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DPS seeking new school proposals

By Tillie Fong, Rocky Mountain News (Contact)

Tuesday, March 11, 2008

Think you have what it takes to create a better school? Then Denver Public Schools would like to hear from you.

Monday, DPS sent out RFPs - requests for proposals - for new schools to be created as part of the Denver New Schools Initiative.

"It is our hope that the release of the RFP . . . will encourage the many talented leaders we have in this district, as well as others, to create high-performing new schools in Denver," said DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet.

While DPS is looking for proposals for all types of new schools, officials would like to address two critical needs:

* The improvement and expansion of educational opportunities for middle school students (grades six to eight).

In the 2006 testing cycle, more students scored "unsatisfactory" on the eighth-grade math CSAP test than "proficient" or "advanced," and that was true for 87 percent of DPS' 15 middle schools.

Additionally, 42 percent of parents of middle school students sent their children to schools other than their neighborhood school, leading to declining enrollment.

* Creation of programs that will help high school students graduate and prevent them from dropping out.

The new schools can either be "innovation schools," which are operated as district schools, or charter schools, which are independently operated public schools.

Letters of intent are due April 18 and final proposals on May 16. For information, call the Office of New Schools at 720-423-1234. The RFP can be found at planning.dpsk12.org/newschools/RFP/Default.aspx.

Principal a poster child for 'touching' law

Defining incident as harassment or abuse is key in case

By Nancy Mitchell, Rocky Mountain News (Contact)

Tuesday, March 11, 2008

A Denver Public Schools principal is expected to plead not guilty today to a charge of failing to report child abuse at her school, a misdemeanor that has reverberated throughout the school district.

Attorneys for Nicole Veltze have filed two motions to dismiss the case against her, arguing the state reporting law that she is accused of violating is unconstitutional because it is vague.

They also claim Veltze should be immune from prosecution because she followed DPS policy in handling the Dec. 14 incident of sexual contact between students at Skinner Middle School in northwest Denver.

"In my professional opinion, Principal Veltze was absolutely correct," states an affidavit signed by Irma Anthony, the district's manager of social work services, who is in charge of training staff members to respond to reports of child abuse and sexual harassment.

Definitions vague

The charging of Veltze, 37, prompted confusion in DPS schools and sparked a surge in calls to city social services and to police. Roxane White, manager of Denver human services, told City Council members last week that DPS calls spiked in February.

"I think many principals, including myself, probably reported things we normally might not have," said Edison Elementary Principal Ann Christy. "No one wants to be in a principal's position like this and find out you should have and you didn't and now you're in trouble. We want to do what's right."

Veltze is accused of violating the state law that requires certain people - public and private school employees, doctors, nurses - to report suspicions of abuse or neglect to authorities immediately.

But her attorneys argue that immediately is not defined and gives prosecutors "unbridled discretion" to determine whether a report was made quickly enough.

In Veltze's case, court documents state, she learned at 1:15 p.m. Friday, Dec. 14, that two seventh-grade boys had inappropriately touched a girl during class. By 2:20 p.m., she had statements from both boys and suspended each boy for five days.

She contacted the girl's mother by phone about 5:15 p.m. and agreed to talk Monday, Dec. 17, about "how to proceed," court motions state. But Saturday, Dec. 15, the girl's parents called police, and on Sunday Veltze was videotaping an interview at police headquarters.

She was served Jan. 21 with a criminal summons charging her with failing to report child abuse.

Veltze's attorneys also argue that the law is vague because "persons of ordinary intelligence must necessarily guess" whether the alleged student conduct reached the level of abuse requiring a call to police.

The state law doesn't define abuse or the crimes triggering the reporting requirement; rather, it cross-references other laws defining crimes such as sexual assault and unlawful sexual contact.

"At this point, the individual with a duty to report . . . must make a judgment call: Was the sexual contact made for purposes of sexual arousal, gratification or abuse?" the attorneys argue.

Harassment, or abuse?

Veltze, in making that judgment call, defined the incident as harassment and not abuse. That's key, her attorneys argue, because DPS policy says harassment and abuse are treated differently. Under DPS policy, harassment is "sexually motivated physical conduct" such as patting or pinching. Student-on-student sexual harassment does not have to be reported to police.

But abuse is another matter. DPS policy, in identifying child abuse, emphasizes the term assault or the use of physical or verbal violence.

A reporting bulletin prepared and distributed by DPS, with input from city police and human services, says sexual assault must be reported immediately to police. "The key word is assault. (A violent physical or verbal attack)," it reads.

DPS is backing Veltze's handling of what happened in the technology class at Skinner Dec. 14.

"This incident involved two adolescent boys essentially daring one another to touch the body of a female classmate," Anthony, the district's social services chief, states in her affidavit. "While entirely inappropriate and unacceptable, this conduct fits squarely within the definition of sexual harassment."

Seeking clarity

Denver District Attorney Mitch Morrissey is not talking about the Veltze case or the related law, citing the pending charges and motions.

Veltze's attorney, Richard Caschette, also declined to comment. He is expected today to ask for a hearing date on the motions to dismiss.

But a Feb. 4 presentation to DPS principals by Morrissey's chief deputy, Lamar Simms, has been entered as evidence by Veltze's attorneys.

The talk, captured on DVD, shows Simms and Denver Police Chief Gerry Whitman apparently disagreeing over the state reporting law. It's evidence, Veltze's attorneys argue, of just how unclear the law is.

Some DPS principals who watched that talk said Monday that clarity is needed.

"Absolutely, and I mean very, very specific clarification," said Ruth Frazier, principal of Greenwood K-8 School in Montbello.

Frazier said she has a strong working relationship with Denver police in her area. But, she said, "I have no assurance at all that if the DA was surveying that, he wouldn't agree with DPD and say I should have done something sooner."

Frazier and Christy, at Edison in northwest Denver, said they hope the Veltze case will clarify the reporting requirements - and soon.

"We need to know what the scenarios are for reporting and what the scenarios are for not reporting," Christy said.

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Reporting timeline

An incident at Skinner Middle School in northwest Denver resulted in a criminal charge against Principal Nicole Veltze. Here's what happened, based on court documents:

* Friday, Dec. 14

1:15 p.m. Veltze hears allegation that two seventh-grade boys touched a girl in class. She asks the girl about the incident.

2:20 p.m. Veltze and another staff member interview the boys and suspend them.

3 p.m. Veltze calls the parents of the boys.

4 p.m. Veltze leaves Skinner for a mandatory districtwide meeting.

5:15 p.m. Veltze returns to Skinner and speaks with the girl's mother by phone. In her affidavit, Veltze states the mother says she will see how the girl does during the weekend and will call back Monday or Tuesday.

6:30 p.m. Veltze talks with DPS human resources officer Lee Renfrow, who says she can wait until Monday morning to submit written reports.

* Saturday, Dec. 15

11 a.m. DPS security calls Veltze and tells her Denver police want to talk to her about the incident.

Denver Post

Tuesday, March 11, 2008

DPS seeking big ideas on creating perfect school to prevent dropouts

By The Denver Post

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Those who think they have the key to creating the perfect school — especially one for middle schoolers and kids in danger of dropping out — have the chance now to share that big idea.

Denver Public Schools Monday formally launched its request for the proposal process for new schools — an effort to get individuals or groups to start new district schools.

While proposals for any type of school will be accepted, the district specifically seeks new high-performing programs for grades six to eight and options for secondary students who are at risk of dropping out. Those could include schools specifically for those ages as well as K-8 or schools for grades six through 12.

The district shows 90 percent of students dropping out have too few credits to move to the next grade, and nearly a third are older than their classmates.

The Denver Classroom Teacher Association said that it is preparing a proposal for a teachers' union school.

Applicants may submit letters of intent by April 18 for the early stage and June 27 for the regular cycle.

Final proposals are due by May 16 for the early stage or Sept. 12 for the regular cycle.

The New Republic

Tuesday, March 11, 2008

Reform School

by Josh Patashnik

The education (on education) of Barack Obama.

Post Date Wednesday, March 26, 2008

Despite his occasional pandering to the left, many reformers assume that, deep down, Obama is with them. They don't have much of a choice: Clinton has never released a detailed K-12 education plan, and her orthodox public statements and union support have made it fairly clear that she toes the party line. But there's good reason to believe that the reformers aren't just deluding themselves. The *Journal Sentinel* interview wasn't an isolated incident: Obama has a habit of peppering his speeches with hints as to where his sympathies lie--a sort of dogwhistle politics for education wonks. He cites as a model Denver's pioneering teacher-compensation system, which provides bonus pay to teachers who agree to teach in poor neighborhoods and who do well on a variety of quality assessments, including having

students who score highly on standardized tests. "Denver has become a buzzword for a willingness to do things differently," says Brad Jupp, a former teacher and senior academic policy adviser with the Denver Public Schools. By contrast, in November, Clinton told Iowa teachers the idea "would open a whole lot of problems."

Another reason to expect a new approach from Obama is that the terrain in the Democratic Party is as favorable as it's been in recent memory for an education reformer. The influence of teachers' unions within the party, though still strong, has waned. In September, Representative George Miller, the influential chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, publicly rebuked NEA president Reg Weaver for objecting to performance pay. And the AFT's backing hasn't exactly been a boon to Clinton.