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THE 2015 EDUCATION CHOICE AND COMPETITION INDEX  
A KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY DENVER MAYOR MICHAEL HANCOCK

Washington, D.C.  
Thursday, February 4, 2016

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## P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. WHITEHURST: Good morning. I'm Russ Whitehurst. I'm a senior fellow in Economic Studies here at Brookings and I'm the author of the Education Choice and Competition Index. That's presumably what you're here to learn about today. If it's foreign affairs you're interested in, it's the wrong room. You should be next door.

So thanks for being here. I'm appreciative your interest in this. Just a little background for those of you who may not know about the Education Choice and Competition Index. This is something we've been doing for five years. It tracks the status of school choice in the geographical areas that are served by the 100 largest public school districts, so we just look for the districts that have the largest enrollment and then we look at the status of choice in the geographical areas that are served by those districts. And that turns out to be important for you to understand because we're not looking just at what the district does. We're looking at what the city does, we're looking at the availability of affordable private schools, and other things that are not always under -- and frequently are not under the control of the school district itself.

The Choice and Competition Index measures the status of school choice in several categories. I'll summarize them and collapse them somewhat.

We're very interested in the amount, variety, and quality of the supply of schools. So we'd like to see schools of various types, not just a standard, regular public school is available for parents who want to choose. We count whether they're good traditional public schools, whether they're magnet schools, whether they're public charter schools, whether they're affordable private schools, whether there's an availability of virtual education.

We're interested in a process for school choice when it's allowed by a city or district, a process that is fair and that does a good job of matching parents to the school to which they want to send their children. So, for example, when we look at a district, we want to know whether there's a default choice that's geographically based, which is not fair to people who want a school that is not in their geographical region. So we're looking at things like the absence of a default school. We'd like to see a common application where parents can apply to schools at one time for all the schools, not have to go

door-to-door to each school to say I want to be enrolled.

We're interested in the variety and richness and appropriateness of the information that's available to help parents choose. And so we don't want a situation where you'd go on Amazon and you're interested in a watch and it lists 100 brands, but there's no information about the features of the watch or how much they cost or how people are satisfied. We'd like for people to know what they're shopping for.

We'd like to see funding and management that allows popular schools to grow, so that money follows children to the school of their choice rather than being assigned in some mysterious fashion where a school can be half empty and it's getting the same budget it got when it was full.

And because one of the reasons for choice is equity, to give parents who, because of their geography, are living not close to a good school the ability to go to a good school, we'd like to see the provision of support for transportation, so that you don't need to have a car to drive your child to the school of choice in order for the child to get there. So we look at districts on these things.

So a great district, in terms of our scoring, would be a district where it doesn't matter where you live, you can apply for any public school or charter school. If you're interested in a private school there are affordable ones -- and we look at affordability the same way we'd look at affordability for colleges -- where you can apply once, where you understand the system, you know, what good schools are, and where the system's designed so that it's fair and your application is not one that can be gamed.

And in that regard, it's interesting that as more and more cities have embraced school choice, the systems have gotten more complicated. And there are actually now people in the business of being school placement consultants, who will work with upper middle class families to help them game the system, so they're most likely to get the public school that they want. You know, a good system should be one where if you're paying for a school consultant, you're wasting your money.

So this is the fifth year that we've done this. Understand that this is a statistical report and so even though I'm an advocate of school choice and we grade districts from A to F based on the quality of their choice environment, the statistics don't require you to evaluate it that way. So if you're in the audience because you don't like school choice, just flip the scoring, you know. An F is an A for you,

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that will be fine. We do our best to see that the numbers are right and can be used for anybody. And for any researchers or data works out there, we not only have the data for five years, the fifth year of which is presented here, but we have it retrospectively each year back to 2001, so it's an available resource. We give it away free to anybody who'd like to find out more about the progress of school choice or look at how school choice might be affecting student achievement or other aspects of the life in the cities that are providing these services.

Let me—if I can manage this, hold on a second. I'm not going to do it, so the problem with technology is it's never quite ready when you want it to be. Most of the information, if you're interested in the details of what we've done and the findings, most of the information is available not through the report that you picked up when you came in, but through an interactive website. That website is here at Brookings and it provides detailed information on 100+ districts, the 100 largest and some smaller districts that we add in because of special interests. You can find out everything that we scored, why we scored it, find out demographic information about the districts. And so it's the interactive tool that's the powerful way to access what we've done and the results.

Let me turn briefly to a summary of what we found this year. Comparing it to last year, all of the substantial movement at the city district level was in a positive direction. So we found districts scoring higher this year than they did last year. There were no instances in which districts got worse in a statistically significant way.

And so this positive change, actually, is characteristic of what we see when we take the data all the way back to 2001. In 2001, choice was hardly available anywhere unless you had the resources to buy a home close to the school where you wanted to send your child to. So all of it has been moving towards more choice.

One of the things that we talk about in the report this year that I think is going to be increasingly important is how parents still struggle with choice even when choice is available. The systems by which parents choose fairly are really quite complicated systems. Alvin Roth won a Nobel Prize for designing these systems. You don't design a system that gets you the Nobel Prize based on just sketching something out on a white piece of paper and throwing it up, so these are complicated

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systems, and that makes it difficult for people who are making choices.

Think about the mega lottery that happened two weeks ago, where there's, what, a billion and a half dollars out there, and it's managed in a very transparent manner. You get a lottery ticket, it's got a number on it. You tune in to your TV, you see somebody cranking a drum, they pull out a number, you won or you lost. It's very simple to understand.

The good choice systems are good in terms of fairness, but they're very difficult to follow. If you want to see the best presentation, you can Google "one app New Orleans." They have a little animation that takes you through all the steps. It runs 10 minutes and they could probably have used 15 to explain the details of the system. And parents are left feeling, well, I made some choices, but the district assigned me to a school and I'm not really quite sure how that happened.

So much of the work on school choice for cities that have already accomplished it is not only the work that continues to occur, and that is extremely important, like generating the political will for choice, dealing with the tensions that are created when you allow open enrollment, and higher income families feel that they're losing access to the neighborhood school where they bought a home to have access to, and designing choice systems that work, a lot of the work going forward is, I think, going to be on the marketing of the systems, on making it easier to understand, and making parents more comfortable with the fact that this bet they're making is one that they understand, that's carried out in a way that is meaningful to them. And so there really is a tension between a complicated system that is mathematically fair and a system that everybody understands.

I believe that the economists who do this work think of all of us who choose as Mr. and Mrs. Spock. Right? We're completely rational and we're happy with an explanation of what's going on that indicates that it's mathematically fair. But we don't choose that way. There's a lot of psychology to choice and I think that's a challenge in the design of systems.

Finally, in terms of this year's results, we have a new winner in terms of large schools and large cities, and that's at Denver, Colorado. Denver made substantial moves from last year, a 14 point upward movement on our 100 point index. It's now the best, friendliest city for choice in America. And they did that not through something dramatic. They did it through continuous improvement of their

existing system.

It used to be, for example, that you chose during one date during the year and after that you had to negotiate with the district if you came in late, if you moved within the city, if you were dissatisfied with your school. This past year, they reserved choice seats in every school in the district so that parents can choose 365 days a year.

So, again, go on the interactive website if you want to learn more about what Denver is doing. And I think there's a lot to be learned from Denver, not only in terms of the mechanics of the choice system, but in terms of the politics of the system because there are very similar systems placed elsewhere. For example, in Newark, New Jersey, they have had riots in the streets. And Denver's been able to move over a number of years to a choice system that works, that's equitable, and they've done it with a large degree of political success. You know, you can find people complaining on blogs, but it's hard to find a lot of negative press or people upset about this. So how you do that politically is very important.

And so that's, I think, a reasonable way to segue from my comments, the paid political part of this conversation, to the introduction of our speaker for today. The mayor of Denver, Michael B. Hancock, is with us today. Very appreciative of his willingness to fly across country to represent the city and the district for this event.

You know, usually when I'm introducing people I can get on Google, I can find some differing opinions about people, some interesting background information that I can ease in a little bit just to show I'm fair and balanced. But Mayor Hancock has an entirely positive story. His staff well hides what other people don't want to know. (Laughter)

He's in his second term as the mayor of Denver. He won his first election in a runoff, but his second term was a runaway. There was effectively no opposition out there, so he's extremely popular.

I used to work for Texans and so I know a lot of them. And if you're in Texas and somebody's being introduced and they're not from Texas, but they're in Texas, the standard trope is to say, well, you know, blah, blah, I'm introducing blah, blah, you know, he's not from Texas, but he moved

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here just as soon as he could. (Laughter) And so I'm going to switch that around a little bit. Mayor Hancock was born in Texas, but he was moved to Denver when he was three or four weeks old. So he's not a native Denverite, Denverian, I don't know, Denverite. But he moved there just as soon as he could.

And his positions prior to being mayor were positions in city government, on the city council. He served twice as chair of the city council. He became mayor during difficult financial times for the city and has managed its way back very successfully.

And he was raised poor and, at one point, a family of 10 children was homeless in Denver. He's a product of the Denver Public Schools, committed to making life better for everyone in Denver, including those who have been left behind. And it seems to me, both in my appraisal of him from his public record, as well as looking at the fact that he received an appointment as a prestigious Aspen-Rodel Fellow last year, which is an appointment that recognizes rising political stars in America. He's exactly that, somebody we need to pay attention to and learn from.

So, Mayor Hancock, if you'd come up to the stage, I'd be very appreciative. (Applause)

MAYOR HANCOCK: Thank you, Russ. And let me bid a good day to each and every one of you. It's a real honor and privilege to be here at The Brookings Institution. I got to tell you, this is one of America's venerable institutions and when they call, you don't say no, so you find a way. I'm just glad you called before the Super Bowl. (Laughter) And that we're not rushing to get somewhere after being here at the institute.

But it's a real honor and privilege to be here to talk about what I think to be one of America's great opportunities and certainly one of the things that we consider to be really the hallmark, if you will, the opportunity to change the trajectory of the most challenged, as well as the real fortunes of this nation of ours. But, you know, it's always special to be in Brookings, a 100-year-old organization. And we should commend Brookings for really a lot of the work it has done for our nation, for its leadership, not only on education, but on a host of domestic issues here in our country. And so would you join me in just thanking the Brookings Institution and thank Russ for all the tremendous work that you've done. (Applause)

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As we jump into the subject, you know, it's been said many times before it is vitally important that we educate the next generation well. It's a platitude that's often repeated, sometimes with great conviction and sometimes a haunting hollowness. But it doesn't make it any less true or any less foundational to the success of our cities, states, or our country. We know that a quality public education is the greatest weapon in our arsenal when it comes to reducing crime, raising up struggling neighborhoods, or creating economic mobility.

One of the great men of our times, Nelson Mandela, once said education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world. There are very few of us in this room who would disagree. Nelson Mandela was right.

We have seen too many schools fail to meet the needs of students they serve and we have seen communities begin to deteriorate. It's a dilemma that has faced urban school districts across this nation for decades. Many school districts, including Denver, have chosen to combat this trend in a variety of ways and to varying degrees of success, one of which is working to remove the barriers to access, innovation, and quality, opening up school districts, school district-wide, to students through school choice.

Denver Public Schools has done a phenomenal job when it comes to creating a choice system that works for parents and students. And as a testament to their effort, it makes me very proud, I was very proud to read that Denver is the highest scoring large district in the 2015 ECCI.

Traditional schools, like Denver's East High School, remain desired destinations for incoming high school students. And DPS's system of charter schools has brought new innovations to classrooms across the city, prioritizing and raising expectations for students through curriculums that incorporate learning styles of the students to produce outstanding results. For example, the Denver School of Science and Technology is one of the best-performing public charter schools in the entire state. It is reversing the achievement gap within the district with some of their students who are free and reduced-price lunch students, achieving a higher proficiency rate than DPS non-FRL students. It's a phenomenal success.

Providing access at different types of schools for students across the district has been

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successful, and I know this from firsthand experience. I know this because my wife, Mary Louise, and I are choice parents. When it came time to enroll our son in high school we were faced with a decision: enroll him in a neighborhood school that was failing or drive him 18 miles each way every day to a high-performing high school. And as most parents who are faced with this choice with the ability to move their child, we chose the 18-mile trip. And we chose it again when our daughter entered the same high school.

The trip on a regular day took 35 minutes each way. On snowy days -- and, no, we don't close schools in Colorado on snowy days (Laughter) -- it could take up to an hour. And school began at 7:30, and so we were out of the doors as close to 6:30 as we possibly could.

And when we made it a centerpiece of my first campaign, we thought there would be a lot of backlash from the community, but what we found was a much different story. Many parents approached me during the campaign, proclaiming it's not just you and thank you for telling our story.

The fact is 27 percent of all families participated in school choice in 2015 in Denver. At the time that I ran for mayor, in my neighborhood some 80 percent of the students and their families in the far Northeast Denver in transition grades -- kindergarten, 6th and 9th grade -- participated in school choice. In other words, they were choosing out of their neighborhood.

It's a tiring decision to implement and a very difficult decision to make to pull your child away from their friends that they've grown up with, in a community that they have established bonds with. But I recognize that too many parents do not have the option or the ability, as I mentioned earlier the resources, to access high-quality schools across town. Every single one of our families should have the ability to choose a school that encourages educational growth and success and allows students across our city, who otherwise wouldn't have the opportunity, to flourish in their classrooms and allow our district to grow.

Let me say that the way I said it during my campaign. I had the audacity to believe that every child deserves access to quality choices in their home neighborhood, and we must work toward that goal. The choice system has progressed in recent years, but we have to ask a few questions.

What do we truly want school choice to mean for our students and families in the future? What impact do we want school choice to have on education in 2020, 2030, and beyond? How can we

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expect public school choice to evolve so that every child has a quality option? And how can we make sure our schools are preparing our students for college or a career?

What we see in many urban school districts across the nation is that choice is stark. You either have better performing schools in some neighborhoods or underperforming schools in others. The problem we need to solve is simple: it shouldn't have to be a choice between high-performing schools across town and low-performing schools just down the block. The optimal choice system provides families and students with a multitude of good choices.

The choice that parents and students should face is between attending high-performing neighborhood schools or a public charter school with focus on STEM or a school focused on arts or any quality school that a parent believes best fits the educational needs of their child. A choice should be between a good school and another good school or even more good schools with a system of learning that best prepares our diversity of students.

The barriers to those goals are clear: not enough quality schools; the difficulty of recruiting, retaining, and rewarding great teachers; curriculum; and a teacher corps that doesn't reflect on any different students. Let me say that again, a teaching corps that doesn't reflect our many different students; informed and engaged communities; lack of access to transportation. But it remains incumbent upon all of us to overcome these barriers; ensure that our children no matter their means or ZIP code have quality schools to choose from; and the information, knowledge, and access to make informed choices. We must not ever abandon this obligation.

We must demand more of ourselves. We must ask the hard questions that need to be asked. And our fundamental philosophy around this system must continue to evolve to meet the needs of our students, not just for today, but for the students of generations that we will never meet. This is not just local imperatives. This is a national imperative. Our schools must reflect a diversity of instructional and cultural models, with curriculums that meet the needs of our many and unique students.

When our schools can better adapt to their students and not the other way around, our students have more choice. A choice system is only as strong as its success in helping all parents, especially our at-risk students and their families, understand, are supported, and use the system

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effectively. When our parents are more informed of their options, our students have more choice. We must continue to seek ways to engage families through education and outreach and tackle the transportation issues that can stand in the way of our choice system truly having the greatest impact.

When we are able to effectively help all parents access options that exist and how to solve for even the smallest challenges our students have more choice. Our teachers, who willingly take up the greatest task of preparing the next generation, must be prepared to educate in the 21st century. And our schools must be places where they want to teach. When our teachers are prepared to teach and can find the right school fit for their style, our students will have more choice.

When a school is failing, when we take what's working in high-performing schools and translate it to help that school achieve, success, then we begin to make a difference. Simply put, when we have more schools, more high-performing seats in every neighborhood, our students have more choice.

We can continue to do better and we must do better. You know, in Denver, we want choice to be about families choosing between good schools and more good schools, and finding the right fit for their children. This is not a simple task nor should it be. True leadership isn't comfortable and transformation is difficult, and Russ has mentioned many cities have found this across the country. So we must do the hard work and make hard choices to create a system that benefits every student who walks through their school doors today and for years to come. It's up to us as elected officials and even as mayors we talk whether you have control of your schools or not, we have a responsibility to lead. It's up to school districts and it's up to policymakers to set the course for what comes next, and this should be the beginning.

The task has never been more imperative and it lies squarely in our hands. We have the responsibility to speak up for those who have been left behind, for those who have the will but not the means. We know choice is making a difference for those who can take advantage, so we must create options for our children. The time to act is now and I challenge everyone in this room today to help set the course wherever you live, to simply lead. For in Denver, this movement was started by parents who simply said enough is enough and we deserve better performing schools.

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Eighteen miles shouldn't be the distance a parent has to travel to make sure a child or any child gets the education they deserve. It should be something they have the option to do for a reason other than necessity. This is what choice should mean and we must make it so.

And so with that, I want to again thank The Brookings Institution for this opportunity to join you today and I want to thank all of you for listening and I look forward to the discussion. Thank you all. (Applause)

MR. WHITEHURST: I'll go ahead and do some introductions while the two guests on stage are being mic'd up. You've already met Mayor Hancock.

Next to me is Antonio Parés. He's the mayor's director of education for the City and County of Denver. We spent a while talking before the event today. He's a former TFA graduate, worked in Texas, moved to Denver, has been involved in a variety of political activities before working for the mayor, also worked for the Denver schools. And Antonio's here on stage today, he was going to come anyhow, and I appreciate of that, is here on stage because the advertised guest, Brian Eschbacher, who works for the Denver Public Schools, called me midday yesterday and said I have the flu, I can't be here. And so he provided his remarks to Antonio, but Brian has been gracious enough to be on the phone.

Are you there, Brian?

MR. ESCHBACHER: I'm here, yes.

MR. WHITEHURST: So he's available to us for questions if questions arise that he's particularly equipped to answer. And he's also free to enter into the discussion as we go forward.

Before we open up the floor for questions from the audience, Mayor Hancock, I'd like to ask you about what it is you think that's unique about Denver that has allowed this process to go forward with such positive support. I've been to Denver many times. I know that there's an active kind of series of civic organizations that contribute to education. It's not a city in which the mayor controls the schools, so it's different, for example, from New York City and, to a lesser degree, from Washington, D.C. What is it, do you think, that's allowed things to go pretty smoothly there politically whereas it's been so contentious elsewhere?

MAYOR HANCOCK: Well, I appreciate the question. I don't think that we can say that over the entire time that we've moved choice forward that it's been so smooth. We certainly had areas in our city, far northeast being one of them, where, when we first introduced the idea of choice and really changing the framework of our schools out there, it was not easy. I mean, there was a lot of pushback and a lot of contentious moments in that process.

But I've got to tell you that sticking with the foundational focus, the purpose, if you will, of this being about the children and not about the adults trying to truly understand or to place something that is our will on folks, the focus was we have children sitting in perennially failing classrooms and that's not okay. And it's not going to be about the politics between us as adults. It's going to be about what's going to be in the best interest of the children.

And I've got to applaud Denver Public Schools and the leadership because these have not been easy conversations. They have stayed focused on that purpose and they have moved forward with that focus going through even the most difficult challenges. And the reality is when you have focus, when you have a purpose, and you stay committed to it, it tends to work out, particularly if you truly believe in the values of what you're trying to push forward, and that's what DPS has done.

So, it hasn't been easy by any means. It has been difficult at times, but I think the fact that we were all rallied around the purpose and helped people to better understand what we were trying to make happen has panned out well for Denver.

MR. WHITEHURST: Great, thank you. Antonio, do you have remarks for us, both a combination of your remarks and Brian's remarks? If you'd share those with us, we'd be appreciative.

MR. PARÉS: Sure, certainly. I would like to start by saying, I'll switch the (inaudible), I was only in Texas for a little bit. (Laughter) I'm Colorado born and raised, so I notice I'm blue on blue, so if you can transpose anything of Broncos' symbol I think would be great.

I just want to thank Russ and The Brookings Institution for having us and also for recognizing, I think, the really hard work that the city, but also Denver Public Schools has put in. I know Brian, who's a peer and is a friend, is not able here to attend. I wanted to make sure we highlighted some things that I think DPS and specifically his department, which is enrollment, operations, and enrollment

process, have really been working on.

So, this is the fifth year that DPS has used a universal enrollment system. The first year being 2011 that the mayor had mentioned, and starting with our focus on the far northeast. And really I think the success that DPS has seen is, of course, that they've gotten one system, one application, one process that all the districts, that all the magnets, that all the charter schools participate in. But it's a really clear focus on attempting to bring equity across the community via this choice system. And I think, also, within our conversations in the city we have these four kind of large focuses to provide equitable access.

So one is just clear information to parents and you've got something that you have to constantly innovate on and develop as your communities and families continue to change. Well, we are able in Denver to provide a booklet that provides all of the information on every school in our district: charter, magnet, or traditional. Those are broken out in some color-coding methods. It does reflect our state and district school performance framework, which can be a little complicated, and so that's the next step. Right? How do you make the language in this accessible for any parent and parents of differing languages, though the booklet and the individuals who go out and present in the schools bring a multitude of expertise and languages?

Also a big deal was eliminating selective admission schools, not so much as eliminating them, but eliminating the requirements such as exams to enter a school. So currently, 98 percent of Denver's public schools—charter, magnet, district—are open enrollment. There is no need or expectation that you need to take an assessment to be able to enter.

Three is transportation. This is a big issue. To be considered a true choice district, as the mayor mentioned, how do we help ensure that our families can make the choice of a school that may be across the city? And for many of them, they don't have the means to do so. They may be working multiple jobs, they may only have one car, they may have no car. And so how are we utilizing the yellow bus system really successfully? How are we coming up with innovative solutions to fill in gaps? How are we using the public transportation system, which is a discussion that's happening within the city?

Denver has implemented three zones that use what we call the Success Express, which

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is a shuttle model using the yellow buses. So imagine you're running routes, like a public system, but it's yellow buses. And you could move a child across multiple neighborhoods via the yellow buses, catching a blue route to a red route to like a yellow route. And by no means is that perfect, but it has been incredibly successful in helping families navigate the system, get their children across a community to the school they choose, and doing so in a fashion that's a yellow bus and that's a DPS employee. And you're going to feel safe and comfortable with your child on that, especially younger students. You know, instead of putting them on what we call the Regional Transportation District buses or the RTD buses.

I think something that still exists is how are we going to expand that transportation citywide? Because those are three specific zones where students have and families have the most disadvantaged access to successful educational outcomes or schools or high-quality schools.

Fourth, and I think this one's really big and it's really interesting and it's something I'm proud that Denver Public Schools has really tackled -- and I was there for a short bit, so I'll try to say that this was me, too -- but Denver's focus on inequity between schools and communities. So in Denver right now they have opened up 11 enrollment zones.

So, in other words, they're saying this is your neighborhood, there's three schools in this neighborhood that you may have options for, and this neighborhood here may have low-performing and this neighborhood here may have high-quality. The DPS has drawn a new boundary around both of those communities or multiple of those communities. And students within those communities have a guaranteed seat at any of the schools in the zone. And currently, I think 10 out of the 11 zones, 90 percent of students get their first or second choice of schools. And you select, I believe, up to five. We'll let Brian clarify.

And I think another big piece was making sure that in middle school, where you see a lot of inequities and inequalities in schools and even success for students, was 50 percent right now of middle school students don't have a fixed middle school. So you're not just going to be assigned to a middle school. You are going to have to choose. So as a 5th grader moving into 6th grade, you know, 50 percent of our students are going to have to choose something. And we've noticed that even the school you may choose, even though it's right across the street, if you make a choice instead of being assigned

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to it, we see higher results and successes for our students in those schools that do not.

And then as Russ mentioned at the beginning, DPS and its charter schools have now started to implement a 365-day enrollment. Right? So there's a big discussion right now about backfilling of students. And do charter schools and magnet schools allow for backfilling? For those who may not be aware during the school year, as students show up or make moves in the district, can they enroll still in a school of their choice? And we are pushing forward in the district to make sure that is something that is doable.

And, of course, as the mayor and Russ both mentioned, there are still a lot of obstacles. I think we're incredibly proud of the success in DPS and I think the city, but plenty of work to be done. And as somebody who now has the great pleasure of working in the city and having the pleasure of working in the district, you get to see the dynamics between the two. And I am very sure that due to our relationships and partnerships we can continue to push forward and innovative and find the solutions to those things that still are holding us back to ensuring every kid has a great school.

MR. WHITEHURST: Thank you. Thank you. I do want to open up the floor for questions. If you would raise your hand, I will call on you. Tell us who you are and ask a short question instead of making a statement, please.

On the aisle here. Hold on for a second and get your mic.

MS. RICE-THURSTON: My name's Delabian Rice-Thurston. I apologize if this is a statement. I am a graduate of East High School, Class of '62. My youngest sister, who is 60 now, was one of the first students bussed to South High School when my mom's good friend, Rachel Noel, sued to get what amounted to cross-city bussing in Denver. So it may be that losing that cross-city bussing, which a lot of people said was really useful for academic advancement, made people willing to accept charters, you know, in the 2000s.

But how does accountability work? If you're a charter school—because I'm now in the District of Columbia, where the mayor does control the school system and we do have charters and there is a real sense that, one, they kick you out when they don't want you; they don't admit you if they don't want you. And the accountability almost seems like leave the school and find another charter school if



you don't like your public school. How does accountability work?

MAYOR HANCOCK: I'm going to let Brian respond. Let me go to the first part because I think you make a very good point, but Brian can talk about accountability. But let me share with you regarding the bussing because I had the real privilege and honor of, as I said, growing up in Denver and I was also a product of bussing. I went to Manual High School, historic Manual High School, sister city to East High. Our children are graduates of East High School. And, by the way, Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Ed Peter Groff, who is here, is a graduate of East High School, as well.

But let me share this with regards to bussing. The bussing program, as someone who is a product, I can tell you, I felt like it was a successful program. I got to go to different parts of the city. I went to school with students that otherwise I would not have ever met. And today, they're still some of the closest friends that I have. And it allowed for schools to be desegregated in Denver. It was the tool of desegregation.

There was, however, a gap between I'm going to say early to mid-1990s up until the time of about a decade ago, when charter schools started coming in, where the bussing ended. And what happened, we saw the dispersion or, if you will, the abandonment of real quality of services and programs of inner-city schools, particularly in communities of color. And so families started to begin to see the abandonment of their schools as well as the derailing of quality within the schools in those neighborhoods. And so you have a generation of students who were, quite frankly, locked into poor-performing schools.

Those of us who grew up who had started to become parents, started to say this is not okay. What you had in the bussing system was not only were you bussing kids, but you also had at least a choice of a quality school in your neighborhood. I grew up in the Five Points area. At least most of the time I park in Five Points, so I still had Manual High School, which was considered one of the top schools in the city. When bussing ended, that was gone. In other words, when white students left, so did the quality programming and the investment.

And so that is why, I think, you saw kind of pushback to charter schools. One, because people didn't know about it, but, two, why now there's such an openness to charter schools because

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people deserve or believe they deserve quality programming in schools. So it's kind of a push-pull. It's hard to explain you got pushback because you're disrupting our traditional schools, which we loved because we went to school there, but then the schools were failing and so we're opened up to the charter schools. So you had the push-pull situation and that might be kind of the tumultuousness, if you will, of the charter school venturing into our communities.

MR. WHITEHURST: Brian, do you want to add anything to that from afar?

MR. ESCHBACHER: Yeah. And first off, I apologize for not being able to be there in person today.

In terms of the accountability, we've centralized enrollment through the district choice office, so if a student feels that they're being coached out of a charter school or of a district school, our team is able to step in and that no student will be forced out unless both, you know, the school they're at and the school they want to go to approve of that transfer. And those numbers are relatively low during the year.

In addition, again, about equity, we make sure that no student is forced to have any additional requirements to attend a school, you know, the following year. And so by removing all of those requirements by making sure that any in-year movement is centralized through my team, we believe that's made it more equitable.

MR. WHITEHURST: Thank you. Other questions? On the right here, way over on the aisle. Yeah, thank you. Hold on, your microphone's coming.

MR. FOWLER: I'm Tony Fowler. I'm with the U.S. Department of Education. We've heard the choice argument for more than 30 years now. I know because I've been in education for 30 years. One of the primary theories is that by allowing choice it's sort of the rising tide raises all the boats. And so my question to you is what effect has the choice movement in your city had on the lower performing schools and whether there's any indication at all it's actually raising the quality of the lower performing schools so that they can compete with the schools that parents and families are choosing?

SPEAKER: (inaudible) short periods of time.

MAYOR HANCOCK: Yeah. But in a general sense, and, again, Brian and Antonio may

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have a comment on this, I think one is introducing competition has made a difference. It's made in addition to a couple other state laws that have been passed, including the educational innovation law that former Senator Peter Roth wrote, as well, has made a difference with these traditional schools. For example, the schools now can apply to be an innovation school in addition to the charter school. Competition is set.

Teachers can now, as part of an innovation school, can now assume a different position or posture within their school. They can opt out of the district policies with the approval of the district and try some innovational models to jumpstart or to adapt to the young people who are walking in their school based on the neighborhood and the needs that those young people have. And some neighborhood schools or traditional schools have become innovation schools or schools of innovation, I should say, I think is the proper term.

And so I think you see those sorts of things kind of coming out of this surge or charter schools because competition's there and teachers are trying to think differently about not only how they compete, but also how they become one of those successful models in neighborhoods to help these young people excel.

MR. PARÉS: I think another thing that we've seen most definitely, and as someone who was helping open schools, I get to work with teachers and school leaders, and I will say that this is something you don't see in a lot of cities, charters and district schools work together really closely in Denver.

And, for instance, we have an initiative right now across the city with DPS and six of the charter networks that's about recruiting more teachers and educators to Denver. And they're all at the table and we're all using our resources to do that. And you see crossover between school leaders who are at charters entering back into our public traditional schools, bringing some of the innovations or policies that they saw, or approaches, I should say, or strategies they saw and learned in those schools to their classrooms to bear.

I think, also, when you started to really push and bringing forth a different discussion in depth for a different time, but around the accountability using data, using growth, and so forth, schools

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can really look at each other and start to figure out something's really working over there. They're serving a very similar population to my own. And in DPS, and Brian can talk more about it, the willingness and openness to support you in bridging what, you know, I think historically are silos in schools across the city has really broken down. I think the district does a nice job of facilitating that.

And to Russ' point, a lot of our community organizations, or as you hear the language coming out of some of Harvard and the Education Trust or education cities, the harbormasters, those who were really pushing this community to think about this, are also supporting that collaboration.

MR. WHITEHURST: One of the interesting things about Denver is that the district is the authorizer for all the charter schools, as I understand it.

MAYOR HANCOCK: Yeah.

MR. WHITEHURST: And, you know, there's debate about whether that's a good or bad idea. There's concern that if the district is the authorizer, the district's not going to produce a lot of competition for itself. But, you know, the upside is that I think it's easier to get collaboration when you're the boss of the whole thing.

But, Brian --

MAYOR HANCOCK: And raise accountability, as Brian pointed out.

MR. WHITEHURST: Right. Questioner here on the front.

MR. SHAY: Hi, I'm Michael Shay. My question is focused on the booklet of information about the schools because I think, Russ, in your remarks you correctly emphasized the complexity of the system of choice is one factor; the complexity of the information about schools is the other. So my question for the people from Denver is, to make this work, was it important to recruit people who really know data and communications?

And my question for Russ is, do you see evidence that other cities are improving that information flow?

MR. PARÉS: I think we should let Brian start because his department put together the booklet, but we certainly have some thoughts from the city perspective, as well.

MR. WHITEHURST: Brian?

MR. ESCHBACHER: Yeah. This is a tough part of the communication process. I think we've well informed families of the deadlines, the timelines that are required to participate in choice. I think we've well informed families of the options in choice.

I think the tougher question is for a parent what is the right school for my child? Because I think many of those families are going to navigate that question in different manners. And so our communications team has put together an enrollment guide that has about a half a page of detail on every school. It's very easy to read and to navigate. It's translated into 10 different languages each year, as well.

But I still think an area for us to look at is how do I know what the best school for my child is? And we've heard, you know, some of the concerns from parents that we hear at the end of each choice window is I either spent 40 hours researching schools and I'm exhausted or I was only able to spend 1 or 2 hours researching schools and I just don't know if this is the right school for my child. And so I think that's an area that we need to continue to work through, and it's getting feedback from different families about how they navigated choice and how they arrived at a place where they were comfortable with their selection.

MR. WHITEHURST: Thanks. I have two reactions to your great question.

One is that I see a future in which choice portals are not under the exclusive control of the city, where, you know, as if you're shopping for a wallet or something, you can go to many different portals and get different information about that product. And so if we can release the information that is currently controlled by the district to outside entities so that you could shop for your school on Amazon if you wanted to, I think we'd provide choice not only in schools, but choice of who you shop with.

The other is I think there's room for a nudge here. You know, a nudge being a gentle indication of what might be a good idea. And mentioned in the report that was available when you came in is a short description of what Boston has been doing. So they pre-populate the list and they provide for every parent at least one high-performing school that's noted as high performing on the list. And the parent can still choose whichever school they want. They can throw away the pre-populated list. But I think that and behavioral economics approaches that capture a kind of psychology of choice and help

parents with the shopping process is good.

You know, I think we need to think about this from a marketing perspective, and it typically hasn't been thought about that.

MR. PARÉS: I think I also should make the point that as two individuals come back with the community -- I was political community organizing -- is you need to go to families where they are. And DPS, I want to be really clear, does a really good job of going into the neighborhoods where you may see the lowest usage of choice. But let's just be really honest, you know, going to a school or a rec center is still useful, but, I mean, going to the local Laundromat, going to markets, going to the churches, and that is something that you see more and more of the district doing. But I think to Russ' point is, you know, are there outside individuals who don't have skin in the game, who are willing to get in there and really talk to parents?

I think as the mayor's point is, if we want a diversity of schools from models, Montessori to college prep and so forth, you really need to help the parents of all demographics and socioeconomic status really think through, like, what does that model mean for my student? What do I know about my student? What's the information and data look like for my student? And how do I help navigate my kid to the best fit for them? And that is a big task and something I think that, you know, lots of people are working on, but definitely I think DPS has pushed forward pretty well.

MR. WHITEHURST: We have time for one more question. The gentleman in the front row here, just because convenient to the microphone.

MR. KEPKE: Hi, I'm Eric Kepke. My question is related to the question that was over there.

So, to move your child or to pick a school for you child exerts a cost on the parents. So the parents who are most likely to take up that cost are probably well-educated, high-income. So my concern here is that, say, you have a school that was originally doing poorly, now you implement this choice program. The top students move away from the school, the school becomes worse. Now the top teachers leave because the students are worse. And now since the top teachers are gone, more of the top students will leave. So you can see how this might lead to an even worse school.

So I was wondering what you guys think about this and what you guys would do to combat that.

MAYOR HANCOCK: I think it's part of leadership and I'll be interesting in Brian's point of view, but let me give you kind of the general sense. I think your assumptions are absolutely correct early on in this whole process. In fact, many of us push back on vouchers for that reason. You know, you're going to pull resources from the most vulnerable schools and, guess what, now you're going to have an even worse problem than we initially thought.

But in the leadership in Denver, I can only speak for Denver and Denver Public Schools, one of the things that was so important to us that we don't leave those schools behind, that we must be prepared to invest in innovation and transforming those schools that are failing just as we are to help a charter school co-locate or to locate in the city of Denver. Have we been absolutely successful? Absolutely not. You'll still find schools in Denver that are challenged. But at the end of the day, we're not going to stop trying to transform those schools that are still struggling to meet the grade, if you will.

And that means to do the things that we talked about: recruit teachers, retain those quality teachers, make sure they stay in those schools, look for those innovative programs to bring into those traditional schools; where we can step down the size of the school, that might help lift up the kids that are in those schools and give them more personal time and opportunity. We're going to do those things.

And I think that's what DPS has done so well, is not abandon those failing schools. You're failing? No, we're not only going to create opportunities by bringing some quality options to the neighborhood, but we're going to transform this school. And to be honest with you, in my community that's where the big challenge was because we were not only bringing in quality programming, we were stepping down some schools. We're going to say this is not okay, that every child deserves to have access. We want that option, good schools, better schools, and, guess what, some magnet programs that might fit the special needs or desires of a family and a student.

MR. PARÉS: I think it's to Russ' point earlier when he was saying, you know, why was the politics in some senses in Denver easier? There was never an abandoned -- you know, I mean, by

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no means, as the mayor said, were things perfect. Right? Because, I mean, certainly I think what you've shared, there's definitely some of that. Right? Like why wouldn't you, if you understand the system, not navigate it quickly and well or even utilize outside resources to do so, but the reinvestment into those schools, as well, because you wanted to ensure they were great?

And in the far northeast, McGlone Elementary School and Green Valley Elementary, which were traditional --

MAYOR HANCOCK: Exactly.

MR. PARÉS: -- and now have -- they applied for the innovation status, but continue to be the neighborhood schools, are incredibly high performing, and there was a reinvestment into both of those schools.

MAYOR HANCOCK: Can I add something here?

MR. WHITEHURST: Please.

MAYOR HANCOCK: Because this should not be lost. Two things that I think are important here.

One, education was the epicenter, also, of the civil rights movement. And when you think about what schools have meant to this nation in terms of, one, making us the best nation in the world in terms of our competitiveness, but also creating opportunities for equity in our socioeconomic system, when you start attacking that system there's nothing that gets to the emotions quicker, particularly people seeing that whole communities have risen up as a result of this institution that sat here. Okay? And so that's part of what that pushback and the people who have created this whole movement toward charters and choice, we had to come to understand that that's part of the pushback. You're messing with our school.

The second thing is in American life, and, as a matter of fact I should say all over the world, there's nothing more special to us than the school we went to. Right? I'm proud I went to East High School. I'm a Thunderbolt, a Manual High Boo-Boo. You know, you'll be 90 years old going I'm a Thunderbolt, that's who I am. (Laughter) And when you start saying your school is failing, you'll be 60 years old to come back and defend the pride of that school because that's what you grew up doing. I'm a

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Thunderbolt.

Our competition was across the city. And so trying to get parents today to understand that that may be your school, but your emotional attachment to that school is not going to help these kids achieve.

When we close a historic high school in Denver and people marched into that school, it took a sophomore student to stand up and say I'm so glad, she spoke to throngs of parents and community folks, saying I am so glad you all are here. She said I'm glad you're here fighting for our high school. I wanted to graduate from this high school, but now they're about to close it. She said I'm glad you're here.

She said but I got one question for you. Where were you when only a third of these students were showing up every day? Where were you when out of 300, 14 students were walking across the stage with their high school diploma? She said you should have been showing up then. She said I want a quality school and they're trying to give it to me. Your emotional attachment to this school is not going to help me get the education I need to be competitive.

And so we have to stay focused on the kids in that school, not the building, not our wonderful memories of our high school and what high school meant to us, but really how do we help these kids and help our nation be competitive? Because this is a national imperative.

Sorry to get on that trip, but I think it's important that we realize it.

MR. WHITEHURST: No, I was going to make a closing comment, but that does it for me, so thank you very much for being here.

MR. PARÉS: Thank you, Russ, really appreciate it.

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