



## DPS board affirms controversial Lake plan

December 18, 2009

By: Nancy Mitchell



Arturo Jimenez



Mary Seawell, Jeannie Kaplan

Denver Public Schools' board members voted again Thursday to approve a contentious reform plan for Lake Middle School in northwest Denver, despite repeated protests by several community members and teachers.

The vote tally was the same – 4 to 3 – as it was on Nov. 30, when the board first voted on a turnaround proposal for the district's lowest-performing secondary school.

Similarly, of the ten speakers who addressed the board Thursday about Lake, more than half already had urged the board to veto the plan but returned to press their arguments anew.

“Regardless of what forums were held in the community, our concerns were not heard because decisions had already been made,” Lake mom Cathy Vigil told board members and Superintendent Tom Boasberg. “You went, you sat there, you may have heard a few things - but the decisions were already made.”

What was different Thursday was the board's makeup – two newly elected members who were not yet sworn in Nov. 30 when that first vote was cast. But both, Nate Easley Jr. and Mary Seawell, voted the same way as their predecessors and affirmed the earlier vote.

“It’s clear to me that the district must do a much better job of engaging the community,” Easley, the board’s president, said. “I don’t think reform can happen without the real engagement of parents.”

But Easley also pointed out that the board, after its Nov. 30 vote, had signed a contract with West Denver Prep, a charter school to be located inside Lake as that school’s International Baccalaureate program is reformed.

“If I didn’t vote to affirm the (earlier vote), one of the possibilities is that the district could be in a breach of contract,” he said.

### **Allowing a second vote**

Board member Arturo Jimenez, who represents northwest Denver, asked Monday for a second vote on Lake. Under the meeting rules used by DPS, Easley as president could have rejected the request.

But he said he agreed to a second vote because “there continues to be uncertainty, allegations and a lack of understanding” about the vote.

“Therefore, to move forward, I am allowing Mr. Jimenez’ motion to be considered by this board,” Easley said.

On Nov. 30, newly elected board member Andrea Merida was secretly sworn into office hours before the meeting began. But Seawell and Easley waited until their scheduled time, after the meeting, to take their oaths. That means a mix of “new” and “old” board members voted on the Lake plan and other reform decisions that night.

Merida obtained an opinion from an attorney, Mark Grueskin, questioning the legality of any votes by that “mixed” board. DPS attorney John Kechriotis then issued an opinion stating the Nov. 30 votes were legal.

Still, when Jimenez made his motion Thursday to rescind the Nov. 30 vote on the Lake plan, Seawell introduced an amendment to “affirm” that vote – saying she wanted to put the action into positive terms and to do away with any lingering concerns about the legality of the Nov. 30 action.

Board members voted 4-3, with Jimenez, Merida and Jeannie Kaplan in the minority, to accept Seawell’s amendment and then 4-3 again to approve it.

### **Passionate pleas for change**

In trying to reverse the board vote, Jimenez, Merida and Kaplan cited a lack of community support for the plan.

“I’m for making sure that all of the pieces of the puzzle for the achievement of our young people are locked together,” Merida said. “And what that is, it is a clear consistent community process from the beginning of an assignment of a red (failing) status to a school to the bitter end, whatever that happens to be.”

DPS, she said, must get better at including “the people who pay the taxes to keep the doors open and who feed and clothe those children and send them to those schools” in deciding what to do about struggling schools.

Jimenez said the debate over Lake symbolizes a polarization in DPS between those who support its teachers' union and those who support the district, including businesses and charter school supporters.

"There's always a huge group that's left out of the decision-making and that's the parents," he said. "This is another example where parents are being left out and we're being accused of being on one side or another."

DPS leaders counter that they've listened to plenty of parent and community comment. In a letter published in *The Denver Post*, Boasberg cites "more than 40 public meetings and community conversations" held in northwest Denver since spring and the participation of nearly 1,000 residents.

Kaplan said her biggest concern was that decisions about Lake and West Denver Prep were being made without consideration for the impacts on other nearby middle schools, such as the already under-enrolled Skinner Middle School.

"It doesn't seem to me that we have an overall plan right now," she said, "and I'm really worried that we're making one-off decisions that aren't as thoughtful as they could be."

### **Spotlight on West Denver Prep**

The Lake plan will place West Denver Prep, the district's highest-performing middle school, inside Lake Middle School as that school launches a new IB academy and its existing IB program is phased out.

Several Lake supporters said they are not opposed to West Denver Prep. But they worry placing it inside Lake will hinder growth of the IB academy and their eventual goal of a 6-12 or even a K-12 IB school.

"The co-location of West Denver Prep in Lake will stifle the community's dream," said DPS parent Wendy Silveira-Steinway. "Please allow us as a community to have three great middle schools – a fully implemented and strengthened IB at Lake, a neighborhood middle school at Skinner and West Denver Prep at another location."

Another group of parents have rallied around Skinner and are working to enrich its curriculum and build on its recent academic gains. They fear a West Denver Prep at Lake, plus a second West Denver Prep campus to be located within northwest Denver, could hurt Skinner's chances of renewal.

"The result may be the closure or significant negative impact on Skinner," said Renee Martinez-Stone, a DPS parent and member of Northwest Neighborhood Middle Schools NOW.

Yet another group of parents and teachers in northwest Denver urged board members to consider placing West Denver Prep near their school.

Members of the school decision-making council at Valdez School voted this week to recommend that DPS close their small middle school program, which they're struggling to staff.

In its stead, the group is asking for more high-performing middle schools options such as West Denver Prep.

"We would like to see another West Denver Prep located on our campus," teacher and council co-chair Lizka Randall told board members as she stood surrounded by nine other council members and Valdez Principal Peter Sherman.

If that's not possible, the group said, they'd like Valdez students to have priority at West Denver Prep at Lake or at the Lake IB program.

### **Votes prompt mixed reactions**

While board members voted to uphold the earlier Lake vote, they agreed to delay for 30 days a decision on the exact location for the second West Denver Prep campus.

Jimenez had asked that board members agree not to place the second campus north of Sixth Avenue or west of I-25 – effectively eliminating the district's original plan to put the campus at the Emerson Street School, adjacent to Valdez.

But that motion died by a 5-2 vote – with Merida joining Jimenez in the minority – after board member Bruce Hoyt said the board shouldn't limit its options on determining a second location.

“I think more engagement still does need to happen,” Hoyt said. “My feeling is ... let's not limit our options, let's have everything on the table.”

Some Lake advocates who stuck it out through the lengthy meeting were not pleased with the final votes.

“It's really disappointing that the new board members, who completely committed to the community engagement and recognized that the process was flawed, did not honor (Jimenez') request,” said Janine Vanderburg, a longtime northwest Denver resident whose children attended DPS schools.

Debbie Ortega, a former city councilwoman who has four grandchildren in DPS, said the board's vote on Lake turned out to be little more than a legal clean-up.

“It was evident that they were really doing nothing more than trying to cover their tracks by revoting on this issue so they could say the legal challenge was no longer there,” she said.

Ricardo and Pam Martinez, founders of Padres y Jovenes Unidos, which is based in northwest Denver and which supported the Lake proposal, were happier with the night's results.

“The idea that there hasn't been community input, there has been a lot of community input,” Ricardo Martinez said. “Just because we disagree doesn't mean that there's no community input.”

Pam Martinez called it a win-win for northwest Denver, pointing to Boasberg's statement of support for helping Skinner, the reform of Lake IB and the location of two West Denver Preps there.

“I think two West Denver Preps will start to scratch the surface of the 84 percent of students who enter North High School substantially below grade level,” she said. “We're creating a critical mass of middle schools to bring our kids up to grade level, all kids, so they can really be college bound by the time they get to high school.”

*Nancy Mitchell can be reached at [nmitchell@pebc.org](mailto:nmitchell@pebc.org) or 303-478-4573.*