

In the Denver Post December 27, 2008

Education needs a better remedy

If remediation rates are ever going to go down, Colorado will need more innovative approaches to its staid education system.

The Denver Post

The numbers are stark: 30 percent of college freshmen in Colorado need to take a remedial class in at least one subject.

The cost is staggering: Roughly \$30 million in state tax dollars and tuition costs each year.

In 2003, 25 percent of freshmen needed some form of remediation. Clearly, we're heading in the wrong direction. And as the state plunges into recession, no one is going to throw more money at the problem. Nor should they.

It's time for innovation.

The large number of students who just recently were deemed fit for a high school diploma yet aren't prepared for college courses is a K-12 problem.

There are no silver bullets or easy fixes, but just tinkering around the edges of reform, as we've done over

the past decade, isn't working.

Some educators and a few politicians get it.

Witness last year's legislation by state Senate President Peter Groff and Sen. Nancy Spence to give schools more autonomy.

The idea is to allow some schools to shed some of the entanglements forced on them by districts and teachers unions, allowing schools to make their own decisions on spending, the length of the school day and year, course content, hiring and teacher pay.

Principal Kristin Waters of Denver's Bruce Randolph School is a pioneer of sorts in this autonomy experiment. Before the Groff-Spence law passed, she successfully petitioned the Denver school district in 2007 for increased autonomy. She introduced Saturday classes, after-school

tutoring and summer school for students who were lagging.

The early results? Test scores this year showed an increase for all tested grades in nearly all subjects.

One small step in the right direction.

Earlier this month, the Adams 50 School District announced sweeping reform. The district will eliminate grade levels and instead group students based on what they know, allowing them to advance to the next level after they have proved proficiency, The Post's Jeremy P. Meyer wrote.

"If they can pull this off, it will be a lighthouse for America's challenged school districts," said Richard DeLorenzo, the consultant who implemented a standards-based model in Alaska and is

working with Adams 50. "It will change the face of American education."

Will it work? No one knows. But we do know, with some certainty, that the tired model they've been using for decades is not working. Funding for K-12 education will continue to grow even as the state grapples with recession because of 2000's Amendment 23. But since a political consensus has never been built in this state for early childhood education, it will be on the chopping block. That's unfortunate.

If remediation rates are ever going to go down, it seems the state will need to invest in more early childhood education and embrace more innovative approaches to our staid education system.

Letter to the Denver Post Printed January 4, 2009

Re: "Adams 50 skips grades, lets kids be pacesetters," Dec. 21 news story.

Congratulations to the Adams 50 School District for its decision to eliminate grade levels and to group students according to knowledge. A typical first-grade class will have some children more like 8- or 9-year-olds, while others will resemble 3- to 4-year-olds. The rest are spread out between these extremes. Grouping them according to language development and general knowledge makes a lot of sense.

Many Americans think students should be treated all the same. This is true in the area of respecting individuals and equal rights. But students have many differences in needs and capabilities. Research shows there to be eight or more kinds of intelligence. Schools traditionally have tried to develop verbal and mathematical skills, plus foster healthy habits and interactions with others. Teachers face a huge task in trying to answer such a wide range of needs. It is good to hear that a school district is willing to try something different.

Jeanne Hull, Gunnison