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Denver Post

Thursday, January 24, 2008

editorial

Teachers union missed a chance

Though the DCTA did waive some elements of its contract, it still didn't give Bruce Randolph School enough flexibility.

By The Denver Post

Article Last Updated: 01/23/2008 09:08:41 PM MST

The Denver teachers union walked away from a golden opportunity to become full-fledged partners in an ambitious school reform project at Bruce Randolph School.

What a shame.

Fortunately, for the students, school leaders have vowed to press forward with their plans for autonomy.

The school wanted to waive much of the negotiated teachers' contract to gain such revolutionary powers as setting its own timeline to hire teachers, and paying teachers to work extra. The Denver Classroom Teachers Association declined to pass the waiver request in its entirety.

Granted, the union did come further than we thought it ever would by agreeing to let Bruce Randolph set its teachers' schedules, and pay them extra for additional work. Kim Ursetta, DCTA's president, called these wage and hour issues "sacred cows" for the union.

But the union, frankly, had been backed into a corner on this issue. Decline a request from a successful inner-city school that has gotten national attention and you look like obstructionists. Agree, and run the risk that other Denver schools will want the same thing and your organization ebbs into irrelevancy.

So the union tried to come out somewhere in the middle, granting waivers but not buying off entirely — a move that ends up smelling of desperation.

DCTA representatives say they gave the school, which has made great strides since being labeled one of the worst in the state, really everything it wanted.

Except that they didn't. They offered to give the school some "outs" from the contract, which was a big step. But it also layered some additional conditions on Bruce Randolph.

The whole idea here is to get out from under burdensome rules and conditions, not add more.

For example, the union says it will only agree to the piecemeal waiver so long as achievement keeps improving at the school. Test scores dip and the union takes back the waivers. The union wants quarterly reports on progress.

The key item the union refused to approve is one thing principal Kristin Waters very much wanted: a pared down framework of contract rules that allows the school the flexibility to change without having to jump through multiple hoops.

In essence, she wanted everything she considers irrelevant in the contract to be waived. Her mindset was to create an agreement that included only the elements needed to guide the operation of the school.

Union board members were concerned, Ursetta told us, by a provision that would cut the organization out of the school improvement process, making that the purview of the school and the district administration.

Furthermore, the union won't consider any more autonomy bids from other schools until it has a chance to come up with a new broader framework for a waiver process with the district.

The DCTA is emerging from this grueling process looking like an organization that is first and foremost concerned about maintaining its power and its relevancy.

The union could gain an immense amount of support, publicly and internally, if it were at the forefront of the educational change that's necessary to improve education in DPS. As a union leader at Bruce Randolph told us, education reform is coming. Get on the bus, or get run over by it. The union, he said, should be driving the bus.

Waters vowed the school would pursue its plans to govern by the agreement approved by 67 percent of its instructional staff and the DPS board.

It wouldn't take much of a leap in logic to expect other principals might follow suit, getting permission from the DPS board and moving forward regardless of what the union says.

We would like to see all parties — the union, the district and the schools — pulling together to make education work.

Powerbrokering should never be allowed to deprive our children of the education they need and deserve

School rebuffs union offer

“We’re moving ahead” with autonomy plan, Randolph principal says

By Jeremy P. Meyer The Denver Post

Teachers at a school in northeast Denver seeking freedom from union and district rules will move forward with their autonomy plan, despite failing to get wholesale approval from their union.

Teachers and administrators at Bruce Randolph School want control over the school's budget, teacher time, incentives and hiring decisions and to be free from union and district red tape that they say is impeding student progress.

Denver's school board last month agreed to the Bruce Randolph autonomy proposal, but the teachers union balked Tuesday at permitting much of the school's request — which sought waivers from 18 articles of the union contract and parts of six other articles.

Instead, the executive board of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association offered a counterproposal — waiving five articles of the 32-article contract.

Officials at Bruce Randolph rejected the counterproposal presented Wednesday, saying it was more bureaucracy and not what the school initially requested.

“Bits and pieces have been pulled out and handed back to us in a form we can't understand,” said principal Kristin Waters. “They want more hoops when that is what we are trying to get away from.”

Waters said the union is forcing the school to choose between becoming a charter or proceeding with its original autonomy proposal.

“We're moving ahead,” she said. “I don't know specifically what that means.”

Informed of school officials' plan to move ahead without union support, union president Kim Ursetta said she hopes to have further conversations with the school.

Ursetta said the major problem with Bruce Randolph's proposal was that it sought a continuing working relationship with the district on policies but not with the union.

“If we want to move forward and make changes for everyone, we also need to sit at the table,” she said.

Under the counterproposal presented Wednesday, the union would allow school leaders to make

decisions about time, pay and hiring, according to Ursetta.

“Anything that has to do with the typical union rules of workweek and time are sacred cows to us, and we waived them,” Ursetta said. “We are giving things that I never thought we would ever give. We overwhelmingly passed them.”

The waivers offered in the counterproposal would be voided if school performance drops.

Bruce Randolph would be the only traditional public school in Denver with these types of waivers.

Requests for autonomy agreements from other schools in the district would not be entertained while the union works out a framework with the district for how schools could enact autonomy proposals.

Greg Ahrnsbrak, a union representative at the school, called the counterproposal half-hearted and said the waivers offered essentially insert the union into decisions about hiring and teacher time.

“They are doing everything they can to block a real reform effort,” Ahrnsbrak said. “Reform is happening. You’re either going to be on the bus or beneath it. I want to be driving it.”

Waters said school officials hope to be eligible for the more than \$100,000 in grants offered by nonprofit groups, including the Piton Foundation, to the school if they enact the autonomy plan.

Van Schoales, an education policy expert from the Piton Foundation, said the money should be available to the school.

“We said the condition was they had to operate autonomously,” he said. “It matters less how it was done but that they did it.”

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Rocky Mountain News

Thursday, January 24, 2008

Denver students can still enroll in choice schools

This Web only Speakout has not been edited.

Wendy Pierce, Wendy Lanier and Jeannie Peppel

Across the U.S. and here in Colorado, public schools of all kinds are working hard to deliver a meaningful, relevant education that prepares students to thrive in our increasingly changing and interdependent world.

They're also working hard to capture the attention of parents.

In Colorado, students may attend public schools outside their own neighborhood or in a different school district entirely.

Now more than ever before, parents have many choices for different schools that best match their children's needs and interests.

This month, parents will explore schools, talk to other parents, visit open houses and tour classrooms. It's the time of year they can "choice" into schools outside their neighborhood. The choice enrollment period for Denver Public Schools started Jan. 7. The first-round deadline is Jan. 31.

While "choice" is positive for children, the scores of choices can be overwhelming for parents.

Choosing an International Baccalaureate (IB) education means students learn the kinds of behaviors and skills essential to success in the 21st century – analyze and evaluate vast quantities of information, solve complex problems, communicate effectively using a variety of media, work in teams, create, and innovate.

IB students learn on a deeper level, make connections to the world around them, and ask questions. They are intellectually curious about the world, are analytical and creative thinkers, and express ideas with confidence. They also learn a second language, participate in community service and appreciate cultures

around the world from an early age.

IB is one of the fastest-growing and most prestigious educational approaches in the U.S. It's taught worldwide to over a half million students in nearly 2,200 schools in 126 countries – and right here in our own backyard.

The southwest Denver family of IB schools is a unique partnership among Sabin International School, Henry World School and John F. Kennedy High School (JFK). Faculty at the three schools work together to offer a seamless IB education to students from preschool through high school.

Sabin is one of just three public elementary schools in Denver to offer IB for all students from Early Childhood Education through grade 5. Henry is the first public middle school in Denver to provide IB for all students in grades 6 through 8. And when the IB Diploma Programme starts this fall for juniors (and next fall for seniors), JFK will be the only Denver high school to offer IB for students in all grades – 9 through 12.

Students throughout the greater metro Denver area are eligible to attend Sabin, Henry or JFK.

The highly esteemed IB approach to learning, which began in 1968, is recognized for its rigor, high quality and global emphasis.

Data show that rigorous coursework is a predictor of later success. A national study found that students who enrolled in IB courses were more prepared for college, earned higher first-year grade point averages in college and had a higher college graduation rate. This was true for all ethnic groups and socioeconomic levels.

Leading college admissions expert Barmak Nassirian recently told Education Week, a national weekly newspaper focusing on education issues, that IB generally is regarded as “the gold standard of high school curriculum in admissions circles.”

And almost half of the U.S. high schools listed in Newsweek magazine's top 100 last year were IB schools.

What's most important is taking the time to research schools, visit with teachers and principals, and talk to other parents. Taking the time to research the right educational fit for your child will pay big dividends in the long run.

Wendy Pierce of Sabin International School, Wendy Lanier of Henry World School and Jeannie Peppel of John F. Kennedy High School are principals of the southwest Denver family of IB schools.

Randolph teachers displeased by union

By Nancy Mitchell ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Teachers at Bruce Randolph School on Wednesday called their union's response to their autonomy request "unacceptable" and said they'll consider other options to run the north Denver school their way.

Those options could include applying to become a charter school, which would give the Randolph staff the greater freedoms they sought in hiring, time in school and budgeting.

But it's an idea that Randolph teacher Greg Ahrnsbrak is reluctant to discuss.

"We feel we're being pushed to look at that," he said.

"We want some of those advantages that charter schools have . . . but we want to serve the neighborhood children, and we're not going to deviate from that."

Randolph's historic bid to free itself from union and district rules is being followed closely by politicians, parents, policymakers and education reformers.

That's largely because Principal Kristin Waters and her staff have lifted the school from among the worst in Colorado with outside-the-box strategies such as refusing to promote students who are failing classes.

But Randolph teachers said they believed they could do more if the red tape were loosened. Denver Public Schools board members last month agreed 7-0.

The union's governing board on Tuesday, though, issued a counterproposal that approved some freedoms sought by Randolph but not others. The response, from many, was swift and angry.

"I'm surprised that this board isn't willing to support their own union members, their own teachers," said Tony Lewis, of the Donnell-Kay Foundation, among the groups supporting Randolph in its request.

Ahrnsbrak said some have encouraged the staff to go ahead and implement the proposal anyway, regardless of the union's stance.

"The truth is, we don't know what DCTA will do," he said. "Will they sue us? That's definitely a possibility."

There's even talk of a legislative solution. The Randolph autonomy bid caught the attention of State Senate President Peter Groff, D-Denver, who has said he plans to introduce a bill that would allow other schools statewide to make similar requests.

Kim Ursetta, president of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association, in releasing more specifics about the counterproposal, said the union is allowing Randolph to do most of what it is requesting.

For example, the school can post teacher vacancies and fill them "at any time" with candidates from inside and outside the district.

But Ahrnsbrak said even on waivers the union agreed to, it set conditions. In one case, the union states the school can determine time in school — but it also says union leaders must work with school staff on exactly how they plan to do so.

CARROLL: MLK's heirs?

By [Vincent Carroll](http://www.rockymountainnews.com/staff/vincent-carroll/) <<http://www.rockymountainnews.com/staff/vincent-carroll/>> , Rocky Mountain News ([Contact](http://www.rockymountainnews.com/staff/vincent-carroll/contact/) <<http://www.rockymountainnews.com/staff/vincent-carroll/contact/>>)

Thursday, January 24, 2008

Attorney David Lane invoked the image of Martin Luther King Jr. in trying to persuade a jury this week to acquit three Columbus Day protesters who'd tried to block a Denver parade.

The parallel is obvious, don't you see?

King broke the law and was arrested.

The anti-Columbus protesters broke the law and were arrested.

King fought injustice.

The protesters fought injustice - or at least they say they did, which is good enough for this sort of simpleminded theme.

King trampled on other people's constitutional rights.

No, wait: That won't work. King did no such thing. He did the opposite: He pushed for the fulfillment of constitutional rights. Which is the point at which the anti-Columbus Day protesters are upside down. They contend the Columbus Day parade is a form of "hate speech" that can and must be suppressed.

Like intolerant bullies since the dawn of time, they believe speech and images that deeply offend them must be suppressed for the good of all.

The jury didn't buy this rationale for mob rule and convicted all three. That is a shock in itself given how often previous anti-Columbus protesters who broke the law have waltzed away from accountability - occasionally after obliging Denver juries deliberately snubbed the law.

Why, some of us had begun to wonder whether the First Amendment actually had a future in this town. In a fitting tribute to MLK himself, a jury has just said yes, it does.

The stalling game

The Denver teachers union spent Tuesday hauling more sandbags to the levee, but the effort will probably only postpone the flood threatening to engulf its contract with the district.

How long can the union block a request from teachers at Bruce Randolph School for a waiver from contract provisions that hurt the quality of education - by the teachers' own description - without destroying every last speck of the union's moral authority?

On the other hand, if the union grants a waiver to one school, how can it deny waivers to others, such as Manual High School, that decide to seek similar freedom? It can't, of course. Hence the coming flood.

For the time being, the union has chosen a strategy familiar to anyone who watched befuddled apparat- chiks in Eastern Europe attempt to manage demands for freedom in the waning days of the Cold War.

First, offer a lump or two of sugar to the unruly masses in the form of minor

concessions. Meanwhile, issue warnings that order and tradition must be preserved in the interest of the greater good. Third, attempt to redirect and co-opt demands for liberation. And last but not least, stall, stall, stall for more time.

"We believe that all Denver's students deserve a great public school. In good conscience we cannot grant the extensive waiver requested that would favor Bruce Randolph teachers and students at the expense of other teachers and students in the district," the union's statement reads. Yet if a waiver favors Bruce Randolph - what an astonishing admission! - it certainly isn't "at the expense" of other schools. Through such Orwellian claptrap does the union seek to cling to its cherished contract, however encrusted it might be with language that many teachers themselves no longer believe makes sense.

Vincent Carroll is editor of the editorial pages. Reach him at carrollv@RockyMountainNews.com.

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Wednesday, January 23, 2008

School seeking autonomy gets waivers instead

written by: [Nelson Garcia](#)

<<mailto:nelson.garcia@9news.com?subject=RE:School%20seeking%20autonomy%20gets%20waivers%20instead>> , Reporter

created: 1/23/2008 6:36:11 PM

Last updated: 1/23/2008 6:53:17 PM

DENVER – The Bruce Randolph School wants to be the first traditional public program to break away from its district and operate without oversight. While the board of education approved the proposal, the teachers' union did not.

"I hope it's not a lost opportunity because I think that what the Bruce Randolph faculty is trying to do is incredibly exciting for the Denver Public Schools, for the kids at Bruce Randolph, for our teachers, our union, this district," said Michael Bennet, superintendent of Denver Public Schools.

Principal Kristin Waters wants to operate the 6th through 10th grade school without having to deal with bureaucracy associated with district policies and union agreements. She wants the power to control her hiring, budget and instruction directly. Last month, the school board approved the idea, but it needed the blessing the Denver Classroom Teachers Association.

"What Bruce Randolph is doing is incredible," said Kim Ursetta, president of the DCTA.

She says the ideals of the autonomy proposal are commendable, but the union did not feel comfortable granting autonomy until the idea is explored further for the sake everyone else.

"We do have a school system in Denver and so we need to look at the impact of anything at Bruce Randolph on the other schools and making sure that our other schools have same opportunity as well," said Ursetta.

Instead of approving autonomy, the union granted Bruce Randolph a series of waivers to circumvent current union agreement with the district. Ursetta says the waivers do give the staff at Bruce Randolph the power to control its hiring, its scheduling and certain issues with regards to pay.

"And, the waivers that we granted allow them to move forward with every piece of their plan now," said Ursetta.

The Bruce Randolph staff sees it differently.

"It doesn't make sense. It was a whole package," said Waters. "It was not one thing here, one thing there."

"Our teachers are very disappointed, in fact, even outraged," said Greg Ahrensbrak, teacher and union representative for Bruce Randolph faculty. "We're basically being told we have to go back to square one again."

Waters says her struggling students don't have time to wait while the union works with the district to figure out a system of helping all schools gain autonomy if desired.

"To say we'll come up with a plan or a process for the district and union to work together over the year, no! That's not soon enough. We need it now," said Waters.

Ursetta says the union will not entertain any other autonomy proposals, including one to be filed by Manual High School next week, until a framework can established district-wide for schools seeking autonomy.

"We really want to look at how we can affect change in 140 some schools and we want to make sure that we are creating the systems so that those things can happen," said Ursetta.

Bennet hopes politics is not getting in the way of trying a new way of running a school.

"What we're talking about here is really a dispute between the union leadership and its membership at Bruce Randolph," he said.

7 News

Wednesday, January 23, 2008

Second Student Plans To Sue DPS

Student Claims Former CLA Principal Made Inappropriate Contact, Sent Text Messages

By [Jane Slater](mailto:jane_slater@kmgh.com) <mailto:jane_slater@kmgh.com> , 7NEWS Reporter

POSTED: 5:35 pm MST January 23, 2008

UPDATED: 6:07 am MST January 24, 2008

DENVER, Colo. -- It's the second claim in as many weeks.

Another Contemporary Learning Academy student has retained Denver attorney, Ed Ferszt, to represent him in a civil suit against Denver Public Schools.

The student, said former principal Dave Debus sent him numerous text messages in November and December. Ferszt provided copy of those text messages to 7NEWS.

Some read:

"Beings u apparently work on weekends, I was tryin 2 c if u could go 2 avs 2night, but you never replied!!"

"Gee, (students name), y no replies??"

"...u lie, disappoint, break promises..."

"U know what? If u dont bother 2 go 2 school 2morrow on time at seven, i tink u shoul jut drop out."

Ferszt said family members are "irate and besides themselves in shock." He said they can't understand how an administrator could have been so blatant in his attempts to be with students.

Ferszt also represents another student who claims the principal asked him to come to school for a "special detention" and touched him inappropriately.

Ferszt said Debus' actions in this second case didn't stop with text messages and calls.

He showed 7NEWS surveillance video of the principal visiting the teens place of employment after school.

Debus could not be contacted for comment. Sources who worked with him in the past said it was not uncommon for him to show an interest in students and their education.

Still Ferszt said it's his clients position that the former principal abused his position of trust.

"I don't doubt that Mr. Debus had altruistic motives to help some of these kids but I think at one point he went over the line and used his role as a counselor...as a ruse for more sereptious purposes," said Ferszt.

Denver Police confirm an ongoing investigation into the claims and said they expected to present a case to the district attorney's office in coming weeks. It will then be up to the D.A.'s office to decide, what, if any charges will be filed.

Denver Public Schools did not return calls but last week confirmed an investigation of an administrator at CLA though they could not comment on it because it was a personnel matter.

Debus resigned from the district in December.

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