

BVSD Stratification Task Force
Summary of Analysis and Recommendations

June 10, 2005

Background

Concerned that socio-economic stratification in BVSD may be increasing, and could limit the Boulder Valley School District's ability to achieve its strategic initiatives and New Century Graduate vision, the Board chartered the Stratification Task Force. The charge to the Task Force was to study the patterns and causes of stratification, including any unintended consequences of open enrollment, and recommend strategies to reduce and reverse stratification.

The Task Force was formed, with Board input, to include a broad representation of the community and its range of perspectives. Mack Clark, deputy superintendent, and Rich Lopez, local attorney, were asked to serve as co-chairs. The Task Force began regular meetings on November 30, 2004, and met as a group twelve times through the end of May, 2005.

Methodology

The Task Force members reviewed, analyzed, and discussed:

- background materials and national studies on stratification, choice, and achievement to help inform them on the issues involved.
- enrollment statistics and data concerning the movement of students throughout BVSD and the impact on stratification, achievement, and equity.
- research specific to BVSD on stratification, choice, achievement, equity, and the assessment of academic quality.
- approaches to addressing stratification by school districts in California, North and South Carolina, Delaware, Georgia, Florida, Massachusetts, and Wisconsin.

The Task Force planned a process to gather community perspectives, which began with interviewing six principals in February, 2005. Six focus groups with parents were conducted during April, and two community forums were held in May, attended by approximately 100 people. Participants in the focus groups and the community forums expressed a wide range of views on causes and potential solutions, and provided responses to general areas the Task Force was exploring for possible recommended action. Task Force members attended these events to observe, listen, and report back to the full group.

Analysis of Patterns and Causes of Stratification in BVSD

Patterns of Stratification

The Task Force's analysis shows that there is socio-economic stratification in the Boulder Valley School District. To cite one example, 59% of the total population of elementary children eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) are educated in just seven of the 34 elementary schools.

There is evidence that socio-economic stratification is increasing in the district. In the four neighborhood schools with the highest percentages of FRL students, the percentage of FRL students has steadily increased over the last eight years. Several other schools may be approaching a point at which their degree of stratification could accelerate.

Patterns of socio-economic stratification are very closely correlated in BVSD with patterns of ethnic and linguistic stratification.

Causes of Stratification

The Task Force's analysis suggests that stratification is the result of the interplay of several main causes:

- **Attendance Area Boundaries and Housing Patterns:** the underlying patterns of housing stratification in the district combined with the way attendance area boundaries are defined would create stratified schools regardless of the impact of any of the other causal factors.
- **Centralization of Special Programs:** the center-based distribution of programs for ESL and Special Education, in particular, have led to concentrations of low-SES students who require those programs and services.
- **Unintended Consequences of Open Enrollment:** participation in open enrollment has been increasing, and it is disproportionately higher-SES families that open enroll, while there are obstacles to lower-SES families' awareness of and participation in open enrollment.
- **Lack of Accurate Information on School Quality:** parents need better information than aggregate CSAP scores and a school's informal reputation in order to assess school quality.

Implications of Stratification

The stratification in the Boulder Valley School District has a negative impact on the achievement of New Century Graduate goals and strategic initiatives regarding diversity. It also exacerbates inequities between schools and between groups of students. According to many national studies, schools with high concentrations of students of lower socio-economic status, although they can be excellent and successful schools, are at a disadvantage in terms of closing the achievement gap for their students.

Recommendations

In May, the Task Force began to focus on and prioritize a set of strategies or "levers" that had been discussed at various meetings, focus groups and forums. Members recognized that no single strategy would solve the problem, but that a combination of strategies applied comprehensively could reduce stratification and encourage integration, while preserving or enhancing educational quality, equity, and choice.

These strategies were debated by the Task Force, and formulated as possible recommendations. Finally, the Task Force prioritized ten recommendations and discussed specific variations of each recommendation. Through an iterative process individual

written response, debate, prioritization, voting, discussion and synthesis, the Task Force arrived at a set of ten linked recommendations, summarized below:

Program Decentralization

The Boulder Valley School District should continue and extend the decentralization of center-based programs with particular emphasis on ESL services, which would be designed and distributed based on analysis of student populations, both to provide ESL students excellent education wherever they are and to attract them to schools where they are currently under-represented. This recommendation aims to reduce the concentration of students with particular needs in schools with center-based programs by providing those programs and services in more schools. An added benefit of decentralization would be to drive the adoption of methodologies such as differentiated instruction and language-enriched classrooms, which improve educational quality for all students.

Reassessing Boundaries

The Boulder Valley School District should conduct a study of school boundaries to determine a logical placement that would then be phased in over time to lessen the impact of racial and economic stratification. Criteria for redrawing boundaries would include addressing stratification due to location of affordable housing, population patterns, issues of walking distances and transportation, and school feeder systems. The aim is to reduce the economic and racial stratification of attendance areas that do not reflect current housing patterns, and that have become further stratified over time due to consolidations.

Communication and Outreach

The Boulder Valley School District should implement a district-wide communications campaign to provide accurate information and influence parental perceptions and choices in the direction of greater integration. This campaign would include messages regarding the overall high quality of BVSD schools, strengths of individual schools, the academic outcomes of open enrollment for students in particular groups, and the use of alternative metrics of school performance. It would also include outreach both to low-SES families who have not participated in open enrollment previously, and to high-SES families who might choose to stay in or return to more diverse neighborhood schools. The aim is to reduce stratification by providing parents with accurate information to help them make good choices, as well as countering inaccurate perceptions currently influencing choices in the direction of stratification.

Transportation

The Boulder Valley School District should provide transportation funded at district expense for students who meet federal free and reduced lunch guidelines to schools that they have selected through the open enrollment process outside of their neighborhood school. The scope of subsidized transportation should be determined based on a study that the district shall perform. The aim is to make open enrollment equally accessible to all BVSD families.

School Visit Requirement:

The Boulder Valley School District should amend its regulations concerning open enrollment to include the requirement that all families who participate in the open enrollment process must first visit and review their school of home attendance area as a precondition of participating in open enrollment. Standards for what is included in a school visit to satisfy this requirement would be defined by the District and applied equally in every school. The aim is to help parents accurately assess the quality and fit of schools for their child or children.

Developing and Publicizing Alternative Metrics

The Boulder Valley School District should develop and strongly publicize metrics for school quality that will provide a more accurate alternative to aggregate CSAP scores. Promising alternative metrics for consideration are Year Over Year Growth, the district weighted index, and disaggregated reporting of CSAP results (e.g. showing ESL students' results separately). The district is urged to develop a communication strategy and a rewards structure to promote the understanding and use of the selected alternative metric(s) for assessing school quality, along with qualitative information about the strengths of each school. The aim is to provide parents with accurate information on which to base their assessment of school quality.

Weighted Funding Formula

The Boulder Valley School District should implement a weighted funding formula for all students from low-income families, based on analysis of educational, financial, and stratification impacts such a formula would have. Under this approach, additional funds would follow free/reduced lunch (FRL) students with respect to full-time equivalent (FTE) allocations, without reducing Title I funds. Allocation would be on a sliding scale based on the average percentage of FRL students for the district – schools with a lower-than-average proportion of such students would receive less funding for FTE, down to a specified minimum below-average funding level (a funding “floor”). Schools with higher percentages of such students would receive proportionately more funding, up to a maximum above-average funding level (a funding “ceiling”). The aim is to reduce the disparity in resources associated with meeting the needs of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, which leads to inequalities of educational opportunity and quality.

Range of Diversity

The Boulder Valley School District should establish a desired range of diversity within all schools, using federal guidelines for free and reduced lunch (FRL) as the benchmark for diversity level. Under such an approach, if the FRL student population of an individual school were outside a range of plus/minus a specified percentage of district average, then preferences for admission would be adjusted to give socioeconomic status greater weight until the FRL percentage reached the acceptable range. The aim is to reduce stratification by placing some controls on the unintended stratification consequences of open enrollment, adjusting admission criteria in schools that do not reflect a desired level of diversity.

Training and Professional Development

The Boulder Valley School District should offer all teachers and administrators training and professional development to improve schools' academic quality and effectiveness in meeting the needs of a diverse student population. This would include training in differentiated and language-enriched instruction, and other pedagogical techniques shown by research to be effective in diverse classrooms. Training in cultural competency and diversity awareness should be made available not only to staff, but to parents and students, as well. The aim is to improve the academic quality of all BVSD schools by improving instructional skills and methods, and increasing cultural competence and diversity awareness, so that families of all backgrounds and needs are welcomed equally, communicated with respectfully and effectively, and well-served.

Enrollment Caps

The Boulder Valley School District should study the options for capping enrollment at selected schools that are experiencing high inbound open enrollment and that presently use "portable classrooms" to expand capacity beyond their buildings' actual program capacity. The aim is to reduce stratification by limiting the expansion of availability for open enrollment of schools where it most strongly contributes to stratification as an unintended consequence.

Many of these recommendations will require additional study, and all must be evaluated by the District's legal counsel. The Task Force members believe that all will have a positive impact on stratification if employed comprehensively.

Task Force Report and Next Steps

The final report of the Task Force is being produced and will be presented to the Board in June. It will include the following contents:

1. Executive Summary
2. Introduction and Context
3. Methodology
4. Analysis of Patterns and Causes of Stratification
5. Definition of the Desired State
6. Recommendations for Action
7. Conclusion
8. Appendices