



# Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University

A JOINT INITIATIVE OF  
THE HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION  
AND HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL

**PEL-084**  
JULY 7, 2017

MICHAEL L. TUSHMAN  
COLIN MACLAY  
KERRY HERMAN

## Denver Public Schools (B): Innovation *and* Performance?

In early December 2015, after a unanimous vote, the Denver School Board approved Denver Public School (DPS) Chief of Schools Susana Cordova as acting superintendent of DPS.<sup>1</sup> Cordova would serve in the role from January to July 2016 while Superintendent Tom Boasberg was on sabbatical. Cordova and DPS Chief Academic and Innovation Officer Alyssa Whitehead-Bust were among the candidates for the role during Boasberg's absence and both had been strong and inspiring leaders for DPS. Boasberg acknowledged, "I greatly respect both Susana and Alyssa. I think Susana brought a set of leadership skills, experiences, political ability, and a level of credibility both within the organization and out that was stronger. They are two of the most brilliant, talented, passionate people I've ever worked with, but I felt Susana's set of skills was stronger for the role."

The fall had brought other changes too. Autumn elections had shifted the School Board's membership from a six-to-one split to unanimity among its seven members in support of district reform. Turning around underperforming schools, and unlocking continued sustained performance across the district's healthy schools, continued to be the Board's and DPS's top priority. Boasberg acknowledged the challenges: "We continue to discuss the tension between the need to increase the level of skill and precision and quality of execution at the school level and our move to empower schools." The Board continued its push for decentralization, following up its 2015 decision to decentralize significant decision-making responsibilities with a move to give schools flexibility in choosing their curriculum.<sup>2</sup>

By year's end, DPS saw continued improvement in school performance, making a range of gains in statewide comparisons to other Colorado schools. Educational consultancy A+'s April 2016 report captured the improvements: statewide, in elementary education, DPS moved from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 42<sup>nd</sup> percentile in English Language Arts (ELA) and from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 49<sup>th</sup> percentile in math.<sup>3</sup> In middle school education, DPS rose from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 51<sup>st</sup> percentile in ELA, and from the 39<sup>th</sup> to the 65<sup>th</sup> percentile in math.<sup>4</sup> The report's authors noted, "This means DPS is outperforming districts with similar free and reduced lunch populations." However, A+ acknowledged, there was further to go, especially in school performance, as only 20% of DPS students attended high-performing (blue or green) schools.<sup>5</sup>

---

Professors Michael L. Tushman and Colin Maclay (University of Southern California) and Associate Director Kerry Herman (Case Research & Writing Group) prepared this case. PELP cases are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management.

Copyright © 2017 President and Fellows of Harvard College. To order copies or request permission to reproduce materials, call 1-800-545-7685, write Harvard Business School Publishing, Boston, MA 02163, or go to <http://www.hbsp.harvard.edu>. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, used in a spreadsheet, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without the permission of Harvard Business School.

About one week after Cordova's appointment was confirmed, Whitehead-Bust announced that she would be leaving her role at DPS. Her departure would occur in April, over the course of three months.<sup>6</sup> Discussing her decision to leave, Whitehead-Bust expressed her satisfaction with the progress DPS had made during her tenure, her conviction that the district was well-positioned for continued progress, and her desire to contribute to new schools and districts.<sup>7</sup> After leaving DPS, Whitehead-Bust worked with a variety of school districts and organizations across the United States; in October 2016, she founded a consulting firm.<sup>8</sup>

In February 2016, four DPS innovation schools (Ashley Elementary School, Creativity Challenge Community, Denver Green School, and Cole Arts & Science Academy) sought to form an "innovation zone" under the Innovation Schools Act.<sup>9</sup> They worked with education consultants and the Gates Family Foundation to organize their proposal. The four schools were ranked yellow and higher (Ashley and Cole ranked as yellow, the third-highest of five color rankings; Creativity Challenge Community and Denver Green School ranked as green, the second-highest level). The schools sought greater flexibility around governance, learning structures, and budget in the belief that such flexibility could promote stronger student achievement.

The innovation zone would grant individual school principals, who would be overseen by a nonprofit group, more discretion over how to allocate their state funds,<sup>10</sup> and potentially allow schools to make more autonomous decisions regarding issues such as compensation, teacher training courses, and teacher evaluation.<sup>11</sup> Use of state funding was an important topic of discussion: of the approximately \$7,600 per student in state funding provided to DPS, about \$5,600 went to the schools, and \$2,000 stayed with the district to fund expenses such as facilities maintenance, transportation, athletics, special education, and information technology (IT).<sup>12</sup> The innovation zone leaders sought to receive a larger portion of this allocated state funding.<sup>13</sup>

In late April 2016, the four schools were approved for a new "innovation zone" and formed the Luminary Learning Network.<sup>14</sup> The schools put a strong emphasis on creating new peer-to-peer learning structures across schools in the new network. The schools were already among DPS's 40 innovation schools (schools that, per the 2008 Colorado Innovation Schools Act, could petition for exemption from certain state, collective bargaining, and district rules). As part of the Luminary Learning Network, the schools would be overseen by a nonprofit organization, have more control over how they spend state funding, and be exempted from certain district meetings, initiatives, practices, and requirements.<sup>15</sup> They could opt out of centralized district support services<sup>a</sup> (i.e., website design, reorganization of schools libraries, and advice on staffing decisions) and by doing so, be eligible to receive about \$350 more per student.<sup>16</sup>

Upon resuming his post, Boasberg restructured the senior leadership and made Cordova deputy superintendent. Erin McMahon, a former instructional superintendent, principal, and consultant, was named assistant chief of Academics and Innovation, including oversight of the Imaginarium, reporting to Cordova.

On December 16, 2016, the Denver School Board voted to close several underperforming schools. The closures reflected DPS's new policy, School Performance Compact, which the board had adopted

---

<sup>a</sup> Trying to express the costs of certain district services on a per-pupil basis was difficult, and many costs had interdependencies and had never been broken out separately before, making it challenging to come up with a la carte pricing for those which might opt out. The final agreement represented an increase over School-Based Budgeting (SBB) called SBB+. Following the negotiations, the district challenged itself to accurately identify as many of its service costs as possible on a per-pupil basis, and began exploring the expansion of SBB+ to all innovation schools. The portfolio management office worked to develop supportive resources to help schools decide which services they needed.

in 2015 and implemented in the fall of 2016.<sup>17,b</sup> Underperforming schools remained a key focal point for Cordova. “Early on, we had not spent enough time in planning for a school’s turnaround,” she noted of past missed targets for improvement, adding, “In some cases we had not ensured that planning and school leadership were in synch, or that leaders were bought into the turnaround plan early enough.”

In early 2017, a national educational organization reported on DPS’s continued improvements: their cross-state study showed that DPS had attained the second highest academic growth for its students compared to peer districts nationwide (those with more than 25,000 students).<sup>18</sup> The report noted the continued gains for individual schools, as DPS gave school leaders greater flexibility across a range of decision areas, affirming the board’s continued push for decentralization.<sup>c</sup> However, the authors of the study found that this flexibility remained under-utilized, leading to gaps in meeting the needs of students, especially with regard to differentiation of instructional time or group size based on student learning needs.<sup>19</sup> A+ published an additional study that showed Denver made significantly more academic progress than any other medium or large Colorado district from 2014 to 2017.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>b</sup> The policy provided guidance for closing or restarting schools, specifying that a school had to: be ranked in the bottom 5% of all DPS schools based on multiple years of school ratings; fail to show an adequate amount of improvement on the most recent state tests; and score fewer than 25 out of 40 points on a school quality review. See Asmar, “Denver School Board Votes to Close Three Low-Performing Schools under New Policy,” *Chalkbeat*, December 16, 2016.

<sup>c</sup> These decision areas included hiring, staffing, assignments, and scheduling, among others.

## Endnotes

---

- <sup>1</sup> Melanie Asmar, "Susana Cordova Named Acting Superintendent of Denver Public Schools," *Chalkbeat*, December 1, 2015, <http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/co/2015/12/01/susana-cordova-named-acting-superintendent-of-denver-public-schools/>; Yesenia Robles, "Susana Cordova to Serve as Acting Superintendent for Denver Schools," *The Denver Post*, December 1, 2015, updated April 19, 2016, <http://www.denverpost.com/2015/12/01/susana-cordova-to-serve-as-acting-superintendent-for-denver-schools/>; both accessed April 2017.
- <sup>2</sup> A+ Colorado, "A+ DPS Progress Report: Big Gains, Big Gaps, Big Ideas," A+ Colorado, April 2016, <http://apluscolorado.org/reports/denver-public-schools-progress-report-big-gains-big-gaps-big-ideas/>, accessed July 2017.
- <sup>3</sup> A+ Colorado, "A+ DPS Progress Report: Big Gains, Big Gaps, Big Ideas," A+ Colorado, April 2016.
- <sup>4</sup> A+ Colorado, "A+ DPS Progress Report: Big Gains, Big Gaps, Big Ideas," A+ Colorado, April 2016.
- <sup>5</sup> A+ Colorado, "A+ DPS Progress Report: Big Gains, Big Gaps, Big Ideas," A+ Colorado, April 2016.
- <sup>6</sup> Melanie Asmar, "Alyssa Whitehead-Bust, Top Denver Public Schools Administrator, to Leave Her Position," *Chalkbeat*, December 10, 2015, <http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/co/2015/12/10/alyssa-whitehead-bust-top-denver-public-schools-administrator-to-leave-the-district/>, accessed April 2017.
- <sup>7</sup> Melanie Asmar, "Alyssa Whitehead-Bust, Top Denver Public Schools Administrator, to Leave Her Position."
- <sup>8</sup> Melanie Asmar, "Alyssa Whitehead-Bust, Former Top Denver Schools Administrator, Launches New Consulting Firm," *Chalkbeat*, October 21, 2016, <http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/co/2016/10/21/alyssa-whitehead-bust-former-top-denver-schools-administrator-launches-new-consulting-firm/>, accessed April 2017.
- <sup>9</sup> Yesenia Robles, "Principals' Roles Changing in Denver Area as Some Seek More Autonomy," *The Denver Post*, March 20, 2016, <http://www.denverpost.com/2016/03/20/principals-roles-changing-in-denver-area-as-some-seek-more-autonomy/>, accessed April 2017.
- <sup>10</sup> Melanie Asmar, "In Denver, Four Schools Want to Push the Boundaries of Innovation," *Chalkbeat*, February 24, 2016, <http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/co/2016/02/24/in-denver-four-schools-want-to-push-the-boundaries-of-innovation/>, accessed April 2017.
- <sup>11</sup> Yesenia Robles, "Principals' Roles Changing in Denver Area as Some Seek More Autonomy."
- <sup>12</sup> Melanie Asmar, "In Denver, Four Schools Want to Push the Boundaries of Innovation."
- <sup>13</sup> Melanie Asmar, "In Denver, Four Schools Want to Push the Boundaries of Innovation."
- <sup>14</sup> Melanie Asmar, "Denver School Board Approves Innovation Zone, Granting Schools New Freedoms," *Chalkbeat*, April 28, 2016, <http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/co/2016/04/28/denver-school-board-approves-innovation-zone-granting-schools-new-freedoms/>, accessed July 2017.
- <sup>15</sup> Melanie Asmar, "Denver School Board Approves Innovation Zone, Granting Schools New Freedoms."
- <sup>16</sup> Melanie Asmar, "Denver School Board Approves Innovation Zone, Granting Schools New Freedoms."
- <sup>17</sup> Melanie Asmar, "Denver School Board Votes to Close Three Low-Performing Schools under New Policy," *Chalkbeat.org*, December 16, 2016, <http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/co/2016/12/16/denver-school-board-votes-to-close-three-low-performing-schools-under-new-policy/>, accessed May 2017.
- <sup>18</sup> Educational Resource Strategies, "School System 20/20. It Takes a System: Denver, Colorado," ERS, March 2017, <https://www.slideshare.net/ERSslides/ers-system-2020-analysis-of-denver-public-schools-march-2017>, accessed June 2017.
- <sup>19</sup> Educational Resource Strategies, "School System 20/20. It Takes a System: Denver, Colorado."
- <sup>20</sup> A+ Colorado, "The Outliers: The State of Colorado School Districts, 2016," no date, A+ Colorado, <http://apluscolorado.org/reports/the-outliers-2016/>, accessed June 2017.