
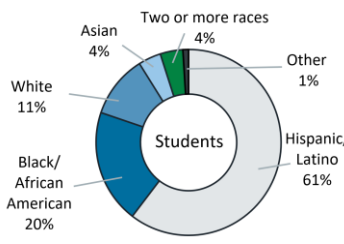
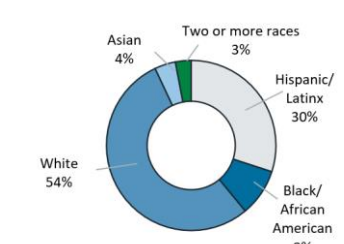




BRIDGES COLLABORATIVE MEMBER PROFILE

DSST Public Schools

Organization type: Charter Management Organization

Location: Denver and Aurora, Colorado	Population	
	<p><u>School Population</u></p> 	<p><u>City Population</u></p> 
	<p>35% are multiple language learners</p>	<p>77% are FRL qualifying</p>
Size		Year Founded
 <p>16 schools on 8 campuses (each campus has a middle and high school) 7,363 students</p>		 <p>2004</p>



How does DSST Public Schools work toward integration?¹

DSST Public Schools is a network of 16 tuition-free, public science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) charter schools located in Denver and Aurora, Colorado. Founded in 2004, DSST’s mission is to eliminate educational inequity, and it advances this mission by interrupting inequitable practices, examining biases and other root causes of inequities, and actively valuing diversity and inclusion.

DSST exists within communities that have been historically segregated due to redlining practices in Denver. DSST’s mission is grounded in equity and integration, and every aspect of its work is aimed at providing equitable opportunities and experiences for all students. As outlined in their strategic plan, DSST actively pursues its mission of fostering integration and educational equity. The organization is dedicated to equipping all students, particularly those who have been historically marginalized, with the skills to be successful in 4-year colleges while also nurturing students’ self-awareness. These goals are outlined in DSST’s *graduate profile*, which describes the skills and attributes expected of every

¹ By design, DSST focuses on integration within its network of schools; this includes integration by race, gender, and ethnicity and providing equitable education opportunities for all students.

DSST graduate. The profile serves as a guiding “North Star” for integration initiatives, providing a clear direction for the organization’s efforts.²

The graduate profile was developed by incorporating feedback from families, alumni, and current students. The graduate profile includes three key areas: college readiness, proficiency in STEM skills and mindsets, and a well-developed sense of self. DSST helps students gain skills in these areas by offering students opportunities to enroll in STEM courses and participate in SAT preparation activities. Additionally, DSST encourages identity exploration through various activities to foster self-awareness and facilitates social-emotional learning activities to prompt student reflection on purpose and values. Taken together, these opportunities anchor DSST’s integration work by ensuring that all students have equitable education experiences and are prepared for future success.

Dr. Aaron Griffen, the chief equity officer for DSST, noted that “we not only talk about integration by race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, but we also talk about the integration of opportunities, creating opportunities where Black and brown students have historically been excluded from STEM.”

DSST’s strategic plan offers concurrent enrollment and advanced placement courses at the schools, along with a strong focus on STEM education across all course offerings. DSST’s goal is that 50% of all students earn STEM certificates and that 50% of the students earning certificates are students of color. By intentionally focusing on STEM education for students of color, DSST makes continued progress on academic integration within its schools.



Spotlight on continuous improvement and sustainability

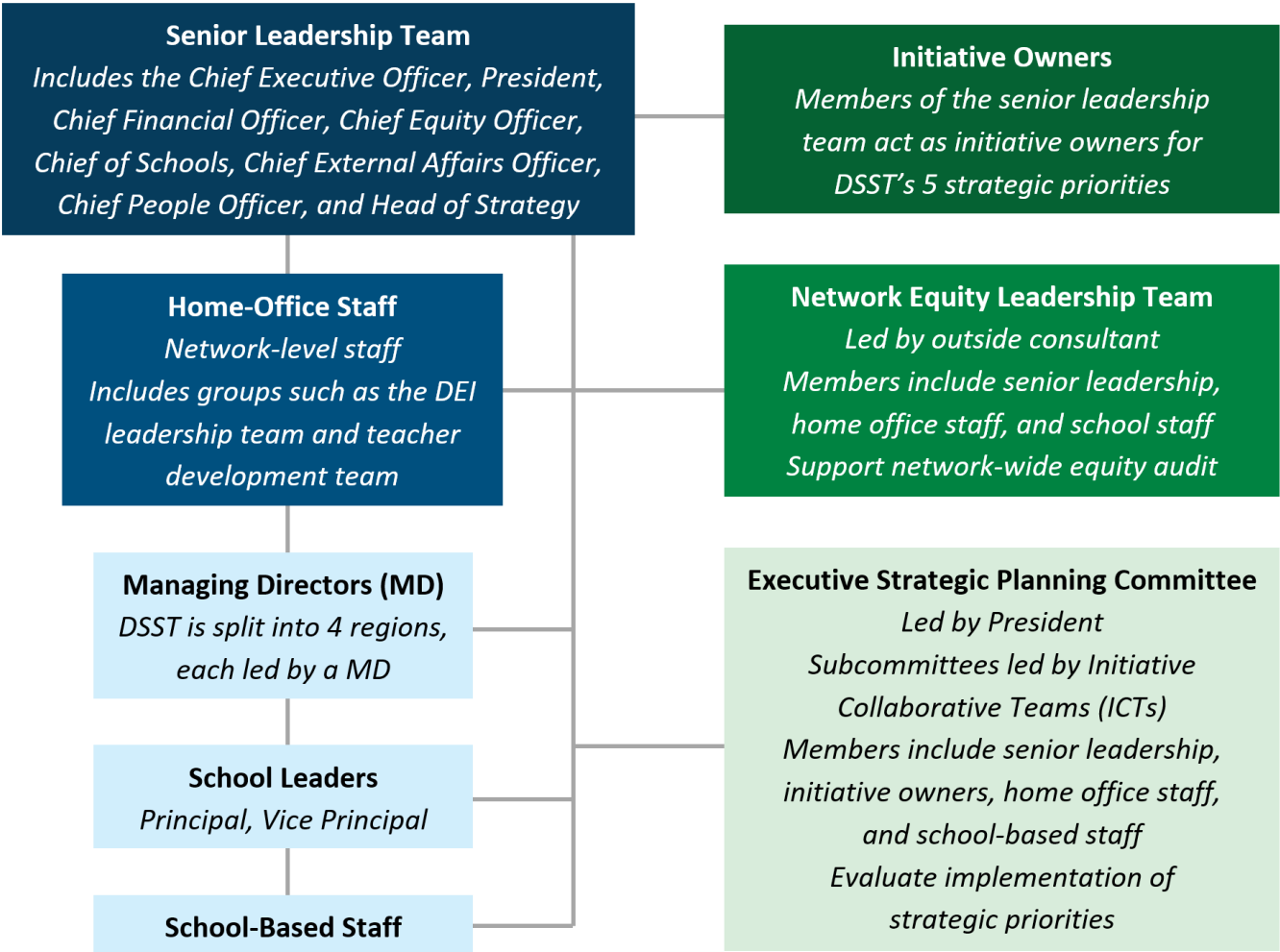
This profile provides examples of how DSST makes progress on school integration by proactively planning for sustainability, evaluating effectiveness, designing a structured continuous improvement process, and examining funding and other financial needs.

Sustainability planning

DSST intentionally embeds sustainability planning into its strategic plan, which facilitates the management of network priorities over time. DSST develops 5-year strategic plans to drive its work forward, setting yearly goals and initiatives for the network. The current plan focuses on five strategic priorities: (a) STEM-centered college prep program, (b) excellent curriculum and instruction, (c) transformational talent (i.e., leadership development), (d) student and staff experiences (i.e., school culture), and (e) collective impact. Each priority, or initiative, is spearheaded by an initiative owner, who is a member of the senior leadership team (refer to the organization chart below for an overview of DSST’s staffing structure). Dr. Griffen emphasized that all strategic priorities “must align with and contribute to the achievement of the graduate profile,” signifying that DSST intentionally structures the strategic plan to advance integration objectives. As a result, each of the five priorities is designed to reinforce the graduate profile, and every department aligns its efforts with each of these overarching priorities.

² For additional details on DSST’s mission and its graduate profile, visit <http://dsstpublicschools.org/about-us>.

DSST Public Schools Organization Chart



DSST embeds sustainability processes within their strategic priorities. This year, the president of DSST launched an executive strategic planning committee, whose purpose is to both assess implementation and evaluate the sustainability of plans for achieving the network’s strategic priorities. The committee is comprised of cross-functional working groups, which include senior leadership, initiative owners, home office³ staff, and school staff, who meet weekly throughout the year. This committee evaluates whether the priorities within DSST’s strategic plan are being implemented with fidelity and examines initiative roll-out, communication, attainment of set goals, and feedback received. To distribute the work among committee members, DSST formed subcommittees called Initiative Collaborative Teams (ICT). Each ICT focuses on a specific priority within the strategic plan. Each initiative owner meets with their ICT monthly and reviews multiple sources of data, including metrics on school climate, student discipline practices, staff retention, classroom observations, and feedback from students and staff. The ICTs and initiative owners report back to the larger executive strategic planning committee about their implementation successes, areas for growth, and plans for sustaining and improving their initiatives.

³ The “home office” refers to the main DSST office where district-level staff provide support for all schools in the DSST network.

Evaluation of effectiveness

DSST uses a number of tools to assess the network’s progress toward integration and education equity goals and to identify effective and ineffective practices. To systemically evaluate the organization, DSST is conducting an equity audit during the current school year (2023-2024). Based on a cost analysis and a scope of work aligned with the network’s goals, the DEI office selected an outside consulting agency to lead the equity audit. The equity audit focuses on five areas selected by the consultant: professional development, curriculum, student experiences, family engagement, and systems.

Dr. Griffen noted that “three of these [areas] are aligned perfectly to our strategic priorities. At the end of this [audit], whatever the recommended actions are, we’re going to look at those, look at our priorities and our initiatives, and align those [actions] to the initiatives, so that they will be embedded within, rather than becoming their own priority.”

To help oversee the equity audit, DSST formed a *network equity leadership team*. This team includes members of senior leadership and the home office. However, although DSST’s DEI leadership team is available to provide resources and guidance when needed, they are intentionally not included on the network equity leadership team. DSST opted not to include Dr. Griffen and the DEI team as members of the network equity leadership team. This decision was made to create room for others within the network to lead this kind of work. The network equity leadership team met with the consultant in September to identify appropriate focus groups, select questions for focus groups and surveys, and select quantitative measures that represent the five focus areas of the equity audit. In the fall of 2023, focus groups were conducted with families, students, and staff. Subsequently, in the spring of 2024, surveys are scheduled to be administered to gather feedback from families, students, and staff. After the audit is complete, the consultant will review the qualitative and quantitative data, then meet with the network equity leadership team in April to design a scope of work based on equity audit results. Dr. Griffen will act as a bridge between the network equity leadership team and the executive strategic planning committee to ensure that recommendations based on the equity audit are integrated and put into practice in the strategic planning for upcoming year.

In addition to the equity audit, DSST also uses a series of network pulse surveys to regularly evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of their strategic priorities. Every semester, surveys are administered to families, staff, and students. The staff survey includes questions about staff familiarity with DSST’s strategic priorities and how well staff feel the initiatives are being implemented at their schools and across the network as a whole. If the survey data reveal any areas of concern, DSST leadership holds follow-up conversations with staff to learn more about their feelings and identify gaps in communication or understanding.

Continuous improvement

DSST has established a systematic continuous improvement process for its network of schools. This process allows DSST to regularly assess progress and provide targeted support in areas where goals are not being met. DSST divides its schools into four regions, each led by a managing director. To identify evidence of what DSST terms a “strong start” toward priority goals, school leadership teams visit DSST schools during the first 3 weeks of the school year to collect data related to the *school culture* priority.

According to Dr. Griffen, the teams “look at specific measures and metrics that we put in place [to evaluate] how staff are meeting the plans as outlined by the culture initiative in the strategic plan. Now we know where our schools sit with the implementation of our cultural system and expectations for students and staff.”

For the remainder of the first quarter, the school leadership teams conduct instructional observations to evaluate the *curriculum and instruction* priority of the strategic plan. These observations focus on aspects such as curriculum fidelity, instructional equity, lesson plan development, and active engagement of students. The leadership teams complete observations using a teacher rubric developed with feedback from multiple departments within DSST. Data from the rubric are disaggregated in multiple ways to examine group patterns. For example, data are disaggregated by level of teaching experience, student race/ethnicity, gender, special education learners, multiple language learners, and students receiving free or reduced-price lunch.

The senior leadership team examines data collected in the first quarter of the school year and shares the information with multiple groups, including managing directors, school leaders, and home-office staff (e.g., the teacher development team). When sharing this information, the senior leadership team provides the data, along with specific action steps, recommendations, and a menu of data-driven options for support. Managing directors then develop an “arc of the year,” which outlines planned support for each remaining quarter of the school year. The data also drives professional development activities as managing directors plan school-specific activities, and home-office staff plan network-wide professional development activities that meet the specific needs of individual schools and the broader DSST network.

Funding and financial planning

To prepare for sustainable progress toward integration goals, DSST places strategic priorities at the center of budgeting and financial planning. DSST’s funding model is driven by state per pupil revenue, and over seventy cents of every dollar spent goes towards the people in the organization. DSST uses a blended school staffing model in which each school is allocated funding to staff a core model, then schools are provided additional need-based funding for English language learner programming, special education, and mental health staffing. For network funding, DSST considers the specific roles or staff needed to meet strategic and network priorities, then they determine how best to fund those roles. Department leaders are provided with base funding, and they also have the opportunity to request additional funds to support priority work. The finance team works collaboratively with budget owners to finalize budgets, ensuring that spending aligns with the network’s strategic priorities. The finance team regularly holds financial forecast meetings with budget owners to anticipate additional resources

that each department may need to support the network’s initiatives. DSST’s strategic priorities also guide budgeting decisions. If funds are not spent in support of the priorities, the finance team may move those funds to another department that has an ask aligned with the network’s priorities.

Dr. Griffen explained, “I know [the finance team] will ask, ‘How does that additional new hire help you meet the strategic priorities? How does having an additional professional development fund help this network reach its strategic priorities?’ When we start making decisions around budgets, there’s a responsibility there that the finance department puts on budget-owners to think about how that [ask] meets [the priorities].”

DSST also has a development team that leads fundraising campaigns and maintains relationships with donors. In addition, the development team supports budget owners by identifying potential funding sources. For example, the development team works with budget owners to complete a needs assessment for their department; then, the team identifies grants that match specific needs, such as funding a reading interventionist or curriculum specialist.



What factors support the continuous improvement and sustainability of DSST’s integration initiatives?

Intentionality. DSST intentionally embeds sustainability and continuous improvement processes into their work from inception. First, DSST established a clearly defined and compelling vision (i.e., the graduate profile) which remains at the core integration-related work. After establishing this core vision, DSST intentionally built sustainability processes into the 5-year strategic plan. DSST also integrated continuous improvement processes into all stages of the workflow. This approach supports the network’s ability to assess progress toward desegregation and integration goals, providing the flexibility to pause and make course corrections when needed.

Community Engagement. The network’s continuous improvement approach is also supported by input and buy-in from the school community. DSST regularly shares data with the school community summarizing successes and areas of improvement. Additionally, the organization uses community feedback to inform the design and implementation of specific initiatives. DSST incorporates feedback from many different groups into integration-related work, including students, families, current staff, former staff, alumni, board members, and community members. Using town halls, focus groups, and surveys, among other means, DSST maintains a continuous cycle of two-way communication, which has enabled wide buy-in for DSST initiatives within the community.



What are the challenges DSST faces related to the continuous improvement and sustainability of its integration initiatives?

DSST continues to work on communicating effectively about the organization’s priorities. Dr. Griffen notes, “*we all know that effective communication is two-way communication. Often ownership falls on the receiver, but ownership is actually on the messenger.*” To improve communication, DSST is committed to taking the time necessary to share information with families, while also listening and actively seeking opportunities for families, students, staff, and community members to share their thoughts and opinions.

Ensuring fully inclusive decision-making in the context of continuous improvement remains a challenge. Dr. Griffen described the difficulty of including people from different backgrounds, not only based on race or gender, but also based on learning styles. Dr. Griffen explains that since people receive and process information differently, the network is working to “*communicate in ways that are receptive, valuing, and inclusive*” so that all people, regardless of their intersectional identity see themselves in the work. DSST aims to foster a clearer understanding of the “why” behind its initiatives within the school community by being mindful of their communication approach. This, in turn, can facilitate a deeper sense of community investment in the work.



Lessons learned

- Bring people to the table who enjoy strategic thinking—and also those who don’t. People who are passionate about project management, strategic planning, and systems thinking are valuable team members. People who may not share a passion for strategic thinking should be given an opportunity to provide input as well, as they will help ensure that diverse ideas are considered.
- Set the stage before taking action. When outlining continuous improvement plans, clearly describe the current context and define key roles ahead of time. Provide time for staff and community members to ask clarifying questions and fully understand the “why” before beginning the work.
- Embed sustainability and continuous improvement processes into overall planning from the start. To be successful, these processes must be thoughtfully planned and intentionally incorporated throughout all stages of the work.
- Be willing to pause. Have the confidence and courage to acknowledge any missteps, realign, and get started again. Pausing enables leaders to redirect their focus from meeting deadlines to ensuring understanding, when necessary. This approach maintains credibility and buy-in among those invested in making progress toward integration outcomes.