



Xochitl "Sochi" Gaytan, a leader of a union-backed community organization called Our Voice, Our Schools, was elected to the school board in November 2021 and was chosen as board president.

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Dismantling Denver

FEATURE

The city was a national model for education reform. Then union-backed candidates took over the school board.

DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS' three-year plunge from one of the nation's most carefully planned and promising examples of public-education transformation into a district led by a school board in disarray has multiple causes, and there's plenty of blame to spread around.

Ultimately, however, it is the result of a concerted effort over more than a decade by organized and committed activists, local and national, who have opposed changing the governance and operation of school districts in any significant way. The politics of public education in Denver have grown increasingly school systems across the country. What distinguishes the conflict over reform in Denver is how unrelated it is to student outcomes.

While Denver's reforms have been far from perfect, they merit the national attention they've drawn. A growing body of evidence makes clear that outcomes for students in the city slowly yet significantly improved, including for students the district has

**By PARKER BAXTER and
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historically failed to serve well (see “Redesigning Denver’s Schools,” *features*, Spring 2019).

When the district launched its reforms in 2005, students in Denver were more than 20 points behind their peers throughout the state in math and reading. Fewer than 60 percent of Latino and Black students were graduating from the district’s high schools.

By 2018, Denver students were performing only a few points below state averages, and graduation rates for Black and Latino students exceeded 65 percent, even as postsecondary enrollment grew and remediation rates fell. Significant achievement gaps persist by race and income, in part because student performance improved among white students as well as students of color.

Yet as soon as Denver Public Schools took its first, tentative steps toward reform more than two decades ago, an active opposition campaign arose, aimed not at moderating or improving the reforms, but at destroying them. In 2019, the election of three new anti-reform members to the Denver Board of Education flipped the board majority to that camp.

In Denver, families have embraced choice: almost half of all students choose a school other than the one assigned to them, and half of the public schools are either independent charter schools or semi-autonomous innovation schools, in which staff have the power to waive certain state and local requirements as well as some union contract provisions. Yet the new majority board members, backed by a reenergized teachers union, campaigned on a platform of opposition to choice, school autonomy, and performance-based accountability.

The broad popularity of choice in Denver makes dismantling reform politically fraught for the board and its allies. In fact, the board has faced strong pushback from some parents and educators and has had to confront the complex reality of governing a district where choice, autonomy, and a focus on outcomes are now woven into the fabric of public education.

But the union-supported board majority was determined to push ahead, and that meant cleaning house at the top. In fall 2020, Superintendent Susana Cordova resigned after less than two years on the job. Cordova is a Denver native and Denver Public Schools graduate who had spent most of her professional career working for the district.

Cordova has not said publicly that she was pushed out by the board, though at a news conference on the day of her resignation she “acknowledged she didn’t always have the smoothest relationship with staff and the board,” the *Denver Post* reported. And board member Tay Anderson said, “A lot of constituents had the criticism when we appointed Susana Cordova that there was a lingering of past administrators. They were right.”

Cordova never got a chance to enact her own agenda.

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First, a teacher strike weakened her just weeks into her tenure. Next, the new board gave her no room to enact changes. Finally, softening the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic became the district’s sole focus.

Now that the pandemic’s disruption is receding, the board appears poised to renew its efforts to roll back reform. It has a good chance of succeeding, because in November 2021, all four of the anti-reform candidates won, giving their side unanimous control.

But does the new board have an alternative agenda? So far, it has offered only vague platitudes about prioritizing traditional district-managed schools and focusing on equity. Yet there’s no evidence that traditional neighborhood schools in this city have ever provided anything close to an equitable education for all of Denver’s kids.

The city’s anti-reform activists depict their movement as a homegrown, grassroots effort. Evidence suggests, however, that it is a well-funded and concerted campaign backed by state and national interests to destroy Denver’s reforms. Those reforms, because of their marked (if incomplete) success, threatened the old status quo.

Three interrelated factors have driven the attack on Denver’s reforms:

- a well-organized, longstanding campaign to undermine the reforms
- a complacent and intellectually exhausted reform coalition in Denver
- a disengaged public, susceptible to social-media persuasion

Fourteen-Year Battle

The deterioration of education reform in Denver over the past three years mirrors the national collapse of a bipartisan consensus that made possible the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 and that fueled the reform strategies nationwide during the past two decades.

By focusing on teacher quality, accountability for student performance, and public-school choice—through open enrollment, charters, and innovation schools—Denver became an exemplar of bipartisan education reform. As the city implemented its reforms, the district attracted national praise as well as scorn.

When Tom Boasberg became superintendent in 2008, he picked up where his predecessor Michael Bennet left off and continued the reform effort until his departure in 2018. Four school-board elections maintained pro-reform majority control during the nearly 14-year Bennet-Boasberg era. That's Methuselah-like longevity relative to most large-city districts. (One of the authors of this article, Parker Baxter, worked for Denver Public Schools under both Bennet and Boasberg, from 2008 to 2011.)

Now, as opponents attempt to undo the changes, they're finding that some elements, notably school choice and autonomy and a unified enrollment system that includes charter schools, have vocal supporters and constituencies.

Most school districts in the United States operate as centralized, vertically integrated bureaucracies, in which resources are controlled by the district office, teachers are paid on a standardized scale irrespective of where or what they teach, and students are assigned to schools based on where they live.

Yet though centralized school systems have endured for 150 years, they are not the only way to provide public education. The wide variety of delivery options that have arisen in the past three decades have earned growing acceptance.

What set Denver apart was the district's explicit attempt to redefine every element of the traditional model of unified delivery, which both Bennet and Boasberg said was poorly serving the majority of urban public-school students. Their wide-ranging assault on the old model roused fierce antagonism, both locally and nationally. Cordova spent her short tenure reminding people that she was not a clone of her predecessor.

Cordova's departure and the disarray that has followed are the consequences of a years-long campaign to undermine the district's reforms.

School-board terms in Denver are

four years; elections are held off-cycle every two years. In 2009, when the reforms were still in their infancy, a *Denver Post* headline read: "Denver school-board election seen as neighborhood schools vs. charters." That story could have run every two years since. There were then 20 charter schools in the city and no innovation schools. Today, there are more than 50 of each, serving almost half of the district's 90,000 students. Over four elections, the opponents of the district's strategy failed to take control of the board, but each loss intensified their resolve and their rhetoric.

To many observers and participants, Denver's reform era seemed like a model of compromise and collaboration.



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But for those with an interest in preserving the traditional district model, the reforms presented a mortal threat.

Initially, the Denver Classroom Teachers Association, the National Education Association's local affiliate, was ineffectual in publicly countering the intellectual energy and enthusiasm of reform's supporters.

Early on, perhaps because of perceived support for bipartisan reform and a reluctance to challenge a Democrat in the White House, the Colorado Education Association and the Denver Classroom Teachers Association chose to stage their fight in the courts. They spent the next decade unsuccessfully but persistently suing the district to block the creation of new innovation schools.

They also sued to block the implementation of a state law that ended forced teacher assignments by requiring



Michael Bennet was school superintendent in Denver before serving as U.S. Senator and seeking the Democratic presidential nomination.

ALAMY

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hiring decisions at the school level to be made through the mutual consent of the teacher and principal.

Outside of court, the Denver Classroom Teachers Association was much less confrontational and even partnered with the district on several early reforms. Still, as Denver's reforms grew in scale and in prominence, so too did the opposition to them.

In 2015, as the presidential primary season heated up, education journalist Richard Whitmire warned supporters of reform that the schism that should concern them was not between Republicans and Democrats but among Democrats. He warned that unions were rolling out a comprehensive strategy of “class warfare” aimed at making reform toxic among middle-class whites by telling them that testing and charter schools didn't benefit them, while at the same time portraying opposition to charter schools and testing as an abstract matter of racial and social justice.

That turned out to be prescient in describing what would happen in Denver.

Beginning with the testing opt-out movement in spring 2015, opponents of reform took advantage of bipartisan frustration with standardized testing to undermine support for test-based accountability as a tool for school improvement and public transparency. They also conducted a relentless media campaign against charter schools, which, they maintained, were part of a conspiracy to destroy public education.

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The election of Donald Trump and his selection of Betsy DeVos as education secretary in 2016 gave opponents of Denver's reforms a broad brush with which to tar all of Bennet and Boasberg's efforts. DeVos was painted as the Cruella de Vil of public education, and school choice and charter schools in Denver were falsely painted as part of “Trump's ideas” for schools—as a series of union-funded campaign ads did in 2017 and again in 2019.

Almost immediately following Trump's election, a more progressive and assertive group of Denver Classroom Teachers Association members formed the Caucus of Today's Teachers, which quickly gained strength and ultimately assumed control of the union. Leaders were more aggressive, better organized, and more effective at rallying support to fight reforms than previous Denver Classroom Teachers Association leadership had been.

In March 2017, while DeVos was faulting Denver's reforms as insufficient for not including private-school vouchers, the teacher caucus organized around a platform to support “public education” and to fight for “community schools” and against “privatization.”

Unknown to Denverites at the time, and largely ignored by the press, the takeover of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association by the caucus was just one part of a well-funded, multipronged campaign by the National Education Association and Colorado Education Association to “shape the narrative” and undermine support for reform.

Just as Whitmire had predicted, the unions started their narrative-shaping with an easy target: middle- and upper-income white residents,



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many of whom have no children or who live in one of the city's upper-income enclaves where schools remain relatively untouched by the reforms.

In the spring of 2016, Scott Gilpin, a real-estate developer, and Jeanne Kaplan, a former school-board member turned disciple of Diane Ravitch, formed Our Denver, Our Schools. The two organizers characterized Our Denver, Our Schools as a grassroots, community-led advocacy group. It didn't officially register as a political-advocacy organization until six months before the 2017 board election. Then, for the next two years, Our Denver, Our Schools did not file annual reports with the Colorado Secretary of State. Local media covered the Our Denver, Our Schools launch event alongside the union's launch of its own campaign committee and quoted a local parent who said she joined Our Denver, Our Schools because she and her neighbors wanted "traditional, comprehensive, district-run schools-down-the-block."

Our Denver, Our Schools spent more than two years "educating voters" by spreading disinformation. One example, from the group's website:

Like "No Child Left Behind," Portfolio Management and Reform are strong words that imply good things, but the reality is that Reform Districts monetize our education making the rich richer, forgo research-based best educational practices for profitable testing, and leave behind the poorest and most vulnerable in our communities.

Our Denver, Our Schools said on their website that "the corporations that put the Denver School Board . . . in office are trying to make money off a public good. They profit and the most vulnerable parts of our community are left behind." The site also said that "the Reform Approach . . . disproportionately neglects and even targets schools in communities of color and low-income communities, robbing them of the center of their communities, their political power, and a fair chance at a good education."

In spring 2017, the National Education Association and Colorado Education Association, perhaps realizing that they needed to appeal to low-income families of color, who comprise the majority of Denver Public Schools constituents, funded the creation of another "community" organization, Our Voice, Our Schools, led by a Black man, Hasira "H-Soul" Ashemu, and a Latina, Xochitl "Sochi" Gaytan.



Hasira "H-Soul" Ashemu led a union-backed organization, *Our Voice, Our Schools*.

Like Our Denver, Our Schools, the new organization called itself an authentic grassroots coalition. But that claim rang hollow, because Our Voice, Our Schools was receiving annual grants from the National Education Association's Community Advocacy Promoting Education fund "to partner with the Colorado Education Association (CEA) to host . . . meetings in targeted Denver neighborhoods near the schools being impacted the hardest by pro-charter-school privatizing reformers."

One of the two co-founders, Gaytan, also ran for the school board in 2017 but lost, even with the help of more than \$100,000 from the unions' independent expenditure committee. (In 2021, she ran again, and won.)

Our Voice, Our Schools asserted on social media that the district's reforms were a purposeful effort by "implicitly racist district leaders and their corporate backers" to "lynch Denver's Black and Brown families." In a Facebook post, the organization said: "Family, let's continue to educate ourselves about these choice charlatans as they abound. These corporate charter sharks smell Black/Brown blood-money in the water."

The strategy paid off in fall 2017 when two of the union-endorsed candidates won their races, breaking reformers' unanimous control for the first time in eight years. Then, in 2019, three more anti-reform candidates won election, securing a five-to-two majority.

In a 2020 report detailing efforts to promote "racial justice in education," the 3-million-member National Education Association highlighted its funding of anti-reform efforts

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in Denver. With the headline “Denver Coalition Organizes to Decolonize Schools, Empower Students and Families of Color,” the union claimed that, in just four years, Our Voice, Our Schools “has flipped a corrupt, for-profit, education reform-minded school board to one that is focused on equity and racial justice.”

The new board set out to dismantle some of the reforms they had campaigned against: charter- and innovation-school expansion, test-based accountability, and standardized testing.

Dismantling Reforms Piece by Piece

Here is where the board’s efforts to roll back reform now stand.

Merit pay for teachers. Once hailed by reformers in both parties as a promising example of “new unionism” and even touted by President Obama, Denver’s groundbreaking ProComp performance-pay plan for teachers, funded by a special tax approved by Denver voters in 2005, was all but completely dismantled following a teachers strike in 2019, during the early weeks of Cordova’s leadership.

Although the compensation plan was designed in partnership with the union, the union’s leadership abandoned its support within a few years. The weakened program endured for nearly another decade.

The collapse of bipartisan consensus on reform coupled with the rise of teacher activism in states across the country provided an opening for local union leaders to cripple the program. By the time of the 2019 strike, the compensation plan had become deeply unpopular among teachers active in the union, partly because ProComp was overly complex and its implementation was confusing and inconsistent.

Yet the Denver Classroom Teachers Association made it clear that it wanted not to reform or improve ProComp, but to abandon it and replace it with the traditional step-and-lane pay model.

“We’re not proposing something that’s out of step with what the rest of educators expect from their salary schedule. . . . We want to make sure our salary schedule is like what nearly every other district in the United States has,” said strike captain Rob Gould, who in 2021 was elected Denver Classroom Teachers Association president.

Dismantling ProComp ultimately means more than eliminating performance pay. It could also signal the demise of progressive education-reform priorities such as incentives for teachers who work in schools serving the most at-risk students. While Denver Public Schools strike negotiators succeeded in keeping this element of ProComp intact, this last vestige of the pay experiment may ultimately be rolled back too.

Performance-based school closures. The Denver school board adopted the School Performance Compact

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in 2015, aiming to define “a clear process” for how the district “identifies and supports the most persistently low-performing schools.” Based on data from the district’s robust school-level dashboard, the board could decide to close or “restart” chronically failing schools. In the case of charters, persistent low performance would lead to non-renewal.

The closure in 2016 of an abysmally performing but popular district-run Montessori school in central Denver created an enormous backlash, much of it emanating from the same forces that had opposed all of Denver’s reforms over the past decade-plus.

In 2018, with two new members, both of whom ran in part on their near-total opposition to closing schools, the board amended the compact to allow low-performing schools to “present to the board regarding their ongoing or planned improvement strategies and their planned or needed supports, along with a presentation of their improvement goals over time.”

The compact would in any event be crippled by the board’s 2020 decision to dismantle the foundation on which it is built, the School Performance Framework.

The advocacy organization A+ Colorado lambasted the board’s retreat from accountability. “This is a major shift in policy and the lack of engagement with community members prior to the decision raises major questions on school improvement efforts,” A+ wrote on its website. “Opponents of dramatic action believed that schools should remain open no matter how many kids, disproportionately students of color, languished in their halls and that someday, an improvement strategy would emerge to turn schools around. . . .

“With this pause, we worry that informed judgments by the district leadership and school board about school quality will now be postponed; what’s another year to a student not learning to read?”

Now, with the entire board vocally committed to reconsidering the policy of school closures on the grounds that they are punitive and damaging to communities, the compact is unlikely to resurface. However, steady

enrollment declines are forcing the board to consider school consolidations, which they insist are not the same as closures. Before the pandemic, district officials were estimating a decline of more than 3 percent by 2025, but they are now predicting losses nearly double that.

School Performance Framework. The weakening of the district's process for intervening in low-performing schools was a significant win for the opponents of reform, but it is the changes to the district's tool for evaluating schools that have the most potential to change the landscape. Launched in 2008, the School Performance Framework became a lightning rod in the community.

to maintain the district's framework and those who would prefer no evaluation at all. The board voted to scrap the district School Performance Framework in favor of the state's less comprehensive and rigorous version but also called for the development of a new multidimensional dashboard. As a result, parents now have significantly less information about schools as they seek the best option for their children.

Unified enrollment system. Launched by the Boasberg administration in 2011, Denver's first-of-its-kind unified enrollment system, SchoolChoice, was intended to make it easier for families to navigate the bureaucracy.

Under the system, families can, via a single application,



A seven-member elected board governs the Denver Public Schools. Now that the pandemic's disruption is receding, the board appears poised to renew its efforts to roll back reform.

DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Denver's framework was so robust that the state used it as a model for its own accountability system. Although largely based on standardized-test scores, the framework heavily weighted student growth, and it included additional measures like postsecondary readiness and results of student and family surveys. Yet opponents of Denver's reforms aimed to dismantle the framework.

The opportunity to do so came in 2020 when, after a yearlong process, a committee of community members, educators, and district administrators issued recommendations, presented as a compromise between those who wanted

rank-order their preferred schools, district-run and charter alike. Students are assigned to schools via a complex algorithm designed to give families their highest possible choice.

Before the SchoolChoice system, parents had to navigate multiple enrollment deadlines and applications. The system has simplified the process, and though it remains imperfect at best, it survives to this day. Now, though, the board's hostility toward charter schools may pose a threat to SchoolChoice.

Charterschools and school choice. Last fall, the board voted to delay by a year the opening of a new high school

by DSST Public Schools, a local STEM charter network. The new high school would have enrolled students from its nearby middle school—the highest-performing middle school in Denver, where 80 percent of students qualify for subsidized lunches and 94 percent are of color. While board members said their move to delay was prompted by concerns about achievement at other DSST schools, they were holding DSST to much higher standards than those they applied to middle schools under their direct control.

Ultimately, the State Board of Education reversed the decision of the Denver school board. The local board cannot end charter schools in Denver and in fact could lose exclusive chartering authority under state law if the district denies charters to worthy applicants. Denver’s charter schools are much more integrated into the district than they are elsewhere in the country, sharing not only an enrollment system but also various facilities and some services for students with severe special needs.

But with Denver Public Schools enrollment projected to shrink for the foreseeable future, cooperation is under pressure. Some board members buy into the narrative that Denver’s charters—all nonprofits—have some sort of profit motive, and they describe charters as part of a corporate- and privatization-backed conspiracy to weaken traditional public schools. To many who oppose choice, charter schools present a threat to their vision of what public education ought to be: funded, employed, and controlled by a central authority.

Innovation schools and zones. The state legislature passed the Innovation Schools Act in 2008, offering

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district-run schools a measure of autonomy by allowing school employees to waive certain district and state policies and collective-bargaining terms and create school-customized policies in their place. Proposed waivers must be approved by at least 60 percent of a school’s staff.

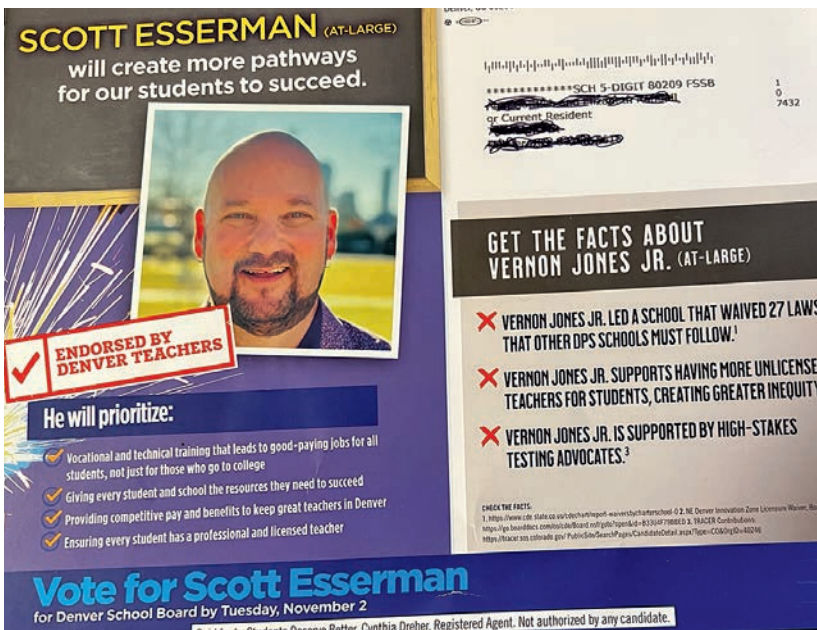
Union leaders dislike the law because of the autonomy it affords school staff—the ability, for example, to develop their own hiring process and define their own school day and calendar. The Denver Classroom Teachers Association opposed the original law but, once it passed, tried to show the law was unnecessary by creating an innovation school itself through the district’s new-school development process.

By the time the Caucus of Today’s Teachers took over the Denver Classroom Teachers Association, one third of district-operated schools had innovation status. The ascendance of such schools posed a threat to the union, as did the fact that more than half of teachers in the city were not then union members.

Originally, Denver Public Schools granted innovation status to almost any school that requested it. Many of those schools struggled and continue to struggle. Over the past four years, however, the district has put in place a rigorous innovation-authorizing process that paralleled its tough charter-school authorizing process. In recent years, autonomy wasn’t granted willy-nilly but rather only to those schools that demonstrated a compelling rationale, a strong plan, and community support.

Innovation in Denver first came under threat in spring 2020, when board member Brad Laurvick (who won election in 2019 with support from the Denver Classroom Teachers Association) pushed a proposal that would have gutted the autonomy of innovation schools.

After fierce blowback from innovation-school principals and others caused some board



The union-funded expenditure committees sent out the only negative campaign mailers in this cycle, stoking fears about candidates who backed reform.

ADAM GOTTLIEB

members to wobble on supporting the resolution, Laurvick stepped back and proposed a “pause and reflect” period. But this move represents a reprieve, not a compromise. Nearly all innovation schools and the district’s three innovation zones will be up for renewal during the 2022–23 school year. Recent statements from several school-board members show that, to the extent allowable under state law, they will try to limit the expansion of innovation schools and zones going forward.

An Uncertain Future

When the innovation law passed in 2008, it was meant to spur “collective school community engagement in these plans, not just the teachers, or just the principal, but also the families,” said Jennifer Bacon, a charter- and innovation-skeptic board member, at a June 2021 board retreat. “Are we finding that that’s really happening? And can people articulate what it means that their school is an innovation school, or what that has meant for their kids? Because the suspicion that I have is, who doesn’t want to be an innovation school? Because that sounds fantastic.”

Bacon suggested that the process of becoming an innovation school has been driven by principals, not teachers or parents, and therefore is of questionable legitimacy.

Board member Barbara O’Brien, a former lieutenant governor, put the matter in perspective. “I just want to remind us that when innovation schools were created, it was an attempt to reimagine public education for our most vulnerable children,” O’Brien said. “I do not think we ought to have our feet set in cement. . . . And if we’re still leaving kids behind, let’s keep trying to find solutions. But I want us to remember that the roots of this state and district policy are in trying to help our most vulnerable kids.”

O’Brien could not run for reelection in November 2021 because of term limits, and the other board member who was at least partially supportive of reform, Angela Cobian, chose not to run for another term. Some strong, young candidates of color who favored the portfolio model threw in their hats, but the anti-reform candidates prevailed—Gaytan, Scott Esserman, incumbent board president Carrie Olsen, and Michelle Quattlebaum—consolidating unanimous control of the board. Turnout for school-board elections over the past decade has rarely broken 30 percent, and it was abysmal again in 2021, with just 29 percent of registered voters casting ballots in the one at-large race.

While incumbent Tay Anderson is claiming a mandate for what he called in a tweet a “union super-majority,” it’s hard to justify such a claim when so many registered voters declined to participate in the election.

In 2021, the board selected Alex Marrero as Denver’s next superintendent. Marrero, a former principal and teacher, and



In May 2021, the board selected Alex Marrero as superintendent of Denver Public Schools. Marrero, a former principal and teacher, and briefly the interim leader of the 10,000-student district in New Rochelle, New York, is a charismatic leader and a child of immigrants who seems committed to deep community involvement in district decisions.

briefly the interim leader of the 10,000-student district in New Rochelle, New York, is a charismatic leader and a child of immigrants who seems committed to deep community involvement in district decisions. But he lacks seasoning and experience, and how closely he aligns with the board’s agenda remains a mystery.

The old reform coalition in Denver seems demoralized and intellectually exhausted. Some say they hope that, if the school board succeeds in rolling back reform, the pendulum will swing back in the other direction sooner rather than later. Some newer advocacy organizations are seeking a viable alternate path that incorporates the successes of Denver’s reform efforts and learns from its shortcomings. Until then, school reform in Denver is stalled, and the roughly 90,000 students in Denver Public Schools can expect an educational environment characterized by backsliding rather than systemwide improvement.

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