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"Give light and the people will find their own way"

EDITORIALS

DPS weighs a Marshall plan

THE ISSUE:
DPS begins considering charter school proposals

OUR VIEW:
First one at the gate looks promising

Last week the Denver school board succeeded in muscling out tiny, nonsectarian St. John's Academy (maximum enrollment: 160) from its high bid to buy old Stevens Elementary School because it augured "competition" for DPS. Instead, by ignoring neighborhood and Landmark

Preservation Commission pleas to preserve Stevens as a school building, DPS has almost parodied a spirit of craven self-interest by announcing plans to take Stevens condo.

As folks who appear to know excellence when they're threatened by it, perhaps school board members will find supporting charter schools, which would remain within the district, a trifle less fearsome.

So far, 10 such applications, born of the state's new charter schools law, are in the hands of DPS. One application has already been the subject of press reports, and this week details of all the others will be released, says a district official. After review and public hearings, the school board will make its selections in February.

We intend to review the plans, and begin this process today with a look at the Thurgood Marshall Charter Middle School, which has been proposed by two DPS employees: Hill Middle School science teacher Cordia Booth and social studies teacher Noblet Danks, who earned a good share of public limelight last year with her pointed claims that the DPS budget was larded with administrative costs at the expense of students and classroom.

Their Marshall Middle School would avoid such bureaucratic lassitude by keeping staff lean. Marshall would have no principal but would be run by Danks and Booth as

trustees; parents would be expected to help operate the school, along with a 15-member faculty and a secretarial support staff of two.

Marshall would draw its 200 students by lottery, while being careful to match the district's ethnic and racial proportions, and serve "all students including regular-education, gifted and talented, at-risk, disabled and limited-English proficient students." All students would have to become literate in three "languages": English, Spanish and Computer, and complete a stint of community service.

Students would follow the DPS curriculum. If, say, the topic of sixth-grade social studies is Latin America in the Denver schools, so it would be at Marshall. But students would also have to demonstrate daily that they worked hard. Danks says they will insist that any failure in self-discipline or in academic work be met by "immediate same-day remedies" — more familiarly known as staying after school.

Thanks to its flexible staff, teachers will work on a staggered schedule so that they can stay late to deal with each student who needs it. Students would be assessed using traditional grades, as well as written assessments and formal conferences for eighth-graders.

Danks tells us she is adamant that each student receive the support needed to succeed personally and academically. Idealistic? With a responsive and motivated teaching corps, small classes and a commitment to each child's progress, there's no reason why such idealism cannot become a matter of practical routine at Marshall.

We look forward to hearing more details as the public process continues, but from this initial look, Danks and Booth, both of whom have publicly fought for high educational standards, appear to have backed their preaching with a solid proposal.