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Fewer than 10 schools may close DPS leaders expected to unveil plans on Monday

By Nancy Mitchell, Rocky Mountain News

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Denver Public Schools leaders are expected Monday to announce the closure of fewer than 10 schools across the city - a steep drop from earlier estimates of 30 to 40, sources said.

The change comes, at least in part, because DPS does not have enough quality schools to close any more buildings and fulfill its promise that every displaced student would have access to a better education.

That's why DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet also plans to announce a way for new schools to form, or for existing schools to re-form, through an application process open to those inside and outside the district.

A number of large urban school districts - New York City, Chicago, Oakland, Calif. - have successfully used a similar "request for proposal" or RFP process, according to a report released Thursday by the Donnell-Kay Foundation in Denver.

"To me, it's the next step in school reform in DPS. It builds on what they're doing now," said Tony Lewis, executive director of the nonprofit. "It's providing families and kids really great schools based on results we've seen in other urban districts - and that's the other half of the school closure question."

Few 'better' options

Lewis is a member of the A+ Denver Subcommittee on Facilities and Finance, the citizens group that worked for months to come up with the criteria DPS should use in deciding which city schools will close.

The group's top suggestion to Bennet is that students affected by closures must be assigned to a better school or program.

But, particularly at the middle and high school level, quality options in DPS are few.

"DPS clearly needs to close some schools, both for performance reasons and for attendance reasons," Lewis said. "But at the same time, you have to start thinking about what kinds of new schools you want to create in their place."

DPS is about 30 percent empty, largely because officials have been reluctant to close schools as its enrollment has dwindled from 98,000 pupils in 1969 to about 72,000 students today.

The Donnell-Kay report, "Creating a Culture of Success: New School Development in DPS," urges the district to set the stage for the creation of new small schools to open in fall 2009.

Lewis said the district should solicit middle and high school ideas first, given the need for quality options.

He also pointed out those are the years students tend to leave DPS - "by dropping out or choosing out." So the smaller schools, by hanging on to more students and the state education dollars that follow them, would not necessarily be more expensive.

Changing closure list

Bennet has been reluctant to comment on rumors about the school closure list or other parts of next week's announcement.

Other sources are willing to talk only if they're not named and with the caveat that the school closure list seems to change from day to day.

Thursday, eight schools were expected on Monday's closure list, along with Del Pueblo Elementary in west Denver. School board members unofficially closed Del Pueblo this fall after only 80 students enrolled.

DPS spokesman Alex Sanchez preferred to say the school's academic program was "suspended," with its final outcome pending the school closure decision.

A+ Denver members have strongly urged DPS against "rolling" out the closures over time.

Federico Peña, the former mayor and U.S. Cabinet member who is chairing A+ Denver, along with former Mayor Wellington Webb and others, said the group will have no problem voicing its discontent if DPS does not follow its recommendations.

Bennet is releasing the plan to A+ Denver on Monday and to the school board on Tuesday.

"If we believe decisions are being made that are not appropriate, we will speak out," Peña said. "Our goal is to find the best possible way to make Denver Public Schools the best in the country. We will take whatever actions are necessary to make sure that happens."

While Bennet's proposal may focus on a single round of school closures, he also is expected to release a process that makes closure a consequence for schools repeatedly failing to make academic progress.

'Lot to be hopeful for'

Lewis, with Donnell-Kay, said the closures can be seen as an opportunity.

"Chronically low-performing schools should be closed so that an array of new, personalized schools can be born," the report states.

New York City, for example, has created 274 small schools of fewer than 600 students since 2002.

In Chicago, an initiative known as Renaissance 2010 has created 32 charter schools, 19 district schools with more autonomy and four contract schools.

In Oakland, the district has created 39 small schools with 300 to 500 students.

"Simply being small isn't enough, it isn't even close to being enough," Lewis said. "You've got to have a really good school design, really clear curricula and clear buy-in by instructional staff.

"I look at this as a great opportunity," Lewis said. "With the results other districts are seeing so far, there's a lot to be hopeful for in DPS."

School closure timeline

Denver Public Schools leaders on Monday will announce their proposal to close some city schools, kicking off two months of community meetings and public hearings before a final vote.

- **Monday - 5:30 to 7:30 p.m.**, Turn Halle at the Tivoli Student Union, 900 Auraria Parkway. Denver Public Schools Superintendent Michael Bennet's first public outline of his proposal to close some city schools and funnel the savings into improve student achievement districtwide.

- **The audience** is the A+ Denver Finance and Facilities Subcommittee, the community group which spent months setting criteria for the closures. The group will then meet to decide whether the proposal fits their recommended criteria.

This meeting is open to the public but is not intended as a forum for community input.
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Rocky Mountain News will provide live coverage of the meeting at **rockymountainnews.com**.

- **Tuesday - 5 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.**, DPS administration building, 900 Grant St. Bennet presents the plan to the Denver School Board. This meeting is open to the public but is not intended as a forum for community input.
- **Wednesday and Thursday - 5:30 to 7:30 p.m.**, locations to be announced on Monday. Meetings for families affected by the closures.

The following week is intended to allow families affected by the closures to visit their new schools.

- **Oct. 8-Oct. 17** - Dates, times and locations to be announced on Oct. 1. Families will assemble at the schools to which their students are assigned in fall 2008.
- **Public hearings** scheduled Oct. 18 and Nov. 15 - 6:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m., DPS administration building, 900 Grant St. School board members hear from the community about the proposal.

Decision time

- **Nov. 19 - 5 p.m. to 8 p.m.**, DPS administration building, 900 Grant St. School board vote expected on closure proposal.
- **For more information**, including meeting updates, letters to parents and frequently asked questions throughout the closure process, log on to **dpsk12.org** and click on "District Reform Efforts."

mitchelln@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-954-5245. To see the Donnell-Kay report, log on to rockymountainnews.com or dkfoundation.org

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