

EDUCATION: Triumphs and failures

Schools seek recipe for success

Ingredients, cooks vary from district to district

By BILL SCANLON
Camera Staff Writer

Ah, what a glorious education you could concoct for a Colorado teenager if you could mix:

1 *T. Money* — heaping Cherry Creek variety.

2 *T. Motivation* — the kind that spurs students at Evergreen Open Living School to work overtime.

7 *dashes* — of the best Boulder Valley has to offer.

LAST IN A SERIES

Add an involved parent, a dedicated teacher and a child with a vision, and you've got excellence under glass.

Sadly, that recipe is in sporadic supply in Colorado, where high schools range from holding tanks for listless minors to lyciums of excellence.

Some of the ingredients for success are already in place, others must be added if schooling is to improve, say educators throughout the state.

Money — the lack of it and its uneven distribution — remains paramount in any discussion of education reform.

Teachers are, of course, crucial — retaining the good ones, recruiting the bright ones, training the young ones, getting rid of the bad ones.

Students need to be motivated, and that means showing them a reason to learn, opening a window on possibilities outside their neighborhood or farm.

Money — give school districts enough to do the job right and give more of it to the "have-not" districts.

The problem: The state's minimum requirement to educate a child is \$2,550 per year. That's not enough to do the job right, scream educators and concerned parents in Colorado's "have-not" districts.

The gap between the prosperous and the poor districts isn't closing because wealthy homeowners are many times more willing and able to tax themselves for extra money for local schools.

The median base amount in the state's 179 school districts is \$3,027 per child — slightly more than the national average. But educators say being above average in a nation with a less-than-praiseworthy education system isn't worth pats on the back.

Solutions: Colorado, which ranked 47th in the nation in per capita income from state taxes, has just had a tax increase that should put \$100 million into the state coffers.

A \$125 million coalition finance bill would have given extra weight to students with special needs — non-English speaking students, special education students, vocational education students — thus propelling more money to districts that need it the most.

Outlook: Poor. State Sen. Les Fowler, R-Boulder, says the \$100 million in revenues expected from the tax increase will only be used to replenish reserves. Education will get perhaps a 5 percent increase in funding, little more than the inflation rate.

The coalition bill did not pass because there is not enough money in the state coffers. For political reasons, taking money away from rich districts is never going to happen, says Joe Stewart, supervisor of school finance for Colorado.

Quote: "Colorado has the most archaic, unfair school finance law" of any state he has seen, said Jerry Wisner, principal at Valley High School near Greeley, where students are educated. (See SCHOOLS, Page 7A)

Schools seek a recipe for success

(From Page 1A)

ated for the minimum — \$2,550 per year. "In no way, shape or form does it meet needs."

Money — making wise spending decisions.

The problem: With dollars scarce, school districts cannot afford to make any mistakes in hiring, in setting salary scales, in the streamlined operation of their schools. The battle rages as to whether key decisions should be made at the school or the central office.

Solutions: Educators at Cherry Creek in Englewood say the key to their success is autonomy in each building.

Educators increasingly are saying that the only way to be sure dollars are being spent in the right way for kids is to get decision-making down to the school level.

Outlook: Good. Jim Rose, a University of Colorado education professor, says he is seeing stronger leaders than he has ever seen in 30 years in school positions, "emotionally capable of making decisions."

Quote: "Most people transfer to the central office because they want to deal with power," said Rose, who believes decision-making power needs to stay at the schools. "We need to make sure we get rid of the no-fault managers at the schools. The one's who don't want to make decisions, who say 'it's not my fault.'"

Boulder Valley's problems: Some Boulder Valley educators lament what they see as a return to central control.

They say an insistence that all the high schools offer the same classes is sacrificing creative excellence for the sake of no high school being perceived as any better than another.

Boulder Valley parents and teachers want an honest accounting of expenses and budget decisions, and they feel that in the past they haven't gotten it.

Boulder Valley's Outlook: Mixed. To save money, Superintendent James Hager wants, for example, to limit the freedom schools have to order their own set of textbooks.

Many Boulder Valley educators continue to rave about the flexibility they have in the classroom and in the school building — to teach what they want, to get money to implement good ideas.

Ken Reiter, principal at Casey Junior High School in Boulder, says he has "absolutely" as much freedom to put his own stamp on that school as he ever did when he worked in Cherry Creek.

"They let us try things," said Fairview High School special education teacher Jane Sutera, who team teaches a computer English class with a business teacher. "Some (ideas) are good, some are bad, but we can try them. I've been encouraged by that."

Most people now agree that Hager inherited a financial mess — some \$4.3 million in miscounting or underestimating has plunged the district into a hole — when he arrived last July. They are split on whether he is correcting the problems quickly enough or wisely enough.

Hager has vowed to modernize an accounting and data-gathering system that is so antiquated that it wasn't until this year that officials knew how many teachers were in the district. His most controversial move has been to cut teacher aide hours 35 percent. Some say that move was necessary given the financial mess. Others say nothing could cut deeper into the heart of learning.

Quote: "It's real clear that the (accounting) system hasn't kept up with the size of the district," said Boulder Valley Board of Education member Karen Sandstead. "Unfortunately, we tend to be reactionary. I would like to see the district become a little more proactive, and not just react to national studies."

Teachers — training the new ones, rewarding the good ones.

The problems: Teachers in rural areas complain that many parents don't think much of education, don't particularly like their own teachers, and so don't support them.

College freshmen who say they want to enter teaching rank near the bottom of the class, according to college board test scores. A recent geography test given to 254 elementary education majors asked them to locate 10 countries — Angola, Argentina, England, France, India, Japan, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela and Vietnam — on a blank outline map of the world. The average score was 3.26 correct.

Solution: The Carnegie Report on Teaching as a Profession, released last month, recommends a four-tiered career ladder, that would pay top teachers up to \$72,000 per year, and longer training times for prospective teachers.

The University of Colorado has eliminated the undergraduate elementary education major. Now most of its teacher candidates already have bachelor's degrees, which means they have four years of a diversified liberal arts education.

Outlook: Mixed. The state has allotted some money to study student teachers and to consider implementing some of the recommendations of the Carnegie Report. But, again, lack of money and unwillingness to transfer other state money to education means that little will be done.

CU education professors continue to rave about the quality of their students — eight this year were Phi Beta Kappas. But programs in the rest of the



Camera staff photo by Vern Walker

A HAPPY TEACHER: Irwin Hoffman, right, head of the computer department at George Washington High School in Denver, says he wouldn't change places with any teacher anywhere, because of the opportunities to "give a chance in life" to students like Mark LaGrone, left. LaGrone, a whiz in GW's touted computer lab, sought Hoffman's help in pursuing a scholarship to the University of Colorado.

ACT scores 1984-85	
Boulder Valley	21.3
Cherry Creek	21.2
St. Vrain	19.9
State average	19.7
U.S. average	18.6
Denver	18.3
Byers	18.7
Valley	18.3
Prospective teachers	17.7

Seniors taking ACT test 1984-85	
Cherry Creek	75%
Boulder	60-70%
St. Vrain	40%
Denver	35%
Byers	50%
Gilcrest	41%

Students — give them a reason to learn, show them possibilities, eliminating dullness and reach the students who don't fit the comfortable mold.

Problem: It's easy to teach the motivated learner, but those who don't see the point of learning are restless, bored and given to copying words from a book onto paper.

Poor or bored students are precisely the ones who need exciting educational opportunities the most, says CU education professor Miles Olson.

"Instead of giving them poor grades and humbling them," show them how learning can connect them to their community or to places beyond the tethers of their farms or neighborhoods.

Students at the Evergreen Open Living School went to Yellowstone this spring. To prepare for their visit, the students became experts on ecology, on bear tracks, on flora and fauna, on wildlife laws, and environmental impact statements. Along the way, they learned their way around the library and government bureaucracy, learning perhaps for the first time why facts are important.

But you don't have to go to a national park to connect kids to something that turns them on, educators say. Start with something important in their lives, show them the possibilities and watch their disdain for school turn around.

Outlook: Mixed, but many hopeful signs.

The computer program at George Washington High School in Denver is the vibrant nerve center of the school, with 400 computer terminals used by all students from special education to honors.

Computer teacher Irwin Hoffman has taken the anti-drone approach to computer instruction. Instead of using the computer for students to practice multiplication tables, he asked the question: How can you use it to make the brain expand?

"You go to most schools, they're

dull, burned out and tired," said Hoffman. "Not here."

Valley High School, a school near Greeley with more than its share of educational and financial problems, has the finest vocational agriculture department in the state.

Students who might never read a book for pleasure, learn valuable lessons on scientific farming, caring for livestock and keeping accurate books.

It is this kind of program, doing at least something right and well for the students that a school reaches, that gives optimism for the future and the confidence that the schools of the state will stay above the national average.

Boulder Valley viewpoint: The biggest rap against Fairview High School in Boulder is that it doesn't do as much for the average child as it does for the exceptional ones.

Some Boulder Valley students are bored.

Quotes: "All the really intelligent people I know have dropped out," said Boulder High School junior Toby Maloney. "You're turned into a number." Maloney believes Boulder High School gears its education toward the conforming average student. For two weeks, he signed all his papers "62899," his student number, instead of his name.

Solutions: Fairview High School counselors are trying to meet with all juniors for a new "Planning Now Beyond High School" program, specifically to make sure that the middle level kids don't get overlooked.

Outlook: Fairly good. Students in Boulder Valley have praise for the many teachers who "connect to today" the book or history lesson or science lab.

The students mentioned several examples of exciting, anti-dullness things in their classrooms. Out of the many, here are a few:

● Hershel Doyle at Centaurus High School, who tells his students in his Current World Affairs Class: "Here are some things that are going on. What does it mean to you? Do you care?" And his delivery ensures that they do.

● Carol Koch at Fairview High School, whose students bristle with enthusiasm for literature because everything they read is related to what is happening today and what could happen tomorrow.

● The math teachers at Boulder High School, who insist that students do more than solve abstract problems in a book. Students there solve real problems, backyard problems, brain-wracking problems. And they continue to get superior scores on college-board tests.

There are hundreds of teachers who teach their children that facts are tools, but that real learning involves applying, analyzing and synthesizing those facts in new ways.

Teacher salaries Average for 1986	
Cherry Creek	\$36,014
Boulder	\$30,050
St. Vrain	\$26,774
Denver	\$34,755
Byers	\$19,924
Gilcrest	\$21,960

The Carnegie Report on Teaching as a Profession, released last month, recommends a four-tiered career ladder that would pay top teachers up to \$72,000 per year, and longer training times for prospective teachers. The state has allotted some money to study student teachers and to consider implementing some of the recommendations. But, again, lack of money and unwillingness to transfer other state money to education means that little will be done.