

The Rocky in Iowa: Republican field gives chase to 'Rudy McRomney.' **NEWS 4**

# Rocky Mountain News



JUDY DEHAAS/ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Henry Carson, 2, runs in the auditorium at DPS' Brown Elementary. His mother, Jennifer Carson, is touring schools early to find one for him.

## Leaving to learn

A **quarter** of the city's school-age children **don't attend Denver Public Schools**. Among Anglos, a **quarter** go to **private schools**. ■ In some southwest Denver neighborhoods, **half** the kids go to **sub-urban districts**. ■ Enrollment at independent **charters** has skyrocketed **300 percent** in six years. ■ These are the **stark findings** of the first study of the **impact of school choice** on DPS, by the *Rocky Mountain News* and the nonprofit Piton Foundation, with **cooperation** from DPS. ■ The district is **urgently working** on reform, hoping to **attract more students**. ■ Can it improve **fast enough**?

**SEVEN-DAY SPECIAL REPORT BEGINS ON NEWS 22**



LEAVING  
TO LEARN  
DPS’ ENROLLMENT GAP:  
PART ONE OF SEVEN

Denver’s public  
schools face a dilemma.  
Students are leaving.

“You can’t persuade people to stay if they think they’ve got an option that’s better for their kids,” said Denver Public Schools Superintendent Michael Bennet.

Enrollment in neighborhood schools is declining, despite more preschoolers and kindergartners. Many schools are failing or underperforming, and parents are taking advantage of federal and state laws that give them more choices about where to educate their children.

The result? About 20,300 school-age children in Denver did not attend DPS in 2005-2006, a study by the *Rocky Mountain News* and the Piton Foundation found. Bennet says DPS can’t afford to lose any students.

“We don’t want 100 percent of the Anglo community checking out altogether. Then we are in a death spiral,” he said. “We want middle-class African-Americans just as much. We want everyone.”

A healthy Denver public school system is critical to the entire metro area, said Mayor John Hickenlooper.

“We are all joined together whether we like it or not,” he said. “Aurora and Lakewood and Douglas County and Northglenn will all benefit dramatically as DPS becomes successful.”

THE SERIES

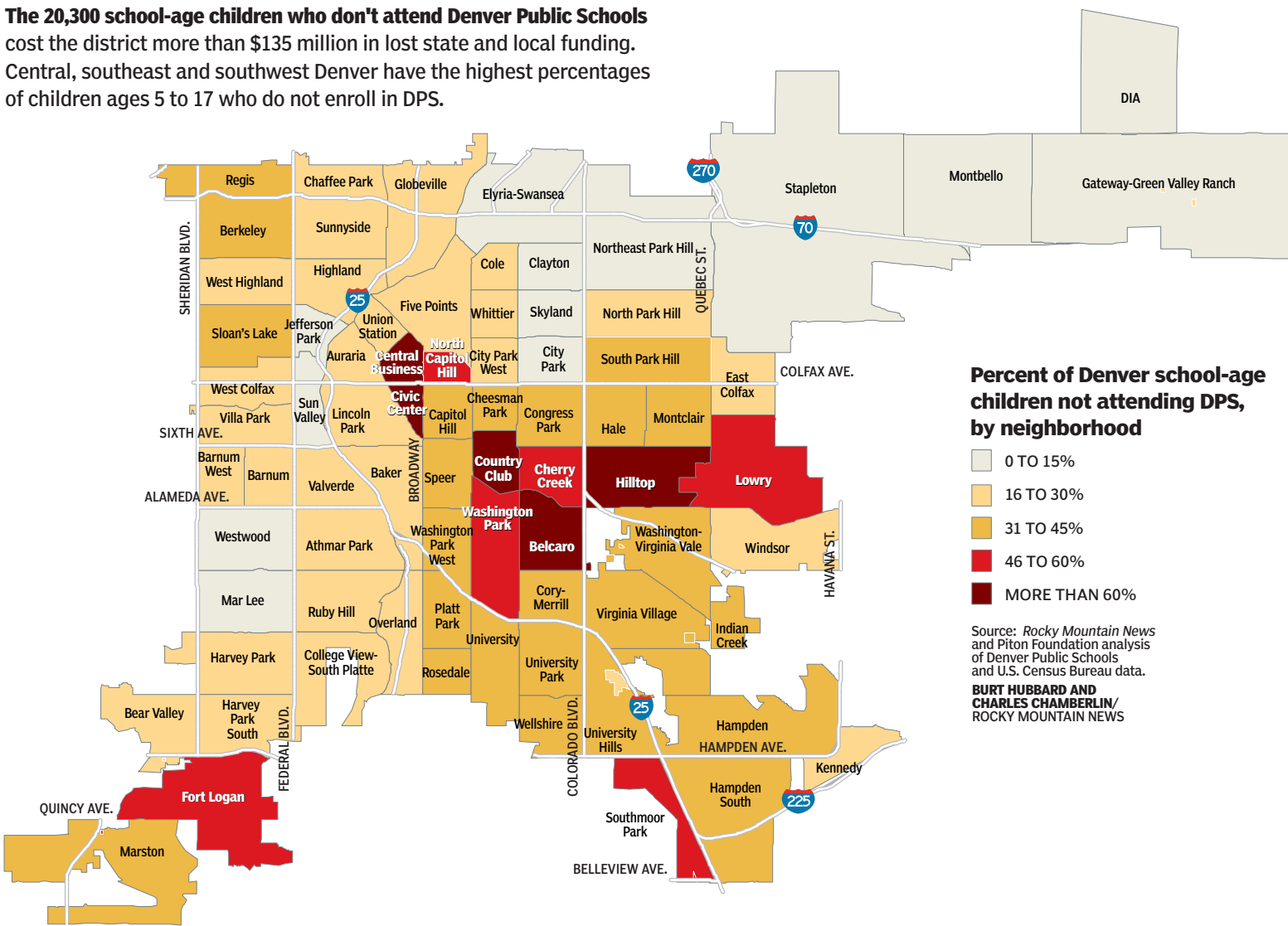
- **TODAY:** Denver Public Schools aren’t enrolling about 25 percent of the city’s school-age children, a study by the *Rocky Mountain News* and the Piton Foundation has found.
- **TUESDAY:** A fourth of all Anglo kids in Denver go to private schools. It’s almost half of all school-age kids in some areas.
- **WEDNESDAY:** In some areas of southwest Denver, up to half the school-age children go to suburban schools.
- **THURSDAY:** Charter school enrollment has grown 300 percent in six years, with black families most likely to choose them.
- **FRIDAY:** Northwest Denver exemplifies the tensions over reforming schools.
- **MONDAY, April 23:** Hispanics are most likely to choose neighborhood schools, but they increasingly are exercising choice.
- **TUESDAY, April 24:** What lies ahead for DPS?



Weston Littman, 5, hides behind his mother, Hatton Littman, as she speaks to other northwest Denver parents in February during a DPS elementary school choice fair at Highland Park Presbyterian Church.

Losing \$135 million

The 20,300 school-age children who don’t attend Denver Public Schools cost the district more than \$135 million in lost state and local funding. Central, southeast and southwest Denver have the highest percentages of children ages 5 to 17 who do not enroll in DPS.



DPS brain drain

Stories by Burt Hubbard and Nancy Mitchell ■ Photos by Judy DeHaas ■ ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

About a **fourth of school-age children in Denver don’t attend the city’s public schools**, according to a first-ever analysis of data by the *Rocky Mountain News* and the nonprofit Piton Foundation.

■ An estimated **15,700 students bypassed Denver Public Schools** last year in favor of private or suburban schools they see as safer or academically superior. ■ In addition, about **4,600 Denver kids up to age 17 didn’t go to school** at all, for reasons as varied as dropping out, home-schooling or incarceration, the analysis found. ■ School and city officials project that **the number of Denver families abandoning public schools will grow** through 2016, exacting a social and financial toll for the district and, some argue, the city itself. (Continued on NEWS 25.)



## LEAVING TO LEARN **DPS has 31,000 empty seats** in a district with capacity for 98,000 kids.



**Denver Public Schools Superintendent** Michael Bennet talks on a hands-free phone, bites his nails, flips through a notebook and drives at the same time. The former chief of staff for Mayor John Hickenlooper has said his top priority is

improving quality across the system, which should bring families back to DPS. Bennet recognizes that declining enrollment in neighborhood schools means the loss of millions in state and local funding, as well as school closures.

# How numbers for series were crunched

This series is the first detailed investigation of the impact of school choice on Denver Public Schools.

DPS leaders say the system must attract a greater share of the city's children to survive financially.

The *Rocky Mountain News* decided to track who was leaving neighborhood schools or DPS entirely and where they were going. DPS officials, eager for the same information, agreed to cooperate.

No single organization had all the data to answer these questions. But researchers at the Piton Foundation, a nonprofit highly regarded in education circles, were working on similar questions. Piton describes its mission as developing programs to improve public education, expanding families' economic opportuni-

ties and strengthening low-income neighborhoods in Denver.

The *Rocky* partnered with DPS and Piton to pool data. The *Rocky* collected information from some private schools and surveyed public school districts surrounding Denver. That data supplemented figures from DPS, the U.S. Census Bureau and the Colorado Department of Education.

This helped Piton do the most detailed estimate to date of the school-age population in Denver — 83,600 children ages 5 to 17 in 2005-2006. The estimate is the basis for many of the series' percentages.

DPS, Piton and the state demographer all agree on the validity of the statistical methods and findings.

DPS provided enrollment figures and

data on its 63,335 Denver students ages 5 to 17 in 2005-2006. No names or addresses were provided. The data included each student's age, neighborhood, assigned neighborhood school, the DPS school each attends, eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch and ethnicity. The study did not analyze data for preschoolers, older students and DPS students from the suburbs. They brought DPS' total enrollment to 73,000 last year.

The *Rocky* surveyed suburban districts to count Denver students, by ZIP code, who attended other public districts. The Colorado Department of Education provided the total number of Denver students enrolled in other public schools — about 5,500.

Piton estimated the number of private

school students living in Denver by neighborhood by using the 2000 U.S. census and its 2005 Community Survey.

Private school information was supplemented by the Association of Colorado Independent Schools, which surveyed 14 of its member schools. ACIS provided numbers of students living in each Denver ZIP code, with no names, addresses or school-by-school breakdown.

The estimate of 4,600 Denver kids ages 5 to 17 who are not enrolled in any school came from the 2000 census.

For the Stapleton area, which was not developed at the time of the 2000 census, Piton estimates are based on school enrollment and don't reflect kids in private school or no school.

Burt Hubbard

Continued from page 23

The 20,300 potential students streaming away from DPS already cost the district more than \$135 million a year in lost local and state funding.

Overall enrollment in DPS increased by more than 2,000 students from 2000 to 2006, mainly because of growth in preschool, kindergarten and charter schools, all of which bring less funding to DPS than do neighborhood schools.

But with a loss of more than 4,800 students in neighborhood schools during that period, DPS is filling, on average, only 68 percent of its space. The district has 31,000 empty seats out of 98,000.

This declining neighborhood school enrollment, which isn't keeping up with population growth, is forcing the district to confront one of the toughest, most divisive experiences a community can go through — closing some of its schools. A citizens group is meeting to consider that painful task.

The stakes are huge.

The city's health depends on a strong public school system to attract business and families. And Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper argues that the entire metro area benefits if DPS succeeds.

"The stark reality is if we . . . take our school district back where every school has a quality education where we want to send our kids, it will have a dramatic (positive) effect on property values on every person's home," he said. "Not just in the city of Denver but in the metro area."

New state and federal laws in the past decade have mandated that public schools offer parents more choices for their children's education. The study by the *Rocky*, in partnership with the district and the Piton Foundation, is the first detailed investigation into the impact of choice on DPS.

The district has 63,300 Denver students age 5 to 17 enrolled, with the total growing to 73,000 when preschoolers, students who live in the suburbs and those 18 or older are included.

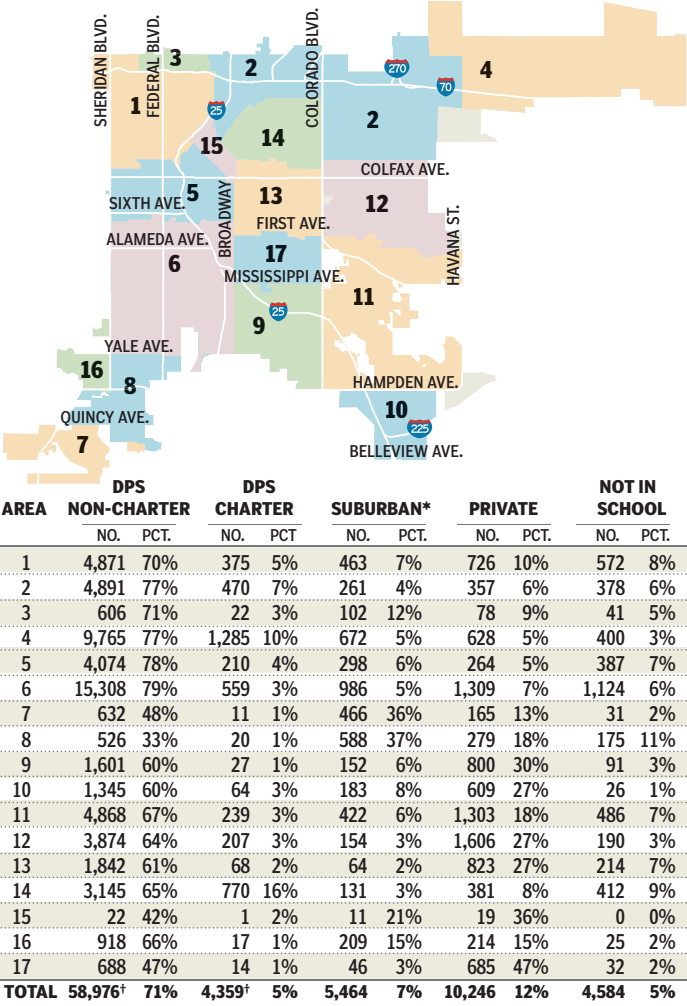
To track Denver's estimated 83,600 school-age children, the study analyzed data from DPS, suburban school districts, private schools and the U.S. Census Bureau. The study found:

- More than half the children in parts of affluent central and southeast Denver are not enrolled in DPS schools. In some of those neighborhoods, such as Belcaro, Country Club and Hilltop, more than half the children attend private schools.
- That contrasts with northeast and west Denver, where incomes tend to be lower and 85 percent or more of all children are DPS students.
- The city's private school enrollment has remained relatively static for the past decade. That indicates the exodus of students from traditional neighborhood DPS schools appears aimed toward suburban districts, DPS' independently run charter schools and DPS magnet schools offering special programs to students districtwide.
- Almost half of the Denver students going to suburban schools come from southwest Denver. One neighborhood, Fort Logan, has more children enrolled in Jefferson County and other suburban districts than in Denver schools.
- Charter school enrollment has increased 300 percent in six years, with growth especially strong in northeast Denver and among black families. One in eight DPS students in northeast Denver attended a charter school in 2005-2006, compared with one in 10 students districtwide.
- While opening doors for students, charter schools bring DPS only a fraction of the money it receives in state funding for students at traditional neighborhood schools. Independent groups operate charters under contract with DPS. By law, the district passes along to charters an average of 95 percent of the per-pupil funding for their students. DPS receives \$6,794 per student in state and local money this year.
- In northwest Denver, many schools are half empty. Young professionals without kids and affluent families with preschoolers are gentrifying the area and aren't yet adding to public school enrollment. At the same time, the blue-collar Hispanic families living there are taking greater advantage of school choice for their children.

Continued on next page

**DPS draws 76 percent of school-age kids**

Most DPS students still go to neighborhood or other non-charter schools, but charters — campuses run by independent groups with taxpayer funding — are growing. Suburban and private schools pull 19 percent of Denver's children ages 5 to 17, and another 5 percent aren't in school at all because of dropping out, home-schooling or other reasons. The numbers and percentages of Denver's school-age children in each type of school are broken down by 17 areas of the city, created by overlaying neighborhood and ZIP code boundaries.



\*Area numbers do not add up to the total because ZIP codes for 256 suburban students were not available.  
† Total does not include suburban residents, preschoolers and students older than 17. With those, enrollment in non-charters is 66,553 and in charters is 6,846.  
Source: Piton Foundation analysis of Denver Public Schools enrollment and U.S. Census Bureau data.  
Burt Hubbard and Charles Chamberlin/Rocky Mountain News

ONLINE  
at RockyMountainNews.com

- **School comparisons:** Find schools near you and compare enrollment and performance.
- **Slide show:** See more photos of area schools and the Evans family as they exercise school choice.
- **Chat at 11 a.m. today:** Talk with reporters Burt Hubbard and Nancy Mitchell on RockyTalk Live. See comments and add yours.

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PARENTS' VOICES

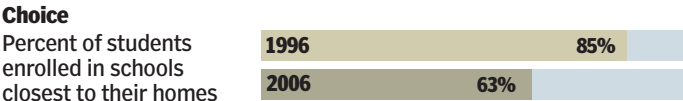
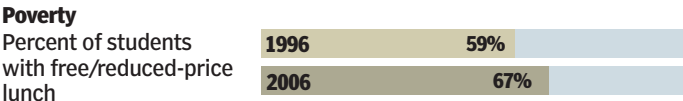
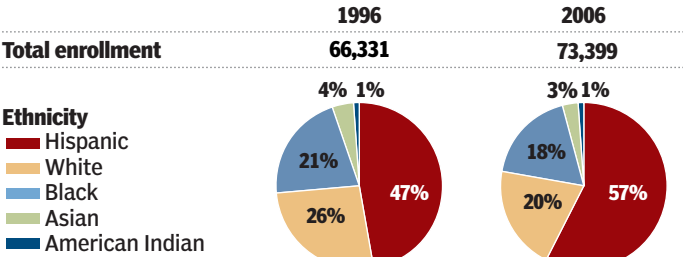
"Class size is a huge issue in that there are just too many kids in the classroom to be taught effectively and not enough staff."

Marie Heaton, mother of three students at DPS' Maxwell Elementary School

■ Hear more parent views at RockyMountainNews.com

DPS poorer, more Hispanic

Over a decade, the percentage of Denver Public Schools students who are Hispanic has grown, along with the percentage who are low-income. Changes in state and federal laws gave parents greater choice in choosing schools for their children, and the share of students going to neighborhood schools has shrunk.



Source: Denver Public Schools and Rocky Mountain News analysis ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS



# LEAVING TO LEARN 15,700 Denver kids attended private or suburban schools last year.



**Smiley Middle School Principal** Nate Howard asks sixth-grader Erin Urasery, 12, to tie his shoe as his physical education class begins. Smiley, in the Park Hill area, consistently is rated low by the state, with academic achievement declining. It's losing enrollment, leaving it with one of the lowest occupancy

rates of all campuses in Denver Public Schools. Howard says gentrification contributes to the school's struggle to keep students because many of the new families moving into the northeast Denver neighborhood are young families whose children aren't yet of middle-school age.

Continued from previous page

North High School and the three middle schools feeding into it are less than 60 percent full. One of the three — Horace Mann — is only 34 percent full.

■ School choice is not only draining students from DPS, it is redistributing them within the district. About 40 percent now skip their neighborhood schools in favor of other options, from dual-language programs to performing arts magnets to back-to-basics charter schools.

■ Statistics comparable to those compiled for the *Rocky* study could not be found for other urban school districts across the country. But rough estimates by the National Center for Education Statistics using enrollment and census data show some large urban districts, such as Phoenix's, capture a higher percentage of potential students than DPS does. Others, such as Detroit and Baltimore, capture even fewer than Denver.

DPS has recognized that it faces a daunting challenge in improving its schools fast enough to lure families who have more and more alternatives.

If the trends continue, a public school population that is heavily weighted toward low-income students could lose even more middle- and upper-income students. DPS already is predominantly Hispanic, and those students are more likely than black or Anglo students to come from poor families, based on percentages receiving free- or reduced-price lunches.

Twenty-six percent of Anglo children in Denver go to private schools, and middle-income black families are the least likely to attend their neighborhood schools, the analysis found.

"We don't want 100 percent of the Anglo community checking out altogether. Then we are in a death spiral," said DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet. "We want middle-class African-Americans

just as much. We want everyone."

**Farther afield**

Neighborhood schools, once seen as the building blocks of communities, are no longer the first choice for a growing number of parents willing to go farther for what they believe is a better education.

"I personally think the traditional neighborhood school has come and gone," said Rob Stein, who is leaving Graland Country Day School, one of Denver's largest private schools, to reopen Manual High School. The troubled public high school was closed last year so it could be reformed.

"In this climate, all schools are schools of choice," Stein said.

Alex and Michele Wiseman see that on their block in the Lowry development in east Denver. Almost all the families drive their children to school — in different di-

rections.

The Wisemans moved their two sons from DPS to a private school this fall.

"On my street, there are one, two, three . . . seven children in school," Michele Wiseman said. "There's only two kids that go to the same school.

"And of the other children around me, the kids all go to different schools. Kids don't run around in the neighborhood like we did."

Interest in school choice appears to be growing in all parts of the city.

In west Denver, about a dozen Spanish-speaking parents braved icy roads in February to attend an hourlong class on their rights as parents and how to choose a school. The Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options offers the classes throughout the city.

In northwest Denver, about 50 parents crowded into a church on a cold February night to hear pitches from five DPS



**Sarah Hawkey, 10, practices** the lip formation she must master to play the flute well during her music class at Graland Country Day School in Denver's affluent Hilltop neighborhood. Students at the private school are exposed to a wide range of learning opportunities.



**Fifth-graders Hector Dominguez, left, Isaac Juarez and Omar Zavala** at KIPP Sunshine Peak Academy Charter School listen to teacher Antonio Vigil. He is reading a list of students with discipline or academic issues who won't get to bowl during the post-CSAP party. They weren't on it.

schools. The newly renamed Brown International Academy passed out color brochures about its academically rigorous International Baccalaureate Program. All of the parents were at least a year away from enrolling their children in kindergarten.

And in central Denver, Robert Koopmeiners and his wife, Brigitte Baehre, attended an informational breakfast with their daughter, Sophie, a sixth-grader at the private Denver Waldorf School. They came to hear about the Center for International Studies, DPS' newest magnet program for grades 6-12.

The family lives in northwest Denver, and dad has deemed the area's high school, North, "unacceptable."

"It's sad," he said. "You should be able to send your kid to the neighborhood school. It's a shame in this community because Denver is an educated city."

For longtime northwest Denver resident Tina Bosse, the choice for her son, Gabriel, came down to music. Gabriel was accepted into programs for gifted students at Edison Elementary in Denver and Hackberry Hill in Jefferson County. But the Jeffco school had a more advanced music program.

She now drives Gabriel 20 to 30 minutes each way to the school on West 76th Avenue. But the time-consuming drive shouldn't last much longer.

"We have our house up for sale," Bosse said. "We're thinking of getting a little bit closer to the schools in Jeffco."

Even the mayor and his wife, Helen Thorpe, are studying school choices to decide where to send their 4-year-old son, Teddy.

"Let me guarantee that my wife, like every wife and every father, is all over that," Hickenlooper said. "To her whether a school is a charter school, a public school or a neighborhood private school, she's going to pick the school that's best. She doesn't care who the mayor is."

## SCHOOL CHOICE

### Expanded options

Public school choice is a relatively recent phenomenon in Colorado. State laws and school district rules requiring families to enroll their children in their assigned neighborhood schools have been gradually loosening since 1990. In Denver, the result is that nearly 40 percent of students choosing public education enrolled in a school other than their assigned neighborhood school in 2005-06.

### Open enrollment

**Choice within school districts:** In May 1990, state lawmakers slip a provision into the School Finance Act that allows students to attend any school within their own school district — not just their neighborhood school. The provision creates a pilot program allowing students to transfer between school districts without requiring parents to pay tuition.

**Expanding choice:** In August 1991, school boards in Denver and Jefferson County, the state's largest school district, agree to admit students living outside their district boundaries.

**The numbers:** By October 2006, 48,543 students attend schools outside the school district in which they live, according to state officials. That includes 6,319 Denver students.

### Charter schools

**New law:** In May 1993, the General Assembly enacts the state Charter Schools Law, sponsored by then-state Sen. Bill Owens, R-Aurora, who went on to become governor. It allows independent groups to run public charter schools under contract with school boards and funded by state per-pupil education dollars.

**First charter school:** In September 1993, Colorado's first charter school opens in Pueblo. Denver's first charter school opens a year later.

**The numbers:** By October 2006, 52,352 students attend 133 charter schools across Colorado, including 6,846 students in 20 Denver charters.

### Denver busing

**Busing begins:** In fall 1974, a federal judge's order begins mandatory cross-town busing in Denver to desegregate city schools. This spurs the creation of magnet schools, or special programs designed to attract whites to minority neighborhoods and vice versa.

**Busing ends:** In fall 1996, the court determines busing can stop for Denver's elementary students and, a year later, for middle- and high-school students. Enrollment falls from 87,620 in 1973 to 68,893 in 1998.

**The numbers:** By fall 2005, interest in charter schools, magnet schools and other programs has grown. DPS officials report only 63 percent of students — down more than 20 percentage points in 10 years — attend their assigned neighborhood schools in 2005-06. The district offers 17 magnet programs, including Montessori, dual-language immersion, international studies, computer technology and the Denver School of the Arts.

### Federal mandates

**No Child Left Behind:** In January 2002, President George W. Bush signs the federal No Child Left Behind Act. It says school districts must offer students in low-performing schools a choice of other public schools and must provide transportation for certain schools.

**The numbers:** By fall 2005, DPS estimates 1,500 students moved to other schools via No Child Left Behind. District officials credit the law with increasing the numbers of low-income families in Denver who are exercising school choice.

Nancy Mitchell

## Enrollment dilemma

**Denver Public Schools lost enrollment** in first through 12th grades in its traditional neighborhood schools from 2000 to 2006, creating a financial problem for the

district. Growth in preschool, kindergarten and independent charter schools has boosted enrollment, but DPS gets far less funding for most of those students.

**Enrollment 2000-2006**

	NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS			CHARTERS			TOTAL
	2000	2006	+/-	2000	2006	+/-	+/-
Early childhood	3,015	4,345	+1,330	0	30	+30	+1,360
Kindergarten	5,609	6,243	+634	24	438	+414	+1,048
1st-12th grade	60,823	55,965	-4,858	1,484	6,378	+4,894	+36
All	69,447	66,553	-2,894	1,508	6,846	+5,338	+2,444

Source: Denver Public Schools

ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS



LEAVING TO LEARN About 27,000 students travel to DPS schools outside their neighborhoods.



6:49 a.m. Aaron Evans, 8, stretches as he prepares for his day at Polaris at Ebert, DPS' elementary for gifted students.



7:21 a.m. Angela Evans spends hours driving her kids to school and herself to her Denver Tech Center job.



7:41 a.m. Angela Evans says goodbye to daughter Lauryn, 3, at the Hope Academy in Denver's Five Points area. The Evanses live in far northeast Denver's Green Valley Ranch, but are willing to endure long commutes to ensure the best education for the children.

ISSUE: CHOOSING TO COMMUTE

Slide show  
See Angela Evans and her family as they pursue school choice. Online at RockyMountainNews.com

Angela Evans, a mom who lives in Green Valley Ranch, knows the meaning of school choice as well as anyone.

"I spend three hours on the road between the morning and the afternoon, but that's OK," she said, "because my child is where he needs to be to be successful."

Evans drives Aaron, a third-grader, from their home in far northeast Denver to Five Points near downtown to attend Polaris at Ebert, DPS' elementary school for gifted kids. Lauryn, 3, goes to a preschool. Evans, an insurance executive, then drives southeast to the Denver Tech Center. In the afternoon, she repeats the circuit.

"When I had children, I didn't know this was what I signed for," said Evans, who shares driving duties with her husband, Leonist, a firefighter. "I truly envisioned kicking my kids out of the door to walk to the neighborhood school. It didn't happen that way, so I made the necessary adjustments."

Nancy Mitchell



5:09 p.m. Leonist Evans unloads sports equipment, his children and the Febres kids, who carpool with his family, at the Montbello Recreation Center.



6:40 p.m. Aaron Evans attends Ebert's Night of the Notables as former Mayor Wellington Webb. He talks with Allison Fisher, 8 — Cleo Parker Robinson.



LEAVING TO LEARN DPS' ENROLLMENT GAP: PART 2 OF 7



**Andy Dodge, right**, a fifth-grade science teacher at Graland Country Day School, tests the structural strength of a balsa wood tower built by Amy Greenspan, left. Classmates Clare Berzins, second from left, Belle Stockdale, Ryan Broida,

Calvin Barret and Olivia Arthur watch the experiment as Amy looks away. Dodge uses a machine that measures the pressure it takes to collapse each tower. Creative, hands-on experiences are one of Graland's attractions.

In some **affluent areas of Denver**, almost **half** of the kids ages 5 to 17 attend **private schools**, based on 2005 U.S. census estimates. ■ **Among Anglos** citywide, it's a **fourth**. ■ Denver Public Schools probably **won't ever draw some** of those families. ■ But **many parents** say they would **choose public schools** if the **quality improved** in time for their kids' education.

# DPS losing 12 percent to private

Story by Nancy Mitchell  
Photos by Judy DeHaas  
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Erik and Mandy Koskinen did not plan to join the nearly 30 percent of families in their Congress Park neighborhood who enroll their children in private schools. They tried two different Denver public schools. They agonized over what to do. But in December, the couple decided they had to look outside the city school district for Jack, 8, and Sam, 5.

"We believe that a thriving society depends on a strong and well-functioning public school system," Mandy Koskinen wrote in an application to a local private school where tuition tops \$10,000 per child. "But simply, our children do not have time to wait."

More than 12 percent of Denver children ages 5 to 17 attend private schools, based on 2005 U.S. census estimates. That's slightly higher than the national average of 10 percent. It works out to about 10,200 students.

The Koskinens' Victorian home near Colfax Avenue and Colorado Boulevard marks the northern edge of a southeastern swath of the city where families are most likely to make that educational choice.

A *Rocky Mountain News* and Piton Foundation analysis of census data shows

that, in some of Denver's wealthiest neighborhoods, more than one in three children attend private school. That includes the central-city neighborhoods of Cherry Creek and Country Club and extends to Southmoor Park at Denver's southeastern tip.

"Where we live, almost everybody on our street sends their kids to private school," said Gil Rosenthal, an attorney who lives in the Hilltop neighborhood. "You sort of feel some people question your decision to send your kids to public school."

Denver Public Schools, in the quest to attract families back to the city district, is unlikely ever to draw some who opt to go private.

"I've never even considered sending my children to public schools," said Kelly Tynan, whose two sons attend St. Vincent de Paul Catholic School in southeast Denver, following a family tradition.

"I'm not a fan of public schools," Tynan said flatly, adding that he wished the property taxes he pays for public schools could offset his sons' tuition bills.

Other families, including the Koskinens and the Rosenthals, tried public schools before turning to private education.

Gil and Chandra Rosenthal gave in because of two concerns frequently cited in interviews with parents leaving DPS: large



# LEAVING TO LEARN

Even with annual tuition running **\$15,070 to \$16,680 per student**, competition



**Jack Koskinen, 8**, a third-grader at DPS' highly rated Cory Elementary School, does his homework at the kitchen counter of his Congress Park home. His

mother, Mandy Koskinen, didn't like Teller Elementary, their neighborhood school, or Montclair Elementary. She's frustrated with DPS' emphasis on tests.



**Sam Koskinen, 5**, takes a moment to think about what to write in his journal at his Cory Elementary School kindergarten class. Jack and Sam are on a waiting list to get into the private Stanley British Primary School.



**Mandy Koskinen kisses** her middle son, Sam, 5, while her youngest son, Will, 11 months, watches from his highchair in the kitchen of their Congress Park home.



remains fierce for private Graland’s 639 seats.

Continued from page 33

cause of two concerns frequently cited in interviews with parents leaving DPS: large class sizes and the annual uncertainty of public school funding.

Their son Abe, 7, attended DPS’ popular school for gifted students, the Polaris Program at Ebert Elementary, in the Five Points neighborhood near downtown. But two years of constant budget talk wore down the couple.

Would Abe have more than 28 students in his class next year or could Ebert afford another teacher? Would the school have to eliminate kindergarten to make room for smaller classes in the upper grades?

And would the situation be any different for younger son Jonas, 4, or little sister Naomi, 2?

“I just don’t want to have this discussion every year,” Gil Rosenthal said. “I would like to know that if my son is at Ebert and my other son is entering kindergarten, I could send him there, too. I don’t want to worry that there’s no kindergarten or that one of my sons has 22 kids in his class and the other has 32.”

Last May, after outlining their reasons in a letter to DPS officials, the Rosenthals decided to enroll Abe — and likely Jonas and Naomi — in private school. It was not an easy choice.

“I try to think I’m a good citizen, and part of being a good citizen is making decisions that are helpful and good to everybody,” Gil Rosenthal said. “I tend to think we are the kind of people who would help make a school better. I feel like, by leaving, I’m shirking my responsibility to do that.”

**A question of diversity**

Private school enrollment in Denver appears to have stabilized and even dropped slightly in the past 10 years.

That may be a result of other options available to parents who don’t want to send their kids to neighborhood schools.

Schools opening today tend to be charter, not private, said Rob Stein, the head of Graland Country Day School, one of Denver’s largest private schools. He recently was named principal of DPS’ troubled Manual High School.

Charter schools are public schools typically run by independent groups with local school board approval and state education dollars.

“Private schools are based on a business model that requires tuition and private subsidy,” Stein said. “Charter schools are a much more stable business model. You can get 90 to 95 percent of per-pupil operating revenue from the state.”

But competition remains fierce for Graland’s 639 seats. The school won’t release specific numbers, but it has no trouble filling slots, even with annual tuition running \$15,070 to \$16,680 per student.

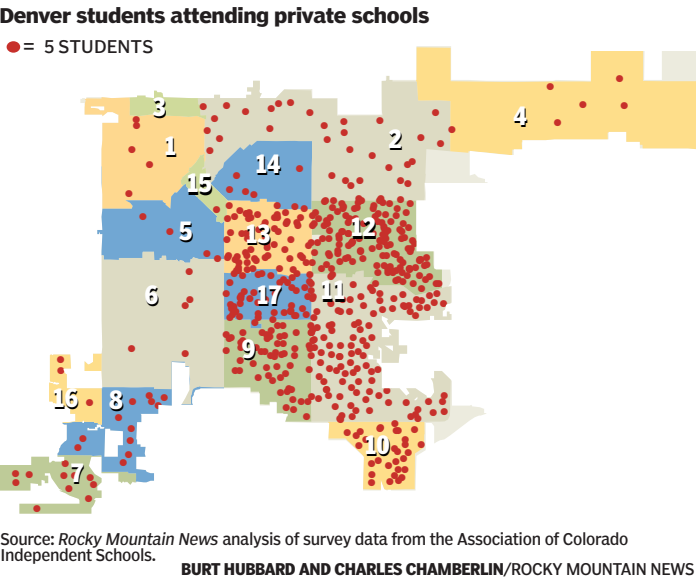
“People will call when they’re coming home (with a new baby) from the hospital,” said Carolyn Craig, director of admissions and financial aid, though the school typically asks parents to wait until their kids are age 4 to call.

Craig said Graland is seeing a slight increase in interest from minority families, who make up a disproportionately small percentage of private school enrollment across Denver.

Twenty-six percent of school-age Anglo children in the city are enrolled in private schools. That compares with 5.3 percent of Hispanic children and 5 percent of

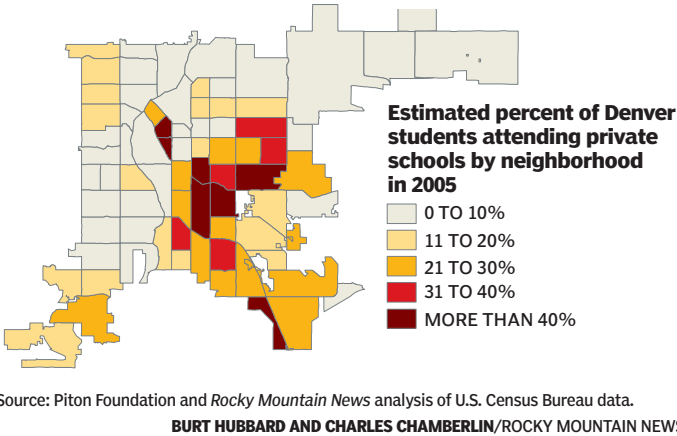
Snapshot of 14 private schools

The Association of Colorado Independent Schools surveyed 14 of its member schools in the metro area at the request of the Rocky Mountain News to find out where their Denver students live. They represent about 3,000 of the 10,200 Denver residents who go to private schools. The map divides the city into 17 areas based on ZIP codes and neighborhood boundaries and randomly assigns dots to represent students’ homes based on their ZIP codes.



Private schools draw heavily from central, southeast Denver

An estimated 10,200 Denver students attended private schools in 2005, with central and southeast Denver sending the largest percentages to independent schools. The nonprofit Piton Foundation used the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2005 Community Survey to adjust the 2000 census number of private school students by neighborhood.



black children, according to census estimates.

The result is a private school population that is 35 percent minority, while the city’s public school enrollment is 80 percent minority, predominantly Hispanic.

The diversity found in DPS classrooms is one reason Mandy Koskinen wanted to stay in the district.

“My parents moved back into the city of Denver when integrated busing began,” she said, “because they wanted their children to experience that kind of school system, where everyone did not look the same as their children.”

That experience — resulting from a federal judge’s ruling mandating busing to desegregate DPS from 1974 through 1996 — opened her eyes to a world beyond the white middle-class household in which she grew up.

“I still value that because I think it really helped me to grow as a person,” she said. “I desperately wanted that for my own children. But I don’t think that is enough. I don’t think it can be enough for me to keep my children in Denver Public Schools.”

**Fatigue and joy**

By the time Mandy Koskinen filled out her sons’ private school applications in December, she had visited at least eight DPS elementary schools in search of the best place for them and their younger brother, Will, though he is only 11 months old.

She had decided against her neighborhood school — too traditional. She filled out applications for two sought-after

Continued on next page

THE SERIES

- **MONDAY:** Denver Public Schools aren’t enrolling about 25 percent of the city’s school-age children, a study by the Rocky Mountain News and the Piton Foundation has found.
- **TODAY:** A fourth of all Anglo kids in Denver go to private schools. It’s almost half of all school-age children in some areas.
- **WEDNESDAY:** In some areas of southwest Denver, half the school-age kids go to suburban schools.
- **THURSDAY:** Charter school enrollment has grown 300 percent in six years, with black families most likely to choose them.
- **FRIDAY:** Northwest Denver exemplifies the tensions over reforming schools.
- **MONDAY, April 23:** Hispanics are most likely to choose neighborhood schools, but they increasingly are exercising choice.
- **TUESDAY, April 24:** What lies ahead for DPS?

ONLINE at RockyMountainNews.com

- **Slide show:** See more photos.
- **School comparisons:** Find schools near you and compare enrollment and performance.
- **Discuss:** Chat at 11 a.m. on Rocky Talk Live with Rob Stein, who is leaving Graland Country Day School to lead DPS’ Manual High. See others’ comments and share your thoughts.



Hear more parent views at RockyMountainNews.com

PARENTS’ VOICES

“What is really important is that our kids are prepared for the 21st century, the global economy, the highly technological world that we’re all living in.”

Patty Bortz, mother of a junior at DPS’ East High School and a seventh-grader at the private Stanley British Primary School

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# LEAVING TO LEARN

Denver had **59 private schools** last year with **11,242** students.



**Ninth-grader Buzz Miller, 15**, of Graland Country Day School in Denver's Hilltop neighborhood, pauses to think about the correct answer to a verbal test

from science teacher Dick Kinney during the dissection of a fetal pig. The private school offers many activities, such as cross-country skiing and rock climbing.

Continued from previous page

DPS programs but was rejected by both.

Her boys wound up at Cory Elementary, a popular school in southeast Denver rated excellent by the state, based on its test scores. There, one classmate is the oldest daughter of DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet.

But what Mandy Koskinen wants to see in her sons' faces when they come home from Cory is the joy of discovery. What she sees most often instead is fatigue.

The former DPS teacher, whose parents also taught in the district and whose brother still does, blames an overemphasis on test scores.

"Jack, in the first grade, his first semester, actually said to me, 'Mom, I know I'm not going to do well on the CSAP,'" she said. The state exams do not begin until third grade.

"Sam, one of the first things he said to

me about kindergarten was, 'Mom, this school seems to be all about reading,'" Mandy Koskinen said.

"I wish I would hear, 'Mom, school is really fun. Mom, we got to do this really cool science experiment today.' I don't hear about the creative hands-on experiences I wish they were having."

She understands the drive to improve achievement, she said, but not the dis-

trict's approach.

Why must every elementary school adopt the same literacy and math curriculum? Why can't schools with good test scores deviate from the mandatory focus on the basics?

"I feel that public education in our city is no longer for the families who don't have the failing students, who have students who are achieving at grade level,

## Private to public, and back

**An analysis of Denver Public Schools' enrollment of more than 73,000 students from Sept. 30, 2005, to Oct. 2, 2006, found:**

- 516 students entered DPS from private schools\*
- 168 students left DPS for private schools
- The result: DPS gained 348 students

\* Most private school students entering DPS came to high schools, with East getting the most — 93.  
Source: Denver Public Schools

who may be achieving above grade level," she said.

"The sole focus now is, 'How do we close the achievement gap?' instead of, 'How do we make successful learners across the board and how do we inspire the lowest-level learners to have a love of learning — and not just do well on tests?'"

On March 13, a letter from the private Stanley British Primary School arrived at the family's home.

The Koskinens' sons weren't accepted but are on a waiting list.

Jack and Sam are likely to return to Cory this fall. Will's future school is uncertain.

"I'm disappointed," Mandy Koskinen said, then quickly rallied her sense of optimism that change is possible in DPS.

"I'm feeling hopeful. I think that the conversation is getting started, and people are willing to take a look at what is happening and possibly make some changes."



## ISSUE: PARENTS PROMPT CHANGE

# Word of mouth can change a school. A recruiting campaign by parents is bringing the neighborhood's students back to the Hill Campus of Arts & Sciences.

The public middle school in the affluent Hilltop area of Denver was once shunned by many families living around it. More than a third of Hilltop kids ages 5 to 17 go to private schools, an analysis of data by the *Rocky Mountain News* and the Piton Foundation found.

"Everyone looked at Hill and was sort of scared," said Luke Duffy, 13, who lives nearby. "There were rumors about how it wasn't a good school."

Hill is a short walk across a grassy field from Denver Public Schools' Steck Elementary, a sought-after school with high test scores. But many Steck families had chosen to go elsewhere for middle school.

A few years ago, Duffy's mom, Teri Anderson, and some other parents decided they didn't want to put their kids on buses or pay private school tuition.

"Back in the day, Steck kids went anywhere but Hill," said Hill Principal Don Roy. "The (parents group) over there invited me to come talk about why people didn't come here."

Start an honors program, the parents told him, and they would help bring neighborhood kids back.

In fall 2005, Hill began an honors program with 30 sixth-graders. Next fall, it will expand again from its current 125 slots to between 180 and 200 — a third of the school's enrollment.

Siobhan Haskell, who runs Hill's welcome center, gauges interest by the number of elementary students who sign up to follow Hill kids around in a shadow program. When the center opened three years ago, 20 students signed up for shadowing. This year, there were 130.

They come from top-rated elementary schools such as Steck, Bromwell and Southmoor. A handful of shadow students this year even came from Graland Country Day School, a prestigious nearby private school.

"I think my son's class was probably the last class at Steck where it was sort of like, 'Uh, you're going to Hill? I can't believe it,'" said Lisa Lancelot, whose son is a seventh-grader at Hill. "I said, 'Yes, we are. It's great.'"

Lancelot and Anderson say they believe Hill was always a good school. But they believe some parents worried about its diversity. The school is 80 percent minority, while Hilltop is 89 percent Anglo.

Part of Hill's diversity comes from its special programs, including one for English-language learners, and from the more distant neighborhoods it serves, including the area served by



**Lisa Lancelot visits** with Matthew Richardson, 13, a seventh-grader at Hill Campus of Arts & Science middle school. He was sent to the Hill Recovery Room for getting in trouble during recess. Lancelot has a seventh-grade son, Griffin, 13, at Hill, and volunteers to bring her dog, Beatrice, to the school once a week to work with students who need extra attention. "I was mad that I got sent in here, but now that I've been patting the dog, it calmed me down. It was kind of soothing to me," Matthew said. Lancelot and several other Hilltop parents made a group decision to send their children to their neighborhood middle school.

now-closed Gove Middle School.

"Difference, diversity can be very uncomfortable for some," Anderson said. "I draw to diversity."

Luke, her seventh-grader, said attending a school where he is in the minority as a white student "definitely opened up my world."

"At first, I almost judged a book by the cover, like thinking people were like the stereotypes in movies, you know, all black kids are gangsters," he said. "But then I started making new friends."

The new honors program might reduce minorities' share of the student population. Roy said the program does not reflect the school's overall demographics — 44 percent Hispanic, 32 percent black, 21 percent Anglo. But he said he and his staff are recruiting minority fifth-graders.

"I want Hill to be proof to the city

that a diverse inner-city school can take kids from all backgrounds and be competitive with other schools," Roy said.

Hill, like most DPS middle schools, struggles to maintain enrollment. Enrollment this school year dropped for each ethnicity except Anglos, whose number increased by 26. Many are neighborhood kids.

"I think we are drawing them in through word of mouth," Anderson said. "You know where it happens? It happens through sports, on soccer fields, at hockey rinks, on lacrosse fields."

"Parents talk, and people start to realize that other parents who care about their kids are sending their children to their local public school without question. It's a huge domino effect."

Nancy Mitchell

### Hill Campus of Arts & Sciences middle school

■ **Location:** 451 Clermont St. in the Hilltop neighborhood, which is 89 percent Anglo.

■ **Enrollment:** 585 students in grades 6, 7 and 8, with capacity for 1,125.

■ **Demographics:** 44 percent Hispanic, 32 percent black, 21 percent Anglo, 2 percent Asian and American Indian.

■ **Low-income:** 78 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

■ **State rating:** Low and stable, based on annual state exams.



LEAVING TO LEARN DPS' ENROLLMENT GAP: PART 3 OF 7



**Grace Harris, 6, kicks the snow** in the backyard of her southwest Denver home in February. The houses that appear beyond the fence are in Jefferson County. Grace, a first-grader, and her 8-year-old brother, Will, a third-grader, attend Jefferson

County Public Schools' Blue Heron instead of Denver Public Schools' Grant Ranch K-8. Their mother, Melodie Polidori Harris, says they are receiving a better education in the Jeffco school. She also attended Jefferson County schools.

Denver Public Schools **lost about 5,500 Denver students** to suburban schools last year, while **gaining 3,900** from surrounding districts. ■ Nearly half the Denver kids ages 5 to 17 who go to suburban schools live in **southwest Denver**. ■ In several areas of southwest Denver, families live closer to **Jefferson County or Littleton schools** than to DPS schools with **lower academic ratings** by the state.

# Southwest suburbs an easy choice

**Story by Burt Hubbard**  
**Photos by Judy DeHaas**  
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Denver's public schools are losing the tug-of-war for students in southwest neighborhoods, where as many as half the school-age children are attending suburban districts, an analysis by the *Rocky Mountain News* and the nonprofit Piton Foundation found. That's more than any other area of Denver. DPS needs every student it can attract to offset declining enrollment in its traditional neighborhood schools. The district needs the state and local dollars those students bring. But southwest Denver is bordered on two sides by higher-performing school districts with more convenient school locations. Within a mile of the Grant Ranch neighborhood near West Bowles Avenue and South Wadsworth Boulevard, Denver residents with elementary-age kids have the choice of a DPS school rated average by the state, a high-rated

Jefferson County school or an excellent-rated Littleton school. Those willing to look five miles away can choose from five other Jeffco elementary schools — three rated high and one excellent. Only one other Denver elementary is that close, and it's rated average. For high school, the nearest DPS school is low-rated Kennedy, six miles away, while two high-rated Jeffco high schools and excellent-rated Heritage High in Littleton are within the same reach. "People are going to send their kids where they're going to do well," said Denver Public Schools Superintendent Michael Bennet. "You can't persuade people to stay if they think they've got an option that's better for their kids."

**Give and take**

DPS middle schools work against the district's efforts to recruit students. A report to the Denver school board on April 5 presented a dismal picture of failing student performance

Flip to page 13



LEAVING TO LEARN

One-third of the 3,900 suburban kids in DPS are enrolled in its charter schools.



Melodie Polidori Harris, left, takes orange juice out of the refrigerator while her daughter, Grace, 6, makes pancakes and her son, Will, 8, puts waffles in the toaster. Although they live in southwest Denver, Will, a third-grader, and Grace, a first-grader, go to Jefferson County’s Blue Heron Elementary School. The boundary between the suburban district and Denver Public Schools lies just beyond the fence in their backyard. Both schools are within walking distance.

Choices in Denver Public Schools

The types of public schools available to Denver families have increased in the past 15 years. Here's a look:

■ **Traditional neighborhood schools:** They serve students living within a geographic boundary. Every Denver home is assigned to a neighborhood school. No special applications are required. The district receives 100 percent of state and local per-pupil funding for each student enrolled. DPS provides transportation beyond a certain distance from school. Elementary students can ride school buses if they live more than a mile away.

■ **Magnet programs:** They offer special programs and were originally designed to encourage racial integration. Anyone in the district may apply to attend and will receive transportation, if chosen. The district receives 100 percent of per-pupil funding for each student. Examples: the computer magnet programs at North and Thomas Jefferson high schools and Academia Ana Marie Sandoval De Lengua-je Dual Montessori.

■ **Alternative schools:** They serve students with special needs, typically those who are struggling or have dropped out

of other schools. The district receives 100 percent of per-pupil funding for each student. Example: Emily Griffith Opportunity High School.

■ **Charter schools:** They are operated by independent groups of parents, teachers, community members or education management organizations under a contract or charter with the Denver school board. Charters can establish their own curriculum, budget and hiring practices but must follow state and federal laws. The district passes along an average of 95 percent of per-pupil funding to charters for each student they enroll. Students may apply from across the district. Example: Omar D. Blair Edison Charter School.

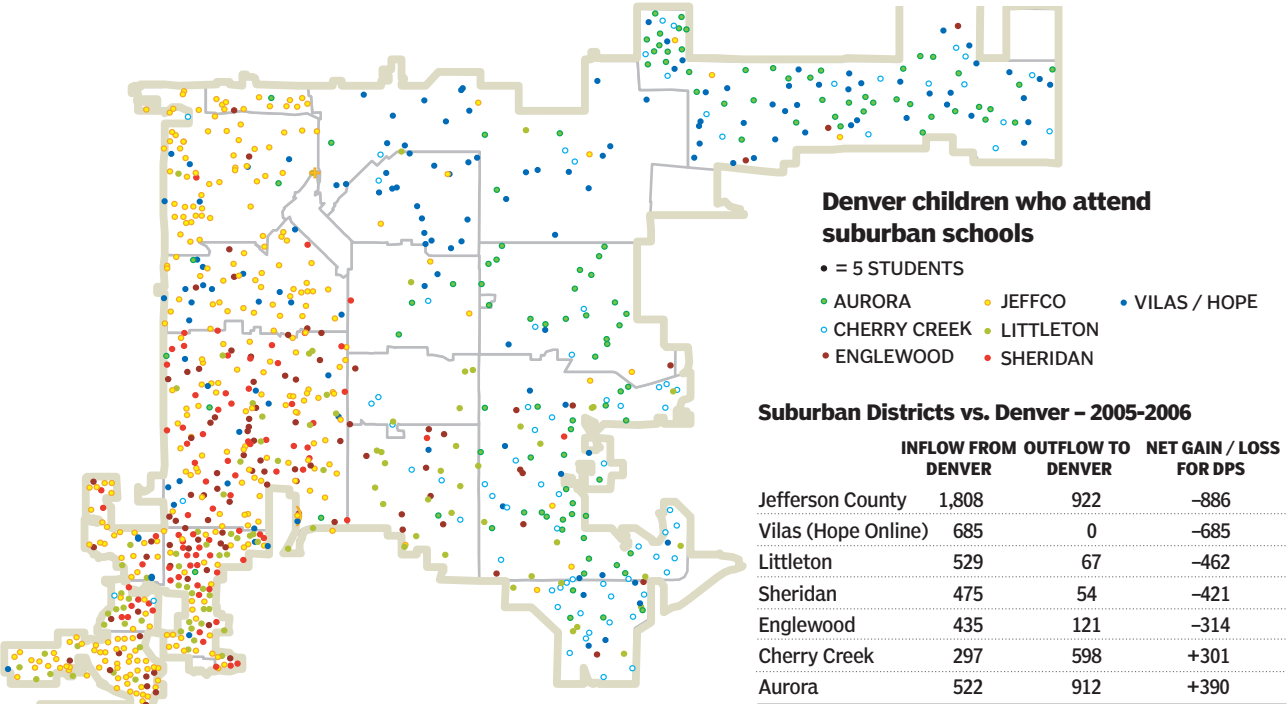
■ **Contract schools:** They are operated by independent groups under a contract with the Denver school board. They're similar to charters but contracts may be for shorter periods and the district may pass on less per-pupil funding, depending on the contract. Example: The online Connections Academy.



Addie Cavallaro, 7, a first-grader at Grant Ranch K-8, loves the way her warm pancake feels against her face as she eats breakfast in the school cafeteria. Her mother, Stephanie Cavallaro, enrolled her children in the DPS school, even though they are surrounded by schools in other districts with better CSAP test scores, because she believes in Denver Public Schools. The free breakfast is just a perk of having her kids in DPS.

Suburbs take more students than they give to Denver

**Denver Public Schools lost about 5,500** students to suburban districts last year, and DPS gained about 3,900 suburban kids who chose city schools. Southwest areas account for nearly half of the Denver students in suburban districts. Each dot represents five students who go to one of the seven suburban districts that draw the most Denver kids. Based on students' home ZIP codes, the dots are randomly placed within one of the 17 areas created by overlapping neighborhood and ZIP code boundaries. The accompanying chart shows that DPS loses the most students to Jefferson County, statewide Hope Online Charter, Littleton and Sheridan schools. Cherry Creek and Aurora send more students to DPS than they take.



Source: Rocky Mountain News analysis of suburban school district data on ZIP codes of their students who live in Denver; and Colorado Department of Education data on school choice within school districts

BURT HUBBARD AND CHARLES CHAMBERLIN/ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

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and dramatically declining enrollment in those neighborhood schools.

In southwest Denver, parents can avoid DPS' middle-school system of sixth through eighth grades by choosing Jeffco elementaries, which go through sixth grade.

Angie Walter, who lives in the Sloan's Lake area of Denver, felt strongly against sending her daughter, Piper Rosen, to sixth grade in a middle school. After fifth grade at Denver's Colfax Elementary, Piper went to Vivian Elementary in Jefferson County for sixth grade.

"I didn't think a sixth-grade girl should be around eighth-grade boys," Walter said. "I also wanted a Jefferson County school because Denver Public Schools are just rougher."

Piper is now in eighth grade in Jeffco and will attend Wheat Ridge High School this fall, Walter said.

From the Barnum neighborhood south to the city's southwest tip, about 2,200 children attend Jefferson County, Littleton, Englewood or Sheridan schools.

Jeffco and Littleton schools especially are taking more students from Denver than they give, according to the analysis of DPS and suburban school data.

Last year, Denver lost about 1,800 students to Jeffco, while DPS picked up 900 students from Jeffco. The split with Littleton was even more one-sided. Littleton attracted 530 Denver students and lost only 70 of its residents to DPS.

In southwest Denver's Fort Logan neighborhood, more children go to suburban schools than to Denver's public schools. In the nearby Marston neighborhood, almost as many Anglo students go to Jefferson County schools as Denver schools, the analysis found.

Districtwide, about 5,500 students have left Denver for suburban schools, while DPS attracted 3,900 from surrounding cities — a third to DPS charters.

Some officials think DPS actually lost more students to the suburbs in earlier years and has regained some through its charters and less-crowded west Denver schools, though they aren't sure the statistics are reliable.

And on the east side of Denver, DPS is attracting more than three times as many students from the Cherry Creek district than it is losing and twice as many from Aurora.

Cherry Creek's desirable schools fill up quickly, so parents may turn to DPS charters or magnets, and the Glendale portion of the Cherry Creek district has no schools but is surrounded by Denver.

Like Denver, Aurora has many poor-performing public schools and low-income students. In a parents' survey commissioned by DPS, only Aurora schools ranked lower than DPS in a comparison of metro area schools.

**Classic case**

Farther to the south in Denver, the Vilages at Raccoon Creek subdivision in Grant Ranch and its cul-de-sacs are a microcosm of how choice plays out.

Three elementary schools from three school districts are within a mile radius. And two — Jefferson County's Blue Heron and Denver's Grant Ranch K-8 charter school — are within sight of each other, only 2,000 feet apart.

Both Melodie Polidori Harris and Lisa Davis chose Blue Heron, a high-rated school.

Harris said DPS was never really an option for William, a third-grader, or Grace, a first-grader, because of the district's poor academic reputation.

"I didn't want my children to be products of Denver Public Schools," said Harris, who graduated from Jeffco schools. "That's not to say they're all bad, because most of the people that go to the Grant Ranch school are fairly happy."

Instead, the choice for William came down to Blue Heron, a new school, and Littleton's Wilder Elementary, an excellent-rated school about a mile away.

When Littleton accepted William, Harris had 24 hours to make a decision.

"I tell you my stomach was in knots," she said.

Harris chose Blue Heron for its proximity. Now, William and Grace take part in a "walking car pool" in which parents take turns with the half-mile trek to school every morning and afternoon.

Davis started her son, Quin, in kindergarten at Grant Ranch, but transferred to Blue Heron after first grade. She said she loved the teachers, but school officials spent a lot of time talking about rules and focusing on kids — not her son — who were acting out, she said.

"(Quin) rarely wanted to go to school," she said. "He was very frustrated."

Larger class sizes, lack of a plan for advanced-learning students and the bigger K-8 campus compared with the smaller elementary also persuaded Davis to switch Quin to Blue Heron for second grade. He's thriving this year in third grade there, Davis said.

"He loves to go to school. He actually walks in the door, gets his homework out and does it," she said.

Stephanie Cavallaro also started her children — Jack, a fourth-grader, and Adalyn, a first-grader — at Grant Ranch K-8.

Continued on next page

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Hear more parent views at **RockyMountainNews.com**

PARENTS' VOICES

"The majority of schools have programs that parents don't participate in. No matter if we are Hispanic, Caucasian or African-American, as parents, we have to have more responsibility over our children."

Maria Rodarte, mother of a sophomore at DPS' Montbello High and a sixth-grader at DPS' Martin Luther King Jr. Early College

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LEAVING TO LEARN

DPS receives **\$6,794** of state and local funding this year for **each student**.



Grace Harris, 6, gets ready to put on her shoes to walk to Blue Heron Elementary with brother Will, 8.

Continued from previous page  
Ranch. She likes the K-8 format as an alternative to middle school.

She said both children will attend the same school for five years.

Cavallaro, a teacher for nine years in Englewood, said research has shown that children at K-8 schools in other parts of the country have higher academic achievement than those at traditional elementary schools.

She also wanted a neighborhood school.

"I made the decision that we would go to our home school unless there was a reason not to," she said.

Kristie and Craig Hopp have experienced all three school districts with their four daughters.

They were at DPS' Marrama Elementary when the family lived near Denver International Airport.

When the family moved to southwest Denver about 10 years ago, Normandy Elementary in Jefferson County was the nearest school. Grant Ranch had not been built.

Besides, Kopp said, Tami, the oldest, was behind in some subjects by moving from a Denver school to a Jefferson County school.

When it was time for Tami to enter high school, the choice came down to one of the Littleton high schools or the new Dakota Ridge High in Jeffco.

The family chose Heritage in Littleton with its long record of offering advanced classes. The other three daughters have followed Tami's lead, including twins Tracie and Tonia, who are juniors this year.

"It is what worked for our kids," said Kopp. "I am very happy with the choice I made."

Even though residents of the Crossing attend a variety of schools, the kids still play together, and the parents often socialize on weekends.

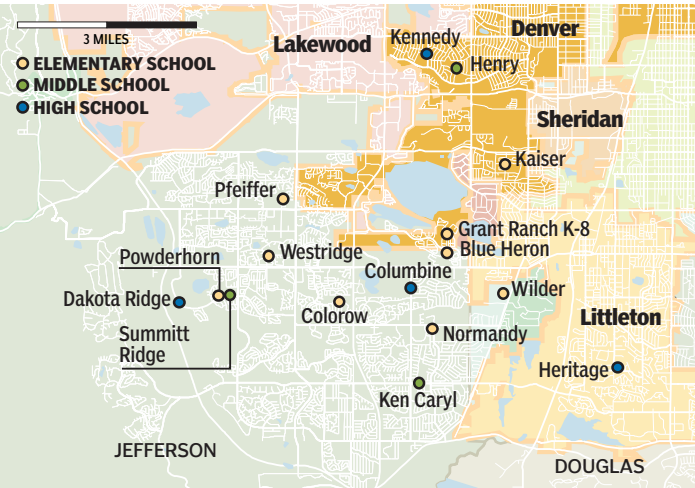
But the potpourri of schools sometimes led to awkward social moments when the topic turned to which schools were best, Cavallaro said.

So they came to an understanding.

"We agreed that we all are making the right choice for our kids."

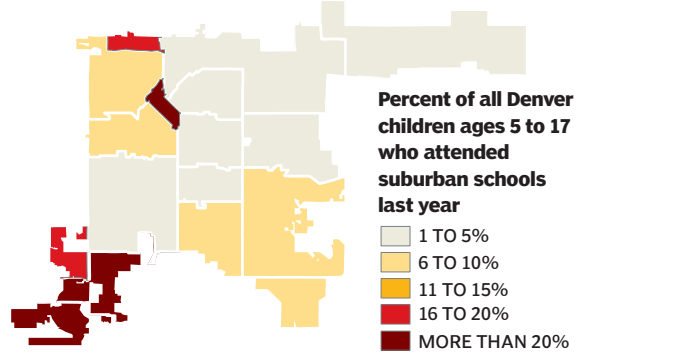
Schools close to the border

For southwest Denver residents, many suburban public schools are closer to their homes, and often rated higher by the state, than the closest DPS schools.



Suburban flight

About 5,500 children who live in Denver attended suburban schools last year, with nearly half in the southwest part of the city. These are the percentages of the children in each of 17 areas of Denver who attend suburban schools. The map divides the city based on ZIP codes and neighborhood boundaries.



Source: Rocky Mountain News analysis of data from suburban school districts.  
BURT HUBBARD AND CHARLES CHAMBERLIN/ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS



Sixth-graders Angel Rodriguez, left, Lauren Trujillo and Janesa Stollsteimer check out trophies that will be handed out at DPS' Kaiser

Elementary School during a monthly pep rally. Principal Richard Sinclair rewards classrooms that show improvement.

ISSUE: MARKETING

Kaiser Elementary got a wake-up call in 2005-2006 when Denver Public Schools announced it would close some half-empty schools.

The alarm rang even louder when school board member Michelle Moss said Kaiser was the most likely candidate in southwest Denver.

The K-6 school's enrollment had declined over five years, languishing in 2005 at 277 students in a building that can accommodate 560. About half the school-age kids in the surrounding Fort Logan neighborhood attended nearby suburban schools.

Second-year Principal Richard Sinclair went to work.

"When it came down the pipe that we were going to be closing schools, I said, 'Here we go,' " Sinclair recalled.

He started tours and open houses for parents and enlisted the local homeowners association to cover the neighborhood with fliers.

Nora Nichols, the volunteer parent involvement coordinator, persuaded students' parents to spread the word

Kaiser Elementary School

- **Location:** 4500 S. Quitman St. in the Fort Logan neighborhood
- **Enrollment:** 367, in kindergarten through sixth grade, with capacity for 560, including early education.
- **Demographics:** 57 percent Hispanic,

- 29 percent white, 10 percent Asian, 3 percent black, 1 percent American Indian
- **Low income:** 64 percent eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.
- **State rating:** Average

about Kaiser.

"This year, people came back," Sinclair said.

Enrollment rose to 334. Some classrooms had more new students than returning students, he said.

Now the school, rated average by the state for the past two years, is concentrating on academic achievement. The school is about 60 percent Hispanic, and 64 percent of students qualify for free- or reduced-price lunches.

The school uses monthly posters to track progress in each class on learning essential skills in reading, writing and math, he said. After three weeks, students who have not mastered the skills get a refresher course and after-school tutoring, Sinclair said.

At the end of the month, staff members do what Sinclair calls the gallery walk by the posters. They can see the percentage of students in each grade who have attained 12 to 15 skills listed

on each poster.

Staff members, including art and physical education teachers, are asked to sign off on how they plan to help students achieve the next month's skills.

The school also tracks academic performance and behavior for each student with a system of green and yellow lights.

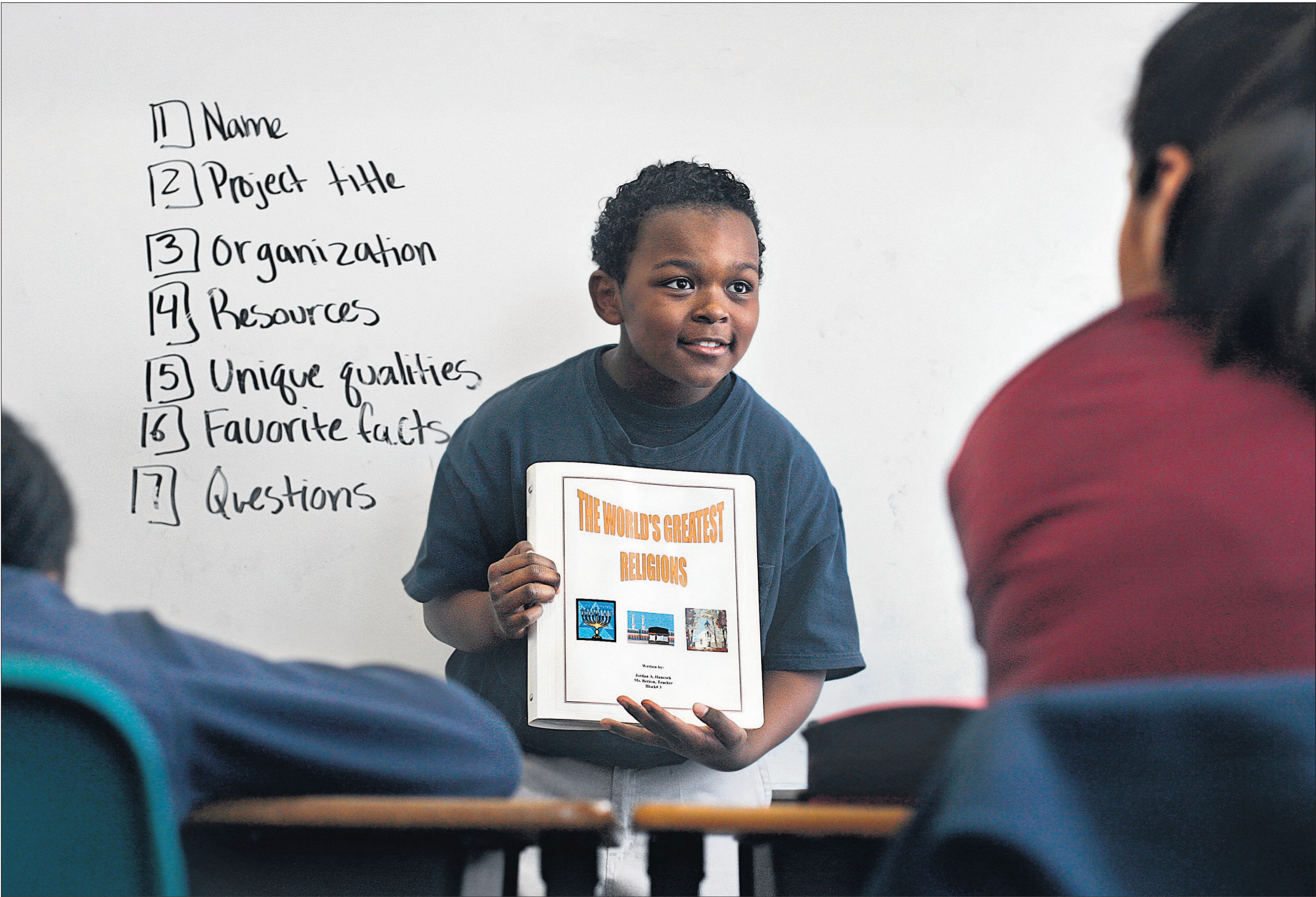
The cafeteria even has a traffic light that changes between green and yellow, depending on the noise volume at lunch, Sinclair said.

At monthly pep rallies, Sinclair asks all students who have achieved the "green light" for mastering academic skills to stand up, leaving the rest sitting on the floor.

"What you see is almost every kid in the place standing up," Sinclair said. "For the kids not standing, it's really powerful."



LEAVING TO LEARN DPS’ ENROLLMENT GAP: PART 4 OF 7



Jordan Hancock, 11, son of Denver City Council President Michael Hancock, makes a presentation Feb. 27 about world religion in his class at Omar D. Blair

Edison Charter School. Before going to Blair, Jordan attended a private grade school and a DPS magnet school that required a bus ride of up to an hour each way.

**Charter students** account for **9 percent** of Denver Public Schools’ **73,000** students, a figure expected to keep growing. ■ About **13 percent** of black students in DPS attend charters, more than twice the rate of Hispanic or Anglo students. ■ These **independently run** schools create **more choice** for parents, but, by law, DPS passes along to them, on average, **95 percent** of the students per-pupil funding.

# Charters’ enrollment exploding

Story by Nancy Mitchell  
Photos by Judy DeHaas  
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Lured to Denver to work for Mayor John Hickenlooper, Peter Chapman moved his family from Boston to the far northeast neighborhood of Green Valley Ranch in fall 2003. He and his wife, Gail Busby, quickly enrolled their son, Evan, in a neighborhood public school. Before the year was over, they had signed him up to go elsewhere. Like a growing number of the city’s families, they have chosen a charter school over the traditional options in Denver Public Schools. Evan is a fourth-grader at Omar D. Blair Edison Charter School. Enrollment in DPS charter schools grew by 300 percent — to 6,846 — from 2000 to 2006. At the same time, enrollment in traditional DPS schools fell by 4,028 students. A study by the *Rocky Mountain News* and the nonprofit Piton Foundation shows that families like Chapman’s and Busby’s are leading that

trend — black families with enough income to make school choices easily. More than half of all black students enrolled in DPS last year did not attend their neighborhood schools, edging out Anglo students by a slight margin and Hispanic students by substantially more, the study found. And in exercising that choice, black students in DPS are twice as likely as Anglos or Hispanics to pick charter schools over other options, such as magnet programs. Thirteen percent of all black students in DPS now enroll in charter schools, compared with 5.9 percent of Anglo students and 5.6 percent of Hispanic students, according to the *Rocky* analysis. Add income to the mix and the numbers go up, with 15 percent of all middle- or higher-income black families choosing charters. Chapman isn’t surprised that black families aren’t settling for the schools closest to their homes. “As African-American families move up the socioeconomic ladder, as income increases, as educational attain-

Flip to page 41



LEAVING TO LEARN

Surveyed parents said 3-to-1 that **charters are better** than other DPS schools.

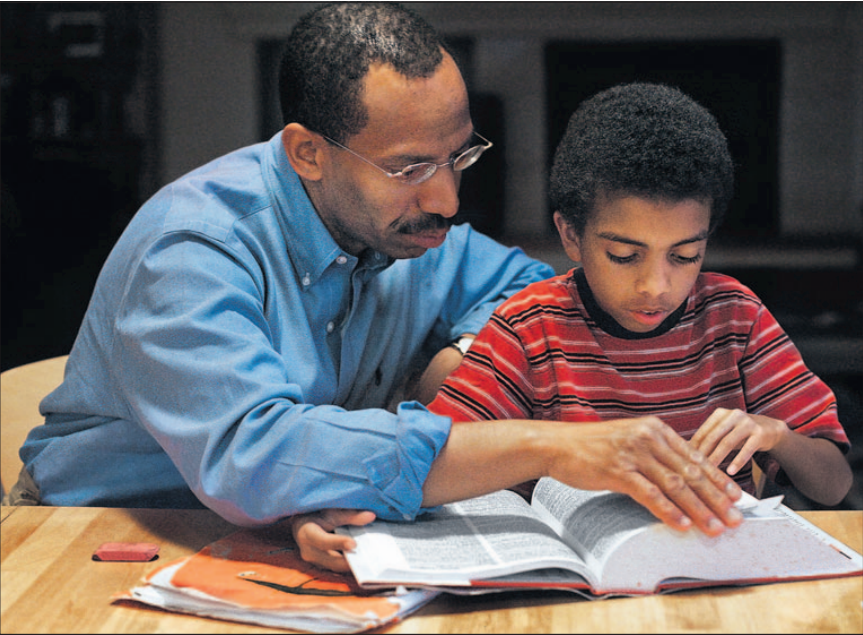


**Buffalo soldier re-enactor** Fred Applewhite, above, visits Omar D. Blair Edison Charter School in far northeast Denver in February. He and fellow re-enactor John Bell described for students what it was like to belong to the



**Principal Deborah Blair-Minter** directs traffic in front of Omar D. Blair Edison Charter School as parents pick up their children. Blair-Minter is the daughter of the school's namesake, the first black DPS school board president.

first peacetime all-black regiments in the regular Army. The school, which has a predominantly black student body, offers a rigorous academic curriculum and a strong emphasis on black history.



**Peter Chapman helps his son**, Evan, 10, look up a word in the dictionary for his homework on a March evening. Chapman and his wife chose Omar D. Blair Edison Charter School because the neighborhood school didn't satisfy them.

Continued from page 39  
ment increases, I think our demands in terms of education increase accordingly," Chapman said.

Colorado lawmakers, led by former Gov. Bill Owens when he was a state senator, paved the way for charter schools in the state in 1993. DPS now is home to 20 charters, with more planned.

Charter students account for 9 percent of the district's 73,000 students, a figure seen as likely to increase in coming years. A survey of parents commissioned by DPS found that, by a 3-1 ratio, respondents thought charter schools were better than other DPS schools.

"I think parents have become very savvy," said Deborah Blair-Minter, principal of Omar D. Blair, the largest charter school in Denver, with 763 students. "They will shop around until they find the right school for their kids."

Denver charters also pull in students from outside the district. A DPS analysis found that a third of the 3,900 students who come into DPS each day from the suburbs go to charter schools.

Some parents want the specialized curriculum offered by a charter, such as the popular Core Knowledge or Edison. But some Denver charters also have proven to be academic powerhouses.

The Denver School of Science and Technology Charter is one of only two high schools in the city rated excellent by the state. And KIPP Sunshine Peak Academy, a middle school, is outperforming its DPS peers with similar populations of children in poverty.

Yet the district hasn't always welcomed charters. Under Colorado law, DPS passes along to charters an average of 95 percent of local and state per-pupil funding for each student they enroll.

So some educators have seen charters as competitors for scarce financial resources, rather than partners in teaching kids. Superintendent Michael Bennet, who took over DPS in July 2005, sees them as both.

"The financial effect is not the charter schools' fault," he said, noting that DPS has tried to operate the same number of schools while serving thousands fewer children in the past few years.

"The big effect is that the fixed cost per kid goes up," he said, referring to expenses such as building utilities and maintenance. "That's the financial cost, but that's the district's issue."

Bennet said the politics of charter vs. traditional schools can obscure the real issue: Are kids learning?

"What we need here are a lot more good schools," he said. "That's what I'm interested in, whether they're DPS schools, charter schools, contract schools. Whatever they are, we've got to make them better."

#### Charters by neighborhood

In some Denver neighborhoods, the percentage of children in charters is much higher than the district average of 10 percent.

More than 30 percent of school-age children in the Cole neighborhood in northeast Denver attended charters last year, largely because Cole Middle School was converted to a charter after failing to meet performance levels mandated under state law. The nearby Clayton neighborhood also had high percentages of charter enrollment.

The Cole conversion aside, Green Valley Ranch posted the highest charter en-

rollment rate, nearly 19 percent.

There, Omar D. Blair Charter, named for the first black president of the Denver school board, has become a beacon for professional families who want an alternative to struggling neighborhood schools.

Every elementary school in far northeast Denver is rated low by the state, except for the elementary grades at Blair, which are rated average. Blair serves kindergarten through eighth grade.

Its enrollment is 48 percent black — more than double the DPS average — and 40 percent low-income in a district with a poverty rate of 67 percent.

Blair-Minter, the daughter of Omar D. Blair and a DPS graduate and 20-year DPS teacher and administrator, carefully chose her words when asked why black parents are the most likely to exercise school choice.

"I think sometimes they feel like we haven't gotten the education for our kids we really want," she said, "and we are going to keep looking for it until we're really satisfied."

#### Hancock's travels

Charters may be attracting many students in far northeast Denver because of the perception that schools in Green Valley Ranch and adjacent Montbello are not up to par.

A reputation for violence has plagued some schools there. A fatal stabbing in the school cafeteria at Montbello High School in 2005 only added to safety concerns some parents had about the school.

And years after a national TV news show depicted discipline problems at what is now called Martin Luther King Jr. Early College, some parents still cite it as a reason to avoid the school.

"I have never stepped foot into the school, but I don't need to send my kids

into no kind of wild environment," said one Montbello mom who mentioned the show. She asked not to be identified.

Denver City Council President Michael Hancock, who represents far northeast Denver, also was hesitant about neighborhood options when he and wife Mary began looking at schools for Jordan, 11, and Janae, 8.

"We couldn't find a school we had confidence in then in Montbello," he said.

So the Hancocks, who are black, enrolled Jordan in the private Union Baptist Excel Institute for kindergarten and first grade. Then they switched both kids to Knight Fundamental Academy, a back-to-basics DPS magnet program.

Both schools were academically rigorous and, because most of their students are black, they focus more on African-American history. That was particularly important for Michael Hancock, who says DPS did a poor job teaching him black history.

He remembers sitting in a class at his mostly white small college in Nebraska and hearing his classmates talk about black leaders he did not know.

"I sat there and told myself, 'never again,'" he recalled. "We want our kids to have some sense of their history."

But the school bus ride from their Montbello neighborhood to Knight in the Belcaro area southeast of central Denver took 45 minutes to an hour each way.

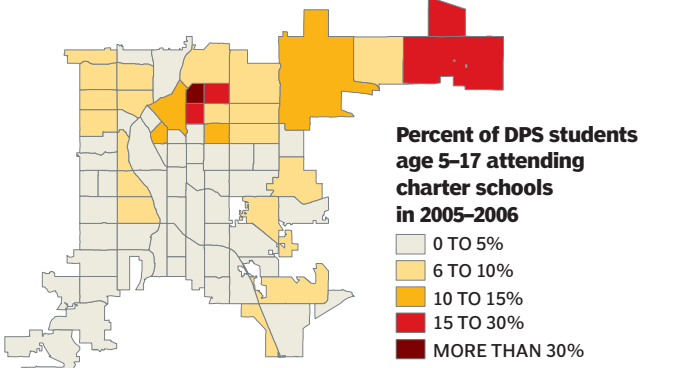
Then they heard about Blair charter, opening in fall 2004 only a few blocks from their new home in Green Valley Ranch.

Mary Hancock said they liked the rigorous Edison curriculum, a national model that requires a longer school day and year and assesses kids' learning monthly. That, and the promise of smaller class-

### Charter enrollment up 300 percent

Denver's charter schools, which operate independently under contract with the DPS school board, have exploded in popularity in the past six years, with a 300 percent increase in enrollment, to 6,846 students this year. The percentage breakdown by

neighborhood of the DPS students who chose charters in 2005-2006 shows that charters are especially popular among northeast Denver families. By law, DPS gives charters, on average, about 95 percent of their students' per-pupil funding.



Source: Rocky Mountain News analysis of Denver Public Schools data for 2005-2006 school year for Denver students ages 5 to 17.  
BURT HUBBARD AND CHARLES CHAMBERLIN/ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

## THE SERIES

■ **MONDAY:** Denver Public Schools aren't enrolling about 25 percent of the city's school-age children, a study by the *Rocky Mountain News* and the Piton Foundation has found.

■ **TUESDAY:** A fourth of all Anglo kids in Denver go to private schools. It's almost half of all school-age kids in some areas.

■ **WEDNESDAY:** In some southwest Denver areas, half the school-age children go to suburban schools.

■ **TODAY:** Charter school enrollment has grown 300 percent in six years, with black families most likely to choose them.

■ **FRIDAY:** Northwest Denver exemplifies the tensions over reforming schools.

■ **MONDAY, April 23:** Hispanics are most likely to choose neighborhood schools, but they increasingly are exercising choice.

■ **TUESDAY, April 24:** What lies ahead for DPS?

## ONLINE

at [RockyMountainNews.com](http://RockyMountainNews.com)

- **Video:** See how Principal Antwan Wilson is remaking Montbello High.
- **Slide show:** See more photos.
- **School comparisons:** Compare schools near you.
- **Chat at 10 a.m. today** on Rocky Talk Live with Principal Deborah Blair-Minter of Omar D. Blair Charter. See comments and share yours.



Hear more parent views at [RockyMountainNews.com](http://RockyMountainNews.com)

## PARENTS' VOICES

"We do have great academic options and opportunities at most of the schools in our southeast area, but we need to bring that to the rest of DPS."

Michele Olree, mother of three students at DPS' Cory Elementary School

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# LEAVING TO LEARN

This past fall, **1,700 students enrolled** at Montbello, up from **1,400 in fall 2005**.

Continued from previous page  
es, spurred the Hancocks to switch to Blair.

“I don’t know if all charters are like that, but I know in a regular Denver Public Schools setting you’re going to have a lot of kids in the classroom,” she said. “It’s just not enough teachers.”

## Diversity or academics?

For some minority couples in Denver, choosing schools requires a balancing act with competing values.

Do they want their kids in the toughest possible curriculum, even if most of their classmates are white, as is the case with some honors or International Baccalaureate programs in DPS?

Or do they sacrifice academic rigor for a more diverse neighborhood school?

It’s a dilemma that Peter Chapman, who attended elite private schools growing up in Manhattan, knows well.

“From the time I was extremely young until I was 12, I was one of just a handful of children of color,” he said. “There is something you miss in private schools.”

Before the move to Denver, his son, Evan, had been in the same position in his suburban Boston school, in a district respected for its academics.

For now, Chapman and Busby said, Blair offers the happy combination of diversity and rigor.

“I am very encouraged by the fact he brings home tons of homework and he complains about too much homework,” Chapman said. “I’ve looked at a lot of his assignments, especially the math, and I’m pleased.”

But the couple also said Blair must deliver on some promises made when the school opened — offering world languages, including Spanish, and instrumental music.

Their bottom line is academics.

“You have wonderful opportunities to expose them to culture and other experiences on the weekends, when they’re not in school,” Busby said.

And yes, they would consider private school for Evan, now 10, and his younger sister, Alana, who’s 3, if they become dissatisfied with Blair.

“We know, absolutely, it’s an option,” Busby said.

## Black students drawn to charters

The percentage of DPS’ black students in charter schools in 2006 was twice as high as the percentage of Anglo or Hispanic students who chose charters. Low income is measured by eligibility for free or reduced-price lunches.

### Denver students in charter schools in the 2005-06 school year

	IN DPS	CHARTER SCHOOLS PCT.	NO.
Black	11,409	12.6	1,433
Low-income	7,875	11.6	914
Not low	3,534	14.7	519

Hispanic	37,354	5.6	2,080
Low-income	31,005	5.4	1,668
Not low	6,349	6.5	412

Anglo	11,939	5.9	706
Low-income	2,955	6.3	187
Not low	8,984	5.8	519

All	63,334	6.9	4,219*
Low-income	43,356	6.5	2,836
Not low income	19,978	7.6	1,523

\* Does not include 140 Asian or American Indian students.  
Source: Rocky Mountain News analysis of Denver Public Schools data  
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

## Explosive growth

DPS charter enrollment has risen each year since 1998.

### Enrollment, including suburban residents

YEAR	NUMBER	PERCENT OF DPS STUDENTS
1998	1,082	1.6
1999	1,247	1.8
2000	1,731	2.4
2001	2,097	2.9
2002	2,579	3.6
2003	3,316	4.6
2004	5,969	8.2
2005	6,467	8.9
2006	6,846	9.3

Source: Denver Public Schools  
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

## Top DPS charters by enrollment

### 1. OMAR D. BLAIR EDISON CHARTER

- **Grades:** K-8 in far northeast Denver
- **Enrollment:** 763
- **Approach:** National Edison Schools curriculum, including monthly assessments and longer school days

### 2. WYATT-EDISON CHARTER

- **Grade:** K-8 in north central Denver
- **Enrollment:** 660
- **Approach:** Edison curriculum

### 3. RIDGEVIEW ACADEMY

- **Grades:** 9-12 in Watkins, chartered through DPS
- **Enrollment:** 491
- **Approach:** State’s first charter school for juvenile offenders

### 4. HIGHLINE ACADEMY

- **Grades:** K-8 in southeast Denver
- **Enrollment:** 452
- **Approach:** Popular Core Knowledge curriculum created by University of Virginia emeritus professor E.D. Hirsch Jr., which defines what students should learn at each grade level.

### 5. DENVER ARTS AND TECHNOLOGY ACADEMY (DATA)

- **Grades:** K-8 in northwest Denver
- **Enrollment:** 448
- **Approach:** Combines classical education with technology, managed by Mosaica Inc., an international charter company

Nancy Mitchell



Members of the Montbello High School Drum Line play in front of the DPS school in early March as a sendoff for the basketball team before its

tournament game. Principal Antwan Wilson is emphasizing academics first but also wants to create enthusiasm for the school’s athletic teams.



Wilson, left, talks to students who came to Montbello from New Orleans.



Wilson patrols the hallways to make sure students are dressed properly.

## ISSUE: REBUILDING AN IMAGE

# Fran Roberson would like to send her daughters to Montbello High.

It’s right down the street from their home in far northeast Denver, and she is a proud alum, Class of ’86.

“These are my old stomping grounds,” she said, a smile flashing across her face. Then the smile fades.

“I know they’re trying to make it better, and I know it takes time, but I’m sorry,” she said, “it’s not ready yet.”

Few schools in Denver have been saddled with a reputation as bad as Montbello’s. “Mont-ghetto,” as students once called it, was the scene of the first homicide in Denver Public Schools’ history.

Leading such a school as more Denver families are exercising choice about where to educate their children might daunt some principals. But little seems to intimidate Antwan Wilson, the 6-foot-4 Kansas native who took over Montbello in July 2005.

Some in the community call him “the answer,” as in the answer to a prayer, and he has made remarkable progress in reshaping the school. This past fall, 1,700 students enrolled at Montbello — up from 1,400 the year before.

“We want the kids, but we want the right kids,” Wilson said. “This is not a free-for-all.”

That 1,700 figure has since dropped to 1,580, he said, because some students wouldn’t follow school rules.

“We’re going to enforce the rules. We’re not going to bend them,” he said.

Education needs to be a No. 1 or No. 2 priority, along with family or jobs, Wilson said.

“I believe for some of our students, it’s priority No. 5 or 6, and that’s a problem,” he added. “If your priority is gangs or something else, then this isn’t the place for you.”

While improving discipline sends a message to students, Wilson says academic rigor will win over parents.

“The bottom line is they want the best school they can get that is also convenient for them,” he said.

So his recruiting message — delivered in DVDs mailed to about 450 neighborhood families last spring — focuses heavily on college and the school’s new curriculum.

“Fifty-nine percent of our seniors applied to college as of today,” he said on Feb. 1. “Forty-five percent have gotten acceptance letters. That will help parents who believe you’ve got to send your child to another high school if you want them to go to college.”

Other highlights include 350 freshmen who came to school two weeks early last fall for an “academy” designed to ease the transition to high school. And about 150 students are taking college

## Montbello High School

- **Location:** 5000 Crown Blvd. in the Montbello neighborhood, which is 45 percent black, 37 percent Hispanic and 13 percent white.

- **Enrollment:** 1,580 students in grades 9-12, with capacity for 1,945.

- **Demographics:** 57 percent Hispanic, 34 percent black, 5 percent Anglo, 3 percent Asian and American Indian

- **Low-income:** 73 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

- **State rating:** Low and stable.

courses along with high school classes.

Then there’s the Denver Scholarship Foundation. It chose Montbello as one of three city high schools to pilot its program covering college costs for DPS graduates who stay in Colorado.

“I know of at least 10 kids who came back specifically for that,” Wilson said.

In addition to the DVDs, recruiting efforts include sending Montbello counselors to DPS middle schools and bringing in 750 eighth-graders to tour the school. Angela Robertson, the school’s community liaison, wrote a personal thank-you note to each of them.

“I’ve had a lot of parents call and inquire,” she said. “That’s good. That means the kids are going home and telling their parents about Montbello.”

Isabella Allen, a community activist who has lived in the Montbello neighborhood for 28 years, said the community is buzzing with praise for Wilson, from her church to the local rec center to the Boys’ and Girls’ Club.

“He has made a difference,” she said.

Roberson, the Montbello alumna, attended a DPS community forum at the school on March 22. She brought her daughter, Tashay, who will enter high school this fall, and younger daughter Seanae.

Roberson was excited to hear that Wilson plans a school dress code this fall. “I really like him,” she said.

But Wilson knows the school still has a ways to go. He expects that changing its image will take three years.

That is not soon enough for Tashay Roberson. She’s been accepted at DPS’ Thomas Jefferson High and is No. 12 on the waiting list at the Denver School of Science and Technology Charter.

Meanwhile, her mom is watching what Wilson does at Montbello.

“I’ve heard he’s getting rid of students who don’t want to be here,” Fran Roberson said. “But it’s still not enough yet.”

Nancy Mitchell

**Video:** See Principal Antwan Wilson as he reshapes Montbello High School. Online at [RockyMountainNews.com](#)



LEAVING TO LEARN DPS’ ENROLLMENT GAP: PART 5 OF 7



**Lake Middle School cheerleader** Savanna Lopez, 13, center, greets people coming for a DPS middle-school choice fair for northwest Denver. Also welcoming visitors are Shayleen Garcia, left, Selena Suazo, Mariah Trujillo and Ronisha Crockett. DPS

is trying to increase enrollment, particularly in the northwest area where schools have many unused seats. Choice fairs are a way for schools to answer parents’ questions and describe what the schools can offer students.

In the **northwest** sector of Denver Public Schools, **North High** and the three middle schools feeding into it are **less than 60 percent full**. ■ That unused capacity, along with the **need for better quality**, makes the northwest a **hotbed of school reform**. ■ The **push** for change is **urgent**, but parents **sometimes differ** on how schools should be improved. **Tensions have increased** each time a school goes through **transformation**.

# DPS change in direction stirs tension

**Story by Burt Hubbard**  
**Photos by Judy DeHaas**  
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Jennifer Draper Carson is on a mission — find the best possible public elementary school near her northwest Denver home for her 2½-year-old-son, Henry.

Joelle Pacheco is anxious about what Denver Public Schools can offer her children, too. Her daughter, Kayla, is thriving at North High School, yet the district is revamping it. Her other daughter, Arianna, suffered through a series of substitute teachers at Brown Elementary as the school was transformed into a more rigorous International Baccalaureate curriculum.

Carson and Pacheco are the two faces of northwest Denver.

Carson is among hundreds of new families in the area, many of them Anglo, with young children about to enter school.

Pacheco is among thousands of long-time Hispanic residents of the area who often are frustrated by the drastic

changes in their children’s schools and what they say is the district’s indifference to their input.

DPS needs them both.

The district is struggling to improve the quality of its many poor-performing schools and boost the shrinking neighborhood school enrollment that threatens its health.

Tensions over curricula and values exist throughout the district. But persistently poor quality and the need to close schools because of too many empty classrooms make the northwest a hotbed of school reform. North High and the three middle schools feeding into it are less than 60 percent full — even more underused than the district as a whole, which is 68 percent full.

Gentrification is changing the area and bringing in professionals and young families whose children aren’t yet in school. At the same time, school choice is giving both Anglo and Hispanic families options that draw them away from the neighborhood schools.

From 2000 to 2005, the number of Anglo births rose while Hispanic births

Continued on next page



LEAVING TO LEARN

DPS schools, on average, are using only 68 percent of available space.



**Jennifer Draper Carson introduces** her 2-year-old son, Henry, to Ann Christy, principal of Edison Elementary School, which is one block from their house in northwest Denver. Carson is checking out neighborhood schools for Henry to attend when he is ready for preschool at age 3 or 4.



**Joelle Pacheco and her daughter**, Arianna, a DPS fifth-grader, share a moment at a Girl Scout forum. Pacheco, who is active in her children’s education, didn’t like how the district went about transforming Arianna’s school, Brown Elementary, to an International Baccalaureate program.

Continued from previous page

fell for the five northwest neighborhoods that traditionally have been heavily Hispanic.

The push for change is urgent, but parents don’t always want the same things, and tensions have increased each time a school undergoes transformation.

Pacheco and Carson met by chance in February at a night meeting on the future of North. They have been talking on and off since, trying to open communications between the old and new northwest Denver residents.

“I really appreciate that she wants to bridge the gap, and there is one,” Pacheco said.

Both have seen tensions increase be-



**Arianna Pacheco, right, throws paper airplanes** in the kitchen of her family’s northwest Denver home with her classmate and fellow Girl Scout troop member Ashlee Velasquez, 11. Arianna’s mother, Joelle Pacheco, is a troop leader for the girls from Brown Elementary and is glad the girls have

to northwest Denver about two years ago, part of a wave of young Anglo families. She threw herself into the community, becoming a leader of the Highland Mommies, a group of about 500 mothers, most with prekindergarten students.

This year, she became executive director of Northwest Parents for Excellent Schools, a group that wants to improve schools.

Through the winter and spring, with Henry in tow, she has visited elementary schools. She looked at Brown and its IB program, Edison with its gifted program and Ana Marie Sandoval with its dual-language immersion program.

She sets up tours for other parents and organizes forums for schools to make their pitches to parents.

She said Henry initially will go to the early education program at Valdez, another school she visited.

She said she is determined that Henry will go to a diversified DPS school.

“I want my kid to be integrated,” she said. “I don’t want him to be hanging out with a bunch of other little white kids.”

So did Kristi Conroy. She wanted her son, Ethan, to go to the neighborhood school, Columbian Elementary near West 44th Avenue and Federal Boulevard, just as she did growing up in a small town in Texas in the 1970s.

Ethan went to the school through first grade, and Conroy and her husband, Brian, were happy with the diversity.

“We loved it,” she said. “The teachers

stayed together through their grade-school years. She is optimistic about a DPS plan to create a K-12 school tied to North High School.

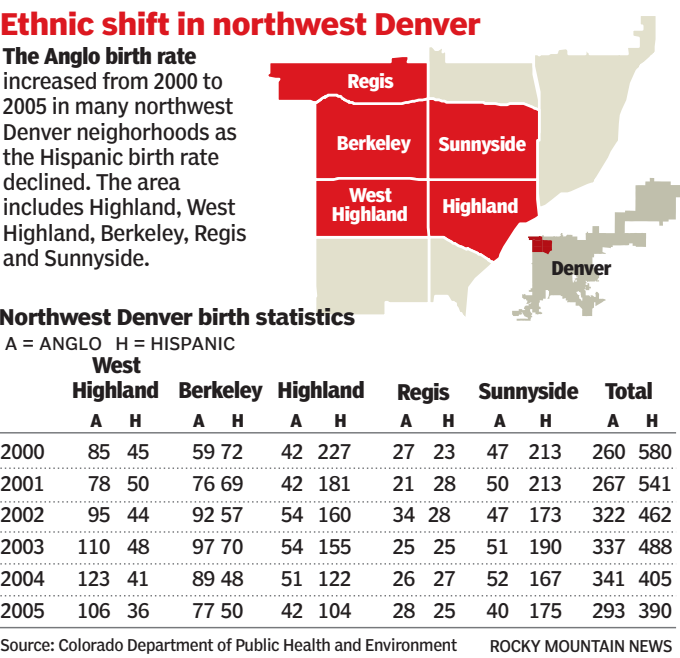
there were amazing.”

However, by second grade it was clear Ethan had no friends at the predominantly Hispanic school. None of his classmates shared his interest in *Star Wars* and robots, she said. And most of her neighbors were sending their children to other DPS schools or out of the district. This year, Ethan transferred to a Jefferson County elementary school.

“It stinks,” Kristi Conroy said. “But we just felt like mommy is pushing an agenda that isn’t fair.”

Still, the Conroys remained on Columbian’s school council. And when Columbian was scheduled to make a pitch to northwest Denver parents, it was Brian

Continued on next page



THE SERIES

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- **TUESDAY:** A fourth of all Anglo kids in Denver go to private schools. It’s almost half of all school-age kids in some areas.
- **WEDNESDAY:** In some areas of southwest Denver, half the school-age children go to suburban schools.
- **THURSDAY:** Charter school enrollment has grown 300 percent in six years, with black families most likely to choose them.
- **TODAY:** Northwest Denver exemplifies the tensions over reforming schools.
- **MONDAY, APRIL 23:** Hispanics are most likely to choose neighborhood schools, but they increasingly are exercising choice.
- **TUESDAY, APRIL 24:** What lies ahead for DPS?

ONLINE

- at [RockyMountainNews.com](http://RockyMountainNews.com)
- **Slide show:** See more photos of northwest Denver parents.
  - **School comparisons:** Compare schools near you.
  - **Chat at 11 a.m. today** at RockyTalk Live with Brian Weber, vice president for education at the Stapleton Foundation. See others’ comments and share your thoughts.



Hear more parent views at [RockyMountainNews.com](http://RockyMountainNews.com)

WHAT PARENTS WANT

“I feel that children learn best at an early age, and exposing them to a foreign language at a young age will be beneficial.”

Susan Sundeen, mother of a DPS third-grader at Cory Elementary

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# LEAVING TO LEARN

Seven DPS middle schools have lost **26 percent to 57 percent** of area students.



**Jennifer Draper Carson points** and tells her son, Henry, to put the blocks back in Edison Elementary School’s kindergarten class during a tour with Principal Ann Christy. Carson is the new leader for Northwest Parents for Excellent Schools and is researching where to send 2-year-old Henry for preschool. She says she’s determined to send her son to a DPS school with a diverse student body.

Continued from previous page

Conroy who stood up and made the presentation.

Joelle Pacheco, 33, runs a Girl Scout troop, teaches Sunday school and provides day care in her home. She has watched her two daughters navigate through an often tumultuous school system.

Kayla attended DPS’ Skinner Middle School when it went through a transformation and will enter her junior year in a revamped North High School. Pacheco tried sending Kayla to Wheat Ridge High School in Jefferson County for her freshman year because of “all the bad publicity” about North.

But Kayla wanted to be with her friends and transferred to North this year as a sophomore. She thrived, Pacheco said. She’s on the student council and earning A’s and B’s.

Pacheco’s younger daughter, Arian-

na, has been going to Brown Elementary through its conversion.

Pacheco doesn’t object to improving schools. And she is optimistic about a plan to use the available space at North to combine it with Valdez Elementary and eventually create a K-12 school.

What bothers her is the way DPS has gone about it. She says the district has ignored input from Hispanic parents.

“Anytime you want to make something better and improve something for your children for their future education is great,” Pacheco said. “It’s just not been a very nice process.”

She spoke out about problems in transforming Brown, especially the dismissal of all of the teachers in favor of new ones. Now she says she feels alienated from the school that Kayla first attended 10 years ago.

“As a parent, I think the district has a hard time reaching out to current parents,” she said.



**Northwest Denver mothers** listen to new North High School Principal Joanne Trujillo Hayes as she talks about DPS’ plans for the area. Brandy Barnes, left, Julie Shaw and Marjorie Comer, who brought her 4-year-old daughter, Charlotte, hear about a dual-language Montessori school planned for Valdez Elementary, which will become a K-8 school on North’s campus.

## Choice affects enrollment

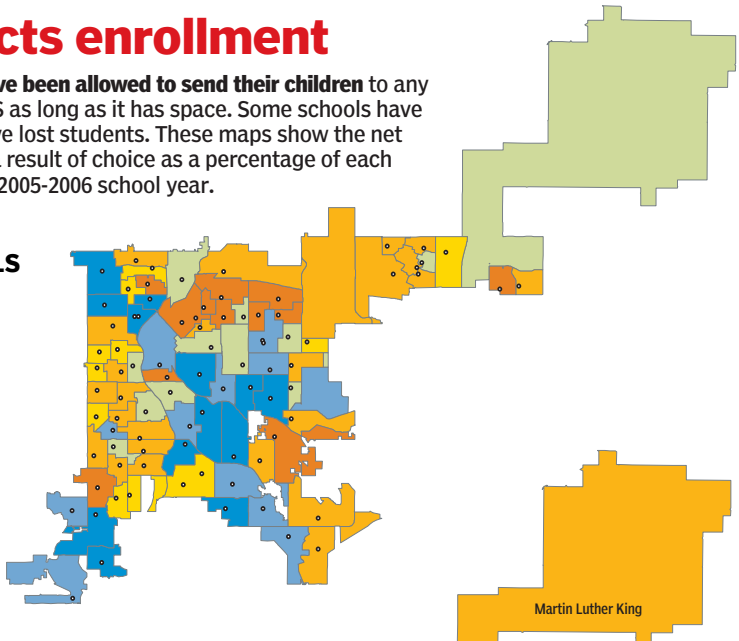
Since the 1990s, parents have been allowed to send their children to any neighborhood school in DPS as long as it has space. Some schools have prospered, while others have lost students. These maps show the net gain or loss in students as a result of choice as a percentage of each school’s enrollment for the 2005-2006 school year.

### ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Percent loss or gain in students because of choice

- MORE THAN 30% LOSS
- 10 TO 29% LOSS
- 0 TO 9% LOSS
- 1 TO 10% GAIN
- 11 TO 30% GAIN
- MORE THAN 30% GAIN

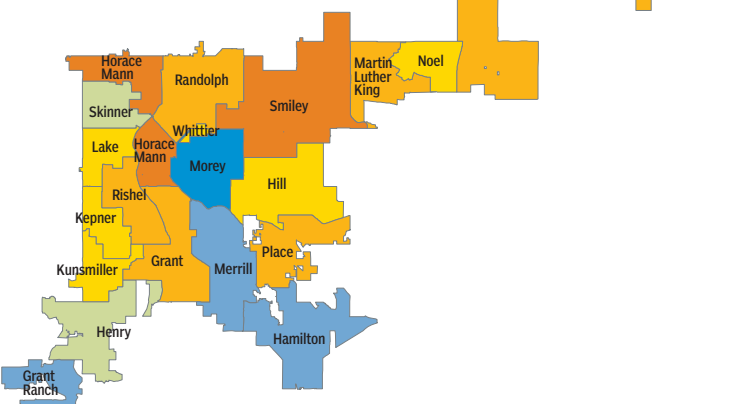
- ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



### MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Percent loss or gain in students because of choice

- MORE THAN 51% LOSS
- 25 TO 50% LOSS
- 0 TO 24% LOSS
- 1 TO 24% GAIN
- 25 TO 50% GAIN
- MORE THAN 50% GAIN



Source: Rocky Mountain News analysis of Denver Public Schools data BURT HUBBARD AND CHARLES CHAMBERLIN/ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

## Empty classrooms

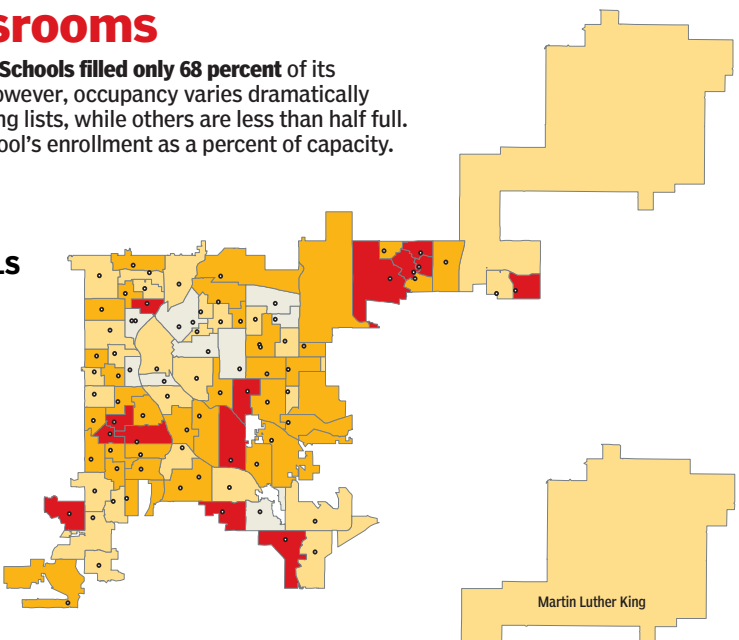
Districtwide, Denver Public Schools filled only 68 percent of its classroom space in 2006. However, occupancy varies dramatically by school. Some have waiting lists, while others are less than half full. These maps show each school’s enrollment as a percent of capacity.

### ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Enrollment as a percent of capacity

- 45 TO 60%
- 61 TO 75%
- 76 TO 90%
- MORE THAN 90%

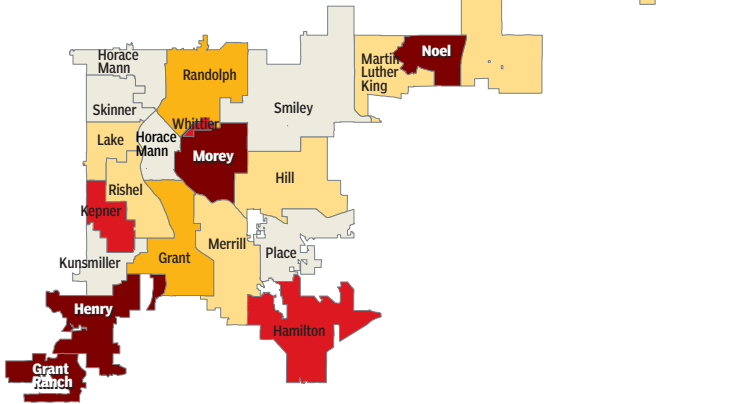
- ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



### MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Enrollment as a percent of capacity

- UNDER 50%
- 51 TO 60%
- 61 TO 70%
- 71 TO 80%
- 81 TO 90%



Source: Rocky Mountain News analysis of Denver Public Schools data BURT HUBBARD AND CHARLES CHAMBERLIN/ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

## Elementary school losses and gains from choice

<b>MORE THAN 30% LOSS</b>	Samuels -16%	Fairmont 9%
Doull -39%	Ellis -16%	Greenwood 10%
Mitchell -38%	Munroe -15%	<b>11 TO 30% GAIN</b>
Marrama -38%	Maxwell -14%	Castro 16%
Hallett -38%	Johnson -14%	Southmoor 21%
Harrington -37%	Brown -13%	Traylor 22%
Stedman -35%	Whittier (K-7) -12%	University Park 24%
Del Pueblo -34%	<b>0 TO 9% LOSS</b>	Bradley 25%
Smedley -34%	Barnum -9%	Grant Ranch (K-8) 26%
Gilpin -33%	Remington -9%	Lowry 26%
Smith -32%	Knapp -8%	Palmer 27%
McMeen -32%	Colfax -7%	Greenlee 27%
Columbine -31%	Columbian -7%	Bromwell 28%
<b>10 TO 30% LOSS</b>	Whiteman -6%	Park Hill K-8 School 30%
Holm -30%	Asbury -6%	<b>MORE THAN 30% GAIN</b>
Oakland -29%	Ashley -5%	Bryant-Webster 36%
Fallis -28%	College View -5%	Centennial 37%
Westerly Creek -27%	Lena Archuleta -5%	Lincoln 38%
McGlone -26%	Barrett -3%	Edison 38%
Schmitt -26%	Cowell -3%	Kaiser 48%
Montclair -26%	Gust -2%	Valdez 49%
Green Valley Ranch -24%	Cheltenham -1%	Dora Moore School 50%
Force -22%	Waller 0%	Steele 52%
Newlon -21%	<b>1 TO 10% GAIN</b>	Sabin 69%
Beach Court -20%	Wyman 1%	Slavens 70%
Ford -19%	Garden Place 1%	Carson 81%
Swansea -19%	Valverde 2%	McKinley-Thatcher 84%
Goldrick -17%	Fairview 3%	Steck 95%
Godsman -16%	Schenck 4%	Cory 95%
Amesse -16%	Philips 4%	
Eggleton -16%	Teller 5%	

## Middle school losses and gains from choice

<b>MORE THAN 50% LOSS</b>	Kunsmiller -21%	<b>1 TO 24% GAIN</b>	Henry 5%
Smiley -57%	Noel -19%	Skinner 5%	
Horace-Mann -56%	Whittier (K-7) -12%	<b>25 TO 50% GAIN</b>	
<b>25 TO 50% LOSS</b>	Kepner -12%	Hamilton 25%	
Martin Luther King -43%	Hill -10%	Grant Ranch (K-8) 26%	
Place -38%	Lake -5%	Merrill 50%	
Rishel -35%		<b>MORE THAN 50% GAIN</b>	
Grant -34%		Morey 148%	
Randolph -26%			

## Elementary enrollment as a percent of capacity

<b>45 TO 60%</b>	Marrama 72%	Johnson 85%
Del Pueblo 45%	Holm 72%	Grant Ranch (K-8) 86%
Hallett 45%	Remington 73%	Godsman 86%
Teller 48%	Cowell 74%	Schenck 86%
Fairview 50%	McKinley-Thatcher 74%	Montclair 87%
Bradley 55%	Whittier (K-7) 74%	College View 87%
Wyman 57%	Mitchell 74%	Valverde 87%
Smith 59%	Centennial 75%	McMeen 87%
Gilpin 59%	<b>76 TO 90%</b>	Carson 88%
Valdez 60%	Amesse 76%	Steele 88%
<b>61 TO 75%</b>	Palmer 76%	Ellis 88%
Stedman 61%	Oakland 76%	Park Hill K-8 School 88%
Garden Place 62%	Swansea 77%	Lena Archuleta 89%
Columbine 63%	Ashley 78%	Schmitt 90%
Philips 63%	Eggleton 78%	<b>MORE THAN 90%</b>
Dora Moore School 63%	Westerly Creek 78%	Munroe 91%
Waller 65%	Knapp 78%	Cory 93%
Smedley 65%	Lowry 79%	Steck 94%
Greenlee 65%	Barrett 79%	Goldrick 94%
Kaiser 66%	Lincoln 79%	Green Valley Ranch 94%
Cheltenham 66%	Edison 80%	McGlone 95%
Fairmont 66%	Beach Court 80%	Ford 96%
University Park 66%	Columbian 80%	Bryant-Webster 97%
Doull 67%	Harrington 80%	Slavens 98%
Whiteman 69%	Asbury 81%	Southmoor 101%
Brown 70%	Barnum 81%	Greenwood 101%
Gust 70%	Force 82%	Maxwell 102%
Samuels 70%	Colfax 82%	Traylor 105%
Newlon 71%	Fallis 85%	Castro 107%
Sabin 71%	Bromwell 85%	

## Middle school enrollment as a percent of capacity

<b>UNDER 50%</b>	Martin Luther King 52%	<b>71 TO 80%</b>	Whittier (K-7) 74%
Smiley 34%	Merrill 56%	Rishel 76%	
Horace-Mann 34%	Rishel 58%	Hamilton 78%	
Place 44%	Lake 59%	<b>81 TO 90%</b>	
Skinner 45%	<b>61 TO 70%</b>	Grant Ranch (K-8) 86%	
Kunsmiller 49.5%	Grant 64%	Noel 87%	
<b>51 TO 60%</b>	Randolph 68%	Morey 88%	
Hill 52%		Henry 90%	



# LEAVING TO LEARN

DPS preschoolers were **10 percent** more likely to stay in DPS through third grade.



Laila Silva, 2, cuts daisies to put in a vase in her toddler class at Mile High Montessori Early Learning Center near Rude Park in west Denver.

## ISSUE: EARLY EDUCATION

### Parents who start their children in preschool in Denver Public Schools are more likely to keep them there — at least through third grade.

A DPS analysis shows the retention rate is about 10 percent higher for families who send their children to DPS preschool versus a non-DPS preschool. Nearly 73 percent of DPS preschoolers in 2001-02 were still with the district four years later, the most recent analysis found, compared with 63 percent of those who went to a non-DPS program. So expanding public preschool programs might seem to be one way to attract — and keep — more families in DPS. Cheryl Caldwell, who heads early childhood education programs for the district, said the need is there. “In some parts of the community, you have the need but not the space,” she said. “That would be Montbello, Green

Valley and part of central southwest Denver. There are waiting lists there.” But because Colorado law does not require children to enter school until age 7 — or first grade — the state does not fund preschool or even kindergarten for every child. DPS receives much less taxpayer funding for those programs than for first through 12th grades. Principals who want to expand preschool classes would have to take money from other grades to do it. Kevin Fletcher, principal of Farrell B. Howell K-8 School in Montbello, has two empty classrooms where he could put preschoolers or more kindergarteners from a waiting list. “If we get them young, they grow with us and stay with us,” he said. “And we know what kind of education they’ve received.” He could pay for another preschool or kindergarten teacher from his budget, he said, but “the reality is, when I’m sitting on 30 to 35 students in each of my classrooms already, that’s hard to do.” Caldwell said individual schools in DPS have asked to add preschool as a marketing tool, and she tries to locate grants and other dollars for them. “But our primary goal is not marketing,” she said. “It’s having a high-quality program, which hopefully then is kind of a marketing tool for the school to keep kids.” Some community leaders said DPS could do a lot more to bring in preschool programs and families. Anna Jo Haynes, executive director of Mile High Montessori, which serves low-income families, said the district has plenty of space that preschool providers could use. Her group wants to begin a Montessori program starting with 8-week-old babies in a DPS school. If DPS worked with community organizations, they could have a strong

Nancy Mitchell

## ISSUE: SETTING BOUNDARIES

### Polite debates over setting boundaries for neighborhood schools sometimes mask tough underlying issues of race and income.

Stapleton, the thriving development in northeast Denver, is home to an estimated 600 to 800 children under the age of 6. It also houses a population that is mostly white and middle-class, in the midst of a school district and a community that is neither. That’s created a thorny issue for some Stapleton parents and for the Denver school board members who are trying to keep them in Denver Public Schools: Should DPS limit schools at Stapleton to residents only — creating what some say is essentially a separate school district? Or should the district encourage student flow from the outlying community, which is largely minority, into Stapleton schools — and flow kids from Stapleton back into the half-empty schools ringing the development? “What was sold at Stapleton was a neighborhood school — but a neighborhood school within a neighborhood that was going to be diverse,” said Justin Silverstein, whose son, Cooper, is 2. “That’s what we were looking for.” Instead, “The schools just seem relatively upper-middle class,” he said. “It doesn’t necessarily put into play what we were hoping for with our son’s schools.” So Silverstein supports opening some seats in Stapleton to families outside the housing development. Brian Weber, Stapleton Foundation vice president for education and workforce initiatives, has proposed creating a “zone of innovation” that would encompass Stapleton and parts of communities south and west, including Park Hill. Students living in the geographic area could choose any school within its boundaries. To entice students from Stapleton, struggling schools in the surrounding area would add special programs such as arts or dual-language programs. The ideal would be opening 30 percent of seats in Westerly Creek and other Stapleton schools to non-neighborhood residents, Weber said.



Kelly Anolin, left, and her friend and neighbor, Jennifer Shouse, ask the Denver school board not to change the configuration of their neighborhood schools in the Stapleton development.

DPS leaders say they’re still figuring out what to do about Stapleton. “This is a completely new way of doing business for us,” Brad Jupp, DPS senior academic adviser, said at a recent board meeting. Board members decided then to make one Stapleton school, Westerly Creek, for preschool through first grade only, accommodating the wave of younger children. A nearby Stapleton school, Bill Roberts, was designated for preschool through grade 8. Families living in Stapleton get to choose which school their child will attend. If any seats are left, families from outlying neighborhoods can fill them. It’s uncertain how many seats will be available to students outside Stapleton, though, because the demand is high. “We turned away 48 3-year-olds this year because there was no room,” Westerly Creek Principal Trish Lea said before the board vote. “There are 300 3-year-olds coming up.” Board members quickly asked tough questions: What is the racial and ethnic diversity in the area? How will this change affect racial equity in these and surrounding schools? “Could those schools draw city-wide?” asked board member Lucia Guzman, who is the city’s human rights director. “Can we ask the schools to try?” Jupp, who is working with Stapleton parents on what they want from DPS, said the development may serve

as “a small lab” on how families choose their schools. Some parents said it’s difficult to know whether to support opening schools to outlying communities. They want diversity — but they also want seats in their neighborhood schools. “I don’t want Stapleton to become kind of a gated community. It could have the potential to become that,” said Jennifer Shouse, who has two children in DPS schools, one at Stapleton and one outside. On the other hand, she said, “You did move in to have a neighborhood school . . . Neighborhood schools always have to have room for neighborhood kids.”

Nancy Mitchell



# LEAVING TO LEARN DPS' ENROLLMENT GAP: PART 6 OF 7



**John Youngquist, right,** principal of Smedley Elementary School in northwest Denver, listens to Joleen Mendoza's concern about a teacher while her granddaughter, Serina Torres, 9, listens. They met during a February meeting

to discuss adding a sixth grade in the fall. Hispanic students in Denver Public Schools are least likely to leave neighborhood schools for a charter, magnet or other choice, but that is changing as awareness of options increases.

**Hispanic students**, who make up **57 percent** of Denver Public Schools enrollment, are **least likely to bypass their neighborhood schools** for charters or other options in DPS. ■ **Still, 37 percent** of Hispanic DPS students took advantage of **school choice** in 2005-2006, compared with **more than half of black and Anglo** students. ■ And **Hispanic families** are growing **more savvy** as **awareness** about school choice **expands**.

## Hispanics get serious on choice

**Story by Burt Hubbard**  
**Photos by Judy DeHaas**  
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Fine.

That was the gist of the answer most of the time when Rosanna Torres asked her son, Hugo, how his day had gone at Johnson Elementary in west Denver.

This year, the sixth-grader attends West Denver Prep charter middle school, and he has a lot more to say.

"Now I ask Hugo, 'How was your day?' and it's, 'Mom, I did this and I did that,'" Torres said. "He's really talking."

Torres is scouring the Internet for a charter school for older daughter Britany, too.

Torres and West Denver Prep are part of a slowly emerging trend among Hispanic families to exercise more choice in where their kids go to school.

Most Hispanic families still attend Denver's traditional neighborhood schools — even when those schools are failing or underperforming.

Hispanic students, who account for 57 percent of DPS enrollment, are the least likely to leave their neighborhood schools for a charter, magnet or other DPS school, according to a *Rocky Mountain News* analysis of DPS data. About 80 percent of DPS' Hispanic students are low-income.

Still, among Hispanic DPS students, a hefty 37 percent chose a school other than their assigned neighborhood school in 2005-2006. The figure was more than 50 percent for Anglo and black students.

And interest in school choice has accelerated among all students. Since 2002, the percentages of DPS students bypassing neighborhood schools have grown 10 percentage points for black and Hispanic students and 6 percentage points for Anglo kids.

As choice widens, a sense of urgency is pushing DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet. He is leading a fast-paced effort to improve neighborhood schools because they're hemorrhaging enrollment. Preschool and kindergarten are growing, and so are DPS charter schools. But the district doesn't get full

Continued on page 13



# LEAVING TO LEARN

About **5 percent** of Hispanic students in Denver attend **private schools**.



**West Denver Prep** sixth-grader Soren Garcia, 12, tells Alissa Brown, 12, far right, to be quiet during the weekly community meeting in the library. The



**Chris Gibbons, director of West Denver Prep charter school**, holds a meeting at 8:15 a.m. every day with students and teachers to go over the news of the day and the previous day's successes. They also review areas that need improvement. Students then quietly return to their classrooms and begin their academic instruction.

charter school, which is in its first year, is so popular a lottery was required to fill its limited space for sixth grade next fall. It will eventually have grades 6-8.



**Briseyda Salgado** and her son, Luis Lucio-Salgado, left, talk with West Denver Prep Director Chris Gibbons, as younger son, Jorge, 6, listens. Luis was chosen in a lottery to attend sixth grade next fall at the charter. Gibbons meets with all parents and children to discuss the school handbook and have them sign commitment contracts.

Continued from page 11

state and local funding for the youngest children, and for DPS charters, an average of 95 percent of per-pupil funding goes to the independent groups running them.

Bennet knows DPS must improve. "We can't expect people, no matter the ethnicity, to compromise the education of their child," Bennet said.

## Keeping kids close to home

Jaime Aquino, chief academic officer for DPS, said a tendency to choose neighborhood schools rather than send kids too far from home fits with Hispanics' strong belief in close-knit families. "Hispanic families will be comforted to know their kids are near them," Aquino said. "If anything happens, they can get there very easily. We are very protective, sometimes overly protective, of our kids."

A recent DPS-commissioned survey of Denver parents found that Hispanics gave DPS a higher grade than Anglo or black parents did. The survey also found that low-income and high-income parents gave DPS higher marks than middle-income parents did.

In almost half of the predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods on the west side of Denver, fewer than 5 percent of students go to charter schools, the *Rocky* analysis shows. Districtwide, 6 percent of Hispanic DPS students and 6.6 percent of Anglo students attend charters, compared with 13 percent of black DPS students.

Private schools draw about 5 percent of Hispanic students, compared with 26 percent of Anglo students and 5 percent of black students, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Denver Hispanics' reliance on neighborhood schools reflects a national pattern.

## Looking for structure

The discipline, academic rigor and uniform dress code are major reasons Rosanna Torres and fellow parent Olivia Sanchez chose West Denver Prep.

Every school day, West Denver Prep Director Chris Gibbons stands outside the two-story building on South Federal Boulevard, shaking the hands of all students as parents drop them off at 8 a.m. The school, in its first year, has only sixth-graders but will expand through eighth grade.

"Are you ready to strive for college today?" Gibbons asks.

The predominantly Hispanic and low-income students quietly enter the school and walk to their classrooms, passing a banner touting their college graduating class of 2017. Each classroom has the college pennant of its teacher on the door.

Students spend 2½ hours a day on reading and writing and almost two hours on math. Homework averages two hours a night. Students stay in the same room to minimize disruptions in the hallways. Instead, the teachers change classes, wheeling carts filled with their books and eraser boards.

Students all wear blue polo shirts, dress shoes and jeans with belts. Discipline is strictly enforced.

"If you make a big deal out of the little stuff, the big stuff doesn't happen," Gibbons said.

Unlike Torres, Sanchez is a veteran of

## Big growth in choice

The number of DPS students who don't go to their neighborhood schools has jumped dramatically, even among Hispanics, who are least likely to bypass the closest school.

	BLACK	HISPANIC	ANGLO
2000	43%	29%	44%
2001	43%	28%	46%
2002	43%	27%	46%
2003	45%	29%	48%
2004	50%	32%	51%
2005	53%	37%	52%

Source: Denver Public Schools

choice, with her four oldest sons going back and forth among neighborhood schools, private schools and charters.

She learned a hard lesson with her oldest son, Christopher. He went to DPS' Kunsmiller Middle School and did poorly, she said. Sanchez said she did not find out from school officials until weeks before the grading period ended that Christopher hadn't done his homework.

She and her husband enrolled him at Mile High Baptist, a private school in Jefferson County, to finish middle school. Christopher persuaded his parents to let him go to Lincoln High School.

He dropped out after two years.

"I just couldn't get him motivated," Sanchez said.

Christopher's younger brother, Danny, also wanted to go to Lincoln with his friends, but Sanchez prevailed.

"We almost gave in," she said.

Instead, Danny and younger brother Louie attend Southwest Early College, a charter high school in west Denver.

Their youngest boy, Marcos, went to Mile High Baptist through third grade, then returned to his neighborhood DPS school, Doull, for fourth and fifth grades. He's doing well as a sixth-grader at West Denver Prep, she said.

During a schoolwide community meeting held each Friday, Marcos was part of the choir that sang "Seasons of Love" from the Broadway musical *Rent*. The teachers used the song's "525,600 minutes. How do you measure a year?" to review math techniques.

Earlier, during a discussion of the book *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* on segregation in the South, Marcos asked a pointed question.

"What would the story say from the white person's point of view?" he said.

## Awareness growing

at low-performing schools that they have the right to switch their child to another public school, with transportation provided.

Last year, 1,500 of DPS' 73,000 students took advantage of the program, a DPS study found.

Flores estimates that CREO worked with about 4,000 parents in the metro area last year. About 70 percent were Spanish speakers, he said.

Some of the Hispanic interest in choice might come from new options springing up. West Denver Prep is only the fourth charter school in the city's western neighborhoods. Denver has 20 charters.

For this year's class, the charter had 138 applicants for 100 spots. More than 180 students applied for 110 positions in next fall's class. The school eventually will serve about 300 sixth- to eighth-graders.

The waiting lists show the demand among Hispanic families, Gibbons said.

"That tells me, wow, if we had more room, people would come," he said.

Both KIPP Sunshine Peak Academy in central Denver and Cesar Chavez Academy in Pueblo have shown that charter schools can succeed with low-income Hispanic students. KIPP's middle school was rated average by the state last year, while Chavez's middle school was rated high.

Another charter is on the way.

The Ricardo Flores Magon Academy at West 72nd Avenue and Irving Street expects to open in August with kindergartners and first-graders, with plans to expand through eighth grade. The DPS school board turned down a contract with the charter last year, but the Charter School Institute, a state body that can overrule school districts, approved it to serve Denver and Adams County students.

The school day will run from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. to accommodate working parents and increase academic achievement, said school leader Marcos Martinez. Summer break will be cut short and the Christmas break extended because many parents take their children to relatives in Mexico during that time of year.

"We're trying to cater to the community," Martinez said.

## Recruiting heavily

After West Denver Prep obtained its charter last year, Gibbons and the school's teachers went door-to-door to encourage parents to apply.

The first year, his student body was 91 percent Hispanic, with 84 percent eligible for free or reduced-priced lunches. Gibbons estimated a third came in proficient at grade level, another third were two to three grades behind and the rest were even further behind. Almost all the students came from DPS elementary schools in west Denver.

Students took the CSAP standardized tests for the first time this March and won't know results until summer.

But Rosanna Torres and Olivia Sanchez said they already have seen results with their sons.

For hyperactive Marcos, the uniforms and structure are comforting, Sanchez said.

Torres said Hugo fought back tears during the first weeks when he struggled with hours of homework. Now, he has set his sights high academically.

"Every day he's saying, 'I'm going to go to college, mom.'"

## THE SERIES

- **MONDAY:** Denver Public Schools aren't enrolling about 25 percent of the city's school-age children, a study by the *Rocky Mountain News* and the Piton Foundation has found.
- **TUESDAY:** A fourth of all Anglo kids in Denver go to private schools. It's almost half of all school-age kids in some areas.
- **WEDNESDAY:** In some areas of southwest Denver, half the school-age children go to suburban schools.
- **THURSDAY:** Charter school enrollment has grown 300 percent in six years, with black families most likely to choose them.
- **FRIDAY:** Northwest Denver exemplifies the tensions over reforming schools.
- **TODAY:** Hispanics are most likely to choose neighborhood schools, but they increasingly are exercising choice.
- **TUESDAY:** What lies ahead for DPS?

## ONLINE

at [RockyMountainNews.com](#)

- **Videos:** See West Denver Prep and meet Dolores Duran and her son.
- **Slide show:** See more photos.
- **Interactive map:** Compare schools.
- **Chat at 11 a.m. today** on RockyTalk Live with Chris Gibbons, director of West Denver Prep charter and Jim Griffin, executive director of the Colorado League of Charter Schools.



Here more parent views at **RockyMountainNews.com**

## PARENTS' VOICES

"What works is when the teachers get personally involved with each student . . . I believe that children need to know that someone cares for them."

**Jose G. Flores**, father of three students at DPS' Lincoln High School

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- **Photographer Judy DeHaas:** [dehaasj@RockyMountainNews.com](mailto:dehaasj@RockyMountainNews.com) or 303-954-2916



# LEAVING TO LEARN

In a parent survey, **Hispanics** rated DPS **higher** than blacks or Anglos did.



**Demetri Hernandez visits** DPS' Henry Middle School on his own in late March to learn about the school he will attend as a sixth-grader next fall. His mother, Dolores Duran, had hoped he would win a spot at West Denver Prep charter school, but he wasn't chosen in the lottery. After also visiting KIPP Sunshine Peak Academy charter school and DPS' Kepner Middle School, Duran chose Henry.

## ISSUE: NEW CHOICES FOR HISPANICS

### Dolores Duran silently wiped away a tear as the 110th name was called in the cafeteria of West Denver Prep.

That was the last spot available in the lottery for the charter school on South Federal Boulevard, and former Denver City Councilwoman Rosemary Rodriguez still hadn't called the name of Duran's son, fifth-grader Demetri Hernandez.

As Duran listened with about 100 other parents on that night in February, Demetri's name finally came out of the bowl that had held 181 slips of paper for 110 openings at the school. At No. 161, Demetri was so far down on the waiting list he had no chance.

Duran, the mother of three, could not keep quiet.

"I'm disappointed. I'm not going to lie," she told the audience.

Beside her sat her friend, Berdina Rivera, mother of Demetri's best friend, Antonio. His was the 83rd name picked.

Duran had visited the school and talked with officials. Rivera had simply sent in the application form.

"He was going to middle school next year, which I think is too advanced for Denver kids," Rivera said. "So I was going to put him over to Jefferson County, where they are still in elementary school. That was my last option."

The next morning Duran started the search for another school for Demetri, determined that he was not going to attend his neighborhood school, Rishel Middle School.

Dolores Duran is among a growing number of low-income Hispanic parents taking advantage of school choice. Traditionally, Hispanic parents in Denver Public Schools have been the least likely to venture outside their neighborhood schools.

Duran became disenchanted with

Rishel when Demetri's older brother, Richard, got poor grades there several years ago.

"It just seemed like the instructors there are combative. It's like we're not on the same page with his success being the main goal here," she said.

She said she transferred him to Northglenn Middle School, where he raised his grades to A's and B's. But she lost her car and had to re-enroll him in Rishel.

Demetri and Richard had both gone to DPS' Wyatt Edison charter school in 2000 and 2001 when Duran worked at the nearby Community College of Denver.

"I really like it. It was extended days and extended school year," she said.

That stopped when she lost her job.

After the lottery, she visited KIPP Sunshine Peak Academy, another Denver charter, and Kepner and Henry middle schools in West Denver. She and Demetri decided on Henry.

That night after the lottery, Duran said Demetri knew he didn't get into West Denver Prep by the expression on his mother's face.

"I didn't cry in front of him, but I just told him whatever school you end up attending is what we make out of it. It may not be the one we wanted, but we will make the best out of it."

Burt Hubbard



#### West Denver Prep

- **Location:** 1825 S. Federal Blvd. in Mar Lee area.
- **Grades:** Started with sixth grade this year, will go through eighth grade.
- **Students:** 100, with eventual capacity for 300
- **Demographics:** 91 percent Hispanic, 5 percent white, 2 percent American Indian, 1 percent Asian, 1 percent black.
- **Low income:** 84 percent eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.
- **State rating:** Not rated yet.



▲ **Dolores Duran forces back a tear** after learning that her son, Demetri Hernandez, was not chosen to go to West Denver Prep charter school in its Feb. 13 lottery. There were 181 applicants for the 110 sixth-grade spaces at the school, which opened last year and eventually will go through eighth grade.

◀ **Former Denver City Council member Rosemary Rodriguez** draws names from a glass bowl during West Denver Prep's lottery for spots next fall.

#### Online

■ See two videos, one on West Denver Prep charter and another on Dolores Duran's search for a school for her son at [RockyMountainNews.com](http://RockyMountainNews.com).



LEAVING TO LEARN DPS' ENROLLMENT GAP: PART 7 OF 7



**Denver Public Schools Superintendent** Michael Bennet walks across the lawn of DPS' Maxwell Elementary School with Simon Bertron, a student at Bromwell Elementary. Simon's parents won him the honor to be superintendent for the day

at a Bromell fundraising auction. Bennet tends to take the most direct route from Point A to Point B to accommodate his tight schedule. He said if he is late to one event it can throw off his timing for the entire day.

Can Denver Public Schools **improve** enough to persuade **more parents** to have their children educated in the district? ■ **Superintendent Michael Bennet** knows it's a daunting challenge — one that no **struggling urban district** has met so far. ■ But it's **not slowing** him down. ■ DPS is **urgently working** on reform, and it's considering the **painful closing** of some schools to **save money** and focus more resources on **raising the quality** of those that remain.

# DPS chief runs race to revitalize

**Story by Nancy Mitchell**  
**Photos by Judy DeHaas**  
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Michael Bennet was giving another talk on the future of Denver Public Schools on a recent Wednesday night, speaking in his usual rapid-fire fashion. Jacket off and tie loosened, he was bouncing on his feet as he got more and more wound up. Then a self-described “angry mom” in the audience rose with a question. She was holding a summary of the district’s reform plan, the topic of the superintendent’s impassioned speech. “This is not what we’re talking about on the playground,” Ayo Labode, a 38-year-old lawyer, told Bennet. “We’re talking about, ‘Where in God’s name are you going to send your kids for school?’” “I have 2-year-old twins,” she told him. “I live in North Denver. I’m scared to death to put them in DPS. My question is, ‘Where would you send them if you were in my place?’” It was a question that, for about 30

seconds, stumped the usually unflappable Bennet. It also is a question that crystallizes the debate on playgrounds across the city and in the hearts of many Denver moms and dads: Will they take a chance on the city’s struggling public schools? Or will their children join the 20,300 Denver students bypassing DPS every year? Bennet, 42, came to DPS in 2005 as a star in business and government but with no background in education. He’s a good speaker — smart, but not too much of an egghead and given to flashes of self-deprecating humor. But the dilemma he faces in trying to revive DPS’ enrollment is complex and contentious. He will be campaigning to recruit families even as the district is expected to close some schools. He will be wrestling with the issues of race and class that often emerge in conversations about school choice. “Every time I listen to Michael Bennet, I think he’s great,” Labode said later, echoing the sentiments of numerous parents interviewed by the *Rocky Mountain News*. “I like what he has to

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LEAVING TO LEARN

It would cost DPS \$16 million to cut every grade-school class to 22 students.



Mile High Scholars receive congratulations from DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet during an awards ceremony Feb. 7 at Boettcher Concert Hall. Joining Bennet to honor the students are Mayor John Hickenlooper, right, Denver School Board president Theresa Peña and vice president Bruce Hoyt.

Older students use school choice more

The percentage of Denver Public Schools students selecting a school other than their assigned neighborhood school grows as students get older, and the trend is toward more school choice among all students.

Percent opting out of neighborhood schools:		
Grade	2000	2005
Kindergarten	32%	36%
Grade 1	32%	36%
Grade 2	31%	35%
Grade 3	32%	37%
Grade 4	32%	38%
Grade 5	32%	39%
Grade 6	34%	42%
Grade 7	34%	43%
Grade 8	36%	43%
Grade 9	41%	55%
Grade 10	44%	55%
Grade 11	54%	57%
Grade 12	48%	57%

Source: Denver Public Schools



Don Reeverts, executive director of Whiz Kids Tutoring, talks with Bennet during a fundraiser in March for the nonprofit program, which pairs volunteers with students who need extra help. Bennet was the keynote speaker for the event, held at the Hyatt Regency Denver Tech Center.

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say. But do I trust it? With my own children?"

The answer, for now, is no. She and her husband, Jim Scott, a registered nurse, are "probably 90 percent" sure that their twins won't attend DPS.

"We may be moving," Labode said. "Education is that important to us."

Empty classrooms

More than 31,000 of the 98,000 seats in DPS classrooms today are empty, district data show.

A study by the *Rocky* and the Piton Foundation found one in four Denver children ages 5 to 17 do not enroll in DPS.

Even if DPS could bring back all 20,300 kids, thousands of chairs would still be empty.

"We're spending a lot of money on empty space in this district," Bennet said. "That's a difficult conversation to have because no one wants, all things being equal, to close schools."

When he brings up this point in his speeches, he ties it to a frequent parent complaint: "The question is, do you want to use the money in classrooms? In lowering class size, for example?"

The bottomline, of course, is money. A lot of it.

Every student in grades 1 through 12 in DPS brought in about \$6,800 in local and state funding this year. Denver kids who are not choosing DPS cost the district at least \$135 million in lost revenue.

And running partially empty buildings — DPS schools, on average, are 68 percent full — also costs in utilities, maintenance and other fixed expenses.

Those dollars could be better spent on what Bennet says is the No. 1 priority — improving the quality of teaching.

That means smaller class sizes, more training for teachers, up-to-date textbooks, better leadership development of principals — all the stuff outlined in The Denver Plan, DPS' reform strategy.

"I understand why it's not being talked about on the playground," Bennet told Labode. "But I believe that plan, faithfully implemented, is going to create marvelous schools all over Denver."

Sense of urgency

Sure, say parents such as Kim Allen, but how soon?

Allen, who lives in northwest Denver with her husband and two children, is a mom who plans ahead.

The family attended an informational breakfast in February at the Center for International Studies, DPS' newest magnet school for grades 6 through 12. Their oldest, Tyger, is a fourth-grader.

Tyger and his sister, Riley, are happily settled at Polaris at Ebert, the district's elementary for gifted students. But their parents are mulling middle and high school options, and private school is a strong possibility.

"It sounds like it's not going to be business as usual (under Bennet)," Kim Allen said. "I just don't know if it's going to be in time to help my kids."

A recent survey of parents in Denver found they share Allen's view — 50 percent said DPS will be "much better" in three to five years.

Recent enrollment trends show DPS is gaining in the earliest grades — preschool and kindergarten. Then the numbers drop off, particularly in the middle school grades of 6, 7 and 8. Grade 9 enrollment is up again, as some students re-

Steps DPS is taking

Denver Public Schools leaders have identified initiatives designed to improve schools and increase student enrollment.

SHORT-TERM

**1 Enrollment incentives:** Schools that recruit students from charter schools, private schools, home-schooling or suburban districts this past fall received an extra \$1,179 per pupil.

**2 Marketing director:** Mile High United Way is paying for DPS' first marketing director, who is working with individual schools on recruitment strategies.

LONG-TERM

**1 School improvement plans:** Every school will be required to complete a plan that prioritizes needs in improving student achievement, sets out realistic and measurable goals and identifies steps to reach them.

**2 School accreditation framework:** Every school will be measured on a framework that includes progress toward state and federal student performance goals, comparisons with other DPS schools with similar demographics, student gains over time and progress in closing achievement gaps among student groups by race and income.

turn from private middle schools, then drops again for grades 10 and 11.

Even for those who stay in DPS, the older the student, the more likely that student is attending a school outside the neighborhood. More than half of all DPS high school students go to a campus other than their area school.

Bennet said he feels a strong sense of urgency to make change happen — fast.

"It is a race against time," he said.

When pressed, Bennet says he needs the next five years. He's had nearly two.

Scars of Manual

A citizens panel is reviewing criteria for determining which schools should close and is expected to refine them by May 31. The school board likely would vote on a plan in July.

Nearly a year later, the targeted schools would close in May or June 2008.

If that seems a lengthy process, credit the public-relations beating Bennet took over Manual High School. The school board abruptly decided in February 2006 to close the mostly minority, mostly poor school for a year because of low enrollment and poor performance.

Bennet, a Democrat who can quote the most obscure speeches of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., found himself confronted by a roomful of angry Manual supporters singing the civil rights anthem, "We Shall Overcome."

It was a lesson in the emotions involved in shuttering a school. Bennet has learned to acknowledge a community's attachment to a school, no matter how badly it's performing.

"Those are all important values, that

there was always a school there, that my parents went there, that I went there," he said. "They need to be respected. We also, as a community, need to come to grips with our single most important priority, which is educating the children of Denver."

"It's long past time for Denver to create a school district that can serve the kids of the 21st century."

The Pittsburgh plan

Denver's crisis is not unique. Urban school districts across the country — Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Baltimore — are grappling with enrollment gaps and school closures.

Few are doing it without controversy. As was the case with Manual, race and class tend to bubble to the surface.

"What we're imagining in DPS is not what has been done in other school districts," Bennet said. "It will look different."

Theresa Peña, the DPS mom who chairs the Denver School Board, said the district must "fundamentally change the way we're doing business."

What that will look like is not exactly clear — yet.

"We can acknowledge we're a system in failure, but where do we go from there?" Peña said. "That's what we're struggling with right now."

They are taking advice, most recently from Pittsburgh Superintendent Mark Roosevelt, who visited this month.

Roosevelt's "right-sizing plan" closed 22 schools, eliminated 10,177 of the dis-

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THE SERIES

- **APRIL 16:** Denver Public Schools aren't enrolling about 25 percent of the city's school-age children, a study by the *Rocky Mountain News* and the Piton Foundation has found.
- **TUESDAY:** A fourth of all Anglo kids in Denver go to private schools. It's almost half of all school-age kids in some areas.
- **WEDNESDAY:** In some areas of southwest Denver, half the school-age children go to suburban schools.
- **THURSDAY:** Charter school enrollment has grown 300 percent in six years, with black families most likely to choose them.
- **FRIDAY:** Northwest Denver exemplifies the tensions over reforming schools.
- **MONDAY:** Hispanics are most likely to choose neighborhood schools, but they increasingly are exercising choice.
- **TODAY:** What lies ahead for DPS?

ONLINE

at [RockyMountainNews.com](http://RockyMountainNews.com)

- **Multi-media:** Audio slide show of DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet and video of him discussing education.
- **Video:** Meet Principal Kevin Fletcher of DPS' Farrell B. Howell K-8 School.
- **School comparisons:** Compare schools near you.
- **Chat at 11 a.m. today** with Superintendent Bennet on RockyTalk Live.



Hear more parent views at [RockyMountainNews.com](http://RockyMountainNews.com)

PARENTS' VOICES

"We have signs now on stores in Spanish. It's the fastest-growing language here. It's going to be the second language. Why not start offering it at the elementary school age?"

Monica Moore, mother of a first-grader at DPS' Maxwell Elementary School

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# LEAVING TO LEARN

More than **half** of **high school** kids in DPS don't go to their neighborhood school.

**Timeline for closing schools**  
**An A+ citizens panel is studying school closures in Denver Public Schools.**

■ **April:** Panel presents draft criteria for closing schools.

■ **May:** Panel holds five community meetings to discuss criteria.

■ **May:** Panel meets with school board to discuss criteria and set timeline.

■ **May 31:** Panel hopes to present final school closure criteria, refined by community input, to Denver school board by this date. But the panel chairs have indicated additional days or weeks may be needed.

■ **Mid-June:** DPS presents its new schools plan based on criteria.

■ **July:** DPS holds regional community meetings and a public hearing to discuss its new schools plan.

■ **July-August:** Denver school board votes on new schools plan.

■ **Summer-fall:** Community meetings to discuss implementing the plan.

■ **October:** DPS completes a new school enrollment guide.

■ **December:** Aggressive public relations campaign begins around new school-choice options.

■ **May-June 2008:** Schools marked for closure have last day of classes.

Source: A+ Denver Subcommittee on Finances and Facilities



DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet talks with his chief of staff, Sarah Hughes, about principal salaries at North and Manual high schools, which are undergoing transformations to improve quality. Manual was closed last year and will reopen this fall.

Continued from page 13  
trict's 13,706 empty seats and is expected to save \$14.7 million per year.  
It also opened a new school, expanded preschool and turned eight low-performing schools into back-to-basics learning academies with longer school days.  
Roosevelt argues that the plan, which took effect this past fall, will save money and improve achievement.  
It's the magic combination Bennet is after.  
"We have got to restore the district to financial health," Bennet said. "That's why we've raised the question about the number of school buildings. We may be able to provide a richer academic environment in smaller settings in fewer buildings."

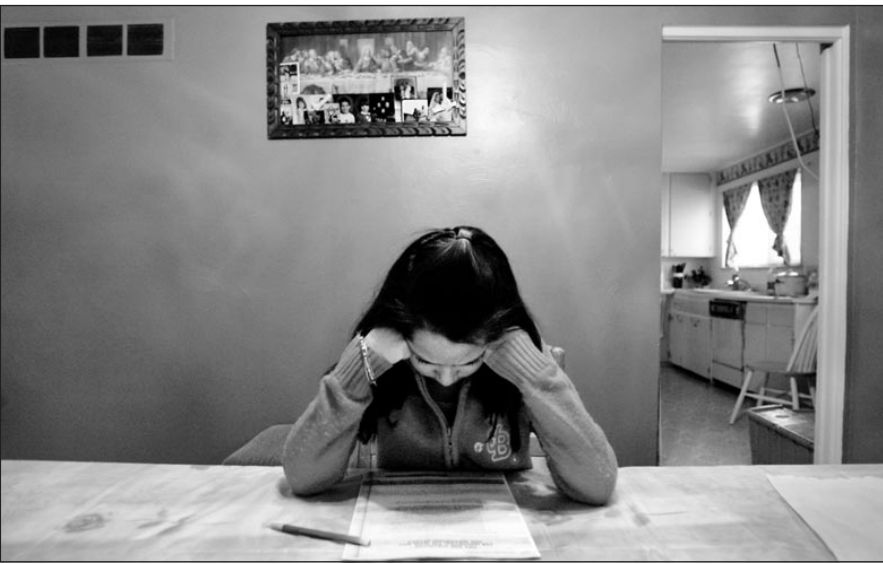
## Rich, poor in DPS

But which buildings? In whose neighborhoods?  
The *Rocky*-Piton study confirmed what many suspected — wealthier families, who tend to be white, are the most likely to leave DPS. One in four white school-aged children living in Denver is enrolled in private schools.  
White students who stay in DPS tend to cluster in certain schools. Two popular programs — Polaris at Ebert, the elementary for gifted kids, and the Denver School of the Arts for grades 6-12 — are mostly white and affluent in a district that is mostly minority and poor.  
Fewer black students than white students are leaving DPS, but black students are moving within the district. In 2005-06, upper-income black students, more than any other ethnic or economic group, chose DPS schools other than their assigned neighborhood schools. They are the most likely to choose charter schools. DPS, by law, funnels an average of 95 percent of state and local funding for charter students to the independent groups that run them.  
So should DPS target upper-income families to help fill its empty seats? There aren't enough of them to fill the gap. And what happens when their desires clash with the district's biggest population — Hispanic low-income students?  
Other urban school districts have wrestled with the issue, and lost.  
"The truth is that DPS and other urban districts don't really have any great options to choose from," said Kevin Welner, assistant professor of education at the University of Colorado at Boulder.  
"If they cater to the wealthier families who, as a practical matter, have more choice options and who are disproportionately white, then they unfairly distribute opportunities," he said. "If they don't, then they lose enrollment — and those lost students tend to be more academically successful."  
Kim Ursetta, president of the Denver teachers union and a former teacher of bilingual education, said the district must consider diversity in its school closures.  
She worries that many community discussions about closures are scheduled for the summer, when busy families may not hear about them or be able to attend.  
"We need to have that tough conversation about how we integrate our schools," Ursetta said. "This is not something that has been at the forefront of people's minds, and it's a very important conversation for us to have."

# District responds to parents' complaints

**In recent interviews and community forums, parents voiced common concerns. These are the most frequently cited, along with a response from DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet.**

**Concern:** DPS classes are too large.  
Monica Moore, who lives in the northeast Denver neighborhood of Montbello, said her son has 30 children in his first-grade class. His teacher has no aide.  
"She can't see him as an individual," Moore said.  
**Response:** DPS staff is surveying classrooms to determine how large classes really are in each school. Bennet said the average elementary class size is 23 — but it's more in some areas and less in others.  
"If we can find a way to invest in class-size reduction, I believe it will increase enrollment and our revenue and, in the end, pay for itself," Bennet said. "The question is, how do we get the funds



Arianna Pacheco, 10, a fifth-grader at DPS' Brown International Elementary School, does her homework at the dinner table. Her mother, Joelle Pacheco, is unhappy with how DPS is carrying out reform. She feels her children's education has been disrupted by school revitalizations.

## No appetite for busing

Other districts have incorporated race and income in their choice plans.  
Seattle Public Schools uses race as a tie-breaker in admissions to some schools. The U.S. Supreme Court is weighing the legality of that system.  
And the Raleigh school district in North Carolina has made income a factor in its choice policy. The idea of "economic integration" has found favor among some local education researchers.  
Not with Bennet.  
"I have no doubt that if we waved a magic wand and our kids were distributed on a more economically integrated fashion, our kids would do better," he said. "It's not going to happen while I'm here. Denver doesn't want it."  
Nor does he favor race as a factor.  
"The only way to do it would be through a system of mandates or busing," he said. "I don't think there's a lot of appetite for that."  
Instead, Bennet and his chief academic

recently began talks about improving middle schools. Also, the district has added a number of schools serving kindergarten through grade 8. The district also has added grades to two schools — Bruce Randolph School and Martin Luther King Jr. Early College — so they serve grades 6 through 12. A new program, the Center for International Studies, also is a 6-12 school.

**Concern:** DPS schools are too fixated on state tests.  
Parents with children at higher-performing schools most often voiced this complaint, saying the district is too focused on the basics for lower-performing kids. These parents argue that higher-performing schools should have more freedom.  
**Response:** Bennet and Chief Academic Officer Jaime Aquino say the curriculum is designed to push kids of all abilities.

officer, Jaime Aquino, say the focus is on improving every school.  
The *Rocky*-Piton analysis found low-income students are less likely to leave their neighborhood schools. Aquino said DPS has a "moral and legal obligation" to ensure that they get a quality education.  
"There is always the reality some families cannot choose out, and how fair is that?" he asked.

## Tough proposition

If the prognosis for DPS seems grim, Bennet is not.  
"We have to transform our school districts in America's cities, and we intend to be a leader in this in Denver," he said.  
He reels off the dire statistics for DPS: Only 40 percent of students are reading at grade level, based on state tests. Just one in 10 is proficient in math by the 10th grade. The dropout rate for some ethnic groups in DPS is 50 percent.  
"We are not getting the job done," he said, using the statistics as ammunition for his vision of reform. "I have no interest in telling a story that isn't true."  
His optimism may spring from his history of success. A graduate of elite private schools and Yale Law School, he made millions working for billionaire Philip Anschutz and helped guide the seemingly golden career of Denver Mayor John Hickmool as his chief of staff.  
While some viewed him as an unlikely choice in July 2005 to run DPS because of his lack of education experience, he has since won over many skeptics with his smart hires and grueling schedule.  
Whether he can persuade families to return to DPS remains to be seen.  
"You're really asking for changing a whole city's idea about education," Thelma Hutt, 80, the mother of four DPS graduates and grandmother of two DPS students, told Bennet on that recent Wednesday night. "You're asking for a complete about-face, and it's a tough proposition."  
Bennet smiled.  
"I agree with you. It's a tough proposition," he said. "Hope springs eternal. And we don't have a choice."  
"I think we're going to figure it out."

Teacher planning guides, for example, include tips for gifted students as well as slower learners. And struggling students often must spend time in additional classes.  
Aquino meets monthly with the principals of gifted programs about how to adapt the curriculum to their schools. He cited a school where DPS granted the staff's request to change the sequence of units in one subject.  
"Nationally school districts have tried to prep for the tests," Bennet said. "We're trying to take a different approach. We're figuring out what the important standards are at each grade level based on the state standards. What does a third-grader need to know? We start there and then align our curriculum with it."  
"Eventually we believe this will relieve the pressure that people feel historically about performance on the tests."

Nancy Mitchell



# LEAVING TO LEARN

Howell has drawn **45 students** back into DPS, including **five from private schools**.



▲ **Students at Farrell B. Howell K-8 School** line up for lunch as Principal Kevin Fletcher plays the grand piano for them during his weekly duty supervising the cafeteria. Listening are Falisha Chapmon, 10, left, Kristiena Rand, 11, Esmeralda Barron, 10, Almerita Williams, 9, and Justin McCalman, 9.

► **Fletcher jokes** with seventh-grader Kuliana Fifita, 12, during her language arts class. Fletcher says he wants students to have a wide range of experiences. Howell is DPS' first "choice only" school, which means no students or neighborhoods are automatically assigned to the school. Anyone can apply to attend.



## Farrell B. Howell K-8 School

- **Location:** 14250 E. Albrook Drive in the Montbello neighborhood, which is 45 percent black, 37 percent Hispanic, 13 percent Anglo and 5 percent other.
- **Enrollment:** 510 students, with capacity for 1,005 when it grows to prekindergarten through grade 8.
- **Demographics:** Students are 60 percent Hispanic, 33 percent black, 6 percent Anglo and 1 percent Asian
- **Low-income:** 84 percent receive free or reduced-price lunches.
- **State rating:** Not yet rated, just opened this fall.

## ISSUE: ALL-CHOICE SCHOOL

Saida Aguirre called Denver Public Schools as soon as she saw the banner draping the new building across the street in her far northeast Denver neighborhood of Montbello.

"I actually went to the school where (the new principal) was staying while his school was being constructed," said the single mother of four girls. "I was the second parent to enroll."

If Kevin Fletcher, the principal of Farrell B. Howell K-8 School, had any doubts that the new school would fill quickly, parents such as Aguirre quickly eased them.

Howell, which opened last fall, is DPS' first all-choice school, other than independently run charters. That means no students or neighborhoods are assigned to the public school. Instead, any interested family can apply.

It was up to Fletcher, using whatever recruiting tools he could muster, to make parents aware of that.

"I came in with zero students," said Fletcher, a first-time principal and former music teacher.

That was February 2006. Fletcher quickly began hiring staff and brainstorming ideas. From DPS, he obtained a list of all students living in a wide area around the school. He mailed 5,000 letters to those homes, describing the new school and enclosing applications.

He visited churches and left fliers. He and staff members went door to door, handing out brochures. He had banners hung across the new building.

By late March, the applications were flooding in, 30 to 40 a day. A few weeks later, with more than 600 applicants for a school projected at 400 for its first year, Fletcher won permission from DPS to cap class sizes. The school has 510 students this year.

"It was overwhelming," he said, crediting the new building as a big draw. "I think every time you see something new, you want to check it out."

Howell's location in Montbello, one of the city's fastest-growing neighborhoods, certainly helped with enrollment. And families in far northeast Denver are more likely to exercise school choice, according to an analysis of data by the *Rocky Mountain News* and the Piton Foundation.

The analysis found that families in Montbello and the adjacent Green Valley Ranch are more likely than families in other areas to enroll in charter schools — run by independent groups under contract with DPS and funded by taxpayers.

Howell lies within a half-mile of four other DPS neighborhood elementary



**Principal Kevin Fletcher hugs** student Isaiah Winn during a breakfast with parents in the meeting room of the Farrell B. Howell K-8 School.

schools — Greenwood, Maxwell, McGlone and Oakland — and draws students from all of them. Because it also is a middle school, it draws students from Martin Luther King Jr. Early College.

But Howell also has recruited students back into DPS traditional schools, including 36 from charters, five from private schools, three from suburban districts and one from home-schooling. Under the district's enrollment incentive program, which rewards schools for attracting new kids, Howell received an extra \$53,055.

Fletcher will funnel the money back into recruitment. DPS is projecting enrollment of 700 for the school this fall — meaning another 200 seats to fill.

"We just put the banner back up on the building," he said in February. "We're sending letters home to all students asking whether they plan to come back. We're looking again at fliers and direct mailing."

He's relying heavily on two recruitment tools this time — the school is intensifying its focus on the arts, and the parent buzz about Howell is strong.

"One of our big tools has been word of mouth," he said. "That is our absolute best recruitment tool. I am never afraid to beg. I beg parents. I ask them, 'If

you're happy here and you want to come back, tell your friends about the fun things we have going on here.'"

Aguirre has done more than talk about her kids' experiences at Howell. At Children's Hospital, where she assists Spanish-speaking patients, she passed out applications to co-workers.

She bought a home in Montbello, she said, because it was affordable. But she didn't like the neighborhood schools.

One daughter, who primarily speaks English, was placed in a class of native Spanish-speakers. Another daughter attended a school where the playground was open to the street — so Aguirre felt compelled to hire a babysitter to keep watch during recess.

But at Howell, she said, she believes her children are safe and well-educated. Each teacher sends home a daily e-mail, and the office staff knows her as Saida — and not just as the mother of Cassandra, Abigail, Estrella and Cecilia.

"At Howell, I feel like I'm in family," Aguirre said. "The teachers communicate their concerns about my daughters. It's not about Mom, you need to help her, it's more like a team thing. It's always a 'we.' It's never a 'you' or a 'she.'"

Nancy Mitchell