

News Clips

Headlines

Denver Post

Friday, February 1, 2008

- Groff school bill offers flexibility

Rocky Mountain News

Friday, February 1, 2008

- SPEAKOUT: American teachers unions: the fatal flaw
- Bill encourages schools to seek autonomy

Youhub.com

Friday, February 1, 2008

- Smart-Girl is a Smart Choice for UC Denver

Denver Post

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Groff school bill offers flexibility

The measure would exempt traditional schools from union rules and give them much more control. Denver schools are pressing for such changes.

By Jeremy P. Meyer The Denver Post

A bill that would give traditional Colorado schools the flexibility to operate more like charter schools and allow them to be removed from union agreements was introduced into the legislature Thursday.

Senate President Peter Groff, D-Denver, submitted the "Innovation Schools Act of 2008," which would give schools control over their budgets, hiring decisions and length of the school day and calendar.

The bill would relieve schools from, among other things, having to follow state statutes regarding teacher pay and hiring.

"There is a laundry list of things that impairs and impinges innovation in schools," Groff said. "The question we have to be asking is, 'What is in the best educational interest of the child?'"

Controversy, however, lies in a section that says schools can be removed from the teachers union collective bargaining agreement. Teachers in the school must vote on whether to drop out of the contract, and those who don't agree may be transferred out of the school.

Union opposition

The Colorado Education Association, which represents 38,000 schoolteachers in the state, has reviewed the bill.

“There is no research to show that abandoning state laws and collective bargaining improves student achievement,” the union said in a statement. “We oppose several parts of (Groff’s bill), including the waiver of state laws guaranteeing fair evaluation and dismissal procedures and the waiver of locally bargained contracts.”

Sen. Josh Penry, R-Grand Junction, said Groff “deserves a lot of praise for walking into what will be a major fight with the education establishment. The idea of giving these schools broad flexibility to get kids to where they need is a fight worth picking.”

Groff’s bill would let a public school or a group of schools create “innovation zones,” allowing schools to implement new methods and practices while holding them accountable for student achievement.

Schools, for instance, could change the length of the school day and the calendar and even graduation policies. But students would still be required to take state assessment tests and schools would continue to meet federal requirements.

Schools want waivers

The bill comes while attention is still focused on the efforts by teachers at Bruce Randolph School in Denver to get autonomy and control over the school’s budget, hiring decisions and time issues.

Denver’s school board in December approved the autonomy proposal, but the Denver Classroom Teachers Association last week did not agree to many of the waivers and issued a counterproposal.

“Therein lies the issue,” said Groff. “What I am concerned about is, ‘What is the best way to teach students?’ It’s their relevance that is my concern.”

Manual High School is also seeking waivers from district and union policies, specifically on hiring and time issues.

Eighteen other schools from far northeast Denver — including Montbello High School — already have formed a “zone of innovation” and will request waivers from various rules and regulations they say are holding them back.

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Rocky Mountain News

Friday, February 1, 2008

SPEAKOUT: American teachers unions: the fatal flaw

By Bill Moloney

Friday, February 1, 2008

The refusal of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association to support the contract waivers sought by Bruce Randolph School has resulted in one of the worst public relations disasters ever suffered by a Colorado labor union. In rejecting the very reasonable reform requests sought by the great majority of the school's teachers, supported by parents and approved by the Denver Public Schools board, the DCTA has gotten a very public black eye that no amount of union doubletalk or sophistry can conceal.

The message is clear: Union power trumps both the wishes of teachers and the needs of children.

As this tragedy unfolds, observers sigh and say, "Oh, that's just the way all teachers unions behave." Not so! It's just the way American teachers unions behave, and it is profoundly important for public policy-makers to understand this critical distinction.

Believe it or not, teachers unions in France, England and Japan are much more powerful than their American counterparts. Teachers union leaders in France truthfully boast that they can put a million people in the streets of Paris to back their salary and benefit demands. In England, the National Union of Teachers vastly exceeds the legendary power of the British mine workers.

Yet in none of these countries are the teachers unions the dangerous obstacle to student progress and quality teaching that they are in America.

How can this be so? The answer is that teacher unionism in America arose from dramatically different historical circumstances than was the case in Europe.

In Europe, today's teachers unions trace their origin to the centuries-old system of guilds or craft associations. These entities were as devoted to advancing the material interests of their members as any modern union, however they always understood the fundamental link between good work and good pay. They also knew that the best guarantee of good work was good workers, and this meant requiring high standards for anyone wishing to enter their ranks.

In keeping with these ancient traditions, becoming a teacher in Europe involves a highly demanding admission process including university training with strong content (i.e., no "education" courses), rigorous examinations and a strict apprenticeship prior to full admission to the profession.

These demanding qualifications for teachers allied to similar traditions of strong academic content measured by rigorous national examinations for students goes far toward explaining the repeatedly demonstrated inferiority of U.S. student achievement in those embarrassing

international comparisons that invariably show America at or near the bottom of the class despite per-pupil expenditure nearly twice the average of the European Union.

American teachers unions as we know them are a relatively new invention. The National Education Association through much of its history included both administrators and teachers and had very little to do with issues like salaries and benefits. When teacher organizations finally went their own way - much influenced by the fierce Albert Shanker-led labor wars in New York City in the 1960s - the structural models they chose were the industrial trade unions. Thus, organizationally, American teachers unions looked much more like the United Auto Workers or the Teamsters than teachers unions in Europe.

The union role was seen as protection of the "workers"; product quality was viewed as exclusively a "management" concern.

This indifference to "product quality" would eventually bring disaster upon competition-driven private sector industries and their unions. However, in the competition-free public education sector, product quality (i.e., student achievement) never became an industry-threatening issue. In effect, it remained an exclusively management issue toward which unions need only offer the hypocritical lip service we so commonly see today. As Shanker - always the realist - once brutally put it, "I'll start worrying about kids when kids start paying dues to the union."

This attitude - so dramatically different from other nations - is the Achilles' heel of American education reform. Until it changes, any renaissance in American public schools is a pipe dream.

William J. Moloney was Colorado education commissioner from 1997 to 2007.

Bill encourages schools to seek autonomy

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Friday, February 1, 2008

Colorado Senate President Peter Groff on Thursday introduced a bill that encourages schools statewide to seek more freedom in hiring, scheduling and spending - and allows them to sidestep the teachers union to get it.

"It's about clearing out a lot of the bureaucracy that we have created and the districts have created," said Groff, D-Denver, "all of which, at the time we did it, probably sounded really good."

The Innovation Schools Act of 2008 was welcomed by Denver City Council President Michael Hancock and a half-dozen Denver school principals during a news conference at Manual High School.

"The status quo is simply unacceptable," Hancock said. "Our schools are struggling. We need to think creatively . . . about how we're going to purposely address the education of our children."

Groff's bill follows attempts by Bruce Randolph School Principal Kristin Waters and her staff to gain autonomy for their school in north Denver. With 67 percent of teachers in agreement, the school asked to be freed from district policies and union rules.

DPS board members enthusiastically agreed to the plan, but the Denver Classroom Teachers Association did not, stalling the effort. DCTA President Kim Ursetta said the district, school and union are scheduled to continue their talks Tuesday.

Under Groff's bill, union approval would not be necessary. Instead, a school - or a group of schools - would submit a plan to the local school board for approval. If the board agrees, it could then seek to become a "district of innovation" from the State Board of Education and the education commissioner.

Winning that designation would free the school from state rules governing the hiring and dismissal of teachers, among other regulations. It would also allow the school to be removed from any collective-bargaining agreement or union contract.

However, the bill says removal from a union contract would require approval by a majority of staff in the school.

"I vote with the union 99 percent of the time," Groff said. "But there are times when we need to ask . . . 'What's in the best educational interest of the child?' "

The Colorado Education Association, the state teachers union, issued a statement saying, "there is no research to show that abandoning state laws and collective-bargaining improves student achievement. We oppose several parts" of Groff's bill.

Randolph's autonomy bid was followed by a similar proposal from Manual. The union board may vote Monday on that plan.

Hancock said 18 schools in the northeast Denver area he represents, including Montbello High School, want more autonomy.

"We wanted to let the public and the legislators know this bill has some support in the community," he said, "and we hope they'll look on it favorably."

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Smart-Girl is a Smart Choice for UC Denver

Contributed by: [Caitlin Jenney](http://denver.yourhub.com/User.aspx?UserID=49578) <<http://denver.yourhub.com/User.aspx?UserID=49578>> on 1/31/2008

University of Colorado Denver is First in Denver to Partner with Organization That Supports Girls at Critical Time

The [University of Colorado Denver's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences](http://thunder1.cudenver.edu/clas/) <<http://thunder1.cudenver.edu/clas/>> on the downtown Denver campus is proud to become the first higher-education institution in Denver to partner with Smart-Girl, a non-profit, research-

based organization that focuses on enrichment and prevention programs for mainly middle school girls ages 11 to 14. Together, UC Denver and Smart-Girl have formed a partnership to offer the Smart-Girl Leadership Training Course, as well as internship opportunities.

This past fall, Mary Coussons-Read, PhD, associate professor of psychology at UC Denver, was the instructor of record for both the 2 credit Leadership Training Course and the 3 credit Facilitation Course. Dr. Coussons-Read has been the key player in establishing the partnership between Smart-Girl and UC Denver.

Through the leadership training, high school and college students learn leadership, facilitation and management of the program; these students then lead small groups of younger girls in activities that focus on team-building, refusal and anti-bullying skills, mood management, overcoming peer pressure, self respect, motivation for success, conflict resolution and other burgeoning concerns specific to these young women.

Five UC Denver students have gone through the 2 credit Leadership Training Course and two UC Denver students are currently taking the 3 credit facilitation course. During the course of the academic year, these college students will mentor 16 Lincoln High School girls who will in turn become Smart-Girl Guides for all of the 7th grade female students at Kepner Middle School, the largest middle school in DPS, as well as girls enrolled through the Boys and Girls Clubs of Metro Denver. All 7th grade girls enrolled at Kepner will attend the Smart-Girl program once per week during their 8th period elective. The program will run over the course of the school year serving over 140 girls.

"The UC Denver Smart-Girl partnership creates the supportive communities that are necessary for good decision-making, and provides adolescent girls with the tools that will help them become the confident, capable and self-reliant women they deserve to be," said Sameen Noorulamin, director of programs at Smart-Girl, Inc.

For more information on the UC Denver Smart-Girl Leadership Training or the [Smart-Girl program](http://www.smart-girl.org/index.html) <<http://www.smart-girl.org/index.html>> , or to support the leadership and community outreach goals of the program, please visit the Web sites.