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“Shackles” of structure cast off in child-directed “unschooling”

By Nancy Lofholm The Denver Post

Boulder» It's a Tuesday morning at the hectic Coulson house and “unschool” is in session.

Upstairs, 11-year-old Julia writes in her journal as 14-year-old Gavin checks on the family stocks. Downstairs in their cramped apartment living room, Hayden, 3, cries out in frustration: He can't make out a letter on a television learn-to-read program. Meanwhile, Corban, 5, ping-pongs among the floor-to-ceiling bins of school supplies deciding what to do next.

“Mommy, Mommy, can I do the space puzzle now?”

To an outsider, the scene looks more like summer vacation than a day of learning. But it's all part of the free-form curriculum that defines this type of home schooling — based on the idea that learning is a natural consequence of living.

It needn't be boxed into time increments, targeted at certain age groups, limited to traditional school subjects or measured in tests.

Generally speaking, most homeschoolers follow a traditional curriculum of math, science and social studies.

Much of their education is guided by textbooks and scheduled lesson plans.

Flip that whole notion over, and you have unschooling.

If unschoolers wake up one morning with an interest in horse training, salamanders or ancient Chinese dynasties, that is what they study. Their sources could be the Internet, museums, farms, library books, movies or professionals in their field of interest.

That, according to the late education guru John Holt, is a more natural way to truly learn than the forced education of regular school. In unschooling, also known as "organic" or "child-directed" learning, kids decide what they want to do and when. Their interests drive their studies. Their parents facilitate but don't direct.

So Julia learns grammar by reading books on vampires or from the "Absolute Boyfriend" series that lines her desk. Gavin gets a practical lesson in economics and a sidelight on social ethics every time he checks on the Coulsons' carefully picked, no-sweatshop investments. Their brother, Corban, memorizes the names of the planets because he wants to, not because he has to.

“I do believe that kids are good, curious, inherent learners,” said Jessica Coulson, a former teacher who has been unschooling her children for six years. “They can learn anything.”

Unschoolers are a small, but it is said growing, faction of the more than 6,000 registered home-schoolers in Colorado. Along the Front Range, they tend to be concentrated around Boulder, where 60 to 80 families now belong to a home-schooling organization that includes unschoolers.

No statistics are kept on unschoolers. The Colorado Department of Education doesn't even list such a category. But unschooling proponents estimate as many as 20 percent of homeschoolers are unschooled.

Many don't understand it

Unschooling may sound like playing hooky, but it passes muster with state education regulations, as long as the rules for home schooling are followed.

Students must be registered with a school district. Their hours of instruction must be documented. They are required to pass a standardized test or be evaluated by a person certified by the state every other year.

If scores are too low or an evaluator finds a student is lagging, the state can require that child be enrolled in a school.

“There are people who don't really understand it at first,” said Terri Kirby who is unschooling her 10-year-old son and 15-year-old daughter in Lyons. “But when people meet my children, they certainly get the sense that whatever they are doing is working.”

Not that unschooling is right for everyone. Parents who want to try it need to have a knack for providing the right kind of stimulation and environment that inspires their kids to want to learn. Some children may end up with gaps in their education because they are not motivated or suffer behavioral or learning problems.

But Pat Farenga, a former employee of Holt's who speaks about unschooling around the country, said he sees mostly success stories at unschooling conferences.

At a recent conference, a panel of formerly unschooled students talked about how they fare at Harvard, Amherst and Brown universities.

"They tend to be very self-motivated and can do independent studies well," Farenga said.

The idea behind this type of schooling actually took root more than a century ago when educator John Dewey pushed the concept that children learned better through hands-on activities than through reading or listening to lectures.

Holt, who authored 10 books on education before he died in 1984, is often called the father of unschooling. He developed the idea further and began advocating in the 1970s that children be freed from traditional classrooms — and from at-home classrooms.

"He didn't like the word home schooling. He did not want people to duplicate school at home," Farenga said.

Given the potential problems of home schooling, let alone unschooling, James Dugan, a former teacher and current co-

director of the Research and Development Center for the Advancement of Student Learning, said he doesn't believe it is a wise choice.

"I would question the validity of unschooling," Dugan said. "I wonder why they would do this to their child."

The center, a joint endeavor of Colorado State University and the Poudre School District, has not done research on unschooling. But experience has taught Dugan that while some home-schooled children thrive, others do not get a broad enough education or enough socialization.

Like other home-schoolers, unschoolers socialize through outings to museums, botanic gardens, musical performances. They participate in sports through schools or clubs or church groups. They meet up with other home-schoolers to snowboard, bowl, dance and take guitar lessons.

"I don't miss anything not being in school," Gavin said.

His sister, who sports trendy pink stripes in her hair, added: "You don't have to worry about fitting in or being bullied."

In the Coulson household, unschooling has led into some unexpected areas. Julia has decided she wants to be a psychotherapist, and Gavin has been delving into medical subjects after a visit to the "Body Worlds" human-anatomy exhibit at a museum made him think he would like to be a physician.

Older kids have passed tests

Recently, they have studied ancient civilizations, socially conscious investing, map designing and filmmaking. The latter

they are learning from their father, Brian Coulson, who holds a degree in film.

The two older children have passed all their standardized tests.

But even Jessica Coulson, who is president of the Boulder Independent Educators and is completing her master's in education this semester, said like other unschooling parents, she has occasional doubts. She has to remind herself that this is her children's learning, not hers.

"I was hoping he'd be reading Shakespeare by now," she said with a nod toward her 5-year-old, who at the moment was flying a Lego rocket around the room and saying he wanted to go to Mars.

Rocky Mountain News

Thursday, February 28, 2008

Denver adding 40 child-welfare workers

Move comes after calls to hot line on abuse soar

By Ann Imse, Rocky Mountain News (Contact)

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Denver is adding 40 child-welfare caseworkers because calls to its abuse-and-neglect hot line have soared in the past two years, largely because of a jump in calls from Denver Public Schools.

The rise in calls from the schools followed the story of 7-year-old Chandler Grafner's being starved to death despite warning calls from his school to social workers.

Then a principal was charged with failing to report abuse in an incident among students at a middle school.

Now, "The schools are calling in any incident they feel bears investigating," said Carmen Carillo, deputy manager of Denver Human Services.

A significant number of the calls do not prove to be abuse, but "when in doubt, err on the side of safety," she said. "By law, we have to look at them."

The staff increase, at a cost of \$2 million from emergency reserves, comes shortly before the expected release of two studies of recent deaths of children who had been reported to human services before they died.

Carillo said she did not know what the reports would say. But she said, "Everyone is distressed, and trying to figure out what to do."

Hot line callers also appear to have been spurred by publicity over a number of recent child deaths.

In 2007, calls spiked during publicity about the deaths of the emaciated Loreyna Barea and Chandler Grafner in March and May, during the trial in the Barea case in August, and again in September and October when the Grafner report was released and the body of 3-year-old Neveah Gallegos was found in a park. Calls peaked at 512 in October and dropped to 266 in December.

All of this means more work for social workers because they must check out every call. They did 58 percent more intake assessments in 2007 than two years earlier, with only an 8 percent increase in staff.

Richard Wexler of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform warned that Denver and Colorado could be going through "a classic foster-care panic." That happens when publicity spurs more calls warning of child abuse, and then overworked social workers "have less time to make a decision on every case."

"That means they are going to make more bad decisions in both directions, taking away more children needlessly, and they will overlook children in real danger," Wexler said.

In Denver, all of the checking has not resulted in a large jump in the number of children removed from their homes for the first time.

That figure rose 5 percent last year, to about 1,000, even though the number of court cases increased 41 percent, from 395 to 557, said the department's in-house evaluator, Corey Johnson.

Often, social workers need court orders, not to remove a child but to get parents to go to substance-abuse treatment or parenting classes, or to take care of a child's medical care or other needs, said Barbara Shaklee, assistant city attorney.

Calls of concern

Year Hot line calls Assessments Services provided Court cases

2005 9,739 2,925 4,505 336

2006 10,050 3,928 7,150 395

2007* 11,500 4,622 7,500 557

Gazette.net

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Teachers to get better pay for better test scores

Pay-for-performance program launching at 10 county schools

by Dennis Carter | Staff Writer

A plan to provide extra pay to Prince George's County teachers who raise test scores at low-performing schools is bringing hope for recruitment but sparking concerns over equal pay and cheating risks.

Prince George's was one of 18 school districts nationwide — and the only one in Maryland — to receive a \$17 million federal grant to begin a five-year, pay-for-performance pilot program in the fall. Teachers could earn up to \$10,000 more annually if their classes improve on state tests.

Officials hope the plan will lure teachers to low-performing schools that tend to be hard to staff because of the demands to improve performance.

“We want to reward those individuals who go above and beyond the call of duty ... and do exemplary work,” said county school board member R. Owen Johnson Jr. (Dist. 5). “Right now, there are no monetary rewards to work harder, and that is what we want to provide.”

Ten county schools will take part in the program, but they have not yet been selected. Officials said participating schools must have at least 30 percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch, an indicator for schools with a large population from low-income homes. Fifty-two of the 207 schools in Prince George's meet the requirement.

County schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress, a series of benchmarks that include test scores and attendance, have had trouble retaining and attracting teachers. Teachers' unions are typically opposed to the alternative pay scales, county union officials said, but they are willing to see if the plan works.

“We realize that there are hard-to-staff schools. They're all over America, not just in Prince George's,” said Donald Briscoe, president of the county teachers' union and a member of the school system committee that took part in pilot discussions. “We

have to step outside of the box to staff schools that have more challenges than others.”

Teachers are currently paid based on their education, certifications and tenure.

Union representatives said teachers worry about nontraditional pay scales tied directly to student scores because not all teachers may receive the same opportunities. For example, a teacher at a low-performing school with promising students could make more than a teacher who works just as hard but is at a school where students face more obstacles or already have high scores.

“It’s a trust issue,” said Carol Kilby, a former Prince George’s teachers union president who now serves as a liaison between the school system and union leaders. “Will everybody have a fair shot at getting this money?”

George Jackson, a spokesman for the American Federation of Teachers, a national union, said teachers largely reject tying extra pay to rising scores. Teachers can be successful and facilitate learning even if test scores don’t skyrocket, he said.

“Test scores alone are not a true indicator of student achievement,” Jackson said.

Cheating challenges

Pay for performance has also raised concerns because of reports of cheating in other school districts to receive the extra money.

In 2003, every school in the Scottsdale Unified School District in Arizona was audited after a principal was caught changing test scores so teachers could receive incentive pay they were not entitled to, according to a 2005 study by Arizona State University’s Education Policy Studies Laboratory.

The study outlined other examples: In Massachusetts’ Worcester school system, an elementary school principal resigned in 2004 after it was found that she distributed exams to teachers so they could tailor lessons around the tests, and teachers in Austin, Texas, in 1998 allegedly gave students false identification

numbers so their poor test scores would not be recorded and would lower the class' average exam score.

Prince George's school officials are still working out the final details of the pilot program, but said they are considering several provisions that will help prevent cheating.

"Trust is important, but you can't leave [teachers] and never be able to validate that trust that the job is getting done," said school board member Rosalind Johnson (Dist. 1) of Laurel. "It has to happen."

One of the measures outlined so far requires administrators and other school system personnel to periodically check in on teachers, especially during critical testing periods in which students take standardized state exams.

Evaluations of teacher incentive programs show mixed results. A study conducted at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in 2000 showed almost no difference between the performance of teachers in school systems with incentive pay and teachers with a traditional pay scale. A Duke University study published in 1999 evaluated a Dallas school with an incentive model, where student achievement increased almost across the board compared to previous school years. The Duke study also found that dropout rates fell when the incentive pay scale was introduced.

Some school districts say the model has worked well for teacher recruitment. Denver Public Schools began using pay for performance in the 2006-2007 school year, and principals reported a 10 percent jump in applications for teaching positions labeled "hard to staff."

'The cutting edge'

No other Maryland school system offers the alternative pay scale, state school officials said. County funds will not be used for the pilot, but school officials said local funding might be considered after the five-year grant ends.

Participation in the program will be optional, but about 80 percent of teachers at the 10 pilot schools are expected to participate. Union officials said some teachers would likely refuse to participate because they support the traditional pay scale.

Pay cannot be docked for poor class performance.

Prince George's teachers with undergraduate degrees currently start at \$43,481 and teachers with master's degrees start at \$46,663.

Many PTA leaders and education activists support the merit pay system, but want the incentives to be offered at all schools.

"I wouldn't use [schools with high poverty rates] as guinea pigs," said Darlene Stukes, a PTA member at Dr. Henry Wise High School in Upper Marlboro who has served as PTA president at several county schools over the last 20 years. "If it's going to be done, it should be done across the board."

Stukes said a benefit of the model is that it could bring attention to teachers whose classes consistently score lower than the rest of the school.

"I say go for it because it'll weed out teachers who aren't doing their jobs," she said.

School board members said the program demonstrates the school system's willingness to use alternative methods to improve academic records.

"We look forward to the scrutiny," said R. Owen Johnson, acknowledging that the system's effort will be closely watched by other districts. "It says that we're on the cutting edge of doing whatever it takes to affect student achievement."

Donna Hathaway Beck, an at-large school board member, said the performance-based pay model is in line with the board's pledge to bring equity to schools since the plan encourages teachers to apply at all schools, regardless of their test scores.

“The possibilities have really moved me,” she said. “I just hope we can come to an agreement of how this can be rolled out.”

E-mail Dennis Carter at dcarter@gazette.net.