

**FOCUS GROUP--
LOUISVILLE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
APRIL 26, 2005**

Question 1: Lower income in some schools; higher income in others.

Due to higher paying jobs, kids go to schools in neighborhoods with higher income. Sanchez and Lafayette are located in more mature neighborhoods where residents have lower income.

In Lafayette, Indian Peaks residents can go to any school -- they can drive. It's not the demographics of the school; it's test scores that attract higher income families. The academic standards and curriculum of the schools are not meeting the needs of the kids. So parents move to a school that would do this. The lack of leadership in a school to raise the standards for all students is a problem.

The open enrollment process in Colorado is different from the process in California. When we moved from California, we wanted to support Lafayette Elementary, the neighborhood school. Douglas was preferred by other families in the neighborhood and I was guided by opinions of the neighbors.

At Lafayette, the principal cancelled a meeting with us. I wanted to do a tour, I was invited to look around without a guide. I was concerned about security at the school. The anti-bullying program was the only program mentioned. Also, I had a son in day care, none of his friends was going to Lafayette. The marketing of the neighborhood school is a big issue.

I made a decision based on the overall package. Parents go with what feels most comfortable. No sense of security at Lafayette. Test scores and environment were also a problem.

[I am] a resident of Erie, BVSD has great schools. Home school is Lafayette.

Four to five families tried to visit that school and were not welcomed. I relied on their experience because I had no time to go to look at a school where I was not welcomed. I made the decision based on how the environment felt.

I attempted to change Lafayette from within. I tried for years, got no response, no consideration, and no improvement. My oldest child was there from kindergarten through fifth grade. When my second child was in second grade, I switched schools. Why would BVSD be concerned about stratification and demographics rather than the excellence of the school regardless of demographics?

In California, white high-income families go to neighborhood schools. The demographics do not matter, just the quality of the school.

Question 2: How did you decide what school your child would attend?

Initially, guided by test scores. Identified eight to ten schools with acceptable test scores. Visited eight to ten schools. At the school chosen, loved the art room, gym, extra-curricular offerings, and the principal. Looked for a feeder school for Platt. Leadership was a major factor. At Douglas, the principal supports teachers and encourages family involvement. Focuses on academics in a balanced, positive way. Considered lots of factors. Considered Peak to Peak, Lafayette, Fireside, and Louisville. Peak to Peak was not established then. So that was too uncertain. At Lafayette, security and take-it-or-leave-it attitude were unattractive.

Loved Fireside but wanted to go to a different middle school. At Louisville, the overall feeling, test scores, great reports of neighbors and availability of carpool were the deciding factors. Toured lots of schools. Test scores were important at the beginning. Coal Creek was the only school that involved students, at the students' request. Loved the feel of the school and the artwork. Knew the Literacy Coordinator and Librarian, which also helped create a comfort level. Son's peers were going there, too. We came from California. Thought all schools would be great in Colorado. Considered four schools and were prepared to send daughter to any of them, Coal Creek, Ryan, Louisville Elementary, and Douglas. Got into Douglas and stayed there. Relied on neighbors, tours, and gut feelings. We considered same factors as above, together with wheelchair access for one of our kids.

Geography was a factor, all of the schools in East County were considered. Began one year before Kindergarten, and investigated for the next three years visiting the schools and getting the feel for them. Priority was a school that strived for academic achievement, community feeling, safety and security. Wanted to find a neighborhood school. Was promised one, but it was not built. A variable that sold Louisville Elementary was the principal, so warm and willing to listen to parents. Ethnic demographics were not a factor in the decision. Instead, the decision was based on other factors, like test scores, quality, overall feel of the school, and security.

Question 3: Possible steps for BVSD to take to have schools with more ethnic diversity without sacrificing academics – should rules concerning open enrollment be changed, and if so, how?

OE should remain as is. Parents should have choice. What has to be done to draw more students to schools without a good mix of demographics? Do not restrict parental choice. Focus on academics and leadership. This will take time for the community to see a change.

I am Hispanic. I did not look at demographic composition. It was pure academics. In schools with primarily Spanish-speaking children, parents may not know about OE. Therefore, BVSD should educate all parents regarding OE. We did not depart from Lafayette due to demographics; it was due to academics.

Kids are at Coal Creek. Decision had nothing to do with demographics, it was academics. But schools should have to market to all, and assure that all families know about OE and possibility of choice.

I have a hard time with this question. Look at it from ratings. It is counter-intuitive to say improvement comes from limiting choice on something that's very personal. People can still move their homes. Focus has to be on improving and attracting people back to neighborhood schools. There is no quick fix. It took years to get here and will take years to change it. Choose to invest in schools that you want to improve. Do not do so to the detriment of schools that are doing well. Raise the progress and achievement of all schools and do not harm one to help another. Restricting OE is not a lever to fix this problem.

Those are great comments. I looked at academics, not demographics. Parents do have to be educated about OE. Assure that all families are familiar with the OE process.

BVSD is on the right path with changes at Lafayette and at Sanchez, opening a preschool which will be free for families who are not able to pay. Also, transportation may be an issue in some areas. BVSD should spend money on busing. This would improve OE and change mix of students.

What would happen if OE were to stop altogether? That's limiting choice, but people can move. Instead, focus on improving the quality of the neighborhood schools. Given a choice, most people would support neighborhood schools. But when families have not seen that neighborhood schools are supported and standards are met, they choose other schools. At Lafayette, with a new principal, families are moving back. If you eliminate OE, people can move to neighborhoods where schools meet their needs.

Eliminating OE would have a big backlash. We've had neighbors move to be closer to schools, even with OE.

Look at Silicon Valley. A high percentage of well-educated people. The common understanding is that families live in a house they do not want to in order to get their kids into school. Pay a higher premium to live in certain areas. This is a sacrifice people are willing to make because that's how important the issue is. OE should make efficient use of buildings. Task Force needs to clarify the purpose of OE.

Question 4: What should be done inside the schools, academic programs, support, staffing, what programs should be offered and where?

This depends on how much budget BVSD has. Small classes, libraries, music programs, all cost money. So the question is how much can BVSD spend?

Why bring students in to balance ethnicity? Invest in making a school better, this will pull the local community in. Do not know whether this will achieve ethnic and economic diversity. If a school is doing well, it will draw students from the local community.

A greater diversity of staff. Schools should have enough staffing for all levels of learning. Diversity of staff allows a diversity of academic levels. Team teaching assures that students are not bored or lost.

Increase the budget. Funds for literacy aids, multiple math levels, so schools can serve needs of more diverse students. Have lots of work to assure families are comfortable moving schools. Parents look for climates that support kids. Add programs for ESL, recruit Spanish speaking teachers.

Programs depend on funding and budget. Do not know how to meet the goal of ethnic or economic diversity. What does this mean anyway? The question should be how to bring up levels at all schools. By attracting and retaining best teachers, rotating teachers among schools, sharing proceeds of fund raising, among schools, establishing literacy, math, TAG programs. Look at teacher tenure – is this necessary? How do we hire the best teachers? Teachers should be awarded for performance; tenure inhibits this.

Focus on balancing the funding rather than balancing ethnic and racial backgrounds. For instance, funding for TAG is so miniscule. This sector is not funded. Minority schools are receiving funds. We're talking one-sided – get high income to move to low income. Spanish speaking families are more comfortable in environments they choose. It would be better to immerse these students in English speaking classrooms. Educating low income parents that it is okay to go to higher income schools is a tough task. It is easier to go the other way, from higher income to lower income. This can be done by increasing quality of all schools. What schools need to do to support a higher percentage of low income; Spanish speaking students – provide ESL programs. Can see it is easier to be bilingual and go to an English-speaking school than the other way around.

Question 5: Transportation, location of schools, definition of Attendance Areas.

If District allows busing into Boulder, I would consider schools in Boulder. Designate general areas for buses to pick up students. This helps with traffic and is more convenient for parents. This is an issue for lower SES students to move into other neighborhoods. Need busing and daycare. Educate parents re OE. Even at Lafayette, there is choice within the school. Hispanic population that open enrolls into Pioneer is making a choice. If funding for it, provide transportation to support all school choice. Or provide for low SES families. Spend monies on schools. Make them so good no one wants to be bused. Parents would love kids to go to schools that are more diverse. We would have stayed at Lafayette except for the academics. There are so many advantages to neighborhood schools. It would be good to go to a neighborhood school.

Question 6: How should BVSD communicate the strengths of schools, how they are measured and described?

It's all academics. Have to improve the academics in minority schools to get more high income students. I did not look at demographics. Neighborhood schools had no quality, that's why we pulled out. We would like to compare apples to apples, we would like to know how students are doing at all schools, Asians to Asians, if everyone is doing the same regardless of the school, that would matter. This is only part of it. Also have to do multi levels of teaching. Multi racial families report their students as Caucasians [so "apple-to-apple" comparison may not be accurate]. Maybe report not by race but by need, i.e., report ESL students, compare scores of ESL students with other ESL students.

LAST QUESTION: Any other thoughts for the Task Force?

Get into the need to improve local schools rather than investing too much time and resources on stratification. I do not see the benefit of ethnic/economic mix – what improvement will that achieve? The question is what you want your children to accomplish and what education should be. This is what BVSD's focus should be.

I'm a minority. I do not focus on the demographics of my kids' friends. I want them to be well-behaved, treated with respect, and get a good education. White people are concerned with stratification than minorities themselves. In Berkley, California, schools are 35 – 40 % Asian; no one is looking at those schools and saying that is too much. What value does ethnic mix provide? The primary focus should be on academics. This also would allow principals to use their time more wisely. I heard BVSD put more money into Lafayette to attract Caucasian students. Adding TAG, literacy programs. Trying to market the school to families in the area. This will not be successful unless BVSD deals with the academics of the school. The principal makes a major impact. Only spend money on improving academics; all other money will be wasted. The [former] Lafayette principal said "if you are looking for an academic school, this is not where to come." The biggest question is, "How important is school to parents." Racial makeup does not matter. Race should have nothing to do with it. Deal with academics. Educate parents of ESL students. This is not so much a racial thing; it's economics and exposure to education.

Remember that time matters. Makes things change for questions like economic status, language. In one generation's time, things change. In what time frame should success be marked? It is unrealistic to expect change in two to three years. Why look at the ethnic and economic diversity rather than why people move away from neighborhood schools? Instead look at what it would take to make people stay. Look at the diversity in the academics offered at the schools. This [stratification] is a symptom of a larger problem. This is not the issue that drove families away from schools. Why is this question being raised now? The approval of charter schools and the fact that charter schools can go to their own chartering authority. Money follows the students. New principal coming to Lafayette will have an impact on Peak to Peak enrollment. There would be less work to do at Lafayette if BVSD had dealt with the problems there sooner. If this [stratification] is the issue, it further isolates families. This [stratification] is a symptom of a different problem.

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