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REVIEW OF *A 21ST CENTURY SCHOOL SYSTEM IN THE MILE-HIGH CITY*

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Summary of Review

A report published by the Progressive Policy Institute calls for aggressively closing more public schools and expanding charter schools and charter networks. It highlights reforms adopted by Denver Public Schools, notably a “portfolio model” of school governance, and argues that these reforms positively impacted student test scores. However, causality cannot be determined, and the report did not attempt to isolate the effect of a multitude of reforms—including charters, performance pay, and a new performance framework—from larger complex forces shaping student demographics in the city. Written in a reportorial voice, the only data presented are in the form of simple charts. The lack of conventional statistical analyses thwarts the reader’s understanding. The report also characterizes the reform’s adoption as a “political success” born of a healthily contentious electoral process. In doing so, it downplays the role of outside forces and moneyed groups that influenced the form of reforms, and it disregards missed opportunities for meaningful engagement with community stakeholders. Finally, while the report acknowledges the district’s failure to close achievement gaps and admits limitations with the evaluation system, it never explains how a successful reform could generate a widening gap in performance between student groups by race and class.



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REVIEW OF A 21ST CENTURY SCHOOL SYSTEM IN THE MILE-HIGH CITY

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I. Introduction

*A 21st Century School System in the Mile High City*¹ highlights a set of reforms adopted in Denver, most notably a “portfolio strategy” which includes a mix of traditional, charter, and hybrid public schools (also called innovation schools). The report argues these reforms have improved student outcomes across the city and serve as a model for other cities. While the report highlights several other reforms—a performance-pay system to incentivize and reward effective teachers, a student performance framework (SPF) used to measure (and rank) school quality based on academic growth, a collaborative agreement between district and charter leaders for equitable funding and replication of effective schools, and a common enrollment application for parents who “opt in” to the city’s school choice process—the report focuses on charter schools and attributes gains in academic outcomes to these schools. The report argues ultimately for the expansion of charter schools by particular charter networks.

The report praises Denver as a “political success” for its ability to carry out aggressive reforms in the face of contentious electoral politics, such as closing public schools and expanding charter schools. The report notes several factors unique to Denver that aided reform, but argues the political feat of closing schools and opening new schools rests with “astute politicians” (p. 5) who marshaled support for reform from foundations, philanthropic groups, and community organizations.

Findings and Conclusions

The report contends that reforms in Denver delivered results over a 10-year period, including a reduction in dropout rates and improvements in graduation rates; increases in the percentage of students scoring at or above grade level in reading, writing, and math; and dramatic differences in Denver’s standing among schools with a percentage of students at proficiency. Reforms are also reported to have contributed to higher rates of minority students taking advanced math classes, faster rates of improvement in ACT scores compared to students in the state, higher rates of college enrollment among low-income students, and fewer students needing remedial classes once in college.

Based on the report’s analysis of data from Colorado Department of Education, the report

contends that charter schools outperform traditional district schools and accounts for most of the academic growth of students at the secondary level. The analytic problem is that the district had a massive population increase, gentrification and shifts in ethnic populations while implementing charters, school autonomy, performance pay, innovation zones, a leadership program and a new performance framework. This combination is measured by an unconventional median growth of percentile ranks method and does not employ inferential statistics. The report admits flaws in the district's evaluation system, which bases performance ratings on median growth scores and assigns high ratings to schools with low proficiency percentages (p. 7; see also an example from a Denver teacher's comparison of 2014 performance ratings with raw achievement data²). Nonetheless, the report highlights two prominent charter networks with high performance ratings, Denver School of Science and Technology (DSST) and Strive Prep.

Results of innovation schools operated by the district were less significant and yielded less remarkable academic growth. Based on reported improvements in academic growth, the report concludes that closing poorly performing schools and replicating the best charter schools have led to positive results.

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report argues that gains in achievement occur once districts relinquish control over school functions, moving key decisions closer to the school level, including selling traditional central services to schools and permitting school leaders to buy services elsewhere if preferred. In this way, districts move away from a "one-size-fits-all, centralized, Industrial Age enterprise" and toward operating as a partner in building capacity and leadership at the school level and serving as an incubator for innovation (p. 4). The report concludes that charter schools best represent the benefits of "real" autonomy and decision-making at the school level, yielding better outcomes in student achievement, citing math and ELA proficiency rankings of charter middle schools compared to district schools and higher average ACT scores for high school students (p. 17-20). The report does not address underperforming autonomous charter schools and their implications for autonomy as a path to greater student performance. The report's call for less district oversight, moreover, did not specify what the districts' role would be in strengthening regulatory oversight and accountability of charter schools in light of publically expressed concerns about the vulnerability of charters to financial waste, abuse, and "self-dealing."³

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report scatters endnotes at the end of sections but these are almost exclusively drawn from advocacy publications from partisan foundations, including Piton and Donnell Kay

Foundations. The report cites one study from researchers at MIT and Duke on charter performance in math, writing, and reading. Survey data are presented from the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) on parents' views of school choice and the common enrollment system. While CRPE's study includes interview and focus group data, the report summarizes favorable views of parents surveyed in Denver who find the school choice system less confusing with a common enrollment system (p.12). The report does not share less favorable views of parents from CRPE's interview and focus group data on the quality of school choices or lack of quality information about schools beyond performance ratings. CRPE's report, for instance, notes that common enrollment is not a cure-all to meaningful school choice, particularly for Denver parents desiring student body diversity, a broad range of extracurricular activities, a balanced approach to testing, and information about "school culture, relationships between adults and students in schools, the approach teachers take in the classroom, and how their own child might react to the school's environment" (p. 19).⁴

The report does not cite qualitative studies on youth's experiences of school closure and turnaround, including challenges experienced by students who have transitioned from closed schools to new or reconstituted schools.⁵ Nor does the report cite research that challenges the evidentiary basis of turnaround models on academic growth or long-term sustainability of academic growth of turnaround efforts.⁶ While the report frames school choice as an expansion of equal opportunity for students of color, it does not acknowledge that school closures have a disproportionate impact on communities of color and often exclude students of color in deliberative processes about how to improve their schools or outline effective turnaround strategies.⁷ 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.⁸ Lastly, the report notes the importance of soliciting community input to build broad coalitions for reform, but does not cite examples of community-engaged models of district reform and turnaround or data published by community organizations in Denver that serve as alternative forms of evaluation of school reform in the city.⁹

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report primarily presents simple descriptive scatter plots and uses this data to support the city's efforts to close schools and open new charter schools. The descriptive statistics are interspersed with narratives on various reform facets. Unfortunately, since all of this is in school level aggregate and descriptive form, the reader is unable to attribute causality to any of the features either in the schools, the city or society at large. The report acknowledges that regression to the mean may be in play. Economic changes and migration patterns may also be relevant factors. The problem is an interested reader cannot determine the effect of any variable. It is puzzling as to why the report collected massive multivariate data but reported no analyses of this trove.

The report is divided into seven narrative sections that describe the story and "secrets" of

political success in Denver leading to the adoption of a portfolio model and what it views as the positive impact of these reforms, particularly its charter schools.

1. The Denver Story: Focuses on the political climate of school reform in Denver in 2005 and key developments leading to the adoption of a portfolio model over time.

The report notes that in 2005 Denver school buildings were half-full, including almost 16,000 students who chose private or suburban schools in surrounding districts. It is not clear to what extent the report attributes subsequent changes in Denver's school enrollment patterns to DPS's portfolio strategy or to larger forces such as the 2008 recession. Demographers have noted that the number of DPS students from higher-income families grew faster than the number of students from lower-income families in 2013-2014, due in part to gentrification, the return of middle class families to both the city and its schools, and evidence that families were moving out of poverty as the Great Recession receded¹⁰ The report does not discuss whether rising numbers of middle-class families in DPS, and declining poverty rates, have contributed to overall academic growth.

The report also gives great weight to coalition ties and the role of community organizations compared to the role of foundation executives and business leaders. The report's narration of community organizations' involvement in reform, however, describes their involvement as a form of political stratagem on the part of leaders rather than as partners in the formulation and development of reform:

“Astute politician, [Michael] Bennet also solicited the views and support of two community organizations . . . Both worked on a variety of issues but were instrumental in supporting Bennet's reforms, including closure and replacement of failing schools, weighted student-based budgeting, innovation schools, and charters. ‘ They really inoculated the district from having the kind of blowback that other districts have had from low-income communities of color,’ says Van Schoales, CEO of A+ Denver. ‘It made it harder for the traditional factions. They lost some of the potential opposition to a lot of these reforms’ ” (p. 5).

The report does not quote local activists or members of community groups, nor cites literature published by community organizations about the kinds of reform desired. *Padres Unidos* (PU), for example, is described as a supporter of school reforms, such as school closure and charter expansion. PU publishes annual “community accountability report cards” of public schools in Denver, including its charter schools. One recent report by PU notes racial disparities in school discipline practices evident in some charter schools, which are among the city's top schools in suspending and expelling students at alarming rates.¹¹ Charter schools highlighted in the report as “successful” and tagged as models for replication seem to clash with alternative evaluations of schools generated by community organizations. This example contradicts the report's insistence that Denver “builds a broad coalition

for reform, including organizations that represent minorities and low-income people” and “sought community input about change” (p. 31).

While describing a good deal of political churn, this part of the report also complicates the task of ascribing magnitude or causal effects to any of the changes.

2. Winning the Political Battle: Focuses on the politics of school board elections in Denver, which shaped majority coalitions favoring school closure and charter expansion.

The report narrates electoral politics in Denver between 2005 and 2010, but downplays the unprecedented flow of money into Denver’s local school board elections from regional and national foundations, hedge funds, and philanthropic groups.¹² While the report acknowledges the role of advocacy groups, such as Democrats for Education Reform, in recruiting candidates to run for school board and in raising significant amounts of money, it does not note that these efforts provided three-to-one fundraising advantages for candidates backing charter reform, and an infusion of more than \$600,000 from regional and national intermediate organizations.¹³ The report likewise downplays similar infusions of large campaign funds in more recent board elections from regional and national organizations in favor of charter reform.¹⁴ An alternative narrative of school board elections during this period suggests the role of advocacy groups, like Stand for Children, yielded heavy influence on electoral politics that led to “disruption, disenfranchisement, and drama” for residents in the district’s heavily black and Latino district.¹⁵

The report also considers senate Bill 191 a crucial part of winning the political battle for school reform in Denver, which requires districts to end layoffs by seniority, dismiss teachers rated ineffective for two years in a row, and allow principals to refuse hiring teachers laid off from other district schools. The bill also establishes that if teachers were laid off because of school closings and could not find new jobs within 12 months or two hiring cycles, they would be put on unpaid leave (p. 11).

The report does not acknowledge unintended consequences of the bill, including racial discrepancies in teacher layoffs,¹⁶ which may aggravate existing parity gaps between students and teachers of color in the city. “Crisis levels” of teacher turnover, moreover, are also unacknowledged, particularly acute in Denver charter schools, including charter schools spotlighted in the report.¹⁷ Turnover and churn undermine what the report notes as effective practices in successful charter schools (e.g. report highlights the use of “advisories” in successful charters where one teacher stays with 15 or more students for a few years to get to know them well (p. 17); this practice is undermined in charter networks that have difficulty maintaining a stable force of teachers year to year). Also, while the expansion of school choice ideally makes for a more competitive labor market that can attract large pools of teachers with a variety of workplace options, research suggests that if teacher benefits are not portable across schools, particularly in environments where school closure happens, charter districts with decentralized pay systems and weak professional supports and protec-

tions can limit competitive labor markets and aggravate teacher shortages further.¹⁸

The bottom line is that a good deal of political upheaval is reported but again, the relationship of this occurrence with any reported gains is purely speculative.

3. Delivering Results: Focuses on reform's impact on academic growth in Denver.

The report contends that reformers in Denver “won” in part because the portfolio approach yielded positive results from 2005 to 2015. As stated earlier, it is unclear if reported academic growth can be attributed to reforms as a causal factor isolated from co-occurring forces in the city, including demographic shifts in the wake of the 2008 recession and rising numbers of middle class students returning to Denver public schools and neighborhoods. Data is presented showing modest gains in student proficiency in reading, writing, and math over 10 years (15 percentage points from 33 to 48 percent), but does not make clear whether gains were evident before reform initiatives were implemented in 2009 and 2010 or were accelerated in light of reforms between 2009 and 2014.

The report acknowledges concerns with academic growth measures compared to proficiency scores, noting that:

Schools are given a Median Growth Percentile (MGP) by calculating the growth percentile for each of their tested students and picking the median—the student exactly in the middle of the distribution. All of this means that a school can have a high MGP while its students are falling ever further behind grade-level proficiency. Since growth has accounted for roughly two-thirds of a school's score in recent years, the problem is significant (p. 6).

The report acknowledges but minimizes the reform's limited impact on closing achievement gaps between student groups:

“Denver's one big failure has been to narrow the achievement gap. The gap has widened—something that happens in many urban districts that improve, because white and middle-class students raise their scores faster than minority and low-income students, as shown in Figure 7. 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. Even growth scores have increased faster for middle-class than for low-income students.” (p. 15)

The method of analysis, comparing median percentile scores by schools, is unique and introduces error as the scale is not composed of equal intervals. This leaves the reader adrift. But widening gaps in achievement should have (but did not) temper the report's call for aggressively expanding school choice as the best strategy for equalizing opportunity. A read-

ing of the finding above, however, and abundant literature on school choice, suggests choice systems segregate children and exacerbate gaps in achievement.

4. Charter Schools lead the Way: Focuses on charter school outcomes compared to DPS operated schools.

The report contends that charter schools in Denver have led the way in academic growth, presenting evidence of higher school performance on ACT scores among charter schools compared to DPS-operated schools with similar poverty levels (p. 18). The report also presents evidence that charter schools outperform DPS-operated schools on PARCC assessments in Math and ELA for middle schools and in ELA for elementary. (p.19). The report spotlights two charter networks in particular as models of success that should be replicated—Strive Prep and Denver School of Science and Technology (DSST).

Again, the data is incompletely presented. The reader is led to conclude the efficacy all manner of reforms based on eyeballing what is basically a scatterplot. The report gives scant consideration to reasons for charter performance, including student selection effects, active parents, socioeconomics, teacher quality, geography or back-filling policies. The report cites one quantitative study by MIT and Duke researchers, who used Denver’s lottery system to control for selection effects of students in charters. The report argues significant gains among Denver’s charter schools in math, writing, and smaller but significant gains in reading compared to DPS schools.¹⁹

But again, the weakness of the data does not support the weight of the conclusions.

5. Innovation Schools Struggle: Focuses the rather weak outcomes of Denver’s innovation schools on academic growth and student proficiency.

The report contends that hybrid public schools in Denver that are operated by the district struggle to yield results and significant outcomes, due to what the report describes as “real” autonomy enjoyed by charter schools.

6. Denver’s Remaining Challenges: Focuses on next steps to expand Denver’s portfolio reform strategy.

The report praises Denver’s reforms as a political success and an effective strategy for improving student achievement, and should be expanded aggressively including: accelerating the replacement of failing schools; expanding the charter sector; making innovation zones work by granting full autonomy to school leaders; expanding equal opportunity by expanding public school choice; expanding equal opportunity by budgeting for actual salary rath-

er than average salaries; “taming the district monster” by creating real autonomy for all schools; aligning district staff and leaders around the portfolio strategy; doubling down on recruitment and development of leaders; and fixing the student performance framework to weigh student proficiency and measures of academic growth equally.

Not until this section is a single teacher quoted about the city’s reforms, and conveys teachers’ concerns with the pace and urgency of reforms that lead to job dissatisfaction and teacher turnover (p. 27). The report attributes teacher dissatisfaction and turnover, however, to central management and oversight of the “district monster” (p. 27). Data suggests that teacher turnover in Denver schools, however, is as much, if not more, a phenomenon in charter schools that operate autonomously from district oversight.²⁰

7. The Secrets of Denver’s Political Success: Focuses on “political elements” of Denver’s experience adopting portfolio strategies of reform.

The report attributes Denver’s ability to implement portfolio strategies with a traditional school board to its pace of change, noting that Denver’s leaders moved strategically so as not to spur backlash seen in other cities. The report shares opposing views of those who regard the pace of Denver’s charter replications as too slow.

The report does not share perspectives of those in Denver who view the pace of reform as too fast, including charter school leaders themselves who have halted replications in light of underperformance, workforce needs, and weak retention of teachers.²¹ The report suggests, moreover, that political tensions and challenges in Denver are settled (at best) and healthily tense (at worst), both of which downplay the vulnerability of current reforms to future protests due to embittered stakeholders and local actors concerned about the influence of outside interest groups and intermediary organizations believed to have undue influence on district leaders and board members that disrupted electoral processes and traditions of democratic localism.²²

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The report uses descriptive quantitative presentations of student performance data over 10 years to support reform efforts calling for the closing of struggling schools and the opening of new schools, including replication of successful charter schools.

The fundamental failing is the report bases its findings on a collection of scatter-plots where the reader is asked to look at what appears to be something like a regression line. From this, the report draws conclusions about the efficacy of a whole set of inter-related reforms and writes testimonials endorsing the desired reforms based on the trends. As valid science, the method falls short.

These efforts appear particularly off-point in light of the city's widening achievement gaps. Research that challenges the evidentiary basis of turnaround models on sustained academic growth over time is not utilized or cited prominently, nor does the report consider any qualitative studies on youth's experiences of school closure and turnaround, particularly for youth of color in poverty who bear the burden of poor schools and transitioning to new ones.

As it is impossible to determine causality, all findings become matters of personal interpretation.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

Ironically, the report celebrates Denver's portfolio strategy and its expansion of charter schools as a model of 21st century reform at a time when other cities have discovered that charters are not panaceas. By focusing on highly ranked charter schools using median growth measures (despite underperforming on neighborhood expectations of academic proficiency), the report attributes academic growth to school autonomy and school choice but does not examine other factors that may be in play. In the absence of research about the causes of school closures and charter non-renewals, the reports' endorsement for more school closures and charter creations seems costly and ineffective. Replication of charter schools that use a narrow set of practices, moreover, suggests limited options for parents seeking diverse curricular and pedagogical choices.

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[On pg. 341, Levin notes the issue of charters purchasing goods and services:

“Schools should have the options to purchase goods and services directly in the market place or by establishing consortia among schools to gain market power... The only mandatory involvement of the district is in financial accountability where it needs to monitor school purchasing to avoid self-dealing (schools purchasing services inappropriately from organizations sponsored or owned by their operators). Many charter schools in the U.S. pay management fees to external organizations to operate their schools. In some of these cases it has become clear that these are special arrangements, not subject to market competition, in which family or close associates of the charter boards or staff have created special arrangements that provide benefits, payments, or profits to school operators. Monitoring of these irregularities by the district should be undertaken whenever it appears that transactions appear to be unusually costly, not directly related to school purposes, or self-dealing.”]

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[Article notes that, "DPS records for the past three years show that black teachers have been fired at a higher rate than other racial and ethnic groups: 6.5 percent of black teachers, 4.2 percent of white teachers, 3.8 percent of Latino teachers and 5.4 percent of mixed race/Asian/Native American teachers have been dismissed over the past three years."]
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