

Jeffco school board critics must face some painful facts

By Tom Coyne *The Denver Post*

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Re: ["What Jeffco school board is doing is shameful," March 18 guest commentary.](#)

One of my favorite quotes is from Peggy Noonan: "If you don't get the facts right, you'll never get the policy right." With that in mind, I would like to amplify statements made in this commentary about Jefferson County's academic achievement performance.

The authors say, "Jeffco Public Schools ties for the second best high school graduation rate of the nation's 50 largest school districts." What they fail to note is the negative correlation between these districts' percentages of students eligible for free and reduced lunch (F&R) and their graduation rates. As Jeffco's percentage of F&R students is one of the lowest among these 50 districts, this is exactly the result we would expect to see, and not something to brag about.

They also fail to note that 29 percent of Jeffco's graduates who attend a public college or university in Colorado have to pay for remedial (non-credit) courses, which suggests that the district has been graduating too many students who aren't college and career ready.

The authors also observe that Jeffco students outperform the state on CSAP/TCAP tests. Once again, there is a negative correlation between achievement results and districts' percentage of F&R students. Since Jeffco's F&R percentage is 10 percent lower than the rest of Colorado's, our achievement results should be higher. If they weren't, something would be terribly wrong.

The authors neglect to mention the long-term trend in the percentage of Jeffco students who score proficient or advanced on CSAP/TCAP. Despite spending almost \$1 billion per year, over the past eight years Jeffco's percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced in math, writing and reading has often significantly declined from third to tenth grade. For example, in 2013, 57 percent of Jeffco tenth-graders were not proficient in math. Over the past eight years, 30,155 tenth-grade students have scored below proficient in math — about equal to the population of the city of Wheat Ridge.

[This pattern appears in the TCAP results](#) for every student group, including special education and gifted students.

This pattern of grade-to-grade proficiency decline is not due to poverty. In 2013, 48 percent of tenth-graders who were not eligible for free and reduced lunch were not proficient in math. For Jeffco's F&R students, performance was much worse: In 2013, a stunning 80 percent of tenth-graders were not proficient. (In Massachusetts, where the state tests are much tougher than Colorado's, only 37 percent of F&R tenth-graders were not proficient in math).

It does not appear that a lack of money is the root cause of this broad pattern of grade-to-grade decline in proficiency. It was there before Jeffco's budget cuts started in 2009, and it has not worsened since then.

A reasonable question to ask is whether academic achievement substantially improves between tenth and 11th grade. The ACT is a national test, taken by all Colorado 11th-graders. In 2013, 55 percent of all Jeffco 11th-graders were below the minimum ACT math and reading scores for "college and career

readiness." For science, 61 percent fell below this mark.

Jeffco graduates compete for college admissions and jobs not just against students from the rest of Colorado, but against students from the rest of the world as well. In today's intensely competitive global economy, bragging that Jeffco outperforms Colorado is extremely naïve, and ignores the heavy price many of our kids may pay in the future for the district's poor achievement results.

The good news in this otherwise dismal story is that last November Jeffco voters finally got fed up with this painful track record and elected a new board majority.

Whether they will be able to significantly improve achievement results over the next four years remains to be seen. But I, for one, am glad that we are trying a new approach.

Tom Coyne chairs the Wheat Ridge High School Accountability Committee. He has worked on corporate performance improvement issues for over 30 years.