

North High School Report

The Voice of Over 700 Students



March 2004

**A Publication Compiled & Written by
Jovenes Unidos & Padres Unidos**

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JOVENES UNIDOS

NORTH HIGH SCHOOL REPORT AND REFORM PLAN

This report is dedicated to making North a school of academic excellence - where all students learn at high levels, graduate, and have the option of going on to college.

“What if...poor and minority students are performing below other students not because something is wrong with them or their families, but because most schools don’t... teach them what they need to know?”

Kati Haycock, Executive Director
The Education Trust

This report is an intergenerational project between Jovenes Unidos and Padres Unidos.

Community Members Comment on the Contribution of over 700 Students to Reform North High School

“I think the report is great; it is very important and makes us want to know more about what is going on at North. That you as students are interested in your school... is important, because you are the ones who go there every day and see what the problems are.”

“Me parece perfecto[el reporte], es muy importante, los motiva a conocer más. La base [los estudiantes] es muy importante. Ustedes interesándose...no solamente los padres, es importante porque están allí, adentro, nosotros solo vamos y los dejamos pero ustedes son los que van y ven los problemas.”

Juventino Trijon
32nd Avenue Merchant, Vaquita Carniceria

“We... support the leadership that *Jovenes Unidos* has demonstrated in identifying the issues that are important to the students at North High School. This group of students should be recognized for their hard work and commitment to reforming their school.

Here at Clínica Tepeyac we would like to help not only with this endorsement, but also by offering our support in their future endeavors.”

**Rosanna Reyes, Executive Director and
Cecilia Apodaca, Program Specialist, Clínica Tepeyac**

“*Jovenes Unidos* has produced a report that is remarkable in its breadth and depth. Whether or not a reader agrees with all of its conclusions or recommendations, the quality and quantity of the work involved has to impress.

The report lays out in clear and measured language the litany of woes that plague North – in many ways a typical inner-city high school. Clearly, well-intentioned adults with deeply ingrained low expectations of low-income students of color are doing those students a major disservice.

The contrasts drawn between North and more privileged schools inside and outside of Denver are startling. If this report does not spur DPS to action, one has to wonder if anything ever will.”

Alan Gottlieb
Educational Expert

“Escuela Tlatelolco enthusiastically endorses and supports the student-led effort to reform North High School. We hope that *Jovenes Unidos* will be given a serious ear and encouragement by DPS for this productive and positive strategy.”

Rudolph Gonzales
Escuela Tlatelolco, Learning Director

“North students can definitely perform if we give them the tools and the expectation that they will succeed. As a college administrator, I am deeply encouraged by the students’ initiative in addressing pressing issues pertaining to their educational success. As an alumna, I support many of the recommendations provided by Jovenes Unidos and would love to see the formation of a North High School Reform Committee whereas alumni could contribute to this effort.”

**Miriam Tapia, Associate Director of Recruitment
Services, Metro State College**

“I was visited a few weeks ago by a group of intelligent and very organized youth. They have spent many months researching and assessing their school environment at North High School in Denver... In all my years working with youth and college students, I have not seen any group more organized and focused than this group.

As I sat faced with their concerns and proposals, I couldn’t help but feel my heart move to want to provide them with as much support as possible. I am sure you are feeling the same if they have talked with you.

I would like to extend my support for creating and enhancing the opportunities for youth and their schools in as many ways as possible. At the Conflict Center, we wish to offer our work in schools as a resource should the need arise.”

**Michelle Binkowski, Executive Director
The Conflict Center**

“They need to pay attention to what you are doing – because it will make the school better for all the students, and because Hispanics need to be prepared to go to college.”

“Que los escuchen en lo que estan haciendo. Mientras sea para el mejoramiento de los alumnos de la escuela y va a traer mejoramiento. Y tambien para que los hispanos se preparen para el colegio.”

**Francisco Toual,
32nd Avenue Merchant, Rey del Taco**

“I can’t believe North has not changed yet. I graduated in 1990 and we are still hearing the same stories from students. We started with over 500 students in my freshman class and only graduated 240! If teachers, parents, and students are still frustrated, we are still doing something wrong. It doesn’t matter whose fault it is – what does matter is what we’re going to do to prepare our students to succeed in college and beyond.”

**Johanna Leyba
Organizational Consultant for Nonprofits**

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Additional copies of this report are available free for students and at a cost of \$15.00 for non-students, please make checks payable to Padres Unidos.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The North High School Investigation and Report

In the spring of 2002, parents and community members of Padres Unidos raised concerns about the low academic achievement and low graduation rate at North High School. Jovenes Unidos members at North took up the call to investigate the low graduation and high drop out rates at our school and to develop solutions to improve it. To do this, Jovenes surveyed 700 North High students, collected school and district data, visited a high-performing area high school, and looked at educational research and school reform experiences from around the country. From our investigation, we found that on average, **only 38% of 9th graders who enter North each year graduate four years later.**

The goal of this report and reform plan is to change that statistic, and to make North a school of excellence where all students learn, graduate, and have the opportunity to go on to college. This report outlines the findings of the North student survey, national education research findings, and our proposal for school reform. As North students, we believe that the voices of students are critical to the effort to improve North, and we are committed to working with the school and community to achieve this goal.

Public Education: Separate and Unequal

There is a well documented achievement gap between affluent white students and low-income students of color. While the reasons given for this gap often focus on the lack of family support and numerous hardships affecting low-income students of color, a closer look at public school systems suggests that other factors are even more important. In this report, we cite research from around the country that shows great inequalities between schools depending on what students they serve. **Low income students of color are largely concentrated in schools that have fewer resources, less qualified teachers, and lower level curriculum offerings that leave little opportunity for students to go to college.** The prevailing expectation for low-income students is that they will not achieve at high levels, and so fewer resources are invested in their education, resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy. In contrast, schools with majority white, middle class and affluent students have the most qualified teachers, the most resources, and the most rigorous curriculums that prepare their students for higher education.

Factors Leading to High Achievement for All Students

The educational research we found also shows what *is* possible when low-income students are taught at high levels by highly qualified teachers – both quality of teaching and level of curriculum are more important to student achievement than student background, race, or income level. Numerous studies have shown that when taught at a

rigorous, college prep level by highly qualified teachers, **the academic achievement of low-income students of color will rise to meet the level of instruction and expectations given to them.**

Looking at the research on high-performing schools that serve a majority of low-income students of color (including information gathered by Padres and Jovenes Unidos during visits to New York City schools), we found **4 common elements** that lead to success:

- **High Expectations:** Teachers, administrators, and staff truly believe that the students can learn and succeed at high levels, and create a highly motivational environment that fosters success for all students.
- **High Quality Teaching:** Teachers are not only knowledgeable in their subject areas, but use interactive teaching methods and adapt instruction to student needs. Teachers receive ongoing professional development and support.
- **High Level Curriculum:** All students are taught at high levels, and given the curriculum necessary not just for graduation, but for college preparation.
- **Supportive School Culture:** The school is structured to support students academically, socially, and emotionally through small groupings like “Learning Families”; students have a strong voice in school decision-making; and students’ cultures are honored and celebrated throughout the school.

These schools are performing in the top third of all schools in their states, and their students are graduating and going on to college in record numbers. If this kind of success is possible at hundreds of other schools across the country with a majority of low-income students of color, we believe it is also possible at North.

Results of the North High School Student Survey

In the results of 700 North student surveys, we found that student opinions and insights mirrored the nationwide educational research – both in what students identified as being wrong at their school, and in their ideas for what would improve the quality of education at North. Here are some of the key survey findings:

- **93% of North students surveyed want to go to college, but 56% feel that they are not being prepared adequately for college**
- **58% of students surveyed do not feel motivated to succeed by North teachers or administrators**

- **65% of students surveyed said that students ditch school because classes are boring; and 39% said that the #1 way to increase attendance would be to improve the quality of teaching and curriculum**
- **50% of students surveyed do not feel that North has a school culture that respects students**
- **83% of students surveyed disagree with the way that discipline is handled at North (suspensions, expulsions)**

Jovenes Unidos Proposal for North High School Reform

We not only identified problems at North, but also took it upon ourselves to research and develop solutions to improve the school. As students, we are committed to having a strong voice in reform development and implementation. Jovenes Unidos offers these reforms in a spirit of collaboration with the school district and the community, so that by working together we can achieve educational excellence at North. The following is a summary of our proposed solutions.

GOAL I: Keep Students in School and Learning

- a) Increase access to the school building, create a bilingual tutoring center with extended hours, and increase student access to the library and computers.
- b) Reform school discipline to emphasize alternatives to suspension and expulsion, such as peer mediation or restorative justice.

GOAL II: Prepare Students to Graduate and Go to College

- a) Raise the curriculum level for all students, implement AVID, increase the number of AP and X classes offered in English and Spanish, expand culturally relevant curriculum and improve teaching quality.
- b) Inform and assist all students to explore their college options through one-on-one counseling, a college path publication, and a college options library; and support passage of the DREAM Act and similar legislation, so that undocumented students can go to college.

GOAL III: Improve Student Support Systems to Ensure Academic Success

- a) Strengthen the counseling department by increasing the number of counselors and grouping students by last name, with the same counselor for all four years.
- b) Create a family environment by forming small student groups with adult mentors that stay together for all four years, and provide support for students during the school day. Examples are Learning Families at Cole Middle School, Houses at DeWitt Clinton High School, and Familias at the El Puente Academy.

GOAL IV: Create a School Climate of Respect

- a) Give equal acknowledgement and opportunity to Spanish-speaking students, including translation of all school activities, meetings, announcement and materials.
- b) Create an elected student government with real decision-making powers in issues of school policy and practice.
- c) Improve school environment conditions – for example, provide adequate seating and better food for school lunch, explore re-opening the campus, and improve the role of security guards with students.

CONCLUSION

Jovenes Unidos recognizes the steps taken by the current and previous North High principals to improve the school. To continue and deepen those efforts, we call for the formation of a Committee to Reform North High School – open to all students, parents, teachers, administrators, school staff, and community members – to collaboratively develop and implement school reforms, and work in unity to achieve educational excellence at North.

Special Thanks and Acknowledgements

We would like to give special thanks to everyone who helped and supported us in this research.

To the parents and community members who first identified the issues at North and took a stand to improve our education: Amalia Carrillo, Maria Santos, Maria Lara, Miriam Sotelo, Ana Sotelo, Ofelia Sotelo, Manuel Chacon, Doña Jubensia, Martha Parra, Maximiano Cardosa, Dolores Obregon, Gerardo Perez, Maria Martinez, Rosa Arambula, Rosenda Salas, Maria Ramos, Rosalinda Aguirre, Martha Gallardo, and Santos Cabral.

To the students who took up the call to investigate what was going on at North, surveyed 700 students and developed solutions to improve the school: Julieta Quiñones, Juan Evangelista, Monica Acosta, Luis Rodriguez, Eva Bonilla, Lizette Quezada, Lizzeth Nevarez, Jorge Evangelista, Alex Martinez, Jesus Aguirre, Lynn Khuu, Victor Nevarez, Esmeralda Martinez, and all the other students who gave their time and effort.

To all of the students at North High who took the time to complete the survey and share your personal stories – your voices are being heard in this report.

To the former North students who graduated, went on to college and professional careers, and gave testimony to their experiences: Johanna Leyba, Dusti Gurule and Miriam Tapia.

To the DPS staff and board who supported our efforts: We thank Dr. Darlene LeDoux for her heartfelt efforts to move North High School forward. She has created new cultural options, eliminated the “No D” policy, made college information accessible to Spanish-speaking students and initiated many positive changes. We thank Dr. Offie Hobbs for embracing change during his time at North and starting the process of reform. We thank DPS Superintendent Dr. Jerry Wartgow, for his support of institutional change in the Denver Public Schools and at North; and the North High School staff and teachers for supporting our research by allowing us access to your classes, your information, and your time. We look forward to continuing our work with North High School, Rev. Lucia Guzman, our school board member, and the entire Denver School Board in our quest for educational excellence at North.

A special thanks to: Judith Browne, Aurora Vasquez, Monique Dixon, and Sabrina Williams of the Advancement Project who have supported, trained, and stood by the efforts of Jovenes Unidos.

For your willingness to provide data, share your own experiences and findings, review our surveys, answer questions, and help us reach students: Mark Stevens, DPS Public Information Officer; David Lowery, Executive Director of the DPS Department of Planning and Research; Robin Kane, Executive Director of DPS Human Resources; Roger Magnuson, Assistant Principal of Cherry Creek High School; Alan Gottlieb of the Piton Foundation; Arnie Langberg, master teacher and mentor in educational reform; Robert Reichardt of the Alliance for Quality Teaching; the Applied Research Center; Californians for Justice; Generation Y; Students 4 Justice; the Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Center; Crossroads Middle School in East Harlem, DeWitt Clinton High School in the South Bronx, El Puente Academy in Brooklyn; John Beam, Executive Director of the National Center for Schools and Communities; the Educational Trust -- for believing that all students can learn and achieve at high levels and that the system is failing us, it is not that we are failures; and Justice Matters for their critical publication *Turning To Each Other, Not On Each Other: How School Communities Prevent Racial Bias in School Discipline*.

Finally, thank you to the following foundations that have made this research and campaign possible: Common Counsel Foundation, Edward W. Hazen Foundation, The Denver Foundation, Rose Foundation, Norman Foundation, Unitarian Universalist, Public Welfare Foundation, Daniels Fund, Peace Development Fund, Funding Exchange, Washington Mutual, Mott Foundation, Gay & Lesbian Fund, Anschutz Family Foundation, Chinook Fund, and Ben & Jerrys.

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INTRODUCTION

Who is Jovenes Unidos

Jovenes Unidos is the student-organizing branch of Padres Unidos-- which fights for educational equality, student rights, and justice for immigrant people. Jovenes Unidos empowers young people to defend our rights in our schools and in our communities, to work together to identify problems, find solutions and create change, and to stand up against discrimination and oppression wherever it occurs. We believe that **every** student has the right to a high quality public education and the chance to go to college. We feel that students should have a very strong voice in decision-making in their schools because all school decisions primarily affect us – our education and our futures.

Jovenes Unidos began in 2000, when students working with their parents during the struggle to reform Cole Middle School decided that they needed their own youth-led organization. Jovenes Unidos formed a chapter at North High School in 2002. Concerns about high numbers of suspensions and expulsions and the low number of students graduating from North every year brought students and parents together to begin looking at how to improve North.

Some of the campaigns that we have worked on include: the defeat of Amendment 31, which would have eliminated all bilingual education in the state of Colorado; demonstrations against the war in Iraq; and support of immigrant workers' rights. We participated in the Jovenes Unidos 2003 Summer Youth Organizing Institute that trained us to become youth organizers and have a bigger impact in our schools and communities.

Currently, we are working to support passage of the DREAM Act, which if passed would give undocumented students the right to go to college, receive financial aid and scholarships, and work legally in this country. Many bright and talented undocumented students drop out of high school because they know they have no chance of being able to go to college after graduation. The DREAM Act will lower the dropout rate by giving undocumented youth the hope and motivation they need to finish high school, and pursue all of their goals and dreams without limitations.

We are also part of a national project called the Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Project – to investigate the use of zero tolerance discipline in public schools and its effect on students. Through our research, we will document the over-use of suspensions and expulsions that pushes students out of school and leads to high numbers of youth of color entering the juvenile justice system. Armed with this information, we will work to change the system and demand that our schools serve as high quality educational institutions, not as pipelines to prison.

Over the past year and half, Jovenes Unidos has conducted research into the low graduation rate and low quality of education at North High School. This report is not the end of our efforts, but just the beginning. We are committed to making the proposals of this report become a reality – so that all North students have the opportunity to receive a high quality education that prepares us for graduation and beyond.

Jovenes Unidos Call for Reform

The goal of this report and reform plan is to improve North High School and make it a school of excellence for all students. We want North to give its students a high quality education that prepares us to graduate and to be successful in college and our careers. We want “Excellence is Expected”, our school motto, to be believed in and acted upon by teachers, administrators, students, parents and community members. We want incoming generations to feel proud of the education they are receiving at North, and we want all North students to learn, to graduate, and to have the chance to go to college.

For these reasons, Jovenes Unidos conducted research on North High School and developed a Plan of Reform from the spring of 2002 through the fall of 2003. We surveyed 700 North students, collected school district data, and visited a high-performing Denver area high school – all to gain a deeper understanding of why so few North students are achieving at high academic levels, graduating, or going on to college.

We are presenting this report to outline the issues at North that must be addressed in order for educational opportunities to improve for all students. In this report we will present: 1) the results of our student survey, 2) educational research on the key components for high achievement, and 3) our proposals for making North a school of excellence. As North High School students, we believe that the work to reform our school must begin now – our education and our futures are on the line.

We applaud the two most recent North High principals who have started to address the problems at North. We look forward to participating in an open and inclusive reform process, so that students, parents, and community can work collaboratively with the school and district to make North High a school of academic excellence.

*It is important to note that from those surveyed,
we found that **93% of North students**
want to go to college,
yet, DPS district data shows that only
38% of students who enter North as 9th graders
actually graduate four years later.*

The Crisis at North High School

In the spring of 2002, North High parents and community members came to Padres Unidos with serious concerns about the school. They were worried that too many of their children were carrying low class loads and not meeting requirements for graduation, much less being prepared for college. They wanted to know why so many students were not graduating from North each year. They wanted to know why the level of learning at North was so low – with 2002 CSAP scores showing students at only 15% proficient or advanced in reading, only 23% proficient or advanced in writing, and only 2% proficient or advanced in math.

So, members of Padres Unidos decided to survey students in an effort to find out more about what was happening at the school. When parents began surveying on 32nd Avenue during lunchtime (North had open campus at the time when the surveying started), students quickly took interest in the issues and wanted to get involved. We formed a North High chapter of Jovenes Unidos and took up the investigation, surveying 700 North High students, inside the school and out in the community, during that spring and throughout the next school year. We also collected district data, visited a high-performing Denver area high school, and met many times with North High School administrators to gather information.

Nationwide Crisis in Public Education

There is a well-documented achievement gap between white and African American and Latino students, affluent students and poor students. Low-income students of color across the country are graduating from high school and attending college at much lower rates than white affluent students. Many public schools with majority low-income students of color have been labeled as “failing” – with their students scoring low on standardized tests and dropping out in high numbers.

In the debate about how to improve these failing schools, it is often accepted that low-income children of color come to school with all the odds stacked against them – they come less prepared to learn, have parents that don’t get involved or can’t give them educational support at home, their communities don’t reinforce educational values, they aren’t proficient in English, or they are dealing with too many stressors like violence or family dysfunction to concentrate on school... far too many challenges for any regular public school to overcome. But studies by a number of education research organizations, as well as the school reform experiences of grassroots community organizations across the country, are challenging that assumption and asserting instead that it is the low expectations and lack of investment in poor students of color that causes them, and their schools, to fail – it is not that the students themselves are deficient.

“What if...poor and minority students are performing below other students not because something is wrong with them or their families, but because most schools don’t... teach them what they need to know?”

Kati Haycock, Executive Director
The Education Trust

We believe this is true: low-income Latino and African American students are just as intelligent and able to learn as affluent white students. We are just as motivated to learn and believe just as strongly in the importance of education. Yet a history of unequal investment and low expectations for our schools has denied low-income students of color equal opportunity to high quality public education, and has essentially created two public school systems—one for the haves and one for the have-nots. Numerous studies have shown that highly qualified teachers, access to educational resources, and a challenging curriculum are the keys to high school graduation and continuance to higher education. The opposite has also been shown: that under-qualified teachers, few educational resources, and “dummied-down” classes result in poor student achievement.¹ Still, a majority of low-income Latino and African American students are segregated into schools that get less money, less-qualified teachers, lower level curriculum offerings and lower expectations and standards for their students.

A 2000 report by the Applied Research Center found that students of color are tracked into an educational system that “channels them away from academically challenging courses, punishes them more frequently and harshly, and ultimately pushes them out of school without a diploma – all in much higher proportions than their white counterparts.”² In their study, they looked at the public school systems in 12 cities, including Denver. They found that African American students were over 3 times more likely to be suspended and that Latinos were 2 times more likely to be suspended than their white peers. The Advancement Project also found great racial disparities in its 2003 report “De-Railed: the Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track” – finding that zero tolerance discipline practices push students out of school and into the criminal justice system – and that these practices disproportionately harm students of color.³

The Applied Research Center study also found that students of color are pushed out of school through a system of assigning them lower classes, less-qualified teachers, and fewer academic resources. Engaging and challenging classroom instruction has been linked to higher attendance, fewer behavior problems and college success. However, in all twelve cities in the study, Latino and African American students were severely under-represented in Advanced Placement and other college prep classes, while white students

were over-represented. Research conducted throughout the nation – including a study of the New York City public schools as well as various statewide studies by the Education Trust – has found that as the percentage of Latino and African American students in a school increases, the average teacher quality declines. The New York study also found that the quality of libraries also went down as teacher quality decreased.⁴

How North Compares

North High School fits the profile of so many high-poverty, high-minority, low-performing urban schools with a student body that is 83% Latino, 67% of students receiving free or reduced lunch, and a 79% attendance rate. The 2002-2003 School Report Card showed that: 39% of teachers are uncertified in the subject they are teaching, the ninth grade student/teacher ratio is over 30 students per teacher, and there were 396 suspensions during the 2002-2003 school year – in a school of 1500 students. North offers only 6 Advanced Placement (AP) and 18 Accelerated (X) classes, and few AP or X classes are offered for its 20% ELA (English Language Acquisition) population. In many classes, there are not enough books for each student to have one to take home.

Student thoughts on North in the 1990s...

“Tracking was prevalent. The counseling staff had certain expectations about the “type” of student who was college material and those who were not... it often appeared that little effort was put into motivating all students to consider college (especially selective colleges) as an obvious option following high school. The students had the potential, desire, and ability to succeed, however due to the lack of knowledge regarding “the process” many students were left behind fending for themselves.”

Miriam Tapia, North Class of 1990

And today...

93% of North students surveyed (in the Jovenes Unidos North High Survey) want to go to college, yet 56% feel that they are not being adequately prepared for college.

What the North High Data Means

If we look at the official data put out by the district, however, the situation at North may look better than it is. When we collected data both from the school district and directly

from North’s administration, we found some major differences in the information they provided versus what we knew to be student experience. Here is what we found:

Official School Data...

(According to DPS official documents)

“North has a 59.9% graduation rate⁵”

“North’s dropout rate was 3.3% in the 2002-2003 school year⁷”

What We Found...

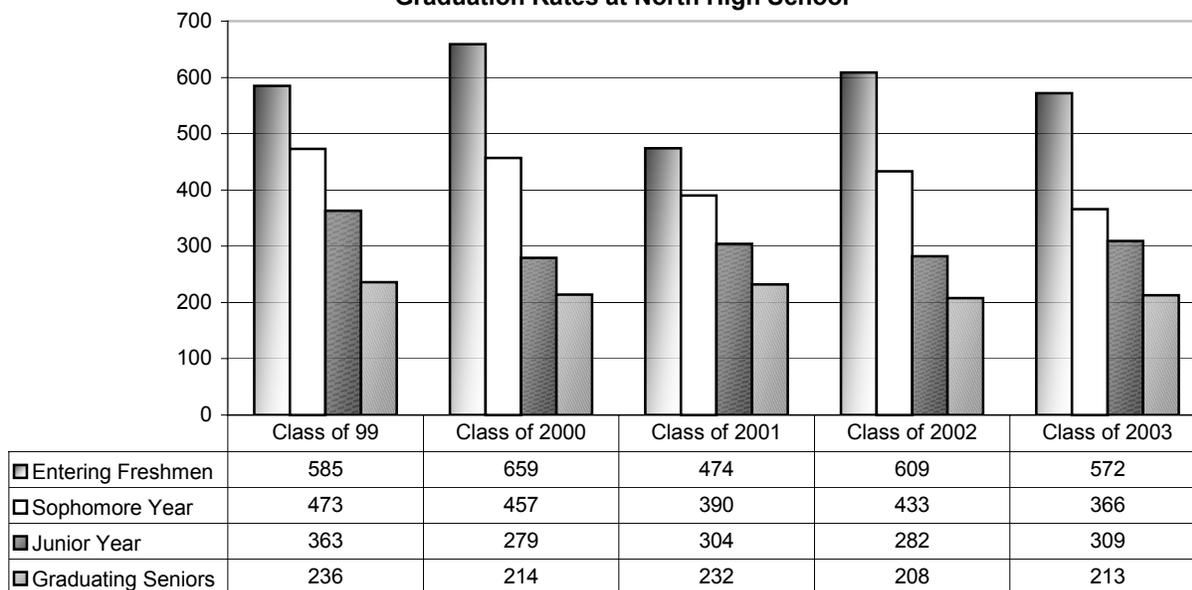
(According to DPS official statistics and the Jovenes Unidos North High School survey)

609 students entered the class of 2002 as 9th graders. Four years later, 208 students graduated – a graduation rate of only 34%.

The chart below shows that over the past 5 years, North has had an average graduation rate of 38%⁶.

Similar drop out rates are reported by North in previous school years. However, the chart below shows a clear and consistent pattern of student attrition each year. For example, the chart shows that 572 students entered the class of 2003 as 9th graders, yet only 213 students graduated four years later. That means 359 students did not graduate.

Graduation Rates at North High School



From DPS Report Titled “Student Membership by School, Grade, Gender, & Ethnicity”, 1999-2003

Official School Data...

“Advanced Placement and college preparation courses...prepare our students for the challenges of post secondary education.⁸”

North follows the DPS discipline policy, which states that school discipline must “protect the right of the student to become educated.¹⁰”

North’s report on School Environment says that the school “allows after-school programs and encourages community programs in (the) school building¹¹”.

What We Found...

93% of North students surveyed want to go to college, yet 56% feel that they are not receiving adequate college preparation at North.

North offers 6 AP and 18 X classes, compared with 18 AP and 30 X classes offered at East High School this year (see p. 20 for an explanation of the AP/X count). There are only 360 more students at East than at North.

While 20% of North students are in ELA classes⁹ (English language acquisition), the only AP or X classes offered to monolingual Spanish speakers are Spanish classes and studio art classes.

Our survey found that 85% of students disagree with the use of suspensions at North, which can remove students from school and result in missed class time.

Studies by the Applied Research Center and the Justice Matters Institute show that students who are suspended and expelled are more likely to drop out of school. (Please visit www.advancementproject.org & www.justicematters.org for more information).

Even though North encourages extra enrichment opportunities for its students, what about access to basic resources for learning? Students report having to leave the school immediately after last period and having limited access to the library, tutors, and computers.

In order to improve North, it is important that we look at the problems straight on -- because only by admitting what the problems really are and by agreeing to work together for change, can we start to find and implement the right solutions. As students our futures depend on the quality of education we receive at North, we believe that it is both the right and responsibility of North students to be involved in developing school reforms, with equal voice and participation to adults.

Life at a High-Performing Colorado School

Instead of just identifying North's problems we decided to also look for solutions, and see what was possible in public education by comparing our school with a local high-performing public school. **We decided to do this comparison because we believe that North students should have equal access to a high quality education and the opportunity to go to college – regardless of our race, our family income, or what part of town we grew up in.** We took a trip to Cherry Creek High School – a high-performing school in the area whose students are mostly white and affluent. What we found was a school that seemed like it was in a different universe from North, with a completely different atmosphere, different attitudes, different availability of resources, and ultimately, completely different results for its students.

Cherry Creek High School has a 93% graduation rate, a .6% dropout rate, and high student achievement. On our visit to the school, we saw that students there were very independent and allowed to move around campus freely, yet they still excelled academically. They were given the trust and support that all students need to perform at a high level, and they felt motivated by the school to succeed. Teachers were very enthusiastic about what they were teaching. They assumed that the students would continue their education after high school, and gave each student the individual attention they needed to fulfill this goal.

At Cherry Creek High School we spoke with students and administrators and found that students took a large role in school decision-making through their student government, which is empowered to make policy recommendations, amend the school constitution, get student input on school issues and address student concerns.

We took a tour of the campus and observed that each class had enough books for each student to take home. We learned that the library at Cherry Creek is open from 7:30 am until 5:30 pm and that it contains three computer labs, each with 30 computers. Two of these labs are reserved for

class instruction. The other lab is used as a “drop-in” lab, where students can use the computers at any time during the school day without a pass. We were also shocked to see that Cherry Creek had 2 resource centers for core subject areas (1 Math and Science; 1 Humanities) that were open to all students from 7:00 am to 3:30 pm and were equipped with computers, resource materials, and space for students to study. Tutors (teachers and National Honor Society students) are available in these centers throughout the day to provide extra help to any student who needs it. In addition, Cherry Creek has an evening tutoring program that is available to students who can’t attend tutoring sessions during the day.

College preparation was a huge focus at Cherry Creek as well. We visited the Post-Graduate Center, which is staffed by Post-Grad specialists who assist students in exploring their options and preparing college and scholarship applications. In addition, all regular counselors do post-graduate counseling with their students. There is a “Freshman Seminar” for all 9th grade students, during which counselors meet with each student in the first three weeks of school to develop a four-year plan that fits their post-graduation needs and goals. Each year after that, students meet with their counselors (the same one for all four years) to review and revise their plans. In the senior year, each student works with their counselor to develop a complete student resume, compile letters of recommendation, and outline final steps to achieve post-graduation plans (information courtesy of Cherry Creek High School Counseling Department).

What is Possible

So what happens when the lack of resources and low expectations for low-income students of color are replaced with high expectations, high-level curriculum, high-quality teachers, and sufficient academic resources? Is it possible for North to perform like Cherry Creek? The evidence we found says that it is. We know that North has many talented and highly effective teachers. However, we need to support professional development for all teachers at North in order to create a culture of high academic standards.

Studies by the Education Trust back up this idea that high quality teaching is key to student achievement. In various statewide studies, they found that when students were taught by highly effective teachers* for several years in a row, they learned much more than students who had less effective teachers. For example:

- **An extensive study of Texas schools found that teacher quality affected student achievement *more than any other factor* – including parent education level or family income**
- **In a Tennessee study, 3rd grade students scoring approximately the same on math achievement tests were compared again in the 6th grade. Those students who had been assigned high quality teachers for three years scored up to 50 percentile points higher on 6th grade math tests than those students who had been taught by less qualified teachers¹²**

* A high quality teacher is defined by the Education Trust based on two factors:

- 1) strong verbal and math skills, measured by how teachers score on certification exams, and
- 2) deep content knowledge, reflected in whether a teacher has a degree in the subject that they are teaching.

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards additionally defines a highly effective teacher as one demonstrating the following expertise in teaching skill: **showing high expectations, and engaging and challenging students; demonstrating respect for all students' learning and well-being and finding ways to overcome barriers to learning;** drawing upon a wide range of approaches to tailor instruction to student needs; and creating an optimal classroom environment for learning by being aware of students' responses to instruction.¹³

The Education Trust studies also looked at the connection between college prep level curriculum and student achievement, and found that:

- ***All* students – even previously low-achieving students – learn more when placed in high level classes instead of remedial or vocational classes**
- **Students who were low-achievers in the 8th grade were found more likely to earn an A, B, or C when placed in 9th grade *college prep level classes* than when placed in low-level classes**
- **High school students of *any achievement level* were found to be more likely to fail a low-level class than a college prep one.**¹⁴

The above results were not just isolated cases, and did not happen only in “miracle” schools.

In their 2001 publication *Dispelling the Myth – Revisited*, The Education Trust identified **1,320 high-performing schools** across the country with student body majorities of low-income students of color (Latino, African American, and Native American). In these schools, student performance in reading and math is in the ***top third*** of all schools in their states.¹⁵

Three key components are common to these “high-flying” schools:

1. **High standards and expectations for all students**
2. **Rigorous academic curriculum, and**
3. **Highly qualified teachers.**

Several years ago, Padres Unidos and Jovenes Unidos visited a few public schools in New York – including El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice, the Julia Richmond Educational Complex, and DeWitt Clinton High School – schools that are high-performing and have student-body majorities of low-income Latino and African American students. In these schools, over 90% of students are graduating and over 80% are going on to higher education! In addition to **high expectations, rigorous curriculum, and highly qualified teachers**, these schools have other qualities that contribute heavily to their success.

1. A personalized educational experience for their students– so that no one falls through the cracks. The schools all find ways to give students individual attention and support by breaking down large schools into groupings like “Houses” or “Familias”. These smaller groups that stay with students through all four years give each student a team of teachers, staff, and their peers who are familiar with their academic strengths, needs, and progress. The groups are also important as social/emotional support, so that a student can be nurtured and grow as a whole person, as well as academically.

2. A culture of respect and caring – students are treated like equal members of the school community. Students are taught both respect and responsibility at every level of their school experience. They are given ownership in their schools through meaningful involvement in school decision-making, and through a school culture that honors and reflects who they are and is closely tied to family and community. Students feel that their schools belong to them, and they are an essential part of making their school community work.

3. Fair alternatives to discipline – rather than pushing students out through reliance on out of school suspensions and expulsions. Alternatives include peer mediation, restorative justice, staff training in dealing with conflict without escalation, and in-school consequences that don’t remove students from the learning environment. The whole school, including students, is involved in developing, implementing, and making the rules and discipline processes work. Additionally, in these schools the consistent student support systems provide a point of intervention before most issues become real behavior problems, and a high level of involvement in learning means that there are fewer behavior problems to begin with.

Jovenes Unidos believes that to reform North High School we need to implement the above mentioned components in the following ways:

- **High expectations and standards:** teachers must truly believe and convey to students that they *can* learn and perform at high-levels, that their success is expected and therefore, that they will be supported in whatever way possible. This includes honoring each student and helping them develop their individual strengths.
- **Rigorous academic curriculum:** based on the belief that North students can learn at high levels, we must have a curriculum that offers all students high level, college preparatory classes.

- **Highly qualified teachers:** all North teachers must be highly qualified to teach students at high levels. This includes the ability to respond to the different needs of students and help *all* students learn.

While some people will still say that this kind of atmosphere is not possible at North, we believe that it is. These schools show what is possible when we invest and believe in all students – and give them the education they need to succeed. These hundreds of schools with students just like those at North are proving that with the right kind of education and school structure, low-income students of color can do just as well as white students from wealthy suburbs. We believe that if all of us invest and believe in North enough to make these kinds of changes, it will become a high-performing school, too.

The Jovenes Unidos North High Survey

Student Voice

The Jovenes Unidos North High survey was conducted to collect information on the quality of education at North from the students' perspective. We felt it was important to understand how the problems at North impact the students and are factors in pushing so many of us out of school before graduation. We also felt that since we are the ones living through every day at North, student perspectives were critical to knowing what the real issues are and what the solutions might be.

What we found was that the issues and ideas that students expressed in the survey were the *same ones* that have been identified by education researchers around the country as important to improving education. The students' ideas for fair and creative solutions to make North better also are in agreement with what many education researchers are saying will fix our public schools. The students we surveyed at North know through their own daily experience what good education is, and they also know when they are not getting it. If we, the students, are listened to, our experiences will help to identify the issues that need to be addressed, and our ideas can help drive the process of making North better.

How we did the survey

From the spring of 2002 to the spring of 2003, Jovenes Unidos surveyed 700 North High School students. The bilingual survey went to students in ELA, AP, X and regular classes. We surveyed students on 32nd Avenue, in the cafeteria, in Denver Recreation Centers and other community organizations. We also surveyed some students that had been expelled or had dropped out. During the summer of 2003, Jovenes Unidos members went through all the surveys, both in English and Spanish, tallied all of the results, and documented the testimonials from students.

In order to do the survey we had to get it approved by the principal, Dr. Hobbs (during the 2002-2003 school year), who supported our work and our efforts to give students a voice in our school. We also had to ask permission from the teachers to survey in their classes. Doing this wasn't an easy task. While some teachers supported us and appreciated the fact that students were being active and making a change in the school, we got resistance from other teachers who believed the problems at North were caused by the students and had nothing to do with the staff. Some felt offended by the questions that were on the survey and refused to let us into their classes. Some students also felt that what we were doing was hopeless and that it wouldn't change anything at North. However, many students were glad that someone realized there are problems at our school and that we were going to do something about it. We know that change is never easy, but requires determination and hard work. We appreciate the students and school staff who believed in what we were doing and helped the survey to happen. The voices of 700 North High students are represented in the following survey results.

North Student Survey Findings

In addition to surveying 700 North students in 2002 and 2003, we have collected data from North High School and the Denver Public School District, and analyzed all of this information for our report. We have also used the knowledge of school reform and educational best practices that was gained by Padres and Jovenes Unidos during the Cole Middle School reform process to support our findings. The following are the key points from our research.

Classroom Instruction

- ❖ **41% of students surveyed think that the quality of education at North is low**
- ❖ **47% of North students feel that they are not learning what they should be at their grade level**
- ❖ **65% of North students think the #1 reason that students ditch is that class is boring**
- ❖ **39% of students say that the best way to improve attendance and graduation rates is by improving the quality of classroom teaching and curriculum**

The beliefs of North students are backed up by educational research which shows that high-quality classroom instruction is crucial to keeping students in school and having high numbers of students graduate and go on to college. The first ingredient in high-quality classroom instruction is a rigorous academic curriculum. Studies by the Education Trust have found that all students benefit from taking high level courses, regardless of their previous academic record. Overall, they found that students of any academic level are more likely to fail low level courses than high level ones, and **when put in academically**

**“I’m learning
the same thing
now like in 7th
and 8th grade.”
Celia, 9th grade**

**“People ditch
because they are
bored or the
teachers don’t
challenge them
enough...”
Anonymous
10th grade**

challenging courses, students' level of learning will rise to meet the high standards, even if they were previously low academic achievers. California, like the rest of the nation, has a significant achievement gap between its white students and students of color. However, when high academic expectations and a college-readiness curriculum were instituted in all schools in the San Jose School District, math scores for Latino students nearly doubled and African American students' scores more than doubled¹⁶.

Based on their research, the Education Trust recommends that schools implement college preparatory curriculums for all high school students beginning in the 9th grade. Instead of this happening, however, our surveys found that many North students are bored with their classes and feel like they really aren't learning much at all.

Scores from the 2002 CSAP show that only 23% of North High 10th graders are proficient or advanced in reading, only 15% are proficient or advanced in writing, and only 2% are proficient or advanced in math. School grades are also extremely low. The chart below shows that 45% of all grades given out in the 2002-2003 school year in non AP or X (advanced placement or accelerated) classes were Ds and Fs. In science, social studies, and literature classes, more than half of all grades given were Ds and Fs.

High Percentage of D's & F's in mainstream classes at North (From grades given out in the 2002-2003 school year)

Subject	% of D's per year	% of F's per year	% of D's and F's per year
Writing	11.2%	14.8%	26.1%
Literature	13.7%	37.7%	51.4%
Reading	14.6%	21.8%	36.4%
Social Studies	19.0%	35.0%	54.0%
Science	18.0%	33.5%	51.5%
Math*	3.1%	37.8%	40.9%
Languages	11.5%	25.6%	27.1%
Total D's & F's			45.6%

Source: Denver Public Schools

*We thank Dr. Hobbs for raising concern, and Dr LeDoux for eliminating the "no D" policy in Math, which may result in more students receiving Ds and fewer receiving Fs in math in the future. In addition, new teachers have been hired in several departments.

- ❖ **36% of students surveyed feel that they do not get enough attention from teachers**

"I think people ditch because they get frustrated because the teachers don't take the time to go over things that they don't understand."

**Manuel
10th grade**

"(North) should make the classes fun and interactive, more hands on. Teachers should be nice and interested in their students when they ask questions. Some teachers don't let students ask questions."

**Salina
10th grade**

Studies have shown that high-quality teaching is crucial to raising students' academic level. In fact, a student's rise or fall of one whole grade level during a school year has been closely tied to teaching quality. Separate studies in Texas, Tennessee, and the Boston Public School district have shown that the achievement of low-performing students grew significantly in math and reading when taught by highly qualified teachers. Schools with a majority of low-income students of color generally have the most under-qualified teachers, and these teachers get little professional development or support to improve. Nationwide studies show that as the percentage of students of color in a school rises, teacher qualifications decrease. In contrast, the most qualified and experienced teachers are overwhelmingly found in high-performing schools where the majority of students are white and of middle or high income.¹⁷ This must change if high-quality education is to become equally available to poor students of color.

College Preparation

- ❖ **93% OF NORTH STUDENTS SURVEYED WANT TO GO TO COLLEGE**
- ❖ **56% of students feel that they are not being adequately prepared for college**
- ❖ **30% of North students have never been given information about college**
- ❖ **37% of students surveyed are carrying less than a full class load**

In other Denver area high schools and in the New York schools previously mentioned, students are prepared for college from their very first day of 9th grade (See East High attachment). In fact, in many high performing school districts students are encouraged to start thinking about college as early as middle or even elementary school. Last winter, when Jovenes Unidos members visited Cherry Creek High School we were shocked to see the large college counseling center and the numerous staff on hand in the center to help all students -- 9th through 12th grade -- to explore options and complete college and scholarship applications.

In contrast, North students' desires to go to college are not sufficiently supported by the school curriculum or with the necessary information and support. North students receive their first official information about college at the "Senior Meeting" held in the fall of 12th grade. This is too late for many students to explore college opportunities and apply for scholarships before the deadlines. It is much too late for many more students whose high school courses throughout their years at North have not prepared them for college—because they have not received the guidance or support necessary to consider college as an option.

“Teachers should make class worthwhile – not forcing kids to come, instead making them want to come.”
Anonymous
12th grade

“I still don't have any college preparation...I think it's bad that no one talks to freshmen about college, just because we are 9th graders.”
Diana, 9th grade

The necessary resources are not in place to provide college counseling to each student. One counselor is available to all seniors – and this same counselor serves all ELA students at North, making it difficult to spend the time necessary to counsel all seniors on post-secondary options. At the beginning of the school year, all seniors must sign a contract that details what they need to do to graduate. However, with so many students to counsel, individual attention throughout the year – crucial support that can make the difference between staying on track to graduate and falling short, missing deadlines and opportunities and getting into college – is nearly impossible.

The single most important predictor of success in college is a challenging, high-quality high school curriculum.¹ North offers 6 AP and 18 X courses, compared to 18 AP and 30 X courses offered at East High*. For ELA students at North (students learning English as a second language), who make up 20% of the student body², the only AP and X courses offered are Spanish and studio art – no other advanced subjects are available in Spanish.

AP & X Classes Offered at North and East High School

	East High School	North High School
Advanced Placement (AP) classes offered	18	6
Accelerated (X) classes offered	30	18

*The AP and X totals count courses offered – but not the number of times each course is offered in a school’s schedule (ex. if North offers 2 different periods of AP Chemistry, it only shows up as one course offered in the total count). Also, some courses are offered as multiple-semester classes, but are only counted as one total course (for example, AP calculus at East is a three-semester course, but shows on the chart as one total course). The count was done this way in order to make an equitable comparison between East and North.

In addition, several young professionals who graduated from North and went on to college shared their experiences with us:

**Miriam Tapia, Associate Director of Recruitment Services,
Metro State College, North High Class of 1990**

“North had many supplemental programs designed for high achieving students — perhaps the top 10%. The rest of the students, especially average performing students, were left on their own to sink or swim. Tracking was prevalent. The counseling staff had certain expectations about the “type” of student who was

“(North should) have more classes that prepare you for college and put more emphasis on college.”
Monica
10th grade

“(North should) ...explain much better what you have to do to go to college.”
Martha
11th grade

“Education and college prep need to improve because the students don’t believe in themselves.”
Anonymous
12th grade

college material and those who were not. Furthermore, it often appeared that little effort was put into motivating all students to consider college (especially selective colleges) as an obvious option following high school. The students had the potential, desire, and ability to succeed, however due to the lack of knowledge regarding “the process” many students were left behind fending for themselves. First generation students needed more assistance, not less. From my past perspective, it appears that many of North’s challenges remain the same in comparison with my experience in the 1990’s.

North has the student body that every college wants to look at. However, when students are not solidly prepared, academically and psychologically, they will often be hindered from pursuing or completing their degrees. Counselors are the “gatekeepers” to higher education. By the time a student applies to college, their immediate fate is often decided based on the coursework they did or did not complete while in high school.

North students can definitely perform if we give them the tools and the expectation that they will succeed. As a college administrator, I am deeply encouraged by the student’s initiative in addressing pressing issues pertaining to their educational success. As an alumna, I support many of the recommendations provided by Jovenes Unidos and would love to see the formation of a North High School Reform Committee whereas alumni could contribute to this effort.”

Dusti Gurule, Program Manager, COLOR (Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity & Reproductive Rights), North Class of 1986

“I saw a counselor once in my four years at North, and that was in the 9th grade. So, as I continued through 10th, 11th, and 12th grades, I had no idea what courses I should be taking to prepare myself for college. In fact, I had led myself to believe that I wasn’t smart enough for the advanced English courses that my white friends were taking. Because of the lack of personal attention from counselors or even teachers, I had accepted my fate just to get by.

After I graduated most of my friends went on to college, so I enrolled in a few classes at UCD. I had no idea how ill prepared and lost I would be in those classes until I was forced to drop them about 3 weeks into the semester. It wasn’t until four years later that I developed the courage and desire to try it again so I enrolled at Metro State College...

In retrospect, some of the issues I experienced...could have been alleviated had I been made to feel as though I belonged there [at North]. **Regular visits with a counselor to motivate all students – regardless of how they look – are necessary. All students should receive information and counseling regarding potential colleges as well. I never received information from anyone in the school, only from friends. Teachers should also assess student achievement and suggest they move ahead or assist them with tutoring to bring up their level. Many students are probably taking remedial and beginning courses because of their confidence level, not necessarily because of their academic level.”**

“...the principal and the administration do not get involved with students enough – only the high achievers are recognized.”
Anonymous
12th grade

“I get treated like a student and not a person...Some teachers don’t even know my name and don’t care that we might be having problems at home.”
Chris, 10th grade

**Johanna Leyba, Organizational Consultant
for Nonprofits, North High Class of 1990**

I was not the first in my family to go to college – my father was a college graduate and all three of his daughters went to college. It was always expected that I would go. I had the support of my family, I went to school everyday, I was enrolled in all AP classes, and yet, I was not ready for what I would experience in college.

My freshman year at Colorado College was an incredibly hard time. To pass my economics class I had to see a tutor six days a week and still the professor had to give me a modified class so I could pass. My Greek History and Philosophy professors told me my writing skills were remedial and they didn't know how I had gotten into CC – even though my AP English teacher in high school had always given me A+ on my papers. The false sense of success I experienced at North made my struggles in college that much more difficult to handle. Maintaining an almost 4.0 grade point average, ranking 10th in my class and being accepted to Colorado College despite my low ACT scores made me feel I was ready. When I realized I was not ready, my confidence and self-esteem were shot. I felt hopeless. Had it not been for a strong familial support system, I would have acted on my two applications to transfer to UCD.

I can't believe North has not yet changed. I graduated in 1990 and we are still hearing the same stories from students. We started with over 700 students in my freshman class and only graduated 240! If teachers, parents, and students are still frustrated, we are still doing something wrong. It doesn't matter whose fault it is – what does matter is what we're going to do to prepare our students to succeed in college and beyond.

Student Support

- ❖ **58% of students surveyed do not feel motivated by teachers or administrators to succeed in school**
- ❖ **44% of students surveyed had not met with a counselor about their schedule**

Our survey showed that a majority of North students feel that their teachers and administrators do not believe in them or encourage them to succeed academically. Students talked about wishing they got more personal attention at school, that they were treated like a whole person, and that teachers would show that they cared about them even if they weren't doing well in class. Again, while a majority of surveyed students said they were satisfied with the attention they get from their teachers, 36% said they do not get enough attention from their teachers. These students talked about attention only being available to the best students or the students most liked by the teacher. Others said that when they asked questions, they were told by teachers to figure it out themselves or ask for help from other students.

“I don't get enough attention from teachers, because they always pay attention to the smart kids.”

**Anonymous
9th grade**

“Every adult around you makes you feel like you are always doing something wrong.”

**Anonymous
9th grade**

“If you get suspended for a stupid reason that makes you get behind in your school work...”

**Veronica
11th grade**

Class size is also an issue that affects how much attention a student gets. North's ninth grade class consistently has the highest attrition rate of any grade in the school (see chart on p. 3). Yet class size is biggest in the ninth grade, making it even more difficult for teachers to give individual attention to ninth graders who need it. Except for the 12th grade ratio, North's student/ teacher ratio seems to go down only as students drop out each year. Based on this data, veteran educators we spoke with recommend that North assign only the most highly qualified, skilled, and experienced teachers to teach 9th grade in order to increase learning and stop the especially high drop out in this grade. The average number of students per teacher in each grade is shown in the chart below.²⁰

North Student: Teacher Ratio by Grade

Grade	9th	10th	11th	12th
Average number of students per teacher	30:3	16:7	11:6	12:1

Data from the 2002-2003 Colorado Schools Accountability Report

In addition to wanting and needing more individual attention from teachers in class, students expressed frustration over not getting extra help that they need after class. Tutoring is not widely available at North. Some teachers do stay after school to help students and offer tutoring during their free periods. However, only the math department has decided to offer department-wide tutoring. In other course areas extra help is only available if a teacher decides to provide it. Many students said that it is a constant struggle to get teachers to respond to them and give them extra help when they need it.

Attention from counselors is also in short supply at North. There are only 4 counselors for a student body of over 1500 students. As previously discussed, there is one counselor assigned to all seniors and, as the only bilingual counselor on staff, this same counselor is also the only one available to meet the needs of all Spanish speaking students (20% of North's students). The situation is also especially difficult for the 9th grade class, which usually has 600-700 students all assigned to one counselor. Students told us about having to wait in line for hours at the beginning of a semester to try to see a counselor. Many students also said that it is hard to get out of class to talk to a counselor, and that counselors are often not available when students need to meet with them.

When we spoke to Jose, a former North student, he was finishing high school at Career Education Center (CEC). He told us that a year earlier he had been told two weeks before graduation that he didn't have enough credits to graduate

“How can you discipline students and teach them a lesson if you kick them out of school—give them a vacation?”
Everardo
12th grade

“Some security guards abuse their power with students of a different race, or who speak a different language.”
Mario
12th grade

from North. When asked what North could have done better to help him graduate he said:

“Counselors need to pay more attention to the students. My counselor never told me I wasn’t meeting requirements to graduate.”

“Security guards have favorites – they choose who to hassle.”
Anonymous
12th grade

Student Access to Resources

Students need access to many resources – tutoring, counseling, use of computers and a good library – to support their learning. However, in our investigation we found that:

- ❖ **30% of students reported having to leave the school during free periods**
- ❖ **School policy is that students must leave the building immediately after the last period bell rings, unless they are in an after school club or sport**
- ❖ **Students are not allowed in the library during their lunch periods, during free periods they can be in the library only if they have a pass or can otherwise prove that they’re not “ditching”**

“Security guards act like prison guards.”
Maria
10th grade

30% of surveyed students reported to us that they were not carrying a full class load, and that they were told not to be in the school building when they did not have class -- resulting in a shortened school day for these students. The students explained what happens in the following way: if a student does not have a class during first or second period they enter school late, at the period when their first class begins. Or, if a student does not have classes during the last periods of the day they leave the school early, when their last class is over. If students cannot be in the building during school hours, they have even less opportunity to take advantage of academic supports like tutoring, to use school resources like the library or computers, and to study in a quiet place that they may not have outside of school.

“We (Spanish speakers) need to have more variety of elective classes, and to have the same rights as all the rest of the students.”
Ruben
12th grade

Surveyed students also reported a lack of access to school resources throughout the day. While the library is open after school, its closing time of 3:30 means that students only have 30-45 minutes after school to access books, computers, and the internet, and to have a quiet space for studying and doing research. During the school day, the library can only be accessed by a student if they have a pass from a teacher or show a copy of their schedule, to prove to the librarian that the student is not using the library as a place to ditch class.

Students have limited access to computers at North as well. The Computer Magnet Program has 162 students enrolled in it, and draws students from all over the north half of the district. However, we found that many North students were unaware of the program. North holds one meeting for 9th graders during the first week of school each year to inform them of the program, but additional information and recruiting throughout the school year could help better inform students of the Computer Magnet as an option.

- ❖ **Only 50% of North students surveyed had heard of the Computer Magnet program**
- ❖ **Only 27% of surveyed students said they were given the chance to apply to the program**

For North students not in the Computer Magnet program, there are computers in the library which is open from 7:30 am to 3:30 pm. However, as discussed above, students have limited access to the library in order to use these computers. Other department computer rooms are available only during class time or with the special permission of a teacher.

School Discipline

- ❖ **85% of students surveyed disagree with the use of suspensions at North**
- ❖ **47% of students feel that they were not treated with respect during the discipline process**
- ❖ **53% of students were not given a chance to tell their side of the story when suspended**

Our survey found that North students want to feel safe in school, and want rules that make sense and are applied fairly. However, surveyed students talked about the use of suspensions for minor incidents, irregular application of the rules favoring some students and coming down hard on others, and a discipline policy that causes students to miss class time and lose out on their education.

At North, there were 387 out-of-school suspensions and 60 referrals to law enforcement in the 2002-2003 school year²¹. Many students reported being suspended for being late to class* or for ditching school. Others reported being suspended for asking too many questions in class or for wearing clothing of certain colors (and therefore being suspected of gang activity). One student reported that he was suspended for having markers in school, even though he was part of a city-wide art program and used the markers in this program.

Instead of correcting behavior and increasing school attendance, suspensions cause students to fall behind in class work and feel like they are not wanted in school – leading to higher risk of dropout. The Reverend Jesse Jackson, in

**“Mexicans
always get
pushed to one
side here, and
that is not fair.”
Anonymous
11th grade**

**“Discrimination
is what worries
me most at
North – there is
a lack of equality
among all
students.”
Natalie
11th grade**

**“Racism
(concerns me
most) because it
makes people
feel like they
have low self
esteem.”
Anonymous
9th grade**

advocating for fair school discipline that does not harm a student's access to education, said: *When teachers recognize that all children have promise, they teach differently and seek creative solutions to persistent problems. When legislators and school administrators recognize that all children have potential, they legislate differently and channel resources toward educating and away from incarcerating... As (former U.S. Secretary of Education) Richard Riley has said, "No punishment should result in the loss of educational opportunity. It is not beneficial to the child, nor is it beneficial to society as a whole."*²²

* The suspension policy for tardiness has been changed during the 2003-2004 school year, and includes progressive steps of alternatives that must be used before suspension.

School Security

- ❖ **60% of North students surveyed think that school security could be improved**
- ❖ **21% of students reported being harassed or treated unfairly by school security guards**

Surveyed students reported that instead of helping to create a climate of safety and order in the school, some school security guards abuse their power, treating some students with leniency and being extra hard on others. Many students said that some security guards treat Latino students more harshly than white students. Others said that guards discriminate specifically against Spanish speaking students. Overall, students felt that some of the guards make the school feel like a prison and do not respect students*.

School Culture

- ❖ **50% of North students surveyed say they do not feel respected at school**

Many surveyed North students talked about wanting a school climate in which all students are respected and taught to respect one another. They identified two major ways that they do not feel respected: 1) Racism and discrimination against Mexican and Chicano students; and 2) Lack of an overall student voice at North.

Mexican and Chicano students, as well as other students of color, talked about being put down by their teachers and feeling targeted for harsher discipline. They said that at North there is unresolved tension between groups of different students that results in conflicts, and that the school does not feel welcoming to

**"I wish teachers would respect a student's ability to learn, and to respect the human being for who they are and most teachers don't do that here."
Anonymous
9th grade**

**"Student rights (is the issue of most concern to me) because we are able to make our own decisions."
Kara, 11th grade**

students. They expressed dissatisfaction about the lack of classes and support available in Spanish, and about having few culturally relevant classes and activities offered in the school. As mentioned earlier in this report, even though 20% of the students at North are classified as ELA students, there are few AP, X, or elective classes offered in Spanish. Dr. LeDoux, the current North principal, has done an excellent job in expanding the presence of Latino arts at North (including a Mariachi class and new Chicano and Mexicano art and theater classes). This is a good foundation to build on and we look forward to even more improvements towards building unity and respect for all students within North.

North students also expressed the desire to have their opinions heard and respected, and to be part of school decision-making in relevant ways. They said that they want to be treated like young adults and to be respected as whole people with personal, academic, social, emotional and cultural needs and contributions to make to their school. Surveyed students said they have ideas on how to make their school better and want to contribute them, but their school participation is limited to student council social events and having only 2 student representatives on the adult-led CDM (now called the CSC). Cherry Creek High School uses a very different student participation model: their elected student government is completely student-run, helps develop school policy and serves as a forum for student input on school issues. Social functions at Cherry Creek are handled by school clubs rather than by student council.

School Lunch

- ❖ **94% of students are not happy with the way lunch is handled at North**
- ❖ **84% of students surveyed think North should have an open campus**

Another area in which students feel that their voices are not heard is with the issue of school lunch. The overwhelming majority of students surveyed felt that North should not have closed its campus and left students to eat their lunch in an overcrowded cafeteria that serves limited food choices. Many students reported that they do not like the food served in the cafeteria, and that the same things are served over and over, leaving them few choices in what to eat. *

Students also expressed frustration at not being able to find a place to sit in the cafeteria, and at being forced to stay in the lunchroom for the entire lunch period rather than being allowed to use the library, the gym, or to go outside and get some fresh air after they had finished eating. Many students said that being forced to stay in an overcrowded cafeteria during lunchtime is one cause of fights this year at North. North's cafeteria has 444 seats, but must seat approximately 650 students during each lunch period (the 1500 student

“When are we going to be heard? When are we going to be trusted? I come here to learn how to be an adult, not to be treated like a kid.”
Anonymous
10th grade

“During lunch they keep us all closed in...and you get so bored eating the same thing every day.” Karla,
11th grade

population divided into two lunch periods, minus approximately 200 seniors who are allowed to go off campus).

Opening the campus is a controversial issue. School administration and staff maintain that the campus was closed to keep students from leaving school before the end of the day. However, students deserve to have enough space to eat, and to have appealing food available to them. Also, students have expressed over and over in their surveys that locking up the school is *not* the way to keep them in class – but providing interesting and engaging classes with good teachers *will* increase student attendance. These issues must be addressed.

*We do not blame the cafeteria staff for any of the conditions mentioned above. School food quality is a district-wide problem, and we appreciate all of the hard work the cafeteria staff does to give us the best lunch possible with the food provided by the district.

Conclusion of Survey Findings

Student surveys showed that North students *want* to be challenged, engaged, and motivated in their classes. We want hands-on, interactive learning that relates to our real lives. We believe that students can be motivated to stay in school and to care about learning if our teachers have high level expectations, support and encourage all students to do their best, and give us the kind of instruction and individual attention that we need to really learn and understand our course material. We want to be treated like young adults, and to be given the opportunity to participate in meaningful decision-making and have our voices heard. We want our opinions, cultures, and individuality to be respected. As North students, we don't think we can be *forced* to stay in school through stricter discipline, closed campus, and taking away student freedoms. But, we believe students *will* stay in school and succeed if we are given a high-quality education in a welcoming, respectful environment.

High-performing schools across the country – schools like North where the majority are low-income students of color – are proving that all of this is possible: when given a high quality of instruction, high expectations, and a school culture of respect and support, students *can* perform at high levels. If this can happen in other schools, **why not at North?**

“The lunch food is gross and you’re never allowed out to eat what you want.” Maria, 10th grade

“Students shouldn’t feel like they are restricted – it will cause more rebellion.” Anonymous 12th grade

“(To improve attendance) Make North more like a school, and less like a prison. They have us on lockdown.” Veronica 11th grade

Proposed Solutions to Improve North

by Jovenes Unidos

From the surveys we have learned:

- * How students feel about North,
- * How comfortable they are in their school environment, and
- * What areas they feel need to improve.

Based on survey results and additional research, we have not only identified key issues of student concern but have also worked to find solutions to improve our school. We believe that North can change, and are committed to working for its improvement. We believe that the reforms we have outlined below will improve the school's environment, raise the students' academic level, improve attendance and graduation rates, and increase the opportunities for North students to go to college.

It is in the spirit of making North High School a school of excellence for all students that we offer the following proposals for reform.

GOAL I: Keep students in school and learning during the whole school day

A. Increase access to academic resources and study space in the North school building

1. Extend the hours that students are allowed in the building so that they can get extra help and use study resources, instead of making them leave right after 7th period
2. Give students places to study, get tutoring, and read during their free periods and before and after school
3. Open a bilingual tutoring center to support students in math, literacy and other subjects (open 7am – 7pm and on Saturdays) and that also has computers for student use
4. Keep the library open all day and after school (7am -5:30pm)—using volunteers as necessary to staff it during extended hours
5. Increase student access to counselors and mentors during the extended school hours

B. Reform zero tolerance discipline policies that encourage out of school suspensions for minor offenses (387 in the 2002-2003 school year)

1. Stop the push-out of student from North by implementing in school suspensions – where students continue academic activities – instead of out of school suspensions

2. Explore and implement other alternatives to suspension like restorative justice or peer mediation
3. Develop discipline reforms with the involvement of students, parents, and school staff. Students should have a major voice in this process.
4. Create a clear discipline policy including a discipline ladder that emphasizes alternatives to suspension and expulsion, inform all students and parents of the policy in writing and have all staff implement it consistently throughout the school

GOAL II: Prepare North students to graduate and go on to college

A. Improve the academic level, expectations, and student achievement at North

1. Make class curriculum academically challenging, engaging, and relevant to students' real lives
2. Teachers should expect and support students' ability to learn and do high-level work
3. Use interactive classroom teaching – so that teachers are working directly with the students on a daily basis (not just assigning hand-outs and readings)
4. Educate all students about the computer magnet and make it accessible to those who want to apply, by recruiting in various ways throughout the 9th grade year
5. Implement culturally relevant programs throughout all classes by utilizing La Alma Program (See attached)
6. Substantially increase the number of AP and X classes offered in English – and in Spanish – to raise the overall academic level of North's course offerings
7. Assign the most highly qualified and effective teachers to teach in the 9th grade, in order to increase learning and lower the extremely high drop out from this grade

B. Prepare North Students to go to College

1. Implement the AVID program to give students the skills necessary to succeed in college and post secondary education (See attached)
2. Distribute a college path publication to all students at registration each year – 9th – 12th grade, like the one distributed at East High every year (See attached)
3. Build a library of college opportunities and scholarships for both documented and undocumented students – and have fully bilingual college counselors who inform and assist students with exploring college options, applications, and financial aid
4. Support the passage of the DREAM Act, which would allow undocumented students who have graduated from high school to attend college and work in the United States

GOAL III: Improve student support systems to ensure academic success

A. Strengthen the counseling department

1. Increase the number of counselors at North
2. Have fully bilingual counselors who encourage and mentor students to go to college
3. Keep the same counselors with the same group of students through all four years so counselors really know the students, and assign students to counselors alphabetically (ex. One counselor has all students with last names beginning with a – g)
4. Implement a Freshman Seminar program to inform all 9th grade North students about options for going to college. As part of this program, each student would meet with a counselor at the beginning of 9th grade to develop a four-year plan for their education at North, and they would meet with their counselor every year after that to review and revise the plan.

B. Develop a Tutoring Program

1. Create a bilingual resource center (see Goal I #A-3) where students can receive tutoring in any core subject area. Explore options for staffing this center with teachers, honor students, and community volunteers
2. To meet student need, make tutoring available in the evenings (Cherry Creek High School model) and/or on Saturdays (DeWitt Clinton High School model)

C. Create a supportive family environment for all students at North

1. Explore how to group students so they have a family within the school that supports them and is led by an adult mentor/advocate. Examples of this structure are: *Learning Families* at Cole Middle School, *Houses* at DeWitt Clinton High School, and *Familias* at El Puente High School. In all of the referenced schools this structure has led to high attendance and graduation rates with little to no suspensions or expulsions.
2. As part of learning families, each student would be provided with a mentor/advocate who would stay with them throughout their years at North

GOAL IV: Create a School Climate of Respect for Students

A. Equal opportunity & acknowledgement of Spanish Speaking students at North

1. Have fully bilingual tutors and support services including: college counselors, nurses, and psychologists/ social workers
2. Offer bilingual AP and X classes –in equitable proportion with mainstream AP and X classes (20% Spanish speaking students = 20% of AP and X classes in Spanish)

3. Have fully bilingual counselors and a bilingual scholarship center that includes information on how immigrant students can access college
4. Provide materials in Spanish for the District Literacy Improvement Plan
5. Fully translate all announcements, handouts, posters, and events in the school
6. **Honor Spanish speaking students on equal footing with English speaking students** (i.e. honor roll, newspaper articles, translate 50% newspaper, treat the soccer team with the same respect we have for the football team (i.e. pep rallies, announcements of wins, etc.), and recruit these students to all clubs, sports, student activities and organizations)

B. Strengthen the Role of Students in School Decision-making

1. Students should have a key role in all school decision-making including: developing policies to improve attendance, discipline, school curriculum, school culture, and any other issues students want to take up
2. All school committees should have open meetings in which any student or parent can fully participate, including participation in setting the agendas and having voting powers (and these meetings should be conducted in English and Spanish)
3. Create a student-led elected governing body with real decision-making powers on issues of school policies and practices. Social functions should not be handled by this student government-- but instead by other students groups and clubs-- so that the student government can dedicate its time to issues of school policy and student representation in decision-making. Students should be elected to this government by their peers, and all students running for election should participate in forums, etc. to inform the entire student body about the candidates and yearly elections
4. Have a monthly student-led forum open to all North students to present concerns, discuss issues, and find solutions. These forums should be publicized in multiple ways to inform all students about them – special announcements, postings around the school, etc.

C. Honor the students as a whole by improving the conditions in the cafeteria*

1. Have more food selection/ better food and lower prices
2. Allow more time to eat
3. Open up food carts with good Mexican food
4. Expand cafeteria seating to seat at least 650 students per lunch period, or increase the number of lunch periods so that fewer students need to eat at once
5. Create a committee of students, parents, and school administrators and teachers to explore options for opening the campus

* The cafeteria staff is not responsible for any of the above conditions. We respect all of their efforts and work to feed us and thank them for all that they do.

D. Improve the role of security guards

1. Have clear school rules and policies that are followed consistently by all school staff, including all security guards
2. No playing favorites or treating English and Spanish speaking students equally
3. Treat female students with dignity and respect (no checking them out)
4. Treat all students with dignity and respect – no yelling, put-downs, etc.

Conclusion

In the spirit of everyone working together to improve our school, we are calling for the formation of a Committee to Reform North High School to explore reforms and develop a plan. The committee should be open to everyone, meet regularly (monthly), and welcome the input and ideas of administration, staff, students, parents and people in the community. The community and DPS should work together to chair meetings and set agendas. This committee could produce a plan to improve North for approval by the Denver Public School Board.

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