

Questionnaire for school board candidates in Denver Public Schools

Mary Seawell, at-large candidate

Effective teaching

1. Nearly 100 percent of teachers in Colorado's largest school districts received satisfactory ratings in each of the past three years, according to an analysis by Education News Colorado. Because the current evaluation system appears to be broken, please provide specific examples of measurement tools you believe should be used to gauge teacher effectiveness and explain why. Examples might include linking CSAP growth data to a teacher or school, classroom observations by peer teachers, growth on district assessments, etc.

Creating a comprehensive teacher evaluation system should be the key focus for DPS and the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) in the next year. In order to effectively gauge teacher performance, we also need to have a more comprehensive system to evaluate student performance. Linking CSAP growth data to a teacher is important, but it should be seen as baseline information from which a more comprehensive system needs to be developed. Student and teacher assessment needs to be compatible. The biggest drawback to using CSAPs as the sole mechanism to evaluate student performance is that it is of little help to teachers. Student assessment needs to provide real time information to teachers on the effectiveness of their instruction. This gives a teacher the opportunity to modify instruction to best help his or her students. It also creates a framework for professional development that is more targeted to individual teachers.

2. Most forcibly assigned teachers are placed in higher-poverty schools, at least partly because those schools tend to have more openings, according to an analysis by the Denver Post. This suggests the district's "market incentive" – or \$2,345 in 2008-09 – component of ProComp is not working to attract teachers to these schools. What should the district do to, first, end the predominance of direct placement in the poorest schools and, second, better attract teachers to these schools?

I believe these questions are really the same. If we create better incentives, schools will attract good teachers thus ending the predominance of direct placement in the poorest schools. The market incentive is clearly not enough to attract teachers, often more experienced ones, to teach in schools with significant numbers of low-income students. One way to end the predominance of direct placement in low-performing schools is to modify the way schools are funded. One of the best ideas is to fully implement weighted student funding which ensures that all school funding follows students. This system could give additional

funding for children who are low income and English language learners. That funding could be directed at making higher salaries for teachers in those schools, thus attracting more experienced teachers.

Pace of reform

3. Denver Public Schools has set 3.5 percent as its annual academic growth target on most CSAP indicators, a figure that some board members initially considered to be too low. Yet the district failed to meet even those goals on the 2009 CSAP administration. How do you feel about the pace of reform in DPS – are the district’s goals too high or too low?

Growth targets are like starting a car on a freezing morning in February. It takes some time to get the engine warm, but once it is ready it’s time to move the car. The engine should be warm enough by now to hold the administration accountable for seeing more dramatic gains than we have had so far.

4. DPS recently celebrated an increase in the graduation rate at Abraham Lincoln High School. Yet state figures show an increasing number of Lincoln graduates require remediation when they attend a college or university in Colorado. How can the district both increase the rigor of instruction while also increasing the percentage of high school graduates who are prepared – i.e., do not need remediation – in college?

Our schools need to be preparing all students for college whether or not students choose to go. One way to do this is by aligning high school graduation standards to college entrance requirements. By expanding college-prep courses in high school, graduates would not need remedial courses in college. There is also evidence that college prep courses have a positive impact on graduates whether or not they go to college. Graduation requirements need to be strengthened so that every DPS graduate can succeed in college.

Equity

5. What steps should be taken - or are being taken now – to ensure an A in an academic core course at a historically struggling school such as North High School carries the same weight as an A in an academic core course at a traditionally high-performing school such as the Denver School of the Arts? How do you ensure the quality of education is consistent across the district?

Courses must be built around consistent content standards. When students are evaluated on mastery of standards as opposed to their age, it creates more equity in the way students from different schools are educated.

6. Does DPS currently have an appropriate balance of school options – traditional, charter, innovation - for students and parents? Why or why not? And, specifically, does DPS currently have an appropriate balance of options for low-income families?

The balance between traditional, charter, and innovation schools is less important than answering the question of, "Are we meeting the needs of students regardless of the form of the school?" Currently we have too many schools that are under performing, especially for low-income students and families.

School choice is a part of the culture of DPS, and it has resulted in some real successes in the districts. It has also contributed to an increase in economic and racial segregation in many of our schools. Choice has largely become a tool for middle and higher income families in the district. These families may have more flexibility to drive a student to another part of town unlike a single-parent headed household or a family with two full-time working parents.

We do not have enough good choices for low-income families. For that reason we need to be open to different school models in those communities. Those models need to have the flexibility to have longer school days or school years to catch up kids that are too far behind. Every child needs a great quality school and we need to make sure that principals and teachers have every tool at their disposal to educate all children.

Struggling teachers, schools

7. What should be done with school staff members who are shown to be ineffective, based either on the current DPS evaluation system or using the measurement tools that you outlined in question no. 1? How long should a teacher or principal be given from the determination of ineffectiveness to consequence?

The main source of tension when addressing teacher evaluation is whether the purpose of the evaluation will be merely punitive and used for firing teachers or if it will be used for increased professional development to make teachers more effective. This is about balance. The system should be instructive and not punitive, but it should also be used to identify and remove teachers who consistently underperform. Like any other profession, there are people who are effective and ones who are not.

8. DPS' School Performance Framework is intended to serve as a warning system for troubled schools yet its consequences are rather vaguely described. When the SPF data is released later this month, if it shows a school is failing to meet the needs of its students – less than one year's growth in one year's time – what actions should be taken to ensure students are given an opportunity to succeed? What actions should be taken if a school persistently failed to meet the needs of its students – for example, insufficient growth for three consecutive years?

Closing a school, even a low-performing one, is an incredibly dramatic step which has ramifications for the school and the surrounding community. The dialogue about what needs to happen cannot start after the decision has been made. The DPS administration and school board members need to be reaching out to a consistently failing school as soon as it shows insufficient growth. There must be an education process with stakeholders about the consequences of failure for the students and that dialogue must happen well before a closure takes place. If a school consistently fails and there is no real likelihood to turnaround performance by making dramatic changes in the operation of the school, the school needs to close. Denver needs to bring students, parents, teachers, principals and the

school's neighborhood into solving the problem and helping to build a new school that has a real likelihood of succeeding for students.

Federal efforts

9. Are there any aspects of President Obama's strategies for school reform that you oppose? Why?

I support the President's strategies for school reform. As our state moves forward in applying for this incredible opportunity, we also need to strike a balance in how we approach reform. It isn't enough to create comprehensive student assessment tools, teacher evaluation systems, and cutting-edge strategies for turning around low-performing schools, we also have to make sure that we do not lose sight of the immeasurable purpose of education which is to instill a love of learning in children. We need to ensure accountability while still giving teachers the ability to be creative in how they teach. We need to recognize that a child is more than a test score and that the goal of education includes a student's emotional and character development.

I'm a metaphorical thinker, so I imagine the challenges of education as something to hold in our hands. Our left hand holds our duty to guarantee that our schools are succeeding all children. Our right hand holds our value for teachers and principals as creative professionals who need to have flexibility to inspire and educate students. Leadership in education reform is about making those two needs not be at odds but fit hand-in-hand.