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A NEW TWIST IN TURNAROUND

## 8 struggling schools opt in to Colorado's new turnaround network

BY NIC GARCIA - JULY 10, 2014

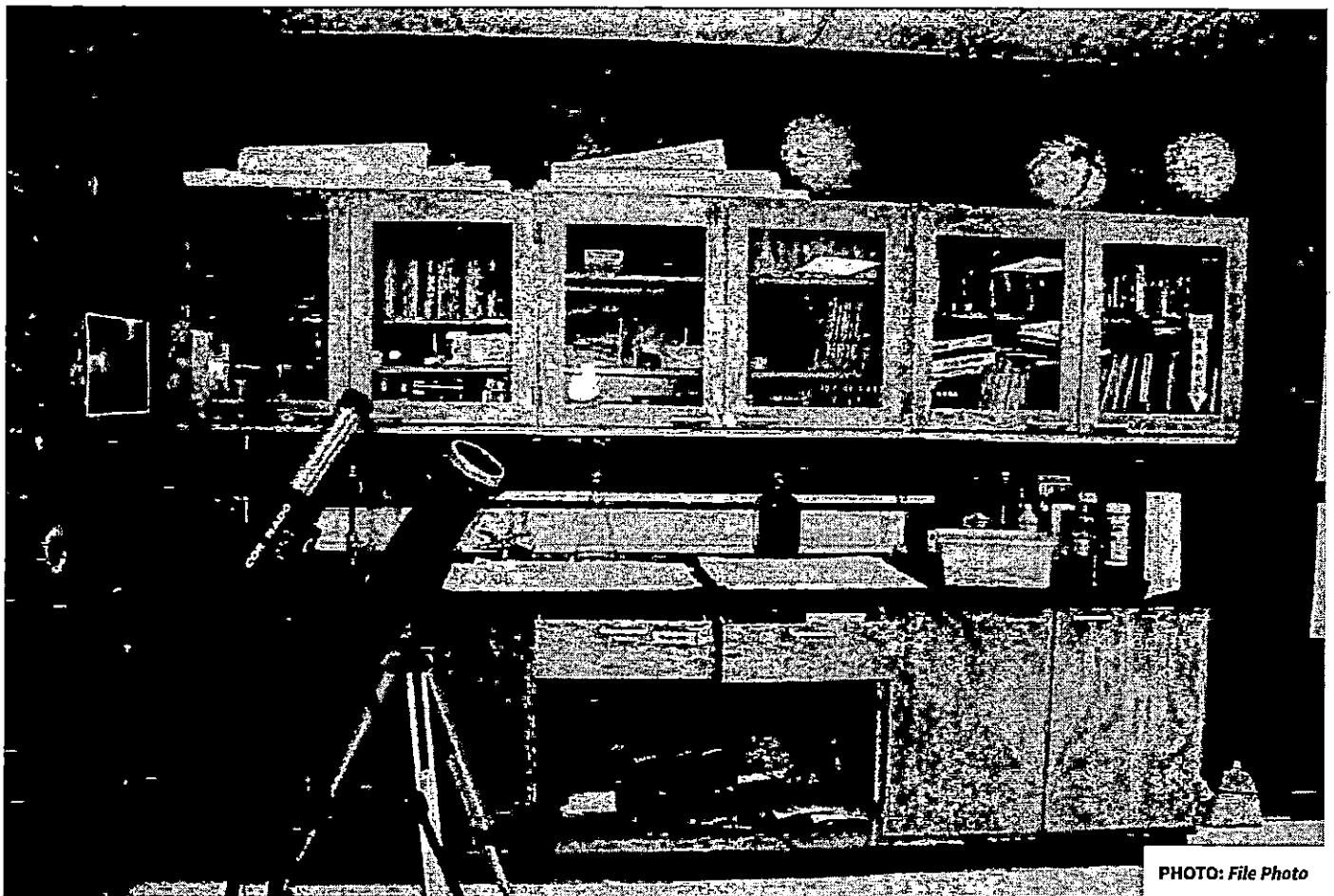


PHOTO: File Photo

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When Rob Stein, chief academic officer for the Roaring Fork School District, learned third-grade reading scores at Crystal River Elementary School dipped this year, he called his old friend and former colleague Peter Sherman to ask for some advice.

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Unlike his other elementary schools, which saw spikes in reading scores, something just wasn't working at Crystal River, which has been on and off the state's school accountability watch list for four years.

Sherman, the state's executive director of school and district performance, suggested Crystal River apply to be a part of his new endeavor: the Colorado Turnaround Network, a state-run but voluntary co-op of schools working together to boost student achievement.

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The network borrows some inspiration from efforts by other states that share a federal mandate to track and improve low-performing schools.

But unlike controversial initiatives in Louisiana and Tennessee, which have concentrated weak schools in districts run directly by the state, Colorado is leaving control of the turnaround schools up to local districts. Colorado also formed the network quietly, rather than trumpet its tough-on-struggling school approach, as some other states have done. And instead of requiring all low-performing schools to undergo the same changes, Colorado is asking schools to opt in — and to decide for themselves what changes would help students.

### Colorado's Turnaround Network

- **Adams 12 Five Star Schools:** Hillcrest Elementary
- **Adams County School District 14:** Rose Hill Elementary
- **Pueblo City Schools:** Haaff Elementary, Irving Elementary
- **Calhan School District RJ1:** Calhan Elementary
- **Roaring Fork School District:** Crystal River Elementary
- **Lake County School District:** West Park Elementary, Lake County Middle

The collaborative approach piqued Stein's interest. "What I like about the network is that it's do-with, not do-to," he said.

The eight schools in the network — which include Stein's Crystal River — met for the first time last month to hear more about Sherman's vision for school-based solutions to four kinds of challenges: culture, internal operations, personnel, and district relations.

Entering the turnaround network doesn't take schools or districts off of the state's "accountability clock," in which persistently low-scoring schools get five years to improve or their school districts could face state sanctions.

But it does offer a last-ditch effort for schools that have failed to boost performance for as much as four years already.

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"Our belief and one of our theories of action is that we can provide some resources, some frameworks, for what we believe is necessary for success," Sherman said. "We believe strongly that solutions for low-performing schools will come from the local communities."

Balancing its influence against Colorado's cherished local control could be a challenge for the turnaround network.

Pat Sanchez, the superintendent of the Adams 14 School District, said he got on board only after becoming convinced that the state's priorities for Rose Hill Elementary, his lowest-scoring school, corresponded to the district's own. The state network will provide training for the school's new leader and will offer support to help the school reach the district's reading and math goals.

"A big selling point is that the network will not create a new set of priorities for my principal," Sanchez said. "She won't have two sets of marching orders. The state is about supplementing that will hopefully help accelerate learning."

Colorado's approach has benefits, according to Ashley Jochim, a researcher for the Center on Reinventing Public Education, or CRPE, who has researched the role of state education agencies like CDE.

Because the state is acting more like a broker of resources and advice than directly running the schools, the state's limited turnaround staff of five isn't likely to be strained.

But Jochim said the resources will only be fruitful if principals are allowed to adopt the best ideas, even if they run counter to district policies — something that could be a challenge when it comes to personnel, budget, and curriculum.

If Colorado stumbles, it won't be alone, Jochim said.

"We're not in a place where anyone has done [a turnaround network] right," she said.

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By **Nic Garcia** @NICGARCIA NGARCIA@CHALKBEAT.ORG

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IN THIS STORY: A NEW TWIST IN TURNAROUND, ADAMS 14 SCHOOL DISTRICT, COLORADO DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, PAT SANCHEZ, ROARING FORK SCHOOL DISTRICT, ROB STEIN, SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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DIVERSITY DELAYED

## NYC is expanding a program to boost diversity at its elite high schools. But it mostly helps white and Asian students

BY ALEX ZIMMERMAN - 12 HOURS AGO

PHOTO: *Alex Zimmerman*

Stuyvesant High School will begin participating in the Discovery program this year.

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RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

# Voices from turnaround: What five schools are doing to boost student achievement

BY NIC GARCIA, SARAH GLEN - JANUARY 6, 2015



PHOTO: Nicholas Garcia

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The state of Colorado labels more than 100 schools with the same term: failing.

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But no two turnaround schools, as they're sometimes called, are failing for the exact same reason. And it's unlikely that the solution the schools need is the same.

That's probably because the schools and the communities they serve are just as unique. Some schools are urban, some are rural. Some serve large populations of English language learners. Others serve second, third, and fourth generation Coloradans.


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Last month, nine schools from five school districts that are participating in the state's voluntary Turnaround Network gathered at a Colorado Springs hotel for a lesson on teacher feedback. In its first year, the network is run by the Colorado Department of Education and provides mentoring and independent analysis for its partnered schools.

At the seminar, Chalkbeat asked school leaders about their most important work to improve student learning. Listen to the clips below and then explore the turnaround network school profiles on the map below. Clips are color coded to match their schools on the map.



[sarahglen](#)  
Nancy Murri, Westpark Elementary School, ...



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ROCKY MOUNTAIN TURNAROUND

# How a Colorado school district turned things around at 10,000 feet above sea level

BY NIC GARCIA - MARCH 30, 2018



Students from Lake County High School work outside in December. (Photo by Nic Garcia/Chalkbeat)

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**L**EADVILLE — When Ben Cairns took over as principal at Lake County High School in 2016, he made a deal with his students.

Those who showed more growth on the state's English and math tests than 90 percent of their peers across the state would earn steak dinners with the principal for themselves and their parents.

Cairns, a former Denver charter school principal hired to turn around a school that had been struggling academically for years, figured only two or three students would accomplish such an extraordinary feat.

Then last summer, Cairns received a phone call from a district administrator: "You're in trouble."

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Sixteen students had made more than enough academic growth — a key data point that measures how much students learn during a year compared to peers with similar test results — to earn dinner with the principal at the local steakhouse, Quincy's.

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School improvement efforts look a little different at 10,000 feet above sea level. While many of the strategies used by the Lake County school district are familiar to urban settings, they've been retrofitted to meet the needs of the 1,000-student school district that's 100 miles west of Denver. A new curriculum coupled with intense training for teachers is showing progress. And the district has had plenty of help from outside consultants paid for in large part by state and federal grants.

For the first time in seven years, the district's students showed enough progress on the state's English and math tests to stave off state intervention for continued poor performance. At the same time, the district, and its intermediate and high schools have earned one of the state's highest quality ratings. Now state education leaders and other observers of Colorado's efforts to improve schools are heralding the work in Lake County as a model others — especially those far from the state's urban center — can replicate.

"There is no magic solution for every community seeking to improve student achievement," Katy Anthes, Colorado's education commissioner, said in a statement.

“It’s hard, complex work, and the solutions differ based on the local context. Lake County School District has shown dramatic improvement, and we think there’s a lot we can learn from them.”

Despite sitting high in the Rocky Mountains, Lake County looks like many of the struggling urban school districts in Colorado and across the country. Most students are non-white; 70 percent are Hispanic. That’s a big swing since 1990 when the mountain school district was predominately white. Now, forty percent are learning English as a second language. And 67 percent of students in 2016 qualified for free or reduced-price lunches, a measure of poverty.

Source: Colorado Department of Education; Graphic by Sam Park/Chalkbeat

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What makes the turnaround in Lake County so appealing to observers is that the district bucked the conventional wisdom of the day. Unlike most places working to improve schools, there were no mass layoffs of teachers or principals. No schools were closed. And handing over management of the schools to charter operators wasn’t considered an option given the distance from the state’s urban Front Range, where most successful charter schools operate.

Instead, district officials adopted a new way of teaching — one they hoped would better engage students. Teachers were given more training on how to teach core subjects with a unified curriculum, in some instances from groups known for their work in urban school improvement. The district added more services for students and families, including a health center. The district applied for and was awarded millions of grant dollars. And the district’s staff and governing board received coaching to focus on the difficult work of school improvement.

“The belief that the people are the problem is wrong,” said Wendy Wyman, the district’s superintendent. “Our teachers are professionals, and we believe in them. We’re proving that there is a framework or a pathway for rural schools to improve that’s about building capacity within your own community.”

Some education activists and researchers have long been critical of the kind of school reform efforts that call for total disruption.

“The notion that you just have to blow it up and start fresh has just proven to be a failure time and time again,” said Michelle Renée Valladares, the associate director at the National Education Policy Center based at the University of Colorado, Boulder. “Creating more instability in an already unstable situation does not help.”

\* \* \*

Since 2010, Colorado has rated the quality of its schools largely based on results from standardized English and math tests. Schools that perform the worst are flagged and put on a watchlist. If they don't improve quickly enough, the state is required to step in and direct drastic action.

Wendy Wyman, the Lake County School District's superintendent, watches students as they line up after recess. (Photo by Nic Garcia/Chalkbeat)

At the same time, the Obama administration created a school improvement grant program that came with millions of dollars in an effort to get schools in Colorado and around the nation to improve at a quicker clip. In creating the program, the administration touted controversial methods of school reform that often pushed for the firing of school principals and required teachers to reapply for their jobs. (The program was eventually deemed unsuccessful.)

The Lake County district, which sits at the foot of the highest peaks in the Rocky Mountains, was among the first to receive a failing grade from the state's new school quality rating system.

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School leaders felt that the sort of disruption that was typically used to turn around schools in urban settings wouldn't work for their isolated mountain community.

“We could have fired everyone,” said Amy Frykholm, the school board's president. “But then we'd have to hire them right back. And that'd be devastating for morale.”

Instead, Wyman and her team embraced a total instructional and cultural shift.

In 2013, the district adopted the EL Education model, which shifts focus away from lectures and tests toward research and long-term projects that tackle big problems. (EL Education was formerly known as Expeditionary Learning.) Often, after a project

is completed, students spend time outdoors connecting their learning to real life problems and nature.

Third-graders end their lesson on the history of the 10th Mountain Division, a mountain warfare unit of the United States Army that trained near Leadville during World War II, with a ski trip. More recent military veterans from the unit join them.

“It bridges the community with the learning,” said Kim Kortkamp, the district’s academic dean for literacy.

Along with a new curriculum and teaching techniques, the expeditionary philosophy asks students and teachers to behave differently. There are regular “crew” meetings, where students meet with teachers to discuss their academic goals and receive emotional support. And the district adopted a list of shared expectations – what they call the “habits of a learner.”

The habits, which are posted in classrooms through the district, include responsibility, curiosity, and collaboration.

\* \* \*

**L**ast fall, first-grade students at Lake County’s elementary school were practicing how to use capital letters and periods to form a basic sentence.

Teacher Ally Duncan zig-zagged her way through the room, crouching down to meet students at eye level to check their work.

Ally Duncan, an elementary school teacher in Lake County, works with students on sentence structure. (Photo by Nic Garcia/Chalkbeat)

Duncan was practicing “aggressive monitoring,” an effort to catch students making mistakes in real time and correct them immediately.

The strategy is one of dozens that teachers in Lake County have learned from the district’s classroom consultants.

The Achievement Network, or A-Net, a nonprofit that works to improve teaching in struggling schools, is just one of several consultants and organizations the Lake County school district has invested in since it began its turnaround work. The outside help is in part a recognition that school improvement is difficult work that few educators are prepared to do.

“My teacher college didn’t teach me how to turn around a school,” said Wyman, the superintendent, who spent most of her career in Colorado schools that serve students from low-income homes.

Source: Colorado Department of Education; Graphic by Sam Park/Chalkbeat

Along with A-Net, principals and their assistants at each school have a coach to help them focus their time on coaching teachers on instruction. District leaders, including the school board, have received training from a variety of state-run school improvement programs, as well as the New York-based Relay Graduate School of Education. And the district is investing in some online tutoring programs to help students catch up.

“Wendy has done a nice job of strategically partnering with other organizations to draw in expertise the district needed to change,” said Peter Sherman, who recently left his post as the executive director of school performance at the Colorado Department of Education. His office at the state education department helped manage some of the training and grants Lake County received. “They’ve strategically taken advantage of the resources and expertise out there to their advantage.”

While some Colorado school districts have been let down by consultants helping with their turnaround work, Lake County says it’s been important for them to tailor all of their training and support to real needs. And if something isn’t working, they jettison it.

“We learned to say to our partners, ‘This is who we are. This is what we need,’” Wyman said. “If something isn’t working, we try to fail quickly and try something different.”

Source: Colorado Department of Education; Graphic by Sam Park

The new curriculum and training has not come free. In fact, school improvement work is very expensive.

Each of the district’s consultants or programs — EL Education, the Achievement Network, the Relay Graduate School of Education, and the National SAM Innovation Project — cost annually between \$10,000 and \$40,000, Wyman said.

To help pay for the work and other needs — including infrastructure and buildings — the district has applied for and won more than \$24 million-dollars in grants. The lion’s share was a \$16 million grant for a new school. The next largest block, \$3.2 million, was specifically for its turnaround work.

It paid for principal and teacher training, travel, and consultants.

“The figures may be surprising for their sheer size, particularly given the size of our district,” Wyman said. “However, the magnitude of the funding validates another core belief we have come to hold: It does take resources – and even significant ones – to do the work of reforming an entire system.”

\* \* \*

**L**ake County school leaders focused most of their early school improvement work on younger grades. The elementary and middle school were the first to adopt the expeditionary model.

Then in 2016, Wyman made one of her most important hires: former charter school principal Ben Cairns.

Roxi Aldaz, a 24-year veteran of the Lake County School District, leads a class at the high school in Leadville. (Photo by Nic Garcia/Chalkbeat)

Cairns would seem an unlikely fit for a small rural school district that had a strong teachers union. Cairns got his start in Denver Public Schools and cut his teeth leading schools at DSST, Denver’s high-achieving charter school network. He would go on to open DSST Cole High in one of Denver’s historically black neighborhoods that had long lacked a quality school.

But Lake County teachers, including the leaders of the county’s teachers union, welcomed Cairns.

“We needed a really strong leader to step in,” said Roxi Aldaz, a 24-year veteran of the district and co-president of the Lake County Education Association. “That’s Ben.”

According to Aldaz and other teachers, the high school lacked order and discipline. Cairns, who had been looking to relocate his family to the mountains, would be able to provide that. Before Cairns was hired, though, Lake County sent teachers to see him in action at DSST. They were amazed.

Now, Lake County High is a place where students put away their cell phones and are never late for class. (If they are late, there is lunch detention, no questions.) Instruction begins as soon as students take their seats. And teachers are attempting to establish common expectations in every classroom.

“We put a lot of time and energy and thought into school culture and working with teachers around what their perceived needs were,” Cairns said. “There’s been a big emphasis on building relationships and holding kids accountable. The mix I always try to bring is restorative justice along with a little bit of the no-nonsense approach.”

\* \* \*

**W**yman and her team of educators are well aware that dozens of Colorado schools that have jumped off the state’s academic probation list, like they did last year, have slid back.

“It’s going to be a little back and forth until we steady out,” said Cheryl Talbot, the district’s math dean.

A Lake County elementary school student works on an assignment away from his desk. (Photo by Nic Garcia/Chalkbeat)

And there are still plenty of obstacles for the district to work through.

The district’s average attendance rate is 88 percent — far lower than anyone would want. The graduation rate is well below the state average. Getting parents involved is difficult. Most parents work outside of the county limits at nearby ski resorts. To schedule a parent meeting could include two hours of travel time over snowy passes. And despite some improvement, teacher turnover remains high.

Source: Colorado Department of Education; Graphic by Sam Park/Chalkbeat

And while students are making large leaps on state tests, the district’s average proficiency rates still remain lower than the state average.

“(This) for us is by no means the end point,” said Dan Leonhard, Lake County’s Intermediate School’s culture and operations manager, referring to the color associated with the state’s highest quality rating. “This doesn’t mean we’re there. It means we’ve made success in what we’ve been doing now and we have to keep the foot on the pedal.”

But all the work is paying off and has been noticed — perhaps most importantly — by students.

Leo Littlepage, a fourth-grader, said school was more difficult two years ago because teachers weren’t helpful. Teachers would hand him and his classmates worksheets with little instruction, he said.

“Here’s your math, you’re on your own,” Littlepage recalled.

He and other students said they often felt lost. But now, there’s more explanation from teachers and fewer worksheets.

“The teachers thought because it was easy for them, that it’d be easy for us — but it wasn’t,” Ever Leon, a fourth-grader said. “Now they’re explaining the steps.”

Some fourth-graders, who spent the first part of the school year learning about poets such as Robert Frost, Walire Worth, and Walter D. Myers, said classrooms aren’t perfect yet. There’s a lot of repeating material in math, and their spelling words aren’t tough enough.

“I want our teachers to challenge us more,” said Giselle Sarabia. “I want to think hard.”

Students at Lake County Intermediate School line up after recess. Behind them is one of the state’s highest mountain peaks. (Photo by Nic Garcia/Chalkbeat)

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**By Nic Garcia** @NICGARCIA NGARCIA@CHALKBEAT.ORG

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IN THIS STORY: ACHIEVEMENT NETWORK, COLORADO DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, KATY ANTHES, LAKE COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT, SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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DIVERSITY DELAYED

## NYC is expanding a program to boost diversity at its elite high schools. But it mostly helps white and Asian students

BY ALEX ZIMMERMAN - 12 HOURS AGO

PHOTO: Alex Zimmerman

Stuyvesant High School will begin participating in the Discovery program this year.

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For the third year in a row, a smaller share of black and Hispanic students are benefiting from a program designed to boost diversity at the city's elite and hyper-segregated high schools.

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The city's recent expansion of the program has disproportionately benefited Asian students, who are already overrepresented at the eight specialized high schools, according to new data.

The initiative, known as the Discovery program, aims to promote diversity at the schools by offering admission to students from low-income families who score just below the entrance exam cutoff if they successfully complete summer coursework.

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But as Discovery has more than tripled in size since Mayor Bill de Blasio took office, it has consistently had little effect on improving racial diversity at the schools, where just 10.4 percent of this year's admissions offers went to black or Hispanic students — a number that has gone virtually unchanged for years. (Nearly 70 percent of the city's students are black or Hispanic.)

In 2017, the most recent year for which data is available, white and Asian students comprised 78 percent of the students who were offered admission through Discovery, a slight increase from the previous year. By contrast, black and Hispanic students made up between 18-20 percent of the program's offers, a percentage that has been shrinking since 2015.

Advocates who are pushing the city to diversify the schools say the latest data proves more aggressive efforts are needed.

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LESSONS LEARNED

# Thornton Elementary improved enough to get off the state's watch list. Here's how.

BY YESENIA ROBLES - OCTOBER 12, 2016



PHOTO: Yesenia Robles

Third graders recite the pledge of allegiance in class at Thornton Elementary School.

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Each morning, Thornton Elementary School teachers try to make eye contact with every kid they greet. Students are expected to speak in complete sentences in class.

Reading at the school has gotten a complete overhaul, with teachers working from more focused plans.

#### SPONSOR

These and other changes over the last three years — some small, others substantial — helped spare Thornton Elementary from state sanctions just in time, school leaders believe.

As a handful of Colorado school districts and a dozen schools face possible state intervention for persistent poor performance, strategies employed by schools that avoided that fate provide possible lessons for those wishing to drop off or never join the state's academic watch list.

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Preliminary school ratings show Thornton Elementary, part of the Adams 12 Five Star School District, has fallen off that list.

Districts and schools that didn't make enough improvement now face action including the possibility of closure or takeover by a management company or charter school operator.

It will be the first time under the current accountability system the state reaches the step of handing out consequences to schools or districts that have five consecutive years of low ratings.

Administrators and teachers at Thornton Elementary have been tracking data about their nearly 400 students for the past few years and knew things were improving, but say having the data from the state helps.

"It's really affirming to us," principal Betsy Miller said. "The things we're doing are working. Now we stay the course. We have to continue the great things we have started."

About 39 percent of students in the school aren't fluent in English. About 76 percent qualify for free or reduced-priced lunches, a measure of poverty.

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Thornton Elementary students had higher academic growth than the state this year, but the number of students reaching or exceeding expectations on state reading tests is still low. Based on PARCC tests, 21 percent of third graders in 2016 met or exceeded expectations on reading tests, up from 14 percent who met or exceeded expectations from 2015's third-grade class.

The large number of students learning English, and the large number of students with trouble reading, led Miller to focus changes on improving literacy.

"We know that kids have to be able to learn to read," assistant principal Tracie Stauffer said. "If they have strong literacy skills, it spills over to other areas."

One of the school's big changes was adding new reading material that included books and teacher lessons that tie to state academic standards. The curriculum supplement, from Mondo Educational Publishing, gave teachers lesson suggestions, rather than asking teachers to piece lessons together from different books and sources. This way, there is a threaded focus in all the lessons, Stauffer said.

The materials also help teachers adjust lessons for students who aren't fluent in English yet.

Most of the day, English language learners are in mixed classrooms with students who already speak English. They also spend about 45 minutes in the middle of the day with one of the school's three language coaches — grouped by their level of English proficiency.

The Mondo curriculum support is now used in 10 of the district's schools. But whether or not to adopt it is up to school leaders, not mandated by the district.

"We are not necessarily a one-size-fits-all district," said Tracy Dorland, chief academic officer for the Adams 12 school district. "We do believe in common curriculum. We do believe that schools need some flexibility. I believe in Adams 12 we have really found a balance between shared commitments across our district and across our schools and the flexibilities we sometimes need to give."

Then there are the more modest changes the school put in place.

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One recent morning, third grade teacher Molly Stenzel asked her students to tell her one good choice they would make on their field trip later in the day. The question was written on the whiteboard in front of the children sitting on the carpet. They raised their hands and repeated the beginning of the question to form their answers in complete sentences — a requirement.

In a class of first graders next door, a teacher asked her students to remember an adventure from a story they had all read. Some spoke slower than others, but all formed their complete sentences. Their teacher reached and gave them high-fives or clapped after they answered.

Last year, the school also got the added help of a full-time counselor, paid for by the district, to help lower discipline issues in the school. Surveys from the start and end of the year showed kids reported feeling less stressed and more confident.

Other schools in the Adams 12 district also showed improvement and dropped off the state's watch list, but Thornton Elementary was the only one facing a deadline this year to show improvements before facing consequences. The one remaining district school on the list has more time to improve.

One takeaway from Thornton Elementary that Adams 12's Dorland said the district would like to replicate at other schools, especially struggling schools, is the ability to send more school leaders to the same training that taught Miller and others a new way to critique teachers.

It's a cycle of teacher observation, about once a month at Thornton Elementary, followed by "bite-sized feedback," suggestions on making that change and then more observations. The training was from the Relay Graduate School of Education, a stand-alone, graduate charter school with master's, teacher residency and principal fellowship programs. The New-York based program now operates a Denver campus and does work with several area districts.

"They worked incredibly hard to give teachers bite-size feedback that isn't really global," Dorland said. "It's more like, 'Try this tomorrow.' That made a huge difference. Now our teachers really want that feedback."

4/9/2018

Thornton Elementary improved enough to get off the state's watch list. Here's how.

At Thornton Elementary, teacher coaches will soon get the training, too.

Dorland said Thornton's improvements are evidence that the training worked.

"We have some results that we're pretty excited about," Dorland said. "Results matter."

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**By Yesenia Robles** @YESENIAROBLES YROBLES@CHALKBEAT.ORG

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DIVERSITY DELAYED

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BY ALEX ZIMMERMAN - 12 HOURS AGO

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In 2017, the most recent year for which data is available, white and Asian students comprised 78 percent of the students who were offered admission through Discovery, a slight increase from the previous year. By contrast, black and Hispanic students made up between 18-20 percent of the program's offers, a percentage that has been shrinking since 2015.

Advocates who are pushing the city to diversify the schools say the latest data proves more aggressive efforts are needed.

"It's clear at this point that it's not an effective approach," said Lazar Treschan, youth policy director at the Community Service Society and who has studied specialized high school admissions.

City officials argue that the program is valuable because it gives low-income students a leg up and more black and Hispanic students gain admission through the program (roughly 20 percent) than they do during the normal admissions process (10.4 percent).

They have grown the program in recent years: 202 students were offered admission through Discovery in 2017, more than three times as many students as 2014. (Despite the program's expansion, it represented just 4 percent of admissions offers in 2017.)

NEWS &gt; YOURHUB

## How the Colorado Principal of the Year turned her school around to “good, better, best”

Every morning Golden leads her school in a chant: “Never let it rest, til your good is better, and your better is best”

By **ALEX SCOVILLE** | [ascoville@denverpost.com](mailto:ascoville@denverpost.com) | The Denver Post

March 21, 2018 at 12:54 am

Principal Kristin Golden helped turn Riverdale Elementary School in Thornton around through an expert mix of data-driven teacher feedback, engaging school culture and her warm personality. The results speak for themselves: Over her four-year tenure at Riverdale, the school's performance ratings jumped from 40 percent to nearly 75 percent.

That success landed Golden a top honor. On March 5, she was named Colorado's National Distinguished Principal of the Year by the National Association of Elementary School Principals. In the fall, she'll travel to Washington, D.C. to mingle with and learn from the other 49 honored principals.

We asked Golden to explain her award-winning leadership, the chant she leads with students every morning and if she watches the popular CW television show baring the same name as her school.

*Answers have been edited and condensed for clarity.*

**YourHub:** So how'd it feel to accept this honor?

Golden: Oh my goodness, I don't even know how to explain to you how it felt. What I keep telling people is that I don't feel like I won this award alone. We have worked so extremely hard to do what we need to do to make it right for kids. I feel like the award is a representation of all our work together. I'm ecstatic! But I share this award with everyone.

**What do you credit for your success at Riverdale? How does the data-driven instruction work?**

Every week our teachers come together in grade-level teams and with our instructional coach to look at student data. I'm not talking about attendance or grades, we're looking at assessment data. Let's say it's on short vowels. We'll keep data on each student, which students are getting (phonics), which students are not, is it just short “a,” or is it short “e”? We get really nitty gritty. We'll look at the data and address those gaps. Our teachers collect data on every student based on those goals every week, and we share that data as a team and we collectively decide what we need to do to meet the needs of those students. We share all the students. My entire staff really cares about each student and the success of each student.

**How did you engage parents and bring them on board?**

We're a small little neighborhood school. We have always had great attendance at school functions. Our parents have always trusted us with our students. I'll give you an example: In December, we have an evening event called “Writing in a Winter Wonderland.” Every student in our building has a proficient piece of writing that is not only posted in the hallways, but in the past few years we've also added QR codes so parents can scan them and hear their child read them. People are wearing PJs and drinking hot chocolate. We're really celebrating their literacy, but we get such a great turnout because it's so much fun.

What's this chant you started every morning?

"Good better best /  
Never let it rest /  
'Til your good is better /  
And your better is best."

(The mission statement and the chant) really go hand in hand. If you were to come here and visit, you would really see that we have high expectations for others.

What was the biggest challenge you've faced as an educator? How'd you overcome it?

I have high expectations for my staff and students, as well as myself. Often times when I want to make sure I'm meeting the needs of all of my stakeholders, I can have a pretty big plate. I prioritize and always put children first, but I also want to make sure I'm meeting the needs of my staff, my parents, the community, the district. It's definitely a hard job, but the rewards outweigh that dramatically.

What sparked your passion or interest in education?

Oh my gosh, it's the kids. There's really no other answer for you. When I was in first grade, I knew I wanted to be a teacher. I actually was in the classroom for 17 years. I'm kind of a late bloomer for (administration). I meet a lot of principals who taught for three to five years before moving to admin. My passion is certainly for children, and it still is, and it always will be.

How has being a principal and a teacher changed over your career?

Definitely technology. I think that the stakes are certainly higher, because schools are held accountable by the state. And when I was a younger teacher that wasn't the case. No one becomes a teacher unless they love kids. What hasn't changed is that anyone working in a school is there for kids.

What do you do to relax alone and with your family? Is it hard to take off that principal hat at home?

It certainly took some adjusting. They understand that I am on call 24/7, and they support me in that. At the same time, we try to have dinner together every night as a family.

I have to ask: Do you watch the TV show "Riverdale"?

No I don't! But I've heard people talking about it. My own teenager has mentioned it to me. I may get into that this summer.

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## Crystal River Elementary makes gains

September 26, 2016

Crystal River Elementary School in Carbondale, which has been under the watchful eye of state and school district officials since 2014 following multiple years of lagging test scores and poor teacher and community survey results, appears to have turned a significant corner.

Growth data released by the Colorado Department of Education last week measured progress over the last two years for students from third through ninth grade in meeting the new, more stringent standards on state math and English literacy assessments.

In comparing third-grade student scores from 2015, the first year the new Colorado Measures of Academic Success tests were administered, to spring of 2016 when those same students took the tests as fourth-graders against the level 4 standards, CRES outperformed the rest of the Roaring Fork School District and the state in nearly every student subgroup.

While the percentage of students at the individual grade levels meeting or exceeding expectations in both English and math was still low, RFSD Superintendent Rob Stein said the year-over-year growth is a better measure of the progress that's being made.

"From an educator point of view, whether you're a teacher or an administrator, that's what we have under our control," Stein said last week when the growth data was released.

CRES saw "exceptional growth" for last year's fourth-graders, as determined by scoring at the 55th percentile or higher, as well as in several student subgroups, for both math and English.

Especially in math, CRES had some of the highest growth of any school in the district at any grade level, including 65 percent for English Language Learners and non-ELL students alike, and a highly encouraging 78 percent for male students and 64 percent for female students as they moved from third to fourth grade.

Students at the school who remain below the benchmark in math also saw growth at the 72nd percentile, according to the state's growth model (<http://www.cde.state.co.us/schoolview/coloradogrowthmodel>), an online platform showing growth for each public school in Colorado.

"What's happening at CRES highlights the direction we've been seeing across the district," Stein said.

Moreover, it affirms that the school is taking the proper steps to right the ship after being on the state's "turnaround school" watch for the past two years, he said.

"At that time, we were seeing declining proficiency scores, relatively low growth numbers and we had a big growth gap where our Hispanic student growth was much lower than that for white students," Stein noted.

In addition, a survey of CRES staff around that same time found that just 68 percent saw the school as a good place to work and learn, compared to 80 percent across the district. The survey also indicated low confidence in school leadership at the time to turn things around.

A combination of a leadership change, bringing in new Principal Matt Koenigsknecht, and collaborating with the state's school turnaround network to try some new approaches, improved things on the staff morale front, Stein said.

"Now, getting these growth scores ... it seems to be working," he said.

Stein also applauded state education officials for working directly with the school instead of taking a heavy-handed approach.

"It wasn't like, 'We're going to come in and fix you,'" he said. "It was more about bringing in more resources and partnering with us on how to create a different culture in the school, and improving what we call academic systems."

Through that process, the school "earned a greater degree of latitude, autonomy and self-direction," Stein added.

Koenigsknecht has attributed the school's improved performance to an emphasis on coaching teachers, as well as weekly meetings devoted to analyzing student work samples and making real-time instructional adjustments.

"If we aren't in classrooms regularly as instructional leaders, we don't really have a strong sense of what our teachers' next steps are, or what our next steps are as an organization," Koenigsknecht said in a June presentation to the RFSD school board.

Overall, in English literacy, CRES saw growth at the 55th percentile compared to 52 percent for district elementary schools as a whole, according to the data released by the state.

In math, the Carbondale school saw growth at the 65th percentile, compared to 56 percent for all district elementary schools combined.

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