

# Elevate The Students Community Report

Despite the landmark 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* America still struggles to remedy the systemic racism in its educational systems and institutions. The long, slow struggle for equity in the Denver Public School system (DPS) evidences the intransigence of these problems, which in 2021 continue to create barriers to the academic success of students of color. This report outlines the attempts, struggles and successes of student-led activism, from a historical lens to today in our very own community.

## Institutional Racism in Denver Public Schools

On its own, DPS has a storied history of litigation, beginning with *Wilfred Keyes v. School District No. 1, Denver, Colorado*, the 1969 lawsuit that exposed the Denver School Board's de facto creation of a segregated school district.<sup>1</sup> At the conclusion of that lawsuit, DPS was ordered to implement a plan to desegregate schools in the City's Park Hill neighborhood and busing was the chosen method. Following appeals over various matters, including whether desegregation was to only involve Park Hill schools, or all DPS schools, the case was argued before the United States Supreme Court in 1974. Ultimately, it was determined that all DPS schools were to be subject to desegregation.<sup>2</sup>

In 2016 persistent disparities in achievement and opportunities for African American students remained a problem. Likewise, African American educators complained of the ongoing negative effects of institutional racism on their students and on their own professional performance and satisfaction.<sup>3</sup> As a result of these concerns, then acting Superintendent, Susana Cordova, commissioned Dr. Sharon Bailey to prepare a report for DPS to provide feedback and to better understand the experiences and challenges faced by African American students and educators within DPS, as well as to strengthen partnerships with the African American community. In her report entitled *An Examination of Student and Educator Experiences in Denver Public Schools Through the Voices of African American Teachers and Administrators*, Dr. Bailey gathered qualitative data through one-on-one interviews and focus groups regarding the perceptions of African American teachers and administrators related to:

- Critical issues impacting achievement and opportunity gaps of African American students
- Policies, practices and programs that positively and negatively impact these gaps
- What African American students need to do well academically

Participants were asked to share perceptions of their lived experiences as teachers and administrators in the district related to:

- Policies, practices or programs that positively or negatively impacted them
- Organizational climate

---

<sup>1</sup> United States, Supreme Court. *Wilfred Keyes v. School District No. 1, Denver, Colorado*. 21 June 1973. Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School, [www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/413/189](http://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/413/189)

<sup>2</sup> University of Michigan Law School. *Case Profile: Keyes v. School District No. 1*. Civil Rights Litigation ClearingHouse. <https://www.clearinghouse.net/detail.php?id=1051>

<sup>3</sup> Bailey, Sharon. *An Examination of Student and Educator Experiences in Denver Public Schools Through the Voices of African American Teachers and Administrators; A Qualitative Research Study*. Denver Public Schools, 2016. [celt.dpsk12.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/52/Dr.-Bailey-Report-FULL-2.pdf](http://celt.dpsk12.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/52/Dr.-Bailey-Report-FULL-2.pdf)

- Whether they would recommend DPS to colleagues
- Whether they are viewed as valuable
- Recommendations for recruiting and retaining African Americans
- Rating the level of institutional racism they feel is present in the district

The dominant themes that emerged from this study of African American teachers and administrators that are perceived as having a negative impact on their experiences at DPS include:

- Lack of qualified, diverse, culturally competent teachers and African American role models (a dominant theme recurring with greater frequency than any other in the analysis of interview and focus group transcripts)
- Disproportionate discipline suspension and expulsions of African American students
- African American students do not receive services equivalent in value to those received by English Language Learners (ELL) under the ELL Consent Decree
- Human Resource issues/unfair Learning Education Assessment and Performance (LEAP) evaluations/unclear and inconsistent practices

In addition, discrepancies and inconsistencies in hiring practices were noted by participants who suggested that African Americans seem to be intentionally screened out, find it difficult to obtain mutual consent once laid off, received no follow-up on promised second interviews, and were passed over for other White applicants who had fewer credentials and experience. They complained that the fairness of personnel actions regarding African American educators was never questioned and lacked accountability. Whether it be a hostile work environment, fear of retaliation, feeling undervalued, or dealing with general racial stereotypes, they suggested that it is just *assumed* that something is *wrong* with African American educators.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Black Excellence Resolution of the Denver School Board**

Black students and educators face much of the same systemic racism in DPS today as they did when Dr. Bailey submitted her report in 2016. *The Black Excellence Resolution* passed in 2019, again aimed to address the racial inequity in DPS. This is a document drafted at the request of the Denver Black Educators Caucus to the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) to formalize the support of the DCTA for language changes to the union contract that would be adopted by both the DCTA and DPS. The Caucus wanted to include definitions of overt and covert racism. DPS agreed to the changes and the language was added into the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).<sup>5</sup> However, language revisions to the MOU are a minor change and relatively insignificant in the scope of DPS's wider issues of inequity.

## **Denver Public School Student Bill of Rights**

For the past 5 years, students across DPS have engaged in writing policy proposals within Student Voice and Leadership. After the publication of the Bailey Report a group of

<sup>4</sup> Bailey, Sharon. *An Examination of Student and Educator Experiences in Denver Public Schools Through the Voices of African American Teachers and Administrators; A Qualitative Research Study*. Denver Public Schools, 2016. [celt.dpsk12.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/52/Dr.-Bailey-Report-FULL-2.pdf](https://celt.dpsk12.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/52/Dr.-Bailey-Report-FULL-2.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> School District No. 1 Denver Board of Education. *Resolution on the Excellence of our Black and African American Students*. BoardDocs.com, [www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/files/B9M86R7AB10A/\\$file/Black%20Excellence%20Resolution%20-%20FINAL.pdf](https://www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/files/B9M86R7AB10A/$file/Black%20Excellence%20Resolution%20-%20FINAL.pdf). Passed 21 Feb. 2019.

students formed Young African American Latinx Leaders (YAALL) demanding that DPS respond to the specific needs of students of color in the district. In September 2020 a group of students from across DPS joined to develop a Student Bill of Rights (SBoR). The SBoR demands agency in the following areas: Student Voice, Equity, Culture/Diversity, Health, Sustainability, Staffing, and Curriculum. As this courageous group of students from across DPS contributes to the SBoR, they engage with a great tradition of student revolt; of student seizure of the means of their own liberation. The tradition of student organizing is as old as education itself and is global in scope. Students of color have sought to transform their schools, societies and thus themselves for as long as educational institutions have aided in engineering their subjugation, preparing them to endure it, or training them to resist it (e.g., HBCUs, Freedom Schools). This section of the report gives a brief, but scarcely comprehensive, glance at the more recent history of these efforts.

## Historical Context

In the 1960s, tumult over racism, poverty, war, and student rights shook the nation and the world. The Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) are two well-known examples of student involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-war movement, respectively. In 1966, a Black Student Union was formed at San Francisco State University (SFSU) who later mounted a historic strike in 1968. That same year, the Human Relations Council formed, which later evolved into the Black Student Alliance. Also in 1968, SFSU witnessed the formation of the Third World Liberation Front, a coalition of Black, Chicano, Filipino, and Asian American students. In the years since, Student Unions of African American students continued to form at high schools, middle schools, colleges and universities across the nation. Alongside Asian, Middle Eastern, Muslim, LGBTQIA+, and other students from marginalized communities band together to demand and defend their human rights.<sup>6</sup> A notable movement ignited from the uprising of student activism in Los Angeles was the Chicano Movement, who were focused on struggles for land rights, language rights, workers' rights, and against racist persecution and discrimination in education. The spring of 1968 saw tens of thousands of students staging walkouts, which came to be known as "blowouts." As the students organized in protest, they were often met with a militancy response from authorities.<sup>7</sup>

This upheaval did not leave Denver, Colorado untouched. Integration of public schools, mandated by laws and court decisions, were attempted and embraced by students of color, even in the face of white supremacist terrorism such as the bombing of school buses in 1970. It remains a woefully incomplete process. In the 1960s the emerging Chicano Movement in Denver was manifested in the Crusade for Justice, led by athlete, poet, and activist Rudolfo "Corky" Gonzáles (1928-2005). The Crusade for Justice, like the Chicano Movement as a whole, was deeply involved in youth and student coalitions, building and organizing a Freedom

---

<sup>6</sup>Schumaker, Kathryn. *Troublemakers: Students' Right and Racial Justice in the Long 1960s*. New York: New York University Press, 2019. *STRIKE!... Concerning the 1968-69 Strike at San Francisco State College*. FOUND SF: Shaping San Francisco's Digital Archives [https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=STRIKE!...\\_Concerning\\_the\\_1968-69\\_Strike\\_at\\_San\\_Francisco\\_State\\_College](https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=STRIKE!..._Concerning_the_1968-69_Strike_at_San_Francisco_State_College). Accessed 21 April 2021. SF State College Strike Collection. <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/strike/bundles/187979> Accessed 21 April 2021.

<sup>7</sup>Muñoz, Jr., Carlos. *The Chicano Movement: Mexican American History and the Struggle for Equality. Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*. 17.1-2 (2/2018) 31-52.

School in the summer of 1968 and the first National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference in 1969. The conference produced the “*Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*,” a document that outlined understandings of identity and expressed aspirations for self-determination. That same year Denver’s West High School students staged a blowout of their own, by walking out of classes until their demands were met. They demanded justice against racist personnel and school policies, bilingual education, and curriculum reflective of their Chicano culture. They found hundreds of comrades in the streets outside the school and were also met with highly militarized units of police. These peacefully assembled Latinx students were confronted by clubs, gas and guns, with snipers deployed by the police on the roof of West High. This repression was part of a pattern that included the infamous COINTELPRO program of the FBI and local law enforcement across the country.<sup>8</sup> As a result of this iconic blowout and the larger Chicano Movement arose the Escuela Tlatelolco (successor to the Crusade’s Freedom School), national political organizations such as the Brown Berets, MEChA, and the La Raza Unido Party, as well as cultural/artistic institutions such as El Teatro Campesino in California and Denver’s own Su Teatro Cultural and Performing Arts Center. The efforts of these revolutionary forebears have left a rich legacy on which the student organizations of today, such as YAALL, 10for10, and Padres & Jóvenes Unidos, can build upon.<sup>9</sup>

In talking with the student leaders crafting the DPS SBoR, each shared their own story of the deep frustration felt in their schools and across the DPS student body. One student described how, on top of the immense stress of a pandemic and remote learning, he and many of his classmates felt their stress compounded because they did not have decision-making power within their own school. Another student described her school’s decision to remove durags from the dress code as the last straw. The messaging these students are receiving from DPS is that their thoughts, in general, are not deemed important. In other words, school administration has continued its history of making decisions that directly impact students absent of their input. Despite DPS students’ legacy of leadership, advocacy and organizing, students are still not seeing their voice reflected in the policies or decision-making processes of their schools and are ready to take measures into their own hands. The SBoR is the culmination of decades of student organizing and decades of being dismissed by the DPS administration.

In September 2020, Steve Finesilver, wrestling coach at George Washington High School and founder of Denver Youth Initiative, met with Dan Walter, a teacher at West High School who championed the voice and leadership of DPS students. Soon after, Mr. Walter reached out to Student Voice and Leadership (SVL) with the goal of bringing in as many students across the district as possible, while encouraging different leadership than SVL through this new SBoR initiative. The group started with around 30 students attending the early meetings and while the group has shrunk to about a third of the original size, the students remaining are deeply involved. When discussing why they joined and stayed on the SBoR committee, one student said they joined “because my opinion is really heard here.” Schools

---

<sup>8</sup> Mejia, James. *West High School Walkout of 1969*. (El Chicano Movimiento Series Part II of V) La Voz. October 2015. <http://www.lavozcolorado.com/detail.php?id=8082> Accessed on 21 April 2021.

<sup>9</sup>Muñoz, Jr., Carlos. *The Chicano Movement: Mexican American History and the Struggle for Equality*. Perspectives on Global Development and Technology. 17.1-2 (2/2018) 31-52.

belong to the students: it is their experience and feedback that tell us whether our schools are successfully serving their purpose. It is this message that the SBoR articulates.

The first public presentation of the SBoR at the School Board meeting on April 22, 2021 coincides with the search for a new DPS Superintendent. Student and adult leaders see this time of leadership change as an opportunity to tell the district what they want to see in a Superintendent and influence the direction of DPS's future. Today, Mr. Walter supports logistics, like setting up Google meetings and sharing spreadsheets, but it is the students who lead, who own the ideas, the process and the effort. Students spent months considering district-wide needs and potential solutions, crafting this document out of the student demands that have arisen over and over again through the years. It's time we listen.

## **Challenge 5280's Education Policy Reform**

The SBoR is the culmination of decades of students making their voice heard; whether it be through large-scale demonstrations, meetings with administrators, or extensive policy research and implementation through Challenge 5280. Challenge 5280 is "a bi-annual showcase in which Student Board of Education (SBOE), YAALL, and DPS student leadership teams are invited to showcase the student-led policy solutions and campaigns they are leading in their schools."<sup>10</sup> These campaigns illustrate how students attempt to change or shape DPS policies and how meaningfully our educational institutions could support their students if they were designed to follow the students' leadership and value their voice. This section summarizes the student policy proposals from 2016 to 2021, analyzes prominent themes that arose and describes how the Challenge 5280 proposals support the SBoR.

### **Research Methods**

We conducted a qualitative analysis of the SVL Challenge 5280 policy proposals starting with school year 2016-17 and ending with school year 2020-21. We analyzed Challenge 5280 presentation videos for school years 16-17 and 17-18 and analyzed the written policy proposals that SVL groups published in 2019, 2020, and 2021. We first coded each policy proposal based upon the seven categories around which the SBoR demands are organized: Student Voice, Equity, Culture/Diversity, Health, Sustainability, DPS Staff, and Curriculum.<sup>18</sup> Then we developed themes within each category and overarching themes across all categories.<sup>11</sup>

### **Challenge 5280 Proposal Themes**

Our qualitative analysis of Challenge 5280 proposals from 2016 to 2021 found the following themes in students' policy solutions:

---

<sup>10</sup> *Challenge 5280*. Student Voice and Leadership at Denver Public Schools. [svldps.org/svl-challenge/](http://svldps.org/svl-challenge/). Date of Access 20 Apr. 2021.

<sup>11</sup> See *Appendix A* for a breakdown of the analysis and links to the student groups' policy proposals or presentation videos. You can also reach out to our team at [fromalliestoabolitionists@gmail.com](mailto:fromalliestoabolitionists@gmail.com) to request access to the individual student policy proposals.

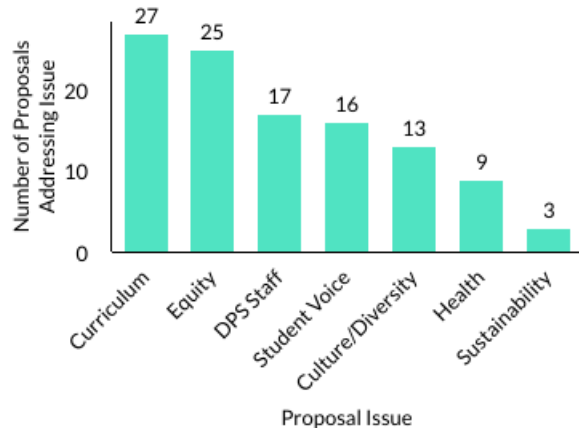
- Incorporating student voice and leadership into decision-making around all policies and their ongoing implementation
- Issues with School Performance Framework (SPF) rating and resources/funding tied to it
- Ensuring students know they have rights
- Broadening student horizons and opportunities
- Integrating more of student population, addressing a lack of inclusion on the school's part
- Increasing involvement in AP or other higher level classes

### Challenge 5280 Proposals & the Student Bill of Rights

The SBoR seven core tenets listed above are directly addressed by many student proposals over the years. Curriculum came up most frequently, in 27 proposals requesting a change in curriculum, while 25 proposals addressed Equity, 17 addressed DPS Staff, 16 focused on Student Voice, 13 on Culture/Diversity, 10 on Health, and 3 on Sustainability. Below we will break each category down a bit more into the specific analyses and solutions brought forth by students.

- **Curriculum** proposals varied widely but shared a common theme of addressing the specific needs of the student body at that school. Some of these curricula aim to support a defined population, like undocumented students or Multilingual Learners (MLL) at large. Others aim to expand access to particular subjects like the arts or higher-level AP classes. The majority, however, suggest new elements be added to the curriculum so students can see their culture, language, or real-life learning needs reflected in their education.

Challenge 5280 Proposals (16-21)  
Organized by Student Bill of Rights  
Issues



- **Equity** was a theme that ran through a large portion of students' policy proposals. These proposals centered on challenging norms that create inequity and offering additional support to students most harmed by our inequitable system.
- **DPS Staff** policies focused on student-led training and hiring changes with the goal of promoting more equitable hiring and support of teachers who reflect the student body, increasing cultural responsiveness, and reducing implicit bias.
- **Student Voice** proposals sought to fundamentally shift school operations and decision-making to center student leadership and increase meaningful student engagement. Different proposals suggest students lead trainings, implementing a suggestion box, creating boards of student leaders, and actively recruiting marginalized students into positions of leadership.

- **Culture and Diversity** proposals overlapped greatly with other sections like Equity, DPS Staff, and Curriculum. These proposals suggest teacher training, inclusion of students' language and culture in the school, promoting leadership of MLL students, and intentional events to celebrate and include a diversity of culture.
- **Health** proposals addressed a variety of health concerns, focusing on curriculum improvements in health and sex education, creating a healthier environment in schools (i.e. school nutrition and water fountains), and mental health.
- **Sustainability**: While we did not find many student policy proposals focused specifically on the issue of sustainability, we did identify the overall theme of planning for the future and "making sure students know they have rights," which ran through many of the policy proposals and is a close reflection of the Sustainability principle.

The remote learning conditions of the 2020-21 school year have further revealed the ways in which the DPS system works to maintain status quo power structures that disadvantage a majority of its students. Now more than ever, students are digging into the structural and systematic barriers that keep students without power and the resources to thrive. This year's Challenge 5280 proposals focus on the importance of DPS investing in building relationships, curriculum, and resources that reflect the identities of the student community and the needs that students are and have been expressing.

The themes of inclusion, uplifting student voice, rights, opportunities, and dismantling structurally unequal funding practices are all as prominent in this year's policy proposals as they were in the blowouts of the 1960s. In no unclear terms, students have been asking for their voices, identities, experiences, and needs to be reflected in their educational institutions for years. They've done the leg work of researching, discussing, and constructing powerful solutions to the inequities and shortcomings of DPS. Students have taken their education into their own hands, but because of the power imbalance DPS creates, they need administrators to follow through with resources and action to make these proposed solutions a reality. Next, we analyze case studies that illuminate how student policies are - and aren't - supported and sustained over time.

### **Challenge 5280 Proposal Outcomes**

Inviting students to propose new policies is a great step toward amplifying student voice, but unless some of those proposals become enforced policies, the process is pointless. So, how does a proposal for change become a transformative action? Unfortunately, given the transitory nature of student groups year-to-year, it's difficult to track policy success, let alone sustain it. Maintaining momentum for projects over multiple years is challenging enough, but sustaining velocity over the inertia of a pandemic is essentially unfeasible. We were able to collect some representative narrative around previous years' policy proposals from three schools; DSST: Green Valley Ranch, John F. Kennedy High School, and the West Campus.



## **DSST: Green Valley Ranch (GVR)**

For the 2018-19 school year, the DSST: GVR student group proposed a policy to develop and implement a civic engagement curriculum for senior-level students to learn and teach to parents in the school's neighborhood, especially to engage ELL families. Part of this policy work was for student leaders to present at their school's morning meetings during election seasons to both educate the student body and to encourage early registration for voting, as well as to host discussions at home with family. In 2019, the students were able to do that at a school-wide level, but in 2020, they could not continue due to the pandemic. Similarly, in 2019, the students hosted school trips to attend school board campaign town halls and debates and to attend school board meetings. However, in 2020 they could not. The 2018-19 policy also closely aligned with work the DSST: GVR Civics teacher organized through her class. A lot of the civic engagement work has continued on, but through the Civics course itself, with a newer teacher in that role.

For the 2019-20 school year, the DSST: GVR student group proposed the development of a program that would allow students to pair up with an upperclassmen they relate to for additional support. They designed the policy to include more student voice and support in their school-sponsored "improvement plans." Essentially students who were "off track" for promotion were to be provided a support plan in the school's third trimester. The policy was also intended to incorporate a peer-to-peer mentor into that programming. Unfortunately, the pandemic sent students home during the third trimester, and the students were not able to pilot the program like they would have hoped. This year, the school vastly changed grading policies, retention and promotion plans. Due to the fatigue of screentime, they did not assign peer mentors to students.<sup>12</sup>

## **John F. Kennedy High School (JFK)**

For the 2018-19 school year, the JFK student group proposed the development and implementation of a Life Skills class for students, including instruction from experts and other guests from the community, as well as establishing a 4-year Advisory Teacher for students to address the intersection of life skills mastery and student retention. Ultimately, they proposed the school's administration add an advisory class to the schedule to which the administration agreed. The students also requested that Thursday lessons be reserved for the SBOE team to roll out student-created life skills lessons to which the administration also agreed to do. The JFK student group proposed to maintain the advisory class period for at least one day every week, while maintaining a commitment to the SBOE's original objectives of improving student-teacher relationships and teaching life skills.

In practice, every student had an advisory class 4 days a week for 30 minutes. The curriculum for Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays was developed by adults and the lessons on Thursday were created by the SBOE team. The format was successful all year until the

---

<sup>12</sup> T. Shipman, personal communication, March 19, 2021



pandemic shut the schools down. Unfortunately, the advisory classes were halted once the school switched to remote learning, but ultimately the implementation was a success.<sup>13</sup>

### **West Leadership Academy and West Early College (West)**

For the 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20 school years, the West student group had multiple policy proposals that all pointed in one major direction: to re-unify the two disparate schools West Leadership Academy (WLA) and West Early College (WEC) back into one integrated campus. For 2017-18, the students proposed the development and implementation of a PTSO (Parent/Teacher/Student Organization) for both schools to increase involvement of parents of students in underserved communities. In 2018-2019, they proposed bringing the two schools closer together through community service. Finally in 2019-20, the students made an official proposal to unite the schools to form one West Middle School and one West High School beginning in the 2021-2022 school year.

After working on the goal for multiple years, in both student voice and leadership, as well as in community-wide meetings, and participating in several School Board meetings around the issue, the students successfully managed to persuade the Board to officially reunify the campus. The School Board announced the reunification on November 19, 2020, starting with the 2021-22 school year. Luckily, the students had completed their final 2019-20 policy proposal before the pandemic interruption and had (just) gotten the proposal in front of community members before the lock-out. The timing, unfortunately, meant that it has been challenging to share the process and information with all students in a virtual world. West's 2020-21 policy proposal continues the themes of unity and community by focusing on DPS school segregation, SPF issues, and Choice.<sup>14</sup>

Based on these anecdotal success (or partial success) stories, the general public would not be wrong to find some hope in the process at the individual school level, at least, some proposals were finding their way into the daily life of the students. However, as illustrated by our study of previous proposals and their relation to the core tenants of the SBoR, student-led groups seem to propose creative solutions to the same problems year after year, with little apparent district-wide progress. Activities like Challenge 5280 demonstrate that the DPS Board of Education is willing to provide student leadership a platform for voicing their issues. But with limited follow-up from the Board to measure the implementation of any student-proposed policy, it is not evident that those voices are being heard or vision being enforced. These student-led groups are putting in massive amounts of excellent work into their policy proposals, not simply because they want to build and showcase their leadership skills once a year but because they care tremendously about their schools and communities. They want the system to better serve the students that come after them. If the DPS School Board is truly committed to the same goals, they should commit to a process for implementing and supporting student-proposed policies across the district and tracking the results over time.

---

<sup>13</sup> K. Orlandini, personal communication, March 22, 2021

<sup>14</sup> S. Kennedy, D. Walter, K. Edwards, J. DeLeon, A. Rosas, personal communication, March 23, 2021

## Radical Pedagogy & Student-led Processes

*“The mission of the Denver Public Schools is to provide all students the opportunity to achieve the knowledge and skills necessary to become contributing citizens in our diverse society.”<sup>15</sup>*

The notion that education is a way of growing future citizens is not a new idea, the question is how well are we doing it? What are the kinds of citizens that we wish to inspire within our systems of learning? Educators have an opportunity to create awareness and prepare our country’s future politicians, business owners, artists, educators, etc., with the knowledge and literacy to design a new paradigm for citizens that are conscious and agents for change in the world around them. The idea of a new radical pedagogy supposes a creative and critical approach to revisit and re-evaluate how we understand our personal practices as well as the often-invisible driving forces and effects of this practice on the world around us.<sup>16</sup> This new pedagogy is a hope, as Paulo Freire states, that

does not yet liberate the oppressed. But the revelation is a step in the right direction. Now the person who has this new understanding can engage in a political struggle for the transformation of the concrete conditions in which the oppression prevails (p. 23).<sup>17</sup>

Learning is a human right and a dignifying act and depending on how the education system and the educators themselves conduct their practice, education can be liberating or continuing the very oppression we fight to end.<sup>18</sup> Educators, working to reform pedagogy, have the possibility to contribute to the construction of a knowledgeable and literate society that possess the thinking tools to transform these issues plaguing our society in a personal way. In developing radical pedagogy, educators have a window of opportunity for students to participate in these issues of social and environmental justice through their everyday social practice.<sup>19</sup> Espinoza & Vossoughi advocate that “under circumstances of extreme and invidious constraint, learning has the power to ‘unfit’ individuals from subordinate social status. Insofar as learning helps persons and selves flourish, it is dignity conferring.”<sup>20</sup> Rodriguez discusses the

attempts at abolitionist pedagogy that—in an urgent embracing of the historical necessity of innovation, improvisation, and radical rearticulation— are attempting to generate new epistemic and intellectual approaches to meaning, knowledge, learning, and practice for the sake of life, liberation, and new social possibilities (p. 8-9).<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> *Denver Public Schools Mission and Vision*. Denver Public Schools. [www.dpsk12.org/about/mission-and-vision/](http://www.dpsk12.org/about/mission-and-vision/). Accessed 18 April 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Sandlin, Jennifer, and Peter McLaren. *Critical Pedagogies of Consumption: Living and Learning in the Shadow of the ‘Shopocalypse.’* Taylor & Francis, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*. Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2000/1998.

<sup>18</sup> Espinoza, Manuel Luis, and Shirin Vossoughi. (2014). “Perceiving Learning Anew: Social Interaction, Dignity, and Educational Rights.” *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 84, no. 3, 2014, pp. 286-313.

<sup>19</sup> Luce, Austine. *Consumption Literacy: A New Pedagogy for Environmental Science in Higher Learning*. 2014. University of Colorado at Denver, PhD Dissertation.

<sup>20</sup> Espinoza, Manuel Luis, and Shirin Vossoughi. (2014). “Perceiving Learning Anew: Social Interaction, Dignity, and Educational Rights.” *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 84, no. 3, 2014, pp. 286-313.

<sup>21</sup> Rodriguez, Dylan. “The Disorientation of the Teaching Act: Abolition as Pedagogical Position.” *The Radical Teacher*, no. 88, 2010, pp. 7–19.

Pedagogy based around student-led processes has been successful at progressing student-centered policies and student development. By allowing students to identify the problems they face in education in collaboration with educators, local and systemic barriers to student achievement are addressed. Radical pedagogy targets wide ranging topics, from social events to curriculum to health, keeping education moving forward in supporting marginalized students. The end result is “schools get stronger — more developmentally and culturally responsive” and involved students have greater academic achievement, self awareness, community awareness, as well as civic understanding and strengthen their internal loci of control.<sup>22</sup>

## **Educating as a Process of Human Development**

With every community, every student, every teacher, every classroom, and every school learning has the potential to be present in multiple forms. In the most basic view, one could see educating and learning as two separate processes; not mutually exclusive, but rather coexisting in the same educational space and time. One view of educating could be a conventional view of teaching and assessing for specific learning outcomes. Perhaps that is what most of us know best. The notion that students come in as empty cups, the learning process occurs and the end results are the correct answers on a test or in a report. Freire refers to this as the banking model of education where,

knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry (p.72).<sup>23</sup>

Another way of handling learning is as a unique process of cognitive development that happens within each student’s life, rather than as a passive linear sequence of events.<sup>24</sup> Barbara Rogoff explains in her book *Apprenticeship in Thinking* that learning is,

assumed to proceed throughout the lifespan, with individuals’ ways of thinking reorganizing with successive advances in reaching and contributing to the understanding, skills, and perspectives of their community. Examples of reorganization of thinking in adulthood include managing new roles... taking on new intellectual challenges...where transformation in levels of understanding can be seen; and achieving shifts in perspective where whole patterns of relationships fall into place, as in leaps of understanding of social institutions and interpersonal relationships (p.11).<sup>25</sup>

A view of learning through this lens sketches a process that happens over time, is situated in the experience of the learner and within their specific sociocultural settings. Lave and

---

<sup>22</sup> *Transformative Student Voice*. Transformative Student Voice. <https://transformativestudentvoice.net/>. Accessed 18 Apr. 2021

<sup>23</sup> Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos, Continuum, 1993 (1970).

<sup>24</sup> Luce, Austine. *Consumption Literacy: A New Pedagogy for Environmental Science in Higher Learning*. 2014. University of Colorado at Denver, PhD Dissertation

<sup>25</sup> Rogoff, Barbara. *Apprenticeship in Thinking: Cognitive Development in Social Context*. Oxford University Press, 1990.

Wenger relate to this notion of learning by looking at the context of the person, the world, and the relationship between them and contextualizing learning within the activities of social practice.<sup>26</sup> In this way, learning is defined as a lifelong process of cognitive development through experiencing, reorganizing and rethinking, where the learner attempts to better understand themselves, and the particular sociopolitical worlds in which they live.<sup>27</sup>

## Improving Curriculum - Ethnic Studies

As examined in previous sections of this report; scholars, activists and some faculty have united to build working partnerships with students from marginalized and oppressed communities. Their aspirations sometimes manifested in ethnic studies programs, which in turn became political struggles. Highly visible examples of these struggles are in Arizona and Texas.

A notable attempt to introduce ethnic studies into Arizona Public Schools occurred in 1998. The students and activist-educators most devoted to it quickly discovered learning about their heritage(s) and engaging in activism were mutually reinforcing activities. Much of this activist-centered ethnic studies approach derives from the theory and practice of Brazilian revolutionary teacher and writer, Paulo Freire (1921-1997). In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire advocates an approach to teaching and learning that makes students active agents in their education. He asserts that the transformation of self goes hand in hand with the struggles to transform societies, and that education and activism reinforce one another. In the case of some Tucson, Arizona high schools, this approach resulted in a model for teaching and learning for students of color that deployed a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) program that was known as the Social Justice Education Project (SJEP). These programs attempted to transform students' "double consciousness" of their "different" status in Anglo-dominated society into Critical Consciousness of how these positions are socially and historically constructed. They also then utilized Critical Consciousness into political action that strengthens their sense of self through recognition and exercise of their agency as a force for change. In practical terms, students learned their histories, kept journals, wrote poems, polled their fellow students, documented unfair conditions and practices (in pictures, videos and other media), and confronted elected and other officials when the backlash came.<sup>28</sup>

Through the forces of power and privilege, H.B. 2281 was introduced to the Arizona state legislature in 2010, supported by the state's Superintendent, Tom Horne, and signed into law by then Governor Jan Brewer, which effectively banned ethnic studies in Arizona. The success of these programs and the participation in them was what frightened politicians and bureaucrats like Horne and Brewer and brought about the ban. The students fought back by defending their programs, by not only showing up at School Board meetings but chaining themselves to the dais where the Board members met. They publicized their struggle and joined with other forces in their communities. Even when the law shut down the YPARs and SJEPs,

<sup>26</sup> Lave, Jean, and Etienne Wenger. "Practice, person, social world." *An Introduction to Vygotsky*, edited by Henry Daniels, Taylor & Francis Group, 2000, pp. 143-150.

<sup>27</sup> Luce, Austine. *Consumption Literacy: A New Pedagogy for Environmental Science in Higher Learning*. 2014. University of Colorado at Denver, PhD Dissertation

<sup>28</sup> Cammarota, Julian. *The Praxis of Ethnic Studies: Transforming Second Sight into Critical Consciousness*. *Race Ethnicity and Education*. 19.2, 2016, pp. 233-251. <https://www.tandfonline.com/aurialibrary.idm.oclc.org/doi/full/10.1080/13613324.2015.1041486>

new classes of students took up the cause. A lawsuit was filed; and in 2017, a U.S. district judge struck down the law banning ethnic studies.<sup>29</sup>

Texas saw similar programs instituted and similar struggles as the result. A foundational piece of ethnic studies are the principles of Critical Civic Inquiry, which is an approach to learning “civics” and encourages students to use their growing knowledge of social, political, and legal functions to challenge barriers to social justice. Here again, the very storm this brewed up with the powers that be were and are proof of their effectiveness. An article in the scholarly journal *Equity and Excellence in Education* by Angela Valenzuela describes some of the topics that recognition of students’ cultures introduced into the curriculum.

The student understands developments related to pre-colonial settlements and Spanish colonization of Mesoamerica and North America. The student is expected to:

(A) explain the significance of the following events as turning points relevant to Mexican American history: Aztec arrival in Mexico’s central valley, establishment of the Aztec Empire, Hernán Cortés’s first encounter with the Aztecs, Spanish conquest of the Aztecs, creation of the New Laws, and Jesuit expulsion from the Americas; and

(B) examine the contribution of significant individuals from the Spanish colonial era, including Moctezuma, Hernán Cortés, La Malinche, Bartolomé de las Casas, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (pg. 199)

The curriculum proposals advocated in Texas also include and recognize more recent developments like the Zapatista Rebellion of 1994. Valenzuela notes that the intricacies of indigenous identity and liberation struggles need to be a part of both ethnic studies and general curriculum in both K-12 and post-secondary education.<sup>30</sup>

The pushback in Texas has often centered on textbook selection as on ethnic studies programs as whole. The Texas State Board of Education (TSBOE) is a particular hotbed of white supremacist reaction to a more inclusive and accurate history curriculum. *Perspectives on History*, the newsmagazine of the American Historical Association documented the intensely politicized process of textbook selection and curriculum review which, in Texas, is in the hands of the TSBOE. A January 2019 article notes the storm that broke out over these issues in 2018.

On the surface, the process of revising the standards is relatively straightforward: the TSBOE convenes curriculum teams, or “work groups,” comprising scholars, educators, and citizens from around the state to review the existing standards and suggest changes. The TSBOE then holds public hearings on the recommended changes and later votes on them. The process is profoundly

---

<sup>29</sup> Associated Press. *Arizona judge declares ban on ethnic studies unconstitutional*. NBC. 28 December 2017. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/arizona-judge-declares-ban-ethnic-studies-unconstitutional-n833126> Accessed 21 April 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Valenzuela, Angela. *The Struggle to Decolonize Official Knowledge in Texas’ State Curriculum: Side-Stepping the Colonial Matrix of Power*. *Equity and Excellence in Education*. 52.2-3, 2019, pp. 197-215. <https://www.tandfonline-com.aurarialibrary.idm.oclc.org/doi/full/10.1080/10665684.2019.1649609> Accessed 21 April 2021.

political, since board members are elected and Texas is a majority-Republican state; the TSBOE is currently composed of 10 Republicans and 5 Democrats. Notably, few of them have any background in the field of education. (¶ 5)<sup>31</sup>

As in Arizona, the controversy emerged about a decade ago. The relatively centrist account of the *Perspectives* article throws into sharp relief the discrepancy between the values promoted by the forces that control the TSBOE on the one hand, and the consensus of even mainstream historiography on the other (let alone a historiography that truly serves students of color).

The resulting standards [from the meddling of the TSBOE] were so flawed that even the conservative Thomas B. Fordham Institute blasted them. The institute's scorching 2011 review of state US history standards characterized the Texas standards as "a politicized distortion of history." Among other things, noted the report, the standards offered an "uncritical celebration of 'the free enterprise system and its benefits,'" completely overlooked Native Americans, downplayed slavery, barely mentioned the Black Codes or Jim Crow, and dismissed the separation of church and state as a constitutional principle. (¶ 7)<sup>32</sup>

The article goes on to analyze the impact of the imposition of these reactionary "standards" on student outcomes and teaching efficacy. The adherence to the standards results in "teaching to the tests" of students' knowledge of these imposed benchmarks. Ethnic studies scholars, teachers, and students have long since documented the negative impact on students of color of curriculum that excludes or distorts their heritages. Yet the struggle for curriculum in which these students can see themselves goes on, in Colorado and elsewhere. The proponents of Critical Consciousness and Critical Civic Inquiry continue to demonstrate that combining pedagogy with praxis enlivens education for those who have been historically left out of its advantages, and that the motivation to transform themselves and their society produces an illumination of the stakes for these primary stakeholders in learning.<sup>33</sup>

## Improving Access to Education on Native Americans

Most students across the United States do not receive accurate or comprehensive education about Native American history. In *Manifesting Destiny: Re/presentations of Indigenous Peoples in K–12 U.S. History Standards*, a 2015 study by researchers at Pennsylvania State University found that 87% of content taught about Native Americans includes only pre-1900 context and relegates the importance and presence of Indigenous

---

<sup>31</sup> Agarwal, Kritika. *Texas Revises History Education, Again*. *Perspective on History*. 11 January 2019. <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2019/texas-revises-history-education-again-how-a-good-faith-process-became-political> Accessed 21 April 2021.

Falcón, Maribel. *Never Without a Fight: How Texas has Stood Up for Ethnic Studies*. Remezcla. 18 May 2020. <https://remezcla.com/features/culture/tejas-the-fight-for-ethnic-studies/> Accessed 21 April 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Muñoz, Jr., Carlos. *The Chicano Movement: Mexican American History and the Struggle for Equality*. *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*. 17.1-2 (2/2018) 31-52.

<sup>33</sup> Agarwal, Kritika. *Texas Revises History Education, Again*. *Perspective on History*. 11 January 2019. Accessed 21 April 2021.

peoples to the distant past.<sup>34</sup> Despite recent movements to address social justice issues and the one-sided nature of U.S. history textbooks, Anglo-American voices dominate textbooks and content standards. Efforts at rectifying this problem are occurring nationally, through state legislative mandates, creation of new curricula and educational programs like the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) Native Knowledge 360 Educational Initiative.<sup>35</sup> The program's *Essential Understandings about American Indians* provides a framework that offers new possibilities for creating student learning experiences. Building on the ten themes of the National Council for the Social Studies' national curriculum standards, the NMAI's Essential Understandings reveal key concepts about diverse cultures, histories, and contemporary lives of Native Americans. It provides a platform for NMAI and Native Americans to correct, broaden, and improve what is taught in the nation's schools and to provide model instructional materials and professional development for teachers.

Most significantly, certain US states now require the teaching of Native American history in their public schools. Montana's groundbreaking constitutional amendment requires that the histories and cultures of each of the tribes residing in that state be taught in its public schools as follows:

MCA 20-1-501 (Indian Education for All) 20-1-501, Recognition of American Indian cultural heritage -- legislative intent.

- (1) It is the constitutionally declared policy of this state to recognize the distinct and unique cultural heritage of American Indians and to be committed in its educational goals to the preservation of their cultural heritage.
- (2) It is the intent of the legislature that in accordance with Article X, section 1(2), of the Montana constitution: (a) every Montanan, whether Indian or non-Indian, be encouraged to learn about the distinct and unique heritage of American Indians in a culturally responsive manner; and (b) every educational agency and all educational personnel will work cooperatively with Montana tribes or those tribes that are in close proximity, when providing instruction or when implementing an educational goal or adopting a rule related to the education of each Montana citizen, to include information specific to the cultural heritage and contemporary contributions of American Indians, with particular emphasis on Montana Indian tribal groups and governments.
- (3) It is also the intent of this part, predicated on the belief that all school personnel should have an understanding and awareness of Indian tribes to help them relate effectively with Indian students and parents, that educational personnel provide means by which school personnel will gain an understanding of and appreciation for the American Indian people.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Shear, Sarah B., et al. "Manifesting Destiny: Re/presentations of Indigenous Peoples in K–12 U.S. History Standards." *Theory & Research in Social Education*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2015, pp. 68-101, DOI: 10.1080/00933104.2014.999849.

<sup>35</sup> *Native Knowledge 360 Education Initiative*. National Museum of the American Indian at the Smithsonian. <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360> Accessed 18 Apr. 2021.

<sup>36</sup> *Constitution of Montana*. Art. X. Sec. MCA 20-1-501.



Following the example of Montana, in 2015 Washington state became the second state to mandate Native American education in all of its public schools.<sup>37</sup> Oregon's Senate Bill 13 (passed by the Oregon State Legislature in 2017) authorized the creation of a statewide curriculum that will address the histories and cultures of its 9 federally recognized tribes, as well as such issues as tribal sovereignty, treaty rights, socioeconomic experiences and current events.<sup>38</sup> North Dakota became the most recent state to pass a similar law on April 6, 2021.<sup>39</sup>

With most of the heavy lifting done by Montana, Washington, Oregon and North Dakota in the creation of replicable models, the State of Colorado could streamline the process to adopt similar laws with respect to the Southern Ute Tribe and the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, the State's two federally recognized tribal nations located in the Four Corners region.

## Resource Equity - Mental Health

Prioritizing student mental health issues in schools leads to having the individual students' needs met and therefore improved school performance. In fact, social and emotional learning programming improve students' achievement test scores by 11 to 17 percentile points. Additional research indicates that students who utilize mental health services are two times more likely to stay in school than students who did not use school-based health center services.<sup>40</sup> Common mental health disorders in youth include; attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), behavior, mood, anxiety disorders, substance abuse, and tourette syndrome.<sup>41</sup> Students are more likely to utilize mental health support when school-based services are available to them.

In Colorado alone, approximately 57,000 adolescents (13.7% of all youth ages 12-17) reported at least one significant episode of depression in the year prior to being surveyed. Over 62% of adolescents experiencing depression do not receive treatment. 12% of high school youth made a plan about how they would attempt suicide, and almost 7% attempted suicide one or more times. Despite these alarming statistics, Colorado dropped from 19th to 48th on youth mental health in the past two years.

### Mental Health Resources

School psychologists provide direct support and intervention to help students overcome barriers to their education and often collaborate with parents, teachers, and other mental health

---

<sup>37</sup> Janzer, Cinnamon. *States Move to Add Native American History to Curriculum*. US News and World Reports, 19 Nov. 2019, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2019-11-29/states-move-to-add-native-american-history-to-education-curriculum> Accessed 18 April 2021.

<sup>38</sup> 79th Oregon Legislative Assembly. Senate Bill 13. 7 July 2017, <https://olis.leg.state.or.us/liz/2017R1/Downloads/MeasureDocument/SB13>.

<sup>39</sup> Kickingwoman, Kolby. *'Required': North Dakota Passes Native Education Bill*. Indian Country Today, 6 <https://indiancountrytoday.com/news/required-north-dakota-passes-native-education-bill> Accessed 21 April 2021.

<sup>40</sup> *School Mental Health Toolkit*. Mental Health Colorado. [https://www.mentalhealthcolorado.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/School\\_Mental\\_Health\\_Toolkit\\_Interactive\\_Final.pdf](https://www.mentalhealthcolorado.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/School_Mental_Health_Toolkit_Interactive_Final.pdf), Accessed 21 April 2021.

<sup>41</sup> *The Status of Denver's Children: A Community Resource 2019*. 4th ed., Denver Office of Children's Affairs. [https://www.denvergov.org/content/dam/denvergov/Portals/713/documents/data-resources/StatusOfDenversChildren\\_ADA\\_2019.pdf](https://www.denvergov.org/content/dam/denvergov/Portals/713/documents/data-resources/StatusOfDenversChildren_ADA_2019.pdf). Accessed 21 April 2021.

staff. They work with school administration to help improve school wide practices and policies, as well as coordinate with community supports as needed for students.<sup>42</sup> School social workers support students by assisting with mental health and behavioral concerns as well as offering classroom support and collaborating with teachers, parents and administration to create a supportive environment for students.<sup>43</sup> School social workers collaborate with other mental health staff to support students, teachers, administrators and families. A school counselor's role involves helping students succeed in school and plan their career. They help students develop healthy goals, mindsets and behaviors.<sup>44</sup> Historically, students have to be 15 years of age or older to access mental health support in schools without parental consent in Colorado. In May 2019, Governor Polis passed a bill dropping the age from 15 to 12 years for students to access mental health support without parental consent. However as of January 2020, DPS had not implemented the new policy.<sup>45</sup>

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recommends one counselor for every 250 students, one social worker for every 400 students, and one school psychologist for every 500 to 700 students. However, based on findings from a report by A+ Colorado, an independent nonprofit organization, 85% of schools across DPS are not sufficiently staffed with social workers, 40% are not sufficiently staffed with psychologists, and 65% are not sufficiently staffed with school nurses.<sup>46</sup> In fact, only eight schools across DPS have adequate staffing according to NASP recommendations. In 2019 the Colorado Sun reported the state's student to mental health staff were as follows; 1,380 students per social worker, 1,112 students per school psychologist, 1,432 students per school nurse, and 455 students per school counselor.<sup>47</sup>

## Mental Health in Remote Learning Environments

The pandemic has taken a toll on students' overall mental health and well being. According to a DPS survey conducted in September of 2020, 7% of students reported feeling "bad, not ok." This percentage was up from May of 2020 when 5% of students reported feeling "bad, not ok." Additionally, 22% of students reported they did not feel their social/emotional needs were being met.<sup>48</sup> In response, DPS increased screenings and training around social/emotional health, which includes training and education for both students and teachers. They also designated two Covid coordinators per school who work with the district's Covid

---

<sup>42</sup>Who Are School Psychologists? National Association of School Psychologists, 2014, <https://www.nasponline.org/about-school-psychology/who-are-school-psychologists#:~:text=School%20psychologists%20are%20uniquely%20qualified, socially%2C%20behaviorally%2C%20and%20emotionally>. Accessed 21 April 2021.

<sup>43</sup>Role of School Social Worker. School Social Work Association of America, <https://www.sswaa.org/school-social-work#:~:text=student%20services%20team-. School%20Social%20Workers%20are%20trained%20mental%20health%20professionals%20who%20can, individual%20and%20group%20counseling%2Ftherapy>. Accessed 21 April 2021.

<sup>44</sup>School Counselor Roles & Ratios. American School Counselor Association, <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/About-School-Counseling/School-Counselor-Roles-Ratios>. Accessed 21 April 2021.

<sup>45</sup>Brundin, Jenny. *Students In Many Parts of Colorado Can Now Get Mental Health Treatment Without Parental Permission. But Not In Denver.* Colorado Public Radio News, 10 January 2020, <https://www.cpr.org/2020/01/10/students-in-many-parts-of-colorado-can-now-get-mental-health-treatment-without-parental-permission-but-not-in-denver/>. Accessed 21 April 2021.

<sup>46</sup>Morrison, Eden, et al. *Access to mental health services in Denver Schools: Recommendations for mental health funding in DPS.* A+ Colorado Sharpening Public Education, 8 January 2021, <https://apluscolorado.org/reports/mentalhealthdps2021/>. Accessed 21 April 2021.

<sup>47</sup>Osher, Christopher, et al. *No Colorado school districts meet federal safety standards for behavioral health staffing, investigation shows.* The Colorado Sun, 12 April 2019, <https://coloradosun.com/2019/04/12/colorado-school-districts-behavioral-health-staffing/>. Accessed 21 April 2021.

<sup>48</sup>Well-Being & Engagement Survey Results. Denver Public Schools, September 2020, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/18BTcy-5qnRiIplqKobucW3zm46pH7Wh/view>. Accessed 21 April 2021.

response team. Denver Health has partnered with DPS since 1987 and currently has 18 school based health sites. These school based health centers include free mental health resources for students and families.<sup>49</sup> However, the extent to which students across the district feel supported by these measures is unknown.

## Resource Gaps and Improvements

In the 2015-16 school year, nearly 75% of Colorado School Districts were unable to meet any of the NASP standards. Of the 178 districts, 27 had no counselor and most districts reported having no psychologist or social worker on staff that academic year. Compared to nationwide stats in 2015-16, 1 in 4 schools had no counselors. The next year there were 956 students per school psychologist as of December 2017, nearly double the standard ratio. Denver Public Schools saw an improvement in 2017-18 school year with 1 psychologist for every 611 students.<sup>50</sup> This last year has proven more challenging for students due to the new remote learning environments. Yet in 2021 only 1.5% of DPS students attend schools that are fully staffed with mental health professionals.<sup>51</sup> Whereas nearly half of the population in the DPS system (39,000 students) do not have adequate access to social workers and psychologists (44.7%).<sup>52</sup>

## Resource Funding and Opportunities for Growth

A \$32 million mill levy override passed in Denver in the November 2020 election. Of the \$32 million, the district has earmarked \$3 million for mental health staff and support, \$4 million for nursing services, and \$2 million for special education services.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, the Colorado state legislatures are working on the 2022 budget. Five amendments were recently passed focusing on education. One of these amendments proposes another \$2 million for school bullying prevention, \$2 million for school based health centers, and \$500,000 for suicide prevention programs.<sup>54</sup>

In light of this commitment from the state and DPS to increase funding for mental health resources, A+ Colorado urges DPS to allocate the bulk of the money set aside for expanding mental health services towards schools with the highest needs, namely high schools and those with the largest populations “since these are the schools that most often failed to provide adequate funding in multiple categories.”<sup>55</sup> Our Turn Colorado, a nonprofit action network

---

<sup>49</sup> *Social-Emotional Supports*. Denver Public Schools, 2021, <https://www.dpsk12.org/coronavirus/return-2020/students-mental-health/>. Accessed 21 April 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Wilcox, Katie, et al. *Do schools have enough mental health resources?*. 9News, 30 October 2018, <https://www.9news.com/article/news/investigations/do-schools-have-enough-mental-health-resources/73-609278703>. Accessed 21 April 2021.

<sup>51</sup> Morrison, Eden, et al. *Access to mental health services in Denver Schools: Recommendations for mental health funding in DPS*. A+ Colorado Sharpening Public Education, 8 January 2021, <https://apluscolorado.org/reports/mentalhealthdps2021/>. Accessed 21 April 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Ricciardi, Tiney. *39,000 Denver students attend schools that lack adequate mental health staff, study finds*. Denver Post, 16 January 2021, <https://www.denverpost.com/2021/01/16/denver-public-schools-mental-health-needs/>. Accessed 21 April 2021.

<sup>53</sup> Ricciardi, Tiney. *Denver election results for 4A, 4B: School bond and mill levy appear headed toward victory*. Denver Post, 3 November 2020, <https://www.denverpost.com/2020/11/03/denver-election-results-4a-4b-dps-bond-mill-levy/>. Accessed 21 April 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Gonzales, Jason. *Colorado Senate adds special ed funding, chief equity officer position to 2022 budget*. Chalkbeat Colorado, 8 April 2021, <https://co.chalkbeat.org/2021/4/8/22374711/colorado-senate-2022-budget-amendments-special-ed-funding-equity-officer>. Accessed 21 April 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Morrison, Eden, et al. *Access to mental health services in Denver Schools: Recommendations for mental health funding in DPS*. A+ Colorado Sharpening Public Education, 8 January 2021, <https://apluscolorado.org/reports/mentalhealthdps2021/>. Accessed 21 April 2021.

focused on fighting for educational equity, has two recommendations for how the mill levy funds should be allocated for mental health across DPS. As the 2018 Board of Education Resolution declared DPS a Trauma-Informed District, Our Turn Colorado is calling on the district to secure a trauma informed practices team for the long term. The other demand is to use remaining funds of the earmarked \$3 million towards a pilot program to staff mental health counselors, “whose primary responsibility would be supporting DPS improving mental health outcomes for students.”<sup>56</sup> Since school psychologists and social workers have legal mandates and requirements which can restrict their flexibility to respond to students’ mental health needs on the spot, Our Turn Colorado is calling DPS to hire mental health counselors who have more flexibility to respond promptly to students’ mental health needs as they arise.<sup>57</sup>

## **Conclusion & Call to Action**

It may appear that DPS students have been galvanized by the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter Movement during the summer of 2020 following the murder of George Floyd, and while that may be partially true, these current students are also following the thread of resistance that traces back to the 1969 West High School Blowout. For nearly 50 years, DPS students have been asking for a curriculum that is reflective of their diverse cultures and backgrounds, embracing a curriculum that is not Eurocentric. It is time that we, in community, elevate the students and listen to their demand of a culturally relevant curriculum. We support the students’ demand that their cultures and diversity are honored. We support the students’ demand that equity is not just a DPS NAMED value, but a LIVED value most especially in funding. We support the students’ demand for teachers of color and white teachers who are continuously reflecting on their internal bias. We support the students’ demand for due process. We support the students’ demand for comprehensive health services. As community members, WE demand the next Superintendent and the School Board not only listen deeply to the students’ voice AND you take action on their demands. There is a difference between being invited to the table to speak and having decision-making power.

## **Authors**

*Shannon Hoffman  
Delaney Coe  
Chelsea Long  
Terry Burnsed  
Jefferson McClure  
Austine Luce  
Jami Horwitz  
Matthew Koch  
Meg DesCombes*

---

<sup>56</sup> *Recommendations to DPS BAC on Allocation of Mental Health Mill Levy Funds*. Our Turn Denver, January 2021, [https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1KTLZY0sOfw\\_KrUh951jGdAFb2gCuo9D9-l-2EaUjYxg/edit#slide=id.gaa44740f90\\_0\\_0](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1KTLZY0sOfw_KrUh951jGdAFb2gCuo9D9-l-2EaUjYxg/edit#slide=id.gaa44740f90_0_0). Accessed 21 April 2021.

<sup>57</sup> *Recommendations to DPS BAC on Allocation of Mental Health Mill Levy Funds*. Our Turn Denver, January 2021. Accessed 21 April 2021.

## Appendix A

Student Voice		
Year/School	Theme	Proposal Topic
<a href="#">16-17 West</a>	Increasing engagement	Recruit ELL students to leadership and SBOE
<a href="#">16-17 TJ</a>	Increasing engagement	Student Voice: Suggestion Box
<a href="#">16-17 South</a>	Increasing engagement	Learning from ELL students, increasing their leadership
<a href="#">16-17 DSST CV</a>	Increasing engagement	Supporting Students Initiative: uplifting undocumented students' voice
<a href="#">17-18 West</a>	Increased Engagement	West Parent/Teacher/Student/Organization (PTSO) for both campuses
<a href="#">17-18 CEC</a>	School Operations	Student Engagement Policy: engagement in decision-making through monthly or bi-monthly meeting of student leaders
<a href="#">17-18 JFK</a>	Increasing engagement	Building the Student Board of Education Foundation: increase involvement of marginalized and alienated students.
<a href="#">18-19 DSISD</a>	School Operations	Student-run Future Center
<a href="#">18-19 KCAA</a>	School Operations	Culturally Responsive Training PDU
<a href="#">19-20 DCIS</a>	General Increase	A Place at the Table: the DCIS Baker Instructional Leadership Policy
<a href="#">19-20 Northfield</a>	General Increase	Establishment of Student Voice and Leadership within Northfield High School
<a href="#">19-20 East</a>	General Increase	Create an administratively supported Student Board of Education program at East
<a href="#">19-20 DMLK</a>	School Operations	SVL Safety Proclamation: the Board of Education shall include a board of SVL student representatives in its decision making process on any further safety policy
<a href="#">20-21 DCISM</a>	Increasing engagement	Center student voice and power in education
<a href="#">20-21 South</a>	School Operations	Student Board of Education Endowment and Student-Led Committee
<a href="#">20-21 Northfield</a>	School Operations	School Voting System: weight student vote as equal to DPS teachers and admin, requiring approval from students to change policy

Equity		
Year/School	Theme	Proposal Topic
<a href="#">16-17 DSISD</a>	Mentoring	Increase awareness and use of school choice through mentoring program in middle school and a DPS policy to fund free RTD passes for those in areas without a blue or green school
<a href="#">16-17 West</a>	Challenge Norms	Turn West into a bilingual friendly school
<a href="#">16-17 TJ</a>	Additional Support	Increase resources provided to students (meditation, food, mentor program) in order to reduce socioeconomic stress
<a href="#">16-17 Washington</a>	Challenge Norms	Student-led Bias Workshops: eliminate bias and create an integrated and safe space
<a href="#">16-17 South</a>	Challenge Norms	Double students of color enrolled in higher level courses
<a href="#">16-17 DSST CV</a>	Additional Support	Supporting Students Initiative: offering community resources and protecting the rights of students regardless of immigration status
<a href="#">17-18 ALHS</a>	Challenge Norms	Inequity of SPF Ranking
<a href="#">17-18 DSA</a>	Mentoring	Schoolwide Art Education Equity: outreach program with elementary schools
<a href="#">18-19 South</a>	Additional Support	Exclusivity and Equity Policy: include, preserve, respect, and provide an academic and social opportunity to immigrant and English Language Learning students.
<a href="#">18-19 DCIS</a>	Mentoring	Empowering Young Men of Color Policy: middle and high school mentorship program
<a href="#">18-19 West</a>	Action	West Campus Unity Policy - bringing campuses together through community service
<a href="#">18-19 East</a>	Challenge Norms	Equitable Discipline: restorative justice programming and culturally responsive teaching pedagogy
<a href="#">18-19 Manual</a>	Voice	Student Success Policy: advocate with administration for what students want and need to meet 93% attendance
<a href="#">19-20 DSST GVR</a>	Mentoring	Trimester 3 Plan Mentoring Program
<a href="#">19-20 West</a>	Action	West High School: Unite West Early College and West Leadership Academy beginning school year 2021-2022.
<a href="#">19-20 DSA</a>	Assess Current State	Equity Audit of DSA Audition Process
<a href="#">19-20 CEC</a>	Mentoring/Additional Support	Learn Something Real Policy: life skills curriculum in advisement

<a href="#">19-20 ALHS</a>	Challenge Norms	The SAT, SPF, and School-to-Prison Pipeline: have SPF place less value on SAT and more value on unweighted GPS
<a href="#">19-20 North AP</a>	Challenge Norms	Diversify AP: AP Ambassadors Program
<a href="#">19-20 North LGBTQ</a>	Challenge Norms	Gender-neutral Bathrooms
<a href="#">19-20 DSISD</a>	Challenge Norms	Incentivize Don't Penalize: incentive driven school scoring (SPF) system inspired by Mazlow's Hierarchy
<a href="#">20-21 North AP</a>	Challenge Norms	AP Ambassador Program, Peer2Peer Tutoring
<a href="#">20-21 SPED</a>	Mentoring	North Inclusion Crew: club to increase inclusion and interaction with students from the MI center
<a href="#">20-21 West</a>	Challenge Norms	Justice Not by Accident, but by Design: address biased SPF rating system and transportation barriers
<a href="#">20-21 YAALL</a>	Additional Support	Beyond Standards: ensure all DPS students have an abundance of supportive resources they need to thrive

Culture/Diversity		
Year/School	Theme	Proposal Topic
<a href="#">16-17 West</a>	Inclusion	Turn West into a bilingual friendly school
<a href="#">16-17 KCAA</a>	Inclusion & Training for teachers	Implicit Bias Trainings for teachers and culturally authentic events
<a href="#">16-17 South</a>	Inclusion	Increase inclusion and leadership of MLL students
<a href="#">18-19 South</a>	Inclusion	Exclusivity and Equity Policy: include, preserve, respect, and provide an academic and social opportunity to immigrant and English Language Learning students.
<a href="#">18-19 ALHS</a>	Training for teachers	Raising Cultural Awareness in the Classroom: ongoing bias training for teachers
<a href="#">18-19 KIPP</a>	Inclusion	Student Teacher Hiring Committee: equitable teachers and hiring
<a href="#">19-20 TJ</a>	Inclusion	Know Your Rights, Know Your Neighbor; Culture Fest
<a href="#">19-20 KCAA</a>	Training for teachers	Student Led Culturally Responsive/Implicit Bias Professional Development Unit (PDU) for Teachers
<a href="#">19-20 GW</a>	Training for teachers	Culturally Responsive Mindset Survey
<a href="#">19-20 SPED</a>	Inclusion	Include Students with Special Needs
<a href="#">19-20 North AP</a>	Inclusion	Diversify AP: AP Ambassadors program
<a href="#">20-21 North AP</a>	Inclusion	AP Ambassador Program, Peer2Peer Tutoring
<a href="#">20-21 DSA</a>	Inclusion	Equity Centered Affinity Groups



Health		
Year/School	Theme	Proposal Topic
<a href="#">16-17 DSST Cole</a>	Health in School	Water for the Win: replace old water fountains in the school
<a href="#">17-18 DSST GVR</a>	Curriculum	Health Education Course & Revitalize Community Garden: support students' academic performance and address GVR's location in a food desert
<a href="#">18-19 DSST Cole High</a>	Health in School	Raise DPS Nutrition Services standards
<a href="#">18-19 TJ</a>	Curriculum	"Bringing in the Bystander" sexual assault training
<a href="#">19-20 DSISD</a>	Mental health	Incentivize Don't Penalize: incentive driven school scoring (SPF) system inspired by Mazlow's Hierarchy
<a href="#">19-20 South</a>	Curriculum	Comprehensive Health Class
<a href="#">20-21 ALHS</a>	Mental health	How can our school help improve students' mental health issues?
<a href="#">20-21 TJ</a>	Curriculum	Improved/Inclusive Sex Education Curriculum
<a href="#">20-21 KIPP</a>	Curriculum and Mental health	A Program (Curriculum) to dismantle Machismo and Marianismo Towards a Path of Mental Health in Latinx Communities
<a href="#">20-21 East</a>	Curriculum and Health in School	Reimagining Denver Public School's Sexual Assault and Harassment Policies for Equity, Transparency, and Accessibility

Sustainability		
Year/School	Theme	Proposal Topic
<a href="#">17-18 North</a>	Future Planning	Student-led Restorative Justice Class: will remain a foundational part of our school-wide discipline system
<a href="#">17-18 GWHS</a>	Future Planning	Revive and Revitalize COLOR (Creative Optimistic Leaders of Respect) from 2014 as COLOR 2.0
<a href="#">20-21 South</a>	Future Planning	SBOE Endowment and Committee: the future backbone to support future larger projects

DPS Staff		
Year/School	Theme	Proposal Topic
<a href="#">16-17 KCAA</a>	Student-Led Training	Implicit Bias Test and Trainings: increase engagement and welcoming of non-white families
<a href="#">16-17 South</a>	Student-Led Training	Racial Bias Training with staff: addressing lack of inclusivity, outreach, acceptance, and participation of English Language Learners

<a href="#">16-17 DSST CV</a>	Student-Led Training	Supporting Students Initiative: students provide training to teachers better discuss current events and support students with them
<a href="#">17-18 DCIS</a>	Student-Led Training	Monthly cultural and racial awareness workshops to address implicit bias in teaching
<a href="#">17-18 DSST College View</a>	Inclusion	Reflective Classroom: create student-led hiring committee to address the problem that staff does not currently reflect the student body
<a href="#">18-19 CEC Early College</a>	Relationships	Add another layer to the hiring process for both CTE and CORE teachers to develop better student-teacher relationships
<a href="#">18-19 KIPP</a>	Inclusion	Student Teacher Hiring Committee: equitable teachers and hiring
<a href="#">18-19 East</a>	Training	Equitable Discipline: restorative justice programming and culturally responsive teaching pedagogy
<a href="#">18-19 KCAA</a>	Student-Led Training	Culturally Responsive Training Professional Development taught by students
<a href="#">18-19 ALHS</a>	Training	Raising Cultural Awareness in the Classroom: ongoing bias training for teachers
<a href="#">19-20 DCIS</a>	Inclusion	A Place at the Table: the DCIS Baker Instructional Leadership Policy
<a href="#">19-20 YAALL</a>	Action	Eradicate the School to Prison Pipeline via addressing and lessening the amount of policing in schools
<a href="#">19-20 West</a>	Action	One West High School: Unite West Early College and West Leadership Academy beginning school year 2021-2022.
<a href="#">19-20 South</a>	Health	Comprehensive Health Class
<a href="#">19-20 KCAA</a>	Student-Led Training	Student Led Culturally Responsive Professional Development Unit for Teachers
<a href="#">20-21 JFK</a>	Relationships	Building upon and maintaining advisement as a student-driven class that promotes positive student-teacher relationships and life skills
<a href="#">20-21 YAALL</a>	Relationships	Beyond Standards: strengthening student-teacher relationships as partnerships that can serve as real supports to students' learning

Curriculum		
Year/School	Theme	Proposal Topic
<a href="#">16-17 CEC</a>	Add new elements	Leadership at Your Fingertip (LYF) program: provides incoming freshman with the skills they need to be prepared and confident in high school
<a href="#">16-17 West</a>	Add new elements	Turn West into a bilingual friendly school, in part through infusing dual language curriculum

<a href="#">16-17 South</a>	Expand Access	Curriculum change to student leadership class, more support for ELL students and learning more from ELL students
<a href="#">17-18 TJ</a>	Add new elements	Chicano Studies course credit as the beginning of a program to implement ethnic studies at TJ generally, using Teaching Tolerance materials for teachers and students
<a href="#">17-18 DMLK</a>	Mentoring	HS Volunteers Tutoring Program for MS Students
<a href="#">17-18 DSA</a>	Expand Access	Schoolwide Art Education Equity: outreach program with elementary schools
<a href="#">17-18 DSST GVR</a>	Add new elements	Health Education Course & Revitalize Community Garden: support students' academic performance and address GVR's location in a food desert
<a href="#">18-19 DMLK</a>	Expand Access	Bridging the HS/MS Gap: Turn a mentoring program in STEM disciplines into a class students can take for credit
<a href="#">18-19 DSA</a>	Mentoring	Increasing Equitable Access to Arts Education at DPS: 1) Establish a Creative Youth Leadership connecting student artists to Elementary schools and 2) Develop a District-wide Arts Access initiative in collaboration with A+ Colorado
<a href="#">18-19 South</a>	Support for a Specific Population	Exclusivity and Equity Policy: include, preserve, respect, and provide an academic and social opportunity to immigrant and English Language Learning students.
<a href="#">18-19 North</a>	Expand Access	Diversify AP: AP Ambassadors program
<a href="#">18-19 DSST GVR</a>	Add new elements	Civic Engagement Curriculum: senior-level students learn and then teach to parents in school's neighborhood, especially to engage ESL families
<a href="#">18-19 JFK</a>	Add new elements	Life Skills Class
<a href="#">18-19 West</a>	School Operations	West Campus Unity Policy - add community service requirement to advisory course to bring campuses together and improve image
<a href="#">19-20 JFK</a>	School Operations	Maintain Advisement Class at least once per week: maintain commitment to improving student-teacher relationships and teaching life skills
<a href="#">19-20 West</a>	School Operations	West High School: Unite West Early College and West Leadership Academy beginning school year 2021-2022.
<a href="#">19-20 TJ</a>	Support for a Specific Population	Know Your Rights, Know Your Neighbor
<a href="#">19-20 DSISD</a>	Add new elements	Incentivize Don't Penalize: incentive driven school scoring (SPF) system inspired by Maslow's Hierarchy
<a href="#">19-20 CEC</a>	Support for a Specific Population	Learn Something Real Policy: life skills curriculum in advisement

<a href="#">19-20 South</a>	Add new elements	Comprehensive Health Class
<a href="#">19-20 KIPP</a>	Add new elements	A Program (Curriculum) to dismantle Machismo and Marianismo Towards a Path of Mental Health in Latinx Communities
<a href="#">20-21 North AP</a>	Expand Access	AP Ambassador Program, Peer2Peer Tutoring
<a href="#">20-21 DSA</a>	Add new elements	Integrate different cultural histories and arts backgrounds into the regular curriculum
<a href="#">20-21 TJ</a>	Add new elements	Improved/Inclusive Sex Education Curriculum
<a href="#">20-21 KIPP</a>	Add new elements	A Program (Curriculum) to dismantle Machismo and Marianismo Towards a Path of Mental Health in Latinx Communities
<a href="#">20-21 JFK</a>	Add new elements	Building upon and maintaining advisement as a student-driven class that promotes positive student-teacher relationships and life skills
<a href="#">20-21 YAALL</a>	Add new elements	Beyond Standards: improve curriculum offerings around real life skills and ethnic studies so that curriculum is culturally responsive and students see themselves and their voices reflected