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DPS committee: Better schools needed to retain students

By Nancy Mitchell, Rocky Mountain News

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A citizens' panel studying the closure of some Denver public schools today said the district must show any school closing will result in better academics for the kids forced to move — or their school cannot close.

"If all we do is put kids in bigger, equally bad schools . . .," began panel member Tom Gougeon, a developer.

"Game over" with the public, finished Tony Lewis, another member who is head of the Donnell-Kay Foundation.

Members of the panel, the A+ Denver subcommittee on Finances and Facilities, voted at meeting's end to add the conditional language to their draft report containing criteria for school closures.

The 45-page report will now go before the public in five community meetings scheduled across the district through the end of May. The panel hopes to incorporate public input and present the report to the Denver school board on June 7.

Denver school board members are expected to vote in July on any school closures, with the last day of classes for those targeted likely in spring 2008. More than 30 percent of the 98,000 classroom seats in DPS are empty.

Lewis, whose foundation works with Colorado school districts on issue such as leadership and capital construction, said it's not enough for DPS to say, "Trust us, in five years, it's going to be better."

DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet said his staff would return to the panel this summer with a list of schools to be closed, if any, and an explanation of how the students affected would be served.

"We have to do that," he said. "That's the commitment we've made from the beginning."

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