

STRATIFICATION FOCUS GROUP AT COLUMBINE 4/21/05

Nancy,
Facilitator

The idea is that all the district schools are excellent but there are some that are made up primarily of minority and low income students while others have mostly white and high income students. This concentration of different groups has grown over the year and we can see it at this school. A task force has been set up to study the reasons for this stratification and to see what measures can be implemented in order to stop this trend. The reason for tonight's meeting is to try to help this task force to understand this event. I will pose the same questions to all the groups and you'll have to give them some thought and answer them. The members of this task force are here only to observe and learn, not as active participants. I am here as facilitator because of my ability to speak Spanish. We are going to tape this meeting and your comments will appear in the final report while your names will remain confidential and will not be disclosed. This is a different type of meeting than what you probably expected. I would like you to speak freely and openly about your own experiences, what you have seen or the problems you have encountered. I appreciate your participation and would like you to introduce yourselves by stating your name and the name of the schools your children attend.

Parent

My name is Maria. I have a daughter in first grade at Columbine and a sixth grader at Casey.

Family Resource
Specialist

My name is Wanda and I am the Family Resource Specialist.

Teacher

My name is Sue and I teach first and second grade at Columbine.

Literacy Teacher

My name is Sue and this is my second year teaching literacy at Columbine. I have a son in the bilingual program at Casey.

Member of the
Task Force

My name is Guillermo. I have three children, one at New Vista HS and two daughters at Horizons.

Member of the
Task Force

My name is Stephanie and I have a daughter in third grade at Crest View.

Facilitator

To make this discussion a success I would like to ask you three things: speak with a loud and clear voice, talk about your own experiences and please do not interrupt when someone is speaking. I will ask some questions and I'd like you to think about them for a minute. You can even take notes or write your ideas down on paper. Then I will ask one of you to start the discussion. For every question I ask, I will choose a different person to start the discussion so that you can all have a chance to participate and express your ideas.

The first question is: More and more often we are finding that some schools have a great concentration of minority and low income students while others tend to have more white students with higher incomes. In your opinion, what do you think is causing this separation?

Parent I think one of the reasons is the Open Enrollment program. My daughter is here thanks to that program. Since my older daughter was already attending this school, I applied to try to get my younger daughter in as well so that both of them would be in the same school. That would make my life a lot easier. In addition, I liked how this school works. My oldest daughter came to this school because, at the time, this was her neighborhood school but we moved and I had to go through OE to get my other daughter in.

Teacher I agree that OE has a great influence on where parents send their kids to school but it also has to do with families wanting to take their children to schools where the population is made up of people who speak their same language and with whom they have something in common. If someone sends her daughter to this school and loves it, then everyone wants to take their children here too. They want to bring their children to a school like this one because they feel they can trust the teachers, because most of them speak Spanish and they take the time to talk to the kids, and because they see that they're learning. In this school, parents feel trust and a sense of community since many of them live in the same area or are related and they can take care of each other.

More parents arrive and the facilitator asks everyone to introduce themselves again and explains the purpose of the meeting to the newcomers.

Parent My name is José Pech. I have a son here at Columbine and this is the first time I come to a meeting because of my job. This time my wife stayed home babysitting and I am very pleased to be here.

Parent My name is Imelda Strut and I am the mother of José Pech.

The meeting goes on.

Parent I think much of the problem is racism. I think people are afraid. It's hard to talk about Open Enrollment because I used the process to send my son to this school where I am very happy with the education he is receiving. Not everyone has access to the information and that is a problem.

Parent I am very happy to see how much my son has learned. He speaks English and Spanish well and the school gives him a lot of support. I like the school.

Parent I am also very happy with my son because he already speaks English better than Spanish. He has a few problems in Spanish and when he doesn't know a word, he says it in English. This is a very good school and I am happy my son is here.

Facilitator Do you have any ideas as to why some people choose certain schools and other families decide to take their children to other schools?

Parent I like this school because it is bilingual. A teacher at New Horizons suggested that I send my son to a bilingual school because if I were to take him to Crest View he would only learn English and because I wouldn't have anyone to interpret for me whenever I had to attend a meeting. This is why my son is here and I like the school a lot. Everyone says hello when you come and talk to you and you feel like you are part of a family.

- Teacher Many of the people who chose this school for their children did so through referrals from other people. On some occasions Social Services has also referred families to our school because it is a good school and because they will receive a much more personal kind of education. Many families come to this school because they have friends here and because of the family oriented environment. Many English-speaking families leave our school because they think that their kids won't have anyone to speak English with, they won't be able to make friends and they won't get a quality education. They trust the rumor mill instead of doing research. It's a matter of racism as someone said earlier.
- Parent I bring my son here because I was looking for the best option for him. I feel the education he receives is a gift and this school has the same curriculum as the other schools in Boulder Valley but they learn it in two languages. The teachers here have more training in all aspects of education. There are people who only value the percentages and the report cards they read in the paper. They don't want to send their kids to this school because they say the scores are lower. The kids in this school can do the same things that other kids in the district do but they can do it in two languages and the teachers speak both languages as well. They have studied Spanish for a long time and they continue to study to learn how to work with children who are learning a second language.
- Facilitator We have more or less answered the question but specifically, what was the decision process to choose one school over another? What kinds of things did you think about in order to make the decision to send your children to your specific school?*
- Parent Where I work there is a man who went to school here and he referred me to it. I told him that I didn't know where the school was and he showed me and assured me that I would be very happy. That's the reason why I enrolled my son here.
- Parent My daughter came here because this was our neighborhood school after we moved from Lafayette. I was told that she had to attend her neighborhood school. This happened six years ago. At that time I was unaware of the existence of OE. I enrolled her here because we lived near and didn't have any information about other schools. We've been very happy.
- Teacher I don't have any children but I was given the option to choose among four schools that have this program. I chose this school because, during the interview process, I was able to meet some of its staff, including the principal. I had read about the school and it seemed to me that it had gone from having many white students to having a majority of Latino children and other communities who were learning English. I felt it would be a good place to start from zero. The program was still in the implementation process and there were a lot of opportunities to learn from everyone and to help everyone to learn together.
- Teacher I don't have any children but, if I did, I would bring them here. I see how the children are learning and how engaged they are and how much they care about learning. They are focused on learning to think and they learn that life is a school in itself. We don't stop teaching concepts after a certain grade. Instead we build on them and teach the children to think, to focus, to make decisions and to be lifelong learners.
- Facilitator Do you live in Columbine's attendance area? Is this your neighborhood school?*
- Parent No, I live around 19th St. I could've had my son stay at Crest View, just two blocks from home but, as I said earlier, I bring my son here because it's a bilingual school.

- Parent I don't live in this area either. I live in north Boulder. My older daughter came here because this was her neighborhood school. Now I bring my younger daughter because I want them to be together and because I really like the way they teach here. The teachers are very friendly and very dedicated. Their work schedule is not limited to a certain number of hours. My younger daughter used to speak English only and I asked that she be put in the Spanish program to learn the language. With my oldest daughter I didn't have the same opportunity to help her. I worked and she would stay after school and would do her own homework. She didn't need my help. I was pleased to see the level of dedication she had but I didn't have the chance to help her. I have had more opportunities to help my younger daughter with her homework because she has usually needed more help. I am glad that my daughter is here now. Since the school is bilingual, I can help her with her homework. I definitely wanted her to learn Spanish.
- Facilitator *The committee is considering four different areas in which to decide what the district should do. We will discuss each one individually. Do you all understand the concept of Open Enrollment? Do you understand what this term means? The idea is to integrate student populations who are financially disadvantaged and who come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. What should the district do regarding Open Enrollment? Should they change the rules or the steps the parents need to follow? Is there anything else you think the district should change with respect to Open Enrollment? You can take a few minutes to think about it.*
- Teacher I think we should change the open enrollment process. I have heard comments about open enrollment being something the State chose to implement and, whether it works or not and regardless of how we feel about it, we have no choice but to have it. During my interviews in Fort Collins, I noticed that the schools there have a similar percentage of Spanish-speakers and of English-speakers. Supposedly that's the way it should be here too but it is obvious that our rules are not consistent. Very often, the parents who don't have resources or don't speak the language complain but the district ignores them by telling them something to appease them. This makes these people feel like their opinions don't count and they don't trust the system enough to make questions or comments and so they settle for whatever they are given. The district's rules should be consistent for everyone and not just for the benefit of those who speak the loudest.
- Parent She's comparing the school districts of Fort Collins and Boulder Valley. Then, do you mean to say that Boulder Valley is not adhering to its rules?
- Teacher What she's talking about happened years ago and the political situation and the rules have changed. What you are saying is that each school district is interpreting the rules to their advantage, according to its needs and to the pressures from the community. What is being said is that we can't do anything about it because it is state law and the districts interpret this law differently.
- Teacher I also agree that the school districts must follow the rules strictly. I don't know how the system works because I don't have any children but I have some idea. I do agree however that they should have a certain percentage of English-speakers and a certain percentage of non-English-speakers in the schools. The district should not allow English speakers to leave a school or to try to enroll their kids in a different school just like that. There should be rules like make them visit the school and spend some time there to get a good feel before making a decision. There should be quotas and requirements before telling them that they can take their kids wherever they want.

- Parent What about the requirements for Open Enrollment? I'm not informed as to how it is regulated, how many people of different ethnic/economic groups participate in the process or what the percentages are. I found out recently. All I knew until now is that it is my right to participate in the process of Open Enrollment.
- Counselor What I want to say is that the way the information is presented to the parents is very confusing, not only for those who don't speak the language but for the English-speakers as well. I am a counselor and I don't have a clear idea of how the process works. Parents read the material and they don't understand what it's all about. I have the same problem. People rush to try to figure out how it works and instead of visiting several schools, they limit their choices by going where they have been referred to. I don't think this is fair because we are not allowing parents to make the best decisions for their children. They don't know what is available.
- Facilitator* *Next question. What should the district do in the schools in terms of academic programs and support to the staff? Which programs should the schools offer? We have said that the stratification issue is bad. These questions come from the fact that we need to prevent this differentiation of families in the schools. The question is, should the district offer a wide variety of programs in the schools to avoid this?*
- Parent I'm not saying that this is a bad issue. Many families have chosen their schools because they have people of their same cultural background there, people with whom they have something in common or because they know each other. Just because there are more Spanish-speakers in a school doesn't mean that a child is not going to learn English. There should be programs to help everyone learn, not just the Spanish-speaking parents and kids. The programs should include all speakers.
- Parent It would be good for many Spanish-speaking families who don't speak English well. Maybe the district doesn't give all the information or, if it does, maybe the parents don't have time to read it. Maybe these parents feel that since the meetings are conducted in English, the American families will be the ones to make decisions so why bother going. My personal opinion is that we (Spanish-speaking families) haven't taken the time to get involved. It's not about the schools not informing the parents in their own language. I know many families that don't get involved because they don't want to or don't have the interest. They get the information but some say "I don't have time because I'm going to watch the soap opera. That is more interesting than the meeting."
- Parent Many years ago in our countries, when you were invited to a PTA meeting it meant selling things for a school fundraiser. We had not been taught that helping our kids was the main goal. As Hispanics we have a tendency to think we don't need to help our kids academically, that's what the school is for. Those of us who truly care need to get other families involved and tell them about our experiences, not only with the school but as families as well. Help them show that they care about their children not just in school related matters but in all matters. I care about my son and about everything that has to do with him, with his friends and with his environment.
- Facilitator* *What do you think about implementing some programs in different schools?*
- Parent I am very happy now that he is participating in the chess club after school. There are interesting after school programs if the kids want to attend.

- Teacher
 There are two types of students and schools. Those are the ones who understand the system and the ones who speak English. They are learning and reaching goals and it seems that they receive more support. They look at us with a magnifying lens, making us feel like there are constant problems, like we have to make justifications and be on the defensive. They don't really know the efforts we make in this school. We are the ones who are constantly trying to identify the students' needs and trying to meet them. Maybe we have a somewhat different curriculum but that's what our students need. It is important that the district notice the quality education we give and that they find other ways to measure the kids' learning. Looking at their test scores should not be the only way since our scores are low for obvious reasons. They need to look at each specific case to see the individual progress. It is important to measure the learning progress in our school, not only on the elementary level but in the other levels as well, and establish some kind of program to continue this type of effort. What good is it for us to make this type of effort if there is no system in place that grows with the students' needs?
- Teacher
 There are teachers in other schools and in other levels of education who lack the knowledge, the education and the willingness to make an effort. When the students go from this school to middle school, they miss out on the special attention they receive here. It would be good if the district could establish some type of program that allowed continuation of the efforts started here.
- Facilitator*
There are a few more questions. What could or should the district change? What can or should the district do in terms of transportation? How about the location of the schools in the different neighborhoods? How would you define the attendance areas and the location of the schools in the different neighborhoods? Would you like to make any suggestions to the district in terms of transportation? I don't know if this is something you took into account when you chose your school.
- Parent
 The problem I have is to have to take him and pick him up from after school programs or activities. The school is far and I can't always do it.
- Facilitator*
But, did the lack of transportation affect your decision?
- Parent
 Yes, a lot. I have requested and continue requesting transportation but I'm not getting anywhere since we don't live in the attendance area of the school. We belong at Crest View but I don't like that school. I'm forced to take him and pick him up every day.
- Teacher
 I've seen many parents change schools but they're not happy there. When I see them they tell me that they don't like the school they attend but that they have no choice because of transportation issues. I have also seen the opposite, parents who don't live near the school but make the effort to drive their kids every day because this is the school they like for their children. I have also heard many parents wonder why the district doesn't change the attendance boundaries of the school since they know that these parents want to bring their kids here. They wonder why the district doesn't take these children into account and provide transportation for them. In reality, those other schools are not meeting their educational needs and my children and I don't understand why we are being punished.
- Parent
 It does affect us. I've been able to drive my kids but what has helped me a lot are the before and after school programs and activities. What I did was to try to find a job that had the same schedule as the schools so that I could be off at the same time as my kids.

- Facilitator* Do you know anyone who has not been able to take his/her kids to the schools they were interested in because of the lack of transportation?
- Parent I know a lot of people who are taking their kids to other schools instead of to Columbine because they don't have school transportation. I also know many people who, even though only one parent works, they have to stay in their neighborhood schools because there they can have school transportation. I tell them that even if I didn't work, I would still take them to the school of my choice because I have the ability to do so. If I worked, my job would have to fit our family's needs and schedules because I would still take them to the school of my choice.
- Teacher I have seen many parents who bring their children to school even though it is in their neighborhood and it's fairly close to their homes. The problem is that the kids have to cross four avenues from any direction. I would love for the district to set up some kind of a program that would teach the kids the safest routes to get to school. In that way, the parents whose children have to cross Folsom, Iris, Valmont, or 19th would feel more at ease and they wouldn't keep the kids at home when the weather is bad, or if the child is very young and there is no one at home who can walk him to school. The district could talk to the parents to create alternative programs and explore different ways to make it safer for kids to come to school, whether through groups of parents from the school or from the neighborhood who could walk with the children.
- Teacher There are many families who don't send their kids to our school because the bus is very cold. They say that if they lived closer to our school then they would send them.
- Teacher Some of the schools with more resources and more money don't have transportation problems when it comes to their activities or their field trips. It would be nice if they had alternative funds or means for the schools that lack resources to have more activities. We shouldn't have to worry about taking kids from one school to another in order to participate in activities. We also shouldn't have to worry about the bus leaving before our kids are done with their after school activities.
- Parent For me it works better if I bring my son and pick him up because the idea of him riding a bus or be exposed to fights or accidents worries me. I prefer to bring him myself. Now I am carpooling with Carlos. He brings the kids in the morning and I pick them up in the afternoon because he says that gas is very expensive and this way we save money.
- Facilitator* *Fourth question. What the task force is looking at has to do with how we document the achievements and the strengths of the different schools and how to inform everyone. Do you have any suggestions or ideas as to the best way to inform families about each school in order to help them decide which schools they want for their children?*
- Teacher Are you referring specifically to how the school goes about informing parents regarding the school's achievements or to how we inform the general public?
- Facilitator* *To the community. For example, what is Columbine? What is Fairview? That is the purpose of the question.*
- Teacher I feel like everyone should know about the school. We should talk to the Daily Camera, the Colorado Daily and to other newspapers and say, "look at mi school, we have this program and so many parents. I want you to send someone to our school to talk to us." I don't know how else to inform the public.

- Facilitator* *How did you hear about this school? Did you hear about it from friends? The question is, how can the district improve the process of communicating to the public the strengths and level of performance of the schools?*
- Parent We know how this school informs the parents because we are involved parents. I don't know how the district goes about informing people on other schools.
- Teacher At present, they publish something on the newspaper. They publish the state test scores in the paper. I've heard it also comes out in Spanish with a very brief paragraph describing the location of each school, their programs and their test scores. The information is very brief because there are 55 schools. What the task force is asking is if there is a better way to inform the general public about the existing opportunities for the children in the district.
- Teacher It's difficult. How does one inform people? People watch TV, read the newspaper. I could call the newspaper but they decide which news are important enough to publish and which are not. Something the district can do is to work more closely with the community and to focus on a different school each month, giving in-depth information about it. That would motivate people to go visit the schools.
- Facilitator* *Is there anything else you'd like to tell this task force? Any last thoughts on this issue?*
- Teacher As I said just a minute ago, I don't necessarily think it's a bad thing that schools' population is made up primarily of children learning a second language. I don't see the district telling schools to take in more Hispanic children or more kids from other cultural backgrounds. It's very important that parents have a school where they feel comfortable sending their kids.
- Teacher Their comments go along with what I was saying about the questions posed. Everyone is asking how to attract more English-speakers to our school and at the same time, how to attract more Latino children to other schools where the primary population is white. It's not about having transportation or help or how to pay for a private school or if we charge for participating in a program. It's about accepting other cultures.

End of the meeting at Columbine Elementary School