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## **‘Old Way’ No Longer Enough - DPS chief, board call for extensive district reform**

**By Nancy Mitchell, Staff Report**

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Denver Public Schools leaders on Wednesday joined a growing chorus of voices saying the school district is broken and radical reform is needed.

"It is hard to admit but it is abundantly clear that we will fail the vast majority of children in Denver if we try to run our schools in the same old way," reads a letter signed by DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet and all seven members of the school board.

The letter is a response to the *Rocky Mountain News* series "Leaving to Learn," about the growing number of families leaving Denver's public schools.

"We really believe what we wrote. We really see that DPS has to have a fundamental change in order to meet the needs of the kids in the district and the kids we're losing," said six-year school board member Michelle Moss. "We are absolutely at a place where we know it has to start now."

Such statements may surprise some, said Scott Foust, a parent serving on a citizens panel studying school closings in DPS, where 31,000 of 98,000 classroom seats are empty.

"That group of people standing up and saying how stark the reality is, is new and hopefully will raise some eyebrows," said Foust, a senior vice president for First Bank Data Corp. and father of two students at DPS' Teller Elementary.

It's not new to former Denver Mayor Federico Peña, who said he believes a tipping point for change has been reached.

"Many, many people in Denver - and they represent a cross section of citizens, parents, business people, civic leaders - all believe the Denver Public Schools system is broken, that we are failing thousands of students every year and we cannot continue to do that," he said.

Peña, who is leading A-Plus Denver, the 125-member citizens panel recently created to guide DPS on issues such as school closings, is optimistic.

"I think there is a tremendous amount of not only interest, but concern and willingness by many, many people to correct this major problem in our city," he said.

Some close observers of DPS - Mike Kromrey, director of Metro Organizations for People, a community advocacy group, and Tony Lewis, who heads the Donnell-Kay Foundation - said the most radical idea in the letter is restoring "much greater control at the school level."

But it also may be the most contentious. It includes the hiring of teachers and the length of the school day and year, which are issues partly under the control of the teachers union.

"So the question becomes, can you pull that off?" said Lewis, whose foundation works on education issues in Colorado.

Kim Ursetta, head of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association, said the union "embraces reform and is ready to do things differently."

"DCTA is willing to have those tough conversations in order to make student learning more effective in this district," she said. "But we cannot dismiss the fact that teachers and parents are the ones with the most influence on kids."

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