Denver Public Schools Performance Report

November 2024

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POLICY CENTER

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Introduction

It is well established that the COVID-19 pandemic had a life-changing impact on America's youth, from mental health to traditional academic skills and overall satisfaction with school. Now that we are several years removed from the COVID-19 school closures it is an important time to take stock of how students in Denver are recovering from these impacts compared to their peers across the state and nation.

This report is focused on how students are recovering academically, as measured by state mandated standardized tests. This is not to say that these are the only metrics that matter when thinking about COVID recovery, but it is an important indicator of student preparation for success in college or career that we must consider. We must also remember that the rate at which students were mastering grade level content before the pandemic was still insufficient and inequitable so we must aim higher for all students to reach their potential.
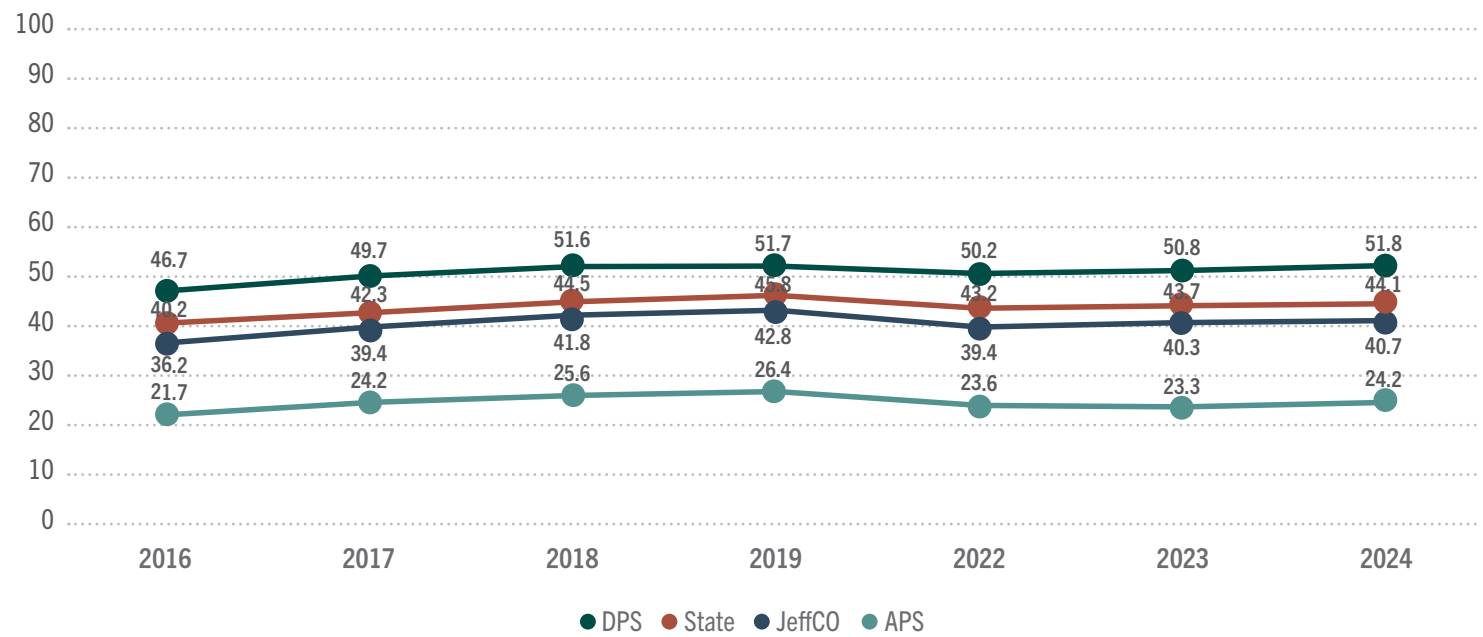
It is also important to put these results within the context of enrollment in DPS and across Colorado. Enrollment has been declining since before COVID-19 and state demographer reports suggests that this will continue in Denver and many parts of the state. At the same time, cost of living in Denver is steadily rising so the population remaining in Denver Public Schools is more affluent than in prior years. In many cases this has results in improved overall performance for students in DPS but when this data is examined further it shows that many students are still struggling and must continue to be supported as they work towards higher rates of mastery.

DPS Performance Over Time

When looking at overall performance of DPS students on CMAS (Grades 3-8) we can see that performance is below the state and proficiency rates in 2024 still lag 2019 proficiency rates. Only about 4 in 10 DPS students are reading at grade level, compared to over half of students statewide. The district did see proficiency rates rebound from the two prior years slightly, but this was not sufficient to return to pre-Covid levels. Again, even these proficiency rates from 2019 were not sufficient to prepare students and DPS is still performing below them. When looking at two large neighboring districts with diverse student populations, DPS performance lags Jefferson County who has also been able to recover to exceed 2019 proficiency rates. DPS does still outperform Aurora Public Schools by a large margin that is similar to the 2019 margin between the two districts.

When looking further back we can see that DPS made sizable gains after 2016, narrowing prior gaps with the state, but has since stabilized. This is consistent with recent research showing positive impact of DPS reform efforts during this time period.[1]

CMAS ELA PERFORMANCE

Inequitable Recovery

While looking at overall performance shifts is important, it is also critical to look at how different groups of students are recovering as we know COVID-19 impacted students differently depending on circumstances. This report is focused on the performance of students from low-income households based on data availability, but similar trends exist for Students of Color and English Language Learners when compared to their peers.

The key takeaway is that students from low-income households in DPS have struggled to recover academically when compared their more affluent peers. These students also master grade level content at very low rates, and lag students from low-income households both statewide and in some neighboring districts.

Looking more deeply at DPS performance by Free and Reduced Prince Lunch status ("FRL"), we see that FRL students lag their 2019 performance levels while non-FRL eligible students are performing at or above 2019 levels. Fewer than 1 in 4 DPS FRL students was proficient on CMAS ELA in 2024, compared to over 7 in 10 non-FRL students.

	CMAS ELA		SAT ELA	
	FRL Students	Non-FRL Students	FRL Students	Non-FRL Students
2019	27.9	69.2	N/A	N/A
2022	22.6	55.2	28.4	61.7
2023	21.8	63.3	30.6	63.7
2024	23.4	70.8	31.3	73

[1] https://publicaffairs.ucdenver.edu/docs/librariesprovider36/research-projects-documents/center-for-education-policy-analysis/denver-report---technical-emarboed.pdf?sfvrsn=6a9745bb_6.

In addition to these comparative results within DPS, we can look at the performance of low-income students in DPS compared to the state and neighboring districts and we see that in most cases low-income students in DPS lag their peers. In all cases, DPS FRL students have seen larger declines from 2019 to 2024 than the comparison groups. In Jefferson County, FRL students see proficiency rates above 2019, and statewide low-income students have seen proficiency rates decline less than two percentage points, compared to over 4 in DPS.

CMAS ELA PERFORMANCE
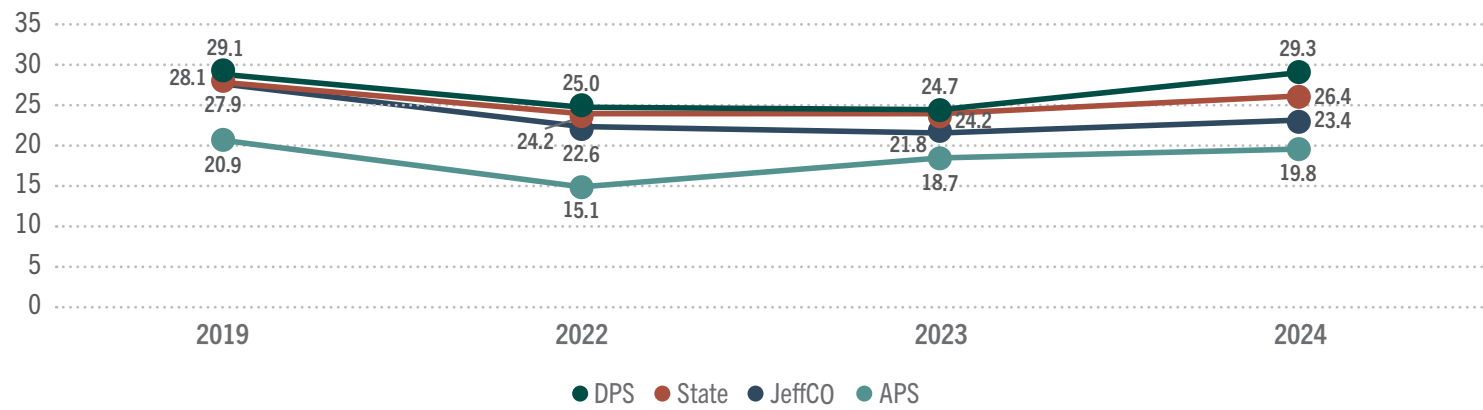
Another way to put DPS performance for low-income students into context is to look at where it falls compared to a percentile rank of all other districts and how this has changed over time. DPS low-income student proficiency is in the 41st percentile of districts statewide, meaning that almost 60% of districts get stronger outcomes for low-income students. This is a decline from 2019, although an improvement over 2023. Jefferson County has seen great progress over this same period going from the 51st percentile to the 66th percentile for low-income student performance on CMAS ELA.

### LOW INCOME STUDENT PERFORMANCE 2024
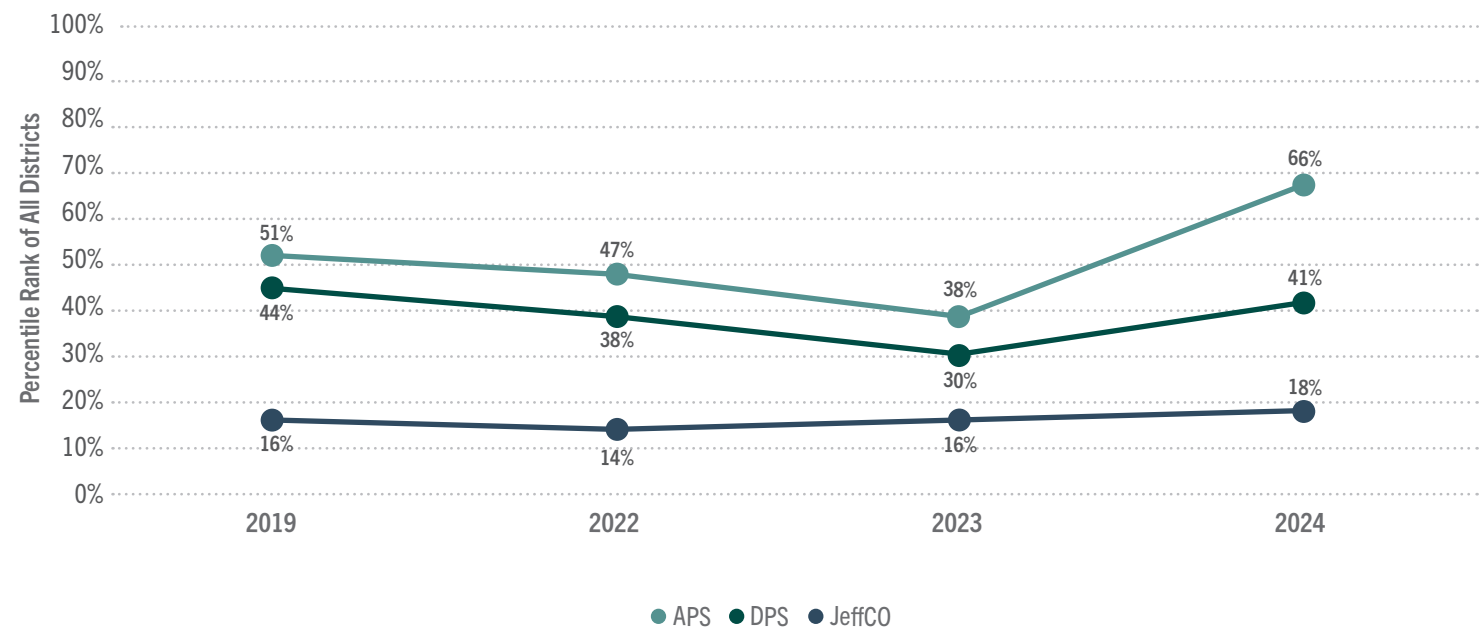
School Level Variation

In addition to looking at overall district performance, it is important to look at the variation in school level performance and its relationship to demographics. In looking at all DPS schools, performance is strongly correlated with FRL percentage, and this correlation is stronger than in 2018-19. There are some outlier schools at higher percentages of FRL, but there are also many schools that underperform expectations.

### 2023-24 CMAS ELA PROFICIENCY (ALL SCHOOLS)
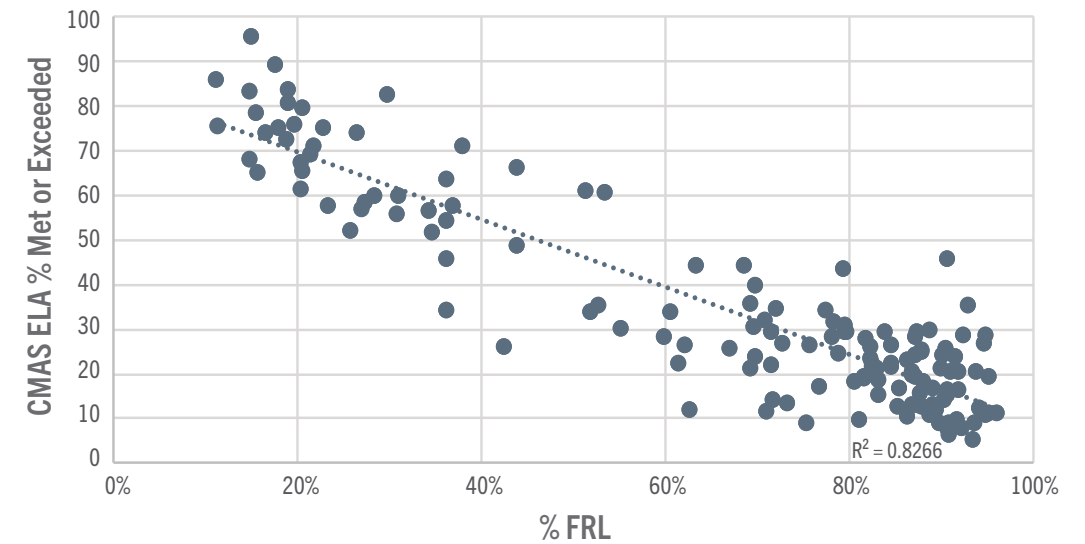
2018-19 CMAS ELA PROFICIENCY (ALL SCHOOLS)
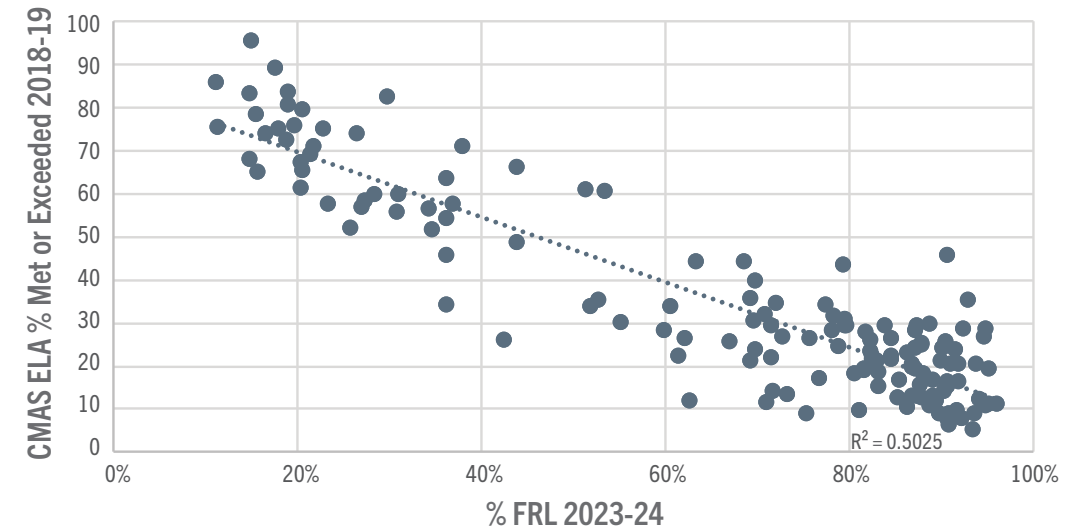
When looking by governance type, you can see that there are outliers across all governance types. Charter schools see less correlation between FRL and proficiency (r2=.662), while if looking solely at district-managed schools the correlation is stronger (r2=0.896.)

2023-24 CMAS ELA PROFICIENCY (BY GOVERNANCE)
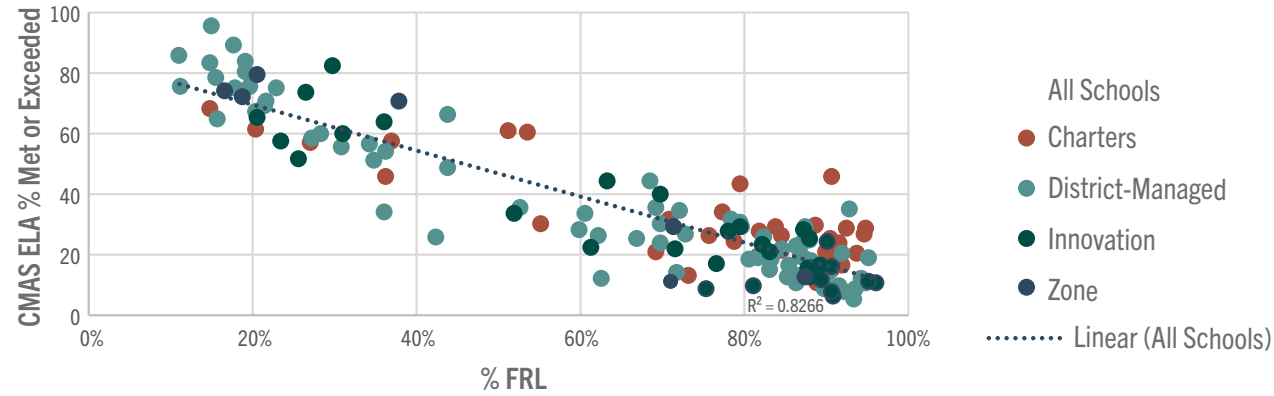
Recommendations and Next Steps

The data is clear that there remains a lot of work to be done in Denver to ensure all students are mastering grade level content. This requires a renewed focus on academics in addition to support for the whole child and transparent regular sharing of data.

Denver dropped the Denver school performance framework in 2020 and fell back on the Colorado school performance framework which had a lower bar with less of an emphasis on low-income student learning. It is critical that Denver either return to its former school framework or establish a new framework that allows the district to manage for improvement with a clear standard for quality. Having a clear standard for school quality will enable the district to point to bright spots, both within Denver and outside to learn from what is working (and not continue to do what is not working).

Finally, given what we know about the relationship between academic growth and proficiency we need more robust and regular ways of communicating to families and educators to better support student development. While there have been some modest growth by some student groups at some grades, there will need to be far more growth faster if students are expected to be prepared for work, higher education and being successful adults.

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