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DPS panel: Offer birth control

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By John C. Ensslin, Rocky Mountain News

Denver Public Schools high school health clinics should be allowed to dispense contraceptives if the individual schools approve, a report on the system recommended Monday.

Birth control options would include condoms, the morning after pill and contraceptive pills and would be dispensed with a parent's approval.

A 21-page report by a task force studying Denver's school-based health clinics makes several recommendations on expanding services provided by the 20-year-old system run in partnership with Denver Health.

These include:

Hiring more school nurses and part-time case managers.

Expanding the current 12 clinics to some middle or elementary schools in poorer areas.

Providing more dental care and mental health services.

Seeking more diversified funding sources.

Helping more uninsured families enroll their kids in Medicaid and other assistance program.

A Denver school board member who served on the 43-member task force agreed that the most controversial part of the study is the contraceptives recommendation.

"It's obviously something where we're going to work with our school communities," said Michelle Moss. "But I really like that it comes from each school, rather than a district-wide policy."

Moss said she hopes the school board, which is currently busy with a plan to close certain schools, can take up the health study by December.

Currently, the school-based health clinics offer general medical care plus pregnancy testing, counselling and referrals as well as routine gynecological exams and family planning evaluations. However, none dispenses contraceptives.

Moss said it is her understanding that even if the principals and community boards of individual schools were to opt to provide contraceptives, parental approval would still be required for each student.

Paul Melinkovich, a task force member and director of Community Health Services at Denver Health, said he believes the most vital recommendation is one that calls for expanding the clinics, which cost \$3.6 million to operate annually and are funded by public and private sources.

The Task Force on the Future of the Denver School-based Health Centers was created by the Colorado Health Foundation and the Donnell-Kay Foundation, which funded the study.

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