

Strengthening Neighborhoods Committee Recommendations

Denver Public Schools (DPS) is committed to operating and sustaining high-quality, socioeconomically integrated schools in our communities. On March 16, 2017, the DPS Board of Education passed the Strengthening Neighborhoods [resolution](#) to convene a citywide committee tasked with reviewing changing demographics and housing patterns in our city and the effect on our schools.

The Strengthening Neighborhoods Committee (SNC or the Committee) developed the following mission statement to guide our work:

Research indicates that high-quality, integrated schools offer both improved educational outcomes for our children and serve a vital role in promoting and sustaining vibrant neighborhoods. Our committee's mission is to develop recommendations to increase integration and inclusion in all of our schools and to effectively address issues associated with the declining number of school-aged children in impacted areas of the city.

Following a six-month process that included conversations with over 300 community members and educators, the Committee has developed recommendations in the following areas:

- Overarching committee recommendations
- Recommendations for access
- Recommendations for equity
- Recommendations for design and sustainability
- Planning for implementation

Before the Committee began developing specific recommendations, we created and aligned on the following belief statements to guide our work:

Core Beliefs

Root Causes

- Historic, institutional racism and discrimination have inhibited the academic and social progress of students of color and low-income students in Denver.
- The root causes of inequities existing in Denver Public Schools stem from many social, cultural, political, and economic factors that may be beyond the district's control. However, it is critical that the district both focus on strategies within its locus of control while advocating for strategies that may require additional stakeholders or resources.

Characteristics of a High Quality Integrated School

- High-quality, integrated schools reflect the equitable involvement of families, students and the community.
- High-quality, integrated schools drive district-level and school-level improvements.
- High-quality, integrated schools benefit all students in multiple ways, including but not limited to academic outcomes.

- High-quality, integrated schools are characterized by classroom diversity, student diversity, teacher diversity and diversity of pedagogy.

Strategies

- Strategies and policy recommendations will leverage community expertise, existing data, academic research and the experience of other comparable districts.
- Strategies and recommendations should balance the benefits of integration with the importance of parental choice.
- The district's role and responsibility in articulating goals and communicating policy decisions to all audiences and driving process improvement cycles should be clearly articulated.
- Strategies and policy recommendations that require the use of district resources should ensure that district resources are allocated equitably.
- Strategies should increase equitable access to high-quality integrated schools for students and families.
- Throughout the development and communication of strategies and recommendations, there should be evidence of equitable and meaningful community involvement.

The Committee supports the DPS goal of Great Schools in Every Neighborhood and believes that achieving high quality and integration in every school is an important strategy to achieve this goal. We recommend that integration should be a key part of the multi-pronged strategy to achieve this critical goal.

While the SNC identified three specific areas of leverage and formed working groups around those areas, there were areas of commonality across the working groups that form several umbrella recommendations. The Committee understands that there is a significant amount of resources to support the implementation and community engagement required to effectively act on these recommendations. Success in Phase II of this work will require collaboration and commitment from DPS, the City of Denver and community partners to prioritize and sequence the recommendations, as well as lead community conversations.

Overarching Recommendations

- Goal Setting and Progress Monitoring:** The Committee recommends that DPS establish a quantitative target for increasing socioeconomic integration within our schools. Having a goal will provide a clear and shared outcome for collective efforts. The Committee believes that, based on academic research and national data, DPS should strive to increase the percentage of students attending an integrated school. Attaining this goal needs to be based on the socioeconomic diversity of the school's student body, as well as tangible measures of equity and inclusiveness for all students enrolled. It is not enough to have students attend school together; integration requires a school environment where all students feel welcome, safe and valued. The SNC individual working groups developed different proposed ranges for the diversity goal. However, setting the right goal will require additional analysis and community engagement early in Phase II. The Committee recommends that ongoing implementation be regularly monitored and the findings made public, including an annual report to the DPS Board of Education regarding the level of integration in our schools and progress toward the goals.

- B. **Resources, Incentives and Supports:** The Committee recommends that DPS, along with community partners, establish a set of resources and supports for schools to use in creating a more integrated and inclusive environment. Inclusive excellence is defined as a school that has diversity of overall student body, diversity of teaching staff, diversity of pedagogy, equitable access to rigorous curriculum and the inclusive involvement of families, students and the community. Creating an environment of inclusive excellence within a school requires time and intentionality. The Committee recommends that these supports include opportunities for schools to learn from each other and understand the systems and processes necessary to create schools of inclusive excellence.
- C. **City Coordination and Advocacy:** The Committee recommends that DPS embed systems and structures that facilitate close coordination with the City and partner agencies in Phase II. In order to more holistically address the impacts of gentrification on Denver families, DPS should partner closely with city agencies such as the Office of Children’s Affairs, the Office of HOPE (Housing and Opportunity for People Everywhere), the Office of Economic Development and the Office of Human Rights and Community Partnerships. The district should also expand partnerships with other organizations, including Denver Housing Authority, the Regional Transportation District, Blueprint Denver, Denver Public Library, Human Services and others as situations and circumstances evolve. In this way, DPS can increase its advocacy for students, families, and teachers on important issues such as affordable housing, access to public transit, and inclusive economic development.
- D. **Community Engagement:** The Committee recommends that DPS and community partners launch a meaningful public engagement and communications effort to increase awareness and understanding of the benefits of socioeconomic integration, current trends in enrollment patterns and the SNC recommendations for increasing integration. The SNC designed our recommendations with significant community involvement. However, more direct engagement is needed in order for this effort to succeed. Students and communities must be true partners in implementation rather than experiencing these efforts as something that happens “to” them.

Recommendations for Access

The SNC recommends that DPS pursue policies and strategies that promote socioeconomic integration by increasing access to less diverse schools in the enrollment system. The Committee had meaningful discussions regarding the competing values at play in promoting integration. The Committee recommendations focus on the importance of increasing integration at the school level and acknowledge the tensions that exist with supporting neighborhood schools and the availability of school choice. The specific recommendations include:

- A. **School Choice:** The Committee recommends that DPS expand the use of preferences within the choice process for underrepresented students. The existing school choice process contains preferences for a number of student sub-groups (e.g., an incoming student with a sibling already at that school receives preference). The Committee believes that prioritizing enrollment access for underrepresented students is a lever to promote school integration and increase enrollment equity.

Opportunities for Early Progress:

- Expand pilot programs for under-represented students to receive priority in the choice system for assignment at schools with lower levels of socioeconomic diversity.

Identified Tension:

- There are limits to the ability to use the choice process to increase socioeconomic integration at schools that are at or close to full enrollment. This is because there exist very few seats available for students who reside outside the existing boundary or enrollment zone.

- B. **Boundaries and Enrollment Zones:** The Committee recommends that DPS create additional enrollment zones as a means to increase socioeconomic diversity, as well as increase access to homogenous schools for underrepresented families. DPS currently uses a combination of enrollment boundaries and enrollment zones to determine where a student is guaranteed enrollment. In an enrollment boundary, students who reside within the set boundary of a school are guaranteed a seat at that specific school. Whereas in an enrollment zone, students who reside within the enrollment zone are guaranteed a seat at one of the multiple schools within a zone. The Committee believes that using enrollment zones to guarantee enrollment to students across larger geographic areas with multiple school options increases opportunities for socioeconomic integration. In light of housing patterns across the city, smaller individual school boundaries are more likely to result in less-integrated schools. The Committee recommends that DPS strive to include all schools within an enrollment zone’s geographic area (including charters and district-run schools), with very limited exceptions in the case of very specialized school models. The Committee does not recommend that schools be required to change academic programs in order to participate in an enrollment zone.

Opportunities for Early Progress:

- Identify areas where diversity can be most increased through a zone or boundary changes. Focus efforts on geographic areas where housing changes are occurring and proactively design enrollment systems to increase diversity.

Identified Tension:

- The definition of a ‘very specialized’ program should not be so broad as to limit the impact of the policy.

- C. **Transportation:** The Committee recommends that DPS support the expansion of enrollment zones by providing transportation to families to any school within the zone, subject to economic feasibility. The Committee believes that transportation can be a lever to increase access to schools for both more- and less-affluent families. The Committee acknowledges that the ability of DPS to expand or modify current transportation options is constrained by a number of statutory requirements, as well as limited resources. To the extent that additional funds for transportation become available, the Committee recommends that those funds be prioritized for student transportation within enrollment zones and also for underrepresented students to access a greater diversity of school options. Additionally, the Committee recommends DPS continue and expand partnership opportunities with RTD, the City and community partners in order to expand access to student transportation. The Committee recommends that a special election is explored and considered to raise additional funds for transportation.

Opportunities for Early Progress:

- Evaluate how existing transportation is increasing access to schools, as well as how transportation is currently being utilized by underrepresented students who chose to

attend schools outside their enrollment zone. Evaluate transportation opportunities that could increase integration in a cost-effective manner.

Identified Tension:

- Dedicating limited resources towards increasing transportation services that support integration may limit or decrease resources available to invest directly into classrooms, including resources that could support equity and inclusion within schools.

- D. **Enrolling All Students:** The Committee recognizes that housing insecurity is an important factor that limits the ability of students to access school options in an equitable manner. Therefore, the Committee recommends that schools across DPS make seats available at all grades as well as the seats of students who leave mid-year. This is intended to meet the needs of highly-mobile students who may enroll mid-year. In the past, some schools have developed enrollment practices that limit access to students who need or choose to enroll after the start of the school year or after a certain grade. The Committee believes that all schools should make seats available for students to enroll across all grades throughout the school year and that no school should restrict access based on testing or other factors.

Opportunities for Early Progress:

- Create an equity audit for any restrictive enrollment policies and their impact on socioeconomic integration. Ensure there are no entrance requirements for any school in an enrollment zone.

Identified Tension:

- Students entering a school with a highly-specialized program in non-transition grades may find it particularly challenging to succeed. Families must be fully informed of those challenges before enrolling.

Recommendations for Equity

The SNC recognized that in order to create strong integrated schools and address the impacts of gentrification, it is important to identify recommendations that increase equity for all students in all schools. This Committee recommends that DPS monitor school-level equity by expanding equity metrics and indicators of success, striving for equity in resource allocation and in community engagement. Given the progress in efforts related to equitable resource allocation and community engagement, the SNC recommends prioritizing efforts to expand equity metrics.

- A. **Expanding Measures of Equity:** School autonomy and flexibility are important strategies that can improve student outcomes in an equitable manner. However, school flexibility and autonomy may result in disparate outcomes for students if not executed with fidelity or with an eye towards increasing equity for all students. The Committee recommends that DPS develop measures covering school culture and climate that can be used by each school to identify and assess equitable teaching practices, including high expectations that support rigorous instruction, teacher-student relationships built on trust and teachers' ability to engage all students in learning. The Committee also recommends that DPS develop an expanded set of measures to evaluate student learning and development over time, including academic (e.g., grades, evaluative results), non-academic (e.g., discipline, attendance), and social-emotional outcomes (e.g., identity development, safety, belonging). Expanded measures should be disaggregated by

race/ethnicity, disability status, eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch (a proxy for poverty), and English language learning status. These measures would present the benefits of driving school- and district-level action, increasing transparency, and informing parents and families about student learning experiences during the choice process.

Opportunity for Early Progress:

- Facilitate a collaborative process that allows for participation from all schools regardless of governance model (i.e., district-run, innovation, and charter schools) in the development of a shared set of equity measures of school culture and climate that can be used to foster equity and to guide the work of all schools in DPS.
- Review the Student Perception Survey, Parent Satisfaction Survey and Student Satisfaction Survey to determine if they measure the inclusive climate of each school. If not, survey items should be created and added.
- Gather and share Whole Child data that has been disaggregated by race/ethnicity, disability status, FRL status and English language learner status. The district should share data about each school.

Identified Tensions:

- Opportunities that close gaps should be available to all students and considered even more broadly than the outlined groups above (race/ethnicity, disability, FRL, and English language learning status). While student and family rights to privacy may preclude disclosure, teachers and school leaders should be trained and supported in knowing the ways gender fluidity/conformity, sexual orientation, religion, and/or immigration status impact children's ability to learn and overall wellness. Schools should be required and receive support to adapt school safety, culture, and practice without need of knowing specific students' status.
- In expanding equity measurements, it is important to keep in mind that measures should be shared by all school types (whether district-run, innovation, charter) and levels (e.g., early childhood, elementary, secondary) while particular processes for measuring equity should be informed by school characteristics (e.g., homogeneity, heterogeneity, socioeconomic integration).
- Many of the measures that the Committee are recommending are qualitative in nature and difficult to assess in a consistent manner. The Committee recognizes that DPS will need to explore the feasibility of evaluating the aforementioned individual indicators.

- B. **Equity in Resource Allocation:** The Committee recognizes that when distributing resources, including leadership, staff, money and programming, the district considers the targeted needs of students and schools, and adjusts allocations to ensure equitable outcomes rather than equal distribution. The Committee recommends that DPS commit to transparency for investments intended to increase success for all students in all schools. DPS should also commit to regularly evaluating these allocation strategies to determine if they are creating greater equitable outcomes, and to identifying opportunities to further prioritize equitable outcomes. The Committee believes that equity must be used as a prioritized lens for all resource decisions and that purposefully investing in equity work will be required to ensure real change.

Suggested Areas for Exploration:

- A diverse staff is a resource to the district. Prioritize recruitment, retention, placement and support of diverse staff members as a lever for ensuring equitable outcomes for students.
- To increase more equitable outcomes in staff diversity, DPS should share the demographic data of employees for each school.
- DPS should share the number of participants in “grow your own” programs such as EDConnect, para-to-teacher program and pathways to teaching, as well as identify opportunities to deepen these investments.

Identified Tensions:

- The district should pursue both long-term and short-term strategies in developing high-quality, diverse educators, while continuing to invest in efforts to support retention.
- While recognizing the deep thought of the Design and Sustainability Committee, this group also requests further inquiry into how resources are allocated when looking at small schools, high-needs schools and schools facing consolidation.
- Community involvement is an important part of the decision-making process for resources allocation but also creates a lot of opportunity for tension and differing values.

- C. **Equity in Community Involvement:** The Committee recommends that DPS expand the role of community and families by increasing support structures that build trust, increase engagement and provide authentic feedback between schools and community. The Committee believes that equity is a more likely result when the district acts “with” rather than “to” or “for” families and community. Therefore, creating an inclusive district where all students succeed is the collective responsibility of families, the district and the community. It is the district’s responsibility to achieve and sustain equity throughout all schools and programs and to involve families and the community in achieving and maintaining equity. Including community and families will add needed assurances of partnerships and actions that support the district in achieving its goals for all students in all schools.

Suggested Areas for Exploration:

- While surveys are a good source of information, opportunity structures related to race/ethnicity, language and socioeconomic status can create barriers to authentic participation. Therefore, the Committee recommends that the district review methods for measuring climate and family engagement and explore additional methods to collect information, including compensating families and community partners as a resource for information collection.
- Additionally, we recommend that DPS explore opportunities to create support structures that meet families where they are, build trust and increase engagement. Suggested opportunities include developing school-level parent affinity groups.

Identified Tensions:

- While discussing the role of the community, the Committee has differentiated three categories of community:
 - Families (e.g., students, parents and caregivers of students)
 - Community members (e.g., alumni, neighborhood residents)
 - Community partners (e.g., members of community organizations without a formal relationship to schools)

- The Committee recognizes that characteristics related to responsibility, role and resources including, but not limited to, access and economic considerations, create different power structures that often overly favor community partners. The Committee believes that community partners have an important role to play, but recommends that future work be mindful of the need to support the equitable involvement of families and community members.

Recommendations for Design and Sustainability

The SNC recommends that DPS promote integration and inclusive excellence through their new school approval and annual school planning processes. The Committee recognizes the importance of intentionality in designing a school with diversity and inclusive excellence – it does not happen by accident. Additionally, the Committee recommends that DPS proactively address regions that are experiencing a declining number of school-aged children as a result of changes occurring in the city. The Committee expects that DPS will see positive results from an investment in diversity and inclusive excellence in the form of increased student achievement, improved non-academic (or equity) outcomes, and an increased likelihood of strong and stable student enrollment over time.

- A. **Declining School-Aged Population:** The Committee recommends that DPS proactively evaluate and respond to the impact of actual and forecasted declines in school-aged population throughout the city. Because school funding is determined by enrollment, schools with low and declining enrollment lack adequate resources to provide a comprehensive set of school activities and services that support the ability of students to thrive. Schools with sustained enrollment below 300 students face particular challenges in effectively supporting students. Current demographic forecasts predict that DPS will lose 3500 elementary students in the next five years, elevating the urgency of these conversations. In the face of low and/or declining school-aged population, DPS should engage in advocacy that supports the ability of low-income and working families to continue to be able to live and work in Denver. At the same time, DPS should support schools that are beginning to experience enrollment declines with marketing, school design and planning tools. However, these supports should be time-limited, if a school does not show evidence of an enrollment reversal. In areas of the city where declines in the school-aged population have impacted schools' immediate or near-term ability to provide a robust program that supports students' ability to thrive, DPS should have a transparent school consolidation process that allows impacted communities to reimagine their schools with the goal of strong and stable enrollment, higher quality and greater integration in all schools within the community. If empty DPS facilities result from this process, then DPS should consider possible long-term beneficial community uses for the vacated facilities.

Opportunities for Early Progress:

- DPS should develop an Enrollment Support Toolkit that will assist school leaders in mitigating the impact of declining school-aged population as much as possible.
- To further mitigate declines in school-aged population, DPS should advocate helping prevent housing displacement of their families. In areas where declines in school-aged population have impacted students' ability to thrive, and cannot be mitigated due to demographic changes in the neighborhood, DPS should facilitate a collaborative and community-based school consolidation process. In this process of consolidating existing schools, the community will reimagine area schools with the

goals of increased equity, integration, higher performing options for all students, and strong and stable enrollment in all area schools.

Identified Tensions:

- While the declining school-aged population may be driven by social and market forces that are beyond the ability of the district or any one community to control, DPS is responsible for responding to these changes in a way that is in the best interest of all students. Some school-level declining enrollment may be mitigated with programmatic and engagement improvements. However, the Committee recognizes that overarching demographic trends often cannot be mitigated with school-level supports. Further, the Committee understands that school consolidations or school closures can also negatively affect students, especially if they are conducted without intentional community collaboration. The Committee recognizes the tension, pain and difficulty associated with consolidating schools. Our intent is to ensure that the result of a consolidation process is equitable and better for students than the status quo in areas where there are too many schools for too few school-aged students.

- B. **New School Applicants:** Schools are vital elements of our diverse and dynamic city. DPS should strive to foster schools that are similarly diverse and that provide inclusive excellence for all students. Though having a diverse student body is one facet of a high-quality, integrated school, the inclusive excellence that happens within the school building and the classroom is just as critical to measure, monitor and link to clear rewards and accountability metrics.

Opportunities for Early Progress:

- The Committee recommends that the district incorporate a rubric to assess school diversity and inclusive excellence into district practices (such as the Call for New Quality Schools or the Facility Allocation Process), to evaluate all new school applicants on their ability to appeal to a diverse student body and offer inclusive excellence in the classroom. This rubric should include, but not be limited to, a diverse and inclusive classroom structure, a diverse teaching staff, diversity of pedagogy and culturally-responsive curriculum.

Identified Tensions:

- While integration is the focus of the Committee and a value that should be prioritized, there are several other factors that have to be evaluated for new school applicants and placement decisions, including academic performance and quality. Integration should be pursued in conjunction with, not at the expense of, academic quality and inclusive excellence in the classroom.

- C. **School Planning and Improvement:** The Committee recommends that the district hold individual school leaders and teachers accountable to, and reward them for, making progress toward shorter-term goals related to diversity and inclusive excellence in schools. School leaders should be required to set individual school goals related to diversity and inclusive excellence during their annual school planning process and should be offered a package of resources and rewards (by DPS and/or community partners) tied to concrete outcomes that will incentivize school leaders and teachers to make desired changes.

Opportunities for Early Progress:

- Through the annual school planning process, instructional superintendents should work closely with school leaders to identify and evaluate existing opportunities to

improve diversity and inclusive excellence in their schools. A cohort of leaders with exceptional results in this area should be identified in conjunction with community partners, and invited to lead the creation of the resources, identify best practices, and develop the rewards and accountability system. DPS should also publish (or commission from a community partner) a biennial report on diversity and inclusive excellence in schools. This report, in addition to evaluating the diversity of students within a school building, should evaluate the benchmarks, progress, and achievements of school leaders and teachers who are adopting best practices for diversity and inclusive excellence.

Identified Tensions:

- It is crucial to give existing school leaders the resources to pursue diversity and inclusive excellence in addition to newly opened or authorized schools. However, the Committee realizes that if a school is in turnaround or is located in a very homogeneous area, the goals around diversity and inclusive excellence may look different than the goals set at a school that is located in an area where the general population is diverse. This does not mean that schools in homogeneous areas can ignore diversity and inclusive excellence, it just might mean that their goals and strategies look different.

Planning for Implementation Recommendations

As articulated by the SNC working groups, implementing these recommendations is not the sole responsibility of DPS but rather is a shared responsibility that DPS should lead with the community and city partnership. The Committee recommends creating an implementation steering committee that may contain committee members from SNC as well as new members to serve as implementation advisors and advocates. Successful implementation will also include intentional evaluation, reporting and communication.