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Mayor's staff chief takes top job at DPS

New superintendent vows to make district best in U.S.

By Susan Greene
Denver Post Staff Writer
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Public education newcomer Michael Bennet will become the new superintendent of Denver Public Schools, promising to end a culture of frustration he says has kept the district from boosting student achievement.

"We will build what can be and must be and will be the best big-city school district in the United States," said Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper's 40-year-old chief of staff, a lawyer who worked as a corporate turnaround expert for Denver businessman Philip Anschutz's investment company.

The only one of three finalists who has no teaching or school administration experience, Bennet snagged the appointment Monday on the strength of his management record and the promise of galvanizing all of Denver - not just parents and teachers - around the goal of improving city schools.

"Michael is the candidate who we felt could lift us to a level that has not been achieved before," said the school board's president, Lester Woodward.

"He had the best chance at fixing systems and implementation and strategic planning to move the district forward," said board member Michelle Moss.

Just as the district is seeking reforms that would tie teachers' pay to their performance, Bennet hopes to do the same with his own contract. Instead of earning a flat \$200,000 as did his predecessor, Jerry Wartgow, he'll ask for a pay package with \$160,000 base salary plus \$40,000 in incentive pay linked to the district's successes.

Denver's seven-member school board unanimously ratified his appointment Monday evening after picking him behind closed doors in a secret straw poll earlier in the day.

The three-hour deliberations reportedly turned prickly on the subject of Denver oilman and Republican power broker Bruce Benson, who in recent days contacted Woodward and board members Elaine Berman and Bruce Hoyt to express his preference for finalist Patricia Harvey. Some on the board felt Benson - whose deep-pocketed Denver Public Schools Foundation helps fund the district - inappropriately weighed in on the appointment process.

"He should have stayed out of it," said one source close to the board.

Benson said he favored Harvey because of her proven track record raising test scores as superintendent of Minnesota's St. Paul Public Schools. He made his wishes known, he said, "because I have a lot in this game."

Anyone offended by his input, he added, "is just sore they didn't get a call from me, too."

Bennet was privately educated, from grade school through Yale Law School, and admits to having spent little time in city classrooms. When he takes over as superintendent in July, many say, he'll need a crash course in the complexities of big-city public education.

"He has a sharp learning curve," said former Colorado Gov. Roy Romer, who had no background as an educator when he took over as superintendent of Los Angeles' 725,000-student school district. "But Michael is smart enough to figure out how to make a large organization work for kids. It's a good move for Denver."

Much of the chatter leading up to Monday's appointment focused on how race might affect the board's decision.

Finalist Christine Johnson - president of the 15,000-student Community College of Denver - had heavy backing among fellow Latinos who said she was the best fit to lead the majority Latino district.

Harvey, who is black, did not have organized support from any particular community group.

Bennet, the only white candidate, enjoyed endorsements from several prominent minority leaders, including Denver Councilwoman Rosemary Rodriguez and former Mayor Wellington Webb. Bennet also had the nod of many Chamber of Commerce types and the city's political elite, including his boss, the mayor.

Others, including some parents and teachers and community leaders, said they felt that Bennet's political connection played to his advantage, for better or worse.

Bill Brown, an African-American grandfather of two DPS students, attended each of the three community forums for the finalists last week. After weighing everything - including race - Brown decided Bennet was the best choice because he had political insight.

But John Garcia, chairman of the Hispanic Public Affairs Committee, fears DPS will become another arm of the mayor's administration.

"That's the hidden agenda. ... You can smell it's political," he said. "This is a disaster for DPS."

Marsha Burger, an English teacher at Abraham Lincoln High School, also saw politics in the selection.

"It's more of a political, number-crunching, business kind of person in charge as opposed to somebody who has an educational background," she said.

During a news conference Monday, Woodward forcefully denied that politics "in the usual sense of the word" played a role in the decision to pick Hickenlooper's chief of staff over two women with solid backgrounds in education.

Though she lost the Denver job to Bennet, finalist Harvey promptly announced her resignation from the St. Paul position Monday effective at the end of the year. Harvey said she resigned because she wanted to seek a greater professional challenge.

For her part, Johnson said she is prepared to "rally with anyone else to support Michael Bennet to make sure he is successful." She said she plans to remain at Community College of Denver.

Staff writers Karen Rouse and Kevin Simpson contributed to this report.

Staff writer Susan Greene can be reached at 303-820-1589 or sgreene@denverpost.com.