

How Well Has the New Jeffco School Board Majority Performed?

*By Tom Coyne
June 2014*

About seven months ago, Ken Witt, John Newkirk, and Julie Williams became the new majority on the Jeffco Board of Education. With summer upon us, it is time to assess their initial performance. In this column, I'll give you my conclusions, as well as the evidence upon which they are based. To help you understand my perspective, let me first tell you a bit about myself. I chair the School Accountability Committee (SAC) at Wheat Ridge High School, where over half our students are eligible for free and reduced lunch (F&R), and an even higher percentage are "at-risk" when that term is expanded to include F&R students, plus children who are either English language learners (ELL) or members of minority groups. I have spent my career in the private sector, where I was the CEO of a public company. For most of my life I was a registered Democrat; however, as the party moved to the left in recent years while I stayed in the moderate, pragmatic center, I became an independent.

My starting point for assessing the board majority's performance is Jeffco's poor academic achievement track record. In 2013, Jeffco's high school graduation rate was 82%. However, 29% of Jeffco graduates attending public colleges in universities in Colorado had to pay for non-credit remediation courses, which usually don't work. For example, in Colorado, only 22% of students who take a college remediation course graduated with a bachelor's degree within six years (see, "[Remediation: Higher Education's Bridge to Nowhere](#)" by Complete College America).

Nobody who understands [Jeffco's poor academic track record](#) should be surprised at this result. In 2013, on the national ACT test, which every Colorado eleventh grader must take, only 45% of Jeffco students scored at or above the minimum math and reading standards for college and career readiness, while only 39% were at or above the standard in science.

The root causes of this poor academic performance reach far back into these students' experiences in Jeffco schools.

The State of Colorado has established [academic standards for different subjects](#) and grade levels. Every year, our children's mastery of those standards is assessed using the TCAP tests. If they achieve proficiency at each grade level, they should also meet the college and career readiness standard on the eleventh grade ACT, and not need to take remediation courses in college. Unfortunately, the percent of Jeffco students who are proficient tends to steadily decline from grade to grade. For example, in 2013, 74% of all Jeffco third graders were either proficient or advanced in math; by tenth grade, this had fallen to 43%. This was

not a function of poverty: for students not eligible for free and reduced lunch, the fall was from 83% to 52%. For F&R students (about 34% of Jeffco students), it was much worse: from 57% to 20%. For special education students with IEPs (about 10% of Jeffco students) the fall was from 36% to 4%. And for gifted students with ALPs (about 11% of Jeffco students), the percentage scoring advanced in math fell from 79% in third grade to just 35% by tenth grade. You can get the full data set on K12accountability.org

This pattern has not changed in the eight years for which we have public data, despite the fact that taxpayers have been spending about \$1 billion per year on Jeffco schools. To be sure, there are individual student success stories in Jeffco, and some of our schools have won awards (though some of these, like the John Irwin Award, seem to reflect favorable student socioeconomic circumstances, and not true school value added). However, these favorable anecdotes pale in comparison to the excruciatingly painful story told by Jeffco's eight-year achievement track record, and the inability of previous boards and district leaders to improve it. Perhaps that is why, even before the new board majority took office, Superintendent Cindy Stevenson announced that she would be leaving.

So what has the new board majority done to address Jeffco's achievement improvement challenge? In my view, they have taken quite a few steps that were long overdue.

In December, the board unanimously approved five clear and quantified achievement improvement goals, focused on elementary literacy, elementary math, writing at all grade levels, gifted students' performance at all grade levels, and post-high school remediation rates. In the past, previous Jeffco boards had never gotten this specific, despite reapproving these two goals year after year: "Every Jeffco student will master the Colorado academic standards at grade level", and "Every Jeffco student will graduate career and/or college ready." In the private sector, there is an old saying that "what gets measured gets managed." Setting specific academic achievement improvement goals was a great start.

The new board majority was then faced with the challenge of ensuring that the district's billion-dollar budget was aligned with its achievement improvement goals. As the new majority had been elected mid-way through the budget process, they focused their first-year's efforts on the incremental spending in different areas that had been proposed by district staff.

Quite properly in my view, the board assigned the task of conducting an initial review of these requests to the District Accountability Committee (DAC), which Cindy Stevenson had combined with the district's Strategic Planning and Advisory Council (SPAC). School and District Accountability Committees were established by the Colorado legislature to provide independent oversight of

academic achievement results and the implementation of improvement plans, and to make recommendations to School Boards with respect to the alignment of budget priorities with these initiatives.

Unfortunately, rather than analyzing the merits of the district's spending proposals, the DAC majority (who had been appointed by the previous school board majority under Lesley Dahlkemper) instead chose to carry out an unscientific online survey to collect the public's input on a range of spending proposals that were substantially unrelated to either the Board's five achievement goals or the Major Improvement Initiatives contained in the district's Unified Improvement Plan that was submitted to the Colorado Department of Education. The survey was open for only six days, and allowed for multiple responses from the same person. There were about 13,000 responses in total. This compared to about 4,000 responses to a later online survey that was done as part of the new superintendent search process that was open for much longer, and to the 135,891 people who voted (once) in the November 2013 school board election. Unsurprisingly, survey respondents' top spending priority was raising teacher compensation. Subsequently, the DAC majority tried to claim that the results of this survey somehow represented the will of "the community", rather than a clumsy attempt by a narrowly focused interest group to manipulate the budget process.

A minority of DAC members (including me), who were appointed by the new board majority [produced a separate report](#) that analyzed the district's spending proposals and found many of them poorly supported, at least by private sector standards. An excellent example of this was the District's proposal to increase spending on full day kindergarten (FDK) programs for free and reduced eligible students by \$600,000, from \$4.9 million per year to \$5.5 million per year. Questions were raised about the design of the program, as Cherry Creek and Denver allocated their FDK money direct to F&R students, while Jeffco allocated spending to schools with high F&R populations. The net effect of Jeffco's approach is that F&R students who attend low F&R schools are not eligible for FDK, while non-F&R students who attend high F&R schools attend FDK for free. This did not seem equitable or efficient.

[Questions were also raised about the effectiveness of Jeffco's FDK program](#) in meeting its stated goal of significantly and sustainably raising F&R students academic achievement results, when research had shown that the effectiveness of similar FDK programs had been found to be questionable. For example, a comparison of multiple FDK studies was published by the State of Washington in January 2014. It concluded that, "the weight of evidence suggests that the benefits of investing in full-day kindergarten are unlikely to outweigh the costs because the initial test score gains are not typically sustained" ("[Full Day Kindergarten: A Review of the Evidence and Benefit Cost Analysis](#)" by Washington State Institute for Public Policy).

The board majority subsequently asked District staff for an evaluation of the effectiveness of Jeffco's FDK program and discovered, to its shock, that despite the fact that millions of dollars had been spent on the program over the previous six years, an analysis of its effectiveness had never been done! When at the board majority's request, [Jeffco staff finally performed this analysis](#), they found that Jeffco's FDK program had not been effective in achieving its goals (which obviously raises further questions about how many other Jeffco programs are also failing to deliver their expected results). Given this finding, the board majority did not increase funding for the FDK program, and instead kept it at its previous level for another year so that further studies can be done to better understand the root causes of the performance shortfall and whether they can be overcome. Despite this very pragmatic decision, the more rabid opponents of the new board majority accused them of not caring about "poor kids". In my view, in this decision the board actually showed its respect both for taxpayers and for the parents of the children attending FDK who have not been getting the results they had been told to expect.

Would you rather have the stewardship of a billion dollars a year in taxpayer money guided by anecdote, ideology, and emotion, or by data, analysis, and logic?

Another technique that was piloted in this year's Jeffco budget process was the application of "Activity Based Costing", which explicitly links academic achievement goals to the changes in activities needed to reach them, and links activity levels to the investments, staffing, and budget needed to perform them. For example, this approach identified annual labor cost savings of about \$8 million per year that would result from the approval of the proposed investment in improved information technology, including the Classroom Dashboard, improved privacy and security, and improved infrastructure to support expanded use of tablet computers and other mobile devices. I hope to see the expanded use of this approach in next year's budget process.

This year's budget also aligned incremental spending with the board's achievement goals, approving new investments in elementary math, elementary reading, writing at all grade levels, and gifted education. It also created new educational choices for parents and students by expanding Jeffco's online "Virtual Academy" to include grades 7 to 12.

The board majority also used this year's budget to take a major step towards equalizing per student funding between charter, option, and neighborhood schools (before additional funding for special education, free and reduced, or other special status). The Denver Post supported the board majority's decision in two separate editorials. In my view, since they are all public school students, equal funding makes sense as both a matter of equity and equal protection under the law. Moreover, as the purpose of charter, innovation, and option schools is to speed the pace at which the district experiments with new

approaches to achievement improvement, and as it is clear that some charter models are working extremely well (e.g., at STRIVE and KIPP charters in Denver, 61% of Grade 8 F&R students are proficient or advanced in math, compared to just 36% in Jeffco), equalizing per student funding will make it easier for the most successful charters to open in Jeffco, which in turn should improve the District's ability to learn from them and improve the performance of our neighborhood schools. Equal funding should also bring an end to Jeffco's endless cycle of charter school loans and repayments, whose root cause has been their lower level of per pupil revenue.

The new board majority also made an important budget decision with which I do not agree. Despite Jeffco's dismal eight year achievement track record, despite the fact that 85% of Jeffco teachers are currently paid at or above the comparable average pay in other Front Range school districts, and despite the fact that research (including Jeffco's own strategic compensation pilot's findings) has concluded that for professionals (e.g., doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers, etc.) compensation is a desired reward for superior performance but not an effective incentive for producing it, the board decided to set aside \$18.2 million in funding for an across the board raise in teacher compensation, assuming a final agreement can be reached with the teachers' union (the JCEA). While there is abundant evidence to support higher pay in Jeffco for new teachers and for principals (both of whom are relatively underpaid), and while I strongly support awarding bonuses to our highest performing school teams (using performance metrics that measure real value added, and not just favorable student demographics), I do not agree with the decision to award all teachers (except those deemed ineffective or only partially effective) an across the board pay increase.

That said, I also find it remarkable, and extremely maddening, that JCEA is fighting the board majority, and demanding raises for partially effective teachers despite all the research evidence that shows the substantial negative impact they have on students' academic achievement (not to mention the recent Vergara decision in California, and the repeated complaints by Jeffco's Chief Academic Officer about "widely varying levels of rigor" in district classrooms). Actions such as these raise a question in my mind: when the current contract ends, how does Jeffco continuing to recognize the teachers' union as a bargaining unit contribute to improving the district's dismal achievement results?

Beyond what I consider to have been a very successful first year budget process, the new board majority also made several decisions in other areas that I strongly support.

They conducted a very professional search process for a new Superintendent to replace Cindy Stevenson (who as the press has highlighted, was hired without one). From what I have seen so far, Dan McMinimee is an impressive leader who deserves our strong support as he takes on the very difficult challenge of

improving our children's academic achievement results in the face of a Jeffco culture that has long resisted change.

The board majority also reformed the Board subcommittee structure, instituting a new Information Technology subcommittee to provide independent oversight over the District's investments and policies in this increasingly critical area (which will hopefully avoid another inBloom episode). It also created another subcommittee to independently review issues related to school choice and how to improve the way best practices for achievement improvement are identified and transferred between District schools.

Finally, after uncovering the extent to which Jeffco has not complied with state law regarding the operation of School Accountability Committees and the vital oversight and budget roles the Colorado legislature intended them to play, the board majority has taken steps to strengthen them, and hopefully the District Accountability Committee as well.

In sum, the new board majority has, in its first seven months in office, made a lot of progress towards finally improving Jeffco's stagnant student achievement results. To be sure, some of the decisions it has taken have been a source of conflict. But as everyone in the private sector can attest, performance improvement inescapably requires change, and change creates conflict. You cannot have one without the other. If your highest goal is to avoid conflict, you will never improve performance.

The new board majority has also taken steps to improve transparency and accountability in Jeffco. The district's true achievement track record is now painfully clear. So too is the poor performance of some programs, like full day kindergarten, whose effectiveness was never analyzed before, despite millions of dollars in spending on them. The logical linkages between achievement goals and budget spending are also being made transparent, and will no longer be treated as a black box as they were in the past. Contracts are now discussed in full public view, unlike the way they were handled by the previous board, where they were regularly hidden in the Superintendent's consent agenda (remember all those 3-2 Dahlkemper, Fellman, and Johnson versus Noonan and Boggs votes, when the latter two would try – and fail -- to take items off the consent agenda and have them debated in public?). And until the JCEA forced them back behind closed doors, the new board majority also tried to have negotiations with the teachers union transparently conducted in public.

In spite, or perhaps because of the amount of progress the new board majority has made in just seven months (and what it implies for the future), there is a group of teachers and community members who continue to rabidly oppose them, seeking at every turn to block the changes they are trying to make, and who regularly disrupt school board meetings. It has even been said that their ultimate goal is to return Cindy Stevenson as superintendent.

To them, I ask the following question: There is a very large and still growing number of children whose futures will likely suffer because of the failure of Jeffco schools to adequately prepare them to compete in the unforgiving global economy they will face after high school. Between 2008 and 2013, on the national ACT test, 20,792 Jeffco 11th graders scored BELOW the college and career (C&C) readiness standard in reading, 22,345 scored BELOW the C&C standard in math, and 27,111 scored BELOW the C&C standard in science.

If you add in all their frustrated parents, you would have more than a sellout crowd at Sports Authority Field. Much more.

I ask the people who so rabidly oppose the new board majority, including Lesley Dahlkemper, Jill Fellman, and the leadership of the JCEA, what would you say to these 76,000 angry people at Sports Authority Field? Why should they vote you back into control of Jeffco? Would you tell them you were unaware of how poorly Jeffco has performed over the past eight years? I think not, because if this were the case, then your shame would have compelled you to resign the positions you hold on the Board and on the SPAC/DAC. But having seen no such resignations, I can only conclude that for the past eight years you have been fully aware of Jeffco's dismal achievement track record, and still found both it and Cindy Stevenson's performance acceptable, despite the immense cost imposed on so many of our children year after year with essentially no improvement.

And so I ask: What would you say to that crowd?

Tom Coyne chairs the Wheat Ridge High School Accountability Committee and recently joined Jeffco's Strategic Planning and Advisory Council. He has worked on corporate performance improvement issues for more than 30 years.