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### **Analysis**

## **Education savvy sent Bennet to head of class**

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**By Allison Sherry and Michael Riley**

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Although many Colorado Democrats see Michael Bennet as a risky Senate pick — untested electorally and unknown to many voters — education officials in the new Obama administration are casting him as a golden choice.

That may go a long way toward explaining how Bennet rose to the top of a field of strong candidates who could boast a record of successful elections, pockets full of newspaper endorsements or support in the state's key electoral hot spots.

Despite expectations that political calculation would weigh most heavily on the governor's choice, the president-elect's sweeping national agenda just may have trumped the powerful pull of local politics.

"I'm so appreciative that the governor had the vision and the foresight," said Arne Duncan, Chicago's public schools chief and Obama's pick for secretary of education, one of several national officials who praised Bennet's choice Friday.

"Yes he may be nontraditional but he is an extraordinary public servant, and he'll do the state very proud," Duncan said.

Skeptics point out that no one knows what kind of campaigner Bennet will make. They worry that he's little-known outside Denver or outside an elite group of national education reformers.

"This is a more Denver-centric pick than Diana DeGette even," said one Democratic insider who asked not to be named in order to speak more frankly. "It's a stunning choice, just totally stunning. I mean that in a negative way."

Another key Democrat characterized it as potentially a major political blunder: "I don't think Ritter has any idea what he's just done," said the insider, who also asked for anonymity.

Sources close to the selection process say that the force of Bennet's personality and his wide experience — he served in Clinton's Justice Department and made millions in business before giving it up to work for Mayor John Hickenlooper and then to redesign Denver's failing urban schools — impressed Gov. Bill Ritter and key players who had input in the choice.

But Bennet's close relationship with the incoming Obama transition team — a relationship forged as a top candidate to be secretary of education — also helped build a powerful constituency, one that sees Bennet as a critical ally for education reform in the Senate.

If this was a choice that was Ritter's alone, insiders say it can't be isolated from the context of a sweeping national education-reform agenda.

The Obama administration plans to reform but keep No Child Left Behind, the landmark Bush administration legislation that requires all 50 states to test students for progress in reading, writing and math.

More controversial, Obama's team is interested in encouraging school districts to consider pay-for-performance plans for teachers and increasing federal money to non-union charter schools.

Bennet has helped cement a pay-for-performance system in Denver and has come down hard on low-performing schools, closing or repurposing a handful of those with disastrous test scores over the past two years.

"The most amazing thing about today is that Colorado is the proud home of the most thoughtful education advocate . . . who is also going to be a senator," said Michael Johnston, principal of Mapleton Expeditionary School of the Arts in Thornton and a top education adviser to the president-elect. "He'll be the most knowledgeable in the Senate on education from Day 1."

That was less comfort to some Colorado Democrats, who had expected the choice to be largely governed by who could best win what is now expected to be one of the most hard-fought Senate races in the country in 2010.

"Michael is going to have to walk the fine line of championing a national cause, bringing home federal dollars and running for re-election," said Tony Lewis, executive director of the Donnell-Kay Foundation, which has funded several Denver education projects.

National education reformers are worried that a host of new Democratic lawmakers want to throw out the No Child Left Behind act.

Instead, the Obama administration wants to salvage some of the law's key tenets of school accountability and testing students.

Bennet has supported testing and managed to get what he wanted from the Denver teachers union in recent contract negotiations, including flexibility to reward them for student achievement.

Despite a sometimes stormy relationship, the union recently endorsed him for secretary of education.

Duncan, who still needs to be confirmed by the Senate, said he expects Bennet to play an important role.

"There is no question we're going to need every ally we can get," he said. "And having an ally who has lived it and understands it and wants to see us get dramatically better . . . is a big part of the answer."