February 16, 2012

Denver Board of Education
900 Grant Street
Denver, CO 80203

Dear Denver Board of Education Members,

We are asking you to revise and update the strategic plan for Denver Public Schools with a clear set of goals and a well-defined set of strategies that will drive academic improvement. Denver Public Schools has begun to make progress but we have little understanding of what strategies, programs, and efforts are working. Until the broader community is presented with a clear strategic plan and corresponding set of processes for evaluating each of the district's strategies, it will be impossible to adapt strategies to accelerate progress.

A+ Denver has been engaged in a thorough review of the Denver Plan and has found that while it provides a fairly comprehensive list of the district initiatives, it does not clearly describe how the district will be managed for success. We are concerned that the Denver Plan does not address the need for ongoing systems to measure the impact of the plan's strategies, programs or initiatives throughout the district. For example, we have no idea what aspects of the district's math program from the curriculum to the professional development are causing high math growth scores in some schools. It is critical that the district have a thorough understanding of how well various district efforts are working or not.

When the 2010 Denver Plan was presented to the community in the fall of 2009, A+ Denver leadership expressed concerns that the plan was not a strategic document. Rather, it was simply a list of practices to be implemented throughout the district. The connections among the 13 goals established by the BOE, the strategies employed through the Denver Plan, and the practice of these strategies at the school and classroom level are poorly established within the Plan. The goals themselves are a disjointed list of deliverables. The fact that so few of them are within reach, even though many are quite modest in aspiration, must suggest that the strategies employed to achieve them are inadequate in design or in practice.

In your introduction to the 2010 Denver Plan, you describe the Denver Plan as the "basis of individual school improvement plans and central office departmental plans which in turn drive budgets, timelines and individual performance goals". As a group of civic leaders, we have struggled to use the Plan to rally support for district improvement and in turn hold the district accountable for results.

We have concluded that a redraft of the Denver Plan is urgently needed and suggest the following:

IMPROVE GOALS AND THEIR CORRESPONDING ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES: Most of the DPS goals outlined in the Denver Plan relate to meeting a particular threshold or singular quantitative goal (typically 3.5%-- an arbitrary number) with no prioritization. We know that measurement tools can have unintended consequences when there is a lack of systems evaluation and reflection of progress in a larger context. For example, DPS has been making good progress toward meeting goals concerning graduation rates; however, this is a hollow victory if the remediation rate for college-bound students is increasing at the same rate or faster than the graduation rate. Further, the goals lack prioritization and a rationale for why specific percentage points are chosen as target numbers for achievement. Addressing these issues will give stronger guidance to schools and provide the public more confidence in DPS's ability to meet meaningful goals.

REDRAFT THE PLAN TO REFLECT CURRENT PRIORITIES: In the State of the Schools Address to A+ Denver in late October, four district priorities for 2011were identified: Educator Effectiveness, English Language Learners, New Standards/Use of Data in Assessments, and Turnaround Schools. Only the first two are specifically addressed in detail in the current Denver Plan. Each of these efforts, like most of the efforts in the district, has had little or no evaluation component. This makes it difficult to determine whether programs are effective or if goals are being met. Without clear metrics, the district will have no ability to know which strategies are working or which investments warrant further resources.

REDRAFT THE PLAN TO MATCH THE THEORY OF ACTION: The theory of action committed to by the district and board of education is *performance empowerment;* a tool which has proven useful in the business community and districts across the nation. Authentic *performance empowerment* transfers decision-making responsibility from the central office to principals and teachers, but it balances this power with accountability and support. As described in the plan, DPS's implementation of performance empowerment is mainly responsibility and accountability, with some important teacher support included, but almost no real transfer of power. It is often confusing where the power for decision making rests and how this may or may not drive student achievement. Is the curriculum and program fixed centrally while decisions about people, time, and money are driven by decisions at the school level? There must be greater clarity about where decision-making lies for major aspects of the district's operations and programs. The district must determine whether or not it is committed to full implementation of performance empowerment.

ADD A SECTION THAT ADDRESSES SUBJECTS OTHER THAN MATH AND LITERACY: Proficiency in math and literacy is vital to educational success and workforce readiness, and a focus on these subjects is essential. However, the important role that social studies, science, civics, economics, art, and health play in connecting students to school and career both socially and emotionally makes them deserving of more than a mere mention. Parents should be assured that DPS is committed to these content areas, as should the majority of teachers at the secondary level who are engaged in teaching these classes daily. We are concerned that the district has no means to measure whether a student is graduating with the knowledge, skills and habits necessary to succeed in college and work other than the highly subjective system of "credits" used to grant a diploma.

ADD RECRUITMENT, TRAINING, AND SUPPORT OF SCHOOL LEADERS: The central issue of school leadership is absent in both the 2011 priorities and in the 2010 Plan, suggesting that a key component of district success has been overlooked. We applaud the district for launching several new programs supported by the Wallace and Dell Foundations but we wonder how we would know if these programs or any of the other efforts at ensuring that every school has a great principal, are working.

We recommend that the Board of Education revisit the Denver Plan and its goals. Specifically, we believe that the Plan should be redrafted as a shorter, strategic document with benchmarks easily communicated and accessible to the public; that the Board of Education develop and approve a new set of goals embedded in the new Plan; and that the school improvement plans be redesigned to represent both a blueprint that educational professionals can use and that can be an accessible tool for parents.

Recently the superintendent stated that the district might be seeking additional public tax-payer support. Redrafting the Denver Plan as we have suggested herein should serve as the basis for explaining to voters why new funding is needed, how it will be used, and what outcomes will result and be measured. The acknowledgement of the need for more resources and their strategic allocation will place all of the district's goals and strategies in realistic focus for the public.

We recommend that the Denver Plan and the various metrics therein tie back to the school improvement and redesign plans. In a recent BOE meeting, it was clear that communication on the status of individual school performance still lags behind available data. This is a lost opportunity for engaging parents and holding school leaders and teachers accountable. The School Improvement Plans available on the DPS website are obscure and inaccessible. For many schools, it appears that the plans represent a form to be filled out and not the ongoing monitoring and fine-tuning of educational practices suggested by the

term "Continuous Improvement". Parent and community awareness of the status of school performance and the school's plans to address performance gaps are key components in the district's effort to turnaround failing schools.

The State of Colorado and Denver Public Schools are moving closer to a system where teachers and students are held accountable for their performance. A+ Denver seeks a tool by which the community can hold management, as well as the Board of Education, accountable. The 2010 Denver Plan does not provide that capability.

A+ Denver would like to work with you to identify where we may be helpful in supporting you in the development of an effective strategic plan. We want to support you in creating a framework that enables the district to move with agility while reflecting upon work and building public support for radical improvement in DPS performance. The first step is to acknowledge that it is time to have a clear, focused plan to drive district improvement. We would like to have a more in-depth conversation about our concerns and recommendations while also providing a more detailed critique.

We look forward to working with you to make a plan as strategic and impactful as Denver deserves.

Respectfully,

The A+ Denver Board of Directors

The Honorable Terrance Carroll, Co-Chair

The Honorable Federico Peña

Mary Gittings Cronin, Co-Chair

Rob Stein

Jesus Salazar

Anna Alejo

Charles Ward

Dr. David Scanavino