

News Clips

Headlines

Rocky Mountain News

Friday, April 4, 2008

- Eighth-graders gain in writing
- 'Innovative' school bill gets initial House OK

Denver Post

Friday, April 4, 2008

- STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS STEADY SINCE '02
- Dropout rate "catastrophe"

Yourhub.com

Thursday, April 3, 2008

- Flamebot ranked number one in Colorado.

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Eighth-graders gain in writing

But only 38% in state proficient or better in study

By Berny Morson, Rocky Mountain News (Contact)

Friday, April 4, 2008

Darin McGregor / The Rocky

Colorado eighth-graders were among the best in the nation on a writing test administered last year, the U.S. Education Department reported Thursday.

But the national results were hardly good news - only 31 percent of students nationwide scored at the proficient or advanced level on the test.

In Colorado, 38 percent of the eighth-graders scored at the proficient or advanced level. Colorado and Maine were tied for fifth.

Nationally, and in Colorado, girls far outscored boys.

The tests were part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The program tests students every few years, rather than annually as under the Colorado's Student Assessment Program. NAEP tested a national sample of 139,900 students at 6,810 schools. CSAP tests all children.

Colorado should be proud that its scores were among the highest in the nation, said Amanda Avallone, an eighth- grade language arts teacher at Summit Middle School in Boulder. She is a member of the NAEP governing board.

But the Colorado average is well below proficient, Avallone said.

"That (proficient) would be the goal. In the perfect world if all were working well that's the level of really being able to do the kind of writing that is going to be essential in high school and college and life," Avallone said.

Avallone flagged the gender gap as the biggest problem uncovered on the test.

Only 28 percent of boys scored at the proficient level, compared with 49 percent of girls. Nationally, the figure was 20 percent for boys and 41 percent for girls.

"That, I think, is a significant gap at the higher level of performance," Avallone said.

The latest figures show progress since 1998, the last time Colorado eighth-graders took a NAEP writing test. Colorado students improved by an average of 10 points on a scale that runs from 0 to 300.

The Colorado average for 2007 was 161 on the 300-point scale. The national average was 154.

A score of 173 is considered "proficient." Scores between 114 and 172 are "basic," while scores above 224 are "advanced."

In Colorado, 13 percent scored below basic, compared with 18 percent nationwide.

Only 2 percent of Colorado students were advanced, the same as the national average.

Colorado students may have outperformed other states because writing is tested annually under CSAP, said Pam A. Sandoval, the Colorado Education Department official who coordinates NAEP testing.

"We always want to see more improvement," Sandoval said.

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2007 national writing test

Colorado eighth-graders scored above the national average on the writing exam given by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Colorado National average* average

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All students

161 154

*

White

170 162

*

Black

145 140

*

Hispanic

142 141

*

Asian

173 166

*

American Indian

NA 143

*

Male

152 144

*

BRUCE RANDOLPH MODEL

‘Innovative’ school bill gets initial House OK

A bill that lets innovative schools waive some state rules and parts of union contracts won approval Thursday in the House Education Committee.

Senate Bill 130 is modeled on the experience of Denver’s Bruce Randolph Middle School, which has seen significant academic improvement since the staff was given more authority over the school’s budget, work rules and hiring.

The bill, by Rep. Terrance Carroll, D-Denver, and Rep. Rob Witwer, R-Genessee, sets up a process by which the Colorado Board of Education can designate individual schools, groups of schools or whole districts as “innovative.” The measure requires approval by 60 percent of teachers before union rules could be waived.

The measure was approved 9-4, with some on the panel saying they’re not sure many schools elsewhere in the state share Denver’s labor situation.

Berny Morson

Denver Post
Friday, April 4, 2008

STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS STEADY SINCE '02

About a third of the nation's eighth-grade students, and roughly a quarter of its high school seniors, are proficient writers, according to nationwide test results released Thursday.

That proportion of students demonstrating writing proficiency is about the same as in 2002, when a similar exam was last given.

But the results of the latest test, given last year, also found modest gains by lower-performing students. Nearly nine students in 10 can demonstrate at least a basic achievement in writing, defined as partial mastery of the skills needed for proficient work.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress test was given to 140,000 eighth-graders and 28,000 12th-graders selected to form a representative sample of all students nationwide in the two grades.

Dropout rate “catastrophe”

Reach columnist David Harsanyi at 303-954-1255 or dharsanyi@denverpost.com.

According to a new study by America's Promise Alliance, 17 of the nation's 50 largest cities had high school graduation rates lower than 50 percent. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell, whose wife, Alma, chairs the alliance, calls it a “catastrophe.”

To fix the mess, education leaders have sprung into action. Yep, they're going to have meetings. Fifty state “summits,” where local

experts — you know, the ones who have reliably failed before — can chew the fat. And rest assured, teachers unions, the chief obstruction to progress, will seldom be mentioned by participants.

This catastrophe is predominantly about minority kids living in inner cities. Suburban schools perform well. Suburban parents have the ability to get involved — or to escape government-run schools altogether. Poor parents, most often, have no such luxury.

In Baltimore, one of the shoddiest systems in the free world, over 81 percent of public school students in suburbs graduate, yet only 34 percent in the city.

It may be even more than a generic “urban” crisis. According to Robert Balfanz, a Johns Hopkins University research scientist, there are approximately 2,000 high schools in 15 states that produce 50 percent of all the nation’s dropouts. He calls them “dropout factories.”

Either way, poverty is not new. Yet, dropout numbers, as well as proficiency in reading and math, have become increasingly problematic for poor students. More single-family households, more English-as-a-second-language kids and a lack of funding are cited by experts.

The urban areas most prominently featured in Alliance’s study — you may not be surprised to learn — are also ruled by teachers unions. And these unions are indefatigable in working against any parental choice or competition. Or, rather, funding candidates, from national office to school boards, to do the dirty work for them.

Teachers unions place culpability for education woes on a lack of funding and “cuts.” This is a myth. Obviously, schools could always benefit from an infusion of cash but, in most of the failing systems, funding per pupil is at an all-time high.

According to a study by the right-of-center Hoover Institution, in 1982 per-pupil spending was \$5,930 and rose 60 percent by 2000 to \$9,230 in inflation-adjusted dollars (in high-population districts, the number is far higher).

In Utah, a recent school-reform initiative failed after the National Education Association pumped \$3.1 million (allied groups even more) into a campaign to mislead voters. What the NEA never mentioned was that the proposed initiative would have increased per-pupil spending. The sin? It would have allowed parents to choose where they spent the money.

In America, you are free to choose your church, your hairdresser, your employer, your neighborhood ... yet you're prohibited, in most places, from picking a school for your kids. For parents in urban areas, this can prove tragic.

Tragedy or not, the NEA argues that less service and poor results are grounds for higher pay and enhanced benefits. Unfortunately, taxpayers have no way to reward high-performing teachers, even if they wanted to, as the collective spirit of unions shuns individual achievement.

The Hoover study found that less than 1 percent of teacher pay in 1982 was based on performance; by 2001, that figure had not changed. (Modest inroads have been made in this regard.)

In more than a dozen states, small-scale voucher programs, funded by private groups, have emerged. Elected Democrats in Milwaukee, Colorado, Washington, D.C., Newark and numerous

other municipalities are supporting choice programs over union cash.

These legislators are rare. And until there are more of them, neither 50 nor 5 million meetings will make a dent in the problem.

Yourhub.com

Thursday, April 3, 2008

Flamebot ranked number one in Colorado.

Contributed by: [Joyce Neufeld](#) on 4/1/2008

On Friday afternoon, March 28 the JFK robotics team was ranked 39th out of 42 teams in the First Robotics regional competition that was held at the University of Denver March 27-29. A programming error had led to the low ranking. Phil Neufeld, father of one of the team members, assisted with the programming issues and had the program loaded into the robot before the last two matches of the day. With the problem corrected the Commanders almost tripled their average points per game jumping their ranking up to 22nd.

The Commanders, along with teams from Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Denver School of Science and Technology, East, CEC, and Montbello, were battling against teams from as far away as Florida with sponsors such as NASA, Ball Aerospace, IBM, American Astronautical Society and Lockheed Martin. The entire competition was a David versus Goliath frenzy. The regional competition is the prelude to the national competition that will be held in April in Atlanta, Georgia. Only the number one ranked alliance attends the national competition. On the second

day of competition the top eight teams choose two partners from the entire field of teams for the final three rounds of the competition, everyone else is eliminated. The Commanders were chosen by the number two-seeded Alliance, which included two teams from Missouri. This Alliance of three teams won their best two out of three series in both the quarterfinals and semi-finals in four games. In the finals, the Commanders Alliance competed hard against the number one seeded alliance consisting of teams from Wisconsin, Florida, and Texas. With an incredible show of heart and determined play during their final loss, they held the opposing Alliance to half their usual points per game. The Kennedy Commanders finished as the number two Alliance in the Region, and the highest ranked team from the State of Colorado. Kennedy's robot - named "Flamebot" for the distinctive flame pattern on its bumpers was recognized for its strength, speed, agility and the driver's excellent defensive strategy.

Teams are given only six weeks to build and test their robots prior to packing them up until the competition. Each year a different task is assigned. This year the robots were tasked to lift a three foot ball off an overpass six foot high, herd it around a track and either launch the ball over the overpass or place it back onto the overpass for bonus points. Kennedy built their robot to push the ball off the overpass and herd it around the track. Some teams built bots only to go around the track and run defensive maneuvers. Kennedy's team members spent three to four hours a day after school and up to eight hours each weekend beginning in January through February 19 building their bot. This is the fourth competition that Kennedy has entered and has made it to final match rounds three times.

The student team members were Gabe Rios (driver), Shawn Collins (co-pilot), Andy Neufeld (Capitan), Brandon Bender, Nick Lieu, Bobby Darrow, Thomas Williams, Teetima Chaimanee, Evan Villereal, Phat Luong, Liz Hayes, and Porsche Castillo. A special thanks to Ted Zeiger and Jeremy Green of Pearl Development, Ezra Boman from Lockheed Martin and Phil Neufeld from Polycom Inc. for their help and guidance. All are professional engineers who volunteered their time to work with these great students. Thank you to John F. Kennedy High School Principal Jeannie Peppel and Denver Public Schools for their continued financial

support. Thanks to Scott Springer, Executive Director - Post Secondary Pathways, Career Technical Education and Arts for his support. Thank you to Paul Jasinowski, Steve Rounds and Kevin Lindaur, Kennedy Science teachers for their help and supervision.