

Center could become a national rural schools model

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CENTER During a visit Monday to Center Schools, Colorado Dept. of Education (CDE) commissioner Dwight D. Jones told Center school board members and administrators that Center Schools could "even be a model for the nation."

In their attempts to address Colorado students' reading and math deficits, the CDE has required schools statewide with low reading and math scores to use "turnaround providers" to conduct special programs to improve performance. Center is one of those schools and has chosen the Lindamood-Bell Learning Processes as its provider.

Jones heard the school's progress report on the Lindamood-Bell instruction and listened as Superintendent George Welsh and staff addressed problems such as the district's high poverty standing, an English Language Learner rate of over 55 percent of the school's population and sagging financial and academic accreditation

The tenor of Commissioner Jones' evaluation of the school's efforts to improve their CSAP scores and overall academic performance was markedly favorable. "I have districts with lower poverty rates that are not nearly as aggressive [as Center]," Jones said. "If I could get some of my other districts to take on as much as you're taking on, it would benefit the whole state."

Jones continued: "I am so pleased to be in this district. You're a great partner for the state and will be a model for the state." Jones told administrators and board members not to apologize for their "backwards statistics" because they have given students a kick start in improving their skills. He commended the school for participating in the ASCENT program, which helps high school students build college credits before graduating.

Gov. Ritter is insistent on post secondary training for students, Jones noted, and Center's enthusiastic reception of the ASCENT program is to be commended. Jones said he read documents prepared for his visit by Superintendent George Welsh and was "quite impressed" with the multifaceted approach Center is using to improve their schools. He remarked that "The Dept. of Education in Washington doesn't understand rural communities" and for this reason it would be good to use Center as an example of the little rural school that could. Coming from a small Kansas community himself, Jones commented, he understood the "twists and turns" in political plays that can occur, but congratulated staff for effectively countering these.

Before he left the board room to tour the school, Jones told those gathered to hear his comments: "Don't be discouraged; you will hit dips. I am your biggest advocate."

Welsh offers pointers for CDE

Supt. Welsh provided some pointers to Jones for improving Center's relations with CDE and streamlining some of the processes that work for larger school districts but do not work well for Center. Among these, he suggested better communication strategies between the two entities, additional grant monies that can be used to support the school's efforts to improve and better utilizing resources by scheduling more meetings with CDE using computer technology to limit travel time and costs.

Welsh thanked Jones for being the first commissioner to visit the school in recent history and promised to continue his efforts to make Center Schools a model participant in the Turnaround Program.