

Denver Public Schools



**Recommendations for the Board of Education on the
District Unified Improvement Plan for 2013-2014**

**The District School Improvement and
Accountability Council (SIAC)**

Date: April 21, 2014

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). The UIP for 2013-2014 was reviewed by the UIP standing committee of the District SIAC. The committee began meeting in January of 2014 including briefings by staff from the Department of Accountability, Research and Evaluation of the Denver Public Schools. The committee reviewed the UIP in detail and compared the current UIP with the plan from the previous year. Over the course of several meetings, the committee discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the plan, with the final result being this report.

On April 29, 2014, the committee presented District SIAC with a progress report including an overview of its recommendations for the UIP. District SIAC adopted the resolution supporting the work of the committee subject review of the complete document.

This report was formally approved at the District SIAC meeting of April 29, 2014. This report and recommendations will be presented to the DPS Board of Education for their use. By the time this report is received by the Board, the UIP is scheduled to have been submitted to the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) and will likely be posted on the CDE website.

The persons participating in a portion or all of the subcommittee work include:

- Sherry Eastlund, community member
- Dorolyn Griebenaw, community member
- Don Griebenaw, community member
- Roger Kilgore, community member
- Dr. Jesse Sutherland, community member
- Kristen Tourangeau, DPS parent

Recommendations

This report is organized with the primary recommendations for the Board of Education of the Denver Public Schools listed first. This section is followed by more detailed discussions of the findings and recommendations. This UIP is virtually unchanged from the plan from the previous year. The reason cited for this is that the revisions to the Denver Plan will be used to update the plan when those revisions are completed. Our understanding of the revisions to the Denver Plan is that they are more oriented to high-level strategic topics such as vision, mission, goals, and values. However, the UIP is a more tactical document reflecting specific plans and actions to respond to weaknesses in District performance. To use the terminology of the UIP, these plans and actions include identification of "Priority Performance Challenges," "Root Cause Analyses," "Major Improvement Challenges," and "Action Steps." We do not anticipate that this level of specificity will be found in the revised Denver Plan. Therefore, we are resubmitting our recommendations from last year because each remains valid. We look forward to further engagement with the Board on these recommendations.

District SIAC is a dedicated group of parent and community volunteers with broad and varied experience with the Denver Public Schools. As such, it collectively is more likely to be able to understand reports and documents prepared by or for the District compared to the typical parent or community member in Denver. Even with this experience, the committee found the UIP prepared by the District to be largely inaccessible, filled with jargon, and awkwardly organized. We recognize that the latter may be, in part, due to the format required by the Colorado Department of Education (CDE). It also lacked a critical linkage of the performance measures that have not been achieved with a plan to reach performance goals. Updated annually, this document could be a roadmap for improvements in program planning, program implementation and program evaluation, and should be more than an exercise to satisfy CDE requirements.

Our primary recommendations are:

1. Develop more meaningful root cause analyses. Six general statements are provided as root causes that do not appear to derive from critical analyses of the data or feedback from teachers and principals.
2. Prepare separate root cause analyses and major improvement strategies by education level (ECE, elementary, middle, and high school) and for English Language Learners (ELLs) since the needs and strategies of each category differ. Lumping most of the analysis together creates a generality that causes the plan to lack the necessary focus.
3. Discuss successful strategies that are contributing to performance measures that were achieved by the district. Since the CDE does not require that the district address performance measures that have been achieved the district leaves these areas blank. The committee thinks it important to analyze the successes so that they may be expanded.
4. Better formulate “action steps” to show how they relate to root causes and how the district is holding itself accountable for their achievement.
5. Broaden input to the UIP to more stakeholder involvement. The plan mentions stakeholder involvement, but only token involvement is indicated. District SIAC expressed an interest in participation in the development of the plan, but was not invited to participate prior to the plan submission.
6. Work with the Colorado Department of Education to break the bonds of this tabular format for presenting a plan. The required format is quite restrictive and difficult to follow. It also discourages innovation.

Discussion

The UIP, as the committee understands it, is intended to be a working document that describes specific strategies and actions designed to achieve specific objectives. It should not be a document submitted simply to satisfy CDE requirements.

The flow of the document, as designed by CDE, starts with a description of the performance measures by which the district is assessed. These include academic achievement, academic growth, academic growth gaps, post-secondary/workforce readiness, and English language development and attainment. Interestingly, academic achievement gaps are not a rated performance measure. Data for ELLs are included, but the plan fails to include strategies to meet the academic achievement needs of this ELL population. Compared to performance goals set specifically for the district, the district was rated as “approaching” for academic status, “meets” for academic growth, “approaching” for academic growth gaps, “approaching” for post-secondary/workforce readiness, and “meets” for English language development and attainment. Overall, the district is “accredited with priority improvement plan” for the third year. This rating is third out of a possible four ratings given by the CDE.

In the UIP, the district is tasked with performing data analyses to identify the “root causes” for the district’s deficiencies and the “priority performance challenges.” Based on these, the district is to develop its “major improvement strategies” for addressing these, including specific “action steps” that are part of each major improvement strategy.

Root Cause Analysis

The district provides the identical list of statements that are called “root causes” for each performance measure not rated as “meets” by the CDE. However, these “root causes” are general statements that do not appear to be informed by an analysis of the available data. They are:

1. “Lack of clear vision, priorities and communication (including feedback from the field)/messaging structures
2. Not effectively managing change and pace of district initiatives (lack of planning timelines)
3. Lack of accountability structures (i.e., effective progress monitoring at central office and school level)
4. Lack of training, capacity building, differentiated and sustained support, and appropriate intervention for school leaders and teachers to support students with lower performance
5. Inconsistent and lack of differentiated language and instructional support based on needs of English Language Learners and all other disaggregated groups across all content areas and grade levels.
6. Insufficient understanding of how students progress through the levels of CELA, transition to English instruction before the native language is mastered, by core subjects teachers and their peers”

In addition, the fact that these same “root causes” are listed for each performance measure indicates a lack of rigor applied to truly identifying root causes. They also are largely unintelligible and lack specificity in such a way that it is difficult to evaluate the quality of the underlying analyses. (Do the levels of a test, for example, the CELA test, truly define or correspond to how English language is

developed and ultimately attained?) Because the district is so large and diverse the obstacles to achieving the goal of adequate academic instruction vary widely based on student age, socio-economic levels, cultural and community differences, and other factors, it is imperative that the root cause analysis be more narrowly focused. Until the root causes are rigorously identified, strategies to rectify the problems cannot be well developed.

We are also concerned with the exclusive reliance on the statistical parameter of the median as a metric for characterizing our students. While the CDE also relies on this statistic, it leaves us uncertain as to how our students at the upper and lower ends of these performance distributions are truly doing. Is the probability distribution flattening (are our better students are doing better and our most challenged students doing worse) or are our students moving towards the median? Knowing this would help the district craft better strategies and action steps targeted to all our students, not just the median student.

Too much of the narrative in the UIP is devoted to “spin” rather than analysis. For example, in the “Review of Current Performance” the text refers to “thousands more of our students have become proficient in reading, writing, and mathematics...” This statement is misleading because no context or data are provided to support it and it also does not serve the objective of root cause analysis. The statement seems more oriented towards advocacy, which should not be part of the UIP.

Other unsupported statements add bulk, but not substance to the analyses. For example, in the “Review of Current Performance” the text states “Our sustained growth and root cause analysis confirms we are on the right track.” This is an unsupported statement that does not inform root cause analysis. Similarly, the text states that “our major improvement strategies are the right focus for the district, the challenges that we are facing have to do with the proper implementation of these strategies.” This statement is also not supported.

Overall, the text is unintelligible to the lay reader and lacks meaning. For example, “our root cause analysis focused on systemic issues facing the district as we work to realize the outcomes of our strategies” left our committee confused as to the meaning of the statement. Another example is “We utilized the input of multiple stakeholders (including outside vendors), focus groups and meetings, and local data such as (district interims) to triangulate and verify our root causes.” Overall, the root cause analysis descriptions do not indicate to us that serious attention was given to this critical part of the UIP.

Planning by Education Level

The UIP should separately address the needs and successes of pre-K, elementary, middle, and high school students. The academic achievement and growth needs of these age-levels differ and the committee believes that it is likely that root causes and response strategies should differ by age group. As previously discussed, the root cause analysis is not detailed and breaking down the needs in this way would strengthen the plan. We also suggest that the district focus more on academic

achievement than on academic growth. The district’s goal is to have proficient learners, regardless of how much growth is needed to achieve that goal.

In addition, our English Language Learners (ELLs) represent a significant part of our student population and separate analysis for this group is critical, especially in light of the current discussion around the Modified Consent Decree. Root causes number 5 and 6 listed above are more specific than the others and represent a good start on this assessment.

Successful Strategies

The UIP is silent in the area of academic growth and English language development and attainment, presumably because the CDE rates these performance areas as “meets” and a response is not required by CDE. The committee believes that this is a mistake for two reasons. First, it is valuable to reflect on why this criterion was met. Was it due to specific strategies that should be strengthened to continue progress or was it simply a fluke? Such analysis, along with continuation of certain successful policies will guard against backsliding in these areas.

Second, the growth goals in all subjects for all grades were not met. Therefore, more work is required in these areas and an intentional focus on meeting all the goals is needed.

Action Steps

Several “action steps” are identified within the context of five “major improvement strategies.” The major improvement strategies listed in the UIP are:

1. Help our Educators Grow: We will use frameworks, coaching, feedback and professional development to support educator growth.
2. Improve the Outcomes of Linguistically Diverse Students: We will strengthen our systems and practices for ELLs and other diverse learners.
3. Shift our Teaching Practices with Students: We will implement new standards using rigorous and culturally relevant curriculum, instruction and assessments.
4. Differentiate Support to Schools: We will provide equitable and differentiated supports and interventions by sharing best practices, piloting new ways to improve.
5. Postsecondary & Workforce Readiness: Increase student achievement on postsecondary and workforce readiness measures by building structures and supports to improve dropout prevention, graduation rates and student engagement.

These strategies are generally vague and describe goals more than they describe strategies. They are also not specifically linked to the root causes. Given the generic nature of these statements it is difficult to envision how they will guide the action steps listed for implementation under each major implementation strategy.

The first set of action steps listed in the plan pertains to school leaders (principals). The fourth root cause talks about training for school leaders and major improvement strategy number one addresses

helping our educators grow. These provide a logical thread leading to school leader related action steps.

However, of the action steps listed very little information on performance benchmarks and implementation accountability is provided. For example, the first action step listed is to “develop a school leadership framework with clear expectations.” It is noted that this action is completed (though its timeline is listed through 2016). The UIP states that the framework is completed, but provides no information on where it can be found or if it is proving useful. Again, no clearly defined strategies are provided to fully realize this goal. Last year, the committee had a good meeting with John Youngquist, which addressed many of these issues. We had hoped to see this section greatly improved in the UIP submittal for this year, but that was not the case.

Similarly, another action step addresses professional development opportunities including the “Teach Leadership Academy, which started in the fall of 2010. The UIP refers to a “new cohort in 2011-12,” but does not say anything about a cohort this year, what the quantitative results have been for the program or specifically what the district hoped to see from the program. The UIP notes that this program is scheduled to end this year, but is silent on the reason for its conclusion. Did the program achieve its goals and should be continued? Or, has it served its purpose or was not found to be beneficial?

Stakeholder Involvement

Stakeholder input and involvement is mentioned in the UIP several times including the following:

- The UIP contains references to “parents and business leaders” as sources of information feeding to the UIP.
- The UIP states that “several DPS stakeholders reviewed and analyzed several years of DPS...performance data.
- The UIP states “We utilized the input of multiple stakeholders (including outside vendors), focus groups and meetings, and local data such as (district interims) to triangulate and verify our root causes.”

The stakeholders are never identified and the process for stakeholder inputs is not described. District SIAC requested the opportunity to participate in the development of the UIP prior to its initial submission, but was not allowed to do so. We know of no participation with other stakeholders including the larger community, the district-wide PTA organizations and CSCs, and the DCTA. It is our belief that stakeholder input to a plan is critical for its success. The CDE District Quality Criteria (2012) states that the plan should describe “stakeholder involvement in the different steps of the plan development process, including, for example, District Accountability Committee, staff, parents, and community members.”

CDE Coordination

Our committee found the UIP very difficult to review because of the constraining tabular format and confusing and somewhat duplicative sections. This critique is provided for the benefit of the CDE since the CDE developed this format. The district should work with the CDE to come up with more workable formats in the future.

In addition, there is a timing issue with the CDE schedule for this UIP. This is a plan for 2013-14, but it is not submitted until midway in the year and finally approved much later. Therefore, most of the year has passed by the time the plan is approved. We recognize that this is, in part, because of the timing of the availability of data from the previous year.