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SPEAKOUT: Repair school culture

By Jerry Wartgow

Friday, January 4, 2008

About this time of year, we all make resolutions. However, when it comes to school improvement, we'd be better off spending less time making resolutions and more time dealing with realizations about what it really takes to boost student achievement.

There are no quick fixes or silver bullets. A key to successful reform is the development of a discipline of patience and persistence. Frenzied quests by elected officials, school boards, administrators, think tanks and other would-be reformers for simple solutions to the complex issues in our education system do not bring sustainable improvement to our schools.

The desire to make a difference during the short tenure of policy makers has resulted in rapid but fleeting reforms. Successful reformers will be more like a tortoise than a hare in the race to improve our schools. Those who rush from one quick fix and shallow nostrum into another will, like the hare, make a lot of noise and promises. In the end, both they and their schools will be losers.

The essence of education reform is the changing of a culture. Individuals and interest groups with a stake in education differ widely in their values, beliefs, information and even perceptions about what our schools are doing, what they should be doing and how they should go about doing it. These differences, now internalized in the education culture, are enduring and change slowly, if at all. Because the U.S. Constitution established education policy as a state's right, there was no early national dialogue, let alone national consensus, about expectations for schools. Therefore, the education culture has been shaped by priorities of individual states and special interest groups, and a variety of other national issues such as security and defense; religion, race and civil rights; poverty and politics. Until we reach agreement as a nation on the purpose, value and expectations for our schools, and our commitment to pay for it, our national education policy will consist of reform du jour.

Introducing reform initiatives - before developing the civic and institutional capacity to understand, manage and support those reforms - is a recipe for failure. In the rush to implement new and different ways of doing things, we have not provided adequate time or attention to educating the community, teachers, principals and parents about the purpose of the changes and the challenges that will accompany new philosophies, directions and programs.

The development of civic capacity and public will is especially important because many of the most significant issues that impact student performance are communitywide and go far beyond the authority and control of the school. It is seldom possible for a school or district to change its outcomes solely from within. That requires collaboration with political and governmental entities as well as with the special interest groups intricately enmeshed in the lives of the students.

The three L's - legislation, litigation and labor agreements - have mired our schools in bureaucracy and legal processes, and have undermined the ability of those responsible for teaching the three Rs to use common sense, exercise professional judgment and retain control of their schools. Legal fear has infected the culture of our schools and influences decisions made by school officials.

Likewise, union contracts, based on the principle that every incumbent teacher is guaranteed a job, result in bureaucratic burdens and the elimination of discretion by administrators and teachers. Because of adversarial processes inherent in both legal proceedings and collective bargaining, schools often are operated in a manner that is based on the best interests of the adults in the system, not the

children. Laws, litigation and detailed provisions in labor agreements don't guarantee attainment of goals.

It is important to keep theory and practice in proper perspective. The leadership challenge is not one of simply organizing to implement known solutions to known problems. Rather, it is one of motivating people to find new solutions to complex problems for which there are no known solutions.

Jerry Wartgow is the retired superintendent of Denver Public Schools and author of "Why School Reform is Failing and What We Need To Do About It: 10 Lessons From the Trenches" (rowmaneducation.com). He can be reached at jwartgow@comcast.net.

Denver Post

Friday, January 4, 2008

New year for principals

DPS picks replacements after 3 resigned or were removed

By Jeremy P. Meyer
The Denver Post

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Three Denver schools will have new principals when classes resume Monday after the administrators were either removed or resigned last month, district officials said.

The principals headed Martin Luther King Jr. Early College Middle School, Knight Fundamental Academy and Contemporary Learning Academy High School.

Interim principals were placed at two schools.

One principal — Dave Debus of the Contemporary Learning Academy — is being investigated by police. He resigned last month.

"No arrests have been made," said Denver police spokesman Sonny Jackson, who would not define the allegations against Debus.

District officials on Thursday would say only that an internal investigation had been conducted on an administrator at Contemporary Learning Academy, adding that privacy rules prevented them from revealing the administrator's name.

Debus, 47, earned \$100,904 a year and had been with the district for 11 years as an assistant area superintendent and principal of Lake Middle School.

He could not be reached for comment.

The district has not named an interim principal for the alternative school.

The other two principals who had their contracts terminated were Anthony Taylor at Martin Luther King and Jana Smith at Knight Academy.

The district would not say what led to their terminations.

Letters home to parents and staff announced the changes and introduced the schools' interim principals, who are both retired DPS administrators.

Taylor, who made \$104,119 a year, had been in the position since July but had some problems at his former job.

Taylor had resigned as principal of a Florida school amid allegations of inappropriate behavior with a staff member, according to media reports.

Denver Classroom Teachers Association president Kim Ursetta said there had been complaints about Taylor in Denver, such as allegedly making teachers and students stay in their classrooms when a bathroom trash can caught fire.

Taylor could not be reached for comment.

Smith, who had been principal since July 2006, made \$78,236. She had been with the district for 12 years.

Her teaching contract has not been terminated, according to school officials.

Former East High principal Kathy Callum will take over at Martin Luther King Jr. She will meet with parents at 6 p.m. Thursday.

Daphne Hunter will take over at Knight Academy.

Superintendent Michael Bennet says losing leadership in the middle of the year is unusual but to be expected.

"This is a large district with 147 schools, and there will be cases where people move in and out of leadership positions," he said. "Ideally you want that to happen at the end of the year, not in the middle. We have good folks coming in to backstop these positions."

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9 News

Thursday, January 3, 2008

Race for presidency may keep kids from getting to school

written by: [Nelson Garcia](#)

<mailto:nelson.garcia@9news.com?subject=RE:Race%20for%20presidency%20may%20keep%20kids%20from%20getting%20to%20school%20>, Reporter

DENVER - When the Pepsi Center hosts the Democratic National Convention, it will draw the politicians, celebrities, and about 35,000 people from August 25 to August 28.

Denver Public School District leaders are concerned all the activity will make it difficult for students to get to class at nearby schools.

"It's a large event," said Alex Sanchez, DPS spokesperson. "DPS is involved in citywide emergency planning."

Sanchez says the convention may affect logistics at 15 schools in the immediate area like West High School, North High School and The Emily Griffith Opportunity School, which is just two blocks away from the Pepsi Center.

"Within one mile to a five mile radius from the Pepsi Center, whether transportation's going to be an issue, whether you are a parent and you want to take your child to school or if you take the bus," said Sanchez.

Security officials with the DNC want to control traffic and may establish a one-mile lockdown radius around the Pepsi Center, making school bus traffic or parent pick-ups very difficult.

The Denver School Board is considering two calendar scenarios. One is to have school start around the usual time on August 18; the other is to shift the whole school year to start two weeks later on September 2.

School Board President Theresa Pena says logistical problems are not the only issues. "Should we delay our start of school until after Labor Day, so it gives both our teachers and our students time to participate in this kind of lifetime event?" said Pena.

Another issue for students, Pena says, is that starting later means finishing further into summer. It means losing about 10 days of classroom time before taking the Colorado Student Assessment Program tests which are always set for the same time in the spring.

"While the 10 days certainly is a consideration, it's not just going to be the only one," said Pena. "Probably for us, it's going to be around the security and access."

The school board will conduct a public hearing on the proposals on January 17. The board may also vote that day. The district is collecting online surveys on the issue. So far, Sanchez says more than 800 people have provided input.

"Right now, there's two scenarios. We encourage both our parents and our community members to come forth and express their opinions," said Sanchez.

[Click here to visit the DPS calendar page and take the survey](http://www.dpsk12.org/calendars/index.shtml)
<<http://www.dpsk12.org/calendars/index.shtml>> .

If the later start option passes, this would be the first time Denver Schools would start after Labor Day since the 2000-2001 school year.

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