School leaders and their teams, working with their communities, should have a strong ownership of all that happens within their buildings, encouraging innovation, flexibility and differentiation … to meet the needs of the students and close gaps in student achievement in each school.”

— Superintendent Tom Boasberg, “Equity and Empowerment: The School as the Unit of Change.”

Context and Data Points

Over the past decade, Denver Public Schools (DPS) has emerged as one of the most innovative and rapidly improving big-city school districts in the nation. DPS has built its strong reputation on steady gains in key student metrics, including performance on state tests and rising graduation rates, and the district’s strategic use of data to identify areas in need of improvement.

Underpinning this progress has been the commitment of district leaders to sound, responsive policies – including the idea of schools as the unit of change. District leaders have embraced school-based autonomy in many forms: high-performing charter schools have helped to significantly increase the number of high-quality seats for students, and district-run innovation schools have helped to diversify school models and expand the impact of strong school leaders. Most recently, the creation of Denver’s first innovation zone has allowed some district schools even more independence, in return for a promise of increasing student outcomes.
A 2017 report from The Center on Reinventing Public Education compared Denver to 17 other urban districts across the nation, and concluded: “Denver is a leader in education reform and an early adopter of cross-sector collaboration. ... However, education leaders must continue to push themselves to tackle the tough issues that remain.”

This focus on empowerment as a way to drive quality within the district has lead to some significant gains. In 2005, a 25 percentage-point gap existed between state growth rates on English Language Arts tests and growth in DPS. By 2017, that gap had shrunk to 4 percentage points. The district has also seen a dramatic decrease in its dropout rate, and a corresponding increase in high school graduation and college matriculation rates.

Yet there is broad acknowledgment that significant challenges remain. DPS still suffers from yawning achievement gaps – among the widest in the U.S. – between white students and students of color, and between low-income and more affluent students. On the most recent state tests, just 26 percent of DPS students who qualify for subsidized lunches (a widely used proxy for poverty) were reading and writing at grade level. And as of 2016, more than 40,000 students attended schools rated yellow, orange, or red – the lowest three tiers of DPS’ School Performance Framework. Meanwhile, 70 percent of Denver’s white students attended top-performing schools, compared to only 43 percent of students of color.

The trend line is clearly pointing upward. A 2017 analysis by Education Resource Strategies found that in recent years, the number of students in high-quality seats has increased most in neighborhoods with the lowest access – though access for high-needs students still lags behind. The same study found that DPS leaders’ “willingness to put teeth into accountability systems” by using data to address chronically underperforming schools and open new ones “avoids the unplanned and fragmented enrollment impacts on surrounding schools often seen in other districts.”

The path ahead, toward continued improvement, is likely to prove more challenging. Between 2005 and 2017, student enrollment grew by 27%. But as the city gentrifies, families with children are being pushed out, and fewer of the new residents have school-age kids. Over the next five years, DPS expects enrollment to flatten and then decline by about 1,500 students.

Between Denver’s soaring real estate costs and limited surplus space available in existing facilities, many in the city’s charter sector – a major contributor to the growth of high-quality seats – have put plans to open new campuses on hold. If the community is to continue increasing student opportunities and raising achievement levels, district leaders will increasingly face the need to turnaround or transform existing low-performing schools – serving primarily high-needs students and students of color.

By 2021, more than half of Denver’s 78 neighborhoods are forecasted to have declines in the number of children attending DPS schools.
The ecosystem remains healthy; questions linger

So how does Denver’s strong ecosystem of public education advocates – both internal and external to the district – chart a constructive path forward? There is a growing sense of urgency to ensure that progress made over the past decade extends and accelerates into the next decade and beyond. Listening carefully to Denver’s school leaders, teachers, students, and families about what matters to them about their schools and systems – and what changes they believe are necessary to improve children’s educational experience and outcomes – is a logical place to start.

“Schools as the Unit of Change” is a half-day convening designed to spotlight innovations and progress in Denver’s schools, but also to ask tough questions and brainstorm ideas for the enormous challenges – and opportunities – that face us:

- What will it take for Denver to remain a leading-edge district for the next decade? What obstacles are holding us back from doing more, faster? How do we scale success?
- How will shifting demographics, family choice, and access to facilities impact Denver’s 21st century system of schools? As quality operators expand out-of-district, what are the implications for Denver students and the system?
- Strong school leaders are stepping forward in increasing numbers to request more school-level control over their campus budgets, time, and focus. What do our school leaders need from internal and external partners in order to push forward? How do we increase racial, ethnic, and gender diversity among our education leaders and teachers?
- Innovative models (schools, micro-schools, sub-schools) are percolating, both within DPS and elsewhere. Are these options strong enough to scale up? How does the system support innovation while continuing to demand quality?
- School improvement is often critiqued as a top-down effort that fails to engage students, teachers, families, and communities. How can we do a better job in Denver of ensuring that these important constituencies are engaged and advocating for their needs?
- As the work gets harder and the politics trickier, how do advocates continue to push without creating a backlash? What will drive family and community demand for quality schools in every neighborhood?

There’s an overarching question as well, with implications for all of the above: As the national, regional, state, and local economies continue to evolve, what role does fundamental educational change play in our vision for DPS? How do we prepare students and adults alike for the “age of agility” being forced upon us by the proliferation of automation and artificial intelligence? How do all of the models for innovation touched on above interact with this emerging reality?

Change is upon us and all around us. It is incumbent upon us to ensure that our schools – and by extension, our children – have the vision, the tools, and the support to move forward.

Thank you for planning to join us on April 13.
Schools as the Unit of Change – Building on Progress in Denver

Friday, April 13, 2018
Denver Museum of Nature and Science

AGENDA

8:30 a.m. Registration and continental breakfast

9 a.m.
Welcome and Landscape View
Tom Gougeon, President, Gates Family Foundation

Bennet and Boasberg: Reflections and Predictions
Moderator: Mary Seawell, Senior Vice President for Education, Gates Family Foundation

Denver Public Schools’ leadership longevity is a unicorn among big-city systems. Michael Bennet (DPS Superintendent from 2005 to 2008, now a U.S. Senator) and Tom Boasberg (Bennet’s deputy superintendent and lifelong friend, and DPS superintendent since 2009) have steered the ship through uncharted waters, avoiding many political icebergs that have sunk their peers nationwide. What have they learned about transforming a system from within? Which risks are worth taking? What convictions have driven their work? What have been the unintended consequences, and how are they being addressed? Looking ahead, where is the greatest sense of urgency? How does the polarized political landscape impact their ability to make change?

10 a.m. Recognizing the broad expertise in the room, each panel discussion will also include time for questions and comments from the audience. If you wish to submit these in advance, please email mdavis@gatesfamilyfoundation.org.

Scaling Success
Moderator: Erica Meltzer, Bureau Chief, Chalkbeat Colorado

How do we get to “great schools in every neighborhood”? What obstacles are holding us back from doing more, faster?

Panelists:
• James Cryan, Chief Executive Officer, Rocky Mountain Prep
• Jane Ellis, Executive Director, Colorado Charter Facility School Solutions
• Brian Eschbacher, Executive Director, Office of Planning & Analysis, DPS
• Alex Magaña, Executive Principal, Beacon Network Schools, DPS

10:50 a.m.
Empowering School Leaders
Moderator: Brett Alessi, Co-Founder & Managing Partner, Empower Schools

How could our systems and structures better support school leaders as the catalysts for positive change?

Panelists:
• Brandi Chin, Founding School Director, DSST Middle School @ Noel Campus
• Christine DeLeon, Founder, Moonshot edVentures
• Kurt Dennis, Principal, McAuliffe International School, DPS
• Scott Wolf, Principal, North High School, DPS
11:40 a.m.  Engaging School Communities
Moderator: Janet Lopez, Senior Program Officer, Rose Community Foundation

What systemic and school-level changes do teachers, students, and families believe are most necessary to improve children’s educational experience and outcomes?

Panelists:
• Tameka Brigham, Chief Officer, Family and Community Engagement, DPS
• Dajia Maestas, Co-Director and Co-Founder, Mardale Jay Writing Center
• Nicholas Martinez, Co-Founder, Transform Education Now
• Erin Miller, Teacher Leader, Denver Green School, Luminary Learning Network

Reflections and Call to Action
Susana Cordova, Deputy Superintendent, Denver Public Schools

12:30 p.m.  Lunch and Conversation: The Path Forward Involves You
Nate Easley, Chief Executive Officer, Blue School Partners

Guiding Question for Table Conversations: “Schools as the Unit of Change” is a concept that only works if various systems are aligned to function well in support of schools. Given the challenges and opportunities ahead, what is the future role of (topic) in ensuring that more of Denver’s children have equitable access to excellent schools in every neighborhood? If you could assign a specific, high-impact “call to action” and/or priorities for (topic), what would it be?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table #</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Table Hosts/Conversationalists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Data</td>
<td>Jennifer Newcomer, SHIFT Research Lab Van Schoales, A+ Colorado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>State funding</td>
<td>Leslie Colwell, CO Children’s Campaign Rep. Alec Garnett, CO House of Representatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Coalition building and family engagement</td>
<td>Reilly Pharo Carter, Climb Higher Colorado Landon Mascareñaz, A+ Colorado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Philanthropic support</td>
<td>Veronica Figoli, DPS Foundation Brandon Zeigler, Walton Family Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Charter schools</td>
<td>Lisa Flores, Denver Public Schools Dan Schaller, Colorado League of Charter Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>School portfolio management</td>
<td>Parker Baxter, CU-Denver Maya Lagana, Denver Public Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Innovation schools and zones</td>
<td>Terrence Carroll, Denver Public Schools Josh Scott, Blue School Partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Teacher and school leader pipeline</td>
<td>Sarah Almy, Denver Public Schools Damion LeeNatali, Teach For America Colorado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Business engagement</td>
<td>Shannon Nicholas, Colorado Succeeds Jesus Salazar, Prosono</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Affordable housing/transportation</td>
<td>Stacy Johns and Karen Mortimer, Together Colorado Dionne Williams, City and County of Denver</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1:30 p.m.  Adjourn