

Surprising findings in DPS study

By Nancy Mitchell | February 24, 2010

Fewer than half of Denver Public Schools students attend schools meeting district expectations for performance, according to a new study that finds the most need for improvement at the elementary level.

The report, “*Locating Quality and Access: The Keys to Denver’s Plan for Educational Excellence*,” was released Tuesday by the **National Association of Charter School Authorizers**, which has been working with DPS to strengthen charter school quality.

The finding on the dearth of quality elementary school seats may be the study’s most surprising finding because DPS efforts have recently focused on improving middle and high schools.

“There are 20,000 elementary school students in the Denver Public Schools system who...don’t have a performing elementary school to go to,” said NACSA vice president William Haft. “That’s half the elementary-aged students in the system.”

The study’s definition of a “performing” school is based on the DPS School Performance Framework, which uses indicators such as student academic growth to rate all schools.

Schools receiving the top two ratings of Distinguished and Meets Expectations were defined as performing schools while those earning the bottom two ratings, On Watch and On Probation, were not.

By that measure, fewer than half, or 59, of Denver’s schools are considered performing. Those schools have a total capacity of 34,668 – or less than half of DPS’ enrollment, which tops 75,000.

“That’s pretty dramatic,” Haft said during a sparsely attended community meeting at Bruce Randolph School that was sponsored by Education News Colorado and Metro Organizations for People.

Among the study’s key findings:

- Performing elementary schools have the capacity to serve 20,141 students but DPS’ elementary enrollment is 42,108 – including 1,924 students who live in other districts. That’s a gap of more than 20,000 seats, the biggest gap by sheer numbers of any grade level.

- The areas around Montbello, North and West high schools have the biggest gaps between performing school seats and enrollment. Less than one-fifth of the students around Montbello and North, for example, have access to a performing middle school.

- Hispanic students, the majority of DPS’ enrollment, are concentrated in the lowest-performing feeder patterns and are the least likely to choose out of those areas. Hispanic families are as likely as other groups to exercise school choice, the report found, but less likely to leave their neighborhoods to do so.

That means “they’re probably going to another low-performing school,” Haft said, “so they’re probably not being helped very much in terms of school performance.”

It’s unclear whether it’s a failure to communicate with Hispanic families about choice options, he said, or evidence that higher-performing options, whether charter or traditional, must come closer to home.

More than 40 percent of all DPS students attend a school other than their assigned neighborhood school. Most of them, or close to two-thirds, choose a traditional neighborhood school.

Strikingly, of the 19,576 students who choose out of a non-performing or low-performing school, 48 percent enroll in another school considered non-performing on the School Performance Framework.

“Maybe they’re going from one non-performing school to one that’s performing a little bit better,” Haft said. “Maybe it has something else that’s attracting them. Or maybe they want a choice and that’s just their best option.”

The report did find a correlation between school quality and choice – 50 percent of students in schools earning the highest rating of Distinguished were there by choice compared to 28 percent of those in the lowest-rated or On Probation schools.

NACSA commissioned the Illinois Facilities Fund, which has conducted similar studies in Chicago Public Schools, to prepare the report with the stated goal of identifying “areas with the largest numbers of school-age children and the fewest seats in schools that meet SPF standards.”



NACSA’s William Haft details DPS study.

In its recommendations, the study notes “charter schools are an important part of the solution” but also says “neighborhood schools must play the central role” in improving performing seats in DPS.

DPS last week issued its annual call for new school applications and board members in November voted to close or reform six of the district’s lowest-performing schools, making way for other new programs.

But Kristin Waters, assistant to DPS Superintendent Tom Boasberg for reform and innovation, said Tuesday that the creation of new schools is not the district’s only strategy to improve quality.

“The focus can’t be just on new schools,” Waters said. “That’s one piece of the strategy ... We need to work with schools to turn things around, like what happened here at Bruce Randolph.”

The report divides DPS into ten zones based on traditional high school feeder patterns. So the Montbello zone includes Montbello High School and the elementary and middle schools that feed into it.

Each zone is profiled in the study, listing demographic, enrollment and school quality data.

Of the zones, North has the smallest percentage of performing schools, just four of 19. That’s followed by Montbello, with four performing schools of 17, and by West, with five performing schools of 20.

[Click on the link below to hear Kristin Waters’ response to a question about the role of new schools. Note: Ed News apologizes in advance for the audible buzzing of Bruce Randolph’s HVAC system. Nancy Mitchell can be reached at \[nmitchell@pebc.org\]\(mailto:nmitchell@pebc.org\) or 303-478-4573.](#)