

News Clips

Headlines

Rocky Mountain News

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DPS board to vote on autonomy plan at Bruce Randolph

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Kristin Waters already is among the most innovative principals in Denver Public Schools, voluntarily moving three years ago from running one of the city's best middle schools to heading its worst.

Scratch that. Bruce Randolph School in north Denver was not only the lowest-performing middle school in DPS, it was officially ranked among the worst in Colorado. Repeatedly.

Few were certain Waters could make any difference, and even she admits it took longer than she wanted. But when state rankings this month showed Randolph had progressed from unsatisfactory to low, she and her staff celebrated by asking DPS and the Denver teachers' union for something no school ever had before:

The autonomy to run their school their way, free from school district policies and

union contract rules.

"We keep hitting barriers to creative solutions," an impassioned Waters told Denver school board members Monday. "This is not just about a contract, it is about district policies, procedures and bureaucracy that have slowed us down. Look at what we've done, and look at what we may be able to do."

DPS board members are scheduled to vote Thursday on the plan.

Responses flow in

Bruce Randolph's request for autonomy has sparked a whirlwind of responses, from local foundations offering \$115,000 in funding to praise from Mayor John Hickenlooper and Colorado Senate President-elect Peter Groff to what a DPS attorney called "almost a scare-tactic type" of document from attorneys for the Colorado Education Association, the statewide teachers' union.

The seven-page document from CEA attorneys circulated Monday at Bruce Randolph claimed teachers there could lose their health benefits, among many other things, if the autonomy agreement were approved.

"It was an incredibly overreaching, almost a scare-tactic type of letter," DPS attorney John Kechriotis told board members. "Some of the things are just flat wrong."

Kim Ursetta, president of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association, which is part of the CEA, said the letter was based on questions asked by Bruce Randolph teachers in a school meeting last week. So it does not reflect an updated autonomy proposal submitted Monday by Bruce Randolph.

"We're still trying to gather some more information," Ursetta said. "We support innovation and we support reform and we are always looking for new ideas that will empower teachers and enable students to succeed."

The autonomy agreement must be approved both by the DPS board and by the DCTA board of directors. But before DCTA board members vote, Ursetta said, a majority of Bruce Randolph teachers must approve the proposal in a secret ballot.

That secret ballot voting is not yet scheduled, she said. The DCTA board next meets Jan. 8.

Not just the union

Waters said the emphasis on union concerns about the proposal is misplaced - district policies are as much to blame for slowing needed reforms.

For example, she told school board members, she asked in May to be allowed to use a position at her school as a social worker to help the families of frequently absent or tardy students. She wanted to focus on working with the families rather than on "the hammer" of taking students to court for truancy.

Monday, more than six months later, Waters said she had yet to hear back from the district on the request.

"The time it takes to navigate through the system . . . is lost time for our kids," she said.

Bruce Randolph is not asking to leave the district or the union, a teacher told board members.

"We still are part of Denver Public Schools and are proud of that," said Greg Ahrnsbrak, the school's union representative and physical education teacher. "We still are union members, we're not leaving the union."

"Our sole purpose here . . . is for us to have the freedom to make real-time instructional decisions that affect our students," said Ahrnsbrak, one of the authors of the agreement who began working on it last spring. "We're simply here asking you to help us."

Teacher support?

Ahrnsbrak said about 75 percent of teachers at Bruce Randolph support the plan. Others dispute that, saying teachers were not clearly told what the agreement contained when they signed their names in support.

At least one teacher has asked to be removed from the list of support in the past week, said Chrisanne LaHue, one of the authors of the agreement.

It is perhaps ironic that Waters first came to Randolph in 2005 with the intention of proving that a school could be reformed within existing DPS rules. The idea was to transform a low-performing school within the parameters of a typical school year and a typical school budget. Show it can be done and then replicate it.

Waters, asked about that goal, laughed a little.

"I think people now in education reform are recognizing that something needs to be done," she said. "The way things have been going is not working . . . I'm looking at what is going to help our kids."

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Serving the students

Principal Kristin Waters and teachers at Bruce Randolph School in north Denver are asking to be freed of school district policies and union contract rules. Waters gave these examples of how her school could better serve students as a result:

* The ability to recruit earlier for better teachers. Waters already knows she needs an 11th-grade chemistry teacher for fall 2008. She also knows science teachers are hard to find. But she can't post a job description yet because the district staffing cycle for the 2008-09 school year does not begin until February. And because of district and union staffing rules, she cannot even interview a candidate from outside Denver Public Schools until late April or May.

* Control over hiring. Waters and other DPS principals do not always decide whom to hire. In late spring, before a candidate from outside DPS can be interviewed, district and union rules require existing DPS teachers unable to find jobs to be placed in a school. Many of these so-called "direct placements" are quality educators, some are not. The schools where they're assigned don't get to say no. Bruce Randolph received four "direct placements" in one year of their past three years of reform.

* Flexibility in spending. Waters said she isn't asking for more money from DPS, but she does want more control over it. DPS gives her a set budget and blocks out a significant portion of it for teacher pay, based on the average DPS teacher salary. Some Bruce Randolph teachers don't yet earn that salary, but district and union rules prohibit Waters from quickly using the excess money for other purposes. She estimates her school would have an extra \$160,000 for classrooms if her budget were based on actual, not average, teacher pay.