

News Clips

Headlines

Rocky Mountain News

Monday, March 3, 2008

- DPS hiring scramble
- 'We will be forever in her debt'

Denver Post

Monday, March 3, 2008

- Noel was gentle, yet strong

Sunday, March 2, 2008

- City will lower flags to honor rights pioneer Rachel Noel

9 News

Sunday, March 2, 2008

- Education advocate remembered

Saturday, March 1, 2008

- Scholarships offered to all Denver grads, but some don't even know it

Rocky Mountain News

Monday, March 3, 2008

DPS hiring scramble

By Nancy Mitchell, Tocky Mountain News

Some principals in Denver Public Schools say they're losing the spring race for top teachers because charter schools and schools granted autonomy don't have to follow the same state, district and union rules for staffing.

Diane Kenealy interviewed for a teaching job at West Denver Preparatory Charter School on Jan. 9, received a job offer within 24 hours and accepted the position three days later.

Compare that rapid hiring to this spring's staffing calendar in traditional Denver Public Schools, which dictates principals can't schedule interviews with teaching candidates until the middle of March.

Even then, they can only talk to candidates already working in a city school.

A DPS principal who wants to talk to a college senior such as Kenealy, who spends her summers teaching poor children in Denver, has to wait another full month, until mid-April.

That's when interviews begin for teaching candidates from outside DPS.

"The process is cumbersome and absurd," said Manual High School Principal Rob Stein, who has led private and public schools in Denver.

Stein and other DPS principals said the district's hiring bureaucracy - including its late start and the preference given current employees - puts them at a disadvantage in finding top teachers.

"I absolutely know from experience I'm not able to get the best people," said Stein, who lost a teacher in August after DPS human resources staff dallied for weeks in finalizing a contract.

'The most important thing'

West Denver Prep, a college preparatory school serving impoverished families on South Federal Boulevard, doesn't have to follow the DPS staffing calendar.

As a charter school, it is freed from most district, union and state teaching regulations.

So Chris Gibbons, West Denver Prep's head of school, began recruiting Dec. 1 for staff for fall 2008. As of Friday, he had screened 239 resumes, interviewed nine candidates in person and filled two vacancies. Most of the openings are occurring as the school, now serving grades 6 and 7, adds grade 8 this fall.

Another nine candidates are scheduled for day-long interviews at West Denver Prep, which include teaching a lesson in front of Gibbons and his instructional chief, John Dues, and meeting with teachers.

By March 21, the Friday before spring break, Gibbons hopes to have filled most of the 10 jobs.

That's about when traditional DPS principals begin their interviews for fall 2008.

"Hiring is probably the hardest and most important thing I do," said Gibbons, whose school opened in fall 2006.

Students there outperformed DPS averages on state reading, writing and math exams in their first year.

"Hiring the very best people who have the very best alignment with our mission is one of the most significant ways we can impact student achievement," he said.

A late hiring start

DPS officials say they can't hire earlier because they spend January and much of February figuring enrollment and budget numbers for each of the city's 140 schools for the following school year.

Student projections determine how many teachers the district needs and, because enrollment determines state funding, how much money the district has to spend.

"What we don't want to do is start staffing," said Bart Muller, DPS director of human resources, "and then pull people out because the money we thought we had, we don't have anymore."

State statute and the district's contract with its teachers union also outlines the staffing cycles, including preference for existing employees.

Teachers hired in DPS are considered probationary for three years. After that, they're non-probationary and have first rights to interview for openings.

"We want to make sure we take care of all of our non-probationary teachers first," Muller said.

DPS essentially has three hiring cycles. First is an internal cycle for existing teachers. Then comes a cycle for current teachers unable to find jobs, the so-called "direct placements." These may be good teachers who have lost jobs because enrollment at their schools has dropped - or they

may be bad teachers whom no one wants. The third cycle is the external cycle, when outside candidates apply.

A mad rush for teachers

For traditional DPS principals, the hiring pressure is intense.

Do you go ahead and hire that teacher from another DPS school, even if you're not sure about the person? Because if you don't, DPS could assign you a direct-placement teacher - and you don't get to say no.

And, what if you can't find someone better when you finally can interview candidates outside DPS?

"It's like you're trying to game the system; do I hire this person or do I hold out?" Manual's Stein said.

On March 13, DPS teachers will first see the job openings for fall.

On March 18, principals will get lists of which DPS teachers looking for jobs are qualified for their openings.

Then principals will spend the following five days in a rapid succession of interviews to secure candidates before spring break.

Bruce Randolph School Principal Kristin Waters called the process "a mad rush."

"It's very fast," she said. "Everybody is kind of jockeying for the same candidates . . . and they get lots of offers, and you have to try to convince them why you are the best place to come."

Kim Ursetta, president of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association, said the mad dash doesn't benefit teachers. She said some will interview from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. before school, work a full day and then interview after school until 10 p.m.

"It's very hard to have a quality interview with such tight timelines," Ursetta said.

Piloting a new way

Stein said he didn't realize the speed at which he was supposed to move when he joined Manual last spring. DPS released its list of teachers

interested in moving at 5 p.m. on a Friday, he recalled, and a teacher who had expressed interest in Manual was snapped up by 9 a.m. Monday.

"It should be an open process," Stein said. "Anybody interested in a job should be able to apply, and the school should be able to look at whoever is interested and hire who's best for kids."

That is the goal of a new hiring system being piloted this spring at Bruce Randolph, Manual and Grant Middle School.

Principals at the schools, frustrated by the hiring process and wary of "direct-placement" teachers, pushed for freedom from district and union rules in staffing.

Earlier this year, the DPS school board and the union's governing board agreed the three could try "rolling" postings, meaning the principals can post vacancies and hire from inside and outside the district at will.

So Waters immediately posted an ad for a high school chemistry teacher on the popular national Web site, Craigslist.com.

The ad, placed Jan. 27, has generated 15 resumes from across the country, she said. She's interviewed two.

Details of the pilot plan are still being worked out, but DPS leaders say the goal is to expand it to all schools next spring.

Muller said it is unlikely the district will be able to start hiring much earlier. And, largely because of state statute, DPS will need to find places for its existing employees.

But, he said, the goal is a system that allows principals to consider all applicants at once.

"The fact I will be able to talk to all of these candidates and be able to consider them for any position for which they're qualified, that's huge," Waters said.

"The bottom line is this will allow me to hire the best candidate to fill each vacancy that I have."

mitchelln@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-954-5245

About the series

Denver Public Schools can change the way it serves 72,000 students - or continue tinkering around the edges of dismal achievement and stagnant enrollment in most buildings.

DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet conceded this after a series in the Rocky Mountain News last year explored why one in four Denver children do not attend the city's schools.

"It is hard to admit," he wrote, "but it is abundantly clear that we will fail the majority of children in Denver if we try to run our schools the same old way."

In February, DPS and its teachers union announced a compromise that will allow three of Denver's 140 schools to run in a very different way in the key area of hiring teachers. Friday, principals of Bruce Randolph School, Manual High School and Grant Middle School met with DPS leaders to figure out details of a pilot plan that will give them unprecedented control over staffing.

Today is part 3 of an occasional series looking at outside-the-box strategies already working in Denver. West Denver Preparatory Charter School is an example of a school whose leaders can hire and, when necessary, fire teachers with much more flexibility than most DPS principals.

It is one of the reasons West Denver Prep leaders believe their school is making gains with the very children failing in traditional DPS schools. How is this strategy working at West Denver Prep? And is the rest of DPS paying attention?

IN HIS OWN WORDS: JOHN DUES

John Dues, 28, is head of curriculum and instruction at West Denver Preparatory Charter School, a high-poverty school on South Federal Boulevard that outperformed district averages on state tests in its first year.

Dues spent three years teaching fifth-graders in Atlanta Public Schools and has a master's degree in education.

Despite that, he might not qualify for a job in Denver Public Schools because he doesn't have a Colorado teaching license.

Not surprisingly, Dues doesn't pay a lot of attention to state certification when it comes to hiring teachers for West Denver Prep. He's more interested in knowledge of the subject being taught, experience in urban education - and a sense of mission.

"We are really trying to find people who buy into our mission (and) the thinking that is kind of antithetical to what is more typical in a public school - the thinking that you need to raise a kid's self-esteem before you work on academic skills. That's the opposite of how we approach things.

"You don't build self-esteem through artificial activities. You feel good about yourself because you achieve . . . We want people to identify that self-esteem and feeling good about yourself and who you are as a student comes through building academic skills.

"I also ask teaching candidates about the importance they place on parental involvement. Their choices are 'essential,' 'unnecessary,' or 'useful but not required.'

"What we're trying to get at is, yeah, it would be great to have it, and we certainly want to engage parents whenever possible . . . but it should not be used as an excuse for why things didn't work. We don't buy into the excuse, 'Our test scores have not improved, but it's because our parents aren't involved, and we can't be expected to do this all by ourselves.'

"I also ask candidates, how do you feel about the structure here? That turns some people off, and that's OK. You've got to have a consistent behavior system before you do academics. If kids are going to choose to be disruptive, then they need to be removed from the classroom. I'd much rather have one kid out of the classroom and 24 kids learning than 25 kids not learning because there's such disruption on a daily basis.

"I don't think certification or licensure means you're more qualified to teach. Some of our best teachers have turned out to be people right out of college without any formal teacher preparation. Or Dr. Levy - science teacher Ellen Levy - came from academia, a professor but not a certified K-12 teacher. Who's going to say someone with a Ph.D. in chemistry from Columbia is not qualified to teach science?"

"You want to get the best people. We want to start recruiting as early as possible, we want to see as many candidates as possible, we want to talk to as many people as possible. Having control over that is just basic common sense.

"There's too much at stake. The time we have with the kids, and the ground we need to make up, we have to have the best people in the classroom if this is going to be successful."

'We will be forever in her debt'

Civil rights leader, educator, pioneer lauded at memorial

Many of those who attended a memorial service Sunday for educator and civil rights pioneer Rachel Noel were drawn to one particular paragraph in the program notes.

It summed up the woman they knew who, in 90 years of life, brought about profound change in the nature of public education in Denver and Colorado.

"In the final analysis," her daughter Angie Noel wrote, "the beauty and wonder of Mrs. Noel's life may come down to one simple fact: she was so well loved because she loved so well."

For two hours on an overcast March afternoon, several hundred people gathered at the Shorter Community A.M.E. Church to reflect on that love and how it showed itself in ways both big and small.

Vincent Harding, a longtime friend and professor at the Iliff School of Theology, said it was a kind of love she had learned from her parents.

"They taught her love was not simply sentimental stuff," he said in his eulogy. Rather, it was something that showed itself, "in working hard for what she believed in."

For Rachel Louise Bassette Noel, that meant becoming the first African-American woman elected to public office in Colorado when voters put her on the Denver Public School board in 1965.

It meant introducing the "Noel Resolution" in 1968, which sought equal treatment of children in DPS regardless of their race.

That amendment, in turn, led to the U.S. Supreme Court's first de facto desegregation order involving a school district in a northern city.

"It was a singular moment in our nation's history and it called for a singular person to stand up," said Mayor John Hickenlooper. "She was that constant, gentle but determined voice that asked for all that we were capable of. . . . She was a true pioneer and we will be forever in her debt."

Signs of Noel's impact were evident throughout the service, from the stained glass image of her face in a window at the church to a choir from Rachel B. Noel Middle School, named in her honor.

Several people recalled a fun-loving, generous, personal side of Noel.

Her niece Phoebe Haddon remembered her aunt's pursuit of "the perfect hat." She also recalled the love her parents shared over 44 years of marriage and the deep bond between Noel and her sisters and how they "were in constant contact with each other."

Former Colorado lawmaker Gloria Tanner recalled how, after her husband died, Noel stayed in touch and took over addressing the thank you notes to the people who sent condolences.

"Rachel taught us so much, and we are better for it," Tanner said.

Former state lawmaker Regis Groff said that long after Noel left office, political candidates would come seeking her advice and support.

He remembered how Noel would quiz him over a ham sandwich in her kitchen or later in a neighborhood Chinese restaurant, about what was happening in the legislature, the mayor's office and in politics.

Hickenlooper recalled talking to her once and thanking her for "the burden she had endured." He said she motioned him closer and added, "I had a lot of fun."

Harding noted the coincidence that both Noel and Martin Luther King Jr. were born on the same day, 11 years apart.

"I'm not sure if she was born on the same day he was, or if it was the other way around," he said.

Harding suggested that people carry on her legacy by paying attention to children.

Noel died Feb. 4 in California, where she had gone to live with her family.

His mother would have liked Sunday's service, Buddy Noel said.

"She would have been quietly appreciative and a little bit overwhelmed," he said. "But probably, since she knew 90 percent of the people here, she'd be over saying hello to them."

Rachel Noel

1918-2008

* Born: Hampton, Va., Jan. 15, 1918

* Education: Graduated first in her class from Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) with a degree in sociology.

* Family: Married Edmond Forrest Noel, Oct. 2, 1942, just as he was being shipped overseas for military duty. Daughter Angie Noel, son Edmond "Buddy" Noel, and five grandchildren

* Offices: Became first African-American woman elected to public office in Colorado in 1965, when she was elected to the Denver School Board. Appointed to the University of Colorado Board of Regents in 1976. Two

years later she was elected to a six-year term. She also served as board chair.

* Faculty positions: At Metropolitan State College of Denver, taught sociology from 1969-1980 and chaired the African-American studies department from 1971-1980.

* Contributions in Noel's memory can be sent to: Metropolitan State College Foundation Inc., Rachel B. Noel Distinguished Visiting Professorship, PO Box 17971, Denver, CO 80217-9812

Denver Post

Monday, March 3, 2008

Noel was gentle, yet strong

**A community celebrates the life of education activist
Rachel Bassette Noel**

By Jenel Stelton-Holtmeier
The Denver Post

Article Last Updated: 03/03/2008 06:07:10 AM MST

Tears of sorrow were sparse as people from all facets of life came together Sunday to remember Rachel Bassette Noel. To cry at her memory was unfathomable.

"Whenever I think of Aunt Rachel, a smile immediately occurs to my mind. It travels to my heart and onto my face," said Kathryn Sue Gavin, a niece of Noel's.

Others in attendance shared in that sentiment. Every accomplishment and memory mentioned from the podium brought smiles from the crowd of 750 at Shorter Community AME Church.

Some, like Genevieve Smith, couldn't contain the spirit of celebration, adding their voices to the calls of "Amen" and raising their hands to the music and the message.

That message: Noel was larger than her life.

A trailblazer for equal opportunity in education, Noel died Feb. 4 at age 90.

She faced bomb and death threats for the Noel Resolution to integrate schools in Denver in 1968.

Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper recalled that she admitted to him that it wasn't all bad. In fact, she told him, she had a lot of fun.

Noel's focus on all children, regardless of race, set her apart from other civil-rights activists of the 1960s.

"She really believed that all the children were hers and she had a responsibility for them," said Vincent G. Harding, professor emeritus at the Iliff School of Theology.

That dedication led her to accept active roles in local and state education. She held posts on Denver's Board of Education and the University of Colorado's Board of Regents, and was the first African-American on either.

She wasn't looking for recognition; she was looking to help the people who most needed help, said Harding. To continue that work would be the best way to keep Noel's memory alive, he said.

However, recognition was given in many ways, and her spirit was evident in everything she did. At the dedication for the Rachel B. Noel Middle School, students had the opportunity to meet with and talk to Noel.

More than one was heard to say, "We won't let you down, Ms. Noel, we promise," Noel's niece Phoebe Haddon said.

Metropolitan State College of Denver created the Rachel B. Noel distinguished Visiting Professorship in 1980. Noel, delighted by the scope of people honored with the professorship, had a dream that one day the honor would be bestowed on Denzel Washington.

Stephen Jordan, president of Metro State, still hopes to make Noel's wish come true.

No one, from family to local dignitary, wanted to let Noel down. Former state Sen. Regis Groff remembered how it was customary for anyone from the community seeking office to first seek out Noel for her blessing, which Noel gave along with advice on how to attain their goals.

And through it all, Noel did it with a sense of grace and strength that truly set her apart, said Gavin.

"Soft voice, gentle in nature, strong as steel in fighting for the rights," she said. "Gentle steel. Genteel. Aunt Rachel."

Jenel Stelton-Holtmeier: 303-954-1661 or jsteltonholtmeier@denverpost.com

Rachel Bassette Noel

- In the 1960s while she was a member of the Denver Board of Education, her Noel Resolution helped end segregation in Denver Public Schools.
- She was appointed to the University of Colorado Board of Regents in 1976, becoming its first African-American. She was the first African-American woman elected statewide in Colorado when she won a six-year term to the board in 1978.
- The Rachel Bassette Noel Middle School in northwest Denver was created in 2002.

Sunday, March 2, 2008

City will lower flags to honor rights pioneer Rachel Noel

By Kirk Mitchell
The Denver Post

Article Last Updated: 03/01/2008 11:43:48 PM MST

City flags will be lowered to half-staff today in honor of Rachel B. Noel, the first black woman elected to public office in Colorado when she joined the board of Denver Public Schools in 1965.

Noel died in her sleep Feb. 4 at age 90.

"It is an honor to be able to pay public respect to Rachel Noel," said Mayor John Hickenlooper. "Those of us who were fortunate enough to spend quality time with her know that she made everyone around her better. She was a courageous woman who had a legendary impact on public education throughout the city and the state."

Her "Noel Resolution" was essential to the integration of DPS in the late 1960s, according to Hickenlooper's office.

Gov. Richard Lamm appointed her to the University of Colorado Board of Regents in 1976.

Metropolitan State College honored her by forming the Rachel B. Noel Distinguished Visiting Professorship in 1981.

Kirk Mitchell, The Denver Post

9 News

Sunday, March 2, 2008

Education advocate remembered

DENVER - A woman who was an advocate for minority citizens and equal access to education was remembered at a memorial service Sunday afternoon.

Rachel Bassette Noel is one of several women depicted in stained glass in the Shorter Community A.M.E Church, where the service took place.

The Noel Resolution, presented to the DPS board in 1968, led to the U.S. Supreme Court decision to address school segregation in Denver with school busing.

Noel was appointed to the University of Colorado Board of Regents in 1976, and two years later she was elected statewide to a six-year term. She was also an associated professor of sociology and African American studies at Metropolitan State College of Denver for 11 years and helped found the Department of African American Studies, which she chaired from 1971 to 1980.

Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper, former Mayor Wellington Webb and Denver Public Schools Superintendent Michael Bennet were among those in attendance for Sunday's service.

Noel passed away Feb. 4 in Oakland, Calif. She was 90 years old.

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Saturday, March 1, 2008

Scholarships offered to all Denver grads, but some don't even know it

written by: [Nelson Garcia](#) , Reporter

DENVER - After T.J. Balous graduated from George Washington High School in 2007, he took a year off to work before going to college.

He wasn't sure he wanted to go back, until he got a letter which surprised him – offering him a scholarship up to \$6,000 just for making it through high school.

"I didn't know about it before," said Balous, hoping to be a psychology major at CU or CSU. "So, the letter surprised me that I was eligible."

In November 2006, Lincoln High School graduate and oil tycoon Tim Marquez granted \$50 million to create the Denver Scholarship Foundation. He and his wife Bernadette wanted to help others who came from humble beginnings, like he did, make it to college.

For the 2006-07 school year, scholarships were offered to all graduates of Montbello, South, and Lincoln high schools. But, scholarships of up to \$6,000 are available to all graduates of Denver Public Schools. Tim and Bernadette Marquez decided to make their offer retroactive so that any graduate from last year can now apply this year.

"They felt it was the right thing to do," said Cynthia Castillo, college and financial aid advisor with the Denver Scholarship Foundation.

She says many 2007 grads don't realize they're eligible for the money even though DSF officials tried to tell seniors last year.

"I don't know seniors got that message," said Castillo. "It's the end of the year. Things are crazy. So, they may have kind of forgotten about it."

The DSF sent letters to every 2007 graduate to remind them. The deadlines are approaching fast with the first being March 15. If you want to find out more, just click on www.denverscholarship.org.

The DSF is holding the following workshops over the next two weeks:

West High School: March 4, 6 - 8 p.m.

Thomas Jefferson High School: March 5, 6 - 8 p.m.

South High School: March 8, 9 a.m. - 1 p.m.

Thomas Jefferson High School: March 15, 9 a.m. - 1 p.m.

George Washington High School: March 15, 9 a.m. - 1 p.m.

Balous is thankful he was reminded about the scholarship.

"The \$6,000 scholarship will help my room and board and everything," he said.

"I was thinking that I wasn't gonna be able to afford a college education for three children," said Nicole Balous, T.J.'s mother. "I was happy about it."

While the Denver Scholarship Foundation works to send all Denver graduates to college, Myles Mendoza is working to raise more money. Mendoza is the development director and says that the scholarship needs far more money than the foundation currently has.

"I think a lot of people think that we are just sitting on this money," said Mendoza. "But, we're looking at raising a \$200 million endowment."

Mendoza says Tim and Bernadette Marquez's grant was a challenge to the community to support a program which is unprecedented.

"There's never been a scholarship program of this scale in the history of the world," said Mendoza. "We're taking on the entire city of Denver."

They want to help families like T.J.'s who will be looking at multiple tuition bills.

"I want to try to get into the Women's College at DU and major in business administration," said Nicole. "I haven't been to school in quite a while."

T.J. is lukewarm to the idea of his mother returning to college. "I'll be helping her with homework and all that," he said.

That's why they both say this scholarship will help them tremendously. It should pay for most if not all of T.J.'s tuition costs.