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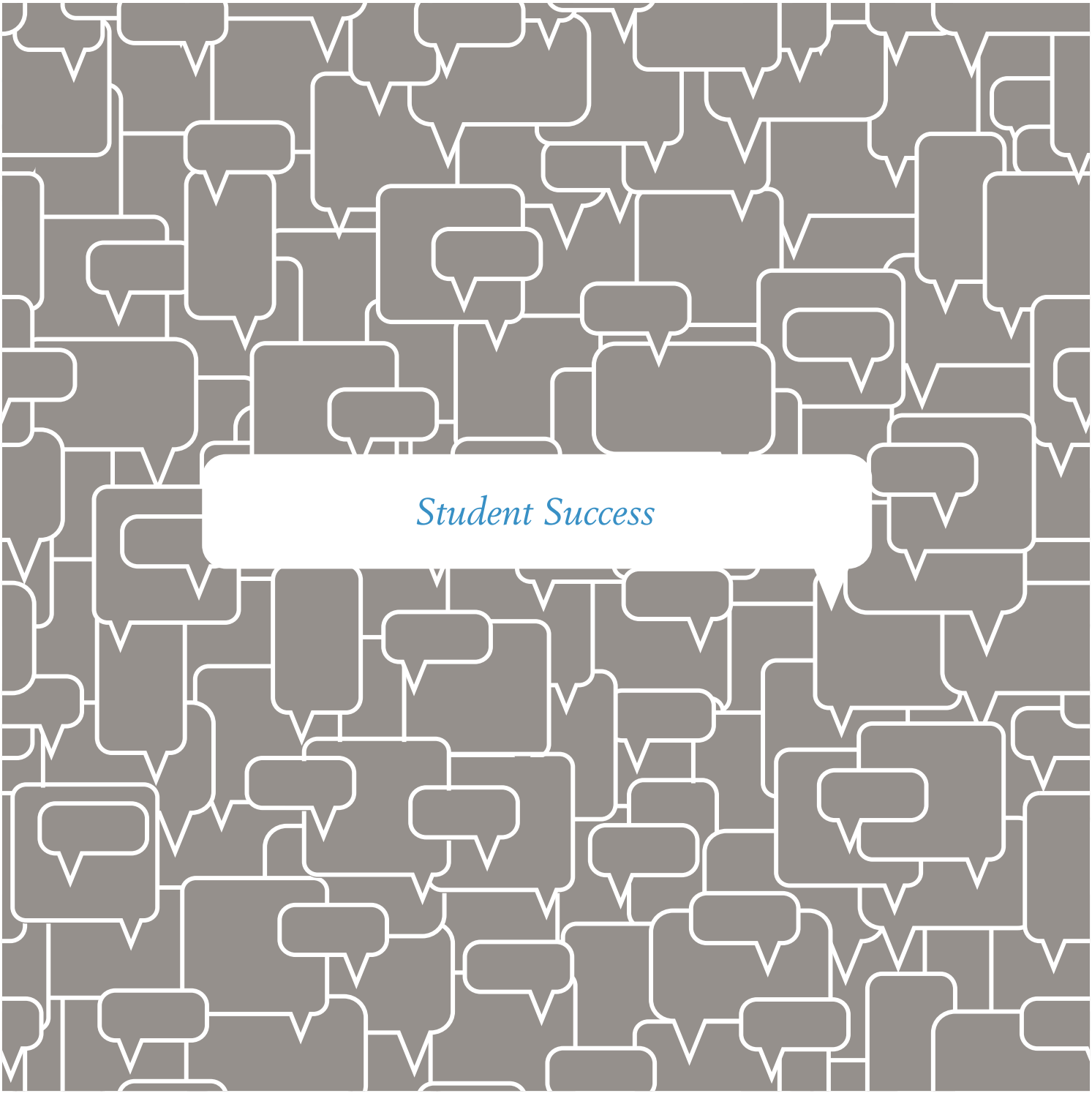

Student Success

A PROJECT OF THE COLLECTIVE

student SUCCESS

A MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR | ANTWAN JEFFERSON, PH.D

Success by Any Other Name

Welcome to the summer 2022 issue of the Denver Journal of Education and Community (DJEC: n. dee-jeck). Since we are at the beginning of a new school year, one that is possibly the closest to the start of a "normal" school year since August 2019, we are taking this opportunity to invite you to join us in thinking about what it means for our children to obtain success as a result of their time in our public schools. How will we know that this school year will sufficiently advance student learning, post-COVID? When will we know enough about the results of remote instruction for students who are nearing completion of high school, and about what adjustments employers and higher education systems are prepared to make? *As the parent of an official high school senior, these questions have provoked in me some uncertainty, some worry.*

Youth and their families–and the broader community–around the region often are thinking about public school as a step towards a range of possible outcomes, often unevenly distributed. For some high schoolers, success is a direct next-step into a competitive college or university; while, for others, success is much more complex, nuanced, a winding path of risk-taking, discovery, and curiosity. Which is the right path, and who decides?

As we are thinking about our own success as a community-sourced publication focused on public education in the Denver metro region, we cannot help but think about the metrics typically imposed on publications that assess their viability, sometimes used to justify their existence. Readership? Subscriptions? "Likes" or "follows"? Site visits? Budget shrinkage and growth? For us, these are not the signals of our success. We may be a bit more like that metaphorical high school student who is endlessly encouraged to attend a university, but who really just wants to learn a trade, something tangible, practical. Can't this also be cool?

Now that we've been creating content for 3 years–does this mean we're almost seniors? We have a much clearer sense of where we belong; about what our inputs and outputs are. And we have a much better sense of what success means for us. *I'll share about this in future quarterly issues, small bites over time.* For us, success means that we can succeed at a trade–by doing something practical and specific, like making repairs to the systems that determine whose voices should inform public education in the region. We aren't general contractors–we do one thing, and one thing only: community-sourced writing about public education in the Denver metro region.

Let's see if this metaphor holds. Repairs to the system–public education will continue to be necessary–this is true of all aging systems–and it's the system-users who experience system failures. These are our inputs, and this journal–along with the digest and accompanying digital content–is our output–to local education professionals, funders, and policymakers.

We won't know that we've achieved success until we see community-sourced changes. But we are clear about what success means to us, and we're directing all of our resources to this end. It may be risky, but this is the journey for us.

We aren't the only ones who are clear about what success means, as we see in the main article that Chief Writer Allan Tellis offers in this issue. His community-sourced journalism reveals that high school students very often hear prescriptive definitions of success–*college, anyone?* And these definitions do not acknowledge success as many of these students envision it for themselves. These definitions also overlook the values of our students' families and communities.

There is much more to success than college attendance, and if we can acknowledge this by supporting educational policy and funding that broadens post-secondary pathways, then we can see change. We can see change by developing a broader definition of success, one that is collaborative, community-sourced, and responsive to our youth and their vision of society's future. Through this, we can also see change. BUT, without a broader definition, we'll continue to see system failures. So, in this issue, we will practice our trade by recommending indicators of system failure. And in our digest, we recommend some actions that will help to repair it.

Happy reading.
antwan

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THE Collective SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

Publisher | *Richard Rhodes*

2372 Central Park Blvd Ste. 100
Denver CO 80238
richard@thecollective.site
(303) 333-5688
TheCollective.site

DENVER JOURNAL of EDUCATION & COMMUNITY

Editor in Chief | *Antwan Jefferson, PhD*

2372 Central Park Blvd Ste. 100
Denver CO 80238
antwan@educationandcommunity.com
(720) 593-8575
EducationAndCommunity.com

EDITORIAL BOARD

Spencer Childress, EdD

Shant'a Johnson

Ali Larson

James Roy, II

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STUDENT SUCCESS: WHO DECIDES?

By | *Allan Tellis*, Chief Writer, Denver

One size fits one

As an institution, local school districts have a tremendous impact on how students, educators and communities create common understandings of success. For students and alumni, it seems that Denver-metro school districts are more interested in using their power to foster environments where success is attached to students' abilities to attend a four-year university after graduating high school, rather than building definitions of success that incorporate students' unique ambitions and dreams. In conversations with community members, students, and alumni in the Denver area, we learned a lot about the way in which success is framed by the district, and the impact that has on how people understand and pursue success. As one DPS alum noted, "the district has real power in shaping success and what that perception is to the students. I feel like I was extremely rocked by that because there was a lot of uniformity between the answers, it was a lot of college, college, college. It's in the way it's internalized and affects each and every one of our lives and how that ends up, how that sits with us well into our early twenties. Just about how much impact the school system really does [have] on our perception of success and how it's so reduced to just what you do if you get into college, or whatever the narrative is pushed from your school." The pro-college messaging coming from the district seems to be working; between 2014 and 2019 the amount of DPS students enrolling in college after high school increased by 35 percent.

DPS, however, doesn't picture itself as an institution that reduces success to students attending a four-year university after graduation. It views itself as an institution that prioritizes students' self-actualization and in doing so, orients them towards success on whatever path they chose. DPS says it strives to promote an understanding of success that is informed by the various activities and occupations students may be interested in during and after their time in the district.

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As is clearly stated on the district's website, the mission of DPS is to "provide all students the opportunity to achieve the knowledge and skills necessary to become contributing citizens in our diverse society." Framing success as students becoming contributing citizens is broad and seems to be flexible enough to incorporate the plethora of ways students desire to contribute to society. However, in practice, the district makes students feel as though success is only attainable if they achieve a narrow set of predefined goals.

Students and alumni suggest that they would greatly benefit from being given the opportunity to express their future plans and have those aspirations supported by the district. Empowering students to define and pursue success on their own terms, helps students feel recognized and valued. For many students, the incongruence between their understanding of what success means to them and what the district suggests success looks like, makes school feel purposeless and uninviting. Without an inclusive and responsive approach to building a common understanding of student success, local school districts will continue to perpetuate a one-size fits all approach that fails to acknowledge the interests of their students. It seems that the district frames attending college as the best option for the long-term success of students, regardless of how students evaluate the importance of attending college in terms of their own long term goals.

In discussions about student success, alumni described being conditioned to believe that attending college was the most effective means of securing a high-paying job and enjoying a higher quality of life. Since most people see the school district as an authority on what is in the best interest of students, direction from the district on what students should do after high school has significant weight in discussions about student success. Given that most people want students to experience a high quality of life, this messaging about how to become successful after high school has largely been adopted, and echoed by students' families and other members of their community. Learning that attending four-year universities is the golden ticket to having a successful life was not a subtle lesson for students. In fact, the importance of choosing a path with a trajectory towards college was stated quite frequently and explicitly for many of them. One alum said, "…how success was presented to me was college, and getting out of the neighborhood… they pushed the IB program, they pushed AP classes." Framing being admitted to college as the first step on the road to a successful career and a high standard of living, makes students aware that they must use their high school years to be in a competitive position for college admission, especially at elite 4-year institutions. This hyper-focus on being a competitive applicant can detract from many of the other ways students may want to develop in their high school years, in preparation for life after graduation.

Presenting success as something to be attained through gaining entrance into elite institutions of higher education, has the insidious effect of framing opportunities for success as only available in already well-resourced communities. For students receiving this message, it can appear that there are always better opportunities somewhere outside the communities they are from. They come to believe that becoming successful requires getting further and further away from their communities. After years of encouragement to elevate their position in life, by removing themselves from their current environment, students can come to believe that the grass is always greener elsewhere. Under-resourced and often perpetually neglected communities are framed as places filled with impediments to success. Former students even noted that they were told that success may simply be surviving their environment. As one Manual High School alum put it, "…our view of success at the time was really about staying alive and kind of staying out of the streets, and being engaged in school. If you were to do that, you would be being successful and unfortunately, what I think my experiences that I've learned is number one, that was a low bar…I think we learn that once we become adults because success is so much broader, where did you get your degree from? Success is just not being able to live and work a 9-5 and not being engaged or involved in your community in any way." Community members, students and alumni see success as embracing and developing the skills to change the environment as opposed to thinking of success as the ability to simply escape or divorce oneself from the community.

Finding success somewhere else

For students in the Montbello area, being successful is tied to being able to participate in the area's

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long-standing history of resilience in the face of systematic neglect and deprivation. Located in a relatively isolated, highway-bound stretch of northeast Denver, Montbello has often been overlooked and underserved. Given the difficulties the community has faced, it has frequently been the subject of scrutiny, and debate. The Montbello Power Advocates (MPA), a group of community-focused neighborhood leaders, describe their neighborhood as a "far-away gem" akin to the promising but oppressed community depicted in the iconic play, A Raisin in the Sun. They believe their neighborhood is a diverse and loving community, with a history rooted in struggle and resilience.

For many years, local government and private sector businesses failed to adequately provide goods and services like transportation, grocery stores, and recreational facilities to Montbello. In 2016, RTD significantly reduced bus services, despite the community being difficult to navigate without a car. In 2014, the community lost its only full-service grocery store, despite community members voicing concerns about the lack of fresh and healthy food options available. In 2010, despite well-documented push back from the community, DPS closed the neighborhood high school, which will reopen in fall 2022. The district's decision to reopen Montbello High School may represent a shift in how community requests are being honored. Allowing community members to have meaningful input in major decisions can help re-establish trust between the community and the district. A continued commitment to recognizing the requests of the community helps community members and students feel as though they have a meaningful say in the direction of the district. Empowering those affected by the decisions of the districts, can help with implementing community-led strategies for running schools and developing prosperous students.

For families of children in the Montbello area, it would be disingenuous to expect educational experiences and the evaluation of their students' development to be divorced from the realities they encounter in the community. Several community members in Montbello asserted that definitions of student success should reflect the need for students to be able to impact and interact with the world that exists around them. To be successful often means having the tools to understand the ways in which the community has been systematically marginalized and then working for change and reform. This understanding and conceptualization presented by, and learned through school is not only desirable but necessary for students to achieve the type of success many of them are seeking.

Shifting the dynamics in the neighborhood requires that students learn to leverage resources found both inside and outside the communities. Developing a robust set of skills in students would allow them to enact their vision of success. As one community member stated, "if [students] were taught to speak up, if they were taught to look at themselves, to look at others and advocate for their needs and the needs of others, then that is what life is about. Sometimes, it's making sure you're out there and recognizing what your needs are and trying to pull those resources for you or for your family. After K-12, that advocacy piece should be a value and a skill that a student has to be successful." It could be that DPS and other area districts are unable to incorporate student success into the larger contexts of students' lives. The inability to do so would indicate that student success is an individual accomplishment.

Not only do community members suggest that students should be equipped to advocate for themselves and others, they also believe that students should develop the self-awareness that comes along with civic engagement and an empathy that allows advocacy to be positive and meaningful for the community. Empowering students to ambitiously embrace their own sense of agency, seems to be critical to developing successful students. As a longtime Montbello resident noted, "I think for students to be considered successful, they need a sense of core values and an understanding of their identity and their place in the world, and the ability to set goals and reach their goals independently. Also knowing how to leverage and build community to achieve those goals and the basics of being able to communicate to the best of their ability, to make their life better, and to improve the lives of themselves and their community." Students' awareness of what it takes to improve the lives of those in their community is a direct result of their lived experience in the currently built environment of their neighborhood. For these students, success can look like bringing resources into their community as opposed to

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seeking them outside of their neighborhood.

"I think there is a kind of disconnect between how people have viewed their own success, versus how I think the district is viewing their success. At the school that I went to in the Denver Public School District (DPS), I was around a lot of high performing students. It felt like we were being pushed toward a four-year university, as if that was the ideal success. Obviously, that is not the only path to success, and I think a lot of students, they feel that disconnect between how the district or how their teachers portray success as – you know, getting into that four-year university, even getting into a top university…the Harvards and Stanfords of the world, versus not even going to a university at all, picking up a trade or not even doing that. There's a disconnect there, and as a result there's a bit of distrust that forms where it feels like the students don't feel that their best interest is kept in mind a lot of the time."
– DPS alum

For members of the community, becoming successful involves students' developing a sense of connectedness to those around them. According to a former Manual High School student, success is "a lot about how I interact with people. When you're really pushing for success when you're younger and the school pushes you about this interaction with institutions versus interactions with people… how are you interacting [to have] the best application for college, that's the only focus of your interactions and that's like your make or break. And then, you get into the real world and it's like no none of that really matters; [what matters] is how I interact with human beings…not this power structure." Looking back, the student concluded that the incongruence between their self-developed definition of success, and those provided in their education caused distrust between students and the district.

Another Manual alum suggested that the definition of success presented to him throughout his high school education made achieving his goals harder in the real world. In his adult life, he has learned that success typically happens in conjunction with the opportunity to explore and potentially fail. Despite the benefits of learning how to pursue success, it is not until post-secondary education that some students effectively have the opportunity to explore their interests and fail in pursuit of their goals. Unfortunately, because many families can not afford college, many students never get to experience education in an exploratory environment. As he noted,"all this information we talk about now, about building community, expanding your network, all those real critical business tactics that build you generational wealth or make real impact in the world is always sold to us when we get to the next level… That critical information is always sold to us, but in the public education system, where it's supposed to be like free education, it's not given to us and I bring that up because I'm trying to wrap my head around why."

To many community members, school districts reduce student success to quantifiable metrics that allow for simple and standard comparisons between students, classrooms, teachers, and schools. Such an understanding of student success does not reflect community-led ways of assessing student development. It instead, reflects a competitive model of student assessment meant to determine how well students are doing based on externally imposed rubrics. As one educator expressed, "as schools we don't always recognize the cultural wealth that students bring to the table. We minimize that for a number or a benchmark and call that success, when that measure of success is built on capitalism and colonization." Given the histories of deprivation and exclusion in Denver Metro's economic, racially and ethnically diverse communities, it is troubling that, for community members, district articulations of student achievement and success are born from the logics of capitalism and colonization. The mismatch between how districts and community members are evaluating student success is a recipe for wariness and missed opportunities.

From success to successes

While seemingly everyone agrees that it is important to equip students with the tools to succeed in unfamiliar environments, singling out the ability to navigate elite institutions as the primary tool for success, can take the emphasis away from other developmental tools. Former students have noted that developing other skills such as networking, engaging other members of their community, and managing routine life tasks were critical in their postsecondary success. For one former John F. Kennedy High School (DPS) student, it made sense to prioritize college as one component of success. However, after receiving the "monumental piece of paper," a diploma from a four year university, it became clear that it was going to take much more

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than receiving a diploma to consider herself successful. More importantly, she later realized that the four-year university path wasn't the only route to success: "I didn't realize my frame of reference of success had shifted until I was able to engage with people who didn't go to college. Because I had such a strong identity in my 4-year institution, I didn't realize you could be successful without going to college until 3 or 4 years ago."

Currently in schools, administrators are seen by students as the representation of district visions of success which only acknowledge attending four-year universities of success. For students and alumni, teachers tend to provide guidance that incorporates a more complete understanding of the lives and goals of the students. Due to their roles in schools and relation to students, administrators are often unable to engage with students in a genuine way. Administrators' commitments to reproduce the overarching approach of the school district, to seemingly advocate for all students to attend four-year universities, constrains their ability to engage students in ways that reflect the plurality of student aspirations.

An alum stated, "administration was kind of there, in a way, because they had to be. They're the higher-ups or what-not, so they kind of had to enforce the idea of going to college, pursuing education past high school or whatever the case may be; whereas teachers themselves, I feel like I had a closer connection to, especially in high school. I was going through a lot of stuff in high school… I feel like honestly you have a tighter connection to coaches and teachers and things like that. Of course they're going to encourage you to do better."

Often, students organically develop complex relationships with teachers, as opposed to the unsentimental and sometimes robotic relationships they develop with those in administrative positions. These teacher-student relationships stand in stark contrast with the relationships, or lack thereof, they form with admins. As one alumni put it, "the difference between administrators and teachers is the connection."

The differences in the types of relationships students develop with different adults in the school, like teachers and administrators, can help explain the distinction in the advice students receive about what steps they should take to be successful after graduating high school. It appears that students are aware and often dismayed by the notion of success being limited to the desires of the "higher-ups" who are unable to account for the plurality of aims students have for their lives after graduating high school. An alum aptly noted, teachers are not only concerned with "helping us get into college but also building personal relationships with us, knowing that sometimes if we needed somebody and couldn't go to a family member, didn't have a friend, you could go to them and that eventually will change your life in a way. They'll always be someone you remember because they helped you."

Even after graduation, many students stay in contact with their former teachers to give them updates, receive mentorship, and generally check-in. While these types of relationships are not in every school, the culture of Denver West High School is especially conducive for students to develop these types of close relationships with their teachers. "I think West just had a different energy when it came to that." One student, after attending three other high schools in the district, stated that they felt a profound sense of relief after encountering the teachers at Denver West High School. Her teachers immediately integrated her into the community, and provided a sense of support and intimacy she had not experienced at any of the other high schools in DPS.

Schools would have to be radically different in order to produce students who are successful in a way that ensures healthy individual results and healthy participation in their communities. For instance, one educator in the Denver metro area suggested that for students to be successful, they would need to "attend a school that's rooted in liberatory practices, facilitated by educators who uplift their lived experiences. A school that is individually and community centered and focused and provided with exposure to skills that empower youth to continue growing beyond the walls of a classroom." Such a school could not be rooted in the type of top-down quantitative measurement currently used by our school districts to determine whether students have in fact achieved success.

In order to rebuild trust between the district, communities and students, Denver Metro districts must display a serious commitment to providing students with a robust and inclusive understanding of success. Ardently elevating the attendance of four-year universities as the sole path to success for students has tremendous, and oftentimes a damaging impact on students and their communities.

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FROM AN EDUCATOR PERSPECTIVE

By | *Maria Sanchez*

"We're doing them a disservice if they don't learn proper english..."

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I spent the majority of my K-12 education in a small mountain town school district called Eagle County School District. Growing up there, I can't say there were many opportunities for me to explore my identity, culture, or background. Much of the work we did was geared towards the same goal Denver Public Schools students are being pushed towards: college. The idea was to get a college diploma, and make lots of money. Being a child of immigrants, I was sold on this dream for a long time. I got to both witness and experience the tough work my parents did for a living. They constantly reminded my siblings and I that if we went to college and worked hard in school, we wouldn't have to work as hard as they did. Now, after having finished my 5th year of teaching in Commerce City, I think I have found the balance between what I was pushed towards, and what actually worked for me. Yes, I went to college and got an English degree, but I didn't use it to seek out high-paying jobs. Instead, I became a teacher, which may not be the most lucrative job, but it helped me achieve what I consider to be success.

The issues brought up in this article are still rampant in the metro area of Denver, not just in DPS. At the beginning of each year, I have my students write what they want to be when they grow up on a paper star. We then hang those stars up around the room, and I try to use them as reminders throughout the year of why we practice Language Arts skills. Their ideas of success always include a beautiful range of careers like mechanics, video game streamers, nail technicians, veterinarians, brain surgeons, CEO's, and my personal favorite, teachers. I've had many conversations with students about how there is no "correct" path after high school. It's all dependent on what they wish to do, and how they want to achieve that. Some 7th graders love to hear that they don't have to go to college, and some are already planning on where they want to go. I think as educators, we should be able to look at both students and tell them that both of those plans (and everything in between), are perfectly acceptable.

Unfortunately, we don't hear those perspectives from educators. Many colleagues are not only convinced that college is the way to go, but that to achieve that, students must code-switch, learn how to navigate worlds that are not always welcoming to them, and in essence change a major part of who they are. In my experience, we constantly ask our students to disavow ways they express themselves in order to please someone else. I've heard everything from colleagues asking me why "my people are so loud" to comments like, "we're doing them a disservice if they don't learn proper english." Both of these comments are rooted in racist ideals that only hold our students back from showing their full potential. As an educator, it is difficult to correct students' ways of speaking because there is no one "correct" way to speak. Rather, we should be focusing on helping students develop critical thinking skills so they can learn how to navigate any path they choose.

At a district level, I would love to see real advocacy and research done to help our students succeed in ways that are authentic to them. Instead of creating a mold and trying to fit every student into it, it would be a beautiful thing to have students constantly creating and changing those molds. One of the easiest things district leaders can do, that they often don't seem to think of, is to talk to students. We need to hear from them about what type of classes they're interested in, what supports they need, and what their goals are. What's really unfair to students is pushing them to a four-year college, only to have them get there and realize that it's not for them. When we start listening to our students, only then will we be able to say that we are advocating for student success.

Maria Sanchez grew up in Gypsum, Colorado, a small mountain town west of Vail. She moved to Denver to attend CU Denver and has been here ever since. The daughter of two Mexican immigrants, she decided early on in college that education was her future and became a teacher. She has been teaching in Commerce City for the past five years, and is working to advocate for biliteracy access in her district. As a natural connection to her work, she is also a part of the Right2Learn collective, a research group that focuses on educational dignity and is currently working on a campaign to amend the state's education clause. In her free time, she loves to spend time with her husband and their dogs.

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FROM A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

By | *Cora Rhodes*

"My classmates have cried in the dean's office because they have felt inferior to the "high-performing students."

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Going to Denver School of Science and Technology: Byers (DSST: Byers), a Denver public school, after attending Stanley British Primary (Stanley), a private school, allowed me to view the public school system differently. Coming from a private school where we did not have grades, to attending a charter school whose primary mission was 100% college acceptance, was not necessarily challenging but changed my perspective on education as a whole. From elementary to middle school, I spent my days at Stanley exploring the land of knowledge in an environment where success was self-defined and self-driven. Although one of the main differences between Stanley and DSST Byers might have been the level of education, I recall being eager to learn, read and advance my knowledge while attending Stanley. As opposed to DSST: Byers, where I was presented with grades and numeral improvements. I felt in competition with my peers, which changed my motivations for learning. Their definition of success influenced the way I perceived success. At DSST: Byers, to me, success was about improving my writing and my performance on tests, not for the sake of knowledge but for higher grades.

I would not say that it is DPS or DSST's intent to make students feel like this, but perhaps unintentionally, this mentalitly places substantial pressure on the students. DSST Byers focus on passing grades and college acceptance causes the institution to lose touch with their student body and in turn, student performance suffers. They wonder why performance isn't as strong as they want it. Their definition of success and the pressure placed on students creates a disconnect. I was able to thrive in this community because my perception of success was somewhat aligned with the school's definition of success. What about the students with different perspectives, needs, and different versions of success?

I have seen many of my classmates struggle at DSST: Byers because they were trying to fit into the school's definition of success, but if it is not aligned with their beliefs, how is it truly defined as success? For example, forcing students to learn DSST Network way, get good grades, and attend a 4-year, high-performing college; benefits whom, at the end of the day? The students or the school's ranking?

This past school year, there was a TikTok challenge called the "Devious Lick Trend." It caused a lot of damage in the school community, not only at DSST: Byers but at other schools as well. In my Student Government class, we were presented with thinking of ways to communicate to our school community that this challenge needed to stop. The School Director took over our morning meeting, and she focused on our school rankings. I remember the days following when students felt as though the school only cared about the school ranking and not about the students. This has been a consistent complaint throughout my four years of high school—the school's definition of success conflicts with the students' definition of success.

Where does success stem from? Individual communities define success in different ways. A school consists of students from all types of backgrounds, different lifestyles, different morals, and definitions of success. I feel that the DSST network's definition of success, being accepted to a four-year college, is narrow and may not benefit all students.

I have seen many of my peers feel defeated because they were accepted into community colleges and not the Ivy League schools. Why is going to a community college deemed unsuccessful? My classmates have cried in the dean's office because they have felt inferior to the "high-performing students." That may be the root of the problem. The key is that they did their best. I know that one of the six core values at DSST is "Doing Your Best," but do they live by that within the community they've created? After leaving Stanley, I felt that losing the joy of learning had caused me harm and unnecessary stress.

At Stanley, the competition was within one's self. Whereas at DSST, the competition was against peers and DSST Network's desires for the community. I know that I continued to compare my DSST experience to my Stanley experience, and I understand that they are two complete stages of my education. However, I believe the joy of learning is at odds with the point of getting into college, and the pressure to accomplish this goal has altered how I perceive education and knowledge.

Cora Rhodes graduated from Denver School of Science and Technology: Byers in May 2022 and will be attending the University of Denver (DU) this fall. Rhodes plans to major in Engineering with a minor in business.

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FROM A COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

By | *Erica Lee*

"Through my gap year, I was able to form relationships with strong mentors who had an experience of personal growth and leadership development that helped forge my path."

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Youth and ultimately, society will realize its full expression of success when the emphasis on education becomes relationally focused, instead of transactionally focused. This will occur by the actualization of what bell hooks calls enlightened education. Whereby educators bring their enlightened (less ignorant) selves in process of ever greater improvement to their work with producing self-actualized scholars. This success is achieved by engaging with education in three primary subjects that are not actively present in education today: financial literacy, mindfulness/ executive functioning/restorative practices and holistic health education.

Definitions and motivators of success within our communities are as varied as the people who make up our collective success. As a child, I was influenced to believe that unless I was going to become a doctor or something that requires highly specific technical skills, then higher education was not necessary. As many students do after high school, I took a break. This practice of gap year would be helpful for more students to clarify who they are and what they care about, before making a life and finance altering commitment such as higher education.

Through my gap year, I was able to form relationships with strong mentors who had an experience of personal growth and leadership development that helped forge my path. Students should be leaving free-public education fully equipt with the skills needed to manage and grow their lives according to their self defined goals. For schools to accomplish this:

- Educators must be the primary designers of curriculum and standards. Administrators are too distant from the day-to-day needs and interests of students. By having administrative leadership dictating success metrics, the politics involved with pacifying the influence of industry and state standards severely inhibits the creative liberation of our youth.
- Youth need to understand and have enacted methods of achieving livelihood and financial literacy before graduating from the public school system. Why would we expect students to make any other choice for their financial security besides higher education, unless we teach them other methods? This component of education is severely lacking and robs students of genuine agency and choice in their life planning.
- Holistic health including family planning and integrative wellness techniques must be taught to equip students with adequate measures to ensure their success in a most basic sense; health is the greatest wealth. Our youth are currently suffering from unprecedented levels of anxiety, depression, cognitive dissonance and violence. We must arm our youth with methods of gaining adequate mental, physical, and emotional resilience that allows them the clarity of purpose and motivation to fulfill their goals of success.
- The federal, state and local governments must fund adequate staffing and amenities for service based learning in schools. Public schools need to be incentivized to have smaller student-to-teacher ratios, so that educators can give ample attention to student needs for success to be achieved. Students need mentorship and leadership modeled through service-based curriculum, affirmation of contributions. Students need to be listened to, cared for, seen and followed up with on a much more frequent basis than current school staffing allows. This severely impairs students' access to meaningful and lasting success.

What would a school that trusted the inherent potential and genius within each student and sought to cultivate students' holistic success look like? Our young people need and benefit from models of success that reassure them that listening to their own internal guidance system in relationship with those that are around them is success in itself. We are doing a disservice to our students by putting off success to a future date where only a few are lucky enough to have a dream come true. We must teach our students, and can only do so to the level of our own healed minds, bodies, and spirits. We must teach our students that their existence in and of itself is success, and to move confidently forward with an inner-knowing that will guide them to places that we cannot imagine. As renowned philosopher and poet Kahlil Ginbran says,

"Your children are not your children
They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself
They come through you but not from you
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you
You may give them your love but not your thoughts
For they have their own thoughts
You may house their bodies but not their souls
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow
Which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams

Erica Lee is a restorative justice practice consultant. With an embodiment, business and permaculture lens, Erica brings these ideas to life through her education models. She partners with non-profit, school and business teams in long term, immersive learning environments. Together, they create organizational cultures with enhanced relationship dynamics, policies and practices to increase efficiency, wellness, collaboration and innovation in the workplace.

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FROM AN EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVE

By | *Spencer Childress, EdD*

"In many instances, public schools may have placed the proverbial cart before the horse. Schools prioritize good grades, good college, then good job and if there's time, learn who you are, what you value, and how to define success, happiness, and community."

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It seems true that students, parents, and educators all hold student success as a goal worthy of pursuing in public education settings. However, the subjective ways in which diverse humans define success presents potential incongruence between internally developed and externally imposed ways of thinking. In this issue of the Denver Journal of Education and Community, you hear Denver metro community members, alumni and current students describe experiencing this incongruence with the idea of success.

In many instances, public schools may have placed the proverbial cart before the horse. Schools prioritize good grades, good college, then good job and if there's time, learn who you are, what you value, and how to define success, happiness, and community. Doesn't this feel backwards? We learn in this issue that the assembly line nature of public schooling is not lost on people, even if they can't necessarily describe it as it's happening. In order to develop an authentic definition of success, this issue suggests first developing a knowledge of self and community, safe opportunities to explore and fail, and an awareness of the inherent dignity that all students hold simply by being human.

This type of learning will not just happen because we want it to. Educators and policy makers need to reorient themselves to the word success and take a long-term approach when it comes to student outcomes. This might mean de-emphasizing how a 17 year-old scores on a math assessment and instead considering how holistically well adjusted that same person will be at 27. Many of the ways schools currently define success for students are rooted in flawed ideas of meritocracy, individualism and college as the "great equalizer", even as it becomes less clear if the cost of a Bachelor's degree is worth the benefit (Marcus, 2021). Our communities and our students want to know who they are personally before they are asked to decide what they are professionally -- a reasonable request in my opinion. We hope you enjoyed reading this issue of DJEC, but more than that, we hope you consider the meaning of success in your life, and in the lives of the young people in the Denver metro area.

Peace,
Spencer Childress

Spencer is the director of the Denver Journal of Education and Community

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EDUCATION & COMMUNITY

THE NEXT CHAPTER

The Denver Journal of Education and Community is our community education journal has focused on topics of education in the greater Denver area for the past couple of years by engaging in community discourse and connecting this content to scholarship and policy.

Today, we're moving in a new direction to further our vision and mission for education and community.

Over the coming weeks and months, you'll hear about our re-organization efforts and the launching of a new nonprofit, research and data hub, and entity to bring innovative solutions to the marketplace.

We look forward to engaging and collaborating with you on this journey. Join our email list to stay up-to-date on the exciting roll-out of our next iteration.

OUR CHILDREN STILL NEED CHAMPIONS.
WE STILL NEED YOUR VOICE.
OUR JOURNEY TOGETHER CONTINUES.

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EDUCATION & COMMUNITY

Education and Community will be our nonprofit focused on improving educational and communal outcomes in the greater Denver area by informing and influencing policy and decision-makers.

DENVER JOURNAL of EDUCATION & COMMUNITY

The Denver Journal of Education and Community is our community education journal focused on topics of education in the greater Denver area. By engaging in community discourse, and connecting this content to scholarship and policy, DJEC hopes to contribute to local education thinking by offering a balanced and well-informed perspective.

VINE | RESEARCH & DATA HUB

VINE | R&DH is taking on a dual role of providing a hub for regional education data and a resource for the region's family, student, and community-based education research.

EDUCATION & COMMUNITY COLLECTIVE

The Education and Community Collective will be our enterprise entity responsible for bringing innovative solutions and products to the marketplace to sustain the nonprofit's overall mission.

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