

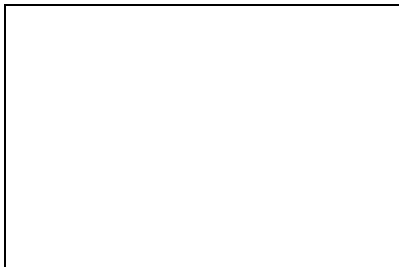
The Denver Post

Valley view schools for success Achievement No. 1 goal

A new study finds that the Mapleton District school is among the state's best at beating the odds and getting low-income kids to succeed.

By Jeremy P. Meyer

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Second-grade teacher Susan Leggett helps Leslye Angel during a math class at Valley View Elementary School on Tuesday. The study identified 10 characteristics of top Colorado public schools, including small learning environments. (Hyoung Chang, The Denver Post)

In Valley View Elementary School, students walk the halls with their hands behind their backs, miss recess if they fail to turn in homework and sign contracts with their parents to uphold school rules and culture.

"They come here with a little suitcase of problems that life has dealt them," said second-grade teacher Susan Leggett. "We try to make it a safe environment and make them know that they are here to learn."

Valley View K-8 in the Mapleton School District on Denver's outskirts is among the state's best at getting low-income kids to succeed, according to a study released Tuesday by Donnell-Kay Foundation and Augenblick, Palaich & Associates Inc. It was funded by the Donnell-Kay and Piton foundations and released in collaboration with the Colorado Department of Education.

The study identified 10 characteristics among Colorado schools that are beating the odds — getting poorer students to outperform their richer peers.

These schools, among other things, have small learning environments, teachers engaged in decision-making and high expectations for all students, said Amy Berk Anderson, director of strategic partnerships at the Donnell-Kay Foundation and co-author of the study, "Profiles in Success. "

"Kids walk into the doors of these schools and are expected to achieve . . .," she said. "And everything is being done at these schools to make sure they get there."

At Valley View, teachers say they get 100 percent of parents to attend twice-annual parent-teacher conferences — even if they have to go to a student's home for the meeting.

Every inch of classroom walls is covered with numbers, words and concepts. Teachers work together to align their lessons. And new teachers are guided by veterans about the school culture.

"It would be possible in other schools, but they've got to get the buy-in from the staff, parents and administration," second-grade teacher Deanna Blunt said.

The study focused on eight Colorado schools where students from low-income families performed better than the state average in at least two areas of the Colorado Student Assessment Program for three years in a row.

The schools were in districts around the state — Pueblo City, Fountain-Fort Carson, Delta, Widefield and Mapleton.

Only one Denver school, CEC Middle College of Denver, a magnet, was found to be beating the odds.

State Education Commissioner Dwight Jones said he hopes the report will become a best-practices model for Colorado schools seeking to narrow the achievement gap between poor and wealthy students.

Jones said he intends for every Colorado school district to get a copy of the study. He said he will post its findings on the state website.

"Having pockets of great schools for some kids is almost an injustice," Jones said. "What we have to do is make sure we create great schools for all 800,000 students in this state. . . . This becomes an excellent guide and a model."

Jeremy P. Meyer: 303-954-1367 or jpmeyer@denverpost.com

Keys to success

- 1) A culture of high expectations and accountability
- 2) Targeted assessments and intensive use of data to guide instruction
- 3) Individualized support for struggling students
- 4) Active engagement of teachers in school leadership and decision-making
- 5) Substantial time for collaborative planning and options for professional development

- 6) A commitment to core academics and standards but not at the expense of arts and humanities
- 7) Stable and consistent leadership
- 8) Small learning communities
- 9) Flexibility to use resources to support student needs and reinforce school culture
- 10) An economically integrated student body

Source: Donnell-Kay and Piton foundations

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