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School plan would give principals reins

Lawmaker taps author's idea to take budget, staffing authority from superintendents

By Karen Rouse
Denver Post Staff Writer

House Majority Leader Keith King on Wednesday pitched a radical idea for improving student achievement in Colorado: Take the power over school budgets and staffing away from superintendents and school boards and put it in the hands of principals. Right now, principals have no control over teachers' salaries, the cost of textbooks or how to meet the needs of struggling students, because they must follow rules laid out by a central office, said King, R-Colorado Springs.

"They would control all this under this plan," he said.

That plan is based on a book by William Ouchi, author of "Making Schools Work: A Revolutionary Plan to Get Your Children the Education They Need." Ouchi spoke Wednesday before a group of educators at a Denver luncheon.

King said he has already created a draft of legislation that would restructure schools as described in Ouchi's book - and similar to schools in Seattle, Houston and Edmonton, Alberta - that he said will be introduced next year.

Under the plan, rather than the state providing funding to a district based on its number of children, the funding would follow children to whatever schools they attend. Children who are considered at-risk, high-poverty, disabled or non-English speakers, or have other special needs, would receive additional funding, Ouchi said.

Superintendents would be responsible for hiring and coaching principals and holding them accountable for meeting goals for student achievement.

Principals, meanwhile, would control the entire budget at their schools, as well as the curriculum, King said.

Ouchi said principals currently have the burden of being held accountable for how students perform but not the authority to control their budgets or staff.

Elaine Gantz Berman, a member of the Denver Public Schools board of education, said the biggest complaint principals have is not having control over staff.

She said the board would like to give more flexibility to principals in schools that are academically successful.

However, she noted that not all principals may want to operate as entrepreneurs and that any free rein a principal could get would be limited by unions, as well as state and federal regulations.

Staff writer Karen Rouse can be reached at krouse@denverpost.com or 303-820-1684.