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## Rejoinder to Response by David Osborne to a Review of *A 21st Century School System in the Mile High City*

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Original Report: <http://tinyurl.com/zvzbzwb>

Original Think Tank Review: <http://nepc.info/node/8145>

David Osborne's Reply: <http://tinyurl.com/ha2mn5s>

White's Rejoinder (this document): <http://nepc.info/node/8145>

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A report titled *A 21st Century School System in the Mile High City*<sup>1</sup> was released by the Progressive Policy Institute in May 2016. The report highlights multiple trends and reforms adopted in Denver between 2005 and 2014, most notably a “portfolio strategy” that includes a mix of traditional, charter, and hybrid public schools. The report argues that school autonomy via charter schools has improved student outcomes across the city and serves as a model for other cities. As described in my [review](#)<sup>2</sup> of the report, the data presented are largely descriptive and do not control for the interaction of multiple variables to justify causal claims. In fact, the report’s median growth percentile method cannot be used for causal claims. In light of these concerns, as well as the report’s acknowledgement of a widening achievement gap during the period of reform, I concluded the report’s causal inferences determining the Denver strategy to be a successful reform that should be emulated could not be supported.

The author of *A 21<sup>st</sup> Century School System* [responded](#)<sup>3</sup> to my review of the report, posting this response on the Progressive Policy Institute’s blog on July 28, 2016. The author expresses appreciation for my review, but is then “flabbergasted” with several concerns I raise. I appreciate that the author took the time to read my review, and I value the author’s effort to highlight markers of academic improvement among students in the city. As an academic,

however, I must weigh research claims about the impact or causes of children's achievements carefully, to ensure that policy recommendations are guided by sound research that education reform are often contentious, his characterization of my review as "anti-charter propaganda" is a step too far. The citations in my review, which included research that reflects diverse perspectives (e.g., members of community organizations, teachers, vocal activists and bloggers, and students and parents), weigh the strengths and weaknesses of the reforms and reflect accepted social science methodology. Below, I [respond](#)<sup>4</sup> to the author's two primary concerns with my review.

### **1. "The only data presented are in the form of simple charts." and "The reader is led to conclude the efficacy of all manner of reforms based on eyeballing what is basically a scatterplot."**

The author claims that I do not acknowledge important improvements in test score outcomes of students in the city. As such, the author bullets each of the data points that I have seemingly overlooked. To the contrary, on page three of my review, I summarize the report's Findings and Conclusions, beginning with an overview of the report's claims of student achievement in Denver. The area of contention between the report and my review, however, is that I question the report's conclusion, which asks readers to attribute student improvement over time to a single reform—a portfolio strategy of shared governance and school autonomy mainly in the form of charter schools.

The strong causal inferences made in the report are not just implied; they are expressly stated and they are not warranted. For example, in response to a school board member who is quoted in the report as stating, "I don't think we have figured out how to educate low-income kids... In terms of a whole district of 90,000 students, the change is incremental" (pg. 24-25), the author follows with a statement "Denver's charter schools *have* figured out how to educate low-income children" (p. 25; italics in original sentence). The author goes on to assert, "Hence the first two challenges Denver faces, if it wants to accelerate its progress, concern replacing failing district schools with charters" (p. 25).

My review cautioned against such claims and subsequent recommendations, noting several key limitations, including the descriptive nature of the data (that is, data and analyses that do not allow for the author's causal inferences). On pages 18 through 20, five charts are displayed that are descriptive scatter plots. All of these data are in aggregate form, and the reader is unable to attribute causality to any of the features, either in the schools, the city or society at large. The author noted in earlier parts of the report that regression to the mean may be in play, as well as massive economic changes and migration patterns. The author also raises a series of important concerns about mitigating factors that may shape charter performance, such as whether charter students have more active families who enroll in school choice, whether students arrive with slightly higher test scores, or whether charters backfill empty seats at a slightly lower rate (pg. 17). This is all true, and these are precisely the sorts of threats to validity that arise when one is using data and analyses that do not allow for causal claims.

I concluded that the data and analyses were insufficient to justify the report's central assertion that school autonomy via charters was the driver of success.

The author's response notes a study by MIT researchers which was more analytic in its

comparison of charter schools, innovation schools, and district schools. (I make note of this study in my review on pg. 5). Indeed the study, which I did not examine because it was tangential to my review, appears to be an example of more rigorous and inferential analysis of reform in Denver. The report, however, did not feature this study—it was offered only as supplementary to the report’s own data and analyses, as presented to readers on pages 18 through 20. The report was not presented to readers as, “The MIT study shows that Denver’s charter/autonomy system should be emulated.” It presented the author’s own research as the key support for that claim. Accordingly, my review was of the new study and its claims, where I and other readers were instead shown descriptive charts interwoven with testimonials that did not support the author’s bold claims and conclusions.

Moreover, I raised concerns about the report’s reasoning in the section of my review with the heading, “Rationale for Its Conclusions and Findings” (p.4). In this section, I note that autonomy as a reform strategy is not clearly defined, theorized, or measured. For example, given the rate of charter non-renewals in the city, which the author notes in the report (“In 2010-2011, [the district] closed 25 percent of charters up for renewal” pg. 11), the report makes little effort to describe the reasons for underperforming charters or charter non-renewals and what this means for a theory of autonomy as a successful strategy. Nonetheless, autonomy as a path of achievement weighs prominently in the report, particularly when ascribing reasons for the weaker outcomes of “innovation” schools (pg. 27 in PPI report). Again, I concluded in the review that these claims were an over-step, as the reader is asked to believe in “real autonomy” with little clarity about the effective and ineffective uses of autonomy in the charter sector.

Most importantly, in light of the author’s recognition of widening gaps in achievement between student groups by both income and race/ethnicity, I found it odd that the report nonetheless asserts that reforms in Denver have been successful and are a model of progress. The report itself states, for example, “Denver’s one big failure has been to narrow the achievement gap... In 2014, the gap between the percentage of low-income and non-low-income students who tested at grade level was almost 40 points across all subjects, and the gap between African Americans and Latinos, on the one hand, and whites, on the other, was 42 points” (pg. 15). The author rightly acknowledged this failure, but it is unclear why such large and growing gaps were not perceived or presented as a bigger problem.

Finally, the gains are presented in “median growth percentiles.” This is a relatively new technique, now being used in Colorado and several other states. Percentiles are not equal interval scales and are particularly suspect for growth measures. In part, this may explain why gains are reported while the numbers scoring “proficient” dropped steadily, each year, from 2006. The author acknowledges this concern when reviewing the limitations of Denver’s student performance framework (SPF) on pages 6 through 8 of the report (“a school can have a high [median growth percentile] while its students are falling ever further behind grade-level proficiency” pg. 6). The author’s concerns, however, do not temper the report’s conclusions of academic progress.

## **2. “The report does not address whether the expansion of charter schools has exacerbated racial segregation, but this is a vital question in light of trends in other cities.”**

The author notes the unique enrollment policies of one of Denver’s larger charter networks,

which maintains a diverse student body by race and income. Indeed diverse enrollments at schools such as the network spotlighted in the study are to be lauded; there is an emerging niche of racially diverse charters in the nation.<sup>5</sup> However, there is a large extant body of literature regarding the segregative effects of charter schools, as most do not maintain diverse student enrollments.<sup>6</sup> My review notes that this most important outcome of charter schools was not addressed. In a school population that is 70% poor and 32% ELL, the omission is glaring. Particularly given the achievement gap noted above, this represents a significant omission.

In conclusion, I appreciate that the author took the time to read my review, and I value the author's effort to highlight markers of academic improvement among students in the city. However, the response does not address the important limitations in the data that invalidate the report's far-reaching conclusions and its claims about the best direction for future reform of Denver public schools.

## Notes and References

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- 1 Osborne, D. (2016). *A 21<sup>st</sup> School System in the Mile High City*. The Progressive Policy Institute. Retrieved June 10, 2016, from [http://www.progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/2016.05-Osborne\\_A-21st-Century-School-System-in-the-Mile-High-City.pdf](http://www.progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/2016.05-Osborne_A-21st-Century-School-System-in-the-Mile-High-City.pdf)
- 2 White, T. (2016). *Review of "A 21st Century School System in the Mile-High City."* Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved August 14, 2016 from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-21st-century>
- 3 Osborne, D., *A Response to the National Education Policy Center*. The Progressive Policy Institute. Retrieved August 14, 2016, from <http://www.progressivepolicy.org/blog/response-national-education-policy-center/>
- 4 White, T. (2016). *Review of "A 21st Century School System in the Mile-High City."* Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved August 14, 2016 from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-21st-century>
- 5 Kahlenberg, R., & Potter, H. (2012). *Diverse charter schools: Can racial and socioeconomic integration promote better outcomes for students?* New York, NY: Century Foundation.
- 6 Frankenberg, E. & Lee, C. (2003). Charter schools and race: A lost opportunity for integrated education. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 11(32). Retrieved August 5, 2016, from <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/260>;  
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