

DENVER'S TASK FORCE ON ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS
to the
DENVER BOARD OF EDUCATION
and the
SUPERINTENDENT OF
DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

January 3, 2008



DENVER'S TASK FORCE ON ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

In June of 2007 the Denver Public Schools convened the Denver Task Force on Alternative Education (the Task Force) and charged it "to begin work on creating a broad portfolio of alternative education services." The group of educators, community leaders, and others met bi-monthly from June through December, 2007 to review research and best practices and produced the following recommendations for transforming and improving the delivery of education in Denver. This document offers an executive summary of the recommendations – a more comprehensive outline of the Task Force's analysis and specific recommendations can be found in the full report.

Through the course of its work, the Task Force concluded that the current system is not working for the majority of the city's youth. Not only are students dropping out in unacceptable numbers, but students and families are increasingly choosing educational options outside of Denver that better meet their needs. As such, Denver Task Force on Alternative Education has come to recognize that this issue of school success is simply too large to ignore any longer and requires immediate action. It is an absolute necessity that Denver dramatically reduce the rate at which its youth are rejecting the current public school offerings.

VISION, MISSION, AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The Task Force developed a vision and mission around which to focus its deliberations and recommendations. The Task Force envisioned a future Denver Public School system where each student, at every point in his or her school career, will have access to high quality, relevant educational options that meet his or her unique learning needs and prepare him or her for college and/or career readiness and life in the 21st century. To realize this vision, the Task Force recommends that the Denver Public Schools, in partnership with the community should:

1. Develop a broad portfolio of educational options and services that meet the diverse needs of Denver's learners,
2. Provide highly effective multiple pathways for students, and
3. Create a comprehensive system for data tracking that successfully guides and engages students through high school graduation.

In addition, the Task Force articulated seven guiding principles and values around which the recommendations were built. Figure 1 provides a summary of these guiding principles and values – the complete set of guiding principles and values can be found in the full report.

Figure 1: Guiding Principles and Values

1. "Alternative Education" is a new way of thinking about teaching and learning in a wide variety of community settings – it is not a repository for "unruly" or "incapable" students.
2. An effective educational system offers multiple pathways to student success and provides effective supports that range from dropout prevention through intervention and re-engagement.
3. All students deserve to and can experience school success that builds college and/or career readiness.
4. Student success must not only be measured in academic and economic terms, but also in terms of their ability to fully participate in a democratic society.
5. Students are more likely to thrive in an educational environment with high expectations, caring adults, relevant curriculum, exposure to a wide range of choices, and multiple opportunities at every academic level.
6. A successful school community is a web of healthy relationships which are a paramount contributor to a student's desire to attend and engage in learning.
7. The work of creating and implementing a seamless continuum of educational options is the work of an entire community.

RECOMMENDATIONS – The Task Force believes that stakeholders collaborating in the success of Denver’s learners must work in partnership to address the following priorities:

1 – Engage & Re-Engage Our Community’s Learners Through A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

In order to ensure the success of all our children and youth – and consistent with Goal # 3 of The Denver Plan: “Collaboration Among the Denver Community and All DPS Stakeholders” – the Denver Public School system and individual DPS schools must continue to work in partnership with other relevant programs, projects, committees, task forces and collaborative efforts working on behalf of Denver’s children and youth, but particularly those learners most at risk of not succeeding.

- a) Involve Task Force members in the development of the core components of the “New Schools” RFP and the implementation of that effort, including exploring innovative staffing models and multi-use school environments.
- b) Actively embrace and build upon the initial success of existing cross-system collaborations that focus on youth success.
- c) Contract for intervention and drop-out recovery services with independent providers.
- d) Connect with Denver’s GED providers to identify dropouts and their needs, and re-engage those learners in appropriate DPS settings.
- e) Incorporate and implement a plan to inform students and parents/guardians of the credit requirements necessary to graduate from high school, as well as credit requirements needed to move from one grade level to the next.

2 – Engage & Re-Engage Our Community’s Learners Through CONCRETE INFORMATION AND RELIABLE DATA

Continue to implement a data-guided system designed to inform current and future DPS decisions – particularly those affecting learners most at risk of not succeeding – in order to effectively meet the needs of all Denver children and youth.

- a) Establish data gathering approaches using effective strategies from other cities.
- b) Set baseline measurements.
- c) Initiate systematic data collecting and sharing.

3 – Engage & Re-Engage Our Community’s Learners Through MULTIPLE OPTIONS

Develop and provide a comprehensive array of educational options that align with both known effective practice as well as the most current research, integrate operations and characteristics supportive of educational environments that ensure learning and growth for all Denver children and youth, and provide multiple pathways to student success.

- a) Address the issues of school accountability, structure, climate, and academic strategies that build upon practices and programs that are currently demonstrating success as well as others that represent the promising concepts from current research.
- b) In the development of new schools, begin by replicating existing effective models within DPS and then collaborate with locally and nationally known experts during the creation of new approaches.
- c) Examine high school graduation requirements and make adjustments for students attending alternative education settings.
- d) Adjust the district’s graduation requirements for the class of 2011 to apply only to incoming freshmen in the current 2007-08 school year and not those students who are currently over-age/under credit.

4 – Engage and Re-Engage Our Community’s Learners Through ADEQUATE RESOURCES AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Focus Denver community attention and resources on the changing needs of Denver’s children and youth – as well as the communities in which they live – and direct attention to the needs of both those who are struggling and those who have already dropped out.

- a) Develop revenue strategies to adequately support multiple pathways to educational success – including innovative approaches to prevention, early intervention, and outreach to re-engage those who have dropped out.
- b) Explore, evaluate and adopt new alternatives to the allocation of budget resources to schools – such allocations are currently based upon just a single day “count” of attendance in October of each year.
- c) Work collaboratively with City and State leaders and government officials regarding school reform policy and finance.
- d) Consider amending The Denver Plan to incorporate the recommendations contained in this report.
- e) Produce annual reports on implementation progress to the community at large through open forums and other “transparent” strategies.

DENVER'S TASK FORCE ON ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS

A. BACKGROUND & CONTEXT OF THE TASK FORCE

“High school dropouts are more likely than high school graduates to be unemployed, in poor health, living in poverty, on public assistance, and single parents with children who also drop out of high school. Dropouts are more than eight times more likely to be in jail or in prison when compared to those who graduate from high school. Furthermore, dropouts are more than three times more likely than college graduates to be unemployed and twice as likely to slip into poverty and are eight times as likely to be in jail or prison as a high school graduate. States and communities must recognize the urgency and mobilize their full range of resources to help more young people graduate from high school ready for college and work.” – America’s Promise Alliance, August 2007

In May of 2005, with the community of Denver deep in the midst of its national search for a new Superintendent of Schools, the Rocky Mountain News published a week-long series of articles entitled “Early Exit – Denver’s Graduation Gap”. This series focused on research conducted by University of Colorado-Denver professor Alan Davis that described an extremely low graduation rate for students in Denver Public Schools. Dr. Davis’ research indicated that of the 5,633 young people who had been in the eighth grade in 1999, only 1,884 had graduated on time five years later – a graduation rate of just one-third.

Clearly, Denver like many other cities across the U.S. was becoming aware of a growing crisis that time has not diminished.

- The Denver Post reported on May 14, 2007 that “a new national database presented last week by US Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings lists Denver’s high school graduation rate as 47%,”
- The Rocky Mountain News reported two weeks later that the high school dropout rate among Denver’s Latino males is essentially 80%; and
- On October 29, 2007 the Christian Science Monitor, MSNBC, ABC News, the Associated Press and other national publications reported that national research on this issue conducted by the Center for the Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University lists the Denver Public Schools as playing host to as many as six “dropout factories” among its high schools.

It is obvious that the current system is not working for the majority of our city’s youth. Not only are students dropping out in unacceptable numbers, but students and families are increasingly choosing educational options outside of Denver that better meet their needs.

Despite these negative statistics, there were and continue to be opportunities for the community of Denver and its many stakeholders to collaborate in achieving success for learners, their families, and the public school system. DPS staff, Board members, city agencies, community-based organizations, business, postsecondary, and civic groups, can position themselves to turn the situation around.

Fortunately, the response to this sobering news has been significant. In April 2007, the Denver Board of Education and Superintendent Michael Bennet issued a clarion call to the community at large . . .

“We must provide a wider array of offerings, including many more alternatives to traditional schools – schools designed to meet the needs of students who excel, are behind on skills and credit, are newly arrived to the United States from around the world, or are working during the school day to support their families. We must expand early childhood education and open up new pathways to college.

In order to create this array of high-quality choices, we must insist that DPS no longer function as a one-size-fits-all, centralized, industrial age enterprise making choices that schools, principals, teachers, and, most important, parents are in a much better position to make for themselves. We must unleash the creative energy of our entire city, and build an environment that propels everyone in our schools – students, parents, teachers, principals – to find their own solutions, rather than assume DPS, alone, will find the right answers in time. DPS needs to function more like a partner, building capacity and leadership at the school level and serving as an incubator for innovation.” – Rocky Mountain News, April 25, 2007

In an effort to develop a plan for community-wide action the Superintendent and DPS Board called for the creation of a community-wide Task Force in May 2007 to address the issue. Between June and early December 2007, a large group of stakeholders met formally at least twice a month to:

- hear presentations by DPS staff, community leaders and relevant experts;
- read, review, and consider available written research;
- conduct small and large group dialogue;
- brainstorm concrete ideas on how to address the dropout problem; and
- draft a set of specific recommendations for action to the Denver community.

In doing so, the Denver Task Force on Alternative Education has come to recognize that the issue of school success is complex yet requires immediate action. Despite the complexity of the problem, the task force believes that much can be done by the community to improve the success of students in preparing for college and/or career readiness and life in the 21st century.

What follows are the results of the task force’s thoughtful deliberations and dialogue. This document is intended to serve as a roadmap for Denver’s community and school district to take actionable steps to turn around its current dropout crisis.

The Task Force also recognizes that Denver’s dialogue has only just begun. This dialogue must continue well into the future if its stakeholders in youth success are to make the U-turn currently being attempted in Philadelphia regarding an issue that Boston recently labeled as “too big to be seen.” As in those cities, Denver must be prepared to accept the challenges related to tough “out-of-our-silos,” decades-long work that will need to be undertaken in order to provide greater educational opportunities for all of its young learners.

The future of our young people’s well being and prosperity depends upon how well we meet this challenge. Members of the taskforce hope to work with the Board and the community to implement the recommendations contained in this report and create the school options that will improve success for all students.

B. THE TASK FORCE’S CHARGE, VISION AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES/VALUES

At its initial gathering in June 2007, the Task Force was issued the following charge by Board of Education members, the Superintendent, and members of the DPS senior staff:

“To begin work on creating a broad portfolio of alternative education services, the District is forming a Task Force to examine how the district can better meet the diverse educational needs of our students, particularly those whose needs may not be well served in our traditional school models...DPS is committed to creating a comprehensive and cohesive strategy to offer compelling and relevant educational opportunities to students who might be considered at risk for dropping out due to low academic performance, poor attendance and other social/emotional challenges and who do not succeed at a DPS traditional school. A key component of the Task Force’s work will be to assemble representatives from the field of alternative education and organizations offering programs for the at risk population to address this critical need and to develop a set of recommendations to ensure high quality educational options necessary for these students to stay in school and successfully complete their education.” – From pages 1-2 of the “DPS Alternative Education Task Force” White Paper

As Task Force members began meeting to review relevant research and reports on the topic, particularly those which focused on the work of communities such as Boston, Philadelphia, Portland, New York City, Las Vegas, Minneapolis, and others, it became clear to everyone that the Task Force required a set of guiding principles and values that could serve to focus its deliberations and eventual recommendations. To that end, members composed a vision statement for both the public schools and itself, a mission statement to guide its own work, and clear statements regarding its guiding principles and values.

Our Vision of the Denver Public Schools

Each Denver Public Schools student, at every point in his or her school career, will have access to high quality, relevant educational options that meet his or her unique learning needs and prepare him or her for college and/or career readiness and life in the 21st century.

The Task Force’s Mission

Develop a broad portfolio of educational options and services that meet the diverse needs of Denver’s learners. Denver Public Schools provides highly effective multiple pathways for students and a comprehensive system for data tracking that successfully guides and engages students through high school graduation.

The Task Force’s Guiding Principles and Values

We believe that:

- 1) “Alternative education,” for the purposes of this task force, is not a repository for “unruly” or “incapable” students. It is a new way of thinking about teaching and learning in a wide variety of settings within the context of community. For example, this includes viewing career and technical education as critical, integrated offerings that respond to student interests and aptitudes and meet the needs of the community, business and industry.
- 2) An effective educational system offers multiple pathways to student success that provide effective supports that exist along an educational continuum ranging from dropout prevention through intervention and re-engagement.
- 3) All students, including those who are working and/or are parents, are newly arrived from another country and learning English as a second language, are involved in the juvenile justice system or experiencing difficulty in their current classroom situation, are dealing with learning challenges or facing social/emotional challenges, are interested in career and technical occupations or excel in the arts or are highly gifted, deserve to and can experience school success that builds college and/or career readiness.

- 4) Student success must not only be measured in academic and economic terms, but also in terms of the ability to participate fully in a democratic society, to transform or build community, to possess the critical tools, skills and spirit to shape our nation's culture, influence its values and positively contribute to the common good.
- 5) Students are more likely to thrive in an educational environment with high expectations, caring adults capable of nurturing healthy relationships, relevant curriculum, exposure to a wide range of career and educational choices, and multiple and ongoing opportunities for success at every academic level.
- 6) A successful school community is a web of healthy relationships between and among students, staff, parents/guardians and the larger community, which are a paramount contributor to a student's desire to attend school and engage in the learning community.
- 7) The work of creating and implementing a seamless continuum of educational options is the work of an entire community – including parents/guardians, all district employees, government, non-profit groups, businesses, postsecondary institutions, the philanthropic community, and other concerned citizens.

C. THE TASK FORCE FRAMEWORK THAT EMERGED

As the Task Force moved forward with its work of reviewing the latest research on the issue of dropout prevention it became clear that a wealth of information had emerged over the prior three years that required careful consideration by the group. Of particular importance was the work done by Robert Balfanz of Johns Hopkins University as highlighted in his publication "What Your Community Can Do To End Its Drop-out Crisis: Learnings from Research and Practice." In that document Balfanz emphasized three points –

- "First, your community needs to understand its dropout crisis and the resources it is currently devoting to ending it.
- Second, your community needs to develop a strategic dropout prevention, intervention and recovery plan that focuses community resources, efforts and reforms at the key points where and when students fall off the path to high school graduation.
- Finally, your community will need to gather the human and financial resources needed for a comprehensive and sustained campaign and develop the evaluation, accountability and continuous improvement mechanisms needed to maintain it."

Three other research studies also became the focus of Task Force attention; 1) "Academic Programs In Alternative Education: An Overview" an April 2006 study authored by Betsy Brown Ruzzi and Jacqueline Kraemer of the National Center on Education and the Economy; 2) "An Overview Of Alternative Education" by Laudan Y. Aron of The Urban Institute, published in January 2006, and; 3) "Federal, State, and Local Roles Supporting Alternative Education" by Nancy Martin and Betsy Brand of the American Youth Policy Forum from June of 2006. [NOTE: References to the research studies mentioned above are included in the appendix to this document.]

From these four studies emerged four broad categories of action recommendations that comprise the framework and influenced the development of this document. These categories are based on the need for . . .

- 1) **A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH** to effectively address the dropout challenge,
- 2) **CONCRETE INFORMATION AND RELIABLE DATA** to inform both dropout prevention strategies and approaches to improving or developing new schools ,
- 3) **MULTIPLE EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS** to be made available to Denver's learners , and
- 4) **ADEQUATE RESOURCES AND ACCOUNTABILITY** to support and provide focus to the work that will be undertaken.

In each of these four areas the Task Force's recommendations focus upon the **ENGAGEment** and **RE-ENGAGEment** of Denver's learners and their families.

The Task Force defined “engagement” as involving activities related to using research data to identify early indicators of the potential for dropping out and taking steps to prevent and intervene as appropriate.

- Prevention – the earliest grades through grade 3 through 5, and
- Intervention – from approximately grade 4 through the middle grades and into early high school.

“Re-engagement,” meanwhile, was defined as undertaking activities related to bringing students who have already dropped out back into the school system and options that will help them succeed.

- Re-connection – this group includes 14 through 20 year olds who are chronically truant or have officially/unofficially withdrawn from school without having received a diploma or any credential.

Finally, each of the four recommendation areas includes a specific and succinct statement of the needed action, the intent and rationale for that action, and multiple components or steps that should be taken to ensure success.

D. SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE DENVER COMMUNITY, ITS BOARD OF EDUCATION, AND ITS SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

NOTE TO READERS: *During their deliberations, Task Force members identified several component items in each recommendation area that they consider to be either “priorities” or potential “quick wins” – each of these items are denoted below using bold italic text and are also included in the Executive Summary of this document.*

Recommendation # 1 – Engage And Re-Engage Our Community’s Learners Through A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

Needed Action

In order to ensure the success of all our children and youth and remain consistent with Goal # 3 of The Denver Plan: “Collaboration Among the Denver Community and All DPS Stakeholders” – the Denver Public School system and individual DPS schools must continue to work in partnership with other relevant programs, projects, committees, task forces and collaborative efforts that are currently working on behalf of Denver’s children and youth, particularly those that focus on learners most at risk of not succeeding.

Intent

This action is necessary to close gaps and build an infrastructure that supports a system capable of providing both multiple and seamless opportunities for education and support to young people regardless of their status in the community or school. This will be accomplished by increasing coordination among schools, parents/guardians, city agencies, non-profit and other community-based organizations, business, postsecondary, civic groups, and other stakeholders. Denver should sustain the work begun by the Alternative Education Task Force, particularly during the impending creation and implementation of the RFP for “New Schools” that is being developed by DPS. The Task Force recommends that the RFP for new schools be developed in a manner that reflects the recommendations and components contained in this document.

Rationale

Because DPS both impacts and is impacted by strengths and challenges within the neighborhoods it serves, DPS must commit at a District and school level to the development of shared leadership, working partnerships and accountability for each child’s success. To that end, a diverse and empowered group of stakeholders can inform and provide DPS Administration direction as it creates new schools, re-forms current schools, strengthens community partnerships and embraces future educational challenges.

Components

Stakeholders collaborating in the success of Denver’s learners must work in partnership to...

- 1) Develop a public education campaign that promotes school engagement, school retention, diverse educational options, multiple pathways to student success, and an environment that welcomes and values all students, regardless of their status.
- 2) ***Be fully involved in the development of the core components of the New Schools RFP; monitor RFP program implementation including exploring innovative staffing models and multi-use school environments.***
- 3) Create a uniform process for families to learn about all educational options within DPS (traditional, alternative, charter, contract, and community-based) and make adequate space available within those options.
- 4) Equip DPS staff, school administrators, parents/guardians, students, community leaders and youth service providers to promote the range of educational options – pre-K through grade 12 and beyond – in their own neighborhoods and community wide.
- 5) ***Actively embrace and build upon the initial successes of existing cross-system collaborations involving the district, its schools, its numerous stakeholders, and the city’s many existing partnership efforts that focus on youth success (e.g., school-based Health Centers, Creative Options, the Denver Youth Development Initiative, the Youth Mentoring Collaborative, the Metro Denver Gang Coalition, the Denver Crime Prevention and Control Commission, Family to Family, Denver Collaborative Partnership, Denver Quality After-School Programs, the DPS/City Coordinating Committee, the NLC Cross-Systems Disconnected Youth Initiative, Denver’s Child and Youth Friendly City Initiative, mental health providers, juvenile justice professionals, career and technology specialists and the work of other relevant working groups).***
- 6) Identify barriers to public/private partnerships that could directly benefit students and develop specific strategies designed to remove these barriers. For example, if struggling students would be better served if increased data sharing could occur between DPS, public agencies and community based organizations, a work group should be created and supported to make this happen.
- 7) Explore ways to strengthen existing partnerships and create new ones, including the use of formal written agreements and joint funding applications.
- 8) ***Contract for intervention and drop-out recovery services with independent provider(s) that have a working knowledge of the community and a solid understanding of the entire range of educational options available to Denver children and youth, particularly those at risk of dropping out who could therefore benefit from a different educational setting.***
- 9) ***Connect with Denver’s GED providers to identify students who have dropped out, determine their needs, and implement processes to re-engage these learners in appropriate DPS setting.***
- 10) ***Incorporate and implement a plan to inform students and parents/guardians of the credit requirements necessary to graduate from high school, as well as credit requirements needed to move from one grade level to the next. This information should be widely distributed by DPS and by public agencies and community based organizations that serve middle and high school aged students.***

Recommendation # 2 – Engage and Re-Engage Our Community’s Learners Through CONCRETE INFORMATION AND RELIABLE DATA

Needed Action

Continue to implement a data-guided system designed to inform current and future DPS decisions, particularly those affecting learners most at risk of not succeeding, in order to effectively meet the needs of all Denver children and youth.

Intent

The availability and utilization of accurate and timely data to guide decision-making will increase the likelihood that a strategy or intervention will target the core issue(s) involved, track the impact of new approaches and designs, and document the changes that occur in the form of measurable results.

Rationale

Gathering, analyzing, distributing and utilizing data can be used to identify trends, issues and potential solutions. Data will also be essential for establishing baselines and analyzing measurable progress that is the result of new approaches. The availability of concrete and accurate information is especially critical in light of the findings of a 2007 study completed at John Hopkins University by Robert Balfanz and his colleagues. This study found that students at the 6th grade level who failed Math or English, had an 80% or less attendance rate, and had been suspended at least one time had less than a 20% chance of graduating from high school. Similar findings exist for students in the 8th grade, where 75% of those who attended less than 80% of the time and failed either math or English eventually dropped out. In 9th grade, meanwhile, a student who attended less than 70% of the time OR earned fewer than two credits OR were not promoted to 10th grade on time “had at least a 75% probability of dropping out.” “Importantly,” they noted, “gender, race, age and test scores did not have strong predictive power.” Clearly, the ready availability of data related to early indications of the potential to drop out will be critical to Denver’s success at early intervention strategies.

Components

Stakeholders collaborating in the success of Denver’s learners must work in partnership to...

- 1) Establish Data Gathering Approaches Using Effective Strategies From Other Cities
 - a) Review data systems used by other school districts that track and report targeted data sets.
 - b) Position DPS to generate and respond to data that can direct system change strategies.
 - c) Develop benchmarks and tracking systems for each recommendation contained in this report.
- 2) Set Baseline Measurements
 - a) Determine the number of students who were enrolled in DPS in 2006 and are no longer enrolled in any school (DPS, private, alternative, home school or GED) in 2007.
 - b) Review Denver-specific truancy data produced as a result of research conducted by the National Center for School Engagement (NCSE).
- 3) Initiate Systematic Data Collection and Sharing
 - a) Analyze data on the 2005, 2006, and 2007 school years regarding 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th grade to identify students who have dropped out (students who did not attend school during the previous semester). In addition, use data to identify students at immediate or imminent risk of dropping out based on school truancy (18 or more days), poor grades (failure of one or more classes per semester) or suspensions (any). Data sets should include grade level, age, gender, ethnicity, primary language, credits earned to date, attendance, course grades in math and English, and suspensions.
 - b) Use “Healthy Kids” survey data to inform grade level and school climate social challenges, strengths and changes.
 - c) Review the recent findings of research to better understand why youth “drop out” in the first place, where they frequently go after dropping out, what can be done to reengage them, and the factors that influenced learners who have dropped out to return to the educational system.
 - d) Develop a way to identify learners eligible for credit recovery and track their progress over time.
 - e) Further explore other data on DPS students and their learning challenges – and any research regarding social promotion – to identify potential effective practices for Denver’s students.

Recommendation # 3 – Engage and Re-Engage Our Community’s Learners Through MULTIPLE EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS

Needed Action

Develop and provide a comprehensive array of educational options that:

- 1) Create options that build upon practices and programs that are currently demonstrating success as well as others that represent the promising concepts from current research referenced in Section C on page 4 above (e.g., Balfanz, Ruzzi & Kraemer, Aron, and Martin and Brand);
- 2) Integrate operations and characteristics supportive of educational environments that ensure learning and growth for all Denver children and youth; and
- 3) Provide multiple pathways to student success, particularly for those most at risk of not succeeding.

Intent

Create a portfolio of educational options that meet the needs of all Denver children and youth. This portfolio will effectively serve who our community’s learners are, where they are located, how they best learn and when. It will include, but not be limited to prevention strategies, early intervention approaches for struggling students, and educational options that re-engage students who have dropped out.

Rationale

The DPS student population is representative of a diverse community with a wide range of needs, challenges and opportunities for traditional and non-traditional learning environments, educational curricula and innovative solutions. As referenced in Recommendation # 2 above, Concrete Information and Reliable Data, the Denver community must recognize and accept the multiplicity of reasons why students drop out. This is a necessary first step toward establishing new educational options that will retain students who are in danger of dropping out and re-engaging students who have already dropped out.

In terms of options, Laudan Aron’s 2006 study, “An Overview of Alternative Education,” and Mary Anne Raywid’s 1994 research both recommend that public school systems “offer full-time, multi-year, education options for students of all kinds, including those needing more individualization, those seeking an innovative or challenging curriculum, or dropouts wishing to earn their diplomas. A full instructional program offers students the credits needed for graduation at the schools that students choose to attend. Other characteristics include divergence from standard school organization and practices (deregulation, flexibility, autonomy, and teacher and student empowerment); an especially caring, professional staff; small size and small classes; and a personalized, whole-student approach that builds a sense of affiliation and features individual instruction, self-paced work, and career counseling. Models range from schools-within schools to magnet schools, charter schools, schools without walls, experiential schools, career-focused and job-based schools, dropout-recovery programs, after-hours schools, and schools in atypical settings like shopping malls and museums.”

Components

Stakeholders collaborating in the success of Denver’s learners must work in partnership to...

- 1) ***Address the issues of school accountability, structure, climate and academic strategies that build upon practices and programs that are currently demonstrating success as well as others that represent promising concepts from current research, and***
 - a) Hold schools accountable for improving attendance and academic growth.
 - b) Create school communities that are welcoming and respectful of students, parents/guardians and staff.
 - c) ***In the development of new schools, begin by replicating existing effective models within DPS and then collaborate with local, state and national organizations with proven experience and expertise with these issues to create new approaches.***
 - d) Incorporate the following effective practice and research-derived characteristics of successful schools (e.g., the findings of Balfanz, Ruzzi & Kraemer, and Aron) as a guide when strengthening existing learning settings and developing or funding new opportunities:

i. Operations And Structure

- (1) Create small schools of 300 – 500 students maximum.
- (2) Place them in convenient locations relative to mass transportation (bus, light rail, etc).
- (3) Grant them operational flexibility including day, night and weekend hours.
- (4) Maximize building utility through multi-use school environments.
- (5) Design smooth transitions between educational options that are created with student needs in mind.
- (6) Co-locate public and non-profit staff within schools to maximize access and utilization of student and family support services.
- (7) Ensure that staff development aligns with the guiding principles and values of this Task Force (as outlined on pages 3 and 4 above) as well as the findings of national research.

ii. Relationships And Climate

- (1) Develop and embrace a supportive school culture and climate which includes:
 - (a) Multiple, supportive relationships for each student;
 - (b) Physical and emotional safety;
 - (c) High expectations for each student as a standard;
 - (d) Strong, supportive staff-to-staff relationships; and
 - (e) Access (at school and in the community) to supports and services that realistically address and meet student needs (i.e., health care, mental health services, quality child care, assistance with basic needs).
- (2) Ensure that youth have an active voice in school design, leadership and evaluation.
- (3) Encourage post-secondary school and work linkages, particularly at the secondary level.
- (4) Reinforce supports at the critical transition points identified in the Healthy Kids Survey data.

iii. Academic Strategies

- (1) Individualize student learning and support (e.g., full implementation of the “My Career and Academic Plan”, “Personal Education Plan,” and “Response To Intervention” initiatives).
- (2) Support English language learners based on their learning styles and academic needs
- (3) Promote the concept of “the community as a classroom.”
- (4) Embrace academic rigor and competency-based assessment processes.
- (5) Support work options and provide learning opportunities relevant to the future career opportunities in the Denver region, particularly at the secondary level.
- (6) Employ multiple and long-term strategies to support student learning.
- (7) Intervene early and intervene often.
- (8) Align instructional strategies with the learning styles of individual students.

- 2) Create and support multiple pathways to student success that integrate research-derived operations and characteristics of educational environments that ensure learning and growth for all Denver children and youth, particularly for those most at risk of not succeeding.

- a) **Assess the capacity and strength of current alternative educational options in Denver, provide support to those that excel, and create new ones where necessary to meet the needs of diverse learners in the earliest grades.**
- b) Create an inventory of community-based, non-DPS educational services and options. Assess the capacity and strength of these options and include these as part of the community’s portfolio of options.
- c) Create and support learning environments that address the diverse learning styles and support needs of learners of all ages (Gifted and Talented, ESL, Learning Disabled, etc.), including those at the middle and high school levels that offer competency-based credit, flexible hours including night school options, school-to-career partnerships, student recovery systems for learners who have dropped out, and quality childcare options for children of teen parents.

- d) At the high school level in particular, take the following steps in the creation of credit recovery and competency-based credit systems:
 - i. Work collaboratively with community partners to define credit recovery options to:
 - (1) Describe how students can earn credits outside of the classroom setting,
 - (2) Invest in and support educational options where students earn credit through competency attainment rather than just “seat-time,” and
 - (3) Design and implement a “Credit Recovery” approach that allows students to receive course credit(s) when they are between two schools or returning to school from having previously dropped out.
 - ii. **Recommend that the district examine high school graduation requirements and make adjustments for students attending alternative education settings. For example, recommend to the district that graduation requirements be modified for alternative education providers to give flexibility on the number of electives required to graduate.**
 - iii. **Recommend to the district that graduation requirements for the class of 2011 apply only to incoming freshmen in the current 2007-08 school year and not those students who are currently over-age/under credit.**
 - iv. Recommend to the district that alternative education providers also be given the opportunity to issue diplomas, similar to the arrangements that the Emily Griffith Opportunity School and DPS Online High School have now.

Recommendation # 4 – Engage and Re-Engage Our Community’s Learners Through ADEQUATE RESOURCES & ACCOUNTABILITY

Needed Action

Focus Denver community attention and resources on the changing needs of Denver’s children and youth as well as the communities in which they live and direct attention to the needs of students who are struggling and those who have already dropped out.

Intent

Denver will direct resources and implement accountability measures designed to maximize the success of all children and youth, but particularly those at risk of falling out of its mainstream educational system.

Rationale

While DPS is actively embracing change within all aspects of the district, at present the educational needs of too many of its students are overlooked or dismissed, leading to a deterioration of the integrity of the school district and a negative impact on the entire community.

Components

Stakeholders collaborating in the success of Denver’s learners must work in partnership to...

- 1) Ensure a community-wide shared vision of accountability and success.
- 2) **Begin developing revenue strategies to adequately support multiple pathways to educational success, including innovative approaches to prevention, early intervention, and outreach to re-engage those who have dropped out.**
- 3) Create, fund, and evaluate a public-private endowed fund totaling \$20million to be held in trust at either the Rose or Denver Foundations or Mile High United Way, the proceeds of which would be used to support intervention & recovery contracts, grants to teachers/principals/schools with innovative ideas, etc.
- 4) Consider committing a fixed percentage of the DPS annual budget to truancy and dropout reduction/retrieval. This percentage should be based upon and calculated using DPS student truancy and dropout rates.

- 5) ***Explore, evaluate and adopt new alternatives to the allocation of budget resources for schools. Current allocations are based upon just a single day “count” of attendance in October of each year.***
- 6) Using the state of Oregon as an example, explore strategies that would allow for per pupil expenditures (currently \$6,800 per student per year) to follow the student from educational setting to educational setting, perhaps using the newly created DPS “student-based budgeting” as a way to introduce the concept of such a “weighted student formula.”
- 7) ***Work collaboratively with City and State leaders and government officials regarding school reform policy and finance, particularly in those areas identified in Martin and Brand’s study “Federal, State, and Local Roles Supporting Alternative Education”.***
- 8) ***Consider amending – by June of 2008 – the February 2006 version of The Denver Plan (Draft #2) to incorporate the recommendations contained in this report.***
- 9) ***Produce and provide annual reports to the community at large (through open forums and other “transparent” strategies regarding the progress made in implementing the recommendations contained in this report, as well as progress in reducing the community’s dropout rate from its public schools.***

E. CONCLUSION

The Alternative Education Task Force members would like to thank the Denver Public School Board and Superintendent Michael Bennet for inviting them to participate in this process of learning how we can work together to reduce the rate at which students are dropping out of school. The task force members recognize that we can borrow many successful concepts and practices from other cities and revise them in ways to address the unique circumstances of our community. We look forward to assisting the Superintendent, District and Board in their efforts to execute the recommendations offered in this document.

While this report contains many recommendations, the overriding theme is the need for the community to recognize that the success of Denver Public Schools and Denver’s learners is a shared responsibility. Creating and implementing new opportunities for learning success will require that individuals, organizations and businesses not only understand the need to revise our outdated methods of educating young people, but also commit their time and resources to building upon successful models. The result will be new educational options that meet the diverse needs of learners and a reduction in Denver’s dropout rate.

DENVER'S TASK FORCE ON ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

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Membership

A total of forty people were originally invited to participate in the Alternative Education Task Force. Their names, titles and affiliations are listed below. Those names with an asterisk indicate individuals who participated actively on an ongoing basis and contributed significantly to the development of this report.

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- * Lisa Bardwell, Executive Director, Front Range Earthforce
- * Troy Becker, Pipefitters Local #208
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Acknowledgments

Considerable ongoing staff support was provided by Happy Haynes and Glenna Norvelle of the Denver Public Schools Superintendent's Office and Al McMahon, a consultant with the City and County of Denver.

Task Force co-chairs Paula Gomez Farrell and Wendy Talley would like to extend their deep appreciation to everyone for their diligent work, patience and persistence over the course of the group's deliberations. Special thanks to Al McMahon who gathered much of the research reviewed by the task force and diligently documented the discussions.