

DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Still waiting for leaders to put students first

BY JAMES COLEMAN AND ROSEMARY RODRIGUEZ

GUEST COMMENTARY

Early last fall, more than 35 business and civic leaders who are concerned with the direction of Denver Public Schools convened and formed a new group called EDUCATE Denver.

Acknowledging that a high-quality public education system is the very foundation of a strong city, these leaders seek to stave off deteriorating performance in the district, which posted the largest achievement gaps by race in the state. Specifically, EDUCATE Denver asked the Board of Education and superintendent to center all of their energy around improving student outcomes.

For the balance of 2022, we watched, instead, as politics and personal agendas dominated Board activity. We pleaded for better community partnership as a bungled school closure effort fueled fear and uncertainty among DPS families. We listened and waited for strategies to close a multi-million dollar budget deficit that was depleting the district's reserves. It was a tough end to a tough year for DPS.

Literally and symbolically, the new year represented the chance for a fresh start. EDUCATE Denver welcomed 2023 with renewed energy to advocate for high-quality public education in our city. We advocate because student outcomes dictate student futures, and, in turn, student futures dictate Denver's future. With that in mind, our coalition drafted a

simple New Year's Resolution:

We resolve to stand by DPS students along with the following business and community organizations: the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce; the Metro Denver Economic Development Council; the Colorado Hispanic Chamber; the Colorado Black Chamber; STAND for Kids; Transform Education Now; FaithBridge; Denver Families; RootED; Lyra Colorado; CLLARO; NAACP Rocky Mountain Region; the Urban League; and the Urban League for Young Professionals.

Together, we support student success by articulating a shared expectation of excellence for school board members and the superintendent — leaders who direct our students' learning opportunities today and who influence their potential as future contributing members of our community.

For 2023 and beyond, this like-minded group asks the Board of Education members and superintendent to conduct business in accordance with four standards: an unwavering focus on student success; high ethics; loyal community partnership; and character befitting a leader.

“Student focus” means a majority of time is spent solving for better student outcomes and district goals that orient around equity and excellence in the classroom. In contrast, last year only 41 minutes of board meeting time tackled student learning (source: Boardhawk) and the priority district goal setting activity in December focused on DPS' carbon footprint.

“High ethics” implies transparent business operations within legal bounds and sound financial stewardship of taxpayer dollars. Today, the district is out of compliance in its handling of innovation schools and has no stated plan for a yawning budget gap.

As for “community partnership,” we expect consistent, respectful dialogue with our diverse DPS communities and a process that invites co-created decisions.

Finally, “character.” Character befitting true leaders. The Denver community as a whole asks our school leaders to act with purpose and professionalism, in a congenial manner, at all times.

A full articulation of expectations that the business and civic leaders of Denver defined can be viewed at <https://educatedenver.org>. If our Board of Education and superintendent can rise to meet these expectations, DPS will achieve our shared aspiration that all students thrive in school, college, career, and life.

EDUCATE Denver believes that Denver Public Schools can, once again, be a national model in its ability to support and serve students, families, and staff equitably. We are confident that our district leadership today and those who will assume this incredible responsibility in the future, will meet the standard we set on behalf of our city’s children.

James Coleman is a Colorado state senator representing District 33 and Rosemary Rodriguez is a former member of the Denver City Council and the Denver Board of Education. Together they co-chair EDUCATE Denver.