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Denver High School Settles Student Disputes

(AP) DENVER The fight began with name-calling in a classroom and had escalated by the time school let out into a brawl outside cheered on by dozens of excited students.

A couple days later, the two boys involved - plus their moms - were sitting around a table at North High School talking about what led to fists flying.

"I told him I was going to d--- slap him," one boy said, using slang for male anatomy. "I was playing."

"He did it maybe about three times and then I just kind of got irritated," said the other.

Some schools might suspend the fighters from classes for a few days and stop at that. In fact, that's the norm in Denver Public Schools, which relies on suspensions as a disciplinary tactic more than any other large district in Colorado.

But North is trying something different, an approach called restorative justice that Denver school board members in November will consider for use across the district.

The approach stresses understanding the harm done by misbehavior, usually by having those involved talk face to face, and then reaching agreement on how to make it right.

"It's not just about how this affects you guys," Jeremy Simians, North's restorative justice coordinator, told the two boys, "but about how that ripple effect goes out."

"It means I have to make phone calls and get his homework and I'm missing school to be here," one said. "I have a goal of perfect attendance and I'm not able to do that."

So did the teacher, whose room was the scene of the name-calling.

"It changes the whole environment of the classroom for sure," she said. "I feel a little disrespected that you guys would even do that in my classroom."

The boys shift in their seats, looking uncomfortable.

"How can this be made right?" Simians asked them. "What I would throw out are two options - you guys can pick one."

Write an article for the school paper about how you agreed not to fight again, he said, or write an apology letter to the class and read it aloud. Each picked one.

"Do you guys understand the importance of other people knowing you squashed it?" one mom asked.

"So other people don't egg us on?" said the boy who fought her son.

"Right," she said. "You guys have the power back."

If restorative justice sounds a bit touchy-feely, a concern raised by some in community meetings about the proposed policy change, consider Lookout Mountain.

Bob Anderson, DPS' director of prevention and intervention initiatives, brought restorative justice to the maximum-security juvenile facility when he ran the school there.

"Even in that environment, it's just that whole element of taking responsibility for your actions . . ." he said, referring to behavior inside the center. "It changed the whole flavor of the school."

The number of Lookout Mountain students completing high school subsequently rose from five or six a year to 35 to 40, he said.

Anderson, who is leading the effort to change DPS discipline policy, said about half of Denver schools handle discipline well, without banning students from classes for three to five days at a time.

But others are too quick to suspend students, he said, or rely too heavily on Denver police officers writing tickets that require trips to juvenile court.

Between 2001-02 and 2004-05, Denver schools, through the police officers working on campuses, annually referred more than 1,200 incidents for legal action.

That number dropped by half - it was 504 in 2006-07 - after the community group Padres and Jovenes Unidos placed Denver in a national study titled "Education on Lockdown: The Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track."

Their March 2005 report, which Anderson cites in community meetings, documented a rise in out-of-school suspensions and the harsher penalties of expulsion and referrals for legal action.

They also found black and Hispanic students were disproportionately affected: "Black students in DPS were given tickets at twice the rate of white students while Latino students were given tickets at seven times the rate of their white peers."

Ricardo Martinez, co-founder of Padres Unidos, said meetings with DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet and Denver Police Chief Gerry Whitman followed the report.

"More expulsions, suspensions and tickets always comes at the expense of academics," Martinez said. "We're linking how bad our schools are doing academically with how badly our schools are dealing with certain behaviors."

"We have never seen a school with high rates of expulsions and suspensions - and high academic performance," he added. "We see the opposite."

Padres Unidos also helped DPS win grants to pilot restorative justice in seven schools. Success in those programs - reflected in declining suspension rates - helped persuade DPS' discipline policy reform committee to champion the approach citywide.

"Our goal is to make discipline as developmentally appropriate as possible so that we're not treating an 8-year-old like an adult," DPS mom Jeanne Price, a committee member, told those attending a community meeting at East High School on Sept. 24.

"Our main goal is to keep kids in school as much as possible."

At Montbello High School, where restorative justice has been in effect two years, Principal Antwan Wilson estimates it has cut out-of-school suspensions by as much as 40 percent.

"We have kids who otherwise used to just argue and fight over the silliest of things," he said. "Now we're starting to hear kids say, 'Why don't we go to restorative justice?'"

Restorative justice doesn't necessarily get students out of a suspension, he pointed out, but "it helps prevent the next one."

"Most who go through it don't fight again," Wilson said.

Simons, North's restorative justice coordinator, stepped in when rumors of trouble began flying about a trio of cheerleaders.

Instead of waiting for something to happen, Simons pulled the girls in to talk. And just in time, said one of the three, who already had told friends to prepare for a melee.

"I was at the point where if I passed her in the hall, I wanted to hit her," one girl said.

"I think it helped because they set you down and make you talk," said another, sitting beside her. "I don't think we'd have chosen to come together and start talking about it."

Costs for implementing restorative justice throughout DPS are estimated at \$2 million, which would fund a coordinator or staff training at every school. Anderson said grant dollars could help defray those expenses.

He is especially keen about getting the program into elementary schools as a preventive measure. Anderson handles the worst discipline cases in DPS - about 800 per year - and he's seeing more and more fourth- and fifth-graders come through his office.

At Barrett Elementary on a recent Tuesday, students in Donna Shelley's class are seated in a circle, passing around a stuffed animal named Brownie.

When Brownie gets to you, it's your turn to talk.

"We're talking about teasing today," Shelley tells the 20 first- and second-graders in her combined class - "the difference between teasing and bullying."

"I feel unsafe with people bullying me," said the girl holding Brownie.

"What do we do we when feel unsafe?" Shelley asks.

"We tell grown-ups," they say.

Principal Allen Smith, who used restorative justice when he ran a charter high school before bringing it to Barrett last year, smiled as he listened.

"There are a number of ways you can do restorative justice," he said. "The whole thing is to be a community together and talk about it."

Denver Public Schools hands out more out-of-school suspensions than other large Colorado districts and suspends more middle school students than any other grade level. Critics say the district disproportionately suspends and expels students by race.

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Denver Post

Tuesday, November 27, 2007

Ex-teacher still passing along her pioneering spirit

By Jeremy P. Meyer
The Denver Post

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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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