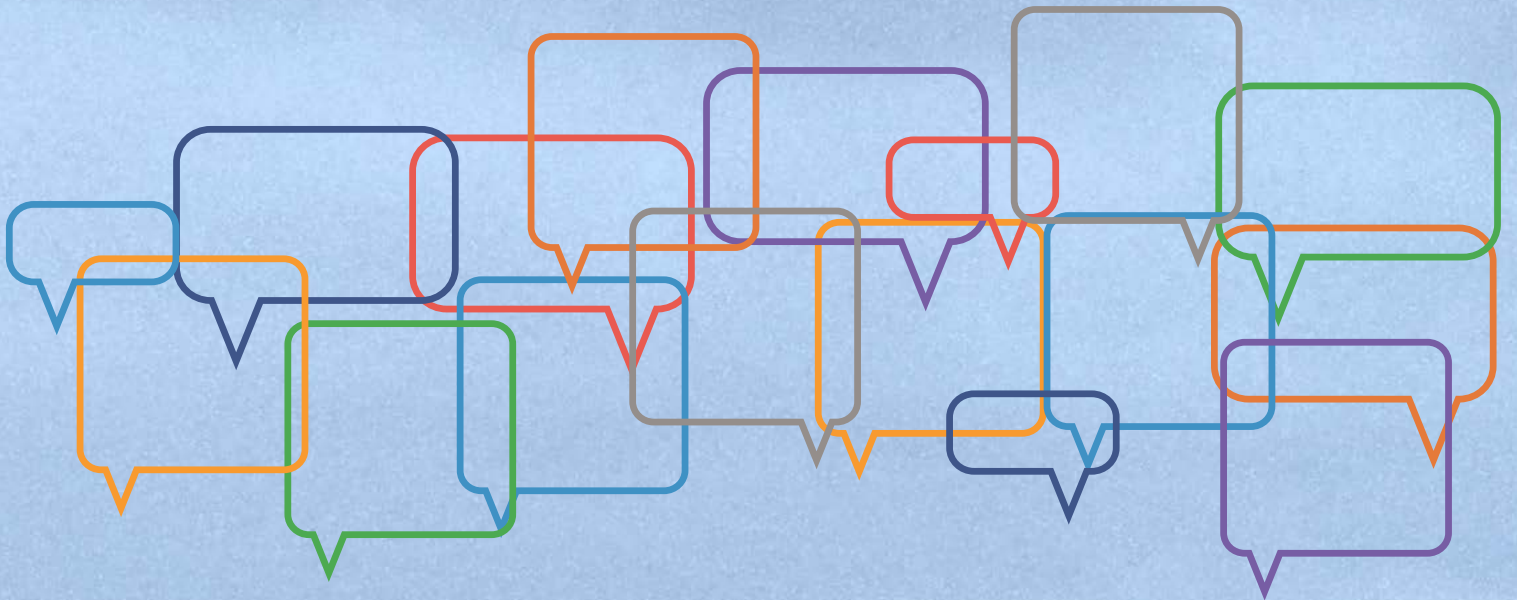# DENVER JOURNAL of EDUCATION & COMMUNITY

Engagement Report: Family Decision-Making

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Executive Summary

Overview: Informed by a process of regional community dialogues hosted by community members throughout Denver, CO in February and March 2020, this report was developed to address the ways in which families of Denver Public Schools (DPS; the District) students make decisions about their children's education and options for schooling. The researchers were interested in knowing whether the information provided to parents by DPS included the types of information that families consider valuable or important to their decision-making. Additionally, because DPS has begun a process of rethinking its School Performance Framework, this report reflects a coordinated effort to hear from a range of community members, families of DPS students, to understand more broadly what types of information are useful to families, including, but not limited to, the SPF.

Purpose/Objective: Our purpose was to discover, understand, and report genuine perspectives of families throughout the City, representing the various types of information used to make schooling/educational decisions for their children. Another purpose was to encourage high authenticity while minimizing control of the environment or the nature of the discussion. By working with a range of community members and organizations throughout Denver, we sought to gather authentic perspectives that were not influenced by unfamiliar or potentially disruptive influences, trusting instead that community dialogue can be a resource for informing public education systems. We also hoped to engage a wide and diverse set of
perspectives--another benefit of working with community organizations--to find opportunities to learn and uncover underlying needs that prevent, or encourage quality schools in Denver.

One question guided our inquiry, and this same question was used as a prompt for each regional community conversation: *What information do you rely on or wish to have in making school decisions for your children?*

This report synthesizes the combined conversations of families in communities throughout the Denver city area.

The report was requested by RootED, a local philanthropic organization involved in education in Denver.

Findings: Although families in Denver care deeply about their children's academic success, they also value additional elements that help to ensure that success and to inform their practice navigating their child's development. These additional elements are evident in the two major findings that emerged following our analysis of the qualitative data, and reflect the two emphases of the guiding question: the information that families use and/or want in order to make schooling/educational decisions for their children.

Major Finding 1: Families rely upon a range of information sources

- District
- School
- Personal experience
- Community

Major Finding 2: Families want to know more about schools

- What is the school like?
- How does the school work?
- How does the school reflect our community context?

Background: The State of Colorado and Denver Public Schools, the state's largest district, measure academic performance through School Performance Frameworks. Though the name is shared and both frameworks measure student performance on state assessments and growth between cohorts of students on the same state assessments, the Frameworks differ in fairly substantive ways. Broadly, the state measures achievement and growth on state assessments, along with

such postsecondary measures as graduation rates, drop-out rates, college entrance exams and college matriculation rates. Denver Public Schools measures additional and important aspects of its schools – such as how satisfied students and parents are, how much students have improved their scores on state tests from year to year, and how well the school serves and challenges all of its students.

Summary: Families hold the academic growth and success of their children in high regard and do not want to replace this priority with other outcomes. Instead, families want the academic experiences and measures of their children's learning to be supplemented with a broader and richer set of information about the social, developmental, and contextual nature of their children's school and school experiences. Both of these types of information are necessary, and likely equally-valuable to families throughout Denver.

Additionally, what is evident in the data are that tremendous insights into the educational experiences of families of school children throughout Denver can help lead the way to maintaining the public commitment of public education--serving and structuring and achieving educational equity for all students in Denver. By relying upon the voices of families as reliable information sources, new ways of prioritizing academic, contextual, and developmental outcomes can be discovered, and the systems and structures in place to communicate with families can be improved.

Recommendations: As independent researchers, we have drawn conclusions from our data collection. These recommendations are intentionally minimal--sourcing our recommendations from the data, but not co-constructing our recommendations with the families who participated in this effort and the school district where these recommendations may be enacted, replicates a tension that surfaced clearly in this research. A statement made by a participant in the Northwest Denver regional community conversation captures this tension well:

> Make sure that we're looking at these things systemically, but also to bring it back once we have a draft of it and to say "is this what you said, what you meant to say?" Or "is there anything else we should make sure to ask or put in, you know, to make sure it's consistent with the spirit of what's happening...?" And that's important to me as a mom, former teacher, school counselor, principal, community person. It's just important to honor what happens in the community, so...

Thus, in short, our recommendations are limited to the following

Additionally, from these rich conversations came what families needed in order to make decisions on the best academic environments for their children. These elements included wanting school profiles, in-depth information regarding school culture and climate, the school leadership and details regarding teachers' preparedness, tenure and ability to connect and support the learning needs of their children. In addition to culture and climate being most prominent in the conversations was the idea of school access. School access was often referred to in context of transportation, access to information about transportation and transportation as access to real choices.

Changes to measuring and reporting school performance should be community- and research-based and balance academic data with contextual (school and community) and developmental (student) data.

The provision of information about schools should be diversified, such that it is made available in more forms, and at various levels of depth and detail. Color-coding school quality based on academic measures is not reflective of the values of many families and presents unintended consequences for children's development. This is particularly important for Latinx and Black children, and is likely the case for students from other historically marginalized backgrounds.

Many families want to know about the adults in their children's schools. This includes indicators such as length of teacher service to the school, styles of school leadership, and the disciplinary climate, including the presence of police. This information is not limited to these indicators, however, and also may include staff racial demographics and the presence of skillful and caring adults who are closely involved in providing targeted support and care to individual children as proxies for families. Families have little choice but to trust the adults in their children's schools.

Limited transportation options are a high priority for many families and influence their school decision-making. The intersection of transportation and choice is complex and costly, but also constrains families' decisions.

Topics for Future Study

To conclude this report, we make recommendations for future engagement with families, in forms of formal research and informal practices of inquiry.

Purpose and Overview

In this report we present the results of a series of regional community dialogues that were organized throughout Denver in which family members and community members met to discuss the information that informs families in making education decisions for their DPS-enrolled children.

Over a stretch of 4 weeks, from February-March 2020, five regional community conversations took place; each was hosted by community members who were interested in hearing from members of their communities. One inquiry question guided these regional community conversations: What information do you rely on or wish to have in making school decisions for your children? By focusing upon a single question, asked of a wide array of people throughout the city, we set out to understand the usefulness of information provided by the District and other resources, as well as to understand what information is valuable to families, but may be missing or not easily accessible.

The arrangement of each regional community conversation was determined by the host(s), and guidance was provided to ensure that the conversations were similar in format: open dialogue; neither moderated nor facilitated. Conversations occurred in English and in Spanish, and were audio-recorded, and transcribed.

Some Background

There are two structural mechanisms in place to measure the performance of each school in the Denver Public Schools portfolio. One is a state measure, the School Performance Framework, and another, also called the School Performance Framework, is a measure specific to Denver Public Schools. These two measures differ in fairly substantive ways, and more about the both can be found on the respective websites of the Colorado Department of Education (www.cde.state.co.us) and Denver Public Schools (www.dspk12.org). Briefly, though, both frameworks measure student performance on state assessments and growth between cohorts of students on these same state assessments.

The state website describes the SPF as a measure of "overall ratings assigned [are] based on achievement and growth on state assessments, along with such postsecondary measures as graduation rates, drop-out rates, college entrance exams and college matriculation rates.

The DPS website describes its SPF as a measure of "many important aspects of what we know makes a great school – such as how satisfied students and parents are, how much students have improved their scores on state tests from year to year, and how well the school serves and challenges all of its students." The District goes on to describe the framework as "a critical tool for helping our students and families understand how their school is performing."

Despite the differences in measuring school performance by two differently-oriented organizations, which is a substantial point of consideration, these school measurement frameworks are not our focus in this report, nor was it the focus of the conversations that we have analyzed and shared here. Instead, our focus is upon information and knowledge, especially the information about schools that is important to families, and the knowledge that families use to navigate their children's school district.

Preliminary review

Prior to engaging in the data collection and analysis process described below, we reviewed a range of other documents in order to establish a baseline representing a current landscape to frame the input and perspectives of family members of DPS students in leading educational thought and practice. In developing a baseline through document review, we focused upon four guiding questions:

I.   Were families involved in informing the report? If so, what do we know about these families?

II.   How is the information reported connected to information about school performance and family member decision-making?

III.   Given Denver Public Schools' current focus on equity, in what ways are the contents of the report connected to equity in education?

IV.   What types of information are used to inform reporting?

A synopsis of this landscape analysis is below. Further details can be accessed by contacting RootED, which is the organization that commissioned this report.

Landscape analysis

I.   The concept of school performance is an important topic for many organizations in Denver that examine education. However, there is variance in people's understanding of the important indicators of school performance. These understandings are not inconsequential.

II.   Educational equity, despite its centrality in Denver Public Schools as reflected in the district's current efforts to develop a Unified Equity Plan, is not a central focus in many recently-developed documents focused upon education in Denver. Some education recommendations may not be concerned with educational equity.

III.   The family members of DPS students are positioned in a wide range of ways by several different organizations, though it is not clear that they are valued as sources of knowledge or expertise. In cases in which families are considered creators and sources of educational knowledge and expertise, their voices are represented by others, such as community leaders.

Baseline for current report

Understanding that a preliminary landscape analysis is fraught with limitations, and recognizing that there are various levels of outcomes (and corresponding implications, as discussed above), our purpose in developing this report is to represent points of alignment and discrepancy between the information about school performance provided by Denver Public Schools and the information that families of students rely upon to make school decisions. Another purpose of this report is to highlight what we have learned about the types of information that families of DPS students find valuable and wish to have reported to them by the District.

Disclaim(er)

As researchers responsible for the collection, analysis, and reporting of the data reflected in this study, we acknowledge potential conflicts of interest in working with a single organization otherwise involved in education in Denver. We have produced this report, requested by RootED, as independent researchers, and have used strategies for qualitative research to gather, analyze and write-up the data reported here.

What we did

To source content for this report, we worked closely with community members who expressed interest in hosting a regional community conversation. In order to standardize the structure of each conversation, we provided a guiding document that provided a step-by-step process for each host to follow. This guidance was intended to reduce some variances of process that may prevent comparable data.

Each host relied upon their relationships with community members to invite participation, determined date/time/ location details, and ensured audio-recording of the full group discussion.

We delivered the recording devices and guiding host document prior to the meeting. During each regional community conversation, participants were invited to give permission to be recorded, and were encouraged to share their genuine thoughts and experiences in response to a single question. To support candor and reduce any risk to participants, we committed to de-identifying their personal information. We have done so here.

Five regional community conversations took place. A sixth planned discussion in Far Northeast Denver was canceled due to unforeseen circumstances. However, members of Far Northeast Denver were well-represented in a regional community conversation that was hosted by the African Leadership Group (ALG) in Southeast Denver. Thus, families in each of Denver Public Schools' six regions were represented in these five regional community conversations, despite the unplanned cancellation of one in the Far Northeast region. Organizing the conversations according to this regional structure aligns to DPS' regional reorganization. The five regions in which these conversations occurred were:

- Central Denver
- Southwest Denver[1]
- Northwest Denver
- Southeast Denver[2]
- Near Northeast Denver
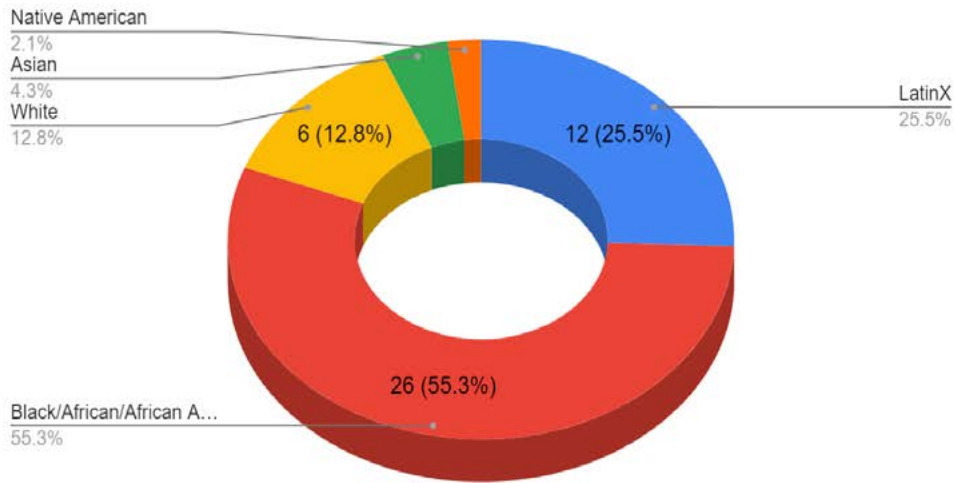
Table 1: Regional Community Conversation Profiles

Date / length	Location	Participants
13 Feb 2020 Conversation (1:10)	NW Denver	7 (5 parents; 2 community organizers) (2 Latina mothers, 1 white mother, 1 Latino father)
19 Feb 2020 Conversation (1:16)	NNE Denver	7 participants (7 DPS parents) (1 White; 6 PoC)(4 Black, 1 Asian, 1 Latinx)
29 Feb 2020 Conversation (0:50)	SW Denver	6 participants (5 parents; 1 community member) (Spanish language)(all Latinx)
29 Feb 2020 Conversation (1:32)	SE/FNE Denver (combined)	19 (12 DPS parents)(7 community members)(all Black American or African)
3 Mar 2020 Conversation (1:23)	Central Denver	8 participants (8 DPS parents) (3 White; 5 PoC (2 Black, 1 Asian, 1 Latinx, 1 Indian)
Conversation Total Length: 371 min (6hrs; 11min)	Locations represented (6 Denver regions (ALG combined)	Participants: Total: 47 Latinx: 12 Black: 26 White: 6 Asian: 2 Indian: 1

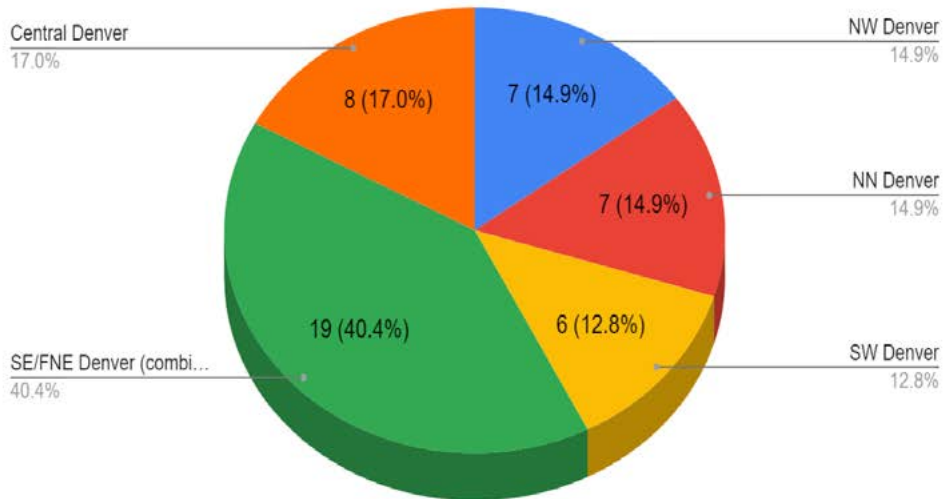1   This conversation occurred in Spanish, and was transcribed to English.
2   This conversation included 19 participants from the Southeast and Far Northeast regions.

Participants By Ethnic Group

Native American
2.1%

Asian
4.3%

White
12.8%

6 (12.8%)

LatinX
25.5%

12 (25.5%)

Black/African/African A...
55.3%

26 (55.3%)

Participants By Location

Central Denver
17.0%

8 (17.0%)

NW Denver
14.9%

7 (14.9%)

NN Denver
14.9%

7 (14.9%)

6 (12.8%)

SW Denver
12.8%

SE/FNE Denver (combi...
40.4%

19 (40.4%)

Once each of the conversations took place, we uploaded and stored the audio recordings to a shared (protected) cloud storage space, allowing limited and controlled access. We also established a procedure for analyzing the audio files using 1- and 5-minute annotations, and met to ensure that our procedures for review and analysis were calibrated[3]. Each annotation was organized according to the previous categories of information that we developed through the landscape analysis which provided a baseline. We also sought out additional categories of information beyond those developed through our landscape analysis of previous reports.

Our annotations were systematically quantified so as to help us to understand frequency of mentions as well as hear across multiple conversations to discover patterns. In order to refine our findings, each recording was professionally transcribed, and we re-calibrated our coding of the text files, and analyzed the data again, identifying two categories of information related to families' education decision-making.

a) Information used
b) Information desired

These patterns result in the findings we report below and are supported by a range of direct quotes from the participants in each region. Throughout this report, we attempt to support each claim with statements made by participants from each regional community conversation, prioritizing family and parent voices.

Major Finding 1: Families rely upon a range of information sources

It was clear to us that families rely upon a wide range of sources of information when making education decisions for their children. While Denver Public Schools is a primary source of information for many families, families also rely upon outside organizations, their children's experiences, and their communities to make education decisions. It also was clear that families find DPS-provided information inconsistent or incomplete, not reflecting their public education values, and frequently not socially, developmentally, or culturally responsive.

Based upon our analysis, there are four key categories of information sources that families rely upon to make education decisions for their children: a) the school district, b) individual schools, c), personal experience, and d) the larger community.

District as Source of Information

Families rely upon Denver Public Schools for information about school options for their children. By visiting websites, making telephone calls, receiving mail, and participating in District events, families learn about the options available to their children. There are characteristics of families' interactions with District-provided information that qualify their reliance upon District information. Greater than half of the mentions of Denver Public Schools as the source of information about schools in the District was characterized by distrust, the absence of consistent or reliable
information, and the lack of a known central source available to families to ask questions about schools.

School Performance Framework

Observations were made by family members, including those who also are DPS employees, reflecting frustrations that they've felt in their efforts to use the District's primary source of school information, the School Performance Framework (SPF). When asked by another Central Denver parent, "As a parent, um, first, and you also have the instructional lens, what are you thinking of when you look at, for quality, and then what tools are you using?

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3   We sought inter-rater reliability through calibration and continued until our codes were agreed upon.

Are you using the enrollment guidebook?

Are you using the SPF? What makes you say, 'Yeah, that works for my kids?'" a parent and DPS educator replied:

> *I think, first and foremost, like, um, word of mouth. Like, um, friends, colleagues. I'm thinking of, like, who I trust. Who's in my, kind of, tribe, that I want to trust and hear about their experiences. Um, so I think, first and foremost, I think about that. Um. I think I'm privileged enough to feel like I can somewhat navigate this choice process, 'cause it's kind of confusing. Um, so understanding that I do have some choice in this, um, so that, recognizing that, and then trying to figure out, like, so now what I'm hearing about schools, or what, you know, friends experience is about, now it's something, something I'm curious about. I want to know what does it look like in that school? Um, so then I'll, you know, sometimes that's potentially going to the school. I want to see what it looks like. Um, I want to know what their, kind of, educational philosophy is. So, I want to think about that. I have, and I will, look at the enrollment guide, because that, that at least, gives a snippet of information about, like what are the programmings, what's the programming there? What's the philosophy, what's the model, mission, vision? Um. But, in order to really know the school, I need to know somebody there, or go see it. So, um, that's a big piece for me.*

There was a range of views about the usefulness of the District resource for communicating school information to families. The District's School Performance Framework (SPF) has some use for families, but it is limited due to its primary source of input. This was a particularly salient topic in the Central Denver region, particularly after the SPF was defined following one parent's request for clarification about the meaning of SPF: *"What is SPF? Sorry. I was thinking sunscreen at first!"* This parent was responded to by another parent who commented:

> *No, yes. School Performance Framework. The tool that the district uses to evaluate schools. Think of it like a report card. So for me, having been there is what made me say "No, this is not going to work for her." But then after that point, that was the other place we had to choose, because all the other seats were taken, and the only place you could go back to was her home school. We had to default there, so we're just counting down the days to where we can get her into high school. That's it for us.*

This parent goes on to state that:

> *I think one of the most powerful tools of SPF was to differentiate from schools who were serving kids from high trauma well and poorly... The beginnings of some of those tests for the first time. From most of educational history, there was a one-one correlation between demographic codes and outcomes. And it's not like I'm defending the SPF, I don't really mean to do that. But there's something about standards and evaluation that gave us this ability to say it's not deterministic. It's about the environment that we create... So we have to have some way of differentiating between what are the inputs of the students we're serving... I feel something happened when we went from the value that could provide to these unsubstantiated leaps of closing schools...*

Several minutes later, another Central Denver parent returns to this topic of limited utility of the SPF's primary source of input, stating:

> *Even though there's bias and how tests are written, you can see some correlation in most schools have in-house interim assessments. You can see some correlation in most schools. The I-station I feel like I've always used it as a tool. I use that data more than state tests, because state tests are a one-to-day thing, and iStation data, we were taking those every six weeks so we can really track and then respond to the data. You guys adjust your instructions based on the data, right? And so, that's why I've never put too much stuff on the data. We never get that back. And those kids are already gone for us to be able to adjust and deal with anything there.*

Later in this regional community conversation, a parent expanded this uncertainty about measuring school performance using such a mechanism, albeit with a focus upon implications for Black students:

> *The school was looking like it was doing great, but it was failing black kids. Specifically, black men, boys, were being failed prior to this. It calls it out. So, those are the things that, if I'm a black parent, would I even choose the school that says, if we had that pie graph, again, going back to your point... OK, you can take out the academics slice, and then you click on the academic slice, and then it unfolds and says: this is how we're*

doing for black kids, black males, black females. If you're a parent and you see that it's red. And then you see the green for white students, and it still sees all this red for black students, do you choose that school for your kid? That's, I think, where this conversation is. What kind of data do we need to see that would push us to choose differently, but also would push the quality conversation? To say, it's not just about the score. We want to know my son's teacher, but also I want to know that he's going to be able to read. And he's going to be able to do his arithmetic, and I want to know that he's going to have opportunities. And I want to know he's going to be able to engage in sports, right? What data do I need to see that? And that's how messy this is. I mean, right now districts decided they're going to rewrite the SPF, there's not committee conversations about that. I mean, definitely a lot of this work with people who're having those conversations. What's important? What needs to be measured?

Families also consider the SPF difficult to understand in general. One Central Denver parent described feeling overwhelmed when trying to make sense of data provided by the SPF, emphasizing challenges with understanding the data:

Many of us see data, but understanding data is very different. I look through some of the stuff and I don't even know what I'm looking at or how to really translate it. So, it is… and it doesn't matter if these kids are on grade level if they're not growing. And then where does that come from? What test was given to see that? It's a little overwhelming.

For some families, interpreting SPF data also overlooks the stories of schools. And, while putting the SPF to good use, families also find it necessary to supplement the report:

I think that SPF is a good indicator, and I have started to use it. I do use it now. I don't think it's like an end-all for schools, because there's so many different things, like you said, that contribute to those scores. But I think that one that I think is important is leadership. What does the leadership look like? (Near Northeast Denver parent)

I used to look at it [SPF] quite a bit. My now working for the schools on a different level I see it differently. One of the schools I work for had their ranking go down for something that seemed so minute. Some people who really look at this and base their decisions on the color of the school it impacts their decision making. At this point they don't even look at the school if it's not the color they hoped for. (Far Northeast Denver parent)

SPF is an attempt to measure the ultimate outcomes of what we want to see in our schools, which is, I guess, a fair question. What do we want our schools to produce in our kids? And, to some degree, we've seen the history of inequitable access post-high-school, and post-primary and secondary education to opportunity. And so, I do wonder whether it's through the lens of what we call as accountability, or we call it as quantitative… Do we have the right measures to inform what happens beyond the time at school? Because, for many of us, I don't think it's ever a question. Our kids will be given as many opportunities as they can have, whether we believe that's college, or access to something post-high-school that's going to be meaningful and ideally successful. But when families are using this tool to see, belonging matters, these are all fundamentals like thinking of the hierarchy of basic human needs, we have to achieve those first and foremost before you can engage in learning. That's absolutely essential, but at some level too: are we giving parents a tool to understand "what will my kid have at the end of this?" My kid could go to a bad school and still have access to college, most likely. But historically, a lot of people have completed high school or not completed high school because their families sent them to a school where they didn't know what opportunities would be… and then you look at success rates of kids who started college and dropped out because they were set up to believe they could go there, and they don't have the tools to do it. And they're coming underprepared. I think like "How SPF is or isn't a spring board to the right information to help families understand what is beyond it?" Especially for the families who don't have a historical context family-wise or community-wise to say "We all understand what college entails". 75% percent of the first graduating class was first-generation, and 75% of the families who don't have a context for what it's actually like to feel and experience postsecondary education. So, how do we use SPF to help families know that they are sending their kids on a course to have the opportunity? Because the inequities in society don't just stem from what happens K-12, but what happens after. So I'm curious… […] I have come to see that differently. I identify that because I came from two college-educated parents and educators, and I've never had to confront these things. And then I traced from my first years as a teacher in a small school in Ala-

bama, where I don't know what happened to some of those kids and whether they… I know a lot of them didn't go to college and get a job after high school, and some of them may not even be alive… Seeing a slightly different trajectory. And the information about families has helped them to understand what happens. And I think that, in some capacity, is more important to think about. I'm not saying SPF measures all of that, but what is the correlation between what SPF does and how it ties to the society at large? It measures people frankly in ways that are inaccurate and unfair, but nonetheless measures and creates opportunities or prevents opportunities. (Central Denver parent)

Enrollment Guide

Families utilize the District's enrollment guide in order to learn about their children's education opportunities and to inform their choices. However, it was clear that there were some additional limitations presented by the format and platform through which the information was shared:

…it told me what was in my region, but even what's in my region was not particularly helpful, because some of the schools in my region are really far away. So, the map online was more helpful, because I could put in my address and see dots of the schools that were nearby. There was no information on there about transportation, so I didn't know until I went to [School] that, because it's a magnet school, you can get a bus. Or that in Denver's [School X], [School Y] you could, maybe I shouldn't say this, but in theory, the bus from Park Hill, if you dropped your kid off at the bus stop and there was room, they would take your kid, but you wouldn't know that unless you went in and actually saw it. So, there were a lot of places I was like "I'm not going to drive all this way." So, transportation is the other issue. Like if we're serious about having parents choose schools that are a good fit transportation matters. They don't have two hours a day, in addition to the extracurriculars that I take my kids to, to drive my kids back and forth to school. (Central Denver parent)

District events

Families rely upon District events to gather information about schools:

I went to the school fairs. They had one downtown, when I was getting ready to enroll them in ECE, where all the schools in DPS that offered ECE were present. There's many that are for elementary and high schools. They do offer them in English and in Spanish. (Southwest Denver parent)

Phone Calls

One Northwest Denver area parent, in communicating her frustrations about getting information about half-day ECE options for her son, described her experience this way:

All of the phone calls that I've made in the last month or so, I feel just like were the runaround. Like, I have called and I have wanted to put him half-a-day because I feel like full-day (ECE) is too much to start him. And I got told, you know, three, four different things, depends on who answered the phone with what they told me. And, ultimately, I spent two days on the phone calling every single school individually to get my questions answered. So, I feel like, you know, whatever, not even just DPS, but whatever school district you go to, they have support for parents in all of the decisions. And, if we are going to talk specifically about DPS, I don't feel DPS has that.

As a parent in Southeast Denver discussed accessing information about schools in the District, the context of the parent's comments indicate dissatisfaction with the available information as well as the process of acquiring the information.

Denver Public School. There is a hotline, you can ask the principal to provide you with that hotline and they will help you solve that issue. Please, do that. Ask them for the hot line because there is a program that can help that situation in Denver Public Schools.

Websites

Families also use the Denver Public Schools website to gain information about school options for their children.

I feel like I am struggling right now with my daughter. My son has already been in school for so long that the process to enroll my daughter seems new. She is going to be three in April and starting ECE and I am aware of the resources and went on the site and started looking but I realized that many of the school that were "good" or that I liked, didn't offer the three-year old program. The space is so limited and even though I did complete my application and submitted it for the first round, I didn't know that there will a spot for her. I spent all day looking for these programs, looking to see how close or far they were. (Far Northeast Denver parent)

School as a Source of Information

In addition to utilizing information from the Denver Public Schools District at-large, families also are likely to rely upon a particular school, more narrowly, to gain needed information. This practice includes school visits, talking with school staff, and accessing school-provided resources, such as classroom videos and school-based newsletters.

School visits

When time and resource align, families may visit schools to gain first-hand access to information about school options for their children. This practice, however, may be understood as a reflection of the social and economic privilege that many families have (and that many others may not have). At the start of the discussion in Central Denver, a parent identifies her experience visiting schools, noting that her professional privilege provided an opportunity that should be available to all families:

…this is such a hard question, but I just have to navigate the insanity that is the Denver school choice process. I had to do my forms yesterday for an entering middle-schooler, entering sixth grade, and a child who's in seventh grade who I would like to move. And I'm so thankful that I have a job that gave me flexibility and time to go on school tours, figure out shadow days for my children, take them on tours with me when I could, go to evening kind of events. And I only looked at… I mean, I had a short list. So, based on the thing that I got that told me where the schools were, I only really looked at six or seven. And it took an enormous amount of time and I kept thinking "what about all the parents and families that don't have this time and don't have the ability to navigate, or don't have the chutzpah … When I got the mean email from school about "why are your kids out of school so much?" to be like "Give me a break, leave me alone". So, I'll just say that: the process of doing it, the information that is provided in a colorful, colorful brochure to me wasn't particularly meaningful. I probably know more than those parents, but I was really interested in: how does this school feel when I walk into it? What's on the wall? How are classrooms named? I think that's fascinating, what are they named for? How are people talking about the developments and needs of my kid, as a middle-schooler? Do they even mention it at all? Do I have the sense that they have the sense of what middle schoolers are? Does it feel like I walk into classrooms but only see kids on computers and sort working quietly but on laptops? You know, with twenty percent of them actually doing what they're supposed to do. So those are the things, right? And you can only learn those things by going into a school.

School visits are a source of information for families, though families visits to schools also may produce unintended consequences based upon the ways that they are treated when they visit. This thinking emerged in a comment made by a father from Far Northeast Denver, though it was shared by other parents as well, including a mother in Central Denver and another parent in Southwest Denver.

So, what I do when I go visit schools… My son is nine years old and…I intentionally go to the first meeting in every school in my slides and my hoodie, and my cap backwards, my chain out, I don't say much, and I've just got to see how they're going to treat me. And there is very distinct difference between when I come dressed like this… Or like really the moment I open my mouth and start asking questions, you know… So, there's a distinct difference on how you are treated. The other thing is… Back to the GT point… I felt like I had to make a conscious decision between putting my son in a school where kids look, act, talk and think like him, that resembled what he might experience at home and a good education, that's going to challenge him, you know, to think. In that moment, I had to make that decision, right? Which, I think, is a testament to what everybody is talking about here. (Far Northeast Denver parent)

Every month there was something new that we had to come in about me and my partner. "This is the work I do,

I'm happy to consult with you. I'm happy to do this for free, but you can't do this when you have black children." They have a huge... are they African? There was a huge immigrant community at [this school...which] as a whole is very dismissive of adults, children are black people. I know what they experienced. And then was my boys' experience. And then when I was looking for another school, this year. (Central Denver parent)

I did focus more on touring schools. I would call and they would give me a date, we would visit the schools and that way we were able to get all of the information we needed to help decide. We compared and talked about what we liked about each school. I was able to do it before the first round but at the same time it was because [another parent] told me and gave me the information on steps to take. I also didn't know that if we didn't choose beforehand the schools we wanted may not have had space. If I wouldn't have had her to help me I also would have known about that and this was when she was going to go into Kindergarten. I do believe there is a lack in communication where if you don't have someone already in the schools or may be working for the schools the information takes longer to get to you. (Southwest Denver parent)

For families who arrive to Denver from other US cities, navigating school options for their children may also require school visits as a sort of default:

Same with you, knowing people and talking to people is a way that later on helped us navigate the school. But when we moved to Denver, we were coming in with two elementary school kids and a middle schooler. We didn't know anybody. We didn't have that avenue to ask people and get opinions, so we were going very programmatic. We started researching programs specific to schools, so that's how we started to drive our way down there, and then going into the schools. Coming from a teaching background too, it's like you want to see this. Also I remember meeting each of the administrators. Just knowing the administrators, hold the key to the culture of the schools and just kind of getting a sense for that. But that was a whole different mind frame, to remember "How did we pick schools when we didn't know people?" We didn't know the area, and we didn't know... Coming from a smaller town into a bigger city, it was a little overwhelming. So, we definitely started looking for programs. (Central Denver parent)

Comparing school programs

Some families understand that schools differ in programs, though the nature of programming differences takes additional time to learn about. As one Far Northeast parent noted, even school programs similarly labeled may differ significantly in substance, and learning that lesson places demands on families:

We were really frustrated but we attested it to the GT program. There was one school that had a GT program. And it wasn't actually a full program, but it was more like more worksheets that they did, as opposed to more critical... higher level curriculum. And we only went there because, one, it was close to our house, and two, it had a GT program. He ended up getting in in the second round to [...] two completely different programs, both GT programs, but with two completely different demographics. Well, right. But then the other part was like the fact that there's other schools close to our house wasn't necessarily helpful.

Additionally, schools can be a resource of a different sort to parents thinking of schooling options for their children. For instance, a Central Denver parent noted that default economic segregation occurs in some schools, though knowing the dynamics and details of this segregation was a late lesson:

But I think we should also talk a little about the choice process itself, because I refer to this as legal segregation because that's what it is, right? We can't segregate anymore. So we have the choice program. It's for people who have... Shift workers. Our kids are out at 1:15 on Friday? I don't know. Is that something you guys can do? If your kids were out on Friday at 1:15, is that something you guys could...? If you worked in Walmart, I don't believe your schedule would be conducive to you having a kid, right? And then we have these adventure trips, where the kids sleep over for a few days a week at a national park. And so it's not required but it's strongly encouraged that we pay additional 800 bucks for two kids to be part of this program. For some who is working at Target, or someone who's scraping by, there's no...

This parent, who self-identifies as black, goes on:

I think there's a reason why my school is majority white, because we have priced out poor people. There is a list of things that are strongly encouraged. For these trips. They were like "The North Face".

We don't say you have to buy this brand, but you should get a mummy-style sleeping bag that is rated 30° degrees below. And so when I added up all… And I camp, so I know I'm an outlier, because that's not something that black people do. I know I'm an outlier, so I have those things. But they didn't know if I didn't have a partner, and if I was a single parent… And they do have the opportunity to borrow those things, but that's a different barrier. But it's like I'm already a single parent who can barely pay the fees, I don't want to borrow stuff from you. And I'm like…

Direct School Communication

Families seem to value direct communication from their children's schools, whether in the form of a newsletter or a classroom website.

My fifth-grader, oh man… I'm like "buddy, what did you do at school today?" and he's like… "play"… "Great, and Math?" and their teachers actually do a very cool thing, where they send us a newsletter just for the fifth grade, letting us know like "this is what your kids are working on." And so, I'm also like zero volunteer. I drop him off at six a.m. But it's really nice to have like those newsletters that tell me like "this is…" So now I'm like "hey, you were dividing decimals, how did you do on your quiz? Show me your quiz" And he'll bring it out. He's taking access… so, OK, you're doing access testing, how did you do? So it makes it easy for me. If I'm at work, I can pull it up, and I can see exactly what they're working on. (Northwest Denver parent)

We stopped by the office and asked and they would say the teacher had gone home and it was always so busy. A month later he transferred to a new school and this school was so different. A week in they emailed via email and updated us on how he was doing. Giving us tips on focus points links to all the online work. Yes, I do know that working for the district you gain much more information, but it just felt so nice to be informed on all upcoming events and deadlines. Unfortunately not all schools are like that. (Southwest Denver parent)

Sometimes, I feel like it's not that they don't have the resources, it's that they don't know how to put it out there for parent to hear that these resources are out there. The resources are there but they may be over the phone, web, like you said. I also receive all of my information via email or text. Now they are able to send you information any way you need it and in many languages. They just don't know how to let parents know that they are there. (Southwest Denver parent)

Social Media

School communication does inform families' education decision-making for their children. Social media is one such format, though this may be characterized by some distrust of the presentation of schools, assumptions about the role of social media as legitimate communication about public schools, and the privilege needed to reconcile incongruent communication about schools.

I know [one school] sends messages through Facebook. Letting you know that if you have any kids going into ECE. Now, I don't know If this is something available to all. I know I see these messages because I follow their Facebook page because my daughter attends that school. (Southwest Denver parent)

Also being in the belly of the beast and seeing how schools operate, you can make things look beautiful. You can make things and that's what social media does. You can present a picture that is not reality. So I think I look at those with a grain of salt too, like "Ok, it looks beautiful. There's something about here that's intriguing." You can't totally fake that, but I want to know the authenticity of it. Schools are hard places, ups and downs, day to day… Does the staff love kids? Do you get this feeling that the staff is there for kids even on the hard days? Somehow, I need to get a vouch for that. (Central Denver parent and DPS educator)

Every day I worry about "is she learning? Is she safe?" Because on paper it looks good. The social media looks good. I've had other people to vouch for. But from my visits, and from the things that I know… I guess when you're in it you know what to look for. The enrollment guide did not serve any great purposes for me, because it said one thing… SPF even said one thing, but then when I went in there, I was like "I don't know how they achieve this". Because it was just absolutely not good. So for us that visit was important. And not everybody has that opportunity to make the visits. (Central Denver parent)

Relationships to School and School Staff

Given that schools are located in communities throughout Denver, sometimes there is overlap between the school

as a source of information, and schools as a place for family members to connect with neighbors and friends who are District employees. One Central Denver parent described it this way:

> [School] is our homeschool, but because the coaches for football are coaches we've known since before he was born, they wanted [my son] to play for them he got along with those coaches rather than the [school's] coaches. We know a lot of the people that work in the building, family members.

This overlap between schools and community as points of information about schools was shared by other members of Central Denver:

> To a larger degree, I know a lot of the men that work in that building. A lot of my family graduated from [another school], and so… He really cannot understand why he was called […]because I had more eyes on him. He doesn't really understand, but now… he's kind of like "Hey, you know everyone in the building." And yeah, I know people there. He doesn't have those things, but I felt comfortable with him being around a lot of guys I knew were not going to let him fall with the dynamic. He's getting in high school, there're certain keys.

> Ultimately, the decision wasn't really based on the sports, or him playing football. As much as I know that if I have him over here with Coach ___ who knows those guys, I can rest assured that he's going to have some support over there. You know, one way or another. And I think for me, the academics are number one before any of that. So, I also kind of wanted to look into some of the classes he would be taking. So, there were some pretty good classes and things that he actually takes right now that I thought, "Yeah, take advantage of some of those classes. You have advanced skills and Math and things like that." So, some of them was both. (Central Denver parent)

Experience as a Source of Information

Families may be influenced by children's experiences in school, indicating an additional source and type of information to decision-making.

> For me, I always, every time… even my kids are going to middle school next year and I'm terrified, but everywhere I go, I talk to kids. Because kids will tell you, a hundred per cent will let you know how they feel about teachers, how they feel about their class, about how they feel about the work, if there's too much homework. And I always ask them like "do you know your principal's name?" and, if they say "no", I'm like "oh, yeah, I'm not going to come here." I think it's important that kids know their leader. (Northwest Denver parent)

Students, too, may be influenced in their own thinking about their educational options by peers. In Northwest Denver, a current student described the influence of the school's color rating on his (and his classmates') interest in attending that school:

> Well, middle-school is not really a topic that we talk about, but when we do talk about it… and a lot of kids, because I don't think you guys have seen them, but they give us all these little magazines. That's actually how I learned what an SPF rating was. Because when you opened it, it showed you a bunch of schools, and it showed their SPF ratings, it showed a lot of stuff about their, all their info, what they do. And I saw a lot of kids being very impressed. And the kids compared once [School A and School B]. They were really impressed with about [School B], because it was a green school. They had all these activities… But then there's [School A]. And it's very… I don't remember what the SPF rating was, but it was not a green, I think it was an orange. And they did have a lot of activities, but not just as much as [School B] did. So I think when kids say "I want to go to [School B], I don't want to go to [School A]." And, it is in my neighborhood, but I don't want to go there either, because they're not doing well. They don't have a lot of activities. So, I think DPS can see that, and see how the kid helps them make more growth, not just put it on a magazine.

He goes on to elaborate:

> I think to most kids… I think the majority of kids… they thought the color mattered more, because, you know, of the way that they perceived it. So, they think like "Oh, it's a green school. That means I have to go there. Oh, this is an orange school, there's no way I could go there." And realistically, [School A]… I haven't been there before, but one of my friend's teacher… one of my friend's dad goes there, he works there, and they're trying to make a difference, you know. That's because of other previous ratings. So I think it's maybe just a color, and also what interests them most.

A Central Denver parent describes a variety of factors informing the role of his child's experience in selecting, and remaining at, a local high school, including his son's needs and experiences:

> I said [my son] goes to [school] because the football coach is no longer there, but he went because of that and he went because he wanted to go to a school where this athletic program, in the school, it was not a regional program. In Green Valley Ranch they have a regional program where kids come from all over schools and then they form a team. We wanted a high school experience where you're going to class with your teammates. And it was at the risk of the data I knew. I knew that the school that he was going to did not serve black students well. I knew that. The data said that. And I had to stay on top of it, stay on top of him. But I know that there's not one person of color on the administrator team, so I'm worried about that all the time. There's not... There's two guys around the instructional team, but one is credit recovery. So he's not in there to direct instructions. He's helping kids catch up. And so there's no instructor there of color. The leadership of the team... mostly white women and one white guy. So the data is very alarming, has always been very alarming to me, so you guys... I did not choose the school for academics. I chose the school for other… And one, his best friend…goes there, so... safety in numbers.

Families make education decisions for their children based upon firsthand experience, whether positive or negative.

> Well, I don't have any information other than that my son wanted to attend [School]. My daughters at one point also attended [this school] and one of them graduated from there. I think that it's a good school for my son because it has a lot of good programs and that's why I agreed to let him go there. (Southwest Denver parent)

> My son has moved schools quite a bit. When he first started in preschool, we did Choice and during this time I was able to pick up to five schools and since it's a lottery system, he attended whatever school he got. After a year in school, I started to pay more attention to the things I liked for him, such as programs that schools offered, distance, etc. That is now what I am doing for my daughter as well. (Far Northeast Denver parent)

> Number one, she was bullied three years ago for the whole year and I fought. I fought. I had to call the police. She had three concussions and the school was not doing anything. So I tried to call a meeting with the parents of the other kid. It was just one particular girl who was bullying and pushing her, and she hit her head on the concrete and they called me to come and take my child because she has a concussion.

> It was horrible. So I became bad. I had to be bad. I literally had to be wild. I went to the school and I told the principal: "What do you want me to do? Do you need me to go to Washington D.C. to scream about what is hap-pening? What are we waiting for? Are we waiting for my child to break her neck, and then that's when you're going to do something? Or what are we doing?" Because the other parent did not want to come to a meeting. And then, as the year went, we discovered that their first grader was a bully too in the first grade. So, it was not that child. It was the family. But for... they look at you and it's like literally we are the minority, right? And it's like maybe they won't do anything about it, but we have to speak up. I fought for my daughter to a point that they had to remove that family from school. But I had to call the board, I had to call another... I had one teacher, who told me not to tell who she was, but she gave me all these numbers that I was supposed to call. And I called those numbers, and I fought, I wrote a police report. I did everything I could until that family was removed from that school. So that was good for my daughter. And then that same teacher discovered that my daughter was brilliant. So, she pushed for them to test her for gifted and talented, so now she's in that. At least she's busy because she does her class. Then, after that, she has the program and she has to do presentations in other classes so she's not bored... She's excelling very good. The problem is my son, that now... he's fourteen. He feels nobody cares, so he goes to class and doesn't do anything. He's got Fs. And then the teacher calls me and is like "we know he has potential," but what are we doing? What can we do? So, what I'm really asking is... I was saying, last week, "can we do an online process for him?" I just want to pull him out and then we'll figure out what to do. (Southeast Denver parent)

> I can say that I haven't experienced any blatant racism, but there has been racism and you'd better believe I pointed it out at every opportunity. Every opportunity. Because what we went through at [School]... I'm just going to be much more vocal. So I always pointed out, and it's well-received. But there's not a lot of engage-ment at our school with minority parents and there's only a handful of us, to be clear. There's not a lot of en-gagement to put the parents in the school. And it seems as if they want to remedy it, but they don't know how.

I believe they are sincere. They are incredibly sincere, they just do not know what to do. But there has not been a school in Denver that I have been able to find where… I think there's one school in Green Valley Ranch. I can't remember the name, where the staff mimics the student body population. (Central Denver parent)

Community

Another important source of information about schooling in Denver is the broader community. While it is clear that families do not make decisions in isolation, they clearly do make collective decisions. A Near Northeast Denver parent described his community orientation this way:

As a black man, African American, I don't feel individualistic. I feel very much a part of the collective and I feel like that that's the way we actually ride on a daily basis. And I feel like I daily confront it with data and systems that want me to be an individual.

There were several other key indicators of the role of community in informing school decisions for families throughout Denver.

I run an organization that is an advocacy organization in Denver, and I have enough information. I run a whole program that's getting parents information on how to improve their schools. And even in that, because of the lack of collaboration within the school, and even though that I can ask for I recognize there's so much privilege in that, I still don't know… I think that, because of the lack of collaboration, it's almost like there's no route to enter, which is a really interesting problem as an organizer, but also as a parent. And also I think those two things don't always align. (Northwest Denver parent and community organizer)

I trust parents, but I would say more parents that are just like us. I mean, if I'm getting a phone call from some-one from the PTA or the person from PTA or, you know, whatever, and "oh, you should come here because of this or that" I'm going to trust a parent that I know from the neighborhood or from whatever more. My kids play sports year round, and we're on multiple teams, so we know parents, like [community organizer] said, all over Denver, and your sports family becomes your other family because we're together so much. So a lot of opinions that I've got have been from my kids' friends' parents. And I would trust their opinion more than, like I said, you know, just going to an expo and hearing what the principal says, or whatever, you know. So, I listen to a lot of, like I said, parents, and kids too. I talk to the kids, you know. We always have a kid in the car, we always have a kid we're taking home, so I say "how's school? what's going on? what do you like?" (Northwest Denver parent)

…we went to visit schools but it took a long time. You had to schedule and then go, and sometimes they didn't have enough staff for tours so you'd have to wait even longer. Even then, I didn't find a single school that wowed me and said this is the best choice for my daughter. So I needed up doing with what was convenient and since my sister worked at [School] I chose to enroll my daughter there. I figured if I have my sister there. I can always talk to her if anything happens and I saw that my niece was thriving there and was reading al-ready. (Southwest Denver parent)

Word of Mouth

Families talk with other families and community members about their school experiences. The influence of families' experiences can significantly impact their decision-making as well as the decision-making of others.

I was talking to some parents from this one school, [Name] I think. They were saying that the principal was so mean and was really hard on the kids. Around four parent jumped in and agreed and well that give me the idea that the school must not be good. If this happens to so many of them, I wouldn't put my kids there. (Southwest Denver parent)

The unique experiences of families who arrive to the US presents opportunities for community support during their transition to the educational system of DPS. One resident of Southeast Denver, an immigrant to the US described it this way:

I met [community leader] a few years ago, when I had just moved to Colorado. I think it was 2013. And all of you guys know him, so… as you know him, he won't live here anymore. Well, when I came over here my little girl was… I think she was only a few months, she was less than a year. And then we start talking about education, that's how I learned about US education, because as a foreigner, as an immigrant, when you come to this country, I think the first thing you have to learn…

Well, everybody has different objectives, but I think it is more useful to learn about education in order to settle your objective and then which direction to take exactly.

Another immigrant parent expressed gratitude for a community-based organization that supported the parent's learning about how to navigate schools in Denver:

And then one thing... when it comes to your first child and as immigrant in this country I think it's really complicated to rely or to try to have an idea of what information to rely on when you send your child to school. I'm taking an example on my kids. I did not know anything about the school education system until the class that we took together at ALG. And then they explained what information you might need to look at. But when I chose a school for my daughter, I was mainly focused on the main language that she adopted or had it, as a second potential on top of English so she can communicate with people back home. (Southeast Denver parent)

Major Finding 2: Families want to know more about schools

It was clear to us that families use a wide range of information to inform their education decisions. It was also quite clear that families, collectively, are interested in knowing much more about education and schools in Denver. Much of the information that families would like to have reflects their values and the unique nature of their experiences as diverse members of society. Having access to relevant and responsive information about schools is not limited to academic outcomes or growth on academic assessments. Throughout the data, underlying feature of the information that families discuss as important, but missing, from their experiences with Denver Public Schools was clear: families want to know about the school as a whole, including the nature of a school's culture, climate, staff, and structure.

While the particulars vary, a clear underlying category is apparent in the data. We refer to this underlying category of information about the school as a whole as a School Profile.

Information Used

- District (SPF; Enrollment Guide; phone calls; website)
- Access to School (transportation for students; proximity)
- Students (first-hand experience; perspectives; preferences; needs)
- Community (social media; local websites; organizations; neighbors; family)
- School (visits; website; phone calls; videos; location/proximity; programming; newsletters)

Desired Information

- Culture and Climate Information (student experience; child is known; child development focus and differentiation; discipline policies; discipline data; racial and culture & climate;
- Access to School (transportation for students; proximity)
- Communication (accessible; community-responsive; consistent; community-responsive;
- Staff Information (tenure; training; expectations of educators; leadership style; leadership beliefs; professional learning emphases;
- School Profile (school model; programs; variations in student outcomes; ratios; operations; school philosophy; external pressures; community partner organizations; community values; district support indicators; enrollment profile; cultural values; opportunities to engage; postsecondary attainment)

School Profile

Overall, family members want to know whether a school will give children what they need. Academic performance is a key aspect of the information about schools that families need and want; in some forms, this information is currently provided by the District. As families discussed wanting to know more about schools than was provided by the District, they mentioned an array of indicators and characteristics that were not limited to academic outcomes or student/parent satisfaction survey results. This range of information includes key information that answers three specific questions about schools:

What is the school like?

- Academic programs
- Variations in student outcomes
- Student-teacher ratios
- Student-teacher relationships

How does the school work?

- Enrollment profile
- Postsecondary attainment information
- School operations
- School philosophy
- District support indicators and variances

How does the school reflect our community context?

- External pressures
- Community partner organizations
- Integration of community values and cultural values
- Engagement opportunities

What is the school like? (School Culture and Climate)

Family members voiced time and again that academic indicators, absent insight into what the school would be like for their children, were inadequate data for families interested in understanding how any school would serve their children. Several families expressed concern about their children's sense of belonging in school, as well as their safety, both forms of information not communicated to them directly by the District through its current practices. Evidenced by high interest across each of the regional community conversations, information about what schools are like is a key indicator that would be valuable to the families of DPS students. We discuss the features of school culture and climate below.

Supplement academic outcome data

Families want to know what the school will be like for their children, beyond the outcomes of its specific academic programming.

> *The idea of: are you actually measuring what you care about in meaningful ways that are accurate? Or are you trying to compare people, or compare things? That's reliability. And we have put too much pressure on reliability as though having a narrative. I would love to have a narrative about school.*

Like, here is where your child's school place's going to be, here is are the things that they're going to hear, here are the people that are going to know, here's the accommodation... I'd like to hear different learners' stories about whatever.

There is this fear that it's too subjective, that I can't compare it between one school and another, and I think that's part of the underlying mindset and worldview, and part of what's been driving what we've done. Somehow we can objectify it, we can standardize it and we can learn something about it, when, actually, what I care about for the little human I have is not the stuff that is standardizable, because how he feels belonging may be very different to how your son feels belonging and your daughter feels belonging. And that's what I care about. I just want to push against the notion that we have to somehow quantify it and have it be this thing. Different schools are sometimes up to different work. (Near Northeast Denver parent)

I want to have the balance of this. Stories matter... stories and data. And I don't want us to fall into the trap that somehow the narrative qualitative storytelling isn't something that is really important. And I don't want us to always fall into the trap of everything has to be quantifiable. Stories matter. So I want both. We can quantify the things we can, and then maybe dig deeper, get the stories. But I just don't want to lose those, because I think that that's part of what we've done. (Northwest Denver parent)

…if there was a pie chart that said "ok, this is how this school is when it comes to academics. Here's what they scored based on community engagement. This is the scored based on…" If we had a total evaluation it would make things so much easier from my perspective to say "Hey, this is the totality of the school. Yes, they may be struggling here with the academic stuff, but let me tell you the strengths of this building and why the academic piece is not as problematic as it may appear." Because a red school may be that way because… kids were coming in at third and fourth grade level. But no data point ever told that truth to the community. And so all they told the community is "that school is a red school" but never explained why. Never explained twenty-six languages. And never explained schools that have high ELL population with monolingual parents. Or it doesn't explain high mobility rates. So, the red is just out there like the scarlet letter, to some degree. (Near Northeast Denver parent)

Demographic and developmental indicators

Families are interested in knowing whether schools are succeeding with all children, beyond the particular collection of academic outcomes. In some conversations, families indicated that school information should reflect success with students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds; in other conversations families shared that they wish to know how schools respond to nuanced variations in student development, such as levels of interest and success in given subjects, and schools' capacities to individualize learning and supports for their children.

So, those are the things that, if I'm a black parent, would I even choose the school that says, if we had that pie graph, again, going back to your point... OK, you can take out the academics slice, and then you click on the academic slice, and then it unfolds and says: this is how we're doing for black kids, black males, black females. If you're a parent and you see that it's red. And then you see the green for white students, and it still sees all this red for black students, do you choose that school for your kid? That's, I think, where this conversation is. (Near Northeast Denver parent)

I think there's also this... sometimes for me that data, when I look for it at schools, says that if your kid does not get it by now, they won't. And we know there's data about reading and there are some basic child development stuff, we know there's mile markers that we need to achieve, we know that, but as… There are some things where I say "It's K through twelve, and don't we have the whole continuum? And how do we mark that?" It's kind of like when you go to the well care appointments for your kids when they are first born. You go to the doctor and they tell you "Oh he's in this percentile doing good."

I think I said it. [My daughter] wasn't gaining weight one time and so they told us, "Oh, just put some butter in her diet and help her gain some calories." And we, as parents, we didn't feel horrible, we didn't feel judged. We're like "the doctor just says we need to give her more calories." And up to this day she will get a stick of butter, you know. We did that. But the thing is like what is this? This is the stuff that matters to us.

This is the stuff that they should be reporting. These are the things that matter to parents.
(Central Denver parent)

A leading indicator of information about school performance for families is whether the school context will be a "fit" for their child. Fit, in this case, represents important characteristics of the tangible and intangible practices of a school. Tangible practices include activities and socializing opportunities that support the healthy development of children (including, but not limited to sports and clubs and before/after school programs), while intangible practices include those that are affirming to individual children, representing adequate school and staff capacity to provide a safe, welcoming, and culturally-affirming school environment for children. Often families discussed wanting to have multimedia forms of communication about school options for their children, including interviews with teachers; videos of schools in action, including school and classroom; and other representations of what the school is actually like.

A Central Denver parent described it this way:

It gets to the question about what motivates... what is the context in which a student is going to learn best? And it's going to be where I feel like I have the environment around me that I want. It's the activities that are around me, it's the people that are around me and the SPF doesn't measure it. I mean, every person is going to have a different opinion. It's just like some students choose colleges sometimes. They are choosing it based on wherever friends are going, not whether or not it has a strong academic program. And even if it does have a strong academic program, if they're not feeling all the other needs are met to be a good learner, that doesn't actually matter. So…

Similarly, a parent in Northwest Denver shared similar concerns:

I have to know that school. I have to know who my kids are being graded by. I have to know that I'm welcomed in there. All trust was broken at the last school, so now it's like this is our school, and if we were to leave it would be a huge decision. All trust was broken with principals... It was traumatic in several ways for both my kids from ECE to the older one. So, it's not negotiable. And then, being a mom who talks to other moms all the time, I find this to be a common story at [School 1], at [School 2] and it's kind of spreading. So I feel like it is a district thing. Why are there some schools that do really, really good? And I know that charter schools have to be transparent with their money, but obviously the resources are being used properly because the schools are performing. In my situation... there are some that aren't, why? Why is the same support not across? Why can some schools call the cops on kids? If we all have access to multiple principals, why is some dean of discipline, or whatever you call them, really showing up for their kids and being those mentors whereas some are just like... "Sit there and wait for your mom to call back"? That's inconsistent to me.

School disciplinary climate

There was a host of indicators about school culture and climate named in each of the regional community discussions, representing a wide range of perspectives, each of which indicated that families are concerned about their children's well-being. Another important indicator of families' value placed upon information about school culture and climate is knowing the extent to which they can expect the fair and responsive treatment of their own child.

And another thing is more transparency about the discipline issues. In the exact same district, you have cops who go to school daily, whereas some are never there. Why is that? Why is there kids who felt unloved and get cops and all that, but then they go to a school a couple of miles away and, yeah, they may get in trouble with their principal, but it's not the same? Why are those stories so different in the same district? So, I'd say be more transparent about all this leadership style, how they discipline, what expectations there are.

A parent should know like "we may call the cops on your kid." I think we should know that it could be a real thing, or, you know, you might know this, how they deal with issues, like how they allow volunteers to come in. Those types of things. (Northwest Denver parent)

We want to know suspension rates. That's important to me. And I want it broken down by gender and race. It's really important to me. (Central Denver parent)

Leadership and Teaching

Further examination of family members' thinking about the valuable and important indicators about a school's performance continued to reveal even more nuanced thinking about what counts as meaningful information about a child's school in DPS. Indications of effective and visionary leadership, alongside information about teacher stability and experience, were frequently considered necessary data. For instance, in a Central Denver community conversation, parents shared hopes and frustrations about characteristics of adults working in their children's schools. One parent noted that, having visited one school in hopes that there were administrators of color at the school, and also noting that it was important to her to have teachers who were not moving on to other schools after a brief stint at their first school placement, she was let down:

When I was looking for another school...again, I was looking for, uhm, administrative staff that look like us. [This was] definitely not there. I couldn't find that period. I found that at [another school]...I feel like a lot of teachers cut their teeth at [their first school], get the experience working at an underserved school or whatever, and then they move on to the biggest, better thing, and I wanted--it's important to me that my kids, their teachers grow with them. That's really important to me. (Central Denver parent)

It was clear that families want to know more about the teachers in their children's schools, not once the child has enrolled, but as a factor informing their enrollment choices. For instance, a parent in Central Denver described teacher racial identity as an important indicator:

I had three black boys, what was really important to me was that the staff looked like my boys. And I didn't mean the custodian. It was important to me that teachers and administrators looked like my boys. And I could not find that consistently. And when I did find it, they were typically first year teachers and I didn't want my kids necessarily learning from first year teachers because I just didn't feel it was fair to judge people by that nature. I wanted people who had been in the game a little bit longer to see how I could evaluate them. So, I found the [School T] school for my boy. And [School U] was still around at that time. So there was a school that would pick... If you got your kid to [School V, School W, School X], or one more, they would take your kid to school. So, if you could get your kid there, they would then bring your back home. So, he doesn't want to do that anymore. He takes the city bus, and that's fine. I found [School Y]. I didn't understand choice. And it was close to us, it seemed like innovative and I don't mean the technical label innovative, but from what I read in the booklet, it's still an innovative school and I was hugely disappointed once I got there. It was not... there was one black person… A third grade teacher, right?

Another parent built upon this point, noting that data matters to families. He responds to the group of parents, pointing out:

Everything you're saying is bringing up data. You may not be saying it, but it's bringing up data points that matter to families when you look at it. What is the tenure of the teachers? I mean you don't see that. Where is that in an enrollment guide? Where is that on an SPF? How do parents know that, hey, the average tenure of a teacher is, you know, if you go to things like Great Schools, their websites, right, they capture that.

This parent was not alone in his interest in how long teachers have been practicing their profession. Teacher experience and tenure in schools was important to parents in multiple regional community conversations.

If expectations were the same across the board, then I could go to my neighborhood school or go to a charter school. Why is it that I need to go this school? Also, teachers. Having those same standards for teachers across the district. Why is it OK for some teachers to have the basic credentials, while some require a bachelor's or a master's? Is that the best decision? Even if you take their kid and take them to school across town, they'll still play with their neighborhood friends. We're still together, we're still partners. Is that fair for everyone? So, I wish they were more transparent. (Northwest Denver parent)

Another Northwest Denver parent reflected on the role of leadership in Denver schools, reflecting a different view of leadership's role in her children's school:

...there's, like, so many different things like you said that contribute to those scores...but, I think, like, one that I think is important is, like, leadership. What does leadership look like? You can tell the culture, like, I feel the same at our school. I feel welcomed, I feel like it's clean, like, everyone has high expectations, and I feel like my own personal experience tells me that comes from good leadership. Whereas at our previous school I felt like there was a lot of disorganization, lack of communication. I felt unwelcomed, and it made me wonder, like, what type of leadership is here, are my kids safe? So, I think the SPF scores are not end-all, they definitely don't tell the whole story, but I think those schools that have those high scores, they worked really hard for them, like they do tell a story for them, and, like, those that have pulled themselves out of those low scores, that wasn't easy. You are dealing with hundreds of families, so they tell a story, like, they don't tell the whole story, but I think they're important.

Demonstrating a slightly different perspective about the role of leadership in Denver schools, families also discussed the role of coaches in their children's schools. In general, parents discussed the role of supportive and caring adults who would support their children and give parents comfort that someone would care for their child. It was clear that this discussion also challenged assumptions that teachers cared by default, simply because they were in classrooms with children. In fact, in each conversation, there was at least one significant interrogation of whether, generally, District teachers understood, saw, or knew their students of color, or even attempted to do so. In the Near Northeast, this topic was discussed by one father:

...what I care about most is, I--do my kids' teachers know who they are. And like, can they share, like, do they advocate for themselves? Like, do they get picked on and speak up? Do they engage and participate? And can you just tell me something about my kid, um, that shows me that you know more than just, like, what they've produced? And obviously it helps to hear things like, he's on grade level for math, or he's a little behind, and a little bit ahead. And I think data's important, like, we heard that his spelling needed some work, so we worked on a little bit more, and he's doing fine, now. So, I think that being known is really important, uhm, from, you know, 13 years of education myself as, on one side of it, and now, really, 3-4 years as a parent, like I don't find myself, and part of it like you said...both of his parents are educators and are educated, and, like, to some degree there's some privilege in saying that regardless of the environment in which you're around, like, we're savvy enough to not let them, you know, fall behind. And I think that is a privilege to know that. But at the same time, like, what I'm looking for is, like you've all said, the feel of the school and, like, the communication that comes home is not just overarching and data-based, but like, hey, [student] is doing well here. Or, we're worried about this. Or, I pulled him in to lunch today because he was sad that, um, X, Y, or Z happened.

And those types of things give me confidence in him being trusted to learn and, I think that's something that's jumped out as what I think about. And, again that's not, you know, surely you can drive some data to get to that experience, and parents, I'm sure, can contribute answers on that level that can be built into it, but, um, yeah, it's a feel thing in a lot of ways.

How does the school work? (School Operations)

For parents, the usefulness of school information is limited if it does not reflect the site-based modifications and other school-by-school differences, such as early release days or an adjusted calendar. For instance, one Central Denver parent described his concern for his own high school son's experience:

When they have early release days and things like that, I'm so... it's a tension for me. I have to pick him up, I have to get there... I can't have him wander around the neighborhood. So, that was definitely a concern that almost overrode everything else, because at the end of the day it was like "is he going to be safe if X happens at this school?" So, that's a very real grappling, and I think with all my kids I've always looked at private demographics of the school, more than so than anything. Are they going to feel like home? And not necessarily... I've never looked at the teaching demographics. I think it was more like "are they going to have peer groups where they feel like they belong?"

Access

Families frequently shared concerns that the information they needed to make educational decisions also included a clear path to accessing the school. Whether discussing transportation access to their child's school or their own access, as parents, to be engaged in the school, families were faced with a timing lag between when they needed information and when they gained this information.

Transportation access. It is likely that many DPS families do not have clear understandings of the District's transportation system, although it was quite clear that limited transportation options produce an array of consequences for families. It also was clear that in order for families to understand how schools work, they need to understand the transportation options available to them accompanied by forthright communication about the District's transportation decisions.

Part of making the decision is also the broad picture, like: how am I going to get my kids there? How am I going to get my kids home? Transportation at DPS... it's a nightmare to call that department. I've called them so many times and said that it makes no sense to me. I mean, I don't work there, so I guess maybe I don't get it, but I called and said "I want to send my son to this school, can he go on the bus? Is there a bus?" "Oh, we won't know until next year". Well, how am I supposed to make a decision if I can send them there, if you don't know if you can get him there and I don't know if I can get him there? So, like I said, I feel that DPS doesn't support parents in that aspect. (Near Northeast Denver parent)

To be clear, information about transportation is not enough for families. Families want more transportation support across the District.

But transportation, I think, is this crazy thing that I don't feel it gets the attention that it needs, because choice is not choice if you can't actually get there. So, I don't care how many schools you have, and where they are... if I can't get to it, or the only people who can get to it are the people who can hire a full-time nanny, then it's not really choice? (Southeast Denver parent)

But that's part of what I look for in choosing this school, because if you don't have that support... and, like I said, the transportation problem. My son, it's not that far, but he goes to school, you know, quite away from us, where it worked out for us, but the first year I didn't know how he was going to get there. I called DPS: "is there a bus? can he take the bus?" And, like I said, I was told "well, we won't know until next year." Bus routes aren't done until... I think they told me August. School starts in August. How am I supposed to plan for that? So, we had to make other arrangements for him to get to and from school, which worked out for us. But next year, it's not going to work for my... he's going to go to sixth grade. They'll be at two different schools. I should have three kids at three different schools but, like I said, we decided not to do preschool next year. Yet the year after that he has to go to school, so I'm going to have three kids: I'm going to have a high schooler, I'm going to have a middle schooler, and then I'm going to have a baby. So, I'm going to have them at three different schools. I don't have a choice. They have to be at three different schools. So, I just... I don't know. That's part of the frustration. It's not feeling the support in that way. And, we've kind of been at different schools and I understand that there's different needs of the students and the population in each school, but you can't only concentrate on one, and not the other. And I've seen that in DPS as well. (Near Northeast Denver parent)

School program and enrollment access. Families are interested in clear, consistent and reliable information about school programs and are discouraged by a lack of such information.

When I called DPS it's like "Well, you need to call this department for this, you need to call this department for that, you need to call this for that." It was frustrating…If you call somewhere and you get a good customer service and it's organized, you feel better. These are the people that are teaching my kid. This is the system that I'm trusting my kids in. When you go to another system: "Oh, we don't know, I don't know." Like I said, when I called the preschool early development, or whatever department, I was told "I think there's only one school in DPS that has half a day for four-year-olds." And I was like "OK." "And it's in Park Hill." And then I called back, and I was told something different from a different girl who answered the phone. And I was told "I think this school, and this school, and this school do." "Well, is there...? I'm on the website. It does not say it on the website." "Oh, no. Well, try this school and this school." So, like I said: it was two days of calling schools individually and saying: "do you guys have half a day for four-year-olds?" and getting told, you know, "yes or no" ultimately "no", because I haven't found a school yet. Then, they told me a couple of schools that did and I called them, and then they said "we do this year, but next year we won't." So, like I said, it was just frustration and getting the run-around. (Near Northeast Denver parent)

Family engagement access. When learning about their children's school options, families also want to know how schools will treat them as parents.

My son currently goes to school that we're talking about, and I feel a similar way. Like I was sharing earlier today, this morning there were a couple of moms from my son's class and did a really good job making all this Valentine's Day stuff for the kids in the class. And there's really inconsistent communication with the parents. And so we just did it on our own. And then this morning, when we got there, one, there was no heat in the auditorium. So, then they had a 45-minutes assembly. The dean was reading what was like very strange stories for 45 minutes. And I said "this is the strangest thing I've ever witnessed."

Anyway. But then when I came for the Valentine's day party, the teacher was like "this is just for the kids. There are no parents." And we all laughed. Honestly, I mean, I cried a little in my car... It's really sad to stay up all night like doing these cool bags for my kid and then all the moms warmed up together and we have to have coffee and talk about this, and figure out what to do next year. But it's true, all schools are not equal on this district. And there are schools that are really unwelcoming to families and it's hard to send your child to them every day. (Near Northeast Denver parent)

How does the school reflect our community context? (School and Community)

Regarding school narratives, context also matters to parents. Not indicative of excusing poor academic outcomes, parents understand that schools, students, and families face many external pressures. Knowing the nature of these pressures and schools' responses to them is additional information that families are interested in. In Central Denver, one such indicator was described this way:

> *Mobility rates. Those are of the biggest detractors from those data. You're not talking about the same kids year to year. You're using that rear-view mirror, and if you don't understand mobility in the school, that makes everything worthless. Those numbers, at least. So, then you look at the teachers again. You look at the people sitting in front of them.*

A similar indicator of the community context was discussed by another Central Denver parent describing his experience with information about a Denver area high school.

> *...at [School], 85% of …kids were coming in at third and fourth grade level. But no data point ever told that truth to the community. And so all they told the community is "that school is a red school" but never explained why. Never explained twenty-six languages. And never explained schools that have high ELL population with monolingual parents. Or it doesn't explain high mobility rates. So, the red is just out there like the scarlet letter, to some degree.*

Another important indicator of a school's community context is the nature of involvement of community partners connected to schools. This was important to many families, though it had particular importance for families who arrive to US schools in Denver.

> *I think when you're thinking about what is the data that is needed... I'm thinking about faith-based organizations and expanding that. I wonder if that plays a role too. I think about the place of a [School], that has twenty-six languages, kids from fifteen different countries, mosques... Within the community, oftentimes that's where the community is. That's how faith works. So, the role that faith-based organizations play in helping, because oftentimes the good families, they are looking at the red. I've been told I'm not supposed to go to red schools. There's a bias coming in the door, right? They don't know anything else, but that's the only thing their network has told them. So, who informs their network about all these things we're talking about? We should look at all these things before you make a choice. Color is just one thing, but let's look at all these other things, too. If you need help, that's what we're here for. We're here to support and help you navigate this process so that you then know what to do. So it's not just... because, like I said, most foreigners population, they're going to show up because "I'm supposed to go to school." And I've been told so oftentimes "I've heard this is not a good school." And that's it. That's all the interaction they really have. Or like "I'm going to push back right away because I've been told I don't have to do or listen because this is a bad school." So how to help in that other sense? (Central Denver parent)*

School and community information that matters to families also includes the thoughtful integration of community values in identifying and displaying key indicators of a school's performance.

> *And to their parents who we know that we've gone back and forth with at the DPS board for [School] and we said "This is the data we're looking at. How is this a fair representation of what's actually going on at that school?" Because these parents would go there and say "I don't care about that." My kids feel safe. All the stuff that we've talked about. There are people of color at that school so my kid feels like they're seen. I'm not worried about if my kids are going to be impartially disciplined. I'm not worried about other issues that were brought up at this table. So, the things that are put out there, are they speaking to what we really care about? And, if they're not: how do we inform the people to say "We want to see this thing. This is what matters to us"? We want to know teacher tenure. We want to know racial demographics. We want to know the opportunities that are available to our students via athletics (Central Denver parent)*

A very interesting and important indicator of a school's connection to the community is the postsecondary attainment data of students who complete high school in Denver. Families are interested in knowing how their children are doing in schools at present, but this interest should not be understood as disconnected from families' interests in children's future opportunities. This is well-stated by a Northwest Denver parent:

> *I worry that constraint that we continue to put on it is college-going as the measure. If at the end of the day... why aren't we talking about social mobility, capital, right? Our kids can go to college... I have a lot of student loan debt. Aside from going to college, all of those things, and my brother does not... His path is drastically different at his age compared to mine, and the amount of debt that I have to deal with every day.... Those are decisions that we made, one because I thought like "college is the path. It is the way forward." And in today's society, it's not. So how are we actually measuring that? If we say "oh, we've got 75% of our kids to college. Pat on the back! and let's move on..." I don't think we've done our jobs. Where are they going? What are they doing? Do they get out of college and do they have jobs? Are they making the type of money that can move them through society in a different way? We're just not talking... They don't persist but then they still go to do other things. We have come up with such finite measures that are debilitating.*

Summary

As is evident through these data, rich community dialogue can provide tremendous insights into the educational experiences of families of school children throughout Denver, and their insights can help lead the way to achieving educational equity. Contrary to some public thought about public schooling, measuring a small slice of public schools does not reflect the range of values and concerns held by the families of students throughout the District. By centering the voices of parents, we can learn new and transformative ways to rethink--and possibly restructure--public schooling in the region to promote shifting the practices of school performance in service to the needs of the public good. To be sure, families care about their children's academic experiences and growth. However, the academic emphasis should not be without the context of school culture and climate,

Recommendations

As independent researchers, we have drawn conclusions from our data collection. These recommendations are intentionally minimal--sourcing our recommendations from the data, but not co-constructing our recommendations with the families who participated in this effort and the school district where these recommendations may be enacted, replicates a tension that surfaced clearly in this research. A statement made by a participant in the Northwest Denver regional community conversation captures this tension well:

> *Make sure that we're looking at these things systemically, but also to bring it back once we have a draft of it and to say "is this what you said, what you meant to say?" Or "is there anything else we should make sure to ask or put in, you know, to make sure it's consistent with the spirit of what's happening...?" And that's important to me as a mom, former teacher, school counselor, principal, community person. It's just important to honor what happens in the community, so...*

Thus, in short, our recommendations are limited to the following:

- Changes to measuring and reporting school performance should be community- and research-based and balance academic data with contextual (school and community) and developmental (student) data.

- The provision of information about schools should be diversified, such that it is made available in more forms, and at various levels of depth and detail. Color-coding school quality based on academic measures is not reflective of the values of many families and presents unintended consequences for children's development. This is particularly important for Latinx and Black children, and is likely the case for students from other historically marginalized backgrounds.

- Many families want to know about the adults in their children's schools. This includes indicators such as length of teacher service to the school, styles of school leadership, and the disciplinary climate, including the presence of police. This information is not limited to these indicators, however, and also may include staff racial demographics and the presence of skillful and caring adults who are closely involved in providing targeted support and care to individual children as proxies for families. Families have little choice but to trust the adults in their children's schools.

- Limited transportation options are a major concern for many families and influence their school decision-making. The intersection of transportation and choice is complex and costly, but also constrains families' decisions. New transportation options should be developed in order to ensure that each family has access to transportation for their children, and new options should be consistent (to support family planning), of no cost (to minimize financial strain to families) and co-planned (to be informed by families' needs).

Topics for Future Study

Although we are confident in the two major findings discussed above, we are sure that there is much more to be learned from the data. Preliminary indicators suggest that a broader set of findings, based in the current data, will provide an opportunity for educators to think in even more sophisticated and community-responsive ways about the role of family and community voice in shaping the ways in which school performance is measured. These indicators also suggest that systems of assessing school performance can be guided by the needs and values of DPS students and their families. These opportunities include:

- Collective co-creation of strong and relevant measurement tools
- Shift of focus to what students are learning through formative and summative assessments
- Quantifying and more fully exploring and understanding the consequences of structural changes, such as reduction in transportation
- Integration of new forms of data reflecting school performance
- Thoughtful distinctions between assessment of students, schools, district
- Development of community partnerships that provide families with greater access to more robust information about schools

Each segment of the city had very valuable perspectives about what was necessary to meet their decision making needs, though there were significant trends. A more in depth analysis of their particular perspectives could prove valuable and informative if contextually analyzed in order to incorporate the rich data presented by this study and report. Additionally, ongoing engagement with the diverse families of our shared City and District should take on formal (i.e., research) and informal forms, providing on-ramps for families to continue to co-develop the public school system.
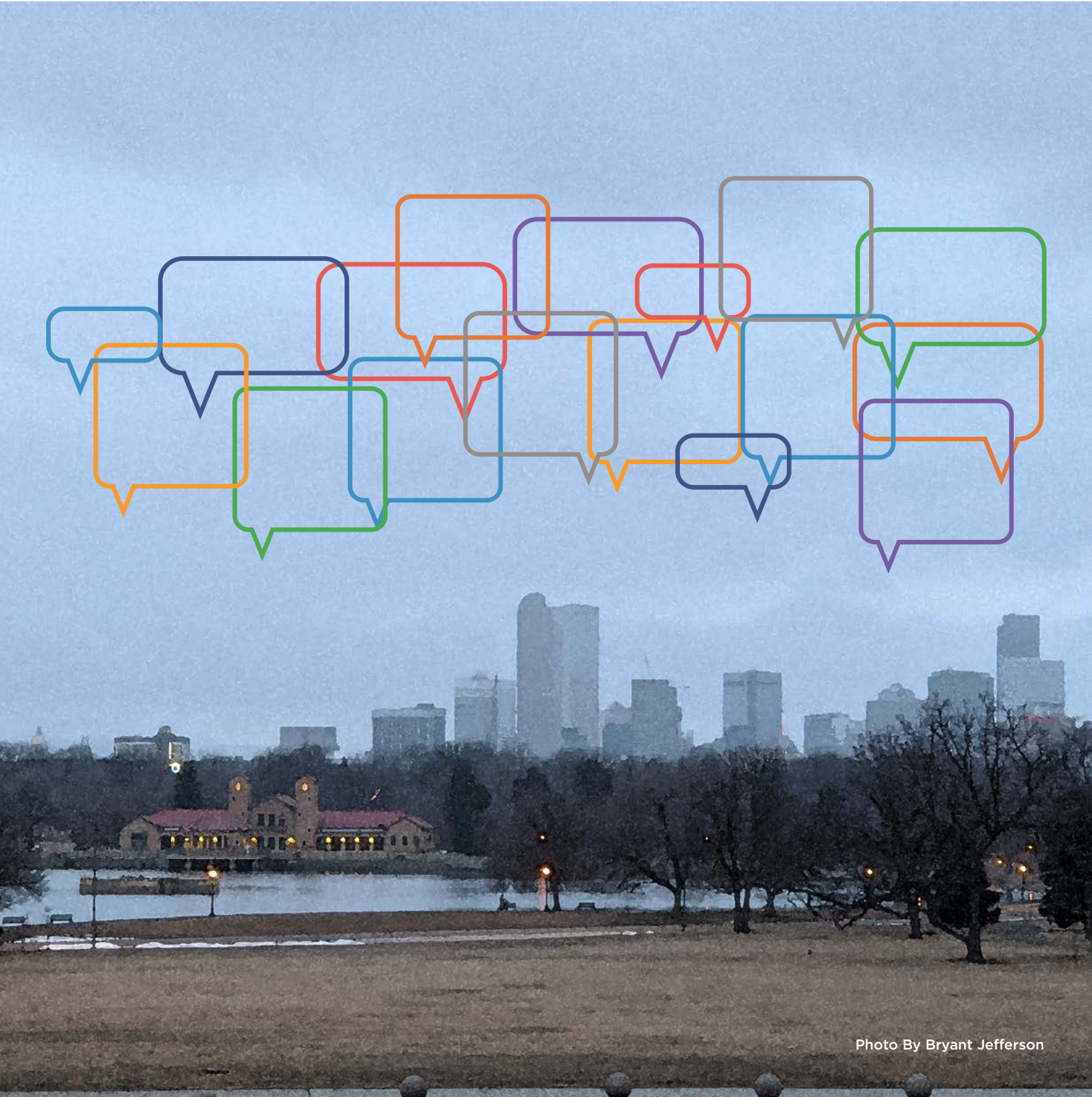
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