

# COMMUNITY VIEWS ON QUALITY AND EQUITY IN EDUCATION

...



November 2021

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

---

*Brown, Black, and Indigenous students and their families have invaluable perspectives on quality and equity in education.*

Brown, Black, and Indigenous students and their families have invaluable perspectives on quality and equity in education. This report presents those perspectives based on a year-long study conducted by community co-researchers. For many years, the terms quality and equity have been used by the district to describe Denver Public Schools' (DPS) values and goals. However, as the DPS 2020 Community Insights report indicates, the meanings of quality and equity are not fully shared or understood by DPS educators or alumni, nor by DPS students and their families. With this in mind, community members (community organization staff) and formally-trained researchers (academics who work, parent, and/or live in Metro Denver) collaborated to design and carry out a study about quality and equity in DPS.

Over a period of five months, data for this study were collected through 200 community surveys and 28 community interviews (in English or Spanish), each consisting of 3-10 participants with a total of 92 interview participants. Each community interview was hosted by community organization staff members, recorded, and transcribed before being analyzed by the formally trained researchers.

Indigenous, Brown, and Black<sup>1</sup> families, students, alumni, and educators discussed five topics that are related to educational quality and equity: systems, responsiveness, struggles, voice, and hope. Combined, these topics emphasize the need for a systemic approach to racial justice in DPS.

**“... it’s incredibly fundamental for them to address issues such as racial injustice.”**

**“I just don't see a focus on elevating student voices and actually learning from their perspectives.”**

**“I heard. . .someone saying that it starts at home, but how does that start at home if the parents don't even have those resources to help their kids?”**



## 90K

**STUDENTS ENROLLED**

Denver Public Schools (DPS) is Colorado's largest school district with a total of 90,000 students enrolled.



## 70%

**ARE STUDENTS OF COLOR**

More than 70% are students of color who deserve the best public education.

<sup>1</sup>Throughout this report, we alternate the order of these three racial-ethnic groups to honor their significant contributions of leadership for racial and educational justice in DPS and throughout the US.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY CON'T

---

Indigenous, Brown, and Black families, students, alumni, and educators discussed five topics that are related to educational quality and equity: systems, responsiveness, struggles, voice, and hope. Combined, these topics emphasize the need for a systemic approach to racial justice in DPS.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

1

Create systems that ensure consistency across and within DPS schools for equitable, quality education.

2

Hire, support, retain, and develop Black, Brown, and Indigenous educators and leaders at all levels of the DPS community.

3

Provide rigorous, relevant, culturally-rooted, and racial justice curricula for all students.

4

Combat school-to-prison pipelines with an action plan and timetable.

5

Provide pathways for Brown, Black, and Indigenous students and families to pursue dreams, opportunities, and possibilities.

6

Honor and incorporate Indigenous, Black, and Brown student/family/community definitions of success.

7

Expand pathways for multiple postsecondary options that align with Black, Brown, and Indigenous students' interests and needs.

8

Prioritize Brown, Black, and Indigenous students' well-being and provide ongoing, culturally-affirming mental health support.

9

Listen to and respect the voices of Indigenous, Black, Brown students, families, and educators, and engage them in leading educational change.

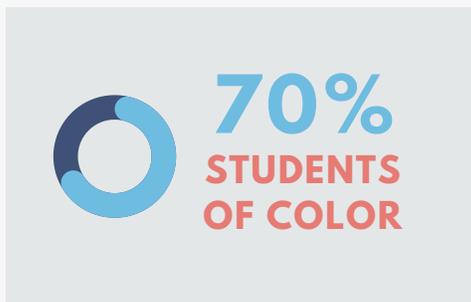
10

Improve and increase parent/family communication, support, and opportunities for learning and growth.

# I. CONTEXT

---

Denver Public Schools (DPS) is Colorado’s largest school district, with about 90,000 students enrolled. More than 70%<sup>2</sup> are Students of Color who deserve the best public education. Our purpose was to examine, understand, and report the perspectives of students and families throughout DPS about what quality and equity mean to them. This project is crucial in a context where DPS educators and leaders often refer to quality and equity to justify decision-making and innovation, often without clarifying what they mean. This project is timely, in light of the district’s efforts to develop a new strategic plan, which involves community input and asks community members about characteristics of a DPS graduate, the meaning of educational equity, and actions the district should take to improve education for students.



This report presents what we, community co-researchers, learned after studying this issue for a year. Community co-researchers included community members (community organization staff) and formally-trained researchers (academics who work, parent, and/or live in Denver) who collaborated to design and carry out a study about quality and equity in DPS. To explore quality and equity in DPS, we asked People of Color to talk about their experiences as families, students, alumni, and educators in DPS. Together, their experiences highlighted strengths and weaknesses of a DPS education. They described educational inequity along color lines throughout the district. Their stories showed that students’ families are making tough decisions to help their children succeed in schools, even when it seems that the district is not. Collectively, DPS families are grappling with questions about how the district is supporting their students and advancing educational equity. As one parent stated, “What should the district be doing to support students? Another way of looking at this question is, in a world as it should be, in a world as we would like it to be, what would the district be doing to support students more equitably?”



## II. DOING THE RESEARCH

---

We planned this study to focus on Brown, Black, and Indigenous voices. As community co-researchers, we wanted this study to represent DPS' student population, which is predominantly Brown, rather than the city's population, which is predominantly white. We use the term "Brown" in place of Latinx to acknowledge and celebrate the indigenous heritage of many DPS families and students. We included "Black" and "Indigenous" students and families because these groups' voices deserve to be heard as we seek racial equity in education. Participants were recruited through community organizations that include: Young Aspiring Americans for Social and Political Activism (YAASPA), FaithBridge, Colorado Youth Congress, Transform Education Now (TEN), and Project VOYCE.

### PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTION

How do Black, Brown, and Indigenous families and students in DPS conceptualize quality and equity in education?

As community co-researchers, we were guided by a set of four principles. Our research must be community-based, collaborative, racially-conscious, and liberatory. These principles allowed us to prioritize Indigenous, Brown, and Black voices to understand quality and equity in DPS.

Over a period of five months, community co-researchers interviewed Indigenous, Black, and Brown DPS families, students, and others (DPS alumni, educators). Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed.



### III. TIMELINE AND PARTICIPANTS



Beginning in November 2020, community co-researchers planned the study, collected 200 community surveys, and conducted 28 community interviews (in English and Spanish) with 3-10 participants in each interview; there were 92 total interview participants. These took place over five months. Next, over the six months that followed, we analyzed the interviews and wrote about what we learned. Honor and incorporate Indigenous, Black, and Brown student/family/community definitions of success.



## IV. LIMITATIONS

---

One limitation of this study is that it includes a small segment of the DPS community. Also, while we designed this research to focus on the voices of Indigenous, Brown, and Black students and families, we did not exclude anyone interested in participating in this study, such as DPS alumni and educators. The vast majority of participants were Brown, Black or Indigenous. In addition, participants were not asked to disclose their race or ethnicity during the recorded interviews. A separate survey was used to gather this information. Nearly half of those who participated in the interviews did not complete the survey. It was challenging to capture the survey data because some of the interviews were completed virtually due to COVID-19 constraints.

**"Relying on the words of community members and co-researchers, we identified five topics that students and families describe when they discuss educational quality and equity. These are: systems, responsiveness, struggles, voice, and hope."**



# WHAT WE FOUND

Quality and Equity Report



## V. WHAT WE FOUND

---

To include a wide range of values and historical knowledge, we looked for a wide range of values and historical knowledge and we looked for patterns that were common to their experiences while maintaining a focus on the purpose of this research and the research question: *How do Black, Brown, and Indigenous families and students in DPS conceptualize quality and equity in education?* Relying on the words of community members and co-researchers, we identified five topics that students and families describe when they discuss educational quality and equity. These are systems, responsiveness, struggles, voice, and hope. These topics emphasize the importance of educational quality and equity that applies a systemic approach to racial justice in DPS.



Systems



Responsiveness



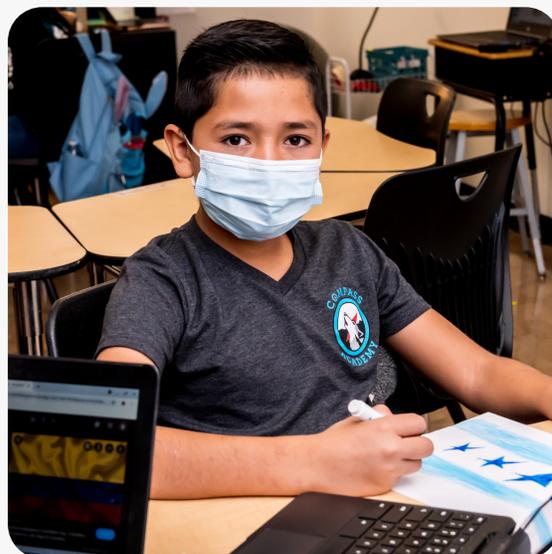
Struggles



Voice



Hope



**"Relying on the words of community members and co-researchers, we identified five topics that students and families describe when they discuss educational quality and equity."**

## #1: SYSTEMS

---

When Brown, Indigenous, and Black students and their families discuss quality and equity in education, they interrogate district systems. District systems create the biggest challenges for Black, Brown and Indigenous students and their families, AND district systems offer the greatest opportunities to improve DPS educational quality and equity. DPS families and students consistently talked about inequities in resources and support across schools in the district. They believe that DPS schools that serve wealthier families offer greater access to high quality teachers (high expectations, higher retention rates) and more challenging curricula (Advanced Placement, college prep). These schools are also perceived to provide a wider range of academic support (tutoring, technology, college counseling) and non-academic support (mental health, well-being, extracurricular activities).

Based on these and other inequities, Indigenous, Black, and Brown students and families want systems that:

- acknowledge, account for, and address racial inequities
- provide equal access to funding
- recruit, develop, and retain culturally responsive educators and leaders
- offer mental health supports that are explicitly responsive to their needs
- maintain well-resourced facilities

Providing equitable access to resources and support to Indigenous, Black, and Brown students and families is a racial justice issue. These families and students want and deserve long-term, systemic change—not temporary “band-aid” solutions—tailored with respect for their needs and rights.



## #1: SYSTEMS - QUOTES

---

“Let's put it together and be on one accord so not one school is getting something better than the other school or the opposite. So just be on one page so the district is doing what's best for all kids and not making one school shining and the other schools suffering.”

“How is DPS central office changing? Because there's also power dynamics there. There's also biases there. I think it's about also being able to hire folks of color that reflect the DPS community and student community at all levels.”

“A lot of the time schools are stuck in the idea that they need to get us ready for success and for life through academics, and they need to better prepare us for academics, but they're also helping find who we are as people and human beings. And so it's incredibly fundamental for them to address issues such as racial injustice, because if not, then we're not going to be becoming human beings that are aware of everything going on and are trying to help stop injustices from occurring.”

“One thing that I feel like DPS is helping us to do to be successful is to recognize that there are problems with the education system, that we have or to recognize that there is a flawed system. But instead of helping us to maybe change that or maybe do something to make sure that it doesn't have as huge an impact on our lives. I feel like they're trying to help us more kind of adapt to it. Or maybe even like game it, in things like offering us free SAT courses, which are really helpful to get a better score on standardized testing, but that may get us into college but at what other point in our lives will that be helpful? Would that get us any lasting change for the education system? Probably not. But it would put us in a position to gain more capital and to gain more power.”

“I also feel like if they want to bring something to the community, then they should at least have it planned out instead of just like throwing ideas out and not having a structure for what they plan on doing to achieve their goals.”

## # 2: RESPONSIVENESS

---

Black, Brown, and Indigenous students and their families expressed that they want DPS to develop systems that are responsive to who they are and what they need (culture, language, history, ways of knowing). Black, Brown, and Indigenous families want systems that guarantee:

- ✔ their definitions of success (academic and non-academic)
- ✔ racial justice curricula, practices, policies
- ✔ educators of color at every level of the DPS system
- ✔ empowered leaders of color
- ✔ educators who treat families with empathy, patience, dignity, and respect
- ✔ culturally responsive mental health supports



- ✔ increased support for students with special needs
- ✔ increased focus on LGBTQ+ individuals and groups
- ✔ culturally responsive and racial justice educator professional development
- ✔ culturally responsive white educators who can implement racial justice curricula for all students
- ✔ a wider range of postsecondary options

Brown, Black, and Indigenous students and families want DPS to see their humanity, beyond academics. And they want DPS to prepare students for the “real world” they will experience as People of Color.

## # 2: RESPONSIVENESS - QUOTES

---

"How do we push in white staff to have conversations that are not normally comfortable talking about, right? I'm talking about race. I'm talking about equity, I'm talking about power, inclusion, oppression."

"The deeper the roots, the harder it is for you to knock the tree down."

"I am valedictorian. I have a 5.2 GPA. I am what other people see as the pinnacle of success. And everybody just assumes that I'm doing great and that that means that I'm happy. But I think me and students like me are so stressed. Is it worth it for the mental health issues that it caused? There's a really big difference between being successful in terms of academics and then being successful in terms of being happy and fulfilled."

"So the, what can the district do, I think, one, is really take a really strong look at what is equity in the district and looking through an equity lens, how are we, what measures are we putting in place, how are we educating and supporting our leaders and our teachers of color so that we can continue advocating for the students of color?"

"I had two teachers that actually cared about what my personal success and the things that I was going through in my life, and they cared about that for all of their students and wanted them to do the best that they could. They're the ones who were giving options for, 'If you don't want to go to college, here's a different route to take.'"

"Most of the time, our people, Brown people, we need that connection from home, right? We want to make sure that we feel like home."

"I think a lot of the important classes that people use outside of school are more so like clubs. Because I know back home we did have a financial literacy class, but it was not a class, it was a club. I think the clubs should be more so maybe classes. Financial literacy is big for me. I wish that was a standard, a curriculum that should be taken."

## #3: STRUGGLES

---

Indigenous, Black, and Brown students and their families have a shared experience of DPS failing to see and end generational struggles to achieve educational equity. Despite this reality, these students and families continue the struggle to persist and succeed in DPS schools. They described numerous examples of their struggles to be seen, heard, and treated with dignity and respect. In some cases, this has spanned generations—from great-grandparents to current students. They want to be acknowledged, listened to, and included in identifying the solutions to the struggles they face throughout DPS. They describe the district as failing to acknowledge how racial inequality and educational inequity persist through inadequate funding, curricula, policies, resources, and hiring practices. Brown, Black, and Indigenous students and families want DPS to acknowledge their historical and everlasting pain in the district, to address their struggles, and engage them in bringing about systemic change.

## #3: STRUGGLES - QUOTES

---

“I think that's important for our culture to know about, being Brown in this country first, and how to make it through with what you have.”

“What does it matter if we spend 45 minutes looking at a suicide prevention program in schools, but teachers, I guess they're not willing to work with us on our mental health? Or what does it matter if teachers have the indigenous land acknowledgement statement at the beginning of their slides, when they're not teaching trauma informed for indigenous students? Does that make sense? I think just kind of band-aid solutions don't work if the school's culture isn't really, really trying actively to end these problems.”

“But it is frustrating to still look back, I'm not going to say how many years ago I graduated, but to look back so many years later and still be like, this [support and guidance] hasn't improved in any way, shape or form. And I know how that has impacted me individually, and how that would have impacted the rest of my siblings, and nieces and nephews after me, so how many other students are falling through those cracks? Whether it's like, 'I want to go to college and there's not enough support there to help me navigate that system', or, 'I don't want to go to college. What are my options outside of this?'”

### #3: STRUGGLES - QUOTES CON'T.

---

“We pull data from all the systems. Straight up, Black and Brown boys in schools are getting punished at this similar rate for similar offenses. Not offenses. It’s not the right word. I mean, a lot of our language is also very much tied to the prison system. We have data, but we need a stronger action plan.”

“I have a staff at one of the schools who’s like, ‘I don’t look at kids by their race. They’re all human beings to me.’ I’m like, ‘Good for you. But I’m Brown, and I want you to know that I’m Brown, and I’m proud, and here’s why. . . And don’t ever label me as a human being because the world doesn’t work like that, right? First of all, you’re going to notice I have an accent, second, because I’m Brown. And third, I don’t look like you, and I want you to know who I am as an individual, having this Brown skin and this accent and why is it that I have that. I think there’s a lot for me to tell you why I have what I have.’”

“It is a challenge when it comes down to the mindset. You have 90% or 85% of your staff white. They have a hard time making that clear connection of why we’re talking about why we need to make sure to close the gap for Black and Brown students, what can we do to provide them additional supports with the understanding that many of them have some additional challenges, or they’re automatically judged just based on their skin color.”

““I heard it twice or someone saying that it starts at home, but how does that start at home if the parents don’t even have those resources to help their kids. Like I just know that because growing up with my mom and my dad, they couldn’t help me, because they didn’t even know how. So, even being in a situation that they’ve been in and financial crisis or whatever it may be, I’m like, they didn’t even know how to be a support to me, because they didn’t even have that support.”



## #4: VOICE

---

Black, Brown, and Indigenous students and their families want to share their voices to challenge inequality and to help develop educational solutions designed for their communities. Students and families consistently talked about being silenced, disrespected, or dismissed when they share their concerns and ask for—or demand—change. They want to be treated with empathy, patience, dignity, and respect. They believe their voices are key to creating quality and educational equity. Brown, Black, and Indigenous students and families want DPS to listen to their voices, honor their voices, and put their voices at the center of educational change. And, they want to engage DPS alumni in that change.

## #4: VOICE - QUOTES

---

Spanish:

“Muchos padres ya no asistimos a las juntas, porque dice, “¿A qué voy? Es tiempo perdido porque no me toman en cuenta. No hacen nada. No nos apoyan. Entonces nada más es ir a poner la presencia para que ellos queden bien. No.”

“Many parents no longer attend meetings, because they say, ‘Why am I going? It is wasted time because they do not take me into account. They do not do anything. They don’t support us. Then our presence makes them look good. No.’”



“One particular issue that I see at my network is that I just don’t see a focus on elevating student voices and actually learning from their perspectives. We occasionally do surveys, maybe quarterly, and they’re very generic questions and answers. But we’re not really tapping into what they are experiencing? What is their day-to-day like? How do they feel? How are they experiencing oppression? I don’t think we’re doing enough to combat systems of oppression that we enforce their white supremacist culture in our schools.”

“I think the district should be getting more involved. I don’t think they’re not involved, and I think they should be more [communicative]. They aren’t talking directly to the people because they are scared of confrontation. And I feel like that’s not a leader.”

## #4: VOICE - QUOTES CON'T.

---

Spanish:

“Porque muchas de las veces ya se hizo aquello para que lo – hacer levantar la voz para que nos escuchen, pero no nos toman en cuenta, y al último la gente se cansa y ya no quiere volver a levantar su voz. No tiene caso.”

“Because many times we raise our voices so that they can listen to us, but they just ignore us, and at the end people get tired and no longer want to raise their voices again. There is no point.”

“When it comes to teachers trying to learn about or teach people or kids of color, in particular, Mexicano, Latino, Brown kids, I see that they, yeah, it's another extra step for them to do, right? And they don't have to if they don't want to, right? It's more about, I just want to make sure I get my score, and I'm a good teacher, right? But it doesn't work like that in our community, right? And that's why I'm a big fan of going to home visit, get to know my kids in a whole different level, right, knock on both doors and get to know their family, get to know the kids because I know that at the end of the day, yeah, I know more about how we can better support this kid.”

“I have a staff at one of the schools who's like, 'I don't look at kids by their race. They're all human beings to me.' I'm like, 'Good for you. But I'm Brown, and I want you to know that I'm Brown.'” “When it comes to teachers trying to learn about or teach people or kids of color, in particular, Mexicano, Latino, Brown kids, I see that they, yeah, it's another extra step for them to do, right? And they don't have to if they don't want to, right? It's more about, I just want to make sure I get my score, and I'm a good teacher, right? But it doesn't work like that in our community, right? And that's why I'm a big fan of going to home visit, get to know my kids in a whole different level, right, knock on both doors and get to know their family, get to know the kids because I know that at the end of the day, yeah, I know more about how we can better support this kid.”, and I'm proud, and here's why. . . And don't ever label me as a human being because the world doesn't work like that, right? First of all, you're going to notice I have an accent, second, because I'm Brown. And third, I don't look like you, and I want you to know who I am as an individual, having this Brown skin and this accent and why is it that I have that. I think there's a lot for me to tell you why I have what I have.”

## #5: HOPE

---

Indigenous, Black, and Brown students and their families experience hope. They believe that the district can be a place where everyone thrives—not just barely survives. They want to share their dreams for the future. They want educators to understand, value, and incorporate their definitions of success inside and outside of school. They believe DPS can improve educational quality and equity throughout the district. To do this, the district must be willing to share power with Black, Brown, and Indigenous families, students, and educators. Brown, Black, and Indigenous students and families want DPS to help build and support their hopes and dreams, based on their own definitions of well-being and success.

## #5: HOPE - QUOTES

---

“So if we really ultimately want to drive and make change, it has to start with us having seats at tables, where we normally want to sit in. And having people of our essential makeup be in these conversations to dictate what happens to Brown, indigenous and white and Black kids. Because until we have people who are essential, best interests, though, I know many Caucasian people are looking out now on our interests and they're siding with us, we really have to start being systematically savvy, right?”

“I want to be happy and stable and feel secure.”



“A lot of times, the students don't know of opportunities, and end up losing out on these things to pursue their dreams. You don't know what you don't know, and it's not until you see it that you're able to think about it as a possibility or an option.”

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

---

Our research revealed that Brown, Black, and Indigenous students and families care deeply about quality and equity. They envision a system of culturally-responsive and just education that offers equal access to everything that they need to thrive. To be culturally responsive and just, the DPS system must acknowledge, account for, and address differential experiences and needs based on racial and socioeconomic injustice. Brown, Black, and Indigenous communities need DPS educators and leaders to stand up for quality and equity in education and take immediate action so that this generation of students, and subsequent generations, experience a quality, equitable education. We drew upon what participants shared to offer the following recommendations to DPS for achieving that vision. We encourage DPS to engage in strategic, systemic, and sustainable planning processes to implement these recommendations.

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1 Create systems that ensure consistency across and within DPS schools for equitable, quality education.
- 2 Hire, support, retain, and develop Black, Brown, and Indigenous educators and leaders at all levels of the DPS community.
- 3 Provide rigorous, relevant, culturally-rooted, and racial justice curricula for all students.
- 4 Combat school-to-prison pipelines with an action plan and timetable.
- 5 Provide pathways for Brown, Black, and Indigenous students and families to pursue dreams, opportunities, and possibilities.
- 6 Honor and incorporate Indigenous, Black, and Brown student/family/community definitions of success.
- 7 Expand pathways for multiple postsecondary options that align with Black, Brown, and Indigenous students' interests and needs.
- 8 Prioritize Brown, Black, and Indigenous students' well-being and provide ongoing, culturally-affirming mental health support.
- 9 Listen to and respect the voices of Indigenous, Black, Brown students, families, and educators, and engage them in leading educational change.
- 10 Improve and increase parent/family communication, support, and opportunities for learning and growth.

## Primary Researchers

María del Carmen Salazar, Ph.D.

Antwan Jefferson, Ph.D.

Brenda J. Allen, Ph.D.

Jesús Rodríguez, Ph.D.

Tracie Trinidad, MNM

---

## Contributors

Janiece Mackey, Ph.D

Stacey Adimou



**Felipe Vieyra, Jr.**

**TeRay Esquibel**