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Everyday Heroes: Rob Stein, C.A.S.'93, Ed.D.'01

by Elizabeth Gehrman

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*In spring 2003, **Ed.** magazine dedicated its cover to "**Everyday Heroes**," a feature about the people who work daily on the frontlines of education: teachers. We are pleased, now, to pick up where that story left off, not only acknowledging the work of Ed School alums who teach, but also those who are focusing their considerable talents and efforts on administration, counseling, and other areas that impact students and their learning on a daily basis. These are the people, as we noted in 2003, "leading our nation from its classrooms." The *Everyday Heroes* web series will tell their stories.*



In 1975, Rob Stein was in the first class of Denver public school 10th-graders to take part in court-ordered busing. Even then, he understood the problems that were to plague his school for the next 30 years.

“I was very much aware of the inequities when I was there,” Stein, C.A.S.'93, Ed.D.'01, says of his years at Manual High, a largely minority school in the impoverished northeast section of the city. “It was obvious which textbooks, materials, and supplies had been in the school prior to busing and which were being brought in with the white kids. The whole time I was there, there were basically two schools under one roof.”

Unfortunately, Manual only declined in the intervening years. But as the school’s new principal, Stein hopes

he can help change all that.

Manual has a troubled history. In the mid-1990s, when busing ended and state-mandated testing began, it became clear to even the most optimistic educators just how bad the school's problems were. "It was the worst-performing school in the state," Stein says, and his contention is backed up by the numbers: 9 out of 10 Manual students were failing the state writing test; 97 percent were failing the state math test; and only one in five freshmen were graduating. A large grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and a complete revamping by a progressive principal didn't help. "The community thought of it as a big experiment being done on poor kids that would never have been done on rich kids," says Stein.

Manual really wasn't on Stein's mind much at the time. After an early career as a teacher and a stint at Harvard for his doctorate, he had taken a job as principal of the Rocky Mountain School of Expeditionary Learning, a progressive K-12 school affiliated with Outward Bound. Five years and a finished dissertation later, he was "itching to try something different," and ended up at the private Graland Country Day School.

While he was at Graland, he began to notice dramatic changes taking place in the Denver Public School System. "They've started, in the last five or six years, to implement the kind of practices that really work, such as project-based and inquiry-based learning," Stein says. "I felt like things were looking exciting in the public schools. I asked the superintendent whether there would be a role for me in the district, and this is what we came up with."

"This"—the reopening of Manual—is not going to be easy. When the district closed Manual a year ago, promising that a redesigned "model" school would open in the fall of 2007, admitting one class year at a time, the community was up in arms. Stein hopes to win their trust, he says, by listening to them and by speaking their language—literally; he has traveled extensively in Latin America and taught for a year in Colombia, so he brings to the table Spanish skills that are crucial for communicating with his primarily Latino students.

He plans to further increase good will with programs of the sort that are common at Graland and other private schools. "Simplify and focus," he says. "Public schools are overcomplicated. They have too many periods in a day, and too many choices that aren't high quality. Private schools don't have a bajillion electives. They tell you what a good curriculum is. It's a gourmet menu with a few options, not a cafeteria with many low-quality options."

Another fundamental principle, he says, is to increase the education, skill, and experience level of the teachers at Manual. "Right now at many public schools in the United States," he says, "we've got the worst teachers teaching the neediest students. That's how high schools work. When you're a rookie they give you a 9th grade class with 37 students, then, after you've put in your time, you get to teach a 12th grade elective class. That's totally the inverse of how it should be. In surgery you have the best doctors treating the worst cases, not the other way around."

His third major change will be heterogeneous grouping rather than honors and vocational tracks. "Just because you get 25 kids in a room doesn't mean they all have to be doing exactly the same thing," he points

out. “You can have a big house next to a small house. But when you put all big houses in the same neighborhood, you create a stratified system.” Like, perhaps, the system he saw at Manual all those decades ago? “Exactly like that,” he says. “We’ve got to get away from that system.”