

Denver Daily News

Group urges Colo. schools to get smart' With autonomous schools

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What does Colorado need to get more kids to graduate, be engaged in learning and become successful young adults, asks a new Colorado education reform organization.

It needs to “get smart schools,” states the organization whose name mirrors that slogan.

Get Smart Schools is focusing on building new K-12 autonomous schools both in the charter and district worlds of education. Unlike most education reform efforts, the Get Smart Schools initiative looks to build autonomous schools from the ground up, rather than trying to rebuild existing schools. The focus is placed on schools serving low-income students along the Front Range.

“Nearly half of the students in the urban core fail to graduate from high school, and Colorado ranks 32nd in the nation on the poverty achievement gap in reading and 43rd in math,” said Senate President Peter Groff, who is also co-chair of the reform group. “Colorado’s kids deserve more — more schools to meet their needs and more proven school models that will keep kids engaged and in school through graduation.”

Innovation Schools Act

Groff successfully lobbied the Legislature last year for the Innovation Schools Act. The legislation created “Zones of Innovative Performance” allowing schools, or groups of schools within a school district to seek designation from the State Board of Education to innovate in the areas of curriculum, length of school day and year, budget, teacher compensation and employment. Schools must submit a three-year plan to their local school boards for approval.

The legislation originally met resistance from unions and the Colorado Education Association, but that opposition quickly disappeared.

‘Mark of approval’

Building on Groff’s success in the Legislature last year, Get Smart Schools includes local educators, community organizers and business executives looking to develop new, high-performing public school curriculums that will share the Get Smart Schools “mark of approval.” To qualify, a Get Smart School would need to meet several requirements, including offering a “rigorous educational model with proven academic results,” as well as “demonstrated success in closing the achievement gap.” An educational focus would be placed on preparing students for college and the 21st century. Studies indicate that Denver schools that opened in the last six years — like West Denver Preparatory and KIPP Sunshine Peak Academy — out-perform schools with similar populations, according to reports.

“Education reform leaders generally agree that starting new schools is more effective than transforming failing schools,” said Amy Slothower, executive director of Get Smart Schools. “While the cost of starting new schools is high, the cost of doing nothing is higher.”

Autonomy

Several Denver schools, including Bruce Randolph and Manual High School, were granted autonomy by the school board last school year. The two schools started the Colorado autonomous school reform movement.

Get Smart Schools will also help school start-up leaders secure resources, including financial and access to facilities, that will help them build new schools and curriculums from the ground up. The group is providing fellowships to start-up leaders that will offer training on how to manage large budgets, human resources and building boards, to name a few areas of training.

Funding

The reform group will raise funds to be dispersed as both direct cash support and technical/strategic support for schools within its network, according to a news release announcing the creation of the group. It currently has secured an initial round of funding from the Daniels Fund, Piton Foundation and Donnell-Kay Foundation. It will also look to offer educators a dual MBA and master's degree in education to equip educators with management, administration and teaching skills all in one package.

Get Smart Schools will also recruit charter management organizations and national education reform groups like New Leaders for New Schools, which currently offers leadership programs in New York, Chicago and New Orleans.