

The Bruce Randolph Story

Changing Student Achievement by Changing How Schools Work

As part of its Teaching and Learning Initiatives, the Colorado Education Association (CEA) commissioned Progressive Promotions to document the successes achieved by the dedicated teachers and administrators at Bruce Randolph Middle School (BRMS) during the 2005-6 academic year.

Progressive Promotions conducted extensive interviews with School Board members, DPS officials, and BRMS staff to gather first-hand accounts of the strategies and tactics employed at BRMS that directly impacted student performance and improved achievement.

The collaboration between BRMS educational professionals (particularly the efforts of Principal Kristin Waters and Literacy Coach Chrisanne Lahue) and DPS created reforms that transformed the school's climate and led to significant improvements in academic performance.

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A School in Crisis

Just a year ago, Denver Public Schools' Bruce Randolph Middle School was in crisis. Serving low-income students—more than 93% of whom qualify for free or reduced price lunch—and staffed primarily by inexperienced teachers, student learning had taken a back seat to gang violence.

Conditions for kids and learning were abysmal. Teachers felt isolated and ineffective. Violence and bullying were common. Students were failing. No one had much hope.

While there were pockets of teachers and students trying to rise above the circumstances, the primary goal was to keep a lid on the simmering tensions at the school. Not surprisingly, the school earned an “unsatisfactory” rating on state school report cards two years in a row. Under Colorado law, Bruce Randolph was in danger of being shut down and converted to a charter school by the state.

A Plan for Change

State “takeover” of the local school was not an abstract threat. A very public effort by DPS officials to save neighboring Cole Middle School from a similar state takeover in 2004 had failed. Cole closed. And now the same fate awaited Bruce Randolph.

Fortunately, two talented and committed educators intervened to change what most thought inevitable.

Principal Kristin Waters and Teacher/Literacy Coach Chrisanne Lahue were enjoying great success at Capital Hill's Morey Middle School, having lifted the school's state rating from “low” to “high” in three short years. Yet that achievement was often dismissed by the public and DPS administration alike due to Morey's high-risk population being offset by the presence of the High Strides program and the Highly Gifted and Talented program.

Determined to prove themselves against all odds, Waters and Lahue got to work crafting their improvement plan for Bruce Randolph, incorporating what they knew worked with best practices promoted by the University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Learning—common vision, clear and universal expectations, careful planning and evaluation of teaching goals and a supportive professional development environment.

“Randolph was looking very dire,” Lahue remembers. “I had sat on the sidelines and watched Cole go down and thought that was really painful. So Kristin and I started to play around with what would we do with Bruce Randolph. At Morey, we instituted sound educational principles. And so we said let’s test these sound education principles at the one school that the state recognized as the least functional and most in-trouble school.”

They introduced the plan to then-Superintendent Jerry Wartgow in December of 2004, and soon developed it into a detailed 17-page document outlining all aspects of their intentions. Waters and Lahue viewed their document as nothing less than a challenge to the status quo at Bruce Randolph. A challenge to the administration to truly manage instead of bunkering down, to educators to impart knowledge and prove it has been absorbed, to students to rise to the task of learning and to the state that this school shouldn’t be given up on. They called the plan Challenge 2010, the year chosen to commemorate the anticipated graduation of the first set of students educated under it.

Amazing Progress

After just one year, DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet says with unbridled enthusiasm, “It’s really amazing what they’ve been able to do.”

All staff members, including administrators, teachers, clerical staff, custodians, parents and kids, are clear about academic and behavioral expectations. Educational best practices are faithfully implemented, grounded in a rigorous curriculum. Teachers are continually working on their practice, using student assessment data to focus their teaching on their students’ needs. The students themselves are aware of their own learning and can articulate what they know and what they need to work on. And not only have the constant discipline problems stopped, but the students actually confess that they look forward to coming to school.

Internal tests and assessments show remarkable growth among the seventh and eighth grade students. During the school year, average reading and writing scores soared:

- Seventh graders average reading scores more than doubled from an average of 9.47 to 21.27 (out of 30), and their writing tests rose from 1.51 to 2.95 (out of 4)
- Eighth graders average reading scores shot up from 10.18 to 23.53 (out of 30), and their writing tests increased from 1.94 to a 3.13 (out of 4)

Changing Student Achievement by Changing How Schools Work

Turning a school around in a year took nothing less than a complete sea change in the way schools are typically run, including an insistence on:

- Common vision and explicit staff commitment to a school environment fully dedicated to student achievement
- An empowering operating philosophy that allowed staff to focus on their part of maximizing student learning, from instituting meaningful teacher-driven professional development to eliminating tasks that distract from student achievement
- Consistent, defined academic, procedural and behavioral expectations, understood by everyone, including school staff, parents, the community and the students themselves
- Rigorous curriculum with high minimum standards in knowledge, problem-solving and reasoning, with fair and credible assessments geared to the standards
- Active student involvement in their own learning, including setting goals, learning self-monitoring and self-management strategies and evaluating their own efforts

Common Vision and Commitment

The staff's common vision is articulated simply: "Focus like a laser beam on student achievement."

Waters explains the key to Bruce Randolph's progress: "Everyone who signed up...believed in it and said I'm willing to do what it takes to be committed to having consistent expectations. That was the number one thing that really led to our success."

And while teachers and coaches were on the front lines, the shared responsibility didn't end with them. DPS School Board President Theresa Peña says what impressed her most was that "all the adults in the building, including custodians and clerical staff, believe in the potential of the kids to learn."

Math/Science Teacher and Coach Taylor Betz describes it this way: "I see it as one of those old Viking boats, every one is rowing exactly together, there isn't a lot of people banging paddles together. We have a picture of what it all should look like...it's written down, the vision, and everyone agrees to it, the administration, the teachers and the kids."

Leadership with an Empowering Operating Philosophy

The leadership team, made up of Waters, Lahue, Betz, Assistant Principal Cesar Cedillo, and Literacy Teacher and Coach Jennifer Swinehart, agree that their role was to entrust and empower the teacher-leaders to maximize student achievement.

Bruce Randolph's operating philosophy was consciously designed to eliminate the usual adversarial management-staff relationship and instead replace it with a supportive one. Harkening back to her Viking boat example, Betz explains, "You can't have everyone rowing all together if you don't have the people sitting in the front, both demanding and cheering you on, and not being critical, not saying 'What's the matter with you, #6,' but providing assistance."

Focusing on cooperation freed the leadership team to concentrate on attracting quality teachers; providing responsive and meaningful professional development and coaching; creating a supportive, collegial environment; and removing barriers and hindrances to teaching.

Staff Recruitment: "The team's number one goal was to recruit the best possible staff that we could," Lahue says. They sought a mix of veteran, mid-career and new teachers to create a vibrant community where teachers could learn not only from the coaches, but from each other as well.

Professional Development and Coaching: While every teacher wants to teach well, the fact that every child comes in with different knowledge and varying learning styles makes it a very challenging profession. Professional development and coaching tailored to specific classroom needs can help teachers improve their craft so students learn more.

But at many schools, professional development is a series of mind-numbing meetings that have no connection with real classrooms and kids, and coaching is a once-a-year, 15-minute observation captured on a standard written form. A lot of teachers will tell you that at best it's not very helpful, and at worst it's an egregious waste of their time.

The team at Bruce Randolph made a firm commitment to avoid that sort of "random, 'drive-by' professional development." Instead each coach agreed the goal was that teachers would be immediately ready to put into practice that which they learned in any coaching session.

The five members of the leadership team worked with teachers to find solutions to real-world teaching dilemmas in the classrooms, like how to effectively teach and evaluate reading comprehension of second-language learners, how to incorporate the use of scientific terminology to boost science and writing skills or how to maintain student engagement. Every teacher at Bruce Randolph attended professional development sessions and received regular coaching, even art, music, P.E. and special education instructors.

Professional development was carefully planned and implemented to address teachers' real challenges, and was integrated in weekly Tuesday after-school installments. The first Tuesday featured a whole-faculty meeting focused on a universal concern; the second Tuesday department meeting examined the concern in light of a subject area; the third Tuesday was a mixed "craft" group to further extend the discussion; and the fourth Tuesday was dedicated to the monthly Denver Classroom Teachers' Association (DCTA) meeting.

One-on-one coaching helped teachers study what was happening in their classroom, measure it and go from there. A 1-2-3 coaching cycle was instituted. A teacher and coach first met to plan a lesson together, taking into consideration learning objectives, methods, teacher and coach roles and an evaluation plan to know if the kids "got it." The second step was a shared class experience, with the coach either observing, co-teaching or modeling instruction for the teacher. In the third debriefing session, they examined their plan and strategies to see if they worked as hoped. After that, the cycle started over again as a continuous source of feedback and support for the teacher's practice.

Informal coaching became a way of life. Coaches welcomed the opportunity to study problems that "just came up," visiting classrooms of teachers who wanted help resolving issues like student inattentiveness or problems in classroom management.

Betz emphasizes that coaching was a positive experience for teachers: "The coaching is totally teacher driven. It's not me telling them how to do the work. It's being able to help someone think about their own work, facilitate their thinking."

Indeed, teachers embraced the feedback. P.E. teacher Greg Ahrnsbrak says, "Betz or Lahue or Swinehart would come in for a full class period—they could help teach, they could sit back and watch, or if you wanted, they'd take it over, they were really flexible. They didn't come in and start grading us or evaluating us. We talked about what worked and what didn't work and what we could do. That kind of thing was really positive, and I had never experienced that any place else."

Supportive and Collegial Environment: Recognizing that teachers' working conditions are children's learning conditions, the team put a high priority on developing a positive environment that supported teachers' efforts and valued their accomplishments.

In most schools, teachers go into their classrooms, close their doors and are on their own—the nature of the profession precludes collaborative problem-solving discussions over the water cooler. It can be very isolating.

Not the case at Bruce Randolph. The shared vision and commitment to their Challenge 2010 plan helped develop a positive collaborative climate. "We were constantly asking ourselves what we could do to improve student achievement. This is the kind of approach to take whether it's Toyota or IBM or DPS. It creates a kind of environment where teachers feel safe to ask and receive meaningful, competent assistance," explains Ahrnsbrak.

Teachers began to look to each other for professional guidance, as well. Teachers scored assessments together so they could come to a shared understanding of what “proficient” should look like. The leadership team took over classrooms so that teachers could take time to observe their colleagues at work, to learn from each other.

“What we did was we broke that [isolating] mold,” Lahue explains. “Whether people were having a good day or bad day, they knew they weren’t alone; someone would come next door and help out. People graded each other’s papers. We had unprecedented levels of cohesion and teamwork.”

With 100% teacher membership in the DCTA, everyone involved considered the Association part of the solution at Bruce Randolph. Lahue and Ahrnsbrak credit their long-time Association involvement with giving them the system-wide perspective to think about—and implement—meaningful instructional development.

“Walking into Randolph was a completely different approach in dealing with the Association,” DCTA building representative Ahrnsbrak explains. “I had many conversations with everyone in leadership, and we were all on the same page. They truly believe that the most important component in the whole system is the teacher, and we were treated as professionals. We represent what can happen or what should be happening in our schools.”

Barrier Removal: The administrators saw themselves as facilitators, coordinating people, time and materials. In particular, they were committed to taking “away the stupid stuff off of teachers’ plates...to ensure they focus just on instruction,” Waters says.

Prioritizing student achievement meant staff meetings concentrated on professional development, not mundane items like bus duty and lunch detention, which were handled mostly through email and one-on-one conversations. “We had so much work to do at Bruce Randolph and I didn’t want to waste anyone’s valuable time,” Waters says.

The administration also eliminated resource allocation battles that tax teacher energy and fuel ongoing frustration. Opposed to teachers using their time on budget minutiae, Waters told her educators to simply ask for the teaching materials they needed and most of the time she delivered. For example, the “copy paper wars” that are part of most schools’ office culture were conspicuously absent at Bruce Randolph. Staff were able to focus on the content of their teaching materials rather than on hoarding the paper for those materials.

Consistent and Defined Expectations

The team believed that consistency in well-defined academic, procedural and behavioral expectations would help students focus on learning.

Consistent, school-wide policies were adopted for virtually everything in the school. All classes, regardless of subject, started with an automatic “warm up” assignment, segued into a workshop period and ended with closing procedures. Names and dates appeared on the right hand upper corner of every paper throughout the school. In every classroom, inattention or misbehavior earned a posted name with checks with consistent consequences. Three-ring binders, not spiral notebooks, were used for all classes. Incomplete class work was finished in after-school academic detention, no exceptions.

School-wide rules meant that some teacher autonomy was sacrificed for the common good. Staff members had to let go of some pet preferences, but the team felt it was crucial to the ultimate goal. “Taking the guesswork out of school made it easier for kids,” says Betz simply. So the teachers complied, and reaped the rewards.

Getting students to buy into the new school atmosphere was a challenge in and of itself, but the school-wide consistency made that buy-in a reality. In years past, the students had watched as their teachers and principals would give in to lowered expectations by October or November. This time, things were different. “We told them, the same rules in every room...and they tested and tested and tested,” Lahue remembers.

The staff stayed the course and implemented their plan faithfully. “By December the progress we were seeing just really amazed us,” Waters says with a smile.

Rigorous Curriculum with High Minimum Standards

Every school talks about rigorous curriculum, rubrics and standards. But at Bruce Randolph, the difference was a fully-developed, assessable program on every level.

Waters and Lahue had learned at Morey Middle School that the standard Studio Literacy Program was lacking both a writing component and a reading comprehension component. So they added their own, a weekly essay and a biweekly reading comprehension assignment, on top of all the standard curriculum. They piloted the additions at Morey and brought them with them to Bruce Randolph. In math and science subjects, the Bruce Randolph team used the Connected Math and Piloted Science programs, but the difference was that they stuck to the pacing and planning guide, doing extra work when catch up was needed.

Student assessment is a key element in teaching and learning at Bruce Randolph, not as an end in itself, but as a means to improving instruction. Teachers started school by administering a series of tests to form a baseline data for students, and throughout the year, students took unit pre- and post-tests and quarterly exams, and completed graded assignments and projects.

This data was distributed to students and parents in weekly progress reports and provided a roadmap for teachers creating lesson plans to meet students' needs. Waters underscores that in all curricular areas, the students "never did another assignment without first getting feedback on what they already did. The kids kept all of their work from the beginning of the year, and they could look back on it and see their progress."

Not being used to working so hard academically, the students struggled at first. But when they saw that the staff wasn't going to back down on the expectations, the students started to respond. "The kids wanted to be challenged, they wanted to have boundaries, and they wanted to have teachers expect things from them." Lahue says, "As they felt themselves opening up and learning, they said, 'Give me something more; give me something harder!' They loved it, They loved doing hard work and succeeding at it. Contrary to what the world thinks about middle school students, they wanted to do something meaningful and hard."

"School Board President Theresa Pena sums it up this way: "Bruce Randolph adopted high expectations for standards of learning, fully defined at every level, appropriate to each child...and they gave that information to kids. The children understand that they're accountable for their learning."

Their approach is obviously working. Internal spring assessments show that on average, students more than doubled their reading scores, exceeded their writing goals and demonstrated significant mathematics improvement, although 8th graders fell just short of increasing one full grade level in math.

Active Student Involvement in Learning

Teachers worked with students to develop self-monitoring skills so they could become more aware of, and responsible for, their own learning. This process included having students set their own learning goals and choose strategies to meet those goals.

With the leadership team covering classes, students met individually with teachers to set quarterly goals for themselves. The teacher and student would review the previous goals and progress, identify academic strengths to capitalize on, focus on areas for improvement, determine tools and strategies to use, and then look at rubrics and examples so the student had a clear understanding of what "proficient" work would look like.

Teachers say that they loved this opportunity to counsel each and every student individually, at length, four times during the school year—an unheard of luxury in almost any other school setting. Inspired by their teachers’ attention, the students became more engaged and enthusiastic learners.

“The students kept rising to our expectations...we kept pushing them to do more and more and more and they kept doing it and responding,” says Waters. Lahue describes one student as telling her, “In the past they gave us boring work, but now I have to think hard, and I have to explain my thinking and explain my reasoning.”

Betz identifies another, unexpected result of student engagement—social reinforcement of learning. “Being good at school became a cool thing at our school.”

Sustaining Progress

So much is in place to sustain Bruce Randolph’s progress in the 2006-07 school year: district support, shared vision, a quality leadership team, committed teacher-leaders, collegial support, defined expectations, rigorous curriculum, and a student population who have changed from passive to active learners.

But this coming year, the school will double its challenges as it adds 6th and 9th to its collection of 7th and 8th grade classrooms. To sustain their progress they will need even more momentum. Here is where some of it will come from:

Inspiring shared vision and commitment of new staff: The school has already recruited the additional teachers they need, a diverse group of hard-working professionals, drawn to the infectious enthusiasm pervading this newly successful school. The new teachers have attended orientation and training with the team, and have affirmatively bought into what the school is trying to accomplish.

One of these new teachers, Margaret Bobb, a 15-year veteran of DPS’ Horace Mann Middle School, describes her commitment to the team’s vision: “Last spring, I got hold of the Challenge 2010 plan and I read it cover to cover. It was everything I’ve ever thought about teaching middle school, especially the need for consistency. Everyone will be working as hard as I am.”

Before Bobb signed on, Lahue told her, “We’re not looking for teachers who are perfect; we’re looking for teachers who are willing to be learners and who want to learn from each other.” That sounded just right to this veteran teacher. Bobb says she’s “psyched to get set up and get going. I have all these ideas and I want to get unpacked and get started.”

Waters predicts that new staff will be impressed and motivated. “When they get there they are going to be amazed about the collegiality, the commitment and the teamwork, because I have never seen a level like I have at Bruce Randolph.”

Maintaining empowered and supportive environment: Maintaining the supportive team environment where teachers and management own the change is the critical element in sustaining progress at Bruce Randolph. Describing the yearlong experiment as “electrifying” and “rejuvenating,” staff members believe that as long as they can continue to operate the school autonomously and stay intact as a team they will continue to be successful.

Increasing parent and community involvement: While parents were involved through daily reading, calendar signing, signing weekly progress reports, and participating in parent-teacher conferences, Waters points out that with limited time and resources, the team concentrated on teachers and students the first year rather than on the community, “We focused our energies. We didn’t use as excuses the fact that parents weren’t involved.”

But now with the reform effort in full swing on-site, the team plans to increase parent and neighborhood involvement this coming year with help from neighborhood activists who last spring helped gather community input about how the school can increase collaboration outside the school.

Metropolitan Organizations for People (MOP) Organizer Patty Lawless reports that despite the school’s limited community communication plan, parents definitely got the message that things at Bruce Randolph had changed. They saw their kids producing much more sophisticated work and felt student behavior was much improved. She says, “I’m very excited. There is very fertile ground for us to get parents engaged” next year to improve student learning and address after-school safety.

Driving academic results: Staff believes that student test scores will continue to increase if they stick to their plan of teacher empowerment, holding students accountable and increasing parent and community involvement pieces. Betz offers, “We’re all really proud of our work, our students included. We know we’re not perfect, we know we have more work to do. We won’t ever hit a mark and be done. But we look forward to it. Student achievement will be a byproduct of all we’re doing.”

Changing Schools District-wide and Beyond

With hard work and attention to staff and leader cultivation, Bruce Randolph radically changed student learning in just one year. And the powers-that-be want to see more of that kind of success. “If we can do it at this school, we can do it across the district,” says School Board President Peña. Superintendent Bennet agrees with that replication potential, calling it a “hugely useful model for us going forward.”

Building bridges with feeder schools: Peña points out that to make reform work across DPS, collaboration among feeder elementary, middle and high schools to establish mutual expectations and avoid “passing the buck back and forth” is important.

Implementing best practices: Bennet admits that much of what is in the Denver Plan is integral to Challenge 2010. “What they’re doing is an authentic implementation of best practices, what we know works. What I say to people is if you want to see the endpoint of the Denver Plan, you ought to go look at Bruce Randolph. I feel confident they’ll be driving achievement for every student there.”

Identifying inspirational leaders: Both Peña and Bennet note that the development of staff leaders is the most challenging aspect of taking the lessons learned to other schools. As Peña says, “Leadership, passion—you just know when you see it. Knowledge and commitment is important, too. How do you clone charismatic leadership, passion, and willingness to do hard work?”

Recruiting, supporting and retaining teachers: Peña insists that district-wide, teachers have done a good job, but too often it’s been in a vacuum. “We need to do a better job of working together to know what the outcome should look like, what good teaching and learning looks like, what leadership looks like, doing it on customized basis structured around needs of kids in the classroom.” Bennet, too, wants to make professional development a district priority, stating, “It is my hope that Denver will be viewed as a place where teachers can come to perfect their practice.”

Before that can happen, DCTA representative Ahrnsbrak says, some attention has to be paid to increasing teacher salaries and benefits and creating better work environments. “I’ve seen a lot of good teachers go down—either leave the district or leave teaching entirely—because they didn’t have the support.”

Viewing DCTA, CEA and NEA as partners: DCTA, the Colorado Education Association (CEA) and the National Education Association (NEA) enthusiastically support academic reform embodied in Bruce Randolph’s plan. “There’s no reason for battling and animosity...if we’re on the same side—all about student achievement and supporting the teachers and making sure they have everything they need to do the job that they do,” Ahrnsbrak says. The Association is part of the solution.

According to Bennet, the number one take-away lesson of Bruce Randolph is “you can get much farther down the road with collaboration than with division.”

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