

*This is a lightly edited transcript of EWA RADIO Episode 13.*

Emily Richmond: Welcome back to EWA Radio everyone. We're here with Kate Schimel, Staff Writer for Chalkbeat Colorado, to talk about her deeply reported story regarding the challenges Denver Public School is facing in keeping principals from leaving their jobs. While she cites research that principals realistically need five to seven years to affect change at their schools, many Denver principals are being reassigned after just two years in their position. Kate, welcome to EWA radio.

Kate Schimel: Thanks, thanks for having me.

Emily Richmond: What would you say is the chief conflict that's running through the thread of your story?

Kate Schimel: I think the biggest problem that I identified was really a conflict between what schools needed and what the district bureaucracy could provide. What it could and was providing, I guess is a better way to put that. Schools and parents and teachers really felt like they needed one thing and then the way the district was set up was really providing something else and was focused on some other goals. Does that make sense?

Emily Richmond: It does, and I mean I remember talking to a superintendent once about how he had a map and globe fund. Every year he had to ask the schools, "Who needs new maps and who needed new globes?" The teachers at the school would say, "We need science equipment, we need things for the athletic field." He would have to say again, "How many people need maps and globes?" because that's what the money was allocated for.

I think you're right, and some of it is about resources and some of it is about the priorities that they've set that are just not aligned with what the schools need. Did you get that sense?

Kate Schimel: Yeah, I think some of it is structural. I think that's a great example of asking whether you need maps and globes when the schools are saying, "We need textbooks and we need new basketballs." Within the district people have different roles, like I'm the data person; I help schools with data.

If a school says, “Well you know I’m a new principal and I actually ... Like let’s set aside the data. Like how do I order paper towels?” There isn’t necessarily that flexibility within the district to say, “Okay, let’s get you the person to get you the paper towels and then let’s come back to the data.” It’s like, “No, this is your data time, let’s talk about data whether you’re ready to or not.”

Mikhail Zinshteyn: Kate, you report that while research on what effect principals have on students is fuzzy, they tend to affect student test scores in the low tens, like 10 or 12 percent. You also note that after a principal leaves, it takes a school two or three years to recover. Did you see that research play out in the schools you visited for your story?

Kate Schimel: Yes, very definitely actually. The principal who left at one school actually said, “Scores went down after I left and I think that didn’t need to happen.” That was a school that was then subsequently put on turnaround and I thought that was an interesting story of like, okay, here’s this research really abstractly that says scores go down.

Principal leaves, immediately the scores dropped and it took two years to recover at which point that new principal had then left again. You just saw this cycle of never having a chance to show sustained gains.

Emily Richmond: There’s something [all education reporters could learn from here]: when we’ve made the mistake in stories of referring to students as guinea pigs and we’d get the phone calls from parents saying, “Do not refer to our children as lab animals.”

There was a quote in a story that caught my attention, there was a mother who said that it felt like at their schools they were “trying different techniques to see what works” as if the district was experimenting with mostly low-income schools. Is that a prevalent new point among parents in that area and is this something the district’s PR machine is trying to change?

Kate Schimel: That’s a really interesting question. I think it is a very real sense among parents and teachers and students at schools that have seen a lot of principals and a lot of change. She said it maybe most articulately but it was something I heard from parents at a number of Denver schools.

I think that's one incidence where the parent's perspective is really really different from the district's. The district says, "Okay, we tried something, it didn't work; we need to do something different. It's really important that we make things better for these kids in this school now."

The problem with that, and I think where parents I think their voices may play a role, is is the district giving anything enough time to see whether it works? The people I talked to suggested that isn't happening. However, it's true if something isn't working, if someone isn't working as a leader is there room to change?

I asked a lot of experts about that and they said the role of the school and the role of the principal in a community is extraordinarily important. Parents often have a very skewed perspective of how successful a principal actually is.

Someone gave the example of a principal who'd been at a school for five or 10 years and the scores had made this like massive rebound and it turns out it was cheating. It turns out he'd been falsifying student scores left and right. He was fired, I think that makes sense, but parents were extremely upset and wanted him to come back anyway. I think sometimes parents are right and I think sometimes you have a district that's really trying to do best by schools.

Emily Richmond: Kate isn't that a lot to ask from parents to ask them to wait five to seven years for this turnaround to happen, especially if you're talking about a parent of an elementary school's student whose kids are going to have moved on to middle or high school by the time things actually start to work.

Kate Schimel: Yeah I think it is a lot to ask. Interestingly I was telling my parents about this story and that was their response. [They said] "If you had had someone who wasn't doing their job when you were in fourth grade, we would have wanted that person out then," like let's not wait, let's make it good now. It's a lot of to ask of parents to wait, and it gets totally fair.

Mikhail Zinshteyn: What about the districts? You talked about the parents, but what is the district doing to decide whether the principal is doing a good job or not? Or even ready to take on the role of a principal if he or she has never served in that role? In your reporting you

spoke to at least one principal who's never been a principal before and suddenly was forced to move up.

Kate Schimel: Yeah, I think that is an area where the district doesn't necessarily have clear systems and to their credit they really are trying to create them. That was a very difficult place to get any sort of concrete information but the sense I got from district officials was that they use a guy check almost. Like is this person ready to go? Maybe they don't have the metrics for making sure that that person really is.

Then for making sure that a school is actually functioning, they certainly have a lot of systems. I think the question is whether those systems are actually measuring the right things.

Emily Richmond: Let's talk about principal training; describe the network that you research in your story. If principals are in training for one or two years, are they being paid while they're being prepped to take over their schools?

Kate Schimel: They are. They're working as assistant principals while they're also being trained, which is a huge, huge job.

Emily Richmond: Is the program popular? Let me ask it that way. Is there a waiting list or are they really beating the bushes to get people to step up for this?

Kate Schimel: That's a great question and was not one that I was able to get concrete information on.

Emily Richmond: Okay, well I think that's something that might reveal itself as you go on. Either the program is going to be successful and they're going to have enough people in it or it's going to fade off like so many of these interventions do for lack of interest.

Kate Schimel: [Well] one thing I heard was that the district selection process for people to get into the program was very competitive. That the metrics for someone getting into the program sometimes seemed out-of-sync for the skills that principals actually needed. That wasn't something I was able to track down to the degree that I wanted but it was something I certainly heard.

Mikhail Zinshteyn: Principals told you they had two years to improve student test scores or else. Is that pressure actually improving student

learning? That seems like a really tough mandate especially given the fact that you cite experts that say a principal needs at least five to seven years to make a difference.

Kate Schimel: My observation was that that was an incredibly heavy burden to put on any principal, even principals in higher-performing schools. The kind of culture it produced was for a principal to come in and make drastic changes that they thought would result in gains in very very quickly. The problem is when you have principals coming in every so ... every couple of years; you're going to have drastic changes really often.

Emily Richmond: Now Kate, what's been the response to your stories both from the public, parents, and also from school district officials?

Kate Schimel: The district hasn't officially responded but I have had a very gratifying number of emails from principals being like, "Thank you for writing the story and also here is some more information on that thing that you touched on." That was what I was most looking for; was did this accurately capture Denver principals' experiences? The response I've gotten is that it did.

Emily Richmond: I would encourage our listeners to go to Chalkbeat Colorado's website and take a look at the interactive graphic that you guys built, which I think was just fantastic. Where parents can click on their school in their neighborhood and get some details about the principal leadership at that school.

You know we talk all the time about teachers' salaries, we talk about it's not enough probably, about teacher allocation and how teachers are assigned. There just isn't as much of a conversation about school leadership. I think your story really advances that Kate.

Kate Schimel: Well, thank you.

Emily Richmond: Kate Schimel is a Chalkbeat Colorado staff reporter. Previously she wrote for Portland's Willamette Week, and co-authored a series of children's books on New York's history. She's interned previously for both Chalkbeat Colorado and Chalkbeat New York. If you're not familiar with the Chalkbeat network, it is a non-profit news organization covering education news in cities throughout the country.

Kate thanks for joining us on EWA Radio.

Kate Schimel: Thank you for having me.