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Many Denver Schools To Close Campuses During Lunchtime

By Patricia Hawke

Beginning with the fall of 2006 school year, many high schools in the Denver schools system will close their campuses during lunchtime. This means that Denver schools students will not be allowed to leave campus to eat at nearby restaurants, fast foods, and convenience stores.

Denver schools superintendent Michael Bennet introduced the final draft of the new policy, called the Denver Plan, in the spring of 2006. Bennet believes his plan will reduce the increasing afternoon truancy within the high schools.

The Denver schools plan has taken several drafts to reach implementation. The first draft was introduced to Denver schools principals in November of 2005, suggesting that schools could submit waiver requests by April to exempt the older students in 11th and 12th grades. A second draft was presented to the Denver schools principals in February 2006, amending the original policy by stating that more time was needed to determine how the policy would be implemented. At a March meeting of the Denver schools principals, administrators presented the final plan, which requires all freshmen to remain on campus. Waivers may be requested for the other grades of 10th, 11th and 12th.

After the meeting, principals scrambled to make the new Denver schools policy work. Since the lunchtime schedule dictates the classroom schedules, the new Denver Plan is causing an upheaval in many Denver schools, where they have a common lunchtime for all students and teachers. Small cafeteria capacity means multiple lunchtime schedules must be implemented. For example, Denver schools East High School enrolls 2,092 students with a cafeteria that seats only 258. If only the 750 freshmen are kept on school grounds during lunchtime, at least three lunch periods will be required. This also upsets the activities by possible by a common lunch period, such as club meetings, students meeting with classroom teachers, and students socializing with their friends and siblings who are in different classes.

The Denver schools principals must submit waiver requests for their schools before April of each prior school year, which will be granted based upon the quality of the school's truancy reduction plan. Principals consulted with staff and solicited input from students and the community before deciding for which grades to request waivers. To support their waiver requests, they included student data, such as

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attendance. Additionally, it is unclear whether Denver schools with current good attendance rates will receive special treatment; however, the plan has a 97 percent attendance rate goal for all schools.

Though Denver schools principals received the new policy with mixed reviews, the students vehemently oppose it. Hundreds of students attended a student forum on the topic and completed an online survey. It was the hottest topic at the end of the Denver schools 2005–2006 school year. Even the middle school children were hotly debating the subject, since the policy will affect them in the near future. Students are in total agreement that the Denver schools would be better served by targeting their anti–truancy efforts at the students with actual attendance problems. The students see the new policy as a punishment for all students.

Patricia Hawke is a staff writer for Schools K–12, providing free, in–depth reports on all U.S. public and private K–12 schools. Patricia has a nose for research and writes stimulating news and views on school issues. For more on Denver schools visit

<http://www.schoolsk–12.com/Colorado/Denver/index.html>

New Denver Plan Of The Denver Schools Is Ready To Launch

By Patricia Hawke

The Denver Schools have a new roadmap to reform — The Denver Plan. After making the Plan public, the Denver schools then solicited comments from principals, teachers, parents and the community at large. Thirteen public meetings were held across the city. All were packed with people who wanted to discuss the future of the Denver schools. The Denver schools received hundreds of emails and letters, as well.

Superintendent of the Denver schools, Michael Bennet, described the process as a very powerful experience and was happy to find that many parents support the Denver schools in their work toward reform. "Parents realize that there is ample room for improvement across the district," stated Bennet.

The purpose of the Denver Plan is to succeed in graduating students who can read and write at expected levels. It addresses this problem by focusing on improving the quality of teaching, provided in all classrooms by the Denver schools.

Feedback, provided by educators, parents and the community, meant some changes to key provisions within the plan. Once these changes were evaluated and made, The Denver Plan Committee then scrutinized the Plan. The Committee, a group of 40 teachers, principals and staff, has one purpose — analyze and critique each word of the Plan, which they did at two meetings each week for a two–month period. Upon completion of their mission, the Committee sent the finished Plan to the Denver schools' board, which then evaluated it during a four–hour work session.

Bennet believes the resulting Plan is an enduring, common roadmap for reform within the Denver schools; yet, flexible enough to be referred to as a "living document". It was structured so that it can be adjusted and refined, based on classroom plan implementation.

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Some key points of the Denver schools' Plan are:

- Explicitly describes the strategies to close the achievement gap for students of color;
- Calls for diversity training for faculty;
- Provides "double block" intervention for ninth graders, who are not learning on grade level;
- Creates eight Instruction Support Teams (ISTs) with facilitators within each of the schools; and
- Places a parent advocate with each Support Team.

Two major issues that concerned educators, parents and/or community were the double block (taking lessons twice) intervention and the closing of several high school campuses. The campus closings are still being resolved with ongoing discussions and analysis.

In the original plan proposed by the Denver schools, intervention was to be applied to both ninth and tenth graders, who were not learning reading and/or math on grade level. The intervention consisted of doubling up on those core subjects until the student became proficient for their grade level. Common consensus was that those students forced to double block the core subjects of math and reading would lose too many elective hours, if intervention were at two grade levels. This would mean that such Denver schools students would miss out on music and the arts, something everyone strongly opposed. The final Plan now intervenes only with ninth graders not learning on grade level.

There are eight new Instructional Support Teams, each with four staff developers, who are teachers with specialties in math, science, humanities, special education, and English Language Acquisition (one teacher for each specialty) on special assignment. Each IST is responsible for 15 schools, where facilitators support them. The purpose of the ISTs is to:

- Work with principals and teachers to support quality instruction;
- Combine curriculum, content awareness, and data assessment to plan program improvements;
- Assist principals, assistant principals, and teachers in grade level planning meetings to evaluate student performance; and
- Be highly visible within the schools and classrooms.

Next for the Denver schools is to develop and finalize timelines for each step of the Plan, as well as develop progress measurements.

The Denver Plan focuses all efforts of the Denver schools on student instruction by providing teachers and principals with the best professional development possible. Additionally, the Denver schools will support their efforts to efficiently apply educators' time to help students learn, without being distracted by other non-instructional issues.

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