

Charter-school fans want more

Schools' success has parents clamoring for the same for their kids

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At top-performing West Denver Preparatory Charter School, curriculum director John Dues talks to students and staff during the meeting held each day before classes begin. (Andy Cross, The Denver Post)

A group of angry parents stood before the Denver school board last month, holding up newspaper articles about a high-performing charter school and asking why their children were unable to receive the same education.

"We want this for our kids and our families," said Luci Saenz, mother of a child at Valdez Elementary. "We are ready to fight. We believe in our children, and we believe they deserve it."

Like other urban districts, Denver Public Schools has had trouble

educating the city's poorest students. But two charter middle schools on the city's west side have proved it can be done.

The success of KIPP Sunshine Peak Academy and West Denver Preparatory Charter School is spurring a charter renaissance. At least a dozen charter schools are being planned for the city over the next decade based on high-performing models.

At the same time, a group of charter advocates is joining forces with plans to add dozens more schools to teach low-income urban youth on Colorado's Front Range.

"You are going to see more and more of this — more schools are going to get created and more communities demanding them," said Tony Lewis, director of the Donnell-Kay Foundation. "I don't think this is an aberration. This is a new trend."

- Denver School of Science & Technology, which is sending its entire senior class to colleges next year, recently broke ground on a new middle school in northeast Denver.
- West Denver Prep wants to add three more schools and serve a total of 1,000 students from sixth to 12th grade by 2015. It is already adding to its current facility.
- KIPP Sunshine Peak, another high-performing charter school, wants four new schools: two elementary schools, one middle school and a high school. It is seeking buildings and leaders and hopes to serve 2,400 kids on five campuses.
- Global Prep, based on the successful Envision Schools in San Francisco, is planning a sixth- through 12th-grade school for students



Jonathan Carda-Cerate, 12, fills in a chart for a math class at West Denver Preparatory Charter School, the best middle school in Denver by a new districtwide gauge. At the school, students study math for nearly two hours a day, the school day is longer, homework must be done and

youths are surrounded with reminders to keep a focus on college. (Andy Cross, The Denver Post)

from families whose members have never been to college. The school could be the first of six in Denver.

"People are so starved for high-performing new schools," said Lewis, whose organization is behind the creation of the Global Prep school and who has been meeting with others about forming a group to help create more schools.

A similar organization in Chicago, The Renaissance Schools Fund, is an independent nonprofit working with Chicago Public Schools to create 100 schools in underserved parts of the city by 2010.

Lewis and others are in Chicago this week to discuss the concept.

On Thursday, officials from Chicago schools will meet with Denver school board members and the public to discuss their city's new schools program and how charter schools share facilities with other schools.

DPS invites outside-the-box ideas

It's unclear whether increasing the number of charter schools in Denver will dilute their success. Critics of charters argue schools are successful because they cater to parents who are already engaged.

Yet, DPS understands there is a need for new school programs and this year sought proposals from groups inside and outside the district to develop new schools.

They got 19 proposals — eight were charter schools, and eight were "innovation schools," a school program with greater flexibility but staffed by district employees.

"We are looking for strong new district schools and strong new charters," said Tom Boasberg, DPS operations officer. "We're very pleased to see so many strong applicants."

Last month, the parents who stood before the school board had a model in mind.

They had visited West Denver Prep in southwest Denver and were intoxicated by what they saw.

The 2-year-old school for sixth- and seventh-graders is the best middle school in Denver, based on DPS' new assessment tool that tracks student growth.

Not far behind is KIPP Sunshine Peak — a school for fifth- through eighth-graders that also serves mostly low-income Latino students on the city's west side.

"We would love to have that for our children," parent Luci Saenz told the school board.

Kids work hard, with college in mind

West Denver Prep, in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods, uses a program designed by its 29-year-old Yale-educated leader, Chris Gibbons.

Gibbons studied successful charter schools around the country and built a program that uses rewards, continual assessments, strict discipline and rigorous academics.

Students every day get 110 minutes of math, 150 minutes of literacy, and one 50-minute period each of history and science. The school tests often, employs interventions early and keeps parents informed about their children's progress and behavior.

About two-thirds of students enter into the school at least one grade behind. Students and parents sign a contract at the beginning of the year agreeing, among other things, that students will not advance to the next grade unless they prove to be proficient.

The school's 196 students arrive by 8 a.m. and leave by 4:15, unless they've failed to do homework, which means they must stay another hour.

Throughout the day they receive messages about going to college.

Classrooms are named after teachers' colleges, entry-way posters proclaim sixth-graders as the "College Class of 2018" and students cap the morning all-school meeting with a chant — "I am here to strive for college."

"If a kid doesn't leave the eighth grade with a sense of college and being on track, it's going to be way difficult," Gibbons said.

The school opened in August 2006 in an old nursing home and next year will add an eighth grade. Plans call for a new middle school and a new high school.

"These charter schools are finally making this second leap," said Alex Ooms, president of the school's board. "You're getting this second wave of really good charters separating themselves from the pack."

More time in school "all pays off"

A few miles away, at KIPP Sunshine Peak, director Richard Barrett likes to take visitors into the boys' bathroom and ask what they see.

White fixtures, white stalls and white paint are spotless with no trace of graffiti.

Barrett says the bathroom reflects respect.

"We bring kids into this bathroom and say, 'This is your mama's bathroom; don't mess it up,' " he said.

Barrett also walks visitors outside to show them the grounds that he says reveals a lack of respect for his program.

The school has a waiting list of 250 kids. But it is sandwiched between two DPS schools and unable to expand.

Half of the students are taught in 14 portables, and the school uses tennis courts for outside physical education.

Next door, Rishel Middle School, which serves a similar demographic, was at 58 percent capacity in 2006, according to DPS records.

"We're too cramped," Barrett said. "We would like a building that could suit all of needs. Shared use and shared space is our goal."

Students have three hours of homework every night, they begin school at 7:25 and end at 5 p.m., they have three weeks of summer school and 18 days of Saturday school.

They also get cross-country field trips during the spring.

"It all pays off," said Aurora LaMarine, 13, who got a full ride next year to Middlesex School in Concord, Mass., a private boarding school.

"We have 60 eighth-graders, and every one has been accepted into a quality four-year pre-college program," Barrett said.

"That's our standard. . . . Our goal is to revitalize the community through the schools and make it a safer community for all individuals, not just a select few."