

News Clips

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Rocky Mountain News

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SPEAKOUT

Anti-teacher charges untrue, don't help

By Ted Brucker and Barbara Piascik

Ted Brucker and Barbara Piascik are retired DPS teachers.

After reading Bill Moloney's Speakout commentary of Feb. 1, "American teachers unions: the fatal flaw," we are compelled to respond. We understand Moloney's frustration, but find that blaming the Denver Classroom Teachers Association specifically and teachers unions in general, as the major impediments to school reform, is counterproductive and simply not true.

Teacher unions continue to be a necessary force in protecting teachers' rights and sounding the alarm against unwise administrative policies.

Nationally, teacher unions are becoming more involved in school reform as illustrated by the formation of the Teachers Union Reform Network, made up of a number of progressive urban locals — both National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers affiliates. The goal of TURN is the exploration and development of school reform models that lead to the restructuring of unions so

they will become more responsible for and responsive to projects that improve student achievement.

Locally, the DCTA, an active member of TURN, agreed to a pay-for-performance program for teachers — a school reform model noted by school districts and teacher unions throughout the country.

Despite well-intended school reforms and large increases in spending, academic achievement has not substantially improved in decades. This is the contention of McKinsey & Co., a global research company that problem-solves for more than 70 percent of Fortune 500 companies. McKinsey's study of the 10 best-performing school systems in the world was published in September 2007. The research did not focus on pedagogy or curriculum, but on the organization of school systems.

McKinsey discovered that there were several core principles that all these systems had in common: that the quality of a school system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers; that high performance requires every child to succeed; and that the only way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction. These principles transcend language, culture, tradition and even geography.

The company is now helping a select group of school systems around the world to incorporate these principles. While it is clear that full implementation might take years, positive results are already being noted. To learn more about these core principals and how they are being implemented in the top-performing school systems in the world, we refer Rocky Mountain News readers to the report, *How the World's Best Performing School Systems Came Out on Top*, which has been published on the Internet.

While we have made reference to the McKinsey report, we cannot be sure that it is the best plan for the Denver Public Schools. We are sure that Denver Public Schools, DCTA and the Denver community must create a comprehensive and practical vision that can create a high-performance school system.

It's time that we in Denver, in Colorado and in the United States stop looking at the trees and start looking at the forest. The futures of our children and our communities are at stake.

A Rebel with a cause — to be one no longer

Chris Strudwick insists he has done nothing special.

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And a child shall lead them. The child, in this case, is named Chris Strudwick, a 16-year-old junior at South High School in Denver, who may have pulled off — and pulled down — what some grown-ups hinted or insisted he likely never would. He may be on the verge of getting rid of Johnny Rebel.

The possible demise of the decades-old mascot was triggered several weeks ago during a discussion with a couple of friends about athletes at the school getting new team uniforms, Chris Strudwick said.

“He (Johnny Rebel) and the Confederate flag are viewed by a lot of people as two symbols of racism, you know,” he told his pals.

Get out, they replied. We should do something about it, he told them. It set into motion a student walkout that would occur the following day.

Chris Strudwick said at least 300 students walked out . . . “Some teachers stood in their doorways and clapped.”

The actual fate of the mascot, though, has not been determined.

Alex Sanchez, a Denver Public Schools spokesman, said Principal William Kohut and other administrators are supportive of students' desire to change the mascot, but discussions are ongoing.

Included in those talks are proposals to change the rebel character's "look and feel" without eliminating it.

"They are looking to maybe change its overall design and the colors, things like that. No firm decision has been made," Alex Sanchez said.

He knew of Johnny Rebel even before attending the school, Chris Strudwick said. "From the time I was a freshman, kids would talk about it, of how with so much diversity in the school, we should have a mascot that is representative of the student body." That's Chris, said his father, Lindsey Strudwick, 59, Denver's director of right-of-way enforcement. "Chris," his mother, Nancy, said, "is an intelligent, kind and good person . . . who just decided he would be a leader."

When he told his parents of his plan, they told him that if he felt so strongly, he should go for it, that he would never know if he could be successful unless he tried. Make sure, though, his father told him, to have his facts in order, to realize that risks were involved and to be prepared to accept any consequences that followed.

"To me, I see that image, and it still brings back bad memories of my upbringing in the South," Lindsey Strudwick said. He made his son research Johnny Rebel and write an essay.

Chris Strudwick then decided on the walkout.

"He gets it from my mother," Lindsey Strudwick said, "who for decades was involved in the civil rights struggle in North Carolina and, even today at age 86, still is."

Chris would accompany her on summer breaks all around Durham, Lindsey Strudwick said, “to council meetings and various other gatherings, fighting for things. He is a child I am very proud of.”

Plans for the walkout three Thursdays ago initially were circulated by word of mouth. And soon, Chris Strudwick said, kids began text-messaging everyone they knew: “At 11:20 a.m., third period, we’re all going to walk out.”

He and the others were met in the hallway by Principal William Kohut.

“This mascot serves only as the support of racism,” he said he told the principal. “Look around at the diverse faces here. That mascot is the total opposite of what South represents.”

The principal, he said, agreed.

The biggest point of contention, Chris Strudwick said, is removal of the mascot from the front hallway floor, which would require school district and other approvals because the building is designated a historic landmark.

More than 300 students in recent weeks have signed petitions to have the mascot removed from the floor, Chris Strudwick said. He expects more than 700 will have signed before they present them to the school district.

“Once people found out what the mascot stood for, they really came out in support of what we are doing,” he said.

The design team, he said, is a mixture of University of Denver and South High students, who are in the process of drawing up different versions of a new mascot, the winner to be determined by a vote of the student body.

Chris Strudwick insists he has done nothing special. What amazes him, he says, is it took a 16-year-old junior to get it done.

“You would think this school, with its diversity — a melting pot in the true sense of those words — alumni or the administrators would have looked around and been as sensitive to it. Universities and a few pro teams, even, have done this.

“But no one,” Chris Strudwick said, “took charge of it.

“I had to say, ‘I’ll do it.’ ”

Teacher sex bill shifted

Moved from House ed panel to judiciary

Associated Press

Concerned over reports of schoolteachers involved in sexual misconduct with students and other illegal behavior, lawmakers transferred a bill giving school districts a 24-hour deadline to report violations to the state from the House Education Committee to the Judiciary Committee on Thursday.

"I think the issues on this bill are much more legal than educational," said Mike Merrifield, D-Manitou Springs, chairman of the Education Committee.

No testimony was taken and no new hearing date was set.

The bill, introduced by Rep. Gwyn Green, D-Golden, also would give the state Department of Education 24 hours to respond to a background query

on teacher applicants and would require school districts to report any teacher who is dismissed or who resigns as a result of unlawful behavior involving a child if it is supported by a preponderance of the evidence.

If the board or school district fails to do a hiring background check, a parent of a child victim could sue.

Green said teachers involved in cases of alleged sexual misconduct should be forced to go through a license revocation hearing to determine the facts, and parents should be told the outcome, especially if a teacher is being returned to the classroom.

Currently, teachers are allowed to withdraw their licenses voluntarily and avoid a hearing.

From 2001 through 2005, the Colorado Department of Education suspended, denied or revoked licenses for 151 teachers.

Fifty-one of those cases involved sexual misconduct, according to an analysis of Colorado records by The Associated Press last year that formed part of a national project on teacher sex abuse.