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## **Panel: Rein in online schools** Study group suggests agency set standards

**January 27, 2007**

**By Berny Morson, Rocky Mountain News**

The Colorado Department of Education should step up supervision of online programs following a critical state auditor's report, a study group said Friday in a draft recommendation.

The four-member study group, headed by University of Colorado Law School Associate Dean Lorenzo Trujillo, said the education department should establish quality standards for the programs, including teacher qualifications, student-teacher ratios and the design of courses.

Sen. Sue Windels, D-Arvada, the chairwoman of the Senate education committee, has said she will use the report as a starting point for a bill she is drafting to regulate online programs.

Trujillo and Windels were meeting late Friday to discuss the report.

The Trujillo panel was convened by the private Donnell-Kay Foundation after the December state auditor's report.

Much of the criticism was aimed at the Hope Online Learning Academy Co-Op.

The school, headquartered in Centennial, is chartered by the Vilas School District in Baca County in southeast Colorado. Hope runs 79 learning centers around the state, where more than 3,800 students use an online curriculum provided by Vilas.

The audit found that Hope had failed to perform background checks on some employees. The audit also said Hope channeled funds to sectarian groups, which contracted to run learning centers.

Much of the problem was blamed on the inability of the tiny Vilas district, which enrolls only 100 traditional students, to oversee the much larger Hope operation.

Under the recommendations released Friday, a new division within the education department would have to certify that a school district has the capacity to oversee a proposed online program.

Hope Director Heather O'Mara could not be reached for comment Friday.

The Trujillo panel was divided on what to do with the 79 existing Hope learning centers.

One alternative is to let centers continue if the larger program meets criteria set by the state education department.

The other alternative is to require the centers to apply for charters from the school districts in which they are located.

Most are scattered around the Denver area.

As part of the second alternative, each center would be required to have a qualified teacher on site. Hope learning centers are staffed mostly by "mentors," who are not certified to teach.

In addition to Trujillo, who once ran an online school in Commerce City, the panel included Kinny Griffith, who heads a firm that creates content for online programs; Timothy Snyder, a former executive of Colorado Online Learning, which provides courses to school districts; and Jane Urschel, the associate director of the Colorado Association of School Boards.

A second panel, established by the Colorado Board of Education, also is studying online learning. It will release a draft report in mid-February.

The Trujillo group's draft will be the subject of a hearing at 1 p.m. Friday at the Denver Public Schools administration building, 900 Grant St. A final report will follow next month.

### **Key elements of the Trujillo report**

- **Oversight** A new agency with at least four staff members within the state Department of Education should oversee online programs.
- **District capacity** The agency will determine whether a school district has the capacity to adequately supervise online programs for students elsewhere in the state.
- **Standards** Online programs will be held to standards in areas such as course design and teacher qualifications to be established by the agency.
- **Funding** Disparities in state funding for online and traditional students should be resolved.
- **Data** The state should keep better data on online schools to show whether students - particularly at-risk students - are being adequately served.

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