



Delta County School District Has VISION for School Choice



*by Marya DeGrow, Education Policy Center
Foreword by Jared Polis, Colorado State Board of Education*

IP-5-2005 • May 2005

Foreword

Delta County School District: A Secret No Longer

When discussing the most innovative education reforms in Colorado, I frequently mention Delta County School District. Until now, no one in Colorado has provided for broad-based public consumption a description of the exciting path that Delta County School District has embarked upon with its VISION program. This small district is one of the "best kept secrets" of education reform in Colorado.

One of the most important things that we as a society can do to meet the important challenges of educating our next generation is to encourage the vast creativity of our citizenry to form solutions. Empowering individuals to reform education is paramount.

Reaching out to innovative non-governmental organizations and inviting them to participate in the public education system can help provide the new ideas we need to successfully educate all children. Through its VISION program, Delta County School District found a way not only to partner with private schools but also to provide meaningful assistance to homeschool families, employing a wide variety of learning models and offering more differentiated options within the public education system.

When I first brought Delta County School District to the attention of Pam Benigno, Director of the Education Policy Center at the Independence Institute, I was hopeful that the organization could play a role in the dissemination of this "best practice." After having read the publication, I am even more thrilled that this policy paper not only accurately presents the history and current status of the choice program in Delta County School District but also includes some thoughtful ideas for Delta and other districts to consider for making the program even more robust.

My hope is that people across Colorado and the nation read this Issue Paper and that more districts open up their system to these forms of public-private partnerships that foster the creation of innovative programs to meet the needs of all students.

Jared Polis
Vice-Chairman
Colorado State Board of Education

Executive Summary

An innovative school district on Colorado's Western Slope created a system of unique educational choices to satisfy the demands of families in its community. In fall 2000, Delta County 50 (J) School District unveiled the VISION Coalition. Built on the pillars of trust and autonomy, the program now serves nearly 15 percent of the district public school student population.

A large and growing number of Delta students had been pursuing home-based and private school options outside the public education system. While discussions about VISION were taking place in 1999, some parents were also proposing a Montessori charter school. The challenging circumstances facing then-Superintendent Laddie Livingston convinced him "that the future of public education hinged upon having real and meaningful choice within public schools."

Today the Coalition includes the "VISION Home and Community Program" (HCP) and three brick-and-mortar "independent campuses." All students in the VISION Coalition are required to participate in the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP).

In order to implement VISION, the district obtained 14 waivers from the Colorado State Board of Education. The waivers give each VISION school and program autonomy from local school board policies and authority to determine the educational program, to hire teachers who may or may not be licensed, to dismiss ineffective teachers, and to determine salaries.

VISION HCP allows each enrolled student and her parents to work together with a district employee to create an education program called a "Learning Plan." Students study at home and with approved community members—"Educators"—who tutor or teach classes in particular subject areas. At least 180 of the student's

required 720 hours of learning per year must occur outside the home with an Educator. The school district allocates as much as \$2,150 to each full-time student for educational expenses related to the Learning Plan, such as curriculum, science class, violin lessons, or math tutoring. Students enrolled in traditional public schools or VISION brick-and-mortars may also take advantage of classes and tutoring provided by VISION HCP.

The three VISION brick-and-mortar schools are not charter schools but can be described as public "contract schools" that have an agreement whereby the school district purchases educational services from the governing board, which then runs the school. The schools offer diverse programs: a middle school using Core Knowledge curriculum, a former private school with an experiential learning and arts emphasis, and a Montessori school. The Core Knowledge school and the former private school each receive 82.5 percent of the district's Per Pupil Operating Revenue; the Montessori school receives 95 percent.

Delta County School District leaders deserve credit for their flexibility and willingness to change with the demands of families in their community, particularly because the district voluntarily divested itself of some power by requesting waivers from state law for the VISION schools and programs to operate autonomously.

VISION HCP levels the financial playing field for parents and gives students a greater opportunity for enhanced education. Without school district funds, some parents of VISION HCP and traditional public school students would have lacked the resources to pay for high-quality materials, tutors, or special classes.

Delta County School District and the families that have enrolled in VISION HCP, many of

whom are former homeschoolers, benefit from the spirit of collaboration and respect that helped shape the program. While some school districts have a strained relationship with homeschooling families, Delta County School District chose to partner with them.

The district also seized the opportunity to partner with private schools. The experiential learning program was originally operated by a private school. The program now exists as a public school and the staff utilizes the former private school's nonprofit status exclusively for fundraising purposes. A private school in Colorado can serve public school students but remain a private independent contractor. A north Denver private school has proven this through its contract with Denver Public Schools. The private school serves public school students and operates as a public school but legally is an independent contractor.

Such differences in contracts exist because districts have leverage to shape contracts. Unlike when they are in negotiations with charter schools, districts can stop talks at any time with no appeals process for the contract schools. Delta County School District retains for itself more per pupil funding for two of the VISION schools than if they were charter schools. The arrangement benefits the district but financially burdens the schools. Additionally, the schools cannot access many public and private grants available to charter schools, making fundraising more difficult. The school district currently has a moratorium on any new schools joining VISION, which clashes with the innovative spirit that started the program.

All VISION Coalition CSAP results are compiled into a single State Accountability Report (SAR). Yet each brick-and-mortar school has a unique philosophy, and every student enrolled in VISION HCP is enrolled in a one-of-a-kind school. Combining all the scores into one SAR defeats the purpose of the SAR, which is to hold a school accountable for its program.

The following recommendations would advance the spirit that gave birth to the VISION Coalition:

- Delta County School District officials and the Colorado Department of Education should stop combining VISION Coalition CSAP scores into the same State Accountability Report and only create a SAR for each VISION brick-and-mortar school.
- Delta County School District should lift the moratorium on new VISION schools while establishing policies to approve only new schools that will provide a quality education.
- Colorado public school districts should not abandon chartering schools in favor of contracting with schools. Some schools are better suited to be contract schools while others should be charters. School districts should recognize the difference and seek to do what is best for the sustainability of the school.
- Colorado public school districts should explore contracting with private schools to provide more educational choice. However, the schools should remain independent contractors and not abandon their private school status.
- Colorado public school districts should consider implementing the Home and Community Program in their own districts.
- Nonprofit organizations and the federal government should seek to find and fund unique programs like VISION.

The multi-faceted VISION Coalition demonstrates how a school district can identify needs in the community and partner with its citizens who, for various reasons, decide not to enroll their children in traditional public schools. All school districts should follow Delta County School District's lead in moving beyond the status quo and developing innovative programs that satisfy the educational needs of students in their communities.

VISION Coalition Background

A conversation five years ago between two men led rural Colorado Delta County 50 (J) School District to heed the demands of families by building a structure of educational innovations on the pillars of trust and autonomy. The resulting system, called the VISION Coalition, has transformed the delivery of public education so as to allow local families more educational choices using public dollars.

Delta County School District is tucked away among the hills, orchards, farms, and coal mines of Colorado's Western Slope. Delta County is home to more than 29,000 people with about 8,000 residing in Delta, its largest city and county seat.¹ In 2004-2005, the district serves 5,194 public school students in Delta County. Fourteen traditional K-12 schools and one alternative school serve 4,444 students. The VISION Coalition, comprised of six unique public entities, provides schooling options to 750 students, almost 15 percent of the public school student population.²

The VISION Coalition was conceived in 1999 during a discussion between Dev Carey, an educator

...the VISION Coalition has transformed the delivery of public education to allow local families more educational choices using public dollars.

who worked with local youth, and then-Delta County School District Superintendent Laddie Livingston. A large and growing number of Delta students were pursuing home-based or private school options outside the public education system. At the same time, some parents had also proposed a Montessori charter school.³ According to the *VISION Home and Community Program Policy Handbook*, the challenging circumstances facing Livingston convinced him "that the future of public education hinged upon having real and meaningful choice within public schools."⁴

Livingston's emphasis on meeting the needs of students within the public school system led the district to offer the same alternatives that had been drawing students away from the public

schools. The Delta County Board of Education gave its official and unanimous support to VISION on January 29, 2000, and the program began that fall.⁵

Though the initial composition of the VISION Coalition has changed, there are currently three brick-and-mortar "independent campuses" and three branches of the "VISION Home and Community Program" (HCP) that operate within the VISION Coalition. VISION HCP and each of the brick-and-mortar schools maintain a contract with the school district.⁶ These are not charter schools, but autonomous public school programs.

Any student who resides in the district may enroll in a VISION program, provided space is available. There are no enrollment restrictions for students who formerly attended private schools or who were homeschooled.

Trust is the foundation of VISION, according to former Superintendent Livingston.⁷ VISION's brick-and-mortar and HCP sites run highly autonomous programs that require trust and integrity among the participants. The school district maintains oversight of the entire VISION Coalition through meetings of the VISION Representative Board. The Board is comprised of representatives from each VISION entity and the district. Board meetings allow for open discussion between the school district and VISION members to discuss contract adherence, pupil count, funding, and other issues of mutual interest.⁸ By all accounts, the district has a positive relationship with each of the VISION entities.

All students in the VISION Coalition are required to participate in the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP). The "VISION School" State Accountability Report (SAR) contains the combined CSAP results of students enrolled in both the brick-and-mortar and home and commu-

Livingston's emphasis on meeting the needs of students within the public school system led the district to offer the same alternatives that were drawing students away from the public schools.

nity elements of the VISION Coalition.⁹ VISION School's SARs for the 2003-2004 school year are as follows: grades one through six, "Low"; grades seven through eight, "Average"; grades nine through 12, "Average." The ratings are somewhat

...the waivers give each VISION school and program the authority to determine its educational program, hire personnel who may or may not be licensed, dismiss ineffective teachers, and determine salaries.

below those received by other district schools: The six other elementary schools in Delta County are rated as "Average." Four middle schools are rated "Average," and one is rated "High." Two Delta County high schools are rated "Average," and the other two are rated "High."¹⁰ According to Anjula Jalan, director of North Fork VISION Home and Community Program, the school district is working with the VISION Coalition to increase student achievement.¹¹

VISION operates as a pilot program with permission from the Colorado State Board of Education. On May 11, 2000, the State Board unanimously approved 14 waivers from state law for the VISION Coalition, including exemptions from the following requirements:

- Licensed principals and administrators to conduct written performance evaluations of licensed personnel;
- The local board of education to establish policies regarding competitive bidding for goods and services, to employ and set compensation of education personnel, and to determine the educational program and textbooks to be used;
- The local board of education to employ licensed principals;
- Principals to perform particular administrative responsibilities;
- Administrators to abide by teacher licensure requirements and to adhere to grounds and procedures for dismissal;
- The local board of education to adopt district salary schedules and each teacher in the district to be compensated according to the schedules.¹²

Simply put, the waivers give each VISION school and program the authority to determine its educational program, hire personnel who may or may not be licensed, dismiss ineffective teachers, and determine salaries. Several unique aspects of VISION HCP particularly rely on the waivers. With the guidance of a district employee, families—not school boards—determine the contents of each student's educational program. In addition, VISION HCP has no need to employ principals.

The Colorado Department of Education is currently conducting an evaluation of VISION and plans to submit a report to the State Board prior to the expiration of the waivers in June 2007.¹³

VISION Home and Community Program

The VISION Home and Community Program (HCP) allows students to study at home and in the community with the aid and resources of the school district. Students who enroll in the program are public school students, though some students spend a majority of their learning hours at home and others may be educated almost exclusively in the community. Because the program bears some resemblance to homeschooling, building trust among the homeschool community was vital to the acceptance and growth of the program. In the beginning, families who were not part of the public school system were skeptical of the school district and of VISION. Some homeschool families were concerned that the program would threaten their freedom from government regulation. However, over the past five years the VISION concept has gained acceptance and broad support within the Delta County homeschool community.¹⁴ Since 1999, the year before the program began, homeschooling (independent of VISION HCP) in Delta County has steadily declined from 155 to 52 students in

The VISION Home and Community Program (HCP) allows students to study at home and in the community with the aid and resources of the school district.

2003.¹⁵ VISION HCP began operating out of one office in 2000; two more branch locations have since opened. Participation in VISION HCP has increased from 133 students in its first year to 629 students (12 percent of the district's public school population) in 2004-2005.¹⁶

All VISION HCP decisions are made by consensus, which provides the foundation for the fulfillment of the mission statement: "The VISION Home and Community Program promotes meaningful choice and diverse opportunity within public education by supporting the development of the optimal learning environment for each learner and the optimal teaching environment for each teacher." The best way to create that environment, VISION HCP founders determined, was

to seek the consent and support of the people involved, which requires relationships built on trust and integrity.¹⁷

VISION HCP operates branches out of physical buildings located in Delta, Paonia (also known as North Fork HCP), and Cedaredge (also known as Surface Creek HCP).¹⁸ Each branch controls its own budget and is independently operated by a "Director" and other on-site staff. However, the entire program is under the leadership and oversight of the Board of Stewards.

Board members focus on "the big picture" as they carry out their responsibilities, which include: identifying long-term goals and priorities, reviewing budgets, hiring and evaluating program Directors, mediating problems, and advocating for the program.¹⁹

VISION HCP students are known as "Learners" and are considered public school students who are required to participate in the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP).²⁰ Learners may be admitted to the program if they are residents within the school district, submit an application, and finalize an agreement with a "Resource Consultant" (RC). The RC is employed

by the district and is the liaison between the Learner, parents, and HCP staff.²¹

Integrity in relationships is vital to the success of the Learner and the program. That is why an "Advocate" works with each new VISION HCP student to match her with an RC with whom she is compatible and who is suited to help meet her needs. (Parents may not be RCs for their own children.)²²

The *VISION Home and Community Program Policy Handbook* suggests that the Director of each HCP branch office engage in RC duties to help the Director "keep children and families foremost and see firsthand the implications of policy decisions."²³ About 50 RCs maintain one-year contracts with VISION and the school district.²⁴

Also vital to VISION HCP are "Educators:" approved Delta County community members who teach, tutor, mentor, or monitor a student in one or more subject areas.²⁵

The RC helps the student develop a "Learning Plan" which details activities and subject matter the student will pursue, the Educators who will be engaged, and the costs involved. At least 180 of the student's required 720 hours of learning per year must occur with an Educator outside of the home.²⁶ The RC, as a representative of the school district, must approve each component of the Learning Plan.²⁷

Development of the Learning Plan is based on criteria intended to help students set goals for the year:

1. Current status, or where the Learner is educationally;
2. Goals, or where the Learner wants to go;
3. Strategies, or how the Learner is going to get there.²⁸

VISION HCP students are known as "Learners" and are considered public school students who are required to participate in the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP).

At least 180 of the student's required 720 hours of learning per year must occur with an Educator outside of the home.

The Learning Plan and curriculum are developed according to the goals, interests, and values of the Learner and her family. Because of a Delta County School Board Resolution passed for the operation of VISION HCP and waivers from state law, students are allowed the freedom to choose curriculum based on their individual needs.²⁹

For the 2004-2005 school year, each VISION HCP office receives approximately \$4,785 for each student enrolled full-time at its VISION HCP site (which is about 82.5 percent of the district's

\$5,800 Per Pupil Operating Revenue).³⁰ The HCP office keeps more than half of the funding to pay program expenses.

In 2004-2005, each full-time Learner in the program may use as much as \$2,150 for educational expenses (each part-time student receives as much as \$1,075). Families have more than one

option for how they request and receive funding. Parents can be reimbursed for expenses already incurred or, if the expense is for an Educator's services, families may opt to pay the Educator directly from the Learner's funds through a check from the school district office. Low-income families that do not have the funds to pay for educational materials out-of-pocket can request funds up front, receiving a check from the district to purchase the needed items. In all cases, families must supply proper receipts to their RC for educational expenses paid with VISION HCP funds.³¹

Families may use VISION HCP funds for a wide variety of purposes so long as the expenditure relates to the student's Learning Plan. The official policy states:

VISION HCP honors the freedom of Learners, parents and Resource Consultants to choose by consensus a Learning Plan that addresses a Learner's physical, emotional, mental, social and/or spiritual development. VISION HCP will fund and

count as learning hours those instructional materials and activities that are compatible with the Learning Plan and not explicitly prohibited by law.³²

For instance, families could use their funds to purchase a Saxon math textbook or pay fees for an art class but could not purchase a gun for a firearms safety training class or materials for religious training.

Unused funds remaining from the maximum allotment of \$2,150 (or \$1,075) are kept by the HCP branch office. The Learner may allocate her remaining funds to special areas of HCP such as the Library Fund or the Education Fund; if left undesignated, the monies are put into the HCP general fund.³³

Several documents support the Learning Plan. The "Learner Schedule" states the anticipated learning hours per subject each semester. The "Learner Update" summarizes the accomplishment of activities that were laid out in the Learner Schedule. The Learning Plan is reexamined at least every six months through a "Learning Plan Reflection." The Reflection is a means through which the student, parents, and RC examine the past semester to determine what went well and what needs to change.³⁴ The Learner is required to submit to the VISION HCP office the Learner Schedule, Learning Updates, and Learning Plan Reflections, along with Attendance Records and a Transcript.³⁵

An Educator must oversee each subject area in the Learning Plan. A parent may be her child's Educator for any subject.³⁶ In order to ensure student safety, Educators (including parents only if they are also Educators of other people's children) must pass a background check before participating in the program.³⁷ Each HCP branch has its own list of Educators; for instance, in Delta HCP, Educators teach, tutor, or guide students in the following subjects:³⁸

In 2004-2005, each full-time Learner in the program may use as much as \$2,150 for educational expenses...

An Educator must oversee each subject area in the Learning Plan.

- Arts and Crafts
- English
- Field Trips
- Foreign Languages
- History
- Home Economics
- Horsemanship
- Life Skills
- Math
- Music
- Physical Fitness
- Science

A student who wishes to pursue a course of study not offered by Educators need only find a quali-

A student who wishes to pursue a course of study not offered by Educators need only find a qualified person willing to teach her and to follow HCP procedures for becoming an Educator.

fied person willing to teach her and to follow HCP procedures for becoming an Educator. One student in Delta interested in becoming a pilot talked with his parents and his RC about incorporating flying lessons into his Learning Plan. They agreed, and he found a flight instructor who became one of his Educators.³⁹

Middle and high school VISION HCP Learners may also take classes at a traditional public school. Sports and extra-curricular activities are free, while aca-

ademic classes are available for \$200 per semester per course (to be paid from the student's HCP funds). Students who take five or more classes in a semester are counted as students of the traditional public school, not of the VISION School.⁴⁰

Each HCP location maintains a physical building housing student records, resource libraries, and classrooms that Educators can use to teach classes or give presentations, or that RCs can use to meet with families. Delta HCP has saved some of its unused funds to purchase land on which it will build a new facility suited to the specific needs of its program.⁴¹

Accountability is an important part of VISION HCP. Student progress is measured through the "Accountability and Evaluation Process." This process establishes goals and objectives, then defines the process to achieve them, and finally evaluates and documents how well the goals and objectives are achieved. The *VISION Home and Community Policy Handbook* states, "The entire process, i.e. viewing options, communicating, being in relationships, setting clear goals, evaluating progress, establishing alternatives, and reaching consensus agreement, is foundational to this program and at the core of VISION HCP accountability."⁴²

Accountability is an important part of VISION HCP. Student progress is measured through the "Accountability and Evaluation Process."

HCP uses many forms of assessment to track student progress including:

- Portfolios;
- Quarterly updates and Learning Plan Reflections;
- Yearly determination of basic skill levels (the CSAP is one of many means of measurement);
- Quality of the relationship and conversation among the participants of the program.⁴³

At the heart of VISION HCP's Evaluation and Accountability Process is its trust in the Learners and their parents; if families know where the Learners are educationally and have options for the future and a clear and attainable path for achieving their goals, the Learners will "naturally learn and live to the fullest of their capacities."⁴⁴

VISION Brick-and-Mortar Schools

The VISION Coalition brick-and-mortar schools were initially composed of a Montessori school and two existing private schools that joined the VISION Coalition. Since that time, both former private schools have closed. Two new schools joined the program in 2002.⁴⁵

The current three VISION brick-and-mortar schools operate as independent public schools, each having its own governing board and its own five-year contract with the school district. Each governing board has control over the school budget and the power to make decisions about the school's educational program, hiring and firing of teachers and other staff, and salary rates.

To attend these schools, students must live within district boundaries and there must be space available in the program. The public school bus system is available to VISION students, but the buses only transport students to traditional public school sites.⁴⁶

The **Delta Academy of Applied Learning** is located in the city of Delta. Students attending the school may ride the district bus to Delta Middle School, four blocks away. In 2004-2005, its third year of operation, Delta Academy serves 24 students in grades six through eight.⁴⁷ The school is required to have a minimum of 15 students who are committed to attend the school on a regular basis.⁴⁸

Students work at their own level using Core Knowledge curriculum supplemented with Saxon Mathematics.

The school's founders initially created it to meet the needs of middle school students who once were enrolled in VISION HCP but whose parents no longer had the time to school the students at home. However, the school now also serves students who have never been involved in VISION HCP. Students work at their own level using Core Knowledge curriculum supplemented with Saxon Mathematics. Each student follows a Learning Plan to guide his studies.⁴⁹

Housed in a former Catholic school, Delta Academy pays rent to the Catholic Church across the street. The school receives 82.5 percent of the district's Per Pupil Operating Revenue (PPOR) for each full-time student.⁵⁰ The school purchases special education services from the district when necessary.⁵¹

Twenty-three miles east of Delta, located in Hotchkiss, is **North Fork Community Montessori School** (NFCMS). About one-fourth of the students take the district school bus which stops in front of the school on its way up the driveway to Hotchkiss High School. The NFCMS is in its fifth year of operation and serves students in kindergarten through sixth grade. Preschool students also attend the school, but payment of tuition is required. Each grade level is capped at approximately eight students, with as many as 24 students learning together in multi-age classrooms.⁵² In 2004-2005, 55 students attend kindergarten through sixth grade and 16 attend preschool.⁵³

Though students have daily and weekly goal plans, the school does not incorporate an HCP-style Learning Plan nor employ a Resource Consultant. All teachers are Montessori-certified, and the school strives to meet and exceed Colorado state academic standards.⁵⁴

The founders of the Montessori school originally sought a charter but worked with the district to become a part of the VISION Coalition in 2000—enticed in part by the district's offer to loan money to NFCMS to build a new facility designed for the Montessori program. The school is on a 19-year plan to reimburse the school district for the building.⁵⁵

NFCMS receives 95 percent of the district's PPOR for each student enrolled in kindergarten through sixth grade but buys back special education services from the district. After building and special education expenses are paid to the district, NFCMS retains about 82.5 percent of the district's PPOR.⁵⁶

Lamborn Valley VISION School is located 12 miles northeast of Hotchkiss on the outskirts of Paonia and is a little more than a mile from the nearest traditional public school and bus stop.

The founders of the Montessori school originally sought a charter but worked with the district to become a part of the VISION Coalition in 2000...

The school originated from the independent non-public Lamborn Valley School that opened in 1974.⁵⁷

When the VISION Coalition formed in 2000, Lamborn Valley School participated in VISION HCP, providing classes and tutoring to HCP students. In 2002, the program opened as the public Lamborn Valley VISION School.⁵⁸

The original “Lamborn Valley School” no longer enrolls students but still exists as a nonprofit entity that receives tax-deductible donations to help with operating expenses of the public Lamborn Valley VISION School. The K-12 school is housed on a 120-acre organic farm that also operates a health food store and restaurant.

Students attending Lamborn Valley VISION School choose from a variety of academic and experiential courses. The school offers a rich program in the arts and the opportunity to learn work skills at the store, restaurant, and farm. The

school employs a Resource Consultant who advises students in the development of individual Learning Plans.⁵⁹ In 2004-2005 the school enrolls 26 students, exceeding the contractual requirement that at least 15 students commit to attend the school on a regular basis.⁶⁰

The school still welcomes HCP students who want to take classes offered at the school and allows its students to take classes from HCP Educators in the community during the school day.

Lamborn Valley VISION School rents its classroom space from the farm via the nonprofit Lamborn Valley School. The facility includes a recently renovated auditorium for performances. The school receives 82.5 percent of the district’s PPOR to educate each full-time student.⁶¹ The school purchases special education services from the district when necessary.⁶²

The school offers a rich program in the arts and the opportunity to learn work skills at the store, restaurant, and farm.

Traditional Students Benefit from VISION

Students enrolled in a Delta County traditional public school may also take advantage of classes and tutoring provided by VISION HCP Educators (elementary school students enrolled in traditional public schools cannot take part in HCP). Middle and high school students, enrolled in no more than six or five classes respectively, have access to as much as \$500 for use in HCP learning options outside of the traditional public school. Middle and high school students, enrolled in no more than seven or six classes respectively, have access to as much as \$250. A student interested in this option must first talk with the district Resource Consultant to create a Learning Plan.⁶³

Discussion

The VISION Coalition provides Delta County parents of all income levels a variety of educational programs, philosophies, and environments from which to choose. Delta County School District leaders deserve credit for their flexibility and willingness to change with the demands of families in their community. The district invited its community members to actively participate in the creation and implementation of the VISION Coalition. In the process, the district regained local community trust and support.

The district also chose to divest itself of some power by seeking waivers from state law to give VISION schools and HCP freedom from local school board decisions. The State Board of Education granted the waivers to the district and the VISION Coalition, giving the brick-and-mortar schools and the VISION Home and Community Program (HCP) governing boards autonomy to do the following:

- Make decisions about educational programs and their implementation;
- Control the school or program budget;

Students enrolled in a Delta County traditional public school may also take advantage of classes and tutoring provided by VISION HCP Educators...

- Hire teachers who may be qualified but do not have a state teaching license (for example, teachers at North Fork Community Montessori School who are not licensed but who are Montessori certified);
- Fire ineffective teachers.

VISION HCP is a unique program within Colorado and possibly the nation that offers students the choice to learn at home and in the community with public funds. Some school districts have strained relationships with homeschoolers, while other districts and schools in Colorado offer part-time classroom instruction and/or loaned materials to homeschool students enrolled in their programs.⁶⁴ Based on the number of hours spent in classroom instruction, these programs receive a portion of the Per Pupil Operating Revenue

(PPOR) for each enrolled student, but they are not considered public school students.

VISION HCP attracts many homeschooling families. However, not all families who homeschool in Delta County enroll their children in the program, nor should they be required to do so. By enrolling in VISION HCP, students become public school students with requirements such as taking the CSAP and learning from Educators outside the home. But families who do participate have a working partnership with the school district, from which both the district and the families benefit.

One advantage is the spirit of collaboration and respect that helped shape the program. Rather than standing at odds with families who homeschool, the school district communicates respect for families' educational decisions by being willing to partner with them. Parents in turn have placed their trust in the district, as evidenced by the hundreds of students who have enrolled in VISION HCP.

The allocation of funds to traditional school students to attend VISION HCP classes taught by community Educators, while a small component of VISION, is unique among school districts. Traditional school students benefit from the arrangement by having access to tutoring in core subjects and extracurricular activities that many low-to-middle income families could not normally afford.

The VISION brick-and-mortar school contracts allow the district to retain more funding than if the schools were charter schools; state charter school law allows school districts to keep a maximum of 5 percent of the PPOR and requires documentation of expenditures charged to the charter school. The district can control much of the content of the non-charter contracts because, unlike in contract negotiations with charter schools, the district can stop negotiations at any time with no appeals process for the contract school. Delta County School District benefits from its arrangement with VISION schools because the district is free to determine how much PPOR it keeps—currently 5 to 17.5 percent. According to former Superintendent Laddie Livingston, the district uses revenue from HCP and brick-and-mortar VISION schools in part to provide extra compensation for traditional public school teachers. The school district currently has a moratorium on any new schools joining VISION, which clashes with the innovative spirit that started the program.

What is beneficial to a school district can be detrimental to a school. By joining VISION instead of becoming a charter school, North Fork Community Montessori School lost the opportunity to apply for public and private grants that are available to charter schools. However, the district did build the school a facility designed for a Montessori program. Lamborn Valley VISION School Board Member Lu Vorys stated, and other program directors agreed, that being a part of this unique program makes raising funds harder be-

...the district uses revenue from HCP and brick-and-mortar VISION schools in part to provide extra compensation for traditional public school teachers.

Rather than standing at odds with families who homeschool, the school district communicates respect for families' educational decisions by being willing to partner with them.

cause so many funders focus on providing assistance to charter schools.⁶⁵

Delta County School District seized the opportunity to form partnerships with private schools. Lamborn Valley VISION School serves public school students and is legally a public school. The staff utilizes the nonprofit, private Lamborn Valley School exclusively for fundraising purposes. However, a private school in Colorado can serve public school students and remain a private independent contractor. Denver Public Schools (DPS) has proven this in its partnership with Escuela Tlatelolco Centro de Estudios, a north Denver private school. According to the contract between Escuela Tlatelolco and DPS, the school operates “in all respects as a nonreligious, nonsectarian, non-homebased public school,” but is also “an independent contractor and neither it nor any of its employees or agents is an employee of [DPS].”⁶⁶

Combining all VISION Coalition CSAP scores into one State Accountability Report (SAR) defeats the purpose of the SAR, which is to hold a school accountable for its program. DPS has created three small schools within Manual High.

Delta County School District seized the opportunity to form partnerships with private schools.

Each school has a unique program, its own principal—and its own SAR. Each VISION brick-and-mortar school likewise has a unique educational program. If reported separately, the Delta County School District brick-and-mortar schools would not be able to report their scores to the public because, due to privacy concerns, any given grade level must have at least 16 students testing to report results to the public. None of the brick-and-mortar schools have 16 students per grade level, nor do they currently have the physical space to expand enrollment. However, many small rural schools face similar class sizes but have their own SAR with no rating. Every student enrolled in VISION HCP is enrolled in a one-of-a-kind school within a home, which makes holding each program accountable through a SAR imprac-

ticable. Delta County School District must ensure that VISION HCP is held accountable and that students’ needs are met through the program.

Recommendations

- Delta County School District officials and the Colorado Department of Education should stop combining VISION Coalition CSAP scores into the same State Accountability Report and only create a SAR for each VISION brick-and-mortar school.
- Delta County School District should lift the moratorium on new VISION schools and establish policies to approve only new schools that are likely to provide a quality education.
- Colorado public school districts should not abandon chartering schools in favor of contracting with schools. Some schools are better suited to be contract schools while others should be charters. School districts should recognize the difference and seek to do what is best for the sustainability of the school.
- Colorado public school districts should explore contracting with private schools to provide more educational choice. However, the schools should remain independent contractors and not abandon their private school status.
- Colorado public school districts should consider implementing the Home and Community Program in their own districts.
- Nonprofit organizations and the federal government should seek to find and fund unique programs like VISION.

Combining all VISION Coalition CSAP scores into one State Accountability Report (SAR) defeats the purpose of the SAR, which is to hold a school accountable for its program.

The multi-faceted VISION Coalition demonstrates how a school district can identify needs in the community and partner with its citizens who, for various reasons, decide not to enroll their chil-

dren in traditional public schools. Some Colorado school districts are experiencing declining enrollment. Many districts also have long waiting lists for options such as charter schools. All school districts should follow Delta County School District's lead in moving beyond the status quo and developing innovative programs that satisfy the educational needs of students in their communities.

Endnotes

- ¹ Delta Area Development, Inc., Web site, "Population," <http://www.deltaareadevelopment.org/population.html>. These numbers are from July 2002.
- ² Telephone conversation of the author with Terry Kimber, Business Manager, Delta County 50 (J) School District, January 25, 2005.
- ³ VISION Coalition representatives special meeting, September 8, 2004. Meeting participants included the author and Pamela Benigno, Director, Education Policy Center, Independence Institute, and the following VISION Coalition representatives: Laddie Livingston, then-Superintendent, Delta County 50 (J) School District; Diane Hackl, Board Member, North Fork Community Montessori School; William Eyler, Director, North Fork Community Montessori School; Darci Hellman, Director, Delta Academy of Applied Learning; Lu Vorys, Member, Governing Board, Lamborn Valley VISION School; Caryn Braddy, Director, Delta VISION Home and Community Program; Anjula Jalan, Director, North Fork VISION Home and Community Program; and Lulu McCay, Director, Surface Creek VISION Home and Community Program.
- ⁴ *VISION Home and Community Program Policy Handbook, 2004-2005*, "Origins," 11. The 2003-2004 *Policy Handbook* can be found at: <http://www.visionhcp.org/Handbook2004/Handbook%202003-2004.htm>.
- ⁵ Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Board of Education, January 29, 2000, Vocational Center, Delta, Colorado.
- ⁶ Telephone conversation of the author with Mike McMillan, then-Interim Superintendent, Delta County 50 (J) School District, September 27, 2004.
- ⁷ VISION Coalition representatives special meeting, *supra* note 3.
- ⁸ Telephone conversation of the author with McMillan, September 27, 2004.
- ⁹ VISION Coalition representatives special meeting, *supra* note 3.
- ¹⁰ Colorado Department of Education, State Accountability Reports, VISION School, Grades 1-6, 7-8, 9-12, 2003-2004, <http://reportcard.cde.state.co.us/reportcard/CommandHandler.jsp>.
- ¹¹ Telephone conversation of the author with Anjula Jalan, Director, North Fork VISION Home and Community Program, February 25, 2005.
- ¹² Colorado State Board of Education, Board Report, "Board Actions – May/June, 2000," May 11, 2000, http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdeboard/download/bdrpt5_00.pdf. Waivers were granted for Colorado Revised Statutes § 22-9-106(4); 22-32-109(1)(b)(f)(t), 110(1)(h), 126; 22-63-201, 203, 206, 301, 302, 401, 402, 403.

- ¹³ Telephone conversation of the author with John Penn, Regional Service Manager, Grand Valley BOCES, Colorado Department of Education, October 6, 2004.
- ¹⁴ VISION Coalition representatives special meeting, *supra* note 3.
- ¹⁵ Colorado Department of Education Web site, "Home Based Education Fall 1999-2003," <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/download/pdf/2003PM/2003HOMEBASEDED.pdf>. This reflects the number of students who notified the school district of their intent to homeschool but does not take into account students who may not have registered with the district.
- ¹⁶ Telephone conversation of the author with Jalan, October 14, 2004. Telephone conversation of the author with Kimber, January 25, 2005.
- ¹⁷ *Policy Handbook, 2004-2005*, "HCP Mission and Philosophy," 1; "Governance," 14.
- ¹⁸ VISION Coalition representatives special meeting, *supra* note 3.
- ¹⁹ *Policy Handbook, 2004-2005*, "Roles," "Board of Stewards," 62. New Board of Stewards members are chosen by the consensus of HCP Directors and current Board of Stewards members.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, "Curriculum," 79.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, "Roles," "Learners," 37; "Roles," "Resource Consultants," 40.
- ²² *Ibid.*, "Roles," "Advocate," 59; "Roles," "Resource Consultant," 40.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, "Roles," "Director," 54.
- ²⁴ VISION Coalition representatives special meeting, *supra* note 3.
- ²⁵ *Policy Handbook, 2004-2005*, "Roles," "Educators," 47.
- ²⁶ VISION Coalition representatives special meeting, *supra* note 3.
- ²⁷ *Policy Handbook, 2004-2005*, "Roles," "Resource Consultants," "2004-2005 VISION HCP Resource Consultant Job Description and Contract," 43-46.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, "Curriculum," "Creating a Learning Plan," 82.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, "Curriculum," 78.
- ³⁰ Telephone conversation of the author with McMillan, September 27, 2004.
- ³¹ *Policy Handbook, 2004-2005*, "Funding," 125, 128-129.
- ³² *Ibid.*, "Funding," 125-126.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, "Funding," 131.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, "Curriculum," "Creating a Learning Plan," 82-86.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, "Documentation of Learning," 110.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, "Program Summary," 2; "Roles," "Educators," 47. A parent may not be paid to teach her own child unless she teaches a class of four or more other Learners who are not family members. If her child participates in the class, she may be paid a maximum of \$5 per hour for teaching her child, though other families may pay her at a higher rate.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, "Roles," "Educators," 47.
- ³⁸ "VISION Home & Community Program, Educator Network, Delta Area, 2004-2005," Delta VISION Home and Community Program.
- ³⁹ VISION Coalition representatives special meeting, *supra* note 3.
- ⁴⁰ *Policy Handbook, 2004-2005*, "Entrance," 72-73.
- ⁴¹ Personal conversation of the author with Caryn Braddy, Director, Delta VISION Home and Community Program, September 8, 2004.
- ⁴² *Policy Handbook, 2004-2005*, "Evaluation and Accountability," 27.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Telephone conversation of the author with Anjula Jalan, Director, North Fork VISION Home and Community Program, February 25, 2005. The two private schools that joined the VISION Coalition in 2000 were North Fork Community School and The Learning Cooperative.

⁴⁶ Telephone conversations of the author with McMillan, September 27, 2004, and October 6, 2004.

⁴⁷ Telephone conversation of the author with Kimber, January 25, 2005.

⁴⁸ Delta Academy of Applied Learning, District Charter Contract, p2, 3., April 2004. Delta County School District chose to call VISION brick-and-mortar schools "District Charter" schools. However, the school is not a charter school as defined by the 1993 Colorado Charter Schools Act, C.R.S. § 22-30.5.

⁴⁹ VISION Coalition representatives special meeting, *supra* note 3.

⁵⁰ Ibid. Site visit to Delta Academy of Applied Learning.

⁵¹ Delta Academy, Contract, p3, 5.f., April 2004. The district retains all federal and categorical monies designated for special education unless otherwise agreed upon in the school's annual budget.

⁵² Telephone conversation of the author with William Eyler, Director, North Fork Community Montessori School, January 17, 2005.

⁵³ Telephone conversation of the author with Kimber, January 25, 2005.

⁵⁴ Telephone conversation of the author with Eyler, January 17, 2005.

⁵⁵ North Fork Community Montessori School, District Charter Contract, p9, 13., April 25, 2002. Telephone conversation of the author with Eyler, October 7, 2004. Delta County School District chose to call VISION brick-and-mortar schools "District Charter" schools. However, the school is not a charter school as defined by the 1993 Colorado Charter Schools Act, C.R.S. § 22-30.5.

⁵⁶ North Fork Community Montessori, Contract, p3, 5.f. and 7.a., April 25, 2002. The district retains all federal and categorical monies designated for special education unless otherwise agreed upon in the school's annual budget. VISION Coalition representatives special meeting, *supra* note 3.

⁵⁷ VISION Coalition representatives special meeting, *supra* note 3.

⁵⁸ Telephone conversation of the author with Jalan, February 25, 2005.

⁵⁹ VISION Coalition representatives special meeting, *supra* note 3.

⁶⁰ Telephone conversation of the author with Kimber, January 25, 2005. Lamborn VISION School, District Charter Contract, p2, 3., April 2004. Delta County School District chose to call VISION brick-and-mortar schools "District Charter" schools. However, the school is not a charter school as defined by the 1993 Colorado Charter Schools Act, C.R.S. § 22-30.5.

⁶¹ VISION Coalition representatives special meeting, *supra* note 3. Site visit to Lamborn Valley VISION School.

⁶² Lamborn Valley VISION, Contract, p3, 5.f. and 7.a., April 2004. The district retains all federal and categorical monies designated for special education unless otherwise agreed upon in the school's annual budget.

⁶³ *Policy Handbook, 2004-2005, "Entrance,"* 72-73.

⁶⁴ Jeffco Home School Option Web site, http://jeffcoweb.jeffco.k12.co.us/isu/homeschool/info_letter.pdf. Connections Academy, "Connections Academy An-

nounces Part-time Program for Colorado Students," Press Release, May 10, 2004, http://connectionsacademy.org/pdfs/CO_PR_Littleton_PartTime.pdf.

⁶⁵ VISION Coalition representatives special meeting, *supra* note 3.

⁶⁶ Professional Services Agreement between the Denver Public Schools and Escuela Tlatelolco Inc., June 24, 2004, p14, 26.1.

Copyright © 2005, Independence Institute

INDEPENDENCE INSTITUTE is a non-profit, non-partisan Colorado think tank. It is governed by a statewide board of trustees and holds a 501(c)(3) tax exemption from the IRS. Its public policy research focuses on economic growth, education reform, local government effectiveness, and Constitutional rights.

JON CALDARA is President of the Institute.

DAVID KOPEL is Research Director of the Institute.

PAMELA BENIGNO is the Director of the Education Policy Center.

MARYA DEGROW is a Research Associate for the Education Policy Center. She is the author of the Issue Paper *Cutting Back on Catching Up: Reducing the Need for Remediation in Colorado Higher Education* and the Issue Backgrounder *Educational Vouchers & Tax Credits: A State-by-State Summary*.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES on this subject can be found at:
<http://www.IndependenceInstitute.org>

NOTHING WRITTEN here is to be construed as necessarily representing the views of the Independence Institute or as an attempt to influence any election or legislative action.

PERMISSION TO REPRINT this paper in whole or in part is hereby granted provided full credit is given to the Independence Institute.



13952 Denver West Parkway, Suite 400
Golden, Colorado 80401-3141

303-279-6536 • 303-279-4176 fax
www.IndependenceInstitute.org