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Dots on graph provide clues in DPS puzzle

District's new tool for gauging schools goes online today

By Nancy Mitchell, Rocky Mountain News (Contact)

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"This tells me the curriculum is working for all learners," Aquino said Tuesday, charts in hand. "The question is, why is it working in some places and not others?"

For parents and others not versed in the complexities of educational assessment, the new school measurement tool released Monday by DPS, which will be available online today, may be confusing.

In fact, the use of a system highlighting student growth from one year to the next places Denver among only a few large urban districts nationwide trying such a different approach.

Most other districts - and state and federal accountability laws - measure schools by whether students achieve certain levels on state tests. In other words, they measure where kids end up but not where they start.

"We are beginning to tell a different story" about DPS, Aquino said, "but it is a story we believe is more accurate about the work happening in our schools."

How high a school's students score on state tests does matter in the new system. But 60 percent of a school's final point total is based on growth, or how well its students are progressing from year to year.

"The growth measure, I think, is the most important measure of a school's success because it demonstrates the value of what kids are actually learning once they walk into the doors of your building," said Bill Kurtz, head of school at the Denver School of Science and Technology.

DSST showed the top growth of any DPS high school on the new measure, and its students also had the highest test scores. Aquino said that is the goal for every school - high growth and high performance.

At DSST, the result is that all 79 seniors have been accepted to four-year colleges or universities. The senior class is 60 percent minority, 40 percent low-income, and 50 percent will be the first in their families to go to college.

All DPS principals have received detailed binders filled with data on their schools, and they're being urged to ask questions - Why is my school meeting expectations in reading and math but not in writing? How are we producing such great math results?

"We cannot leave teaching and learning to chance," Aquino said. "We want to know why schools are succeeding as well as why they're not."

Then they're supposed to share those stories.

"You can't control how students come into your building," Aquino said. "You can control how they leave you."

Reading the numbers

Want to see how your school did under Denver Public Schools' new measurement system? Log on to www.dpsk12.org. Starting today, the district's Web site is slated to include information about how to read the new reports and individual school data.

But DPS leaders urge caution. The reports are based on 2006-07 and 2007-08 test scores and are designed, in this first rollout, to get school staffs up to speed on how to use them. More parent-friendly reports, including a school rating and up-to-date test results, will be coming in September.

SPEAKOUT

CSAP testing remains a vital tool

At its core, regimen offers valuable insights on student progress

By Dwight D. Jones

Dwight D. Jones is the Colorado Commissioner of Education.

Imagine for a moment that the results from the Colorado Student Assessment Program were returned only to parents and teachers to improve instruction for each individual student.

At its core, that's the essence of CSAP — to see if students are meeting state standards. While other states have lost legal challenges over the validity of their statewide tests, Colorado is fortunate to have an assessment that has provided educators, policy-makers and taxpayers with accurate information about student achievement for 11 years.

Just a few years after being introduced, CSAP results were considered so legitimate they were used to form the heart of the accountability systems for state and federal governments (through both School Accountability Ratings and accreditation status and the No Child Left Behind Act).

Prior to the introduction of CSAP, each district selected its own assessments. CSAP changed that.

Results revealed some tough truths about school performance. That's the sign of a good accountability system doing its job. From the federal government's system through No Child Left Behind, the results revealed that many school districts weren't reaching all their populations.

CSAP results played a key role when I worked as a district superintendent. The data was critical to spotting gaps in achievement associated with race and income. I used the data to ask questions of schools and identify successful strategies. Principals statewide use the data to drive school improvement planning. Parents use CSAP results — and deserve the results — as an indicator of progress.

As the General Assembly passes the halfway point in its deliberations this year, a number of proposals have surfaced that would begin to dismantle CSAP. I believe caution is in order. Like an iceberg, there are some issues below the surface of CSAP that are less visible and quite substantial.

One issue is the Colorado Growth Model. Following the lead of the Colorado state legislature and two bills that received strong bipartisan support, staff at the Colorado Department of Education recently unveiled a new tool that will soon enable parents, schools, districts and the state to understand how individual students are progressing from year to year and

provides a common, statewide means to understand how much growth is needed for each student to reach post-secondary readiness.

The data that fuels this tool is generated by CSAP and draws on year-to-year, student-by-student information. Swapping out CSAP for another test in grades eight through 10, as has been proposed, would render much of our data useless.

The second issue is federal accountability. The federal No Child Left Behind legislation requires states to have tests in place that are aligned to standards, produce valid results and generate the data required to measure Adequate Yearly Progress. The AYP philosophy, I believe, has compelled schools to discuss the needs of every child. That has been an extremely positive step. Swapping out CSAP for another test could jeopardize federal funding and might prove costly. Other states (Michigan, Illinois) have tried this and struggled.

It is time for thoughtful changes to CSAP. The current standards need to be updated. The State Board of Education joined me in announcing the review of standards last September. We announced also that the review of standards would lead, quite naturally, to changes in the CSAP test itself. The understanding was that the standards review would be done first.

I am a user of CSAP. I believe in the results it generates. I believe it's important to maintain a strong statewide accountability system for students and schools. Common sense suggests we should fix what needs fixing, build on what we've learned and continue to make improvements.