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# **Rocky Mountain News**

## **Tuesday, April 8, 2008**

### **District OKs plan to borrow on 17 buildings**

Nancy Mitchell and David Milstead

Tuesday, April 8, 2008

Denver Public Schools leaders will know next week whether their plan to refinance pension debt will save up to \$18 million annually for city classrooms.

DPS school board members voted Monday to move ahead with a financial transaction that uses 17 school buildings as collateral to borrow \$700 million.

Most of that money, \$400 million, would be pumped into the district's underfunded pension plan. The rest would pay off older pension-related borrowings.

"Eventually, we'll reown these buildings?" asked board member Jeanne Kaplan.

"Yes," said DPS finance chief Velma Rose. "As we pay down (the loan), there is an order of release - building by building."

Rose also said that DPS is allowed to substitute buildings on the collateral list, including administrative headquarters at 900 Grant St.

That means the district would be able to close or sell any of the 17 buildings as long as they were replaced with schools or facilities of similar value.

The transaction essentially means DPS' pension debt goes on the market for investors starting next Tuesday. The sale of the debt, at an interest rate still to be determined, would garner \$700 million.

At least that's what DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet is hoping will happen.

Using the loan dollars to fully fund the DPS pension means the district can cut back on its annual contribution. Because the pension is underfunded, DPS must pay millions more every year to try to catch up.

The use of loan dollars to pay off the older debt also will save in annual interest costs.

Bennet has described the pension debt as one of the biggest financial issues facing DPS. He calculates that the district pays \$800 more per student in pension costs than any other Colorado school district. If successful, the transaction would drop that to \$500 or \$600 more per student.

"This has been a really hard-fought transaction," Bennet said, noting the recent volatility of U.S. financial markets. "We've been in a market with a lot of disruptions. But it's also created a lot of opportunities."

DPS already has decided how the savings would be used in schools, creating a 2008-09 budget that gives more money to poor kids and cuts the funding gap between elementary and high schools.

Principals have received school budgets based on a successful pension transaction. They'll learn next week whether they get to use them.

## **DPS shifts gears on how it rates schools**

### **New mode prizes student growth over test results**

By Nancy Mitchell, Rocky Mountain News (Contact)

Tuesday, April 8, 2008

Denver Public Schools' new way of measuring academic success shows that the best grade school in town is not Bromwell in chi-chi Cherry Creek or even the nearly impossible-to-get-into Polaris School for the gifted.

Instead, it is a small school near Washington Park that Daphne Hunter spent nine years building into a program offering traditional and Montessori classes.

"I was hyperventilating because I was so excited," Hunter said Monday after DPS released its new progress rankings and she saw Lincoln Elementary on top.

DPS' new school report cards prize growth in student achievement rather than results on state tests, which many educators believe to be linked more to family income than anything occurring in a classroom.

The rankings show that measuring Denver schools by growth provides a different picture. No longer are Bromwell, Polaris and Slavens - among the district's most affluent and whitest schools - leading the pack.

### **Goal: a year's growth**

Instead, there's McMeen and Beach Court, two schools with high poverty and high minority rates. Lincoln, the top school, falls somewhere in the middle in terms of income and race.

And then there's Steck and Asbury elementaries, two schools in the top five for both growth and test results.

Chuck Raisch, Steck's principal for five years before retiring last spring, credits hard-working teachers who strive for at least a year's growth for every student.

"The minimum goal was a year's growth," he said. "If you were working with a kid who was three years ahead, it was still to get a year's growth."

The new rankings are based on up to 42 indicators, including academic factors such as state test results and nonacademic factors such as attendance. Growth measures account for 60 percent of the final rating.

Three measures compare schools of similar demographics based on poverty and ethnicity. The intent is to see how schools with like challenges are performing.

At McMeen, for example, students speak 20 different languages, with Arabic the most common after English.

"We look at the population as a positive, not a negative," said Principal Michael DeGuire. "The children who are English language learners may be different ethnically, but they are part of a diversity we celebrate."

DPS Chief Academic Officer Jaime Aquino said it's the first time city schools have been ranked by growth, so some principals may have been surprised.

### **'Make the reality better'**

"Acknowledge the brutal facts, the reality, and make the reality better," Aquino said, paraphrasing leadership expert Jim Collins. "But first you have to acknowledge the reality."

It might sting that West Denver Prep Charter led all DPS middle schools in growth, including perennial top performer Denver School of the Arts. Or that the Denver School of Science and Technology Charter beat all high schools in both growth and test scores, including popular East High.

Monday's rankings are based on 2005-06 and 2006-07 data. Reports set for release in September will include 2007-08 results.

"The purpose of this is to make sure we are learning from each other," Aquino said. "If someone says, 'I work in a school with high free lunch rates and I can't deliver those results' . . . We can say, 'No, here in Denver, we have schools who are doing it.' "

[mitchelln@RockyMountainNews.com](mailto:mitchelln@RockyMountainNews.com) or 303-954-5245

### **A new way to measure**

**DPS released its first school rankings Monday under a system that emphasizes annual growth in student achievement. It's a new way to compare schools:**

**Top schools by growth Top schools by test scores**

**ELEMENTARY School Address Poverty rate**

1. Lincoln 710 S. Pennsylvania St. 43%

2. Steck 425 Ash St. 9%

3. McMeen 1000 S. Holly St. 75%

4. Beach Court 4950 Beach Court 89%

5. Asbury 1320 E. Asbury Ave. 52% **School Address Poverty rate**

1. Bromwell 2500 E. Fourth Ave. 9%

2. Polaris 410 Park Ave. West 15%

3. Slavens K-8 3000 S. Clayton St. 2%

4. Steck 425 Ash St. 9%

5. Asbury 1320 E. Asbury Ave. 52% **MIDDLE School, address Poverty rate**

1. West Denver Prep Charter 1825 S. Federal Blvd. 84%

2. Bill Roberts K-8 2100 Akron Way 63%

3. Fairmont Dual Language K-8 520 W. Third Ave. 90% **School, address Poverty rate**

1. Denver School of the Arts 7111 Montview Blvd. 14%

2. KIPP Sunshine Peak Charter 375 S. Tejon St. 87%

3. Slavens K-8 3000 S. Clayton St. 15% **HIGH SCHOOL School, address Poverty rate**

1. Denver School of Science and Technology Charter 2000 Valentia St. 38%

2. CEC Middle College 2650 Eliot St. 67%

3. South 1700 E. Louisiana Ave. 62% **School, address Poverty rate**

1. Denver School of Science and Technology Charter 2000 Valentia St. 38%
2. Denver School of the Arts High 7111 Montview Blvd. 12%
3. CEC Middle College 2650 Eliot St. 67%

## **DPS, PERA to discuss pension merger again**

*By Nancy Mitchell and David Milstead  
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS*

Maybe this time — the third or possibly even the fourth — will be the charm.

Talks are on again between Denver Public Schools and the state's largest pension fund, the Public Employees Retirement Association, though at least two previous merger attempts have failed.

Monday, DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet and PERA Executive Director Meredith Williams met with Colorado House Speaker Andrew Romanoff, D-Denver, to discuss legislation that would allow the DPS and PERA pension plans to merge by year's end if a deal can be struck.

DPS is the only school district in Colorado with its own pension plan. That makes it hard for Denver teachers to get credit for their years of experience if they want to work in another school district.

It also makes it tough for teachers in other districts to move into DPS.

DPS and PERA leaders have had at least four meetings over the last several weeks to discuss a merger. Both sides say they will preserve their

pensioners' benefits and try to craft a combination in which neither pension plan subsidizes the other's members.

"We would not do a deal that would ever reduce anyone's benefits," said Tom Boasberg, DPS' chief operating officer.

PERA's Williams said his board has historically said "no subsidy — a level playing field."

The last attempt to combine the plans collapsed in October 2005 when the two sides couldn't nail down the cost of the deal.

## Testing bill fails to make grade

### Ritter opposes measure to pare scope of CSAP

*By Berny Morson ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS  
morsonb@RockyMountain News.com or 303 954-5209*

An effort to reduce the number of statewide achievement tests has stalled amid resistance from the state education department and Gov. Bill Ritter.

The flashpoint in the dispute is a bill that would eliminate the writing portion of the Colorado Student Assessment Program and all tests in the ninth and 10th grades. But the issue of how much testing is enough could remain volatile for years if lawmakers heed Ritter's call to overhaul the public school system.

Teachers have long resented CSAP, saying that the tests take time from instruction.

They also chafe at annual school ratings based on the test scores. Schools that serve disadvantaged students — and teachers who work in them — are unfairly stigmatized by low ratings, said Jeanne Beyer, the communications director for the Colorado Education Association.

“Not the test itself, but the way it’s used is punishment,” Beyer said.

Beyer said the system needs to be “fundamentally overhauled.”

Education Commissioner Dwight Jones said CSAP is needed to identify schools or groups within schools that are falling behind. Many failing students did not get the help they needed before the current tests shined a spotlight on them, Jones said.

Jones said he understands why teachers working with disadvantaged students feel the school rankings are unfair. But that will change this year under a new system, he said.

Under the old system, rankings were based on how many students demonstrated proficiency. The new system recognizes progress students make, even if they don’t reach full proficiency.

“We will actually start recognizing teachers for the great work they’re doing with some of the most challenging kids,” Jones said.

The 2008 CSAP tests wind up this week. Results will be released in August.

The CSAP scores are used to demonstrate that Colorado is complying with the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which sets academic goals to be met by 2014.

The bill currently at the center of controversy, HB 1357, would reduce CSAP to the minimum number of tests needed to comply with the federal law. Juniors would still take the ACT college entrance exam.

“I want them (state and federal officials) to hear the voices loud and clear that the amount of testing that we’re doing is excessive,” said Rep. Judy Solano, D-Brighton, a retired teacher and the chief sponsor of HB 1357.

Ritter has said he wants testing revised as part of the larger school reform effort that would take place under SB 212. That bill, working its way through the Senate, was drafted with input from Ritter’s office.

Under the bill, the Colorado Board of Education would take the lead in a reform effort that would take several years and would include new achievement tests.

Solano appeared to have the votes to pass her bill in the House last week. But she pulled the measure from consideration at the request of House Democratic leaders last Wednesday after 45 minutes of floor debate, and it has not come up since.

Speaker Andrew Romanoff, D-Denver, said discussions are going on in an attempt to “harmonize” Solano’s bill with the measure Ritter backs.

# **Denver Post**

## **Tuesday, April 8, 2008**

### **DPS gets OK to refinance pension**

The Denver Post

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Denver Public Schools got the go-ahead from its board Monday to refinance its pension, which could provide the district with \$18 million a year to be reinvested in schools.

Currently, the district's pension is 88 percent funded, leaving the district with a \$400 million shortfall that it covers at an 8.5 percent interest rate. The district will go to bid April 15 to fill in that \$400 million shortage and fully fund its pension.

If the district gets an acceptable interest rate, it expects to close on the deal on April 17.

"Whether or not we are successful depends on market conditions," said Superintendent Michael Bennet.

## **DPS analyzing, liking what it sees**

### **ANALYZING PROGRESS**

**Despite struggles, district leaders are heartened by individual kids' strides.**

By Jeremy P. Meyer  
*The Denver Post*

Article Last Updated: 04/08/2008 12:53:08 AM MDT

Students in fewer than half of Denver's schools showed academic growth over a two-year period, according to a new analysis that administrators hope will focus their efforts to improve achievement.

Still, in a district where most schools — 107 out of 164 — are rated "low" by the Colorado Department of Education and three are "unsatisfactory," officials said the analysis is encouraging.

"We believe this is a much more accurate story of the school," said Jaime Aquino, chief academic officer for Denver Public Schools.

"We put more value on growth because that's more important," Aquino said. "For parents and community members, they will know the value the school is adding."

The district's new School Performance Framework looks at how schools and their students perform in dozens of areas, with an emphasis on student improvement.

The analysis actually paints a fuller picture of Denver's schools than the state's annual School Accountability Report, or SAR, which assigns rankings from "excellent" to "unsatisfactory" based on how well schools do on the Colorado Student Assessment Program or CSAP.

Denver's new accountability system digs deeper into the data and tracks individual student scores from year to year, showing that students at many low-rated schools are steadily improving.

A total of 78 Denver schools exceeded or met the standards for academic growth under the district's new framework.

Forty-six, however, did not meet growth standards — indicating students are not improving.

The new framework gives administrators the ability to share best practices, see what is working at similar schools and use it to better their students.

### **Making sense of data**

Principals Monday at a districtwide conference received a packet of information about their schools' performance and discussed a communication plan for how to explain the complex new system.

Ratings are based on a variety of factors, including enrollment data, whether the school meets federal Adequate Yearly Progress standards, how students compare to their peers statewide, and even how many students are going on to college or dropping out.

Schools are given colors instead of grades or rankings.

Blue is great, green is good, yellow is holding steady and red is trouble.

"The most important thing about this is it takes the data that is available . . . and puts them into a form that is usable," said Superintendent Michael Bennet. "This is an effort to get us focused on continued improvement of our schools."

"I do think that for a long time we have relied on labels that may make sense for a state regulation, but they tell only one story and not as rich a story as we are telling here," Bennet said.

Principals hope the district's new framework keeps students enrolled and good teachers employed in the district.

"We are rated a 'low' school, but that doesn't show how close we are to being average," said Anne Dalton, principal at Schmitt Elementary.

"Parents choose to go to (another) school that is rated higher. But this gives us a global picture of the growth rather than a snapshot."

Schmitt, a school in which 82 percent of students are poor enough to receive federal lunch benefits, was rated low by the state in 2006 and 2007.

But the district's analysis shows Schmitt students are actually exceeding the growth standards every year.

"It's positive for our teachers to be able to see something good going on in our schools," said Dalton, who has lost good teachers who quit because they couldn't take continually being in a "low-rated school."

"They work hard and they feel that it goes unnoticed," Dalton said.

### **Giving encouragement**

Another shining star under the district's new methodology is Eagleton Elementary, which has 74 percent of its students

eligible for federal lunch benefits and also has been rated low in 2006 and 2007. Those students also are exceeding the growth standard.

"This will give people more confidence in their neighborhood schools," said Principal Erica Ramlow. "It's very encouraging for people who are working so hard to improve performance."

Colorado Department of Education also is revamping the SAR reports, and deputy commissioner Ken Turner said he was impressed with DPS's new model that pays more attention to academic growth of students over time.

"For years people have been clamoring for something that took account of movement," Turner said. "As long as we don't lose sight of what is growth. It still has to be growth to a particular standard. We still want to deliver a child to a specific learning destination."

*Jeremy P. Meyer: 303-954-1367 or [jpmeyer@denverpost.com](mailto:jpmeyer@denverpost.com)*

### **Encouraged by student progress**

*Students in these Denver public schools showed the strongest academic growth between the 2005-06 and 2006-07 school years, according to DPS's new analysis. Each school's latest state ranking is in parentheses:*

#### **ELEMENTARIES**

- Lincoln (high)
- Steck (excellent)
- McMeen (average)
- Beach Court (average)
- Asbury (high)
- Eagleton (low)

- Omar D. Blair (average)
- Academia Ana Marie Sandoval (average)
- Odyssey Charter (average)
- Schmitt (low)

### **MIDDLE SCHOOLS**

- West Denver Preparatory (average)
- Roberts (new school/no rating)
- Fairmont (low)

### **HIGH SCHOOLS**

- Denver School of Science and Technology (excellent)