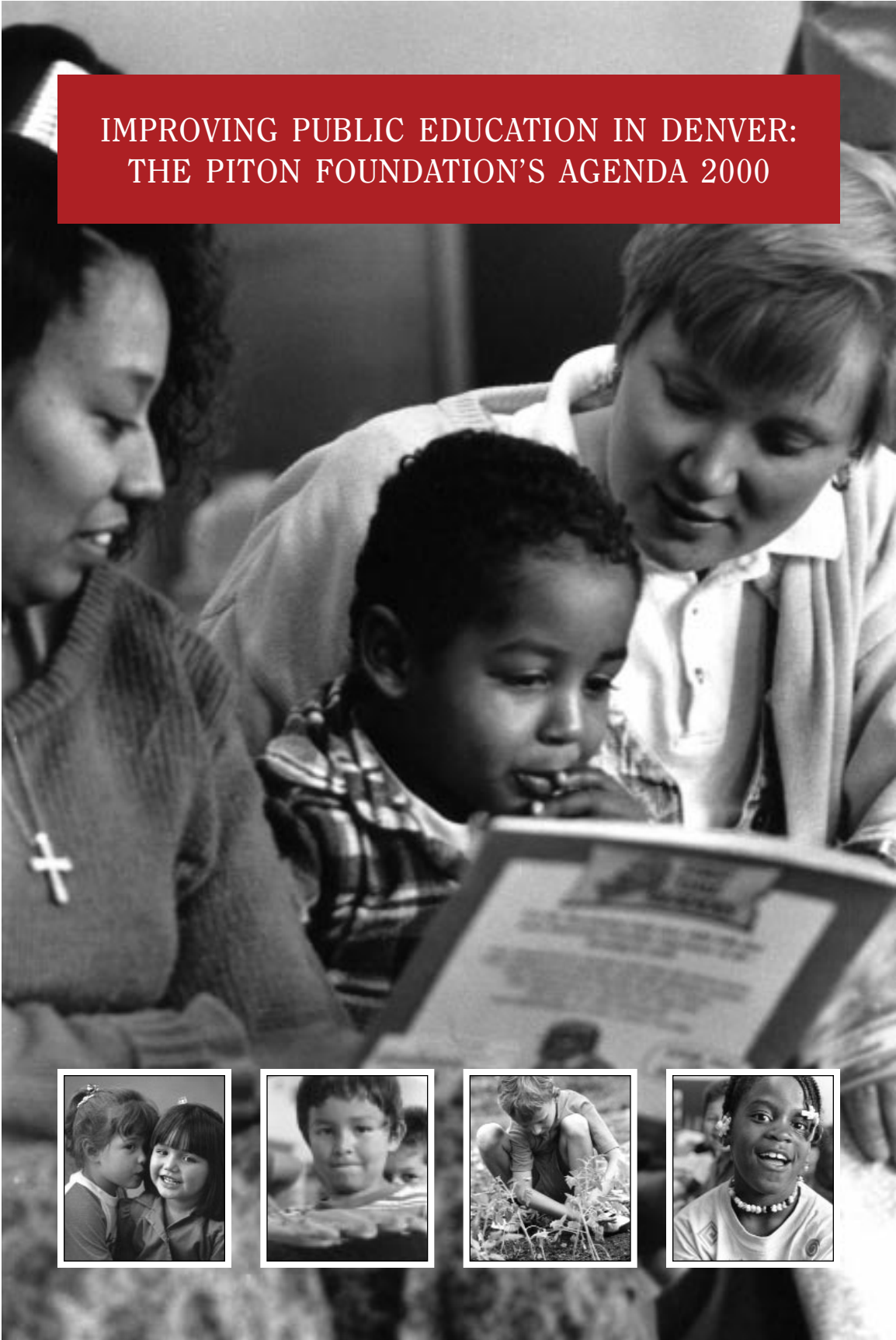
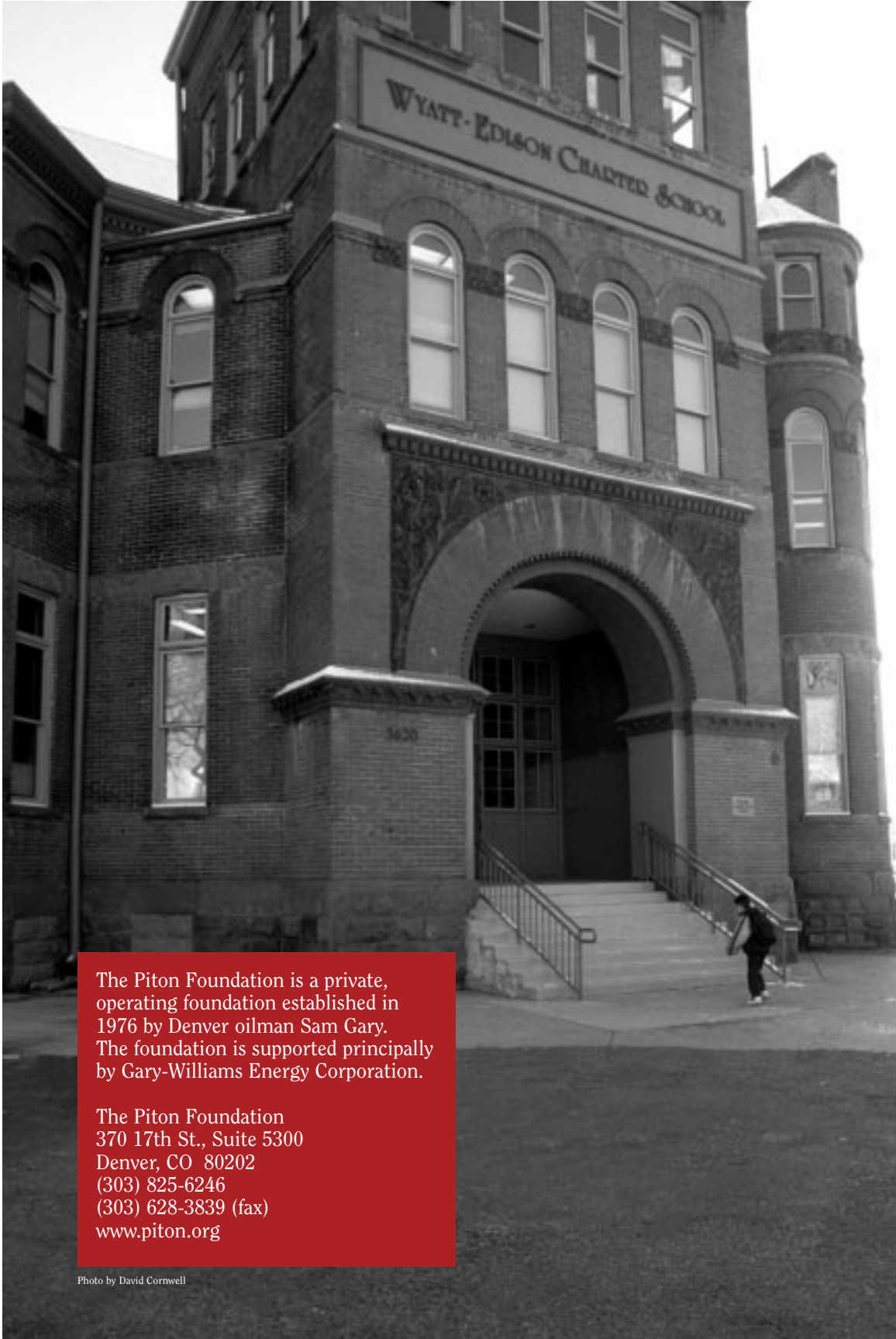


IMPROVING PUBLIC EDUCATION IN DENVER:
THE PITON FOUNDATION'S AGENDA 2000





The Piton Foundation is a private, operating foundation established in 1976 by Denver oilman Sam Gary. The foundation is supported principally by Gary-Williams Energy Corporation.

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Photo by David Cornwell



Dear Colleague:

Our purpose in sharing this report — the first in a series of publications on The Piton Foundation’s programs — is to inform the community about the role we play in Denver. As an operating foundation, Piton develops, manages and/or incubates programs to carry out its mission: *to provide opportunities for children and their families to move from poverty and dependence to self-reliance.*

The projects you will read about in this report are examples of this form of philanthropy. Unlike other private foundations, Piton does not accept unsolicited grant proposals. We do, however, provide support to community partners with whom we collaborate to achieve common goals.

Currently, we focus on five program areas: creating economic opportunity for families, strengthening neighborhoods, supporting youth development, increasing access to vital information, and improving public education, which is the topic of this report.

The Piton Foundation regards its work in public education reform as a long-term commitment. We have learned that persistent social issues do not respond to quick fixes, but must be addressed with multiple strategies. With each success and failure, we attempt to build on the lessons we have learned to develop a more informed approach.

Over time, our work in the schools has taught us that above all, we must be flexible in our approach and well connected to communities. We want always to be open to new opportunities and new ideas about improving public education. Listening well and being adaptable will help us achieve that goal.



Mary Gittings Cronin
President & Executive Director



Alan Gottlieb
Education Program Officer
(agottlie@piton.org)

PHILOSOPHY

The Piton Foundation strives toward a straightforward but ambitious vision — *a better future for the low-income children of Denver*. But that vision will remain unrealized as long as so many of our most vulnerable children fail to get a quality education. National research shows that succeeding academically and completing school increases the likelihood of children escaping poverty, forming strong families and raising successful children of their own. That is why improving public education is one of our key program areas.

We believe that public schools should be capable of successfully educating all children. But we also believe that this can't happen unless and until:

- Parents play an integral role in their children's schooling;
- Individual schools have the autonomy to innovate and select strategies best suited to their student populations;
- Each school consists of a team of dedicated, well-prepared professionals working together toward commonly agreed-upon goals.

Over the years, Piton has promoted parental involvement in a variety of ways. The foundation has been a leading advocate for site-based decision making in Denver schools. Also, we helped launch the Family Resource Schools program, which included, among its primary goals, parental involvement and education. And, working with the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, a national organization dedicated to systemic reform of urban school systems, Piton has sponsored community organizing workshops for parents on school reform issues.

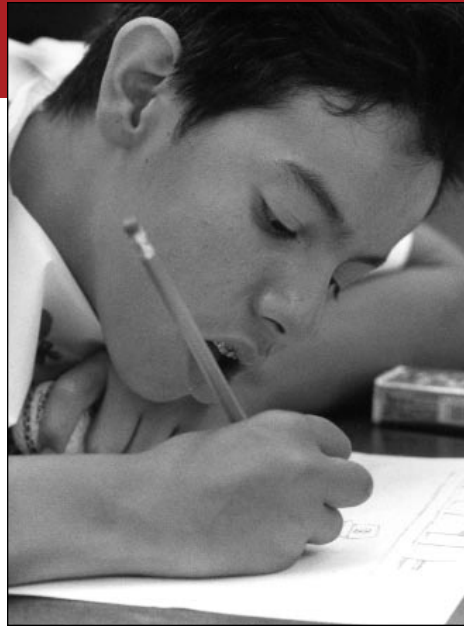


Photo by Christopher Takagi

The Piton Foundation believes that all children must receive a quality education in order to succeed in life.

More recently, the foundation has been working with the Denver Public Schools to produce data-rich annual reports on each of the city's public schools. We believe these profiles will allow parents to make informed choices about which schools best fit the needs of their children, and to study the strengths and shortcomings of their local schools. We believe that equipped with valuable information, parents can continue to act as effective advocates for meaningful school reform.

Over the years, Piton has worked on promoting systemic reform within the Denver Public Schools (DPS), and on supporting innovative schools and programs within individual schools. The foundation believes strongly in school choice. Choice is not an end unto itself, but a way of promoting healthy competition that spurs the kind of systemic reform and improvement we believe in so strongly.

Consequently, Piton supports research-based programs that employ a variety of educational approaches, as well as charter schools that break the mold — like Denver’s Wyatt-Edison, P.S. 1 and Odyssey charters. The foundation also supports more traditional neighborhood schools that have challenged themselves by discarding conventional wisdom and employing cutting-edge strategies. Through efforts currently underway at Manual High School and Newlon and Cheltenham elementary schools, the foundation hopes to promote school communities with cohesive teams, operating under a unified vision of what works best for their children. We hope these schools, and the processes they employ in their redesign, will serve as examples for other schools, and for the system as a whole.

Piton also is involved in a partnership with Denver Public Schools to operate school-based community centers that offer to children, youth and adults educational, vocational and recreational activities after school, in the evenings and during the summer.

Most recently, Piton has begun exploring, in partnership with DPS and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the benefits of granting autonomy to schools in two communities — Cole and the westside. What form this autonomy might take is not yet clear. But Piton firmly supports the underlying idea: that bringing the governance of schools closer to the people who support and attend those schools is essential if inner-city children are to receive the education they need and deserve.

DPS Enrollment, 1999-2000

African American	14,550 (20.9%)
American Indian	909 (1.3%)
Asian	2,367 (3.4%)
Latino	35,653 (51.1%)
White	16,297 (23.4%)
Total	69,776

DPS Free-Lunch Participation, 1999-2000

Elementary Schools	60.7%
Middle Schools	59.1%
High Schools	39.7%
Total	54.6%

**To qualify for free school lunch, a family's income cannot exceed 130 percent of federal poverty guidelines — or \$21,710 for a family of four — in 1999.*

DPS Graduation Rate, 1999

African American	68.4%
American Indian	52.5%
Asian	76.2%
Latino	54.5%
White	75.5%
Total	64.9%

DPS CSAP Scores, 1999

4th grade reading	
unsatisfactory	22%
partially proficient	39%
proficient or advanced	31%
no scores available	8%

4th grade writing	
unsatisfactory	31%
partially proficient	39%
proficient or advanced	16%
no scores available	14%

7th grade reading	
unsatisfactory	25%
partially proficient	31%
proficient or advanced	31%
no scores available	14%

7th grade writing	
unsatisfactory	5%
partially proficient	57%
proficient or advanced	19%
no scores available	19%

5th grade math	
unsatisfactory	31%
partially proficient	42%
proficient or advanced	20%
no scores available	7%

A LOOK BACK

Over the past decade, the foundation has helped launch and participated in a host of initiatives aimed at improving the quality of public education in the heart of Denver. Throughout this time, our focus has been on boosting achievement among the city's low-income students.

Piton was among the organizations involved in the founding of **Family Resource Schools** in 1989. The program, initially located in six inner-city elementary schools, eventually expanded to nine schools. This program was aimed at boosting student achievement, strengthening the capacity of families to support their children's learning and development, and forging partnerships between schools and the communities they serve. At its best, the program transformed neighborhood elementary schools into after-hours community centers, where parents and their children could learn side-by-side. Children received one-on-one tutoring, acquired computer skills and participated in a variety of activities too numerous to list here. Parents, meanwhile, were able to take classes in effective parenting, work toward their GED, learn English and boost their own literacy.

Although the centrally-managed program no longer exists, the family-centered philosophy it espoused lives on in many of the schools.

Over the years, Piton also has been a leading advocate for the decentralization of decision-making and authority within Denver Public Schools. Early in 1991, with the threat of a strike by teachers looming, Piton helped form **Citizens for Quality Schools (CQS)**, an advocacy organization that pushed for



Photo by William Swartz

Piton was among the organizations involved in creating Family Resource Schools, which transformed elementary schools into community centers where parents and their children could learn side-by-side.

decentralization through the creation and development of collaborative decision-making (CDM) committees. The organization's first action was to support Governor Roy Romer in a bold move, without precedent in the country. As part of his effort to avert a teacher strike, Romer inserted site-based management into the teachers' contract. CQS



Photo by William Swartz

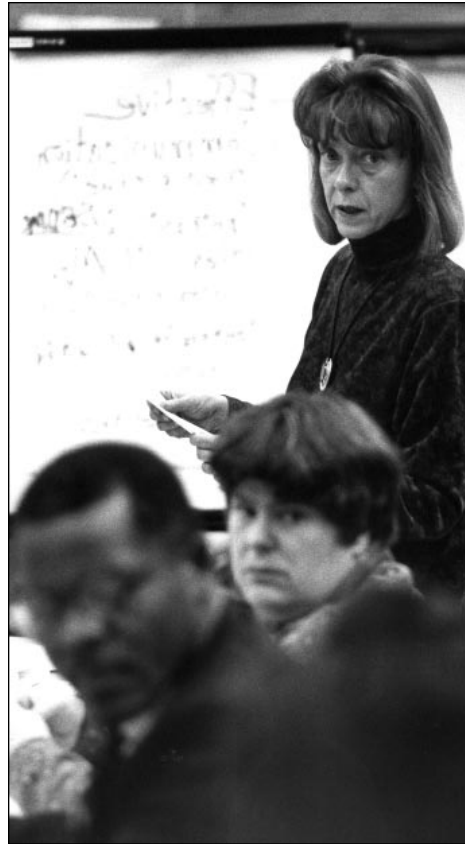


Photo by David Cornwell

The Center for Quality Schools served for several years as the only provider of training for collaborative decision-making committees.



supported decentralization not for its own sake, but as a means of improving student achievement, as well as community participation in the schools.

In 1992, CQS responded to a lack of on-going training for CDM members by founding the Center for Quality Schools, which served for several years as the only training ground for CDM members and provider of technical assistance for the committees. In 1997, DPS opened its own CDM office, and in 1998, CQS and the Center for Quality Schools disbanded, its primary mission accomplished.

CURRENT EFFORTS

Currently, Piton employs five strategies to implement its educational agenda: advocating for systemic change within Denver Public Schools; working as part of the Philanthropic Education Partnership with the Denver and Rose community foundations; supporting innovative programs and schools; bringing together innovative thinkers to move issues forward; and, supporting the local work of the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform. Below we will touch briefly on each of these.

Systemic change

This is a time of dramatic change for Denver Public Schools. A new superintendent, Chip Zullinger, came on the scene in 1999, and has demonstrated an eagerness to work closely with communities. The most dramatic example is the possibility of allowing unprecedented autonomy to groups of schools wishing to pursue stronger relationships with their surrounding communities. These new relationships should, in turn, prompt authentic, community-based school reform, designed to lead to heightened student achievement.

At this writing, the exact shape of this initiative remains unclear. But the commitment of the school board and superintendent, and the interest of many local, as well as two national, funders — the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Ford Foundation — gives this ambitious undertaking great momentum.

The Philanthropic Education Partnership

Piton pools resources and expertise with the Denver and Rose community foundations to promote meaningful



Photo by David Cornwell

Through support from the Philanthropic Education Partnership, two elementary schools are embarking on a wide-ranging redesign of their educational programs.

reform in Denver Public Schools. In addition to limited grant-making, the partnership has developed and spearheads the following initiatives:

- **Rethinking Excellence.** Early in 1999, the partnership issued a Request for Proposals and then selected two public elementary schools in Denver. Newlon and Cheltenham will undergo a thorough, data-driven self-examination, assisted by outside experts as well as extensive team-building activities both within the school and between the school and its surrounding community. Once this process is complete, the schools will embark on a wide-ranging redesign of their educational programs. The partnership has committed to funding this process for three years, and then will determine whether it should be expanded to other schools.

■ **Manual High School reforms.** The end of 25 years of busing in 1997 spelled dramatic change for Manual High School. Under busing, the school was racially and economically integrated. As a neighborhood school, Manual has a student body that is overwhelmingly low-income and of color. Under Principal Nancy Sutton, Manual has changed from a school that tracked some students into a college preparatory curriculum and others into a more general course of study to one where all students are expected to achieve at a high level. The partnership has supported this effort financially and with an intensive commitment of staff time. Our involvement has focused primarily on supporting Nancy Sutton and on providing funding and technical assistance for professional development of the Manual staff. At present, the partnership is focusing its efforts on supporting a new partnership between the school and Children's Hospital. It is hoped that this new partnership will evolve over the next few years into a medical careers magnet program at Manual.

■ **Northwest Denver Education Initiative.** The partnership has organized a diverse group of concerned residents of northwest Denver to study an array of educational models and ideas, locally and nationally. Initiative participants will use their new knowledge to propose an educational initiative for the children of their community. Northwest Denver is a predominantly Latino community. Latinos comprise more than 50 percent of all Denver Public Schools students. The partnership is committed to working closely with Denver's Latinos to help improve their children's academic achievement, and their access to the powers-that-be within the school district.



Photo by David Cornwell

Piton supports research-based programs that employ a variety of educational approaches, including several charter schools — like Wyatt-Edison pictured here.

Supporting Innovative Programs and Schools

The foundation seeks out educational innovators because it believes that supporting them financially and logistically represents a sensible investment in the future of public education in Denver. Over the past two years, Piton has provided money and technical assistance to three charter schools — Wyatt-Edison, P.S. 1 and Odyssey — and three public schools — Mitchell and Ashley Elementary and Manual High School.



Photo by Christopher Takagi

Piton is involved in a partnership with Denver Public Schools to operate school-based community centers at three middle schools.

Piton also provides technical assistance to three Beacon Neighborhood Centers — in a partnership with Denver Public Schools and Rose Community Foundation. The centers, which opened in summer of 1998 in Cole, Lake and Rishel middle schools, are school-based community centers that offer children, youth and families a wide range of services and activities after school, in the evenings and during the summer. These include educational enrichment activities such as tutoring, as well as arts and crafts, sports, computers, field trips, community service projects, employment opportunities and leadership training. For adults, the centers offer GED and ESL classes. Beacon centers are based on a youth development approach that helps young people develop the skills and abilities to become economically self-sufficient adults, successful parents and active members of their communities.

Bringing Together Innovative Thinkers

Educators work long hours, and often find themselves under a great deal

of stress. It's hardly surprising, then, that many teachers and principals long for opportunities to gather with colleagues to discuss the educational issues they face each day. Over the past two years, Piton has facilitated an informal monthly gathering of some of Denver's cutting-edge educators. The gatherings take place in a private home, and allow participants a chance to catch up with old friends, to share concerns and to work together to devise solutions to vexing problems.

The Student Engagement Project is a newer initiative jointly funded by US Bank and the foundation. It brings together 20 diverse thinkers from various walks of life. Their mission is to study why so many students are not engaged in school-based learning, and to come up with some creative ways of remedying the situation. The group consists of educators, youth workers and advocates, journalists, advertising and marketing executives, and, of course, youths. Participants are committed to developing some type of tangible product before the series of monthly seminars concludes in the fall of 2000.



Photo by David Cornwell

The mission of the Student Engagement Project is to study why so many students are not engaged in school-based learning, and come up with some creative ways of remedying the situation.

Supporting the Work of the Cross City Campaign

Piton's education staff also oversees the local staff of the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, a Chicago-based organization of school reformers from seven cities across the country. Most recently, Cross City has conducted training sessions for parents and other concerned residents who wish to organize communities around school reform issues. Cross City advocates for decentralization of decision-making authority in public schools, the creation of small schools and more effective accountability measures in schools and in districts' central offices. The organization also provides a highly effective networking system, through site visits and meetings held regularly in member cities.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Seeing exactly where our work will take us far into the future is impossible, because we believe in remaining flexible and seizing opportunities as they arise. In the near term, however, Piton intends to support the reform agenda of DPS Superintendent Chip Zullinger and the school board, continue its work in individual schools, to work closely with school reform groups, and to support and encourage innovation.

We also expect, in coming months, to launch the following efforts:

- Placing a renewed emphasis on early childhood education issues. As research establishes indisputably the importance of a child's first years on brain development, Piton is beginning a thorough study of early childhood educational models. We expect to develop some initiatives in this area in the coming months and years.
- Supporting the work of the Stapleton Foundation, which will work in partnership with DPS, the Stapleton Redevelopment Corp., and Forest City, the project developer, to design a "mini-campus" of elementary schools, each with a distinct educational philosophy.



Photo by David Cornwell

Piton is beginning a thorough study of early childhood educational models.

The one certainty in school reform work is that the journey has no discernible end. At Piton, we are committed to helping transform Denver schools into academically excellent neighborhood centers, responsive to the needs and wishes of their communities. Schools of this type will prepare their students to lead productive lives and to play meaningful roles in shaping the 21st century.

THE PITON FOUNDATION



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