

The New Education Reform Lie: Why Denver Is a Warning Sign, Not a Model, for Urban School Districts

The rush to expand charters is hardly justified by the performance of the ones already in operation.

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Scott Gilpin works in advertising, so he's used to dealing with people in the promotions business. He's just not used to seeing them operating a local public school.

Gilpin lives in Denver, where he grew up, graduated from high school and now has two children enrolled in the public school system. Recently, when he decided to get more involved in Denver school politics, he discovered that the most rapidly growing form of school in his community were charter schools. So he determined to check one out.

When he toured his first charter, a school in the Strive Preparatory network, he couldn't help but take note of the school's staffing structure, which could have supported a mid-sized promotional campaign: his guide was the chief of external affairs for the network, and the school boasted a senior director of development and an associate director of recruitment, too.

Gilpin—who sent his children to the local public school they were zoned for, as his parents had done—wondered, "What kind of local public school needs to recruit its students?"

As Gilpin would learn, lots of new Denver schools are that "kind of school."

Across the city, Denver has opened 27 charter schools in the last five years, and plans to start up six more in the 2016-17 school year – effectively doubling the number of charter schools in the city in less than six years, according to a recent report from the Center for Popular Democracy, a left-leaning research and advocacy organization in Washington, DC. Yet this rush to expand charters is hardly justified by the performance of the ones already in operation.

According to CPD, based on the school performance framework Denver uses to evaluate its own schools, "Forty percent of Denver charter schools are performing below expectations." And of those schools, 38 percent are performing significantly below expectations.

Nevertheless, numerous articles and reports in mainstream media outlets and education policy sites enthusiastically tout Denver as the place to see the next important new "reform" in education policy in action.

"Reformers are paying close attention to Denver," notes David Osborne of the Progressive Policy Institute in an op-ed recently published by U.S. News & World Report. Osborne declares Denver's education reform effort a success based on evidence of gains in "academic growth" and on-time high school graduation. He says Denver can show the rest of the nation "a way to transform ... 20th-century school systems, built on the principles of bureaucracy, into 21st-century systems, built to deliver continuous improvement."

Recent reports from other Beltway-based think tanks, on both the right and the left of the political spectrum, also hail Denver as a model for advancing "school choice" and charter schools that have the power to "transform" the education of low-performing students. Earlier this year, the Brookings Institution named Denver the second-best of the nation's 100+ largest school districts that provide parents with options for "school choice."

But Gilpin and other Denverites tell a different story about Denver-style urban school reform.

Instead of a glowing example, they point to warning signs. Rather than a narrative of success, their stories reveal disturbing truths about Denver's version of modern urban school reform – how policy direction is often controlled by big money and insiders, why glowing promises of "improvement" should be regarded with skepticism, and what the movement's real impacts are, especially in communities dominated by poor families of color.

'Eye Opening' Revelations

Gilpin's initial foray into Denver school politics began in 2011 when he joined in a campaign in support of a new bond initiative to raise new funding for, "school renovations and classroom enrichment programs," as the Denver Post put it.

The proposals passed in the 2012 ballot, but Gilpin's plunge into citizen involvement brought him up close to the often-unseen inner workings of contemporary urban education reform in Denver.

"What I found was eye-opening," Gilpin tells me in a phone conversation. Among those eye-openers were the intense lobbying and marketing efforts being undertaken to promote charter schools; their powerful and elite corps of backers; and the staggering amount of money, from taxpayers and private donors, that is being funneled to them.

Specifically, Gilpin saw firsthand how bond money intended for renovations and instructional programs was instead used to purchase a 13-story building downtown to house, in part, a new charter school.

Gilpin then learned that the district's chief operations officer, David Suppes, had signed the intent-to-purchase agreement for the new building on August 10, nearly two weeks before the board approved the bond initiative on August 23. Gilpin also saw how school leadership overlapped with the vendors and contractors used by the schools, potentially creating conflicts of interest and cronyism.

As the Colorado Independent reports, two members of the controlling school board majority in 2013, Barbara O'Brien and Landri Taylor, headed up organizations that contracted directly with the city school district. The two consistently voted with attorney Mike Johnson, whose law firm earned \$3.8 million from the district during his tenure on an advisory committee before stepping up to the board.

Taylor, who was appointed to the board in 2013 and had the advantage of running as an incumbent in 2015, was well known as a key backer of opening new charter schools. After winning the election in 2015, he abruptly resigned earlier this year for family reasons.

To replace Taylor, the board picked MiDian Holmes who, according to Chalkbeat Colorado, is "an active member in the school reform advocacy group Stand for Children," a pro-charter organization that has made large donations to school board candidates running on a pro-reform platform. (Holmes eventually resigned when background checks revealed she is a convicted child abuser, and the board seat is, at this date, vacant.)

This tight, sometimes hidden, collusion in Denver school governance has led Gilpin to believe Denver reform is the product of "an elite circle" of people with little to no input from the public. Other careful observers agree.

"Forced on Our Community"

"They invite the community to look at plans already being put into place," Earleen Brown tells me about the Denver school board in a conversation over the phone.

An African American grandmother from a Northeast Denver community populated predominantly by non-white, poor families, Brown sees the Denver school reform model from a very different vantage point from where Gilpin sees it. (Denver schools are majority Latino and African American, with 70 percent of students classified as low-income and nearly a third non-native English speakers.) But she shares many of his concerns.

Like Gilpin, Brown's involvement in Denver school politics began with a bond referendum, this one in 2008. In that effort, Brown contends, there was widespread belief money would go toward paying for either a new traditional comprehensive public high school in Northeast Denver or for a substantial renovation of the existing Montbello High School.

In 2009, after the bond passed, district officials approached parents in the Montbello neighborhood, a mostly African American community, with a set of four options for the struggling high school. The options followed guidelines from the Obama administration, which ranged from changing staffing to closing the school. Parents, Brown recalls, created a petition campaign that gathered over 300 names in favor of the option labeled "transformation," the choice generally agreed to be the least disruptive to the school.

But when district officials came back with their decision, they had picked a different option: turnaround, generally regarded as a much more disruptive process. And the next year, Montbello parents learned yet another option had been chosen for their school: closure. The last class to graduate from Montbello was in 2014, and the school is now no more.

Now the community has – instead of the traditional, comprehensive high school parents requested – an array of new charter schools. Housed in what used to be Montbello High are two innovation schools (schools that get much of the flexibility of charter schools but are not privately operated). One school has a very specialized program focused on international studies. The other is an arts-focused school that is already being scaled back due to academic distress.

Some of the new schools serving the Montbbello community are well known for enforcing the harshest forms of school discipline disproportionately on students of color. A 2015 report from a Denver-based education justice and civil and immigrant rights organization tracked Denver school discipline incidents – such as out-of-school suspension, expulsion, or referral to law enforcement – and the correlation of those incidents to race.

What the report shows, according to a review in the Colorado Independent, is that students of color in Denver schools are 219 percent more likely to receive harsher discipline than their white peers. The disparity is particularly acute among charter and innovation schools. According to the report, nine of the ten worst offenders in Denver are charter or innovation schools. The schools that replaced Montbello high are numbers five and two on the 10 worst list, with racial gaps in punishment that are 990.9 and 1,361.4 percent wider. (The worst school, a charter with a racial punishment gap of 2,991.2 percent, is now closed.)

The discriminatory treatment toward her community has led Brown to believe the whole Denver reform model has been "forced on our community."

What Big Money Wants

While some parents see the effort to remake Denver's schools as an agenda controlled by a small circle of local actors, others point to big money and influence coming from outside.

When Emily Sirota and her family moved to Denver in 2007, she and her husband quickly became concerned the schools their children would eventually attend were too focused on test scores and competition, and that leadership was "divorced from the desires of families," she tells me in a phone call. Her concerns motivated her to run for school board in 2011.

The quick lesson Sirota learned about Denver education politics was that connections to big money had more to do with determining opposing forces than traditional party lines.

Sirota, who is a Democrat, aligns politically with many in Denver who participate in education advocacy and serve on appointed education committees and elected boards. But because she did not align with the reform orthodoxy of school closures and charter school expansions (a wave of reform that many trace to Michael Bennet, a former investment banker who was superintendent of the district from 2005 to 2009 and is now a Democratic U.S. Senator for Colorado), she was not on the side of big money.

As *The Nation's* John Nichols reported at the time, big money lined up with Sirota's opponent Anne Rowe. Rowe, a former owner of a Denver publishing business, has strong ties to the Denver Public Schools' political establishment and was founding co-chair of A+ Denver, an influential advocacy group that backs charter schools and the Denver reform model.

Nichols notes that Rowe received strong financial support from "donors who, in several cases, have ties to groups that promote charter schools and vouchers" across the country, including the Alliance for Choice in Education, Stand for Children, and Democrats for Education Reform.

That funding disadvantage – Rowe out-raised Sirota by more than \$90,000 – was "one of the biggest reasons" she lost, Sirota contends. An article for *In These Times* points out that many of the same donors who funded her opponent also funded two other establishment candidates – Allegra Haynes, who won her race, and Jennifer Draper Carson, who lost hers by just 73 votes.

"Denver school board elections are just the latest examples of elections being bought," says Jeannie Kaplan, an eight-year veteran of the Denver school board. Kaplan, who has lived in Denver for over 40 years and raised children in the local public schools, first ran for school board in 2005 in an open seat contest she won. Kaplan was term-limited out in 2013 and could no longer run. Two years later, deep-pocketed privatizers poured money into the school board race and swept the election to take a 7-0 majority. As Kaplan describes on her personal blog, a key to the election sweep was late money coming into the race to preserve the at-large seat held by the pro-reform Haynes.

Campaign funding reports show that Haynes outspent her opponent Robert Speth by more than 2 to 1.

An article in the *American Prospect* on the increasing role of big money in school board races reports that Democrats for Education Reform, a PAC founded by hedge fund managers that pushes hard to expand charter schools nationwide, "contributed a quarter-million dollars to launch the Raising Colorado super PAC, which went on to spend \$90,000 running ads and mailing flyers" in support of Haynes and Lisa Flores, another pro-reform candidate who also won. (According to the Center for Media and Democracy, DFER has poured millions of dollars of "dark money" into elections in Colorado and other states to tilt elections to candidates who favor charters and other "reform" measures.)

As Kaplan writes in a blog post, "Public education in Denver, despite what you may have heard or read about in the press, is a system in chaos. It is a system run by a cabal. It is a system where politics, pardon the expression, trumps good policy and the truth."

'Highly Politicized'

So how did education reform in Denver become mostly about politics and power?

"Denver school reform has become highly politicized because the ideas supporting it are highly controversial," Chris Lubienski, an education scholar and a professor of education policy, organization, and leadership at the University of Illinois, tells me over the phone.

From 2011 to 2015, Lubienski and a team of other education researchers conducted a study to ascertain how intermediary organizations (IOs) supported by foundations and philanthropists influence public opinion on education in Denver. These organizations, which "serve a number of functions in school reform, including advocacy, consultation, policy design, alternative teacher and leadership preparation, and research," tend to promote reforms that "are often highly contested by parents, public education advocates, and teachers unions," the report contends. "In addition, the research evidence on the efficacy of these reforms is similarly unsettled."

"In Denver, reform ideas emerged from a very small handful of people," Lubienski tells me. "Reformers who work there may believe the origin of these ideas is in research and is homegrown," but he points to influence centers outside Denver, such as Silicon Valley and Washington, D.C., as more likely incubators of these reforms.

Lubienski also questions claims from Denver reform proponents that a democratic process produced their policies. "Their origins are not as democratic as is suggested," he shares. "Having policy decisions result from more of a consensus-based approach is admirable. But in Denver, that consensus is not as well developed as many people say it is."

In Denver, according to the study, only three foundations – the Daniels, Piton, and Donnell-Kay Foundations – fund most of the IOs driving change in the system. "Without this hub of funding," the report concludes, "and alignment around the importance of [these] reforms, it is unlikely that such reforms would have moved forward at the size and scope that we witness in Denver."

The study from Lubienski et. al., also cites the influence of a small number of national foundations, principally the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, that advocate for expansions of charter schools. Other sources, such as the Denver Post, document the influence of the Walton Family Foundation, the philanthropic organization created by the wealth of the family that owns the Walmart retail chain. According to the Post, in 2011, WFF awarded Denver with nearly \$8 million in grant money, "more than many of the nation's largest cities," because of "the strength and profile of [Denver's] charter-school world."

The Problem With 'Portfolio' Reform

Though the evidence that the reforms these foundations are pushing actually work is nowhere near as convincing reformers would have you believe, efforts to root charters deep within Denver's educational soil continue apace.

The mechanism reformers have used to seed the growth of charters across the city is the "portfolio model" – an approach that "shifts decision-making away from district superintendents and other central-office leaders," according to the National Education Policy Center. Four strategies form the core foundation of such an approach: "school-level decentralization of management; the reconstitution or closing of 'failing' schools; the expansion of choice, primarily through charter schools; and performance-based (generally test-based) accountability."

In Denver's case, the portfolio approach has led to the rapid expansion of charters while closing supposedly failed public schools. As Osborne writes in his U.S. News op-ed, "Since 2005 [Denver] has closed or replaced 48 schools and opened more than 70, the majority of them charters." Of Denver's 223 schools, 55 are charters and another 38 are "innovation schools" which Osborne describes as being "like charters."

To feed the system's numerous new charter schools, Denver has implemented an enrollment process that gives parents the opportunity to list up to 5 schools for their children to attend rather than simply relying on proximity. To help guide parents in making their school choices, the district uses a school ranking system with color-coded labels for schools – blue at the top (for "distinguished), green, yellow, orange, and red (for "accredited on probation") at the bottom. The rankings are used not only by parents, but also by the district to determine which schools need interventions and closure.

As Chalkbeat notes, Denver also has "enrollment zones" where students "are given a preference at the schools in the zone and are guaranteed a spot at one of them, though not necessarily their first pick. The zones are set up to encourage – some would say force – families to participate in the choice process."

But research experts are skeptical the portfolio approach alone will yield good results.

In an op-ed for Education Week, Montclair State University professor Katrina Bulkley joins with Columbia Teachers College professors Jeffrey Henig and Henry Levin to caution, "The portfolio-management approach to urban education is a work in progress."

NEPC adds further caution, writing, "There exists a very limited body of generally accepted research about the effects of portfolio district reform."

NEPC managing director William Mathis, one of the report's authors, tells me that it is, in particular, the combination of reforms that confounds research into portfolio results. "There are so many factors at play that describing causality is problematic," Mathis notes. "Portfolios mean different things in different places."

"If you don't change what happens in the classroom, you don't really change anything," Mathis contends. And he finds little evidence a portfolio approach will necessarily result in improvements in curriculum and instruction.

Former school board member Jeannie Kaplan also questions the success of such reforms. In an op-ed published last year in the Denver Post, Kaplan spotlighted numerous negative outcomes after many years of portfolio-based reform, including growing achievement gaps between white and non-white students, a school system stubbornly segregated along racial lines, and high staff turnover rates in schools.

Her op-ed pointed to a 2015 analysis from the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education (an organization that advocates the portfolio approach), which looked at the 50 largest urban school districts in the country that have been actively engaged in education reform. Kaplan noted that, "Of them, Denver Public Schools was dead last in both reading and math, with gaps of 38 percent and 30 percent respectively. The average for the other districts was around 14 percent for each subject.

"As for graduation rates, Denver ranked 45th out of the 50 districts."

Whose Choice?

So far, less than 27 percent of families have opted to participate in Denver's choice program, according to a Chalkbeat analysis. The remaining 73 percent have chosen to remain in their current local schools.*

That same analysis attributes the low participation rate to the extremely small percentage of parents who opt to "choice out of" their current school when their children are not in a "transition year" – for instance, moving from an elementary school into a middle school. An older article in the Denver Post reported numerous parents feeling "stressed out" over the choice process.

That said, some parents do find there are advantages to the choice system. For instance, when Scott Gilpin looked to enroll one of their daughters in a school, they used the enrollment process to "choice into" an innovation school that offered a dual language program. Similarly, when Emily Sirota looked for a school for her oldest daughter, she found an innovation school that had an expeditionary approach more to her liking.

But there's also evidence Denver's system of choice leads to a lot of outcomes that look more like forced choice. For instance, Gilpin notes that the enrollment zones set up to encourage choice often result in students being placed in charters whether their families indicated that as their top choice or not.

When Sirota visited the neighborhood school her family was zoned for, she noticed extremely large class sizes and the lack of adequate facility space for the students. Upper grades in the elementary school were housed in portable buildings. No doubt, such conditions dis-incentivize parents from

choosing that school.

"Choice sounds good," says Earleen Brown, but "there aren't five high performing schools in our area to choose from," she says. Although there are some "blue schools" in Brown's Northeast neighborhood, she argues their high ranking is often mostly due to Denver's methodology that rewards schools for recent growth in test scores, even when the percent of students who are on grade level in the school is still quite low.

Also, many of the traditional public schools in Brown's community have been closed or had charter schools "co-located" in them (an arrangement where a charter takes over a portion of a public school's facility). So for some families in Northeast Denver "being able to enroll in a nearby traditional public school is a choice you don't get," she notes. Certainly, for parents who wanted Montbello High School to serve as a traditional, comprehensive high school, that choice was simply overruled by the district.

"We really have no choice in our community," Brown maintains.

What Parents Want

Given all of the obvious flaws and questionable results attached to Denver's current reform model, one can't help but wonder why is this approach is being lifted up as a "model of excellence" to be replicated across the nation.

Of course, we've seen this type of bluster in support of charter schools and education reform before. For years, the New Orleans school system was held up as a reform model for other urban communities to emulate.

NOLA schools, essentially wiped out by Hurricane Katrina, provided reformers with "a clean slate" to remake an urban public school system based on their own ideas alone, which consisted primarily of converting the district into a nearly all charter school entity and turning school enrollment into a choice process.

Former Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal claimed NOLA-style reform had laid down a path for schools everywhere else to follow. David Osborne, in another of his laudatory commentaries about education reform, wrote in 2015, "New Orleans made charter schools work." Politico reported, "Mayors and governors from Nevada to Tennessee" were in full throttle campaigns to "replicate the New Orleans model."

Except that, for a host of reasons, the New Orleans model turned out to be impossible to replicate. In fact, in Denver today there's little discussion of education reform being patterned after New Orleans. In Osborne's promotion of the Denver model, in fact, he contrasts the Denver approach with New Orleans', and lauds it for being an approach to education reform that hasn't required state intervention or other forms of "insulation from local electoral politics."

But it's not clear that the form of electoral politics practiced in Denver has yet given parents what they want as much as it has delivered outcomes desired by an elite few.

In Earleen Brown's case, what she wants is pretty specific: She'd like to see the district act on her community's desire to have a comprehensive, public high school.

Jeannie Kaplan advocates the adoption of models she has seen work in the past that provided schools resources to stay open longer hours and provide a fuller range of services including tutoring, health care, and extra-curricular activities. "Now we call these 'community schools,'" she explains. What Denver needs most, she believes "is the money [to fund] this."

"We need more focus on the schools in our neighborhoods, rather than popping up new charter schools here and there," Emily Sirota maintains. And she'd like to see smaller class sizes, guaranteed recess for kids, and a more equitable system that ensures a high level of quality curriculum and instruction in all schools, not just the ones the better-off children attend.

As for Scott Gilpin, he wants to see spending on education in Denver going more toward the classroom instead of to administration, consultants, and school board elections. He thinks less emphasis on testing would not only free up more time for instruction; it would make teachers' jobs more rewarding – which would, in turn, lower teacher attrition rates.

What Denver parents seem to want most from education policy in their community is for leaders to find a different way to talk about these issues, and to solicit, and honor, parent input before decisions are made.

Whether they will ever get what they want in this regard remains an unsettlingly open question.

* Though officials from Denver Public Schools argue that in the transition grades (kindergarten and grades 6 and 9) participation levels are now at 84%, overall participation rates across all grades remain at just 26.5%.

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By Jeff Bryant

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