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DPS sings new tune on calming kids

Denver's North High touts new approach to student behavior

By Burt Hubbard
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The North High School drum line plays for fellow students in the auditorium at a gathering Friday. North has been at the forefront of a Denver Public Schools policy that emphasizes intervention and mediation to resolve discipline issues. (Photos by RJ Sangosti, The Denver Post)



Lorena Zamora, a junior at North, watches the program, sponsored by Padres & Jovenes Unidos, that made clear students' rights regarding suspension and expulsion.

Now that's an incentive. Ben Cairns, the man in charge of North High School's new discipline policy, promised the students Friday that if they recorded four or fewer fights for the rest of the year, he would wear a tuxedo right out of the screwball comedy "Dumb and Dumber" to the prom.

"An orange one," Cairns, the school's restorative justice coordinator, told the auditorium full of students.

The promise marked the finale of a student assembly that included the school's drum-line band, a skit, the wave and videos.

All of the entertainment had the same message: There's a new approach to disruptive behavior at North.

For the past several years, North has been in the forefront of a new Denver Public Schools policy that emphasizes intervention and mediation to resolve fights and disruptions rather than out-of-school suspensions and expulsions.

The session, geared toward letting students know their rights, was sponsored by Padres & Jovenes Unidos. The group's 2005 report charged that the district suspended too many students for nonviolent offenses and disproportionately targeted minorities. It helped lead to the policy changes.

"It's important that every student know their rights," junior Brandon Garcia told the students after leading them in a Denver Broncos version of the wave.

Garcia was one of the central characters in a skit showing how a fight between two female students who bumped into each other in the hallway ended under the old and new policies.

Under the old policy, the combatants were sent home for three days and threatened with trespassing if they showed up at school.

Under the new policy, the two students talked out their dispute with Garcia's help and apologized to each other.

Cairns said the new approach has cut suspensions in half, and the school has yet to record an expulsion this year.

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