

Rocky Mountain News – news-education

School choices pushed Sen. Groff backs statewide bid for more classrooms

<http://www.rockymountainnews.com/news/2008/sep/24/groff-lead-schools-effort/>

By Nancy Mitchell, Rocky Mountain News

September 24, 2008

Colorado Senate President Peter Groff is heading a statewide effort to improve school choices for low-income families, an initiative that could launch as many as 100 new small schools over the next decade.

Groff, a Denver Democrat who has been outspoken in his calls for classroom reform, will be co-chairman of the board of the new education group Get Smart Schools. Its public launch is slated for today.

"When parents are stopping you at stores, at parks, after church, before church, sometimes during church, saying, 'How can we better educate our kids?' it's a concern," Groff said. "What we're doing with Get Smart Schools is one more tool in terms of this transformation of education."

The idea behind Get Smart Schools is similar to school initiatives in Chicago and New York - one group pooling expertise and funding to help promising new school models get off the ground.

That's because research shows it's typically more effective to start good new schools than it is to transform existing schools that are failing.

In Colorado, the focus will be on importing quality school models that have been successful elsewhere and on helping promising new schools find facilities, an obstacle for many.

Parents will see the first two Get Smart Schools next fall, with the opening of Envision Academy in Denver and Atlas Preparatory School in Colorado Springs.

Envision, a charter approved by the Denver Public Schools board, is based on the successful Envision schools in San Francisco. Atlas is partly modeled on the high-performing West Denver Preparatory Charter School on South Federal Boulevard.

"We think they're a great school overall," Ricardo Martinez, co-founder of Padres Unidos, said of Envision.

Its first academy is slated to open in northwest Denver, where Padres Unidos is active.

In addition, Get Smart Schools will focus on principal training through partnerships with national groups such as New Leaders for New Schools.

Three Denver-based foundations are providing the initial funding for Get Smart Schools.

The Daniels Fund and the Donnell-Kay and Piton foundations have been working on creating the group for at least six months.

Van Schoales, urban education officer for Piton, said the three have financially committed to supporting the new schools' development but declined specifics.

"We've said we will do what it takes to get these schools up and running," he said.

"So much depends on what kind of support they need," he added.

Piton previously has given school start-up grants ranging from \$50,000 to \$1 million.

Donnell-Kay gives about \$1 million a year to education reform efforts.

Daniels, among the state's largest foundations, helps hundreds of low-income students attend college every year with scholarships.

"We know it has to be way behind the three foundations," Schoales said of funding for the statewide effort. "We expect to go to national partners."

In Chicago, leaders of the city's Renaissance Schools Fund have raised more than \$44 million to help open 55 new schools since 2004. In New York City, the nonprofit New Visions for Public Schools has launched 88 new high schools since 2001.

Get Smart Schools

WHAT IS IT?

* A group of educators, leaders and school officials who are working to increase the number of new, public, high-quality schools serving low-income students in Colorado.

HOW DOES A SCHOOL QUALIFY?

A new or existing school must:

* Offer a rigorous program with proven academic results and has successfully worked to close the achievement gap.

* Have an infrastructure to make sure all students have the chance to achieve at high levels.

* Be committed to providing students with skills and to prepare them for college and the economy in the 21st century.

* Possess exceptional leadership.

* Be committed to serving underserved students.

Find out more

* Read more about this program at GetSmartSchools.org

Copyright 2008. Rocky Mountain News. All rights reserved.