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Citizens panel issues report on DPS closings

By Nancy Mitchell, Rocky Mountain News

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A citizens panel studying the possible closings of some Denver Public Schools sought reassurances Wednesday about how the district will treat families affected by any changes.

Members of the panel, the A+ Denver subcommittee on finances and facilities, even debated whether to ask DPS leaders for proof that they'll craft a thoughtful and detailed transition plan for those students.

"I have some doubt about the district's thoughtfulness or ability to make this work," Tony Lewis, head of the Donnell-Kay Foundation, said, echoing other panel members. "Do we just say, 'You've got to have a plan' or do we ask for proof?"

Brad Jupp, DPS senior academic policy adviser, told panel members that the district has some preliminary ideas.

"It's sketched out," he said. "It's better than on a cocktail napkin, but it's not fully developed."

A statement in the panel's final report, which now goes to DPS leaders, made its position clear:

"These transition plans ... are the single most important aspect of our recommendations," it reads. "The district must provide detailed transition plans for all affected students."

Wednesday's meeting wrapped up the panel's work, at least for a couple of months. The 55-page report, including a series of criteria and principles for DPS to follow in making school closing decisions, now goes to the Denver school board.

No names of schools targeted for closing are included, and those specifics aren't likely to be released until late fall.

That's when DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet is expected to present a "complete package," including school names and transition plans, to school board members, DPS spokesman Alex Sanchez said Wednesday.

The board will have the final say and is expected to vote the entire package up or down. DPS leaders have said any closings would occur after the 2007-08 school year.

Members of A+ Denver, a citizens group of more than 100 that was created last year to help guide DPS, have estimated that as many as 30 to 40 of the district's 150 schools might close or undergo changes such as new staff and new instructional programs.

The subcommittee has been meeting since February to analyze district data and recommend ways to improve the district's financial state.

Their 55-page report does not explicitly recommend that DPS shutter schools, but it comes close, noting "cutting expenses (without closing schools) is unlikely to produce significant budget improvements." It also states that the district's buildings are "well in excess of its needs," with classrooms only about 70 percent full across the city.

DPS enrollment has dropped by about 30,000 students since 1969. That's a huge financial hit since state school funding is based on numbers of students.

Much of the report focuses on the principles that DPS should follow if schools are closed. At the top of the list is the idea that students affected by closings must have access to a better school.

The report also lists criteria that DPS should apply to determine which schools to close. Most of the more than 300 people who attended recent meetings across the city said that schools showing poor academic growth should be considered first for closing.

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