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Union revisits school waiver Leaders will weigh a contract exemption again for Denver's ailing Bruce Randolph school.

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By Jeremy P. Meyer

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A bid for autonomy at Denver's Bruce Randolph school faces another test today, when union leaders meet for the second time to vote on whether to accept a waiver from the teachers contract.

The union, so far, has balked at the request — which despite the uncertainty of ever going into effect has drawn intense interest.

The school board approved its part of the waiver last month, and a majority of teachers at the school voted for the proposal. Last week, Manual High School in Denver made a similar request.

State Senate President Peter Groff may introduce a bill to encourage other schools to do the same, and more than \$100,000 from nonprofit organizations has been offered to Bruce Randolph if the move goes forward.

National education experts are watching the Bruce Randolph proposal that would give the school control over its budget, teacher time, calendar, incentives and hiring decisions.

"It is going to be fascinating," said Andrew Rotherham of Virginia, co-founder and co-director of Education Sector, a national education policy think tank. "This is what progress looks like, messy and contentious."

Today, the leadership of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association meets about the proposal, which two weeks ago was tabled on a 19-2 vote.

The union wanted Bruce Randolph to clearly explain what parts of the contract should be waived. Last week, teachers submitted a five-page response, outlining each article and subsection they want waived or retained.

Union President Kim Ursetta said she discussed the proposal with representatives from the school Saturday.

"We want to be able to look at what contract provisions, if any, impede student achievement at Bruce Randolph," Ursetta said.

Tony Lewis, director of the Donnell-Kay Foundation, said problems could result if more and more schools come forward with individualized waiver proposals.

"Let's say you say 'yes' to Randolph, and Manual wants a different waiver," said Lewis. "Then 143 schools come with different proposals. You have a level of chaos. Rather than create a whole bunch of

one-off negotiated agreements, the district and union should be saying, 'Our big, thick agreement is causing more problems than it's solving.' "

The union should be flexible, said Rotherham.

"If (unions) see this as an opportunity to redefine their roles, they will thrive," Rotherham said. "If they don't get in the game, it will pass them by."

Bruce Randolph in northeast Denver had been one of the worst in the state, repeatedly ranked as unsatisfactory on state report cards.

After getting an ambitious principal, Kristin Waters, who put in a plan called Challenge 2010, the school began making gains.

Improved scores on the 2007 Colorado Student Assessment Program tests allowed the school for the first time to rise from the bottom.

"We took the worst middle school in the state and brought it to a low ranking," said Greg Ahrnsbrak, a teacher at Bruce Randolph and the school's union representative, who helped craft the waiver plan.

"We were thinking, 'How can we take it to the next level? What are the problems we are having?' We started looking at the district policies and teacher contract," he said.

The model is similar to the innovative pilot school program implemented in Boston more than a decade ago.

That plan, which has grown to 20 schools, gave each school complete autonomy over budgets, hiring and curriculum.

In Boston, the district collaborated with unions to craft the plan they believed was a way to keep students from leaving the district.

"We were saying it was good for everyone to provide for change within the system to counter the allure of the (state-authorized) charter schools," said Tom Payzant, former Boston superintendent.

Aurora Public Schools also is developing a pilot model with hopes of having one in place this fall.

A recent four-year study by the Center for Collaborative Education shows Boston pilot schools outperform district averages across every indicator of student performance and engagement.

"Historically, school districts have determined the practices for schools, and teacher unions have determined working conditions," said Dan French, director of Center for Collaborative Education. "We may have seen that the time has come that we will see better progress in schools if we turn that power over to the teachers," he said.

Manual principal Rob Stein said he respects the union and its contract but will go through the process to get an autonomy agreement, regardless of today's vote on Bruce Randolph.

"It conjures an image of Gandhi," he said. "How many people are you going to knock down before you submit to the will of the people? These are union teachers in a union school."

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