

# Jeffco Schools Must Separate the SPAC from the DAC

*By Tom Coyne*

Jeffco's Board of Education has repeatedly affirmed two goals, that should guide the way the district spends its billion dollars per year budget: Every student will meet state grade level subject matter standards, and will graduate college and career ready.

In 2013, Jeffco's high school graduation rate was 82%. However, 29% of Jeffco graduates attending public colleges in universities in Colorado had to pay for non-credit remediation courses, which usually don't work. In Colorado, only 22% of students who take a college remediation course graduated with a bachelor's degree within six years (see, "*Remediation: Higher Education's Bridge to Nowhere*" by Complete College America).

Nobody who understands Jeffco's academic track record should be surprised at this result. In 2013, on the national ACT test, which every Colorado eleventh grader must take, only 45% of Jeffco students scored at or above the minimum math and reading standards for college and career readiness, while only 39% were at or above the standard in science.

Between 2008 and 2013, 20,792 Jeffco 11th graders scored BELOW the ACT's college and career (C&C) readiness standard in reading, 22,345 scored BELOW the C&C standard in math, and 27,111 scored BELOW the C&C standard in science. If you add in all their frustrated parents, you would have more than a sellout crowd at Sports Authority Field. Much more.

The root causes of this poor performance reach far back into these students' experiences in Jeffco schools.

The state of Colorado has established academic standards for different subjects and grade levels. Every year, our children's mastery of those standards is assessed using the TCAP tests. If they achieve proficiency at each grade level, they should also meet the college and career readiness standard on the eleventh grade ACT, and not need to take remediation courses in college. Unfortunately, the percent of Jeffco students who are proficient tends to steadily decline from grade to grade. For example, in 2013, 74% of all Jeffco third graders were either proficient or advanced in math; by tenth grade, this had fallen to 43%. This was not a function of poverty: for students not eligible for free and reduced lunch, the fall was from 83% to 52%. For F&R students (about 34% of Jeffco students), it was much worse: from 57% to 20%. For special education students with IEPs (about 10% of Jeffco students) the fall was from 36% to 4%. And for gifted students with ALPs (about 11% of Jeffco students), the percentage scoring advanced in math fell

from 79% in third grade to just 35% by tenth grade. You can get the full data set here on [K12accountability.org](http://K12accountability.org)

This pattern has not changed in the eight years for which we have public data, which includes the period before Jeffco implemented budget cuts. Money does not appear to be the problem – and we’re still spending a billion dollars per year. To be sure, most of us have heard of individual student success stories in Jeffco, and that some of our schools have won awards (though some of these, like the James Irwin Award, seem to reflect favorable student socioeconomic circumstances, and not true school value added). However, these favorable anecdotes pale in comparison to the systematic data that describe Jeffco’s excruciatingly painful eight-year achievement track record.

In short, it is clear that Jeffco’s strategy has failed.

But this begs the question of just what is meant by “strategy”, which is perhaps one of the least understood and most misused words in any language. As I use the term, a strategy has five essential components:

- (1) A clear statement of the ends to be achieved, how they are to be measured, and why they are critical (i.e., to organizational survival and success). This is not to be confused with an organization’s mission, or the fundamental purpose of its existence (i.e., what would the world lose if the organization disappeared tomorrow?). In Jeffco, the Board has very clearly stated the ends to be achieved: Every student meets state grade level subject matter standards, and graduates college and career ready. In terms of metrics, they are also clear, if implicit in the goals: annual state assessments measure the extent to which state standards have been met, and the ACT test that all Colorado 11<sup>th</sup> graders must take measures college and career readiness. Given the intensely competitive global economy Jeffco students will confront after they graduate from high school, the endless increases in the cost of college, and the levels of debt students are taking on to meet them, the importance of meeting these goals is, I hope, self-evident.
- (2) Assumptions about future trends and uncertainties that are relevant to the achievement of the organization’s ends. There is no lack of these facing Jeffco today, including the state-mandated transition from seat-time to competency based education; the profusion of online and dual enrollment course offerings; the blurring of the line between high school and college (e.g., due to increasing use of AP and IB courses, and Early College High Schools); increasing cost pressures on the district budget, due to rising expenditures for PERA, health care, salaries, energy, technology, and facilities; increased pressures on family incomes in today’s economy that make it more difficult for parents to pay school fees and higher taxes; a rising percentage of at-risk students; accelerating progress in the range and uses of educational technologies (e.g., classroom dashboards; blended

and adaptive learning offerings; rising use of mobile devices, etc.); the introduction of more rigorous academic standards; the way evolving student demographics, technology, and standards are changing the definition of “effective teaching”; and whether the teachers’ union will or should continue to be recognized as a bargaining unit when their current contract with the district expires next year (e.g., in light of questions raised by the Vergara court decision). And I’ve sure I’ve missed other trends and uncertainties that also belong on this list.

- (3) A description of the means available to achieve the specified ends, including not just the billion dollar annual budget, but also Jeffco’s technological and physical resources, and key organizational competencies.
- (4) The creative heart of any strategy, and indeed the essence of the strategic art, lies in a clear, high-level description of how the available means will be used to achieve the desired ends. Effective strategists don’t simply punt and say, “we can’t achieve those ends with these resources.” They cast aside the conventional wisdom, get creative, and find a way to get the job done with the means available. That is what private sector companies have had to do to survive in the face of the tremendous increase in global competition they have faced. Effective strategists also don’t simply put together a laundry list of disjointed initiatives and plans, and call it a strategy. Detailed plans are almost always out of date as soon as they start to be implemented (i.e., “no plan survives contact with reality”), and most people can remember all the information they contain. In contrast, an effective strategy – what the military calls a commander’s “concept of operations” – is short enough to be easily remembered, and clear enough to guide action and set bounds on acceptable adaptations in pursuit of the desired ends.
- (5) All strategies require making difficult choices in the face of uncertainty, and thus entail the chance of failure, or, as it is more commonly termed, “risk”. An effective strategy will highlight the most important potential causes of failure to achieve the desired ends, and note the steps that will be taken to minimize these risks (e.g., monitoring early warning indicators, piloting initiatives before scaling them up, making contingency plans, etc.).

As I use the term, Jeffco does not have, to my knowledge, a coherent strategy. If anyone doubts this, I challenge them to download Cindy Stevenson’s last strategy presentation ([you can find it here](#)), and evaluate it against the five criteria I’ve just noted.

This brings me to the role of the District’s “Strategic Planning and Advisory Council”, whose stated purpose is “to act in an advisory capacity on such topics as district budget and the Strategic Plan.” The very poor quality of Jeffco’s strategy and its eight-year failure to achieve its goals (despite a billion dollars per year in spending) is inescapably a

reflection of the quality of the advice provided by previous SPACs to Cindy Stevenson and the Board of Education. Anyone doubting this need only review copies of the strategy advice that SPAC has provided, which can be found in the [SPAC archives](#) on Jeffco's website.

I have no doubt that one of the root causes of the SPAC's poor performance was a previous Board of Education's decision to combine the SPAC with the District Accountability Committee (DAC).

District and School Accountability Committees were created by the Colorado legislature to provide independent outside oversight and recommendations to the district Superintendent and Board of Education on issues related to academic achievement and budget allocation.

The membership, duties, and powers of District Accountability Committees are described in Colorado Revised Statutes 22-11-301 and 302. Section 302 (1) describes a DAC's basic powers and duties:

(a) "To recommend to its local school board priorities for spending school district moneys. Whenever the school district accountability committee recommends spending priorities, it shall make reasonable efforts to consult in a substantive manner with the school accountability committees of the school district. The local school board shall consider the school district accountability committee's recommendations in adopting the school district budget for each fiscal year;"

(b) "To advise its local school board concerning preparation of, and annually submit to the local school board recommendations regarding the contents of, a district performance, improvement, priority improvement, or turnaround plan, whichever is required based on the school district's accreditation category. In advising and preparing the recommendations, the school district accountability committee shall make reasonable efforts to consult in a substantive manner with the school accountability committees of the school district and shall compile and submit to the local school board the school performance, improvement, priority improvement, and turnaround plans submitted by the school accountability committees;"

(c) "If the local school board receives a charter school application, to review the charter application prior to consideration by the local school board as provided in section 22-30.5-107 (1);"

(d) "To provide input and recommendations on an advisory basis to principals concerning the development and use of assessment tools used for the purpose of measuring and evaluating student academic growth as it relates to teacher evaluations;"

(e) “To consider input and recommendations from the school accountability committee of each school of the school district to facilitate the evaluation of the performance of the school's principal for the purposes of article 9 of this title;”

(f) “To provide input to the local school board concerning the creation and enforcement of its school conduct and discipline code; and”

(g) “To increase the level of parent engagement in the school district and in the public schools of the school district, especially the engagement of parents of students in the populations described in section 22-11-301 (3).”

Section 302 (2) provides for the expansion of these basic duties: “The local school board and the school district accountability committee shall, at least annually, cooperatively determine the areas and issues, in addition to budget issues, that the school district accountability committee shall study and concerning which the committee may make recommendations to the local school board.”

The legality of the original decision to combine the SPAC and the DAC seems questionable -- have you ever heard of a subordinate level of government unilaterally combining one of its organizational entities with an organizational entity created by a higher level of government? More importantly, it seems obvious that combining the SPAC with the DAC, and then having the SPAC/DAC meet for only 17.5 hours per year (based on this year's published schedule) practically guarantees that it will poorly perform its wide range of duties.

The Jeffco Board of Education, Superintendent Dan McMinimee and his leadership team, and the parents, voters, and taxpayers of Jefferson County all need to have confidence that the SPAC is providing deeply considered and well-reasoned strategic advice on the many critical issues and uncertainties facing the district, and that the DAC and school SACs are providing effective oversight of academic achievement performance and well-supported budget recommendations. In my experience, none of these critical functions is being effectively performed today. It is time we separated the SPAC from the DAC, and challenged them both to improve their performance.

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