

# Thinking Critically About Jeffco's New Strategy

*By Tom Coyne*

Just published research has found that Jeffco's failure to successfully address its academic achievement problems has likely had a significant negative impact on our children's economic future.

In "[\*The Impacts of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility: Childhood Exposure Effects and County-Level Estimates\*](#)", Chetty and Hendren analyze the impact on income at age 26 of county of residence from birth to age 20 for children born between 1980 and 1991 (i.e., those who graduated from high school between 1998 and 2009). They further segment their findings into the impact on children whose parents were at the 25th percentile of family income (i.e., relatively poor) and the 75th percentile (i.e., relatively affluent). Since about 40 percent of Jeffco families are at or above the 75th family income percentile (based on 2013 Census data), I will focus on those results here.

Chetty and Hendren's research finds that living in Jeffco from birth to age 18 results in a likely negative impact on an affluent child's future income (at age 26) that is so large that it places Jeffco in the bottom 5% of all counties nationally for children from similar families (the authors' extended analysis reaches the same conclusion for children from families in the top 1% of incomes). For example, compared to a child who grows up in an affluent family in Fairfax County, Virginia, a child raised in Jeffco is likely to have an income at age 26 that is 25% lower (because the Jeffco child is likely to be 10% under the mean for 26 year olds who grew up in affluent families, while the Fairfax child is likely to be 15% above it). Note that this income could be earned anywhere — for example, a 26 year old who grew up in Jeffco could be working in Seattle. You can find similarly negative results by comparing Jeffco to large affluent suburban counties in other major cities, including, for example, Dupage County, IL (Chicago), Allegheny County, PA (Pittsburgh), or Norfolk County, MA (Boston). Here is what the *New York Times* special section on the Chetty and Hendron research had to say about these

findings: “Jefferson County is extremely bad for children in rich families. It is among the worst counties in the U.S.”

In their analysis of the possible causes of these results, the authors find that two have had the strongest impact on outcomes for children from affluent families: their county’s level of social capital (e.g., as described in Robert Putnam’s book, “*Bowling Alone*”), and the quality of their county’s schools. The data show that Jeffco’s level of social capital has remained relatively unchanged between 1990 and 2005, ranking in the middle of U.S. counties ([data can be found here](#)). That leaves our schools as the most likely driver of Jeffco’s deeply painful results.

Unfortunately, this should not come as a surprise. For over thirty years it has been clear that Jeffco has a student achievement problem. This year the district is once again formulating a new strategy to solve it. To help the Board of Education, district staff, parents, and taxpayers to evaluate the proposed new direction, in this article I will discuss the nature and results of the district’s current strategy, a range of considerations that the new one should take into account, and what a high quality strategy should include.

Between 1971 and 1992, Jeffco published an annual report on its achievement results, titled “Are We On Target?” Starting in 1985/86, the report’s findings were based on the results from the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills for grades 3 through 8, and the Iowa Tests of Achievement and Proficiency for grades 9 through 12 that were taken by all students every year, as well as on the results for Jeffco students who took the ACT and SAT college entrance tests.

In the mid-1980s, it became apparent that Jeffco’s math scores on the ACT and SAT were slipping. Between 1985/86 and 1991/92, Jeffco’s performance on most of the Iowa tests declined compared to the national norm. There was also a significant drop in the number of Jeffco students scoring in the top quartile of these tests. The district itself noted “results suggest that Jefferson County has not kept pace with the improvement in basic skills which has occurred nationally.” In 1992, Jeffco announced it would no longer publish the “Are We On Target?” report.

According to Marilyn Saltzman (*F.M. Duffy Reports*, January 2006), “in April 1997 Jeffco hired a research firm to conduct a survey of Jefferson County voters. Results

showed that 48 percent believed the district was on the wrong track, while only 37 percent said it was moving in the right direction.”

In July 1997, Jane Hammond was hired as Jeffco’s new Superintendent, in order, as she noted, “to bring 144 relatively autonomous schools into one high-performing school district. The goal was to increase student achievement in a community with high standards and expectations” (Jane Hammond 2009 interview on AASA.org).

Hammond undertook an extensive process to develop a new strategy for the district, while the Board of Education established a new Strategic Planning and Budgeting Council (which is today known as SPAC) “to oversee the strategic planning process as well as the implementation and evaluation of its results” (Saltzman article).

A key feature of the new strategy was the successful 1999 passage of a unique and nationally recognized “incentive” mill levy increase, the ultimate size of which was tied to meeting a series of achievement improvement goals (the target metric was based on the percent of students scoring proficient or advanced in grade 3 reading, grade 4 reading, grade 4 writing, grade 5 math, grade 7 reading, grade 7 writing, grade 8 math, and grade 8 science). Here is what Hammond said about this innovative approach in an interview with the American Association of School Administrators: “On the November 1999 ballot, we asked voters to approve a mill levy override that would provide \$25 million annually in additional funds. Another \$20 million in increased annual funding was contingent upon improved student performance on the Colorado Student Assessment Program, or CSAP. To earn the entire \$45 million, we had to improve the percentage of students scoring advanced or proficient on the CSAP by 25 percent over three years. This unique approach worked, and we passed the first mill levy override since 1983.”

“The next steps were critical: To meet our promise, we had to wisely invest the \$25 million in upfront money to improve student achievement. We developed a comprehensive program based on best practices research. Our plan included hiring instructional coaches in elementary and middle schools and significantly reducing class size in 3rd and 4th grades, which are the first grades tested. We also implemented increased teacher training, extended learning programs for students in need of extra help and special programs to serve our at-risk populations.”

“The baseline test score, calculated from 1999-2000 test results, was 53.2 percent of students scoring advanced/proficient. This meant the three-year goal would be 66.5 percent at the advanced/proficient level, a 25 percent gain. Just one year after implementing our Performance Promise Program, we increased to 60.4 percent of students scoring at that level — 13,459 more students or the equivalent of 138 classrooms! The improvements made by Jefferson County students exceeded those of most other students in the state. These results meant that in a single year, we met more than half of our three-year goal. As a result, the district will receive approximately \$10.6 million in additional revenue to support educational opportunities for students in the 2002-2003 school year.”

In July 2002, the Jeffco Board of Education replaced Jane Hammond with Cindy Stevenson. Over the next three years, Jeffco failed to meet any more achievement improvement targets and as a result received no further increases in mill levy funding. I have updated Jeffco’s results against the Performance Promise for 2008 through 2014 (previous TCAP data are not available because science standards were made more rigorous in 2008. In turn, TCAP science standards were replaced by CMAS standards in 2014, which I have included in my analysis). In 2008, an average of 66.7% of Jeffco students scored proficient or advanced on the eight targeted tests, just barely meeting the achievement improvement target set in 1999. Between 2008 and 2014, the average remained essentially unchanged.

Before discussing past and future strategies, let us be crystal clear about the situation we face today. For thirty years, Jeffco has failed to successfully address our district’s student achievement problem. And Chetty and Hendren’s research has found that this has likely had a negative impact on the incomes of at least forty percent of our children.

With that very sobering thought in mind, let us now turn to the new strategy that a bipartisan team will soon propose to the Board of Education (this team includes both Julie Oxenford-O’Brian, the current chair of the Strategic Planning and Advisory Council, and Bill Bottoms, the SPAC’s 2013/14 chair, who were both appointed to the SPAC by Cindy Stevenson).

What is strategy? The modern term comes from the Greek word “strategos”, which translates as “the general’s art.” A strategy is a coherent set of critical choices about how to achieve an organization’s most important goals in the face of uncertainty, with limited resources and an acceptable degree of risk. A choice is likely to be strategic if it will have a pervasive and persistent impact on an organization, because it will focus and set boundaries on a large number of subsidiary decisions and actions.

A well-crafted strategy proposal includes the following:

- (1) An assessment of the results of previous strategy, and the lessons that can be learned from them;
- (2) An assessment of, and assumptions about key trends and uncertainties that could affect the nature of the organization’s goals and its ability to achieve them;
- (3) Assumptions about the resources that will be available to the organization over the time frame covered by the strategy (and note that good strategists don’t simply assume the resources needed will magically appear; they either explicitly explain why they assume this will be the case, or devise creative ways to achieve desired ends with the current means available);
- (4) The coherent set of strategic choices that determine how scarce resources will be used to achieve the organization’s goals; and
- (5) An assessment of the risks inherent in the proposed strategy, and how they will be managed.

In contrast to strategy, a plan is an integrated sequence of actions that use specifically identified resources to achieve a relatively short-term and measurable objective. When you hear someone refer to “strategies” (plural), they are usually referring to plans, unless they are referring to the strategies employed by different organizations.

An example may help to make clear this fundamental distinction between strategy and plans. Apple’s strategy includes some very clear choices about where to compete (e.g., primarily focus on consumer markets, which over time have grown to include desktop, laptop, and tablet computers, music, photography, video, telephony, and now watches), and about how to create value (e.g., through superior design, superior ease of use, and superior brand experience). To implement this strategy and

deliver results for its customers and shareholders, Apple has crafted and executed a very large number of plans.

Let us now turn to the strategy that has guided Jeffco's use of scarce resources in recent years. First, what were the goals it was intended to achieve? In various documents, I have found Jeffco's mission described as: "To provide a quality education that prepares all children for a successful future." I have also found two very concrete and measurable goals: "Every student will meet state grade level subject matter standards, and will graduate college and career ready."

Second, let's look at the scarce resources whose use in the pursuit of these goals was guided by the strategy. Based on the most recent CDE data, in 2012/13 total revenue per student in Jeffco was \$10,420, or over \$260,000 for every classroom of 25 students. In aggregate, Jeffco schools have been spending close to a billion dollars per year to reach their achievement goals.

Third, let's identify the key strategic choices that have guided the way these billions have been spent. Unfortunately, this turns out to be far from easy. The official strategy document that was prepared by Cindy Stevenson and approved by the previous board is known as the "*Call to Action*". As you can see from [this presentation of the strategy](#) to the district's Strategic Planning and Advisory Council, and [this translation of the strategy into specific goals](#), it is essentially incoherent.

In the absence of an explicit description of the critical choices that have guided Jeffco's use of scarce resources in pursuit of its goals, we must infer them from our observation of consistent patterns in Jeffco's decisions and actions in recent years. This approach is unavoidably subjective, and reasonable people will likely disagree about the conclusions I reach (please feel free to add your own inferences in the comments section below, hopefully showing your logic and evidence). However, the absence of any proper written record of the strategy beyond the incoherent "*Call to Action*" leaves us with no choice.

As I have said above, a key characteristic of a critical strategic choice is that it has a pervasive and persistent impact on an organization, and substantially focuses and constrains a wide range of subsidiary decisions and actions. Given that definition, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that perhaps the most critical choice made by the previous

district leadership (and the boards that approved the strategy) was to pursue a collaborative relationship with the teachers union that minimized conflict between the JCEA and Jeffco's district leadership (right down to the level of school principals).

Objectively, it is easy to see the logic behind this choice, as the JCEA has historically played an important role in electing the members of the Board of Education, who in turn evaluated the Superintendent's performance. Indeed, there continues to be a chorus of people who praise Cindy Stevenson and previous school boards' track record of "close collaboration" with the JCEA, and who today criticize what they see as an increased level of conflict between the board, the district, and the teachers union. However, the other side of this argument is that substantial improvements in performance always require significant changes, which inevitably result in a higher level of conflict. By placing such a high priority on "close collaboration" with the JCEA, conflict has indeed been minimized, but at the cost of foregone changes that could have improved Jeffco's student achievement results.

Once this choice in favor of conflict avoidance was made, many other choices logically followed, including:

(1) Discouraging the removal of chronically absent and ineffective teachers from Jeffco's classrooms;

(2) Opposing the use of alternative school organizational forms, including the expansion of option schools (like Manning and D'Evelyn), early college high schools, and charter schools, even as Denver sharply increased the number of charters and saw significant improvements in its achievement results for at risk students;

(3) Resisting the use of alternative teacher certification and performance based pay, while defending seniority-based teacher staffing decisions, regardless of teachers' effectiveness in the classroom;

(4) Avoiding the comparison of school and Articulation Area achievement performance, and reporting district level achievement results in the most flattering light (and, more broadly, minimizing the use of data and analysis to drive performance improvement, in contrast to other districts like Cherry Creek and Denver);

(5) Avoiding evaluation of achievement improvement initiatives, such as full day kindergarten and cluster grouping;

(6) Investing in technology that is intended to improve the existing K12 model, rather than technology that could disrupt it. For example, the classroom dashboard/In-Bloom initiative was intended to automate data gathering and analysis processes that teachers today perform manually. Based on information presented to the SPAC, the project was expected to save 26,047 days of work, which is equivalent to freeing up about 139 full-time staff (based on a 187 day contracted work year). Yet the previous district leadership team offered no answer about how the labor savings from the classroom dashboard project would be used to improve achievement. In fact, they refused to answer questions about how those saved work days would be used.

(7) Avoiding experimentation with innovations that represented fundamental challenges to the existing Jeffco model, and would have required significant changes to organizational processes, the nature of a teacher's job, and school staffing levels (e.g., expanded use of dual enrollment; use of online courses provided by third parties; use of blended learning; and moving from seat time to competency based education, as was done in the Adams 50 district),

(8) Focusing budgeting decisions on incremental revenues rather than starting from a "zero base" (i.e., effectively "locking in" funding for the existing model), and not drawing a strong link between achievement improvement and budget decisions;

(9) Limiting spending on certain state-defined categories of student (e.g., until the new board changed the policy last year, Jeffco did not allocate district funds to GT programs; and after 2008, Jeffco's percentage of IEP identified students dropped to 1.61% below Cherry Creek's, a very demographically similar district which previously had the same IEP identification rates as Jeffco); and,

(10) Minimizing investment in the principal selection and development process (in contrast to far higher investment in Denver), while also centralizing many decisions at head office and limiting principals' decision and budget authority.

In essence, and in contrast to the approach taken by Jane Hammond, Cindy Stevenson's strategy could be summarized as "avoid conflict with the JCEA and do everything possible to preserve Jeffco's very traditional K12 model."

Unfortunately, Jeffco's achievement results over the past decade suggest that, despite spending nearly a billion dollars each year, this strategy has repeatedly failed to

achieve its two key goals of all students meeting state grade level standards every year, and graduating college and career ready.

In 2014, only 46% of Jeffco students met the “college and career ready” (C&C) standard in reading, only 47% in math, and only 45% in science. Since 2008, over 24,000 Jeffco 11th graders have failed to meet the C&C standard in reading, over 25,000 have failed to meet the math standard, and over 30,000 have failed to meet the science standard. In today’s intensely competitive global economy, these students and their families will likely pay a heavy lifetime price for these failures.

The usual excuse one hears for these dismal results is that they are due to poverty. Unfortunately, the truth is more painful. Among Jeffco students eligible for free and reduced lunch (FRL), just 26% met the C&C reading standard, and 23% met the math and science standards. However, only 52% of non-FRL students met the reading standard, 55% met the math standard, and 52% met the science standard. Jeffco’s achievement problems go beyond poverty.

Let me anticipate one more frequently heard comment: “I’m sure that isn’t the case at OUR high school.” Even in our most affluent articulation areas (Chatfield, Columbine, Conifer, Dakota Ridge, Evergreen, and Ralston Valley), only 58% of non-FRL eligible 11th graders met the C&C reading standard in 2014, 64% met the math standard, and 59% met the science standard. Affluence has not protected our children from serious achievement shortfalls.

Clearly, these are very disturbing and frustrating data that are sure to distress many parents – yet they are mirrored in [the past decade of CSAP and TCAP data](#) about the percent of students who have been meeting Colorado’s state academic standards in grades three through ten (and, in the case of GT students, [the low percentage who have been at the Advanced level](#)). Even worse, the data show that Jeffco’s achievement performance worsens as students move from grade to grade.

A frequently heard response to these poor achievement results is to point out that Jeffco outperforms Colorado. To that I have two replies. The first is that we should, because we have a lower percentage of at risk students than the rest of the state. The second is to note that what matters for our children when they apply to college, the military, or for a job is their performance versus absolute standards, and not their

performance relative to Colorado. If your child can't do algebra, it doesn't matter that Jeffco outperformed Colorado. He or she is not getting the job.

Another interesting and important question is what previous Jeffco leaders, SPAC members, and Boards of Education have identified as the causes of the district's failure to meet its achievement goals. Each year Colorado law requires school district leaders to prepare (and their board to approve) a Uniform Improvement Plan (UIP) that includes at least three of the most important root causes of the district's achievement problems. Here are the major root causes that were identified in the UIPs prepared by Cindy Stevenson's leadership team and approved by previous SPACs and Boards of Education:

#### 2010/11 UIP

- "Schools lack district-wide formative and benchmark progress monitoring tools in writing to calibrate the fidelity of implementation of the district writing curriculum."
- "Students needing to catch-up do not receive quality and/or adequate time for universal/core instruction in addition to effective, aligned targeted/intensive interventions."
- "Many secondary schools do not have a systematic, tiered system of support to respond to the needs of catch-up students."
- "The district has not strategically resource mapped and allocated resources differently among schools to better meet the needs of catch-up students."

#### 2011/12 UIP

- "Schools lack district-wide formative and benchmark progress monitoring tools in writing to calibrate the fidelity of implementation of the district writing curriculum."
- "Teaching and learning have not consistently demanded high expectations in every classroom due to superficial coverage of a large number of standards, lack of understanding of grade level mastery, lack of relevance for students, and lack of systemic progress monitoring."

- “Educators lack consistently rigorous, growth-producing feedback through the evaluation process.”
- “The district is not meeting the state expectation of 100% highly qualified teachers...because an effective monitoring system is not in place for existing staff especially for secondary schools.”

#### 2012/13 UIP

- “The district lacks systemic practices in writing instruction and effective feedback in every classroom.”
- “The district lacks structures to ensure consistent quality of professional development is provided to all instructional staff.”
- “District and school leadership lack systemic understanding around multiple pathways for students to stay on track to graduate.”

#### 2013/14 UIP

- “Systemic implementation of intentional lesson design to engage students’ conceptual understanding of their learning and increase student cognitive load is not evident in all classrooms.”
- “Educators have received inconsistent training on effective literacy instruction and the use of research-based resources.”
- “Math instruction tends not to be differentiated, lacking a variety of structures to meet students’ needs.”

These UIP Root Causes echo former Chief Academic Officer Heather Beck’s frequent references to Jeffco’s problems with “fidelity of implementation” and “lack of rigor” in many classrooms. However, when I look at this list I see deeper and more fundamental root causes than the ones cited, including the failure of three core management processes: innovation, implementation, and continuous improvement.

Consider innovation. At a recent school board study session, these were held up as examples of the most exciting innovation experiments under way in Jeffco today: the use of tablet computers at one school, increasing the amount of students' physical exercise at another, and extending the length of the school day at a third. There was no mention of what other potential innovation experiments were considered, or why these were chosen. I was particularly interested in the use of tablets, because of the very large body of research in this area, the large number of pilots that have been completed around the world, and the large amount of money that Jeffco (via district, grant, and PTA funding) has invested in tablet computers.

I had expected to hear a review of the research, a summary of the expected achievement impact of tablet use, a clear description of how the experiment was conducted, and how its results compared to the research findings, to results of tablet experiments at other Jeffco schools, and to results for a non-tablet using control group of students at the school in question. I heard none of these. Instead I heard a description of how the tablets had been used and some changes in achievement results at the school, but without any meaningful comparative context to interpret their significance. The only interesting thing I heard was how few teachers had progressed to the two higher levels of the "SAMR" technology adoption scale, where technology is used for something other than just executing existing processes in a different way (over the past 30 years, the private sector has painfully learned that in the absence of process and organizational changes, investment in technology will never produce its hoped for benefits). And this was a presentation of the results from one of Jeffco's premier innovation projects!

Next consider implementation. While every school and district UIP contains a list of "major improvement initiatives" that are intended to address the root causes of achievement problems, their execution is hardly ever tracked, much less rolled up into the type of comprehensive implementation reports (or online dashboard) that are routinely provided to private sector management teams and boards. This was a major red flag for me at a recent board presentation on the results of the Strategic Compensation pilots, which only focused on the results from the "high implementing" schools, and neglected those from the other, presumably "low implementing" schools. If

you read school level UIPs, you repeatedly encounter root causes that are clearly implementation problems (e.g., “teachers don’t use the collaborative curriculum alignment process”).

Recall also a frequently heard excuse for Jeffco’s low TCAP and CMAS scores: “The tests don’t cover what we teach.” Again, Jane Hammond provides a different perspective on this: “If standardized tests are aligned to high quality, rigorous, standards-based curriculum, you are not teaching to the test, but teaching to the standards” (*Education Week*, 9/21/05). The tests don’t cover what Jeffco teaches because the district has not fully aligned its curriculum and instruction with state standards – and then teachers and administrators have the audacity to blame the tests for the Jeffco’s poor results!

A central question is the extent to which Jeffco’s pervasive implementation problems reflect a lack of ability or a lack of will on the part of its professional staff. I won’t mince words: While poor principal and district leadership, and poor management processes and systems have undoubtedly played a role, so too has the district’s practical inability under the JCEA Collective Bargaining Agreement to dismiss teachers who are unwilling or unable to implement achievement improvement initiatives.

Now consider continuous improvement. Over the past decade, Jeffco has spent millions of dollars on instructional coaches, peer evaluators, instructional rounds, and professional development. Yet [the variation in levels of achievement growth across schools is still very large, within every category of students](#). In addition, the failure of the district to routinely produce reports comparing schools, and the systematic failure to evaluate achievement improvement initiatives that have been undertaken are more symptoms of a continuous improvement process that is fundamentally broken (e.g., about \$30 million was spent over six years on full day kindergarten before, at the request of the new board, the program received its [first performance evaluation](#) — and failed it).

Finally, consider the case of Jefferson High School. In a 2006 story in the *Denver Post* about the last turnaround at JHS (“Out of the Chaos: Jefferson Rebounds” 12/5/06), Area Superintendent Irene Griego claimed that Jefferson “could become a model for other urban schools”, and noted that the school had received “hundreds of

thousands of dollars” in additional funding. Yet that turnaround failed – otherwise the district wouldn’t be implementing another one. But does the new turnaround plan for JHS start with an unflinching assessment of why the last one failed? Is it based on research findings about the key success factors in school turnarounds? Did Jeffco even consider closing JHS and replacing it with a high performing charter, as Denver has repeatedly done with failing high schools that serve high numbers of at-risk students (with improved achievement the usual result)? From what I’ve seen, the answer to each of these questions is “no”. The closer you look, the more it becomes painfully apparent (and ironic) that, despite the fact that it is a billion dollar school system, Jeffco is far from being a learning organization.

Sadly, these broken management processes should not come as a surprise. When you think about it, you can see that their failure is a logical outcome of the strategic choices previous district leaders and boards of education have made, and the deep cultural beliefs and habits those choices have ingrained in many Jeffco employees and the unions that represent them.

Now let us turn to the future, and how the Board, parents, employees, and taxpayers should evaluate the new strategy that the district will soon propose. I will begin with some of the trends and uncertainties I expect the district’s strategy proposal will discuss.

Perhaps the most important is the rapidly evolving nature of the world in which our children will have to find jobs and make a living, where they will continue to find themselves under pressure from the twin forces of globalization and improving technology, which have eliminated many middle skill/middle wage jobs, and driven the sharp increase in inequality. Goldin and Katz highlight the implications of these trends for our schools in their book, *“The Race Between Education and Technology”* (similar points are made in *“Racing Against the Machine”* by Brynjolfsson and McAfee). Put simply, “college and career readiness” will continue to be a moving target, with the bar rising ever higher as improving technology changes the mix of knowledge and skills that humans require to effectively complement technology’s growing capabilities. People who master these skills will earn high compensation; people who do not will increasingly

find themselves in jobs with lower compensation, where personal service is critical (and which cannot be outsourced to another country or performed by technology).

This is the reason that today so many groups have created their own lists of “21<sup>st</sup> century skills” for high school students to develop, in addition to meeting ever more rigorous standards for academic competency (in fact, in the early 90s, Jeffco adopted a set of goals that said its graduates would have the knowledge and skills to be “an effective communicator; a complex thinker; a responsible citizen; a self-directed learner; a quality thinker; and an ethical person”). However, very few of these lists include the means for assessing the extent to which students have developed some or all of the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills they seek (for two that have taken this step, see [Project Be Ready](#) and [this report from the ACT organization](#)). And programmatic approaches to systematically developing these skills are also few and far between.

Authors as diverse as Robert Putnam (see his book, “*Our Kids*”) and Charles Murray (see his book, “*Coming Apart*”) have highlighted another consequence of rising economic and social pressures on many families: It seems highly likely that an increasing percentage of our student population will need extra supports of one type or another to enable them to graduate college and career ready.

The widening inequality gap also has important implications for the future funding which schools can expect taxpayers to provide. First, taxpayers who are facing more job uncertainty and whose incomes are likely to be under pressure are going to be much more reluctant to agree to higher taxes. To cite but one example of the pressures on family finances, Gallup recently found that 73 percent of families are worried about how to pay for college – an all time high for this issue, and families’ number one financial concern today. A second source of pressure on school finances will come from reduced funding from state government, which faces growing demands for increased spending on various safety net programs (as we just saw in this year’s state budget).

At the same time, current PERA regulations make it certain that schools will have to spend an increasing amount on pensions, while current health care cost trends indicate that future health insurance costs will also likely increase.

Another trend that potentially has important implications for Jeffco’s strategy is the state-mandated transition from the traditional educational model that is based on

days spent in school each year (or “seat time”) to one based on mastery of a defined set of competencies (“[competency based education](#)”). Adams 50 has already piloted the competency-based approach, and achieved significant achievement improvement gains. The move to competency based education is just one part of a larger trend in the private sector, where an increasing number of competencies are being formally defined, assessed, certified, and included as part of people’s online profiles and resumes. A traditional example of this is the CPA competence and certification; a relatively newer one is PMP (Project Management Professional). LinkedIn’s recent \$1.5 billion acquisition of online professional skill education company Lynda.com suggests that the existing trend toward competency certification and the development of online resumes based on portfolios of certified competencies will soon accelerate.

I also expect Jeffco’s proposed strategy to make explicit assumptions about four [important and accelerating technological trends in K12 education](#) that potentially complement the competency-based approach. The first is the expansion of [high quality online offerings](#), beyond those provided by Jeffco’s Virtual Academy. While the rapid expansion in online education offerings was initially focused on college level courses (e.g., Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs offered by Udacity, Coursera, and EdX), an increasing number are now focused on K12 (e.g., Boulder Valley Schools offers online AP courses from Fuel Education that are available year round to its students; Jeffco parents have to pay \$750 per course). Much as Edison’s invention of the phonograph reduced the attractiveness of the traveling singers who once graced the Leadville Opera House, vastly improved online courses and tutoring offerings like Kahn Academy now make it possible for K12 students to access some of the world’s best teachers in different subjects.

Closely related to this is [the growth of blended learning](#), which fundamentally redesigns the learning process to take advantage of the world-class lectures that are now available online. For example, rather than listening to lectures in class and doing homework problems at home, in a blended learning approach, students watch a lecture online, and their teacher works with them in school to discuss the application and implications of what they have learned from the lecture. To be sure, this requires the redesign of educational processes and teachers’ jobs; however, it also holds out the

promise of substantially improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the learning process.

The third important trend is the addition of “[adaptive learning](#)” features to online courses and blended learning offerings. A glib description of adaptive learning is that it is the magic that keeps your teenager in front of that online game for so many hours. A more technical description is that adaptive learning involves the real-time assessment of a student’s grasp of a concept, and the recalibration of the degree of challenge to an optimum level that will maximize his or her attention and rate of learning. Put differently, it is a technological solution to the problem of how to improve the personalization and differentiation of the education offered to our students, given that continued reduction of class sizes (to their logical conclusion of a tutor for every child) is economically infeasible.

Last but not least, and seldom mentioned in the recent controversy over school testing, are technological developments that have been made possible by the increasing adoption of national (or international) academic content and achievement standards. In much the same way that online offerings have rebalanced the traditional relationship between doctors and their patients (with patients now having access to a wider variety of much cheaper diagnostic technology that is linked to knowledge bases and algorithms that make treatment recommendations based on diagnostic results), technology is poised to soon do the same for the relationship between parents and teachers. In the not-too-distant future, it will be possible for a parent (for a price) to have his or her child sit at home and take an online academic (or 21<sup>st</sup> century skills) assessment and then receive not only a diagnosis of the extent to which their child has met or exceeded a given set of standards, but also specific recommendations for steps their parents and teachers should take to address identified areas of weakness. It has taken doctors 20 years to come to terms with the implications of this type of technology, and many still struggle to adjust to a new relationship with far more empowered patients. I don’t think teachers and districts will find it any easier. But they will have to do better than doctors, because our kids don’t have 20 years to wait for them to get it right.

All of these trends have important implications for the goals that Jeffco should pursue, the resources that will be available to achieve them, and the critical strategy

choices and implementation plans that Jeffco management will recommend to the Board of Education. Here I will only comment on the first two, and will wait to see the district's proposals in the third area.

In terms of the most important goals that Jeffco should pursue over the next five years, it seems clear that we must continue to strive to have every student graduate college and career ready. Yet we also have to recognize that this bar will continue to rise higher every year, given the unrelenting pressure from globalization and increasingly capable technology. Jeffco must also avoid the risk of making empty claims about developing students' 21<sup>st</sup> century skills by ensuring that any we target can be rigorously assessed. However, the challenges facing students and families today go beyond the need to master basic academic content and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Given the increasing financial pressure facing so many families, Jeffco must also pursue the goal of having students graduate with as many college credits as possible, to reduce their parents' college cost burdens and fears.

It is also critical that Jeffco's new strategy explicitly acknowledge the tight resource constraints we are likely to face in the future, and avoid the temptation to either assume a miracle ("don't worry, more money will be available in the future") or simply punt ("we can't reach those achievement targets using the current approach unless taxpayers give us many millions more in funding"). Great strategists devise creative ways to use available means to achieve their organization's most important ends, in the face of uncertainty and with an acceptable degree of risk. They don't assume miracles and they don't punt. Jeffco's new strategy should meet the same high standard.

So, to conclude: I hope this article has convinced you that the current redesign of Jeffco's strategy and then its aggressive implementation are both critical to our children's future -- regardless of the increased level of conflict that will inevitably accompany them. Here are the questions we should use to evaluate the quality of the new strategy that the bipartisan district project team will soon propose to the Board of Education:

1. Does it present an insightful analysis about what the previous strategy was and why it failed? Remember that those who ignore history are usually doomed to repeat it.
2. Does it discuss critical trends and uncertainties that could have a substantial impact on Jeffco, and make well-supported assumptions about them?
3. Does it clearly define the most important goals the strategy is intended to achieve, over what time frame, and the metrics that will be used to evaluate performance?
4. Is it based on realistic assumptions about the resources that will be available to achieve these goals?
5. Does it present a coherent set of critical choices that will focus and constrain the way scarce resources will be used to achieve the stated goals?
6. Does it include plans (activities, milestones, resource requirements, responsibilities, etc.) for implementing these choices, and for reporting implementation progress to the Board?
7. Does it present an assessment of the most important risks inherent in the proposed strategy, and how they will be monitored and managed?

Last but not least, after you have judged the proposed strategy against these criteria, ask yourself one final question: Does my intuition tell me it will work? And if the answer is no, then what is missing?

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