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Mixed Income Schools Through Choice Gaining Favor in Denver

By ALAN GOTTLIEB

Creating a new and rich array of programmatic choices would be the most effective way to promote more mixed income Denver schools.

That's the conclusion some school officials and foundation representatives are reaching as they study the opportunities created by the concept of voluntary economic school integration.

Although challenges clearly exist, the group believes that a properly planned phase-in of top-notch programs would serve the self-interests of current and potential DPS families as well as teachers and school administrators.

Discussions and other action were prompted by a study The Piton Foundation published in May highlighting the educational benefits of mixed-income schools.

While no definitive plans yet exist, some district officials and parents are intrigued by the idea of moving soon to redesign a few schools in low-income neighborhoods

to boost achievement and make the schools more attractive to a wider array of families.

Since May, a group of parents, supported by Piton, have surveyed northwest Denver to gauge the level of interest in a number of proven, research-based school models (see accompanying story and graphic).

More recently, a group of over 50 northwest Denver parents have begun meeting to devise strategies for influencing the decision-making process within DPS related to the future of schools in their neighborhoods.

Simultaneously, Denver Public Schools has started to look seriously at how it can meet strong parental demand for a wider array of educational choices, particularly in northwest Denver.

District officials also are pondering how to take advantage of the soon-to-be burgeoning Stapleton redevelopment site to revitalize struggling schools located near the former airport.

In early October, a group of seven school officials and

foundation representatives traveled to Raleigh, N.C. to look at that city's system of magnet schools (see accompanying story).

Raleigh's magnets combine unparalleled student achievement with a rich array of arts programming that draw neighborhood children as well as students from wealthy suburbs as much as an hour's drive distant. The group returned to Denver convinced that some of Raleigh's best practices could be adopted here.

This issue of *The Term Paper* focuses on new thinking in Denver about parental choice leading to more mixed-income schools. For a variety of reasons, this seems to be an opportune time to promote new thinking about the city's public schools.

Superintendent Jerry Wartgow and his team have made it clear that fresh perspectives are welcome, as long as increased student achievement remains the focal point of any new endeavors.

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Raleigh Trip Inspires Denver Visitors

In early October, seven people from Denver visited Raleigh, N.C., to take a first-hand look at how an urban school system has achieved excellence through expanded parental choice and an unwavering commitment to diversity.

The trip, sponsored by The Piton Foundation, had one overarching goal: to jump-start local conversation and action toward improving public schools in Denver's low-income neighborhoods.

The Denver delegation consisted of school board member Lucia Guzmàn, North High School Principal Offie Hobbs, Assistant Supt. for Northeast Denver John Youngquist, DPS Program Manager Allen Balczarek, northwest Denver parent Janine Vanderburg, Piton Chairman Sam Gary, and Piton Program Officer Alan Gottlieb.

In recent years, Raleigh has succeeded in bringing 90 percent of its students to proficiency on state End of Grade tests. One policy that has helped this happen requires that no school should consist of high concentrations of low-income students or low-performing students.

To help keep concentrations of poverty from occurring, Raleigh, for the past 20 years, has operated a system of magnet schools—44 in all—located mostly in low-income neighborhoods. The schools offer academic excellence and a rich array of arts programming to draw affluent families from suburban neighborhoods into these inner-city schools.

During the Denver group's 24 hours in Raleigh, we visited several magnet schools and spoke with school officials past and present to learn how Raleigh launched its system of highly successful magnets, and how the district has managed to keep them vital after 20 years.

Raleigh schools are different from Denver's in many key respects. Most notably, only 25 percent of its students

qualify for free or reduced-cost lunch, compared to almost 70 percent in Denver. (For a detailed description and analysis of Raleigh schools, see the May, 2002 issue of *The Term Paper*. It is available on Piton's web site at www.piton.org).

Nevertheless, the school district's consistent approach and guiding philosophy offers important lessons to Denver, as officials here begin pondering how to raise the academic achievement of all children.

Below are delegation members' thoughts on how the Raleigh experience might apply to Denver.

Lucia Guzmàn

What I saw in Raleigh were excellent schools that are succeeding in tackling the issue we are struggling with in Denver—high academic achievement for all children, and closing the achievement gap.

The schools came about through an organized plan and bold decisions. In Raleigh, the Board of Education, joined by the leaders in the business community and in the black community, made a deliberate decision to transform its inner

city schools into centers of excellence that would draw children from throughout Wake County. They started big, transforming several in one year into choice schools. They provided transportation, so that choice was truly available to all children. For over 20 years, they have held to this vision that deliberate integration and

trip made me realize that Denver still has some schools that are operating in a 1950s model in 1950s buildings. Often, we have eliminated arts and music—which could engage children in school—in a single-minded focus on CSAP testing; yet, we lack the results we hoped.

My goal is to move toward installing some of the Raleigh models in my district in northwest Denver by 2003. We will have to be bold with our vision and decisions if we want to accomplish our goals. I will work in my community to encourage a pilot of economically integrated choice schools in northwest Denver so that we can demonstrate that the Raleigh model can work in Denver.

I intend to use my time and influence on the Board to do just that, to enact whatever policies are necessary so that all

Denver children have the option of attending schools that offer them academic and social opportunities, and hope.

Sam Gary

It was a great trip. Everyone in the group was in agreement about what we saw, which is in itself unusual. It was like the Holy Grail—we all ran home and said "we're going to get one."

I was impressed by the core principle, the unwavering commitment to socioeconomic integration. The leaders of the school district in Raleigh committed to staying with this for the long-term. That has made all the difference

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DENVER VISITORS SAM GARY AND JANINE VANDERBURG OBSERVE STUDENTS DOING LIBRARY RESEARCH AT LIGON MIDDLE SCHOOL IN RALEIGH.

focus on academic excellence for all children will yield the results we want, and it has worked.

Things are looking up for DPS these days, thanks to our new superintendent and administrative team. However, the

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Overview, continued from page 1

The promise of better student achievement is the strongest argument for fostering more economically integrated schools, as Piton's study illustrated.

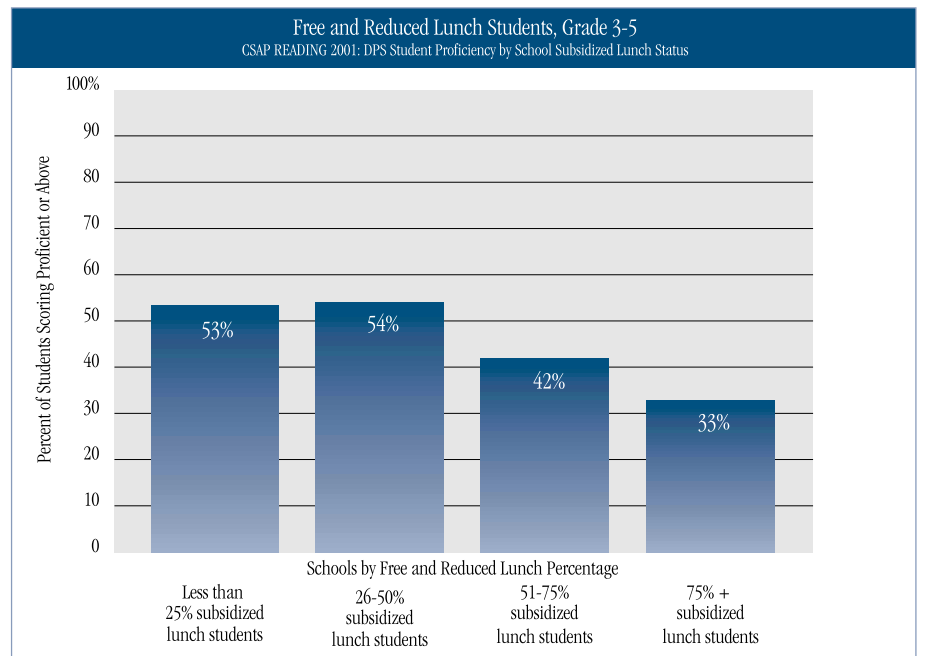
The study was conducted by Dianne Lefly, a Ph.D. statistician and the research manager in the Denver Public Schools Assessment & Testing Department.

Among the findings:

- Low-income students (as measured by eligibility for federally-funded free or reduced-cost school lunch) perform significantly better in schools with fewer poor students than in schools where over half the students are poor. For example, on the 2001 CSAP reading test, 53 percent of low-income elementary students scored proficient or advanced in schools where fewer than 25 percent of students qualified for free or reduced cost lunch. However, in schools where over 75 percent of the students were poor, just 33 percent of the low-income students scored proficient or advanced.

- More affluent students perform well on standardized tests in schools with low to moderate levels of poverty. However, the scores of non-poor students begin to deteriorate significantly in schools where over 50 percent of all students are poor. In elementary schools where under 25 percent of students are poor, 83 percent of non-poor students scored proficient or advanced on the 2001 reading CSAP. However, in schools with over 75 percent low-income students, only 49 percent of the non-poor students scored proficient or advanced.

Lefly conducted the study by analyzing scores over the last three years of elementary students (grades three through five) on the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) reading test and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills reading test. Lefly analyzed the performance of students who qualify for free or reduced-cost lunches in schools with low, medium and high rates of poverty. The analysis also included non-subsidized lunch students in schools with varying levels of poverty.



School officials, foundation representatives and parents recognize that promoting economically mixed schools through parental choice is a long-term strategy that cannot promise a quick fix.

But these early steps toward promoting excellence through enhanced choice could well be a harbinger of a larger, longer-term strategy that would benefit not only the school district, but the city as a whole.

Raleigh, continued from page 1

As Denver thinks about adopting pieces of this concept, people need to realize the time this took in Raleigh. You need to get away from the strong desire to find a quick fix. These things are generational; thinking of it any other way is frustrating and disappointing and discouraging.

We need to connect the dots here in Denver, to create these initiatives that may at the time seem to be isolated. They need to be successful. Once you achieve this, and if you stay with it long enough, eventually you have three or four of these magnet-type schools, and they connect.

Janine Vanderburg

What was most interesting and ironic to me was how the Wake County Public Schools seem to defy conventional wisdom, at least the way we've come to define that in Denver.

CW: Parents don't want to put their children on a bus.

In Raleigh, most parents do—to make sure that their children can take advantage of the dizzying array of options offered within Wake County's choice programs in 44 magnet schools. Busing is viewed as an investment in educational excellence, not a cost.

CW: We don't have the money to spend on arts and music; even if we did, we need to focus on the basics because our children are so far behind.

In the schools, visual and performing arts and music are a core part of the curriculum, in addition to highly challenging academic programs. It's not either/or; it's both.

CW: Decisions are best made at a site level.

In Raleigh, there is a deliberate, systemic

focus on integration and academic excellence. School leaders told us they don't allow site-based decisions that would jeopardize the success of the overall system.

CW: Integration as an idea or value is passé; neighborhood schools are best.

In Raleigh, integrated schools are a core value. Every effort is made to ensure that each school is integrated socio-economically. Choice/magnet programs, student assignment policies and transportation are all strategies used to achieve that end.

What does all this defiance of conventional wisdom lead to?

Great schools. We saw an elementary, middle and a high school in our whirlwind tour. All had small class sizes. Each housed diverse students, engaged in challenging academic programs, and a range of electives in art, music, foreign languages and sports that would rival the selections offered by many colleges.

And this system is yielding measurable results...

- High levels of academic achievement for all children—student performance at every income level, in every racial and ethnic group, is above state and national averages.
- Effective utilization of existing building capacity—the county is saving money by building fewer new schools, despite an annual growth in number three times that of Denver's.

Can we defy conventional wisdom in Denver?

Isn't it worth trying?

Allen Balczarek

Raleigh has had the extraordinary foresight to combine solving a school district

economic issue with an intentional plan to integrate its students economically.

The district's economic issue was how to fill under-utilized, older school buildings in the core city while simultaneously coping with rapid growth in the outlying parts of the district boundaries.



AN INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC CLASS AT THE WASHINGTON ELEMENTARY GIFTED AND TALENTED MAGNET SCHOOL IN RALEIGH IMPRESSED DENVER VISITORS.

There are ways Denver Public Schools might apply Raleigh's lessons. First, DPS could closely examine the missions of existing magnet offerings. Next, the district could be intentional in the planning of future magnet or theme-based initiatives in the district to promote economic school integration through choice.

An important difference between Denver and Raleigh is that the excess classroom space in DPS is almost the reverse of Raleigh's. Here, most schools in the older, core areas of the city are not as underutilized as Raleigh's were.

There are, however, other areas of the district where under-utilized schools do exist and could draw some economically disadvantaged youth from schools with extremely high rates of poverty.

Another benefit to considering additional magnet or theme-based schools is the draw it may have on parents who live in Denver but choose not to send their children to a public school. Drawing students back into the system could help reduce the rates of poverty at newly designated magnets. This, according to the research, could positively affect student achievement in schools that have continued to struggle academically.

John Youngquist

The visit to Raleigh was both enlightening and challenging to the ideals that I own as I think of efforts to explore school

improvement in the Denver Public Schools. Schools can be "high," and schools can be "unsatisfactory." What is it that makes them so?

The first thing that struck me about the Raleigh school system was the level of responsibility assumed by every member of the leadership team for every school in the district. All their decisions had a well-defined purpose.

In theory, this purpose was to economically integrate the school system. In reality, the plan also integrated the system in terms of achievement and race. What a contribution

to the learning life of every child to have the opportunity to attend a school that is integrated economically, racially and intellectually!

In many ways, Denver's challenges are similar to those faced by Wake in the early 80s. The end of busing for racial integration left us with a city system with many de facto segregated schools. This segregation is racial, economic and achievement-based. There are lessons learned from Raleigh that can lead to a more equitable system of education in the Denver Public Schools. These lessons include:

- Start by defining your shared value(s)
- Allow this value(s) to drive the change that you desire
- Collective passion toward the goal can help manage challenges and lead toward success
- Use the present geographic and economic realities to your advantage (children's advantage)
- Use keen political awareness and partnerships to your advantage
- Focus on short-term action, long-term support and consistent, longitudinal progress

In our Denver system, there are pockets of opportunity throughout our city. Identifying needs and forging a collective action to make the right things happen can bring us toward effective interventions such as those we observed in Raleigh.



SAM GARY



LUCIA GUZMÁN

The Piton Study: Caution Proceed Slowly

RICHARD D. LAMM

John Gardner once said that higher education in America “was caught between unloving critics and uncritical lovers.” Let me try to be a loving critic of the thoughtful work on economic integration done by The Piton Foundation.

I. The Proposal is not politically practicable

Before getting too involved in this project, I urge you to ask some prominent business leaders about the civic and political acceptability of any proposal that would come out of this study. This metropolitan area was deeply traumatized by the busing controversy and the battle over the Poundstone Amendment. This study strikes me as busing all over again and I doubt that it would find much civic support, regardless of its validity. I would suggest asking a variety of civic and political leaders for their evaluation. Is this the type of thing they would support? Would they endorse an economic integration proposal? What do they see as the metropolitan area’s receptiveness to a proposal of this kind?

II. The impact of this study seems too late in a child’s life to have beneficial impact anywhere near the social disruption it will cause

I am increasingly impressed by the studies showing that the key crucial time to significantly impact children is before they ever get to school. Anyone seriously thinking of supporting the Piton proposal should read *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed; What Parents Need To Do* by Steinberg; and *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children* by Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley. These books argue that the best school experience for those who grow up in educationally deprived homes can only be at the margin. We should turn our focus on preschool programs and recognize that thus far our liberal idealistic hopes for school programs to correct impoverished backgrounds have produced little.

Steinberg boldly states that “no curricula overhaul, no instructional innovation, no change in school organization, no toughening of standards, no rethinking of teacher training or compensation, will succeed if students do not come to the classroom interested in and committed to learning. In order to understand how this commitment develops, why it has waned, and more importantly, how we can reengage students in the business of learning, we need to look, not at what goes on inside the classroom, but at student lives outside the school walls.”

I read these books/studies to say we should be starting earlier and earlier with more and more resources and if we wait until the child enters school, there will be little that can be done. The battle for a child’s cognitive development can already be lost by the time the child enters school. The impressionable gelatin of a child’s mind has mostly hardened to cement. As Laurence Steinberg has said, we must look “Beyond the Classroom.” The recent research in this area shows that we have only a relatively small window of opportunity in which to stimulate a child’s potential and that by the time kids enter school, it is largely too late.

III. Kansas City, Missouri results

Kansas City has been through a somewhat similar experiment. About ten years ago Judge Clark ordered a metropolitan-wide system of magnet schools in Kansas City. White students from the suburbs were bused to magnet schools and about half the black students in the district were bused to the same magnet schools. The other half of the black kids stayed in their neighborhood schools. After a few years, the judge looked into the feasibility of extending the court order to include the remaining half of the black children in the magnet school plan and the Attorney General of Missouri (and the court) asked for a study of the results. This study was done by Professor John Alspaugh of the University of Missouri and his study found that the black kids who stayed in their neighborhood schools did BETTER than the kids bused for purposes of integration. The very best school in the whole district was a 95% black school named Border Star which had strongly and successfully resisted busing their students.

Professor Alspaugh feels that busing breaks up the spirit and the sense of unity in those schools. He found that the dropout rate of the schools that bused some of their kids went up dramatically (his words were “very dramatically”). Kids lost the sense of unity they found in the neighborhood schools. They discouraged easier and dropped out in greater numbers. Judge Clark, once he saw the study, vacated the original order and the system stopped the social experiment because it was harming kids

IV. My generation of political leaders have not been able to make the schools a tool of reform

Head Start was the big hope of my generation of politicians. Yet a 1995 study by HHS concluded that “in the long run, cognitive and socio-emotional test scores of former Head Start students do not remain superior

to those of disadvantaged students who did not attend Head Start” or that a 1995 study found no difference between siblings who did and did not attend Head Start? The bright promise of this program has never been realized. Sad but true.

How about all the hopes we had for Title I? A 1997 study conducted for the Department of Education concluded, “there were no differences in growth” between students who did and did not receive Title I assistance? No difference? We spent hundreds of billions of dollars on Title I and seem to have achieved very little.

The War on Poverty? Walter Williams says that we have spent 2.5 trillion dollars on the War on Poverty and that amount is enough to buy all of America’s Fortune 500 Corporations plus most of the farmland in America. Was this an efficient and effective program? The Conservatives just might be right when they say the net effect was to increase dependency.

Busing? Many (most?) of us who supported busing are, in retrospect, wondering if we didn’t do more harm than good dividing the community and ultimately achieving little. We don’t think, on reflection, that we advanced race relations or education. We are extremely hesitant and skeptical to go down this road again. Many of us who supported busing believe we might have brought net harm to both Denver and race relations.

How could we propose busing for economic integration when our own Denver studies have shown that busing for racial integration did not significantly boost the achievement of minority students? Piton says that these analyses never took into account socioeconomic status, but anyone involved deeply in that issue saw clearly that socioeconomic status might not have been studied, but the effect of busing for racial integration clearly was also busing for socioeconomic integration. We bused kids from poor schools and poor neighborhoods to better schools and better neighborhoods and failed to “significantly boost achievement of minority students.” You will need a better answer to the legitimate claim that “we already tried this and it failed” than socioeconomic status was not specifically studied. How do you answer the inevitable charge (which your commentary itself recognizes is coming) that this proposal is just another social engineering project where well-meaning but self-righteous people view the rest of the population as mere chess pieces to be moved around according to some ideal, liberal vision?

For 30 years my generation of political leaders have looked to schools for the answer. Nothing we have done seems to have worked except at the margin. Scott Miller, of the College Board, wrote that while “some strategies for investing resources in disadvan-

tagged children are substantially more productive than others...there is little evidence that any existing (school) strategy can close more than a fraction of the over all achievement gap.” It was logical to look at schools as the solution; but we must recognize that most of our bright hopes have not been realized. I was just devastated to read “Schools are Not the Answer” in the *New York Times Magazine* (January 16, 2000) which was even less hopeful that schools could play a meaningful role in salvaging children. “How powerful can this one institution (schools) be in the face of the kind of disadvantages that so many ghetto children bring with them to the schoolhouse door and return to at home?”

We must move upstream from schools for as Arthur Reynolds has found: “As a central mechanism of occupational attainment, educational success is strongly linked to the cognitive and social advantages promoted by participation in early intervention” (p.4). Schools are not the answer because they come into a child’s life too late and after too much damage is done.

V. An Alternative Proposal

The problem described by The Piton Foundation is real, but the implied solution is politically unobtainable and impracticable. Why not instead initiate an intensive Child Parent Center like the one in Chicago, which has already received a positive evaluation? Let us work with young minds before it is too late. Second, if we are to experiment with schools, why not look at the proposal of Robert Reich in his book, *I’ll Be Short: Essentials for a Decent Working Society*. His proposal is to create a voucher (he denies the term voucher and says let’s call it “liverwurst”) for all low-income children. He suggests that it should be so generous that schools districts will fight to get these children to attend their schools, including sending buses into the inner city to bring them to suburban districts (see pages 66 to 71). I sense that Americans are basically fair and recognize the problems of the inner city and want to help. They don’t want to sacrifice their kids to some unproven social scheme, but I suspect they would be willing to fund a stake for inner city children large enough that their own school districts would compete and welcome these children. This would be somewhat the same result as the Piton Plan but with smaller disruption and using incentives rather than regulatory sticks.

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A Response to Richard Lamm

RICHARD D. KAHLBERG

Governor Richard Lamm has provided important insights and leadership on a range of public policy issues over the years but his criticism of The Piton Foundation’s proposal for economic school integration is off the mark in several respects. I take each of his objections in turn.

I. Politics

Governor Lamm suggests the proposal for economic school integration may not be politically viable because it represents “busing all over again.” But advocates of integration have learned a great deal since the busing controversies of the 1970s. The primary insight is that parents must be given a say in the matter of where their children attend school. The current system of neighborhood school assignment gives no say to poor parents (who can’t afford to move) just as surely as involuntary busing did. Instead, most advocates of economic integration propose a form of managed public school choice to achieve their goals.

In systems employed in Cambridge, Massachusetts and many other jurisdictions throughout the country, every school becomes a magnet school, with something attractive to offer to particular parents. A small school may be just what a parent with a shy child would like. Another family might prefer a school that uses a Core Knowledge curriculum, while another likes the Montessori teaching approach, and yet another wants a French immersion school. Parents within a given geographic region rank their preferences, and then school officials honor those choices with an eye to ensuring a strong middle class presence in every school. The key is to give at least some parents an incentive to want to have their children attend a public school beyond the one in their (economically segregated) neighborhood—a quality program at the end of the bus ride. A 1998 Public Agenda poll found that while 76% of white parents oppose involuntary busing, 61% support a system of managed choice, where the district honors parental preferences with an eye to integration. Governor Lamm himself has recognized the appeal of public school choice in a nation where “we can choose among 100 breakfast cereals, 200 makes of automobiles, 300 different religious denominations.”¹

Some say the “economic integration” will never

happen. But the number of students attending economically integrated schools has jumped from about 20,000 in 1999 to more than 400,000 today. Others say public school choice will never take place across school district lines. But 300,000 students attend public schools of choice across such lines every school day. By contrast, publicly funded private school voucher programs, which dominate much of the debate over education today, educate just 14,000 students nationally.

II. K-12 is “Too Late”

Governor Lamm argues that reforming schools isn’t likely to help much because by the time a student enters kindergarten “the impressionable gelatin of a child’s mind has mostly hardened to cement.” This would be surprising news indeed to all the parents who search hard for a good school for their children, for all the elementary and secondary teachers who devote their lives to shaping minds, and to all the researchers who find enormous effects depending on what school a student attends.

Of course, preschool matters a great deal, and we should do much more to improve it. But even here, The Piton Foundation’s emphasis on economic integration is relevant. Recent research in West Hartford, Connecticut found that low income students in economically integrated preschools gained vocabulary at six times the rate of low income students in economically segregated preschools.²

III. Kansas City, Missouri Results.

Governor Lamm cites Kansas City as an example of the failure of busing and the success of neighborhood schools. In the research literature, however, Kansas City is universally cited as an example of the failure of extraordinary spending by itself to boost achievement in part because officials put no structure in place to ensure that the spending would actually produce integrated schools. By contrast, in St. Louis, a public school choice program which allows roughly 14,000 urban students to attend suburban schools has shown high levels of success. In the late 1990s, the business community in St. Louis formed an alliance with suburban Republican legislators and civil rights groups to maintain state funding for the program.

There is overwhelming evidence that all children perform better in middle class schools. The Century

Foundation’s Task Force on the Common School, led by Governor Lowell Weicker and consisting of scholars, teachers, business leaders and others, recently concluded that economic school integration isn’t just another reform option; “Of all the various strategies available, research suggests that the best method of improving education in the United States is to eliminate the harmful effects of concentrated school poverty.” To cite one statistic, the Department of Education reported this year that looking at 4th grade math scores on the 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), low income children in middle class schools performed higher than middle class children in high poverty schools. To cite another, in Wake County (Raleigh), North Carolina, schools are economically integrated and 90% of students achieve at or above grade level.

IV. Schools not a Tool for Reform

Governor Lamm laments that many of the strategies tried over the past many years—including Head Start and Title I compensatory spending—have had little effect. The economic school integration movement fully recognizes those failures and asks, why doesn’t extra spending do more? The answer is that per pupil expenditure only represents one element of what makes a school strong. The other ingredients of a good school include efficient spending; an orderly environment; a stable teacher and student population; a good principal and well qualified teachers trained in the subjects they are teaching; a meaty curriculum and high expectations; active parental involvement; motivated peers who value achievement and encourage it among classmates; high achieving peers, whose knowledge is shared informally with classmates all day long; and well connected peers who will help provide access to jobs down the line. As outlined in an earlier article, middle class schools do a much better job of providing all ten of these ingredients.³ Parents know this, which is why those who have options find good, middle class public schools for their children. (Even Laurence Steinberg, whom Lamm cites, notes that “For a large number of adolescents, peers—not parents—are the chief determinants of how intensely they are invested in school and how much effort they devote to their education.”)⁴

Governor Lamm adds racial integration to the list of failures—alongside compensatory spending—but

here he is only half right. Racial integration programs sometimes improved achievement (in places like Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina) and sometimes didn’t improve achievement (in places like Boston). As a general rule, racial integration worked when it involved economic mixing, and didn’t when it involved mixing low income whites with low income minority students. That’s why a growing number of communities are now honing in directly on the factor that matters most: economic integration.

V. An Alternative: School Vouchers

Governor Lamm concludes by suggesting an alternative proposal—Robert Reich’s plan for school vouchers generously funded for low income students. A plan to include private schools would undercut the role of public schools in fostering social cohesion amidst racial and religious and economic diversity, but if limited to the public school system, and properly funded, such a plan would serve the goal of economic school integration and would represent a genuinely innovative and constructive move. Separate schools for rich and poor, even when adequately funded, are unequal. In a middle class country, we should find ways to give every child the chance to attend a good middle class public school.

RICHARD D. KAHLBERG, A SENIOR FELLOW AT THE CENTURY FOUNDATION, IS AUTHOR OF ALL TOGETHER NOW: CREATING MIDDLE-CLASS SCHOOLS THROUGH PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE (BROOKINGS INSTITUTION PRESS, 2001). HE ALSO SERVED AS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE CENTURY FOUNDATION TASK FORCE ON THE COMMON SCHOOL, CHAIRED BY LOWELL WEICKER, WHICH RECENTLY ISSUED DIVIDED WE FAIL: COMING TOGETHER THROUGH PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE (CENTURY FOUNDATION PRESS, 2002). FOR FURTHER INFORMATION SEE WWW.EQUALEUCATION.ORG.

ENDNOTES

1. Richard D. Lamm, “Can Parents Be Partners?” *Pbi Delta Kappan*, November 1986, p. 211.
2. Carolyn Moreau, “Learning in Mixed Company: Study Shows Low-Income Preschoolers Learn Better, Faster Alongside More Affluent Peers,” *Hartford Courant*, October 19, 2002.
3. Richard D. Kahlenberg, “The Why’s and How’s of Socioeconomic School Integration,” *The Term Paper*, May 2002, p. 4.
4. Laurence Steinberg, *Beyond the Classroom* (1996), p. 138.

Attracting new families: key to school improvement

By JOHN CREIGHTON

"I don't know about 'back to basics' or 'Montessori.' All I know is that my child doesn't have a good school to go to," remarked a mother holding her infant.

"Who can we work with? I'm no expert on all these school programs and I don't know if anyone here is," added a father.

This mother and father were among thirty-plus northwest Denver parents who gathered recently with great energy and passion to talk about what might be possible to improve Denver Public Schools (DPS).

These comments affirm two major conclusions that emerged from work done by Conocer on behalf of The Piton Foundation to better understand key stakeholder perspectives on education issues in Denver.

- People believe that there are serious, systemic issues with DPS that need to be publicly discussed.
- Parents' starting point for thinking about improving schools is "what makes schools work?" not "what is our preferred special curriculum focus?"

Conocer's work for Piton included interviews with education policymakers, civic leaders and parents, and analysis of a survey Piton circulated in northwest Denver that garnered more than 800 responses.

The initial purpose of this work was to understand people's perceptions of economic integration of schools. As readers of *The Term Paper* know, Piton commissioned research that showed low income students who attend schools with fewer than 50% of students receiving free or reduced lunch perform significantly better on state proficiency tests than in schools where most of the students are poor.

But Conocer's findings yielded more than simple feedback on the concept of economic school integration.

Serious and Systemic Issues

Everyone we talked to agrees that Denver Public Schools must strive to better serve the children, families and community of Denver. Most people also concur that there are fundamental questions that need to be discussed, though there is little consensus on solutions.

What should be done about inequities within DPS? Most people we interviewed accept the premise underlying economic integration: Community/parental wealth, political influence and efficacy matter. Most people also agree that there are vast disparities among DPS schools—quality of facilities, finances, parental involvement, and quality of teachers and administrators, to list a few—that dramatically affect student performance. People generally aren't ready to embrace economic integration as the solution to inequities but agree that disparities created by economic segregation are a major issue.

What are the best ways to assign students to schools? Most people agree that the same model of education does not work for all students, and that parents should have choices about where their children attend school. A majority of people perceive value in diverse student bodies but are loath to support "social engineering" through student assignments—especially with the history of court-ordered busing fresh in people's minds.

Also, many people express a belief in the virtue of neighborhood schools. But beyond these general parameters, people raise many more questions than answers about effective strategies for assigning students to schools to boost achievement for all children.

What are effective ways to create better learning environments in all DPS schools? The answers to this question are as varied as the people with whom we spoke. Some people suggest that improving the learning environment is all about teacher training. Others suggest it begins with aesthetics and quality facilities. Some focus on school management. Others emphasize class size and classroom environments. Still others talk about the influence of home and community life on schools.

What are more complete measures to evaluate the quality of DPS schools? Many people—educators and parents alike—express concerns that proficiency exams—especially the state-administered Colorado Student Assessment Program, or CSAP—dominate school assessments and drive education policy. Most people believe that proficiency scores have an important place but that they are only one way of looking at a school.

What is reasonable to expect of DPS? Many people, especially those who do not work directly for DPS, asked what is possible for DPS to accomplish. People look at the challenges facing DPS—size, lack of resources, number of low-income students, highly charged political environment—and wonder if it is reasonable to expect DPS to overcome all of these challenges on its own. And, if not, what does that suggest?

Interviewees perceive all of these questions to be highly complex and politically charged. But, people are not sure where it is possible to have constructive conversations about these issues.

A prevailing perception is that forums that do exist—for instance, school board meetings or community gatherings—focus on topics other than systemic questions and/or are inhospitable to open and frank conversations. Indeed, several people suggest that while these types of questions may be central to DPS' future, raising them publicly is tantamount to political suicide.

Parents' Starting Point

Almost everyone with whom we talked agrees that DPS must develop schools that are more appealing to a broader cross-section of parents and their children. A consensus seems to exist that an alarming number of higher-income and motivated families opt out of DPS schools, or are on the verge of opting out, which undermines the quality of the entire DPS school system.

People we interviewed agree that developing schools with special areas of focus (commonly called magnet schools) has the potential to attract and retain more children to DPS schools. But, Conocer's work to understand stakeholder perspectives raises a strong point of caution as DPS considers the path of "specialty" schools.

When parents talk about schools, they say that they want "schools that work," plain and simple. As one parent we interviewed said, "I don't care what kind of special focus the school has if it works." In our conversations and in

written comments on the northwest Denver survey, here are what parents say make schools work:

- **Safety.** Parents express a desire for their children to feel physically safe *and* to be in a "safe and comfortable" learning environment.
- **Quality parent-teacher interaction.** Parents speak often about the importance of good communication with their children's teachers. Parents say they want to know what is happening in the classroom and want ample opportunities to talk with teachers.
- **Quality school management.** Parents want to know that there is appropriate administrative support of teachers and students, that the school as a whole is well managed and that school staff work well together.
- **Academic accountability.** Regardless of any special program focus, parents want to know that the schools their children attend deliver academically. Parents measure this by consistency of high-quality teachers, a sense that everyone in a school is working toward the same academic goals, and student performance.
- **Personal development and interest.** Some parents say that critical decision factors about whether to keep their children in a school include whether a child enjoys going to school and whether the parent perceives personal development in the child.
- **Logistics.** High-quality education alone does not lead parents to send their children to a particular school. The location of a school and other logistical issues must fit within the daily lifestyle of a student's family.

One way to think about the factors that influence parental choice is that there are two types of variables at work: Deal-breaker requirements and virtues.

Deal-breaker requirements are factors like the ones listed above. If they don't exist, and a family has the ability, they will choose a different school for their child.

The virtues of a school include such factors as student body diversity and specific models of curriculum. Parents have preferences about these factors and want their voices heard when decisions are being made about curriculum. But "school virtues" are a more important factor in parental decisions when there are multiple "schools that work" from which to choose.

Conocer's work to date for The Piton Foundation suggests two important implications. First, as a *community*, Denver must find constructive ways to talk about the serious and systemic issues facing DPS in ways that account for the unique perspectives of educators, parents and community members alike. The responsibility for constructive dialogue should not rest with DPS alone.

Second, as DPS officials consider approaches to school improvement, they should strive to meet parents where parents start, not where school district policies and procedures start.

Editor's note: John Creighton, founder of Conocer, has over a decade of experience with public research on education issues. He is the author of reports such as Halfway Out the Door: Citizens Talk About Their Mandate for Public Schools, published by the Kettering Foundation. Conocer is a Boulder-based public leadership consulting firm with staff experience working with education coalitions in Colorado, Texas, Georgia and South Carolina.

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