Democratic School Design:
Reimagining School Turnaround in Denver Public Schools

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Finally, to John. Thank you for morning walks, uncovering our bricks, and endless love and encouragement. I can’t imagine this journey (or any other journey) without you by my side.
For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.

—Paolo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed
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Abstract

After a decade of focused attention and millions of dollars, school turnaround remains one of the education sector’s most pressing challenges. Research shows that tackling it requires the implementation of tried and true levers—high-quality instruction, effective school leadership, and family engagement—at the highest possible levels, and that it requires a sophisticated interrogation of broader structural challenges such as segregation, poverty, and racism. This capstone explores a novel approach to school turnaround in Denver Public Schools (DPS), the Year Zero Redesign cohort. This approach strives to equip principals with the mindsets, skills, and autonomy to build partnerships with families, redesign their schools, and effectively lead dramatic change efforts. Through this inquiry, I explore the unique role of principals in system-level transformation; the way trust affects schools and communities; and the quest to redesign schools in alignment with the needs and preferences of students and families. I also examine how DPS, a large and ambitious school district, might learn to support this work in a rapidly evolving policy environment. I argue that taking time for intentional school design and leadership development—not instructional leadership development alone, but community and creative leadership development as well—holds great potential for more consistent results in school turnaround and school redesign. I also suggest that this and other creative approaches to turnaround will become possible only when system-level incentives and accountability measures allow for it. This capstone offers lessons for DPS as it seeks to create an ecosystem of excellent and diverse school models, and for practitioners and policymakers across the sector seeking to realize transformative change through community mobilization and school design.
Introduction

My first job out of college was teaching sixth grade in San Francisco, California. My school had an inspiring mission, an energetic new leader, and, as a turnaround school, had recently received a sizable grant through the federal government’s School Improvement Grant (SIG) program. The influx of money was easily apparent. We had a full-time wellness center staffed with a nurse and a psychologist, small class sizes, a brand new computer lab, and an extended day for students and teachers alike. As a new teacher, I assumed these ingredients would ensure success.

Just two years later, I was making the difficult decision to leave, and my brief tenure was not considered unusual. The energetic principal left after one year, and a dozen staff members had moved on to other schools. Our new initiatives sounded compelling to new teachers like me, as well as on flyers and in grant applications. However, I noticed they were rarely, if ever, initiated in response to our students and families’ expressed needs, preferences, or aspirations about school. And worse, they distracted us from the core work of improving teacher practice and student outcomes. This revolving door of new ideas without any forward momentum had devastating consequences. Southeast San Francisco lacked (and still does lack) a high performing public middle school. Our students were trapped in a failing school, a fate far too common nationwide.

This Capstone explores my role as a doctoral resident in Denver Public Schools (DPS) trying to reverse this trend. There, I led an innovative approach to school turnaround: the Year Zero Redesign cohort. Uniquely, we hired principals at four elementary schools a year in advance, developed their skills in user-centered design and community engagement, and sought to amplify their leadership capacity for turnaround success. Our hypothesis was that school turnaround—a unique moment in time where dramatic change is not only
accepted, it is expected—provides an opportunity to rethink schooling and design something different in partnership with students and families. “Democratic school design” is a term that emerged late in my residency, as I sought to specify the tactics that Year Zero principals would use to collaborate with families and teachers in redesigning their schools. For the purposes of this paper, I define democratic school design as, a participatory, design-based process that acknowledges the unique needs of students and families and seeks to build a learning environment that serves those needs well.

But democratic school design sounds compelling; much like those flyers and grant applications did years ago. Not surprisingly, executing it well within a large, urban school district is much more difficult. The school where I first worked is now closed, demonstrating how difficult it is to spark transformative change in our nation’s lowest performing schools. Doing so requires attention to the nuts and bolts of effective schooling—instruction, school culture, family engagement, and more. It also forces a discussion about the larger societal dynamics at play, including segregation, racism, and poverty. And finally, it requires that system-level leaders create the conditions where school-based transformation is possible.

With that in mind, there are two primary questions embedded in my strategic project, each of which lies at the crux of the education sector’s most important work:

1. How might DPS catalyze transformative change in its lowest performing schools by cultivating the creativity and leadership of principals?

2. How might DPS create the central office conditions to support learning toward that end?

Before detailing my work at DPS and its emerging results, I’ll first describe some important context in the education sector and in Denver.
A MOMENT IN TIME

Long before I arrived in Denver, practitioners and policymakers throughout the education sector were tackling school turnaround, a term that describes efforts to catalyze dramatic improvement in our country's lowest-performing schools. More recently, we've seen a rise in “school design” work, which assumes that the structure of schooling must evolve to better match the needs of students today and to keep up with the pace of technologic change in our economy and society. In this chapter, I explore school turnaround and school design and question whether they should be more closely intertwined. Next, I examine the DPS environment leading up to my residency, focusing on the Denver Plan, a strategic planning document that outlines DPS’s goals and priorities. And, I end with a brief overview of my strategic project and a preview of subsequent chapters.

The work of improving the sector’s lowest-performing schools is of critical importance, but it’s hardly new. The term school turnaround became popular in 2009, when the U.S. Department of Education passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), in which it identified dramatic improvement of our country's bottom 5% of schools as an urgent priority. The Department of Education specified four interventions in the nation’s lowest-achieving schools:

**Turnaround**  Replace the principal and rehire no more than 50 percent of the school’s staff; adopt a new governance structure; provide job-embedded professional development; offer staff financial and career-advancement incentives; implement a research-based, aligned instructional program; extend learning and teacher planning time; create a community orientation; and provide operating flexibility.

**Restart**  Transfer control of, or close and reopen, a school under a school operator that has been selected through a rigorous review process. A restart model must enroll, within the grades it serves, any former student who wishes to attend.

**Transformation**  Replace the principal (no requirement for staff replacement); provide
job-embedded professional development; implement a rigorous teacher-evaluation and reward system; offer financial and career advancement incentives; implement comprehensive instructional reform; extend learning and teacher-planning time; create a community orientation; and provide operating flexibility and sustained support.

Closure

Close the school and enroll students in other, higher-achieving schools (Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahmatullah, & Tallant, 2010).

Since 2009, districts, states, and the federal government have invested an enormous amount of time and money in improving persistently low-performing schools (O’Brien & Dervarics, 2013), and the term school turnaround has been used to describe a myriad of approaches to dramatic school improvement. The results nationwide are mixed at best, and at worst, they have been consistently unsuccessful (Anrig, 2015).

Change management and turnaround are difficult in all sectors (Sirkin, Keenan, & Jackson, 2005), but in public education, compounding factors such as systemic inequality, poverty, and racism add to the challenge. Throughout the United States, a student’s race, income, and zip code largely predict her academic and life outcomes. This is especially clear in turnaround schools, where the majority of students are of color, and many are living in poverty. For example, in the 2010–2011 School Improvement Grant (SIG) cohort, which targeted chronically low-performing schools, 77% of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch and 83% were students of color (USED, 2011). Contrast those data with overall public school demographics, and the difference is striking. The same year, 48% of all U.S. students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, and 48% were students of color (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

While school systems work to improve our nation’s lowest-performing schools, a parallel set of work is underway to design innovative school models that acknowledge our changing economy and society and better prepare students for the future. In an increasingly
global world, where the workforce demands more of its employees and technology abounds, U.S. students are too often being asked to work individually, without the assistance of technology, on problems that have one right answer and one way to find that answer. In addition, sizable disparities exist between the types of learning experiences to which children of color and their white peers are exposed. Linda Darling-Hammond writes that children of color are too often relegated to “transmission-oriented curriculum,” in which a teacher delivers a set of information to students, whereas more affluent children are given access to a more “thinking-oriented curriculum” (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

With this inequity as a backdrop, educators and policymakers have begun to acknowledge that students are preparing for jobs that do not yet exist and that these jobs will likely require mind-sets and skills that schools are not designed to achieve. Therefore, individuals and organizations across the country are turning their attention to innovative school models and approaches that prepare students for a more complex set of outcomes. For example, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation recently launched a series of Next Generation Learning Challenges that incentivize policymakers and practitioners to reimagine American schools. Organizations such as NewSchools Venture Fund, 2-Rev, and Education Elements partner with schools, districts, and states to help them develop new school models, train and support the teachers in them, and measure a more holistic set of student outcomes.

DPS has invested heavily in this type of work in the Imaginarium, which supports schools with workshops, planning sessions, learning labs, coaching, and consultation services. It seeks to foster a culture of innovation within organizations and schools, using processes that are well researched, documented, measured, and analyzed (DPS, 2015a). These examples demonstrate a trend toward school design and redesign in service of students’ individual needs and preparation for the twenty-first century.
In summary, organizations and school systems are tackling two challenges simultaneously: how to consistently spark transformative change in our nation’s persistently low-performing schools, and how to design and redesign schools so they are built to prepare students for work and life in the twenty-first century. Although this work is well begun, organizations are not commonly addressing these two problems in the same schools at the same time. My hypothesis is that school turnaround—a moment in time where dramatic change is expected—provides an opportunity to rethink schooling and to design something different.

RAPID CHANGE IN DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

DPS is a large urban school district serving approximately 90,000 students. Nearly 70% of DPS students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and, as in urban districts across the country, student outcomes are largely predictable by students’ race, income, and zip code (Gorski, 2015). As I entered my residency, DPS was in the midst of organizational change and in pursuit of ambitious goals. The Denver Plan 2020, the district’s strategic planning document, had recently been released, outlining the district’s five-year plan and intended outcomes by 2020.

To achieve its goals, DPS was continuing to pursue its portfolio management strategy, in which it pushes autonomy and flexibility to schools while holding them accountable for outcomes.

School districts adopting the emerging strategy of portfolio management oversee and hold accountable a supply of diverse schools that are managed in many ways—including by charter operators, nonprofit organizations, and the district itself. Portfolio districts aim to provide parents with varied schools in every part of a city, create new options for groups of students who are not learning in existing schools, and continuously improve the overall quality and performance of the schools. They explicitly foster an environment to attract talent and support innovation and school improvement (Yatsko, 2012, p. 2).
As part of this strategy, DPS maintains its position as “governance agnostic,” which means it doesn’t favor district-managed or charter-managed schools in accountability systems or decision-making. To support its work, DPS central office had recently undergone a relatively large reorganization when my residency began. Most notably for my strategic project, the reorganization established the Chief Schools Office, which would formally house the work of school turnaround, and the Portfolio Management Office, the district’s main accountability function.

When I began my residency, I sensed urgency around the work of school turnaround, which was largely driven by the Denver Plan, the district’s strategic plan and current guiding light. In order to contextualize the district’s strategic plan and goals, I’ll briefly describe the evolution of the Denver Plan over the past decade.

Superintendent Michael Bennett announced the first iteration of the Denver Plan in 2005. At that time, the Denver Plan had three goals:

Our children will learn from a highly-skilled faculty in every school that is empowered by robust professional development and timely assessment data. Highly trained principals and assistant principals will serve as instructional leaders of the faculty in DPS schools. Collaboration among the Denver community and all DPS stakeholders will support our children in a safe, orderly, and enriching environment in every school and classroom (Denver Plan, 2005).

These goals saw impressive results. Between 2005 and 2010, proficiency rates on state standardized tests rose steadily, the dropout rate was reduced by one-third, and the number of students taking Advanced Placement exams doubled (DPS, 2005).

Superintendent Tom Boasberg took office in 2008. Despite DPS’s gains under Bennett, Boasberg faced persistent challenges and educational inequity across the district. In 2009–2010, fewer than one-half of students were proficient in reading and less than 40% in math and writing. Not only that, but fewer than one-half of DPS students graduated from
high school, and a 35-point achievement gap persisted between white students and students of color (Denver Plan, 2010, p. 5).

With his team, Boasberg created the second iteration of the Denver Plan in 2010, which sustained many of the strategies that Bennett had begun. Besides continued work on instructional improvement, educator quality, and accountability, Boasberg spearheaded Managed Performance Empowerment as a key district strategy. This meant DPS central office would maintain tight control over instructional standards, professional development, and assessment while cultivating a culture of school-based autonomy and innovation. The plan articulated five essential strategies to execute this theory of action: (1) focus on the instructional core, (2) develop educators’ and leaders’ capacity, (3) engage communities and families, (4) strategically manage financial resources, and (5) drive a culture of high expectations, service, empowerment, and responsibility (Denver Plan, 2010, p. 7–8).

The plan defined school-based autonomy as control over people, time, and money, but it did not seek to define empowerment or innovation. The 2010 plan represented the early push toward a portfolio management strategy by suggesting that the school district should set parameters and desired outcomes but transfer greater decision-making authority to schools. The plan encompassed all governance types: due to the Colorado Charter School Act of 1993 and the Colorado Innovation Schools Act of 2008, the district comprised district-managed, charter-managed, and innovation schools; innovation schools receive any number of waivers from state and district requirements. For example, innovation schools might choose to extend the school day, offer annual contracts to teachers, or change their school calendar while still being operated by DPS as opposed to a charter operator.

The Denver Plan 2020 was announced in August 2014. Led by the board of education and jointly constructed by DPS senior leadership, community members, and
charter leaders, the Denver Plan 2020 is the district’s current guiding light, articulating shared core values, core beliefs, five key strategies, and ambitious goals. The plan’s top-line goal, “Great Schools in Every Neighborhood,” is followed by several other goals, including: increased graduation rates, closing opportunity gaps, and serving the whole child. The strategies employed in the Denver Plan 2020 have evolved since 2010; the district’s main strategies in this iteration are leadership, teaching, flexibility, early investment, and culture. Some of these strategies build directly on previous iterations of the Denver Plan, such as teaching and leadership. Others, such as flexibility, represent the district’s evolution. In the Denver Plan, a “great school” is designated blue or green, the highest rankings on the School Performance Framework. The goal is to have 80% blue or green schools in every region by 2020.

The evolution of this framework and the district’s rapid pace of change provide important framing for my strategic project. Notably, the four schools in the Year Zero Redesign cohort were among the furthest from blue or green status of any in the district. Therefore, the need for dramatic improvement was urgent, both because the children attending those schools deserved a high-quality education, and because DPS was pursuing ambitious goals and was accountable to the board of education to ensure "great schools in every neighborhood" by 2020.

THE YEAR ZERO REDESIGN COHORT

My strategic project, the Year Zero Redesign cohort, was in many ways a response to contextual factors in the sector. Namely, turnaround has not been consistently successful, and at the same time, the pace of economic and societal change demands that our schools evolve. It was also a response to the DPS context where the Denver Plan requires the
district to make rapid gains in its lowest-performing schools. In short, the Year Zero Redesign cohort is a structure in which principals are hired a year before they take the helm at their schools. During Year Zero, principals build relationships with community members and redesign their schools in alignment with community need. They also focus on building competencies to be successful turnaround principals and on hiring the right team to implement their school designs successfully. My charge in DPS was to execute the first iteration of the Year Zero Redesign cohort. I’ll provide more detail about this work and its results in Chapter 2, after a brief look at the contents of this capstone.

A PREVIEW OF WHAT’S TO COME

In the following chapters, I place the research on school turnaround, community mobilization, and user-centered design in conversation with my work in DPS. I begin with an analysis of the literature in these areas to understand the work preceding mine. Using this research, I outline a theory of action for achieving democratic school design and organizational learning, which guides my work at DPS.

In Chapter 2, I examine the Year Zero Redesign cohort as a structure and process for dramatic school improvement. How might principals develop their capacity for community mobilization and innovative school design? Are those skills necessary to achieve accelerated improvement? With whom must principals collaborate to ensure sustainability? What, if anything, does trust have to do with school turnaround? I end the chapter with an exploration of the system learning that transpired in relation to this work. Here, I’ll take a closer look at the role of DPS central office in facilitating transformative, school-based work. What practices and policies are most likely to support rapid improvement? How might DPS navigate the tension between its dual role as an operator and authorizer? How might a large
school district organize itself for execution and learning? For excellence and equity? For technical and adaptive problem solving?

Chapter 3 summarizes what I learned during my residency. As this experience comes to a close, I’m left with key takeaways about my own leadership in this complex system as well as some reflections on the work ahead for DPS and for the education sector. My hope is that this capstone offers transferable knowledge and experience, at both the school and system levels, that can be applied in other educational contexts.
Chapter 1: Review of Knowledge for Action

As I entered my residency in June 2015, I first needed to understand the content of my strategic project (school turnaround) more deeply. Second, I had to hone my understanding of the methodologies needed to carry out the work (community mobilization and user-centered design). This chapter presents an analysis of the literature on those topics. First, I explore the history and results of school turnaround efforts over the past ten years and identify conditions that were common to those efforts. Second, I analyze community mobilization as a lever for transformative school-level and system change. Finally, I review the research on user-centered design to understand its potential role in catalyzing creativity and learning. This chapter culminates with a theory of action for my strategic project, which I use to analyze the results of my work in subsequent chapters.

SCHOOL TURNAROUND: A DECADE OF STUBBORN RESULTS

Few questions remain as pressing, with answers as elusive, as how to dramatically improve chronically low-performing schools. Central office administrators and educators have been involved in school improvement for decades, but school turnaround as an explicitly stated strategy is a more recent phenomenon (American Institutes for Research, 2011). The term school turnaround is used to describe many approaches and strategies, but it also refers to a specific model for school improvement specified by the U.S. Department of Education’s SIG program (Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahmatullah, & Tallant, 2010). In this analysis, I use the definition for school turnaround set forth by Mass Insight Education, a Boston-based nonprofit:

Turnaround is a dramatic and comprehensive intervention in a low-performing school that, (a) produces significant gains in achievement within two years, and (b) readies the school for the longer process of transformation into a high-performing organization (Calkins, A., Guenther, W., Belfiore, G., & Lash, D., 2007, p 1).
As a practitioner, I have reservations about using this definition because of its overly narrow focus on standardized test scores. However, the definition is widely accepted by schools that are implementing turnaround plans and by districts and states that hold them accountable to a limited set of metrics. The current School Performance Framework, by which DPS holds its schools accountable, has a similar emphasis on achievement and performance and therefore this definition aligns well with the district’s goals.

In 2009, the U.S. Department of Education passed ARRA, which designated school turnaround an urgent priority for the lowest-performing schools and cited turnaround as one of its four pillars of education reform. Since then, districts, states, and the federal government have invested an enormous amount of time, human energy, and money in tackling this problem (O’Brien & Dervarics, 2013), with mixed results (Anrig, 2015).

Ample research has been done on school turnaround, much of it focused on the actions needed to transform a school. However, the results described in the literature on school turnaround are somewhat disheartening, highlighting that after years of focused attention, school turnaround efforts have not led to sustained improvement in the lowest-performing schools. The American Institutes for Research, contracted by the U.S. Department of Education, summarized the results of 350 turnaround efforts in written testimony to the U.S Senate. The conclusion of their report reads, in part:

In summary, turning around chronically low-performing schools and sustaining improvement strategies are difficult, but not impossible. Research provides evidence about which practices are evident in turnaround schools, and these practices can be included in the intervention models required by ARRA funding programs. However, the research base on the ARRA intervention models themselves is mixed, at best (American Institutes for Research, 2011, p. 6).

An analysis of Denver’s own data on school turnaround suggests that these efforts often result in marginally better results for a handful of years but rarely catalyze sustained,
transformational change. Figure 1 summarizes the results of school turnaround in DPS between 2010 and 2014.

![Figure 1: Results of turnaround in DPS from 2010-2014 depicting percentage of students who were in each year. (Bold-bordered cells indicate the year of turnaround, including intensive financial investment and principal and staff restart).](image)

The *Denver Post* wrote about these results during my residency, declaring, “Many Colorado schools still failing after years, millions of dollars” (Brown, 2016). The article emphasizes the difficulty of realizing sustainable improvement in persistently low-performing schools and makes clear that the results in Denver and Colorado mirror nationwide results. In short, we have not yet seen interventions or strategies that consistently ensure success in school turnaround efforts.

Despite the lack of consistent results, we can glean some knowledge from a decade of effort. First, we can learn from the rare success stories. Public Impact (2008) studied dozens of successful turnaround schools and found that effective turnaround leaders (1) focus on a few early wins, (2) push rapid experimentation, (3) get the right staff and “right the remainder,” (4) drive decisions with open-air data, and (5) lead a turnaround campaign.
Public Impact's work offers useful insights for turnaround principals and the school systems that support them. Second, the lack of consistent results suggests that context and the quality of execution matters. A recent report by the Century Foundation identifies increased funding, extended day, and instructional coaching as strategies that work (Anrig, 2015). However, many schools that were not successful also tried those strategies, highlighting the need to match “proven strategies” to an identified need. Finally, Kahlenberg (2009) insists that school turnaround is an example of attempting to make “separate but equal” work, and often failing at it. He argues that school systems that focus on improving schools without addressing segregation are not addressing the root cause of the problem.

While the results of past turnaround efforts are inconsistent and discouraging, the conditions in turnaround schools across the country are strikingly consistent. Two conditions emerge from the research as being especially important in turnaround environments: (1) schools subject to turnaround serve a high concentration of historically marginalized students and families and (2) these schools exhibit signs of compromised trust at multiple levels. The following section explores the implications of these two conditions.

**Historic Marginalization**

Chronically low-performing schools disproportionately affect poor students and students of color (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). However, a mass of recent research on the best practices in school turnaround fails to mention the characteristics of students in turnaround schools, which suggests these characteristics are unimportant in our quest for solutions to chronic low performance (e.g., Public Impact, 2008).

Ignoring the realities of students and families who are hurt by failing schools is hugely problematic. The fact that teachers and administrators often do not represent the
students they serve magnifies the problem. Table 1 shows the racial demographics of DPS
students, teachers, and administrators.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Administrators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>56.7%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>74.2%</td>
<td>61.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Racial demographics of students, teachers, and administrators in DPS (2015)

These data make it clear that teachers and administrators are significantly more likely
to be white than their students overall. And, in DPS’s turnaround schools, the disparity is
even more marked. In Denver, turnaround schools overwhelmingly serve students of color
who are experiencing the challenges of poverty. Figure 2 depicts the socioeconomic and
racial disparities between Denver’s turnaround elementary schools and its elementary
schools overall.

Figure 2: Socioeconomic and racial composition of Denver Public Schools’ turnaround schools in 2015

Disparities between students and their teachers in turnaround schools perpetuate a
pattern of historic marginalization in several ways. First, students of color are more likely to
be negatively affected by bias, especially when their teachers are white (Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2015). This might mean that academic expectations are lowered or disciplinary action is more severe. Additionally, students who are poor experience challenges outside of school, including hunger, housing instability, additional work responsibilities, and neighborhood violence, and all of which influence students’ ability to learn (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997).

Compounding factors can be disastrous. Students who experience poverty often experience “toxic stress,” or the accumulation of multiple negative stressors without the resources to cope (Duncan-Andrade, 2014). Duncan-Andrade documents the way in which educators respond to students who are experiencing toxic stress and finds that a caring adult is the number one protective factor for youth. Educators are rarely trained to respond to toxic stress, however, and schools typically do not consider trauma response to be part of their core work (Duncan-Andrade, 2014). These factors have implications for school turnaround (e.g., focus on solid instruction is likely not enough to serve students well) and for school design (e.g., the teacher role may need to evolve to allow for more time and attention to students’ social-emotional wellness).

Persistent racial and socioeconomic segregation adds to the complexity of marginalization. In Denver, turnaround schools represent some of the most extreme racial and economic segregation in the city (see Figure 2). A national expert in school integration summarizes this issue concisely:

Mountains of research suggest that the reason high-poverty schools fail so often is that economic segregation drives failure: it congregates the children with the smallest dreams, the parents who are the most pressed, and burnt out teachers who often cannot get hired elsewhere. There is a strange quality to the turnaround debate, in which we stand in awe of the impressive efforts of a few schools and ignore the larger reality that economic segregation normally perpetuates failure (Kahlenberg, 2009, p. 19).
Simply ensuring that students of color come into contact with white students at school doesn’t boost performance, according to Kahlenberg. Better teachers and facilities, heightened public investment, and other resources are likely to concentrate in places where white children attend school. Given the highly segregated nature of Denver’s turnaround schools, the negative consequences of segregation only add to the factors affecting students and families.

Compromised Trust

Trust can be defined as “the belief that relinquishing some degree of control over a situation to one or more others will not lead to personal loss or harm” (Edmondson & Moingeon, 1999). In other words, people make calculations to determine the intentions of others. Based on their calculations, people decide (1) whether another’s interests align with theirs, (2) whether another person is likely to act consistently with their own interests, and (3) whether to risk vulnerability given another’s likely actions (Henderson, 2007). Trust is an essential ingredient in any high-performing organization, and schools are no different (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Within an organization, trust promotes cooperation, productive relationships, effective communication, and learning (Arrow, 1974).

The knowledge that trust is a critical ingredient in effective organizations raises questions about how to build and sustain trust. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) compiled nearly a dozen studies on relational trust and found that six qualities were consistently identified as those that build and maintain trust: willing vulnerability, benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness.

Often in turnaround settings, trust between district administrators, principals, teachers, and community members has been compromised. Instability in the form of teacher
or principal turnover chips away at reliability. A revolving door of reforms casts doubt on individual or collective competence. And a lack of community engagement (e.g., in instances where school closure or principal turnover is determined without consulting parents and community members) can be seen as jeopardizing honesty and openness. The stakes are higher when trust is compromised: “As trust declines, the cost of doing business increases” (Arson et al., 2003, p. 6). When trust is compromised, people become averse to risk-taking and engage in self-protection. These reactions stifle learning and therefore endanger turnaround schools' ability to realize their potential.

Cozolino (2011) explores the relationship between inequality and trust. He argues that the degree to which resource distribution is equal or perceived as equal predicts the degree to which cooperation is possible. “The unequal distribution of resources generates . . . a greater sense of negativity towards other members of society and a sense that those others cannot be trusted” (Cozolino, 2011, p. 316). In under resourced and underserved communities, therefore, people are less likely to trust public institutions because those institutions have not served them well. Given the high concentration of students and families living in poverty, and the racially and economically isolated nature of turnaround schools in Denver, this finding is important. Cozolino’s research helps to illustrate how poverty and inequality contribute to mistrust and how that mistrust may impede the collaborative work of school turnaround.

Research by Bryk and colleagues highlights the impact of trust within schools in more nuanced ways. In Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago (2010), Bryk and his colleagues define relational trust in schools:

At the most basic level, relational trust is grounded in social respect. Key in this regard are the conversations that occur within a school community. Respectful exchanges are marked by a genuine sense of listening to what each person has to say, and in some fashion taking this into account in subsequent actions. Even when
people disagree, individuals feel that the value of their opinions has been recognized. Such social exchanges foster a sense of connectedness among participants and promote affiliation with the larger institutional context (Bryk et al., 2010, p. 138).

Bryk et al. argue that relational trust promotes school improvement in three key ways. First, teacher and parent buy-in occurs more readily in schools that emphasize strong relational trust. Second, relational trust creates a “motivating force for taking up the difficult work of school reform” (Bryk et al., 2010, p. 140). The vast majority of teachers work extremely hard, so selling the need for additional or difficult work is understandably challenging. Relational trust helps to make this selling point salient. Third, change initiatives are more likely to diffuse broadly across a school community where relational trust is present (Bryk et al., 2010, p. 140). Bryk and colleagues (2010) emphasize that relational trust among adults is not enough to affect student learning directly:

Rather [relational trust] creates the fabric within which school professionals, parents, and community leaders can initiate and sustain efforts at building the essential supports for school improvement. In short, trust facilitates core organizational change processes that instrumentally contribute to improving academic productivity (p. 140).

On the contrary, it lays the groundwork for organizational change and sustained improvement.

COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION: AN OFTEN OVERLOOKED LEVER

While often treated as something extra, family and community engagement is critical to a school system’s success. First and foremost, family engagement improves student outcomes (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In their comprehensive literature review, Henderson and Mapp found that family engagement contributed positively to a wide range of outcomes, including grades, test scores, course rigor, and social skills. These outcomes were consistent
across ethnic and socioeconomic groups, and they persisted throughout a child's schooling experience.

More importantly, family and community engagement is critical if the challenges we face in public education today are in fact adaptive and not technical (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). In their seminal work, *Leadership on the Line*, Heifetz and Linsky clarify the distinction between technical and adaptive challenges. They explain that technical problems are those for which an answer or solution already exists, whereas adaptive problems have no known solutions. Adaptive problems feel risky because the path forward is unclear and people don’t know for certain that the future will be better than the past. Instead, they are highly attuned to immediate loss that will come from change.

Indeed the single most common source of leadership failure we’ve been able to identify . . . is that people, especially those in positions of authority, treat adaptive challenges like technical problems. In times of distress, when everyone looks to authorities to provide direction, protection and order, this is an easy diagnostic mistake to make. In the face of adaptive pressures, people don’t want questions, they want answers. They don’t want to be told that they will have to sustain losses; rather, they want to know how you’re going to protect them from the pains of change (Heifetz, 2001, p. 15).

Adaptive challenges require adaptive leadership. Unlike common archetypes of leadership, adaptive leadership is not synonymous with positional authority or charisma; rather, it is an activity. In order to exercise adaptive leadership, one must recognize the two-way nature of interactions and transactions. “Leaders not only influence followers, but are under their influence as well” (Heifetz, 1994).

When an adaptive leader encounters a challenge such as disproportionate disciplinary action in her school, she will not rush to implement a new program or initiative. Instead, she will raise the issue with parents, teachers, and administrators to explore its root cause. She will recognize the value in pushing people outside their comfort zone and having others push her. She will understand that complex challenges require an entire community to
wrestle with their beliefs. This participatory work of leadership has the potential to alter the values of a collective and therefore spark a deeper kind of change.

One way to think about effective community engagement might be to focus on research about practices that yield the highest impact on student outcomes. Henderson (2007) points to activities that are significantly more likely to raise student achievement than others, such as parent-teacher home visits and parent education programs. These activities, however, cannot restore trust that has deteriorated or build a sense of collective vision and direction—outcomes that are especially important in turnaround environments.

Community organizing or mobilization offers a more sophisticated method of involving families and community members in the schooling system. “In communities where parents are well organized and politically influential . . . poor performance is not normally tolerated nor allowed to persist. Yet, parents in low-income communities typically do not have the political clout to effect change” (Warren & Mapp, 2011, p. 5). In A Match on Dry Grass: Community Organizing as a Catalyst for School Reform, Warren & Mapp detail the potential of community organizing, which enhances the political power that communities experience, for effective change in schools: “Community organizing offers a fresh approach to addressing educational failure as part of a larger effort to build power for marginalized communities and tackle issues associated with poverty and racism inside and outside of schools” (Warren & Mapp, 2011, p. 5). Community mobilization moves beyond family involvement as a tool for improving student’s academic outcomes, expanding family and community influence in the system at large.

Marshall Ganz draws a connection between leadership and collective participation. In his work on social movement theory, Ganz writes that leadership is one of the most critical components of social movements and community organizing. He defines leadership
as "accepting responsibility to create conditions that enable others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty" (2010, p. 1). This acknowledgment that leadership is critical for driving collective participation and organizing helps to reconcile a potential tension in my strategic project. My theory of action focuses on principals enacting change in schools, primarily because I chose to view leadership in much the same way Ganz does. Considering the conditions of historic marginalization and distrust present in turnaround schools, Ganz's definition of leadership is uniquely promising. It offers an opportunity for historically disengaged families to shape the future of their school and community.

DESIGN: A CATALYST FOR CREATIVITY & LEARNING

I entered my residency intrigued by the promise of user-centered design methodologies for two main reasons. First, the sporadic and incremental results of past turnaround efforts suggested a need for creativity and new ideas. User-centered design is intended to help teams think about problems in new ways and develop more innovative solutions. Second, school has changed very little over the past hundred years while the students in schools have changed dramatically. This is especially true in Denver’s turnaround schools, where most students are of color, speak a first language other than English, and are living in poverty. For this reason, it seemed important that we take a user-centered approach; designing schools for the specific students and families they serve. In this section, I explore the research behind user-centered design and the potential benefits it offers for students and educators alike.

User-centered design, also known as human-centered design, is a “process and a set of techniques used to create new solutions for the world” (IDEO, 2015). The Stanford Design School (2010) offers a five-stage design methodology: empathize, define, ideate,
prototype, and test. This process is increasingly known in the education sector and in DPS, where people are familiar with the language and overall concept. This and other design methodologies are user-centered, meaning they seek to create solutions with people's needs, wants, habits, and beliefs in mind. They are also collaborative, iterative, and experiential, which heightens the learning for designers themselves. User-centered design methodologies operate on an assumption that innovation and creativity are heightened through processes that enable and encourage them. This assumption contrasts with popular perceptions about innovation. “The myth of creative genius is resilient: We believe that great ideas pop fully formed out of brilliant minds, in feats of imagination well beyond the abilities of mere mortals” (Brown, 2008).

Design processes offer deliberate strategies for creativity and innovation, by incorporating elements such as empathy, discovery, and feedback loops. The focus on empathy in user-centered design offers a realistic way for educators and system administrators to design schools for today's students. Conducting empathy interviews, for example, prompts a designer to understand her user’s thoughts, emotions, and motivations so that she can build a solution that will satisfy and even delight the person using it. This type of discovery and exploration not only yields better solutions, it also fosters learning for the designer. From the perspective of a neuroscientist, Cozolino explains why that is: “Human animals are generally considered to be exploratory creatures, and we are rewarded for our curiosity by the generation of dopamine and endogenous opioids, which are stimulated in the face of something new” (2013). One does not need to understand the brain’s physiological and chemical nuances to grasp that our bodies and brains enjoy discovering new things. Good design processes fully anticipate discovery and inquiry in the quest for solutions. As we strive to solve a problem like persistent low-performance in
schools, which has persisted despite intense energy and investment, user-centered design offers educators and policymakers the chance to expand their notion of what is possible.

Incorporating feedback loops into design methodologies makes them especially relevant to creating excellent schools. Argyris (1977) emphasizes the importance of “double-loop learning,” or the ability to interrogate underlying assumptions and make corrections based on reconsideration of those assumptions. Double-loop learning is distinct from single-loop learning in that information travels two ways. Feedback from one party influences the behavior or thinking of another party and prompts the second party to ask why and question her assumptions before correcting course. User-centered design requires double-loop learning by structuring the inquiry process to be generative, and by prioritizing prototyping and constant iteration. As I approached school turnaround in new ways, my hypothesis was that user-centered design methodologies offer a concrete set of tools for enhancing collaboration and organizational learning throughout the process.

A THEORY OF ACTION

Equipped with the research above, I dived into my strategic project in June 2015, with a somewhat theoretical and all-too-broad theory of action:

If DPS hires principals a year in advance, builds their capacity for community mobilization, user-centered design, and turnaround leadership; and if DPS builds the organizational infrastructure to support this work, then DPS will effectively turn around its persistently low-performing schools.

This initial theory helped me understand the thinking and intention that DPS leaders had done before my arrival, but it was less helpful for defining my own role and the work I would lead during the course of my residency. For this reason, I attempted to isolate my own role in a somewhat more specific theory of action:
If I build a cross-functional support team and create shared vision, purpose, roles, and responsibilities, and if we create the conditions for effective learning in the Year Zero cohort, then Year Zero principals will form community design teams that effectively redesign their schools aligned with community need.

The revised theory assumed that DPS central office was willing and able to learn from the Year Zero cohort and that the district would use its learning to create the conditions for future success. I wasn’t entirely sure how system learning would happen, but I believed (and still do believe) that central office administrators can and should learn from the work of principals, teachers, and community members who are closest to students. One of my learning goals in the residency was to better understand how system learning could occur in a context of high stakes and fast-paced work.
Chapter 2: Pursuing Democratic School Design

My primary responsibility as a resident in DPS was to organize, execute, and study the Year Zero Redesign cohort. The task represented three big bets DPS was making in service of more equitable schools. First, DPS had committed significant money, time, and people to its lowest-performing schools. Second, it was investing heavily on the front end of change by hiring principals a year in advance so they could develop the skills necessary to succeed. Finally, DPS was thinking creatively about how it might partner with families, rebuild trust where it had deteriorated, and ultimately redesign schools to serve students well.

In this capstone, I define democratic school design as a participatory, design-based process that acknowledges the unique needs of students and families and seeks to build a learning environment that serves those needs well. This definition is purposely broad, and it excludes words such as innovation. Although I think it’s ultimately possible, if not likely, that democratic school design processes produce innovative school models, innovation for innovation’s sake is not the goal. Rather, the purpose is to serve the needs of students and families well. Part of the journey, therefore, entails a school community’s quest to define its beliefs and develop a school model in alignment with those beliefs.

My definition of democratic school design illuminated two tensions during the residency. First, there was tension between emphasizing principal leadership and conducting a participatory design process. Rather than see the concepts of leadership and participation in conflict with one another, I chose to view the principal’s role as one that can invite participation and collaboration. This is not to say tension did not arise throughout the work. It did, and it required the Year Zero principals and me to communicate clearly about the degree to which participation and collaboration would influence the process and the final school design product. For some aspects of the design—the school’s vision and guiding
values, mechanisms for family engagement, and plans for schoolwide communication—families collaborated in making decisions and even became the primary owners of these decisions. Other aspects of the design, such as adoption of specific curricula or teacher professional development, were determined by school leaders and teachers, with opportunities for feedback from families. This level of intentionality was critical for navigating the tension between leadership and widespread participation.

The second tension inherent in my definition of democratic school design stems from the possible uniqueness of each school model. The definition I offer articulates a process rather than an outcome, assuming that a creative, participatory process leads to diverse school models that meet the needs of particular school communities. The tension lies in the degree to which schools should deliver on a common good or offer a common experience in many schools. Given DPS’s identity as a portfolio district—a system of schools rather than a school system—and its nationally recognized school choice process, I believe there is value in constructing a system wherein various school models can thrive. Acting Superintendent Susana Cordova articulated this point in a weekly email update to the DPS community:

Because, as the mother of two and a former teacher to many more, I know one size doesn’t fit all kids. Our chances of achieving our vision, Every Child Succeeds, are far greater when we allow our families to select the school that best fits their students, allowing them to thrive as the unique and wonderful individuals they are (personal communication, March 18, 2016).

This district-held belief in operating a variety of school models sometimes feels in conflict with its responsibility to assure that schools are of a high quality, thus achieving a common good. DPS’s accountability measures, including the rubric by which school models would be evaluated (Appendix A) and the district’s School Performance Framework, which places a heavy emphasis on reading and math scores, define the outcomes that DPS schools must
achieve. Ideally, various school models could pursue these outcomes through their own means; however, in practice, these accountability measures tend to lead schools toward specific practices. I discuss this conflict further in the following description and analysis of my strategic project.

The majority of this chapter focuses on my first essential question: *How might DPS catalyze transformative change in its lowest-performing schools by cultivating the creativity and leadership of principals?* I begin with a description of the key events that unfolded during my strategic project with respect to principal leadership development, community engagement, and school design. From there, I move on to the results of that work to date and analysis of why these results unfolded as they did, using the research presented in Chapter 1. I close the chapter by describing and analyzing the organizational learning that occurred and did not occur as a result of this work, especially in relation to my second essential question: *How might DPS create the central office conditions to support learning toward transformative school-based change?*

Before diving into a more narrative description of my work in DPS, I provide an overview of the leadership actions I took with the intention of catalyzing democratic school design across the Year Zero schools (Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Leadership actions: Designing and leading the 2015–16 Year Zero Redesign cohort</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>March–May 2015</strong></td>
<td>▪ Year Zero identified as a strategy in collaboration with advocacy groups and charter school leaders (March 2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Prior to my residency)</td>
<td>▪ Year Zero learning excursion to Lawrence, MA, to observe the Lawrence Family Development Charter School, which emphasizes academic rigor, family ties, and universal access to the “gifted and talented” experience (April 2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Community meetings held at each Year Zero school with district leadership and principals (March–May 2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Initial plans for summer Year Zero professional development formulated (May 2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>June and July 2015</strong></td>
<td>▪ Formed core team and built shared purpose for work together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Created timeline and work plan for Year Zero Redesign cohort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Coordinated 4 weeks of professional learning for Year Zero principals and interim leaders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
focused on transformative leadership and community engagement

- Held 1:1 meetings with instructional superintendents who supervise Year Zero leaders
- Scheduled 1:1 meetings with central office staff across DPS departments (HR, CELT, CSO, Portfolio, ELA, Chief of Staff, etc.)

**August 2015**

- Held initial 1:1 meetings with principals
- Built the scope and sequence for principal learning in fall 2015
- Initiated “collaborative Wednesdays” for principals and core team to work together
- Supported principals in launching their community design teams

**September 2015**

- Led Bay Area learning excursion for principals and the core team
- Worked with Human Resources to define principal evaluation for Year Zero leaders
- Held first extended team meeting with participants from HR, CELT, CSO, Portfolio, ELA, chief of staff, and more
- Continued leading “collaborative Wednesdays” for principals and core team to work together
- Supported principals in executing community design team meetings

**October 2015**

- Supported principals in writing and developing their redesign plans, and in meeting the October 23 deadline for Redesign Plan submission
- Read and edited all four Redesign Plans and provided line-by-line feedback to principals
- Continued leading “collaborative Wednesdays” for principals and core team to work together

**November 2015**

- Administered survey to principals to understand successes and challenges in Year Zero
- Held formal step back with Year Zero principals to dive deeply into three topics: the relationship with interim principals, drafting school designs, and collaborative structures
- Prepared Year Zero parents to present to school board members at Public Comment

**December 2015**

- Developed scope and sequence for principal learning and task completion in spring 2016
- Planned and executed community forum to discuss successes, challenges, and lessons learned in Year Zero
- Conducted 1:1 interviews with principals, instructional superintendents, and district leadership to collect feedback on Year Zero so far and understand its relationship to other district decisions

| Table 2: Timeline of leadership actions for the Year Zero Redesign cohort |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| **Key:** CELT = Culture, Equity, and Leadership Team; CSO = Chief Schools Office; ELA = English Language Acquisition |

The following narrative is intended to bring my work to life. To highlight some key successes, challenges, and lessons learned, and to explain important decisions and the interplay between community members, Year Zero principals, and central office staff, I focus on four key moments during my residency: forming the Year Zero cohort, the Bay
Area learning excursion; finalizing the redesign plans, and the School Redesign Community Forum.

Although the Year Zero Redesign cohort spanned an entire year, my description of the events that transpired focuses on the first half, which took place between June and December 2015 (Figure 3). During this time, principals were primarily concentrated on community engagement and school redesign. Believing that these two topics are critical but not sufficient for effective school turnaround, in early 2016, principals turned to hiring, instructional improvement, and operational readiness.

KNOCKING ON DOORS

When I arrived in Denver in June 2015, my first task was clear. A month of professional learning for the Year Zero principals was scheduled to start a week after my residency began, and therefore I needed to quickly form the Year Zero core team. This cross-functional group of central office administrators would support the Year Zero principals and ensure we were ready to execute high-quality professional development a week later. Luckily, I was not starting from scratch.

The Year Zero core team (Figure 4) began forming prior to my arrival, and the team had already designed the first two weeks of professional learning for principals. In alignment with DPS’s initial theory of change, the core team members held expertise in community...
engagement, school design, human resources, and leadership development—all areas deemed critical to principals’ success in school turnaround. My role was to coordinate our cross-functional efforts so that support to principals would be aligned and coherent.

The launch in June marked the formation of the Year Zero cohort, which comprised four elementary school principals with diverse experience and backgrounds. They had one to ten years of school leadership experience, and three of the four were Denver natives. One principal had led a turnaround school before, another had led the district’s gifted and talented magnet school, and a third had led a charter school in New York City. Demographically, the principals were somewhat less diverse. Three of the four were white, whereas a majority of students in their schools were Latino.

The primary objectives for summer professional learning, which formed the basis for programming during the first two weeks, were these:

1. Leaders build a shared purpose grounded in social justice and transformative leadership.
2. Leaders begin building relationships with families and community members.
3. Leaders begin building awareness of “turnaround competencies” and a plan to develop them.
4. Leaders know what to expect in the year ahead and know how to access support from the core team and DPS central office.
In the forming of the core team and the cohort of principals, two aspects of our launch were especially important in shaping the work we would do together throughout the year. First, the launch opened with a strong emphasis on transformative leadership and social justice, which would lay the groundwork for our focus on community engagement. Dr. Carolyn Shields led the first two days of professional learning. Dr. Shields is a scholar and author, and one of her main areas of study is transformative leadership. This concept (not to be confused with transformational leadership) is grounded in Freire’s (2000) call for critical awareness. Shields points out that many leadership frameworks today, including that of transformational leadership, ignore the historic and current racism and inequality inherent in the U.S. school system. Therefore, a new kind of leadership is required, one in which leaders recognize the need to change beliefs, values, practices, and policies so that our system can fulfill its promise of serving all students and families. Dr. Shields’ work also stresses the need for school change to be driven by those educational inequity has harmed most. Her facilitation involved reading and reflection, role-play scenarios, and discussion, all of which were aimed at helping leaders ground themselves and their work in transformative leadership.

Second, much of the learning that took place during this time was experiential and intended to help leaders begin building relationships with families and community members at their schools. The executive director of Family and Community Engagement (FACE), with several team members, led the principals through a set of learning experiences and work sessions. This included an opportunity for all Year Zero principals to canvass their respective communities and introduce themselves to families. Knocking on doors gave them an important opportunity to make a good first impression by greeting families, introducing themselves, listening, and learning about students’ and families’ previous experiences.
The rationale for this programmatic choice was the evidence we had seen of significantly compromised trust at several levels in the Year Zero schools. Parents expressed skepticism about yet another new initiative and another new principal. In some cases, they had become disengaged: they weren’t attending school-based events or community meetings. To begin reengaging families, one strategy we employed was to show quick and visible improvement. To that end, each Year Zero principal asked community members about their community's nonacademic needs. Responses included increased police presence in a nearby park, better signage at a busy intersection, and English-language programming at the local community center. Principals collected these requests and we delivered them to the City of Denver’s office, where they were moved to the top of the queue. These visible “quick wins” were an attempt to build credibility and demonstrate early progress with families and community members.

At this point in my strategic project, I did not yet have a clear picture of what “restored trust” would look or sound like if we were successful. During these first few weeks of the residency, I was operating with information I heard second- or thirdhand, as opposed to information I knew from personal experience, about the need for community engagement and trusting relationships. As my residency progressed, I would come to believe we should strive for three main indicators of restored trust in the Year Zero schools:

- An increased number of families would attend school-based events and community meetings.
- Families and community members would voice their opinions and concerns related to the school’s future (e.g., in surveys, at design team meetings).
- Families would articulate the vision for their school themselves (to their friends or neighbors, during canvassing efforts, in public forums).

My hope was that these results, if achieved, would help sustain the work of school improvement and turnaround in the years to come.
Our concurrent foci of building shared purpose within the cohort, developing principals’ orientation toward transformative leadership, and developing strong relationships with families were connected. They attempted to orient leaders in such a way that they would prioritize relationship building in their ongoing work and be poised to spark the relational trust and buy-in needed for turnaround success.

PUTTING A STAKE IN THE GROUND

One strategy I employed to foster learning and growth related to school design was to lead a learning excursion to the Bay Area in September 2015. We identified this learning excursion as a strategy that would help accelerate two main needs of the Year Zero cohort.

- Learning Objective 1: Explore the intentional design and implementation of various school models to push principals’ thinking about what is possible.
- Learning Objective 2: Learn from principals who have done community-driven redesign and/or school turnaround.

There was a third, less explicit objective. Time and space away from the day-to-day work in schools was meant to foster strong relationships between principals and between district team members and school leaders so as to make transformational team-based learning possible.

To fulfill these learning objectives, I chose five schools to visit, based on the following rationale:

**Summit Denali Middle School**  Summit Public Schools is known for its innovative, competency-based approach. It is often held up as a national exemplar for personalizing learning for students and developing deeper learning competencies for its graduates.
Think College Now (TCN)  
Founded during the height of the small schools movement in the early 2000’s, TCN is now a well-known K–12 school in Oakland. TCN has seen impressive results with its predominantly low-income students of color. TCN prides itself on a “college-going culture” and on its rates of college admission and graduation.

Manzanita Seed Elementary  
Manzanita Seed was also founded during the small schools movement; it is one of two schools in California that is closing the opportunity and achievement gap. It is a dual-language, expeditionary school, which emphasizes bilingualism and student leadership. It also intentionally builds strong relationships with families and community organizations, including prominent community organizing groups in the Fruitvale neighborhood in Oakland.

Acorn Woodland Elementary  
Acorn Woodland is a traditional, neighborhood elementary school in Oakland. Also founded during the small schools movement in Oakland, Acorn came into existence with a community design team much like our principals’ design teams in Denver. Acorn offers intensive social-emotional supports for students and prioritizes family and community engagement.

The New School of San Francisco  
The New School of San Francisco is a new, inquiry-based elementary school serving a deliberately diverse student body. The school was founded in partnership with the Exploratorium Museum, and it is a self-described lab school for other educators and school leaders who are interested in moving toward an interdisciplinary, inquiry-based model of teaching and learning.

I chose these five schools to represent different school models, different theories of learning for adults and students, and different contexts and histories, but they all had one thing in common: each one was created with families and community members. For example, we learned that parents and community members, in partnership with Oakland Community Organizers, had conceived of Manzanita Seed. Meeting with members of Oakland Community Organizers allowed Year Zero principals to learn from the school’s model and design. It also prompted them to reflect on the process of effective school design and turnaround.
My belief was that exposure to a broad spectrum of schools would help principals expand their thinking and question their assumptions about teaching and learning while underscoring the idea that all good schools operate with a clear theory of action. In short, the excursion was intended to help principals put a stake in the ground—to hone their school’s vision and values—based on the collaborative work they had started with families.

A PUSH TO THE FINISH LINE

At the start of the school year, each principal began to form a community design team. These teams included teachers, parents, and community members, and they met three to four times per month to provide input and opinions on the various aspects of the school design. Each school used a slightly different approach for recruiting its design team members. At one school, anyone on the school’s staff was welcome to join the design team. At another, staff members were invited to join after they completed a short application.

After the design teams were launched, principals engaged in several weeks of joint visioning and decision-making with the help of user-centered design methodologies. Appendix B depicts one principal’s articulation of the design process.

The timeline for this process, which had been determined before my residency began, was aggressive because principals had to finalize their school designs by the end of
October. Figure 5 shows the timeline, beginning with the formation of design teams in August and ending with official Application Review Team (ART) feedback in December.

As the October 23 deadline approached, principals worked to finish their designs in alignment with DPS’s rubric for new schools. After a rapid cycle of feedback from subject-matter experts and other contributors, principals submitted their plans for district review. The New Schools Team (situated in the Office of Portfolio Management) facilitated the ART, which would determine whether and how the redesign plans met the district’s bar for quality aligned to a detailed rubric (see Appendix A). Through the ART process, a broad group of district staff members from different DPS departments read the redesign plans and gave principals formal feedback. (I address the content of ART feedback when I discuss the results of this work shortly.)

Two challenges emerged toward the end of the design process, which ultimately affected the design teams’ final products. First, principals, teachers, and families said the timeline limited the extent to which collaboration could occur. Time constraints forced principals or a small committee of design team members to complete some aspects of the school design hastily; designs were then presented to the whole group for feedback instead of being crafted more collaboratively. In some cases, this was appropriate given that expertise or experience might be concentrated in certain members of the group. In other cases, those decisions were made for the sake of efficiency as opposed to quality. Second, rigid evaluation criteria in the form of a detailed rubric (see Appendix A) discouraged new ideas and creative, user-centered solutions. Principals found the rubric to be so specific that it often suggested a “right answer” for many aspects of school design. This became clear after the design process was complete, and several aspects of the designs were strikingly similar to one another.
“THIS IS THE FIRST TIME”

As the fall semester came to a close and community design teams finalized their schools’ redesign plans, the core team decided to plan and execute a School Redesign Community Forum to unveil the recently completed school designs, celebrate the contributions and work done by community design teams, and preview the work ahead in 2016 and beyond. The main intention of the School Redesign Community Forum was that board of education members, DPS staff, and community members would build relationships with each other and feel shared responsibility for improving the Year Zero schools. My hypothesis prior to the event was this: if community members, advocacy groups, principals, and DPS staff and board members feel collective ownership of our lowest-performing schools, those schools will be more likely to succeed.

Before the event, I believed that the School Redesign Community Forum would be valuable to the extent that participants represented the various constituencies involved in Year Zero. This belief was partially driven by something I noticed throughout my residency: conversations about the future of our schools happened in many different spaces among different groups of people, but many of those people did not know each other or talk across groups about the topic they all cared so much about. For example, parents talked with their friends and sometimes teachers about their students’ successes and challenges and the trajectory of their school community. District leaders talked with one another about trends in the data and the need for reform or improvement. Teachers and principals talked with peers about their work, their goals, and potential changes or improvements that would make a difference for their students.

My observations led me to spend much of my time and energy before the forum ensuring attendance by a variety of groups who had been involved with Year Zero. We
secured translation services and transportation for parents who would need it, we chose to hold the event at Schmitt Elementary School, which is located in Southwest Denver where most parents live, and we organized one-on-one outreach to families on the community design teams, DPS teams, and advocacy groups so they would feel personally invested and invited. These efforts paid off: more than 50 people attended the School Redesign Community Forum (approximately 10 more than were expected). More importantly, the attendees were extremely diverse in terms of experience and vantage point: they were parents, teachers, counselors, community liaisons, principals, DPS central office staffers from five departments, heads of Denver advocacy groups, district leaders, and board members.

The agenda for the forum (Appendix C) was designed to foster conversation. Susana Cordova, the sitting chief of schools and soon to be acting superintendent, welcomed the group and introduced the Year Zero principals individually. She gave them an opportunity to “pitch” their schools and expressed her excitement about the work ahead. I presented a short overview of the Year Zero process, our work together, and our learning so far. We then spent nearly an hour focused on two questions, one intended to spark reflection and the other intended to spur momentum for the work ahead.

- What has been most exciting about this process so far, and what have you learned?
- As your schools are finishing their school designs, what work must still be done to ensure our schools are successful?

We closed the event with reflections from Southwest Denver board member Rosemary Rodriguez and Assistant Superintendent Ivan Duran.

The conversation during the forum was indeed rich, and it brought out some of the complexities of our undertaking. A second-grade teacher confessed, “This is the first time in
eighteen years of teaching that I’ve talked with parents about our shared vision for students.”

Through a Somali interpreter, another mother said, “This sounds fine, but in the meantime, I have to drive seven miles every morning so my child can attend a charter school while we wait for our neighborhood school to improve.” The two comments reveal some central questions in our work. Why is it rare for parents and educators to work together? Is it okay to “go slow to go fast” in the work of school turnaround? What are the options for a family who doesn’t have the time or resources to drive across town for a better school while we work to transform their current choice?

MIXED RESULTS TO DATE

My initial theory of action sought to influence principal practice most immediately, with the assumption that principals would lead change in their schools and communities.

*If I* build a cross-functional support team and create shared vision, purpose, roles, and responsibilities, and *if we* create the conditions for effective learning in the Year Zero cohort, *then* Year Zero principals will form community design teams that effectively redesign their schools aligned with community need.

The results of my work in this area were promising in a few key ways.

- **Conditions for principal learning:** Principals reported, through a survey instrument and one-on-one interviews, that they had experienced conditions that support learning. In particular, principals felt supported by each other. Three of the four reported that their relationships with fellow Year Zero principals “contributed greatly” to their leadership development and ultimate school design, and all four said the relationships with core team members “contributed greatly.” Principals also reported that they were likely to try new things, to fail, and to learn throughout the process. “It was so exciting to reimagine our school, and parents are thrilled about International Baccalaureate (IB)—I didn’t see it as a risk so much as a challenge,” said one principal. Finally, principals benefited from shared learning experiences. All four reported that our
excursion to the Bay Area led them to think creatively, express themselves openly, take risks, and engage with different beliefs and opinions.

- **Representative engagement:** Three of the four schools’ design teams reflected their school communities along lines of race, income, and home language. “Parents heard about the redesign plan from other parents. It was important we could get the message out through social networks that were already in place,” said one principal. Another principal said, “Our Spanish-speaking parents were used to being heard at the school, so my goal was that the design team would be more representative of our school. It was important and new that native English speakers, Vietnamese speakers, Arabic and Somali speakers all showed up to work together.”

- **Collective responsibility:** As measured through regular attendance at community design team meetings and other opportunities (e.g., public comment at DPS board meetings, the School Redesign Community Forum), seven to ten parents at each school site demonstrated an ability to speak about the school’s future direction with confidence. It is worth noting that the size of design teams was intentionally small compared to the number of families at each school site (e.g., approximately 6 to 8 parents made up each design team).

As mentioned previously, I was primarily concerned with three early indicators of restored trust in the Year Zero schools: (1) an increased number of families attending school-based events and community meetings, (2) families and community members voicing their opinions and concerns related to the school’s future (e.g., in surveys, at design team meetings), and (3) families articulating the vision for their school themselves (e.g., to their friends or neighbors, during canvassing efforts, in public forums). As our results demonstrate, we saw early progress on all three indicators. However, indicators 2 and 3, which require parents to take ownership of the change process and express themselves on its behalf, are happening only in small pockets. It’s not yet clear that they will permeate school communities more broadly.
The results are not to be undervalued, however. They represent the power of intentional, team-based learning, community engagement, and school design, and they are likely to have a positive impact on each of the Year Zero schools in the years to come. However, although learning conditions were present within the Year Zero cohort and the individual community design teams, those conditions didn’t necessarily translate into innovative or user-centered school designs. In fact, the designs were similar to one another and to the school models that were in place before leaders began their work. This result became apparent in two key ways.

First, an analysis of the schools’ organizational structures and budgets illuminate a strikingly familiar allocation of resources. With a few exceptions (e.g., two deans replaced an assistant principal), schools tended to allocate money to the same positions and resources that existed at the schools previously. On the surface, this might not come as a surprise. After all, more than 95% of a school’s budget is typically reserved for salaries. A closer look reveals that the positions and the basic schedule and structure of the school day remained nearly constant. In more user-centered designs, we might have seen unique configurations of teachers and students to support remediation or acceleration, schedules aligned to principals’ expressed values (e.g., project-based learning or student leadership), or something beyond the minimum legal requirement for supporting language acquisition.

Second, the feedback the designs received through the district’s review team process illuminated several areas for improvement. Most notably, the ART found substantial need for improvement and modification in the English language acquisition elements of each plan. Given the high proportion of English learners in each of the Year Zero schools, this feedback further suggests the designs did not ultimately fulfill the criterion of “serving unique student needs well.” The results suggest that, although our work might have been
necessary, it was not sufficient to realize change in the school models themselves. The next section explores why these results unfolded as they did.

A HEALTHY TENSION IN PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

In response to my first essential question—*How might DPS catalyze transformative change in its lowest-performing schools by cultivating the creativity and leadership of principals?*—results illuminated three main points: (1) the Year Zero cohort did in fact exhibit qualities of transformative, team-based learning; (2) however, those learning conditions did not translate to innovative or user-centered school models to the degree I intended; and (3) we see early indicators of restored trust in school communities, but those indicators are not yet diffused throughout entire school communities. What accounts for these results?

As I reflect on the degree to which we created conditions for team-based learning in the Year Zero cohort and on the design teams, it seems that in many ways, we did achieve conditions for learning. Amy Edmondson (2012) outlines several conditions that support collective learning:

Collective learning includes such activities as collecting, sharing, or analyzing information; obtaining and reflecting on feedback from customers or others; and active experimentation. Individual learning behaviors within a collective learning experience include the following: Asking questions; Sharing information; Seeking help; Experimenting with unproven actions; Talking about mistakes; and Seeking feedback (p. 27).

According to Edmondson’s criteria, we successfully created these conditions within the Year Zero cohort. The early emphasis on building relationships and trust, as well as opportunities for shared experiences (e.g., local school visits, the Bay Area learning excursion), allowed us to ask questions and share information. The school design process, and the fact that leaders went through it together at the same time, provided space for some amount of experimentation and feedback. These conditions undoubtedly contributed
positively to the experience that Year Zero leaders had, but they did not have an impact on the school designs to the extent I had hoped.

My initial hypothesis was that learning conditions in the Year Zero cohort would spark principals’ creativity, and ultimately lead to user-centered school designs. However, results indicate that wasn’t the case. This made me reflect on the other factors that likely limited principals’ ability to be creative, hatch new ideas, and ultimately redesign their schools in more radical ways. One might argue that innovative thinking is simply rare, or that we are all influenced so deeply by our own experience in school, or that breaking a mental model is difficult. This might be true; however, I suspect that other factors also influenced principals and community design teams during this process.

Upon reflection, I believe two main forces prevailed, and each resulted from a tension in the user-centered design process. First, the rubric we used to ensure each design met the district’s “quality bar” acted as guardrails on the principals and the designs. Our process strongly emphasized the need to comply with this rubric, and for good reason. As a taxpayer-funded school district, DPS has a responsibility to ensure our schools meet certain criteria and are of high quality. Therefore the district developed a detailed rubric to evaluate new school models (see Appendix A). The benefit of clear evaluation criteria and a tightly managed district process also presented a real challenge. “Human centered design starts from a place of not knowing what the solution to a given design challenge might be” (IDEO, 2015, p. 21). This belief of user-centered designers—that we don’t yet know the answer and that’s okay—became especially difficult to maintain with a lengthy rubric for success. Toward the end of the design process, as principals were evaluating their designs against the rubric and gathering feedback from others, some of their initial priorities were watered down and some design aspects that had emerged from their interviews and research
were abandoned completely. In short, the rubric hindered our ability to engage in real inquiry about an unknown solution.

I initially thought about this rubric as a constraint for principals to design around. However, the experience of using it made me believe it is in fact too prescriptive if we believe that schools should adapt to meet their students' needs. For example, one criterion on the rubric reads,

The application identifies essential elements of teachers’ lesson planning, including daily objectives that will be clearly communicated to students and aligned to standards, along with daily checks for understanding that will be evaluated by the school’s academic leaders. These elements will increase the impact of teacher planning and student learning.

Of course, this pedagogical approach works well for many schools and is designed to ensure teachers are consistently tracking progress toward measurable outcomes, but this level of detail on the rubric had the unintended consequence of guiding principals toward a specific end product as opposed to opening the possibility of something different than what we see in schools today.

Another tension emerged during the design process that ultimately shaped the final products: the trade-off between authentic user-centered processes, in which the designer’s position is distanced from her users, and the need for designers (in this case, principals) to build deep, trusting relationships with students and families. In Year Zero, users (students and parents) participated actively in the design process, and their preferences and opinions mattered greatly because we saw evidence that trust had deteriorated over time. One of the most important messages that principals sent to families early on was that their ideas and participation were genuinely important.

Therefore, rather than conducting “empathy interviews” to collect information about the lives of students and families and probing for stories that illuminated their hopes and
preferences (which, we discovered, can initially feel unnatural to the person being interviewed), principals instead defaulted to asking parents directly, “What ideas do you have for the school?” This approach seemed wise at first because it invited parents into the process, but it came with real tradeoffs. Parents often made suggestions based on something they heard was happening at another school or based on their own experience in school, thus making it difficult for principals to unearth possibilities that might emerge from a more open-ended set of questions and insights. Our inability to balance the tension between an authentic user-centered approach and a more collaborative process, in which ideas are encouraged and valued, contributed to school plans that contained an amalgamation of ideas from various stakeholders as opposed to truly user-centered designs.

As I reflected on why the school designs did not become what I had hoped, I came up with a threefold hypothesis. First, the timeline did not allow for principals to build their knowledge, skill, and confidence in conducting a user-centered design process. Second, the robust rubric against which school designs were evaluated guided principals toward specific design features and limited their ability to offer new ideas. Third, and most importantly, I missed an opportunity early in this project to collectively define what good would mean for the process and end product in Year Zero. This misstep meant that aspects of the overall implementation were not always aligned and that the DPS departments influencing the work were not aiming for the same target.

If I were to revise the initial strategy, I would consider several changes in response to these reflections. At the school level, I might have helped principals understand the purpose and orientation of user-centered design methodologies more deeply, and help build their skill to execute it. Concrete tools would have helped, such as interview protocols and opportunities to practice and anticipate challenges. I might have considered equipping
families on the design teams to conduct empathy work with other parents to create a closer relationship between designers and users. Or I might have explicitly made time for building relationships during some interactions and empathy work or user-centered design during other interactions. Having more time overall would have enabled these changes, but that would be difficult to grant given that we already took significantly more time than is typically offered to turnaround schools. Most importantly, if I were to use this strategy again, I would begin by building collective agreement internally about what success would mean—for the process as well as the end products—so that timelines, feedback structures, professional learning, central support, and accountability systems would be aligned with a common goal.

My initial theory of action assumed that by creating the conditions for team-based learning and by building principal capacity in community engagement and design, school communities would see positive results, including indicators that trust was gradually being restored. We found that the community design processes at each school engaged and empowered a small number of families. We also saw a small number of parents speaking publicly about the future of their school on radio broadcasts, during school board meetings, and in front of other parents. These early indicators suggest that principals were somewhat successful in cultivating collective efficacy and relational trust; however, these indicators are not yet diffused across an entire school community.

In the work ahead, it will be important for principals and district support staff to continue building and spreading relational trust to maximize the probability of long-term success. “The state of relational trust in the school community conditions the school’s capacity to enhance the functioning of these core organizational subsystems” (Bryk, 2010, p. 147). As Bryk suggests, much of the upcoming work for Year Zero principals will involve building core organizational systems that ensure effective instruction, develop teachers’
knowledge and skill, and create opportunities for family engagement—and relational trust can lay the foundation for those critical systems to take root and flourish.

Marshall Ganz (2010) offers a useful framework for how a small set of nascent relationships can snowball to create more engaged school communities in which relational trust is pervasive:

Social movements emerge as a result of efforts of purposeful actors (individuals, organizations) to assert new public values, form new relationships rooted in those values, and mobilize the political, economic, and cultural power to translate these values into action . . . they are collective, strategic, and organized (Ganz, 2010, p. 1).

In short, social movements harness the power of relationships and shared values to enact change.

In the Year Zero schools, these shared relationships and values are just beginning to form, and they are well positioned to grow and spread. Ganz (2013) identifies five key leadership practices that will build individual and group capacity to organize and lead successful change in the organization: creating a shared story, shared relational commitment, shared structure, shared strategy, and shared measurable action (Ganz, 2013, p. 80). In many ways, these steps mirror the work facing Year Zero leaders and their community design teams. So, while we don’t yet see evidence that collective efficacy and responsibility permeate entire school communities, Ganz helps us understand the work ahead, which may lead to many more parents and families feeling empowered in the quest to dramatically improve their schools.

ORGANIZATIONAL ADAPTATION & LEARNING

The second, more amorphous undertaking during my residency was to help create the learning conditions that would allow DPS to support transformative, school-based change. Shortly after I arrived in Denver, I learned that DPS was pursuing aggressive policy
change for its lowest-performing schools through the development of the School Performance Compact (SPC). Although it wouldn’t affect my strategic project immediately, its development would have an enormous impact on the timeline, strategy, and environment for improving the district’s lowest-performing schools and therefore it became a focal point for my second essential question: How might DPS create the central office conditions to support learning in service of transformative change in persistently low-performing schools?

My initial theory of action did not adequately address this question about organizational learning:

If I build a cross-functional support team and create shared vision, purpose, roles and responsibilities, and if we create the conditions for effective learning in the Year Zero cohort, then Year Zero principals will form community design teams that effectively redesign their schools aligned with community need.

My first theory of action assumed that executing the Year Zero Redesign well would lead the broader organization to take notice and adapt based on its success. Not surprisingly, it was much more difficult to spark organizational learning, especially in the midst of rapid change.

DPS leadership presented the SPC formally to the board of education on November 5, 2015, and spelled out its purpose this way:

To ensure all students have access to high quality schools that allow them to succeed and graduate college and career ready by establishing a transparent and consistent policy that prevents students from languishing in persistently low-performing schools by identifying and designating for restart or closure the most persistently low-performing schools (DPS, 2015b).

The SPC would identify a “designation line” for school performance (e.g., a school is red on the School Performance Framework for two consecutive years); once a school crosses that designation line, it is considered for restart or closure. If selected for restart, the school is placed in the Call for Great Schools, a public Request for Proposals process that encourages district-managed and charter-managed schools to compete to run the designated school.

This approach will likely be more aggressive than the Colorado Department of Education’s
accountability clock, which holds schools accountable for turnaround around in five years.

The SPC operates with four guiding principles:

1. **Accountability across governance type**: All our students deserve high quality schools that allow them to succeed and graduate college and career ready. We cannot let students in charter, innovation, or district-managed schools languish in low-performing seats.

2. **Transparency**: The District should provide a clear and transparent process for designating persistently low-performing schools for restart or closure. The process for designation should be objectively and consistently applied across all schools.

3. **Equity**: Equity of responsibility, accountability and opportunity must be preserved across all schools.

4. **Engage communities and families**: School communities will be educated and informed about the process for designating schools for restart or closure. School communities will be empowered to share in the responsibility for reviewing applicants and recommending matches to the Superintendent and Board (DPS, 2015b).

The board of education approved the policy on December 7, 2015, but it will not go into effect until fall 2016. The policy builds on other recent board-level actions in DPS that move the district in a direction where high-stakes decisions are increasingly data-driven and transparent, and where the district fosters explicit competition between district-managed and charter-managed schools.

What struck me about the development of this policy during the execution of the Year Zero Redesign cohort was that forces within DPS were operating with competing theories of action. On one hand, the theory of action behind the choice to execute Year Zero stressed the need for time; it suggested that a “go slow to go fast” approach is worth the investment. It allowed for relationship building, intentional school design work, leadership development for principals, and in our case, it allowed us to attract principals who might not have taken on a turnaround school otherwise. On the other hand, the SPC was
creating a heightened sense of urgency that could prevent the investment of a full year in school redesign for red schools. The theory of action underpinning the SPC pointed to a need for swift and dramatic change in low-performing schools. These two concurrent belief systems—"it takes time to do this well" versus "there is too much urgency to take time"—highlight a central tension I experienced in organizational learning.

I played a supporting role in the policy shift as a member of the Internal Working Group, which gave feedback on SPC policy language and helped to draft the policy’s implementation guidelines. This Internal Working Group comprised different, more senior team members than those on the Year Zero core team. The Internal Working Group tackled questions about the policy’s purpose and impact: How long does it take for a school to show gains? What criteria are most appropriate for measuring school improvement? What does equity mean in a highly segregated school district? In what ways do our current measures mirror the outcomes that matter most for students? Discussion of these and other questions led to invaluable learning and offered me a unique chance to practice leading without authority during my residency.

My position working directly with schools gave me a unique vantage point during our central office conversations. Much of my time was spent in schools, with school leaders and community members, and so I often felt like I carried their perspectives into Internal Working Group meetings. At first, I assumed this was an asset, that it was advantageous to understand multiple perspectives on a complicated policy issue. I realized, however, that my ground-level relationships and experience presented a challenge equal to the advantage: my relationships with principals and community members in our lowest-performing schools made me protective of them. Therefore, it was difficult to effectively “get on the balcony,” as Heifetz and Linsky (2002, p. 53) advocate, because my friends and colleagues, for whom I
held deep respect, were implicated in our conversations about persistent failure and the need for something new.

Before analyzing the outcome of my own leadership, I describe the results of the district’s new policy. First, the SPC will lead to increased transparency about restart and closure decisions for students, families, and educators in our lowest-performing schools. They will soon know the criteria by which decisions about restart and closure are made. Eventually (after the implementation guidelines are drafted), they will know the timeline for restart and closure identification and the corresponding support systems as well. Second, that transparency has created a heightened sense of urgency, and for some, anxiety, about improving red schools. In particular, the policy (and the media attention surrounding it) had the unintended consequence of making it difficult to attract experienced principals and teachers to work in Denver's lowest-performing schools. Because the future of those schools is uncertain, the personal and professional stakes are high for potential leaders, and naturally the best educators are in high demand and have many career options. We haven’t yet found a way to articulate why those educators would choose to work in schools near the designation line instead of taking other opportunities.

“What people resist is not change per se, but loss” (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). As I tackled this challenge of organizational adaptation and learning, my leadership role lacked formal authority. For this reason, I turn now to Dean Williams’ “real leadership” (2005) framework, which builds on Heifetz and Linsky’s concept of adaptive leadership. Williams presents the unique characteristics of a transition challenge, in which:

(1) Compelling evidence suggests that a new threat or opportunity has emerged, and if the people can move from one location (physical, mental, or operational) to another, their condition will be improved.
(2) The people have the resources to make the transition, but to do so they will have to replace one system of values for another. That is, they will have to give up, or at least modify some of the traditions, habits, and practices that they cherish.

(3) Given the strong inertial influence of values, tradition, and habit, combined with the fear of the unknown, the people are reluctant to make the journey (Williams, 2005, p. 200).

Williams contends that transition challenges arise when shifting dynamics in the environment or the emergence of a new threat or opportunity outpace a people's mind-sets or values. The leadership work to be done in this type of challenge is to “transition the group to a new state of operating and refashioning the values, loyalties, and mindsets of the people” (Williams, 2005, p. 197).

The nature of our current work in DPS matches the description of a transition challenge in two key ways. First, the SPC presents a new environment, seen by some as an opportunity and others as a threat. Second, school teams and central office teams are hesitant to make the journey. This manifested in heartfelt objections from principals and instructional superintendents, who feared that the SPC would make it difficult to recruit and retain good talent or that it would only scratch the surface of serving Denver’s most vulnerable students, given the out-of-school challenges that students and families face.

Another threat of loss often went unspoken: many feared that the SPC would have the intended or unintended consequence of paving the way for significantly more charter schools in Denver. This fear was rarely, if ever, discussed in formal DPS meetings. We often spoke about being “governance agnostic” but rarely discussed the concern sparked by a possible increase in charter schools. In one-on-one conversations, however, people often expressed this sentiment. One principal, when asked about her understanding of the SPC, said, “Well, it’s obviously a move to expand the number of charter schools in the city.”

Another instructional superintendent commented, “As if we didn’t already have enough
DSST’s, Strives, and KIPP’s around town.” These fears and feelings of potential loss are real and, according to Williams, must be acknowledged.

Williams outlines four critical leadership actions to move a group forward in response to a transition challenge: (1) provide an orienting purpose; (2) get people to own the passage; (3) determine what must be preserved, and help people deal with losses; and (4) become a visible symbol of the transition ideal (Williams, 2005, p. 243). The last two actions are most relevant to my own leadership.

During a time of transition in DPS, I am struck by how difficult a task it was to identify what to preserve and what not to preserve. For example, as a general principle, it was easy to decide that we would hold tightly to our value of collaboration and partnership with families and community members. However, more specifically, this value was something we’d have to examine. When exactly would we seek input from community members instead of simply informing them in a timely and proactive manner? And which of those was more desirable? In the face of a transition challenge, Dean Williams recommends certain actions:

The leadership task is to determine what values, symbols, and practices can be preserved and to develop a strategy for protecting them, and to dispense with the values, symbols and practices that impede progress. The process of figuring out what is essential and what is unessential can be enormously difficult, particularly when the group or institution has overextended itself and people are in a mad rush to get to the other side (Williams, 2005, p. 232).

This difficulty was palpable as we drafted and adopted the SPC, and it remains relevant as we continue drafting implementation guidelines.

In his final recommendation, Williams explains that to exercise leadership for a transition challenge, one must “become a visible symbol of the transition ideal” (2005, p. 236). In many ways, my position as the leader of Year Zero, a high-profile new initiative, lent itself to exercising leadership in this way. For example, I often brought principals into central
office meetings to expose district decision-makers to the principals' points of view. I also focused heavily on central office staff members' attendance at the community forum, where they could learn more about the work of Year Zero. These strategies helped us “become a visible symbol of the transition ideal.”

Unfortunately, I fell short of this goal in other ways. Williams writes:

I suggest that any group in the midst of a difficult transition challenge when frustrated with their predicament—and without an authority to be a visible manifestation of the transition ideal—will create their version of the golden calf and attach themselves to a set of false tasks and counterfeit issues that have little to do with maintaining the right course and generating sustainable progress (Williams, 2005, p. 236).

This paragraph makes me cringe. There were so many times that we at DPS, myself included, created sets of false tasks that ultimately distracted us from effectively making the transition to something new. These took the form of hasty project plans focused on an isolated piece of the work, meetings in which we talked in circles about the challenges facing schools and school leaders without any clear objective, and an overemphasis on short-term stage gates, such as the School Quality Review that schools would undergo before being designated. Williams articulates the frustration that brews in a group if its members cannot fully see the possibilities inherent in a transition challenge.

The difference between the present conditions for Year Zero leaders and future conditions for leaders affected by the SPC augmented the challenge; that is, the Year Zero principals were not competing with charter schools to run their schools, nor did they face immediate job insecurity. These differences emphasize the need to acknowledge the SPC from the perspective of teachers and leaders. Potential job loss, feelings of inadequacy, and the heightened scrutiny associated with transparent decisions about school restart and closure are not conditions that educators are likely to view as opportunities. On the contrary, these conditions will likely make the day-to-day work feel risky, and as we’re already seeing,
they will cause educators to look for work elsewhere. As DPS continues to develop implementation guidelines for the SPC, it must tackle these realities head-on and find creative ways to mitigate the negative impact they have on schools.

In summary, Williams offers a method for exercising adaptive leadership in the midst of a transition challenge. This framework is helpful as I analyze my own successes and failures as an actor without formal authority, who was seeking to help the group transition from its current reality to something new. As I assess our work to date, I see inklings of progress: increasingly we refer to the SPC as an opportunity rather than a threat, and I hear acknowledgment that we can and should learn from the work underway in our Year Zero Redesign cohort and elsewhere in the district. At the same time, we have a long way to go if we are to successfully make the transition. “The commitment should never be framed exclusively in terms of getting to a new destination, but in learning how to deal with the array of problems that ultimately allow the group to get to the new destination” (Williams, 2005, p. 242). This focus on the group’s learning is something we have not yet mastered, but perhaps it offers insight about the possibility ahead.

A REVISED THEORY OF ACTION

This analysis has focused primarily on understanding the results of our school design and community engagement efforts, as those were the main priorities according to an initial theory of action. With that in mind, it is also worth interrogating the assumptions and shortcomings in my initial theory.

*If I* build a cross-functional support team and create shared vision, purpose, roles and responsibilities, and *if we* create the conditions for effective learning in the Year Zero cohort, *then* Year Zero principals will form community design teams that effectively redesign their schools aligned with community need.
This theory of action assumed that the team-based learning would spark participatory design processes and that those design processes would enable transformative redesign. The results suggest that these inputs are part of a more complicated formula. If I could revise this theory of action, I would honor the complex way in which people and organizations really change. Of course, they don’t change just because a central process dictates it. I believe we would have had to create a much stronger sense of shared vision within DPS for the outcome of Year Zero, with more intentional learning experiences aligned to that purpose and a more nuanced approach to the inputs required to change behavior. In short, new school designs might be necessary, but they are in no way sufficient for real change to occur. A revised theory of action might read:

*If I build a shared vision for the outcomes of Year Zero and assemble a cross-functional support team, and…*

*if we clearly articulate the intended outcomes of Year Zero aligned to the shared vision, build high-quality adult learning experiences aligned to those intended outcomes, and create the conditions for team-based learning, and…*

*if DPS aligns its incentives and accountability systems toward these ends and enables autonomous school-based decision-making…*

*then Year Zero principals will develop their own knowledge and skills in community engagement, school design, and turnaround leadership, and principals will form community design teams that effectively redesign their schools aligned with community need to realize sustainable turnaround success.*

This revision addresses the need for even more detail and specificity on the front end of change. For example, because the work had already started when I began my residency, I skipped the important step of developing a shared vision for success. Doing so might have allowed us to develop a timeline, feedback structures, professional learning, and central support aligned to a collective vision. This revision also acknowledges the necessary relationship between school-based and central office–based work. Some aspects of this revised theory would require change at the central-office level, such as the district's being
willing to pare down the detailed rubric. It is clear to me now that system-level change is required to enable creative redesign work; that is, incentives and accountability structures must allow for (or even encourage) creativity and new ideas if they are to take root.
Chapter 3: Implications for Self, Site, and Sector

So what does it all mean, not only for me and for DPS but for practitioners and policy-makers across the sector? In this chapter, I reflect on the implications of this work for my own leadership. I suggest strategies and next steps for DPS, understanding full well that my novice standing in this district and city make me much more a learner than an expert. Finally, I articulate how the lessons I learned during this residency might be useful to future efforts in community mobilization, school design, and school turnaround.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SELF

Finding my own voice and confidence as a leader in DPS was as rich an experience as the more explicit aspects of my strategic project. I was drawn to DPS because, simply put, districts matter. Approximately 90% of students nationwide attend district-run schools (NCES, 2015), and yet districts are commonly held up as part of the problem in public education today. I wasn’t ready to give up on big districts as places of improvement, innovation, and change. Over the course of ten months, I found that leading within an old system presents unique challenges, but it also offers an unmatched opportunity for impact. Several themes emerged as I reflected on what I’ve learned about leadership and impact during this residency.

Resist the polarities in our work

In countless ways, my residency taught me that there is great danger in approaching complex problems as if they have a right or a wrong answer. In fact, this is rarely the case. Sociologist Barry Johnson (1992) says that people are inclined to think in terms of polarities, which can be real or imaginary. For example, the leader of an organization wants to institute
a new structure to encourage tight project planning. Because she thinks that tighter, more precise project plans will enable employees to be more efficient or more transparent with their clients, the leader may inadvertently shut down the fluidity, flexibility, or creativity that was possible with a less controlled project planning approach. Instead of acknowledging that there might be virtue in finding a balance between these two approaches, the leader falls into a common trap, in which the organization is efficient or flexible, analytic or creative.

My work in DPS highlighted this danger in various ways. As a project manager and leader of adult learning, I sometimes struggled to see the virtue in both a fluid and emergent plan that lent itself to flexibility and nimbleness and a tighter, more certain trajectory that would provide clarity and predictability to principals and central office staff alike. I toggled between these extremes without finding the right balance. Similarly, in the quest for strategies that would ensure turnaround success, our team was conflicted. Did we need confident and decisive leadership to institute swift change? Or did we need space for collective decision-making that would nurture relationships and ensure inclusivity? Perhaps the most complex polarity that emerged was whether to focus on the solid execution of technical solutions or create the time and conditions to effectively address the enormous adaptive challenges in our work. These tensions sometimes tempted me to choose one way of being, thinking or acting. In fact my thinking might have been strengthened and my solutions more impactful if I had been able to acknowledge and manage the complexities, tensions, and polarities imbedded in the work.

Start by asking the right questions

As a doctoral resident, I occupied a unique position at DPS. I was tasked with a specific and important project, but I lacked formal authority. In fact, my title, Turnaround
Planning Lead, was purposely vague and unattached to the traditional district hierarchy. This ambiguity was useful at times. It allowed me to float up and down in the organization and across it as well. I could position myself explicitly as a learner, which lent itself to building relationships with members of the senior leadership team, teachers at our Year Zero schools, and everyone in between.

At the same time, my lack of formal authority presented challenges. For example, I could not make swift decisions about budget allocation or adjust course quickly when new information presented itself. Late in the school design process in the fall, we learned that enrollment declines across the district would affect Year Zero schools (and many other schools in DPS). This would mean less funding than schools anticipated and therefore reduced staffing structures, schedules, and supports for students. I quickly realized that my primary role in dealing with this challenge was to raise questions that would help decision-makers see the tradeoffs clearly and grapple with the most central questions.

Similarly, in discussions about DPS’s overall strategy for school turnaround, I found that my most effective role was often that of questioner. I didn’t have the authority to draft policy or determine the overall strategy for its implementation, but I could raise questions that helped us to strengthen district policies and make better decisions. One example of this came about in relation to the SPC’s impact on recruiting and retaining good leaders. Early on, I raised a question about the value proposition for high-quality, experienced principals and teachers to work in schools nearing the designation line. Though we still haven’t answered this question, it remains a common topic of conversation. The residency taught me that in any organization, but especially in a large one where authority is concentrated at the top, it is valuable to pose questions for productive, deliberative thinking and stronger decision-making.
Be disciplined and specific in the quest for system-level learning

My DPS supervisor and mentor asked me regularly, “What are we trying to learn here?” With that question, she was pushing me to be more disciplined in order to facilitate learning within our large, complex organization, and this was critically important. Given a long history of turnaround efforts in Denver and decades of new initiatives, I quickly understood that it wasn't enough to declare, “We learned that a cohort-based approach works.” In fact, in that example, DPS had already learned that lesson through its leadership pipeline programs, teacher leadership initiative, and its personalized learning work in the Imaginarium.

In the case of the Year Zero Redesign cohort, we could have focused on countless lessons and reflections, so it was important for me to name our most important learning questions and then answer them based on what happened. For example, one of the questions we were most interested in during the execution of the Year Zero Redesign cohort was “What is the best way to recruit and prepare principals for turnaround success?” We found that the Year Zero structure offered a way to recruit experienced and highly capable principals to work in turnaround schools. We also found that experiential team-based learning (e.g., school visits and learning excursions) had great power to spark new ideas and that leaders need training and expertise in community engagement in addition to instructional leadership skills. Leaders who built strong relationships with parents and community members during Year Zero are entering Year 1 with a different type of momentum and buy-in than leaders in previous years, who did not have time to do so.

These lessons would not have been possible if we hadn't first asked what we were trying to learn. Naming our learning goals allowed us to see implications beyond a second
iteration of the Year Zero Redesign cohort, and therefore we could infuse lessons learned throughout the district.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Like other high-functioning organizations, DPS exhibits a hunger to learn and improve, and it is one of my favorite qualities of DPS. The SPC, one piece of a shifting policy context, presents an opportunity as well as great urgency for the organization to adapt and learn. My hope is that the reflections and suggestions here might be useful as the district continues on a path of learning, one in which a new environment and challenge is met with creativity and new thinking.

Evaluate intersecting policies for their impact on recruitment and retention

One of my close friends and colleagues on the Human Resources team said to me recently, “Leadership, leadership, leadership!” She was commenting on the inadequate management of an initiative in one school, but her words resonated well beyond the example. As I examine the successes and challenges I encountered throughout my residency, I am struck by how much responsibility school leaders have and the enormous impact they make. Luckily, senior leaders in DPS are well aware of their responsibility, as their investment in the Year Zero Redesign cohort attests. However, DPS retains policies and structures that act as disincentives for top candidates who might consider working in low-performing schools.

Soon after the SPC was announced and we began working closely with schools it might affect, the risk for teachers and leaders at those schools became obvious. Leaders were concerned that their best teachers were looking for jobs elsewhere, and the recruitment of
experienced, highly qualified principals grew more difficult. We were reluctant to face this reality. “We need to articulate this as an opportunity,” one team member said in a recent meeting.

Although I agree with that advice, I would also encourage DPS to acknowledge the inherent risk in teaching or leading in a school that is likely to be restarted or closed. The benefit of more transparent decision-making has had the unintended consequence of causing anxiety for educators. Teachers and school leaders have expressed concern about a tarnished reputation, the need to find a new job quickly, and the fear of letting their staff and families down. These are valid concerns, and DPS must find a way to provide political cover and develop the most compelling possible job descriptions—perhaps featuring enhanced autonomy or additional resources to build exciting programs for students—in order to make these positions attractive to good teachers and leaders. DPS also might need to evaluate other existing policies and potential new ones for their impact on the district’s ability to recruit and retain excellent teachers and leaders.

**Continue to invest early and allow schools to opt in to support**

One of the most promising aspects of my strategic project was that it was proactive rather than reactive. It allowed the district to attract strong leaders and it opened the door for planning and preparation on the front end, which we anticipate will pay off long-term. As this residency comes to a close, I would encourage DPS to continue investing in schools early, possibly when schools begin to show signs of dipping performance or when they first become orange or red, to avoid a triage approach to improvement.

This early investment will be especially important in the new policy context. First, it would allow for a heightened degree of integrity while supporting schools. If a school is
identified for (or opts into) a structure like Year Zero with three or more years before restart or closure is on the table, the Year Zero structure will feel much more like real support. On the other hand, if a school is identified for dramatic intervention this year, and told that it may be identified for restart or closure next year, the intervention feels far less supportive.

Second, early intervention will strengthen the district’s ability to make good decisions about restart and closure. If an intervention has had more than a year to take hold and hasn’t led to substantive improvement, DPS can feel more confident that restart or closure is the right choice.

Finally, I wonder what it would look like to put learning and support in the hands of school leaders. In alignment with DPS’s push for school-based flexibility, schools should have the opportunity to opt in to specific support structures that suit their needs. My experience with the Year Zero schools showed me how often support comes with strings attached. Grants require time away from the school or extra people in the building for “progress monitoring,” and in our case, being part of the Year Zero cohort entailed a significant time commitment, an expressed interest in community mobilization and school design work, and the ability to contribute to the overall cohort experience. Rather than the district identifying the types of support schools need, I would encourage DPS to explore ways in which schools might choose support structures.

Build the necessary infrastructure and focus on solid execution

Finally, as more schools move into the Intensive Tier next year, and the number of schools that are designated for restart potentially increases, DPS should build the necessary infrastructure to support the work of new school design, existing school redesign, and accelerated improvement. Understanding that our context is unique, DPS might consider
learning from examples in other districts. For example, New York City once formed an Office of New Schools, where experts in community engagement, new school design, and school turnaround worked together to support new school design and existing school redesign, including for that of turnaround schools. Oakland Unified School District has built the Quality School Development Office, which runs a School Design cohort each year, taking leaders through an immersive experience focused on community engagement and school design somewhat like that of our Year Zero schools. And the Tennessee Achievement School District has codified its approach to “inviting” new charter operators to open schools that meet an identified need.

As DPS considers how to organize itself for the work ahead, it must consider that the SPC can only be effective if the district has a clear theory of action for school turnaround and the capacity to implement that theory well. In order to fulfill those two roles, the district might consider forming a unified team whose job it is to support Intensive Tier schools. This would allow a team to codify its support structures, continuously improve them over time, and become expert in the work of school turnaround and accelerated improvement. It would also ensure clear accountability and enable proactive budgeting and resource allocation. Of course, infrastructure can take many forms, but no matter what form it takes, DPS should establish clear roles and responsibilities and systems to ensure continuous improvement.

Take decisive action in service of effective school turnaround

In order to move from diagnosis to action, senior leaders in DPS should act on the aforementioned implications in three key ways. First, develop a new rubric for school redesign success. The process of convening a cross-function team in charge of this body of
work – ideally comprised of Portfolio, Family and Community Engagement, the Chief Schools Office, English Language Acquisition, Human Resources, and Culture and Equity – has the power to spark conversation and debate about what turnaround success means in Denver, and to move closer to a shared definition of success. It also has the power to dial back the criteria by which schools are evaluated to leave room for more innovative solutions that are unique to each school and community context. As the district embarks on this work, it should consider whether a revised rubric is necessary for both new school design and existing school redesign, and the degree to which innovative school models are allowed or even encouraged by the criteria for approval.

Second, invest resources – time, people, and money – in the work of school redesign and turnaround. The work ahead is critically important and large in scope. It entails early intervention for school’s who have seen a recent dip in performance signaling the need for action. It requires accelerated improvement support for schools at risk of hitting the designation line soon. And, it necessitates a solid plan for supporting district-run applicants in the Call for Quality Schools before, during and after The Call process. This sizable and important body of work demands that the district organize itself and invest accordingly. I propose two structural changes for DPS. First, group turnaround schools with a singular instructional superintendent who has expertise in community engagement, school design, and instructional improvement for turnaround. Having one instructional superintendent would ensure a cohesive experience and would allow for a community of practice that isn’t possible when schools are spread across the district’s networks. It would also allow for the instructional superintendent to develop her expertise in the work of turnaround. Second, create a senior-level role and a team to develop and run programming for DPS principals who are identified for accelerated improvement, early intervention school-design or district-
sponsorship in The Call. In collaboration with a turnaround instructional superintendent, this role and its supporting team would have the capacity to develop truly world-class learning experiences for principals, execute them exceptionally well and continuously iterate and improve them over them. Further, a senior-level role would act as a direct liaison between turnaround schools and DPS senior leadership.

Finally, I encourage the district’s senior leadership team to host monthly conversations about the status of specific Intensive support schools with principals and their instructional superintendents. This structure has the power to bridge the divide between principals’ and teachers’ lived experience and the central office conditions that impact their work. Also, as various policy decision present themselves, this structure will provide a concrete lens for district leaders as they consider the implications of district policies on recruitment and retention of high quality teachers and leaders. Together, these actions have the power to move DPS toward an aligned theory of action as it relates to turnaround and intensive support for DPS schools, and realize dramatically better results for Denver’s students.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SECTOR

The work of reimagining schools will require actors at every level of our educational system to engage deeply in the work and wrestle with questions that remain abstract and unanswered. Over the course of my residency, I have become convinced that there is vital promise in utilizing community mobilization and user-centered school design to serve all students better, especially those who have been underserved by our schooling system for decades. With that in mind, I offer the following reflections for the sector at large.
Enable the principal role to evolve

Across the country, principals are being asked to do backbreaking work. They must simultaneously build a positive school climate, facilitate rigorous adult learning, manage school operations, respond to district and state mandates, build community partnerships, and be responsive to students and families. Each of these tasks is critically important for student success, yet principals wind up compromising somewhere because there simply is not enough time in the day. At the same time, principals occupy a hugely important position in the system, since they set the vision and direction for a school community and act as a lynchpin between the larger district and state bureaucracy and students and families. This was overwhelmingly apparent during my residency as principals interfaced with families to redesign their schools while navigating complicated district and state requirements.

As actors across the education and learning sector continue problem solving in the areas of school turnaround and school design, it will be imperative to rethink the role of a principal. This might mean continuing to invest in leadership teams as opposed to exceptional individuals. It might mean revamping principal pipeline programs so that leaders are as skilled in community engagement as they are in instructional leadership. Or it might mean reimagining the configuration of schools entirely so that a principal’s job is more sustainable. As the sector continues working toward a more excellent and equitable schooling system, one thing is clear: we cannot continue to pile demands onto a principal’s plate without reevaluating the way the role is constructed in the first place.

Value and use multiple measures

There is overwhelming evidence that standardized test scores are not enough, and my strategic project highlighted this as well. Whether it be Angela Duckworth’s research
demonstrating the power and value of non-cognitive skills; the ground-breaking Measures of Effective Teaching study, in which students identified high-quality teaching as well as a teacher evaluation tool; or saddening literature on the school-to-prison pipeline, which articulates the way discipline practices funnel students—especially students of color—into our criminal justice system.

During my residency, school leaders strived to build schools that would sustain a trajectory of improvement. Unfortunately, in doing so, they faced decisions about whether to take the path of least resistance to increased student test scores or instead, to focus on building foundational relationships and systems and structures that would lay the groundwork for student and adult learning and long-term success. Of course, these two paths are not mutually exclusive: effective school leaders do in fact prioritize strong relationships, a positive school culture, and academic outcomes. However, in a turnaround environment, where there is need for significant improvement across the board, leaders must decide where to start. My fear is that our current accountability system, which values reading and math scores above all else, negatively incentivizes leaders and schools to focus solely on these outcomes, thus deprioritizing more holistic learning and more creative solutions. Furthermore, as principals in Denver and elsewhere consider creative approaches to providing their students with more rigorous and relevant learning experiences (something parents asked for consistently), it is critical that system-level measurement systems catch up to enable that type of innovation.

As political battles about Common Core, the SAT v. ACT, and value-adding measures continue, it is time that we, as a sector, acknowledge the many outcomes that matter for students and families. These include a strong sense of self; the pursuit of a passion; opportunities for exploration in the arts, sports, literature or science; and academic
skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and effective communication. If our schools are to fulfill their purpose in a democratic society, they must strive for much more than reading and math scores. By valuing and using multiple measures (e.g., student and family surveys, attendance and discipline data, portfolio assessments, live demonstrations of learning, and standardized test scores), the education sector will better honor the complexity of the work needed to give children an excellent education. It will also motivate teachers and leaders to meet students' academic and nonacademic needs and prepare them for a rapidly changing workforce and society.

Recognize when it's not working

My residency experience demonstrated the profound role of courage in this work: courage to try something new, courage to change direction, and courage to admit when something has been unsuccessful. My read of the literature on school turnaround suggests that it’s time to admit that what we’ve tried isn’t working, at least not consistently or at scale. I don’t believe this is reason to give up or to feel defeated. Rather, I believe it is cause to demonstrate courage across the sector and declare that it’s time to try something new.

The Year Zero Redesign cohort offers one example of a novel approach: giving principals a year of preparation and planning that includes building training and offering experiences to support them in community mobilization and user-centered design so they can reimagine school in partnership with those who have been most affected by chronic low performance. We won’t know for several years whether this approach has truly been successful, and even if it does succeed, I don’t believe we’ll ever discover a “silver bullet” for a problem so systemic and adaptive in nature. Rather, I would encourage actors across the system to continue exhibiting courage, exploring our approach along with many others, and
thinking much more radically about the question of school turnaround and school redesign.

The power in such an admission is enormous. It gives us permission to think more creatively and act more boldly, as opposed to tinkering around the edges. For school turnaround specifically, I wonder if it would allow us to take more time to examine the adaptive qualities of our work. What role do segregation and integration play in persistent low performance? What mind-sets and skills, beyond instructional chops, must educators possess if they are to truly disrupt the inequity that plagues our schools and our society? And who is best positioned to grapple with these questions? To truly transform our schooling systems, I believe we, as a sector, must overcome the fear of admitting failure. Acknowledging our failures has the potential to unleash the courage needed to solve our most persistent problems.
Conclusion

During my second week at DPS, Superintendent Tom Boasberg welcomed thousands of DPS employees to Creating Connections, a regular gathering intended to connect educators across the district and celebrate the hard work happening at every level of our organization. During his opening remarks, Boasberg challenged employees with this advice: “Don’t wait. Lead.” This residency has taught me that there is tremendous power and potential in big ideas and courageous action. My strategic project, the Year Zero Redesign cohort, represents DPS’s tendency toward boldness. Through this project, the district has invested time, energy, and resources in the places that need them most, and it sent a strong signal to families that they, too, are an essential part of the solution as we work to improve schools. Investment in this project is a powerful demonstration of courage, and it has been a tremendous gift to complete my residency at DPS, an organization willing to think big.

In closing, I realize there is no easy or clear path forward. Our public school system has seen decades of change and little improvement. It faces daunting economic, social, and technological changes. And, it suffers from bitter ideological and partisan divides causing pendulum swings but little positive momentum. The need for collective and creative action has never been greater.

The intersection of community mobilization and school design holds great promise in the face of these challenges. It offers an opportunity to redistribute power in our system, rebuild trust between people and the institutions that serve them, and design learning environments that genuinely meet the academic and nonacademic needs of our students. However, a well-constructed strategy toward these ends will not be enough. Transforming our schools and schooling system will require courageous and skilled educators at all levels.
of the system, who are willing to challenge the status quo, believe in our students, and deliver an education that allows them to fulfill their potential. No doubt there are powerful dynamics of race, class, and power embedded in this work. These issues are entrenched and their reach extends far beyond public education and schooling. Yet what better place to tackle them head on than in our schools, which have the power to shape and meld our future society?

This is the heart of the work ahead for DPS and for the sector as a whole. System-level designers and leaders, working with educators, families, students, and community members, must commit to tackling our system's toughest questions. The courage to confront these challenges offers an unprecedented opportunity to transform schooling as we know it and unleash the potential of our students and our communities.
Works Cited


Appendix A: Rubric for School Design

Denver Public Schools School Redesign Application Rubric and Evidence Collection Template 2015

"Meet All Expectations" can earn 4-5 points; "Meet at Least Half of Expectations," 2-3 points; "Meet Less Than Half of Expectations," 0-1 points

Section I: School Culture

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<tr>
<th>School Culture</th>
<th>Meets Expectations Characteristics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.A Vision / Mission/ Values</td>
<td>1. This vision statement would provide the entire school community, as well as external stakeholders, clear description of the unique focus of the school. 2. The mission statement identifies the school’s target student population and the community to be served with rigorous standards for pupil performance. 3. The mission and vision serve as the foundational driver for the school’s systems, structures, and practices (as evident in the rest of the application).</td>
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<td>1.B Targeted Student Population &amp; Data</td>
<td>1. There is detailed research on and demonstrated understanding of the student population in a clearly identified neighborhood/region, including grade levels and ages, expected demographics (%FRL, %ELL, %SPED, race, ethnicity), achievement data, academic needs, etc. 2. A compelling explanation of how the decision to serve this targeted population would meet the district and/or community needs.</td>
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<td>1.C School Culture &amp; Student Leadership</td>
<td>1. The culture described is clearly designed to promote a positive, rigorous academic environment. 2. The culture described will reinforce student emotional and social development. 3. The culture described will promote high levels of collective responsibility, trust and efficacy amongst staff, students, and families. 4. Systems, practices, and traditions are described that the school leader and staff can implement on day 1, and beyond, to foster this culture for students, teachers, administrators, and parents. 5. The application specifically addresses systems to be inclusive of all students including students with special needs and English language learners. 6. The school has a researched-based plan for meaningfully investing students in the life of the school, promoting student voice, and for engaging them in both their individual academic goals and the school-wide achievement goals.</td>
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<td>1.D App. E Discipline Policy</td>
<td>1. The policy clearly aligns with the systems, practices, and traditions the school intends to use to promote positive school culture. 2. The discipline policy meets the standards and procedures outlined in the DPS discipline policy, including clear expulsion or dismissal procedures, appeal processes, and an explanation of how expectations will be communicated to parents/guardians and students. 3. Staff members directly responsible for oversight of the discipline program and for entering the disciplinary records into Infinite Campus are clearly identified. 4. The application details why the proposed policy will equitably serve students of color, students with disabilities, language learners, students identified as gifted and talented, and other students traditionally “at risk” for discipline disproportionality.</td>
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5. The policy details discipline data monitoring practices, designed to identify disproportionality among for these student groups.

6. The policy describes a process that will be used to remedy any disproportionality that may arise.

1.E Student Recruitment & Enrollment

1. The application details marketing and recruitment efforts, with strategies, activities, events, and benchmarks that will result in sufficient progress over time.
2. Recruitment efforts include targeted outreach to students with disabilities and English Language Learners.
3. The enrollment policy specifies that enrollment is available to all students and specifies any admission priorities for students, as well as timelines and whether enrollment will be determined by the DPS SchoolChoice Process, in the case that the school is oversubscribed.
4. The target re-enrollment rates provided in the application meets the SPF rubric for this metric, and the application includes specific plans for ongoing student enrollment plans once the school is open.

1.F Student Attendance

1. The application sets goals for student attendance that meet or exceed standards on this section of the SPF and describes specific steps the school will take to promote attendance.
2. The application identifies who will enter attendance data into Infinite Campus, describes how that data will be monitored and defines a process for improving attendance, should goals not be met.

1.G Ongoing Parent/Guardian Involvement

1. Robust methods are described to build family-school partnerships to strengthen support for learning and encourage parental involvement in the school’s culture and operations.
2. The CSC design meets statutory requirements, in terms of composition and responsibilities.
3. The application sets goals for parent satisfaction that meet or exceed standards on this section of the SPF.
4. The application defines how the school leadership will use parent satisfaction data.

1.H Community Partnerships

1. If the application describes community partnerships to support students and families: Letters of support from the organizations describing the nature, purposes, terms, and scope of services they will provide are included in an Appendix.

Section II: Leadership

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<th>Leadership</th>
<th>Meets Expectations Characteristics</th>
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<tr>
<td>2.A App. F, G Leadership Team Personnel</td>
<td>1. The leader profile details the skills, qualifications, characteristics, and essential duties/responsibilities necessary for a leader to effectively manage the school’s operations and lead the school in the central process of teaching and learning. 2. The application identifies a leader, or has provided a profile of a leader, who has managed a high performing school and has established a consistent track record of improving student achievement. Or, the application identifies a leader, or has provided a profile of a leader, who has not managed a school but is part of a principal leadership training program, has a strong organizational and academic track record in past roles, and demonstrates capacity to design, launch, and manage a high performing school. 3. There is sufficient data and evidence to demonstrate the leader’s ability to implement the school’s unique mission and serve the target population well. 4. The application clearly describes the duties, responsibilities, qualifications and credentials necessary for key members of leadership that will result in a high-quality, well-rounded team that will ensure successful ongoing operations of the school. The members of the team that have been identified are qualified with strong track records, and there is a clear process and timeline to fill all other positions. 5. There is a proactive, robust leadership succession plan in place, including strategies to develop internal candidates and a clear decision making process that engages the school community to ensure continuity in the event of a leadership transition.</td>
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2. The organizational structure has well-defined roles, clear lines of accountability, manageable employee to supervisor ratio, and is in compliance with state or federal law.
3. The staff roster is in list format, distinguishes between full-time and part-time positions using FTE conventions, uses multiple columns to clearly indicate which positions are added each year (if applicable), and includes adequate staffing for ELL, Special Education, and G&T instruction, as well as for paraprofessionals and specialty teachers.
4. The organizational structure and staff roster supports the effective implementation of the academic program, both as it phases in and at full build-out.
5. The organizational structure and staff roster is organizationally and financially viable and is in alignment with the budget figures.

### Section III: Educational Program

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<tr>
<th>Educational Program</th>
<th>Meets Expectations Characteristics</th>
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<tr>
<td>3.A Pedagogy</td>
<td>1. The application identifies school-wide instructional methods and strategies that will be implemented by staff that promote rigor and high expectations for all students and foster student collaboration, critical thinking, problem solving, and higher order skills.</td>
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<td>2. The application identifies culturally responsive, research-based instructional methods and strategies.</td>
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<td>3. The application describes how teachers will differentiate or group students to meet the needs of the targeted student population. Grouping decisions target groups of students who require remediation or acceleration, and there are systems to flexibly re-group.</td>
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<td>4. The application identifies a process and clearly articulates how teachers will plan and use student academic performance data to inform daily instructional practices. This also includes the regular use of formative assessments by teachers to guide and adjust daily instruction.</td>
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<td>5. The application identifies essential elements of teachers’ lesson planning, including daily objectives that will be clearly communicated to students and aligned to standards, along with daily checks for understanding that will be evaluated by the school’s academic leaders. These elements will increase the impact of teacher planning and student learning.</td>
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<td>3.B Curriculum</td>
<td>1. The curricular model and focus are clearly described.</td>
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<td>2. The curricular choices were intentionally made to meet the needs of the particular student population.</td>
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<td>3. The application provides evidence that the curriculum is evidence-based, has a track record of strong results for the target population, and will deliver rigorous, engaging and effective instruction for the target student population.</td>
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<td>4. The proposed curriculum is clearly aligned with the Colorado State Standards and the Common Core standards (including 21st Century Skills).</td>
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<td>5. The applicant demonstrates how the standards will be implemented using their curricular materials.</td>
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<td>6. The application adequately details the specific instructional materials (including both core content materials and skill development activities) necessary to implement the school’s proposed curriculum.</td>
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<td>7. The application describes how the instructional materials are aligned with the mission and philosophy of the school; will enable the school to meet the proposed learning standards and school goals; and will enable teachers to meet the needs of all students, including ELL and students with special or exceptional needs.</td>
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</table>
The application includes an overview of the course scope and sequence by subject for all grades that the school would serve in year 1 (e.g., K, 3, 5, 8, 12, as applicable).
2. The provided course scope and sequence is clearly aligned with the Colorado State Standards and the Common Core standards (including 21st Century Skills).
3. The application describes relevant supports and resources it will or has used to ensure alignment to CCSS/CAS.

The application describes a learning environment with a reasonable class size and structure for both core and elective subjects that will ensure students have access to the core curriculum. The applicant's teacher schedule provides adequate planning time, teacher collaboration time, and professional development time.

The application indicates that the school will utilize grade level appropriate assessments (including baseline, interim, and summative assessments) that align with the school’s curriculum, performance goals, any school-specific targets/indicators, and state standards.
2. The application confirms the school will administer each of the state mandated assessments (e.g., PARCC, WIDA-ACCESS, CoACT, CMAS, etc.)
3. There is a plan to ensure the school will supply all required computer-based assessments all at once. These expenses are reflected in the provided budget.
4. There is a process to ensure the proposed interim assessments will be valid and reliable indicators of progress, and align with the school’s curriculum, performance goals, and state standards. The rationale for why these assessments were chosen is reasonable.
5. The application includes reasonable and rigorous academic performance goals for student achievement that meets or exceeds the standards on the SPF, goals are aligned with district and state expectations, and there is a clear process to monitor progress towards goals.
6. The application identifies specific interim performance goals and assessments that the school will use to confirm that it is on-track with students during the first year of operation (since all new charter school will not receive an SPF rating until after completion of their first full year).
7. If applicant is an Elementary or ECE-8 school that plans to phase in one grade at a time: Specific performance targets for all state-mandated tests and interim assessments that the school will use to measure its success for grades K-2 are described. There is a clear explanation for how these assessments will be used, and the steps that will be taken in the event that the school does not meet proposed targets.
8. The application describes explicit trigger points that would lead to a detailed array of corrective measures.
| 3.G | Academic Interventio n and Acceleratio n | 1. The application details a thorough, evidence-based MTSS plan that includes the use of PBIS and an RTI plan that meets the state’s requirements and includes specific research-based strategies to support students in Tiers I, II, and III. 
2. The application describes how the school’s assessment system and any other processes will be used to regularly identify and adjust grouping for students in need of academic intervention or acceleration. The data trigger points and the staff members involved in this process are identified. 
3. The application describes specific, evidence-based interventions to help close the achievement gap. 
4. The application describes that the school will schedule and use time to ensure adequate opportunities to support the needs of all students, including ELL, SPED, intervention, and G&T programming. This is aligned with the school schedule, staffing structure, and budget. |
|---|---|---|
| 3.H | Promotion & Retention Policies | 1. The application includes clear promotion criteria, including an explanation if any policies differ from the District in any grade level, a description of the role of parents/guardians in determining promotion and retention decisions, and a description of the specific interventions that the school will implement prior to and after retention to accelerate achievement. 
   a. If the school will serve grade levels covered by the READ Act: The promotion and retention policies and practices will comply with the Act. |
| 3.I | ELL Instruction | 1. The application describes intentional strategies to recruit students with disabilities in a non-discriminatory manner. 
2. The application describes a thorough process using a body of evidence to identify students with disabilities in a non-discriminatory manner. The staff members responsible for the identification process are stated and there is a system to ensure the school avoids misidentification. 
3. The school will regularly assess IEP goals and supports through the Inquiry Assessment Cycle which includes normative, diagnostic, and frequent progress monitoring. 
4. There is a communication plan for the Special Education teacher and General Education teacher to identify students’ needs, supports and progress. 
5. The application describes quality methods to regularly evaluate and continuously improve the effectiveness of the special education program, including the staff responsible. 
6. The application includes a plan to ensure that all staff are “Highly Qualified” in accordance with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and are appropriately licensed and endorsed to serve students with mild and moderate disabilities. Appropriate pre-requisite qualifications are detailed for these positions. There is a detailed plan to recruit, hire and retain high-quality teachers that meet these requirements. 
7. The staffing structure adequately provides special education staff to serve students with disabilities, both as the school phases in and at full build, and expenses are included in the budget. The mild/moderate pupil to teacher ratio is within the DPS recommendations of: 19:1 for Elementary and K-8 schools; 21:1 for Middle and 6-12 schools; and 23:1 for High Schools. 
8. The application provides regular research-based PD about serving students with disabilities that will be required of both general education and special education teachers that is reflected in the school PD calendar. 
9. The application describes research-based practices, and strategies the school will employ to provide a continuum of services that will ensure students’ access to the general education curriculum in the least restrictive environment (LRE) that meet IDEA and FAPE requirements, and will ensure academic and social-emotional success for students with special education needs. 
10. The applicant demonstrates a clear understanding of their obligation to students with mild and moderate disabilities, details appropriate resources to meet the needs of students with mild and moderate disabilities. |
### Section IV: Teaching

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<tr>
<th>Teaching</th>
<th>Meets Expectations Characteristics</th>
<th>Score</th>
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| **4.A Teacher Recruitment, Hiring** | 1. The school will ensure that all Core Content teachers hired are "Highly Qualified" in accordance with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The application clearly defines what this means.  
2. The application thoroughly describes the professional backgrounds, depth of experience, pre-requisite qualifications, and personal qualities that will be used in hiring teachers and other school staff. The selection criteria described gives appropriate consideration to the school’s unique design and target student population, and will ensure staff fits the mission and vision of the school and will be culturally responsive to student needs.  
3. The application also adequately addresses the cultural competencies and skills required of key staff positions to ensure the target population is appropriately served.  
4. The application describes a teacher recruitment and selection process that articulates a diversified approach to publicizing open positions, a clear timeline and thorough interview process for selecting teachers, and a clear decision making process to ensure a robust pipeline and good hiring decisions. | | |
| **4.B Teacher Retention** | 1. The application indicates that the school has thorough research-based strategies to promote teacher retention (i.e. new teacher support systems, mentoring programs, methods to promote distributive leadership and develop teacher leaders, etc.), has a reasonable target for teacher retention rate and factors staff retention into the school leader’s evaluation. | | |
| **4.C Teacher Coaching** | 1. Teachers will be observed and will receive feedback on an identified regular basis. There is a clear schedule for observations and subsequent feedback discussions.  
2. The application clearly states which personnel will be involved in teacher coaching and whether feedback will be given from non-supervisory coaches or peers. There is sufficient staff capacity to implement the coaching plan.  
3. The classroom observation protocols and feedback instruments provided in the application are based on research best practice, use well-defined criteria that fit the needs of the school model and will drive high-quality instruction, and ensure feedback is specific, descriptive, and actionable.  
4. There is a data driven process in place to ensure teacher coaches are delivering relevant and differentiated coaching based on teacher needs (i.e. first-year and new teachers to the school). | | |
Section V : Governance & Finance

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<th>Governance</th>
<th>Meets Expectations Characteristics</th>
<th>Score</th>
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<tr>
<td>5.A School Governance (Primary)</td>
<td>1. The application provides a clear process for ensuring that parents/guardians, teachers and community members are active participants in the school’s governance structure including outlining any committees, the purposes of such committees, and how committee membership will be determined.</td>
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<td>2. The SAC/CSC as proposed meets statutory requirements. The applicant clearly describes what this means.</td>
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<td>3. The proposed structure will sufficiently support the SAC or CSC in their role supporting and providing input into the school’s oversight (ex. Budgets, evaluations, academic goals).</td>
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<td>5.B Budget Template Budget and Policy Narrative (Primary)</td>
<td>1. The budget provided in the application balances, is transparent, and demonstrates an understanding of how revenues flow.</td>
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<td>2. Operating expenses are covered by continuous income streams, such as SBB, and are not reliant upon private or start-up grant funding.</td>
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<td>3. The application describes private revenue sources, noting which are secured and which are anticipated as well as how each revenue stream will be used in support of non-core operational expenses.</td>
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<td>4. The application describes, and the budget reflects, any services that will be contracted (i.e. business services payroll and auditing services) and there are reasonable costs and rigorous criteria for selecting such services.</td>
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<td>5. The application includes a realistic contingency budget that details the budget cuts and the dollar amount related to each adjustment in the event of only 80% enrollment in year 1. The contingency plan does not compromise the ability of the school to implement the education program.</td>
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<td>6. The application describes systems, policies, and procedures, including internal controls, to manage accounting, purchasing, payroll, and financial reporting requirements.</td>
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<td>5.C App. B Facility (Primary)</td>
<td>1. The application an appropriate plan for utilizing and improving any necessary facility constraints.</td>
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Appendix B: Overview of One School-Based Design Process
Principals used design methodologies at a high level to organize their community design team meetings.
Appendix C: Community Redesign Forum Invitation and Agenda

Invitation to participants:
This year, four DPS principals (Valverde, Goldrick, Schmitt & Harrington) are engaged in the Year Zero Redesign Cohort to approach the work of school turnaround in a creative, new way. “Year Zero” principals are spending this year deeply engaged in the work of community engagement and school redesign in an effort to ensure that each school’s programmatic offerings are well-aligned to the specific needs and wants of the students they’ll serve. On December 14th, principals will be eager to unveil a co-created vision for their school, as well as a redesign plan, which outlines the details of their school’s future model.

Through interactive conversation, attendees will learn about “Year Zero” from various perspectives. Principals, members of the Board of Education, DPS staff, parents & students, and members of the broader community will have an opportunity to learn and share more about each school’s unique design, and to talk with one another about the successes, challenges and learning that is emerging from this work.

Please help us spread the word about this important event and pass it along to your members and stakeholders to attend if they’d be interested.

Agenda

School Redesign Community Forum: A conversation about DPS’s “Year Zero” approach to school turnaround
December 14th from 4:30pm – 6:00pm
Schmitt Elementary School

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4:30 – 5:00p</td>
<td>Arrival, snacks, mingling</td>
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<tr>
<td>5:00 – 5:15p</td>
<td>Opening + welcome</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Welcome &amp; introduction (Susana Cordova)</td>
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<td>• An overview of Year Zero (Brittany Erickson)</td>
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<td>5:15 – 5:50p</td>
<td>Small group discussion</td>
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<td>• Round 1: What has been the most exciting part of this process and what have you learned?</td>
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<td>• Round 2: As your schools are finishing designs / plans, what work must be done to ensure your schools realize dramatic improvement for kids?</td>
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<td>5:50 – 6:00p</td>
<td>Closing Remarks</td>
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<td>• Ivan Duran (Asst. Superintendent) &amp; Rosemary Rodriguez (School Board member)</td>
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