DENVER SCHOOL CLOSINGS
School bonds down drain?
Four years ago, voters OK'd major spending on schools. Millions went to those now singled out for shutdown.
By Jeremy P. Meyer
The Denver Post
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Children play last month at Hallett Elementary School, one of eight schools targeted for closure. Thanks to a 2003 bond issue passed by voters, the school in north Denver received a new $353,000 playground last year. (Post / RJ Sangosti)

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Six of the eight schools recommended for closure by DPS administrators got new playgrounds in the past three years at a cost of nearly $1.9 million, according to district reports.

In total, Denver Public Schools spent $8.6 million in voter-approved bond money since 2004 for improvements to the eight elementary schools that may be shut down at the end of the school year under a proposed reform effort.
"That was a waste," said Madeline McAlester, whose grandchild goes to Hallett Elementary, a north Denver school that received a $353,000 playground last year. "They knew the school was in trouble," she said. "Let's fix the inside. Let's change the curriculum. Change something that is important. The playground

DPS changes at a glance

Schools to be closed:
- Del Pueblo Elementary
- Hallett Elementary
- Fallis Elementary
- Mitchell Elementary
- Remington Elementary
- Smedley Elementary
- Whiteman Elementary
- Wyman Elementary

Changed schools:
- Place Middle School would cease operations and be changed to a magnet school for pre-schoolers through eighth-graders with a focus on immigrants and English-language learners. The new Place would become the neighborhood school from Whiteman and Fallis students.
- Gilpin K-8 would become a Montessori school, serving infants through eighth grade.
- Cole would reopen for pre-schoolers through eighth-graders and become the neighborhood school for Mitchell and Wyman students.
- Horace Mann Middle School would cease operations and become a new preschool through eighth grade school.
- Kunsmiller Middle School would cease operations and become a new sixth grade through 12th grade arts magnet program.

More information:
- Read Denver Public Schools' 14-page FAQ about the changes. (PDF)
- Watch DPS superintendent Michael Bennet address teachers and students wasn't important."

District officials last week announced a proposal to close eight schools that have been low performing and under-enrolled, which would give DPS an expected $3.5 million in savings every year that would return to the classroom.

The final decision on closures is to be made by the school board Nov. 19. Each building tabbed for closure has received a variety of fixes over the past three years that ranged from new paint, new floors and new carpet to new boilers, new windows and new roofs.

The schools that got "learning landscapes" or new playground equipment were Fallis, Whiteman, Wyman, Hallett, Smedley and Mitchell. The average cost for the playgrounds was $313,000 apiece.

Circumstances change

The money came from a $310 million bond sale approved by voters in November 2003.

Bond money was intended solely for nonacademic needs, including repairs to existing buildings, upgrades to facilities and construction of new schools in
crowded northeast Denver.
Money from the bond sale was spread among all schools, and projects are expected to be completed by December 2008. No one in 2003 could have predicted that a new superintendent would close schools, said Tom Buescher, who is on the citizens committee that scrutinizes the district's use of the bond money.
"The fact of the matter is circumstances change," Buescher said. "I don't think there was a disconnect at all over the decisions. They were made with the best information at the time."
The district may face tough questions from voters in future bond elections because of the money spent on schools tabbed for closure, said Floyd Ciruli, a Denver public policy consultant.
"That definitely will be a question people would ask, 'Are we being asked to spend money on facilities that are vulnerable to be closed in the future?'" Ciruli said.

**Accessible playgrounds**
DPS officials have not decided what to do with the empty buildings if the board approves the closure and says it wants to involve the public in that discussion. "We'll make sure these schools don't fall into disrepair," said Happy Haynes, special assistant to the superintendent for community partnerships.
Officials have promised that fields and playgrounds would remain accessible to the public at closed schools as long as they're owned by DPS. Administrators are continuing to work out how much it will cost to retrofit the schools that would receive the new students from the closed schools. Cole, Horace Mann and Place Middle Schools would need new playground equipment, said Alex Sanchez, DPS spokesman.
The costs will be made public at the Nov. 19 school board meeting, Sanchez said. School board member Michelle Moss said she could understand why people would be upset about the bond money going to schools recommended to be closed.
"It highlights why as a board we need to stay ahead of our enrollment problems and our building capacity issues," she said. "We can't wait until we have 40-percent excess capacity when we decided to do something."

Jeremy P. Meyer: 303-954-1367 or jpmeyer@denverpost.com

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**Bond breakdown**
Voters in November 2003 approved a $310 million bond sale for Denver Public Schools to pay for bricks-and-mortar projects throughout the district.
For the eight school buildings the district has proposed to close, 2003 bond money paid for $8.59 million of improvements. Six of the eight elementary schools got new playgrounds, or "learning landscapes," at a price tag of $1.878 million, according to DPS records.

*Fallis Elementary:* $1.542 million
*Mitchell Elementary:* $1.54 million
*Whiteman Elementary:* $1.52 million
*Remington Elementary:* $1.355 million
Wyman Elementary: $873,000
Hallett Elementary: $759,000
Del Pueblo Elementary: $459,000
Smedley Elementary: $552,000

This is an excellent example of why voters should take a very hard look at the tax and spend initiatives on the ballot in November. When the current administration and council learns to spend the tax dollars citizens are already contributing appropriately, then they can ask for more. For now -

JUST SAY NO to the biggest tax increase in Denver history.

Dave
Joined: Jun 22
Points: 294 Posted by Dave (aka uncledave) at 7:28 AM on Wednesday Oct 10 Report Abuse | Report Good Comment

Here's the best part - the next time that DPS wants money to "improve" the schools, the voters will remember this and say "no" as we are tired of government officials wasting our tax money. Then, on the night of said election, the DPS officials will hang their heads low and tell the media that the voting public just doesn't support education and our children's futures. So predictable.

Rex
Joined: May 16
Points: 771 Posted by Rex (aka Rex)
at 7:34 AM on Wednesday Oct 10 Report Abuse | Report Good Comment

- Hmm. "learning landscapes". Is that the term they came up with to somehow justify spending $313,000 on a playground? You could build a HOUSE for that and it requires utilities, foundation, etc!! What in the world could have cost $313,000? Friends in the construction industry perhaps?

Cynthia Clark
Joined: Oct 10
Points: 211 Posted by Cynthia Clark (aka Cyn)
at 7:52 AM on Wednesday Oct 10 Report Abuse | Report Good Comment

- How can a PLAYGROUND cost $313,000?! Hope that someone investigates the playground contractors and school official who awards contracts.

Robert Gift
Joined: May 10
Points: 6798 Posted by Robert Gift (aka Robert Gift)
at 8:07 AM on Wednesday Oct 10 Report Abuse | Report Good Comment

- Meanwhile, Hick proposes an alphabet, A-Z, of tax hikes as he piddles-away your money right down the mahoula!

Vote NO on all tax hike proposals!

Hank
Joined: Aug 12
Points: 3225 Posted by Hank (aka Hank Riehl)
at 8:16 AM on Wednesday Oct 10 Report Abuse | Report Good Comment

- Mass Chaos It looks like DPS is in mass chaos with all the language problems, school closures, good teachers and students leaving.

On top of this we bone headed management via the mayor and Bennet.

W Fuentes
Joined: Jul 12
Points: 660 Posted by W Fuentes (aka Scotty9)
at 8:45 AM on Wednesday Oct 10 Report Abuse | Report Good Comment
I agree there's definitely a debate about whether these should have been built. A few thing other things to consider though before we hang the district and the contractors...

I haven't been to these schools or looped through all of these neighborhoods, but often times the school playground is THE park for the neighborhood as well. That may or may not have been a factor for whether these got built. Regardless, schools, grounds, parks, etc all fit into quality of neighborhood. Right or wrong they end up being at least the visual cue that money is coming into the area (admittedly possibly covering up neglect in others) It's easy to say put the money in the curriculum, but there's another group that'll be howling where's the new playground. DPS has said that these grounds are staying open as long as they own them.

It is also easy to say I can get a house for that, but playgrounds actually are not cheap. The equipment has high development, testing and certification costs. Materials and finishes have to stand up to abuse and our outdoor environment. Somebody has to design the layout, specify the equipment, and engineer the site. These just don't arrive out of the box from Walmart and get put up. If pits, padding and other landscape is associated that has to be designed. Whether it is the manufacturer, contractor, or district, there is liability associated with installation. None of this is cheap when somebody can jump around with a lawsuit because their kid fell off the slide.

J Daw
Joined: Oct 10
Points: 97 Posted by J Daw (aka dawson07) at 9:16 AM on Wednesday Oct 10 Report Abuse | Report Good Comment

The older playgrounds really were unsafe and badly outdated. Relax everyone. There are so many schools in DPS. They all badly needed newer and safer playgrounds when we passed the bond. It would have been unthinkable to limit the improvements to schools in wealthier neighborhoods with higher performing schools. These school playgrounds are used by children of all ages in the community and are a very welcome improvement. A right wing, knee-jerk, anti-any-tax, blame-the-schools-for-all-of-the-city's-problems attitude is, as per usual, completely off the mark.

C J
Joined: Oct 10
Points: 163 Posted by C J (aka C J Denver)
The bond money resulted in a DPS free-for-all that nobody will ever know about, thanks to the secrecy that the District is allowed to maintain while at the same time collecting money from the taxpayers. Luckily, we don't live in Denver anymore. DPS is the reason we left and why we will never return.

Kathy
Joined: May 16
Points: 475 Posted by Kathy (aka Kathy)

But how can it average $313k?

Robert Gift
Joined: May 10
Points: 6798 Posted by Robert Gift (aka Robert Gift)

CJ @ 9:18 writes:
Relax everyone. There are so many schools in DPS. They all badly needed newer and safer playgrounds when we passed the bond. It would have been unthinkable to limit the improvements to schools in wealthier neighborhoods with higher performing schools. These school playgrounds are used by children of all ages in the community and are a very welcome improvement. A right wing, knee-jerk, anti-any-tax, blame-the-schools-for-all-of-the-city's-problems attitude is, as per usual, completely off the mark.

So, just because I hate having taxpayer dollars wasted, my comment is a "right wing, knee-jerk, anti-any-tax, blame-the-schools-for-all-of-the-city's-problems"??

CJ, you forgot to blame this all on President Bush and global warming.

Rex
Joined: May 16
Points: 771 Posted by Rex (aka Rex)

• How much would you like to bet that the $313,000 per playground did not include the several DPS "Pro Tech" employees being paid with bond funds? Children shouldn't go without schools so that unqualified, overpaid gov't workers can retire for 30 years of leisure, but that's the way it's done in Denver. So Surprise! The kids and families are gone!!

Kathy  
Joined: May 16  
Points: 475 Posted by Kathy (aka Kathy) at 10:28 AM on Wednesday Oct 10 Report Abuse | Report Good

Comment

• Learning Landscapes - More than a swingset Again, not saying that there isn't ground to argue whether these playgrounds should have been built, and that DPS needs to connect between planning and funding but...

I did a little more digging on Google and more information on the "Learning Landscapes" playgrounds appears to be available here... 
 http://thunder1.cudenver.edu/cye/lla/about.html

I don't know if all of these school's grounds came from the same initiative or are a spin off. The web sites list of schools is dated (last one's being '03). At any rate it is an initiative by the city, CU, DPS, neighborhoods and private organizations.

Regardless, these are not just 2 swings and a slide, they are what I guessed at earlier...a reconfiguration of old urban school playgrounds as a park for the community. That's how they cost $330K. What's not clear is that the program seems to be funded through donations.

The article is far to generalized. We need someone with more info on EACH of these school grounds to comment and for the Post to provide more info please. Were these grounds actually privately funded, was 330K the contribution from DPS, etc???? Wherever it came from, all is not entirely down the drain as the headline implies if the grounds do stay open as DPS has stated they will. The grounds will remain as usable

J Daw  
Joined: Oct 10  
Points: 97 Posted by J Daw (aka dawson07) at 11:35 AM on Wednesday Oct 10 Report Abuse | Report Good

Comment

(must be logged in to vote)
This is the pattern. I taught math in a nearby district. This seems to be the pattern for failing districts everywhere: When district officials have no idea how to improve academic performance, they do a three-card monte with facilities.

I'd bet that the following things are going to happen:
1) The closed schools, despite promises, will fall into disrepair
2) The next superintendent will reopen some or all of the schools
3) The schools (and "learning landscapes") will require overhauls
4) A bond will be proposed
5) DPS matriculation rates and academic performance will remain about where they currently are.

Sad, but it seems to be how public schools (especially low-performing districts) operate.

Mike McHugh
Joined: Jul 13
Points: 304 Posted by Mike McHugh (aka lardlad) at 5:55 AM on Thursday Oct 11 Report Abuse | Report Good Comment

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