

By Melissa Taylor

Extreme School Makeover

Adams 50 Reveals Big Changes to Revive a District in Need

Adams County School District 50 needed an extreme makeover. The district suffered from poor test scores and in 2006, their graduation rate was only 58 percent. Not pretty by anyone's standards.

So, when Adams 50 students return to school this fall, they will notice some extreme changes, shifting the very basics of traditional school practices. Adams 50's new approach is called Standards Based Education (SBE). Despite the unoriginal name, the SBE concept, implemented to address the poor district performance, is quite unique.

At the heart of the concept, each student takes on a greater leadership role in his or her own education. Students partner with teachers to set and reach goals and master certain skills.

Students also are placed in groups based on performance instead of age. Once they have mastered the defined set of skills for one level, they may move up. In addition, each group works together to create a code of conduct that guides classroom behavior.

While a makeover of this scale is large – all Adams 50 elementary and middle school students will transition this fall with high schools beginning the transition in fall 2010 –

other districts likely won't feel any affects, but they may be watching. If the Adams 50 SBE makeover is successful, struggling schools around the country may choose to adopt the system.

Grouping

Lori Dillon, a parent new to Adams 50, has mixed emotions about the new program. "The only thing I'm looking forward to is that (my children) will be tested and put in the proper skill level." She looks around and whispers, "Actually, I'm dreading it. This district is in the bottom twelfth in the nation."

Lori's kids will be put in classes with other kids at their performance level but with a range of ages. None of the Adams 50 classes will have the traditional labels of first grade, second grade, and so forth. Instead, they'll have numbers, based on performance levels. Preschool is labeled "R" but after that, students progress from level 1 through 10. Number 11 earns college credits. Age does come into consideration when moving to middle school, at age 11 and to high school, at age 14.

Grading

If you have kids in Colorado public schools, you'll recognize the one to four "rubric" scoring method the SBE program uses. One is poor, two is developing, three is proficient and four is above proficient. In SBE, the four-point rubric applies to every subject from math to reading comprehension.

This scoring does not extend into high school – yet. If Adams 50 adopts the four point rubric for high school – and they'll decide soon – GPA and student rankings will disappear for Westminster, Ranum and Hidden Lake High School students. Adams 50 says transcripts will be converted for college applications.

Self-evaluation plays a big role in the SBE system. Teacher Jennifer Kush's level R learners work in a room decorated with their school work. She sits with 5-year-old Juan.

"Juan, is this your best work for the week?"

"Yes, teacher."

"What kind of work is it?"

"It's a three."

Mrs. Kush prompts, "Why?"





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"Um . . . because it's really good on my neatness but I could have done a little better," he replies.

Juan, like all the learners in Jennifer's room, sets his learning goals on Monday for the week. Today, Friday, he and his classmates show their best work. Scores of three and four earn a spot on the class poster and a reward at home if the system goes according plan.

Teachers and Students

You may have noticed that in Juan's case, SBE changes the role of the teacher to "guide" instead of "sage of wisdom." The teacher no longer decides the learning goals alone. Instead, the students take the lead in setting their goals with the guidance of their teacher. The students, called "learners" in SBE, decide how and what they will learn (within set performance level parameters) and participate in self-evaluation of their work.

The leadership and personal responsibility emphasis also extends to the group level as the students work together to create a code of conduct for the classroom.

Stephanie Rasch, SBE test teacher at Scott Carpenter Middle School says, "It's a huge change. The kids in my math class wanted to work more with friends. I said, okay, now we have to talk about how to work with friends. The kids made five rules about noise level and staying on task."

Pros and Cons

Dr. Bob Marzano, educational advisor to the Adams 50 SBE implementation, loves the "freedom for students to move at proficiency." But, he adds, "How do you handle when the kids move from levels? Do they stay with the same teacher? If they move, when do they move? Quarters? Semesters?"

Adams 50 Chief Academic Officer, Dr. Copper Stoll, answers, "It will depend on the school. Some classes which have almost mastered a level may move together with their teacher to the next level. In other classes where one or two students are ready to move on, they will move to a different teacher."

Parent, Nicki Ozzell, questions students' goal setting ability. "They're not going to push themselves, they'll just skate. I think in elementary schools, it's a good thing. But not for junior high."

"It will be challenging to change our complete idea of how to teach," says third year teacher, Sarah Burkeen. "[But,] I think this new system allows each student to be successful."

Adams 50's makeover starts now. Will there be tears of joy with cheers of excitement when results of the change are revealed? Adams 50 hopes so.

To read more about the changes in the Adams School District 50 visit www.sbsadams50.org. ♦

