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# Denver Post

**Tuesday, March 4, 2008**

## **Minorities, poor get "highly gifted" lift**

**A new DPS system awards some kids an extra boost to make things more equitable.**

By Jeremy P. Meyer  
*The Denver Post*

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More minority and poor students in Denver are being classified as highly gifted under a new system that gives extra credit to children who are economically disadvantaged or nonnative English speakers.

Denver Public Schools is trying to fix a disparity in the program that serves its smartest and most talented students — which up until now has drawn mostly white students in a district that is mostly Latino.

"It's a much more holistic look at the kid," said Diana Howard, principal at Polaris at Ebert, the district's sole elementary school

for the highly gifted and talented. "I wanted this system to look at much more than test scores. This is going to have a huge impact."

More than 1,800 students in Denver Public Schools — about 3 percent — fit the highly gifted classification and are served by magnet programs at seven elementary schools and one middle school.

Denver is the only district in the metro area that has a program specifically for "highly gifted and talented students."

To determine who gets into the program, the district previously relied on oral tests that measure a student's reasoning and IQ.

But some educators and social scientists believe those tests are biased against students learning English and poorer students who may not have had the same life experiences as their richer peers.

"They may be bright children but may not know what plaid is," Howard said. "Or their concept may not have involved a vacation. Or they may have never been on an escalator."

To make things more equitable, the district now relies on a sum of measures to determine eligibility into the highly gifted program — cognitive tests, annual assessments, reading tests and teacher nominations. Next year, the district will consider artwork and writings.

Also, students get extra points toward entry into the program if English is their second language or if they receive federal meal benefits — a measure of poverty.

For example, a student who scores as low as the 75th percentile on cognitive tests could be considered, Howard said. Previously, that child would not have been admitted.

"We want to find the gifts that these children have, not exclude them," she said.

Experts in the gifted field say DPS's change follows a national trend.

"Standardized tests are tipped against children from underserved populations and children from diverse backgrounds," said Nancy Green, executive director of the National Association for Gifted Children. "We have got to find other ways besides verbal tests to determine whether kids are gifted."

The American Civil Liberties Union in California last year threatened to sue the Tustin Unified School District over low numbers of Latinos and African-Americans in the district's gifted programs.

Districts from Miami to New York are giving more credit to smart children from culturally diverse or economically disadvantaged backgrounds, said Joshua Wyner, executive vice president of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation.

"If what we are trying to do is measure not accomplishment but giftedness and talent, then putting your thumb on the scale or adding points for kids from low-income backgrounds re-equalizes things," he said. "The question is how heavy should that thumb be?"

Wyner said weighting the system carries political risks.

"If there are a limited number of slots in those programs, then the wealthier student who is excluded will always feel wrongly excluded if their test scores were higher than a lower-income student or Hispanic student who was included," he said.

Jaime Aquino, DPS's chief academic officer, said adding more highly gifted students will not exclude others.

"Every school gets an allocation per student who is identified as gifted and talented, so they can provide them some enrichment or some differentiated services within the building," he said. "You have several magnet programs throughout the district. Many still have room. It's just whether the parents want to send their kids to those schools."

***More students are applying***

DPS's student population is 57 percent Latino, 20 percent white and 19 percent black. But the highly gifted and talented program serves only 25 percent ethnic minorities, Howard said.

After this year's screening, a third of the newly identified highly gifted students are ethnic minorities, Howard said.

One other reason for the more diverse field is that more students are applying to be in the program. This year, the district began mailing home applications to likely candidates with self-addressed stamped envelopes to be returned to the district office.

With that change, the district received about 500 more applicants for the program. Almost 170 more students were accepted for the 2008-09 school year than this year — including 49 English-language learners and 119 students who receive free and reduced lunches. Those were threefold increases in both categories over the previous year.

"This is exciting," said Howard, who started the district's only elementary school for highly gifted and talented students in 2000 in the old Crofton school in Five Points.

Initially, the student population was 30 percent Latino, 30 percent African-American and 30 percent Anglo — drawing mostly kids from the northeast part of town.

The program has since moved to the larger Ebert School, just north of downtown, and began getting kids from homes in the Stapleton redevelopment. Howard said that changed the demographics of the school, which is now 70 percent white. About 10 percent of the 341 students get federal-meal benefits.

Enrollment into Polaris is highly competitive, with an annual lottery and a waiting list. The Denver school board last year promised to open another highly gifted and talented school, but so far DPS has not delivered.

Letters went out late last month to parents who had sought to get their children into the school. Many were rejection notices telling them of other options for highly gifted students. To meet

the growing need, Polaris is dropping a kindergarten class next year and adding another fourth grade, Howard said.

Thirteen of the 33 new fourth-grade students are ethnic minorities, Howard said.

Inside the brick building, off Park Avenue West, creative chaos takes place, Howard said.

"We're very messy," she said, pointing to a cardboard box overflowing with forgotten coats.

Artwork adorns the walls, African drumbeats waft from dance class, and fourth-graders in the library study for their trip to Crow Canyon Archaeological Center, near Mesa Verde National Park.

### ***Chirps and squawks***

Inside the kindergarten classroom, chirps and squawks come from the menagerie of caged animals — a snake, chicken and hedgehog.

"Does this belong in the classification of poetry or fiction," asked teacher Eileen Wise, after reading a story to the class while petting a hedgehog in her lap.

Kindergartners entering Polaris are reading "Harry Potter" while peers elsewhere are learning their ABCs.

"They are very different children — difficult to raise," Howard said. "They are very intense. This is a safe place for kids to be, and ask their weird questions and make up their strange games."

Soon, she hopes, kids from all backgrounds will have the same opportunity to be safe and weird in their brilliance.

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## **Glory, struggles coexist in ex-coach**

## **Reporter Irv Moss writes about stars from the past**

By Irv Moss

*The Denver Post*

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Rayford Tillis continually struggles to break through.

It's like trying to keep your head above water and not being swept away by the tide. Sayyid Abdal-Rahman is in control, and it isn't easy to circumvent his mind or his 350 pounds.

"Rayford Tillis comes through all the time," Abdal-Rahman said in describing the competition. "They're like two different human beings. Both have their skeletons."

Tillis was an accomplished athlete at Denver East High School and is scheduled for induction April 12 into East's Hall of Fame. Abdal-Rahman was an accomplished basketball coach at Montbello High School, winning the state championship in 1984, but lost his way in the murky world of drugs and bright lights. He now lives in Bakersfield, Calif., with his mother, Derosette Cole, and is trying to mesh the best from Tillis and Abdal-Rahman into a person with inner contentment.

"A lot of people at East liked me," Abdal-Rahman continued. "It was like living in a fairy tale. There were no limits. I always was laughing. Everybody called me Big T. Sayyid became a hardened person because of what I was seeing at the time. I've always been a very giving person, but people saw me differently."

The transformation of Tillis to Abdal-Rahman began when he left Denver after high school to attend junior college in Washington. He found that his fairy-tale world at East High School wasn't the norm.

"I never had any kind of boundaries, and I didn't understand the hatred I encountered," Abdal-Rahman said. "The racism was so blatant that it knocked me for a loop."

He returned to Colorado and enrolled at Trinidad State Junior College, where he was a teammate of Spencer Haywood, who went on to Olympic, ABA (with the Denver Rockets) and NBA fame.

Abdal-Rahman needed a solution.

"I couldn't stay a Christian because I was so angry," he said. "I didn't treat people very well, and I looked for something else. I studied Islam. Some people don't recognize my choice of religion. It can be a tough jacket to carry, but I can deal with that."

But Abdal-Rahman had another side.

"I've always been a free spirit," Abdal-Rahman said. "I'd be in the clubs. I always was carousing the streets with my partners. I was hanging around in the wrong places and doing things I shouldn't have been doing. Maybe that's a stigma on kids who don't have a father. But I stayed at the party too long."

In April 1992, while he was raising two young daughters and coaching at Montbello, Abdal-Rahman went down the wrong path. He said he delivered a substance to a buyer for a friend, and he was caught. He served time until March 1993, wore an ankle bracelet for four months and served three years of probation.

"That devastated my mother," Abdal-Rahman said. "I didn't break my bond with my players. I was able to keep that part of my life away from them. I let them down in some aspects, but none of them were unforgiving."

Abdal-Rahman paid his debt to society, but some interest payments remained. He was unable to return to the Denver Public Schools system and was put on a "no hire" list. He drove a taxicab to help make ends meet. He worked at youth centers and

coached basketball. He wound up in California and filled his life with time for the needy and underprivileged.

"I remember what was the worst day of my life," Abdal-Rahman said. "You don't see me in the clubs anymore. I don't hang out there. I think about the old times in Denver. That helps me stay straight and eliminate the temptation."

Abdal-Rahman faces other problems. Doctors have urged him to lose weight. He would like to drop 110 pounds to 240. He also thinks of returning to Denver. He clutches to the memory of mentors such as Alex Burl, Pat Panek and Paul Coleman and teammates Rudy Carey, the basketball coach at Denver East, and the late Art Levy, who introduced him to Islam.

"There was some shock and surprise when he converted to Islam," Carey said. "It was his choice and the thing for him to do. But none of his friends look at him as an outcast. Everybody has things in their past that they regret. We're supposed to be forgiving people."

A coaching record of 273-68, a state championship and six Denver Prep League titles are remainders of Abdal-Rahman's days gone by. Rayford Tillis fights to break through.

"Rayford Tillis still is part of me," Abdal-Rahman said.

### **Abdal-Rahman bio**

Born: Feb. 16, 1948, Los Angeles; High school: Denver East, 1963-66

Advanced education: Grays Harbor College, Aberdeen, Wash.; Trinidad State Junior College; Colorado State

Family: Daughters Shahada Saultheis and Jasmine Saultheis

Hobbies: A jazz and blues music bug, played saxophone, avid reader.

Ambitions: Visit Mecca, the pyramids in Egypt and the Taj Mahal in India.

# Honey of a concept's bitter finale

By Susan Greene  
*Denver Post Columnist*

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Susan Daggett will never live down what is remembered in her family as the "honey-fish incident."

It happened the evening the busy mother of three served a seafood dish she made at one of those food-assembly joints for folks who want someone else to grocery shop, chop vegetables and clean the bowls after them.

The glazed tilapia was among a dozen meals Daggett slapped together in the hour it took for her daughter's ballet lesson. Her plan: to serve them on nights she would rather spend time with her kids than cook.

Quite a concept.

So the day of the incident, Daggett defrosted the fish in question. She heated the bag of honey and soy sauce she had mixed to specification, brushed the glaze over the frozen filets and baked for 40 minutes.

Feeling smug about her time-management savvy, she presented the dinner triumphantly to her kids and husband, Denver Public Schools chief Michael Bennet.

"This was a dish I wouldn't make normally. I felt sort of gleeful about it, like I was beating the system," she said.

Like many of us torn between making dinner and connecting with our kids, Daggett was thrilled by the advent of meal-prep shops in metro Denver.

With names such as Dream Dinners and Super Suppers, the kitchens provide stations with pre-prepped, pre-measured ingredients for entrees that change monthly. Step-by-step instructions are tough to mess up, unless of course you're trying to prepare a Lemon Kissed Apricot Chicken while conducting a column interview.

The concept of stockpiling several freezer-friendly meals sounded dreamy to me when faced with an empty refrigerator and the dread of subjecting yet another waitress to the milk-spilling that marks most dinners with our boys.

So I picked the place with a name even more superlative than the rest, Miracle Meals, sandwiched between Mr. Sushi and Wells Fargo in a Littleton strip center.

Inside, I found three tired moms determined to churn out their 12 dishes in time to catch "Supernanny."

"I'd rather clean bathrooms than cook," said Donna Westwood, a mother of three and a foster mom, wrapping krab into six seafood enchiladas.

Printing-company owner Kirsten Kreiling served up four miracle meals last week to avoid meltdowns when she returns from work.

"We call it the witching hour," she says of the time between 5:30 and 6:30 p.m. when her kids are cranky, needing help with homework and reaching for Oreos in the pantry. "This makes me feel a whole lot better than ordering in for a pizza."

First-timer Allie Walker amazed even the most seasoned regulars by cranking out a dozen dishes in 45 minutes — inspired, she said, by the Christian music on the boombox.

"This lets me get out of the house and learn homemaking stuff that I should have figured out 10 years ago," she said, measuring pinto beans into her Ziploc of Hearts Afire Chili.

Let's be clear. While these meals may be miraculous, they are hardly more artful than Jane Jetson pressing a button to prepare

dinner. Food - assembly stores are to cooking what glaze-it-yourself studios are to pottery — a utilitarian way to feel better about our stressed out, overly-scheduled selves.

Which brings me to the super supper that was supposed to make Daggett's evening easier.

Hot out of the oven, her "honey fish" prompted one daughter to plug her nose and another to the gag reflex.

"It was disgusting," she admits. "I took one bite and said if I can't eat this, they shouldn't have to, either. So we had ice cream for dinner instead."

*Susan Greene writes Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Reach her at 303-954-1989 or [green@denverpost.com](mailto:green@denverpost.com)*

# **Rocky Mountain News**

## **Monday, March 3, 2008**

### **Educators tentatively back Ritter plan, but await details**

**Readiness would be defines for life after high school**

By Berny Morson, Rocky Mountain News

Gov. Bill Ritter's proposal to overhaul the public school system is meeting with cautious support among education groups.

But education leaders said the hard part will be filling in details of the sketchy plan, which Ritter and Sen. Chris Romer, D-Denver, have termed "revolutionary."

"There's not a lot of clarity about what teachers need, what principals need in terms of training and professional development and resources to complete the revolution," said Bruce Caughey, deputy director of the Colorado Association of School Executives, which represents superintendents and other top school administrators.

Ritter's proposal is contained in a bill circulating among educators and lawmakers in draft form. The measure probably will be introduced this week, with Romer and Sen. Josh Penry, R-Fruita, as the bipartisan sponsors.

Under the bill, an 11-member "preschool to postsecondary alignment council" will devise a definition of readiness for either college or the work force.

The Colorado Board of Education and Colorado Commission on Higher Education would jointly adopt that definition to guide high school graduation and college entrance requirements.

The new council would also recommend to the state academic standards to guide public school curriculum and prepare students to meet the definition of readiness.

Students who meet the standards would receive a diploma endorsed by the state Board of Education, as well as the local school board. Endorsement would entitle the student to enter a state college, although not necessarily the most selective four-year schools.

The state's 176 school districts would revise their curriculums to reflect the new standards.

Seniors would take CSAP

Tests administered under the Colorado Student Assessment Program would be overhauled to reflect the new standards. The tests, which now end in 10th grade, would extend to the senior year.

School districts, in judging whether students have achieved readiness, would no longer be required to use the traditional measures, such as course completion with a passing grade. They could adopt some other method, such as the use of a carpentry project to get across concepts of geometry.

The program would take effect for students entering high school in fall 2011. Still under discussion are important provisions that would affect the earliest grades, said Matt Gianneschi, Ritter's education adviser.

Groups representing educators are still digesting the draft bill, but leaders say the ideas are good in general. None, however, has issued an endorsement.

"I don't think we're ready to do that yet," said Jeanne Beyer, a spokeswoman for the Colorado Education Association.

Success of the entire effort hangs on who is named to the new council that will initiate most of the changes, several people pointed out.

The panel would be co-chaired by the Department of Education Commissioner Dwight Jones and Colorado Department of Higher Education Executive Director David Skaggs. The rest of the members would be selected by Ritter and the Democratic and Republican leaders in the House and Senate.

Beyer said teachers will want to know how their voices would be heard in the council's proceedings. The bill directs the council to hear from educators, but does not specify a process.

The rapid pace set for the council could preclude public comment, Beyer said. By Jan. 5, 2009, the panel must come up with both a definition of college/work force readiness and proposed revisions to the state's public school academic standards.

Not all are college-bound

Jane Urschel, associate director of the Colorado Association of School Boards, said a major challenge lies in meeting the needs of students who are not going to college. Students headed for technical education should not be made to "feel they're taking some sort of second-class path," Urschel said.

"This is the old (issue of) vocational education, which has always been the stepchild of public education," Urschel said.

Unless the needs of noncollege-bound students are addressed, Ritter won't meet another of his main goals - reducing the dropout rate, Urschel warned.

Rona Wilensky, principal of Boulder's New Vista High School, said the council should talk to business leaders, not just academics.

"When you ask people who work in schools what kids need to know, you get school kinds of answers," Wilensky said.

"That's not what we want to make as the universal standard for everybody, because most people aren't going to work in schools. So what is it you need to know in real life?" Wilensky said.

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## **CBS 4**

### **Monday, March 3, 2008**

#### **Pioneering Black Woman Remembered In Denver**

DENVER (CBS4) — City flags in Denver were lowered to half-staff Sunday in honor of the first black woman elected to public office in Colorado. A memorial service was held Sunday at the Shorter Community A.M.E. Church at Martin Luther King and Colorado Boulevard in northeast Denver.

Rachel B. Noel died in her sleep on Feb. 4.

The former Denver School Board member and University of Colorado regent was 90 years old.

Noel is widely remembered for her impact on public education, specifically, the integration of Denver Public Schools in the 1960s.

"Here in Denver it was Rachel B. Noel, along with others, who forced Denver, forced this city to take on those issues and to do what was right and to do what was essential," said Mayor John Hickenlooper.

The Rachel B. Noel Middle School in Denver was named in her honor. A distinguishing visiting professorship at Metro State is also named for her.

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