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Web sites can help parents find valuable information on schools

By Katherine Boehret
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Education — an issue that affects everyone in one way or another — is an ideal candidate for discussions on the Web.

There, parents, students and teachers can ask questions under the cloak of Internet anonymity, which enables conversations about personal topics such as learning disabilities and teacher conflicts.

But the vastness of the Internet can leave people wondering where to begin, especially when it comes to sensitive questions about education. And, even in a sea of discussions and forums on education, parents are often hungry for one piece of information above all else: data that help them select a school for their children.

So last week I tried three education-related Web sites that dedicate some or all of their resources toward providing free school comparisons, including demographics, test results, teacher-to-student ratios, and percentages of students eating free and reduced-price lunches.

I performed various school queries using Education.com Inc., GreatSchools Inc.'s GreatSchools.net and School-Matters.com by typing in a ZIP code, city, district or school name.

Overall, GreatSchools and Education.com offered the most content-packed environments, loading their sites with related articles and offering community feedback on education-related issues by way of blog posts or surveys.

And though GreatSchools is 10 years older than Education.com, which made its debut in June, the latter has a broader variety of content and considers its SchoolFinder feature — newly available — just a small part of the site.

Both Education.com and GreatSchools.net base a good portion of their data on information gathered by the Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics, the government entity that collects and analyzes data related to education.

SchoolMatters.com, a service of Standard & Poor's, is more bare-bones, containing quick statistical comparisons of schools.

This site gets its content from various sources, including state departments of education, private research firms, the Census and National Public Education Finance Survey. This is evidenced by lists, charts and pie graphs that would make Ross Perot proud.

I learned about where my alma mater high school got its district revenue in 2005: 83 percent was local, 15 percent was state and 2 percent was federal. But I couldn't find district financial information for more recent years on the site.

All three sites base at least some school-evaluation results on test scores, a point that some of their users criticize. Parents and teachers, alike, say that testing doesn't always paint an accurate picture of a school and can

be skewed by various unacknowledged factors, such as the number of students with disabilities.

Education.com's SchoolFinder feature is starting with roughly 47,000 schools in 10 states: California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, New Jersey and Georgia.

In about two months, the site hopes to have data for all states, totaling about 60,000 public and charter schools.

Sunday, April 6, 2008

Speakout

Schools overload on incident reports

Elizabeth Rodriguez

Sunday, April 6, 2008

Is Denver's Human Services leaving child welfare decisions too much in the hands of the public schools? It appears so. In "Schools Vigilant on Child Welfare," Denver Post reporter Christopher N. Osher explains that Human Services officials are trying to develop referral guidelines for public school administrators to follow in cases of possible abuse or neglect. In the past there has been both overreaction to minor incidents in schools as well as underreporting of dangerous situations. Osher notes that since a Denver Public Schools administrator was prosecuted for failure to report an incident in a timely manner, the amount of school-reported referrals increased up to 55%. It appears that schools administrators are nervously reporting non-serious cases to social workers because prosecutors seem to want them to report just about everything. The real victims in this situation, however, are the children who either need help and are overlooked or are traumatized unnecessarily when involved in some minor childish infraction. To improve the situation, what is needed is on-site Human Services social workers, not new bureaucratic guidelines. The current Denver Public School counselors are lacking the authority and autonomy to decide if a case warrants Human Services intervention.

Only individuals trained as social workers are equipped to make decisions when dealing with sensitive issues amongst children. Handing a school

administrator a thick pamphlet of new guidelines on when to issue referrals will only continue to cause more confusion and delays. Osher writes that two five year olds were reported to child-welfare investigators after they kissed on the playground. In another incident a 6 year old boy was investigated by police for telling a 6 year old girl that she had a “sexy booty.” In these scenarios, an on-site social worker could have immediately addressed the issue and dealt with teacher complaints without opening a case report and embarrassing the child and family. As a mother of a 12 year old, the last thing I want is for him to be investigated by police or Human Services just because he got caught being curious and kissing a girl. Unfortunately, schools will continue to struggle with these non-dangerous incidents if administrators, counselors, and teachers are encouraged to act like social workers without proper training.

Proper training for social workers begins with a rigorous background in education and experience. In the article “Making a Difference,” the state of Georgia not only requires for their social workers to possess a master’s degree, but they must also serve two years of post-master’s supervised school social work experience, as well as a passing score on the Social Work Component of the National Teacher Examination. In comparison to Colorado’s requirements after conducting a telephone interview with Mike Johnson, Director of Human Resources for the St. Vrain District in Colorado, points out that to work as a social worker in the state of Colorado, one must have a master’s degree in school education or social worker, a Colorado Department of Education License, and a 16 weeks internship program completed at the school level of choice for example: elementary, middle or high school level. A teachers or school administrator may be just as well educated however, the difference is while teachers are trained to report, social workers are trained to handle everything. This reiterates my point of lesser referrals and legal complications.

This past winter, Mrs. Veltze, a middle school principal was prosecuted and charged with a misdemeanor count of failure to report an allegation of child neglect in a timely manner. A 13 year old girl was fondled by two of her classmates when the teacher turned away for a brief moment (Osher). He adds that the incident was immediately brought to Mrs. Veltze’s attention who, like most principals would have done, tried to solve the matter themselves by suspending the two young males involved and contacting the victim’s mother to advise her of the plans to follow up with Restorative Justice. The enraged mother contacted law enforcement and pressed charges. She felt that the school did not take the right approach in handling the situation.

Fortunately, this particular case raised flags for all public schools across the country to make them aware of the penalty of not reporting. Now, officials are overwhelmed with referrals and are looking for ways to give limited control back to the administrators accompanied with a “how to pamphlet”. I don’t think so.

The Human Service Department lacks accountability for their actions, either they want administrators to report or not. You can’t mandate what is acceptable through a pamphlet, every case will be different. In “Report Finds Holes in the City’s Child-Protection Safety Net” The Rocky Mountain News, Ann Imse, reports that the Denver Department of Human Services is working on hiring over sixty-five employees to make the services better and give each individual case the importance it deserves.

That’s a great start but placing them throughout Denver’s public schools is better.

Elizabeth Rodriguez is a resident of Firestone.

Saturday, April 5, 2008

Two, four, six, eight, who do we appreciate . . . scholars!

Students rally for good grades at North High

By Nancy Mitchell, Rocky Mountain News (Contact)

Saturday, April 5, 2008

Denver's North High School gym reverberated Friday with the cheers and applause typical of pep rallies, although there was little typical about this one.

No athletes in uniform, though the cheerleaders were.

No coaches with whistles, just teachers in shirts advertising alma maters of Yale and Oklahoma State.

No balls or bats of any kind, because the muscle on display was academic and not athletic.

"Are you ready for our first academic pep rally?" Principal JoAnn Trujillo-Hays asked hundreds of students at the recently renamed North High School Institute for World Learning.

"I love all the cheering," she said when they roared back, "because the children receiving the awards are so deserving of cheering."

Perhaps the applause wasn't quite as raucous as that afforded the school's athletes. Perhaps not all of the school's 1,080 students stuck around on a sunny Friday afternoon to high-five over high grade point averages.

But when a school is trying to remake its image and refocus on academics, sometimes the form comes first and the buy-in comes a bit later.

"Johnny Alvarado," Trujillo-Hays said, reading off the names of every student with a grade point average of 3.0 or above.

Alvarado, a junior with a GPA of 3.9 out of 4.0, bounced off his bleacher seat with a smile and picked up his certificate. Not too eager, because he is also a cool mid-fielder on the varsity soccer team and he's heard the "nerd" label.

"I ignore it," he said.

Not every student does. One boy refused to go get his award and sent a friend instead. He also declined to talk about the honor after the rally.

Altogether, nearly a quarter of North students met the 3.0 or above mark. Some far exceeded it, including senior Norma Bonilla whose 4.0 helped win entry to prestigious universities.

Bonilla is trying to decide between offers from Stanford University and Wellesley College. Her class standing is surpassed only by Ed Ndikumana, who will be attending another Ivy school, Columbia University.

Ndikumana is North's valedictorian this spring; Bonilla is salutatorian.

"Nobody can tell you what you're capable of," said Bonilla, who has braved the "nerd" label in her 12 years in DPS.

Ndikumana, too, has paid little attention to the gibes.

The teen grew up in Burundi until civil war forced his family into refugee camps in Tanzania.

"We went to school under the trees," he said. "You have to use what you have."

He came to America six years ago knowing little English. This school year, he's taking five Advanced Placement college prep classes.

"Whatever you do, do it the best you can," Ndikumana advises other students.

Friday, as academic honors were doled out in between cheerleading routines and a drumline performance, some said the rally represents a shift in culture for North.

"This is a big deal," said Jennifer Draper Carson, the northwest Denver mom hired by North to spread the word about changes at the school. "It is a big change to be called out for doing well."

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NewsWithViews.com

Monday, April 7, 2008

THE CAUSE OF EDUCATIONAL CRISIS IN ARERICA

By Frosty Wooldridge
April 7, 2008
NewsWithViews.com

Last week, many of you listened to ABC, CBS and NBC report on horrific educational failures in our major cities. Detroit, Michigan schools tallied a phenomenal 76 percent of their students as dropouts before graduating from high school.

Chicago, Atlanta, New York, Los Angeles, Houston, Denver and many other cities feature from 50 to 60 percent dropout rates. Three years ago as reported by the Rocky Mountain News in "What Happened?" the dropout rate hit the ceiling at 67 percent in Denver Public Schools.

Denver Post journalist, David Harsanyi addressed our national tragedy, but didn't dig far enough into the problem to reveal the source. Harsanyi 'failed' as a journalist to study the 'core' reason for those failures across the nation. Harsanyi stands with thousands of American journalists that fail to connect the dots on the big 'why' of this national educational predicament.

As a professional journalist and a teacher, I launch where Harsanyi dropped off. I'll try to 'teach' and mentor Harsanyi to do thorough journalistic work. To give you an example of why Denver suffers incredible educational consequences, we must investigate deeper. You may examine these facts as to that Rocky Mountain News report and my teaching experiences reveal:

* Denver Public Schools and Colorado schools suffer over 20,000 to 30,000 illegal alien children along with an estimated 10,000 legal immigrant children at a cost of \$654.1 million annually according to "Breaking the Piggy Bank: How Illegal Immigration Sends Schools into the Red" (Source: FAIRUS.ORG broken down by state).

* DPS suffers 43 different languages that make it impossible to educate our children. (and theirs)

* One in five teachers quits or transfers out of DPS each nine month cycle because the chaos in the classroom exceeds their futility threshold.

* Classrooms suffer ethnic tension, racial bias and violence.

* Good and marginal Colorado students suffer as time and allocations go to illegal alien and legal immigrant children such as ESL classes.

* Illegal alien children siphon funds from our kids via free breakfasts and lunch programs. We educate Mexico's children in deference to our own as well as feed them.

* We displace and dumb-down our courses to the lowest academic denominator that prevents Colorado students from pursuing a first class education paid for in taxes by their parents.

* Up to half our Colorado students, because of a marginal high school education caused by the aforementioned points, must take remedial classes in order to ramp-up to academic requirements at the college level.

Please note that every American city suffers commensurate educational failures depending on the number of legal and illegal immigrants. Quality education cannot succeed by injecting 2.5 million legal and illegal immigrants into the United States annually. Those immigrants originate from third world countries where illiteracy dominates.

Those examples illustrate the lose-lose situation for our Colorado and American students across this nation. As a teacher who taught in the ghetto (PC= inner city), I can assure you that our kids don't stand a chance against illegal alien-filled classrooms. You may extend that across the nation where an estimated four million illegal children and babies born here that received instant citizenship overwhelm our educational systems.

Their parents remain illiterate in their own languages and illiterate in English. Thus, our educational systems cannot succeed. As you heard from the national reports, our educational system, once the envy of the world, fails stupendously.

What does it mean in the long run? It means 1.2 million young people, as told by Brian Williams of NBC, hit the streets annually with little ability to read, write or speak correctly, i.e., functionally illiterate. It means millions of unwed mothers

birthing babies that immediately go on welfare to further the cycle of poverty, illiteracy, despair and drugs. It means young men locked into the lowest rung on the employment ladder. Others digress into drugs, crime and violence. It means our prisons overflow with more hopeless lives.

How can we solve our educational, linguistic and social dilemma? We must initiate a 10 year moratorium on all legal and illegal immigration. We need to stop the unrelenting and unending flow of over two million legal and illegal immigrants annually. Otherwise, we add more immigrant children that throws more gasoline onto our educational house that burns out of control.

Here's a question: what if we continue ignoring this national tragedy?

Journalist Mike Folkerth said, "Ignore what? The fact that this past January 1st, the first of 78 million Americans began the longest and largest retirement in history? And that this baby-boomer retirement line is 17 years long? That Medicare will pay out more than it takes in this year? The fact that America cannot mathematically grow out of what the Dallas Fed President reported last week is a \$99.2 trillion unfunded debt?"

"Or maybe the fact that food prices including rice skyrocket as shortages appear around the world! Or that the US is running out of water? Or that oil reserves are diminishing and fuel costs are rising at an unprecedented rate?"

"So what's so hard to ignore about a little immigration? After all, we can use the Calcutta, India and Mexico City master plan to deal with it."

Final note: I am looking for thinkers, writers and advocates to add to my monthly "Master Mind Think Tank." In reality, our politicians create the problems that they campaign to solve. They never solve them; thus we spiral into deeper national chaos. I need new ideas and new creative thinkers to help me bring our most pressing issues onto the front burner. As you know, the recent PEW report shows immigration adding 100 million people

to our country in 30 years. We need to stop it and we need to stop it now. Join me in saving our civilization. frostyw@juno.com

Listen to Frosty Wooldridge on Tuesdays and Thursdays as he interviews top national leaders on his radio show "Connecting the Dots" at republicbroadcasting.org at 6:00 PM Mountain Time. Adjust tuning in to your time zone.

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