than one-sixth of respondents (16 percent) indicated that the voices that should matter more are those of the “Superintendent and Board of Education.” Finally, one sixth (16 percent) said that the voices that matter most are “people of color.”

The next section outlines recommendations. Following that, Appendix A contains themes emerging from thought leader interviews (with representative remarks). Appendix B lists the 20 questions that formed the basis of the interviews with thought leaders. Appendix C contains a brief analysis.

Recommendations:

I. Policy environment

- A. Define equity in DPS policy (to include adopting a vision statement that features equity)
- B. Create a policy structure that redefines school quality by elevating equity so that to be an excellent school requires making substantial progress closing subgroup performance gaps.
- C. Adopt a districtwide equity framework that uses “Targeted Universalism” as the foundation.
- D. Adjust District onboarding procedures to conform with and support newly created policy language with respect to this equity framework and the concept of targeted universalism.

Description: Adjust onboarding procedures so all newly hired staff (teachers and principals and central office administrators) are equipped to know and apply the principles of targeted universalism

- E. Adjust District job descriptions for licensed educators (teachers, principals, supervisors, etc.) to conform with and support newly created policy language with respect to this equity framework and the concept of targeted universalism.

Description: Make licensed staff aware that evaluation expectations for teachers and principals and supervisors are amended to reflect a requirement that educators know and demonstrate the ability to apply principles of targeted universalism

- F. Adjust District expectations related to school improvement planning to conform with and support newly created policy language with respect to this equity framework and the concept of targeted universalism.

Description: Going forward, each school will include in its school improvement plan at least one school-level goal that calls for using targeted universalism in ways that lead to closed subgroup gaps.

II. Consider a unified system of equity-based accountability & support (focused on getting better faster)

- A. Expectations: DPS Board of Education creates a policy framework that uses expectations, incentives, capacities, and opportunities to encourage schools that: (1) embrace a District commitment to equity, (2) willingly elect to gauge their progress toward eliminating subgroup performance gaps, (3) publicly report annual equity goals and yearly progress toward those goals, and (4) systematically share successful techniques with schools that are struggling.

- B. DPS Board may wish to consider creating a policy that reframes “accountability” (as it is used with respect to a unified system of equity-based accountability and support).

Description: The word “accountability” shall answer the question “Who is responsible to whom and for what?” Accountability as it is used in this context and for this purpose here shall not be for high stakes purposes or for competition (as in for the *School Performance Framework*). Instead it shall exist for the purpose of promoting collaboration between and among DPS schools and educators.

- C. DPS Board may wish to consider approving an administration proposal to establish a school-level Equity Playbook and Scorecard.

Description: The Playbook and Scorecard could exist for the purpose of supporting greater collaboration (rather than competition) by identifying what works (with respect to closing performance gaps) and then sharing successful ideas with educators in other schools. A school’s decision to participate in using the Equity

Scorecard makes the school eligible for funding via a District mini-grant process. This provides grant funds to schools that elect to adopt an equity goal and then to report yearly progress on that equity goal. Further this provides continued grants to schools that first make progress on that Equity ScoreCard and then also step up to support a school that is struggling to achieve its equity aims. Sample indicators on the Equity ScoreCard could include some of the following:

↑	Student uptake/performance in pre-collegiate coursework (AP/IB)	Note: "Uptake" means number and percent of students. "Gaps" means disparity by race, language, ability, income, or school. "Equity" means students have different starting places in life, and this confers an advantage to some over others. To promote fairness, school resources, services, and opportunities are distributed to compensate for starting-gate differences. Rather than equally distributing resources and opportunities so every student gets the same amount, students receive support they need so each can compete on a level playing field.
↓	Gaps in uptake/performance in pre-collegiate coursework (AP/IB)	
↑	Student rate with respect to on-track to on-time HS graduation	
↓	Gaps with respect to the rate of on-track to on-time HS graduation	
↓	Exclusionary practices (# of suspensions and expulsions)	
↓	Gaps in exclusionary practices	
↑	Student uptake/performance on dual-enrollment	
↓	Gaps in student uptake/performance on dual-enrollment	

D. District leadership may wish to consider an instructional model that adds an equity element.

Description: This would build on the three questions DuFour asks (What do we want students to know/do? What evidence tells us that they have acquired the desired knowledge/skill? What do we do if students arrive at the learning destination early or late?) The model could add a fourth question from International Baccalaureate (How best does each student acquire and then demonstrate the desired learning?). This amendment can help establish an expectation that educators in schools will identify pathways and supports that are individualized for each student. Personalizing education this way increases engagement. Engagement leads to improvement. If this happens, then it sets the stage for creating a standard of professional practice.

E. Capacities: Leadership may wish to establish an internal equity-based, mini-grant process

Description: This could confer grants to schools that commit to adopting an annual goal of completing professional learning for all administrators and teachers focused on cultural responsiveness/proficiency/competency and on overcoming implicit bias. The mechanism provides grants to schools that share with other struggling schools how the min-grant funds were used to translate equity-related goals into plans, plans into actions, and action into desired results.

F. Opportunity: Leadership may wish to offer grants to schools embracing equity-based tactic

Description: Conceivably, leadership could decide to identify one of these as a tactic that schools could use to help achieve an equity-based goal: (1) wraparound services; (2) social-emotional learning; (3) trauma-informed instruction; or (4) community partnerships designed to enhance student well-being.

III. Leadership Development

- A. DPS may wish to consider having all administrators demonstrate that they: (1) understand and apply the principles of culturally-responsive education; (2) are culturally proficient and competent in their daily practice, and (3) have an appreciation of and respect for culturally-sustaining educational practices.

Description: The specifics of these expectations are found in Standard #3 of the *Professional Standard for Educational Leaders* (2015, from the *National Policy Board for Educational Administration*)¹

IV. Resource management

- A. DPS may wish to align the budget process to reflect a new commitment to equity as the organizing principle (this assumes virtual learning becomes standard operating procedure).

Description: In the interest of promoting more-equitable funding school-to-school, the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* calls on each State Education Agency to take steps to ensure that local school districts report publicly on school-level educational funding. The underlying assumption is that greater transparency in school-level budgeting will drive budget processes to be more responsive to equity concerns. The question is, what budgeting mechanism will school districts use that goes beyond Title I funding in a manner that successfully provides a better way to provide more-equitable funding at the school level?

The challenge for principals is to appraise the equity needs of the school and then to assemble budget plans that seek to ameliorate inequities in resources. This is particularly important, especially in light of the sparse national support that is now available to school building leaders who are expected to make a case for more-adequate school-level funding. How precisely does a school principal make a credible case for more, different, and/or better resource support? To present a defensible and persuasive argument, what elements should a school building leader consider? What framework does a central office use to evaluate proposals that individual school building leaders submit? What tools and techniques will help local educators meet this challenge?

One approach DPS could consider is to have principals develop a “proposal for supplemental equity funding”. Principals would submit the proposal to their region. Each region would establish a council of principals (all from the schools in the region) to review proposals. The District would grant each

¹ Strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.
Ensure that each student is treated fairly, respectfully, and with an understanding of each student’s culture and context.
Recognize, respect, and employ each student’s strengths, diversity, and culture as assets for teaching and learning.
Ensure that each student has equitable access to effective teachers, learning opportunities, academic and social support, and other resources necessary for success.
Develop student policies and address student misconduct in a positive, fair, and unbiased manner.
Confront and alter institutional biases of student marginalization, deficit-based schooling, and low expectations associated with race, class, culture and language, gender and sexual orientation, and disability or special status.
Promote the preparation of students to live productively in and contribute to the diverse cultural contexts of a global society.
Act with cultural competence and responsiveness in their interactions, decision making, and practice.
Address matters of equity and cultural responsiveness in all aspects of leadership.

region a substantial level of funds each year (e.g., \$10M/region) that can only be deployed for equity purposes within the coming fiscal year (use it or lose it) and successful application must be supported by principals in the region.

V. Long-Term Planning

- A. DPS may wish to develop a political strategy that makes a vision of enhanced equity compatible with the district desire to raise capital and operational funds.

Description: Even though accommodating the effects of the virus is top of mind, thought must be given to post-virus planning. From a resource standpoint, as the economy contracts, the tax base shrinks, and revenues to schools decline. Thus, the revenue-side of the financial outlook is grim. At the same time, on the demand side, the needs of DPS are likely to increase as leadership strives to make the infrastructure changes required to make a virtual learning platform more effective and efficient. Consequently, it is entirely likely that DPS will soon need to consider bond and/or mill levy campaigns. The question is, what political strategy will guide DPS in that effort? How is this equity conversation going to affect District efforts to increase both capital and operational funds? Does the District have any data on how voters in different regions of the city will welcome or support an equity-themed school district?

VI. Reconceptualize the Model of Schooling

- A. DPS may wish to adapt instruction so it better supports equity on a virtual learning platform.

Description: If the prospect of a continuing virus threat takes shape, there is the distinct possibility that COVID alters not just the economy but the format for public education. If a social distancing requirement became commonplace in a post-pandemic world, then space requirements alone could prompt changes to schooling as we now know it. Staggered schedules, flipped learning, and hybrid classrooms may become the norm. Project-based instruction may lend itself more-readily to this kind of environment.

Note, the term “staggered schedule” means students attend classes once or twice a week; on alternate days, students participate virtually. The term “flipped learning” means teachers record lessons, post them to the web, and students pull the lessons down each night, and view them at home. Then, student interaction with the teacher – either face to face or virtually -- focuses on students applying the learning to problem sets and the teacher providing customized assistance. The term “hybrid learning” means some combination of face-to-face and virtual learning whereby some students in a class participate virtually while others are face-to-face in a traditional classroom.

VII. Management Practices

- A. DPS may wish to address role clarification around decision-making within staff of the District

Description: Develop and implement a decision-making framework so that school, regional, and central office staff have a consistent understanding about what decisions are site-based and which are made centrally.

- B. DPS may wish to address role clarification around responsibilities of BOE and Superintendent

Description: Create a framework that articulates the responsibility of a Board, to include: (1) define the duty of the district administration to marshal resources to help ensure students are educated to some level of performance; (2) adopt policies that establish a frame of work for staff; and (3) hire and supervise the Superintendent. The framework should also articulate the duties reserved to the Superintendent.

Closing: In the end, how far, how fast, and in what direction DPS moves will largely depend on how brave and bold the District leadership is willing to be in the pursuit of greater equity.

Appendix A: Themes emerging from thought leader interviews (with representative remarks)

On vision

We need a coherent vision. Such a vision would make it possible for people to say, this is what DPS is and stands for.

The vision should be more inspiring.

The challenge we all face is whether the vision we create really is something that helps students, especially those needing the most help.

We all need to be grounded in a vision of success for every child, a vision that is inclusive of all kids.

[The Superintendent] will have to create a vision and a plan that the community can get behind (and one that really delivers results).

On root cause

Without completing a root cause analysis, how can we know what to change?

Has the district really done a root cause analysis (and if it did, what did it find)?

On a school system that enables educators to learn from each other

Be sure you have data so you can compare how one school is doing compared to the rest. Without that, you can't learn from each other. That is more important than you realize.

We need data that is comparable school to school so we can see how schools do relative to others and so schools can learn from each other.

There is so much autonomy that there is no comparability school to school; as a result that doesn't allow for us to learn from each other at all.

On focus

We have too many priorities right now.

We have too many things going on.

On equity

We don't want kids to feel they are somehow "less than". Our approach to achieving equity begins with realizing that kids all start in different place in life so one size doesn't fit all.

This is what equity means to me. Every child has the needed knowledge, skills, character, and beliefs. They all have the skillset to reflect on themselves and their career path. It is

making sure every child has access to the right resources and curriculum. For me, equity isn't something based on ranking of some competition between kids.

What is success for one is not necessarily success for another. For some, it is going to college and get a job, [but] every child needs to thrive. All children need to reach their dreams. Every child needs to reach full potential.

Whether we look at the current situation or the way it was before (before the virus), there are still students who have greater needs who will require more resources.

I understand that it isn't just up to [the Superintendent] to push for equity. For 10 years in DPS, I didn't see a goal to move toward equity. For 10 years, I didn't see a lot of people training on inclusive practices. DPS still lacks a common definition of equity.

On success and the whole child

There is more to a student than a test score.

I have real issues with "success". At the end of the day, I want people to be content with their life and their ability to be productive . . . to have a fulfilling life, whatever that means to them. I want them to have the knowledge, skills, character, and beliefs to live a fulfilled life. I want them to have some understanding of the world of competition and how to live under it and survive.

What I want to know is whether each student can feel a measure of personal success for having worked to pursue a dream that is important to them, not a dream that is important to someone else. Success is when every student feels safe at school, being who they are. Each student is entitled to that.

To me, success means thriving. We can prosper academically but still not be successful. Success means being resilient and having the ability to self-advocate and think critically. A broad definition of success asks how are kids at working out a plan for their lives. It means that he or she finds a way to negotiate life. They find a way to achieve their dreams.

On equity, non-negotiables, and the limits to autonomy

There are certain things where we need to put a stake in the ground. We all need to be on the same page when it comes to equity.

Who gets to say, "I don't need to do that equity stuff?" But in DPS we told people you all need to train on this. Then we said you have choices and so now you have people who aren't doing it. Most people in Denver think DPS works pretty well for those with power, sure. But we gave people too many choices and now we have too many who are defiant.

On our approach to system improvement

The main blind spot is being overwhelmed by complexity. There are so many things on the DPS agenda, it is hard to focus.

We "over-process" things. We really make things (too) complicated.

The level of complexity that we bring to things just gets in the way sometimes.

We complicate things too much. The art of being smart is can I take a complex thing and make it simple enough so all can get it? Make stuff simple yet effective. That is the challenge.

On alignment

The most important barrier is our misalignment with things that matter most.

We're just not aligned to what we need to get achievement to improve in a way that moves equity forward.

It isn't possible to focus on the main thing. We can't keep the main thing, the main thing. We don't keep the main thing, the main thing. At the end of the day we do a lot of stuff. But is it the right stuff? It doesn't always feel like it is the right stuff. Ron Edmonds said it best "We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need in order to do this. Whether we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far."

On openness to change

We are our own blind spot. We don't know what we don't know. We're not really open to anything that looks at it differently than it is now.

We suffer from unchecked liberalism in Denver and the Denver Public Schools. We all think we know what is needed and what is best. People think they're being equitable when they really aren't.

We have to be willing to push ourselves and not get offended. We have to take a good hard look at what we have done and own it. As great as we have been, if it was really that important to us we would have made more progress.

The blind spot will be an unquestioning commitment to (and sense of) "the right way" that things have to be done. I don't know how to get the staff in our schools to overcome the fear of looking inward, of really questioning what we do and whether it is successful or appropriate.

We do need to look at our policies and practices that have given us the system and the inequity we have now. I remember an LA Times story about big challenges there. How could improvement in equity happen with the failed policies that created the problem?

We have to shake ourselves. Education need not work the same way it always has. If one thing is hitting us now (with the virus), it is how we can -- and need to -- change.

We can't achieve equity until we disrupt white power and privilege that institutionally prevails. We have to interrogate our blind spots. We all have to examine our practices with a critical lens.

Racism and inequity are deeply ingrained in our society. It is part of our history as a nation. Our country is based on injustice and domination where one group thought it was better than another group. Inequity is made worse by those who still strive to hold onto advantage over others.

Is it the student or the system that is falling down?

We have to integrate this work so it permeates and affects everything we do. We have to envision what we want to see. Then we need to adjust the curriculum to make it so. This involves adaptive change. People don't necessarily have the knowledge and skill they need to make this leap. We have to recognize this, and we have to manage this change with that reality in mind.

On denial

There is a lot of denial in Denver about this topic.

We have a tendency to talk to ourselves and tell ourselves stories. We need to resist the temptation to do that. We have to be willing to take a bold step and get out of our own way.

Don't kid yourself. Own your truth. You can't achieve equity by taking a module here or there or online. This is a "hands-on journey" and its going to take a while. You can't have "drive-by equity". We think if we take a module here or there, we're done with that. Not so.

The lesson is that you begin by "standing in your own truth." Own up to the truth. The 2020 Denver Plan was way too aspirational.

It is the question we are all asking about vision. What do we now do with the answers we hear from those we speak to? Do we continue to deny the problem and then coverup the denial? Or do we take a serious look at ourselves and our practices?

On the phrasing of goals in the *Denver 2020 Plan*

We should not have aspirational goals. On the other hand, you can't have a bunch of key performance indicators (KPIs) that are too fine-grained. If you have aspirational goals, you will pay a price in criticism for not making them or for taking forever to achieve them. I have learned it is easier to make gains with older kids than with younger kids. Focus on

Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate or things like that. It is so hard to change where kids start out in school.

Take the goal "A great school in every neighborhood." The lesson we need to learn is that we need to be more honest and transparent about what we mean by these things. It sounds so positive. But when it really gets down to it, it means competition.

The *2020 Denver Plan* was way too aspirational. To achieve the gap closure that we want, folks like A+ for Colorado will point out that at the current rate it will take until the next Ice Age for gaps to close. So, admit that. Don't repeat it.

Aspirational goals were wrong.

You can't just put some aspirational goals out there that are unreachable. And you can't just go for tiny little increments.

In previous versions of the *Denver Plan*, we had aspirational goals. These set us up for failure. They don't motivate people. So, let's avoid phrases that are only for marketing purposes; that leads to a plan that feels hollow. Statistics should not be in the goals.

We can't set aspirational goals so high that it isn't realistic to achieve them. We need high but realistic goals.

On finding the moral high ground

Real change requires cultural leadership that is fearless, leadership that sees racial disparities and inequities in schooling as the civil rights issue of our time. Coming into this conversation we know we are going to be pushed down. Keep pushing.

This is the age-old question. If we solve this, we solve everything else. That includes crime, racial relations, etc. Solve the equity piece and all our social issues and problems become better. There is no more important question. It is a "game changer". To do it well means to live up to the founding documents of our country.

This is a freedom moment. People either have access or they don't. We need to figure out how to stop what we see (bias and indifference that are socialized and normalized).

People point to this as a civil rights moment. It will take hearts and minds to change the policies and practices. Leadership matters in this.

We are a literate society where so much power in society comes from access to education. Education is almost a fundamental condition of living.

I say this is a sprint, not a marathon because kids are in school now and they can't wait for years for things to improve.

On knowing what needs to happen

I know it seems simple. Make sure every student has access to rigorous coursework. But it's not so simple. This is so important.

The most important barriers are lack of access to: rigorous instruction, rigorous curriculum, rigorous expectations, and rigorous enrichment.

Holding adults accountable to make sure young people have access and attainment of rigorous grade-level coursework. We haven't done this.

We need proven and targeted strategies that work for each student and each subgroup.

We have been successful when we used targeted interventions for particular student groups (like English learners), but we have not been successful in finding and providing targeted interventions for our African American and black children.

Targeted universalism is needed to achieve and ensure equity.

We have to normalize conversations about racial equity and at the same time operationalize social justice practices top to bottom.

You can't do it to people; you have to do it with people.

We need three things. First is "landmarks". Second is "pathways". Third is "mile markers".

We need strategies that link to the goals.

We have to do three things. The first is school choice; the way it is set up not every child can get to the school he or she needs. The second is stop the student-based budget program. The third is end our accountability system that uses the SPF to create winners and losers. All three rely on competition that is not good.

We can motivate through FEAR or we can motivate through HOPE. Fear is fast-acting, but hope is long-lasting. Motivate through hope.

On the interplay of governance and operations

I think about how the board interacts with the Superintendent. How does everyone stay in the right lane (that is, the board in the governance lane and the Superintendent in the operational lane)? I wonder whether the Superintendent is empowered to make the changes that will be needed to achieve what we say we want to achieve. If the Superintendent isn't empowered then is the Superintendent just being told what to do operationally (and if that is happening, then people are "out of their lane").

On thriving

"Every student thrives" says it for me.

I like what Susana says. She uses the word "thrives". It isn't just about high school graduation. It is about creating schools that support each student and find ways to help him/her/them to lead the lives they dream of having. That doesn't always mean college.

On deficits versus assets

In a perfect world we would have less-biased mindsets. We'd be better off if we took an asset-based approach. We'd see behaviors change if we did that.

We have let a deficit mindset rule the day. We say, "if you're not like us, you're less than us."

Students should be able to cultivate the assets they come with. They can use what they have when we ask and encourage and support to expand that.

On sustaining and scaling

What we still have as a challenge is scaling systems.

It is that it is not about one thing. It is about many things. There is excellence in instructional strategies. It is about working across lines of difference. It is about believing all kids can be successful. It is about knowing when and how to "solve for" the one child in front of you.

We've seen how hard it is to sustain excellence over time when there is instability in the school. It is getting all of this right all the time . . . in various settings.

The ceiling just moves up and all get better, but the gaps don't close. We do see pockets of dramatic growth, but more importantly, when we see dramatic growth it isn't sustained.

There isn't a problem we haven't solved somewhere in DPS; the problem is that we have not solved it throughout DPS.

On system benefits and how they distribute based on economics of the family and the community

While lots of people said DPS was the shining jewel, there is serious work that remains to be done here. While reforms have happened in DPS, most have not affected the side of town where our economically disadvantaged students and families are found.

I think the accountability system (School Performance Framework or SPF) is part of it too. Whenever we do rankings, someone is at the bottom and someone is at the top. The problem is that the affluent communities make out when that happens. They just know how it all works.

People of means in Denver are generally happy with their schools. They support them until the time comes that their child doesn't get into the school of choice. Then they game the system or leave for private school.

It isn't OK for only 50 percent of a certain group of students to graduate from high school. I never want it said that this was all that was possible or this was the best that could be done.

At a surface level, we are still "being othered."

Some parents wonder, "Will my kids get what they need (being in the public schools)? If my kids don't get it in the public schools, then I'm taking them to private schools."

Appendix B: Questions from thought leader interviews

1. What is the most important thing you know about achieving equity in public education?
2. DPS is known for its talented staff, but if we are so smart, why have gaps persisted for so long?
3. What is your theory of the case? How did DPS get here?
4. Beyond what you have already said, in your mind, what else is going on here?
5. How important is it to get this right, i.e., achieving equity in DPS?
6. Is this more about changing policies and practices or hearts and minds?
7. DPS defines its vision as “every child succeeds”; how do you define the success of Denver Public Schools?
8. When it comes to this work, where would you start and why?
9. How do you make sense of these terms; is any one more or less important or do they cluster in any way?
 - Belief gaps
 - Opportunity gaps
 - Achievement gaps
 - Racial gaps
 - Family wealth gaps
10. How confident are you that DPS can make this happen, i.e., achieving equity in Denver Public Schools?
11. What is going to be our blind spot in this work?
12. Some point to tension between autonomy and accountability in DPS. They say principals are independent operators who are relentlessly focused on innovation, on school as the unit of change, and a commitment to “just make it happen for kids.” Do you mostly agree or mostly disagree?
13. What is the biggest barrier that has contributed to performance gaps that have persisted over time?
14. What lesson have we learned from previous versions of the *Denver Plan*?
15. If it wishes to be known as “The Equity District” what does DPS need to stop doing and start doing?
16. Do you agree or disagree with the statement, “some voices matter more or should matter more?”
17. Drucker says, “culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Is that of any relevance to the DPS work on equity?
18. If we are interested in helping DPS get to the next level, what question should we be asking?
19. What do you know about equity work that is important, but no one has yet asked for your view on it?
20. What do you wish we had touched on but did not?

Appendix C: Brief Analysis

1. What is the problem we are trying to solve?
 - Equity is one of three cornerstones in the Denver Public Schools, yet history shows past district efforts have been insufficient to advance the interests of equity.
 - For example, through the earnest and ambitious efforts by smart and talented educators, district performance has trended upward; at the same time, while the performance of subgroups has improved modestly, gaps that separate subgroups have not closed appreciably for nearly a decade.
 - DPS seeks to improve yet lacks system-wide data that could enable schools to learn from each other.
2. What questions are we trying to answer?
 - How can DPS better prepare students to thrive, especially those who have historically had access to fewer opportunities and have faced more barriers?
 - Can a system that learns to get better faster overcome historical patterns of educational inequity?
 - Is it premature to recommend a solution until we have a clearer sense of the root of the problem?
3. What are the possible root causes?
 - Over-confidence that we are on the right path
 - Struggle to scale up when we encounter pockets of excellence
 - Inability to sustain success when we encounter it
 - Unwillingness to deviate from what has been
 - Reluctance to believe that improvement is possible
 - Lack of knowledge/skill in how to better support youth who struggle
 - Splintered focus or focus on the wrong stuff
 - Insufficient commitment of resources to the problem
 - That which brought success in the past now impedes our ability to improve at a faster rate
 - Lack of data that allows us to learn from each other
4. What is the working theory of the case?
 - Uncertainty exists around why DPS is finding it hard to improve on the equity front. There are competing views. One says scale up (do more of the same, just better). Another says focus more tightly. A third says better align to factors that really make a difference in the classroom. Finally, some say that the greatest impediment is that modest success of the past makes it difficult to abandon practices that lifted overall district performance but did little to close subgroups gaps.
5. What questions might DPS wish to consider?
 - How serious are we about doing what it takes to improve on the equity front?
 - How honest are we willing to be about possibilities?
 - How open are we to a better way?
 - Are there any sacred cows (if so, what are they)?
 - Whose support is needed for any change(s) we want to see?
6. Does any single claim stand out?

- Flexibility granted to individual schools means there is a shortage of comparable performance data school-to-school and program-to-program; this impairs the District ability to learn and self-correct.