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Charter school aimed at struggling kids

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By Carol McGraw

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Just who is that guy who, for months, has been standing outside grocery stores and in malls and even going door-to-door looking for fourth graders?

That would be Zach McComsey, and his intentions are downright noble.

McComsey, a Harvard Divinity School graduate with ties to a new Colorado educational reform coalition, is approaching parents in Harrison School District 2 in search of students for a new public charter school. It would serve low-performing, low-income students who are at high risk for dropping out. The Atlas Preparatory School would be patterned after several Colorado charter schools that have had measurable success with at-risk kids, and it would join a handful of others nationwide that focus on that population.

Proponents of the schools say the concept brings charters closer to their roots. The movement began 16 years ago with a mission to increase quality public school options for all children, particularly minority and disadvantaged students left behind in traditional school systems. But most charters do not adequately address the needs of that population, many educators say.

"We are trying to dispel the idea that charter schools should only focus on children who are the cream of the crop. We want kids who are struggling the most," McComsey says.

He'll present the Atlas Prep vision to parents and the Harrison school board at meetings on Wednesday and Thursday. The board plans to vote by Nov. 20 on whether to accept the school.

If the proposal flies, Atlas Prep would start with a group of fifth-graders in August 2009, with a school day that would go from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., and a school year that would be 190 days, compared with the 180-day calendar for most traditional schools.

PLAN IS TO BRIDGE POVERTY GAP

McComsey, who is married but has no children, seems an unlikely person to lead the charge for a charter school, since many are started by parents.

But he's as civic-minded as they come. After graduating from Colorado Christian University in Lakewood, and Harvard Divinity School, he completed a two-year fellowship at El Pomar Foundation in Colorado Springs, which supports civic and community programs. One of his projects there was working with students in an ethics program. He also had a year's fellowship at Building Excellent Schools, a national nonprofit that helps train leaders for urban charter schools.

He also became the first fellow with Get Smart Schools, a new Colorado educational reform coalition formed to support nontraditional public schools for underserved students along the Front Range. The organization hopes to turn around a dismal statistic: Colorado ranks 32nd in the nation in the poverty achievement gap in reading and 43rd in math.

Get Smart, which receives money from the Daniels Fund, Piton Foundation and Donnell-Kay Foundation, provides technical assistance to charters, including training for the board of directors, start-up grants and leadership coaches for principals.

Amy Slothower, Get Smart's executive director, notes that charter schools have historically come out of "mom and pop" efforts, with few resources to support school leaders and give them adequate time to plan their new schools. Many ended up closing.

McComsey has been given a stipend and support to carefully plan Atlas to avoid such pitfalls.

McComsey and his staff pinpointed D-2 because of the reputation of its superintendent, Mike Miles, as well as its urban demographics. Sixty-eight percent of the students were eligible for free and reduced lunch prices last year.

"Mike Miles is fighting to close the achievement gap, and we hope to contribute to his great work," McComsey says. "Our program would complement what they are doing."

He plans for Atlas to mirror programs such as those at West Denver Prep, where he was a fellow through Building Excellent Schools. West Denver Prep and two others in Denver - KIPP Sunshine Peak and the Denver School of Science and Technology - are considered success stories in working with minority and poor populations. West Denver Prep, opened two years ago; last year, it ranked No. 1 in its district and third among all Denver Public schools in certain progress evaluations.

LONGER DAYS, MORE LEARNING PLANNED

So far, Atlas has enlisted more than 100 parents interested in the concept. Students would be chosen by a lottery, and open next year with fifth graders. It would add grades each year until it was populated with fifth- through eighth-graders.

A key component of the school would be its longer school days, allowing kids to get in class from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., giving them double doses of reading and math, plus writing, history and science. Students would also have time for music, art and sports during the day.

Between the longer school days and longer school year, students would end up with the equivalent of five years of education in just four years.

Students also will wear uniforms, and follow a strict code of conduct. There will be rigorous academics, mandatory homework and "homework clubs." Teachers and staff will get four weeks of development training in summer and would have four planning periods each day, more than most get in public schools.

"The families and staff will commit to doing whatever it takes to educate," McComsey says.

The goal? To get students into a college-prep mindset. They'll get college prep courses, field trips to colleges, college mentors and classrooms named after their teachers' colleges .

"College can be a pretty abstract concept to fifth graders, So we will immerse them in college culture so they get excited about it," McComsey says.

While charter schools that target high-risk populations are few and far between, their rigorous structure provides a formula for success, says Dick Carpenter, an education professor at the University of Colorado-Colorado Springs who has studied charters.

Carpenter recalls a visit to a Houston KIPP school - one of the models that Atlas would be patterned after. The students were there from early morning to sometimes late evening for various activities.

"The principal had me look across the street at some apartment buildings," Carpenter says. "There were kids from other public schools milling about doing nothing. He said 'That's what our kids would be doing if they weren't here'."

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