

[North High students need say in reform](#)

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Their faces may not make the sides of milk cartons, but the fate of the missing teens is still a mystery.

Each year, an average of 360 students - a third of the students who entered as freshmen four years earlier - disappears from the rolls of North High School, victims of a system they say does not challenge or nurture them.

The district doesn't acknowledge their disappearance. Instead, Denver Public Schools uses a creative formula that last year tabulated a dropout rate of 3.3 percent.

If a company played with numbers in the same manner, it would be hauled to court for accounting fraud. Yet it happens, not just at North High School, but at inner-city high schools across the nation.

The students who stay are in a school that consistently underperforms on CSAP and every other skill indicator.

Those in the know grumble about it, but their voices rarely get heard.

What North needs is a major overhaul.

That's the assessment of a group that has spent two years studying the problems at North.

While the members may not have a background in academic analysis, they are far more attuned for one reason: They are students at the school.

I met with seniors Eva Bonilla, Julieta Quiqonez, Monica Acosta and Juan Evangelista of Jsvenes Unidos, Spanish for Youth United, to talk to them about their 35-page report.

In it, they challenge the statistics given by DPS. They researched district statistics and found that just 34 percent of ninth-graders graduate four years later. DPS claims a graduation rate of 60 percent, a figure that doesn't jibe with the numbers I analyzed.

The report gives results of a survey they conducted of 700 students - about half the enrollment - that had surprising results.

Fifty-eight percent of the students don't feel motivated to succeed by their teachers and administrators.

Half of the students say they feel they are in an environment that doesn't respect them.

And the saddest thing the survey shows is 93 percent of the student body wants to go to college, but 56 percent feel they're not being adequately prepared.

"We believe we deserve as good an education as the students at Cherry Creek and East," Juan said.

He and several other students toured Cherry Creek High last fall and were amazed at what they saw: Students had enough books to take home. The library was open until 5:30 p.m. The school has three computer labs with 30 computers apiece. Evening tutoring is offered.

Freshmen learn what classes they should take to get into college. Specialists help them with college applications.

And Cherry Creek offers a wide array of advanced-placement and accelerated-studies classes.

But at North, the research conducted by Jsvenes Unidos shows there's a shortage of textbooks, students get hardly any homework, a third of the teaching force is not certified, there are just six advanced-placement courses offered, and there are only four guidance counselors - one for every 350 students.

It shouldn't matter that the school is 83 percent Latino or that 67 percent of the students are on free or reduced-price lunches, meaning their families are part of the working poor.

Jsvenes Unidos researched high-achieving schools that exist even in the South Bronx. They want to have a voice in helping North become a school of excellence by partnering with faculty, staff and principal Darlene LeDoux, who arrived just last year.

LeDoux was a bit defensive about it, but that's a normal reaction. No

principal wants to hear his or her school is below par - even if it's an inherited problem.

Truth is, it's not the fault of any one person. While more money from the state would help, the bigger problem is lack of community involvement and creative brainstorming to get grants and find better teaching methods.

LeDoux met with the students prior to the release of their report and already adopted some of their ideas: keeping students with the same guidance counselor all four years, keeping the library open during lunch period and on Saturday mornings.

She also altered the discipline policy. Suspensions are now a last resort. Instead, students clean the school grounds.

And she started an after-school tutoring program for math. Problem is, she says only a few students go.

She's placing teachers in training programs so they can teach more advanced-placement and accelerated-learning courses.

She started a school reform committee that has met just three times, but only teachers are on it.

LeDoux says when it comes to reforming the school, she has to listen to everyone. But more than anything, she should listen to these students.

They may seem anxious for change, but it's for good reason. You only get four years in high school.

Cindy Rodriguez's column appears Mondays and Fridays.