



University of Colorado  
Denver

## **DPS Exemplary Schools Case Study:**

### **West Denver Prep Middle School – Federal Campus**

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## DPS UCD ELA Exemplary Schools Case Study Overview

### School and Study Overview

The Denver Public Schools (DPS) University of Colorado Denver (UCD) English Language Acquisition (ELA) Exemplary Schools Case Studies investigated DPS schools with a high density of learners of English as a second or additional language and high levels of students who qualified for a free or reduced price lunch that were experiencing the most success with English language learners (ELL students). The study was conducted by the DPS UCD Research Collaborative between December 2010 and March 2011. The purpose of the study was to identify school-wide practices that have been successful in supporting the achievement of these students. Six schools (two elementary, two middle, and two high schools) were identified on the basis of five criteria: (1) an open enrollment policy, (2) at least 40% of total enrollment consisting of ELL students, and at least 100 English language learners enrolled, (3) a total School Performance Framework (SPF) rating greater than 49% for elementary schools, and greater than 45% for middle schools and high schools, (4) at least 50% of students in the school qualified for a free or reduced price lunch, and (5) high gains on the CSAP and CELA tests for the past three years relative to other schools serving the same grade levels. Two additional elementary schools, which did not meet all criteria, but have good reputations among area educators were also studied. The case studies involved three sources of data: 1) photographs providing environmental scans of the language resources and supports for ELL students in the schools; 2) documents and public information (e.g., websites) as well as student performance data; and 3) interviews with school leaders, teachers, and other support personnel. This report will detail the practices uncovered at West Denver Prep Middle School – Federal Campus.

NOTE: This case study of West Denver Prep is ongoing. These preliminary assertions and explanations are based on interviews with seven teachers and administrators, photographic inventories, and archived data collected between December 2010 and March 2011 only. We anticipate that further study, e.g., observations in classrooms and additional interviews, will expand our understanding of the school's practices.

The following assertions emerged as key components contributing to the success of West Denver Prep in working with English language learners:

#### *Schoolwide practices to focus student attention and maximize effort:*

- Culture of Achievement and Engagement
- Teacher and Student Self-Selection
- Formative Feedback to Students
- STRIVE Dollars Incentive System
- Parents as Allies

#### *Sustained Instruction tailored for English Language Learners*

- Extended Academic Time

- Scaffolding for Multilingual Students
- Direct Instruction Focused on Specific Learning Objectives

### ***Organization to maximize likelihood of effective instructional activities across classrooms***

- Strong Stable Leadership
- Attention to Teacher Induction and Professional Development
- Extensive Use of Data
- Structures to Maximize Student Engagement and Time-on-Task
- Test Preparation and Confidence Building

The following sections of this report will include a more in-depth explanation of the study, a brief history and demographic description of the school, and a more detailed narrative of the case study assertions and how the described practices are facilitating academic growth for ELL students at West Denver Prep (to be found beginning on page 9).

## **DPS Exemplary Schools Case Study: Context and Purpose of the Study**

As of October 1, 2010, there were 26,761 identified English language learners (non-exited ELL students in grades ECE-12) enrolled in Denver Public Schools. Of these students, 17,544 received ELA services at a designated ELA program school. Spanish was the primary language for 15,246 (87%) of these students, while other common languages included Vietnamese, Arabic, Somali, Nepali and Karen/Burmese <http://ela.dpsk12.org/>

Denver Public Schools and University of Colorado Denver are working in collaboration on the DPS ELA Exemplary Schools Study to examine practices within DPS schools in which learners of English as a second (or additional) language are outperforming their peers in similar schools. The purpose of the study is to provide guidance to DPS and other districts in improving the educational performance of English language learners by describing practices currently used in six DPS schools in which English language learners are experiencing the most academic success. The primary research question addressed by this study is:

- *What are the school-wide practices of schools that are successfully serving a high number of English language learners?*

This study was formulated in accordance with the Department of Justice Court Order, which provides guidance to and approval of the DPS English Acquisition program, and includes guidance regarding research on the effectiveness of DPS ELA programs. One goal of this study is to identify practices that have been successful across different school contexts. This report focuses on the practices at West Denver Prep Middle School – Federal Campus.

## Study Design and School Selection Criteria

This study of school practices involved three sources of data: 1) observations/photographs of language resources in the school environment; 2) documents and public information (e.g., school websites, newsletters) as well as aggregate data on student performance; and 3) multiple interviews with school leaders, teachers, and other support personnel. In this preliminary phase, the study did *not* include students as participants.

A three-step process was used to select high performing schools for English language learners in DPS. For the purposes of this study, English language learners at DPS were defined as those students who were currently receiving ELA services, opted out of services, or exited from ELA services.

Step 1: In order to select the case study schools, schools were identified at the elementary, middle, and high school level, which met four criteria:

- 1) at least 40% of the school's total enrollment consisted of English language learners,
- 2) at least 100 ELL students were enrolled at the school,
- 3) at least 50% of students at the school qualified for a free or reduced price lunch, and
- 4) the school received a School Performance Framework (SPF) rating greater than 49 for elementary schools, and greater than 45 for middle schools and high schools.

For the SPF, every school in DPS that contains at least one grade that takes CSAP (grades 3-10) is assigned one of the following accreditation ratings every September using data collected during the previous three school years: Distinguished, Meets Expectations, Accredited on Watch, Accredited on Priority Watch (added in 2010) or Accredited on Probation. Ratings then relate to how much autonomy schools are given, the support needed, corrective action taken and compensation earned by principals, assistant principals and teachers. For this study, the SPF rating was used to ensure that the schools chosen were not on probation and were meeting expectations or nearly meeting expectations (for all students, not only ELL students).

Step 2: Performance data for English Language Learners on the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) Reading, CSAP Writing, CSAP Math and the Colorado English Language Assessment (CELA) were analyzed for each school for the past three years. Schools from the initial list, which were making the largest gains were identified, weighting gains in 2010 the highest, 2009 second highest, and 2008 third. Data presented in Table 1 below show the three-year weighted averages of the CSAP median growth percentiles for each school and average gain (Z score) on CELA. Based on these criteria, three schools at each educational level, for a total of nine schools, were identified as candidates for the case study.

Step 3: The student recruitment and retention policies at the nine schools were investigated to determine whether the schools had policies for admittance or dismissal related to performance, special education needs, or behavioral problems. In narrowing the selected schools to six,

researchers agreed that at least one school at each level should be a comprehensive neighborhood school, as opposed to a charter school or magnet school. The six schools included Bryant Webster Dual Language ECE-8 (study focused on the elementary grades), Force Elementary, Merrill Middle, West Denver Preparatory Charter – Federal Campus (a middle school), Abraham Lincoln High, and Bruce Randolph High.

Once the schools had been narrowed to six high performing schools, two additional elementary schools of interest were selected based on a combination of their relatively high performance and reputation among educators in the district. Both schools added additional characteristics to the pool of schools, including learners of English from diverse linguistic backgrounds and concentration on math and science. These two additional “reputational” schools were Goldrick Elementary and the Math and Science Leadership Academy (K-3).

### **History of West Denver Preparatory Charter Middle School**

West Denver Prep, located at Jewell and S. Federal Blvd. in southwest Denver, was the first of four West Denver Preparatory School charter campuses started by founder Chris Gibbons. Before coming to Denver, Gibbons worked with Building Excellent Schools, a leadership organization based in Boston aimed at building and supporting academically excellent charter schools serving low-income populations. West Denver Prep opened in 2006 with sixth grade only, and added one grade per year during the first three years. It is now in its fifth year of operation, and its first graduates are now high school sophomores. Chris Gibbons served as principal the first three years, and Katie Holz-Russell served as Director of Curriculum & Instruction during that time. She then succeeded him as principal. The four-campus West Denver Preparatory charter system provides a common set of core values, curriculum, and operating procedures that each school adheres to.

### **Demographic Overview of West Denver Preparatory Charter Middle School – Federal Campus**

In the 2009-10 school year (the school year based on which schools were selected for the study), 326 students were enrolled in grades 6-8 at West Denver Prep, Federal Campus. A large percentage of the students at West Denver Prep Federal were Hispanic/Latino (96%) and 86% of students spoke Spanish. Among the student body, 91% qualified for a free and reduced price lunch. In the 2009-10 school year, the Federal Campus received an SPF rating of 88%, indicating that they received distinguished status. Last year, WDP met AYP (Annual Yearly Progress).

Of the students enrolled in West Denver Prep in the 2009-10 school year, 76% (285) were designated as English language learners (including students currently receiving ELA services, students opted out of services, and students who have exited from ELA services). Among the ELL students at the school, 107 were designated as current ELL students, 15 as opted out of services, and 127 as exited from ELA program services. The large majority of the English language learners at WDP spoke Spanish.

AMAO 1 (Annual Measurable Achievement Objective) is an indicator of English language acquisition. It represents the number of students who are making progress on the CELA exam. In 2010, 42% of ELL students at West Denver Prep were making progress. Further, the three-year (2007-08, 2008-09, 2009-10) weighted average gain (Z score) on the CELA for ELL students at West Denver Prep was 0.34 standard deviations above the mean, meaning they showed above average growth; this is compared to a state-wide gain of 0. Three year weighted averages are included here as these data are less subject to year-to-year fluctuations.

The three-year weighted averages of the CSAP median growth percentiles for English language learners (median growth percentiles indicate how well these students are growing in comparison with other students) were 73.7 in Reading, 84.3 in Writing, and 91.2 in Math, compared to the state average of 50. The median student growth percentile is the middle score if the individual student growth percentiles are ranked from highest to lowest. A “typical” school would have a median student growth percentile of 50.

The charts below display student demographics (including primary home languages and ethnicities of students throughout the school), the CSAP and CELA growth scores of ELL students at the school, and the proficiency levels of West Denver Prep Federal students on the CELA and CSAP. All non-exited ELL students (which includes students who are opted out of services) take the CELA exam, which test students on four domains – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Students in grades 3 through 10 take the CSAP exam. The option to take CSAP in Spanish is available in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades.

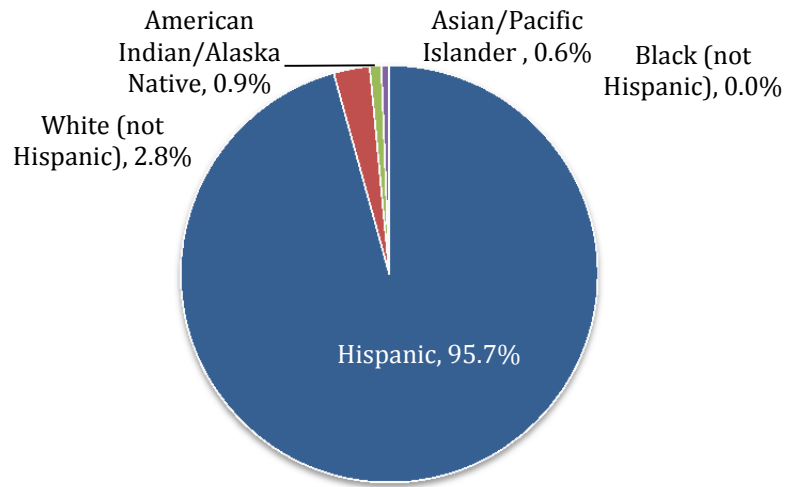
**Primary Home Language Spoken by West Denver Prep Federal Students**

LANGUAGE	
Spanish	85.5%
English	13.9%
Navajo	0.3%
Vietnamese	0.3%
<b>Total (N=317)</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Source: Administrator Portal pulled February 22, 2011 (the Administrator Portal uses data from the 2010-11 DPS October Count, matched with current student enrollment).

Note: Data describe students throughout the entire school, not just ELL students.

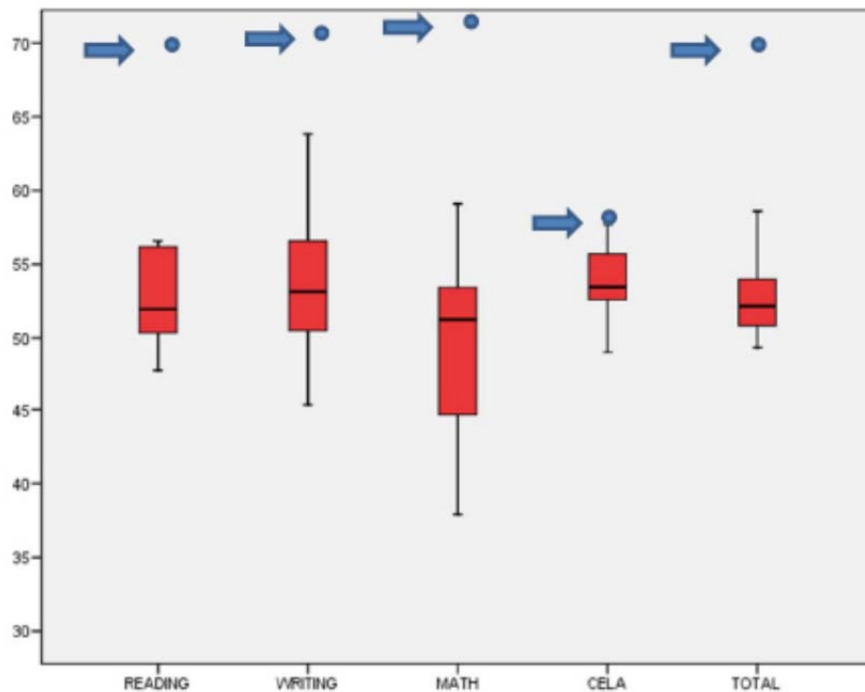
### Ethnicity of Students at West Denver Prep Federal, 2009-10



Source: DPS Strategy Department, Count of Student Membership by Ethnicity by School, 2009-10 from October Count 2009.

Note: Data describe students throughout the entire school, not just ELL students.

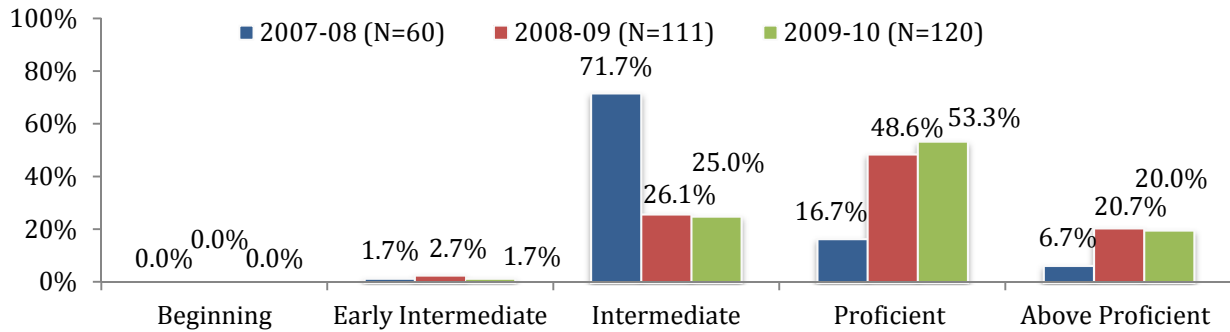
### Achievement Growth of English Language Learners 2008, 2009, 2010 (arrows refer to West Denver Prep Federal)



Source: Developed using data from the DPS AllScores repository.

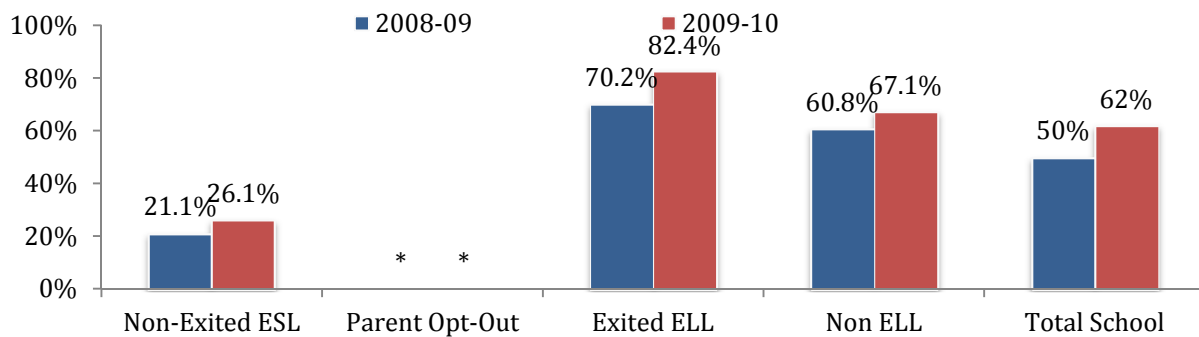
Note: Comparison includes all DPS middle schools with more than 120 English language learners with CSAP growth percentiles.

### English Language Proficiency Level, CELA Overall



Source: DPS Department of Accountability, Research and Evaluation, CELA Report 2010.

### Percentage of ELL Students Who were Proficient or Above on CSAP Reading



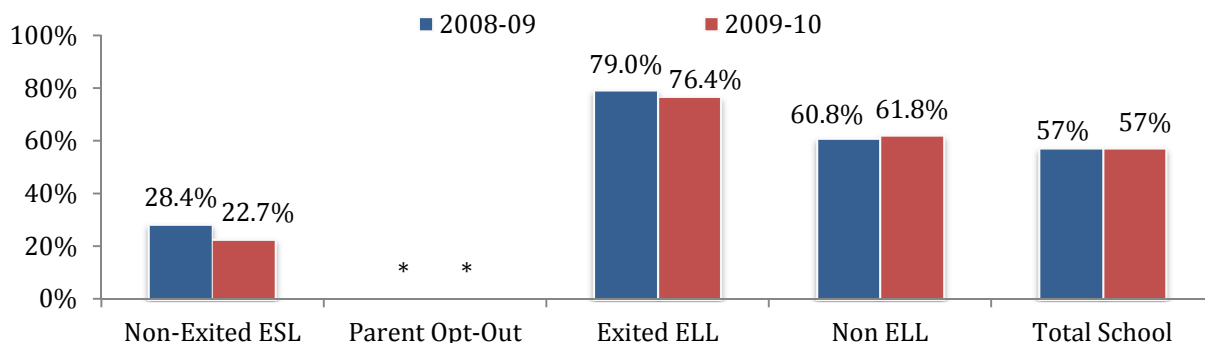
Source: DPS Department of English Language Acquisition, November 2010.

\* Data not available

Sample Sizes: 2009 – Non-Exited ESL N=95; Exited ELL N=114; Non ELL N=74; 2010 – Non-Exited ESL: N=88; Exited ELL N=148; Non ELL N=76



### Percentage of ELL Students Who were Proficient or Above on CSAP Writing

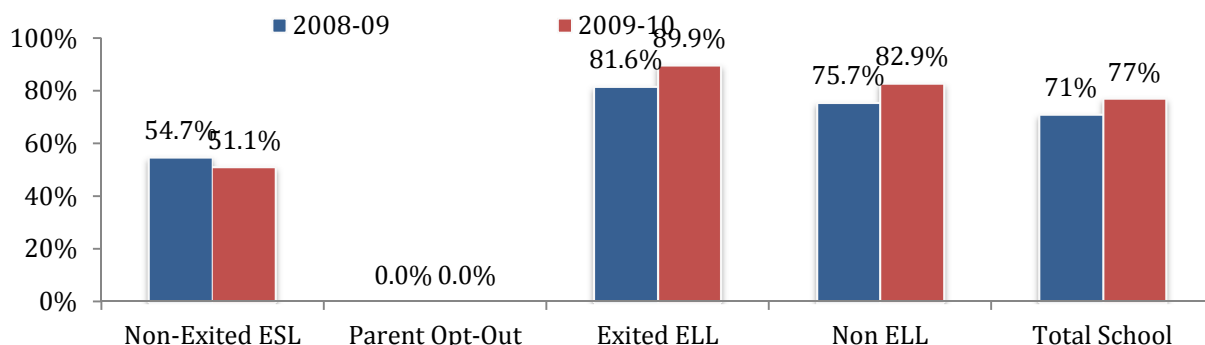


Source: DPS Department of English Language Acquisition, November 2010.

\* Data not available

Sample Sizes: 2009 – Non-Exited ESL N=95; Exited ELL N=114; Non ELL N=74; 2010 – Non-Exited ESL N=88; Exited ELL N=148; Non ELL N=76

### Percentage of ELL Students Who were Proficient or Above on CSAP Math



Source: DPS Department of English Language Acquisition, November 2010.

\* Data not available

Sample Sizes: 2009 – Non-Exited ESL N=95; Exited ELL N=114; Non ELL N=74; 2010 – Non-Exited ESL N=88; Exited ELL N=148; Non ELL N=76

## Summary of Findings from Case Study

West Denver Prep has demonstrated the strongest gains in both CSAP scores and CELA scores of any middle school in DPS for students whose home language is not English. We do not have evidence of direct and narrow “teaching to the test” or practices that would suggest that these gains are invalid. It appears that West Denver Prep students are becoming better at reading, writing, and math at a remarkable rate. This learning occurs mainly through students’ active participation in fast-paced, tailored instructional activities in class and out of class. Our findings are grouped to address three main questions: (1) What schoolwide practices are present to focus

students’ attention on learning and lead them to put forth exceptional and sustained effort? (2) What is the nature of learning activities in which English language learners participate? And (3) How is the school organized to maximize the likelihood of effective instructional activities across classrooms month after month and year after year?

### **Schoolwide practices to focus student attention and maximize effort:**

- ❑ Culture of Achievement and Engagement
- ❑ Teacher and Student Self-Selection
- ❑ Formative Feedback to Students
- ❑ STRIVE Dollars Incentive System
- ❑ Parents as Allies

### **Sustained Instruction Tailored for English Language Learners**

- ❑ Extended Academic Time
- ❑ Scaffolding for Multilingual students
- ❑ Direct Instruction Focused on Specific Learning Objectives

### **Organization to maximize likelihood of effective instructional activities across classrooms**

- ❑ Strong Stable Leadership
- ❑ Attention to Teacher Induction and Professional Development
- ❑ Extensive Use of Data
- ❑ Structures to Maximize Student Engagement and Time-on-Task
- ❑ Test Preparation and Confidence Building

### **Schoolwide Practices to Maximize Student Attention and Effort**

#### ***Culture of Achievement and Engagement***

No student can be forced to learn, and nowhere is this more true than in middle school. At West Denver Prep, careful attention has been given to creating a motivational climate referred to by school leaders as a “culture of achievement and engagement” intended to lead students to want to learn and achieve and to put forth unusual effort. There are several well-coordinated elements contributing to this schoolwide culture: a daily admonition to STRIVE for College, emphasis on college as a goal echoed in symbols and classroom names, the use of school money as an incentive system, uniforms to support belonging and reduce symbols of competing affiliations, and

recruitment of parents as active allies to focus students on the long-term goal of college and the daily goals of completing work and staying focused.

Each of the seven educators we interviewed emphasized the establishment of a pervasive schoolwide culture of achievement and engagement. This culture was first communicated to families in home visits before their sixth grader enrolled. For example, in January, sixth grade math teacher Diane Kaneally began visiting the homes of prospective sixth graders telling the students and their parents, “We’re safe. We’re small. We’re rigorous. We’re fun. And, we’re college prep.” When a student enrolls, they encounter the expectation of college attendance in multiple ways every day. They belong to an Advisory named for the college their advisor attended, becoming a member of the Boston College Team or the Colorado State University team, and they see banners and emblems of that college on the wall (practices confirmed by our analysis of photographs of each classroom). Objectives posted on the wall each day in literacy classes include “How does today’s lesson help me get into college?” (also confirmed by analysis of classroom photos). The school’s motto, STRIVE for College, is a repeated theme. According to the principal, in each day’s Morning Meeting students respond in chorus to “Why are you here?” with “To Strive for College!” Students earn \$30 of “school money” per week but are fined \$10 for any infraction of the school code during the week. Founder Chris Gibbons said, “The Culture of Engagement conveys that it is “cool to be smart” and “cool to do my homework.” It is supported by a structured environment with strong emphasis on time-on-task. “I count how many hands are in the air when questions are asked,” he said. Teachers we interviewed agreed that the great majority of West Denver Prep students internalize goals of academic success and pay attention and put forth effort in and out of class.

### *Student and Teacher Self-Selection*

One contributing factor to the maintenance of a culture of achievement and engagement at West Denver Prep is that students and teachers who are not interested in participating in such a culture may choose to go somewhere else. Although admission to West Denver Prep is open to all students, and the school deliberately recruits students from low-income families, the school is unusual in its academic demands, the length of the school day, the requirement to wear a uniform, and the mandatory Homework Center, and parents and students who are not attracted to this approach go somewhere else. The school presents itself as the school of choice for parents and students looking for a rigorous education leading to college with strict homework demands and an extended school day. These expectations are communicated to prospective parents in person. If the family isn’t willing to live with these expectations, they go somewhere else. Similarly, teachers are aware when they apply that they must work an extended day, that they will be evaluated on student gains, that they must come early for 3 weeks of professional development in the summer, and they must be willing to take parent or student phone calls regarding school work until 9:00 p.m. every night. In the words of one teacher, “We’re very up front. If you come to this school, it’s not easy. It’s going to take time, and you’re going to have to work really hard.”

On the other hand, the school has a policy of not replacing students who leave. The school has no motivation to push out under-performing students, because they're not going to be able to replace them with a new student. According to one teacher:

We want them there. We want to give that kid what they need in order to succeed, whether that's calling every night and saying, "Ms. Palmer, I'm confused about #5, will you help me?" "Sure." You can call me anytime. If you're confused and you're stressing about my homework, if you want to stay for voluntary homework center, which is in a different room, which is just volunteers who want to go in a quiet place and do your work for an hour, great. Because if you go home, if you have to babysit and there's too much going on, great, stay here and do your homework. So, we try and give lots of different alternatives for kids when what the rest of the kids are doing isn't working.

### ***Formative Feedback to Students***

According to teachers, students at West Denver Prep receive frequent feedback about their academic progress, and one use of this is to assist students to set personal goals and to monitor their accomplishment of their goals. Each student is encouraged to demonstrate two years of measured growth in each year, in each academic subject. Currently, NWEA MAPS tests, given in August, December, and May, are the measure used to track this rate of growth. Based on the August test results, teachers confer with students and work with them to set a goal for the December test representing double the nationally expected annual rate of growth, and student conferences following the December test focus on comparing the attained growth with that goal.

In addition, photographs of classroom walls showed charts in every classroom plotting class performance on objectives over time, so that students could see how they were improving from week to week.

### ***STRIVE Dollars Incentive System***

Students earn \$30 of "school money" per week but are fined \$10 for any infraction of the school code during the week (until they reach a balance of zero in their account). Deductions occur for minor infractions, and rarely do students accumulate a large sum of school dollars. Periodically, students are allowed to cash in their accrued school dollars at the school store for clothing, snacks, academic supplies, games, and sports equipment. Several teachers mentioned STRIVE dollars as an important element of the school's incentive system.

### ***Parent and Community Relationships; Parents as Allies***

An important element in obtaining the active participation of students is securing the active support of parents and maintaining strong communication with them. A relationship with each parent begins with the introductory visit to the home of each prospective sixth grade student described previously. A week before school starts, there is a required Orientation Day, attended by parents and students together. Students and parents visit the Advisory Room where their child will be based all year, and meet the Advisory teachers, and learn about all school procedures. Parents are

given teachers' contact information so they can call any teacher with questions until 9:00 at night any school night. When the year starts, parents get a progress report or some other communication from each teacher every three weeks. Every letter that goes home is in both English and Spanish. Parent meetings are held every six weeks. During these, according to one teacher:

We bring parents in and we say, "This is what's working with Jesus. This is what's not working. How can we work together as a team? Here's what we think we can do at school. What can you do at home to coordinate more work together on like ...?"

One teacher pointed out that the requirement that parents come at 5:15 to pick up their student who came to school missing homework creates a strong awareness in parents of students' homework assignments, and soon encourages parents to make sure that students are in fact doing homework. A parent with two students in the school may have to come twice to pick up students if one has completed homework and the other hasn't. Students can also choose to stay for the additional homework help voluntarily.

## **Sustained Instruction Tailored for English Language Learners**

### ***Extended Academic Time***

Student time and student work are structured to maximize students' academic focus, and to minimize transitions and opportunities to lose things, lose focus, or adjust to different peer groups. The school day at West Denver Prep is structured to provide approximately two more hours of instruction per day in comparison with most middle schools in the district. School begins at 8:00 a.m. and goes until 4:15, with a 25 minute break for lunch and 25 minute recess. There are no passing periods except to go to lunch and, at the end of the day, to an enrichment block. There are no lockers. Students, grouped in-to a grade-level "Advisory" of about 28 students, remain in the same room for instruction in core subjects until 3:00 p.m. and their teachers rotate, each bringing a cart with instructional materials. Reading period is 100 minutes long Monday through Thursday, and shortened to 50 minutes on Friday. There are 50 minutes of writing instruction daily, and two 50 minute math periods each day, one emphasizing basic math facts and concepts, and one emphasizing applied problem solving. There is a 50 minute World Studies and a 50 minute Science class Monday through Thursday. Electives are taught at the end of the day, from 3:00 to 4:15 or 4:30, depending on grade level. For all students who came to school with any of their homework unfinished, the academic day continues in the Homework Center until 5:15.

### ***Scaffolding for English Language Learners***

All instruction at West Denver Prep is designed with English Language Learners in mind, reflecting the fact that Spanish is spoken in the home of 86% of the students, and 76% of students are formally designated as English Language Learners. At the same time, however, few students arrive at the school with minimal knowledge of English; only 2% tested in CELA levels 1 or 2 in 2009-2010. The average reading level of incoming sixth grade students is at the third grade level, according to

the two sixth grade reading teachers. Supports for English Language Learners are built in as an integral part of the overall instructional approach of the school. More than half of the faculty speaks Spanish, and Spanish-speaking teachers are involved in introductory home visits to prospective new sixth grade students. Sixth grade students are grouped for reading instruction on the basis of fifth grade test results into low (reading level between Kindergarten and third grade) and high (reading level of fourth grade and above). Vocabulary is taught both from a school-wide list of words and from content of specific reading lessons. A recent grant was used to purchase high-interest books at low reading levels, and care is used to select books for Reading Workshop that are at the independent reading level of students. Extensive use is made of visual cues in reading, including drawing pictures to represent new words, and word walls are present for referencing during instruction.

A different type of scaffolding occurs in relationship to organizational skills. Teachers explained that students need explicit training in such skills as keeping their work organized in binders, maintaining a regular place for their homework and school supplies, and keeping a calendar showing when assignments are due and tests are scheduled. Accordingly, these practices are taught directly and monitored daily. At the beginning of the year, students are supplied with three-ring binders in which they keep the curriculum packets supplied by the school and all assignments and tests. As curriculum packets are passed out each day, students add them to their binders. One teacher told us that if she notices that a student's desk contains loose pieces of paper, she initiates an "organizational intervention" with that student lasting until every piece of paper is correctly filed in a binder. By the eighth grade, students are expected to exercise more autonomy in organizing their work, in preparation for high school.

### *Direct Instruction on Specific Learning Objectives*

Each day instruction in a particular subject begins by identifying Achievable Learning Objectives and, in the case of reading and writing, identifying how the day's work supports readiness for college. According to founder Chris Gibbons, a key to success is the Direct Instruction Model. Each lesson is structured into three parts: Presentation and Explanation ("I Do"), Guided Practice ("We Do") and Independent Practice ("You Do.") The use of a common vocabulary to describe instruction is apparent in the following description by a sixth grade reading teacher of how she taught a recent instructional packet:

Each day I do word study, fluency, mini-lesson and workshop. Here you see my word study, this is think-pair-shares. For "I Do" I usually annotate on the Smart Board, the first couple of lines, and then I'll stop and see how they annotate the rest. It is really helpful for them to circle, underline, write words in the margins. Then for the We Do, I give them sentence starters. And then for the You Do, they continue without sentence starters.

This approach to instruction restricts classroom activities to a limited and shared set of learning objectives which is closely aligned with tested state standards. It also features direct teacher-led large-group explanation and guided practice.

## Organization to maximize likelihood of effective instructional activities across classrooms

In any school, the nature and effectiveness of classroom instruction will vary from classroom to classroom. In highly effective schools, structures and procedures are in place to maximize the likelihood of effective instruction in all classrooms, including procedures regarding selection of teachers and the cultivation of a culture of professional development and improvement. Sustained active leadership is required to establish such systems and keep them functioning from year to year, and to maintain the motivational culture of the school.

### *Strong Stable Leadership*

West Denver Prep has had only two principals in its six years of existence. Chris Gibbons, founder of the charter system, served as the first principal West Denver Prep, and the current principal, Katie Holz-Russel, served as Director of Curriculum at that time. She is in her second year as principal. Ms. Holz-Russell explains her role:

My number one job as a principal is to oversee faculty and student life, and to make sure that things are as they should be. The Assistant Principal and I are the head instructional leaders. I would say our teachers get observed and evaluated a lot, compared to other schools. Every six to 12 weeks, my Assistant Principal and I divide the staff and we each take half. So I am instructional leader for 11 teachers.

In addition, each subject area is led by a teacher designated Specialist for the entire charter system for a particular grade level. This individual leads curriculum revision teams in the summer, and is available during the academic year as an instructional mentor. Teachers we interviewed said that their content specialist was a valuable resource and a person they turned to for ideas and advice.

### *Attention to Teacher Induction and Professional Development*

Instructional quality is valued and supported through extensive collaboration among teachers and administration regarding curriculum development and implementation as well as instructional practices. One teacher described her experience coming in as a beginning teacher:

When I started here, I was fresh out of college. And, I think the teachers' method of becoming a teacher at West Denver Prep, is the same as the students' method of becoming a real student. That you're just boom, thrown in, learn how to do data analysis, learn the SIOP model, we're going to help you, we're going to give you the tools you need, but we're going to anticipate, whether or not it's true, that you have no background knowledge on any of it. And, we're going to give you everything you need and just as the students rely on systems, so do teachers. There's no reason for a teacher to say, "I don't understand data analysis so, I'm not going to use it" or "I don't know how to differentiate a packet so, I'm not going to do it." They give you all the tools and all the steps to do that and it's a really fast learning curve.

The induction of new teachers begins with a required four-week session, 8 hours per day, during the summer. The first week is an orientation to all the systems employed throughout the West Denver Prep charter system, beginning with central themes of STRIVE for College, creating a culture of achievement and a culture of engagement, the Advisory system and the flow of the school day, the incentive and demerit system, and finally the curriculum and assessment systems. During the next three weeks, teachers work on curriculum revision grouped by grade level and subject area across the four schools. Each of these teams has a teacher designated a Specialist, who leads the team and provides mentoring to other teachers during the year. Math specialist Andrea Palmer explains:

Diane is in the specialist role for 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading, I'm in the specialist role for 6<sup>th</sup> grade math, and I'm a co-specialist with another veteran who has taught at West Denver Prep for five years, at another campus. We worked together on the math curriculum with the other two teachers who are brand new. One is a Teach for America teacher, first year, the other taught Science but, this is her first year teaching math. We mentor a lot on that level, where we have meetings that the school organizes.

I feel like that if you bring a new teacher in and you say, "Look what I already have for you. I have all the lesson plans, I have all the homework. I have all of the packets. Our job is just to focus on some areas of improvement and make that better." Because in a traditional school, you're given a book and a teacher's guide, and you're told like, "There you go." And here, collaboration is fostered in our professional development. We have time to meet with those people. We have time to observe those people. And, I think that really fosters a community where you know if you need help, if you have questions, or you're overwhelmed, you have that group to go to. You have your grade level team at your school. You have your administrators.

Teachers we interviewed said that they valued their specialist and made use of her support and expertise. Teachers also pointed out the advantage of having shared grade-level office space and common planning periods. Conversations within the shared office often touched upon problems of individual students and problems concerning the grade cohort. In addition, teachers teaching the same grade and subject have the same planning period within their campus but intentionally staggered schedules across the four West Denver Prep campuses, so that teachers can observe other teachers of their grade and subject area. One teacher said:

So, for instance, with the one 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher that I work with at a different campus, she has different 'off-periods' than I do. So, I can go observe her during first period, when I don't teach. Or, I can go 3<sup>rd</sup> period, when I don't teach. So, she kind of has an opposite schedule as I do. Also we have flip cameras, those cameras you just record and it has a USB and you can plug it right and I can send them a video of an example. So, this is how I taught, this, and I can send that to them. ~~I think, also, something that is off topic, but is relevant to what's going on.~~ Every teacher, except for 8<sup>th</sup> grade, they have a different schedule, has three fifty-minute 'off-periods' ...



Teachers teach four 50-minute classes and have three hour-long planning periods. Teachers' offices are grouped by grade level. Each teacher can use up to \$500 a year for professional development, including enrollment in a university course.

### *Extensive Use of Data*

Data is used actively and frequently to monitor progress, students are regrouped based on performance, and data displays are used so that students are aware of their own progress and progress of other classes. One teacher explains:

We do a lot of regular assessing of where they are and where they need to be and what needs to happen. For instance, every month basically, we have grade level team with our grade level administrator. And, part of that time is set aside to look at students who are failing more than one class, and what are these kids not getting that they need. We had this meeting two weeks ago and some of the students we focused on were ELL kids. So, we made a plan, okay, this kid is already in the Wilson Intervention during 3-4. So, they already have that type of intervention during the day. What else can we do? Okay, we're going to pair him with an 8<sup>th</sup> grader and we're going to create a checklist and train him how to practice and give a fluency test to this 6<sup>th</sup> grader in the morning and also practice reading fluently. So, how do we want Jesus to read with his 8<sup>th</sup> grade buddy? So, we're creating a relationship there. The 8<sup>th</sup> graders all have jobs. So, that could be their 8<sup>th</sup> grade job. And then, so that's maybe 30 extra minutes every morning that Jesus is getting time. So, I think we do a really good job at assessing kids and what kind of needs they have and we also have parent meetings.

Students are administered a RAP (Reviewing Academic Progress) test every 6 weeks in each subject, developed by the West Denver charter system. A teacher describes their use:

After each RAP test, beginning this year, we close school the following Monday to meet at the system level and assess the data. So after teachers grade their RAP tests, they input the responses into a spreadsheet, and we work with ALPINE to aggregate data so we can see what percentage what percentage of students have mastered each standard. That Monday we get a data printout, that the teachers help create. And they meet in content teams to analyze and create a "RAP Action Plan" to identify things that need to be re-taught to particular kids. I can see which students scored 80% or above on a test, who was in the 70%-80% range, and who scored below 65%. The last group we're really going to re-teach.

### *Structures to Maximize Engagement and Time on Task*

#### **School-Wide Curriculum and Procedures**

West Denver Prep admits to cultivating a fairly high degree of uniformity in curriculum and procedures across its four campuses and across classrooms within each school. "I'd say we seek 85% shared practices, and 15% innovation and creativity," said founder Chris Gibbons in our interview. The purpose of establishing uniform curriculum and procedures is to provide a supportive and familiar structure for both teachers and students that can be refined from year to

year and provides clear and consistent answers to the question “What should I do now?” The belief of administrators is that this consistency supports consistently sound instruction, and new teachers we interviewed agreed that it was supportive to know that there were shared understandings about what to teach and how to teach.

The West Denver Prep system has developed its own curriculum in all subjects. Each curriculum is divided into units called “packets,” which include student assignments and worksheets, and these are passed out to students who enter them into three-ring binders and then submit them for comments and grading. This system minimizes the likelihood that any student will lose or misplace materials, and facilitates collegial conversation among teachers about curriculum and instruction across the four schools of the charter system, and guards against disruptions caused by district adoptions of new programs or texts.

Following the School Meeting, the day begins with homework check and identification of students who will need to report to the Homework Center. An automated telephone call to parents in Spanish and English informs them whether their child will be staying until 5:15. One teacher gave us a detailed account:

So let’s say that this is the packet that I’m giving the kids today. Every kid gets this packet and we fill it out together. At the end of the day, I give them their homework and they take their homework and this packet and put it in their homework binder. We require them to use their notes. So, if they are confused, before they can call me, they have to go through their notes and say, “What did we do again?” And, then do their homework. The next day, they come in and they turn in their homework and they put the packet, from the previous day, in the morning or PM folder, under whatever class. So then, if you are having a quiz, and I say it’s over this day to that day, they can go through their packets and say, “Okay, maybe I should look at these” or, “I was absent, I need this.” So, I think part of it, we keep kids really organized and we hold kids accountable at all levels. If you’re in 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade and you forget your reading homework, you stay from 4:30 to 5:15 to do it again. If you do not do your math PS homework, you miss one problem, you’re in homework center because this is not ready to turn in. You finish that during homework center and use the rest of the time to work on that night’s homework. So, I feel like in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, they don’t do that because they are getting more ready for high school. They have office hours instead. So, I feel like that also keeps kids on track. If they’re absent, we have them in homework center. We give them the fill in notes and the assignment and then we work with them and they catch up through there. So, kids can’t fall through the cracks in homework in 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade. We know oh this person is two days behind, we’re going to focus on that kid, maybe pull them during break, and be like, okay, I’m going to mini reteach the past two days and make sure that he is on track

### **Advisory Structure**

Students are grouped into Advisories of 30 students. Each advisory meets in a room that is named after the undergraduate college of the Advisor. Students stay in the room all day, with breaks for

lunch and recess, and content teachers come to their room bringing instructional materials on a cart. In sixth grade, Advisories are grouped by achievement level for instruction in reading and writing. In seventh and eighth grade, advisory classes are heterogeneous. But students are further grouped for instruction within Advisory groups on the basis of particular instructional needs, and periodic analysis based on 6-week common tests developed by teachers and directly tied to instruction. A consequence of the advisory system is that students become well integrated into a small group of people they know very well, and no time is lost in passing periods or going to lockers. It is essentially impossible to “ditch” a class once a student enters the building.

### ***Test Preparation and Confidence Building***

Sometimes when a school demonstrates test gains that are far greater than what other schools have achieved, questions are raised about the validity of the scores. The gains on the CSAP tests demonstrated by students at West Denver Prep are far higher than gains at other middle schools, and so we inquired about testing practices. We did not encounter evidence that West Denver Prep spends more time and attention on CSAP preparation and teaching test skills than other schools. However, the approach they use may be distinctive and may contribute to the level of CSAP growth of their students. Teachers we interviewed described a playful, confidence-building approach in February, during the weeks preceding CSAP. In math, this took the form of games including problem-solving and computation races, and a raffle in which students who answered five questions correctly were given a raffle ticket for a prize drawing. In reading, students were given a short practice test each day, consisting of a passage and a set of questions about it. Students were also instructed in test-taking strategies, which included reading the questions before reading the passage in a reading test, and eliminating clearly incorrect responses before narrowing in on selecting between more viable options. Efforts were made to convey to students that they were well prepared for the test and they should approach it like a game or contest.

### **Concluding Observations**

We approached this case asking how it is that West Denver Prep has demonstrated the strongest gains in both CSAP scores and CELA scores of any middle school in DPS for students whose home language is not English. We proposed that students were learning at an accelerated rate through students’ active participation in fast-paced, tailored instructional activities in class and out of class. To ensure that this takes place, this school has developed a strong shared schoolwide culture around a goal of college readiness and college attendance. From the perspective of students, this culture is reflected in daily admonitions to strive for college, the use of monetary incentives, close attention to measured progress toward academic goals, and high expectations regarding homework completion and academic mastery. Student sense of belonging is fostered through small Advisory groups, use of uniforms, morning assemblies, and expressions of confidence in their ability to succeed. From the perspective of teachers, the school presents a common curriculum, shared planning space and time, intense summer sessions on learning the procedures of the school and revising curriculum, plus long work days and very high professional expectations. West Denver Prep hums with a certain intensity, and while it does not have selective admission, not all middle school

students would choose to go to a school where so much is expected. For students who choose to come and persevere, they are likely to enter high school well prepared academically.

At West Denver Prep, where 86% of students come from homes where Spanish is the dominant language, English Language Acquisition is not treated as a program for a designated group of students, but rather as the underlying context for all instruction for all students. This is apparent in explicit attention to vocabulary development, the use of word walls in all courses, the integration of visual resources into instruction, the use of interactive techniques such as share-pair, careful monitoring of comprehension, and efforts to select high-interest reading texts at students' independent reading level. Initial home visits and frequent ongoing communication with parents in both Spanish and English contribute to building a school-home partnership.