



Annual Report

2011-2012



Date 1/2/13

Dear Friends of A+ Denver:

The past year has been one of growth and change for this organization and for Denver Public Schools. Over the past year, DPS has grown by over 10,000 students. Meanwhile, A+ hired a new leader and staff; and renewed its strategic focus.

With the increase in students in DPS, it is more important than ever to push for better outcomes. While we believe DPS is moving in the right direction, we cannot lose sight of the fact that we still have a long way to go before kids are college and career ready. For example, of the students who go on to college, well over half still require remediation.

A+ Denver believes we must continue to work toward dramatic increases in student achievement. We have and will continue to do so by harnessing the power of Denver's civic leadership toward building public will and advocating for reform.

This year, our focus has been on advocacy, community engagement, research and analysis. We have investigated and informed reform efforts such as turnaround, innovation and charter schools. We have evaluated the new school enrollment systems and looked closely at arts education. A+ has and will continue to push for a revised Denver Plan that includes a clear articulation of reform strategies.

A+ Denver thanks you for your support and leadership. We are very appreciative of the many nonprofit, business, and public sector leaders who have given their time and energy to this important work. With your help, we hope to continue to give voice to Denver's 80,000 students, to demand better schools for them, and for their children.

Sincerely yours,



Van Schoales
CEO



Terrance Carroll
Co-Chair



Mary Gittings Cronin
Co-Chair

The Mission of A+ Denver is to harness the power of Denver's civic leadership to build public will and advocate for the changes necessary to dramatically increase student achievement in public education in Denver.

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Left to right: Van Schoales, Supt Tom Boasberg, and DPS board president Mary Seawell discuss DPS reform with A+ members

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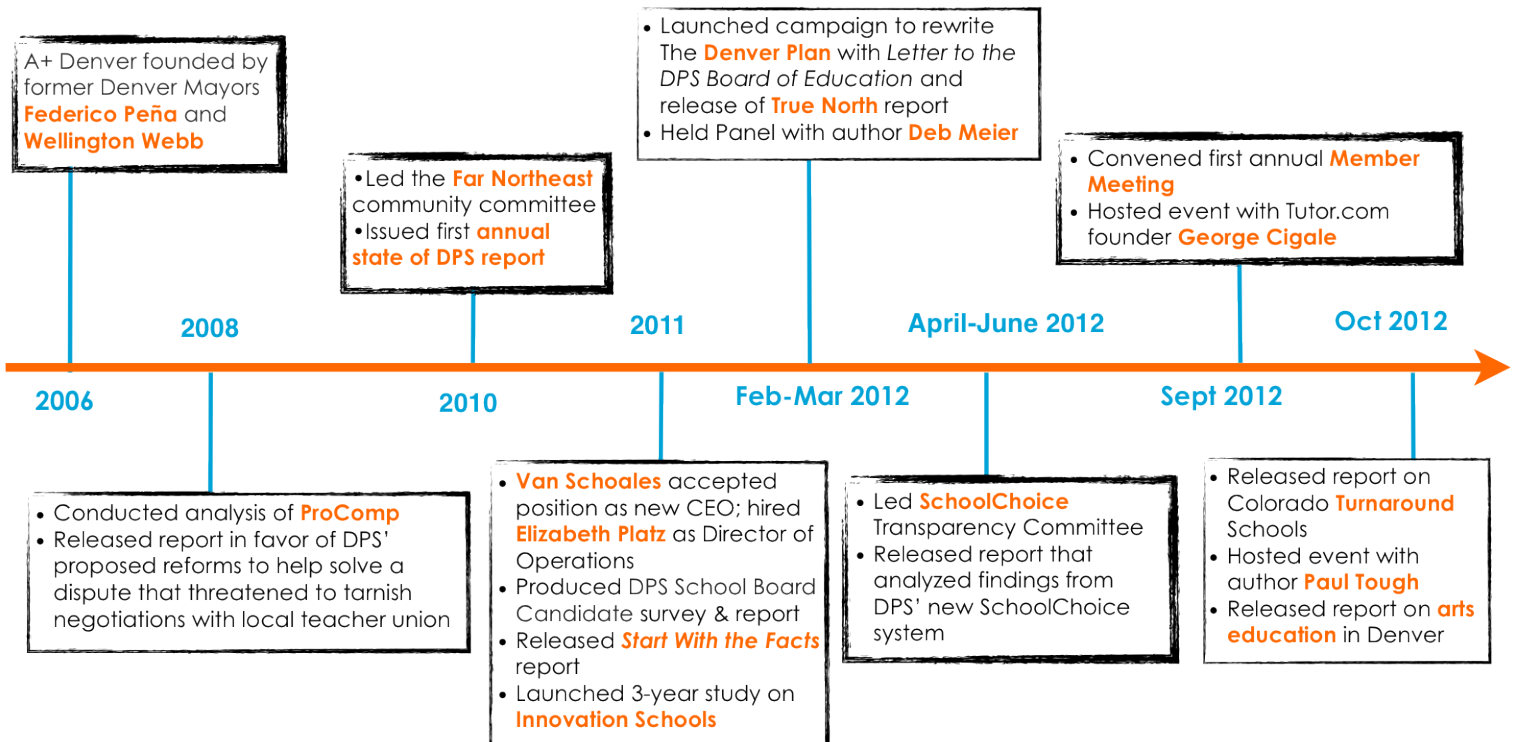
CHARLES L. WARD
*Former CO President for Qwest
Interim CEO
National Sport Center for the Disabled*

History & Purpose

Effective public schools are prerequisites to the health and economic success of our community. A+ facilitates needed education reform by uniting separate groups and interests around our core principles:

- Student-centered decisions
- Transparency
- High Expectations
- Accountability
- Awareness & Engagement
- Choice & Equitable Access
- Adequate Resources
- Data-driven best practices

A+ Denver sets itself apart through a unique civic leadership approach focused on building a consensus around education reform. We harness the voices of community leaders to demand substantial improvements in Denver Public Schools. Since our founding in 2006, A+ Denver has strengthened this voice to affirm that all children in Denver deserve access to high-performing schools so they can graduate prepared for college and/or career.



Research and Analysis

A+ Denver believes that data and research are essential in guiding our work. We look closely at reforms across the state and district to determine which are working for kids, and which need to be revised or rethought. We examine academic outcomes and trends, and evaluate new systems and strategies. This year, A+ Denver has published eleven reports. Here are a few.

By the Numbers

- A+ Denver published **11 reports** in 2011-12, partnering with other organizations for many of them.
- Approximately **1700+** community members opened and read our reports through our email service
- Approximately **1580+** community members opened and read our reports through our webpage

Analyzing the Impact of Reforms:

Crafting an Innovation School: Findings from Denver's first eight Innovation schools (December 2011)

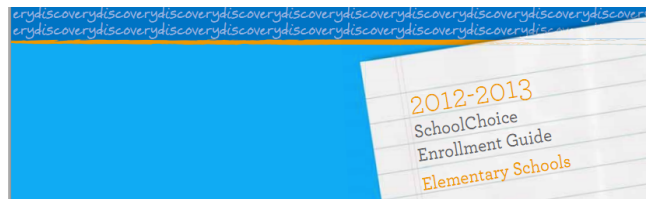
Policies allowing traditional schools to earn charter-like autonomy have been one of the most important reform strategies in Colorado. Beginning in 2010, researchers at UCD, contracted through a collaborative effort including DPS and teachers' unions, began evaluating Denver's Innovation Schools. These initial findings are intended to help us understand what is working well and what challenges schools are facing. Important questions still surround the district's role in supporting innovation schools. Read [here](#).

“A+ Denver has been an invaluable partner and needed challenger to Denver Public Schools.”

**--Mary Seawell
President, DPS Board of Education**

School Achievement in Denver: The Impact of Charter Schools (January 2012)

This report shows that Charter Management Organizations (charter organizations that manage more than one school, currently DSST, West Denver Prep and KIPP) are not only outperforming district and other individual charter schools, but are having a significant impact on the district's overall growth and achievement scores at grades six and above. Read [here](#).



DPS SchoolChoice Findings – An Outsider's Perspective (April 2012)

In 2011-12, Denver Public Schools moved to a new streamlined school enrollment system. The new system moved over sixty separate application processes to a single one. For the first time, families could easily view and evaluate all schools, and then choice into whichever schools were the best fit and had space. This is the first enrollment system of its kind in a large urban school district that includes all schools, regardless of type (charter, district, innovation). A+ Denver was involved in the multi-year process to build support for this new system and advocate for its implementation. We then led efforts to form an independent transparency committee to evaluate the impact and efficacy of the new system after its first year. Read [here](#).

True North (May 2012)

By May 2012, many reform-minded groups and individuals worried that the district lacked a strategic plan based on high standards and clear, measurable goals. A+ was skeptical of whether DPS students graduated with the resources required for success in college or career. We partnered with the Donnell-Kay Foundation to release "True North-Goals for Denver Public Schools." The report emphasizes where DPS can improve and set higher standards as they continue to redraft the Denver Plan. A+ Denver called on DPS to publicly evaluate itself against the goal of exit-level proficiency measured in part through students' ACT scores. Read [here](#).

Colorado Turnaround Schools--Rays of Hope (October 2012)

This fall A+ released its second report focused on Colorado turnaround schools, schools that receive federal dollars for turnaround efforts. The report highlighted a handful of schools that have seen impressive growth; but it revealed many schools that are still struggling. Recommendations included pulling funding from specific underperforming schools and districts, and encouraging communication and sharing of best practices by schools that have demonstrated success. Soon after the release of the report, funding was withdrawn from several schools in Pueblo 60 and one school in DPS. A+ continues to work closely with partners to improve turnaround strategies. Read [here](#).

Examining Academic Outcomes and Trends:

Start with the Facts: Strengthening Denver Public Schools (November 2011)

This follow up to our 2009 report on the state of DPS identifies both positive and negative trends over the past three years to provide an honest and sobering look at where we are. We believe it is critical for outside groups like us to objectively analyze data to identify where growth is occurring and how best to focus our energy. Partners on this project included the Colorado Children's Campaign and Together Colorado (formerly MOP). Find the full report [here](#).

Arts Education in Denver Schools: Envisioning Excellence (October 2012)

Denver has built a reputation as a hub for arts and culture in the past decade, but arts education has been left behind. Denver has some strong arts programs but lacks an overall strategy to ensure equity, K-12 pipelines and an efficient use of community resources. As a result of the 2012 bond and mill vote, Denver will receive additional tax dollars to support the arts in schools. This report lays the groundwork for ongoing conversations about how we can design and execute a high-impact strategy for arts education. Read [here](#).

"A+ Denver has been a critical friend to the Colorado Department of Education in supporting higher achievement for students not only here in Denver, but throughout the state."

**--Robert Hammond,
Colorado Commissioner of Education**

Advocacy

By the Numbers

- A+ Denver led **four** community based committees.
- At least **85** community members actively participate in these committees.

Revision of The Denver Plan

The current strategic plan for DPS is outdated, includes arbitrary benchmarks and is unfocused. We are badly in need of a revised Denver Plan with a clear roadmap that defines goals, strategies, and processes for evaluating those strategies. This plan will give the public measurements by which to hold the district accountable to its goals. In partnership with Donnell-Kay and others, A+ published *Truth North* (see Reports) and continues to push the Board of Education to clarify its strategic vision. Read our appeal [here](#).

School Board Candidate Survey

Many voters don't consider themselves experts on education policy nor do they typically have a full understanding of school board candidates' positions and records. To improve voter turnout and awareness, we gave a 28 question survey to the school board candidates. We compiled the responses into a voter-friendly report to inform voters of each candidate's platform and position on important education issues.

Denver School Performance by School Board Member Districts: Results and Trends

Prior to the most recent school board election, A+ embarked on a project to link school performance to the efforts of individual board members. We believed this connection was an important and often overlooked part of accountability. [Read](#) report.

2012 Bond Mill Levy

A+ Denver has also been a strong voice at community meetings for the 2012 Bond and Mill Levy ballot proposals. DPS is the fastest-growing urban school district in the U.S. At the same time, the state is imposing budget cuts. For these and other reasons, A+ Denver believes that the district needs increase funding to continue and build upon the proven successes of recent reform such as expanded learning opportunities and tutoring. At the same time, we advocate for diligent oversight to ensure that each dollar positively impacts student achievement.

Turnaround School Strategies

This year, A+ Denver led coalitions on turnaround efforts in Denver and Colorado. A+ members continue to play a leading role in shaping recommendations to turn around Colorado's lowest performing schools. Our members are dedicated to advocating at the city and state level to ensure policies increase the number of high quality seats in Denver and around the State.



Superintendent Boasberg speaks with students from High Tech Early College at the press release for Colorado Turnaround Schools--Rays of Hope

Community Engagement

By the Numbers

- **100+** members in our network of community leaders - and counting!
- **910+** contacts on our email list staying in touch with our work.
- **220+** Twitter followers and **70+** Facebook friends.
- Our reports or staff have been featured in **54** articles from **9** different press sources

Membership

To expand our impact in the community, A+ Denver organized a year-long membership drive. Since August 2011, we have grown to over **100 members**, all of whom are leaders in business, nonprofit, education, and other important sectors. Though diverse in their professional backgrounds, they are all passionate about improving our public school system. They all use their distinctly influential networks to promote the findings of our organization.

Mailings and Website

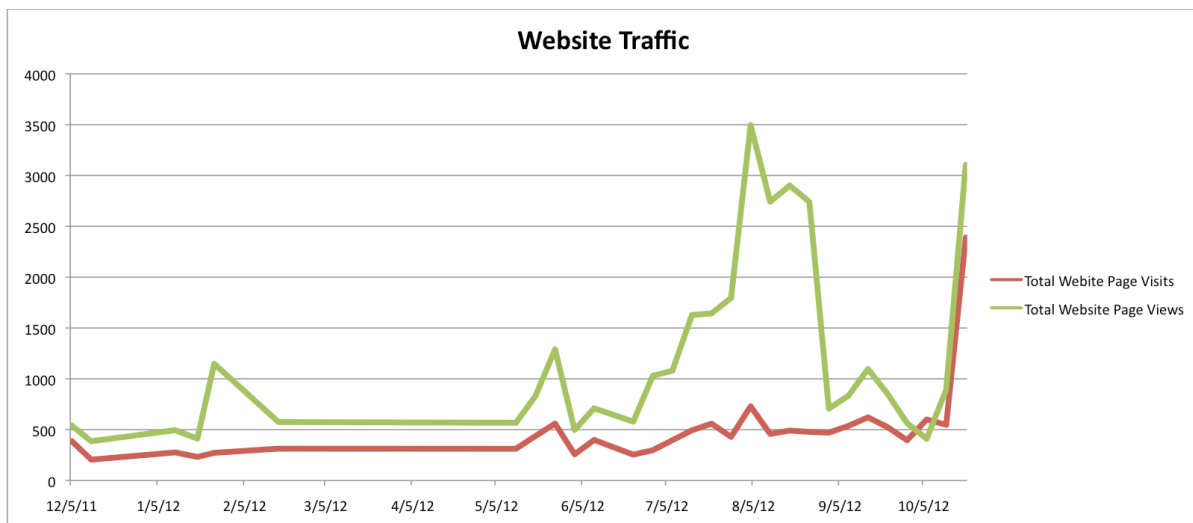
A+ Denver now has **over 910 recipients** on our email list. A+ has sent out **7 newsletters** and nearly **100** other updates on A+ and education reform. Our website regularly receives **over 1000** visitors and page views.

“A+ Denver has helped drive the education dialogue throughout Denver. Their powerful reports, ranging from the importance of the arts in school to an honest and deep look at our state’s turnaround efforts, have ensured school quality and student outcomes remain the center of focus in Denver and beyond.”

--Chris Watney, CEO
The Colorado Children’s Campaign

Social Media

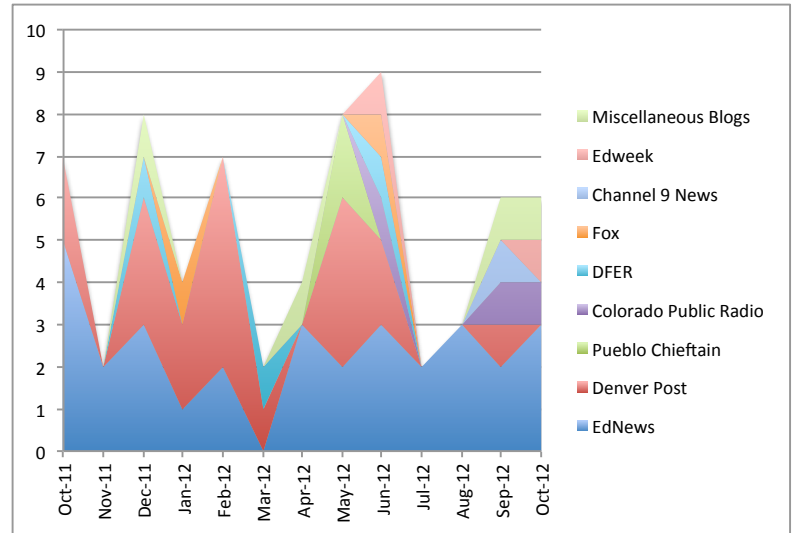
A+ joined Facebook and Twitter at the start of the 2011-2012 school-year. Since prioritizing our social media campaign in August 2012, our Twitter following has increased by approximately **55%**. Over **220** groups and individuals follow A+ Denver through Twitter, and our Facebook profile is “liked” by over **70** people



Press Coverage

Local and national news sources like the Denver Post, EdNews Colorado, EdWeek, and Colorado Public Radio have featured A+ Denver in **over 54** articles this past year. Our reports are regularly cited, with each averaging 2 media hits once released. Van Schoales, other A+ staff, and board members have authored **18** articles in addition to this independent press coverage. Also, A+ has produced **7** press releases in coordination with the release of reports.

Press Coverage by Source



Events



By the Numbers

- **5** events featuring national experts in education.
- A total of over **680** people attended our events in the past year.

Member Events

As part of our membership campaign, we held several member-only events, including coffee hours, networking opportunities, social hours, and conversations with DPS Superintendent Tom Boasberg.

School Board Candidate Forum (October 18, 2011)

In 2011, A+ Denver worked with a variety of groups to host a school board candidate forum at the University of Denver. Over 200 people attended this event moderated by Eli Stokes of Fox 31.

An Evening with Alexander Russo (October 19, 2011)

Our friends and members were invited to join us for a discussion on school turnaround fea-

turing Alexander Russo, author of *Stray Dogs, Saints and Saviors: Fighting for the Soul of American's Toughest High School*.

Start with the Facts Report Release Luncheon (November 30, 2011)

Together with our partners, Colorado Children's Campaign and Together Colorado (formerly MOP), we held a small lunch with high-profile decision makers to release our Start with the Facts report. Guests were given a highlight of data and recommendations covered in the publication.

Innovation Schools Legislative Briefing (December 14, 2012)

In November, we held a meeting to discuss the first-year findings of our three-year study on innovation schools conducted in partnership with UC-Denver and CEA. We shared baseline data that will help education leaders monitor innovation schools in their early stages. Around 100 people attended including state legislators, teachers, and community leaders.

“As a bipartisan, diverse group of stakeholders with interest in improving education outcomes for children and reforming our education system, A+ is a voice for excellence in education. I'm proud to be affiliated.”

--James Mejia
CEO of Mejia Associates

Education Resource Strategies Breakfast Meeting (January 18, 2012)

Earlier this year, A+ Denver hosted a breakfast with Tom Boasberg, DPS staff, and Jonathan Tavers to discuss the district's use of people, time and money to improve educational outcomes and ensure the diverse needs of all Denver students are served.

Conversation With Deb Meier (March 8, 2012)

We hosted an evening with national education expert Deb Meier which attracted close to 100 community members.

An Evening with Eva Moskowitz (July 17, 2012)

Most recently, we partnered with the Donnell-Kay Foundation to host an evening with Eva Moskowitz, CEO and Founder of

Success Academy Charter Schools and author of *Mission Possible*.

An Evening with George Cigale (September 13, 2012)

George Cigale, CEO and founder of an on-demand tutoring service called *Tutor.com*, joined A+ for an informative reception. Cigale uses twenty-first century tools to provide a modern form of tutoring that assists students whenever and wherever their questions arise. Cigale shared his company model with A+ guests as well as his vision to expand the service to more districts like DPS.

An Evening with Paul Tough (October 15, 2012)

Paul Tough is a leading education expert. Paul has written extensively about education, child development, poverty, and politics including cover stories in *the New York Times Magazine* on character education, the achievement gap, and the Obama administration's poverty policies. He has worked as an editor at the *New York Times Magazine* and *Harper's Magazine* and as a reporter and producer for the public-radio program "This American Life." He was the founding editor of *Open Letters*, an online magazine. His writing has appeared in *the New Yorker*, *Slate*, *GQ*, *Esquire*, and *Geist*, and the *New York Times*. Tough spoke to 130 attendees about his most recent book, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*.



Paul Tough talks to over 100 people about his new book, *How Children Succeed*.

Acknowledgments

Contributors

A+ Denver Board of Directors

AmeriCorps

Federico Peña

Mary Cronin

Jesus Salazar

Rick Griffith

Summit 54

The Anschutz Family Foundation

The Carson Foundation

The Daniels Fund

The Denver Foundation

The Donnell-Kay Foundation

The Gates Family Foundation

The Piton Foundation

The Walton Family Foundation

Partners

The following organizations have collaborated with A+ to conduct research and/or promote improved learning opportunities for Denver students:

ACE

Colorado Children's Campaign

Colorado League of Charter Schools

Center on Reinvesting in Public Schools

Colorado Succeeds

Democrats for Education Reform

Denver Public Schools

Denver Public Schools Foundation

Denver Scholarship Foundation

Donnell-Kay Foundation

EducationNews Colorado

Education Reform Now

Foundation for Education Excellence

Get Smart Schools

Metro Chamber of Commerce

Padres Unidos

Stand for Children

Summit 54

Teach for America

Together Colorado

University of Colorado, Denver

Young Education Professionals

Members

Marco Abarca
Cindy Abramson
Paul "Berrick" Abramson
Anna Alejo
Amy Anderson
Gregory Anderson
John Arigoni
Barbara Atkeson
Liz Aybar
Brian Barhaugh
Parker Baxter
Beth Bean
Becca Bracy-Knight
Billie Bramhall
Kelly Brough
Brooke Brown
Matt Carberry
Mario Carrera
Terrance Carroll
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Maira Cullen
Steve Dayney
Christine De Baca
Steve Dobo
Pat Donovan
Jennifer Douglas
Jennifer Draper Carson
Doug Elliot
Nora Flood
Scott Foust
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David Goldberg
Alan Gottlieb
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Jim Griffin
Rick Griffith
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Kevin Hall
Patrick Hamill
Jane Hansberry
Pamela Harris
Janel Highfill
Peter Huidekoper
Bill Jaeger
Mike Johnson
Cyndi Kahn
Rebecca Kantor
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Denise King
Kim Knous Dolon
Ben Kornell
Mike Kromrey
Arnie Langberg
Tony Lewis
Laura Lewkowitz
Janet Lopez
Cathy Lund
Denise Maes
Ricardo Martinez
James Mejia
Myles Mendoza
Aaron Miripol
Liane Morrison
Buffy Naake
Zack Neumeyer
Marco Nunez
Barbara O'Brien
Michael O'Hagan
Cecilia Ortiz
Jeff Park
Federico Peña
Eileen Piper
Illana Poley
Ellen Robinson
Rosemary Rodriguez
Susanna Rodriguez deLeon
Jesus Salazar
Deanna Sands
David Scanavino
Kevin Seggelke
Kent Seidel

Alexis Senger
Derec Shuler
Roberta Simonton
Amy Slothower
Eric Sonderman
Remy Spreeuw
William "Gully" Stanford
Rob Stein
Tim Taylor
Landri Taylor
Dawn Taylor Owens
Paul Teske
Sean VanBerschoot
Peter Vigil
Bonnie Walters
Rosann Ward
Chuck Ward
Chris Watney
Steve Weigler
Les Woodward

