



An example for other schools

Science charter living up to its billing

August 31, 2005

How many more parents would choose Denver Public Schools for their children if more Denver public schools were like the Denver School of Science and Technology?

News columnist Tina Griego painted a glowing picture of the year-old charter school's opening days last week, as a new freshman class got its first introduction to the school's culture of high academic expectations in an atmosphere of personal integrity and mutual respect.

On the evidence of its first round of state testing, the school seems to have hit on a formula for success. It was first in math among all DPS schools, and second in reading after the Denver School of the Arts, which is the only DPS school to earn a ranking of "excellent" from the state.

So why aren't other schools doing what obviously works?

The facile answer is, "it's a charter," and charter schools are supposed to lead the way in demonstrating successful new models. Others might point out that it received additional monetary help from private donors and foundations. But a more serious answer is that existing policies and institutions effectively prevent other schools from following the charter's lead.

One clear difference is that the head of a charter school has far more autonomy than a principal in a traditional school. Charter heads can hire a staff of their own choosing, to ensure teachers are committed to the school's philosophy.

At the science and technology school, teachers are on one-year contracts (we note that is still more job security than most employees in the private sector enjoy) and if their performance is below par they shouldn't expect to be rehired.

Does that sound harsh? Remember, a child's whole life will be affected by the quality of his or her teachers. Shouldn't the child's welfare be paramount?

Of course giving principals authority to hire and fire staff is not the way the district's teacher contract is structured now. Everything about hiring and firing of teachers is centralized, meaning principals have "responsibility but no power," as David Ethan Greenberg, DSST's founder, puts it. And it is hard to hold people accountable if they have little control over the factors that make the difference between success and failure.

When the Denver Commission on Secondary School Reform issued its report in March, one of its chief recommendations was to move away from that centralized model. We endorsed that idea, while recognizing that it couldn't happen everywhere all at once. Many principals would need training in a different set of skills.

In fact, Superintendent Michael Bennet has said that he believes principals are the key to successful school reform, and he said last week that he would be raising private money for a leadership academy.

As more principals acquire the necessary skills, some traditional schools could begin to negotiate performance contracts, as charter and contract schools do now. If, under those contracts, they could begin to approach the results of a school like DSST, that would be powerful evidence that the current system hinders academic performance, and needs fundamental restructuring.