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School wants to set own course

As poor-performing Bruce Randolph Middle School improves under a reform plan by principal Kristin Waters, right, even further-reaching ideas are proposed.

By Jeremy P. Meyer
The Denver Post

Article Last Updated: 12/06/2007 02:17:52 AM MST

Teachers and administrators at a Denver school are seeking autonomy from union and district rules, asking for control over the school's budget, staff, time and incentives.

Bruce Randolph Middle School in northeast Denver would be the first Denver public school to separate itself from key parts of the union contract.

"We don't see this as radical," said Greg Ahrnsbrak, physical education teacher and union representative at the school. "We see this as common sense. We want to be released from this bureaucratic entanglement that will allow us to do better."

The matter was presented Tuesday to the Denver Classroom Teachers Association board and will be discussed this month with the Denver school board.

Bruce Randolph has been under threat of takeover by the state, which labeled it as one of the worst-performing schools in the state.

For three straight years, the school had been rated unsatisfactory, but its 2006-07 scores improved and, for the first time, the school on Wednesday was rated "low."

Principal Kristin Waters put in place a reform plan called Challenge 2010 and yearly is growing the school to a sixth-grade through 12th-grade program.

The school day was increased 10 minutes; struggling students must attend after-school tutoring or classes on Saturday; and summer school is also a part of the plan.

Waters said the new proposal is being developed through collaboration with teachers. Ahrnsbrak said 75 percent of the school's 46 teachers have pledged their support for the proposal.

It would allow the principal to hire teachers months earlier than is currently permitted. Teachers could add more classes for more money. Many of the decisions would be made by a leadership team that would be comprised of the principal, assistant principal and key faculty members.

School board President Theresa Peña supports the idea.

"They are not saying, 'Let it be a charter school,' " she said. "They are saying, 'Let us be a DPS school without the obstacles. It's courageous leadership saying here are policies that don't work for us. If you can relieve us of those, this is what we can do.' "

Union president Kim Ursetta said her board and the school board must approve the change.

"There are a lot of questions about what they exactly want and how it would be implemented," Ursetta said.

One teacher who asked not to be identified out of fear of retribution said there is concern about the proposal.

Some teachers feel they cannot voice their disapproval and have not been part of the plan's development. Concern also surrounds one provision that gives the principal freedom to fire an employee without union protection, the teacher said.

"They will take the calendar away, the workweek away and leave it up to this group of teachers," the teacher said.

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Gains modest for Colorado students

47% attended schools rated "excellent" or "high" in 2006-07, accountability reports say

By Jeremy P. Meyer
The Denver Post
<mailto:jpmeyer@denverpost.com?subject=The%20Denver%20Post:%20Gains%20modest%20for%20Colorado%20students>

Article Last Updated: 12/06/2007 01:54:58 AM MST

Nearly half of Colorado students attended a school rated "excellent" or "high" last school

year — almost 10 percent more than in 2001-02 when the state's School Accountability Reports were first published.

The reports that go out to schools and parents, ranking schools based on student assessment scores, were released Wednesday in a muted manner and with indications that the reports would change in the future.

In the past, the official unveiling of the annual School Accountability Reports has been marked by a news conference hosted by Gov. Bill Owens, who had hoped the reports would be a part of his legacy.

This year, however, under a new governor and a new education commissioner, the announcement was via a press release while Ritter unveiled his new education plan during a forum discussing how to cut the student dropout rate.

"We can and should continue to debate whether the (report) is the best measurement tool available to us," Ritter said.

The possibility for change wasn't lost on anyone.

"Clearly they are trying to get away from the brand of accountability that Owens trumpeted and do something different than using this (report) as a weapon against schools," said Alan Gottlieb, vice president for policy at the Public Education and Business Coalition.

The reports showed modest gains for the state's students — with 20 more schools achieving "excellent" ratings and nine schools falling off the "unsatisfactory" category.

In total, 410,502 students, or 47 percent of the state's 875,458 students, are in schools rated "high" or "excellent." That's up from the 38.6 percent tabulated in 2001-02.

"The steadily increasing number of students learning in strong schools is an upbeat trend," said Education Commissioner Dwight Jones in a prepared statement. "We know from looking at the overall CSAP results that students from every background are fully capable of reaching state standards when expectations are high and instructional practices are aligned to meeting the needs of children."

However, students who meet the federal poverty standards remain disproportionately enrolled in schools that are rated low or unsatisfactory, according to a nonprofit children's advocacy group that analyzed state education data.

For example, about 70 percent of students in schools rated low are from poor families, said Alex Medler, vice president of research and analysis for Colorado Children's Campaign.

"In excellent schools, only 10 percent of kids come from poor families," Medler said.

"The key question is how excellent would that school be if it were serving poor students, and how good would low-performing schools do if they had a bunch of kids who weren't so poor."

The achievement gap in Colorado's schools is not a new development and has been the underlying story of the state's School Accountability Reports since they was first unveiled in 2001.

"It's important for people to understand those facts and that reality," said Michael Bennet, superintendent of Denver Public Schools, where 66 percent of students are eligible for federal meal benefits. "It's critical that we design a system of public education that ensures all kids have a shot at a great education. That's why this data is important."

The forms are mailed to 1 million Colorado parents at a cost of $290,000. The reports also provide information on academic progress in schools — ranging from "significant improvement" to "significant decline" or "no growth" — and other specifics about the school, such as teacher-student ratio, safety data and district financial information.

The forms have long been controversial — some claiming they fail to take into account how the school educates disadvantaged students. And others have complained about inaccuracies in some of the data, specifically safety information that is self-reported by the schools to the state.

Last year, lawmakers passed a law splitting up safety data to classify fights and felony assaults differently on the forms. Officials last year claimed erratic safety data would be cleared up this year, but statistics this year had some strange results.

For example, Aurora Public Schools led the state in the number of fights at its schools, with 1,433 incidents — almost three times as many fights as the next highest district, Cherry Creek.

But Aurora school officials said their district is not more prone to fighting than others, just that they are adhering to the state's reporting rules that were delivered last year.

"I wouldn't say kids are fighting a lot," said Barbara Cooper, director of school services. "We are reporting it differently."

In Littleton, principal Wendy Rubin of Falcon Bluffs Middle School celebrated with her staff because the Jefferson County school improved from the "high" category to "excellent."

Rubin was particularly pleased because the school offers an inclusive program for all of its 700 students, regardless of whether some are in special education.

"We don't have any classes that are remedial math or English or special-education science," she said. "When kids have gaps or are struggling, you are not going to help

them by going slower or taking important information out. You need to find the supports."

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"Unsatisfactory" schools in DPS cut from 10 to 3

By Jeremy P. Meyer
The Denver Post
<mailto:jpmeyer@denverpost.com?subject=The%20Denver%20Post:%20"Unsatisfactory"%20schools%20in%20DPS%20cut%20from%2010%20to%203>

Article Last Updated: 12/06/2007 01:47:56 AM MST

The bad got better this year in Denver Public Schools rankings on the state's School Accountability Reports released Wednesday.

Last year, Denver had 10 unsatisfactory schools, half the state's total in that category, according to state figures.

This year, only three Denver schools received the lowest rating — Howell K-8, Mitchell and Skyland Community High School. A total of 11 were rated unsatisfactory statewide.

One of those, Mitchell kindergarten through eighth-grade school, is scheduled to close at the end of the school year as part of the district's reform plan.

"Many more schools are stable or improved rather than on decline," said Superintendent Michael Bennet. "We won't be satisfied until all of our schools are improving."

Bennet is leading a massive change in the district, an effort he put in place two years ago. Last month, the school board voted to close eight poorly performing and under-enrolled schools.

Four of those were tabbed "unsatisfactory" last year. In the state's accountability report, three of those four elementary schools — Del Pueblo, Wyman and Whiteman — had risen from "unsatisfactory" to "low." Del Pueblo's academic growth was rated as improving.

The district also is changing programs in five schools, including one that was unsatisfactory last year — Gilpin K-8, which is being changed into a Montessori program for infants through eighth-graders.

Most DPS schools in this year's ranking — 107 out of 164 — were rated low by the

Colorado Department of Education based on performance by students on the Colorado Student Assessment Program.

Twenty of the 164 schools — or 12 percent — received "excellent" or "high" ratings, according to state data.

District officials say the numbers fail to show what is happening in schools.

Fifteen schools improved on the School Accountability Reports from the previous year, and five went down. Specifically, six moved from low to average and two improved from average to high.

The report, which also examines overall academic performance, showed 24 significantly improved and 13 significantly declined.

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The Baltimore Sun

Thursday, December 6, 2007

Contraceptives concept

Denver panel suggests offering birth control at high school clinics serving impoverished students

By DeeDee Correll

December 6, 2007

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 that she is.

With the city's teen birth rate 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 Denver proposal

School officials in Denver 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 highly publicized 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 only to 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 teens who have chosen to have sex 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.

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 sexually transmitted disease 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 noted those factors when it recommended that 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 that 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 has not formally considered. 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 who chaired the task force.

In an informal e-mail survey of 180 people, Denver City Councilman Doug Linkhart said more than 70 percent of the respondents 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 Faye Alexander, who has two teen-age 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 school grounds: Minors can obtain contraceptives without parental notification in Colorado.

School officials await the task force recommendation on that issue, said Alex Sanchez, a spokesman for Denver public schools.

DeeDee Correll writes for the Los Angeles Times.
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Rocky Mountain News

Thursday, December 6, 2007

School report cards level out

More improvement needed, says top official

Berny Morson and Burt Hubbard

Originally published 12:30 a.m., December 6, 2007
Updated 05:56 a.m., December 6, 2007

Colorado school reform has hit a plateau, with percentages of students in high- and low-performing schools virtually unchanged from last year, according to reports released Wednesday.

The school accountability reports, often called "school report cards," show 47.8 percent of students this year attending schools rated "high" or "excellent," compared with 47.7 percent last year.

At the other end of the scale, students in schools rated "low" or unsatisfactory dropped from 19.35 percent last year to 19.27 percent.

Education commissioner Dwight Jones said the reports show "pockets of progress" in the form of schools that moved up in the ratings.

"I believe there is some progress, though it is certainly not at the level we'd like," Jones said.

He cited improvement since figures were first reported in 2002. At that time, only 38.6 percent of students were in top-rated schools, while 25.3 percent were in schools with the lowest ratings.

Parents in coming weeks will receive report cards for schools their children attend.

The rankings, compiled by the Colorado Department of Education, are based on achievement tests administered last spring and the ACT college entrance exam.

In addition, the report card contains a broad range of statistical data about each school, ranging from the experience level of teachers to the number of fights and the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunches.

Denver advances

Among school districts showing strong improvement was Denver. Excluding charter schools, which are run by their own boards, 14 Denver schools showed improvement in the ratings. Only one declined.

However, two of the improving schools declined when rated by another measure

the Education Department uses to track individual students from year to year.

"I think there's a lot of tremendous growth, but we've got a long way to go," said DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet. "I don't think any of us are going to be satisfied until all our schools show improvement."

Jefferson County, the state's largest school district accounting for 11 percent of all students, saw increases at 12 schools and declines in nine, excluding charters.

Most Jefferson County schools - 56 percent - were rated high or excellent. "We're pleased," said Superintendent Cindy Stevenson.

She said improvement is not coming fast enough. The county has some schools in poor areas that continue to draw low ratings, including Alameda High School. Leadership at that school has become more stable in the past few years, and the district is considering adding an International Baccalaureate program at the school, Stevenson said.

"Obviously, we still have work to do, no question," Stevenson said of several schools with low ratings.

Statewide, schools with large numbers of poor students continue to show low achievement.

Among the 191 poorest schools - those with more than 75 percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches - only six scored high. Only one - Manassa Elementary School in the San Luis Valley - scored high for two years in a row.

None of the poor schools scored excellent.

Among 709 schools with low levels of poverty, 543 scored high or excellent.

Leader focuses on gap

Jones, who has been commissioner since May, has made a priority of closing the achievement gap between middle class and poor students, as well as between Anglos and minorities.

"Schools that have high percentages of those youngsters - it continues to be some of the hardest work to be done," he said.

Jones said the department will try to replicate programs that are working for the poor schools that are succeeding.

"There are some schools that are beating the odds. What we're trying to do in the department is to say how can we help leverage and study what those schools are doing?" he said.

Stevenson, the Jeffco superintendent, said achievement for poor students won't improve until the state takes more steps to address larger social problems.

A council named by Gov. Bill Ritter to study education recently recommended more preschool programs for kids who are living in poverty, Stevenson noted.

"The other thing I think we really have to look at as a culture is, how are we supporting families. You look at kids who move a lot, or you look at kids who are really dealing with substantial poverty, and we don't provide job training for their parents or medical care for the kids," she said.

"As a community, we have to decide if we want to be strategic about family and kid support," she added.

Report card Q&A

What are the five ratings? Excellent, High, Average, Low and Unsatisfactory.

When did Colorado start issuing school report cards? In 1998, Gov. Roy Romer signed into law the Accreditation Accountability Act. Two years later, Gov. Bill Owens delivered the School Accountability Reports (school report cards).

Why does the state rate schools?

The ratings focus attention on those schools that need the most help and resources. **What is the grading system ?**

Schools are rated based on their overall CSAP scores in grades three through 10 and the ACT, a college entrance exam taken by 11th-graders.

Report card highlights

* **School rankings** showed little change this year. About 48 percent of Colorado public school students attended high- or excellent-ranked schools, and 19 percent attended low- or unsatisfactory-ranked schools. Those are virtually unchanged from 2006.

* **Compared with last year,** more schools advanced than dropped in rankings. (195 vs. 165) More than 80 percent kept the same ranking as last year.

* **The number of unsatisfactory** schools fell from 20 last year to 11 this year, with most of the improvement in Denver Public Schools. DPS saw its number of

unsatisfactory schools fall from nine to three.

* **Income, as measured by the** percent of students eligible for free- and reduced-priced lunches, played the major role in how a school was rated. Only 3 percent of schools with 75 percent or more of their students eligible for the lunch program ranked high or excellent. By comparison, 76 percent of schools with 25 percent or fewer low-income students ranked high or excellent.

* **In terms of academic progress,** the state slipped. This year, 32 percent of schools showed improvement or significant improvement, compared with 36 percent last year. At the same time, 29 percent of schools posted declines or significant declines, higher than the 25 percent last year.

* **Neither teacher experience** nor class size seemed to be factors in the ratings. There was little difference in both measures between excellent-rated and low-rated schools. However, teacher and student turnover were contributors to the rankings.

* **Inconsistencies remain** in reporting assaults. This was the first year schools reported fights and the more serious assaults separately. Still, the Hanover Junior/Senior school in El Paso County reported twice as many assaults, 20, as all Denver Public Schools combined, 10. Jefferson County, the state's largest school district, reported no assaults at any of its schools, while Cherry Creek schools reported 22.

DPS stresses progress, despite setbacks

By Fernando Quintero <http://www.rockymountainnews.com/staff/fernando-quintero/> **, Rocky Mountain News (Contact** <http://www.rockymountainnews.com/staff/fernando-quintero/contact/> **)**

This year's state report card was generally good news for Denver Public Schools, although some ratings declined.

Six DPS schools moved off the "unsatisfactory" list, and nine others improved their ratings to "average."

The number of schools that scored "high" and "excellent" remained the same, which district officials said indicates top performance is consistent and not a fluke.

DPS and the state disagree on some 2006 ratings. For example, DPS said eight schools were unsatisfactory that year, but the state reported nine. The discrepancy continues to affect some calculations this year.

When compared with last year, the 2007 report cards show gains and losses. Although the number of schools that improved this year remained steady, 33 percent of schools declined this year compared with 23 percent last year. And 41 percent of schools showed no improvement at all, compared with 32 percent in 2006.

DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet said it was important to keep long-term trends in mind.

"I think the right way to look at (the report) is not from a single year to the next, but over time," he said.

Bennet focused on the positives but admitted "we still have a tremendous way to go."

"There were a number of schools that slid backward, but I think overall the report shows a strong improvement in our schools. . . . " he said. "More is going right than going wrong."

Mitchell and Bruce Randolph 6-12 school, which last year had received its fourth straight unsatisfactory rating, moved up one notch to "low." The Colorado Board of Education agreed last July, after DPS officials submitted their school reform plans, to give Mitchell and Randolph one more chance to improve.

Mitchell, which rated "unsatisfactory" again, is among the eight schools board members in November decided to close. Bruce Randolph, one of the lowest-performing schools in the state, was spared the ax.

"To move up to "low" would normally not be cause for celebration, but in this case it's exciting news," said Bruce Randolph Principal Kristin Waters, who came to the school in 2005 to help turn things around.

Armed with a 20-page redesign plan and permission to hire her own staff, Waters helped the school make a change for the better.

"It was a collaborative effort of all the staff. We gave our teachers the support they needed and we were determined to look for solutions," Waters said. "In the end, it was about believing in the kids."

But for parents of Remington and Smedley, which along with Mitchell and five other schools have been slated for closing, the ratings show cause for concern.

Both Remington and Smedley showed significant declines. And the principals at those schools were picked to run the newly transformed Horace Mann and Place middle schools, which will serve students preschool through eighth grades from Remington and Smedley, and Fallis and Whiteman, respectively.

"Our parents agreed with the recommendations of A+ (a citizens' panel) that we should move students from lower-performing schools to higher-performing schools," said J.C. Braga, an organizer with the community group, Metropolitan Organization for People. "If we're merging low-performing schools together, that is not going to make the situation any better for the students or their parents."

West Denver Preparatory Charter School received an "average" rating in its first year and was one of only two DPS middle schools among 45 to earn a "significant improvement" designation.

"This represents a significant first step that our students are taking toward a future of college success," Principal Chris Gibbons said.

Breaking down results

2007 DPS ratings by number, percent

Students: 73,873

Schools rated: 164

* **Excellent:** 10 (6 percent)

* **High:** 10 (6 percent)

* **Average:** 34 (21 percent)

* **Low:** 107 (65 percent)

* **Unsatisfactory:** 3 (2 percent)

2006 DPS ratings

* **Excellent:** 10

* **High:** 10

* **Average:** 25

* **Low:** 102

* **Unsatisfactory:** 9

What it means

This was a good year for DPS, which lowered its number of unsatisfactory schools by six and increased its average schools by nine. It's trending in the right direction for those bottom schools. The top schools were static - the numbers of excellent and high schools remained the same.

DPS schools rated excellent*

* Bromwell

* Cory

* Polaris at Ebert

* Denver School of the Arts (middle and high schools)

* Denver School of Science and Technology

* Slaven (elementary and middle)

* Southmoor

* Steck

School closings

DPS is closing eight schools at the end of this school year.

Here's how they fared on ratings:

Del Pueblo: No rating, already shut down

Fallis: Rated low again, and showing significant decline in academic growth of students

Hallett: Rated low again, but showing improvement

Mitchell: Rated unsatisfactory again, and stable

Remington: Rated low again, and showing significant decline

Smedley: Rated low again, and declining

Whiteman: Improved from unsatisfactory to low, but showing a decline in academic growth

Wyman: Improved from unsatisfactory to low, but showing a decline in academic growth

Détente in Denver

Bruce Randolph School proposes work rules for the 21st century

Few noticed at the time, but the earth moved Tuesday night in Denver and the aftershocks might be felt for a long time to come.

Appearing before the board of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association, the principal and other representatives of Bruce Randolph School asked for something that's apparently never before been formally sought in Denver Public Schools: freedom. Freedom to better educate students by releasing the staff and teachers at Bruce Randolph from many - but not all - of the provisions of the union contract, and allowing them to work under their own autonomous agreement.

Teachers' union approval of the request - along with an eventual OK by the DPS board - would give the northeast Denver institution a chance to prove whether a school can be helped in its core responsibilities by relaxing restrictions that tend to be a drag on the sort of team effort that has already boosted the school from an "unsatisfactory" ranking in the state assessments to a not-so-dire "poor."

Indeed, in its darkest hour the school was the worst among all of the state's failing middle schools, Principal Kristin Waters told us. As recently as July 2006, the school was slated for mandatory re-organization into a charter school under state law because of its atrocious academic achievement - and was spared only because of its new commitment. By then, Waters had been brought in to reorganize the school, hire new staff and refocus its academic program.

Ironically, the lone dissenting voice on the state board in '06 complained that the school makeover didn't go far enough because it failed to dispense with union work rules. Now Bruce Randolph's own teachers are proposing to do just that.

Or at least a large majority are - including the school's union representative.

They're not trying to leave the union. Teachers would still pay dues and benefit from the negotiated pay schedules and a variety of other provisions. But a number of union provisions and district policies that limit the flexibility of the principal and staff - to the detriment of kids - would be waived under this groundbreaking concept.

Take hiring. Denver principals have to jump through a series of hoops when filling a critical teaching slot. They can't just cast a wide net and directly hire the best person they locate for the job, as a good private school would. Bruce Randolph seeks that same freedom.

Meanwhile, as Waters also explained, a centralized budget system prevents her from rewarding teachers who exhibit initiative or even exemplary attendance in the classroom, and restricts teachers - theoretically, at least - to a 40-hour workweek.

The Bruce Randolph strategic plan is a highly ambitious document that refuses to concede that educational achievement must be hobbled by the disadvantaged background of so many of the school's 705 students. (The school is nearly 98 percent minority, with an almost equal percentage qualifying for free or reduced lunch.) Its stated goal: that "all students who have entered or will enter as sixth-graders will graduate from high school in seven years and be ready to enter college or other post-secondary institutions and/or move seamlessly into the workplace."

To achieve such goals, the school's staff believe they must be liberated from all unnecessary impediments to effective hiring, teaching and program design - as well as be free to create new incentives for teachers willing to go the extra mile.

The question is, will the teachers' union and the district agree? Are they ready to concede that the time has come to trust the judgment of serious adults determined to give their all for the future of the kids in their school and who no longer believe that they require the confining "protections" more appropriate to a 19th century labor model?

If the answer is no, those who quash the dreams of Bruce Randolph are going to have a great deal of explaining to do - not only to residents of Denver, but to everyone in Colorado who appreciates the stakes in urban school reform.

Westword

Thursday, December 6, 2007

Life Skills Offers Last-Chance High

Justin Martinez was raised in the school of hard knocks, but Life Skills is his last hope for a diploma.

By Luke Turf

<http://www.westword.com/feedback/index.php?author_email=&headline=Life%20Skills%20Offers%20Last-Chance%20High&issuedate=2007-12-06>

Published: December 6, 2007

Anthony Camera

Justin Martinez missed school — again — on November 2. But this time, the nineteen-year-old's absence was excused. He had to go to Pueblo to see his father. In the morgue.

Justin's parents had split when he was just a kid. Justin and his brothers stayed with their mother in Denver; his father wound up in Pueblo. Although Justin had spent summers with his dad when he was younger, he hadn't seen him much lately. But none of his uncles would go identify their brother's body, so the job fell to him. Since he was too upset to drive, his godmother drove him down; Justin's little brother tagged along for support.

At the morgue, the coroner rolled out a body bag with a tag that read "John Doe." But the minute the coroner unzipped the bag, Justin saw his father's face.

Later, he went to the spot where his father's body had been found the day after Halloween, near some bushes five or six feet from a bus stop. The police were saying the death was suspicious, but probably not a murder.

Justin couldn't get his father's face out of his mind. He suspected foul play: He knew his father fought a lot and drank even more, had many women and even more enemies. Justin locked himself in his bedroom for hours, lying there with his eyes closed, opening them only to cry. Over the next three weeks, he only made it to school once or twice. He'd been hoping to finally graduate in December, but now that looked out of reach.

The day before Thanksgiving break, Santiago Lopez, the principal at Life Skills Center of Denver, looked up and saw Justin walking into the alternative high school, his head hung low. A photo of his father was pinned to his jacket. Justin had a fresh haircut and new sneakers, but his eyes were puffy, and there was still swelling on his forehead where someone had hit him with a bottle a month before.

Santiago turned on his computer to take a look at Justin's earned-credits report. At Life Skills, one of the requirements for getting a diploma is that a student have an attendance rate higher than 80 percent for the three months leading up to graduation. That's a requirement that Santiago can waive in extreme circumstances — and Justin's would seem to qualify. Still, Justin needed nine more classes to graduate, and the most he'd ever finished in a month was four.

This last semester had been rough even before Justin's father died. His mother had broken

up with her boyfriend, and Justin had been working more hours at his janitor gig at Eagleton Elementary School to help pay the bills. His older brothers, twins Joshua and James, weren't around. One had disappeared, then resurfaced in a rehab facility for drug addicts; the other, who'd been rolling with a gang, had just been sentenced to four years in prison.

Compared to the rest of life's bullshit, missing December's graduation didn't seem like such a big deal to Justin, especially because he wouldn't be kicked out of Life Skills for skipping school or being too old. Students range from previously home-schooled kids to former dropouts, single parents to night-shift workers, and they all take classes at their own pace, earning credits off a computer-based curriculum and taking as long as they need to fulfill the requirements for a diploma.

"You know we're here for you, whatever you need," Santiago told Justin.

Life Skills is there for him now, but it may not be much longer.

Life Skills is the last in a long line of schools that Justin has attended.

As a kid, he bounced around public schools all over Denver's west side. His mother kept moving the family; the only places she could afford to rent always came with pain-in-the-ass landlords, leaking roofs, plumbing or some other problem, and they were always in rough neighborhoods.

By the fall of 2002, Justin was a freshman at West High School. But he didn't spend much time inside. For one thing, Mexican students would give him dirty looks. They didn't know that he couldn't speak Spanish — like his mother, Justin was born here — they just thought that he refused to, that he'd sold out *la raza* and thought he was better than the rest of them. Justin preferred to hang around outside, talking to girls, selling dime bags and hustling car stereos — chasing fast money instead of an education, always carrying a knife or a gun, never books or a backpack. Although he never got jumped into a gang, Justin ran with plenty of people who did, and always repped west side when people asked where he was from.

After just a few months at West, Justin dropped out. But he soon saw that hustling full-time was more work than it was worth.

"I knew that if I didn't go back to school, I would never make it in life," Justin says. "I wanted to make more money. The money that I was making, I wasn't making it the right way, anyway, so sooner or later I knew I was going to get caught. So I thought I might as well just face the facts and quit the bullshit before something bad really happened, getting locked up or something."

Justin enrolled at the Contemporary Learning Academy in northwest Denver, one of Denver Public Schools' "alternative" schools. But he made the mistake of wearing red his first day there, and some Crips from Montbello who were attending CLA assumed he was

Bloods. Justin had beef with these black kids from day one at CLA, and he soon stopped going.

Then one day the cops showed up at his house and accused him of selling mari-juana to younger kids. They searched the place, found two ounces in the basement, and cited him for possession with intent to distribute, even though Justin said the dope was just for personal use. It was the first time he'd been arrested. On the way to the station, one of the officers ripped up the original ticket and wrote a new one just for possession; he didn't want to stick the juvenile with a felony charge.

It was through his probation officer that Justin learned about Life Skills Center of Denver, a charter school at 1000 Cherokee Street. The school had only been open a year and a half when Justin enrolled in January 2005. He was seventeen and still a freshman.

At Life Skills, there was no classroom instruction. Students sat in cubicles studying on computers, and used those same computers to take tests and turn in assignments. Justin quickly saw that he could do whatever the fuck he wanted at Life Skills, since no one seemed to care if the kids studied or cut class to smoke, drink, make out, go to the store, whatever. "This is school?" he remembers thinking after his first day there.

It seemed like the teachers were always coming and going, getting hired and quitting. A couple were "hoochies," and older Life Skills students claimed they'd run into these hoochie teachers at clubs. The school's security guard, who was from a private firm, didn't bother watching the screens that showed surveillance video from around the school. Justin once asked the guard if he could hold his gun. The guard wouldn't hand it over, but he did unload it and show Justin and his friends how to cock the weapon.

The school's principal didn't check up on the kids, either, and mostly kicked back in his office. One day he asked Justin and a few other students to help a friend move. While he and the other kids were earning a few bucks, they were also earning school credits, because the principal let them stay clocked in at the computers.

This was not how school life was supposed to be at Life Skills.

In the spring of 2002, a half-dozen community activists started searching for a new educational alternative for DPS dropouts, mostly minority kids from low-income homes and single-parent families who'd had no success in traditional schools. Kids like Justin. They looked around the country for model programs and found Life Skills and its parent company, White Hat Management, which David Brennan had founded in Akron, Ohio, in 1998. Four years later, White Hat had fifteen schools, seven of them Life Skills Centers.

"There were just a couple companies like it," remembers Pierre Jimenez, an activist who'd worked for then-governor Bill Owens at the time and later went on to a job with White Hat. "What we were looking for was a school that specialized in the high-risk population — dropouts, per se." The six, who'd formed a volunteer board to oversee a new school, invited Brennan to speak to them, and then they went to Ohio to see Life

Skills in action.

"Initially, we were just happy to see a new building with clean equipment and people who were genuinely happy to be working with these kids," Jimenez says. "The curriculum was designed specifically for students who were significantly behind academically, to create an environment to remediate those deficits. Life Skills was able to zero in on where a kid was functioning and then begin on the remediation, figuring where he was and where he needed to be."

But the curriculum wasn't the only thing that made Life Skills attractive to the board. The company had some real capital behind it, which made it more likely that the Denver Board of Education would approve it as a charter school. Charters were introduced in Colorado over a decade ago, and today there are 140 in operation — all working with the approval of the school districts in which they are located, all collecting money that otherwise would go to those districts. "In some respects, it's kind of a low-risk venture on the district's part," says Jim Griffin, director of the Colorado League of Charter Schools. "If they succeed and they do a great job, they're making a difference, and if they don't succeed, you can at least say you gave them a shot — and you gave them a shot at something that no one else is trying."

The DPS board wasn't entirely enthusiastic about the Life Skills proposal, Jimenez remembers, but still granted a three-year contract. As a charter school, Life Skills would get about $6,000 in federal education money for every student who enrolled. But even before the school opened in August 2003, White Hat pumped more than $700,000 into the new building it had rented for the school on Cherokee.

Unfortunately, Jimenez says, the company back in Ohio paid more attention to the physical setup than the makeup of the potential student population. "There's a huge Latino population out here," he points out. "You go to Akron, it's reversed. They didn't seem to recognize that. Their marketing materials had predominantly black students, and you would think they would try to appeal to a wider audience. In my opinion, it should've been a bigger emphasis." He and the rest of the board had told White Hat that many of the students would have limited English, but it took two years before Denver's Life Skills got an English as a Second Language component.

At the end of 2005, Life Skills was nearing the completion of its three-year contract with DPS and getting ready to reapply. By then, the school had received a total of about $5.8 million in funding and had graduated only about a hundred kids, according to DPS figures.

On the one hand, Life Skills was taking kids who otherwise might have dropped out of school entirely, kids no other school would take because they didn't have enough credits for their age, they had long disciplinary records, or they were single parents who couldn't meet traditional school guidelines. On the other hand, Life Skills wasn't living up to the goal of 60 percent attendance, which the DPS board and Life Skills had agreed on back when the charter was granted.

Even so, in February 2006, the DPS board voted to give Life Skills a fourth year.

But this was not the same old Life Skills. There was a new principal at the school: Santiago Lopez.

Santiago knows where the Life Skills students are coming from because he was once there. His parents met at Manual High School, where his mother earned a diploma but his father did not. One of Santiago's earliest memories is of his father taking him and his older brother to a bar in Globeville, where his dad would fill one of his hands with warm cashews and the other with quarters for the pool table, which Santiago could barely reach. While he and his brother played pool, their father got smashed.

It wasn't long before Dad left the family altogether for the bottle. Concerned about providing for her two sons, Santiago's mother went back to school and earned a degree in education. Santiago remembers sitting beside his mom, coloring through her classes at Metro State. His father came back into the picture just long enough to create a little sister, then left his wife to raise the kids alone. "She had to worry about daycare and financially being able to both raise us and pay for school," Santiago says. "Having three kids and trying to go to school would be almost impossible. College may not have been as expensive then, but if you put everything in perspective, it was probably just as difficult."

With money in short supply, the family moved around a lot — more than twenty times, by Santiago's count. But his mother has seven sisters and a brother spread around the metro area, and they helped to create a strong support system. And after Santiago's mother started teaching, things got easier. She was a first-grade teacher at Greenlee Elementary School when Santiago enrolled at Abraham Lincoln High School in southwest Denver. By then, he was a class clown who wasn't afraid to talk back to teachers, and he frequently landed in the principal's office. He got good grades, but he also ditched class a lot. When he cut, though, he usually wound up in his mother's classroom — tutoring her students.

School wasn't as easy for his siblings. His brother barely made it through high school, and his sister got pregnant at fourteen. Still, she managed to earn her diploma from the now-defunct Alternative Center for Education in Adams County.

While friends got into drugs and gangs, Santiago got jobs. At sixteen, he started working at Elitch's every summer. He also worked at a factory making the cardboard rolls that tape wraps around — a job that solidified his determination to go to college. He graduated with honors from Lincoln in 1990 and then, inspired by his mother, earned a bachelor's degree in education at the University of Northern Colorado.

Santiago returned to Denver for his first classroom gig, as a computer teacher at Remington (now on DPS's closure list). Next came a two-year stint teaching a combined second- and third-grade class at Greenlee Elementary. His mother was no longer there; she'd earned her master's and was now a principal at a different school.

In 1998, Santiago got his first charter-school experience when he helped open Wyatt-Edison (it's one of six current Denver charters, including Life Skills, run by an out-of-state management company). He started out teaching third grade, then took a position overseeing four other teachers, then filled in for Wyatt-Edison's assistant principal, who had medical problems. After Santiago earned his own master's degree in educational administration from the University of Phoenix, he took a job developing curriculum and training teachers for Wyatt-Edison's management company, which is based in New York. But in August 2004, the company did a round of layoffs, and Santiago's job disappeared.

He landed at Angevine Middle School in Lafayette as part of a literacy lab. His return to the classroom represented both a pay cut, which he could handle, and no chance to use his administrative skills, which he could not. So he looked around and found a one-year, grant-funded position as a math curriculum coordinator for DPS elementary classes. When that ended, he signed on as dean of students at South High School for the 2004-05 school year, but there wasn't much administrative work. He moved on to a slot as assistant principal for two elementary schools in Commerce City. The positions were each supposed to be half-time, but he wound up putting full-time hours in both.

"Every time I made a job switch, it was because it was a new challenge," Santiago says. "And I always told my bosses that I was looking and asked their opinions about the jobs. I never went behind their back; I just wanted to learn more. I wanted more experience."

All of that experience prepared him for his biggest challenge. In January 2006, he became principal of Life Skills Center of Denver, a job he'd found on the Colorado League of Charter Schools website.

Before taking the position, he researched the curriculum and visited the school twice to talk with staff and students. He saw himself in the kids, who'd lost friends to prisons and cemeteries. He liked a lot of what he saw, but he didn't see any accountability. Students weren't accountable, employees weren't accountable. As part of their Life Skills program, the students were supposed to be working jobs outside of school — but if they didn't, no one gave them any grief. No one was suggesting that kids go on to vocational schools or college. In fact, no one seemed to care if the kids came to school at all. And if they didn't show up, no one called to check up on them.

"I was very surprised," Santiago remembers. "I took the job because it challenged me in every aspect of my knowledge and abilities; it was in such chaos. I haven't had an easy life, and I know our students haven't had it easy, either. That's why I have to be here, to show them there is life outside of poverty, there is life outside of the struggle. That's what I want to teach these kids. I had a choice to go one way or the other. In a way, I relate to these kids — but I had a strong family behind me that helped me see my way out of it. A lot of our kids don't have that support."

Santiago quickly brought both a support system and accountability to Life Skills. He let staffers know that things were changing. He got rid of the private security firm and

brought in off-duty Denver cops to monitor the school. He had a wall built and moved the principal's office so that it would be the first thing that people saw when they entered the building. And he put a bowl of chocolates on his desk as bait to induce kids to come in and talk.

He reviewed the work of the six state-licensed lab teachers who oversaw the computer curriculum and hired a master teacher to oversee those positions. He evaluated the special-education teacher, the English-language acquisition teacher, the vocation specialist and the family advocate (a licensed social worker). Ultimately, only one full-time staffer stayed on. Life Skills also has a four-hour-a-week social worker and a four-hour-a-week nurse whose time it purchases from DPS; every week, it has four hours with a speech language pathologist and eight with a psychologist.

Santiago consulted with White Hat while he was making the changes, but he says the company isn't heavy-handed with its management, and the same holds true for the six-member board that oversees the school.

Santiago didn't just change responsibilities for staff; he changed the school's culture for students. Now if a student didn't show up for school, someone called him. If a student was having problems, someone called him. Santiago estimates that the staff makes about 500 calls a week — which averages out to almost two for each of the school's 269 enrolled students.

Before Santiago came on board, Life Skills had three sessions a day. He cut it to two — one in the morning and one in the afternoon — because the overlap of students coming and going was too distracting. He encouraged students who live in dangerous neighborhoods to come in the afternoon so that they didn't have to catch the bus in the dark. He did the same for students who work late-night shifts. And if a student couldn't come to school because her child was sick or needed daycare, Life Skills started trying to locate those services.

For students who lived with their parents, there were parent/teacher conferences. For students who'd moved out — or were thrown out — of their parent's homes, Life Skills helped them find food and shelter. Santiago started serving lunch at school, burgers off the dollar menu of fast-food joints or cheap fried chicken from the grocery store.

To make sure students met the work requirement, Santiago put the name of those slacking off on a "wanted" list and let them know they'd be hunted down. For students who didn't have papers, he let volunteer work qualify for credit.

Through a new partnership with Goodwill, the school got another staffer — an employment specialist who helps students find jobs and careers. "The greatest quality is their dedication to each other, and also the things that they've overcome in their life to even be here to give themselves another shot at a diploma," says Goodwill's Bryan Pontius, who teaches students how to write resumés and act on job interviews. "They use their life experiences in their work. As employees, people won't be able to pull things

over their head, because they'll see it coming from a mile away. No one can take advantage of these kids. But it's a bit of a double-edged sword, because due to the circumstances of what they've been through, they don't always deal with conflict in a healthy way. It's often confrontational."

The changes made a difference outside the school, too.

Justin remembers one incident that was like the classic scene in *Boyz N the Hood* when the college football recruiter comes to Ricky's house in Compton — only this time it was a Redstone College recruiter for the school's construction-management program who arrived at Justin's house on the southwest side, where the ghetto bird was flying overhead, just like it does in the movie. After the recruiter told Justin that he could attend the school at night and get paid for doing construction work during the day, Justin signed up to go there once he graduated, ideally in the fall of 2007. And then he walked her out to her car past the homies on the front porch drinking 40s.

"Hey, I want to go to college, too. Hook me up with a scholarship," they said, quoting the movie almost verbatim.

The recruiter gave Justin hope. He was warming to Santiago, even though Life Skills now expected more of him. Much more. The school's social worker pointed out that most of his fights stemmed from incidents on the bus, and the school helped Justin land a job at a Village Inn so that he could buy a car. That didn't work out because Justin punched his superior in the face — not every fight started on a bus — but he moved on to a job at a body shop and managed to get a car. Soon he was working for UPS. When an error in the payroll department left him without money to put gas in his tank or food in his belly, a Life Skills teacher helped him track down the missing money. And in the meantime, Santiago handed him $40 for gas and groceries and walked off. Justin couldn't believe it.

"Who does that?" he wondered. "I didn't even ask him for anything."

When Justin got his money, he repaid Santiago the $40.

Santiago was making a difference. But was it enough?

This past February, Life Skills' contract was again up for renewal at DPS, and word started spreading among the students that the school might be closing its doors.

Because Life Skills is considered an alternative school, it's eligible to be evaluated on more than its CSAP performance. But until Santiago came on board, the school had failed to implement the testing at all, and a few years' worth of results are necessary to demonstrate any significant change. So instead, DPS focused on the charter school's attendance rate — pegging it at 34 percent for the 2005-06 school year, while Life Skills had it at 59 percent.

This time, though, the board's concern wasn't only with the Denver school, but also with

its parent company, which by now owned a total of fifty schools spread throughout Ohio, Arizona, Florida, Michigan and Colorado (including a second Life Skills in Colorado Springs). In Ohio, a state audit had revealed that boardmembers at White Hat schools were often paid double because they stacked school meetings, and that they were allegedly abusing the school's credit-card accounts. And all twelve of the Life Skills Centers in Ohio are currently listed by the state's department of education as being on "academic watch" (the equivalent of a D on a grade scale) or "academic emergency" (the equivalent of an F).

The DPS board voted against extending the Life Skills contract. The school appealed that decision to the Colorado Board of Education, whose vice-chairman, former Congressman Bob Schaffer, was among those who ordered the DPS board to reconsider. His vote was consistent with Schaffer's strong support of charter schools. "The only objective here is the best interest of poor, underserved schoolchildren in Denver," Schaffer says. "I'm always going to fight for those who are bereft of sufficient opportunity in public education."

Rather than go another round with the state, in May the DPS board decided to give the charter school another year to operate.

The state board's role caught the attention of Michael Huttner, director of the political watchdog group ProgressNowAction, who noticed that Schaffer had failed to acknowledge that he'd received $2,000 from David Brennan, founder of White Hat, for his 2004 Senate campaign against Pete Coors in the Republican primary. And in the weeks after his vote, Schaffer collected another $4,600 in campaign contributions from Brennan and his wife for his current Senate campaign. (Steve Schuck, a real-estate developer who's on the board of the Life Skills in Colorado Springs, also donated to the campaigns of four school-board members who backed the charter application there, according to the *Colorado Springs Independent*.)

In June, Huttner spilled the news of the Brennan donations to the press.

Although Jimenez had problems with the lack of supervision and poor implementation of curriculum in the first years of Life Skills Denver, he believes that Brennan is motivated by more than money. Now in his seventies and reportedly in poor health, Brennan is trying to leave a legacy, Jimenez suggests, and the Life Skills students are the unlikely beneficiaries. "There's no deception here," he says. "This is 'Let's do what's right for the kids.'"

Ada Diaz Kirby is one of the two original members still serving on Denver's Life Skills board, currently as its president. She acknowledges that the board wasn't active at first and made a mistake taking the former principal's word that things were going well. But now, she insists, they actually are. "At the end of the day, it's about saving kids that nobody else has been able to save," Diaz Kirby says. "We hear all these politicians like our governor talking about the dropout rate and how we need to save kids. As a community, let's focus on that and not how much White Hat is making. White Hat's heart

is in the right place; they do everything they possibly can to help these kids. The company was founded on the premise of helping kids who aren't getting help anywhere else. White Hat is not the big bad wolf that people make them look like."

But DPS boardmember Jill Conrad — the only one of the seven boardmembers to return *Westword*'s repeated calls, and also the only boardmember to spend any time at the school before deciding to turn down its application — doesn't see it that way. "White Hat held the purse strings too tight for too long and didn't allow the local institution the flexibility to do what it needed to do," Conrad says. "Now, if this whole experience produces a situation where that company looks at its model and makes it less about profit and more about education, fine. But I'm not sure that's what I've seen to date from that corporation."

She remains troubled that Life Skills is managed by an out-of-state, for-profit company that doesn't have to account for how it spends millions of federal education dollars coming to Colorado. "I was concerned about the lax approach to calculating attendance, I was concerned about the overall model of the school, the governance and the financial structure, and the school not being flexible to support the needs of the student population, flexible enough at the local level," she says. "I felt that the corporate leadership at White Hat in Ohio is a model that does a disservice to the kids who have the kind of needs where you need to be making decisions at the local level. They weren't able to respond fast enough to improve. They had resources that were tied up at the central office and an unresponsive governing board in place."

Last fall, the DPS board sent another $1.8 million to Life Skills for the next school year, and upped the attendance requirement (but not as high as Santiago's personal goal of 75 percent). The board is expecting results. In February, it will again decide whether to renew the school's contract. (Earlier this year, the Colorado Springs board decided to renew the contract of the Life Skills there through 2010.)

"I do feel that the current leaders of the school and the current board have the potential to turn this school around," Conrad says. "Unfortunately, the leaders who are currently operating that school have only been there one year, and they were initially handed a school that could've been better to start with, sort of like 'too little too late.' Either accountability in the school-renewal process is going to mean something, or it is not. How many chances do you give a school that asks for a one-year extension and then another? We've now said they can have their extra year, so by next year, if they have again not met the goals that they helped to outline and articulate, it would be difficult for me to keep the school open."

Santiago starts his rounds at 9 a.m. every day. One recent Friday morning, he had to wake up a few students who'd dozed off at their cubicles. In the hallway, he saw a student with a backpack.

"Are you just getting here?" Santiago asked.

"No, I'm leaving," the student said.

"Why are you leaving?"

"Because it fucking sucks."

"Okay," Santiago said with a smile. "See you Monday."

"Fuck, no," the student responded.

Santiago rarely raises his voice with the students, and no matter how rude they are to him, he always says "please" and "thank you." A few days before, when a kid came in reeking of weed and was asked to empty his pockets, the off-duty officer found that he wasn't carrying any pot but did have a knife with a 3.5 inch blade — and under DPS rules, Santiago had to expel him. The kid got lippy, and the cop barked back in such a way that Santiago let him go, too.

"We want it to be a learning experience and not a street experience, because they already get enough of that," Santiago says. "It's the same thing for the officers as it is for the teachers: There's a niche with our population, and working with them is not for everybody."

During Santiago's tenure, there have been no busts for guns or drugs. Two kids were sent to other schools because they brought knives to Life Skills. There have been three fights, all between girls, and one vehicular assault between boys. Both Santiago and his students say that Life Skills kids just don't give each other as much shit as kids at public schools.

"You just look at everybody else and know they have problems, just like you. That's why we're all here," one Life Skills student says.

One former student is doing 180 years for unloading an AK-47 on a residential street and hitting two girls with stray bullets ("Girl Crazy <http://westword.com/2006-08-17/news/girl-crazy/> ," August 17, 2006). Another made headlines earlier this year when the body of her missing baby was found. But some kids who have graduated Life Skills have gone on to college, and others report successes on many levels.

The school has a regular 10 a.m. smoke break. After one recent break, a friend whom Justin calls "Loco" snagged some hot sauce off of the receptionist's desk and put it in his pocket.

"Hey, Santiago," Loco said. "Which bar does your Dad work at?"

"Why?" Santiago wanted to know.

"Because I want to go pick a fight with him."

"Trust me, you don't want to do that," Santiago said. His father hasn't hit the bottle in more than 25 years, and now brings snacks from the food bank to the Life Skills kids each week.

"I'm taking off," another student told Santiago.

"Why?"

"Because my girlfriend's dad and her brother got in a fight and she got in the middle of it, and one of them hit her in the face."

"Did they call the cops?" Santiago asked.

"I don't know."

"Do you want to call the cops?" Santiago asked.

"No," the student said, as an off-duty cop shook his head in disappointment.

The cop moved on to the computer lab. "Do you guys need to use the restroom?" he asked. In Life Skills' continuing efforts to keep graffiti off the walls, all male students are accompanied to the bathroom. Last year, Santiago tried doing away with this rule. But when the ink came back on the walls, the policy was revived.

While Santiago can control some things on the local level, others are over his head — like the ugly gray polo shirt that Life Skills used to make students wear. Santiago hated the uniform as much as the kids did, but it was a corporate policy he couldn't change. So instead, he used it to teach kids another life lesson: You may have to wear things you don't like from time to time, particularly for work. Life Skills has since changed its uniform to brightly colored T-shirts that proclaim "MY SCHOOL MY CHOICE."

Every little thing helps. Although Santiago is no longer feeding kids off the dollar menu, he's looking into federally subsidized lunch programs that they may qualify for. And at least the state has taken up the issue of dropouts, with Governor Bill Ritter hosting a two-day education summit this week, the "Colorado Dropout Prevention, Retention and Recovery Summit," that will focus on ways to cut Colorado's high-school dropout rate in half over the next ten years.

Santiago is proud of the part he's already played in helping kids stay in school. "A change was made — granted, a little bit later than it should've been, but a change was made for the better," Santiago says. "And my life, the way I live, I wouldn't be here if I didn't believe that."

He can make a difference for kids like Justin, who didn't get the breaks he did as a kid. "My older brother was with us," Santiago points out. "He was helping us out, not necessarily as a father figure, but an adult male in the house. Justin doesn't have that.

Justin is the adult male in the house."

Justin originally wanted to graduate last spring and move on to construction college, but he just couldn't finish classes fast enough. And now it doesn't look like he'll make December, either. So he's focused on next June — when he could be part of Life Skills' last graduating class. And if the school goes, he doesn't know where kids like him will turn.

"A lot of kids got it a lot worse than I do," Justin says, fighting back tears in his principal's office. "Santiago is saving my life. Who knows what would have happened if there wasn't this school, if I just left West and that was it?"

If Life Skills has to shut its doors, Santiago will find a place to go. He's done it before. But he has an education. He has options. For most of his students, this is their last chance. "My biggest fear," he says, "is that they're going to end up on the streets if we are forced to close."

9 News

Wednesday, December 5, 2007

Report cards have good news for schools that have struggled to improve

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DENVER – When Principal Kristin Waters took over Bruce Randolph, it was the lowest performing middle school in Colorado. Wednesday, she celebrated the achievement of her school obtaining a "low" rating from the state.

"How can you celebrate being low? Well, from where we came or where we started, it's huge," said Waters. "And, it's not over. It's just beginning."

Waters is just one of thousands of educators who received the School Accountability Reports released by the Colorado Department of Education. Commonly called "School Report Cards," it provides insight on how every public program is doing. The reports include information on funding, teachers, crime and test scores.

A combination of several factors leads to a rating of "unsatisfactory," "low," "average," "high," or "excellent." Academic growth is measured as significant improvement, improvement, stable, decline, significant decline or no growth.

Bruce Randolph sits in northeast Denver in a neighborhood where poverty and crime are issues. For years, the school failed at educating kids adequately enough that it was on the brink of being severely sanctioned by the Colorado Department of Education. Waters came in and hired an entirely new staff and implemented practices where teachers work together to train on new methods and to get students interested in succeeding academically. Bruce Randolph improved its rating from "unsatisfactory" to "low."

"Students didn't have the confidence that they do today," said Waters. "They recognize that they are improving and they are successful."

In Arvada, Pomona High School is celebrating its success. Three years ago, the school was on academic probation with declining test scores.

"We weren't getting the results that we were happy with," said Barbara Taylor, a history teacher at Pomona. "It was a good experience to have to decide what we are going to do."

Principal Dan Cohan took over and established a vision to turn the school around. Wednesday, Cohan got word that his school is rated as "high" and the student academic growth is rated as "improvement."

"So, it tells us that we must be doing something right," said Cohan. "It's always great for people to feel good. I want students to feel good about their school to feel safe, to be happy, to feel like this is a place where I can learn and I can graduate with choices for my future."

Cohan says teachers started implementing researched-based teaching techniques. Some work together to continue a lesson from one class to the next. For instance, a subject being taught in a history class will be the topic for a writing assignment in a language arts class. Cohan says he is proud to say his teachers do teach to the standardized tests like the Colorado Student Assessment Program tests or CSAPs.

"Because the CSAPs is based on the state standards, the ACT is nationally normed, so it gives us an idea to what extent students are learning," said Cohan.

This is the first year the School Accountability Reports had to reflect crimes on campus differently. Felony assaults and fights are now split into two different categories so parents can be clearer about safety at school.

The change stemmed from the actions of Rev. Calvin Hall. In January of 2005, Hall's stepson, Contrell Townsend, was stabbed to death in the cafeteria of Montbello High School in north Denver. The following year, Montbello's report card listed no assaults or fights at the school. School officials say the 17-year-old's death constituted a "weapons violation" – a determination Hall found insulting.

With regards to academics, State leaders were happy with the results. Across Colorado, 43 percent of the schools were rated as "high" or "excellent;" 38 percent rated as "average;" 19 percent received ratings of "low" or unsatisfactory. The Colorado Department of Education lists 109,848 students in attendance of the "excellent" schools which is a state record.

"The steadily increasing number of students learning in strong schools is an upbeat trend," said Education Commissioner Dwight Jones in a statement. "We know from looking at the overall CSAP results that students from every background are fully capable of reaching state standards when expectations are high and instructional practices are aligned to meeting the needs of children."

School report cards released

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DENVER – Governor Bill Owens said the sixth unveiling of school accountability reports is the best yet with more students attending highly-rated schools and fewer attending poorly-rated ones.

“I believe that these accountability reports ensure that our schools are performing at the level they should be,” said Governor Owens during the official unveiling at the Department of Education building. “They, in fact, are meant to be an incentive.”

At one Denver school, it was.

“They were struggling and we didn’t have in place what we have now,” said Karti Lyons, principal at Teller Elementary.

Teller just received its report card carrying a “high” rating. After years of struggling and on the verge of being rated “low,” Lyons said teachers, parents, and administrators worked hard to improve the learning at her school.

“It’s everybody coming together and looking at what the needs are and making sure that we are focused on that,” Lyons said. “It’s sweet. It is extremely satisfying.”

Teller is a school familiar with common urban problems. It has a significant population of English language learners and a population where more than half of the kids come from low-income families. Both are common denominators in poorly-performing schools.

“In spite of the level of free and reduced lunch we have, we have been successful in elevating student achievement,” Lyons said.

“Those are the kids that you have to target even more and those are the kids that you set the bar even higher,” said Nancy Maniatis, 5th grade teacher.

She says that teachers have worked hard to close the achievement gap between white students and minority students and that they’re team-oriented approach is working.

“I challenge the 5th graders. I tell them that Ms. Lyons is challenging me and I like to win,” said Maniatis.

With their “high” rating, Teller parents feel like they finally won.

“We made it,” said Michele Foust, a parent. “It’s kind of the difference between an A and a B. We’ve always known that we’re an A school, but finally someone has given us the grade.”

The state lists more than 99,000 students attending schools with an “excellent” rating this year as compared to 97,752 last year. The report cards also list incidents of crimes reported at a school. Last spring, a law was passed to make that reporting more accurate, listing more specific crimes, but that change will not take affect until the 2007 school accountability reports.

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