

GUEST OPINION

Time to redesign Colorado public schools

By ED LYLEL

The Daily Camera, in its editorials, and Boulder County citizens, in letters to the editor, have expressed concern for our public school system, present budget constraints, and the alienation within the community concerning priorities. As Boulder County's representative to the State Board of Education, I would like to react to these concerns, explain what the state board is recommending, and ask for advice from citizens.

The State Board of Education last month passed three resolutions designed to accelerate the total redesign of Colorado's educational system, pre-school through Ph.D. Members of the board believe it unwise to continue to cut away on the edges of the present system through necessary budget cuts of 6 to 12 percent this year, and again next year.



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Most districts and colleges are trying to do the same things with fewer dollars. That could lead to efficiency, but not learning effectiveness. Rather it is time to redesign the system for the new needs and opportunities of the information age.

Hardworking, well-meaning school board members, administrators and teachers have been trying to keep up with the

a statewide, broad-based forum to re-design our system, starting with a blank piece of paper. All Coloradans must examine the roles, methods, responsibilities and governance of local school districts, colleges, state agencies and non-governmental organizations. We must re-design the tax districts, tax sources and the formulas used to distribute funds.

The state board urges the Legislature to declare all current education law, K-12 and higher education, null and void in December 1994 upon passage of a new system by the voters in November 1994. Many changes can occur without voter approval, but significant changes must occur in taxation, financing and governance policy which require voter approval under Amendment 1.

Parts of today's 200 pages of education code can be incorporated into the new system, but only after re-examination and adjustment to a system based on student achievement rather than the present system based on hours in school and credit hours taken.

The State Board of Education, Governor Romer and legislative leaders have all agreed that Colorado, like the nation, must change from an industrial-era, factory-style school system to one based on recognizing students' differing learning styles and capacity for reaching world-class skills and competencies.

We can individualize learning plans for every learner and eliminate the costly boredom, duplication, closed-door classroom

activities, and involvement by the total community.

Wasteful duplication in courses, support services and trained staff exists between high schools, community colleges and universities (and local and state government agencies). Our challenge is to design a better secondary and job-based post-secondary system, while keeping the best of our world-class graduate schools.

One major change which I recommend is to eliminate the 11th and 12th grade in high school and shift those resources in two directions. Our most cost-effective dollar is spent on our youngest children. Preschool, kindergarten and the first three grade levels must be priorities for funding, improvement and adult involvement.

Second, schools should re-design programs to insure that all students have current 12th grade level skills and competencies accomplished by age 16. Youth begin college or become enrolled in new service learning programs focused on mentorship, apprenticeship, and learning while working.

Music, sports and other social activities that dominate the current 11th and 12th grade should be provided by city and county recreation programs and newly formed or expanded non-governmental programs, such as scouts, church groups, future farmers and student achievement.

■ CHARTER SCHOOLS:

The state board's second resolution is to create charter

State Board of Education, which could send it back to the local district urging them to approve it, or the state board could issue the charter itself and oversee the school directly.

A Charter School bill co-sponsored by Sen. Bill Owens (R) and Rep. Peggy Kerns (D) has been introduced in the Legislature. I am convinced that thousands of existing educators and parents want new methods, new schools and new approaches.

■ SERVICE LEARNING PROGRAMS:

The state board's third recommendation is for legislation permitting and funding service learning-based programs. These programs incorporate paid and non-paid jobs for youth directed toward reinforcing their school based learning, and providing hands-on skill and competency development. President Clinton has pledged to develop federal programs to assist in this effort.

We need legislation permitting us to be at the forefront of this proven method of reaching students who usually drop out or perform poorly in the present system. Colorado's Commissioner of Education, Bill Randall, and department staff are already involved in the design of the national program.

Charter schools, service learning and a shift in all schools to standards-based learning is now supported by advocates from the political left and right. The concept of charter schools started as a Republican program to publicly fund private schools. As proposed by the State Board of Education,

fewer dollars. That could lead to efficiency, but not learning effectiveness. Rather it is time to redesign the system for the new needs and opportunities of the information age.

Hardworking, well-meaning school board members,

administrators and teachers have been trying to keep up with the shifts in society to all working parents, increased global competition, rapidly changing technology, and greatly increased entertainment distractions for the attention of the learner.

We must not expect educators to meet these challenges constrained by the present system, even with more resources. Rather we must create learning communities, enlist the aid of unemployed and retired citizens, and utilize government and business workers and their organizations as integral parts of the learning delivery system for our children and adults of all ages.

The three resolutions passed by the State Board of Education:

■ RE-EXAMINE AND RE-DESIGN COLORADO'S TOTAL PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

We urge the Legislature to lead

change from an industrial-era, factory-style school system to one based on recognizing students' differing learning styles and capacity for reaching world-class skills and competencies.

We can individualize learning plans for every learner and eliminate the costly boredom, duplication, closed-door classroom and lockstep curriculum that the present industrial-era school and college are protecting.

Westminster District 50 is ready to pilot test such an individualized program including a computer in each student's home. This is a school/business partnership of some magnitude and hope.

Financing formulas for schools and colleges should no longer be based on the school's or college's historical cost, the age and academic degrees of the faculty, or the number of hours students sit in a classroom. Instead we must fund all public education with incentives based on the school's and teacher's contribution to student knowledge and skill gained. A value-added reward system will encourage the implementation of technology, individualized and diverse learning

activities that dominate the current 11th and 12th grade should be provided by city and county recreation programs and newly formed or expanded non-governmental programs, such as scouts, church groups, future farmers and student achievement.

■ CHARTER SCHOOLS:

The state board's second resolution is to create charter schools where Colorado's children can try more diverse learning environments than presently exist or that local district bureaucracies can design and implement.

A Jan. 24, Sunday night ABC-TV special described innovative cost-effective schools that already exist in Jefferson County and throughout America. Most of these examples are schools created outside the mandates of local district and state rules. Frequently called magnet schools, they have hundreds of students on their waiting lists.

Charter schools could re-vitalize public education. School building staff, parents or citizens in a neighborhood could propose a new kind of school and seek a charter from their local district. If the local district disapproves, the groups could submit their request to the

involved in the design of the national program.

Charter schools, service learning and a shift in all schools to standards-based learning is now supported by advocates from the political left and right. The concept of charter schools started as a Republican program to publicly fund private schools. As proposed by the State Board of Education, charters would be limited to public schools.

Learning communities can be created, and Boulder County could lead the nation. As money for our school system is scarcer, ideas and innovation are more important.

Please contact me with your ideas, comments and criticisms; call 466-6707, or write to 2187 Sunridge Circle, Broomfield, 80020. I can also be contacted through the internet at lyvell@csn.org. Additionally, I am putting up a bulletin board for discussion of these ideas at 466-7007.

(Ed Lyvell represents the Second Congressional District on the State Board of Education. He is co-chair of the Telecommunications Advisory Commission to the Legislature, and Senior Fellow of the Center for the New West.)