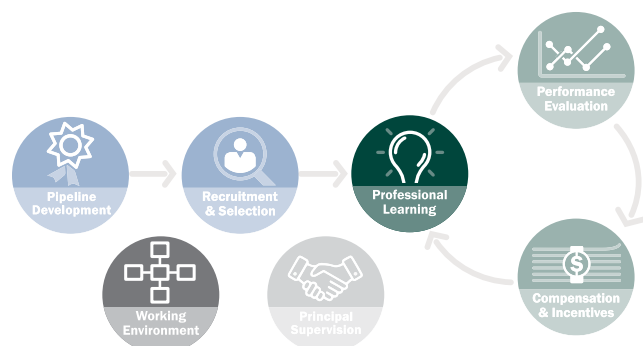


Denver Public Schools



Denver Public Schools (DPS) is a large urban school district, serving approximately 90,000 pre-K to Grade 12 students across 199 schools. The district's Denver Plan 2020 (DPS's five year strategic goals plan) commits to recruiting and retaining great leaders and teachers—in large part through the development of supportive working conditions.¹⁷⁵

Practice Overview

DPS has made concerted efforts to improve working conditions for principals through two approaches: improving the principal to supervisor ratio and increasing principal autonomy.

DPS has a ratio of about one instructional superintendent for every eight principals. This ratio is noteworthy given, in some large districts, the ratio can be as high as one supervisor for every 40 or more principals. This resulted from DPS' school turnaround efforts, in which it grouped about 20 of its failing schools into two geographic clusters and assigned an instructional superintendent to oversee each cluster. The district also appointed deputy instructional superintendents to each cluster for extra support, allowing each principal supervisor to manage only four or five schools. DPS then applied this model across the district. Now, instructional superintendents spend approximately three quarters of their time observing classrooms, reviewing student data, and coaching principals. The district also assessed and eliminated redundant meetings to allow supervisors to spend more time on school campuses.

In addition, DPS has provided increased autonomy to principals in the form of increased choice of curriculum, additional authority over staffing and budgets and discretion over class size, field trips, and technology. Schools participate in a "Universal Flexibility" decision-making process in which they submit their decisions in alignment with the annual school budget process (typically in February). DPS provides a number of supports to school leaders to clarify the process and explain options, such as in-person sessions, one-on-one consultations with central office experts, and a series of guidance documents.¹⁷⁶

Evidence of Success

The district has tracked its overall progress in student achievement and graduation rates across the past five years. Although progress on these metrics may not be a direct result of Denver's efforts to improve the principal working environment, with the first implementation of the Denver Plan, DPS rose from a district with the lowest rate of student academic growth to the district with the highest rate of academic achievement growth for students in poverty and middle-class students.¹⁷⁷ According to DPS, in the last five years, the district has significantly reduced the drop-out rate and has increased its four-year graduation rate by 11 percentage points. It has record enrollment increases, and has continued the student-achievement gains initiated with the creation of the Denver Plan in 2005.

Source: Information for this "District to Watch" example was collected through an interview with Denver Public Schools; the Denver Public Schools website, a Wallace Foundation on-the-spot report¹⁷⁸, and Teamwork Matters, a blog the George W. Bush Institute wrote.

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