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Rocky Mountain News

Monday, November 26, 2007

'Hidden' homeless of Jeffco

More than 2,200 attend county schools, 2% of district's students

By Myung Oak Kim <<http://www.rockymountainnews.com/staff/myung->

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Monday, November 26, 2007

Linda McConnell © Special to the Rocky

Aubrey Stacy holds 9-month-old Mable Smith as she and her other children, from left, Elizabeth Smith, 4, Sahara Smith, 12, and Elias Smith, 9, make a pecan pie for Thanksgiving last week in Arvada. The family is living in transitional housing provided by the Family Tree, a nonprofit social service agency. Sahara and Elias, who attend Jeffco Public Schools, are among the largest homeless student population in the state.

Aubrey Stacy lost her telemarketing job in June 2006 and ended up on the street with her kids two months later.

The 33-year-old woman stayed in a series of shelters in Denver and Englewood. The upheaval was especially difficult for her children, who changed schools three times in a year.

Her daughter Sahara, 12, fell behind three grade levels in reading. Her son, Elias, 9, acted out at school. They worried for their safety and whether they would have a roof over their heads.

Since January, however, the family has been living in an Arvada apartment - temporary housing provided by the nonprofit agency Family Tree. Sahara is catching up in reading at Arvada Middle School. Elias' behavior is improving at Lawrence Elementary.

Sahara and Elias are part of the largest homeless student population in the state.

Last school year, more than 2,200 homeless children were identified in Jefferson County schools, and officials expect this year's count to be similar.

With the highest concentration in Arvada and the Wadsworth Boulevard-Alameda Avenue area of Lakewood, Jeffco's homeless student population is more than double that of Denver Public Schools.

It also has a higher rate of homeless students. Two percent of students across Jeffco are homeless, compared with 1 percent in Denver, according to officials in those districts.

The homeless problem in Jeffco is "hidden," said Sheree Dougherty, homeless coordinator for Jeffco Public Schools. "People don't know that it even exists."

"The homeless have been hidden in Jefferson County because they're doubled up and tripled up with family and friends," said Linda Barringer, a Family Tree administrator. "You don't see them on the sidewalk."

While Denver has made great strides with its well-publicized 10-year plan to end homelessness in the city, suburban counties are just beginning to address their homeless problems.

Jeffco government and nonprofit officials recently began developing a plan called "Heading Home - A Proposal to End Homelessness in Jefferson County."

The most critical needs are housing and emergency shelter.

Jefferson County, which spans 773 square miles to the west of Denver, has no general-purpose shelter.

There are about 50 shelter beds - accessible to people who meet certain criteria, such as having a job - provided by a handful of nonprofit agencies, including the Jeffco Action Center, a Lakewood social service provider.

"If I'm homeless right now and I need a place to stay for tonight in Jeffco, there is no place for me to go. I have to go downtown (to Denver)," said Mag Strittmatter, Jeffco Action Center's executive director. "It's very sad."

Transitional housing options are also bleak.

About 150 apartments, duplexes and townhomes are spread throughout the county. Denver, by contrast, has almost 800.

The waiting list for Family Tree's 29 transitional homes is more than a year, and the wait for its Section 8 low-income units is several years, Barringer said.

"There absolutely is a shortage of beds and housing," said Mary Boland, director of community assistance for Jeffco's Department of Human Services. "Most people don't want to admit that there is a homeless issue in Jefferson County."

Almost 70 percent of the homeless people identified in Jefferson County are families with children, according to a January survey by the Metropolitan Denver Homeless Initiative.

The children are staying in motels along Colfax Avenue, in cars and campgrounds. The vast majority are "doubled up" - packed into homes or apartments two or three families at a time.

The families often are newly homeless due to economic hardships - such as a

job loss or rising rents related to the foreclosure crisis - rather than "chronically" homeless because of substance abuse or mental illness.

Dougherty, of Jeffco Schools, said her district's high numbers are due to better reporting by school administrators and higher homelessness caused by the lack of affordable housing.

In the 2004-2005 school year, Jeffco schools identified 1,220 homeless children. The next year, they counted 2,680. The count dropped to 2,241 in the 2006-2007 school year.

More than 300 homeless children live in Arvada, with some schools having 50 to 60 homeless children.

Schools serving these children must devote more time to providing basic needs, Dougherty said.

"They're acting like social services more than ever before," she said.

Homeless children also have more demands for remedial education, medical problems and special education services.

Nearly 18 percent of homeless children in Jeffco are classified as special-education students. Just over 6 percent are English language learners.

Leaders must address the homeless children problem, Dougherty said. Otherwise, "It'll be a very scary future."

Who, where they are

Homeless population in Jeffco Public Schools (out of a total enrollment of 84,000 students):

2,241: Students counted as homeless during the 2006-07 school year

1,220: Students counted as homeless during the 2004-05 school year

74 percent: Doubled up in a home with other families

5 percent: Living in motels

9 percent: Living in transitional housing

53 percent: Caucasian

35 percent: Hispanic

4 percent: Immigrants

18 percent: Have special-education needs

61: Number of homeless at Arvada High School in 2006-07

57: Number of homeless at Molholm Elementary in 2006-07

56: Number of homeless at Lawrence Elementary in 2006-07

The Denver Post

Monday, November 26, 2007

Ex-teacher still passing along her pioneering spirit

By Jeremy P. Meyer
The Denver Post

Article Last Updated: 11/26/2007 12:09:46 AM MST

Marie Anderson was the only African-American sophomore at East High School in 1929 when a counselor told her she shouldn't worry about grades or going to college.

"She said, 'You'll be wasting your father's money, because all you'll do is be someone's cook or do the day work,' " said Anderson, who married and became Marie Greenwood.

Those words became a challenge to Greenwood — who went on to graduate from West High School, get her college degree from what is now the University of Northern Colorado and become the first African-American teacher under contract at Denver Public Schools.

Greenwood — who turns 95 on Saturday — was honored in 2001 with a school named after her in northeast Denver and had her notes and papers preserved by the Denver Public Library.

This summer she self-published a book about her experiences, called "Every Child Can Learn."

Next month, she will be the guest speaker at the fall commencement of UNC in Greeley and will tell the graduates to continue their lifelong quest for learning and to be ready to fight to get what they want.

"The world does not owe them a thing," she said.

For much of Greenwood's early life, she experienced the barriers of a racist world.

As a fourth-grader, the girl who was the only child of a railroad chef and domestic worker endured insults from her teacher who refused to call on her — though she almost always knew the answer.

"I always wanted to excel," she said in her Denver apartment last week. "I vowed I was going to be better than everyone else."

A more welcoming place

Greenwood transferred to West High, a more inclusive school under principal Harry V. Kepner.

She graduated in 1931 third in her class. At the time, the state offered full-ride, four-year scholarships to state colleges to the top five graduates at each Denver school.

Greenwood went to Colorado Teacher's College in Greeley, but she had to live off campus with other minorities and could not participate in any club activities.

She also was not allowed to student-teach, but she graduated in four years, took the state teaching exam and accepted a job in 1935 to teach first grade at Denver's Whittier School for \$1,200 a year.

"The school was practically all black," Greenwood said. "That was the only place we could teach."

Since she had no classroom experience, her first few weeks were bedlam. Children were out of control, she said.

"The principal told me to forget the theory of teaching with a soft voice and being gentle," she said. "She told me to get control and teach. I lowered the boom."

She taught for 10 more years at the school, married Bill Greenwood in 1943, began having children and moved to a house in west Denver off Sixth Avenue.

Back to the classroom

Greenwood had four children and resumed teaching in 1955 when the principal at Newlon Elementary near her home asked her to teach first grade.

DPS, however, had no black teachers outside of northeast Denver, and administrators were worried.

The first year she began, administrators would call the school to make sure there were no problems.

"By the spring of 1956, the administrators quit calling," she said. "The door was wide open for our minority teachers everywhere."

Greenwood continued to teach at Newlon until 1974. She retired, built a home in the mountains and continued to read to children at libraries and schools. She experienced tragedies in her later life, with her husband dying in a car wreck in 1983 and her eldest son, Richard, dying from cancer in 2003.

Greenwood said she was surprised in 2001 when DPS officials called and said she was going to be honored with her own school.

She tries to go to the school at least four times a year to read to the students.

"Every time I drive up to that school, I am thrilled to death," she said. "I say to myself, 'Thank you, Lord.' "

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The Denver Post

Thursday, November 22, 2007

Catholic school wins funds but loses bid to be a charter

By Colleen O'Connor
The Denver Post

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[%20Catholic%20school%20wins%20funds%20but%20loses%20bid%20to%20be%20a%20charter>](#)

Article Last Updated: 11/22/2007 01:35:09 AM MST

Escuela de Guadalupe, the award-winning Catholic elementary school struggling to survive financially, achieved its goal of raising \$200,000 to keep the school open.

"Reaching this important fundraising milestone gives us some breathing room," said Christine Marquez, chairwoman of the school's board.

"Now we can focus on identifying the long-term solutions that will enable us to sustain our successful program."

Converting to a secular charter is no longer an option. On Monday, Denver Public Schools rejected the school's application.

Three major donors committed \$150,000 in challenge gifts to the school, which serves mostly low-income Latino students. Parents also worked hard to raise funds, including a yard sale and fundraiser held at the Museo de las Americas.

"These parents are not a highly resourced group," said president David Card, "but they did some really extraordinary things."

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The Denver Post

Wednesday, November 21, 2007

DPS closures hit home

By Jeremy P. Meyer
The Denver Post

Article Last Updated: 11/21/2007 06:04:15 AM MST

Students asked why, teachers pondered their futures and a principal gave comfort food to her staff on the day after Denver's school board approved closing eight elementary schools.

Tuesday, Roberta Mantione — principal at Hallett Elementary, one of the targeted schools — brought in bagels and cream cheese for her staff.

"We need to feed them," she said. "The people here who have been involved are disappointed and sad."

Denver Public Schools has 30,000 empty seats because of declining enrollment.

On Monday, the board voted unanimously to close the schools and redesign programs at five others to save space and improve student achievement.

Closing eight buildings will get rid of 3,000 empty seats and save the district \$3.5 million a year that will be channeled back into classrooms, DPS officials say.

"People understand that the building is half empty," Mantione said. "But there's still the sadness of letting go."

District officials say Hallett students will be reassigned to either Stedman or Smith elementary schools, which will have more programs and offerings than Hallett.

While DPS officials hope the students will excel in their new environments, Mantione said, the children are worried about going to new schools and needing to make new friends.

"Kids are worried they will be made fun of because they are from a school that closed," Mantione said.

In Erik Myhren's fourth-grade class, students were hoping to graduate from Hallett and now say they wonder if their classmates will be in the same school next year.

"I'm worried that I won't see our teachers or our friends," said Juan Sanchez, a student in Myhren's class.

"I'm really shy, and I may not be able to make friends," said Karina Monte.

Officials at Stedman and Smith are writing letters and inviting Hallett students to events.

"It's really important that kids know it is not their fault," said Superintendent Michael Bennet. ". . . We need to use this time to ensure them that these schools are welcoming places and their achievement is front and center."

The other schools to be closed are Del Pueblo, Whiteman, Wyman, Remington,

Smedley, Fallis and Mitchell. District officials say they are developing transition plans for all 3,000 students affected by the closures.

Some of the loudest-voiced opposition came from parent and community groups in northwest Denver, who balked at the closure of Smedley Elementary.

They also disagreed with the creation of a new preschool through eighth-grade school at what is now Horace Mann Middle School.

Smedley students even made a last-minute appeal to board members by attending Monday's meeting, dressed in their school T-shirts.

The board agreed to close Smedley and Remington to create a new Horace Mann, led by Remington principal Veronica Benavidez.

On Tuesday, Benavidez sent letters to parents inviting them to a Nov. 29 meeting to help design the new Horace Mann. She also invited them to tour Greenlee and Centennial K-8 schools in the coming weeks.

Smedley officials declined to talk on Tuesday, saying the emotions were still raw.

One parent who has children at both Remington and Smedley said she will leave the neighborhood before sending them to Horace Mann.

"I don't like it at all," said Sarah Sanchez. "I don't know about Horace Mann. I don't think it's safe. I think the little kids will be bullied."

The district predicts 710 students at the new Horace Mann, and fewer than 200 of those are likely to be middle schoolers from the existing school.

"There will be a lot more elementary kids than middle-schoolers," Bennet said. "It will be vital for adults to enforce the shared-school culture."

Los Angeles Times

Saturday, November 24, 2007

6 Denver high schools may offer birth control

A task force has recommended that campus clinics dispense contraceptives. Critics say that would encourage teens to have sex.

By DeeDee Correll, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

November 24, 2007

DENVER -- At least once a day, a teenage girl walks into North High School's health clinic, wanting to find out whether she's pregnant.

Frequently, it turns out she is.

The city's teen birth rate is more than double the statewide rate of 24.3 births per 1,000 girls age 15 to 17, and Denver school officials are considering a proposal to dispense contraceptives in its six high-school-based health clinics, which serve the district's most impoverished students.

The recommendation by a task force studying the future of the clinics comes shortly after a highly publicized case in Portland, Maine, where a local school board allowed a clinic to dispense birth control to middle-school students.

The Denver proposal would affect only high school students, but it has raised similar concerns: Opponents say the easy availability would encourage youngsters to have sex.

Proponents counter that sexually active teens should have as much access to birth control as possible.

"While it's not a panacea to unplanned pregnancies, access is extremely critical," said Lori Casillas, executive director of the Colorado Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Parenting and Prevention.

Most of the country's school-based health clinics do not dispense contraceptives, said Divya Mohan, spokeswoman for the National Assembly on School-Based Health Care. Some school districts prohibit it.

That's the case for Denver Public Schools, whose students can visit school-based clinics for pregnancy and STD testing. But if they want condoms or birth control pills, officials refer them to an off-campus community health center, said Dr. Steve Federico, who oversees the school clinics for Denver Health. (The agency also runs a hospital and other community health centers.)

The problem for a lot of students is getting there, said Janine Solano, a physician assistant at North High School in northwest Denver.

"They'll say, 'I couldn't find a ride. I couldn't find a friend to take me. My parents are really strict and I couldn't get away,'" Solano said.

A 43-member task force charged with defining the future of the clinics cited those factors when it recommended that the clinics begin offering contraceptives.

Solano said she would continue to counsel students that abstinence is the only foolproof birth control method. But, she said, "for children who choose not to do that, we need to take care of those kids."

Critics say offering contraceptives in schools amounts to abandoning standards for teens.

"If you think they're going to do it anyway, they're going to do it anyway," said Joneen Mackenzie, executive director of WAIT Training, an abstinence education program.

There is no evidence that offering contraceptives makes teens more likely to have sex, said Katy Suellentrop of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies.

Research does suggest that dispensing birth control can increase the number of sexually active youths who use contraceptives, she said, and in some cases has decreased teen pregnancy rates.

Denver school and health officials say parents haven't reacted strongly to the recommendation, which the school board has yet to formally consider. But some parents may distinguish between handing out condoms and writing a prescription for the pill, said Elaine Gantz Berman, a member of the Colorado State Board of Education and chairwoman of the task force.

In an informal e-mail survey of 180 people, Denver City Councilman Doug Linkhart said, more than 70% said they were fine with contraceptives in the schools -- as long as parents gave consent.

"I'm not against it, but I think the parent should have knowledge of it," said parent Faye Alexander, who has two teen daughters and heads a community committee at Denver's Montbello High School.

That raises the question of whether requiring parental consent would inhibit students from asking for contraceptives. It's a requirement that doesn't exist off-campus: Minors can obtain contraceptives without parental notification in Colorado.

School officials await the task force's recommendation on that issue, Denver schools spokesman Alex Sanchez said.

Schools might dispense birth control

By DeeDee CORRELL

LOS ANGELES TIMES

November 25, 2007 - 1:00AM

DENVER - At least once a day, a teenage girl walks into North High School's health clinic, wanting to find out if she's pregnant. Frequently, it turns out she is.

With the city's teen birthrate more than double the statewide rate of 24.3 births per 1,000 girls between the ages of 15 and 17, Denver school officials are considering a proposal to dispense contraceptives in six school-based health clinics that serve the district's most impoverished students.

The recommendation by a task force studying the future of the clinics comes shortly after a Portland, Maine, case in which the local school board allowed a clinic to dispense birth control to middle school students.

The Denver proposal would apply to only high school students, but it has raised many of the same concerns: Opponents say the easy availability would encourage kids to have sex.

Proponents counter that kids who have chosen to have sex should have as much access to birth control as possible.

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The majority of the country's school-based health clinics do not dispense contraceptives, said Divya Mohan, spokeswoman for the National Assembly on School-Based Health Care. In some cases, the school districts prohibit it.

That's the case in Denver Public Schools, where students can visit one of six high school-based clinics for pregnancy and STD testing.

But if they want condoms or birth control pills, officials refer them to a community health center off-campus, said Dr. Steve Federico, who oversees the school clinics for Denver Health, which also runs a hospital and other community health centers in the city.

The problem for a lot of students is getting there, said Janine Solano, a physician assistant at North High School in northwest Denver.

"They'll say, 'I couldn't find a ride. I couldn't find a friend to take me. My parents are really strict, and I couldn't get away,'" she said.

A 43-member task force charged with defining the future of the clinics cited those factors when they recommended the clinics begin offering contraceptives directly.

Solano said she won't stop counseling students that abstinence is the only foolproof birth control method. But, she said, "For children who choose not to do that, we need to take care of those kids."

Critics liken the idea of contraceptives in the schools to abandoning standards for kids. "If you think they're going to do it anyway, they're going to do it anyway," said Joneen Mackenzie, executive director of WAIT Training, an abstinence-education program.

There is no evidence that offering contraceptives makes kids any more likely to have sex, said Katy Suellentrop of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies.

She said research does suggest dispensing birth control can increase the number of sexually active kids who use contraceptives, and in some cases, has decreased the teen pregnancy rate.

School and Denver health officials say parents haven't reacted strongly to the recommendation, which the school board hasn't considered formally. But some parents might distinguish between handing out condoms and writing a prescription for the pill, said Elaine Gantz Berman, a member of the State Board of Education and chairwoman of the task force.

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That raises the question of whether requiring parental consent would inhibit students from asking for contraceptives. It's a requirement that doesn't exist off school grounds: Minors can obtain contraceptives without parental notification in Colorado.

School officials await the task force's recommendation on that issue, said Denver Public Schools spokesman Alex Sanchez.

DETAILS

Task force recommends six school-based health clinics issue contraceptives to fight the problem of teenage pregnancies.

For more information, please contact the Communications Office at (720) 423-3414.