

Denver teacher placement can add to disparities

Forced assignments, mostly to low-income DPS schools, can lead to no one being happy.

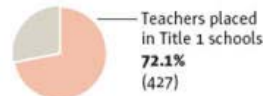
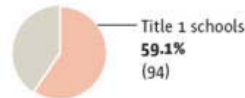
By Jeremy P. Meyer
The Denver Post

Posted: 08/16/2009 01:00:00 AM MDT

Updated: 08/16/2009 08:38:06 AM MDT

Teacher placement

Nearly three-quarters of the 592 teachers forcibly placed in Denver schools in the past four years landed in Title 1 schools, which have the lowest-income students. Reformers want to change the system to bring the most effective teachers into the poorest classrooms. Charter schools do not receive direct placements.

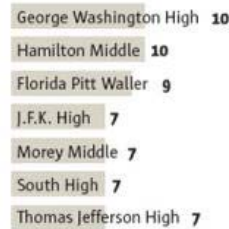


Schools that have received the most direct-placement teachers

Title 1



Non-Title 1



Source: Denver Public Schools

The Denver Post

Nearly three-quarters of unassigned veteran Denver Public Schools teachers who have not found jobs are forcibly placed into schools with the poorest students.

According to data obtained through a formal records request, in the past four years, 427 out of the 592 forcibly placed Denver teachers landed in Title 1 schools.

Under union and district rules, these direct placements are made without regard to the desires of the teachers, school principals or parents.

Title 1 schools get a disproportionate number of direct placements because they also have higher numbers of teacher vacancies.

"Forcibly putting teachers in a school against the wishes of the school leadership, and sometimes against the wishes of the teacher, is a bad thing for everyone involved," said Denver Superintendent Tom Boasberg.

Getting highly qualified teachers into the poorest schools has become a national issue, with billions in federal money and millions in foundation money being dangled to force changes.

Denver is leading the effort in Colorado and is touted as a shining star in the state's bid for part of the \$4.3 billion federal Race to the Top grants. And Microsoft founder Bill Gates is offering half a billion dollars to improve teacher effectiveness.

Yet the issue of forced placement continues to vex the district, said Boasberg, who believes a conversation must begin between the union and community on changing the system.

"It is wrong that in those schools that have the highest need, we have this," Boasberg said.

"Innovation" sidestep

Bruce Randolph school in northeast Denver became the state's first "innovation" school in 2008 — getting waivers to hire and fire its own staff. The root of the reform was in halting the process of direct placement.

The school's teachers had been trying to fix what was the state's worst middle school but felt four direct-placement teachers the school inherited in 2006 were a bad fit, said Greg Ahrnsbrak, a physical education teacher at Bruce Randolph who led the autonomy fight.

"We ended up with teachers who didn't want to be there, weren't supportive and didn't share our same philosophy," he said. "That's when we as a faculty raised concerns."

Three more Denver schools have since obtained innovation status, including Cole Arts & Sciences Academy, which won approval Thursday by the Colorado State Board of Education.

Rob Stein, Manual High School's principal, agreed to quit his job as headmaster of the private Graland Country Day School and lead the inner-city high school only if he did not have to take on

directly placed teachers.

"I want to be able to hire the teachers I think who will best serve our students," Stein said. "That was a key to our innovation status."

Today Manual has 40 faculty members, none of whom was directly placed, Stein said. "I can't just imagine a direct placement," he said.

In July, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan told a gathering of the National Education Association that tenure rules must change.

"We created seniority rules that protect teachers from arbitrary and capricious management — and that's a good goal," he said. "But sometimes those rules place teachers in schools and communities where they won't succeed."

Duncan is using the Race to the Top grants to goad states into changing their policies.

Bill Gates, too, is using his money to get school districts to change how they evaluate, train and retain teachers. Denver is among 10 school districts in the country competing for the five-year, \$500 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

For the past two years, DPS has been trying to improve its direct placement system.

In 2006-07, there were 214 teachers forcibly placed in 93 schools and the administrative office. For this school year, 107 teachers were forcibly placed in 63 schools.

Teachers are no longer placed by the central administration. Now, every spring, principals from each of the district's eight school networks gather in a closed-door session to decide where excess teachers in their networks will go.

"That forcing mechanism was very, very painful for principals," Boasberg said. "But it was a necessary step."

Excess teachers come from schools that have downsized because of drops in enrollment or where subject areas have been cut. Principals or the school's leadership team decides who will become excess teachers, and they rarely include the school's best educators.

Data that shows whether they are effective isn't available.

State law says that tenured teachers — those with more than three years' experience — must be given a job.

In Denver, 117 teachers were repeat direct placements over two years. And 22 teachers were repeat direct placements three years in a row.

Union officials bristle at the negative stigma given to excess teachers.

"I do not think it's right to say direct placements are the ineffective teachers," said Deborah Fallin, spokeswoman for the Colorado Education Association. "They are all kinds of people who are entered into the pool, in my understanding,

for reasons that rarely have anything to do with performance."

Kim Ursetta, former president of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association and now kindergarten teacher at the Math and Science Leadership Academy, said she was recently classified as a direct placement because she lost her union election.

"I am nationally board certified," she said. "There may be some ineffective teachers in there, but why aren't they moved out?"

Filling Title 1 holes

Colorado state law provides only two teacher evaluation ratings: "satisfactory" and "unsatisfactory."

Denver stood out in a recent national report by The New Teacher Project for its tough evaluation efforts by handing out unsatisfactory ratings to 1.4 percent of teachers over three years. Other districts surveyed in the report gave unsatisfactory ratings to between zero and 0.03 percent of their teachers.

The problem in Denver is the majority of schools — 60 percent — are in the Title 1 program, which provides extra funding to schools where 40 percent of enrollment is poor.

Those schools also have higher numbers of teacher vacancies because fewer people want to teach there.

The district offers a \$2,345 annual bonus to teachers under the ProComp pay system who choose to work in high-poverty schools, yet those positions are still the toughest to fill — leading to higher numbers of direct placements and more teachers with only one or two years' experience.

"It's something we have worried about for years," said Tim Daly, president of The New Teacher Project. "How can you create high-quality programs for kids who need it the most when you are forcing these teachers on them?"

One solution, said Kate Walsh, president of the National Center on Teacher Quality, is to do a better job of dismissing poor teachers and offering more money to people to teach in the tougher schools.

"Until we change state laws to make it a smoother process for dismissing teachers, it won't happen," she said.

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