



2024-2025 End-of-Year Report

We're happy to report:

- ✓ Of the 26 students served during the 24-25 school year, 11% were African American, 39% were Hispanic/Latino, 15% were of mixed ethnicity, and 35% were Caucasian.
- ✓ We continue to serve Denver's underprivileged population, many of whom live below the poverty level. This translates to about 88.5% of our students qualifying for the free and reduced lunch program.
- ✓ Our school-wide daily attendance rate was 84%-87%.
- ✓ Five out of six eligible students received diplomas. Four of them finished their last credits before December, and the last one completed their credits in May.
- ✓ New students at the start of the school year took the Woodcock-Johnson III Achievement Battery. This standardized test enables us to better match their educational levels with appropriate classes and learning materials. Additionally, students are tested periodically in English classes using the IXL program. This program individualizes instruction and measures growth for several key reading and language arts skills over time.
- ✓ Every student received a faculty advocate designed to connect them within the school, assist in college and career planning, and provide guidance in life skills and goal setting. They meet three to four times a week.
- ✓ In Q3-Q4 Advocacy, the school counselor and Dean of Academics met with students to show them their credits, explore options after graduation, and help them develop a graduation plan.
- ✓ Red Rocks Church pastors spoke at our weekly chapels, brought weekly lunches, and provided a safe space and caring community for our students to enjoy.
- ✓ Juniors and seniors engaged in various activities, including researching careers, visiting college campuses, applying to colleges, and applying for scholarships and internships.
- ✓ Over 90% of the student body participated in staff and partner interactions outside school hours, with about 1500 hours of positive extracurricular activities offered to our students.
- ✓ Alternatives Pregnancy Center facilitated a workshop with our students called "Engineering Love." It taught about finding healthy relationships and setting healthy boundaries.
- ✓ We took our juniors and seniors to CrossPurpose for pre-testing, so the transition into the program would be smoother if they are interested, once they graduate.

Measurables

- ✓ To start the school year with 20 students (70% returning/30% new students to maintain DSS culture). Then, grow by 3-5 students until a maximum enrollment of 35-40 is reached in the last quarter. ***We did not meet this goal, serving a total of 26 students during the 24-25 school year. Our detailed response is in the Lessons Learned section below.***
 - Rationale for shortfall: (1) Practicum Week's Credit Recovery Bootcamp nearly doubled our expected graduating class last year, when we had expected them to finish this year. (2)

Some students returned to public school after finding stability. (3) Others decided to pursue a GED. (4) We also had a lack of applicants in Q3 and Q4 compared to previous years.

- ✓ To have a classroom size of no larger than 10 students. *Yes.*
- ✓ To have a student/teacher ratio of 7/1 so every student is known, cared for, and personally educated. *Yes.*
- ✓ To have 90% of enrolled students return the following quarter. *Yes.*
- ✓ To maintain or improve an 85% daily attendance rate. *Yes.*
- ✓ To have an overall Credit Completion Rate of 80%. *Yes.*
- ✓ To see a 50% improvement in credit completion at a C or above in 1st year after intake. *Yes.*
- ✓ To see a 1.00 GPA improvement in the 1st year after intake. *Yes.*
- ✓ To see all eligible seniors earn diplomas. *We did not meet this goal.*
 - One senior who experienced homelessness and instability earlier this year chose to extend her graduation date, so she'd have more time to figure out her next steps.
- ✓ To see 100% of our graduating seniors have a transition plan to a 4-year, junior, or community college, vocational school, apprenticeship, the military, or gainful employment. *Yes.*
- ✓ To provide each student with a faculty advocate. *Yes.*
- ✓ To offer each junior and senior personalized career testing and counseling. *Yes.*
- ✓ To provide counseling services for students struggling with addictions and other personal issues that affect school and life performance through an in-house counselor and community partnerships. *Yes.*
- ✓ To expose all students to basic economic principles and personal finance training through a variety of required and elective courses before graduation. *Yes.*
- ✓ To involve all students in at least one community service project per quarter (4 quarters total). *Yes.*

Hope Initiative

- ✓ We continue the Hope Initiative, always ready to receive any student coming out of sex trafficking who is looking to fill their educational gaps and earn their diploma.
- ✓ Understanding ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) and being trauma-informed has become increasingly important in our interview and hiring process, matching even the teaching proficiency level.
- ✓ With the addition of new staff and teachers, trauma-informed care has become a vital component of our onboarding process.

Lessons Learned

Discipline/Parenting: Building on last year's efforts, we are seeing the fruits of our labor, particularly with returning students, as we have placed greater emphasis on rigor, structure, and discipline. Our gospel-centered approach to balancing gentle parenting and authoritative parenting is a slow, transformative process.

Some successes we've seen include a student who slept in most of his classes, got in trouble for being high and drunk, and is now passing all his classes. He was recently baptized and is pursuing a dream of becoming a lawyer.

We've also had to expel two students due to violence permanently. While it's painful to enforce these boundaries with our student demographic, it's essential to create a safe space in our hallways and classrooms. We may be gracious and flexible in the majority of other areas, but we have a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to violent behavior.

Cell Phones: Last year, we implemented a color system. This year, we added a positive reinforcement strategy, incentivizing students to put their phones away with candy, homework passes, and gift cards. We wanted to stray away from a punishing system that perpetuates a scarcity mindset and instead promote an empowerment system, guiding a self-control mindset when it comes to phones. As their devices become less of an issue, we're seeing the use of AI as the upcoming topic to address.

Changing Things Up: We learned the value in changing things up, especially for the 3rd quarter, since it's the longest. We implemented a Practicum Week before Spring Break to help students and teachers get a break from the usual classroom setting. This is an experiential learning opportunity where different teachers lead different tracks. This year, we focused on farm life, outdoor adventures, and a Credit Recovery Boot Camp. In the future, we plan to offer additional opportunities, such as mission trips to Florida and Alaska.

Enrollment Response: We discovered that we needed to develop new strategies to increase awareness of the school in our surrounding community, as there has been a shift in enrollment since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before it, we didn't need to advertise DSS, as we had always maintained a waitlist of students and consistently received inquiries and applications. DSS was also more widely known, as our late founder was deeply engaged in community and networking.

So what changed? A significant factor in the decline of applicants in recent years is the increased availability of alternative schooling options, which has become more prevalent following the COVID-19 pandemic. Online-only options are the default for lots of kids struggling in public school. And while it has been proven not to be a great option for kids already behind or at risk with high ACEs, the public school keeps them enrolled. They receive funding without having to deal with bad behavior or the difficulties of the student. Truancy is less of an issue as real attendance is harder to track through online options. Therefore, schools are less likely to recommend that they send kids to DSS if it transfers them out of the district. Parents/students are also less likely to explore other education options if they are not getting dropped/expelled or in trouble due to truancy.

In response:

- We've taken steps to incentivize our students to refer their friends to the program.
- We've developed a DSS Ambassador program, a grassroots effort to raise awareness about our school. We have created brochures, posters, information cards, banners, and other marketing materials, and are distributing them to local businesses. Additionally, we are delivering information packets to local public schools, counselors, probation officers, and other professionals who work with our target demographic.

The Power of Connection: We continue learning about the power of connecting with key community partners. We work with many partners, but we wanted to highlight two in particular.

Red Rocks Church has helped in ways we never imagined, and we are grateful for their partnership. They facilitated our weekly Chapel and brought lunches for staff and students. In doing so, they provided a whole new group of positive role models and mentors for our students to engage with and learn from. Several of our students have started attending their youth group and Sunday services, finding a better and healthier community.

Alternatives Pregnancy Center embraced two of our alumni, both single mothers with unplanned pregnancies. They offered them support and resources like a free ultrasound and counseling. They led a workshop for our students that covered important topics, including healthy versus unhealthy relationships, consent, boundaries, and intimacy. And they also helped us throw a baby shower for one of our pregnant graduating seniors.

Removing Obstacles: We've learned that one of the obstacles to many of our students' success is the struggles that stem from living at a poverty income level. To help address short-term or immediate needs, we have established the Compassion Fund to offer support when possible, guided by oversight and godly wisdom. We've been able to assist with rent, utility bills, groceries, clothing, and healthcare. This supports individuals on their journey towards personal growth, but also helps DSS demonstrate our commitment to making a meaningful difference in the lives of those we serve.

Approach to Academics: We have learned that persistence in our efforts and creativity in our program pay off. This was a great year academically, and we watched many of our students flourish and find success. We've seen a connection made in some of them to where they are now focused and improving. Even in Study Hall, which has always been a challenge to get students to participate, they have been more engaged than in previous years.

As a smaller school, we're better equipped to meet students where they are and provide a more individualized approach to their educational needs. For example, we had a student who hadn't been in school for five years and was able to pass all her classes every quarter because of the one-on-one help we provided her.

Teachers were empowered to explore creative ways to reach their students and meet their needs more effectively. They offered interactive activities, such as using Legos in history class to recreate scenes or playing the learning game Kahoot! to motivate students through competition in English. Additionally, two teachers collaborated in one math class to provide more targeted help in one of the more challenging subjects for our students.

Intentional Safe Space: We learned the need to create a safe space for our students since many have or continue to experience trauma. It's even safer than most of their own homes, which is why students would rather be in school than anywhere else. It has not only led to academic growth but also to holistic development. Our students are self-regulating more effectively and experiencing a decrease in drug use.

DSS is receiving high praise and positive feedback from Case Managers and Parole Officers, and they are, in turn, recommending more kids to our program. Overall, our students continue to report that their favorite thing about DSS is that teachers care. Time in our school fosters an openness to God and helps them find purpose in living for the right things.

Future Plans

Student Population Growth: We will continue to promote DSS in the community through our Ambassador Program. We will also continue to encourage current students and alumni to share DSS with friends who may be struggling in other schools, in hopes of creating a steady list of applicants each quarter. We have also recently overhauled our website to enhance our online presence and serve as a central hub of information.

Teacher Development: We're working to improve our onboarding process and find professional development opportunities for our faculty. As we grow and hire more teachers, we want to ensure we're all

on the same page in terms of training and development. An essential part of a teacher's longevity at DSS is paying them well, cultivating their growth, and supporting them through the difficulty of the job. We're committed to promoting better self-care practices and achieving a work-life balance. We are also adding more built-in feedback into the schedule by having teachers observe one another during their prep times to aid in support and growth.

Policy and Culture Review: We will conduct ongoing, intensive debriefs to determine which policies are working effectively and which require updates or revisions. The idea is for our policies to continue reflecting what is best for the school, its staff, and its students. It also allows us to identify our blind spots, both in what we are doing well and what we are doing poorly.

AI Literacy and Ethics: Rather than fighting the Artificial Intelligence battle with our students, we need to explore how to facilitate and educate them in the ethical use of AI. It's an essential tool our students will need in the future because, without it, they'll be unable to access the job market. And if our students are not taught how to use AI ethically, they risk losing their identity and their ability to think critically.

Maintaining Culture Amidst Growth: As we grow, there is a potential for cultural change that could cause us to lose the positive rhythms we have established within the school. With new students come new dynamics that can disrupt the hard-won order we have created through relationship and student buy-in. Therefore, we intend to be extra intentional in explaining the reasoning behind our attendance policy, advocacy program, and our desire to see them grow holistically.

To empower leaders, we will ask student representatives to speak into the new students, taking ownership in helping them find success as they have. We will also create healthy and productive ways to help students redirect feelings of aggression, like providing punching bags and a weight room. The strategy of empowering rather than controlling works great with our demographic.