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

“...we like it or not,“ 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 result? About 20,300 school-age children who don’t attend Denver Public Schools in 2005-2006, a study by the Rocky Mountain News and the Piton Foundation found.

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.

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.)
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 opportunities and strengthening low-income neighborhoods in Denver.

The Rocky Mountain News 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. 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
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 are in charter and 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 southeast 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 pre-schoolers 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

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**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.

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**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.

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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

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**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

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**Hear more parent views at RockyMountainNews.com**
Denver Public Schools lost 4,858 students in first through 12th grades in its traditional district. Growth in preschool, kindergarten, and early childhood schools has been gradual. The numbers: DPS estimates 1,500 students moved out of the district in 2005-06. The district offers 17 magnet programs and 145 alternative programs, and, a year later, for middle- and high-school students. Enrollment in Denver charters. Including 6,846 students in 20
LEAVING TO LEARN

About **27,000 students** travel to DPS schools **outside their neighborhoods**.

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**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.”

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**Slide show**

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

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**Angela Evans** spent hours driving her kids to school and herself to her Denver Tech Center job.

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**Leonist Evans** unloads sports equipment, his children and the Febres kids, who carpool with his family, at the Montbello Recreation Center.

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**Aaron Evans** attends Ebert’s Night of the Notables as former Mayor Wellington Webb. He talks with Allison Fisher, 8 — Cleo Parker Robinson.

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**Nancy Mitchell**
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.

Story by Nancy Mitchell
Photos by Judy DeHaas

ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS
LEAVING TO LEARN
DPS’ ENROLLMENT GAP: PART 2 OF 7

Flip to page 35

An 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.

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 $15,000 per child. “But simply, our children do not have time to wait.”

More than 12 percent of Denver children ages 3 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/Piton Foundation analysis of census data shows that, in some of Denver’s wealthiest neighborhoods, more than one in three children attend private schools. That includes the central-city neighborhoods of Cherry Creek and Country Club and extends to Southmoor Park at Denver’s southeastern tip.

“We see kids almost everywhere on our street send 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...
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 to 90 or 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 $15,670 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 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 son’s 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

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

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

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.

The Piton Foundation and Rocky Mountain News analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data.

Source: Piton Foundation and Rocky Mountain News analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data.

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

C O N T A C T

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■ Photographer Judy DeHaas: dehaasj@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-954-2916

The Piton Foundation has found.

Source: Piton Foundation and Rocky Mountain News analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data.

Continued from page 33

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.

Denver students attending private schools

• 5 STUDENTS

Continued on next page
LEAVING TO LEARN

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

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

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.

Private to public, and back
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Source: Denver Public Schools

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 district’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, 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 someone’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 is 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 now-closed Gove Middle School.

“Diversity is the key. We want to show 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 numbers 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.”

“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.”

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 putting 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.

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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, whereas 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.

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.

Denver 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. Southwest Denver is closer to Jefferson County schools, the district's main competitor. The district needs to do better with its schools to compete.

Denver Public Schools' Grant Ranch neighborhood near West Bowles Avenue and South Wadsworth Boulevard is home to Grace Harris, 6, and her 8-year-old brother Will, both second-graders. Their parents, Melodie Polidori Harris and Tom Harris, said district leaders have not been proactive enough in the neighborhood.

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LEAVING TO LEARN

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

Suburbs take more students than they give to Denver

Chad Swenson

In the past year, Denver Public Schools lost about 6,000 suburban kids to its city schools. Southwest areas account for nearly half of the Denver students in suburban districts.

A total of 2,000 kids in Denver area suburbs transferred to city schools. Nearby Jefferson County and Cherry Creek districts also lost a number of students.

Top suburban districts that lost kids to Denver Public Schools:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Students Lost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jefferson</td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherry Creek</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Douglas</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jefferson</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Douglas</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

West side Denver kids suffered the most suburban losses. Choices in Denver Public Schools

Addie Cavallaro, 7, a first-grader at Grant Ranch K-8, loses her way 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 higher CSAP test scores, because she believes in Denver Public Schools. The free breakfast is just a perk of having her kids in DPS.

Choices in Denver Public Schools

The types of public schools available to Denver families have increased in the past 25 years. Here’s a look:

1. Traditional neighborhood schools: These serve students within a geographic boundary. Every Denver home is zoned to a neighborhood school. Special applications are not required. The district receives no state or local tax-levy per-pupil funding for each student enrolled. DPS provides transportation beyond certain distance from school.

2. Magnet programs: They offer special programs and are typically designed to encourage racial integration. Applicants 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: Emily Griffith Opportunity High School.

3. 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. charter schools are established by their own curricula, budget and hiring practices but must follow state and federal laws, The district pays an average of 95 percent of per-pupil funding to charters for each student enrolled. Examples: Denver’s Speech & Hearing Center.

4. Alternative schools: They serve students with special needs or those who are struggling or have dropped out of other schools. The district receives 100 percent of per-pupil funding for each student. Examples: Emily Griffith Opportunity High School.

Denver Public Schools lost about 6,000 suburban kids in its city schools. Southwest areas account for nearly half of the Denver students in suburban district. Each student represents five students who go to more than one of Denver’s 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 schools, and charter schools.

Denver children who attend suburban schools

- **Students:**
  - AURORA
  - AURORA
  - AURORA
  - ENGLEWOOD
  - SHERIDAN

Suburban Districts vs. Denver – 2005-2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>DPS Students</th>
<th>Denver Students</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jefferson</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>1,600</td>
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<tr>
<td>Littleton</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1,400</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lakewood</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>1,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Highlands</td>
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<td>800</td>
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<tr>
<td>Englewood</td>
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DPS receives $6,794 of state and local funding this year for each student.

Kaiser Elementary School
- Location: 4101 S. Quinta St., near Fort Logan neighborhood
- Enrollment: 371, kindergarten through sixth grade, with capacity for 580, including early education
- Demographics: 57 percent Hispanic

Kaiser Elementary School
- 12 percent white, 10 percent Asian, 1 percent black, 1 percent American Indian
- 64 percent eligible for free or reduced-price lunch
- State rating: Average

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

ISSUE: MARKETING
Kaiser Elementary School 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.

Then principal Richard Sinclair took charge. His student enrollment had declined over five years, languishing in 2005 at 277 students in a building that can accommodate 580. About half the school’s kids were in the surrounding Fort Logan neighborhood attended nearby suburban schools.

Second-year Principal Richard Sinclair went to work.

“Where came down the pipe that we were going to be closing schools,” Sinclair said. “Then we go...” Sinclair recalled.

He started outside open houses for parents and enlisted the local home owners association to cover the neighborhood with fliers.

Non-Michelle, the volunteer parent involvement coordinator, persuaded students’ parents to spread the word 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, emphasizing essential skills in reading, writing, and math, he said. After three weeks, students who have not mastered the skills get a reteaching course and after school tutoring, Sinclair said.

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

When the poster was half-empty schools.

SIXTH-GRADE ANGEL RODRIGUEZ, left, Lauren Trujillo and Janessa Stilslaker 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.

Suburban flight

About 1,500 children who live in Denver attended suburban schools last year, with nearly half in the southwest part of the city. Those are the percentages of the children in each of 17 areas of Denver who attended suburban schools. The map divides the city based on ZIP codes and neighborhood blueprints.

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

Charter students account for 9 percent of Denver Public Schools’ 73,000 students, a figure expected to keep growing. ■ About 12 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.

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.

Charters’ enrollment exploding

Story by Nancy Mitchell
Photos by Judy DeHaas
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Add income to the mix and the numbers go up, with 13 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-
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 popular Edison curriculum, a national model for black students.

Continued from page 39

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Black parents are the most likely to choose charter schools, according to the National Education Association’s 2005 report. But the data on Denver-area schools shows that charters are especially popular among northeast Denver’s black families. By law, DPS gives charters, on average, about 95 percent of their students per equal funding.

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

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.

**Top DPS charters by enrollment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHARTER SCHOOL</th>
<th>GRADES</th>
<th>2005-06 ENROLLMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. OMAR D. BLAIR EDISON CHARTER</td>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>1,225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. HIGHLINE ACADEMY</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>763</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. SOUTH AFRICAN HIGH SCHOOL</td>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>491</td>
</tr>
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**LEAVING TO LEARN**

Grades:

Enrollment:

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Jennifer Draper Carson is on a mission — find the best possible public elementary school near her northwest Denver home for her 21/2-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 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 longtime Hispanic residents of the area who often are frustrated by the drastic changes in their children’s schools and what they see as 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...
Jenifer Draper Carson introduces her 2-year-old son, Henry, to Ann Carson and her husband, Wade, moved 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 Mommes, a group of about 100 mothers, most with kindergarten 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 visited one of the neighborhood schools. She liked what she saw, and her older daughter, Ana Marie, is now taking a dual language immersion program. She sits up front for other parents and organizes forums for schools to make pitches to parents.

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 Ashley Velasquez. Arianna’s mother, Joelle Pachec, is a Girl Scout troop leader for the girls from Brown Elementary and is glad the girls have their pitch to parents. She said Henry initially will go to the early education program at Valley, an option that she visited. She said 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 bunch of other white kids." So did Kristi Conroy. She wanted her son, Ethan, to go to the neighborhood school. She loves the school, and its IB program, with its gifted program and Spanish immersion program. She sits up front 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 Valde, an option that she visited. She said 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 bunch of other white kids." So did Kristi Conroy. She wanted her son, Ethan, to go to the neighborhood school. She loves the school, and its IB program, with its gifted program and Spanish immersion program. She sits up front for other parents and organizes forums for schools to make their pitches to parents.

Both have seen tremendous increase between the two groups, especially over transforming Brown into an International Baccalaureate school and enrolling all of the teachers to start over. Pacheco said that it is the latest example of Anglo parents’ desire for a new staff and integrated Hispanic families’ concern that good teachers would lose their jobs. "They didn’t even acknowledge us," she said.

Carson believes reason is essential. "We are not just going to make it cover here in my neck of the woods if one half of the population is striving for something without the other half." Highland Mommes Carson and her husband, Wade, moved 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 Mommes, a group of about 100 mothers, most with kindergarten 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 visited one of the neighborhood schools. She liked what she saw, and her older daughter, Ana Marie, is now taking a dual language immersion program. She sits up front 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 Valley, an option that she visited. She said 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 bunch of other white kids." So did Kristi Conroy. She wanted her son, Ethan, to go to the neighborhood school. She loves the school, and its IB program, with its gifted program and Spanish immersion program. She sits up front for other parents and organizes forums for schools to make their pitches to parents.

Continued from previous page:

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 district site is swapped for the five northwest neighborhoods they value. "I want my kids to be integrated," she said. "I don’t want him to be hanging out with bunch of other white kids." So did Kristi Conroy. She wanted her son, Ethan, to go to the neighborhood school. She loves the school, and its IB program, with its gifted program and Spanish immersion program. She sits up front for other parents and organizes forums for schools to make their pitches to parents.

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 Ashley Velasquez. Arianna’s mother, Joelle Pacheco, is a Girl Scout troop leader for the girls from Brown Elementary and is glad the girls have their pitch to parents. She said Henry initially will go to the early education program at Valley, an option that she visited. She said 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 bunch of other white kids." So did Kristi Conroy. She wanted her son, Ethan, to go to the neighborhood school. She loves the school, and its IB program, with its gifted program and Spanish immersion program. She sits up front for other parents and organizes forums for schools to make their pitches to parents.

There were amazing. However, by second grade it was clear Ethan had no friends at the predominantly Hispanic school. His classmates shared his interest in Star Wars and robotics, she said. And most of her neighbors were sending their children to other DPS schools or out of the district. That 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 Columbine’s school board. When Columbine was scheduled to make a pitch to northwest Denver parents, it was Brian Pacheco who came up with the finish: He wanted his son, Ethan, to go to the neighborhood school. She loves the school, and its IB program, with its gifted program and Spanish immersion program. She sits up front for other parents and organizes forums for schools to make their pitches to parents.

Continued from next page:

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

Online

See others’ comments and share your thoughts.

Hear more parent views at RockyMountainNews.com

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

Ethnic shift in northwest Denver

The Anglo birth rate increased from 2000 to 2005 in many northwest Denver neighborhoods as the Hispanic birth rate declined. The area includes Highland, West Highland, Berkeley, Regis and Sunnyside.

Ethnic shift in northwest Denver

Northwest Denver birth statistics

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Choice affects enrollment

Since the 100%, people have been allowed to send their children to any neighborhood school in DPS as long as it has space. Seven DPS middle schools have lost 26 percent to 57 percent of area students.

Empty classrooms

Districtwide, Denver Public Schools filled only 56 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 school losses and gains from choice

Middle school losses and gains from choice

Elementary school enrollment as a percent of capacity

Middle school enrollment as a percent of capacity

Choice affects enrollment

Since the 100%, people 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 gains or losses as a result of choice as a percentage of each school’s enrollment for the 2005-2006 school year.

ELEMENARY SCHOOLS

Percent loss or gain in students because of choice

MORE THAN 60% LOSS

5 TO 20% LOSS

1 TO 5% LOSS

MORE THAN 20% LOSS

MORE THAN 5% LOSS

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ELEMTARY SCHOOL

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Elementary school as a percent of capacity

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Since the 100%, people 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 gains or losses as a result of choice as a percentage of each school’s enrollment for the 2005-2006 school year.

ELEMENARY SCHOOLS

Percent loss or gain in students because of choice

MORE THAN 60% LOSS

5 TO 20% LOSS

1 TO 5% LOSS

MORE THAN 20% LOSS

MORE THAN 5% LOSS

MORE THAN 5% LOSS

ELEMTARY SCHOOL

Student enrollment as a percent of capacity

Elementary school as a percent of capacity

MIDDLE SCHOOLS

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MIDDLE SCHOOL

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Elementary school as a percent of capacity

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MIDDLE SCHOOL

Student enrollment as a percent of capacity

Elementary school as a percent of capacity

Five DPS elementary schools have lost 30 percent to 43 percent of their students.
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 around 83 percent for families who send their children to DPS preschools vs. more than 65 percent for families who send their children to non-DPS preschools. Nearly 75 percent of DPS preschoolers in 2002 were still with the district four years later, compared with 45 percent of those who went to a non-DPS program. So expanding preschool programs might seem to be a way to attract — and keep — more families in DPS.

Cheryl Caldwell, who heads early childhood education programs, said, “That would be Montbello, Green Valley and part of central southeast Denver. Those are waiting lists.” But because Colorado law doesn’t require children to enter school until age 7 or first grade — the state does not fund preschool even kindergarten — every child.

DPS receives much less taxpayer funding for those programs than for those for first through third grade. Principals who want to expand preschool classes would have to take money from other grades to do it.

Kevin Fletcher, principal of Parrell B. Howard K-8 School in Montbello, has two empty classrooms where he could put preschoolers if more kindergarten-age students from a waiting list.

“They 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 kindergarten teacher from his budget, he said, but “she really is, when I’m staffing on 30 to 35 students in each of my classrooms, almost that hard to do.”

Caldwell said individual schools in DPS have added to add preschool as a marketing tool, and she tries to locate grants and other sources for that. In the district, preschool teachers are key, Lovato and Humes said. “That’s who parents trust,” Humes said.

And if the programs are strong, both women said, parents will stay.

Anna Jo Haynes, executive director of the Mile High Montessori Foundation, said, “The ideal would be opening 30 percent of seats in Westerly Creek and Stapleton, the thriving development in Denver. That’s who parents trust,” Haynes said. “That’s what we were looking for.”

Instead, “The schools just aren’t relatively upper-middleclass,” he said. “It doesn’t necessarily put into play what we were hoping for with our son’s school.”

So Silvestro supports opening some seats in Stapleton to families outside the housing development. Brian Weber, Stapleton Foundation vice president for student education and communications, said, “This is a completely new way of doing business for us.”

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 high school.

Students living in the geographic area could choose any school within its boundaries. To entice students from outside the housing development in Stapleton, district officials would accept some students in Stapleton schools. 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 devil move in to have a neighborhood school. Neighborhood schools always have to have room for neighborhood kids.”

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.

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-age 6.

It also houses a population that is mostly white and middle-class, a model of a school district and a community that is neither.

That’s created a thorny issue for some Stapleton parents and Denver school board members who are trying to keep schools in Denver Public Schools:

Should DPS limit a school to residents only — creating what some say is essentially a separate, neighborhood school? Or should the district encourage student flow from the outlying community, which is largely minority, into Stapleton schools — and how kids from Stapleton back into the half-empty schools ringing the development?

“What was said at Stapleton was a neighborhood school — but a neighborhood school within a neighborhood that was never designed,” said Asian Jo Haynes, whose son, Cooper, is 2. “That’s what we were looking for.”

“I think a completely new way of doing business for us,” said Jupp, a senior policy advisor, 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 in DPS schools. Some parents said it’s difficult to support opening schools to outlying communities. They want diversity — but they also want seats in their neighborhood schools.

DPS leaders say they’re still figuring out what to do about Stapleton.

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DPS leaders say they’re still figuring out what to do about Stapleton.
LEAVING TO LEARN DPS' ENROLLMENT GAP: PART 6 OF 7

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 Brittanys, 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.
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 next page

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Continued on next page

Continued on page 13
Chris Gibbons, director of West Denver Prep charter school, holds a degree in education. "I don’t want students to be10 years in the same room," he says.

Briseyda Salgado and her son, Luis Lacio-Salgado, left, talk with West Denver Prep Director Chris Gibbons, as younger son, Jorge, 6, looks on. 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.

### LEAVING TO LEARN

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

### West Denver Prep

Sixth-grader Sorena Garcia, 12, tells Alissa Brown, 21, far right, to be quiet during the weekly community meeting in the library.

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

### High School growth

The number of DPS students who don’t go to their neighborhoods are escaping and going to charter schools, even among Hispanics, who are least likely to enroll in the closed schools.

### Black Hispanic Anglo

2002 47% 24% 26%
2003 47% 28% 46%
2004 55% 29% 18%
2005 50% 33% 15%

**Source:** Denver Public Schools

### Parents’ voices

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

Jo Ann Flavell, father of three students at the SPS Lincoln School

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**ONLINE**

See more photos.

Interactive map: Compaanies.sor

Chat at 11 a.m. Today: Talk Live with Chris Gibbons, director of West Denver Prep charter and Jim Griffin, executive director of the Colorado League of Charter Schools.

### RockyTalk

See more parent views at RockyTalk.RockyMountainNews.com

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LEAVING TO LEARN

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

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. “He was going to middle school next year, which I think is too advanced for Denver kids.”

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.

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.

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

ISSUE: NEW CHOICES FOR HISPANICS

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.

Duran and Richard had both gone to the same bilingual charter school in 1999 and 2000 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.”

Barth Hartman

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: 150, with eventual capacity for 300.

Demographics: 92 percent Hispanic, 5 percent white, 2 percent American Indian, 1 percent Asian, 1 percent black.

Low income: 86 percent eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

State rating: Not rated yet.

Delores 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 school and another on Dolores Duran’s search for a school for her son at RockyMountainNews.com.
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 say, but...”

Continued on next page

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
Professor, for no. is no, & her husband, Jim Scott, a registered nurse, say “probably 95 percent” but that there isn’t a word that lives.

“We may be moving,” Abbot said. “But it’s important that it be.”

Every classroom

More than 5,000 of the 8,000 seats in DPS classrooms today are empty, dis- trict data show. In 2005, the district said it would reduce student capacities by 22 students, 10,000 kids, thousands of chairs would still be occupied.

“We’re spending lots of money on empty

spaces in this district,” Bennett 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 or lowering class size, for example?”

The bottom line, of course, is money. A lot of it.

Every student in grades 1 through 12 in DPS brought in about $8,000 local in state and federal funding this year. Denver kids who are not choosing DPS cost the dis-

trict at least $335 million in lost revenue. And running partially empty build-

ings costs about $10 million, plus costs in utilities, maintenance and the dilapidated appearance.

Those dollars could be better spent on what Bennett calls in his No. 1 priority improving the quality of teaching.

That means smaller class sizes, more training for teachers, up-to-date text-

books, more students to student ratios of principals — all the stuff outlined in the Denver Plan.

“I understand why it’s not being talked about on the playground,” Ben-

nett told Labode. “But I believe that plan, formally implemented, is going to create marvelous schools all over Denver.”

Sense of urgency

Some parents, such as Kim Allen, Bennett says, are looking.

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 Information and Studies on Charter Schools, which Bennett said he would be interested in joining.

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“Lately, kids of the 21st century.”

Bennett to honor the students are Mayor John Hickenlooper, right, Denver School Board president Theresa Petka and vice president Bruce Hoyt.

Don Reverts, executive director of Kids Without Tutoring, talks with Bennett during a fundraiser in March for the nonprofit program, which pain volunteers with students who need extra help. Bennett was the keynote speaker for the event, held at the Hyatt Regency Denver Tech Center.

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More than half of high school kids in DPS don’t go to their neighborhood schools

Continued from page 13

Rocky Mountain News 4/24/07

Continued from page 13

The Rocky Piton study confirmed what many suspected — wealthy families, who tend to be white, are the most likely to leave DPS. In one four-week window, students living in Denver were enrolled in private schools.

While students who stay in DPS tend to choose in certain schools. Two popular programs — Polaris at East, 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.

Feeder schools

Black students generally do not go to their neighborhood schools.

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

Rich, poor in DPS

“Which schools?” in whose neighbor- hood?

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

Rich, poor in DPS

“Which schools?” in whose neighbor- hood?

The Rocky Piton study confirmed what many suspected — wealthy families, who tend to be white, are the most likely to leave DPS. In one four-week window, students living in Denver were enrolled in private schools.

While students who stay in DPS tend to choose in certain schools. Two popular programs — Polaris at East, 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.

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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 lunch. Fletcher jokes that he also wanted students to have a wide range of experiences.

Kristiena Rand, 11, Esmeralda Barron, 10, Almerita Williams, 9, and Justin McCalman, 9, were among the students serving as Principal Kevin Fletcher plays the grand piano for them during his weekly duty supervising the lunch as Principal Kevin Fletcher plays the grand piano for them during his weekly duty supervising the lunch as Principal Kevin Fletcher plays the grand piano for them during his weekly duty supervising the lunch as Principal Kevin Fletcher plays the grand piano for them during his weekly duty supervising the lunch as Principal Kevin Fletcher plays the grand piano for them during his weekly duty supervising the lunch. Fletcher has drawn 45 students back into DPS, including five from private schools.

“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.”

Kevin Fletcher, the principal of Farrell B. Howell K-8 School, had no doubts that the new school would fill quickly, parents such as Aguirre quickly signed them. Howe, which opened last fall, in DPS first all-choice school, other than independently run charters. That means no student or neighborhood is 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 math 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 1,000 letters to those homes, describing the new school and recruiting applications.

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

By late March, the applications were flooding in, 10 to 12 a day. A few weeks later, the first round of applicants came back. At a school projected at 400 for its first year, Fletcher was permitted from DPS to cap class sizes. The school has 350 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 oldest and fastest-growing neighborhoods, certainly helped with enrollment. Families in the northwest Denver area are more likely to exercise school choice, according to an analysis of data from the Rocky Mountain News and the shelf 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 or magnet 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 schools — Greenwood, Maxwell, Sloansville 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 $24,105.

Fletcher plans to funnel the money back into recruitment. DPS is projecting an enrollment of 750 for the school this fall — meaning another 200 seats to fill.

“We just put the banner back up to 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 in-the-streets and draws parent buzz about Howell is strong.

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Saida Aguirre, 37, of Montbello, has one girl who primarily speaks Spanish. Aguirre is the mother of Kassandra, Abigail, Estrella and Cecilia.

“I felt engaged to teach parents,” he 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-speaking students — Greenwood, Maxwell, Sloansville 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.

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Aguirre has done more than talk about her kids’ experiences at Howell. At Children’s Hospital, where she was a student Spanish-speaking patients, she passed out applications to enroll. She bought a home in Montbello, she said, because it was affordable. But she didn’t like the neighborhood schools.

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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 Kassandra, Abigail, Estrella and Cecilia.

“A little bit of me is in family,” Aguirre said. “The teachers communi- cate their concerns about my daugh- ters. It’s not about Mom, you need to help her, it’s more like a team thing. It always was: ‘It’s never a you or a us.’”

Nancy Mitchell