

Failing kids offered a way back - Catch-up classes put ninth-graders on road to diploma

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In the middle of lessons about math concepts - median and mean, mode and range - life can intrude at Bruce Randolph School in north Denver.

For one boy, it's the bullet he caught in the leg in a gang fight. For a girl, it's finding a dress for her quinceanera party.

But the reason a student is missing on a recent morning is neither as dramatic as gunshots nor as frivolous as shopping.

"He's still at work," a sibling tells two Bruce Randolph teachers who knock on the door of the family's home.

It's a little after 9 a.m. on a Thursday in early June, and most 15-year-olds are still savoring the absence of the alarm for school.

But this student, his teachers have learned, often works the 4 a.m. to 1 p.m. shift with his father.

He tries to get off at 8 a.m. for summer school - time to get home for a quick shower - but sometimes, he runs late.

Still, he shows up, as do most of the 21 students enrolled in Bruce Randolph's summer school.

It may be the teachers' morning home visits to offer a ride, their frequent phone calls, the promise of snacks such as red hot Cheetos.

Or it may be that the teens - all are ninth-graders who failed at least one required class - realize they have a rare chance to get back on track for graduation.

"I gave up; I never thought I would raise my grades," said the boy who works overnight. "Since they made this program, I started coming. If I pass this, I'll be in the 10th grade next year. That's why I come. I don't want to be a high school dropout."

The beginning of failure

About one in five students in Denver Public Schools falls behind during **freshman** year of high school, a **Rocky Mountain News analysis** found.

That means they've failed enough required courses that they have to repeat ninth-grade classes as sophomores.

It also can mean the beginning of high school failure. The **Rocky analysis** found that 49.5 percent of the **freshmen** who fell behind ended up dropping out.

Taylor Betz, a math teacher at Bruce Randolph, said falling behind can be shocking for students used to being passed from grade to grade.

"In **DPS**, kids are told if they're not passing in first through eighth grades, they'll be held back," Betz said. "But then they're passed anyway."

High school is "the first time they really have to acquire a certain number of class credits," she added. "They don't understand it, and they somewhat don't believe it. The system kind of fools them."

DPS policy is unusual in the metro area in that it explicitly requires parents to give their permission to hold their children back a grade - until they reach high school.

Then, students are required to accumulate a certain number of courses to move up a grade.

It's unclear how many **DPS** students are recommended for retention every year. Principals are supposed to file letters in those students' files but **DPS** doesn't collect the data.

At Bruce Randolph, Principal Kristin Waters and her staff recommended that 50 to 55 students in grades six, seven and eight this past year repeat those grades. The parents of seven students agreed.

Crackdown suggested

DPS' reform map, the Denver Plan, calls for a review of the retention policy and suggests cracking down in the "key transition years" of grades two, five and eight.

But the proposed timeline for the change - school board approval in August 2006 - has come and gone.

"I think the board has probably had a general concern that we really don't hold our kids back," said board President Theresa Pena.

Still, "until the district has a curriculum and staff training and a real program of alternatives, until the district offers something dramatically different," she said, "we can't."

What's the point of holding students back, Pena asked, if they're going to do the same thing over?

Revising the retention policy is among "a whole list of strategies and related policy changes dependent upon when we can afford it," she said.

So Bruce Randolph, on its own, will try something different when students return in August.

Teachers are writing out the big concepts or "power standards" to clearly explain to students and parents what's required in each subject and grade.

Struggling students will get help after school and on Saturdays, starting in September. By school year's end, if students have not mastered the standards, they will not be passed on - even if their parents disagree.

Waters said the change is being written into the agreements parents and students sign each fall. "The days of cruising and not doing anything are over," she said.

The choices are few

Bruce Randolph already is doing something different for its **freshmen** who failed classes this past school year.

But only one other school - Montbello High School - is offering a "credit recovery" summer program aimed at catching its own students up to grade level.

The few other **DPS** summer programs for high schoolers focus on older students, such as an Emily Griffith Opportunity School program targeting seniors in need of a class or two for their diplomas.

In addition, **DPS** is offering new "Ninth Grade Transitional Academies" to boost the skills of about 2,600 incoming **freshmen** this fall.

But the choices are few for wannabe high school sophomores.

Waters said the Bruce Randolph session was born out of the realization that she could not offer enough **freshmen** classes this fall for those who failed.

"The goal is to make sure tenth- graders start as tenth-graders," she said.

Of the 122 students who began last fall, 21 failed classes they needed to become sophomores.

Those students were invited - nagged, in some cases - to an intensive summer school session that started June 4 and wraps up Friday.

It's not a repeat of a semester-long course; instead, students must show they understand the major concepts in the subject they previously failed.

Virtually all of the students are retaking math. So they work through a series of lessons in each of 15 to 20 major concepts.

"It's broken down to, here are the mathematical concepts you need to have in the ninth grade," Betz said.

As of Wednesday, 18 students had caught up to grade level and one was still working on it. Two students were no-shows, including a boy whose family appears to have left for the summer to work in Wyoming.

Individual attention

For Angie Hernandez, 15, the difference in the summer session is a student-teacher ratio of 2-to-1. "I started failing math in the eighth grade," Hernandez said, "and then I got to ninth grade and realized it was harder."

If she didn't understand a problem, she quit. Her teacher "couldn't stay with me," she said, "she had other people to help."

For teachers, too, the session allows the kind of individual attention impossible in a regular classroom.

"Can you imagine if we could do this during the year?" teacher Lisa Yemma said to another.

It means teachers Patrick Millican and Glenton Muller can drive each morning to the homes of students who might need a ride or who've missed a day.

It means time for calls home to convince boys with gunshot wounds that they need to come back to school. It means trying to convince moms that dress shopping can wait until after summer school is over.

It means Muller can call the boy who works overnight every half hour to make sure he's on his way.

"He's taking a shower?" he said last Thursday after the home visit. "Tell him Mr. Muller called. If he wants me to pick him up, call me back at this number.

"Tell him I'm waiting for him."

INFOBOX

Bruce Randolph School

3955 Steele St.

* Enrollment: 656, grades 6 through 9

* Demographics: 84 percent Hispanic, 14 percent black, 2 percent white; 98 percent qualify for federal lunch assistance.

* Academics: Once among the lowest performing middle schools in Colorado, Bruce Randolph

is in the midst of an ambitious reform plan.

* Led by Principal Kristin Waters, Bruce Randolph is transitioning from a middle school, grades 6-8, to a school serving grades 6 through 12, adding one grade per year.

Falling behind in high school Fewer than four out of five students in Denver Public Schools are still at grade level after their first year of high school, according to a **Rocky Mountain News analysis** . The number left behind grows each year until the students become seniors. This may be because students who are behind decide to leave school altogether:

* PERCENTAGE STILL AT GRADE LEVEL, BY YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL

Group **Freshman** Sophomore Junior Senior

* All 98% 79% 72% 76%

* Anglo 99% 90% 87% 91%

* Black 98% 81% 73% 77%

* Hispanic 98% 73% 64% 68%

* Anglo male 98% 86% 84% 89%

* Anglo female 99% 93% 91% 92%

* Black male 98% 77% 68% 73%

* Black female 99% 85% 78% 80%

* Hispanic male 97% 72% 61% 66%

* Hispanic female 98% 76% 68% 73%

* What this means: Falling behind appears to be linked to dropping out of school altogether. Of those students who fell behind as **freshmen** :

49.5% later dropped out of **DPS**

29% later transferred out of **DPS** 19% were still in high school after four years

2.4% graduated on time within four years

Source: **Rocky Mountain News Analysis** Of Denver Public Schools' Data. The **Analysis** Tracked All Eighth-Graders In Fall 2001 Through Their Expected Graduation Dates.