

Testimony of Tom Boasberg

U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

“Fixing No Child Left Behind: Testing and Accountability”

Wednesday, January 21 2015

10:00 AM

Chairman Alexander, Ranking Member Murray, members of the committee thank you for inviting me to testify today. My name is Tom Boasberg, and I am superintendent of the fastest growing school district in any city in the country, the wonderfully diverse Denver Public Schools (DPS).

Let me tell you a little about my district. Today, we have a little over 90,000 students, with over 70% qualifying for free or reduced price lunch. Two fifths of our students are English language learners, and over three quarters are students of color. Our children come from a diverse set of circumstances, but they all have one thing in common: they want a great education and the chance it will give them to succeed in life.

In DPS, we have seen a remarkable progress in the last decade under the reforms and improvement efforts begun by my predecessor, Michael Bennet. In that time, we have increased our number of high school graduates by a thousand, increased the on-time graduation rate for African-American and Latino students by 60%, decreased our dropout rate by over 60%, and have gone from the district with the lowest rate of year-on-year academic growth among major districts in the state to, for the last three years, the highest. The gaps between our middle class students and students in poverty and between our white students and students of color, however, have moved very little, and we are acutely aware of how much more progress we need to make for our kids.

As a result of the improvements in our schools, our enrollment is booming as families come back to and stay in our schools. In the last seven years alone, our enrollment has grown by a remarkable 25%, far higher than the growth in school-age population in the city.

# DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS (DPS)

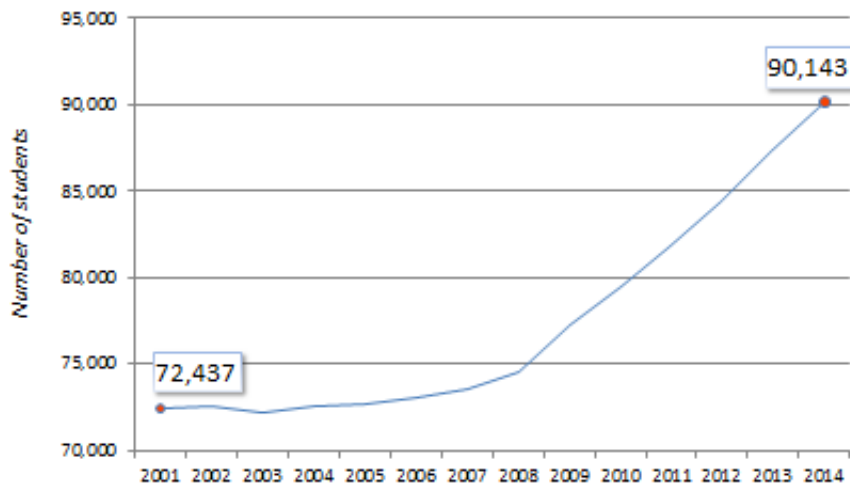


## *The Students We Serve:*

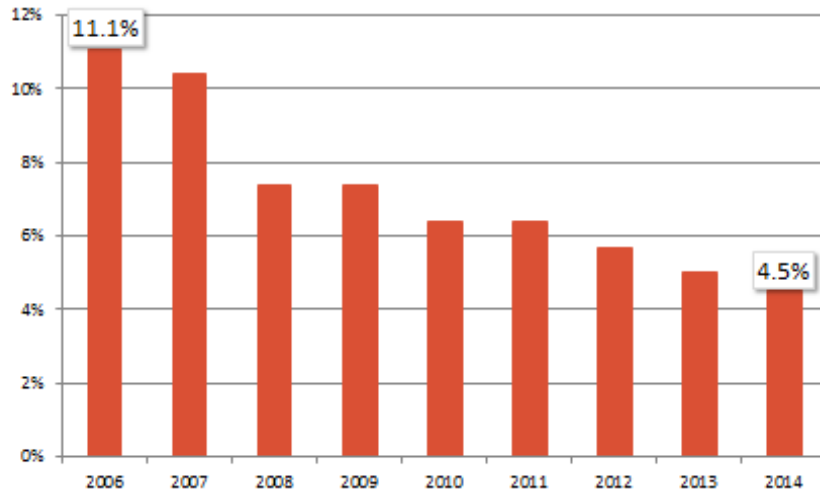
- Enrollment: 90,143
- Languages spoken: 140
- Poverty rate: 70%
- Race/ethnicity:
  - Hispanic 57%
  - White 22%
  - African-American 14%
  - Asian 3%
  - More than two races 3%
  - Amer. Indian/other 1%
- English learners: 39%
- Students with special needs: 11%



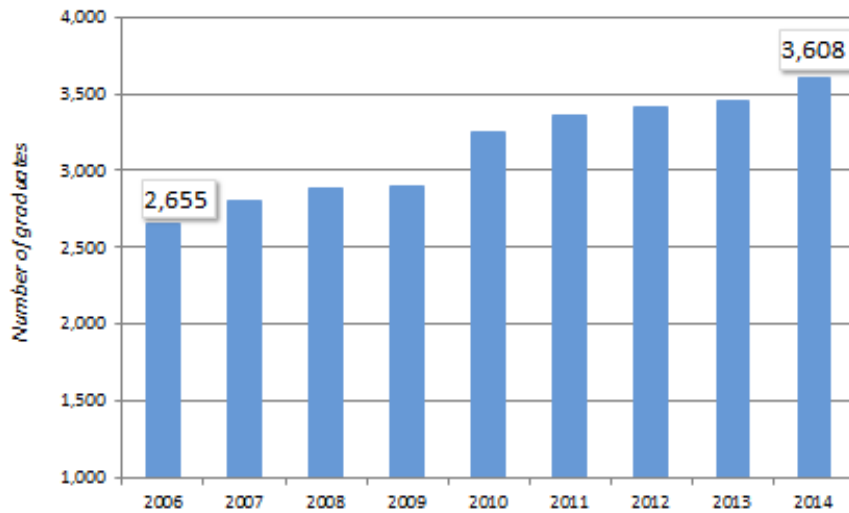
## DPS enrollment growth 2001-2014



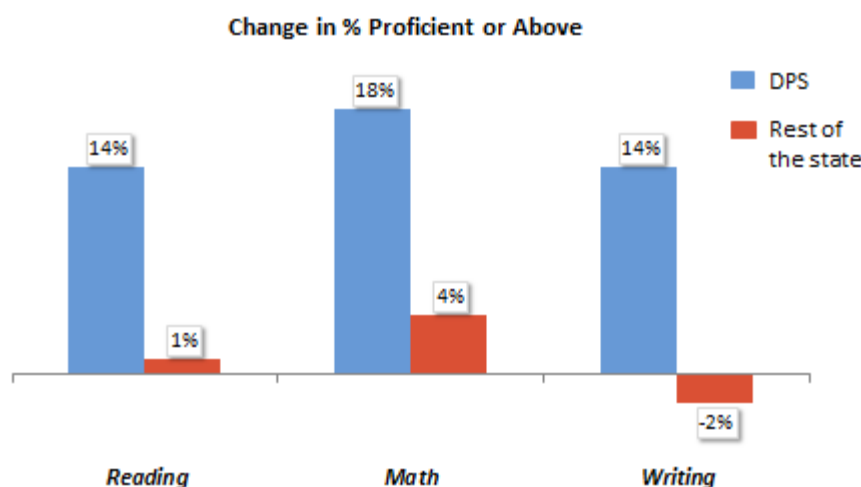
## DPS drop-out rates 2006-2014



## DPS total graduates 2006-2014



## DPS growth on state exams 2005-2014



One key to our progress is our refusal to be imprisoned by the ideologically polarizing debates and false conflicts that we often see around us. We focus on what works for kids.

We cannot be stuck in an either/or world. The needs of the children we serve are too great and the stakes for their success too high.

What does that world look like? It's a world where we can dramatically improve our district-run schools, unleash the creative energies of our teachers to open innovative new schools, and at the same time welcome high-performing charters. It's a world where both district-run and charter schools work together to drive greater equity in our community.

It's a world where we do measure the progress of our kids in literacy and math to see whether they are on track in these key areas to graduate from high school prepared for college and career. And, it's a world where we care deeply about nurturing and developing the whole child – expanding opportunities for arts and music, deepening interest in history and science, and nurturing our kids' physical, social, and emotional growth.

Two years ago, for example, when we went to Denver voters for a local tax increase, the first thing we asked for was funding dedicated to expanding arts, music and sports in our schools. And we are very proud that Denver has the largest parent-teacher home-visit program in the country to strengthen vital ties between home and school.

There does not need to be a conflict here. In fact, to the contrary, our experience has shown us the schools that most emphasize a broad curriculum and promote creativity are

the ones that actually do best in helping develop and grow their students' literacy and numeracy abilities.

As both a parent of three kids and superintendent for 90,000, do I care about seeing the progress my kids make every year in literacy and math? Yes, of course, I do. I care that their progress is measured against a meaningful benchmark aligned to where they need to be to be on track for success in college and career. This ensures that they and all children in our state are held to the same high standards. Our future economy and civic leadership in Colorado depend on our graduating students who are ready to work in our knowledge-based economy and lead our community. This makes having high expectations for their achievement and measuring their progress towards that achievement all the more important.

At the same time, both with my own three kids and all kids in DPS, I care deeply about how they do in the classroom on the projects and work assigned by their teachers. I care deeply as well about their opportunities in the creative arts, in social sciences, in sports, and their personal growth as members of our community. It does not have to be either/or.

While I do believe that annual measures of progress for our kids in literacy and math are important, I have also advocated in our state that we need fewer and shorter tests. For example, I do not see why we cannot have good measures of student progress that are limited to no more than three to four hours combined time for literacy and math per year – or less than ½ of 1% of students' total annual classroom time. We as a state also need to eliminate the other state tests that have been added in recent years that are unrelated to the law before this committee today.

The new generation of assessments does a good job at helping us understand how our children are progressing in literacy and math. They measure high-order thinking skills, and ask students to solve complex problems and demonstrate the knowledge and skills they will need for college and careers.

It is important that kids and their parents know how they are doing in mastering these critical skills -- just as teachers need the information to tailor and individualize their instruction for their students. This transparency, in short is vital, and it is vital that all involved get this information at least annually.

Without annual data, we cannot effectively measure the growth, the progress our kids are making. Seeing how much kids are growing is equally important for the high-achieving student who wants to keep moving forward as it is for the low achieving student who needs to see the progress he or she is making to catch up.

Likewise, having annual data about students' growth is necessary to see what is working best in our schools – to understand the effectiveness of academic initiatives and to share the best practices we are seeing in our classrooms and schools where kids are making the most progress.

Transparency and the sharing of best practices are important for all kids, but they are particularly important for our kids in poverty and kids of color. Historically, too many of our most vulnerable students have not been held to the high standards that will enable them to compete for, and succeed in, college and the knowledge-intensive careers in today's economy.

And, that is why accountability is also vital here. Not accountability in a blaming or punishment sense but accountability to see what is not working for kids and to make the necessary changes in the extraordinarily high-stakes work we are all committed to -- to help children and families break out of poverty, to help all kids realize the potential they are born with.

So, as we celebrate this week the birthday of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., I hope that we can help all our kids live in the "both-and" world they deserve.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to answering your questions.