

Denver, Bennet became his chief of staff. Two years later, the superintendency came open for the fifth time in a decade, and Hickenlooper suggested that Bennet apply.

To Bennet, who aspired to public office, running an urban school district seemed more likely to end a political career than to launch it. Most of the children in the district were poor, and eighty per cent were minorities, including a huge number of Latino immigrants. Nationally, Latinas are twice as likely to become mothers in their teens, and Latinos of both sexes are two times as likely to drop out. Moreover, while student achievement is closely correlated with parental involvement, many Denver parents hadn't attended high school in their native countries, and some were illegal residents in their new one. The illegals tended to steer clear of public institutions, including their children's schools.

Still, Bennet was struck by the fact that a few schools across the country had raised the test scores of their poor and minority student bodies—successes that seemed counter to the idea that underlying social conditions had to be redressed before disadvantaged minority students could do well. As Bennet studied those exceptional schools—a Knowledge Is Power Program charter school in the Bronx, public schools in Norfolk and Aldine, Texas—he began to think about how some of their strategies might be expanded to reform a whole district. Ambitions began to coalesce, and the school board chose him over two strong minority candidates.

In July, 2005, when Bennet took control of the district's hundred and fifty schools, he still knew little about life inside public-school classrooms. He knew less about children like Norberto. Nevertheless, he moved quickly to impose on his seventy-three thousand charges the toughest graduation requirements in the state, aiming to prepare the majority for college.

Some of Bennet's forty-four hundred teachers and principals looked askance at this abrupt elevation of standards, cautioning that many students would fall short, and then drop out. Bennet considered this view to be cynical, and saw in the underpopulated, seemingly irremediable Manual High an opportunity to show how intolerant of low expectations he planned to be. The school was costly to run half-empty, and, when he'd paid a visit on the first day of the school year, he'd found the students and teachers already exhausted. The principals were feuding, and their attention to children was so erratic that some of them had taken and passed freshman English only to be forced to repeat the course

as sophomores. "Nobody in America should have to go to a school like that," he told his wife that night. A few months later, when he had in hand a commissioned study of the school's dim prospects, he told his school board, "We shouldn't let any more students enroll there." Board members agreed, and went further: the current students shouldn't stay and languish, either. In February, as a warning to the dozens of other schools in the district that were failing to properly educate poor and minority children—and with little warning to students and neighborhood residents—the board moved, with Bennet's approval, to shut down Manual at the end of the semester. It was an admission, Bennet said, of a school district's absolute failure.

Bennet has an open, lightly freckled face, and an air of capable good spirits—qualities that only partly mask the intensity and severity of his judgments. (Even asleep, his wife had noticed, he issued orders, as if crisply directing his dreams.) His arguments occasionally got ahead of themselves, with interpretations that outran the facts, but this was not, in the main, a careless tendency. It was the practice of an overachiever. He liked to announce improbable goals, then defy expectations of failure. Among the challenges that now intrigued him were the six hundred students of Manual High.

Other ambitious superintendents admit privately that radical reform has collateral costs, and that students like Norberto bear them. Compared with pliable second graders, teen-agers are a poor investment, and districts routinely write off the worst performers. (In fact, in the age of the all-determining standardized test, nudging indifferent high-school students to drop out before exam day is one way for administrators to boost their test scores.) At first, Bennet seemed to advocate a write-off as well: offering to give Manual students free transportation to a nearby high school that was almost as bad. When school-board members objected, though, he began to give the matter more thought.

The teen-agers' educational deficiencies would not be easily corrected; to judge by state assessments through the years, many hadn't had a decent year of schooling in their lives. But he decided that, with aggressive help, some futures might still be improved. Under Bennet's new plan, the Manual children would choose from an array of better high schools across the city, and be offered mentors, summer remedial courses, and academic counselling to ease the transition. Computer programs would track their performance—a failed test here, a week of unexplained absence there—and identify those who might need extra help.



This approach was shrewd politics, some of Bennet's peers in the city's elite observed. Otherwise, in some future campaign ad, he'd be the rich guy who stole the futures of six hundred poor children. A futile gesture, said the Manual teachers, who predicted many dropouts and fleeting public concern. The term "moral obligation" was also suggested as an explanation of Bennet's interest, mostly by the superintendent himself. Whatever the motivation, for the rest of 2006 the wholly inexperienced Bennet found himself trying to prove that teen-agers like Norberto were not lost causes of educational reform. Among his doubters were the children themselves.

When Norberto was upset, he fell silent. It was a habit he despised in himself, and one that his friend and classmate Julissa Torrez did not share. When she was in distress, words flew from her like sparks, and this made the weeks following the Manual decision less depressing to the student body than they might have been. A hundred-pound former cheerleader, Julissa had been changing—flattening her ringlets under knit caps and bandannas. She no longer wore saucy outfits, and no longer smiled on command. Instead, she wrote clipped, angry poems. Before the Manual decision, these works had typically addressed the males she was falling for ("I'm one confused Virgo, and not ashamed to say it, because I always choose the boys with downfalls") and the world in which she and Norberto were growing up:

Go home be ashamed  
foodstamps to medicaid  
poor slang hustlas  
we are all each other customers  
boys go from apple jacks to weed sacks fast.

In February, though, she addressed her poems to Superintendent Bennet. One couplet conveyed neatly the sentiments of Norberto and the rest of the student body, some of whom were so attached to Manual that, upon enrolling, they'd carved its initials into their skin:

You might as well put us in jail  
because your plan sets us all up to fail.

When Bennet arrived at Manual for a community meeting one winter evening, Julissa summoned the old cheerleader bravado, stood, and read one such poem "right to his face." When she finished, a hundred and thirty people cheered, and the next day her words were in the *Rocky Mountain News*. It was the beginning of a season—brief, it turned out—when strangers seemed to hang on what Manual students had to say.

The high point, Julissa and Norberto later agreed, was February 17th—the day that the students marched down icy streets to the superintendent's office, a crew of cameramen beside them, demanding that Manual stay open. Julissa wept, and punched the air. "We're human beings, not animals to be tested on!" she screamed. "I am successful, whatever you say!" Norberto, coatless and freezing, stood at the periphery, holding a sign that someone had put in his hands. Education activists from a nonprofit organization downtown were energetically backing the rebellion, providing reporters with tips and students with stickers that said "Not My Choice." Most of the Manual faculty supported the protest, too, in part because they were angry at Bennet, who had publicly declared their work a failure, and in part because they feared for the children. As a Manual principal named Tim Harp put it, "You put these kids in a regular school—well, I hate to say it, but they're going to get punked. And they can see it coming."

Before long, some of the city's black leaders had joined the movement. Criticizing school officials who think "they know more about what we need for our children than we do," the clergyman who heads the Greater Metro Denver Ministerial Alliance rallied citizens to "stand up like Rosa Parks sat down," and the pastor of New Hope Baptist Church called Bennet and his allies "later-day representatives of the Ku Klux Klan." The education of white children would not have been so summarily disrupted, the ministers argued. Community rallies ended with renditions of "We Shall Overcome," the words to which Norberto and Julissa didn't know, and civil-rights lawyers began to hang around. However, Bennet and the school board didn't budge, and by the end of April, with other outrages presumably beckoning, the television reporters, ministers, and lawyers moved on.

The students were as perplexed about why they'd lost the community's attention as they'd been about having it in the first place, but there wasn't much use in complaining. Julissa had two sisters at Manual, one, Zerina, who was to be valedictorian, and one a thoughtful ninth grader named Ashley, whose advice to schoolmates was succinct: "We have to get over losing this thing, because we're going to be losing things all our lives."

Norberto agreed with this assessment, and returned to his academic routine. As a student, he was ranked in the middle of his junior class. Many of the adults at Manual, however, assumed that his grades were lower—a poor opinion for which he blamed himself.