



**MIXED ACADEMIC  
PERFORMANCE IN DENVER'S  
CHARTER SCHOOLS:**

**Flawed DPS Authorization Process  
Leaves Many Underperforming  
Charters in Need of Support**

# Mixed Academic Performance in Denver's Charter Schools:

## Flawed DPS Authorization Process Leaves Many Underperforming Charters in Need of Support

### Background

When state lawmakers passed the Colorado Charter School Act in 1993 they mandated high performance. The Act stated that charter schools must "implement new and innovative methods of educating children that are proven to be *effective*..."<sup>1</sup>

Colorado's largest school district, Denver Public Schools (DPS), has most deeply embraced the Act, bringing online an additional 27 charter schools in the last five school years, with six more set to open this fall.<sup>2</sup> At the start of the 2016/17 school year, the total number of charters will be 59 – making charter schools a quarter of all DPS schools.<sup>3</sup>

Denver schools' academic performance is tracked using the School Performance Framework (SPF), which rates each school through a rubric that is primarily focused on testing, but also student/parent satisfaction and enrollment. Each school is assigned an SPF score that places it on a scale on which it is either meeting expectations, or it is not.<sup>4</sup> Our analysis of this SPF data finds that while DPS has been able to grow the charter sector quite quickly, two of every five charter schools authorized by DPS are underperforming.

### Findings

Our research looked at the performance of existing Denver charter schools. According to the School Performance Framework,<sup>5</sup> we found:

1. **Forty percent of Denver charter schools are performing below expectations.**<sup>6</sup>
2. Using the same data, we found that **of those schools that are below expectations, 38% are significantly below expectations.**<sup>7</sup>



**40%**  
of denver charter  
schools performing  
below expectations



**38%**  
of those schools  
are significantly  
below  
expectations

\* Based on 2013/14 SPF data, which is the most recent available.



3. At the start of school this fall, **the number of charter schools in Denver has doubled**. An additional six schools coming online this fall will take the total to thirty-three new schools in six years.<sup>8</sup>
4. DPS has not provided School Performance Framework data since the 2013/14 school year because of changes to state tests that were the foundation of the data, leaving the **public without a consistent tool to gauge whether DPS' rapid charter approvals are sound policy. However, DPS officials say that they are continuing to use SPF data to inform their decisions regarding charter approvals.**<sup>9</sup>
5. This fall, 19 new charter schools will have been opened since the 2013/14 school year when the last SPF scores were issued, leaving DPS parents with **no performance data for 32% of available charter schools in the 2016/17 enrollment process.**<sup>10</sup>

## Recommendations

By rapidly expanding the number of charter schools in Denver without clear evidence that charter schools are providing a high-quality education to Denver's children, DPS has only made a structural change – to private-operation of publicly-funded schools – and not the strategic change it claims.

Rather than continuing in this direction, we recommend the following:

1. In the absence of data that clearly shows Denver charter schools are performing effectively in fulfilling the reform mission they are legislatively required to fulfill, **DPS should pause its authorization of new schools** and focus on reengineering its authorization process to better predict quality, before resuming its authorization of new charters;
2. DPS should focus on **bringing the 40% of charter schools that are currently below expectations up to levels where they exceed expectations;**
3. DPS must provide Denver parents and taxpayers with an **ongoing framework through which to assess school performance;**
4. The Colorado legislature should declare a **statewide moratorium on all new charter authorizations** unless and until authorizers can prove that this school model is fulfilling the legislature's high-performance mandate.

## Notes

1. Colorado Charter School Act, C.R.S. 22-30.5-102, Legislative declaration. Emphasis Added.
2. DPS does not publicly provide a comprehensive list of both existing and approved, but not yet open, charter schools, so we compiled one using the DPS charter school list & the DPS school list. See the DPS charter school list: <http://portfolio.dpsk12.org/our-schools/charter-schools/charter-schools-of-denver-public-schools/> & the DPS school list: <https://www.dpsk12.org/schoollist/default.aspx>. 27 schools currently open includes schools opened in the 2011/12 through the 2015/16 school year.
3. See DPS charter school list and DPS school list: <https://www.dpsk12.org/schoollist/default.aspx>. Calculated based on 59 charter schools out of 230 total schools
4. Schools that DPS defines as meeting expectations are rated “Distinguished” or “Meets Expectations,” and schools that DPS defines as not meeting expectations are rated “Accredited on Watch,” “Accredited on Priority Watch,” and “Accredited on Probation.”
5. Zubrzycki, Jaclyn, “Here’s How Denver Schools Are Going to Be Evaluated This Year,” Chalkbeat, March 23, 2015, <http://co.chalkbeat.org/2015/03/23/heres-how-denver-schools-are-going-to-be-evaluated-this-year/>.
6. DPS does not provide a comprehensive list of all charter schools and their SPF ratings, so we combined sources. See the DPS charter school list, the DPS school list, and DPS’ SPF spreadsheets: [http://spf.dpsk12.org/spf\\_districtsummary.html](http://spf.dpsk12.org/spf_districtsummary.html). To calculate the rate of “below expectations” schools, we found 16 out of 40 charter schools were rated “accredited on watch,” “accredited on priority watch,” or “accredited on probation” on DPS’ School Performance Framework in 2013/14. Definitions of each rating category are available here: <http://spf.dpsk12.org>.
7. 6 of the 16 schools that were below expectations were rated “accredited on priority watch” or “accredited on probation,” both of which are considered “significantly below expectations” according to DPS’ SPF definitions: <http://spf.dpsk12.org>.
8. Calculation is based on 26 schools open prior to the 2011/12 school year, and an additional 27 schools open from 2011/12 until 2015/16. An additional six schools to be opened in the fall of the 2016/17 school year takes the total of newly opened schools to 33.
9. See Zubrzycki.
10. Calculated based on 19 charters with no SPF data out of 61 charters total.



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