

## News Clips

### Headlines

#### Denver Post

Sunday, November 11, 2007

- School woes sacking DPS football teams
- More critics fault DPS's closure plan

#### Rocky Mountain News

Tuesday, November 13, 2007

- DPS pace irks some

Monday, November 12, 2007

- Questions and criticism

# Denver Post

## Sunday, November 11, 2007

### School woes sacking DPS football teams

"We can't let anyone get injured. We don't have enough guys."

Article Last Updated: 11/11/2007 01:51:05 AM MST

All of the North High School football players at practice on Oct. 23 do jumping jacks during warmups. Approximately 20 players attended the practice, some arriving up to 45 minutes late. North High School's football players - in casts and braces - didn't have to limp far to shake hands after the game, since they'd all been on the field for every down. Not a single one was able to take a break during the three-hour contest with George Washington. North's star played the entire time on a bad leg.

And this, Coach E. Paul Kelly says, represents a dying football program in the city's urban core.

"It's so different from when I played," said Kelly, who also graduated from North. "When I played, you had to make the team. ... Now we can't let anyone get injured. We don't have enough guys out there as it is."

Though the overall number of kids playing football in Denver Public Schools has held steady at about 700 a year since 1990, individual programs at some of the city's schools are suffering.

This fall, North High canceled its junior varsity team for lack of participation. John F. Kennedy High has to augment its freshman team with junior varsity players. West High is limping along with about 20 kids on varsity and 18 kids on junior varsity.

Prep football observers say school choice, an overall decrease in population, changes in neighborhood demographics and higher poverty contribute to the decline in high-school football programs.

But North senior Keith Valdez puts it another way.

"DPS is making so many changes, we feel experimented on," said Valdez, who will play for Santa Barbara (Calif.) Community College next year. "People don't want to play for a school where the feeling in the building is bad."

School choice is probably the biggest factor. Twenty years ago, football programs were stocked with neighborhood kids and the many urban high schools were full.

Now, because Colorado kids can pretty much attend school in any

neighborhood or district they want regardless of their address, many schools such as North and West, with struggling student achievement and soaring dropout rates, have become poorer and less populated.

"We're transient; we have people moving in and out of schools and neighborhoods," said Bert Borgmann, assistant commissioner to the Colorado High School Activities Association. "It's much easier to select a school that is not in the school district simply by choice."

Statewide, football programs are growing. Roughly 17,800 kids played this year, up from 13,400 four years ago. That growth, Borgmann said, is primarily in suburban and rural areas.

In the cities, though, large flight from some schools and neighborhoods means higher concentrations of poverty and at-risk kids.

Nine of 24 boys on Coach Kelly's team a few years ago had their own kids. At West, one of the star players had a daughter, missed a few weeks of school, and became ineligible. Almost all the players have jobs to support their families. And many don't have health insurance. Kelly befriended a neighborhood chiropractor who donates his services during practice and finds doctors who will see the kids for broken bones and torn ligaments.

Coaches also say they struggle to keep students' grades up. At North, Kelly has implemented a mandatory tutoring hour before practice each afternoon to make sure the kids aren't falling behind in their schoolwork.

"The best athletes in this building are ineligible," he said. "Half the kids in here can't even read or write. ... They're living for now."

An increase in the immigrant population - many of the kids come from Mexico and prefer soccer - also could be a factor, Kelly said.

At a recent game with George Washington, North fell behind by 41 points. The opponent is a high-achieving team, whose success coach Steve Finesilver attributes to his steady presence at the helm since 1982 and a football culture at the school.

It's not uncommon, coaches say, for suburban teams to bring 60, 70 or even 80 students suited up to play. They use "platooning," which means the coaches send in fresh kids for new plays, to tire out the

DPS students.

North finished the season last week with one win and seven losses. West, too, had only one win.

Marcellus Bell, who helps out at the Denver Prep League and had two sons play for DPS, shook his head when asked about Denver's high-school football programs.

"The good kids are moving out. ... We're losing them to private schools," he said.

Parents move their students to suburban schools with bigger-name coaches and stocked, wealthy teams, said Al Love, a field supervisor for the Denver Prep League.

"They want to play where they can go to college and play," he said. "CU and CSU don't even come out here anymore to watch these kids."

## **More critics fault DPS's closure plan**

**The Metro Organizations for People, which has set a rally this week, says the plan is inequitable and not well thought-out.**

By Jeremy P. Meyer  
The Denver Post

Article Last Updated: 11/11/2007 01:51:49 AM MST

A plan to close eight Denver schools and redesign five others is drawing its second round of criticism in a week, this time from a group intending to stage a rally over the proposal on Wednesday.

Metro Organizations for People - a community advocacy group - on Friday issued a list of concerns about Denver Public Schools' plan, including a set of ideas on how to improve the district's plan that will be voted on by the school board on Nov. 19.

Mike Kromrey, executive director of the group, said the district's plan

that was unveiled Oct. 1 has problems "that we see as very serious."

DPS wants to close eight elementary schools and redesign five other schools with the goal of reducing the amount of unused classroom space and improving academic achievement.

The group's criticism comes a week after a select group of community members on the A-Plus Denver committee issued a final report on the district's closure plan outlining a number of similar concerns.

District officials, who say the plan will save \$3.5 million a year in operational costs, did not comment Friday.

Metro Organizations for People and Kromrey, who is also on the A-Plus Denver committee, were unrelenting in their critique.

The group is planning a rally Wednesday at the old Cole Middle School, where the district wants to open a new school serving students in preschool through eighth grade.

The rally will be a day before the board's final public hearing before the vote.

Specifically, Metro Organizations for People's note said the district should take its time rolling out new schools with new programs, that the plan was not sending students from closed schools to better ones and that the distribution of resources was inequitable.

The note cited national examples in which attempts to roll out all grades at once in a preschool through eighth-grade school have been unsuccessful.

"In near-northeast Denver we have a history of unsuccessful closures," the note says. "We all have a responsibility to do it right this time."

Instead, the group urged DPS to hire principals with proven track records, spend a year developing the new school plans and open in August 2009 with fewer grades.

The group also said the reassignment plan "does not appear to be well thought-out" and urged DPS to send students from Hallett Elementary to Teller and Wyman students to Moore - both of which have better accountability reports than the schools where DPS has proposed sending the students.

Also, the group said the DPS plan, which would have roughly \$2.1 million every year for three years follow the students to their new schools, is not equitable, especially for Cole.

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# Rocky Mountain News

Tuesday, November 13,  
2007

## DPS pace irks some

**Slowdown sought on proposal for shutdown, change**

**By Nancy Mitchell, Rocky Mountain News  
November 13, 2007**

Rumblings about the Denver Public Schools proposal to close eight schools and change five others are growing louder, with a number of parents and educators urging Superintendent Michael Bennet to slow down.

Alan Gottlieb, vice president for policy for the city's Public Education & Business Coalition, said critics of the proposal kept quiet until after Election Day last week - and the return of incumbent school board President Theresa Peña and Vice President Bruce Hoyt.

"The sense was that if some of the people running against Bruce and Theresa got elected," Gottlieb said, "it would have thrown everything into chaos and increased the

likelihood none of this stuff would be done at all, let alone done right."

But with less than a week before the board votes the closure package up or down, some consistent concerns are emerging from groups such as Metro Organizations for People - a community advocacy group - and local education policy wonks:

- Lack of planning time. Three of five principal or leadership positions at the new or changed schools - Cole, Gilpin and Kunsmiller - have yet to be filled. The other two principals - for Horace Mann and Place - are preparing for those new schools while they're running elementaries. The new schools are slated to open in fall 2008.
- Lack of a better option. Students being displaced by school closures are being sent to schools rated low by the state or not rated at all - because they don't exist yet. Parents of students at Hallett Elementary in northeast Denver and at Smedley Elementary in northwest Denver, both slated for closure, share this concern with MOPS.

"We believe that the plan as currently stated by the district has very significant gaps in . . . guaranteeing a better education to children who are being displaced by the closures," MOPS organizers Karla Loaiza and Nola Miguel wrote in a letter sent Friday to Bennet and board members.

- Lack of answers. Why couldn't students displaced by Hallett's closure be sent to Teller, a school rated average, instead of Smith, a school rated unsatisfactory? Why do staffs at the underperforming schools slated for closure get first dibs on interviews at the new or changed schools? What happens if the student counts projected for the new schools fall short?

Members of A+ Denver, the citizens' group charged with compiling criteria for DPS school closings, asked a series of questions in its Oct. 31 report reviewing Bennet's closure plan. The group asked for responses "within a reasonable time frame."

That meeting isn't expected to happen until after the board vote next week.

"The superintendent has given us assurances that he will be responding to those other concerns," said Federico Peña, the former mayor and one of the A+ Denver co-chairs. "I am sure over time the school board and the superintendent will continue to add more specificity as they develop their plans even further."

If board members don't have the specifics they need, he added, they could "decide to slow down the process if they so choose."

At least two board members are still hoping to get more answers before the vote. Jeanne Kaplan and Michelle Moss said they've submitted lists of lingering questions to DPS staff.

But both also said it's difficult to advocate delaying closures, knowing reform is needed

in DPS.

"Would we be able to stop and, if we were to regroup, would that kill the momentum?" Kaplan said. "On the other hand, don't we want to do it correctly?"

Bennet said he has heard the concerns but isn't sure a delay is the answer. "I worry a lot about whether the alternative makes better sense than the one proposed," he said. "If you have schools that feel on the chopping block, I'm not sure that benefits anybody. I think what all of us need to do is roll up our sleeves and get this work done."

### **Questions and criticism**

Denver Public Schools board members will vote Monday on a plan to close eight schools and change five others. Concerns about the plan appear to be rising:

- **A+ Denver subcommittee on Finance and Facilities** The citizens' watchdog group charged with compiling criteria for the closure of some Denver schools issued a three-page report Oct. 31, indicating its criteria had been faithfully applied but also raising questions:

"(A) key mandate in the criteria was that all students displaced by closure be provided a better educational opportunity. . . . (We) are concerned about the district's capacity to deliver on this commitment since that better outcome rests largely on the success of the redesigned/new schools proposed to open in the fall of 2008," the report states. Then it lists specifics:

"What resources/strategies does the district have in place to assist principals who have not yet been hired at those new schools? . . . Will the district and the board of education set benchmarks and/or indicators by which success at these new schools can be measured?"

- **Metro Organizations for People** The advocacy group for low-income and minority communities will hold a rally Wednesday to outline its concerns about the DPS closure plan. In a Nov. 9 report, the group says the proposal is inequitable, sends displaced students to low-performing schools and doesn't give leaders of the new schools enough time to plan:

"In near northeast Denver, we have had a history of unsuccessful closures, redesigns and takeovers. We all have a responsibility to do it right this time."

- **HeadFirst Colorado: Education on the Edge** Alan Gottlieb, editor of the online magazine and vice president of policy and business engagement for the Public Education and Business Coalition, issued an editorial Monday, writing:

"There's a growing consensus among education advocates of various stripes that the new-schools plans are half-baked and doomed to fail unless Michael Bennet and Co. listen to

reason and slow down."

### **DPS plan**

#### **WHAT WOULD CLOSE**

- Del Pueblo Elementary
- Fallis Elementary
- Hallett Elementary
- Mitchell Elementary
- Remington Elementary
- Smedley Elementary
- Whiteman Elementary
- Wyman Elementary

#### **WHAT WOULD CHANGE**

- Cole Middle: preschool- grade 8
- Gilpin Elementary: infants- grade 8 with Montessori
- Horace Mann Middle: preschool-grade 8
- Kunsmiller Middle: grades 6-12 performing arts school
- Place Middle: preschool- grade 8, immigrant support

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# **Monday, November 12, 2007**

## **Questions and criticism**

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**November 12, 2007**

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Bottom of Form