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Romanoff kicks off school-reform tour Students offer wish list as school-reform tour kicks off

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By Jennifer Brown



Colorado House Speaker Andrew Romanoff asks Hill Middle School student Nya Ray, 12, what she likes best about the school's breakfast and lunch programs. Her answer: orange juice. At right is teacher Bern Douma. (Post / Lyn Alweis)

Eighth-grader Jacob Yolles told House Speaker Andrew Romanoff he wants classes with fewer students.

Sarah Naughton, 13, wishes she and her classmates could go on more field trips to "experience things." And Magali Ramirez put in a pitch to eliminate suspensions and instead force misbehaving kids to clean up the school.

On Tuesday, Romanoff visited Denver's Hill Middle School, 451 Clermont St., the first stop on a year-long, statewide school tour to find out what works in public education and what should change. It's part of a plan to mobilize revolutionary reform in Colorado.

A national report that calls for preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds, doubling teacher salaries and letting kids test out of high school after 10th grade is providing a framework for the conversation.

The "Tough Choices, Tough Times" report is energizing educators, parents and lawmakers looking for answers to failing public schools.

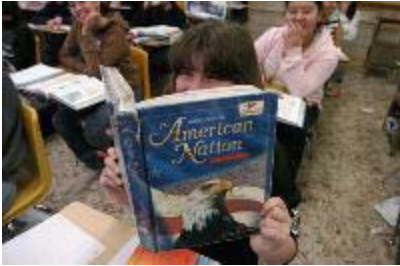
Most of the more than 500 people who packed the Colorado Convention Center two weeks ago for a presentation of the report wrote on questionnaires that they are ready for radical change.

Romanoff, a Denver Democrat, said he is visiting schools to make sure the "conversation is grounded in reality," and he hopes lawmakers will hold town-hall meetings on education throughout the summer.

The Piton and Donnell-Kay foundations, two Colorado education-advocacy groups, are developing a website and a series of statewide conversations. They want the discussion to stretch beyond a few education groups and make sure it isn't viewed exclusively as a Democratic initiative.

"It's much bigger than that," said Van Schoales, program officer for the Piton Foundation.

A year from now, education and political leaders hope to have a comprehensive plan that would shift resources within the education budget and lay out constitutional and legislative changes necessary for a major overhaul.



Stacey Tabb, 13, an eighth-grader at Hill Middle School, tells House Speaker Andrew Romanoff, not shown, that newer textbooks are needed. She's holding up her frayed 2000 edition of "The American Nation." Hill Middle School was the first stop on a statewide school-reform tour. (Post / Lyn Alweis)

At Hill Middle School, which has about 60 out-of-neighborhood kids who want to "choice in" next fall, students can round out their days with elective courses some other schools have phased out - drama, orchestra, wood shop or weight lifting.

The extra courses help engage kids who have other aspirations besides college, principal Don Roy said.

Romanoff plans today to visit KIPP Sunshine Peak Academy, a high-scoring public charter school that keeps kids in school until 5 p.m. and half days on Saturdays.

One of the recommendations in the report from the National Center on Education and the Economy is to pay teachers more than \$100,000 per year if they are willing to work as many hours as other professionals.

Another idea up for debate is the timing of the school day.

"We're in the 21st century dealing with public education like it's the 19th century," said Denver school-board member Jeannie Kaplan, calling it unnecessary for students to get out of school at 3 p.m. because most don't have to "go home and plow the fields."

Kaplan, who joined Romanoff at Hill Middle School, said Colorado needs "systematic change" in public education, but she does not agree with all the recommendations in the national report. For one, she is opposed to letting some students leave high school after 10th grade.

"There is too much to learn, and to end it two years early doesn't make a lot of sense," she said.

The report says that if states send all kids to preschool, pour extra money into schools serving disadvantaged students and recruit teachers from the top third of their class, then some students would be ready to start college after 10th grade.

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