

[School turnaround lessons from Denver](#), Dallas Morning News

By Michael Bennet

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In public schools across the country, we simply are not getting the job done for our kids. Our schools were largely designed for an economy that no longer exists. To succeed, we must be willing to re-imagine a modern classroom that prepares students for a global economy where a college degree has increasingly become a prerequisite for success.

Districts like Denver and Dallas have demonstrated that we can begin to open the doors of opportunity to more students. In 2008, the Dallas Independent School District was named by the Brookings Institution as the second-best school district in America at closing the achievement gap. It has been a leader in developing an innovative English-language learner curriculum.

And now a new leader will have the opportunity to build on these successes.

Dallas, like Denver, still has work to do. And there will be resistance.

But in a system of public schools where only 9 in 100 U.S. children growing up in poverty graduate from a four-year college, it is time for the burden of proof to shift from those who want to change the system to those who want to keep it the same.

When I took over as superintendent of Denver Public Schools, in a school district of 75,000 children, only 33 African-American and 61 Latino students scored proficient on the state's 10th-grade math test.

Denver has made progress. From 2005 to 2010, students showed significant gains in achievement. The dropout rate fell 42 percent, and, most important, 29 percent more students are attending college.

Creating results required change throughout.

We closed failing schools and opened new ones. We implemented a groundbreaking teacher pay system, working with the union. And we began

measuring the year-to-year progress of students, rather than making a meaningless comparison of one year's class against the next year's.

While our reforms were not unique, our relentless commitment to implementing them in a way that empowered the people closest to kids was essential. I learned quickly that nothing gets done through a command-and-control approach.

Our strategic plan in Denver would never have worked if we closed the office door, came up with a great plan and required people to comply. We went through an extensive process of input and engagement that included changes and compromises. We worked hard to build an enduring coalition for reform, where everyone – parents, teachers and principals alike – held a stake in students' success.

We aimed to create an administration office geared to the service and training of principals and instructional leaders, focused on student results. To demonstrate this shift, I started almost every day in our schools, reviewing student work with principals. Principals began to do the same with their teachers.

Finally, and probably most important, I did not do the work alone. I surrounded myself with people who could all do their jobs much better than I could have.

We spent a great deal of time in the community, working to ensure that people had a shared understanding of the facts and a sense of urgency about improving our schools.

The results were reflected in school board meetings. Rather than being attended by the same few but outspoken people, they became packed with parents asking us to change the system.

It wasn't easy. Our tendency in education is to debate modest, incremental reforms instead of doing the hard work of identifying successful school structures and human capital strategies and bringing them to scale.

The task is made all the more difficult by a narrow, small politics that has allowed us to duck making real choices about anything. It has, failure after failure, shriveled our shared ambition for America's children.

But this cycle of failure is not unbreakable.

In Denver, Dallas or almost any urban school district, we find successes that have risen above the noise and demonstrate what is possible when people pull together and put the future of our children above the interests of adults.

The challenge is to bring these successes to scale and no longer make exceptions to the rule, but change the odds for our children and our nation's future.

*U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet, D-Colo., was superintendent of Denver Public Schools from 2005 to 2009. He may be contacted at [bennet.senate.gov/contact](http://bennet.senate.gov/contact).*