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**Majority of school's teachers vote for autonomy proposal  
Thirty-three of the 49 at Randolph Middle School support  
separating from key parts of the union contract.**

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**By Jeremy P. Meyer**

Two-thirds of teachers at a northeast Denver school seeking autonomy from district and union rules voted for the plan, which tonight will be considered by the school board.

Thirty-three of the 49 teachers at Bruce Randolph Middle School — with two abstentions — supported separating from key parts of the union contract in a blind ballot Tuesday that was counted Wednesday.

Specifically, Randolph's teachers and administrators want control over the school's budget, hiring decisions, time, calendar and incentives. They have moved the school from being one of the worst in the state to being just another low-performing school in the district, and they want to be able to do more — without the restrictions.

Introduced this month, the proposal has generated much attention in the past few weeks — becoming fodder on opinion pages, the kernel of proposed statewide legislation and an incentive for more than \$100,000 in grant money.

On Friday, Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper walked through the school, and he will meet with the teachers union president today to hear about the proposal.

"I just want to listen to both sides," Hickenlooper said.

Teachers and administrators at the school have received flowers of support and phone messages and e-mails — some supportive and some not.

"We've become a bit of a political football in this," said Greg Ahrnsbrak, physical education teacher and union representative at the school.

"The union is concerned we are opening Pandora's box. Others are saying this is a great thing. Our position is we are just trying to do what we do best. And that is teach the children."

### *Yea or nay vote is tonight*

Tonight, Denver's board of education will vote on approving the autonomy agreement.

Next is the teachers union, whose executive committee will examine the proposal Jan. 4. The earliest the union's board would vote on the matter is Jan. 8, according to Denver Teachers Classroom Association president Kim Ursetta.

"There are some great innovative ideas," Ursetta said about the proposal.

"We still have some questions about vagueness of the language, what the intent is, what exactly they want waived," she said.

At least one other school is closely watching whether the Randolph experiment gets approved.

Manual High principal Rob Stein said he would love to be untangled from the district's bureaucratic red tape.

"It seems, on its face, to solve many problems that I have experienced as a principal," he said. "We don't have enough control of our own decisions on-site — how and when we hire teachers, determining our own schedule and calendar. I could go on and on. If this works out, it will be very interesting."

School board member Michelle Moss wondered about the implications if Randolph's effort eventually snowballed into every school seeking autonomy from district rules. For example, she asked, what would become of the school board?

"If the board's role right now is to deal with policy, if we exempt the schools from policies, it seems silly to sit around and make them," she said.

On Wednesday, the Donnell-Kay Foundation released a report on how Denver Public Schools could improve, based on experiences of districts across the country — including a segment that urges the district to give schools more autonomy.

Donnell-Kay director Tony Lewis said schools would have the authority to fund their own services and not be tied to the district's "Soviet-style bureaucracy."

"The board could be all about results," he said — holding schools accountable for not only assessment scores but also graduation rates, attendance, dropouts and college readiness.

The board would be the ultimate judge on whether to close schools that are not performing, he said.

"I think Bruce Randolph could be the start of it," Lewis said.

*Some suspect nefarious motives*

Some believe the effort at Randolph is being directed by district officials as a way to circumvent the union and school board. Teacher Chrisanne LaHue, who is leading the autonomy effort in the school, is married to Brad Jupp — senior academic policy adviser to the superintendent.

Jupp said he has not influenced the effort, saying that teachers and principal Kristin Waters have taken the spirit of the district's reform effort into their own hands.

"The district and the board are on record saying that schools need to be given much greater control at the local level," he said. "The school has captured the spirit of that statement."

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