



APS 2020: Shaping the Future – Implementation Plan

ACTION Zones

Strategic Plan Reference:

- Core Belief – A district with students at its center provides an adaptable and responsible foundation for learning.
- Core Belief – Every student has unique abilities that we must recognize and engage.
- Core Belief – Diversity is a strength in our community.
- Core Belief – Students, families, staff and community members share the responsibility for student achievement.

APS 2020: Shaping the Future – Implementation Plan

ACTION Zones

Plan of Action:

By 2020, APS will have created up to three community-focused Innovation Zones within the district. The zone concept will be embodied by the name Aurora Community-Based Transformation, Innovation and Opportunity Network, also known as “A.C.T.I.O.N. Zones.”

Theory of Action:

Student achievement will increase if we provide targeted support in a collaborative and focused environment that draws upon community strengths.

Evaluation:

Evaluation components should include: increases in student engagement; decreases in student discipline; increases in parental and community involvement; increases in college and career readiness; and increases in student growth and overall achievement.

Discussion

Current Status:

APS has a track record of maintaining students' achievement levels. Students that come to APS with academic strengths continue on this pace and tend to graduate on time with strong Postsecondary Workforce Readiness skills. Conversely, students who come to APS with academic challenges tend to struggle, and many do not experience significant levels of academic success. Year-to-year, the greatest predictor of academic success has been a student's prior level of success.

In the status quo, APS is constrained in its ability to provide rapid response resources to address targeted student needs. While district policies, practices and agreements maintain "positive stability" in settings where achievement is strong, they also entrench "negative stability" in other settings.

Rationale for Change:

APS has stable instability. In other words, APS has a variety of risk factors that impede academic progress in schools, but these factors are predictable and well known. APS should adopt strategies that provide direct responses to these factors to break the cycle of predictability. APS needs an infusion of creative disruption.

Creative disruption is difficult to foster on a large scale. This type of change requires targeted work at a grassroots level. While APS is currently looking at specific options to address challenges in certain schools identified as underachieving by state accountability measures, APS needs to implement school reform strategies across a broad group of schools. APS also needs to create space for environments where such changes can occur and then spread across the district.

In an effort to push school reform in recent years, APS has attempted to foster alternate school designs. For example, one school and one P-20 campus, comprised of two schools, have district-approved innovation plans in place. However, no schools have sought state-level innovation status. APS has experienced many positive outcomes from implementing this district-level reform approach. New ideas about the usage of time, instructional models and methodologies and strategies to build out of district partnerships have helped to spur areas of improvement. Yet, these schools and district personnel ultimately have struggled in their ability to define autonomies, institute innovative practices, maintain an innovative mindset and attract outside resources.

Likewise, APS has created a framework to support pilot schools, modeled after a Boston Public Schools K-8 program. These pilot schools have also seen some success, but the model is designed for a small school or school-within-a-school approach. For example, Los Angeles Unified School District has implemented several school-within-a-school pilot school models by breaking up larger schools and dividing them into autonomous schools in a shared space environment. Large school pilots are largely untested and are counter to the model design. Stand alone pilot models are also not designed to affect change outside of the individual small learning community.

Across the country, some school districts have utilized a combination of innovation schools, pilot schools and charter schools as a reform strategy within a "portfolio" model. While APS has several successful charters and a strong partnership with the Colorado Charter School Institute, APS is not well situated for a broader portfolio approach that aggressively seeks out multiple charter operators. Such models have typically been implemented where a school district has seen declining enrollment coupled with low achievement, thus creating building capacity for a variety of school designs. But Aurora does not have the real estate to support a significant charter expansion in the near future. In addition, the rapid student growth in APS limits the district's ability to provide alternate space. In reviewing the models of successful charter conversions, key components typically include some or all of the following: closure and restart; transfer of property to a charter organization; dividing the student body into small

autonomous schools; non-retention of staff; and creation of a broader choice strategy within the district to accommodate families who want to opt out of a charter school as their neighborhood school. While any or all of the above need to be considered to address chronic underachievement, these options do not directly address APS' circumstances and the broader community of schools that are experiencing high degrees of challenge.

ACTION Zones that are targeted to specific community strengths, priorities, and needs provide an opportunity for disrupting the status quo and addressing APS' specific issues. While operating on a much larger scale, the well-known Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) provides a philosophical role model for the work contemplated by an ACTION Zone. In the late 1990's the HCZ formally took on the mission of leveraging community resources to improve educational outcomes for children in a 24 block area.¹ While the outcomes of the HCZ have been debated, in the most authoritative study to date two Harvard researchers concluded:

HCZ is enormously successful at boosting achievement in math and ELA in elementary school and math in middle school. The impact of being offered admission into the HCZ middle school on ELA achievement is positive, but less dramatic. High-quality schools or community investments coupled with high-quality schools drive these results, but community investments alone cannot.

Taken at face value, the achievement gains of HCZ students will translate into dramatically improved life trajectories.²

This is not an effort to replicate the HCZ. Over several decades of school reform initiatives, Colorado has developed significant frameworks to implement turnaround efforts in our state. The ACTION Zone concept seeks to utilize the state framework which provides clear processes and examples, minimizing the time and cost to APS in the development process:

The Innovation Schools Act of 2008, (§22-32.5-102, C.R.S. et.seq) was created in response to district and school leaders' interest in finding a way for districts to develop and implement innovative practices in a wide variety of areas for the purpose of improving student outcomes. The Act provides a formal process that allows schools to petition their local school boards for waivers from district-level policies and for school boards to petition to the Colorado State Board of Education for waivers from certain state-level laws and regulations that would otherwise apply to the schools and their districts. The Act furthers the belief that educational services must be tailored to meet the needs of the student populations it intends to serve. It also supports the belief that by providing flexibilities to school personnel, such as principals and teachers, they can determine the most effective and efficient manner in which to meet their students' needs, (§22-32.5.102, C.R.S., Legislative Declaration).

¹ Hanson (2013), *Assessing the Harlem Children's Zone*, The Heritage Foundation Center for Policy Innovation Discussion Paper #08 on Education (noting that "services are structured to fit into a "pipeline" that provides continuous support and reinforcement from a child's birth until graduation from college, with an underlying system of community services supporting the educational pipeline.")

² Dobbie and Fryer (2009), *Are High Quality Schools Enough to Close the Achievement Gap? Evidence from a Social Experiment in Harlem*, National Bureau of Economic Research.

The Act must have the support of many stakeholders to be approved, thus suggesting a high level of collaboration and input from various perspectives. It is required that the prospective innovation school receives majority support from teachers, administrators and School Accountability Committee (SAC) members; as well as a statement of the level of support from classified school staff, parents, students and the surrounding community. The plan must ultimately be approved by the local board and if the school wants to receive waiver from state law and regulation, must be approved by the state board. Upon agreement of affected employees at an innovation school, collective bargaining provisions may be waived as well, (§22-32.5-104(3), C.R.S., Innovation plans-submission). Information about the application process and applications from the schools that have applied to be designated as innovation schools can be found on the Colorado Department of Education's (CDE) web site at: <http://www.cde.state.co.us/choice/innovationschools>³

Policy Proposal:

APS proposes to design and implement one to three ACTION Zones over the next five years.

In general, an ACTION Zone is a collection of schools that: 1) Have attained state innovation school status, and 2) Share similar interests (e.g. geography, student demographics, educational approaches). State-approved innovation schools are made possible by the 2008 Innovation Schools Act.

The ACTION Zone concept would seek to build upon the foundation laid by APS' prior work in developing charter, pilot and district-innovation schools by pairing the ACTION Zone model with the community needs, goals and priorities embodied in the APS 2020 Strategic Plan: Shaping the Future. An ACTION Zone would be designed to respond to specific community needs with targeted innovations and resources. An ACTION Zone would reflect to community needs rather than academic reform trends. This design methodology would provide an adaptable foundation for the unique abilities and circumstances of APS students.

Finally, ACTION Zones would have the unique possibility of taking advantage of some of the autonomies and practices that are attractive in charter and pilot school options. A zone design team could propose a variety of models and options for governance, curriculum, staffing, professional learning as well as any other factor that would benefit students and student achievement.

Project Outline:

School Year 2014-15:

1. Engage community stakeholders
2. Identify design team and advisory groups
3. Identify project lead
4. Identify potential outside funding sources
5. Identification of ACTION Zone 1
6. Identify clear zone outcomes/priorities

School Year 2015-16:

1. Planning year for Zone 1
2. Innovation proposal presented to APS Board of Education and State Board of Education

³ 2013 CDE Report on the Innovation Schools Act

3. Identification of need, priorities and location of Zone 2
4. Engage Zone 2 community

School Year 2016-17:

1. Implementation of Zone 1
2. If appropriate, planning year for Zone 2

School Year 2017-18:

1. Implementation of Zone 2
2. Detailed implementation evaluation and review
3. Identification of need, priorities and location of Zone 3
4. Engage Zone 3 community

School Year 2018-19:

1. If appropriate, planning year for Zone 3

School Year 2019-2020:

1. Implementation of Zone 3

Design Concept of Zone 1

Because the APS community values the diversity and unique abilities of students, APS must provide adaptable and responsible foundations for learning. As a result, APS proposes that ACTION Zone 1 be designed to improve outcomes for the entire student body. To do this, this zone would provide specific support to leverage the assets of the growing refugee and immigrant community. Refugee and immigrant students and families have unique strengths and priorities in APS. They also help APS expand strategies for providing all students with the opportunity for acquiring career and college readiness skills, developing language skills and enhancing cultural understandings. In schools where APS has significant concentrations of refugee and immigrant students, APS has unique opportunities to partner with private, philanthropic and community organizations. These partnerships would enhance professional development, cross-disciplinary training for socio-emotional needs, cooperation and engagement with families and targeted work related to culturally responsive teaching methods. By having a core staff within a community of schools develop these specialized and valuable skills, APS could increase academic achievement for entire school and zone populations.⁴ The schools could also showcase the international experiences of families and communities. APS has the ability to utilize an environment that would be the envy of most prestigious universities.

At present, APS has five schools that have a significant concentration of refugee students (“significant”= greater than 10%) and a significant immigrant student population: Aurora Central, Aurora West, Boston, Crawford and Sable. While it is not likely that all five schools would create a manageable zone, some subset of these five should be considered for ACTION ZONE 1.

⁴ See, Boykin and Noguera, (2011) *Creating the Opportunity to Learn* (commenting on how increasing guidance factors and the overall quality of the teacher-student relationships can enhance key factors of engagement and raise achievement for all students); Bazron, Osher and Fleischman, (2005) *Research Matters / Creating Culturally Responsive Schools*, Educational Leadership (commenting on how aligning practices with the cultural diversity of the student group “can strengthen student connectedness with schools, reduce behavior problems, and enhance learning.”)

Conclusion

The creation of an Innovation Zone is by no means a “silver bullet.” According to the CDE, the State Board of Education has approved 53 Innovation Schools and two Innovation Zones in the state. According to the 2013 annual report, cited above, the schools at issue have had mixed results since the first schools were designated in 2009. But as of the 2013 report, 61% of the schools with a three year School Performance Framework (SPF) were rated with a “Performance” Plan.

Like any reform strategy, the ACTION Zone concept will require appropriate support, commitment to implementation and significant collaboration to be successful. Success will be measured by APS’ ability to accelerate learning for students, facilitating their opportunity to shape their own futures.