

Part I – Eligibility Certification

The signatures on the first page of this application (cover page) certify that each of the statements below, concerning the school’s eligibility and compliance with U.S. Department of Education and National Blue Ribbon Schools requirements, are true and correct.

1. All nominated public schools must meet the state’s performance targets in reading (or English language arts) and mathematics and other academic indicators (i.e., attendance rate and graduation rate), for the all students group, including having participation rates of at least 95 percent using the most recent accountability results available for nomination.
2. To meet final eligibility, all nominated public schools must be certified by states prior to September 2019 in order to meet all eligibility requirements. Any status appeals must be resolved at least two weeks before the awards ceremony for the school to receive the award.
3. The school configuration includes one or more of grades K-12. Schools on the same campus with one principal, even a K-12 school, must apply as an entire school.
4. The school has been in existence for five full years, that is, from at least September 2013 and each tested grade must have been part of the school for the past three years.
5. The nominated school has not received the National Blue Ribbon Schools award in the past five years: 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, or 2018.
6. The nominated school has no history of testing irregularities, nor have charges of irregularities been brought against the school at the time of nomination. If irregularities are later discovered and proven by the state, the U.S. Department of Education reserves the right to disqualify a school’s application and/or rescind a school’s award.
7. The nominated school has not been identified by the state as “persistently dangerous” within the last two years.
8. The nominated school or district is not refusing Office of Civil Rights (OCR) access to information necessary to investigate a civil rights complaint or to conduct a district-wide compliance review.
9. The OCR has not issued a violation letter of findings to the school district concluding that the nominated school or the district as a whole has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes. A violation letter of findings will not be considered outstanding if OCR has accepted a corrective action plan from the district to remedy the violation.
10. The U.S. Department of Justice does not have a pending suit alleging that the nominated school or the school district, as a whole, has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes or the Constitution’s equal protection clause.
11. There are no findings of violations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in a U.S. Department of Education monitoring report that apply to the school or school district in question; or if there are such findings, the state or district has corrected, or agreed to correct, the findings.

PART II - DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Data should be provided for the most recent school year (2018-2019) unless otherwise stated.

DISTRICT

1. Number of schools in the district (per district designation):
- 114 Elementary schools (includes K-8)
 - 50 Middle/Junior high schools
 - 60 High schools
 - 0 K-12 schools
- 224 TOTAL

SCHOOL (To be completed by all schools)

2. Category that best describes the area where the school is located:
- Urban or large central city
 - Suburban
 - Rural or small city/town
3. Number of students as of October 1, 2018 enrolled at each grade level or its equivalent in applying school:

| Grade | # of Males | # of Females | Grade Total |
|-----------------------|------------|--------------|-------------|
| PreK | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| K | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 6 | 84 | 80 | 164 |
| 7 | 94 | 72 | 166 |
| 8 | 91 | 76 | 167 |
| 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 10 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 11 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 12 or higher | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total Students | 269 | 228 | 497 |

*Schools that house PreK programs should count preschool students **only** if the school administration is responsible for the program.

4. Racial/ethnic composition of the school (if unknown, estimate):
- 1 % American Indian or Alaska Native
 - 2 % Asian
 - 15 % Black or African American
 - 28 % Hispanic or Latino
 - 0 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - 46 % White
 - 8 % Two or more races
 - 100 % Total**

(Only these seven standard categories should be used to report the racial/ethnic composition of your school. The Final Guidance on Maintaining, Collecting, and Reporting Racial and Ethnic Data to the U.S. Department of Education published in the October 19, 2007 *Federal Register* provides definitions for each of the seven categories.)

5. Student turnover, or mobility rate, during the 2017 – 2018 school year: 5%

If the mobility rate is above 15%, please explain.

This rate should be calculated using the grid below. The answer to (6) is the mobility rate.

| Steps For Determining Mobility Rate | Answer |
|--|---------------|
| (1) Number of students who transferred <i>to</i> the school after October 1, 2017 until the end of the 2017-2018 school year | 9 |
| (2) Number of students who transferred <i>from</i> the school after October 1, 2017 until the end of the 2017-2018 school year | 13 |
| (3) Total of all transferred students [sum of rows (1) and (2)] | 22 |
| (4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2017 | 474 |
| (5) Total transferred students in row (3) divided by total students in row (4) | 0.05 |
| (6) Amount in row (5) multiplied by 100 | 5 |

6. English Language Learners (ELL) in the school: 31 %
154 Total number ELL

Specify each non-English language represented in the school (separate languages by commas):
Arabic, Spanish, Amharic, Tigrigna, French, Oromo, West-Central, Somali, Bulgarian, Russian, Vietnamese, Korean

7. Students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals: 44 %
Total number students who qualify: 219

8. Students receiving special education services: 8 %
38 Total number of students served

Indicate below the number of students with disabilities according to conditions designated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Do not add additional conditions. It is possible that students may be classified in more than one condition.

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <u>4</u> Autism | <u>1</u> Multiple Disabilities |
| <u>0</u> Deafness | <u>1</u> Orthopedic Impairment |
| <u>0</u> Deaf-Blindness | <u>5</u> Other Health Impaired |
| <u>0</u> Developmental Delay | <u>18</u> Specific Learning Disability |
| <u>3</u> Emotional Disturbance | <u>4</u> Speech or Language Impairment |
| <u>1</u> Hearing Impairment | <u>0</u> Traumatic Brain Injury |
| <u>1</u> Intellectual Disability | <u>1</u> Visual Impairment Including Blindness |

9. Number of years the principal has been in her/his position at this school: 6
10. Use Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs), rounded to nearest whole numeral, to indicate the number of school staff in each of the categories below:

| | Number of Staff |
|--|------------------------|
| Administrators | 6 |
| Classroom teachers including those teaching high school specialty subjects, e.g., third grade teacher, history teacher, algebra teacher. | 26 |
| Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading specialist, science coach, special education teacher, technology specialist, art teacher, etc. | 3 |
| Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a professional supporting single, group, or classroom students. | 3 |
| Student support personnel e.g., school counselors, behavior interventionists, mental/physical health service providers, psychologists, family engagement liaisons, career/college attainment coaches, etc. | 1 |

11. Average student-classroom teacher ratio, that is, the number of students in the school divided by the FTE of classroom teachers, e.g., 22:1 18:1

12. Show daily student attendance rates. Only high schools need to supply yearly graduation rates.

| Required Information | 2017-2018 | 2016-2017 | 2015-2016 | 2014-2015 | 2013-2014 |
|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Daily student attendance | 95% | 95% | 96% | 97% | 96% |
| High school graduation rate | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |

13. **For high schools only, that is, schools ending in grade 12 or higher.**

Show percentages to indicate the post-secondary status of students who graduated in Spring 2018.

| Post-Secondary Status | |
|---|----|
| Graduating class size | 0 |
| Enrolled in a 4-year college or university | 0% |
| Enrolled in a community college | 0% |
| Enrolled in career/technical training program | 0% |
| Found employment | 0% |
| Joined the military or other public service | 0% |
| Other | 0% |

14. Indicate whether your school has previously received a National Blue Ribbon Schools award.

Yes No

If yes, select the year in which your school received the award.

15. In a couple of sentences, provide the school’s mission or vision statement.

DSST Public Schools transforms urban public education by eliminating educational inequity and preparing all students for success in college and the 21st century.

16. **For public schools only**, if the school is a magnet, charter, or choice school, explain how students are chosen to attend.

DSST Public Schools participates in the Denver Public Schools SchoolChoice enrollment process and all admissions to DSST Public Schools are coordinated through the lottery process. To be eligible to attend a DSST Public School families must submit a SchoolChoice form with Denver Public Schools. DSST: Byers is an open-enrollment charter public school with no pre-enrollment qualifications or requirements. Students gain entry through the city-wide lottery process. In order to build an integrated student population in a relatively high-income Denver neighborhood, students who receive Free or Reduced Price Lunch (FRL) have a weighted preference in the lottery. There is also a sibling preference that applies when families would like their children to attend the same school.

PART III – SUMMARY

DSST: Byers Middle School was founded in 2013 as the fifth campus of the thriving DSST Public Schools network in Denver, Colorado. DSST now has 9 campuses across Denver and Aurora, Colorado and consistently produces schools with some of the top results in the city, state, and country. We are open-enrollment charter public schools that are fully integrated into the Denver Public Schools district and 100% of our graduates have been accepted into 4-year colleges for all 13 DSST graduating classes.

We began DSST: Byers in 2013 with a class of 150 6th grade students who had breakout learning success their first year. Composite growth on our state exams (TCAP) was the highest in Colorado history and showed strong results for students of all backgrounds and abilities. Our school was rated on Denver’s School Performance Framework as Distinguished and also as the top-performing middle school in Denver following that first year. Following several years of a different school becoming the top school each year, DSST: Byers has maintained that #1 middle school status since our founding in 2013. We are also deeply proud of our rating as Distinguished regarding Denver’s important “Academic Gaps” indicator, demonstrating that our students have no, minimal, or even inverted achievement gaps when examining learning by sub-groups such as students of color or students from low-income families (FRL). Across many subject areas, for example, our FRL students are out achieving their higher-income peers around the city. In short, our students have achieved and sustained excellence since our founding.

We are inherently a learning-focused school at all levels and humbly believe that we have built our school on the shoulders of giants. Our team has visited dozens of excellent schools around the country and we read extensively as a team in order to continuously refine our practices and get closer to achieving our mission, which reads: DSST Public Schools transforms public education by eliminating educational inequity and preparing all students for success in college and the 21st century. When you ask our leaders why they lead in our building, they will unanimously say it is because we are a people development organization through and through. All members of our team receive weekly coaching and development and we meet in many intentional structures and teams in order to maintain excellence and nurture innovation in continuous cycles. This focus on coaching and teaming reinforces our view of the human condition that all people want to be known, affirmed for who they are, and to contribute meaningfully to the larger human story. Our systems, structures, and practices reinforce the belief that schools are built to nurture individuals to their fullest potential- adults and children alike.

In our work together, we have accumulated hundreds of practices that form a coherent whole. These practices are often grouped according to the acronym TIOCCC: Team, Instruction, Operations, Culture, Community, and College. The following is a brief explanation of each area:

Team: We are obsessed with our people and building healthy, dynamic teams. We base much of our teaming efforts on the work of Patrick Lencioni and Strengths Finder. We employ a distributive leadership philosophy emphasizing teacher leadership supported by high quality administrative leadership.

Instruction: We are a standards-based liberal arts program with a focus on STEM. Our instructional practices are captured in DSST’s Teacher Effectiveness Rubric and reflect best practices from research. We employ strategies ranging from Socratic Seminars and group-centered problem solving teams to daily Mastery Checks and a posted agenda for every class.

Operations: We strive to reduce the administrative burden on teachers and streamline school operations for families as much as possible within Colorado’s relatively resource-scarce environment. By creating and committing to high-quality systems, our team can maximize their focus on the needs of our students.

Culture: We believe that you either shape culture or it shapes you. We are incredibly precise about the culture we are working to build together and have layers of systems that support the maintenance of an inclusive, high-achieving, relationship-centered school and staff culture.

Community: As a diverse-by-design, open-enrollment school in the heart of the segregated city of Denver,

we work to build community among students who would not have had the opportunity to be in community otherwise. We gather daily in advisories, grade-level, and whole-school meetings to celebrate our values, individual growth and achievement, and our community as a whole.

College: We strive to prepare all our students not only for college acceptance but for success in college in the 21st century. This requires an individualized college placement process, world-class academic environment, family partnerships, and a network of strong relationships with colleges and universities.

If you ask a member of our team how school is going, they will likely point first to something we are working on improving versus the school's many strengths. We strive for excellence and to eliminate educational inequity. We have not yet achieved either of these to our satisfaction so will always pursue the next opportunity to improve and fulfill our full potential as a school community.

PART IV – CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

1. Core Curriculum:

1a. Reading/English language arts:

All reading and writing classes are aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). This includes incorporating close reading of fiction and non-fiction into reading courses and having students develop narrative, informative, and argumentative writing; including both literary analysis and research into their writing in their writing classes. Students participate in 25 mins of independent reading daily that is aligned to their independent reading level as measured through STAR assessments and using AR reading quizzes to ensure students are comprehending what they are reading. This allows for differentiated instructional time where students are reading at their individualized reading level. This also allows teachers to conference with students to hold them accountable to reading during this time, and build their independent reading skills including book choice and stamina in reading. When planning literary units, teachers pair focus standards with the text in the unit to ensure that there is both a balance of standards throughout the year, along with ensuring that the unit highlights the most important aspects of the novel or nonfiction writing. Reading and writing teachers collaborate regularly to ensure there is consistency in literacy practices between the two classes and often have units that build off of each other. For example, a student may read and analyze a book in reading class and then later write a literacy analysis of the text in their writing class. Teachers give mastery checks daily that assess student's mastery of the content and/or skill of the day. These are used to plan the upcoming lessons to address individual or group misconceptions. Teachers also use larger data sets, such as NWEA MAP data, STAR data, and internally-created Interim Assessment (Finals) proficiency to determine ways to differentiate content.

1b. Mathematics:

For students to thrive and succeed in the 21st century, they must be able to make sense of the world through a mathematical lens. Therefore, learning mathematics requires more than learning facts and procedures for solving certain types of problems. The goal of our math program is to build the following skills, knowledge, and mindsets in our students:

- 1) Conceptual understanding of mathematical ideas, which fosters greater curiosity to discover links between mathematical ideas, build on foundations over time, and make authentic connections to real world problems and personal experiences. Deeper conceptual understanding engages students in ways that lead to greater retention over time.
- 2) Skill in carrying out procedures flexibly, accurately, efficiently, and appropriately. The development of procedural fluency allows students to free up mental energy to focus on flexibly approaching and thinking through problems: skills that translate to lifelong learning.
- 3) Strategic thinking and adaptive reasoning; the ability to formulate, represent, and communicate mathematical problem-solving while demonstrating logical thought, reflection, explanation, and justification through multiple modalities.
- 4) Seeing mathematics as a study that builds upon itself year over year. Students can transfer and apply knowledge to new contexts by recognizing patterns in practice.
- 5) An inquiry-based mindset, where students see mathematics as fascinating, useful, and worthwhile, and believe that productive struggle and creative problem-solving leads to breakthroughs in understanding.

Additionally, we are making a shift from students taking leveled/tracked classes throughout our high school and much of our middle school to a more equitable, heterogeneous balance in classes that meets our commitment to equity and produces higher achievement for all students. Teachers are carefully considering how to build their differentiation practice so that every student is working on an individualized objective.

We are building in more strategies involving Jerome Bruner's Three Learning Modes to give students more access to rigorous, high level content. And finally, we are grappling with much of Jo Boaler's work on Mathematical Mindsets to allow students to grapple with the big ideas in mathematics and see it as a living, breathing, and creative subject.

1c. Science:

The goal of our science program is to instill the understanding in all students that science is not simply a set of facts, but a process to evaluate, critique, and discover new information.

DSST: Byers Middle School's science program is based on the NGSS Framework and partners with Amplify Science Education to provide an experience that is rooted in three-dimensional learning. We create experiences founded on a view of science as both a body of knowledge, an evidence-based model, and a theory-building enterprise that continually extends, refines, and revises knowledge. We believe that science is best learned when students have the opportunity to apply their knowledge of content to scientific practices that include investigating scientific questions, building models, and testing theories about the natural world. Science instruction is rooted in teaching content deeply so that students have many opportunities to apply their content knowledge to NGSS practices. In order to foster deep conceptual understandings we prioritize content standards that allow students an opportunity to apply the information to real-world problems.

At DSST: Byers, common assessments are given three times per year in each science course to assess student mastery of standards. The NGSS curriculum necessitates assessing students on the content of science through the application of science practices. Students take a content based assessment and a performance assessment each trimester. Though both of these assessments focus more on doing science, and less on recalling science. Additionally, all students are assessed in eighth grade on the statewide CMAS assessment.

1d. Social studies/history/civic learning and engagement

DSST: Byers Middle School exposes students to an overview of World History in their first two years of middle school. Students begin in 6th grade by exploring Western history from Greco-Roman civilization to the Enlightenment era, before a deep-dive into Chinese history. In 7th grade, students focus on the dynamics of power and privilege by looking at the rise and fall colonialism, particularly in Africa. They then move to a survey of the Industrial Era through the Cold War. United States history is the sole focus of their 8th grade year.

We choose this path in order to build both literacy and content knowledge and to give students access to the historical documents that both describe and shape our world. From 6th to 8th grade, students are challenged to interact with these documents with increasing sophistication, analyzing not only a text's meaning, but how our understanding is affected by its context as well as authorial purpose, audience and point of view. Our goal is to aid our students in becoming critical thinkers who can use these skills to evaluate the reliability and relevance of their sources of information and to form a cohesive understanding of the world in which they live, including an understanding of their own power to shape it.

Our social studies classrooms emphasize expressing understanding through writing. Enabling our students to use a set of diverse primary sources as the basis for an organized, well-reasoned historical argument is a goal our teachers work towards each day. On a given day, an observer is likely to see teacher-led close reading of dense texts, students interacting with documents through annotations, and group discussion of text-dependent questions.

To provide access to this level of rigor to all students, our teachers work hard to differentiate materials, utilizing multiple sets of notes for different levels of learners, and offer vocabulary and sentence stem support for students who need it on a daily basis. In order to gauge progress towards standards and provide meaningful feedback to students, they are typically assessed on a daily, weekly, and unit basis, and we do our best to respond to the resulting data on a near-daily basis.

1e. For secondary schools:

We are a middle and high school, so as part of our graduation requirements, students in 11th grade are required to complete a 40-hour internship at a site that includes both job shadowing and hands-on work in the field. Senior Project is a required class in 12th grade where students utilize project-based learning to research, carry out, and write about a passion for meeting a significant need in the world. Additionally, weekly, for 25 minutes, in grades 9-11, students engage in advisory lessons on a variety of topics including building college knowledge, personal college portfolios, financial aid, career interest tools, ROI of college and career, financial literacy, and more.

1f. For schools that offer preschool for three- and four-year old students:

2. Other Curriculum Areas:

DSST: Byers is a liberal arts school by design, so we provide opportunities for students to take high quality courses not just in reading, writing, mathematics, science, and writing, but also in music, art, and computer programming. Students have their core offerings daily, with each grade level receiving a different number of class minutes per day. For example, students in 6th grade have 75 minutes daily of reading, math, and science, but 55 minutes of writing, social studies, or one of their three rotating electives (PE, music, art).

Our middle school music curriculum focuses on performance, music theory, and music composition. By 8th grade, students complete projects involving composition with MIDI controllers and full interaction with a DAW (e.g. Garageband) to manipulate and engineer their compositions. This requires them to synthesize skills across college-level music theory, critical and creative thinking, group problem solving, and technology skills within digital music composition. Students are taught college-level rigorous music theory standards equivalent to those taught in college music schools. They are taught sight-singing and musical analysis skills starting in 6th grade. In performance, our students sing mostly modern popular songs with passion and unity reflective of our school culture and diverse population of students.

Art and computer science in our middle school consists of digital art, media, design, web design and computer programming skills. In 6th grade students begin their core art pathway with Design 101. Here students learn about color theory, hue saturation and tone, shading as well as how to interact with and produce art on an art creation and image editing software (e.g. Gravit Designer). Once students are exposed to design principles they move to brand identities where we explore sketching, typography, logo design and practice advertising and design pitching ideas to clients. 6th grade culminates in web design where students create and publish a functional website. 7th grade then explores animations, games and physical computing preparing them for 8th grade computer programming. Here we take advantage of the resources available on code.org. This wealth of computer science hub is full of individualized curriculum directly aligned to AP computer science. Here students learn all the basics of programming (printing, variables, conditional statements, inputs, functions, loops, etc.) and create multiple iterations of mobile phone projects culminating in building apps for change in our community.

Our middle school physical education courses provide either 1 or 2 days a week of physical education. High-quality PE curriculum is an integral part of the whole school curriculum and one that staff, students and parents value greatly despite the limited time offering. Our program emphasizes enjoyable participation in a variety of physical activities in order to help students develop their physical literacy - the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life. Through the use of heart-rate monitors we strive to push our students to engage in moderate to vigorous physical activity throughout 80% of the class.

We offer Spanish to all students starting in 9th grade, so do not offer foreign language courses in middle school. Once in high school, students take 3 or 4 years of Spanish (through AP Spanish) and many will graduate with a Seal of Bilingualism due to their fluency in English and Spanish.

Our 1:1 laptop program allows students, teachers and parents to have access to thousands of points of data regarding daily student performance, growth and proficiency levels. Teachers give quick and concise

assessments mid-class, checking both progress and proficiency, so they can modify instruction based on data and continue with class. All classes culminate with a mastery check or exit ticket (most through quick digital quizzes). We are able to look at all data through sub-categories of students (504, IEP, ELL, students of color, etc.) and analyze standard breakdowns, common misconceptions, whole class misunderstandings and individual growth areas. From here we can quickly and effectively create targeted and individualized plans for all students.

Finally, we seek to build the individual character of each of our students towards their eventual graduation from our high school. Our school is built on six core values that represent our shared vision for how we continuously build community. Our staff, students, and families all sign a Core Value Commitment that unites us around these values and accelerates our work together. Each grade level team creates a weekly social-emotional lesson for all students that is completed within their advisory. We are also piloting Compass Circles based on the work of Valor Collegiate Academy in Tennessee and hope to continue to invest directly in the social-emotional development of our students and staff.

3. Special Populations:

DSST: Byers is an intentionally inclusive school, indicating that all of our learners receive the majority of their instruction in the general education classroom. Within our school we have a wide composition of exceptional learners including students on 504s, multilingual learners, students identified as gifted and talented, and students with disabilities on IEPs. Our school also runs a cross-categorical special education program that supports students with more significant disabilities. All of these students are in general education classrooms learning amongst their peers to the maximum extent possible despite their significant needs. In order to support our exceptional learners, many of our classes are co-taught with both a general education teacher and special education teacher providing instruction. We also have several paraprofessionals who support students in classrooms. All of the staff at DSST: Byers consider themselves whole-school teachers: we are all teachers of all students. Each staff member plays a part in ensuring that curriculum is appropriately accommodated or modified so that students are able to access the material, as well as ensuring exceptional learners contribute meaningfully to our community.

We have worked intentionally for several years to ensure that all teachers are developed in supporting exceptional learners within the classroom. We focus on differentiating for the needs of each learner based on larger data sets (such as state tests and NWEA MAP assessments) and with daily mastery checks to determine growth and mastery within the daily content. Teachers receive a list of students and where they fall on a bell curve for average performance based on previous state test results and MAP data. This helps to give a sense of where students have performed historically, can allow for flexible grouping, and allows teachers to track the growth of students through different apples-to-apples performance bands throughout the year. After trimesterly interim assessment cycles teachers review the data for their students by subgroups compared to both historical data and data across our network schools to determine if the students within each group are growing and achieving at a high level. If they are not, teachers will work with their content teachers in order to develop a plan as to how better to support that student group. Teachers are also able to compare different sub groups of students (such as students with IEPs or ELL students) to their performance band to determine if there are gaps in performance between the larger group of students who were performing at a certain level at the beginning of the year to students within that group who also have an IEP or are learning English. To set a focus on serving the unique needs of exceptional learners, we begin to develop our teachers before school begins. During training before the beginning of the school year our teachers receive training on how to support students with IEPs, including individualized student snapshots that help teachers to identify the most important information from a student's IEP towards their strength areas, accommodations, and modifications within the classroom. Teachers are also provided lists of their English Language Learners, who we call multilingual learners (MLL) to honor their assets across multiple languages, students who are gifted and talented, and students with 504s. This allows teachers to be able to plan for all exceptional learners even before they set foot in their classrooms.

1. School Climate/Culture:

Creating a positive environment that supports student academic, social and emotional growth starts with our staff team. We aim for teachers to be supported in their development, fulfillment, and sustainability. When teachers have these conditions met, they are able to be their best selves. We organize our staff into “house” teams, which are formally led by teacher peers and who are given more time together than any other team structure. This team is intentionally set up and supported to ensure every teacher feels part of a healthy team that knows, appreciates, and supports them. Additionally, each teacher has a coach and manager who is responsible for their growth and development. Our leadership team discusses our “team pulse” 2-4 times monthly to assess the status of and assign supportive action steps for each member of our teaching team. We know that when we have healthy teams of teachers, teachers are able to provide great experiences for students.

Relationships are the most fundamental aspect of our approach to student success. We prioritize relationships between students and teachers. Our teachers are teacher-advisors. Our advisory program ensures that all students have a “person” at our school that is their champion. We value their roles as advisors as well as their roles as instructors of content. We provide development for both roles. Advisors intentionally cultivate a supportive community for their advisees through a collective identity as one smaller community within the greater school. We know that a student can not actualize their academic potential until their social-emotional needs are met and that students respond to feeling known, seen, and appreciated for who they are.

We deeply believe in the human need for joy and brain-based teaching. Therefore, we place a value on the joy-factor of classrooms and the student experience overall. Students are welcomed to school every day with music, participate in 3 weekly morning meetings filled with celebration and joy, and teachers greet students at the door of every classroom. Additionally, teachers punctuate learning time with call and response and kinesthetic celebrations such as snaps, claps and unique celebrations. Teachers also plan for daily, class-based opportunities for adolescents to meet social and executive functioning needs with “brain-boost” activities.

Last, we have tiered systems of support for students that need additional layers of support. When students do not respond to the first tier of support, introduced above, we initiate an individualized problem solving process. When done well, this ensures that all students contribute to and benefit from a learning community that develops all students academic, social and emotional growth.

2. Engaging Families and Community:

We believe in the power and importance of partnership with our parent and guardian community, and we communicate our belief from the very beginning of the enrollment cycle. True community engagement is built between connectedness of student, parent, and teacher, so we do our best to be clear about what we intend for this to look like. From the initial parent orientation to Parent Academy and our new student home visits, we come together to make commitments to each other. Students have a core value pledge that we review and sign, but so too do students and staff. This shows our families that we value how hard it is to be a parent of a growing adolescent and we are excited to partner in the work with them. This all happens before the first day of school.

Once the school year begins, all parents get a phone call within the first month from their child’s advisor. Parent and advisors communicate daily: advisors make sure students have day planners that are complete with homework assignments, and parents sign to “tell” teachers that they’re aware of what their student is working on academically. Our intervention system is a way daily we communicate if their student is on track that particular day for academics, study habits, and behavior expectations. We don’t just send home report cards at the end of the trimester - we believe that the work and effort a student put in over the course of 12 weeks deserves a conversation. We have report card conferences where the student, advisor, and

parent all sit down to celebrate successes and set goals for growth.

There are plenty of barriers for communication between our school team and families that we work to overcome. We use robocall, robotext, email, and will send home a paper version of our weekly Falcon Informer Newsletter with an emailed digital version as well. Strong systems make it possible to ensure every flier, permission form, and survey is translated for our Spanish-speaking families. Apps like Remind can send pictures of Advisory events and translate updates about math assignments.

We also want our parents to have a seat at the table when it comes to decision-making and keeping us accountable. Our Science and Tech Parent Group (STP) requires no membership, and deeply values whatever it is that families can contribute to make our school the best it can be. One of our core principles is to push ourselves to consider, what if each parent did just one thing to make the community better--how much richer of a place would DSST: Byers be? We joyfully welcome "Plus One" donations of goods or money, contributions of time and efforts, offerings of expertise and passion projects, and community connections. One person can't do everything, and every person can do something. If each is willing to do something, we can do anything as a community.

3. Professional Development:

Professional development happens primarily through coaching, but also through other variable structures. Since every individual teacher and leader has unique needs, coaching provides the opportunity to individually differentiate support for all staff. Every member of our team engages in 30-90 minutes of individual coaching weekly for approximately 30 weeks a year (can vary due to school events, testing, etc.) that includes deliberate practice, instructional or leadership feedback, co-planning, data cycles, and much more. Although there is much to be learned from external conferences, readings, and other structures, we find that nothing else compares to the effectiveness of individualized weekly coaching. Also important to note is that it is customary for coaches to set not just instructional and data goals with their coachees, but also fulfillment and sustainability goals. This focus on the whole person helps acknowledge that we are professionals and people, and has contributed to our annual average 90%+ teacher retention rate in a sector (high performing charter schools) that tends towards 70% or less teacher retention.

We also work extensively with data in collaboration with teachers across the DSST network. Data-driven instruction is a core component of our work, and data is used on a daily, weekly, monthly, trimesterly, and annual basis to drive student achievement. Fundamentally, our teachers believe that it is their responsibility to ensure that all students learn, and that all students can learn with effective instruction. Mindsets and skills are developed in more than two weeks of team development before the school year begins and nurtured throughout the year in Cross-Campus Collaboration (C3) teams that review data, practice instructional techniques, and plan excellent units and lessons together. After each assessment cycle, ALL data is available to ALL teachers in our network. It is highly common to hear teachers immediately reaching out to connect with, shadow, and meet with teachers at other schools who have found success with a particular standard, sub-group, or unit within minutes or hours of reviewing our comprehensive data.

Aside from all this in-house development, we do offer some external opportunities. Teachers and leaders have attended professional conferences or opportunities like Relay Graduate School of Education or the National Academy for Advanced Teacher Education. The National Equity Project has worked with our school for five years to develop equity skills and mindsets so that we can serve our diverse student population more and more effectively.

Last but not least, we read a lot together. We have an annual whole-staff book that is incorporated into staff development throughout the year and various teams read aligned texts as needed and appropriate. Through this, we model lifelong learning for each other and our students.

4. School Leadership:

We are a middle and high school with a single school director and a central leadership team serving our comprehensive 6th-12th grade school. This is not a structure employed at most DSST campuses, where our

middle schools and high schools are run by separate leaders and teams. The single leader and team model has enabled us to pilot innovative and effective approaches while maintaining and scaling excellence since our founding in 2013. Overall, we adhere to a distributive leadership philosophy and model, striving to place responsibility as close to those serving students as possible, while maintaining a strong core leadership team to ensure continuity, scalability, and sustained success.

Our comprehensive middle and high school leadership team includes 13 members: School Director, Associate School Director- Culture, Associate School Director- Instruction, Director of School Operations, Director of College Success, 4 Deans of Students, and 4 Directors of Curriculum & Instruction. We meet weekly in two distinct types of meetings, a 60-minute execution meeting that reviews our calendar, clarifies ownership, ensures accountability to action steps, and reviews the status and needs of every member of our entire team. We also meet in a 90-minute deeper dive strategic meeting each week. This weekly strategic meeting is centered on our core areas of Team, Instruction, Operations, Culture, Community, and College. We present and review data, employ leadership texts and tools to analyze our school's needs, and provide input on key decisions.

Our campus leadership team is responsible for our school's success, but our school is led much more through several other teams. Grade-level "House" teams are led by teacher leaders and are responsible for grade level culture, MTSS, weekly awards and culture programming, and much more. Teachers also meet monthly in vertical 6-12 teacher-led departments, reviewing student work, instructional strategies, and data within each content area. We also have domain-specific teams like the Culture Leadership Team (deans and mental health), Instructional Leadership Team, Operations Team, but also cross-domain teams like our Directors Team (like a school level C-team), Attendance Team, and OCI (Operations, Culture, Instruction) Team.

Based on Patrick Lencioni's vision for teams, we focus on building not just working groups, but true teams that have clear responsibilities, authentic relationships, and cadences of accountability so that we can achieve our ambitious mission and excellence student achievement results year after year.

Part VI – STRATEGIES FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Schools are incredibly complex institutions, with hundreds or even thousands of people interacting in interdependent relationships and systems on a given day. As organizations centered on people development, we aren't churning out products or commerce, but rather we are people whose primary goal is to develop other people.

Some of the most defining aspects of our school are our authentic relationships, commitment to excellence and core values, semi-obsession with our symbol and mascot the peregrine falcon, and intentionally designed and layered systems. However, above all else, what sets our school apart is our view of the human condition and our alignment to this belief across systems, structures, and practices school-wide.

The “human condition” encompasses the experiences of being human in a social, cultural, and personal context. As humans, what do we strive for and long for? DSST’s view of the human condition is the following, “Each human being strives to be fully known and affirmed for who they are, and to contribute something significant to the human story.”

For example, when we hire teachers and staff, we look not just for desirable resume qualities, but we structure our process to illuminate individuals who will honor the humanity of our students. Candidates have multiple interviews, meet with students, perform a sample lesson and then receive direct feedback from students, future peer colleagues, and an instructional coach. They are also asked to share their personal story, leading us through their journey as a human being and what brought them to the interview itself. This process aligns with the words of Parker Palmer, “[K]nowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self-knowledge. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly I cannot teach them well.” Even candidates who do not receive an offer to join the team remark that the process was individually honoring and helped them grow as a person.

Another example of alignment to this view of the human condition is our approach to report cards and conferences. Students receive extensive feedback from their teachers and advisor, which is then discussed together with their family twice annually at conferences. Students earn academic grades and effort grades for all classes and notably, they are also given Core Value Grades normed by the entire grade level team that reflect the student’s character development successes and opportunities. Teachers provide insightful comments through report cards and conferences that clearly demonstrate knowledge of the student, value for the student, and a clear path for next steps so they can continue to grow consistently and thereby contribute even more meaningfully to the larger human story.

By approaching our comprehensive work through our view of the human condition, we have built a school community that strives to nurture the growth of our students, staff, and families. This is what truly sets us apart at DSST.