

A Failing Ashley Elementary, Reborn

By Courtney Drake-McDonough

Students address 28-year-old Ashley Elementary principal Zachary Rahn with a combination of respect, affection and enthusiasm. As they show him their latest drawing or maybe their shiny boots, he, in turn, addresses them by name, sharing their excitement over whatever they are doing at that moment. Rahn is a whirlwind of energy, enthusiasm and confidence that's infectious. And now there's a positive energy coming from each classroom that the community wasn't so sure would be there this school year. In fact, for a while, it looked like the school itself wasn't going to be there.

Last April, Denver Public Schools abruptly announced they were going to close Ashley, located at Syracuse and Montview with neighborhood boundaries of Quebec, Montview, Yosemite and Colfax. The school was considered a "red" (failing) school due to the persistent low performance of its students. DPS's plan was to close the school in June 2014 and re-open it in September as a new turn-around school with, potentially, a new staff. Beverly Haddon, chief executive officer, Stapleton Foundation for Sustainable Urban Communities, which is heavily involved in the support of area schools, explains, "The parents and teachers were stunned and livid, but they effectively petitioned DPS to develop their own plan for consideration, and DPS agreed. However, DPS wanted a new principal."

Rahn was hired in late May. "With great enthusiasm, and a significant grasp of effective academic curriculums, Zach gathered about 20 shell-shocked teachers and principals (from other schools) to write a new school plan for Ashley," says Haddon. Despite his youth, Rahn came with years of practical experience as a teacher, then an advisor for Teach for America, and as assistant principal at Cole Arts & Sciences Academy. Rahn was also armed with a list of lessons learned from successful schools.

Ironically, when the Ashley opportunity arose, Rahn had just been offered a principal position in Boston, closer to his New England roots and his family. Torn between selling his Clayton neighborhood house, packing up his dog, Wallis, and heading back East versus the prospect of creating a high-performing school



New Principal Zachary Rahn is leading the rebirth of a once-failing school. He greets every child at the door each morning and assesses how he or she is doing.

at Ashley, Rahn called his dad for advice.

His dad, who had been a physical education teacher for 34 years, encouraged him to take the job, saying "You need to do this. It's going to be more rewarding. We're proud of you." Rahn accepted the position at

Ashley and started working to not only revamp the school, the curriculum and procedures, but he got DPS to improve the building, including painting the dingy, yellow walls bright white with colorful stars.

In July, he went back home to visit family and spent time lobstering with his dad. The day he returned to Denver, his father died while scuba diving for lobster traps. Rahn immediately returned home and stayed until just before school began.

"Coming into a new setting is difficult anyway but losing my dad was incredibly difficult. But him saying 'you need to do this' sticks with me to this day," says Rahn. When the going gets tough, Rahn looks at a photo of the more than 1,500 people who attended his father's wake. "Sitting in that receiving line for hours on end, the amount of stories I heard of the impact someone can have on others' lives was a galvanizing force for me to make sure this (Ashley) is successful. Being in education is oftentimes a thankless job. You aren't a celebrity and aren't going to make hundreds of thousands of dollars, but look at how many people this one P.E. teacher touched. I look at that photo and



While Ashley has necessary regimentation, the staff is comforting and provides a warm atmosphere for students.



To jumpstart a successful academic career, Ashley offers Early Childhood Education.



Ashley is using blended learning, offering technology in every class.

remember why I'm doing this."

The compilation of ideas for Ashley's transformation came from the commonalities Rahn found in the successful schools across the country that he visited as part of a principals' leadership program through the DPS Office of School Reform and Innovation.

Those commonalities included a two-teacher per classroom model, blocks of instruction for core classes, a structure for every system in the school from how Morning Meeting runs to how the students maneuver the hallways to the dismissal process at the end of the day. Rahn acknowledges that the degree of structure has been a concern among parents, but when they see what Rahn refers to as the "Joy Factor" in the classrooms and parents see improved behavior and enthusiasm for school from their children, they are on board.

Rahn also found the successful schools he visited had a specific "culture," which he says stems from the leadership and teachers. He feels Ashley's culture is "warm and welcoming but with clear expectations and learning time that is completely maximized." He also witnessed blended technology (the incorporation of technology in every class) and unique administrative positions to support the school's mission.

To assist in the goal of those last two items, Colorado Studios' owner and founder Philip Garvin, a longtime advocate for Ashley Elementary, committed to purchasing iPads for every first- through fifth-grade Ashley student to use in school and at home, making Ashley the first DPS

elementary school with a 1:1 student-to-technology program. Rahn offers scenarios of students using iPads to track their fitness levels in gym class, taking photos of their artwork and uploading it to an online portfolio in art, communicating with other students about projects and teachers being able to see each night where individual children need help the next day. It will also assist with making sure every child is bilingual by the time they leave fifth grade, one of Rahn's goals.

Garvin is also committed to paying for a "dedicated and knowledgeable" Blended Learning Coach and Coordinator at Ashley. That position is one of the unique ones Ashley will have, along with a Dean of Culture and Director of Operations. Rahn feels those support systems, together with an advisory board, will enable him to focus on providing the best instruction for the students, which he calls a principal's most important job.

Rahn's goal is to enroll 100 percent of the students who live in the school's boundary. Currently, he has 71 percent and the DPS average is 81 percent. "Historically, the school hasn't provided a good educational choice so parents rightfully went elsewhere," he says. His recruitment goal is to bring those students back and to grow the school to have three classes at every grade level.

On December 19, the DPS Board voted 7-0 in favor of Ashley's innovation plan that will allow more freedom in curriculum, schedule and funding. "We always hear, 'this can't be done, kids of poverty can't learn, kids of high socioeconomic and low socioeconomic status can't work together jointly in a school.' All of that is just not true. We know it can work and it puts all kids on a path to college," says Rahn. "We're going to do this and do it really well."



To be more efficient going from one class to another, students follow lines on the floor—an example of how Ashley carefully manages time.