

OBITUARY

Deceased Name: Rep. John Buckner: Buckner a beloved educator, legislator

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State Rep. John Buckner was remembered Friday as a softspoken lawmaker whose work as a high school principal overshadowed his career in politics.

Buckner died Thursday after a brief illness that complicated a respiratory condition. He was 67.

Services had not yet been scheduled for the Aurora Democrat.

Tributes poured in Friday, from Gov. John Hickenlooper to House Speaker Dickey Lee Hullinghorst of Boulder, but the most powerful testimonials came from the hundreds of students he mentored over the years.

Sabrina D'Agosta, the spokeswoman for the state Department of Personnel and Administration, graduated from Overland High School in Aurora.

"My mom always tells the story of me going into a meeting with him to talk about the fact that I was headed to truancy court and came out with a plan to graduate from high school a year early," D'Agosta wrote on her Facebook page. "I am so grateful that I was able to work with him at the state, so he could see that I did something with the opportunity he gave me. I know I'm only one of hundreds, but he made all the difference in my life."

After Buckner retired, Overland High in 2008 renamed the gym in his honor.

"John Buckner was an invariably kind man, with a gentle sense of humor that brought people closer, never pushed them away," Hickenlooper said. "He brought that same spirit of inclusiveness to his work as an educator and a legislator in his mission to ensure that all Colorado children have access to the best education possible."

Buckner's most significant piece of legislation reduced testing of Colorado schoolchildren. He co-sponsored the bill with Republican Rep. Jim Wilson of Salida.

Each man put in about 40 years in education before being elected to the House in 2012.

"We got the ball rolling, and it turned into an avalanche," Wilson said of the long-sought testing compromise.

Buckner's last activity on Twitter was May 20, when he tweeted the news that Hickenlooper had signed his testing bill into law.

"He believed passionately in education, and he believed it would give the kids he cared about their best opportunity to succeed," said Hullinghorst, who had appointed Buckner to chair the House Education Committee.

In 1975, Buckner went to work for the Cherry Creek School District as an assistant principal at Laredo Middle School. He then was an assistant principal at Smoky Hill High and at Prairie Middle School before becoming principal at Overland High in 1988.

The current Overland principal, Leon Lundie, recalled how Buckner invited Overland's boys basketball team to the Capitol to be recognized by the legislature after winning the state championship in March.

"Overland was not just a job for John -- it was his home," Lundie said.

A Democratic vacancy committee in Buckner's House District 40 will name a replacement to serve the rest of his term until next year's House election.

Buckner is survived by his wife, Janet; twin daughters, Joy and Jennifer; a son, Jay; and three grandchildren.

"I can't believe my life partner isn't going to be here, but he got a lot done," Janet Buckner said. "He was fair, and he was a straight shooter."

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