

**A STUDY OF BOULDER VALLEY SCHOOL
DISTRICT'S OPEN ENROLLMENT SYSTEM**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Open enrollment has existed in the Boulder Valley School District (BVSD) since 1961. However, it did not become a significant practice and source of controversy until the mid 1990s. Spurred by a concerned and vocal group of parents' discontent with the District's implementation of the "middle school philosophy," coupled with a perceived lack of emphasis on academics in BVSD more generally, various choice options began to proliferate. This was also a time when the school choice movement began accelerating at both the state and national levels.

Several types of choice options were differentiated, and "open enrollment" became an umbrella term that, in addition to the option to enroll in any District neighborhood school on a space available basis, covers 4 other kinds of options: (1) focus schools: schools with a particular curricular focus that have no attendance area; (2) neighborhood focus schools: focus schools that give priority for enrollment to students from within the neighborhood attendance area; (3) strand schools: neighborhood schools employing the BVSD curriculum that share a site with a different curricular strand previously approved for focus schools; and (4) charter schools: relatively autonomous district schools with no attendance area whose accountability to BVSD is specified in a contract. Variations also exist within these types.

Prior to the 1994-95 school year, there were 5 articulated choice options in BVSD, all emphasizing diversity, experiential learning, integrated learning, or bilingual education, sometimes in combination. By 1999-2000, there were 16 additional articulated choice options, half of which had adopted a new kind of mission consistent with the mood of the mid 1990s, namely, an explicit emphasis on academic rigor.

Dramatic changes have occurred in BVSD as a result of the growth of choice options in the district. Approximately 20% of students now open enroll in BVSD schools other than those assigned to them by attendance area, a much larger percentage than is typical in public choice systems. Also, because all BVSD schools must compete for students, all BVSD schools are affected by the open enrollment policy.

Purposes

To date, the practices and effects of open enrollment have not been systematically described and evaluated. One purpose of this study is to provide such a description and evaluation. A closely related purpose is to provide information to BVSD officials, the School Board, and the public that they will find useful in deliberating about what reforms in BVSD's open enrollment policy might be indicated.

Background: The School Choice Controversy

BVSD's open enrollment system is an instance of "public school choice," to be distinguished from vouchers which transfer public funds to private schools. There is a broad set of controversies about public school choice that goes well beyond the confines of BVSD, but that also helps frame the controversies within BVSD. Claims for and against public school choice fall into three general categories: competition, meeting student needs, and equity.

Competition

Advocates of school choice contend that competition in public education can drive improvement. Competition gives parents a voice and the power to vote with their feet; it shakes up ossified and unaccountable school district bureaucracies and schools; and it spurs innovation. Schools that perform poorly will lose students and be forced to close. The result will be increased achievement for all children and increased parental satisfaction with public schools.

Critics respond that competition is destructive of cooperation among teachers and schools, and that it neglects the interests of students enrolled in schools not doing well in a competitive environment. And, instead of increasing achievement overall, it only stratifies school achievement, as certain schools "skim" the most able students and affluent parents with exclusive admissions procedures or targeted recruiting.

Meeting Student Needs

Advocates of public school choice argue that traditional public schools cannot respond to the diverse array of interests and learning styles that characterize school children. Traditional public schools employ a "one-size fits all" approach. Although the associated curricular and instructional approaches may be suitable for some, even many, students, many other students need different approaches better suited to their specific interests and needs. School choice can provide the variety that effectively responding to the diversity of student needs and interests requires.

Critics respond that genuinely *public* schools must be open to all students, and must accommodate, rather than exclude, student needs and interests that depart from the norm. Especially where schools of choice are permitted to define needs in terms of excellence in academics, schools become stratified by race and income, exclude special needs students, and force other public schools that cannot turn students away to carry the entire burden of accommodating the needs of more difficult to teach students.

Equity

In general, those who see public choice as a means of promoting equity observe that public school choice is really nothing new, for parents have long chosen schools by choosing their place of residence. Parents' incomes and social positions thus largely determine their power to choose. A choice policy that removes attendance boundaries permits students to attend schools independent of the price of houses in the neighborhoods in which they live. It thus provides all parents with choice, and also promises to promote diversity in schools.

Critics charge that school choice can only exacerbate inequity, not mitigate it. Without free transportation, which public choice plans typically fail to provide, many parents are precluded from exercising choice. Certain parents also lack the information needed to participate in meaningful choice, and others may lack trust. And not only do certain parents operate with an unfair disadvantage. Because of "skimming," schools will also be subjected to unfair comparisons. Schools that benefit from skimming and those hurt by it will be judged in terms of the same criteria, especially test scores, with no regard for the kinds of students they enroll or the resources they can garner.

Controlled Choice

An early outcome of the back-and-forth between advocates and critics of public school choice was the emergence of the idea of "controlled choice." Controlled choice places certain constraints on choice to help avoid the problems enumerated by the critics. Among constraints that have been advocated, adopted, or both are: limits on the number of choice schools; requiring oversubscribed schools to select students by lottery; requiring that choice schools reasonably reflect the socio-economic composition of the district; prohibiting schools from requiring parents to sign agreements to donate time or resources; prohibiting parents from supplementing the funds available to their children's schools; and providing additional funding for schools that enroll difficult to teach students.

Currently, the idea that school choice must be constrained by some set of the kinds of rules described above is almost unanimously embraced. Controversies continue, however, concerning just which of these rules are required, and how far they should go.

The Study

The controversies in BVSD surrounding open enrollment often echo the broader controversies just described. But to avoid prejudging what the most salient issues for BVSD parents and educators are, and what positions might be taken on them, the perceptions of parents, teachers, and principals regarding BVSD's open enrollment policy were thoroughly investigated. They play a central role in this study.

DATA

Five kinds of data were collected: surveys of parents and educators in BVSD schools; focus group discussions with this same group; a follow-up survey of principals; a random telephone survey of BVSD parents; and records of open enrollment, BVSD test scores, BVSD demographics, BVSD funding, and fundraising by individual BVSD schools.

The BVSD Department of Research and Evaluation supplied most of the records. On occasion, data were also obtained from the BVSD and Colorado Department of Education web sites. Data from these sources were used to create a number of computer files, keyed to the different analyses that were conducted.

The parent/educator surveys (hereafter: school surveys) and focus group discussions were designed to elicit the beliefs and attitudes about open enrollment and school choice held by people actively involved in BVSD schools. Participants were 466 individuals representing 43 “schools” (defined to count strands or focus schools sharing sites as schools). All choice schools, including strands, were included, except Sojourner, Arapahoe Ridge, and Boulder Preparatory. A sample of neighborhood schools was selected geographically to include several from each of the District’s 8 regions. The overall sample contained 23 neighborhood schools, 16 “choice schools,” and 4 “bilingual choice schools.” There were 5 high schools, 11 middle schools, and 28 elementary schools (K-8 schools were counted as both elementary and middle).

Participants in the school surveys and the focus groups were the same, and typically included the principal, teachers and parents on the School Improvement Teams. The sample was disproportionately white, highly educated, and female, reflecting the characteristics of people most active in BVSD school communities.

The telephone surveys were designed to elicit the beliefs and attitudes of district parents who have not participated in open enrollment. For this survey, the District was divided into the 8 geographic regions used by the District to identify attendance boundaries and feeder patterns. Eighty-five potential respondents from each region were selected at random from a list of parents provided by the district. Potential respondents were called and asked to answer the survey questions until 30 completed surveys were obtained from each region, netting a total of 240 telephone surveys. This sample was more representative of parents in BVSD than the school surveys, except for including a disproportionate number of women.

FINDINGS

The data were analyzed and combined, as appropriate, in terms of the three general parts into which this study was divided: Parents’ and Educators’ Perceptions of Open Enrollment; Open Enrollment Patterns, Practices and Procedures; and Workload, Funding, and Fundraising.

Parents' and Educators' Perceptions of Open Enrollment

In general, BVSD parents, teachers, and staff believe their schools should focus primarily on the development of social, citizenship, and academic skills in safe, comfortable environments in which teachers are sensitive to student needs. Most say that they choose a school for their child(ren) on the basis of its curriculum, teachers, and staff and that they find the curriculum, teachers, and staff to be the major strengths of their particular school. Very few express concern about ineffective curricula or ineffective teachers at their school. Although standardized test scores are much more accessible as a means of comparing schools in this district than information about curricula or teachers, very few people say that they choose or like a school because of its test scores. In general, the level of parent satisfaction with the curriculum, teachers, and staff (seeing these as strengths) of their school is high. What people say they most want in schools is what they think their own school provides.

However, people do seem to praise different things when they refer to academic preparation, social and citizenship skills, curriculum, and good teachers. At bilingual choice schools, people focus on what their schools accomplish in terms of serving diverse populations, celebrating cultural difference, and offering bilingual curricula and teachers. They talk about their children coming to “value learning” broadly construed. At choice and neighborhood schools, the focus on learning and curriculum tends to be more narrowly construed in terms of academic basics, while positive school climate is more generally construed in terms of student safety and comfort level.

Parents, teachers, and staff at bilingual choice schools also criticize different things. Whereas at choice and neighborhood schools, people are dissatisfied most often about inadequate funding and support for their schools, people at bilingual choice schools are dissatisfied most about the problems associated with a disadvantaged population and a bad reputation. Thus, it appears that while people choose bilingual choice schools in part for their diversity, they also believe that their schools suffer some special negative effects because of that diversity. In sum, it seems that different values and priorities regarding learning, curriculum, and school climate motivate those at bilingual choice schools, compared to those at choice and neighborhood schools. In contrast, there is very little difference evident in the values and priorities of choice and neighborhood schools.

Regarding equity issues, people in BVSD say they believe that schools should avoid discrimination, including elitism, favoritism, segregation, racism, sexism, and classism. At the same time, however, most also believe that there currently are unequal opportunities to participate in open enrollment in the district (due to such things as inadequate or inaccessible information about various schools, lack of transportation for choice students, open enrollment timelines, and special requirements for choice school applicants) and that these unequal opportunities have led to increased disparities among the District's schools. As consequences of open enrollment, people believe that some schools have gotten stronger while others have been weakened; some parents have been able to raise large sums of money for their schools while others have not; and some schools have been able to find many parents to participate in school-related activities,

including fundraising, while others have found only a few. People also believe that open enrollment has tended to increase the concentration of ethnic minorities (mainly Hispanics and Blacks) and low-income students at certain schools. Finally, most people say that these kinds of inequities are divisive and unfair and should be reduced or eliminated.

Regarding competition, two opposing views of competition among schools are evident. One view is that increased competition is beneficial because it strengthens all schools as they strive to attract parents and students. The second view is that increased competition is harmful because it reduces collegiality in the District overall and leads to the closing of some schools and threats to close others when their enrollments decline. Not surprisingly, neighborhood schools, most vulnerable to being closed, are the most worried about the negative consequences of competition. In a district where almost everyone believes that their own school has a strong curriculum and teachers, any school closings are likely to be sad and traumatic events. Perhaps because some neighborhood schools have recently been closed and others are threatened, more people in the District believe that competition has hurt BVSD schools than believe that it has helped them.

Among the reasons for supporting school choice, almost everyone surveyed believes that open enrollment helps parents and schools meet the needs of particular students. Almost everyone also believes that school choice strengthens the bonds of community that form at a school. Although there may be downsides to choice (e.g., increased inequities, threats from competition, and weakened neighborhood bonds), there is powerful sentiment in the District that increased ability to meet student needs and strengthen within-school communities are strong justifications for school choice.

Whether they favor the expansion or contraction of choice options, each side tends to believe that the District's support for their side is weak or equivocal. Those favoring more choice believe the District is anti-choice; those favoring neighborhood schools believe the District is pro-choice.

Almost everyone agrees that the District and the local media have not been as helpful as they could be in providing and disseminating information about school choice--what the options are, what the procedures are, what the deadlines are, and so forth. Further, they chide both the District and the media for their heavy reliance on test score comparisons, their failure to provide information in languages other than English, and some policies that seem to increase divisiveness within the community.

Although most BVSD parents, teachers and staff believe that school choice should be continued, most also think that changes are necessary. The strongest recommendations to the District are to reduce the numerous inequities associated with choice and to make the policies and procedures for school choice more widely accessible and easier to understand.

Open Enrollment Patterns, Practices, and Procedures

Two factors are most strongly associated with the open enrollment “demand” (the number of open enrollment requests of a school corrected for its size) for BVSD schools: test scores and parental satisfaction. But the strength of these associations varies, depending on whether the school level is elementary, middle, or high school. At the elementary level, demand is strongly associated with test scores and associated, but less strongly, with parental satisfaction. At the middle school level, demand is strongly associated with both test scores and parental satisfaction. At the high school level, demand is strongly associated with parental satisfaction but appears not to be associated with test scores. The evidence also suggests that Latinos are less motivated by test scores and satisfaction ratings than whites, or are willing to trade these off for a bilingual program.

In general, parents are more satisfied with choice schools than neighborhood schools. It is reasonable to infer that giving parents a greater voice in the operation of schools and the power to choose the curricula and methods of instruction they deem best for their children explains this. On the other hand, this is not the whole explanation, for, at the elementary and middle levels, parental satisfaction is highly associated with test scores, and choice schools’ test scores tend to be the highest.

The emphasis on test scores is reflected in the pools of students requesting open enrollment for 6th and 9th grades, when they enter middle and high schools, respectively. In general, these students have higher test scores than their BVSD cohorts and apply disproportionately to schools with higher test scores. Thus, a form of “skimming” is occurring at both the middle and high school levels (notwithstanding the apparent lack of association between test scores and demand at the high school level). But it is important to note that it is not skimming in the sense of selecting the highest scoring students from among students in the pool requesting open enrollment. There is no evidence of this. Rather, the pools from which students are selected are themselves made up of higher scoring students. This deserves the name “skimming” because some schools are drawing a disproportionate number of students from the high scoring pool (for certain schools, all of their students), whereas other schools are losing a disproportionate number.

Race/ethnicity is a prominent feature of open enrollment patterns, both regionally and with respect to individual schools. The most pronounced regional movements via open enrollment are from North Boulder to South Boulder and from Lafayette to Louisville/Superior. In each case, students are leaving regions with higher percentages of minorities for regions with lower percentages. With respect to individual schools, whites are leaving high minority schools through open enrollment at a disproportional rate; in one case, at a rate nearly double their proportion of the school’s population. Whites are disproportionately requesting open enrollment in schools with high test scores; Latinos are disproportionately requesting open enrollment in bilingual schools.

Overall, BVSD schools have become significantly more stratified with respect to race/ethnicity since the expansion of open enrollment in the mid 1990s and the advent of choice schools heavily emphasizing academic achievement. Stratification of BVSD has also increased with respect to SES since the mid 1990s. Moreover, strongly associated with minority enrollment to begin with, the association between SES and minority enrollment has become even stronger. These outcomes are evident at the elementary and middle school levels in the change since 1994-1995 in the overall racial/ethnic and SES distributions of students among elementary and middle schools. At the high school level, the evidence is piecemeal and inconclusive, limited to some evidence of “skimming” and to the fact that a disproportionate number of white students are open enrolling out of BVSD’s two highest minority enrollment high schools.

The stratification that marks BVSD’s open enrollment system has sometimes been attributed to the motives of racism, classism, and elitism, among others. These motives might be at work for some parents participating in open enrollment, but it must be emphasized that racial/ethnic and SES stratification are virtually impossible to disentangle from test scores and parental satisfaction ratings. To the extent they can be disentangled, test scores and parent satisfaction are, generally speaking, more strongly associated with the demand for BVSD schools than are minority enrollment or SES make-up. On the other hand, even though best interpreted as a side effect of parents’ desire for schools with high test scores and satisfaction ratings, increased stratification is an undeniable outcome of their choices.

These choices are made within the context of BVSD open enrollment procedures and practices, and these procedures and practices help explain the observed open enrollment patterns. First, the District practice of prominently displaying test scores in the annual Daily Camera open enrollment insert, as well as in district and school web pages, helps explain why this factor is so large in the demand for BVSD schools, and why the form of “skimming” described above is evident. (Although test scores have become the primary, if not sole, criterion for judging the quality of schools at the state and national levels, presumably, this is not a position that BVSD wishes to endorse or encourage.) Second, requiring parents to obtain their own information on open enrollment rather than sending information directly to them; requiring them to visit schools in which they wish to open enroll; and requiring them to provide their own transportation help explain why open enrollment may have a stratifying effect. For this favors parents with savvy, time, and resources. It also favors parents who are best connected to the parent information network, the importance of which is shown by how prominent word of mouth is as a student recruitment method, particularly for choice schools.

That some individual schools (all charter or focus) have created their own list of open enrollment preferences and requirements, in addition to the District’s, may also contribute to stratification. This is not to suggest all preferences are problematic, even when they do favor certain groups of parents. For example, although giving preference to the children of the founders of a school for three years, as the District does, advantages parents who have the time and resources to engage in the rather demanding activity of establishing a school or strand, this appears to be a reasonable compromise to strike.

Placing no time limits on such a preference, as is the practice at several individual schools, is prima facie exclusionary and not easily justified in a public school system. Also prima facie exclusionary are (1) additional preferences afforded to certain groups, such as siblings of graduates, children of teachers and staff, and students previously enrolled in a tuition-based pre-school program; (2) additional application requirements, such as interviews and supplementary forms to fill out; and (3) additional expectations for parental participation, formalized in written agreements.

The District policy on student recruitment that disadvantages neighborhood schools may also contribute to stratification. Whatever the historical reasons for restricting neighborhood schools to recruiting within their feeder systems, this places them at a distinct disadvantage relative to choice schools in the current open enrollment system. For they are as vulnerable as choice schools to the loss of FTE and other resources, or even closure, if their enrollment drops, but they are not equally able to recruit students to help prevent this. They are also vulnerable to having their most active and financially able parents lured away. This breeds resentment on the part of neighborhood schools toward choice schools, as well as the District, and gives them an incentive to become focus schools solely for the purpose of eliminating their recruiting disadvantage. Several schools have taken this step, and several others have considered it.

Workload, Funding, and Fundraising

At the District level, administering open enrollment has increased the duties of personnel in various departments. This has typically been accomplished by simply adding on to pre-existing duties. In the case of the Business Department, the most heavily affected unit, an additional staff person was hired to help manage the intensified activity.

Open enrollment duties have also been added on to pre-existing duties at the individual school level. Many principals reported that open enrollment consumes a significant amount of time, and takes them away from their other duties. Several of these principals questioned whether marketing their schools is an appropriate role for them, several were uncomfortable with the competitive environment they believe exists, and several displayed cynicism and low morale. Finally, several principals also questioned having to use school time and resources for advertising, and, on this point especially, a number of parents, teachers, and staff joined them.

The BVSD budgeting process, including for charter schools, makes no provision for the percentages of low-income students in BVSD schools. Auxiliary funds are provided to schools with the highest percentages of low-income students in the form Title of I, but these funds are inadequate to meet the needs. This budgeting process is prima facie inequitable in light of the facts that (1) stratification by income in BVSD schools is on the rise and (2) BVSD receives additional funds in the state formula proportional to its number of students qualifying for free lunch (approximately 10% per qualifying pupil).

Based on numerous comments of participants in surveys and focus groups, in addition to the information from BVSD records, there is good reason to believe that significant disparities exist among BVSD schools in the amounts of additional funding they can

garner, and that these disparities are tied to parental income. Given the uses to which such funding is put--library and classroom books, curriculum materials, computers, art supplies, adjunct faculty, guest speakers, among others--this creates substantial advantages for some schools and substantial disadvantages for others.

General Conclusions

Several general conclusions follow from combining the perceptions of BVSD parents and educators of the open enrollment system with other findings from this study. These are framed in terms of the three general categories of controversy about public school choice policy introduced at the outset, namely, competition, meeting student needs, and equity.

Competition

Many BVSD parents and educators see competition as the driving force in obtaining District resources and support, for good or ill. To our knowledge, BVSD has never declared that competition will be the mechanism by which it decides the levels of support to be provided to its schools, but it seems to have adopted this mechanism by default. The resources provided to BVSD schools (and, in the extreme, whether they will continue to exist) are tied almost exclusively to enrollment, for which all schools must compete. And here they are left to their own devices.

Test scores loom large in how schools fare in the competition. Test scores are strongly associated with the open enrollment demand for BVSD schools, especially among middle income whites. As these parents move to high scoring schools, already mostly white middle income, they take their various resources with them and further stratify BVSD schools with respect to race/ethnicity and income, in addition to test scores. The schools they depart are left with fewer resources and with a more diverse student population. This diversity complicates their educational missions, both administratively and in the classroom. The result is a "spiral of decline" for schools losing enrollment: They have relatively low test scores; they lose parental resources; and, due to decreased enrollment, they begin to experience cuts in resources from the District. Their test scores drop further; they lose more parental resources, and so on. All along they are scrambling to find new programs to attract students, further complicating and intensifying their work. Several BVSD schools have fallen into this spiral or are threatened. Elementary bilingual schools are an exception. They have kept their enrollments up despite possessing features that threaten them, such as relatively low test scores, increasingly high percentages of minority and low income students, and the "bad reputations" that go with these.

Proponents of competition contend that it works to boost achievement overall, even if some schools may decline. This must be classified as conjecture in the case of BVSD. The fact that some BVSD choice schools, particularly those emphasizing academics, have high--remarkably high--test scores does not establish the claim that competition has

stimulated increased achievement in BVSD schools overall. No further evidence exists to support this claim.

Evidence from this study indicates that rather than increasing achievement overall, open enrollment is a zero-sum game—a situation in which some schools do better only at the expense of others doing worse. There is suggestive evidence at the high school level and strong evidence at the middle school levels that certain schools are disproportionately gaining high scoring students and others are disproportionately losing them. So, rather than boosting the achievement levels of BVSD students overall, open enrollment is merely redistributing them. The result is that while certain schools spiral down, certain others, those schools gaining high scoring students, thrive. And it is these latter schools who win awards for excellence and receive coverage in the press for their exceptional curricula and teaching.

Focus and charter schools embrace competition, for the most part. This is consistent with the fact that these schools were born competing for students and with a commitment largely limited to their school. Moreover, competing for students has served them well. But a significant portion of BVSD's other schools--schools that have had to take on competing for enrollment as a new activity--perceive the competition for students as having mainly negative effects on them, as well as the BVSD community overall. These BVSD parents and educators see themselves as being required to divert time and resources away from curriculum and instruction toward keeping their enrollments up. Because open enrollment is so demanding, at the same time that these parents and educators have less time and resources for curriculum and instruction, their total effort has increased. The competition for students has also engendered a breakdown of collegiality in their eyes, as individual schools are forced to look after their own interests and to place them above the District's as a whole.

These concerns about competition are more fundamental than the complaint voiced by many neighborhood schools that the terms of competition are unfair, based on the fact that they are restricted to recruiting within their feeder systems whereas choice schools recruit from across the district. For challenging competition on the ground that it destroys collegiality and inappropriately diverts time and resources away from the educational mission of schools challenges competition itself as the means by which to determine the level of support BVSD schools receive.

Meeting Student Needs

BVSD parents are by-and-large satisfied with the schools to which they send their children, and those who send their children to focus or charter schools are the most satisfied. This applies across BVSD's array of choice schools: to predominantly white schools emphasizing academics, such as High Peaks and Summit; to largely Latino schools, emphasizing diversity and bilingualism, such as Uni Hill and Washington; and to various kinds of alternative schools, such as New Vista and Arapahoe Ridge. Increased parental satisfaction is one of the claims made on behalf of public school choice, and this is an apparent benefit of BVSD's open enrollment system.

But this claim faces the same difficulty as the parallel claim about achievement. Insofar as parental satisfaction is important in judging the effects of open enrollment on BVSD

schools, overall satisfaction is what should be at issue. If some parents are more satisfied only at the expense of others being less so, then open enrollment is a zero-sum game. Tackling this question requires longitudinal data that spans the period when open enrollment burgeoned, and such data is unavailable. Thus, the claim that open enrollment has resulted in an overall increase in parental satisfaction is also based on conjecture, though perhaps less so than in the case of achievement. BVSD parents are generally satisfied with their schools. The approximately 20% of students who are open enrolling certainly seem to be having their needs met well. Perhaps it can be presumed that the approximately 80% attending schools within their attendance area, or at least a large proportion of them, are having their needs met too, as evidenced by the fact that they are not open enrolling out.

Significantly obscured by questions about how well needs are being met (as measured by parental satisfaction) is the prior question of how to think about and identify student needs in the first place. Traditionally, the focus has been on “at risk” students who have needs that require additional resources, efforts, and methods to meet. And many initiatives and school reform policies have emphasized improving schools for at risk populations, including Colorado’s charter school law. In BVSD, the idea of student needs has been stretched to include the need for a rigorous, college preparatory education.

If a rigorous, college preparatory education is a need, it is certainly of a different order than the needs of at risk students. And there would seem to be nothing special about it that warrants schools especially devoted to it. Although there are differences among groups of BVSD parents and educators on the question of how exclusively they can and should pursue the goal of increased academic achievement, each group places academic achievement at or near the top on the list of things that schools should accomplish. Culling academic achievement out as a special need that may used to define the mission of certain BVSD schools has resulted in tracking writ large—tracking *between* schools rather than *within* them—and the racial/ethnic and income stratification that goes with this.

The idea that schools should promote social/citizenship skills was also high on every group’s list, along with high academic achievement. Unless learning to appreciate and interact with a diversity of people are excluded from what goes into social/citizenship skills, and it is difficult to see how they could be, students who are separated off into homogeneous, predominantly white schools will not acquire these skills. From this perspective, their education is impoverished. Moreover, the broader aims of public education embraced by a considerable number of BVSD parents and educators are left wanting.

Equity

One of the complaints frequently lodged against the open enrollment system is that it is inequitable because it sets up unfair competition among BVSD schools. This claim has considerable warrant when advanced by neighborhood schools, and the solution is to level the playing field, for example, by permitting neighborhood schools to compete under the same set of rules as focus and charter schools. Although leveling the playing field in this way would be an improvement, it implicitly concedes that competition is the principle that ought to determine which schools thrive and which are adjudged “good.” (Currently test scores are the major determinant of both.) As suggested above, more fundamental concerns about the principle of competition exist, concerns grounded in equity.

Letting things shake out through competition does not insure equity. For it does nothing to address the problem of the inequity experienced by students and educators languishing in schools caught in or threatened by the spiral of decline. Addressing this problem requires invoking another principle that sometimes limits competition: insuring that all students receive a good education on equitable terms.

Letting things shake out through competition does not insure equity even for those schools that manage to keep their enrollments up. Consider BVSD’s bilingual schools. That Latinos are getting their choice of bilingual schools and that the majority of these schools are maintaining their enrollments does not mean they are getting the same kind of benefit that whites who are enrolling their children in homogeneous, high achieving schools are. Unlike the complex set of challenges facing bilingual schools, these high achieving schools can be single-minded in their pursuit of achievement because they have a homogenous set of students who predictably do well. Despite the relatively easier task they have to perform in comparison to bilingual schools, these schools receive the same per pupil funding from the District, and they typically have more additional resources at their disposal through fundraising. And the uses to which fundraising is put—books, computers, staff development, and, in some cases, teacher salaries—are anything but marginal to the quality of education that schools can provide.

In addition to the fact that there is inequality in the costs and benefits associated with the school choices made by BVSD parents, there is inequality in their opportunities to choose at all. Lack of transportation, time, and information diminish or eliminate the opportunities of many parents to participate.

Final Observations

We have not hesitated to draw critical conclusions about BVSD’s open enrollment system when they were warranted by our findings. But we have confined our conclusions to the *system* and its outcomes, and have drawn no conclusions about individuals or groups of individuals. In our view, criticizing the motives and behaviors of

individuals would not only be bad strategy, more likely to inflame people than to lead to constructive change. It would also be unwarranted.

The BVSD administration and Board have been beseeched with demands and counter-demands over the last five years, amidst significant turnover. For their part, BVSD parents participating in open enrollment have what they perceive to be the best interests of their children in mind, across the array of groups participating. That no one or no group should be assigned responsibility, however, does not erase the fact that the current open enrollment system is riddled with inequities and has resulted in a disturbingly high degree of stratification among BVSD schools with respect to race/ethnicity and income. Accordingly, the set of rules that has brought BVSD to this place need to be revisited and revised.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Below are 12 recommendations that grow out of the findings of this study. Several overlap, and this is especially true of the first recommendation to create a unit in the Education Center to oversee and coordinate open enrollment. Most of the subsequent recommendations, if implemented, could be within the purview of such a unit.

1. A unit devoted to open enrollment should be created in the Education Center

The District should consider establishing a unit in the Education Center which has the major responsibility for overseeing and coordinating open enrollment, and which is clearly identified as such. The open enrollment system is currently spread across several departments at the Education Center, as well as individual schools. This leads to inefficiency and inconsistency in administering open enrollment procedures, and confusion and uncertainty on the part of BVSD parents.

2. Open enrollment procedures should be centralized

Whether or not a unit responsible for open enrollment is established in the Education Center, applications for open enrollment should be submitted directly to the Education Center and handled there. Currently, individual schools have major responsibility for administering the open enrollment system, which requires considerable effort and resources on their part. A significant number of school communities see the effort and resources they must devote to open enrollment as unduly burdensome and as compromising their ability to pursue educational goals. Because individual schools must provide information on their open enrollment requests to the District for budgeting purposes and the open enrollment lottery, the current system also results in double handling of open enrollment applications and thus inefficiency.

3. Parents of prospective open enrollees should not be required to visit the school(s) to which they wish to apply for open enrollment

Parents of prospective open enrollees should be encouraged but not required to visit the school(s) to which they wish to apply for open enrollment. Such a requirement is inequitable for parents who lack the time and resources to arrange school visits, and should not be a condition of taking advantage of open enrollment.

4. Open enrollment procedures and requirements should be consistent across schools

The open enrollment procedures and requirements across BVSD schools are not consistent. Certain focus and charter schools have established their own preferences and requirements that go beyond the District's and that are prima facie exclusionary. The District should consider abolishing all such preferences and requirements.

5. Free transportation should be made available for open enrollees

The District should undertake to make free transportation available for all students accepted for open enrollment. Currently, open enrolled students are required to provide their own transportation. This creates an insurmountable obstacle for all of those wishing to take advantage of open enrollment who cannot provide their own transportation.

6. Open enrollment information should be sent to all BVSD parents

A large number of BVSD parents lack good information on open enrollment under the current system. The District should mail information on open enrollment, including in languages other than English as appropriate, to all BVSD parents apprising them of their opportunity to apply for open enrollment and how to go about it. The mailing should also include an application and pertinent information about BVSD schools with suggestions on how to evaluate such information, particularly what average test scores mean for their individual child(ren). In addition to apprising a much larger number of parents of their opportunities, such mailings would also help mitigate the disadvantage of neighborhood schools in student recruitment.

7. The BVSD funding formula should take into account the characteristics of school populations

The BVSD funding formula should be revised to take into account the characteristics of school populations, particularly their percentages of low-income students. The current formula makes no allowance for the relatively large proportions of low-income students in certain schools in allocations from the general fund. This is prima facie inequitable given that the BVSD per pupil allocation derived from the Colorado School Finance Act rises as the percentage of low-income students rises. The inequity has been exacerbated by the fact that open enrollment has resulted in larger proportions of low-income students being concentrated in certain schools. To the extent that low-income students have educational needs that require more resources to meet (the rationale for the low-income allocation in the state financing formula) the current BVSD formula also provides a disincentive for schools to enroll low-income students.

8. The District should obtain and make available accurate and complete information on individual school fundraising

Accurate and complete information on the amounts and uses of funds that individual BVSD schools obtain through fees, donations, and fundraising activities is difficult to obtain or unavailable. The District should establish reporting requirements to remedy this situation, and should make the resulting information readily available to the public.

9. Inequalities in individual school fundraising should be addressed

Individual BVSD schools vary considerably in their capacity to raise funds, an often-cited source of inequity that has been exacerbated by the stratifying effects of open

enrollment. To mitigate this source of inequity, the District might consider requiring individual schools to contribute a portion of the funds they raise to a District fund to be redistributed to individual schools and students most in need (perhaps earmarked for transportation). Alternatively, or in addition, the District might direct its discretionary funds, and encourage organizations such as the Boulder Valley School Foundation to direct theirs, toward individual schools least able to raise their own funds. (These methods and similar ones require accurate information on the amount of school specific funds individual schools obtain, Recommendation 8.) Among the justifications for such a requirement are that individual schools are a part of the larger BVSD community (see Recommendation 11) and also take advantage of BVSD resources and facilities in their fundraising efforts.

10. Stratification by race/ethnicity and income should be addressed

The District should consider measures to reduce the stratification by race/ethnicity and income among BVSD schools caused by open enrollment. Such stratification not only raises equity issues, but also narrows the educational experiences of BVSD students. A change in funding is one such measure that would change incentives (Recommendations 7 and 9). The District should seek legal counsel to investigate the possibility of stratifying its open enrollment lotteries by income and race/ethnicity (though only the former is likely to be legally permissible.) The District should seek legal counsel also to determine whether District open enrollment practices may be in violation of the U.S. Department of Education's implementing regulations for Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits a funding recipient from practices that have a negative disparate impact on individuals because of their race or ethnicity (34 C.F.R. §100.3(b)(2)).

11. The District should foster the idea that BVSD is one community

The District should take steps to help rejuvenate the larger BVSD community, for example, by supporting and facilitating collaboration across individual school communities on the curricula and instructional methods they have found most effective. Open enrollment has encouraged individual schools to focus on their own interests and welfare and on competing with other schools for enrollment. In the process, the idea that they are all part of the larger community that is BVSD has been overshadowed.

12. A comprehensive, long-range policy should be developed

The District should develop a comprehensive, long-range policy on open enrollment. Such a policy should articulate the scope and limits of open enrollment consistent with the overall mission and principles that guide District decision making. Among the specific points that should be articulated is the relationship between enrollment patterns and decisions to open and close BVSD schools.