


State celebrates schools that are 'beating the odds'

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State celebrates schools that are 'beating the odds'. 02/26/08

DENVER – Closing the achievement gap between lower income students and higher income students is a universal issue that schools across the country face. The Colorado Department of Education is celebrating programs who are able to do just that.

"This is about what can happen when folks are able to beat the odds," said Commissioner Dwight Jones with the Colorado Department of Education. "And, what lessons can be learned from doing that."

The state worked with the Donnell-Kay Foundation and Piton Foundation to study what makes schools successful when dealing with lower income students. Statistically, lower income students do not score as well as higher income students on achievement tests like the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) tests.

However, the foundations identified 39 schools statewide that outscored the state average on the CSAPs in at least two subjects for at least three consecutive years.

The study entitled, "Profiles of Success," focuses on eight of those schools located around the state to examine what characteristics they have share so other schools can learn from

their examples.

"It probably is around taking what we know works, and you may be doing a portion of that, but how do you fine tune that?" said Jones.

Valley View K-8 in Adams County is one the eight schools featured in the report. The school had 63 percent of its students qualify for the federal Free and Reduced Lunch program, a common measurement of the poverty in schools. Yet, students there performed well on the

CSAPS compared to schools with similar populations.

"I see other schools within the district. I see other schools in neighboring districts and their demographics are the same and it's not happening over there," said Susan Gerhart, school director of Valley View.

The report states that Valley View and the other seven schools share 10 common traits:

1. A culture of high expectations and accountability for all students.
2. Targeted assessments and intensive use of data to guide instruction.
3. Individualized support for struggling students.
4. Active engagement of teachers in school leadership and decision-making.
5. Substantial time for collaborative planning and options for professional development.
6. A commitment to core academics and standards, but not at the expense of other important learning in the arts and humanities.
7. Stable and consistent leadership.
8. Small learning communities.
9. The flexibility to use resources to support student needs and reinforce school culture.
10. An economically integrated student-body.

"I think the things that go on here are just what needs to be happening in education," said Susan Leggett, a 2nd grade teacher at Valley View.

She says high expectations, academic rigor and teamwork are the most important keys to their success.

"I expect the same from every child regardless of what goes on at home or what they have at home," said Leggett. "And, if we're all on board doing the same thing, the same way, we have the same expectations and it's just like every child in this building is mine."

Commissioner Jones says the state will send the report to every district in the state on top of creating a Best Practices Guide to help other schools tackle the achievement gap in their own way.

Recently, schools in Denver and Aurora sought autonomy to make decisions without approval from the district or the school board. Jones says giving schools a degree of flexibility to make decisions on their own is part of the solution.

"At some point, the folks that are held most accountable should have the flexibility to do the work that makes sense," said Jones.

Gerhart believes that sharing concepts of success will work at other schools around Colorado.

"I think every school could come in and glean something from Valley View and take it back to tailor to them," said Gerhart.

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