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Making the grade

Janitell, Carson schools highlighted in state study

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Remember middle school?

That strange period when childhood collided with adolescence? That time when raging hormones declared victory over better judgment, compelling you to wear stupid things and do even stupider things in the name of "looking cool"?

Ah, yes. There is a chance, just a chance, that you may not have been paying close attention to your classes at that time. (Quick, what's a rhombus?)

Now, imagine reliving that period. But this time, your family is barely scraping by, and your dad's fighting a dangerous war in the Middle East.

Sound like a recipe for disaster? The strange thing is, for kids in some of our local schools, it's not.

Going back to school

"I got it! I got it!"

The kid is shaking in his chair, a goofy grin scrunching his cheeks. Teacher Mendi Weeks acknowledges his victory. He has found the area of the trapezoid displayed on the overhead.

Soon, hands are waving all over the Janitell Junior High School classroom.

Weeks smiles. The lesson plan is moving swiftly, refreshing the brains of seventh- and eighth-graders who will be staring down their Colorado Student Assessment Program tests next week. There's a lot of ground to cover: fractions and decimals, geometry, pre-algebra.

Desks are arranged in circles. Kids solve a problem together one moment, and relearn a concept on the overhead the next. Weeks doesn't brandish a wooden ruler, and apparently she doesn't have to. The kids are into it. They're even laughing at her jokes.

Just down the hall, in language arts class, Nicole Muñoz is teaching her seventh-graders proper form for business letters. (To indent, or not to indent?) But the kids aren't just staring at the chalkboard; they're writing a fictional sales pitch to convince Cheyenne Mountain Zoo to adopt a creature from another planet. One girl is pushing a "lizaroo."

Apparently, the creative ideas are working. Here at Janitell, the sector of kids from the least privileged backgrounds (those who qualify for free or reduced lunches) has scored at or above the state average on CSAPs for the past three years. A new report spotlights Janitell (which has a Fountain address but is in Widefield School District 3) and Carson Middle School (part of Fountain-Fort Carson School District 8) as among eight state schools that are "closing the achievement gap."

This, from two schools that face the additional challenges that come with military life.

Reporting excellence

The mission of "Profiles of Success: Eight Colorado Schools that are Closing the Achievement Gap" was simple: focus on what certain schools are doing right in educating economically disadvantaged kids.



Marion Gobert teaches math to eighth-graders at Carson Middle School, where interventions are common when students fall behind.

The report, prepared for the Donnell-Kay and Piton foundations in collaboration with the Colorado Department of Education, identified schools with a high percentage of kids who qualified for free or reduced lunches, then looked at those kids' CSAP scores for the past three years.

Encouragingly, the study found many schools whose disadvantaged kids were scoring well. Some were even scoring above the state average.

The study then selected eight of the high-performing schools for a closer look — among them, Janitell and Carson. They found some similarities: The schools all set high expectations for every child; collected data

on students' performance and used it to mold curriculum; offered individual support to struggling students; got teachers involved in decision-making; gave teachers educational opportunities and special planning time; focused on core subjects without axing the arts and humanities classes; had consistent leadership, small "learning communities," and some flexible cash; and welcomed kids from a mix of economic backgrounds.

Amy Berk Anderson, co-author of the study, says Janitell and Carson were of special interest because of the unique challenges they face.

There's the emotional toll of having a family member deployed. (Some kids have even lost a parent to war.) Also, military families tend to move often.

"That was an amazing thing to me, that with all that mobility and turnover, that these schools can continue to maintain that high academic gain and to continue to see all kids succeeding, including the ones that are continuously turning over," Anderson says.

Principal subjects

At Carson, principal Steve Jerman says 85 to 90 percent of his students are directly connected to the military. Reassignments result in an annual turnover of approximately 40 percent. The movement is constant, and it can be difficult for teachers to pick up where another school left off.

"There's just so many holes that can develop in their learning," Jerman says.

Carson may only have a child for a short time before he or she moves. So, Jerman says, you do the best with the time you have. Some of his school's best practices include:

- Constantly assessing kids, then giving them an extra time each day to catch up on subjects in which they've fallen behind. In some cases, a child may give up an elective period to work on a core subject he's struggling with, or even be assigned mandatory after-school tutoring. "I've been known to walk on the bus and grab students and say, "It's time for tutoring,"" Jerman says.
- Offering special deployment groups for kids, and working with the Army to provide counseling for distraught children.
- Letting teachers give input on everything from curriculum to budgets.

At Janitell, principal Aaron Hoffman says about 40 to 60 percent of students district-wide are tied to the military in some way, with annual turnover of about 10 percent. And that flow can tax teachers.

"I would put our teachers up against any of the best for the work they do," Hoffman says.

Like Carson, Janitell is big on regular assessments and teacher communications. But administrators don't pull kids out of elective classes or require tutoring (though it is offered). Instead, Hoffman says teachers focus strongly on adjusting their methods to suit the kids. And there's a wide variety of electives (even medieval technology!) that sneak math and reading into the lesson plans.

"We hopefully instill in them a desire to want to go to class," Hoffman says.

As anyone who ever fell asleep in American history knows, that's no small feat.

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