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Explaining the process for Montbello

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More than a year ago, we called on the community to engage in a thoughtful conversation about improving educational outcomes for all kids. What we hear from the community is that for far too long, northeast Denver has not had the resources, the support, or the urgency to deliver great results.

Nowhere is this more evident than one staggering statistic: Of the 100 students that enter Montbello High School as freshmen, only four of them will enter college without needing remediation.

This is an outrage. With the help of a \$6 million federal grant, we have the clear demand from our parents and students that they deserve better, and we have a thoughtful and engaging community process to shepherd us toward the best results.

There are misunderstandings about the process, so here are the facts:

High-performing, district-run schools are the centerpiece of transformation in the far northeast. While much of the conversation has focused on a mythical conflict between charter schools and district-run schools, the far northeast transformation is built on strong district-run schools.

When we talk to parents, their top priority is not the governance model of the school; they care that their child goes to a great school. The district is proposing that the three schools at the Montbello campus will be district-run schools.

Admissions to those schools will be based on student choice, not a lottery. No school will be able to consider a student's grade point average or special-needs status. Because the schools will be smaller and provide more individualized instruction to students, it's true that students will not always get their first choice. However, no student will be denied the opportunity to enroll in a school near his neighborhood. Indeed, there will be more high-quality seats for students than what is available now.

We have learned from the mistakes — and the successes — of Manual High School. The closure of Manual was not a perfect process, but the far northeast transformation is not a school closure. The schools in Montbello and Green Valley Ranch will remain open. Currently enrolled students can stay at their schools.

Last year, Manual boasted stellar attendance rates and rapidly increasing test scores, and we will incorporate Manual's best practices in the far northeast. We know these changes will be hard, but they are the right steps to take for the children of our community.

The far northeast has incredibly talented leaders who themselves support the need for more dramatic change to generate the results that students deserve. And these improvements will not undo the proud extracurricular heritage of Montbello; there will continue to be a unified and expanded set of athletic teams serving all kids in the far northeast.

The process is far from complete, and the community will have multiple opportunities to provide input. Designed by A+ Denver and Denver Public Schools, the Far Northeast Community Committee has 45 members from the community and has been meeting since April. Teachers and students gave critical input, and FNECC held nine public sessions where the community was asked to provide feedback.

Even so, many community members are justifiably frustrated that they are just now hearing of the proposed transformation. This is an opportunity, not an obstacle. Go to www.fneccschools.org to learn more about the process and the upcoming meetings.

While there may be legitimate concerns about the proposal, we must put the interests of the kids of northeast Denver first, and the conversation should be based on facts. This will be a model process for community engagement, and it will continue to balance the urgent need to give our kids what they deserve with the opportunity to let community members design and shape the plan.

Democratic state Rep. Terrance Carroll is speaker of the House. Michael Hancock is a Denver City Council member. Signing this commentary were state Sen. Michael Johnston, D-Denver, RTD board member Chris Martinez, and Angela Williams, a Democratic candidate for state representative.