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DPS teachers union offers plan to open own school

By Nancy Mitchell,

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Denver Public Schools' call for new school proposals is being answered by its teachers union and by groups eager to replicate models proven successful in poor communities.

The Denver Classroom Teachers Association wants to open its first school in fall 2009 emphasizing science, technology, engineering and math. It would be called STEM Leadership Academy.

DCTA President Kim Ursetta said she knows the school, if approved, will be closely watched by education reformers - and by union naysayers.

"We know this is a challenging proposition," she said. "We want the opportunity to put our best practices in place."

The DCTA school would open as a kindergarten through second grade program and add a grade a year until it serves through grade eight. A teacher/leader would head the school.

Union leaders submitted their letter of intent Thursday to beat today's 5 p.m. deadline for new school plans. DPS leaders announced the "request for proposals" process in October, specifically seeking middle and high school models that have been successful with poor children.

Six letters of intent were submitted Thursday, including a proposal to open the first of what likely will be six schools across the metro area modeled after Envision schools in San Francisco.

Amy Anderson, director of strategic partnerships for the Donnell-Kay Foundation in Denver, said the goal is to serve children who would be the first in their families to go to college.

Envision charter schools emphasize arts and technology in a college preparatory curriculum. Anderson said Donnell-Kay, along with the Piton Foundation of Denver, has been working for a year to bring the model to DPS.

The initial phase of the proposal includes opening one school serving grades six through 12 in fall 2009 and a second, similar school in fall 2010, she said. One school would be in northwest Denver and the other would be in the city's northeast.

Also, West Denver Preparatory Charter, a high-poverty, high-performing middle school on South Federal Boulevard, submitted a letter of intent to expand. "We are looking at a vision to serve 1,000 kids over three campuses in southwest Denver," said head of school Chris Gibbons.

The plan is to open a second middle school in fall 2009 and, three years later, a high school to serve students from both West Denver Prep middle schools.

Complete application packages are due to DPS by May 16. Denver school board members will vote on applications in early July.

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