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# Denver Post

## Sunday, February 3, 2008

### Denver school board fine-tunes plan

**Place Middle will now serve preschool through eighth grade, but not some older refugee students.**

By Jeremy P. Meyer

*The Denver Post*

Article Last Updated: 02/03/2008 01:42:42 AM MST

A much ballyhooed reform effort in Denver Public Schools last fall that closed schools and reworked programs in several others got a minor tweak Saturday by the school board.

Place Middle School in south Denver will change next year to serve students in preschool through eighth grade who were affected by the closure of Whiteman and Fallis elementary schools.

Place also will be a newcomer school for refugees through the fifth grade rather than through the eighth grade. Previously, the plan was to serve refugees through the eighth grade. Those middle schoolers now will attend Merrill Middle School.

School officials changed the plan because they said Place Middle had space and staffing problems.

"The community and the principal at Place think the best program is to have it at these two schools (Place and Merrill)," said Alex Sanchez, a spokesman for Denver Public Schools. "It eliminates more transitions for these students. It makes more program sense."

Changing the plan needed school board approval because the board already had approved the first configuration of Place as part of the larger reform package that was voted on Nov. 19. School board members voted 4-1 to change the plan and promised to monitor whether it is working.

The board was going to vote on the change at its Thursday meeting, but board member Jeannie Kaplan wanted to meet with school officials for clarification.

Kaplan, who voted against the change, said she was concerned that the switch would add another level of confusion to a vulnerable population.

"I'm worried about the kids in the families we are trying to serve," she said. "The goal was to give them a seamless entry into our public school system. It was presented to them one way, and now we're changing that. It's not what we said we were going to do to people who have no voice."

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

## **Friday, February 1, 2008**

### **Opinion**

### **A leader in school fight**

By Susan Barnes-Gelt  
<<mailto:bs13@qwest.net?subject=The%20Denver%20Post:%20A%20Leader%20in%20school%20fight>>

Article Last Updated: 02/01/2008 04:20:44 PM MST

"Fix the schools and plant more trees."

That's the solution a very smart friend suggested nearly 20 years ago in response to a question about the elements of a great city.

Easier said than done.

The recent kerfuffle surrounding Denver's Bruce Randolph School provides an excellent case in point. Located in north-central Denver, the school serves primarily low-income students. More than 90 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Four years ago, the school was high on the state's list of low-performing schools and was a hair away from being closed and converted to a charter school.

In 2005, new principal Kristin Waters, fresh from successful reform at Morey Middle School, pulled together a team of committed professionals and set forth to implement a plan, called Challenge 2010. Elements of the plan include:

- Rigorous curriculum with high minimum standards and data-driven accountability measurements;
- Common vision and commitment;
- Leadership based on inclusive and empowered stakeholders; and
- Consistent and defined expectations and active student engagement.

The most recent state rankings revealed Waters, her team and their commitment to the plan had successfully elevated Bruce Randolph from one of the lowest-performing schools in Colorado to, well, still low. As a result, Waters and her staff asked Denver Public Schools and the teachers union for autonomy from union recruitment, hiring and pay rules, district policies and budgetary oversight.

To no one's great surprise, the school board and administration responded favorably, liberating Bruce Randolph from district regulations and bureaucracy. The union offered a far more ambiguous response, agreeing to waive fewer than 20 percent of the 32 changes requested by the school.

All sides — the school, the union, the district and the board of education — have backed into their respective corners. And to date, only the predictable brick-bats — union-bashing, hand-wringing, slurs and counter-slurs — inform what should be a much broader civic conversation.

Perhaps that conversation could begin with someone — a leader, of sorts — convening a meeting of the board of education, DPS administration, the Denver Classroom Teachers Association, and Waters and her team. Evidently, such a meeting has yet to occur.

The next steps would be to aggressively and comprehensively engage the community — beginning with the parents of current and future Bruce Randolph students — and extending out from there. After all, it is clearly these and other taxpayers who represent the most important stakeholders. It also seems that their active engagement in these negotiations has been marginalized.

There are 130 other schools under the jurisdiction of Denver Public Schools. Issues of accountability, reform, autonomy, the work force, the students and the community are no less pressing for these schools than for Bruce Randolph. The future of this city is at stake. It is long past time for true leadership to emerge, articulate a broad vision and bring disparate interests together to work toward a common goal.

That voice has yet to emerge.

*Susan Barnes-Gelt ([bs13@gwest.net](mailto:bs13@gwest.net)) served eight years on the Denver City Council and was an aide to former Denver Mayor Federico Peña. Her column appears twice a month.*

# Rocky Mountain News

Monday, February 4, 2008

## Desperately seeking teachers

***DPS is having a hard time filling positions in subjects like math, special education and bilingual education***

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/>> )

**Originally published 12:30 a.m., February 4, 2008**

**Updated 08:54 a.m., February 4, 2008**

Julio Rodriguez spent his fall semester in an advanced algebra class at Denver's Lincoln High School taught by a succession of substitute teachers.

Some knew math but most did not. On the days when a sub could not be found, an administrator or a teacher with a free hour would be pulled in to cover the class.

On the days when even they could not spare the time, the students would be sent to computer lab. Rodriguez, a junior, said that's where they ended up most days.

"It kind of sucks because you don't learn anything," he said. "It's not the same as having a teacher teach you; you're just typing on the computer."

Lincoln Principal Antonio Esquibel estimates 90 students were taught by rotating subs for an entire semester, from Aug. 20 to Dec. 21, after the school was unable to find a math teacher this past fall.

Students in algebra 1, geometry and algebra 2 often wound up working on computerized math programs overseen by subs or others with little math experience.

"They got minimal instruction at best," Esquibel said, adding, "It was very frustrating because there wasn't anybody out there."

### **A national shortage**

For Denver principals, and for principals nationwide, some jobs are always hard to fill - math, special education and bilingual education continually top the list of federally designated teacher shortage areas.

At Lincoln, the math shortage was compounded because enrollment spiked by 320 students last fall, forcing Esquibel to hunt for teachers in September after most schools had begun classes.

Some principals in Denver Public Schools also say the teacher shortages are made worse by the district's substitute teacher deficit, triggered partly by a controversial pay cut for subs in 2004.

That means that students, rather than having one substitute when a full-time teacher cannot be found, may face many.

Consider Knapp Elementary in southwest Denver, where a group of second-grade English language learners had eight substitutes in eight weeks this fall.

Or Manual High School, where six students with intense special needs had three different substitutes last fall. Or North High School, where math teachers banded together to cover classes for students with mild special needs, figuring a few familiar faces - however harried - were better than many unfamiliar ones.

"We basically gave the kids a lot of work sheets to do," said North math teacher David Alex. "It was certainly not the ideal situation."

DPS leaders don't know how many classrooms in the district were staffed by rotating subs for long periods during the fall semester.

"The district simply has not been able to track grade, subject and school name for substitute teacher assignments to the extent that we would like to," spokesman Alex Sanchez said.

### **Luring, keeping staff**

Data released by DPS, with a caution that it may be incomplete, highlights the district's sub shortage. It shows city schools requested 20,666 substitutes for most of the fall semester, from Aug. 20 to Dec. 10, and filled 17,458 of them.

That's a fill rate of 84 percent, leaving more than 3,200 instances where schools had to make do.

The ability to find subs varied widely by school. At the low end, a school in Montbello reported a fill rate of 56 percent. At North High, where subs were found 89 percent of the time they were requested, Principal JoAnn Trujillo-Hays admits to using incentives such as Starbucks cards.

"We nurture subs who come and do a nice job," she said.

### **2004 substitute pay cut**

DPS angered many subs in fall 2004 when the district and the union agreed to cut sub pay by a third to fund a raise for regular classroom teachers.

Now they want to give back some of that money. DPS board members soon will vote on a plan to pay subs who work more than 60 days in the district up to \$150 per day, a high in the metro area.

One goal with the increase is to avoid what happened at Knapp, when the regular classroom teacher left Oct. 10 - and a new teacher wasn't hired until Dec. 10.

In between came eight subs.

Rachel Bernard, a bilingual teacher with six years of experience who was hired in December, said it was clear when she arrived that the 20 7-year-olds had seen little consistency.

"There was no structure, no routine, no homework, no reading groups," she said. "There was no sense of community in the room whatsoever. I started over."

Bernard worries about the time her students have lost. In some cases, she said, the children have special needs that have not been addressed. A regular classroom teacher likely would have identified them earlier.

"These are good kids; I love them already," she said. "The teachers at this school work really, really hard. I have been working my little tushy off. I definitely will bring them up."

Can she make up for time lost?

"I'm going to do everything I can," Bernard said.

### **Recruiting programs**

DPS is tackling its teacher shortages in multiple ways.

One is through ProComp, the comprehensive merit pay system that rewards teachers for, among other things, working in hard-to- staff jobs.

That means Bernard, as a bilingual teacher working in the English Language Acquisition program, can earn an extra \$1,067 this year.

DPS also has brought in Teach for America, the national recruiting program for recent college graduates. Started in fall 2007, it has placed 50 teachers in some of Denver's poorest schools. Three at North High teach science, another tough area to fill.

Most recently, the district announced the Denver Teaching Fellows program, with a goal of plugging in another 50 teachers in hard-to-fill subjects this fall. It targets all ages but emphasizes mid-career changers.

"We have had a lot of success in recruiting for math and other critical shortage areas across the country," said Layla Avila, with the Teaching Fellows program at The New Teacher Project.

The project, based in New York, won a federal grant to partner with school districts across the country, including Denver, over the next five years.

Avila points to success in New York as an example: Her program has recruited 23 percent of the math teachers now working in New York City schools.

As of Friday, the Denver Teaching Fellows program had received 226 applications for up to 50 slots.

**Found: math teacher**

Alex, the North math teacher, said reaching out to working professionals is a wise move.

"I think there are people out there who want to be teachers," he said.

He should know. He was one.

Originally trained as an engineer, Alex said teaching was always in the back of his mind. After two years in the corporate world, he was ready.

Yes, it's challenging, he said. And yes, it's worth it.

"Yesterday was a 15-hour day," he said on Thursday as he prepared for classes. "But I was doing stuff I loved."

He had planned on two years at North. He's been there five.

"I plan on coming back for a sixth year, a seventh year . . ." he said. "Every student I get, I want to see them graduate."

Alex expects to complete his master's degree in math this summer. It's the kind of credential that schools are hungry for.

Just ask Esquibel, the Lincoln principal who sought a math teacher for an entire semester.

After talking with candidates from as far as Florida, he finally found his math teacher across the city at South High School.

The teacher finished her student teaching in December and has been working at Lincoln for four weeks.

"She's teaching us something," Rodriguez said. "We're learning now."

### **Fill a need**

**Denver Public Schools is looking for substitute teachers and full-time teachers in key shortage areas such as math, special education and bilingual classes. Here's how to find out more:**

### **BECOMING A SUB**

\* The process can take up to eight weeks or more so be patient, advises Katherine Johnson with DPS. She suggests first ordering at least two copies of your official college transcript. DPS subs must have a bachelor's degree.

\* Log on to the Colorado Department of Education Web site at [www.cde.state.co.us](http://www.cde.state.co.us) and click on "Educator Licensing." You can learn more and request an application online for a three-year substitute license. A fingerprint check is required and can be done at local police departments.

\* Go to [www.dpsk12.org](http://www.dpsk12.org) and click on "Careers" to learn how to finish the process.

\* Join the crowd: To highlight DPS' sub shortage, Superintendent Michael Bennet and other administrators have gone through sub training. Bennet, whose sub license hangs on his office wall, has scheduled his first sub day at East High School on Feb. 12.

## **TEACHING FULL TIME**

\* The Denver Teaching Fellows program is geared toward professionals but also accepts applicants from recent college graduates and retirees. Go to [www.denverteachingfellows.org](http://www.denverteachingfellows.org). An information session is scheduled Wednesday from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at DPS headquarters, 900 Grant St. Others will follow. The program is looking for 50 applicants to teach in tough-to-fill areas such as math and bilingual education in fall 2008.

[mitchelln@RockyMountainNews.com](mailto:mitchelln@RockyMountainNews.com) or 303-954-5245

# **9 News**

## **Friday, February 1, 2008**

### **BusRadio suspended in one school district, starts in another**

written by: [Nelson Garcia](#)

<<mailto:nelson.garcia@9news.com?subject=RE:BusRadio%20suspended%20in%20one%20school%20district,%20starts%20in%20another>> ,

**Reporter**

**created: 2/1/2008 5:26:28 PM**

**Last updated: 2/2/2008 10:40:50 AM**

LITTLETON – For the past five months, school bus driver Danny Kenny has been fighting. He's been trying to get his school district to drop the radio system he's supposed to play for his kids. It finally did – for now.

"They did this last week – asked us not to play BusRadio anymore until they can check to

see if it's a good fit for them," said Kenny, a driver with the Littleton School District.

BusRadio is a program offered free to school districts. Radio systems are installed in each bus to broadcast music, commercials, announcements and safety messages via satellite. BusRadio even offers districts some money through a portion of the advertisements, which the company claims runs only about four minutes every hour.

BusRadio advertises itself as playing age-appropriate music without explicit lyrics. Kenny says that's partially true. He claims that the songs may be technically clean, but the themes are too adult for young kids. He says he's heard songs, for example, about suicide or about stripping. Plus, Kenny thinks the music tempts kids to find out more when they get off the bus.

"Do you want to introduce a kid to, Ne-Yo and say, 'Hey this guy is a great singer. He's a great artist and this is a great song.' And then when he buys the album you find out there are other songs on there you don't want them listen to," said Kenny.

Littleton Schools spokesperson Diane Leiker says the district has suspended operations of BusRadio indefinitely until it investigates it further. It will seek input from drivers, parents, students and assess how it is working in nearby school districts before deciding whether to continue with the program.

BusRadio spokesperson Wesley Eberle says parents should feel confident BusRadio is safe for their kids.

"Our editing standards far exceed FM radio," he said. "Not only lyrics, but in subject matter."

Despite's Littleton's hesitations, Denver Public Schools will move forward with its plans to unveil BusRadio later this spring. Kenny has contacted DPS with his concerns, but district leaders say they've done their research.

"Radio on school busses does help in behavior. It keeps students attentive," said Pauline Gervais, executive director of transportation for DPS. "The music is selective and age-appropriate. So, we don't have music that would be playing that would be more appropriate for a high school student versus an elementary student." BusRadio offers different selections for elementary, middle, and high school students which play a different selection of songs.

"If we feel there's music or a song that's inappropriate, I have no problem with calling BusRadio and saying that's not a song that should be playing on DPS busses," said Gervais.

Kenny says he just wants all parents to be aware of the door BusRadio opens for kids. He says while "clean" versions may be played on the busses, students can find the "explicit" versions online.

"What you're doing is, you get into kids' heads," said Kenny. "They go out and buy it."

Eberle says neither BusRadio nor the school district should be responsible for what students do at home.

"Outside of the bus, it's up to the parents," he said.

Gervais calls Kenny's concerns a stretch.

"I don't think what students are going to be listening to on the bus is what's going to sway their decision as to what they're going to listen to or not," she said.

BusRadio was founded in 2004 and is currently based near Boston. The company says it's in 24 states and installed in more than 10,000 busses. The system also allows for GPS tracking.

BusRadio does provide a sampling of its songs on its website. But, full play lists, lyrics, and song themes are not available. Kenny says he just wants parents to be fully aware of what their kids are listening to back and forth from school.

"The parents had no idea what was being played and who the artists were and some of these artists are rather objectionable for anybody with some of the songs that they sing," said Kenny.