



# INDEPENDENCE INSTITUTE ISSUE BACKGROUNDER

## GREELEY PUBLIC SCHOOLS: LEARNING REIMAGINED

BY BEN DEGROW • IB-D-2013 • JULY 2013

### STUDENTS, FUNDING AND STAFF

Northern Colorado's Greeley Public Schools, also known as Weld County District 6, serves nearly 20,000 enrolled students<sup>1</sup>:

- More than 60 percent are eligible for free or reduced lunch due to family poverty
- More than 60 percent are racial minorities, most of whom are Hispanic
- More than 25 percent do not speak English as a native language at home
- Fewer than one in 10 are classified as special education program participant

In 2011-12 Greeley received \$8,956 in revenue for every funded student, a real dollar amount that has fluctuated in recent years but remains essentially the same from 10 years earlier. The district's share of state revenue (58 percent) nearly doubles its local contributions (30 percent), with federal tax dollars comprising the remainder.<sup>2</sup>

District 6 employs more than 2,300 staff members, roughly half of whom are designated as teachers. One in four 2011-12 employees did not return the following school year, the second-highest personnel turnover rate among the largest 20 districts and well above state average.<sup>3</sup> The District 6 superintendent receives more than \$270,000 in total salary and benefits, including \$40,000 deposited into a special "deferred compensation program." The Chief Academic Officer and Chief Operations Officer each take home more than \$160,000 in total compensation.<sup>4</sup>

### SHORT ON RESULTS

A litany of facts demonstrates the unacceptable results for District 6 students:

- At every grade level of state reading and writing tests, District 6 underperforms the state average by more than 10 percentage points<sup>5</sup>
- Half of 9th and 10th graders in District 6 score "unsatisfactory" on state math tests<sup>6</sup>
- The average ACT score is 17.4, well below the state average of 20.0; the average ACT score in one District 6 high school was 13.7, below the mark for basic literacy<sup>7</sup>
- Six of every 10 graduates at in-state colleges need remedial help in basic subjects<sup>8</sup>
- Half of the non-charter schools receive either a D or F on a leading statewide report card<sup>9</sup>

Many Greeley-Evans families are expressing their dissatisfaction with the district program by exercising what rights they can to choose other options. More than 3,800, or nearly one in five, students is enrolled in one of the district's charter schools, with an additional 2,000 on waiting lists. Further, for every non-resident child who opts into District 6, more than 5 opt to cross district lines—resulting in a net loss of 1,170 students through open enrollment.<sup>10</sup>

During the 2012-13 school year District 6 dropped its accreditation rating to "priority improvement," the 2nd lowest on the state's 5-point scale. The state's accreditation system primarily measures student academic gains in different grade levels and subject areas. District 6 falls short on 21 of 23 performance indicators.<sup>11</sup>

### REACHING A NEW VISION

To meet the requirements of its new accreditation ratings, the District 6 Board of Education was required to submit a Priority Improvement Plan to

the Colorado Department of Education. Yet at least some Board members had no advance notice of the plan or need to review its details before casting votes on the January 15, 2013 deadline.<sup>12</sup>

Elected school district leaders, accountable to parents and taxpayers, should be set free to craft bold plans that can turn around the district's struggling academic record and make it a successful model of innovation. To help as many students as possible achieve their learning potential, the Board of Education should consider the following strategies:

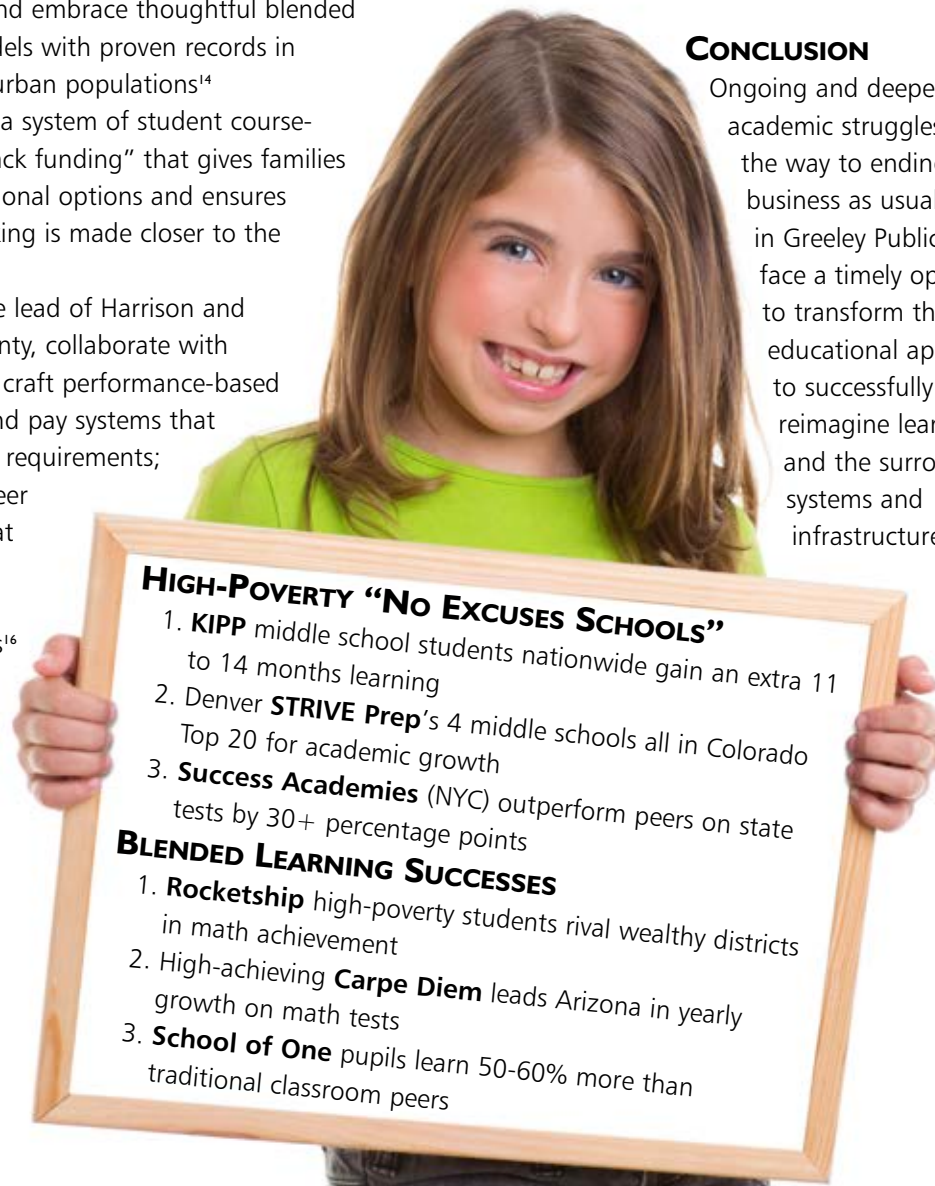
- Starting with the poorest-performing schools, adopt a portfolio management approach that solicits innovative plans from employees, non-profits, and for-profits to manage site-level turnarounds with autonomy and accountability<sup>13</sup>
- Emphasize and embrace thoughtful blended learning models with proven records in challenging urban populations<sup>14</sup>
- Transition to a system of student course-level "backpack funding" that gives families more educational options and ensures decision-making is made closer to the classroom<sup>15</sup>
- Following the lead of Harrison and Douglas County, collaborate with educators to craft performance-based evaluation and pay systems that surpass state requirements; and new career pathways that include more mentorship opportunities<sup>16</sup>

In support of these strategies, to ensure the effective use of scarce public dollars and show accountability to taxpayers, the following policy changes also should be sought:

- Eliminate or competitively contract central office functions from a "zero-based" budget
- Hold binding union negotiations and other policy making discussions as public meetings<sup>17</sup>
- Stop payroll dues collection for union political organizations; or a) require full union financial disclosure and b) allow union members to opt out any time as conditions<sup>18</sup>
- Require union, not taxpayers, to underwrite full salary and benefits of union officers on leave from classroom duties<sup>19</sup>
- Give non-union groups and teachers fair, equal access to school communication systems, professional events, and participation on committees and task forces<sup>20</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Ongoing and deepening academic struggles point the way to ending business as usual. Leaders in Greeley Public Schools face a timely opportunity to transform the educational approach, to successfully reimagine learning and the surrounding systems and infrastructure.



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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Colorado Department of Education (CDE), Pupil Membership Statistics, <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/pupildistrict.htm>.
- <sup>2</sup> CDE, Fiscal Year 2011-12 District Revenues and Expenditures, Tables IA-IC, <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdefinance/FY11-12RevExp.htm>.
- <sup>3</sup> CDE, School/District Staff Statistics for 2012, <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/staffcurrent.htm>.
- <sup>4</sup> Compensation figures obtained through Colorado Open Records Act request to Greeley Public Schools by author, May 10, 2013.
- <sup>5</sup> CDE, CSAP / TCAP, Data and Results, <http://www.cde.state.co.us/assessment/CoAssess-DataAndResults.asp>.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> CDE, 2012 Colorado ACT State Status Summary and District and School Results, <http://www.cde.state.co.us/assessment/CoACT-DataAndResults.asp>.
- <sup>8</sup> Colorado Department of Higher Education, 2012 Legislative Report on Remedial Education, Submitted April 16, 2013, [http://higher.ed.colorado.gov/Publications/Reports/Remedial/FY2012/2012\\_Remedial\\_relmay09.pdf](http://higher.ed.colorado.gov/Publications/Reports/Remedial/FY2012/2012_Remedial_relmay09.pdf).
- <sup>9</sup> <http://ColoradoSchoolGrades.com>.
- <sup>10</sup> CDE Pupil Membership Statistics.
- <sup>11</sup> CDE, State, District, and School Performance, Greeley 6 Improvement Plan, 3-Year District Performance Framework report, <https://cedar2.cde.state.co.us/documents/DPF2012/3120%20-%203%20Year.pdf>.
- <sup>12</sup> <http://www.greeleygazette.com/press/?p=21890>
- <sup>13</sup> See Robin J. Lake and Paul T. Hill, *Performance Management in Portfolio School Districts*, Center on Reinventing Public Education (August 2009), <http://www.crpe.org/publications/performance-management-portfolio-school-districts>.
- <sup>14</sup> See Krista Kafer, *The Rise of K-12 Blended Learning in Colorado*, Independence Institute Issue Paper 4-2013 [publication pending]
- <sup>15</sup> See Benjamin DeGrow, *Online Course-Level Funding: Toward Colorado Secondary Self-Blended Learning Options*, Independence Institute Issue Paper 4-2012 (May 2012), <http://education.i2i.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/IP-4-2012-OnlineCourse-LevelFunding-highres.pdf>.
- <sup>16</sup> See F. Mike Miles (with Ellen Belcher), "Teacher Compensation Based on Effectiveness: Harrison (CO) School District's Pay-for-Performance Plan," Thomas B. Fordham Institute (March 2012), <http://edexcellencemedia.net/Ohio/FORINSTeacherCompensationReportHRA.pdf>; Douglas County School District, Pay for Performance at a Glance, <https://www.dcsdk12.org/strategicplan/systemperformance/payforperformance/index.htm>.
- <sup>17</sup> The current District 6 collective bargaining contract indicates that open negotiations are the default policy, but that is not the case in practice. For more context, see Benjamin DeGrow, "Colorado Education and Open Negotiations: Increasing Public Access to School District Bargaining," Independence Institute Issue Backgrounder 2010-B (April 2010), <http://education.i2i.org/2010/04/colorado-education-and-open-negotiations-increasing-public-access-to-school-district-bargaining/>.

<sup>18</sup> Members of the Greeley Education Association can only opt out of membership during the month of September. To compare with revocation windows in other districts, see <http://education.i2i.org/teachers/membership-opt-out-windows/>.

<sup>19</sup> As determined through May 10 CORA request, taxpayers currently cover almost \$20,000 of salary and benefits for the current president of the Greeley Education Association, released from classroom duties. To compare with other Colorado district policies, see Benjamin DeGrow, *Colorado Schools and Association Release Time: Making the Privilege Accountable to Citizens*, Independence Institute Issue Paper 1-2010 (February 2010), [http://education.i2i.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/IP\\_1\\_2010\\_Web.pdf](http://education.i2i.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/IP_1_2010_Web.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> See Benjamin DeGrow, "Nine Key Changes at the Bargaining Table: A Policy Handbook for Colorado School Board Reform Leaders," Independence Institute Issue Backgrounder 2011-D (September 2011), <http://education.i2i.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/IB-2011D-Web.pdf>.

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