



Statement of Alyssa Whitehead-Bust, Chief of Innovation and Reform, Denver Public Schools

Before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce Hearing Entitled “Raising the Bar: The Role of Charter Schools in K-12 Education”

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Chairman Kline and Members of the Committee, I am honored to be here testifying on behalf of Denver Public Schools (DPS) on the important role that public charter schools play in “raising the bar” in our urban school system, a system that is driven to realize equity and achievement for all students. My name is Alyssa Whitehead-Bust and I currently serve as the Chief of Innovation and Reform for Denver Public Schools. I come to my role having previously worked for fifteen years helping to launch and lead charter schools across the country. As Chief of Innovation and Reform, I oversee Denver Public School’s portfolio management work, including charter school authorizing, accountability, support, and collaborative efforts. I am proud to serve in a district that is setting the pace nationally in part by drawing on an intentional and strategic approach to equity and collaboration across all public schools, including charters.

Before exploring the role charter schools play in our system of public schools, I want to set some context about my testimony and about Denver. While I am grateful that the Denver charter portfolio boasts high results, mine is not a testimony of how charter schools are better than, or unique from, other public schools. While in fact charters in Denver do out-perform district averages and do operate with a unique set of autonomies that have been traded for higher accountability, I want to focus my time delving into the role charters in Denver play in helping to raise the bar for all students across all school types. In Denver, we see the growth and achievement of the charter school sector as a necessary—but not sufficient—component of a larger strategy that focuses on ensuring equity of access to high quality education for all students. We see collaboration and transfer of promising practices as an equally, if not more, important component of our strategy. We know that by collaborating across school types and thinking of

our charter schools in part as the R & D labs that their original federal mandate suggests, we can more quickly fulfill our fundamental promise to graduate 100% of our students prepared for college and the workforce. Knowing the critical role our charter schools play in our local context, we are grateful to Chairman Kline and members of this Committee for your leadership and service on behalf of charter schools across the nation. Your advocacy is making a difference not only for students in charter schools, but also for students across all school types.

The Denver Context

By way of context, Denver Public Schools is one of the fastest growing urban districts in the country, serving over 87,000 students, 72% of whom qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program; 39% of whom speak Spanish as their primary language, and 79% of whom are minority students. Of the district's 170 schools serving K-12 students, 43 (25%) are charter schools that serve over 13,000 students, or approximately 15% of DPS students. Since 2010, charter school enrollment has grown by 17% annually. An additional 32 Denver schools have taken advantage of Colorado's Innovations School Act to join their charter school peers in trading autonomies for accountability. Combined, autonomous schools in Denver comprise 44% of DPS's overall portfolio.

Denver prides itself on being agnostic to governance type and focused, instead, on equity and achievement. We consider ourselves one system dedicated to serving all students well. All schools – whether district-run or charter – adhere to a consistent set of expectations and are able to access equitable resources. These principles are articulated in Denver's Charter Compact as our "Three Equities":

- **Equity of Opportunity** means that all schools, charter or otherwise, have access to equitable per pupil funding, support services from the district, and available facilities.
- **Equity of Responsibility and Access** means that the schools must offer equitable and open access to all our students—regardless of socio-economic status, disability, home language or other status—and share an equal obligation in district-wide responsibilities such as the cost of pension obligations and district-wide special education funding.
- **Equity of Accountability** means that all schools have the same accountability system under our School Performance Framework and that standards of performance are applied evenly across all school types.

Denver charter schools, as an example, demonstrate their equity of responsibility and access by serving an equivalent percentage of English Language Learners as district average and a relatively proportional share of students who qualify for special education services. The district has fulfilled its commitment to the principle of equity of opportunity by addressing one of the greatest barriers to charter school viability—facility access and expense. DPS allocates available facilities on the premise that buildings are a public resource meant to serve all students, not just students served by schools of particular governance types. As such, 79% of Denver charters are currently located in a district-owned or operated facility.

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Charters located on shared campuses	6	9	12	16	19	22
Charters located alone in a district building	3	5	7	8	11	12
TOTAL charters in district bldg.	9	14	19	24	30	34

To codify the focus on these three equities as well as to deepen collaborative relationships between charter schools, non-charter schools, and district leadership, Denver has launched its Collaborative Council, one of the nation’s first intentional structures focused explicitly on cross-governance collaboration. Denver’s Collaborative Council develops policy recommendations to improve the way that Denver Public Schools and its charter schools work together to fulfill shared priorities and commitments for kids. The Council brings together senior leaders from the district and elected school leaders to: 1) promote Denver’s three equities; 2) champion the value of sharing best practices and collaborating among multiple school types; 3) sustain charter school autonomy. In addition to focusing on key policy initiatives, the Collaborative Council provides leadership and direction to a number of working groups that bring together school leaders and district personnel to problem solve specific issues of shared concerns.

Charter Schools Purpose In A System of Public Schools

Quality and Outcomes for Kids

Denver's Collaborative Council exemplifies a shared belief in Denver held both by charter leaders and district leaders that charter schools serve multiple purposes and add multiple points of value to Denver students, schools, and the system writ large. While charter schools are autonomous schools governed by independent governing bodies, they are also intricately connected to and a part of a broader public school system. In Denver, charter schools add quality seats into a system that needs them, filling both capacity gaps and performance gaps in all regions of the city. While DPS has shown steady improvement in performance across almost all measures since 2005 (graduation rates, drop-out rates, proficiency rates, enrollment) simultaneously charter schools have consistently out-performed all other school types. In 2013, as an example, charter schools posted overall proficiency rates on our state summative assessment, called the TCAP, of 53% compared to overall proficiency rates of 47% for direct-run (non charter or innovation) schools. Differentials in student growth are even starker, with Denver charters posting summed median growth in 2013 of 173, with state average being 150.

Denver's rising success is due, in part, to improving quality of continuing schools, and in part due to Denver's aggressive stance on closing poor performing schools and opening higher performing ones. In the past five years, DPS has closed 20 poor performing schools, including 10 charters. In the same time frame, DPS has opened 51 new schools, 28 of which are charter schools. Of these new charter schools, nearly all relied significantly on federal Charter Schools Program (CSP) funds to launch. Eighteen are rated "meets expectations" or higher on the Denver School Performance Framework (or are on track to be so), four are in their first year and therefore have no rating, and six are underperforming. Three of these six under-performing charters schools have already been closed, meaning that 85% of the charter schools opened and remaining in operation in DPS in the past five years are meeting or exceeding expectations. Simply put, Denver's charter school strategy is clearly working to both add capacity and to raise achievement of the overall public school portfolio.

Choice and Access

Due both to the quality of seats many charter schools provide, as well as the unique programming that many offer, charters help ensure that families have a range of school choices. Denver is proud of the varied school models (e.g., dual language schools, "no excuses" schools,

expeditionary learning schools, international schools) that populate our portfolio due, in large part, to our charter schools. We know that a one-size-fits-all approach to education will never produce the dramatic gains we need to realize for students. To ensure equity of access and promote choice, DPS operates a unified school choice system. As such, charter schools are marketed alongside all other Denver public schools and all students are matched with their school choice through a unified lottery. We know that charter schools offer programs that families want because they are disproportionately over-represented in families' first choice preferences. In 2013, while charters represented less than 25% of the DPS portfolio, they represented 60% of the hardest-to-get-into middle schools in DPS in that same year.

6th Grade programs that were the hardest to get into in 2013*:

Rank	School Name	Seats Offered	Waitlisted
1	KIPP Sunshine Peak Academy	0	139
2	Academia Ana Marie Sandoval	0	1
3	Lincoln Elementary (Montessori)	0	2
4	Highline Academy	6	41
5	Odyssey Charter School	4	26
6	Omar D. Blair	15	39
7	Trevista ECE-8 at Horace Mann	10	7
8	Escuela Tlatelolco	2	3
9	DSST: Green Valley Ranch MS	150	222
10	STRIVE Prep - Westwood	128	182

*KIPP, Highline, Odyssey, Omar D. Blair, DSST and STRIVE are all charter schools.

Innovating Promising Practices & Collaborating Across the System

Charter schools are in high demand in part because their autonomies afford them the opportunity to deploy innovative new and promising practices. Charters schools, as an example, have lead the way in piloting strategies related to human capital, school culture, instructional delivery, and use of time and technology. Specifically, Denver charters were among the city's first schools to expand learning time by extending both the day and the year; they have lead the way on use of data to drive instruction, as well as in establishing high expectations learning cultures. While these innovations are important unto themselves for the benefit of charter school students, they are particularly important in the context of collaboration. If isolated to the province of charter schools alone, such promising practices would only impact 15% of DPS students. But because of Denver's approach to collaboration, these promising practices are able to quickly spread to

schools across governance type. Five years ago, expanded learning was largely a charter school strategy. Today, dozens of non-charter schools have extended both their days and their years in order to ensure more and better learning time for kids.

Denver has intentionally established systems and structures to promote cross-pollination of promising practice. Occasions to share practice and collaborate across schools include low intensity opportunities such as structured school visits and observations as well as higher intensity opportunities such as participation in shared professional learning communities that focus on peer-to-peer learning or participation in cohort-based structures that focus on piloting new practices. Such structures provide avenues through which all schools can both share successful practice and learn from that of others. Current pilot cohorts are exploring, for example, differentiated teacher leadership roles, personalized learning, and assessment strategies.

Denver's Approach

Denver is grateful to receive national attention for its approach to charter school authorizing, accountability, and—perhaps most importantly—collaboration. Our approach is based on a simple premise that begins with high-quality and shared accountability, includes differentiated supports for struggling schools as well as a courageous willingness to close schools that aren't serving kids well, and places a high premium on finding places of commonality in order to fulfill our shared commitment to the success of students and families. We are truly one system of public schools.

To ensure the sustainability of its work, Denver relies on a significant number of tools it has produced and published: rubrics that guide school approvals and closures, as well as decisions regarding supports and interventions; performance-based contracts that ensure shared understanding of expectations for students; and policies that safeguard equity of resource allocation. Through the work of the aforementioned Collaborative Council, the Denver Board of Education has adopted policies focused on the three equities and the charter community has adopted commitments to shared accountability.

Denver's Next Steps

As we seek to continue to raise our own bar for student achievement, for charter authorizing, and for collaborative efforts that ensure reciprocity between schools of all governance types, Denver is focused on: 1) developing even deeper collaborative relationships focused on shared strategic priorities such as human capital development; 2) ensuring equity of access and innovation of service for Denver's most highly impacted students, including our opportunity youth, students with severe special needs, and our most limited English proficient students; 3) developing more deliberate shared campuses that promote deep collaboration and shared programming, not just shared facility use; and, 4) deepening and codifying all collaboration efforts.

Denver students and families need our charter school sector to continue to grow, and to continue to adopt and transfer promising practice across our system of public schools. Cities across the nation, likewise, are depending on a thriving and successful charter sector as part of an intentional strategy to provoke dramatic gains in student achievement and dramatic reductions in achievement gaps. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today, respectfully encourage Congress to align its reauthorization work to the important role charter schools play in public education, and look forward to answering any questions you may have.