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Tuesday, March 18, 2008

DPS pensions 'lopsided'

Costly plan makes it harder to hire - and keep - young teachers, report says

By Nancy Mitchell, Rocky Mountain News (Contact)

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Denver Public Schools' pension plan not only costs the district \$800 more per student than other Colorado school district pension plans, according to a new report, it is "lopsided" and ill-designed to attract top teachers.

The report released Monday concludes that DPS' compensation package, including its retirement benefits, is poorly structured to recruit the best new teachers because it is so heavily weighted toward older employees.

It also encourages the most senior teachers and principals to retire as soon as possible since they can earn more if they leave than if they stay.

And teachers in mid-career are effectively stuck because their retirement benefits become lucrative so rapidly that they cannot afford to go.

"The system is lopsided," said Tony Lewis, executive director of the Donnell-Kay Foundation, which funded the study with the Piton Foundation. "It is great if you plan to stay with DPS your entire career and it is lackluster if you don't."

But, as the report points out, only 15 percent of DPS teachers and other employees stay with the district long enough to collect full pension benefits.

What new teachers want

DPS created the first pension plan for teachers in Colorado in 1945, when the likelihood of changing jobs was less.

Today, though, a U.S. Department of Labor study shows people change jobs, on average, nine times during their lifetime.

Teachers, in particular, are mobile. The probability that a teacher will stay with DPS for five years is just under 40 percent, Monday's report found.

So, Van Schoales, a former teacher who is Piton's urban education officer, questioned whether it makes sense to financially emphasize retirement.

"When I entered the teaching profession, it wasn't high on my list of concerns," he said. "I was concerned about salary, as I think most younger folks are.

"I think right now the pension frankly isn't much of an incentive for folks that are newer employees."

The report by Piton and Donnell-Kay found a DPS teacher would earn, including salary and pension, \$446,259 in their first decade of work.

That figure grows to \$607,799 in the second decade.

But in the third decade, as that teacher nears retirement, her or she would earn more than double those amounts, or nearly \$1.4 million.

The mid-career lock

That rapid increase in compensation can make it tough for a teacher to leave DPS.

"People who put in 10 to 15 years all of a sudden look at where they are and realize it's better to just keep plugging away than it is to move," said Lewis. "You may not be keeping the people who actually are excited and passionate and doing a good job."

It's also difficult for DPS teachers to move because their pensions aren't portable. They have to stay in Denver to continue earning years in the pension system.

But once a teacher reaches retirement age, as early as 50, the plan encourages leaving.

That's because teachers who retire from DPS are eligible for full benefits through the end of their life.

So every year worked after reaching retirement essentially means giving up a year of retirement benefits.

And because benefits are based on highest salary earned, the district could end up paying a teacher more for years retired than for years worked:

"Given that the average life expectancy today of a teacher retiring at age 55 with 30 years of experience is over 85 years of age," the report states, "DPS will be paying the teacher more in her years of retirement than they paid her for years of employment."

A national issue

Schoales said the report is intended to start a conversation about what DPS leaders call their toughest financial issue.

"Often these things are viewed as sacred cows," he said of pension plans. "We wanted just to say, 'Here's what it is, here's what the sacred cow looks like, now is there a different way of thinking about it?' "

School districts nationwide are struggling with the same issue. A report by the National Center on Education and the Economy caused a furor by advocating that districts funnel money from retirement benefits and into higher teacher starting pay.

Such suggestions raise alarm bells for some.

Monday's report "devalues the contribution of experienced employees in this district," said Kim Ursetta, president of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association.

DPS Chief Operating Officer Tom Boasberg emphasized that the pensions of Denver teachers and retirees are "very, very clearly protected by Colorado law."

That said, the report "does make you question whether we have the right incentives in place," he said.

"The last thing we want to be doing is encouraging, in effect, some of our best, most senior employees to leave the district," Boasberg added. "Likewise, we clearly need to do more to recruit and retain folks in their early years . . .

"We should think carefully about whether the system is properly structured to offer the right incentives."

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Letter

CSAP tests traumatic for 9-year-old

My 9-year-old daughter recently took her CSAP tests. She is only learning what will be on the tests and not the concept for lifelong retention and knowledge. If a child is taught to memorize the tests before taking them, what has he or she learned? The CSAPs are set up to advance the gifted children and leave the ones who need to be taught behind.

For two weeks my daughter could not sleep, had diarrhea and tummy ache. Why? Her teacher told her the scores would be looked at all her life and even as an adult when she tried to get a job! She had a star painted on her hand to concentrate on in an effort to calm her enough to take the tests!

I agree there must be benchmark testing and some form of tracking and repercussions for failing schools. Reduce class size, remove problem children who distract the teacher and do away with the CSAPs as they

currently are before our children can't function on a college level! I won't allow my child to take another CSAP test.

Victoria Brady, Denver

Denver Post

Tuesday, March 18, 2008

Study finds DPS pension flaws

The plan isn't designed to attract top teachers, the research concludes.

By Jeremy P. Meyer

The Denver Post

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The pension offered by Denver Public Schools is antiquated and not designed to attract top-quality teachers, a study released Monday says.

Less than 15 percent of Denver teachers stay with the district long enough to receive full benefits of their pension system, according to a study by the Piton and Donnell-Kay foundations.

"What we found is that if you are an employee who doesn't last for 25 years, the pension doesn't do you that much good," said Tony Lewis, director of the Donnell-Kay Foundation.

A system that makes employees wait that long to get lucrative benefits may not be attractive to workers when the workforce tends to be highly mobile, the study found.

The study, prepared for the A+ Denver citizen's group, comes as the district looks at refinancing its pension system and getting legislative help to possibly merge the district's pension program with the state-run system.

"The paper raises some important points for us to think about," said Tom Boasberg, DPS's chief operating officer.

Boasberg has said Denver's pension program pays \$50 million a year more or \$800 more per student than the state's Public Employees Retirement Association system.

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DPS board eyes shift in duties for chief

By Jeremy P. Meyer The Denver Post

In an era of increasing school autonomy, Denver's school board is considering a new level of self-direction for its top administrator.

The school board Monday began discussing a new governing structure that would give the superintendent more discretionary power.

At a meeting Monday, DPS attorney John Kechriotis presented three governing models, all of which give the superintendent more control over certain policies.

One model, in use by at least 26 Colorado school districts, is called "policy governance" — a system that effectively removes school board members from day-to-day decisions about operational issues and lets them focus on "big picture" efforts such as improving student achievement.

“It’d be a good thing,” said Van Schoales, an education policy expert from the Piton Foundation. “Having a board focused on policy and the development of policy and not the operations makes enormous sense.”

“Governing is hard work, and this model is hard work,” said Colorado Association of School Boards deputy executive director Jane Urschel. “Sometimes it’s easier to take it issue by issue.”

Here’s how it works, Urschel said: The board decides what is important and what results are desired, then the superintendent is responsible for getting it done.

“They can delegate,” she said. “Then they will check up and verify whether what they have delegated is getting done. If it doesn’t work, they will ask why not.”

Adams County School District 50 board president Vicky Marshall said her district has used a form of policy governance for six years.

“I’ve been pleased with it,” she said. “I get to focus more on where does our community want us to go, what are the results, and we can begin to have more of those philosophical discussions on what do we want for our district. We can then turn it over to our staff and say make it happen.”

The concept has spawned many hybrids, along with many consulting firms to help boards master the model.

In at least one district, however, the policy shift has been blamed for managerial problems.

A recent investigation into the problems of the school district in Racine, Wis., found that too little oversight led to a \$1.5 million contract for a firm to run the district's business office, issued without the approval of the school board or the district's attorney, according to the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel.

Denver has not decided what to do and will discuss the matter at meetings next month.

In Monday's study session, board vice president Michelle Moss said she worries that people who now call her with problems would not know where to turn if board members weren't involved with the daily operations.

Board president Theresa Peña said the board has an enormous policy book that is too exhaustive for anyone to understand.

"That says a lot, doesn't it," she said, explaining why the board asked Kechriotis to examine a change in governance.

"It's about how do you have policies that say, here is the work of the board and here is the work of the district," she said. "That's what we're really talking about."

DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet said the district has talked about changing governance for two years and added that the board already is focused more on achievement and less on the day-to-day operations.

"They've been tremendous about working that way," he said. "I've been very grateful to operate in that environment."

Sunday, March 16, 2008

Program to help teens focus on job training

By Anna Haislip
The Denver Post

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Denver's West High School plans to use a \$77,000 grant to develop a program it hopes will link students' interests more closely to their course work.

"It's a philosophical viewpoint on how to give kids a reason to go to school," said Les Lindauer, executive director of Emily Griffith Opportunity School, which will work with West. "When they hear they are getting training that will get them a good job, their eyes really perk up."

Incoming freshmen at West will choose an area of focus and then will take classes that match that focus.

The classes will align with programs students could pursue at Emily Griffith, Community College of Denver and the University of Colorado Denver.

The \$77,000 School Innovation Grant is from Denver Public Schools.

"All kids need something relevant on the immediate horizon," said Pat Sanchez, principal at West. "If a student is interested in art for example, he should be able to see a career in it and not have to wait four years."

School officials hope to begin the program in the fall of 2009.

Wartgow: Reform takes time

By Jeremy P. Meyer
The Denver Post

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Former Denver Public Schools Superintendent Jerry Wartgow recently had a book published about his views of school reform. Since stepping down as superintendent in 2005, Wartgow, 65, has been serving on boards, traveling and working on his book, "Why School Reform Is Failing and What We Need To Do About It: 10 Lessons From the Trenches."

Q: Why did you write a book?

A: My hope is by doing this, someone else can learn some of these lessons with a lot less pain.

Q: What is the book's theme?

A: There are no silver bullets or quick fixes in school reform. . . . Reformers ought to read Aesop's fable "The Tortoise and the Hare." We need our policymakers to be a lot more tortoise-like when we move forward with reforms.

Q: But people say there should be a sense of urgency about the necessity of school reforms.

A: There is a sense of urgency. There was urgency when I was there, there was a sense of urgency in 1990 and 1980. My point is, yes, there is a sense of urgency. With all of the studies and reforms and legislation and regulations and billions of dollars, we have made no progress. We ought to stop and reflect upon what the real issues are before we just continue.

Q: What reforms do you think work?

A: I am convinced that it almost doesn't make a difference about which one you select as long as you select one and stay with it.

Q: In Denver's case, you are saying people should get behind the reforms and let them stay in place for a while?

A: Yes. My other big theme is the three Ls are strangling the three Rs. The three Ls are legislation, litigation and labor agreements. Those three combined have created such a bureaucratic mess that it is literally impossible for most schools to do a good job and carry out the responsibilities.

Q: Are you optimistic about Denver schools?

A: I am optimistic because of the leadership we have here. The mayor is huge. What bigger champion do we have for public education than John Hickenlooper? It was wonderful when we worked together.

Q: What is the main message of your book?

A: I hope this raises the awareness of how important reforming public education is and at the same time how complicated and complex it is, so that we don't spend another 15 years and find out we are right back in the same place.

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DPS to integrate disabled students

The inclusion plan will put 50 special-needs kids in preschool classes with their peers this fall.

By Jeremy P. Meyer
The Denver Post

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Preschoolers with disabilities will be taught in classrooms alongside their nondisabled peers next fall under an inclusion program piloted at seven Denver schools.

Until now, Denver Public Schools placed most children with disabilities in one classroom, separated from nondisabled peers.

The number of preschool slots next school year will increase in Denver by as much as 40 percent, and administrators say they want integrated classrooms for children with disabilities.

"The district has had a goal to create more-inclusive classrooms," said Cheryl Caldwell, director of DPS's early childhood education. "This happens to provide us an opportunity. It's the right thing to do."

The district's pilot program will begin in August with 50 slots for 4-year-olds with disabilities in seven schools: Horace Mann, Archuletta, Schenck, Valdez, Ellis, Sabin and Place.

A team of two early-childhood special educators and a speech and language therapist will rotate through the schools.

The change in DPS is a welcome one, said Laura Freppel, assistant director of the exceptional student leadership unit with the Colorado Department of Education.

"We certainly do recommend preschools be as inclusive as possible," Freppel said.

But, she cautioned, inclusive environments are not for every child.

"For some kids it's not appropriate to be in the general classroom," she said. "It can't be inclusion for inclusion's sake. "

Researchers have trumpeted the benefits of inclusive education, particularly in the early years.

Kids with disabilities in a high-quality inclusive program learn appropriate social interactions, communication skills and classroom behavior, said Samuel L. Odom, education professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"Access to a peer group that is socially competent, talks and plays and engages children with disabilities in an appropriate way is really beneficial for kids with special needs," Odom said.

Typical kids in inclusive settings build positive attitudes toward their peers with disabilities as well as knowledge about disabilities and differences, he said.

Research also has shown that costs of inclusive programs are about the same, if not less, than placing kids in self-contained special-ed classrooms, he said.

Current legislation is seeking to increase the funding for preschool and kindergarten programs in Colorado, and Denver residents passed a sales tax increase to pay for preschool slots.

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