

# News Clips

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**Charter schools face the music**

## **DPS staff are urging probation for seven schools. Two may face closure votes tonight.**

By Jeremy P. Meyer  
*The Denver Post*

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At least two underperforming Denver charter schools could face closure votes and five others could be put on strict probation when the school board meets tonight.

District staff members are recommending the board place the seven charter and contract schools that have had academic problems on two-year probation with specific plans for improvement.

Some board members said they are fed up with the chronic problems at Challenges, Choices and Images and Denver Arts and Technology Academy, which serve a total of 1,030 students. They said they may vote to close them.

Other board members said they are equally frustrated with the lack of progress at Life Skills Center of Denver, an alternative school for chronic dropouts that serves 238 students.

"I've lost my patience with several of those schools," said board member Bruce Hoyt, who would not identify ones he will vote to close.

"Rather than keeping the failing ones alive, it's better for the system as a whole to close the ones that aren't working," he said.

In total, the board will vote tonight to renew contracts of 11 charter and contract schools that serve nearly 3,000 students.

Denver Public Schools staff members are using a new accountability framework that assesses student academic growth over time, attendance, whether the students are ready for college and the school's financial wherewithal.

The staff is recommending five-year renewals for three schools: Denver School of Science and Technology, Academy of Urban Learning and Ace Community Challenge School. It is recommending a three-year renewal for Pioneer Charter School.

Forced closures do not happen often, said Jim Griffin, president of the Colorado League of Charter Schools.

"There is added pressure because Denver has closed mainstream schools because of performance," he said. "That forces their hands on charter decisions."

In the past decade in Colorado, he said, Denver Public Schools voted to close a charter school, Life Skills Center of Denver.

The school's officials appealed to the State Board of Education and Denver's school board reversed its decision, allowing the troubled school to continue under a one-year probation.

However, Life Skills has yet to show significant progress in student achievement, according to the district.

Only half of students attend regularly, and performance falls below targets set under the district's probationary window.

Santiago Lopez, principal of Life Skills, said the school is slowly improving and attendance rates are getting better.

"Where are students going to go?" Lopez asked. "We truly serve those students who are extremely at risk . . . students who haven't succeeded in a traditional setting or alternative setting."

Districts across the nation tend to avoid closing charters because of the possible backlash, said Randy DeHoff, director of the state's Charter School Institute.

"There are some charters that should have been closed several years ago," DeHoff said. "Boards are reluctant to do so for political ramifications."

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# **Rocky Mountain News**

## **Thursday, February 21, 2008**

### **Split vote selects Benson to lead CU**

*Six Republican regents back him; three Dems don't*

**Berny Morson and Sara Burnett**

Newly appointed University of Colorado President Bruce Benson vowed Wednesday to build the kind of support among students and faculty members he enjoys among some of the state's education leaders.

"I will be out building bridges, creating bonds," Benson said shortly after the regents named him the 22nd CU president on a 6-3, party-line vote, with Democrats opposed.

It was the first time since 1974 that a CU president was appointed on a split vote.

Benson said he'll schedule meetings with groups who opposed him, including the regents who voted against his appointment.

"When your votes are over, you just forget everything in the past. You embrace everybody. You treat everybody exactly the same, work together for the common good of our institution," he said.

Benson briefly hugged Regent Cindy Carlisle, a Boulder Democrat.

Benson, 69, was supported by leaders ranging from Education Commissioner Dwight Jones to Denver School Superintendent Michael Bennet.

But many faculty members argued at public meetings and in comments on a CU Web site that Benson is unqualified to lead CU because he holds only a bachelor's degree in geology from the school. Most college presidents hold advanced degrees.

Also driving opposition was Benson's political involvement. He is a past state Republican Party chairman and helped found a conservative issue groups that ran attack ads against Democrats.

Some faculty members believe the Denver oilman will not be committed to tenure or academic freedom, charges Benson denied.

Physics professor Uriel Nauenberg, who leads the Boulder Faculty Assembly, said after the regents' decision that Benson can build relations with the faculty if he "meets with it often and listens."

The assembly last week opposed Benson's appointment on a 40-4 vote.

President Hank Brown, who is retiring, said he expects Benson to begin reaching out to groups that opposed him.

"As people see how dedicated Bruce Benson is, a lot of concerns expressed here will dissipate," Brown said.

Regent Michael Carrigan, a Democrat who voted against the appointment, said Benson needs to consult with the regents and the chancellors of the CU campuses "to identify some bold move he can take to regain (the faculty's) confidence.

"I don't think it can happen overnight. I'm committed to helping him do it," Carrigan said.

Benson has headed fundraising efforts for numerous educational causes. He headed a drive that pulled in \$1 billion for CU. He donated \$8 million.

"I'm just very proud and excited and honored to be named the president of the University of Colorado," Benson said.

Benson has led the Colorado Commission on Higher Education, the trustees of Metropolitan State College of Denver and the Denver Public Schools Foundation.

In 2005, he helped pass Referendum C, which sent more tax money to higher education and health care. His supporters believe Benson can help end the funding crisis that has plagued higher education.

Benson said a funding question could go to voters as early as this fall. But, he said, such a measure must be an effort by all of the state's higher-education leaders and Gov. Bill Ritter.

Among the ideas for increasing funding is raising the severance tax that oil and gas companies, the industry with which Benson is identified. He said he could support such a proposal.

The regents voted after more than two hours of discussion behind closed doors.

Earlier, the regents heard from students and faculty representatives. All opposed Benson.

"Mr. Benson is no doubt an accomplished man and an exceptional fundraiser," said Ryan Biehle, of the Intercampus Student Forum. "But that is not all that our university needs at this time."

Critics also said Benson is too political and that the CU president should have an advanced degree.

But Benson drew support at the regents' meeting from civic and education leaders, including Mayor John Hickenlooper, former state Supreme Court Justice Rebecca Love Kourlis, Bennet and Jones. All pointed to Benson's work on behalf of schools.

Stephen Jordan, president of Metro State, said that as chairman of Metro's Board of Trustees, Benson helped approve an initiative that has so far added 110 tenure-track faculty members.

"I truly believe he can help bring together all of higher ed, all of our institutions," Jordan said.

*Kevin Vaughan and Ann Imse contributed to this report.  
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### **What's next?**

Bruce Benson said he could begin his job as University of Colorado president in a few weeks after winding down most of his business and

philanthropic projects. Briefings on how the university works will begin almost immediately, he said.

Salary negotiations are expected to move quickly, several regents said.

### **What they said**

#### **Comments during and after the regents meeting on the vote to appoint Bruce Benson president:**

\* "Congratulations to Bruce Benson and the CU regents on this important decision. We must all now focus on uniting around this appointment so we can move forward together in the best interests of the university."

#### **Gov. Bill Ritter**

\* "Hire him as a fundraiser instead."

#### **Andrew Cepeda, 23, Metropolitan State College of Denver student**

\* "I don't know anyone who works harder or who is more passionate about CU and higher education."

#### **Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper**

\* "If he ends up doing what his supporters and he contend he can do and stabilize the crumbling fiscal foundation of CU and higher education in general, (and) leave the curriculum matters and academic personnel decisions to the academic faculty and administrators, then the controversy will dissipate. If on the other hand he steps into those areas, it will be a bumpy ride."

#### **John Straayer, Colorado State University political science professor**

\* "The job description states the president should be the chief academic adviser. I have as many qualifications to run our university as Mr. Benson, and shortly will have more . . . and I am not qualified to run this university."

#### **Jennifer Johnson, CU graduate student**

\* "Bruce Benson has been somebody who time and time again in my experiences with him was able to reach across all kinds of divides."

#### **Michael Bennet, superintendent of Denver Public Schools**

\* "Mr. Benson is no doubt an accomplished man and an exceptional fundraiser. But that is not all that our university needs at this time."

**Ryan Biehle**, chairman of the Intercampus Student Forum

\* "To know Bruce Benson is to love him. If he tells you he will stay out of academia, he will stay out of academia."

**Rebecca Love Kourlis**, former state Supreme Court chief justice