

News Clips

## Headlines

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### DPS closes Polaris debate

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*The Denver Post*

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The guiding tenet of Denver Public Schools should be to provide the highest level of education to as many children as possible.

The least important factor should be the political concerns of school board members or superintendents. But alas, it seems that an unhealthy aversion to controversy is too often driving policy.

Take the plight of one of the more admired school programs in Denver. The Polaris program at Ebert Elementary is "designed to serve highly gifted and high-achieving children."

You can visit the school and be impressed. There are more than 300 kids in the DPS program and, I'm told, 150 on the waiting list. (One of my children was once on this list.)

Twice, the Denver Board of Education has talked about a 2008 expansion of Polaris to northeast Denver, where there is growing demand for the program. A quasi- guarantee is far from a mandate, and DPS seems to have no such plans.

Let's be honest. Most parents are under the mistaken notion that they've spawned gifted miracle children for the rest of us to be astonished by.

My sense, purely anecdotally, is that most often kids with involved parents are the ones that achieve, while others tend to struggle.

The parents of highly gifted overachievers are also spectacularly annoying. But they also get what they want. This sort of hyperactive, middle-class busybody — the sort who will flee to private schools when they don't get the education they want — would be a perfect import to lower-income neighborhoods where schools struggle and parents often don't have the time to be as involved.

### ***Mum's the word***

Diana Howard, principal of the Polaris program, has made the gifted testing more inclusive so kids in struggling schools get a shot at Polaris. One idea was to house the program at Hallett Elementary, one of the schools being closed for low achievement.

That idea was shot down. Why? That's a question no one will answer.

There are school board members who won't talk on the record. Howard, who has publicly talked about her desire to expand to two schools, now won't talk on the record — and she has a vested interest in this happening.

DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet was in meetings *the entire day* Thursday, according to his office, and couldn't carve out 10 minutes to talk about this issue. At least we know he's hard at work.

Why is everyone so timid about a small-potatoes issue like Polaris?

One person close to the situation tells me (off the record, naturally) that the Polaris program is diametrically opposed to what DPS wants: a regimented learning experience. It would also set the wrong example. Parents of the ordinarily gifted — and aren't *all* children gifted in their own special ways? — will expect the same treatment.

### ***Fear of igniting protest***

Another reason, the real reason I suspect, is that opening a snotty school for advanced kids in a building recently closed for low achievement will ignite protests and nasty words.

Alex Sanchez, school district spokesman, explains that "gifted and talented programs exist at all schools. We are looking at what we do and cater to all the students in Denver."

Sanchez tells me there are three future possibilities for the schools to be closed:

1) They will house administrative offices. 2) They will possibly house new programs. 3) The city will sell the buildings.

Again, Sanchez is the master of the obvious. What he hasn't told us is why an expansion of the Polaris program isn't happening.

More than that, this mildly controversial event clues us in to a larger problem at DPS.

Judging from the many people I spoke with on this issue, there is not much creative discussion or dissent going on when it comes to Denver schools. The wrong idea can mean a browbeating or the threat of obscurity.

That can't be healthy.

In a recent evaluation of Bennet, the board contends that if "there are areas that the Board believes can be improved, they appear to be in the operational management and infrastructure support of the district, and both internal and external communications."

You can say that again.

Now, a disagreeable columnist doesn't automatically deserve much time. But parents certainly deserve better.

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