

In Denver Times

DPS urged to address alternative ed

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By Nancy Mitchell

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More than a third of Denver high school students are at least a year off track to graduation in a district with few resources to steer them back to a diploma, estimates a report released Thursday.

The study urges Denver Public Schools to focus on building alternative education options for those 7,500 students – as well as at least 6,000 dropouts living in Denver who are aged 16 to 20 and eligible to return to a public school.

“This is a call to action,” said Tony Lewis, executive director of the Donnell-Kay Foundation, which produced the report. “This has been a problem that has been talked about for the ten years I’ve worked at Donnell-Kay and I’ve not seen any movement on it, none.”

Lewis is not the first to express frustration about alternative education in DPS. In June, Denver School Board President Theresa Peña told Superintendent Tom Boasberg that it was “absolutely unacceptable” the district had yet to develop an alternative education strategy.

Her comments came more than a year after an alternative education task force convened by DPS produced a series of recommendations. Little, if anything, was done with them.

“These kids don’t have a voice,” Lewis said. “These are typically disenfranchised kids and families so it’s really tough for them to push on a system that isn’t all that interested in hearing about it.”

A deeper picture of struggling students

Researchers analyzed data for 21,279 DPS students in 2006-07 to develop a better picture of the district’s faltering high school students and their peers who had already dropped out.

Of the total, 10,005 students were off track to graduate by a year or more and 7,569 of those were still in school. The other 2,436 were dropouts.

What they found were a diverse group of students with differing education needs:

- About a third, or 29 percent, of the 10,005 students off track to graduation are younger, ages 14 to 16. Adding extra academic support and credit recovery programs in their traditional high schools might be enough to get them back on track to a diploma, the study notes.
- But most of the students, or 62 percent, are older, ages 17 to 20, so a high-quality alternative option is cited as the best bet to graduate by age 21. That’s when the state stops paying to educate K-12 students.

- The remaining students, or 9 percent, are both older and “significantly off-track” or behind enough in credits that it is unlikely they could receive a diploma by age 21. So a GED program with transitional services to college or work is listed as a viable option.
- Of the 11,274 students who were on track to graduate, 879 were not in school indicating a traditional high school program also had not worked for them.

“It’s not, ‘all dropouts are the same. They aren’t,” Lewis said. “I think our report really goes into the detail to say there are different groups of kids to be served and the best way to serve them in a district that has very few high-quality alternative ed schools is to create new schools and programs.”

What DPS offers: ‘Few seats, poorly located’

The study counts 11 DPS schools as “alternative,” defined as schools serving students who are not succeeding in traditional schools. Those 11 schools serve 2,700 students.

In addition, DPS has two “behavioral” schools that typically serve students referred by social services or juvenile courts and two online schools. The four schools serve 1,100 students.

Of those 15 schools combined, only two are rated as “meets expectations” by DPS – the others either received the two lowest possible ratings or are not rated by the district.

In addition, the location of the schools is cited as problematic. Nearly a third of all 2006-07 high school dropouts live in southwest Denver, the study found. But only two alternative schools are located in that part of the city and one of those is a program for teen moms.

“Of course we want to see alternative education programs here because we absolutely need them,” said Michelle Moss, the Denver school board member who represents southwest Denver. “But the reality is, I have only one building with open seats and that’s Kennedy high school ...

“So the question is do we use those seats for alternative education?” she asked. “Do we use those seats for a high-performing high school? Do we use those seats for a high-performing middle school? Because we don’t have any of those in southwest Denver either.”

DPS data shows 939 high school dropouts in southwest Denver in 2006-07. The second highest area, with 552 dropouts, was far northeast Denver.

Tackling the issue, one school at a time

Earlier this month, DPS officials announced plans to open a “multiple pathways center” in fall 2010 to serve students in grades 9 through 12 who are behind in their credits.

The center will be open from 7 a.m. until 10 p.m. Monday through Saturday and students could attend full or part-time. Its location has yet to be announced.

Lewis said he has been unsuccessful in getting more details about the proposed center.

“It wasn’t clear and it still isn’t clear to me which students are going to be served,” he said. “The gist of our report is to say, you don’t randomly open multiple pathway or dropout centers or

alternative ed schools. You really collect the data, analyze the data and then thoughtfully create the options.”

DPS has solicited proposals for new high-quality programs serving struggling middle and high school students. But it’s received few responses that fit that specific request for proposals or RFP.

“The RFP is not an excuse for not taking action on our own,” Moss said. “If we can’t find someone who wants to come in and turn these alternative programs, then the district has to figure it out on our own.”

The study cites successful alternative education models in Portland, Chicago and Philadelphia. Lewis said researchers have talked with alternative education providers interested in coming to Denver.

He also said successful local models with waiting lists – Florence Crittenton, Emily Griffith – should be encouraged to replicate.

But DPS needs to pursue those successes and not wait for them to respond to an RFP, he said.

“What is the systemic DPS roadmap for serving these kids, both kids who have dropped out and who are at risk of dropping out?” Lewis asked.

Click here to view [A Call to Action: Getting Denver Public Schools Students Back on Track to Graduation](#), which includes a series of recommendations and a two-year timeline to improve alternative ed in DPS.

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