

Blue School Partners

Blue School Partners is the working name of this initiative; a placeholder, intended to invoke the promise of great schools accessible to all, and raise the profile and relevance of Denver Public Schools' School Performance Framework by amplifying its most critical elements: equity, growth, family engagement, and achievement.

Position Description: Founding Chief Executive Officer

The Context

Colorado and Denver have developed an educational ecosystem that enjoys one of the country's most amenable political and operating environments for creating and supporting quality, autonomous public schools and parental choice. Denver's progress in providing new and better options for families, and particularly underserved families, has served as a national example of what is possible in urban school reform.

Despite Denver's commitment to universal choice, accountability, autonomy for school leaders, and a portfolio approach to school development, the path toward continued improvement is likely to prove more challenging. With limited surplus space available in existing facilities, and slowing enrollment growth, Denver Public Schools (DPS) faces the need to improve or replace existing low-performing schools if the community is to continue to raise achievement levels. The majority of the schools that must be addressed now are persistent underperformers serving primarily underserved students and students of color.

The substantial progress made in recent years belies the scale of the challenge that remains:

- The most recent data shows that more than 40,000 students attend schools rated yellow, orange, or red.
- In a district with 67% of students eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch, and where 80% of students are students of color, the impacts of low-performing schools are disproportionately felt by families of color. Currently 70% of white students are in high-quality seats, vs. only 43% of students of color.
- According to the Education Equality Index, Denver Public Schools' achievement gap is bigger than nearly 90% of major U.S. cities of similar size and demographics.

Today, Denver's challenge is largely not a policy problem. Current and past DPS boards and staff leadership have put in place much of the policy environment required to drive academic success for all children. The challenge now is more a question of filling gaps in essential infrastructure, building and sustaining political will, and executing effectively on a strategy to create more high-performing schools.

Over the past 10-15 years, there has been significant community support for reform activity and the development of higher-performing school options. The local and national philanthropic communities have been active investors, although never in a highly coordinated fashion, or with any defined quantifiable objective. Looking forward, it is clear that the pace of progress cannot be maintained or accelerated without a more intentional approach across funders and investment strategies, and more clarity about the shared ultimate objective.

The Opportunity

Over the last two years, local civic and philanthropic leaders have joined together to identify potential strategies to leverage past success and accelerate progress. While there is significant talent and momentum in the Denver education sector, there are also still significant gaps – particularly in the areas of developing and launching school operators, diversifying the mix of school models available, expanding pipelines of school leader and teacher talent, and effectively engaging parents and community members. Failure to address these gaps could result in a plateauing of the progress made to date. Also, the absence of a more transparent and coherent

strategy for continuing to scale high-performing school options has resulted in some lost opportunities, and acted as a barrier to investment in Denver by other potential national partners.

The Organization

Recognizing both the urgency and the opportunity, a group of local and national funders and community partners have come together to create Blue School Partners (BSP). BSP will play three primary roles in the city:

- **Strategic Leader** – BSP will coalesce partners in support of a vision and strategies to dramatically improve academic outcomes, and hold all of the stakeholders accountable for achieving those outcomes. BSP’s independence will allow it to approach this task with urgency, long-term commitment and stability, and a focus on both excellence and equity.
- **Investor** – BSP will raise and coordinate the use of philanthropic resources commensurate with the scale of the challenge. BSP will ensure that the resources available are aligned with an effective high quality seats strategy, and are used to support the most critical strategies, tactics, and partners. BSP will initially focus on investments in quality schools development, expanded pipelines for effective school leader and teacher talent, and stakeholder engagement.
- **Advocate** – BSP will work to ensure the existence of a policy environment that supports the success of quality schools. BSP will seek an environment where school leaders have the autonomy they need to make the best decisions for their students: where schools operate under clear performance expectations and consequences, parents are able to make informed choices for their children, and resources are equitably allocated to support the growth of what is working.

Denver Public Schools’ Board of Education has adopted the Denver Plan, an ambitious commitment to ensure that 80% of all DPS students attend schools rated blue or green on the School Performance Framework (the district’s report card on school quality as measured by a number of variables) by 2020. The Denver Plan commits the district to providing great schools in every neighborhood in the city. Blue School Partners’ goals embrace and build on the goals already set by the district. BSP has set an ambitious goal of creating or improving 35,000 quality school seats in Denver by 2030. This goal equates to moving nearly 40% of students into schools with a blue or green rating (the highest performers on the district’s SPF). BSP’s work in quality school development, expanding educator and school leader talent pipelines, and supporting authentic stakeholder engagement will all be in service to this seat goal.

BSP will exist to serve the needs of educators and families, and these needs will likely change as existing problems are solved and new challenges arise. BSP’s job is to identify problems and help coordinate solutions; its aim should not be to exert top-down control over a vibrant ecosystem. Accordingly, neither all substantive work nor all local philanthropic dollars will, or should, flow through the organization. For these reasons, BSP is imagined as a lean, nimble, collaborative, and entrepreneurial organization.

Management and Governance

BSP will operate as an independent 501(c)(3) organization, governed by a board of directors composed of mission-aligned civic, community, and education leaders, and representatives of the philanthropic sector. The founding board will hire the founding CEO, who will recommend for approval the organization’s strategies and major investments. The CEO will work with the founding board to recruit additional board members with strong community ties, strong commitment to the mission, and additive skill sets, and be responsible for hiring a staff capable of carrying out BSP’s mission. An organization that may grow to 3 to 6 FTEs is envisioned.

Resources

BSP has engaged in extensive conversations with a core group of local and national education funders, most with years of experience investing in and supporting high-quality schools in Denver. The core funders involved anticipate initial commitments for three years, and will ensure that BSP will have sufficient resources available to it to advance work in each strategy area, as well as support the organization's staffing and operations.

Role and Responsibilities

The founding board and founding CEO will ensure that BSP succeeds at its core mission of developing quality schools, growing the pool of talent, and expanding parent and community engagement. The CEO will be responsible for leadership of all aspects of the organization, including financial, operational, strategic, as well as relationship management. Key responsibilities of the founding CEO will include:

- Effectively launching the BSP organization, including establishing the nonprofit organization, developing the operating and financial model, and recruiting a highly qualified initial staff team;
- Serving as the face of BSP, developing its brand identity, articulating its vision, leading outreach and communications efforts, and representing the organization and its mission with key stakeholders throughout the community;
- Refining identified strategies and developing investment plans and criteria for aligning and deploying philanthropic investment in support of the quality seat plan;
- Working closely with existing charter leaders to facilitate an effective and coordinated strategy;
- With support from the board, securing additional funding from foundations and other mission-aligned investors and building strong relationships with key strategic partners;
- Creating timelines, benchmarks, and a process for continuously evaluating impact and refining strategies and investment objectives,
- Identifying and advocating for policy outcomes that impact the success of quality schools;
- Building an organization that is lean, professional, entrepreneurial, financially sustainable, and accountable; and
- Coordinating efforts with the Charter School Facilities Solutions initiative, a Colorado vehicle for financing and delivering facility solutions to charter school operators.

Qualifications

The role of founding Blue School Partners' CEO represents an exceptional opportunity to drive better outcomes for tens of thousands of children in Denver. The CEO must be firmly committed to the proposition that every child can learn, and that every child in Denver deserves access to a quality school. The CEO must believe that change is possible, and that BSP's ambitious seat goal is attainable.

Beyond these characteristics, the founding CEO should have the vision, entrepreneurial spirit, perseverance, and imagination that will be required to be effective in this role. The CEO must also be comfortable with complexity, adept at management of relationships, and capable of inspiring confidence and earning the respect of others.

Candidates for this position should possess the following types of **experiences**:

- Relevant senior level management/leadership experience;
- Experience leveraging community assets and diverse perspectives to drive change;
- Proven strategic planning and tactical execution experience;
- Deep commitment to and understanding of the urban public education landscape;
- Experience in building and maintaining strategic partnerships with nonprofit organizations and organizations from other sectors;

- Demonstrated commitment to working with diverse communities;
- Experience building a new or early-stage organization;
- Demonstrated ability to recruit, hire, develop, and retain effective team members, and
- Substantial experience working effectively with a board of directors or similar governing body.

Candidates for this position should possess the following types of **skills**:

- The ability to inspire confidence, and provide forward-thinking and focused leadership;
- The ability to think strategically, and to effectively blend strategic focus and practical application;
- The ability to work collaboratively;
- The ability to work well with diverse organizations and personalities, navigate complex dynamics that include race and class, and promote a common vision while recognizing and acknowledging essential differences;
- Political savvy, and the instincts and ability to navigate across the Denver educational, political, community, and philanthropic landscape;
- Excellent communications skills, both verbal and written, and the ability to convey ideas effectively to very diverse audiences;
- Excellent quantitative and qualitative analytical skills, a generally high level of financial literacy, and
- The ability to distinguish and articulate the difference between a good school and a great school.

Additional considerations:

- BSP is committed to building a diverse and multicultural staff.
- An advanced degree is not required, but highly preferred.
- An understanding of the current Denver educational landscape and actors will be highly valued, but is not considered essential.
- Strong local ties and strong credibility in the local Denver community are a plus.
- Knowledge of and access to thought leaders and key influencers locally and nationally in K-12 education are a plus.
- Cross sector experience is of value, although not essential.

Compensation

Competitive and commensurate with experience.

Location

Denver, Colorado

How to Apply

The review of applications will begin immediately and will continue until the position is filled. For best consideration, applications should be submitted electronically prior to May 1, 2017, and should include a letter of interest and a current resume. Nominations, applications, or inquiries about the position and/or the search process should be directed to the executive recruiting team managing the search:

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