

News Clips

Headlines

Rocky Mountain News

Monday, December 17, 2007

- Time matters at two schools
- 'I didn't really know how good I could be'

Saturday, December 15, 2007

- SPEAKOUT: Giving schools some leeway

Denver Post

Monday, December 17, 2007

- Editorial: School deserves chance at change
- Shiny new wheels for 330 students

Rocky Mountain News

Monday, December 17, 2007

Time matters at two schools

Hispanic and lower-income students moving from DPS to charter schools are finding that the long hours and hard work is paying off as they catch up and move ahead

By [Nancy Mitchell](http://www.rockymountainnews.com/staff/nancy-mitchell/) <<http://www.rockymountainnews.com/staff/nancy-mitchell/>>, Rocky Mountain News ([Contact](http://www.rockymountainnews.com/staff/nancy-mitchell/contact/) <<http://www.rockymountainnews.com/staff/nancy-mitchell/contact/>>)

Monday, December 17, 2007

Elijah Ruff, age 14, has a daily schedule that would make many adults wince - nine hours of school, on average, followed by a couple hours of homework.

The eighth-grader at KIPP Sunshine Peak Academy, a Denver charter school targeting largely poor and minority students, is living proof of the words on the blue banner hanging in the school's front lobby:

"Welcome to KSPA," it reads, "Home of Denver's Hardest Working Students."

True. A *Rocky Mountain News* analysis shows the average school day for KIPP students is two hours and 23 minutes longer than their middle school peers in traditional Denver Public Schools.

Add Saturday school - 16 days in 2007-08 - and the required summer classes - up to 18 days in June - and the KIPP school year exceeds that of DPS by more than 600 hours.

In other words, DPS middle schools would have to add 89 more days to their annual calendars to match KIPP.

And that's still not enough for Richard Barrett, founder and director of KIPP Sunshine Peak, where the motto is "Work hard. Be nice. No shortcuts."

"We need more time," Barrett said. "Our kids are coming to us (from DPS elementary schools) usually three grade levels behind. It's taking us four years plus to catch these kids up."

Longer day, year

Requiring students to spend more time in school is a key feature of KIPP and West Denver Prep, another charter middle school in an impoverished southwest Denver neighborhood.

Both schools are seeing success with a population of students - Hispanic children from low-income families - who are floundering in traditional Denver middle schools.

At Rishel Middle School, across the parking lot from KIPP near the corner of Alameda Avenue and Tejon Street, fewer than one in five students were proficient on 2007 state reading tests.

At KIPP, where the poverty rate exceeds that of Rishel, 51 percent of students were reading at grade level.

Similarly, at Kepner Middle School, which is 1.3 miles from West Denver Prep, fewer than one in four students were proficient readers.

At West Denver Prep, 49 percent of students were proficient.

Chris Gibbons, who last fall opened West Denver Prep on South Federal Boulevard, said the need for more class time was clear from the outset.

Students coming into his school as sixth-graders were testing, on average, at early fourth-grade levels.

"Time is critical," Gibbons said, echoing Barrett. "If we're taking kids a couple years behind, on average, I need more time to get them on track."

A sense of urgency

Students at West Denver Prep average an eight-hour school day, in contrast to the seven-hour day in DPS, and attend school nearly three weeks longer.

The *Rocky* analysis showed DPS middle schools would have to add 41 seven-hour days to match West Denver Prep.

Gibbons, to drive home the "time is critical" message, visits each class in the fall with a stopwatch.

He times how long it takes for students to pass back papers and rewards the fastest classroom.

"What it conveys to kids is, time really matters. That may not have been the case before, so it helps set that difference," he said. "It's one part how important time is. It's another part understanding the kind of attitude we're going to take here."

For some students, it's a tough adjustment.

Tim Cruz, 11, came to West Denver Prep this fall after his grandmother heard about the school.

"I was just so shocked the school expected so much out of me because I just wasn't used to it," he said.

Time spent on homework has more than doubled - an hour and 20 minutes or more most nights.

"It's kind of too much," Cruz said. "The homework is too much and they're very, very strict."

Work now, payoff later

Still, he reasoned, "If they pass me now and I don't know stuff and I'm going to college, that could be pretty bad for me. I think how my future's going to be if they

kick me out of college. I'll probably be working at McDonald's and making \$2 an hour and living with my mom."

He sighed.

"So you might as well do it while you can and not have to go through all of that in high school and college," he said. "Do all the hard work now."

It is much the same reasoning that Gibbons uses when families approach him with time concerns.

"I've had some parents for whom it's a really big deal," he said. "They say, 'My kid's in school all day, doing homework all night.' It's not their idea of childhood."

Gibbons' response is to turn to his computer and pull up the academic data for his school vs. the school where the parent is considering a transfer.

He tells parents, "I believe my obligation to you is to get your child to grade level . . . If you don't agree, that's OK."

Six families have left the school, citing time as a factor. Another three have discussed it but decided to stay.

More time, more money

Some traditional Denver Public Schools are starting to become more flexible in how they use time.

At Montbello High School, Principal Antwan Wilson has implemented a Saturday school and "night" school - typically 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. - to help students catch up on credits and get them on track to graduate.

"We're committed to it," Wilson said, "but there are tough decisions that have to be made. It costs a lot of money. This year, I started out \$30,000 in the hole."

Costs include paying for the self-paced computer program that is being used and, of course, personnel - paying teachers willing to stick around. Wilson is looking at different options, such as a later start for teachers willing to try it, to ease the expense.

DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet said he supports the idea of individual schools trying a longer school day or a longer school year.

But he said the costs for a districtwide move in that direction are prohibitive. Adding a single day to the student calendar equals about \$1.3 million in teacher pay, or roughly \$162,500 for every added hour.

"It's clear that there are places that have made really good use of a longer school day and a longer school year to meet the needs of kids," Bennet said, "and we'd love to see more of that in this school district."

Time for teachers

But, he added, "I'm not an advocate for teachers working longer and not getting paid for it."

Neither is Kim Ursetta, president of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association, the teachers union.

"We feel teachers, like all professionals, need to be compensated for the extra time they put in," she said.

The contract calls for teachers to work a 40-hour week, with 40 minutes daily set aside for planning and up to two hours per week for training and staff meetings.

Teachers in individual schools can vote to waive contract provisions and agree to minor schedule changes. But adding hours to the work week would require permission from the union and the district.

KIPP and West Denver Prep, as charters, aren't subject to the union contract. And while teachers in both schools work a longer day, they also get more time within the day to prepare and plan.

KIPP teachers get a minimum of 100 minutes per day for planning. West Denver Prep teachers have 220 minutes to 240 minutes daily.

Several teachers said it's easier, in some ways, than teaching in traditional public schools.

KIPP teacher Carolyn Brug, 26, said her two years in a North Carolina school were hard because behavior problems and other interruptions often got in the way of teaching.

At KIPP, discipline is strict and class time is protected.

"Now it feels a lot less stressful," she said, "because I'm actually teaching."

'I feel their pain'

In the lobby at KIPP, near the banner declaring its students the hardest working in Denver, is laminated proof that all that effort pays off.

Letters of acceptance from top public and private high schools - Denver School of the Arts and Kent Denver locally, The Masters School and Deerfield Academy nationally - line up to spell out the school initials.

For Elijah Ruff, who is now applying to some of those schools, time at KIPP has been its own revelation.

He spent his first year at the school not wanting to be there, bewildered by the sudden onslaught of work.

"To even bring books home was awkward. I had never done that before," he said, seated in KIPP's cafeteria. "If I had my own decision in the fifth grade, I would not be here."

But he's glad he stayed,

"Now I'm glad," he said, because what he wants even more than homework-free evenings and weekends without school is to become an engineer.

A graduate of the Colorado School of Mines, in fact.

Still, he looked over at a dozen younger students, off to the side, consigned to KIPP's version of in-school suspension, with sympathy.

"I feel their pain," he said. "I was there a lot. If I get a chance to talk to them, I motivate them."

mitchelln@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-954-5245

About the series

Denver Public Schools can change the way it serves its 72,000 students - or continue tinkering around the edges of dismal achievement and stagnant enrollment in most buildings.

DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet admitted this reality after a series in the *Rocky Mountain News* explored why one in four Denver children do not attend the city's schools.

"It is hard to admit," he wrote, "but it is abundantly clear that we will fail the vast majority of children in Denver if we try to run our schools the same old way."

On Nov. 19, DPS board members approved their most dramatic reform package to date, including the closure of eight schools and the transformation of five more.

They also approved a pathway allowing those inside and outside DPS to propose innovative new schools to open in fall 2009. DPS leaders are particularly seeking ideas for middle schools, long the weak link in the district's academic chain. One report found poor children in Denver middle schools consistently score 10 to 14 percentage points lower on state tests than their low-income peers statewide, across all grades and subjects.

Today is Part 2 of an occasional *Rocky* series looking at outside-the-box strategies already working in Denver. Read Part 1 online at **RockyMountainNews.com**. Some charter schools are making gains with the very children - Hispanic, poor, middle school-aged or older - failing in traditional DPS schools. What are schools such as West Denver Preparatory and KIPP Sunshine Peak Academy doing to create success? And is the rest of DPS paying attention?

<http://www.rockymountainnews.com/>>

'I didn't really know how good I could be'

By [Nancy Mitchell](http://www.rockymountainnews.com/staff/nancy-mitchell/) <<http://www.rockymountainnews.com/staff/nancy-mitchell/>> , Rocky Mountain News ([Contact](http://www.rockymountainnews.com/staff/nancy-mitchell/contact/) <<http://www.rockymountainnews.com/staff/nancy-mitchell/contact/>>)

Monday, December 17, 2007

IN HER OWN WORDS: BRIDGET NEWMAN

Bridget Newman, 25, began teaching this fall at West Denver Preparatory Charter School, a college prep middle school on South Federal Boulevard. It's her second job in teaching. She taught for two years in a traditional public middle school in Camden, N.J., not long after the city was named the most dangerous in America. Her experience there nearly turned her off teaching. West Denver Prep changed that. She spends more than two hours a day on the bus, commuting from her Boulder home to the school. Here's why she believes it's worth it:

"At my former school, I didn't feel like student achievement was the focus of the school. It might have been about keeping jobs for people, it might have been about what was easiest for teachers, what was easiest for administrators. But it wasn't about the students.

"I saw a lot of students fall through the cracks, and I saw a lot of students that a lot of teachers had basically written off, and I just couldn't deal with that anymore.

I wanted to be at a school where there was a commitment to all of the students.

"(Right away here) I just felt so at home and I was just so relieved to be in a place where it was, 'This is how we make sure every student achieves,' and 'This is the extra tutoring that we give students,' and 'This is the kind of structure we have in our classroom.'

"What was really refreshing to me as a teacher was to hear, if there's a student that you have already given a consequence in your classroom and they're still disrupting your teaching, you send them out. At my former school, you could send a kid out, say for even getting into a fight with another student, and they could be back in three minutes.

"The expectations of teachers are definitely higher here. But I've really liked that.

"Before I came here, I didn't really know how good I could be. If it's enough to come in at 8:30, leave at 3:30, and if your kids are quiet, and that's the main expectation, you don't really know everything you can do. . . .

"Here, we're actually treated as professionals, professionals who can design their own curriculum, professionals who went to college and know a lot about their subject matter.

"At my old school it was very common to have the entire school, say 100 teachers together in the library, and a PowerPoint presentation about how you should do things. The language would be, 'OK folks, we have to raise test scores' or 'Some folks aren't coming to work every day; well, you have to come to work every day.' It just felt not inspiring.

"I really like being on call at night. It is a little bit of extra time, but I'm not getting 20 homework calls a night. I maybe get two or three, and I think it's really good that kids know they have that lifeline.

"Sometimes I am tired. I get up at 5 o'clock in the morning to get a 6:10 bus that leaves for Denver, and then I take another bus to come here. But I think . . . I must really like doing this because I can't think of anything else that I would even want to get up at 5 o'clock in the morning and go do.

"When I was teaching in Camden, I was about 99 percent sure that as soon as I was finished teaching, I wanted to go to grad school.

"But once I visited this school, I realized that I really did want to stay in teaching. I actually ended up turning down several grad school offers. . . .

"I don't think there's anything more important or anything that fits my skills and interests better than helping to make sure all kids have opportunities."

Saturday, December 15, 2007

SPEAKOUT: Giving schools some leeway

By Sens. Peter Groff and Chris Romer

Saturday, December 15, 2007

Last week, teachers at Denver's Bruce Randolph School asked the Denver Classroom Teachers Association and the board of Denver Public Schools to recognize the school as an "autonomous" school. Principal Kristin Waters emphasized that she wants to have a top-flight teaching staff that is not burdened by onerous regulations. We want to give that same opportunity to schools and school districts that wish to follow suit.

As parents and active community members, we are all too aware that the widening achievement gap illustrates a need for creative solutions for our students. We are not preparing all our kids to compete in a global economy. We must encourage our districts to take innovative approaches to break down barriers to success in order to truly create a world-class education system for Colorado.

With these goals in mind, we plan to introduce legislation that will allow schools and school districts to enter what will be called Zones of Innovative Performance, or ZIPs.

Simply put, the legislation would allow school districts to create these areas within existing districts.

The concept is not new, having been embraced in Chicago, Boston and, most recently, by the legislature in Nevada. It is grounded in the existing public school system, with proposed oversight by the State Board of Education and the commissioner of education.

This legislation would allow a school district or individual school to submit an application to the education commissioner for participation. The number of districts would initially be capped at 17 (10 percent of the total number of school districts in Colorado). Any of the state's 178 school districts could submit an application directly to the commissioner.

The legislation envisions that these schools and districts would receive a waiver

from state and local requirements that impede the implementation of their innovative vision for academic excellence.

What if, for example, a school or district wanted to pay its teachers more than the negotiated contract agreement? One of these schools could do so by offering a higher starting salary in exchange for a defined-contribution retirement program. Additionally, principals and their staffs would be able to direct and spend their budgets, in a way that is not necessarily dictated by the district office, to better meet the individual needs of the students they are educating.

The Zones of Innovative Performance proposal seeks to bring unions, parents, business and management together to focus on the most important responsibility: the needs of the children. This proposal would allow districts and schools to innovate in areas such as school governance, teacher recruitment, setting performance expectations and evaluation procedures for teachers and principals, compensation for teachers and principals including performance-pay plans, and the preparation and counseling of students for transitions to post-secondary education or the work force.

We won't prescribe how schools or districts use the flexibility we are proposing. We are confident that placing more decision-making directly into the hands of our education professionals and parents will result in the kind of innovation that will make schools more competitive, help close the achievement gap, unshackle our schools from restrictive regulations, and move Colorado forward.

Sen. Peter C. Groff, D-Denver, is Senate president. Sen. Chris Romer is a Democrat representing Denver's Senate District 32.

Denver Post

Monday, December 17, 2007

Editorial

School deserves chance at change

The Denver school board and teachers union should both OK a plan to give teachers at Bruce Randolph more control.

The Denver Post

Article Last Updated: 12/16/2007 08:03:26 PM MST

Ask any public school teacher about what's wrong with education and pretty soon you'll find yourself talking about the problems with mandates from on high.

You know, the broad, inflexible rules that seem to dictate every move they make.

This week, Denver Public School officials are expected to begin discussing one school's request to deviate from the lockstep contract that spells out the delivery of education.

We hope the DPS board and ultimately the Denver Classroom Teachers Association will approve the request from Bruce Randolph School, which is fervently trying to reverse a history of abysmal student achievement scores.

We're not the only ones enthused by the idea of letting this school take a crack at tailoring its education to fit its students.

On Friday, the non-profit Piton Foundation announced it would give the school \$100,000 to be used toward increasing student achievement if the union and the DPS board agree to the school's request for more autonomy.

In a district as cash-strapped as DPS, the school board and the teachers union are going to be hard-pressed to justify denial of what really is a request for small freedoms.

To be clear, the request from Bruce Randolph principal Kristin Waters, her faculty and union representative Greg Ahrnsbrak would not change Bruce Randolph's public school status. It wouldn't mean a break with the teachers union. And it wouldn't put the school outside the auspices of the district's blueprint for improvement, called the Denver Plan.

This request, which has the support of most of the school's faculty, would give Bruce Randolph some of the tools it needs to continue improving student test scores at the school, which until recently was labeled one of the worst-performing schools in the state.

The changes would allow Bruce Randolph to recruit teachers at the same time other metro-area districts are vying for the cream of the crop instead of waiting a couple of months and having to take a current DPS teacher who maybe isn't the best fit.

Waters and her leadership team could decide to scotch an in-service day and have the staff be in the classroom instead.

We understand there's some trepidation about the proposal. Perhaps approving the request with a sunset provision — meaning it would expire at a certain date unless renewed — would alleviate those concerns.

Outright rejection would be an unconscionable slap in the face to an enthusiastic school leadership team that is trying valiantly to do the best for students. Ultimately, isn't that what it's all about?

Shiny new wheels for 330 students

"We want to give back," said McDonald's franchisee Geta Asfaw, who came to the U.S. from Ethiopia.

By Tom McGhee

The Denver Post

<mailto:tmcghee@denverpost.com?subject=The%20Denver%20Post:%20Shiny%20new%20wheels%20for%20330%20students>

Article Last Updated: 12/17/2007 12:38:05 AM MST

D'Angelo McWilliams eyed the ranks of shiny new Huffy bicycles, searching for the one that would soon be his.

He didn't find it, but the Wyman Elementary School student, one of 330 fifth- and sixth-graders to receive a bike at a giveaway arranged by McDonald's franchisee Geta Asfaw, wasn't disappointed.

"It feels good," said the 10-year-old, who along with the other recipients got his bike during a later ceremony.

McWilliams and the rest of the students were nominated by their teachers and community organizations because of their academic achievement, good citizenship, financial need or chronic illness, said Asfaw, who owns six local McDonald's franchises.

Asfaw, who came to the United States to attend the University of Washington 35 years ago, said he organized the event to give back to the community.

He stayed in the states after the Ethiopian government was seized in a coup d'etat, he said. "You start from nothing, and today we have a whole bunch. We want to give back," he said of himself and other franchisees who contributed to the event.

It was the second year that the giveaway was held. In 2006, the Arches of Hope, which was formed by Asfaw's foundation, gave away 50 bicycles.

Similar charitable events are held by franchisees in Indianapolis and other cities, said Don Thompson, president of McDonald's USA.

"There are not any silver spoons that came up through the system in McDonald's. We have all made hamburgers and cleaned restrooms," said Thompson, who spoke at the event.

Twenty local schools and organizations selected students, each of whom went home with a 20-inch bike, either blue or pink depending on the child's gender, and a helmet. The

bikes took up a large rectangle of floor at a gym on the Auraria campus.

"Many of them would never have had a brand-new bicycle," said Carolyn Jones, principal of Challenges, Choices & Images Charter School in Denver.

Kia Johnson, 11, a sixth-grader at the school, found out she would receive a bicycle when an associate principal told her last week: "I was shocked."

"I almost passed out right there," said Kenny Harris, a wide-eyed 11-year-old who also attends the charter school. His last bike fell victim to some rough treatment by a brother who jumped on the tires, he said before running off to get a close look at the gleaming rows of bikes waiting to be presented.

*Tom McGhee: 303-954-1671 or tmcghee@denverpost.com
<<mailto:tmcghee@denverpost.com>>*