

**Dan Haley**  
**MAKING HIGH SCHOOL BETTER**  
**High Schools Need Change**

By [dhaley@denverpost.com](mailto:dhaley@denverpost.com)

Dan Haley

Denver Post Staff Writer

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With more than 100 ninth-graders, teachers and staff encircling her, Cathy Brosius pushed back her shoulders, took a deep breath and began The Long Walk.

The art teacher was asked to walk around the "community circle" and recite each person's name. The Long Walk, as it's known at Denver's School of Technology and Science, is part memory game and part community-forming exercise.

The circle typically begins each day at this new high school - a school that's anything but typical. If you're late to the community circle - student or teacher - you must apologize to the community. At this school, accountability starts the day.

If you're suspended, you must apologize to the community, and they'll vote on whether to let you back in. There's responsibility at this school.

Bill Kurtz, whose title is "head of school," says the DPS charter school in the emerging Stapleton neighborhood has two themes: high academic standards to ensure every student is ready for college and a community obligation that provides students with a sense of responsibility to their friends and their community.

Denver's School of Technology and Science is high school as you've never seen it. But it could become the model for future high schools as reform finally hits secondary schools in Colorado, and across the country.

There's no bullying (both administrators and students claim there hasn't been one verbal or physical altercation since the school opened last fall); there's intensive homework (about 2 1/2 hours per night); and demanding coursework (Homer's "Odyssey" and physics for ninth-graders).

The school knows no ethnic or economic boundaries. At the most diverse high school in Denver, with 70 percent of its students ethnic minorities, everyone is pushed to accomplish the same lofty goals.

For decades, American high schools have not fundamentally changed. But after two decades of sweeping changes to elementary schools, from standards to testing to teacher qualifications, reform finally has come to high schools.

What's taken so long?

"Changing a high school culture is like herding cats," said Patricia Hayes, a University of Colorado regent and member of the Colorado Commission for High School Improvement.

Adults are sometimes reluctant to change high school because it's part of the social fabric of America, from Friday night football games to proms.

When it was first proposed to divide Manual High School into three smaller schools to help student achievement, some Denver school board members fretted over athletics and school dances. Would they have three proms or one?

Be prepared for more of those conversations. With high school achievement static across the country, there's growing momentum for some monumental change. And in Colorado, where one in four college freshmen needs to take remedial courses - costing taxpayers \$15 million a year - and 30 percent of today's ninth-graders never graduate, something needs to be done.

For now, the reform movement here has taken the form of two reports: the Colorado Commission for High School Improvement, which was released by the Colorado Children's Campaign last month, and the Denver Commission on Secondary School Reform, which will be released later this month.

Both call for rethinking high schools.

Smaller schools. Fewer courses, but longer hours. More teacher-student interaction. More control for schools.

The Colorado Children's Campaign study endorses more adult mentoring. Even if it's the janitor at school, students need someone who cares about them and wants to see them succeed.

At many big high schools, students see their guidance counselors once, maybe twice, a year. The average counselor sees 225 students.

At DSST, which eventually will enroll about 425 students, students interact with their advisers an average of 10 times per week, since teachers also act as advisers.

And remember the community circle? Before the school day even began, each student was addressed by name by Brosius, a positive adult contact, and they stood among their "advisory groups."

Both reports also call for giving school principals more authority, and more flexibility with their budgets and their hiring.

Kurtz hand-picked his staff at DSST, choosing people already sold on the school's principles. He can ask them to work late to tutor students and can fire them if it's not working out.

The reforms called for in the reports are seismic for a reason. "It's hard to change a high school or slightly tweak it," said Van Schoales, executive director of the Colorado Small Schools Initiative. "The culture has a way of eating reforms."

Schoales predicts the reform wave sweeping over the country will be realized first at urban schools, where expectations aren't being met. Suburban schools with decent graduation rates will resist any change.

Whatever becomes of the DPS report, it likely won't impact 14-year-old Chloe Rankin, who has found a home at DSST.

She's enrolled in a pre-collegiate program at the University of Colorado and dreams of attending UCLA someday. In the meantime, she relies on the school's expansive support system to juggle her rigorous academic course load and three hours of homework each night while helping to care for her brother, sister and grandmother.

"They push you more" at DSST, Rankin said. "They give you more homework but they're more available after school" to help.

DSST is still in its infancy, so it's an unproven model. But if education leaders follow these two reports, there will be more schools like it in Colorado's future. It's worth a shot.

*Dan Haley is a member of the Denver Post editorial board.*