

## **Rocky Mountain News**

### **New schools for poor? Urban education groups reviewing successful models**

<http://www.rockymountainnews.com/news/2008/may/12/new-schools-for-poor-planned/>

**By Nancy Mitchell**

**May 12, 2008**

Some prominent Denver foundations are working on a plan that could create new schools for thousands of poor children in Colorado in the next few years.

The loose-knit group, called the New Schools Collaborative, includes the Piton Foundation, the Donnell-Kay Foundation and the Daniels Fund, names known for their work in urban education.

The idea is to pool money and knowledge to help jump-start the creation or replication of schools that have proved successful with students from low-income families.

That includes expanding homegrown models such as West Denver Preparatory Charter School on South Federal Boulevard, which Head of School Chris Gibbons wants to grow from a single school to three by 2015.

It also includes importing to Denver successful models such as Envision Schools of California.

Donnell-Kay is supporting a proposal to bring six middle and high schools to the metro area by 2013.

"Are low-income kids in urban communities being well served today? No," said Tony Lewis, head of the Donnell-Kay Foundation. "Will they be well served in 10 years just through school district efforts? No."

Goals of the New Schools Collaborative have hit as high as enrolling 40,000 students in as many as 10 new schools a year for the next 10 years.

#### **Chicago model**

But Lewis and Van Schoales, urban education officer at the Piton Foundation, are shying away from specific figures. They said they're still exploring how the group might operate.

In Chicago last week, Lewis met with leaders of the city's Renaissance Schools Fund, a nonprofit that has raised \$44 million to help open 55 new schools since 2004.

Chief Operating Officer Connie McHugh said the fund has worked alongside Chicago Public Schools since the district announced its plan to add 100 new schools by 2010.

In addition to raising money - its total goal is \$50 million - the fund assists in the selection of new schools and awards startup grants.

Lewis and Schoales also have visited New York City to look at how the private sector can partner with districts in creating new schools.

"Chicago is a better analogy than New York," Schoales said, "but I don't think you can replicate what they're doing."

"I think it will be hard for the business and foundation community in Denver to come up with \$50 million," he added, "but it may not be hard for the business and foundation community to come up with something that is approaching that."

In New York City, the two are talking with Robert Hughes, whose nonprofit New Visions for Public Schools has launched 88 new high schools since 2001.

### **New schools movement**

New York, like Chicago, is in the midst of a new schools initiative. The nation's largest district has added 230 schools in the past five years.

The push isn't from student numbers - neither school district is seeing a surge in enrollment.

Instead, it's a reform strategy that calls for closing large, low-performing schools and replacing them with several small, high-performing options.

Chicago has closed 19 schools; New York City has shuttered 55, with 25 more to close by 2010.

Supporters say research proves it's faster to fix a school by closing and then reopening it after an overhaul, than by trying to turn it around while keeping it open.

"Shut 'em down," agreed Timothy Knowles, with the Center for Urban School Improvement at the University of Chicago, "and they have to reopen with different conditions, or the conditions will repeat themselves."

Districts from Boston to Oakland, Calif., have started new schools offices, but some question whether the new schools movement isn't simply the latest education fad.

Teachers' unions, for one, tend to be critical. Many new schools are charters, or public schools operated by independent boards with nonunion staffs.

"We have to have grass-roots innovations in our district and charter schools are one option," said Kim Ursetta, president of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association. "But we also need to make sure our traditional public schools are meeting the needs of our kids, parents and teachers."

### **Denver's plan**

That's one reason the union has applied to open a school in fall 2009, Ursetta said.

The DCTA proposal is among 19 received by Denver Public Schools in its first call for bids to open new schools.

DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet said there is no set goal for the number of new schools, either in 2009 or thereafter.

Creating new schools "is an important and essential piece of the reform," he said, "because we don't have enough of an array of choices for kids that meet the diverse needs in Denver."

But DPS' larger effort is instructional reform across the district, Bennet said, driven by a new accountability tool that measures growth in every school.

That tool, the School Performance Framework, will be used to ensure schools are making progress - and to decide when they face closure for lack of it.

Already, DPS middle and high school principals have been told they need to fill their schools or they may find themselves sharing space with new programs.

Some of the new schools approved to open in fall 2009 likely will be occupying district buildings.

The New Schools Collaborative would like some of that space.

"Of course we need partners," said Bennet, who is aware of the group. "We're interested in working with them just as we're interested in working with all high- quality providers from either inside or outside the school district."

### **A collaborative plan**

Lewis and Schoales say they want to work with DPS - but also with Aurora, Colorado Springs and Pueblo.

They also say they're interested in more than charters, that traditional schools with innovative ideas could benefit as well.

For now, the New Schools Collaborative is focusing on how to work in three broad areas:

\* Expanding schools that are successful with low-income students, whether already in Colorado or proven models from elsewhere.

\* Creating a strong training program for new school leaders.

\* Assisting new schools in finding buildings or working with districts to get them space in existing schools.

"I still feel like we're very much in the learning mode around this," said Schoales, who expects a public unveiling of the effort in September.

"But Denver has all these incredible opportunities," he added. "If Chicago and New York can do this, then what is keeping us from doing it and doing it much better?"

Results of the Chicago and New York efforts are promising, if preliminary.

Perhaps the strongest example of success comes from the work in New York City of New Visions for Public Schools. The nonprofit led the effort there to open new small high schools starting in 2002.

In October, an outside research firm released a report showing 78 percent of students in those schools graduated in four years, compared with 58 percent in New York City high schools on average.

### **Partners in Chicago, New York**

**Local foundations interested in partnering with Front Range school districts to create new schools are visiting other cities to see how their partnerships work. Here are two examples:**

#### **\* CHICAGO: Renaissance Schools Fund**

**What it is:** A nonprofit in the venture philanthropy mode, the fund has tapped businesses, foundations and individuals to raise \$44 million as part of Renaissance 2010, the Chicago Public Schools' initiative to open 100 new schools by 2010.

**Results:** The fund has helped open 55 new schools since 2004. Early achievement results are promising. Students in the 55 schools spend more time in school: A pupil in a fund school will receive an average of 5.3 years more core instruction, from kindergarten through graduation, than peers in traditional schools.

**Learn more:** [rsfchicago.org](http://rsfchicago.org)

#### **\* NEW YORK: New Visions for Public Schools**

**What it is:** A nonprofit created in 1989 to improve New York City schools, the group has leveraged more than \$250 million in private funding to create 122 small schools, bolster

leadership training, and partner with more than 225 community, university and national education organizations.

**Results:** New Visions' New Century High School Initiative, creating 88 small high schools in 2002, achieved a 78 percent graduation rate. That's 20 percentage points higher than the citywide average graduation rate.

**Learn more:** [newvisions.org](http://newvisions.org)

## Creating new schools

**School districts across the country are launching "new schools" offices as part of their reform efforts. Here's a look at what Denver Public Schools is doing:**

\* **DPS' New Schools Office:** Announced last fall, the office is charged with recruiting, selecting and overseeing new high-quality programs. DPS announced last week that former Martin Luther King Middle School Principal Michael Gaither will be in charge.

\* **How it works:** DPS issued its first call for new school proposals in March, specifically seeking quality middle and high school models. To date, 19 groups have applied to run a school starting in fall 2009. Selection of new schools is expected in July.

\* **Who can apply?** Anyone can submit a proposal. The first group of applicants includes the Denver teachers union, DPS Distance Learning Department and Edison Schools Inc., a charter network.

\* **Isn't DPS closing schools?** DPS is closing eight low-performing schools this spring. Most districts using this strategy are closing large struggling schools, while opening smaller, higher-performing programs, sometimes in the same buildings.

## A collaboration

**A group of local foundations has been meeting for several months to figure out how to support the creation of new schools in poor communities along Colorado's Front Range. Some key players:**

\* **The Piton Foundation:** Created in 1976 by Denver oilman Sam Gary and funded by the Gary-Williams Energy Corp. to improve opportunities for low-income families. Education is a key focus. Learn more at [piton.org](http://piton.org)

\* **Donnell-Kay Foundation:** Created in 1965 and now led by Allen Dines, a former Colorado state legislator, its mission is to improve public education through systemic school reform. Learn more at [dkfoundation.org](http://dkfoundation.org)

\* **Daniels Fund:** Created in 1998 by Denver cable magnate Bill Daniels, it perhaps is best known in education for its scholarships to disadvantaged students. Learn more at [danielsfund.org](http://danielsfund.org)

*mitchelln@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-954-5245*

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