

School Autonomy Subcommittee Recommendations

DCSD School Choice Task Force

November 11, 2010

This Subcommittee Defines School Choice as...

“School Choice in the Douglas County School District (DCSD) means systematically empowering families to make educated decisions about which DCSD school their children will attend based on geography and program that best fits their family’s needs.”

Term Clarification

“DCSD Schools” is inclusive of all district neighborhood, charter, magnet and alternative schools.

What We Have Learned ...

- There is a lot more choice in the district than we first thought.
 - DCSD schools offer an incredibly wide selection of high-quality educational programs, student learning opportunities and activities for families.
 - It apparently hasn’t been adequately promoted.
 - DCSD does not provide a systemic, user-friendly consumer guide to inform families of educational programs and student learning opportunities while helping them make educational choices.
- Even without knowledge of all these choices or new ones, parent satisfaction is over 90% among parents responding to a recent district-wide survey.
- It appears there is enough physical capacity through existing DCSD school facilities to handle demand. Adding more capacity in many parts of the district could actually “rob Peter to pay Paul”, jeopardizing a number of schools’ viability; similar to what happens when commercial real estate is overbuilt. There needs to be a very strong fiduciary review to make sure that additional school construction does not negatively impact current facilities.
- Because current existing choice options are not widely known, anecdotal evidence warrants deeper review to understand the proposed educational offering of any proposed bricks and mortar new school in light of what existing DCSD schools are currently offering or plan to offer.
- Open enrollment already makes it moderately easy to access current choices; the new DCSD website enhancements and other changes being implemented will make it even easier and will spur more innovation and choice.
- Some of us used to think that “school choice” necessarily only meant charter and a new building. We are learning that it does not; but those are options if needed. We need a paradigm shift in our collective thinking.
- There seems to be an “Us vs. Them” mentality that is inwardly focused and is fragmenting DCSD. All schools must work together to be compelling enough to keep DCSD families in the district and bring back those that have departed, and as best as possible understand why some have selected to leave.
- To fulfill our fiduciary responsibility to bond holders, holders of loans DCSD has guaranteed, and to taxpayers; and ensure the ongoing financial viability of DCSD; we need to maximize the percentage of students attending DCSD schools who live within Douglas County; and optimize the usage overall of current facilities.
- The BOE has stated its desire that the playing field be level for all DCSD schools as they move forward in this new dynamic environment. At a minimum there is a strong perception from among charter and neighborhood schools that this is not the case. We attempted to gather all the comparative data but, considering time constraints, found it beyond our ability to access and chart. We tend to think that the playing field indeed is probably not level, going both ways. Preparation of a comparative analysis of a number of factors regarding neighborhood, charter, magnet, and alternative schools, including a line item comparison of funding through district funds, and sharing the results with the public, would remove barriers of misunderstanding that currently exists.
- Our collective effort should strategically be focused on core strategies that will bring about desired impact in increasing choice for the maximum percentage of parents/students; within a reasonable timeframe; in a way that maximizes stakeholder buy in; that optimizes utilization of current facilities; and maximizes resources available for the education of our children.

Introduction

The Board of Education (BOE) of the DCSD presented a vision for the School Choice Task Force to reflect upon: *An education system that maximizes choice, celebrates freedom, improves quality through competition, promotes excellence, and recognizes that the interests of students and parents are paramount.*

The DCSD has been steadily moving away from a top down management approach to one that is in the early stages of increasingly empowering schools and parents. There has been progress in encouraging more autonomy, competition, innovation and responsiveness to the educational customers and stakeholders. The challenge facing this task force is to develop a clear and full understanding as to where this process should be headed; determine how it can positively empower DCSD schools to a much greater level of site autonomy; and identify key processes that need to be established to accomplish these goals.

The purpose of the listed recommendations of the School Autonomy Subcommittee is to provide a framework and vision for what system wide change and unprecedented effectiveness could look like if we truly empower our schools, principals, parents, students, teachers, staff, and local communities. Schools must have the autonomy to craft and create a vision and then own and implement it.

The BOE “call to action” has required this subcommittee to look microscopically at the current state of our schools and this system to create a climate where the truth is heard, the facts confronted and essential change supported. What we discovered is a high achieving, academically rigorous system that offers an extensive menu of student opportunities that have been promoted only to our individual school communities. This report is filled with optimism on what is happening as evidenced in our school and district survey data of parental satisfaction with neighborhood, charter, magnet and all forms of educational choice. The harsh reality is that the system has not provided evidence of or promoted the innovative and unique school services to the broader community of stakeholders and the “added value” of the DCSD.

High on our list of recommendations is to “spread the word” in a professionally designed, deliberate way. Compliance and control are no longer acceptable in how we promote our individual schools. They must be provided the resources to construct creatively designed websites, annual reports, and communication tools to effectively demonstrate they are “choice” schools. Transparency in what we do well is as important as in our budget.

We suggest a paradigm shift in our thinking about various conceptual issues. School choice does not automatically mean charter or magnet schools but also encompasses the concept of neighborhood schools as a popular choice in DCSD. Currently, providing parents/students school choice has been accomplished through Open Enrollment and Administrative Transfer. With approximately 92% of all DCSD students attending what we currently label as neighborhood schools, it is intuitive that over 90% of the change effort should be focused on ensuring that they are fully empowered and that expanded school profiles be available to showcase and market their identity. We believe this need really underlies the call for greater “choice”.

This may be the challenge of the decade for this district and must be approached in a carefully constructed, thoughtful way. We caution against immediate action and/or decisions without many more hours of study and stakeholder input as to not break a successful system but look more toward continuous improvement. When system-wide autonomy is achieved, we envision that all schools cumulatively will offer a wide menu of choices that will meet marketplace needs and demands.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1

DCSD should establish a BOE standing committee that strategically advises it on school autonomy, innovation and choice – *The School Autonomy and Innovation Committee* (working title – subject to change).

- Because of the complexities surrounding this issue and the need to avoid unintended consequences, this committee can provide ongoing research, communication and recommendations. It would build upon and further what this subcommittee has started with a strong focus on current and potential operations and execution.
- It would analyze and clarify the level/not level playing field issues; work with all parties; and make recommendations to the BOE.
- It would carefully research and systematically address relevant issues so that a comprehensive strategy and process can be developed and implemented for empowering schools and providing more autonomy so they can better fulfill their missions.
- It would also research and analyze why different types of schools and schooling scenarios are selected (for example – why do some DCSD parents select other districts or private non-religious schools? Are religious schools only selected for religious purposes?)
- This all is a dynamic and evolving topic that needs to be continuously addressed; hence a standing committee of the Board.
- This committee would complement the three current standing BOE committees: Financial Oversight (money), Long Range Planning (capacity/facilities, boundaries and sites/land) and District Advisory (policy).

Recommendation #2

Actively market what our district offers for educational choice.

- Provide resources to create design websites, annual reports, and other communication tools to effectively demonstrate the “choices” available in today’s DCSD schools.
- The central DCSD website should be conceptually transformed to be customer and market place oriented. Schools should market and differentiate themselves to parents and students. Parents should be able to search by various criteria to determine which schools provide the types of programs they seek.
- In selecting schools, parents and students should be able to access information about each school through an improved and refocused website. Schools would provide key information in the following primary areas: academic programming, learning environment, social/emotional support, logistical/calendar information, student achievement results, and other unique characteristics, specialty areas and student opportunities.
- Enrollment for all schools under the DCSD “umbrella” could be completed centrally on the district website.
- Understand market factors driving parents to other districts or private schools: program choices, including non-college curriculum, calendar, social policy (i.e. uniforms), athletics, and perceptions.
- Develop and market branding and tag lines for schools similar to monikers used for IB and core knowledge programs.
- Annually publish to the community senior graduate destinations (i.e., number of students going to Ivy League schools, state colleges, military service, trade schools etc) and associated scholarship values granted.
- Consider school branding enhancements to build regional affinity between DCSD high schools and major regional media such as the Denver Post and TV news channels. For example, place “DC” in front of each high school (e.g. DC ThunderRidge) to connect the school to DCSD and highlight success, expand awareness and strengthen message of the DCSD tagline.
- Provide marketing and branding training for principals and associated staff
- Consider joint marketing activities at other public facilities (e.g. recreation centers, city/county/special district admin buildings, DMV offices, senior centers).
- Encourage all charter schools to build and strengthen brand affinity with DCSD under the premise that all children are “our children, our schools (community), our future”.
- Explore establishing a low power FM capability for student/community operated radio for district/county centric media

Recommendation #3

DCSD strategically should explore and define greater levels of empowerment for DCSD schools and arm them with the responsibility and authority to shape and fulfill their missions in partnership with their School Accountability Committee (SAC) or in the case of a Charter School, their Governance Board.

- The School Autonomy and Innovation Committee would undertake this assignment.
- Discussions with principals, a SAC and others shows a willingness and need for more empowerment; and they are willing to leverage that to better serve the needs of students.
- School principals would be increasingly empowered and responsible for decisions within his/her facility subject to approval by each school's SAC or Governance Board.
- All direct school-related expense line items should be on the individual school budgets and may require a new look at (or in-depth review of) site based budgeting buckets and their inputs.
- Even with current site-based budgeting, an example of a concern is that much the budget of neighborhood schools is not actually on their budgets; including the cost of the principal. From a financial management and cost/benefit analysis perspective, this is robbing the BOE and central administration of key governance and management data and tools.
- A process over time should be implemented that moves from central procurement only to a more dynamic system that includes more potential options for schools; since it is their budgets.
- Schools have expressed keen interest in designing and implementing exciting new programs based on demand and becoming leaders in specific educational areas. Perhaps a R&D office and/or competitive grant process from a district pool of funds for our own Race to the Top competition could be considered. Likewise, establish a process to pool best practices and share what works and what has failed across all operational aspects from fundraising to field trips and recognize/reward innovation and success.
- The central administration should be focused on its core responsibilities and functions; and empower the schools with the rest as much as possible over time.
- Each neighborhood school may choose to procure services centrally or buy services similar to charter schools through competitive bidding, purchased through the local school's budget; likewise, neighborhood schools might consider managing their own facility rental opportunities.
- Required services, purchased or centrally provided, must be clearly defined by the BOE and meet federal and state guidelines/regulations.
- Services distribution/alignment would be managed and offered with fiduciary intent to properly recognize the extensive infrastructure and capital equipment investment already in place in DCSD and may require a phased approach over multiple years and/or limited participation pilot programs as well as partnerships with local governments and special districts.
- Consider realignment of school services located in schools but not managed by schools such as preschool and after school programs.
- As DCSD moves close to a nearly uniform calendar, consider how summers can be utilized to bring new, innovative and additive programming open across the district. For example, one elementary school could offer a science camp for five weeks with Lockheed Martin while another offers a three week art camp with the Denver Art Museum. Parents would have additional choice and opportunities to experience other schools. Market these programs to parents who have opted out as a vehicle to entice enrollment. Highlight these efforts nationwide to demonstrate innovate, international approaches to 21st century efforts to make our students the best not only in Colorado but across the world.

Recommendation # 4

To ensure ongoing financial and operational viability of all DCSD schools, before giving final approval to any proposed new schools (regardless of type), applications must include thorough feasibility studies verified by DCSD planning staff that detail what existing schools offer (including program and operational characteristics) and what need beyond that might be filled; what the demand is; and what the impact would be on enrollment and hence viability of existing schools.

- Such data is necessary for the BOE to make informed decisions and avoid potentially substantial and costly unintended consequences.
- Prior to approving a new school the BOE should consider if there are other alternatives available or if changes can be made at existing sites or areas to accommodate the request.

Recommendation # 5

The BOE should develop a definition of School Choice and market this definition as a core district and community value.

- An option: “School Choice in the Douglas County School District means systematically empowering families to make educated decisions about which DCSD school their children will attend based on geography and program that best fits their family’s needs.”
- Highlight annually choices made – parents who moved to new locations, children open enrolled, charter selections, special program participation (e.g., IBs and academies).

Key Outcomes/Strategies

Key outcomes and strategies of the change process for greater school autonomy:

- Empower every school within the DCSD system (neighborhood, charter, magnet, etc.) with the responsibility, authority and resources to be a school of choice, to serve our “customers” in the broadest sense while meeting the educational needs of students who choose to attend.
- Offer a means of local school governance that creates a strong sense of ownership and self reliance.
- Foster a school environment where every member thinks and acts as an owner.
- Define school quality clearly in customer-response terms, both internally and externally.
- Ensure that the individual school community knows best how to organize to save a dollar, serve a student, and get it right the first time.
- Provide parents and students with an increasing number of educational choices and options from which to choose.
- Provide equitable and consistent funding and resources among schools to respond to demands and needs of students, parents and the business community.
- Encourage the return of students living in Douglas County who attend other districts or area private schools; understand thoroughly why parents opt out.
- Engage in active partnership with the business community to ensure that we are providing the type of educated graduate that the business community demands; and provide a broader array of workplace career mentoring and internship opportunities.
- No longer will we assume that establishing innovative schools in DCSD automatically means building new facilities nor assume that providing that type of school can only be done by a new, non-neighborhood school in a new facility.
- Students would ideally always have first choice to attend their nearest or designated DCSD school. Then, all schools would be open enrollment based and would have the same open enrollment window, including neighborhood, charter, magnet, alternative and online. These windows would also be aligned, as closely as possible, with neighboring district windows and other educational institutions to highlight regional competition.
- Develop marketing materials that highlight to parents the cost benefit of remaining in DCSD and how invested savings can lead to greater post-high school educational opportunities and more choices.

Feeder System

Discussion encouraged: Feeder systems were designed to connect communities in a K-12 grade structure to build community in neighborhoods and to pool funds and resources. *How may we connect feeder systems to a choice environment? Is it possible to have “feeders of choice” that develop comprehensive learning opportunities for families in a K-12 continuum?*

Additional Relevant Information

- The vast majority of students in DCSD attend neighborhood schools and recent polling gave high marks to these schools.
- Neighborhood schools serve defined boundary geographical areas and in many cases families select or purchase homes in a neighborhood to attend a particular school.
- Neighborhood schools must serve all students who move into the geographical area regardless of capacity and enrollment; charters/magnets do not have this requirement.
- All children/families in any neighborhood currently have these school/educational choices: public neighborhood, charter, magnet, on-line, private (religious and non-religious), other districts and home school.
- Neighborhood schools today include activities not managed by the school including Pre-K, special education, food services, purchasing, operations/management, after school care, facility rentals and more.....
- When neighborhood schools and charters are compared on a demographic/socio-economic basis, test results are similar.
- An in-depth fiscal study should be made comparing neighborhood/ charter funding.
- Principals and their staff in general do not have extensive business or operational training to manage activities currently addressed by the central office (maintenance, transportation, food service). This would need to be phased in a process over time.
- Should there be a fee to open enroll?
- Should feeder alignment be broader to encourage greater movement/choice at middle school and high school transition points?
- Should central administration offer shared services for two fees - one required and the other optional - and set required standards? Fees should be equitable for all schools.
- Encourage BOE and Central Administration to continue efforts to highlight/promote/inform the community on current educational choice opportunities in DCSD.