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Bruce Randolph School may get freedom it seeks

By [Nancy Mitchell](#)

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Thursday, December 20, 2007

A Denver school's bid for autonomy from district and union red tape appears to be headed for approval today, after a majority of teachers at Bruce Randolph School formally voted in favor of the plan.

It also appears likely that Bruce Randolph will not be the only school seeking such freedom.

"I have a lot of respect for what they're doing over there and I'm very interested in it," said Manual High School Principal Rob Stein.

"I think what they're doing is reacting to a need that I'm experiencing as well, which is to have more control over decisions that affect my students."

Denver Public Schools board members will vote tonight on the Bruce Randolph autonomy agreement, a first-of-its-kind proposal by Principal Kristin Waters and her staff to waive district policies and teachers union rules.

Waters and four teachers presented the plan to school board members on Monday, prompting praise from some and concerns from others.

Board member Michelle Moss, for example, was worried by reports that all Bruce Randolph teachers were not fully informed of the details of the proposal.

But a vote Tuesday at the school eased those concerns. Waters said 33 teachers voted yes, 14 voted no and two abstained, for a 67 percent approval rate.

"Having the teachers in that building supporting this by at least a two-thirds majority takes a huge burden off of me," Moss said, "and makes me feel comfortable moving forward."

Board members also received a legal analysis from DPS attorney John Kechriotis, who labeled as "false" and "misleading" a number of claims by the Colorado Education Association, the state teachers union.

The CEA, in a document circulated at Bruce Randolph, claimed teachers would lose job protections and health benefits if the agreement were approved.

"(I)t seems fairly clear that the CEA analysis is, at best, misleading and overreaching, and more often than not, false," Kechriotis wrote in his response.

If board members vote yes tonight, the Bruce Randolph proposal still must be approved by the governing board of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association, the city chapter of the CEA. The board meets Jan. 8.

"We still have some questions," said DCTA President Kim Ursetta. "We're going to keep working with the Bruce Randolph staff."

It's clear that the proposal has sparked interest from other DPS schools. Stein, who came to Manual after eight years running a private school, likened district regulations to a "logjam" that makes the challenges at his school "worse, not better."

"Virtually everything I need to do, it takes a lot longer and a lot more work because I'm an extension of an unwieldy bureaucracy," he said.

DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet noted that "many people in the district, both principals and teachers, have asked about this." But he declined to say whether he expects a rash of similar proposals - or how he would react to them.

"I think we'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Bennet said. "What we have in front of us right now is a request by an incredibly committed staff of people and I hope we can support it."

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Teacher incentives pitched at forum

Legislators discuss issues they expect to see at their '08 session, such as health care and the environment.

By Jennifer Brown
The Denver Post

<mailto:jenbrown@denverpost.com?subject=The%20Denver%20Post:%20Teacher%20incentives%20pitched%20at%20forum>

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A statewide pay-incentive program for teachers willing to take the toughest assignments was among the ideas pitched by lawmakers Wednesday in a forum with Colorado journalists.

House Speaker Andrew Romanoff said the state could fund a pay-for-performance

system by decreasing pensions and strengthening incentives earlier in a teacher's career.

The Denver Democrat suggested following Denver Public Schools' model, which rewards teachers based on what they teach, where they teach and how well their students do on state tests. Romanoff said the state has to do a better job of giving bright, motivated people incentives to be teachers and rewarding those quality teachers who have stayed in the profession despite the appeal of more lucrative jobs.

"We've relied, really, on the kindness of strangers," he said. "And that, in my opinion, isn't a durable strategy."

But Romanoff's proposal — like most of those tossed out at the forum — is far from becoming law.

The legislature convenes Jan. 9.

The lawmakers — the leaders of both parties in the House and the Senate as well as Gov. Bill Ritter — discussed issues they expect to play a role in the upcoming legislative session. Besides public education, topics included health care, transportation, higher education and the environment.

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Majority of school's teachers vote for autonomy proposal

Thirty-three of the 49 at Randolph Middle School support separating from key parts of the union contract.

By Jeremy P. Meyer
The Denver Post

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Two-thirds of teachers at a northeast Denver school seeking autonomy from district and union rules voted for the plan, which tonight will be considered by the school board.

Thirty-three of the 49 teachers at Bruce Randolph Middle School — with two abstentions — supported separating from key parts of the union contract in a blind ballot Tuesday that was counted Wednesday.

Specifically, Randolph's teachers and administrators want control over the school's

budget, hiring decisions, time, calendar and incentives. They have moved the school from being one of the worst in the state to being just another low-performing school in the district, and they want to be able to do more — without the restrictions.

Introduced this month, the proposal has generated much attention in the past few weeks — becoming fodder on opinion pages, the kernel of proposed statewide legislation and an incentive for more than \$100,000 in grant money.

On Friday, Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper walked through the school, and he will meet with the teachers union president today to hear about the proposal.

"I just want to listen to both sides," Hickenlooper said.

Teachers and administrators at the school have received flowers of support and phone messages and e-mails — some supportive and some not.

"We've become a bit of a political football in this," said Greg Ahrnsbrak, physical education teacher and union representative at the school.

"The union is concerned we are opening Pandora's box. Others are saying this is a great thing. Our position is we are just trying to do what we do best. And that is teach the children."

Yea or nay vote is tonight

Tonight, Denver's board of education will vote on approving the autonomy agreement.

Next is the teachers union, whose executive committee will examine the proposal Jan. 4. The earliest the union's board would vote on the matter is Jan. 8, according to Denver Teachers Classroom Association president Kim Ursetta.

"There are some great innovative ideas," Ursetta said about the proposal.

"We still have some questions about vagueness of the language, what the intent is, what exactly they want waived," she said.

At least one other school is closely watching whether the Randolph experiment gets approved.

Manual High principal Rob Stein said he would love to be untangled from the district's bureaucratic red tape.

"It seems, on its face, to solve many problems that I have experienced as a principal," he said. "We don't have enough control of our own decisions on-site — how and when we hire teachers, determining our own schedule and calendar. I could go on and on. If this works out, it will be very interesting."

School board member Michelle Moss wondered about the implications if Randolph's effort eventually snowballed into every school seeking autonomy from district rules. For example, she asked, what would become of the school board?

"If the board's role right now is to deal with policy, if we exempt the schools from policies, it seems silly to sit around and make them," she said.

On Wednesday, the Donnell-Kay Foundation released a report on how Denver Public Schools could improve, based on experiences of districts across the country — including a segment that urges the district to give schools more autonomy.

Donnell-Kay director Tony Lewis said schools would have the authority to find their own services and not be tied to the district's "Soviet-style bureaucracy."

"The board could be all about results," he said — holding schools accountable for not only assessment scores but also graduation rates, attendance, dropouts and college readiness.

The board would be the ultimate judge on whether to close schools that are not performing, he said.

"I think Bruce Randolph could be the start of it," Lewis said.

Some suspect nefarious motives

Some believe the effort at Randolph is being directed by district officials as a way to circumvent the union and school board. Teacher Chrisanne LaHue, who is leading the autonomy effort in the school, is married to Brad Jupp — senior academic policy adviser to the superintendent.

Jupp said he has not influenced the effort, saying that teachers and principal Kristin Waters have taken the spirit of the district's reform effort into their own hands.

"The district and the board are on record saying that schools need to be given much greater control at the local level," he said. "The school has captured the spirit of that statement."

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