

Denver Public Schools



**THE DISTRICT SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AND
ACCOUNTABILITY COUNCIL (SIAC)
RECOMMENDATIONS AND COMMENTS
TO THE BOARD OF EDUCATION
ON THE
DISTRICT UNIFIED SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLAN**

MARCH 2012

Introduction

The Educational Accountability Act requires the District School Improvement and Accountability Council (District SIAC) to submit recommendations to the local school board concerning preparation of the district's Unified Improvement Plan (UIP). This responsibility was delegated to a subcommittee. This report is the result of that process for Spring 2012. The persons who participated in a portion or all of the subcommittee work included the following:

Earleen Brown, District SIAC
Sherry Eastlund, District SIAC, Co-Chairperson
Dorolyn Griebenaw, Secretary, District SIAC
Rita Montero, District SIAC, Co-Chairperson
Jesse Sutherland, M.D., District SIAC

The Process

The District SIAC received a draft of the UIP in late January. In reviewing the draft UIP, the principal concern was whether the proposed plan demonstrated a good possibility of providing Denver Public School students with an educational environment resulting in high levels of academic achievement.

The subcommittee examined the following:

- the data analysis information;
- the root causes and proposed strategies to address the identified causes of low student achievement; and
- how the strategies would be implemented and periodically evaluated to determine success or whether changes are necessary.

The subcommittee also reviewed the Denver Plan, the 2012 Board of Education District Goals, and some of the 2012 proposed budget strategies for alignment with the UIP.

The subcommittee report was submitted to the District School Improvement and Accountability Council on Tuesday, March 20, 2012, for review, approval, and forwarding to the Board of Education.

Findings

In general, District SIAC acknowledges the alignment of the UIP with the Denver Plan, the Board of Education 2012 Annual Goals, and many of the proposed budget expenditures; however, the subcommittee has concerns that the UIP and the Denver Plan both lack specific details regarding the implementation of strategies, timelines, and periodic evaluation components to determine the impact on the classroom and improving student achievement.

In addition, the root causes identified in the plan are general and vague. For example, on page 27, the strategy to increase achievement of students who are English Language Learners identifies the root cause as, “Thirty-one percent of our nearly 80,000 students are classified as ELLs, and 40% of our students speak Spanish at home. Through root cause analysis, we know that our ELLs are not acquiring academic English rapidly enough.” The action steps do not clearly address the reasons that the students are not acquiring academic English in DPS classrooms.

It appears that the action plans are designed to address and support the strategies in the Denver Plan and the District Goals rather than address root causes as determined by data analysis.

Recommendations

During discussion of the root causes for low student achievement and strategies to improve student achievement, areas of concern were identified.

Elementary Level Focus: District SIAC recommends that the District refocus its efforts at the elementary level. Implementation of a rigorous curriculum at the elementary level coupled with a no social advancement policy would avoid years of remediation efforts at the secondary level. The latest information shows more students are graduating from Denver Public Schools and are entering the workforce as well as higher education. However, many students graduate with a substandard education and are in need of remediation.

Allocation of Funds: It is the recommendation of District SIAC that most new project/program funds appropriated for the specific purpose of academic advancement be allocated at the elementary level, that these dollars have strict periodic evaluation, and that programs not meeting high and stringent goals have their funds terminated. Additionally, funds allocated to the secondary level must be well defined and allocated so students can meet all new Common Core Standards.

Pilot Programs: Pilot programs carry the implication that the proposed initiative has not been tested and evaluated but is being tested at a particular school. If a pilot program or initiative has not demonstrated proven success, the district should not expand the particular “pilot” at other schools until proven effective.

Training Funds for ELA Parents: Rather than providing ELL parents with training on how participate on CSC and other school committees, District SIAC recommends the use of training funds for English Language Classes for parents. Such classes would give parents the ability to help their children at home and to encourage one another to achieve English acquisition. The end result would be the ability of these parents to comfortably participate at their schools and the greater community.

ELA Teachers: District SIAC recommends that all teachers (per the Federal Court Order) be trained to use ELL strategies. Many ELL teachers in DPS have not entered the program able to meet the requirements of the Court Order nor have some teachers already in the system been adequately trained. It is our understanding that all DPS teachers must receive instruction that gives them ESL skills and strategies to effectively teach ELL transitioned students.

Commitment to DPS of ELL Trained Instructors: The District spends a significant amount of fiscal and human resources for special professional development. Many of the trained teachers leave the District. It is the recommendation of District SIAC that the District provide appropriate training to ELL instructors but require those trained to make a five-year commitment to the District. If a teacher leaves the District before the five-year commitment, there should be a requirement that the teacher reimburse the District for any and all funds expended for the special training.

General Obligation Bond Funds: District SIAC questions whether General Obligation Bond Funds can be used for the implementation of the STAR assessment, for the update of district interim assessments, and for Schoolnet Assess online platform for assessment development, administration and data capture as stated in Strategy #3. Additionally, the Council of Great City Schools is listed as an evaluator, and these results need to be made available to stakeholders.

Student Promotion: The District SIAC recommends that the Board of Education review and consider changes to Policy IKE, Promotion, Retention and Acceleration. District SIAC recommends first and foremost that Denver Public Schools end social advancement in all grade levels beginning with 1st grade and ending with 12th grade. This would include any student who is preparing for graduation. Gone should be the days when teachers are working over time to make it possible for a 12th grade student to graduate when that student has not seriously made an effort to ensure his or her graduation. Likewise if a child is not adequately prepared to continue from first grade on to second grade, a passing nod will cause harm to the child as he or she struggles grade after grade because of the inability to master the skills needed to pass to the next grade level. All students in elementary school need to be proficient in reading, writing and math skills before advancing to the middle school level.

Closing Observations: District SIAC admires and acknowledges the District's attempt to demand rigor and recognizes that need at the high school level. However, waiting to invoke a level of rigor at the high school level is a formula for disaster. Rigor must be in place in every school, in first grade and every grade thereafter. Rigor must not be desired, but demanded. This will enable DPS children to achieve in today's world including successfully completing X-track, AP classes or Advanced Programs. The District's attempt to find alignment with the Denver Plan, District Goals, the UIP, and the proposed budget is to be admired; however, the UIP must clearly state how the data analysis guides the identification of root causes that the District is responsible for and can influence. Root causes need to be clearly delineated. The resulting implementation plan and outcomes should be clearly defined, be more strategic, and should include strong evaluation components along the way.

Additional Comments: Several members of the District School Improvement and Accountability Council did not agree with and had concerns about the section on student promotion. A summary of their thoughts with regard to Student Promotion are listed below:

- The State Board is scheduled in May of 2012 to consider adopting updated CBLA rules, and to approve new assessment tools if necessary. The rules identify the standards and criteria for the assessment of literacy in grades K-3 (including the identification of grade level proficiencies, assessment instrument criteria and permitted exceptions). District alignment with the expectations outlined in the Colorado Academic Standards, along with implementation and compliance with the rules and tools provided by the CBLA, could very well provide the positive impact needed to improve literacy and better ensure student promotion versus retention.
- Retention varies from situation to situation and seems to be more appropriate and less concerning in earlier years (up to 2nd grade.) Later years seem to cause some additional problems, especially when adolescents are kept back in elementary school.
- When social promotion is harming a student's ability to perform well in the next grade, and it is possible that the student is being set up for future failure, it makes sense to have a variety of options to "retain" that student in order to help him or her to move forward with the skills needed to achieve academic success.

Acronyms used in this Report:

CBLA - - Colorado Basic Literacy Act

CSC - - Collaborative School Committee

DPS - - Denver Public Schools

District SIAC - - District School Improvement and Accountability Council

ELL- - English Language Learners

ESL - - English as a Second Language

UIP - - Unified Improvement Plan