Summary of *Crafting an Innovation School:*
Findings from Denver's first eight Innovation schools

Beginning in 2010, The Evaluation Center in the School of Education and Human Development, at the University of Colorado Denver, was contracted through a collaborative effort by Denver Public Schools (DPS), Colorado Education Association (CEA), A+ Denver, and the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) to provide external evaluation services to study the Innovation schools in Denver.

This is the final report for year 1 of the evaluation, which covers the 2010-11 school year. The purpose of this report is to provide preliminary data about the Innovation schools that will help DPS and its partners understand the changes that have occurred since schools gained Innovation status, what is working well, and what challenges they are facing. The results are designed to be formative in nature, which will provide stakeholders with information that can be used to inform decision-making, and to help improve and support Innovation schools.

Methods

The evaluation is based on a mixed-method framework which incorporates multiple sources of data. Data collection was framed around the Five Essential Supports for School Improvement, which have been found to be critical in school reform efforts by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, & Luppescu, 2006), and which include school structures, professional practice, and school cultures.

Interviews - Between May and June of 2011 seven of the eight Innovation schools opted to participate in interviews. A total of seven interviews were conducted with principals, thirteen with teachers, and six with parents.

Climate surveys - Between May and June of 2011, teachers at all eight of the Innovation schools were invited to participate in a survey to measure aspects of the climate and culture of the school. The total response rate across all teachers was 55% (n=347 of 626).

Innovation Plans – An analysis of the Innovation plans submitted by schools was used to clarify other data collected, and to gain an understanding of what waivers each school had requested as part of the Innovation process.

Achievement data – Existing data regarding student achievement on the CSAP was obtained from the Data Lab on the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) website. This data included the percent of students scoring proficient or advanced in each subject, and median growth percentiles.

Human resources data – DPS provided evaluators with human resources files for 08-09 and 09-10 which included information about teacher and principal staffing, experience, and degrees earned.

Findings

Innovation schools did not tend to look drastically different than other schools. Most principals reported that they have taken the approach of deliberately moving slowly with the implementation of their Innovation plan. It was clear that principals felt they could make more substantial changes given the waivers they have from district, state, and union policies; some principals were considering additional changes in the coming years. Given the flexibility that Innovation schools have, it is possible

that they will begin to implement more numerous and substantive changes in the future. However, there remains the question of what it means for a school to be "innovative", and what expectations exist (from the district and the schools themselves) around what an Innovation school looks like, and how it may differ or not from its previous practices and from other DPS schools.

The four major issues driving schools to seek Innovation status were: budget, schedule, workforce management, and level of control. These were also the areas in which respondents said they saw the most obvious changes following Innovation status. It was somewhat remarkable that principals did not raise issues around curriculum and instruction as a key reason for seeking Innovation, though they did note that flexibility in these other four areas allowed them to make shifts related to instruction. The changes schools made which had the most potential to impact instruction had to do with teacher planning time, teacher PD, funds for additional academic and enrichment activities, schedule changes, and workforce management (e.g., hiring, opting out of direct placement). Given that there was such a consistent set of core drivers for all schools seeking Innovation status, this suggests there may be key areas where principals feel that district constraints are most burdensome. Principals appeared to view these issues as key levers in their management of the school; eliminating or reducing constraints in these areas at other DPS schools could potentially improve principals' perceptions about their ability to make decisions and manage their schools. At this point there is no evidence from this study to support or refute the idea that autonomy in these areas will improve school outcomes, but removing constraints in these areas clearly improved the staff and community sense of autonomy and ownership in the Innovation schools.

Principals are relatively happy with the support they have received from DPS. They found that support improved after the formation of the Office of School Reform and Innovation (OSRI). A number of principals noted that in the early years of Innovation schools there had been challenges getting basic services from the district (particularly around HR and budget) because of a lack of understanding in central office. Departments did not know how to deal with the needs of Innovation schools, which differed from the traditional ways of doing things. Principals said that more recently, there had been a shift towards having dedicated central office liaisons in these departments who were knowledgeable about the Innovation schools and better prepared to assist. OSRI was cited by principals as a key force in helping the district better align systems of support for Innovation schools, though some principals felt that the high turnover of OSRI staff had impeded the unit's effectiveness.

Innovation led to an increase in both real and perceived control over the schools by principals, teachers, and parents. This increased control was viewed as a major positive by these groups, who expressed a sense of greater ownership of their schools. There was a general sense of increased empowerment around decisions including resources, workforce, and instruction. One specific change that was appreciated by many respondents was the enhanced agility to make rapid decisions at the school level, without having to wait for approval of the decision by various central office entities.

Having control over the workforce was a significant change in Innovation schools, from the hiring process to one-year contracts. The Innovation schools have made substantive changes in the way that they deal with their workforce. One major change was around hiring, including changes to timelines and the interview process. Schools were particularly pleased about opting out of direct placements;

respondents were very negative about direct placement because they felt it led to schools having teachers who were not a good fit with the school's culture, philosophy, or rigor. Innovation schools tended to use one-year contracts with their teachers, and most respondents were happy with this. Parents and principals particularly liked the idea that they had a chance to determine if the teacher was a good fit before committing to them longer term.

Innovation schools have experienced high rates of mobility among teachers and principals. Their teachers tend to be somewhat less experienced and are less likely to have master's degrees than teachers in comparable schools. Although the data available for this evaluation did not allow us to draw strong conclusions about the effect that Innovation has on a school's workforce, these findings suggest that Innovation schools may have unique needs around developing and maintaining their teacher (and principal) workforce.

Innovation schools tended to have overall positive cultures. Schools which had less positive cultures had experienced problems with the principal, principal turnover, and often lacked a clear vision for the school. In general, schools tended to be either high or low on all culture indicators. This suggests that different elements of school climate are highly intertwined, and problems in one area are likely to spill over into discontent in others. The interview data suggested that principal leadership was a key element, and that when the principal did not adequately support staff, or created an atmosphere of mistrust or negativity, climate indicators at the school tended to be more negative. Interestingly, the lack of a clear strategic vision was also present in schools which scored lowest on climate measures. Having a strong principal in whom the teachers and parents have trust, who is able to articulate a clear vision and align structures around that, seems to be an important element in the climate of schools.

With high principal turnover at the Innovation schools, there has been some confusion about the role of the district in choosing a new principal. Three of the Innovation schools have changed principals since they gained Innovation status, and this change was associated with difficulties and discontent at the schools. One theme which emerged in these schools was: What is the role of the district and the school in choosing a new principal? There appears to be a lack of clarity around which entity will make the final choice. Going forward, it will be important for the district to clarify the process of principal hiring, and the role that staff, community, and district have in choosing a new administrator.

Most of the Innovation schools were working on alignment across grades and subjects. Schools saw this work as critical, but the process was not necessarily effective at all schools. Innovation schools were dedicating considerable amounts of time to engaging teachers in work around creating better vertical and horizontal articulation. The work tended to focus on understanding what on-standard or on-grade work looked like. However, in several schools respondents felt the time dedicated to articulation was poorly used. This was generally associated with a lack of articulated goals or expectations, or a lack of structure to help move teachers towards the goals (since this left the onus on them to push the process forward). The prevalence of these articulation activities across schools raises the question of what support DPS provides to all district schools around operationalizing the standards, and helping teachers understand what on-standard and on-grade work looks like in various subjects.

There was a lack of clarity around the boundaries of autonomy in Innovation schools – what flexibility they have, and what regulations they are still subject to. This theme emerged in various ways from

principals and teachers and was centered on the idea that the district has not adopted a clear vision of what Innovation schools are and what they should be able to do. This has resulted in some frustration for school staff, who at times felt they had to battle for autonomies they thought they were entitled to under Innovation status, or led to confusion around district requirements. With the formation of OSRI, the district may now be better positioned to define the district's understandings around Innovation schools. However, it was clear that principals believed the district has a distance to go in defining and understanding Innovation schools. It may be very useful for DPS to consider outlining the expectations the district has for Innovation schools in a transparent way, including the autonomies Innovation schools enjoy as well as the boundaries they must still adhere to.

There are not yet clear trends to help us understand how Innovation will affect student achievement. Prior to gaining Innovation status, many of the Innovation schools were already trending up in terms of the percent of students proficient and advanced, and most also had median growth percentiles above the state average of 50%.

Important questions remain about Innovation schools, and the district's role in supporting them. These questions are not only important in relation to the Innovation schools themselves, but are also critical for the district as a whole as more schools gain Innovation status. Specific questions the district should consider include:

- Has DPS had a conversation around what it means to be 'innovative'? Are there particular expectations for what an Innovation school looks like and how it may differ or not from its previous practices, and from other DPS schools?

- What does success look like for an Innovation school? Is it only about student achievement? Are there other factors that should be considered? (e.g., teacher satisfaction, parent involvement, student perceptions).

- What are some cost implications (both in terms of additional costs or loss of economy of scale) as schools opt out of traditional district structures? What is the cost to the district and schools?

- How can the district best support Innovation schools as their practices diverge from district offerings (e.g., around curricula, assessment, professional development, leadership, etc.)?

- How is monitoring data about the Innovation schools used? What types of metrics are considered in the monitoring of Innovation schools (e.g., teacher satisfaction, parent involvement, teacher mobility, principal turnover, etc.)? How is this information used?

- What supports does the district provide to assist Innovation schools who are struggling with various issues (e.g., principal leadership, collaboration and planning, articulation, trust, etc.?

- The Innovation Schools Act requires a 3 year review of each school's Innovation status. What will be considered as part of this review? Under what circumstances would the district take action with regards to a school's Innovation status? Do issues like climate, student achievement, mobility, instruction, etc. play a role? If so, how? If not, why not?