

# COLORADO'S TURNAROUND SCHOOLS 2010-2013: Make a Wish

A+ Denver & Democrats for Education Reform-Colorado



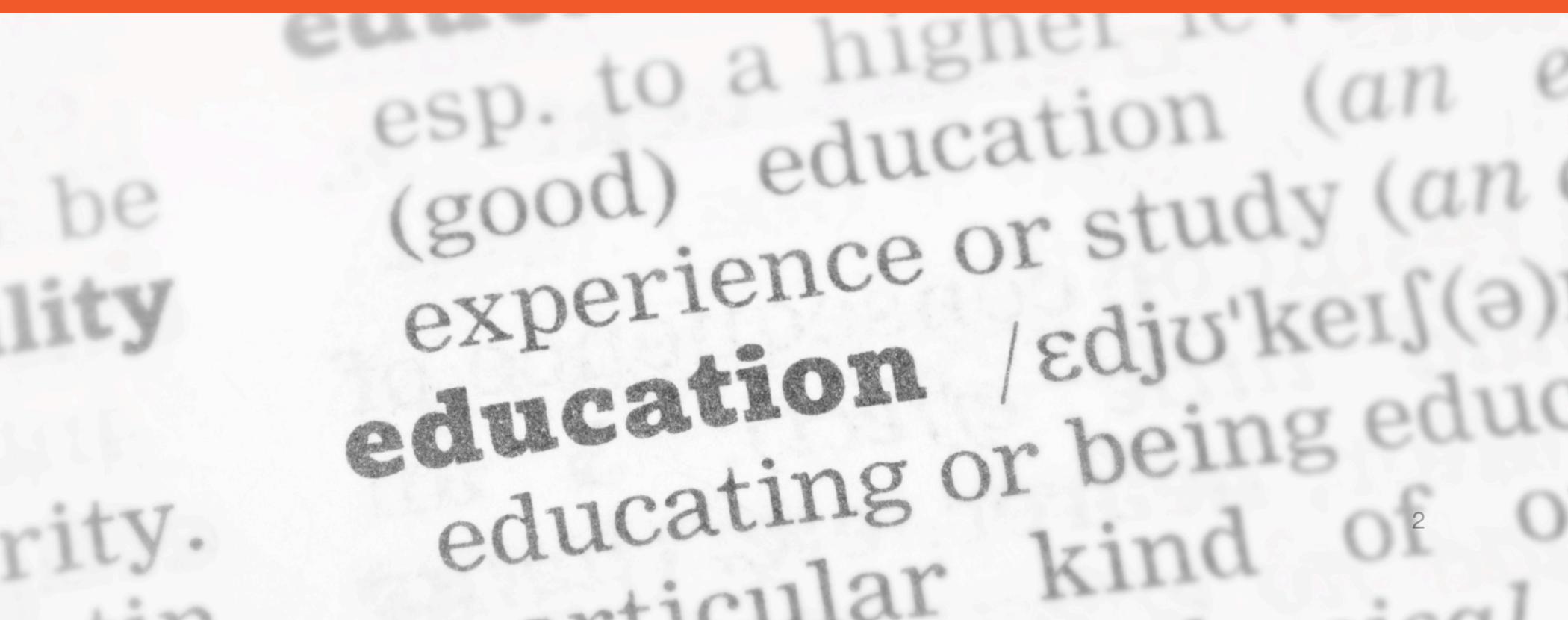
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Introduction 6  
Results 9  
Accountability 13  
Recommendations 14



# a message from the CEO



Dear Reader,

The federal government has committed \$58 million to Colorado's lowest-performing schools since 2010 with the hope of turning them around. The "School Improvement Grant" program, or SIG, is the largest single federal investment in failing schools in history. At \$4.7 billion, the total federal investment is now larger than the entire Race to the Top effort, which cost \$4.35 billion. The intention was to go beyond tinkering and "effect dramatic, systemic change in the lowest-performing schools."<sup>1</sup>

In its first two years of SIG grants, Colorado reviewed 27 applications and awarded every applicant a grant—totaling close to \$47 million (\$11 million more was doled out in the second and third year). Two years ago, A+ Denver sounded an alarm, claiming that there had been little selectivity, transparency, accountability, or most importantly, evidence that the oversight body was using past experience to inform its award-making. Money was pouring in and being spent on very short timelines—before the state, districts, or schools had time to formulate clear plans for spending the funds.

Now, based on the percentage of students reaching proficiency, we find that about a third of Cohort I, II, and III schools are doing worse than they were pre-funding (it's too early to assess Cohort IV by this measure). Using the Colorado Growth Model, which looks at the rate of student learning, we find that, again, fewer than half of the Cohort I, II, and III schools outperformed the state average growth percentile from their first year of funding. Those schools doing the best are ones that made the boldest and most difficult changes.

The lesson learned from this expensive effort is that we must go much farther if we are to succeed in turning around failing schools where dozens of past efforts have nosedived. A 2009 Brookings report states, "The science of turnarounds is weak and devoid of practical, effective strategies for educators to employ. Examples of large-scale, system-wide turnarounds are nonexistent. A lot of work needs to be done before the odds of turning around failing schools begin to tip in a favorable direction."<sup>2</sup>

“To win the future, America must ensure that every child graduates from high school, prepared to succeed in college and in the workforce. But the United States cannot substantially boost graduation rates and promise a quality education to every child without ending the cycle of failure in its persistently lowest-performing schools—schools that have failed to make academic progress year after year.

Approximately 5,000 schools linger in this chronically underperforming category, roughly 5 percent of the total, or one school in twenty. At the high school level, roughly 2,000 schools—about 12 percent of all high schools—produce nearly half of our nation's dropouts, and up to 75 percent of minority dropouts.”

White House Press Release, 2009.<sup>14</sup>

Andy Smarick, a partner at Bellwether Education Partners and Senior Policy Fellow with the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, recently wrote: “Mountains of studies had clearly demonstrated over many years that the success rate of school-turnaround efforts was miniscule. The research showed that regardless of the intervention used or the amount of money spent, persistently low-performing schools stubbornly remained that way.” Reacting to the Department of Education's initial analysis of SIG school progress, Smarick noted that, “After two years of results, the most sanguine assessment the Department's team could muster was ‘incremental’ progress. Needless to say, we did not spend \$5 billion for incremental change.”<sup>3</sup> Smarick isn't the only one skeptical of turnaround efforts. Reporters at *Education Week*, *Washington Post*, and *US News* have pointed out that the dollars have not led to transformative change.<sup>4</sup> Even the most recent analysis by the U.S. Department of Education shows that a third of schools receiving turnaround dollars stayed the same or actually got worse.<sup>6</sup> (Note that the national analysis is being repeated because a significant number of schools were omitted due to factors such as assessment changes. This change does not affect our results.)

Despite tall odds, states are intent on fixing failing schools. They should be; it is a moral imperative to improve public education. That said, we have to learn from past mistakes and change current and future practices. Specifically, we cannot fund half-baked plans, or even those that might theoretically work. We must look at the small set of successful examples—primarily new schools or extremely bold and aggressive turnaround models—and replicate those strategies.

The findings are particularly relevant now because, while SIG funds may taper out, the state will soon embark on a turnaround process of its own as mandated by SB163 in 2009, which calls for “dramatic intervention” in the lowest-performing schools. We must use this experience to learn what to ask for, and perhaps what to insist on, if our most troubled schools are truly to “turn around.”

Sincerely,



Van Schooles

# summary of results

- A third (36%) of SIG schools for Cohorts I-III performed worse than before funding based on proficiency rates (change between pre-funding year and most current year).
- All Cohort II schools performed better in reading and math after funding.
- Fifty-four percent of schools in Cohorts I-III showed greater academic growth than the state average while 46% (17 schools) underscored the median growth percentile.
- Just a handful of schools—almost all new schools—saw high enough growth to make a significant impact on college readiness.
- The SIG cost per student that moved into proficiency over the grant period was \$132,800 for Cohorts I, II, and III.\*
- There have been few consequences for poor results; two schools had their funding pulled for two years of low performance.

\*to arrive at \$132,800, we estimated the total number of students at each SIG school who were tested in 2012 (3rd-12th grade) from Cohorts I-III (excluding new schools). We multiplied students tested by the average percentage of kids that moved into proficiency since funding began to find an estimate of the number of students that reached proficiency. There were about 400 students in SIG schools that moved from partially prof to prof/advanced. Taking the total SIG dollars allotted to Cohorts I-III and dividing that by the number of students that moved into proficiency, we arrived at an approximate cost per student that moved to proficiency: about \$132,800. Note that we did not subtract the students that moved from proficiency to partially proficient or unsatisfactory, which would have raised the per student cost.

# introduction

Over the past five years, the U.S. Department of Education has invested \$4.7 billion into turning schools around, including \$58 million into Colorado's lowest-performing schools. The government's expectation has been that dollars be used for drastic school turnaround efforts. As President Obama described the problem, 12% of schools are responsible for 50% of the nation's dropouts.<sup>7</sup> President Lyndon B. Johnson, President Ronald Reagan, President George H.W. Bush, and President George W. Bush called attention to the growing crisis. Just over a decade ago, the Clinton administration called on Congress to enact a "\$250 million Education Accountability Fund, to help communities turn around failing schools or shut them down. [The executive order] directed the Department of Education to compile and publish key data on low-performing schools across the country and help states fix those schools."<sup>8</sup> This problem isn't new, nor is the proposed solution: "turn around" schools. What was new about the Obama administration's turnaround initiative was the specificity about how to turn around schools that included bold proposals to close or restart schools, matched with an extraordinary dollar figure.

The Obama administration's grant guidelines mandated that bottom tier schools be either (1) transformed, (2) turned around, (3) restarted under a different governance model, or (4) simply closed. Once the department issued guidelines, it was left to the states to allocate funds to districts and schools to oversee. (ED has a monitoring office that provides some oversight regarding state processes for managing the SIG grants.) Many of the policies were informed by the 2007 Mass Insight report, *The Turnaround Challenge*,<sup>9</sup> which recommended that districts and states abandon the light-touch improvement efforts of the past and embark on fundamental changes at the school level with serious consequences for failure to improve.

In April 2010, Colorado began distributing funds to schools and districts based on need. The districts submitted applications to CDE that showed which of the four turnaround models the schools would use (though only a certain percentage of schools in a given district could use the same turnaround model) and a plan for how the schools would implement the models. CDE reviewed the plans and granted funds to the districts. Over four years, the state selected four cohorts of schools—each school having three years to use the funds.

In all, 38 low-performing schools in Colorado were awarded funding. Several schools were restarted as multiple schools, so there are now 46 schools (including five closed schools and two schools where the funds were withdrawn) that technically qualify as "turnaround" SIG schools because they have received SIG funds.

Roughly two percent of all of Colorado's students attend schools that received funding. Many of the SIG schools have seen multiple rounds of interventions and leadership changes. This effort marked a unique opportunity to put millions of dollars into schools to allow them to make the drastic changes needed to help the small percentage of students falling far behind.

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# turnaround models<sup>10</sup>

**Turnaround:** Replace the principal and rehire no more than 50% of the school's staff; adopt a new governance structure; provide job-embedded professional development; offer staff financial and career-advancement incentives; implement a research-based, aligned instructional program; extend learning and teacher planning time; create a community-orientation; and provide operating flexibility.

**Transformations:** Replace the principal (no requirement for staff replacement); provide job-embedded professional development; implement a rigorous teacher-evaluation and reward system; offer financial and career-advancement incentives; implement comprehensive instructional reform; extend learning- and teacher-planning time; create a community-orientation; and provide operating flexibility and sustained support.

**School Closure:** Close the school and enroll students in other, higher-achieving schools.

**Restart:** Transfer control of, or close and reopen, a school under a school operator that has been selected through a rigorous review process. A restart model must enroll, within the grades it serves, any former student who wishes to attend.

Cohort I (10-11 to 12-13)	Cohort II (11-12 to 13-14)	Cohort III (12-13 to 14-15)	Cohort IV (12-13 to 15-16)
Nineteen schools awarded \$39,732,239	Eight schools awarded \$7,469,800	Six schools awarded \$5,775,682	Five schools awarded \$5,275,756
Average award: \$2,091,170	Average award: \$933,725	Average award: \$962,614	Average award: \$1,055,151



Each grant, beginning in 2010, was for a three-year period, as shown in the chart above. The bulk of the funding was given in the first round—making Cohort I much larger than the other three (due to stimulus funding). Dollar amounts given to schools typically comprised a significant portion of a school’s funding. For example, North High School received approximately \$1,000 more per pupil with SIG dollars.

After two years of SIG funding, A+ Denver published *Colorado Turnaround Schools - Rays of Hope*, a report on the progress of 20 turnarounds in Colorado. The report was optimistic about some of the investments: Hanson Elementary in Adams 14 and Aurora’s Fulton Elementary had shown high growth, and there was promising activity in Denver, where new models replaced failing schools in Far Northeast Denver and West Denver. North High School and STRIVE Prep-Lake showed significant growth, as did seven of the 11 turnaround schools in the Far Northeast—including High Tech Early College, Collegiate Prep Academy, KIPP Montbello, Noel Community Arts High School, and DCIS at Ford. Other promising results were coming out of Central High School in Pueblo 60 and four schools in Sheridan and Westminster 50. By 2013, however, some of this optimism had dampened, and many of the schools that had seen a bump had faltered.

# are school turnarounds in colorado working?

There are two common ways to measure the progress of a school. The first is by looking at proficiency. What percentage of students is proficient at a particular grade level? Have more kids moved to proficiency? Another important measure is “growth,” or how much students are learning as they move from one grade to the next. Growth is calculated by the state using the “Colorado Growth Model” and compares how a particular student or group of students is doing relative to their peer group. Here, we look at both proficiency (what percentage of kids moved to proficiency at SIG schools) and growth (how quickly students move toward proficiency compared to their peers).

## Proficiency

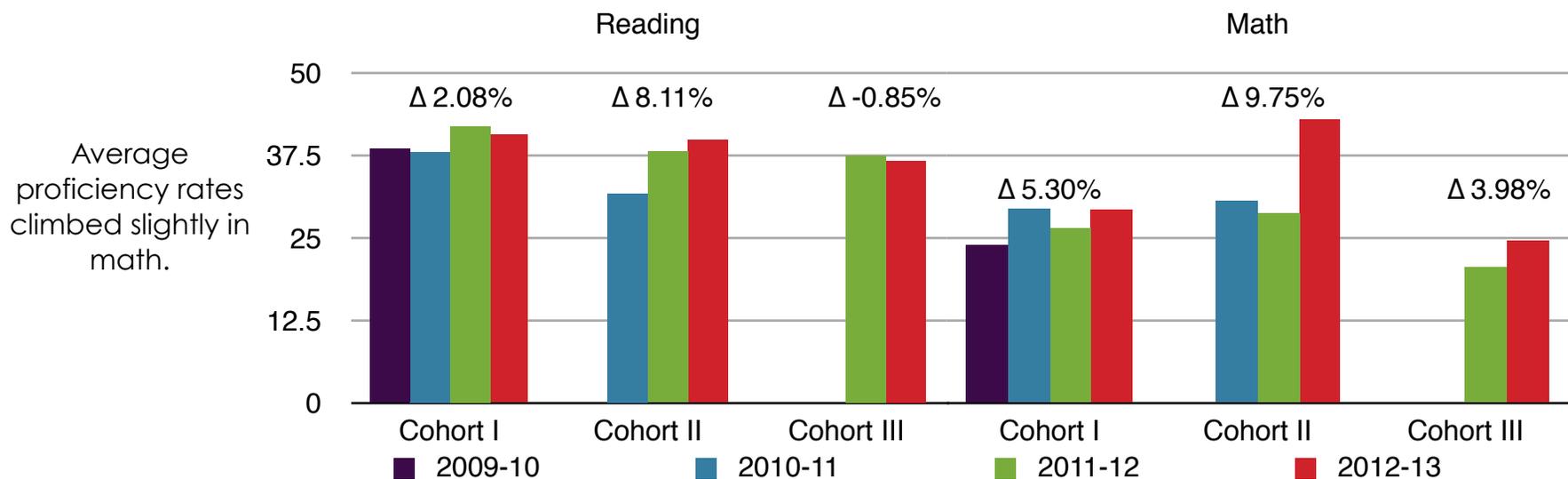
Grade level proficiency is the best indicator of whether kids will finish high school prepared for post-secondary opportunities. In November 2013, the U.S. Department of Education released an analysis of SIG funding's national impact using grade level proficiency as the metric for measuring success. Researchers found that nationwide, about a *third of SIG funded schools from Cohorts I and II had declines in achievement*. (Again, note that this analysis is being repeated because some argued that too many schools were omitted from the analysis.) The report used pre- and post-funding proficiency percentages to capture whether more students were reaching grade level, signaling school improvement. Using similar metrics for Colorado schools\*, we found that in Cohort I, almost half performed worse after receiving funding. North, Haskin, Pitts, and Greenlee were the only Cohort I schools that had improvement in all years of funding. Cohort II fared better; only two of the nine schools performed worse post-funding. Cohort III had mixed results, and the majority of schools performed worse. In all, about a *third of Cohort I-III schools performed worse after funding than before*.

Gains/Declines since receiving funds	Cohort I (2010-2013)	Cohort II (2011-2013)	Cohort III (2012-2013)
Reading	Gain-62.5% (10 out of 16) Decline-38.5% (6 out of 16)	Gain-100% (9 out of 9) Decline-0% (0 out of 9)	Gain-40% (2 out of 5) Decline-60% (3 out of 5)
Math	Gain-50% (8 out of 16) Decline-50% (8 out of 16)	Gain - 100% (9 out of 9) Decline-0% (0 out of 9)	Gain-40% (2 out of 5) Decline-60% (3 out of 5)
Writing	Gain-62.5% (10 out of 16) Decline-38.5% (6 out of 16)	Gain-64% (6 out of 9) Decline-33% (3 out of 9)	Gain-60% (3 out of 5) Decline-40% (2 out of 5)
Average Across Subjects	Gain-56% (9 out of 16) Decline-44% (7 out of 16)	Gain-89% (8 out of 9) Decline-11% (1 out of 9)	Gain-40% (2 out of 5) Decline-60% (3 out of 5)

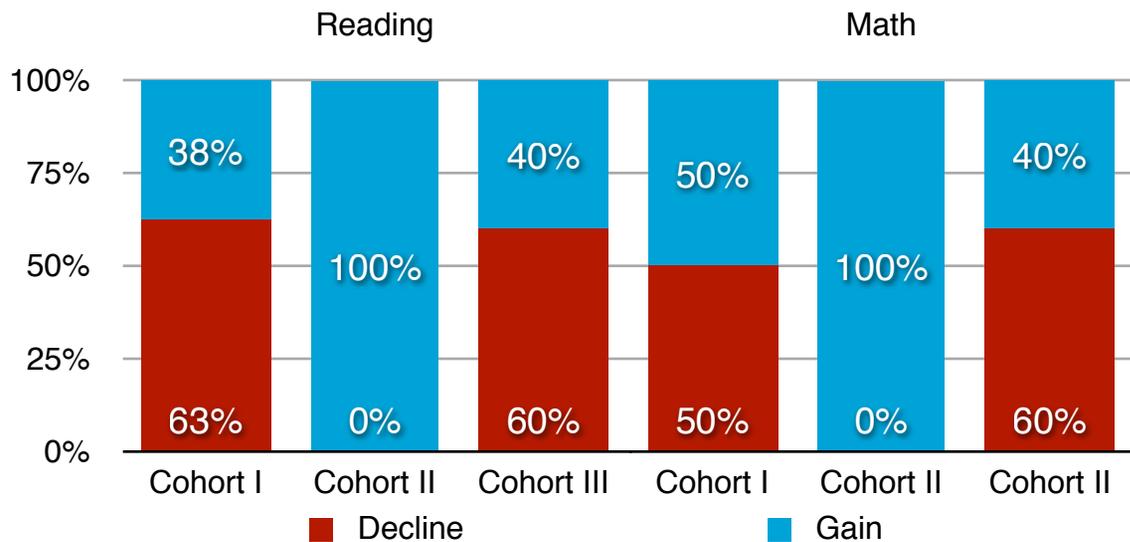
\*Calculations exclude closed schools and schools with incomplete data. Omitted schools were: Spann, Lake, Ford, KIPP Montbello, Collegiate Prep, DCIS Montbello, High Tech High, Noel Community, DCIS Ford, R5 HS, West Generation, and West Leadership.

\*\*CDE withdrew SIG funds for Pueblo's Freed and Roncalli for 2012-13 after two years of poor performance so they are omitted in the third year of calculations for Cohort I.

### average proficiency rates in reading and math 2009-2012



### percentage SIG schools demonstrating gains and declines in average proficiency rates since receiving grants



Between 2010 and 2013, Cohorts I, II, and III saw both gains and declines in the percentage of students proficient. A \$52 million investment resulted in about 400 students moving to proficiency. The average investment per student that moved to grade level was about **\$132,800**.

marginal growth percentile compared to state (across all subjects over funding period)				
	Cohort I	Cohort II	Cohort III	Combined Cohorts I, II, & III
Excluding New Schools	Better-29% (4 out of 14) Same/Worse-71% (10 out of 14)	Better-78% (7 out of 9) Worse-22% (2 out of 9)	Better-75% (3 out of 4) Worse-25% (1 out of 4)	Better-52% (14 out of 27) Same/Worse-48% (13 out of 27)
Including New Schools	Better-50% (11 out of 22) Same/Worse-50% (11 out of 22)	Better-78% (7 out of 9) Worse-22% (2 out of 9)	Better-43% (2 out of 6) Worse-67% (4 out of 6)	Better-54% (20 out of 37) Same/Worse-46% (17 out of 37)
<small>*All calculations exclude closed schools and schools with incomplete data. Omitted schools were: Spann, Lake, R5 High, Ford, West Generation, and West Leadership.  **CDE withdrew SIG funds for Pueblo's Freed and Roncalli for 2012-13 after two years of poor performance so they are omitted in the third year of calculations for Cohort I.</small>				

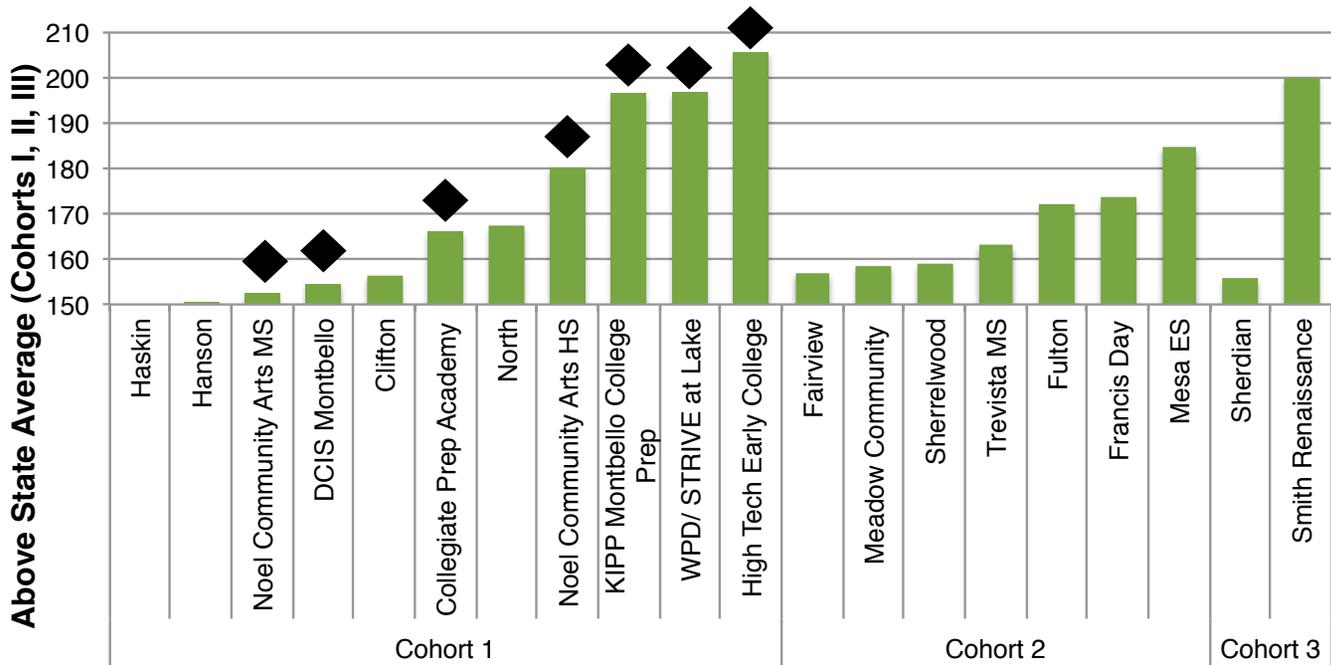
### Academic Growth

The Median Growth Percentile (MGP) represents students' academic growth: the higher the percentile, the more students making gains. In Colorado, the average is 50% in reading, writing, and math, or 150 points overall. Students at those schools that exceeded 150 grew at a faster pace than their peer group. Those below 150 showed slower academic growth than students in their peer group at other schools.

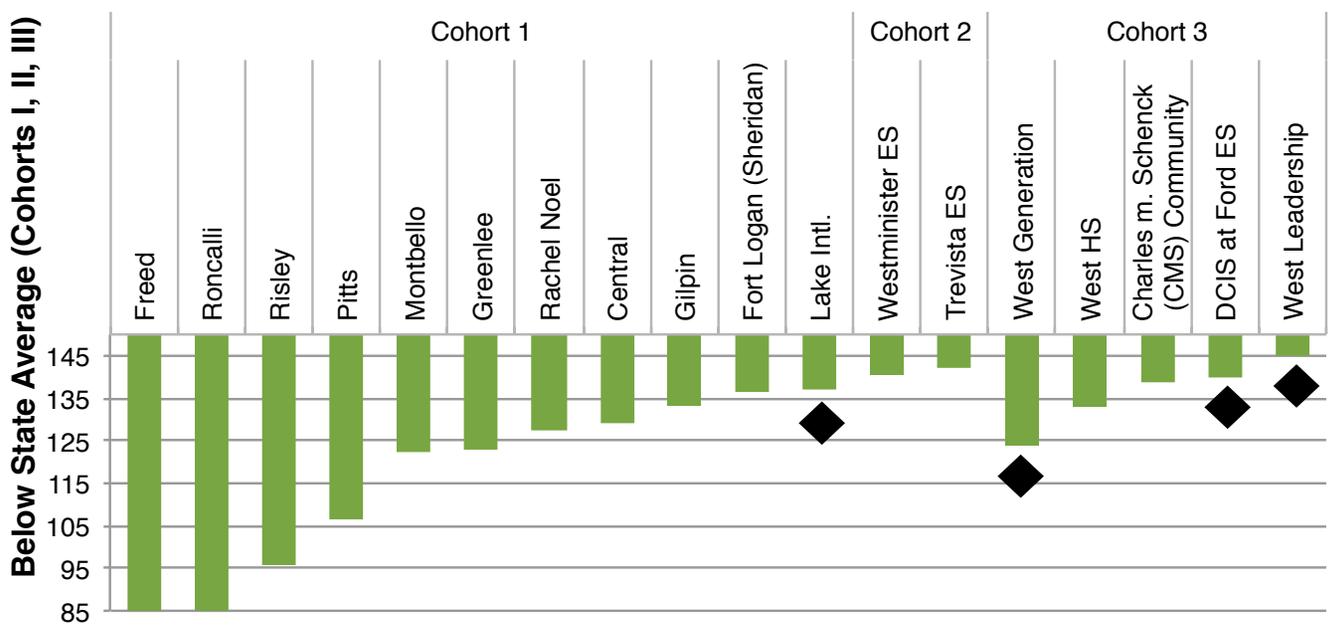
To date, 52% of the turnaround schools from the first three cohorts exceeded the state MGP over the life of their grant. Including the new schools, only 54% of the schools beat the state. This means that overall 46% of the schools in Cohorts I-III are losing ground to their peers (advancing more slowly). Many of those beating the state growth average are just a few points over 150 (the average across subjects) which indicates that it is unlikely that students are progressing quickly enough to catch up to grade level.

As seen on page 12, those SIG schools that beat the MGP by more than 10 percentage points in each subject (30 points overall), have mainly been new schools. It's important for schools to significantly outperform the MGP (50%) because, as Donnell-Kay Senior Fellow Alex Ooms points out, to reach significantly higher proficiency, schools have to beat the median growth percentile by about a standard deviation. In other words, schools should be in the 61st-65th percentile depending on grade and subject.<sup>12</sup> Just beating the median percentile by one or two points isn't going to mean much in terms of the percentage of students at grade level over time; in fact, because tests get harder as a student reaches high school, proficiency levels might fall.

We applaud the schools that are approaching the level of growth necessary to move the majority of kids to proficiency, which are High Tech Early College, STRIVE-Lake, KIPP Montbello, Mesa Elementary, Smith Renaissance, and Noel Community Arts High School.



The Median Growth Percentile in Colorado is 50% in reading, writing, and math, or 150 points overall. These graphs show Cohort I-III growth compared to the state average. Students at those schools that averaged 150+ grew at a faster pace than their peers. Those below 150 showed slower academic growth than students in their peer group at other schools.



Only **20 schools** beat the state average of 150, meaning **17 schools** in Cohorts I, II, and III showed slower growth.

◆ New School  
State Average = 150

# selection and accountability

We have raised questions in the past about whether the state's selection process was competitive enough and whether schools and districts have been held accountable for results. We believe that processes have improved slightly since Cohort I was selected, but that selection and accountability have not been rigorous enough.

While CDE maintains that one of its objectives was to allocate resources to struggling schools as quickly as possible, we believe that had a large pool of applicants been recruited and funding been awarded more selectively, applications might have been stronger and thus the likelihood of success higher. As it was, 95% of applicants were awarded funding, compared to 63% nationally. Just two schools were denied grants. It would be one thing if all of the applications were strong, but by the state's own standards, many of the applications were very weak. Many of the scores were in the 50s and 60s (out of 100) and one school scored as low as 46. However, all but two schools were awarded large grants no matter how strong their proposal. (Note that many large year one grants nationally were made quickly in an effort to distribute TAARP money).

The second issue we've pressed is accountability. We have maintained that if an awardee's performance remains low after they receive a grant, that money should be withdrawn. CDE seemed to support this position. In 2012 Keith Owen (CDE) stated that if a SIG school's SPF overall percentage of points earned declined (post grant), the school would not be funded for a subsequent year. Thus far, just two schools have lost funding and three others had their funding temporarily suspended.

And finally, at least from an outside perspective, it appears as though there has sometimes been a mismatch between the plans submitted, approved and executed. For example, Montbello and Rachel Noel applied for and were awarded \$6 million in August of 2010. However, just three months later, different plans were submitted to the DPS school board for the Far Northeast Denver school cluster, of which Montbello and Rachel Noel were a part. The money ended up being distributed to Montbello and Rachel Noel for phase out and new schools. We also note that Trevista was awarded \$1.3 million and Mesa R-5 awarded \$1,167,657, despite the fact that CDE's website does not reveal either Trevista or Mesa R-5 submitted SIG applications; instead we see the Unified Improvement Plan (UIP) from Trevista and only 12 pages of Mesa R-5's UIP. Information on Trevista on CDE's website was missing entirely until we pointed it out to CDE a year ago (Jan 2013). While some of these glitches may be due to human error or a result of internal processes that are not apparent to outside observers, there does seem to be a need for a higher level of public transparency and clarity about the application and approval process.

Reviewer scores given to applicants\*

Cohort II (2011)		
Aurora	Fulton	59%
Mapleton	Meadow Community	66%
Pueblo 60	Spann	49%
Westminster	Fairview, Francis Day, Westminster ES, Sherrelwood, Mesa ES	56%
DPS	Trevista	N/A
Cohort III (2012)		
DPS	Charles m. Schenck (CMS) Community School	60%
	Ford	67%
	Smith Renaissance	63%
	West	63%
Mesa 51	R-5 HS	57%
Sheridan	Sheridan MS	62%
Cohort IV (2013)		
Adams 14	Lester Arnold	67%
Aurora	Aurora Central	66%
DPS	Bruce Randolph	71%
Westminster	Scott Carpenter	46%
Vilas	Vilas Online HS	N/A

\* CDE notes that weaknesses in applications are addressed before funds are awarded

# recommendations

As we look to 2014 and beyond, we know we must continue tackling chronically low-performing schools, but also owe it to taxpayers and kids to refine state-level strategies. Some shifts worth considering (or accelerating) include:

- 1. Support Structures and Resource Allocation:** Several academic and nonprofit groups have proposed Colorado create a Turnaround District or “achievement district” as states like Louisiana and Tennessee have done. This approach marshals the lowest performing schools under a separate governance team whose sole focus is to turn schools around. This strategy might create autonomy “zones” under which schools operate independently. The Colorado Department of Education should be re-designed so that decisions about federal funding streams, especially the 1003 (SIG) funds, are coordinated under the same office which provides support. Such alignment will maximize how these funds leverage improvement and oversee the state’s investment.
- 2. Investment in high-impact strategies:** Only those investments with a high probability of success based on past results should be pursued with SIG funds. (For example, we’ve seen the best results when proven turnaround principals are hired and are given time to plan; or when failing schools are phased out and proven operators phase in.) Reform strategies like adding programs, tutoring, new curriculum, consultants, technology, or changing a math program may inch scores upward (or not), but haven’t historically led to sustained improvement in student achievement.
- 3. Accountability with autonomy:** We recommend that districts and schools have high levels of autonomy and flexibility with minimal reporting and “red tape,” but that they be held to high standards using a set of uniform performance metrics. Schools and districts should only be given funds when they prove they are ready to use the money effectively. The US Department of Education should also make adjustments to the SIG program to enable states to award funds in a shorter cycle, with a focus on a planning year, and with more flexibility for school eligibility.
- 4. Transparency:** The public and the State Board of Education should be aware of school performance. Monitoring and evaluation tools, including basic information on how much money is being put into each school, where it is going, and how schools are progressing according to predetermined benchmarks, would provide needed clarity.
- 5. Analysis:** Finally, more analyses are needed that examine what does and doesn’t work within schools so that we can further replicate and scale success and avoid repeating past mistakes. We know that the most important element of successful turnarounds is a school culture where all adults and kids in the building have shared goals and a common understanding of what needs to happen. By taking a close look at programs, structures, systems, phase-ins versus changing all grades at once, etc., we can build a common understanding of the most and least effective strategies. What have successful principals done? Why have we cycled through so many principals? What systems must be in place to sustain progress and how do those systems persist during leadership changes?

# conclusion

We are nowhere near finished transforming our lowest-performing schools. While there are a handful of bright spots, we still have a lot of work to do to crack the code on turning schools around. Particularly in rural areas, we must think creatively about solutions that are not the same as in suburban or urban areas. The good news is that we have seen models that are showing success, and there are leaders at CDE and within districts that are committed to doing what works better.

# endnotes

- 1 Department of Education. (2011). Principles for Improving Student Academic Achievement and Increasing the Quality of Instruction. Retrieved from <http://doe.sd.gov/pressroom/educationonline/2011/november/documents/Principles.pdf>
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- 6 US Department of Education. (2013). U.S. Department of Education Releases School Improvement Grant (SIG) Data Analysis. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-releases-school-improvement-grant-sig-data-analysis> (as noted, the report is under review due to omission of schools)
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## about us

A+ Denver is an independent, non-partisan 501(c)(3) organization working to bring the power of Denver's citizens to bear on school reform. Our mission is to harness the power of civic leadership to build public will and advocate for the changes necessary to dramatically increase student achievement in public education in Denver. A+ focuses on the intersection of policy, practice, and politics—building support for changes that put the interests of students over those of adults.

## membership

The success of A+ Denver depends on members and friends. Members are nominated and invited to join the organization by our Board of Directors. We seek members that are proven leaders in the community who will work with us to advocate on behalf of Denver's students.

Many of our members started out as friends. A+ friends receive newsletters and invitations to events. We hope you will join us today. Please email [admin@aplusdenver.org](mailto:admin@aplusdenver.org) to join our mailing list or to learn more about becoming involved.



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