

## News Clips

### Headlines

#### Rocky Mountain News

Monday, January 7, 2008

- Teachers union head talks about Randolph
- GRIEGO: First semester changes new DPS teachers

#### Denver Post

Monday, January 7, 2008

- Birth leave sought for girls

# Rocky Mountain News

## Monday, January 7, 2008

### Teachers union head talks about Randolph

*Ursetta wonders how contract hurts student success*

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, January 7, 2008**

A Denver school that could make history by breaking free of district and union rules still needs one more stamp of approval - and it may not come easy.

Tuesday, the 22-member governing board of the Denver teachers' union may vote in closed session on whether to waive contract rules for Bruce Randolph School in north Denver.

Already, Denver Public Schools board members have given an enthusiastic

thumbs up to the Randolph bid for autonomy. Local foundations have pledged more than \$100,000 to make it work.

And 67 percent of Randolph teachers in the once-floundering school have said they need more freedom to increase student achievement.

For Kim Ursetta, president of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association, the pressure is on to get a yes vote. She talked recently about Randolph's bid for autonomy. Her answers have been edited for space and clarity.

Where does the union stand on the autonomy plan?

Most importantly, we recognize what a great job the teachers and staff at Bruce Randolph have done. We still have some questions about what exactly they're asking for. If there are things impeding student achievement at Bruce Randolph, we want to make sure we can remove those barriers for Bruce Randolph and every other Denver public school.

What happens if the union's governing board says no?

If we were to vote no, then it doesn't go through. The contract does have a provision for waivers, and we have approved waivers in the past. Whenever we've approved a waiver, it has to be approved by both parties. They could come back to us, and we could agree on a different version of the autonomy agreement.

Why do you think the plan has generated so much attention?

I think it's because Bruce Randolph has shown success, and people want to replicate success.

Does the union's hesitancy on this issue mean you're out of touch with the need for reform in DPS?

No. I think we have put forth many ideas on reform. Half of the committee that reviewed the Denver Plan - the district's strategic reform plan - was composed of teachers appointed by DCTA. We put forth our "Promoting School Success" plan, so I do believe we embrace change and we are trying to find ways to increase student achievement.

An analysis of the plan by union attorneys claimed teachers would lose numerous job protections if it passed. A DPS attorney called those claims misleading and overreaching. How do you respond to critics who called those "dirty tactics"?

I don't feel they were dirty tactics at all. Teachers requested a legal opinion from

our association attorneys, and our attorneys answered the questions and put the answers in writing. It was based on the first version of the autonomy agreement, not the subsequent versions.

I also asked several times for a meeting with the district and our attorneys to make sure we have the same interpretation and that has not happened.

Is the contract impeding progress in DPS schools?

We keep asking, "What in the contract is impeding student achievement?" and have not gotten a specific answer. As I said earlier, if there are things in the contract that are impeding student achievement, then we need to change them for everyone.

The only thing that has been mentioned is the teacher transfer process, and we currently have a joint (union-district) group working on redoing the entire transfer process.

Most of what the proposal talks about are things that are controlled by the district. Allocation of funding is not under our purview. It's important to understand that a lot of what the Bruce Randolph staff is asking for is not in the contract.

Doesn't that make it easier for your board to approve the plan?

But the document they've given us does not say exactly what they want waived, and that's what we're hoping for. Our board of directors wants more specificity as to exactly what is impeding student achievement - so we can make changes for all teachers and students.

Is the union being unfairly scapegoated as blocking this reform?

I think there are a lot of misconceptions out there as to what exactly is in our contract. The union has absolutely no interest in blocking student achievement. Our goal is to increase student achievement for every child in Denver, and we are committed to working with the administration, with the school board, with community members, with parents, in order to make that happen.

## **GRIEGO: First semester changes new DPS teachers**

*First semester changes new DPS teachers*

By [Tina Griego](http://www.rockymountainnews.com/staff/tina-griego/) <<http://www.rockymountainnews.com/staff/tina-griego/>> , Rocky Mountain News ([Contact](#)

<http://www.rockymountainnews.com/staff/tina-griego/contact/> )

**Monday, January 7, 2008**

The second semester of Denver Public Schools starts this week. Time to check in with my new neighbors, the two first-year teachers. New to the city, the system, the profession, their insights illuminate.

I introduced you to Anna Kwan and Krista Trofka, as well as Gavin Goodall, Trofka's colleague at North High School, last September. The three were among 58 Teach for America Corps members assigned to work in some of Denver's struggling schools. It's the first partnership between DPS and Teach for America, a nonprofit that seeks the nation's top college graduates and trains them to teach in schools grappling with the achievement gap.

How many of the 58 remain, I asked Sean VanBerschot, TFA's Denver executive director, last week.

Fifty-six, he said.

I honestly thought there'd be fewer. Spend time in a school, and you learn teaching is more than getting up in front of students and opening a book. It's managing a class when one student will not stop pacing and two others will not shut up. It's preparing a lesson so that the most-prepared and least-prepared students get something out of it, all blissfully unaware of the tears you shed in the act of differentiation.

It's learning a bureaucracy creates its own inertia and you must find a way to thrive within it or else be swallowed. It's talking to those parents who would prefer your silence. It's an attendance roster grown long with names of students who have left and the students who show up in your classroom two weeks before the semester ends.

The rewards are plenty, but teaching, particularly that first year, is grueling under the best of circumstances, and Teach for America isn't going into schools with the best of circumstances.

"I'll be honest. The first semester was tough," VanBerschot tells me. "Like any first year-teacher, reality is hard to confront. We know our students are capable, but to see how far behind many of them are was difficult. We're seeing more small success stories, but they have the struggles of what it really means to close the achievement gap as new teachers in a new community. There's been excitement and anger and tears."

I repeat that to Goodall, a University of Florida graduate from Jamaica, and he says in his matter-of-fact way that he's been near tears himself.

"My low point was the last day of the semester."

That's when he saw the results of his freshmen algebra students' end-of-semester assessments.

"Only 6 percent were proficient. That would be a 'C' or higher. That's just below CSAP average, and it was the math department average in terms of Algebra I. Six percent. I felt so frustrated and mad at myself. My brightest students got C's. That was shocking to me in and of itself."

I hear some of the same frustration in Trofka. Some of her sparkle has been replaced by measure. She had back surgery on Thanksgiving and gave herself four days to recover before returning to her 150 sophomores. Between that and the frenzy of a closing semester, I suspect two weeks' winter break was not enough. She tells me she always pictured "going on these extravagant vacations during the break, but I found myself just trying to repair my soul.

"It's been hard for me to learn that I don't instinctively have it. That teaching is not meant to be easy and if it were, everyone would be doing it. . . . I had this idea that I would come into a classroom and I would make my students angry about what was going on in the world and that would motivate them to overcome the challenges. I've learned they're angry enough and that they need an education to express it. They need to learn to read and write, and I need to teach them to read and write."

Kwan is changed, too. An eagerness now radiates from her. She spent most of last semester in "survival mode" with her class of 30 fifth-graders at McGlone Elementary in Montbello. But by its end, things started clicking.

"I'm really excited now. At the beginning of the year I had four boys who said they were B.F.F. (best friends forever). They would command the negative attention of the class and nothing I did was working."

Her colleagues suggested transferring two of the boys to her team teacher's class.

"I didn't know I could do that. At first, I felt bad. I felt like I failed," she says. "But ever since then, it's been a lot smoother. I've been using positive reinforcement with the two left, and one of them has become a great helper to me."

The class also showed progress in the end-of-semester assessments, she said. Her students charted their improved scores with bar graphs and "they really got into it. It was just really exciting to see that growth."

I asked VanBerschot last week how he counseled the new teachers who tell him,

"I can't do this. I'm not capable."

He says he tells them: " 'You have to remember why you were accepted into this program. You have leadership skills you have demonstrated over and over. Yes, this is probably the most difficult thing you have done, but you have the capability.'

"These are superstars. They're used to success with everything they touch, and it'll take three, five, nine months to see the success they're used to."

My neighbors are back in school today. They embark upon the second semester buoyed by pep talks, equipped with personal plans of action.

"If there is no way to move forward, move sideways and don't stay in one place too long," Trofka writes on a piece of paper.

"We moved to Denver to teach," Goodall says, "and most of our lives are consumed by that. I wonder whether, if someone else came in and took my class, if they would still be at 6 percent. Am I being effective? You want to do what's best for them. Your love for your students, your concern about their education keeps you going. You don't want to fail, period."

So they repeat to me a promise they have made to themselves and for their students: This semester will be better. No doubt.

[griegot@RockyMountainNews.com](mailto:griegot@RockyMountainNews.com)

# Denver Post

## Monday, January 7, 2008

### **Birth leave sought for girls**

**Soon-to-be-moms at East High School ask for four weeks of maternity leave.**

By Jeremy P. Meyer  
*The Denver Post*

Article Last Updated: 01/07/2008 02:00:49 AM MST

Pregnant students in a Denver high school are asking for at least four weeks of maternity leave so they can heal, bond with their newborns and not be penalized with unexcused absences.

The request is unusual in Colorado's public schools, where districts tend to deal with pregnant students or new moms with specialized programs or individualized education plans.

Denver Public Schools has no districtwide policy, leaving it up to schools to work out plans for students to continue their education.

Two counselors from East High School approached the school board last month, saying the policy at their school is unfair and inconsiderate because it forces new moms to return to school the day after being discharged from the hospital or face being charged with unexcused absences.

"My initial reaction is if we are punishing girls like that, that is unacceptable," said Nicole Head, one of the counselors who brought the matter to the school board last month. "We've got to do something."

East High School administrators could not be reached for comment over the winter break, but district officials say they are reviewing the policy on absences to make it "friendlier" to new moms, said DPS spokesman Alex Sanchez.

Kayla Lewis, who is five months pregnant and a senior at East, requested that the board establish maternity leave for students at a Dec. 20 public hearing.

"After you have the baby, your body needs time to heal," the 18-year-old said.

That is true, said Dr. Sarah Grope, pediatrician at HealthOne's Rocky Mountain Hospital for Children in Denver.

"To just assume that two days after having a baby they can go back to school is ridiculous at best," Grope said. "During that time, they should be able to do their schoolwork and give time to bond with their children."

School-board member Michelle Moss was baffled that schools were giving girls unexcused absences after birth.

"It's critical that these young women have a chance to bond with their babies," Moss said. "Maybe we do need a policy. Clearly, as a district, we have to look at what is going on with our young women. We've got to look at the birth-control issues and teen pregnancy and how we best help them deal with it and still graduate."

Denver has one of the highest teen-pregnancy rates in the state. Of every 1,000 girls ages 15 to 17, 54.5 will become pregnant in the city, compared with 24.3 throughout Colorado, according to state health statistics.

The district has a school for pregnant teens and new moms, Florence Crittenton School,

but it has a waiting list. Plus, many students want to remain at the school where they started, said Head, the counselor at East.

Cherry Creek, Adams 12, Jefferson County and Douglas County school districts have policies in which students work with counselors and principals to devise plans that will keep them in school.

Several districts have special schools with child-care services for new moms. Others have programs that allow students to receive high-school credit.

"When a girl tells us she is pregnant, we advise her to work one on one with her counselor and go from there to see what they can work out," said Michelle Ancell, spokeswoman for Cherry Creek Schools.

"The counselor plays middleman between the principal and the student," said Melissa Reeves of Jefferson County Schools, who added that the district has started a computer-based credit-recovery program that students can use during evening hours.

Douglas County has had a program for 19 years called WINGS, or Winning in New Growth Situations, that offers support and instruction for the girls once a week, allowing them to earn elective credits in nutrition and parenting. The program has 20 students, said coordinator Susan Anderson.

The district has a school that begins at 4:30 p.m. for new parents that is attached to Highlands Ranch High School. Students also are able to stay in their schools, but that is not easy for many new moms, she said.

"Day care is very difficult, hard to come by and expensive," Anderson said. "We just work really hard to make sure kids graduate high school. We know it's so important."

Teen mothers face a challenging future, with many dropping out. A third of teen moms receive their high-school diplomas and 1.5 percent get college degrees before they turn 30, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

"If there are young mothers asking for maternity leave, the board should listen to them," said Lori Casillas, executive director of the Colorado Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Parenting, and Prevention. "If they think it is a barrier to graduation, the board should look at that."

Her organization advocates that schools provide child-care services for new moms. Too many girls drop out after giving birth, and schools must do something to keep them, Casillas said.

Students at one high school in southern Colorado wanted to set up a child-care center, but the principal forbade it, saying it would encourage teen pregnancy, she said.

"There is no evidence that has ever happened," Casillas said. "I don't think schools have been proactive at creating policies that encourage young mothers to remain in school. Schools need to say, 'What if you do come back, then what?'"

"Schools need to say, 'This is what we do to support your learning.' That's not happening."

*Jeremy P. Meyer: 303-954-1367 or [jpmeyer@denverpost.com](mailto:jpmeyer@denverpost.com)*  
<<mailto:jpmeyer@denverpost.com>>