
lead·er·ship (noun)

It's the ingredient Rob Stein thinks is crucial to turning around troubled urban schools.

BY SARA VITASKA

As you watch Rob Stein work the halls at Denver's Manual High School, you know right away he's not the sort of principal who holes up in his office. With shirt sleeves rolled up and purpose in his step, he stops a freshman in the hallway for a chat. A few minutes later he's in an intense conversation with one of his teachers.

His enthusiasm, hands-on style and commitment to strong leadership are what's needed if Manual is ever again going to be one of the top high schools in this city. Manual shares the troubles of urban high schools in scores of American communities. It has struggled with freshmen who enter far below grade level in reading and math, dismal test scores, staggering dropout rates, and endemic gang violence and poverty.

Manual's challenges mirror statistics outlined in a recent report released by America's Promise Alliance, an educational advocacy group founded by retired general and former Secretary of State Colin Powell. The study found that only half (52 percent) of public school students in the 50 largest U.S. cities—Denver is 25th—graduate in four years. This sobering figure is well below the national average of 70 percent. Dropout rates are substantially higher for racial and ethnic minorities and males. The report acknowledges “a

movement is afoot” to better equip educators, legislators and the public with information to assess the severity of the graduation crisis, and points to some innovative efforts at the state and district levels to turn around low-performing schools.

Although Denver may seem an unlikely testing ground for how to turn around troubled urban high schools, larger cities with similar problems might be well-advised to see what kind of difference someone like Stein can make. His success or failure could determine whether this approach will be followed across the country.

REINVENTING MANUAL

Stein, who holds graduate degrees from Stanford and Harvard and is a 1978 graduate of Manual, does not just want to improve the school. He's trying to reinvent it—again. Manual was closed completely in 2006 because of low test scores and high dropout rates.

Stein believes an effective principal, one who can bring about and lead change, is a key ingredient in turning around low-performing schools and raising student achievement. His primary responsibility is student learning, he says, and he's committed to making it happen through finding and allocating resources, steering programs, nudging, coaching and nagging.

“Whatever it takes,” he says, and that includes offering students cash incentives for

taking the required state assessments.

“I have mixed feelings about incentives, but they work,” he says.

They certainly do. The entire student body showed up in March to take the Colorado Student Assessment Program test.

A GRADUAL DECLINE

Manual, Denver's oldest high school, was once a model of success, offering programs that produced Ivy League-bound students like Stein and graduates such as former Denver Mayor Wellington Webb and Chicano activist Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales. From the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, it was an esteemed school where students scored well on tests and excelled in athletics. It boasted a mix of middle-class white students, most of whom were bused in, and low-income minorities. When a federal court order ended busing in Denver in 1995, a new student population emerged that was predominately Hispanic immigrants. Test scores dropped, athletic success suffered and dropouts soared.

For the past decade, Manual has been a testing ground for school reform that's been watched around the nation. In 2001, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation poured nearly \$1 million into a program that divided Manual into three specialized schools, each with its own principal. The small-schools initiative—intended to fos-

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ter an intimate, small-school environment with high teacher-student engagement—was a failure, and similar efforts around the country met with mixed results.

In 2006, under new Superintendent Michael Bennet, Denver Public Schools closed Manual and promised to reopen it as a model high school in the fall of 2007. But it didn't happen without a fight. Bennet admitted that the district's decision to close Manual was "an admission of complete failure." The closing forced 558 students to enroll in other, higher performing district schools, and it drew national attention when *The New Yorker* published a lengthy piece and *BusinessWeek* ran a cover story.

Community members, mostly low-income African-American and Latino families, were outraged and there were accusations of racism. *The New Yorker* painted a vivid picture of the community unrest. They reported that clergy in the Denver area rallied community members to "stand up like Rosa Parks sat down," while the pastor of New Hope Baptist Church called Bennet and his allies "latter-day representatives of the Ku Klux Klan."

The school reopened in fall 2007 with just a freshman class of 163 students. The "new" Manual opened for its second year this fall with 311 students and was tied for fourth in a ranking of Denver's eight traditional high schools.

STATE ACTIONS

Stein's belief that effective principals are a key ingredient to education reform and raising student achievement is backed by research.

A 2004 landmark study commissioned by The Wallace Foundation found leadership to be second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to learning, especially in high-needs schools. The report also found that almost no schools had been turned around unless talented leaders took charge.

Legislatures are responding by passing legislation aimed at more effectively recruiting, preparing and supporting strong school principals. States are being more selective of principal candidates. They're redesigning and raising standards in their university-based principal preparation programs and, in some states, creating statewide leadership academies. They also are ramping up their licensure and certification requirements, creating strong partnerships between universities and school districts, and creating robust mentoring and induction programs.

Assessing the effectiveness of principals and looking at compensation and incentives also are part of the effort. In addition, states are starting to provide principals with more flexibility and authority over hiring, curriculum and budgets in exchange for increased performance and accountability.

"Autonomy is critical to creating a culture of excellence,"

Stein says.

"School leaders are the second most important factor in the public school environment when measuring student success," says Senator John Goedde, chair of the Senate Education Committee in Idaho. "Studies

A NEW CROP OF TEACHERS

Should those fortunate enough to receive an Ivy League education help out in our nation's underperforming schools?

Like Rob Stein, Wendy Kopp thinks so.

Kopp, who graduated from Princeton in 1989, wrote her thesis on how to best serve the nation's low-performing schools. She then turned it into a business plan to form the nonprofit organization Teach for America.

Her goal was to create a national teacher corps by recruiting talented people—from new college graduates to career business leaders—to serve two years in a low-income area with a high need for teachers. By serving in those areas, Kopp hoped, recruits would ultimately alter their careers and become education leaders.

Kopp's adviser thought the idea was ridiculous. But she persevered and Teach for America opened its doors in 1990. The program started with 500 recruits from across the country who went to work in seven low-performing schools. So far, Teach for America has placed 20,000 teachers who have influenced more than 3 million students in urban and rural America.

"I think this says we've tapped into something," said Kevin Huffman, executive vice president of Teach for America. "There is a desire among young people to serve."

New college graduates are among the largest group of recruits. Teach for America recruits on 100 college campuses and attracts a large pool of applicants from America's Ivy League schools. Huffman says close to 8 percent of the graduating classes at Princeton, Yale and Harvard applied to Teach for America in 2007. But, he adds, the program is picking up steam at several state universities, including the University of Michigan, and historically black colleges such as Morehouse and Spelman. Only 3 percent of applicants to Teach for America have been education majors.

Huffman says the fact that college seniors are choosing teaching in the inner city over other careers where they could make a lot more money "sends a pretty positive signal about the importance of teaching and education."

So how do these once-aspiring bankers, doctors and lawyers become certified teachers? They start by enrolling in an intense summer training program before they set foot in a classroom. While teaching, they also take graduate-level courses to become certified teachers. The program has exposed many fresh graduates to the classroom, though research indicates that to date it has not had a significant effect on improving student achievement in high-needs schools.

"We are getting them to view teaching and education as a unique leadership experience opportunity," Huffman says.

And Teach for America alums are staying the course; two-thirds of the inaugural 1990 class are still working or studying full time in education.

Huffman also points out that 10 percent of the principals in the Washington, D.C., area are Teach for America alums.

"We think that's pretty remarkable."

—Meagan Dorsch, NCSL



CYRUS MCCORMON/THE DENVER POST

Rob Stein, the principal of Manual High School.

have shown that the working environment is more responsible for teachers leaving the profession than salaries, and the school administrator is directly responsible for creating such a workplace."

State legislatures, Goedde says, "have a duty to taxpayers to see that their money is spent in the most efficient manner possible without interfering with local control."

In a practical sense, that means monitoring college education programs to be sure they're using the best practices in educating teachers and administrators, providing money for mentoring and creating incentives.

CHANGING ROLE

The role of the principal has changed vastly from the disciplinary figure many remember from their formative years. In today's complex school environment, principals are expected to be jacks of all trades—building and fiscal managers, discipline dynamos, data analysts, instructional leaders, fundraisers, community leaders, politicians and public relations specialists. They are expected to do all that while being held accountable for student academic success. In the No Child Left Behind era of increased accountability, principals are under increased public pressure to turn around low-performing schools and significantly improve student achievement.

Stein, picked in March 2007 to lead Manual's revival, is out of that new principal mold. He left his "cushy" job as headmaster at Graland Country



SENATOR

JOHN GOEDDE

IDAHO



Day School—a prestigious, college preparatory private K-9 school in Denver’s upscale Hilltop neighborhood—and took a pay cut of more than \$30,000 to run his alma mater.

He likens being a principal to a chief executive officer: Today’s school leaders, he says, must have a broad understanding of myriad skills, including resource allocation (monetary and human capital), management, adult development and cultivating leadership teams.

While Stein views instructional leadership as the core function of a school leader, he thinks principals must view themselves more like chief executives who are responsible for everything from “soup to nuts.”

“School leaders must understand and work with the community and acquire the political skills required to transform schools,” he says. This includes working closely with parents, teachers, school board members, district officials and community members to gain support and get things done.

This broad range of skills is important and learnable, but Stein doesn’t think our current principal preparation programs are up to the task.

“If principals are going to run autonomous schools,” he says, “they need more CEO skills, not just training on being an instruc-

tional leader.”

That includes giving principals significant leeway to make their own decisions, something Denver school officials and the local teachers association have given Stein, including a good deal of authority over hiring, curriculum and budgets.

Once the landmark agreement was reached, Bennet released a statement: “The board of education has stressed how important it is for us to give greater flexibility and autonomy, combined with accountability, to our schools, and this agreement is an important step forward toward those goals.”

Across town at the statehouse, the Colorado General Assembly passed The Innovative Schools Act of 2008, legislation sponsored by Senate President Peter Groff, to provide similar flexibility to schools across the state.

“There is a laundry list of things that impairs and impinges innovation in schools,” Groff said in an interview with *The Denver Post*. “The question we have to be asking is, ‘What is in the best educational interest of the child?’ ”

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

Stein, in his late 40s, brings a wealth of leadership experience, both in public and pri-

The Wallace Foundation, a private charitable foundation created by Lila and DeWitt Wallace, the founders of *Reader’s Digest*, has led a large-scale national effort to highlight the importance of high-quality leadership for student achievement. Since 2000, Wallace has invested more than \$200 million and worked directly with dozens of states, districts and researchers to develop and test ways to improve leadership and share the lessons broadly. NCSL has been a partner with Wallace to engage legislators and their staff in this national initiative.

vate schools. As Graland’s headmaster, Stein honed his fundraising, fiscal management, political, community development and governance skills.

“Graland was a great place to cultivate my own learning,” Stein says.

He learned how that school community functioned and how to build support. The first thing he did when he came to Manual was to raise money. This may seem a strange task for a public school principal, but Stein says it’s a job that needs to be done until the state legislature catches up with needed funding.

The national K-12 average per-pupil expenditure was \$9,154 per year in 2006, while Colorado’s per pupil spending was only about \$8,166. Although there are many opinions about how student spending affects academic achievement, most educators would agree that it costs more to educate students in low-performing urban schools than their peers in higher-performing suburban schools. Colorado, like every state, could use more money for education. But since more than half of the states are facing budget shortfalls for fiscal year 2009, increases in K-12 education funding are unlikely. Stein believes it’s up to principals to try to fill those gaps.

“It is obvious, when looking at per student funding levels across the nation, that simply



SENATE PRESIDENT
PETER GROFF
COLORADO

providing additional money is not a fix for education,” Goedde says. “I have seen huge successes in education in buildings that were below standard, where students took pride in overcoming adversity. Still, adequate funding of teachers and administrators is needed to attract good candidates to the field.”

Another key challenge for Stein is getting good data to help him track student progress and improve teaching and learning. He would like timely, valid, reliable and user-friendly instructional data, including frequent assessments in literacy and math, in addition to the current state assessments that take up to six months to be scored. Stein and his staff are also using attendance rates, which are an early indicator of progress; parental involvement, measured by contact with parents and their participation in conferences; and grades to track student progress.

Manual administered a reading assessment at the beginning of the 2007 school year and grouped students according to their ability to provide intensive support. Teachers are using their own benchmark tests to identify students who need intensive intervention in math.

In July, state test results revealed that stu-



CYRUS MCCRIMMON/THE DENVER POST

dents in Denver’s public schools made the greatest statewide gains in reading, writing and math in every grade.

Rob Stein with Denver Schools Superintendent Michael Bennet.

At Manual, where students on average started the school year four grade levels behind, only 29 percent of ninth graders were proficient or advanced in reading, 17 percent were proficient in writing, and 5 percent were proficient in math.

Stein acknowledges students were unlikely to reach remarkable proficiency rates last school year, but he points to some promising indicators of success. The attendance rate was 88 percent. Parental involvement was 75 percent, which Stein says was “very strong” for any public high school. This can be attributed, in part, to intense outreach, including door-to-door campaigning to engage students and parents. In addition, the percentage of honor roll students is increasing and the number of students not eligible to participate in extracurricular activities is decreasing.

As in medical research, Stein’s goal for Manual is “beating the odds.”

“If you have a new treatment that outperforms all other existing treatments, it’s a success, even if it isn’t a cure,” Stein says. “I’m confident we’ll outperform.”

CHECK OUT an interview with Idaho Senator John Goedde, chair of the Senate Education Committee, at www.ncsl.org/magazine.