



Create joy and adventure ~ Nurture a culture of quality ~ Celebrate the process ~ Honor perspectives and intentions ~ Aspire to understand every voice ~ Champion a growth mindset

Be Crew

October 20, 2017

Dear DDES Community,

In the words of my Italian grandmother, "Oh, Mio!" The annual season in which school accountability measures are released has returned. I join you as a DDES school leader and parent, in the hopes of better understanding these complex measures and what matters for our school and our families. **I will warn you that this is a lot of information and this is the start of a long analysis and important advocacy for all Denver students, so dive in and I will update with the most current information soon.**

Before I get into the details, I want to emphasize that DDES is committed to ensuring every one of our students achieves their greatest potential. We've seen significant progress in the past year as a school community, and we know there is much more work to be done. We are more committed than ever to removing barriers to education for students who face the most obstacles.

In August, we received the results of our students' performance on the state assessment (PARCC) and saw significant gains in our students' achievement in English Language Arts. We were pleased with those gains, which were coupled with very positive early literacy scores. We reported those data to you in our [Fall Data Dive](#), which included our EL Education credentialing report and our target focus areas for 2017-2018 in Math and equitable achievement. In September, the State of Colorado released ratings for schools based on PARCC scores. These ratings use a scale that is common to all schools in the state. **DDES earned a green rating--the state's highest rating on a four color scale. This green indicates that DDES met or exceeded state expectations.** This was due to our strong academic growth and proficiency levels, particularly in English Language Arts.

Recently, Denver Public Schools (our charter authorizer) has designed and implemented its own measurement tool also called the School Performance Framework (SPF), in an effort to represent additional aspects of accountability important to the district. This district SPF replaces the state SPF for all DPS schools, effectively creating a measurement system used only by DPS schools. This year DPS added another 100 points to a new version of the report to better address growth in--and achievement in--early literacy, and academic gaps within subpopulations of schools (e.g., students who qualify for free and reduced lunch, students of color, english language learners, and students with disabilities). This year, for DDES, the points on overall SPF report total 223 points. In comparison, last year's total was 106 points, and the previous year totalled 32 points. Suffice it to say, the reports and metrics have changed dramatically each year.

Last week, DPS released its SPF school ratings and are reporting DDES as "orange" on their new tool, or "Accredited on Priority Watch." We were disappointed by this decrease in rating by the district given our state SPF rating and our increases in academic achievement. Indeed, in both English and Language Arts (ELA) status and proficiency, DDES' PARCC scores represented one of the biggest positive changes in the district. DDES improved in 17 of the consistent measures on the district SPF and yet received a lower rating. In October of each year, DPS asks the state to use their measurement system over the state's measurement system. If that is granted this year, DDES' green rating will be changed to orange in the state accountability system.

We did a deep dive into why the vast difference between the state and DPS rating. We identified major challenge areas, including a comparison schools cohort measure and our academic opportunity gaps. Neither of these areas are

factored into the State SPF--only DPS' unique SPF framework, explaining one of the reasons for the large difference in ratings. Our cohort of comparison schools are a high-achieving group, including an elementary that received the highest rating of any DPS school this year. Eight of the other 9 were all rated as green schools. We accept the challenge of being in a league with high-achieving schools and still are concerned about the immediate impact of losing a significant number of points in the SPF measurement tool because of it, especially when DPS defines orange as a school that "demonstrates low results overall and/or has multiple areas in need of significant improvement."

DDES is paying a lot of attention to our academic gaps. We are committed to working with DPS to support robust systems of accountability that are focused on racial and socioeconomic equity. We commend the district for helping us think through data that draws important focus to opportunity gaps and make the work of achievement for all students visible. DDES is one of the few schools within DPS which intentionally pursues an "integrated model" - making this work especially relevant. Indeed, many of the innovative and targeted approaches we've implemented in the past few years have helped remove significant barriers to achievement for students of color, students eligible for Free or Reduced Priced Lunch, students learning English, and students with special needs. Those interventions benefit all students and so we've seen significant growth among all students--yet our gaps remain as achievement rises across the board. For example, in 2016 the English Language Arts (ELA) median growth percentile for students of color was 39. This year our students of color MGP was 53. In addition, our students who qualify for free and reduced lunch had an MGP of 59. Both indicators exceed the district benchmark and indicate that these subgroups are demonstrating adequate growth. **DDES believes it is a more equitable and accurate approach for the DPS accountability system to measure all sub-populations against the district average in each sub-population. And we fear not doing so, hurts integrated school efforts.**

To understand why this was happening and how to continue to improve as a school, DDES began working with an independent analyst to deeply dive into the data so we know how to improve. This analysis has revealed a number of issues with the DPS accountability rating system. Based on his preliminary work, this analyst has expressed three primary concerns about the DPS framework: 1) there are too many indicators and the framework is overly complex; 2) the indicator scores often appear to be divorced from the underlying measures; and, 3) in certain circumstances the framework may be encouraging unintended behaviors. This analyst is working to dig into each of these three issues and is currently preparing a memo that will include examples and visual representations of how these three issues impact DDES and other DPS schools.

Based on our experience with the DPS framework, we are concerned that many DPS schools dramatically move within the five color rating system, sometimes raising or dropping two color levels in a year. Additionally, schools are rated as green schools, even though they show dramatically low proficiency levels. There are 20 plus elementary schools with a higher SPF rating than DDES but lower achievement and growth levels in all categories. Similarly, some schools that demonstrate high growth and proficiency have received low ratings. We agree with a [report](#) by A+, a Colorado advocacy group, which last year commended DPS for working towards a more robust system, but worried that Denver's unique SPF attempts to serve too many purposes. The report indicated that one unintended consequence might result, when "schools are rated green where students have only a small likelihood of mastering grade level content."

We do not believe that this variability represents a valid or stable reporting system, especially important given the "high stakes" that are often attached to such reports including how schools are closed, effects on enrollment, what supports schools receive and in the current framework, if you are not a green school, you school is not eligible to compete for a DPS facility. **We join other school leaders who are raising questions around how this rating system--and its significant revisions every year--especially affects new schools, growing schools, and small charter schools.** DDES is diving into this advocacy effort as part of the Collaborative Council, a district collective of all DPS charter schools. We have brought these concerns to DPS Superintendent Tom Boasberg through our Council representative and we will meet with our DPS Board representative as well. We are strongly urging the

use of a measurement tool that is agreed upon by district and school leaders, effectively measures what it says it will measure, and is stable for at least three years in order to accurately communicate growth.

Our Board and Leadership are in agreement that until DPS' accountability system (and SPF report) is stabilized, we must cautiously proceed in drawing conclusions from this system without looking at the underlying data. **We remain committed to robustly measuring each student's school success through academic achievement, ability to create high quality work, and character development.** As a district, DPS is showing an increasing interest in advancing in "whole child" learning that emphasizes physical, mental and community health, but those efforts aren't part of accountability systems yet.

And as a DDES parent, I know that all of us at DDES--students, staff and parents--have come together to do more than is measurable on a report such as the School Performance Framework. We are not saying we are satisfied with these results on the framework, and our academic performance on assessments are important to us at DDES. Our work plan this year centers around our math program and achievement of all students. And we understand that you have chosen this school because of our shared commitment to a multifaceted approach to education. We see that in our enrollment trend--where DDES continues to grow in a region that is seeing overall declines in enrollment. We understand our common desire to see--and have our children experience--a comprehensive education.

This commitment to bringing to life a comprehensive and compelling vision of teaching and learning is one of the reasons we knew from the start that we wanted to be an EL school - accountable to the EL Education network. **As a reflection of this multi-year commitment, DDES has been awarded the distinction of "credentialed school" this year for precisely exceeding these lofty credentialing standards.** The evidence used to make this decision included three years of thorough reviews, numerous observation visits by EL regional leaders and designers, a 50 page portfolio of evidence of all three pillars of achievement, and a final presentation to regional EL Education leaders. EL Education's president, Scott Hartl states: "Students deserve schools that develop their intellect and their character; that develop their strong habits of quality work and their habits of contribution to their communities; and provide them with both rigor and joy in learning." We are proud to have earned inclusion in this esteemed family of schools. You can view our entire EL "credentialing portfolio" on our [website](#) and our last three years of credentialing [data](#) here.

We sincerely thank you for your continued partnership. Please reach out to me with any questions. Erin and I will host our first morning community coffee on **Thursday, November 2 at 8:30 a.m. in Emily's Cafe.** **We will also join the Family Council meeting Tuesday, November 9 at 5:30 p.m.** to answer questions there as well and childcare will be provided. In the meantime, please don't hesitate to give me a call to talk through our data and goals further: 720.424.2352. I have been sequestered as a witness in a trial until Tuesday so I will get back to you as soon as possible.

Best,
Letia Frandina, Interim Executive Director
Erin Sciscione, Principal
The DDES Board