

DPS Candidate Questionnaire
Nate Easley, District 4 Candidate Response
September 17, 2009

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.

Effective evaluation would be best served by developing – and implementing – consistent and equitable policies, and all viable and measurable tools should be considered; including peer review, principal evaluations and non-academic measures of student performance (student attendance, behavior and credit completion). Evaluations also should be required for everyone on the team: teachers, staff, principals and administrators.

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?

Many factors, in addition to compensation, influence attracting and retaining teachers; beginning with providing a quality learning environment where educators feel safe, respected and have adequate resources to teach. The jury is still out on the effectiveness of ProComp until more data can be collected and evaluated.

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?

Before we can pace reform we must define it. Clearly, as it endeavors to establish high quality schools in all district neighborhoods, DPS must "walk and chew gum" simultaneously. In other words, DPS must engage immediate and short-term reform strategies at the same time it is developing and acting on long-term reform strategies. We also must embrace all options, all options and innovations: traditional, magnet, autonomous, alternative independent and charter schools.

Evaluating current CSAP data, and subsequent goal setting, is an important and complex task for the board. All factors must be taken into thoughtful consideration, including student participation and

individual school resources. Further study is needed before realistic goals can be set or met. As District 4 Director I would work with all stakeholders to carefully examine existing DPS data, conditions and resources, revamp current data collection, and evaluation, methods and determine appropriate and achievable goals.

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?

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?

First and foremost, the principal, faculty, staff and students of Abraham Lincoln High School must be applauded for what they have accomplished! We should be proud that Lincoln is another neighborhood school to establish itself as a beacon of hope, for so many families enrollment is capped for lack of space. Now that Abraham Lincoln has improved its enrollment and graduation rates, how can district leaders help it produce more college-ready students?

Not all students are the same. Traditional approaches to improving academic performance risk treating students as if they were from similar backgrounds. Lincoln happens to be more than 80 percent Latino and also serves undocumented students, with possibly little hope of achieving a college education due to government policies and regulations. These issues must be taken into account before drawing definitive conclusions about the college readiness of Lincoln graduates. Clearly, Lincoln has gained the trust of its community; the rest is up to us to properly support their success.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funded extensive research on improving student outcomes. It concluded the best path to producing college-ready students is includes quality teachers. These dedicated professionals – and their students -- require quality learning environments. There are no simple answers; however, I would advocate the following as a DPS board member:

- ***Working to eliminate overcrowding in classrooms***
- ***Facing behavioral issues and applying thoughtful policies fairly and equitably.***
- ***Identify where student performance is falling and focusing resources on prevention. Students who fall behind in elementary school are not likely to match their peers prior to high school graduation.***
- ***Advocate for identifying and engaging parents in the community. Encourage mentoring by involved parents from the surrounding community. Engage them as family liaisons at neighborhood schools.***

- ***Provide more autonomy and greater accountability to principals, empowering school staffs as the best experts on the academic needs of their students.***

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?

The district must set and enforce consistent academic standards at every school – and excellence is excellence. Additionally, I am unaware of any subjective/substandard grading practices or policies at any DPS school. To suggest otherwise, without verifiable evidence, is not only unsupportive and unproductive, but also undermines and devalues the efforts – and achievements -- of our students and educators.

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?

District leaders must examine all options and innovations: traditional, magnet, autonomous, alternative independent and charter schools. All communities deserve and expect quality neighborhood schools, regardless of socioeconomic status or circumstances. DPS needs a strategic plan for reform that is transparent, ambitious, attainable and outcome-oriented. To develop such a plan, elected district leaders must fully engage ALL stakeholders (students, families, teachers, administrators, community leaders). All promising practices, and there are many in DPS schools, must be identified, replicated and applied appropriately to all 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?

Accountability is expected by and from everyone charged with the education of our children. Mechanisms for evaluating, rewarding, counseling and dismissing school staff currently exist and must be uniformly enforced. The District must maintain fair and equitable standards – factoring in significant differences and challenges, such as resources, environment and parental and community support -- which are then fairly and equitably applied. Principals and administrators also need structured and effective training on implementing these standards objectively and consistently.

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?

Our students and teachers deserve to learn and teach in quality schools, and parents must have the options of sending their children to viable neighborhood schools. If a school is consistently failing, other options must be identified and implemented. Determining a school's viability, however, demands careful consideration of many factors; including resources, student attendance, behavior and credit completion, teacher retention, leadership, parental involvement and community participation and support. All of these factors must be carefully weighed and all stakeholders engaged in an open and transparent process. Those schools then determined to be failing our children should be closed and quality options offered to those students and parents – preferably in a neighborhood school.

Reforming Denver schools -- correcting faults, removing inconsistencies and abuses, and imposing modern methods or values -- requires patience from the community and the board, as there are rarely any easy answers or quick fixes. It is important, however, to acknowledge that patience DOES NOT equal inaction. District leaders must be ready to act on day one of their terms! As a son of Northeast Denver, who has dedicated his life to leading and expanding educational opportunities -- particularly for low-income and minority student -- I have the skills and experience to serve as an innovative, responsive and action-oriented member of the Denver School Board.

Federal efforts

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

The over-arching goals of the president's strategies are designed to best serve the educational needs of American students and prepare them to thrive and compete in our global world and economies. The challenge facing federal and local administrators is developing specific and effective policies to meet those goals and include all stakeholders: parents, teachers and local school boards.