

# Douglas County: Building a Better Education Model

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by Benjamin DeGrow, Senior Policy Analyst  
Education Policy Center

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## Executive Summary

Effecting successful suburban school reform poses an authentic challenge. Many students do well compared to their peers in neighboring districts, but overall test scores conceal shortcomings. The U.S. spends more per person on education than any other country, yet even middle-class students academically lag their peers in other countries. The fast-growing Douglas County School District (DCSD) south of Denver, Colorado, has attempted a different approach to aim higher. The relatively high-performing suburban district has broken down boundaries through a wide range of innovative strategies. Since the 2009 election of a reform-minded school board majority and a change in district leadership, DCSD has implemented a fiscally responsible, three-pronged strategic plan:

- Enhanced student and parental choice, including public and private options
- An enriched system of world-class standards, curriculum, and assessments
- Performance-based instructional evaluations, pay, and career growth

The ambitious program is designed to enhance district operations, and, ultimately, outcomes for students. By adopting the Blueprint for Choice, including the first-of-its-kind Choice Scholarship Program, DCSD leaders have given tremendous attention to serving individual student needs based on parental direction. By developing a new curriculum rooted in world-class education standards, and aligning assessments and professional development to serve the needs of schools and teachers, DCSD has expanded their vision and raised the bar for students.

At the core of the performance-based system upgrade are new evaluation frameworks for teachers and principals. DCSD has placed itself a year ahead of a 2010 state law's requirements to tie educator effectiveness to new quality standards and to student academic growth. The district further has taken the unprecedented step of blending substantive performance pay with market-based salary bands that distinguish teacher specialties based on supply and demand. More than 40 career options provided through "Professional Pathways" give teachers a tremendous degree of career flexibility.

To complete all the changes in a cost-effective manner, DCSD leaders took a bold stance in their first-ever open negotiations with the teachers union. While the union conceded on many points, they would not give up all tax dollars to subsidize union officers, nor the privilege of district dues collection to fund a national union organization, nor the exclusive authority to bargain for all licensed educators. The collective bargaining agreement lapsed in 2012, even as many teachers worked directly with district leaders to craft many elements of the innovative system.

The crafting of a "new order" has generated some friction. The repurposing of current resources to raise expectations and reward performance has motivated interest groups to marshal a focused opposition. DCSD leaders face a political challenge as they build a better education model that seeks to translate comprehensive innovation into long-term student benefits. As key elements of the model spread and take hold, Douglas County's example points the way to transforming American public education.

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## **Introduction: The Case for Suburban School Reform**

In a speech delivered at the American Enterprise Institute on April 26, 2013, former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett observed, "Somebody is trying to do all of the good reforms at once out in Douglas County, Colorado." Bennett had recently returned from a visit to see the school district firsthand. Citing the efforts to increase parental choice, enhance accountability, and raise standards, he also predicted that the reforms "will be challenged."

Indeed they have been challenged. Opposition from formidable interest groups, notably the displaced American Federation of Teachers bargaining unit, creates the impression of widespread discontent. Inevitable discontinuities arise when reformers overcome the inertia of many decades-long patterns, policies, and practices. Five hundred years ago, the Florentine political philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli keenly identified the challenge in his classic volume *The Prince*:

There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order, this lukewarmness arising partly from fear of their adversaries ... and partly from the incredulity of mankind,

who do not truly believe in anything new until they have had actual experience of it.

Across the United States, countless dollars and hours have been expended to reform K-12 education, to change policies and to weaken power structures that preserve a school system little changed from a century earlier. Due to the challenging impacts of poverty and social dysfunction, urban school environments have served as the primary venue for education reform. Schools in more affluent settings seem to be doing an adequate job. Suburban residents tend to be satisfied with schooling in their own communities. Half of Americans give an A or B grade to their local schools, but only one in five give a similar high grade to public schools nationally.<sup>1</sup>

The United States spends more per capita on education than anywhere in the world, yet the nation's students rank 32nd in math and 23rd in science among developed countries.<sup>2</sup> Some apologists try to dismiss the troubling statistics by attributing the deficit to the effects of poverty. But a closer look at the achievement of middle- to upper-middle class American students (those in the 50th to 75th percentile of family income) refutes the claim that poverty is the only reason that Americans lag educationally. Controlling for poverty and comparing U.S. students only to their foreign socioeconomic peers yields similarly weak American results (32nd in math, 21st in science). The poorest 25 percent of Shanghai students outperform upper-middle class Americans in reading.<sup>3</sup> Relatively high-performing suburban school districts, properly compared

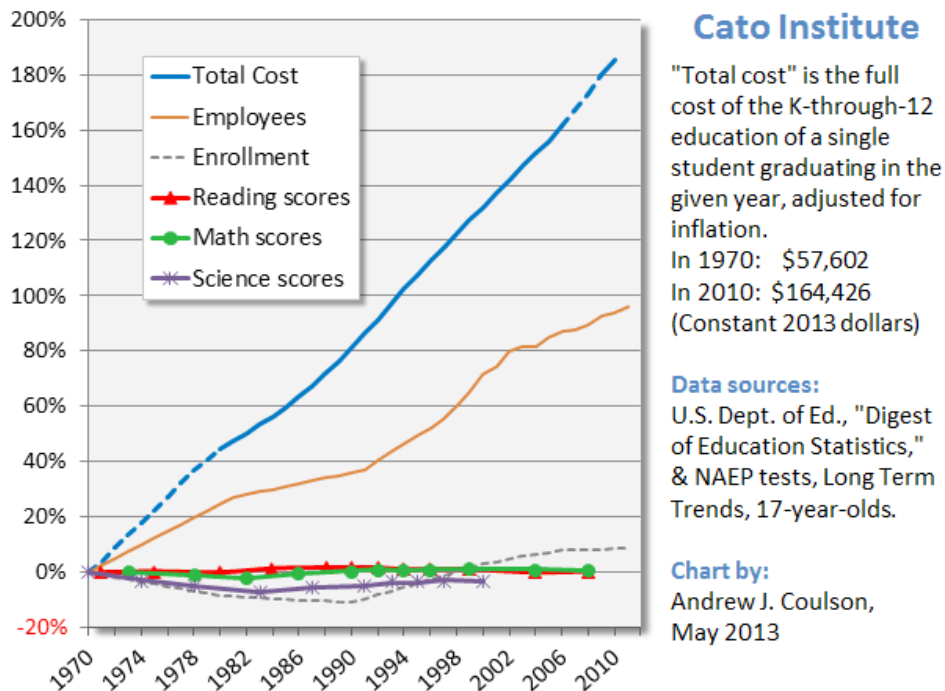


Figure 1.

on the competitive international stage, certainly have room to improve.

Efforts to increase performance through traditional methods and structures largely have been tapped out. The declining productivity of U.S. schools is well documented. Over the past 40 years, the cost to educate the average K-12 student has nearly tripled. Yet the measurable math and reading skills of the nation's 17-year-olds have not significantly changed (see figure 1). Adding more employees to the K-12 payroll has yielded substantial costs with very few benefits. The already-limited positive effects of shrinking class sizes, at the margin, yield rapidly diminishing returns.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 exposed how many school systems inadequately serve certain groups of students and how state accountability systems helped to

conceal shortcomings in achievement. Policymakers have directed attention and resources to failing and marginally performing districts and schools. Meanwhile, relatively high performers largely have avoided external policy pressures that could motivate a climb toward excellence. A concerted effort to improve achievement without these pressures requires extraordinary leadership.

Underlying the hard-to-see shortcomings in traditional suburban school systems is the centralization of decision-making power at more distant levels of government. Douglas County leaders have boldly staked success on a different approach that more broadly shares power and responsibility. The significant experiment along Colorado's Front Range seeks to forge a difficult but successful path to maximize student achievement.

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## **Douglas County Steps Forward**

Located directly between Denver and Colorado Springs, Douglas County, Colorado, covers about 840 square miles of mixed suburban and rural composition. The 2010 population of 285,465 marked a 62.4 percent increase from 10 years earlier, making it one of the fastest-growing counties in the United States. With a median household income at roughly \$100,000, the county is the state's most affluent.<sup>4</sup>

The Douglas County School District (DCSD) educates more than 64,000 students, making it Colorado's third-largest school district and the second fastest growing district in the Denver metro area. In the 2011-12 school year the district collected \$8,582 in tax revenue for each full-time student enrolled, roughly seven-eighths of the state average. About 72 percent of the \$8,582 (\$6,215) came in as Per Pupil Revenue (PPR) through the state's School Finance Act. Two years later, the district's PPR has increased 2.75 percent to \$6,386.<sup>5</sup>

DCSD's payroll (which accounts for the vast majority of its annual budgeted costs) covers about 7,000 employees, a large majority of whom are also Douglas County residents, making the district far and away the county's largest employer.<sup>6</sup>

In 2008 a majority of the seven-member Board of Education agreed to raise teacher salaries on the promise of additional local tax dollars. Months later, Douglas County voters rejected the tax proposal. In November 2009 a slate of reform-minded school board

candidates swept to victory on a platform that promised more parental choice and teacher performance pay. Since assuming the majority following the November 2009 election, Board leaders have delivered an ambitious three-part strategic plan:

- Enhanced student and parental choice, including public and private options
- An enriched system of world-class standards, curriculum, and assessments
- Performance-based instructional evaluations, pay, and career growth

The Board has combined the strategic plan with a fiscally conservative approach. Saving an additional 4 percent of annual general fund spending beyond the constitutional requirement has moved the district away from the "boom-and-bust" budgeting method that depends on taxpayer bailouts through additional mill levies.<sup>7</sup> The policy has earned the district a very high AA+ bond rating, which yields considerable savings through lower debt financing costs.<sup>8</sup> Further savings have been achieved through the elimination of union-negotiated perks as well as a 25 percent reduction in spending on central office administration from 2009 to 2013.<sup>9</sup>

The interconnected components of innovation are meant to devolve power to families and local schools, and to reshape *what* is taught and *how*. The strategy also is designed to attract more entrepreneurial teachers and creative school leaders *who* will enhance student learning



opportunities. The following sections highlight the course of many key changes, the challenges they face, and the promise of greater success that comes from fundamentally reimagining how education is delivered in an American suburban school system.

### *Blueprint for Choice*

The Douglas County School District's pioneering work through the March 2011 adoption of the Blueprint for Choice represents one leg of the ambitious reform agenda. The Board of Education recognized that traditional district programs cannot best serve every student, and that competition helps to foster excellence. Citizen input and staff research built the Blueprint. In 2010 board leaders convened a School Choice Task Force made up of educators, parents, community members, and other policy experts.<sup>10</sup> Participants recommended policy changes in numerous areas including private vouchers, open enrollment, charter schools, neighborhood school empowerment, contract schools, home education options, and virtual learning.

At the forefront of the Blueprint is the unique Choice Scholarship Program to provide publicly funded, parent-directed learning options with partner private schools. The pilot program was designed to serve 500 eligible students starting in the 2011-12 school year. Family income does not factor into eligibility, but prior district enrollment is required. The district approved 21 private school partners—16 religiously affiliated, 5 independent—to receive tuition payments worth about \$4,600 a year for each student

who opted to enroll. The ACLU and other plaintiffs filed a lawsuit, and a Denver district judge enjoined the program in August 2011. In March 2013, the Colorado Court of Appeals reversed the lower court's injunction and upheld the constitutionality of the program. Undaunted by the appeals court ruling, plaintiffs have sought review in the Colorado Supreme Court, which has not yet decided whether to take the case. Regardless, the litigation should be concluded by 2014.<sup>11</sup>

The groundbreaking advances for private school choice are especially remarkable in an area where demand for educational alternatives is relatively small. The DCSD board has demonstrated an extremely rare blend of commitment to seeing all children effectively and suitably served, respect for parents as the primary directors of their children's education, and humility in recognizing that the district cannot provide the best service for every single child.

The commitment to parental choice extends well beyond Choice Scholarships. Thirteen charter schools operate under authorization by the district, five of which have opened since 2010.<sup>12</sup> Most of the charters offer a Core Knowledge program, though there are other options as well. The DCSD board stands out as one of very few to extend full, equitable sharing of local property tax dollars with its authorized charters. They also have used facility leasing arrangements with new charters to achieve fiscally responsible development while striving to meet demand for different education options with a growing population.<sup>13</sup>

**In March 2013, the Colorado Court of Appeals reversed the lower court's injunction and upheld the constitutionality of the [Choice Scholarship Program].**

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Following the Blueprint, DCSD also has extended neighborhood school authority to the site level to cater programming that matches with more localized student interests and needs. An online School Choice Selector helps families find the most suitable options.<sup>14</sup>

Under a parent-friendly open enrollment policy, the rate of students who enroll in DCSD from outside district lines is more than 50 percent greater than those who leave the district.<sup>15</sup> District leaders also are working to expand the flexible digital course options within the in-house eDCSD cyberschool.<sup>16</sup> Finally, they have expanded services for homeschoolers by providing a range of options that include dual enrollment and enrichment, as well as registration and testing services.<sup>17</sup>

#### ***World-Class Education: Raising the Bar***

Not surprisingly, Douglas County has sustained a record as a relatively high achiever. Typical DCSD students show slightly more year-to-year learning growth than their counterparts in other Colorado public schools. Among the state's 30 largest school districts, none earns as high a share of A-level schools as DCSD.<sup>18</sup>

Students in the suburban district significantly outperform Colorado averages on rates of state-assessed proficiency, on-time graduation, and remediation at in-state colleges. DCSD students' tested proficiency outstrips the state by an average of 12 percentage points on the Transitional Colorado Assessment Program (TCAP). On the mandatory ACT exam, the district's

11th graders maintain a nearly 2-point lead over the state average, having improved their score nearly a full point from 2009 to 2013.<sup>19</sup>

DCSD's student enrollment has grown 10 percent during the same time span. Even so, the number of students taking rigorous Advanced Placement courses has increased by more than 60 percent. The share of students who receive credit from the AP test has dropped but slightly.<sup>20</sup>

From 2010 to 2012, with consistent graduation standards in place, the rate of DCSD students who complete high school on time rose from 83 to 87 percent.<sup>21</sup> Student attainment is strong, but could be still stronger. Though considerably better than the state at large and better than previous years, a quarter of DCSD's 2011 graduates who enrolled at a Colorado postsecondary institution still need extra academic help before they can tackle college-level material.<sup>22</sup>

Nonetheless, the relatively high performance only tells part of the story. Without pressure from state or national policymakers to excel further, DCSD for years has reached the comfort of an achievement plateau. Academic growth as a credible measurement represents a relatively recent phenomenon. The ability to track individual student progress provides a more nuanced picture of learning success, and a platform for future improvement. In Colorado generally, and in DCSD particularly, most students who fall behind in math or reading are not on track to catch up.<sup>23</sup>

Broader international comparisons suggest targets of opportunity to excel further. A tool known as the Global Report Card builds on state, national, and international testing data to estimate how a given school district stacks up against a select group of other nations. In math, DCSD outperforms Canada and Switzerland, rates about even with Finland, and lags behind top-performing Singapore.<sup>24</sup>

Major employers seek more qualified applicants for knowledge-based jobs both present and future, applicants who possess skill sets that vary from the industrial demands of prior generations.

DCSD leaders have confronted head-on the challenge of raising the bar of expectations, when they easily could rest on their relative standing within the state. As a result, the district can help prepare even more well-educated citizens to reach their potential.

### *21st Century Curriculum*

Douglas County superintendent Elizabeth Fagen, hired by the reform board majority in 2010, frequently articulates the need to provide students with deeper learning opportunities. The district's systemic overhaul is framed around the four recognized Cs of 21st century education: Creativity, Collaboration, Communication, and Critical Thinking.<sup>25</sup>

To implement a district-wide program focused on developing 21st century skills, DCSD has worked to provide a new "guaranteed and viable curriculum" (GVC). The "guarantee" is that students will have access to the same learning outcomes, part of the change from what previously

was taught.<sup>26</sup> The "viability" is that the material can be presented and mastered by the appropriate level of student in a timely manner. To work effectively, GVC has to align across grade levels and across subject areas in order to offer students a coherent learning experience.

Following legislative changes, the State Board of Education in December 2009 adopted new Colorado Academic Standards (CAS) that now cover 10 subject areas. The CAS represent formal expectations of what students ought to know and be able to do in order to advance to the next step of their academic career, and ultimately to become responsible and productive citizens. In 2010 the State Board signed on to the Common Core standards, making changes to the CAS in math and language arts, as a condition to apply for federal Race to the Top funds.<sup>27</sup>

Under state law, Colorado schools must implement fully the new standards by the 2013-14 school year. DCSD leaders reviewed the CAS and Common Core and determined they did not focus sufficiently on the "higher-order thinking" students will need to succeed – and even lead – globally. GVC's design embraces the idea of teachers as facilitators, of students taking greater ownership of their learning. Focusing on the four Cs, the set of 21st century skills, the curriculum infuses greater use of technology into helping students master content more deeply through projects both inside and outside the classroom.<sup>28</sup>

In the summer of 2012 about 300 teachers participated in a three-

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day lesson writing academy, then implemented the lessons in classrooms during the subsequent school year. All told, more than 500 district teachers from across subject disciplines helped to craft the latest iteration of GVC. DCSD reached out to local firms and Fortune 500 companies to make sure the knowledge and skills promoted in the new curriculum aligned to private-sector workforce needs. The response was overwhelmingly positive.

DCSD leaders continue the work of collecting model lessons that can be shared through a district-wide database. Though small adjustments may continue to be made, the GVC commenced full-scale implementation in the fall of 2013.<sup>29</sup>

In July 2013 the DCSD Board of Education asserted its constitutional prerogative to direct local instruction and adopted a resolution opposing the Common Core as inadequate for the district’s goals and expectations. The justification rests in a confidence that the GVC will work effectively as it unfolds:

...[T]he Douglas County School District’s standards are more rigorous, more demanding, more thorough, and reflect higher expectations and aspirations for our students than any national standard now in existence, including the Common Core Standards. In Douglas County, our taxpayers, parents, teachers and students expect the very highest and rigorous standards – as embodied in our Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum – that will allow

our students to learn today and lead tomorrow.<sup>30</sup>

### *Balanced Assessment System*

The current standardized testing regime only roughly captures students’ overall learning, not to mention 21st century skills like creativity and collaboration. State tests provide a helpful but limited picture of the knowledge and skills students acquire that will serve them in their future lives and careers. Coming up with a system to measure more effectively the depth and diversity of student learning poses a real challenge. Without the critical component of a Balanced Assessment System (BAS), it would be extremely difficult for DCSD educators to show, and for others to see, that students are mastering the new curriculum.

The system’s purpose “is to provide teachers, parents, and students the full spectrum of student performance.”<sup>31</sup> While achieving a perfect picture is impossible, room to improve the old model remains. “The end goal is to demonstrate learning on a higher level,” says DCSD chief system performance officer Syna Morgan. Her office regularly refers to the importance of measuring “transfer skills,” knowledge that students will be able to use in different situations, especially in a college or career environment.<sup>32</sup>

The process of creating the BAS includes the development and coherent alignment of new assessment tools. The objective is to present the results in a clear and timely manner to teachers and parents in order to help students close learning gaps

and maximize their potential. During the 2012-13 school year, the district implemented new valid interim assessments for math and reading. Tests for science and social studies are being released for 2013-14.<sup>33</sup> These instruments are capable of providing school-level comparisons showing achievement and growth. Putting together the various assessment pieces, DCSD is making progress toward a system that ultimately may lead to the use of video games and virtual learning to measure student learning (see Appendix A).<sup>34</sup>

As part of the district's unique new InspirED Innovation software platform (see page 10), all schools this year can access a common bank of performance-based assessments. In addition to state and district-wide test data, teachers and leaders also will be able to draw from multiple writing assessment systems, district-purchased components of the PARCC<sup>35</sup> and Smarter Balance interstate testing consortia, and the products of a larger cooperative venture. DCSD belongs to Ed Leader 21, a network of 120 school districts in 32 states teaming together to create and share performance-based assessments that measure 21st century skills, or the 4 Cs.<sup>36</sup> All these tests are available for formative purposes—to diagnose student strengths and weaknesses so teachers can prescribe instruction in a more timely and effective manner.

### **A System Rebuilt to Perform** *Before and Beyond SB 191: CITE 1.0*

Successfully raising the academic bar without bankrupting the treasury requires significant adjustments to a large-scale K-12 education system. At

the core of Douglas County's high-profile, performance-based changes is the CITE evaluation tool, short for "Continuous Improvement of Teacher Effectiveness." The district, in conjunction with the Douglas County Federation of Teachers, began to develop a new evaluation system in 2009. As employees wrapped up months of work crafting a pilot system for the 2010-11 school year, the General Assembly adopted Senate Bill 191. The bipartisan legislation set new requirements for the Licensed Personnel Performance Evaluation Act. Among the changes, at least 50 percent of evaluations must be linked to measures of student growth.<sup>37</sup>

The state's Council on Educator Effectiveness began to implement the large-scale changes required in the legislation. The prescriptive reforms presented DCSD leaders with a decision. They rejected the option of using the model evaluation instrument crafted by the Colorado Department of Education (CDE).<sup>38</sup> Seeing the state's 30-page evaluation tool as "too redundant, and too ambiguous," the district instead opted to revamp the original CITE plan, aligning it to state guidelines and making further refinements.<sup>39</sup> DCSD is one of only seven districts statewide to craft its own evaluation system both for teachers and principals, as allowed under the 2010 law.<sup>40</sup>

### *Evaluating Teachers with CITE 2.0*

Mirroring the requirements of the updated Licensed Personnel Performance Evaluation Act, DCSD's template for evaluating teachers features six instructional quality standards. CITE 2.0's first five

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Assistant  
Superintendent  
Dan McMinimee**

standards were used in classrooms during 2012-13 to rate teacher effectiveness across the district. In coming years these standards, summarized in Appendix B, together will comprise 50 percent of a teacher’s evaluation.<sup>41</sup>

The first five standards are broken down into 29 elements. On 28 of the 29 elements teachers can earn one of four ratings.<sup>42</sup> From highest to lowest, the ratings are Highly Effective, Effective, Partially Effective, and Ineffective. Teachers also accumulate an overall evaluation rating on the same four-tiered scale.

The CITE evaluation tool was built to align with the important developing pieces of the Balanced Assessment System. Formal input from teachers was crucial to the development of the tool, and of various refined rubrics for specialized licensed positions. Many licensed educators from art and music teachers to counselors, librarians, and literacy specialists have pitched in to define relevant rubrics that correspond directly with their “job-specific duties.”<sup>43</sup>

Hundreds of hours of collaborative work have resulted in a clearer set of professional targets for teachers to meet. “We are measuring the most important things teachers teach,” wrote DCSD board president John Carson.<sup>44</sup>

The sixth and final standard will measure student academic growth. TCAP tests are just one of a host of reliable assessments used to help determine a teacher’s evaluation rating. Also included in Standard 6 are basic literacy testing tools,

Advanced Placement exams, specialized instruments for special-needs and English language learners, and various internally developed assessments.

To comply with the statewide implementation of SB 191’s significant changes, DCSD will make use of the Standard 6 assessments to determine the other 50 percent of a teacher’s evaluation rating in 2013-14. District leaders believe the large-scale pilot program in the prior school year has given them an edge. “We think we’re a year ahead of other school districts because we’ve used [the CITE 2.0] tool,” said assistant superintendent Dan McMinimee.<sup>45</sup>

### *InspirED Innovation*

In July 2013 the district unveiled the new InspirED Innovation software tool, designed to help enable DCSD teachers enhance their professional performance. The unique creation was developed internally through hours of extra work by DCSD technology staff. In its first phase, the tool streamlines the process of creating lessons with relevant student learning activities through Backward Planning. A “drag-and-drop” computer interface gives teachers easy access to standards and assessments that measure student progress. The tool streamlines planning time so teachers can focus on developing high-quality instruction focused on students’ needs.

The software also allows teachers to receive real-time feedback from their school leadership on student growth results and other classroom data. This feature will help teachers to measure their own progress toward

professional evaluation milestones and increased compensation, as the academic year proceeds.

After a preview of the final product, one DCSD elementary teacher rated the system an A-plus. "I did not become a teacher to do paperwork or to sit at a desk and cipher through things. I want to be in the classroom with my kids," another teacher said. "Whether we knew we wanted it or not, this is the tool that teachers have been waiting for, because it compiles everything."<sup>46</sup>

### *Principals "LEAD"*

Corresponding with the CITE evaluation upgrade for teachers and other licensed specialists, DCSD also has focused on defining and measuring school principal performance. A large group of principals met during the 2012-13 school year to adapt the state's model standards for school leaders and to align them closely (though not exactly) with CITE.<sup>47</sup> In addition to the Standard 6 assessment piece, the Leadership through Effective Analysis and Data (LEAD) system rates school-level administrators on five performance standards, summarized in Appendix B.<sup>48</sup>

The LEAD framework captures the breadth of important responsibilities in a principal's job description. A meaningful application of the Instructional Leadership and Evaluation standards particularly could yield powerful effects on classroom outcomes. In most traditional K-12 systems, evaluators face far greater costs than benefits for identifying poor classroom performers. Attaching accountability

to the challenging role of instructional leadership and evaluation shifts the balance of incentives. A performance-based system broadly aligns the interests of teachers and principals so that ineffective instruction is improved, or ultimately removed and replaced.<sup>49</sup>

LEAD was used to benchmark principal performance on the standards in the 2012-13 school year, and to set goals for professional improvement during 2013-14.

### *Rethinking Professional Development*

To meet the changing needs of a district dedicated to achieving world-class academic standards, Douglas County has redefined professional development to align with educator evaluations. As the process continues to unfold, the number of available courses continues to grow. Many DCSD teachers need enhanced understanding of goal-setting and Backward Planning, of successful professional habits, of fostering 21st century learning, or of restorative classroom practices. DCSD has discarded the "sit-and-get" method of professional development in favor of "product-based learning" that is expected to manifest itself in the classroom setting. All courses require teachers to complete a project in order to earn credit.<sup>50</sup>

In keeping with the district's emphasis on choice in its strategic plan, professional courses look different from place to place. The needs of individual school programs and philosophies largely drive content and delivery. Many courses are

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offered in person at nearly 50 different district sites, mostly school buildings, though educators can complete some courses fully online or in a “blended” manner (divided between in-person and online settings). Trainers both internal and external to the district may lead the instruction. Teachers enroll through a centralized online course catalog.<sup>51</sup>

To help develop and customize the course offerings for each school, representatives of more than 60 DCSD schools participated in the Change Agent Program in 2012-13. An administrator and a teacher-leader selected by the principal from each school helped research and design the general Resource Courses. A principal or Professional Learning Specialist<sup>52</sup> can tailor the course and run it on-site for teachers in a certain subject area or grade level. Teachers incur no cost in taking advantage of these resources. In fact, they can receive up to \$300 for taking two courses that align with school and district goals and that focus on improving their effectiveness through CITE.<sup>53</sup>

The challenge going forward will be to sustain the variety and flexibility of relevant course offerings for educators. As with its students, DCSD aims to be able to differentiate learning effectively between teachers in need of remedial or advanced instruction. “As people grow in their professional life, we want to meet their progression,” said Pat McGraw, a former union officer who oversees the program for DCSD. “Development of our people is a priority. Teachers are most important in determining whether a child will be successful or not.”<sup>54</sup>

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## **Breakthrough in Educator Professionalism**

Many of the assumptions that guide contemporary American education systems are rooted in collectivist thought. The reigning single-salary schedule offers the clearest example of the inefficiency of this approach. The salary advancement of certified employees according to seniority and degree credentials misaligns resources with student outcomes. In 2007-08 the average Colorado teacher earned an \$8,000 “bump” for holding a masters degree, at a statewide cost of nearly \$230 million, or 3 percent of total K-12 operating budgets.<sup>55</sup> Recent research unanimously has shown the standard practice of granting permanent pay increases for earning advanced degree credits has no significant impact on measurable student learning.<sup>56</sup>

Further, the failure to make distinctions regarding different professional specialties—by grade level or subject area—sends confused signals to teacher training institutions. College students see no monetary benefit to teaching advanced math or helping students with certain kinds of special needs as compared to other professional assignments. As a result, colleges and universities often prepare too few qualified instructors in some fields and too many in others. A recent *Education Week* analysis found some serious imbalances in several states. A number of states produced up to three (Delaware), four (Pennsylvania), or even nine times (Illinois) as many elementary teachers as there were positions available in 2010.<sup>57</sup>

The original version of the CITE evaluation system was designed to underlie a series of individual, group, and school-wide pay incentives for teachers. Seen as a tool to promote harder work and better classroom results, the track record of incentive pay has been mixed at best. Prominent studies in Nashville and New York City have shown very little or no benefit for students from either blindly distributed individual incentives or school-wide bonuses.<sup>58</sup> By contrast, a true performance-based pay system, like the one DCSD has adopted, completely disconnects from the single-salary schedule's automatic increases for seniority and credentials.

The process of moving to a performance-based and market-based footing was accelerated by a dramatic change in labor relations. While some groundwork was laid in previous years, district leaders, teachers, and principals forged the bulk of the transformation during the 2012-13 term.

### *Opening Negotiations*

A 2010 Independence Institute analysis found only one of Colorado's 42 bargaining school districts had "an established policy that thoroughly ensures the public's right to observe bargaining negotiations."<sup>59</sup> Since that time, an increased interest in transparency has led three districts to open at least some of their bargaining sessions, with more citizens demanding and board leaders considering the approach. Among them, Douglas County clearly has provided the greatest transparency and public access to union negotiations.

The district's master contract with the Douglas County Federation of Teachers (DCFT), an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, was scheduled to expire or be renewed on June 30, 2012. The contract had given the DCFT exclusive representative status over negotiated teacher issues since 1972.<sup>60</sup> Most prominent among the negotiated issues was whether to continue or discard DCSD's modified single-salary schedule. A fundamental redesign of teacher compensation first would have to proceed through the bargaining table.

Douglas County voters in the November 2011 election solidified the unanimous pro-reform school board majority. They also rejected a controversial request to raise local property taxes that would have funded the infrastructure of a new evaluation and performance system. Shortly thereafter, tensions between the Board of Education and the teachers union began to boil over.

In February 2012 a locally-created citizens' group known as Parent Led Reform circulated a petition calling for the next round of negotiations to be held in public session so differences could be aired and resolved openly. The group's leader, Karin Piper, delivered the request during public testimony at a school board meeting. By the next meeting in early March, DCFT president Brenda Smith formally offered to hold open negotiations for the first time in the school district's history.<sup>61</sup> The Board voted to accept the request on March 20, and open sessions commenced on April 11. A total of 10 sessions were held between April and June.<sup>62</sup>

**DCFT president Brenda Smith formally offered to hold open negotiations for the first time in the school district's history.**



**[DCSD uncovered] arrangements for additional payments to union officers, totaling \$1.3 million over a five-year period...**

**Trading in Union Perks**

DCSD negotiators quickly set the tone of bargaining sessions with an aggressive set of proposals. The election sent a strong twofold message from local voters: proceed with bold reforms, but no new revenues will be provided to develop performance-based systems. As a result, district leaders had to look at redirecting existing resources. Cuts to central administration staffing had provided a small amount of relief. In order to reshape compensation and to end a four-year teacher pay freeze, DCSD leaders targeted various collective bargaining perks for removal.

1. **Paid Union Officers:** Fourteen Colorado school district collective bargaining agreements provide tax dollars to underwrite union activities performed by employees released from full-time classroom duties.<sup>63</sup> Uncovering arrangements for additional payments to union officers, totaling \$1.3 million over a five-year period, Douglas County leaders initially offered to continue the payments in exchange for direct accountability to the superintendent. During contract negotiations, DCFT representatives conceded to ending district payment of union officer salaries but fought to continue pension contributions through the Public Employee Retirement Association (PERA).
2. **Extended Service Severance Benefits:** An embedded feature of the collective bargaining contract was a substantial

lump-sum payout to departing teachers with 15 or more years of district teaching experience. DCSD negotiators proposed eliminating Extended Service Severance Benefits to redirect an estimated \$2 million into rewarding current employees. After initial union resistance, the two parties agreed to phase out the perks by 2013. An exception is provided to maintain the benefits for teachers who earn a Highly Effective rating on their CITE evaluation.<sup>64</sup>

3. **Longevity Pay:** Adding to the inefficiencies of the single-salary schedule, the contract with DCFT offered extra automatic salary increases to teachers completing their 14th, 19th, 24th, and 29th years of service. Teachers at each of the four steps would gain an extra \$750 a year, \$1,500 if they possessed a master's degree. The school board's wishes to phase out Longevity Pay and to redirect the funds into performance pay prevailed.

***Ending Dues Deductions***

DCFT leaders eventually accepted many of the proposed compensation changes but rebuffed three of the board's key proposals: allowing other groups to bargain for teachers, requiring the union to pay the entirety of its officers' compensation, and ending the collection of union dues through the district payroll system.

The two parties were unable to reach an agreement before the contract expired in June 2012. The union's status as monopoly bargaining agent

thus simply lapsed. Colorado school boards have great latitude in deciding whether and how to negotiate with employee representatives. DCFT's pleas to the state labor department director for intervention went unheeded. Lt. Gov. Joe Garcia and Gov. John Hickenlooper went no further than to urge publicly that a "spirit of collaboration and cooperation be maintained in Douglas County."<sup>65</sup> The district is now free to negotiate directly with its licensed teachers.

On September 5, 2012, the Board of Education ratified a policy stating that DCSD no longer would "collect, or participate in the collection of, dues or fees of any kind from its employees for, or on behalf of, any labor union or labor-union affiliated organization..." (see Appendix C for full policy).<sup>66</sup> Board leaders made the prohibition enforceable by explicitly granting the right of Douglas County residents to sue the district for breaching the clear language. The policy further ended the practice of compensating unaccountable union officers.

Most Colorado school districts collect and bundle dues payments to labor organizations through public payroll systems. The 40 districts with recognized unions all have the practice protected in bargaining language to ensure funds are gathered at the local level and then funneled to the state and national organizations. Yet even most of the state's non-union districts send money to the Colorado Education Association or other labor organizations on behalf of individual employees who have opted to join. A survey of 95 of the state's 138 non-union districts found 74, or nearly 80 percent, collect union dues on this

basis.<sup>67</sup> Though it is the largest non-union district and only recently ended its contractual relationship with the local union, DCSD stands in the minority and may be the only district to have a formal prohibition in effect.

DCSD board leaders recognized that less than 1 percent of collected union funds served the purpose of providing professional development to instructors, and that more than 60 percent of funds supported the state and national AFT organizations, particularly in their efforts to influence political campaigns and elections. During negotiations, union representatives resisted the demand to stop payroll dues collections, even claiming that such a change would violate the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. They threatened a lawsuit.<sup>68</sup> No such legal complaint has ever been filed.

When the District collected dues on the union's behalf, about 70 percent of DCSD teachers participated in payroll withholding. Since its monopoly bargaining status and its access to district resources have ended, the number certainly has decreased, though DCFT closely guards its current membership figures. The union now offers on its website a direct deposit option from a bank or credit card account, including separate signups for general dues payments and a political campaign fund.<sup>69</sup>

## A New Compensation System

### *"Pay for Performance" Now a Reality*

Two decades ago Douglas County established itself as a pioneer in teacher compensation reform. The

**Yet even most of the state's non-union districts send money to the Colorado Education Association or other labor organizations...**

**The union now offers on its website a direct deposit option from a bank or credit card account...**

system in operation from 1994 to 2008 frequently was classified as “pay for performance,” though it qualified in only a rudimentary sense. The plan essentially represented modest additions to the single-salary schedule. Knowledge-based inputs and years of experience were still the primary driving factors. To receive credit for seniority, instructors had to cross the relatively low bar of receiving a proficient evaluation in a binary (two-tier) rating system. In the 1999-2000 school year, 98 percent of teachers were rated proficient.<sup>70</sup>

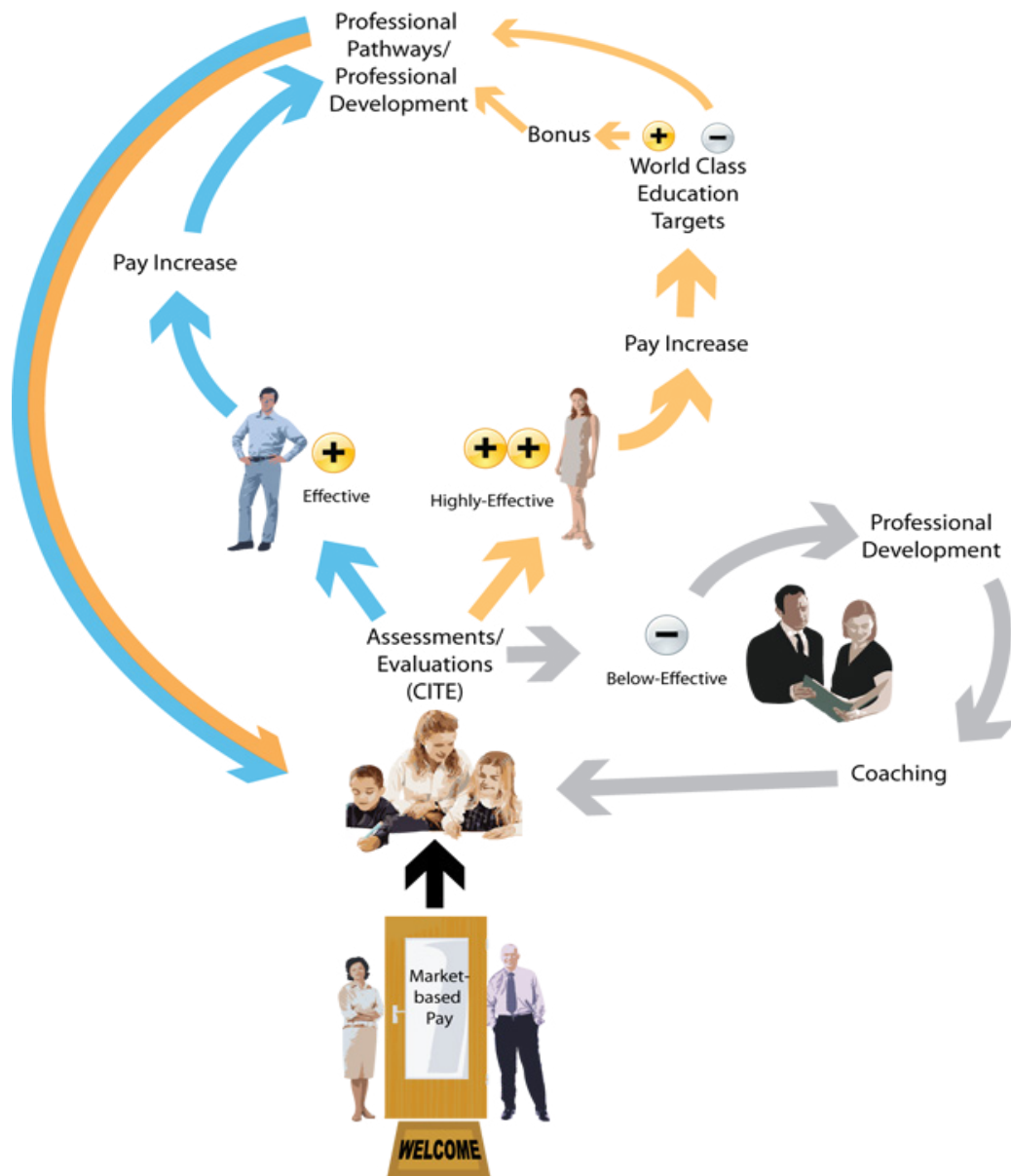
The system added a series of bonuses atop the traditional salary scale. To receive an Outstanding Teacher award, educators had to submit classroom portfolios. Many of the best candidates lacked time to complete the project. Skills-Based Pay was supposed to be given in support of school district goals, but often rewarded “skills blocks” that did not develop better employees. Site leaders were given very small pots of money in the form of Responsibility Pay to distribute at their discretion to teachers who worked on a committee or with an extra-curricular activity. Small stipends also were available to compensate teachers for working on district-level projects, such as implementing the “pay for performance” plan. Finally, the record of Group Incentives to reward collaborative efforts was uneven, sometimes going to excellent efforts and sometimes funding glorified book clubs.<sup>71</sup>

In the program’s first 10 years, DCSD employees took in a total of \$12.5 million in bonuses. More than 40 percent funded 12,207

Group Incentive payouts, while about 3,000 Outstanding Teacher bonuses went out in the amount of nearly \$3.3 million. The rest covered Responsibility Pay and Skills-Based Pay. In 2008, then-DCFT president Brenda Smith touted three local property tax measures passed since 1994 as successes of the performance pay plan.<sup>72</sup> Shortly thereafter came Douglas County’s failed mill levy and bond elections that helped to launch the shift in school board power and the truly groundbreaking changes to the local education system.

By 2013, with the CITE evaluation system in place, DCSD was fully prepared to embrace performance-based compensation that represents a true departure from the single-salary schedule. The first five standards of CITE all were used to assign roughly 3,000 teachers one of the four ratings, from Highly Effective to Ineffective. The rating not only represents the primary factor in determining changes to a teacher’s compensation, but also makes a teacher eligible for additional career and pay opportunities at the Effective level or higher (see figure 2).<sup>73</sup>

Adhering to the guidelines of SB 191, pay for performance in the 2013-14 school year and beyond also will incorporate measures of student academic growth. Results from the TCAP state assessment and from district internal assessments in math and reading will comprise 50 percent of educator evaluations, and thus play a more significant role in determining levels of teacher pay. Effectiveness now has become the primary factor in differentiating educator salaries. The



**Nearly all American K-12 pay systems not only fail to distinguish teachers by effectiveness but also by job description.**

**Figure 2.**

Source: Douglas County School District, <http://www.dcsdk12.org>

new program therefore truly deserves the title of Pay for Performance.

### **Market-Based Pay**

Nearly all American K-12 pay systems not only fail to distinguish teachers by effectiveness but also by job description. First-year teachers in elementary classrooms are paid the same as first-year physical education, foreign language, math, and special

education instructors. A few exceptions exist. The Classical Academy, a large Colorado Springs charter school, has pioneered differential pay to suit the needs of its instructional program. Salary premiums have been used as high as 20 percent (for qualified Latin teachers).<sup>74</sup> But no large-scale precedent of market-based pay in K-12 education is known to exist.

**[DCSD's human resources officer] could not believe that licensed educators in so many different positions all were paid the same based on two factors: seniority and degree credentials.**

Several states have considered initiatives to pay math and science teachers more. Union resistance often derails such policy changes with arguments that differentiated pay undervalues certain kinds of instructors, or even discriminates against women (who are less likely to teach math and science). Some initiatives have overcome resistance but either never get off the ground or, if they do, fail to effect significant change. A differential pay plan in California has borne no fruit because changes are made subject to local collective bargaining processes. A Georgia state law and Denver's own ProComp plan offer bonuses for limited numbers of hard-to-fill positions, but fail to provide sustainable pay systems that recognize scarcity in certain teaching specialties.<sup>75</sup>

When Brian Cesare joined DCSD as chief human resources officer after more than 20 years in comparable private-sector positions, he could not believe that licensed educators in so many different positions all were paid the same based on two factors: seniority and degree credentials. "I was baffled we were looking at only two positions for setting pay," he said. "A teacher is a teacher, even though there are 70 different types of teachers?"<sup>76</sup>

DCSD at first has used market demand factors to differentiate base pay only for new hires. Existing teachers could not earn less under the new system. However, the rate of 2013 salary increases partly was determined by the market demand for a teacher's job position. Pay changes were set according to the reported input of new state funding, with the Effective

teacher who is "at market" used as the norm.<sup>77</sup>

In May, the district issued all Effective teachers a 2 percent bonus plus a permanent salary increase. The increase for those in harder-to-fill specialties was 3 percent, compared to only a 1.5 percent increase for their peers in "above market" positions. Likewise, all Highly Effective teachers earned a 1 percent bonus. But based on supply and demand, they also could collect anywhere from a 4.5 percent to a 7 percent permanent raise.<sup>78</sup> DCSD's board followed a conservative budgeting approach. When extra property tax revenues later arrived, DCSD further increased teacher salaries on average by an additional 1 percent. More effective instructors in higher-demand positions received larger increases.<sup>79</sup>

Developing an equitable and coherent system presented DCSD officials with a challenge. In the private sector, a human resources officer can call various industries to gather a useful picture of the job market in setting compensation. National data on the education sector gave Cesare very limited help, however. Further, the few models within the world of education use only bonuses for certain positions instead of a truly comprehensive market-based pay system. DCSD began to build a market-based pay model that stands as the first of its kind in K-12 education. Essentially starting from scratch, district leaders asked all principals to rank the 70-plus positions based on their scarcity. DCSD began to test the model in the spring 2012 hiring process. Daily feedback from school leaders resulted in continual adjustments. By 2013, the

market-based pay model had been sufficiently stabilized. Nearly all of the positions remained in the same band, with a few more specialized positions added.<sup>80</sup>

As shown in figure 3, DCSD has placed all teaching positions in one of five different salary bands, based on the supply of qualified applicants. Average entry-level pay in the highest band for occupational therapists and teachers who work with severe special needs students exceeds that for physical education, middle school drama, and upper elementary classroom teachers by roughly 40 percent. Still, the bands are flexible in two ways. First, as job market trends change, positions may move into

different bands. Second, significant room exists within each band to distinguish educator pay based on prior experience, special skills, and job performance. In fact, unlike nearly all K-12 systems, the characteristic of performance is the true primary driver of Douglas County teacher compensation.

Differentiating pay by job description likely will lead to the attraction and retention of more high-quality professionals in harder-to-fill specialties. The effects of competition over time could lead surrounding districts to adjust their own pay models accordingly. In turn, colleges of education would receive stronger, clearer signals concerning how much

**DCSD began to build a market-based pay model that stands as the first of its kind in K-12 education.**

CERTIFIED SALARY BANDS				
BAND - 25	B30	B35	B40	B45
ART MID/SEN	ADMIN INTERN EL ED	ALTERNATIVE ED	ACE	NURSE HEALTH SERVICES
DRAMA MIDDLE	ART ELEMENTARY	BRT	ADMIN INTERN	AUDIOLOGIST
FIFTH GRADE TEACHER	BUSINESS	COORD SWAP	AGRICULTURE	HEARING IMPAIRED
FOURTH GRADE TEACHER	CONSUMER FAMILY STUDIES	COUNSELOR SEN	CRIMINAL JUSTICE	OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST
FRESHMAN TRANSITION	COUNSELOR - MID	ENGLISH MID/SEN	ENGINEERING	PSYCHOLOGIST
HEALTH E/M/S	DEAN INSTRUCTOR	FIRST GRADE TEACHER	ESL/ELL	SEVERE NEEDS
LIBRARIAN	DEAN MIDDLE/SENIOR	FOREIGN LANGUAGE FR/SP	FOREIGN LANGUAGE ASL	SIED
PHYS ED E/M/S	DRAMA SENIOR	GIFTED/TALENTED	FOREIGN LANGUAGE CHINESE	SPEECH LANG PATHOL
SECOND GRADE TEACHER	MUSIC ELEM	GRADE K	FOREIGN LANGUAGE GERMAN	VISUALLY IMPAIRED
SOCIAL STUDIES E/M	MUSIC INSTRUMENTAL FEED	LITERACY	FOREIGN LANGUAGE JAPANESE	
SPEECH MIDDLE	MUSIC INSTRUMENTAL MID	LITERACY SPECIALIST	INDUSTRIAL ARTS	
THIRD GRADE TEACHER	MUSIC ORCHESTRA MID/SR	MUSIC INSTRUMENTAL SEN	MATH MID/SEN	
	MUSIC MIDDLE (CHORAL)	RTI	SCIENCE MID/SEN	
	MUSIC SENIOR (CHORAL)	SCIENCE ELEM	SOCIAL WORKER	
	SPEECH SENIOR	SIXTH GRADE ELEM		
	SOCIAL STUDIES SEN	ECSE		
		SPED MODERATE NEEDS		
		STAR LAB		
		TEACHER LIBRARIAN		
		TECHNOLOGY		
(32.5(35-48)61)	(33(36-52)64)	(35(38-60)72)	(37(40-70)82)	(45(50-80)94)

**Figure 3.**

*Source: Douglas County School District*



**Through demonstration of increasing skills, classroom instructors can access a variety of other professional opportunities...**

teaching talent in different specialties they ought to prepare.

The *Denver Post*'s editors described as "innovative" DCSD's bold shift to market-based and performance-based pay: "If it works—and it's important to note that no one is being asked to take a pay cut—it could set an example for how to attract good teachers in all subjects while offering incentives for them to go the extra mile."<sup>81</sup>

*More than a Ladder: Professional Pathways*

Douglas County teachers who earn an Effective or Highly Effective rating are eligible to participate in the Professional Pathways program. Through demonstration of increasing skills, classroom instructors can access a variety of other professional opportunities to contribute to the district's educational mission. Professional educators who wish to devote themselves to classroom duties are free to pursue that path. The district also has worked to increase the number of avenues available for employees to ply their talents and their passions. Then-DCSD administrator Marie Unger summed up the vision behind this focused effort. "When skills increase, so should opportunities," she said.<sup>82</sup>

In their initial 2012 negotiations proposal, DCFT leaders called for the creation of a joint committee with the district—six representatives from each—"to create a new career ladder-based compensation system."<sup>83</sup> Both sides initially agreed. In three meetings, a team of teachers, principals, and central administrators broadened the focus from a vertical

"career ladder" and decided to rename the system Professional Pathways. The group then was reformulated. The district insisted on broader teacher representation than a group handpicked by DCFT, no longer a monopoly bargaining agent. A small cross-section of teachers based on experience, geography, and grade level provided input into the final plan adopted by district leadership. Feedback was solicited from teachers and leaders at different DCSD school sites.<sup>84</sup>

The biggest inspiration for DCSD's Professional Pathways concept came from ACT's World of Work Map, a visualization designed to help aspiring college students see the relationships between different types of careers.<sup>85</sup> Into this design the group fit 42 different pathway options, some for different job classifications, under four major headings (see also figure 4):<sup>86</sup>

- Development (mentoring, training): 20
- Innovation (including organizational design): 10
- Leadership (organizational and employee leadership): 8
- Systems Performance (assessment development, data analysis): 8

About half of the different "pathways" formalized practices already taking place in DCSD, while the remainder represent newly defined opportunities. Each of the pathways includes a formal description, corresponding quality measures, and a link to recommended professional

development opportunities to guide a teacher down her chosen path.<sup>87</sup>

### *World Class Education Targets*

DCSD teachers who earn a Highly Effective rating are eligible for an additional bonus through the achievement of “World Class Education Targets” (WCET). Based on 2012-13 evaluation results, about one in seven teachers were eligible to be rewarded for going above and beyond the standard expectations in 12 defined areas. Besides exhibiting exceptional performance in prominent aspects of the district’s larger themes (e.g., imparting 21st century skills, performing Backward Planning, and practicing restorative justice) WCET also incentivizes teachers to respond to the results of teacher and student surveys.<sup>88</sup>

In all, more than 160 teachers dedicated four long Saturdays during the school year to do the challenging work of defining WCET.<sup>89</sup> Displaced union leaders have attacked the project for lack of specificity. However, teachers who participated in the design process have expressed confidence that the WCET aligns well with the larger pay-for-performance program and should motivate excellence. “If I’m working as a teacher to be Highly Effective, if that’s my goal, the Targets are going to fall right into line,” one middle school instructor observed.<sup>90</sup> The first round of bonuses was issued in September 2013. Eleven different Highly Effective teachers achieved a total of 22 World



**Figure 4.**

Source: Douglas County School District

Class Education Targets. Peer review determined which of the 15 eligible applicants qualified for rewards under the program. DCSD gave teachers stipends worth \$500 for each Target achieved.<sup>91</sup>

### **Signs of Progress**

#### *The First Round*

During February and March 2013, teachers across the state of Colorado participated in the state’s third biennial TELL survey. The inquiry into classroom educators’ opinions of professional learning environments and working conditions not only yielded a significant increase in DCSD teacher participation but also substantially higher marks of satisfaction. Out of nearly 100 questions, two-thirds showed more favorability than 2011, and three-fourths were significantly higher

**...more than 160 teachers dedicated four long Saturdays during the school year to do the challenging work of defining [World Class Education Targets].**

**...95 percent of DCSD teachers said they “are held to high professional standards for delivering instruction”...**

than the state average. For example, 95 percent of DCSD teachers said they “are held to high professional standards for delivering instruction,” and 88 percent agreed with the statement, “Teachers are effective leaders in this school.”<sup>92</sup>

One area of notable weakness, however, was the response from instructors to the new, less-than-fully-known CITE evaluation system. About 35 percent of DCSD teachers felt that evaluations were unfair, while only 37 percent expressed a belief that the “components of the evaluation accurately identify effectiveness.”<sup>93</sup> Assistant superintendent Dan McMinimee compared the responses to the state of Denver Broncos fans early in the 2012 season. Quarterback Peyton Manning then engineered a historic second-half comeback against the San Diego Chargers that resurrected hopes and began an unbroken string of regular season wins. McMinimee believes considerably better results would be seen after the first round of new evaluations was completed.<sup>94</sup> A future gauge of teacher satisfaction with the CITE system could provide valuable insights, as well.

Major district evaluation systems with two different ratings typically find 99 percent or more of teachers to produce “satisfactory” performance.

Districts with more rating options still find upwards of 94 percent land in one of the top two categories.<sup>95</sup> For its first full run, CITE 2.0 issued the Highly Effective designation to 14.7 percent of instructors and the Effective designation to 71 percent (see table 1). DCSD’s outcomes demonstrate somewhat greater variation than other district evaluation systems have shown.<sup>96</sup>

Teacher evaluation systems in traditional K-12 settings often have been criticized for their subjectivity. Any system faces the challenge of producing reliable results among different schools and evaluators. Despite publicized challenges at two elementary schools, DCSD largely found reliable results among different schools on the more subjective half of the new evaluation model required by state law. “We’re closer to a level of perfect consistency than ever before,” McMinimee said, expressing confidence that the district is ahead of nearly all its peers beginning full implementation of state-required evaluation changes in 2013-14.<sup>97</sup>

### *New Professionals Flock In*

Turnover of Douglas County licensed teachers increased from 2012 to 2013, but remained within range of past performance and of neighboring

**Table 1. Douglas County Teachers by Evaluation Rating and Market Salary Band, 2013**

DCSD Teachers	Highly Effective	Effective	Partially Effective	Ineffective	TOTAL
Above Market	216	780	113	2	1,111
At Market	142	650	111	1	904
Below Market	112	834	222	4	1,172
TOTAL	470	2,264	446	7	3,187

districts. The number of DCSD teacher retirements nearly doubled from 53 to 101. The increase partially was due to some veteran teachers taking their last chance at claiming the Extended Service Severance Benefits being phased out. More teachers also submitted their resignations (302, as compared to 219), a result that can be explained by a district in a major transition from a compensation system based on entitlements to a performance-based system.<sup>98</sup> Even so, as of the end of June, five DCSD school sites reported 100 percent teacher retention for 2013-14.<sup>99</sup>

Pay-for-performance programs, though typically less dramatic than what Douglas County has developed, can be used as a tool to motivate underperforming instructors, retain high-quality instructors, and to attract instructors with new characteristics. A strong case can be made that DCSD is succeeding at the third strategy. A total of 6,389 applicants vied for 481 teaching positions in 2013. Among the pool of new teachers, most enter the workforce earning more than they would have under the old single-salary schedule.<sup>100</sup>

### *An Island or a Bridge?*

In 2010 Douglas County embarked on a bold plan to craft a new model of public education. Leaders acknowledge that the district benefited from a favorable starting point. The traditional mode of running a large-scale public K-12 enterprise limited their predecessors' ability to cope with revenue cutbacks and left fiscal challenges to inherit. Overall, though, DCSD undeniably is blessed with some key advantages. Student population growth in the

relatively high-performing district has eased the acceptance of public charter schools as alternative program options. Charter schools also now share as equal partners in DCSD mill levy dollars, virtually unmatched among Colorado districts. Affluence and comparatively strong academic achievement may mean a shorter path to excellence. These advantages also may make it harder for parents and community members to see the need to push higher.

Nonetheless, DCSD has more than its share of engaged parents who readily have taken on leadership and advocacy roles at the school and district level. Board leaders have come from the professional ranks, including respected attorneys, business executives, a former state government official, an engineer, and a physician. The board crucially hired a superintendent who shared the vision and surrounded herself with other leaders who have played instrumental roles in guiding the large pioneering project.

The program of decentralized decision-making, parental empowerment, performance-based management, high standards, 21<sup>st</sup> century learning, and ongoing innovation continues. Whether breaking down the boundaries of choice, raising the bar on educational standards, implementing market-based pay, or reining in union power, the facets of Douglas County's transformative agenda have gathered both critics and admirers from near and far. For now, DCSD stands largely unique and unmatched.

However, a very real question emerges with which other reform-minded

**A total of 6,389 applicants vied for 481 [DCSD] teaching positions in 2013.**

education leaders in Colorado and beyond will have to wrestle. Other districts will find certain ingredients of DCSD's formula cannot be easily transplanted into their particular environments. Reformers in other places will encounter their own challenges of inertia and political will, and may wonder if DCSD is destined to be an island of innovation that thrives for a time on its own. At the same time, many aspects of the growing suburban district's educational reinvention (e.g., market-based pay) could create a formidable competitive pressure that builds a sturdy bridge to other communities that seek to follow, or even surpass, their achievements.

Should its program grow and thrive into 2014, DCSD still faces real challenges to overcome through persistence and innovation. Observers then will note how significantly and how quickly the decentralized, performance-based model builds bridges within and beyond Colorado. The model someday may grow to be a formidable force within American K-12 education. And if it does, many of its roots will be traced to the large and growing school district south of Denver.

### **Conclusion: K-12 Re-imagined**

The combined result of Douglas County's broad and fast-paced changes represents in many respects a fundamental break from systems and practices long embedded in American K-12 education. The fearless commitment to a broad definition of parental choice is without parallel at the local level.

**The model  
someday may  
grow to be a  
formidable  
force within  
American K-12  
education.**

Deeper classroom content, measured by a new battery of tests, evidences a fidelity to higher learning standards that clearly sets DCSD apart from most of its school district peers. And the holistic upgrade of performance-based systems to develop and reward effective professional instruction has very few, if any, rivals. The district has begun to re-imagine what elementary and secondary education can be with lofty aspirations focused on preparing the youth it serves for a dynamic future.

The verdict on the bold reform plan ultimately rests on the outcomes achieved for students. DCSD maintained its relatively high proficiency numbers on 2013 state tests, though no signs of newly charted progress are yet evident. The extensive focus on deeper learning and higher standards means TCAP or other state tests alone cannot adequately capture the results, and that the broader picture of other assessments and rigorous metrics will have to be used.

It certainly is too soon to issue the final verdict. Nearly every available indicator, though, signals that the transformation ought to continue. The promise of a new and greater public education system—rooted in professionalism and the pursuit of excellence, with tax dollars soundly used and focused on empowering decisions at the most local level possible—demands it. Douglas County leaders have forged a path toward success for generations to pursue. It will take the continuing work of many parents, teachers, and other leaders to see it through.

## Appendix A: Three States of DCSD's Balanced Assessment System

Douglas County School District's Balanced Assessment System is conceived to unfold through the following series of three well-defined states:

1. **Critical State:** Aligning the state and common district assessments onto an electronic platform to review and share data has already been achieved. The critical state also includes the development of a Parent Dashboard to view their students' attendance and test results, as well as a public platform on the DCSD website that provides more performance content than is available on the state's SchoolView site. These are set to be rolled out in a future phase of InspirED Innovation.
2. **Desired State:** In two years, DCSD leaders are aiming to move beyond the Critical State to the point where "student performance connects seamlessly to educator performance." A full array of appropriate assessment tools would enable all district teachers to collect, analyze and share measurements of higher-level student thinking.
3. **Ideal State:** Chief system performance officer Syna Morgan envisions a somewhat futuristic "science fiction" scenario in which students inhabit a "virtual learning environment." For all students formal learning no longer would be bound to a physical school site during a prescribed set of hours. Young learners instead could be at a library interacting with international experts in a specific field as part of a deeper educational experience. Rather than being disruptive, assessments would be a "seamless part of learning" that could be captured by decisions made or proficiencies demonstrated in a video game or other virtual environment.

## Appendix B: Summary of CITE and LEAD Evaluation Standards

DCSD's Continuous Improvement of Teacher Effectiveness (CITE) system measures performance based on five standards, summarized as follows:

1. **Outcomes:** Effectiveness is demonstrated through the focused and constructive use of Backward Planning, the formulation of challenging learning objectives first as a guide to planning lessons and other student learning activities.
2. **Performance Assessments:** Effectiveness is demonstrated through careful analysis of testing data, sharing timely feedback with students, and using assessments that foster the 4 Cs and various 21st century skills.
3. **Instruction:** Effectiveness is demonstrated through content expertise and facilitating learning opportunities that use the best available technology to engage all students and to develop higher order thinking and 21st century skills.
4. **Culture and Climate:** Effectiveness is demonstrated through promoting safety and positive relationships, respecting differences, and fostering a "restorative classroom community" to address and prevent wrongdoing.
5. **Professionalism:** Effectiveness is demonstrated through practicing ethics, collaborating with colleagues, creating and applying professional growth that aligns with school needs, and using various methods to communicate with families about classroom goals.

DCSD's Leadership Effectiveness through Analysis and Data (LEAD) measures the effectiveness of principals based on five standards, summarized as follows:



1. **Instructional Leadership:** An effective principal inspires teachers to excel in the first three CITE standards (Outcomes, Assessments, and Instruction), as well as develops and implements innovative plans for school-wide improvement.
2. **Evaluation:** An effective principal conducts thorough, consistent, and confidential evaluations, while coaching staff members to improve and empowering them to lead.
3. **Operational Leadership:** An effective principal hires and retains quality employees; keeps the building safe; develops and manages a student-centered, site-based budget; and communicates school values to the community and school progress to the public.
4. **Leading Continuous Improvement:** An effective principal carries forward the vision for how to get the school to its desired state, inspiring teachers to deepen their level of instruction and to “take learner-centered risks.”
5. **Professionalism:** An effective principal stays updated on relevant research, models personal integrity and professional relationships with staff and stakeholders, and assumes responsibility for decisions affecting the school.

## Appendix C: Douglas County School District Board Policy HB

*“Policy Governing Relationships with Labor Unions or Labor Union-Affiliated Organizations” (Adopted September 5, 2012)<sup>100</sup>*

The Douglas County School District shall not collect, or participate in the collection of, dues or fees of any kind from its employees for, or on behalf of, any labor union or labor-union affiliated organization.

The Douglas County School District shall not use any taxpayer funds to pay, directly or indirectly, any salary, wage, fringe benefits or other

compensation of any kind whatsoever (whether or not such payments are reimbursed to the District) to any person for the purpose of such person serving, on either a full or part-time basis, as an officer, director, employee, representative, or agent of a labor union or labor union-affiliated organization.

It shall be considered an unlawful breach of the fiduciary duty of a Director or the Board of Directors to violate this policy.

The Board recognizes and supports the right of any resident of the Douglas County School District to bring an action for injunctive relief only in a court of competent jurisdiction against the Douglas County School District, and if successful, to recover from the District all reasonable attorneys’ fees and costs in pursuing claims for violation(s) of this Policy HB. To the maximum extent permitted by law, and for purposes of this Policy HB only, the Board of Education hereby waives any and all legal and equitable defenses, including any defense of sovereign immunity, to an action brought by a resident under this Policy HB.

Nothing in this Policy HB shall be construed to, or is intended to prohibit or discourage any employee of the school district from membership or affiliation in or with a labor union or labor union-affiliated organization, or from serving as an officer, director, employee, representative, or agent of such an organization on the employee’s own time and at his or her sole expense.

Nothing in this Policy HB shall be construed to, or is intended to, prohibit or discourage any employee from voluntarily choosing, and making independent financial arrangements, to pay dues or other fees to any private organization as to which any employee desires to maintain membership, including without limitation a labor union or labor union-affiliated organization....

This Policy HB shall not apply to, and shall be subject to, any contracts or agreements currently in effect for the 2012-2013 school year.

## Notes

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JON CALDARA is President of the Independence Institute.

DAVID KOPEL is Research Director of the Independence Institute.

PAMELA BENIGNO is the Director of the Education Policy Center.

BENJAMIN DEGROW is Senior Policy Analyst for the Education Policy Center. He is the author of numerous publications, including *Douglas*

*County's Home-Grown Teachers: The Learning Center Waiver Program, Pioneering Teacher Compensation Reform: K-12 Educator Pay Innovations in Colorado, Nine Key Changes at the Bargaining Table: A Policy Handbook for Colorado School Board Reform Leaders, Online Course-Level Funding: Toward Colorado Secondary Self-Blended Learning Options, and A Scholarship Tax Credit Program for Colorado.*

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