

# THE Term Paper

News and Analysis on School Reform from The Piton Foundation

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## FROM THE EDITOR

### term paper

Function: *noun*

1. A major written assignment in a school or college course representative of a student's achievement during a term.

As The Piton Foundation staff began discussing what to call this new publication on education issues, "The Term Paper" surfaced almost immediately. It had a nice ring to it, and quickly became the front-runner. Then a few people pointed out that while the name suggests a certain weightiness and seriousness of purpose, it also carries negative connotations. For some, in fact, the name evoked a nightmare they suffered repeatedly in their youth:

*It's the end of the semester. You're walking to school, when suddenly you realize: I haven't even started researching my 25-page term paper, and it's due today! Cold sweat. Heart palpitations. Dread, despair, impending doom.*

In the end, we decided not to let these worries deter us. We trust that readers will quickly realize that our goal is not to induce fear. What *The Term Paper* intends to do is provoke debate and provide credible, in-depth analysis and data, embedded in compellingly written stories. Ultimately, we would like to nudge forward the ongoing Denver debate on education reform.

We would hope readers will approach this publication expecting what a term paper ideally should offer: a breadth of research and a depth of thought that passes knowledge on to those who read it.

Why, after more than 20 years working on school reform initiatives, has Piton decided to launch this publication now? It would be presumptuous of us to claim we have the answers; that we know how to solve public education's persistent problems. But we believe that the lessons we've learned from our two decades of work have taught us how to ask the right questions.

Each issue of *The Term Paper* will focus on a single theme. This first issue, for example, examines school autonomy, how and why site-based control does or does not lead to increased student achievement. In every issue, we also will include guest opinion columns, letters from readers, and updates to and follow-ups on issues of general interest or that we have written about in the past.

Piton is a private operating foundation that focuses its work on improving the lives of children in inner-city Denver. Therefore, *The Term Paper* will concentrate its research and reporting on education issues in Denver or directly relevant to Denver. It often will be the case, however, that school reform work being done elsewhere will offer Denver valuable lessons.

In this issue, for example, we have traveled to Chicago and to Edmonton, Alberta, cities that have implemented system-wide changes granting schools autonomy beyond what most other public schools in this country — including Denver — have enjoyed. Contrasting Denver and its Collaborative Decision Making committees to related efforts in Chicago and Edmonton can teach us a great deal about what Denver has accomplished to date, and how far it still has to go to make meaningful changes in its governance structure, leading to improved student achievement.

We hope that you find *The Term Paper* a stimulating, provocative read. Please let us know what you think, by e-mailing us at [termpaper@piton.org](mailto:termpaper@piton.org), or calling Alan Gottlieb at 303-825-6246.

## School Autonomy Alone Is Not Enough

BY ALAN GOTTLIEB

School reform fads bloom, fade and die in the blink of an eye, or so goes the conventional wisdom. But there's at least one exception to the rule.

Site-based school management swept across the nation in the mid- to late-1980s. It has ebbed and flowed ever since, but remains a cornerstone of many publicly and privately funded school reform efforts.

A straight-forward theory motivated this move toward school autonomy: if school districts give the people who know their students best the power and resources to chart their own course, and hold them accountable for results, improvements will follow.

It hasn't proved to be that simple.

Decentralization has taken different forms in different places — from the relatively radical approaches undertaken in Edmonton (with great success) and Chicago (with mixed results) to the cautious steps attempted in Denver (see *accompanying stories*). Districts that have undertaken bold experiments generally have recorded both notable successes and dismal failures, while those taking a more cautious approach have had little to show for their tinkering.

The issue is a particularly timely one for Denver Public Schools. This year, the Denver school board and Supt. Jerry Wartgow are re-evaluating DPS' decade-old system of site-based governance — Collaborative Decision Making committees. The system potentially faces a radical overhaul (see *"CDMs at a Crossroads,"* pg. 4).

Districts, like Edmonton, that have successfully implemented meaningful site-based management have given schools real control over the most essential resources — money, staffing and time. Districts where site-based management implementation has been less successful have kept significant controls over resources in the central office.

Today, charter schools represent the most publicized type of autonomous public schools. Charters have close to complete control over their essential resources. To the extent they are successful in raising student achievement, charters place great pressure on large public systems to loosen the reins or lose "customers" (see *"Charter Schools,"* pg. 8).

But charters, beset by chronic financial and facility problems, are far outnumbered by schools operating under various forms of site-based management more directly controlled by school districts. So far charters, while important, are a mere drop in the bucket.

Over the years, researchers have asked, and to a great extent answered, two basic questions about autonomous public schools:

- Is the strategy of freeing schools from centralized control effective in boosting student achievement?
- What other reforms or supports must be put in place to help autonomous schools succeed?

Answering the first question is simple: autonomy alone does nothing for student achievement. Numerous studies since the mid-1980s have found no statistical link between self-governing schools and gains in student learning. In fact, in schools with inept leadership and a lack of focus, autonomy can hurt rather than help.

"For a local school board to adopt site-based management and expect all great things will happen is

naïve at best," said Priscilla Wohlstetter, director of the Center on Educational Governance at the University of Southern California, and a leading researcher on school autonomy issues. "We've found that it's so much more complicated than just a shift of power. Very rarely now do we see site-based management adopted as a stand-alone reform. It's now typically adopted as part of a major initiative to improve curriculum and instruction."

Expert after expert echoes Wohlstetter. Unless a host of other changes are implemented in concert with decentralization, it amounts to a pointless and time-consuming exercise.

Studies on school autonomy agree that teachers, and to some degree parents, must play key roles in running autonomous schools. Controversy surrounds

### Essential components of an effective site-based system

- Leadership
- Family and community involvement
- Research-based instructional program
- Professional development
- Use of data

what part parents should play — supportive or decision-making. Many researchers say creating district-mandated councils with dominant parental participation (like Denver's Collaborative Decision Making committees or Chicago's Local School Councils) is not the only way, or always the most effective way, of playing this management role.

In fact, the most successful autonomous schools augment governing councils with faculty committees that make the key decisions on issues of curriculum and instruction, which have the most direct impact on what occurs in classrooms.

If site-based decision-making alone won't do the trick, what else must be in place for a self-governing school to succeed? Researchers attach different labels to the ingredients they say must accompany decentralization for it to lead to improved student learning and achievement. One common theme cited in research is the importance of trust — among teachers, between teachers, principals and parents, and between central administrators and people in school buildings.

Other essential elements fall generally into the following five areas:

- Strong, collaborative leadership from principals, teachers and parents.
- Partnerships with families and communities to ensure that the instructional program best meets student needs.
- A coherent, research-based instructional program tied to local and state standards.
- Meaningful, ongoing, school-based professional development.
- Systematic use of data to drive reforms.

If any of these elements are absent, an autonomous school will find it hard to succeed in boosting student learning, researchers say. Without school autonomy, the building leadership required from principals, teachers and parents to move a school forward is less likely to surface.

This can be disheartening for people who focus their work on urban school systems, because it is the

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# Despite Changes, Chicago Parents Still Wield Power

By ALAN GOTTLIEB

CHICAGO — From 1989 through the mid-1990s, this city was regarded by many as the heart and soul of parent-driven urban school reform.

Elected Local School Councils, dominated by parents, had been granted unprecedented power by state legislation to hire and fire principals, to set school budgets, to oversee curriculum. In schools where parents had the proper background or received adequate training, this autonomy proved an invaluable gift. Student achievement, as measured by standardized tests, climbed significantly. By contrast, schools where parents and staff were less prepared struggled. In those schools, student achievement stagnated at low levels, or in some cases declined.

In the past six years, Chicago's experiment in school autonomy has been weakened by a re-emergence of centralized authority. Paul Vallas, who served as Mayor Richard M. Daley's appointed chief executive officer from 1995 until earlier this year, slimmed down the system's bloated, inefficient bureaucracy and imposed one of the nation's most stringent accountability systems.

Under the new scheme, Vallas gained the power to remove principals or teaching staffs from chronically failing schools, to place schools on probation, and to dictate how larger chunks of school budgets were spent. Local School Councils lost some, but far from all, of their sweeping powers.

While most observers acknowledge the need for some of these changes, ardent advocates for parental power say Vallas overstepped his bounds. Debate continues to rage in Chicago whether modest gains in student

Councils, wield power here unlike anywhere else.

## Chicago as outlier

"Chicago is an outlier in terms of the involvement of parents," said Priscilla Wohlstetter, director of the Center on Educational Governance at the University of Southern California, and a leading researcher on school autonomy issues. "The Chicago model was very much founded on democratic principles. But we do not see that form of site-based management adopted much."

Because of the depth and breadth of the Chicago experiment, researchers have studied school reform here exhaustively. What they have found has been consistent with the findings of their colleagues elsewhere: autonomy alone does nothing to improve student learning and achievement. But when schools have the right people and systems in place to take proper advantage of the freedom autonomy affords, gains can be dramatic.

"If you're going to grant autonomy, you really need to pay attention to the conditions in the communities to see whether they have the social resources to take advantage of this autonomy," said Penny Bender Sebring, co-director of the Consortium on Chicago School Research. "And you need to pay attention to the social capital and human capital within the school. It's key to have a good leader, and it's key to have a cadre of committed and competent teachers."

## Essential supports

With the right people in place, Sebring said, other of the "essential supports" required to increase student achievement are more likely to emerge.



HIGH EXPECTATIONS YIELD STRONG RESULTS AT WASHINGTON ELEMENTARY IN CHICAGO.

- deep staff collaboration;
- An instructional program that places the highest staff priority on student learning.

Research conducted in Chicago schools throughout the 1990s by the Consortium and Designs for Change, an educational research and advocacy organization, found that 87 of 349 elementary schools in Chicago substantially increased their reading scores on standardized reading tests between 1990 and 1997. A follow-up study conducted early this year found that this trend continued through the 2000 testing season.

Research showed that principals, staff and parents at these "substantially up" schools placed far greater emphasis on the "five essential supports" than did schools with either modest or non-existent test score gains. More important, this emphasis went far beyond lip-service and into fundamental changes in practice.

Designs for Change echoed many other researchers in concluding that school autonomy is an important precondition for increasing student achievement. The organization's comprehensive 1998 study of site-based decision-making found that autonomy represents a necessary first step toward getting school staff and parents invested in pushing a fundamental overhaul of curriculum and instructional practices within a school.

## Community's role

Another important benefit site-based governance affords is that it brings community-based players to the table. This infuses the change process with local knowledge that proves invaluable in designing an educational program that meets the needs of students.

"When you live in a community, you know what the community's students face," said Valencia Rias, a Designs for Change policy associate and community organizer, who also has served as a parent representative on two school councils, "what bubbles up in the councils in poor neighborhoods is people who have been through community service, that have built block clubs, that work in their churches. So they may not have gone to college or finished high school but they have a lot of common sense."

In a visit to Chicago in September, *The Term Paper* spent time in two high-poverty public schools that have succeeded in implementing the "five essential supports," and in so doing, have significantly boosted student

achievement. We briefly profile George Washington Elementary School and Daniel Boone Elementary School below.

Although the two schools have followed different paths to success, they clearly shared key attributes. Chief among them were dynamic, inspiring principal leadership, which in turn empowered teachers and parents to take the lead in charting the school's course.

## George Washington Elementary School

Chicago's far Southeast Side neighborhood is best known for the bare-knuckle style of its legendary ex-alderman, "Fast Eddie" Vrdolyak, the undisputed king of patronage politics through the 1980s. If you knew the right people, you could land a cushy city job, regardless of whether you were qualified.

Given its political history, the neighborhood seems an unlikely place for a flower of open and democratic school governance to bloom.

But drive past the abandoned steel mills that fringe the neighborhood and enter George Washington Elementary School, and you encounter precisely what school reformers have in mind when they advocate for schools freed from the shackles of central bureaucracies.

Craig Ergang, in his third year as Washington's principal, is a product of the neighborhood. Though he is a relatively new principal, Ergang is as rooted in Washington as in the neighborhood. This is his 15th year at the school. He started there as the reading and writing coordinator, then became the assistant principal seven years ago.

He presides over a school in slow-motion transition. Over the years, as the steel mills have closed, long-time, middle-class residents of eastern European descent have moved out of the neighborhood. Low-income immigrants from Mexico, Central America and Southern Asia have replaced them.

As the student population of Washington has grown more diverse and predominantly low-income (77 percent qualified for free or reduced-cost lunch last year), achievement has soared. This bucks a national trend, but Ergang shrugs that off. All it takes, he says, is hard work, a systematic approach and a committed teaching staff.

"I have input, like everyone else, but rarely do I step in," Ergang said. "I'm part of the process, that's all. I trust the staff to do the right thing."

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PARENT-DRIVEN REFORMS HAVE HELPED RAISE ACHIEVEMENT IN SOME LOW-INCOME CHICAGO SCHOOLS.

achievement over the years should be credited to the first wave of reform or to Vallas' counter-reforms.

Despite the more recent erosion of site-based authority, Chicago schools today arguably enjoy more autonomy from the central office than schools in most other urban systems in this country. And parents, who by law hold the majority of seats on Local School

In addition to school leadership (which includes the principal, Local School Council and strong teacher-leaders), the Consortium identifies four other essential supports for student learning:

- Strong family-community partnerships;
- Healthy school environment and culture;
- Meaningful staff development and

# Instructional Focus Is Key in Decentralized Edmonton Schools

By ALAN GOTTLIEB

EDMONTON — Schools in this northern prairie city have operated under perhaps the most radically decentralized system in North America for the past 15 years.

Although curriculum in Canada is set by the province, Edmonton Public Schools has devolved virtually all authority over instruction, staffing levels, budget and maintenance to principals in the system's 207 schools. The thinly staffed central office operates as a "service center" to support principals. Dictates from downtown are rare indeed.

So when people raised and nurtured in the empowering environment of Edmonton Public Schools visit an urban school system in the United States, they're often shocked by glaring deficiencies they see as entirely avoidable.

Take principal Nancy Petersen, an energetic woman who looks to be in her early 30s. She has spent her entire professional career in Edmonton, first

## Budget freedom

Given the freedom Petersen has to use her budget as she sees fit, it's little wonder she found the Boston system so stifling. In 1979 the Edmonton central office began transferring budgetary control to schools. By 1995, Edmonton principals had control over 92 cents of every dollar allocated to their schools.

This means that decisions on how to spend money on everything from building maintenance to professional development is left up to the principal. A principal can buy building maintenance services, professional development or educational consulting from the central office (known here as the "Centre for Education") or from any outside vendor.

"I have seen us go from a top down model to much more of a they-are-there-for-us-to-use-providing-we-are-willing-to-pay model," said Colin Inglis, an Edmonton principal for 20 years. "In some areas that relationship is really healthy and in some areas, like



ACHIEVEMENT HAS RISEN STEADILY OVER THE PAST 5 YEARS IN EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

began to take much more notice of their results on the Alberta achievement tests and diploma exams and began to use those results to reflect on their own programming."

Dosdall moved on after the 2000-2001 school year. His successor, Angus MacBeath, was a loyal lieutenant and educational kindred spirit. He is expected to continue charting Dosdall's course.

This year, all Edmonton schools are being required by the central office to identify a specific instructional focus. What that should be is left up to each school. But the central office will monitor and hold principals accountable for identifying and implementing a focus.

One innovation Dosdall brought to Edmonton was a focus on "value-added" achievement gains as opposed to looking only at absolute scores. In other words, the key measure became how much growth a student showed year-to-year rather than the student's absolute test score.

Looking at data in this new light showed that some of the district's higher-achieving schools significantly under-performed lower-achieving schools in terms of growth in test scores.

Since Dosdall took the reins at the beginning of 1995, student achievement in Edmonton has risen steadily, as measured both by provincial exams and by district-designed assessments.

District officials and principals credit Dosdall with bringing to Edmonton a focus on student achievement. But they also said that translating that focus first

ting strong leaders into schools, and supporting them once they're placed.

People who express interest in principalships can apply to attend a 10-week course in beginning administration. Classes take place evenings and weekends. The course is "very rigorous, there are assignments and they are marked," said Ken Dropko, executive assistant to the superintendent.

People who successfully complete the course can apply for assistant principalships. Generally, however, only the top half-dozen graduates (out of an average class of between 20 and 30) actually get administrative jobs immediately upon graduation.

For people who then aspire to principalships, there is an equally rigorous 20-week course. Again, the application process is competitive — about 35 out of 120 applicants are accepted in a typical year. Some of those 35 are counseled out of the program before its completion, and only the top "students" are offered principal positions.

It is possible to get a principal's job without taking the courses, especially for proven leaders from outside the Edmonton school district.

Principals are responsible for ensuring that their teaching staffs get the kind of professional development they need. Most schools take advantage of opportunities offered by the Centre for Education on topics like the Reading Recovery early literacy program, combined with school-based professional development.



EDMONTON OFFERS A VARIETY OF PROGRAMS CATERING TO A DIVERSE STUDENT BODY.

as a teacher and, in the last four years, as a school administrator. Her visit last year to schools in Boston with a group of Edmonton educators left her puzzled and a bit depressed.

"Walking around these schools, the achievement was incredible and the kids were incredible," Petersen said. "But I couldn't get over the condition of the buildings. It just blew my mind. I thought they were badly in need of repair, and also very poorly equipped to meet the educational needs of the kids."

Clearly, schools that succeeded did so in spite of the system, rather than because of it. Why would schools in Boston, "the Athens of America," be hurting so, Petersen asked her Boston peers. It didn't take long to get an answer.

"We went to five different schools and at every one we heard from the principals about how their hands are tied for so many things," she said. "Anything they want extra beyond staffing their building and buying their basic textbooks comes from grant-writing."

Petersen also expressed bafflement at the district-imposed staffing formula for schools, which left some schools top-heavy and others lacking in administrative support. "It was very formulaized and it was tied to the contracts that the individual teacher (unions) sign. Everything according to the size of the student body, not the size of student needs.

"It was Greek to me. Absolutely Greek."

maintenance, we haven't quite figured it out yet."

Edmonton has gained renown over the years for its decentralized school system. Score of visitors flock here every year from across Canada and the United States to get a first-hand look at radical site-based autonomy. Coupled with autonomy is a wide array of programs of choice, which offer students and families a staggeringly diverse menu of educational options. At least one program offered in Edmonton would seem likely to meet the needs of any imaginable type of student.

But it wasn't until a new superintendent Emery Dosdall, arrived on the scene in 1995 that the district made a concerted effort to use its decentralized model to boost stagnant student achievement. Since that time, Edmonton achievement has climbed steadily. Even as the city became markedly poorer during the 1990s — the city's monthly child welfare caseload nearly doubled, to about 4,000, between 1994 and 1999 — student achievement has climbed steadily in terms of the percentage of students scoring proficient or better on provincial exams.

## Focus the key

Why? District officials give a one-word answer: focus.

"I think what happened (when Dosdall arrived) is our schools began to realize OK, somebody is finally serious about this," said Anne Mulgrew, supervisor for student assessment and a 28-year veteran of the district. "They



EDMONTON SCHOOLS ARE FREE TO TAILOR PROGRAMS TO THEIR STUDENTS' NEEDS.

into action and then results was made possible by the groundwork laid over the preceding 15 years of decentralization.

## Developing principals

In a decentralized system that grants great authority to principals and holds them strictly accountable for results, recruitment, training and ongoing support of principals is a vital precondition for school improvement. Over the past two decades, Edmonton has developed a comprehensive system for get-

At Petersen's Spruce Avenue Elementary School, students are released 75 minutes early every Thursday so that teachers can have an uninterrupted block of time to meet and learn together.

## Parental involvement

While Edmonton's successful schools look similar to U.S. schools where autonomy is working well, there is one

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# Denver's CDMs at a Crossroads

By BRIAN WEBER

In 1991, a top-down mandate from Colorado's governor forced a bottom-up management system on Denver Public Schools.

It was a paradoxical start that helped stop a teachers' strike. And it led to a fitful decade for site-based management in Colorado's largest urban school district.

What remained consistent throughout that decade, however, was lagging student achievement. Gains in achievement — the goal that fueled the site-based management experiment in the first place — have yet to result from the Collaborative Decision Making (CDM) structure.

"The critical question is: 'Does (site-based management) translate into student achievement?'" said school board president Elaine Berman. "We all question whether it does."

There is no evidence that school governing committees have done much for student achievement in



SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT ELAINE BERMAN

Denver. That troubling issue now drives a critical reevaluation of the site-based management approach in DPS. The school board and Superintendent Jerry Wartgow have joined the teachers union to determine how well CDM works and what form it should take in its second decade.

"This is kind of a pivotal year for CDMs," Berman said. "They do play a valuable role but it may have more to do with school climate and parent satisfaction and less to do with curriculum and what goes on in the classroom."

The examination of CDMs will occur under some of the same conditions that spawned them: the teachers contract is up for negotiation and the district faces mounting pressure to boost achievement.

## Changes are coming

Officials say that CDMs won't go away. But they could soon look much different. For instance, the self-governing structure may get cut from the next teachers contract, where it has resided for the past decade. That's a step that could potentially weaken the CDM system.

Individual schools may decide how to use the CDM approach. Others may junk it entirely. More flexibility may be built into the membership.

Whatever the result, few disagree that the CDM ideal is a good one. Clearly, however, its reality has been less than ideal.

An extensive 1998 study of Denver's CDMs found that "collaborative decision making is at a pivotal juncture in Denver. It is perceived positively... Yet significant and legitimate concerns are repeatedly expressed..."

The Community Training and Assistance Center (CTAC) of Boston interviewed more than 200 teachers, parents, principals, students, administrators, business and community members and surveyed a total of 800 people in preparing its study. Denver is

ambivalent about CDMs, the study concluded.

"A vast majority of survey and interview respondents want CDM to continue and be improved."

Former board president Aaron Gray echoes that. "Even after 10 years the challenge is how to get a clear role for the CDM," he said.

And he has a theory about lack of attention CDMs typically have paid to student achievement: "CDMs came from adult issues."

Gray has seen the system from two key sides: as board policy maker in the mid- to late-90s and in practice as the current head of the district's community relations department, which assists CDMs.

Along with clarifying their roles, CDM members need training and guidance from the central administration, Gray and CDM representatives say.

"Some (CDMs) worry about bathrooms and cutting the grass," Gray said. "These are important but they are not at the heart of what CDMs are about."

## A look back

Seeking help from the central administration presents an ironic twist for Denver's CDMs. Frustration and anger with district headquarters created the demand for site-based management in the first place.

By 1990 the central administration had operated under a court-ordered desegregation edict for 15 years. The district seemed most interested in keeping a federal judge at bay by ensuring racial balance through busing and other rigid student assignment rules. Mediocrity in many classrooms that schooled predominantly minority children became an accepted fact of urban education life.

As a result, the administration — often referred to by its address, "900 Grant" or simply "downtown" — was considered autocratic, unwilling to listen to its constituents.

Labor relations were strained as the district struggled through Colorado's lean economic times in the mid-1980s, hard pressed to raise teacher salaries.

In late 1990, open antagonism reigned between teachers and administration. Contract talks stalled. Then-Gov. Roy Romer seized little known state law to mediate. Both sides resented the intrusion. Romer was just entering the education reform field that would ultimately be a cornerstone of 12 years in office. He took the rare opportunity to impose site-based management, an idea that was beginning to win nationwide favor at the time.

The primary areas of authority and responsibility of the governing committees were spelled out in the teachers' contract: student achievement, personnel, school operations and parent and community relations. At a minimum, membership was to include: a principal, four teachers, four parents, one classified employee, one business or community representative. Middle and high school CDMs also have two students; middle schoolers are ex officio.

The overall objective, according to the contract: "Schools that have the vision and flexibility to make operational and instructional decisions based on the changing and diverse needs of their population will provide the best learning environments for all students. Consistent with this belief, collaborative decision making will allow school communities to focus on student achievement by offering diverse programs and services as they seek to meet the unique needs of their students."

Indeed: "the primary goal of CDM... is to improve student achievement," the contract stressed.

## Confusion reigns

"There was great hope that people closest to schools would get involved in decision making and take ownership of schools and have a big impact on student achievement," said Berman, who was a founder of Citizens for Quality Schools, a private organization that helped create and guide the early stages of CDMs.

It was a tall order. CDMs struggled in the first years on practical aspects of running schools. Could they really control their budgets? Did they know how? How much hiring power did they have? Should they dictate curriculum and instruction practices? Were they better off leaving it to professional educators? And if they did, what was their job? How were they to convince enough teachers and parents to participate?

And there were tensions with an administration unwilling to relinquish real power. The two superintendents during most of the 1990s grew up professionally in the DPS top-down system. They gave CDMs minimal support, as did their lieutenants. As the new committees organized, there was little self-governing leadership from "downtown."

"CDM is like a headless horseman," a PTSA parent told CTAC. There is no direction from above. There are no guidelines. You make it up as you go along."

For the first seven years, an outside group of volunteers from business, foundations and the community, called the Center for Quality Schools, handled CDM training, conferences, workshops, team building and conflict management. The Piton Foundation, where

lower-income communities, parental involvement in CDMs languished. Many lower-income parents have time constraints. They also tend to be less educated and are uncomfortable in positions of power in public institutions that often intimidate them.

The end of busing further isolated poverty in certain schools, particularly in northeast and northwest Denver. Those schools lost what influence they had from middle class parents whose children had been bused there. CDMs suffered.

"That (end of busing) had the biggest impact on individual schools," Berman said.

Janice Spearman is principal of Columbine Elementary, located in a low-income neighborhood in northeast Denver. Before taking over Columbine three years ago, Spearman led University Park Elementary, in an affluent neighborhood near the University of Denver. The U Park CDM had consistent and concerted parental involvement.

At Columbine, not one parent serves on the CDM.

"One comes regularly but she is not a verbal person," Spearman said. "She's supportive but she does more listening than contributing."

"We talk about a partnership but the partnership is skewed."

Her teachers keep the CDM going. They use it to plan staffing and the make-up of classes. The committee plans how to best spend the budget and hire people.

"The CDM is a big help on those scenarios," Spearman said.

Columbine's CDM is considered



PARENTS ARE SUPPOSED TO PLAY A KEY ROLE ON DENVER'S COLLABORATIVE DECISION-MAKING (CDM) COMMITTEES. RESULTS HAVE BEEN MIXED.

Berman was a program officer and leader of CQS, was a key player and the main financial backer of CQS.

The tensions with the administration and toddling missteps by infant committees were to be expected, Romer cautioned.

"We ought not be thrown by it," said the former governor who is now superintendent of the Los Angeles school district, the nation's second largest. "This isn't going to work unless administrators, teachers and parents all want it to work. If they don't have their hearts in it, it's not going to work."

## A new era

That commitment was as diverse as the district's student population. Then in 1995 court-ordered busing was lifted and the district returned to neighborhood schools. It exacerbated existing problems with parent involvement.

Many parents in middle class neighborhoods took more control. In many

good compared with demographically similar schools. With her U Park experience, Spearman is sold on CDMs.

"It's important that we keep it. It's a good place to hash out issues and to know what's going on and problem solve."

## Problems abound

The CTAC report agreed with Spearman. But there are just as many negatives as positives, the study found:

Some parents feel more involved and connected to their children's schools with CDMs. Others think small groups of parents call the shots and jealously guard their power.

Schools in middle class neighborhoods generally boast active CDMs. Others in lower income, minority neighborhoods — schools most in need of parent involvement — tend to have CDMs in name only. This disparity widens the gap between schools in

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# Superintendent Wartgow: "Downtown" Will Be More of a Resource to CDMs

Since taking the helm at Denver Public Schools in June 2001, Supt. Jerry Wartgow has instituted a sweeping restructuring of the district's management. Most notably, he disbanded long-standing departments of elementary and secondary education, and replaced them with four area superintendents who oversee four geographically defined quadrants of the school district.

After he had been on the job for four months, *The Term Paper* sat down with Wartgow to discuss his assessment of the district's model of site-based management, and of the supports required to ensure that it leads to improved student achievement.

**Term Paper:** What's the current status of Collaborative Decision Making committees, in your view?

**Wartgow:** It's all over the map. I don't think I can make a generalized



SUPERINTENDENT JERRY WARTGOW

statement about how effective it is across the district. Some work very well. Some don't work at all, and there are a lot in the middle that are struggling — and that's the largest number. I think it's still a matter of seeking their role. They're looking for more definition. It appears to me that after 10 years, that has never been clarified.

**Term Paper:** As CDM leaders seek clarity, what have you been telling them?

**Wartgow:** It's situation-specific. I have been telling them I am a believer in the fact that we need community involvement, parent involvement, school involvement, to cause improvement here. The CDM is a mechanism, a device, a structure for us to get that. But in order for us to get there, it has to be meaningful.

**Term Paper:** What else needs to be

in place for a CDM to be an effective mechanism for improving student achievement?

**Wartgow:** There needs to be more guidance from the district in the areas of curriculum and instruction. I think when it comes down to improving student performance, choosing instructional methodologies, that's tough for anyone. A tremendous responsibility is placed on CDMs without — I don't want to say further direction, but it's bordering on that. They need more guidance. To get the discussion started, we have to come in and say, 'here are some recommendations. Here are some menus about what we need to do instructionally. Here is some evidence of best practices.' And try to encourage them to begin there. Now, if they want to step outside of the box, that's fine. I like the creative thinking. But we have got to make it a little more coherent and consistent.

**Term Paper:** So you believe there are areas, like curriculum and instruction, that have been under site-based management that are better off being managed centrally?

**Wartgow:** I am really convinced that there has to be much more coherence. And the way to get that, is we (at central office) become a little more proactive. I don't think it's inconsistent necessarily with site-based management.

I think in many CDMs until now, parents weren't comfortable with curriculum and instruction decisions, so they'd go on to other things. But in the meantime, there was no direction on the curriculum, because the central office could say 'it's site-based, hands-off, we won't go in there unless we're asked. People won't ask us.' It's a two-way thing where both sides have to

**"There needs to be more guidance from the district in the areas of curriculum and instruction."**

take some responsibility, and that's what I keep saying.

It can't be, 'here we are, downtown, we have all these great resources and we know all this about curriculum. Come and get it.' We've got to get out into the schools. We can't, on the other

hand, come in and say this is what you have to do. It's common-sense communication. And I think we're getting there.

**Term Paper:** Our research shows that principal leadership is the most important precondition for improving achievement in autonomous schools. Do you agree, and what are you doing to strengthen principal leadership in DPS?

**Wartgow:** It's absolutely essential. I

**"I want to recruit nationally. It's a priority for me."**

think the role of principals in standards-based reform has to change to that of an instructional leader. And many of them were not trained that way. They've come up as counselors, or assistant principals who were in charge of scheduling or discipline — the mechanical things.

I want to recruit nationally. I've got to work through this with the (teachers union). It's a priority for me. And I've got to negotiate with CDMs. The CDMs now believe they have the responsibility at least to interview and recommend principals. That's true. But if they've got an interim principal that they like, they can as an option say they don't want to do a search. I want to somehow get people in the pool (from outside the system).

**Term Paper:** What is your view on the current state of professional development for principals and aspiring principals?

**Wartgow:** We need to get a comprehensive system in place. I discovered that we have something here called the Leadership Academy, for principals within DPS. From what a lot of people out there have told me, it doesn't have a lot of credibility. Right now, there's the accusation that it's all politics, and you can't get on the list if you don't know the right people. This is the trust factor we have to get over.

**Term Paper:** Another key component of strong, autonomous schools is collaborative leadership — a principal who delegates, teachers who take on leadership roles. How is Denver doing in developing this type of leadership?

**Wartgow:** I'm trying to encourage it through everything I do. Low-perform-

ing schools are now required by the state to develop new improvement plans. I'm requesting in those plans specific strategies that are being used to improve collaboration and cooperation within the school. It's a tough thing for some principals. Some just seem to have it. And some are threatened by it.

**Term Paper:** Another key component is making sure you have a coherent instructional program, a systematic use of data and ongoing professional development aligned with standards and curriculum.

**Wartgow:** We need to do an induction and orientation program for teachers that focuses on instructional matters. Right now we do two days at the beginning of the year. One day is on how to identify child abuse, how to fill out your CSAP forms, how to request field trips, how to do all these rules. I'm telling people I want it focused on instruction: here's what CSAP scores are, here's our curriculum, here's what you're supposed to be teaching, here's where you go for help. It's a changing the focus to instruction from all of this other stuff. We've just got to keep the focus on instruction.

**"There's got to be a way we can teach principals how to work effectively with parents."**

**Term Paper:** And the final key component we found was forging effective partnerships with parents and communities.

**Wartgow:** There's got to be a way we can teach principals how to work effectively with parents. It's easier not to do it, in the short term. But it's not easier if you have to deal with the superintendent when it is not working well. That's a professional development question. I don't know where you learn that. They're sure not learning it in any of the traditional schools.

## CDM, continued from previous page

affluent neighborhoods and those in low-income areas.

Some teachers like the voice in curriculum and instruction policy CDMs can offer. Others avoid serving because they value their own time too much or they fear offending their principals — the ultimate veto power on CDMs.

"Half the CDMs are run by principals," an activist parent told CTAC. "This has a chilling effect on staff."

And parents.

"As long as the principal has total control, others aren't empowered," another activist said.

But principals feel squeezed by a demand to share power but carry the

responsibility.

"My job is to ensure that children are well educated," a frustrated principal said. "I don't need parents and business people to do this. I need to spend more time in classrooms and less time in meetings."

When the phone rings, says another, "the principal is the bottom line."

Some community members feel more empowered while others say the central administration uses them to validate what administrators planned to do anyway.

"We can put things in place but it can change at the whim of downtown," a parent said.

Berman, Gray and others see a need for changes, including:

- Base all decisions on student achievement.

- Make school improvement the CDM's main job.
- Have CDMs find ways to use test and other data to drive improvement plans for individual students.
- Establish measurable goals for students and teachers and principals.
- Use CDMs as a place for teachers and parents to better track individual students and their abilities as they progress from grade to grade.
- Train principals better on how to work with CDMs and how to use them to the school's advantage.
- Clarify specific roles for CDMs.
- Provide more flexibility for schools to determine who can serve on CDMs, such as more parents or teachers, instead of requiring one citywide standard.

- Increase outreach efforts in low-income areas to include parents.
- Seek more business and community support.

The CDM system has made a mark. How significant a mark is debatable, as is CDM's future.

"I was a passionate believer in CDMs," Berman said. "After ten years it's clearly not the silver bullet to school reform."

*Brian Weber is a former education writer for the Rocky Mountain News with 20 years of newspaper experience. He is now the program director for the Stapleton Foundation where he works on education and other issues related to the redevelopment of Denver's former airport.*

rare school indeed that has all the above-listed ingredients in place.

"You've probably got at most a third of your urban schools that are high capacity and ready to run with site-based management (SBM)," Wohlstetter said. "You've got probably a third that would take SBM and continue operating things the same way they do now, showing no improvement. And a third would be like deer in the headlights. They didn't know what to do with more limited responsibility. Now you give them more. What can you expect?"

Nevertheless, having a clear idea about what it takes for autonomous schools to be effective should help decision-makers figure out how to get the needed resources to the schools that need them most.

Let's briefly examine the five required elements for successful, autonomous schools.

### Leadership

Having a strong principal in place is an absolute prerequisite for success. A principal who tried to run all facets of an autonomous school would quickly burn out from the demands of the job. Effective leaders in this context are experts at collaborating and delegating key responsibilities to teams of teachers and, when appropriate, parents.

"Principals in a system where schools act as independently managed entities need different skills from principals in schools that are traditionally organized and run," writes Allan Odden, co-director of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, and a Professor of Educational Administration at the University of Wisconsin.

In effective, autonomous schools *The Term Paper* visited in Chicago and Edmonton, principals created faculty committees to oversee curriculum and instruction. This made teachers active partners in setting the direction of the school. It helped them identify the kinds of professional development they needed to continue improving their practice. Serving on meaningful committees also helps develop teachers as leaders, both within the building and as potential future principals.

"I think the strength of this is when you can take that principal (authority) and put everybody on a more even playing field and say 'OK we are doing this together, we are making a decision as a team,'" said Colin Inglis, who has served as a principal in the highly decentralized Edmonton Public Schools for the past 20 years.

For Lucy Klocksins, a reading specialist at Boone Elementary School in Chicago, working with a strong, collaborative leader has made an enormous difference. Teaching in such a school, she said, has been "a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

In her previous school, Klocksins said, "the principal ruled with an iron fist and she told you what to do and she yelled at the teachers and treated us like children. And I had no interest in taking on leadership or trying to make it a better place. I just wanted to do my job, go home, and get out of there."

How model school districts go about identifying, recruiting and training successful principals will be the topic of a future issue of *The Term Paper*.

### Family and community involvement

Researchers divide into two camps over the question of family involvement in autonomous schools. Everyone agrees that having parents involved in their children's education is of paramount importance. Parents usually know best what their children need. It's what that involvement looks like that sparks disagreements.

The larger group of researchers advocates primarily for home-based parental involvement. That is, parents

need to create a home environment conducive to learning and studying; help their children with homework; and ensure that their children arrive at school each day rested, well-fed and adequately clothed.

Penny Bender Sebring, co-director of the Consortium on Chicago School Research, advocates this position. Even though Chicago schools are governed by Local School Councils comprised primarily of parents, most parents steer clear of areas where they lack expertise.

"They're a little less likely to get involved in the curriculum area because they are oftentimes pretty willing to

making and collaborating with the community. Decision-making duties can and should include serving on curriculum committees, according to Epstein's model.

### Instructional program, professional development and use of data

These last three key ingredients are closely interrelated. Together, they're often described as a school climate conducive to academic growth.

Typically, states or school districts set academic standards and school districts dictate at least the framework of a curriculum that helps children reach

teams would meet together to strategize, discuss challenges and share ideas. But these schools also had established "vertical teams" — in which a teacher from each grade level was represented, so that instructional strategies remained consistent for the children as they moved from grade to grade.

In Edmonton, all schools are required to implement a specific instructional focus. What that focus will be is left up to the schools. At McCauley Elementary School, Principal Colin Inglis and his Instructional Focus Committee have decided to hone in on writing.

They decided on this focus after examining student work and test data. The analysis revealed that their mostly low-income, immigrant population seemed well-versed in the basics of writing, but their knowledge and skills tended to stop there.

Examining student work also has helped teachers understand where they need to strengthen their practice, and that is where the school will focus its professional development.

One aspect of professional development that is vital to autonomous schools is often ignored: training principals and teachers alike in basic management skills. Odden and Wohlstetter highlight several non-academic areas where training benefits self-governed schools, including:

- Working effectively in team or group settings (includes conflict resolution, meeting facilitation skills, consensus-building);
- Managing the fiscal aspects of the school;
- Counseling, parent outreach and other roles typically performed by non-teaching staff.

When an autonomous school manages to implement these key components, success is likely to follow. But there's an intangible that underlies everything: trust. Without trust, the best laid plans will go awry. Yet school researchers don't often discuss it.

When parents, teachers and the principal trust one another, they feel comfortable delegating authority and responsibility. This allows people to focus on what they do best, rather than monitoring every aspect of the school to make sure everyone is pulling their share of the load.

But trust is something that people must earn. Typically, schools with new-won autonomy lack the kinds of trusting relationships that develop over time. Trust often emerges as a self-defense mechanism when fatigue sets in, Wohlstetter said.

It's clear that school autonomy represents a key component of meaningful school reform. Reform efforts that do not include devolving significant decision-making power to school sites frequently fail. But then so do efforts that grant autonomy and fail to capitalize on the sense of ownership autonomy creates. ■



**AUTONOMOUS SCHOOLS HAVE GREATER FREEDOM TO DECIDE HOW TO GET THEIR CHILDREN TO PROFICIENCY.**

defer to the professionals on those issues," Sebring said.

Many parents apparently take a similar view. In a 1999 survey by Public Agenda, only one-third of parents surveyed said they felt comfortable serving on curriculum or instruction committees, evaluating teachers, or serving on teacher hiring committees.

Other researchers and school reform advocates see a more central role for parents as essential to improving student achievement. Sue Davenport, assistant director of Designs for Change, a Chicago-based educational advocacy organization, said people who advocate limiting parents' role in schools are selling parents short.

"The interest of the parents to be involved in the school is there, and it is strong, but it takes nurturing and facilitation," Davenport said. And when schools commit themselves to involving parents in meaningful ways — as leaders of school governance bodies, as reading tutors, classroom helpers and members of curriculum committees — the "artificial barriers" that keep parents out melt away. The result, she said, is a school more deeply rooted in its community, that can draw on the varied resources of that community to enrich children's education.

"I think that this thing about parents learning how to help kids at home simply isn't enough, and I think it is a way of keeping parents out of the school," Davenport said.

She cited research by Joyce Epstein from the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University, which identifies six essential components of parental involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-

proficiency. In centralized systems, the district either imposes instructional strategies or allows schools to choose from a limited menu.

Autonomous schools, however, have greater freedom to decide how to get their children to proficiency. In other words, these schools determine what instructional programs and strategies best meet the needs of their particular students.

Again, developing a coherent, site-based instructional program requires the principal and teachers to work as a team. Together they must develop the program, get the on-going training they need to make it succeed, and then examine data they generate to see how well it is working.

Schools visited by *The Term Paper* in Chicago and Edmonton set aside time for teachers to meet in various groupings to discuss instructional strategies and student work. Typically, grade-level

### For further information on this issue's topic:

<http://www.designsforchange.org/> — Designs for Change, Chicago public education research and advocacy organization

[www.ncrel.org](http://www.ncrel.org) — North Central Regional Education Laboratory, research organization on educational issues

<http://www.naschools.org/> — New American Schools - whole school design organization. Web site contains links to many research publications

<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/CPRE/> — U.S. Education Dept. links to research publications

<http://www.usc.edu/dept/education/cegov/> — University of Southern California Center on Educational Governance. Includes links to research by Priscilla Wohlstetter.

<http://www.epsb.edmonton.ab.ca/> — Edmonton Public Schools web site

<http://acct.multi1.cps.k12.il.us/> — Data site for Chicago Public Schools

<http://www.crosscity.org/> — Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform web site

Ergang also has built the school schedule to allow common planning time three days each week for teachers at each grade level.

Ergang and Assistant Principal Jane McDonald require all teachers, rookies and old pros alike, to submit lesson plans for review each week. Administrators grade a random sample of the plans on a rubric and return them to the teachers.

Teachers say the scrutiny is fine with them. "Curriculum and instruction is not dictated by the administration at this school," said Susan Rangel, a fifth-grade teacher who has been at Washington for four years. "We discuss it with them, and they act as facilitators. They structure what needs to be done."

On any given day, the school is full of parents, performing tasks ranging from the mundane — collating homework packets — to the more complex — working with a second-grade reading group. Parents at many low-income schools report feeling uncomfortable and unwelcome in the school building. But that clearly isn't the case at Washington.

"(Ergang) has an open-door policy and you can go to him with anything," said Darlene Hidalgo, president of the Washington PTA. "If you have suggestions or if you have a problem, any ideas, or if you just want to talk, he's always available."

McDonald said that if she had to sum up what makes Washington a top-flight school, she'd point to Ergang's clarity and his low-key, no-nonsense leadership style. "He really knows what he is doing, he is really dedicated and he is committed to it. He is absolutely, thoroughly committed to it, and that is what it takes."

### Daniel Boone Elementary School

West Rogers Park is known as a solidly middle- to upper-middle-class neighborhood. Houses and brick apartment buildings sit packed tightly

together on streets shaded by towering maple and oak trees.

But the student population of Daniel Boone Elementary School tells a different story, one that more accurately reflects the shifting demographics of this Northwest Side neighborhood.

Two-thirds of Boone's kindergarten through eighth grade students qualify for free or reduced-cost lunch, twice the percentage of a decade ago. Sixty percent of the students are non-white, many of them immigrants from

marks of successful schools everywhere.

Teachers and parents alike credit 10 years of strong and stable leadership under Paul Zavitovsky, who left the school at the end of the 2000-2001 school year. In his 10 years at Boone, Zavitovsky put in place a system of faculty committees that involved everyone, got teachers working from the same script, and made the staff feel invested in the school's success.

"One of the first things Paul did was, instead of operating top-down like



TEACHERS PLAY A KEY LEADERSHIP ROLE IN STRONG, AUTONOMOUS SCHOOLS.

Mexico, Southeast Asia, Pakistan and Arab countries.

Yet despite its relatively high poverty, Boone boasts test scores that match or exceed state averages. And as the school's population has grown poorer, test scores have risen. Visiting classrooms, one senses the enthusiasm and sense of calm and focus that are hall-

a factory model, he decided to expand horizontally," said expressive arts teacher Ruth Sidener. "He got ideas flowing both ways."

One set of committees focuses on operational issues, which frees another block of committees to work exclusively on curricular and instructional issues directly tied to student achievement.

"The LSC and the principal worked well together and I think that was the foundation," said Lucy Klocksins, a reading specialist in her eighth year at Boone. "And then upon that we built all these other layers of faculty leadership of different kinds. It makes people feel really vested in what happens here."

"At most schools where I've worked you were just told 'this is what you do' and you did it and you went home. Here, the attitude the LSC takes and the encouragement they give does somehow make us all feel vested in this. I've never worked at another school where teachers are in the building until 6 in the evening working on aligning a curriculum or whatever. That just isn't done most places."

Equally important, Boone has been blessed with a high-powered Local School Council that immerses itself in issues of curriculum and instruction that parents often avoid.

"That's my interest, because to me it's the heart of the school," said Evelyn Asch, a Boone parent (and college English professor) who chairs the council. "And we are not just a glorified PTA, raising money for new curtains for the auditorium."

Parents on Boone's LSC are doctors, lawyers and college professors. That's a far cry from the make-up of a typical LSC, and it does not accurately represent the overall population of the school. Teachers and parents say this has never been a point of contention within the school. Still, a lack of representation and involvement from all type of parents is troubling.

Resolving this problem is difficult, Asch said. "How do you overcome this? You bang your head against the wall a lot. I mean, you work at it and you work at it."

Strong leadership. Committed teachers working from a coherent plan they created. A school climate focused on student learning. A core of deeply involved parents. Boone embodies, or at least is working hard on embracing, the Five Essential Supports identified by Designs for Change and the Consortium on Chicago School Research. ■

**THE**  
**Term Paper**

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notable difference: parental involvement is less of a centerpiece here.

By law, every school in Alberta must have an active Parent Advisory Council. These councils, however, have little in common with Chicago's powerful Local School Councils or Denver's Collaborative Decision Making committees.

As the name suggests, Parent Advisory Councils have no decision-making authority. Instead, according to legislation that created the councils, they are charged with providing "advice and consultation to the principal and (school board) regarding educational issues."

Parent advocates, administrators and teachers in Edmonton say they are comfortable with this more constrained parental role. According to Dropko, draft legislation in 1995 called for parents to be granted decision-making authority. It was parents who objected to having that much power.

"Throughout the province, parents said loud and clear to the government 'we don't believe we can be accountable that way, we don't have all the skills and talents to make those decisions and we think we would like to provide good input instead. Let the experts (make the decisions).'"

Alberta Learning, the province education department, defines the primary role of councils as "a key venue for involving parents in the education of their children." This clearly is distinct from a school governance role.



EACH EDMONTON SCHOOL MUST HAVE A CLEAR INSTRUCTIONAL FOCUS.

Although the majority of council membership consists of parents, they tend to be run by the school principal, according to Elaine Decker, a district employee who serves as the main liaison to parent groups and committees.

Principals of two low-income schools in Edmonton said they would like to see more meaningful and effective parental involvement in their schools. But making it happen isn't easy.

"If you go into affluent communities

of course, you have (parents) demanding to run the school," said Colin Inglis of McCauley Elementary School. "They want complete control. In our situation, parents too easily give up that role, and that is something we have to work hard on, to try to help them find their place."

### School choice

Parents do play a key role, however, in keeping the Edmonton system responsive to the free market. In 1995,

when Alberta passed its liberal charter legislation, Edmonton Public Schools felt threatened by the potential for a massive exodus of students to charter schools. Dodsall, who had just become superintendent, shaped the system to be responsive to parental requests for special programs and schools with a particular focus.

"Sometimes, schools call with a proposal to change, but more often, we are getting calls from parents who indicate that they would like some type of other program," Dropko said.

Consequently, Edmonton today offers a dizzying array of choice schools. They include International Baccalaureate programs; bilingual programs in Arabic, Chinese (Mandarin), German, Hebrew and Ukrainian; professional ballet and hockey training programs; an all-girls middle and high school; an academy for aboriginal (Native American) students; and many more.

Clearly, despite being renown for its decentralized governance structure, Edmonton is still a work in progress. Inglis, having watched the process unfold for 20 years, said he thinks the work will never be done.

"When every employee in the district has that sense of ownership — 'this is my school' — that is when we will have arrived," he said. "But you know, that is going to be a forever thing, developing that sense, because staff always changes." ■

In theory, letting public schools govern themselves is a good idea. People closest to children and their families should know best how to meet local educational needs. This, in turn, should help boost student achievement, the ultimate goal of any reform effort.

In practice, however, site-based management has fallen short in many places. As Brian Weber's article in this issue illustrates, Denver's decade-old experiment with Collaborative Decision Making committees provides a sterling example of how good intentions can be undermined by inadequate implementation. There's no evidence that CDMs have led to better student achievement.

Fortunately, Superintendent Jerry Wartgow has a clear understanding of

the problems that beset the CDM structure. And he intends to make some changes. Wartgow lays much of the blame for past weaknesses at the feet of the system he now heads. Over the years, Wartgow says, DPS has served as a passive resource to CDMs. Wartgow intends to transform the central office into an active resource, one that reaches out to schools and offers help. If implemented properly, this would emulate the best of what Edmonton Public Schools offers.

Some school leaders interpret Wartgow's calls for "coherence" as an attempt by the bureaucracy to seize power from schools and undermine site-based governance. But this is not what Wartgow intends. He sees a crying need for schools to be aware of

what others around them are doing. If this means requiring elementary, middle and high schools within a feeder pattern to communicate and develop consistent educational approaches, so be it. It does not mean that 900 Grant Street will be forcing a particular set of textbooks on all schools, as some have claimed.

As DPS ponders how to restructure CDMs, the best role for parents is sure to be a point of controversy. Most, but not all education researchers say parents can do most for student achievement by working with their children at home and ensuring that they arrive at school each day well-rested, well-fed and ready to learn. Parental involvement in matters of curriculum, instruction, budget and personnel is

less important, researchers say.

This may be true in many cases, but forcing a limited role on parents can lead schools down a dangerous and elitist path. Some parents want to be involved in the daily details of school governance. Often, they offer a positive contribution, and a perspective that might otherwise be lacking.

Schools committed to parental involvement on many levels must, however, commit to training those parents to be effective participants in school governance. This may be a commitment many school leaders feel they don't have the time or resources to make. In the end, though, the goodwill and good ideas generated by parents make the investment a worthwhile one. —ALAN GOTTLIEB, EDITOR

## Charter Schools: Autonomy in Its Purest Form

By JIM GRIFFIN,  
COLORADO LEAGUE OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

Charter schools are perhaps the purest version of site-based decision-making in our public school system. Since the nation's first law passed in Minnesota (1991) laws in 37 states have authorized the creation of some 2,400 charter schools serving over 500,000 students. Among those 2,400 charter schools are everything from dual language Hawaiian-English schools, to online high schools, to relatively mainstream suburban charters.

Colorado passed its charter legislation in 1993.

Charter laws are in part an attempt to challenge state systems, under which school districts act as public education's controlling entity. Under this system, individual schools play a subservient role within centralized public school systems. Schools have limited freedom to chart their own course.

Charter schools represent a significant departure from that system. They are, in effect, a broad-based experiment in making schools the key unit of control in public education. Creating a school reform laboratory is one of the chief aims of charter school statutes across the country. Among other frequently cited goals for charter school legislation are:

- Improved student performance;
- Generating competition within the public school system;
- Expanding the range of education options for parents;
- Serving at-risk students;
- Serving as a laboratory for public school innovation.

Research from around the country validates many of the goals of charter legislation. A 1999 study out of Arizona found significant parental satisfaction with the charter school choices they made.

Charter schools have also demonstrated the promise (or popularity) of a variety of successful practices and programs that school districts have replicated.

Research also has found that charter school competition has forced districts to become more customer service oriented, offering new educational programs and making changes in existing programs.

The most significant evidence of improved student achievement is anecdotal information on parental satisfaction, long waiting lists, and healthy numbers of schools being renewed by their chartering authorities (lower than 10 percent closure rate — almost

always for fiscal or operational reasons).

Studies of student achievement in charter schools are generally state-specific, and with a large number of charters still in their formative years, those studies can be considered preliminary. All the same, a number show promising results.

Given the high number of charter schools serving low-income and urban populations, some history of success in serving at-risk populations is evident. In Texas, the state with arguably the highest percentage of charter schools serving at-risk students, performance among those at-risk students has exceeded performance among similar populations at regular public schools (*Texas Public Policy Foundation — text of the study at [www.tppf.org/education/nmcu/toc.html](http://www.tppf.org/education/nmcu/toc.html)*).

In Colorado, annual state reports demonstrate widespread charter school success on state-sponsored tests as well as those administered locally. Colorado's annual review "The State of Charter Schools in Colorado, 1999-2000: The Characteristics and Performance Record of Colorado Charter Schools" (March 2001), found that the average score of the charter schools on the Colorado Student Assessment Program exceeded the state average by a significant margin, and also exceeded the scores in "matched" public schools (ethnically and economically comparable groups of pupils in other public schools who are enrolled in academically comparable courses).

Site-based decision-making in charter schools can be largely reduced to three critical components of a school's operations: curriculum, personnel, and finances. Curricular control refers to a charter school's ability to identify the curriculum and overall academic program that meets its mission. Control over personnel grants the school freedom from state and local rules that dictate everything from educator qualifications to work hours to salary schedule. Finally, charter school control over the above two elements is supported and even magnified by each school's ability to allocate its financial resources in ways that best support its mission.

When adeptly wielded by a school's governing board, control over the above elements provides virtually complete local control and site-based decision-making. For example, Passage Charter School in Montrose is able to allocate resources toward the child-care and parenting training necessary to make its teen-parent school a suc-



THE NEWLY RENOVATED WYATT-EDISON, PICTURED HERE, IS ONE OF 7 CHARTER SCHOOLS IN DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

cess. In Marble and Clark, Colorado, parents used the charter act's flexibility and control to re-open community schools long-ago closed down by their districts as financially "inefficient."

Finally, unlike most mainstream public schools (which concentrate their foreign language instruction resources at the secondary level), a high percentage of elementary charter schools in Colorado begin Spanish language

instruction in kindergarten. Foreign language acquisition research shows this is a wise course for schools genuinely interested in having their students become proficient in a second language. ■

*Jim Griffin is head of the Colorado League of Charter Schools, a state-wide advocacy organization. He can be reached at 303-989-5356.*

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