

Rocky Mountain News

DPS fields new ideas - Moms proposing an immersion language school

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By Nancy Mitchell

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Two Denver moms tired of driving their young children to Aurora are proposing the city's first public Chinese and Spanish language immersion school.

"We're trying to build this program from our kitchens," Camilla Modesitt told Denver Public Schools board members on Tuesday.

Modesitt and Kristy Fantz are co-founders of the Denver Language School, one of five new schools seeking space in DPS in fall 2009.

They are among those responding to DPS' first open call for new school ideas. Others include the Denver teachers' union, which is proposing its own school, and a bid to expand the sought-after West Denver Prep charter school.

"We did this . . . to unleash creativity in this district," DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet told the two moms. "You've certainly taken us up on that."

Their proposal has emerged from the kitchen to gain some powerful backers, including the Stapleton Foundation, which has assisted schools such as the Denver School of Science and Technology, or DSST, among the state's top high schools.

"This model is very, very effective for students of all backgrounds," said Brian Weber, Stapleton's vice president of education and workforce initiatives.

As with DSST, the Denver Language School would require a certain percentage of students - at least 30 percent - come from impoverished backgrounds, Weber said.

Unlike DSST, he said, the language school would not be located at Stapleton. It is looking to secure space in a nearby DPS building.

Fantz and Modisett drove children this past school year to an Aurora charter school, Global Village, which offers Chinese and Spanish immersion.

They wanted something closer to home but DPS, while offering dual language programs, does not offer full immersion. That's where children spend more than 50 percent of their day in the second language.

More than 200 parents have expressed interest in the school, which would open for kindergarten through second grade and add a grade each year to become K-8.

"The biggest appeal is preparing our children for the global economy," Fantz said.

DPS board members will vote June 26 on the five applications. A fourth applicant is Envision Schools Colorado, a proposal by the Donnell-Kay and Piton foundations to open two schools targeting students who would be the first in their families to attend college.

The fifth applicant is Gerald Dare, who wants to open a charter school for at-risk students. Dare's attempt to open a charter school in 2005 was rejected by state officials after they learned he had reached a plea bargain in a case alleging sexual assault on a 14-year-old girl in 1996.

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