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Perspective

Integrated schools can excel Race, income need not determine success

By Bill Kurtz and Alan Gottlieb

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Chioma Nwankwo does homework on her laptop computer before classes start recently at the Denver School of Science and Technology, a charter high school. (Post / John Prieto)

It's disappointing that so many people seem resigned to the results of a new study documenting the resegregation of Denver Public Schools since court-ordered busing ended a decade ago.

The collective response to the Harvard Civil Rights Project study from many opinion and education leaders goes something like this:

Yes, we would prefer schools that are racially and socio-economically mixed. But we're never going back to the days of busing. Demography is destiny, and DPS is becoming an ever-poorer and more heavily minority school district. Insisting that a more integrated school district is possible amounts to a pipe dream. Better to focus instead on making our high-poverty schools better.

While we agree that improving high-poverty schools is imperative, we disagree that the future of DPS as a segregated, high-poverty district is carved in stone. In fact, we can point to examples that already bolster an alternative view of DPS's future.

We are convinced that:

By creating a large number of high-quality choice options (both charter and district schools) for parents and students, DPS can attract a significant number of middle- and upper-income families to public schools. To do so, DPS must send a strong and clear message that student achievement takes precedence over all other interests in the system and that high-quality charter and choice schools are viewed as assets, not liabilities to DPS.

By strategically locating these



Isabel Espinoza, Alan Garcia and Angelo Chavez read their report on famous people at

attractive and high performing choices, DPS can promote a healthy economic mix of students in schools that currently are disproportionately high-poverty.

Fairmont Dual Immersion Academy. (Post / John Prieto)

The Denver School of Science and Technology, a charter high school, and the Fairmont Dual Immersion Academy, a DPS elementary/middle school, demonstrate that these strategies can work.

The early success of the Denver School of Science and Technology (DSST), now in its second year, merits a close look. Located in the Stapleton redevelopment community, the school serves and continues to attract one of the most diverse student populations of any school in the city. Forty-four percent of students are low-income; 34 percent of the student body is white, 34 percent is African-American, 24 percent Hispanic, 4 percent mixed race and 3 percent Asian.

Science and Technology demonstrates that a school can intentionally commit to an economically diverse student body and a rigorous, college-prep curriculum, thereby attracting new families from all backgrounds to public schools.

The proof is in the numbers. The school recently completed its admissions lottery for the 2006 freshman class. To date, more than 320 students have applied for ninth-grade admissions from more than 65 schools in the metro area. Only 18 of these schools are standard DPS schools. Just 36 percent of applicants came from DPS district schools, and 40 percent came from private schools and out-of-district public schools. Forty percent of the applicant



D'Nae Randolph works on an acrylic painting at the Denver School of Science and Technology. (Post / John Prieto)

pool was low-income. Students from all geographies, ethnic backgrounds, income levels and kinds of schools are attracted to DSST, creating a diverse student body through choice.

So why has the school been able to accomplish this?

First, DSST has a singular focus on providing every student a rigorous high school education. Because it's committed to giving all students the academic foundation necessary to succeed in and graduate from elite four-year colleges, students are not tracked - there is only one college-bound track for all students. All students take physics and a college-preparatory math class in the ninth grade so they can pursue advanced courses later.

Initial CSAP results show the success of this approach. The DSST ninth-grade class was the highest performing class in Denver on the math CSAPs; it finished second to a magnet school in reading and writing. And DSST was the only Denver high school to earn a "significant growth" designation on students' CSAP scores growth from year to year.

A closer look into the CSAP data reveals that the school's low-income students were proficient or advanced on the math, reading and writing CSAP tests at significantly higher percentages than DPS students who aren't low-income. An African-American student at DSST was five times more likely to be proficient in math, three times

more in writing and two times more in reading than his counterpart in other Denver public schools.

A Hispanic-American student at

DSST was 13 times more likely to be proficient in math, four times more in reading and three times more in writing than his counterpart in other Denver public schools. The school had the highest percentage of students scoring "advanced" on the math CSAP of any school in the city. While we recognize that CSAP scores are only one measure of academic quality, this initial data is very promising.



Mystic Valdez writes in her journal at Fairmont Dual Immersion Academy. (Post / John Prieto)

The school's focus on community and core values makes possible this high academic achievement. A school community centered on six core values has been created: respect, responsibility, integrity, curiosity, courage and doing your best. These values allow the school to build on its student diversity to create a cohesive whole, rather than letting diversity become a dividing force.

Students are empowered to be who they are on the inside, not on the outside, to see differences in background, ethnicity and income as positives, not dividers. The fact that so many families from different ethnic, geographic and income backgrounds are seeking to enroll in the school highlights the attractiveness of the school's culture.

The school is a work in progress and has a long way to go to fulfill its ambitious vision. However, initial results indicate that the school provides a new paradigm for creating a high-performing school that attracts a diverse student body. We need more schools like DSST to reverse the recent demographic trends in our schools.

Some people may argue that creating DSST's conditions for success is possible only in a charter school, which operates without some of the strictures that bind traditional public schools. But this needn't be the case.

At Fairmont Dual Immersion Academy, an early-childhood through eighth-grade DPS school in the Baker neighborhood, an attractive new program has begun to alter the socio-economic mix of the school. Achievement is on the rise as well.

Three years ago, 97 percent of Fairmont's students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, an indicator of poverty. Last year, that percentage had dropped to 75 percent. The drop in low-income students was most dramatic in early childhood, kindergarten and first grades, where the dual-immersion program had been implemented.

Dual-immersion students receive instruction in math, reading and writing in their native language. English speakers are then immersed in Spanish lessons and Spanish speakers in English lessons. English-speaking and Spanish-speaking students also come together to learn science, social studies and other lessons in both Spanish and English.

The program is rolling out one grade at a time at Fairmont. Now in its third year, the program extends from early childhood through second grade. It will move up to include third grade for the 2006-07 school year.

Although the dual-immersion programs have not reached the CSAP-testing threshold of third grade, an evaluation commissioned by The Piton Foundation showed that dual-immersion students at Fairmont showed early signs of out-performing Fairmont students from previous years who weren't in dual-immersion programs.

We know from personal experience as well as research that low-income students have a better chance of success when their classmates come from diverse backgrounds. We have the means to create more mixed-income schools in Denver on a purely voluntary basis. The only remaining question is whether we have the collective will to make it happen.

Bill Kurtz is founding head of the Denver School of Science and Technology. Alan Gottlieb is education program officer for the Piton Foundation.