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State eager, wary over school reform

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By Jennifer Brown

Coloradans are eager for a radical redesign of the public education system but wary about the state adopting an exact replica of the latest national guide to reform.

That was the sentiment among about 500 people - educators, business leaders, parents and lawmakers - who filled a ballroom Wednesday at the Colorado Convention Center to hear about a report that is suddenly all the rage in the education world.

"I think there is a firestorm out there," said Jayne Schindler, an education lobbyist who came for the presentation of "Tough Choices, Tough Times."

Colorado is poised to become an experimental state for the major overhaul laid out in the report from the National Center on Education and the Economy.

It calls for allowing students who want to attend community or technical colleges to test out of high school by passing a statewide board exam after 10th grade. Students headed for top universities and colleges would stay in high school until 12th grade, and students who failed the test could take it in following years.

The savings from students heading to technical schools would be used to make sure all 3- and 4-year-olds can go to preschool. The report also says teacher pension plans should shrink to pay for much bigger salaries - up to \$110,000 per year.

Two creators of the report are in Colorado this week for a three-day visit.

Marc Tucker, president of the national center, and William Brock, former Republican U.S. senator from Tennessee, met with lawmakers in state House Speaker Andrew Romanoff's office before Wednesday evening's community meeting. They also have appointments with business leaders and newspaper editorial boards.

"No state has expressed more excitement," Brock said.

The report was intended to provoke a massive conversation that leads to education reform individualized by states, he said.

"Anybody who thinks you can impose a blueprint on Colorado or any other state in this country is smoking something strange," Brock said.

Colorado is competing with Massachusetts and Connecticut, states that have shown interest in the report, said Tony Lewis, executive director of the Donnell-Kay Foundation, a Denver education research group.

The report's authors are looking for big-donor backers and intend to push Congress to give federal grants to states piloting the ideas.

"I'd like to see us be first in line," said Romanoff, D-Denver, who plans to set up a statewide commission to develop a Colorado version. "I think there is an opportunity for Colorado to lead the world in education."

Many are lining up behind Romanoff, as evidenced by the packed ballroom filled with people scribbling notes.

"There is a real need for change in the system," said Curtis Dotson, a retired school psychologist. "They are making a lot of sense to me."

Some, though, were concerned about pieces of the report - particularly that states, not school districts, would employ teachers and that some kids might get stuck on a trade-school track after 10th grade while others stay in school to prepare for select universities.

"I'm fearful that the students moving on would be a certain part of the population, low-income or students of color," said JoAnn Trujillo-Hays, principal of North High School in Denver.

Jefferson County school board member Sue Marinelli said the report has energized educators, but it is not the "one solution or the one answer."

State Rep. Michael Merrifield, a Colorado Springs Democrat who chairs the House Education Committee, said he has received dozens of e-mails from people worried the report "would just be slapped down on them."

Merrifield wants a year-long statewide conversation. "This report is one great source, but it's not the only one," he said.

Staff writer Jennifer Brown can be reached at 303-954-1593 or jenbrown@denverpost.com.

What the major education redesign would do

- Create state board examinations that students would take after 10th grade. Students who score well enough could go straight to community college for a two-year technical degree. Students with the best scores would stay in high school to prepare for entry into selective universities.
- Recruit teachers from the top third of high-school students going to college. Shrink teacher pension plans and use the savings to give starting salaries of \$45,000 per year, now the median teachers' pay, and up to \$110,000 per year for teachers willing to work the same hours per year as other professionals.

- Provide state-funded preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds. Pay for this with the money saved from eliminating 11th and 12th grades for some students and remedial courses in college.
- Let teachers operate schools themselves, similar to doctors or architects in a firm. School boards would manage them as independent contractors.
- Abandon local funding of schools in favor of state funding using a uniform pupil-weighting formula. Infuse additional money into schools serving disadvantaged students.
- Push the federal government to create "Personal Competitiveness Accounts" to pay for higher education. The government would deposit \$500 upon birth, adding smaller amounts until age 16.

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