

# DENVER'S FUTURE

## Denver Mayoral Candidates on Public Education





March 7, 2011

Dear Denver Voters,

This past month our coalition of education non-profits asked the six leading candidates for Mayor of Denver to respond to a 28 question-survey on K-12 education in our city. We also asked them to create their “priority list” on 11 key education issues.

Our goal has been to help Denver citizens have a clear picture of where each candidate stands on the critical issue of public education. We hope this enables voters to be more informed as they decide who will be Denver’s next mayor.

Five of the six leading candidates responded to our survey with one responding with a letter; we share the results of our survey here.

Our coalition, Education Reform Now, Get Smart Schools, Colorado Succeeds, Colorado Democrats for Education Reform, Colorado League of Charter Schools, and Stand for Children, is committed to ensuring that every child in Denver graduates from high school prepared for college, work and life.

Denver’s public education challenges are enormous with more than half of Denver’s kids not graduating from high school and of those that do, few being prepared to succeed. 59% of Denver’s high school graduates require remediation in college. Most of these students will never get a college degree.

As education becomes more clearly tied to economic development and a city’s overall future, Denver’s next mayor will require an effective public education system where most kids are fully supported to live out their full potential and contribute to the growth of Denver.

This survey is designed to be a starting point for helping the public understand where the leading candidates stand on improving Denver’s public schools.

You will see the 28 questions we asked, and then each candidate’s response, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). We have not graded or rated the candidates, but

California | Colorado | Florida | Indiana | Massachusetts | Michigan | New Jersey | New York | Ohio  
Oregon | Rhode Island | Washington State | Washington D.C. | Wisconsin

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encourage readers to investigate how best to improve public education in Denver along with what each candidate can do to support effective school improvement policy and practice.

We also present the aggregate response to the priorities we asked of the candidates; it is perhaps useful to see that overall these five candidates put as their highest priorities:

- 1) maintain or increase K-12 funding;
- 2) Reward and hold educators responsible for student results;
- 3) Increase the level of accountability and intervention for low-performing schools; and
- 4) Expand the number of new high-performing district and charter schools.

However, as voters, it is most helpful to examine each individual's response—which you can find at the close of each person's survey.

To see the complete survey response from each candidate, you can go to candidate survey attachment at the end of the document or see the survey's [here](#).

Each of the candidates offered additional comments that can be seen at the end of this paper in the candidate comment section.

We thank those candidates for the time and effort they put into responding to our questions. A short survey, of course, only scratches the surface of a host of complex and challenging issues.

We encourage the public and reporters to inquire more deeply into the topics we raised; while we understand Denver's mayor is not a superintendent and does not manage the school district, city leaders can play a critical role in moving public education forward.

Please also mark your calendar for a mayoral forum on education hosted by Get Smart Schools, Education Reform Now, Colorado Children's Campaign, Denver Public Schools Foundation, Colorado League of Charter Schools, Colorado Democrats for Education Reform moderated by Rocky Mountain PBS and Fox 31 on the evening of **March 15 at Denver's East High School Auditorium at 5:30 P.M.**

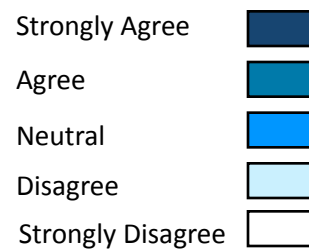
Thank You,



Van Schoales

Executive Director, Education Reform Now

# DENVER MAYORAL CANDIDATES EDUCATION SURVEY



Questions	Boigon	Hancock	Linkhart	Mejia	Romer
1. DPS needs radical reform	4	4	1	5	4
2. DPS doing the best it can	?	2	2	4	3
3. DPS moving in right direction	?	4	3	4	5
4. Support for turnaround far NE	?	4	2	2	4
5. DPS needs more funding	4	4	4	5	4
6. Teacher employment tied to results	?	4	2	4	4
7. Teacher employment tied to experience	?	2	2	4	2
8. Teacher performance available to public	?	2	2	5	4
9. DPS needs to do more to recruit the best/ brightest	?	4	2	5	5
10. Actively promote choice	?	5	4	5	5
11 Support district managed schools over charters	?	3	4	3	3
12. Assist high quality charters .	?	4	1	4	5
13. Charters should have same funding as district	?	4	2	4	5
14. City should be able to charter schools	?	3	1	1	4
15. Support public funding for private schools	?	3	1	1	1
16. Schools should have rewards or sanctions based on performance	?	4	3	3	5
17. Low performers for 2 years should be phased out or closed	?	4	2	4	4
18. DPS should grade schools	?	5	3	5	5
19. Every neighborhood should have a high quality school regardless of charter or district	5	5	4	5	5
20. State should provide more funding and flexibility for low performing schools	?	2	4	3	2
21. More important to decide how to spend than increase funding	?	3	1	2	4
22. Money should follow kids.	?	4	4	4	4
23. Funding should have ROI measures	?	5	4	5	5
24. Mayor should primarily support superintendent	?	4	4	4	5
25. Mayor should hold DPS accountable	?	5	1	5	5
26. Mayor should have cabinet level position for education	?	5	3	3	5
27. DPS and City should share facilities	?	5	5	5	4
28. Mayoral takeover if DPS moves in wrong direction	?	4	1	1	4

# TOP 5 PRIORITIES

We asked each candidate to choose and rank order their priorities from top to bottom with a choice of 11 possible priorities for public education in Denver.

Priority	Boigon	Hancock	Linkhart	Mejia	Romer
1	?	Increase accountability for low performing schools	Maintain funding	Reward and hold educators responsible for student results	Reward and hold educators responsible for student results
2	?	Increase funding	Increase funding	Increase accountability for low performing schools	Maintain funding
3	?	Expand number of new high performing district and charter schools	Decrease class size	Expand number of new high performing district and charter schools	Increase accountability for low performing schools
4	?	Maintain funding	Change school finance formula and law	Increase funding	Expand number of new high performing district and charter schools
5	?	Reward and hold educators responsible for student results	Expand number of new high performing district and charter schools	Change school finance formula and law	Reduce class size

# CANDIDATE COMMENTS

## CAROL BOIGON:

“I do not think this is the right format to address these critical and substantive issues, and I look forward to discussing further at your forum.

School District No. 1 and the City and County of Denver serve the identical jurisdiction. Their fates are deeply interconnected but the relationship is collegial, not legally authoritative.

I built the Mayor’s Office for Education and Children and managed it for eight years to improve the relationship. I created Denver Head Start, expanded school-based clinics and summer recreation opportunities, developed manuals for non-profits to operate in schools after hours, and put police in the schools. We totally changed the relationship to a partnership on services, cooperative relations with the superintendent, regular communication with the school board and council.

We as the City must now foster a collaborative dialogue among parents, classroom teachers, advocates of charters and advocates of neighborhood schools. That starts by ending the food fight over BELIEFS of what works and focusing on the SCIENCE of how learning works.

As Mayor, and as a mother who sent two kids through DPS, I will be uniquely positioned to reach out to everyone – the Mayor’s office, DPS, DCTA and the community – for a pilot project focused on bringing child-by-child individualization techniques into the classroom at three of the lowest performing elementary schools in the city, using three different models of individualization, with the expectation of success within three years.

As a reading specialist, I’ve seen this work with my own eyes, and the data prove it works in other countries. We have not used it here except for cases of children with extreme disabilities. With this pilot project, full cooperation among the stakeholders, and investment from pro-education groups, we can enhance both the ability of our children to learn and further strengthen the relationship between the City and DPS.

With proof that this approach works in Denver, we can come together on a road map to improve all DPS schools.”



## DOUG LINKHART:

“The primary job of the Mayor and city is to support and assist children and families so that young people can be more successful in schools and have a healthy, prosperous future.”



## **JAMES MEJIA:**

Survey Question 1)

“Denver Public Schools needs leadership that has the best interest of the students and teachers in mind. Reform doesn’t mean a radical change in making the district entirely charter or entirely neighborhood schools. Reform means hiring well qualified and well trained teachers who have access to resources that will allow them to best prepare students for the next phase of life after 12th grade. “



Survey Question 4)

“I do not fully support the turnaround plan passed by the School Board for far northeast Denver. In walking the neighborhood in the last three weeks I have received substantial feedback that the Spanish speaking community was as not as engaged in the process as they should have been. Additionally, the schools going in are primarily new and not tested in DPS, such as DSST, and I have concerns that leadership has not yet been identified for these new schools.”

Survey Question 15)

“The difference between DPP and this proposal is that the DPP created a whole new revenue stream. Diverting existing education funds for private education is a different situation and I do not support this voucher program.”

## **CHRIS ROMER:**

“I’ve spent 22 years as a leader in education reform, raising the expectations and achievement of DPS students, teachers and schools. I’ve served on the advisory and governing boards of three charter schools, co-sponsored Senate Bill 191, the nationally renowned tenure reform legislation, and helped pass Amendment 23, putting more resources in public education. I challenged the status quo and developed public-private partnerships to give students in low-performing schools the skills to take Advanced Placement courses in calculus, physics and chemistry.



As mayor, I will use my experience in business and education to raise expectations for all students – pushing them to compete in challenging math and science courses that our new economy demands. We need to improve the effectiveness of our educational wrap-around services, including the over 50 after school programs in DPS, and raise expectations and achievement for all our students, teachers and schools.”

**THERESA SPAHN:**

“Thank you for the opportunity to answer questions, but I feel strongly that the appropriate role of the Mayor is to support DPS and the School Board in areas where it would be most productive. Over the last two months, I have been meeting with concerned citizens regarding DPS. I have a son at Denver East High School, so I truly understand the importance of our public schools. I believe that the Mayor must positively support and work with the school board to make our school system one of the best in the country.

Currently, DPS only graduates 51.8% of students. Less than half of the Hispanic students, who comprise close to 60% of the district, graduate from DPS. We need to increase our graduation rate, increase our minority graduation rate, decrease our truancy rate, and better prepare our graduates for college-level courses. The Mayor must be a partner with DPS, teachers, parents, and our communities in approaching these issues. Once again, I appreciate your interest in my campaign and I look forward to meeting with you in the future.”



# DENVER MAYORAL CANDIDATE SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. First Name, Last Name, Title, Email Address
2. Where did your children attend K-12 school?

**Each Candidate was asked to respond to the following statements on a five point scale with 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)**

3. Denver Public Schools (DPS) is in need of radical reform.
4. DPS is doing the best it can with the resources it has and we should do all we can to support public education in Denver.
5. DPS is moving in the right direction with districts current leadership. The districts interventions in low-performing schools and the development of more high-quality traditional and charter schools (e.g. Beach Court, West Denver Prep, DSA, DSST etc.) is an important strategy for improving the quality of Denver's public education system.
6. DPS requires more funding (current operating spending is \$9,075 per pupil) in order to make progress on student achievement and success.
7. The Mayor and City of Denver should actively support school choice for Denver families, giving them the opportunity to choose a high-quality school that best meets the educational needs of their child.
8. The Mayor and City of Denver should support struggling neighborhood schools rather than support charters and other new schools that are draining essential resources from an already under-resourced system.
9. The Mayor and City of Denver should assist high-quality charter developers with a variety of resources from community investment funds, facilities and others to accelerate development of new or the expansion of such strong charter schools. This should include forcing DPS to allow such high-quality charters to operate in closed or underutilized district facilities.
10. Denver charter schools should receive facilities, bond and mill funding equal to other public schools (including funding for facilities).
11. As mayor, I would support changing the charter law so that the City of Denver would have the additional authority to authorize and close charter schools so the city could accelerate the development of high-quality schools in Denver.
12. As Mayor, I would support legislation allowing low-income students to attend schools of their choice (including private schools) provided the students participate in the states testing program. (This program would operate similarly to the Denver Preschool Program and Denver Scholarship Foundation, which provide financial

support for low-income Denver students to attend quality preschool programs and college.)

- 13.**DPS and our state should carry out accountability measures that expect improvement in student results on state and/or national assessments, with rewards and sanctions for success or failure.
- 14.**Chronically failing schools should be restarted or phased out (as has been done at Manual and Bruce Randolph) and replaced by new high-performing schools like Beach Court, West Denver Prep or Denver School of Science or Technology.
- 15.**DPS schools should provide parents with simple and easy to understand performance grades. The grades should be based on student outcomes that include student achievement and growth on state and/or national assessments, graduation rates, college readiness of graduates, and other standardized measures.
- 16.**The City of Denver should support every neighborhood having a high-quality public school option regardless of whether it is a district managed school or a public charter school.
- 17.**Our state and DPS should provide additional funding, flexibility and time to low-performing schools so that they have adequate resources to improve.
- 18.**Teacher employment, evaluations, pay and "tenure" in Denver should be based primarily upon student results that would include 1) adequate "growth" or improvement on standardized test scores and 2) preparation of students for college and work.
- 19.**Teacher pay should be based primarily upon years of experience and degrees earned with a smaller percentage of pay based on performance or teaching in hard-to-serve schools, as outlined in the Denver Pro-Comp agreement.
- 20.**Denver teacher performance ratings as measured by growth and impact on student learning should be available to parents and the public.
- 21.**DPS and the City of Denver should be doing much more to recruit and retain the best and brightest to serve Denver kids through incentives and outreach to the best human capital pipelines in education like Teach for America.
- 22.**The more critical funding issue for K-12 education in our state is not adding more funds, but deciding how best to direct the education portion of the states budget to improve our schools.
- 23.**The DPS school finance system needs to be redesigned so that 70% or more of funding follows students to their school of choice, or to programs based upon their needs; funding should also be weighted to particular needs such as poverty.

- 24.**DPS education spending should be more transparent and have "return on investment" measures so that parents and voters have a clearer understanding of where taxpayer money is spent and where there is the biggest return on public education investments.
- 25.**The mayor and her/his staff primary role should be to lend support to the DPS board and superintendent.
- 26.**The Mayor and her/his staff should hold the District accountable for ensuring that every Denver student receives a quality education preparing them for post-secondary or college success.
- 27.**The Mayor will have a cabinet level position focused on ensuring Denver has a quality K-12 and Preschool education programs.
- 28.**DPS school facilities and park facilities should be shared equally with students and community members; for example, the track and pool at each Denver high school should be open to the public when not in use, just as park and recreation facilities should be made available to DPS schools when possible.
- 29.**If DPS is proven to be going in the wrong direction, the Mayor should take responsibility and work towards shared governance or Mayoral control of the city's public schools (like Chicago, DC, NYC, Boston, LA (partial) and a growing number of cities).
- 30.**Rate in order of importance-
- Redesign teacher evaluation, non-probationary status ("tenure") and pay
  - Increase K-12 funding
  - Expand number of new high performing district and charter schools
  - Increase the level of accountability and intervention for low-performing schools
  - Maintain K-12 funding
  - Increase on-line education options and other learning technology
  - Revise collective bargaining agreements so that schools/principals have more authority to hire and fire
  - Change school finance formula and law
  - Reward and hold educators responsible for student results
  - Reduce class size
  - Reform/revise pension system so that it is sustainable into the future