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Saturday, February 23, 2008

Charter to fight DPS on closure

Educators urge kids to enlist parents in the fight to save the arts and technology academy.

By Jeremy P. Meyer
The Denver Post

Article Last Updated: 02/23/2008 11:22:13 PM MST

In a second-floor classroom of Denver Arts & Technology Academy, teacher Adrienne Nault called her second-grade students around her and fielded their difficult questions.

"Why," asked student Inea Scott, "do they want to close our school?"

Denver's school board voted 4-3 Thursday to close the northwest Denver charter after this year, citing chronic academic problems, financial mismanagement and lack of student growth.

"One thing is for sure," Nault told the class. "It's not your fault. It's kind of a grown-up thing right now."

On Friday, school officials called an assembly to explain to the 400 students what occurred. Administrators promised to appeal the decision to the state board and asked the students to rally Tuesday.

"Tell your parents it's going to be like the '60s all over again," said principal Ray Griffin. "We're going to do everything we can to keep it open."

The school was started in 2000 by parents seeking a college-prep education enhanced by arts and technology and primarily for Latino students.

Five years ago, the school moved to an \$8 million facility near the old Elitch Gardens amusement park.

But the K-8 school has had difficulties — seven principals in seven years, low scores on state tests and discipline problems.

Last year, the district placed the school on probation, demanding significant improvement in student performance and financial reporting.

Mosiaca Education Inc., which runs the school, hired Griffin this year to turn it around.

Griffin, who started a high-performing charter-type school in Washington state and headed a successful private school in

Santa Fe, hired several new teachers and has worked to improve the school culture.

The school received a \$380,000 Read to Achieve grant from the state, 50 new computers from the Jared Polis Foundation and a group of new teachers.

Stan Stockdale used to be director of middle years at Graland Country Day School and now teaches middle school at the academy.

"This group of teachers is on par with any faculty I have ever worked with," Stockdale said.

Griffin said the school has improved and was upset no board member who voted for closure visited him or the school.

"We have a well-designed program with well-behaved kids," he said, noting that 25 troublemakers have left the school. "There is no reason of any kind that says this school should be closed."

The district's analysis of the school found student growth lagged behind expectations, but it has demonstrated some growth this year, particularly at the middle-school level.

Board member Jill Conrad, who became the swing vote, said she was swayed when she learned that no students from nearby schools that were closed chose to attend the arts and technology school.

"That says to me something is wrong," she said.

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Denver Arts & Technology Academy

Grades: Kindergarten through grade 8

Founded: 2000

Enrollment: 414

Students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch benefits (a measure of poverty): 70.75 percent.

Overall performance on state assessments (2006-07): Low

Overall academic growth, elementary (2006-07): Stable (up from significant decline in 2005-06)

Overall academic growth, middle (2006-07): Stable (up from decline in 2005-06)

Sunday, February 24, 2008

guest commentary

By every measure, Colorado students are worse off

By Angela Engel

Article Last Updated: 02/24/2008 08:30:21 PM MST

In 2000, Citizens for Quality Public Education published "Senate Bill 186 and The Truth About Colorado Educational Reform," a report warning about the consequences of grading schools based solely on standardized test scores.

Under the leadership of Gov. Bill Owens, SB 186 was passed anyway. At that time, my daughter, Sophie, was 4 months old. The following year, the federal No Child Left Behind was enacted.

Since then, everything the report cautioned concerning high-stakes testing has come to pass: narrowing curriculum, negative school climates, disenfranchised teachers, frustrated parents,

and children who quickly losing sight of the value of their own education.

Not only were the Citizens for Quality Public Education correct, but all of the outcomes associated with education reform over the past decade have demonstrated failure. Consider the following:

- Dropout rates have increased significantly. Since the implementation of high-stakes testing, including NCLB and SB 186, Colorado's dropout rate has nearly doubled, from 2.4 percent in 2003 to 4.5 percent in 2006.
- Students now have fewer course electives. A survey by the Center on Education Policy found that since the passage of NCLB and high-stakes testing, 71 percent of the nation's school districts have reduced the hours of instructional time spent on history, music and other subjects.
- Recess has been reduced or canceled. According to the National Parent Teacher Association, nearly 40 percent of U.S. schools have either canceled recess or are considering doing so because of the time constraints of standardized testing and budget cuts. Over the past 12 years, DPS has decreased physical education time by an average of 40 minutes per week.
- More than a dozen schools have been closed down. High-stakes testing promised to close the achievement gap, but instead districts are closing schools predominantly in low-income areas. Cole Middle School is on its third conversion in a decade, now that KIPP has abandoned its students. Before SB 186, Cole was a thriving school for the performing arts.

By all indicators, the state's version of school reform has not worked. Even test scores have remained mostly flat, despite the millions spent on McGraw-Hill tests, curriculum guides, and after-school tutorials. Littleton and Cherry Creek, some of the highest performing districts in the state, haven't been meeting federal guidelines for "adequate yearly progress."

The biggest complaints of parents include large class sizes, too much homework, insufficient time for our children to eat lunch or

play outside, decreases in programming, and stressful learning environments. These complaints are echoed in the appallingly high turnover of teaching staff.

Assessments aren't the problem; high-stakes testing is. And there is a difference. In very simple terms, the problems we are facing today are the result of an education system that has been redesigned to serve the state. We need a system that serves our children.

Standardization and high-stakes testing rest on a paradigm of uniformity and conformity. If we graduate an entire generation proficient on a single skill set and mindset, we will have failed because our future will depend upon adaptability, imagination and collaboration.

The danger of this game is that it reinforces the misconception of a failing educational system, when what we really have are failing priorities and policies. We can no longer afford to defer the responsibility of our children to a one-size-fits-all test, or "all or nothing" reforms.

This session, Sen. Mike Kopp will introduce Senate Bill 61, requiring exit exams for 11th-graders. Sen. Peter Groff is sponsoring Senate Bill 130, establishing a two-tiered system for accountability while maintaining the real barrier to innovation: CSAP.

It didn't work in Florida and it won't work in Colorado. Quality doesn't rely on doing the wrong thing better.

Before adding more layers of legislation, our government representatives first need to clean up the mess they've already created.

Sophie is 8 years old now; our children simply can't afford to wait any longer for the legislature to come to terms with its mistakes.

Angela Engel is project director for the Children's Action Agenda.

Monday, February 25, 2008

Governors hear Ritter's school plan

Focus is on at-risk kids, measuring learning

By Anne C. Mulkern
The Denver Post

Article Last Updated: 02/25/2008 02:40:06 AM MST

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Targeting at-risk students and finding accurate methods for measuring learning are cornerstones of Colorado's new education initiative, Gov. Bill Ritter told a panel of governors Sunday.

"It's about what we should be measuring in terms of learning," Ritter said. "It's kind of the biggest thing we've done in Colorado in terms of education reform in a really long time."

Ritter spoke at a meeting of the Education, Early Childhood and Workforce Committee during the National Governors Association conference. The panel discussed elements of Colorado's plan, as well as those in Virginia, Oklahoma, Connecticut and Rhode Island.

Ritter gave information on his three-year plan, which will specify accomplishments that students must master in each grade. The initiative will revamp testing, possibly creating new tests that assess student skill levels. Colleges would use those scores as part of their admissions criteria.

The Democratic governor also is likely to assemble a panel of experts who would recommend new curriculum standards, update exams and create a tiered diploma system.

Ritter told the governors that he developed the initiative in part to break a partisan logjam over how to boost achievement and lower dropout rates.

"I was so tired of these political fights," Ritter said about how many years of math and science students should take.

"We believe it does focus on the need to get kids into college," Ritter added.

Governors on the committee discussed efforts to provide better pre-kindergarten and kindergarten education for lower-income students. They also talked about obstacles, such as lack of parental and community involvement.

The governors heard from an expert who is studying methods for improving student achievement.

Poverty is often tied to low-performing students and schools, said Pedro Noguera, a New York University professor and director of NYU's Metropolitan Center for Urban Education.

All schools should have certified teachers, mandatory recess, a good lunch, textbooks, lab equipment and well-built facilities, Noguera said.

"We put our kids in conditions that affirm their dignity, affirm their worth, they respond," Noguera said.

Ritter noted that a study by an economist at the Federal Reserve in Denver found that the "single best way to change your economic station in life is education."

"Where in the U.S. is a community or state getting it right, where we have measurable results we can at least look to?" Ritter asked Noguera.

Noguera pointed to Oklahoma, which he said has the largest percentage of children in early childhood education programs. At the middle and high school levels, he said, links to the business community become more important.

Ritter asked whether that "is in part a cultural thing," as the influence of parents becomes less important to older students and peer groups dominate.

While at the conference, Ritter, as part of a group of Western governors, spoke with Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne about fire prevention, the impact of drought in the West and how oil and gas development is affecting the sage grouse bird.

He also spoke with Transportation Secretary Mary E. Peters. Ritter said he hopes to get funding for U.S. 36 for such improvements as HOV lanes and bike paths.

Rocky Mountain News

Monday, February 25, 2008

Math score drop a big test for schools

Educators point to developmental differences for dip

By Berny Morson ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS
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Willie Angelo's grasp of math, never firm, took a sharp nose dive just before Christmas.

"Towards the end of last semester, it was all building up," said Angelo, 17, a senior at Jefferson County's Bear Creek High School. "It was too much for me to handle."

So there he was at a recent early-morning tutoring session with his teacher, struggling to learn polynomials — mathematical expressions studded with digits, X's, exponents and parentheses.

He's not alone.

Students across Colorado are struggling with math, according to results of statewide achievement tests.

And the test scores go down as the students get older.

The vast majority of students — 68 percent— scored at the proficient or advanced level in the third grade in tests given last spring under the Colorado Student Assessment Program, or CSAP.

But only 30 percent of 10th-graders scored at that level.

The pattern has been the same for five years — a nearly straight decline between third and 10th grades in the percentage of students who score at the proficient or advanced levels.

The pattern is the same in most of the state's 176 school districts. Jurisdictions that serve more affluent students show more success among 10th-graders. But the proficiency rate of 10th-graders is still lower than those of third graders in the same district.

CSAP reading scores, on the other hand, do not show the same pattern of decline. Those scores remain roughly level as students advance in grade.

The Colorado Department of Higher Education, in turn, reports that math is the subject in which the most students need remediation, including 44 percent of recent high school graduates entering community colleges and 16 percent entering four-year schools.

Scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress suggest that older students nationwide have problems in math, with fourth-graders outperforming eighth-graders over the past four NAEP cycles but not in some earlier versions.

The NAEP test is given only in those two grades and only at selected schools in a sampling of states. It is not administered every year.

Trouble in high school

Educators say some students squeak through elementary and middle school math, only to hit a brick wall of abstract concepts in the upper grades, accounting for the decline in test scores.

“They get to high school, and that learning is exponential, and not all kids can learn at the same rate,” said Tammy Maccalous, Angelo’s teacher, who runs the 7 a.m. tutoring session.

Many school districts have increased their focus on math.

Jefferson County now requires one hour a day of math at the elementary school level, said math coordinator Jill Fellman. The amount used to vary among schools.

At the secondary level, kids who are struggling can find themselves taking an extra period to boost their basic skills.

Educators say the CSAP results give a somewhat distorted picture of how students are doing. That’s because the test may not match exactly what’s being taught in thousands of classrooms across the state.

Also, students who have trouble reading may not understand the instructions on the math test.

But no one argues that the problem with math is purely a function of the test.

“Math has especially been the great challenge for the state. We are concerned,” said Deputy Education Commissioner Ken Turner.

But the state is concerned about other subjects, too, he said.

Educators say schools must become more flexible to meet the different learning styles and developmental levels of students.

“It’s my opinion, but I think that it’s obvious to me that people learn math at different rates of speed, and the way the school systems are set up — they’re essentially in 18-week blocks,” said Scott Mendelsberg, who heads Gear Up, the higher education department’s program to prepare low-income students for college.

“And so to me, the only kids that get the biggest benefit out of math are the people who happen to learn it in those 18-week blocks.”

Some kids need 21 weeks, said Mendelsberg, the former principal of Denver’s Abraham Lincoln High School.

Others note that the brain doesn’t mature at the same rate in all children, and some kids may not be ready for algebra in the ninth grade.

“Developmentally, you have to be at the right place at the right time in order to get it (math),” said Kelly Hupfeld, a research associate at the University of Colorado’s Center for Educational Policy Analysis. “And the way we structure math classes to be essentially identical to other types of classes doesn’t fit how kids learn math in different ways along different time lines.”

One size does not fit all

Kids don't all get teeth at the same age, said Charlotte Ciancio, superintendent of the Mapleton school district in Adams County.

"Some kids get them when they're 4 months old; some kids get them at 8 months. We're cool with that when they're little," Ciancio said. "As soon as they get into first grade, we suddenly don't care where they are developmentally."

Deep changes are needed in the way schools operate for all kids to master math, Ciancio said.

Meeting the different learning rates of students is at the heart of Gov. Bill Ritter's proposal to emphasize mastery of subject matter as a condition for graduation, rather than passing courses. A bill to enact Ritter's proposal will be introduced in the legislature, probably by the end of the month, said Matt Gianneschi, the governor's education adviser.

Students who struggle with math give explanations similar to those offered by the experts.

LeAnna Ochoa, 18, a Bear Creek junior, said she has trouble in math "because the teachers go too fast."

"When they try to help me, I get it more," said Ochoa, who is in the same class as Angelo.

Ochoa said she understood addition and subtraction in the early grades but has been behind since multiplication and division.

Maccalous, the Bear Creek math department co-chair, said the school is trying to meet the needs of kids who learn differently through a variety of programs, including morning and afternoon tutoring.

Students who did poorly on the eighth-grade CSAP test get a “double dose” of math in ninth grade — a period of basic math facts in addition to the regular Algebra I course.

Meanwhile, some students will be allowed to stretch Algebra II — the highest-level course required for admission to Colorado state colleges — from one year to two years, Maccalous said. That serves the needs of students who don’t learn as fast as others.

Students who need more than one year but less than the full two years can fill out the remainder of the course with more advanced work, Maccalous said.

“We have so many kids coming in at so many different levels, and we’re trying to help every single kid,” Maccalous said.

7 News

Friday, February 22, 2008

Mother Says Son Strip-Searches At School

Employees Told Students To Take Off Pants While Looking For Money

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DENVER -- The mother of a student, who said he was searched by two lunchroom employees looking for missing money, says they overstepped their bounds.

The alleged incident happened Thursday at Florida Pitt Waller K-8 in Denver.

Two employees, the lunch lady and a female custodian, thought \$180 was stolen and suspected two eighth-grade boys took the money, one of the student's mother, Nadia Cleere, tells 7NEWS.

"I am very upset and disappointed with the school and how they handled the situation. To me I am just very disgusted," Cleere said.

One of the employees asked the 13-year-old student if he was wearing shorts under his pants and he said yes, Cleere said.

Cleere's son was asked to take off his shoes, socks and drop his pants in the middle of the lunchroom, she said.

Custodians and teachers saw the search happening and intervened. The money was later found where it was supposed to be.

"I think they really did overstep their boundaries. I think they should have got on the phone and called me and let me know what was going on instead of walking up to my son and making him strip down to his drawers and accusing him of stealing money and telling him afterwards what the situation was about," Cleere said.

Detective John White of the Denver Police Department said officers were called to the school but that the police department will not be involved and no charges will be filed against the employees.

DPS released a statement saying: "Florida Pitt Waller K-8 and Denver Public Schools take any allegation very seriously. The school administration contacted the DPS Safety and Security Department as well as the Denver Police Department to investigate an allegation of employee misconduct. DPS is collaborating with the Denver Police Department as they continue the investigation."

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CBS 4

Saturday, February 23, 2008

DPS Debates Whether To Offer Contraception

DENVER (AP) — Denver's public schools are debating whether to offer contraceptives in school clinics.

The debate began last week in a school board meeting. The board took no action except to accept a report on the proposal.

The Rocky Mountain News said the report calls for several additions to the clinic system, including contraceptives. Other additions would be preventative dental care, more nurses and creating a school for students with severe mental or chronic mental problems.

The contraceptive proposal drew predictable responses from religious groups and organizations who want to reduce the teen pregnancy rate.

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Medindia.com

Monday, February 25, 2008

Bully Control Through Prevention Programs

A curriculum-based prevention program is suggested by the Researchers at University of Denver to check on cases of bullying among elementary school children.

The study led by Jeffrey M. Jenson and William A. Dieterich of the University of Denver's Graduate School of Social Work examined more than 1,100 students in 28 elementary schools in Denver public schools with the help of the bullying prevention program "Youth Matters" (YM).

One group was exposed to a bullying prevention program while the second "control" group of students was not.

They were trained in four 10-week modules over the course of two academic years where the curriculum focused on two themes including issues and skills related to bullying and other forms of early aggression.

Prior studies have suggested that about 25 percent of elementary students either bully or are victims of bullying and both the groups were at risk of later mental health problems and involvement in anti-social activities.

The findings revealed that bully victimization among students taking the 'Youth Matters' curriculum decreased by 20 percent compared to a 10 percent drop from students in the control group.

"By the end of the study bully victimization was significantly lower in the YM group relative to the control group," said Jenson.

"This outcome is encouraging because the curriculum modules tested in the study focused on teaching the social and emotional skills necessary to avoid becoming a bully victim," he added. The aim of the training was to teach students how to use these skills to stay out of trouble, build positive relationships, make good decisions and avoid anti-social behaviour.

"Understanding the consequences of bullying from both a bully and a victim perspective is emphasized in training sessions," he said .

"Our findings point to the importance of social and emotional skills in reducing bullying," he added.

The study appears in the December 2007 issue of Prevention Science by the Society for Prevention Research.

Source-ANI
SUN/K