



Building Strong Schools and Strong Cities

The [UNC Center for Urban Education](#) thanks Denver Mayor Mike Johnston for visiting our campus earlier this month and inspiring us to keep doing the hard work it takes to build strong schools in our communities. Strong schools need strong teachers, and CUE teacher candidates learn how to step into that role. They are successful classroom teachers and active democratic citizens.

Introducing the Mayor

Professor Jim Walsh has been teaching history at the UNC Center for Urban Education (CUE) almost since it was founded 23 years ago. "It's the most rewarding place I've taught in 30 years," he said as he addressed the audience gathered at the CUE Lowry campus auditorium. Walsh was there to introduce Denver Mayor Mike Johnston, with whom he is well acquainted: He was one of 16 candidates who ran against Johnston in Denver's 2023 mayoral race.

Walsh joked that he and Johnston had spent so much time up on stage together that, "We could

play each other theatrically.” He reminisced about the time when the mayoral candidates assembled in front of the Capitol building at dusk in February 2023 and fielded questions from Denver’s unhoused. “It was the first time I thought, ‘I kinda like this guy,’” said Walsh.

Johnston as Educational Leader

Walsh and Johnston share more than their desire to serve in office; they both have a love of education and teaching. Johnston comes from a background in teaching and leading K–12 schools. He told the inspiring story of how he took over one of Denver’s schools that had a 50% graduation rate. Only 10% went to college, and only 10% of those students graduated with a degree.

Johnston had different ideas for this school. He took all the 9th graders out on the football field and told them about a crazy idea he had. “We know you’re capable. I want 100% of you to walk across the stage at graduation in four years. I commit to doing something different, and I’m asking you to do something different,” Johnston told them.

He went on to establish co-accountability for the cohort, supported them academically and personally, and set up an elaborate framework for achieving success. During the celebration four years later, each student named the four people who had helped them the most and then climbed a ladder while their chosen theme song played to symbolize the progress they had made. One hundred percent of them graduated and were accepted at four-year colleges.

Johnston believes it’s impossible to build a strong city without a strong school system.

Johnston continued the tradition with each incoming class and even broadened it by bringing in sixth and seventh graders to watch the annual celebrations. “We wanted them to start thinking about where they wanted to go to college,” said Johnston, “rather than accepting the way it had always been.” He believes it’s impossible to build a strong city without a strong school system.



CUE teacher candidates converse with Mayor Mike Johnston

Johnston as City Leader

Now that he's Denver's mayor, he's taking the same approach with the unhoused—thinking broadly about how to build infrastructure and permanent housing for our citizens in need rather than following the longstanding policy of breaking up camps and moving the unhoused from one place to another. Upon taking office, he declared a homelessness emergency and started working on moving 1,000 of Denver's unhoused into permanent housing and permanently closing those encampments.

He also asked other large-city mayors to accompany him on his visit to meet with the Biden Administration and ask for more financial support for cities supporting migrant refugees entering the country from the southern border. Johnston is also pushing for changes to work authorization procedures. "Once they move to permanent housing, they won't be able to stay there for long without jobs," said Johnston. "I talk to the restaurant and hotel managers who say they have jobs available, and I talk to the people who want to work. We can fix this problem," he added.



Denver Mayor Mike Johnston takes questions from the audience

Johnston then took questions from the audience on a variety of topics, from Colorado's environmental goals to daycare centers for migrant families to his efforts to provide full-day preschool to all Denver children.

Thinking about Becoming a Teacher?

We are enrolling new students for the spring 2024 semester. Call Dr. Rosanne Fulton, Director, UNC Center for Urban Education, at 303-637-4334 or [email](#) for more information. Watch our [short video](#) to learn more about the CUE teacher-preparation program.