

Rocky Mountain News

Lessons of hope

Valley View among 39 schools in state boosting learning for poor

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By Berny Morson

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Seven-year-old Delilah Flores was struggling to figure out which word best completes a sentence about why dinosaurs left the Earth.

"No guessing," second-grade teacher Deanna Blunt told her Tuesday. "You have to find the right word. So read the sentence to me."

Academic rigor - insisting that students work to get the right answer - is among the reasons why Valley View Elementary School north of Denver scores well year after year on statewide achievement tests, even though 62 percent of the children are from lower-income homes.

But Valley View, part of the Mapleton school district, has an additional distinction, according to a study released Tuesday. Students in the fourth and fifth grades earn scores higher than the statewide average for all students in reading and writing. The fifth-graders also bettered the state average in math.

Valley View is one of 39 Colorado schools in which children of poverty have exceeded the state average in one or more subjects for at least three years, the study funded by the Denver-based Donnell-Kay and Piton foundations concluded.

Rising to the challenge

Their success is significant because boosting learning among disadvantaged students is one of the major challenges that educators face. Poor students often lack the educational support at home that many middle-class students have.

"We can learn from these schools," said Dwight Jones, state education commissioner. He will be citing them as examples of success as he travels the state.

The Pueblo city district had the most schools - 12 - on the list of 39.

Four schools are in El Paso County's Fountain district, which Jones headed before he was named commissioner last year.

In addition to Valley View, metro-area schools on the list are the CEC Middle College Program in Denver, and Bear Creek Elementary School and Falcon Bluffs Middle School, both in Jefferson County.

With one exception, the successful schools used test data to identify struggling students for additional help, the study said. Teachers are critical in formulating the school program.

Valley View Principal Susan Gerhart said that the school will do what it takes to help students, including those who come to class hungry.

Valley View is a "back-to-basics" school.

That means teachers emphasize academics. For example, Blunt's second graders must master 20 spelling words a week.

Finding ways that work

But lessons can still be fun.

The sentence completion that had Delilah, the second-grader, temporarily stumped was part of a lesson centering on a story in which dinosaurs build cars and roads for people.

And Valley View doesn't boost test scores by jettisoning art. The halls are festooned with student creations. Students get homework Monday through Thursday, and parents are expected to help.

"That gives them a chance to be involved in a child's learning, and then they know the expectations of the school and the teacher and of their own child," Blunt said.

Working is not an excuse for parents to skip involvement, she said.

"Even if mom or dad's getting dinner ready, you (the student) can be reading out loud to them and they can be listening as you're reading," she said.

"Shut off the TV and use 10 or 15 minutes to read that story," she added. "What's more important? And to me, that's quality time spent with your child."

morsonb@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-954-5209

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