

## **Half of teachers at North will be shown the door - Superintendent says cleansing can save school**

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Stuart Steers, Rocky Mountain News

Denver's effort to reform its public schools hit North High School like a hurricane Friday, when students learned that half of their teachers would not be returning in the fall.

The news upset many students, as well as their teachers, but DPS administrators said drastic action is needed to save North.

"We had 19 community meetings to have a conversation about North," said Michael Bennet, superintendent of DPS. "We heard loud and clear that the school needed to have a fresh start."

Last year Bennet decided to close Manual High School because of low test scores and a sky-high dropout rate. That move proved controversial, and some feared a similar fate might befall North. Instead, Bennet has undertaken a "redesign" of the school, bringing in a new principal - JoAnn Trujillo-Hays - with orders to turn North upside down.

As part of the reform, all of the 68 teachers at North were required to reapply for their jobs. Sixteen chose not to interview, 18 interviewed and were not offered positions, and 34 were rehired. That means at least half of the faculty next year will be new.

North's enrollment has been shrinking for years and the school has one of the highest drop-out rates in DPS. Bennet said 733 ninth-graders enrolled in North in 2001; only 206 graduated four years later.

The school's test scores aren't much better. Last year, 400 ninth- and 10th-grade students at North were rated unsatisfactory in math; only 14 10th-graders were proficient.

Many parents believe North is overdue for a makeover.

"We have tried to do school reform there for a number of years and it just wasn't working," said Ricardo Martinez, co-founder of Padres Unidos (Parents United), a group of Hispanic parents. "They had to do something different."

But many teachers at North believe they're being blamed for things beyond their control.

"I think we're being scapegoated," said Lawrence Garcia, a math teacher who has been at North for three years and was not invited to come back next year. "I've been busting my butt for three years trying to raise scores."

Garcia is a DPS grad with a master's degree who wanted to work at North.

"I considered myself to be a role model, I wanted to work with students just like me," he said.

But Martinez said many North teachers had resisted change.

"From the beginning we met with resistance from the teachers," Martinez said. "People feel like teachers are taking the brunt of the redesign, but the students have been taking the brunt of failed schools for decades."

Trujillo-Hays said she had to take dramatic action to change things during the next school year.

"I know there will be a different culture at North," she said. "We'll build a climate based on what's best for students, not adults. We have to work collaboratively."

Some North students said they were sorry to see many of their teachers go.

"Some of them have been here 20 years and are leaving," said Alma Trvizo, a 16-year-old junior. "It's going to be weird. We'll graduate with teachers we don't know."

Ezequiel Galvan, 16, said he worried the teachers he knows best wouldn't be around to write letters of recommendation for college. He plans to study medicine and wants to become a paramedic.

Galvan said North's problems are not because of the teachers. "It's the students' fault, the ones that don't want to learn," he said.

Several DPS schools have now undergone redesign, which involves a massive change in staff. North is the only high school to be redesigned.

Kim Ursetta, the president of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association, questions whether the redesign process is an effective way to turn around schools.

"This dynamites the relationships between teachers and students and teachers and parents," Ursetta said. "It's devastating."

But Bennet said North must change or die.

"What I hope comes out of this is a flagship high school led by one of the best principals in the district with a staff that shares a common vision that leads to dramatically increased student achievement," Bennet said. "It will make it a better place to be a kid."