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## Student Assessment Data and Innovation Status: How Grant Beacon Middle School is Using Resources in Innovative Ways

**GRANT BEACON MIDDLE SCHOOL** *sits on a quiet street in Platt Park, a middle-income residential neighborhood in southeast Denver. The school’s student population, however, doesn’t match the neighborhood’s: 84 percent of its 454 students qualify for free or reduced price lunch, and 51 percent are English language learners.*

*Despite demographics that cause many schools to struggle, Grant Beacon has prospered over the past four years. Test scores have increased steadily, and the school has implemented a longer school day, a wealth of enrichment activities for its students, and a technology-rich, blended learning environment that includes a Chromebook laptop for every student.*

*Grant Beacon has been successful enough that Denver Public Schools (DPS) asked its principal, Alex Magaña, to replicate the program at Kepner, a struggling middle school three-and-a-half miles to the west, in a high-poverty neighborhood. Magaña eagerly accepted the challenge, and the Kepner Beacon program launched in August 2016 with an inaugural sixth grade class. Magaña serves as executive principal, overseeing both schools, in what DPS calls an Innovative Management Organization.*

# Objective

When Magaña came to Grant Beacon as assistant principal in 2008-09, the school was failing by anyone’s definition. Enrollment had slumped to about 300 students. The school had only recently climbed from red, the lowest category on the district’s five-point School Performance Framework (SPF), barely into yellow, the third lowest. It was on the district’s watch list for possible takeover.

“There were highly ineffective teachers, fighting and discipline issues, even some gang problems,” Magaña said recently, sitting in his cluttered office.

During Magaña’s first year as assistant principal, his supervisor, principal Greta Martinez, went to her staff with a bold proposal: Since state tests, which determined school ratings, were focused on reading and math, Grant Beacon should dramatically reduce reading and math class sizes to no more than 20 students, even if that meant overloading social studies and science classes with 35-40 students.

The staff agreed. That year, for the first time, Grant Beacon, by the narrowest of margins, achieved green, or “meets expectations,” on the SPF.

Magaña became the Grant Beacon principal in January 2011, after Martinez won a promotion to the DPS central office. In that spring’s state testing, the school’s scores dipped slightly, but enough to push Grant Beacon back into the yellow, “on watch” category.

“I was devastated; everyone was devastated,” Magaña recalled. But he believed in the model of smaller math and reading classes, and was determined to stay the course.

Then the other shoe dropped.

“(Denver Superintendent) Tom Boasberg called us in, I think it was February the following year, and told us that a high-performing, homegrown charter school network was going to be moving into our neighborhood. That was like a punch to the stomach. Already 80 percent of our kids were bused in, and it felt like the community was turning against us. I thought it would be really bad if we lost some of our top-performing students.”

Unsure what to do next, and worried about the school’s gains eroding, Magaña turned to one of his mentors in the district, who suggested that he apply for innovation status for Grant Beacon. Magaña had no idea what innovation status entailed, so he did some research. What he learned excited him.

Signed into law in 2008, Colorado’s Innovation Schools Act “provides a pathway for schools and districts to develop innovative practices, better meet the needs of individual students and allow more autonomy to make decisions at the school-level,” according to the Colorado Department of Education website. To date, 63 schools across Colorado have gained innovation status.

For Grant Beacon, Magaña learned, innovation status would mean getting waivers from certain provisions of the collective bargaining agreement as well as disentangling the school from some DPS red tape. “More freedom with people, time, and money,” as Magaña explained it.

In the fall of 2011, Magaña put together an innovation team of teachers, parents, and community members to devise a plan tailored to Grant Beacon’s needs. The team met throughout the school year. Team members designed a survey and sent it to thousands of parents and community members, including families who lived within Grant Beacon’s attendance boundaries but did not send their children to the school.

About a quarter of the people sent the surveys returned them, including a sizeable number of families who had chosen not to send their kids to Grant Beacon. “What we heard loud and clear was that people wanted a school that was safe, that offered a STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) curriculum, and enrichment activities, including music and art,” Magaña said.

“Once we developed our mission to say we’re going to service all kids through the use of technology and focus on critical thinking – and bring two communities together – that’s what we build our budgets on.”

*Alex Magaña, Executive Principal*

*Grant Beacon Middle School*

Teachers and parents alike also expressed strong interest in extending the school day to make enrichment activities possible without compromising core academics.

The plan, supported by 97 percent of Grant Beacon teachers (“which means there was only one naysayer,” according to Magaña), was submitted to DPS in January 2012 and approved five months later.

# Strategy: Using technology in a new way

As the 2012-13 school year began, Grant Beacon was a school transformed. Magaña had hoped for a major grant from a philanthropic organization to pay for new technology. When that grant didn’t come through, after a few moments of despair, “I said screw it, we have enough technology in the building to make this work.”

Under the direction of Kevin Croghan, a former social studies teacher promoted to blended learning director, the school dismantled its computer labs and moved technology into reading and math classrooms, and eventually into all classrooms. Each classroom has three technology stations, where students work in groups reshuffled each Monday based on Friday data results.

Each student at Grant Beacon is issued a Chromebook laptop, funded by a grant from Janus Funds. Students set goals and track their progress weekly using a free learning management system called [Moodle](https://moodle.org/) and submit their work using Google Apps. Teachers use online tools to track student progress and write tests and quizzes aligned to Colorado Academic Standards and assessments.

The Grant Beacon school day is more than an hour longer than most Denver schools. Classes start at 7:35 a.m. and wrap up at 3:55 p.m. Monday through Thursday. Classes start at 10 a.m. on Friday, which allows time for teacher professional development. The extra five hours per week allow the school to offer more than 40 enrichment classes, including aerospace engineering, dance team, West African drumming, a girls-only conversation group, study hall, yoga, and 3-D art. Many enrichment classes are taught by community members. Magaña has also been able to use budget flexibility that came with innovation status, along with additional funding from the district to support the extended day, to pay teachers stipends of several thousand dollars for the extra time they put in.

“That flexibility in time allowed me to provide interventions, enrichments to our kids, also give teachers additional planning time.”

*Alex Magaña, Executive Principal*

*Grant Beacon Middle School*

Finally, three data teams at Grant Beacon operate under one common hypothesis, said Valerie Svoboda, the school’s data process manager:

“If we learn to collaboratively analyze student data in order to implement common instructional strategies, then we will be able to develop those common strategies and implement targeted interventions to improve student achievement for one team-wide Essential Learning Goal.”

What this means, Svoboda said, is that each team sets a goal that it then implements across the school. Two of the goals are academic, one focused on literacy, the other math. The third goal focuses on culture and character.

Every staff member belongs to one of the teams. Teams meet Friday mornings, when school starts at 10 a.m. During those meetings, team members closely analyze student data. Teams fill out a detailed proficiency scale document on each student, which pinpoints where the student stands on achieving each academic standard.

Weekly meetings and sophisticated tools allow the teams “to very quickly give our teachers and students feedback so that they may set challenging but attainable goals,” Svoboda said.

A few years ago in September, for example, there was a sixth-grader who scored extremely low on the school’s interim literacy assessment. Even the most basic concepts, like being able to describe the gist of a passage he had read, eluded him. To begin helping the boy develop this skill, his teacher designed a sheet where he had only to fill in blanks in a sentence describing the meaning of the passage. Once he was able to do that accurately, the teacher removed the “scaffolding” of the worksheet and asked the boy to describe the passage entirely in his own words.

On the interim assessment before the holiday break, the sixth-grader demonstrated mastery of the concept of gist. His next goal, which he was able to articulate to his teacher, was being able to summarize in more detail the content of a passage, article, or story. His teacher was confident that the February interim assessment would show they boy has mastered the art of summarizing.

# Results

Grant Beacon is now in its fifth year of innovation status, and top DPS brass consider its focused mission and steady improvement a model for other district schools. The school reentered the rank of green (‘meets expectations’) schools in its first year as an innovation school. The following year, 2013-14, Grant Beacon’s rating increased by 10 percentage points. Magaña is convinced that the school made another significant leap in 2014-15. But because of the change in state test from TCAP to PARCC, DPS did not issue SPFs last year. For the 2015-16 school year, the school improved another 2 points and remains in the green.

he school’s success has led to a steady growth in enrollment. It has bounced back from a low of about 300 students to more 450 this year. But neighborhood families still aren’t sending their kids to Grant Beacon in large numbers. “Some families struggle with sending their kids to a diverse school,” Magaña said.

Magaña sees autonomy gained through innovation status as a major driver of Grant Beacon’s success. “We’ve been able to make significant changes to the school’s curriculum, schedule, assessments,” he said. And because teachers are unanimous in their support of the school’s mission and model, “I don’t have people filing grievances. Everyone buys in.”

One challenge for Magaña and his team has been learning, along with the district, about what autonomies are available under the innovation law and how best to take advantage of them.

Kepner Beacon Middle School opened with sixth graders in August 2016 as an innovation school. Magaña now divides his time between running Grant Beacon and Kepner Beacon, negotiating the logistics of opening the new school on a shared campus.

Because he has been successful with Grant Beacon, and because district leadership looks at the Innovative Management Organization as a model for replicating successful schools, Magaña believes he will be able to transform Kepner in the image of Grant Beacon, and to keep both schools strong.