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**Mayor's "Preschool Matters" On November Ballot For Denver Schools**

**By Patricia Hawke**

Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper has introduced the "Preschool Matters" program that will greatly impact future Denver schools students, if passed by voters in the November election. The early childhood education program is endorsed by the mayor and other Denver officials.

City Council President Michael Hancock believes the measure to be extremely important to the city and the Denver schools. Denver schools Superintendent Michael Bennett agrees, stating that Denver schools educators will do everything they can to pass the measure in November.

The program was developed from recommendations submitted to the mayor by his task force, which was charged with increasing preschool access for Denver's children. Hickenlooper believes that access to quality and affordable preschools is crucial to the city's future, as well as an essential part of improving the Denver schools.

Documented studies show that preschool is one of the best investments for any city and its youth. A recent study in California by the Rand Corporation found that a return on investment of \$2.62 in savings could be garnered for every dollar spent on preschool. The savings is realized through lower juvenile crime and high school dropout costs — saving dollars for both Denver and the Denver schools, as well as graduating better educated Denver schools students.

Other studies have shown that the Denver schools children will be more likely to read by the third grade, less likely to require remedial education, and more likely to graduate high school and enter college.

Preschool Matters, which will greatly benefit the Denver schools and their students, will cost \$12 million annually. The mayor is asking for an increase in sales tax that will equal 12 cents on every \$100 of purchases within the city. If passed, the Denver sales tax will still be highly competitive with other Front Range communities.

Funding of the program covers:

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- Tuition Credits — Open to children only for the year before entering kindergarten. Children are generally four-year-olds, and the program may be used only for one year. Credits are distributed based on need and the quality of the preschool program selected.
- Outreach and Enrollment.
- A Quality Improvement System for preschool providers and programs.
- Administration of the program by a nonprofit organization that still must be created.
- Internal and External Accountability, Measurement and Reporting — Covers the number of children enrolled in preschool, the number of quality rated providers, the program finances, and the academic success of the children who attend preschool.

Preschool Matters is similar to a defeated California measure, called Proposition 82. Though both programs expand preschool for four-year-olds, the California measure was much broader in application and based on an income tax increase only for incomes of \$400,000 or more annually — as compared to Denver's sales tax increase for everyone, making individual contributions minimal. The California measure also was in competition with an alternative offering by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Opponents to Preschool Matters believe there already are opportunities in place through the Denver schools that may be used to expand early childhood education. They believe the mayor is only creating a bureaucracy with administrative overhead. Opponents, as well as all Denver voters, will have their say in November.

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 information on Denver schools visit

<http://www.schoolsk-12.com/Colorado/denver/index.html>

### **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

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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 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.

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