# Table of Contents

Alan Gottlieb, Education Writer and Consultant ................................................................. 3
Andre Spencer, Superintendent, Harrison School District 2, Colorado Springs ......................... 32
Anna Jo Haynes, President Emeritus, Mile High Montessori, Education Activist, Manual High School, Class of 1952 .................................................................................................................. 50
Arturo Jimenez, School Board Member D5, 2007-2015, Denver Public Schools .................... 69
Barbara O’Brien, At Large School Board Member, 2013-Present, Denver Public Schools, Lieutenant Governor of Colorado 2007-2011 .................................................................................................................. 85
Bill de la Cruz, Director of Equity and Inclusion, Denver Public Schools, School Board Member, Boulder Valley School District 1997-2003 .................................................................................................................. 101
Bill Kurtz, CEO, Denver School of Science and Technology, Denver Public Schools ............ 117
Brian Truax, Assistant Principal, Abraham Lincoln High School 2013-2015, Dean of Operations, Valverde Elementary School, Denver Public Schools .................................................................................. 133
Burt Hubbard, Journalist, Rocky Mountain PBS .................................................................... 140
Calvin Fugett, Junior, George Washington High School, Denver Public Schools ............... 154
Carlo Kriekels, Founder, YESS Institute .................................................................................. 161
Charles Robertson, Founder, Young Adults for Positive Action, Far Northeast Turnaround Committee 180
Chris Gibbons, Founder and CEO, Strive Preparatory Schools ................................................. 190
Daniel Medina, Program Director, YESS Mentoring, Community Liaison, Abraham Lincoln High School 210
Devionne Fugett, 7th Grade Student, Denver School of Science and Technology, Denver Public Schools ................................................................................................................................. 224
Ed Benton, School Board Member 1961-1969, Denver Public Schools .................................. 232
Harry Bull, Superintendent, Cherry Creek School District ....................................................... 250
Irene Glazer, Northwest Denver Resident and Parent ............................................................... 264
Janet Matthews, Teacher, 1989-Present, Denver Public Schools, Thomas Jefferson High School, Class of 1978 ..................................................................................................................................... 272
Jon’il Fugett, Sophomore, George Washington High School, Denver Public Schools .......... 291
Justina Garcia, Senior, North High School, Denver Public Schools ........................................ 299
Kaitlin Kocher, Freshman, Northfield High School, Denver Public Schools .............. 305
Kelley Kocher, Stapleton Resident and Parent ........................................................................ 315
Kurt Dennis, Principal, McAuliffe International Schools, Denver Public Schools ............ 327
Landri Taylor, School Board Member D4, 2013-Present, Denver Public Schools .................................................. 340
Laura Lefkowits, School Board Member 1995-1999, Denver Public Schools ...................................................... 365
Marco Antonio Abarca, Latinos For Education Reform and Parent, Owner, Ready Foods Inc ............................ 388
Maria Hernandez, Southwest Denver Resident and Parent ......................................................................................... 403
Maria Rodriguez, Junior, Abraham Lincoln High School, Denver Public Schools, YESS Institute Member and Former Mente  ............................................................................................................. 415
Mayor Michael Hancock, Mayor of Denver, 2011-Present, Manual High School, Class of 1987 .................. 423
Michael Johnston, Colorado State Senator, Senate District 33, 2009-Present, Stapleton Resident ............. 434
MiDian Holmes, Green Valley Ranch Resident and Parent, Montbello High School, Class of 1998 .......... 453
Nabeeah Brown, Green Valley Ranch Resident and Parent, East High School, Class of 1998 ............... 460
Nate Easley, Executive Director, Denver Scholarship Foundation, School Board Member D4, 2009-2013, Montbello High School, Class of 1983, Stapleton Resident .................................................................................................................. 487
Patrick Hamill, Chairman and CEO, Oakwood Homes, ......................................................................................... 529
Quincy “Q” Shannon, Teacher, Community Activist and Parent, East High School, Class of 2003 ........ 540
Renee Martinez, Northwest Denver Resident and Parent, Community Activist for Skinner Middle School Turnaround ........................................................................................................................................ 569
Ricardo Martinez, Co-Executive Director, Padres Unidos ..................................................................................... 582
Roberta Abeyta, Southwest Denver Resident, Former Northwest Denver Resident .................................... 602
Rosemary Rodriguez, School Board Member D2, 2013-Present, Denver Public Schools, Denver City Council, 2003-2007 ........................................................................................................................................ 618
Sabastian Casillas, Junior, North High School, Denver Public Schools ............................................................. 633
Stacie Gilmore, Denver Councilwoman District 11, 2015-Present, Co-Founder, Environmental Learning for Kids ........................................................................................................................................... 640
Theresa Pena, DPS School Board Member, 2003-2011, Plaintiff, “Keyes Case”, East High School, Class of 1980 ........................................................................................................................................... 656
Tom Boasberg, Superintendent, Denver County School District No.1, Denver Public Schools ............... 673
Vernon Jones Jr., Executive Director, Omar D. Blair Charter School, Pastor, Assistant Principal, Manual High School 2010-2011, 2012-2014 ........................................................................................................... 692
Wilber Zavala, 8th Grade Student, Strive Prep Middle School, Denver Public Schools .................................... 717
Julie Speer: Give me a high level overview of your career in education and how long you've been covering education?

Alan Gottlieb: I started covering education in the summer of 1995, when I was a reporter at The Denver Post. The editor at the time Neil Westergaard took me out to lunch one day I was on another beat, I think it was City Hall actually. The education reporter from The Post at the time, Mark Stevens had just left and Neil said I want you to cover DPS and I said what did I do wrong to make you want me to do that? I covered education in some suburban county in Connecticut in my first newspaper job and it was the most boring thing in the world. Did I do something to piss you off? He said no, actually it's the best beat there is. At the time my daughter, my only child was in second grade in DPS so he said you've got a kid in the system, you're going to love this. I said I would do it and I'm really glad I did.

Julie Speer: The bulk of your career has been covering education?

Alan Gottlieb: There was a 10 year hiatus when I was working for a foundation but it was all education work. I basically been doing education, writing, research, journalism full time since 1995.

Julie Speer: Let's talk about your own experience with DPS as a father. Talk to me about the elementary, middle and high school that your daughter went to and how you navigated the system.

Alan Gottlieb: When our daughter was entering elementary school we lived in Washington Park neighborhood and the neighborhood school is still
elementary which was a school that was bus paired with Ebert Elementary if I remember correctly. The way it worked was that the kids all stayed in their home school for kindergarten and then they were bus, I think the steal kids if I'm not mistaken were bus from grade one through three up to Ebert and then the Ebert kids came to steal for grades for and five. That would have been fine with us. Our daughter wound up testing into the gifted and talented program and there was another school where that program was, L-S Elementary.

She didn't go to a neighborhood school and she didn't go to a neighborhood school for middle school because we put her up in an expeditionary learning school that was four districts fed into in South East Denver. Then she went to the International Baccalaureate program at George Washington High School, which is also isn't a neighboring school. It's a magnate program for high school. Never would have hesitated to send her to any of those other schools. There just were other options open and those seemed better. Busing ended very soon after she started school, but it had no impact on her because she was in a magnate program.

Julie Speer: Talk about the GT programs and get to terms of programs in general. From your coverage, if you would have looked roughly at the ratios of who's in those programs, is it mostly white students?

Alan Gottlieb: It has always struck me that the gifted and talented program and particularly the one they call Highly Gifted and Talented in Denver is more an effort to keep affluent white families in Denver public schools than it is in actual highly gifted program. My understanding of highly gifted programs is that they're basically a kind of special education. You're talking about kids here who are so stratospherically bright in a true highly gifted model. That they really have a hard time functioning in a normal classroom environment and need something different and special.

In Denver public schools, my experience has been that bright kids who would benefit from an education like that but could also function perfectly well in a normal classroom get into the highly gifted program. A story I know about a former colleague of mine at the Denver Post room who's kid was also in the highly gifted program and he got a job in Oregon, in Portland and he moved to Portland and he walked into the district headquarters or whatever the first day and said I'd like to enroll
my daughter in the highly gifted program here. They said just a second, we'll test her and assuming she gets in sure. They came back to him and said we don't think so because they actually had different higher standards for what constituted highly gifted.

To me the highly gifted program it was always very disproportionately white and Asian kids. The class sizes were small, the teachers tended to be just absolutely taught not to teachers. As a tool for equity I would say the highly gifted program was going in pretty much the wrong direction.

Julie Speer: Just race of the students.

Alan Gottlieb: Yeah, mostly white and Asian. Overwhelmingly, not 100 percent but largely. For the most part even more important I would say, the kids who are kids of color were often the kids of professionals. They weren't low income kids. Not universally but overwhelmingly I'd say.

Julie Speer: George Washington, this is technically South East Denver. If you look at the SPF or the grades of the schools across the districts, South East typically have the highest grading in graded schools, right? Explain that to me and GW fits into that quadrant right?

Alan Gottlieb: GW fits into that quadrant but GW is also two very different schools. There is the International Baccalaureate Magnet Program, it's been around for over 30 years which just this year is about to undergo something of a change, but it's always been kids have to test into it basically. You could enter it in ninth grade and it's one point of entry almost exclusively at ninth grade, and lots of kids drop out of it or get flanked out of it. It's very hard to get in, almost impossible to enter at any point except ninth grade, and then that's all you do.

Basically the kids in the IB program at George Washington again overwhelmingly white and Asian kids I would say are pretty segregated from the rest of the student body which is much higher proportion, African-American and Latino, because there is a lot of kids actually, the high school boundaries tend to be a lot larger than middle and elementary school. George Washington after busing the boundary included the sort of chimney that ran straight up Monaco Boulevard all the way up to North East Park Hill. That drew a lot of African-American kids in that area and they all ended up at GW, but they weren't for the most part in the IB program.
Julie Speer: Can you explain to me if you were to look at the current SPF system how that works and if you were to divide the district into four or five quadrants what that looks like.

Alan Gottlieb: Well, I think it’s not just Denver but certainly in Denver you can predict, and again if the student performance or school performance framework is based, the ratings are based primarily not exclusively but primarily on test scores, then you can predict more pretty accurately the performance of kids on test base on their socioeconomic status. South East Denver is the most affluent part for the most part of Denver, and those schools rate more highly than schools for instance in the South West or the Far North East where there tend to be more low income kids. It correlates very, pretty nicely or not nicely maybe is a better way to put it. It tends to correlate pretty accurately or track pretty accurately. Socioeconomic status and test score performance are very closely correlated.

Julie Speer: You got involved in DPS, right. Was it Keyes case, I mean where was that at?

Alan Gottlieb: The story I just told about having lunch with my editor, I started covering DPS if I remember correctly right as the school year was starting in 1995. It was the end of August, beginning of September.

I was talking about I started covering Denver public schools at the end of August or beginning of September of 1995. I don't remember the exact date. I'm sure we could look it up, but it was within two weeks after I started covering DPS that one afternoon this press release came along that said that Judge Mitch had lifted the court order and that busing in Denver was over. I barely knew the beat and that was a scramble. I had to gather some background.

I was brand new on the beat and I pretty much didn't know very much about what was going on, so I had to scramble to find all the background. Back in those days there really was no ... I think there was one PC in the entire newsroom. The rest were dumb computer terminals, so there was no internet. There was no electronic library. There was like send me down the manila envelopes stuffed with clippings about the Keyes case and just had a couple of people helping me to support and do research and write the kind of B copy about the Keyes case.
The other thing I remember is that was the first year of Crouseville and I had really good tickets to the Rockies game that night and I was determined to like get the story done before deadline so I could, before the game started. I managed to do that. It was that soon after I started covering the beat that the Keyes cases ended and so sort of the same as Laura Lefkowits said when she was interviewed here that she ran for school board on her own platform and wound up doing something totally different at least in her first term. I didn't know what to expect from the beat but the beat became very quickly all about how Denver was going to go back to a system of neighborhood schools after 20 plus years of court ordered busing.

It started in the early 1970s in Denver, was found to have basically deliberately segregated African-American students from white students in Roman patterns in the city and was ordered to remedy that and so they had to start busing kids across town. Mostly it was primarily aimed at the black-white segregation issue, although back then, of course today Latinos are by far the largest so called minority group in Denver public schools actually make up the substantial majority of students in DPS.

Julie Speer: How do you summarize what happened? What years did we bus and then how did it come to an end?

Alan Gottlieb: The Keyes case was filed in the early 70s and decided by the Supreme Court of the United States in the early 70s. Busing began right around 1972 I believe and it went until again 1995 when the district had been trying for many years to get release from the court order saying that they had become what's called a unitary school district, that they were no longer passing messages of segregation and judge Mitch, the US Direct Court judge Richard Mitch decided in 1995 that that was the case and that was permissible under the terms of the original court order to return to neighborhood schools. Pretty much left it up to them for public schools how they were going to do that.

That was the task that the school board faced and then I had to track as a reporter was how, what kinds of decisions were they going to make. They could have decided that they were going to do what they could to promote integration to the greatest extent possible, while allowing family's choice that state law requires. They decided instead to go to one more or less extreme really, which was completely back to neighborhood schools which in a segregated city means segregated schools.
Julie Speer: So what happened when busing ended?

Alan Gottlieb: Well the district was given time by, I'm not actually sure. I think basically what happened was that the state legislature and opponents of busing agreed that Denver public schools should be given the time to formulate an intelligent plan, rather than like okay tomorrow, now that the court order is lifted we throw everything up in the yard and kids go back to their neighborhood school. For the 95, 96 school year, all the busing and everything else stayed in place. For the following school year 1996, 97, elementary schools returned to neighboring schools and the school board spent a good part of the first half of the 95, 96 school year figuring that out.

The school year after that, 1997, 98 is when high schools and middle schools went back to neighborhoods school. They decided elementary schools were the highest priority, that's where the passion are greatest, where people feel most reluctant to put their kids on a bus and have them sent far from home, little less inflamed about middle and high school, so they got the next three year to do that. There were a number of very difficult decisions about boundaries and about how to draw this, but in essence what happened was they went back to schools that were the kids who were assigned to them were the kids who lived closest to them and as a result you wind up with a pattern of a pretty extreme segregation in many of the schools in Denver.

Julie Speer: Is this when they were looking at redrawing the manual lines?

Alan Gottlieb: Yeah, I mean that was sort of in the second year because it was a high school. One of the most fascinating things to me in this whole debate was what to do about Manual High School. Manual had been very integrated by busing. It’s located at the time was a low income and primarily for much of its history African-American neighborhood, that became increasingly Latino and it continues to be more increasingly Latino, maybe more Latino now than African-American. Now in 2015 is facing a way of pretty significant gentrification as well.

At the time, the decision had to be made. Okay so we had all these kids being bused to integrate the school from the affluent Hill Top neighborhood and the Manual neighborhood made it pretty clear the people, the leaders of that neighborhood, the primarily African-American clergy and mayor Wellington, whoever at the time who lived in the
neighborhood they said we want Manual back for the neighborhood. We're tired of it being a school where so many kids are busted. We can make the school succeed with the kids who live around here. At the same time there was claimer of course in the white communities to get their neighborhoods' schools back as well.

The school board faced all this pressure from both, a number of different constituencies and made what to me at the time and history was kind of born out of a pretty bizarre decision to draw boundaries around Manual that would make it a high poverty, all kids of color school that also had rival gangs attending it. Kids from rival gangs just because of the neighborhoods they drew. There were a number of different ways they could have drawn the boundaries and there was really only one member of the school board at the time, interestingly enough the one Republican member of the school board although the school board races are nonpartisan but he was clearly a Republican from South West Denver. He just thought his was bizarre decision and made a strong case.

I wrote a story about that was, I remember ended up on the front page saying, which also create a huge fear because what he was recommending was drawing a boundary in such a way that it just went straight down, North to South and would have extend a bunch of kids from the affluent country club neighborhood who would always go into East High School to Manual.

Julie Speer: It was North South York?

Alan Gottlieb: Down York Street. From the northern boundary of the city down York Street all the way to where York turns into the university and hits First Avenue Speer Boulevard where the big whole foods is now. The kids on the west side of that would have gone to Manual and the east side of that would have gone to east. The kids on the west side of that boundary had always gone to east and those are powerful, wealthy influential parent and the school board did not want to cross them any more than they really wanted to cross the Black Ministerial Alliance as it was called at the time in Mayor Wellington Webb.

They made the decision to draw these boundaries that basically doomed Manual to being a high poverty school again with all of these social issues in it and no real plan for how to make that work. As result Manual has been pretty much a disaster since then.
Julie Speer: You think that would have been a good idea?

Alan Gottlieb: It would have been a really good idea but it would have taken a lot of political courage and nobody displayed any at the time.

Julie Speer: Okay, so Manual and the mayor.

Alan Gottlieb: Manual was integrated in a sense in that there were kids of different races and socioeconomic classes attending the school. If you went inside Manual during the busing era you would have found it pretty segregated in the classrooms. There were AP classes that were mostly white. The African-American kids for the most parts and Latino kids were in general track classes. It was not truly an integrated school inside the building. Very much the way East High School is today although East has made really significant efforts to change that dynamic. My impression of Manual at the time was that people were pretty contempt with it the way it was.

It was obviously things like athletics were integrated, extracurricular were integrated but academically it really wasn't very integrated once you looked inside the building, not just what it looked like as kids walked in the door. I cynically say sometimes that it was a great school for the kids from Hill Top to go to because they could write on their college essays about going to an integrated high school without actually having to go to an integrated high school inside the classrooms at least.

Julie Speer: Talk about the achievement gap and the reality of it in Denver. What is the achievement gap? How do you define it to someone who is not living and working in education?

Alan Gottlieb: The achievement gap is the difference in basically academic success between more affluent kids who tend generally to be white, and lower income kids who tend to be kids of color that there is a really yawning gap that often grows as they progress further into school and really creates huge challenges because low income kids or color tend to wind up not prepared for college and career to the same extent that their white more affluent peers are.

Julie Speer: Talk about the reality of the achievement gap in Denver public schools. How bad is it?
Alan Gottlieb: Denver is no different I would say than most cities in the country. That the achievement gap is yawning significant and a huge social issue that has major implications for the economy, for really every aspect of life in the city. There are huge numbers of kids who are not getting an education that's going to allow them to have a life that's economically secure.

Julie Speer: It's been 20 years you've been working in education. You must have thought about how does one fix the achievement gap? What's the solution?

Alan Gottlieb: There is no easy answer to how you close or fix the achievement gap or it would have been done by now. I think that in my experience from having done a lot of research and looked at a lot of schools, integration actually is one of the most effective strategies. It's challenging in a district like Denver and in many urban districts because they're just aren't enough middle class kids in the system to fully integrate every school. I really think of it in terms of socioeconomic much more than race. I think that to me is more significant. I think they both come into play for sure, but socioeconomic is more significantly.

Colorado has a number of laws that make it impossible to do inter-district transfers that are at least required. For instance, you could take Denver, in some States you could take Denver and Cherry Creek school district or Douglas County which is even more white and affluent and you could somehow mix those populations so that you fostered integration. You cannot do that in Colorado by state law so that makes it very difficult.

Integration is a promising strategy especially in schools where you can keep the percentage of low income kids under 50 percent. That it tends to, there is a lot of research that demonstrates that those schools succeed for both the more affluent kids and for the lower income kids. It creates a culture of success and really makes a significant district difference. In more recent years some of the charter schools, like the KIPPs of the world and the STRIVEs have proven that it's also possible to educate low income kids in a pretty highly segregated environment and show success with them. It's a pretty regimented model that wouldn't appeal in many cases to middle and upper middle income families who want sort of more freedom and a broader offering of academics and arts for their kids then those schools typically offer.
Julie Speer: Are you following what's happening in North Denver? Are they trying to have a STRIVE B, a neighborhood school that would then have more affluent kids going to STRIVE?

Alan Gottlieb: Well, yes that's part of what they're doing is that they're trying to actually make these tenant boundaries wider and also have in some cases the charters become just like neighborhood schools. Again in Colorado there is a state law that makes choice available to all families and you cannot be assigned to a school and be forced to go there. A parent whose child was assigned to STRIVE who didn't want their child to go there would be able to choose assuming space was available another school close by or anywhere they wanted to send them. You can't tell people they have to send their kids somewhere. It's the easiest option because there is a space for your child in the school to which they're assigned but there is usually ways to find other schools as well.

Julie Speer: Talk about STRIVE if you stick with that example. I mean there are kids that cannot get into STRIVE and there is a wait list.

Alan Gottlieb: Well that's more the sort of pure charter school model without the waiting lists and all of that are sort of pure charter school model and not the neighborhood school model. STRIVE has been for most of its history last year they had a little drop in their test scores but they've been extremely successful with a population that's almost 100 percent free in reduced lunch in kids of color. Free and reduced lunch being a proxy for poverty. It's kid who are poor enough to qualify for a subsidized lunch and they've gotten better results with those kids than any Denver public school.

It's not a charter. Just about any other school and so as a result there is demand from families and again it's virtually all low income families to get their kid out of some of the other failing schools, mostly middle schools in that area and into STRIVE because they've seen the results. They have to have these lotteries and only some of the kids get in and then you see parents in tears because their kid didn't get in. It's a challenge that charters face that are having these kind of successes all over the country it's not unique to Denver.

Julie Speer: Is there anything else about STRIVE before we leave. I understand they raise a lot of money but they're also going to, last I heard they were going
to carpet I think 17 schools and then that's it. It's part of a district mix but it's not going to fix them would it?

Alan Gottlieb: I think one of the interesting things about schools like STRIVE is that they've demonstrated that integration isn't the only way to provide successful education for low income kids of color. That there are ways that schools that are pretty much all low income kids of color can be successful. For some reason traditional neighborhood public schools despite the ongoing clamor for them among all sorts of constituencies do not work and have not been demonstrated to work for that population. I mean there was a whole raft of stories and a lot of publicity, five or six years ago about the one school in North West Denver that was a high priority school.

It was Beachy Cove Elementary where they were having fabulous success with the kids and these great test scores and it turned out that the principal was going in there and erasing all the scores, single-handedly supposedly without teachers knowing about it and that the whole things was erased. There were no great results coming out of that school. These charter schools by having longer hours, longer days are very regimented, some say overly regimented kind of curriculum and norms or behavior. I'm I able to succeed with kids? The people who don't like those schools say they suck all the joy out of learning, that it's all by road, the kids have to walk down the hall silently and it's just school is no fun.

What people in those schools will tell you and I think there is a lot of change going on in how those schools operate and what their philosophy is but it's like when kids are four or five grades behind it's an emergency and you do what you need to do in an emergency to make the emergency go away and that is you get them up to where they can perform at grade level. It's an ongoing debate.

Julie Speer: Talk about DSST. I call it the conscious integration model. Describe to me what the DSST model is?

Alan Gottlieb: DSST is a network of high performing also charter schools, middle and high schools that consciously integrates by having a dual lottery system so that it guarantees that at least 40 percent of the kids in any of those schools will be eligible for free and reduced lunch. The reason that they feel they have to do a dual lottery is that the way it traditionally works is that once a school gets a buzz going about it that it's a successful school,
that's it's rigorous, that it's good, families like mine that know how to work the system, that know how to get their kids in the school that they want to get them into will somehow prevail and get their kids into that school.

The low income families of color that don't have that kind of savvy and those connections, know how to pull strings just get shoved off to the side. DSST didn't want that happen and from the start Bill Kurtz is the founder of the network is a profound believer in integration. He said we're not going to let that happen here. They've done this dual lottery and as result they actually wind up in most of schools having more than half their kids qualify for free and reduced lunch. I think last year if I remember the data correctly there are at least in some grades the low income kids out performed the no income kids which I think was a first. They are pretty proud of that.

People who object to what DSST does claim that they push a huge number of kids out of ... kids are starting to really struggle in that school. They get rid of them so that their scores continue to look good. That the school vehemently denies that and will show you data showing that it's not true. That's sort of the rub against DSST that its opponents will bring up.

Julie Speer: Have you ever researched the turnover? Has someone done that research?

Alan Gottlieb: There is a column actually, I think probably the most thorough thing that's been done. It's one of those things that we keep thinking we should do but haven't gotten to. Vince Carroll did a column at a trial pitch of The Post sometimes last fall in which she basically looked at all the sort of anti- DSST what he labeled as myths and debunked each one of them and said they really don't push out more kids than any place else. What they're doing is real and it's not smoking mirrors.

Julie Speer: Off the top of your head do you have any idea what percentage the DSST student body right now is reduced lunch?

Alan Gottlieb: It's about 70 percent of the kids.
Julie Speer: Explain the math of this. There is this ratio of 30 to 40 somewhat percent that didn't have that amount of reduced lunch you can manage but once it goes above that your achievement is too hard.

Alan Gottlieb: The challenges become pretty overwhelming when the percentage of free and reduced lunch kids get about 50. Certainly above 50.

Julie Speer: So if math speaks you have more free and reduced lunch kids, not every school can have a 40 percent so explain this conundrum and this ideal amount of free reduced lunch.

Alan Gottlieb: Well it is a huge conundrum that ideally to have integrated schools that work best for most kids you would want a ratio of about 40 percent low income to 60 percent non low income in the district where 70 percent of the kids are low income the math just doesn't work. That's a huge issue. What districts elsewhere in the country have done over the years would be things like strategic ... I mean you can't get around that math. That's a very real thing, but there is also a huge number of kids, I mean the Rocky Mountain News did a series back in the early 2000s about the number of kids who live in Denver, who do not attend Denver public schools.

If you could draw a bunch of those kids back by having appealing offerings you're never going to get everybody who goes to Kent Denver and Colorado Academy to ever send their kids to a public school. Some people just won't, but you could certainly, probably recapture some because who wouldn't want to save the 30 or 40,000 dollars in tuition that these schools cost if they felt there was an option that was vigorous enough for their kids to end up in Harvard or Yale or wherever mommy and daddy went. There is more that could be done.

There is also things that can be done in other cities do like strategic locate really attractive offerings near boundaries of other school districts so that it would draw kids in from let's say Littleton or JEFFCO or Cherry Creek, more from a white and affluent in public schools. Again because of the state law about open choice, assuming there are space available in those schools kids from those districts could attend Denver public schools as long as their parents made arrangements for getting them transported to those schools.
Julie Speer: Are there any efforts to bring affluent kids back into the district? Are there any that you know of? Is anybody even trying to do that? It sort of sounds to me like it's a stop for bleeding, we're in triage.

Alan Gottlieb: I haven't seen any. Yes, I guess there is like the Polaris Program at Ebert Elementary which was originally envisioned as a highly gifted and talented magnet but it's sort of a sad story actually because that school under its founding principal was supposed to be a school that got the best and brightest kids in and it was supposed to be highly integrated because the idea was it wasn't just test scores it was also teacher observation and recommendation so that the sort of bias that exists in testing that tends to favor more affluent, usually white and Asian kids is wiped out by the fact that teacher say this child is clearly really bright and has the capacity in the right environment to do the work even though their test scores don't reflect it.

The original idea behind that school was to get those kids in with the high achieving, highly gifted and talented mostly white kids and how it really integrated school with kids who all could perform at a high level in the right environment. Over time what happened is almost exactly what I described about what DSST is trying to avoid, which is just the school just got overwhelmed by the pushy white affluent parents and that whole piece of it that used to be kids who didn't necessarily test well has just gone away and Polaris is no longer a school. It's as mixed as it was in its early days.

Julie Speer: Let's talk about choice because I know that DPS talks of it's choice district. I choiced in to five schools, they were all blue schools, didn't get into any of them, so I had to go to a neighboring school. Choice doesn't always work, or there is limits to choice because there is not enough high performing schools.

Alan Gottlieb: Well, I think one of the things that DPS is trying to do with its efforts to seed new schools and create new schools is to cooperate the issue that there aren't enough high quality seats in the district to educate all the kids. It's a huge challenge right now because like if you look at the blue schools as you call them, which are the highest rated schools on the school performance framework they are disproportionately white and middle class.
There is also data out there from the studies that had been done that white kids in Denver are more racially isolated from minorities than they were before busing. That the numbers are still small although they're going up a little bit. The kids are more concentrated in a few schools and have less exposure to kids of color and conversely kids with color have less exposure to white kids than even before busing. That may have wandered off your question.

Julie Speer: You're going to stay working in education right?

Alan Gottlieb: Yeah, that's mostly what I will do.

Julie Speer: Why do you stay working in education?

Alan Gottlieb: Education is the field and schools are the place in society where every social issue comes home to roost and that makes schools the most fascinating places that you can possibly work and write about and stuff. Everything that's happening in the society comes right into the schools and the passions around it are just incredible because if you're talking about people's kids. I might be sitting here being sort of critical about people and the choices they make but I made the same choices for my kid when it came down to it, right. I put my kids in the schools that I thought would be best for her. I did not.

Some people, and I'll give some people a lot of credit that they actually say that sending my kid to an integrated schools is my primary value and I would do anything and I will sacrifice the quality of their education because I think what they'll get from that in terms of what they learn about the world is more important than the book learning that they might get by going to be extreme about it, Kent Denver or Colorado Academy or a place like that. Those choices when you aggregate them you don't just do ... one family makes this choice, another family makes that choice. You aggregate them and it has this hugely negative effect and this hugely segregating effect and I don't know how you tell people not to make the choice that they think is best for their kids but it is interesting that those choices in the composite are bad for society probably.

Julie Speer: If you look at what's going on right now in America with race, I mean it's almost at least every week, police are shooting somebody, it's like high school to prison pipeline, race is an issue in America and race is an issue
in Colorado. We don't have as dramatic of an issue, it's a lot but talk about that reality we're in right now. Our schools are segregated and how we grow as a city is going to define how our community integrates or not.

Alan Gottlieb: Well, I mean people rally against what they call social engineering, trying to get people to do things that they might not choose to do of their own free will for the greater good. People say it's sort of mushy liberal speak to say that there is benefits to having kids of different types go to school together, different socioeconomic classes, different races because it helps people, if it has a negative academic impact or people perceive that then they think that any soft or less tangible benefit is like ridiculous and shouldn't be considered.

Actually if you think about it and if you look at the issues of racial misunderstanding and white cop shooting an armed black man all the time, part of it is probably attributed to the fact that there is so little interaction between different groups of people that they don't understand each other or fear each other and have misunderstandings that if they had grown up going to school together they might had a slightly different reaction.

I actually grew up on the south side of Chicago going for fifth grade I went to a very integrated public school and I mean that was a fascinating experience because my parents did pull me out there after fifth grade and sent me to a private school. By that point I think I was one of two white kids in my class and we were on the edge of the huge south side African-American ghetto in Chicago and so all the kids, it was back and white and almost not white at all by the time I left that school. I learned a lot from going to that school including that as we got to be in about fifth grade, scrawny little white me and bring fifth graders who grew up in real tough circumstances I didn't really stand a chance in terms of physical altercations which happened all the time.

I did still learn a lot and really feel like I feel more comfortable in an environment that's more mixed that a lot of people might from having had that from a really young age.

Julie Speer: Let's talk about our neighborhoods. In terms of Manual today, it's no longer a neighborhood school, right? As I understand it it's full of smaller schools, right?
Alan Gottlieb: Not yet, it's still a neighborhood school. There is a lot of talk about putting some sort of medical careers magnet program in there. It's probably still mostly going to draw kids locally from the neighborhood at least till it proves itself. They're talking about putting a middle school program in there as well because it's a big building. It can hold 12 or 13 hundred kids at least and it's got a few hundred, three or four hundred in it now. They're trying to figure out how to make good use of all that space.

Manual is still open and they actually have a new principal who seems like a really promising guy coming in from another DPS school. I don’t know if he’s from that neighborhood but he is a young African-American guy with a lot of passion and a lot of energy and commitment. I think people who are feeling hopeful that he is going to be able to really make a difference.

Julie Speer: There’s been a lot of leaders over the last decade right?

Alan Gottlieb: There have been a lot of leaders and there’s been a lot of turmoil.

Julie Speer: There’s also North Field coming in. It sounds like they’re intentionally keeping that 40 percent free reduced lunch which I hear is actually been like 60 percent the first year because they’re drawing so many students Far North East. What issues do you see with North Field?

Alan Gottlieb: I did a story about this last year. The principal Avi Tropper is his name, came from New York and he is absolutely passionate about the fact that if you set the bar high, you can get any kid over it. What they’re doing there which is sort of the anti-George Washington IB program, is that they’re doing a diploma program, International Baccalaureate program which is very rigorous. They are determined to get every single kid in that school to get the IB diploma or at least strive for the IB diploma. That includes the 40 to 60 percent low income kids that they’re recruiting from the Far North East as well as the kids from Stapleton.

Nothing like this that I could find has really been tried anywhere else before. It’s hugely audacious and ambitious. I would say the odds of success, I Just can’t see the odds of success being particularly high that they’re going to have to make some compromises along the way, because if you bring in a lot of kids whom many of whom they’re not going to ... let me put it this way, they’re not going to be bringing in kids
from the Far North East all of whom are the exceptional stars in their schools and are at grade level. They’re bringing in all comers so there’ll be plenty of kids who are three or four years behind grade level probably entering ninth grade and how you get a kid from that point to be able to pass the IB diploma exams at the end of their senior year is just a huge mountain to climb, huge.

Julie Speer: Have you followed at all what will happen because I understand that Stapleton families definitely get a seat in this school and that in five years or so the Stapleton kids could fill the school, in which case they have the whole free and reduced lunch ratio goes out the window.

Alan Gottlieb: Well, this is one of those schools where they hired a principal they really believed in and they decided to let him run with his vision. I’ve been around education having watched all these cycles of things happening for 20 years. My prediction is that Avi will stick around for a while. He’ll either succeed or he won’t and that once he’s gone, however long that takes that same passion and commitment for the integration model will slowly fade away and so will the kids who don’t live in Stapleton and the incredible pressure that affluent parents can bring to bare on an elected body like a school board will just erode the determination to do that and North-field High School will be Stapleton’s High School. That’s my prediction.

Julie Speer: That sounds like it’s a trend, if you look at Polaris where it’s a great idea but over time it just doesn’t stick.

Alan Gottlieb: The determination of families to advocate for the best interest of their kids is never going to, that’s a momentum, that’s a force that’s never going to diminish. After a while the bureaucracy that’s trying to count to push back against that and say well there is a broader way of looking at what the best interest of kids is and even your kids. You can’t stand up to that constant. It’s a like a beach getting eroded by waves. It’s just you can’t. How do you over time fight that?

Julie Speer: Is it about activating the involvement of the parents of these low income families? How active are they? They don’t know that Lincoln High School is a failing school and they send their kids there anyway. They don’t use choice, they’re too busy surviving.
Alan Gottlieb: Well there’s that. Some of these families are too busy surviving. Some of these families have not ... particularly in Denver where there are a lot of immigrants from Mexico and Central America, there is a sort of cultural difference especially in education to the authority of the teacher and the principal that they know what’s best for my kid and I trust and believe in what they’re doing. There is also a lot of people who from lower income backgrounds who may not have had the most positive of experiences in schools themselves and don’t have the same level of comfort walking in and pushing that an affluent white family might have. All of those things mitigate against there being as involved as parents who a, have more time on their hands. B, are comfortable pulling the levers of power and c, schools or places they feel really comfortable.

Julie Speer: When busing ended were there any changes, did things happen with East High School?

Alan Gottlieb: East was never really affected by busing because East is naturally integrated by where it’s located. You get low income kids and you get affluent kids just through the natural boundaries of the larger high school neighborhood. There really were no changes at all that East. Maybe the more interesting thing other than Manual thing that happened at the end of busing was that there was this Montessori program in elementary school very close to Manual, Mitchell Elementary School that was ... magnet schools at that time really were primarily created to foster voluntary integration. This was a Montessori school located in a high poverty Latino and African-American neighborhood but had such a dynamic leader and such a good kind of pure Montessori model program that a lot of affluent middle class, white families sent their kids there too and the school it’s truly and integrated school.

As soon as the busing decision came down, what happened was that you had those white families who came from all over Denver from South East from Northwest, really aggressively, assertively advocating to keep the Montessori program at Mitchell. They really loved the integration, they loved the school and what you had was you had people from that neighborhood saying we don’t want these families in our school anymore. This is our neighborhood we want our school back. Send that program somewhere else and in fact it did wind up getting sent down to Southwest at Denisson which is where it still is today. Mitchell went back to being a neighborhood elementary school which is no longer opened because it failed so catastrophically that they wound up closing it.
Julie Speer: Far Northeast, did you follow, when you were covering the education beat what was up with Montbello?

Alan Gottlieb: That was a long time ago and I don’t know in great detail about what’s happened up there. I mean other people have covered it the topic great. Montbello was a disaster of a school back then. It was known for gang violence. There was a kid stabbed to death in the cafeteria I remember that. It was just a place for nobody who didn’t have to send their kid there or felt like they had no other choice would send their kid. I remember when Mayor Hancock was running he did a commercial, it was really powerful, a political ad about how he got up every morning and drove his kid to East, I think it was, because he didn’t want his kid going to school there.

It just was a school that never gained any traction academically at all and yet there was a lot of community pride around it was just one of the things that you face in these situations is if people didn’t know that their school is failing, they’re going to feel personally attacked almost if people are criticizing the school and saying the school is failing, so how do you counter that? It’s really difficult.

There’s been so much change in turn but there is no Montbello High School anymore. Yeah there are different programs in that building.

Julie Speer: There are folks who say that Far North East has turned around. Now it’s successful and the schools are doing well and there is transportation, support and is now a model for other zones districts like South West. Do you sense that the Far North East has turned around, is it done?

Alan Gottlieb: Again I can’t say that I have a lot of information. I’d love you to ask Burt that question but my sense is that that’s absolutely not the case. That those schools are still struggling mightily and that maybe there are a few bright spots but they might have a year where things look better and then it cycles back down. I don’t think that things are looking all that positive in the Far North East.

Julie Speer: Testing is making a big splash right now and parents are trying to opt out of testing and yet testing is the only way that we can track and evaluate achievements. Talk about testing’s role in the bigger scheme of education and what you would advocate for.
Testing is one of those things like everything else in education where if you’ve been around watching for a while, I don’t know if it’s a pendulum that swings back and forth or if it’s a cycle that just circles around but I remember so well. This is a little bit of a long story but it’s probably a good illustration. When I first left the Denver Post as an educational reporter and went to work for the Piton Foundation, one of the first things I tried to do, and this was 1997 so it was before No Child Left Behind. It was before there was a lot of good data that for all of it’s fault No Child Left Behind brought. An idea that I had and I hashed it with my former colleague at the Denver Post who then worked for Denver public schools, Mark Stevens, he was their public information guy was we should do report cards on every Denver public school, where we break out test score results by race and all of these stuff and just have a lot information about how the school is performing.

Mark thought that was a great idea and I was all excited about it so I got on the agenda for a school board work sessions and Mark and I went and presented this. I almost got bottled thrown out of that meeting by the superintendent at the time in the school board and I still remember one school board member saying, why would we want to make schools feel bad about themselves? Why would we want to put schools in competition with each other? Back in the late 90s, mid late 90s, you had this aversion to data, aversion to actually opening up the truce about how schools were doing and how sub populations of kids were doing in certain schools.

Then No Child Left Behind came along and for all its flaws a real positive about it was that it created data that people could look at and required data broken out by race and socioeconomic status. Schools could no longer hide behind the mask of the highest performing kids, which is a hugely positive thing. Then the pendulum swung too far and the testing got crazy and people started being neurotic about well fearing for their jobs and so teaching to the test completely and so now you’ve got this backlash against testing because it went too far but if you don’t have testing, if you don’t have a way of measuring how kids perform, how do you know and do you really want to go back to the days when nobody really knew how schools were performing is the question I would ask.

How do you find a happy compromise between not over testing and making it so that school is basically a way to prepare kids to do well on test so that school districts look good and don’t get sanctioned and
teachers keep their jobs and principals keep their jobs? We don’t seem to be able to calibrate. It’s like it’s either here or it’s here and we just can’t find that sweet spot.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about North Denver. Was Brown one of the stories that you had talked about?

Alan Gottlieb: I was actually involved with that when I worked at Piton. There is something in the water in North Denver first of all that makes people very, very passionate and willing to fight very aggressively for what they believe in more than most other parts of town. North Denver has been gentrifying for longer maybe than other parts of town and so as a result you get the tension between the gentrifiers and the people who’ve lived there for a long time. You also get gentrifiers who are political progressive who even though they’re gentrifying don’t want what they’re doing to change the ultimate character of the neighborhood. Brown Elementary was a school that had been one of the lowest performing schools in Denver for many years despite sitting in the slum. It's like neighborhood really quickly gentrifying area.

One of its many integrations of attempts to reform schools back in the, it might have been the early 2000s Denver I can't remember the exact terminology they used at the time but they had some money from a mill levy election, some tax increase basically for schools that allowed schools to try to reinvent themselves. The Brown community decided they wanted to become a primary years which means elementary basically International Baccalaureate Program which is not like the IB diploma program I was talking about earlier. That it’s like super rigorous and you have to test into it. It’s just a very good curriculum that is sort of internationally normed. The school actually managed to get that program approved, brought in a principal out of experience I think from Colorado Springs running it.

She fired every teacher except one in the entire school, brought in an entire new team and the school has become a very integrated model for that kind of thing. The integration there may be a temporary thing as the school gains a new reputations and more and more middle class families come in and may more and more squeeze out the low income families. It’s sort of integration because it hasn’t become segregated yet rather than because it’s the model. I don’t have a lot of current information about how well things are going at Brown but my son says that it’s
become another really viable option for the middle class families of that neighborhood.

Julie Speer: Do you have any historical knowledge of the North and what’s happening with North High School?

Alan Gottlieb: I mean North has always been a troubled school with a very high dropout rate, again the gentrifying portion of the population of that part of town did not send their kids there. Maybe sending their kids there in slightly larger numbers, I haven’t looked at the data lately I couldn’t actually say. It seems to be doing at least incrementally better than it did before. I don’t know if the changes are all as dramatic as they’re being pushed. I just can’t speak with a lot of authority about that. I have my doubts but I remember going there once when I was at the Piton Foundation taking a wealthy individual there who wanted to sort of learn about school reform with my boss, the had of the foundation.

It was probably like January or February and we walked into that school and it was empty. You looked into the classrooms and there were like 10 kids to a class because it was one of those schools where they did their damned as to keep the kids in until count day in October which is what determines how much funding they get to keep on a per people basis. Once the count day pass they sort of relax and kids just started to drop out. By the time you got to the January, February the schools was amazingly empty. I think that they’ve improved that. I think the dropout rate has dome down the graduation rate has gone up significantly so I do think things are better in that regard but it’s been a school with a long history of failure basically.

Julie Speer: Anything about Southwest Denver in general. Does it have the lowest performing school in the district?

Alan Gottlieb: If it doesn’t have the lowest performing schools it’s got among the lowest performing schools and probably a number of the Southwest Denver schools are in the very bottom tier of performance. People used to refer to at least one part of Southwest Denver I remember is like the triangle of neglect because there were fewer social services there. It was like less of everything there than anywhere else and it was just sort of a desert in terms of services, supermarkets, anything else. It may have gotten a little better over time but the school certainly have not been the top schools.
That’s why we talked earlier about STRIVE and why they were the waiting lists. There was just no viable option.

Now they’re attempting to do things like put some new programs in the Kent Middle School which has been a low performing middle school from forever that I know of to try and revitalize it. I think you would know better because you live there but I think my sense is that that Southwest Denver is also slower to gentrify than other parts of town. There may be some parts that are starting to gentrify but I think because of the housing stock, because of how far parts of it at least are from sort of the heart of the city it’s just been slower and gentrification for all of its problems brings pressure for improvement because as more affluent people come in they won’t put up with the low quality schools that people of more moderate means seem not able to advocate to end.

Julie Speer: Okay, first of all what is remediation?

Alan Gottlieb: Remediation rate is when a kid graduates from high school and wants to go to a community college or a four year college and is found to be unable to perform work at the level that’s required to succeed. They’re required to go back and take remedial courses. They can take them at that institution. They have to pay for them and it doesn’t count toward their college credits but it’s just to get them to the starting line so they’re capable of doing college level work. It’s a huge problem. It sucks money out of people who can’t afford to pay it because they’re having to basically paid tuition for classes that they should have gotten, or education that they should have gotten when they were in high school.

The remediation rates in Denver have been very high for many years. I can’t quote the number but I know Lincoln High School is one with extremely high remediation. I think most of the high schools in Denver have them and it’s basically, one way to look at it is high schools had a lot of pressure on them to improve their graduation rates and one way to improve your graduation rate is to graduate more people even if they aren’t ready. Basically what you’re doing is you’re just pushing the problem further down the pipeline where you’re saying let the community colleges and colleges worry about it. We got them off our books, they didn’t drop out, we gave them a diploma. That kind of cynical manipulation goes on all over the country and it’s when you have perverse incentives which seem to happen in education all the time perverse things happen.
Julie Speer: When I was a kid if you didn’t pass third grade they held you back. Twice if need be. I mean that doesn’t happen anymore does it?

Alan Gottlieb: Well there’s been a lot of, like that’s been one of those things that happens in waves. If you’re not proficient in reading by third grade you should be held back but then there is the opposite of that is called social promotion, where they just promote kids because they went from being eight to nine so they should go from being in second grade to third grade or whatever. There have been movements against doing that but then there’s been research that also shows kids who are held back don’t succeed at any higher label. That it hurts their self esteem. I think that’s one of those education policy in research debates that isn’t early resolved. Is it better to hold kids back or is it better to move them forward and give them extra support so that they don’t fall behind their peers and they don’t get discouraged.

Then again I also argue that education research is so often really politicized that it’s like I don’t trust a lot of it personally because I just find that ... Who's funding it or what the beliefs of the researcher are. I’ve had fights with researchers about it because it just seems to me that if you look at a research study and you see who the author is and you can predict what it’s going to say before you read the study because of who the researcher is, then is that really research? Is that really like scientific research or is that ideology masters research.

Julie Speer: How does Denver compare as a city in a school district? How does Denver compare to other cities and school districts of its size across the country?

Alan Gottlieb: I don’t think that Denver is markedly different. If anything it may be a little better than a lot of other cities in terms of both, not in terms of segregation but in terms of achievement. I think it’s made some gains.

Julie Speer: Can you clarify cities across the country as opposed to Colorado?

Alan Gottlieb: I think Denver is compared to other cities across the country is probably maybe doing a little better in terms of achievement and has made pretty strong gains in the last few years. In terms of integration segregation I don’t think it’s really made, it’s fundamentally different. Although I will say there probably a larger number of middle class kids even with 70 percent free and reduced lunch in Denver that’s a lower free and reduced lunch percentage than in major cities in the country. Denver has
managed to either attract or retain a higher percentage of its middle class families than a lot of other major cities.

In terms of large cities. I mean, look at Chicago, look at Detroit. Detroit is probably an outlier. Look at Boston even I would think that the percentages are probably higher than they are in Denver.

I guess just talking about Denver I would also say is that I think that they’ve been trying some really innovative, they’re kind of on the edge in terms of how much they’re experimenting with governance structure for the district trying and doing things like creating bigger attendance zones in parts of town like near Stapleton to try and promote integration. In other words they’re not signing kids to a middle school but they’re joining these larger zone so that the areas are more diverse because they're larger. They’re getting some pretty significant push back in places like Stapleton where families don’t like that. They want the smaller zones where their kids can go to school with kids who look more like they do. That’s a challenge and Denver it’s got a nationally among education performers people sort of see Denver right now as the place to look. It’s really exciting what’s going on. Those of us closer to the ground see the works more and the implementation of the ideas isn’t perhaps strong as the ideas are.

Julie Speer: It seems like a very daunting problem, like how are we going to fix it and the city is growing and we don’t even have it figured out now. How are we going to fix it once we have 50,000 more kids out into the district? Where is the hope? Is there any?

Alan Gottlieb: I don’t know if it’s hope because I think what’s happening in a lot of cities it’s not, I don’t know how long the economy will stay as strong as it is. Certainly I’ve seen this, as I said I’m from Chicago and Chicago this is certainly happening too, is that for years in like the 50s and 60s the affluent populations fearing poverty and poor people fled to the suburbs and created these school systems out there and abandoned the cities. Now you’ve seen this trend over the last 15 or 20 years of like wait the cities are a lot cooler than the suburbs so we have to drive everywhere. You see this move back into the city and that’s the gentrification phenomenon and as a result what’s starting to happen is that the low income people are getting pushed out and so what you’re seeing is that the challenges in districts like Aurora, suburban Denver are becoming stronger and other suburban communities and Denver.
I don’t see this is as hope, it’s just a reality is that Denver may become a more affluent city with fewer low income people, the district may become less high poverty and therefore the school district may improve. It may mean that the outcome for the low income kids who do remain get better over time but it’s not necessarily pushing people out. If you think that the inner city ghettos of the past were bad, wait till you move them into the ticky tack housing developments in the suburbs that weren't build to last more than 20 years.

If you look at the Colorado springs, Aurora like parts of Aurora just the quality of the housing that was build out there. One thing you can say about the housing stock in like the South side ghetto of Chicago those are ... it’s terrible the ghetto and tenement stuff. The structures themselves are really solid, good buildings. Buildings are going to be collapsing on people in the sort of new ghettos in places like Aurora because it’s crap housing, it’s crap construction.

Julie Speer: You’re still working in education even though it’s all very dire. You must end on a high note. You’re not going to give up are you?

Alan Gottlieb: No, I don’t think you can ever give up. I think that there are probably more people and a more diverse group of people who are more engaged in trying to crack this nut and figure it out than there ever have been in this society and it’s actually creating a lot of dislocation and discomfort among the sort of more established education interest groups because they’re feeling this pressure from the outside that’s building. I think that gives hope, it also creates a lot of tension and friction and anger but maybe that’s what it takes for change to happen.

Julie Speer: A lot of people say vouchers are the answer because then all those people who live in the district can go wherever they want and the money will talk.

Alan Gottlieb: Vouchers are probably I would argue they’re probably going to be the most segregating influence of anything because they’re going to encourage, I think what’s going to happen is that the only private schools that will take vouchers for the most part. You’re not going to see Greyhound, Kent, Denver or Colorado Academy ever take vouchers even
if they ever passed here and if I’m wrong I challenge them right now to take them. I kind of think that won’t happen.

You’re going to have a lot of little small religious schools and second tier private schools taking vouchers but I think that if their mean is tested there is a better argument for vouchers if their mean is tested meaning that you only get them if you’re low income and you are in a failing school and this gives you an out. If what it sends you to is a fly binate school operated by some full profit operator without any standard then is that really helping? I know that the true choice people believe that vouchers are part of the answer. I just haven’t seen evidence anywhere that they have been.

Julie Speer: Are unions a problem?

Alan Gottlieb: I don’t know, I mean unions are both defenders of the status quo and protectors of overworked underpaid labor. You can look at them both ways I think. I do think that some of the changes that are going on that I just talked about are making them very nervous. I think another thing we didn’t talk about at all was magnet schools which were originally designed to, in Denver to foster integration which no longer do. The Denver school of the arts is the one truly untouchable magnet school in Denver it seems to me. They’ve made an effort now and the superintendent Tom Boasberg has really made a point of trying to make the IB program at George Washington more open and inclusive not as walled off as it was.

They don’t want to touch the Denver school of the arts where a significant proportion of the kids actually come from the suburbs because it’s a really great school but there is this incredibly high bar to get in, which is basically that you have to audition in and so if you’re a player or violin player or whatever, and you come from a family that can’t afford to pay for private lessons for you you’re going to have a leg up over a kid who may have all the natural talent in the world but hasn’t had any training because their parents can’t afford it. You have a very high percentage of more affluent families in that school and kids who may have the raw talent to succeed don’t ever get a chance because they can’t get over the audition bar.
Julie Speer: Talk to me about the reality of race in general in America right now and then specifically, how you see that playing out in education.

Andre Spencer: The reality for race in America, race in our schools, I think it's definitely prevalent. It's definitely known and understood. The opportunities that are provided to students who may not have a certain socioeconomic status or situation or may not come from a particular zip code, their education is different. It shouldn't be, but it's different. I think that's where leaders really come into play with making sure that those opportunity gaps are non-existent. Definitely, we know when we look at the makeup of American public education, predominately the teacher population in our schools, it's white female. It's not to say that white females cannot teach all students because I believe great teachers can teach all students, but it's also important for us to recognize and understand that there are times where students have to see and should see people who look like them and have situations where they're connecting directly to their community. Having situations where they're seeing themselves reflected in materials that's being used in schools and then having some open and honest dialogue and conversations around what's truly happening with students in American public schools.

From my perspective, it's really around opening up those opportunities for students, having that dialogue with the adults, rather it's with teachers, rather it's with principals, rather it's with superintendents. Even our legislatures really having that honest, open dialogue about what's happening in our schools and how we can begin to make sure that
students, all students, have opportunities and advantages just as a higher socioeconomic student would have with regards to education.

Julie Speer: How do you spell out what is happening? How do you define the problem?

Andre Spencer: I think and I'm not necessarily sure that it would be a problem in education because I think that there are a lot of great things that's happening in public education today. I think it's really being strategic for how we are targeting or improving areas within the educational system. When we talk about what's happening in education today, I think one, there's a huge focus on being college and career ready. I think a missing component to that is perhaps being college and career, as well as community ready. I say that because I think sometimes we miss where students are at this particular point in their lives. How do we make that a part of their educational career? We know that whenever we make a connection to students, we make a connection based off of what's in their immediate environment, what's relevant to them. When we begin to make situations and circumstances in school, relevant to students, that's making a connection back to the students' community.

Julie Speer: How would you do that? Give me an example.

Andre Spencer: For example, if we know that a particular student is living in a situation where they may have to catch public transportation to school versus driving themselves to school, we can make that as a part of the student's math lesson. There's this wonderful book that's out there that's titled, Only if She Knew. It's really about a young student in elementary school who's talking about if his teacher only knew some of his experiences from his neighborhood, she would incorporate that into their instructional program everyday. That would make just that much of a different in his life.

He was speaking about catching the bus, the local transportation to school, and understanding the time at which he needs to be on the bus stop in order to get to school on time. That's discussing elapsed time and that's really looking at how do you bring the academics from a student's home environment into the classroom. He talked about filling up a washing just being able to eyeball a load of clothes and understand through estimation how much clothing could fit into a washing machine.
and how much money he would have to bring to the laundromat in order to be able to wash his clothes.

It's really understanding that student's perspective in order to be able to bring those type of situations into the classroom and help students to learn the concepts that we're expecting students to learn. I think we need to do more of that. That's where it gets into providing students opportunities and not just looking at opportunities that students may get outside of school, but looking at school as a means to open the doors for opportunities for students to enhance their learning rather they’re in school or out of school, whatever their situations may be.

Julie Speer: Talk about how things are changing right now. Traditionally, culturally, are there differences in how White, African-American, or Latino or Asian families value education and how they talk about education? How they're expected to do different levels?

Andre Spencer: It goes back to previous comment or previous statement around how do we make sure that we’re tapping into the students environment to really make their situations, as far as academic situations, culturally relevant to that particular student. To say ethnicities would have a different perspective on education, I'm not necessarily certain that different ethnicities have different perspectives on education more so than the way in which they anticipate the way education will benefit them. I think that becomes the difference. I think every single parent, it doesn't matter the ethical background, all parents want what's best for their kids. This is something that we live by definitely at our school district, is understanding that every single parent wants the best education for their child. They might not be able to articulate it, they may not be able to express how that should look, but nonetheless, they want the best.

When we talk about the differences in how ethnicities will deal with or respond to the education that they’re receiving, I think it goes back to if we make a culturally relevant, make the educational experience culturally relevant to that particular student, that is ultimately going to help the student and the parent to see the connection back to how they can benefit from the education experience.

Secondly, I think it’s important for us to really begin to look at student interests. When we start to talk about academics, generally we stick with reading. We stick with English. We stick with Mathematics, we stick with
Science, and we stick with Social Studies. There are a ton of students who are interested in the arts. There are tons of students out there who are interested in creative writing. How do we really begin to expose students to those opportunities so that we can show them that those are available chances that they can then take that knowledge and move out into the workforce and get employment in the workforce? Again, in order to that, we have to show them people that look like them in those particular career aspects, in those particular career areas. Bringing those individuals to the school house or taking students to those individuals and showing them that this is the work that they engage in everyday. This was their experience as they went through K12 education and this is how it can be applicable to you.

When we talk about the ethnicities and we talk about how each ethnicity responds to education differently, I think it's important to understand the background of those individuals to understand that everyone has a different make up. It can be an African-American, it can be two African-American students. I can't expect that they will respond to the educational experience the same because their experiences are different. It's the same as any other ethnicity. I think that's when it's important upon us as educators, to really figure out what's significant to that student, what's culturally relevant to that student and then tap into that as we provide experiences for that student.

Julie Speer: How do you define the achievement gap? What is the achievement gap?

Andre Spencer: I'll probably end up giving you a textbook definition of the achievement gap. When we look at our socioeconomic status of our students, our ethnicities of our students, our genders for our students, in determining if there's any difference in their performance versus the other group. One thing that we do in Harrison School District, is we make sure that for every data point that we collect, we're looking at those different student groups. We want to look at those student groups so that we can begin to make sure that we're addressing any deficiencies in those areas. I don't necessarily look at it as an achievement gap, more so than an opportunity gap. I say an opportunity gap because a part of our performance has been really centered around how are we providing better opportunities for the students that we serve.

For example, if we're looking at our advanced placement scores and our advanced placement data and holistically we're seeing that Caucasian
students are outperforming our Hispanic students or African American students, but when we also look at the number of students that are participating in those courses, we have many more Caucasian students participating in the course than African-American and Hispanic students. Ultimately, we would expect that there’s going to be a difference in their performance. There are many more students that are in those particular courses. If we provide the opportunity for more Hispanic students and African-American students to participate and we have a balanced array of students that’s a good reflection of our school system participating in those type of experiences, then we can begin to truly measure if there's an achievement gaps between those groups of students.

Ultimately, I 100% believe that if a student is taught, the student will learn and the student will perform. If we aren't providing the student the opportunity to be taught, they can't learn and they can't perform.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about teachers of color. Talk about your own experience in the classroom in just being not only a person of color, a male. Talk about why you chose to go into that and why you don't see a lot of people who look like you as a teacher. Then transition to now in the leadership role and what Harrison's doing to recruit and keep teachers of color. Is that even a problem?

Andre Spencer: I think it's something that's missing across the board in all of our school districts across the country. With regards to teachers of different ethnicities and I think that's important and critical for students to actually see it. It's just not critical for African-Americans to see African-American teachers. It's also critical for other ethnicities to see African-American and other ethnic group teachers being represented because then it can show you individuals in a different light that you may not be accustomed to seeing those individuals which I think is really critical and important in the message that it sends.

In my experience, being in Baltimore and started off teaching in 7th grade in Baltimore as a male, science, 7th grade teacher, I thought it was really critical. One, there were tons of students in my class, tons of African-American boys in my class who had an interests in science, but the way in which they demonstrated their interest in science was different than perhaps how some female students had demonstrated their interest in science.
Boys were a little more active and boys were a little more, I guess I could say intrigued. They demonstrated that by being more active and being more hands-on. They wanted to touch, they wanted to manipulate, they wanted to concoct something. In their minds, that was science was about. When you really think about science, that is what science is about. Expressing to students that many of the scientists that we see operating nowadays are functioning based off of mistakes that were made and then they discovered something. Students don't think that way. Students aren't traditionally taught to learn that way. We're traditionally taught to learn, well this is the answer and that's what you get. Well, sometimes I may make a mistake and come up with a better answer and that's okay too. I think now we're beginning to be more aware of the exploration that comes about in that area.

I think allowing students to see me, I didn't come to school looking a certain way. I was very professional in my look. I was very professional in my speech. Just giving students the opportunity to see that not everyone behaves a certain way even if they are part of the same racial group or racial makeup. I think that's the importance of all students having that diverse population of teachers that they get an opportunity to see and work with. In my current school district, that's something that we continue to try to evolve in. Are we there yet? No. We're not there yet, but that's something that we definitely know we're paying attention to.

It's really just looking at one, who's the best candidate. It has to be the best candidate. You have to be great at what you do, but again, providing the opportunity. That's where I go back to that opportunity word. Teachers have to be provided the opportunity to have a fair chance of getting into our classrooms as well. That's something that we make sure that we do in Harrison School District Two, is provide everyone a fair opportunity to be the best teacher that they can be in our district.

Is there anything about teacher pay? Is that a problem? Do you make enough as a teacher? Is that part of the problem? If it was a higher salary do you think more men of color would want to go into that profession?

I'm not sure if it would necessarily attract any particular ethnic group. I think it would attract everyone if we paid teachers more. I do think that we should pay teachers more. I don't believe teachers make enough money in comparison to my experiences back east on the east coast. The average teacher salary was around $70,000 versus in the state of
Colorado where the average teacher is less than $70,000. That's pretty significant. I think it's definitely understandable for us to know teachers have lives. Teachers have families that they need to take care of and they need income in order to do that. That's a reality. I believe that teachers go into the profession because they want to make a difference in the lives of children, but they also have to take care of their own children as well. It takes money for them to be able to do that. For anyone to think that teachers should not be paid more, I'm not sure how they come up with that conclusion.

I think teachers should be paid more for what they do, not from the aspect of just the job in itself, but from the aspect of what we require teachers to do when they step foot into a classroom. No longer do we straight rows in a line and kid's hands on the desk. That's not how children learn nowadays. With the influx of technology in everything that we do, teachers have to be performers and they have to keep the attention of every single student. They have to engage students who have disabilities. They have to engage students who are our gifted and talented students. They have to engage children who may not be interested in that particular content and they have to do all of that with this magical thing that we call technology. That's a pretty challenging job. That's a pretty difficult job. I think that they should be compensated for that.

Julie Speer: Tell me about Harrison School District, the demographic. First, the geographical boundary. Where is Harrison? Then the size, sort of population of the district and the demographics of the students.

Andre Spencer: Geographically, Harrison School District Two is located in the southeast section of Colorado Springs. We're pretty close to the mountains so we have a pretty good view of the mountains beautiful location. Our student make up or our student population, we have 46% Hispanic students. We have 26% Caucasian students and we have 16% African-American students. We're actually the most diverse school district in the Colorado Springs area and one of the most diverse school districts in the state of Colorado. We have a little over 11,000 students in our schools.

Julie Speer: Talk about the reality of institutional racism.

Andre Spencer: Definitely, I would say that institutional racism is real. Institutional racism exists. I think it really exists and is real just based on the historical
perspectives from where we can pull to really begin to pull out the data that shows that it does exist, but I also think it stems back to that opportunity piece that I'm speaking about. When you come from an affluent family and that has been the case for many Caucasian families, they've come from pretty affluent families. You have opportunities that aren't available to students who may come from lower socioeconomic situations. This isn't to say that all minority groups, whether it's Hispanic or African-Americans come from lower socioeconomic groups, because that's not the case. They're many affluent Hispanic and African-American groups, but when we look at the proportion of those groups in relation to one another, it's disproportionate. That's where I'm speaking from.

With regards to institutionalized racism, we know that that exists. I think it's a matter of bringing it to an awareness, having a conversation about it, really beginning to pinpoint what we can do to provide everyone a fair opportunity to a quality education. What does that look like in providing a fair opportunity for every student to have a quality education? We cannot say that we want certain groups of students to go to college and other to go into a career. I don't think that that's a choice that we should make. I think that's a choice that they student should make. If the student chooses to go to college, the student should have the option to attend college. If the student choose to go into a career, the student should have an option as to which career he or she chooses to go into. I think once we begin to have those types of conversation and really be truthful and really be honest about what we see happening in our country today, I think we can fix it. I think we can fix it.

Julie Speer: Are people talking about it in your community?

Andre Spencer: I don't think we're talking about it enough, I really don't. I don't think we take about race relations enough. I don't think we're as honest as possibly can be about the impacts of race relations. I don't think we're really honest about our individual thoughts and how some of those thoughts in itself can prevent students from getting access and opportunities to certain experiences. I think it's an uncomfortable situation, but I think if we're really about making sure that every single student's getting a fair opportunity for an equal education, I think we will talk about it. I think we'll force ourselves to be a little uncomfortable talking about it. I definitely think we need to talk a little more. Not just in Colorado Springs, even though we do need to talk about it more there, but throughout the entire country. It's something that's impeding
progress I think, throughout the entire country. We just have to have those conversations and be honest.

Julie Speer: Let's talk about what you guys are doing, you guys have decreased the gap. Is it a focus? Are you saying, all right, let's decrease that gap or let's bring those kids up? How's the gap in Harrison?

Andre Spencer: The achievement gaps for us, it's intentional. We focus on that. It's very intentional. Our goal is to reduce any achievement gaps, any opportunity gaps that students may have just because of their ethnicity or their zip code or whatever it may be. That's something that we do intentionally. Every data point that we collect, we're disaggregating that data point down to the student groups that we actually service in our district. If we see that there is a gap, we need to figure out how we're going to reduce that gap and how we're going to decrease that gap.

To give you an example of something that we've down, I'll go to advanced placement opportunities for students. We have released all criteria for students taking advanced placement courses. Previously, we had situations where students had to get teacher recommendation. Students had to have a certain GPA in order to participate in advanced placement courses. We've done away with that. Any student has the opportunity to take an advanced placement course and they take the advanced placement exam in addition to the advanced placement course. What we've seen from that, is we've seen an astronomical increase in the number of students taking the course, but then also getting a 3 or better on the exam because we provided the opportunity for students. That's something that we think is really critical and really important for us.

Secondly, another piece that we make sure that we do when it comes down to students who may come to us with disabilities or students who are coming to us and they're limited in their English proficiency, we have very specialized programs that we attend to the needs of those particular students. In that opportunity, we are addressing students' academic deficiencies and we're very strategic and very pinpointed in what we're doing to address those particular deficiencies. We constantly monitor what those deficiencies are and how those interventions are actually making a difference and improving student’s deficiencies. That's something that we do across our entire district in making sure that every single student is focused on in order to improve that student. We can't allow any one student to be masked by the performance of another.
group. That happens when you don’t disaggregate the data. When you disaggregate the data down to the actual student group and then specifically, down to the student, you can begin to identify where the student's weaknesses are and in fill in the gaps and correct those weaknesses.

Julie Speer: I know that's one thing they're doing here in Denver, is looking at the student growth. Have you looked at those numbers for your students too? Are you showing good growth?

Andre Spencer: We are and we have. We have looked at our students growth and we are showing good gains in our student's growth across the board. We want to make sure that if a student is not necessarily at that the target where we've set to say that this is a proficient level, then we want to know how fast is that student growing to get to that specific target. Once we begin to track that student and measure that student's performance, that's where the interventions come into play. Really identifying specifically what do we need to target in order to make a difference academically for that student. We do that for every student across the board.

Julie Speer: What about preschool? You guys have a pretty unique approach to preschool too.

Andre Spencer: One of the ways that we have decreased the ill performance or the poor performance of our preschool students is by partnering with one of our preschool partners in Colorado Springs. We partner with the Colorado Preschool Program. They manage all of the preschool programs and all of our elementary school. It's housed in the inside of our elementary schools. It provides an opportunity for preschool teachers to partner and collaborate with kindergarten teachers, which is something that is pretty significant. During that collaboration opportunity, our kindergarten teachers are sharing with preschool teachers the expectations for what kindergartners need to know and understand when they arrive.

For example, our expectation is that we'd like for all of our kindergartners to come to kindergarten knowing their letters, being able to recognize their letters, being able to associate sounds with those letters. We want them to be able to recognize numbers when they see appropriate numbers. We like for them to be able to spell their name, at least their first name when they enter into kindergarten. That wouldn't be able to be done if we did not have that partnership to have the preschool
directly in our schools. Our preschool program, we actually assess students at that level to get an understanding of when they first arrive, what letters do they know, what letters can they recognize, can they recognize colors? Can they recognize numbers?

As a part of their instructional program, and it may appear to be a lot of play, but it's really teaching kids how to recognize a letter, recognize a number, what letters make which sounds that they're going to engage in. How do they begin to spell out their names rather it's spelling out your name in the sandbox or actually holding your pencil to spell out your names? Those opportunities are what affords us the good chance of providing our kindergarten students the opportunity to come into kindergarten pretty much at, I would say at an advanced level in some cases. Not all cases though. Not all of our kindergarten students are entering into kindergarten having gone through the preschool program. In the state of Colorado, preschool is not required.

We try to make it an available opportunity for our students just as we do with kindergarten, which also, is not necessarily a requirement in the state of Colorado. We try to make that an available opportunity because of the student population that we serve. What we're finding is that that's helping students to transition into 1st grade. One thing that we have as a goal for us in Harrison School District Two, is we would like to have 100% of our students reading by the time they leave 1st grade. Not 3rd grade, but 1st grade. One way that we can make sure that kids are doing that, is engaging them early, and very early. When we do that, we're seeing pretty good gains with the students who are leaving our classrooms 1st grade.

Julie Speer: How long have you been doing that?

Andre Spencer: We have been doing that for about 5 years, 5 to 6 years now. I think that preschool is a pretty significant opportunity. I think that one thing that's good to understand and to know, that when we start to talk about the differences in socioeconomic status between students who are more fluent and those students who are less affluent. We already know because the research shows this, that typically a student who comes into preschool or even kindergarten and they're coming from a low socioeconomic household, that student has about a 3000-5000 vocabulary gap. That's huge when we're talking about students who are learning to read. That's pretty significant. How do we prevent those
situations from coming about? We can prevent that by getting them into school earlier and by helping them to engage in building a vocabulary capacity earlier. That's something that we're doing in Harrison School District Two.

Julie Speer: What about full day kindergarten?

Andre Spencer: In Harrison School District Two we also have full day kindergarten. All of our kindergarten programs are full day kindergarten, at all of our schools, all of our elementary schools. We have some slots that we have actually acquired form the state to give us additional slots to bring in additional students in our kindergarten program. Their academic program, I think is second to none. It's because we really look at what are we expecting students to know and understand and be able to do when they transition to 1st grade. We make sure that our kindergarteners are actually learning those particular skills. Going back to letter recognition, we're expecting a kindergartener to leave kindergarten knowing all of their letters, knowing all of their numbers at least up to 100. If they beyond, then that's perfect, that's great. We're expecting kindergarteners to leave kindergarten being able to write a complete sentence and being able to formulate or start to formulate an entire paragraph. That's what we believe is important to us.

When you look at what the classroom teacher is doing in the classroom with kindergarten students, you're going to see exactly that type of work. Teachers making sure that kids are learning to read, making sure that kids know their letters, know how to spell their names, they can recognize and write numbers, and that they can actually write full and complete sentences, perhaps even paragraphs. That's something that has benefited us in the long run.

Julie Speer: You introduce high school type classes in middle school. That's getting them accustomed materially and culturally ready and setting them up for success. Talk about that as well.

Andre Spencer: Yes. In Harrison School District Two, when we start to speak about preparing middle school students for high school expectations, we think it's very strategic and very pointed as to how do you go about doing that. One way that we have gone about doing that, is by making sure that our students in middle school have opportunities to engage in high school courses. At all of our middle schools, you'll see students taking English as a 9th grade course and they're taking it in the 8th grade. In some cases, in
the 7th grade. They're taking Mathematics and they're also taking Science, 9th grade Science in the middle school. Our intent is really to give kids the opportunity to see what they will be expected to know when they get into high school. Then it frees up opportunities for them to take additional courses beyond just their high school experiences. Another thing that we do in Harrison, is we provide our middle school students the opportunity to take advanced placement courses, which generally doesn't start until they get into high school, but we back that up down to 7th grade.

Julie Speer: That's just kind of getting them ready? They're not taking tests in 7th grade, right?

Andre Spencer: They aren't necessarily taking the tests in 7th grade. One thing that we know that the existing literature that's out there now is telling us about advanced placement exposure, students who are taking advanced placement courses fare much better in college when they take college courses. Those students are students who typically take college courses that are in alignment with the actual advanced placement courses that they've taken. It's kind of two-fold that we're doing here, preparing kids to move or transition into high school, but we're also preparing them to transition into graduate from college. Our program that we have in the middle schools when we go back to providing students the opportunity to take the 9th grade courses prior to their entry into high school, it provides kids the opportunity to engage in our guarantee transfer, Pathways, that we have in our high schools.

The way that this program functions or works in our high school, is a student enters into 9th grade and that student may come into 9th grade with 3 high schools credits already. We start engaging that student is taking the introductory college courses. We have a partnership with Pikes Peak Community College. In that partnership, Pikes Peak Community College offers a course that they call their Introductory to College course. We start our 9th graders in taking that course. They take one course the fall semester. They take another course the spring semester. When they transition into 10th grade, students start taking what we call Concurrent Enrollment courses. Concurrent Enrollment courses are courses where it's an actual college course so they get college credits, 3 college credits. We also give them high school credits for that particular course.
Students start taking 2 of those courses in their fall semester of their sophomore year. As they continue through their sophomore year, their junior year and their senior year, they take more and more Concurrent Enrollment Courses. At the end of their senior year, they graduate from us with a high school diploma. They return to Pikes Peak Community College in the summer and they take 2 additional courses. They graduate from the community college with an Associate's Degree that they can then take off into a 4 year institution and they enter as a junior. Those are opportunities that we're providing for our students which is why we start them with high school credits in early in the middle schools.

Julie Speer: What do you do if a kid's not up to par? Talk about some of the support for them with the monitoring that you do. If they can't perform or if they're not performing. Talk about what you do there.

Andre Spencer: When students have difficulties performing or they're struggling to perform, in all of our schools we have intervention periods. It looks different in the middle schools than it may look in the elementary schools, but we have an intervention period or block during the school day where students can get some additional support or some additional help. Our goal is really to try to prevent students from having to repeat a course. We know when students repeat a course, that puts them in jeopardy of falling behind and that puts them in jeopardy of dropping out, which is something we try to prevent. When we do that, we engage them in this intervention course.

If I'm a student and I'm having struggles in let's say, algebraic equations, I'm taking my math class and I'm struggling with integers and not really understanding how to add integers and how to connect integers and variables. When they go to their Intervention course, that is the focus, specifically on the area of deficiency. Once we remediate that to a point that the student is beginning to do much better, than the student doesn't have to go to the Intervention Course anymore. The student can go to a different course at that particular period. We catch that early on.

Julie Speer: The teachers do or the students self-identify?

Andre Spencer: Both. Mostly, it's the teachers because in the beginning what we do is we do a progress monitoring. We call it progress monitoring type tool, where we're actually assessing where students are. It's not necessarily a paper and pencil. It's the teachers providing a lesson or the teachers
implementing a lesson. Based off of that lesson, the teacher's taking observation as to how well Andre or any other student may be performing on that particular class assignment. When the teacher sees that there's a deficiency, the teacher then pulls Andre or pulls that other student to the side and works with that student in a small group.

The teacher also collaborates with another teacher who is the interventionist to ask for Andre to come to that particular site to get some additional intervention. That happens across the board, rather it's English or rather it's with Mathematics for students to get that additional support. As we continue to monitor how well students are grasping the concepts, that determines if that student need not have that intervention anymore. We provide the intervention for as long as the student needs it, but then we withdraw the intervention when the student no longer needs it and we've now provided enough instruction for the student to master that concept and move forward.

Julie Speer: All of those things sound like no-brainers. Why is everybody not just doing that? Intervening early, preschool, full day kindergarten, just letting the kid get into AP if they want. You're taking away barriers, you're making opportunities. You're having success with your kids and your kids are performing. Why aren't more districts not doing this? Why do we still have so many kids failing?

Andre Spencer: We still have work to do. We definitively still have work to do. I think in some cases for why some places aren't necessarily paying attention to it is because it's not intentional. For us, it's very intentional. We strategically look for areas where we're not doing well and areas where we are doing well. In the areas where we're not doing well, we try to fix it. We don't want to mask it with the areas that we are doing well. In circumstances where they may be some districts that are not as progressive I guess I could call it, I think it's just a matter of being very strategic and being very intentional about what needs to be done in order to fix the problem. It could be money in some places as well. I think that's a critical point.

I know for us, in Harrison School District Two, we are very strategic about where we put dollars to make sure that we are providing support in the right places. That means that there may be some locations where they won't get an equal slice of the pie because they don't need an equal slice of the pay. It gets into that equity versus equal component. We look at
what's most equitable. If we're identifying that there's a population of students in our district that may have a higher or greater need than other population of students, then we need to make sure we're supporting and paying attention to that need. We're not dismissing a population of students. We're paying attention to them, but we're giving some additional support and attention to where that support and attention is needed. I think that is where the difference is made. We're very strategic. It's not just me focusing in on this particular area, it's everyone throughout the entire district having a focus on that particular area.

My thought and my sentiment and my voice has always been, if we have any school that's not successful, any school that's failing, we've all failed. If we have any student that's not successful, no student is successful. I think when we come about it from that approach to really show that this is holistic, this is a team approach. It's not about one group doing well and another group not doing well. It's about everyone doing well. When everyone is doing well, we as a team will do well.

Julie Speer: What percentage of your student body is on free and reduced lunch?

Andre Spencer: We have 76% of our students in our district who are on free and reduced lunch. That's pretty high.

Julie Speer: That's very much the demographic of DPS and yet, their gains have not been as great. Is there a silver bullet? Is there a magic wand to fixing this gap? Or is it really just doing what you're doing in Harrison? Just calling it out and taking care of it? Can we decrease this gap across the country? Can we fix it in Colorado? Can we make opportunities for all students here in Colorado?

Andre Spencer: I absolutely believe that across the country and the state of Colorado, in any city, in any state in our country we can fix the problem. We first have to acknowledge the problem and then we have to strategize to see what we're going do about the problem. For us, in Harrison, one thing that we don't spend a lot of time doing is talking about the problem. That's not going to resolve it. We actually have to do something, put forth an action. That's what's going to make a difference. When we begin to problem solve, if it doesn't work, that's okay. Let's do something different or let's fix what's not working and continue to progress and move forward.
I think when we look at the achievement gaps and the opportunity gaps in our country, I definitely believe that it's something that can be fixed. I think we have to be very intentional about fixing it. We have to acknowledge that we can fix it. We have to hold people accountable to making sure that it gets fixed. We also have to recognize that if we're saying that this is important, we have to put some resources to it. I believe that if you begin to assess where we're spending dollars, and that's not to say we get enough dollars in education, because we don't. We can always use more.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about Colorado's per people spending. People don't know where our money comes from.

Andre Spencer: We can definitely use additional resources towards education, public education, within our school systems throughout our country. But yes, especially here in the state of Colorado, but I think we have to be strategic in where we're spending our dollars. If you are saying that your focus has to be on providing kids opportunities to take advanced placement course, Concurrent Enrollment course, providing your middle schoolers the opportunity to take high schools courses, we have to make sure we're putting monies into those particular areas. We have enough teachers at the middle school level who can teach those courses. We're providing academic resources at the middle school level for teachers to be able to effectively teach those courses. If we don't do that, the problem will not be fixed.

I think the problem gets fixed when we're very strategic, we're very pinpointing on what the actual issue is and attaching some resources to fixing that particular issue, and being very intentional. I think sometimes in education we kind of get caught up into the whole accountability measure of well, I don't want this to be an issue. Well, if it's an issue, it's an issue. I don't want it to remain an issue. That's where I live in Harrison. We don't want it to remain an issue. If it's an issue, okay, what are we going to do about it? How are we going to fix it so that it is not an issue next year, this time? I think that's what will begin to make some repairs and fix some of the issues we're dealing with in education.

With regards to the sustainability that we have in our district, we really hold true to the initiatives that we put in place. If we may not necessarily see the immediate outcomes, we don't necessarily throw it away. It's something that we may may a tweak to it to make an adjustment, but we
have to stick with it in order to see the outcomes that we're looking for. I think sometimes in education, we will jump on a bandwagon of let's do this, this year. Oh, that didn't work so let's do something different next year. Oh, that may not work, so let's do something. I think that that can create a lot of confusion and that can create a lot of chaos for us.

In Harrison School District Two, we've been very strategic. We've been very consistent on this is what is our focus, to help us to achieve x goal, whatever x goal may be. If it's not working, what do we need to do to fix that thing so that it works. We know what the best practices are as educators. We know what the best practices are. We know that sometimes some of those best practices may take a little more time for it to manifest and for us to see the outcome that we're looking for, but if we don't stick with it, we'll never see that outcome. That's something that we do in Harrison School District Two, is be very strategic and consistent on what we're actually implementing so that we can see the outcomes that we're looking for.
Julie Speer: Let’s go back in time, 1960s, before busing. Where did you live? What was going on in your life? Talk about the climate in society, especially in regards to racial inequities and integration.

Anna Jo Haynes: I’m a native Denverite. In fact, my family was the first Garcia in the fambook and now it’s like Smith. I was born where the Auraria Campus is now and then lived for my entire life and still do in Northeast Denver. When I think about the 60s, I think about turmoil. Lots of things going around country wise, really the start of Civil Rights Movement and how tumultuous that was. I think, for me, it was the beginning of segregation as I knew it. My children are mixed. I was married to a black man. I knew that I was going to have to be very, very active in their lives in everything they did and record because it was going to be a little tough in some spots.

Julie Speer: That’s very brave in that time frame to marry a black man.

Anna Jo Haynes: Yes. I couldn't get married in Colorado. I had to go to New Mexico to get married because it was not possible to get married in Colorado.

Julie Speer: Because it was illegal?

Anna Jo Haynes: It was illegal, yes. As my kids were growing up, I knew that there were things that needed to be done and that I needed to be involved and furthermore I thought they need to be involved as well. I involved them in everything I did. One of the things I did in 1965 was to get involved with the Head Start, The War on Poverty. I helped put that together in
Denver. Because my youngest was 4 at that time in 1965, I thought I actually could go back to work so I work for the Head Start Program. My office was about a half a block away from the center where I work. I work and did my volunteer stuff for the Congress of Racial Equality. I went to Chicago to train under [inaudible] and brought that information back and used it as we began to look at segregation and inequality and those kinds of things.

What we did in the CORE office was to make sure that ... We were concerned about schools and what was happening there. We have a lot of ski bunnies come in and they were hired to work in our district. At the end of ski season, they were gone and you didn't see him again. The kids, there was not equitable education. We decided that we needed to do something about that. We had the people who were part of the Congress of Racial Equality who were the white members of the organization go into the schools and just monitor what was going on where there enough books, talk to the teachers a little bit, find out what kind of a background they had and so forth. We began to build a case to say that things are not equitable here.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about the start differences.

Anna Jo Haynes: We knew that there are schools on the south side of the city. They had adequate books. They had everything they needed and our kids did not. They often didn't have any books at all or if they did, they couldn't take them home because they want to keep track of them. I could understand that when you don't have very many. We found out just a lot of things about what wasn't equitable in our side of town. Of course, we had people going into schools on the other side of town just to be sure that we were not making this up. This was really fact.

We decided that we needed to do something about it so we started with an old mimeograph. I don't know. You are probably too young to know what that is, but it was the old drum kind of thing. When you wanted to print something, you turn it and crank that and you copy these things and that's what we did. We cranked those out at night with all the facts and then hand deliver them after dark to the people in the neighborhoods with facts about what was happening in their schools so that they could get educated and become advocate. It was fun to do, very exciting because it felt like you are doing something that's really worthwhile.
Of course, the parents didn't know who was putting it out there. In the beginning, we didn't put any attachment on it at all. This is just some information. As the bus began to happen and because I was working in Head Start in the neighborhood in the day, I heard a lot of people say, "Did you did that fire? What do you think about that fire?" It was easy for us to then think, "Okay, it's time to maybe talk about this with the neighbors and to say, 'What do we want to do about that? Is there something you want to do? Now, that you know that there is inequality here and your kids are not getting the same kind of thing, how do you feel about it?" We began to have small little focus groups and have people tell us what they actually saw, what they were thinking, what they saw. We asked them if they would be willing to sit in that school so they could have the same experience that we had in terms of finding out the information. Some of them were not allowed to come in which was interesting.

Julie Speer: Because of their skin color?

Anna Jo Haynes: Yes. Some of the parents were not allowed to come into the school because we were talking about Latino parents at that point and black parents. Schools are not the place that was very welcoming at all. For many of these parents, schools had not been welcoming to them as well. They didn't know enough to say, but it's my right to do this. We realized that we had to do a lot of educating about what is your right as a parent, what's your responsibility as a parent. We spend a lot of time that was not necessarily, what you would called rights way to look at it, but certainly a way to say that's what schools are for. You are supposed to be making sure that your kids get some things they need. We did a lot of that kind of educating. Eventually, we then began to work with people who were thinking about what eventually became the Noel resolution. Then, we could combine our efforts in a very significant way to say this is really important work.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about Rachel.

Anna Jo Haynes: She was a wonderful woman, Southern, well-educated, from a family of doctors and educators, just marvelous woman. I helped on her first campaign. In fact, my 2 youngest children were young enough that they were in a playpen in the office where she was running. I spend a great deal of time working for her on that campaign because I knew that she had what it took to be able to get something done that she was well
respected. That what she needed to have. I mean, they were a lot of people out there at that time who were doing the street stuff and the things that needed to be done to make sure that you could get work done, but you had to have people who also had the respect of the community in a very different kind of way. To have those 2 elements working together was really, really important. Her election to office was critical. We work very, very hard and it was very organized. We knew we had an uphill road or at least we thought we did, but she won fairly handily. Then, she served just beautifully for years.

Julie Speer: Was having an African-American school board member a big deal at that point? Had there been any?

Anna Jo Haynes: There had not been any black school board members. Rachel was the first. Then, it was really meaningful that we had somebody who we thought could really speak for the community and was courageous enough to be able to do that. I knew it would be a tough go, but she was strong and that was very important and she wanted to do it. It just fit nicely the fact that she was ready and we were ready for her. She was trusted and respected and educated. All the kinds of things she want in a school board member.

Julie Speer: You were gathering this data and educating folks under the disparities in the schools. Was the Noel resolution being pieced together at the same time? Was it coordinated?

Anna Jo Haynes: Our work in getting ready to see what we could do about the inequities and so forth, it took a few years to do actually. It was not a really fast process. A lot of strategic planning went into it and so forth. When Rachel was elected to the school board, she knew that we were doing some work and she knew that it eventually would be helpful to her to be able to give her in a sense what she needed. She was elected later, but it was close together and that’s when after she was on there for a while. She then worked on the Noel resolution. That also took a considerable amount of time before it could do at end. She had to learn who her allies were on the board whether or not this could even happen. She did a lot of work and she relied heavily on those of us who are working in the community for detail and so forth so that she could speak to it adequately.

Julie Speer: Explain to me what the Noel resolution was and why it was so necessary?
Anna Jo Haynes: It came from the base of equity. Our kids are not getting the same kind of thing and this just isn't okay. She felt strongly that we had to develop something that would say, "How do we make this happen?" What came from that was then to say that maybe we needed to bus the children, but something happened even before that. There was a move in the community and it was partly with the Park Hill neighborhood. Then, in the neighborhood where I work from, Head Start which is near Northeast Denver, which is a little further down. The Park Hill community was in a sense kind of ready to do their part to help that happen, but none of that happened overnight. I'm trying to get that information ready for her so that she could get it done was really important.

There are something else I want to say that I missed that I think is really important to say and that is that while getting ready to strategically try to do something that would impact all of the kids across the city and really be good education for all children was to see whether or not people would be willing to be volunteers on the buses. Of course, I offered my children immediately. My children were one of the first kids on the bus to the south part of the city. That was even before the Noel resolution. There were people who were willing to do that. It was interesting how that worked, but it also set the stage to be able to say, "This can be a good thing." It helped considerably with the Noel resolution and because she had information from people who were doing it and doing it on the volunteer basis before it became mandatory.

Julie Speer: I also heard that she filed or submitted the resolution right in the aftermath of Martin Luther King's assassination.

Anna Jo Haynes: That's correct. The resolution was done very close to the time that Martin Luther King was killed. It was kind again the strength. It was the grief that went on with that to say, "I fought so hard. The leader is now gone." How do you then ask people to step forward and what do you do to step forward. There was a lot of anger and there were people who had different organizations. When I worked in Congress of Racial Equality, there were the Black Panthers out there. There were all these groups of people who had something to say about how it should work. The work was really hard because there was a lot of work that needed to be done to ensure that everybody had something to say and they would be heard. We wouldn't always agree about the strategies for then how you move that forward, but at least the end goal was a good thing.
There was still some people who felt like, "We should just take this in their own hands. An eye for an eye." There was a lot of turmoil. The pastors in the community were wonderful and were extremely helpful. The faith community helped a great deal at that point in time to try to keep believing on things so that we could move forward with what we thought this would help. It was what Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and all of the leaders in the world have said, "If education is okay, at least kids have a fighting chance." That's what was used by ministers to say to people, "We've got to do it this way and we've got to do it peacefully because it's important to do so."

Julie Speer: When people think of segregation, they think of the south. They don't think of Denver, but talk to me about the reality of the segregation here. You are very close to it.

Anna Jo Haynes: There are people who think that Denver was just a little community where there was no worry about segregation and so forth. I grew up in a time where if I wanted to go to the movie, I had to sit up stairs. You could not sit down stairs. There was a movie theater right on the corner of Colfax, New York. It's now an Asian place to eat, but it was a movie theater. We were always escorted upstairs because we could not sit down stairs. The swimming pools in the city were such that the white kids went on Monday and the Latino kids went on Tuesday. The Asian kids went on Thursday. The black kids went on Friday. The pool was drained so that it would be clean for the white kids to swim again on Monday. Curtis Park. There were definitely things here that were not equitable at all. Certainly not like in the south where your lives were on the line, where they were going to be lynchings and so forth. It was still there and you knew it.

There was the Ku Klux Klan and so forth, but there were dividing lines. For instance, a dividing line before the Noel resolution and before my kids were put on a bus on the volunteer basis. When they realized that blacks were moving closer to what they call the demarcation line, and so there was one before, York was the demarcation line. Then, it became Colorado Boulevard. When it started and to cross in to Park Hill, the district decided to build a new school. My daughter, Happy, who is now on the school board went to Park Hill for her first year while the school was being built, but then Barrett was built then on the west side of Colorado Boulevard to make sure that all of those kids would not be
going to Park Hill School. She had to go to Barrett because that's where
the black kids went.

**Julie Speer:** We know about the Noel resolution, run through the defeat of Benton
and Monty and then the Keyes case.

**Anna Jo Haynes:** Confusing times. There were some good people on the school board. It's
kind of what I've said with my kids over time. Important to say to them
that we should not be judged by the color of our skin nor should white
people be judged by the color of their skin. That there are always good
people who are willing to step forward and I would tell them the story of
Harriet Tubman and all the various stories where without those people,
we would have never been able to do some other things that happen.
Because it was so tumultuous and kids hear and they see and they ask
questions, at least I did and I'm sure other parents did as well explaining
to them that there are really good people. Rachel found those good
people on the school board.

It was Ed Benton and Monty Pasco and they were wonderful. She relied
on them very heavily to help with what needed to be done. I can
remember working on their campaigns as well. I remember when Monty
lost the campaign and how just devastating that was because that was
really important key for us and somebody who was there and willing to
take whatever punishment. He took in his home neighborhood for
standing that for what he felt was right. Those times were very, very hard
on all sides of the issue. There were very good many white people on the
other side of town who felt the same way. He wasn't out there all by
himself or neither one of them, but the toll was there. It's not easy to do
that.

**Julie Speer:** Were you shocked when they lost?

**Anna Jo Haynes:** When Monty lost the campaign first that we were shocked because we
thought we really had it together. Of course then we were convinced that
it had been tampered with. That something just was not quite right. You
don't like to think that that would be the case so we were careful not to
say it so loudly that the kids would hear it. They know all of the stuffs
going on and they know it's about them and they know why. When you
think that somebody stoop to do that, so we wanted to be really careful
that how we handle that. We had to step back and just say, "Well, it's a
defeat. We have to go back at it again." We certainly had those feelings
that maybe that was the case and it wasn't just said if that were the case that people would do that. There was certainly wasn't any proof so we had to be careful about it, also careful about how you talk about it so that children are not doubly hurt by the situation.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about the Keyes case.

Anna Jo Haynes: I think the big thing that came out of all of this was then the Keyes case and I knew both Keyes. They were friends. I remember being asked if I could do that. If I would consider being one of the people on the case. I said, "I just don't think I can do that. My kids had gone on the buses going south and a volunteer basis before that time." I felt strongly if I was going to continue to do that I have to be a lot more cautious and careful because we knew that there would be violence. I wanted to do the right thing, but also you don't want to walk directly into what you think. It might be a violent kind of thing and they had wonderful people to step to the plate to be willing to do that.

Julie Speer: The Keyes had a bomb on their porch, right?

Anna Jo Haynes: Exactly. It was very scary and my children were terrified that somebody whose family they knew had a bomb thrown at their house. Then, to hear how they handled it the next day was just so wonderful. "You can't scare us. You can't make us not do this. This is too important not just for our kids, but for all kids and for our country. This is important to do." They could have cried and said, "Well, I'm not gonna do this. I'm gonna step back." That kind of thing, they didn't. They handled it so beautifully that the children felt comforted by that. When I said to my children, "Look what they've said. Listen to that very carefully." It's scary. I said, "So, we need to be cautious as well" because people knew that we were deeply involved. Of course, the kids wanted to find out what we could take to them and what could we do to be helpful in that sense. It was so scary to think that somebody would go to that depth to say, "No. We can't do this."

Julie Speer: It's the Keyes case, but there was many other names on the lawsuit, right?

Anna Jo Haynes: Yes. I think there were 3 or 4 other names. I can't remember them right now. It was handful of names. The people who step forward, I think there were 4 or 5. The max would have been 6. It was very small number of
people who were part of the Keyes case. I think they wanted to do that to [inaudible] the lawyers who were working on this and so forth because I think they felt that they wanted to be cautious as well. To be able to help the people and guard them and safeguard them in best way they could, it would have been much harder to do with a large group of people.

Julie Speer: Where they all families of color?

Anna Jo Haynes: As I remember it, they were all families of color. They wanted to be sure that they could withstand the trauma that was going to be a part of this. What they ask the people in the community to do was to be helpful then in whatever way they could to continue to do what it is that you are doing and be ready if we need you to go some place to help in this kind of situation and so forth. They were well regarded and it was such a brave thing for them to do. It's kind of like the Little Rock Nine. That was sort of our Little Rock Nine. They were highly regarded by the community for their willingness to step forward and take the heat that it was going to come from that.

Julie Speer: It went all the way to the Supreme Court, it also shows the conflict in the community. Talk to me about that.

Anna Jo Haynes: In our biggest dreams did we think it would go to the Supreme Court. It was the only first case to go to the Supreme Court around this issue, Denver, think about it. I think it was because there was so much pre-activity that it happened before and our sort of getting ready for it and being strategic about how we did it and so forth. Then just had incredible attorneys helping with the case. Then, when it went to Supreme Court, I you could have been here that day, if people could have live that with us to know that it went that far and that's how important it was. What it meant to us as individuals that we work so hard that we got there. That they saw it and then when we won, it was just jubilation. The community just gathered. It was joyous because it sort of vindicates, "You're right." The highest court in the land says that "You are right and that we cannot continue to have this kind of inequality." There's something just so uplifting about that. When you [inaudible] and something like that can happen, it's just amazing.

Julie Speer: It was years, right?
Anna Jo Haynes: Yes. It took a long time. You kind of lose hope in there so we stayed strong. We did things that kept it up. We did things like when they close the doors. We did a little freedom school for the kids who wanted to come. We kept trying to do things that were uplifting to the kids because the kids knew that this was about them. That things weren't fair. To the kids, it was not equitable. It's just isn't fair. Some great leaders came out in this city around the stuff. People who've become leaders in the city were part of that.

It came from I think just like the largest Civil Rights Movement felt that you could stand on any street corner and talk to people and you could feel like this is right for our country and we are on it together. There's nothing more uplifting than that. It's like you really feel like you are a part of something that's a huge movement. I can't remember any other comparable feeling to that to say, sometimes I try to explain it to my grandchildren, "How did you feel?" Just the happiest you could possibly feel, but the sense of pride mixed into that said, "This is really meaningful and you've done something that really does make a difference."

Julie Speer: Let's fast forward and talk about the early busing drama that happened because it wasn't as smooth. Talk about busing and the bombs and torching at the bus depot.

Anna Jo Haynes: Early on, when we thought, "Okay, we've made it kind of." You think there is euphoria and fortunately you can live off of that for a long time and it's a good thing that you can. You can go back to rejuvenate yourself a little bit because there was certainly a lot of things that were not good. They were bound and determined to defy the order in whatever way they could. When the busing started, the safety of the children ... People were terrified. They wanted to do it because they knew it was the right thing to do. The people on the other side were just as terrified were going to go on that side of town and they hate us and they think we are awful. The poor kids had the trauma. Then, when you hear about buses being burned and bombed because people didn't want that to happen.

Questions for my children at that time, "I thought we won? I thought this was going to be okay and look what's happened? Maybe we shouldn't have done it." Trying to them work, to have them understand that anything worth doing is hard, but if it's worth doing, you stick with it. You live through whatever it is no matter what. You hold hands and you hug and you take care of each other in the best way that you can. When you
see somebody in the grocery store and you sense they are feeling down, you do what you can to perk them up. If there is great fear, you say, "How can I help you with that?" It was really awful and the newspaper blasted it all over the place and it was just plain scary.

Julie Speer: Did you put your kids on the bus every day and just pray?

Anna Jo Haynes: Yes. I have to tell you there were times when I jumped in my car and went to the other end of the bus because I couldn't stand not knowing that they were okay or not.

They did know that, but I drove to make sure. When I saw them get off the bus and I'm like, "Okay, they are okay." It haunted you all day long. Whatever it was you were doing, it was hard. To feel joy about it, you felt like it was something you had to do, but there wasn't a lot of joy in it. It was just plain hard work and you have to know you have to do that too. We felt so euphoric when the decision came down and you feel you win and then you don't really win and it's just half there. It's very hard and demoralizing and so forth. You just have to buck up and you have to be twice as strong. It's hard enough to be a parent. It's the hardest job you ever do. To do it when you have to explain those kinds of things that are ugly. They are just not pretty at all. No one wants to feel that somebody doesn't want you there that you are not okay. It's hard.

Julie Speer: You say Northeast Denver, but tell me exactly where you lived and then where your kids were bused.

Anna Jo Haynes: When I put my kids on the bus as a volunteer, we had moved to the 27 in Cook and that's where we remained throughout their school years. They took the bus and my elementary school kids went to Carson Elementary which is at 1st and Grape. I have to tell you some things that I want to let people know that there was some wonderful people at that school, wonderful teachers. There were some that weren't so good. Just we're on the other side and couple of my kids have teachers that we are on the other side and a couple had really great teachers who did the best they could to make the kids feel welcome. The principal was good and that was very helpful. I went probably more than most parents never go to visit to make sure that they were okay and also to let the teachers know that I knew it was hard for them as well.
They did the best they could under really trying circumstances. I think for the ones that weren't so open, they also knew that I was going to be monitoring and they had to do it even if they didn't want to that it was not okay not to do that. If I was going to put my kids on the bus, then they had to do their job. That's what they got paid to do and they couldn't mistreat my children or any of the other children who were on that bus. Me and a couple of other parents who just made it a point because some other parents couldn't go to be there and to make sure that they understood that we are going to be there to do 2 things; number 1, to support them and number 2, to make sure that it was going okay.

Julie Speer: After the busing was made and ticketed, do they continue going to the same school?

Anna Jo Haynes: They did, yeah.

Julie Speer: Where did they go for middle school?

Anna Jo Haynes: They went to Gove Middle School which is back over in our part of town, but a lot of the kids from other parts of the city were bused to Gove. It was kind of their home school. My children were in their home school, Gove, and so children were bused in to Gove from other parts of the city.

Julie Speer: White kids?

Anna Jo Haynes: Yes. My kids had for the most part really good experiences there. For a lot of this, I said the community leaders in town who were a part of that if you ask them, they say it was the best thing that ever happened to them both sides of the fence. They've never would have known those kids otherwise. It just made such a different in their lives and how they live today. What kind of a wonderful thing that was even in spite of all of the terrible things that happen as a part of it that if you ask them, they say "Just so enriching and so good. We had no idea." That's on both sides of the coin, which is a good thing.

Julie Speer: Where did they go for high school?

Anna Jo Haynes: They went to East. I went to Manual. They are East Angels. When they were ballgames going on, I root for East when you don't play my school.
Julie Speer: Let’s talk about Manual. The busing time at Manual was great, but then when it ended, it was sort of the end of Manual.

Anna Jo Haynes: It was.

Julie Speer: Tell me about your experience at Manual when you were there and how it was for you.

Anna Jo Haynes: I was in the old school. The last class out of the old school so I'm old. They built the new school and we watched it being built and so forth. Off and on over the years, I've been really involved with Manual, with friends of Manual which is the alumni association and then back about 10 years ago, maybe a little longer when they did the 3 schools because they closed it down and then opened it up. They drew the boundaries in such a way that Manual no longer had any kids from any other part of the city where there could be any kind of exchange that made a difference. The school just went downhill. We are talking about a neighborhood of poverty where parents had to work 2 jobs. They couldn't do what happen in some of the schools were parents would hold fundraisers, do things that parents do for their kids.

The parents there didn't have the ability to be able to do that. For whatever reason, there wasn’t the support early on when they first did that that there should have been in the main office to make sure that these kids were not put into that kind of situation. Parents who really wanted the best for their kids started sending their kids outside of the Manual boundaries. The school just got smaller and smaller. Even the [inaudible] School so not just Manual, but the whole area and not just Manual in that side of the city, but in very many parts of the city where there are poor families. Though same kinds of things happened that were happening way back when we're doing are due diligence and going in and seeing what wasn't equitable. This was also the case. It was just different way to look at it.

They didn't get the same kinds of things. Unfortunate to say, but it was true. Not only where the boundaries changed and kids left in those communities without the supports they needed. Not just the kids, the teachers as well. They didn't have the resources they needed to be able to do it. We have found ourselves in the last several years in this situation that every bit as bad as it was now. Are they struggling to get better? Yeah, very much so and things were so much better now than they were.
6 or 7 years ago, very, very important. I want to say something and you can use this or not use it. Because my daughters are on the school board and also worked for the district, people might think that I would be just as total supporter, nothing wrong has ever happened and so forth. It's for this thing from the truth. I'm one of their friendliest adversaries because I will say what I don't think is going well. I think that's really important and we've worked that out between us so that she knows and they know that what happens there, things that she has to not say that they are working on whatever were very good about doing it. If something comes out and I think it's not the right thing, I'm going to say it. When I'm saying I think it's so much better now, I really mean that. It's better because I think they realize they have to do better. If they don't, it will just be horrible for the city. It just would not be good. When they finally decided, "Okay, we got to do this. There's just no backing down."

There was again enough of a group of people in the city who said, "We can't let this happen. We cannot let kids not have the things they need." It's going to be hard and it's going to take a long time, but we've got to say, "We're gonna do it." I think they are doing it. One of the things I was very involved really has nothing to do with this piece of it, but it has to do with the charter schools. I was one of the people that help pass that legislation because I thought it was so important to have some models on the outside that had different kinds of ways of looking at how schools are run and what you do. That if we didn't try something, then we might just take forever. It might be 50 years from now before things look better. We had to do something that at least gave them a fair shot at kids having some choices and parents having some choices. I felt pretty strongly about education and whatever it takes to do what needs to happen.

**Julie Speer:** Let's talk about modern day segregation. A lot of ways we are doing this piece because we are looking at the 20-year end of busing, using that to have a dialogue about the current re-segregation in Denver Public Schools. Although the divides are not necessarily black and white, it's more brown and white now, but there is segregation in our schools. Race is still an issue in America. We have it in Colorado. Talk about your feelings about segregation in schools today.

**Anna Jo Haynes:** Having been at this for a really long time, I think that for a while it seemed okay. We have done the busing and now we've been relieved of it. I think people were just tired and most people want their kids throw a possible to go to school close. I think that's just human nature. I think
that's that what they wanted. I think just from conversations with various people that they've felt that it was safe to say that you could do that now. That things would be equitable. It would be okay to have kids go to their neighborhood schools that it wouldn't be a bad thing. It's taking years for people to realize that it's total segregation again and it's classicism as well. It's in poor neighborhoods again. I don't think we are seeing people choice in from certain neighborhoods in the city into the poor neighborhood. The offerings aren't there. Why would they subject their children to that? Yet, as a whole, we subject the poor children to it. It's the same kind of thing. It's just different coating. That all, but it's the same.

I think the district is trying desperately to figure out how they do that. How do you pay teachers better who work in schools where we now have a choice system and these kids were have choice here or they live in this neighborhood and can't get to a choice situation. What do we do? Do we pay the teachers a little bit more and say, "You deserve it. This is hard and we want you to have the best." I think they are really trying hard. I worry that it won't work without having something as significant as busing once was. I certainly don't know the answer to that. I think they are struggling with what the answer is and now saying that schools can't have a lot more say about what happens in their school [inaudible]. Maybe with a little more freedom for the schools to be able to say, this is how we want to do it and maybe what parents feeling like they have more to say about what happens. Maybe it can work. We have to hope that it will because I don't know that anybody has another sort of wonderful idea that might work.

I think what we have to do is put as much effort into this as we did into saying, "We are gonna put this kids on the bus and it's going to be hard." All those kinds of things. Somehow or another we have to work hard enough to come up with some solutions that can maybe get us to the next place. You have to be strong and courageous all of those same things. It's just that maybe at least in the schools there's not that much violence. There certainly are in neighborhoods because people have been totally segregated again. Our housing patterns have much to say about how schools are. When we said you can choice out, but you still live in the same neighborhood and if the neighborhood feels totally locked in and they are in food deserts and they are in places where its abject poverty. Can doing the things we are talking about right work? I don't think anybody knows.
We are going to have to wait and see and have a lot of hope that maybe it can work. Just keep trying because I think that's where we are now. We are going to have to rely on hope and a lot of elbow grease. People are saying we do care belongs to us and we've got to do something about housing and we've got to do something about food deserts. We can't just send kids to school hungry and I know they are trying to do the best they can to make sure kids get fed. There are no jobs for people in those neighborhoods. If you can't work, how can you do that? Schools feel that. They get that. They have to work with it every day. Gets are going through misery. Young man who formerly were able to work in places like McDonald's or some place else, the older people need those jobs. There's no jobs for young people. What are they supposed to do? How do we care for these kids? They are still kids too. If we know anything about child development, which I do, that these kids need help until their mid 20s in some way.

Until then, they need us and we need to help them. We've got to be there for them. If we don't, what are we facing as the future goes on? We can't just say, "Well, too bad" or ignore it because it's too painful. We've got to figure out ways to do that. I remember back during the Civil Rights Movement when people joined in each other's homes to share a dinner and talk about what they could do together. There was something very powerful about that because they felt like we can do this. It's small enough and it's a group who can smith together and say, "We can do something in this neighborhood about gangs." Maybe we figure out how we feed them instead of having them stand the same line as the older people. The just feel like they are hopeless when they stand there. I look in this guy down the line. He is old. Am I going to be just like that in a very short period of time? I worry incredibly about those kids just as I do the little ones that I work with all the time. They all fall that same category of needing us as adults, as parents and as people who care about the other children because they are your children too. They may have to take care of you so you better take care of them.

Julie Speer: How do you describe the achievement gap?

Anna Jo Haynes: Let me say something about the achievement gap. In education, we come up with these words all the time. There's no other profession I think that does the same thing. They come up with stuff and they use it. I'd say it's more of an opportunity gap. I think if kids have opportunity then we wouldn't have an achievement gap. Let's give them opportunity. Let's
find every way possible to give them opportunities. If they have the right opportunities then they are going to achieve. Kids are so resilient. They can go for a long time and then just the smallest thing will happen in their life that's really big for them and suddenly they've changed and the resilience just comes forward. They are just remarkable creatures being able to do that.

We've got to do things that help them store that resilience, be able to use it and create and make school fun. They have to take test and I totally believe [inaudible]. We have to have some accountability and I fought hard for it in the legislature. I believe it and I think we have to do, but we also have to make space for all the other wonderful things that kids like. They love the arts and the music and façade and they like to make things with their hands. We just got to make sure they have that and that there's some hope and joy and resilience in their lives. Because if that's not there, it's so hard to move forward.

Julie Speer: Talk about the importance of public education and also what you would say to folks who are affluent and opt out of the district?

Anna Jo Haynes: Let me talk a little bit about public schools in a sense why they are so important to us. I think there are some things you can change and other things you may want to change bit and pieces of it, but you want to leave enough there that is for the greater good. I think public schools are for the greater good. They really make a difference and that's not to say that private schools or parochial schools or charters schools or public schools. That's not to say that other forms of education aren't good. They are all good. Every kid is different and certain things fits certain kids. I think the fact that this institution that we know is public schools is unique. I can just remember I love school. It was a place to be with your friends and it was joy for me. It provided great joy, not all the time. When I think about school, I think it was one of the happiest times of my life.

I think that that's not necessarily the case for kids right now. We have to find a way to do that again because public schools are for my reasoning the base of a community. It's what pulls communities together. I would like for us to find a way to do what ... I forgot the gentleman's name, but early childhood person who really spoke about schools being the hub in a community and even with choice this could happen. Back when I was a kid, the janitors lived in the building. I remember sleeping with my best friend who was the janitor's daughter. I slept overnight in the school. Talk
about being invested in the school and the teachers lived in the community. Clearly, we are not going go back to that. Some things you can't go back and we live, but there are things that you can do that are similar to that.

If the schools were hubs so that people felt close to that hub, if there were parent education classes at night, if kids could be in there on Saturdays but in there for different reason than school and I think that if we had those kinds of things, schools would change. I really believe that. I think it would make all of the difference in the world and that's still if you wanted to choice out, you could, but the school is there for you. You're a taxpayer, it belongs to you. You should be able to utilize it and surely in this great country with all these brains. There are wonderful things that people are able to do. We should be able to come up with the way to say, "Why can't these places be hubs for the school?" I work with a program out of my agency called Babies Ready for College.

Parents come and they learn all about the milestones of kids. We talk to them right away about your child being ready for college even though they may choose to something different so that they are really prepared and how you advocate for them in what you do and that schools are really important so that they get a feel and we are in some Denver Public Schools. They are already at a very young age. Their parents are there. There's already a way to feel as if they belong. When you do that, all of us feel that way. If we are going to a club to exercise or whatever [inaudible] there's a hub and there's something important about that no matter what. They sound very old-fashioned, but it isn't. In this country in the beginning in the 1900s when European immigrants came to this country, there were settlement houses for them. Several of our centers were old settlement houses at one time.

People came here and everything was taken care of for them. They were taught how to speak English. Their children were taken care of. They got all their immunizations. They learned. The parents learned English and they help them to get a job. No wonder they eased in to the fabric of the country the way they did. Those ideas if they work then, people are the same. They are not different now. They still have children they care about in the same way. Why aren't we doing some of the kinds of things that make people feel the way that would make a difference in this country? My worry is if we don't do something, then we're going to live to regret it. I just think we've got to figure out ways to solve the problems and
sometimes we think about the problem as being too big or there is no way out of it. Sometimes the simple as things will make a difference.
Arturo Jimenez
School Board Member D5, 2007-2015
Denver Public Schools

Arturo Jimenez: I am director of District 5, school board member, Denver Public Schools.

Julie Speer: What would be your years of tenure?

Arturo Jimenez: I started, I was elected in November of 2007 and my term will end this November of 2015. I'll be term limited.

Julie Speer: Tell me where you grew up and where you went to school.

Arturo Jimenez: I grew up mostly in Northwest Denver. I had a couple semesters where we moved to Greeley as a child. I was fortunate enough to go to Catholic school when I started. My mom did bingo. She's a single mom. My dad was in prison till I was 12. She had me go to St. Mary Magdalene for kindergarten and 1st grade. St. Catherine's for 2nd and 3rd grade. 4th grade, I did one semester in Greeley, came back and forth during 5th, 6th, and 7th grade and then went back to St. Catherine's for 7th, half of 8th grade.

Yeah, during three years, we were back and forth between Denver and Greeley. I had a step dad and we were trying to work all that out and move back and forth with his job.

Julie Speer: What about high school?

Arturo Jimenez: High school, I went to Ranum High School and Adams District 50.

Julie Speer: So mostly Northwest Denver growing up?
Arturo Jimenez: Yes, all the time.

Julie Speer: What decade would be your growing up decade if you will?

Arturo Jimenez: The 80s was my decade.

Julie Speer: Talk about the 80s and talk about the realities of the neighborhood. Then describe the socioeconomic demographics, racial demographics, and what the vibe was like in the neighborhood in the 80s.

Arturo Jimenez: Okay. Kind of leading up to the 80s real quickly. My family is one of the first Mexican families to move in to Northwest Denver. That was mostly Italian back when they came in in the 50s, 40s and 50s. It was a very working class neighborhood, very ethnic community.

There were, for instance, three Catholic churches within three blocks of each other. Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Mexican church, where my grandparents still live down by the train tracks where I almost meets up to I-70. Then just right up the block, two or three blocks is Mount Carmel, the Italian Catholic church. Then another few blocks away, St. Patrick's, the Irish Catholic church.

A very Catholic working class neighborhood, but a lot of little ethnic enclaves within the neighborhood itself. It kind of stayed that way I think for many, many years. A really rich ethnic tapestry of working class folks. A little area that was always considered rougher than the rest of Denver.

When I went to school in Adams County District 50, my classmates would be afraid to come down to my neighborhood to visit me. They would kind of be scared to drop me off down in Northwest Denver. I always lived and grew up next to North High School where my parents went and graduated from. My mother graduated from North High School.

My grandparents, my grandfather went to Bryant-Webster. My father went to Bryant-Webster. They both went to Horace Mann and then they both went on to North. That's the neighborhood that I come from.

The 80s of course was a great time for me. I just remember the wonderful Northwest Denver just so rich with everything going on. Break dancers, hip hop, and then towards the end of the 80s, more of a gang issue started up in the entire city. By the time I headed to high school,
there was a lot of issues I think with street gangs and youth crime and a lot of issues around that.

I had some wonderful friends and most of them went to North High School and graduated, became professionals, doctors, psychologists, teachers, business people. They've done wonderfully, but I chose to go a little bit further north to 80th and Zuni to unincorporated Adams County. I still have always lived in Northwest Denver and always will I believe.

**Julie Speer:** By the 80s, was the community becoming more Latino and Mexican at that point? Or were there still the Italian and the Irish communities? What did it look like back then?

**Arturo Jimenez:** Yeah, back in the 80s, I think the Latino community started to kind of take over in terms of population and the cultural centers. The schools, the population, there were still the traditional Italian community that stayed there, but they were older for the most part. The same with the Irish community and the Jewish community more around Sloan's Lake.

The youth though, and the schools were filled with Latinos and the schools became ... Have stayed to this day to 80%, 90% Latino until recently. Things have changed very recently.

**Julie Speer:** Why did you decide to run for school board?

**Arturo Jimenez:** The reason I ran for school board is because I was a part of the Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition for many years since college. In 1992, I started out with them and remained involved with them as a volunteer, as a presenter. Then eventually as a board member, and then finally I became president for about five years. I still consider that my organization, my home organization, my community organization. Even though I'm not at their meetings or formerly part of their organization, I still feel like I'm a part of the Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition.

We always wanted a voice in policy. We always wanted the districts to address parental involvement, parental engagement, family engagement and still feel that the districts and the school systems really do not give enough attention to parental engagement and don't realize how much that can affect and enhance student success, student academics and learning. I wanted to have that opportunity. I ran for school board to give a voice to those of us in the parent engagement area.
Julie Speer: Does the Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition focus on Latino parents or is it all parents? What is the membership like in that group?

Arturo Jimenez: The Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition is a broad-based multicultural parent organization. Probably the majority of the parents involved are Latino, a significant number of African Americans, of Anglos, of Native Americans, of different ethnic groups, but largely Latino reflecting the larger demographic of the schools. They also have the largest number of Spanish-speaking parents of any parent organization in the state.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about race in America. How race is in Colorado and Denver right now. We’re having a very candid conversation about race, poverty and achievements and how the achievement gap remains quite significant.

Talk about the reality of race and racism and how in your experience, that's still alive today. How it kind of translated towards the school systems. Or how do you think that the school systems mirror the community at large.

Arturo Jimenez: Yes. I mean I think race still plays a significant factor and racism in maintaining the achievement gap. Absolutely, segregation which is what we really want to talk about. I think for so many years, the United States has seen race in terms of black and white. In Denver, we absolutely had a more significant, larger African American community.

Now, we look at that community becoming smaller and smaller moving to Aurora or moving to other communities. Denver really has a disappearing African American community. Now, we have a larger Latino community that has been filling the schools, and so it requires a different mindset to understand the Latino community which is very diverse.

You have folks from all different racial backgrounds within the Latino community. You have folks that are more European, folks that are Native American, more African tied together. Many times, people think by Spanish, but the majority of them speak English like my family. We grew up speaking English only.

It's a dynamic that really needs to be understood in a historical context around the Southwest and the US incorporating Mexico into the United States as we know it. If you don't have that context or understand the diversity or the complexity of the Latino community, it's easy to say that
we really don't have true racial dynamics that exist, say, as in the East Coast.

A lot of folks who come in to our school system from the East Coast, really don't understand our student population. Since they don't see the large black white dynamic within our district, they really don't identify the racial complexity, the issues around schools and around segregation that they really need to understand in order to address the problem.

Julie Speer: Talk about the segregation that you see across the district.

Arturo Jimenez: Okay. The segregation across the district has returned to the same levels or higher levels of segregation than we had in 1970 and the Denver Public Schools. Anyone who knows about school segregation knows that Denver was under the premier US Supreme Court order, the Keyes case, ordering desegregation of the schools. In order to do that, forced the busing basically across the district.

The busing, of course, what happened was an unintended consequences, there was white flight out of Denver schools. There was something like 140,000 students, if I have my math correct, and it dropped down to very low levels of 60,000 students at one point. We've been trying to grow our student population back and recapture the student population from before.

Now, we're up to close to 90,000 students which means that we're growing again. However, the segregation by race and by economic status has returned and we see higher levels than before. The difference is, as I mentioned before, is that we're seeing more Latinos who are representative within the ethnic minority and the lower economic class that is being segregated within the schools.

Julie Speer: How are you on the SPF and the school ratings? I've had folks who say that it's good and it's transparent. Then there's other folks that say that it labels a school and causes more harm than good. What's your take on SPF?

Arturo Jimenez: The School Performance Framework in Denver was a very innovative, one of the first of its kind measurements to measure growth. To see if schools were moving in the right direction. If they were very low in proficiency and in student academic achievement. If they were growing at a rate that
showed that they were working really to move their students towards proficiency.

I supported that and I do support growth models. They're very important to know that we're moving in the right direction. However, going beyond that, to use the School Performance Framework as a way for parents to understand how good a school is doing or how well a school is performing. Or also to use this high stakes School Performance Framework to close schools or to award them with autonomy or give them other privileges so to speak or other flexibilities that some schools don't get, I don't agree with that, because I think that that's a misuse of a growth model.

Absolutely, I would say that the School Performance Framework confuses people. You might see a green school on that School Performance Framework and it looks like that school is doing better than the rest. However, if you look only at the proficiency, if those students in that school are at the level of proficiency for reading that they need to be at an acceptable level, you'll see a lot of green schools are not even close to proficiency.

Many of the astute parents in our district completely ignore our School Performance Framework when they want to understand how well a school is performing and simply look at performance. That was very detrimental for the Federal Government to only look at performance in the past and not give credit to schools that were moving in the right direction.

I agree, using that model for federal purposes to show that schools are succeeding and moving forward, but I don't agree to utilize this as a way for parents to understand where the school is at at a certain point in time.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about the achievement gap. Everyone defines it slightly differently. What is your definition of the achievement gap?

Arturo Jimenez: The achievement gap is that difference in academic performance and proficiency between African American and Latino and Native American students versus the Anglo or white students in any particular district. This is not just in Denver issue the achievement gap, it’s a national issue.
In some jurisdictions, they have more Native Americans than any other ethnic minorities or they might have more Southeast Asians in other districts or more African Americans. In Denver, it's absolutely more Latinos about 58% to 59% of our student population are Latino.

There is a large and static, and some say, growing achievement gap depending on how you look at the proficiencies or the growth models. People differ in how large or how fast that difference is growing, but it's absolutely there. No one disagrees that we have an achievement gap and that it is not a preferable and not a desirable way. That it's not a just result that we want for our students. I think we have agreement across the board amongst to all people in the education area regardless of their ideology or their approach.

Julie Speer: You've done a really good job of showing that we're in this reality. How do you suggest we get out of it?

Arturo Jimenez: We have to look at doing two things that we haven't done before. We need to integrate the schools. I didn't say desegregate, because I'm not ever going to suggest that we go back to busing. We need to integrate the schools racially and socioeconomically. Part of that, just as important as creating strong neighborhood options for schools. That means investing into schools rather than letting them fail or utilizing a competitive model that does require winners and losers.

When you do that competitive model, you're going to see this segregation and achievement gap just grow exponentially. Right now, that's been our strategy. I say our in terms of the larger education community, but I would not recommend that we continue down that path.

Julie Speer: What do you mean by that? Do you mean the competition when two schools are sharing the same campus? What do you mean the competition?

Arturo Jimenez: Really, what it boils down to the issues in schools right now, the differences in approach and ideology, is that there are a lot of folks that are pushing towards corporatization and outsourcing of schools. That requires a business model and in the business model, of course, you have competition between entities and school management organizations and public schools.
You have some schools that win and some schools that lose. When you do that, you have students who win and students who lose. Guess who those students who lose for the most part are going to be, are going to be the ethnic minorities and lower economic status. That's why we have a growing achievement gap.

We need to find ways to integrate schools that also account for demographic shifts. We have a strong gentrification movement happening in Denver. When I say gentrification, I mean a lot of upper income, mostly Anglo, vast majority Anglo, upper income folks moving in to Denver. Professionals, educated, lots of money, and the housing prices rise as a result of that, as a response in the market.

Lower income folks, many of which are ethnic minority populations, then are pushed out of the city and county of Denver, or their rents are raised so high that that causes so much difficulty for them to make the rent, to pay the bills, to buy a house. To then have time also to dedicate to their students and invest more money into education. That's what I mean by gentrification.

We have to address the gentrification and that can't be done by a school district alone. That has to be a collaborative process with the City and County of Denver. It has to be a collaborative process where we look at affordable housing and a strategy to ensure that we maintain affordable housing throughout Denver.

As long as we can maintain a good amount of affordable housing through all parts of Denver, we can maintain integrated schools as well. So far, I have not seen the leadership of the school districts, particularly Denver Public Schools and the City and County of Denver work in concert. Work vigorously to address that issue. That's what has to happen.

I've done a lot of good work I believe in my time on the school board. I'm in my 8th year, but I lament to many folks that we have not had the city district cooperation and program around this issue of integrating schools and having affordable housing. We just have not worked on that as a team. I wish that that can happen and I will continue to suggest and facilitate and help in any way that I can once I'm off the board so that it can occur, because I don't think it's too late.
I think city council, the mayor can absolutely work with Denver Public Schools and the school board and create those strategies along with Denver Housing Authority. Along with the developers are going to have to be a part of this. The neighborhood organizations are going to have to come to the table. Everyone is going to need to be there and so that's going to take real leadership and real work rather than just this being parochial and kind of staying in our areas.

The fact is, I'm a board member for Northwest Denver, but I vote on the entire city and county of Denver and the schools that affect neighborhoods across the entire city and county. Just siloing my work or my leadership does not benefit or doesn't benefit the entire community or it doesn't solve the problem, so we're going to have to approach it differently.

Julie Speer: You mentioned corporatization. Are there certain schools that have that model?

Arturo Jimenez: Corporatization is kind of a big area. Corporatization has to do with schools, the testing regime with No Child Left Behind, with all the curriculum, core curriculum. All the things that take big money and now are controlled by corporations. The school curriculum, the testing, and now charter management organizations and school management organizations and outside school consultants are creating kind of a big money. Wall Street-driven profit motive for a lot of schools.

We oftentimes don't talk about it and we say, "Oh, these are non-profits that we're dealing with." We still don't address the issue that school districts now are outsourcing many of the things that they used to do. I'm not saying that that's wrong in all instances, because sometimes it's cheaper.

Sometimes it's desirable and those collaboratives, public-private collaboratives are valuable, but we're moving towards this market business model that really does, in the end, cost a lot of money and then it does result in winners and losers. That's the great debate too. Do we just need more money for schools? Right?

Julie Speer: Ours is one of the lowest, right?
Arturo Jimenez: We have a state that has one of the lowest amounts of funding per pupil in the nation. Some people say it's 48th, some people say 49th. It's very low, but at the same time, we have millions of dollars that we're using to run our schools. It's not that simple to say that if we just had more money we could address the problem.

If the system is set up to continue this segregation, to continue the widening of the achievement gap, throwing more money at it does not necessarily solve the issue. I do believe that we do have a short fall in funding and so we absolutely need to fill that and pay for what we have.

We also have to address what we are doing with the money as well and we have to be very critical about that. We have to be thoughtful and innovative about how we're going to approach the problem. Just putting a business model in place is not thoughtful and is not innovative in my opinion. I've seen very little innovation with regards to parent engagement. Very little innovation with regards to closing the achievement gap and I still have yet to see any of those business models truly address the issues.

Julie Speer: When you look at STRIVE and DSST, they're doing great work with minority students and closing the gap. Do you see them as successful model? Because they're charter, they're kind of separate. What is your take on that?

Arturo Jimenez: My take on the success of charter schools in general is a mixed bag. The results nationwide and in Denver basically tell us from an objective standpoint that charter schools are not doing any better than public schools as a whole. Then you break that down into specific charter schools or you could group them by charter management organizations.

Some folks really are fans of some charter management organizations and certain schools, but for the most part, you still see many of the schools that are popular. Particularly the corporate management organizations, the once that have a portfolio of schools that run more than four or five schools at a time.

For the most part, they are focused on their public relations more than on student achievement. I haven't seen the results from those schools and I hate to pick on any one of them in particular on camera, but when you look at their socioeconomic status, you look at the low income
students and the ethnic minorities in each of those schools, and you do not see a very high proficiency among that group.

Some of the schools have found a way to mix socioeconomic status and racial groups and kind of have floors and ceilings to ensure that they have a certain number or a certain amount of ethnic minorities or free and reduced lunch students. By doing that, they also have been accused of cherry picking. The students who have higher achievement or whose parents are more involved or might be a little bit more upper income, or may not need as much special ed service. Or may not have as many issues needing English language acquisition services.

It's unclear that they have been more successful. I would say that none of those charter management organizations has shown clear results to address students that have the average number of special ed. I mean special education in terms of not just mild, moderate, but severe also. Or students who have English language learner needs. I mean those who are at the high end of ... They just need a little bit of intervention versus those that need a lot of service for beginning or intense, severe.

Julie Speer: The monolingual Spanish speakers basically.

Arturo Jimenez: Right. More intense English language acquisition services than others. When you look at the schools that are addressing the students that have the whole spectrum of those needs, whether it be special ed or ELA, English language acquisition, or have a lot of free and reduced lunch students, or ethnic minority. I don't see a lot of difference in any of the schools in Denver with regards to success.

I think most of it is public relations and putting a lot of money into celebrating their success and maybe comparing themselves to other schools that don't have the same amount of money or don't have the ability to engage in that public relations dialog. I think if we rely on that, we're never going to get to the true problems. Also, if we just rely on the public versus charter dichotomy and demonize one or the other, we're never going to get to the root of the problems either.

Julie Speer: How do we integrate then? That's the number one priority, right? Then just raise the bar. Is that to raise the achievement? The integration I know you said was number one. What was number two?
Arturo Jimenez: Then affordable housing in order to support that. We have to do the two things which is look at integration, socioeconomic and racial populations. Then we have to combine that with effective strategies for low income housing, for mixed income housing, to ensure that communities have access and have a diverse population.

The area I represent in Northwest Denver and Lower West Denver, Globeville, Elyria and Swansea have been areas that have always desired and tried to achieve more integration on their own just as communities. I think the rest of Denver has struggled much more. They have their successes and I definitely don't want to downplay much of the work that's been done through the years and other communities. Especially in East Denver.

Definitely, other parts of Denver have kind of sat back and been okay with making sure that those kids aren't in their neighborhoods. Or that if they are that they're in a small place, a smaller contained area and haven't been as engaged as the rest of Denver in terms of integrating their neighborhood with affordable housing, number one, and then integrated the schools, number two.

Julie Speer: I don't see the city changing anytime soon. We're not going to have an integrated city tomorrow. Are you a proponent of social engineering and saying, "All right, each school has to have 30% high income and 70% or 50%, 60% free reduced lunch." Again, that is the busing model I guess. How do you integrate if the city is not integrated?

We're one of the fastest growing cities. As you said, we need to deal with it now. It's a snowball. It's just going to be a bigger. The longer we ride, the bigger the snowball is.

Arturo Jimenez: Right. It really is affordable housing that's at the key point of this. You can call it social engineering, but being equitable in terms of our housing for all of our residents at Denver is much more than social engineering. It's an equity. It's an equality issue that we really haven't addressed. We haven't taken that up as a leadership team between the city and the school district and the state and the special districts.

We have to do that. If we don't do that, we can never really see integration. We'll just see segregation or flight of ethnic and lower income communities from the very boundaries of the City and County of
Denver. We should be very concerned that the African American neighborhoods that we knew in Northeast Denver near and far northeast have almost disappeared.

There still are significant neighborhoods, and not to say that they're completely gone, but we have so many less African American neighborhoods than we had before. It's not that they moved in to other parts of Denver, they moved out of Denver. We can see that that will happen to other ethnic minority groups including Latinos and low income folks. We really have to address that issue city-wide.

**Julie Speer:**

We've seen that there's a sub-urbanization of poverty. You've spelled it out with the gentrification and we see that. It's now going up in Adams 14. Sub-urbanization. What interesting experiment that I see happening now is with Northfield High School and I understand the goal is to have 30% to 40% free and reduced lunch seats, although now there's more. I think it's like 60%, because the Stapleton families aren't filling the school yet.

I've heard both sides. One side says, "We're going to keep that ratio into the future." I've also heard families saying, "It's going to be the Stapleton neighborhood school and we fill the school to 200%, then that's what's going to happen." As a school board member, I'm sure you're up to speed on what's going on with Northfield, but what would you say is the hope of Northfield and what's your prediction?

**Arturo Jimenez:**

The hope of Northfield is that families who are more socioeconomically and racially diverse from the Montbello area, a little bit farther east, will come and help fill the school and bring diversity to the school. Also, I don't think it's ever been said publicly, but it's right next to Commerce City, so there's expected that there will be a draw from the surrounding suburbs near there, particularly the Commerce City and Adams 14 schools.

The issue with Stapleton is that it lacks affordable housing. What may occur, and we can prevent this and we can work so that this doesn't happen, is if we do not bring affordable housing to the Stapleton community itself, what you may see is a school that is filled with students who don't live in that immediate community, and that immediate community moving their students to schools elsewhere.
That has happened over and over again in Denver. It continues to happen, so we have an opportunity now to address it head on and talk about affordable housing with Stapleton itself. Rather than rely on kind of a quiet busing system which would mean bringing those kids from Montbello or letting the students from Adams County find their way across the Denver border.

It's still a busing strategy. It's not forest, it's not going to fix the problem, and therefore busing will not fix the problem again. We saw that it didn't happen before. It's not going to happen now, but Stapleton truly has to address more affordable housing in the Stapleton development itself.

Julie Speer: I've heard from folks who work with the developers in Stapleton that there is 20% affordable housing. What would you say is the ideal ratio of affordable housing in the community to achieve that integration?

Arturo Jimenez: I'm not in a position to give a ratio of how many affordable housing units should be within a development, but absolutely what we've seen so far has not been adequate. It needs to be much greater, without putting a number of it. It has to be much more intentional.

Julie Speer: DPS right now has upwards 60%, almost 70% free and reduced lunch. That would suggest then really to have a diverse neighborhood school, you would need 70% of the houses to be affordable.

Arturo Jimenez: You're right. To reflect the population of Denver Public Schools that has above 60% of students who are at the free and reduced lunch economic level, you absolutely would have to create that space within your community and your developments for those students and their families to live next door, to work next door, to travel, to play, to go to hospitals and libraries and rec centers. As well as the schools together. It has to be a comprehensive plan.

Julie Speer: Do you see the Country Club area or Stapleton having 70% affordable housing around them like realistically? That's not going to happen. I'd love a community where that was the reality, but ...

Arturo Jimenez: I think you're right. Some people say, "You'll never say that over a high percentage of affordable housing around the Country Club or around Stapleton, or around some of the other developments." Also, I would say
that Denver is special. We absolutely have done things differently than other parts of the country.

We've lamented how we've lost a large percentage of our African American population in Denver to the suburbs, but at the same time, using that example, we have a much greater percentage of African American leadership in all levels of government that don't reflect the diminishing population of African Americans within the city and county of Denver.

We have done things in Denver and we continue to have a large number of representatives who advocate for a community that's becoming smaller and smaller. I think that in Denver, we have advocated for those who don't have majority status, those who don't have power and don't have the demographic or socioeconomic power of other populations.

I think we can address it and perhaps I'll be the first one or one of the first few to start pushing those communities to offer affordable housing within their neighborhoods or within their developments. I know it well. I shouldn't say I'll be the first absolutely. I should join the chorus I guess. I'll join the chorus of those folks who are calling for affordable housing in all communities in Denver.

Julie Speer: A lot of folks would say that far Northeast Denver has been turned around. North Denver has been turned around. Now we're going to focus on turnaround in Southwest Denver. How would you talk about turnarounds specifically with North Denver? Were you a part of that turnaround and is there still work to be done?

Arturo Jimenez: The term turnaround is a loaded term that has different meaning for a lot of folks. I think if we're just talking about bettering our schools in Northwest Denver, we've seen a rejuvenation of the neighborhood schools in particular that some other communities have not seen.

Skinner Middle School for instance is a neighborhood school that did not receive a lot of attention from the district. Was in a lower income and high ethnic minority Latino area. You saw a large number of parents who were Anglo for the most part and higher income simply commit and dedicate to sending their students in bettering the school along with other middle income and low income Latinos to make more class offerings and really better the public school in their neighborhood.
They were successful as a group, and now they're being celebrated by the state for their high growth or high enrollment, their rise in student achievement. They are really a success story within Denver Public Schools in the city. Now, we're seeing that that is translating to North High School. Those are our real gains where we haven't seen in many parts of Denver a focus on and a rejuvenation of the public schools.

Instead, what we've seen as a reliance on the corporatization, the private corporations utilizing private money being charters mostly, that that has been the strategy for the most part. It's come with mixed results that really haven't shown any real change. I think if we're going to have real change, we have to focus on strengthening those public schools like we did at Skinner, like what's happening at North High School. There are other examples all around the city, not just in Northwest Denver.
Barbara O’Brien: I’m President of Catapult School Leadership and a member of the Denver School Board.

Julie Speer: Tell me how many kids you have and where you chose to send them to school.

Barbara O’Brien: I have two boys and I’ve seen a lot of change because when I was working in the 1980s, it was almost impossible to find before and after school care for working parents and ended up having to use a private school and today of course, virtually every school has before and after care so parents can work. It’s been a wonderful change I think.

Julie Speer: Your children didn't have to go through the busing process then?

Barbara O’Brien: No, my boys didn’t go through busing. They came along after that was over and things were pretty settled so we didn’t experience that.

Julie Speer: Did you personally grow up in Denver?

Barbara O’Brien: No, I grew up in Southern California in a little farm town and went to public school all the way through.

Julie Speer: What led you personally to work in education? Would you consider the Children’s Campaign actually being education?

Barbara O’Brien: The way I got started working in education was that I was the speechwriter for Governor Richard Lamm and a report had come out
called A Nation at Risk, saying that we were becoming mediocre in our public education system and falling behind the rest of the world and Governor Lamm asked me to look at some data on Colorado and we were very definitely slipping. We were a good state for education but slipping and he gave a speech that sort of lambasted public education and that created quite a furor.

Julie Speer: Did you write that speech?

Barbara O'Brien: I wrote that speech and I had to write all the answers to the 3,000 letters that came in telling him he was wrong. What I found was that almost all the letters talked about the adults. They almost never talked about the kids who weren't getting an education. It was about don't criticize teachers or wish you just pay everybody more. Whatever it was, it was about adults, and I became really angry about that and I thought, "Why are we missing this opportunity to think about the next generation, the kids? Why is this all about adults?" That sort of put me on a path toward pushing for better schools that's lasted 25 years.

Julie Speer: What timeframe was that when you were working for Governor Lamm?

Barbara O'Brien: That was in the mid 1980s.

Julie Speer: Talk about your tenure in the Children's Campaign and poverty in general and how poverty has an impact on education specifically. Was that something that you tracked annually?

Barbara O'Brien: I started working at the Colorado Children's Campaign in 1990. We had been created because Colorado had just gone through an economic downturn, and our organization, which wrote an annual report on the status of kids, discovered that the greatest number of the new homeless were children under the age of 9. We also found out that our college graduation rates were starting to drop. We were discovering what's now called the Colorado paradox, that it can be a great state for adults, we tend to be educated. Compared to the rest of the country, we tend to earn higher incomes but when we look at how the state was taking care of kids, especially kids who didn't come with all the resources of the middle and upper middle class, it had almost nothing in place for them.

The Colorado Children's Campaign was created to push for a better education system and health system for Colorado kids.
Julie Speer: I would imagine then since the '90s you’ve seen the trends. Overall is there less poverty now? Is it the same? Are there any high level trends that you see?

Barbara O’Brien: The trends I've seen for kids in Colorado is that it's almost like following the housing market or the energy market. They rise and fall with the economy so when we've been through a rough time like we were for the past couple of years, you see the poverty rates for kids skyrocket, and when things get better and parents can earn more, they come out of it. The fate of Colorado kids and our economy, which drives housing and transportation and food and all of these things, they are just inextricably linked. I've just found that when you work to improve the lives of kids, you have to also be looking at what can you do about the economy.

Julie Speer: Let’s go down that little path for a moment. Are you saying then that schools need to be working with the Economic Development Committees of the state? How do you do that?

Barbara O’Brien: I think the way you come at that odd connection between economics and education is that you look at whether or not kids are really being prepared for the workforce or for college and do you have community colleges that really give kids certificates or higher in industries that are booming. For example, it turns out Colorado has the fourth best creative economy in the country. Those are jobs that are linked to movies and drama and set design and graphic arts. Do we have high school requirements that give kids the basic skills to study those things, and then can they go to a community college or a college and have a certificate saying that they can build sets or they can do graphic design or they are trained to sing in a production. It's just thinking through at every stage what do they need to be prepared.

Julie Speer: What neighborhood were you living in when your kids were going to private school?

Barbara O’Brien: Congress Park right in the heart of Denver.

Julie Speer: That would be near your office. Do you still live there right now?

Barbara O’Brien: Yes, yes.
Julie Speer: Did you follow the end of busing and the turmoil at that time? Do you remember any of that?

Barbara O’Brien: The part that I was most involved in was the switch. Once busing was over, then what do you do? If you switch to neighborhood schools but you still believe in equality of opportunity, how do you reconcile those two things? I wasn’t involved in Denver public schools. I tended to work more at the state level but there were lots of meetings and panel discussions about what you do to make up for how dominant housing is for whether or not your schools are integrated. If people want to go to a neighborhood school, fine, but what if it’s not very strong and they want their kids to go somewhere else. To what extent is the school district responsible for transportation or the city, so lots of conversations about how we tried to equalize educational opportunity, given that busing was gone and neighborhood schools were back.

Julie Speer: What were the conversations that they had specifically around Manual High School, the lines were tentatively redrawn to be down York. Would that have made your students then to go to Manual versus East?

Barbara O’Brien: I followed it very carefully, and by the time my kids were old enough for high school, actually they would have been in the George Washington boundary. They were just - they were being redrawn all the time trying to balance these things, trying to balance the number of kids so that schools would have a proportionate number of students attending them and George wouldn’t have been right for my kids so I was able to choice them into East.

Julie Speer: You personally did go through the choice process then. Talk about how that was for you as a parent. Were you worried?

Barbara O’Brien: I didn’t know enough to be worried. It was so relatively new back then and there weren’t a lot of parents doing it. Most people, you just had to call and sign up. My main glitch was that they changed the sign up date without letting us know until it was on spring break and a bunch of us were going like, “Why are they telling parents when it’s spring break time that there’s been a change?” None of us knew and you get a lot of educated parents who are upset at our process, the process changes but it’s a lesson in what do you do when you’re voiceless. How do you get the system to respond to you if you don’t know how to get a lot of connected
friends together to say, "You, DPS, blew it on this one and we would recommend change."?

One of the things I learned about trying to improve education for kids, especially kids at the margins was that in working with the legislature, they really resisted categorizing kids by race or ethnicity. We couldn't propose a policy change or a budget change that would benefit mostly Hispanic kids who had English language learning issues or something else. What we had to do with the legislature was talk about risk factors but they did not want to talk about race or ethnicity. I think that's one thing that has changed over the years that we're becoming a little more willing to grapple with how complicated those issues are and we don't have to pretend they don't exist quite as much.

Part of the change has just been the environment for at least talking about the challenges we have.

Julie Speer: Describe current day reality of Denver public schools. We talk about the segregation that DPS has right now, why do you think it is the way that it is?

Barbara O’Brien: The segregation in DPS is very much driven by affordable housing and when you have parts of the city that are reasonably affordable, it’s going to attract people that can put that into their budget and the more they struggle to pay for housing, the more mobile they'll be, the more there'll be concentrations in small apartment buildings. It's very much a function of housing because we don't have busing. On the other hand, we hear all the time from parents, they want neighborhood schools. They want their kids to walk to school. They wouldn't choose a school far away even if you gave it to them because you might have an aunt or a grandmother who can watch them after school. I’m talking about young middle school and elementary.

Part of the segregation is just what housing cost drives the kind of families that are going to live in that neighborhood and then what they need for their own after school care or when a child is sick, to take care of a sick kid. It's led to these schools that I think are very segregated. We know that. We talk about it all the time. What I really admire about Denver and DPS is that over and over again, the voters vote for repairs to schools all over this city. They vote for arts education in every school. They vote for athletics. The support of the public to try and make sure
that every school is healthy and safe and well designed as it can be and kids are getting the extra things they need, we just have the best track record in the state of doing that but on the other hand, we have schools where we just have not learned how to make sure all kids get a good education.

If you come from a home with a lot of books and a lot of education, your kids are probably going to be pretty well educated, and if you come from a home without those things, our schools have not figured out how to overcome that.

**Julie Speer:** How are our schools a reflection of our neighborhoods in our city?

**Barbara O'brien:** I think the way the schools reflect this city takes place in a couple of different ways. In one way, there are four and five generation families in Denver and they love their neighborhood schools and their grandparents went there and they want their children to go there. There's this sense of rootedness in communities. On the other hand, a lot of those schools have really declined over the years and aren't very good so the strategies DPS is trying, can you fix the existing school? That turns out to actually be quite difficult. Can you bring in a new school that immediate does better? STRIVE? DSST? Rocky Mountain Prep? University Prep? There are all sorts of examples of new schools being able to just reset the clock, start over and achieve better results for kids, but in their heart of hearts, what the parents want is the rooted neighborhood school.

It's this tension all over this city between feeling connected to a neighborhood but knowing you have one chance to get it right for your child.

**Julie Speer:** A lot of folks have talked about Manual and what happened with Manual and what's happening now. Is there anything that you want to add to that conversation and why we're where we're at and what we're doing to fix it?

**Barbara O'brien:** Manual is the perfect example of a city that's divided between loving its traditional school and knowing something very fundamental has to change, so we've been through a number of principals, a number of models within Manual, and yet there's been almost no improvement, maybe a little bit of incremental improvement for the kids. We're starting another effort to reboot Manual and somehow, I don't think we know
really what to do. I have great faith in the current plan to have health and health sciences theme to Manual but the reality is once the lines were redrawn and neighborhoods became more linked to schools than during busing, there is no question that it was more of a challenge to get kids math and reading, science up to grade level and we failed.

Julie Speer: Is the plan right now to have multiple schools within the building?

Barbara O’Brien: The plan now is to have one school. I'm very positive about the new principal they're bringing in. He has turned around the middle school. He has a track record. We have a lot of community support and fundraising going on to really enrich the offerings that they have. I'm hopeful but the reality is you have kids going to an elementary school that wasn't up to par. They go to middle schools, many of them not up to par and you can't work miracles starting in ninth grade so to me, the whole feeder system has to be addressed. You can't just address the high school.

Julie Speer: Northfield, how did that plan come to be and what are some of the surprises? Also explain what the boundaries are.

Barbara O’Brien: It's the old Stapleton airport and surrounding areas, going over Quebec over toward Monaco up to I-70. It's a big part of Denver. It's a surprise almost everyday. First of all, it's the biggest urban housing development in the country. Very few places have had that kind of ability to just create a brand-new community and have parents with school-aged kids absolutely flock to it. The last estimate I heard was that they're going to be 30,000 families in what used to be an airport and they're having kids and they're loving it there and they need elementary schools and now they need another middle school and the high school's about to open so we're seeing an ecosystem of an education district or a mini-district within a big district emerge in the space of a decade. It's really pretty remarkable and we get surprised all the time by this issue of do you want a high-performing charter school? Do you want your children to be able to walk to a neighborhood school? Do you want them all to be good? Do you want to pick a STEM theme or do you just want a traditional school?

Because we have a choice system in Denver, everyone gets to communicate what they want for their kids and the board and the superintendent have to figure out how you make a coherent plan out of that and you have to plan, like who's having babies, they're going to need
an elementary school in 5 years. It is an absolutely fascinating educational experiment going on right here in Denver.

In the fall of 2015, we're going to open the first high school out at Stapleton and it will be partially built out. It will be able to take in several hundred students, but by the time it's done, it's planned to be about a 900 student high school. The voters of Denver approved the money for it. That's another example of Denver supporting what's needed in one part of this city even though another part might not directly benefit from it and we're starting to be pretty creative I think about letting some of the highest-performing principles in these new schools run two schools, share peer learning with other principals. We're trying to be as creative as we can without taking best practices from what's happening at Stapleton and making it available to other parts of this city that are having changes in demographics.

Julie Speer: Was Northfield going to be intentional in the amount of free and reduced lunch?

Barbara O'brien: Making sure that there is an openness and availability to free and reduced lunch students at Northfield has been a core Denver value all along. That's one of the reasons we're changing, we're getting flexible boundary lines so that children who are lower income from parts of Park Hill have a chance to go to a high school in Stapleton or that kids living above I-70 could come down. We're doing as much as we can to make choice mean that there's real diversity of economy and of ethnicity and race and everything in Northfield and all of our high schools.

Julie Speer: Do you think that having diversity within education makes education stronger or that it is a value of education?

Barbara O'brien: There's a lot of research on the role of diversity in student achievement. I think the takeaway message is that different kids learn in different ways and when you have kids who are together and learning from other students who do things differently or when you have classrooms that don't just teach the way a middle-class Anglo kid learns best, but also has - there are proven techniques for working with African-American students for example that are more relationship based and more group learning based, which works for some students. Figuring out how we have teacher preparation, teacher training. We have students who are used to being around kids who learn differently. I think for society,
diversity is an absolute essential. The results are mixed on research, on how much it changes kids' achievement but I think for having a whole society that is tolerant of other people's different ways of doing things and thinking about things, it's critical.

Julie Speer: If you look at our schools now then, we're not giving them that diversity in a lot of respects in a lot of the schools. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Barbara O'brien: We are not giving kids the benefit of that diversity in a lot of our schools. Again, housing plays such a big role in who goes to what school. I don't know if there's a solution to that in sight but I do think that Denver's becoming actually pretty innovative. There's something called Success Express, which is a bus that links a variety of schools and that lets parents hop on and off if they have parent-teacher conferences at a middle school and an elementary school. We are flexible with our boundaries. We have a Choice system so I think Denver is probably leading the country in figuring out how to make the district flexible in a way that doesn't impose its ideas of diversity but lets people choose where they want to go and that will help create diversity and opportunity.

Julie Speer: Is Success Express only in far northeast Denver?

Barbara O'brien: Success Express is in far northeast Denver and it's a bus that goes in a circle around that whole part of town and it lets kids jump on and off, so let's say if you go to a charter school but you want to play on the baseball team at a traditional school, after school you can take the bus to the traditional and then when the baseball practice is over, get back on the bus and it will loop around by where you live. It lets parents use it. It's this very innovative idea of transportation and I know that there are conversations around other parts of the city about having something similar.

Julie Speer: What about southwest Denver? We're really looking specifically at Lincoln High School and we're looking at the remediation rates there. It's a high 90% of Latinos. I mean it's a segregated school. Are there any thoughts historically and current day about Lincoln High School or southwest Denver in general?

Barbara O'brien: The parents in Southwest Denver have been talking to the school board for a year and a half now that they want the district to come up with a
plan to improve the schools in southwest, and they are very impatient and the district I think frankly was a little slow to respond but now has some very ambitious plans that could be very disruptive to communities. Again, it's that immediate access to a better school or rooted love of your local neighborhood school in conflict. The way this is going to happen at Lincoln is actually very interesting. I went to a meeting of parents about the changes that are coming and they had Vietnamese translation, English translation and Spanish translation simultaneously because of the mixture of the parents who turned out for this meeting.

Top of mind, no matter whether you're Vietnamese, Hispanic or Anglo, top of mind was the safety of kids and how would the safety of Lincoln be improved. Second was they don't want drill and kill, they wanted to make sure that music and art and after-school sports, the band and all the things that you think with the high school would still be there, and then they were open. They were open to the idea of a middle school maybe being in the wing of Lincoln that has space, maybe a good new middle school, could be a feeder, making sure that the kids are better prepared once they start at Lincoln. They were open to that. They were open to Henry Middle School being open to redesign and let people who have a track record of running good schools bid to run it in the next couple of years.

The parent engagement was very high. The diversity of parents at that meeting was very high and they sounded like every parent meeting I've ever been to. They want their kids safe and they want them to have full-rounded educations and they were willing to talk about pretty fundamental change to get there.

Julie Speer: What is the plan at Lincoln?

Barbara O’Brien: There are changes coming to Lincoln High School, and it's partly in response to parents who demanded change and it's partly because the board and the superintendent were looking at the education data from Lincoln and it's completely unacceptable. Those kids are not getting the education they deserve. Something had to happen and we're proceeding with fairly fundamental change.

Julie Speer: Is it about the achievement? Is it the remediation rates? What was it specifically with Lincoln?
Barbara O’Brien: Part of it is the achievement. Just not enough kids are prepared to go to community college or college when they graduate. Their remediation rates, once they go, part of it is that people are voting with their feet and attendance at Lincoln is way down. Parents aren't sending their kids there because they know they’re not getting the education they should. There were just a lot of factors that went in to say this isn't a viable school, a little bit too small to have a high school. If parents don't want it, why do we have it in this shape, and they can't go off and do the work they need to do as young adults. It was a multifactored decision.

Julie Speer: Along those same lines, talk about Kepner a little bit. I know that's one of those middle schools that had really low performance. I did not know middle school kids ditched so much. They just were completely disengaged. Then I got to Lincoln and they we're disengaged there as well. Luckily, there's a safety net for them, so talk about Kepner and what happened there and what's happening.

Barbara O'Brien: Kepner Middle School has been on everyone's radar screen as just not responding to any attempts to improve it or turn it around. My colleague on the board, Rosemarie Rodriguez, has worked incredibly hard to see what could be improved or salvaged from Kepner. She told me she went to nine meetings there and the number of times she would be walking through the halls and see students and then when she left her meeting, would see them out on Federal walking somewhere in the middle of the day. Discipline had broken down. I don't think anyone believed the kids were going to get a good education no matter how hard the teachers tried or how much parents, I mean I think everyone just started to think you can't get an education at Kepner.

It is going to be turned into two schools and one is going to be an English language transition program for kids who don't speak English very strongly and the other part is going to be a STRIVE which is a pretty high achieving disciplined middle school with a really good track record in the city. It will be interesting. I can't wait to see which model gets the best results for kids. I think it will be a very interesting way to find out what ultimately works for kids in that kind of tough situation. They didn't believe they could learn. They have English language challenges, so pretty rigorous, disciplined or confront the language issues upfront and try and accelerate what the brain is doing anyway, no matter what words come out of your mouth, in what language and we'll see.
Julie Speer: You brought up STRIVE so I'd love to talk about that. Their scores are really great. There is no achievement gap but there's no diversity either. It's very high free and reduced lunch. It's all primarily Latino and they're achieving really well. Some would say it's segregated so then you're not really setting them up for success long term because of how they're going to go interact in society at large.

Barbara O'Brien: STRIVE is what they call a charter management organization in Denver, which means that they have multiple campuses but they run in the same model and they're overseen by the same executive principal. I think they do a remarkable job and they have just decided that they accept that in their lifetimes, they're not going to be able to change the segregation of housing or of students that they're going to work in neighborhoods where there will be a preponderance of low income Hispanic kids and they are going to make sure that those kids have a different future. They require a lot of discipline. They have a lot of homework. They have extra time on tasks so kids have more learning time. Their teachers just work like crazy and they're getting phenomenal results for kids who normally would go to a Kepner or a school that's failing and they wouldn't have those opportunities. I really admire them for saying we're not going to change social ills right now but in the life of this kid, they have a couple of years, middle school, high school, to be able to go out and compete in the adult world and they are going to make sure that as many of them as possible do, and they'll let the rest of society grapple with its own ills. I just think they do a phenomenal job.

Julie Speer: There's examples like DSST that are consciously trying to keep it integrated. Talk about DSST a little bit.

Barbara O'Brien: DSST has a different model from STRIVE. DSST believes in economic integration in the schools so they have a very conscious lottery system of pulling at random lower income students and middle income students so that they get a fairly even proportion in their schools. They have the highest scores in the entire district. Some of their schools have the highest scores in the whole state and I think their model proves that that kind of integration and diversity is what actually gets kids performing at the highest level possible. I also don't think it's realistic in a district that is predominantly minority. How do you spread enough kids from different groups around to enough schools? You cannot get to 40% middle income kids if you just divided that group up and spread them out over most schools in Denver, if you want to think of it that way.
What I like is both models. We have parents who can say, "The STRIVE schools are in our neighborhoods. Our kids can go to them. We understand them. If we can't get into their school, they'll help us figure out transportation to a different STRIVE campus. They are very family friendly.", and you have a DSST that believes mixing socioeconomic status kids together will get all the kids working better together and you don't have so far to go in pulling kids up because you've got a base of kids and all the research says actually if you have kids doing peer tutoring, they learn more.

There's all sorts of strategies DSST can have, just because it has a mix and you have a STRIVE who's courageous about saying these parents want an immediate benefit for their kids and we're here for them.

Julie Speer: Do you have any thoughts on North High School and what happened with that?

Barbara O'Brien: North High School in northwest Denver is another one of these schools that's in a gorgeous historic building and if anyone has not seen their murals, they need to go. It's a work of art. It's another school that the voters of Denver voted to spiff up and fix the murals and fix the heating and cooling. The rest of this city supporting a school in northwest, it's part of what I love about Denver but it's also gone through a very tough time as the neighborhoods changed and the income of the neighborhoods dropped. School performance dropped. They've tried some changes. They have a terrific principal in there right now, who's getting great results but I think what's going to lift North and the middle schools that feed into North is that the population is diversifying.

We're getting young families with educations of their own and prospects for good incomes moving into neighborhoods with very low income people and English language challenges, starting to all go to the same schools and I think that a variety of elementary schools and Skinner Middle and now we're seeing it at North. I think that mix is going to help lift all of these schools and we have a chance of a different model of how to improve the school, driven by young families looking for affordable housing.

Julie Speer: Do you know the percentage of students who live in Denver but don't go to Denver public schools?
Barbara O’Brien: I’d know the trend. The trend in Denver over the past 10 years has been that after a long period of families leaving Denver public schools, sending them into private schools, moving out of this city, that families are flocking back in. The Stapleton families are just one example. A lot of the growth of the student population has been families who live in Denver and are using DPS schools instead of going someplace else. Part of it is this great opportunity to work on different kinds of schools and new schools and part of it is it helps the budget because instead of losing students, we’re gaining students. It’s helped just funding programs in DPS and it’s a vote of confidence in the citizens that they think these schools are good of their kids.

Julie Speer: How do we avoid the suburbanization of poverty? How do we keep the gentrification in check as we grow, because Denver’s one of the fastest growing cities in the country right now. How do we balance the gentrification with the suburbanization of poverty so that we don’t lose that diversity?

Barbara O’Brien: Mayor Hancock has made quality of life in Denver one of his top priorities and I’ve been to a number of community meetings where his planning people have been talking about housing and how do we make sure there’s affordable housing all over this city, how do we make sure the RTD buses run in ways that lets parents get to work but older kids get to school. He’s been great about opening up rec centers so that the quality of life in every part of this city, especially in the summers, is better. Kids can get out of the heat and go swimming. I think it’s very much on the mayor’s mind. I think it’s a little bit less in the control of Denver Public Schools to work on this. What we can do is let people know, "Your kids can get an excellent education in this city.", and to deliver on that, but the economy, the jobs, the housing, transportation, all those things are really I think going to be the result of a more intentional partnership between the city and the school district.

Julie Speer: I know you’re really involved with the charter movement, if you look historically at the end of busing, the charter schools were ramping up, was there overlap in there in any way?

Barbara O’Brien: I was very involved in helping write the first piece of legislation to create charter schools in Colorado. This was 1992. It came out of this experience the Children’s Campaign and I were having that we had very high quality preschool for low income kids. They were looking great in terms of
readiness for school and by third and fourth grade, all those gains were lost. When a number of us tried to meet with school districts and talk to them about what's known, the evidence on how you sustain those early strengths, they couldn't care less. They felt that it was up to the child to adapt to the school district instead of the school district to adapt to children with new kinds of challenges in their lives.

The charter school movement grew out of all right, well if the districts aren't going to respond, what if community groups want to design schools that are more welcoming to kids that are dealing with economic or family challenges. It just turned out that that coincided with busing and neighborhood schools and all these other things but it really came out of the inflexibility of districts back at that time and their unwillingness to change to meet the needs of modern kids.

Julie Speer: A lot of people are still stuck in that charter neighborhood debate. What would you say to folks to define the challenges that we have now and it's just bigger than that?

Barbara O'brien: I think the debate that's still getting in the way of big urban districts like Denver's is that we haven't figured out how to balance as a society equal opportunity and equal results. Is it enough to just say that there's a neighborhood school that your student can go to or do you have to say, "We're going to make sure that there's a school that can educate your child to these new standards, but it might not be as convenient. It might not be as close to home." I think the way Denver has answered that is to say parents get to choose. They can choose a neighborhood school and we'll try and make that as strong a school as we can but if that school's not right for their child, there will be these other options and the parent will know what's best for their child and let them decide. That's how we are trying to answer that dilemma between opportunity and results.

Julie Speer: How do you define the achievement gap?

Barbara O'brien: The achievement gap is this difference between how different groups of kids benefit from our school system and the question behind the achievement gap is why do some students do so well and other students, we never overcome their zip code or their parents' income level? Why can't schools make up for that? I think in trying to close the achievement gap, it's not in any way to slow down the high achievers. We want to accelerate them but we also want to figure out why our schools aren't
making sure these kids get what they need to also be accelerated and trying to close that would be evidence to the school board that we have figured out how to really educate kids who are behind in a way that lets them speed forward without holding anyone back.

Julie Speer: Do you have any words of wisdom or final thoughts on this intersection of achievement and race and poverty and how as a society we deal with all this?

Barbara O’Brien: Society is having trouble dealing with race and ethnicity and school achievement. We see that all over the country right now. I think Denver is in a better place than most other cities. When you look around at how hard people are working to make sure kids are getting a good education, when you look at the number of people over years who have been willing to serve on the school board, the people who came before me, I'm just in awe of who they were. When we look at the willingness to try different things, to try and get better results, it's a very open, adaptable environment. I think we're grappling with it but I think Denver is within a societal very tough phase, where it's hard to face up to the role of race and class and equality. I don't know right now where that's going to end up.
Bill de la Cruz
Director of Equity and Inclusion, Denver Public Schools
School Board Member, Boulder Valley School District 1997-2003

Bill de la Cruz: I’m the director of equity and inclusion with Denver Public Schools.

Julie Speer: Talk about the uniqueness of your role within a school district. Is this normal that a district has this job title?

Bill de la Cruz: I wouldn’t say it’s normal. I would say that there are some districts who are realizing the importance of equity and inclusion work and have not taken it to the degree that Denver Public Schools is doing currently with this role because we work on both the academics and the operations side of our organization so we’re not limited to just working with teachers or administrators in the principal ranking. We work with transportation and food services, facilities management. There’s also folks who are actually doing training work in some of those areas themselves so then we collaborate with them to support them in some of their work.

I’m part of a larger team called the Culture, Equity and Leadership Team, and we’re a 13-member team that is responsible for all of our leadership development training in the district. We have leadership training. We have a management training for operations. It’s a cohort-based training. We have personal success factors which is student-based. We have DPS teams, school culture academy which is working with whole school cultures. Our team is responsible for all of our leadership professional development in the district and then we collaborate with various departments, and then my team is specifically focused around the lens of equity and inclusion.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about first of all the culture at DPS in terms of inclusion. If we’re talking about race and education, talk about the climate and the culture of DPS.

Bill de la Cruz: I think the climate and the culture has been in the past I think as this work and the work that you’re doing exemplifies has been very divisive, and some of the community engagement work has been volatile and has pitted community
against community. This was again in the previous five years that I did work with
the district, not as an employee, as a consultant. The changes that I’ve seen
even in the last three years have been pretty large in that we’ve moved more
around being more inclusive and really looking at how do we engage a
community in a way that brings various different groups together to have really
rich and deep conversations about issues around race and class and
demographics and really doing it from the lens of not just content, also building
relationship.

How do we deepen and strengthen the relationships that colleagues have with
each other, that students have with each other, that community members have
with each other? Also, from all of those various perspectives, teacher-
community, teacher-students, so looking both peer to peer and also within
different groups to really create a conversational format that engages people in
the long term because these conversations around race and class are not going
to be fixed in one dialogue or one community meeting. I think that we’ve come
a long way in our work. We have a department called Family and Community
Engagement. Their role is around parent development, leadership development
and also really engaging the community in a substantive way.

Julie Speer: I think there’s an awareness nowadays that there’s this gap and the inequity is
largely by race and class. Are folks aware of this now and is there a tension
within DPS? Or are we just academics so we’re looking at it from a high level? Is
this a real issue?

Bill de la Cruz: I think the reality of race is that people are aware of it and I think the tension
today is more around how do we solve for it or how do we talk through it so
that we don’t stay stuck on race, because a lot of the focus of my work is
around, are we having the right conversation? The challenge with the race
conversation is whenever it digresses into someone feeling like they’ve been
called a racist, the conversation ends and the ability to develop a relationship is
over.

I would use the word culture because we are really looking at how we impact
the culture of learning, how we’re impacting of culture of relationship, how
we’re impacting the culture of people coming together. It’s now around how do
we have these conversations so that we could become more aware of the
impacts of biases around whatever it is? It could be a gender bias. It could be a
racial bias. It could be a demographic bias, a language bias. When we get to the
bias conversation, it broadens our ability to talk, and it also creates a challenge
because if I were to walk into a room and tell you I’m biased, the first thing that
most people go to is something negative.
Even a characteristic that defines something that all human beings are, we’ve created a negative connotation to it so it challenges us to even engage in that conversation about how our biases impact our relationships. I think that’s our current tension because we’ve risen this issue to the level that people are really aware that their biases are a big impact in these gaps that we’re seeing both from a racial perspective and also from a gender perspective.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about institutional racism and the reality of it and what DPS is doing to combat it.

Bill de la Cruz: The idea of institutional racism is built around power and privilege. It’s not just about race on its own. It’s about the combination of power and privilege. As our institutions have been created, so education was created in the Industrial Age by white men based on a workplace model to teach a pretty homogenous group of folks and it was selective to begin with. We needed managers and we needed folks to build things. The inception of public education started out that way. As it’s grown and as we’ve seen a more multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-gender institution, some of those structures of white male homogenous culture are still inherent as part of it.

I think when we talk about institutional racism, the issue for me is that it exists. In Denver Public Schools, we’re working really hard to break this down. I have worked in school districts all across the state, and I have never met a superintendent who was willing to take this work on, and that’s been in probably 50 or 60 different districts that I have been in. Until I met Tom Boasberg, I had not met a superintendent ... I’ve challenged a number of them over the years to say, why don’t we do this district-wide? He’s willing to take this on.

It’s a challenging position to be in as a white male to say, you know what? I understand that this is real work and that we need to do this, and I applaud him for that. His leadership team is really working strongly on these issues in all of the areas that they represent, and it’s beginning to filter down through the whole organization to where I don’t think we have enough people to do all of the training that is being requested now in terms of team building, leadership development, bias awareness at all levels of the district.

Julie Speer: That’s really encouraging as an outsider to hear that.

Bill de la Cruz: That’s true. I worked with the Colorado Department of Education and doing consulting work and all across the state designing that equity toolkit. Leaders across the board were like, hmm, glad you’re doing this work. I’m not sure I want to take it on in my district because some of the issues are very challenging
and very emotional, and that’s what drives a lot of this, is that people are afraid of the emotionality of it, and that’s what causes people to stop.

**Julie Speer:** You say it’s a system created by white men and it’s a white man institution, it’s very clear. Talk about all of the ways that that kind of manifests and is challenging for students of color. For example, even present curriculum is very focused on white historical perspectives. List all the ways that you see how one might see this racism and then how you’re attacking them.

**Bill de la Cruz:** From a curriculum perspective, obviously our kids of color are not reflected in a lot of the curriculum as it’s created. It’s created again for a different cultural set and so as a black or brown student, I don’t see myself in the way that curriculum is written. I don’t see myself in the leadership of the building in many cases as the principal or the teacher. We think about role models and how students see someone who looks like them and say, oh, I can achieve that and I can do that. We hear story after story of students of color who are told by teachers that great aspiration I don’t think you’ll be able to achieve that.

It shows up in a lot of ways, both overt and covert. The way that we’re attacking that is through the bias awareness and really having people, challenging people to really look at how their biases impact their relationships and asking this question: Do your biases inhibit or enhance your ability to be in an authentic relationship? Simple question, really deep dialogue and self-awareness to answer it.

We’re also working a lot with culture-responsive pedagogy and practices. That’s a research-based practice that looks at the entire environment of the school. If the curriculum is being delivered and we’re talking about scientists, are we just talking about white scientists or are we talking about black and brown and gay and the whole plethora of folks who have contributed to scientific discovery? That’s where that culture-responsive practice comes in because we can support educators and teachers in the delivery of that content so that it becomes relevant for every student.

The idea of this equity and culture-responsive practices is to create relevance and relationships with all of the students through both the direct interaction that we have with each other and also through the curriculum that we’re delivering. Through the environment as a parent, do they feel welcome when they come in to the building? Is someone greeting them? The idea of equity is about opportunity access and inclusion. When we talk about those things from a real perspective, we have to look at even our hierarchical structure is based on that Industrial Age model where if you have enough privilege, you can get the information from the top. For the most part in a hierarchy, the messages go from the top down.
If you have enough privilege, you're able to get to that top level. If not, you're just subjected to either being told or being asked if you agree with the solution that we’ve created for you. It shows up both at the parent level, at the student level, and it does have an impact. The other way that it shows up is looking more subjectively at things that happened versus objectively. When we talk about our discipline disproportionality, much of that is based on subjective approaches to respect, for instance. I might look at you and say you're being disrespectful because the way that you're sitting, I find it disrespectful, and you may have not been told the rules so you’re not even aware that you’re doing that until I tell you that you’re doing it and then I’ll send you out of my classroom.

We’re really working hard. This culture-responsive pedagogy and practices is an area that really supports our teachers and our educators in the classroom. Our bus drivers even about ... That’s why I say we work both the operations and academics, understanding that everyone who interacts with students throughout the course of a day impacts their academic experience, from the time they get on the bus, walk to school, have lunch, go to their classrooms. That’s why we have to work throughout the whole system to make sure that we’re impacting people’s mindsets and self-awareness around bias.

Julie Speer: How would you describe to someone the bias awareness that you’re doing on a district level? Simply stated, what are you guys doing? What is your bias awareness?

Bill de la Cruz: Simply stated, that’s a challenge to simply state bias awareness.

Julie Speer: It’s a district-wide training model that’s available for everybody.

Bill de la Cruz: The district has adopted a foundational model around bias awareness. The way that it looks, I would say there are three major components to it. One is a purposeful conversation. How do you structure the conversation so that it’s meaningful and that everybody knows what we’re doing? The four components to a purposeful conversation are establish the purpose, decide what you want to accomplish through the conversation, decide what your elements of success look like, and then what do you want to model as a facilitator as you’re facilitating this dialogue?

The purpose of our programming around bias is to really surface the impacts of biases in our relationships. What we hope to accomplish is to develop deeper relationships and also lower the level of fear when we are having this conversation. Success is really about people embracing the work and having it impact their practices, whether they’re a bus driver or a teacher or the administrator. Then, the modeling piece as a facilitator, I want to be able to do
everything that I’m asking another person to do. As a facilitator, it means that I have to be doing my own personal work around bias awareness to be able to facilitate it because it is not an intellectual exercise.

The second approach that we take to our foundational training is really looking at it as a skill development. One of the practices that we really work hard on is deep listening. We put folks in an environment where they actually do some deep listening exercises. It challenges their awareness around whether they’re being responsive or reactive, and being reactive is where I’m thinking about what I want to say before the other person is done, and being responsive is where I do my best to quiet my mind and wait and ask questions and then respond to everything I’ve heard. So really looking at how do we enhance the skills that people have?

We use an inquiry and asset base for that so we ask a lot of questions. The asset base is just really looking at everything that people bring as a strength. A lot of our work in the past in diversity training has been more from a deficit base. We really want to look at it from an asset base and ask people about so what are the strengths that you have and how can we enhance those strengths?

The final element of this foundational training is actually getting people into a conversation on bias where we work in groups of four and they spend 30 or 40 minutes sharing a bias to another person that in most cases they’ve never talked about their biases with. It’s just amazing to see what happens when people go there and have these really deep conversations. They find at the outcome that they’ve learned something new about their colleague. Whether it’s in the community or whether it’s at a school, they find that they have shared biases which is really interesting. Eighty to 90% of the people who go through this training realize they have shared biases, and we follow that up with if we have so many shared biases, why are we so afraid to talk about them?

Julie Speer: Give me an example. What’s a shared bias? Go to the extreme.

Bill de la Cruz: A shared bias could be a group of folks who say I have a bias towards white people and they realize that it could be a mixed group of a white male, a black female, a brown male and maybe even a gay female and they’ve all talked about who they are and they will realize that their bias towards white people is all based on a unique story that they’ve had with someone from that group that then they’ve extrapolated to a whole group.

I can give you a personal example that is easier to tell. I grew up in a home where my dad was angry and abusive and took that out on myself when I was nine years old in a variety of ways. By the time I was 12, I created a bias that all men are mean. Even though my dad only represented one member of that
group, in my head, I went to that extreme, and so in relationships with men, I wouldn’t trust them. I wouldn’t allow them to get close. That was a lot of my own personal work.

The idea of these shared biases is that they can be political. They can be religious. They can be gender based. They can be based around sexual orientation. Once people start talking about it and sharing their stories, they realize that there’s an origination point for each of them and that’s where the richness of that relationship building comes in.

**Julie Speer:** By doing the bias training, is it just awareness so they’re no longer controlled by the bias or they become stronger employees? What’s the end result of the bias?

**Bill de la Cruz:** The end result is as people become aware of their biases to look at the origination point, and that’s challenging sometimes because it can be highly emotionalized or it could be really simple and they learn the bias when someone said now, remember, when you drive in that part of town to roll up your windows and lock the doors. The idea of this is really going to that origination point and then looking at what’s the impact with my colleagues in Denver Public Schools? What’s the impact with that bias on the students in my classroom?

When we talk about the discipline disproportionality, are white males disciplined different than our males of color and much of that is based on a bias that that teacher has or that administrator has or that person has that says they’re different people based on my own experience with members of their group? Not so much that particular student but a member of that group that I had an experience with that could have been when I was a child or when I was in high school or when I was in college.

The end result is a change in practice, change in mindset; and by mindset, I mean looking at just something as simple as expectations. Do I have the same expectations for all of my students regardless of what I know about them in terms of their socioeconomic status or their home makeup? I was just talking to a teacher yesterday who works with a lot of students who have incarcerated families and realizing that a lot of her colleagues in the building don’t understand how to work with students who comes from families of incarceration and really thinking about how are those biases playing out in terms of their ability to get a really quality educational experience.

**Julie Speer:** Are there a lot of white employees doing the training that are serving kids of color, or is it very well mixed?

**Bill de la Cruz:** It’s really well mixed and it’s by design because the idea that as a school community ... It depends on the school obviously because in some schools, we
have a higher number of white educators versus other schools. The idea though is that everyone is playing a role in this because research shows that regardless of your race that this idea of discipline, folks do that just based upon their own experience. We have a number of opportunities through the year to bring really diverse groups of educators together to work on these issues, have conversations.

It’s very cross-functional in that people are working outside of their departments. They’re working outside of their grade level or department and talking more systemically about how do we create a culture that we’re aware of our biases and we’re working to change our practices? The way that I interact with you and also my mindset, the way that I think about you or folks in your group based upon my own experience. I’m really hopeful as we head into year three that it’s starting to really have an impact in the district.

Julie Speer: Talk about the achievement gap and how achievement is tied to race or historically how the two have been tied together.

Bill de la Cruz: It’s a really interesting question because in the late ’80s, early ’90s when we talked about the achievement gap based on race, many people would just say, well, it’s anecdotal because at the time, we did not disaggregate by race or ethnicity or socioeconomics. In the mid-’90s, the federal government said you will disaggregate. Once that happened, it was no longer anecdotal because people could see clearly from the data that our students of color were achieving at a lower level than our white and Asian students.

It’s hard to say how race has played a role in it. I think that we see it as a gap based on race, and yet there’s an opportunity gap as well in terms of resources, in terms of access. For a lot of us now, we’re using the language of the opportunity gap because are we providing the same level of access and inclusion and resources to our more needy students versus students who don’t need as much? Again, the challenge in my work is how do we move past race to look at equity and look at are we differentiating based on need and are we really looking at what those needs are? Because even our gifted and talented students need to make sure that they’re getting everything they need just as much as our students who are coming in below grade level. We need to make sure that they’re getting what they need.

It’s a challenging conversation because education was created as being equal. It’s been the equalizer and yet you can see where equal has got us. Now we’re doing this complete shift and really working on so how do I change someone’s thinking who’s been in education for 20 or 30 years working equal to differentiating which is a completely different approach both from a mental
mindset and also from practice that we’re looking at around being culture responsive?

Julie Speer: Do you think that part of the gap is a cultural difference in that if I’m an immigrant parent, I finished sixth grade, how am I going to have a cultural expectation that my students are going to go to college when that wasn’t a reality for me? Is there a cultural difference in the families that you could generalize between, say, an immigrant family or an African-American family? Is the value of education different across different communities?

Bill de la Cruz: The value of education in the experiences that I’ve had, I’ve not seen differences. I’ve yet to meet a parent in the 15, 20 years I’ve been doing this work, black, brown, white, rich or poor who said, you know what? I don’t really want my child to get a good education and be successful. My belief and my experience has been that every parent wants their child to be well-educated, to be successful, to have more than what they had. Some of the cultural barriers show up more around the level of involvement that some parents may have because in other countries, there’s a higher level of respect for teachers where a parent would not confront a teacher like we do in America and challenge them in some of the ways that we do.

Some of the biases that come back from that are, well, parents don’t care, rather than parents have such a high respect for you as a teacher that they believe you’re going to do what’s right by their child, and so they have a different level of interactions again with the various cultural beliefs. That’s where culture-responsive practices come in. We have to be aware that not every immigrant parent, not every parent, period, even parents who were born and raised in the United States have a different cultural value and a cultural way that they approach education.

We need to honor where everyone comes from, create this entry point for you no matter where your belief system lies so that we meet the needs of your child because that’s really what we’re here to do, is to really create a quality environment for every student. It’s challenging because we have students from so many different countries, various language backgrounds, cultural levels, education levels, and that’s where this differentiation model is so key, I think, to the future of our success.

Julie Speer: Is that what people call it, differentiation?

Bill de la Cruz: Yes. That’s the language that we’re using. Basically it’s differentiating based on need. It drives us to the relationship piece which is a whole other conversation because the value of relationship has not been as strong as the value of the academic piece. In many areas of the state that I’ve worked in, the comment
comes back, well, you know what? We just don’t have time to build relationships because where are we assessed? We’re assessed in academics. We’re so highly assessed that the pendulum has shifted to this assessment culture that says we don’t have time to build relationships. A lot of our work is saying, well, where is that happy medium?

In the 1980s, it was all about self-esteem. We wanted to know if you felt good, not whether you could read or write. Then, we shifted over to this highly assessment-driven culture and now we’re seeing that there’s got to be some middle ground that says relationships are just as important as making sure that our students are academically strong. A really smart student without the social, emotional intelligence to maneuver in a multi-cultural world will not be successful. A student who’s highly socially, emotionally intelligent that doesn’t have the academic skills won’t be successful. How do we blend both so that as a community, as a parent, you realize that your students need both? Your children need both social, emotional intelligence and academic intelligence.

Julie Speer: How does the Denver Public Schools compare to other districts in the state?

Bill de la Cruz: I think Denver Public Schools is really leading the way in this work. I’ve had calls from superintendents in other districts to say we heard about this equity boot camp that you do. Would you let us know when you’re having another one because we’d like to send a team out to see what you’re doing? When I started doing this work and with the team that I work with, we researched districts around the state to see who was really doing a good job at this work. We really couldn’t find a district that was doing it. There are schools that are doing it.

What we’re doing in Denver I think is really unique and it’s starting to be heard about by other districts in the state. I’m getting calls from districts that say, tell us about this equity and inclusion work that you’re doing. Even our broader leadership development training and our values work that Tom brought into the district, there’s a lot of districts who are asking about that. I believe that we’re really leading in a lot of ways around this idea of equity and inclusion and differentiating based on need in terms of the educational structure that we’ve built.

Julie Speer: Is there anything that you want to talk about in terms of working with students that are free and reduced lunch students, poor students? The opportunity gap is because of poverty, but the reality is the majority of the students in Denver Public Schools are free and reduced lunch kids, right?

Bill de la Cruz: Yeah. There’s a lot, yeah.

Julie Speer: Talk about poverty in the district.
Bill de la Cruz: I think the poverty in the district and poverty in general has been limited to dollars or socioeconomic status. I think what we’re seeing is poverty is a much broader topic. When you think of poverty related to a student who hasn’t had a hot shower or a meal at school or maybe they’re living with their grandparents or their aunts and uncles or maybe they come from an abusive home which are all elements of poverty that we need to start talking about. In fact, there’s research now that shows that students of poverty over time have similar characteristics of posttraumatic stress disorder as folks in the military. It’s this way that they never have a chance to really balance out and to come into neutral.

In a normal human being, we have a status of where we’re just, I’ll just use the word normal and then a crisis arises and we arise ... Our emotional state arises to that and then we come back down to our normal state. For some of our students in poverty, they don’t have that normal state because their world is so traumatic that they’re always in that higher level of trauma. The whole conversation around poverty has been broadened to really look at how does trauma impact a student’s ability to stay centered?

I’ll use the Cole neighborhood. When our kids were there and all of the shootings were going on in the Cole neighborhood and there were days when Cole was locked down for the whole day just because something might happen. You think of the students. Were they ready to learn and how does that affect them? How does that affect the teachers in the building?

When you brought in poverty to include this whole idea of traumatic experiences, it’s a much bigger conversation that we’re just beginning to scratch the surface of, to really look at it beyond just dollars and cents.

When Tom talked about there’s no silver bullet, I think one of the challenges in our work is, how do we measure it? Even that’s a big piece because we value quantitative data over qualitative data. The reality is that work around equity and inclusion and values, it’s about, do you feel valued? Do you feel trusted? Do you feel safe? Do you feel like someone cares about you? Do you feel like you have an adult in the building that you can talk to?

On my team, I was just able to hire a data research analyst who’s going to help us to measure behavioral change in human beings through our training. To your earlier question about what’s the end game in terms of someone does a training, we want them to change their practices, their thinking, and so now we’re developing ways to measure that, which is pretty unique. There aren’t a lot of districts who are doing this work. I haven’t found any actually who are actually taking and making an effort to measure the qualitative changes that we need to see so that over time, we can close some of these gaps.
Julie Speer: I would imagine just intuitively that all that work would benefit the students. The student is safe and there’s a good relationship and there’s trust that their academics actually would increase.

Bill de la Cruz: The focus that we’ve done in the past is let’s just focus on the academics. Let’s just bring all these programs in to strengthen academics. As a student if I don’t feel safe, I’m not going to learn. Now we’re again combining these values and culture work which for families and parents who just want to say, no, this is about academics, they might see that as fluff work where we’re starting to see it as really critical work because if you feel safe, if you feel valued, if you’re reflected in the curriculum, if you have a role model that says you can do anything you want then it changes the way that you show up and the way that you interact at school.

This whole idea of teaching to the test, we need to come to some middle ground where we teach to the student so that they can then be able to do whatever it is that they need to do, whatever that content area is.

Julie Speer: The majority of the students in Denver Public Schools are kids of color. All these issues of they’re maybe not feeling safe or respected. It’s just interesting to me that you’ve really underscored the reality of the system that it’s a white system, teaching kids of color and that on some level, there’s a bit of disconnect.

Bill de la Cruz: Absolutely. The challenge is because even in the teachers colleges, some of the teachers that we get, they’re not being taught around culture-responsive practices or multi-culture education. Some colleges do it better than others so it’s not all of them. I think there’s a pipeline there that we need to look at as well because when they come to DPS then all of a sudden, we say this has to be a really strong focus around how are we meeting the needs of all of our students regardless of their race, their color, their socioeconomic status, their sexual orientation, religious background so that they know that they’re valued and they’re cared for. It’s not one thing that we could point to that says we’ve done it.

Some of it is how we engage in community as well. The trajectory that we use in the schools that we work in is leadership, staff, students and parents so that everyone has access to this foundational training on bias that we spoke about earlier. We have some schools that have actually created parent equity teams and the parents are doing their own training work and we go in and support them. We have schools that are bringing the students in to the conversation in an age-appropriate way so elementary, middle and high school, how do you have these to create awareness at the young ages, connect awareness to behaviors as kids get older.
As they move into middle and high school, connect awareness behavior to accountability so that throughout the whole system in DPS, our students are really getting what I would call world-class education because when they leave here, they’ll be able to function in pretty much any environment through this work and through the academics that they’re getting.

Julie Speer: DSST and Strive are two things that we were looking at in terms of conscious integration. Strive, even though it’s a segregated school right now, the kids are achieving, so they’re both successful models. Is there anything that you have to add to the conversation on those different models?

Bill de la Cruz: What I would say is with the conscious integration model, if you take out weighted choice, if you take out the community piece, the places where we have commonality is in the culture-responsive curriculum and the culture work of the building because both of those schools use that same model around how do we have a culture-responsive pedagogy and curriculum and how do we create an environment where students and families feel welcome and safe? I think there’s a lot of synergy in the work that we’re all doing. In fact, I’ve worked with Strive in some of their schools. My work is not limited to just our public schools, even though charters are public schools. We work with all schools in the district.

Our charter schools, our innovation schools, pathway schools, all the schools have access to this level of work. I just think it’s important that it keeps moving through all of our school system so that we can get to a great school in every neighborhood.

Julie Speer: We’re not there yet.

Bill de la Cruz: No, we’re not. I completely agree with you. I think to accomplish this notion of a great school, and I have to applaud the board and the leaders of the district to say this is what we want by 2020. I believe it can be accomplished in collaboration with the community because the community plays a really strong role in this work. In some ways, the community separates itself from the district to say the district needs to do this. Even within the district, I have folks that I’ve heard who say, well, the district, and I have to say, wait a minute. We’re Denver Public Schools’ employees so we are the district so we can’t separate ourselves. As part of the community, what is your role as a community member to also make sure that we have great schools?

Choice is an interesting concept because prior to choice, it was all neighborhood schools. If something needed to be fixed in the neighborhood school, we have to come together as a community to fix it because we couldn’t just opt out. Where choice has created an environment where the community is not the
same. I’ve heard parents say, yeah, my children don’t have any friends to play with because the students that they go to school with live eight miles from here so it’s hard to have overnights. When it’s easy to just opt out because of something that’s going on, it gives another message to our students around the value of community.

A lot of my work is in the community as well and collaborating with our community engagement folks to say, how do we make people aware that the decisions and the roles that they play are really critical for how their children view and value community as they get older as well? We do have a lot of work to do. I think that without these conversations, it didn’t go anywhere and that was my own experience. What I’ve seen in the past few years is that through these conversations, more and more leaders, and I look at leaders throughout the whole system, are embracing this work, are willing to look at their own biases, their leadership style and are really trying to engage their community in a more meaningful way.

Julie Speer: What is the 2020 plan or the Denver Plan?

Bill de la Cruz: The Denver Plan was created by the school board. I don’t have all of the components of it, but the main one that I look at is a grade school in every neighborhood. The idea is really looking at all of our schools from academics to the culture of the building to the relationships that people have and how do we make them inviting in places where regardless of where you live in that neighborhood, you’ll say that’s a great school.

What it’s done systemically in our district is it’s really pushing us to work together and to be very collaborative with HR and with our Office of Social Emotional Learning and Restorative Justice and all of the various components of the district that maybe have not worked together as well. Now we’re looking at so how do we create an environment where we’re looking at the whole system? Back to our original conversation about the creation of the system, we work with our HR partners with this foundational training. We work with a variety of different other departments.

I think the goal is that as we work together, we can create these great schools defined by having smaller gaps, defined by having welcoming cultures, defined by having teachers and administrators that reflect the student population. Yes, it is going to be a lot of work, and that’s why we need to engage our community as well as all the various departments in our schools to make it happen.

Julie Speer: Looking at Stapleton and Northfield and the move out into the Smiley campus and McAuliffe, there was some contention. If you can describe to me what the
tension was historically and just how tricky these conversations are. What happened? What was the history of Stapleton?

Bill de la Cruz: High level, the history of Denver and especially in that area has been a dividing line that said the people of color live on this side and the white people live on this side. It was York Street. It was Colorado Boulevard. Now it’s Quebec. I think the crux of it is a pretty large misunderstanding about the impact of race in a student’s ability to get a good education with the idea that if my white student is being educated with a group of students of color that they’re going to get less than, or if my student is educated with a group of students that are not at grade level then the bar is going to be lower so that we can meet their needs. The idea of equity is not lowering the bar for anyone. It’s about creating consistency and making sure that every student gets a really good education.

I think historically, it’s been a racial dialogue that people have on Facebook anonymously or that people throw out in a question at a community meeting and don’t really explain that it’s really based on race. I think that that’s been historically where we’ve been pitted. It just pits one community against the other. I think we’re at a place now where racially, ethnically, we need to come together to realize that all students matter, and the success of all students is based on our ability to work together. This idea that we can educate students in isolation of other students, it’s not reality anymore.

That’s a lot of the work that we do in terms of these conversations, is really beginning to surface people’s racial experience, racial story outside of judging, blaming and shaming them and then thinking about what do we do next because that judgment, shame and blame, if you feel like you’re going to be judged, shamed, or blamed, you’re not going to talk honestly and openly. That’s the approach that we use in terms of especially the race conversation because it allows people in environment to share their story because everyone has a story about race regardless of your color.

How do we surface that and then how do we model that for our students? Because we have students now who are not only multi-racial, they’re multi-ethnic so you can’t look at a young person and decide what they are anymore by their skin color. I’ve seen students who are Korean, Jewish, African-American born right here in America. Their racialized experience is completely different than for folks who grew up in the ‘60s and ‘70s. How do you meld that generational gap that we also see around this conversation? It’s a real challenge.

Julie Speer: Is there any other final thoughts you have?
Bill de la Cruz: My own final thought is that if we’re going to really resolve these issues, everyone has to be involved in the conversation. Whatever people’s fears are around it, that’s what they have to own and figure out, how do they move through that so that we do the best for our students because that’s really going to be the factor that decides if we move this conversation of race beyond race to really looking at what’s real. For me, what I found is what’s real is that our biases impact everything that we do with each other, and that’s where the richness of our stories and our conversations and our relationships lie. Let’s just go there, have those challenging conversations and get to know each other differently.
Bill Kurtz: My title is chief executive officer of DSST Public Schools.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about DSST. When did you start and where did the idea come from? How did it even come to be?

Bill Kurtz: DSST was started, our first class of students started in August of 2004. We came to be from a series of conversations. It started with a conversation between then Governor Owens and Bill Gates. Bill Gates wanted to bring small schools to Colorado. He talked to the governor and the governor said that’s a great idea. There is an effort to create some small schools that were focused on STEM. They started that I think in really 2000, 2001.

Julie Speer: Why Colorado?

Bill Kurtz: The Gates Foundation was looking nationally to do this. They did this in lots of states. I think their strategy was really to go to the governors and then the bill consensus. DSST came out of that strategy. Marc Holtzman who was the Secretary of Technology came and then they put again a board and the board then hired me to create the school. That was in the fall of 2003 and then we opened in the summer of 2004 as a single high school.

Julie Speer: Which was the first one?

Bill Kurtz: Stapleton, DSST Stapleton High School. We started that in 2004 and had our first graduating class in 2008. Then, we started a middle school in 2009.

Julie Speer: Explain your enrollment process and how you create your student body.
Bill Kurtz: One of the core design principles of the school was to create an integrated school. That was certainly one of the key concepts of the school was to acknowledge and recognize that Denver was one of the few cities in the country that really has a diverse population that lives in the city core. We just acknowledged that as a real opportunity and strength to build on. We created a lottery process that said let’s make sure we have a school that reflects the rich diversity of the city. That lottery process said we get a minimum of 40% of our students are going to be low income.

We worked really hard to create both economic and racial diversity in our first student class. The floor of 40% really helped us ensure that we did that. Oftentimes, great new schools are created and immediately they are flooded with middle and upper income families that either have greater access to information or access to process. We just want to make sure that we were intentionally creating a diverse student body from the being.

Julie Speer: You succeeded, right?

Bill Kurtz: We succeeded. One of the ways which we succeeded which is interesting is that we were located in Stapleton which at the time had very few high school students, a couple high school students. There’s really not a local high school population so we did reach out to lots of communities. We served a broad swath of communities across the city including Stapleton and Park Hill but also Montbello and Green Valley Ranch and a number of kids came from the Northwest and the Southwest and the Southeast. It really enabled us to build an integrated school based upon a wide geographic origin of students. That was really important to us.

Julie Speer: Talk about the reality about sci funding. It’s not just the people funding from the state. You have communities at work.

Bill Kurtz: Yes. I think in the beginning when you’re creating something new, oftentimes the design, if you will, phase or the creation phase require these resources when you’re creating a new model. We’re very fortunate to get outside support. A lot of local foundations here were very supportive of us. We had some national foundations that were supportive of helping us, what we would call reimagine the American public high school and rethink how that is done. We were really blessed to have that support.

Over time as we’ve grown and expanded and tried to scale our model, it is very important that we create a school model that doesn’t rely upon fundraising but
relies upon the public dollars which we have done such that every school we add, we’re not looking to add a fundraising total to 200, bottom line. We are working really hard at scaling our institution and through that process, building a financial model that really does live on public dollars plus a very, very small amount of fundraising that is consistent with other public schools here in Denver.

Julie Speer: Talk about the immediate successes you were seeing or maybe it was slower success than you thought. How was that in those early years?

Bill Kurtz: The early years were a lot of fun. It was really great to create a new way of doing high school with our students, with our families and building a new model that would get different outcomes for kids. Really our focus was on a couple things. One was creating an institution that really embodied a set of values where we truly explicitly took on the reality that all people, young people, staff really benefit from being a part of a community, that has shared purpose and shared values, that really helps all of us grow. We want to build that.

We want all of our students to have access to four-year college. We knew the data. We saw the data. We know how economically impactful it is for all students to have the opportunity to attend four-year college. That is economically and career wise that game changer and data today continues to demonstrate that.

Lastly, we wanted the kids to have access to a great liberal arts education with a STEM focus because we also know that the greatest opportunity in our country today is in the STEM fields of study where students earn the highest wages and are the highest need jobs. As we try to provide a pathway for our young people to the future, preparing them for the highest need, highest paying jobs particularly those students who are coming from poverty is a tremendous way to change their trajectory.

Those are what we focus on. For us, I think we’re fortunate to accomplish all three of those very early on. Probably the most important being the reality that we prepared a hundred percent of our seniors for four-year college and that, I think ... We celebrated on the front page, a full front page picture and story on the old Rocky Mountain news.

I do think that was a very, very symbolic moment for public education in Colorado because if you look at that picture, you’re looking at students of color, students from very diverse backgrounds, students from low income backgrounds
and it was a picture of the belief that all students have the capacity to achieve at high levels and that we could no longer accept an achievement gap and a college going gap that had been the norm in this city in this state for a long time. I think that singular act demonstrated that we should believe and have high expectations for all of our students and that they all can get there.

I think that was really critical to our early success. We’ve had eight classes now at Stapleton, 100% accepted to four-year college and we had our first class at Green Valley Ranch. We continue to see that as being a revolutionary moment for communities when we create schools in those communities without community and then see all students, all seniors in those school go off to four-year college.

It was one of those front page photos. The photo was the whole front page of our class and it said 100% at the bottom. I think it was just one of those, the way sometimes things can be very symbolic and very catalytic. I think that was what it was. The interesting thing is I think ever since then, prior to that graduation stories about schools or about, “Oh, the valedictorian’s going to Stanford and the salutatorian’s going to Colorado College or CU Boulder and what a wonderful class.”

Then, what you saw after that was every graduation story started to reference the percent of kids from that class accepted to four-year college. I think it just changed the whole conversation about celebrating a couple individuals to schools and society recognizing that really the success of a school is the collective ability for that school to get all of the students the opportunities that they deserve to continue their education. That was really fun to see. That’s where some of the catalytic parts of that accomplishment came in.

Julie Speer: How do you define the achievement gap?

Bill Kurtz: It’s a great question. The achievement gap largely has focused on looking at achievement levels of students who come from both different economic family levels and racial backgrounds. Those are an important way to define the achievement gap and looking at test scores and how that plays out. I think you can also look at achievement gaps around academic preparation, around students with special needs, students who are English language learners. I think there are really important gaps there as well.

Test scores are a way, a formative, a report card for you to get to the place where you need to go. For us, the ultimate closing the achievement gap is when
we send all of our kids off to four-year college that are good colleges that are appropriate for our students and where they succeed in those colleges and are prepared for a fulfilling and productive life after college. We think the achievement gap as measured by test scores is an important report card, are we on track to do that.

We feel the college readiness assessment, ACT on eleventh grade, is the most important because it really combines both of those ideas. Are you both on track to succeed in college? Are you going to get into college because it’s a college entrance exam as you know. It really brings to a confluence those two important concepts. For us, really education is about developing people for lifelong success. We would ultimately define that gap as are we creating an opportunity gap for kids going to college?

As you know in this country, we have a dramatically large opportunity gap where 8% of low income kids in this country graduate from four-year institution in six years and 38 to 40% of non-low income kids are graduating from school in six years. The rates over the last 30 years have accelerated. It’s growing dramatically for non-low income students. Essentially, the college completion rate for low income students is essentially held flat for the last 30 years. Our gap is getting much bigger nationally and locally. That’s where we really want to focus and attack is making sure all of our kids have the opportunities they deserve.

Julie Speer: How do your kids compare to the other kids in the district or how would you say the gap is in your school? Is there really a gap in your school?

Bill Kurtz: We were very excited this year to see what we have called the inverted gap which is in three out of our six tested subject areas in the tenth grade, there are two high schools. Our low income students had a higher proficiency level than our non-low income students, an extraordinary accomplishment that I think our teachers and principals accomplished. Typically, that gap is 30% when you look at it across the board, 30 percentage points difference in terms of proficiency for low income students versus non-low income.

We literally had three out of the six tested subjects where our low income students had higher proficiency. Sometimes, people confuse that with growth and say, “Oh, well do you have higher growth with those students?” No, we actually have higher absolutely performance, not just they grew more but they actually performed better. That was very, very exciting for us. We also had seen a very small gap between low income college completion and non-low income college completion with our students.
Julie Speer: You track that too?

Bill Kurtz: We track that and we’ve seen the gap. In our first class, I think the gap is I think 2 or 3% difference.

Julie Speer: Where the low income don’t finish?

Bill Kurtz: Yes. That’s compared again to about 30 to 32% gap nationally. We had a 2 or 3% gap. We’re very excited to see some of those indicators that we are closing the gap. It doesn’t mean we’ve closed the gap perfectly in all places. We still have gaps in places but we have seen really encouraging signs that we can close the gap in places and we’ve done it. I think that’s really important.

Julie Speer: Talk about conscious integration. Your model is great. I know even at Green Valley, it’s higher than 40%. Isn’t it like 90 to 70?

Bill Kurtz: Yeah. Our schools range from essentially 35 to 40% low income to 90%. As a network this year, as a set of nine schools, we were 65% low income, 35% non-low income. We were roughly 75 to 80% either mixed race or people of color versus Caucasian. We have always wanted to create a school system that largely reflected the diversity of the population of Denver and with maybe a shade towards giving students from low income families maybe a disproportionate share, shade above the averages.

We do rest a shade above the averages in terms of the number of low income students in Denver, the percent and we also have a higher percent minority in our schools than the Denver population. We’re just a shade over those averages. That’s where we’d like to be. We do honestly believe that with a country that’s going to be majority, minority in 2040 to 2045 and a K-12 school system today that is already majority, minority, we have schools that are re-segregating in a faster rate than we ever have in our country’s history. We believe that public education has an obligation to create schools that truly reflect the diversity of the city, town, community in which they sit.

We’ve taken that very seriously at DSST. We believe that not only does it lead to better societal outcomes where our young people can learn to live and work and play and exist with people who look different than they do but we also believe it improves their academic performance. We think it’s an incredibly important value that requires courage. It requires planning.
It requires commitment but ultimately, where will our society be if we don’t commit to this? What will be the future of our civic fabric in our cities, towns and states in this country if we don’t commit to reintegrating our public schools? I don’t know where we will end up if we continue on a trajectory of allowing our schools to re-segregate which is what we’re doing right now.

Julie Speer: You have nine schools. Tell me how many students there are, because for me, the conundrum is also there’s 90,000 in the district. There’s even more who leave the district. How can you fix it?

Bill Kurtz: We have 10 schools serving 4,100 students currently. We are proposing to grow to 22 schools serving 10,500 students which would be 25% of the sixth, twelfth student population attending Denver public schools. We believe that we have a tremendous opportunity to help Denver become truly an integrated public school district, one through creating integrated schools ourselves. We think that’s very important and may continue to see such benefits for our students and our families and our staff when we create truly diverse schools.

We also believe that we can help continue to make a statement and to continue to challenge the status quo around are we really creating inclusive schools in Denver. I think in this current environment where there’s tremendous economic expansion, there’s a tremendous influx of people into the city of Denver, I think it’s becoming more challenging to create integrated schools. It’s going to require a true statement of principle. It’s going to require a statement of values that says this is core to our public school system and this is a core part of our success.

Short of that, as we have seen over the history of our country, when integration is not a core value and when there is not opportunities for people to select in, in a self-interested way, integrated schools would typically fall apart. We’ve seen that in busing examples across the country whether it be in the North Carolina markets, whether it be here in Denver, whether it be here in Boston, there just isn’t enough support unless we believe you create choice in high quality schools that are integrated where all families see an opportunity to get an extraordinary education in the same building.

We do believe that choice is critical to this because we do believe that public policy that sticks over the long term generally relies upon an ample dose of self-interest. We need to create in this case great schools that all families want to choice into and a visionary set of principles and courageous leadership to say this is who we are as a city, this is who we are as a district and we are going to stand on building integrated inclusive schools and we are going to provide great
options for our families and our students so they can choice into a school that works well for them that both serves a diverse population and serves it extraordinarily well. That is very, very important. Without all those elements, it’s, as we see throughout the history of busing and desegregation, that nothing will stand the test of time unless you incorporate those core elements.

Julie Speer: Your success is different than the district’s success on a whole. Are they learning from you? Are they taking your model? What impact are you having on the district as a whole? Not all schools are high performing right now. It’s going to take decades probably for them to get there but you’ve had success right out of the gate.

Bill Kurtz: Yeah. It’s an interesting question. I think overall, we have had a great collaborative partnership with Denver Public Schools. I think DSST and DPS have worked incredibly well together on behalf of providing great educational options for kids in Denver. We’re really grateful for that relationship. I think ultimately, it is a mutually beneficial relationship where we learn from each other and we think that’s what it’s going to take.

It’s a large city with close to 100,000 students now. I think we believe if we’re going to truly close the achievement gap, if we’re truly going to create a city school system that serves all kids in extraordinary ways, one, we have to do things very differently than we’d done in the past. We have a long history of not doing that.

Secondly, we have to do it collaboratively together. Nobody, there’s no one person or one organization that has all the answers. We have a collective fabric of answers that has to lead to high performing schools for all kids and that has to be a non-negotiable goal but within that, we have to work in all sorts of different ways to get there. We have learned a ton from DPS. We have also been very willing and we have a very open source policy about sharing everything we do and we do train district principals for the district. We certainly share the way we approach teaching and learning and school culture.

We have a very strong desire to share whatever we do for the benefit of other kids. It’s been a great relationship with the district. We think that’s the pathway forward. What we ultimately hope is that we have a city and a school system that serves that city that truly reflects the values of excellence and that all kids ought to have an excellent extraordinary world class education that prepares them for college, that we have a school systems that truly reflects the diversity of this city and provides equal opportunity for all kids who live in the city.
Thirdly, that we commit to doing that through integrated schools such that the amount of money your family can spend on a house does not determine the quality or the economic or the ratio make-up of your school. We have a long way to go in Denver to get there today. In fact, I think we’re moving some places in the wrong direction where it’s becoming more true that the quality of your school is determined by how much money you can spend on a house and we have to commit to creating great schools on all neighborhoods where all kids can access those schools and potentially create the rich fabric of a diverse school. I think that’s critical for the future of our city. I think DSST, DPS and other organizations can collaboratively work to get there.

Julie Speer: What kind of school is DSST? Is it a charter school? Is it an innovation school?

Bill Kurtz: We’re a charter school. All of our schools are charter schools. A charter school is an essentially an open enrollment school that has an agreement with the district to operate. All of our schools are open enrollment, have an agreement to operate with the district that has a time limit. If we don’t perform at the level that we’re expected to, then we are closed.

Julie Speer: Do you have kids?

Bill Kurtz: I do. I have three kids.

Julie Speer: Tell me what neighborhood you live in and where your kids go to school.

Bill Kurtz: We live in Park Hill. My oldest is in seventh grade and she goes to one of our DSST campuses. Then, our younger two go to St. Anne’s right now.

Julie Speer: Why did you choose to go to a private school?

Bill Kurtz: We actually tried to choice in and we couldn’t get the right choices because there were limited options and high quality options for our kids. I think that was a big part of it. We found the right school for them that seemed to work and so we’re very happy right now. We’re very excited for them to go to a DSST school when they’re old enough in the sixth grade.

Julie Speer: Choice is great when there’s enough choices and enough seats. There’s not enough seats. Choice doesn’t work right now. Talk about that reality of choice in the current landscape of public education in Denver.

Bill Kurtz: Choice is a really important catalyst but it’s not the answer. Choice gives everybody the opportunity, one, to select a set of choices that hopefully they can
send their kids to. It allows them not to be bound just to the school that’s down the street which could be great or terrible. It is a catalyst in terms of it can allow the district, it can allow educators, it can allow the public to see where do people want to send their children to school. It indicates a demand and interest in great schools.

Choice does not ultimately create great schools. It can be a catalyst to help create great schools and so Choice can become frustrating when there are not enough great options. It’s probably better to have at least the opportunity to choice out and not get your choice than to not have the choice at all and be stuck with the school down the street that you know is a failing school. It is a step up in terms of giving parents options but it is a problem when we don’t have a lot of great choices.

That is what’s before us in this city today, is are we going to have the courage and the commitment to really push to the Denver 2020 plan goal of 80% of our schools in communities being high performing. We have a long way to go in this city to hit that goal. It is very clear from the data and from the reality that in our calculation, only 35% of families in the grades sixth through twelfth have a high performing choice to go to. We have a long way to double that number. Choice is a catalyst to indicate what people want. It gives people the option to choice out and now, it is up to the district. It’s up to providers like DSST public schools to go out and create more great options.

The public, the city, the parents, the students should be demanding that of the district. They should be demanding that of us at DSST public schools because it is their right ultimately to have a great public school in their neighborhood. As a city, we have to commit to that vision and we have to have the courage to get there.

Julie Speer: What is it going to take? Committing to the values, the principles as you said, I think everyone has that commitment but really what is it going to take?

Bill Kurtz: Ultimately, it takes people understanding how to create and open grade schools. I think that we have to get better at that. We don’t have a tremendous track record of that over time. I think that’s where it really begs the question of the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and getting the same result. At some point, we have to acknowledge that what we have done over and over again for the last 50 years has not led to achievement gaps closing. It’s led to them increasing. We don’t have more high quality options today than
we did 20, 30 years ago when you look at the district run options. Ultimately, we have to start thinking about doing things differently.

Charters have been an opportunity. We’re not the solution but we are an opportunity to think about it differently and to create high performing schools. As you may know, nine out of the top 10 student growth schools in the district last year at the secondary level were all charter schools. There is a track record now of, there are schools that know how to get great results for all kids. We need to do more of that. We need to commit to that.

We need the courage to have more schools like that. We have to have the courage to close schools that aren’t performing well and to start that cycle of building hopefully high performing schools. I think we know how to do this. I think it’s a question of how to do it at scale and do we have the courage to step up and really take the challenge on both politically and our communities and really building high performing schools.

Julie Speer: Charters are very much changing the landscape but they have complete autonomy. They don’t follow the same rules.

Bill Kurtz: It’s a challenging thing.

Julie Speer: You did say charters are not the answer. They’re just part of the solution.

Bill Kurtz: We’re part of the solution. We think that there are certainly ingredients that I think are important to a high performing school whether it’s a charter, whether it’s innovation school, whether it’s a district school. There is enough evidence out there and data that says there are certain things that one can do in any public school that I think will lead to great outcomes. School size is very important.

High expectations is this overused set of words that people throw out all the time but we would say really high expectations for all students, not just a select few. You need to mean it and then you need to provide great teaching and learning and support to get kids to those expectations. You need to have school cultures that really reflect, A, a true commitment to getting all students to meet the goal and B, a commitment that actually a culture is about one’s obligation to each other and that oftentimes, the obligations to the community trump individual interest.
Many American public high schools and middle schools for a long time have taken this belief that middle and high school is about young people discovering themselves and finding themselves in the absence of really anything other than please don’t burn the school building down and please don’t hurt somebody. We would say, “No, that’s actually not right. We know that’s not true in communities that we live in.”

Communities can’t operate that way. There’s a common set of values and understanding. You don’t just leave your trash on your neighbor’s porch. There’s common commitments you make in communities. At work, in a workplace, there are common commitments that you make that are implicit to a community, a set of values and professionalism that you create in. Oftentimes we get into this place with our kids where we get so hung up in them discovering everything in absence of asking them to conform to a set of expectations and values in a community that we let our kids have this false sense of beliefs that it is all about their interest and what they want as opposed to being a part of a larger whole.

All these things I think have really played out to how you get to achievement gap closing results, how you close the opportunity gap, how you give all kids that opportunity and how you get through academic and developmental success with kids. I think there’s a lot of research, a lot of practice that’s pretty clear about that. We just have to have the courage now to do it. We have to have the courage and the ability to scale it.

Julie Speer: Talk about Green Valley and the Evie Garrett Dennis campus. Is that campus a model for the future?

Bill Kurtz: Our DSST Green Valley Ranch campus is a tremendous example of success of really unlocking the potential of the young people and those communities to demonstrate just how high achieving, how high potential, how outstanding the young people in that communities really are. There’s been a long history of schools not being successful in that community. Sometimes, that has led to a narrative about these students need this or that. We look at those students and those families and say, “Wow, we know there’s enormous potential. These are amazing kids, amazing families that can do amazing things and let’s just unlock that and allow for them to shine and to do all the great things that they have done out there.”

I think it is groundbreaking. I think the results that those students have achieved statewide is truly groundbreaking. I think they are mode of the future. They have reversed the gap in what we talked about. They are sending kids to some of the
best universities in the country in full scholarships. They have completely closed that opportunity gap in substantial and significant ways. Yes, I think that is truly a story of the power of what I would say is providing opportunity for young people to shine and to really grab hold of a highly rigorous, high expectation academic program and to watch them run with it.

We’ve seen that. We’ll see that continue for a long time. I also think that school speaks to the power of integration and the power of creating a diverse school where all students and all staff benefit from the opportunity to go to school in a very diverse environment, in an environment that really reflects the community and helps all students achieve at a high level.

Julie Speer: What about the campus actually housing multiple charter schools and sharing facilities? How is that as a model?

Bill Kurtz: I think that the Evie Dennis campus is a great example of how to collaborate to build the best school system in the world right here in Denver when you have the opportunity for all sorts of different schools to come together to share one facility towards the same goal. I think that’s really important. It’s an example of how the district and charter schools have collaborated and provide both options for the community and do that in a way that maximizes the resources and the facilities of the district.

Julie Speer: What about teachers of color?

Bill Kurtz: Creating a diverse teaching staff that reflects the students and the families that we serve is a really important goal that DSST is working hard to accomplish. It’s something that we have not been very successful today. We found it very difficult for us to attract the number of diverse candidates that we want to really build our teaching force and our team to reflect our students but it’s very, very important. We’re working really hard to grow and improve there. We’re really thrilled to say that 30% of our new hires this year reported they are people of color. 37% reported they’re people that have come from low income backgrounds.

We’re really excited to say we’re making real big progress on that but it’s not enough. It’s not fast enough. We have a long way to go and I think it’s a very important part of our diversity is that we learn how to create a much more inclusive and equitable culture where we can build our capacity to serve all students and to help our teachers and our staff of color do that in big ways.
Julie Speer: Do you think that the teachers’ union is a big blockage to the district or is that an overused excuse?

Bill Kurtz: I think that we know how to create great schools. I think that we can create great schools. Oftentimes, we look at lots of barriers of why we can’t do that. Sometimes, people would use the teachers. Sometimes they use funding. Sometimes they use all sorts of things. In the end, we have a body of research that says this is what can lead to gap closing great schools. The real challenge in front of us is how do we implement that with fidelity and scale. That’s the big challenge in front of us.

Julie Speer: Do you think it’s possible?

Bill Kurtz: I do think it’s possible. That’s why we’re doing the work that we’re doing.

Julie Speer: Yes, but you’re going to have 22 schools. Should we just give you the keys to the car?

Bill Kurtz: When we created one great school, people said, “You can’t do this again. We don’t believe you can do it again and we’ll see what happens when you have three or four schools.” We did three or four schools. People said, “Oh, well, that’s great. You did three or four schools really well but that’s only three or four. Let’s see if you get to 10 or 11.”

Last year, we had our best year results ever in the history of DSST public schools. We had the most kids in the most schools. We have had a little bit of a trajectory of the bigger we get, the better we’ve gotten. I do think it’s possible. You can go from one to 10. You can go from 10 to 100. I do believe it’s possible for our districts across this country to get far better what we’re doing than we are right now.

Julie Speer: Do kids still get the complete high school experience at DSST?

Bill Kurtz: We’ve always created schools that really reflect hopefully a well-rounded education. We always started with athletics. We’ve had arts. We have great academic program. We had a homecoming our first year. Yeah, I think that’s really important. Students learn as much from outside the classroom as inside the classroom. We now have athletic programs that are quite successful and it’s really fun to watch our teams participate in state tournaments and get to the final four in basketball.
To see the experiences our kids have through athletics and through the arts, we have a number of schools that are putting on plays and productions, yeah, it’s really important that we create very well-rounded students who have the opportunity to explore lots of interest including our internship program, our senior project program where they get to self-direct their own interest and at the same time get a world class liberal arts education that will help them succeed in college and life. That’s the important combination.

Oftentimes, we get hung up on let’s provide our kids everything else and those things are great but the core of their education is actually inadequate. It actually doesn’t get them into college. At some point, we got to say, “No, that’s not acceptable.” We always try to say, “No, the core of your education is going to be the most rigorous in college preparing in the state and we’re going to give you athletics and we’re going to give you the opportunity to participate in the arts and we’re going to give you the opportunity to self-drive your own learning through a senior project, through an internship in a place of work.” We think that combination is really important to be an extraordinary school.

I think there’s two to 3,000 students on our waitlist across our schools. We see six out of our nine schools actually had the highest demand they’ve had. We’re really gratified that ultimately, our schools are attracting a really diverse, a representative population from the city of Denver. What’s more important to us is that all families feel like they have access to our schools and that they see our schools as a place that their children can succeed.

An integrated school ultimately is if families from all backgrounds feel comfortable sending their kids there. Oftentimes, schools that try to be integrated unfortunately gravitate towards one kind of family or one race or one income level. All of a sudden, other families don’t see that school as a place that serves their children. It’s really important for us that we have a diversity of families that are always saying, “Yeah, I could see my child at a DSST school.” They come from all different backgrounds, races, economic situations. I think that’s really important that our schools are in that place.

Julie Speer: You think about race in America right now and race in Colorado and Trayvon Martin and Ferguson, there is a lot of racial tension in our country right now. Civil rights is a long time ago and yet here we are having this issue. How do you think education either mirrors that or things play out in education or what is education’s role in the broader context of race in America?
Bill Kurtz: Education is oftentimes the real reflection of the society in which we live in. I worry today that our schools are re-segregating at a really fast rate. That is mirroring some of the challenges we’re having nationally around understanding between races and building commonality and building a joint vision for our country. I get very concerned about the fact that I think our schools as they’re re-segregating if you will are reflecting that tension.

What do I think the obligation of public education is to participate in that conversation and hopefully help improve it? I think it’s to get clear about what we believe in and what the role of public education is. One of the great opportunities the role of public education has is to serve as a place in which we bring people together to live our common values and common expectations and common knowledge as a society. You can’t do that when you have segregated schools.

We saw that in Brown versus Board of Education and the heart of that decision was not about buildings, not about the condition of buildings. It was about the learning experience of people in those buildings and the richness of a learning experience when you have diversity in the room. We have to, as a country, as a state, as a city, commit to the value of integration in our school so that our kids can truly learn how to live, work, play with people who look different than they do and to build that experience in a way that will normalize that for their future, for the communities they live in and for the workplaces they work in.

That is a critical role that we in public education have to make a decision about. We have an opportunity right now to take a stand in Denver and to say inclusive integrated schools are core to the principle and equity in this city. That’s a very hard conversation right now but it’s a really important conversation. The question really lies, do we have the courage to have it? Are we going to stand on the principle that we believe in?
Julie Speer: Tell me about your role as assistant principal here at Lincoln.

Brian Truax: My role as assistant principal, I'm in charge of a couple departments that I oversee. I oversee the discipline, attendance, social studies, special education, those are my primary responsibilities. Not to mention other duties as assigned that come in with just being that administrator in a school.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about the YESS Institute and its role here at Lincoln.

Brian Truax: The YESS Institute here at Lincoln is a very positive program for our students. It’s targeted students that have had attendance issues, maybe falling off track but are very close that can be persuaded, turned around, if they have the right touch with another student here at Lincoln. Their role here is we have mentors that work with students and we identify those students based on some attendance issues, maybe some academic issues, some discipline issues. We bring those students in, we give them an upperclassman that they can gravitate to. Someone that works with them twice a week but also makes contact to them throughout the week to see how they’re doing, how classes are going, how they’re keeping up on the homework. We make connections with the students, student to student connections that make them feel like they’re part of a community.

We have over fourteen hundred students here so it's easy to get lost in the shuffle. Those kids that a little off track, they have a connection to somebody here, whether it be a teacher or a student, they're more likely to stay on track or refocus and get back on track.
Julie Speer: Talk about the success you've seen with students going through the YESS Program.

Brian Truax: The students successes that I've seen have been increases in attendance, increases in academics, their grades gradually climb back up into that passing zone so that they can stay on track with their academics. They connect with other students, I start seeing them at sporting events, school activities. General attitude at school is much more pleasant, they're happy, they look like they want to be here. They come in, their prepared. They follow the lead of the mentor, if their mentor is here on time and doing what they need to be doing, which is pretty much every mentor that I know, their mentees are doing the same thing, so they have that peer to look up to and say, "This is how I should be a student in high school," and they follow that, and they go with that.

The successes I see might be a little subtle but they make big differences. Like I said, their academics improve, attendance improves and that overall attitude, they just feel better about being a high school student.

Julie Speer: What's the relationship between YESS and DPS? Does DPS pay YESS? Do you know what the arrangement is?

Brian Truax: Abraham Lincoln High School, we have an agreement with the YESS mentoring program. We do fund a portion of the YESS mentoring program, a lot of it is funded by outside agencies to the YESS directly but then we also pay for a portion so we can have someone here in the building on a regular basis so Mr. Medina can facilitate the YESS mentoring program, get our students together, monitor students. We pay for a portion of it but a majority of what goes with the YESS is paid for by donations from businesses and contributors throughout the Denver metro area.

Julie Speer: Tell me when the YESS Institute came into Lincoln. Do you foresee it being here for a while?

Brian Truax: The Yes Institute came into effect here at Abraham Lincoln in 2006, so this is our eighth year going on nine years. It's been a very solid program, we run it a little bit differently than some of our other comparable high schools in DPS that have it. We do it after school instead of during the day as a class which gives our kids an opportunity to see what goes on after school hours, the full spectrum of the school day. I foresee this and I think our principal and our community agrees that this is something that's going to continue here at Lincoln. It's very positive, it reengages kids with school and it's something that the community recognizes
and when Mr. Medina or the Yes mentors go out and talk to families and so on, they know what it means and they're happy that their kids are a part of it.

This is a program that for the foreseeable future, we will continue at Lincoln and we will continue to fund on our part.

Julie Speer: Is there anything else you want to say about the YESS Institute?

Brian Truax: The YESS Institute, I've had an opportunity to work closely with Carlo Kriekels, very genuine person. He's a father, he's a family man, he believes in kids, he loves kids, so it's easy to make a connection with him. As an educator, he may not be a formal educator, but he likes working with kids and making sure that they have whatever opportunities available to them that he may not have had or other kids he has known have had. It's creating those opportunities for students to be successful at high school which is not always easy to do, especially in an urban setting. He wants our kids to be successful so we've had that connection with Carlo and it's an always nice conversations and it's always positive. We're always talking about kids and it's nice to see our kids develop through the program and then how that's transformed them for success in the future.

Julie Speer: As an assistant principal, as an educator, where are you at in terms of what you see as the achievement gap problem and DPS's desire to close that gap? Also, your own SPF scores with Lincoln, one of the big issues too is our remediation rates. The kids who graduate aren't ready for college.

Brian Truax: The achievement gap is something that we're always looking at, whether it's our ELL, English language learners, our special education population or diverse populations. At Abraham Lincoln, we're not a very diverse school actually. We're ninety six, ninety seven percent Hispanic. We have African American's, Asian and some White's but primarily we're a very homogeneous school. Our kids come to us with some deficits, we work hard to try to close that gap for them. We see our students that come to us as freshmen, they may not be making that status growth on SPF that we'd like to see or which we want, but they are making that academic growth. They may not be moving up proficiency levels, but they are moving within the band that they are working in closer to that proficiency.

We're really working with our kids on how to close that gap but comparable kinds in our building, our kids are all the same. Other high schools have a more diverse population so it's easier to track that gap, ours we know we just have to move up. The more we can get our students to improve academically, it's going to help DPS in general with closing that achievement gap. We align our classes to
meet the needs of our English language learners, our special ed students. That's how we've developed our schedule. We're going to meet their needs first, build a schedule around those students which is a large population of our building. We build that schedule around them so that they have those needs, those classrooms are set up, ready to go for them first and everything else builds in around it and fills in. We know our target group is and we do our best to meet their needs with the schedule, with the classes we offer.

We're also increasing our offerings, we're moving towards a more CTE type model, a career and tech ed model as well here at Lincoln. We're really trying to give our students opportunities that are going to help them excel in the building and in the new digital world, the new age of education. DPS, as leaders we talk about the achievement gap every time we meet. What are we doing? What are strategies we're using in our schools so that we can close that gap? How are we meeting the needs of all of our learners, free and reduced students, our ELL students, our African American's, our Hispanics, what are we doing? Because those are where our gaps are at. What are we doing to close those gaps? There's always conversations, there's always development, there's always courses that our teachers are available too that we present to our teachers, that the district offers so we can work together so we can narrow that gap as best we can, without having a group fall back.

Those high end groups, we don't want them to stop moving forward. It's about everyone moving forward but the groups that are struggling jump higher at a higher rate. That's where our work is and moving our students that are in that gap area at a quicker pace so they can catch up.

Julie Speer: Do you know what the population of your students are that are in the free and reduced lunch category?

Brian Truax: The free and reduced lunch population at Abraham Lincoln is around ninety five percent. Ninety five percent of our students get either a free lunch or a reduced price lunch every day. We also offer a free breakfast which is kind of a DPS model. We're the largest breakfast program in DPS. When our kids come in, they get something to eat. Our food service manager has been recognized by the district for the serviced that she provides our students and the kids just love the fact that they can walk in, grab a breakfast in the morning, have it so they're ready to go. We understand our population, we know their needs and we do the best we can to meet their needs.

Julie Speer: Talk about the remediation rate.
Brian Truax: Our remediation rate at Lincoln is a little higher than we'd like but we as a high school network have taken steps to increase our developmental education classes. This is our second year of working with developmental education classes so when we assess students through our accuplacer testing, it tells us are they ready for college. If they're not ready, what classes will they need to have late junior year, first part of their senior year, so that when they look at those colleges, they make those applications to our area colleges and colleges around the state and the nation, that they are ready to go to college. We provide classes for those students to build those skill so that they can be college ready. This is our second year really pushing that.

As a network, as a high school network, all the high schools [inaudible] have the developmental education classes and I can say that our school, the kids that need developmental classes, a hundred percent of those kids are in developmental classes. If they need the remediation, they need the support here, they're going to get it. We also offer concurrent enrollment classes so students that are already ready to go, they're able to earn college credits so they can have some credits before they even leave high school.

At Abraham Lincoln, we have developmental classes for our students and we also have concurrent enrollment classes so our students can earn college credits before they even graduate from Abraham Lincoln. We're working not only for the remediation part so that we have fewer kids that need remediation but we're also giving them opportunities to have a head start with college. All the high schools do that but we're getting more active. We have a lot of partners in the college level that work with us and we're always looking to increase our number of concurrent enrollment students. Our advanced placement classes, we're always looking to increase those and increase our scores in all aspects of education for our students.

Julie Speer: If you look at your student body, generally speaking, some of the outside challenges that these students are living with keep them from being able to focus on studies a hundred percent.

Brian Truax: Again, we're ninety five percentish free and reduced lunch. They don't have the income that they can afford to have nice clothes, maybe a meal every night and so on. A lot of students, they'll go home and they're the oldest. They're babysitting their younger brothers and sisters or they're going to a job. Many of our students, they come here from seven thirty to three twenty and then they're going right to a job and working from three thirty, four o'clock 'till eight, nine, ten o'clock at night and then they're doing their homework or they're hopefully
doing it when they wake up in the morning. Our students have a variety of challenges they face before they even come into our doors. We understand that and when we see attendance issues and so on, we try to find out, okay why is it that you're late to your period one?

Or, you can't attend your period one, you haven't been attending? Or, why are you not sticking around for your eighth period class? We look at those trends, we look at those patterns, we talk to individual students and see and then we'll work with them and say, "What can we do to help? How can we get you here? We want you here. Can we do a schedule adjustment with our counselors? Can we shift some classes around so that you know you're getting your content areas, where you know you're getting your math, your social studies, your science, your language arts?" You get those, so we might move an elective here or there which towards graduation is not as many points towards graduation. It's some points but it's not as immediate and those are classes they can pick up throughout. Our students are eligible to earn seventy credits a year, so if they pass all their classes, they get seventy credits.

They only need to have sixty credits to be eligible for the next grade level. There's opportunities to move ahead so if a student is on track, doing well with their credits, they can actually graduate at semester, their senior year, after first semester. Occasionally, we have stunts that do that but we also like to have them here to take those concurrent enrollment classes and so on. Their outside challenges, we try to work with those as best we can. It's conversations with parents, or whoever they might be living with, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, whoever it is. We also have some students that live, their eighteen, they're on their own. I'm here for my own education, so there is no parent that I'm accountable too, they're here, they're for their own education so they're taking on that adult responsibility but they still want to get an education. We work with the kids as best we can, we make those adjustments to meet their needs. Sometimes they're successful, sometimes they're not but we like to think in the grand scheme of things, we're far more successful than not.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about Southwest Denver in general.

Brian Truax: Southwest Denver is fairly diverse. It does have a high Hispanic population but there is also a large African American population. Southwest Denver has a large African American population, a large Anglo, Caucasian population as well, so even though our school may not be as diverse, our neighbor to the southwest, Kennedy is more diverse than we are. Our students, the income rates are similar, as you move a little bit farther southwest, a little more income. Towards
Kennedy they have a little bit better income, there are less free reduced at Kennedy but I'm fortunate that I know students a Kennedy myself, so I know what they do over there and I know what goes on here and the education is comparable.

The opportunities are the same, they have a CTE at Kennedy, so our neighborhood, the southwest neighborhood, we're really pushing towards that CTE model. We're trying to give students access to the programs that are going to be out there when they graduate. We don't know what they are, our students that are freshmen now are going to face hundreds and hundreds of jobs that didn't exist when they were freshmen, so we're trying to give them the skills, the opportunities to step into those jobs that don't exist right now.

Julie Speer: Is there anything else that you feel like should be said about either the YESS Institute or the achievement gap?

Brian Truax: As far as the YESS Institute, this is my second year working with the YESS Institute. Great group of people, I've had an opportunity to go to some of their events, participate with the kids and see what they do when they celebrate the students. It's really much a celebration of how the students are growing, how the students are achieving. Everything they do is around celebrating the students and when they do fundraising, the groups that work with them with the fundraising, a hundred percent of that goes right into the YESS mentoring program. When they have fundraisers, I try to get to those events when I can when I have availability with my responsibilities. The YESS mentoring program is very much aligned to kids and trying to get as many opportunities to share in their successes.
Burt Hubbard
Journalist
Rocky Mountain PBS

Burt Hubbard: I've been a journalist for a long time, specializing in investigative, in-depth stories.

Julie Speer: Would you consider yourself a researcher?

Burt Hubbard: I've done a lot of research using data, some complicated data, especially in education.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about your education research, how you do that and how you gather and mine this data.

Burt Hubbard: Basically what we try to do is get as much data as we can on the students themselves. For example, years ago we took an eighth grade class in Denver Public Schools and were able to, using data, track them over the next five years to see what happened to all the students so that we could then tell details such as how many students moved out of the district, how many students just dropped out of sight or dropped out of school. We could do that by race. We could do that by gender.

Then we could cross index it with things like were they falling behind in class credits while they were dropping out? What were some of the factors? Was poverty a factor? Things like that so we can try to do a detailed profile and show what factors are coming into play that lead to people dropping out or maybe leaving the school district or, conversely, graduating. What's been their success rate?

We could do it by high schools. We could say, "What's going on in this high school versus what's going on in another high school," that could
show something about what is succeeding and what is failing within the education system.

Julie Speer: How long have you been covering research? How long have you been researching projects on education?

Burt Hubbard: Probably since the late-1990s when the standardized test scores came in to being and we started to look at trends on the test scores themselves. We've been doing a lot of sort of high profile research stories. Alan had mentioned one we did when we looked at how many people who live in Denver actually go to school in Denver Public Schools. That was very challenging but it gave us some real good indications of some of the things that were succeeding in DPS and some of the things that were failing in DPS during that time.

Julie Speer: Do you remember what year that was?

Burt Hubbard: That would have been the mid-2000s.

Julie Speer: When you did that, what percentage of students did you see opted out of the district?

Burt Hubbard: It was a large percent. I think it was around DPS was capturing around 60-70% of the students living in Denver. I mean, you had a high percent going to private school. You had a lot choosing out into neighboring school districts like Jefferson County, and Cherry Creek, and even Littleton School District. Then frankly because of some of the poverty and immigration issues, you had a percentage of students who just didn't go to school period. You had all those factors. We could actually look geography and see where was the attrition occurring in DPS type of thing.

Julie Speer: Why do you think education is so important?

Burt Hubbard: Well, we did a series where we looked at the gaps between income and the races and everybody we talked to almost across the board said education is the number one issue to address if you want to address these racial and income gaps. That it starts with education and that, of all the research, some of the clearest research is college degrees make a big difference as far as attainment of middle class status. That's why we sort of focused in on education because it is so important. Everything collides
in education, all the social economic issues, all the learning philosophies, all of the experiments that go on, they start in education.

Julie Speer: Let's talk about this achievement gap project. Looking at achievement, race, and poverty, explain what you did and has this ever been done before?

Burt Hubbard: What we've looked at is, in this case of Denver Public Schools, we've tried to go back in time. We've looked at, for achievement, we've tried to look at standardized test scores over the decades and we could look pretty clearly at what was going on in the '80s and early-'90s during busing and we could look at very clearly what's been going on since busing. Unfortunately the comparisons before busing are very murky because there were different test scores. Even comparing during busing with after busing, there were two different sets of test so have to be a little careful. We did it based on ratios to take a look at what the gaps were during busing and after busing.

Julie Speer: What did your research find?

Burt Hubbard: Basically, as far as the achievement gaps, there has really been no change in the gaps since the mid-1980s at the height of busing. Basically low income and minority children are still only scoring at about 40% of what white students are scoring as far as these achievement tests. The gaps are huge. Frankly, there's no real difference between the gaps economically and racially.

Over 30 plus years the gaps really have not changed over time. Now, that doesn't say that there's been success stories and individual projects or individual school but, overall, if you look at all of the students going through Denver Public Schools, the gaps really have not changed that much.

Basically, if you're looking by race, the gaps are actually a little higher if you do it totally by race than if you do it totally by income. If you compare low-income, which is defined as free and reduced lunch versus the rest of the student body, those gaps are slightly less today than the gaps between whites versus blacks and whites versus Latinos type of thing. One of the interesting things why that is the case in Denver Public Schools is because each group's achievement scores have gone up considerably. Denver has done a good job of increasing achievement
scores across the board but the achievement scores are going up faster for the white students than they are for the black or Latino students.

Julie Speer: Is DPS more segregated now or is it the same?

Burt Hubbard: Yeah, it depends on which group you’re talking about. There's different things. One of the most amazing things I think that we discovered in looking at segregation patterns was that during busing the segregation of Latino students actually increased. After busing it took off so that today the segregation patterns for Latino students in Denver Public Schools mirrors what the segregation patterns were for white students before busing began type of thing.

Basically what that means is that you have a high percentage of Latino students in schools that are 80% or more Latino. The Latino students are not sort of integrated into a lot of the schools. To look at it a different way, if you wanted to have all schools mirror the overall Latino student population in Denver, you would have to move 51% of Latino schools out of their schools and into a different school which is more than half type of thing.

For black students the schools are more integrated today than they were before busing. Not quite as much as during busing but more so. Part of that is just there’s been an integration of African-Americans throughout the whole metro area. There's been a large migration into Aurora type of trends going on.

For white students the segregation today is not quite what is was before busing but white segregation is increasing. In fact, if you wanted the white student population each school to mirror what it is in DPS overall, you would have to move 57% of the white students to a different school which is sort of what happened during busing.

Julie Speer: Do you have any idea how the student enrollment, racial enrollment, parallels the city actual census data?

Burt Hubbard: The enrollment in DPS is far more minority and poor than the overall demographics of the city. For example, believe it or not, in Denver the white population has actually been increasing over the last decade or so. There's been a slight increase in the percent of white students in Denver but, white students in Denver Public Schools account for 20% of the
school enrollment, white residents count for over 50% of the whole city enrollment. You could see that there's some discrepancies going on there.

Julie Speer: That basically means that white families are opting out of the district.

Burt Hubbard: Yes. Basically what it shows is that white families are not going to DPS in the numbers represented within the community as a whole. Private schools have a lot to do with it. Now, one of the trends that we did see was that private school enrollment since the end of busing has gone down in number so there has been some attraction back to Denver Public Schools through, I think, gentrification and some of the other trends going on.

Julie Speer: Anything with poverty that you’ve seen?

Burt Hubbard: Well, I mean the poverty has really reflected sort of, after the end of busing, the return to the neighborhood schools and so what's happening is that you're getting neighborhoods with high degrees of poverty are still being reflected in the neighborhood school enrollment, minus the fact that you've got some families opting out of DPS altogether so it's reducing that sort of pool down.

You can see that the high poverty schools really are a combination of sort of gentrification pushing low income families only into certain areas of the city and the fact that more low income families are going to DPS than middle class and upper class families. The combination of those two forces is creating high poverty schools in Denver.

Julie Speer: Did you see an increase in poverty in enrollment over those, with the research? Were there any trends?

Burt Hubbard: It's hard to tell because it's defined by free and reduced lunch program and there's been more sort of a concentration by school districts to get more kids into those programs and so we're not sure if it's a reflection of the fact that there's more low income kids out there or the fact that the districts are capturing more low income kids and getting them into these programs. Overall, poverty in Denver, it went up during the recession but it's coming back down now so it's not that different from what it was ten years ago.
Julie Speer: What about teachers?

Burt Hubbard: The interesting thing about the teachers is we looked at the Denver Public Schools teacher sort of demographics. We went back to before busing in the 1970s and then looked at what it was today. The percent of black teachers in Denver Public Schools has dropped by almost half while the black African-American student population is almost unchanged. The white population of teachers has gone down slightly but it's still around 80% while the student body is 20% for white students.

Julie Speer: And Latino teachers?

Burt Hubbard: The percentage of Latino teachers has gone up. It does not reflect the overall numbers because Latino students make up more than 60% of the Denver Public Schools student body, but the numbers have gone up.

Julie Speer: Do you know what the current DPS student body looks like?

Burt Hubbard: The DPS student body is roughly a little over 60% Latino, around 20% white, and about 14% African-American. I think Asian is around 4% or so.

Julie Speer: What does your research tell you about segregation in Denver Public Schools?

Burt Hubbard: Generally, what it says is that the most segregated schools in terms of poverty and minority enrollment are faring the worst academically, especially when you get into neighborhood schools. Now, there are exceptions. One of them is STRIVE. STRIVE is basically a series of charter schools that deals with generally poverty rates of 80-90% of their student body as far as free and reduced lunch, and Latino enrollment of around 70-90%. They are a model that's showing segregation of low income and minority students can lead to achievement. Some of the big differences are they have longer school days and they have an incredible emphasis on homework and making sure that homework is done before the students can advance on to other types of activities.

Julie Speer: It's very rigorous, right? There's a lot of discipline?

Burt Hubbard: A lot of discipline. They got to be quiet. There's a whole emphasis on college. For example, when I went to spend a day at STRIVE I had to stand up before the student body and tell them what college I went to. Every room has a college emblem outside.
Julie Speer: Why would you guess those schools work for those kids?

Burt Hubbard: I think it's a more intense education experience. They're doing a lot. I think the longer school day, frankly, probably works to a certain degree. I think the fact the concentration they're doing on academics and making sure that if the students come in and they haven’t done their homework, they don't get to do the extracurricular activities until they finish that homework. They also have an opportunity when they get to the school initially in the morning to go into a classroom and finish their homework, so they're making sure that the work is getting done.

Julie Speer: What about DSST?

Burt Hubbard: DSST is the opposite; it's an integration model. It has been probably the most successful charter school in Denver as far as integrating low income and minority students with higher income and white students. The test scores are probably among the highest in DPS for individual schools. They have shown that an integrated model also can work type of thing.

Julie Speer: Do you know any of the history with Montbello?

Burt Hubbard: Well, Montbello as a neighborhood was created I think in like the 1950s and '60s. Initially it was a fairly integrated white/black neighborhood. Then initially there was Latino families began moving in and it became even more integrated. The other thing is that during busing Montbello was paired with Thomas Jefferson High School.

There’s a lot of loyalty among Montbello families to TJ today still. I think you see a fair amount of Montbello families still taking their kids to Thomas Jefferson type of thing.

What's happened in the last couple decades is Montbello's become fairly high poverty. It's a big area, it's had a lot of gang issues, poverty issues, and so the problems spilled over into the schools big time. Montbello, the high school itself, they've brought people in there to try to turn it around, it just hasn’t succeeded.

I mean, Denver Public Schools has done a lot to beef up the schools up there. DSST has put some schools in there. Some of the other charters has done some schools in there but I don’t think it's really moved the needle too much as far as achievement so far. I mean, people have to
realize these things do take time. You can't just change a whole school system or an area and expect the results to be like that. I think it's still up in the air whether those changes have made a major difference at this point.

Julie Speer: Montbello's not an active high school anymore.

Burt Hubbard: Not really. It's a series of charter schools inside there. I think sports-wise it's still an active high school and maybe some of the extracurricular stuff but academically, no it's not.

Julie Speer: What can you say about DSST scores in general?

Burt Hubbard: DSST scores are high. The last time I looked at Green Valley they were a little lower than the other DSST scores but that was a relatively new program. I'm not sure how many years it's been up there.

Julie Speer: They just had their first graduating class.

Burt Hubbard: Okay, so maybe four years as opposed to ten years or so with some of the other programs. Last time I looked, which was about a year and half-two years ago, they were slightly lower than the other DSST schools. They're higher than the normal, yes.

Julie Speer: Talk about Lincoln High School in terms of enrollment, segregation, achievement.

Burt Hubbard: Lincoln and West, and West itself has been changed dramatically, have traditionally been probably the two lowest performing high schools in Denver Public Schools. Lincoln is I think it's 80-90% Latino.

It's very, very high. It's also been a very poor school. Denver Public Schools, with some of the principals they've put in there, have done major efforts. They were one of the leaders in doing concurrent enrollment so that students could stay in the high school and still do college level classes to try to make the transition into college much easier. It is a very large school and it's a very poor school and those demographics are hard to overcome when you're talking about achievement.

Their scores have come up slightly over the years. Their graduation rates have improved and the dropout rates have fallen to a certain degree. I
think they may be the poorest performing high school in Denver right now in terms of achievement and dropouts and graduation rates type of thing.

Julie Speer: Was there anything with Lincoln specifically after busing?

Burt Hubbard: I don't specifically remember Lincoln. I mean, traditionally those are generally Latino neighborhoods and they have been I think over the decades so I don't if there was as much concentration on busing at Lincoln as there were in some of the other high schools. You have to remember during busing what the education leaders paid attention to were the white ratios at schools. They weren’t looking specifically too much at what the Latino ratios were.

Julie Speer: I understand that when busing happened a lot of the white families that lived in southwest Denver just popped down to the Jefferson County.

Burt Hubbard: Yeah, when we did where Denver students were going to school, if you looked at the southwest corner you had Denver Public Schools, Littleton Schools, and Jefferson County Schools all competing against each other for students during choice. This would have been after busing. Generally, Littleton and Jefferson County were winning those wars. They were getting more of the Denver students than were being kept in the southwest Denver schools.

Julie Speer: Do you know anything about Kepner Middle School?

Burt Hubbard: Generally, Kepner Middle School is in that southwest quadrant. That whole area, as a result probably of gentrification to the north, has resulted in a lot of low income families moving into the southwest quadrant, so that area has become poorer. What's interesting is that a lot of the social services for those families were in northwest Denver and so southwest Denver didn’t have many services. When those families moved down to southwest they weren’t getting the same sort of help infrastructure that they were when they were up in northwest Denver.

Julie Speer: Anything else about southwest?

Burt Hubbard: I know that's where Denver Public Schools is now trying to do the next big overhaul plan. They’re trying to see what they can do with those schools. There are some potential educational philosophy clashes.
Southwest Denver, if you go far enough southwest, tends to be one of the more conservative areas of the City of Denver so it'll be interesting to see how those play out in the coming years.

Julie Speer: What's interesting too and more so in southwest Denver, is the neighborhood school. Families will go to the neighborhood school no matter what it is. Maybe they don't have a car, they don't have time to drive. Choice doesn't really factor in to the families that we've spoken with in southwest.

Burt Hubbard: No, and southwest is a high immigrant community too so you've got a lot of families from different countries who are moving in there and traditionally they would send their students to the nearest school so you still I think don't have quite the choice outreach down there with a lot of those families that you would in other parts of the district.

Julie Speer: Is there anything about Manual specifically in terms of achievement levels that changed?

Burt Hubbard: Manual has been through so many different experiments over the years. I mean, if you step back and you look at education in general, everyone's trying to figure out what the best way is to educate hard to educate children whether they're low income, or the families are struggling, things like that. The problem is that each experiment takes away a generation of students. In the case of Manual, what's happened is they've tried these different changes but they haven't succeeded so another generation of students has gone through, literally, a poor educational experience because they haven't been able to fix what's going on there. Manual is just the classic example of, they're trying different things but so far nothing's really succeeded since the end of busing.

Julie Speer: Did you look at achievement levels at Manual specifically, have they just been flat?

Burt Hubbard: Achievement levels at Manual have generally been flat. There's been some up and down as they've changed the school because they've had different grades in there, they've had schools within a school in there so you could look at different schools. We did look way back at what happened to all of the Manual students who left when they closed the school initially before they reopened it and a lot dropped out, they were
just dispersed throughout the whole DPS system and that was almost like a lost couple of classes for Denver Public Schools.

Julie Speer: Did you look at East at all?

Burt Hubbard: We have looked at East over the years. There are still probably, of your traditional neighborhood high school, they have had the most success over the years. They’ve been generally the most integrated. They did have problems, probably back 10, 12 years ago where white students were in the AP classes and lower income students were in the more traditional classes but they’ve integrated that a lot better over the last couple years.

Julie Speer: When you say 12 years ago are you looking at the early 2000s?

Burt Hubbard: Basically if you look at sort of the change of decades back in the late-1990s, early-2000s there were problems where white students tended to be in the AP classes and low income students tended to be in the more traditional classes. But that's changed over the years.

Julie Speer: Did you look at achievement gaps at East?

Burt Hubbard: We did years ago and we did find considerable gaps between white versus black and Latino, but we haven’t really updated that as far as east is concerned recently.

Julie Speer: North High School, any trends pre-busing, post, during?

Burt Hubbard: North was in the same category as west and Lincoln after busing. There was a deterioration of academic achievement, graduation rates fell, dropout rates rose but, in recent years they have been one of the schools to really start to see gains in achievement. It's one of the trends that's pretty distinctive that somebody's doing something out there that tends to be working I believe based on what we're seeing with achievement scores both for low income, minority, and white scores.

We've seen distinctive movements in achievement where the scores have been going up and graduation rates have gone up and dropout rates have fallen. It's enough of a pattern to really indicate that somebody is doing something out there that's making a difference.
Julie Speer: One of the things that we're doing is comparing the top 20 school districts of Colorado. Talk to me about some of the key takeaways of that research.

Burt Hubbard: Basically we looked at the segregation patterns in the 20 top enrolling school districts in Colorado and Denver, by far, is the most segregated. If you look at either diversity patterns, or segregation patterns, or clustering of low income or minority students, Denver stands out.

Julie Speer: Just to qualify that, of the top 20 is Denver the largest?

Burt Hubbard: Denver and Jeff Co are the two largest. Denver is the largest and Jeff Co is slightly behind it. Those are two. The other ones, the large ones are Douglas County, Cherry Creek, those are the big ones, five-star.

We basically looked at the 20 largest enrolling school districts in Colorado. Almost all of them are along the front range except for the school district that serves Grand Junction out on the west slope.

Julie Speer: Are there any trends or any high level other takeaways you see other than Denver is segregated?

Burt Hubbard: Cherry Creek is probably the most integrated large school district in Colorado right now despite the fact that they’ve had an increase in both low income and minority students over the last decade or so. I believe that is reflecting housing patterns so that Aurora, which is probably at least half of Cherry Creek’s school district, is probably the most integrated city in Colorado, more so than Denver right now. I think what you’re seeing there is that the district is reflecting the housing patterns out in the Aurora, Arapahoe County, area.

Basically if you look at the Cherry Creek School District, it is probably, of the largest districts, it is the most traditional neighborhood school district in the metro area. It only has one charter school and so it is going with the neighborhood model. As such, the enrollment in the schools is reflecting the demographics in the neighborhoods where the schools are located. For example, you have a lot more integration in the housing in the Cherry Creek School District than you do in City of Denver.

Julie Speer: What about the achievement gaps?
Burt Hubbard: The achievement gaps, for example, both Latino and black students in Cherry Creek have among the highest achievement scores in the metro area among Latino and black students. The gaps between Latino and black students in Cherry Creek versus white students have been going down consistently over the last decade.

Julie Speer: And only one charter school.

Burt Hubbard: Only one charter school.

Julie Speer: Does DPS have the most charter schools? Do you have any idea?

Burt Hubbard: I’m pretty sure the Denver Public Schools has the most charter schools/magnet schools. They have had an explosion of schools. As far as pure number of schools, they have more by far than any other school district in Colorado so they have probably the biggest choice of any school district in the state.

Julie Speer: Any other high level takeaways of the top 20 that you found interesting?

Burt Hubbard: Well, I mean you had other districts that were poor that seemed to be doing better with achievement among low income and minority students. For example, there’s a small district in El Paso County called Harrison. It has among the lowest gaps between white and Latino and black students and between poor and not poor students. Colorado Springs and Aurora School Districts, they’re not quite on the same pace as Cherry Creek and Harrison but they seem to be making in-roads into the gaps as well. You are seeing in the suburbs some in-roads. Denver, as we said before, Denver has shown really good results in raising the achievement all across the board, but, as a result, the achievement is rising faster among white students and so the gaps are growing.

Julie Speer: How does Denver compare to other cities nationally?

Burt Hubbard: Denver is comparable to other cities across the U.S. They’re dealing with some of the same issues. There’s a lot more heavily low income and minority school districts in some of the major cities than in Denver. For example, the New York Cities, the Detroits, the Bostons, the Clevelands are all dealing with probably higher levels of poverty than what Denver is dealing with and so you probably have seen probably a little better marks
on achievement in Denver than you've seen in some of the other districts.

As far as segregation, almost all of the old busing cities have become more segregated because of a return to neighborhood schools so you're going back to the neighborhood housing patterns that existed before busing began. The exception for Denver is it's one of the few districts in which the segregation among black and white students is not as high as it was before busing. Among Latino students it's still pretty high.

Julie Speer: That's because a lot of them moved to Aurora.

Burt Hubbard: That's correct. You have a lot more integration of African-American families within the whole metro Denver area.
Tell me your name, grade, and regular school.

My name is Calvin Donelle Fugett Jr. I go to school at George Washington High School and I’m a sophomore.

What elementary school did you go to?

The elementary school I went to was Florida Pitt Waller and I started playing basketball in fifth grade in elementary. Middle school sixth and seventh grade I went to MLK and then eighth grade I went to DSST, Green Valley.

Tell me the story of your choice for sixth grade and that what happened.

Well my choice for going to DSST was originally supposed to be in sixth grade but I didn't get in because I was the first child and I didn't get into their lottery system so I chose to go to MLK. From MLK I went there for sixth grade and seventh grade. Since my brother was already in DSST for sixth grade and seventh grade, I was able to get in eighth grade because they have the sibling rule where if your sibling goes to the school then you can go.

How did that feel when your brother got lotteried in and you didn't.

When my brother got lotteried in and I didn't I was actually happy for him because it was a good school. I was also happy because about the sibling system and I was able to go in for eighth grade.
Julie Speer: Talk about your mom and her personality and the values that she's instilled in you guys.

Calvin Fugett: My mom takes education very seriously. She's also motivational when it comes to our activities that we do like for instance basketball. She also reflects on what basketball and education will have for our future. She's brings a good attitude to it all.

Julie Speer: Talk to me a little bit about school because you weren't in DSST for sixth grade and seventh grade. Do you feel like you got behind because of those years?

Calvin Fugett: When I went to MLK for sixth grade and seventh grade I was really advanced as the DSST kids were when I went to DSST for eighth grade. That year I was able to acquire their culture I would say. Freshman year the first semester I was in AP & Honors. Those are really good. Then half the second semester I went to IB which is also hardly similar to DSST. It was weird going through the changes back and forth but I was able to maintain it.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about school and the homework. What's your favorite subject? What's the hardest one? Pros and cons, challenges, strengths.

Calvin Fugett: At school I say since at IB we get a lot of homework. My favorite subject would probably be history because my teacher he's great, he knows how to teach it. My hardest subject is probably chemistry. I would tell it's probably hard because I never really even get it at science so.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about standardized tests. How many tests in your life do you remember taking? Name off as many tests as you can remember and then talk to me about what you think of those tests.

Calvin Fugett: I've always remembered taking TCAP tests. Well they were originally CSAP and then they changed over to TCAP in my seventh grade year. I remember taking IAs. They're like Integrated Assessment so every semester you would take it. That would be a big grade. There were summatives assessments, formative assessments and I think that's all.

Julie Speer: What do you think they're for? Their purpose? Did you like them, did you not like them. Reflect on that a little bit.
Calvin Fugett: I think the tests were to see where you're at in that curriculum. That you would take it every year to see if you're improving or decreasing, so I think that's the importance of it. Mainly I think it was also for to see if your race in that area was improving because on the tests [inaudible] where you have to mark what race you are. I was just thinking they wanted to see if your race in that area was improving in education as well.

Julie Speer: Do you know how you did on those tests?

Calvin Fugett: With TCAPs I've always been in the proficient range. With IB, IB test I've been part superefficient proficient.

Julie Speer: Have you ever heard about the achievement gap?

Calvin Fugett: I've heard of the achievement gap but I never really gone in-depth in it so. I think the achievement gap would be the space between education-wise of different races if I had to guess.

Julie Speer: I'll tell you and then you can react to it. Right now there is an achievement in Denver Public Schools. The kids who are largely affluent and White achieve better meaning that their test scores are higher than kids who are poor and mostly kids of color. They don't know if it's by race or if it's just because of poverty. Does that surprise you? What feelings does it bring up?

Calvin Fugett: It's somewhat surprises me because how accurate it is but I think that's unfortunate for the kids who have poverty issues. Really I don't know I think there should be a change but I don't really know how to describe what change it should be so.

Julie Speer: How could there be more equality within the school system?

Calvin Fugett: I think every kid should get the same chance. I'm saying that every kid should be able to have the same materials. Lately I think schools have been doing that but I don't know. The achievement gap doesn't show it did so.

Julie Speer: Do you have friends that are not in IB and friends that are not into school and academics?
Calvin Fugett: I had a couple of friends but they have people surrounding them that care about their education so they're getting it fixed. I have tons of friends that do care about their education so that's mostly the environment I used to stay around.

Julie Speer: Talk about some of the challenges. People think okay you're a young Black man, do you feel pulled to do things that may not be so good for you or?

Calvin Fugett: I don't really feel pulled for things that might not be good for me because I've always had my mom tell me things that are good and what's not good. My family is always been that way too. I'm probably sort of like a leader so if I see something wrong I tell my friends and I'll try to motivate them to do the right thing so yeah.

Julie Speer: Talk about the gangs and guns or drugs. They're out there. Talk about the reality of that or maybe you're not even aware that those things even exist.

Calvin Fugett: Yeah I'm aware of all the gangs and guns, that's around all of America but I just try ... With squad just try to think of basketball because that's my motivation and anybody who I hang around with. I've had friends that were thinking about trying to join gangs and all that because it's all around the world. I was telling them like, "That's not smart, that's not a smart thing to do. You have to think about your future and all that."

Julie Speer: What about your future?

Calvin Fugett: For my future I just really want to be able to go to college and play basketball because that's my dream. Mainly have a successful job.

Julie Speer: If you were to have any kind of job or career that you wanted, what would it be?

Calvin Fugett: I want to have a job that involves business and dealing with money, but that's my plan B but plan A would be I want to be a professional basketball player.

Julie Speer: What about your dad?
Calvin Fugett: My dad he formally lives in Texas right now. I haven't recently seen him because it's been a family problem back then when we were little but he's been trying to reach out lately to talk to us.

Julie Speer: So your mom's been doing it all by herself?

Calvin Fugett: Yes, my mom has been doing all by herself with the help of my close family members like my aunt, my uncle, my grandparents.

Julie Speer: Let's talk about race a little bit. I mean there's been a lot of stuff in the news, Ferguson and Staten Island and Mr. Garner, how does all that make you feel?

Calvin Fugett: Well with race it has been going on lately around the world it's pretty sad because it's crazy how the time zone we're in now like 21st Century is still all going on with Black people dying and all that. I don't know, I would say that's happening a lot. Everywhere racial issues are still going to exist. I just say if we build a strong community where everybody supports the issue, then it probably won't happen as much.

Julie Speer: As a young African American man do you feel close to that issue or does it feel so separate from you because it's not your reality? Do you relate to those things that are happening or not at all?

Calvin Fugett: I don't relate to it like any of that has happened to me or come close to happening to me but I do support it because that's wrong. I'm going to be a supporter but it never has involved me.

Julie Speer: If you were able to fix the race problems in America, how would you fix that? What kind of future do you imagine for race in America and in Denver?

Calvin Fugett: It's hard to say. I would just say it should all go away but as I said I would try to motivate communities to become stronger. Eventually that would lead to race, not so much ending but lowering I guess.

Julie Speer: Do you feel like we have a race problem or is it a poverty problem?

Calvin Fugett: I do think some part is poverty. I don't think we're too deep into the poverty and racial issue problem but we have it so.
Julie Speer: Do you feel like in your own family you have financial issues at all or do you feel like you guys are solid?

Calvin Fugett: I feel like we're solid. We're not rich but we're not poor so we're good.

Julie Speer: Tell me about basketball. What is basketball for you?

Calvin Fugett: For me basketball is life because I have grown up playing it for seven years and this is a love for me.

Julie Speer: Is it weird having your little brother on your team?

Calvin Fugett: It's not weird at all because when were little we used to always play with each other. For about three years we weren't playing with each other so it's like I have to get back in the zone with playing with him again but I'm going to get used to it.

Julie Speer: Talk about your teachers a little bit. Have you noticed the ethnicity of your teachers?

Calvin Fugett: Most of my teachers are White and then some of them are Indian, Black. They're all pretty diverse and they know how to communicate with the kids very well. I don't think seeing their race can be a problem with teaching the kids. They're all good teachers so.

Julie Speer: Do you see any differences between what you guys call the traditional school and the IB Program?

Calvin Fugett: With traditional and IB, IB there's more Caucasians and traditional there's more minorities. I have friends in IB and I have friends in traditional and me, I don't want to brag but I'm a leader so they realize I'm in IB. Kids have been seeing that there hasn't really been a difference between both programs. They're getting along very well. It's a good community.

Julie Speer: If you could design the ultimate school what would it be? What would it look like?

Calvin Fugett: If I can design the ultimate school all the kids would probably be super nice to each other. It would be a great community. The teachers would be very communicative to the parents and the students. The school spirit would be great. All the kids would support every sport. The lunch would be way better.
Julie Speer: What do you think about the reality that some schools are way better than others? Talk about that, and in the same school district.

Calvin Fugett: I think with the reality that some schools are way better it's probably the kids' perspective and kids' attitude that they take upon the school. Like I said it's based off of the school spirit so.

Julie Speer: Do you know about Montebello High School?

Calvin Fugett: I do know. With Montebello High School they were bad at first but I heard they're beginning to be a good school and started getting their stuff together. There's multiple other schools that are trying to be built in with Montebello. Their basketball team is very good this year.

Julie Speer: If you weren't going to GW, where would you go?

Calvin Fugett: My mom had two options for me, she said either it would be Vista PEAK or DSST High School but DSST High School didn't really offer a basketball team that was [inaudible]. She was going to have me play for Montebello but go to DSST High School.
Julie Speer: Why did you choose to go into education?

Carlo Kriekels: That’s a long story actually because my background is very different. I went to law school in Belgium, and I also went in Germany to law school where I did what they call a Magister Legum which is called an LLM which is a postgraduate law degree in German. The reason why I’m in the world of education is that because I made a trip on a motorbike a la Che Guevara from California to Chile. The difference with Che Guevara is that we lasted much longer. The other difference of course is that we’re not quite as famous yet as Mr. Guevara.

It was in ’92 and in ’93, I made a trip on a motorbike from Los Angeles all the way to the bottom of Patagonia. It’s really during that trip that made a difference for me. It gave me what I call a compass for caring because I went to law school really for social justice. In Central and South America, I felt that I truly cared about developing of children. When I came back, I decided that I want to dedicate my life to that. That’s how I’ve come into the world of education, and that’s why I founded the YESS Institute.

Julie Speer: Tell me why the YESS Institute exists because what you guys do is so different? It’s not reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Carlo Kriekels: Yeah. I co-founded the YESS Institute with Susan Greer, who at this moment is not involved in the YESS Institute anymore, but she was one of the cofounders. The YESS Institute started with the idea to teach emotional intelligence to kids.
The importance of emotional intelligence, I have experienced that in my own life because with all the education that I had, I felt like when I turned 30 years old and had my early midlife crisis that at that time, I felt that I let those emotional intelligence goes and it felt like these skills are truly the skills which are necessary in every part of your life, in your personal life, in professional life, in school; but on the other hand, these emotional intelligence skills are taught nowhere.

Somehow, if you’ve had some great role models, you could have learned those skills from those people because they modeled them to you but if you have not, they are not really being taught to you. Somehow, you have to get these skills through osmosis or go to a shrink for 30 years which most people do if you can afford it. We feel that it’s necessary for you, for the next generation, to teach those skills because that’s not going to only make them successful inside the school but also in their lives, and also in their jobs later on, and their careers.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about your own kids first, and then we’ll talk about the YESS kids. Tell me how many kids you have and where you choose to send them to school.

Carlo Kriekels: I have two children. They are in fourth and fifth grade. They are within Denver Public Schools. They, at this moment, are at Polaris at Ebert which is one of the magnet schools of Denver Public Schools and a great service that DPS is providing to students.

Before that actually, they went for five years to Gilpin Montessori in Curtis Park which is on 29 California where my children chose in an early age, like in kindergarten an ECE. At that time, DPS had decided to turn this school around into a classic montessori school. Because of the leadership inside that school and their dedication, and experience, and expertise in montessori, we decided, my wife and I decided to put our kids in that school.

At that time, my kids which are white completes minority inside that school. When they came in to that school, it was a very high percentage poverty school, very high in free and reduced lunch, and on the other hand also, it was about 90 or 95% black or Latino. It was actually a great experience for my children to be in a neighborhood and to be in a school where they were the minority inside that school.
We have seen this later on is that just ease in which they are playing with kids from different ethnicities. For instance, when they are in contact outside of the school in a group where you have the majority of white kids and you have maybe some Latino or black kids with that, it’s always my children who are the friends that are hanging with the Latino and black kids while the other white kids stay here and play among themselves.

Julie Speer: Did you choose Gilpin because of the racial integration or because of the exposure to that or was it just a montessori?

Carlo Kriekels: We chose Gilpin for both reasons. We chose Gilpin because of the racial integration but also because of the montessori education.

Julie Speer: Actually, that wouldn’t be racial integration. It would be more racial exposure or something, right?

Carlo Kriekels: Yeah.

Julie Speer: Because it wasn’t integrated in that, it was a balance of ethnicities, right?

Carlo Kriekels: It was pretty much a mono-cultural school to a great extent because it was mainly between a Latino and black school because it was fitting so much from that neighborhood.

What’s happening in that neighborhood is that that neighborhood is completely gentrifying is that the community that was living there had to move away, and we saw that each year that some of their friends had to move away. They moved to Adams, they moved to Aurora, and so they were not going to that school anymore. Much more of the young white families were moving inside that school, they were the ones who are sending their kids now.

At this moment, the free and reduced lunch rate has changed dramatically. I think now, it’s only down to 60%. Connected to that, of course, there are many more white students there. It’s much more of a balance now between white students than Latino and black students.

Julie Speer: Why did you leave it then?

Carlo Kriekels: We left it because we had a great opportunity because when our children tested as highly gifted, we had the opportunity to go to one of the best
schools in Colorado which is a public school which is Ebert. We felt that as loyal as we were to montessori, to Gilpin, we felt that we had to give our kids the opportunity to go to Ebert.

**Julie Speer:** In terms of sticking with your kids for a second, we’re going to go to McAuliffe, right?

**Carlo Kriekels:** My oldest son is in fifth grade, and we went to a very interesting choice process within DPS for middle school. We live in Park Hill. Park Hill and Stapleton, they had become one area. As a parent, when you’re choosing into middle school, you have five choices because you do not know which school you’re going to go to. Whenever you live in Park Hill or Stapleton, you have a choice of one of these five; however, it’s not sure which school your kids will be on. It is based upon the result of the lottery.

We were very fortunate that we actually got our first choice which is McAuliffe which is only one mile away from our home. We chose that school because it’s much more of a liberal arts school and it will expose my children to all different aspects of education from arts, to science, to sports, and so forth, languages, music.

**Julie Speer:** Plus, is it because of the proximity to Martin Luther King and North Hill and there’s a high percentage of kids of color going to McAuliffe, are there not? Do you know?

**Carlo Kriekels:** I am not sure of the percentage of kids of color that are attending McAuliffe. The old school and Smiley, of course, had a very high percentage of free and reduced lunch of poverty, and of course of kids of color. However, the school decided to let go of that model and integrate a new McAuliffe model which is an IB program. Because of that, there has been a tremendous shift in the demographic of the students that are going to McAuliffe. I’m not sure what is happening to all these other students which are the kids of color which used to be at Smiley.

**Julie Speer:** Sticking with the choice process for a little bit, because my experience was I wasn’t so lucky. We choose actually into five schools, and she didn’t get into any of them. Her default was her neighborhood school which was not a good option for us. Your neighborhood schools are all good schools so that’s not the case across the whole district. What would you say about the choice process and the shortcomings of that because not all the schools in DPS are good schools?
Carlo Kriekels: Yes. What can I say about that?

Julie Speer: The pros and cons of the choice process.

Carlo Kriekels: I think there are definitely pros to the choice process since, for instance, in the neighborhood where I live, there are different options of all good schools and schools with different philosophies and different backgrounds; however, these are better schools. Unfortunately, not every neighborhood in Denver, the parents have that choice that if your child would go to the choice number three, four, or five that that is a good school. It’s very unfortunate that Denver Public School has not able yet to provide a strong choice in every neighborhood.

Julie Speer: Are you pretty committed that your kids will stay in public education through high school?

Carlo Kriekels: Yeah. My wife and I, we were very aligned in the fact that we wanted our children to go to public schools. I’m from Belgium, and so I went to a public school all my life, and I feel that since my career at the YESS Institute is within the public education, I feel that if I am within integrity, I have to send my own children also to public schools. We have had so far a great experience in working with public schools within DPS.

Julie Speer: You’d probably be okay because you go to McAuliffe and then your kids will go to East, right?

Carlo Kriekels: As my fifth grade son is going to McAuliffe and since we live in Park Hill, his high school will be East High School which we’re very happy.

Julie Speer: We might as well talk about McAuliffe. There is a lot of families who actually chose out of Smiley from Park Hill, and now they can’t get back in.

Carlo Kriekels: What happened in McAuliffe is that, and there were some articles in the Park Hill Newspaper and the Stapleton Newspaper, there was tremendous upset by the parents because there were some people who can see the McAuliffe school, the Smiley building from their kitchen, and were unable to get their kids into the school. As you can imagine, that’s very upsetting. That’s definitely one of the downsides of the choice process.
Julie Speer: Okay, let’s talk about race and let’s talk about segregation, and the fact that... These are kids you work with. If you look at the kids, we can start there and go down. Talk about the students, of the 600 students that are in your program, the majority of them are students of color, correct? Maybe, who are the kids in your program? Then, explore the schools that they go to and how diverse those schools are.

Carlo Kriekels: If you look at the students who are being served by the YESS Institute within Denver Public Schools are in Adams, Fifth, and Westminster, we have over 90% of the students are students of free and reduced lunch which is the indicator for poverty, and over 80% of the students are students of color which are pretty much all Latino students that we are working with since the programs at the YESS Institute are along the west corridor. It’s along the federal corridor of North, West, and Lincoln High Schools.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about each of those schools individually. Let’s talk about Northwest Denver first. Talk about North High School. Talk about what you see for that school and how long you’ve been there because it used to not perform well at all. It’s turning around now but talk about North High School and what you saw before Nicole and how it’s changing now, and it’s what? I think it’s 90 or 93% Latino. It is high ...

Carlo Kriekels: A very high free and reduced lunch.

Julie Speer: Yes, it is not an integrated school.

Carlo Kriekels: Yeah, not yet.

Julie Speer: Tell me about North High School.

Carlo Kriekels: One of the things that I’ve learned in working in the world of education over the last 15 years in Denver since I’m here in America is that the importance of the principal. I used to underestimate the importance of the principal. The leadership of the principal is essential. For instance, North High School is a great example of that.

The YESS Institute has been working with North High School since 2011, and that’s also about the time that Nicole Veltzé became the principal of North High School.
What we have experienced at North High School is that the commitment, and dedication, and the belief of the principal that students can be successful, no matter their backgrounds, is essential. Ms. Veltzé has provided very strong leadership and very strong commitment to the success of that school.

The North High School is still a school where it’s pretty much all Latino students. It’s still a very high poverty rate but we all know that that neighborhood is gentrifying or has been gentrifying tremendously and that there are a lot of white middle class families who have moved into the highlands who might now have only a kindergarten student or first grader, and they would like to see that their daughter or son can go to North High School so that North High School to a certain extent becomes the new East High School of Northwest Denver.

Julie Speer: Describe the academics and the student body before Nicole.

Carlo Kriekels: The leadership and the commitments of Nicole Veltzé has shown that a low performing high school such as North High School has been for a long time can be turned around and can become the school with the same students without becoming a charter school. By rallying the teachers and by truly creating a community that you...Nicole Veltzé has shown that by creating a community and by having all the horses running in the same direction that the car can go at a very high speed. What I mean by that is that if everybody is aligned and has the same vision and purpose in serving the students and is on the same message, then a school which like North High School which has been for a long time a low performing school can turn around and can become a high performing high school with a student population which traditionally is a low performing student population.

Living in a community where there’s a lot of history where the parents of these students which are attending North High School were North High School students, and were dropouts of North High School students, were very young parents as well, which were teen parents.

Julie Speer: Do you anything about the dropout rate in DPS or North?

Carlo Kriekels: No, they manipulate the numbers. It's ridiculously low. I know North High School, in some recent articles in Denver Post, it showed North High School increased their graduation rates by 13%. North High School is
hitting all the different data points to become a very successful school, thanks to the leadership of Nicole Veltzé. It’s not just Nicole Veltzé who did all the work of course.

What she has been able to do is that to bring all the teachers on the same message because I am very strongly convinced that everybody who wants to become a teacher is very passionate about education. What teachers want is to be regarded, is to be heard, and if teachers are supported by their principal to be successful inside their classrooms, they will go the extra mile for their principal, and that’s what happened at North High School.

Julie Speer: Can you explain to me, at North High School, are you guys inside the day, the school day or are you outside of the school day?

Carlo Kriekels: Inside school day.

Julie Speer: Explain that to me and I think that’s part of the reason your program works.

Carlo Kriekels: The YESS Institute serves what they call the tier three students which are the highest risk students within inside of the building. We’re still serving students which are coming to school to a certain extent. The students that we’re working with in North High School are the students which are very disengaged and disconnected from the school. The model that the YESS Institute has developed in collaboration with the school is a during-the-day class. Students attend that class almost daily. It is a class for which they get credits.

Within that class, there’s two happening. One is that students are helping students under the supervision of an adult. There is a teacher inside the room and older students are helping the younger students. The juniors and seniors are working with the sophomores and the freshmen, and they are working together in small groups.

What are they working on? They’re working on academics, homework help, they are teaching them academic study skills, how to organize themselves, time management, how to take tests, and so forth. They’re working on emotional intelligence within the world of education, social and emotional learning, because those skills, we believe, are essential to become successful not only in school but also in your life and in your
career. We also are integrating a college and career component for the students as well.

What we’re doing inside the school is truly creating a community and a class for those students, a place where they can belong inside the school because what YESS does is to create a community inside the building for students which are very disengaged and disconnected from that school for them to come to the school. They have to feel to have a place where they feel regarded, where they feel respected, where they feel loved, and where they have friends.

Especially, when you have adolescence. Adolescence hang out with adolescence. Every parent know that. Every parent knows that once your child turns a teenager the peers become the number one influence. Who are those peers? Because they’ve become the number one influence. If your kid hangs out with other kids which have bad behaviors that you don’t want, your kid is going to take over those behaviors.

What we’re doing is that we’re exposing these students to their peers from their own community which have what we like to call the same cultural zip code, they have the same background, they come from the same neighborhoods, they have the same values; however, they are successful and they have goals to maybe go to college, or go to Emily Griffith, or to develop a career, to graduate high school, and you make that cohort of students, you make them the role models within that community.

By doing that, what you’re truly doing is that you’re creating a pipeline for emerging leaders within those communities. The essential component is that it’s not so much the white community coming in and saying, “You should do this and you should do that,” and so forth. It is more to develop that leadership and develop that sense of ownership for success within those communities. All we do is just providing the structure, the guidance, the skills so they can do it within their own set of values.

Julie Speer: Do you have alumni yet who are coming back and they graduated and are becoming leaders?

Carlo Kriekels: Yes. When we look at the staff that we’re hiring, the support staff that we’re hiring into the schools, these are alumni of the programs who are
coming back to support those schools and to support their own Alma matter again.

Julie Speer: Good, all right. Sticking with North Denver, you touched upon the gentrification but talk about that a little bit more and tell me where these kids are moving to. Gentrification of North Denver.

Carlo Kriekels: We’re not seeing those kids yet. We’re not quite there yet. They have not come up to the surface yet.

Julie Speer: Are they not going to Adams County?

Carlo Kriekels: No, no. I mean the white kids.

Julie Speer: Okay. Explain that to me because I don’t know if that’s the highest. I don’t know. I have to talk to a realtor to find out but those homes now are selling for probably close to a million dollars.

Carlo Kriekels: They are like Park Hill prices. Probably $400,000, $500,000, $600,000.

Julie Speer: Yeah. Probably more.

Carlo Kriekels: We’re just looking in your lobby here, 5280 shows the best neighborhoods. It shows Park Hill at the moment is around $500,000.

Julie Speer: That’s insane. Did you remember reading about the Highlands just now or was it only for ...

Carlo Kriekels: I didn’t see. It showed the best neighborhoods in Denver. It actually didn’t show the Highlands on that.

Julie Speer: It didn’t?

Carlo Kriekels: No.

Julie Speer: All right. Let’s talk about the growth and gentrification that’s happening in Northwest Denver. Do you think it’s still happening now?

Carlo Kriekels: I am not a realtor but just in general terms, it looks like Northwest Denver is going through another shift of demographics. Me being Belgian, I didn’t grow up in Denver, I didn’t even grow up in America but what I understand from people is that that neighborhood has gone through
several demographic changes from it used to be a very Jewish neighborhood, Italian neighborhood. Then, it became much more of a Latino neighborhood and it looks like it’s going through another demographic change, and turning into a white middle class neighborhood at this time.

At this moment, what we’re seeing at North High School is that we are not seeing yet the children of the white middle class families that have moved into the Highlands. I believe if you would look at the elementary schools, that’s where you will see the difference at this moment. However, it is our experience that a lot of the students who were living in that corridor along Federal, especially more on the north side, are being pushed out of the neighborhoods because of the gentrification.

Where do these students go? What we have found is that a lot of these students go north into Adams County. The YESS Institute has been talking and it’s talking to the different school districts in Adams County, Mapleton, Adams 12, Adams 14, Adams 50, and also Brighton which are the five school districts north of Denver in Adams County. We have learned that there’s somewhat of a migration that happened of these low economic families which moved north or they moved to Aurora where they also can afford houses.

At this moment, for instance, the YESS students providing services in Westminster and that’s because of the influx of poor families, pretty much poor families, poor Latino families which have been forced out of North Denver and have gone north, north of, what is it, 55th Avenue and gone into … or 56th Avenue, have gone north of 56th Avenue and into Adams County and into Westminster.

Julie Speer: Would you imagine that this is a suburbanization of poverty as Denver grows becomes more affluent that the poverty is being pushed out. In theory, in 50 years, the achievement gap would be gone because it’s all going to be wealthy people in the district, do you think that would be a fair statement? I don’t know.

Carlo Kriekels: Maybe Denver or America is starting like Europe. If you go to Europe, you go to the big cities like Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam, there are no poor people inside the towns. You have to be very wealthy to live in Paris or to live in neighborhoods in Brussels and so forth. In Amsterdam, these beautiful houses you see along the canals, its millions of euros they cost.
What happen is that we call them the [inaudible] which are the suburbs around the big cities, and that’s really where all the social projects are, and that’s where all the poor people live. For instance, Europe is where all the immigrants lived and that could be something that is also happening in America where you can see here in Denver at this moment, because of the gentrification and because Denver, I understand, is the second fastest growing city in America at this moment, is that so many people are moving in, there is such a shortage of apartments and houses in Denver is that a lot of these neighborhoods are going to be turned around into white middle class neighborhoods.

The price of the houses goes up and so forth, and so where do these people go? They go like what is happening in Europe, is that they have to go the [inaudible], they have to go to the suburbs. Hence, the suburbanization of poverty.

Julie Speer: Then, what about the beautiful diversity and cultural awareness that you get from having a diverse school. Think about, is that really what Denver wants? We’re in a critical point right now, right? If the Denver School Board, the Denver Leadership said, “We want our communities to stay integrated, we want diversity.” Diversity, not just of ethnicity in race but also of social economic diversity.

If we sit down and intend that, we can create that. If we don’t, it’s going to become a homogeneous district. I don’t know. Would you agree with that and do you think that’s true? If you look at DSST, for example, they are consciously saying, “We must have 40% free and reduced lunch. Yes, we have high standards,” and that’s conscious integration. They’re doing that.

Carlo Kriekels: In order to keep the beautiful diversity in every aspect within Denver and the city encounter of Denver, there has to be a collective impact initiative which truly looks at every level of how can we keep a very diverse population within Denver, diversity, socio-economical, gender, sexual orientation and so forth, all different aspects of diversity within Denver.

I think that, to a great extent, this is driven by city planning because if there is no affordable housing, then you cannot hold on to people of lower social economic status because they can very simply not afford to live in Denver. The city has to make a very conscious decision to continue
to have that diversity inside its boundaries by integrating housing which these people can afford.

Julie Speer: Does the school board not have to do that as well in terms of quotas for schools like DSST is doing? Does it?

Carlo Kriekels: In my humble opinion is that the school board may set certain quotas or maybe certain schools might set certain quotas and say, “We will serve X percentage of students of free and reduced lunch,” but if they are in neighborhoods where there are no poor kids, how are they going to keep that quota? Because they can say, “We want to serve 50% of kids of poverty,” kids which are eligible for free and reduced lunch; however, if they’re in a neighborhood where there are no such kids, then it doesn’t matter what the quota is.

The great extent, it is driven on a different level. The schools actually get the back ends of the students which are living in that neighborhood. It’s truly city planning really who has to keep the housing affordable in those neighborhoods to be able to hold on to these people.

Julie Speer: Because you think it is important for a balanced education that kids have exposure to all the different races, classes, genders. Talk about why diversity is important in education?

Carlo Kriekels: To talk about the value of diversity, I can only look at my own experience that I’ve had because I’m a white guy from Europe talking about diversity in America. The advantage that I’ve had is that I’ve lived in six countries and in five different cultures. I’ve lived in Germanic cultures. I’ve lived in English culture. I’ve lived in American culture. I’ve lived in a Latin Spanish culture. I speak six languages.

By doing that, I have learned that beyond diversity, how important it is to be exposed to all these different cultures and how it expands your belief system, and how it expands the paradigms that you have. It’s like when you go and travel to a third world country, you truly understand that people all over across the world, and I’ve learned with myself, I’ve traveled in over 60 countries, and I’ve seen the people across the world all want the same component.

The all want to be loved, they all want to be valued, they all want to take care of their family, they all want to be safe, and they all want to be
respected. It’s very important for students and for families to experience that across cultures, everybody is living by the same values and it might look very differently across those different cultures.

That’s why I believe it’s very important, from my own experience, it’s very important to have that diversity and that people within Denver continue to be challenged by other cultures, by other belief systems, by people who have different perspectives because otherwise, when we all live on an island where everybody has the same belief system, the same paradigm, then, the danger exists that we believe, this is the only and the right paradigm to have.

Julie Speer: How would you describe the achievement gap? Some call it the opportunity gap. What is it for you? How do you describe it to a layman, to somebody who doesn’t work for education?

Carlo Kriekels: The achievement gap is that you run a marathon and you, as a white middle class person has to run 26.1 miles. You as a white middle class person has to run 26.2 miles. The Latino student has to run 30 miles. The black student who grew up in poverty who have the single mom has to run 35 miles. That’s really the achievement gap.

What’s happening is that nobody is showing up at the starting line equal. You still have to run, the white middle class person still has to run. Yes, that’s great. They still have to run, and they have made the effort. That is true but the other person living in poverty, the student of color, student which come from a neighborhood where very few people even finished high school, or students where there’s a very high crime rate, or who have not been exposed to role models which have gone to college, it’s like they have to run a 35-mile marathon.

Somehow, at the end of the marathon is a college graduation or is a great career. They have to make up ten miles. That’s the achievement gap. There is no equity. Equity is a word that is being used a lot but that’s really what it is that not everybody is starting at the same starting line and some people have to run ten extra miles to finish the marathon.

Julie Speer: It’s a marathon, okay. If you were to describe the barriers to success, and we have to come back to Southwest Denver, but if you were to describe the barriers of success that these kids face, the kids in your program, let’s say, what are all the barriers? What are those five and ten miles to keep
with your analogy? What are these barriers these kids face, generally speaking?

Carlo Kriekels: When you look at the barriers of success, you can go to the risk factors. The risk factors go in to different domains. You have individual risk factors, you have family risk factor, you have risk factor from the neighborhood, you have risk factors from their peers, and you have risk factor from the school they’re attending. There are like five key domains which researchers are looking at as that, what are the risk factors that these students are exposed to?

When we look at the students which are being served, for instance, by the YESS Mentoring Program and along the federal corridor, are students which are exposed to all these different risk factors. They come from neighborhoods where there’s high poverty, where there’s a very strong correlation between poverty and college graduation or even high school graduation. That’s very, very strong correlation there.

I think the main component is that within your own communities, there is no role model of anybody who finished high school or went to college, and was successful in college because many of them go to college but never finished it because so many of these students, they go to college they’re the hope of the neighborhood. Then, the next year they come back and say, “You know what, it didn’t work out.”

This is just another stone in that wall that says, “You see, college doesn’t work. Why would I even bother? Why would I take loans? Why would I make the effort when it doesn’t work? I might as well go to a job that I know, and I know that I can provide for family. I might as well take a job so that I know that I can provide for my family.”

Yeah, but there’s all the different dysfunction about it but of course, with living within these communities is of course the entire dysfunction that comes with poverty, which comes from delinquency, alcoholism, and so forth. There’s so many subsets of what’s happening of these communities living in poverty. Of course, these are all different risk factors that are inhibiting these students to be successful in school.

I believe it’s a big part of being successful in school is to have somebody from within your own community which has been successful as well. I know for myself, my parents never went to college but it was because of
my older sister that she went to college. That gave me the hope and the belief that I can go to college as well.

Julie Speer: Good. Let’s talk about Southwest Denver.

Carlo Kriekels: Southwest Denver.

Julie Speer: Southwest Denver. Lincoln and what’s the other one? West. You worked in West.

Carlo Kriekels: West is technically not south of Denver.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about Lincoln because that’s really where we’re focusing on Lincoln and Kepner. Talk about Southwest Denver because then, if you look at like Kepner, like all the schools that are feeding into Lincoln are low performing elementary middle school. They get to high school, they’re not setup for success, and a lot of your students have already talked about that. Teaching at Kepner, teaching in eighth grade, that’s sad, but I don’t know. Just talk a little bit about Lincoln High School, and the makeup of the student body there, and some of the issues around the achievement gap in Lincoln.

Carlo Kriekels: The YESS Institute has been providing services at Lincoln since 2006 where we started under the leadership of Antonio Esquibel who is now the West Denver Network Director within Denver Public Schools. The interesting part about Lincoln High School is that it’s a different subculture within the Latino community where if you look at North Denver, it’s much more of a Chicano culture of different generations which already has been within Denver; where if you look at Southwest Denver, it’s much more of a Mexicano culture where people who are first generation here in Denver I’m also first generation in Denver. It is a different subculture within the Latino community in Southwest Denver.

Consequently, what is happening is that there is a certain percentage, nobody knows exactly what percentage it is, of students which are undocumented, which do not have the papers to be legal in the United States or maybe their parents are undocumented, and the students might be legal in the country.

What that does is that the fact that many of the parents are from the Mexicano culture is that a lot of the parents do not speak English or
maybe dad speaks English but mom stays home and she doesn’t speak English. That means that there is a huge obstacle for them to come and connect to the school because they are not going to walk in to the front door like maybe a white middle class person does, and say, “I need to talk to the principal because something happened to my child and there need to be some changes here.”

The question is that, how do you reach out to do that community? How do you reach out if the community is somewhat scared of the school or maybe is afraid to be found out because of their legal status? How do you integrate that community within the world of education?

Also, they come from a culture which is a different culture where there is more of a distance between the parent and the school. Even if you go back to Europe, if I look back in Belgium, where I grew up in Belgium, there was no connection with my parents or any parents with the school. You send your child to school and the school does its work, educate my child, that’s what you have to do.

Do I have to be involved as a parent? No, that’s your job. It’s a very different culture. American culture is to involve the parents, bring in the community but many of those students which come from the Latino community, they came from a Mexicano culture where they have very similar culture that I have in Belgium. I bring my child to school, you educate it. I have my job, this is your job, so why do I have to be in the school? That is also another barrier for them but because it’s a cultural shift on top of all the different other components.

Julie Speer: Tell me about the documentation status. That’s even something that DPS, they’re not allowed to ask about.

Carlo Kriekels: No. It’s my understanding that a public school system has to accept the students and cannot ask for the legal status of that student. What’s happening is that within Lincoln High School, there’s a certain percentage of students which are undocumented or at certain extent, just students which their legal status is that they are not allowed to be in the country legally. That affects the students at a later age.

Many of these students actually don’t know that. Many of these students don’t know their legal status. It’s only later on when they’re in junior or senior years where they’re starting to fill out paperwork for scholarships
or paperwork to go to college, that’s where they find out what their legal status is. They have to talk to their parents. They’re actually finding out that they always have been undocumented inside the United States.

Which what we have seen in our program truly affects the students because many of those students, many, many of these students are star students, they’re doing very well, and what’s happening is that once they find out that they’re undocumented and understand the obstacles that’s going to provide them, somehow, they lose heart, and it’s very hard to continue to motivate them later on to continue to be successful in their education. It is good that there are initiatives such as DACA where students have the opportunity to have a legal status and to continue their education.

What we’re doing at Lincoln High School is that we are working inside the school. I need to say this again. What the YESS Program does with Lincoln High School, what YESS mentoring does in Lincoln High School is truly to connect the community to the school. We’re working with Dan Medina. Dan Medina who is a community liaison technically for the student but he’s a very strong advocate and leader within that southwest community. His strength is to build relationships inside the community and connect the community to the school.

Remember, many of these students or many of the families of that community feel very disconnected from the school for a variety of reasons that we talked about. How do you bring a student that is very disconnected in the southwest neighborhoods into the school and make them successful inside the school while he might feel that he has no community inside that school?

What we have done in Lincoln High School is that what they call, “attend, attach, achieve.” First of all, the students need to attend but then, also they not only have to attend, they also have to attach. How do we attach them? We attach them by connecting them to peers. We attach them by connecting them to a community where they feel that they belong. By doing that, now, they are starting to achieve inside the school.

For instance, we have seen that the students that we have been working with at Lincoln High School tend to be students which have a very high truancy rates. Many of them come to school maybe 40-50% of the time. We have seen consistently over the years since 2006 that we bring up
their attendance to 88%. We have seen also looking at 2006, we have looked at all the students that have gone through the YESS Mentoring Program at Lincoln High School compared to students from same cohort in ninth grade that the YESS students had an 85% graduation rate compared to the other students at a 45% graduation rate.

Julie Speer: These were the tier three.

Carlo Kriekels: These are the tier three students. These are the tier three students which to a great extent were students which were never going to be successful. These are students who have three or four more Fs, pretty much they have zero Fs. We work with students which have GPAs below 1.0. They have GPS of 0.3, 0.4, and come maybe to school half the time, or one or two days a week.

Julie Speer: If you were to look at the achievement because we talked about diversity really well, what are the solutions?

Carlo Kriekels: That’s what I want to say. It’s our belief, it’s our philosophy to deal with the achievement gap or to deal with this low performing communities is by truly developing the leadership inside these communities from within.

It’s not about middle class community to come in and say, “This is how you have to do it because this is how we do it.” We have to develop and provide them the skills and the tools that they, within those communities, that these communities from within can develop the leadership from within those communities given their set of values and create their own role models within their own communities, and that, we believe, is the way of how you can close the achievement gap.

Julie Speer: Anything else you feel like must beat this? Is there anything else you have in your heart you must say about this?

Carlo Kriekels: I made it and I’m in in America. Just a poor immigrant coming to Ayers Island. I’m here on television now.
Charles Robertson: I'm going to talk to you about the boundaries and basically they are going to be Charles Robertson boundaries. May not be how the city lay out for far northeast or the district look at far northeast but I look at far enough east basically from Havana. East, I70, North to DIA. Basically when you look at those boundaries, I'm going to give you a little demographics that you may not know. Between those boundaries there's 14,000 K-12 students. And if you take those 14,000 K-12 students, and if this area had their own district, we will probably be the sixth or seventh largest school district in the state just in this area alone. And I'm only talking about the Denver corridor. Given that, when you look at that, here's the reason why it's so important to have great schools in this community. I just talked to you about the boundaries and I just told you about Havana, I70 to DIA. When you look at what's on the other side of Havana and you look at Northfield and Stapleton and what's going on and basically they've probably got another 10 years of development over there. You're talking about another 3000, 4000 jobs that would be added over the next 10 years.

If then you go across I70 and go two miles up the street and then you look at the Anschutz Medical Campus, at fully bill out they're talking about 56,000 jobs there. 56,000 jobs when basically right now they're probably at about 30,000 jobs on that campus right now. I'm talking these numbers because I think it's very important that you understand that that's only five minutes away from the Mount Bella Green Valley Ranch community. Then if you look at the other thing that's happening, light rail coming from Union Station to DIA, which there would be one to three stops before it makes it to the airport that would go through Mount
Bella, go through Green Valley Ranch, up to DIA and at some point that is going to look like a smaller version of the tech center. Let's talk about 20, 30 years from now. Let's talk about maybe, I'm going to be on a short change, maybe another 20-30,000 jobs. Just that long when you talk about airport city and those things and golf courses and things that's going to happen right here in the center of Mount Bella Green Valley Ranch. Then as you go inside the gates of DIA and all of the development that is taking place and is going to take place there, I would probably say that there's going to be another, over the next 10, 15 years, another 3-5000 jobs.

We just talked about 75,000 jobs over the next 10-20 years that would be located five to ten minutes away from the schools that are supposed to be teaching our babies to go to college or to go get a trade to be able to take those jobs. And so in trying to make a community strong, and trying to make, we talk about minorities, all minorities in this community, isn't that a great opportunity, a great thing to work toward? Isn't that a great thing? When you look at all those jobs and all those things. That's why we're here today for the Plant the Seed Conference. That's the reason why yesterday we had 400+ students talking about these issues, whether social justice or education or being an entrepreneur because all those jobs. You can either create them on your own or you can go work for someone and manage someone's company and be a CEO. That's what we're trying to create here today.

Julie Speer: So what is it, because you brought it up, the mission of Planting the Seed, or organizing a conference? What's it's purpose?

Charles Robertson: Right, so today we're here celebrating the Planting the Seed Conference. It's a conference that was started three years ago. A group of individuals led by myself and Amy Schwartz and Sylvia Brookhart, we felt that it was an opportunity given the fact that the demographics and the numbers that we just talked about as far as jobs and the 14,000 students in this area, that we needed to help our parents to understand what's coming. A lot of times that doesn't happen across the United States and for some reason, minorities always say, well we didn't know. What we're doing is this week, what we're doing is sharing out. A lot of us get to go to conferences. Myself, you, companies, corporations pay for you to go to conferences, they expense the airline tickets, hotel rooms, conference fees or whatnot. What I wanted to do is bring the conference to the community. They get the same thing that you get if you were to go to a
conference in Seattle, Washington, DC, New York. They get the goody bags, they get the continental breakfast, they get the opening session, they get the tracts. They get all those things. What are we doing? What's being accomplished? What are we trying to get them to do?

We want to teach them how to advocate for themselves and to do their research on their own. So that way they can be great also. They don't always have to depend on someone to tell them what's going on. We're showing them, we're training them, we're teaching them how to do that. Then also here at this Planting the Seed Conference, the other thing that we are celebrating is our community ambassadors. We have over 350 community ambassadors that are a part of our program. What do our community ambassadors do? We have what we call community ambassadors at large, who represent the whole community, who do not have students in schools. Then we also have another, the parent ambassadors, who have students in school who also support and help the program. We meet once a month and we bring in guest speakers and we do volunteer projects as a ambassador program in order to motivate. We want to be partners and we want to collaborate from that perspective. What I love about this is our ambassadors, we train them to pull someone up, which means if you have a neighbor who has students who don't have books, let us know.

If you have a neighbor who water, a light bill just got cut off, let us know. If you have a neighbor who needs job or needs job training or needs medicine, let us know. So basically we're not saying that we want you to do a whole lot of work. We just want you to be focused on your block and the neighbors. Make sure they are all right. And if you don't know where to get the resources from, pick up the phone and call Young Adults and Positive Action. We'll navigate that process. We'll make sure that those people are taken care of.

Julie Speer: That's great. How big is the organization?

Charles Robertson: How big is the ambassadors program?

Julie Speer: No, you mentioned the number of ambassadors. The program that it's part of, it's your organization?

Charles Robertson: Young Adults and Positive Action. So basically I have a partnership with the Foundation for Educational Excellence, who have been great. We
partner with Americo Vista so we have, right now we have 10 Americo Vistas, who have been great. They spend a lot of time doing research, data gathering, customer service and then I have three full time employees on top of that. It's not about the 13 because the 13 is not a lot of people for the work that we do. It's about the partnership and collaboration that we do. I am able to bring my skills that I've learned. I have over 35 years of experience in hospitality so obviously my meeting planning background, being able to run resorts and hotels have come into play for a community that has that need.

Julie Speer: That's very well said. Does your organization just serve Far Northeast?

Charles Robertson: My organization basically what we try to do is look at the children's corridor. We started our work from Havana to DIA. Just this year we have moved from DIA to 6th Avenue. If you had an opportunity to come to our Students of Style conference yesterday we had Aurora Central there. We had some schools from Aurora so we're starting to now pull students and parents into what we're trying to do. If you noticed today we had teachers from Aurora who were celebrated today. We had parent ambassadors from Aurora who were celebrated today. We have the superintendent Rico Mont, who's going to be here today, who is a part of one of our panels. Basically we have expanded more because we think now the corridor's opened up and we think that we talk about statements in our field and when we talk about the Anschutz Medical Campus and when we talk about DIA and what's happening with Regional Transportation District, RTD, we think that they are our partners also. The last thing we did today, we celebrated safety. We gave awards to Aurora Police Department. We gave awards to Aurora Public Schools safety department. We gave an award to Denver Public Schools police department and we gave one to Denver City and County Police Department.

Basically what we're trying to do is bring that partnership and collaboration across the lands. We don't look at the lines from a perspective if you can't go over there. We just didn't have the resources and now we have a little bit more resources that now we can go over to Aurora and help those students also. Because when you look at it, and they live that close together, they're really cousins and brothers and sisters and uncles and nieces and nephews. It's the same family so when you talk about wraparound services, you need to help the whole family, not just some of the family.
Julie Speer: We're really going to be exploring the gaps and the inequities in the education and our research is seeing that the gaps are very much between rich and poor and so there's some racial division between privilege and non-privileged. Just talk about what your experience with the achievement gap is and then what you think there's a problem in the first place.

Charles Robertson: Well, when you talk about the achievement gap, I look at it a little bit differently obviously because I'm on the ground and I believe in ground work, right? Basically the achievement gap, to me a lot of times, has to do with what's happening at the student's home. Also, with our community groups that are in these minority communities. So I'm not going to blame it on the system. I'm going to talk a little bit about home based first. When I talk about our community groups, when you look at the minority community groups they are not as strong as they used to be 10 years ago. They have either gone out of business or they are trying to survive in order to help someone. So when I talk about those types of groups I'm talking about the churches. I'm talking about the Greek organizations, I'm talking about organizations like that. Then when you look at the student's home and you look at the parent or the parents, or no parents and it's the grandparent because the mother can't be found or on drugs or prostitution or not at home all the time. You look at the father who may be in jail or may have gone and is doing something else.

A lot of times either the student is raising themselves or the grandparent is trying to raise that kid. What that adds up to be is the student really raising themselves because the grandparents should really be retired and really should be enjoying themselves from that perspective. Obviously they love their grandkids. That's part of the achievement gap. First of all, students are not sure of who they can really turn to. The students who have a parent and a mother, I mean a father and a mother at home, and have a strong family base, I can probably tell you that student is probably doing a lot better than the student who don't have that. And so given the fact that we're talking about minorities, that's where a lot of your achievement gap comes in. And so what we do is try to depend on someone outside our community to come in and help us. That works for a few years. But at some point, this is not their home. They're not going to stay here in order to make sure that you go all the way to college.

What they'll do is say we'll give you two years or three years of help. We want to try to sustain you. I'll get you through some type of sustainability
and then what we need to do is move on. Then once they move on there’s no more help. Then what happens is that family or that student falls back down. Then you’re going to try to pick them back up. I can tell you that that doesn't work because then they’ve lost all confidence. Then they don’t trust the system. That’s what we’ve been dealing with for the last seven to eight years here. In Montbello Green Valley Ranch area when you looked at the stats about eight years go we had the highest foreclosure rate. We had the highest bankruptcy rate. Our crime was high and individuals was asking the students in this community, you can do better. How can you do better when your mother can’t feed your or can’t keep the lights on? Or getting ready to get put out of their house. Don’t have a car. Can’t pay car insurance and yet you’re saying we want you to go home and study. That's the achievement gap. That's where discrimination comes in at. Not discrimination against black and white.

It's discrimination just how the system is and basically how long will an organization or group stay in to really help and support those individuals.

Julie Speer: Wow, yes. It's not just about school.

Charles Robertson: Not just about school.

Julie Speer: I think I can infer a lot about what the solution would be because far northeast Denver is really kind of an example of how to turn around the district, a part of the district. I know they’re looking at southwest Denver now, kind of following the model. The first question is do you feel like the turnaround in far northeast is done and what more work is there to do, and how this community can be an example for the rest of the city?

Charles Robertson: I’ll tell you, I have debates on this question all the time because we just got started and individuals looked at three years into this turnaround project and they’re saying well, your students should be doing a whole lot better. Well, all of the things I just talked to you about, how can they do a whole lot better or how can they be at this standard? The growth is good because if a lot of these high school students was reading at a fifth grade level and doing math at a sixth grade level and now at least we've got them up to an eighth or ninth grade level and they still are dealing with not knowing their mother is located or their father is located. I think we have a lot to celebrate. That’s a lot to celebrate. Are we done? No we’re not done. We just got started. We had to clean up a whole lot of things. We had to filter through a lot of stuff just to get to where we are right now.
Now what we have is a plan. Here's the plan. We have better principals now. We have better principals. We have better charter schools, selections in this community. Also what we have is we have nonprofits now starting to spend more time with our students. We have adults starting to learn how to communicate more with our students, but also following up. Being able to follow up. Not just saying something, or not just being a dictator and then not coming back and asking the students for more of their opinions and how do they feel about this. We have a whole lot of adults that feel they can talk for students. I would not sit here and say that I would talk for any student because I started Young Adults and Positive Action when I was in 11th grade. So I know and given the fact that my father left home when I was in fourth grade, promised my mother that if you stayed home, you didn't have to learn how to drive. You didn't have to go to school, go to college. You didn't have to do none of that stuff because I was going to take care of you.

Southern women, my mother's a southern woman. She said okay. Came home one day and my father was gone. I became the man of the house in sixth grade, okay? I started working in sixth grade. Was able then to help to buy my mom a house when I was in 12th grade. That's how hard I worked. You're talking about a product of an individual who believed that 9th grade, 10th grade, 11th grade and 12th graders could be CEOs right now. They want to be held accountable and if you allowed them to trick you and take a handout, they'll take handouts all day. What happens is a lot of times people make them lazy instead of having that rigor and being tough and showing some tough love. But also loving them while you're being tough.

Julie Speer: Because they'll rise to the bar if you set it high.

Charles Robertson: They'll rise to the bar if you set it higher.

Julie Speer: What about your own son? Did he graduate from Villa? Where did he graduate from?

Charles Robertson: I'll tell you a little bit about my son. I'm proud of this story because it's no different on my being able to advocate for other kids. My son ended up going to Mount Villa and graduated from Mount Villa High School. When he graduated he graduated from Mount Villa High School with 32 college credit hours. Basically he took classes at the community college while he was in high school. He also took some classes at Mount Villa High School.
because Anschutz had classes also there. My son went on to University of Northern Colorado. Played football for a year and after that he decided he did not want to play football but here's the key thing. He graduated from University of Northern Colorado in two and a half years. Then now he is working now out here in the far northeast in the schools. There you go. That's the reason why I have so much belief in one, this community and what can happen. But also believe in these young kids and these young students, young men and young women. They can make a difference. All we've got to do is set the standards and work well.

Julie Speer: That's great. Can you tell me like what is Push Academy? Is it part of the district?

Charles Robertson: Push Academy is part of the district. Push Academy stands for persevere until success happens and so basically it's what they call a school that deals with overage and under credit students, so students who are off track to graduate or students who have dropped out and who is over the age of 16 years old basically will apply to Push Academy.

Julie Speer: In talking about how this community has grown, one of the angles that we're looking at is with real estate and with Pat Hamill. So talk a little bit about the partnerships that are community wide and how you've grown this area.

Charles Robertson: Well, let me say that first of all you had mentioned Pat Hamill and let me say Pat Hamill is a super fantastic individual. Pat, along with Oakwood Homes, have done tremendous work, not just for Green Valley Ranch but Mount Villa. Pat has opened up his pocketbook in order to make sure that schools across the far northeast are balanced and have the resources that is needed in order to move students down the field from that perspective. There's the Foundation for Education Excellence that is attached to Oakwood Homes and basically Foundation for Education Excellence helped to do a lot of the policy and research for a lot of the community groups, helps to bring them together, to talk about issues that are affecting the area from their perspective. Basically we get together at what we call Z Place, operation, there's a building that Pat Hamill helped to spearhead that they raised $10 million in order to build that building. Today we have early childcare, Clayton Early Childhood is in there. Young America's Bank is located in there. Young Adults and Positive Action has its office there. The enrollment center for the area is located there. Regional athletics and activities program is located there.
What they did was fundraise for a building that brought all these partners together that are working on behalf of the community.

**Julie Speer:** It's a good model. Do you believe that's what makes a successful community, when you have people with similar but different interests all working together?

**Charles Robertson:** Absolutely.

**Julie Speer:** His goal was that you can sell houses when the schools are good. Just talk really quickly about the community, private, public, nonprofit, it all...

**Charles Robertson:** Absolutely. It's the only way it works, right? We started this conversation early on. I mentioned 14,000 students. Just Young Adults and Positive Action alone, to be successful with any student, we might be able to help about 250 students a year. 250, subtract that from 14,000. That tells you how many we're still short of nonprofits and foundation community money for this community. That's the reason why, for us, any foundation or nonprofit who is here working on the behalf of students and in a positive way, we welcome them with open arms.

**Julie Speer:** That's great. Last question. Do you think someday there will be a separate district for far northeast? It's an interesting thought you brought up.

**Charles Robertson:** I'll tell you what. I don't know about a separate district. Obviously I'm all about a separate district. Honestly we have what we call a Different School Summit network right now who kind of runs eight to ten schools in this area. What I would like to see is that I would like to see an area superintendent that brings the elementary schools, the middle schools and the high schools together and that they have a separate meeting that then reports up to the board and the superintendent on their actions. Obviously the board sets the policy and procedures and the superintendent sets those policy and procedures, but wouldn't that be amazing if you had one person who was coordinating the elementary to feeder patterns. Elementary to middle school, middle school to high school and setting the direction. I think that we can get there a whole lot quicker doing a model like that. Right now there's probably about three or four bosses in this community. Elementary boss, there's a middle school boss, there's a DSSN boss. There's too many bosses. Be nice when if you want to talk to the elementary school and you want to get the
middle school and high school on the same page. It's almost like you almost have to go to the superintendent to make that work.

I know downtown you have some positions but if you had one superintendent who was in the field, right here, out here. Office was out here, everything was out here, that would be a whole lot, customer service would be what I call super fantastic.

Julie Speer: Is there anything else that I didn't ask you that I should or anything else you think our viewers need to know about this area, about the achievement gap, about race in education? Anything at all?

Charles Robertson: The only thing, I'm a beggar. I'd just like to make a plea that if you have time, if you have any time and would like to mentor or support students or support families, or you know of any resources that we can bring to the far northeast, I would welcome those opportunities. Those resources needs to be easy to get to because a lot of times what happens is almost 100 pages you have to fill out for $100. That also deters the pace that we need to keep up to make sure we're helping and supporting individuals.
Chris Gibbons
Founder and CEO, Strive Preparatory Schools

Chris Gibbons: I am the founder and now CEO of Strive Preparatory Schools, which we call Strive Prep.

Julie Speer: Tell me where you grew up, what neighborhoods, and what your own educational experience was like, and talk about what decades those were.

Chris Gibbons: Sure. A proud Colorado native. I have lived in the Denver area, Denver Metro area, nearly my entire life. I grew up in Littleton, I was educated in private school and [inaudible] Denver Alum, in the Class of '96. I'm both incredibly grateful for the high quality education I received at Kent, and also very aware of the privilege that afforded me, and the differences of opportunity around race and class that I experienced so vividly growing up. My time at Kent changed my trajectory in education completely. I was planning on a career in law, possibly civil rights law. I knew I wanted to make an impact in the world. Then, in 1995, the Summer Bridge program opened at Kent, which is now known today as Breakthrough Kent-Denver, and very much on a whim at the time, I volunteered to help plan the summer program and then be a teacher. I taught there for three summers, and completely changed my worldview and my plans for myself. I fell in love with education, saw the enormous impact that could be made in the classroom, learned and enormous amount about race and privilege, and by the time those three summers were concluded, I new education was where I was headed and what I wanted to do.
I was a high school science teacher after college, and then had the extraordinary opportunity to be the director of the Summer Bridge program, now known as Breakthrough. Did that for three years ...

Julie Speer: Where did you teach science?

Chris Gibbons: I taught science at a charter school in Boston called "City On The Hill". Not in Denver. It was my short stint away from home. I got a good experience of charter schools and what I hoped to create in the future as an education leader, and then got the extraordinary opportunity to run the Summer Bridge program as the director. I did that for a while, in 2001 to 2004. It's an extraordinary program. I have the utmost respect for what they do, and what I learned and experienced there, and by the end of my time there grew quite tired of families coming to us at the end of the summer and saying, "We really want this to be a school," and "How can we make this a school?" With the support of a group of families in West Denver that we knew well, and a few critical advocates and leaders like Rosemary Rodriguez, I was afforded the opportunity to prepare for a couple of years with a national fellowship called "Building Excellent Schools", and then opened the first West Denver Prep in 2006.

Julie Speer: Tell me what Summer Bridge or Breakthrough does, did?

Chris Gibbons: Still does, oh yeah. Absolutely. I'll use the new name. Breakthrough Kent-Denver, as it's called today, is just celebrated its 20th anniversary. That was a pretty extraordinary event last March. Breakthrough is a "students teaching students" model, and so the program hires high school and college student, who are themselves interested in education, and interested in making a greater impact, and leads a college preparatory summer enrichment program for middle school students from predominantly low-income middle schools around DPS, and it's a great model on both counts, and has a great track record of helping the middle school students remain on track for college and pursue their own college educations, while at the same time it has a terrific track record of high school and college students then coming back to be professional educators, which was certainly what happened for me.

Julie Speer: Excellent. Maybe start off by telling me, then, what year you founded West Denver Prep, the first Strive school. Then, talk to me about the early philosophies, what you were trying to accomplish even then.
The original Strive Prep school was founded in 2006 by the name of West Denver Prep, and we started out as West Denver Prep for several years, until we expanded outside of West Denver and renamed, re-branded ourselves as Drive in 2012. The original school opened in a converted nursing home on South Federal Boulevard, with 100 students in 6th grade, and our belief and our vision, from the very beginning, was that students of all backgrounds, and by background I mean race and economics, but I also mean past academic experience with public school system, special education status, English language learner status, all students of all backgrounds deserve the opportunity to go and succeed in a four-year college, and then to live the life of agency that that opportunity affords. That has always been our driving philosophy and our belief about what we do.

All right. At Strive Prep, we really believe in building schools that are of our community and that truly serve all students in the neighborhoods where we operate, and so we seek to open schools in the communities that we believe have the greatest need, and then in those communities build schools that truly serve all students who want to be there, regardless of past academic experience, and regardless of background. At the majority of our schools.

Around our network, about 90% of our students qualify for free and reduced lunch. About 95% are students of color, about 11-12% are students with special needs, and about 40% are English language learners. Those statistics, or those demographics, are highly reflective of the broader community demographics in the neighborhoods where we work, and that's really important to us. We are not seeking to work with
an elite group of students, we are not seeking to work only with those families who have sought us out and worked hard to choose to be there. We are truly seeking to work with all families and all students, and provide schools that are going to have a transformative impact for each of the communities where we're part of them.

Julie Speer: Good. Very good. Because of that demographic, talk about some of the philosophies of the school that might seem different but that really work for your school, particularly the uniforms, the discipline, you know: tuck in that shirt, and the walking in lines. Some might see it and be, "Oh, it's so rigid," but that discipline and that structure really serves the kids. Talk a little bit about the culture of the school, and some of the rules and guidelines.

Chris Gibbons: Where will I start? The promises we make our families about the education at Strive Prep are that your child will be safe, and that your child will go to college, and we take those promises extremely seriously and build our educational program around that. Speaking to our mission, our mission speaks to an education of high standards, as well as accountability, as well as structure, and we really believe that a structured learning environment is going to lead to that level of safety and that level of college success. We adopt practices that we believe best make those promises happen. Our school day is longer than a traditional district school day. Our emphasis on math and literacy, particularly in the early grades of middle school, is higher than in many other schools. We adopt, we call, a warm-strict environment in the building, where we want every child to be known, and valued, and respected. An example of that is every school leader stands outside and greets every student every day with a handshake, and a look in the eye, and a welcome by name. You're known here, and this is a place where you're going to be safe.

It's also a place where the expectations for behavior and the expectations for engagement are both very high and very clear, where students are going to know when they get there what class is going to look like, and what's expected of them, and what's expected of them is a really high level of participation, a really high level of engagement, and a high level of accountability to their own future success. Every practice that we build into our school culture, and we spend a lot of time talking about school culture and working on school culture, is built in with that in mind. This is going to be a structured place, with clear expectations. It's also going to be a place where you are known, valued, respected, and there's a lot of
warmth and joy about the learning and the education that you are going to receive.

Julie Speer: It's probably harder to ditch school when the teachers know your name.

Chris Gibbons: Yes, it is.

Julie Speer: They're in a ... "Oh, they're going to notice if I'm not here."

Chris Gibbons: Yes, it is, yes it is. That's right. In the interest of contributing to a joyful culture, we are always looking for ways to recognize, and honor, and acknowledge students, and that looks like lots of different things. There are lots of awards or recognition for academic success throughout our school. We have a Strive Stick, which is a weekly acknowledgement of a student who truly shined that week as one of the exemplar students in the school for either academic reasons or cultural reasons. Another practice we use a lot is the snapping, which folks remember and hear. It's a way of showing quieter or quick applause, and it's also a way of showing agreement; that if you're speaking to something in class that I agree with or I empathize with, snaps show support, and if I'm in a full group setting, it's a way of acknowledging and celebrating each other that has become very much a cultural norm around the network.

Julie Speer: Excellent. Do teachers have to kind of go to a Strive boot camp, because I also notice the teachers have a certain language that, granted, I've been out of school for a long time, maybe that's how they talk to kids in all public schools, but I don't ... Do you know what I mean?

Chris Gibbons: I do.

Julie Speer: There's a vocabulary there.

Chris Gibbons: We take the development of our teachers very seriously. It's a huge part of providing the education that we want for our students, to have all of the adults in our building to have great professional development, great support, and great coaching to be better at what they do. That looks like a lot of different things for us. All of our teachers participate in a three-week summer training. The new teachers just arrived come for a fourth week before that training starts, and that training is divided up between instructional support, curriculum development, and school culture, and largely in equal parts we want to provide a great deal of support in all
those areas. During the school year ... Next year we'll be on a quarter system. Every quarter we stop and have two days where students are not in class, and teachers are spending one of those days analyzing the data of the last assessment that they gave, and learning from that data how can they make their instruction better, and then second day doing content, rigorous professional development, really focused on English, language arts, math, science, world studies; what is the work in those content areas that needs to be improved and made even stronger.

That's six professional days during the year. Every teacher has a coach; she is observed at a ... Every teacher has a coach, and is observed at least every other week, with a classroom observation and debrief, and so all of those practices come together to hopefully build the strongest culture among teachers that we can, and a culture of learning in each of our buildings.

Julie Speer: Wow, that's a lot. Every other week?

Chris Gibbons: Yep.

Julie Speer: That's good, though. That's great. Good. Do you have kids?

Chris Gibbons: I do.

Julie Speer: How old are they, and where do they go to school?

Chris Gibbons: They just moved schools this year. Yeah. Proud parent of two daughters, and nine and seven, entering fourth grade and second grade. We spent many years in a local charter school in our community, and they have recently moved over to their traditional neighborhood school.

Julie Speer: Good. In DPS?

Chris Gibbons: No.

Julie Speer: Outside of DPS?

Chris Gibbons: Outside of DPS.

Julie Speer: It's interesting, because you're part of the district, but you're not at the same time. How do you define Strive's role in the district, and how you're
a part of the district, but then the autonomy that you have from the district?

Chris Gibbons: Strive Prep is a network of public charter schools, and I want to emphasize "public". Charter schools are public schools, and we are a proud part of the DPS system. Our schools are authorized by the board of education for DPS, and we consider DPS our most important partner, and the organization of which we are both proud members and proud collaborators with, in many, many ways. As charter schools, we operate with a degree of autonomy that is not necessarily afforded to traditional schools, though a number of innovations in DPS have made that more possible. The most important areas, in my mind, of freedom and autonomy are around who the people are in our building, who we hire, and how we train them; how we use our financial resources, and how we build and adapt our academic program. We look at those as the opportunities we have to innovate, to try new things and learn from them, and adjust, and adapt as we go. Then, most importantly, to contribute to the overall achievement of the city. All the students in Denver are all of our collective responsibility, and it's critical that every operator of schools, whether traditional, innovation, or charter, is very focused on the achievement of all the students in school, in this shared community, and doing their very best to make an impact there.

Julie Speer: How do you define the achievement gap?

Chris Gibbons: To me, the achievement gap, which is also now frequently talked about as the opportunity gap, is the inequity of opportunity that our children have to achieve the same future in their lives, by especially race and class, though by other differences, as well. How we define the future our students choose to achieve or seek to achieve, I believe, at the end of the day is up to them. My perspective is that we are responsible for the preparation so that every one of our young people can make an authentic choice about what they want that future to look like, so when they leave our K-12 system as age 18, they have the skills, they have the knowledge, they have the personal capacity, they have the social-emotional skills to choose any future that they want, including that of a four-year college.

Once they get to that point, that choice is theirs, and theirs alone, and it's our job to make sure that's a real choice; that they're not making a determination about what that future looks like because of a lack of preparation or because of a lack of opportunity. When I think about the
opportunity gap or the achievement gap, and what it is we're seeking to do, we will know we have changed that situation. We will know we have changed that trajectory dramatically in future generations, where a child is born, the color of their skin, or how much money their parents make has no impact on the opportunities that they can pursue after they're out of K-12 education.

Julie Speer: Perfect. Tell me how Strive is shrinking that achievement gap, or how you're tackling it, or how you're solving the problem.

Chris Gibbons: I would say the entirety of the strive prep mission is around seeking to make a significant change in the opportunity gap in our communities. We are focused very much on community change in the three neighborhoods of Denver in which we work, which are southwest Denver, and North Denver, and the far northeast. That's why our growth vision and plans are to grow a K-12 pathway in those communities. We believe the unit of change of a school is not enough; that one great school is tremendous but insufficient to really change the educational opportunity of an entire community. We believe everything we're doing is focused on the opportunity gap, and that this is a critical and unconscionable reality about our society today.

I'm sure you have lots of statistics you will use in the piece, and ways in which you will talk about ... From a national study, it's about three years old, students born in the top quartile of income in America had an 84% chance of completing a four-year college, and students born at the bottom quartile of income in America an 11% chance of achieving that same reality. That, in my mind, speaks volumes about the society that we are a part of, and is the fundamental reason why we have to do something about this in a very, very significant way. To me, the entirety of Strive's program is focused on the achievement gap, with the level of academic rigor, the level of college preparation, the emphasis on joy, and safety, and community, all seek to lead to a different future, where graduates are pursuing college education at a far different rate than they are today.

Julie Speer: The last decade has shown you've had great success in achievement, right, and scores.

Chris Gibbons: Since 2006, we've seen strong results from our scholars at our Strive Prep schools. Over a course of a seven-year period, one of the schools in our
network was the leading school in academic growth in DPS on the Colorado Growth Model. Our first juniors in our first high school posted a 20.5 average AT, ACT score in 2015, which exceeded the prior year's state average, and was several points higher than the prior year's district average, which gives us enormous optimism about their potential college future and college success. Our first elementary school, we're seeing a year and a half of reading growth in a year's time in our kindergarten and first-year classrooms, and 90% of our students are meeting or exceeding their growth goals in reading at the elementary level.

Julie Speer: Good. You're sort of breaking all the odds, because we've talked a lot about the sweet spot, of the ratio of free and reduced lunch in a school population being around 40%: 40 to 60's manageable. That's almost all of your population. Just talk about that a little bit, and that it's possible to do. Your model is sort of debunking the myth that the best academic levels are achieved when there's a lower free and reduced lunch rate.

Chris Gibbons: Okay. Denver is a district of 90,000 students, approximately 70% of whom qualify for free and reduced lunch. As I said before, we believe in building schools that are of the community and a part of the community, and that are serving the kids who live in the neighborhood in which we're opening schools, and we have elected to work in communities of greatest need because we feel like that's where our model is most necessary and where it's most important to make that contribution. As a result, our schools average about 90% of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch. It is fundamental to our work and our belief system that all students can achieve at high levels, and that regardless of background, all students can have tremendous success in college and in their own educational futures, and that is not relative to some communities, or some neighborhoods, or some students of some background. When I say "all kids", I truly mean all kids, and so we believe the results of our schools and the progress in growth of our scholars is evidence of that fact, that students can and will challenge the assumptions, the statistics, the beliefs about their background, and demonstrate the highest level of achievement for all students of all background possible, and not just possible, but attainable and critical to the success of our community.

Julie Speer: I agree with you in showing that is the case. Why are we in the situation that we're in now if all kids are capable?
Chris Gibbons: I believe that there are an enormous number ... To close the opportunity gap at scale is going to take our very, very best work from all of us, inside the educational system and outside the educational system. The constraints to the success of our students is not about our students. The constraints to the success of our kids is all about the adults, the system, and the structures that we have in place to educate our students, and it starts with how we value schooling in our society and how we value teachers in our society. The single most important thing we can do to close the achievement gap is encourage, inspire, and support the most talented people of our generation to go into education as a career, and we don't systematically do that in how we value the teaching profession, in how we respect teachers, how we pay teachers, how we build a system around teachers to allow them to be tremendously successful. That certainly must change. We have a whole variety of political obstacles to achieving the kind of success that we seek to achieve, and the schools need a system of success around them.

Denver is working harder than any district in the country to build an sustain, where leaders have the innovation and the autonomy to innovate and meet the needs of their kids as best they can, where families have transparent, clear data and information about what schools are like, and then they have real choice to decide where they want to educate their children, and those conditions are all critical to changing this opportunity gap at scale. With a courageous superintendent and school board, Denver has done as much as any city in the nation to do that, and we will all agree, we have an incredibly long way to go. The current strategic plan in Denver of 80% of all students in every neighborhood attending a high quality school by 2020 is absolutely the right goal, possibly the most ambitious in the country, and it's one that we absolutely have to achieve on to make this vision possible. I would stress the "Every neighborhood" part of that goal. It's not enough to say, "80% of our kids go to a good school". We're going to be clear that every neighborhood has to have 80% of our students at a great school, which is our own accountability that every community matters, every neighborhood matters, all kids matter: not just some, and not just some communities.

Julie Speer: You know, race is an issue in America.

Chris Gibbons: Yes, it is.
Julie Speer: Race. Talk to me about race in America and how you think the school system is mirroring our society, in general.

Chris Gibbons: If we're going to talk about root causes of the achievement gap and the opportunity gap, the institutionalized racism throughout our country is the primary cause, in my mind, of this, and it is all of our shared, collective responsibility to build, lead anti-racist organizations that are actively seeking to undo both that narrative, but also the real obstacles to opportunity that students of color experience in the system as it's constituted today. In my mind, there is nothing more important we can do to combat racism than education, and this is the place that has the greatest hope, it's the place that has the greatest opportunity, it's the place where our work and our collective impact will make the greatest change for the future that our students experience. We start there.

Julie Speer: Right now, if you were to look at the school performance across the district, where do you see the most low-performing schools are, and are they in southwest Denver still?

Chris Gibbons: Not exclusively, so we can speak to that.

Julie Speer: Paint the picture of the entire district and where the low-performing schools are, and where the high-performing schools are.

Chris Gibbons: Sure. The past ten years in Denver are an enormous success story in rising performance for students across the city in many different areas, and there are many individual schools, and I'm proud to include some Strive Prep schools in that list, that have made incredible changes in the potential opportunities for our students in Denver. We see evidence of that in graduation rates, and we see evidence of that in state test scores. We have enormous work to do. This is by no means complete, and the enormous work is in the area of 80% of students in every neighborhood going to a great school. We're a long way from that reality, and while our performance has gone up, the gaps by race and income remain substantial and of enormous importance to change.

I am not the best person to answer this question. I am not the most expert on exactly where performance trends are throughout the district, and the neighborhood Strive Prep is identified in which to work: north Denver, the far northeast and southwest, all have a high proportion of schools that are not meeting the performance goals that all of us share,
and are not yet on track to meet that 80% goal of students in every neighborhood going to a great school. That tells me we have an enormous amount of work to do.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about the whole notion of ... There are those who say, "Strive is good, but it's still segregated, so you're not addressing the issue of segregation because the kids are segregated." Talk about that reality, the segregation of the kids, versus the achievement that they're getting, and kind of just how you balance that in your mind.

Chris Gibbons: When we talk about the students that Strive Prep serves, first and foremost is our goal to build community schools that are of the community, and we want a great school in every neighborhood, and we want the families who live there to be able to choose our school. The process of choice is incredibly important to this. One of the most important innovations in Denver in the past ten years is the adoption of enrollment zones by region of the city, where, instead of there being a small neighborhood boundary for each single school, a larger group of schools are together in a single enrollment zone, and every family makes a choice about where they want to go, and what we’ve seen from those zones is many, many more families make an affirmative choice about the school that they desire for their kids than ever before, which is a tremendous positive and increases agency, it increases ownership, and it increases our buy-in belief in the system in so many ways.

Our goal is to open schools in the neighborhoods of greatest need, and then run great schools that serve the communities that are there. We very much believe in choice as a fundamental tenet of what we do, and so those that choose our schools should come, and those who are seeking a different option should choose another option, and the enrollment zone system in our city should allow us to provide for those choices and provide for those opportunities across the board.

It's also true that a high preponderance of Strive Prep students qualify for free and reduced lunch, and the reason for that is we've chosen those communities to open, and are serving the families that live there, and we believe that that's enormously important. It matters a great deal to me that every family have a school down the street in their own community that they consider high performing, that they consider safe, and they consider great for their own kids. It's one thing to say "We believe in integrated schools", which is a goal that's incredibly noble, and one I
personally, deeply support, and it matters that that school that's high quality is down the street from a family. It is a difficult choice for a family to make, to say, "You can go to a low-performing school here and close to home, or you can go to a high-performing school somewhere else across town," and we want to undo that mythology and build a great, high-performing school in every neighborhood, that is easily accessible for families, and easily, easily, a great place for them to go to school.

We have never seen, at scale, a large proportion of middle class or upper middle class families choosing to send their kids to school in high poverty neighborhoods, and provided that that doesn't happen, if they're going to be great schools in high poverty neighborhoods, we're going to have to build them and support them being great schools for the families who live there, and being great options for the families who live in that community and want a great school down the street for their kids.

I really believe that, that the ... Having a great school in every neighborhood means schools in every neighborhood are going to serve the kids who live in their own community. That's critical. Families deserve a great school down the street, not just a great school across town.

Julie Speer: Very well said. Talk about how many Strive Schools there are now, and the vision for the future. I've heard that you're going to grow, but that there is a capped amount, at least a business plan? Talk about how many schools there are now, and your growth plan, and is your growth plan only for DPS?

Chris Gibbons: Strive Prep, today, is a network of nine schools, serving the 3000 students in elementary, middle, and high school, in southwest Denver, north Denver, and the far northeast. We're extraordinarily grateful for the support that the school district has provided to assist in that growth, and the support of 3000 families who have trusted us to educate their children, which is the highest measure of trust a family can afford. We're extraordinarily grateful that that has allowed us to continue to grow in the way that we have. Our vision is to deepen that engagement in each of those communities, and so to ultimately operate a K-12 system in each neighborhood in which we currently operate. That is an ultimate network size of 17 schools and 7500 students within the next five to seven years.

We currently intent for that growth to be in DPS. We believe there's an extraordinarily supportive relationship among different school types in
DPS; we believe there is courageous vision from the school board about the kind of change we seek to achieve in Denver; we very much want to be a part of that vision, and want to be a part of that success. We also believe greatly in community and change, and community and partnerships, so the unit of change of a school is not enough. We want to build a group of schools, or a system of schools in a community that can afford a family a safe, known, high-quality operator from Kindergarten through 12th grade, and in order to do that, we need to only deepen our engagement in each of those communities and commit to growing there, not seeking to grow someplace else.

Julie Speer: In terms of north Denver ... We're doing an episode in north Denver, and so there's been some concern with some north Denver families, some affluent, white North Denver families. Talk a little bit about north Denver. It's tricky, because you're balancing gentrification with traditional neighborhoods, and there's a lot of other things happening there.

Chris Gibbons: Strive Prep has been operating schools in north Denver since 2010, and we started work in north Denver associated with the turnaround at Lake Middle School, which was a revolutionary approach to turning around a school, where a school that was being phased out was replaced by a district-run school and a charter-run school that opened at the same time, in the same building, under the same conditions, with the same potential opportunity for success, and we were very proud to be a part of that. It meant that we operated with the new enrollment conditions that we now have across the city, where all of the families in the Lake boundary were afforded an option between Lake International School and Strive Prep Lake, and were encouraged to make an affirmative choice between one and the other, and the vast majority have. Those that did not make a choice, or moved in mid-year, or came to the district by some other means, we shared equally in enrolling and working with those students, and that's very much mission-aligned with us, to make a contribution alongside district-run schools, and under the same conditions and in the same environment.

In terms of north Denver, the Lake Middle School, Strive Prep, Sunnyside, which is in 47th and Pacos, and Strive Prep Excel, which co-locates at the North High School building, we're very proud of the work all three schools are doing. We have worked in north Denver with the same mission and focus that we work everywhere in the city, which is a great school in every neighborhood, and serve the students who are here, and
then make it accessible to everyone, and I think we found strong success doing so in each of the schools I described.

North Denver’s a neighborhood that has a deep legacy of both concern and disappointment about how Denver Public Schools has reacted to their needs and supported their initiatives and innovation, and I have enormous respect for that passion. It is a community of deeply passionate advocates who fight hard for what they believe in, and care greatly about the nature of their schools, and how those schools can change. That's an extraordinary opportunity for all of us. That's a level of engagement that is unusual, frankly, among many regions of the city, and it's a great opportunity for us to build on, and we have incredibly strong partnerships in north Denver, we have very loyal families that are proud of the education they've received, and the experience they've shared at Strive Prep, and we look forward to continuing to build on that in the future.

Julie Speer: Good. How is it with Lake and Strive, the relationship between the two schools? We talked to Wilbur: he was saying that the kids don't interact, there's really not any unity of the two schools. How's their performance compared to yours?

Chris Gibbons: I don't know that off the top of my head. I have to look that one up, or ask someone. What I would say I've learned about co-location of schools in traditional district buildings is, first of all, it's an incredibly important strategy that schools of all governance types have equitable access to facilities, because that has a huge impact on their ability to be successful. We've also learned that great co-location requires great collaboration between school leaders, and that, provided that the principals are on the same page and able to communicate well, and work closely together, we have far, far more in common than we have different, and those conditions allow for very successful interactions between the schools. We have lots of different initiatives and different efforts at some of our different co-locations: shared sports teams at North High School, and common ROTC program are some real success stories about how kids can collaborate and work together in those environments.

Julie Speer: Kepner, you guys are going to be [inaudible]?

Chris Gibbons: In 2016 there will be a phase-in turnaround at Kepner Middle School, which we are largely drawing from our experiences at Lake to build on
that, and build a terrific partnership at that school, as well. We already operate several schools in southwest Denver, one of which is very close to Kepner and has a long, long waiting list, and so that inspired us to take on a third middle school in that region to make greater impact and be able to serve the families that are currently on our waiting list.

We'll be partnered with a district-run school called Kepner-Beacon, which is a replication of the Grant-Beacon Middle School. We're really excited about that partnership, and believe there's a lot vision and a lot of common opportunity that we can use to create a terrific middle school in southwest Denver.

Julie Speer: Can you actually explain to me, because we only know about Kepner through the kids who we've been interviewing, who went to Kepner, and these were primarily kids that dropped out, had ... Not dropped out, they ditched a lot. They passed, they went through Lincoln, but now they're failing at Lincoln, which just goes to show that the academic levels at Kepner, and the engagement of it, previously... Can you just kind of summarize that it was low-performing and it was ... Was it closed, or it was just low-performing, and now it's being turned around.

Chris Gibbons: Yep. The way many secondary school turnarounds in Denver work as a result of strong leadership from our superintendent and our school board, is that when the district and the board decide they want a new operator or a new program in the school, that's made public, and there's a community process to identify who wants to work on that project, and who might be best equipped to operate a new school in that environment. The district announced plans to make a change at Kepner in January of 2014, and engaged in a community process for six months, and made a decision in June that Strive Prep would be one of the middle school operators at Kepner when the turnaround starts in 2016.

Julie Speer: Do you want to talk briefly about the ... I think your ... Is it Evie Garrett Dennis?

Chris Gibbons: Yep.

Julie Speer: Talk about that campus, and is that a model for the future, that large campus and multi-buildings, and shared ... Or not?
Chris Gibbons: It certainly could be. We're thrilled to be a part of the Evie Garret Dennis Campus in the far northeast. Strive Prep GVR's middle school is located there, and we hope to, in the future, expand to a high school in that community. It's an extraordinary campus. It was generously funded by bond funds, approved by the voters, originally envisioned by Mayor Michael Hancock, and is the result of so many people's community vision coming together around a common facility that meets so many of our students' needs. We're thrilled to be a part of it. It's a very collaborative environment; there are a number of different schools, charter and district-run on that property that share best of class facilities, and certainly for a growing community that is seeking to expand its educational offerings, I think that's a great template for what we can do.

Julie Speer: Tell me about charter schools, neighborhood schools, innovation schools, and how all of this makes up a district. Is this ... Is Denver unique in having all these different types of schools, or is it ... I don't know, it's just the reality of the landscape of the district. How would you define the makeup of Denver public schools?

Chris Gibbons: We are at an extraordinary time in Denver's history, in the rate of change we are making, and in the opportunities to innovate as an urban school system, and I, personally, am so proud to be a part of this, because I believe it is incredibly distinctive, nationally, in both the vision that the organization has, that 80% of kids in every neighborhood go to a great school, but also in the variety and creativity of the strategies that we're using to get there. There are charter schools in Denver which operate with autonomy, under state law. Seventeen percent of Denver's public school students go to charter schools this year. They're innovation schools that operate under Colorado's innovation law, which allow for leaders to adjust their strategy around program, and their strategy around hiring, and they're strategy around the hours of the school day, and a variety of other things to best meet the needs of their students. That's a tremendously important innovation that we're incredibly optimistic about what it can create for the system.

Denver, as a district, is changing strategy into a less centralized, more portfolio-based approach to how we provide public school, and it's the notion of changing from a public school system to a system of public schools. If you're a system of public schools, there are a whole variety of different ways that we can deliver a great education, and that we can operate school, and that we use robust accountability systems to
evaluate which of those are working the best, and replicate those, which of them are not working well, and close those down. That opportunity is enormous because it allows for the possibility to have a dramatically different school system ten years from now than we did now, than we did ten years ago, that is taking the very best of the innovation and creativity in the sector to make our schools great.

Julie Speer: That's great. Do you feel like the district is learning from your successes? Are there things that Strive does that the district's implementing elsewhere? Have you seen any of that?

Chris Gibbons: We're fortunate to have pretty extraordinary collaboration with DPS, and I mean that both at the high level, of work with the school board and the support for opening new schools, and co-location in district buildings, and issues such as those, but I also mean that at the grassroots level. A significant Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation grant several years ago has funded something called Compact Blue, which is an explicit investment in school to school collaboration at the teacher level, assistant principal level, and the principal level to share practices, and our schools have participated in that for several years, now, and a number of other charters have, as well.

Lots and lots of folks from DPS have visited our schools on our data days to participate in our data analysis protocols and systems, and I think there is real collaboration around the city. I think there is real opportunity to learn from one another and build strong relationships and strong partnerships. Every one of my principals has strong relationships with companion principals in schools of different governance types in their own neighborhoods, and those community partnerships only make the school stronger both ways.

Julie Speer: Do you see Strive as neighborhood schools? Because a lot of folks would ... There's this whole charter-neighborhood thing, which on some level, I think, is a waste of energy, but a lot of people will go back to it, constantly, and I think it's ... I could naively be thinking that it's just because it's proximity. It's really just they want to go to a school in their neighborhood. Do you see Strive as a neighborhood school? Schools?

Chris Gibbons: Our goal at Strive Prep is to build community schools that are both of our community and serve all the kids who are in our community. I object to the classification as charter schools as neighborhood schools or not
neighborhood schools. I don't believe that's the right way to think about school types. I think we have district-run or potentially direct-run schools that are operated by a district. We have innovation schools that operate under the innovation statute, and then we have charter schools that operate as charter schools. All of, in my mind, all of those schools should operate with the same enrollment systems, and the same choice options for a family, and create a zone in the city where schools of all of those types that we just listed are open to all families, and families can make choices about where they think they'll get the best education for their kids. We believe very much in serving the neighborhood that we are a part of, and so in that regard I absolutely think of us as operating neighborhood schools.

Julie Speer: My last question is about testing, just because people, there's all this hubbub about testing right now. We could not have done our research if there had not been good testing data to go back and mine.

Chris Gibbons: The word "accountability" is in our mission statement for a reason: because we believe that schools should be accountable to their communities, schools should be accountable specifically to parents, to provide a great education for their kids, and then student accountability also matters in the structure of a school, that students are accountable to their learning, and to their own success, and to their own future. We can't have accountability without agreeing on some common measures of what we should evaluate, and we can't have an accountability at the system's level without some measures of the academic success of our kids. That can look lots of different ways. In my mind, a focus on college readiness and college success is enormously important, and so we look at the measures that are highly predictive of success in college, is the ones that are the most important to us to measure and evaluate, but there has to be some tool for evaluating how much are our students learning in this classroom, in this school, and in the system.

The transition to a new system of tests and a new system of evaluation has, of course, been rocky, and it's been rocky because of several things. One is, change is hard, and any time you take an evaluation system and make it dramatically different, there are going to be implementation challenges around that, and they're going to be understanding challenges around that. It's also worth noting that the change to a common core standards is raising the bar of rigor dramatically, and saying publicly and accountably that what our kids need to be successful in this century, and
in their current future, is dramatically higher-level thinking than what we have been measuring and have been held accountable to previously. That transition is painful, because it requires us facing some facts about what we have been evaluating might not be as predictive of future success as we thought it was, and we might need to have a much higher bar of rigor and evaluation.

The sooner we can all become familiar with that, really understand it, do it more quickly so it takes less time out of our instructional day and year, the better, but the notion that we would be able to operate an effective system of public schools without regular measurement of how much our kids are learning isn't viable and isn't feasible, and so we have to keep that level of standard support, and we've got to do it in a way that is empowering, makes sense, and is not disruptive to kids and families.

Julie Speer: Do you test your kids a lot, or is it just, compared to other schools? Do you have any idea?

Chris Gibbons: It's hard to compare to other organizations. I don't know ... We have invested in multiple measures during this transitional time because of the level of political uncertainty around what would happen with park testing, what would happen with other areas of testing. I look forward to scaling that back once there's a consistent commitment to "these are our evaluation tools that we can all agree on".
Julie Speer: Tell me about High School for you and how you were part of the problem and not the solution so let’s start there.

Dan Medina: Parents had us in a private school down the road here Mile High Baptist School, kept getting in trouble over there, lived right across the street from Lincoln High School uh father just said I’m not paying the money and said I’m sending you to the public school system sent me in here lasted about maybe 4 months again because I was a troubled teen found the wrong crowd right away uh got in trouble here uh got suspended out got home and my clothes were in the front yard so my father told me if you want to be a man go try the world and be a man I never went home I actually those days gangs were really looking for kids I was looking for a family so it was immediate contact for both of us and I ran that way for quite a few years until I had kids

Julie Speer: So how old were you when that happened?

Dan Medina: I left home at the age of fourteen uh eyes opened for me about the age of thirty and six kids later.

Julie Speer: Wow

Dan Medina: Yeah

Julie Speer: So talk to me about that unique position that gives you to understand the kids today.

Dan Medina: Um I guess the best way to say it is been there done it. I’m a product of southwest Denver my kids were raised in Westwood I’ve seen the neighborhood go back down and come back up and go down. Age of thirty refocused my life
got a GED program was doing a lot of volunteer stuff in the neighborhood for the police athletic league assistant principle here at Abraham Lincoln took notice at what I was doing and went out to one of my football games and I was being very productive reaching the at risk kids thirteen years old and gave me an opportunity to come over here so I came in 97 and I started working out in the sports programs and in 2000 was asked to come inside the building

Lincoln at then had different dynamics so there was a lot of gang issues in our neighborhood and were seeing the kids come into the building so again because of my relationship and how I could relate to the kids it was kind of the marriage was perfect match so I was able to come into the building and start working with the kids.

Kids that were dropped out I knocked on doors and brought them back and started putting them in GED programs, my motto was quitting is not an option so we were able to put those kids in here that claimed leadership of a gang same thing I was able to move them out my motto then was the head’s chopped off the hands and feet don’t know what to do so I just kept taking the leaders out till nobody wanted to be the leader any more, we seen the building go from 900 to 2100 students

We became a safe zone and that stigma that we had was now off our shoulders and we started moving forward with it.

Julie Speer: So when was that was it like early 2000's?

Dan Medina: We hit it about I’m thinking about 2001 2002 was when I hit my dropping point 900 and some students 2006 was when we hit our high point 2008 we had a principle in here that really helped us build a community. I’ve always preached the message hill to community hill to school and so I kept going out and reaching in instead of always trying to be in the building reaching the kids still to this day that’s how I do it I truly believe it starts in the home.

Julie Speer: If you were to describe Southwest Denver to somebody like you know who had no clue who doesn’t live here there over in Park Hill I don’t know. How do you describe the Southwest Denver community and some of the challenges kids face?

Dan Medina: I’d start by saying it’s a great community to live in. The Southwest Denver community is a great neighborhood to live, 80219 is a big neighborhood at one time we had the highest foreclosure rate and one of the highest welfare rates in the city of Denver again our main thing is that many of the kids weren’t getting educated so it was going back and teaching to break the cycle that binds you
and for me having six myself, education was the key again living in Southwest Denver we’ve seen it on a daily basis so we just again started educating inside the home and at the same time starting educating out in our community. We’ve had kids that a fine example I had a picture of a kid gave a drawing of our neighborhood, a couch on our front porch, shoe strings or shoes hanging off the wires on our telephone poles, beer bottles on the ground, I took that same picture and I scanned it and I took everything off, the bars off the window, the couch off of the front porch, beer bottles gone and I gave the picture back to the same kid and he says that’s awesome what neighborhood is that?

I told him it’s yours we just gotta learn how to care. That Summer I had about 20 kids doing graffiti cleanup for me every morning tackling Morrison road corridor and we cleaned it, inspired a bunch of kids who were tagging at the time inside Lincoln High School and it changed them because they realized that it’s your community and you could do a lot more. So it was a great thing to see that group grew up and they did graduate and went on.

Julie Speer: That’s great

Dan Medina: Yeah it was awesome

Julie Speer: So earlier you talked about there’s a cycle and you had to break the cycle and for you it’s education. What is the cycle you see generally speaking? Is it a poverty cycle? What is the cycle?

Dan Medina: Well poverty is a tough cycle but it’s not only that, it’s being uneducated, it’s not caring, it’s being part of the welfare system and doing it for generations, again how do you get up in the morning and go to school when someone in your house is sitting on the couch and didn’t make it and is surviving. Our parents didn’t graduate and don’t know the value of an education because they didn’t live with themselves so it’s again breaking that cycle and saying there’s a key to all of this if your parents are working hard and working two three jobs, educate and go back and help your parents I mean again it’s a message that I would preach on a daily basis there is a way out of this and it’s through the education.

Julie Speer: Excellent. That’s great cause the film we’re looking at now is on the achievement gap and it’s in a lot of ways rich kids have high achievements and poor kids don’t and a lot of those free reduced lunch kids, there’s a percentage of kids of color so talk a little bit about that gap and what you see now.

Dan Medina: The gap within itself if you look at different neighborhoods, their support systems inside homes for kids that are really making it they probably got a mother and a father that are educated, know the value of an education and preach inside their home. For a kid that does not have that you need to work.
We need to pay the rent once you turn sixteen, there is a cycle of an income needs to come inside the house. One thing we see with Hispanic families, we’re big families I’m a product of that I have six kids myself I came from a family like my wife a family of eight so working has always been key providing for your family and what we’ve seen now is kids doing the same thing. I need to get to work. Education isn’t first hand work so what we’re telling them is let’s adjust, and we’ve been great out here at Lincoln and the programs we have inside our building to work with students saying that I understand after school you have to work but you still have to put time aside for education and it’s now teaching you how to micro manage your time. A few hours at work, a few hours at school, you’re still bringing money to your family but you’re still receiving an education.

Julie Speer:  That’s great, within the gap talk a little bit about what makes the gap I mean in addition to the support and not having it do you think that cause we’re looking at the intersection of achievement, poverty, and race so talk a little bit about how race figures into that for you.

Dan Medina:  Coming from a neighborhood of Hispanics coming to a school 96% Hispanic you see the gap a lot, again poverty is a key issue to what we’re seeing in the educational gap because education is not pushed as much as we would like it to be pushed so we’re seeing kids get farther behind. It’s a scary thought every seven seconds a kid drops out of high school, for the Hispanics 50% of us graduate, 50% is a scary number. There’s 1500 kids in my building so if you say 50% that’s only 700 so each morning you get up knowing you have a job to do to fill the gap, you got to be that support system inside your building on a daily basis knowing that no matter how your day is running to make sure that kid is greeted in the morning with a smile on his face, able to problem solve for that student and get things taken care of. At the same time teach that student how to navigate life’s issues and realize that quitting is not that option. And when you do it you start narrowing the gaps in between.

Julie Speer:  Have you seen the gaps, I mean I don’t know if you know that over the years have you seen that dropout rate go down or are you seeing the needle move at all or are you seeing this is still the same issue?

Dan Medina:  In the Southwest Denver neighborhood again where my focus again is in seeing the change because again our foreclosure rate is getting less, our graduation rate at Lincoln has been getting greater, seeing students that were formerly here going into college and coming back here to work is totally awesome because it gives a role model to the student, that is here now so again it’s a battle on a daily but we are and again it’s a struggle and you’ve got to be a warrior and put on the armor every day, you just got to understand that but you’re seeing that get smaller and smaller as we go along and you realize that by
working as hard as you are you create and are saving one student at a time and that is just the key to what we do.

**Julie Speer:** That’s great. So since it’s 96% Hispanic now does that mean it’s not an issue. I mean it’s not an integrated school then I mean it’s pretty much would you call it a segregated school.

**Dan Medina:** No

**Julie Speer:** Talk about that a little bit because it’s not a representation of the city per say.

**Dan Medina:** It’s a representation of the community, again you know if you’re renting on the prices of rent and what’s going on in the community and the city of Denver in general a lot of people have flocked to the Southwest neighborhood. Westwoods is a fine example of that, you’re able to get into a neighborhood with affordable rent and when you get that flock of people coming in you’ll see the rate of a race rise and that’s what we’ve seen in Southwest Denver, and being a student at Lincoln High School in 1970 when I was here 79’ I was minority. Hispanics were a minority in this neighborhood and not the majority so again...

**Julie Speer:** Talk about that a little bit more then so when you were in high school who was here then?

**Dan Medina:** Anglo Americans. So when I was in High School 1978 79, we went in from North Denver we had seen a fluctuation of Hispanics moving from the North Denver area and a fluctuation of Italians moving out to Southwest Denver. When we got into the Southwest Denver neighborhood again the Hispanic was the minority, the Anglo Americans were the population of what was going on in here. Southwest Denver was kind of like the suburb, you were moving out towards the suburbs. Evans wasn’t even a paved road back then in those days that was the end of paved roads, coming through here so it was a fresh start in what we’re seeing in families from the Curtis Park neighborhood moving into Northwest Denver neighborhood then bouncing out into what we’re seeing this far out in the city of Denver.

**Julie Speer:** So do you think that was part of the reason that you weren’t engaging in the schools because it was a white school?

**Dan Medina:** No race was never an issue inside my home so I never looked at people as a color. I just think that again I came from a family that work was more important than an education, neither of my parents had made it through high school my father maybe the ninth grade my mother maybe the seventh, so you can’t preach or teach something you don’t know. I mean my parents taught us values which was great respect which is great, again we never looked at color as an
issue but we were never taught education because my family knew nothing of education, they just knew work habits and that’s what they taught us, work habits and to this day they have been great work habits.

Julie Speer: Obviously they instilled that in you with the drive. Alright, well let’s talk about the YESS institute. First of all what is the YESS institute?

Dan Medina: The YESS institute to me is a program to reach at risk kids coming into high school. My program is an outreach program to incoming ninth graders that do not have the skills, homework, social skills and are having a hard time adjusting to high school life. Middle school you get passed on, 6-7, 7-8, high school it’s all based on credits. Kid comes in here and doesn’t receive credits they don’t move past the 9th grade. Been here since 98 what I’ve noticed is that when you get behind in the 9th grade the likelihood of you graduating gets less and less, because you start playing the catch up game and after a while frustration sets in. Where it’s the words we all hate to hear, I quit, so what I’ve been able to do with the YESS program has been able to find those kids, go into those homes, retrieve them, bring them back. I go up to the student advisors office and find my frequent flyer miles kids that are having issues in classrooms, bring them down and just teach them basic skills. So YESS to me is more of a rescue recovery program, for ninth grade we’re able to get them back on track find out who we are.

Julie Speer: How does the program work explain the mentoring piece to me?

Dan Medina: So the program here at Lincoln when we first started was high school seniors coming in and working with ninth grade students. I kind of renovate the whole program, two assistants that I have inside here that help me with the program are products of the neighborhood, came to Lincoln High School and are role modeling to the students they’re working with. A lot of my seniors at one time were ninth graders that were struggling, that are some of the kids would say paying back others, would say paying forward they came back to the program just to help me out so that way again we’re filling in the gap of the students that are in the need. The ninth grade kids that we’re reaching are kids that have really struggled. We do Tuesdays strictly homework we’re getting work down to classes they are failing and teaching them how to get this homework done. Thursdays we’re teaching them life skills lessons, what is your hot button? What ticks you off when you’re in a classroom? How do we hide those hot buttons how do we survive 45 minutes? I developed this program Cardinal, came up with this great program and we done here raising six kids. I remember my kids coming home sitting them on the table, getting their homework out, getting them a snack and doing work with them till it’s all done. That’s what I do with YESS, I sit
the kids down I get them something to eat we sit down for 45 minutes we pair off student to student and we get work done.

A lot of years of coaching I’ve learned as a coach that when you explain things to kids, some get it some don’t. When it’s a student to a student there’s more of an achievement, when it’s a kid to a kid, a kid’s able to show him here’s my secret to how I get an algebra problem done versus a way a teacher might show you, and that stuff is shared. A kid is able to accept that and develop and mentally process that quicker so they’re able to achieve quicker, it’s quite amazing when a kid has an F and comes back with a D and that smile on his face and then a C. I mean he’s glowing and what we’ve noticed in high schools we’ve given a lot of calls to the home when a kid is struggling, never when they’re achieving. I give that call every Friday to my kid’s parents. I know the pride I have in the kid for when he’s doing good he gets home, mother is giving him a hug and he’s pretty excited to come back on Monday, and the same issue if a kid is struggling and not listening to what I’m saying. I give that call so when he comes back he’s pretty mad at me on Monday but he readjusts and gets himself going.

Julie Speer: So how many kids do you have in the YESS program here at Lincoln?

Dan Medina: I have 50 kids total, 20 mentors and 32 mentees on a good day. Again we have a few that will miss because of a cold or something like that and they’re coming to the doors. I have a hard time saying no to kids. The program here at Lincoln High School, when the kids struggled and is now doing good, the peers around him that he has chosen as friends that are still struggling come to that door, so we see a lot of kids flow in and out that we don’t count on our paperwork but just need a day of homework to get some things done. So a lot of kids come in and out of the program but we keep 32 set strong on the kids that find at the beginning of the school year so I wait for first report cards in October. I see who’s failed, who’s not attending and who’s spent more time up in the student advisor’s office and those are the first homes I go to.

Julie Speer: Great and so the program works.

Dan Medina: Program works. I mean I’m totally amazed with the program. I’ve been with Carlos since 2006, I’m one of the longest employees in the building when he first came to Lincoln and pitched the program to the principle Antonio Escobel. I waited for Carlo to leave and when he left I went to the principle and said are you kidding this program needs to go to the suburbs, it’s not going to work and his words to me was that’s why I gave it to you because you don’t take failure. So I said you’re kidding me, and he says no make it work again. 2014 and we’ve made it work and the blessings we’ve seen with the kids is totally amazing. I’ve had kids from different sides of the road, I mean gang issues come into this room and become best of friends and it’s quite amazing to see because we teach them
how to find themselves as people, as a person other than just coming into the building and rivalries from somewhere in our neighborhood.

Julie Speer: That’s great. So how would you define yourself if you are meeting someone, describe your career to me in a few sentences like who, what do you?

Dan Medina: I’d say I’m Dan Medina, role model and mentor to a person I once was. Probably the best way to put it, it’s like looking at the kids is like looking in the mirror. I know they need help and at one time I know I needed it also. My difference is there was no one in my generation that I could look up to, again I was a minority in a school so I couldn’t find somebody of my color to say I needed help. Coming back now looking at the kids I just know I gotta be there so that’s just who I am, a go getter I guess.

Julie Speer: What is your hope for the kids that are in your program now?

Dan Medina: For the kids I have in the program is just to succeed. To find out who they are as a person and to make sure they graduate. Or the previous kids I’ve worked with I see them in the community and they’re very successful and are giving back to the community. It’s a great thing to see because you know you were a part of what was going on at a crucial time in their life when they could have went either way. I say this in my house and to a lot of kids I work with, the streets fight for them and the gangs fight for them so I must fight for them and that’s just pretty much what I’ve done for the kids that I’ve worked with through the YESS program. You give them hope and they attach and they’ll see their dream come true.

Julie Speer: So is there still a gang problem here in Southwest Denver?

Dan Medina: No it’s pretty much died off. I think what we’re seeing is third generation of kids I’m working with. If they’ve seen the troubles that older brothers have gone through and what they’re parents have suffered and we’ve seen it curtail off the way it was in the first early 2000s and late 90’s. So we don’t see that strong in the neighborhood the way it used to be, is it there? Yeah some people are just born into it but to come out and advertise you know not here we’re very proactive at Lincoln High School and the greatest things we did was the uniforms, we put uniforms on kids and no colors have ever been in our building and its safety has always been our number one priority for us at Lincoln High School so we’re able to keep a balance inside our building. Great way I tell the kids is you can be a homeboy out in the streets but you’re a school boy in the building and when you mix them up that’s when we have a problem

Julie Speer: That’s good you just you say how it is to them.
Dan Medina: I just say it how it is to them, if I say it any other way I wouldn’t be for real and I wouldn’t have the respect I do from the families and the kids that I do by know that I’m really fighting for them, cause I’m not sugar coating it. I’m not trying to be somebody that I’m not. I’m Mr. Medina, I’m from the streets, I mean it’s just who I am and my kids respect me for that.

Julie Speer: That’s good cause you succeed they know they can uh?

Dan Medina: Yeah it’s just being a role model. One of our programs we did in 2008 in the YESS program is I put a piece of paper on every kid and I had them not talk to each other, but I had them walk around and put on paper what you seen, what that person was like to you. Some put mean, some put hate posts, some put nice, somebody put one on me that said find a job you love and you’ll never work a day in your life. I’ve carried that ever since.

Julie Speer: So tell me very quickly about being a coach too?

Dan Medina: All six of my kids were born and raised in the Westwood neighborhood. Again in the late 90’s a lot of gang violence, I got into coaching as a way of getting my kids to keep them off the streets. So I went out to the paol league in the late 80’s or middle 80’s and I volunteered as a coach and for me when a kid knocked on my door, my kid was always too tired to go out and play with them. I kept my kids in basketball, football, baseball. What I didn’t know was I had a good talent of doing this and kids started coming to my house to have a safe place to be so I stood with coaching in 97’. I was fortunate that somebody in the high school level seeing it and brought me again into Lincoln High School. Coaching for me is a fine example, a lot of my kids didn’t play when they were five or six years old but they’re learning life lessons through sports so my kids are going off to college maybe not to play that sport, but they’re lasting all four years in college based on what they’ve learned through the sports that I’ve taught them here at Lincoln High School, how to be a part of a team how to get along with others how to do your work first always student athlete second. And when you do this to students who we already know are going to achieve in the building, that message goes back to communities get into the sports program do what you need to do inside the sports program. I’m fortunate that all six of my kids are all doing volunteer work inside the community of Southwest Denver. My daughter is at Harvey Park now teaching these kids also and feeding those programs inside Lincoln High School. So we have beaters of kids coming in where those values are already taught at a 13 year old 12 year old and they’re seeking us out when they come into high school and then we’re just carrying that torch into the graduation rate. What you see around me is a blessing with what I’ve been able to do within the sports itself I’ve taken the program through a lot of the areas of Denver. Jefferson High School has the same model that we have here at Lincoln High School and able to work with those kids there also and again it’s all through
sports. I’ve found something they love. It’s a key out of the neighborhood I can get a scholarship for a sport and go to a college for two years and they jump on it and they do it again. They may not play professional ball and they might not realize it but it’s a way, an avenue to use a sport on something you love to get into a college and get that education that you need.

Julie Speer: So one of the kids we met is at Kepner and he’s coming here to play baseball. Have you been or are you the baseball coach too?

Dan Medina: I’m not the baseball coach now. I was the baseball coach here 2001 through maybe 2007. I’ve also done the girls varsity basketball program and the softball program. I started in 98 and then I left and went on to another inner city school and helped build their program, returned back here in 2007 and have been head coach since 2007.

Julie Speer: So since you brought up this one kid that’s one of our students in the film that we’re doing and he’s going to Kepner. Kepner’s just not doing so well as a school. So talk a little bit about Kepner and maybe the challenges that the school’s had.

Dan Medina: I’ve noticed the challenge because I’ve worked with a lot of the kids from the Kepner neighborhood. Again my main thing is I can sit back and always talk about the problem but I’m more of a solution finder. I’m going in next week to work with Mrs. Guardo at Kepner to start working on the attendance gap that’s going on there and hopefully help with the transition of the kids coming over here. So I did a reach out to the Kepner school itself and I’m going to do some volunteer work inside there again and help train their staff, what high school is like to what we see is life to identify kids that are struggling so I can tie them into my program right away and we don’t have to wait for them to fall before we pick them up. A lot of schools that feed into here have struggled, we make sure that we build a foundation that they need inside here but we can’t wait for them to come to us, that’s the key to this. The key for us is to stop and say if we see it we’ve got to reach out and that’s pretty much what I’ve done. I’m starting to reach out to our feeder schools and starting to see if I can get myself in them and start helping the kids there.

Julie Speer: If you can get them earlier yeah

Dan Median: It’s key you know what we see in high school does not start in high school. It only really starts in middle school, it’s an elementary school kid saying mommy I have a tummy ache I don’t want to go to school today and it just kind of builds and then middle school you’re invincible as a kid, you think you have it all and you play the system any way you can but when you get to high school, again it’s the awakening call. You’re four years from becoming an adult there is no more calling mommy when you turn 18 so again it’s finding what needs to be done and
correcting and that’s kind of the stage I’m in right now. As many years as I’ve been in the Denver Public School system going back and trying to do some correction on things in my neighborhood because there’s a need in Southwest Denver because we’re growing, we keep growing we’ve been broken down to two sections in district 4. I mean the quadron has changed, our school zone has changed but again we got to fight the fight.

Julie Speer: Is there anything else you feel like ok I gotta say this or is there something you haven’t talked about?

Dan Medina: No I guess I’m happy with what I do. That’s probably the main thing I’m very fortunate that DPS lets me stay at Lincoln High School. I’ve seen a lot of faces come and go. I’ve been fortunate that I’ve been able to do what I do in here and feel in need of the community I choose to live in and the families that I choose to work with. I guess most of all very thankful that Denver Public Schools has given me that option and Carlo mainly that has kept the program here at Lincoln High School and has let us recover and rescue kids the way that we do.

Julie Speer: Actually I’m going to ask one more question. So one of the things we’re doing in this project is going back and looking at test scores and achievement scores way back when and what we see is that back in the 70’s, DPS would not share data with anybody. They would know that there’s some kids failing and there schools failing but they wouldn’t talk about it. And now fast forward you have this whole SPF system and they’re being very transparent about the problems that the district is facing. Do you see that change and that openness to kind of I don’t want to say air the dirty laundry, but sort of yeah there’s some issues here but it seems to me anyway at least from the outside that they’re trying to be more transparent and more solution oriented. Do you see that happening?

Dan Medina: I do see it it’s a conversation we have in here with our principles on the SPF report. I guess it’s recognizing I mean again like we say we weren’t very transparent back in the 70s and the 80s but to find a solution you gotta hear out what the solution is and then as a team collaborate on how do you build, what is our stepping stones to build from what we’re showing. If you hide it nobody ever knows you’re never going to come clean with what’s happening, what we’ve done now is like here. I mean parents get on the computer and find a rating of the school which was unheard of in the 70s, you couldn’t research schools back in the 70s they were just the neighborhood school you go to when we open up the books we want to show parents what we’re doing and then to look at what we’re doing. Abraham Lincoln High School works hard on a daily basis to make sure we are fulfilling the needs of the kids, sometimes it’s not transparent on paper but it’s always transparent in the hallways and I think that’s where it matters most with kids we work with because they see it on a daily basis, but transparency has to be key to be successful.
Julie Speer: Do you know what Lincoln’s SPF score is?

Dan Medina: I don’t know what the total score is, I do know we dropped down to the orange from yellow. I think we’re one or two points away from going back to yellow and working very hard at it.

I think the program we have like YESS and any other programs that come in and argue that giving kids knowledge on a daily basis will always help build the gap because again we’re educating on a daily basis. It’s always one student at a time but support services always need to be in place and what we’re seeing with these programs like YESS is that their support services 30 kids are in my program. If all 30 make it that’s 30 kids teaching 30 other kids there’s 60 then it goes to 90 and then we start seeing a gap close little at a time. It’s a hard job but yes then we start seeing the gap close because of the educational piece of teaching kids how to handle themselves. Some kids will go to high school and graduate and then may never go to college but the life lessons they learn through our program helps them to hold onto a job because they are not firing off at their employer. They know they have to be there daily and if they do that then they know they are earning a steady paycheck, bringing that back to my community buying out the stores in my community and we see the strength of the community still growing, so it’s a full circle no matter what. It is based on programs like this, rescuing ninth graders that are on the verge of failing and retraining them on how to succeed.

Julie Speer: Actually we’re going to talk to these three gals, maybe you can just tell me a little bit about each of them.

Dan Medina: All three of these young ladies pretty much found the wrong group, again gangs.

Julie Speer: Were they in the same group?

Dan Medina: No all three different groups. Gladys said it. When I asked her what the turning point was, 4 F’s coming into my program with a 0.1 GPA. Her first comment to me was coming into the program I learned one thing, change my friends, change who I am. So she doesn’t hang around with the same group anymore, she started hanging around with peers who were going to class on a daily basis, that were trying to be successful on a daily basis and then she started seeing herself become successful as a product of the environment that she was in.

The second one is Maria Rodriguez she came in as a second year ninth grader pretty angry at home, she could do basic work but had a lot of anger issues. A lot of meetings with the parent learned some coping skills with the YESS mentoring
program, mother was in here last week crying, sees her daughter have some goals in life now daughter is now a tenth grader, we got her back on track we’re hoping Maria is kind of the role model for the next two years at the YESS institute program. We’re going to put her as our lead mentor next year so she’s going to come back and start role modeling to the kids. One thing about Maria is the kids she works with that kept her out of school, she’s bringing them into the program so she actually one at a time brought a kid back in because the kids are looking to become successful with what happened in your life and she’s talking about the YESS institute and that kid now has brought other kids into the program. Mr. Medina I know we’re full but please will you give this one a chance or will you work with this one she’s having problems in her home and so Maria brings a lot of kids over into the program or into the office that we’re able to give coping skills to and help them survive.

Maria Juarez picked Maraya out in the neighborhood. So one thing I do here at the school is I hit the neighborhood, being a student here at Lincoln I know all the hiding places. I hid there myself so was able to find her in the community and bring her back and took a look at grades, also failing everything and didn’t have no care for what education did or offered. Quite an angry young lady, brought her into the program and had to monitor her a lot because she was pretty defiant when she first started seeing the grade change in her from an F to a D. I was teaching her how to do basic homework and then a D to a C, it kind of put a light bulb on in her head that brains aren’t my problem, decision making is my problem. If I learn how to make better decisions in my life, life goes a lot easier. That’s exactly what she did, she started focusing on how to make better decisions in her life and with that came the great grades that she now has the three students are quite amazing and they’ll tell a heck of a life story. I’m very thankful I got to be a part of what’s going on with both of all three of them actually it’s quite amazing.

Those aren’t even my hard core kids. I have some hard core kids that are down there now that are going on 45 days without being in the student advisors office. 45 days without missing a class, it’s quite amazing. I had one mother call and ask me what did you do to my kid I thought oh my goodness I’m in trouble what did I do to your kid? He’s not the same kid, he’s coming home, he’s respectful he hasn’t missed school, I don’t get no calls from you Mr. Medina which is good. I brought him up here and what we did was we decided let’s do a student of the week and he became our first student, the kid he’s never had someone do something positive towards him because he struggled in elementary and middle school. To come over here and have somebody pat him on the back and say hey kid you did great. I sat him down and called his home while he was in front of me and told the mom, and he got a little water eyed and this is a tough kid who you
probably would never see emotion out of him. He’d never want to show emotion but he understood the value of what we were doing, he now goes downstairs and automatically makes kool aid right away we tell him he’s the best kool aid maker so he runs down. A kid that didn’t want to be in the program, he’s the first one down there now making sure he’s making kool aid for all the other kids that come into the program but we gave him a job and he learned how to handle it. Yeah there’s quite a few others there’s a lot of stories I mean a lot of stories.

I have one boy Ray. Ray came into high school looking for a place to belong, found the wrong crowd right away, missing school not caring about the homework, peer pressure was the killer for him. Took him off the loose lip, he is now moving through the classes all by himself, shows up downstairs on a daily basis, doesn’t miss school at all and see’s the value of what he’s doing. The hardest thing of high school is you have to belong in a click. We know that just being an adult myself what high school was like. When I came in here either I’m with the football program or the jocks or I’m with the band group or I’m with the hang out group which you belong and click, there’s some lost souls out there that don’t fit in any of those clicks. So what we’ve done with YESS mentoring is we’ve been able to accept the kids that aren’t accepted anywhere else and what the kids are seeing is other kids knocking on the door and they now know that I’m pretty popular, people want to come in here, they want to get good grades like we are so it’s transformed itself all over.

Julie Speer: What is the blue slip?

Dan Medina: I developed this back in 2004. I explained it to my kids that your parents go to work on a daily basis, they punch in, at the end of the day they punch out. So I got the blue slip, you go to a classroom, your teacher signs it, I know you’re in there. Your teacher will give me your grade so I know what your grade is. At the end of the day you bring it back to me, your day is over. I told the kids your parents go to work, that is their job. High school is your job, make sure you do your job correctly in these 4 years. I will teach you the skills to live in the outside world. I probably have about a 120 kids on blue slip on a daily basis, they will bring it to me completely signed. If I don’t get one I’m right back at the home. The key thing for me is that it all starts in the home, so that’s the first place I go. If they were supporting them at home I latch to it right away, if they’re not I’m at the front door knowing that I have to be the support system for that kid, so I’m always at the homes. That’s just key for me.
Julie Speer: Can you introduce yourself by telling me your name, your age and where you go to school?

Devionne Fugett: My name is Devionne. I'm 11 and I go to Denver School of Science and Technology of Green Valley Ranch.

Julie Speer: Perfect. Tell me about school and just as much as you can tell me. Favorite subjects, least favorite subjects, friends, what you like. Tell me about school.

Devionne Fugett: My favorite subject would have to be science because I'm like my Papa. My friends, I have a lot of them. My teachers, they treat us all the same. I like how they do that.

Julie Speer: You mentioned science and your Papa. Who was your papa and what kind of science?

Devionne Fugett: My Papa is my grandfather. We call him my Papa because it's a little weird calling him grandfather. Usually general science because you learn a lot of stuff. It's really fun learning a lot of stuff.

Julie Speer: Good. What kind of grades do you get? Talk to me about your grades and tests and all that stuff.

Devionne Fugett: With my grades, I have all A's right now. With my tests, I usually get a B on there if it's a little challenging. If it's not challenging, I usually get an A. That's pretty much it.
Julie Speer: Do you like school and why?

Devionne Fugett: I do like school because all my classes are understandable and I'm not confused in any of them like I'd usually be. I'm not really confused.

Julie Speer: That makes it more fun or what? What is not being confused mean to you?

Devionne Fugett: Not being confused means to me, it makes it more fun and it makes it easier to learn stuff instead of me tuning it out.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about the plans for the future, with school. Where you think you might go to high school, if you want to go to college and if you do, what you want to study and what you want to be when you grow up. Kind of talk me through the current plan, knowing that it might change because you're only 11.

Devionne Fugett: The current plan is that one, I want to stay in Denver so I can be closer to my mom. I want to be a veterinarian when I grow up. The college I want to go to, it'd be either CCU or DU.

Julie Speer: Very good. You have it planned out, that's good. What's your favorite kind of animal?

Devionne Fugett: My favorite animal I would say, is a cheetah because they are fast and I like fast.

Julie Speer: Good. Well, talk to me about education. Do you think it's important and why?

Devionne Fugett: Education. I think education is really important because some of the adults I know didn't go to college and I don't want to be that adult that doesn't go to college and doesn't get a degree. I won't be in the unemployment list and I won't know what I'm doing most of the time.

Julie Speer: Very good. That's a good plan. Talk to me about those adults who haven't gone to college. Describe them to me. As many things as you can describe about adults who don't go to college.

Devionne Fugett: Adults that don't go to college, I think that a degree is important, so when they don't have a degree, I feel like I don't want to be the person that doesn't have a degree. With my friendship, I don't want to be the
person who doesn't have the degree. I don't want to be the person who doesn't know what they're talking about.

Julie Speer: Have you ever heard of a thing called the achievement gap? If you haven't, even just tell me that. That's fine.

Devionne Fugett: No, I have not heard about the achievement gap. What is the achievement gap?

Julie Speer: I will tell you and then you are going to tell me your reaction to what I'm going to say, okay? Right now, in Denver public schools, and there's hundreds and hundreds of schools, what the research is showing is the rich kids, they are academics up here. They achieve really well. They test really well. They know what they're talking about. They know the subject matter. Poor kids, they're not testing well. They're not achieving well. Their academics are way down here. Rich kids, poor kids. What they're also finding is that, and this is generalization, that the wealthy kids are white and that the poor kids are kids of color. African-Americans, Latinas. Asians are up here too though because Asians achieve really well. That's in general. The thing is that, of Denver Public School, 70 or 80% which is almost all the kids, are kids of color. That's the achievement gap. Tell me what you think of that.

Devionne Fugett: The achievement gap, what I think of it, it shouldn't really be like it is. The richer kids shouldn't be getting better grades and shouldn't understand. The poor kids should be at the same level the rich level the rich kids are. I don't like how it is but hopefully it changes.

Julie Speer: What do you think could fix that achievement gap?

Devionne Fugett: What I think that could fix the achievement gap is if the teachers would teach the same with the rich kids and the poor kids. It would be equal with everyone instead of it being the rich kids get the better grades and the better test grades and all that and the poor kids get the lower grades. That doesn't make any sense to me.

Julie Speer: Good. What about the racial piece? Does that make any sense? That the White kids are doing better than the kids of color?
Devionne Fugett: It doesn't make any sense because we should all be treated being equal. Because it really wouldn't make any sense if it was the other way around. It shouldn't be like that either way.

Julie Speer: There's no wrong answer to this. How would you describe your family in terms of money and stuff?

Devionne Fugett: How would I describe my family in terms of money, it's not that we don't care about the money but it's also that we do care about the money. It's just that sometimes it doesn't really bother us that we don't have enough money or something because we can pay it out. I'm not saying I'm the rich kid or the poor kid or I'm perfect. I'm just saying that it really doesn't really matter to me because it's not important about the money. It's important about how we are all treated.

Julie Speer: Because you're 11, I don't know how much you know about what's going on in Colorado and across the country. Have you or your mom talked about what's going on with places like Ferguson or some of the unfairness that's going on with African-Americans across the country? Have you talked about those things? If you haven't, that's fine. If you have talked about it, what do you think about all those things?

Devionne Fugett: My mom and me have talked about what happened in Ferguson and how the Black men are being treated. I don't remember the question.

Julie Speer: That's okay. How does it make you feel? What do you think about those things?

Devionne Fugett: They shouldn't be treated like that because well, really it shouldn't have happened because it didn't really make any sense why it happened. I'm not going to be the one to say anything about. I'm not going to pick sides or anything. All I'm going to say is that it shouldn't happen. Hopefully, it doesn't happen anymore.

Julie Speer: Have you ever felt any discrimination? Do you know what discrimination is?

Devionne Fugett: No, I do not know what discrimination is.

Julie Speer: It's bad and it's not good. That's good you don't know about it. Tell me about your mom. What do you think about your mom?
Devionne Fugett: What I think about my mom is she's really, really, really smart. I want to be like her. Sometimes we get in our little arguments and we get mad at each other. We always come back around.

Julie Speer: That's good. She is really smart. Does she push you really hard?

Devionne Fugett: If I get an F she will push me really hard and she will help me if I need help. Otherwise, she helps but it's not really big because I really don't need that much help.

Julie Speer: Have you ever gotten an F?

Devionne Fugett: Yeah.

Julie Speer: You have? What was the F in? Do you remember?

Devionne Fugett: It was math because we switched and it was a little hard for me at first. Because everything got mixed up. After we got settled in, I got an A.

Julie Speer: Tell me about your brothers.

Devionne Fugett: My brothers, they are protective, really protective. Even though I will get mad at them, and they'll yell at me and I'll yell at them, they will still, if I'm feeling bad or something, they will still say, "What happened? What's wrong? Do you need help with anything?"

Julie Speer: Excellent. Talk about basketball.

Devionne Fugett: Well, I've been around basketball almost all my life. Most of the time I don't watch them play because I've been there for a long time. Now that I've gotten older, I've been watching them play and I've watched their group mix-tape a lot of times.

Julie Speer: Do you play?

Devionne Fugett: I used to play but then I turned into a girly-girl. Now, I'm all about cheerleading.

Julie Speer: Are you a girly-girl?

Devionne Fugett: Yeah.
Julie Speer: What does that mean?

Devionne Fugett: We're not at tom-boy so we don't really hang out with the boys. We hang out with the girls. We don't really get into fights or anything. We paint our nails and we do our hair and stuff like that.

Julie Speer: Tell me about your friends and kind of what ethnicity all your friends are?

Devionne Fugett: Some of my friends are boys because I've know them since 2nd and 1st grade. The rest of my friends are girls. Usually I will hang out with the girls but I would hang out with the boys sometimes.

Julie Speer: Tell me, of your friends, are they Black, White, Brown? What race are your friends?

Devionne Fugett: They're all. It's all races. Whoever is nice and is really caring, I will hang out with.

Julie Speer: Perfect. That's good. What about your dad?

Devionne Fugett: My dad, he left. I don't remember when he left. He has been coming back around and he wants to hang out with us and see us more. This summer, I met my little sister that I never knew I had. It was kind of fun to know I have a little sister.

Julie Speer: Talk about your mom being a single mom and what you just see about that, if anything.

Devionne Fugett: As my mom being a single mom, she can really hold it in. She'll talk to my brothers about anything she has to talk to them about. She will talk to me about anything I have to talk about. If my brothers need a dad, we have a father-figure. His name's Jaren Clark but we call him Jay. He will hang out with them. I'll hang out with my mom. Most of the time, my mom will talk to them and she'll talk to me. She's really holding it out.

Julie Speer: Good. She's awesome. Tell me about your neighborhood. You live in far Northeast Denver or Green Valley Ranch or Montbello. What do you call your neighborhood and then describe it to me.

Devionne Fugett: We call our neighborhood Green Valley Ranch. We all treat each other the same. If we see someone out on the street, we won't say anything racist. We'll say, hi, and stuff like that.
Julie Speer: Describe it. What does it look like? What does it feel like?

Devionne Fugett: Green Valley Ranch has a lot of trees. We also have a lot of stores. I like how pretty the trees are. I like how there's a lot of stores as well. It's even.

Julie Speer: Were you born here?

Devionne Fugett: I was born in Denver.

Julie Speer: Do you know all your neighbors?

Devionne Fugett: I know most of my neighbors. Otherwise, I will see them; I will wave. I don't know them as good as I know these neighbors over here.

Julie Speer: That's right. You guys just moved here in August. Good. You don't have to take a bus to school, do you?

Devionne Fugett: Well, I used to didn't have to. Then, my mom found out about the bus. Now, I take Success Express, I think it's called. I don't really, particularly know.

Julie Speer: That's exactly what it's called. Tell me what that is. Do you know what that is?

Devionne Fugett: No, I do not know what the Success Express is. I mean, I know that it's a bus line.

Julie Speer: It basically picks you up where and takes you where?

Devionne Fugett: It picks me up from MLK. Me and my mom can walk in the morning. It takes me to DSST.

Julie Speer: How long are you on the bus? Tell me what the bus is like.

Devionne Fugett: I'm on the bus for at least 15 minutes. The bus, the woman, she will keep everyone accountable. So I'm like, "Okay."

Julie Speer: Do you take the bus home too? Does your mom pick you up everyday? Tell me about getting home.
Devionne Fugett: Since I'm a cheerleader, I go to cheerleading practice. Usually Monday-Wednesday, I'm at cheerleading practice. Thursday and Friday, I'm on the bus.

Julie Speer: Is there anything else you think that we should know about your life?

Devionne Fugett: Nope.
Julie Speer: Let’s go back in time before the Keyes Case, talk to me about what neighborhood you lived in and what was the climate like within the school systems and was the city really segregated? Let’s go back to early sixties, describe it for me.

Ed Benton: Well in the early sixties the city was, the school district was essentially segregated. It was segregated not simply by neighborhood housing parents but by deliberate action by the board of education and the administration in establishing boundaries for schools. That led to substantial segregation in the DPS at that time. I was living then in the very early sixties. I was living and still I’m living on the edge of Cheesman Park. I was aware the schools that were related to Cheesman Park had boundaries that produced segregation in the junior high level and even in the high school level.

I became aware of that condition at that time and wasn’t well informed but until I was acquainted with the then I think president of the Urban League of Colorado. He became before the board of education to get the board to oppose a recommendation made by the administration to build a school building at a site and on Colorado Boulevard and I think 32nd. His contention was that that school would under the boundaries that existed and the plan would become segregated when it opened. That was my first real insight and to what the nature of the segregation was and the DPS at least in that area at that time.

Julie Speer: What was it that drew you to run for school board?

Ed Benton: Well I think it was a lifelong interest in education and that was in part induced by my educated wife who was a classic scholar and taught in several colleges and universities. That was her love and life education and I think that’s what inspired me to become interested and in involved in education. Both K12 as well as
higher education and that involvement resolved in eight years on the Denver Public School Board of Education and 10 years on the Colorado commission on Higher Education.

I gained insights into the whole education enterprise and in the city and in the state. That was my personal experience that then played a role and the situation later led to the filing the litigation in the Keyes Case.

Julie Speer: What was your platform when you were running for school board?

Ed Benton: When I first ran it was in 1961 for a two year unexpired term as a member who had died and then in 1963 I ran for a full six year term and was elected by quite a large margin. I wasn’t as I indicated, I wasn’t really aware of the scope and the extent of the segregation of the DPS at that time until a man from the Urban League showed up. That caused me to take new insight, new understanding and so that’s what really initiated my effort in the board. Then in 1963 Rachel Noel a black woman was elected to the board and at that point she and I together begun to move within the board.

Toward trying to get to school board and the administration to adopt a desegregation plan.

Julie Speer: What was the early perceptions of the rest of the board as you brought these ideas to them?

Ed Benton: Well there was early resistance on members of the board and the administration I might add and yet Rachel and I continue to press for recognition of this reality in the system. Namely the drawing of boundaries that were producing racial segregation in the district ... Subsequently Rachel introduced a resolution which was very contentious on the board opposition and cleaved negative attitude in parts of the community. When it became known that this effort was being made and finally after much discourse and much controversy both within the board and within the community the Noel resolution was adopted by four to three vote.

That was when then the superintendent was directed to come up with a plan for the desegregation of the public schools.

Julie Speer: Do you have any idea who were the three that voted against it and what was their argument?
Ed Benton: Well my, now you are asking for a 50 plus year old to comment but it would have included I think Isadol Samuel’s a long time member and maybe Palma Birch and two others. Rachel and I gained support from Dr. Rames at the time and one other I think she had been a state senator, maybe was state senator at that time Allegra Saunders. Those were the four and we ultimately prevailed.

Julie Speer: Talk about some of the perceptions in the community when they heard about this resolution? What were some of the positives and then some of the negative?

Ed Benton: Well in the black community of Denver there was what I would characterize really as a kind of quiet resignation to the fact that the schools were segregated and there was not much capability at that time of altering that condition. There was very substantial opposition in parts of the white community and it gradually increased in intensity and became a very apparent split in the City of Denver. Between those who were in general trying to support the plan and those who were very vigorously opposed to it. The controversy really became quite intense and there was negative attitudes amongst board members and certain members of the administration of the schools.

Rachel and I persisted and gradually gained more and more support but as that support increased so did the opposition. There were some very serious conditions that took place along the way with buses being burned Molotov cocktails being thrown on the front pouches of others. This was somewhat later than that, these events but it was a symptomatic and revealing of the attitude and the significant part of the community. Finally as I said no resolution was adopted and the superintendent undertook to commence the preparation and implementation of a desegregation plan.

Then the next election that came up was in 1969 and that’s when my term was expiring and a friend of mine Marty Pasco and I ran for reelection. The issue in the campaign and it was a very intensive campaign was whether in our view the equal protection laws of the civil rights act and the constitutional the equal protection provisions of the 14th amendment of the constitution. We tried to emphasize in our campaign that was the objective in order to comply with those two constitutional requirements. The other side however, the issue as they presented it and pounded the table in favor of it and gained a great deal of opposition to support them.

Was massive cross town forced mandatory and maybe a few other adjectives busing. That became the fulcrum upon which the whole enterprise was balanced
or unbalanced and that continued right on through the election of 1969. In the meantime then preparations and I don't know whether you want to get into the litigation at this time.

Okay at that time I think it was the support of black churches, other black organizations, the parochial action committee and others that pushed the program. In the election of 69 the two candidates me for reelection Marty Pasco for his first election we were defeated by Jim Parul and Frank Southworth. Their campaign throughout that election period was to repeal the Noel resolution. When they were elected overwhelming the first action they took was to repeal the Noel Resolution.

Which then precipitated the litigation Keyes versus the board of education and that then was very active in the community. That’s also probably about the time when these buses were burned and Molotov cocktails were deployed. The case was filed and the federal court Judge William E. Doyle presiding. After extensive evidentiary presentations to the court Judge Doyle entered his decision upholding desegregation plan that the district had been attempting to implement under the Noel Resolution.

During that period the fewer in the community continued I recall with clarity one night at the board of education meeting the school administration building. There was demonstrations who came up and they were marching around in the street with big placards which read, “Boil Doyle In Oil.” That was a very determined demonstration of opposition to the whole program by a segment of the community. Then the case was appealed to the Court Of Appeal through the 10th Circuit and the court of appeals reversed Judge Doyle and then it went on to the Supreme Court of the United States.

The Supreme Court of United States remanded the case to the 10th Circuit reversing the 10th Circuit. That’s when the proceedings continued and ultimately ended up in the court of Judge Madge who was given the burden to carry out the decree that had been issued. That decree existed for quite a number of several years until under US Supreme Court rulings the district court had to make a finding as to whether there was anything else the court could do to implement the decree and if not then jurisdiction over the matter would be returned to the school district.

Expect for the language requirement Hispanic language requirement that was still retained as a part of the judge’s jurisdiction. As far as I know maybe Judge
Midge still has jurisdiction over that aspect of the case. On the desegregation issue the court no longer and that’s all back in the hands of the DPS.

Julie Speer: What about the language part, explain that to me?

Ed Benton: Well there was an effort made to teach bilateral language essentially to teach Hispanic students English so that they were not disadvantaged with the fact that they did not have adequate instruction in English. That’s my relocation of what that aspect of the court’s order was.

Julie Speer: Why did they call it the Keyes Case?

Ed Benton: Well the principle plaintiff was Wilfred Keyes, a dentist a black man who lived in Park Hill and there were a dozen or 13 I don't know how many other plaintiffs involved. It was a multi person action that was brought but Keyes had all versus the board of education was I think the official title of the lawsuit. I observed publically and otherwise from time to time that if the school district had spent half as much time and effort in supporting a program. Make it more effective and efficient in its implementation as they spent on litigating, the program that would have been a very positive result for the education process and for the community.

They were determined to do what they did and they did what they were determined to do.

Julie Speer: How long did the whole litigation process take?

Ed Benton: It went on for years and I, 50 years ago plus or minus my 89 year old mental function doesn’t necessarily enable me to be precise about some of these matters.

At the end of it all I took pride as did others who were so helpful in the whole matter that the constitution of the United States and it’s provisions were preserved. People even later would ask me, “Ed why did you persist so in this matter?” I said, “Because the program we were fighting for was to uphold a critical part of the US constitution. The equal protection clause under the 14 amendment of the constitution.” I said, “At the end of it all the constitutional provisions were upheld even though the practicality of the effort was diminished by subsequent decisions of the US Supreme Court and change of events of one kind or another.

Julie Speer: Good so did you ever run for school board again?
Ed Benton: I never did and I never intend to. I was urged back in 1963 when I was elected with a greater margin then I think two candidates of votes then two candidates running for mayor obtained. I was asked at that time there was a Rocky Mountain news reporter at the time named Jack Gaski. He write a column or two about because of that margin of my election I should run for governor. Well I had a subsequent call from three county chairs for the Democratic Party. Including Denver Jefferson and Adams I think and a friend of mine who was the Denver chair said, “We need to have breakfast with you.”

I said, “What about?” He said, “We’ll tell you at breakfast.” Well the purpose was to persuade me to be the democratic candidate for governor upcoming. I said, “When ...” I told him, “When do you need to know?” I said, “Well you can take 24 hours.” I said, “I’ll let you know.” I came home and discussed it with my wife, who was the most nonpolitical, un-political person you could imagine. She was totally devoted to her Greek and Latin scholarship. I borrow her in mind in making that decision and next morning at breakfast I called the Denver chairman and said, “Hugh I don't need to wait 24 hours, the answer is no.”

He said, “That can't be your answer, we’ll have to meet again.” I said, “Hugh what is there about this simple two letter word No that you don't seem to understand.” I made that decision and I would say it was the wisest decision ever made. It is such a terrible burden for the first ladies and I will say maybe on the record, ultimately off the record that [inaudible] she was so uncomfortable and noninvolved in the notion of first lady. I made the right decision when I said, “Hugh the answer is no.”

Julie Speer: Good, you kept your marriage instead.

Ed Benton: That’s right.

Julie Speer: That’s good for you.

Ed Benton: For almost 61 years.

Julie Speer: That’s good. Reflect on the racism in Denver a little bit like how bad really was it?

Ed Benton: The racism in Denver at that time was intense and it demonstrated itself in many ways. There was also a situation with the black panthers at that time headed by a man named Lauren Watson. The Black Panthers were opposed to desegregation. They wanted black schools as a function of black power which was their objective. I became very much involved with Lauren Watson and the
Black power community. In the white community there continued to be very substantial racism. There were many, many examples of it that could be sited.

In my own view even though there has been enormous progress made in that issue there’s still substantial racism in communities around the country today including Denver. It is more implicit than explicit. It is more subtle than overt and yet it is there and on a national level a book called The New Jim Crow written by distinguished scholar at the Ohio State University documents. Where in the criminal justice system and otherwise there is still quite evident a substantial racist attitude in the country and Denver is not excluded from that.

It’s still a challenge that has to be faced the whole system of justice, criminal justice I think has to be reexamined. Some of the barriers to the equilibrium and equality have to be recognized and dealt with. It’s a challenge for your public policy process and it’s certainly an ongoing challenge for the process of education. Those 10 years on the Colorado Commission on Higher education that I mentioned I gained additional insight as to the role that racist inclined individuals would play in subtle ways not over necessarily at all.

It’s up to the young people of the country some of whom may have in this little assembly here to solve these problems.

**Julie Speer:** Denver Public Schools is basically segregated again. It’s not black and white segregation like it used to be but now it’s very much brown segregation and talk about why you think we are here again basically first? Where are we?

**Ed Benton:** Where are we today with segregation? I think across the country schools many schools are segregated on a black white basis. That came about I think because the effort to maintain it was modified by decisions of the Supreme Court of the United States that really took the focus off of this issue and that’s created a condition whatever latent racism there was in the country, it could present itself and get a further hold. I think that is, that’s still an unsolved problem despite the very substantial progress that had been made. I think it’s evident today as I mentioned in connection with this, Ohio State expert on the subject.

It permeates the criminal justice system, it permeates other social institutions and I think it’s still work to be done. We know it’s now quite prominent in what’s going on in Oklahoma, what’s going on in Florida and other places. That’s a challenge for the future of the society. I think there was early evidence that diversity in the educational process is important that you can have a much more positive education result if you have diversity. Not necessarily just racial diversity
but diversity based on economic differences so that you don't have simply a single focus on what the process of education ought to be about.

How to be designed, constructed, implemented and I think it all gets into a broader question in my view of what is the proper definition and the execution of the process of education? One aspect of that today, the public does not support education to the extent it should support education financially. You can determine that in Colorado when you look at the public support for the institutions of higher education. I have submitted a firmly held point of view that for a society that will pay doctors, lawyers, merchants and so forth more than it will pay good solid capable teachers ultimately will earn what may happen to it.

That I think is something that relates to this whole discussion of the day about the common core standards and I think in correct rhetoric is that this is simply another example of the federal government trying to insert itself into domestic matters and so on. I think the country should not be treated as 50 states with each state determining everything that should be taught within those states. It is the United States and the things that children ought to learn about the country as a whole and not just about what is thought to be the best interest of their city or their state.

I’ve never been I think the notion that the best education is education that the parents can give the children in the local school. I think that can become a kind of deification of a practice that may not warrant that duty of priority. There ought to be things and I think that was the objective of the common core not to define the curriculum but to have ways, metrics. In which to determine what are fundamental values it will be nationwide not just values of a given state. How successful we are lurking in success the process of education would be or should be.

It’s hard to generate a national dialogue on these things because immediately with the avalanche of talk radio and cable television spouting a different thesis, a different position I think it’s a very difficult thing for citizens to gain inadequate understanding of what the two challenges of the education process are.

Julie Speer: Inter public media.

Ed Benton: Inter public media.

Julie Speer: Well do you think that if, if there were no private schools, if everyone who live here sent their students to the same schools would that solve the problem?
Ed Benton: I don't think it would, I think there's a role for charter schools for example. I think there's a role for private schools, religious schools but the principle role has to be the public schools. There's where the societal support should be focused I think. I think there is value in the diversity of the institution the educational institutions and private schools. I think in contribute to that value but that's not where the center of the country resides and I think the other thing that affects the efficacy of the public education process is poverty. I thinking the schools of Chicago for example the differential in economics in Chicago can play a powerful role in the inability of the schools to turn out qualified graduates. I think the data shows if youngsters three and four, if they do not have opportunities for reading for listening to books being read to them at early ages to develop a vocabulary there can be a massive distinction in that youthful population. Between those who've had that early childhood support and those who did not have it.

Once that gap is created it's going to be a very difficult task to remediate it and that relates to another contention of mine that the largest more serious challenge the country faces today is the widening gap between those who have and those who have not. Because in that have not category is where your find the lowest level of educational achievement. It isn't just that those people in that category are worthless and would rather have their hands out rather than get a job and go to work. It's because there institutional impairments and obstacles stand in their way of one kind or another. That's a very hard in the domestic politics of the day to remediate. Yet it directly affects the educational process and the affectedness thereof. I guess one of my thoughts is that, well let me put it this way. Years ago chairman, CEO of Proctor and Gamble was chairman of the, I think it's called National Business Counsel, chairs and the presidents of all the mostly the fortunate 500 companies. He retained Fr. Theodore Hesburgh of Notre Dame who spent I think maybe almost three years studying this issue and counsel issued a report entitled as I recall Educating Our Children I believe was the name of it. In that thesis it was those who say, the only problem with education today is money, wrong and those who say there's no money problem in education we don't need any more money.

They are also wrong and I think that was a truism at the time and I think it continues to be. Plus I think today this affects more higher education than the K12 but the K12 ragger it's where we are getting into higher education. That is the role of the STEM issue in the country, science, technology engineering and mathematics. An important role but I think it's tending to drown out the
humanities and the liberal arts and I think if Thomas Jefferson was still around he would be appalled at that because he had such a firm conviction on what was necessarily for an education.

In his letter that he wrote through his favorite nephew Peter Carr from Paris in 1789 when Peter Carr was about to enroll in the university ... Outlining what he should have read before enrolling and what he should read if he hadn’t read it every Greek piece of Greek literature. Jefferson said, in the original not in translation, every piece of Roman literature and all written science literature and so on. That was Thomas Jefferson’s view education. I think Thomas Jefferson would be comfortable with having this heavy duty almost distinctive influence on the STEM programs at the risk of losing the values of the humanities and the liberal arts.

Why would I think of this? John Gardner founding chairman of Common Cause, good friend of mine I was on that board for maybe 10 years or so. Gardner in one of his books wrote, “Those a society that will put a higher value on poor philosophy than it would put on good plumbing will fail. Because neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water.” I always thought that was a wise thing we need both, we need good skilled workers and we need philosophers. If we don’t have both then we are going to pay a price.

Julie Speer: Why was the Keyes case so significant?

Ed Benton: Well it was significant I think because it dealt with a fundamental issue under the constitution of equal protection. Because the public authority in this case school district number one both board and administration were drawing lines to segregate citizens entitled to equal protection under the constitution and it was so clear and it became so clear to Jude Doyle that that was arbitrary, capricious and in violation both of the civil rights act of 1964 as well as the equal protection clauses of 14th amendment.

That’s why it was important because otherwise we would have been going forward saying, “Well so there’s a violation of constitution here but who cares? We’ll just continue to draw boundary line where we want to based on such criteria as we determine are appropriate. That’s why it was important and that’s why I defend it to this day when people challenge me personally for having been involved in all of this which they still are so ardently opposed.

Julie Speer: Today there is people that oppose to history of that?
Ed Benton: Of course. I know a number of them and interesting because the issue was no busing. At the same time in my neighborhood many children were going to private schools to Greyland, to Colorado Academy and the bus would come moving into the neighborhood every morning to pick them up, not our neighborhood school but to a private school some distance away and yet they were the most ardent opponents of this desegregation program. That’s why it was important and that’s why it’s important today for the likes of the, I think her name is Melanie, I’m not sure Ohio State person who has written the book the new Jim Carl.

That’s why it’s important to maintain the proper view that we still have major work to be done and important work in the criminal justice system as well as in other of our institutions. I guess there’s a gradient here involved, you go from point A to point B on important issues with difficulty painfully but overtime I think if one can conclude that the curve is an upward tending curve and not a descending curve. There’s a reason for optimism and that’s why I personally worry so much about this increasing gap in economic terms. Which carries with it then social and educational terms as well ...

That’s a challenge for the next president of the United States and for the congress of the United States. People will challenge me as being optimistic and I respond by saying, “I’m optimistic about the future of the country and the future of the world and so I am.”

Julie Speer: Was it at the Keyes case first time there was federal imposing outside of the south?

Ed Benton: No.

Julie Speer: It wasn’t?

Ed Benton: There had been cases back east in Boston, there was a case and I think maybe in New York there may have been a case. The Boston case was a very pronounced case. There was a lot of disturbance in Boston when that issue came to the floor. There were a number of other cases I think there is case called New Rochelle probably it would be in New York. When I first got on the board I was generally aware of those cases but I had taken no significant cognizance of them. Once I was embedded in the Denver public school responsibilities I became aware. I became aware when, first aware when Don Holdren of the Urban League came and said, “Don't build that building on the 32nd in Colorado. It will be segregated when it’s opened.”
That was really the first effective effort I made even to become fully aware but I heard a senior administrator of the Denver Public Schools and I won’t of course mention a name, he’s now dead. Who said to me one day, “Well Ed I’m beginning to think what your are telling us, I think we really do have a problem in the Denver Public Schools with the kinky heads.” I thought that was maybe a revealing characterization that wasn’t just off the top of the head. I think that had some underlying substance in terms of what the attitude of the school district had been when they were clearing drawing boundaries to keep the races segregated.

Another official of the Denver board of education said in my presence once when they were proposing to change the boundary line between Maury Junior High School and what is it ... The junior high school to the south it’s name has escaped me at the moment. They were going to move the line from where it had been historically from 8th Avenue. Everybody above 8th Avenue would go to Maury upon 14th Avenue where all of the black kids and the Hispanic kids were enrolled down to 1st Avenue.

That those people between first and eighth that had been going to bias I think was the junior high school that they had been going to or white. The bias junior high school, no the board member said, he voted against the change of the boundary and I said, “Why?” He said, “Because I have to play golf and play bridge with those people down there and I’m not going to support that putting them at Maury Junior High School.” To which I said, “That’s a hell of a basis upon which to form public educational policy.” That occurred. That’s why Keyes was important.

Julie Speer: Since you weren’t on the board anymore, did you follow how once busing was finally implemented how they chose what schools to bus kids to and from? Did you follow any of that?

Ed Benton: Well to a degree I did. I knew so many people who are involved in that of course and just in the ordinary human context I had I was aware of. Of course it got some notoriety in the press over special aspects of it at least. I don’t know why I thought of this. It was 3:30 one morning and this was right at the heart of the election my phone ring and I sleepily went to the phone and I look right in Cheesman Park from my bedroom and there’s very gruff male voice said, “There is a man in the park behind your house and he’s going to kill you.”

To which I said, “I’m sorry you have the wrong number.” He spurted and speared and I just imagine him say, “How the heck could I have got the wrong number?”
When I looked out there wasn’t any man with or without a gun I called the police and they came and didn’t find any person. There was a lot of potential violence going on. I remember Senator George Brown a black senator ... Well I won’t come to that, it’s too long and too detailed but let me summarize it this way. The school authorities I’ve already really said this, if they had made any effort to implement and irrational reasonably the agreed upon plan and saved the hundreds and thousands of dollars.

Maybe even more than that in litigating the case I think there could have been a much more stable and effective implementation of the program that actually took place. Another incident East High School, no this was at South High School. There was a board meeting right in the middle of all this. There was a group called Citizens for White community originating Park Hill. I think Ad Brenscom who was the Denver post reporter at the time living in Park Hill, he was a part of that. Jules Moonshine a professor at DU and George Bardwell who was a statistician who furnished all kinds of statistical data for all the program. I was off the board at this time and East High School and at other high schools they had armed patrolman in the halls, policing the halls trying to keep order.

East High was a particular interest to me because I had two daughters in East High. On one occasion the policeman was in a stairwell and one of the students grabbed, made a grab for his gun which he had in his holster on his hip. It was discharged and the bullet went downing around the hall, the stairwell no, fortunately no one was hit. That was a matter of concern so George Brown who was then a state senator and black man and also a reporter for the Denver Post. I got George together and I said, “George let’s put together some parents, black and Hispanic in an angle who will patrol the halls to maintain order in the high schools.”

He thought that was a good idea so I was off the board then and the time for public comment at the end of the meeting came and I got up and sort recognition. I was recognized and I said, “Mr. President, members of the board we have a proposal to make.” I outlined getting these parents together. Well one member of the board was smoking a cigar, another ones reading a newspaper, another was totally ignoring me and finally I said, “I’m going to stay in this board of education room, the public room and I’m going to stay here and attempt to conduct a colloquium in support of this idea.”

At which point somebody on the body said, “I move we adjourn.” They got up and walked out. Cindy Palmetto was then a Denver Post reporter covering education and she came over and said, “Ed what did you just say?” I said, “I was
going to stay in this public room of the board of education until the armed patrolmen are withdrawn from the schools and these parents will be in the schools to maintain necessary order.” She said, “Well that’s what I thought you said.” She said, “How long is that going to take?” I said, “I have no idea.” I said, “Maybe a day, maybe a week, maybe a month, maybe a year but I’m going to stay here until that occurs.”

She looked quite incredulous. I sat down and time went on and then out of the night a black minister with a half bushel fried chicken, others brought in soda pop and so forth and after a couple of hours of that it was getting quite late. The place looked quite like a refugee camp of some sort and then I was advised that the television station was coming over. I looked around the room and it was a mess and I thought, well we got to tidy this room up before the TV people, maybe it was BBS for all I know were coming.

Then I thought to myself, no this is what it is. It’s either something or it’s nothing but I’m not going to pretend to do something just to please the press the media whatever. They did come and I think the next morning on the post front page there was a picture of Ed Benton; the janitor had come in and put in a big protective canvass over the table so it won't be damaged. There’s Ed Benton at the table, there’s this one with his foot up on the table, there’s that one half asleep on the table and so forth. That was the media attention that was gained. Then I was the managing partner of my law firm at that time and I had an obligation to meet my partners at the Denver Club to give them a report on what was going on in the law firm.

I call my wife, I ask her to bring down a clean shirt and my razor and so she did and went over to Denver Club and I said to Senator Brown. I said, “George you are in charge here, I got to go over to Denver Club for a speech.” George said, “Ed then you lead a hell of a complicated life.” Well I came back and resume my position there and late one night I was accosted, I went out and laid down in the hall outside of the superintends office. It was total dark and I was dozed off and the fire alarm went off. Because it was an educational building it brought out not just a single fire engine but I think three or four or five fire engines.

The whole street was full of fire engines. I never knew who tripped the alarm so I’m laying there in the dark and the firemen came running down the hall in the dark and tripped over me. Went pitching down in the hall I don’t know if it was more frightened f firemen Ed Benton. Anyway that finally ended when the board agreed to take, begun to adopt our proposal but at that time I think … Well no, I said, “George you are a friend of the mayor.” That was Bill McNicols at the time.
and I said, “You are also a Denver Post reporter.” I said, this was after the fire thing and so he got right through to the mayor and I was listening him on the phone.

George said, “Bill you may have read about this...” He almost said city and I punched him I said colloquium, “This colloquium over at the Denver School Board Building.” He said, “Well I’ve heard about that.” George said, “Well we have an idea and we think you ought to give it consideration and explain to parents, triple parent patrols. The mayor said, well, he said, “It sounds appealing.” He said, “I will get Chief Sidon.” Police chief on the line which he did and went charge with quote into that and I was with quote into George and Bill [inaudible] says, “Chief George Brown thinks they are going to settle this school situation of the high schools by taking the armed patrolmen out putting parents in.”

“How does that sound to you?” Sidon say, “Well it sounds agreeable, it sounds sensible.” He said, “I would like to at least maintain a squad car in the general neighborhood so if something did erupt that the parents couldn’t handle then we wouldn’t be off scene.” The mayor said, “Well that sounds okay.” That was what done and so that ended the colloquium.

Julie Speer: Excellent and was that after busing and was that something that you had to do in reaction to busing happening?

Ed Benton: That was something that had to be done after when the program was being implemented.

Julie Speer: Okay. Do you have any questions?

Speaker 3: The only question I have Ed was since you had kids in DPS at the time you said, what was their experience like in classrooms in terms of segregation, integration...

Ed Benton: Well that’s an interesting question on the day when that question of what my children, two daughters at East High what were they, how were they reacting how were they affected? Well they know that there were places on campus that they should not go because there were some kids there that I rough them up. On the day when that pistol shot in the stairwell took place my daughter Margret came home and I said, “How did school go today?” “Fine.” I said, “Any special happening?” “No, I don’t think so nothing happened special.”
I said, “Well I’m aware that maybe there was a bullet that got loose in the stairwell.” She said, “Yes.” She said, “I heard about that but apparently nothing happened as a result of it.” They essentially unaffected, their biggest problem at East High School during that period is that I was their father and they were always being either kidded among those who agreed and excoriated by those who were on the other side. As to what crazy father of yours is doing.

Julie Speer: Was East before busing was East a white school?

Ed Benton: It was not, it had a few black a small number of black kids. Most of those black kids were at Manuel High School. It had a limited black population at that time later of course after the plan had been implemented then there was a much larger plan. I was called by the principle was in, what was his name? I’ll think of it, Robert, not Collins anyway he called me I was in my office had been in court that day and had on a three piece black suit and a tie and so on. He said, “Large numbers of the black kids are in the auditorium refusing to go to class and I’ve tried to persuade them to go class and they keep resisting.”

Cola, Robert Cola was the principle. “Could you possibly come out and see what you could do to help me?” I got in a taxi went out, got out and across the front entrance of the high school there were, I don't know six or eight young black men standing there. I walk up toward the middle of them and then they locked arms. I said, “I’m here to see the principle so please let me go through your barricade here.” “Well are you from the police?” One of them said, “No.” “Are you from the newspapers?” “No.” “Who are you?” I said, “Well I’m just a citizen I want to go into the school.” “They said, “Well we aren't going to let you go in.” To which I said, “Shit man you aren't going to keep me out of this ramble in there are you?”

They sort of opened up and I went in, went up on the stage and I must have talked I don't how long quite a period of time trying to draw them out. “Why are you here? Why are you not in your classes? What’s your beef?” and so on and then finally I think maybe they just were fatigued and they started getting up one at a time and leaving and finally they had disappeared. I told them I would be glad to come back at any time and sit down with them and talk about their complaints and their concerns and so on. There were two young men who were the leaders of this but they didn’t follow on it so that was the end of that.

Julie Speer: Do you have grandkids that ended up going to school in Denver?
Ed Benton: Well, they all went to, grandkids no, no grandkids in Denver. One grandson his father was a diplomat and he grew in Burma, Cuba, Puerto Rico, several other places, Coast Rica and my other grandchildren two. Grew up in Indonesia and Singapore so they were not a product of Colorado Public Schools.

Julie Speer: Global citizens though. Did you know, did your colleague Miss Noel did she get reelected?

Ed Benton: Let’s see Rachel was elected in 1965 and I think she was not I think she served out her term and then she became a member of the board of regions of the university of Colorado and then a professor down at Metro. Then she died sometime later, she always called me dear heart [inaudible]. She’d say, “Dear heart this is Rachel calling.” We were very close friends and I remember the time when I heard that Martin Luther King had been assassinated. I picked up the phone and called Rachel’s residence, her husband Dr. Edmund Noel answered the phone.

I said, “Is there Rachel here?” He said, “She’s out of the house, why did you call her?” I said, “Well I just heard that Martin Luther King had just been killed. There was silence, I kept saying, “Edmund, Edmund.” Finally he came back on the line but he was weeping so much I couldn’t really talk to him. I said, “Edmund I’m coming right over they lived out at 26th in Dally I think just north of the golf course. I got there and Rachel had come home by the time and they came to the door and I can tell you there was a tri-apartheid flooded tears being exchanged. That was, I was also cornered in the back of a supermarket of the 23rd Walton one night Marty hadn’t gone with me to this, this was during the campaign and there was a group of Black Panthers five or six young men there. They were disrupting for the meeting and the chairman had trouble keeping them under control.

The meeting went on at length finally it was over about 11:30, I had parked behind. It was an old safe way or piggly wiggly store that had been cut, converted into a meeting house, a meeting room. I parked behind so when the meeting was over, I walked out at the backdoor and these four or five maybe they were six of them I think Black Panthers were out there. My car was maybe 25 feet from the door and I was heading toward the car and they surrounded me and joined arms and started circling around and pointing at me.

“We will your death, we will your death.” I thought, “Well this is not good.” I stand still and they would stand still and then I would make another move as though I was going to my car and they’d start the same circling. That went on for
a considerable period of time and they would not let me out of that circle and I wasn’t visible from the street and I kept hoping a police car would go down the alley but it never happened. Finally one of them apparently looked at his watch and he said, “Oh my God is after midnight I’ve got to get out of here.” That broke it up, they let and I got in my car and came home.
Julie Speer: Talk to me first about education and for you personally, especially having been a teacher, why did you choose to go into education?

Harry Bull: You know what, for as far back as I can remember, when I was a little kid, I always wanted to be a teacher. When it was the explore a profession day, I would go back to school and I would hang out with my teachers. Forever, it’s what I wanted to do. I went to school to be a teacher. I was a teacher and a coach. I’ve been in the profession now for 36 years and never regretted it for a second.

Julie Speer: That’s great. Talk about race in education in general. You can talk specifically about the achievement gap or the opportunity gaps but explain to me what you see. First of all, do you see a problem with race in education? Do you see inequities in education when we’re looking at race?

Harry Bull: I think there’s clearly inequities. Some would couch it as a problem. I’m going to probably describe it as a challenge because a problem to me suggests that it’s something that you’re not going to be successful in addressing. I think a challenge says to you that if you’re very cognizant of the work that needs to be done, if you’re really paying attention to the impact of race on learning and acknowledging that it’s there, then you’re moving towards that solution to that challenge than necessarily just describing it as a problem.

Julie Speer: This documentary will definitely look at the past. We explore the segregated past in the school systems and just the reality of the Civil Rights Movement and busing. We’re definitely looking 30% probably at the past and then 70% at modern days. Folks will have a context of where we’ve been and they know it’s not just like who made the problem. People will understand it’s the legacy really
of segregation. What do you describe as the challenge then, in your language? What is the challenge today with race in education?

Harry Bull: The challenge is closing the achievement gap. When you look, and I’ll say that in Cherry Creek, one of the things that we’ve done so that we really can focus on the gap is we’ve taken the performance of our white and Asian students and we’ve combined them and then looked at the performance of our black and brown students. We’re not willing to mask the gap, if you will, by including the traditionally higher performing Asian students. We separate that out and recognize that we have 2 groups of students who historically have performed at a higher level and then look at the performance of our black and brown students and then describe the gap that way. The data is very clear. We have students who are part of an underrepresented population that are not performing at that same level as some of their peers. I really think that’s the work that we need to be involved in.

Julie Speer: How bad is it? Is this something you’ve been noticing your entire career? Is it something that’s always been there? Is it something new? Is it something that’s getting worse? How would you describe the reality of it?

Harry Bull: It’s an interesting question when you put it in a context of a career because recognize that I started teaching in 1980. For the life of me, I do not recall any conversations early on about an achievement gap. I’m not saying that they weren’t there. I just don’t recall them. I don’t recall there being that focus saying that there are some groups of kids who are not performing at the same level of others and they should be. When you put it in the context of a career early on, I don’t recall that. I think people were aware but there wasn’t conversation about it. Now, we’re really focused on it. We’re saying that every child should have the opportunity to experience a challenging and rigorous curriculum and in doing so, preparing them for whatever it is that they want to pursue after high school.

Julie Speer: There’s been some folks that have talked about the reality of institutional racism just because of the segregated past of the United States and slavery. Talk to me about what you see in your district specifically or I don’t know if you’ve witnessed things in other districts around Colorado or even in the country. Talk about institutional racism in education specifically.

Harry Bull: In Cherry Creek, we’ve acknowledged that races is something that we need to look at. Within that context, we’ve talked about that institutional racism that you talk about. We speak about white privilege. We talk about our black and brown students. We’re very intentional in not clustering kids as minority, if you will, or
occasionally, students of color but we’re very specific about recognizing the impact of race. We’ve been doing that now for upwards of 10 years where we have, as a district, talked about people’s personal racial identity and have tried to pull at some of those pieces that, whether you’re aware of it or not, impact your day to day behaviors and impact your day to day decisions as you interact with this construct called race.

Julie Speer: That’s something I heard in the conversations you’ve had with my colleagues is that your district is not color blind and that that doesn’t work as a tactic. I think that’s great.

Harry Bull: There is no such thing as color blind.

Julie Speer: Talk about that, that the cultural, race in culture and how kids learn and how you see that it is different.

Harry Bull: One of the things that I think we’ve worked really hard with is to lean in into conversations with our black and brown students, our students of color and have listened to their description of their experience and recognize that everybody gets to speak their truth. I don’t get to tell you what your truth is and likewise, you don’t get to tell me what my truth is. When you lean in and listen, what you discover is that children have very different experiences in school as they interact in schools. A lot of those experiences are predicated on race. You can’t ignore that.

You can’t suggest that white culture, this is the norm. You can’t discount a child who is coming from a multiracial family that they’re not having to step into perhaps one part of their race at one point and step into another and that that doesn’t interact. Biracial kids wrestle with that all of the time. When you lean in and listen to that, when you listen to your biracial kids, when you listen to your black and brown kids, your Native American kids, you start to hear that race is a part of the experience that they’re having. We’ve worked real hard to acknowledge that and to recognize that and then to use that as we move forward in our work.

Julie Speer: That’s wonderful. Describe to me the district that you work in. What district is it and what is the geographic boundaries as well as the demographics of the students?

Harry Bull: The Cherry Creek School District is the fourth largest district in the State of Colorado. We cover 108 square miles. The easiest way for me to describe it is to
tell you that we’re on the southeast side of the Denver Metropolitan area. We’re as far south as you go before you leave Arapahoe County. We’re on the southeast side as Far East as you can go. We’ve got about 54,000 students. Approximately 46% of our students are students of color. We are typically traditionally described as a very, very wealthy district. We absolutely have wealth but we also have the challenges of poverty. We have the challenges of mobility.

If I were going to, in my estimation, fairly describe the Cherry Creek district, we are an urban suburban district. It’s not a description that typically accompanies school districts. Usually, you’re either urban, you’re suburban or you’re rural but I would suggest that we have parts of our districts that are truly, they’re very urban. Our children live right across the street from the Denver Public Schools. They live right across the street from the Aurora Public Schools. Then, we also have a very much of a suburban impact on the southern end of our district.

Within that 46%, approximately 19% of our students are Hispanic Latino, about 12% of our students are black and we have 8% of our students are Asian and then we have about 5% of our student population is a mixed race.

Julie Speer: Honestly, DPS is 70% free and reduced lunch. It’s almost it’s a different demographics. It’s maybe unfair to compare apples to apples but maybe talk about the free and reduced lunch ratio and how you guys approach that.

Harry Bull: When you look at the district, we’re about 30% free and reduced lunch. When you ask the question how do we interact with that urban suburban mix, I want to be real careful in suggesting that we have a specific area necessarily that is comprised of all one type of student, one type of socioeconomic grouping, whatever. It’s dispersed throughout the district. Do we have some places where we have a higher concentration? We do but we have that throughout all of our schools. It really gives us an opportunity to go and talk about what the kid needs rather than necessarily trying to shape that collectively, if you will.

Our settings that are in some of the, I’m going to say the wealthier part of our district still have students who have great needs and students who are impacted with the SES piece. Then, obviously, don’t lose sight of the race conversation because if you’re a black student, you’re a black student regardless of whether you come from wealth or come from poverty. If race is the issue, then you got to talk about race.
Julie Speer: What is your projected growth demographically? It sounds like soon there’ll be a minority, majority, right?

Harry Bull: I think it’s reasonable in the foreseeable future that the Cherry Creek School District will become a minority, majority district. When that time comes, I don’t know. Our predictive analysis would tell you that we could see that inside of about a 5 to 7-year period of time which we’re 65 years old as a district. It’s not that far away.

Julie Speer: Let’s move on. Before we hop into what you guys have been doing that’s worked, but talk a little bit about teachers of color. I was told the number of $37,000 a year. Is that what the starting teacher makes?

Harry Bull: Somewhere in the ballpark, 30, 37.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about teachers of color and just the reality of teacher pay.

Harry Bull: Let’s start first with teacher pay. I’ve always been fascinated about this. I think that teaching is probably one of the most complex professions that a person can participate in. I think that the general public sometimes just refuses to recognize that. You take all of your students. You put them in a classroom with you all at the same time. I challenge people to show me another profession where all of your clients are with you at exactly the same time and for all day or for an entire period. I think teaching in and of itself is very challenging.

When you start talking about what we’re paying teachers, we’re asking people to come out of a 4 or 5-year degree program to come into a profession where we’re going to start you at about 37, 38, $39,000. We’re going to ask you to do one of the most complex things ever. In the national narrative, we’re going to give you really very, very little respect about what it is that you’re going to do. Then, we’re supposed to encourage the best and the brightest to come and say, “Yes, pick me. That’s what I want to do.”

Hiring teachers is a challenge. If you look at the literature right now, what you’re going to find is there is currently a shortage of teachers. I think that it’s going to get worse. Then, you put on top of that the challenge of being attractive for teachers of color to come into the profession, some of whom do not live in the Denver area, do not live in the State of Colorado. What we’re saying to them is, “Well, why don’t you all just come move to Denver and we’re going to pay you $38,000 a year? We’re going to put you into a market that’s very, very expensive to live and oh, by the way, is becoming increasingly more expensive to live.
We’re going to ask you to move away from your friends and your family and then we want you to stay here and make a profession, make a career.”

It’s a real challenge. I will tell you that we work hard to increase our budget to go out and recruit teachers. We’ve gone to historically black colleges and universities. We’ve gone to Hispanic serving institutions. We’ve gone to places where we know there are great quality teacher education programs to try to encourage quality teachers of color to come and join the Cherry Creek School District. We’ve had success. We’re having greater success.

One of the things that’s really helped us, I believe, is people move out here and they get into our great neighborhood schools and they start interacting with peers who they enjoy, who are professionals. I believe we have a culture that really supports teachers in terms of their work. Then, we have teachers of color who stay and then we are able to find additional teachers of color. People start to feel more comfortable living out here in Denver and living in the Cherry Creek School District.

Julie Speer: Do you know the percentage of teachers of color roughly?

Harry Bull: You know what, the percentage of our teachers of color is fairly low. We’re working real hard to increase that every single hiring season that we have but it’s not where I think that it ought to be. We’re improving.

Julie Speer: Is that because Colorado’s people funding is low? Is it simply a funding issue?

Harry Bull: I think some of it is a funding issue. I think some of it is a cost of living issue. There are places that people can go and live for a lot less than in the Denver Metropolitan area. Remember too, let’s go to just briefly, if you’ll allows me, the topic of math and science. Everybody says we need the best and the brightest math and science people that we can find. Then, they say we need the best and brightest math and science teachers of color.

Then, you look at these students who are 22, 23, 24 years old who’ve just finished 5 years of college who are performing at the top of their class in math and science and they’re challenged with this decision of A, I could go to the business world and I could make $90,000 in my first job or I can come and work with children in one of the most complex professions that there is and I’m going to make $38,000 a year. Then, people say, “Well, why are you not finding the best and the brightest?” I would argue that when they come to us, we hire them
and they are great teachers but is a 24-year-old with a choice ... It’s hard for us sometimes to compete.

Julie Speer: The solution, we’ve been talking that our series is really exploring the achievement gap and race and history and racism and the bias that teachers come in with. You guys have done some great work to decrease that gap. Talk to me a little bit in general that the Cherry Creek School District has been able to decrease the gap and then talk to me about some of the ways that you’ve done that, some of the things that you’re seeing are working. What’s the solution to the achievement gap?

Harry Bull: I don’t know if there’s a solution. I can tell you the work that we’re doing right now. I’m very proud of the work that our teachers and our administrators that our kids are participating in. We’re starting to move the needle. We’re starting to see that we’re having success.

We’re starting to see that we’re closing the gap. It’s at a pace that I wish were faster but I think that we have evidence across multiple data points that would tell you that we’re making in roads. We’re closing the gap and we’re doing that without lowering the performance of our higher performing students. That’s one of the things that everybody gets worried about. You need to increase the performance of your higher performers. You need to increase the performance of your lower performers and in doing so, you need to accelerate the pace at which your lower performers are improving so that you’re starting to close the gap.

We’re starting to have some success with that. I think there’s a couple of pieces that I would suggest are making a difference. I’m going to go back to what I said earlier. We acknowledge that race is a factor. I think that’s important for kids especially students of color. When you are adding validity to their experience, you’re saying that what you’re experiencing every day that you’re walking into school is real. It’s different than saying we’re color blind, we don’t do that. That’s not honest. I can assure you kids don’t believe that’s honest. When you talk about it, it says to kids we value you, we care about your experiences and we’re validating who you are. I think that encourages kids to engage.

Julie Speer: How are you doing that? Is it through teacher training? It’s like, “Hey, all our white teachers, we’re going to teach you about the culture, to be culturally aware.” How are you doing that? This sounds really good.
Harry Bull: We spent a lot of time ... Early on, we were with Pacific Education Group and Glen Singleton. I can assure you that, we smile as we say this but Glenn is the provocateur. He really pushes your thinking. He really causes you to really get at, I think as you described, that institutional racism and what is it that is causing you to think like you’re thinking but more importantly, with that awareness to then change your behaviors. We spent a lot of time and we still do annually working with our new teachers and reinforcing that with our existing staff for them to recognize what ifs. You can’t act like it’s not real. It’s there. Our teachers are very aware of that. We spent years doing that.

We’re starting to do work with Dr. Yemi Stembridge where we’re actually talking about that culturally responsive instruction. We’ve got him in the classroom working with teachers to create settings where kids are respectful of one another, are willing to support one another in the learning for kids who are willing to take a risk. We’re working hard to train our teachers as to how to do that. What that starts to do is it creates a setting where, then, the work that I think is equally as important can start to occur. That is that you’ve got to put kids in challenging and rigorous classes.

I’m the person that always says if you want smart kids, you put them in smart classes. For me, a smart class is at a minimum. It’s a class that’s at grade level. It’s a class that’s challenging. It’s a class that is encouraging the kid to think and to participate, where they stay engaged and they’re willing to take risks. We work real hard with our teachers to create settings where that occurs. You talk about you have 2 kids walking down the hall side by side and the bell rings. This kid goes off to the right and he wanders into a more rigorous and challenging class. This kid goes into a class that’s less rigorous and less challenging. At that very moment when those 2 kids part, what you’ve done is create opportunity over here and you’ve limited opportunity over here.

Julie Speer: You don’t separate your AP and IB students?

Harry Bull: What we do is encourage kids to get into AP, IB and concurrent enrollment.

Julie Speer: You don’t put them together though.

Harry Bull: Kids still go to AP classes but if you go back to what I said earlier, you got to have classes that are rigorous at grade level at a minimum. I’m not talking about a remedial class. I’m talking about kids being at a minimum at a grade level. In Cherry Creek, when we talk about that grade level, it is a class that is intended to prepare that child for college and for success in whatever it is that they choose
to do after high school. It’s moving kids to that level or beyond that I think is most important.

Julie Speer: I understand you had mentioned in talking with my colleagues that Denver is more charter. You’re more neighborhood focused, neighborhood school focused which is maybe why there’s been more success. Talk about the difference between Denver and Cherry Creek School Districts ... There are differences in demographics and in size and maybe in philosophy a little bit.

Harry Bull: Your colleagues pointed out that Denver has more charter schools. I’m always going to try to shape the conversation to talk about what we believe and what we believe is in great neighborhood schools. Everybody wants to have a conversation about charter schools. I have no issues with charter schools. I know that for some kids, some families, charter schools are great but I’d rather shape the conversation around great neighborhood schools and in my opinion, recognize that people move to a neighborhood for a reason and what we ought to do at school districts is really pay attention to supporting the great work that goes on in those neighborhood schools.

To me, it’s a very different conversation. Because in Cherry Creek, we currently have 1 charter school, people have often suggested that we are anti-charter. We’re not. We’re not anti-charter. We just believe very strongly in great neighborhood schools. That’s the conversation that we ought to be having or at least have that conversation on par with the conversation about charter schools.

Julie Speer: If every school was a great school, it would be a moot point.

Harry Bull: Right, but what we need to do is marshal the energy and the resources and do the things that result in neighborhood schools being great neighborhood schools. There’s no magic. We know how to do that. We just have decided that there’s another way to get there. Philosophically, I don’t agree with that. It’s not a commentary about Denver. It’s not a commentary about charter schools. I just believe that the work that we’re doing is about ensuring that every one of our schools is the best school that it can be.

Julie Speer: That is, I think, everybody’s goals. There’s great schools. Every school’s a great school. We shouldn’t be having this conversation but unfortunately, not all schools are great schools. What about school choice in your districts? I know in Denver, they have this open enrollment zones. You can choose the school you want. Is it the same in Cherry Creek? Can you talk about choice?
Harry Bull: I think choice is important but remember that philosophically or fundamentally, we have a belief in great neighborhood schools. The first priority that you have is to accommodate the enrollment of the students who live in that neighborhood. If there is space available, then absolutely, you choice kids in. First and foremost, you got to deliver for the families and the kids who live in the neighborhood. If the school’s full, you can’t go there. Likewise, we’re not going to take kids who live in the neighborhood and say, “Well, there are people from outside of the neighborhood that want to come to your school. Therefore, you have to leave and go somewhere else.” When you have space, choice is good. When there isn’t space, there isn’t choice which takes you back fundamentally to you got to have really good schools in every one of your neighborhoods. That’s the work.

Julie Speer: Talk a little bit about there’s a couple of groups that you have or that you’ve worked with, the PASS and the AVID, those programs. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Harry Bull: When you look at PASS, PASS is a program where what we’re doing is inviting parents. We’re inviting parents into the conversation about race. We’re inviting our parents of color. We’re inviting our white, our Asian parents but we’re talking about supporting our kids, in particularly our underrepresented kids, in their performance in schools. It’s not just a kid thing. It’s not just a teacher or staff thing. It’s including the parents in the conversation.

Again, I would suggest to you that the same pieces are there. When you are willing to have honest conversations and acknowledge the impact of race and what it is that kids are doing, you’re communicating a value to those adults who are sending their children to school. They send their kids to us. They don’t want to hear that we’re not willing to recognize their world. We are and we’re inviting them to help us in conversations around that.

Julie Speer: Is that unique in terms of the openness of acknowledging race? I don’t work within districts.

Harry Bull: I don’t know. I know that other districts have looked at the work that we’re doing but I don’t know if they’ve embraced it or not. I can’t help you with that one.

Let me go to AVID for just a second. Advancement Via Individual Determination. AVID is a program that says that there are certain behaviors that a student can participate in that will really help that student do better in school. It’s things like advocating for yourself. It’s things like actually learning how to take notes. I think
sometimes, we believe that kids, through osmosis, learn to take notes. It’s not the case. It’s talking about being organized. We all know that the better organized you are, the greater success that you’re going to have. Those who are successful that aren’t organized, they hire an assistant to organize them. That’s what we do as adults.

What we’re doing in AVID is saying, “Look, you got to keep track of your assignments. You need to know when to turn in your homework. You need to have a planner where every day, you know what you’re supposed to do and what you’re doing that night.” What it really does is it starts to provide these support mechanisms for kids. If you go back to my comment about smart kids, smart classes, you got to push kids into those challenging settings recognizing that sometimes, it’s going to be hard.

Part of the conversation we need to have with kids is it’s supposed to be hard. Somewhere, we need to say to a kid, “You know what? This is supposed to be hard. If it were easy, everybody would do it, right?” You put kids in these challenging classes recognizing that some of those kids need support. That support comes from AVID. You have a teacher there that’s helping you advocate, that’s helping you with your study skills, that’s helping you get organized, that’s making sure that you’re doing the things you need to do so you can be successful in that class.

Julie Speer: Talk about Gifted and Talented Programs in general and how you operate. Did you ever use it as a tool? Talk to me about Gifted and Talented Program as it relates with race.

Harry Bull: One of the things that I think you have to say on the front end when you’re talking about Gifted and Talented is that all children can be gifted and talented. Gifted and Talented is not for a particular group of kids. All kids have gifts. All kids have talent. I think what you’ve got to do is find ways to make the programming that you have attractive for those kids to want to participate. You got to pull them into it. You got to get them in there. It shouldn’t be a criteria that excludes. It should be a criteria that includes because again, I think if you’re putting kids into those settings, they’re going to experience success.

It’s no different than my thinking about challenging classes, all of your programming, whether you’re talking about Gifted and Talented, you’re talking about AVID, AP, IB, concurrent enrollment, you could do a whole laundry list of all kinds of programs. The criteria that you use to identify the kids that ought to be in there should be criteria that includes. You should always ask the question.
why aren’t those kids in here? However, you define those. I’m being real careful and not characterizing that. I’m just saying that if you have a criteria that excludes, I think it’s a bad, bad model.

Julie Speer: Talk to me a little bit about there’s still work to be done. I think you had mentioned that it’s not fast enough. Talk a little bit about that. When will it be done?

Harry Bull: You know what, I think the work is done when you’re not talking about a gap. The reason that we’re focusing on the gap is because you’re saying it’s not acceptable. It’s not okay. When is that work done? That work is done when all of your students are performing at or about the same level, that there’s no racial predictability with regards to performance, that any child could walk in regardless of race and perform at the same level as everybody else. That’s when you’re done.

I have mentioned earlier that I don’t think we’re moving at a pace that we need to. I get anxious. I try to create a sense of urgency when you recognize that every year, you don’t do something that you need to have done. There’s another group of kids that graduate who are not where they need to be. You want a sense of urgency. This year, I’ve got seniors that if we can’t do what we need to do to help them be ready when they graduate, we failed. You only have 12 years, 13 years if you want to include your kindergarten. You only have so much time. Somewhere, we got to pick up the pace. We got to make it a priority.

I know you’re going to ask a question about does it take more money. You know what, there are some things that you can do if you have more money. There’s a, take a special kind of school. I don’t believe so but I think what you have to do is make it a priority. If as community, if as a country, you say that this is important, then let’s talk about what do we need to do to get to teachers so that we can make it work because remember, I think the literature is very clear on this, the single most important thing in any classroom, the most important variable in any classroom is the teacher. We should never lose sight of that.

Julie Speer: Is it the teacher’s job to fix it? Whose job is it to fix this gap?

Harry Bull: You know what, listen. I’m confident that every day that a teacher goes to school, goes to work, that they bring their A game. They’re doing the best they can. I can’t imagine that a teacher wakes up in the morning and says, “You know, today, I think I’m going to be about a D performer.” They get up every day and they work hard and they do the best that they can but they can’t do it by
themselves. You got to have kids that buy in. You have to have parents that support. You have to have the leadership of a building and of a district that are supporting the teachers to do the things that are right. You have to have a community that’s willing to wrap their arms around what it is that we’re trying to do and you’ve got to bring the resources to bare to do it. You just do.

I think, as a country, there’s examples historically of where we have really said this is important, this is what we should do. Unfortunately, the rhetoric around K-12 public education right now is being fueled by political ideologies. I would argue that is being fueled by interest in big business to try to access the dollars that are available. I think that we’ve lost sight of the fact that these children, the kids who are in school right now, are our future. There is so much more that we could be doing for all of them. We just don’t want to have that conversation because we have to talk about this special interest group or that special interest group. I think it’s a shame.

Julie Speer: We can do it, right?

Harry Bull: I’m confident we can do it. There’s no doubt in my mind that we can do it. It’s just a matter of are we really willing to talk about what’s important.

Julie Speer: Anything else?

Harry Bull: There’s a study that was recently done. It’s about career to work. I can get it to you but in that study, what they talk about is they interview kids after they’ve graduated from high school. They asked kids, “Were you really challenged? Did we really get everything out of you that we were supposed to?” What you find is that most kids say, “No, I could have worked harder. I could have done more.”

When you start looking about who’s enrolled in your IB, your AP, your concurrent enrollment, the very challenging classes that you have, you have to recognize that there a lot of kids who absolutely positively could go into those classrooms and do well. They can. What you got to do is you got to put the kids in the classroom. It’s not always popular. You can hear the collective gasp when they get their class schedules and say, “Oh my, I didn’t sign up for AP.” You say, “No, you know what, you’re a student who ought to be in that class.”

You take your AVID kids and put them in an AP class. You have the conversation. You heard me say it earlier. As a principal, I used to say to people, “It’s supposed to be hard.” I talked to parents about, “I’m sorry that they come home to your dinner table every night and they cry because they’ve never been so stressed.”
Then, I say to parents, “Stand strong. This is the right thing. Support them in staying in that challenging class.” When we put kids into the class, then it’s our job to make it difficult for them to get out.

Now, we got to support them. This isn’t like Gulag or something but we got to put them in a class and we’ve got to support them but we’ve got to say, “No, you can.” We have to be insistent that they stay in. Then, quite honestly, sometimes you hope and pray that they’re successful because success breeds success. You put a kid in a concurrent enrollment or a pre-IB or an early AP class and they do well, then they’re more willing to take the next one. Then, they’re more willing to take the next one. When they do that, they talk to their friends. Their friends are saying, “Well, if he can, I can,” or, “If she can do this, so can I.”

Then, you start to create this culture in a school where kids are saying, “You know what, this is what we do.” Then, you got to get parents to understand that they’ve got to support the kid in staying in that class. That’s the hard part. I’m a parent. I get it. I understand when my kids come home and they’re stressed from school but remember, it’s supposed to be hard. We have in place, systems where it’s not that you go in and just drop it. You’ve got to have a conversation starting with the teacher, probably with the department coordinator.

I hope is that some point in time at high school, you’re walking in and having to have a personal conversation with the principal where the principal is saying, “No, you will stay in the class.” What I really hope is that the answer is no. I get e-mails all the time from people that says the principal was mean. I get that but at some point in time, this is what’s best. It really is. You’ve got to have these experiences to be prepared.
Irene Glazer
Northwest Denver Resident and Parent

Julie Speer: Let's talk about North Denver first. When did you move to North Denver and then just talk a little bit about the neighborhood.

Irene Glazer: I moved to Colorado in '99 and moved to North Denver in 2000. I love this neighborhood. I lived in Potter Highlands at first and then I've moved out to Lakewood for a short stint and then moved back in 2008 and lived in Sunnyside since then. I just love this neighborhood. I love the community. I love the diversity, the people, the food. It's food mecca and food is really my religion. I love to be here and experience all the good stuff that's going on.

Julie Speer: Awesome. You lived in Sunnyside for 7 years.

Irene Glazer: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Julie Speer: Talk about some of the changes you've seen in the last 7 years.

Irene Glazer: In 7 years, I've seen a lot more restaurants and a lot of development obviously. Definitely my block has changed. There's pretty much all new people on my block except for a couple of key people. Yeah. My neighbors grow old. They move into assisted living and then there's new neighbors and people don't sit on their front porches as much as they used to which has been a little bit of a bummer. It's definitely I think more, there's more people. There's less stuff going on at night. It's quieter. As far as people walking by or hearing gun shots, we don't hear those much anymore.

Julie Speer: That's good. You were talking about gentrification and the negative connotation that it stirs up. Talk to me about that a little bit. Your sense of that of gentrification.
Irene Glazer: The word gentrification is overused and has highly negative connotations to me. Just being that English is a second language to me. I'm always breaking words down and to me, it connotes the gentry moving in, taking over and civilizing the lower classes if you will. I just really don't like that word. I know there's definitely changes that are happening in all of Denver. Because we've got over 50,000 people a year moving to the metro area. All the neighborhoods are going to grow and develop and change. It's definitely a transition and neighborhoods go through transitions.

Julie Speer: Let's talk about your kids. How old are they and what grade are they in and have they always lived in this neighborhood?

Irene Glazer: Yeah. I have two girls. One of them is at Skinner. She's going into 8th grade and the other one is at Brown and she's going into 4th grade. We moved to the neighborhood when my oldest was going into versed. She's been through DPS the whole time. When we moved here, our home school was Horace Mann because they close Medley which is only a couple of blocks from my house. I did not send her there. We choiced out and went to Edison and then transferred over to Brown when my oldest was in 3rd grade. I've had to drive them to school ever since and I've really not enjoyed that at all. I think as part neighborhood schools and I want to be able to walk my kids to school. I think schools are the hub of any community and it would just be really nice to be able to have that. We've never had that in Sunnyside and we have a lot of families that live in this neighborhood. Little kids and then they end up moving out because there's a shortage of schools that this neighborhood supports. When they can't get into any of their choices, then they end up moving out of the community and that's a real loss to Sunnyside. It's hard now because my daughter's in middle school, so there aren't any kids her age around because a lot of people leave.

Julie Speer: What are you going to do for high school for your daughter that's in 8th grade? What's the high school plan?

Irene Glazer: My plan is probably different than hers as it usually is. I think that as a parent, I always think that parents should be the ones that guide the process. Through middle school, I instilled the neighborhood school thing and she had other ideas and wanted to go to schools outside of the neighborhood like all of her friends. I really insisted that she go to the Skinner much against all of her wishes and it was a very hard battle for me. I wanted and it was the right choice and I knew it would be. A 10-year old shouldn't be required to make these choices. Like in most families, they do allow that. I really drove that decision but for high school, I am going to allow her more freedom to be able to pick. I'm rooting for North. I
support neighborhood school so I would really hope that she would go there and I think she will though.

Julie Speer: Shes's still young I guess but has she talked about other choices besides Smart or not yet?

Irene Glazer: A little bit. Everybody's got the dreams of the DSA and all that. Hoping that it will be nice.

Julie Speer: Okay. Now, your daughter at Brown. Tell me what the plan is for her for middle school.

Irene Glazer: That's a good question.

Julie Speer: Tell me the strive story. What happened there?

Irene Glazer: Yeah. My daughter that's in Brown. Since my other daughter went to Skinner, had a great experience. I would love for her to go there. Skinner is not our neighborhood school, so it's Trevista. Well, it's not Trevista anymore because they closed that middle school. We're in limbo right now. The board decision did come down among there so ago that Skinner has an enrollment zone that's shared between Strive and Skinner for a neighborhood.

Julie Speer: What did the board vote on? What did the board decide?

Irene Glazer: The school board, Denver Public school board decided this past, I think the decision came down in June that for the Sunnyside neighborhood because they closed Trevista middle school that they were going to do an enrollment zone between Skinner and Strive. Some other schools like the Denver Montessori school which is going into Smedley. A couple of schools. Basically, my daughter would only qualify for the Skinner and Strive and it's basically, it going to be a lottery on which one she gets into. Because of the fact that ... It's going to be a shared boundary and it's going to be a lottery on which one of those two she gets into.

Julie Speer: How does that feel as a mom just to have the lottery and not know?

Irene Glazer: It doesn't feel good. It was very upsetting to me. That's pretty much it. I just ... I would really like for her to be able to go to Skinner but that wasn't my home school anyway.

Julie Speer: What is it about Strive that makes it not the best pick to your daughter?
Irene Glazer: I think there's a lot of things and personally, I don't know. I think when she gets to be in 5th grade, I will go check out the school and see what it's about. The things that I've heard through the grapevine and through checking out their websites. I don't see it as a fit for my daughter. One of the big reasons that as an environmentalist and somebody who is very health conscious, I do not like schools that are next to highways. Strive is pretty much on I70. That for me is a deal killer right there.

Julie Speer: Regardless of what ...

Irene Glazer: Regardless, it could be the most amazing school that is in that building. I would not send my kid there.

Julie Speer: It's not the curriculum?

Irene Glazer: I don't know much about the curriculum. I would have to find more, you know, find that out. I support neighborhood schools. I support public schools. Strive is to me a specialty program that has a different curriculum. It does not answer to the school board. They run their own program. It's a charter school.

Julie Speer: You said she's in 4th grade now?

Irene Glazer: She's going to 4th, so I have two years.

Julie Speer: You have two years. You don't know yet what you will do if she doesn't get into Skinner?

Irene Glazer: I don't.

Julie Speer: Are you thinking about moving out the neighborhood at all? Is that even a part of your realm of possibilities?

Irene Glazer: Everything is on the table, right? I don't know. Hopefully not. I love this neighborhood. I love this community. I want to stay here but it will have to be a ... Schools are very important.

Julie Speer: Good. You've been pretty active, right? Talk about the importance of the community being active and involved in schools.

Irene Glazer: It's of utmost importance that parents are involved and I've seen schools like Brown transform because of the parent involvement. Really, I want integration for my kids. That's the other thing and I feel like a lot of DPS is very segregated.
That's another thing about Strive is I feel like it is a very segregated school. I would like to, I would like integration in our schools. I want to send my kid to a diverse school.

Julie Speer: North is not very integrating right now.

Irene Glazer: No.

Julie Speer: How come that's different then? What is it about North that appeals to you?

Irene Glazer: It's not on the highway.

Julie Speer: That's true. It's a pretty building.

Irene Glazer: That's a gorgeous building. I think North like Skinner will be more integrated as Skinner has gotten more integrated. You have a lot of parental support with North and I think it's going to definitely increase population at North. There's going to be more kids that are going to be going there in general.

Julie Speer: That trend is already starting. It used to be a much higher percentage of this amount of kids and it's going down. Great. The friends of your daughters?

Irene Glazer: I'm not necessarily for Hispanic kids getting pushed out of the neighborhood and I'm not supporting that. I just want integration. I want there to be large populations of Latino as well as other races going to school together. That's really how I have been involved in the last three years. Because trying to desegregate the schools because Horace Mann was our school, our home school. I feel like it's very segregated and so, that's how I got originally involved.

Julie Speer: Tell me your story actually first. Because you weren't born in America, right?

Irene Glazer: I was born in the USSR. It's now known as the Ukraine but back then, we just call it Russia. My parents immigrated when I was seven and we went to school. My first day of school, I don't speak any English and full immersion.

Julie Speer: You learned, right?

Irene Glazer: That was the story. It's a second language and I don't remember not speaking English.

Julie Speer: And you lived in Chicago you said earlier too?
Irene Glazer: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Julie Speer: I would imagine there's more racial issues in Chicago than there are in Denver. I mean, do you even ever think about race in Denver?

Irene Glazer: I think about race more in Denver than I did when I lived in Chicago. I don't know for what reason but Denver does feel very segregated to me unfortunately. Or I don't know, or maybe we're just talking more openly about race these days than back then.

Julie Speer: Maybe. Old or wiser. You've already talked about integrated schools being the priority and that's a priority for DPS too, so they say.

Irene Glazer: So they say.

Julie Speer: A lot of people choose out of the district. Just because they live in the neighborhood doesn't mean that kids are going to school.

Irene Glazer: Yeah. I think it's probably because they don't provide them with good choices and that's why they choice out. The ones that are supposedly good choices are the ones that are overcrowded. My daughter had 33 kids in her classroom in 3rd grade at Brown which I think to me is unacceptable anyway. There's that and something else that I think about a lot.

Julie Speer: That's a lot of kids. Brown now is really diverse, isn't it? It's a pretty integrated school now.

Irene Glazer: I think so.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about that.

Irene Glazer: I don't know. I'd say like I try to stay out of that kind of realm a little bit, if that make sense. I don't walk around and count hmm, let's see. There's more white kids today than last year this time. I just, I don't normally do that.

Julie Speer: We'll put on your realtor hat for a moment. Do you do a lot of sales in this neighborhood? Are you seeing prices going up, on the market gone in 12 hours. Talk a little bit about the market here.

Irene Glazer: Yeah. Definitely, prices in this neighborhood are astronomical and very surprising and that's a big deal to me. I think a lot of the issues that we're faced with as far as segregation in our schools and all of that is also fundamentally a problem with
affordable housing. That I think lies at the core of all of Denver and why we are as segregated as we are. I really do. I hope that that would be the one thing that would change.

Julie Speer: I know you’re residential and then tell me what areas of town you do a lot of work in.

Irene Glazer: I've been a realtor since 2000 and worked primarily in the city neighborhood. I do a lot of my business here in North Denver as well as all the city, inner city neighborhoods, Capitol Hill, Wash Park, Connor’s Park. All of the great Denver neighborhoods.

Julie Speer: It's booming now, right?

Irene Glazer: Definitely. It's boom town.

Julie Speer: It’s good, yeah. It’s one of the fastest growing school districts. One of the fastest growing cities. Big business.

Irene Glazer: We just past San Francisco as far as our affordability index we’re now I think the least affordable city or maybe second.

Julie Speer: Are schools a factor with your clients. Or are you just showing them houses and going around? Does schools come up in the conversation ever?

Irene Glazer: All the time, yeah. Schools come up very often. People want to know what's going on with Denver public schools. There's a lot of people and families moving back into the city about clients from the mountains that moved down here. They want to live in this vibrant neighborhoods. Then they start thinking about schools and a lot of them have really young kids. I think that's not as much of an issue but then as they get older, you see people moving out with the neighborhood and that's really sad to me.

Julie Speer: You were part of a group. Was this an official group that was getting together about a fact to Sunnyside versus the Strive?

Irene Glazer: There was a working group that was set up by DPS to study the issue of first of all, the Montessori school moving into Smedley. Then also the issue with Sunnyside not having a middle school and trying to figure out what to do there. It was a group of parents and community members and we were all representing different schools. I worked with Sunny which is our neighborhood organization,
Sunnyside United Neighbors, Inc. I was one of the representatives for Sunny. That process took some years of my life.

Julie Speer: How long was the process?

Irene Glazer: I think we met for two months before the school board vote and then we were supposed to have a recommendation to the school board. Which I just really think that process was deeply flawed and was not representative of what the group wanted. Really, it was run by the district for the district and they already had a pre-determine outcome that they wanted that they just push for. That's how it went.

Julie Speer: Is it a final, final, final word or is there going to be an evaluation period?

Irene Glazer: Yes. They did put in, I guess that was the big win that they put in a three-year study. Evaluation period on what they were going to do with the Montessori school stay in Smedley as well this enrollment zone that they have instituted here. There's no metrics that are set up for that evaluation period. There's not a number that let's say Trevista has to meet as far as their proficiency level. They don't even talk about proficiency level. They really just talk about colors which, you know, the color coding system. That is the whole other thing. The proficiency level is really what they should be talking about and that should have been put in as one of the metrics. What does Trevista need to see as far as their proficiency level before we figure out another option for that school. Right now, Trevista is in a very large building and the Horace Mann building which was built to be a middle school. The Montessori middle/high school is going into the Smedley building which was built to be an elementary school. Our whole point in trying to push for just doing the swap of buildings because it would just make more sense. It also feels like it would integrate Trevista to have it be at Smedley because I really feel like that would help bridge the gap and bring more people from the community into Trevista. That ends up happening. They're keeping it at Horace Mann, it's a very large building and Trevista is a very small school. It's a mismatch of resources.
Julie Speer: Are you still teaching?

Janet Matthews: I'm not in a classroom per se. I am an AA, which is like administrative assistant and a literacy coach, so I do a .5 of each.

Julie Speer: Were you teaching in DPS?

Janet Matthews: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Julie Speer: Do you remember the years from when to when?

Janet Matthews: I started teaching in, let's see, '89. I think it's '89 to present day.

Julie Speer: 26 years.

Janet Matthews: Yep.

Julie Speer: Let's go back in time. Talk to me about growing up and when you started to notice, or if you were to notice even, that there was segregation going on and then paint the picture for me.

Janet Matthews: Okay. when did I notice there was segregation? We grew up in ... over on 28th and Poplar and there's really no elementary school close so we had to go to Phillip's Elementary, which was on Montview and Monaco. The older kids were allowed to ride a bus but in kindergarten you had to get your own transportation. Either my mom would take us or other ladies in the neighborhood ... mother's in the neighborhood or we walked. We walked most of the time. There was three girls. There was Laila, Karen and then myself and we used to walk from 28th and Poplar all the way to Montview and Monaco, 5 years old. Needless to say, we were usually late. We would get there and they
would be doing the calendar so that meant we were late. We went to afternoon kindergarten, so it was half-day.

Even then, that was 1965 and so the classrooms ... I would just remember the classrooms, they were integrated. It wasn't an all-black school. We had children there, their parents lived on Montview and so we went to school with ... everyone went to school. I didn't really notice it and the friends that I walked to school with, Karen, she was biracial. Her mom ... we were all military kids. Her mom was from Germany and her dad was black. Laila was Puerto Rican. I just remember the other kids in the classroom; we had white children in the classroom and black and it was diverse.

We went to Phillips until 2nd grade. After 2nd grade, in the mid-year of second grade, not even the whole year, halfway through second grade they ... we got a notice that we were leaving Phillips and they were going to bus us to Cory Elementary which was in south Denver. That was right in the middle of the school year. I kind of was excited about that because at the time, I was separated from my friends. I was in a 2/3 split classroom so that's 3rd grade. Third grade was with the intermediate children. I couldn't play on the little playground, I had to play on the big playground. But all my friends were on the small playground. I remember just standing at the fence that divided the playgrounds, watching my friends.

Julie Speer: Explain why though, is it just because of your academics?

Janet Matthews: It's because of my academics and so I was in a high 2nd grade close, more so 3rd grade, even though I was a 2nd grader. They just said "No, you can't play with the 2nd graders anymore. You have to play with the 3rd graders." Our lunch time was a little different, so I would watch my friends that were in 2nd grade every day. I remember that, I was like ... I didn't have many friends I guess because all of them were in 2nd grade and I was with the 3rd graders. When they said we were going to leave and go to a new school midyear, I was kind of looking forward to it because I had an opportunity to be with my friends again.

They sent us, or bused us to Cory and I was in a regular 2nd grade classroom. Only in that 2nd grade classroom though, I was the only black child in the classroom. That was a little different. At least I knew at lunchtime, I could be with my friends. That wasn't even mandatory busing yet but they were sending us to Cory. That was in 1968.

Julie Speer: Why were they busing you then?

Janet Matthews: I don't even remember. I don't know. I thought it was because, as I got older and became an adult, I thought it was because of mandatory busing. Then I found out the busing didn't take effect until 1974. That's when the mandatory
busing took place. That's when Keyes when into court. I don't know why it happened in 1968. That's what I ask myself too. I was bused in 1968 and we went to Cory. It was just a busload of us. I remember that experience, it was just a busload of us going to Cory. The kids on every block ... like the kids who lived on Pontiac, which was a block over, they went to Ellis or University Park. We were all on the same bus, and they would stop at the different schools and let the kids off from each block to go to whatever school they were designated to go to.

That was 2nd semester, so after we came back from Christmas break, we started going to Cory. Our friends on the block behind us, they started going to University Park and the kids the further down went to Ellis, so they split us all up in the neighborhood. We went to Cory and I was in 2nd grade. I was the only black student in my class. I remember the very first day going to school we were confused about bus stops, didn't know which bus to ride. There were several schools going different places so I remember that we went to one bus stop and we missed that bus so we ran down the block and we finally got on the right bus. It was my sisters and I and we got to Cory I remember I had dropped my lunch. My lunch in a brown paper sack was all over the place. I remember though, I went to class and my teacher's name was Mrs. Halloren and a young, little boy named Chris Peterson, a white boy, came over and goes "Oh, let me help you." He was real welcoming. At that point they were really welcoming.

When we first got off the bus, the majority of the people that lived in the neighborhood, they had lined up on both sides of the sidewalk at the school and we had to walk down the sidewalk and they were saying all kinds of not nice things to us children. We didn't understand. Plus, we had come from a school where we were used to being around people, diverse people, even our neighborhood.

Cory was a new experience for us because I looked around and I was the only black child in class. It was that way in 2nd grade and then in 3rd grade

Julie Speer: Talk a little bit more about that. How did that feel for you? Was that awkward, did you then hold back?

Janet Matthews: You know what, I think I was more of a ... like they were just amazed by me, the kids. I remember that. And on top of it, they said "Oh and she's real smart." It was a different ... they embraced me and I was, I don't know, like a new toy or something different. Second grade was fine for me and then 3rd grade, I was still the only black child and I remember we were getting a new student and she moved on my block so I knew her, so there was two of us in the class in 3rd grade. Third grade was good, but we've had ... I mean most of the teachers far as I knew, they were treating us fine. In 4th grade, they decided that they were
going to put all the black children that were in 4th grade in the same classroom. I didn't know why, maybe because they thought that they ... we shouldn't separate them, we should put them all in one classroom so they put us all in one classroom.

Julie Speer: Were there white kids in the classroom?

Janet Matthews: Oh yeah, there were white kids. If you were in 4th grade, they put all the 4th graders in the same classroom so everyone that I knew that was my age was in the 4th grade so they were in the classroom with me. That was kind of nice. I don't think the teacher thought it was nice because she had to deal with all the children that were black in her classroom. Her name was Mrs. Hardy. She was ... I would say she was a good teacher but she had her select children that she liked. If you were smart or if you were on the same level as the other children in the classroom, that was fine. If you were not, or if you had any kind of behavior that was different than what she was used to dealing with, she didn't know how to deal with that.

I remember that one of my friends would always lean back in her chair, which kids normally do. She would tell us constantly "Don't lean back in your chair." She kept leaning back in her chair, so when she walked up she pushed the chair back. She fell back and hit her head on the desk behind us, things like that.

Also, we used to do school plays and she was very selective who would be in the school play. She selected me to be in the school play. I never told this story to anyone. I've told it since, but when it happened I never told my mother anything what had happened until I was grown. I was selected to be in the play. She would make these beautiful gowns that we wore. I forget the name of the play but we wore these beautiful gowns. We learned our lines. It had to do something to do with Christmas I remember and also the Jewish holiday. We were dancing and we did all this. Afterwards, the next day, we had our performance that night. It was a great performance, I remembered my lines and I did what I was supposed to do.

The next day, we had turned in our costumes and I remember her calling me out of the classroom and she goes ... she needed to see me in the hallway. At least she took me out in the hallway. She took me out in the hallway and all the kids were like "Ooh, I wonder what she wants with Janet." I went out in the hallway. I thought she was going to tell me I did a great job, you were wonderful in the play. Yet then she had the costume in her hand. She put the costume in my face and she started saying, "You people are so dirty. Look what you did." You know how you get wring around the collar from sweating? Yeah, that's what she was complaining about, "This dress is ruined, it will never be the same." She did that and I had to suck up my face and go back in class and pretend like she told me ...
and I remember telling a lie, telling my friends, "She just told me I did a great job," and holding in the humiliation that she had put me through in the hallway.

I remember that and I never told my mom until I was grown. When I told her that, she goes, "Why didn't you tell me, because I would have went up to the school," but I didn't you know, it was embarrassing. Treated me, that was the worst experience I remember as a child, as a 4th grader.

Julie Speer: This was in what year, then?

Janet Matthews: Maybe '69. Well in 2nd grade ... right, late 60s. Might have been early because I would have been in 4th grade and 4th grade you're about 9 years old. It would have been 1969, something like that. Maybe it was even earlier that we got bused because 2nd grade I would have been 7.

Julie Speer: I know Park Hill ... I have interviewed some folks, Ana Jo Haynes and she was talking about Park Hill was really leading the way on integration and there was some voluntary busing efforts.

Janet Matthews: Right there was some voluntary. Well I don't know how voluntary it was.

Julie Speer: It wasn't voluntary to you.

Janet Matthews: We didn't have a choice. That's what I was even talking to Vernon, I said, "No we started getting bused and it must have been 1967." Or '68 because I was in 2nd grade. The only reason I remember specifically that was the year that Martin Luther King died. I was in 2nd grade when Martin Luther King died I remember my teacher rushing out and then she came back in with this black and white TV and she sat it right in front of me and said "Your leader died." And I said ... I had no clue who she was talking about. She was saying Martin Luther King was shot and killed. They had the news going on the TV and she put it in front of me. I remember that. I don't remember the reaction of the other kids in the classroom.

Julie Speer: Was that weird, did you know who he was in 2nd grade?

Janet Matthews: I didn't, I didn't know. I didn't even know and then she was telling me, "Your leader died," and I said okay am I supposed to feel sad? I didn't know if I went home and had a conversation with my parents and asked them who Martin Luther King was because I didn't know. I just remember her putting that TV in front of me. I can see that so vividly.

Julie Speer: A 7 year old, that's like a baby. Wow, so were you bused all through school?
Janet Matthews: All through school. Like I said, my experience, besides a few incidents, there was times that the other kids, the white children were mean to us. I suppose we were probably mean back. There was a lot of fighting and a lot of parents that didn't want us there. They were very selective of who their children ... they would allow their child to play with. I remember my friend was always ostracized. Her name was Ellen, she was a little different. I think being a military kid, you're raised a little differently. You're used to diversity. My level of education from my parents was different from my friends' parents level of education. It was a little different in our household and how we were being raised. How she viewed white people and how I viewed white people were different because my experiences were different than hers. I remember she wasn't accepted but she was my best friend, she was my next door neighbor.

I remember when the kids would have slumber parties, they would invite me but they would say, "She can't come. My mom said she can't come. They don't like her kind." I would bargain, I'd say, "Well, I can't come either. If she can't come, I can't come." I remember one of the little girls giving in, she goes, "Okay, we're going to let Ellen come," so Ellen went to the slumber party. I was saying, "You have to be on your best behavior." We went and it was the same way in class. The teachers were different towards her than they were towards me. I didn't know if she struggled more in school. She was a little bit ... she had more behavior issues when I look back on it, as far as they were concerned. I just loved school so it was a little different.

I don't know. Elementary school was fine for me. I think we didn't really have problems. I saw other kids struggle. They weren't just always nice to us. There were people that ... teachers that were very prejudiced towards us. I remember our principal from Phillips, seemed she was elated that we were leaving her school and they were busing us to Cory. I remember that, her name was Mrs. McLaughlin. Mrs. McLaughlin, she got reassigned to Cory. No kidding you, she had a heart attack. She actually had a heart attack and was in the hospital because she did not want to go. She did not want to go to school where those same children, black children were. She thought she was going to Cory and she was done with us.

Third grade was ... you know, we had one black teacher in the school. Her name was Annette Groves and she was the music teacher. I remember she was the only ... and that was 1968 and she was the music teacher. I remember her being that support that we needed at the school. I remember the gym teachers, they were not nice to us. They would say negative things, a lot of negative things. Overall, I don't think most of the teachers wanted us there. There were older teachers but ... then the younger teachers, Mrs. Young, she was a young teacher. She was nice. I remember her, she was very nice to us.
That's the thing, because I remember every one of my teachers by name. I always tell people that either it was a good experience or it was a negative experience that you can remember everyone's name from kindergarten on. I can remember every one of my elementary school teachers names.

Julie Speer: What was your middle and high school experience like? Where did you go?

Janet Matthews: Middle school my parents ... we moved to Montbello area. That was in 1972. That's when ProMack was the builder and it was a brand new area and they were very selective of who could live there. It was very hard for even blacks to buy homes in Montbello at the time. I guess the military was a little different so we bought a house, my parents bought a house out there. There were no schools in Montbello at the time. It was a brand new area so you had to go to school somewhere else. They sent us back to Phillips, I went back to Phillips. I didn't want to go back to Phillips. I remember crying because my experience at Phillips was so negative. I remember that time standing by the fence. I didn't want to leave Cory, I had a great experience. When I found out we were going back to Phillips, I didn't want to go.

When I went back to Phillips, the school ... busing was mandatory by then. No it wasn't because it was 1972. The area was ... Phillips was very diverse. I remember it seemed like there were more black children there then at the time. And the children from Montbello that were going there were white. Montbello was very diverse, we had whites and Mexicans and blacks, Asian, everyone. We were bused to Phillips. Halfway through Phillips, again ... I didn't even realize that. Second semester, 6th grade because it went through 6th grade, they said they were busing us. After Christmas, we left Phillips, second semester and went to Steadman.

That was different because when we went to Steadman, all this time I had been used to going to school with white children. When we went to Steadman, they took us on a tour first, the group that had to be bused to Steadman, before we went on break at Christmas. We went to Steadman and I remember seeing, when I went there Steadman was all black. All the kids in the classroom were black except for one. Her name was Julie Finnity. Julie Finnity was the only white child in the classroom. I thought wow. I didn't want to go there. I said "I don't want to go there." I guess I was afraid, I didn't want to go there. My mother goes "Do you know your not black?"

Anyway, we ended up going to Steadman and we had a black teacher, Mrs. Smith. The music teacher ... most all the staff was black. The school at the time was predominantly black until they bused all the students from Montbello in there and then that's where the diversity came. I think Julie Finnity was glad because now there was more white children coming from Montbello. It was just
from Montbello. We went to Steadman and I remember the music teacher, Ms. Johnson was black. She didn't know how to play the piano so we always had to have other people come in and do the music for us, but she was the music teacher. Mrs. Smith was, no Mrs. Edwards ... Mrs. Edwards [00:24:00] was our 6th grade teacher.

That was a good experience because I went to school with most all the kids in my neighborhood. What happened was they bused a large percentage of the kids that went to Steadman, they bused them out south. We were bused in, they changed the boundaries again so when I went to Steadman, it was like what I was used to. It was just the kids from Montbello, kids from my neighborhood and then a few of the black children that lived within a couple of blocks from Steadman were allowed to stay. Everyone else was bused away. It was easy and it was like being at Cory again because the classroom was really diverse again. There was of course more blacks in the classroom than there was at Cory. Still, it was kids that I knew. That experience was great. It was a little different because we had black teachers. That was getting used to. They were different.

Julie Speer: Any bad experiences?

Janet Matthews: No, at Steadman it was ...because it was only for a semester so it wasn't a bad experience at all. And I continued and went to Smiley, didn't want to go to Smiley. There was horrible stories about Smiley at the time. Maybe because it was at the time ... Smiley had a lot of black children there. They said Smiley always had chain gang fights, and it was horrible and riots. You only heard negative things about Smiley. My sister and I, we cried we didn't want to go to Smiley. We were afraid to go to Smiley. We went to Smiley and it was different, because they had busing and so now the school was more integrated and more of an atmosphere that we were used to. Smiley had a lot more riots. We had more riots.

Julie Speer: What do you mean "riots"?

Janet Matthews: Actually, after school there was fighting against blacks and whites. It was rioting. That was probably ... that was when busing actually was mandatory. There was a lot more unrest. Things that I wasn't really used to until ... Smiley was different. There was more fighting, a lot more not getting along. From Smiley, I went to Thomas Jefferson. They bused us to Thomas Jefferson. That was another experience. There was rioting at Thomas Jefferson too. That was like 1975. There was rioting, children not getting along based on that.

Julie Speer: Did you feel the tension in the school, at TJ?
Janet Matthews: You know what, let's say like at Smiley, my sisters experiences were different than mine. I think I was shielded from a lot of things that went on, I didn't even know was going on, like the fighting and ... because I was separated. They would have modified, regular, high and accelerated classes. That was their way of continuing the segregation. I was back to what I was used to because I was in mostly all accelerated classes. In accelerated classes, I was the only black student in there, maybe another one or two more. Usually in most of my classes, you can count how many blacks, two blacks at the time. I didn't know what was going on in the regular classes and the high classes but I knew that that's where most of the blacks were at, in the regular classes or the modified classes. I was kind of away from people ... more people that looked like myself.

Julie Speer: How was that for you? I mean as a teenager, you've got the hormones going, you're already self-conscious when you're a teenager.

Janet Matthews: I ... well it's because that was my experience though, because from the time I started at Phillips, my friends were of ... Puerto Rican and white and so I was used to that. I was really more comfortable being in that situation, even though there was unrest going on in the building. Was I afraid of it? Yes I was afraid of it too. I remember the teachers were negative, we had a lot of teachers that were negative. Probably prejudiced towards us, but I just did what I needed to do. I remember some of the experiences, I remember in high school, the teacher trying to persuade me, "You don't need to take anymore math classes. Why are you taking these math classes? You just need to take business math," or things like that. Instead of letting me take the classes that I wanted to, because I aspired to go to college.

I remember we were in a pre-calculus class and there was maybe four girls. Back then they did try to talk girls not to take math and it was mostly for guys ... and there was boys in the class. The girls were ... and the teacher didn't assist you. It was two things, being a child of color and then also being a girl. There was discrimination on both parts in certain classes. Science was the same way, they kind of taught you to take home economics, you don't need to take biology. I think that was a girl thing, I don't know, it could have been a black thing too.

Julie Speer: It's high school, it's mid-70s, and they're really trying to force integration. Did you start to notice the integration or segregation in the city and the community, outside the school? Did you start to notice those things then?

Janet Matthews: That's what I feel like, it's hard to ... I don't know. Even in the school, even though we were integrated, we were still segregated, which is a normal thing. If you go into the cafeteria, all the blacks sat together and all the whites sat together. I think the most unfortunate thing is because you didn't get to create that bond that people talk about when you have class reunions. I remember
going back to my class reunion, my 10th class reunion. It was the same way. It was segregated. We were there, but it was still the group of blacks was at their table in there and they didn't really socialize as much with whites. There was a few, if you were on a sports team, of course you did. You knew the people on your team. I played volleyball, so that way, the sport integrated us. Other than that we were separated.

It was really kind of neat because when I got to TJ, most of the kids that I went to high school with, I had gone to Cory with because Cory and TJ basically were in a similar area. Those same kids, here it was years later. A lot of them went to Smiley. The ones that went to Smiley was ones I went to school with at Phillips because they lived over on Montview so I was reunited with some of the same kids I started off with in elementary school. When we got to high school, I ran into some of the same children I went to school with in elementary at Cory, so it was kind of like a cycle. They'd say we're back together again. Sometimes it was a positive thing, a lot of it was a negative.

I remember one person, her name was Tina. She says "Oh, that's that Ellen. She's so mean to me." Her experience was she was so mean to her in elementary and she didn't forget that. It was the same way, I think we felt the same way, you guys treated us so bad and you called us names. It would be so interesting to see what their experience was too because we all came back together. Some of them, I'm friends with on Facebook.

Julie Speer: That's good. What year did you graduate? And then talk about what you were seeing in the city.

Janet Matthews: I graduated in '78. What I noticed mostly in the city, it was interesting to see that the kids from Montbello ... because that was like a step up at the time. You moved from Park Hill to Montbello. The kids that we went to school with, like at Steadman, they thought that okay, those blacks think that they're better than the ones here. It was interesting though because the ones at Montbello, when we look back at who graduated, most of the kids who lived in Montbello, especially the males, graduated. The males and a lot of the females, except a couple of them because one of them is a state supreme judge now, they didn't graduate. I think they had more of a negative experience when they got to high school than my experience because maybe I was more ... I was more used to that environment of always being in a diverse neighborhood.

In fact, when they started the mandatory busing, they didn't bus in Montbello. When they finally built elementary schools in Montbello, they did not bus in or out anymore, because the neighborhoods were so diverse that the percentages that they wanted in schools was automatic there in Montbello schools. My youngest sister, she didn't go through the busing experience after 2nd grade.
She was in Montbello, they didn't bus her. She was there and the schools were diverse so she was always in schools that were really diverse in Montbello. They didn't bus in Montbello and they said it's because they were already diverse neighborhoods.

When I think about busing, I don't think that was the purpose of busing. The purpose of busing wasn't so much ... it was not necessary to have desegregation. It was more so that they just wanted quality schools. They just wanted schools to be equal, separate but equal and they weren't. That was the whole gist of why. We want quality schools, it's not necessary that we need to go to school in white neighborhoods, we just want to make sure that our children have quality schools to go to in their neighborhood, that they're not inferior. Their schools or their education or their curriculum or their books or the materials, that they have everything that you have. They have the same opportunities to the same grade education.

Now they've gone back to neighborhood schools, but if you think about it, neighborhood schools has caused resegregation. Neighborhoods are not diverse. If you go back to neighborhood schools, the only ones that are going to be there are the kids in that neighborhood. If your neighborhood is not diverse, what do you expect the school is going to look like? I think now they're trying to say, "Let's keep it so everyone has the same quality of education, a high-quality school in every neighborhood." I don't know if that's working or not.

Julie Speer: It doesn't exist.

Janet Matthews: No.

Julie Speer: It's not, all schools are not equal now. You look at Lincoln High School, it's a failing school. It's a Latino school, it's 97% Hispanic.

Janet Matthews: You know, I don't think there's a problem with the fact ... like I said that if I was in a neighborhood and it was all black children, I don't feel like it has to necessarily be a failing school just because the school is predominately black, no. I feel like ... I don't feel like I have to sit next to a white student in order to have this quality education or to be saying that I'm learning something because you get to go to school with white children. I don't think that's ... I feel like you can go to school with all black children. It can be just as quality and it can be ... it doesn't necessarily have to be a failing school. Lincoln doesn't either. It can be all Hispanics, why does that necessarily make it a failing school? What makes it not a failing school is busing in white children? Just because you have white children, it becomes not a failing school? What is that saying? What message are we saying?
That's the same thing with busing. Busing gave the message that in order for you to get a good education, you need to sit next to a white student. Even as a child, I didn't feel that way because I didn't have to sit next to a white student in order to get a good education. I just needed you to have a school that was going to give me the same quality education that that white student was able to get at their school. You didn't have to bus me. We just wanted a school that was just as great as the school that they went to in their neighborhoods, that they have the same opportunities. I think the message is that unless you go to a school with white students, then your school is inadequate, is not a high-achieving school. I think that's the wrong message. What makes Lincoln a failing school? What makes Montbello a failing school? Who says it's a failing school?

Julie Speer: Test scores.

Janet Matthews: Okay, test scores, but even that, that's not really a true measurement of what the ability of those students are.

Julie Speer: Of course not.

Janet Matthews: You know what I mean? I just have a problem with that, when they say it's a failing school. Especially when they say it's because mostly Hispanic or it's all black. What makes it a failing school? Test scores? Okay, then we can look more into test scores. What about those test scores? I just have a hard time with that. Even as an educator, I have a hard time with that. I have a hard time with the fact that when we measure kids, we put them in categories like whites and blacks and then the achievement gap is there because you're comparing blacks with whites. If our test scores are not at the same level as whites, then there's an achievement gap. Basically, what's the message that they're telling us? That we have to be what they are, that's where you measure us? That's where the bar is set? I don't get it.

There's some black children that exceed even some of the test scores of white students, yet you said there's an achievement gap because you're comparing us to white students. What's the message there? That we always want to make one group look superior to another group and another group always look inferior? Do we always want that? Do we want to make it seem like if you're white, that's where we measure you. When the Asians start exceeding even the white scores, what do they do? They put the Asians with the whites and then they measure everyone to those sub-groups. What's that about? What message are you doing?

My thing is this, if we're all children, and one child is failing, that's how we should measure it. Children period, not based on color, not based socio-economic levels, not any of that. Just the fact that you have children and these
children are not excelling as well as this group of children. As long as we have, no matter what color they are, this group is not excelling and they're failing, then we all have failing schools, if it's all children in the school district it's the same. If one school's failing, we're all failing.

Julie Speer: Talk about being a teacher and why you chose to go into education. And then talk a little bit about the reality of ... did you see callings in education? There's been a huge decline of African-American teachers. Talk about all that.

Janet Matthews: A huge decline in African-American teachers overall?

Julie Speer: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Since busing, from the '90s to today.

Janet Matthews: Largely in part it's because also ... it's a large part based on income. I mean, you go to college and if you become a teacher, how much money you make is not going to afford you to take care of a family. I think that that's basically why you don't see a lot of blacks going into education. It's based on also money and knowing what it takes to take care of a family and raise a family and afford a certain lifestyle. A lot of teachers, and they're female, white females, they're married to maybe someone else that makes more money, so they can be a teacher because that's not the only income that they have to depend on. When you talk about blacks just going into education, that's the only income, you can't afford to live off a teacher's salary. You can't afford to raise a family off a teacher's salary. If you're going to go to college, you need to choose another profession, even if you do want to teach. That might divert you away from it, based on that.

Why did I go into teaching? I went into teaching because I was a mother first. My main responsibility was to my children and raising my children no matter what. Teaching was a profession that allowed me to be that mother first. Also, knowing the importance of education, I wanted to be right out front for my children and give them what they needed. Teaching allows you to have that flexibility to still be a mother and go to their schools and still be active even thought you had to work. That's the reason why I chose that profession. Not because, like my sister, she always wanted to be a teacher. That was just her calling. Being a mom was my first calling. Knowing that I also needed to have a job, teaching gave me that opportunity to be in that flexibility that I needed to put my children first.

Julie Speer: You stayed in it, even after your kids are grown up.

Janet Matthews: Yeah, after you're there, you know one day you have to retire, you just can't ... you still have to pay the bills. I love all children, my own children and seeing other children, just to be there to give them that education, to make them want to love learning was important to me. Also, children of color it was really
important to me for them to see some role models, to see that someone could
speak into their life about the importance of education, the importance of
learning. Even though there's so many things that might be against you, that
really getting that education and learning too no one can ever take that away
from you. They can't take that away from you. Learning as much as you can, no
matter what else goes on and how other people treat you, that's something
they can't take away from you. And reading, learning to read, that's important.

Julie Speer: A lot of folks have talked about institutional racism and that if you're a kid of
color, teachers just do not push you as hard, they do not have that same bar for
you. Do you think that that exists? Did you see that?

Janet Matthews: I don't really recall any ... there might have been a few teachers that made a
point to encourage me to continue getting as much education as I could. Other
than that, I think it was more from my family, my parents, the same thing that I
instilled in my children that a love for learning, of education, was important.
Knowing their history was important because you see the significance, the
importance of getting an education. What your ancestors went through and
what they fought for. That was what really inspired me to want to stay in school.
That was so important because at a time, we weren't allowed. That's what made
me feel like, to feel so strongly about I don't need to sit next to a white student
to get an education and to love learning. I don't need that. I wanted to relay
that message to my friends and even as I became a teacher to children, to just
really love learning and to get educated. Learn as much as you can, read as
much as you can.

Julie Speer: As an adult working in education, did you see any institutional racism? Is it real
or is it just some people making that up?

Janet Matthews: There's definitely institutional racism. It's because it's made up of people that
are racist. That same mindset is throughout institutions and in education it's still
the same way. It's the same way as when you look at test scores and you
continue to have sub-groups, that's institutionalized. It's still basically saying
that there is a group who is superior to another group. As long as you have that
comparison, you're continuing to create that same thinking, that someone is
superior to someone else. It's the same way, you work with ... they have the
same mindset.

It comes to mind that a teacher was going for an interview in another district
and she had only taught in Denver. A coworker said, "You know what the
problem is. They said that she is not good enough to teach in our district
because she's only taught low-income children of color. She doesn't know what
it means to teach white children that are all on grade level." This was a
coworker that said that. There you go, that's her thinking. If you think that way,
you feel the same way because that's where you're teaching, kids of color and in some areas low-income children. It still exists.

**Julie Speer:** That's crazy, is that recent?

**Janet Matthews:** That's very recent.

**Julie Speer:** We've been talking about schools. Let's pop out of school for a second and let's look at Denver? Is there racism in Denver and is Denver segregated and if you're looking at our town and kind of pull then even on a national level. Where are we at with all that stuff?

**Janet Matthews:** Yes. Denver, all my experience is living here in Denver, I was born and raised in Denver. It's always been pockets of ... let's say the blacks live here and only here. Maybe a few would venture out and let maybe a couple. I don't know how that works. There were lines of segregation, just from my experience. When we moved here, you lived on the west side of Colorado Blvd. We lived on 36th and St. Paul and Colorado Blvd was one of the dividing lines. Most of the majority of the blacks lived west of Colorado Blvd and north of probably 23rd. There was just a pocket right there in that area, a 5-points area. They moved the boundaries and it went up to maybe Quebec so more people, more blacks moved across Colorado Blvd and they lived in other parts of Park Hill. It stopped there and from there they went to Montbello. Now I think a large group have moved to Green Valley and then out into southeast Aurora.

It's not like it used to be. We were ... I remember my parents moved here in 1960 and we moved on 36th and St. Paul and we were probably one of three black families on the block. It's just amazing how that changed so quickly, white flight. They left and they moved further across Colorado Blvd. When we moved to Poplar, we were probably the second black family on the block. Pretty soon, the block became ... more black families lived on the block. When we went to Montbello, it was the same way. It was still not that many blacks and they controlled who was going ... how many in every area. I think it's still the same way.

**Julie Speer:** Is it a problem? Does it matter?

**Janet Matthews:** No.

**Julie Speer:** If you look, is it better that it's a diverse city and everybody's intermixed or ...

**Janet Matthews:** That's what I say, it doesn't matter but I think what makes it matter is because people make it seem like, if you don't live in a predominately white neighborhood, you live in a bad neighborhood. If you don't go to a predominately white school, you go to an inferior school. There was always
made that comparison to if you’re not next to white, it’s not right. It was the same way in schools. I think when ... I bit the apple too because I felt the same way.

When I started having children and we were looking for our first home, our realtor she was always trying to show us homes only in Montbello. I said I don’t want to live in Montbello, I don’t want my kids to go to DPS schools. I don't want them to go to DPS schools. Maybe at the time, I felt like their schools were inferior because all the whites moved away. I said no, I don’t want my kids to have that experience. We moved out in southeast Aurora.

Once my kids finished school and they graduated from high school, I said I want to move back. We bought a home in Green Valley. I love it. I love living in Green Valley. I love knowing all my neighbors. My block is pretty diverse but majority of everyone that lives on my block is black. I love living by people who look like me. I don't want to feel like ... and I hate when other people I work with ... I live in Green Valley, I work in Green Valley. I don't like when my coworkers say ... first of all it's a low-income neighborhood, they say that. I say, “You’re totally wrong, this not a low-income neighborhood. You don't know that but you just assume that because the majority of people that live in these neighborhoods are black or brown.”

I hear those kinds of conversations. They have negative things to say about the area that they work in and the schools. I said no I live in those neighborhoods, it's a wonderful neighborhood. All my neighbors, they look like me. It's a wonderful neighborhood. It doesn't have ... you're measuring my neighborhood based on the fact that there's no whites in it, or there's not majority whites in it, and the schools.

**Julie Speer:** If we go along that line, do you think it would be okay that we have a city where everyone is segregated like that but everyone is successful and there's good schools, is that the way the city should be? Is that the ideal?

**Janet Matthews:** I think people should value all people and there shouldn't be a comparison that white is the best. If everyone felt like it’s great to be who you are and your neighborhoods are wonderful and you don't live up to the stereotypes or what other people think. Not ... even being poor, just because people say that poor people are not smart or all poor people are criminals. You don't have to say ... I mean why can’t poor people be smart? How come poor people can't enjoy living in their neighborhoods? I guess because ... and my parents, it was different. They probably didn’t even know they were poor. They were happy. They were in their neighborhoods. It was someone else that defined how we’re supposed to be and how we act and what to expect in those neighborhoods and that’s just not true. It's just not true.
Julie Speer: Sure, so do you think diversity is important in neighborhoods? Or maybe it just doesn't matter.

Janet Matthews: Diversity is good. I think diversity is good because the world is very diverse. Think about it though, in other countries ... is it diverse if you go to China? They're all Chinese, right? I'm serious, if you go to other places. It's only here in America that we worry about that. We can't just accept who we are and be proud of who we are. There's someone that always has to say someone's better and someone's less than. That's the way it always is and if you look at it, it's the same way.

If we value everyone, and it didn't matter, they're all human, it doesn't matter, we value your thinking, we value your intelligence, we value what's in your mind, we're not comparing you to some other one to make you less than. Diversity is good, though. Diversity is good if people can just accept everyone and don't have to feel like someone's better than someone else, then diversity is great.

You know, what's the point? That's really like how I feel, like what's the point. I look back at 1968, what's the point? What has changed? The minds and the hearts and the attitude of people have not changed. They still think what they think, they still do what they do. They still compare us to the privileged class. Will it ever be equal?

Julie Speer: What you just said though makes me think it's not a race issue, it's an economic issue.

Janet Matthews: No, no. I don't think ... it is partially an economic issue. Also, even if ... it doesn't matter. Even a poor white and a poor black is different. It's different. And they will be seen differently. Dress them up the same, you wouldn't even know that she's poor and you would respond to her differently based on what she looks like.

Julie Speer: Do you think a kid of color is going to have a fundamentally different education than an equal white counterpart?

Janet Matthews: It depends on the kid though. It depends on the kid. I mean because, just like myself, there was ... just like my friend it was totally different from me than her but we were in the same situation. That was a large part of how I felt and what I wanted and what I was focused on versus what maybe her experienced and what she was focused on.

Julie Speer: Your sisters had different experiences right?
Janet Matthews: My sister had different experiences. There's some people that you can talk to that feel like it was all good. I think sometimes we're conditioned, even as educators, it's so easy to be conditioned and persuaded to act a certain way. You even find yourself starting to respond and react to children of color the same way you hear other people talk about them.

Julie Speer: That goes to that institutional racism that we were talking about. How do you break that?

Janet Matthews: You don't go to the teacher's lounge. No, you have to be really rooted and grounded in what you know is right and what you believe about all children can learn. You really have to believe that. I think that's it. People say it, but do they honestly believe that? Is that really what they believe?

You know what? It always goes back that it has to be superior. Let's say if there was ... and it's happened, I know you've probably read about situations like this. If you were doing a valedictorian of a class, and one of the students was black and one the students was white, and the majority of everyone that was teaching those students were white, there would be one teacher or maybe a couple teachers that would give that black student an A-, a point different, let's say on a writing paper. It might be a better paper, but if I give that child, that black student, a better grade then this white student is not going to be the valedictorian, this person's going to be. They still have that power to determine an outcome. No matter what. Now when we have all white teachers, they still have the power over children of color. They still do. That's what's sad. I've seen that and that's what's sad.

Or like if you have a black boy and you have a white boy, and the black boy has a tendency to yell out answers in the class, he gets in trouble for that. Then you're in the same classroom and the little white boy does the same thing, but he doesn't get the same consequence, "He's just gifted." It's a whole different view of it. They did exactly the same behavior.

Julie Speer: I have to ask you about that because you brought up the gifted program. There's a lot of people that say the gifted and talented program and DPS specifically and this is something we have research to back it up, that DPS uses the gifted and talented program as a way to keep white kids in the district, even though they're not gifted.

Janet Matthews: I agree. I can see that. It was the same way with having accelerated and modified classes back in the day. All the accelerated classes were full of white students and you had that one token black that you let in the class so you could say well no there's one black in there.

Julie Speer: In DPS, 40% of the kids in gifted and talented are white.
Janet Matthews: Okay and change the statistics around. How many are in special ed?
Tell me name, grade, school, introduce yourself.

My name is Jon’il Fugett. I go to George Washington High School and I like basketball.

Awesome. What grade are you in?

I’m in the ninth grade.

You’re in the ninth grade and you’re in the varsity team. Tell me that. That’s pretty cool. How did that even happen?

My brother went to the school first. I’m pretty sure that was a big help with it, but I’ve been playing basketball ever since I think I started third grade getting really serious about it. I used to like football first, but then I just somehow liked basketball more, fell in love with it. Then during my middle school, I met some really good coaches, really nice coaches, and that’s what brought me here today, varsity.

Awesome. Ok, so talk to me about being a ninth grader on a varsity team.

I’m a ninth grader. I’m on varsity. The phrase “freshman” comes up a lot, so there’s a lot. There’s not a lot, but there’s some seniors on the team and a couple of juniors I think. They like to use freshman a lot. Sometimes, freshmen have to put all the balls away to the ball back and then, it is hard.

How many ninth graders are on your team?

There are 2 ninth graders on the team.

All right, let’s talk about school. Talk to me about education and the importance of school.
Jon’il Fugett: I think school is really important. I think it plays a big role in life because if you don’t go to school, then you don’t really learn anything. Jobs and stuff will need you to help progress the world and yeah, pretty much that.

Julie Speer: Tell me about your mom, is she really hard on you with education?

Jon’il Fugett: My mom grew up with straight As. She thinks education is really important. She’s really hard-working and that’s why she pushes me so hard. She knows I can do just as good as her if not better.

Julie Speer: Awesome. Talk to me about DSST and that whole process on how you got in there. Tell me that story.

Jon’il Fugett: The process of getting into DSST was difficult. My process wasn’t difficult, but for my brother it was difficult because he wanted to get in, in sixth grade and he got put on a waiting list, and he wanted to get in at seventh grade, and he got put on a waiting list. When I was in sixth grade and he applied for seventh grade, I got in, but he still didn’t so he only got to be in a DSST for 1 year and that’s it. I stayed at DSST for 3 years. At DSST, you get the sibling preference so he got to get in 1 year.

Julie Speer: How was that, that you got in and he didn’t? Talk about how you felt.

Jon’il Fugett: I felt like I was going to be in a better academic standpoint or point of view, and I felt like he got pushed aside and I got it first time. I think that’s unfair.

Julie Speer: Compare your school to other schools in the district.

Jon’il Fugett: DSST or George?

Julie Speer: Oh, both, but stick with DSST for a minute. Talk about middle school and your middle school’s academic standing versus other schools.

Jon’il Fugett: One thing that I notice a lot in my middle school was that they were always talking about college. The first day that you stepped in, that was their goal. I noticed that their discipline system was really different from other schools and the uniform was really structured. I knew that coming into this school, it was going to be different. I was going to have to adjust to it a lot.

Julie Speer: How was discipline? What do you mean? Give me an example.

Jon’il Fugett: There’s a system. There’s 3 things. There’s 3 major disciplinary system. It’s mandatory tutoring, refocus, and CP. I’m just talking about re-focus first because that’s the one I didn’t like the most. Refocus was they didn’t want to call it a detention, but it’s pretty much a detention. Refocus, it’s more of a refreshing on what you did bad and when you broke the rules. It changed over the years. They altered it, but at first year, I had to write
a 3 paragraph and I say on what you did, how you can fix it, and what you’ll do to prevent other kids from doing it. Then, over the years, it changed down to 10 questions. They broke it down in 10 questions. We had to reflect in that way.

Then CP was for if you didn’t get your homework done on time, then they would give you time after school to do your homework.

Julie Speer: What does CP stand for?

Jon’il Fugett: CP stands for College Prep. It wasn’t a detention really. I mean you couldn’t talk, but it was more of a get back on track type thing.

Julie Speer: Looking back in middle school, did that discipline help you? Or did it come up making that?

Jon’il Fugett: At first, I was scared because I didn’t know what my mom was going to think if I got a detention or a CP or something; but then, I took it as a learning standpoint so I would learn from my mistakes, and try not to do better, and I think it really helped.

Julie Speer: Tell me where you go to high school now.

Jon’il Fugett: I go to George Washington High School.

Julie Speer: Talk a little bit about which program and why the heck you’re in George Washington.

Jon’il Fugett: I’m in the IB program at George Washington. I think I’m at George Washington because they had the best IB program in the district and because I would be able to play 5A varsity basketball for Colorado. My DSST high school didn’t offer that.

Julie Speer: Tell me what you have to go through to get there every day and back.

Jon’il Fugett: I have to ride the bus for about an hour and a half every morning. Sometimes, if I don’t have practice, I’ll ride it back home an hour and a half. Sometimes, I have to go on 3 buses. Usually, it’s 2, but sometimes, it’s 3. Today, it was 3.

Julie Speer: How do you feel about that?

Jon’il Fugett: I think I’m used to it now. I mean in the beginning of the year, it was a learning lesson, but I have my brother there to help.

Julie Speer: That’s good. What do you guys do on the bus?

Jon’il Fugett: I usually just watch YouTube videos, play games, listen to music.
Julie Speer: How are your academics? How do you achieve? Do you know what kind of level you’re achieving at?

Jon’il Fugett: From the TCAP test every year, it says that I’m advanced in Math, Writing, and Science, and then I’m proficient in Reading.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about these tests real quick. What do you think of these tests? Do you have any sense about what they’re for? I’m just completely curious.

Jon’il Fugett: The annual test, yearly?

Julie Speer: The TCAP and now, it’s going to be PARCC I think. Before that, there was the CSAT. Let’s talk as many tests as you can remember, and then just talk to me about them and what you think they’re for. I don’t know what you think of them.

Jon’il Fugett: I remember the benchmark test, CSAT, TCAP, and now the PARCC or something. Yeah, I remember that. I usually like them because I find them easy. I don’t take them lightly, but they’re usually easy, no homework for a week or 2, something like that. I think they’re a break from the IB program or DSST or something like that.

Julie Speer: That’s a good way to look at it, no homework for a week. Do you have any idea what they do with those test scores?

Jon’il Fugett: I’m guessing they make us do these tests because maybe it’s for a survey like they’ll take probably races or areas, zip codes, and they’ll see where the progress is at, and which zip code is doing the best, which schools are doing the best, and if there needs to be an improvement in an area or not.

Julie Speer: I think that’s probably exactly right.

Jon’il Fugett: Yeah.

Julie Speer: You don’t mind them then?

Jon’il Fugett: Not at all.

Julie Speer: Do you have any idea about what the achievement gap is and have you ever heard anybody talk about that?

Jon’il Fugett: I’ve heard plenty people talk about it. I heard my mom talk about it a lot. I’m pretty sure that’s a bad thing if they’re talking about it a lot. I’m going to make an impression that it’s a bad thing not easy to fix.

Julie Speer: All right, I’ll give you a crash course in the achievement gap. Rich white kids achieve really well. Poor African-American kids, poor Latinos, they don’t achieve so well. Taking
the same test, big difference. That’s the achievement gap. It’s largely based on race, zip
code, maybe more economics, financial status and stuff. Does that surprise you?

Jon’il Fugett: It doesn’t really surprise me. With the achievement gap, I’ve had both types of friends. I
had the really poor friends and I had the really rich friends that their attitudes toward
school are way different from each other.

Julie Speer: Describe the attitudes.

Jon’il Fugett: Towards the poor kids, they’re usually waiting on summer break, waiting on every
break, trying to find every excuse to go to school. The rich kids, they’re more of I’m
going to get it and I’m going to get it done. Then break is something that’s getting to me
at achievement, something like that.

I think that there’s a difference in attitude maybe because probably the parents
influence on the kids. Probably the more privileged kids, their parents have already
been through it. They’ve been through this process. They worked hard. They got a good
education. They probably look up to their parents trying to be as good or better than
their parents. That’s probably were the drive comes from. The others, yeah, their
parents aren’t as involved with their learning and stuff.

Julie Speer: You’re very aware of these things. That’s great. Your mom is probably having to do a
little bit with that, but let’s talk about race. Ferguson, Staten Island; I mean there’s just
so many things going on and with race in America. Talk a little bit about race and being a
young black man, and what that means to you, and what you see, and what you think.

Jon’il Fugett: It hurts to hear about all the racial issues and the deaths of kids and stuff like that. I feel
it’s being worried about now. I feel there were plenty of these Fergusons and stuff like
that before that weren’t being talked about. I feel it’s just now being talked about I like
the fact that it’s being talked about, but I think if it was earlier, then this problem
could’ve been resolved by now or something like that.

Julie Speer: How do we resolve it now so that we’re not having the same conversation in 20 years?

Jon’il Fugett: I think if people get noticed that there’s being a change, and that rules are being
switched around, like police brutality, I think that would calm down everybody from all
of the marches and strikes. I don’t really know what to say about because there’s always
going to be that one person. I just think that we should be more intentional on the
police test for then, you’d be able to [inaudible] to the police force.

Julie Speer: Are there any racial issues or tensions at George W?

Jon’il Fugett: No, not really. For me, when I’m at school, there isn’t really any problems. I have friends
of all different types of races. I don’t really see a difference. I’m pretty sure there is at
other schools though.
Julie Speer: Talk to me about the kids at GW who aren’t in the IB program. From what I know, it’s almost like there’s 2 schools.

Jon’il Fugett: In the 2 parts of school, the IB and the traditional; traditional is a little bit more wild than IB with some of the language and actions that they take. There are some kids that seem like they should be in IB and traditional, and there are some kids that seem like they should be in traditional and IB. There’s a kid for every kind of programming. I just do my thing, stay in IB and give them my worthy time.

Julie Speer: Do you have friends there in the traditional program? I mean do the kids interact?

Jon’il Fugett: I have a lot of friends in traditional program simply because probably they can’t get into IB or they probably got kicked out of IB. From the basketball team to the football team, I have a lot of friends in traditional.

Julie Speer: That’s good. What’s your favorite subject at school?

Jon’il Fugett: My favorite subject used to be Math, but now, I’m going to start really getting into Science because I feel like my future is going to be based on Science.

Julie Speer: What do you see for yourself in the future? What kind of areas interest you?

Jon’il Fugett: When I go to college, I want to study health. When I study health, I want to go on to be in NBA. If not a player, I want to be a trainer or something to do with health because I want to help basketball as much as possible.

Julie Speer: That’s good. Do you have friends outside of GW? Do you have any friends from the neighborhood?

Jon’il Fugett: From this neighborhood, yes. I’ve lived in Montbello, Green Valley Ranch neighborhood for a long time. I don’t think I remember living anywhere else. I’m really aware with this neighborhood. I have friends from Cherry Creek, other places like that too. There’s just a little bit though, but most of them are from here. I also live fairly close to them.

Julie Speer: Talk about this Far Northeast area like Green Valley and Montbello. Talk about the neighborhood and just describe it to me.

Jon’il Fugett: The neighborhood is a really calm neighborhood. There’s benefits to being far away from everything. I like how it’s right by the airport because I travel a lot with my basketball team and co-basketball team so that makes it easier. I like how everything’s close together. Because it’s a new neighborhood, there’s a King Soopers and a Walmart badmouthing each other like all that’s [inaudible].

Julie Speer: What about the reality of gangs or just kids that are not as invested in school as you? Does that exist around here? What do you think about those guys?
Jon’il Fugett: I think that it somehow exist, but I mean I don’t feel they’re really in a gang. I feel like they walk around telling people that for their rep or whatever. They are skipping school and stuff like that. I feel that’s bad, but they’re not really in gangs to me so I just don’t talk to them. I mean they’re just bad influences.

Julie Speer: What would you say to those kids? If there was no risk of anything happening, what would you say to encourage those kids?

Jon’il Fugett: To encourage them, I would say probably what I say to everybody; stay in school, try and join a sport; if not that, try and join a club, try to find something that you really like and stick with that.

Julie Speer: If you weren’t going to George Washington High School, what would you be doing?

Jon’il Fugett: I’m pretty sure I’ll be doing basketball right now. I don’t know about if DSST’s basketball team would be up-to-date or ready; but I’m pretty sure I’d be doing basketball right now.

Julie Speer: Is your dad in the picture at all?

Jon’il Fugett: My dad, he isn’t really in the picture. I just really actually met him I’d say a month or 2 ago. It was pretty weird, but he’s not really in the picture.

Julie Speer: Tell me about your mom.

Jon’il Fugett: My mom is hard-working. She’s always influencing somebody, influencing the right thing for somebody. She’s really encouraging me in basketball. She tries to help me as much as possible. She makes sure that I have everything to do when I need it.

Julie Speer: Perfect. Right now, there’s a lot of kids in Denver Public Schools wherein traditional schools and not getting their grades, and not really invested in school for a lot of reasons. What would be the perfect school?

Jon’il Fugett: A perfect school for me would probably be school with probably everybody gets the same education, everybody’s getting IB education. There aren’t distractions. Everybody’s having fun. There aren’t any fights or anything. Everything’s calm and basketball is there of course.

Julie Speer: You must love basketball.

Jon’il Fugett: Yeah.

Julie Speer: Are there a lot of African-American teachers or Latino teachers in your school? Talk about the ratio of what the student population looks like, when does the teacher population near the student population.
Jon’il Fugett: I think in a couple of my classes, there has been a lot of kids up to 35, maybe 38 kids on one class; but that’s only in a couple of them. I haven’t seen a lot of African-American teachers, but I’ve seen a couple Asian teachers, a couple Latino teachers, but most of them are Caucasian white teachers.

Julie Speer: Would it make a difference if there were teachers of color?

Jon’il Fugett: I don’t really think it makes a difference. There will probably be more of adjustments or getting to know their students better and easier, but I feel like school is school, learning is learning. It’s the same thing. Education is just the same thing either way.

Julie Speer: Do you think people make a bigger deal about race than they should?

Jon’il Fugett: Yeah. I think that just some of the greats who say like Martin Luther King, we should just overlook it and everybody just do their own thing, get stuff done.

Julie Speer: You’re life’s pretty good, right. Have there ever been any issues or things from a racial standpoint, have you ever had any issues?

Jon’il Fugett: No, not really.

Julie Speer: You’re lucky. That’s good. I hope it stays that way.

Jon’il Fugett: Me too.
Justina Garcia
Senior, North High School
Denver Public Schools

Julie Speer: Tell me your name, your grade, and where you go to school. Then just talk a little bit about North High School.

Justina Garcia: My name's Justina Garcia and I'm in 11th grade. North High School was my first choice, so I wasn't really planning on going to any other school from when I heard about it. It's getting a lot better, so I wanted to be part of the change.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about growing up in North Denver. Just describe the neighborhood to me and how it's changed.

Justina Garcia: I've lived on 35th ... I was actually on 32nd and Quitman, and I lived there ever since I was 3 years old with my grandma and my grandpa, and my uncle and auntie. The neighborhood was ... I wouldn't say it was as bad, or, it's getting better. I guess I didn't really notice a big difference just because I was more around my family than I was outside in the world. Yeah.

Julie Speer: How have you seen the neighborhood change, though, now that you're a little older?

Justina Garcia: I see houses built up in places ... Right next door to the house I used to live, I see houses built all the time. They're getting bigger, and they're getting more expensive too.

Julie Speer: Tell me about why your family moved from the neighborhood?
Justina Garcia: We actually moved to 35th and Sheridan so we weren't too far away. Then we had to move again because it was getting too expensive. My grandma found a cheaper house down south.

Julie Speer: Good. Tell me about living with your grandma.

Justina Garcia: Well I lived with her ever since I was 3, and she's always been a pretty good support system. She's been there for me pretty much my whole life. I have my dad in my life, but my mom not so much.

Julie Speer: Where's your mom at?

Justina Garcia: Living her life somewhere, not with me. She's in it every once in a while, but it's rare.

Julie Speer: Okay. That's good. Talk about how you got into the YESS Institute.

Justina Garcia: Actually my friend had told me about it and the opportunities that it had for me. I considered it and we just went to see what it was like. We didn't really know what it was about too much, but once we got there, Sarah really explained to us what we were doing and what the purpose was. Then we started meeting with our mentees and helping them. We started right off the bat. I liked it a lot.

Julie Speer: When did you start? What year?

Justina Garcia: This year. I actually started this year, yeah.

Julie Speer: Talk a little bit more about your parents, and about them being young, and some of the substance abuse, just to give a kind of context for your own, personal background.

Justina Garcia: Yeah. Well, my parents had me at 16 and 17. They were super young, obviously. Right when I was pretty much born, my parents split up. I lived with my mom for a little bit, and then went back and forth with my mom. I just remember moving place to place with different people. From what I can remember, my parents have never been together since I was little, so they've always been apart. My mom, she started drugs, so then she kind of drifted away. My dad's always been there for me and has always supported me. It's just I think financially it's difficult, but I still have him in my life, and I love him, and I'm thankful for his support in everything I do.
Julie Speer: Is your grandma your dad's mom or ...

Justina Garcia: My grandma is my dad's mom.

Julie Speer: Okay, good. How are your grades? How are your grades and how have your grades been in the past?

Justina Garcia: I've always been an A and B student from what I can remember. Since I was super little I've always kept it kind of ... I've always wanted to get more. I've always wanted to pursue more, growing up, so that's why I'm in National Honors Society, Student Council. I'm a class secretary, and I do leadership programs too. My grades are pretty good, say A's and B's, try not to get C's.

Julie Speer: Good. What's your plan for your future?

Justina Garcia: I want to go to CU Boulder. I actually want to be a journalist.

Julie Speer: One of the things we're looking at in the documentary is the intersection of a lot of new research, and it's researching what's called the Achievement Gap, which is how students achieve. Because there's a big gap between basically rich kids and poor kids.


Julie Speer: There's a big gap, so obviously kids who are more well off, they achieve really well, for a lot of different reasons. Whereas poor kids don't. What happens is a lot of times, poorer students tend to be kids of color. We're kind of exploring how all those things crash together in education. Just talk a little bit about your reaction to just having heard all that.

Justina Garcia: Yeah. Well, I think it's definitely true because you see it all the time. You see kids being able to go to the colleges that they want to go to first hand. They didn't have to ... I mean some of them, I'm not saying all. They work for their scholarships, and I know they probably work just as hard as people of color do. I just think it's a lot harder because the opportunity is less than what it is for well off students who pretty much have it when they're born, rather than kids who ... Like for my situation, my parents had me young. I wasn't planned or anything, so it was kind of ... I'm dumped into this type of situation and I have to learn how to make due for myself and achieve more for myself.
Julie Speer: Good. Do you see any issues with, in your own personal life, either in school or out of school, in terms of race and how that affects things, race or discrimination? Do you ever feel that or experience that in your life?

Justina Garcia: I guess I never really was aware of it. I never noticed it, but yeah sometimes I do, because when I walk somewhere ... I guess, now, in this area, going to Chipotle ... It was never really just one racial group. It was mixed. Now going into Chipotle, for example, there's 1 race usually. I definitely stand out because I'm darker, and how I do my makeup. I always had a lot of ... I don't know, it's [inaudible] towards me, and people act different towards me than they would others. I felt that more now than I have in the past because I never noticed it. I try not to notice it and just live my life.

Julie Speer: Good for you. Talk about your own personal support system.

Justina Garcia: Well, I have my parents, well, dad, and I have my grandma. I have a whole family who's behind me and who support me in pretty much everything I do. They help me. I think I've been told ever since I was a little girl how much college is important. I think that's what's really made an impact on my life because growing up, that's pretty much all I thought about, because that's all I had been told, is to do different for my life and to become something great. That's what I've been doing is pushing myself every day.

Julie Speer: Good. Can you describe super quickly what the YESS Institute is?

Justina Garcia: The YESS Institute is leaders in the community, and the school, just kids in general, it doesn't even have to be super smart students. You're there to help other students achieve more and be their backbone, and be there to help them, and achieve more along with you. You have a partner in your journey.

Julie Speer: What have you personally gotten out of being a mentor?

Justina Garcia: What I've gotten from being a mentor leader is being a better leader. I think being in student council and National Honors Society, being a leader is inevitable, because that's what I'm doing all the time. It adds on to me being a leader and makes me a better leader every day going to this class, because I have someone else, I have to help someone else achieve more instead of focusing on myself.
Julie Speer: Tell me about your mentee.

Justina Garcia: Yeah. My mentee, he's great. Definitely he was shy at first when we first started talking, when we first got paired up. We kind of came out of our bubble, because I'm pretty weird and he's a little weird himself, so we got along pretty well. We've clicked ever since and we work well together.

Julie Speer: That's good. Have you seen him improve? Talk about how you feel about that.

Justina Garcia: I've seen him improve dramatically because in the beginning of the school year I think I saw 4 F's. I would see F's all the time and I'd push him, "You need to get this up. You need to work on this class." As time went on, every trimester his grades were going up. Now he doesn't have ... I think he has 1 F, but he's really improved from 4 F's, almost all of them F's. We're working on it, getting him up there.

Julie Speer: That's good. How does that make you feel?

Justina Garcia: I feel really proud of myself and him because we're there for each other. He helps me too. I'm not the only one helping him. He helps me on homework. Sometimes I don't understand something and he's there for me too. It kind of goes back and forth but it helps him as a person, and it helps me as a person too.

Julie Speer: That's good. You see each other every day?

Justina Garcia: We see each other every day. I have him in my 6th period. I'll see him on the bus. I saw him on the bus once, because he takes the bus too. It's kind of an every day thing. I see him in the hallways, say hi to him, and we communicate all the time. Text, get the reminders.

Julie Speer: Can you tell me about the kind of things you learn on the [inaudible] days, or on the days where you're not doing homework?

Justina Garcia: On those days, a lot of it, just like we did today, was learning about yourself and who you are, and goal setting. We work a lot on goal setting because I think it's important to have a goal and I think that's what Yes Institute is really about, too, is goal setting. Setting high goals for yourself to achieve more. That's pretty much what we work on a lot. It helps so much because some people, some kids don't' really have goals or they never really thought of having goals, so this class really puts a thought in
your brain and lets you know that you are capable of reaching a goal. There's steps to it but we're here to help you.

Julie Speer: Is there anything else that we should know about the YESS Institute?

Justina Garcia: I think the Yes Institute is a really good program, and I'm really happy that I'm in it, and I'm happy for the people who join it.
Tell me what your name is, how old you are, and talk about going to McAuliffe. Then talk to me about where you just finished with.

I'm Kaitlin. I'm 13, and I went to McAuliffe for this past year. The school there was very good. It was easier to get there when it was in Stapleton still. I could walk there almost every day. When it moved to Smiley, it was still good, just the location was different, and the teachers were different. They kept most of the teachers, but they hired some new ones because it was a bigger school and they had more kids coming in.

Let's just start with sixth grade. Tell me where you went for sixth grade.

The first year, in sixth grade, it was ... There weren't a lot of people or a lot of kids, there was like 200 there to start off with. It was kind of small. You knew almost everyone there. When we first got there the school was brand new, and so we didn't know where to drop off or go into the school at first. There's like five entry doors or something around there. There's a front door, and a couple back doors, I think.

When I was first arriving, they said to not have your parents walk in with you, to walk in by yourself to start a new stage of your life. It was pretty scary. Before we had no locks on our lockers in elementary school, so we had to learn how those worked. It was just completely new for us.

The other school was Swigert Elementary, and they were a new school as well. We didn't really regularly see them, but when we were walking from class to class, like from inside ... We'd walk into the gym, and we would get our gym uniforms on, and we would walk out and play outside, and that was some of the times we would see them. We would see them passing in the halls or something.
Julie Speer: Mostly, you didn't really interact with them?

Kaitlin Kocher: We didn't interact with them at all. Most of the time.

Julie Speer: That's great. Tell me, in sixth grade, how you would get to school everyday?

Kaitlin Kocher: I would start out walking to school. The first month or two I would probably be picked up and dropped off at the school, and they had this little thing they would call the, "Kiss and go zone," where it was the drop off part of the school.

Julie Speer: Did you ever end up walking or taking your bike completely by yourself?

Kaitlin Kocher: Yes. I would bike. I started biking at the middle of the school year, and then I would continue biking. When it came around to winter time, we would carpool with our neighbors, not really our neighbors neighbors, but they lived close to us.

Julie Speer: Sure. Tell me what neighborhood we're in and how far away McAuliffe was when it was in the Swigert building.

Kaitlin Kocher: When the school was here, or in Stapleton, it was about four blocks away. It was pretty easy to get to in this area.

Julie Speer: Tell me what school you went to for middle school.

Kaitlin Kocher: In middle school I went to McAuliffe International School for sixth through eighth grade.

Julie Speer: What was so special about McAuliffe especially if you compare it to the other school that was in Swigert? Was there something that was really special about McAuliffe?

Kaitlin Kocher: I believe that McAuliffe is one of the best schools because it's an ivy school and most other middle schools aren't ivy. It's like ... It was just different because the academics were a little bit more higher in standards, and so you had to like ... We had longer school days and we did most of the school work and homework at the school. We didn't have to do much to work harder after school. We would work harder in school, which is the more attention was at the school.
Julie Speer: You wear uniforms too, right? I know there's a couple of schools in DPS that have uniforms, but the uniforms are kind of cool. Talk about the uniforms a little bit.

Kaitlin Kocher: In elementary school I had to choose my own clothing, and I was worried almost everyday that my friends would pick on me because I had that as an experience. I just didn't know that clothing meant so much to them. It kind of hurt me and all my [inaudible]. When I was at McAuliffe, the uniforms really helped me because it ... I didn't have to choose what I wanted to wear. There were options, but I didn't have to find something that would match with another thing. It was just mostly like this shirt or ... That was pretty much it. Which shirt to wear out of the five shirts I had.

Julie Speer: Tell me about your parents. How involved have your parents been in your school in terms of supporting you, or making you do your homework, or making sure you turn in your homework?

Kaitlin Kocher: My parents had taken their time and they would ask me everyday if I had done my homework, or if I had achieved somewhat of a higher ... What I wanted to do that day. If I was going to set a goal for myself, they would ask if anything had happened today, if I wanted to ... They would be adamant about finding what book I wanted to read and what I should start reading, because it was just the thing to do for me.

Julie Speer: Your dad is a teacher, right?

Kaitlin Kocher: He was the vice principal at Westerly Creek this past year, and he now is going to be working at NHS, my high school as the MI teacher, the special education teacher. He's running the whole special education part of the school.

Julie Speer: Tell me what your grades were like in middle school.

Kaitlin Kocher: They use a grading system of one to four, and it was ... I usually got threes or fours in most of my classes.

Julie Speer: Explain the system to me. What is one, and what's a four? Can you get a zero?
Kaitlin Kocher: Yes. Zero is just like failing the class. A four is just advanced. A two and ... One to two is a proficient, and a three is partially proficient, and a four is advanced.

Julie Speer: You got mostly threes and fours?

Kaitlin Kocher: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I did.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about your best subjects, the ones that are either easy for you and that you excel in, and then maybe the ones that are the hardest, and which ones are your favorite.

Kaitlin Kocher: I excelled mostly at math and art, because those were just one of the two classes ... One of ... Two of the classes that I most favored. Then, I would also enjoy ... In sixth grade they had ... They combined language arts and geography, but it was just history class. They combined those two together at first, so I excelled at one part of the class, which was geography, that part of the class. My favorite classes were art and math, I guess.

Julie Speer: That's excellent. Tell me about your neighborhood. Tell me about where you live and describe it for me.

Kaitlin Kocher: Stapleton is mostly younger children and young parents, but as we moved here I was one of the oldest, me and my sister were one of the oldest children here. Not children, but kids here, out of the many people here. It was just really different, but we would always play with each other and have fun with most of the neighbors because they are fun to play with as well.

Living here is just a lot of fun because we would have parties on the muse. We don't have a road or a street, we have a muse. It's like just instead of road, it's grass.

Julie Speer: In terms of the neighborhood of Stapleton, talk to me about the kinds of families you see in terms of their race. Are they mostly white families? Or are there some Latinos, or some black families? Or is it mostly white? In your perception.

Kaitlin Kocher: I mostly notice white families, but on occasion I would see of-color families that would just be walking around in the parks.
Julie Speer: Talk to me again about why McAuliffe left Swigert and moved to Smiley. Explain to me that whole story, what happened there?

Kaitlin Kocher: When I was in seventh grade, the school had 400 students, and it was maybe a little more over 400, but it was pretty big for a small school. The school we were in had not ... It wasn't too small, but there wasn't enough room for all of the students for when we would move up for the next grade. We were comfortable at two grades in the other school, but when we thought about it, we had to move to the other school because it was going to be too big.

We moved from the old McAuliffe building, which is now occupied by the Swigert Elementary and the Denver Discovery School. It's a new middle school. They moved schools to the Smiley campus in Park Hill.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about the move to the Smiley campus. It's a bigger school. It's an older building, a big old brick building. It's really big. Then, there was a lot of other kids that were going to the school. Just talk to me about your eighth grade experience and how eighth grade was going into the Smiley building.

Kaitlin Kocher: When I was first going to McAuliffe at the Smiley campus, it was very different. I got lost about two times at first. I didn't know where my locker was, but then when we moved ... When we settled in there, it was easier to know where I was going, and it was like we all knew where we would have to go. I made a path for my schedule of where I would go next.

Julie Speer: Talk about the student body because I'm guessing that the student body grew, and then there was all the students that were actually from Park Hill neighborhood as well. Talk to me about how the student body changed, and if you noticed were there kids of different racial backgrounds or socio-economic backgrounds.

Kaitlin Kocher: The school had actually taken most of the old Smiley students, and so the school grew and it had more different ethnicity. It was more mixed together. We were talking to a lot of new people. It was a lot better.

Julie Speer: Talk a little bit about how that was for you personally. Were you scared in the beginning? How was it once you got to know all of these kids?
Kaitlin Kocher: I was confused at first because I didn't know what was going to happen. During the summer I had kind of grown apart from my other friends because of some people spreading rumors. I found a lot of new friends, but they had gone to McAuliffe earlier. There was also a couple of new friends that were at the Smiley campus before.

Julie Speer: Good. So it turned out well?

Kaitlin Kocher: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Julie Speer: Okay. High school. Tell me where you're going to go to school in the fall, and talk to me about how you chose that school.

Kaitlin Kocher: I'm going to Northfield, NHS. Well, Northfield High School as the unabbreviated word. I chose NHS because it was pretty easy to go there. First of all, it was closer than any other school. I was also thinking about East, but that was my second choice after NHS.

Julie Speer: Did you have to apply, or did you just get in because you're Stapleton?

Kaitlin Kocher: I just did ... I didn't really have to, but I applied anyways.

Julie Speer: Tell me how you're feeling about going to NHS in the fall.

Kaitlin Kocher: I'm not too nervous because I know a lot about the school already. I know about their academics and what they're offering for sports, or clubs. I know some of the clubs. I don't know all of the clubs.

Julie Speer: Your parents have been pretty involved though, haven't they, in setting up the new school?

Kaitlin Kocher: Yeah.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about that.

Kaitlin Kocher: My mom, she designed the logo for NHS. My dad, he was helping with the starting up and helping with the academics of the school.

Julie Speer: That's great. Talk to me about the fact that it's a new school and how you feel about that.
Kaitlin Kocher: Currently, they're still building the school right now. Some people doubt that it's going to be finished by fall. It's like going pretty fast to be built, but going to a new school, I have already had experience with that because of McAuliffe. I'm not quite nervous about it.

Julie Speer: Tell me, what are your plans once you graduate high school? What would you love to do? What would you love to do as a job, and are you planning to go to college? What are your plans after high school?

Kaitlin Kocher: I haven't really thought about what college would look like for me, but I would like to pursue the pathway of being an architect. I chose engineering and studio arts for a pathway in high school.

Julie Speer: At NHS you have to choose a pathway?

Kaitlin Kocher: You choose two pathways.

Julie Speer: This is brand new information for me. Can you explain that to me?

Kaitlin Kocher: You have your regular academics, like math, and history, and language arts, but you also have a language to choose and two pathways that you would like to pursue for your future. As choosing engineering and studio arts, it's forming some sort of a pathway.

Julie Speer: Why do you think education is important in general? Or do you?

Kaitlin Kocher: I do believe that education is very important because you will use your education that you learn now for your future. It will help because the more you focus on education, you will get further. The way I would say it is like, the more you learn education, the further you'll get ahead in life. The more opportunities you'll get.

Julie Speer: Explain to me who's in your family. Who lives with you in Stapleton?

Kaitlin Kocher: I live with my mom, and my dad, and my sister, and my very annoying cat. We all live in Stapleton in one house.

Julie Speer: This piece that we're doing is really on the achievement gap. Have you ever heard of that before?

Kaitlin Kocher: No, I haven't.
That's good. Talk to me about testing, because a lot of kids have to take a lot of tests. The standardized tests, the PARCC, Common Core. You know, standardized testing. Talk to me about standardized tests. What do you think about those?

Most of my friends thought that the tests were ... The standardized tests were not very important for learning, but you would need to do those so you know where you are in your education. They're pretty important.

They'll track how you do this year, and how you do next year. There's a big problem, and I'll explain it to you and then you can react for me. There's a thing called the achievement gap, which basically says that some kids, they take these tests and they do really well, which I'm guessing your probably do pretty well. Then there's other kids who take the tests and they don't do so well. The difference in between, that's the gap, that's the achievement gap.

The research shows that the kids who are achieving at a high level, a lot of times they're more affluent, their families are more ... They're well off financially, and these tend to be poorer students. Then it also shows that the kids who achieve really well more often are white, and the kids who are not achieving so well, unfortunately, are mostly kids of color. That's the achievement gap.

I actually had no idea that that was something that was happening. It's like some things I don't know what to say about, but I am confused that it's happening, but I also know that I can see it in schools, I just didn't know about it.

You can tell when some kids are just not motivated, right?

Yeah.

Even if you take a class, any of your classes at school, do you sense that some kids achieve more, or try harder than other kids?

Yes, I do.

Talk about that a little bit.
Kaitlin Kocher: One of my friends, she applies herself a lot and she's one of, people say class pets, so she'll work her hardest at doing things. She'll go above and beyond on trying to get the best score she can. There's other people in my class that are sitting in the back of the class and just playing around with their paper, and just fidgeting with their fingers, and not really paying attention to what the teacher is saying. I can actually see that right now.

Julie Speer: Do you think it's the kids themselves who just don't care? Where do you think that comes from?

Kaitlin Kocher: I believe that it's mostly influenced by their friends actually. In the beginning of the school ... Or the mid-beginning of the school year, my friend had written a paper that she wanted to just hand out and see how other people would respond, and see how her writing was. Little did she know that she was going to get judged on it because it was called the "Popular Project." She had gotten extremely, a lot of disrespect from that. Her writing was very great, but what she wrote about hurt a lot of people and she didn't write it from her perspective, she got other people's perspective of what they thought about the populars. She was just writing from their perspective, and she would just keep on getting hurt by that. It was just hurting her. She missed a week and a half of school because of that.

She was doing that so she could see how well her writing was. She was doing it outside of school, or outside of the education barriers, I might say. I don't know. Anyways, after that I noticed that most people mostly cared about what they looked like more than how smart they were, or how they would apply themselves to school work. They would just worry more on their appearances and how well they dressed that day. It made a big difference after that.

Julie Speer: It sounds like peer pressure. Or it's really important what kind of friends you have, I suppose.

Kaitlin Kocher: Yeah. They would pay more attention to their looks and appearances, and it would affect the way that they learned in class. That's where the uniform plays in. I think that the uniform was very great at helping during that time. Kids wouldn't have to fully express themselves by trying to fix
up their clothes or make themselves look better. It just affected the way they learned in class.

Julie Speer: Do you have any challenges academically?

Kaitlin Kocher: In elementary school I wasn’t a very strong reader. I was having difficulty keeping myself to one book. What I would do is I would read the back and I would look at the book, and I would try not to judge it. I was judging all of the books that I saw, and I tried not to continue that habit during middle school. My teachers would create this thing that you had to read the first 30 pages of the book and then you could see what you thought about the book, and so that helped a lot.

Julie Speer: Do you have any other challenges, do you think?

Kaitlin Kocher: Not really. When I start figuring out how I will learn in the class, I will try and keep up that learning. I’ll start taking notes and I’ll keep those like taking notes, and I will ... Most people will stop taking the notes, or stop continue progressing in the class. I’m trying to keep up staying that way.

Julie Speer: That’s good. It’s important to you to be a good student and to get good grades, right? Is it one of the most important things right now for you?

Kaitlin Kocher: Yes it is. I would really like it if I would excel a lot in high school that way I have a lot of opportunities in my future.
Julie Speer: Tell me about where you grew up and was bussing going on there as well?

Kelley Kocher: I grew up in the Indianapolis area. Indianapolis from kindergarten through sixth grade, fifth grade. There was public mandated bussing. My best friend was of color. She didn't live anywhere near me so it was really tough. We didn't do play dates back then, but it was tough to do things with your friends when they were so far away. That was something that I think always left an impression on me. There were also friends in the neighborhood too. I lived in a primarily white neighborhood but there were a lot of Latinos and African American kids in our school too.

Julie Speer: So it was a nice, diverse mixture it sounds like.

Kelley Kocher: Correct.

Julie Speer: And you went to public school?

Kelley Kocher: I did. And then we moved away briefly, to Michigan, and then came back to the Indianapolis area, to a northern suburb called Carmel. Carmel was primarily a white neighborhood. And that was also public schools. It was actually an independent school district just in that area, but it was public schools.

Julie Speer: All right, tell me, when you first moved to Denver, what neighborhood you chose to move into.
Kelley Kocher: When we first moved to Denver it was 20 years ago. We moved to Highland's Ranch actually, thinking that that would provide us majestic views of the mountains. My husband and I moved to Denver from Chicago. Really just for better living, and better way of life, it was very expensive in Chicago. It wasn't necessarily the most economically sound city, it's still expensive in some respects. We moved to Highland's Ranch, we realized within a year we were too far away from the action that we were used to in Chicago. We were used to a walking distance to the coffee shop and to the grocery store and things like that. So then we moved to Washington Park in Denver. We rented a house there.

Then it was time to buy a home. We picked Congress Park. We found a great fixer-upper, at the time it was very romantic. We thought, "Oh, this'll be so great," and it became a really difficult time because we were constantly renovating it and when my husband started renovating the renovations it was time to move. So we decided we would pick up our young family and move to Stapleton, a neighborhood in Denver. It was more of a walk-able, sustainable environment and we loved what it brought for the girls and having friends all up and down the street. Our older neighborhood in Congress Park was older couples, older families, we had a recluse that lived next door to us that we never saw, very few young families and it was tough. There were dangers at every step. Fast racing streets, we could never leave our kids out front and let them play without us having our eyes on them, so Stapleton really offered us that kind of 1950s era neighborhood where we could make sure that we were affording our kids the freedoms that we had. Maybe not 1950s, 1970s, 1980s. But it was a really good move for us.

Julie Speer: That's good. Kaitlin was talking about how she went to Steck, for me as a mom anyways it's like, "Okay elementary school, okay now middle school, okay now high school," it's like you have to think about where the kids are going to go to school. Was Steck the neighborhood school?

Kelley Kocher: No it was not. Steck was in the neighborhood next to ours. It was rated high-achieving, it was a blue school. Because my husband's in education he's always been an educator whether he's been a school teacher, an assistant principal, it's actually always been part of our plan that we make sure that we afford our children the best education possible and so, although our school in our neighborhood was good, the school in the neighborhood next to us was even better and so we tried to choice Caitlin in when she was in kindergarten. She did not get in, so then we
choiced again when she was in first grade and she got in at that point. She spent five years there and her little sister, we choiced her in at kindergarten as well as first grade and then she just finished up fifth grade there.

Julie Speer: So, choice. Talk about that in general, because I think on the plus side Denver does offer choice, and if you can get in, it's great. Do you think that's good for the district?

Kelley Kocher: The choice process with Denver public school was very new to me. Chicago public schools is not a choice school district. Carmel public schools, where I went to junior high and high school, and then Indianapolis public schools were not choice schools. You just go to that school. You move to that neighborhood, you like that neighborhood, you go to that school. No matter what, that's the school you have. When we first moved out here my husband actually worked in Littleton public schools for three years, and actually that was so long ago to me, I don't really remember much about Littleton public schools. But when he moved into Denver public schools and then when we had our first child, that's when I started learning that you could actually pick a school, if you were willing to drive 30 minutes to it, if you got into that school you could go there. My husband and I had a lot of conversations about that because, being inquisitive about it I started to think well, what's happening to the school that the kid is in that neighborhood and they're not attending that school? Ended up that we did the same thing. How do you build community and how do you get involved?

I learned right away at Steck that there were other families in my neighborhood that were also at that school, but it also gave us the opportunity to meet other families that were further spread throughout the city. We all have cars so it was not a problem for us to do play dates with those families and events with them and things like that. It actually worked out well.

Julie Speer: And then choosing McAulife, how was that?

Kelley Kocher: We just moved to Stapleton when we choiced McAulife. Not only was the curriculum great and right in line with what we saw in a middle school, we loved a lot of the things that Kurt Dennis, the Principal told the community, told us at the meetings when all the families would gather, go through tours of the school. Albeit it was, for him, year 0 so classes
really weren't set up. They were there because the school was already built. But another thing was the fact that is was in close proximity to the home we were buying. We were four blocks away, we thought: oh, this is great, that kind of falls in line with that. Caitlin gets to ride her bike to school, or she can walk to school. I work so it was really key for us to have her in a close distance so she could walk home, let herself in until we got home from work that day. That was definitely a deciding factor for us.

Julie Speer: And how does it work in Stapleton. Is there a neighborhood school? I kind of understand that in the neighborhood you have how many handfuls of schools and you still have to get selected, right? How does it work?

Kelley Kocher: For elementary school, at the time when we moved in there were three elementary schools and so you had a seat in one of those three if you lived within Stapleton. With middle school they stretched the boundary to Park Hill, so it's called the greater Park Hill Stapleton neighborhood. And so with the middle schools then your boundary is a little bit larger and so it pulls in more kids and it gives more kids opportunity for the education that these are schools are actually providing.

Julie Speer: And did the parents get a say in the seats, or in which school, or is it just luck of the draw?

Kelley Kocher: It's just luck of the draw, again it's part of the lottery process with the choice system.

Julie Speer: Are there any schools in the neighborhood that you would not have been okay with her going to?

Kelley Kocher: No, not necessarily. Again, that's why we chose this area, because all of the schools are of high quality and we would have been fine with any of them. We were just lucky that the initial class, I believe, had 150 kids for that 6th grade year for Kaitlin at McAuliff and it was great that we were allowed a spot.

Julie Speer: Talk about the process of moving out of the Swigert building and how that was for you.

Kelley Kocher: Personally, I wasn't happy because we were so close and I thought, you know, I can’t carpool and get her to that school and get our youngest daughter back down to Steck Elementary which was in Hill Top
neighborhood. It posed a lot of frustration for me because we felt that the school was going to stay there and we had no idea that they were going to outgrow and become such a popular school to choose. We had a plan in place that we would actually drive her every day before we dropped off our younger daughter, because at that point when they first made the decision, they suggested kids could bike. There's a main artery, Quebec Street, which runs north-south between Stapleton and Park Hill and it was just too busy of an intersection for even considering having Caitlin bike. We didn't know anything about a bus schedule at that time so we had kind of committed that we wanted to keep her there. We didn't want to uproot her from the friends that she did have and move her to another school that was over on this side of Quebec Street. So we just figured that we would drive her.

Then that fall, they came out with a bus schedule and there was a bus that would pick up on the other side of another busy street, Central Park Boulevard, so I would actually drive her over every morning. A few days she would actually walk and another child, in the early morning sunlight, got hit by a car. She was riding a bike. So then I said, "No way. I'm not going to have her walk across that street." And I went ahead and just drove her every day. It's three minutes away, it wasn't an inconvenience at all.

Julie Speer: And are you glad that you kept her at McAuliffe?

Kelley Kocher: Absolutely. We're so glad that we kept Kaitlin at McAuliffe for that last year of her three years in middle school. She really enjoyed it. She had a lot of great friends and it was definitely a good call to keep her there.

Julie Speer: Did you have any concerns about the kids from the northern, Park Hill, going and the free-and-reduced lunch kids, did you have any concerns with that?

Kelley Kocher: I didn't. I was more concerned about the high school. That McAuliffe was sharing the Smiley campus with because I didn't anticipate my middle schooler going to school with high school kids. And because she had always been the oldest in her class I never pictured her with older kids in school and I didn't know if there would be some sort of cross-over in the hallways, I didn't want bigger kids maybe bullying some of the smaller kids. She's a petite girl and so that was a concern for me. But it wasn't necessarily the free-and-reduced kids that would be entering McAuliffe.
Julie Speer: I had no idea there was a high school in that building. Is it a charter school, or is it smaller?

Kelley Kocher: You know, it's actually Venture Prep high school. Yeah, well outside of the school you'll see the two logos. Venture Prep is on the left and McAuliffe is on the right.

Julie Speer: All right, so tell me about Kaitlin.

Kelley Kocher: Kaitlin is just an awesome kid. She's very independent. She is a smart girl. She's actually a terrific artist, she has a very great head on her shoulders to the fact that she will stand up to us when she is frustrated. That is great because she shows her independence. She's a great big sister. She gets frustrated, I get frustrated, her dad gets frustrated, her sister does. That's also just part of her personality, too, and she's actually a fun kid to be around, she's very funny.

Julie Speer: Is there anything besides art that she's into, any hobbies, or what does she spend her time doing?

Kelley Kocher: She actually really absorbs everything around her. She loves looking at things. She just recently got a camera so she's been taking a lot of photos which is still within the realm of art, but that's something for her to be able to express herself. She loves playing with her sister. She smothers our cat who, in turn, claws at her. She also loves hanging out with her friends, talking with her friends. She is really excellent with technology and media. Both the girls have Chrome books, Caitlin and her younger sister are very technologically savvy. Their father is as well, and I also work on a computer at work and so technology is a really big thing for our family. Just making sure that we're educating ourselves for the future and making sure that we can constantly keep up with things. My parents are a little younger than my husband's parents. My husband's parents are completely out of the technology bubble altogether. I think my father in law has also said that the internet is a fad.

My husband and I really want to make sure that we're keeping up with technology and in turn we pass it down to our children. My father thinks that the internet is a fad and he doesn't understand. He would still look things up in the Encyclopedia Britannica and laughs at us when we pull out our phones at lunch to look up a detail and then we have it right away and he kind of sits there. He's a very smart man, he's an attorney.
and has dealt with very high thinking dealings but he just laughs at us because we love technology.

Julie Speer: That's smart though, to have the girls keep up with it.

Kelley Kocher: Oh yeah, and their learning curve is so much shorter than ours. It's incredible how much they pick up and how much they absorb we don't realize that they even know how to do.

Julie Speer: Talk about how you and your husband are involved in the girls' schooling. How involved are you as parents?

Kelley Kocher: We're very involved because Will is an educator. I think I would probably call myself a little bit of a control freak, so I think whether Will was an educator or not I'd probably have some say in the goings on from day to day. But when the girls, and Maggie, of course, our youngest daughter has just finished elementary school but when the girls were in elementary school we really stayed on top of them and made sure that they were keeping up with their homework and we'd ask every day. When Caitlin transitioned to middle school we really made sure that she owned it and she took care of her own homework and she did her own time management for that.

There were a few missteps and 9 o'clock, 9:30 she's going to bed and we'd get a, "Oh, you know, I've got a homework assignment due for tomorrow morning." And we'd make sure that she stayed up and got it done. It was never a matter of quitting and just blowing it off, it was always being diligent about getting things done. And in turn I feel she, as well as her younger sister, have a really great work ethic. They're very conscientious about it and always want to do well.

Julie Speer: Let's talk about Northfield and talk about when you started to get involved. I'm guessing it was pretty early on, so talk about that.

Kelley Kocher: Kind of stepping back, the school that replaced McAuliffe, although I love McAuliffe for Kaitlin I really wanted that school that was going to replace it to still be part of our life because of the close proximity and, again, working and not ... Although we had a terrific bus situation with Kaitlin and she would make every day, she never missed the bus and she'd always get the bus home and then she'd walk just a few blocks to get to our house, I really wanted to make sure that Maggie looked at that
possibility of the school that was replacing McAuliffe. Just for location only. We knew the assistant principle from McAuliffe was going to become the principal at Denver Discovery school. This is actually going someplace.

Kristen and I had a relationship because of my husband. He also knew Kristen Satwood. She and I talked and I actually helped develop the logo for that school and the school website and some icon graphics and things like that about the philosophy and the culture that the school was going to embody. When the choice process came up for Maggie to pick middle school, she actually visited McAuliffe, she visited Denver Discovery School and we left it to be her decision where she wanted to go. And even though Kaitlin had a terrific time at McAuliffe, Maggie decided that Denver Discovery School was going to be a better school for her personally. Secretly I was excited because then I knew it was only four blocks away, but I was also happy that she was empowered to make that decision on her own. That said, it's tough because we also love McAuliffe but we're thrilled with Denver Discovery School.

But because I did the logo for that school, when Avi Tropper the principal at Northfield high school was starting at his year 0, the principal from Denver Discovery School suggested that he reach out to me about looking at an identity and building a school logo as well as the school website. So I worked with him on all of that. From very early beginnings I've always known what's going on with the school. There's another parent who is amazingly involved and knows more about the curriculum and everything like that, so I kind of learned from her too, as well at Mr. Trapper.

Julie Speer: Have you been involved with community meetings and helping set up the school? I heard there were some road blocks and that parents thought that certain funding was already there and then, woah wait we can't do all that... Have you been involved that whole time?

Kelley Kocher: That actually, I believe, even happened before Mr. Tropper was even hired. There was a lot of road blocks and, yes, there was a bond that needed to pass and didn't. I'm not actually very familiar with all of that, but that was before me.

Julie Speer: How did you choose that school for Kaitlin, or did she choose it? What was that whole process like?
Kelley Kocher: For Caitlin's father and me, we moved to Stapleton knowing that all of the schools are most likely going to be great schools. McAuliffe was a school of innovation, Northfield High School, or NHS is a school with innovation. Those things are exciting for us because they're things that can be molded, they're based on research, on how they do well. There's going to be a little bit later school start at Northfield High School, which is great for us. We're already seeing the summer left alone. Kaitlin sleeps in and that's the whole idea of starting the school day a little bit later because the learning curve and the peak where kids are learning happens a little later in the day for a highschooler. That's something that's actually a benefit to us. The curriculum, there are nine pathways that a student can choose. Two of those nine pathways, so there are ... And I don't know what they are. Those are things that you'll probably want to look into.

Julie Speer: Just the fact that there are pathways. It's very focused, it's college thinking. It's career thinking.

Kelley Kocher: The school starts with an academic building and an athletics building, and there's a quad. Kids can go outside and take lunch and when it's nice out it's going to feel very much like college, so they're kind of getting that first step to that type of thinking and when they do go to college it won't be such a surprise. I had a difficult time starting college because I was like, "Oh my gosh, there's a coffee shop and I can go over there and I can order this food by myself?" And I was overwhelmed because in a traditional high school, you're all within the same walls and you go from lunch down the hallway down to the next class down to the next. This is actually kind of getting them prepared four years early for college. And college is a no brainer for us, that's ... The girls are going to go to college. It is something that will afford a better life for them.

Julie Speer: Did you actually choose Northfield, or it's just because it's now that's where all the Stapleton kids are going so that was a no-brainer?

Kelley Kocher: We did I guess, in a sense, choose Stapleton. Kaitlin has pointed out that she didn't necessarily have to put it down on her choice list because we're all afforded a seat for any kid that's in Stapleton today, in 2015 that's the case. But it was something that, not only was the proximity great, it's just the school thinking was really great for us.
Julie Speer: One of the concerns we've talked about is, it's great for now but what's going to happen in five years? Specifically looking at the diversity issue. Because I know right now, I think it's like 40% free and reduced lunch.

62% Okay, that's not part of the design, right. That's because they have those seats right now.

Kelley Kocher: There are fewer older kids in Stapleton if you think about it. So because Stapleton is such a young neighborhood there are, and Kaitlin has mentioned that she and her sister are some of the oldest kids on our block and in our actual neighborhood. That's going to be something to think about. I can only speculate that that will be an issue five, six years from now when that median point tips and there are going to be a lot more kids in Stapleton when they come to school. And other kids in that outlying, near-Northeast neighborhoods, I think, represent a lot of the free and reduced. There are still apartments here in Stapleton that are also free and reduced, so those will make up some of those kids too but I think most of them are going to probably be in the outlying areas.

Julie Speer: Talk about integration, or diversity and how that plays into education. If that's even a thought that you have in terms of your kids.

Kelley Kocher: Diversity doesn't really come in to play. I don't think about it in a negative reason. Caitlin's academics are always top for us. I love that she has a diverse student body. That's great for her to be more forward thinking, less narrow minded. I think that that's terrific. And there's a reason why we haven't moved out of Denver Public Schools. We live in a big city and we've stayed in a big city. It's dear to my husband's heart because he's an educator, but it's also important to us. We both grew up in suburban settings but it is also important for us, my husband and I personally, to be near like minded people, so we just happened to settle in this neighborhood. But again, the schools being as great as they are is definitely a key factor.

Julie Speer: Are you aware of the achievement gap at Denver Public Schools?

Kelley Kocher: I was not aware of the achievement gap. However, I can speculate that there would be an issue with that. Not everybody is going to be the same. Not all families are made up of the same mentality. I even have coworkers at work that work harder than other coworkers, so that's just
my little slice that I see every day so I can only imagine that not all parents are going to be as into their child's education as we are.

Julie Speer: The unfortunate thing is that a lot of the students that are not achieving are poorer students. And they are often times students of color and as we're growing the issue's are going to just get bigger. Luckily you're right that in your neighborhood there are all great schools. South West Denver, for example, I don't know if there are any blue schools, but mostly they're low performing schools. Some people say that's because the parents are not involved. It's a tricky issue.

Kelley Kocher: Right, and I think, being a parent I feel that it's not just the teacher's purpose to teach the child their education. I feel it comes home too. And it's every minute of every day. We're all a part of our children's lives and so I feel personally that parents are just as big of an important part as the teacher is.

Julie Speer: Do you have any thoughts on how to fix this gap? If it's not something you've ever thought about it wouldn't even figure.

Kelley Kocher: Right, it really isn't. And I wouldn't even know where to start.

Julie Speer: Let's go to 30,000 ft. for a second. Because it's in the news all the time now. You've got Treyvon Martin and Ferguson and these race issues in America, which a lot of them are black and white issues and Denver, luckily, hasn't had big racial issues. That's not to say that it couldn't happen here. A lot of people say that it's the women who do make these kinds of changes, we'll bring it into our consciousness, we'll change things. I don't know, is there any thoughts you have on society these days, or maybe it's not even in your thinking?

Kelley Kocher: You know, it is something that I know is still unfortunately in the United States and I believe that the people that may be perpetuating grew up in segregated times and maybe they're still putting their thoughts out on people and it is tough. Being a woman, I'm a minority and I see things in the work force. Not necessarily me personally, but I've seen other people have that same issue and I also have seen issues with people of color too. There's things that are around but I personally don't know what to do about it. It is an unfortunate thing. I think that society has gotten a lot better, which is great. More accepting. I think that millenials are definitely helping that, being a little bit more positive thinking and more
open minded, which I think is great. My husband and I are trying really hard to raise our daughters with very open minds and not thinking about that. Not seeing color when you see somebody. Not seeing whether it's a man or a woman or if it's an elderly person or a young person. We're all created equal and hopefully that will all keep building steam and helping for the future.

Julie Speer: What are your hopes for her future, both academically and just as a grown up, what would you hope for Kaitlin?

Kelley Kocher: Well I hope that she is afforded the same things that her father and I have been afforded. We've worked hard. We work hard for our living and we thankfully live in a nice home and we're surrounded by great people, great friends. We both went to college, my husband actually even went to higher education, he has his Master's and looking at his Doctorate in the near future, and it's things that we hope for her. We hope that she continues after her first four years of college, if she chooses to do more education that's wonderful. But we know that knowledge is power and it affords us a much better future. We're grateful that our girls are on the right track.
Julie Speer: Where did you grow up?

Kurt Dennis: I grew up in Kansas City, Missouri.

Julie Speer: So not a Denver guy.

Kurt Dennis: I'm not a Denver native.

Julie Speer: When did you move to Denver?

Kurt Dennis: Moved to Denver in 2000, so 15 years now.

Julie Speer: Did Stapleton exist then? Where did you live?

Kurt Dennis: No, so we lived in the Cheesman park area for a couple of years, and then moved to Stapleton in 2003, so right after the development opened.

Julie Speer: Excellent. Your kids are older than the school. Well, let's start with the school. Where did the idea come from and how did you get it off the ground?

Kurt Dennis: So in 2011 Denver public schools recognized that the Stapleton community was growing rapidly and that they had built several elementary schools, but were in desperate need of a middle school. They were opening this school as a district run school and they were looking for a principal. I applied for the position, was fortunate enough to get it the summer of 2011, and was given one year to basically plan the school. I was able to engage community, had a thought partner group, did a lot
of research and talking to people, and basically designed this school based on what we heard from the community and what people wanted in a middle school.

**Julie Speer:** What did they say they wanted?

**Kurt Dennis:** Folks really wanted robust offerings. A liberal arts education, they wanted kids to have the opportunity to not just learn the core subjects of math, and language arts, social studies, and science, but also to have the opportunity to explore the arts, technology and engineering, world languages, and physical education. In addition to that, really placed a heavy emphasis on after school programming as well. A lot of athletics, a lot of after school clubs and enrichment opportunities for kids after school.

The community head identified that international baccalaureate was a model that they were very interested in, and luckily I had a background in IB and applied for the position. Got the position, and then was able to basically mold the model for the school around the IB philosophy, which is a liberal arts education, the idea that kids need to be internationally minded, and have the opportunity to learn more than just the basics, but to learn a lot of different elective type opportunities as well.

**Julie Speer:** Talk about the initial plan for the school and about the co-location and the location, and that was only one year. Because I've heard folks say that they were misled, that they thought it was going to be there the whole time. There was definitely some community upset with the move. Talk to me about the early plans, and then the reality of what ended up happening.

**Kurt Dennis:** Sure. It depends who you speak with, but originally a lot of folks thought that these schools would be aligned. Swigert international schools and elementary IB school on the Swigert McAuliffe campus serves ECE through grade five. When we opened with just sixth grade three years ago we were also an IB school, and a lot of folks just assumed that it was a natural progression for kids to move from the elementary IB program into the middle school IB program. However, we weren't a K eight. It was not one school, it was two separate schools, and because it was two separate schools we had separate staff, separate administrations, and separate enrollment policies. There was some consternation when we began having discussions about leaving the Swigert building to move to
Park Hill around the idea that kids who were at the elementary at Swigert were not going to be guaranteed a seat at McAuliffe for middle school. That was one of the contentious issues that we addressed through the community engagement meetings that occurred for over the course of a year prior to us relocating to Smiley.

Julie Speer: So why did you move campuses?

Kurt Dennis: There's several reasons that we changed or moved campuses. First of all, we were running out of space even after one year on the Swigert campus. The building was built to house a middle school of about 450 kids. After our second year of operation when we just had sixth and seventh grade we were already at 400 students, and we had a wait list with over 200 kids on it. We began looking for options that were outside the neighborhood that were large enough to accommodate a large student body. It was important to us that we grow the school to a large size, because basically your school's funding's based on student count. The more students you have the more funding, and the more funding the more programming you can offer kids.

We wanted to grow the school, and the Smiley facility presented itself as an opportunity. We met with the district and discussed the idea that it might be in everyone's best interest if we relocated from the Stapleton neighborhood to Park Hill.

Julie Speer: So in the move, because we're very much exploring the achievement gap and the reality of the segregation in schools, and that the gap is with the kids of color and the affluent white counterparts; was there a conscious decision to have a certain ratio of students come from North Park Hill?

Kurt Dennis: The additional appeal in moving to the Park Hill neighborhood was creating basically an enrollment zone for Northeast Denver. If you look at a map of Northeast Denver, you basically have two big dividing lines. You have one along Quebec street divided east and west, and then you have another along Martin Luther King divided north and south. Kids that live north of Martin Luther King and west of Quebec street, in general it's a higher poverty area, higher minority area. South Park Hill, much more white and Affluent, as is Stapleton. By us relocating to Smiley, presented the opportunity that you could create this larger enrollment zone where kids from Park Hill both south and north and kids in Stapleton could
choose a middle school, one of five, that best fit their needs. In doing so, ideally you created a nice mix of kids across all five schools.

Julie Speer: Do you have DSST? Do you do two selection processes?

Kurt Dennis: No, it's all one process. For our school, because we're not a charter we cannot set a quota around race or socio-economics. We're just a general lottery. The nice thing for us is that we've had a broad enough appeal that we've attracted kids from all socio-economic backgrounds and races, and so we have a nice mix of students demographics, but we're not able to set quotas like a charter school can.

Julie Speer: McAuliffe, when we were enrolling, was the best middle school. Is it still the highest performing middle school?

Kurt Dennis: McAuliffe is currently one of the top 10 rated middle schools in the state of Colorado, and that's out of 505 middle schools. Academically I think we perform very well, and within DPS they use a different framework for rating schools, but one of the top performing middle schools in the city.

Julie Speer: Excellent, so the reality is talk about the wait list.

Kurt Dennis: For the first three years of our school's existence we were able to accept every student that wanted to attend McAuliffe that lived in our attendance boundary. If you lived in Stapleton or Park Hill and you wanted to go to McAuliffe you had a seat. This past year was the first year where we did not have enough seats available to meet the demand of the community. For next school year in 2016, we'll have about 125 students that live in Park Hill and Stapleton that will be on our wait list, which has caused some consternation amongst families, especially those families that live really close to the school, because they're not able to attend the school that's most convenient to them and in their neighborhood. Then you have Stapleton families that aren't able to attend who are rightfully upset, because the school at one time was just a Stapleton middle school. We've had some great successes, but at the same time recently there's been some consternation around enrollment priorities and students being able to attend at school.

Julie Speer: Families can't get in, so how are you going to be able to grow to meet the demand, or are there any plans to open other McAuliffes? What's the plan to meet the needs?
Kurt Dennis: So currently there's two scenarios on the table. One would be that McAuliffe would be able to grow to fill the additional space available on the Smiley campus, so the school could grow to conceivably over 1,000 students. An alternative proposition would be that DPS would open a second middle school on the Smiley campus, so there'd be McAuliffe on the south side of the building and an additional middle school on the north side of the building, with the idea that the space would be used to capacity and it would meet the demand of the elementary school kids that are coming up through both neighborhoods. You'd be able to meet the demand within the communities while at the same time maximizing the Smiley campus. It really wouldn't cost Taxpayers much, because the facility is already built, it's just a matter of filling the classrooms at this point.

Julie Speer: Do you have a preference?

Kurt Dennis: If I had my preference I would prefer to grow McAuliffe. I think that we have a really solid model, we have a great teaching staff, the demand is already there. The key is that we'd have to grow the school intentionally. You can't just have a middle school, 1,200 kids in it, and kids walk in the front door and tell them, "Good luck." You have to have a very thoughtful plan as to how you would divide that large school into smaller learning communities, and give kids the opportunity to feel like they're part of a smaller community within a large campus. Kids could really benefit by having the feel of a small school while at the same time being able to access all the electives, the sports, all the great things that you can offer in a big school. If I had my way we'd probably divide the school into three separate academies, one for each grade level, and each grade level would have about 400 kids.

Julie Speer: Talk about the reality of the achievement gap. Well first of all, how do you define the achievement gap? What is the achievement gap?

Kurt Dennis: A definition of the achievement gap would be basically the gap in performance, academic performance, between more affluent students, traditionally white or Asian, and less affluent students who historically Latino or African American students. The gap most specifically refers to performance around reading, writing, and mathematics. The gap has been significant for decades, and it really hasn't closed much over the course of the past few decades. Unfortunately it's a really really difficult problem to address and solve.
Julie Speer: It's a problem in DPS. As a member of DPS, talk about the broader district. Talk about the reality of it in Denver public schools.

Kurt Dennis: I think the greatest challenge that DPS faces with the achievement gap is that Denver as a city itself is not very integrated. If you look at neighborhoods within the city most neighborhoods are fairly homogeneous, speaking in terms of both race and socio-economic status. The challenge for DPS is how do you create schools that are heterogeneous and that have a diverse mix of students when the neighborhoods themselves aren't heterogeneous and diverse? Recently they've come upon this idea of creating the enrollment zones, where rather than having a neighborhood school that just serves kids within one neighborhood you expand those boundaries, and by drawing a much larger enrollment boundary you're able to bring in kids from much different backgrounds and socio-economic status and races to be in school together.

Julie Speer: The theory is that that would happen organically?

Kurt Dennis: Ideally it would happen organically because if all families are choosing the model of school that best fits their student, that it wouldn't be based on any type of preference other than the fact that we want what's best for our children. If that's what people are doing and it's a random lottery that's implemented through the choice process, then hopefully you are getting that heterogeneous mix in. I think it's worked well in Northeast Denver. I think if you look across all the middle schools, the five middle schools serving kids in Northeast Denver, you do have a broad mix of students in all those schools. Much broader and much better mix of kids than had they not created the enrollment zone, but had left it with just neighborhood boundaries.

Julie Speer: But it's not enough?

Kurt Dennis: It's not enough, no, no.

Julie Speer: You kind of naturally just addressed that. Do you see that the low performing schools are also the poor areas of town?

Kurt Dennis: Yeah. If you look very objectively at the data there's a direct correlation between poverty and lower academic performance, and so that's not any different in Denver necessarily than it is in any other urban city across the
country. Again, the challenge is really how do you serve all kids and serve all students well while trying to overcome the inhibitions or the challenges of poverty? It starts at a very young age, and I think that DPS is on to something really profound with the Denver preschool program, and getting all students into school at age three and four, and hopefully preventing those gaps from occurring in the first place.

I think what most elementary school principals would tell you is that kids are basically arriving to kindergarten at age six and the gap already exists. The earlier the school district's able to get involved the earlier we're able to serve all kids, the earlier students are in class with a teacher. Ideally the gap is minimized and you're not trying to fix the gap or overcome the gap as early as age six. Hopefully you're fixing it earlier.

Julie Speer: Yep, because by the time they're in ninth grade it's harder, it's more expensive.

Kurt Dennis: I think most high schools would tell you it's too late unfortunately. It's just really hard at that point.

Julie Speer: What kind of school is McAuliffe?

Kurt Dennis: McAuliffe is a traditional six-eight middle school. It's an international baccalaureate model, and we offer kids a liberal arts education. We provide them with core courses in mathematics, language arts, social studies, and science, but in addition all of our students have the opportunity to take classes in physical education, the arts, foreign languages, and in engineering technology. Those are full year electives.

Julie Speer: It's not an innovation school?

Kurt Dennis: It is an innovation school, yeah. McAuliffe is an innovation school that operates under the DPS umbrella, but what innovation affords us is some autonomies when it comes to things like budget, staffing, HR policies, our curriculum, and how we use time.

Julie Speer: If you were to look at the district as whole, are there things that the district could learn from the successes of McAuliffe?

Kurt Dennis: I think some bright spots in what's transpired with McAuliffe and the Northeast Denver Enrollment zone really surrounds the idea that families having the opportunity to choose from a broad array of schools. That
you're not necessarily locked into the school that's in your neighborhood, but that you're able to go out and find a school that best fits your student and their needs, and that school is ideally close to your home. I think that in a sense it's worked really well in Northeast Denver because, as I mentioned before, the schools are socially economically diverse and racially diverse due to this process.

I think the challenge for the district is around being adept enough or adaptable enough to address family's desires on a relatively quick basis. The idea that one school within an enrollment zone might be more popular than others and that families are on a wait list doesn't necessarily sit well with everyone, and so how does DPS modify and tailor availability of seats within schools in the enrollment zones so that most, all families are getting the school that they want for their child?

Julie Speer: Choice is great when you can get it. There's not enough high performing schools for choice to work across the district, right? Is that a reality right now?

Kurt Dennis: Well, yes and no. It depends where you live. Again, Northeast Denver, you're fortunate because all five middle schools in the enrollment zone are high performing. In the more impoverished areas such as Southwest Denver where you will have an enrollment zone and there's multiple middle schools to choose from, again, due to socio-economics and multiple factors, you don't have as many high performing middle schools to choose from in that enrollment zone. It really depends on the part of the city and the enrollment zone that you live in as to what options you have available.

Julie Speer: It's back to neighborhood and class?

Kurt Dennis: To a degree, yes. It's no longer neighborhood, but it's regional, right? It's a broader zone. It's a much larger area, but it's still, yeah. You still have boundaries.

Julie Speer: Let's talk about race, because we're looking at the 20 year anniversary of busing and the segregation and the de-segregation efforts from the 70's to the 90's. DPS is still segregated because of all the factors you've already talked about. Meanwhile in the news you're hearing about Ferguson, and Trayvon Martin. Race is an issue in America. Talk about how you think the schools, the school system, and kids in schools mirror
that and or could solve that. Talk about race in America and race in Denver.

Kurt Dennis: Race in Denver, okay. I think at the school level what we're seeing racially in Denver is that where schools are integrated you still have kids self-selecting, right? They choose their friends based upon factors that we all choose friends based on, things we have in common. Proximity in terms of where you live, common interests, sports teams that you might play on together. Even though we have what I feel to be a diverse, integrated school, if you were to walk into our cafeteria during lunch you would see that kids are still sitting, for the most part, with peers that look like themselves and are from a similar socio-economic background as well.

The classrooms are integrated, the programming's integrated, but when there's opportunities in the hallways after school and in the cafeteria you still see that kids are sorting themselves, to the most part, by race. I feel like this generation's much more open minded and much more adept at interacting with kids across all races and socio-economic status than our generation and previous generations, but there's definitely still an issue around kids self-selecting based on appearance.

Julie Speer: Your school is doing a great job of providing the platform for integration, but it's not organically occurring. It's just not happening yet.

Kurt Dennis: Not organically no, no.

Julie Speer: Talk about your kids and where you're choosing to send them to school and projecting through high school.

Kurt Dennis: I have two daughters: a six year old Delaney, and a 10 year old Kelsey. They both go to elementary schools in Stapleton, they go to Swigert international school.

Julie Speer: Was this your first choice? Because you have a guaranteed seat, but not at that school right?

Kurt Dennis: Right. The elementary schools within Stapleton are similar in that it's an enrollment zone. Students or families have a choice of five elementary schools in which to send their kids. Again, there's a similar issue in that not every family's getting their first choice, not every family is getting the school that's right across the street from their house, and so there's
consternation amongst families about the process because they feel that it's not equitable when they don't have access to a school that's close or the school that they feel is the best fit for their child. We were fortunate in that our Daughters were old enough that there was space available at the school that we chose for them several years ago, and so that worked out well for us.

The elementary schools within Stapleton itself are not very heterogeneous in terms of diversity, socio-economically or racially. Again, that's because of the boundaries being drawn around the neighborhood. The community itself is very affluent and primarily a white community, which as a result then the elementary schools are a reflection of that. Fortunately with the opportunity at the middle school level with the larger enrollment zone, you're able to have better diversity with a mix of kids from different neighborhoods outside of the community.

Julie Speer: What's your plan for middle and high school for your girls?

Kurt Dennis: For my daughters ideally they'll come to McAuliffe, my school, and they'll be students there.

Julie Speer: What if they don't get in?

Kurt Dennis: If they don't get in? Well I do get to play the employee card. Because I work full time in this school, we do have priority for enrollment there. Yes, it's not a worry for us at this point. For high school, we would probably be choosing from four or five different high schools for our daughters. I think a lot of that decision making process will be based on their interests and who they become as individuals by the time they're 14. We would look at both the North Field obviously being in the neighborhood, but also look outside the neighborhood for the best fit for our kids.

Julie Speer: Let's talk about North Field. Explain to me the plan right now for North Field, because I know it does have a reserved number of free and reduced lunch seats, which if they're a district school how can they do that, first of all, if you can't do that? Then second of all, how can they guarantee that five years from now when the Stapleton population could indeed fill the school?
Kurt Dennis: I can't speak to all the details of how North Field was able to have an enrollment policy that allowed for them to set aside a certain number of seats for free and reduced lunch students. I do know that basically the secondary enrollment zone, so any Stapleton student that wants to attend North Field high school will be able to. The second tier enrollment zone then for kids who would like to fill a seat that's not taken is the far north east, so that's basically the Montbello and Green Valley ranch neighborhoods. Currently, because there aren't that many high school students or eighth grade students matriculating to high school in Stapleton, we're able to get a nice balance of kids between both Stapleton and the far Northeast. As a result they're going to end up with a diverse student population. The challenge is that as the Stapleton neighborhood grows and more and more kids are matriculating from middle school and high school from the neighborhood, does that continue to hold true? It remains to be seen how many student in Stapleton choose to send their students to Northfield, and if there are so many that are doing so does that then squeeze out the students from more diverse backgrounds who have the secondary priority for enrollment at the school?

Julie Speer: Then we'll be right back where we are now.

Kurt Dennis: Possibly.

Julie Speer: It's tricky, how to socially engineer it. What do you think about it all?

Kurt Dennis: The best model for integration of schools that I've seen is in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Basically the way they do enrollment priorities at Cambridge is they say that our school district has a free and reduced lunch population that let's say is 35%. Every school within Cambridge then must have a free and reduced lunch population of students within 5% of that number. You might be as low as 30%, you might be as high as 50%, but no school is going to be 98% non-FRL and 2% free and reduced lunch. They basically established a policy that's going to allow for equity across all schools in their district. Friends of ours that send students to those schools have similar concerns to Denver families in terms of busing and not necessarily always being able to access the school that's closest to your home, but for the most part if you look at the model itself, it does achieve the goal of integration and maintaining an equitable balance of students of poverty across all schools.
Julie Speer: Talk to me about Kaitlin.

Kurt Dennis: Kaitlin is a wonderful student. She's a great kid. She is strong academically, she's very involved in school. She's a friendly and happy young lady who was with us for three years and is now matriculating on to Northfield high school next year.

Julie Speer: Is there anything else that you can think of that you'd like to talk about in terms of shrinking the gap or integrating schools?

Kurt Dennis: Before I came to DPS I worked in a high poverty district north of the city, and in a school where 80, 85% of the students qualified for free and reduced lunch. For the first 11 years of my career it was a daily struggle addressing the issues of poverty in our school and the classroom.

Julie Speer: Which district?

Kurt Dennis: Westminster. Adam's 50 is the school district. For the first 11 years of my career I worked in high poverty schools, high minority populations, high immigrant population schools, and on a daily basis was addressing the issues that are associated with poverty when it comes to both academic performance, attendance, and mobility in those types of issues. When I got the job to create the middle school in Stapleton it was quite an eye opening experience for me, because working with a vastly different economic group, working primarily with white and African American families, whereas historically I'd work mostly with Latino and immigrant families. The one thing that really stood out to me as the biggest difference between working in a school with poverty and working in a school of relative affluence is the power of social capital.

In a school that's high poverty you don't have a large fundraising base, you don't have parents that are well connected with local businesses or potential funders, or donors, or sponsors. You're working in a school where parents don't necessarily have the time or the means to be in the school helping out. In order they necessarily have the educational background to be advocating for the school or supporting the school from home. The biggest takeaway for me in moving to Stapleton was just the power of that social capital, of having parents who had the opportunity to be highly involved both in supporting the school during the operations of the school day. Also outside of the school day in terms of supporting their students at home, whether it be at the kitchen table
doing homework, providing tutors, providing enrichment opportunities and summer camps and those types of academic opportunities that take place outside of school, and just the sheer networking power.

We've been blessed to have a very supportive parent community and business community for our school, and a lot of that comes with connections. Parents that work at a particular business or organization that has an interest in helping schools. As a result we're able to do a lot of things due to that social capital that I was never able to do in a school that had a very high ratio of poverty. I think it's something that's overlooked sometimes, is it's not necessarily just about dollars. Sometimes it has a lot to do with who you know and what you know, and what resources available that are non-monetary in addition to the financial resources.

Julie Speer: That makes a huge difference.

Kurt Dennis: It is, it's amazing.

Julie Speer: If your parent dropped out of school in fourth grade, barely speaks English, she's not going to go in and demand, "Why did you do?"…

Kurt Dennis: Right. There's a level of trust on the part of the parent sometime that says that, "We trust the school”

Julie Speer: That's true. There's a cultural difference too.

Kurt Dennis: Yeah, but that was a big eye-opener for me, just the difference.
Landri Taylor: I'm Landri Taylor, Denver Public School board member and I represent district four, which geographically is from Five Points to DIA, north of Colfax.

Julie Speer: Let's go back in time and talk about when you moved into the Montbello neighborhood and what time frame this was, describe what the community was like then.

Landri Taylor: I moved to Montbello back in 1979, early 1980. At that time that community was what I would call a very, very proud but young community. Going on to the second generation of people that were actually living there. A new high school had just been build in Montbello, plenty of elementary schools, plenty of additional building to come as building continued on a pace of probably around 50 to 75 homes per year. The community was growing throughout the 80's. Basically it was always considered a majority African American community with a good, what I would call, demographic of also [inaudible] people as well as Hispanic people living in the neighborhood. Montbello was a middle class neighborhood, working families. Both what I would call in the white collar as well as in the blue collar labor force.

Julie Speer: Federally mandated busing started early 70's, so when you moved there busing was going on.

Landri Taylor: Busing did not stop until about 95 I believe. So there was mandated busing but in our community there wasn't very much impact, because as my kids were very young, they were still in either kindergarten or elementary school and by the time that more schools had been built, it
was really a push toward having neighborhood schools and being able to attend those neighborhood schools. Plus the fact that we had really good diversity there with our Anglo population, our Hispanic population and our Black population where it really wasn’t a need to further diversify the schools based on race.

It was a great community to live with regards to are you getting the kind of diverse neighborhood that you like to live in, along with the aspect of having neighborhood schools that your kids could enjoy and you as a parent could enjoy having and seeing your kids walk down the street to school.

Julie Speer: What was the time frame when your kids started school?

Landri Taylor: Well my youngest daughter didn’t start school until about 85, but my oldest daughter was already in school when we bought our house in Montbello, she was already in first grade. Her first school was John Amesse Elementary School, and she went John Amesse Elementary School to Martin Luther King Middle School and the Montbello High School.

Julie Speer: Did both of them go to Montbello?

Landri Taylor: Both of my daughters went to Montbello, graduated from Montbello. And from Montbello the oldest one went to CU-Boulder and the youngest one went to CSU, I think in Fort Collins. I have a son too, but he was already out of school by the time that I moved here to Denver.

Julie Speer: Tell what years your daughters graduated from Montbello respectively, and what their high school experience was like.

Landri Taylor: My older daughter graduated in 1991 from Montbello High School. My youngest daughter graduated in 2000 from Montbello High School. They had what I would call a typical high school like. Enjoying not only their friends, but actively involved in a number of different after school activities from track, to basketball, to tennis, to gymnastics and also in art, art classes that they would participate in. It would be the typical what I would call high school, middle school as well as elementary school experience for my kids.
Montbello was one of those communities where we were known for our achievements both in academics as well as in athletics. We would compete in debate challenges, we would compete in liberal arts types of exhibits and such, my youngest daughter was really good in terms of her drawing, here penmanship and her painting. With the oldest daughter as well involved in painting pictures and doing things that I would call more arts and entertainment types of curricula. But she was also a great track star, she won with Montbello the state championship when she was there in high school. She was also on the basketball team and my youngest daughter was on the tennis team and did a lot of after school activities, running kids all over the city to compete in various sporting events. It was a typical what I would call parent as well as teenage daughters experience growing up in Montbello.

Julie Speer: I understand that some of the students from Montbello were bused. How is it that your girls weren't bused?

Landri Taylor: Timing. It was just timing. Attitudes were beginning to change in terms of forced busing and just by the luck of the lottery system, they didn't have to go outside of Montbello.

Julie Speer: So there was a lottery to see who's bused? Explain that to me because I had never heard that before.

Landri Taylor: We didn't have to really participate in that because of the fact that our girls were at that time, really had what you call a priority for their school. When we enrolled in John Amesse, the priority for her going to John Amesse was a proximity zone and we lived just down the street from John Amesse.

When it came time for the middle school to be build, which was Martin Luther King School, that school needed to also accommodate obviously kids that lived throughout Montbello and Green Valley Ranch. So there weren't enough kids actually in Green Valley Ranch, which meant that kids would be bused from Montbello to Green Valley Ranch where Martin Luther King School existed in order to populate the school. It was really a matter of phasing and timing at that time that our kids didn't have to be bused outside of Montbello.

Julie Speer: Everybody's had a different experience that I've talk to so it's been interesting to paint the picture of the tapestry there. When was the time
frame that Montbello was having some of its challenges and was in the national news? For some of the gangs and violence in the schools?

Landri Taylor: The first what I would call episode of Montbello and Green Valley Ranch actually being in the national news was on 60 minutes, when a story was done about one particular classroom in Martin Luther King Middle School at the time, that was totally out of control. A newsman went in there with a camera and showed how disorganized the teacher was and how out of control the students were in that particular classroom. Some students were sleeping, some students were running around and playing and throwing paper airplanes and such and talking loud while the teacher actually did nothing in the classroom.

There you go, in terms of painting and image and a picture about what it was like in Montbello and Green Valley Ranch at that particular time. I'm sure the episode was right around the mid 90's, I forget the exact year, it could have been 1994. It was during a time when obviously we were having educational challenges in the Montbello and Green Valley Ranch neighborhood, because at that same time teachers did not want to come to Montbello or Green Valley Ranch to teach kids. Most of the teachers were forced placed into the schools in Montbello and Green Valley Ranch.

Forced placement simply meant that if you did not get your first choice about where you wanted to teach, and you didn't get your second choice and as time went on you were guaranteed a job then the district would force place you were the vacancies actually existed and since there were more vacancies in the far north east communities of Denver, in the Montbello and Green Valley Ranch communities, more teachers were being forced to be placed in those school out in Montbello and Green Valley Ranch. As teachers showed up really with an attitude of "I don't want to really be here, and I don't really care about being part of the culture of this very diverse community", then we as residents noticed this, fought against this.

It took us a while to actually have DPS eliminate the forced placement which didn't really happen until the early 2000's, but at that time it was a long fight in order to try to find teachers that wanted to be in Montbello and Green Valley Ranch and wanted to teach our kids. It was important to us that we also wanted to grow our own teachers in Montbello and Green Valley Ranch as well. But often times we would find even through
that process, because there were opportunities for teachers to teach throughout the Denver DPS system that those teachers would often times end up at East or Manual High School which were communities and schools that needed their expertise as well and a lot of kids of color were going to those schools, so we understood that as well but we also had the negative impact because we didn't have teachers of color that would come back to what we would call the traditional outlying communities of Denver or Green Valley Ranch and Montbello.

Often times, as you can recall in those years, those two communities were geographically separated from the rest of the city due to the Stapleton Airport. Most people would ask "Is Montbello and Green Valley Ranch part of Denver or is it part of Adam's county and Aurora?". A lot of times people simply thought that because it was on the other side of Stapleton Airport that we weren't really part of Denver. That persisted for a long time until the neighborhood organizations in both of those communities, me also serving as our neighborhood president in those years, was able to re-brand ourselves as not only part of Denver but being the front door to the city and county of Denver as you come along I70 into the downtown area.

We would brand ourselves as the community of pride, integrity and respect and say that we were the front door to the Rocky Mountain city of Denver, and say that it was the only place that as you came into Denver, if you were to stand almost at any point in the Montbello and Green Valley Ranch communities, you could see over 300 miles of panoramic mountain view. Pikes Peak, Pass Long's Peak on any given day. We would talk about this being the center of Colorado, that alone the center of the world for telecommunications, for the experience of being able to network and be around people that were like you. And we said people like you are people that are both middle class people that are hard working white collar, as well as blue collar workers. You'd find teachers, policemen, we would really talk about what the community was really all about.

That began a very strong momentous effort of people looking the the Montbello and Green Valley Ranch for business opportunities. There you emerged with business opportunities that would come out of the Montbello industrial park. Which meant that in that park where you would have jobs, like Samsonite where their headquarters was, you would have the jobs that would exist now in that part of far north east
Denver, and people from other parts of Denver would now travel to that part and see for themselves that this was not only a healthy community but a vibrant community and that helped the branding of our kids who often times had heard that "Oh, it's not Montbello, it was Montghetto".

They were able to say "Well, this might be the ghetto, but this is a different type of ghetto that anyone would enjoy living in because not only are we number one often times in sport, but we are often times competing number one for academic achievements through the 80's and the early 90's. And that yes indeed, I have fallen off the railroad track in the mid 90's in terms of achieving the type of educational programs that we wanted our kids to enjoy, we got back on the track, it took us a while but we eventually got back on the track later on in 2010/2011, to bring great educational opportunities to the community.

We know that communities tend to have what we call- Let's say not we, what I call our 25 year lifespans. Where in that 25 years you will find that the generation that lived there has raised their family there, that kids leave. Sometimes the kids come back to begin the next generation of families being connected to the community. In that 25 years period, you'll find that sometimes the kids will come back but won't stay because now they're dream and aspirations were to go to other places and establish their job, their family, connections and not at the old neighborhood anymore.

You find that across America, not just in Denver, where you will see that during the span of period of time, in order for communities to stay strong now, they have to have great schools in order to keep those communities strong so that you continue to build and grow your own. And if you don't have great schools in those communities, not only do you lose the kids that are in those schools but now you begin to lose the foundational parents and families that were there that are now going to move to where great schools are.

It was so important to us as we looked at the footprint of what was happening with our schools that in order to stabilize the community both from a business standpoint, because businesses don't want to locate in communities that don't have a pipeline for people that can take the jobs that they offer. We needed to make sure that our schools were excellent to be the foundational piece that brings businesses and families and connects the next generation of those kids that graduate out of our
schools to come back to the communities, like my kids did. When my kids left and went to school, they came back to the community to begin their next phase of their life. When then came and graduated out of college. It was that type of building that we actually needed and I was glad to see that was taking a foothold with many of our families in the Montbello and Green Valley Ranch communities.

Julie Speer: When we talk about the turnaround, were you still neighborhood association at that point? What were you doing?

Landri Taylor: During the turnaround of our schools in far north east communities of Montbello and Green Valley Ranch I was actually the president and CEO of the Urban League, which is a historic over 100 year civil rights organization that began back in 1910, with affiliates all across the United States and I was CEO and president of the Denver affiliate here. As president one of our missions was how to continue to be relevant to all of our communities that served.

One of our platforms was to be relevant in the area of education and how to make sure that education continued to be portrayed as the gateway toward getting to the American dream. That turnaround of our schools was necessary because at that stage in the history of those communities the schools were poor.

Julie Speer: What time frame is this?

Landri Taylor: We're talking about from 1999 until 2011. The schools were at the lowest point of being rated in Denver Public Schools. We were unstable in terms of keeping principals, keeping teachers and keeping families. Families would love to live and would buy homes in Montbello or Green Valley Ranch but would then take their kids to schools outside of the community. And were willingly taking their kids outside of the community, whether it be to George Washington or Thomas Jefferson or East High Schools in order to receive the high quality educational opportunities that those schools actually offered. We didn't have that at that period in time in Montbello.

Seeing that as the president and CEO of the Urban League, I saw a need, and having lived in the community and having kids that attended elementary, middle and high school in that community, I was keenly aware of the problem that had been persisting in the communities for a
long time. For me it was a reason that even though I had the means, my wife and I were middle class with the means to take our kids out of the community and give them a better educational experience outside of the community, we sat down with our kids and said that we believed that it's best to stay here and change our community for the best. We told our kids we don't know exactly what that means for them, but that we would work with them to make sure that they receive all the tutoring that we could give them and the additional educational assistance that they will need in order to go to college.

We did that. Even during a period when the schools were not great in Montbello and we achieved that with our kids. We're glad that we made the choice, but it came a period of time where I had to reflect on why I did that. Why me and my wife decided to do that. It was 2009 that I looked at what was going in on in those communities, and I asked myself "Would I have made the same choice in 2009 that I chose for my family in the mid 90's?", the answer was no. I would have taken my kids outside of the community. That answer didn't sit well with me because it had deteriorated so bad in our community in terms of educational opportunity, that I felt some responsibility for not being as actively involved in what was going on in the community at that point. That my kids had left, they were doing their thing and now I had the luxury of not being as actively involved in the schools. That was a mistake, I fell, on my part that should have continues that fight at that level.

Instead what I chose to do though was stay connected on a foundation in those communities where we could raise money and give kids scholarships to go to school. My fight for better achievement had actually evolved to the point where I now sat in a position to help fund college education for kids that were coming out of that community versus actually being at the grass root level of trying to change what the educational choices were in our community. I should have stayed connected to both of those at the time, so I take responsibility along with many other parents that feel the need that when they look back they say "You know, we might have missed an opportunity". Had we just continued along not only that course but also add an additional chapter in our challenge to make sure that we keep education at the high level.

That opportunity presented itself a second time in 2010. It was at that point that I took hold of that opportunity and accepted to be the coach
here of the turnaround for our schools in Montbello and Green Valley Ranch.

Julie Speer: Who is the other coach?

Landri Taylor: The other coach is here [inaudible] elected city council person, Stacie Gilmore. Stacie and I work together with many of the neighborhood and community leaders to put before the community over a year's period of time to draw up the kind of schools that they would want to have in the community. Those choices as they were outline we were able to implement and begin this road of not only recovery, but turning around the educational choices that parents and students would have in Montbello and Green Valley Ranch.

I'm so proud of how it has progressed. There have been some low moments in terms of turnaround and there have been some very high moments. The low moments are always in that you have to be able to communicate over and over again, because the challenge is hard, but to be able to communicate over and over again to parents and kids. Why are we on this pathway? What is the outcome? Will it actually work? Will it do any good? Those high moments are when you the first graduating classes of the turn around where kids are now graduating and are forced to think about their choices of whether to go to Yale or Harvard or Stanford or some Ivy league school or stay here in the state.

They have to make a choice now and those are choices that weren't on the plate for them years ago. Now we see that as kids struggle about "Do I go to Stanford or do I go to Harvard? Maybe I'll go to Yale or maybe I'll go to Princeton". You see that in these kids and you look at them, and the pride in their face and the pride in their parents or guardians face about ... It was worth it. We didn't know if it would work but we're so glad that we stuck with it and that we enrolled our kids. There were things that we weren't onboard with, but the things that we are onboard with was the eventual that our kids now have this opportunity for greatness, to go to college, to graduate from college.

As we always would tell our kids and tell our parents, our goal is not to graduate them from high school, our goal is to graduate them from college. Because we understood that there's an additional challenge that many kids, especially kids of color, face when they get to school that we wanted to plant this seed in their head that the goal is to graduate from
college, that graduating from high school was simply a step. But the step that you want to make is graduating from college.

Julie Speer: Was closing Montbello one of those low moments.

Landri Taylor: Yeah. Me and my friends, we look at that differently. Closing Montbello was not a low moment. Closing Montbello and reopening Montbello High School was the first step toward a better moment, toward a better opportunity. It was done in such a way that we didn't have a prototype or a blueprint to just pull of the shelf and say "This is how you walk down, crawl down, or run down this pathway on making schools great". We were creating and writing the blueprint along the way on how to do it. It was good because there was no other community in my opinion in the country that would have been strong enough, that would have had the fortitude, that would have the strength, the courage to say that we will lead this effort and we will show and share with others how to do it as well and do it more successfully than we were able to do it. And at the same time making sure that they understood that the goal at the end of this journey is worth the travel along the pathway.

We took that challenge head on, knowing that it was going to be tough, it was going to be a hard fight in order to achieve some of the successes that we just realized this year with some of our schools graduating their first class after the turnaround. I really love the fact that being on the school board I attended a lot of these graduations ceremonies. When you go to one of our turnaround schools like Collegiate Preparatory Academy, they graduated a majority of the kids that were in the 9th grade to seniors. And if I remember the numbers, it was well over two thirds of the kids now have opportunities for four year schools that they may not have had before turnaround.

I look at the kids in fact as we talked about Martin Luther King then and Martin Luther King today. Martin Luther King today graduated 137 students out of 140 students that entered as 9th graders. To have that type of success that our Denver School of Science and Technology graduated 100% of those kids that stuck with it from the 9th grade to the 12th grade. Some of the kids didn't make it along the way. They were happy though that there were other opportunities for them to take advantage of in our Montbello and Green Valley Ranch communities.
One of those opportunities was one of our pathway schools PUSH academy, where if kids felt that this way of obtaining my high school diploma so that I can move on in life is too big of a challenge for me at one school, then at least I have choices of other schools to go to. And as kids will do they will figure it out along the way that "I might not fit here, but I do fit better here. Maybe I'm more arts minded than I am science minded". So to provide the community and parents and kids the kind of choices that, okay if you are more arts molded then maybe you will go to and chose Noel Community Arts versus Denver School of science and technology.

To give that type of broad choice for kids and parents to be able to choose from, to say that we know one size doesn't fit all, so let's make sure we provide the choices so that people do not have to leave the neighborhood in order to find not only the choice that best fits their child but also the choices that exist in their neighborhood for them that can produce the kind of results that parents and guardians want for their young kids, for their families. It's exciting and it was very exciting to see kids walk across the stage at many of these graduation ceremonies, receive the diploma and then hear about their next step, where they were going, whether it was the University of Colorado at Denver or whether it was going to the University of Wyoming. That now, that next step in their educational pathway was there for them to grab and take hold of and enjoy and move forward. It's great to see that.

Julie Speer: What's happening at the Evie Dennis campus. Maybe you could tell me in a sentence or two what is happening there because it seems like that could be a really interesting model in terms of campus sharing. Is that the idea with that campus? Is it a model for the rest of the district?

Landri Taylor: The idea for the Evie Dennis Campus is to make sure that it is a center piece for educational achievement from pre-K all the way up to high school. You'll have day care, you'll have kindergarten, you'll have middle school, high school, you have an alternative school there for kids to also go and learn culinary arts as well. It's to provide a place, a centerpiece so that families who are so fortunate to be able to choice in to any of the choices at the campus can find themselves very happy and satisfied with the offering. Of course the flip side of the coin is that you only have so many spaces for families to be able to choice in. The creature of our success when it comes to choice, and you begin to turn schools around and they begin to be above average and excellent schools, is that it brings
families back to the neighborhoods that they have moved out of before. Or they may have taken their kids to other schools outside of the neighborhood.

Now you have this flood of parents that say "You know, I don't have to drive 15 or 20 miles to take my kid to an excellent school now, it's right here in our community". One of the best examples of that is the Stapleton Park Hill community where I've heard of parents where there are 130 and 140 on a waiting list to go to one of our high performing middle schools. It was just a few years ago where more than 80% of the parents living in those neighborhood were choosing out, the school was practically empty. DPS' effort to turn that situation around and to make sure there was an excellent school, now we have those parents choosing back to want to attend their neighborhood school. It's a good thing. Unfortunately now there's no space because the community has grown in size, where it was this size before now we find that it's this size now. We can't accommodate all of the children at the schools that are there now in those communities.

We have to address that from a Denver Public School point and that is to make sure that we turn around all of our schools, make all of our schools excellent throughout the district. That's a great challenge to have. Absolutely because we have a template on what it takes to be a great school. The elements of that are number one you have to have a great school leader in the school, because you understand that great teachers don't follow poor school leaders. When you have a great school leader, they actually attract great school teachers and they also attract great school staff, from whether it's the person that works in the cafeteria or the janitor or the staff administrative person as well as the teachers.

What happens with a great leader in a school is that it begins to create culture and kids see it and they feel it. The adults feel it, the parents feel it and this culture of excellence emerges where everyone understands what the in goal is of going to school. It is not extended day care, it is about educating our kids to be better, to know more and achieve more than we as their parents did, to afford them that opportunity, that pathway where we can look at them for answers, versus them having to look at us for answers. It's to create that institution, that place of learning, where kids and parents and school teachers and staff run to everyday. They can't wait. They hate to leave at the end of the day.
because so much greatness has gone on inside the building. They can't wait until the next day.

To create that throughout the whole Denver Public School system is our charge to do that. We have enough seats within Denver Public School District to accommodate kids. But some of those seats aren't in our best achieving schools. What we have to do is make sure we work to turn that situation where all the schools are great. I hate color codes. My colleagues on the board know I don't like labeling red and orange and blue and green. I think it does more to harm the community than it does to just harm the school.

Julie Speer: But do you think transparency is a good idea though?

Landri Taylor: Transparency is good but only let's be transparent using a rating that doesn't color code unjustly communities. If the school is red, it impacts the whole community in terms of red. And that's a brand that it's very difficult to reverse. When people and businesses look at an area to either start their business, keep their business or move their business to and they see that it's a red colored neighborhood, then that is not the kind of face that really tells the story of transparency of what's going on in a community. It leaves out the story of who the community is, who are the kids, who are the parents, who are the teachers, what are they actually doing? Wanting to connected and educate kids to a greater experience in their education.

Even though as I look at when my kids were in schools, those schools would be rated red. When you walk in those schools and you see what's going on in those schools then you know that the color doesn't tell the story. The color leaves out a big piece of the story. It doesn't tell the story about how many parents are volunteering in the school to help their kids move up the ladder of reading, move up the ladder of writing and that those kids are going to catch up in a greater way because of parental engagement, because of student and peer engagement, where the kids that actually know it begin to teach and help other students on how to get there and show them that this is how you do it, this is how you learn.

When you create that kind of environment then the color starts to fade and as you walk into buildings where you see that the schools have been rated a particular color and it doesn't tell the entire picture then you
begin to understand that, yeah, we understand what the color of term of status means today but it doesn't tell the story of what's actually going on today. Because when kids are tested and say that ... You know, a majority of our kids English isn't their. That means that these are kids that come from countries all over the world we often paint this picture that all of these kids come from Mexico. No, they don't just come from Mexico, they come from East Africa, West Africa, from Europe, from China. We have kids that come from all over the world. When they come in they have to adjust and we have to be able to provide the curriculum to first make sure that we are testing them in their native language and making sure they can read and write and be proficient in their native language and then transition them to how you read and write in English.

That's not a red, blue, green, purple thing. That is just doing the work, having great school leaders, great teachers, great staff on hand that understand the transition of, where someone begins is not where they're going to end. I do have the difficulty of looking at our color coded rating system. I understand why it's there, how it evolved but we need to adjust that so that it tells, when we're talking about transparency, it tells the whole story about what's going on in a particular school.

Julie Speer: How do you define or explain what the achievement gap is?

Landri Taylor: I have difficulty with the achievement gap as we talk about it today. That stems from the fact of where I came from, growing up in the 50's in a segregated section of Dallas, going to segregated schools where we were taught and our experience of growing up in school is that we had to be better no more than our white counter parts. We always excelled in reading and writing and arithmetic in the segregated schools in which I was a part of that environment. When I left that environment when my parents moved to California, when I was in the 5th grade of course I'm in an integrated environment now and the high bar of expectation wasn't in those integrated classrooms.

I found that that was a luxury for me because I was at least a year or in some cases a year and a half ahead of my peers in those classrooms, but it was also a detriment in that I got lazy. I could play around and it was easy for me not to be very attentive in class, I'd doodle, I'd day dream, I wasn't disruptive, I just wasn't paying attention in the classroom. It left
me with this opinion about the achievement gap and why it exists and it left me understanding that achievement gaps are not racial in terms of their evolution. They really are socio-economic in terms of their evolution and that the pathway on their being zero achievement gap had everything to do with the leadership in the schools that I attended in the segregated south and the high bar of expectation.

I also believe that part of our history that I've experienced in terms of the achievement gap has to do with America's achievement gap, not just the racial achievement gap that has often referred to about the gap between white kids and kids of color. America's achievement gap I believe started and really was severely impacted in the 70's, right after the Vietnam war, where the expectation of great education for our K through 12 classrooms throughout America was not a priority anymore. That America in essence took a timeout because they were sick of war, they were sick of protests and what America wanted to do was just look away and not concentrate and focus on our educational platform that we needed to continue to keep pace with the developing world around us.

What we found is that the developing world around us took advantage by sending their kids to American schools, particularly our colleges where kids from other countries, Africa, India, Europe, South America would then come to our higher learning institutions, get that great education and then bring it back home to compete with America. It was a period of time where it wasn't just the achievement gap as we talk about it in terms of racial and ethnic achievement gap, it was America's achievement gap. The group that benefited the least from that period of time though, were people of color, because people of color were not in charge at a level where they could afford the luxury of not having education as that pinnacle of culture in the community.

We all, whether we were black, white, brown, we took a timeout in the 70's that we're still today paying for with the achievement gap. But I can tell you there's plenty of great examples to use when we say "Is there achievement gap between kids of color and Anglo kids?", and you look at the examples across a wide spectrum across the country and you say "This is indeed a racial achievement gap, it truly is a socio-economic achievement gap". You look at where kids went to school and the status of those schools and find that those schools were very low achieving schools. It's almost like expecting someone, you and I, to be given a job in a foreign country and on day one, without speaking the language being
expected to be successful that first day on the job and we can't understand what people are saying.

That's how our educational system had been, is that we multiplied institutions across America in low, poor socio-economic communities without the resources, without the human capital that would take the very little resources and educate the kids in those communities. Most of America is centered in urban communities and when you have a poor structure of education in those urban communities, you get what you sow. You will reap what you sow, and that is the fact that we find whether you're white, black, brown, if you're in a low performance school you will be tested as low performing on that date you take the test. It's a matter of the kind of opportunity, the kind of information, the kind of education that you get in the school in which you attend.

That was part of our realization about making sure there are great schools in every zip code throughout the Denver area. Particularly in Denver Public School district and that's been our focus, is making sure we have great schools. We've got a lot of work to do. We understand that, but we run toward the challenge because we know we have people who have the courage, the stamina, the persistence, the want to get up every day and go and chip away at this behemoth of the achievement gap. And we're doing it, we're doing it. The example I gave about students graduating at some of our schools, of first graduating class of some of our turnaround schools, it means we're doing it. The pace has to be quickened, we've got to accelerate it because we don't want to lose any more than we've lost already in this. We want to try to accelerate that pace, but this whole idea of achievement gap is one that we admit exists but we also know how to eliminate it and erase it from our communities and I'm anxious to do that.

I also know that sometimes it's really about kids at the kitchen table and parents and guardians and grandparents understanding that a lot of the achievement gap can be erased by making sure that kids understand where they are in terms of their educational status. My oldest, when she went to CU, and she got there that first week at CU and attended classes, it really made her understand that the high school grades that she had gotten even though there were A's were not the same level of A's that kids from other communities had received. She said "Dad, I'm a year, maybe a year and half behind" and she said "Now I understand what you were talking about when you said you wanted to make sure that we
She got it and she excelled, she caught up and surpassed. It was the same with my youngest daughter as well who went to CSU, she saw what her sister went through but she's smarter than the rest of us, so she got to CSU and said "Oh my god. Dad, I'm behind too. I got straight A's, how am I behind", and I said "Yes, you're behind but you saw your sister so you know what you have to do", and she did it as well. Kids just want to know where they are so they know how far they have to go in order to be at where they need to be. We can't be scared to tell them that.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk now about the segregation of DPS. Burt Hubbard has been doing great research looking at achievement and also enrollment by race, pre-busing, during busing and then right after busing and today. It’s basically shown that African American enrollment is pretty much the same, although there was a lot of African American families who moved to Aurora. But all things being equal stayed the same. Busing definitely helped the black and white integration. What’s happened now the research shows is that DPS now is more segregated than it was before busing, but it's a brown and white issue now, as opposed to necessarily a black and white issue. Although you go to some schools like Lincoln, it's 97% Latino, North 90% I think. There are really good examples of integrated schools and diverse schools like GW. Mostly though segregated. Talk about the reality of that and what you see as a school board member. Do you see that DPS has re-segregated?

Landri Taylor: Yes, I do see that DPS all across the district we have schools that when you go in and look at them you will see that classes seem to be segregated, that there are classes where you have black students that congregate or other classes like AP classes where you don't have that diversity as well. We have to make sure that we fix that, but in fixing that the outcome is that you want to have diversity and integration throughout all of the choices within a school building. A number of things that you have to do is making sure that first of all in every school building that there's equity for all kids to be tracked into excellent programs, much of that tracking occurs obviously in the primary grades and elementary.
So to begin to challenge ourselves on how to produce great kindergarten through third grade education, so that when kids are in the 3rd grade they're both literate and achieving. That you will find once you address that, regardless of what middle school or high school, that kids of all backgrounds, of all colors will be at a high achievement level regardless of whether one class is actually less integrated than another class. Those things can work themselves out, where kids gravitate toward the classes that they like, whether they are high achieving math classes or high achieving social science classes. They'll gravitate, but what you want to make sure is that once kids find their footing in a direction that they want to go in, that they are capable of being excellent in those programs, that they don't feel like they're missing in action in terms of their educational information and background and training.

There's a lot to do. My focus is not so much on integrating the schools, at least integrating the schools in terms of their diversity, racial diversity, my focus is integrating the schools in terms of their educational diversity. Making sure that high achieving educational platforms are in every school so that kids can receive that. So when you talk about a school like a Lincoln High School which is in the upper 90's in terms of its population of Latino students, that regardless of that, that the greatest educational experience and high achieving classes can be found in Lincoln High School. If you do that in every school then you will not miss the opportunity for kids to achieve in high performing classes.

It's almost like going to the School of Mines. Where the School of Mines is about engineering, so you don't send a student to the School of Mines if their focus isn't in engineering and math and science. You send them to a school or encourage them on a pathway that better fits what they are most interested in doing in their adult life. You want to give them those choices, but if those choices aren't there and they can only go to the School of Mines, then you're really not doing them a good service. We make sure that we have School of Mines types of curriculum in all of our schools and when you do that, then kids have that choice availability and you also have the equity of opportunity in all of our schools. That's where I'm focusing, to make sure that we have both kinds of curricula opportunities in all of our schools whether it's in the great far north east or it's in south east Denver, or north west Denver. It's how to be able to do that and create that.
It's not just snapping the fingers and saying and wishing that it happens. Again, it has to be with great school leaders. We have to be a place that attracts great school leaders, because we're competing with other school districts not just in Colorado but across the United States. It's about making sure we create where people want to be. The best that any organization, whether it's a public school or a company, is to make sure that your best cheerleaders about this being a great place to be are the people that are already there. Putting and investing in the people that we have in our school buildings is very critical, because they are the ones that are actually doing the work in the classrooms, doing the work in the school building. We have to make sure we invest in their leadership development and their teaching development to be able to provide what we all want for our kids to experience. That is a great educational opportunity.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about Northfield High School. The goal was to design it to have a certain ratio of free and reduced lunch seats. Are you familiar with that whole plan? I understand that now it’s going to be fine in the first five years or so but then what's going to happen down the road when all the Stapleton babies have grown up and they want their seat in their high school. Talk to me about what's happening with Northfield.

Landri Taylor: When we talk about Northfield High School and free and reduced lunching and what I would call social macro engineering of what we’re trying to get to in terms of the diversity of the school, we start off with this premise that in order to achieve diversity we need to make sure that we reserve a number of slots for children that come from free and reduced families. With that belief we think that we’re going to get the kind of racial and social diversity in the school. Sometimes it may occur and other times it may not occur, but we start off there in order to social engineer some diversity. And then we move toward a place we hope that it being a great school will also attract families, particularly families that are in that free and reduced category to be part of the neighborhood of Stapleton where Northfield resides.

I’ve been part in the past of working at Stapleton with Forest City to attract affordable housing for families that are in that lower socio-economic level in our community. When you have the housing that can accommodate families you will achieve some of the other diversity that you want in the schools, in some of the other things, jobs that we also want to address in those communities as well. There’s a lot of different
things that go on, just not [inaudible] reserving places for free and reduced children to attend a school.

We still don't want those families and those kids to have to travel 10 or 15 miles away just to attend a high performance school. We have to work with home builders and developers as well to say here's what we believe is the outcome of some of these strategic things we can do today. We will kick start it by making sure that families that are in a particular socio-economic category for free and reduced lunches can also find housing near the school so that they can be near their neighborhood school now.

How to actually create that? We're still an experiment in doing that. Like I told you earlier, communities typically have a 25 year lifespan and then they reinvent themselves again for the next 25 years of their lifespan. We're still experimenting with that at Stapleton. Our first house was built in 2002, and sold and occupied in 2002 and here we are in 2015, some 13 years into the 25 year cycle of a community life before it begins to reinvent and re-brand itself again.

We'll see what that's like, there is no "This is what it's going to look like" model, there's no blueprint to say this is actually what's going to happen. But we can encourage, we can put together some macro engineering types of things and encourage that this community is one that wants and encourage diversity with our schools, with our jobs, with our housing, with all the amenities that make up a community. From the religious entities to the types of social activities that will happen in a community.

Trying to macro engineer all of that is indeed what government is all about, trying to create the best for the largest number of its citizens. Northfield High is going to be a great high school, it will begin this fall with a great school leader. They are feverishly working on how to make sure that its first year is one that can be a school that invites people from all the surrounding communities to choice into. Of course if they're successful, in a few years we'll probably need another school there at Northfield to handle the demand for the high school.

Right now there are three buildings to the high school. We have platforms to build two additional buildings. We hope that we are in a position where the tax payers of Denver will approve the construction of more high schools in the Stapleton area to accommodate the growing need of the communities within that region. Those communities are both
Green Valley Ranch, Montbello, the Stapleton Park Hill community, as well as kids that may come from Commerce City or Adams County. We want to be in a position where we can offer a choice that kids that want to attend those schools and parents that want their kids to attend those schools can take advantage of that choice.

Julie Speer: Is it written that Stapleton families will have a seat at that school? Is Northfield a neighborhood school for Stapleton?

Landri Taylor: Northfield is the neighborhood school for Stapleton. The guarantee is that we will have enough seats for all the families that want to choice into Northfield High today. We don't what that looks like five years down the road, but we know that we have enough seats today for those families to get their choice into Northfield High School. We will continue to work and try to make sure we forecast when that need can be achieved to build more schools in the area that are high achieving schools. Right now DPS is only focused on turning around schools and to be an excellent school and building more schools that are excellent schools so that we continue to move ahead of the curve of achieving higher education for all of our kids.

It's a heavy lift but it's such a fun lift to make because people understand, parents understand and kids understand when you tell them what we're all trying to work toward. And they all help, we don't do this in isolation as a school board or as a DPS staff, it's done in collaboration with the communities, with the neighborhood, with teachers, with parents, with children. Everyone is involved in the collaborative "how to move ahead". We want to hear those voices, we want to make sure that we don't make people feel dis-invited from the table of communication on how to move forward.

Of course you'll always have a few that may not be ready to join the conversation. They want to see how things go, but we want to make sure that the door is always opened so people can come in and join us in that conversation as we move ahead.

Julie Speer: Is there a certain percentage of the houses that are being built at Stapleton that are going to be low income?

Landri Taylor: Yes. With respect to the redevelopment of the old Stapleton airport, what we call the Stapleton area now, the master developer is Forest City,
who actually signed the contract with the city and county of Denver to not only build the commercial, the residential component of the redevelopment but also the parks and infrastructure of that development as well. Part of the residential commitment is to have a certain percentage of the homes that are built to be affordable as well as a certain percentage of the rental apartments that are going to be build or have been built to be also affordable.

It is part of the make up, it's part of the vision that was first put together and approved by the city and county of Denver from 1995, today what we call the green book. The green book speaks about the diversity that is the vision for Stapleton, it speaks about education and parks and housing and all the components that make a great neighborhood.

Julie Speer: Do you know what percentage it is?

Landri Taylor: It's 20% of the rental housing and 10% of the for sale housing.

Julie Speer: Denver is growing and gentrification is an issue and there's folks that are talking about the suburbanization of poverty. Poverty now is being pushed out to Adams 14 or Commerce City, as folks move in. It's possible that in 50 years DPS is going to be all affluent families right? Talk about gentrification and growth and how DPS is going to manage all that.

Landri Taylor: When we talk about gentrification especially Denver Public Schools and the city and county of Denver, we have to respect the history of how all of this evolved. If we look at the 70's and 80's we'll find that families that lived in the urban core of Denver were moving out of Denver to find great schools for their kids because there wasn't a lot of opportunity and options and choices for great schools. A lot of families moved out of Denver to find those great schools and great neighborhoods for their families.

A lot of the growth today for Denver has to deal with families now moving back into Denver from the surrounding neighborhoods with their young family, with their young kids. The demand now has grown for schools to be great, for spaces to be available to accommodate families as they move back into the Denver city. So gentrification and its impact were simply one where the [inaudible] for the properties in urban Denver exist today because families in the 70's and 80's moved out. Now those families or other families are moving back.
There's a significant price change in property today versus where that property was priced at 30 years ago. You find that the people that have lived in those neighborhoods during that 30 year period of time are somewhat being priced out of the residential marketplace because they can no longer afford either the property taxes or the homes that they live in due to the inflation of their property.

There again, it's one of these things that happens, not just in urban America by the way, it does happen in rural America, if you were to look at the abandonment of family farms throughout the mid-west. What happens is that as families have had to abandon their farms and their kids don't come back to those farms and take those over, you have multinational corporations now come in and buy and establish town centers for their workers in places where families used to be able to afford and now they can't afford.

It's not as visible of gentrification that is now happening in rural America, but it's the same thing. We have the biggest impact of course in urban America. How to address gentrification? Probably just like we addressed gentrification for the first 100 years of New York City Manhattan where the inner core of New York City was where all the affordable housing was. And now it's just the reverse. There isn't affordable housing in New York City, in Manhattan. All of the upper class and income class is the only class that can afford to live in Manhattan where if you were to look at Manhattan and Brooklyn and all of the surrounding barrels in the 30's, and then the 40's and then the 50's, that was the ghetto. Today that is not the ghetto.

Families are being priced out of that market as well in terms of gentrification. There's no answer on how do you stop it? What do you want to stop? Opportunity? No, you don't want to stop opportunity, you want to open the doors to opportunity. We have to still be able to understand the roots of gentrification. It's not that it's a bad thing, but the way that people sometimes address it may not be sustainable on what they're trying to do to address it, to keep neighborhoods as they looked 20 and 30 years ago. That is not the case today, those neighborhoods have changed. Where traditionally Five Points was an African American centered community, today the face of that community has changed.
Julie Speer: Because our neighborhoods are segregated the only way to combat that is like what you're doing at Stapleton, you've got to have the affordable housing as part of the plan otherwise there's no way you can have diverse socio-economic towns, it will all be just affluent.

Landri Taylor: Five Points today is not the Five Points of 20 or 30 years ago where traditionally Five Points had been one of the communities in our city that was an African American community. Today the face of that community has changed where it is not majority African American, it's changed to where very few African American families still reside in the Five Points area. But those families you would find have probably moved to the suburbs. There's some gentrification that actually happens in the suburbs as well. We only think about it terms of the urban core of Denver but if you got out to some of the older established communities, neighborhoods that exist in Arvada, that exist in Westminster, that exist in Southeast Aurora, you will see that those neighborhoods are slowly changing from how they looked 30 years ago.

There's a change that happens not only in the urban core but also in the suburban core as well. As we often say likes attract likes, so you'll find that people as they progress in their jobs, they tend to want to move in social circles and be part of social neighborhoods that are moving in that same direction of realizing the American dream. If their dream is over in Reunion in Commerce City, you will find that people will start to move there. If the dream is over in Highlands Ranch you'll find that people will gravitate there.

Now we find that many young people feel that their dream in the Highlands in north Denver. The people that have lived there for 30 and 40 years are shocked to find that all these new immigrants are coming in, the immigrants to them are the yuppies that are coming in with their dogs and with their baby carriages going up and down the street. They look at that and think "Oh my god, my neighborhood has changed. It's not the way it was". If they wait 25 years they'll see it will change again. Those young families will be older, their kids will be grown and go off to college and the neighborhood will find its new look.

Julie Speer: Do you have any final comments on the achievement gap, the segregation in Denver or any final thoughts you want to leave us with?
Landri Taylor: When we look at what's going on across America in terms not only just the achievement gap and we look at the segregation or integration of neighborhoods across the landscape of America, some of the stuff we can celebrate. Celebrate in terms of the culture of integration that is happening throughout neighborhoods as well, that even though we may find pockets of segregation in certain areas of our culture, even then we find that there's an integration of that culture with other communities and with other ethnic and religious organization.

The dragon boat festival. When you look at a cultural event like that that began to celebrate the Asian community and you look out there and you see people of all backgrounds now, of all ethnicities and different socio-economic levels, participating in an event that was a culture recognition event. That's integration also. When we think about all the different challenges that we're faced with, the city and county of Denver is the leader in terms of how you address these things in a social correct equitable manner, so that people don't feel abandoned, people don't feel like they are disengaged, that they are indeed invited to be part of the greater conversation and of the solutions in which a community find itself and the place of being a leader to show not only communities and neighborhoods in America but communities and neighborhoods throughout the world. Because we really we are one people. We're just one people.
Laura Lefkowits
School Board Member 1995-1999
Denver Public Schools

Julie Speer: Talk to me about your own kids. How many do you have?

Laura Lefkowits: I have 2 children and they are currently 36 and 32. They were in the Denver public schools in the 90s. Their neighborhood school, our neighborhood school was Stedman Elementary in Park Hill. Stedman had been a school that was bused for integration under the court order and shortly before my children started going to school, it was what’s called de-paired. The court decided that there were enough white kids in the neighborhood by shifting the boundary a little bit to allow Stedman to be a walk-in neighborhood school. At that time it was about 30% white. Our kids went there. Most of the kids on our block chose other options, did not go there.

Julie Speer: Why did you choose to send them there then?

Laura Lefkowits: We chose to send them there because we value the diversity that they were going to experience in a school like that. We also wanted to support the public schools. We had moved to Denver in 1980 and had learned about the history of desegregation in the court order partly because we lived in Park Hill. We learned that history of the neighborhood just from our neighbors and from being part of it. We understood that it was important for white families to support the Denver Public Schools by being in them, by sending their kids there because that was the only hope really of truly integrating the system, we needed more white kids. We chose to stick with our neighborhood school. Our children had a great experience there. Then they went on to Smiley Middle School and East High School.
Julie Speer: If your students were there historically, talk about how Smiley was then. Would that be in the '80s?

Laura Lefkowits: It was the early '90s. My son graduated in 1996 from East High School. It was late '80s, early '90s and then my daughter in 2001.

Julie Speer: Was it a middle school or elementary?

Laura Lefkowits: It was a middle school. It was sixth, seventh and eighth. It was an excellent school at that time. My kids had excellent teachers. For both of them Smiley was the school of choice for their friends. There was a group of kids who were fairly high achieving and they were interested in school and there were parents that were involved in the school. It was a very good experience for them.

Julie Speer: In terms of the racial diversity, do you have any sense of what it was at that time?

Laura Lefkowits: Again, it was a minority of white kids but probably more than 30%, probably more like 40% white kids. It was diverse.

Julie Speer: You had a great experience with Smiley. Do you know what happened? Why it got so bad?

Laura Lefkowits: I don't know why it got so bad but I do know that a lot of the white kids stopped choosing it. There were more as they were more and more middle school options in Denver Public Schools. There were fewer white kids who went there and then as I understand it there were more discipline issues and maybe the rigor, the quality went down. I don’t really know that history. I know that they tried a number of different things to make that school work. Certainly, when my kids were there, it was a neighborhood school and it was thriving. It was a good school for my kids anyway.

Laura Lefkowits: As my children were involved in the Denver Public Schools, I became involved in the Denver Public Schools as a parent. This was in the early '90s when the teachers struck. We had a teacher’s strike in 1993. That was resolved by Governor Romer, rewriting the teacher contract in establishing site based decision-making councils called collaborative decision-making councils or CDMs. This was the first opportunity for parents to be part of a governing body, a decision-making body for each
school. Each school had a committee that was comprised of the principal, teachers, parents and community members.

I joined the CDM in elementary at Stedman Elementary and learned a lot about the operation of the district at that time and particularly some of the centralization of budgeting and other decision-making that made it very hard to actually carry out the CDM responsibilities because we didn’t have the information that we needed at the site. That is what got me engaged in the district and interested in running for the school board. I ran for the school board in 1995 on a platform largely about this decentralization movement that was very popular in the ‘90s, the idea that you would devolve decision-making down to the local level at the school where the theory went.

People would make better decisions for kids because they were closer to the kids and they knew the kids and they knew specifically what the kids at, say, Stedman Elementary needed which could be different from the kids at even Park Hill Elementary a mile away. The idea was to give more power and authority and autonomy to the schools but in order to make that happen, there were many things at the central office that needed to change. That was really my platform. That was what I was all about when I ran for the school board and was elected in May of 1995.

The issue of the court order in desegregation while it was of interest to me because I lived in Park Hill and I had actually done some research about it for the League of Women Voters and written a little pamphlet and so on. It was not the hot topic in that election campaign at all. In September of that year, just 4 months after I was elected, I was sitting in the superintendent’s office, happened to be, and Michael Jackson, the district attorney, walked in and said it’s over. What he was referring to was the 26-year-old court order desegregation case, the Keyes case.

That event changed my whole tenure on the board. The things that I thought I was going to be working on were not what I would end up working on and basically we were faced with having to redesign the district without federal oversight which had been in place for 26 years. The changes that we had to make were pretty profound because the busing that had taken place and the magnet schools that had been put into place to encourage voluntary integration, the white flight exodus of white students in the first 10 years after busing started really in 1969 in a limited fashion, 1973 for the whole district.
We lost 30,000 white kids in Denver Public Schools, so enrollment went from about 96,000 kids to about 64,000 kids. Then it continued to decline. The percentage of white kids continued to decline. The percentage of Latino kids continued to increase. The African-American population did also decline but was more steady than the other 2 and so because of those demographic changes, the district was constantly having to redesign the student assignment policy and plan to accommodate what the court required in terms of levels of racial diversity and what the population of the school district itself could accommodate.

When you were down to less than 30% of your enrollment being white and because the court did not … This was an important part of the Keyes case, the court did not count integration between black students and Latino students as true integration. They were not allowed to desegregate one another. You really only had white kids who could provide the kind of quotas which the court was really requiring.

Julie Speer:  Do you know what those quotas were?
Laura Lefkowits:  They varied over the years but there was an ideal of plus or minus 15% of the district averages for each of the racial groups in a school. Overtime, if the district could show as it could that the enrollment in a neighborhood simply wouldn’t allow that then some schools were de-paired, it was called, where the busing was ended for some schools.

Julie Speer:  What do you mean about 15%? Do you mean that this school had to mirror the community? Describe what that means.
Laura Lefkowits:  It meant the 15% within the racial categories within the enrollment of Denver Public Schools which was not the same as the community. In the community in a neighborhood, there were vastly more white children than were in the neighborhood school in many places. Over this period of time, the neighborhoods did not integrate. The neighborhoods continued to be segregated. Of course the segregation of the neighborhoods was something that the district used to defend itself against the accusation that it was discriminating in its student assignment policy.

The district always said we believe in neighborhood school and we place schools where the children are and if the neighborhoods are monoracial, that’s not our problem, that’s someone else’s problem if it is a problem
but what we’re doing is giving children schools close to their homes, schools where most of them can walk to and so forth. This neighborhood school policy was something that was very important in the district and was ended when the court order was imposed because you couldn’t really desegregate schools if they were going to be neighborhood schools in almost every case ironically with the exception of some of the Park Hill schools. That was the more naturally integrated neighborhood. Then what happened is that schools were paired.

Julie Speer: How did you choose the pairing?

Laura Lefkowits: This was something called the Finger Plan, John Finger who came with this plan at the beginning of the court order. To make it less disruptive for students, each school, a school of high minority school was paired with a high white school. The children either went to their home school for first through third grade and then the paired school fourth through sixth grade or the opposite. Every child had the chance to be at their home school, their neighborhood school for at least half of their elementary education.

All kids could stay at their home school for kindergarten. These schools were paired and so the idea was that you really had one community of students in 2 school buildings off and on opposite ends of the city going back and forth. Rather than scattering the children all across the city but at times for example some of the paired schools in the southeast part of Denver which were largely white schools when the busing began, they lost so many white students whose parents did not want them to be on the bus or they didn’t want them to go outside of the neighborhood or go to a minority school and they had options like private school or moving.

This was the rise of our suburbs including the Cherry Creek School District began to grow because white families in the southern part of Denver moved further south so that their children could still go to a neighborhood school. In some cases schools, the paired school didn’t have enough kids even to make the transfer sensible. Many of those schools were actually closed. Then the minority schools something had to be done with them and they might be paired with a different school or some of them were close and turned into magnet schools and so on.

This was a process that was going on constantly over 26 years. Until about the 80s when things started to stabilize a bit and it seemed like the
families that were going to leave Denver Public Schools have left and the ones were going to stay were there. At that point, it was still less than 30% white students in the district.

Julie Speer: Do you think busing in itself worked. Did it served its purpose?

Laura Lefkowits: Originally bussing served the purpose of improving the quality of education for minority students. At that time when the district was sued, the black schools and it really was a lawsuit about the black schools primarily. The Latino schools were different case although they were involved in the Keyes case. The quality of schools that were 90 to 100% black was much lower and very different from the white schools. The curriculum was different. The experience and qualifications of the teachers was lower. Materials were different. They were overcrowded. They were so overcrowded that the district parked trailers on the playgrounds on some of these schools, mobile classrooms rather than redrawing boundaries or sending those kids to white schools.

The district built a new school, Barrett Elementary at 29th in Colorado to address the overcrowding issue and that school when it opened was 98% black. The district was doing many things and making many policy level decisions that resulted in keeping black kids in all black schools and not improving the quality of those schools. Once those children were able to go to the white schools and the white children were going to the black schools, public pressure and district policy went about equalizing all of the schools.

That movement towards true equality, the educational opportunity across the entire district really began with the court order and I don't believe it would have happened at that time or anytime soon after that without the court order. From that standpoint it worked and the district really was never backtracked on that. The district always had to report test score results for example by race, by racial categories. Most schools didn’t have to do this at that time. Today because of federal law, the No Child Left Behind Act. All schools have to do that but for Denver, this was what was going on from the beginning of the court order.

The minority communities had activist organizations, advisory committees and so on that paid attention to those scores and attempted hold the district’s feet to the fire in terms of providing the kind of education that their children needed. In that respect, I think it worked.
Now there are other goals. Now, in terms of student achievement goals, the minority children in Denver public schools have not there is still an achievement gap. They have not risen to the same level as their white peers. There are many, many reasons for that. That didn’t happen for all of them.

For many of them and there are community leaders today who experienced busing, who are from minority communities and will testify that their experience in a white school allowed them to move forward and to get a college education and to be successful in their lives. Overtime, it happened less and less. Again, the schools at the end of bussing, they weren’t really integrated anyway because there were so few white kids. They weren’t integrated and there were pockets of all white schools and all black schools and all Latino schools just as there are today.

The other issue, the more idealistic issue that was part of bussing promise was to promote racial harmony to help students learn and understand kids who were different from them. To be able to live and learn together and that would overtime infuse the entire city with a more racially harmonious attitude. It could have encouraged less racial segregation in neighborhoods and so forth. Again, I think the initial years saw some of that but I certainly wouldn’t say that’s where we are today and I certainly wouldn’t say that busing in Denver Public Schools has did anything to promote racial harmony over the long term. I don’t think we’re there today at all.

Julie Speer: Speaking about the end, talk about some of the challenges or was it, oh, it’s over. Great. It’s all good. Talk about some of that timeframe in late ‘90s.

Laura Lefkowits: It was ’95 when the court order was lifted and we faced a number of challenges as a school board. The first was that in 1973, the citizens of Colorado passed what’s called the anti-busing amendment to the Colorado Constitution. It basically said that it was unlawful for a school district to assign children to a school for the purpose of achieving a racial balance. In other words exactly what Denver Public Schools had been ordered to do by the court was outlawed now by the constitution of the State of Colorado. That was overwritten by the federal control that the district was under. Basically every other district in Colorado could not bus
for integration but Denver must bus for integration because of the federal authority.

Julie Speer: Was there a name for that amendment or was it a number?

Laura Lefkowits: It’s called the busing clause and it’s in the education code. Right away, we were faced with being out of compliance with our state constitution, we thought based on our student assignment plan. Now, Judge Richard Matsch was the federal district court judge who was assigned the Denver case and oversaw the implementation of the court order for that whole time period. He said in his ruling that the anti-busing amendment was constitutional. The district had asked that he call it unconstitutional so that we could maintain our plan. He said it is constitutional.

He’s not overturning it but he said the district hasn’t have to change its student assignment plan because the student assignment plan was not intended to achieve a racial balance. It was intended to remove the vestiges of past segregation. That is legalese, legal convolutes in my view. It was a parsing of words but basically he was trying to say you have a leg to stand on district if you want to keep your same student assignment policy which included some busing.

Now, we heard loud and clear from the community including the state attorney general who was Gale Norton at the time that this was not their reading of it. That in fact the community expected the Denver Public Schools to follow that the Colorado Constitution in that regard and they would not tolerate anymore bussing for integration. Whether there was a legal threat or a political will or just the personal preference as a board member, the board agreed first of all to create a system of neighborhood schools, to provide a neighborhood school of assignment for every child.

Then we also decided to provide choice for every child. In other words, we would have open enrollment. If you did not want to go to your school of assignment, you were free to go to any school in the district as long as there was room for you and neighborhood students had to be accommodated first, as long as you could get yourself there. We realized that this was going to be an option that would be much more available to middle class families than to low income families. What we also did was we put into place something called special transportation zones. This was where we continued to provide a bus for students who wanted to stay with their paired school.
Initially, many families opted for this rather than disrupting the education of their child in the fourth grade moving them to a new school but by the time those kids had grown out of their elementary school. They did not continue sending their younger children on the bus. Pretty soon it was clear that the community we’re saying here’s transportation for you but no one was accessing it. They were choosing their neighborhood schools or they were choosing a magnet school for transportation still was provided with federal funds or some other option. Pretty soon we had most kids back in their neighborhood schools.

In drawing the neighborhood school boundaries we directed, as a board we directed the staff to make these as racially balanced as possible but it was not always possible without really gerrymandering in very weird ways and trying to keep kids from having to cross major thoroughfares and so on. It was just very difficult because our neighborhoods were segregated. The other reason that it was difficult is that the population of the district was more heavily concentrated in the northern part of the city because that’s where minority’s live and that was the majority of the enrollment in Denver Public Schools than in the southern part of the city.

We had buildings that if you assigned all the neighborhoods, children to them were at overcapacity in the north and we had under enrolled schools in the south of the city. We had to add on, make some accommodations for those. Then we also had some very popular magnet school programs in the northern part of the city that had to be moved in order to make wave for neighborhood schools. That was actually taking white kids out of that neighborhood because otherwise the minority children who lived around that school wouldn’t be able to go to it. It had been a school that had been integrated through this magnet program and it had to be moved into another area of the city.

There were a lot of problems with what we did but all along we were really following the political will of the community. There was no longer any appetite for busing including among the African-American and Latino leaders and parents in the city. No one wanted it. In fact, probably one of the main reasons that Judge Matsch released the district when he did was because Mayor Wellington Webb, our first African-American mayor, wrote an amicus brief for the district in asking the court to terminate the order. Mayor Webb said that the kind of racial prejudice that existed in the ‘60s that led to the court order no longer existed.
That minorities had power in the community that they didn’t have it at that time and that minority leaders would make sure that the district did not discriminate against their children. At that time also we had a black superintendent, Abby Dennis and Judge Matsch referred to these leaders in his order saying I’m sure things will not go backwards because we have people in the community in power who will see to it that that doesn’t happen. Mayor Webb, African-American leader is saying we don’t want busing anymore.

For me, as a parent who valued the diversity that my children experienced was pretty difficult for me to argue on behalf of racial integration that the communities for whom it was targeted or seen as a benefit didn’t want either. That was really, really where we were. Then the last thing that we did was we just did the funding formula for schools. We put into place an equity based formula so schools that had a preponderance of students who were low income or qualified for free and reduced lunch, English language learners or had other kinds of at risk factors.

Those schools got more money than schools that didn’t have those situations and that equity in resource allocation was one thing that we were able to do to try to even the playing field. Those were the things that we did and he hoped that it was going to set the course for the district in a positive way. I don’t think it did that. I think that in fact it did set up where the district is today which is a more highly segregated district than it was at that time. It’s segregated both racially and economically. That shows up in student achievement. The schools with the fewest number of kids in poverty, in the district are the most high performing.

Those that are the lowest performing have a significant share of their kids are low income and minority. The other thing that it set up was this system of choice that we have today where if you can go anywhere, at the same in the state, we passed the charter school law and Denver became very welcoming of new school designs, charter schools reforming existing elementary or neighborhood schools in order to encourage a diverse enrollment to go to them but again what we’ve seen is that most of these schools, not all but most of these schools have racial diversity but not economic impact. Very few of them have the 80, 90, 100% of students in poverty the way that most neighborhood schools in Denver have.
Julie Speer: There are exceptions to that though. Because you look at McAuliffe nowadays, doesn’t McAuliffe have 40% in reduced lunch? That’s the highest performing school in the district.

Laura Lefkowits: We don’t know yet because there isn’t data.

Julie Speer: Based on their data?

Laura Lefkowits: No. Let’s talk about that. The 40% of students that qualify for free or reduced lunch is an interesting marker. The federal government uses that as the marker that would designate a school as qualifying for school wide, title 1 services which are extra dollars targeted to the needs of low income kids who are considered to be academically at risk. There’s also research that talks about a school with 40% of its kids qualifying for free or reduced lunch is significantly better able to meet the needs of those kids than a school that is 80 or 90%. If you look at the overall average in the district is about 705 of students qualified for free or reduced lunch.

There are a very small number of schools that have fewer than 40% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch. All of those schools are in the top 2 categories of the Denver Public Schools school performance framework. All of those schools are either meeting expectations or are considered distinguished. The schools that are credited on watch or on probation are by and large schools that have over 70% for free and reduced lunch. Even though those schools get extra resources, the research shows that the concentration of kids in need all in one school, the ways schools are currently designed makes it impossible for even the best teachers under the best circumstances to meet their needs.

Now there are a few exceptions with some of our charter schools, the DSST schools, a couple of those have such high levels of concentrations of poverty. The KIPP schools are designed to meet the needs of schools of children in poverty. They do it very well but they have a totally different design than the regular neighborhood schools than Denver had.

Julie Speer: Is STRIVE a KIPP school?

Laura Lefkowits: STRIVE is a different school. It’s not a KIPP school. STRIVE is another model. There are some models that have been put into place to meet the needs of these kids. Now could we have all of the schools that have high concentrations of kids in poverty adapt one of these models and maybe
that would solve the problem? I don't know. I mean, the models take extra resources, different kinds of training and so on. I question the wisdom of having such schools in the first place and that it's a far more effective model, both academically and socially and culturally and back to this ideal of promoting racial harmony to prevent schools with that kind of concentration of minority and poor kids from existing.

The district has a very open choice process where they put out a call for schools every year where they need high quality schools. They ask educational management organizations or other organizations to create schools and to petition to be a school in the district. They have lots of qualifications and criteria that schools have to meet in order to be included as one of the Denver Public Schools but they don’t have to meet levels of serving levels of poor kids.

They don’t have to for example be at or under even the district to average or within say 40 to 70% which is where we really need more schools to balance things out. We have schools with as few as 2% of the kids qualifying for free and reduced lunch. We have schools with many as 90%. That needs to be balanced out and could be balanced out by policy, I think without running afoul of racial quota, prohibitions on racial quotas and so forth.

Julie Speer: How can you do that in a district were 70% of the kids are on free and reduced lunch?

Laura Lefkowits: Even if the average was 70%, you would be better off. In other words, even if you could bring it down from 98%, to 70% and just ask people to be within 70%. If you could prevent schools that were only 2%, if you had a range from 50 to 80 or something, you’d be in better situation than we are now.

Julie Speer: Is part of the problem because families are opting out and leaving the district and choosing private schools?

Laura Lefkowits: Right now, the percentage of white students in the district is only 22%. Only 14% are black and the rest are Latino and because in Denver there’s a high correlation between race and poverty, that’s how we see primarily low income school district. We’ve had growth. We’re back up to about 90,000 students overall. We have growth at Lowry and Stapleton Airport. People are choosing some of the great options that we have in Denver
like the DSST that recruits kids from all over, Denver School of the Arts is another one that’s been there for a long time.

There are popular programs that bring numbers in but so far it hasn’t changed the demographic proportions. We’re still at 70% free and reduced lunch. In my view it’s not really the answer. This portfolio model it’s called the way Denver Public Schools operates today where you have a significant amount of autonomy at the local site. You have a variety of different types of schools intended to meet the unique needs of kids and you encourage kids to go wherever the school is that best meet their needs. It doesn’t work because there’s no transportation provided and there are cultural norms particularly in the Latino community that really prevent families from taking advantage of options that are far away from home.

They don’t want their kids to be across town even if there were a bus ride mom might not have transportation herself. What happens if her child gets sick at school and he’s all the way across town, how does she get him? There are lots of reasons that parents in general don’t want their kids far away from home but there are structural issues in the Denver Public Schools that prevent that too. We need more of those high quality schools in neighborhoods where people live and that is part of the goal of the district is to get more of those schools in there but it’s a slow process and in the meantime, you’re only in third grade once hopefully. It’s too long a time to make a difference for too many kids who are in these poor low performing schools.

Julie Speer: What do you think is the solution or solutions?

Laura Lefkowits: First of all, I think that we need to talk about this issue. The polarization that existed on the previous school board was in my view of a false dichotomy. It was a split between support for neighborhood schools or support for charter schools. There is a lot of criticism of the district in terms of having abandoned its neighborhood schools and putting all the support and resources and attention on these new charter type schools.

I think the issue really needs to be about what is a quality school in a high poverty, high minority school district. What does that look like and how do you get it? I think that that is not a conversation that is being had broadly enough in the community. I think that especially because of the abandonment of the schools by white folks in the community there’s not
as much attention given to it in policy circles. People don’t know about it. I think that it’s a conversation both about poverty but also about race. It’s a conversation that people are uncomfortable having but that needs to take place. It shouldn’t be a question of competing models.

There are good charter schools and bad charter schools. There are good neighborhood schools and bad neighborhood schools. That isn’t the issue. It’s what makes a quality school and what is the obligation of the school district to provide that quality to every child not just to the children who can manage to get to a high quality school somehow. I would say that the school district is not providing a free and uniformed education as the Colorado Constitution requires to every child. There may be an equitable school funding formula but I think that it’s clearly not meeting the needs. You can see that with the achievement scores and schools that aren’t making the grade. I think it starts with more conversation and more acknowledgement that we have a problem.

Julie Speer: Define what you think the problem is?

Laura Lefkowits: The biggest problem is low student achievement, low graduation rates and too many of our kids leaving the Denver Public Schools not prepared for a college or career. That’s the biggest problem. That’s something that the entire city should be concerned about because these kids who leave unprepared are still part of the community and if they’re not contributing members of society, they’re going to be taking from society in some way down the road. It should be of concern to everybody. I think that really is the biggest problem. I think the other problem is that we have still today a highly segregated school district.

We’re not racially and economically balanced. We do not reflect the demographics of the city that we serve in which 53% of the people are white. 22% is the stat in Denver Public Schools. We’re not as a school district really meeting the needs of the community. Too many people are opting for something else. We’re not reflected by the community. We’re not doing our part to address racial divisiveness that we’re seeing so strongly these days in this country. There had been hope in the ‘60s that the schools would be the place where the races would learn to understand one another, be friends, be colleagues and so forth. That hasn’t happened. To me that’s another part of the equation. It’s not just student achievement, it’s really how people live in this global diverse
society. Are they being prepared to really be part of a highly diverse society which is what we live in?

Julie Speer: How do we fix it, with bus again? It’s like we’re exactly where we were.

Laura Lefkowits: I think we are or worse. I think that the conversations are important. As I’ve said because you can’t assign students by race but you could assign them by income level. Income level is a proxy for race. I think that there are some student assignment things that could be changed. Again, there’s probably very little if any effect, political will for that kind of thing but at a minimum, new schools that the district recruits to come into their portfolio should have to meet some kind of standards relative to the poverty of their students.

They should not be allowed to come into the school district with fewer than 30% poor kids or 40% poor kids. We should distribute children more equitably across the schools in some way. That could be done by that kind of a policy. I mean, we have to look at the achievement gap and why it is that these schools, these high poverty, high minority schools are doing so poorly. We have to look at the models of schools like that are doing well. We certainly have to pay more attention to early childhood education. Most of our kids who come to school if kindergarten is their first experience with school, we know from research that their vocabulary is far less well-developed than middle class kids.

That’s something that they never catch up. Getting to kids early is important. Thinking about school as more of a continuum from birth to death really is important as well. I don’t have a silver bullet. If I did I would certainly be sharing it. It starts with awareness. The public needs to understand what kind of a problem this is. It was clear it was a problem when were under a federal court order. It’s not so clear to people that it’s a problem today because you don’t hear about it in the same way that you used to and hey, we’re not under a federal court order. We must be okay.

We were released from court control because we moved the vestiges of past discrimination. That’s the standard. Judge Matsch said this is not the same as having integrated the schools. You don’t have to integrate in order to desegregate. You simply have to remove the vestiges of past discrimination and integration doesn’t have to be the remedy. It has to be shown that we’re not treating one group of kids differently from
another group of kids. I mean, that’s what happened in the ‘90s with all of these court cases being terminated because there simply weren’t enough white kids in these school districts anymore to force any kind of integration.

The best that could be hoped for was that there was no active discrimination going on and the district could prove that. That got us out from under the court order that it didn’t really address whether we were meeting the needs of these kids or not. We’re clearly not meeting their needs.

Julie Speer: There are some who would say that okay, if we do factors and all kids are going to the same schools and it’s all schools and then the vouchers would just figure that it would work itself out. What do you think about those?

Laura Lefkowits: 89% of students in America go to public schools. There are not enough choices in the private market to accommodate all of the kids in Denver Public Schools who might want to use their voucher for something else. I mean, that’s a solution. It might be a solution for some kids to get them out of a really bad school into a good school but it’s not a system wide solution. The market can’t provide those kinds of choices. You could argue that Denver allows that same kind of thing without the exchange of money because kids can go to any school that they want to but there are limitations. The neighborhood kids need to be accommodated first.

Now, you could abandon neighborhood school policy. That would be huge but if you did not assign every student to a neighborhood school first and give them that priority, but that all kids had to choose a school, you might see something different. You might see more balance at some of the higher performing schools. That was something that was considered in 1995 by the board and overwhelmingly rejected as being unworkable. People buy their homes based on the school of assignment.

People wanted the guarantee that they had a neighborhood school that they knew that they would be able to get into. A system of complete choice has been tried in other communities and certainly can result in more diversity than what we have now because you’re not favoring the segregated neighborhood structure the way that we are now.
One of the most difficult decisions we had to make in 1995 was about Manual High School. Manual High School had a strong, rich history, had been a very good school under busing. The children from the Hilltop neighborhood were bused over to Manual. Over the years they really adopted Manual as their neighborhood school even though they weren’t geographically bound to it.

They loved the school. Those children were very successful in that school. There was still a huge achievement gap in that school but it had a good reputation and they liked it. When we were no longer going to be busing, Hilltop kids into that school, the question was how do we make Manual a neighborhood school. As we looked at the natural boundaries and keeping the East High School boundaries, the same, we saw that the boundaries of Manual was going to create a neighborhood school of almost entirely low income, new Latino immigrants who had not been there in the ‘60s.

In the ‘60s, it was an entirely black community. Now, it was predominantly Latino community. Many of them, new immigrants, who didn’t speak English and there were 2 rivaled gangs in that neighborhood. This looked like a bad situation for a school. One of the options was redrawing of the boundaries so that some of the students who were previously assigned to East would have been assigned to Manual. That would have helped the Manual school not have such a concentration of low income kids and would not have had the gang violence within one school.

Julie Speer: Do you remember what the proposed boundary was?

Laura Lefkowits: It was down York I think. West of York would have gone to Manual and east of York would have gone to East. Those who had traditionally been assigned to East High School which was a very performing popular school still is today did not want to go to Manual. They wanted to still be able to go to East. We had that community clamoring for not changing that boundary. At the same time, we had members of the Manual neighborhood community clamoring not to change the boundary and saying this is our neighborhood, this is our neighborhood school and we want it.

We want our neighborhood school back. We will support it and make it a good school. Many of those people were black activists from the
community but maybe they no longer lived in that community or many of them no longer had children who would be going to that school but philosophically, they were all 4 returning Manual to its original neighborhood boundaries. I personally advocated for putting a magnet school there because I thought neither option was really tenable and that it should not be a neighborhood school because that neighborhood could not support a successful school given the demographics in what we saw.

Again, the neighborhood rejected that idea now. We don’t want a magnet school. We want our neighborhood school. In the end, that’s what happened. From the very beginning, it was a problem. That school, as I’m sure most people are familiar with has undergone a number of transformations, a number of kinds of different approaches attempted to make it work including shutting it down entirely and starting it over. Today, I don’t see that there’s much promise for a new approach. Any more promise than it was back in 1995 when we first started addressing it.

That’s a situation in retrospect. I think that the changing the boundary was probably the most rational thing to do and was more in line with the guidance that we had given to the staff to create boundaries that did not produce racially isolated schools when possible. This would’ve been a possible way but it did not have the political support that it needed to be approved. I also personally wasn’t supportive of it because I had this other option in my mind of a magnet school but we’re all under a lot of pressure from the community, from the white community and the minority community to not do that.

Julie Speer: Was there something that happened in the mid ‘90s in the far northeast?

Laura Lefkowits: Montbello had been paired with George Washington. They were de-paired and some of those kids continued to go to GW. Some of them did not and Montbello had similar issues to Manual in terms of having just too many kids in poverty and too much gang activity that brought that school down I think. Then George Washington and IB program is a different story but I don’t know enough about what happened. What was clear even in the mid ‘90s was that Montbello also was no longer the African-American community that it had previously been and more and more Latino immigrants were moving there.
It was dramatically changed and the schools weren’t really prepared to meet the needs of those kids. The bilingual programs weren’t up to speed out there because it was a change that happened rapidly. The personnel just wasn’t ready to deal with those changes. There was a lot of chaos up there at that time and since.

Julie Speer: Same thing with southwest. If you look at Lincoln High School, was there a paring there at all?

Laura Lefkowits: I don’t remember. I think by the time, the court order was lifted, Lincoln was a neighborhood school. It was actually doing fairly well. I can’t tell you what happened to Lincoln. What happened in the southwest originally was that there were lots of kids who went over the border and to Jefferson County Public Schools in order to avoid busing. Then there was another amendment called the Poundstone Amendment in the ’70s that prohibited Denver from annexing any land without the approval of the residents who lived there.

This was when Denver became locked in. Its boundaries were defined because the people who lived on the boundaries were afraid that Denver would encroach on them and their kids would be bused. That locked Denver in to its existing boundaries at that time and Denver didn’t expand until Lowry Air Force Base was redeveloped and the Stapleton Airport was redeveloped. You may remember when Governor Romer was advocating for Denver International Airport to be for the Adams County residents to allow that to be part of Denver was a big issue at that time. The kids who were on the border down in Southwest many of those white kids ended up in Jefferson County Public Schools because it was right on the border of Jefferson County Public Schools.

Julie Speer: Lincoln was pretty integrated and there were a lot of white students, maybe spell that out a little bit more because you did say that they left but how was Lincoln before busing?

Laura Lefkowits: I don’t really know how Lincoln was before busing. There were more Latino students there and that’s where I think today it’s probably predominantly Latino students. I don’t know. The other issue down there was that the city employees used to have to live in Denver to be a city employee. That was a problem for police officers, firemen, teachers. They all moved to that grant ranch area way down there and sent their kids to Jefferson County Public Schools. That was closed now. That rule no longer
exists. I don’t know if that made any difference or not. I just don’t know enough about the southwest schools, sorry.

Julie Speer: How many students are actually in Denver versus the 90,000 who are actually enrolled in Denver? Do you have any sense of those numbers?

Laura Lefkowits: I don’t. I did look at the recent census data for 2013 and overall population breaks out at about 53% white, non-Hispanic. About 34% Latino and about 15, 16% black.

Our schools on the other hand are 22% white, 11% African-American and almost 60% Latino. Again, the school does not reflect the city. Now, that’s overall population. I don’t have the data on school age population to know. I was looking for that and couldn’t find it. I’m sure Denver Public Schools probably has that because they use it for planning.

Julie Speer: Let’s look at Northwest Denver and North High School. Was there anything that happened there at the end of busing?

Laura Lefkowits: North, again, was a neighborhood school but North had problems then and one thing that we did at that time that was in many ways unrelated to the court order but because we were dealing with population, an immigrant population many students arrived in Denver and in the Denver Public Schools as teenagers who had never been gone to school. This is not just from Mexico although that was the greatest number but from many different countries all over the world.

We set up at North High School and at Place Middle School and maybe at South High School a welcome center where we had special programs for new immigrant kids to get them ready to be able to be successful in high school. That was quite successful. I think that we also had at north, we began to look at things like what if it takes a student longer than 4 years to graduate from high school. Shouldn’t we have a way within the high school to help them catch up on their credits and so on and maybe extend their academic life at the high school a little longer? We started that at North High School I’m pretty sure. Those were 2 things but again, I think North was not paired at the end of busing. It was a neighborhood school at the end of busing, I’m pretty sure. I don’t remember all these things about the high school. I’m sorry.
Julie Speer: One of the things we’re talking about is gentrification because it’s very visual of what’s happening there in the community. The schools aren’t reflecting that yet but is there anything you want to comment on in terms of gentrification or just how neighborhoods change?

Laura Lefkowits: Gentrification definitely has occurred in the northwestern part of the city. It’s occurring in 5 points as well right now. The challenge for the Denver Public Schools is to make sure that new people coming in to communities feel like they have a place in the Denver Public Schools to send their children to. I know there are many people that work on this and are concerned about this. Edison Elementary I think has been somewhat of a success story in northwest. I think it is used by the neighborhood but I’m not sure about some of the other schools.

Some of the schools in 5 points have been converted to charter schools or at Ebert we have a highly gifted magnet school and so there also has to be regular neighborhood schools available for the families, the children of these families and I’m not sure to what extent the district is looking at that but you have an opportunity when an area of the city is seen as an attractive by middle income families and their interest in improving the properties and enhancing the community that the schools become part of that as well and that the schools aren’t just ignored as part of the community. I frankly don’t know what if anything the district does in these situations. To me, it’s an opportunity for greater integration if the schools are welcoming and are available and accessible to new people coming in without obviously displacing the neighborhood kids.

There is a new expeditionary learning school that opened as a charter school in downtown Denver and the design was to provide a school to many families that are now living in Denver both in LoDo, in RiNo and the Golden Triangle and a lot of other areas that are becoming populated potentially with families. This is a school that has just started. I know that they had a goal of serving low income students from the inner city has well. Today the population currently is only 27% free and reduced lunch. They haven’t really tapped into that community as well as they maybe wanted to so far and I frankly don’t know where all those children are coming from if they’re coming from all over the city and outside of downtown.

Julie Speer: What would be your final thoughts on this, words of wisdom?
Laura Lefkowits: I have to come back to the issue that Martin Luther King spoke about in terms of the ideal of little children of all races living and learning together, sitting side by side in school rooms and learning about one another, becoming friends, understanding differences and I feel that, that was an aspiration of the busing movement and the desegregation movement. It was certainly an aspiration of the Civil Rights Act, Equal Educational Opportunity Act. It’s an aspiration that we’ve lost sight of. I don’t think we have to. I think that we lose sight of it even when we focus in on okay, if we have this high minority schools how do we meet the needs of these kids.

That’s better than meeting their educational needs but are we thinking about how to expand everyone’s experience of difference and of diversity as part of their education. Do we care about that? Are we satisfied with a few schools that are high minority, high poverty schools beating the odds so to speak which is what we have today? Most schools not making the grade at all. Are we okay with this notion that became very politically incorrect in the ‘90s that there was benefit to kids of different races from going to school together?

Certainly, I heard often in the ‘90s minority folks saying my child isn’t going to be better off simply because of sitting next to a white kid in a classroom. I would say back to them, I think my child is benefiting and is better off from sitting next to a black child in the classroom because of the experience of diversity. Maybe not because of academic achievement, maybe it didn’t have to do with the academics but certainly it has to do with the social and emotional well-being of all kids. I think we should talk more about that and I think we should pay attention more about that.

I think we should address racial diversity in an open and honest way while not obviously ignoring the unique needs of low income minority kids. They have academic needs separate and apart from the need to integrate but if you look at the state of our country today with the attitude in congress toward our president, the things that have happened in Ferguson, things that are happening today in Baltimore, we know that we are not a post racial society that was envisioned and even identified by Judge Matsch when he terminated the order.

He pretty much said without using those words. We’re post-racial now. We don’t really have these problems that we had in the ‘60s. I’m not
worried that minority kids are going to get a second rate education anymore but they are. They are getting a second rate education and we’re not post-racial. If we’re ever going to be post-racial, talking about how race plays out in our schools is an important thing to do.
Julie Speer: Let’s start with your own story. Talk about your own personal experience growing up. Where you grew up and where you went to school. Then specifically talk about the racial segregation that you remember.

Marco Abarca: To talk about yourself, you always have to talk about your parents. My mother grew up in North Denver. She grew up in an orphanage on 50th and Federal. She was a Northsider. My father was an immigrant from Mexico who came to the United States at the time of the Korean War because of shortage of labor, and they needed people to work as "paseros" and that's how he got his visa to come to the United States to work in the fields. He left and started working in the factories of Chicago. Again, I'm a son of an immigrant, but also a mother from the north side. We always lived in North Denver. I went to Brown Elementary, Lake Junior High School, North High School, and then in my last year of high school, I transferred to Regis High School, which was also located in North Denver at that time.

Julie Speer: Talk about growing up in North Denver.

Marco Abarca: I'm 52 years old. My first memories are in the late '60s early 70s. That's when I entered Brown Elementary. What I remember from that time period, it was a time of great social upheaval in Denver, the nation, all over the world. There were a lot of things going on. It was a really highly political time. In a lot of ways, the social contract that existed in the United States and in Denver was beginning to fray apart. What was happening at that time, African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, women,
gay people were trying to re-write that contract. My early memories at that time, I really have a lot of political upheaval.

Julie Speer: If you’re thinking about your own schooling at Brown, what was the student body makeup? Did you sense there was segregation?

Marco Abarca: I was at Brown Elementary. At that time, it was a middle class and lower middle class school, there were working class kids, but really, if you were to ask what the background, probably it was more lower middle class. It was diverse. It was Mexican-American and white at that time. I would say probably, I would guess maybe thirty, forty percent Mexican-American. Remember, at that time, most of the Mexican-Americans in Denver were from Southern Colorado and Northern New Mexico. They were not immigrants. My family was exceptional in that my father had come from Mexico. At that time, there were not a lot of immigrant families in Denver. That was something that happened later.

Julie Speer: Talk about your experience at Lake.

Marco Abarca: What happened, to go back, at Brown Elementary when I was, I'm going to guess, maybe second or third grade, all of the conflicts about busing started. What happened is, my neighborhood changing. A lot of people, a lot of the white families in the neighborhood sensed that the social contract that existed was coming apart. Especially when it came to schools. They believed that it was better for them to move out of North Denver and move to the suburbs. As time went by, it was solely becoming more and more Mexican-American.

I can really remember in, I think fourth or fifth grade, an exit of a lot of my friends and their families. Where it started really picking up is when they changed the district lines for our local school which is Lake Junior High School. At that time, the northern boundary, if I remember correctly, was either 26th or 29th, and they moved it south to 23rd and they moved the Lake Junior High District much further south into West Denver. What happened is that Lake Junior High School which had a lot of white families in it became heavily Hispanic. They bus student from west Denver to Lake. I knew families, they like being at Brown, but when it came time to go to Lake, they left because they didn’t want to send their kids to what was a more Mexican school at that time.
It was funny. I grew up, again, in a middle class, lower middle class, and going to Lake Junior High School was a shock because there were a lot of really working class and poor Mexican-Americans from the west side of town and the more affluent people from the north side of Sloan's Lake where I lived. It was odd to have to deal with people who are much poorer than the people that you have grown up with. There was a class difference which was, I think, very surprising for me as a kid.

Julie Speer: As an adult, what do you think you learned from that experience? Since you now have the filters of experience.

Marco Abarca: One of the things that I knew at Lake Junior High School when I was there, I think I was unique in this, is I knew I was going to a bad school. I was probably one of the few kids who knew that I was not getting a good education, that I was getting screwed by being there. It was a place that was beginning to lose control. Fights, kids ditching, smoking marijuana. It was a place really under a lot of social pressure and it was going down. I knew it at that time, but I didn't sense that many of the other people around me knew that they were going to a failing Junior High School.

Again, that sense that things weren't going well only picked up when I went to North High School. At that time in Denver High School was three years, it was tenth, eleventh, and twelfth. Going to North at that time was still probably thirty, forty percent white, but the number started going down. The amount of conflict was going up. Fights in the hallways, kids dropping out. At the North High School that I went to in the late '70s or late '80s, I'm going to guess it was a drop out factory even then. A good thirty, forty percent of the students dropped out.

It was interesting, you had the white kids from Skinner, a lot of white families, some from Lake, but it was becoming increasingly Mexican-American at that time and there were racial conflicts at the school. It was not really a great place to go to school. I knew it. I think at that time, there were probably a lot of people who thought it was a great school and the best school of their [inaudible] college. They love their high school, but I knew that I was not getting a good education.

As a senior, I decided to get out of there and transfer to Regis High School because there was really nothing else for me to do at that high school. Then when I went to Regis, oh my god, what a change. It was a great high school. It functioned. The kids wanted to be there. People studied. The
teachers were good. It was a really night and day experience. I'm so happy that I went there. It helped me prepare myself so I could go off to college and be ready and do the work.

Julie Speer: How was that transfer for you academically? Was it hard in the beginning? Were you prepared?

Marco Abarca: I was not necessarily prepared, but I was hardworking. I wanted to better myself. I love school. I loved reading. It was great to go to a place where people valued the things that I valued. Whereas at North High School, the value was not on education; it was on other things. It was great to go to Regis.

Julie Speer: Were there students bused in to North? Do you remember?

Marco Abarca: At that time, no.

Julie Speer: I haven't heard anybody talking about North as per busing. Give me a very short recap of your college and then career.

Marco Abarca: I was a serious, hardworking kid. I went to Yale College for my undergrad and then I went to Stanford for law school. I'm one of the very few people who were able to claw their way out of those schools and that experience. I was really, really lucky.

Julie Speer: That's good. Then, the business.

Marco Abarca: I finished law school. I was an attorney in California for about four years. When I got a call from my family, I was told my father had cancer and that I would either have to come back in the business or they would sell it. I knew that if my father was sick and trying to sell their business, that they would not get a good price for it. I felt obliged, I came back and I got involved in our family food processing business. We have a company that makes soups and sauces. I felt obliged to come back and get involved in the family struggle. I was very, very, very lucky that I did. It turned out really well for me.

Julie Speer: You take a great business and you infuse the Ivy League education.

Marco Abarca: What happened at that time, it was a good small business with good people, good equipment, good recipes. Yeah, I had a different perspective. I had gone away. I'm educated and I was able to rethink the
business, bring in those outside influences and make it grow. I've had the great pleasure of seeing the business go from being a small business and grow into a medium-sized business.

Julie Speer: Then fast forward, now you're a dad. Talk about that.

Marco Abarca: I've been married this year for 20 years. One of the things that we were able to do when we got married was buy the house that I grew up in near Sloan's Lake on the north side of Sloan's Lake. My wife and I moved in to the house I grew up in. A few years later, we had kids. I now have a twelve-year old and an eleven-year old. At that time, we looked around the schools and the schools that I had gone to. Brown and Lake and North, and they were in severe decline. They were terrible schools. At that time they gave grades to schools and they were equivalents of Ds and Fs.

Here we are, my wife also loves education. We worked really hard. If we were going to stay in that home, our kids will be going to failing schools and it was not acceptable to us. We made the decision to leave North Denver and move to Park Hill. The people I knew from Park Hill, we knew grew up on the north side. Park Hill is a great neighborhood. The people are cool. They're educated. A lot of professional families. That was my idea of a great place to raise a family.

We left North Denver. We moved to Park Hill. We got our kids into a local preschool. Then time came that we had to decide where we're going to send our kids to elementary school. There was a great shock to us, and it was that a lot of the families in Park Hill would not send their kids to Park Hill Elementary. At that time, I remember reading that 50% of the families in Park Hill sent their kids elsewhere.

Julie Speer: What time frame is that?

Marco Abarca: This was probably 2004, 2005. All these families that we knew who we went to preschool with, they were not sending their kids to Park Hill Elementary. If they had, it would have been a great school. Because they didn't, what happened is that there were vacancies and Park Hill Elementary, those vacancies were being filled by people from North Park Hill who were predominantly African-American and Latino.
Race is an interesting question. Do we value great education? Do we value diversity? For us as Mexican-Americans, this high premium that people put on diversity, well, we are the diversity. It's more important to us. Education is more important than diversity. We've came to the decision. We couldn't get our son into Polaris because we lived in the wrong neighborhood. Our local school at that time was getting the grade of C. It was not a great school. We decided to take our kids out and send them to private school, which is really hard. We had moved to Park Hill with that idea that we could send our kids to Park Hill Elementary. Then, eventually to East High School. Then we found out that our own neighborhood didn't support our schools, so we sent our kids to private school.

As I thought of it I said, "I want to be in Denver. I want to live in Denver. I don't want to live in the suburbs, but I'm going to have to pay a tax, which is sending my kids to private school every year." Whereas if I had moved to Cherry Hills or Greenwood Village, that would not have been the issue. They could have gone to the public schools and got a great education, but I have to pay to live in Denver.

Julie Speer: What's your high schools plan for your kids?

Marco Abarca: We still live in the East District and I think it's a good option for my kids. Whether they will go to East High School or whether they'll go to private school when it comes to high school, we'll have to see what's going on at that time. What we found out is that these schools can change quickly. Within five years, Brown Elementary School goes from a struggling school to a school where because of gentrification, that it's actually doing all right now. There was no way we were going to send our kids to Brown Elementary in 2005, 2006. Now, maybe we would, if we had stayed in that house.

Julie Speer: Brown is one of those you looked at in the turn around.

Marco Abarca: It is tricky. What will East High School be like in four years or my son [inaudible] would be entering seventh grade, so in three years. What will it be like? Who knows. We're living in a time of flux. It may be an option for my kids. That is one of the reasons we live in the neighborhood we live in, so that East High School is an option for them. North High School would not be an option for them.
Julie Speer: There are a lot of parents who live in Denver who don't send their kids to the district. On some level if we did, maybe we'd be part of changing it, but it's our kids. Talk about that dilemma. As a citizen of the city, do we not have a responsibility to that?

Marco Abarca: At that time, my parents saw the decline at Lake and at North, but my mother was this sort of person who was deeply idealistic. She loved John F. Kennedy, the Kennedy brothers and Humphrey, and she thought it was important that middle class people go to these schools that were struggling, so we went to Lake and we went to North. It was my parent's decision for us to go there. We could have left. We could have gone to the suburbs like everybody else in our neighborhood. The reality is that it worked off for me because I had the temperament for study and my sister did okay, but for my younger brother, Lake and North were disastrous.

I remember asking my parents about this. They regretted staying in the neighborhood and sending us to these schools. They wished they had gone out and left the area and moved to the suburbs or to another part of Denver where the schools were better. They looked at staying in North Denver as one of the biggest mistakes ever made.

My younger brother really paid for it. They paid for my mother's idealism.

Julie Speer: Now we're in the situation now where there are a lot of affluent families who choice out of the district. Talk about that a little. You are not alone.

Marco Abarca: No. I mean, here's the thing about it. I am really, really, really lucky that I own a business, a business that's been successful and that we have the resources to be able to go to a private school. There are a lot of families who are in the same boat and they can't do it. They don't have the money. I feel bad that they're stuck going to schools that they don't want to go to or if they tried to choice into a better school, they can't get it because there's a waiting list. It strikes me as deeply unfair. That is what owning a business has allowed me to do, to have an income so I can do that for my kids. In that, I'm very, very lucky.

Julie Speer: Let's talk about the immigrant experience because your dad's an immigrant, I think that you have some authority and you also worked closely with that community.
Marco Abarca: I am a Spanish-speaking Mexican-American son of an immigrant. I am part of the Mexican community here in Denver. My businesses are located in two parts, in Sun Valley and in North Park Hill. We started in Sun Valley which is that borderland between the north side and the west side. Most of my employees are Mexican, and from Mexico or Mexican-Americans. They live in the surrounding neighborhoods of West Denver and North Denver.

Through my food processing business, I'm one of the people who employ a lot of the people who go to Denver public schools, who drop out. When a young person drops out of West High School or Lincoln High School or North High School, they come to places like Ready Foods and I employ them. I am the one who sees the employees who can barely read, who can barely write, who can't do mathematics. As an employer, it's my responsibility and my interest to work with my employees to be able to get them to have better skills, to be able to do basic Mathematics. To be able to do basic reading and writing. I help a number of my employees get GEDs. I am very much a part of south west Denver through my business and through my employees.

Going back in time about ten years ago, I started reading in the paper about these new charter schools that were opening up in the neighborhood. There were two of them. There was the KIPP Middle School and there was the West Denver Prep which became STRIVE. What I was reading in the paper is that they're doing really, really well. I knew that the schools of southwest Denver were terrible because those were the people who were coming to work for me.

I saw beacons of hope. Places where kids were graduating from high school, hundred percent acceptance, many kids going off to college. I said, "Okay, I need to get behind this. I need to do what I can do for what looks like positive change in my neighborhood." I became involved, started donating money, and then in time, I got in to the board of KIPP Colorado, and was there when they expanded from a middle school to a high school. I bought on to the education reform agenda. I bought on to what was going on in my neighborhood.

Julie Speer: Is KIPP only in South West Denver area?

Marco Abarca: No. KIPP is in Montbello and also in South West Denver. I'm no longer on the board of KIPP, but I'm still a KIPP supporter. I think that they do...
really, really good things. It's a ninety percent poor and minority school. Principally Mexican-American in South West Denver.

The STRIVE school and the KIPP school, they're small schools. They're schools with discipline. It's not for every kid, not for every family, but for the people who are looking for that that type of stability and order. They're perfect schools. They do very, very well. They are able to help kids catch up and help them go to college, and follow them even when they're in college to make sure that they graduate. I felt really, really lucky to be associated with them. I still support both of those schools because they're doing great things in South West Denver. They're giving options to families that had no options.

Julie Speer: I know STRIVE has a pretty big wait list and not all kids get in. Does KIPP also have a waiting list?

Marco Abarca: Again from my own experience growing up and how things having changed, when you're a poor family, you fear chaos. It's all around you. It's in your home life. It's with your neighbors. It's with your family. The last thing you want is it in your schools. I think for a lot of the immigrant families, they look at STRIVE and they look at KIPP as being places that are safe for their kids. That's really, I think, the first appeal is that it's safe and second, that the goal is to send the kids to college.

Think about immigrant families, they come in this country with the idea of progressing, of bettering themselves. Any institution that really sells college is going to do well, and offers safety. That's what KIPP and STRIVE really offer. A lot of poor and immigrant families in South West Denver.

At both KIPP and at STRIVE, there are long wait lists. There are a lot of people who crave that stability, that safety, that aspirational dream of sending their kids to college. They're not finding that at the local neighborhood school and they want to go to these charter schools, and they can't get in. There's a long, long wait list to be able to get in. If you were to talk to a lot of families there, they wish there were more, but there are not.

Julie Speer: Within the Stapleton area, for example, you have very active parents, and they demand a lot from the schools and from the school leadership and from the school board. If you go to South West Denver, if you're an immigrant parent, your involvement is less.
Marco Abarca: What about the level of engagement? The private school I go to, every parent's involved. Every parent's pushing and fighting for their kids. It seems like every parent has a sharp elbow to make sure that things go off for their kids. In South West Denver, you have a lot of really poor humble people. People with elementary school education. They don't have the same level of ability to fight for their kids as more privileged people do. Having said that, you do find parent activist in the worst schools in South West Denver and it's amazing. You find monolingual Spanish-speaking immigrant parents who fight for their kids tooth and nail. A lot of those people who's kids are not having great experiences at the elementary level, they fight tooth and nail to get their kids into the charter schools.

Julie Speer: Going back to STRIVE and KIPP real quick. I know that the opponents would say, "Well, STRIVE and KIPP, they are segregated schools." Maybe just debunk that. I mean, they're achieving so it doesn't matter.

Marco Abarca: People will rightly comment and say, "Hey, STRIVE and KIPP in South West Denver, they're segregated schools. They're all Mexican. They're all poor." They're right. They are segregated schools, but so is all South West Denver. Go to any neighborhood school around there and it's all poor and Mexican or Latino. Yeah, they reflect the neighborhoods where they live. Denver is a segregated city and South West Denver is one of the most segregated parts of the whole city, and the charter schools reflect the city-wide segregation.

Julie Speer: Talk about Denver as a whole in general, as a city and the segregation levels that were experienced.

Marco Abarca: I think we're living in an interesting period. That paradigm is about to shift. Starting in the '70s through the '80s and '90s, we had a massive wave of immigrants from Mexico and Central America come to Colorado, come to Denver, move to South West Denver, Aurora, parts of North Denver and North Central Denver, but that wave is over. After 9/11, the US-Mexico border has been heavily militarized. What was really a large full of people has been reduced down to a trickle.

What that means in the future, the Latino students who will enter into Denver public schools, they're not going to be the children of immigrants, they're going to be the children of Mexican-Americans, Salvadoran-Americans, Guatemalan-Americans, and their parents are going to be English speakers, and maybe a lot of their parents don't graduate from
high school, but they're going to speak English and have eight, ninth, tenth grade education, which is a lot more than their parents had. It's going to change.

The dynamics for Latinos in DPS, there will still be Latino immigrants. There will always be, in one form or the other, but it's going to change and it's going to be more of a Mexican-American, Latino-American experience. I think DPS is going to benefit from that without doing anything at all.

Julie Speer: As Denver grows, talk about how you envision the growth of the city, because it's one of the fastest growing cities right now. How will the schools keep up with that or maybe they'll just be in the private schools. We're going to become like Manhattan and only the affluent can live in the city. What's your prediction as Denver grows and how we deal with segregation?

Marco Abarca: Five years ago, I would have told you that Denver would be a heavily Latino school district in the future and they would probably only grow, but I think things are changing. I mean, the last five years, as the recession came to an end, we're finding more and more white families moving from the suburbs or moving from other states or cities and coming to Denver. Denver is becoming more and more white every single day and the schools where white families will want to send their kids, there are more and more of them opening or changing on a yearly basis. I think what you'll find is that segregation will still continue, but there will be more and more white families in DPS, going back to when I was a kid.

Julie Speer: Everything is in a cycle. Do you think that this is a conversation that will be null and void in fifty to hundred years?

Marco Abarca: To look long term, if I could predict the future in that way, is that I think in the next probably ten to fifteen years, you'll see increased gentrification and then a lot of the renters, immigrant renters will leave and they will go to Aurora. They'll go to Adams County. They'll go to parts of Jefferson County. What were once heavily Mexican-American neighborhoods will change. We're starting to see that North Denver and you'll start seeing it in five to ten years, you'll see that on the west side also, at that whole Barnum Park, Villa Park.
The housing stock is not very good. Where they're mainly renters, you'll find that people scrape and it will become more and more angular year by year. I think that the location is too good and the lots are too large, and the quality of housing there, a lot of it is not very, very good. They will be scraped and new types of homes will go up there. Same thing happened in North Denver. It will continue in North Denver and will move further south into West Denver.

Julie Speer: Fast forward a hundred years, do you think that this whole conversation around integration would be over because everyone will be brown?

Marco Abarca: If we were to look in time, a lot of the lines and definitions that we have will disappear. I see it already what it means to be Latino is changing. Right now, there is so much inter-marriage, that what it means to be Latino will not mean the same thing in twenty years as it does right now. There are going to be a lot of people who are half Latino, and that is the future. I think that the racial lines or ethnic lines that we have right now will disappear.

I could see in the next twenty to thirty years, in some form or another, large parts of the Latino community will assimilate. I see that already in the suburbs. I see many Latino families that don't speak Spanish and their memories of Mexico or Latin America are beginning to fade with every generation. They're becoming assimilated Americans. Whether you like it or not, whether you want to hold on to your culture, it's really, really hard to be able to do that in this country. This country has a genius for taking immigrants and turning them into Americans. The same thing will happen with Mexican-Americans and other Latinos. It's just a question of time. There'll be inter-marriage and what it means to be Hispanic will change.

I mean, I think that there will be, even with African-Americans, we'll see more and more assimilation. I think that you're seeing with a younger generation the rigid lines that I grew up with are not anywhere close to it, and we will change. I'll just say in Mexico, they talk about something called La Raza Cósmica, The Cosmic Race which is a blending of people from all over the world, and that's what we're going to see in America. There will be a melting pot or a salad bowl, but it will be that.

I think we, as people, find the other too interesting to be separate and we will incorporate the other into us. I think what will happen is
American mainstream society will work to assimilate Latinos and Latinos will fight to assimilate mainstream America also and they'll meet somewhere in the middle.

Julie Speer: As you were thinking about this, were there any stories or anything that came to mind?

Marco Abarca: There's this irony that here I am involved in education reform in South West Denver and I send my kids to private school. This hypocrisy of that. It looks like it. Why? If you're out there to improve these schools, why don't you do it with your own kids? The reality is that my parents did that and my family paid for it. I am not going to make the same mistakes with my own kids.

Julie Speer: But you are involved, so you're making up with your time and efforts.

Marco Abarca: I tried to contribute not with my kids but with my time, with leadership, with money, and that is what I'm able to do to make up for that.

We all have an investment in the younger generations. These younger generations will be the people who's money goes in to contribute for my social security. We have an obligation to the young people of our society because it's really in our own self interest. I think that's one reason I'm involved in education reform, but if you ask me really, what is the core reason, it's the injustice of it. I saw that injustice. I lived that at Lake Junior High School and North High School. I knew I was getting screwed. I knew the people around me were getting screwed. Now, I'm in the position to do something about it, I'm going to go out in there and get involved.

Julie Speer: Is there anything about busing or any of that time frame that you'd want to talk about?

Marco Abarca: I think right now, it's really hard to go back into that time of that great liberal optimism that happened in the 1960s. We were a society. There were a lot of really good-hearted people, people like Ed Benton and Pat Patton, and Monte Pascoe who were idealistic and had a dream for what this country could be. They went out there and they made tremendous sacrifices to try to make it happen, but they were ahead of society. The society was not there and ready to follow them. I think what happens is
that they were so far out that it just takes time for the rest of society to
catch up with what their vision was.

When I was growing up, nobody talked about diversity. There were no white people who thought that it was a great value to go have a diverse school. That would have been a ... Only a minority of liberals in East Denver would have wanted to do that. Where I was from, this idea of diverse schools was really not something that the white families in my neighborhood cared all about. You see someone like Ed Benton or Monte Pascoe, they were in the vanguard. It took forty, fifty years for the society to change to see the things the way they saw it.

Julie Speer: In some ways, we're right back to the same place.

Marco Abarca: We are not in the same place we were in the 1960s. Not even close. If you go back and you speak to older people in the African-American community or the Mexican-American community, it was a much harsher time. The racism was more blatant. It was more in your face. It was a much harder time than it is today. It's not even close. People don't remember how bad it was at that time period. The anger that it fueled, the anger that exploded with groups like the Black Panthers, or here in Denver, the Crusade for Justice, there were a lot of people who came back from the Korean War, World War II, Vietnam who really put their lives at risk for this country and came back to a society that was deeply unfair and racist, and they were not going to accept it.

That social contract I was talking about, it was fraying apart and they wanted to renegotiate it. It wasn't pretty. There was a lot of strife, a lot of chaos. We're still working on renegotiating that social contract. It happens all the time. Right now, if you think about it, with Caitlyn Jenner, transgender people are beginning to rewrite that contract right now as we speak. If you would have told me in 1981 when I graduated from high school, I didn’t know anybody who would have tell you that they were gay. Of course I knew gay people but nobody would have ever acknowledged that. The idea of when I graduated from high school that gay people would have civil partnerships or be married, that was inconceivable. That transgender people even existed. I didn't even know there was such a thing as a transgender person. The world changes. That social contract is always being renegotiated.

Julie Speer: Talk about your own experience with racism, if any.
Marco Abarca: Me, I don't deal with racism in the same extent because I have all these things that separated, that put this barrier. I went to Yale. I went to Stanford Law School. I own a successful business. It's not a personal experience, or it is, but not as strong as it is for other people. It's around and I see it. Let me tell you. Yes, there are bad things that happen, but it was much worse when I was a kid. The Trayvon Martin, nobody would have even thought it was a big deal. It was a much harsher time period than it is right now. What we're seeing going on right now, it's a good thing. People are talking about it. That stuff was hidden, a lot of it, when I was boy.

I know what it was like as a kid. The local 7/11, they had a sign saying, "Only one Mexican kid at a time was allowed in the store." That wouldn't happen today. This rewriting of the social contract, it will keep going on and will probably go on in one form or another probably forever just because that's who human nature is, but things are much better than they were. Talk to Pat Pascoe about what segregation was like, the reality. My own parents, when they would go to a bank and try to borrow money to start their business, the bankers laughed at them. They didn't take them seriously at all. It's a much better world. The thing about it, when you're young you don't know that. You only know what you know. You only know what your parents know. It's much harder to connect with the experiences of your grandparents or your great grandparents.
Mateos Alvarez: Speak to us about your own experiences with education. We are going to start with your past, your life, your story.

Maria Hernandez: I was born in Jalisco and later I grew up in San Juan de Los Lagos, Jalisco. And after I was married after 17 years of being married my husband brought us here for a better life for us and our children, here to Denver. And we have been here for 12 years now.

Mateos Alvarez: Did you come directly to Southwest Denver first or how was your trip from Mexico to Denver?

Maria Hernandez: We came directly there. We came here to Denver, Colorado. My husband was already here and since he would go back and forth, 6 months here and 6 months in Mexico with us. He was living here and we came straight here to live with him to Denver, Colorado.

Mateos Alvarez: Tell us about your schooling experience, your first memories of school or education, especially your experience as a child in Mexico.

Maria Hernandez: Well, I always wanted to study more but I couldn’t anymore. Unfortunately my parents had a very big family and I was only able to finish Elementary School. My dream was to become a school teacher. But I never was able to. I always had good grades, I always wanted to be something more, but because of the economy I could not continue my studies and always had the dream of continuing my studies, I loved to study. And due to such a large family, my parents couldn’t provide the education any further, because of so many kids, so much family.
Mateos Alvarez: How was it to grow up in a large family?

Maria Hernandez: For me it was very beautiful. I am the oldest of eleven children. Having a lot of brothers and sisters was nice; I loved it even though there were many of us. My parents always tried to give us what they had. And as all siblings do, we fought like most siblings, there were arguments, but always united like a family and we still are, we still are.

Mateos Alvarez: And by not attending school, how did you help your family during this time to get ahead?

Maria Hernandez: When I was a child, after school and I also worked, I also worked and also helped my mom at home with chores. For me it was a nice experience. Having a big family to share to participate, this was always something very lovely for me.

Mateos Alvarez: Can you tell us about the town you grew up in. What was it like, what are your favorite memories?

Maria Hernandez: My favorite memories were from my childhood. It was a very peaceful town, school, having family and friends, and well I worked it was wonderful growing up there. The downtown was close so we would walk there were the country, we would call it the country and we would go out in the country. Sundays were the best days for me. We had a lot of food, my parents always bought extra food on Sundays for us to eat and it was always like a party on Sundays. And all my brothers and sisters were always excited for Sundays to come, it was our favorite day and we waited all week for Sunday to come.

Mateos Alvarez: Who was your favorite teacher as a child?

Maria Hernandez: My favorite teacher for me when I was a child was my 4th grade teacher. She always was very kind towards me in school. I still think of her and remember her. She was from a town close to Guadalajara. She was a great teacher for me. I did not have a hard time in school except for math and she always helped me, she always supported me in many things. This time in life of my adolescence and she was very important to me, she’d talk to me a lot about many things at this time, she always supported me a lot.

Mateos Alvarez: Was she part of the reason you decided you wanted to be a teacher?
Maria Hernandez: Yes, I suppose so. I remember her work, she inspired me, I saw all the hard work she did with all the kids at school. We had a lot of kids at home, but I don’t know why but she really inspired me to become a teacher.

Mateos Alvarez: How did you feel when you had to stop going to school?

Maria Hernandez: When I found out I wasn’t going to school, that I was only going to be able to finish Elementary School. Well, I was a bit sad, frustrated. I also felt angry because we did not have the economic resources for me to continue school. Well I had to just resign myself to the fact that I had to understand I was not going back but that if someday I was not going to be a teacher, I needed to do something, I needed to set a goal to do something, something more than I was.

Mateos Alvarez: Talk to us about your daughter Maria. Describe her interests, personality and hobbies.

Maria Hernandez: My daughter, Maria, started here in Head Start. She always wanted to go to school. She wanted to go when she wasn’t quite old enough to start school, she really wanted to go. Because I’d take my other daughter who was older and she went so she also wanted to stay at school with her. Maria always went to Head Start since very small. She was very active, she couldn’t keep still. When she started Kindergarten her teacher told me, ‘I can’t get your daughter to sit still and not talk to other classmates.” And my daughter always finished her school work very fast and the teacher would call me and tell me Maria wouldn’t stay in her seat. I told the teacher, “please give her more work, she likes to study.”

The teacher said she couldn’t have her advancing ahead of the class. But this teach was more intelligent than Maria and she had Maria help the other students with their work once she completed hers. And that is how she has always been getting up looking for something to do. All of her teachers said this. When she went to Middle School she started soccer and boxing. It’s a bit harder here but my husband bought something to box with at home. She went to High School, Lincoln High School, and also playing soccer and always practiced boxing here at home.

Mateos Alvarez: What are the similarities between you and your daughter Maria? It sounds like you both have a lot of interest in school and studying.

Maria Hernandez: Well, she has always liked school. I didn’t want to push them into studying because they are very intelligent. When I arrived in this country I’ve worked hard to learn. I had a little time here when I started to study
for my GED. I was able to study. I’ve been involved at the girls’ school which was nice to be close to them while I studied as well. I also liked volunteering at their school to be around English more and learn more. I then started going to school to be a nursing assistant. I’ve never pushed them but always told them studying isn’t easy but they need to study so they can be someone in life. If you don’t go to school you won’t make anything of yourselves. It could be that I might have inspired them to enjoy school and learn because I was always behind them reminding them to study hard.

Mateos Alvarez: Tell us about the process of picking Lincoln High School so Maria could study there.

Maria Hernandez: It wasn’t difficult for us to find Lincoln for her. I have 3 more children and 2 graduated from Lincoln. I always have said it is not the school, it is the student. The school has always been good for us. One of our children graduated early from there. It was not a hard decision to put Maria there because of all the years my other kids attended Lincoln High School. If the kids are behind, for example, I would go to the conferences and the teachers would let us know there are programs at the school to help them catch up. And the teachers are always ready to help. The teachers there have always been very wonderful.

Mateos Alvarez: Talk about the process of Choice. What do you know about the Choice program?

Maria Hernandez: Yes I did already have a relationship with the school because of my other kids. I did get the packet about Choice but I decided not to use it. I used it for one of my daughters but she did not like it and ended up returning to Lincoln. They have sent the packet to me, I reviewed it and then I just decided to stay at Lincoln because it’s easier for us to stay at Lincoln.

Mateos Alvarez: Do you feel you have the same access to these programs?

Maria Hernandez: Yes, I do feel I have options of other schools and better access to get my kids into other schools but we also chose Lincoln because it is the closest to the house.

Mateos Alvarez: Let’s talk about the program, YESS. I understand Maria for a while wasn’t going to school and her attitude was a little strong and she was ditching school and how she became involved in the program YESS.

Maria Hernandez: Well, for me it was very difficult with Maria because Maria was very rebellious; she wouldn’t attend her classes she’d leave, she’d play hockey with her other classmates. I’d know because the school would call me.
She left, with her friends during school. I’d talk with her every which way, giving her advice telling her she needed to go to school because the only thing she did was school, she didn’t work, she just had to go to school and she needed to go. But she wouldn’t do it. The school would call me and tell me she wasn’t in school, that she hadn’t shown up to this or that class. Sometimes she would just be walking around in the halls just not to go to class. I went to the school to go over all of our options to help her. But when I would go into the school to discuss things with her and her teachers she was very rebellious and rude to me and her teachers and it was very embarrassing to me how disrespectful she was.

I didn’t know what to do anymore. A year passed. The next year I spoke with Mr. Medina and we spoke about this program. And since we had tried everything and she just wasn’t doing anything. I was starting to think there wasn’t going to be anything to help her. I saw her low grades, if there is no other option; we need to talk with her. If the program helps her, well I didn’t believe it was going to help, but yes, the program helped. She had 4 ‘F’’s in school, and thanks to the efforts of the teachers, Mr. Medina and people who help her there. She also had tutorial help two times a week and that also helped a lot to get her out of the place where she was before.

Mateos Alvarez: How did you feel when you found out she was a part of a gang, were you surprised by this?

Maria Hernandez: When the school called and told me about this, that she was becoming a gangster, I felt disappointed by her. I never thought she would get to that point. I never thought she would do this after being first in her class freshman year. And for me when she was out from school and not in school I had no idea what she was doing outside of school, not only that she was not taking advantage of school, she was outside of school doing who knows what and this worried me more because I was unable to be there during the day. I was worried for her grades and for her safety when she left school during classes I worried about what would happen to her by not being inside the school and not knowing where she was or what she was doing when she wasn’t in school. When I asked Maria she said she wasn’t leaving school, she was in the hallways. And she was roaming the hallways, not going to class.

Mateos Alvarez: How did Maria’s attitude change once she started working with YESS?

Maria Hernandez: My daughter Maria’s attitude changed during this program little by little. Her teachers said she was starting to control her attitude and anger, but at first was very disrespectful to the teachers as well. And later the same
teachers told me she had changed a lot, which gave me great happiness. I did not like to hear she was being rude. One tries to give them, well maybe not the best education but one at least teaches them to respect elders. I always spoke with them about this; they always need to respect their elders. When her teachers would call me and tell me how she was talking back to them it was very saddening to hear she would act like this and that she was not doing what we would tell her to do.

Mateos Alvarez: How did the YESS institute help your daughter in this situation?

Maria Hernandez: The Institute YESS helped Maria make great changes. Firstly by getting her grades up again and in about 2 months her grades were good. I then spoke with Mr. Medina and he was surprised by how quickly she improved and how he also did not understand how she changed so quickly. He couldn’t even explain it himself. But I feel the program has helped her a lot. Besides getting her grades up but also the way she acted in general.

Mateos Alvarez: Can you tell us now a little more about your experience with Choice?

Maria Hernandez: I receive the Choice packet for Choice every year, I receive it for my children every school year. For me the best option was always the closest school to us which is Lincoln.

Mateos Alvarez: Can you tell us about how your neighborhood is here now? How do you feel living here?

Maria Hernandez: Well, we have lived in this neighborhood for 5 years. I feel safe here and my kids do too. It is very peaceful and well kept. I really like living here. Also there are stores close by we can go to.

Mateos Alvarez: Do you own your home or do you rent?

Maria Hernandez: Yes we own our home.

Mateos Alvarez: Can you describe the reasons why you decided to live here in this area of SW Denver?

Maria Hernandez: We decided to live here when we lived in a different area and then we started to look for a better place, we wanted to be in a nicer neighborhood for us and our children, where our children could be better off, closer to their school. We’ve been here for 5 years. I really love this area around here and we aren’t thinking of moving. We’ve decided to stay, well to stay here forever.
Mateos Alvarez: Let’s talk about Lincoln High School and the academic level and preparing your children for the future. What have they told you at parent teacher conferences regarding academic level, and how they prepare your children especially with regards to your daughter Maria?

Maria Hernandez: Well, I have heard a lot of good things about Lincoln including many good programs they have that students can take advantage of to progress academically. They have always offered me help with programs if my children need help to advance. I know they have a lot of different programs so the students can excel academically. I feel that the school is good, the school is very good. Personally speaking, they have helped my children. My children have done great and friends of my children who have graduated also have said good things about Lincoln High School. They have a program that helps to prepare for college too. I find that to be a good idea, that it helps them out with that.

Mateos Alvarez: What type of student is Maria today? Is she preparing for college and where?

Maria Hernandez: My daughter Maria is a very good student. Right now she still has 2 years to graduate from Lincoln, but she is preparing to go to college. One day she wants to study one thing the next day something different, and then she said she might want to become a police officer as well. She is always changing her mind. But she says that for sure she wants to go to college but as a mother I also want her to go. This way she can be someone in life. Be someone when she is older, be able to do something.

Mateos Alvarez: There are statistics and studies which show that white communities economic status’ are higher, in turn the academics are higher than those communities of color. Have you seen the difference between the Latino community education and other communities of different levels of education?

Maria Hernandez: I haven’t heard anything about that. It doesn’t have anything to do with different persons, Mexicans, different religion. I think we all have the same right to opportunities as anyone in any other community.

Mateos Alvarez: Do you think any child from any community can receive an excellent education?

Maria Hernandez: There are opportunities for everyone. I think it does not matter if we are different people Latino, White or of different colors I think we should all have the same opportunities. The deal is every person needs to think
they can do something, is someone and wants to put a lot of effort into
doing something. Move ahead and do what we want to do.

Mateos Alvarez: Do you think the communities with higher economic status have more
opportunities than those in poorer communities?

Maria Hernandez: I believe the one’s economic status shouldn’t be an excuse for one to say,
I can’t because I don’t have enough money to do it. I think that looking
there are opportunities, and I know there are opportunities. There’s a lot
of programs out there and one can become what one wants to be
whether you have money or don’t have money. I think it depends on
the person’s efforts whether or not there are programs. And I know this,
there are programs what he does, the economic status does not matter.

Mateos Alvarez: There are people who say there is a segregation, the high schools are
95% Latino. West Hight School for example is 95% Latino, and also they
say our communities are divided between Latinos and whites. Do you
believe there is this kind of segregation going on in the community?

Maria Hernandez: What I have seen in the schools in my children at the schools where they
have attended, I know the segregation you are talking about. I’ve never
seen it. My daughters have never mentioned to me that there are cliques
or groups where there are differences like that, No, I haven’t.

Mateos Alvarez: When you go to the school do you feel uncomfortable if your kids go to a
school which is primarily Latino or would you feel good if they were
around and learned about other cultures, is this something which is
important to you or something you recognize as important?

Maria Hernandez: It is, wouldn’t it be important, right? It would really be so important for
them to get to know about other cultures. Well, yes, I do believe it is very
good for them to do so to learn about other cultures, other people, about
other countries, their food. Yes, it would be good for them to know about
other cultures. It would be very nice, maybe it wouldn’t be so important
to me, but very, very, very nice for them to get to know different people.

Mateos Alvarez: Have you heard of or know of Treyvon Martin, Eric Garner and Ferguson
Missouri?

Maria Hernandez: No, honestly I haven’t heard any of that.

Mateos Alvarez: There are two kids who were shot by the police. It had a lot of media
attention and talk in the communities and there are people who believe
it is racism of the police against people of color. Do you feel racism exists in this country of the U.S.?

Maria Hernandez: I do, I do, feel that there are certain people, that there is racism, that it still exists. I have felt it myself at work. I have felt it at times at my job. There are people who, for I don’t know what reason, they tend to ask Mexican people, because they will tend to say to me, “you speak English fine.” I think there is still racism because I have experienced it at work. At my work there are people from different cultures and religions, and countries and, I’ve been faced with them asking me if I’m a citizen of the United States, and I say to them I don’t have to answer this question and I won’t answer this question. And they’ve even asked about my English, why do I have an accent. And I turn around and leave, because I don’t have to answer questions, they have no business asking that has nothing to do with anything. And I feel that, yes, yes, yes there still is a bit of racism still exists.

Mateos Alvarez: And do you believe racism still exists in public schools?

Maria Hernandez: Yes I do believe racism still exists in public schools. Because I have seen, children as well, white kids, who do not speak Spanish and they make fun of others. I can understand them now because I can understand what they are saying to the other kid who doesn’t speak English.

Mateos Alvarez: What do you think the responsibilities of the schools are with regards to racism?

Maria Hernandez: I think the public school’s responsibilities for me, is to first speak with the parents. Because I think all religions, races, countries, I think we are all equal and there are no differences. And for me, I don’t know, I think it’s the parent’s responsibility in that case. Not the public school, because what are they going to do? Talk with the parents to do something for the other children? For me I believe it’s the parents’ responsibility in that situation.

Mateos Alvarez: What obstacles exist for Maria’s future in regards to education?

Maria Hernandez: The obstacles for my daughter, Maria to become someone, I don’t think any obstacles exist. It only depends on the effort she wants to put into it. That’s the only thing, because I think that if she knocks on doors, looks for programs to help her with a career she would like. I think the only obstacle for her is her desire, her desire to succeed, believe she can do it. I believe that the only obstacle she needs to want to get something out of life. There are opportunities, there are a lot of opportunities, that only thing is that she want to take advantage of them.
Mateos Alvarez: Was Maria born here?

Maria Hernandez: No, my daughter was born in Mexico.

Mateos Alvarez: Is she a citizen?

Maria Hernandez: Yes, she is a citizen.

Mateos Alvarez: Talk to us about this, the importance of this, I imagine there are some friends and families, just like some of my friends and family, whom do not have papers. And you say how she does not have any obstacles but instead it’s the desire in her to do so, but some people do not have these luxuries of having papers or being citizens. Tell me about the importance for Maria to have her citizenship and to have a future.

Maria Hernandez: The importance of my daughter being able to get ahead is that she is a citizen of the United States. There are more opportunities for them. And I always try to give them examples of people who we know in the community, who live nearby, who want to study, and they are unable to who cannot reach these goals for the simple fact they don’t have their papers, they do not have their papers, because they don’t have their social security numbers, a residency, a citizenship. You have all these things to be able to do this, I tell them. And if you decide not to do it, it’s because you choose not to, not because you can’t. But there are people who would like to do something, and they can’t because they don’t have papers.

Mateos Alvarez: The problem is out of every 100 Latino kids who graduate high school, only 10 go to college, which include your daughter Maria. A lot of them stop going to school because it is a lot of ‘show’ for the Latino people. A lot of Latino children think if they did not do well in high school they will not do well in college and do not go. Do you think our school system will improve for our Latino kids so they too can succeed and complete college.

Maria Hernandez: I hope our school district can help them to improve, to have something better, further on for when my daughters graduate and know that it is very important for them to help them out so there can be more graduates not 10 out of 100, but more than 10.

Mateos Alvarez: Your daughter also went to Kepner, how was that experience for her?
Maria Hernandez: Yes she did. I don’t remember much. When Maria was at Kepner the first 2 years she was doing very well, great grades, very well. But the 3rd year she began ditching as I call it. And then she went to Lincoln and she started off not so good doing the same things, because she had already started doing it from before.

Mateos Alvarez: What happened in the last year which changed Maria’s situation, what changed her attitude?

Maria Hernandez: For me, the change in my daughter, Maria, for me the last year at Kepner, I don’t know, I don’t from my point of view it had to do with a few of her friends she had there, that’s why she had the change in attitude. Because she had been a very good girl, very good grades, and everything, but when the last year came the grades started to leave and even after school she didn’t come home. She’d leave with her friends and it was 4pm and she wouldn’t come home. So it was a bit difficult for me, but I think it was the friends she had.

Mateos Alvarez: Do you think when she arrived at Lincoln she was prepared for high school?

Maria Hernandez: For me, for I don’t think my daughter Maria was 100% prepared as she could have been. If you figure that for us she was the baby of the family. And for me, I felt that, prep, prep, prep school as I call, it was coming too soon for her to be prep school. I think that didn’t help, that she was too attached to us, and not quite ready for higher education.

Mateos Alvarez: She wasn’t prepared because of school education or she was not mature enough to go to Lincoln?

Maria Hernandez: The change from Kepner to Lincoln? I don’t think it was that she wasn’t ready for the level of academics, it was her attitude. Because I think she was well prepared, she was very intelligent and she always got good grades in her classes before. She was always good in classes; I got good notes from her teachers too. I do not think it was her academics, it wasn’t a problem at the academic level but she did have a problem with her attitude, the way she was.

Mateos Alvarez: How did you figure this out when she got to Lincoln?

Maria Hernandez: How did I notice? Well, first of all there was a lot of attitudes that I didn’t like. It wasn’t the academic level because she could do it. She had always been able to do whatever she wanted to do. It was more her attitude that made her grades drop, it just was she did not always want to do it.
She knows it herself and the teachers told her she was very intelligent and able to do it, it’s just that she doesn’t want to do it.
Maria Rodriguez
Junior, Abraham Lincoln High School
Denver Public Schools
YESS Institute Member and Former Mentee

Maria Rodriguez: My name is Maria Rodriguez. I was born in San Juan del los Lagos, Jalisco, Mexico. I originally came here when I was around 4 years old. I go to Lincoln High School. I'm in 10th grade, I'm a sophomore.

Julie Speer: Talk to me a little bit about your life before the YESS Institute.

Maria Rodriguez: Before I used to ditch, a lot. I would barely be in school. I would just leave. Not caring about my grades, not caring about what I was doing. Just mindless decisions. I had really bad grades. I had around 5 F's.

Julie Speer: How many grades are there total?

Maria Rodriguez: I think 7.

Julie Speer: So almost all the classes?

Maria Rodriguez: Yeah, and most of the important ones, they were all F's. So that's worse.

Julie Speer: What would you do when you would ditch?

Maria Rodriguez: We would go with friends. We would just leave. We wouldn't care what we were doing.

Julie Speer: Just hang out?

Maria Rodriguez: Yeah.

Julie Speer: Were you involved in gang stuff? Was it anything really bad or was it just ditching?
Maria Rodriguez: It was just ditching, but really bad decisions were made in those times.

Julie Speer: What about your family? Describe your family life.

Maria Rodriguez: My family is like an old school family. My parents are still married. They've been married for a while. They expect the best from us. Especially because we have papers. We are allowed to do a lot of things. It's a privilege and they want us to get far in life.

Julie Speer: For those who don't understand what that means, what'd you mean when you say you have papers?

Maria Rodriguez: I wasn't born here. It's a really big deal because we got papers early in life. We can do a lot of things with that. While some other people don't have the same privileges as we do. They can't work good, they can't have a good education. We can, we can take advantage of that.

Julie Speer: So you don't have to be in the shadows?

Maria Rodriguez: Yeah.

Julie Speer: Do you have any brothers and sisters older than you?

Maria Rodriguez: Yes, I have 3 older brothers and an older sister.

Julie Speer: How are you're older brothers and sisters academically?

Maria Rodriguez: None of them went to college. One of them is on his way. He' getting there. One of them graduated. The other one just dropped out in 11th grade. He had a baby so that was harder. My sister she comes here. She's doing pretty good.

Julie Speer: She's older than you?

Maria Rodriguez: Yes, she's 2 years older than me.

Julie Speer: She's a senior?

Maria Rodriguez: Junior, but older in age.

Julie Speer: Anything else about life before YESS. Talk about your attitude.

Maria Rodriguez: I had a really bad attitude. I recall this one time. One time they caught me, when they put me to Medina's office and they were talking to me about that. I was just laughing like I didn't care. I was like "Whatever, I mean it's nothing. It's nothing I'm going to care about. You guys can say whatever you want. I don't
"I was just laughing in front of my mom. It looked worse because it's my mom. I would talk back constantly. I wouldn't listen to what they said. I wouldn't take it into consideration. I was bad.

Julie Speer: Why were you so bad? Where did that come from?

Maria Rodriguez: I don't really know. It just happened. There's not really a good explanation. I don't know.

Julie Speer: It wasn't an influence of outside friends?

Maria Rodriguez: I don't think so. It was probably just always trying to look cool, trying to look tough. Probably.

Julie Speer: Talk to me then about what happened and how you got into the YESS program. What happened?

Maria Rodriguez: I was ditching, like 2 weeks straight so I had a lot of absences. Our advisors here at Lincoln, they were considering moving me to another school so I could get my grades up. Then Mr. Medina came into the picture. He helped me. He helped me a lot. He was strict with me. He would put me on a blue slip where you have to sign it from all your teachers saying you were there and show your grades.

Julie Speer: How was that for you?

Maria Rodriguez: It's pretty good. I sometimes forget to sign it, but it's helping. They check it usually. They obviously know when you miss school, when you miss a class. It's pretty good. We were talking to Mr. Medina. At that moment my mom came in so they were talking to me and my mom. They were just telling me that they want the best for me. That I'm a smart girl. That I can get places. I'm not trying. I'm just not trying. I'm not putting any effort into this. Then he put me in YESS mentoring. In the beginning I was like, "Nah, it's not going to help me. It's just not. It's just homework. It's not going to help me." At that time I had a lot of F's, so in a few weeks it did help me. All my F's were gone, all of them. I had none of them and my grades got really good. I started getting better and with Mr. Medina, he was pushing me to get better, to do work. He would help me so much. I really appreciated that. He believed in me and it really helped a lot.

Julie Speer: How did you feel when all of a sudden you were not getting all F's anymore.

Maria Rodriguez: It felt good. It felt really good. It was just surprising I could get so far. That I could do it. Before I used to not believe in myself. I used to be like, "Well, I'm never going to get there." By him helping me it felt really good.

Julie Speer: Did you feel like you just weren't very book smart?
Maria Rodriguez: I would get it. I would understand. It's just I wouldn't try. I would understand all the subjects we were talking about but it was worthless to me. I was just like, "Nah, it's not going to help me."

Julie Speer: What was it that made you want to try?

Maria Rodriguez: I started seeing everybody believing in me. I started seeing everybody pushing me to do good, that I could do good, and it helped a lot. I wasn't alone in this. I had people to help me out on this. It just felt really good.

Julie Speer: How is your mom and your dad? How were your parents in all this? Were they shocked that you were ditching or were they just clueless about it.

Maria Rodriguez: Yeah, they were. My dad, he was pretty mad. He was like, "Why are you doing this? What's the reason for this? Why are you missing school?" I wouldn't explain to him. I would just be like, "I don't care. I don't care. I don't care what you say. If I did it, I did it." With my mom it was harder, with my mom because I'm really close to my mom. She would cry. She would cry with me. She would say, "Why are you doing this? What did we do? What haven't we given you for you to make these decisions?" Then we would just talk. She took it really bad. The time we were having a really hard time, because my brother and my dad had gotten in a car accident. We were in a lot of issues. Just by putting more stress on her, it sucked because she is already stressed, and I'm putting more issues on her. I'm like, "It's hurting her a lot." She took it really bad.

Julie Speer: So the whole time they thought you were doing fine?

Maria Rodriguez: Yeah, they thought I was coming to school, was doing my work, but they didn't know the real thing.

Julie Speer: How was your parent's own education?

Maria Rodriguez: My parents, I don't think they went to high school. My mom, I think she went to 5th grade, and then she dropped out to help with my grandma and all her sisters and brothers. My dad, I think he went to 6th grade. Then he stopped because he came over here, legally, and then he had to get a job.

Julie Speer: Do you think it's hard for them to support you in high school because they don't really have that experience on their own?

Maria Rodriguez: I think they understand. It's difficult for me to ask them if they know a problem. I mean they don't know it, but by me asking them I think it shows at least we want them to be involved. Like I'm asking you something, I want you to be involved in my school. I want you to talk to me about what's going on. About how my grades are. I think it feels pretty good for them for me to ask them.
Even though they didn't go through that much. They didn't go through all of high school. I think they understand.

Julie Speer: Talk about the mentoring program and how that helped you. What was it specifically that helped you?

Maria Rodriguez: It really helped with Mr. Medina. The mentoring program that we were in, well that I am in, it really helped me a lot because Mr. Medina he pushed me, and Desiree she pushed me a lot too. She saw something in me that just helped. Everybody was just helping me. My tutor, my tutor's name is Cynthia, she would help me if I didn't understand something. I'd be like, "Hey, can you help me?" She would try her best. If she didn't even know it, she would try her best, like anything she could. It really helped knowing that she didn't know this and she's trying to help me even though she doesn't know it. It helped a lot.

Julie Speer: Just having people believe in you?

Maria Rodriguez: Yeah.

Julie Speer: Is it as simple as that?

Maria Rodriguez: I think so. Before nobody would really pay attention. I would try to talk and then they would just talk over me. They wouldn't understand. Then Mr. Medina, and everybody from the mentor program, they listen to me. They were like, "What's going on?" Other people just wouldn't. If I got in trouble, they wouldn't ask for my reason, they wouldn't ask me what I needed for help. They would just either put me in ISS, in in-school suspension, they would suspend me, stuff like that. They wouldn't listen. Then they actually cared. I think that helped a lot.

Julie Speer: You've been suspended before?

Maria Rodriguez: Yes. For the same reasons, talking back, ditching. I've been suspended 3 times out of school, and in-school suspension a few times.

Julie Speer: Always at Lincoln? Or in elementary or middle school too?

Maria Rodriguez: Only twice, I did have a rough patch like in 8th grade, but it stopped kind of. It was kind of hard.

Julie Speer: Where did you go to middle school?

Maria Rodriguez: I went to Kepner Middle School.

Julie Speer: How were your grades at Kepner?
Maria Rodriguez: My grades at Kepner Middle School they were okay. They weren't great, but they weren't bad.

Julie Speer: Obviously students do good everywhere, but there were a lot of students not doing so well at Kepner. They're trying to turn that school around now, do you know anything about that?

Maria Rodriguez: Not really, I heard they were going to switch schools, it wasn't going to be there anymore.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about your academics now.

Maria Rodriguez: They're better. They're way better. In geometry, I was having a really hard time. I didn't understand anything. I started going in for lunch and on my own. Nobody told me to go to lunch, I went on my own. I was really proud of that decision because it really helped me. I started going into lunch and she would help me personally. I understand it. Right now I have a B in that class and I had an F. With my other classes, they're way better. With Intro to Lit, I would talk to her too. It just helped, it helped a lot. I have a C in that class, I think, and I had an F too. In my other classes, I've gotten closer to the teachers. I don't talk, I don't treat them with my attitude, I talk to them, I actually talk to them. It feels good, it feels good to have a relationship with the teacher. It helps you a lot. They find ways to help you. My grades are now way better, a lot.

Julie Speer: What if there was no YESS Institute, where would you be right now?

Maria Rodriguez: I think if there wasn't a YESS Institute, I'd probably be in a different school right now. I probably wouldn't be here. Originally I was planned to move to XL, and then this just started. I was gone, Mr. Medina did everything he could to not move me and he did it. I'd probably be ditching. I'd probably, I don't know. I would be doing a lot of bad things right now.

Julie Speer: What are you're plans now, for your life and your future?

Maria Rodriguez: I plan to go to college. I do. I want that for sure. Right now, I'm just trying to get through high school. It's pretty hard but you can go through it.

Julie Speer: Do you think it's hard just because you haven't applied yourself for so long that you have a lot of catching up to do?

Maria Rodriguez: Yes, that's really hard to not put in as much effort. Then you're so behind that it's so hard to catch up. You have to do extra work. You have to talk to your teachers and then on top of that you still have to be doing the work that you guys are doing. It's a hassle, it's a lot. It's just too much sometimes, but it was on
your own account. You did that to yourself so now you have to do it for yourself too.

Julie Speer: That’s a very responsible way to look at it. How do you see yourself in 20 years? In a perfect world, what would you be doing?

Maria Rodriguez: Married, in my own house. I want to be a cop, but then I want to get higher in that. I want to start doing criminal stuff, like looking at like detectives and stuff. I think that sounds really interesting. I don’t want to just be one of those people that just works and doesn’t care about their family. I want to have time for them. I want my family to be into their education, like they're asking me what's going on, stuff like that. Be involved with my children.

Julie Speer: Is there anything you could say about your attitude changing? How is your attitude now?

Maria Rodriguez: It's respectful now. I respect older people. I don’t just go off on them just because they do something that I deserved, like punishing me for when I ditched. I would get really mad because of that and I would just talk back. Now, I understand. I understand that I did something bad. I understand that I need that. I need to understand that I'm just not going to get away with this. It changed a lot.

Julie Speer: Good. Finish this sentence. "The Yes Institute is..."

Maria Rodriguez: The Yes Institute is probably the greatest thing I've been through. It's the best. It really helped me out a lot.

Julie Speer: Awesome. Do you think you'll be a mentor someday?

Maria Rodriguez: I hope I will be a mentor soon, by probably next year I hope.

Julie Speer: Do you have any idea what the achievement gap is?

Maria Rodriguez: No.

Julie Speer: Okay. I'm going to tell you what the achievement gap is and then you can react to it, okay? They're doing a lot of research and studies, there's this thing called the achievement gap. It's a gap between students who achieve really well academically, a lot of times they're more well off financially, they come from wealthier families, or upper/middle class families. The students who are not achieving very well academically, a lot of times come from poorer families. So that's the gap in between, a lot of it is just economic standing. This is generalization, because of course there are poor kids who are going to be superstars no matter what. When money's not a problem, and they're getting
breakfast everyday, they just achieve better. Maybe their families are more involved. Then to make it even more complicated, a lot of the students that are achieving well are from white families, and the students who are not achieving well are students of color. That is the achievement gap. What's the first thing that comes to mind?

Maria Rodriguez: Now that I know what the achievement gap is, I think it's kind of unfair. Wealthier families have more of an advantage, because they can get better schools. They can get better things, while families that are more lower, they have to go to public schools where sometimes they don't care about their students. Sometimes they don't care what they're going to go through. It's just really unfair how they're going to treat people better. People are going to be better because of that. Everybody needs to have the same chance.

Julie Speer: How would you place your own family's economic status? How wealthy is your family?

Maria Rodriguez: I think we're in the middle. We're doing good.

Julie Speer: The other issue we're kind of exploring is how race plays into all this. Do you ever have issues of racism or prejudice in your world?

Maria Rodriguez: I don't have any racism issues towards me, but I've seen it happen a lot. It happens everywhere. It's just something that people don't change because everybody has different mindsets. Everybody thinks differently, so everybody's going to say whatever they want to say. It really sucks. It sucks that they treat people differently just because of that. It's just unfair. Everybody's the same. We're all people, we're all humans. You're going to judge somebody else just because they're not the same color as you, it's just not cool.

Julie Speer: What would you say to someone to encourage them to donate to the YESS Institute?

Maria Rodriguez: I think it'd be a smart choice to donate to the YESS Institute, because if you look at the students in that program, it really helps them. It's really helped all of them, and our tutors they try to make it fun for us. I think it would be a really smart choice to donate.
Julie Speer: Let's start off with your own personal story. Tell us where you went to school and then your experience at Manual.

Mayor Michael Hancock: When you talk about schools that I attended, I grew up in northeast Denver. And so because of my family dynamics we moved every 6 to 9 months, so it seems like every year I was in a different school. So early on in my primary school years I was in the Montbello community. Later on I would be in Park Hill and the nearer northeast part of town, around the Cole, Weir neighborhoods. I attended elementaries like MS elementary, Hallad elementary, Barnham-Forde, finished at Stech elementary, went to Cole middle school, spent one semester at Hill as a part of busing and finished up at Manual high school.

Julie Speer: So when you talk about Hill, were you bused?

Mayor Michael Hancock: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I went to Hill briefly in the eighth grade, for a semester. I don't even know if it was a full semester. And what it was is an experiment that I decided to test out during the summer months. My grandmother lived in Park Hill and you know, she lived alone. Just to try to escape the chaos of my home I enticed her to let me move in with her and much to my mother's chagrin she let me move in with her. I was in eighth grade and under the guise that I was going to help my grandmother out and as a result, I had to be bused from her home in Park Hill on 35th and Holly to Hill middle school and didn't care much for Hill and wanted to get back to my neighborhood school at Cole middle
school and so ultimately moved back home with my mom on the
guise that I was homesick to attend Cole middle school.

Julie Speer: So aside from not being with your mom and living with your
grandmom, what was that experience like?

Mayor Michael Hancock: Well it wasn't interesting enough. I thought because I was bused
from Stech elementary all the way to Hilltop that it would be cool
because I get to be around my friends who I had gone to
elementary school with, who were attending Hill middle school.
Outside of being with my friends, I just didn't care much for being
at Hill. That's just missing my home where my sister was and guys
I grew up with in the neighborhood, they were all at Cole. It was
just a matter of wanting to get back to the basics. But there is
nothing particularly wrong with Hill, I think it was just me.

Julie Speer: Talk about Manual high school, did you go there all 4 years?

Mayor Michael Hancock: All 4 years, I went to Manual high school. Manual high school was
a phenomenal high school while I attended there. It brought kids
from all over the city. From every socio-economic walk of life
together in that high school. We took a tremendous amount of
pride in being Thunderbolts and that pride carries over today
when we see one another. We take a great deal of pride in
greeting fellow Thunderbolts. But we understood the historic
significance of this high school in the sense of the role it's played
in the city of Denver, the role it's played in integration in bringing
kids together from all walks of life. We took a great deal of pride
in making sure that experiment worked. We did, we learned a lot
from each other.

Today, I tell you there are friends that I have who are very special
people in my life that quite frankly I would have never met them
had they not been at Manual and we had a chance to be a part of
that brand experiment.

Julie Speer: Tell me what neighborhood folks were bused from?

Mayor Michael Hancock: The young people who went to Manual came from Hilltop to Polo
Club, Crestmore Downs. We were all over, Park Hill. Some
sections of South Park Hill. Manual high school, again, pulled from
all different parts of our city. And then of course, the surrounding communities of Manual high school, the northeast, again, the Cole, the Whittier, the 5-Points communities. A melting pot.

Julie Speer: How do you feel about what happened with Manual, what’s been happening, what’s happening now?

Mayor Michael Hancock: When I sum up what happened and has happened at Manual high school, I got to tell you it’s been very painful. One because of the historic relevance and the success that the high school had had prior to the end of busing. It wasn’t just white kids that were bused to Manual, it was all different shades of children that were bused to Manual high school. One of the things we know happened is at the moment they ended busing all of the resources left. When I talk about resources, I’m talking about some of the best teachers were gone, the investments around Manual high school were gone, and quite frankly one of the real sad stories of the history of schools in our city occurred at Manual high school. We had one of the great chronicle success stories in terms of bringing young people from different walks of life together ending in one very sad chapter in its history.

Julie Speer: Any thoughts on how it is today and the mixture of schools within the building?

Mayor Michael Hancock: Manual high school today is I think a school well on the rebound and I think it’s because of the resiliency of the neighborhood, and the resiliency of the people who are in that building, really DPS coming to light in terms of the real tragedy that has occurred. And quite frankly, and this is last, but not least, I think the real power, resiliency of the young people in that building who have simply said we will rise. We don’t have to be characterized based on the injustices that have occurred in this building.

We could be much better than that and we can carry on the tradition and the history of success and commitment to excellence that this building represents. And I’m excited about it. I think that quite frankly with a lot of alumni, and supporters of Manual coming back saying we’re going to help this school rise again and be the great school that it once was. We’re going to do it while these students are in this building and we’re going to help
them build on that success. And the young people saying we're going to be a part of this. A new principal coming in. I'm pretty excited about it. I think just because you don't have the level of diversity that we once shared in that building doesn't mean it can't be successful and those young people have every right and every opportunity to be just as successful if we all stay committed and fight to make sure that they have every right and access to those opportunities as well.

Julie Speer: We're looking at the 20-year anniversary of desegregation of Denver public schools and a lot of folks say, "The schools are segregated because the city's segregated" talk about that a little bit and how do you see Denver in terms of segregation and how you're tackling that.

Mayor Michael Hancock: Well when we look at Denver and you ask a question of how does the city's socio-economic and racial layout kind of lend itself to the face of Denver public schools, I think there is some validity into people have chosen to live in historic neighborhoods where cultural relevance and cultural sameness exist in some respect. You know the reality is that we still have some very diverse neighborhoods. But I think people choose to live around schools that are dynamic and successful, and you see some neighborhoods that are growing, let's look at the far northeast in Green Valley, probably one of the most diverse neighborhoods in the city of Denver. People are rallying around the schools, we now have more options in terms of high quality, high performing schools and so folks are choosing to live near those schools. We have some of that in Park Hill going on as well.

But here's a reality, diversity works. The reality is that our communities and this society is not homogeneous, very few societies that you can go to in the world are homogeneous and the more we can raise our children around diversity, the better prepared they're going to be for society. When you ask what the city of Denver is doing to lend itself to that, promoting workforce and affordable housing is extremely important in every neighborhood in this city so that people who want to live in city can have options to say, "I don't have to just live in one part of the city because I'm at one economic level or strata in this society. I can choose to live wherever I want" and we should have that
option available to them. That's why I continue to promote accessible, affordable workforce housing in our city.

Julie Speer: The reality is that a lot of students don't get into their choice school, so what do you do when the kids can't get in?

Mayor Michael Hancock: Well, when you talk about far northeast Denver, and really a lot of the reforms that have occurred in that community it was never about 1 campus, it was never about 1 school. You know the ultimate vision for me at the time that I was part of that effort was that families would wake up and really have a conundrum and that is, what great schools do we send our kids to? Because whether it's traditional or charter, I think that every child in the city deserves to have access to quality high-performing schools in their neighborhood. We are fighting and continue to work hard to make sure that far northeast Denver has those options. We are seeing traditional and charter schools perform well so if they are unable to get on the Evie Dennis campus, we also have high-performing quality schools sitting in there in terms of Green Valley Ranch elementary school, one of the highest performing schools in the city of Denver as well as strong middle schools that are performing out there as well. We're trying to do the same thing in the Montbello community.

We most recently took the secretary of education, Arne Duncan to Mcglone elementary school because it's doing so phenomenally well. It's those kind of opportunities I think that ultimately create a dynamic community that we're all fighting for. Yes, there are some limits in terms of how many students get on the campus but a goal is to create options for them just as exciting and just as well performing off the campus as well.

Julie Speer: What was your role in the far north east turnaround? What time frame are we talking about?

Mayor Michael Hancock: Oh man, if I can recall, it was mid-2000s, 2007, 8. I worked with state senator, Michael Johnson and many stakeholders in the community to really simply say, "We can't continue to allow these schools to fail our children out here and let's come up with a strategy where we take a look at every school and where they're parentally failing. We're going to do whatever we can to turn that
school around or either as a traditional school or replace it with a high-performing charter school.

Julie Speer: Do you live in far north east?

Mayor Michael Hancock: I do live in far north east, in the Green Valley Ranch community. It is the fastest growing part of Denver right now. It's a very diverse community. I like the fact that we've got a little bit of suburban living inside of the city. My house backs up to open space, where I can see raccoon's, deer, foxes, and coyote's at any given time. I just think it's cool to live in the area that I live. It is quite the distance from downtown, but one in which as a family, we enjoy the quiet, the tranquility that occurs out there. But it is growing quite fast in far north east.

Julie Speer: Talk about your commitment to fighting gentrification, is it affordable housing, is there anything else?

Mayor Michael Hancock: Denver is growing fast. We've seen 100,000 people move into the city in the last 10 years. In the next 5 years we're forecast to see another 50,000 people move into our great city. I like to tell people that the good news is that this is a great city to live and to work and to raise your family. The bad news is that everyone has discovered that this is a great place to live and to work and to raise your family. As a result we're seeing people come from all over the country to be a part of this city.

When it comes to gentrification and when it comes to our neighborhoods the reality is that we must find a balance. You ought to be excited that people want to live in our city, that people want to diversify our city and our community as well. But we as a city have to be always be aware of the fact that dynamics create challenges for people who want to stay in their community and particularly those who live along the fringes and maybe more challenged economically when values go up and then all of a sudden you've got higher taxes and higher cost of living in your community and so we must create those balanced approaches to developing more affordable housing. Helping to protect our seniors in particular who want to age in place. They don't necessarily want to leave their homestead and we've done that and in the city of Denver we've doubled the property tax
exemption for our seniors and helped them to hopefully withstand some of the value increase that we've seen in Denver. That's why we're pushing hard for affordable housing, particularly development around our transits sites so that people can walk out of their units and immediately get to a transit station and help them to avoid the cost of having automobiles and paying insurance and field costs, but more importantly to have that reliable transportation near their home.

So there are ways in which we can bring those opportunities to bare so that we don't have overwhelming whole changes in our community in terms of who lives there and who wants to call a neighborhood home.

Julie Speer: Talk about the role of education in general, and especially as it's fighting poverty.

Mayor Michael Hancock: The role of education in general. I'll tell you, there's not much that I can point to in terms of our efforts to address homelessness, our efforts to address poverty, our efforts to address crime in communities that are not directly linked to education. Typically when I want to see how certain dynamics exist in communities, how they came about, the first thing I need to go to is how are the schools performing. When I run into individuals who've had difficult times in their life, who've been involved in gangs or crime, or who are struggling economically, I ask a question, "Tell me about your educational path and journey and where you've come from and where did it immediately begin to go wrong or begin to go wrong gradually". Often times it leads right back to the classroom, so education to me is that silver bullet, it is that game changer and if we can prepare our young people from the very beginning to understand the importance of education and to understand the importance of being focused on education, I think as a society, as a community we're going to be much better off going forward. But we've got to get it right, education is critical.

Julie Speer: Is there anything that Denver city is doing in partnership with Denver public schools, or is there a complete separation?

Mayor Michael Hancock: When you ask what we're doing in partnership with DPS there's a lot. There's no complete separation. As mayor, as a city, I
recognize the importance of making sure our citizens are well educated. I cannot go around this country, around this world promoting our city for new jobs in placement companies if I don't believe that I have the educated workforce to back us up. But we are providing universal pre-K, access to pre-K education for our children. That's in direct partnership with DPS. That's a direct answer to the city's answer saying, our kids must be ready to hit the ground running when they walk into kindergarten. We're doing everything we can as part of the education compact to make sure that our kids are reading at grade level by third grade and infusing the schools with literacy programs as much as possible.

We recognize that the important role we play as a city is the other side of the school door and so we're doing everything we can to make sure that our kids have a healthy, safe, path to their school door every day. But more importantly after school. We are investing heavily in after school programming, recreational programs, through the My Denver card and making sure when they walk in they have tutorial services, they have healthy activities to engage in so that we keep our kids safe. This is a wholesale partnership that we have with Denver Public Schools and we recognize as a city that we can play as critical a role as anything outside of that classroom. We said to DPS, "You take care of the classroom, we'll do everything else on the outside of that school door".

Julie Speer: As a parent, where do you choose to send your kids to school?

Mayor Michael Hancock: My last daughter is at East High School. She will be a senior next fall at East high school, very proud of her. Our son, Jordan who's in second year of college, also graduated from East High School. So our kids have stayed in public schools all along, either at Omar Blair charter school or at East High School.

Julie Speer: Did you live in far north east at that time?

Mayor Michael Hancock: Yes.

Julie Speer: So they choisced in?
Mayor Michael Hancock: They chose in and this was part of the dilemma that quite frankly we were struck with as a family. I was very disappointed when our son was preparing for high school that either on the performance report card was performing at a level that I felt like that would be a school for him and give him the opportunity to really prepare himself and that was disappointing and that was one of the reasons that sparked, quite frankly, my involvement in turning these schools around. I wasn't just going to ship my kid out of the neighborhood. No, I turned and I said, "Now let's fix these schools and let's get it right for all of the kids".

Julie Speer: If you look at the Southwest end. There's a lot of really low performing schools there. There’s a lot of Latinos in those schools and a lot of the parents are not even aware that they’re low performing, but they send them to Lincoln thinking oh, it's going to be great. Southwest seems to have the most low performing schools, any thoughts on that?

Mayor Michael Hancock: Yes, when we talk about low performing schools no matter where they exist, the reality is that the community owns most of the opportunity, quite frankly, to turn them around. When communities engage and simply say enough is enough, your officials pay attention and the people in the building pay attention. The reality is in far north east when we decided to turn the schools around, we held 1, 2, or 3 town hall meetings. I'm going to tell you you could have landed a helicopter in those meetings. The challenge was, that was unacceptable with that because the schools were not performing well, 8 out of 10 schools out there were failing and they were not meeting the grade, they were on probation or in danger of being closed and so those rooms should have been filled.

Only by speaking truth to justice and being very candid with each other, did we get people to start coming into those buildings and simply saying we can't have this anymore and when that happened that's when we began to turn the tide and we sat down as a community and started making changes so the opportunity exists in every part of town, no matter where failing schools exist. I'm aware of some of the challenges in the south west. I can tell you not only are there some challenged schools, there's also some schools that are performing quite well and proving that when
parental engagement is increased and awareness is increased and you really demand excellence, things can change, and they have in some of those school buildings in the southwest part of Denver.

Julie Speer: Strive is a really good example. Are you familiar with the Strive school?

Mayor Michael Hancock: Yes, absolutely.

Julie Speer: The kids achieve really well, and yet it is kind of a segregated school because they are mostly Hispanic kids. Any thoughts on that, does it even matter, should we even be concerned about that?

Mayor Michael Hancock: Inclusivity and diversity is very important. I think whether they are African-American kids, or Latino kids, or white kids, Asian kids, or American Indian kids, they deserve and should have access to a diverse experience in the classroom and in their community. The reality is when you rob them of that you don't give them the socialization I think that's important to prepare them for society outside of those buildings. But at the end of the day, let's not argue with success. I'm proud of the fact that those kids no matter what ethnic or racial make up they are, they're doing well and we ought to encourage them to keep doing well.

Julie Speer: Denver Public Schools has a huge achievement gap. How do you define the achievement gap and what do you think can be done to fix it?

Mayor Michael Hancock: How do you define the achievement gap is really one of those relative questions because it is relative, it depends on where you're from and what you're dealing with. On the very basic sense the achievement gap is really the disparity between kids of color in particular compared to their white peers in the classroom, but it also equates to the opportunity gap. What's the opportunity these young people have to accessing quality schools, access to quality instruction, access to wholesale healthy programming in those school buildings and quite frankly preparation for a successful productive way of living in our society. But it's also the opportunities that are snatched away from those young people when they are not properly prepared and we can point to those
people who are sitting in jail cells, those folks who are struggling
everyday just to make it in our society, back to those
opportunities that had been snatched away from when they were
much younger and so the reality is that we've got to recognize
that we've got to connect the challenges we face as a society back
to what happens in those classrooms and the opportunities or
lack thereof we give our young people to get ready.

The reality is that our community is shifting. Our society is
shifting. By 2030 this will be a majority nation of color and if we
don't prepare all children to hit the ground running to lead this
nation, we're going to have much bigger conversations about a lot
of other things on a more global scale. So it's important that we
give every child the opportunity to succeed in this nation.
Mike Johnston: I am a State Senator from Northeast Denver so I represent the Senate District 33 in the Colorado State Senate.

Julie Speer: Are you on education committee?

Mike Johnston: I'm on education and finance committees.

Julie Speer: Let's start with your job. Tell me the state legislature's role in guiding education statewide.

Mike Johnston: One of the things that people don't realize is how critical I think the state legislature is in actually driving education policies. People think about the federal government as a key lever. Between state and local governments we make 90% of the education policy and drive 90% of the education funding in the state.

The state itself now drives more than two-thirds of all education funding and so really, the state has in a dramatic way the power of the purse in education funding and when you control the funding you control a lot of the policy sometimes. Then there are things that people want to be common and statewide. People want to know that there is this same expectation for a kid in Alamo so that there is in Adams County, and so when it comes to standards or expectations or accountability or transparency those are all generally state-level functions and so the state has had a pretty active hand I think in trying to raise the bar for educational outcomes, I think that's been good for the most part.
Julie Speer: Our funding levels are kind of terrible, aren't they?

Mike Johnston: Our funding levels in Colorado continue to be terrible. By most metrics we're in the bottom 5 states of all states in the country. If you look at comparisons to states like Wyoming, neighboring states, they spend about twice as much money per student as Colorado does. We spend around $8,000 per student in the state and there are many states that spend 15, 18,000. We're in the bottom 5 and that's one of the legacies of these overlapping conflicting constitutional amendments, of the Taber Amendment, the Gallery Amendment, the Amendment 23 which require us to both spend more on K12 and spend less overall. When those have run into conflict, number 23 is lost. We spent less on K12 and kept overall tax burden lower.

Julie Speer: How do you feel about the levels? Do you think we are doing okay with what we've got, because some people say that we still have really great performance and achievement levels.

Mike Johnston: The nice thing is we are the single most efficient education spending state in the country, which is there is no state in the country that spends less money than Colorado that gets better outcomes. We're doing well in the money we have. The other side of that is if you had a company with that record you would invest a lot more money in them if you had the most efficient state in the country because you get better results for every dollar you put in.

I've always thought it's both. It's both a matter of how much money you spend and how you spend the money you have. I think we've done a lot of things to make sure the money that we spend is spent effectively. Things like financial transparency so you know where every dollar is spent in every school every day. A category for teachers and for principals and for schools, transparencies for families on how their schools perform.

I think we've done a lot to make sure we're good custodians of those dollars. I do think there are critical areas in which we need to make more investments to see better results. We don't even provide full day funding for kindergarten in Colorado, not to mention funding for early childhood for 3 or 4 year olds. We don't provide funding for extended school days or school years that we know are so effective in so many other cities and states around the country.
I do think there are real opportunities we're missing by not providing adequate funding and I think that's one of the areas we're going to have to invest if we want to keep up.

Julie Speer: Have you seen in your tenure, have you seen an increase in transparency looking at DPS specifically?

Mike Johnston: I think we've seen a dramatic increase in transparency over the last 7 to 10 years and particularly in DPS among a number of other districts. You now can get really good, clear data on how each school district performs, on how money is spent at each of those schools and on not just how they're performing but how they're improving over time, so maybe they're starting very far behind but are they growing, are they catching up?

I think parents have more and more demand for information each year than the Denver parents are very engaged, very active and they want information. I think the district has worked hard to try to make that available so I do think there's more information available now than there was ever before. Doesn't mean we've solved all the problems but it does mean I think there's more information available.

Julie Speer: Let's talk about your own family. Did you grow up in Denver?

Mike Johnston: I did not. I grew up in the western slope of Colorado.

Julie Speer: Talk about your own children and where you're choosing to send them to school. Tell us what neighborhood you live in and talk about your own choices in relation to education for your kids.

Mike Johnston: I have 3 children, I have 2 kids who are 7, twin boys and a little girl who's 3, and so for us navigating the choice process was a burden and a curse. We had no idea how extensive it was and how complicated it would be and how many great choices there were.

I'd say one of the challenges for us, we live in Stapleton on the east side of Denver were sometimes the choices that you thought were available weren't always available. For both of our boys we looked at Polaris, we looked at Odyssey School, it's a charter school we were interested in, we looked at our neighborhood school. We liked all 3 of them but they
couldn't get in to either Odyssey, they passed the admissions for Polaris but they were out of neighborhood so really weren't accessible.

In the first round what we thought would be an embarrassment of choices was actually just one choice, but we had a great experience there and it's been very successful. For one of my boys it was a perfect fit. He's still there and loves it. For another one of my boys he just had a different set of learning styles than we thought and so he is in a Montessori school that's in Five Points now where my daughter goes, which mostly it started out as a pre-school, it's called the Montessori Academy of Colorado. They now added a first grade and so he is in their first grade there with his sister, my daughter Ava. It's been a great experience for both of them as well.

We're in that moment of having different kids who have different needs and trying to find different schools as a result.

Julie Speer: They're all public?

Mike Johnston: One of them is public and one of them is private. The Montessori is private. They are working to apply for charters, they'd like to be a charter but they've only been a preschool until just this last year and so they're trying to go through the process of becoming charter, but right now we're still paying tuition to go there.

Julie Speer: The public school, is it the neighborhood school in Stapleton?

Mike Johnston: It is, yeah. My son Emmett goes to Bill Roberts Elementary which is our neighbor public school in Stapleton.

Julie Speer: Were you guaranteed a seat in that one? I understand in Stapleton there's multiple schools.

Mike Johnston: That's right. You're not guaranteed a spot at any one specific school but all the friends I've talked to have gotten a spot somewhere in one of the schools in the neighborhood and we are fortunate to live 100 yards from 2 different schools and so there were a couple options. We ended up with a seat at Bill Roberts. It's been a great fit.

Julie Speer: Contrasting your situation, you live in a great neighborhood with great schools, all the options are great. Now imagine living in Southwest Denver, not all parents have those great choices to great schools.
Mike Johnston: I would say one other thing about whether or not all of our choices are great, which I think there are some wonderful schools in our neighborhood. I think as a parent there are more priorities we have than just the academic performance of that school and so I will tell you when we moved to Stapleton, we bought a house there 10 years ago, we bought it for one very simple reason. My wife and I are education dorks and so we did the research.

We looked at every school in Denver and said, "What school has the highest combination of diversity and performance?" We intentionally wanted a school climate that we knew was diverse and that we knew was high quality and so we literally bought a house in Stapleton because at that point, Westerly Creek and Bill Roberts were the 2 most diverse schools in Denver with the highest performance.

We went there because we really were committed to the idea of diversity in our kids educational experience as well as quality and we were part of the boom of parents moving into Stapleton. As a result what happened was those families entered and reproduced at a much faster rate than the district was ready for. As a result you saw the diversity in those schools decline dramatically.

One of the reasons why we were interested in Odyssey for instance as a place for our kids is it's in Park Hill, it's in our neighborhood, but it has a much more diverse student population than what you might see in some of the neighborhood elementary schools just because the student population has grown so fast. This is why we'll probably get into this later. This is why I [inaudible] with a group of parents and Mayor Hancock when he was then City Councilman Hancock, when we confronted the issue of there are too many kids in Stapleton growing too fast, we need to build more schools.

What we and a group of parents all committed to was yes, we want to build more schools but we only want to build those schools under the promise that those schools will also remain diverse because it doesn't make sense to build more schools if the result is any student south of Mount View or west of Quebec can't get into these schools, that wouldn't really be the idea we came here for. When you look at now the difference in the diversity of the kindergarten when we bought our house 10 years ago, when the Bill Roberts kindergarten was 60, 70% kids of
color and now the middle school, the 7th and 8th grade is still 40, 50, 60% kids of color.

The kindergartens, the first grades are sometimes 10% kids of color and so the school's amazing, the teachers are amazing, we love the principal, it's all been a great experience but I will say one disappointment for us is we moved to that neighborhood because of the promise of diversity and the population hasn't been able to sustain that. I would say while I'm delighted that we have options that families in southwest Denver don't have, I would also say the promise of what brought us to this neighborhood is not always there any more, which is we wanted to live in Denver and send our kids to a Denver public school that was diverse. We've succeeded on two of the three of those but not on the third. I think that's part of the promise that I think we still have to commit to.

When you look at the difference to your early question between the choices that are available to my family in northeast Denver and for families in southwest Denver, it is dramatic. It is dramatic in a way that people I think don't expect from a city like Denver. You think about if you buy a house in a city like DC or Detroit you might have these deep disparities between the quality of one neighborhood public school to the next or one district public school to the next. I think people don't think of Denver as having those kind of disparities, but what you know is that if you are in a different neighborhood in Denver like southwest, the number of options that are available to you that are high quality, not to mention diverse, are tremendously low.

We're living in the reality now where Denver despite all of it's progress, still has 2 divided and deeply segregated systems, depending on where you live.

Julie Speer: How do you personally describe the achievement gap because everybody describes it in a different way. How do you define it? What is the achievement gap?

Mike Johnston: I'm glad that you took the time to ask because I know we talk about it so much we don't want to define it. In my own thinking, the achievement gap is the gap that exists between students in different ethnic or socioeconomic groups that is a function of lack of resources and infrastructure we put in place to help those kids succeed. It shows up because students who have different socioeconomic backgrounds don't
get access to a set of skills or experiences which means they show up to school, kindergarten, 5th grade, 9th grade, freshman year of college, without the same set of background they would've gotten if they were born a mile to the east or a mile to the west or with a parent that made $50,000 more than their parents make. That for me is the key driver in injustice that I think of when I think of the achievement gap.

Julie Speer: One of the things we're talking about is Northfield High School. The promise right now as I see it, is that it will be what you defined and what you went looking for; a certain set ratio of free and reduced-lunch seats. However, as the Stapleton population is anticipated to grow, in 5 years it might literally be the Stapleton High School. Right now it's a grand experiment. Define what's happening now with Northfield, what's your prediction?

Mike Johnston: I think when you think about what is the opportunity in Northeast Denver, what is the opportunity to create a meaningful community experience where people have high quality schools that serve their neighborhood and their neighbors and that are incredibly diverse and give you the rich texture of what all of Denver feels like.

The amazing thing is that's possible right now. The amazing thing is if you cross the street, if you crossed Montview from Stapleton to East Colfax you would go from Bill Roberts to Ashley Elementary, and you would go from a school that's 80% white and non free reduced lunch to one that's 90 plus percent Latino and free reduced lunch. Those kids are in school a block apart. Same is true if you cross Quebec to the west, you'd see a North Park Hill, far more diverse communities of color in those elementaries than you'd see in Stapleton.

The beauty of what I think Denver is trying to do and what we've pushed them to try to do is to say that re-segregation exists because of the way you've thought about neighborhoods in the past and the way those neighborhoods have led to enrollment zones in the past which is hey, if you live north of Montview you're guaranteed a spot in a Stapleton school and you are a Stapleton resident. Which means you're defining that neighborhood as the boundaries of Stapleton.

I think the great promise of this Northeast Denver is you now have a Northeast Denver, what everyone would want in any city. You have a combination of middle class, upper middle class and working class
families. You have a combination of White, Latino and African American families, and if you drew that neighborhood to say include North Park Hill on East Colfax and Stapleton all as one zone, you would have a school distribution that I think everybody is seeking. A balance where one particular group feels like they're isolated or alone and where no one feels like you have to cross that racks to get to school there.

What it takes is it takes convincing folks to think about themselves as neighbors in a region and not neighbors in a block, and so part of the genius about what I think Denver has done around things like McAuliffe, was that was the school we negotiated around to say yes, we want to build a new school but we want to insist that it's diverse and when that population grew faster than we could sustain, Denver made I thought the brilliant move to say we're now going to move this school into Park Hill or we're going to make sure now ids in Park Hill aren't getting left out because they can't get a Stapleton seat. These seats belong to all the kids in the Northeast.

If you thought about building an identity around the entire region and creating schools that everyone had access to that were high quality and diverse, I think you could really capture what folks were after with the first round of busing or what they were after in 1954 when they said let's, with all deliberate speed, try to integrate public schools in America and the things we failed at in subsequent efforts.

I think you have to maintain that delicate balance of making sure no one group feels isolated because they're too much the minority. That's something that's been very, very hard to do because most of these don't have this kind of balance.

Julie Speer: Is that social engineering then? I mean there's 70% free and reduced lunch right now in DPS so a lot of people opt out of the district. Assume everyone comes back in, you would be a proponent of sort of ratios or quotas within each school?

Mike Johnston: I don't think doing this is anything other than giving parents what they've told us they've asked for. We had neighborhood meetings with a thousand people that showed up in Stapleton about the school construction problem and how we needed more schools. They sign on to a list of 3 things that were most important.
They said one is I want a school that is high quality, two is I want a school that is diverse, there is I want a school that's close to my house. You sometimes think the second and third are in conflict. You couldn't possibly have a school that's close to your house and diverse because our neighborhoods have resegregated, but if you look at the drive a parent takes to go from Stapleton to East High School, it is no different than the drive they would take to go from Stapleton to Park Hill. The only question is do you have a school in Park Hill those parents want to go to.

I think what you did is if you could say, "We're going to make this zone now go from Colorado Boulevard all the way to Yosemite, to the Aurora border, and from Colfax up to, just call it Martin Luther King for ease of use, although you would want to include North Hill which is higher north than that." You could still say in that zone you are entitled to a school spot in this zone the same way I'm entitled to a school spot in Stapleton, but once you move that zone, you say there's no reason why because you could pay $70,000 more for a house on the east than the west of Quebec, you have different access to that zone. We're just saying everyone has a seat. Our goal is to create world class schools on all those sites everyone wants to fight to get into and frankly the key is to make sure there are schools on both sides of Quebec that folks really want to go to. That's happening now and you look at the wait list at Denver School of Science and Tech at Cole. The highest demand school in the Denver public school system right now is McAuliffe. That is a Park Hill Denver public school, district-run school and so all types of schools are going to succeed. Our challenge is to build great schools that attract parents from all over and to have those schools evenly distributed enough that everyone's got one in their neighborhood and they've got one in the neighborhood next door if they want to go there.

Julie Speer: I mean it's a beautiful idea but a person's not going to wait until it's fixed, right?

Mike Johnston: I think this is where this work becomes difficult because I think what you have to do is parents are customers and if I went to FedEx and said, "I want to send a package," they said, "We can't this year, maybe we can in a year from now," I would stop coming back, and so the notion that that's what's at tension between ... So when there are 400 parents wanting to go to McAuliffe who can't and you say, "Sorry, come back in a year or 2 years," that's not good enough.
If that's the case, there should be 3 McAuliffe's in the next year and if that's what the demand requires, we should open them. That also means that this is where it gets hard to do that, that means you've got to close some other schools. Denver's done that and it's taken a lot of heat for that but I think what going to have to happen faster is us being more responsive to what the parents are asking for and to providing more schools that meet more of what parents are asking for. By that I mean the explicit ask for diverse schools.

I do think part of what parents love and want about McAuliffe is it's a great school and it's a diverse school. I don't think anymore that those 2 are at odds but I think there are very few schools we're offering that do both of those. Where would they exist? We should do a lot more and a lot faster.

Julie Speer: Is McAuliffe keeping a ratio, a percentage of free reduced lunch?

Mike Johnston: I don't believe they have a commitment to do that right now. I would have to double check but I think McAuliffe is closer to 20 or 30% FRL. It's more significantly under, but again, it's probably more diverse than any of the other schools in Park Hill and Stapleton on either side of the ledger. It has more of a balance than almost any of the schools do. Same with Denver School of Science & Tech. They have worked hard to keep 2 separate lotteries to make sure you have a balance of free and reduced lunch schools, I think there are more places trying to do that.

I don't think it's perfect. What I think is really critical is I think what we've done in the past is we've forced parents to be their worst selves by saying, "You can either choose a high quality school or a diverse school, and what's more important?" When people say, "I'd rather have a high quality school," they say, "You racist."

We're forced to make that false decision. Why couldn't we say, "I want a high quality school that is diverse and close to me and I insist on those 3 things," because what people know in Denver is that's not impossible to do. It just depends how you draw the zone of your school. For me this is the history of school segregation that nobody tells, which is if you look at what happened, I think the worst Supreme Court case in American history that no one knows about is a case called, "Milliken versus Bradley," which is the plan to desegregate the Detroit Public Schools.
The federal government said, "Detroit, you're segregated, you have to desegregate," and they said, "How do you want us to do that? Our district is 99% Black." They said, "We could do that, you know what we would do? We would take the 5 surrounding suburban districts on either side of us and we would build a deseg plan that included both of them and us, and then we could" ... Let me show you something. If you took those districts, right now there's one district at the center, at the core, there are inner-ring suburbs, outer-ring suburbs.

The travel is no farther. If you cut those districts like pie slices, the travel is no farther from an inner-city school to an inner-ring to a middle-ring suburb on the same side of the city than it is from one side of Detroit to another. It's no worse to travel from Montbello to Southwest Denver for a school than it is from Montbello to Aurora, in fact it's much closer, or from Aurora to Cherry Creek. I think the question's to think about, how do we group kids in a way that deliberately matches our values and those values are yes quality, yes close to you, but also yes diverse. I think if we were more aggressive, more committed to doing that you would get a much richer conversation than one that quietly pits people against each other by saying either you want diversity or you want high quality and which is it?

Julie Speer: Are you talking about inter-district integration?

Mike Johnston: I didn't finish the story but in Milliken v. Bradley they proposed inter-district integration and the Supreme Court struck it down and said, "That is unconstitutional, you may not do it." You created the template for the next 50 years of school districts to say the way that we can avoid integration is by simply having a separate district, and that way no kid from name your urban city next door can ever cross that district boundary.

That same opportunity exists within Denver. You have within Denver the same population you have in Cherry Creek and Littleton, Adams County, you have very wealthy, you have middle class, you have working class. Even in just northeast Denver, in northeast Denver you could create the same student population you would by merging Aurora, Cherry Creek and Littleton Schools into one which would never happen, but you could in Montbello, Green Valley Ranch, Stapleton, Park Hill and East Colfax get that same population. That's all within one district. If we just find a way
to draw the boundaries right and build the schools that are quality enough to convince parents to send their kids there.

It's totally tricky. I think that you might find Denver at the heart of one of the most compelling battles for school integration in the 21st Century and may find ourselves there because we have parents who want it and we have schools that are capable of delivering it and you might create a climate for the first time, attract middle class families back into the system or back in to the district and continues to serve low income families really well in their neighborhoods. It's never been done before and so this is no small task, but I think if we're committed to doing it in a bold way it offers real hope for the rest of the country.

Julie Speer: Are there people working towards this or is this just an idea? Right now it's illegal, correct?

Mike Johnston: On the inter-district deseg plans, those are illegal, but what makes it more compelling in places like Denver is you can accomplish that without having to cross district boundaries. Denver can use, and I think this is what the Denver public schools have done with just the northeast Denver zoning plan. By changing the middle school zoning pattern to include Stapleton and Park Hill in the same zone you've effectively done that. You've said we all have seats at one of these schools but we're not guaranteeing that Stapleton, you've got a seat in Stapleton and Park Hill, you get a seat in Park Hill. We're guaranteeing that you are all families in the same northeast region and you all get a seat in that region. If folks are unhappy with the school they get assigned, that means it's Denver's job to make those schools a lot better a lot faster so you don't risk losing them again.

Julie Speer: Are you aware of the historical attempt to re-draw the Manual high school lines after busing ended? Basically they tried to re-draw the boundary to make it more diverse. So that you would have folks from the country club areas still going up to Manual.

Mike Johnston: Nobody went.

Julie Speer: No, because that was going to change those kids who went to East and there was a tradition of that, the community would not have it. It would have been great for Manual and Manual might not be in the situation
that it's in now, but just because it was the right thing to do didn't mean it was the popular thing to do.

Mike Johnston: I think the challenge here is you have to entice people not just by doing the right thing but by doing the thing that is best for their own kids. It's hard to entice them to send them to a school on the other side of town because it's good for the city. Parents are always going to make the decision first and foremost on what's good for their kid and I think bar any belief system you have, I think it comes down to is this very best for my kid right now. I think what we have to do is create the pre-conditions where what is best for your kid is also best for the city. That's not easy.

I do think there is some hope that it's possible in places where you've seen really high quality schools that are intentionally diverse and plan to stay that way. I mean who would've ever thought that you would have Stapleoton parents fighting to get on a wait list for a school in Cole? Or in Five Points? Denver School of Science and Tech is making them do that. Who would've ever thought that you'd have Stapleoton parents fighting to get into the historical smiley building in Park Hill? McAuliffe has them doing that in great numbers, and so I think these examples show us it's possible but you have to be able to do it in a lot more places a lot more quickly and that's not easy.

Julie Speer: Talking about the diversity in education, why is that so important, because we don't have that right now. Why is that something to strive for?

Mike Johnston: For me the reason why diversity is so important in your educational experience is I just think that for my own personal experience as a learner, when I look at the experiences I've had in more segregated learning environments and more diverse learning environments, it is always a far richer, far more profound, far more moving, informative conversation when you have folks from different backgrounds.

That doesn't just mean African American or Latino, that means deeply conservatives, that means religious fundamentalists. That means folks that are on difference sides of the spectrum from you, not just racially or socioeconomically but ideologically. I think that's true also. I think that for myself as a learner I want to be challenged and pushed by folks that do things differently than me, for myself as an employee I want to be
challenged and pushed by folks who do things differently from me and I want my kids to have the same thing.

I think in a pure what is best for my child, that is just best for my kid alone to have kids in his class who think differently than he does. Then I think culturally what is best for this country? I think it's best for this country to have us all exposed to and connected to people that are not like us. I think that if we really are one big fabric you want to know as many parts to that fabric as possible, and I think that so often the divisions we find in this country come from lack of the opportunity to actually sit down with you and get to know you. I think that's as true now for republicans and democrats as it is for White folks and folks of color. I think those divides are not only racial but I think to the extent that one of America's and we see so obviously that one of America's enduring tragedies is the inability to solve our racial gaps.

I think it would be ridiculous to ignore the fact that that is one giant gap we have to try to close. The best way I know to close it is to give people the chance to sit down and work shoulder to shoulder on the same topic, whether it's geometry or building bridges or running a restaurant. The more of that exposure to each other, the more I've always found people pull closer. It's always easier to demonize folks that you don't know and have never sat down and talked to. I've always found when I have the hardest problems I can't solve with someone on the other side of an issue the best step is to call them and sit down in person, but I think that if you haven't done that before you don't know how to do that.

Julie Speer: Let's talk about Southwest Denver. You look at the district as a whole, most of the low-performing schools are in Southwest Denver, Lincoln High School. Remediation rates are terrible. It's just bad all around. Lincoln’s trying to do some things to change that but talk about what you know historically about Southwest Denver specifically.

Mike Johnston: I think that for a long time Southwest Denver has been the part of the city that has received the least attention and the least resources, and that's for a number of reasons, I think some historical and some cultural and some socioeconomic and some racial. It's a heavy immigrant population. A lot of non-native English speakers and a lot of folks who haven't seen the future of the city in the eyes of the kids in Southwest Denver. I think that's been a real loss for us.
The other part of it is there have been other parts of the city to their benefit that have had really energized, engaged champions and advocates who have demanded a higher quality set of schools. I think you've seen that mobilizing the last couple years in Southwest Denver where families are parents are standing up and saying, "Wait a second, I've got a cousin across town who goes to a school where 100% of the kids are going to college. Why does my child not have that option?"

I think right now there is a moment where Southwest Denver is doing exactly what parents should do, which is they're saying, "We don't want to have to move across town to get a better school and we don't want to have you tell us anymore that sorry, you can't get a spot in that school because you're out of region or you're out of district or you're out of zone."

I think now you're seeing a ground swell of demand for more and better schools and I think that that's a shame that it's taken us this long to do it but I'm excited to see that there are a lot more providers coming in a lot more schools opening that I think are going to be promising.

Julie Speer: Gentrification is a big issue. Growth is a big issue. People just being forced out and then we'll look at the suburbanization of poverty. North Denver and gentrification, any thoughts there?

Mike Johnston: I think one of the most difficult challenges we have in all of the communities where we want to make sure we're improving school outcomes, you want to improve the outcomes of those schools but you also want to preserve the reason why those folks love to live in those neighborhoods, which is they have unique histories, unique cultures, unique community relationships and you don't want to just improve a school population by changing the population of kids that go to that school. I think in some neighborhoods that's what's happening.

I don't think that's to anyone's necessary fault other than when your neighborhood becomes more attractive because it's closer to downtown or has a bus stop or a light rail or a great school or some great bars and restaurants, when more and more folks want to live in your neighborhood, that's a challenge. I do think this is one of the reasons why you want to try to maintain broader regions of choice is because if you say, "Okay, the Highlands is it's own school district," well then the
Highlands community is going to look all to different than it did 15 years ago.

If you say, "Northwest Denver is a school zone that still includes the Highlands, Engleville and Elyria and Swansea and far North Denver," those are communities that aren't changing quite as rapidly although they may be in the future, we'll see what happens with Engleville, Elyria and Swansea, but I think you want to be able to make sure that the communities benefit from that growth and aren't harmed by it. I think one of the ways is to say, even if you sell your house, move 15 blocks to the west, because someone offered you 3 times more than your family every paid for it, we're not going to get in the way of your ability to make that income, we just want to make sure that the next house you buy, you don't lose the chance to go to the school that you are at now and you love now.

I think it's not an easy balance but I do think one of the ways we help support it is that the schools become the high beams of those communities where even if you move or travel or change or are mobile, you still have that magnet to come back to, and that magnet remains community-owned even if the population is changing.

Julie Speer: What is the plan with Northfield and then what's your prediction?

Mike Johnston: I think the opportunity with Northfield High School is you have what a lot of us hoped you could build with the new development of Stapleton and the emergence of Green Valley Ranch and Montbello is a neighborhood high school that would serve multiple neighborhoods and would serve them in a high quality diverse way. A lot of people have wanted to build another East, which is a school that is diverse but is also high quality. Folks of all backgrounds want to send their kids there and they feel good about it. I think there's promise that that could happen.

I think that the challenge is you have to make sure that there is both space in that school to serve all the kids that want to go there and that there is a design to that school that best facilitates serving the kids that come. I think this is where there's been some debate about will it be one large comprehensive high school, will it be a couple of high schools on that campus like the Evie Dennis Campus which I think we've seen be I think very successful and Green Valley Ranch, and I think there are different competing visions about what people want out of a high school.
I think if you grew up and went to Cherry Creek High School as a kid yourself and bought a house in Denver, you want your kid to go to a school that looks like Cherry View High School which means a comprehensive high school with 3,500 kids in it. If you come from a community where you want more personal relationships between teachers and principals or between teachers and students and the community, you may want a 500 student high school.

I think that part of what's playing itself out in that battle over the design of Northfield is what communities are we trying to serve and could we serve them all at once with one model that fits all of them. My guess will be we'll eventually see on that campus a couple of different schools on the same campus that offer different designs to different interests. I think if you did that right you could find a way to attract different neighborhoods and different diverse bodies of student into those schools in a way that serve them all on one campus but had schools within them that were diverse but different. I think it would be hard.

My opinion is it's going to be hard to build one 3,000 student comprehensive high school that will serve all the needs of those communities at the same time and do it without recreating what we've seen in other cities which is a heavily tracked high school that appears to be integrated from the outside but when you walk in you see classrooms and cliques that actually belie that integration.

Julie Speer: There’s testing data we've been able to go back and track and now people are all in an uproar about testing and opting out. Is testing important and if so, what for?

Mike Johnston: This is the most rewarding context with which I've had the conversation about testing in the last 3 years because what you realize is all of these conversations that matter, which is how are our kids doing, how are our kids doing from different backgrounds and different neighborhoods and in different schools. Those conversations that matter most to us are the conversations we're able to have because we have good data on how they performed. When people ask, "Why do you support testing? Why do you want to make my kids sit in these boring tests all day long, it's a waste of their time?"

It's not a waste of time at all if what you want to do is know how well is this school serving my kids and how well is this school serving all kids
because I can tell you there are a lot of schools in the state of Colorado where people think things are just fine and those schools are just fine if your kid is White and middle class that goes there. If you have a Latino or an African American kid in some of those high performing schools and high performing districts, they’re doing as poor or more poorly than kids in some of the toughest schools in the state.

It's impossible for us to know where we're doing well, where we're improving, where we're falling behind, what kids we're serving well and what kids we're leaving behind if we don't have that data. For someone who has some responsibility for building a statewide education system it would be irresponsible of me to say, "Let's just turn the school board off in the fourth quarter and have no idea who's getting first downs and who's losing yardage and who's scoring and who's not." If we're going to fulfill the commitment to make sure all these kids are college ready or ready for a career and they're ready regardless of their background or their income, the only way we can hold ourselves to that promise is by having a way to measure ourselves against that promise.

For me that's why this is one of the most important innovations we've had and why you can't possibly now afford to turn back the clock on it.

Julie Speer: How does Denver's education compare nationally?

Mike Johnston: I think there are a lot of ways in which Denver is seen as a pay setter nationwide in which there are a lot of things we're trying to do that people use as role models. If you ask folks where is the most exciting or innovative education work happening in the country a lot of folks would say probably New Orleans and probably Denver, for very different reasons. New Orleans has gone about it in a very different way. They've turned their entire system almost into charter schools.

In Denver we've tried something very different which is to say let's build a really balanced portfolio of schools that include district-run schools, innovation schools, charter schools, magnet schools and let's be more creative about things like not just what schools exist but what students go to those schools and how well are they succeeding and how do we support them.

I think it’s a very, very exciting time to be in Denver and it's a very exciting place to do education work and there's the restaurant of the
country watching in some ways which adds some pressure. I just think what's most important is if we have that debate in the absence of a conversation about race, if we have that debate in the absence of a conversation about integration and the lived joint experience of Americans. I think we're going to find ourselves back in the situation we were in in 1970 where we had spent 20 years talking about building better and more equitable schools and we had seen no real change on the diversity of those schools or the achievement of those schools.

I think if we don't keep ourselves accountable to both of those at once, we will certainly not have achieved Dr. King's dreams and probably won't have achieved the dreams of a lot of parents in Denver who are looking for good schools that look like the restaurant of Denver at the same time.

Julie Speer: You talk about race. Do you mean just racial makeup or do you mean socioeconomic?

Mike Johnston: In my mind this conversation is all about the different types of kids that we're not serving well. In some places those are based on race and ethnicity, in most places those are based on income. I'm really glad that you're focusing this conversation not both because it's easy to talk about either the racial achievement gap and it's seen as literally a Black and White issue or a Brown and White issue, and what we know is that the bulk of those needs overlap income brackets more than they overlap skin color. There is places where they overlap both but I think that a real conversation about inequality without a deep focus on income inequality and the income gaps are probably the most important part of the conversation.

I think we have to be open to all the conversations both about income and about race and about ethnicity, but I think a critical last part of this is focus on poverty and what it means, and not in a paralyzing way but in an empowering way to say we know these kids come with a different set of needs, how to actually commit to meeting them as opposed to concede that those needs are going to drive the final outcomes.
Julie Speer: Let’s talk first about your history. Tell me where you went to high school and tell me your own experience growing up and really dive into the race issue and what you were noticing back then.

MiDian Holmes: I went and graduated from Montbello High School. It was the class of 1998. When I think of growing up, definitely there are key components of your childhood even before high school, right? So, when you talk about growing up for me, we moved around a lot when I was young. I remember we used to live in Pueblo, in Thornton, in Commerce City, but we finally settled, I want to say in Montbello, so that really is kind of where we start to identify yourself and the awkward years of middle school, that's kind of when you start saying, “OK, this is the person I'm going to become”, right? So, that's when we were in Montbello, that definitely is where I would say my roots are and again, I went to Montbello High School and at that time the community was very African American. You rarely saw your Caucasian neighbor, or even your Hispanic neighbor. The race issue was real. It was very real, because we were a community of color and typically that comes with its own stereotypes. Unfair stereotypes for the most part, we definitely had this stigma of a community of color. There must be gang problems, drug problems, and it's just this area in which it's just so toxic, right? One thing I can say is that we defined community. Montbello literally defined community, it was almost like a family. You knew your neighbors, you knew your neighbors' neighbors. The kids that you went to school with, you knew that they were living in a parallel universe like you, so anything that we did, we did together and I felt like we took pride in that. When it came to anything we did athletically, from the block parties to just engaging with each other. We were a community.
Julie Speer: How was the racism in the community back then? Talk about that in general, and maybe you didn't feel it because you were isolated.

MiDian Holmes: Racism from within, you didn't really feel it because we all looked alike. We were all carrying the same baton. However, we all also still felt the racism from outside. The media was consistently reminding us that Montbello was a community of color. There were things that we would do in high school that were very positive. If it was a Student Council exchange, or National Honor Society, things like that. I remember that there was a Guidance Counselor, or someone that was there at the school that used to always reach out to the media and say, “Hey, come check out what these kids are doing”. Never saw 'em when we were doing that kind of stuff.

However, if there was a fight or if there was interaction with the police you saw it on 9 News. You were constantly seeing that in the media, so we never really got the support externally. I think that's where when you talk about racism and the hindrances that come from that, that's where we felt it. We felt it from outside and when we knew that there were a lot of outsiders looking in saying, “Hey, you know, that's a community of color, the success rate is going to be low, there's going to be drop-outs here and there”. Like I said, we weren't a perfect community by any means, but when it comes to racism, it all came from outside.

Julie Speer: Montbello was on the national news wasn’t it? There were closures, were you going to school when that was happening?

MiDian Holmes: Not when the closures happened. I will kind of revert back to middle school. We were on the national news. I went to MLK when it was just MLK Middle School. They've changed the names and variations a couple of times since I've been there. We were literally on I think it was maybe Dateline. Everyone is captivated by this news media presence, there was an individual that came into the school and he followed several students around. We were deemed one of the worst schools in America. That is literally the brand that my middle school received, and that was the only middle school in this community at the time and if you lived in Montbello, you fed right into Montbello High School.

So all of these kids were branded already at the sixth grade, seventh grade, eighth grade as one of the worst schools in America, it definitely came with a huge stigma and it's still a stigma that a lot of people can talk about, can reminisce on, can reflect on, and more than likely it could be one of those silent killers that people can assume makes them really unsafe.
assumptions. But yes, there's been a lot of national attention and media that has not been flattering for this community.

Julie Speer: How was that for you, being in middle school, knowing that you were going to the worst school in the country?

MiDian Holmes: Like I said, we defined community, so we went through it together. It was not flattering. It was not something that you were proud of, and you constantly had to explain yourself whenever you went somewhere else. If you were playing a basketball game and the visiting team comes into your school you had to explain yourself, and there were even times when students would say, “You know what, I thought this was going to be something different when I came to this school? I was scared to come into this school”. Hearing that kind of stuff was really a reflection of what the media and what society, societal reference can do, because walking those halls and going into class, being a part of that experience, it wasn't as bad as it appeared. Again, it wasn't perfect but it was not as bad as the sensationalized worst school in the country. So we always had to explain ourselves.

Julie Speer: So how did you do with school? What about your own academics? What kind of student were you?

MiDian Holmes: I was one of those students that excelled in the classroom. I graduated with a 4.3 GPA. I was excited to be in the front row when we graduated, the class is in order. I think I was fourth in my class, so I graduated top of my class, very thrilling. While I was in high school it was something I was really proud of, still very proud of. I consistently encourage my own kids to have the same ambition, the same drive and be proud of being successful in the classroom. Now what I will say is that as an adult I realized that an 'A' in my classroom at Montbello High School did not mean the same thing as an 'A' in a more privileged community, so I think that again that stigma as an adult, it's definitely been a hindrance to going to a job interview or those scholarship, applications.

When you put Montbello High School on that application there definitely was something to talk about when it was time for the interview, so it was really challenging to say that “Hey, I went and graduated from Montbello High School”. Still say it with honor, but it definitely comes with obstacles and hurdles, and you have to try to overcome them any way you can.

Julie Speer: So did you go to college?
MiDian Holmes: I did. I studied at the University of Denver, Daniels College of Business, so definitely a very rigorous program, nationally known for their school, but it was a struggle. It was definitely a struggle in the beginning because I wasn’t prepared. I wasn’t prepared for that type of academic push, academic focus, so there was a lot of remediation that I had to do, and I wasn’t unique when it came from graduating from Montbello High School or DPS in general. There’s still to this day, a lot of remediation that students have to go through because they're simply not ready. The schools are just not preparing us.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about busing.

MiDian Holmes: In middle school I had to bus from Montbello out here to Green Valley Ranch to go to MLK. It was the only middle school in the community so that was literally our only option. The busing brought two communities essentially. Green Valley Ranch didn’t have very many students out here but it had to bring whatever students were here, students in Montbello, but it still felt the same. We all felt like we were part of one community, but it was interesting. You definitely saw all aspects of every student on the bus. You had your students that excelled in the classroom, you had your students that didn't excel in the classroom and those bus rides were interesting.

Somewhat entertaining, very interesting. So again we weren’t a perfect community, to be completely one hundred percent candid. There were fights on the bus, there were fights at the bus stop, there were fights from one bus to another. So it was definitely a challenge when you got dressed to go to school, sometimes you didn’t know what you were going to see.

Julie Speer: So were you bused because that was the school busing system or was it part of the federally mandated integration busing plan?

MiDian Holmes: I would say that it was part of the integration plan because I don’t think it was MLK saying, “Hey, we need to get transportation for the students in this area”. It was, “Hey, this is how you get to school”. You live in Montbello so you get on this bus, we're going to transport these kids out to MLK because that's the middle school that these students based on their zoning would attend. At that time there wasn't school choice so it was what district or what zone do you fall in the district. I'm making a safe assumption because this is the only option for these kids in this area, this is how you get to school.
Julie Speer: In theory integration, Denver proper city, white kids were going to the black schools, black kids were going to the white schools and there was enforced integration busing. It doesn't sound like that was your reality.

Midian Holmes: No not in my day. I think when you talk about integration and things like that, like you said, white students were going to black schools, black students were going to white schools, I think that it was more driven based on “Where do you live”? “Where can you afford to live”? So I think for me, in my opinion, interestingly enough it was more segregated because where can you afford to live?

If you can't afford to live out there you can't go to that school out there, right? So the privileged communities in my reality, they had more resources. Because of the area that they lived in, we couldn't afford to live out there, so it was kind of like, “OK, this is where you have to go because you can't afford to live out there. You're in this zone so that's where you belong”, almost.

Julie Speer: Talk about being a mom, are there any memories that you have either in the school or in the community or specifically racial issues that made an impact on you?

MiDian Holmes: When you talk about the racial impacts and the stamps that are part of your past, I reflect in a couple of different ways. Like I said when I was younger we moved around a lot. We lived in Thornton, Pueblo, a ton of different places. I can distinctly remember being ridiculed because I was black, going to Riverdale Elementary School in Thornton, Colorado.

Being ridiculed because I was black going to a Hispanic school in Commerce City. I definitely felt and understood what it was like to be ridiculed because you were different. It not being OK to be African American. You know, “You don't belong here”. My brother, my sister and myself we all experienced those comments, shoving and pushing and those kind of things.

When we would be in class on Martin Luther King Day, we would always have some kind of curriculum that was designed to talk about the Civil Rights Movement and the things that happened, and the sacrifices that African Americans made to make these changes, and all of a sudden, just that one day, everyone was nice to me, everyone was nice. I can cut 'em in line for lunch. I didn't have to carry my books to class. I mean everyone was nice to me on that one day. After that we went back to normal, right? Or the normal for them.
So there were definitely stamps in my early years, and then when you talk about coming into middle school and into high school where now I'm in a community where everyone looks like me, and now there are, those few that don't look like me, it was intentional to make sure that those individuals didn't feel ridiculed. That was intentional. So I never wished that on anyone else, to be ridiculed because you're different.

I was proud of my community and the African Americans that I grew up around that we embraced it. We embraced our white classmates. We embraced our Hispanic and Asian classmates. We embraced them. It wasn't a conversation of “Oh, shame on you for who you are”. When you talk about middle school and high school, it's more of a positive impact, seeing how easy it is to embrace it, and seeing what kind of feeling you can give to someone else. It's OK that you're not like me, right, but we're still going to be classmates, we're going to be teammates, we're going to be friends. So I think for me, I was able to see kind of the results of the movement, as opposed to having to constantly stay in that place of “it's not OK to be African American”.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about why you chose to not leave this neighborhood, why you chose to settle here.

MiDian Holmes: So the Green Valley Ranch community and the Montbello community, they are one and the same for me in my mind, and the reason that I chose to stay here is because I can't stress it enough, we are a community. We literally are a community of people that we're living a parallel universe and we know that. We appreciate that. We celebrate that, and I just really found my place here because I wanted my kids to also see what it felt like to be in a community, not to be disconnected from a large city-type scenario but to actually say, “You know what, I know my neighbor, I know my neighbor’s parents, my parents’ neighbor knows me”.

It was just really important for me to allow them to capture that and to see that this is what a community should feel like, and this is how you become a part of the community, and how you bring your voice to a community forum or to the table about changes in your community. So I think for me it was really just taking pride in this area and being able to proudly say that I raised my kids in this area.

Julie Speer: So your neighborhood, if you're to look at just these immediate streets and neighborhood, is it predominantly African American, is it mixed? What's the demographics of your neighborhood?
MiDian Holmes: So the demographics of my neighborhood are, it's very mixed, it's very diverse. I have a Latina family that lives just across the street. I have an African American family that lives to the right and left of me. A couple of Caucasian families that live in the cul-de-sac that I stay in. So it's very diverse. You get a lot of different cultures. I really appreciate the diversity of the neighborhood.
Julie Speer: Let’s go back in time. Tell me, where you were born and where you grew up, then start talking about your neighborhood and what you remember about it.

Nabeehah Brown: I grew up in Denver Colorado in Park Hill. Growing up I just remember we were really close with all of our neighbors, everyone knew my grandma and my mom and my aunt, and my family, and they had lived on the block for a while. It seemed like there was a lot going on in the neighborhood, as far as with gangs and with drugs, and so I kind of had to learn how to just be street smart.

So this is around the late 80s, early 90s. And I just remember playing a lot with my friends, and the alley. We would play all kinds of different games and we would go to the RTD bus stop, and we wanted to catch the bus and so we would pretend like we were catching the bus and then when the bus driver would come, we would take off running, and so yeah, we had a lot of fun. We would pick fruits and vegetables from people’s gardens, my grandma would garden, so she would have us help her in the garden, and we’d have to pick the vegetables and clean them, and snap green beans, and stuff like that. So, yeah I had a lot of fun.

Friends and I, we would take the honey suckle flowers, and we were like yeah you can get honey from here, and so would try to suck honey from the flower petals. I did a lot of exploring as a kid. In the backyard, played outside a lot, and every time I would see something on TV, I tried to go
outside and imitate it, me and my friend, Randy, my next door neighbor. We tried to build a plane, and we had all these destinations that we were gonna go in our cardboard box, and you know we’re trying to hammer and nails, and I swear we probably spent a number of years trying to build a plane, and trying to fix the clubhouse, that was very challenging. It was in the tree house, so it was challenging to climb up the tree to get there, but you know we were determined, you know we were going to fix that as well, and that was going to be our little hide out and getaway. I think I probably only ever climbed up there one time, because it was so high, and really hard to get up the tree. Very scary.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about busing. Talk to me about where you were bussed.

Nabeehah Brown: OK, well elementary school I went to Hallett, and I just remember being excited to go there because all of my cousins before me had gone to Hallett. Then I went to Smith for a number of years and one day it just seemed like, “up, you’re going to be going to a new elementary school”, and I had never heard of it, and no one I really knew had gone to this elementary school. It was a federal mandate, and so we were bused to go to Holmes elementary, and I just remember it was the longest bus ride ever, and we would have to make different stops and I would see different kids from the neighborhood, we all would have to go to Holmes.

At Holmes it was different because I loved Hallett, and I was excited about being able to go to Hallett or to Smith where some of my cousins had gone too, whereas with Holmes I didn’t really know anything about it. Our middle school was a little bit closer, but it was further, and I just remember wanting to go to the neighborhood school, Smiley. And it’s like well a lot of my friends go here, and I didn’t understand why people that lived across the street from me, they had to go to a different middle school which was Hamilton, which was next door to Holmes. And, so, it’s just like, well, why do I have to go to this school, and they live across the street and we all have to go to different schools.

Julie Speer: Did you have any idea why you were busing?

Nabeehah Brown: No, just clueless. So going to school, I didn’t have any idea why I was being bused. And it probably wasn’t until I’m guessing maybe high school, that I learned we were supposed to be bused, and it was the law. Because before that, I had no reason why, it was just “oh this is the
school you have to go to”, and it wasn’t the neighborhood school, but it was “oh this is your home school”, so I just thought, well I live on this side of the street, and this is my home school.

Julie Speer: Holmes Elementary. Tell me about the culture, what was the experience like for you?

Nabeehah Brown: So, at Holmes Elementary, there was a lot of white students, and I would say that was probably my first time really having that much exposure to just white people in general. Because at Hallett and at Smith, they were predominantly African American, and so, even though I was at Homes, I still hung out with neighborhood kids, just because I didn’t really have things in common with some of the other students. I just remember for the most part really just playing with kids from the neighborhood, I didn’t really bond or have a relationship with anyone outside of my neighborhood. In middle school, though, I do recall branching out, and having more relationships with different individuals, but for the most part, it was just like us and them. I suck with you know who I could say “Hey! You going swimming at the rec center this weekend?” So that was kind of the gist of it.

Julie Speer: Was there any animosity? Was there any teasing? Did you ever feel picked on? Is there anything about that time that sticks out in your mind?

Nabeehah Brown: So the hardest part with busing, for the most part it was an all white setting. I wasn’t teased, I for the most part got along with all of my classmates. It was the bus ride though. I hated the bus ride, because it just seemed like whatever issues happened on the bus carried on in the neighborhood for the weekend, and so it just seemed like they probably should have had a parent or something on the bus. Because I probably sat in the back with all of my friends, and I just recall countless times of just being taunted or teased, and you know people punching through the seats. It was a big, big deal, punching the back of the seats, or putting your knees up on the back of the seats, so, I absolutely hated the bus ride. And, in high school I had the option to ride the, the city bus and I was fine. I did not like riding the school bus at all.
Julie Speer: Tell me about middle school and where you went, and if that was still your choice, or if that was the government telling you where you had to go.

Nabeehah Brown: So, during middle school I was bused to Place Elementary. I can’t really say I liked middle school but who likes middle school? It’s a tough time. But I do recall building really strong relationships with two teachers in particular. They were very supportive, and at times I didn’t know why they were so supportive, they were just caring teachers. I just remember during middle school, sometimes we would say hey well I’m going to stay after school, and after school activities was almost non-existent, just for the simple fact that you’d have to catch the city bus. So I really didn’t do too many activities during middle school.

Julie Speer: Did you sense any racial tension when you got to high school? Were you a little more conscious of those issues or were they nonexistent?

Nabeehah Brown: During the period when I was bused to schools I was very outspoken, and I learned really fast. That wasn’t really like excepted in even having a difference of an opinion, and so I can recall being kicked out of the class because I didn’t believe that people came from monkeys, and so it went against what I was raised in my religious beliefs, and so it was more so I would say a lot of conformity. You would be labeled going to the bad class, and at that time, that’s when they had walls put up in the special education rooms. I remember that very vividly, because I would go and actually volunteer during lunch and help out teachers and stuff. To have a difference of an opinion, or if you weren’t cookie-cutter, then I noticed I was in different classes from my friends, and it never changed. It was the same for sixth, seventh, and eighth. So our classes were very different and as I look back, I feel like I received special education services, but I don’t know why. So as an adult, I requested my transcripts and I was looking them over and I saw OK, she received special education services and it wasn’t for anything specific and it all started when I was I wanna say about first grade. It was first grade that I received an IEP and the reason being is because they said I talked a lot, and I didn’t stay focused, and on topic. And my thirty four years much hasn’t changed. I still talk a lot, and I can bounce around from subjects, and reading my IEP,
it was my middle school teacher that was my champion that was saying I’m looking at the tests, and I’m looking at the test scores, and she should probably be tested for gifted and talented, she is a very bright student, so we should work. She’s meeting all of her goals, so we should really look at if services are appropriate for her. It was high school that my counselor tried to continue me on I guess the same track if you will with some other students, and I just protested and I refused to take these classes, they’re too easy. And, that’s when I started selecting my own courses of X and AP classes, but I did receive a lot of push-back in high school. I was told by my counselor, you can’t do baccalaureate, because if you do baccalaureate, most students aren’t able to maintain their grades.

I was told, Oh you don’t wanna do X-classes because they’re too hard, and you’ll have to do a lot of studying, or it seemed like everything that I wanted to do, my counselor would say I couldn’t do it. And so that was part of my choice of going to East High School, and I had made up my mind that I’m gonna have to do a lot of advocating for myself, and everything that my counselor at George said I couldn’t do, I did at East. And all the hard classes, I got A’s in, and my ex-classes were my easy classes, and they were the classes that I found most interesting. Even AP classes and I did baccalaureate and got an A, and maintained all of my grades and I did the speak and debate team, and pretty much conquered everything that she said I couldn’t do. I felt as if I was being tracked, and I was in a certain track, and because I was whatever labels, label-student, that I wasn’t expected to excel and I wasn’t expected to exceed, and because my grandmother was raising me, and she really didn’t know, she was just fine as long as you go to school, get good grades, graduate, she was fine with that.

My mother at the time wasn’t around for high school, so my grandmother was raising me, and she wasn’t able to go to the school to advocate for me, and so I would have to stand up for myself a lot, and I would have to, many, many, many times, go to the principal’s office and say, we need to talk about this teacher because I question if they are an effective teacher, if the majority of the students have Ds in their class, and so is it really an issue with the student or is it an issue with the principal. And one of the trends that the students did was walk out when I was at George, and I was a part of that walk-out because of the disproportionate numbers of students that were being suspended and expelled. We’d have tons of friends at school, and I swear it seemed like after count day, they would just drop off, we wouldn’t see them
anymore, and so we were bothered by the fact that our friends we felt were being kicked out, and they were just seen as a number financially, but after that they weren’t being educated. And so the students organized a walkout against some of the things that were happening at George.

Although I was bused, I can’t say that I really experienced racism at school, in elementary or in middle school, but it was more so in high school that I noticed just a disconnect with the educators and with the students. And there was an educator in particular that I became close with and she was told by the principal, if they wanted to be close with the students that they needed to find another job, and so it was just like OK, goodness, you know. It kind of changed our relationship, because we were like OK, we can’t be around each other as much because she was being watched and it was just really unfair.

Julie Speer: Do you think your experience is unique, or do you think there were a lot of kids just wrongly placed, and tracked to use your words.

Nabeehah Brown: So, I believe I was tracked, and I talk about this all the time. Because the classes that I took or, in some of the teachers I never got to have, and I’m like ooh I want this teacher, and I never got that teacher. And some of my classmates from Hallett all the way up to middle school, we were never in the same class together, and I’m like well how can that be? I do feel like I was being tracked and I do feel like I was written off at an early age, and in middle school I had a lot going on, it was a very, very tough time for me. I would probably say I was being disciplined for something, or even just going to the school psych talking about what was going on in my family and just really wanting help, and wanting really to get out of the situation. But, I do feel like there was a difference, and it’s funny now that I look in hindsight, because a lot of my friends that were in the tracks that I felt were more challenging, and received curriculum that was more challenging, those were some of the friends that had two parent households, and being a parent now working in the schools, I can see the difference. I can see the difference of how it was and those would be the families that I would write to. If we had a school musical, or an afterschool program, otherwise, I wouldn’t be able to go. I do feel like I was being tracked, and I do feel like, the education that I received is probably mediocre to what they received just because of the classes that
I was in. And in high school, that’s just when I was like OK, enough. I refuse, and things have to change.

Julie Speer: But you graduated.

Nabeehah Brown: Yes, I did.

Julie Speer: So tell me what year you graduated, and then tell me if you did anymore schooling after that.

Nabeehah Brown: I graduated from East High School in 1998. And then from East I went onto CSU, and I completed three years at CSU. I was a part of their bridge program, so I started school in the summer after I completed high school, and then I was a part of a key community that was set up to help students of color and also students that might struggle in school. It was set up to create a community of support with students, from our backgrounds, as well as offering tutors, and offering resources that we needed. We did a lot of prep work in the summer time, and this is where I really started to see the value of my education that I had received. It was difficult because there was people from all over the country, and I had a really tough professor, and he was just like, there’s no students that are bright, and he would count how many times we would say “umm”, or “like”, or “and”. He was very critical in grading us, this is all bones, where’s the body, and “who’s the person who got that “F” paper?” He was like a seventy year old professor, rode his bike to school, and kind of had the slick Dennis-to-Menace, but he was very tough, and seeing some of the students in our cohort, if you will, I could see some of their experiences. And the schools and their vocabulary, and how certain things came so easy, and we’re like “huh, I never learned that”. And learning how to take notes and learning skills with test-taking and just so many things that I should have already known going into school, going into college, that I wasn’t prepared for, in that I didn’t know, and that’s where I really noticed, like, wow, I should’ve been better prepared.

And goodness, everything happens for a reason, and my experiences make me stronger, but I’m like boy I wish I had a parent that would be like “no, this is not OK”, and even questioning putting me on an IEP and receiving services. I remember I was in middle school or was I freshman? But my reading level was really high, and I’m like, well if my reading level is so high, why am I in some of the classes that they’re having me in? Or, why are you pulling me out? And so that’s kind of when I’d become a
stinker, like I don’t want to do this. But it wasn’t really until high school, that I was just a firm put-my-foot-down, and it was by any means necessary, I am going to do the things that I want to do that I feel are gonna best benefit me.

Julie Speer: So did you, did you finish CSU in three years?

Nabeehah Brown: Yes. So, I didn’t finish school. I was a junior so I finished my third year of school and I became pregnant, and so I stopped going to school. I tried to do online, but it was very challenging for various reasons trying to get my grandma to understand that it’s OK the have the internet, and this is when the internet and computers, everything was really new, and so I had to drop my classes. And trying to get to either use my neighbor’s computer, or walk to the library 8 months pregnant, to do course work, and I’m just like OK, I’m behind, this is overwhelming. And so I have not returned to school, it’s been 12 years, but I am planning to go back within the near future. One more year.

Julie Speer: Talk about your kids. Did you have kids and then come to Montbello, or come to Montbello and then and have kids, which was first?

Nabeehah Brown: I had kids first and we lived on the East Side.

Julie Speer: What does that mean?

Nabeehah Brown: So the East Side, Colorado Boulevard is kind of the defining line, from Colorado to Quebec is Park Hill. From Colorado and I don’t know what, East-Siders consider the end of their defining line, but it’s East Denver, and what we call East Side. So my family and I we lived over there, and one of the reasons that we moved actually was because we were being harassed because of broken windows. It’s the initiative that came out of New York, and so we would be pulled over, literally once a week, and it would be “oh do you have your seatbelts on?” My boyfriend had a flashy car, and the kids, I mean our experience with the police wasn’t great. They saw us being harassed only when we drove his car, and so it was really bad. I mean, it was constant, even fake tickets when you’re asking them for their card, it was just non-stop.

So, I lived on the East Side of Denver from 2002 to 2007. At that time I had two children, and when I was living there, one of the things that I
wanted for my son was to have a good school. I wanted him to go to a
good school. And I can remember going to greatschools.com and
searching and really looking up on it. I wanted my son to go to Corey, that
was one of my top schools, and Cherry Creek, but I knew it would be very
difficult to get him in. Odyssey was another top choice, so I would
actually drive my son to Odyssey every day, just because I liked what the
school was about and I felt like he would be able to get a good education.

Julie Speer: What made you decide to leave and where did you go?

Nabeehah Brown: I got tired of the police harassment and I got tired of seeing a lot of gang
activity and drug activity. I felt, if my children are looking out the window,
are they going to see role models or are they going to see images that
can create a negative cycle for them? And because of where we live it
was a lot of heavy police presence and I didn’t want that for them. I
didn’t want them to see things that were going on in the neighborhood
as the norm and I didn’t want those things to be perpetuated. I wanted
them to have more and I wanted my children to see more, and so we
chose to move out to Green Valley, and it was a great choice. It’s a lot
more peaceful out here, but once we moved to Green Valley, I faced the
issue of quality schools. And, I did not want to send my children to
school, and I was strongly considering home schooling them, because we
had a lot of different experiences during this time. I had sent my children
to charter schools, to private schools and traditional public schools. And I
just felt with my oldest son, as if he was falling in the cracks. And I felt as
if his needs weren’t being addressed and they weren’t being met.

So, instead of the schools coming up with a plan to service my son, it was
more so, I’m going to give him work that is not on grade-level. I wasn’t as
involved in the schools when he was younger, I would go to events that
the schools had. I would say as a parent, I didn’t have the tools, I wasn’t
equipped with the tools to ask the right kind of questions, to get the
answers that I wanted, and to get services that I felt he needed. So when
we moved to Green Valley, I had a distrust in the education system as a
whole. My son had experienced a teacher that was very strict, and a little
mean-spirited, and so he was depressed. And I’m like, depressed in third
grade? And at first I just thought it was isolated, until I started talking to
some other parents and their children were experiencing the same thing,
and it was kind of the theme of hard-headed black boys. And, I’m like
he’s the sweetest kid. I don’t want him to be criminalized if you will, or
treated a certain way, just because of what he is. So I just began to run out of options, and they were turning around the school that was two blocks from my house. I did not want to send the kids there. So I was really out of options and was really looking into either online school at home or trying to get in contact with a friend that home schooled her children who was going down the path of becoming an educator herself. So I was looking for all kinds of different options and I was wait-listed for a number of schools, so we didn’t have very many options, it was about two weeks before school started before I made a concrete choice about where my kids were gonna go. I looked at a lot of the efforts and a lot of the changes that they were making at the neighborhood school which is Green Valley, and a lot of the changes that they were making were some of the qualities that I looked for in the charter schools that they were wait-listed for. So I made a bold decision to send them to the neighborhood school in the beginning phases of turnaround. I felt like the things that were being done for the school were great, and my kids could benefit from those changes, and it turned out to be a great choice. My son in Green Valley in fourth grade, we finally requested that they do further testing to see what his struggles are in education, because there wasn’t any concrete answer.

So Akron Valley, because he was returning back to a public school they had pulled up his IEP from the previous public school that he had attended. I was mortified after reading his IEP because it said that he was slick, that he was mentally retarded. And, it was the furthest from the truth, and it was the furthest from who he is as a person. And so that disability did not apply to him, but because I wasn’t as engaged, I wasn’t aware of what was going on, and also I was told from individuals that had worked at the school, that it wasn’t important for me to attend his IEP meetings, that it would just be the nurse and some school professionals, and it would be very boring. So I did not attend, and the consequence was my son did not receive services that he should have, and that he was not pushed, and one of the reasons why I did pull him from the school is because I noticed instead of teaching him how to read, they had him pressing words on a machine, and I felt like he is not going to have any gains and growth at this rate. And so, that was one of my reasons for pulling him from the charter school and putting him into a private school. And when I found that out I was very upset, but it was a learning lesson. And, I learned that education and being an involved parent is more than just going to parent night, it’s more than just dropping your kids off at school or helping them with their homework. It’s knowing what they’re
being taught, it’s knowing what’s grade-level, what are the expectations for that grade level. It’s knowing where your child falls within the scheme of things, and if they’re struggling, what is the actions plan, what’s gonna be done about it, and how can you have a home school partnership.

My son was diagnosed with autism, and he received a lot of services his fourth grade year, through Childrens’ as well as through the school, and the process went very fast, and it was like that’s why, that was the mystery, because he was high-functioning enough that you wouldn’t suspect a disability, but then some thing’s just didn’t quite add up, and you seen him struggling as a student, and a lot of teachers, no one could quite pin-point and put their finger on it. And once we got the diagnosis, and started learning more about how he’s impacted by autism, it was an ah-hah moment, like Oh wow OK, and so I started to look at his earlier records with his IEP information, and it seemed as if, the ECE Child-Find, those teams were very close, to stumbling upon his disability. I just know once he entered public school it seemed as if if the resources kind of stopped, he didn’t get as much support. And, to be quite honest, it should have been a red flag because the special education teacher was just leaving her career as a ski instructor, and so that also has a lot to do with the fact of the misdiagnosis and the misinformation among other things and even the services that he received. Even the expectations for him, but in the same token, there was maybe a handful of African American students at a predominant, white charter school in Stapleton, so it was probably the idea that he was performing to the best that he possibly could. Even reading the IEP notes, the attitude towards mom, it was just very negative. And so they didn’t think highly of us. All together, it was kind of sad and because of that, I took on the role as momma bear. So I do let any educator that works with my children know that I am gonna be a momma bear. But I realize that it’s very critical for us to have, a relationship, and communication, and just know that as their parents we are gonna question you, we are gonna ask some of the hard questions and we are gonna have high expectations for you as well as for them.

I’ve noticed a difference of how I was treated then to how I’m treated now and even respect-wise with the kids and their teachers. Before it was, I don’t want him to miss a noodle party, and he hasn’t turned in his homework, so I’m letting you know so you won’t be upset that he doesn’t get to participate and have macaroni and cheese. And I’m like, I don’t care about macaroni and cheese, I care about the fact that my son hasn’t turned in his work, and I wish the communication would have been more
about him as a student versus he doesn’t get to participate in this party, and you’re afraid that I might be upset at you, because he doesn’t get to participate in the party? Whereas now, there’s a lot of open communication and all the teachers say I know your parents and I have their number and I have their e-mail, I can call them. Then there’s a shift with my children because they know that there’s a close relationship between the school and home, they know that they have to be accountable as well, and that they have to do their part. I definitely teach them that it’s a collaboration, the teacher’s responsible for teaching you things, and hoping to give you strategies, and I reinforce those things at home, but they ultimately have to do the work. They have to also advocate for themselves, if they don’t understand, and even in Quincy’s case, if he’s not receiving services or someone’s not really working with him, per our IEP agreement, that he has the right to let me know, and he has the right to speak with a teacher and request that they spend some time to help him because that is their job. But my kids now they’re all in three different unique situations. My oldest is a young boy that is in middle school, he goes to charter school, he also is impacted with autism, and I have my nine year old, who attends an innovation elementary school, and then I have my daughter, who is a first grader who attends a private school for GT, gifted and talented children. And so, I’m able to see a lot of the differences, because with the kids going to three different types of schools and also working in the school, it’s very interesting, and especially when I see my youngest doing work that I have seen second graders doing, I’m like wow, what’s going on? She’s doing this in kindergarten. She learned about this even when she was in preschool to be quite honest, she went to a great preschool that had high expectations, and really challenged her as a student, and really helped to create the foundation for her being a learner. But seeing some of these discrepancies, what one child might be learning in this grade, or some of the things that my kids bring home which I keep as a body of evidence for the following year just for reference, and even if I have to say well hey, this is what you’re teaching my child in this grade, you know? Is there growth? Do I see back-stepping or do I see that they’re staying stagnant? So I use those as my points of reference in how they’re being educated and what they’re being educated about.

Julie Speer: Talk about the achievement gap today. First of all do you see that it exists?
Nabeehah Brown: So working in the school system, I have subbed at a number of different schools. I have worked in special education and I’ve also worked with early childhood education, and so I have pretty much worked with every grade from early childhood education all the way to high school in some form or capacity. One of the things that I’ve noticed and that has really stood out to me is the differences between the school I was at last year, and the school I’m currently at. Even subbing throughout DPS and the district, I see where some schools have a lot of resources and some schools have a really good curriculum, and I see other schools where the classroom is essentially empty, as far as activities and things that the kids can use. There’s definitely been a difference that I can see, and even the curriculum being used, and I know there’s been changes within the last two years with DPS with early childhood education having a curriculum, so now it’s that push. Now that DPS has implemented a district-wide curriculum for early childhood education the schools across the district are all using the same curriculum, but I still see a difference.

I still see a difference in access. One of the schools, some of the books they had were from the 70s, and it wasn’t a very good variety of books for the students to read, it was outdated Sesame Street, and some of the things the kids couldn’t even get into, and it’s interesting because being at the school I was at, and being at the school where I’m at now, it’s night and day. At the previous school we were teaching the students their names, their ABCs, numbers 1 to 10, and where I’m at now, it’s a more affluent community, it’s a higher socio-economic status. So the students I have can count to 200 and above, and they came in the door knowing all of those basic things that we start off with teaching the kids, and I’ve thought about this like what part plays in this? Why are things so different from this neighborhood to that neighborhood? The vocabulary of the students that I work with versus the students from last year, it’s night and day, and I know a lot of it has to play with socio-economic status just from my own experience. From my first child to my last child, her vocabulary is a lot larger.

Julie Speer: Is that because of you though? Is it your own awareness? You’re talking to her differently than you did your first children?

Nabeehah Brown: So some of it is awareness. I have been doing a lot of advocating in education. I think where I was with my first son, I was kind of depressed and it was just a hopeless state. A lot of it had to do with my mental state, I can’t really say my finances have dramatically increased, so I can’t
necessarily say it was socioeconomic for me, but there was an awakening that did happen. The fact that her father’s in school, and he’ll be finishing with his Bachelor’s and just that exposure, when I go to conferences and when I do different things, sometimes I take the kids with me. I take them so that they can see what I’m doing and know why I’m doing what I’m doing, and know that it’s for them and it’s for other children. So I think partly because of my own personal awakening, they are receiving the benefits of that. I don’t have a Bachelor’s degree, and I looked at all the statistics, if your kids receive this or if you’re from a single parent household or all of these different factors, and with her father graduating, it’s like that breaks the cycle right there. So now they have that image, and they know that it’s not just an idea, they know that it’s attainable. That’s why I have to do my part and I can’t preach, you have to go to school when I’m quite capable, and it’s funny because my son has said “Mom, why didn’t you finish school?” and I told him and he says “Well mom you have no excuses, that was 12 years ago.” And so my kids are holding me to a high standard just like I’m holding them to a high standard. And it really makes me feel proud as a mother because my oldest will come in, actually all of them, and they will set goals for themselves. they say alright, I want to get better with reading, or I want to get better with math or I want to work on my handwriting, and the fact that they’re conscious of how they need to evolve and how they have to work hard to become a better student is I feel like, I’m doing the right thing, I’m doing my job. But it’s definitely something I have to constantly advocate for them, and it’s really tough because I’m trying to raise a son that does have a disability, and trying to have a future for him when there’s still disparities that are there, like the graduation rate among students that have IEPs.

So it’s tough when I am looking at my son’s future. Students with individualized education plans or special education, when they have a high rate of dropping out, and so I’ve worked very hard to make sure that his needs are being met because as he gets older, it may become challenging to motivate him to go to school if he’s still struggling in certain areas where he hasn’t received support. I’m teaching my children that you are gonna go to college, and you are going to succeed and have a career, and you get to choose what that career is. But knowing as a parent once he goes to college, I don’t have any rights or access to his records to anything, and everything will be on him as an adult. And, as a mother, it puts even more pressure on me to make sure that he is college-ready. And what does that look like? And what schools offer extra
support and services, so it’s a constant battle because he’s definitely someone that I would say is twice gifted, because he has some really strong areas, but then he’s also impacted in areas of language. And so it can be quite discouraging because we don’t hear about the numbers of students with IEPs or that have intellectual disabilities like autism or Asperger’s. We don’t hear about those numbers often and the success rate, or the retention, the remediation, even going on to higher learning.

That is a real fear for me to make sure that he is prepared for his future because he’s quite capable and he’s very bright, and he’s amazing with numbers, and it comes natural for him. So I really try to push him in the STEM field, but I also know there’s other areas where he’ll need support. It’s been a challenge to make sure that my kids receive the education that they’re supposed to, and it’s difficult when I have an educator that’s not aware of my child, and it’s interesting because I can find out if they have a relationship with their teacher, and that’s very crucial, and it has been crucial. The majority of the teachers that have been most impactful with my eldest, he’s had a relationship, and if you know a personal piece about him, then he trusts you and if you don’t, then I know he doesn’t trust you, because he does not give it to just any teacher, and usually those teachers that he eventually trusts, they really push him as a student. They also see him for who he is, and they’re also amazed, like wow, and it’s funny because a lot of time there’s disbelief, and I’m the mom hyping up her child, but then when he really lets go they’re able to see this side and they’re just absolutely floored and amazed. Quincy just recently took an assessment, and his teacher was surprised that he’s 9th grade level for math, and that’s natural, that’s not with any amount of extra effort. And we’re like well if there was that extra effort, where would he be? What would it look like? Because it is so easy for him, and it is so natural for him.

Julie Speer: So that’s two years ahead right?

Nabeehah Brown: Yeah. Whereas most students struggle in math, and it’s funny because math is my kids’ strong point, they’re all pretty talented in math, but they all struggle with reading, and so that is the stigma of what a smart child is. Oh, my child, if you can read, or you’re above-level, then you’re smart, and it’s not really looking at the whole child, because children can be gifted in many different areas. It might be math, it might be reading, it might be even social and emotional, there’s so many different areas of a gifted child. With that being said, with my youngest, it has definitely been
a push to make sure that she receives services and that she’s being challenged as a learner. And being gifted doesn’t mean you get more homework. It means that you get to expand on a topic, and you get to dive a little deeper, and you’re asked harder questions, and it was definitely, I won’t say a challenge, but it would have been a fight, had she gone to Denver Public Schools. Because she did take one of their tests, and she wasn’t identified as HGT, little on, GT, and I really think the testing we have to address it’s racial biases. Some of the things and some of the content in these tests might one, be out of date, two, where she lives, I mean geographics, socioeconomic status, her exposure, there’s just so many things even stories, I know growing up fairy tales and folklore, books like that weren’t read to us. And so, to hear of Little Boy Blue, or XYZ, that was all things that I acquired at school, and not at home.

A lot of the content on the tests are things that she probably may not have experienced, and not only her, but just in general students of color. So it was great that the school where she’s at helped to fund to have an individualized more personalized test versus a group test that gave a better picture of who she is as a learner. And in fact she is a gifted and talented child, she’s exceptionally bright, but when asked by DPS to look at another test she had taken before hand, we were just pretty much told that it was an assessment, and it wasn’t a valid test that they used, and working in the school system I know that that is a test that they use often to place minority children in special education. So it’s kind of like OK, if it’s good for the goose it should be good for the gander, but it would be a challenge and it would be a battle for her to get the identification of what she is if she did attend a Denver Public School. But I love where she’s at because she’s getting the tools to become a lifelong learner, and the access and the network that she is in, relationships that she’s building, I couldn’t even dream about. So when she does graduate from college, and when she does choose whatever path, she wants to be a veterinarian, whatever career field she chooses she will have a network of individuals that are in different fields, and whose parents currently are in the high-end of the socioeconomic status and are in all different facets. Half her class, the parents are doctors and the other half are attorneys, and so that access that she’s getting just in bonding friendships will be crucial even to her future because I don’t have a lot of friends, not any friends like that, and so I realize the opportunity that it’s affording her, just even in the bigger picture on so many different levels.
I’ve been asked like hey, we want you to be a part of this process, because you are very honest, and I’m asking the superintendent what are you doing about African Americans in school that are in special ed at disproportionate numbers. That’s why I wish Mike was here, because that’s what he does. He works in special education with student services, and so he supports all the traditional middle schools within DPS.

Julie Speer: Is that your husband?

Nabeehah Brown: Yes. And a lot of the things that he sees and even the practices and protocols are not being followed, and guidelines are not being followed, and he’s the one that’s like, hey, what you’re doing is illegal, and so then it’s like well who are you? And we get that a lot. I get that a lot. Who are you? And what degree do you have? All the time, and I’m like, really? Do we have to go there, and it’s frustrating. It’s very frustrating. Like I’m only valid if I have a degree. I have a lot of experience of just living. And I think that qualifies me, because you’re learning a theory, where I’m on the ground. And so working in the school systems and having a child that has special needs, and having a child that is gifted, I’ve seen a lot of disparities around those two areas in particular. I’ve been in classrooms and I’ve seen bright students, but at no time have I ever heard it being suggested to them that you should get your child tested for gifted and talented, and when I took my daughter to testing for Denver Public Schools, I counted about five African American kids there. And it was really sad to see, and I pose the question to a lot of my friends: why aren’t we getting our children tested? A lot of parents don’t know. I see flyers at some schools saying in third grade you can have your child tested, or in this grade, but I don’t see ‘em at all schools.

I wanna say second or third grade they test all the students automatically to find out if they are gifted and talented. Otherwise, it has to be a parental request and I believe to continue on with the testing, the parent might have to fill out a waiver. I know it could also be taboo if you have a gifted child in the African American community, in the sense of, oh well, they’re doing fine, they’re doing just fine in the classes that they’re in. I’m not gonna push them ahead, and I know this because my sister, that happened with her. My mom did not wanna push either of my sisters ahead when the teachers were saying you might want to have them tested, you know one of them, she needs to be up a grade and was never identified as gifted and talented, dropped out at 12 and I signed her up for online school and she tested higher than the district levels, and she
tested in the high national levels, then she did not continue on with school until 16, and she decided to get her GED. She studied for a month and she passed the first time, and she scored 16 in the nation. Exceptionally bright, never had the title of gifted and talented, never receive resources to push her, and in fact, I believe she became very bored with school and disinterested because she felt as if there was nothing that she could learn in school that they could teach her, she felt like she had outgrew it.

Right now she is in school and she’s pursuing a medical degree. And she’s had her bumps and it’s been a journey for her, but it still doesn’t take away from the fact that there are a number of minority children who are gifted and who don’t get tested who don’t get identified. Just looking at my own records, seeing like oh we’re gonna put her in special education, but to test me and put me in the GT program, it’s like that wasn’t an option. It wasn’t seen. I have seen recommendations to white parents, but not to parents of color. And so that really bothers me because a lot of times one of the signs for a gifted child is behavior, but the first thing we do in the school system is if we see behaviors, then you must need an IEP, you must need an effective needs program, because we’re seeing behaviors; you keep blurring out the answers, you keep this that and the other. When in fact those are signs of gifted children, is disrupting the class and all it takes is someone having that conversation with the parent, and saying your child will receive curriculum that’s gonna challenge them because those students, their needs need to be met as well, so that they don’t get bored with school. I can think of countless people who are bright and I know there’s a difference between being bright and gifted, but there was never any identification of being gifted and talented, and it’s really sad to see. I definitely know there are a lot of numbers of African American students that are in special education and effective needs, and I probably would have been considered to be an effective needs student when I was in school, but it was my experience, it was the things that I was going through, and so I don’t think in those terms that it’s an accurate label for a student. Saying that just because I’m going through life’s trials and tribulations doesn’t equate to me having special needs, and right now I think that’s kind of what I’m seeing.

A lot of African American students are being labeled and put in special education. And it’s interesting, just some of the conversations about how schools want the special education programs because they want that
federal funding, and with that federal funding they’re able to do more, whereas if they didn’t have that program in their school their funding would be cut. So then you wonder is it a business or are these kids really this label? Because a lot of funding does go into either ELL or special education. And those funds are guaranteed, and so it’s just very interesting to see. Just the role of socioeconomics and access, a lot of times I’ve seen schools that are afraid to just have conversations with parents, and really talk to them. If someone sat down and had a class or a teacher had a conversation, and if they would have said, you know Nabeehah Brown, it’s very important that you read to your child, not only so much so that they can learn how to read, but reading to them at an early age is the building blocks, and how African American children know 15 million words versus their counterpart white Caucasian students at three that know 30 million words. And that’s how many words they’re exposed to, and how those building blocks will help whatever information that they’re exposed to although they may not use it, it becomes a building block for the future, but if you don’t have access or those conversations aren’t had, then you don’t know.

Julie Speer: What are they afraid of?

Nabeehah Brown: I don’t know what administrators and what educators are so afraid of. I feel at the end of the day if I’m speaking the truth, I feel like I don’t have anything to lose. Even if you were to say, Nabeehah Brown, you’re gonna lose your job because you told a parent that it’s important to read to her child. I think it’s being honest. Especially when you talk about some of these communities and schools that are disenfranchised it’s important to have these conversations, and let the parents know this is what you’re up against, and this is real. I’m constantly sharing information with family and friends about remediation, and about retention on higher education levels and how our children aren’t prepared, and how we are in a state of crisis, but no one knows that we’re there. And how our children of color, when I see them in schools, I think we also need to talk about learning styles and how some of them might be a kinesthetic learner, and how we do a lot of auditory learning at school. I think there’s so many things that we need to have discussions about to improve our education systems, but also to make parents aware because it’s sad, and we all want to offer our children a bright future, but as the boys scout motto is, is always be prepared, so what are you really preparing them for? And what are you up against? A lot of parents aren’t aware of what they’re up against, and
they aren’t aware that it’s important to advocate for your child, and what does that look like? I’ll say hey, did you know that CDE, which is the Colorado Department of Education, offers PEP, which is Parents Encouraging Parents for parents of students with disabilities. And how it’s designed to create a home school partnership, and how a lot of schools do not share that information.

So a lot of times I find myself sending e-mails and I’m sharing the information with schools and with parents, or sometimes schools are like well, I don’t know if I can tell the parents about it. Well CDE is putting it on, you can tell the parents, or they’re afraid to give parents handbooks on their rights and responsibilities. And it’s like, this should all be a part of the process, we shouldn’t fear empowering the parents, so that they can best advocate for their children. If it is a reality, that if we don’t read to our children, these are some of the things that they’ll face. We should share that information versus waiting until they finish and say, oh well did you know that if you don’t read to your child, XYZ, or if you don’t go to the school and ask the right kind of questions. I’ll tell any parent do not settle for, how is your child doing, good. Don’t settle for that. What is good? Are they on grade level? Being equipped to ask those right questions. And I think all of that affects the achievement gap.

And so I look at that. And it’s important because I don’t want my kids to fall in the cracks, and so those type of things are very important. The whole glimpse of him as a student and as they grow, and what is that growth, what does it look like? Because of skill level, I’ve even considered holding my son back, and it was like nooo, no, no, it was very shunned upon. Studies say that holding a student back so that they can obtain certain level skills, that they pretty much don’t obtain the skills and it just ends up harming the student. I felt different, but that whole component of the school not wanting to keep the student so that they can gain more skill to move to the next level. It’s even interesting which I think all schools should adopt a no “D” policy and a no “F”, like I feel even if you’re there, you shouldn’t get an ‘F’. When my son was in second grade, he got a “D” in social studies, and I said a “D”? Why wasn’t there any communication, and it was like oh well he only has this class for a certain period of time and it’s not year-long. OK that’s fine. And the reason why he failed is because he couldn’t read to take the test. And so I’m like, do you hear what you’re saying to me? And does that sound OK to you? So he failed because he did not have access to the curriculum because he
was not at that level, and because you’re learning to read, and they get a “D”, and you’re fine with it as an educator, and you’re also fine with not having any type of communication, and then you base his grade on two tests, which he has to be able to read to take those tests. And so sometimes it’s just like, why don’t you repeat what you’re saying to me out loud to yourself, and tell me does that sound OK, does that sound right? A lot of times this is what parents, families, students might go through. You really have to advocate for correct glimpse, like I said with my oldest son, he was consistently a “D” student in language arts. I took one of his tests one day, and decided I’m going to ask him the questions, and it was more of an oral exam. And he gave me all of the right answers. On the tests, they were all the wrong answers. Why? Because he is not able to access the quizzes and exams like other students, and we learned that if you pull him out, and you give him an oral exam, he knows the information, but he struggled with reading it, because of how he’s impacted by his disability, and so it’s that thinking outside the box, you know?

It’s differentiated education, and what does that look like? What does it look like for all of our students, and how do we help them achieve, education is not cookie-cutter, it’s not one fits all. But also, equipping teachers to know what does that look like? And having them have professional development on it. I know I go to a lot of conferences, and I’ve gone to the Peak Parent Inclusion Conference, and some of their practices, and even some of the best practices in special education, I don’t see that trickling in general education, which it would be beneficial for all students. For instance using foldables, kids are allowed to be hands on, or, for those students that are kinesthetic, and even just really looking at how we address education for all students, having that auditory, having that visual, having that kinesthetic, having all of those components, then all students succeed. Seeing my kids struggle with reading, and talking to other parents, I’m almost convinced that even how African American kids learn to read is different. And so how do we address that? And it doesn’t mean that they’re less than, it just means that they learn differently. I do appreciate that at my daughter’s school, she has had the flexibility where we’ve been able to say, we don’t want our child to learn this way, we want her to learn this way. She’s not gonna just pick up say with the new ECE curriculum, if you say “ta” “ta” “ta”, play this game, the kids will learn that “T” makes the “ta” “ta”. Well, that may not work for all students. We might have to do more of the phonemic awareness approach. So just being mindful of that, and
through trial and error, we’ve been able to say my child does not learn best like this, and so we really have to address that. There is an achievement gap and I think part of it is, I don’t think we’re necessarily culturally responsive. I think that is a factor in how we educate our students. It is shunned upon to be loud in school and communicate, but when I’m at home my conversations are very loud and animated, but if you do that at school, you might have to sit out. And you might have to refocus. So just some of those components of culture in the classroom, and what is it, what does it look like?

Students are, in a sense if you will, kind of being punished for who they are, for what’s natural for them. And it’s funny because the school I’m at is predominantly white. I like to do a lot of rhythm and dance, and they’re like Mrs. Brown what are you doing? And at previous schools, if I’m dancing or trying to engage them like that, they engage right back with me, so just even the engagement is different. I would even have to say as an educator, working at a school where it was predominantly children of color, and then working at a school where it’s predominantly white children, even the students warming up to me, I was a culture shock for them! And just them being trusting, and just some of the variances, you know Miss Brown come sit by me, that did take a while for our relationships to develop. And it’s funny because we have a handful of black students, and they see me, and the little girls they’ll walk up to me, say what’s your name? Or they’ll wanna give me a hug, or they’ll wanna tell me about their day, and I can tell that they’re just happy to see another black face. And, I think to myself, oh is this what my daughter is going through?

Julie Speer: How many kids of color are at your school?

Nabeehah Brown: So the number of African American students at the Logan School, it’s not a large number. She has two biracial students in her class. I think there’s one other African American student that’s her grade level. So there isn’t a lot of children of color, and it is something that she does notice, and she asks where are the brown kids? It’s kind of sad because even in some of her extracurricular activities, she’s like where are the brown kids?

So my daughter is very socially aware, and it has been a learning lesson as well as a challenge when she goes to school and she says, why aren’t there that many brown kids at school? Or, she has her friends, they play at school, she goes to their birthday party, and she’s sad. Or she goes to
girl scouts, and she’s sad, and she loves it, but she doesn’t see anyone that she identifies with. I know it’s going to probably present challenges. Eventually she’ll learn the setting, I may have to act a certain way. So I think of ways of how I can be inclusive to the other families so that they can experience what she does, she wears, she has her hair in braids or things might be different for her, and so I try to include the students at her school. But she has asked why aren’t there many students of color at my school?

Nabeehah Brown: So at the end of the day what I tell my daughter is that although there’s not students of color at her school, they’re people and we’re all people, and that’s what’s most important, that we’re all human, and that she should just treat them as an individual. Treat everyone as an individual for who they are. And I know she wants to be around people that look like her, but it’s definitely a skill that she’s gonna learn at a younger age, versus at an older age. How to get along with people and she’s gonna encounter it all throughout her life, people that are different, and to be accepting of that.

Julie Speer: So, you have two young boys of color, do you see that the system seems to be stacked against them? Talk about the concerns about that reality, and what you’re doing to set them up for success.

Nabeehah Brown: So raising two young African American males, it’s very important that they graduate, that they succeed in life, and really laying a strong foundation. For me, what that looks like is making sure that I really push them in education and making sure that their teachers push them, and that their teachers have high expectations. I won’t allow any teacher to just write them off as oh they’re just another student, or if something is going on, just letting it be. I make sure even before parent teacher conferences within the first two weeks of school I will have met you personally, and will send an e-mail, a follow up email, and let them know that I do send a lot of emails, and that I like to stay in constant contact. I know that it is going to be challenging for them, I know that their future is gonna have to be something that they work very hard because people are going to perceive them by the color of their skin. That will be the first thing they see, and then it will be the male component, and so I make sure that I raise gentlemen, and people are always impressed with them. And I get emails, we had a sub, and your son was so well-behaved, or older women they’ll hold the door, and oh my goodness you’re raising them with manners, and everything like that, but it is scary.
Unfortunately, I’ve had to have conversations about the harsh realities about the world that we live in, and have discouraged them, OK, I don’t want you guys to wear your hoodie when you go outside, or just be aware of your environment, where you’re at, who you’re around. And it’s been tough. I did have an incident where my son was lumped together with a group of students, and he was suspended off the bus. My oldest, Quincy. So I received an email that he was suspended. It was a robo-dial email. So, I was very upset that there wasn’t any type of communication. And when I contacted the school, they said well I don’t know. So it took me about two weeks to get to the bottom of why he was suspended. And I had to personally take off work to go speak to the bus driver. What happened was, they passed around a piece of paper, and said everybody sign it. And my son signed the paper. The paraprofessional on the bus had been having a hard time I guess with some of the students. So he was signing this piece of paper, didn’t know why. And so he was told to get off the bus by the school principal. The school principal, taken the word of the paraprofessional on the bus with not very much background information, just everyone off the bus, you’re suspended. Just to find out from the bus driver that my son is a good kid, and that he didn’t do anything wrong, and he was kicked off the bus wrongfully, and just lumped together with a group of students. That is something that I refuse to happen. I’m not gonna allow anyone to put him in a category, and say this is the behavior that I expect because this is the way that you look or for whatever reasons, and then after further talking to the bus driver, it seemed as if the paraprofessional really didn’t have respect for the students, and for some of the students it was like a back and forth thing. And, because of that, I said all right well he’s just going to sit in the front because I’m not gonna deal with that, and for future reference, if you ever think about suspending my son, we need to talk about it first. We need to talk about what was going on before there’s any type of suspensions. So it was sad, but I’m aware that these are some of the things that he’s gonna have to face, and he has shared with me how he’s had to advocate for himself, and say I’ve noticed you’re following the kids of color around, and it’s not OK, and I wish you would please stop following me around, treating me like I’m going to do something wrong because I’m not, but just those perceived notions.

I also try to make sure that they have as much exposure to a lot of different fields, like Quincy he is on the Impact Factory, which is put on by the Young Philanthropist Foundation. Eventually, I do plan on having him
being a part of Young Americans Bank, because he said he wanted to own his own bank, so whatever they tell me they want, I make it happen. If you say you want to work with computers, then I work really hard to either put them in a camp. My youngest child is very talented, he can dance like it’s nobody’s business, and he’s a part of a dance company, The Breaker Boys, and he’s on a contract and he’s amazing. He’s amazing. And so, I really try to flourish whatever gift they have. Whatever gifts that they have, I try to expand it, and I try to expose them to as many things as possible. So they can know that this isn’t just TV or this isn’t something that’s unheard of, these are realities. I took my oldest son, he attended a conference, it was for youth about financial literacy and he came home and said mom I gotta work on my credit, I gotta have good credit, but just that mindfulness, and having that skill set at 12, and to think as he evolves and gets older and as I keep depositing in their bank as I call it, you know what the reward will be for them, and what the payout will be for them. It is challenging because although as their parent I’m doing my part, I know that they’re still up against a lot, and even their good might not be good enough in society’s eyes, and that they’ll still have to work hard. They’ll have to de-mystify a lot of stereotypes and a lot of isms, but they’re good kids. I really work hard, they have their faults, but I really work to teach them what that looks like. If you get an “F” then you might have to live the “F” lifestyle at home. And what does that look like? You can’t afford a TV on the “F” lifestyle, or you can’t afford a phone, you can only afford probably a studio on the “F” lifestyle, so you don’t have access to the rest of the house, just your room. So I try to make things real for them. And I know sometimes they might think, dang mom is really harsh, but I have a lot of real conversations with them to try to prepare them for the world. From my experience I know that education is the key for their financial success, that’s gonna make the difference and whatever skills or whatever gifts, or things that they bring extra, it will just only increase it.

I really drive that home to them. I’m very transparent about how we live or our situations, and what that looks like. So it’s challenging, but I definitely use my resources, and I definitely reach out to people, and say what are your thoughts? Or, what do you know about this? I try to make sure that I stay well connected. Well connected to help them on so many levels. It’s interesting because I think I don’t have some of the same fears for my daughter as I have for my boys because I know that life will probably be a lot more challenging. I mean you deal with sexism, and you deal with glass ceilings and things of that nature, but just even how
people in general respond, or react to them, is gonna be totally different than how it is with my daughter. It’s interesting because I’ve gone to a meeting and I just had a feeling that said, what if the security guard brought your son back and he had gone to the restroom, and I looked up and he was in the doorway and sure enough there was a security guard looking at him, he didn’t bring him back, but he was making sure, what is he doing in the building, and I’m like it’s unfair, why else would we be in the building, we’re at a meeting, but it was just that gut instinct. And it’s that reality that these things happen and then when they do happen, you’re like I wish I would have been disproved. I wish I was wrong about that feeling. But I wasn’t. It was just like ugh. This is the stuff that they’ll have to deal with, and especially the bigger, the taller, seems like the more fear that it brings, the more presumed threat that they are, and my grandfather was 6’8” so god only knows how tall they’ll be. And I’m just like, it’s a bummer. But I’m their biggest fan, their biggest cheerleader. I know it might be a struggle but with no struggle there’s no progress, and so I always say, it’s a quote, “You have to bear your cross to wear your crown”, and so if it’s worth having it’s worth fighting for. I know we’re gonna have those battles, but it’s worth having because you know, they’re worth it, their futures are worth it.

I’m just like wow, I’m excited like I wonder what their future is gonna look like. My daughter wants to be a veterinarian, and she watches the veterinarian shows on Saturday, and at her school she’s done field studies and she’s gone to a few vet clinics. I looked up does Dumb Friends League have anything for you? So I’m like OK, when she turns 8 I can sign her up. Whatever their passions are, I just really work hard to try to cultivate them. A lot of times there are financial barriers, like I would love for my son to go to an ID tech camp, I cannot afford it, and they don’t really give out scholarships, but I do my best trying to get them to different places and have different experiences. I think it’s paid off because I feel my daughter especially is well-cultured. She loves the Brown Palace and she wants to go to Gumbos for dinner and on her birthday, the experiences outside of her neighborhood, I just think growing up, I didn’t really leave my neighborhood except for school. And the places we’ve gone, to the mountains and just here and there, to this festival and learning about different cultures, different practices, I think it’s very beneficial. It’s also driving in that appreciating, appreciating humanity, so we used to have neighbors, one of their daughters was losing her hearing, and we learned some sign and just those different
things of acceptance and openness and being eager and willing to learn new things.

**Julie Speer:** Exposure, like you were saying earlier, is all about exposing them to as much as you can so that they realize the world of possibilities.

**Nabeehah Brown:** Yeah. I had the boys attend the science camp, the STEM camp that was out here, and they enjoyed it. And, like I said, if I see a strength and they don’t quite recognize it, or they’re like mom, I still will sign them up. And I’m like you need to give it a try. I think kids need more exposure. How do you know what you wanna be if you’ve never been exposed to it? If you have no idea what they do. I don’t think it starts in high school. The more exposure the better, but I do think it’s important to really start looking at their career, their future in middle school. So, let’s shadow a network administrator, if your passion is math or you’re good in math, let’s shadow some of these fields. Let’s try to set up some internship where there’s room for you to grow and say ooh, I did not like it, or I did not think this is the job. I know a lot of boys that the craze is, I want to design video games. Well what does that look like? You might do it, and oh, I didn’t know, I did not like this, and it’s the glamour of playing it, but the work that goes into it, they have no idea. And so that exposure is crucial. It’s crucial. And even for those students that say, oh I’m just gonna get a job after school and, oh I wanna work at McDonalds. Well what does that look like? You might work there a day and absolutely hate it. So, maybe I really don’t wanna do that, maybe I’m gonna have to really step it up to do something that I want to do. Because although sometimes jobs that doesn’t require a degree, although they might seem like they’re easy, you do a lot of work. You might realize, this isn’t the path that I wanna go down but because you haven’t had access or exposure, you don’t know what anything else looks like. And even doing the assessment of personality, I think that’s crucial, what you like? Where you’re at? I didn’t know there was a term for the way that I think, but I’m more of a reflective thinker. And that’s why I have the best rebuttals ever, because I’m a reflective thinker, whereas when I’m in the moment, I’m processing it, and I didn’t know this. I just happen to be sitting in on a class at DU and they were talking about it. And I’m like, ha ha, that’s what it’s called.
Julie Speer: Talk about growing up, what part of town you grew up in and describe your neighborhood, then you can start talking about where you went to school.

Nate Easley: With regard to my background, I'm a Denverite. I grew up in Park Hill and Montbello. I lived at 29th and Olive until I was about in third grade and then we moved up to the East Side Montbello in 1974. Actually the summer of '73, and spent most of my elementary, middle school, and high school years in Montebello.

Julie Speer: Let's talk about Park Hill. Do you remember having any perceptions about Park Hill? Did you feel segregated? Were you even aware?

Nate Easley: When I lived in Park Hill, I wouldn't say it felt segregated because everybody was black and I didn't know any other reality. I started off in kindergarten going to Hallett Elementary School and there were some Latinos and whites there but at that point, from kindergarten to third grade, I didn't really notice race. I just noticed that some kids looked a little bit different than I did.

Julie Speer: When did you start to notice?
Nate Easley: I started to notice with busing in 1972. Actually '71 I bused from Park Hill to Ellis Elementary School. I'm not sure what that neighborhood is, I don't know the name. I know that they didn't bus many of us. There were probably two or three black kids in the class of mostly white kids. From first grade all the way through third grade.

Julie Speer: Talk about that, as a little boy, what your perceptions were, what you noticed and how you felt about things.

Nate Easley: In terms of how I felt about being one of the few bused from Park Hill out to what I call the Brady Bunch neighborhood, is what we called it, I didn't really notice a difference until days like picture day when they would give out the combs and the comb never worked for my hair. Once when I was in third grade, we were learning about Flathead Indians and it's a group of American Indians who when they were babies, their parents would carry them on a piece of wood so the back of their heads became flat so they called them Flathead Indians. Well, in third grade, I thought that was hilarious so I started laughing and the teacher said, "I don't know why you think that's so funny. Black people have kinky hair and big noses." That was the first time that I ever noticed that I was different from everybody else in the class and I felt really kind of embarrassed to be who I was. Things I couldn't change about myself. A white teacher, 1973, and I'll never forget it because it was one of those moments where there's a lot of adrenaline because I was really embarrassed. I was embarrassed about laughing and I was embarrassed about the fact that it was the first time in my life I really noticed that I was different.

Julie Speer: Were you then bused also in middle school and high school?

Nate Easley: When we moved to Montbello the summer of '73, there wasn't much in Montbello. It was Crown Boulevard, which is the main street where Montbello high school is, was still a dirt road and it was just a relatively new area. There weren't many big trees and so it was all new. The house that we lived in I thought was huge because it had four bedrooms and a basement and a big backyard. The house we moved from in Park Hill just had two bedrooms so me and my brother and three sisters all stayed in the same room when we lived in Park Hill. When we moved to Montbello it was really cool that we all had our own rooms. Actually, I only had to share with my brother which was amazing.
Because there weren't many schools after I went to school at Barney Ford, we got bused to Place Middle School. I missed going to TJ by a year. When I got into high school in ninth grade, actually it was tenth grade back then, that was the first year Montbello high school opened and so I was able to go to the neighborhood school. I went to Montbello and it was, at the time, mostly African American. A few Latinos, a few Mexican Americans. A few Asian students. It was an amazing experience for me. It was just fun. There were lots of pretty girls and I played sports and it was a brand new school, state of the art school at the time. I just remember having a lot of fun in tenth grade and being a football player. I graduated from Montbello. Went all through high school and really enjoyed the experience there.

Julie Speer: If you fast forward into the 90s, obviously, Montbello went through a lot of changes but when you were there, was it pretty solid academically?

Nate Easley: When it's your reality, it's hard to know whether it's solid or not. I didn't realize that I wasn't a great student until my freshman year at Colorado State. I was one of Montbello's top math students. In fact, I won a math award when I was a junior in high school. Then when I went to Colorado State my freshman year, I tested into algebra, which they would be remedial math. Which hit me in the chest. I thought I was a really smart kid and turns out I wasn't so bright. At least when it came to the test and the math class that I had to start over in.

Julie Speer: Why do you think that was? Were you just not exposed to that same level of rigor?

Nate Easley: We had three different principals the three years I was at Montbello and I never really got to know them. If you ask me their names, I could describe what they look like but I couldn't tell you their names. I remember a lot of teachers complaining about the kids in Montbello not really studying and not doing their homework. I was one of those kind of kids, though, that if you just had a little bit of charisma, showed up and tried, you ended up getting straight As. When I graduated from Montbello, I had a 3.7 GPA. It was mostly because I was nice to the teachers. I rarely did homework. I remember coming to school and just me and my friends would exchange homework and then copy right there in front of the teacher and then turn it in. I thought that was cool back then but as I got older I realized I was missing a lot.
Julie Speer: Would you consider Montbello an integrated school?

Nate Easley: When I went to Montbello, in terms of its integration, it was not very integrated at all. In fact, in my master's research I did research that involved Montbello high school and it turns out the years I went there, it was over 75% black and it was probably - well, not probably, it had the highest proportion of black students of any school in the state. The years that I went there. It was almost like going back to where I was in kindergarten, really, where it was just mostly black kids.

Julie Speer: I read that during the time of busing that there was a school board mandated percentage that you had to represent the district makeup by at least 15%. My question would be why did they not bus kids to Montbello?

Nate Easley: I remember the parents being up in arms about the fact that this was a neighborhood school and this was a brand new school built for the neighborhood. We were all, as a community, very proud of Montbello high school. It's kind of far. In fact, the district refers to it now as the Far Northeast like it's some other country. It was even further then because there wasn't a lot of development there. I don't think there was a lot - I don't know why they didn't bus to Montbello. It didn't seem like a very integrated school when I went there.

In terms of income, it wasn't a low income neighborhood. We were able to move to Montbello because I had both parents and we were probably working class at the time. Most of my neighbors had both parents at home and were working class. I remember when we moved on to our block, there were three or four black families, three or four white families, and about three or four Latinos. It was pretty mixed but it just didn't show up at school. I'm not quite sure where the other kids were going.

Julie Speer: Busing was new when you were a kid, when you were very little in elementary school. Do you remember any of the bombings or any of the unrest with the early busing years?

Nate Easley: I remember, I have two older sisters, and I remember them coming home talking about the riots at TJ and talking about kids getting thrown through the windows and fighting and that kind of thing. I remember that as the little brother of two sisters who went to TJ.
Julie Speer: How were things in your community?

Nate Easley: When I went to Montbello, there was a lot of community pride and between 1980 and 1983. A brand new school. I remember my best friend's parents were on the PTA and really engaged. It felt like a family. We had a great sports team. I remember between '80 and '83, I'm pretty sure our football team competed in the playoffs statewide. Our basketball team in the year after I graduated actually took the state championship with Craig Jackson. There was a lot of pride in the community.

Julie Speer: Talk about what the pros and cons of being bused were and how it impacted your life and your academics.

Nate Easley: Well, the pros and cons of busing from my perspective. I got a chance to meet kids who weren't black and I remember, you always remember the person you liked. In kindergarten, I think it was a Latina girl that I kind of liked. In first grade, it was a white girl. Second grade it was a white girl. Third grade it was an Asian girl. I got a chance to experience other cultures from the perspective of we're just all people. That was a pro. The con was that they didn't bus a lot of us, it was just a trickle. When the teacher pointed out that I was different, that's when I first noticed that there was a difference between me and most of the kids who went to the school.

A pro was we were probably pretty much low income when we lived in Park Hill. It's hard to say that because it didn't seem like it from my perspective. Everything was fine. To see the other kids who had more. I still remember the telephone number of my first grade buddy. Michael was his name, and just to make us feel better, we all buddied up and you had that buddy and you're supposed to keep in touch with him for at least that whole year. Michael and I stayed in touch all the way through college. He lived in a really nice house and really nice neighborhood and I was able to see that other side of that work and that there was something more than where I lived in Park Hill. That was a good side. That was one of the positives.

I would imagine that the rigor of the school was probably pretty good. It's hard for me to say. For me overall, it was a positive experience. Now, if you were to interview my two older sisters, I imagine they'd have a different story because they started busing when they were in middle
school and high school. It was just really dramatic and a lot of fighting and riots and things like that. I just remember hearing their stories but it wasn't that dramatic for me when I was little.

Julie Speer: Is there anything in your own experience, in your own academics, in terms of achievement or segregation?

Nate Easley: I remember three teachers all the way through that experience and what I think they all had in common was that they saw me as a person who should be held to a high standard. They all challenged me. The first teacher that I remember was at Barney Ford, his name is Mr. Yamisaki. The reason I remember Mr. Yamisaki was that he was constantly on me about learning and about paying attention and I never really took it that seriously. One day he said, "Hey, would you like a ride home?" I said, "Sure, why not? It's better than walking." He gave me a ride home, which I thought was great. Then he stopped the car and when I got out, he got out. I was like, "I'm not sure why you need to get out." I walked up to the door, he walked up to the door with me. When I went in, he came in and had a conversation with my mom. I'll never forget that. Let's say I paid attention a lot more after that meeting. For him to come to my house really meant a lot to me even though I wasn't too thrilled at the time because my mother wasn't happy about the report on me. It made a big difference in the way I acted when I went back to school.

I had another teacher at Barney Ford, my fourth grade science teacher, Mrs. Wilson, who was really, really tough on us. I don't know when they teach it now but it was the first time I learned about sex ed in fourth grade and it just completely changed my whole perspective on life. I have a kid who's in third grade now and I can't imagine having that conversation with him next year. I still remember a lot of the stuff that she taught us. Then fast forward to high school, I had a history teacher named Barbara Piasic, who literally pulled me by the ear because I used a big word in a sentence, and said, "You need to be in my AP history class."

She asked me why I was in the hallway and did I have enough time to make it to my next class. I just learned the word postulate in geometry and I said, "Well, according to my postulation, I postulate that it's going to take me exactly ... " She said, "Oh, postulate. You know how to use words?" She did like this, and she took me all the way up from the history pod, which is in the bottom of Montbello, all the way up the ramp to the office. Said, "I want this kid in my AP history class." That medieval history
class that I had my junior year of high school was the hardest class I ever had all the way through PhD. You never would go unprepared. If you did, she would just strip you down. Make you feel so guilty about not learning.

Constantly, she complained that, "I'm not sure if you guys are going to work with me." She would sometimes talk about how hard it was working in Montbello, but one thing you knew about Barbara was that she cared. I ended up majoring in history as an undergraduate and that was thanks to Barbara Piasic. What was special about her was she held us to a really high standard. To her, history was everything. She brought history to life. It was medieval history and she would put on helmets and act the wars out and have us do it. I still remember a lot of the lessons I learned from her class.

Julie Speer: Do you think race matters with a good teacher? Talk about the role of a good teacher.

Nate Easley: I think it matters to see role models in positions of influence and not just for black people or Latino people, but for white people too so when you get a President Obama, people don't run for the hills because they're used to seeing people of color in authority. I don't know if I thought about the fact that Mr. Yamisaki was Japanese or Mrs. Wilson was black or Mrs. Piasic was white. I was a little bit more aware of race in high school. That wasn't what she led with and it wasn't what made her special.

As I think about my kindergarten through 12 experience, most of the teachers who I thought challenged me were white teachers. Mostly white females, and I think that's probably because that's mostly who's teaching. I had very few black teachers besides Mrs. Wilson. I had one music teacher. I can count them. I had a music teacher and I had an English teacher on my senior year at Montbello. That was about it.

Julie Speer: Why do you think that is?

Nate Easley: Well I know when I was majoring in history and I thought about teaching, my advisor talked me out of it. He said, "You're too smart to be a teacher. You should at least be a professor, or you might want to go into business because teachers don't make a lot of money." He was just like, "You don't want to teach." There wasn't any encouragement to be a teacher. It
wasn't like I'd go home and my mother would say, "You should be a teacher." She wanted me to be an engineer. The jobs that make a lot of money. There wasn't a lot of encouragement to become a teacher at the time.

Julie Speer: Anything else about your early years?

Nate Easley: I didn't mention my middle school experience. It was a very integrated experience at Place Junior High. I'd say it was, if you did the demographics it was probably the same demographics as the city. I knew that through who my friends were. They were mostly black kids from Montbello or Park Hill because Place bused people from both neighborhoods. That's where I got to meet a lot of friends in Park Hill that I still have today. If you played football, the team was a little bit of that Place area neighborhood and a little bit of Park Hill and a little bit of Montbello. It was pretty integrated. I don't remember any race wars in junior high. That said, the girls that I liked were always black girls. I never really looked at any other ethnicity besides black girls when I was in middle school. Something was going on there because it was an integrated experience.

Julie Speer: If you look at everything that's happening across the country. Race is an issue in America, because we're still dealing with it in 2015. Why are we here? Why are we even having a conversation about race in 2015?

Nate Easley: In terms of why we're still having this conversation about race in 2015, I think there's a real overlay with poverty and ethnicity. I did an exercise in my PhD program where I said, "What if tomorrow we woke up and none of us could recognize the difference in ethnicity or race? What would happen in a few years, 10 years out, 20 years out, 30 years out?" What I came out with is people who were in poverty and African American, that group probably can grow and there would just be a few more Barack Obamas and Colin Powells. Why is that? Because as a country, as a world, we've never done well by poor kids. Never.

United States has probably done a little bit better than most countries in the history of the world in terms of giving low income kids an opportunity to pursue happiness through the public education system. But, if you look at the end result of where we're at, poverty is the thing that constantly comes out at the top. When you overlay race and poverty together, then you end up with this really, really bad situation where you have black
males, for example, getting shot. If you grew up in a black neighborhood like I did, that wasn't new. We used to get shot, beat up, et cetera, when I was in high school. Now that everybody travels with a video on their telephone, it's coming out that this stuff is happening.

I'm saying that to say there's definitely a race thing that happens. If you ask me, given the history of specifically blacks in this country and given where we came from, it's the overlay of poverty and race that really, really is the most challenging aspect of blacks in United States. Black people who are in middle class still experience racism. I'm a black person who's middle class and absolutely I experience it. I remember being in North Carolina a week after I had defended my dissertation and I was feeling really good about myself, Dr. Easley, and said that about 20 times, couldn't believe it.

I was wearing a T-shirt and jeans, and there was somebody that spilled something in the airport. A lady who was riding on a plane and was really dressed up nicely said, "You should clean that up before someone slips." I was thinking, "Wow. With all due respect to my friends who do that kind of work, I'm Dr. Easley." Ironically, the woman was black. There is something to it, when people see who I am. I remember getting pulled over in Montbello a few months after I graduated from college because I didn't have a license plate in the front of my car. The officer leaned over and looked at me and then undid his gun and put his hand on his gun. I was like, "Wow, are you going to shoot me because I don't have a license plate in front?"

I calmed down because I always learned from my mother, always be nice. It was a black cop that did that to me. There is something about my appearance that I can never change in terms of that teacher pointing out that my hair is different and my features are different that I share with people who grew up like me and look like me that's real. That said, and racism is something we have to deal with. The poverty issue is something that we also have to pay attention to.

Julie Speer: Tell me about where you live now and about your own kids and where you chose to send them to school.

Nate Easley: I have four kids. I started off at 17. My daughter was born a week after my 18th birthday. I moved out when I was 17 and my daughter was born and she was at my high school graduation. She's in her 30s now. I have a
son that's in his 30s. Then I have a new family, or a younger family, a seven year old and a nine year old and their mother is German Jewish. I have two born again Christian kids who are grown into little black Jews at home, who need both their mom and dad in order for them to have a real identity in terms of who they are.

I live in Stapleton, which is kind of ironic because I lived around Stapleton. Between 8th and Olive is really literally a few blocks from where I live now. My mother still lives in Montbello and I go visit her. Takes me about ten minutes to get there. Stapleton, my guess is it's probably about 90% white. My two boys go to Swigert, which is a school that's majority white and I think Isaac and Charlie are both among the only black kids in their class. Now, they say that they're brown. Their mother's white, their dad's black, so they're brown. They're beginning to figure out their identity. They know they're Jewish because we don't celebrate Christmas and their holidays are Hanukkah and we celebrate the high holidays and we do Passover.

Their mother raises them Jewish and I respect that. It would be interesting to see when they get older if they can hang onto that brown, or if they become black at some point. President Obama's mother is about the same complexion as my wife, and he can never say that he's a white president. He's the first black president, no matter what he does. What's nice about Isaac and Charlie and who they are in terms of race is that they'll never know a world where there's not a president of the United States who's not like them. Which is kind of a special thing. I grew up thinking no one who looked like me could ever be president.

Swigert, I wish it was more diverse. Academically, it's very rigorous. I think it's one of the top five elementary schools in the state. It's an international school. The kids come home talking about India. My seven year old wants to go eat Indian food. My nine year old, wants to live in Germany at some point. He can't wait to go to Germany. I'm glad they're talking about that because I think their world's going to be a lot more international than the world I grew up in. That said, I'm looking forward to middle school and a more diverse experience for them because I think living in Denver, one of the reasons we moved to Denver was that we wanted to have our kids have a diverse experience.

One bit of irony, my nine year old son was doing pen pals with a kid in Spain so he can learn a little bit about Spanish. I thought, "Well, geez.
30% of the kids in DPS speak Spanish. It seems like there's got to be one Martinez somewhere that you can be friends with. I'm not sure you need to write to Spain to learn Spanish." I wish the district would do more with that, with the fact that we have 40% of our kids are bilingual and instead of seeing that as a talent or a necessity, which most of the world would. If you don't speak at least two languages in most parts of the world, you're illiterate. We treat it as a deficit and we label them English language acquisition kids. ELA kids, instead of bilingual kids which had two different connotations. I look forward to my kids going to a middle school that they can learn some Spanish.

Julie Speer: Where are you planning on sending them?

Nate Easley: One of the things I love about Denver and Colorado is choice. That we have the choice to send our kids to a school where they're going to get a good foundation so that when we look at middle schools, we can look at different opportunities. Depends on how they develop. I'm sure we'll look at Denver School of Science and Technology. See if we can get on the late list for that. It's a very diverse, academically rigorous school but it's a bit structured. Depending on how my boys develop, that may be too much structure for them.

One of my sons is into art. We'll look at Denver School of the Arts as a possibility. We'll look at, of course, Denver Discovery School, which is in Stapleton, and McAuliffe. If it's still not going to have the park like I hear now at Smiley, which is a beautiful building, we'll definitely take a look at McAuliffe as an international school. Those would probably be the four that we'd look at.

Julie Speer: What about your older kids? Where did they go to school and what was that education?

Nate Easley: My older kids, my ex wife lives in Mississippi. They did a little schooling in the south, a little schooling in Washington D.C., and a little school here in Denver, and a little school in Ft. Collins where they were born. They had a real national experience when it comes to education. Their mother and I were together until they were five and seven and they went to school in Ft. Collins. It was probably a similar experience to my two boys, my younger kids I have now where they're one of very few black kids in the class. Then when we split, she moved to Mississippi.
In Mississippi, the public schools are mostly black and the private schools are mostly white. They went to a mostly African American and poor, because there were a lot of poor white kids there too, schools in Oxford, Mississippi. Then when they got in middle school, I got custody of them and we lived in Montgomery County, Maryland. Which is one of the best school districts in the country. They went to a highly rigorous integrated school in Montgomery County, which was a really great experience. If you look at the demographics of Magruder High School in Montgomery County, it's almost exactly a mirror of what the United States is in terms of ethnicity. They had a really strong, rich middle school and high school experience and they both ended up going to college and graduating. I think it was really because of that high school experience.

Julie Speer: Anything about being a parent that we haven't talked about in terms of race and integration with your kids?

Nate Easley: Yeah. I go home to integration every day. It's my reality. My boys who are black Jews, there are many parts of the world where if they don't have strong parents, they're going to have a difficult time. For religious reasons, being Jewish, and for race reasons, being black. My wife and I decided to procreate, we knew that it was very important for both of us to be engaged in their identity and who they are. We both spend a lot of time with the boys individually and together as a family. What's unique about who they are is they come from two traditions of oppression in terms of Nazi Germany all the way back to Moses, if you really want to know the truth. Then of course, Africans in this part of the world being slaves.

I think they're both stronger people for it. They're unique kids. At this point, the biggest thing is to make sure they get a strong base and then once they get that strong base, then I want them to not just nationally diverse experience, like black, Latino, white, et cetera, but international. I want to spend significant time abroad with them.

Julie Speer: You bring up a really interesting point. Especially with interracial marriages, there's more and more every day. Do you think we're going to grow out of the issues we're having now with race?

Nate Easley: I think so. I think once more people get educated and less fear about difference, I think it's natural for people to be attracted to folks who have differences from them. I can see in a few generations, this will be a very
antiquated conversation about race. I wouldn't be surprised if my boys married, one marries an Asian woman, and the other one ends up marrying some woman from Australia. Then what are their kids? I think as we get more sophisticated as human beings, I think this will become a moot conversation, absolutely.

Julie Speer: You work in education now. Talk about your perceptions now of Denver Public Schools and what you see as the barriers to achievement.

Nate Easley: What I see when I look at Denver Public Schools are nearly 90,000 really talented kids who haven't been able to reach their potential for a variety of reasons. Primarily ignorance. I said earlier in the conversation that we should look at kids who speak another language as having a talent, not a deficit. In most parts of the world, that's exactly how they're looked at. Here for some reason, we'll look at a Mexican American kid who speaks Spanish at home and consider that kid to be remedial.

When I label you, objectify you, and call you an English language learner or English language acquisition, that label ELA, every time I hear it, it makes my heart hurt because I had the opportunity to live in Germany for a year and travel a lot in the Netherlands, and I was one of those ELA kids or adults, at least. I didn't feel like it made me any less smart, it just was that I couldn't understand German or I couldn't understand Dutch. I needed people to be patient with me.

I feel like if we saw the kids who are in DPS as kids who have a great potential and not as problems, I think we'd do much better as a district overall. I think that's where the conversation really needs to start. Now, I'm not giving the whole responsibility to the district. There is some personal responsibility. Absolutely, parents need to do more to support their kids. The more teachers, et cetera. I'm not completely blaming the district.

On the other hand, I grew up learning to focus on the things you can control and not on the things you can't control. We can certainly control how we treat the students that are primarily the most loyal kids we have. That's primarily Mexican American kids, is the largest group and fastest growing and low incomes kids regardless of ethnicity. They're the population that is growing really fast in Denver.
Julie Speer: The work that you do at the Scholarship Foundation, do you see that you're addressing the dropout rate or is it a completely different issue?

Nate Easley: The work we do at the Denver Scholarship Foundation is towards the end of the pipeline. What it is I would say is the second to last or penultimate part of the pipeline, right before you get to work force which is go to college. We define college as a certificate program and associate's program or a four year college degree. Our mission is college completion for all DPS high school graduates. Whether they're rich, poor, low income, documented, undocumented. Regardless. If you go to Denver Public Schools, high schools, we want you to go to college and graduate.

We do that by leveraging a scholarship, by having future senators embedded in the high schools with advisors who come from similar backgrounds as the students, and by partnering specifically with Colorado colleges so that once students get there, they get the wrap around services they need, the social and academic support to be successful in college. We're really focused on the end result of DPS. We are heavily dependent and have a partnership with Denver Public Schools that says pretty much that they're there to prepare students academically for whatever comes after high school. Then we take it from their junior senior year on through college completion.

Julie Speer: Let's look at Lincoln. Do you guys have a center?

Nate Easley: We do have a future center at Lincoln and our founder is from Lincoln, graduated from Lincoln.

Julie Speer: Lincoln right now has some of the highest remediation rates in the district, kids are not ready at Lincoln. Talk about that reality and the challenges of Lincoln High School.

Nate Easley: I think Lincoln is a good example of what I started off talking about. This low expectation of kids that we have of kids who speak a language other than English at home. I did my dissertation research on Mexican immigrants who made it to UCLA and my research question was, help me understand how you're possible because everything I read says that if you're a Mexican immigrant and you're low income, you're not going to end up at UCLA. Yet here you are and there's a lot of you here so I need to understand how you made it.
What I found out through that research process was that there is so much talent, not in just Mexican immigrants, but any immigrant. This country was built in large part on the talents of immigrants who came here believing in the American dream more than most of us who have been here for several generations. We have a lot of that in Denver and we don't tap into it, for some reason. If you ask me, "Well, Nate, then why don't we do more of that?" I would say it's because we don't have the expectation that these students can perform.

If I'm teaching math and my kids aren't learning math, I shouldn't get promoted. I shouldn't get a raise. I realize that I may need some support because I'm not used to working with kids who come from low income African American backgrounds, or low income immigrant backgrounds, or have disabilities or whatever, so absolutely I need a great principal and I need a great structure to help me figure out what kind of approach to learning and teaching is going to work best for those kids. At the end of the day, my job is to teach you math and if I can't do that and I've exhausted everything in terms of getting help, then I should consider something else.

This is the future of the country that I'm responsible for. As I said at the beginning of this conversation, it was those teachers who not only knew that I could learn but helped me to that standard that made a difference and I can name four of them in my entire experience at Montbello. Imagine if all my teachers or 90% of my teachers had that expectation. My whole experience would be different. We fight this at the Denver Scholarship Foundation. We funded 4,500 students with our scholarship which is only for kids who go to our 33 college partners in state. We've invested 25 million in those students and we've leveraged another 50 million in financial aid to help them go to college. That's in scholarship support.

That said, 76% of those students continue in college or have completed a college degree which is our ultimate metric. 76% is impressive when you look at the base line. It's not impressive when you ask me because it should be closer to 80, 85, 90%. Why? Because I know they can do it. I was a teen parent when I went and I did it. I graduated from a school that didn't prepare me very much academically. I did it anyway. If you have the right either aptitude or attitude and if you have both, you're really going to do well. I know it's possible for these kids to go to college and graduate.
Especially when you talk about if I haven't really prepared myself for the rigor of a university, probably one of the very first things I ought to do is get a certificate so that way I can earn a living wage and I always have the opportunity to go back to school if I want to. I have a PhD now and if I had taken time out to get a plumbing certificate, I'd still be benefiting from that. The CEO of Smash Burger, I asked his permission to tell his story and he said sure. He and I went to school about the same time. We went to college in the early 80s. We both had families early. Before he went to the University of Michigan, he took time out to become a metal worker and he got a certification in metal working.

He welded when he was an undergraduate at the University of Michigan. He made $10 an hour, and this was in 1982, '83. I, at the same time with my family, was making minimum wages around 2.25 an hour. You can see, and if he failed bad, if something happened and he had to drop out of school, he would always have a fallback. Whereas if I would have dropped out of school, I would have been working a minimum wage job. If we have that tool available to us, where a student can get a certificate and we count that as a success as we do, there's absolutely no excuse why we shouldn't be doing better than 76% and we're working really hard to get there.

I don't make excuses for our performance and I don't expect DPS to make excuses either for why kids aren't learning.

Julie Speer: Explain the achievement gap to me. What is AG?

Nate Easley: I think the achievement gap really starts with what people are calling it now, which is an opportunity gap. What you see at the end is a reflection of what happens at the beginning of the education system. When I think about Isaac and Charlie and the kind of preschool experience they had, versus my nieces and nephews who live in low income parts of Aurora, it's a completely different thing. My nieces and nephews, their daycare was my sister, their grandmother, who took care of them and they spent time playing, watching TV, et cetera. Whereas Isaac and Charlie were in preschool programs from the time they were three.

Before three, mom stayed at home with them and made sure she read to them, made sure she helped them develop their vocabulary. She kept them stimulated, et cetera. They start off in kindergarten at a real advantage compared to my nieces and nephews. It's not a matter of
where do you start, it's a matter of trying to help low income kids get that same opportunity from the beginning. Right up front, as much as possible, as Isaac and Charlie got when they were little. That's why these early childhood programs and these preschool programs are so important.

It can't stop there because if you have a great preschool experience and you send them to a failing elementary school, it's all going to go away. We have to make sure that there's great elementary opportunities, there's great middle school, there's great high school, there's great college. All the way to the work force. When people talk about a pipeline that moves kids from poverty to prosperity through our public education system, I say where. I've never seen such a pipeline. I hear people talk about it, but the only evidence I have suggests that there is no pipeline or if you want to call it a pipeline, it leaks so much that if the Alaska pipeline leaked that much, we wouldn't have gas in the United States. There would be an oil disaster. There would be so much oil in the environment right now.

There's not pipeline. There's a lot of smart people that talk about it but we've never built one. Charter schools would talk about the fact that they have this great charter elementary school and I'm the board of a great charter and very much a supporter, but they can't just be an island. You have to figure out what's the next step for your kid. You can't think about that when they're in fifth grade. You have to think about that when they're in kindergarten and then what's the great middle school, what's the great high school and how are we going to get him to college? We got to stop this thing of just trying to create islands and just create islands of excellence and start thinking in terms of a larger pipeline that's really moving kids from poverty to prosperity through our public education system.

That involves not only an academically rigorous experience but a diverse experience because the world is getting smaller every day. One of the things we have in this country is diversity. We can take advantage of that. Kids can grow up used to speaking more than one language. Used to working with people with different ethnicities. Unlike other parts of the world. Instead what we do is we segregate and we lower our standards. I'd love to be part of a dialogue that really starts to rethink how we create this pipeline because if we can get it right for the least of these, the poor kids, then I'm sure that Isaac and Charlie, the middle class kids and the
more affluent kids are going to continue to be fine because we do a really fine job of educating our well off kids in the United States. We do a fine job of that.

It's the kids at the bottom and there was a great article in the Wall Street Journal about a month ago that talked about kids in terms of quartiles and college outcomes. If you're on the bottom quartile of income and you go to college in the United States, you have about a one in five chance of finishing a college degree. We're talking about a university degree. If you are in the top quartile of income and you go to a four year college, you have a 99% chance of completing that college degree. That kind of disparity, what ends up being called the achievement gap really is an opportunity.

Poor kids in many cases don't have an opportunity because their early childhood experiences of watching TV with grandma, then they go to school and the expectation is they're not going to learn and that's reinforced all the way through until we get to prison where we will happily pay $30,000 a year to keep a person in prison. If you have to put them to death, that's millions. In Colorado, we barely pay, what is it, $8,000 per student, and we argue about that. We don't want to pay the $8,000 up front per year but we're happy to pay the 30,000 in the backside. If you look at the people in prison and you interview them, what you find out is a lot of them are very talented. Very talented people.

There is a poverty to prison pipeline. There is lots of evidence of that. Very hard, irrefutable evidence that there is a poverty to prison pipeline and if you want to see the evidence of it, look at where Colorado invests its money in terms of how much we spend per year to keep a person in prison. Then go and interview the person in prison and find out how they grew up. Find out at what point the school system stopped believing in them and find out how many of them grew up wealthy of affluent.

My guess is 90% of them grew up poor. 90% of them we gave up on in third grade. 90% of them we didn't spend a lot of time with when they were young so those demons were planted when they were in second grade and they manifest by the time they're 15, between 15 and 25. Our priorities need to be trying to figure out how we really do give opportunity to kids that the Bible calls the least of these. That's why I like using that term. We consider ourselves to be a Christian country. People
call themselves Christlike which means they really try to mimic Jesus. They're like Jesus. That's what Christian means.

If you're going to be like Jesus then you really care about the kids who are considered to be the least. You have to. If you care about it, your money will follow. This frustrates me to no end when I hear people say, "Well, don't just throw more money at it." That's what we do for prisons. $30,000 a year. I was reading somewhere if you have to put someone to death, how much it costs versus educating someone all the way through the top private schools and sending them to Harvard. It seems like our priorities are wrong. If we can't sustain what we're currently doing, you see symptoms of it in places like Baltimore now where they're rioting.

In Stapleton about two months ago, one of my neighbors, because this was really close to where I live, was walking home from the rec center and somebody robbed him at gunpoint. You can't put a wall around Stapleton and protect it from what you're not doing for the kids when they're young. That's going to come back to get you when they have no opportunity. The achievement gap is really a reflection of the opportunity gap. When I moved back to Denver, Montbello didn't have a grocery store. The one grocery store is Albertson's, which is right on Chambers, it closed. If you live in Montbello in that little six miles or whatever it is between Chambers and Havana and 56 and I70, to get groceries you'd have to go to a 7/11 or a liquor store or if you didn't have good transportation, that's where you get it.

What kind of food are you getting from those places? Is it nutritious? Is it something that's going to help you be able to learn math? Probably not. Whereas, if you look at the opportunities in neighborhoods like Stapleton, and the kind of food that my boys eat, it really is more of an opportunity gap than it is an achievement gap. Achievement gap is the result of what happens when you don't provide opportunity from the beginning. That's the point I'm trying to make.

Julie Speer: What would you say to the folks who say, "Well, it's the parent's job."

Nate Easley: It is absolutely the parent's job to raise their kids and it's also the system's job to make sure that we do what we can within our control to give the kids every opportunity to learn. Yes, it's an and situation, not an or situation.
Julie Speer: Now what about your kids in terms of their high school? Are you going to keep them in the district and what would you say about folks who are in your position and have the means to send their students to private schools? A lot of them do opt out.

Nate Easley: I'm a public school product. I believe in public school. I can't imagine my kids going to private school. That said, when my oldest son, who is 30 now, moved back in with his mother when I lived in Montgomery County when he was 17, his choice of high school was Aurora Central. At the time there was lots of gangs there. I felt like my kid coming from Montgomery County going to Aurora Central would have been more than just lunch money. It would have been like throwing a kitten in the backyard with a bunch of pit bulls. Good luck.

I paid for him to go to a private school. He went to Aurora Christian Academy before it closed. I paid for him to go to that school when I lived in D.C. Now that I live in Denver, back at home, I can't imagine my kids going anywhere but a public school. Given that I pay tax dollars for it now, I have every right to have access to a high quality school and will make sure that my sons have that opportunity. If you think I'm tough, meet my wife. She's three times.

Julie Speer: Private schools. The balance is that choice is good if you want to choose out and be in private schools, but talk about parents who choice out of a district and what that does to the district.

Nate Easley: First let me say I think every parent should have a choice. Every parent, whether you're insanely wealthy, middle class, poor, you should have a choice where you send your kid to school and I feel very strongly about that. In order to have a choice, you have to have the information so it has to be an informed choice. I'll start with that. For parents who send their kids to private school, I personally don't have a problem with that because they're trying to do what's best for their kids and I think it's every parent's responsibility to do what's best for their kids.

I think the challenge is on the district's part to try to let parents know why a public option is a good option. I can talk about that. I can talk about the fact that as a public school product, I got a chance to go through a very diverse school system. As I said earlier to you, the first girl I ever liked was white. The second one was Latina. The third one was Asian. It wasn't until third grade that I discovered that there was
differences between me and them. That was a good experience, even after I went through this whole situation where I was singled out for being black. I still had an integrated experience and that's very, very important to me.

You get that in a public system and I don't know if you're likely to get that at private schools. Not just ethnic diversity or racial diversity, but socioeconomic diversity. It's important for kids who grow up wealthy to know what it's like to meet a poor person and talk to them. It's important for poor kids to know what it's like to meet a rich person and talk to them and see that they're human beings. Otherwise you end up with a situation where we had a president in our lifetime, I believe it was Reagan who said, "I never met a poor person when I was a kid." Wow, that's kind of unfortunate really because there's a richness about people no matter what culture they come from. You get that in public schools and you don't get that in private schools.

I think it's up to the district to do a very much better job of advertising not just for the kids who have the opportunity to go to private school why a public school is a better option.

Julie Speer: Is DPS segregated and is that a problem?

Nate Easley: DPS is very segregated. That's not just me using a controversial term. Let's go to North and look. Let's walk you around the hallways or go to Lincoln and walk you around the hallways whereas 90% low income and 90% Latino and the Latino kids are not necessarily diverse Latino groups. It's mostly Mexican immigrants and the children of Mexican immigrants. It's unfortunate, Denver has a long history of being a segregated city and it plays out in our school district. It's most stark if you go to a school like West and you walk the hallways and you see mostly low income Mexican immigrants and then you go not far to one of our big buildings downtown and you get off on every floor and you see who works there.

You're not seeing 80, 90% Mexican immigrants. You see that if we're going to sustain ourselves into the future, what we're doing is not sustainable. Just continuing to bring our smart people from out of state and bring them here, it won't be enough. I'm not against that because my wife is from California so I think, I love California girls. No problem. At least there's one in particular I'm very much in love with. It's an and situation, and we have to do a much better job of educating our kids who
go to Lincoln and go to North. To blame North, to blame Lincoln for the problem is short-sided. You got to back to where those kids started.

Where they started in the American system. If they immigrated here. What kind of education they got from day one. That's why I love to say that the achievement gap is a reflection of the opportunity gap. You can't just go to the interviews and just get focused on that and then blame those people. Larry Irving at Lincoln is a really high school principal and I think he wakes up every morning and he says, "How am I going to make this a better high school?" I think that's true for Nicole Veltze at North. I think it's true for the three principals at West. They're not thinking, How can we destroy these kids?" That's not what they wake up thinking.

I don't think there's a parent that says, "How can I make sure that my kid has less opportunity than I had when I was their age?" Given that, and then you look at the results, there's something very wrong in the interaction of the student in the system. I would argue that part of that is expectations from day one. Just like the woman who thought I was a janitor after I finished my dissertation. Because of my appearance, people make assumptions about who I am and what I can and can't do. Someone who I really, really admire said to me, "It's always good to be underestimated." He said, "Don't look at that as a deficit. Look at it as a talent."

I actually use it to my advantage now. People underestimate me to their apparel. When I ran for school board, I was completely underestimated. Which was great because all I needed was 4,500 votes to become school board president. In some ways, you can use that to your advantage. On the other hand, when everyone expects that you're not going to be able to do very much, pretty soon you start to internalize that. You see that happening with too many kids. I had a friend who went to West High School and came back and said, "Man, Nate, I talked to some of those students there and I can't believe their stories. I can't see how those kids can even make it every morning."

I thought, "Yeah, well if you just walked in their shoes for a little while and you see what they're able to overcome, you can either get depressed or you can get encouraged that these kids are so strong that people joke and say you have a PhD in life and many of these kids do by the time they're in middle school. How do we take advantage of that, how do we build on those talents and not amplify their deficits? We're really good as
a school district and as a country at amplifying what people's deficits are and not amplifying what their talents are. I would much rather send my kid to a school with bilingual kids than send them to a school with ELA kids.

If I said to you, Julie, do you want to send your kids to a school where 90% of the students are ELA or would you like to send your kids to a school where 90% of the kids are bilingual? It's completely different. I think most people are like, "Yeah, I want my kids going to the bilingual school." That's why there's a waiting list for our language schools in Denver. We just need to change the way we use our language. We need to change the way we think. We need to see diversity as something to market the district on and not something to hit the district on. That's why Isaac and Charlie, two little black Jewish boys, it's very important that they have a diverse experience. It's critical that they have a diverse experience.

That's why I'm a proponent of public schools because I know they're going to be diverse. They're open to the public.

Julie Speer: With the school board, what district were you representing?

Nate Easley: I represented Northeast Denver. I think they changed the lines a little bit, but I represented from Green Valley Ranch all the way to Broadway in Northeast Denver. All those neighborhoods from Green Valley Ranch - actually, High Point is the furthest one now out by the airport, all the way to five points. Then south to Colfax. It was the biggest district of the districts represented.

Julie Speer: What years were those?

Nate Easley: November 2009 to January 2013.

Julie Speer: It would be interesting to have your insight of what happened to Montbello, in terms of the gang violence and their closing. What happened to Montbello?

Nate Easley: When people say what happened to Montbello, I say it's what didn't happen in Montbello that I'd be more concerned about. What didn't happen in Montbello was it didn't have a consistent principal. I think Sam Beatty was probably there the longest from the late 80s to the early 90s. I
think he stayed for seven years and there was no other principal that stayed that long. Like I said, I went there for three years and I had three different principals. If you talk to the kids there now, they've had multiple principals. I talked to a teacher there when I was on the school board who was a math teacher who said she had been evaluated by seven different people in seven years.

Can you imagine that? Who wants to have seven bosses? Seven different evaluations in seven years. Who would want to work under those circumstances? There's a lot of teacher turnover, there's a lot of principal turnover. When I started on the school board, Montbello was the number one place where forced placement teachers attended. When we used to do the dance of the lemons, which I believe we don't do anymore, where people would say, "I don't like teacher A," but teacher A had a right to a job, so if there was a space open that person had first dibs on that space, Montbello had more of those teachers than any other school in the district. Because of that, if I don't want to be there and you're low income and you've already suffered from this opportunity gap, you can see how that's a bad combination.

Fortunately, one of the things I did when I was on the school board was vote to close my alma mater. That was probably one of the hardest things I've ever done. At the time I took that vote, there had been over 25 different principals in Montbello in the 30 years or so that it was open. That's not right. During the testimonials, one of the kids was saying, "Don't close my school because I went to a charter school and I had really poor grades and then I transferred to Montbello and I went up to a 4.0." I thought, "Well, kid you just made my point. What happens when you go to college and you take a test and you find out you're still in tenth grade math and tenth grade writing and tenth grade reading? That's when you find out why it's not good to get those high grades when you really haven't earned them."

There was an effort to recall me because of my vote but it was one of the most important things that I ever did for the city. I have absolutely no regrets. Is it a better situation now? I think we have the opportunity to get there now, but still struggles. It closed and then we opened multiple schools in the building.

Julie Speer: One percent turnaround, right?
Nate Easley: Right. There was a Denver Center for International Studies which I believe is still there. There was a collegiate prep academy that was opened in the school. The philosophy is if you had smaller programs with different principals, kids would get more attention, teachers would get more attention. Then it was Montbello phase out school and Larry Irving, who's principal of Lincoln now, was the principal of that phase out school. Actually, as I talked to the seniors in that last year before it phased out, they were so close knit that it actually turned out, I believe, to be a better situation for them. They actually cared about what the principal thought and Larry stayed there the whole time. He was the principal for three years which for a lot of those kids that never had the same principal for three years, same thing with those teachers.

I had a kid tell me at Montbello, she was in the reengagement school, Push Academy, that when she went to the Push Academy which was one of the programs in the building after the reform, it was the first time that she hadn't been yelled at in her entire kindergarten and high school experience. She said, "What I like about this school is they don't yell at me," and that broke my heart. I was thinking, "Geez, that is a really low bar. They don't yell at you? There's a whole bunch of other stuff that has to come in addition to not being yelled at." I think the programs that we put in the building have more potential. Collegiate prep eventually ended up moving. Nowell Arts Academy moved in. There's a Kipp Middle School there at Montbello now.

I think the district still struggles with how do you get the grown ups to get along when you have multiple programs in the same building? I think it's a challenge for Tom and the school board is to figure that out. If the grown ups don't get along, the principals and the teachers, then the kids are going to mimic that behavior. You're going to have the jets and sharks all over again. That said, I think the idea of having choice in smaller schools is playing out because Montbello is full again. It's full of kids. In fact, I think they're in a situation where they can't take every kid who wants to go to school in that building. Which is where you want to be.

Julie Speer: Can you tell me what happened with Montbello in the 90s?

Nate Easley: In the 90s, I lived in San Diego and D.C. so I was really away from Montbello. Really far away. When I was in D.C. I did do a little work at Montbello with Hansel Gunn. I don't know if you remember Mr. Gunn. He
was the principal when the kid got killed at Montbello. I guess that wasn't the 90s, that was the 2000s.

Julie Speer: What happened with that?

Nate Easley: From what I understand, there was a really decent kid who got pretty decent grades who was being picked on by a gang member. The kid acted out, brought a knife to school and stabbed the gang member and killed him in the lunch room. As a double tragedy, the gang member lost his life and the good kid who had pretty decent grades and probably a decent future is probably still in prison for murder. Mr. Gunn left shortly after that and then the principal turnover machine just kept going.

From my perspective, I think Sam Beatty was the only one that was in the 90s that stayed for more than a few years. Then it was just a turnover at the top which led to dysfunction throughout the school. I think they were waiting on superman every year. When I got here, when I started in 2008 they had just hired a new principal at Montbello and he was going to change the world and he was going to stay and a year later he was gone. It's just a comedy of different principals running through.

Julie Speer: Is it that the gangs were in charge of the school?

Nate Easley: I wouldn't say the gangs were in charge. Gangs are in charge of the crimes in the neighborhood. That's what they're in charge of. The district is in charge of the school. In terms of consistency and again, I wasn't here in the 90s so I'm talking about from being in San Diego and D.C., there was little consistency.

Julie Speer: You talked a lot about great solutions and what the problem is. Is there any final thoughts or words of wisdom?

Nate Easley: Okay. Americans come from a culture where we send people to the moon, which is pretty amazing. I was just watching 60 Minutes on Sunday and we're sending satellites 18,000 miles up in space, which is pretty amazing for our lifetime. They're built right here in Colorado, in fact. That's pretty amazing. When we put our minds to it, when you think about my grandfather in law died at 104, and I asked him before he passed away, "What was the biggest invention in your lifetime?" I thought he was going to say the airplane or the automobile or something
like that and he said electricity. It's pretty amazing. I still am amazed that electricity is everywhere.

We can if we put our minds to it create a school system that teaches kids who come from poor backgrounds how to read write and do arithmetic. It's just that it's not going to be an instant result. It's going to take the same kind of effort that it took sending the first men to the moon. We blew up a lot of rockets and people lost their lives and it took a lot of trial and error before we got there but we kept thinking about it and finally figured it out. Just as we put people on the moon, we can teach poor kids how to read, write, and do arithmetic.

I have optimism and faith that if we start with this microwave solution, and this instant overnight thing, let's just do preschool programs. Yeah, that's it. Let's go with that. Let's do charters. Wow, great idea. Let's just do that. Well, no. We need to do more neighborhood. High quality neighborhood schools. Yeah, great idea, let's do that. We actually need it all. I would love for their to be a dialogue and maybe stimulated by this documentary about how do we really build the pipeline because I think the components are there. It's just a matter of somebody with a vision to bring all that together and really talk about a pipeline that moves kids from poverty to prosperity and not poverty to prison.
Julie Speer: What years were you at state senate?

Patricia Pascoe: I was in the state senate for 12 years, between 1988 and 2003. That doesn’t add up because I was out of office for two years.

Julie Speer: Let’s go back in time. Talk to me about what years you moved to Denver and what neighborhood you lived in and recall the social climate and any segregation that you were noticing.

Patricia Pascoe: Well, I moved to the Denver area when I was a junior in high school which would’ve been 1951. I didn’t live in Denver. I lived in Aurora. My mother came here with the Air Force Finance Center. It was a very white suburb like most of the suburbs in that era. My husband, on the other hand, grew up in Denver from third grade on. He went to Parkhill Smiley in the East. He was almost a Denver native. Most people thought he was a native. That time that area was also all white. No Hispanics or Blacks, I don’t believe.

Julie Speer: Talk about the 60’s, once you got married, what neighborhood were you living in?
Patricia Pascoe: We started out on Garfield Street, which was not too far from where we lived in the house for 45 years. The house we lived in the longest was on Lafayette Street in South Capitol Hill. We really wanted to live in Parkhill, but we couldn’t afford the houses that were big enough. We had two children. We were having a third, so we needed room for to put them all. I think we overdid it. We got a very large house with three floors. It lasted for 45 years because it was so flexible. It was at Denver Square. It was a mixed neighborhood in that there were not just families with children but there were singles and some immigrants and a really interesting complex of people who live in Capitol Hill. Capitol Hill still has that kind of character, which is kind of fun.

Julie Speer: Talk about the 60’s and the times leading us to the beginning of the Keyes case and that whole situation.

Patricia Pascoe: There was a lot of violence as you might recall in the 60’s. You don’t recall personally because you weren’t there, but in the 60’s, there were so many assassinations. What started off actually with first the Cuban missile crisis when we thought we were all going to be blown up. We were glued to the television set thinking any moment, the nuclear bomb is going to start falling. But President Kennedy managed to slip out of that. He made an agreement that wasn’t unknown for 25 years. He agreed with Khrushchev to remove missiles in Turkey and that’s how he got Khrushchev to back down and move out of Cuba, but there was also an assassination of the president, assassination of Martin Luther King, the assassination of Robert Kennedy, the tumultuous Democratic convention of 68. My husband was a delegate, in fact, he was the coordinator for the Humphrey campaign. He was there, so was Ed Benton, as a matter of fact. It was shocking to Americans to see young people attacked by police apparently. It looked like the police were aggressors, and often when they camped out in Grant Park, in fact, my husband Monte was wearing, was wearing a Humphrey badge. When he came out of the convention, Ed Benton told him to take that off he probably wouldn’t survive because the young people were antiwar and were supporting something they called the Kennedy-McCarthy coalition or the McCarthy-Kennedy coalition even though Kennedy was dead.

By the time of the convention, the two forces got together. They didn’t have enough votes to nominate but they can make a lot of noise
definitely. Then of course there was rioting in the streets. The riot at Kent State, where four students were killed. It was a very violent time.

Julie Speer: Did that translate into Denver as well? Were there events here?

Patricia Pascoe: There wasn’t as much violence here but there were demonstrations. It was the fear of the same kind of violence but actually I don’t think it ever got to that level. But in part, it was an inspiration for doing something about desegregating the Denver public schools.

Julie Speer: Talk about the reality of Denver public schools at that time before busing.

Patricia Pascoe: Well, there were two citizen studies at the Denver public schools. One in 64 known as the Voorhees report because Jim Voorhees was chairman, then the second one I believe was 66 known as the Berg report because William Berg was the chair of that committee. The Voorhees committee report especially made it very clear that we do not even meet the separate and equal ruling of Plessy versus Ferguson which the Supreme Court passed in 1896, so we weren’t even giving separate but equal education.

Many of the minority schools, the black schools, and the Hispanic schools had no gymnasiums, no cafeterias, no libraries. If they had libraries, they had three books per student instead of 13 books per student. It was unfair in every way. Black teachers, if they hired any, were all funneled into black schools. Cole had 11 black teachers when many schools had none. Cole was a middle school or junior high in those days.

It was very clear that education was unequal. At that time though, they hadn’t grouped the schools the way they did in the court case. In the court case, they grouped 20 of the worst schools and that they’re the most minority schools and 20 of the best schools in that they were all upper-class white. Then compared it to, and that comparison was so stark, including incomes, achievement, facilities. I mean, you could compare them on every basis and see just stark contrasts between the two. Of course, when the busing argument came along or the integration argument, many parents said, “Oh well, just make their schools better,” but it was clear in the 1954 decision Brown versus the Board of Education that segregated schools, whereby therein ipso facto by their nature unequal and unfair, so just making them equal wouldn’t have solved the problem. Of course, we never did that anyway.
Julie Speer: Talk about some of the key players and how the community and folks came together to make change in Denver.

Patricia Pascoe: Martin Luther King was certainly one. He came in 1964, I believe, to speak in Denver. He spoke at our church, the Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church, which was just jammed. There were so many people there that some of them were outside while it was snowing on them and you saw them outside as he came to the church. He stopped and spoke to them first, the people outside. He was a very impressive person. Then of course his assassination in 68 was a spur for Rachel Noel to pass a resolution to integrate the entire school district. The resolution called for a plan by the following September to integrate the entire school system. Of course, that didn’t quite happen. It wasn’t Gilbert’s plan, but it was quite inadequate according to people who really want an integrated school. It was supposed to be adopted by December of 68. The whole plan wasn’t adopted but some features of it were before the election of 69 when Ed Benton and my husband, Monte Pascoe, ran for the school board.

Julie Speer: Talk about the relationship between Rachel, your husband and Ed.

Patricia Pascoe: Ed Benton and Rachel were very good friends. She always called him Mr. Benton. I’m sure he called her Mrs. Noel too. They were very close, but Ed understood that she needed to sponsor that resolution. She wanted him to cosponsor the Noel resolution but he wouldn’t do that although he helped write it. My husband and Ed Benton walked to work every morning together. They met in Cheesman Park. My husband would walk one block north, and Ed could see from his house by looking across the park if Monte was there, and they met at 8 o’clock and walked downtown, which is a good little walk.

My husband had this theory that you never stop when you’re walking. Red light, never mind, just walk right across the street, and he read the paper at the same time if he wasn’t with Ed. It’s a wonder he didn’t get hit by a car at some point. They were very close. I think that’s why Monte ran because he had asked him to run with him. Actually, a group of people asked him to run. The election was May of 69, but they started in January. The campaign, which was a real campaign in the sense that they raised quite a lot of money. They had printed literature. They went as a team. There ran as a team. They had a schedule every day. Ginny Rockwell brought it over and dropped it at our house at 7 am and they
had probably 8 engagements that day everyday until the election. It was a real election. Usually, school board elections were kind of sleepy, and nobody paid much attention. Nobody much voted. A lot of people voted on this one.

Julie Speer: Talk about their platform.

Patricia Pascoe: The platform was basically you have to break a mold to do the right thing. They had radio ads. The ad said, “Ginny is wondering what kind of people live in Denver,” or they talk about our children not by name, but maybe they did use names. What benefits they could see in an integrated education.

Integration meant that you would get to know people of all backgrounds, ethnic and racial backgrounds, which really equips you for the world in a much better way. My own children, I think, were much better equipped because we open enrolled them in a black school the following fall. My son Ted was in the Peace Corps, and my daughter’s a teacher. I think they learned a lot about other people and how to get along. They went to Moore, Moore and East which are inner-city schools. The premise is that you’re better off, the white students and the black students are better off knowing people of other races and understanding them because in life, you are not going to be isolated hopefully in a white enclave, if you’re white or in a black enclave.

Julie Speer: Talk about the results of the election.

Patricia Pascoe: They lost pretty dramatically, 2 to 1. We had a lot of East High kids working on that campaign. They were so, so depressed and so unhappy. They were wearing black armbands, which is very moving. It was the end of the world as far as they were concerned, but it was just the beginning really of a lawsuit. The following month, many of the same people filed a lawsuit, so it only took one month to start on a different path. It was a definite loss. There was no doubt about it. There was an argument as to whether you do the will of the people or you follow the Constitution. The Constitution, the 14th amendment guarantees equal protection, so the black students who were entitled to an equal opportunity and equal protection, but the public definitely did not want to integrate the schools if it involved busing. The closest they would get is saying I am in favor of integration, but I’m not in favor of busing. You just couldn’t have it that way. It wouldn’t work in Denver.
Julie Speer: Were there tensions in the community? Because I know there were buses being bombed and torched and there was violence afterwards, but leading up to, were there any events in the community that you remember?

Patricia Pascoe: Oh yeah, there were bomb scares and that kind of thing. We actually moved our children’s bed, one of the beds from the front of the house into the back wall of the room because the bombs were typically porch bombs. We had a plan for if the doorbell rang, I was supposed to gather up three children including a baby. We just had a baby. Monte was going to go to the door and meet whoever it was. I was to take the children to the rear of the house. Fortunately, we never had to implement that.

In some parts of town, we used to laugh about sending bodyguards with the candidates. They were very hostile meetings in some parts of town. The community was divided, I would say. The medical doctors were divided. There was an ad of all these medical doctors supporting Benton-Pascoe then there was another ad of all these other doctors opposed to Benton-Pascoe, and supporting the opponents. They went into every area of life, not just what you’d usually think of school politics. The doctors have told me that the referral patterns for the next 20 years were set by those ads. You only refer patients to doctors on this list.

Julie Speer: Tell me about the court case.

Patricia Pascoe: After Monte and Ed lost, [inaudible] of course were elected in the very first school board meeting in June, they reversed the order of the school board plans for just a very small amount of integration in Northeast Denver for Smiley and East. It was really a pretty minor part of town, I mean as far as the whole district goes. They reversed that order or that plan for desegregation.

In doing so, they committed the jury segregation. It was segregation by direction of a government agency namely the school board. That meant a good case for plaintiffs that was both the jury and de facto segregation. They immediately filed the lawsuit right after that reversal. I remember the meeting where we had large meetings all the time with all the supporters, many of them at Martha Radetsky’s house. I remember George Bardwell who was the mathematical genius behind all the statistics, Professor at DU, he said, you’ll probably have to cut this out, “Dammit, it’s the law and we'll sue them. We'll go to court.” Yeah I guess
it is a suit. They went to court. I’m not a lawyer. So they took it to court and immediately, Judge Doyle, I think, was won over by statistics and the material that they presented. They wanted an injunction to stop the Denver public schools from reversing that little bit of integration at Smiley and East. They want an injunction to prevent that.

George Bardwell, his friend, Paul Clyde, who was a surgeon but very good at making graphs and charts, presented pages and pages, I’d say hundreds and hundreds of charts and statistics that show the difference between the 20 black schools and the 20 anglo schools so that I think the judge was won over right then and there. He ordered an injunction to stop the school district from ending that little bit of integration.

That of course was appealed at the court of appeals and they reversed it and lifted the injunction. That was appealed to the Supreme Court. By this time, it was August, the Friday before Labor Day and school started on Tuesday. The students in Denver didn’t know in this neighborhood, they had no idea where they were going to school on the following Tuesday but they found after searching for several judges, they had Judge Brandon to uphold the injunction and overrule the Court of Appeals. So on Tuesday, they started school, in 69, with that court ordered integration but it was just a small part of Denver. Then of course they had to try the suit on the merits. That took four more years. But I really believe the judge was won over in that the very first trial. The school district complained that the plaintiffs had put on their whole case just to get this injunction, but that was really smart tactic.

**Julie Speer:** Talk about the media and the attention this was getting. Did it get national attention?

**Patricia Pascoe:** Yes, there were articles in the New York Times. Calvin Trilling of the New Yorker came and spent a week here, followed us around and Ed Benton around to campaign events. He’s a character, you may know, delightful person. They did get national attention. This case was the first northern case, and in that sense, it was a real groundbreaker because it was the first time a district in the north was ordered to desegregate, up until that time, it had all been the southern cases. So it showed that even in the north, you did have segregation and it was illegal and it had to be changed.
Julie Speer: Talk about some of the community unrest after the injunction and the kids started school.

Patricia Pascoe: We were determined in Denver not to have what happened in Boston which was violence in reaction to court order. I know that when final order came down, that was in 74, 73, and the whole district disintegrated, Kay Schomp and others organized volunteer parents to ride the buses. We went out to Pontiac in about 30 seconds. That was my assignment. I rode a bus with junior high kids. It was jammed. They had not allowed enough bus base for these kids, we were just pressed against the door. The kids from that neighborhood were going to Hamilton, which is far south. We rode the bus till we got to Hamilton.

There were people there to meet them and greet them. Then there were volunteers who drove me back to my car in 32nd and Pontiac. It was all worked out so there would be a parent volunteer on every bus at least once and then they would report, this bus is too crowded, this bus is half empty whenever. There was a lot of distrust to the school board, the school administration because of course it was controlled by the school board. There was an attitude they didn’t want to work and really were hoping that everything would go wrong. The citizen volunteers were trying to make sure that things ran smoothly. We did that the first week.

Julie Speer: When did the bombs happen on the buses?

Patricia Pascoe: During the trial which was in July, it must have been 69 or 70. I think it was 70, it must have been 70. But during the trial, someone set bombs or dynamite between buses on the parking lot, the school parking lot. Forty of them were destroyed. It’s just an indication of the unhappiness of someone in the public. There were a lot of bomb threats at schools as well. Somebody’s counted them, the number of them. That went on for years actually and a lot of security at the administration building and security in the schools. We hadn’t had much before.

Julie Speer: Were any kids ever hurt?

Patricia Pascoe: There were no children hurt, but one of the bombs was at the Keyes home. Keyes was the plaintiff. His daughter was sitting in the dining room doing her homework. They put a bomb on their porch even though this child was sitting right there, but she wasn’t hurt fortunately. I don’t understand how people would want to do that. This was also the time
when the four little girls in Birmingham were killed. There were
demonstrations, there was a demonstration at West High. The Hispanics
were not initially involved and committed to the whole program. They
came in later and filed a friend of the court, their particular interest was
bilingual education. Their part of the lawsuit went on even after the end
of the lawsuit in 95. I guess, the judge wasn’t happy with what had
happened so far in the field of bilingual education.

Julie Speer: How old were your kids at this time and where they going to school?

Patricia Pascoe: Yes. My kids who were in first and third grade, no, kindergarten and
second grade when Monte ran in 69, I believe. Then, for third and first,
they went to Helen, which is a black school. They open enrolled because
the district had a program by then of open enrollment. By then, they
required that you improve the integration both of the sending school and
the receiving school. They left a white school and went to a black school
which improved the integration.

Of course about 275 other kids went there because they were all the
supporters of Benton-Pascoe who were unhappy they lost the election.
They decided they would just open enroll their children. It was quite a
PTA, like all these activists. It was a great experience, I think, for us as
well as the children. We also had before that, we had helped our school
to accept the students from Smith which was one of the very
overcrowded black schools. I think they had 11 temporary trailers on the
site. Rather than send them to another school nearby, a white school,
they just crammed them all into Smith. Some of them open enrolled to
Moore, our school. We were a host family for a family. They were a really
nice family.

Julie Speer: Explain how that worked. How were you a host family?

Patricia Pascoe: We would be available, I was a housewife at that point. I would be
available if a child got sick. They could call me or had to go someplace
after school maybe. Very seldom was it actually used but it gave a sense
of security. A number of us PTA ladies went to Smith and we sort of
picked out each other. We’ve picked out our counterpart and that family
had two children or three there, two more I think. That was a nice
experience too.
Julie Speer: What was your own personal experience like meeting African-American ladies? Had you had any up to that point?

Patricia Pascoe: No. I had never been in a living room with a black person until this campaign which was a joint black and white effort. It was never just the blacks who wanted justice for their children. It was a really cooperative effort. A lot of it came out of Parkhill because Parkhill was trying to be an integrated community. They were working hard at it. They had frequent social gatherings, potlucks, I think, they called it. But I grew up in a very white place until I lived in St. Louis for several years. I went to a high school where one of the teachers started Metropolitan wide black and white teenage organization, where we met once a month. We’d go to the art museum, or we’d visit each other schools. That was a great experience. It was sponsored by the National Council of Christians and Jews. I think they still exist. That was very worthwhile in St. Louis where you really did have pretty strict segregation. They didn’t say it was segregated. But there was black schools and white schools and black swimming pools and white swimming pools and so on.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about Rachel Noel, what kind of a gal was she?

Patricia Pascoe: Oh Rachel was the most lovely woman. Their son Buddy Noel grew up in the schools, and he was integrated early because of a peculiar voluntary [inaudible] they had. Then his sister was moved back to a black school and found out that everything she had had in the previous grade was what they were now doing in the next grade in the black school. That’s what disturbed Rachel the most, I think. But Rachel was a real lady. Her family was an old Southern family, her father or grandfather maybe. I had a school named after him in Hampton Virginia. She was just the most kind and gentle person. She never said, “You have to do this, you have to do that.” She was not a militant black woman. She would just say this isn’t right. This isn’t right, a really great lady.

Julie Speer: What was your husband’s career? What was he, other than when he was running for school board?

Patricia Pascoe: He was a lawyer. He went to Dartmouth undergrad and Stanford Law School. We were married while he was at Stanford. I feel like I went to law school as well. I typed all these papers on this really rinky-dinky old typewriter. As an English teacher, I would say that sometimes you can make this sentence a lot better. Why don’t you just say this? He’d say will
because it isn’t true. The law is so involved that you had to say it this awkward, awful way. He did a lot of resource, water law. He was on the Denver water board for 12 years and on school of mines board for 12 years. He was director of natural resources under Dick Lamm. He also was Democratic Party chair in the state for four years. He had a lot of volunteer experience.

Julie Speer: We are also talking about East High School and Manual. Did you follow any of the aftereffects of busing with Manual?

Patricia Pascoe: No. I was thinking about that today. I would only have anecdotal stories. I do know that Colleges really like to get students from Manual and East because it gave some breadth to their student body. Here’s a student in what they call inner-city school with experience with minorities or minorities with experience with white people, in both schools it was an advantage. In fact, a lot of children would go to Grayland and then go to East High afterwards because it would help get into college, give them a broader education.

Julie Speer: Did you follow what happened when the Keyes case was repealed or undone in the mid-90s?

Patricia Pascoe: Well, it was over in the sense that there were not enough white students left to have integration. There was not much point. Also the Supreme Court released a lot of school districts from their orders. I know it re-segregated. I have a grandson in the Denver public schools. I know that it’s re-segregated. Partly the charter school movement has helped a little bit in that it gives opportunity to a lot of kids, especially when they’re randomly selected. At first, I think, the charter school was just creaming in the best students off the top, don’t worry about the rest of them. But I think now, there’s so many opportunities that maybe it has actually helped.

Julie Speer: Where does your grandson go to school now?

Patricia Pascoe: He’s at Hamilton and he’ll go to Thomas Jefferson.

Julie Speer: You brought up an interesting point that one of the aftereffects of busing or the ramifications is that there was quite a lot of white flight out of the district and movement to the suburbs.
Patricia Pascoe: Well, I mean white flight had been going on since 1900. It accelerated some white flight. A lot of people live in Denver and send their kids to private school so that they haven’t really gone away. They’ve left the school, but not the neighborhood. I don’t think you can blame all of that on desegregation. I know the Catholic archdiocese was very opposed to people coming even to their schools as a flight mechanism from the public schools because they supported integration nevertheless, it’s still happened I’m sure. But it’s important to look at the whole trend of white flight, not just what happened between the court order and the end of the court order.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about your children’s experience at East and East’s integration in academics and what years they graduated.

Patricia Pascoe: I think they all had really great experiences. I hadn’t [inaudible] my third child because he was a baby when the election took place but he also went to East. They got into great colleges. They went to Dartmouth, Colorado College and Stanford. They all did graduate school. I think it was an excellent education. Ted did have a bad experience. One day he walked out of East High and a tall, black boy, man socked him in the face. He said, “Why did you do that?” The guy socked him again. It was a person he didn’t even know. Then he realized he was going to have to start fighting back or he was going to get beaten up so he started hitting back. Apparently, what happened is they were showing Roots, the series Roots. Apparently when they show Roots, there’s a lot of black violence. People tried to get even.

He’s my child, he went in the Peace Corps and spent three years in the village in Senegal. That was the only incident. I guess, Sarah had one. Sarah did have someone in a bus stop knock her down or something. That was before she was changed to her neighborhood school under the court order. She was going to a white school which was farther away by bus.

Julie Speer: Why do you think integration and diversity is so important in education? Is it an American value?

Patricia Pascoe: Well, it’s a reflection of the world. Integration is important. I think people misunderstand the purpose of the court ordered integration. They think it’s so that everyone will be friends which would be very nice. It would be very nice if people could be friends on a deeper basis, but the point of the court order was to provide equal opportunity. It’s a very different thing,
not for everybody to hold hands and go to parties. That comes first. Then, after that, maybe friendship. I know Ted had a black friend that he really enjoyed a lot. They were making a stop action film in our basement, on our ping-pong table, which they thought to be covered with sand. They brought in all the sand from the sandbox and then hand these plastic airplanes then they hold the end of the plane and film only the front of the plane, go like this. I always wondered why it smelled when I’d come home. They’d set fire to the tanks on the table, burned them up. This black young man is now a photographer for one of the channels in Denver.

Julie Speer: That’s really interesting that you bring that up, equal opportunity. Because what’s happening now is we have a very large achievement gap which is that folks who are affluent achieve really well. They have resources and support. Those who aren’t affluent, aren’t achieving very well and unfortunately, the poverty-stricken kids are kids of color. Talk to me about the gap.

Patricia Pascoe: The achievement gap, one thing I wonder about when you talk about the achievement gap is when do we just start [inaudible] gap. Aren’t we happy if the people on the top keep on achieving? So the more they achieve, the wider the gap gets. This is a good thing, right? I mean for the people at the top, it’s a good thing. One way you can get rid of the achievement gap is to get rid of poverty. We haven’t done much about poverty. Actually, during that time in the 60’s when we had the war and poverty, the achievement gap did diminish somewhat. People at the bottom started coming up a little bit. But we haven’t tried, we aren’t doing anything that’s going to help the poverty situation. Our tax system is beneficial to the rich, not to the poor. We have in Colorado at least we have earned income tax credit but they’re so small. It’s not very significant.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about the state’s role in legislating education policies and how the state impacts local school districts.

Patricia Pascoe: The state has the control of the purse, the money. It even tells local districts what they can’t spend on their local money, so the state has a lot of control over what’s being spent. The only distinction that’s made in the state is a small percentage increase for people in poverty, people on school lunch. They measure poverty by how many are on free or reduced lunch. They would make a little noise. They come in as 1, they might
come in is 1.23. I don’t even know what that fraction is but there’s a little more money for kids who are in poverty.

We’ve underfunded education for years. My great campaign has always been to increase preschool. Preschool is really the answer to making all these people achievers. But we don’t even offer free preschool to everybody. There’s something called the Colorado preschool project which they kept increasing the numbers every year. Then, they cut them back, bad year, they cut back the number but we need to really provide free preschool to everyone. There’s research indicate we need to start earlier with infants. We at least get to preschool, but they were only talking about four-year-olds, we should be doing three-year-olds and may be younger than that. I think that’s the answer. The state should take that lead, it should fund those things. There are a few more slots I think for all the kindergarten now, but for our working mother who’s poor, you can’t provide just a half day of preschool, she’s got to do something with the child the other half of the day, if they’re working.

Julie Speer: The only other thing in terms of state funding is inter-district integration. Is that something that’s ever been discussed when you were involved?

Patricia Pascoe: It was proposed even by Gilbert, when they put out the Gilbert’s plan, the superintendent, in 1968, he thought there should be some kind of metropolitan solution, and of course, that aroused the suburbs. They didn’t want any part of Denver’s problems so they passed Poundstone Amendment which says you cannot annex any part of the suburbs without a vote of an entire county so if you want to annex little piece of Arapahoe County, you’d have get a vote of all of Arapahoe County seeding that piece to Denver. That’s never going to happen. That froze Denver within its present boundaries. I don’t know if the metropolitan area would ever want to be part of our integration. I mean those people that you talked about in white flight, that’s where they went. They went to the suburbs, a lot of them. They don’t want to have an integrated school.

Julie Speer: Is the Poundstone Amendment part of the Constitution now?

Patricia Pascoe: Yes, it’s a constitutional amendment. Freda Poundstone was the sponsor. An active Republican in Arapahoe County, a lobbyist, leader and a lobbyist for the gambling interest.
Julie Speer: Here we are in 2015, we have a very segregated school system largely because our cities are segregated and we have this terrible achievement gap. We’re exploring why we’re here again and what can be done about it. Do you have any final thoughts on that situation?

Patricia Pascoe: A very good program is summer scholars. Cindy Collins started it long, long ago. I think it’s really got the right ideas. It gives a little assistance, extra help to people who need it, children who need it. It continues over the summer although it goes all year round. In fact, they’re changing their name, they’re having a breakfast the end of this month, and they’re announcing a new name. That’s sort of project I think is very helpful. Cindy also got a school started downtown. We’re trying to be a real integrated school, I would think. Sometimes they make it hard to have an integrated school by setting requirements at such a high level that people with a weak background, can’t make it.

If they’re going to a black school and they’re achieving a year behind, then it’s hard for them to get into one of these STEM school, that’s science, technology, engineering. You have to take all [inaudible]. I saw on the news hour actually, a school where they’re taking everyone into AP courses, not just the advanced students but everyone and a lot of them are making it in the AP courses.
Julie Speer: Talk about the various ways that you personally have been involved in education?

Patrick Hamill: Through my career, and my life I've been involved in education in a number of different ways. One of the first entrees into education was we bought some land in an auction that was from the FDIC in Dallas. I got home, opened up a bottle of wine. Turned on 20/20, Diane Sawyer was doing a documentary on the 5 worst schools in America. One of them happened to be in one of our master plan communities. Needless to say that was an interesting introduction to education. That was in Green Valley Ranch.

Quickly, I said, "Houston. We have a problem." I was actually quite shocked. I called on a colleague and a friend named Marshal Caplan, and I said, "We need a plan to figure out what we need to do to change this around." When you think about community you think about parks and schools, and everything else. You want your amenities to be something that attracts people, not something that people run away from. It's very easy to blame teachers, or the institution, or the school district, or anything else. Ultimately as we worked through all of the series of issues we found out it was much deeper.

Julie Speer: Talk about the process, how you got involved and what you inherited. then talk me through the transition, the turnaround, and where it's at today.
Patrick Hamill: Well. It's quite interesting. Initially we went into the Middle School, and said we've got to figure this out, we've got to change this around. Initially my motives were quite selfish. I knew I was going to have a hard time selling to certain segments of the marketplace if we didn't create a better school product in our communities. Somewhere along the line I developed an amazing passion for this. Realized it was something I really wanted to do and I wanted to figure out, and our own little place, how we could change the world. If we can create a great model, could be something that others could replicate all across the country. Ultimately, it's a big time issue. We approached it in a fashion of providing gap funding and how do we make enhancements and doing various things. We made lots of mistakes, from schools within schools where we creamed all the smart kids from the school. All the teachers that we brought into the school within a school, they all felt special. It made the other teachers feel not so special.

It just became a broader and broader issue. Ultimately, the thing that I realize most importantly, that this was really the civil rights issue of our time. Because education doesn't really matter if you're white, black, poor, rich. It's something that's available. It's something that if we create the right opportunities, and we really create the right foundation which I want to talk about more, for children coming into our schools, they can succeed and do anything we want. It's important. It's not only important for families of Denver Colorado, but where does the next Steve Jobs come from? Where's the next Bill Gates? Where are the people that are going to be the entrepreneurs and the scholars and the teachers that really are going to shape our future as a community, and a country, and ultimately the world?

Julie Speer: From an outside perspective, everyone came together, or shepherded together, to create a coalition to turn the neighborhood around. Is that what happened?

Patrick Hamill: Well, it definitely takes a grassroots approach. Obviously, the 20/20 story in far Northeast Denver really was a groundswell of people that created many emotions. Anger on both sides of the issue. I mean, some people said it's really not that bad. At least for my own perspective, when I really investigated, actually I thought that it was actually worse. When you really got there. We lost control of the classroom. You really have asked the question, why did we lose control of the classroom? Everybody has a stake in it. Our teachers, our administrators, families. We have multi-
different caregivers and we really had to really figure out really what the real issue was. I think I'm on my ninth superintendent since this occurred. Some of our superintendents has referred to me as a terrorist. On my own right but as the executive director for my foundation, Amy Schwartz, says, we have to fight for these kids and we have to fight for these families.

It's just a real passion of mine, to make sure that our children have the best possible opportunities. I give Denver Public schools so much credit and, initially Senator Bennett who was our superintendent, and Michael sat in my office and we talked about this at great length. We talked about Denver school of science and technology. We talked about West Denver prep, now called strive. Ultimately, Michael came to the conclusion that if they can do it better, then we should let them do it, then Denver Public schools. Versus more of a protectionist approach that they have to do everything, meaning Denver Public schools. Because they're all public schools. I give Denver public school so much credit because they've gone out and found the best opportunities. At one time, where we, statistically and far Northeast, had over, I forget what the time period was, but over eleven thousand kids walked with their feet. Because we have open enrollment in the state of Colorado.

They can go anyplace they want. Parents made the sacrifice to take the kids where they could get the best possible education. Today, what's amazing is we have something like seven schools that are all on lottery today, in far Northeast. We've changed the whole dynamic. We're so proud. We just had the first graduating class of Denver school of science and technology on the Evie Dennis campus. If you haven't been there, you need to see it. It's amazing. It's got five buildings. Small academies. If you were to go to the Midwest, it's like a small midwestern college that you would see. It's really fantastic. One of the most important things I've ever done in my life. We actually have prenatal through eighteen on the same campus. Early childhood education all the way through, now we have two high schools, three high schools with a variety of choices for our families in far Northeast. We have the Denver school of international studies in the old Montebello high school.

Lots of great choices. Choices are important and choices are important for families that can be in their own neighborhood. Competition is important because competition makes us all better. That's the movement that's occurring in far Northeast Denver today.
Julie Speer: It's almost like the pendulum has swung, and now there's so much demand for families to get into the schools, a lot of them now are not getting in.

Patrick Hamill: It's terrible. I have friends and families and people that work in our company, we work in far Northeast area. My corporate office is far Northeast. We have families that want to go to the school. They have to go through the same process everybody else does. I remember an interesting comment that Wellington Webb, our mayor at the time, was a little bit of a naysayer to me. Not that he was against what we were trying to do but he did say, "Hey, I know you will have succeeded in what you're doing when I see the fat banker's kid start going to the schools in far Northeast." Well, Wellington. The fat banker's kids are going to the schools in far Northeast today. If they can get in but this is a nice problem to have. Success breeds success. Families are starting to worry about the high school their kids are going to go to in fifth grade. That's important.

Julie Speer: Let's turn to the Evie Dennis campus, because it is like a small college. It's a pretty unique model, right? Is the land and the facilities owned and managed by DPS? It seems like an interesting model that one might duplicate but were there outside contributions to create this campus?

Patrick Hamill: The Evie Dennis campus was a great community collaboration. Not only between our foundation but to the Piton foundation and Sam Geary, who was instrumental in this. Our foundation, the Daniels foundation, the Ann Shoots foundation to name a few. Many others were involved. The community was involved. Denver Public schools was involved. If it wasn't for Senator Bennett's leadership on this, it never would've happened. At the time, as you may recall, Denver Public schools had a very difficult school board that we had to maneuver through to get this approved ultimately. On this one campus, we have an early childhood center that is operated by Clayton. World-class. Called Z Place, is our great name of it. Within that, we have a whole partner suite with community partners that help provide what I call Services to families that help get them through the whole process. It's not just about school and education. It's really about does somebody need housing vouchers?

Does somebody need other services? We have the Lowery family center there. Just to name a few. We have the centralized school enrollment center where you get to go and look at all the choices that your children are going to have on that campus. Then we have Denver school of
science and technology. We have Soar. We have Strive. We have a vo-tech program where kids can learn about computers and services and health services right there on the campus. Cooking right there. They run the commissary for the sports team. World-class. The best athletic complex in the state, almost. I'm going to say it's the state. Very proud of it. Sure to services. We have gyms and baseball, softball fields all there, that everybody gets to share in, as well as a student union.

Four of the five schools on there are charter schools. We even have a young Americas bank. Bill Daniels has the first branch outside of Cherry Creek for young Americas bank, where kids get to learn about business and open accounts, get loans. I was there not too long ago and they were giving a young child a hamster loan.

Julie Speer: That's great. There is not a campus like this in the district, or even in the state, is there? This is very unique. Is this a new model?

Patrick Hamill: This is a unique campus. Very unique, not only for the state but the country. We have visitors that come in to view this place on an ongoing basis. The Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, has visited two or three times to look at it and hold town halls there. It most definitely is a model and it's something that were all very, very proud of.

Julie Speer: What is it that makes it work? Is it sharing facilities? Is it that they're new facilities? Why does it work?

Patrick Hamill: The campus works because there's a commitment to excellence. In everything that we do. I don't care if it's how the facilities are maintained. I don't care if it's the educational product. When you step foot on that campus, the best is what we expect. It's not only from an educational and services standpoint. It's the food. We have two cup from scratch kitchens on the facility. It's all about health, wellness, good mental state of mind, and it works.

Julie Speer: Do you have kids? Where did your kids go to school?

Patrick Hamill: My kids went to public school. They went to Highland Ranch in Douglas County.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about your decision to send them to public school versus private school.
Patrick Hamill: One of the fundamental investments that we need to make, as not only a state but in our communities, is early childhood education. The research that we know today, that we didn't know the public school system was being devised some hundred plus years ago, is that the most important time in a child's life is early in their life. When we have brain development and so forth. Today, what happens because of incomes, and this is where early childhood has hurt low income families more, is that we don't have the typical stay-at-home family like we did when we watched Leave It to Beaver. Right? There's no stay-at-home caregiver, for the most part. Or it's a secondary caregiver and it's not the TV that we often see children placed in front of. The statistics are quite alarming. We are now starting to test children for kindergarten readiness, today. It's really based on vocabulary words. We have children that are entering kindergarten with a four thousand word vocabulary and some children entering a fifty thousand word vocabulary.

The kids at the lower level will never make it. They just won't make it. They're so far behind, at that point, they won't be able to catch up. In Denver, which we've passed two measures for early childhood education, it's still not enough. My guess is, if we knew what we knew today we would've had more public funding early in the children's life than we do today. To make sure that we have children ready to enter when they are there. The reforms that we've made in the legislature, being able to hold children back in third grade, are really, really important. I'm sad to say that, we've tested kids at different stages and I will mention all the schools, but a prime example of children entering ninth grade where they've had first or second grade reading skills and first or second grade math skills. They're not to be the next Steve Jobs in our society. At that point, it's really too late. Although, I'm very proud of Daniels, and Ann Shoots, as well as ourselves that have helped with tutoring to help these children catch up. We really need to reach our children early in their life.

Julie Speer: As a parent, tell me about your own process with your own kids' education and the choices that you made.

Patrick Hamill: Well, they're all successful. And a lot of rocky bumps along the way. All went to college or some portion of college through their life. I think, ultimately, public schools are really the way of America. That's the choice that we made and it's where they wanted to go because it was with their friends and different sports teams that they wanted to attend. Ultimately, education is really a three-pronged approach. It's making sure
that they have the right education early in one's life. It's about parental or caregiver involvement. It's about personal accountability and commitment on a child's life and education. Too often, today, we don't know the importance of where and when education really needs to start, if you want to go to college. College isn’t right for everyone but, sometimes, kids decide they want to go and it's already too late. In terms of getting into a grade school or scholarships.

Julie Speer: Talk about segregation in the metro area and how you see that playing out in our schools. One, do you even think it's an issue?

Patrick Hamill: Segregation and integration, obviously, is important in America. It's important in Denver. Too often we find that some of our poorest performing schools tend to be in some of our poorest neighborhoods. Ultimately, we need to be able to, I'm not sure if we can fix the problem totally, but we have to give choice. Choice isn't just allowing children to move and go to whatever school that they want to, without providing transportation. Transportation is a big issue. Education isn't just with the children, it's also with the parents. I’ll give you a great example. I was in a community town hall meeting and we were broken up the tables. I was sitting with this woman. She was from Mexico. English was a second language and barely. Her child went to one of the poorest performing elementary schools in Denver Public schools, for example. She was so happy. She started to tell me a story. She told me a story about a school in her hometown that had a dirt floor, no chalkboard and little or no teachers involved. She’s at this brand-new shiny school and she just thinks it's the best thing that ever happened to her child.

Then we had to proceed with the quality statement. What's quality? It's the product that they receive and the importance of her child and where she goes, ultimately, in her life. It's that whole opportunity. That's civil rights issue that I often talk about. There's a gap. There's a gap in knowledge with parents. It is equally important that we have to address in America. I've met, and sat, and talked over my 18+ years in this journey. I have met very few, if any, parents that did not want the best for their kids and their children, did not want a better opportunity for them. I think the bases are there. It's commitment, it's hard work. How many parents do we know that work two or three jobs? How do we provide care for those kids? How do we provide early childhood education? So that when they start school, when they go to kindergarten,
they're ready. That they have a thirty thousand or forty thousand word vocabulary versus a three thousand. That's the key.

Julie Speer: Talk about the affordable housing's role, in a diverse and integrated city and how important that is.

Patrick Hamill: Well, affordable housing is really important. I was quite disappointed, earlier this year, we weren't able to pass a defect litigation bill or an affordable housing bill in the state house, or state rep- Very disappointed this year, when we weren't able to pass legislation that would have created affordable housing. It was the defect bill. Very, very unfortunate because that would help to create affordable housing. Today, rents are just skyrocketing. We're seeing multigenerational families live in the same house, today. Housing plays a very, very important role. I think, what's important as a master-planned community developer, which Oakwood is and we are, is we provide various segments of housing types and prices in communities. I'm very proud of that. We've done that for going on our twenty-fifth year, this year.

Julie Speer: There's folks that are saying that Denver will become like Manhattan or Paris. Where only the very wealthy can afford to live here. Everyone else, suburbs.

Patrick Hamill: We could only be, actually, so lucky, in some sense, that Denver is a great world-class city. I think with a world-class city, and our mayor says this often and our governor says this, Denver is a world-class city and with a world-class city, you have to have a world-class education system that meets all needs in all sectors, and all families, and all markets. Minorities as well as the rich banker.

Julie Speer: Are you involved in any other school districts besides Denver, in Colorado?

Patrick Hamill: Yeah, we're very involved in Loveland, St. Vrain. We're very active in district 49, Colorado Springs, which has some very similar issues. We're actually working on replicating our Evie Dennis campus on the Banningwoods community in Colorado Springs. We're very excited about that.
Julie Speer: There are folks who I've heard advocate that we actually add a new school district. Split up DPS and that far Northeast has its own school district.

Patrick Hamill: I love to quote Dan Ritchie. Dan often thinks that we made a wrong turn, we got rid of the one room schoolhouse. When you think about it, you have older kids mentoring younger kids. He had a very low student to teacher ratio. Which is very important and one of the key indicators in student success. I think, ultimately, you need ownership of our schools. That's what she really had any one room schoolhouse. I would generally say that smaller is generally better. When you look on the Evie Dennis campus, our academies are all in the 400 to 450 student range in the whole school. People know each other. There's accountability. Families know each other. I definitely believe in that. I think that's a great example of how you can do that in a large school district. One of the reason I love Denver Public schools is that if you look at urban school districts, across America, which we visited many of them, there's nothing that compares in terms of the amount of change that they're doing to enhance the students educational experience.

Tom Boasberg has taken what Michael Bennett really started and done just a fantastic job. Am I happy, personally, with the progress that we've made? No. We need to improve the rate of growth for our children but it's also somewhat generational, when you really look at it. Because, if you believe in my premise that it all starts with early childhood education, is that the investments we make today in preschool, and make sure that those kids get to thirty thousand words by the time they enter, it's twelve years. There's all sorts of indicators and testing that we can see progress along the way. We need to see that and that needs to improve. Housing's an important component on this. There schools within DPS where they have in excess of a fifty percent mobility rate. Let's think about that. Fifty percent of the school, or a classroom, changing in a year. That's stability in the family and it's very difficult for teachers to work in an environment where they have constant change like that.

Julie Speer: Seventy percent of the population at DPS is free and reduced lunch. You have all those issues, it can't just be the school.

Patrick Hamill: Well, the amazing thing about free and reduced lunch, if we can make that happen there think of the change that will occur when these kids go
to college, and they get jobs, they start creating jobs. It would be pretty exciting. Look at our first class that graduated this year from Denver school of science and technology on the Evie Dennis campus, in Green Valley Ranch. All of them got accepted to a four-year college. Two got accepted to Stanford. Something like three to Princeton. Ivy League caliber schools. A few are going to University of Denver. CU. I mean, that's amazing. That's in that seventy percent free and reduced lunch. Those kids are going to change the world. They will make an impact. I'm convinced.

Julie Speer: How does our per people funding in Colorado compare to other states that you worked in because I understand it's quite low.

Patrick Hamill: Our per pupil funding, which is really the states allocation to schools across Colorado, is one of the lowest in the country. That's a disappointment. At the same time, it's a quandary, because we have one of the most highly educated populations in the country at the same time. It's a statistic that often gets misused by people. The reason it does is that we have so many people that come to Colorado from other states when they graduate. They leave the Midwest. They leave California. They leave Detroit Michigan and you can't really blame them. Right? They come to a great state that has a great quality of life, and their well-educated.

Julie Speer: We have a lot of transplants but we don't necessarily grow those highly educated populations, right?

Patrick Hamill: We need to grow our own. That's something for the legislature and our citizens to grapple with. On how we improve the quality and the funding that we do in our state.

Julie Speer: As you think about the achievement gap and segregation in schools, are there any final thoughts or things that we haven't talked about?

Patrick Hamill: How we really saw this achievement gap, I know I've been beating this horse, is that we need to start early. Early childhood. We need to focus on not socially promoting our kids if they're not ready, after third grade. We need to hold them back. I think there is an interesting statistic that came out a few years ago. In the whole state there was only like twelve kids that was held back in third grade. Obviously, we had a lot of kids that should have been held back that did not move forward. We need to hold
them back prior to being aware it's a social stigma. I think, as a community, we all need to be accountable for this. This is all of our community. Regardless if we have kids in school were not in school. This is our future. This is our future leaders, our future economy, and I'm embarrassed to say, as a country we went from one of the most highly educated workforce is in the world to seventeenth or twentieth. In this issue on minorities and lower income families in our country, this is who we are as a country. Minorities, for the first time, will be the majority. We need to solve this.
Let’s talk about you growing up and your own personal experience in terms of the neighborhood you grew up in, the time frame this was and your own perceptions of race in your life, in your community and in your school and if it was different in one or the other.

I was actually born in Denver Colorado in 1985. The climate of Denver was a lot different than what we see now. I was blessed to grow up in the Park Hill area right off of Eudora Street, 2840 Eudora Street so right in the middle of a developing neighborhood that had a lot going on for itself. It was when Stapleton Airport was still there, so I remember the house still shaking as planes would land and gang violence really coming up very strong when you come to 1989 and going to the early 90’s. Really living in a reality that it was dangerous where you lived but we didn’t necessarily recognize that until we got older and looked back because we knew everybody in our neighborhood, it was family.

You would see people running from police or running from different elements of things. We had a game on my block called Drive By where any car that would drive really slow on the block or any car that had its lights out everybody in the neighborhood would screen drive by! And you’d run and go hide under a car or behind a building. It was like a neighborhood hide and go seek game but it was survival in many respects and not recognizing what that was.
I grew up in Park Hill, my mother worked for AT&T which then turned into Lucent Technologies and she always worked north, off of 120th. As far as education goes, I first started my schooling at a Christian School right up north. When I look at the pictures I think I was one of 2 black kids in the picture. It was a really interesting environment. I remember the reason why my mother pulled me out of that school was that I came home one day and I said, “Red ants are coming from hell. I don’t want to go to hell so we’re not allowed to eat …” and I had different foods and things that I was being taught at this very religious school. I’ll leave its name out just for that fact.

It really started us on this, okay, where you go to school is important. What you are being taught will translate into what you learn at home and my mom was very mindful about the fact of where I was at. That was preschool and kindergarten when I was at that school and then it was time to come to elementary school. I grew up on 28th and Eudora, a block away from there was Stedman Elementary school, literally a block and a half of a walk away but my mother didn’t want me to go there. When we looked at some of the different kids in our neighborhood who were going to that school, some of the realities of what her research gave her as far as things of that school, she came to her own conclusions that I was not necessarily aware of at that time.

This was coming to the end of the busing program in Denver and it was a time when you could opt into having your child bused. Instead of going to Stedman which was literally a block and a half away, I would get on a bus early in the morning and I was bused all the way to Bromwell Elementary School. I went to Bromwell Elementary which is right outside of where Cherry Creek Mall is and really recognizing the realities of all that goes into neighborhood around Cherry Creek. Bromwell was an amazing experience. They were trying some very new programs, open doors, open polices where students could not necessarily have to stay in their classroom but they wanted to allow them to express themselves in many different ways and feel out the school feel out their creativity.

For me as a third grader now, I started enjoying that open-door policy and being able to be where I wanted. I always liked snacks, I may be a skinny individual but I’ve always enjoyed food and I enjoyed napping. I came to find out that in the third grade I was spending majority of my time in the kindergaten 1st Grade area and nobody was saying anything about it because it was this new open policy. We started recognizing that
although you may be in a quality neighborhood with a very good school, there are still some opportunities within that for you to fall within some very large holes.

Some of the things that I remember at Bromwell though was that a friend of mine Riote Ishi he was an exchange student from Japan, he was one of the first individuals that really showed me that the world was so much bigger than the United States and he had an Ultra-man collection which was this super hero from Japan that I remember. He had hundreds of these Ultra-mans. I loved Hot Wheels. I still have a collection of over 5,000 Hot Wheels cars. I remember him and I going back and forth with these cars and just being kids. Not necessarily recognizing what it was to be black or to be Asian or to be white or all of these different dynamics that people gave us later, but just enjoying being us.

My time at Bromwell ended very abruptly. There was a game going on called duck-duck goose. Duck-duck goose is an amazing opportunity where you can go around a circle tapping on different students’ heads and then when someone names goose, you run around and sit back in your seat. I always think of it that I was a very forward thinker, an outside of the box and saying why run around the circle when you can run through the circle. It just seems as natural I’m trying to get there. We were playing duck-duck goose, going around the circle duck-duck goose had somebody chasing me. Instead of going around the circle I end up going through the circle to get to where I’m at. I jump over a young ladies head, her name was Amy. As I was jumping over and she was trying to move, the bottom of my foot clipped her left shoulder, not ever her head, didn’t think much about it, she cried, we went back then we got in trouble.

Her father who was important in whatever realities and what she was, said a young African-America male assaulted his daughter. Having to deal with the political side of what some of those nuances delivered was very hard as a 3rd grader not recognizing I hadn’t gotten in a fight, I wasn’t a very violent student, I’ve always been a very loving person but because of the game and the nature of me touching her in a way that wasn’t something that she warranted I was put on a suspension, probation type of situation at the school. Where if I had any other infractions within the school I would get expelled.
That situation happened a few months later when I saw some things going on in the school and to be honest with you I can’t even remember what exactly the situation was, I just remember saying I can’t be here anymore and then I got up out of my chair and I ran out of the front door of the school and the principal chased after me and for 2 blocks I’m running towards 6th Avenue with all my might, the Principal is chasing after me I think from the reports of what he said he was afraid that I was going to run into 6th Avenue which is a very busy street. I grew up in a neighborhood where there’s cars everywhere, we know not to jump in the streets. I get to 6th, I make a right turn, I get to the next block and make a right turn and run back to where the school that I had come from was at, he chases me, a security guard ends up picking me up. One of the school DPS security guards.

They end up taking me into a room restraining me, having me cuffed in a way where it’s not necessarily metal handcuffs but I was restrained, had a security guard holding me down and they called my parents. I always remember because my grandmother always tells the story at Thanksgiving of when she walked in the room and there was this huge 200-something-plus security guard holding this 3rd Grade young me in a room while I am being restrained to a chair.

As an 8 or 9-year-old, being restrained to a chair, having a security guard holding me down and my grandmother coming in and asking, “What’s going on? Is he a threat to you or to me? Can you not handle this child?” Really when she came in being a boy, stand up. Yes mum. I always was taught to respect my elders. We walked out and that was my last time being in the Denver Public School system for a long time. After that my mother said, “Okay.” That was our next strike so I was going to be expelled anyway. She took me to catholic school and I ended up having the opportunity to go to St. Ignatius Loyola which was a Catholic School off of York and 23rd.

It was a very different reality. When you come into Catholic school, there’s uniforms now. It’s a lot smaller as a school. Not as many resources there. But an opportunity to really learn and grow. I really enjoyed it. I was in catholic school for 2 years at Loyola and then from there transitioned to Good Shepard which is another catholic school right around the corner from Bromwell but off of 6th Avenue. One of a few African America students within the school. A lot of money within that school. At Good Shepard, I remember having a good friend of mine.
whose parents owned a part of Idaho Springs and when we would go to their summer house in the summers, there were multiple houses that you could walk in and hike and pools and hot springs that went into these things.

As a young child in Park Hill being like, “What is this place? What are these realities?” It was very interesting growing up and having that chance to really be pushed academically. Good Shepard was an amazing school as far as the academics but you were challenged with not necessarily seeing a lot of people who look like you. I’ve never been Catholic but knowing I can do my Hail Mary’s just like the rest of them. I know how to do a rosary, I know all of the different realities of the Catholic Church because I went to Catholic school which can be confusing as a young child who goes to church every Sunday at a Baptist church and you’re hearing contradictory statements from some of the things that you’re being preached to, to what you’re being taught within school.

That brings me all the way up to the 6th Grade. Once I got out of Good Shepard, my mother ended up getting engaged. My mother has always made really decent money although we always lived in a pretty hard neighborhood. She’s worked within Lucent technology to develop phones and to do some really good work with that and the individual who she was getting ready to be engaged to was doing things around computers as well, made really decent money so we finally had our ticket to move out. We ended up moving out to Piney Creek at that time unincorporated Arapahoe County.

Being in Piney Creek this was my first time having a room to myself, I had a playroom. We had a basement that had a pool table and a den and all of these different realities. The guy who lived next to us drove a Ferrari 355 Spider which was his weekend car. Then he had another Range Rover which was his truck during the day and just having this reality of living from the inner city of Denver Colorado and many of the different things that that brought about to now going out to unincorporated Arapahoe County and being in the suburbs, in the legitimate Suburbs where we had a 3-story house and some other realities that I never knew what that was like.

I ended up going to Loretto middle school out in that area. A really good school. They had so many programs and that was one of the things that I remember the most about coming back into the school system in Cherry
Creek Schools was that now we had home economics where you could learn how to cook in stoves actually in the school. You had automotive stuff that you could learn. I have boxes that I made by welding and just so many different rooms within a school that would allow you to just develop what you wanted to do for the future.

It was amazing when you think about that reality of a school to some of the other schools that I visited or that I went to that didn’t have some of these things so students weren’t being pushed in the same vein, in the same reality. I think for me that was when I started makings some strong connections between different areas get different things. Depending on the funding that comes to some of those areas, depends on maybe some of the realities that those students and people in those neighborhoods get to experience.

I had a great educational experience in middle school in going to Loretto. As a part of drama, I started acting. I started really being able to spread my wings but I was faced with a really hard reality of black students coming up to me and trying to figure out what kind of black person I was. Then white students coming up to me and trying to figure out what kind of person I was, and hearing things like, “Oh you’re the guy from the hood?” Well is this how ...” Doing a rap lyric quote and asking me about these things. I became the representative of all things inner city when although I lived in the inner city, I don’t think I was the best representation of knowing all things inner city within that self either.

It really became hard from an identity perspective or now, who am I? What do I represent? Do I have the JNCO jeans that all of the students that go to my school are wearing and doing skate boarding or do I stick to the Bugle Boys that everybody in my neighborhood before were wearing? These are really strong realities of identity that are coming in middle school when most middle schoolers are trying to find themselves in their own right.

I remember just having a lot of challenges within trying to figure out who I was and what did I represent. Unfortunately within that situation, the person who was going to become my stepfather ended up having a cardiovascular heart attack while shopping for my Christmas present at Park Meadows and ended up passing away before he hit the ground. Going from that type of reality to now back to a single income meant that we had to move back. My mother didn’t want to move all the way back
to Park Hill so she chose somewhere in between. There was this neighborhood called Park Forest which is still in Denver but it’s off of Dayton right between Alameda and Mississippi area.

She said, “Okay. You’re getting ready to go to high school, I’ve never given you this option before. What type of school would you like to go to? You know we can push to get you into Kent Denver. You know you’ve never really done great academically but we can try to get you into that. Would you like to go back to catholic school? Did you like Public School? What did you want to go to?”

I wanted to be around my friends who I grew up with in Park Hill and I said, “They’re all going to East, I want to go to East.” Although the school that was within our neighborhood would have been George Washington High School. I had the opportunity to become an East Angel and honestly it was one of the best decisions of my life because East, I think was a culmination of all of these different type of schools. It is a public school. It’s a public school that gets funneled with so many different type of students who come there. You have young students who come from inner city realities that may be associated or understand gangs but then you also have parents who may have grown up and lived in Cherry Creek or near Cherry Creek Mall who knew the value of what East is so they’re still pumping money into the school.

Of all the traditional public schools that I see for high schools, it’s one of the few schools that I don’t think can fail because there are so many different eyes of realities that are watching it and making sure that students who go there are able to matriculate and be all that they can be. That’s on the outside surface because once you get within the school, there are schools within the school that are very hard realities. Where there were some back parts of the school where some of our students who needed some more education and specialized education would stay.

I remember going to school and those are kids we would joke about and laugh about because they were the ones who didn’t leave for off campus lunch. They would stay in the lunch room and eat and some of their socioeconomic statuses wouldn’t allow for them to have as much freedom within the school as many other students. Then we had an amazing sports program. While I was there we went to State Championship twice in basketball, multiple times in other Sports. We had all of Denver watching us from our spots programs where you could see
similar to students who go to colleges, that some of our athletes were treated a little bit differently than some of the rest of us.

If you were a start basketball player at that time, there were some things that you could get away with that some others may not have the opportunity to get away with. For me, that’s what made East amazing. Was that it introduced you to a world that wasn’t perfect. It introduced you to a world that had multiple layers of an onion. It introduced you to a world where you had to find yourself. If you don’t know what finding yourself looks like, give a young freshman, off campus lunch off of Colfax and allow them to navigate all that Colfax has from bums over here to crack heads over here. From fights going on in City Park to having all of these different places you can eat and them figuring out how to navigate that world and come back whole, I think is an amazing opportunity.

I went to East all of my years for high school, was not the best student. Was someone who loved to go to class, was in school, did my work but I was social. I like talking. I like talking to people. I like figuring out ways that I could be a chameleon in many senses where I could go around individuals who are doing gangs and be able to have the same conversation with them as I would be able to go and talk to the kids in Speech and Debate.

Really be able to navigate many of these different realities where I was a friend to most and not an enemy to many. I was able to have a really great high school experience where I was invited to parties if I wanted to go to them. I had a fake ID but don’t tell my mother. Having all of these opportunities to go to different places. For me I think high school really helped me develop into going to college and all of what that was but the thing that I remember the most about high school was a teacher by the name of Tama Ron who is currently still teaching there. I remember her saying, “You’re not allowed to fail. You’re not allowed to fail.” It wasn’t in a sense of my grades. It was you’re not allowed to fail at life.

She would talk to us, she was our African American History teacher and at a time when 2-way pagers just first came out and we were putting the entire test on 2 way pagers so that we would know, A, B, A, B and looking out and being able to text these things out and teachers not knowing to catch these things because it’s new technology, Tama Ron, Miss Ron was one of those individuals who would always go out of her way and even if you weren’t a student who are making the best grades, even if you were
a student who was challenged and struggling in many respects, she would always make sure you knew who you were and that you represented so much more than what you were.

I honestly believe that it’s because of educators like her that I had the opportunity to become what I was. Because at a crossroads where I was still trying to figure out different routes that I could go in life, I had this lady in my back corner who regardless of my grades, regardless of how rigorous I was academically was always whispering to me, “You’re not allowed to fail. You’re not allowed to become a statistic.” She would tell us the real, give us historical facts to back it up and it became something where I really became prideful about who I was and recognized it was more than just me and it’s something that I will always remember from that experience.

Julie Speer: Can you count the number of African-American teachers you had?

Quincy Shannon: At East High School, diversity was something that you would see. We had black security guards like Keith, we had Miss Anderson at one point became one of our black principals at a time. We had some other teachers but there were about 4 or 5 black teachers that I remember, 2 of them specifically. Miss Ron because she was our African American History teacher who was really intentional about teaching her students. Being in this place that would say, “This is the reality that you live. I’m not going to sugar coat it. These are some of the things that you’re going to have to navigate and deal with. And if you’re just being this person, these are some of the challenges that you might have.”

I remember her and then I remember Miss Flowers who then became Miss Artsy. Miss Artsy was someone who I remembered because she was my African American literature teacher and she knows it, I could not stand her while in school. I love her. A great teacher but in school she would hold me to a level of accountability that I wasn’t used to. Although she was a very personable teacher, someone who was very friendly, she didn’t hand out things lower than an A or anything higher than a B very easily. You had to work for every grade you got.

I remember being frustrated by, “Hey, we’re in this together. Like help me out.” Her being one of those individuals saying, “If I help you in that respect, I’m ultimately hurting you.” I’m going to have this high bar because I expect more from you and I need you to rise up and achieve to
this bar in ways that you may not even believe that you can. Honestly in school I didn’t always rise up to her bar. I think I got a C in her class one year and maybe a C- the next. I don’t think I ever really got to a level where I was able to pass with an A but for me that was okay because that was somebody who expected more and they weren’t just going to hand you that easy way out.

At East we had multiple dynamics of teachers were we had some black teachers, we had some Hispanic and Latino teachers. Mr. McMillan was my favorite in that respect because I took Spanish all the way up to Spanish 3X, learned Spanish well, a year later forgot almost all of what I’ve learnt. I think the diversity that I felt at East was a lot different than going to some of the Catholic schools that were in some of my past or going out to Unincorporated Arapahoe County and being one of few out there never seeing a bad teacher in some of those respects. I think East was a way of bringing all of that together which gave me an understanding that there are multiple dynamics to the onion.

Julie Speer: Did you have any White teachers in High School that pushed you to that same level?

Quincy Shannon: I think to be honest with you, I had some Amazing teachers at East regardless of their race, regardless of their gender but when it came down to really pushing me to be more than what I was, it was ultimately those black teachers who were the ones doing it. I remember that I was in speech and debate and having the coach that we had at that time, gave me opportunities to do speech competitions at Berkley or Stanford out in California and travelling to some of these different schools that really gave me an opening that there was something bigger than myself after high school but I never really had the teacher in that same space saying, “I see you going here. We’re going to do this work so that you can go here.” I don’t remember that and if it happened, I may be jaded out of multiple years later but what I remember in my mind is definitely those black teachers who were pushing me.

I loved Mel and some of the other individuals in the drama department and I think that they gave me a really great outlet as far as having the space to really express who I was and being really open and honest with me in the drama department and having some of that but from the academic rigor, it was definitely the black teachers for me that were the ones who were pushing me.
Julie Speer: I want to go back to Cherry Creek School District because we’ve been doing research in terms of the achievement gap and diversity and Cherry Creek right now has the lowest gap and the best integration. Can you reflect back thinking about 7th and 8th grade? Talk about the diversity and just what you sensed in that level.

Quincy Shannon: My time in Cherry Creek School District was very interesting because there were multiple dynamics that I think a lot of students were navigating. What neighborhood were you coming to school from was a question that would be asked a lot. If you were coming from the Piney Creek vistas as opposed to the Piney Creek Estates that meant something. If you were coming from Shannon Dower, that meant something and what feeder or neighborhood brought you to school, at that time, had some type of relevance in that space.

Cherry Creek as far as diversity was really interesting too because although you may have had different races and ethnicities represented, just because you had the skin, doesn’t mean you had the understanding. I think that that was a really hard and challenging situation to try to figure out, “Okay, are you who you are claiming to be based on what I’m seeing or are there some underlying things there of who you think you are?”

I think really just having black students who depending on how they were raised did not know they were black. Their skin color was there but mentality-wise, they didn’t identify with anything that would be seen from a cultural perspective as being black. I remember dating or when you’re in 7th and 8th grade, coming into your hormones and finding out and hearing different kinds of who’s allowed to date and what’s allowed to date, it wasn’t the same messages that I was hearing in other areas of town. I think that integration was a lot more accepted because a lot of people were coming from a lot of different places coming together.

Cherry Creek School District for me was really interesting. Even fast forwarding after going to school in Cherry Creek School District and being at East High School, we always knew the step team from Cherry Creek was one of the best step teams in Colorado. It was crazy because it was made up of black people, white people, all kinds of different individuals. I think that that really spoke to some of the positive things that Cherry Creek School Districts were able to do at that time as far as bringing people from any different diverse backgrounds together to work and to do different things in the school.
Julie Speer: Talk to me about what you did after you graduated.

Quincy Shannon: I applied to 2 schools for college. One was North Carolina A&T, it was a historically black college University in North Carolina, I had gone on a black college tour and fell in love with the school. The second school was Lincoln University in Jeff City Missouri. I applied there because my mother and my father went there and my grandmother went there and I just wanted to make them feel good.

I knew I was going to North Carolina A&T, I got an acceptance to go. I’d always told everybody I wanted to go for Mechanical Engineering because I loved cars, I had a car collection without really knowing what mechanical engineering was besides that. I just knew every time I said it people thought it was a great degree that you could get and I would always get a thumbs up like, “Yes. You’re going to make it.” Took a class during Junior Engineers Tomorrow Scientists which is a program in Denver and took a mechanical engineering class the summer before leaving.

I’ve already been accepted to school, I’ve already had packed my bags, I was ready to go, took this class and realized I hated everything about mechanical engineering. There was not a droplet of anything of that major that made me happy. I despised math, I hated equations, I just liked cars. I didn’t know you had to mathematically equate how the car became a car. For me, I ended up changing my major and saying, “I want to do something else. I like talking, let’s try communications.” North Carolina A&T being a school that is engineering focused saying, “You got into our engineering school, if you change your degree, you no-longer get the scholarship that we’re offering you.” At the time I needed the money, needed to figure something out.

Lincoln University, because both of my parents went there, because my grandmother went there, they offered me money and in the very last moments of getting ready to go to college, I changed which school I was going to go to and ended up going to Lincoln University which for me, in hindsight, was probably one of the best decisions I ever could have made because I got to learn more about my parents through being on the hollow grounds where they were at and hearing some of their stories but being able to forge my own trail and being at Lincoln University which was a historically black college in University of Missouri but being an-hour-and-a-half drive in St. Louis and having that opportunity to go down
and be with them was something that I cherish. I’m very close to that side of the family as a result and I think I learned a lot about myself through hearing about what my college experience was like for my parents and then hearing what that college experience was like for my grandmother who went to college in the ‘30s.

Then after coming out of Lincoln University, I had this amazing opportunity to do an internship with the Environmental Protection agency. There was a lady who came for a job fair that was going on campus at that time. Black schools we have what’s called the Misters and Misses that you can be elected to, I was Mr. Lincoln University so it was my job to be the liaison. I’m just walking different people on campus to the job fair conversing with them, I’m not thinking much about it and she’s like, “You know, how would you be interested in working for us?”

I was like, “I’m not a tree hacker. I don’t want to work for no EPA, I’m going to be this amazing journalist or something else.” At that time where my mind was at and didn’t take it for what it was and she kept reaching out. Kept reaching out. Kept reaching out. Finally I ended up taking that internship which was an amazing opportunity to move back to Denver after graduating and really working for the government. While working for the government, there was just something within me that I still was feeling was missing. There was a void. There was something empty.

While I was at East High School, I was a part of Fellowship for Christian Athletes which was an amazing outlet for me as far as really coming into my own as far as what Christianity and Religion was for me. My Church actually licensed me to be a minister when I was 18 years old. I was going through college as a licensed minister and coming out and not thinking much about it but coming back to Denver, working for the EPA and now my Pastor James D. Peters, at New Hope Baptist Church, one of the most amazing mentors that I’ve ever had in life, was saying, “Okay, now that you’ve gotten your degree behind you, how can we help you step into this calling in which you’ve professed so many years before?”

He started giving me opportunities to preach and giving me opportunities to teach and opportunities to do so many things within the church that I said, “Oh man. I want to learn more”. I felt inadequate being someone who was standing in front of ... Our church has over a thousand people, and not necessarily knowing all of the realities for that. Saying, I want
more schooling. While working for the EPA, I ended up auditing a class at DU Iliff School of theology which was a great opportunity. I was in a class called race, class and Christianity. While I was sitting in this class I was one of 2 black people in the class. The other individual was in his late 50s and in that class they gave us a book to read called Our Kind of People. It was a book that Miss Ron had given me while I was in high school that I had already read and it talks about the higher esculent African American community. Where they travel to, what organization they’re a part of. Some things that they do.

The frustrating thing for that was that while in this class, they were using this book as a way of explaining the black church experience that all black people had experienced. I grew up in a black church, this is not correct. One of my teachers said, “Well prove it. What are your sources?” I was like, “I’m my source. I’m the individual who knows this is not right. I grew up in a black church. Some of the things that you all are teaching in this class aren’t necessarily the reality that I grew up having.”

He says, “Okay. You can be this type of source but I need a primary and a secondary source. I need you to be able to prove to the class and prove to yourself what you’re saying.” I remember being so frustrated in class that I knew something was off base. I knew that what they were teaching wasn’t the truth that I had experienced but not knowing how to express that. I ended up saying I’m not going to come to Iliff School of theology. I started looking up black schools and black seminary particularly that had a high graduation rate of individuals who had gone back into education. Who were going back as being some of the teachers who were teaching some of these theology classes because I figured if they’re able to go back and teach, they darn sure found a source to prove what they believe.

I started filling out applications and it was between Morehouse Divinity School which was in Atlanta, Howard Theological School which is in Washington DC and Virginia Union. Virginia Union was just one of these schools that, it just felt right. At the last minute, I realized I don’t really have the money to go here. I don’t know how I’m going to make it to this school. I had watched a movie called Facing Giants, it’s an amazing Christian movie about a football team and a coach who’s losing the football team and within the movie, there’s a guy who goes up to the coach and he says, “Two farmers were desperately praying for rain so that they could feed and have their farm developed but only one of the
farmers went out and developed his field in preparation for it. Which farmer really believed that God was going to deliver for him?"

I remember watching that movie and at that time I had filled out applications to go to grad school but hadn’t really done much more than that. Hadn’t tried to find financial ways to go or any of those things. It was just an aloof dream that I thought that I could go to. I remember watching that movie, staring at the screen and being like, “I want to be the farmer who actually prepares his field.” I remember going in and writing a letter after that. I wrote a letter to Virginia union, the Samuel DeWitt Practice School of Theology to Dean Kenny and it said, “Hey, I’m a young minister in Denver Colorado. I’ve audited theological classes in other places. I believe this is the place that God is steering me to go, I don’t necessarily have the resources to come now but wanted to find out what would be the best ways to make this a reality for me.” And sat on it. And sat on it. And heard nothing back.

The movie came on again and in the movie I said, “Well, I did it. This is what I feel like I was supposed to do. I’ve prepared my field. I wrote the letter and something in me said, “That wasn’t really preparing a field. You write letters to all kind of people and do all kinds of things. If you’re going to trust that this is where you’re going to be, you’ve got to trust that this is where you’re going to be.” I bought a plane ticket. I bought a plane ticket getting ready to go to Virginia Union, without the money to pay for the school, without necessarily figuring out what my housing situation was going to be. I flew to Virginia and the day ... I couldn’t make it up if I wanted to, the day before I was going to leave, a letter came in the mail, I have the letter framed in my house today. It said, “Dean Kenny created a Dean Scholarship for you and you have received a scholarship to come as a dean scholar.” I ended up having my graduate school paid for by that Dean Scholarship that came as a result of that letters so many days before.

If I wouldn’t have jumped and been ready to go, I may have missed the opportunity to go to grad school. I went to Samuel DeWitt Practice School of Theology at Virginia Union. It was an amazing school. I had professors like Jeremiah Right who was Barack Obama, the president of the United States that was his pastor. When he was going through all of that different controversy in 2008 when he was on television and they were saying, “Oh, Barack Obama, President Obama’s pastor doesn’t respect him or doesn’t care about ...”
I had him as a teacher at that time and was in class being able to glean and learn why he was saying what he said and I have the utmost respect for that man because he is such a brilliant scholar. But we were able to have so many individuals come in and teach us that have written books, that had created theology and black theology and some of the different thoughts that go in the black church that I’ve got my sources. Not only did I get the sources by reading it, but I met some of those individuals and had the opportunity to converse with those individuals.

3 years later, came back to Denver, went to DU and searched out for that teacher who I had and was ready. I was going to tell him this book and tell him that book and never had the opportunity to find him. That’s what got me to grad school, that’s what got me to Virginia and ultimately one of the things that helped to change and shape my life.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about education and let’s talk about race in education and the realities that you see especially for kids of color.

Quincy Shannon: I think race and education is a very interesting thing because segregation is still very alive and present. It was something that I felt while I was still in high school, while I was at East. Not something that I necessarily recognized at East but I was at East when Manual was first going through its transitions. Manual high school was going to go from being our rival as a high school to now they were going to develop it into being 3 schools within the school.

I was in school from ’99 to 2003. This would have happened towards the latter side of that because I was in a group called Students for Justice and I remember doing a seat out in front of Manual during this time but Manual was transitioning and they were going to put this 3-school system into place. I never recognized segregation as distinctly as I did until looking at Manual at that time because they were saying you would not be able to transition from each of the … It was 3 different levels within the school. Some people would be on the top floor, some people in the middle floor, some people on the bottom floor.

What you look at is that they had English as a second language and individuals who were trying to learn English in one of the schools, then you had your high performing or your gifted and talented which was going to have all of your accelerated classes, your AP classes on another floor and then you had your general population, your general flooring.
When you looked at what these schools looked like, it became your English as a second language, became mostly your Latino and Hispanic students. It became your high performing or your gifted and talented track becoming more of your white students and then your general student body being this back students in the middle.

It wasn’t 100%, of course, but it was something that we recognized and something that we saw and it showed me that segregation within schools have taken on new nuances from how we talk about it. Now it’s not, “Oh, I don’t want black people in my school or I don’t want white people in my school or we’re not going to allow these races to intercede, but it’s now saying, “Okay, we’re going to have a gifted and talented or an IB program that generally goes from a certain demographic or pool of people.” Not to necessarily say anything about that is race based, but when you look at the schools, often times that’s a reality that you see.

Then when we’re seeing some of these different things as students, the thing that concerns me is what is the reverses story that some of the things are hearing? If you’re not in the IB program or if you’re not in accelerated classes? Are you now the dumber school? Are you now not the so smart school? Does that mean that education should be something that’s important for you for education moving forward?

That was something that I really saw as far as segregation in Colorado specifically, came into some of these different labels that we would put around schools that if you’re in a gifted and talented school, there’s these opportunities and things that you may have the opportunity to go to but if you’re at this neighborhood school, it may not be the same. Then as we saw what happened in Manuel and the 3-school system didn’t work and it ultimately hurt the school in many ways where it closed its doors for a second and then reopened and then they started doing this 3-school system in other schools. Then it went to Montebello then we see the same thing happen in Montebello where the last graduating classes of Montebello Warriors happened a few years ago because the 3-school system wasn’t what we thought it was going to be.

Now I see the 3-school system at West High School. The question is now, if we see a program or something in our school system that hasn’t had the best rate and it’s really making schools close in some respects, what are we going to do to not segregate our schools but to integrate our schools and to find ways of not making our neighborhoods divided but
bringing individuals together. I think that is where we are in Colorado is a very real possibility of finding what are ways that we bring these different groups together where if I do have a very smart student regardless of what race he is, regardless of what gender they are, how do I match that student with an under-performing student so that their strengths are able to leverage somebody else’s weaknesses and they’re all able to have a rising tide that lifts all boats as opposed to elevating one group and allowing them to have all the resources and opportunities while another group is that group that’s really that strong gap that we’re seeing that we’re trying to stand in.

Julie Speer: If you look at Denver specifically, does Denver have a race problem? Is Denver segregated?

Quincy Shannon: I think Denver has a few different things going on. In looking at segregation from the word, we often times associate it with race specifically and that is true often times. I think it is so much bigger than just simply race. Yes. Denver does have segregation problems but they’re not just race based. We have a socioeconomic problem. We have a how do we make sure that all of the different demographics that are coming to school have the same equal say into their education where if I have a parent who does not speak English, that they still have the opportunity to voice themselves in the very same way that another parent may have. I think one of the issues that I see in Denver around that, is based on socio-economics. That there are differences within our schools.

Not saying that we have a race-based segregation problem but I think that those who can afford often times get more resources than those who can’t. There are definitely some schools within the network that don’t fall into that where we see some of our public charter schools really trying to challenge that and bring in different individuals from different places and saying, “Okay, it’s not how much money you have, you’re still going to get a quality education while in our building.” But when we still look at some of our traditional schools or just Denver in General, we’re seeing that depending on what neighborhood you come out and what school you’re going to, there may be different opportunities.

One of the saddest things that I think I ever saw in education in Denver was us to tell students at Montebello high school you’re school is going to close in 4 years but we’re going to keep you going here for the next 4 years. What is the psyche of a student who is now saying, “Your school is
not good enough? We don’t believe it can be turned around and that it needs to shut down but we’re going to keep you in school 3 more years but each one of those years, more teachers were being taken from the equation. More people were being taken from the equation.” If I’m a student who is a freshman in hearing that and going all the way to becoming that last graduating class, what psychological messages was I given as a student who are saying, “Your school is failing but we’re going to keep you here.”

Those are some of the bigger issues that we see as far as segregation. It’s not just, “Okay, we have a segregation issue from... You know White over here, Black over here, Hispanic over there, Asian and so many of the other races that we can put into that equation, but I think it really goes into what resources are we dumping in what places and are we strategically making sure all individuals who are coming into those schools have the same opportunity to leverage those resources?

Julie Speer: Where do you live now?

Quincy Shannon: I live in Park Hill. I lived in Montebello for the last 3 years when I started working at School. I started living in Montebello loved living in Montebello but wanted to come back to the neighborhood that I left as someone who does a lot of activism and different things within the community, I thought, it’s only right to actually be in the community that I’m trying to speak up for. It was a very intentional move about being the neighborhood that I’m in, but even living there, I’m very mindful about what schools my daughter will go to. What areas that she’ll have the opportunity to glean from. But I am a Park Hill resident in Denver Colorado, I’m proud to be.

Julie Speer: How do you describe the achievement gap? Is it a real gap?

Quincy Shannon: I describe the achievement gap as a young student in Colorado who may not necessarily know that there are other opportunities for him. We see that student in comparison to another student who has already been told all their life, their next step is going to be college. I think the achievement gap comes from a very real perspective, that there are some individuals who just getting out of 8th Grade is enough. Who just getting through High School is enough. Then there’s another demographic of individuals who are being told graduate school. Higher education. I think the achievement gap that I see comes in the messaging that we give to
students based on either what school they’re at and what grades they’re getting or what perception do we gain from what we see from them?

If we have a young individual who looks like whatever stereotype you want to put. This is the skater, this is the gang member, this is the perceived girl who is all into her looks and not into anything else and none of those different stereotypes have any race-based weight to them, although we put them there, and we see students who fit into these different areas but then we see, okay, what are the messages that those students and those different stereotypes are given for what they’re going to get through school and after they leave from school?

I think that the achievement gap that I see comes not always from the classes that students are receiving but the messages that they’re given while in those classes. Are you going to be successful? How do I push you to be successful, are just as much important as what did you get on your State mandated test? Or how are your grades looking in class? Because you have students who can perform, outperform some of the smartest students in the world but because no-one actually gave them the opportunity or believed that they could or should, they are okay with being in their area and have not raised above where they are at.

I think that’s a really strong piece as far as where we’re at. When we’re looking at the achievement gap, what are the messages that we’re giving different students based on whatever matrixes that we have. If that message is not the same, if the message that I’m giving to a high performing student at Kent Denver School is not the same message that I’m giving to a student who’s been kicked out at Emily Griffin then I’m creating a gap within my messaging. If I really believe that education is the passport out then I should say, “Okay, you’ve gotten kicked out of school but this is not it. You have an opportunity now to have these next steps if you’re willing to put forth the work.” I think the achievement gap that I’m seeing is not always individuals getting that messaging.

Julie Speer: Why do you chose to work in education?

Quincy Shannon: I choose to work in education because when I got to undergrad, there was so much that I was taught that gave me pride in being who I am and it wasn’t just race related but just history. This is what this country has been through, this is what you have persevered through as a people and as a people has nothing to do simply with my race, as a group of people
who we should have not made it. When we look at plagues that have happened and depressions that have happened and civil rights and lynching and strange fruit being hung from a popular tree, there is a very small result that I should not be here.

The fact that I’m here with things that I was taught while I was in school and I was flabbergasted that I was never taught these things before. Why didn’t I know that Juneteenth was a celebration of slaves in Gallstone Texas who were not given the freedom that they should have gotten with the emancipation proclamation and they were staying enslaved for 2 more years? Why wasn’t I taught that? But I’m given information about Ann Frank over here that is liberating others but I’m not getting some of those same things. For me I was very intentional about getting an education because I believe there’s a wealth of information that can be given to all students. This doesn’t have anything to do with only pulling up the black students or only pulling up the male or only pulling up some that meet the stereotype but all students.

There are stories of hope that when we look at Chiapas Mexico and look at what the Mayans in that area have been able to do for their people although there are Mexican-American saying you should not be in existence because the Spanish have conquered you, there are messages of hope for a young student who is trying to hold on to their being in face of a reality in which they may not know who others are trying to make them be.

Or when we’re looking at what’s going on in Asia with the Umbrella Revolution and how individuals are willing to stand strong for the things that they believe in. If we’re able to leverage that there is so much history outside of the crazy stuff that is taught in some of our schools, then you may be able to give that student the messaging that the crazy household they’re living in is not it. That’s not the end of their story because other individuals have persevered out of those hard situations. I think the main reason I went into education was I wanted to be sounding board for other individuals that you can make it. It’s not enough that I made it. Even if what you would call what I’ve done making it.

When I first came back from school, from undergrad and from grad school, I was asked to speak to a whole bunch of different students. Here is this young student who grew up in Park Hill and he got a degree and he’s made it. But I was struggling. I haven’t made it at that time. I hadn’t
even had a job that was going to pay me more than $22,000 dollars a year. I hadn’t made it but I had figure out a way to navigate certain realities that had gotten me a piece of paper that in despite of some people is making it, is the achievement. Oh my gosh, you’ve made it through school when so many who look like you or came from your same situations haven’t made it.

I wanted to distinctly go into education to tell that student, that’s not making it. Making it for you is you figuring out what your passion is and figuring out a way to make that passion your paycheck so that you’re elevating and giving goodness to all that are around you. Making it is figuring out ways to elevate your family and give them values and principles so that the craziness that goes on in the neighborhood isn’t given a blind eye but that other individuals care enough about their neighbor to make sure that they’re able to pick them up when they’re down.

Making it for me is so much more than just making it to college. I think that’s a great place to start. I can’t think of what my life would have been without going to college but I really wanted to go into education to inspire students from all background to know that where you started is not where you have to end. As Oscar Wilde once put it, when you really look at your story, your ending of your story, doesn’t have to be what we think the ending is. Like Orson Welles I think was the person who said it best when he said if you want a happy ending that of course happens where you end the story.

I think some of our students need to know your story isn’t over with what’s going on in your household or what’s going on in your school or the poor grades that you’ve had. I was never an A student until I got to college. I was always a B, C, D sometimes Fs were the reality that I was dealing with. It wasn’t that I wasn’t smart, I just had to always find ways to plug it that smartness into the reality of the schools. But finding and pulling that out is why I’m in education and I truly believe that if we all can just inspire a student to believe in themselves, because that’s what a teacher did for me. She made me believe that I was so much more and I wasn’t allowed to fail that it made me in my mind, when those moments were happening saying, “I’m not a failure. I may not have what I see and the grass may not be green but I’m not a failure. I still have opportunities to water this brown grass or to fertilize it and to figure out ways to make it green.” That’s what I hope to do for other students.
Julie Speer: Do you teach history?

Quincy Shannon: I have an opportunity to create a class. I teach a class called helm and it’s a class that I developed which is called Health Identity Leadership Movement. When we look at Helm it basically brings about multiple dynamics. The history piece is in there. Who are you? What makes up your identity? How do you identify yourself? Is this something that comes from race? Is this something that comes from gender? Is this something that comes from sexual orientation? What is your identify?

Then health, what makes you healthy? What are you eating? Are you even mindful that the drive through is killing just as many people as drive-bys in our communities if you’re not necessarily recognizing what’s going in your body. That health aspect. That identify. Then if you recognize that you’re healthy and you’re figuring out ways to be healthy and that you understand who you are as far as your identity, then that next step should be leadership. How do I take the things that I’ve learned about myself and make sure that I’m a driving force to help others learn about themselves? My students in class are learning leadership but not leadership from a boss’s perspective of saying, “This is what you do. Do what I say, that makes me a leader.” But by saying, “I’m going to be an example. I’d rather see a sermon than hear one any day. So that if you can watch what I do, then you can believe the words that I say.”

Really looking at that leadership aspect of saying, it’s not enough for us to figure out ways to elevate ourselves if we’re not leading others to come into the same places. Then looking at it as a movement. Not only saying that, okay, in class, there may be days when we go to the gym and physically move because in books like Brain Rules, they talk about how the more exercise that you do, the more your brain has the opportunity to learn and to grow and why exercise is so important. Also looking at it from a movement and saying, “All of these things that we’re going to do in class can’t stay stagnant.” It’s not enough for us to have this great class for a year, our minds to be opened, us to believe that we are somebody and then we sit and sit in that space. There has to be a movement and every movement moves. How do we take your health, your identity, your leadership and how do we apply that to a movement so that others are able to come together?

Julie Speer: Are the kids in your class mostly kids of color?
Quincy Shannon: Actually the greatest thing that I love is that my class is open to every student who came into our school that were 8th graders. All of our 8th Graders who are getting ready to matriculate from our school and going into high school and what all high school can bring, we were all having these opportunities in class to have these conversations. It wasn’t all Black or all Hispanic and Latino or all White or all Asian or all individuals from this country and that place but we had all of our students able to come and I think one of the amazing things that happened as an African America teacher, that there are some things I never could have planned for that happened through the conversations that happened in class that were dynamic.

When we had one of our students who was white able to say, “I’m a white student in a school that has more Black or Hispanic individuals in this school and I feel pressure not to be able to say my opinions on certain things because people are automatically going to call me a racist although these are things that I truly believe. It was amazing that we had created a space to have that conversation where he was able to speak about some things he deeply believed in but was afraid for 2 or 3 years to share those things with others because he didn’t want to get beat up.

Or we had young ladies in there who were able to say, “My identify in being a woman drives me but I’m afraid of being called the angry black girl or being called this person who can’t handle their emotions so I try not to identify with what I am.” I think having a class like that when it was inviting individuals from so many different areas was so valuable because at our school we were able to have students who lived in apartments and students who lived in houses able to talk about what does eviction look like and feel like.

Being able to have open emotional spaces where students were able to talk about, “Okay. What is privilege and is privilege something that only white people can experience or does the fact that I’m an African American male with not only a degree but a higher education degree, does that give me some privilege that other individuals within my community may not necessarily have or does the fact that I go to a church that has the mayor as one of our deacons give me privilege than an individual who does not have that same connection. Being able to apply privilege to a place where our students weren’t feeling guilt for what they have but finding ways to elevate others to where they’re trying to go.
Julie Speer: Do you still teach this class?

Quincy Shannon: I still teach it.

Julie Speer: What would you say about teachers of color and attracting them and the reality of there not being as many as might be required to reflect the student body?

Quincy Shannon: I’ve really reflected on teachers of color being in education and how my non-traditional way of getting in education even happened. I realize that teaching in my community wasn’t elevated as being a respectable career. When people are talking about they’re teachers, often times people are like, “Well if you can do this, do this but if you can’t, teach.” Which is a crazy reality because teaching is so important.

I think a hard reality and a hard bullet that I often face when I’m looking introspectively is that we have to change the dynamics of even what a teacher looks like and elevating it into being a respectable job. I go to work every day loving my job. I truly believe I was put on the earth to do what I do. But there are not individuals who have that same reality. I think when we look at people of color in education, there is a stigma around being educators one, but then we also have this, okay, if I’m an individual who may have potentially started my family younger, right? If I had a child in high school or in college or in some of these realities and I’m a single parent or I’m dealing with other realities, teaching and starting out may not be something that even looks appealing because now I have to rationalize between paying for my family and figuring out a way for us to survive and navigating all of these different economics that are going up into doing what I love.

Sometimes we don’t put a paycheck behind the passion of what this job gives. So often we have individuals who are coming into the realm of teaching who are our functional poor because they’re not necessarily given what they need or were not able to attract the best teachers because we can’t afford them. When we have a great person of color in education, how are we even able to dangle a carrot in front of them and say, “Come to our school, teach at our school” if I’m not able to match with dollars and cents, what it’s worth. Not everything around the world is about money, you should love what you do but it is a very real reality that if you live in a housing market that all of the rent is going to be this price point and food in the grocery store is this price point and gas is this
price point but then we’re going to offer to pay you this, what are we really saying?

I think when we look at persons of color in education, that it goes to how are we even making this job an appealing job? Because when I was growing up, saying you wanted to be a teacher wasn’t given the same respect as saying you wanted to be an engineer. Even now when I tell people I’m in education, how there is some kind of “Oh you teach?” When it’s, “Yes and I actually have your child, so you looking down in this way is confusing to me because I spend almost more time with them than you do in looking at your job.” I think looking at a person of color in education, it really comes down to how are we attracting this position, how are we bringing them in and then also, what are we allowing them to teach?

If I’m and individual who teaches history and I was a part of Littleton recently, in looking at how they wanted to change some of their history classes and say, “Let’s only teach the good stuff in America history. Let’s not teach any of the enslavement of people or any of that craziness around Jim Crow, let’s just teach the good stuff.” I’m a teacher whose been asked to teach this, that may be very difficult. I think even when we look at curriculum and what can be taught or what can be implemented into classes, I think that also adds to things. For me, I love my job but I’m also able to develop a curriculum that I believe edifies my identity for myself but also able to uplift others. I think if I didn’t have the opportunities and I had to teach something that maybe in my own research I found not to be true, it would be hard for me to swallow the pill being a person of color in teaching.

Julie Speer: Talk about where you chose to send your child to school.

Quincy Shannon: Education as a parent takes on a whole new reality especially when you are an educator. When you know some of the lay of the land and you’re trying to navigate if for your own seed, for me as a person of color in education who is trying to make sure my daughter gets the best education, I often am faced with the real reality that I have to choose between diversity and the quality of education. If she’s going to go to a school with a lot of individuals that look like her, so often it seems that that quality of education may not be the same.
Or if she’s at a school that’s going to push her. It’s gifted and talented. It has programs that are going to send her to Rome and to Egypt and all these places, often times the diversity in that school is not there. It’s a very hard, how do I play this game of making sure she gets the best education that I can provide while not losing some of the realities of being able to be around individuals who look like her, talk like her and be like her. I think in navigating schools, it’s a very hard piece. I will say The Hope Center located on Elizabeth and Bruce Randolf is one of the most amazing schools in Colorado for early childhood education because it’s not an all-black school but it’s a school that has multiple races, multiple socio-economics and it’s a school that believe that preschool is not a place for day care. But we’re going to give you homework as preschool.

My daughter since she was two and half has had homework. She’s gone through life believing that she should do work after she gets home from school and education was something that was driven and pushed in her and I think in looking at early childhood education and going forward, we have to be very mindful of what places are we putting our kids? Are we putting them in a daycare or are we putting them in a school? Are we making sure that the school has individuals who are able to speak about some of the things that are going to identify with our students or is it just convenience?

We’re always playing this revolving game around how do we figure out the best way to navigate the educational system. But for me, it always comes down to how can I push her the most? Because she’s smart, she’s one of the smartest people that I know and I would always prefer to make sure she’s in the smartest school that she can go to and supplement some of the diversity stuff through activities in other places than go the other way. It’s really hard that that has to be a choice that I have to make.

Julie Speer: Where is she going to go to elementary school?

Quincy Shannon: That’s a good question and one that we’re on the bubble of figuring out. The Logan School is a school that she has had the opportunity to get accepted into and they’ve done some work around making sure she was tested and given her the gifted and talented credentials but then looking at the Denver language schools and thinking about, “Okay, what does full immersed into learning Spanish or Mandarin look like and will that be something that will benefit her future?” Or just staying in a neighborhood
school and being at somewhere like Bromwell and her being able to learn individuals within her community? I think that’s the million dollar question and one I’m still trying to figure out myself.

Julie Speer: In terms of thinking of the future, will Denver every get this integration thing figured out? Maybe not even Denver, the entire United States? What’s your hope for the future?

Quincy Shannon: I believe that Denver, not only will figure out some ways to make the gap smaller within the achievement gap but I think we’re already on that path. I think there are some schools that are doing it in a very great way. I think we have some educators who are amazing. I know some of these individuals personally and have had time to interact with them and learn from them and grow from them. I think the way that we change things and my hope for the future is that we continue to bring people into this field who A, want to be here, who B are able to have the very hard conversation about what does the reality look like, and then C figure out ways to navigate around that.

I think what we have going on in Denver right now around some of the different schools that are coming into fruition and also some of the different educators who have been here know the lay of the land is that we find some people who are now seeing the elephant in the room for what it is and are saying, “Okay, we’ve seen this for too long. We’re seeing the cycles that it’s creating, and now we have young people and elders alike who are saying enough is enough.” What are we going to be able to do to change this? It’s not enough to sit back and say somebody else is going to change it. What are we going to do to change it? I think that is my hope right now in Denver and in the world, is that we have a group of individuals who are waking up for the reality and the matrix in which we live and who are uncomfortable with what they see, so much so that they are getting involved in ways to change it.

Julie Speer: Anything else you feel like you’ve got to say?

Quincy Shannon: I would just say I appreciate programs like this and others that are being mindful about some of the real realities that are going on in our communities and not sweeping things under the rug because we have a generation of students who deserve this work, who deserve this type of opportunities for real dialogue. There may be individuals who have different opinions than my own but I’m hopeful about the fact that if we
can get all of us at least in the same room, or on the same program, or at least dialoguing, that at least we can bring multiple individuals from multiple communities together to at least figure it out. Where are we at and where are we going?
Julie Speer: Talk to me about moving to Denver. When did you move to Denver and what neighborhood did you choose?

Renee Martinez: I moved to Denver in 1996. I'm an urban planner. I was working and living in Boulder and I really embraced Denver. It's diversity, the complexity, the changes it was about to undergo and so I started working here and I was commuting from Boulder. Found Northwest Denver. Really, it held a lot of the qualities that I valued. It was walkable, it had integrated commercial uses, it was quaint, it was historic and so we really found a home in a neighborhood that we wanted to plant our roots.

The neighborhood was on the verge of change in 1996. There were some homes that were priced pretty high and some that were available now what would be rock bottom in the market. It was really area by area. In some areas, we didn't see a lot of investment and change and in other parts of Northwest Denver, there was a bunch. We had a lot of opportunities at different price points and bought little and got in. We were kind of warned about the schools at that point in time, but we didn't have kids and so the sky was the limit.

Julie Speer: When did you start thinking about schools, then?

Renee Martinez: Well, we liked Northwest Denver, so we probably started thinking about kids a little bit later than most people do because we love the people who are there, we love the mix of residents as we had neighbors who'd live there for fifty years or longer. Other people had been in there for ten
and so we really fell in love with the neighborhood. A lot of families who were having kids at that time ... This was before there were a lot of kids on every block. A lot of kids didn't go to school in Northwest Denver, so families would leave when their kids either got to elementary school or middle school. We just kind of watched that from afar. At the time in 2000 when I had my first daughter, literally on my street, there were seven kids born within six months and around my block it was somewhere around fifteen that were born within that year. You sense this change and you got to see it in terms of demand for preschool, supplies for babies, music classes ... As you talked to providers, you got to hear that the demand was increasing and so you could feel this surge of change. I worked with a number of parents. I actually worked at infant and toddler child care provider who was getting more demand than she could provide and worked with her and a number of parents to create an infant and toddler child care center. That was at the beginning of the move and that's because there were just so many babies. There had not been for many years in the neighborhood.

Julie Speer: When did you put on the hat of school reform?

Renee Martinez: I put on the hat of school reform when my oldest daughter was in fourth grade. Elementary schools were well supported in Northwest Denver. We went to a school in Northeast Denver for elementary school because of the program. It was attractive.

Julie Speer: Does that mean you choiced in to a different school? In Northeast, you're meaning closer to Park Hill?

Renee Martinez: Yeah. It could be complicated, but it's fairly simple. I wanted to get into a dual language school for my daughter because my grandparents spoke Spanish. My parents did not, so I spoke none at all except for what I had learned in school. I think there was four dual language schools that we did not get into in Northwest Denver. I was just heartbroken with a five year old and I just was disheartened. I just said, "Oh, well. If we can't get into a dual language school, I'm going to go for the next thing down the list, which is programmatically a program that matches my daughter's needs. We found that it's in the Five Points neighborhood. We have been at that school. We just finished our tenth year because my girls are five grades apart.

Julie Speer: It's a public school?
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<tr>
<th>Renee Martinez:</th>
<th>It's a magnet school in Denver Public Schools, so fantastic program.</th>
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<td>Julie Speer:</td>
<td>Is it Ebert?</td>
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<td>Renee Martinez:</td>
<td>Yeah.</td>
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<td>Julie Speer:</td>
<td>A lot of people have talked about that and that in the beginning it was a great mix of diversity and that as it became more popular, the diversity is kind of shrinking and it's been taken over by White affluent families.</td>
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<td>Renee Martinez:</td>
<td>Yes. I was there for ten years so I saw that happen. It's a good example of how complex the issues are. Were we happy from beginning to end? Absolutely. From 2005 to 2015, we had great teachers. We had quality leaders. There's a great philosophy there, but there's things that absolutely changed when the school began to have a lot less diversity. When we first started, it was diverse. There were African American students. There were Latino students. Classrooms were not dominated by Anglo students. The socioeconomics were different. Before endeavors were pursued, there was a pause to see if that was feasible for the families and children so if there was a field trip or a party or something that was going to happen, there was always this measured ... &quot;Is this going to work for all of us? Is this going to work for all of our kids?&quot; That came to play not only in things that parents pursued, but also in the parties. &quot;What kind of party do we want to have?&quot; There was just a lot of interaction about who we were and who our kids were and how that would work and everybody was very respectful of one another in what we could create within the school. The classroom. It worked. It was very comfortable and there was a lot of consideration because all of us are guilty of just forging ahead with what we know and what we're comfortable with, but you don't always stop and look around to see if everybody's comfortable unless there's a really good reason to do so. That's because the people sitting across the table have different values or different capabilities or have different expectations. It was an awareness. All the kids are wonderful. The kids are wonderful from beginning to end, but you have to feel that if we felt that as a parent, the kids must have experienced that in some way in the classroom, that awareness of one another bringing different values and different opinions and different stories and different experiences to the classroom.</td>
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Julie Speer: Was it awkward and uncomfortable or was it different and interesting?

Renee Martinez: I think every parent would have a different answer. I think it was interesting, perplexing and at times, for me, a little bit uncomfortable. There no longer was the need to look around and say, "Oh. Is that comfortable? Is that right? Is that going to work for all of the kids?" It was different for us.

It changed pretty quickly. I know that from being involved in the school, there were efforts early on to go out and market the school. Find families and find kids who showed, not just quality of giftedness, it wasn't just that, it was who match the philosophy. The hundred languages of children who valued that exploration of the arts. Parents were asked to go to different programs, different schools, different ECE. Talking to different parents to say, "Hey, we're here and this is our philosophy. You might know children who belong there or you might want to talk to parents who belong there." That was around the school. That was targeting a lot of the urban programs. That, I believe, changed. It did change. That recruitment stopped, but what also changed was just the structure. What happened was, there used to be priority for the immediate neighborhood surrounding Ebert and that priority was removed. All of Northeast became the quadrant school, so you had families who were actively pursuing the program, taking the spots over those who were unaware that it could be a good match for their children.

Julie Speer: What happened? How did the face of the class change?

Renee Martinez: Well, for a few years, there was hardly any kids of color in the classroom. It was very troubling. There were parents I know, including myself, who just said, "Wow. Is this our trajectory? It feels different. It's about the experience of the kids and it's less so the parents, but is this the environment that we want to create when our kids go into our city and that's not what they experience?" For me, it felt very different. There was a moment that it kind of catalyzed for me. I believe it's second grade where there's a unit on Latin America and Mexico and culture. All the kids dress up in these amazing uniforms. At the time, I think at that grade, there's still two classrooms, so you're in about the fifty range of kids. There was in my mind, and I have to own this, because my youngest daughter, she doesn't look Latina like myself.
There was not one child who looked Latina or Latino out of fifty kids and it really hit me very hard. We, at that point in time, questioned if we wanted to be at the school and did our own personal tradeoffs as every single family does to decide if that was going to impact our daughter's education experience enough that we would not want to be there. Ultimately, we decided that we were going to stay through the elementary years there. A couple more years. I kind of unplugged at that point, but you started to see a little bit more diversity in the classroom. I don't know how that happened, but there were some years in there where I think it took everybody by surprise, where the natural process was one that was not going to keep the school diverse at all.

In fourth grade is when I really came on the scene with a school program and the offerings in Northwest Denver. Still, at that point in time, hardly anyone that I knew in my neighbors, just a couple here and there were going to school in Northwest Denver. It just wasn't on the radar screen. I would ask people, "Well, what about Skinner Middle School? Our neighborhood school?" They would just be like, "Oh. I didn't even go there. I didn't even look at it." I was calling my school board member to say, "Hey, I think it's not really right that my neighborhood school is not ... Nobody's going there. Where are they all going?"

That's a lack of cohesiveness among these kids because these kids are all growing up together, right? They're experiencing one part that we did, which is, you play around your block with a lot of other kids. They were in preschool together to the age of five. A lot of other kids were in elementary school till fifth grade and then everybody just sort of blew out of Northwest Denver at the time. I talked to a few parents and they're like, "Oh, yeah. These schools ... They're not working. We didn't even look at it. Our kids go somewhere else." You fill in the blank. I was like, "Why?" I'm someone who asks, "Why would that be?" The school's close. Who wants to drive around the city, two trips every day? I'm curious enough to ask why, so I was bugging my school board member as to why that situation existed.

Julie Speer: Which was who?

Renee Martinez: Arturo Jimenez. He called me one day and said, "You know what? You're not the only one that's asking, 'Why don't we have higher performing middle schools? More in demand middle schools?' I'm going to have you get together." I don't remember the logistics, but he put a bunch of us
together and so I met a lot of other parents who have the same concern. "Why don't we have high demand middle schools in Northwest Denver?" We got together and we started really at the level of saying, "Well, what do you want in a middle school? What are the qualities that we want in a middle school?" At the time, I think the reason Arturo had gotten us together was because DPS was launching their own traveling show to elementary schools to ask those elementary schools what they wanted in a middle school.

It was really a very positive process because a few of us decided to break up and go to not just our own elementary school, but to go to a lot of them, so I went to three of them. For the most part, everybody was saying the same thing. At Sandoval, which is a dual language school, they weren't saying, "We want a dual language middle school." Everybody was saying, "I want my child to have rigor and academics. High expectations. Exposure to the arts. Value in physical education. Thinkers, writers ..." It was just education, holistic education. Once we realized that that's what we were hearing at a number of schools, the group of us said, "Well, let's advocate for that." We put these values, which are pretty generic, down in a survey and in a petition and we actually asked strategic questions, like, "Would you pick any of the middle schools now?" "No."

I could get you the numbers because it's been many years now, but a lot of people said, "No, I would not choose a middle school here. I would go somewhere." "If the middle schools had the following qualities, would you choose them?" Somewhere in there, we got a number of seventy percent. Seventy percent said, "Yeah. I would probably stay if there was a school with the following qualities." We didn't want to waste our time. I mean, we're not experts in education, but we still didn't want to waste our time on the topic. We took those qualities and we created a petition that said, "I'd really like to have this kind of school." At that point in time, we didn't know where it would be. We just said, "Well, let's just shop around." We met a couple of the principals.

So at this point in time, we're getting to know each other, there's two of us from Ebert, there was just parents who I didn't even know. We split it up. We interviewed the principal from Lake at the time. I wasn't in on that, so I don't remember who it was. I had helped Bryant-Webster to become a dual language. I was a community member on that working panel, so I talked to them a little bit and they were really hunkering down and staying put. They didn't want to change anything. They were having a
lot of success. You stay away from something when it's having success, so then we met Nicole Veltze at Skinner. At the time, SPF wasn't as big as it is now, but it was starting to be and that's when I started to formulate the understanding that these ratings are kind of like consumer report. They rate them, but the value option isn't usually ever the top one that ended up getting the highest points because there's too many attributes that go into "What's the best value? What's the best fit?" We talked to Nicole and we really liked what we saw. She had all the qualities on the sheet, she was very protective of her school. She was very protective about us, like, who were we coming in to try and give her a list of things that we wanted she was working at her school?

Julie Speer: What was the Skinner SPF at that time?

Renee Martinez: There wasn't an SPF score. It was something different. I think it was a red school. It wasn't as complex as it is now, but I believe it was red. At the time when we met Nicole Veltze, Skinner was a turnaround school. There had been a couple efforts that had not resulted in a turnaround for the school. Nicole had been there and she was doing so much in the classroom. She was resetting the culture, they were saying, "We loved what we saw when we went to school, but the school had not yet achieved the scores that really pull people in the door. We decided to ask her if she would work with us and if she would consider some of the additions that we think would help draw families to the school. She was protective of that, protective of the kids that she had who were choosing her school and worked with us very carefully to identify what would benefit the kids that were there and what would help draw students to her school. We did that for two years. DPS helped us to pull in a grant that would provide music interventions for students that weren't proficient.

Things that were going to draw families to the school and at least have them look at it. We wrote a grant those offerings would be put in place for three years and we needed to achieve the enrollment that would sustain those programs. It was a big effort and it was a lot. School choice is a really complicated choice that families make. I think at the time we were banded together, we wanted a neighborhood school we believed in the school leader. Actually, we saw the potential for an integrated school at Skinner and we really believed in that, so we were willing to broach the subject of school choice with families. It's a very guarded decision-making process, but we really saw the potential.
One of the biggest motivating factors was not just that we were asking for programming that we wanted for our kids, but what we saw is that there were kids who were choosing that school. It was their only choice for a number of different factors. These kids were wonderful. Parents weren't looking past their school because anything really was wrong, per se, it just wasn't a supported school and it wasn't identified to be upwardly capable of providing new programming that could draw new families. We like the idea that it could be an integrated school, but that's a long path and that's really complicated. Ultimately, what we found is that, for the most part, people want an integrated school. They want that because it represents their community. They want that because it's a value for their child.

It was important, but just like anything in a school decision, it wasn't the only thing. I mean, we had to pursue academics. We had to pursue music. There were electives, there were structures in place. We had to describe the rigor that was going on. We had to do a lot of marketing. Everything from being at street fairs and having booths, having wine and cheese. Hitting playgrounds, going to schools, showing up as parents, just to get people to look at the program, get them in the door, get them to see the potential, get them to see that there's more to a school than its rating color or its demographics. Those two things in and of themselves can just put a school off the radar. They thought at that time Skinner might fall under enrollment of three hundred. This year, I believe they're going to try and stay at five twenty five. It happened really quickly.

Julie Speer: Do you remember that first year? Did you start that effort two years before your daughter went there?

Renee Martinez: I started it when she was in fourth grade. I started a year before she would declare that she was going to the school and we didn't start it soon enough to get the funding to market. We got the funding for the programs, so the families that went that first year really had to say, "We are being charged to walk the walk." We can talk all about it, but we haven't been able to put the word out and so there's hardly any families who believe, one, this is going to happen, who've seen it. Hardly any had seen it and we were in a position to put our kids in a place where we felt was good for them, but nobody believed it was the right choice. That was really tough. It's not as hard on sixth graders as it is on ninth graders, but we did it. There was a small group of kids that might've otherwise
choiced out that year that ended up going to the school and then that exponentially just grew.

Julie Speer: So the second year, was it out?

Renee Martinez: Our year is sort of called the pioneering year. No, there wasn't a big increase. The next year, it wasn't the go to school, by any means, but you had a little more momentum amongst kids themselves, a little more trust amongst the parents. We were able to market for nine months, so we got more people in the door. There's a fair amount of people who were able to say, "I don't just go by the color rating of a school. I know that a school is much more than that." We were able to snag some of those parents who said, "Wow. This is what I want for my child." That second year was a good year. It was positive. The third year is when we got more kids and then the fourth year just blew it out. It helped us reach the sustainability. I think, at that point, is when it became that they were managing numbers, managing growth that fourth year.

Julie Speer: How was the academic levels at the school now?

Renee Martinez: Growth is really great at the school. My child and her peers did grow, did achieve, learned a ton. I think one of the things that we add to that is, my daughter was able to pursue Spanish, music, drama, in addition to the core academics. To me, that's really valuable for her as a person. For her to figure out what she loves and wants to do and to prepare her in terms of college readiness, as well as the skills of navigating, "Wow. I no longer go to school with everyone who's exactly like me. What does that mean for me as an individual in terms of my friends who I support, who I call my peers?" That idea of "Who are my peers?" is something that really grew in change for our children.

Julie Speer: What were the demographics of Skinner when you were there?

Renee Martinez: When we started at Skinner, there was a very high percentage of free and reduced lunch, very high percentage of minority students. That has changed. I would say probably the free and reduced lunch has changed more than anything at a faster pace. It's gone down and the school has become a lot more diverse. You walk into the classroom, you walk down the hallway and you see what's representative of our community and in Denver. That is a draw. That is being used to market families because that
is seen as a very positive asset and it's not very common in a lot of schools in DPS.

Julie Speer: Do you have a concern that it's going to continue to reflect the neighborhood in that it's going to be only affluent families going to the school?

Renee Martinez: Sure, so will Skinner be taken over, if you will, by affluent families? I think, in a nutshell, is the magic of creating an integrated school. Certainly, Northwest Denver in the skill of gentrification is leading the charts. It's gentrified very quickly. It's changed. Will the school follow that path? It's likely, however, the school started to be integrated a little bit after the neighborhood. I believe that people choose a school because of its offerings, because its potential, because of its teachers and because it is integrated. I believe that that's a draw, not just for kids in the neighborhood. Well, there used to be students who came from Jeffco to Skinner. They can no longer get in at this time, but I believe there are kids from other neighborhoods who would be drawn to the school if they could get in. Again, the structures, just like at Ebert, begin to influence the trajectory of the demographics.

Julie Speer: Isn't the same thing going to happen again as soon as it's ... "Oh. It's a great school, it's high performing and it's integrated. Let's take that over." It's no longer integrated because affluent families take it over.

Renee Martinez: Yeah and then it sort of teeter totters to the other end. A lot of the families there value that it's an integrated school. A lot of the families believe that that is an asset for kids and would, I think, not find the school as desirable if it went the direction of becoming mostly affluent.

Julie Speer: Now, North Denver. North High School. Are you guys the reason that Nicole went from Skinner to North?

Renee Martinez: We're not, but she did follow the students that she loved and had implemented new policies from sixth to eighth and followed them into ninth grade at North. That was not our year. We were a little bit behind that wave, but those were the students that she followed when they were in sixth grade.

Julie Speer: It is growing and their achievement levels have gone up, but it's by no means an academically high achieving school yet.
Renee Martinez: Yeah, so how did we choose North High school, even though it's not a highly rated school yet? I think that I return to my belief that a rating on a rating could put it at the top, it could put it at the bottom, but somewhere in between are the values that are meaningful to different people. What was meaningful to us that was happening at North High School is it has quality teachers, great offerings, a holistic education for your child. There's ceramics, there's computers, there's drama, there's music, there's many offerings. That matched our philosophy of education. There's structures to help your child be successful and to drive their education and to make the right choices.

It had all the makings and so it almost was, "How can we not choose this school?" Our daughter is ready for so much autonomy, it's right in our neighborhood. We made that choice, but I have to be honest and say, there's still that pool of that SPF and that it plants a little bit of a seed of a doubt in your mind and in the minds of many others who do not still choose that school. In addition to that, you have the high minority percentage at the school. Didn't deter us at all, but it deters a lot of families. We're still in the marketing business for Skinner and then North for five years now. It is just unbelievable how it deters families. Yeah, they want their child to have a diverse student body, those experiences. That is enough right there for families not to choose the school.

It's not diverse at all. Some families just stop right there. With the SPF score and the minority percentage, they look no further. It's really unfortunate because there's so many other values there. There's so many great things happening. You really have to dig a little deeper, not only in the school, but, I think, within yourself to say, "Wow." This is what we're offering. We made the choice, we had those doubts, still. We were very watchful. Would the student body create enough diversity and enough of a social peer system for our daughter? That was question number one. Question number two was, is there something to this rating that we're going to open a door or a hallway and realize that that score is for a very specific reason? We found neither one. What we found is a wonderful, supportive school environment. Very positive, a diverse range of students, their interests. What we approached very cautiously saying, "Any decision can be undone and we can change high schools. You could be a sophomore, junior and senior where you want to go." We ended up not at all being in that position because our daughter was academically challenged and she has a great social peer group there. There was no reason to leave. It's growing, but it still is not the school of choice in
Northwest Denver. That'll be intriguing to see the path of how choice influences the future of the school.

Julie Speer: How can a school succeed without parent engagement? Without a strong parent core? I mean, you basically were working for free, right?

Renee Martinez: Yeah. A lot of people were. I think parent engagement is so critical. I highlighted it when my daughter was in fourth grade. Parent engagement was critical. DPS went to elementary schools, talked to people about what they wanted and, at least for us, that helped us really catalyze what we knew was in demand. That was what we helped to shape and influence and market at Skinner. Community engagement, though is at the heart of I believe, keeping a school successful, vibrant, changing to the needs of academics. I believe it's the key to helping schools not be segregated. I think you cannot regulate desegregation and busing is a whole different issue, but you can't create an enrollment zone and try and make three schools more integrated just structurally by forcing that to happen.

You have to talk with parents and understand what they want and create that demand at those schools. Unless you do that, there is no way you're going to be able to undo the lack of integration at schools. You have to talk with parents. You have to gauge parents to understand what they value and what they want to see offered and what changes they want to have in a twenty first century school. You have to ask them why they're not making that choice or what they need to make that choice and then they'll make that choice. Many families, if they're asked to do that and that school is created, they will love that school and they will support that school. That will be a foundation that keeps that school really strong even in the face, I believe, of changing demographics within a neighborhood. Too many times, there's just the structures that are put in place to achieve the outcomes.

Parents are too critical, community is too critical and the nuances of if that success can be meaningful, especially in Northwest Denver, it is not a captive audience in terms of schools. They've proven that, historically. They have one of the lowest capture rates of all the quadrants and we have programs in Wheat Ridge and Jeffco and Adams County that are more than willing to have our kids. You have little sub-communities of kids who have already gone there. It's an easy switch. If a school doesn't work out for you, you have other options and they're not in DPS. When
you don't have a captive audience and you're trying to structurally create an outcome at different schools, it's not going to work. You're going to lose people. You're going to lose customers, not use them to help you achieve specific outcomes.
Julie Speer: Talk to me about your own family and your girls, and talk about your own experience with them in navigating Denver Public Schools as a parent.

Ricardo Martinez: Yeah, I have two girls, now they're adults. It was a learning experience for us, navigating, going through DPS, the public school systems. We sent them both to an extended day program at Gilpin Elementary, because we're both working parents. They offered the opportunity to have children come in a little bit earlier and stay later til we got off work. It was a nice set-up. We never thought about the quality of education. We really liked the after-school programs, there was music, violin, computers, piano, all kinds of enhancements. All the children really enjoyed it. We just assumed that the school itself was great. I guess, everybody was caring, really attended to our kids, and that kind of stuff. We were surprised to find out, later on, actually, not even at that moment, the quality of the education after the girls had left.

But while they were in the school, we ran into an issue around how children were being treated in the school. It was our youngest daughter, in the second grade. First grade, she had excellent teacher, man, she was flying, excited, bouncing off the walls, trying to get to school. Second grade, she did the same thing, and about a month later, she just didn't want to go to school. Tummy aches, headaches, didn't feel good. You know, we made her go to school. It was some months later down the road that one of our friends whose daughter also was in second grade the year prior, we were comparing, as parents do, and they said, yeah, our daughter did the same thing. So we asked them both, [inaudible] and the oldest girl finally admitted, yeah, she was afraid of the second grade teacher because she was smacking kids, it was mainly black kids, just one,
and she would pick in reverse her favorite to hit. And told her, don't tell anybody, because I'm going to get in trouble. She did the same thing when my daughter went to second grade.

It was pretty astounding. We complained. They did too, by the way, raised concerns, apparently nothing changed. We raised concerns, and we had a meeting with them, and they were going to put her on some remedy, some corrective thing. But she's still in the classroom. We pulled our daughter out of the classroom. We had to. But that was a shock, that a school would find it acceptable for an adult to be hitting kids. Even just raise the concerns, the allegations, and the response was very limited. That really was our first thought that as parents that not everything is nice and cozy in the schools, even though overall the environment, as you see it and you perceive it, isn't bad.

And that it took us so long to really listen to our daughter and check what was happening was an experience in itself. We learned a lot from that, that you really have to take the cues from your children, that not everything is coming from them. What are the conditions that are driving those students, especially when they're so excited?

Julie Speer: This second-grade teacher, was this a white teacher?

Ricardo Martinez: Yes, it was a white teacher, really friendly, really nice. We got to know her, even before our daughter went to her classroom, because the school setting was really welcoming and people would float between the classrooms, and then after school they would also take on some of those tasks. So really, the school itself as an environment was really welcoming. That's why it was a shock. But she just picked, and it was both years that we know of, the year prior and then the year that our daughter went to school, it was a black child, a black male. And that's who was getting smacked in the head.

Knowing now, and then just going back and looking at the circumstances, it's pretty telling. We both were educated. I was involved in the civil rights movement from the early sixties by my parents. It's not like it's an unknown factor. But even with that, as a parent, you really trust your child and your baby in a school setting, and that was happening, and obviously it was a pattern that was happening that was not corrected.

Julie Speer: When was this?
Ricardo Martinez: In the middle to late eighties, it's around then.

Julie Speer: Can you summarize for me your experience with the schools? Because you ended up leaving your neighborhood to send your kids to good schools.

Ricardo Martinez: Yeah, Gilpin Elementary... Both of us were working, it was the best school for our needs, for all our needs. But as we started to realize that our child was getting on to middle school, we started paying more attention to where they were going to go. We knew the schools in the northside, where we lived and we have lived ever since, were not the best schools for our kids. They were not going to be providing the best education. Then we started looking around. We were part of the initial School of the Arts at Cole. That's when they opened up at Cole Middle School. We were part of that, trying to find the best place for our kids. Our children didn't attend schools in northside. They went to Gilpin, they went to other schools, and finally in high school, they went to East High School. But they didn't go to our neighborhood schools [inaudible], because they were not that good.

Julie Speer: You specifically did not send your kids to North, right?

Ricardo Martinez: We did not send them to North. I think from where we lived, it would have been either Skinner or Horace Mann, but we were not going to send our kids to either of those two middle schools. Most folks really decided on the later grades, and so our high school for us, the option was East High School, not North. We just drove them or put them on the bus, depending on work schedules. But we intentionally, did not send our kids to our neighborhood schools, especially when it was high school time.

Julie Speer: Because of the academic levels?

Ricardo Martinez: Because of the academics, because we could do research, talk to other parents and we compared North High School to East High School in terms of what the programs they were offering, and there was no comparison. We talked to folks who attended North High School, who then had gone on to college, and they were unprepared. They spoke openly about it. This was early on, "We were not ready for higher education. We thought we were, we were getting straight As, Bs, in high school, then we go ahead to college, and we can't write an essay." That's what drove us then to say, we got to find better options for our kids. And East High School, at
that time, was the best option that we had. They both enjoyed it, they had a great time.

Julie Speer:  Let’s talk about the busing story that you told me. When you were working they were sending 120 students to be bused out. Talk to me about where you were, when this was, and what happened.

Ricardo Martinez:  Yeah, again, this was in the mid to late eighties, around there. I was hired at Smedley Elementary. There was a pilot program, parent engagement. We were parent liaisons, that was a brand new program, I was one of the first folks hired at the school. Got in, buses would come in and then they would go, and realized there were a lot of kids leaving the school. It’s about 120, probably more, but I can say safely, 120 students would leave every morning, and there’d be a bus coming in, be eight to twelve, again, not paying a whole bunch of attention, but just rough count, it was eight to twelve, maybe twenty at the most, that would come in from suburbia, and the kids were being shipped out.

You know, it raises questions in your head. But also it was the court order busing to integrate the schools. We saw very little integration, we ship out 120 students, we got back maybe twenty at the most, fifteen, eight, depending on the week. So our school definitely was not integrated. We still had a majority in white. It took me as parent liaison just asking other folks, and we found out that schools in suburbia, there weren’t as many children. They had brand-new schools, brand-new programs, but they didn’t have the children to really keep those programs and those schools open. Came to realize, we were just trading bodies. Our children were capital, they were commodities, ship them out to keep those schools open, with the guise of supporting white flight.

They open up those brand-new schools, our schools were still old, some of them, a lot of them were old. Not Smedley, Smedley was pretty new. It was about the same time they were closing elementaries in the northside. Ashland Elementary, other schools, and they sold the buildings. Now they're condominiums, town homes, that kind of stuff. They didn't call them lofts back then, they became apartments. But they closed the schools and the children were relocated, and a lot of them had to go down to far south, west Denver and other areas, so they could keep those schools open. It was amazing for us.
That's been, in our learning experience and through Denver, it's been that our students, nonwhites, we were the fillers. We were the folks that could keep schools open, or cram us into a school. Valdez Elementary, brand-new school, was built about the same time, packed to the gills. I worked there too, as a bilingual para. And we were packed to the gills with students. They had closed all other schools. They were not receiving the best education. Teachers working as hard as they could, but it was not the same. So for us it's been, myself personally, it's been just an accumulation of knowledge on how systemic the problem is. It's not a school, it's not two schools, not teachers, really, it's systemic, it's individuals all working together in tandem that created these conditions.

Julie Speer: What is the problem? If you're looking at race and education, if you look at Denver Public Schools in general, talk about the reality that you see in terms of race, in terms of segregation, in terms of inequity.

Ricardo Martinez: Yeah, what I'm saying is, it's systems, not just individuals, and the systems are created policies and practices. Denver Public Schools was found guilty of discrimination twice, in the late seventies, the Congress of Hispanic Educators brought a lawsuit against the Denver Public Schools for unequal treatment in student bodies. English language learners were not being educated in the same manner as English speakers. They brought the lawsuit and they won. DPS was under court order to provide equal access to education for all children in the schools. That meant a sound bilingual program.

In the mid nineties, '95, by that time we had formed Padres Unidos, parents, eighty-six parents signed onto a complaint with the Office of Civil Rights. They did an investigation, two year investigation. They found Denver Public Schools again guilty of discrimination against non-English speakers and students with special needs. So Denver Public Schools has a long history of racism inside, and it's in there. It's reflected on priorities, it's reflected on how they deal with discipline, it's reflected on how they're even dealing with the quality of the food in the schools, and the programs and the priorities in spending money.

When we brought the lawsuit against DPS, or the complaint, there were libraries that had maybe one or two books in Spanish, in bilingual schools, quote/unquote "bilingual schools." So what does that tell you? I was at Valdez, being a bilingual para, I was one of the folks that was doing the reading groups for Spanish speakers. Little children couldn't wait to get
out of the Spanish reading groups, to go into the smart reading groups, English speaking. Now nobody told them they were not smart, nobody told them they were dumb, nobody told them that English was better, but every indicator inside the school, and outside the school, was telling them that if you speak Spanish, you’re dumb. And to get smart, you had to go learn English. Really, I was reading with them, and they wanted to get out. "Oh, Mr. Martinez, when can I go to the, with so-and-so?" I said, "Why? We're learning here." "Yeah, but that's the smart reading group." That wasn't one child, it was several children.

We had a conversation, just impromptu. Oh, yes, from kindergarten through second grade, they got that message. What did that do to a child's psyche? What do they think of their parents if they only speak Spanish? So it's systemic, it wasn't like I couldn't go to this one teacher and say that, it was just the school settings. It was not a surprise that the entire Denver Public Schools was found guilty of discrimination. It was rampant, and it still is rampant. The differences in the quality of education.

Again, it's not saying that somebody is racist, but it's impossible not to admit that, if we live in a society like we have now, where racism is rampant, it's systemic. Our schools are part of that system. We all are raised in this society. We take a whole bunch of cues, all this societal stuff that's around us. It has to affect us. You just don't get a teaching degree, and somehow you're clear of all influences from society, and you step into the halls of the classroom, and everything else vanishes away. The reality and the facts don't bear that out. People bring with them all our baggage from society, and it plays out in the classroom and the schools. Schools is a microcosm of society, in the schools, we're a captive audience and we have a whole bunch of systems to support those practices.

That's around school discipline. It's not a surprise on the disparity for the same student behavior, somebody gets a talking-to, and somebody gets suspended for five days. And they aren't surprised that the one that gets a talking-to is a white student and, same behavior, the one that gets five days out is a black student or a Chicano or a student with special needs. And especially, if you're not white and special needs, you really are going to get out of the school. Who was getting caught more with the police? Black and browns. We're not advocating that we should be expelling and
suspensing more students for the same behavior, I think, but the disparity in the treatment is obvious.

Now since we have started practicing restorative practices and moved the discipline policies to be a little more progressive and less discriminatory, the numbers are dropping, but dropping faster for whites than for other folks. The disparity has increased in terms of comparison. That's not an accident, it's a national trend. So when we say it's systemic, it's embedded, it's systemic. It's part of the fabric of the Denver Public Schools. Which is something that we all have to recognize, and then how do we deal with it. It has to be an honest conversation. It can't be, well, I'm not a racist. You're right, you're not a racist. But we really are working in a system that has racism alive and kicking in.

Our options are either ignore it and be in denial, or be an active resistor and change it. And if you choose to ignore it, you really are an active participant in supporting the status quo and racism in the schools. There's no fence straddling on this issue. You can deny it all you want. That's like people who can deny global warming, evolution, that the Rolling Stones are better than the Beatles, you can deny it, it's just not reality.

We are of the heart and mind that we don't solve problems by denying them. We have to solve problems by looking at them square face, and then what's all our responsibilities to fix it. That's been our trajectory in what Padres y Jovenes now once created Jovenes Unidos. You have to take an active part, and it's been pretty amazing how profound it has been to have young people then come into the picture and address issues and find solutions and take control of, as much as they can, of their environment and their lives. Profound effect.

Julie Speer: It seems like there's an awareness from the district about the reality of institutional racism. Have you seen a change in the last few years? Are things getting better? Is the district open to working and talking about these issues? What's the reality you see?

Ricardo Martinez: You know, for the school district and school board, there has been a significant change in terms of looking at the district honestly and the disparities and the inequities. I can say for us, as Padres y Jovenes, when we just started pushing on the district in a more organized fashion and meeting the resistance of "no, this is not it," when we brought the
complaint around bilingual ed. We were on opposite sides, the district and us, not just because of the lawsuit, even just the acceptance that something was wrong in the district. The openness to have a discussion to say, yeah, maybe we are, our priorities are skewed and they're wrong and they're off. None of that was happening, it was just this back and forth.

With Dr. Worko, actually before that, because I was not working for Padres as a staffer, I was still working for the unions. Chip Zullinger came in, he was the briefest superintendent, I think, in DPS history. He came in, he supported community involvement, he was out. So I can speak from my history with Dr. Worko, when he came in, he came in and was opening up conversations that had not been possible to be opened up before. It was from Dr. Worko to Michael Bennet, and now Boasberg. You can see the shift and the openness in the conversations.

We still have a lot of problems, especially when we started the conversation around school discipline, then Superintendent Bennet really stayed true on that. They were hard conversations, because really we get into the issues of disparities and inequities, and the overt racism and you can see it, as to who would get suspended. That was really the first hardest conversation that we had with the district around race, aside from the lawsuit that we had with them. To their credit, this was not fluff, this was not kind of just bend to the wind on the polls, this was a true, honest conversation and dialogue, and we've seen that progression, from Dr. Worko, to Bennet, to now Tom Boasberg.

And other administrators, not just them as figureheads, but other schools in conversations through the schools. Right now we're working in tandem with their student services, people who address issues of discipline in the schools, you know, John Simmons and Eldridge Greer. Before them were the other folks, and we really are engaged in some hard conversations around race and disparities and the impact of that in the schools and the classrooms.

So yes, the district is moving hard on this stuff, but it's really going to take a collective effort on everybody, because it is the most necessary conversation in terms of this county and how we're going to grow up as a society and turn to the better. It's not possible, if we don't do this, it won't be possible. Democracy is not going to flourish, and that's why, for us, we're glad and we're really thankful for the district that we don't have
to fight so hard to start the conversations, and that we're at the table having this hard conversation. So yeah, my kudos to Tom Boasberg, he's [inaudible] even harder, he takes some licks on this, but that's okay. Change is not easy and change that's necessary is really always difficult.

Julie Speer: Let's talk about change and north Denver. Tell me about where you live, tell me about your neighborhood, and tell me about all the changes you've been seeing and the growth of all that.

Ricardo Martinez: I've been living in the northside now since we've moved here in the early eighties, like '81, just on 35th and Elliott, or Clay and 33d, either side of Federal. Right now we bought a house on what's now called the West Highlands, also old northside before. It's right there on the main, right on 32d. Our neighborhood is changing, has been changing for a while. People moving in, the houses change, houses get demolished. Where one house stood, in some parts, now you got a six-plex. Glorified apartments, but they're town homes. I got one place, like two blocks from my house, it was a row of really small apartments. A lot of parents and children that went to Valdez lived there. Those places were sold and now they're condominiums. I know those actual apartments, because I used to go visit them and talk to the grandma who were raising their child about her child's development and how he was reading and all that stuff. Good, really good hardworking people. So I know those actual places, more like a small studio, almost like what hers was. Now they were sold and they became condominiums. There's been a change that's happening in northside, so now we got West Highlands, Highlands, whatever other Highland property there is now.

You know, and some is good. I know when we bought a house back in the early nineties, the neighborhood was different, and it's been changing, and like I say, some for the good, some for the not-so-good. What's amazing is being in Denver, and seeing almost two now transitions of Denver, the same patterns, only this one is going to last longer economically. People moved in, bought homes and then went over the head in trying to renovate, and then just couldn't keep it afloat. This was different, because nobody thankfully for most folks, nobody really lost their homes. That one prior, people really lost their homes.

What's fascinating, having seen this is, and it's just a human condition, it's nothing different, I think everybody experiences the same thing down the line eventually, is you move into a place, for us in the neighborhood, a lot
of the arts and the [inaudible] for diversity. Because it's a diverse community, you know, you have diverse populations, you have people here, and it was before people moved in. It's not now. People recreate exactly what they left, and then they scramble to create diversity. So now we got pizza joints, but it's not the same pizza joint as when you left. There used to be a Mexican restaurant there, now it's a pizza joint. Whole bunch of cafes. Taverns, they're not bars no more, they're pubs and taverns. Now our bolas and Mexican tortas, now they are wraps and paninis. Just the neighborhood changes.

Our schools are changing, you know, what hasn't changed yet is the population in our schools, because even before this big surge, just like us, like we took our kids out of northside because we wanted better schools, other parents have been doing this for years, choosing to send their kids, or take their kids someplace else. That's still happening in Denver, in the schools. Well-intentioned parents who are looking for the best for the kids, struggle to get new programs in the schools, change the entire school program and the methodology, which is good. But they also eventually then just leave. They don't send their kids to the schools on northside.

We got an IB program in our neighborhoods, in the elementary. And we have an IB program in the middle school. Most white parents send their children to the elementary IB, almost none of them send them to the middle school IB, because they know it's not going to work.

Honestly, because you have too many, there are other students who are not in IB. You have Colfax, you have Cheltenham, you got Eagleton, even some students from Valdez, because now Valdez has been moved out for renovations. So none of those children have been in the instruction of international. It's a rigorous program, it's really more rigid than some of the charter schools that people are talking about. But most of the children aren't ready for that. Not that they can't flourish in that kind of methodology, they just have not been prepared for it.

I even checked the data to see how well they're doing, and how well they're doing by ethnicity. Who's doing good, is everybody doing good, or is it just white parents and their children doing good, and the other kids are doing mediocre. I don't know that. I'm not going to say, but to me it'd be a good subject to see how that divide has been closed in terms of the achievement gap in that school.
Julie Speer: So is north Denver gentrified, and what do you think about what's happening?

Ricardo Martinez: Yeah, as the neighborhood has changed, it's definitely gentrifying. Our parents who could afford rentals in the entire northside, aren't able to afford rent anymore. They've been pushed out, some places were sold so they could be remodeled. My immediate neighborhood, this square blockage around my house, was put on [inaudible], everybody was buying and razing homes, where you had a single family, they were putting in three or four town homes. That's a little section, little sanctuary on a moratorium that you can't do that. You can raze it and build a single family, or if it's a duplex, you can do that. But you just can't build, take down a duplex and put in an eight-unit. Other places they can, but this one little spot, they can't.

But it's immense growth, people all went in, and people got pushed out. That neighborhood has changed, like I say, from where our office was, that side of Federal, it was all working folks who sent their kids to North High School and sent them to Columbian and Valdez, they're all gone. All those apartments were sold, remodeled, and then either sold or rented out at rents that people can't afford. So the distinct population is moving out, going to southwest Denver, going to Commerce City, Aurora, up north, but some even to Lakeside, to [inaudible], right there in Edgewater, there was a huge explosion of folks that moved right across Sheridan but then they got pushed out. Edgewater has received hundreds of folks that used to live on the other side of Sheridan. It's really blooming out, and people are being pushed out.

It's good and bad. We need change, but not if it's out of control, if it's not to the benefit of everybody, then it gets problematic, and it has been up to this point. Not just in the northside, other places where gentrification happens, and there's no thought to the folks who are there, because again, the big selling point is diversity in the community, all this stuff, right? And then the diversity gets pushed out, and what's in place is exactly what people left.

Then you start creating the fancy names for restaurants to give it a sense of diversity. But diversity isn't a name. So you have a pseudo-Mexican restaurants. Nice people, good food, but you know, it's not [Inaudible] on 32d and Clay, you had bakeries here, you had stores, now you got a yogurt place. On Main Street, there used to be a bridal shop, little
Mexican restaurants, they're gone. You got the Best Burger in Denver, ice cream shops. They're good, but if you were looking for diversity and you came in, they've run the diversity out.

There used to be, and I'm not exaggerating, there used to be on 32d between Zuni, there was Clay and Zuni, on 32d. For a while there, they put up on Sundays, and this was approved by the city and police, they put barriers, roadblocks, and you couldn't drive in that section unless you lived there. The only people asked that were Mexicans. Two checkpoints. One of our members who owns a restaurant down a little ways away, she experienced that. She was driving her van, and she got stopped, and she was asked why, what was her business. She was just, "I drive through, I'm going to Federal." You have to go around, you can't. This is back in like mid nineties.

But that's part of the change that's been for gentrification, people will complain that we have too many Mexicans. They're having [inaudible] over on 32d. That's the ugly part of gentrification. The good part of gentrification is that it's becoming more vibrant, shops are opening up, and it's good to mingle with other folks. The bad part is, you come to mingle with other folks, and then they get pushed out. Then some folks really get up and go the extremes of trying to block their haven from Mexicans.

Julie Speer: Let's talk about Strive Sunnyside, what happened?

Ricardo Martinez: You know, way back, Horace Mann was going to be closed. Underperforming, really under enrolled. They were losing a hundred students, which means that was that. That was one of the schools that was going to get closed just because there weren't enough students there. People were opting out, and they were then going to either Skinner, maybe Bryant-Webster, or some other place. But Horace Mann was on the chopping block.

The principal from Remington, Veronica Benvidez, at that time, she said, "Well, let me re-open up Horace Mann and combine Smedley and Remington and close those two schools and I'll have a K-8 at Horace Mann," and that became Trevista, Horace Mann Trevista. The concept and the idea of that formation of K through eighth grade, it really is a good idea, it's not bad. But you have to do it well. Bryant-Webster was doing it well, they have a K-8, they're doing really well. So other schools
in the country do well and their children flourish. So it wasn't like it was a bad idea, but the execution was really bad.

But then even the parents whose children were in the elementary, which was doing pretty good at Trevista, they were doing okay, were opting out from the later grades. I don't know enough about what was happening, but that's the evidence and that's the fact [inaudible], the school, their later grades were not growing and again it was the same pattern, people just leaving the middle school going someplace else. Then this whole brou-ha came about, you know, what happens to Trevista.

In the meantime, Remington was reopened as a Strive Sunnyside Middle School. They needed a space, and they had been housed on the North campus, on one of the wings that was not being used by the school, for years, it had been abandoned. I can't remember what they had the number of the building, but it was just storage space, it wasn't being used by North High School for years. That's where Strive by that point the middle school was housed for a couple of years. Then they wanted to have a high school, so they moved the high school to that location, and they moved the middle school to what's now Strive Sunnyside, that was the old Remington Elementary.

So the building was being used, and Smedley became a catch-all for all kinds of different programs and now it's going to be a Montessori middle and high school, I think it is. Which sounds crazy to me, that you would have an elementary being a high school. The retrofit is going to be tremendous, just the cost but that's why sometimes we question the wisdom of DPS and their choices.

But that was the pattern, all these things would be moved around. Then come up where they were going to close, because they closed just Trevista, and then there is no middle school, and the parents wanted to have a middle school in the immediate area. And they just moved the whole student body. Trying to find solutions to problems is always a good thing, but the logic and the reasoning behind your solution that you're proposing can be problematic. If the reason for your solution is, "I want the best for my children, I really don't care about your children," it's highly problematic. That's a wrong approach, especially when you bring in class and race into the picture. That "it's okay, if you black little kids, you're poor, you're in the projects, you can walk about four or five more
blocks to get to a school. I want my children to walk maybe a block or
two," and that's our interest. That's what we want to do.

You're used to being heard because you're white, and you're not used to
being set aside, you're listened to and it's a community process. But the
community is not just you, the community is the folks that live in the
projects. The community is everybody else. We experience that too,
we're supporting at that point was Westover Prep that became Strive and
Chavez Academy, the same mentality.

The mentality is, it's a question of privilege. I as a white person, I as a
person that has the ability can design and devise, maybe it's a way to find
a solution to how to provide the best for my child. I can send them to the
school, I can send them out of the area, send them to other places. We
did the same thing, we took our kids to East High School. There's certain
privileges you can have because you are able to. No one faults parents for
looking for the best for their children. The problem is if we don't fight to
improve the schools for all our children. The northside has been historic,
there's always been people leaving out and the ones that have no options
were stuck in the schools. They happen to be mostly Chicanos, some
blacks, and Mexican immigrants. That was okay, and I can send my child
someplace else, I'll even design an IB program at Brown Elementary, I'll
find solutions.

As soon as Mexican parents, immigrants, found their own solutions, as
soon as working folks who were blended, white and all that, found a
solution, whether it was Westover Prep or Chavez Academy, huge
uproar. It was okay, we'll find a safety valve, we'll leave, but as soon as
Mexican immigrants found the best solution for the children, and it was a
neighborhood school, you can call it charter if you want, but it was a
neighborhood school, neighborhood children were going to that school.
And it didn't fit your perception on what is a good school, problems
arose. The same thing being displayed over here at Trevista. The problem
is always when the folks who have been silent for long get organized and
fight for their options, fight for their children and it's at odds with the
folks of privilege, conflicts arise.

The standard that some folks operate from, I have the right to find
options, and I'll find them, that standard has to apply to all of us. You
might not like that option, that's tough. You should have then fought to
improve the schools in the neighborhood for all those years before your
babies went to school, because our babies were going to that school, we
found different options. We kept fighting. So the issue is the standard of
who has the right to fight for the children, and who has the right to find
the best for the kids. The answer is, all of us. All of us should support
each other, but no one has the right to say, I want the best for my child,
even though it hurts your child. Plain and simple.

Julie Speer: Tell me the story of the math whiz student from North High School.

Ricardo Martinez: We started at North High School, and that's when we had our second
chapter of Jovenes Unidos. Our first members of Jovenes were mixed. We
had folks who were ready to drop out and we had the class
valedictorians. People were interested in making the school better. This
one young man, he was a math whiz. He was I think a 4.8, some kind of
nuts standing. Really smart guy, math whiz. He gets a scholarship, at
School of Mines. Didn't last a year, didn't last the first semester. He
dropped out, failing math. We said, why? The fact was, there's inequity.
We're not holding the same standards to students.

Our students, most of them that were holding the chapter down at
North, they were honors, they were in all these classes, they were
advanced. They couldn't write an entrance essay to university. Not that
they were not capable, they just couldn't write it. They were taking AP
English, for God's sakes. This young man, he was at the top of his class in
mathematics, and he couldn't make it. It's not like somehow he forgot
the whole math between going from North High School to the School of
Mines. He met the expectations of the teachers. He met the expectations
of the class assignments. He met the expectations of the quizzes and
tests. He did all that, and he shone, he was flying. He was flying at very
low expectations. Then when reality hit him, he just couldn't understand
why he couldn't. You think, well, you're dumb, you can't handle it. He
dropped out. He had the whole world, and he still has, but really at that
point, he really had the whole world before him. And North failed him.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about southwest Denver, and the issues that you see in the
community in southwest Denver.

Ricardo Martinez: Folks in [inaudible] the south of Denver, one, because most of our
members moved to the south of Denver, that's who can afford it. Also
because the schools are really in trouble. Overall it's one of the lowest
performing areas, actually, northside is not that far behind either, with
some shining examples of things going right. But southwest Denver is the highest concentration of really bad schools. We are in deep in just focusing on that area, because we need to make a difference. And by chance, we're also starting to face that gentrification is starting up. We have a chance, how do we formulate sound plans that includes everybody, so that affordable housing is affordable housing. Affordable housing is not two hundred thousand below the medium, when the medium is four hundred and fifty thousand. A $200,000 home is not affordable, or an apartment is not affordable housing to folks who are barely making minimum wage.

We have to clarify those affordable housing definitions, that it's got to be low income, it has to be designed for low income folks, so that people can stay there. Now we have folks in the southwest [inaudible] because the schools are in bad shape. We got Kepner going through a complete transformation, Lincoln is next, and other schools. Parents are engaged, students are excited. We're doing canvassing, just going door-to-door in the neighborhoods, talking to folks about what we want to do, what we need to do. And people are responding. It was really amazing to see high school students just walking the neighborhood, just dropping flyers and talking to folks. It's amazing the response of folks, because what they're seeing is, young people taking it up, taking up how they're going to improve their communities. They see the hope in that, in the kids' excitement. Never [inaudible] has happened. So it's pretty fascinating to see that developing, but we do have a long ways to go in the southwest. It's going to be a long haul.

Julie Speer: Talk about the reality of immigrant parents.

Ricardo Martinez: Most that come from Mexico, and you hit the U.S., it's night and day in terms of resources and the buildings and the grounds and all the programs and it's a new change, right? You got classes with lights, air conditioning, the floors are cement or tile, they're not dirt. Books are free. There's all this support so you think, this is great. We just don't know, even the [inaudible] we don't have a sense of the quality of education.

When I came to this country years back, because I'm from the U.S., resident of Mexico, I came to the U.S., I was three years ahead in all matters, except in English and U.S. history. Parents come in, education varies, some third grade, some through high school, even higher, come in
and they see this stuff, you expect the same. Because schools are schools, teachers are dedicated personnel who are going to do the best for your children. Someone goes to Kepner, and they come out pretty much illiterate in English. Then they go to Lincoln, and it's even worse. I mean, if you come in with a child who's going to go into elementary, and they're in elementary and they don't know how to read by third grade. Not in Spanish nor English, they're just illiterate in two languages. Then you hit middle school, and it happens again, and then you get to high school, and it happens again.

As parents you don't realize in the early grades because you get a lot of smiley faces, and My Little Ponies, and rainbows and stars, and smiley faces. Middle school is when you start hitting the wall because then you got different teachers, and the school work, the courses are different, you have different math, for some reason, people teach differently, and you don't know how to read. You can't read for content. You can parrot the words, you can mimic the words, you can pronounce the words, you just don't understand what you're reading, if the instruction wasn't well done in the early grades. Or if you come into middle school or high school and you're trying to learn English, and there's no support system, then it's going to be harder for you.

I'm not surprised that we hear a lot of cases. One of our parent organizers had that same experience, that exact same experience. She went to Lincoln, she came in as a high school student. She came in so excited, that she was going to come to the U.S., come to schools. Other people that she knew had described the schools to her, and then she stood in the building, big giant schools, walks into the doors, absolutely excited. She was failing every single class. No one counseled her, no one told her about college. So she was cleaning houses for a living for a long time, doing odd jobs. Now she's working with us as a parent organizer. She said, "I learned more here in the two-and-a-half, three years, that I've been working with Padres about the school system and how it works and what I need to watch out to support my children who are in school now, than in the entire years I was a student, obviously, and living in this country."

We don't have the information that's necessary to make sound, informed decisions and ask the right questions. Parents come in from Mexico, and we have a certain understanding of how schools work, and it's completely different from here. Then you throw in the race question and
how people see the value in human beings. In Mexico, we're Mexicans, we're in a sea of Mexicans. We're it. We're not the Other, we're not the minority, we're not the ethnic group, we are it. Same human being crosses the border, and now you are the Other. You're not as smart, you're definitely not intelligent because you don't speak English. You're at risk, you're deficient, because you don't speak English because you're poor, because you're an immigrant, and we become risk factors. We stop being human beings. And schools treat us that way.

Julie Speer: And yet 60 percent of DPS is Hispanic.

Ricardo Martinez: Right. Sixty percent and it's growing, and our teacher core doesn't reflect that.

Julie Speer: Talk about teachers of color and teacher pay and the role of leadership of color.

Ricardo Martinez: You know, and this is not saying that the white teachers can't teach. It's not a dig at them, but we need more teachers of color in the classrooms. We need more male teachers in the classrooms, we need more male teachers of color, we need the curriculum to reflect the people that are studying that curriculum. We cannot be the sidebar any longer in the books, we cannot be the add-on topic, we cannot be the ethnicity of the month club. That has to stop. We all have contributions that are made as human beings that should be reflected in our studies and it's not.

I know people say we are aggressively recruiting more teachers. No, we're not. You can tell me aggressively, but you can't tell me that there aren't any folks who are not white who would not interested in going into education, if you make it accessible to them. Our universities, they have to have different programs. Our schools have to have different programs. Those are in the works right now, but I know for a fact, when I was at Metro State College taking courses in bilingual education, I was in the teacher program as a bilingual teacher. People who graduated before me couldn't find jobs in DPS because of the hiring structure. So they went to work in Texas, in California, outside the district, JeffCo, Commerce City. DPS was not designed to hire teachers. This was back in the eighties, for God's sakes. And it has taken this long to start changing their bureaucracy to hire more teachers. The problem with that is not the lack of teachers, the problem is the institution itself has been so slow to change. There are
teachers out there, so we should go out there and hire them. Give up with the excuses. I get mad because I saw them, I said, holy crap.

I was not teacher material. I was a good bilingual para, I was good working with folks, I don't have the character to make a good elementary teacher. It takes a special person, you have to be dedicated, you really have to be on all tens, I'm not that person. I recognize that. I could have been a teacher in the teacher coordinate. It would not have been good for the children.

Julie Speer: How do we make this opportunity gap or this achievement gap disappear? What's the solution?

Ricardo Martinez: One of the biggest factors is, we have to raise the expectations. It's not programs, it's not methodology, it really is the expectations. North High School, people were doing the college board program or the AP and all that stuff. It's the expectations. We have to really address the difference in expectations. That's a mind change with the teacher core and the administrators and all that, all children can succeed. You just have to push yourself as the adult, to ensure that they succeed. We have to stop treating students as risk factors.

They're coming in as they're coming in. Our job as adults is to meet them where they're coming in and raise them up. Again, poverty is not an issue. In Mexico, we were dirt poor in Mexico. I lived in a house with dirt floors, I walked to a school on a dirt road, I went to school with dirt floors, we bought our books, we were all crammed together. I had algebra by sixth grade. I was raised with my grandparent, so all the indicators that that child is going to fail, I was it. The difference was, in Mexico again, I was the Mexican in a sea of Mexicans. We were all it. Come to this country and I immediately became a risk factor because I was a Mexican immigrant, even though I was born here, I spoke Spanish, and we were poor farm workers. Risk factors. In someone's perception. Same human being. Just crossing the border. The only risk factor I faced here is that I was seen as different by whites. The systems and the bureaucracies were going to look at me differently. That's the only difference.

As public education, particularly in Denver, if you're looking at the achievement gap, we really have to look at the expectations. Yes, people are on hard lives, and schools really are not going to be able to change
the issue of poverty. We as a society have to all work together and reprioritize our funding streams and put way more money into public education. People say, oh, we're spending billions. We are in comparison to what other programs, like the military and that kind of stuff? It's obscene and almost criminal. We have to change our priorities.

We have to demand more of our universities, that they better prepare teachers when they go into the classroom, they are facing a clear reality. And we have to put a priority as a society, all of us have to pay more. We all gripe about paying taxes. If we want better schools, better prepared teachers, better enticements, we all need to pay a little more. Politicians have to just get off the duff and gain the political will to do the right thing by our children. Our school systems have to do the same thing, our universities have to do the same thing, us as a community we have to do the same thing. We all have to really sit down and recognize what we need to do and really it's political will to move and fix our schools and do right by our children.

That's going to take an entire society, that's not a particular school district, that's the entire society, putting children as a first priority. And that's political will. It's not a financial [inaudible], it's not economics, it's political will to do the right thing for our children and by our children, and if we approach it that way, nothing is insurmountable. It's not a program, it's not a methodology. I mean, there's enough of that, and there's enough research to study us up and down and around. We all know what it is and we all know what it should take. And we all should be doing that.
Roberta Abeyta  
Southwest Denver Resident  
Former Northwest Denver Resident

Julie Speer: Talk to me about your own upbringing. Tell me where you grew up, what neighborhood, and where you went to school.

Roberta Abeyta: I was born and raised here in Denver, Colorado, and actually right in this neighborhood. My mother and father bought a home right down here by the South Platte river, on Galapago Street. It was a two-bedroom small home, and my dad was a carpenter, and he made it a five-bedroom, four-bathroom home. We had the best house in the neighborhood. There were six of us.

Julie Speer: You grew up in southwest Denver?

Roberta Abeyta: Yes.

Julie Speer: Because Justina is going to North High School, you guys are actually in the northwest neighborhood.

Roberta Abeyta: We moved from North Highlands to southwest.

Julie Speer: Tell me about growing up in southwest Denver and what you remember the neighborhood to be like in terms of if there was an affluent neighborhood or working class neighborhood. Demographically, how was southwest Denver when you were growing up?

Roberta Abeyta: Southwest Denver was very affluent. We had Ruby Hill right over here. I remember they used to have show wagons in the park, and we would go to the show wagons at night. They had baseball games over here at Ruby
Hill, and we would go watch all the baseball games. They had swimming pools over here at Ruby Hill, and we would walk up to Ruby Hill, swim, and walk home. Then we had Cinderella City. That was a big mall. It was a beautiful mall. Big fountain in the middle of the mall. They had a place called Cinder Ally, and it was a little alley.

This was when pinball, and foosball, and all that fun games were out. Ping-pong, pool. They had pool halls, is what we called them, where we went when we were teenagers. That was really fun, and there's still a pizza joint I go to, called Ricco's down on South Broadway that I go have my pizza every day. I used to work at Jocelyn's and Cinderella City. My sister worked at the Denver, and we would meet down in Cinder Alley at Ricco's Pizzeria. It was called Red Moon Pizzeria, and now he has a shop on South Broadway, so we always hit Ricco's for pizza.

We had a great time growing up out here. We played kick the can. All the kids in the neighborhood would meet and we would find things to do. We did a lot of meeting in the middle of the night, and catch crawdads. Gosh, we'd go down to the Platte River and catch crawdads and tadpoles and watch them develop, and see them turn into frogs. It was fun. It was fun to live in this neighborhood.

Julie Speer: Where did you go to elementary, middle, and high school?

Roberta Abeyta: Elementary, Rosedale Elementary School. That is on Logan and Harvard. Then I went to Grant Middle School, and then I went to South High School. I did not graduate. I went the 3 years at South. Back then it was 10th, 11th, and 12th. I know middle school was 'till 9th grade, and then we went to South.

They didn't do middle school then. It was junior high. Then I went to South and I did all 3 years, but a girlfriend and I, we decided to drop out of school. Yes, we didn't tell anybody we dropped out of school, and it was horrible. We both are very sorry we did that, but we both went back. She actually ran her father's business, and I went back for my GED right away, because I felt, "Oh, my gosh, I can't believe we did that."

She's sorry now that she didn't go back and get her GED, but she ran her dad's business and she's no longer running the business. She says, "I should go back." I'm like, "You should. It's such a good feeling to at least have your GED." Then I went on to college. I went to CCD.
Julie Speer: Talk to me about busing. Tell me what year you dropped out and just high school in general.

Roberta Abeyta: It was strange for me because I was living in southwest Denver, and I thought it was strange in that there were not a lot of Hispanics in our area. I was considered more Washington Park area, and then this side of Platte River, the Platte River was Lincoln. When I went to high school at South, it was predominantly white, and the Hispanic crowd, I could count them on my fingers. There were maybe five of us in each class. It was kind of strange.

That was my sophomore year, and then suddenly all this busing news was coming on over the radio and over the television, and they talked about busing and this was going to happen, and it did. My junior year I went back to school and we just had a lot of different heritages. We had blacks, we had some African-Americans, we had some Indians. We had a lot of different people being bused in. It was interesting to grow up in an area that I didn't even realize that I was Hispanic.

I didn't realize that there was a difference between what I was, and even on my birth certificate it says that I'm white. Then all this busing happened, and then it was pretty obvious that school got really fun. It was just really fun to be there, and all the differences made everything so much more inviting. Friends were just popping up all over, so it was nice. It was a really nice change. I enjoyed it.

Julie Speer: What years were you in high school?

Roberta Abeyta: '79 is my graduation. Busing started in '78 for me, at South High School. Yes, it was 1978, and then '79. I didn't graduate with my high school class, but I did go to the graduation ceremony, so it was nice, but in 1979.

Julie Speer: Talk about your own life, if you've ever had any experiences with race or racism in Denver. Any issues there that you remember or recall?

Roberta Abeyta: You know, I do. Growing up, like I said, a lot of times I didn't know that I was different, but as you grow up in a neighborhood and you feel the difference. I went to South High School, and in my 9th grade year it made me feel like I was in a white school. I didn't think there was any difference until the busing happened, and then what made it so fun was that I did realize I was different, in that the handful of Hispanics that were in the
classroom they did kind of start their little clans, or have their little groups.

Then there would be the black groups and the white groups, and you could go amongst your friends, and you knew some of the white girls, and you knew some of the black girls, and sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't, and you just knew who to stay away from and who not. It was just fun. It was like shopping. You just kind of went around and everybody got to know each other.

It was a good time, but it felt like I was treated different. There weren't any programs like there are now for Justina, where people cared about you. There was just nobody to care for you. It just seemed like you were just another race. It seemed like everybody was concentrating on the busing of the blacks, and integrating them with the whites, but nobody really cared about the Hispanics, and you could feel that.

On top of that, I have six siblings, of course I am the middle of the girls. There were three girls and three boys in my family. I'm the middle child in the girls, and my brother Cedric was a middle child of the boys, and we were always just kind of forgotten. Along with the school and education, you're just kind of forgotten, and so it always felt that way. Growing up it's always been hard.

I feel like I have always played catch-up with my education. I'm always struggling to go back to school, get my GED, then I went back to college, and I'm doing the same thing now. I work for a dentist, and I always feel like I'm the maid. Is that something that I bring on myself, or is it something that is out there? I always wonder if there's a place for Hispanics, and where is it? What does it have to do with? Is it your education, or is it how you were raised? It's there. I don't know exactly what it is, but it's there.

**Julie Speer:** The majority of students in Denver public schools are Latino students. Now it's no longer a black and white issue. It's now a brown issue.

**Roberta Abeyta:** What do we do with this person or these people? I even walk into the Mexican stores and the Mexican girls from Mexico are very rude and mean with me, and it could be because I don't know Spanish, but it just feels rude. It's like, "Wow. You're here from Mexico and you're rude to
"I'm just trying to be nice to everybody, and everything's so mixed up. Everything's so confused.

Julie Speer: When did you move up to northwest Denver?

Roberta Abeyta: My older brother passed away, and he had a home right there on 32nd and Quitman, right in the Highlands. My parents sold it to me, and we lived there for approximately ten years, but I always felt like you're just trying to keep up with the Joneses out there. All the houses around me were going down, and they were popping up these million-dollar town homes right next to me.

My front yard, three town homes went up, million-dollar homes, and they took the sunshine away. They were so tall they just over-towered our home, and then right on the other side of us, another pop-up went up. It just got to be a struggle to just live there anymore. Not only financially, but I just couldn't keep up with the basics any more. The yard work, you need a new fence, you need new doors. The nostalgic homes are beautiful, but they're hard to keep up.

It was right about the time when the real estate market was crashing, so I sold the house before I lost my home. I was glad to at least sell it and move on, without having to lose the home. My sister actually bought the home, and it's perfect for her, so that's great. We got to keep it in the family and she's still out there. It was tough to stay out there anymore. It's sad. It always feels like I struggled to hold onto that house as long as I could.

I did everything I could to keep it, but I just couldn't afford it any more. The kids loved the schools. Lorenzo and Justina both went to Edison, then they went to Skinner. That's where we met the principal, Mrs. Veltze. She asked if we would send Justina to North because she thought she was a very good student and she really wanted to see Justina grow and excel, and she asked if she would come, and we thought that that would be ideal for Justina, because we were afraid.

North had always had a bad rap. Hispanics, the school is filled with a bunch of lazy Mexicans. That's what they used to tell us, and I would always say, "You know, they're calling us lazy Mexicans, and Justina is going to show them that we're not." She has, and we're so proud of her. I would love Lorenzo to go to North, but he's over it. He struggled, too, on
the North side. We all struggled. You just can't really afford to live out there anymore.

It's too bad that the schools, they are there. How do you get the kids there if you can't live in the area? It's funny, because I found this home, and it's the perfect home because it's right on the bus line. That's why Justina travels back and forth to North, and that's why we're here. It's a little bit of both worlds for me. I'm a little closer to where I grew up, and I'm comfortable, although even this area has changed tremendously.

There's a lot of different races out here. There's a lot of blacks, which this part of Denver had never had any blacks, and even Bear Valley or Lakewood, you're seeing a lot of interracial people all over. It's something I'm getting real comfortable with, and it's kind of nice to come back to the area that I'm comfortable with, and see that happening. I don't know, some of it's good, some of it's scary, but I think that it's both ways even in North Denver. We've enjoyed the move and it's time to get used to this. Time for change.

Julie Speer: Where's Lorenzo going to go to high school?

Roberta Abeyta: He's going to go to JF Kennedy, Kennedy High School. He's in a program, which is a college-bound program called Breakthrough, and we're real proud of him. Justina went through that program also, so it's helped both the kids realize that college is just another step in their life. It's a necessity.

Julie Speer: Are you pushing them more with education because of your own past, because you didn't jump into it right away for yourself?

Roberta Abeyta: I think that they know they have to have the education, or they're not going to make it. They see the struggles that even just keeping up is not enough, and they know that without their education they really don't have much of a chance to make it. I think that because they see the struggles, they know. They know they have to do college.

Julie Speer: How many kids do you have?

Roberta Abeyta: I have 4 children. I have 2 older children from my first marriage. They are 35 and 34. I have a son and a daughter. My son is Justina's father. He was 15, barely going onto 16, when he told me he was pregnant with his first
child. I just knew that he would play catch-up the rest of his life. He was that young. Once he told me that, my heart just broke. I had this love for the child, but at the same time it's my child, and he's too young to have a baby.

Then I met his girlfriend and she was just a year older than him. She was 16. He was 15, she was 16. They had my beautiful grandchild, and from there we just watched them grow, and I watched my older son play catch-up, too. He's in college now and he's always struggling to get a better life, make a better life for himself. 17 years later, it's tough for him.

Then I have a daughter that's 34. She's married. She's trying to have children, and so I'm just waiting for some more grandchildren, but Justina is my only grandchild right now. Then I remarried and I had 2 more children. I had another little girl first, and then another boy. They are 22 and 14. Lorenzo is younger than his niece, and that's always been really cute in school and growing up. I think they're 2 years apart. He comes into school and she's leaving school.

I love my children and I look forward to some more grandchildren. That's my situation with Justina. She came into our lives when she was about 3 years old. Her mother had called me one day and she asked me if I could help her. She had talked to her grandmother and her grandmother was going to ask for custody of Justina. She said, "I know I'm her mother and I want my daughter. Would you come to court and speak for me on my behalf so I could keep my daughter?"

We thought that was beautiful, and of course I love Justina's mom, Danielle, and I always wish her the best, but she has always made bad choices. She made bad choices. She hung out with the wrong crowd. She got involved with drugs, and it's always pulling her down and pulling her back. Justina was about 3 years old when she asked for that, when she reached out for the help.

Her grandmother took her to court. Nobody on that side of the family would be able to take Justina because of some sort of drug issue, or alcohol abuse. Like I said, who's to say what's right or wrong, because our family has alcohol abuse in it also, but no one has been prosecuted for that.
By default, the judge had looked around the courtroom and there wasn’t anybody that was able to take Justina in. We had taken a lawyer for my son, which is her father. We took a lawyer in for him, but he had gotten his own lawyer. Luckily, our lawyer, she said she would just be our lawyer and that enabled us to sit in the courtroom and hear all of this. They did a thorough investigation.

They interviewed everybody in the families and they came up with the fact that she could come with me and my husband at the time. We were the only ones that could really take Justina at that time in her life, and we've had her since she was 3, and she's exactly what she is. She's my granddaughter, and most of the time she's my daughter, and then the other 50% is granddaughter.

We legally took custody of Justina when she was about 15. We finally took custody. My son, he's her father. He's always felt like he wants to take her, but because he's always playing catch-up with his education too, he can't afford to take her. He's better off on his own trying to make it for himself, and I had always told him, "Whenever you want her back you can have her back. Just show me you can do that."

It seems like the years just went by. I think I finally took custody maybe 13, 14 years old, and I didn't even want to take custody. I just wanted to have her insured. I wanted to make sure that she had the chances. I played that role of just trying to talk to her mom, trying to talk to her dad. "Who can help me take care of her? She's sick today. Let's get her to the doctor. Who can get her there?"

Nobody could get her there, and nobody could come up with the money for her, so it just got to the point where I just needed to get custody so that I could just put her on my insurance and she would be taken care of. No other reason, so I didn't even take custody. I took parental allocations for Justina, so that I would have the rights to be able to take care of her physically, and make sure that she could survive, so I did that.

I think that that's made it difficult for my son and I to have a perfect relationship, because he's a little angry with me. I think he feels that I took her away from him, and I really didn’t, and I hope he knows that I love him and I did it for Justina. That's the only reason I did it, so there's nothing else to prove. That's how I got custody of my grand-baby. I should say, granddaughter. She's a big girl now, and yes, I love her.
Julie Speer: Describe Justina to me. Describe her personality, her characteristics, and her hobbies, what she loves, what she does.

Roberta Abeyta: Justina Jayla Garcia. She has a beautiful name, and she is an angel. It's like I tell everybody, it's better than having a daughter, because your daughter will talk back to you and not care, but your granddaughter, she always says, "Yes, Grandma. Sure, Grandma. I'll do that, Grandma." She's always been a good girl. She's always helpful. She grew up never talking back, always helpful. Where my kids will just say, "I don't have to. I don't want to." Not my granddaughter. She'd say, "Okay, Grandma," and she'd go just do the dishes.

Of course, now that she's older, she's getting to the point where she'll say, "I don't want to do that," but when she was a little girl she was just the sweetest little thing. I used to think, my poor baby girl, I used to think, she must miss her mother. Everybody wants their mother. I even want my mother, so I know my Justina must want her mother. I just love her. I think she has taken that, and did so many other things with that. That longing for her mother, she does whatever she wants.

I think she took the energy of missing her mother all the time, and she just kind of put it into a little bag for herself. Whenever Justina would miss her mother, or she would be sad, I would just tell her, "You're so beautiful, you could do whatever you want to do, and you have to do whatever it takes to make it, because your mom couldn't, and your dad is trying, but you've got to make it for yourself." She did. She does know that.

She even told me the other day, with this boyfriend. This is her first boyfriend. It's kind of shocking, but at the same time she said, "But Grandma, he's just my first boyfriend. I'm still going to college. It has nothing to do with one or the other." I thought that was very reassuring of her, and very mature of her to make that distinction between a boyfriend and college.

She knows what's best for her, and she's going to get what she needs, before she does anything else for anybody else, because Justina knows she has to take care of herself. It might be the longing that she's always had for her mother, but she knows that she has to take care of herself, and she will not be dependent on someone else. She has this beauty and
this power to get whatever she wants, and she goes for it, and I'm very proud of Justina. She's pretty amazing.

Julie Speer: Has she always been really good at school, and was it because you made her sit down and study?

Roberta Abeyta: Oh, no. I can't take any credit for Justina. I think it's because she does work well by herself and she doesn't realize that it's all within her, and she holds that. That's the beauty about Justina. When she was a little girl, when she was real little she would just stare off. I'd see her in her car seat in the back, and she'd just be looking, and I would wonder where she's at, and I would think maybe it's a detachment disorder from not having her mother, but it was her, playing whatever she wanted in her mind.

She would play by herself, and she would make things happen for herself, and she has that capability and that beauty to do that. I think that's what she's doing now. She's just using that energy to better herself. That's where it comes from.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about Justina's grades and her academics.

Roberta Abeyta: Justina's grades, they're not easy for her. By far, she's not like an amazing student. It doesn't come on a silver platter for Justina. She works hard. She comes home after a long day, even if it's 8:30 at night, she will sit on this kitchen table and study, sometimes 'till midnight, and then get up and do it all over again. I'm very proud of her. She works hard for everything she gets. It's not like it just comes easy for her.

She doesn't even ask for help. She will if she really can't answer something, but she will seek and find it, and she figures it out. That lack of not having somebody, it determines what she's going to do and where she finds it, and she makes her way. There's a strength in Justina that will get her there. She's an amazing girl, but it's not easy, and she has to work at it, and she does. She works hard for every little bit she gets, and she doesn't ask for much in return.

That's just Justina's personality. She never asks for anything. I tell her, "Come on, Babe, you need something. We're at the store, you've got to need something. There's something you need." "Oh, yeah." She'll need her solution for her contacts, deodorant or something. She's so cute, because she never asks for anything. She's really good at everything she
does, and like I said, it's amazing what she brings on for herself. I think she'll be fine. She's going to go to college, and I'm afraid she's not going to need me.

Julie Speer: Do you know about her grades? Are they all A's? Is she in Honor Society? Do you know any of those school details?

Roberta Abeyta: I know that her grades are really good. I didn't know she's on the Honor Society. Coco has told me that she's an amazing student, and that I should just keep doing what we're doing because she might be able to maybe be a valedictorian if she works really hard, and tries really hard. It makes me proud, so I just hope that she gets there. I don't want to do anything different, because she's already doing everything she can.

I'm the one that sees her struggling to do her homework, and to get things in, and to write, and to speak, and she does an amazing job, so I don't think she's going to have any trouble.

Julie Speer: Tell me about your own life. You work very hard.

Roberta Abeyta: I only have 2 jobs right now. I work for a dentist. I've been a dental assistant since I left my first husband. My first husband was very abusive and it was a really bad relationship, and I was very young. I had my first child at 19, so I was very young. I thought 19 was old, back then. All my friends before me were having kids at 16, and I thought my son was young when he was 16, but what I knew is that that was very young. 19 was really young.

Yes, I had my first child at 19, and my second child at 20, so they were only a year apart. I was a young mother, married, 19, and we were both way too young to be married and have children, and go through this. It was a very abusive relationship, and of course, we know now we were just too young. It was just scary, abusive, and young, and stupid. I've learned, I needed to work.

I needed to, like I said, go back to school, get my GED. What was I thinking? How am I going to do it? I knew that I had to go back and get my GED. I was already going to night school to get my GED, in fact, right here at this little College View Elementary School right down the street here, so I passed that, and I think of that often. Went back and got my
GED, got this divorce from my husband. I had a 1-year-old and a 2-year-old. Left him.

Waited about a year before I divorced him, wanting to make sure that I'm doing the right thing. Always trying to make sure I'm doing the right thing. Did that. Went into dental assisting. I went into the field because, another thing, my family had 6 children. When we had a dental issue, it was an emergency and it was a horrible experience. I thought, "Well, you know what? I'm never going to make my kids go through that horrible experience, so I will go to dental assisting school and I'll work my way to a dental hygienist."

That's what encouraged me to go to college, because then I thought, "I can do dental assisting, and I'll go to hygiene school." I made it. I made it up until my associate's degree, and that's about the time I got Justina. I kind of had a choice. It was, finish school or take on Justina. By then it was a second marriage and I had no problem taking on Justina. I wanted another child anyway, so I had Lorenzo right after Justina, so it was perfect.

You put yourself on the educational back burner, as most women do, and then I realized, I turn around and I'm 54, and should I go back to school, should I not? I'm dealing with all of that now. In between all of that, I started cleaning some houses. My mom has always cleaned houses, and I think that it has kept me humble in my life, cleaning homes, because it's helpful. I see a lot of the Mexican girls from Mexico cleaning houses. They'll do the Merry Maids, and they're out there doing all of this, cleaning houses for people. I always say, "Why don't we help our own people?"

It keeps me humble, and it has always given me something to do when I have the kids. I can go clean a house, I could take them to school and still be home for them in the evening. It has always brought me my bread and butter. Then, I have the dental assisting also. With that, I've taken that as far as I could, too.

I'm also an expanded-duty dental assistant, so I fill teeth, I prep teeth with the doctor. I do all the extra stuff, so I always feel like I cap off everything that I'm doing. Now, again, I am looking to go back to the School of Dentistry where I used to work. I started my dental assisting
career at the School of Dentistry, and I think it's time for me to go back. I have put an application in. We'll see what happens, but I'm always looking for something more, or something better.

I always need something to keep me busy, so I always feel a little overworked. I think that's how Justina feels, too. Yes, I have a very strong work ethic, and I hope that the kids have the same work ethic, that they don't overwork themselves either. I don't want them to overdo it, and we live in a world full of stress, and I have no idea how they're going to manage, but I hope the best for all of them.

Julie Speer: I don't know if you know what Justina wants to do when she grows up, but what do you hope for her future?

Roberta Abeyta: I hope that she is everything that she wants to be, a strong, independent young woman, young lady. She is strong. She's already showing us that. She does find all these really neat little programs to get into that help guide her places that only work for her, so I think that she'll be okay. I think that whatever she does she's going to be really good at. I see her in front of a camera. I see her talking to people, and I see her as a leader.

I see her as a role model for a lot of young girls. Maybe wherever she goes or wherever she ends up she can help young mothers with drug issues. I think Justina falls into the role of mothering her mother, so I think that she'll be able to help people if that's what she wants to do. I think she'll do whatever she wants to and be good at it.

Julie Speer: Let's talk about the achievement gap. Unfortunately, not all kids are like Justina. Not all kids have that internal drive and the discipline. A lot of kids need a lot of support that they're not getting at home or at school.

Roberta Abeyta: I think that the obvious gap is money, and that's an obvious gap, but I think that, too, you have to want the help. Justina, she looked for her psychologist to see at the school. She went to see somebody. She knew she needed to talk to somebody, because where do you go? I think that there's so many insecurities for our teenagers, and for our adults. There's so many insecurities that your family has laid upon you, and you've got to drop them off at some point, but how do you do that if you don't know how to do it?
It's about being insecure and knowing how to deal with that. There's so many kids just committing suicide. There's nobody there for them, and there's no support any more. It's funny, because even if you have money it doesn't necessarily mean you have support by family members, or anybody. Even if you're poor, you may have all the support in the world, but you don't have the money to see the right people.

Yes, there's a horrible gap between money and poverty, and what is the issue? How do we, as people, fill that gap? Especially our young people. I went to the YESS Program last night, and it's so amazing to see that there's a program that will help somebody else, and while you're helping someone else, someone else is helping you. It's a 2-way street, and that's what I think would really help fill the gap. It's just a lot of giving.

It would be so nice if somebody would just pick you out of the street and say, "Hey, let me take care of you." People just don't do that anymore. It's like, take care of our kids. Take care of people. There's so many people out there that can help a child out. If you can't do anything and you want to do something, help a kid out. Pick a school. Go pick a kid that you'd just loved and cared for it, and help that kid out. If it's money, great. If it's just visiting or talking to them, help them out.

Listen to somebody. I think our kids are growing up with no support, no help, no mental stimulation. They have all these insecurities, but nobody is helping them. That doesn't mean that they'll tell you, because it's so buried deep inside our kids, too. I know it's hard for Justina, like I said, there's a place in her that nobody can go, and only she knows how to get there, but she expresses that through everything else that she does, and I keep hoping that there's not going to be a crash-and-burn for her.

I hope that it's always encouraging, but she's been around a lot of positive people. She's been around a lot of helpful people. She started with Girls, Inc., and they really helped her grow to be a strong, independent young woman. She went on into middle school, and she got into some other programs at Edison too, but they were really helpful with Justina. The minute she went to North she talked to the psychiatrist right away, and I was so proud of her for doing that.

How many of us get to do that, and how many of us will admit we need help? For someone so young, she showed me it's okay. Now, I would just tell everybody, if help is there, seek it, get it. I would love to see some
help for everybody. Our young kids, boy do they have so many insecurities, and insecurities are killing them.

Julie Speer: A lot of times the schools say, "Well, it's because the parents aren't doing their job," and the parents are saying, "The school is not doing their job." Where does responsibility for educating kids lie? Is it families, schools, the kids themselves, is it the community, everybody? Whose job is it to educate our kids?

Roberta Abeyta: I think it's a part of everybody's job to do that. To have a little bit of kindness inside of them, to share with you, and then it's giving of yourself, to give back. It's like the YESS Program. It's a beautiful program, but then, of course, it ends. If all of us help each other out and never forget that when you help someone, somebody helps you. It's not a selfish world. It's not about just you, it's not about just me. It's about what we do for others.

To me, that's what it's all about. To me it's that simple, and yet it's so hard to figure out. Nobody's helping anybody. The struggle just continues and there's nowhere to go. I remember in my first marriage thinking, I have the number to the Battered Wife's Shelter. Do I want to call them? Do I need help? I have a family. Where's my family? Where's people that will help you? Should I call them? Should I not? Should I call them?

I never did, and I got out of the relationships, but I'm proud of Justina for knowing she needed to talk to somebody. She took the step to call them, to find them, and that's what it takes to get yourself help. You just have to make that step. Some of us have the courage and some of us don't, and for the ones that don't, I hope somebody will ask you, or somebody will guide you into the right direction, but all you can do is hope and pray that you can. Have faith. I think that God will help us all if you ask for it.

Julie Speer: Is there anything else as you were thinking about education, or race and education, or about opportunities?

Roberta Abeyta: I think that we all have a difference in us. It doesn't matter what race you are. We're all different, and we're all unique. Not everyone is going to like you, not everyone is going to like me. We all have to figure it out, so we all have the same differences. Whether you're black, white, blue, yellow, whatever, let's just get along. Let's just all try to get along and stop all of this. Like you said, it's just silly.
Everything's so silly, that we can't just get along, and help each other out. It just seems so awkward. People just need to help each other out. Take on a responsibility. Just do it. It's contagious. Once you start, you just can't stop. We just need all the programs we can get, and the YESS Program really helps. I think that's it.
Julie Speer: Talk to me about growing up in Southwest Denver. Talk about the communities you lived in and if it was segregated, if you felt racism. Go back in time and reflect on your own childhood.

Rosemary Rodriguez: I grew up in Southwest Denver. I was born at 5049 West Cedar which is really Sheridan and Alameda. My father worked at the Federal Center and he had just left the military and married my mother and they started a family, but they got a job close to the Federal Center, close to work.

When we became school age, they moved closer to a Catholic school, Presentation of Our Lady which is where I started school. There was a Rodriguez in every grade just like the other families, the Hueys, and the Kelleys, and the McDougals, and the Louhans. It was very much an Irish Hispanic school population.

We all were in Catholic school until my father got Parkinson's disease at a very young age, because of the financial burden of tuition, transferred to public schools. Fortunately, I, at that time, attended Lake Middle School and this was in the late 60s.

Lake at the time, was a phenomenal school. We had great teachers. It was a Jewish, Hispanic, Italian school at the time. A lot of the families have lived near a synagogue right by Sloan's Lake. Then the National Jewish Hospital was open and operating at the time. There were kids from all over the country who suffered from respiratory conditions, they went to school there.
We took Latin. I took algebra in the 7th grade from Evie Dennis who later became the superintendent of Denver Public Schools. She sent me to summer school. I tell everybody I wasn't making the grade and she made me go to summer school and it was a good thing. Regis Groff, former Senator Groff was my social studies teacher. It was a wonderful, learning, stimulating academic environment.

It was very integrated. However, there was a voluntary integration program available in 1968 and I participated. I volunteered and they sent me to Byers Middle School. We got a bus every day. We walk a mile to Lake and then we'd catch a bus to Byers.

Julie Speer: How long did that bus ride take?

Rosemary Rodriguez: I don't have a sense of the time that the bus ride took, but it was right by my pediatrician's office on South Downing and so I was familiar with that neighborhood. I met some great kids there. I only went there for a semester because the bus ride was long. I went back to Lake the following year and finished at Lake in the 9th grade.

Julie Speer: The one semester that you did do it, if it was voluntary, it wasn't federally mandated.

Rosemary Rodriguez: My participation in the voluntary busing was in response to the Keyes case and the district was just looking for kids who would go outside of their natural boundaries and try something different.

Julie Speer: Reflect upon that semester. How was it? Was there any kind of culture shock? What about the kids? What was your experience like?

Rosemary Rodriguez: Now that I reflect on that time, I guess because I had had a fairly integrated experience, first at Presentation of Our Lady and then at Lake. I didn't have the real sense of isolation or culture shock that I think I would have gotten maybe if I had gone farther south maybe to Hamilton. Byers at the time was somewhat integrated and I fit in.
There were different kids belonging to different social groups at the time. For your older viewers, that was kind of the kids with straight hair and bangs and there were lots of Latino kids.

At Lake, they had a little girls click called The Pearls and they tease their hair and they wore makeup. That wasn't my scene, but I was comfortable with those girls. I had many friends among those girls, but they used to wear little berets with a pearl pin in it. I didn't, but we all seem to get along pretty well.

Julie Speer: Was that more of an affluent area and did you notice any socioeconomic differences?

Rosemary Rodriguez: Byers was a more affluent area, but I didn't really participate outside of the 8:00 to 3:00 school day with Byers kids. I didn't go to their homes, they didn't come to my home. We didn't have play dates back in those days. We never really integrated at a social level. We went to class together, but we didn't do anything else outside of school together. Maybe that's why I wasn't interested in staying.

Julie Speer: You went back to Lake, you finished at Lake, and then where did you go to high school?

Rosemary Rodriguez: I went to West High School, that was my boundary school. There was really no other option unless I went to Catholic school which I did. In my senior year, I transferred to a Catholic school. West was much bigger, much more political. 1969 was a really active year politically at West. Very different, lots of demonstrations.

There was a leader in our group. We had a jukebox in our social room and there was no Mexican music in the jukebox. He planned a demonstration and asked for Mexican music in the jukebox and would wear a poncho from Mexico. I don't believe he was from Mexico, but he was very much identifying with his roots.

Certainly, the blowouts had proceeded our time there, the ones that made out the news. We wanted to be active. We wanted to be political. We walked out on September 16th, but we didn't have the big fights that the kids who would come a few years before us had. It was an interesting time.
Julie Speer: Was West at the time a pretty segregated school then?

Rosemary Rodriguez: If I'd put it into percentages, West was probably 60% Latino which was a majority definitely. My sister was a student teacher there that year that I was a 10th grader. We had a Hispanic principle.

Martha Guevara was my algebra teacher. Margaret McKenzie was my Spanish teacher. She was from Spain. Mr. Mejia who is the father of James Mejia, he was our social studies and history teacher.

We have a lot of Latino teachers. We had a predominantly Latino student body. We had athletes, we had singing Christmas tree. Latinos were very much the fabric of it. Woven into the fabric of the school.

Julie Speer: Why did you leave your senior year?

Rosemary Rodriguez: I didn't feel like I was paying enough attention. There was a lot of social stuff and junior year I panicked. I thought I have to buckle down and talked to my parents. They managed to send me to St. Jo's which was just around the corner. My final year was the last graduating class, 1973.

The class was 35 or 36 kids. It was a very small class, very individualized attention. A lot of focus on service as part of our graduation requirement. That year, we got to pick among different service projects and I went and volunteered with the United Farm Workers who had a little office on Santa Fe.

I picketed every weekend at the grocery store. It was during the Great Boycott and did a lot of clerical office type work for them. It was interesting, because a lot of the volunteers were from Europe and they didn’t want to serve in the military, but they had to volunteer doing something. This was an option for them and they came to this country and supported the United Farm Workers.

Julie Speer: Is that part of the broader Chicano movement in the country, the Farm Workers Movement?

Rosemary Rodriguez: The Farm Workers Movement was definitely an aspect of the broader Chicano movement. Although, there were many Asians
and Filipinos involved with the Farm Workers, it wasn't just Latino farm workers. The leader was Caesar Chavez and he visited Denver when I was a senior in high school. He had a mass at the St. Andrews Seminary and it was a very profound experience for me.

I remember drinking the communion wine from a coffee can and getting tortillas instead of the host. It's burned in my memory definitely. It was a very powerful experience. At the same time, the Crusade for Justice was blooming and really that was the birthplace of the Chicano Movement in the Southwest.

I wasn't a member of the Crusade. My parents took us to cultural events there. They would have folk art dancers or concerts and really that was the only place in town that you could see something like that. We would definitely take advantage of those experiences.

My sister who's six years older than I am. She graduated in '67, she got a scholarship from the Crusade for Justice, $100 college to be applied. She said she used it for books and it made a huge difference for her. They were very, very supportive of education, not just cultural education, but formal education. I really want to make that part of the story, because it was important to my sister and to other students who got those scholarships.

Julie Speer: What year did you graduate?
Rosemary Rodriguez: '73.
Julie Speer: It was not the same year that the federally mandated busing started.
Rosemary Rodriguez: No. I think it was '68. The Hispanic educators later, after the original Keyes case, intervened and they intervened because they realized that kids who spoke primarily Spanish were getting behind and not being fully served by the school district. The Congress of Hispanic Educators intervened in the Keyes case as co-plaintiffs or plaintiffs for the Spanish-speaking students in our district. To this very day, we live with the agreements that they reached with the plaintiffs and with the court.
Julie Speer: Did you stay in Denver when you graduated?

Rosemary Rodriguez: Yes.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about that time frame. A lot of people didn't want to integrate and there was a lot of hatred and racism. Describe that time when you graduated and what was going on when busing began.

Rosemary Rodriguez: We didn't really experience the anti-busing sentiment firsthand in my area in Southwest, Denver, although a number of kids were bused to schools in far Southwest. Kids from Cheltenham which is at Colfax and Irving were bused to primarily non-Hispanic schools closer to Bear Valley.

My neighborhood, because it was kind of mixed, we weren't participating in that, but definitely had friends who were bused. DPS used to provide buses for their parents. If there is going to be a school concert, they would send a bus from Cheltenham to whatever school they were paired with in Southwest Denver as a way to allow the parents to participate.

Then they were bused 1st through 3rd grade and 4th through 6th grade. They split them up. Half the kids went to one school and they switched. Lots of kids. Then the whole Northeast and Southeast Denver busing was going on at the same time. I think that's really where some of the real anti-busing sentiment came. It was primarily I think race based. People didn't want their kids to go to school with African-American kids.

It was very hurtful. Even though I'm not African-American, I was just this close to it in my mind. The idea that people wouldn't want me to go to their school or siblings to go to their school just because of our ethnic identity. It was hurtful and really, we were proud of who we were and we couldn't really figure out why people wouldn't accept us.

When my family moved to our neighborhood which is now, at one time it was primarily Latino. Now, it's becoming gentrified. The neighbors on three sides moved away and it wasn't until I was older that I understood that we were the first Hispanic family on
the block and then bought the house next door for my grandparents. We had nice neighbors, but they all moved to different parts of town and we stay in touch with them.

It wasn't like they hated us or anything, but I think a lot of large Hispanic family moving into a neighborhood was a sign that maybe the neighborhood wasn't going to be the best neighborhood anymore. Again, I didn't know it when I was a kid, but I learned it later.

Julie Speer: Were you considered Southwest Denver or more of North Denver?

Rosemary Rodriguez: I believe I'm considered Southwest Denver. I think anything south of Colfax is Southwest, and we always lived south of Colfax.

Julie Speer: I have also heard that when busing started that there was a lot of white flight from Southwest Denver to Jeff Co. Talk about that and how the face of Lincoln High School changed.

Rosemary Rodriguez: When busing began, a lot of people all over town moved to suburbs, but in Southwest Denver, they moved to Jefferson County. It's a move up in Southwest Denver, although again that area is gentrifying. It's kind of a move up when you move from Denver to the Jeff Co suburbs, because the houses are bigger.

I don't think it's a move up, but I think it's kind of a move up, considered to move up in that neighborhood. It was really interesting during Columbine. I worked for the city at the time of Columbine and there were a large number of police officers whose kids all went to Columbine. Initially, the police moved to Bear Valley.

Julie Speer: Denver City or Littleton City?

Rosemary Rodriguez: Denver City Policy. The police initially moved to Bear Valley and then they moved to Grant Ranch and then a lot of them, not all of them, but a lot of them moved to Jefferson County suburbs.

Julie Speer: Was that because of the rule that city employees had to live in the city lines?
Rosemary Rodriguez: Formerly, there was a rule that municipal Denver employees had to live within city boundaries, but the safety departments, police and firefighters really petitioned their government to put a question on the ballot to allow them to move outside of Denver. It passed and so a lot of them did move to Southern Jefferson County.

Julie Speer: When you say it's gentrifying, do you mean that white families are coming back to Southwest Denver?

Rosemary Rodriguez: Yes. We're seeing gentrification now in Southwest Denver. Again, with the boundary south of Colfax, the light rail line is just south of Colfax through West Denver, through Southwest Denver. It's brought a lot of young people, not necessarily families, but young single people into the neighborhood. They're buying affordable houses, a place where housing is still pretty affordable and they're rehabbing them. They're taking advantage over the wonderful amenities that are there that we've enjoyed all these years.

The city has done some things I think to attract kind of a younger population. They put a Frisbee golf course along the Lakewood gulch. It's a beautiful gulch. We used to call it Bicycle Hill and ride our bikes up and down these big hills. Now, every day, there is young people, mostly young men playing Frisbee golf.

Then there's a BMX bike course just a block or two from my house and all hours, day and night, there is young, mostly young men riding their bikes. I mean, it's like a playground, a giant playground. It is wonderful. They're moving there and creating some real diversity in Southwest Denver.

Julie Speer: Tell me your experience with your own son and where you chose to send him to school.

Rosemary Rodriguez: I have one child. At one point, when he's quite young, I realized I probably didn't want to have anymore, not that I didn't like being a parent, it was just such a huge responsibility and then I thought, "I have to try to do a really good job with the one I have."

He went to a small Lutheran school for kindergarten. There were only five or six kids in the class and he did really well. He was very
mature and then he went to my neighborhood public school for 1st grade and it was a bigger class.

He wasn't really socialized for a big class like that and I didn't think about that when I enrolled him at school. I just went to the neighborhood school. The teacher recommended that he get tested for Title I programs and my sister was a school teacher. I called her and I said to the teacher, "We thought he was kind of smart." We were all like, "He's so smart."

We talked about it and she said, "I'm afraid that he'll get a jacket." I didn't know what a jacket was. She said a jacket is when a kid has been tested, they kind of get tracked into lower achieving courses because someone at the beginning of getting a jacket thought that maybe they didn't have the capacity to learn. She suggested that I go outside of this school to get him tested to get sort of a third party assessment of him.

I knew about a private school in Denver and I called and the woman who's a saint in my eyes, Ludmila Glasscock, asked him to come in and spend a day there and under her observation. The end of the day, she called me and said, "We want him to come to school here." As a result, he was able to go to a private school and on a scholarship.

I think the intent of that program is exactly what's happened. He went there on a scholarship, now his daughter goes there and he pays her tuition. I wish every child could have that experience. It's a wonderful school.

I was there the other day visiting for grandparents day. The intentionality, the culture, it's what I want for every kid in Denver Public Schools. Really, his experience is what led me to run for the school board, because I thought every child should have a great education and attend a great school.

Julie Speer:

Let's talk about segregation in schools today. Reflect on how we're kind of where we were when busing started. Lincoln and North specifically, because they are not integrated schools, so very high populations of Latino students.
Rosemary Rodriguez: Today, some of our schools aren't integrated and all the work that we put in to integrate the system has come undone I guess is the only way I can describe it. For example, Lincoln High School is primarily Latino. It's also a center school for kids who need to learn English. They're encouraged to go there because they will get the language support services they need.

That is definitely contributing to the segregation, but it's also the population in the immediate neighborhood. Denver is a choice district, so a child from Lincoln could conceivably attend almost any school that they can get into. It's really interesting, when I ran for the school board, I said that my child graduated from East High School. It wasn't my district. It wasn't my neighborhood school. We choice into East.

My opponent's children also went to East, because at the time that our kids were coming up, East was the best high school you could go to if you wanted to go to college which between she and I, our kids did. We've taken some steps I think to really educate parents about choice which I think we'll get to integration at some point.

A year ago in 2014, in Southwest Denver, 67% of the parents participated in the choice process. A year later in 2015, after extensive outreach, 91% of the parents participated in choice. What happened with their participation, this new 91% number, is that they're looking critically at descriptions and reports and data on every school and trying to determine what will be best for their child.

I think that process of parents becoming educated and then choosing is going to create some integration. We're also starting two transportation zones in Southwest Denver modeled on the success expressed in Northeast Denver. There's a south zone and a north zone, but we're trying to provide enough choices for parents if the school down the street is going to serve their children to their parent's satisfaction.

They'll be able to get on a bus and go to a better school. This mixing up of choosing and transportation I think is going to lead to more integrated schools. Maybe not ethnically, but
socioeconomically. That socioeconomic diversity is also a huge contributor to success. If we can get enough of a mix with what we have, without asking people to pick up and move to another neighborhood, if we can get enough diversity among our kids, I think that we'll achieve a form of integration that we don't, today, have.

Julie Speer: Do you think diversity and education is an important value for education?

Rosemary Rodriguez: I do believe that diversity and education is important. I think it contributes to the education process. That's why we want a diversity among our faculty. We want kids to see, not only themselves, but someone they can learn something from culturally, ethnically.

We want our kids to go to college with diverse populations, because we want them to become really ready for the world. I know there's sentiment against a global economy, but really, that's our reality now. What are we doing to prepare our kids for that global economy? The obvious next question is are we appropriately valuing the kids who come to us with different languages, different cultures?

We really need to guard that experience for them and protect that culture and those other languages. They're assets in the world. They should be assets in the classroom as well.

Julie Speer: You touched upon this about the affordable housing. In a lot of ways, the neighborhood schools reflect the segregation of the neighborhoods. Talk about the city's role in fixing the problem and how it's not just the school board.

Rosemary Rodriguez: The city definitely has a role in creating or encouraging integration in neighborhoods. You can't force anybody. I used to be in the Denver City Council, and when I was on council, I heard about a program called Teacher Next Door.

There's fewer foreclosures than they were when I was on city council, but would give teachers an opportunity kind of first shot at a foreclosed property in the neighborhood. Then the NEA had a
loan program, a mortgage loan program that help teachers buy a home.

There was also a program called Police Officer Next Door and Firefighter Next Door. The whole attempt was to take foreclosed properties which are lots of times considered a blight in a neighborhood and bring in a professional teacher, firefighter. Well, we don't have the foreclosure inventory anymore that we have thankfully. That's a good thing I think, but I got a bus. I called a bank and I said, "I want to promote this program."

We had a bus and we had coffee and doughnuts and we invited every teacher in DPS who was interested in home ownership. They got on the bus and we took them and we showed them all the foreclosure properties. Those are the kinds of things you can do. This program isn't there anymore, but the city provides down payment assistance for first time home buyers.

We should target teachers and other young professionals with those programs. It really could bring an integration into neighborhoods that might not happen naturally. However, the whole gentrification process is starting to bring that integration. When I was running for a school board in 2013, I went to a neighborhood forum and I was talking about the achievement gap and raising the education level of all our kids.

One guy stood up and said, "Well, my kid is not going to be a part of the achievement gap." "Well, what are you going to do for my kid?" That I don't have yet, but that someday I'm going to have and I'm in this neighborhood. That was kind of the first time I realized, "Things are changing." The problems are going to become very different and the issues will become different.

Julie Speer: One of the things that has been brought up in terms of that, is that in the future, how do we protect Denver from just suburbanizing the poverty? How do we keep gentrification in check so that Denver is not just for the wealthy, successfully, affluent folks?

Rosemary Rodriguez: Keeping Denver economically diverse is going to be a challenge. I think Mayor Hancock is appropriately funding affordable housing
programs. Denver Housing Authority owns a lot of properties in the city. Those are for the poorest among us, people who really need subsidized housing, but they have properties all over the place all throughout Southwest Denver.

Those properties can't be sold on the private market. They're not available to the private market, so we're always going to have some diversity. We have several housing projects that, if they were mixed in income, would provide the affordable housing that we need along with the market rate housing that people are desperate for in this really tight housing market.

The city can, I don't want to say manipulate, but they can control some of that, but so much of housing is market-based. It's a challenge and I think that the city council and the mayor are up to it, but it's going to take a lot of intentional work. What we're seeing with some of the scrape offs and the mega McMansions I think they're called, I don't think that will fly in Southwest Denver, but who knows.

Julie Speer: Talk about STRIVE and that model. We've talked a lot about the 40% free and reduced lunch rates, the perfect mix, but it's impossible when 70% of Denver Public Schools are free and reduced lunch. The STRIVE model where your hope everybody is free and reduced lunch, but it's segregated. Talk about the pros and the cons of that model.

Rosemary Rodriguez: I was an early supporter of STRIVE. In fact, I pulled the names out of the ball for the first lottery. The minute I started, I regretted it, because the faces of the families who really wanted their kids to go there and whose names weren't called. They were bereft, so I decided I'm never going to do that again. I'm never going to be part of that lottery again. There's too many hopes pined on it.

I was an early support of STRIVE. At the time, the only choice in Southwest Denver was either a public school or a Catholic school. The Catholic schools were closing, because kids' families couldn't pay the tuition. In fact, in 2015, the Catholic school we attended as children is going to close after 90 years.
There were no choices in Southwest Denver. Here, Chris Gibbons came, very intentional about his desire to provide a college prep program for every kid that came in the door. I supported him. I spoke for him at the board meeting and I've been an ally of Chris's ever since and the program.

What happened was a lot of the Latino parents really were eager to send their kids there, because of the intentionality to some extent because of the uniforms. In Latin America, all the kids wear uniforms. It can be an equalizer. That's how some kids can't afford a diverse wardrobe and this was a way for every kid to kind of be the same.

They liked the smaller classroom size. The idea that they were welcomed in the building was very appealing to a lot of the Hispanic or Latino parents, but now, we have a situation where primarily Latino kids are at STRIVE. STRIVE has embraced that mission. They have embraced special education now and with the opening of the STRIVE at Kepner, In 2016, we'll work with the transition on native language instruction requirements of the court order.

They'll satisfy the requirements of the court order that was a result of the Hispanic interveners. It's like any challenge we put in front of STRIVE and Chris Gibbons. They meet and then they exceed and then they want more. What we were supposed to learn from this whole charter process was best practices.

What I'm starting to experience in DPS is seeing our district led schools adopt some of the intentionality, the high value on culture, the prominence of the school leader. To me, although STRIVE is primarily Latino, I don't think that is a negative for them. I love for all my schools to be integrated, but most of my schools are primarily Latino in Southwest Denver.

What I want is kids who are ready for college or career and who feel respected and valued in their education process that they're getting at STRIVE and they're getting it in a number of district led schools in my area. When they're not, we're going to work to address that.
Julie Speer: A lot of folks don’t call it an achievement gap, they call it an opportunity gap. Is it a racial thing or is it socioeconomic? What would be your final thoughts or words of wisdom?

Rosemary Rodriguez: When we talk about the achievement gap which I call an opportunity gap, and the reason I do is because it's not the kids' fault they're not achieving, it's the grownups' fault. The blame lies here with the policymakers and others who have neglected to really factor in their achievement as a priority.

I believe with our current board in our Denver plan that we are really focused on closing the opportunity gap and recognizing that we have more to do with it than the individual child learner has to do with it. We're committed to their success. I think what we've learned most, over some pretty serious study, is that the child is the most important entity or individual in this whole scenario.

That the child isn't just coming to us as a learner, but they're coming to us sometimes after sleeping in a car. That they're coming to us sometimes and they're hungry and they're coming to us sometimes with profoundly their learning or language barriers. What we do with them is going to make opportunity for them or not.

We recognize that it's our responsibility to try to create that opportunity. I'm hopeful that if we continue with our focus on the child in Denver Public Schools that, regardless of an integrated or a segregated environment, that we all want the perfect scenario that we can create great educational opportunities for them and Denver is going to be better for it.
Julie Speer: Tell me your name, your grade and then start talking to me about North High School.

Sabastian Casillas: My name is Sabastian Casillas, I go by Sabby. I'm a 10th grader at North High School and I am a proud member of North High School. North, it's old I heard. It was a big change when I came here and it's very different from any other high school that I've seen. Academic-wise and people-wise.

Julie Speer: How is that?

Sabastian Casillas: The people here are a lot friendlier I noticed, than other schools and the faculty, they're very helpful too. If somebody has a problem, they're on it, they'll assist you.

Julie Speer: Where do you live? What neighborhood do you live in?


Julie Speer: How do you get to school every day?

Sabastian Casillas: I either drive or I take the bus.

Julie Speer: How come you chose North?

Sabastian Casillas: North actually was by chance, by luck actually. I applied for a lot of different schools and they weren't accepting. I applied for North and I
was on a waiting list. At the last minute, a day before school started I got
accepted and I was like, "Whoa."

Julie Speer: Tell me your personal story. Your personal life with your parents and your
own world.

Sabastian Casillas: Well, my mom and dad separated when I was about six years of age and
I've been going back and forth between them. I learned to work with it, I
guess, I realized, "Well this probably isn't going to get any better unless I
want to make it better." After that point I decided I'm going to support
myself and don't worry about others so much.

Julie Speer: Let's talk about when you were not, before you had that ah-ha moment.
Talk about being labeled a trouble maker. Talk about that time in your life
and explain what was going on.

Sabastian Casillas: I wasn't too fond of school. I got into mischief, trouble. I caused a lot of
trouble. I don't know, I would yell from across the room, I would jump on
top of the tables, throw stuff. I guess you could say I was really self-
righteous all the time and after a while that started to change, maybe
fourth or fifth grade I got mellowed down. I started using my brain and
when I got to middle school I was very content, I was really quite shy. I
didn't know anybody because I switched from this elementary school
called Gilpin Elementary to Maury Middle School and it was a big change
because I didn't know anyone and I used to get bullied a lot during that
time. I used to pick fights with people I didn't know.

Julie Speer: You were bullied but you also were picking fights with other kids.

Sabastian Casillas: The bully's that bullied me, they had friends who didn't like me. If they
don't like me, oh well, if they want to start stuff with me I'm like, "Bring
it," that was my attitude.

Julie Speer: Did that finally stop or was all of middle school trouble?

Sabastian Casillas: I don't know, around 7th grade I stopped. I got a name for myself,
everybody knew who I was, "Oh, that's Sabastian, you probably shouldn't
mess with him, he's crazy." Then all the friends that I had said, "Oh, leave
him alone, he'll beat you up." I was quite famous I guess.

Julie Speer: How were your grades in middle school?
Sabastian Casillas: My grades. I got lucky passing. Same thing in elementary/middle school, I wasn't a good academic-wise person. I just liked to mess around, I didn't really do much of the work.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about 9th grade and what was going on with you when you came into high school academically?

Sabastian Casillas: 9th grade, again, I switched from a totally environment. I knew one or two people and I kept to myself. I didn't talk to anyone. I kept distant from the teachers because I felt little, small around them. I saw all these talented people and I'm like, "Huh, I don't think that's me. I don't think I can do all that." I kept to myself, I didn't talk to anybody, I was loner-ish.

Julie Speer: How were your grades?

Sabastian Casillas: They were decent, in 8th grade my grades were barely passing. I realized, "Okay, I should probably do something about this." 9th grade I kept a steady level of B's and C's.

Julie Speer: On your self-bio you had said that you had a bad work ethic and your grades were at risk, talk about that a little bit.

Sabastian Casillas: The beginning of the year, I was rebellious, in that phase. I wanted to do whatever, school, "It's not that big of a deal," I thought. Then I'm getting calls from teachers, "You have to do this and this or you're going to fail," and I got a court date, not too long ago. I'm like, "This is serious, I have to do something."

Julie Speer: A court date about school?

Sabastian Casillas: I was ditching a lot. I didn't want to do the work so I didn't come to school. I would tell my parents I went to school and make up excuses and that wasn't good. The court date, that was all because I didn't attend school. I guess a police officer caught me off campus, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm getting something to eat." "Aren't you supposed to be in school." "I'm on a free period." Then they looked up my name and everything and told me to stay put. "You're coming with me."

He took me downtown to his little place, where they hold everybody, jail cell? I'm not going to say that. My parents had to come pick me up and they gave me a little lecture about all of this. I need to put a stop to this and do something about it.
Julie Speer: Was that a wake up for you? How was that?

Sabastian Casillas: It was. It was a wake up call. I realized, okay, I want to make something out of my life. I don't know what it is yet but I should probably find out now.

Julie Speer: Was that event what led you to the YESS Institute?

Sabastian Casillas: No. When I started sophomore year a faculty member came up to me and introduced YESS, it could be a great idea. I said, I don't know anything about it, sure why not? I'll check it out. If I don't like it then I'll change it. The thing is, I ended up liking it a lot.

Julie Speer: Why did you like it? What was it about it?

Sabastian Casillas: At first I was a little bit skeptical because everybody seemed pretty intimidating like they didn't know what the Hell they were doing there, they were, "What's going on?" I was the same way. I met the teacher Miss. Sarah, YESS Institute person, and she was really friendly. She explained what YESS was and I thought, "Huh, that's actually a really good idea, I think I might stay with it." Then I met my mentor, Justina Garcia, she was really friendly. We didn't get along at first because we didn't know anything about each other, I was distant and so was she a little bit but after a while we started to cooperate.

Julie Speer: How's the relationship now?

Sabastian Casillas: Now, it's great. I know everybody, my mentor, we're best friends now, pretty much. I can talk to anybody in that room. We all connect like we're family I would say.

Julie Speer: How did your academics change by having YESS as part of your school day? How did that help your grades?

Sabastian Casillas: By YESS being there to support me, it helped my grades increasingly by getting tutoring, homework help from other people and it gave me the confidence I needed to go pursue what I need to do. It helped my work ethic a lot.

Julie Speer: Do you feel like you're applying yourself now?
Sabastian Casillas: A lot more than what I was before. Before I was really shy, I didn't know what to do. I was in the dark, I didn't know where to go, where to get started. By YESS helping me, by helping me set goals I'm, "Okay, if I do this, I will probably be here."

Julie Speer: What are your goals?

Sabastian Casillas: My goal is to graduate, first of all. I want to go to Berkeley music. I've been really, really studying. I'm an A to B student right now. Music-wise, I think I have a shot at that.

Julie Speer: What kind of music?

Sabastian Casillas: Anything. Anything I can hold, I can play, whether it's a flute, a guitar, a harmonica. I love it in general.

Julie Speer: I'll tell you what to start off the sentence with and then you finish it, okay? "If there was no YESS Institute..."

Sabastian Casillas: If there was no Yes Institute I'd probably be a very different person today. I'd probably be a rebellious kid with anger-management issues. In a cell somewhere probably.

Julie Speer: Do you think you'd still be ditching?

Sabastian Casillas: Not as much but probably a little bit.

Julie Speer: How has having a mentor helped you with school?

Sabastian Casillas: Having a mentor was like having a personal trainer. She got on my case, I didn't like it at first. I tried to rebel against her, "No you can't do this, you're not the boss of me." After a while I decided to cope with it, get with it, go with the flow. "All right, this actually isn't so bad." First A I ever got, I said, "Wow, is that true?" I felt, "Is this a dream?" I felt like a superstar. The YESS Institute is unimaginable.

Julie Speer: Do you have any idea what the achievement gap is?

Sabastian Casillas: The achievement gap. Can you give a little gist of it? I'm going to take a guess, the achievement gap is you don't know where to achieve at, you don't know where to set your goals?
Julie Speer: That's probably very true. What it is in terms of academics, when you take tests, there's kids who achieve really high. Then there's kids who don't achieve really well, they get really bad grades. That's the achievement gap, it's a difference between the achievers and the non-achievers. What research is showing is that a lot of times the kids who are low achievers are poor kids. Rich kids achieve well and poor kids achieve not so well. The research is also saying that a lot of times the poor kids are also kids of color so there's a racial piece to it too. How does that strike you? How does that sit with you? What's your reaction to that?

Sabastian Casillas: It actually doesn't surprise me. You have the high class, the rich people, they have their goals set as where poor people, middle class, I feel like they feel intimidated by everybody else, they don't know what they can do. They don't know what they can be. Say, this poor kid, he wants to be a doctor but he doesn't know where to start and by him allowing himself to think where to start, who knows, maybe he could be the best surgeon in the world or something like that.

Julie Speer: So it's just a matter of breaking it down to goals.

Sabastian Casillas: It's a matter of time and how much effort you put into it. They're so intimidated and nervous about it that they don't take the first step. Instead they take a back step.

Julie Speer: Do you personally ever feel any racial tensions or is it a non-issue? Is it different in school versus in the community?

Sabastian Casillas: In the school most of our population over here is all Hispanic so we all feel pretty welcomed and everybody else it's kind of, we have a little bit of tension but it's not a big thing. Here at North High School I realize that there's not really too much of a hate thing as they do it in a jokingly matter that makes everybody else feel a lot more comfortable I would say.

Julie Speer: What about the community? What about outside of the school grounds?

Sabastian Casillas: Outside of the school I think it's very different. Everybody I can say is a little racist, can be, but that's just everybody in general. We can't force people to change like that. You can't call this person that because it's
racist or sexist. I think in terms of school and the community there's a gap, it's different, can't breach it.

Julie Speer: Tell me about your writing? Favorite subject?

Sabastian Casillas: My favorite subject is writing. I love to write. Give me a pen and paper and I can write about anything.

Julie Speer: One of the things we're doing for the YESS Institute is we're doing a video for people to donate money. What would you say to someone who had donated money to the YESS Institute?

Sabastian Casillas: I would say it's for the right cause. By you giving this little amount of money, it's helping these many people. If I gave somebody ten dollars, it would probably help 100 students. They don't realize that but that's what's happening.

Julie Speer: Anything you want to say about the YESS staff?

Sabastian Casillas: I appreciate their company and I appreciate their help. The Yes staff is awesome. I probably wouldn't be here if it wasn't for them.
Stacie Gilmore

Denver Councilwoman District 11, 2015-Present

Co-Founder, Environmental Learning for Kids

Julie Speer: Where did you grow up?

Stacie Gilmore: I grew up in Brush, Colorado, so in a rural community.

Julie Speer: Where did you first move to when you moved to Denver? Why did you choose to move here?

Stacie Gilmore: I moved close to downtown, when I first moved to Denver. I actually moved up here to go to college, so I went to Metro that way and I got my undergraduate from Metro. I lived and worked in the city right here.

Julie Speer: What took you to far Northeast Denver?

Stacie Gilmore: I co-founded an nonprofit almost 20 years ago, called Environmental Learning for Kids or ELK for short. I have a science background, and started working youth and families in far Northeast Denver and Northeast Denver, so the Montclair, Park Hill, Montbello, and Green Valley Ranch communities.

I was very familiar with the area, and met my now husband about 20 years ago as well. He actually grew up in the Montbello community, and so his family has been out there for about 40 years. When it was time for us to decide where we were going to settle down and raise our 3 children, we decided on Montbello. We bought a house about 17 years ago right in Montbello. It was 1998.
Julie Speer: Is your husband black?

Stacie Gilmore: He is black and Japanese.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about Montbello. 1998, it was pretty bad in 1998 at Montbello school, right?

Stacie Gilmore: The school was definitely having their struggles. They were having huge struggles that way. I worked through my nonprofit work with a lot of students who went to Montbello High School. We were always struggling to make sure that they were college-ready that way.

That was one of the, I think, catalysts to get me involved in the schools, more so that we were just seeing so many of our students, who were coming through Environmental Learning for Kids. We could get them into college, but then keeping them in college, because they really weren't ready, was a huge struggle.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about your kids first. Talk about your choices around education for your students and where they went.

Stacie Gilmore: I have 3 children. I have an 18, and a 16 and a 10-year-old. We've been very blessed. All three of our children have gone to Marrama Elementary, which is in Green Valley Ranch. It just made sense for us logistically to send them out there. We've been always very pleased with the elementary school options that way. I know that a lot of schools have struggled that way, but Marrama has been one of those mainstays that has always been a very strong school.

Julie Speer: Does it have any problems with folks not being able to get in, or is it just a neighborhood school?

Stacie Gilmore: It's a neighborhood school. It's a traditional school. I think the thing that was really attractive to us was the principal had been there for quite a few years, and actually 20 years ago, I had worked with the same principal over at Horace Mann, when she was a school counselor. There was definitely that personal relationship with her.

They have very, very low turnover, which for a parent, that's super important, because my 18-year-old had some of the same teachers that my 10-year-old has had as well. Really that community feel, I think is really important. I would love to be able to see the majority of our
schools have that sort of longevity and retention of teachers and administrators in our neighborhood.

Julie Speer: What about middle school?

Stacie Gilmore: For middle school we kind of have moved all around. My oldest child went to Morey Middle School. Then my second child went to Hill Middle School, but she did start out at DSST out on the Evie Garrett Dennis Campus. She went there for a little bit. It was one of those personal choices, that it just wasn't the right fit, for her, at that point in time in her life.

Logistically, again, it made sense for us to move her to a school where my husband and I, with our work could get her on the way to a meeting or on the way home. That way instead of trying to get all the way out to far Northeast by 2:30, 3:00 to pick her up that way. Then our youngest, she just continued from elementary school from Marrama Elementary School. We're still looking at what middle school we want to send her to.

Julie Speer: Where did your 18-year-old go to high school?

Stacie Gilmore: He went to high school at East. My middle child she is gone to East as well.

Julie Speer: That was through the choice process I'm guessing, so talk to me about that.

Stacie Gilmore: Yeah. I think logistically again, my husband works downtown. I work over the north side of town. For us to be able to pick them up, in the middle of the day, and still make sure that we're able to do our jobs. They enjoy the programming and they enjoy the community of East High School. That way, I think, they both wanted a larger high school option that way, and so they definitely got that with East.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about Montbello and why you did not choose Montbello.

Stacie Gilmore: When it was time for us to decide where our oldest child was going to go to high school, Montbello was in so much flux, at that point in time, that it just didn't make sense for us to send him there. It was a personal option. That's really one of the reasons I love school choice for our families. That you can make a choice logistically for your family and for your child, or you can make it programming nonacademic-wise that way.
It was really one of those personal decisions for us to decide to send him to East that way. Again it was in flux. We weren't sure of what the programming was going to look like. It was all brand new, and at that point in time it just wasn't a good fit.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about the state of far Northeast schools and overall academic achievement levels. Paint the picture of before turnover, and talk me through the process of what happened.

Stacie Gilmore: Before turnover, there was a lot of change. There was kind of it felt constant change within the schools. I think as a community member and as a mom, when we first started talking about looking at Montbello High School, there were, I feel like, a good group of community members that we just didn't want to look at the high school only. We also wanted to look at those feeder schools.

We wanted to look at the elementary schools, and the middle schools, to make sure that when students were ready to go into high school we weren't trying to play catch up with them, but they already had that good baseline. Really looking at far Northeast comprehensively was really important. Now I think we're coming up on 5 years after the big turnaround that way. There has been some successes. There has been improvements that way, but there are still struggles and there are still challenges.

I think going forward and looking at how community members and parents are engaged in that process, and that consistent ongoing engagement, I think is really important, and something that I think could be done in a better way and more consistently. I mean having either those monthly meetings or quarterly meetings that we just know that it's a standing meeting. That parents can really plan around, is really, really important, and something that I hope we can do more of that way.

In 5 years we still have our challenges, but I have been in education for 20 years running my educational nonprofit. Really what I have seen after 20 years in education is that you can change as much as you want with the school, but if you're not supporting working families, if you don't have systems in place to support the entire family, it makes it very hard to have that systemic change at a level that's sustainable.
You still might have families that are struggling with employment. That are maybe working 2 or 3 jobs. The parents that just physically cannot be at home in the evening to help their child with their homework.

From that standpoint I think really looking at our working families, and looking at process and programming, to make sure that we're supporting our working families. If a mom has to go work a night shift at an industrial factory or something like that, that she knows that her child is still going to be able to finish their homework and keep up in school.

That's kind of one of those gaps that I really see, and that I'd like to work together with in public school, and the city, and other nonprofits, and faith-based organizations, to figure out how we can create more of a support network for our working families that way.

Julie Speer: You brought up nonprofits, it seems like there are a lot of nonprofits that are supporting education efforts and curriculum. There are partnerships with the city. There are partnerships with nonprofits. There is outside philanthropic support. It's a bigger community than just a school district or just a school.

Stacie Gilmore: I think there are a lot of nonprofits that serve in different capacities. I think especially in the far Northeast though, we do not have those longstanding nonprofits who have that community engagement.

The nonprofit that I run, Environmental Learning for Kids, we've been around for 19 years. My family, we live right in the Montbello community. If somebody has an issue or a problem or needs help, they come down to my house in Montbello. Really, I think being of the community and having that tie is really important.

Then also being able to hear and listen what our students and what our families are sharing with us, that they might be having trouble communicating with the school administration around choices of classes, or having enough AP classes offered for a student to be able to go on to college, and be prepared that way.

Being able to facilitate and help with some of those conversations but then also providing tutoring programming, mentoring programming and really leadership development, so that our students are learning how to advocate for themselves. Not necessarily feeling like something is being
done to them or not with them, but that they are really part of that process.

That it's okay for a parent to go into a school and say, "I need to have a meeting with the school counselor and with this teacher. I need to do this because my child is struggling, and I want to make sure that they're succeeding. I'm sure that you want to make sure that they're succeeding. How do we come together to do that?"

That's one of the big pieces that our nonprofit work does, is to be able to help prepare our students and families to advocate on behalf of themselves that way. As you can imagine it's an overnight solution. I mean it takes many, many years for families and even students to feel like they have built up those skills, for them to really advocate on behalf of themselves that way.

Nonprofit work in the far Northeast, I think we need to look at the sustainability of programming. That's it's not a quick fix sort of programming. That's something that with the far Northeast turnaround, that there were different programs implemented to support the turnaround process.

I would love to make sure and see that those programs are sustainable or if those programs need to be faced out, what's going to fill that gap, because I think if we don't fulfill that gap, we're going to slide right back to where we might have come from.

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**Julie Speer:** Have you followed the Northfield High School development? Can you explain to me what's happening with that, and the promise of the school as well as your predictions?

**Stacie Gilmore:** My understanding with this Stapleton Northfield High School is that it will be an International Baccalaureate program, and so very, very rigorous academic programming, which I think is a great option for our community and for the region.

I want to make sure that we keep the 35% enrollment that has been put on the table for especially Montbello and Green Valley Families. Make sure that there are support mechanisms in place for our 35% of children, who are going to Stapleton Northfield are supported that way. Because
there might be some educational gaps that are going to have to be addressed.

I feel like at that point that's a place where either the city, Denver Public Schools, and then again nonprofits, if it's all coordinated and communicated and process oriented, we can make sure we that we avoid having those gaps. Or that if a student or family just feels like they are not supported at the school that way. I think it's a great option and it's going to be very, very successful, but we need to make sure we're supporting our students and families for sure.

Julie Speer: There are some who say that Stapleton's growth is going to squeeze out the 35%. Have you any thoughts on that or the projections around that as we grow?

Stacie Gilmore: I think that Denver Public Schools is probably doing the best job as far as projections. That way, it's hard when you have a model that's really successful, or that's anticipated to be very successful. I would love to able to see that 35% stay where it's at. That way just so we have expanded options that are close to home for our students and families.

I think that there is also the option of Montbello Campus, that if it is very successful at Stapleton Northfield, where there might be an opportunity to integrate some of that sort of programming in our community close to home for our young and our families. I think having creative options to address that grow, would be good as well. Of course always over communicating all the time with our youth and families that way is really important.

Julie Speer: We’re looking at the history of busing and how it was federally mandated to integrate our schools. Once it was over, a lot of the schools went back to being neighborhood schools, and because our neighborhoods are segregated largely, the schools are as well.

There are those who say it's not really a school problem or a district problem. It's a city problem of affordable housing and integrating our city. Needless to say it's a reality that exists in Denver Public Schools. Talk about what you see in terms of the reality of segregation in DPS right now.
Stacie Gilmore: The reality of segregation, I think from a historical standpoint, is important to remember. My husband is black and Japanese. He grew up in the Montbello community. He was actually bused to TJ for a couple of years before Montbello High School opened. He graduated from Montbello High School in ’82.

Looking at the demographics of our community, and just knowing that we have incredible diversity in Montbello and Green Valley Ranch. Really from majority of folks who live in the area, myself included, I live there because I love the diversity, and because I love that there is an inclusive community. That I just really want to figure out ways that we can work together to make sure that we're making our schools better.

When you look at the statistics, usually schools that are in black and brown communities are lower performing that way. I think again having that honest conversation of that it might not always be a school issue. It might not always be a city issue. It might really be that we're not supporting the entire family, to make sure that they're supported. They have livable wages. They are able to take that time and have that bandwidth to support their child in school.

If you're struggling to make a paycheck, to find a place to live, to put healthy food on the table, education, by default, ratchets down. In my over 20 years of working in education and being a community member, I have never met a parent that wanted their child not to succeed in life. It was just having that time and space. I think a lot of times that power and privilege, to make sure that they are able to support their own child's educational path.

Julie Speer: Why do you think diversity in education is so important? I mean for all kids from different backgrounds both racial and socioeconomic.

Stacie Gilmore: The value of diversity in education and really beyond diversity, but I think the inclusiveness in education is crucial to have a healthy system. I'm a wildlife biologist, so if you have an ecosystem that is monospecies, that you only have on species. You only have one sort of species in an ecosystem is not healthy.

I look at human systems the same way. You need to have that diversity. You need to have that inclusiveness. Beyond race and class, I think sexual
orientation, I think gender diversity, I think perspective diversity, opens up people's minds to learning and makes it fun to learn.

Being okay with a teach not always knowing the answer, but challenging their students to understand the answer and to find the answer, I think it's so empowering and something I would like to see more of. A lot of times I think teachers and administrators and the whole educational system, they are trying to either teach to a test, or make sure that they are having performance outcomes that really confine the learning environment.

I won't pretend that oh like I have the answer to this, but as looking at it and as a parent and a community member, I would love to work together to figure out how we can make that learning more organic and to really empower our students. Because that's what I'm really hearing from a lot of the students and families that I am working with is that they want to have that challenge.

They want to have those high expectations. It gets really boring if it's the same route sort of education all the time that way. Especially with the internet and technology and how quickly you can expand the world out that way, I would love to see that sort of learning environment integrated more. Then it just brings in more diversity and inclusion to the educational system that way. Hopefully we'll make it healthier and more sustainable. I mean if it's all monochromatic it's not necessarily as healthy.

Julie Speer: We also have an achievement gap, in addition to being segregated racially. It's largely socioeconomic. How do you first define the achievement gap, and then what do you think can be done to close that gap?

Stacie Gilmore: I definitely define the achievement gap based on the academic performance of our students, but then also the allocation of resources for the schools. The allocation of human resources, the buildings that students are in, even the layout of buildings that way. I think all of those different factors go into the achievement gap.

Then I think the achievement gap is as well the time and opportunity that our parents have to really be advocates for their own child's education. If you look at a more affluent school, you most times have parents or some
adult, in that child's life, that is ready to advocate on behalf of that child in a second.

I don't always see that being able to happen in my community, and it's not at all indicative that parents don't want to do that. It's usually that they are trying to pay attention to another child, that they are having to work two jobs. That they are worried about housing or access to fresh food. There is just so many different factors that I think contribute to that achievement gap.

Then how we can address that achievement gap is really having that consistent checks and balances, and that peer to peer accountability between Denver Public Schools and the city, so that there is that accountability. There is that consistent check-in on, where are we going forward?

How are we communicating what's going on within our schools to our parents, to our broader community? Because I guarantee you and I have seen it, and anybody who is a parent, if your child is struggling at school it's affecting your home-life. It's affecting your relationship with your partner. It's affecting how you're doing at work. It affects every facet of our life and our community.

To think that education can kind of be a stand alone issue, I think, is not necessarily bringing it to the forefront of it. They're all very interconnected, and that we need to look at it as interconnected piece of that puzzle.

Julie Speer: Talk about affordable housing. Especially as Denver is in this grow spiral and it's one of the fastest growing cities. If we're not careful it could easily be Paris or Manhattan where only wealthy people live in the inner city areas and everyone else is in the suburbs. Indeed we are seeing a sub-urbanization of poverty and gentrification. Talk about the city's role in ensuring that we have a diverse community.

Stacie Gilmore: I think the city's role in making sure that we have a diverse community is first and foremost making sure that our residents in that sector of the city are prepared to take advantage of job opportunities that are close to home.
That people don’t have to necessarily have to commute 10 or 15 miles to get to work, but that there is actually workforce development training. That there is ongoing training programs to make sure that our adults are able to have a livable wage. Have a sustainable wage beyond minimum wage that way.

I feel like a city's responsibility is to really be able to work with employers, and work with new businesses that might be coming to our city. Having those conversations around how many people are you projecting to hire in the next year, in the next 24 months out until final build out. What is that going to look like?

As someone associated with the city, how can I help make sure that our residents are prepared to take advantage of those job opportunities that way? For some of our folks in our neighborhood, GED preparation is something that's very important. For whatever reasons some folks might not have graduated from high school. The GED test is not necessarily one of those tests that you can just go in and take off the cuff that way.

There needs to be preparation programming to help them make sure that they're going to pass that GED test. What's that pathway for our residents beyond just a job in a life, but really having the access to a true career. Is it a partnership with our community colleges, to figure out if an associate's degree is a right next step, for maybe a working mum or a family that way or what does that look like?

I think having those conversations with our parents and with folks that are taking care of students who are in DPS is an important next step, and really where I feel like the city could really support that.

Then ongoing programming, the MY Denver Card is such an amazing, innovative tool, I think, to engage our young people and the entire family through our recreation centers, through our libraries. Really building that out as well, I think, is an important next step.

Julie Speer: How do those efforts foster integration? I could see why workforce development is key, but how is that going to help integrate? Because if you can only afford to live in a certain neighborhood, that's where you're going to live.
Stacie Gilmore: That integration, and I'll speak specifically for Montbello and Green Valley Ranch, that workforce development integration makes sure that our residents are able to have access to a more sustainable livable wage. Then they are not priced out of a neighborhood. They are able to keep peace with the housing and with that neighborhood, knowing that we do need more affordable housing.

Especially senior based and first time home buyer housing, that way that is definitely a need. I think we need to make sure that we're planning very, very diligently, though so that we don't have an influx of housing projects, and then in 3 years now we have all these vacancies.

It's kind of one of those things that we're addressing a problem that we maybe could have been addressing it a while ago that way. I don't want to get us 3 or 5 years out, and then all of a sudden we have all of these vacant homes or vacant condos that now we can't get people to take them.

I think really planning for each scenario, but being able to make sure that folks can hold onto their historic home in Montbello community. That they are not priced out. That if property taxes do rise, that they're not going to be priced out and end up having to sell and move to somewhere else that would be deemed more affordable.

Julie Speer: Is there anything specifically about gentrification?

Stacie Gilmore: I think gentrification it's one of those issues that everybody kind of has at the back of their mind, wondering. I mean the demographics of our community, they are changing. We have a great community in Montbello and Green Valley Ranch.

Anybody who actually comes to our community, I love it when I bring somebody that's never been to Montbello and drive them around. They're just looking around and they're like, "This is a beautiful community. You have wonderful parks. There is nice homes." I feel like we're one of those best kept secrets in the city.

Then soon with the expansion of the aerotropolis concept with DIA, folks are going to start coming, more so to our community and wanting to make sure that we're able to maintain the integrity of our community is something that's very, very important.
I mean we have families that have lived in our community for 40 years, and they want to stay. They love their block. They love their neighborhood. I want to make sure that we can keep that feel but knowing that there is going to be growth, and so how do we adjust that growth in, I think, a sustainable way is really, really important.

Julie Speer: If you think about Trayvon Martin and Ferguson, race is an issue in America. There are inequities. There are inequities in education, but there are inequities in probably just about every facet of our society. Do you have any thoughts on the reality of that, and the importance of addressing it not only in education but everywhere in our society?

Stacie Gilmore: I think the inequities that already exist and how important race becomes within our society, you've got to make sure that people know how to have those hard conversations. Many times I feel like people avoid conversations that would allow for clarity and transparency of where someone is coming from, they just don't have them because they don't know.

Really I am half-white and half-Latina. I look the way that I look. My husband is half-black and half-Japanese. Our children are multi-ethnic. Having conversations about power, and privilege, and anti-oppression, and race, and gender, and inclusivity is so important.

To be able to call out something that is deemed either inequitable, or that's part of institutionalized racism within our systems be it Denver Public Schools, be it the city, be it faith-based organizations, nonprofits. Whatever systems are out there, being able to have those conversations around that system is oppressive to me as a woman. That system is oppressive as a Latino woman.

I would like to have that conversation and figure out how we can address that, and how we can move forward I think is very important. Unfortunately that's not a skill that's necessarily taught in school. It's sometimes not taught at home, because people just aren't used to having those conversations. I think a lot of times we default back to operating off of stereotypes and biases.

Being able to really, especially within education, say, it is proven that if an African American child, especially a male, a young boy is not reading at grade level by 3rd grade, we are setting them up on a path in life that we
have this statistics, that it is not the path that most parents would want for their child, any parent would want for their child. How are we going to address that institutional process be it stereotype, racism, oppression?

How are we going to address that, and have those conversations with our families around it is so important for you to be able to advocate on behalf of your child. If you see something happening, if you see a process in place, this is the avenue for you to call that out, and let's figure out how we're going to fix that.

I think that's why it's important to have retention within our schools. Because a lot of times when you have that turnover, you lose a culture within that school that maybe has already started along the path on that work. Then all of a sudden you've got new folks coming in and you've got to start back baby-steps to start having those conversations. I think being able to have those hard conversations and calling out things. You're never ever done with this work that way it continues on for sure.

Julie Speer: What is the name of your nonprofit and how does it serves kids?

Stacie Gilmore: It's called Environmental Learning for Kids. 20 years ago I founded and I'm currently the executive of a nonprofit called Environmental Learning for Kids or ELK for short. My undergraduate degree is in chemistry and zoology.

I remember in high school taking a national geographic to my counselor, her fully well knowing that my dad is Latino, my mom is white, in a racial relationships, whatever back then it was a small rural town. There were a lot of stereotypes and biases at work.

Taking to my school counselor a national geographic saying, "I want to do this. I don't know what this is, but I really want to do this," and her looking at me and saying, "I don't think that's an option. I don't know what this is, what else do you do you want to do?" Me saying, "Well I want to do something with science, I think I want to be a doctor." Her looking at me and saying, "You will never make it to be a doctor. Maybe you should look at being a nurse."

In my head thinking, "I can't believe this woman is telling me this that I am not smart enough to be a doctor." When I came up here to go to Metro, I was fully ready to go medical school. I was just about to take my
MCATs. I got a summer job teaching kids how to fish at Wash Park and met my husband doing the same thing.

We shared I'm half-white, half-Latino. He's black and Japanese. He is a wildlife biologist. I have my educational background. Right away we clicked and so we founded Environmental Learning for Kids. Really it's a nonprofit. We work with elementary, middle and high school students to make sure they know about nature.

They go on field trips, so we go to Rocky Mountain National Park and go snowshoeing. We go hiking. We go camping, but on every field trip we introduce them to careers in science and natural resources, and now in engineering and math. We've done that for almost 20 years.

Now our oldest alumni is pushing 35 years old. That we have over 150 young people who have gone through our program, who have graduated from high school. Gone on to college and graduated from college with about 65% of them studying in a science related field, and the majority being students of color.

When you look at the national averages around, especially women and people of color, studying a science related field, it's still in the single digits that way. We are home-growing our next generation of scientists here, right in Denver, Colorado.

**Julie Speer:** Do you do that in school, after school, how do you work?

**Stacie Gilmore:** We do it all. We do after school based programs. We do in-school programs. We do daylong programs, whenever there is a teacher planning day or something like that. We'll have something scheduled that way. We actually just bought 5 1/2 acres of land at the front side of Montbello. We're planning on building about 6,000 square foot education center to provide wraparound services.

We're really walking the talk. When I talk about there not being those wraparound services for the entire family or for our students to be successful, we saw that as a huge need. We're building a 6,000 square foot education center right in our community so that people can walk and bike to it right there.
We're planning on having financial literacy classes, parenting classes, working family support classes and then tutoring, and mentoring and leadership programming, so yeah.

Julie Speer: Wow, that's great. Will it be only students or to the city?

Stacie Gilmore: No we will be open the whole city, but we're looking at a majority of Montbello and Green Valley Ranch students utilizing it, but who knows. When you talk about inclusiveness and diversity, it would be great to have a great cohort of Stapleton families coming to Montbello to receive services and learn about nature and science that way. Yeah, we'll see where it goes.
Julie Speer: What years were you on the school board?

Theresa Pena: I was on the school board from 2003 to 2011. I was board president from '05 to '09.

Julie Speer: Let's first talk about your own experience growing up and your own experience with education. Tell me what neighborhood you were raised in?

Theresa Pena: My parents bought their first and only home that they bought in Park Hill, on 19th and Cherry. It's about four blocks away from Park Hill Elementary School. I was two when we moved in, and my mom just sold that house about three years ago. She lived there for over fifty years.

We moved into that house in 1966. Both my parents were working at the time for Denver Public Schools, they both retired from Denver Public Schools. Originally, we were sent to the local Catholic school. Then because my parents were DPS educators they felt that my brother and I should be in public schools. In fourth grade, my brother was in second grade, we moved to park hill. We went to park hill. At that time it was a K6. Then, we went to Gove which was a junior high, so seven, eight, nine. Then we went to East High School.

Because we lived in Park Hill we were never bused to any school. We had a different experience. I think for both my brother and me, we had amazing teachers. We grew up in a very integrated community, so despite the fact that we were Latino it was Black/White. Most of the
schools that we went to there were very few Latino students, but I think kids don't notice that until they get a little bit older. Both my brother and I had really tremendous experiences and I would say that my time at East really informed what led me down the path to become on the Denver Public Schools. I really felt like it shouldn't be left to chance. The kids grow up in a great neighborhood like we did that our parents were educators, but it should be very intentional that kids should have the kinds of opportunities that both my brother and I had.

I would say the experience particularly at East was really outstanding. Even at Gove, really strong teachers, really integrated both economically, ethnically, just the diversity like the public education you get the social education that we got when we were in Junior High and high school was just so different than when I went to college. I went to California to go to college. My brother stayed here and went to CSU. I think that really kind of laid the foundation for social justice particularly on education that was really formed very early on because of our education, and because it was so diverse.

Julie Speer: What year was it when you went into school?

Theresa Pena: Oh my goodness, I graduated in 1980. I was born in 62. I would have started kindergarten in 67. Prior early 70s is when I was at Park Hill.

Julie Speer: Busing started in the early 70s and there was a lot of tension and friction, were you too young to remember any of these community tensions?

Theresa Pena: I know about that community tension because my parents were very involved in Chicano politics in Denver, but purely from an educational perspective. My brother and I actually over two summers went to the Crusade for Justice which was just down the street from us. It was on 17th Lafayette Pennsylvania, so not too far from where we grew up in Park Hill. Because my parents were DPS educators and they were very involved in the politics of education at the time, and my brother and I were named as ... Test on the Key's case. They needed a Latino family, so my father, because of his work with the Commerce of Hispanic Educators which was very involved in that work at the time, put our names on that case.

Julie Speer: You grew up with hearing about it.
Theresa Pena: Yes. My parents would have meetings at our house. I feel like I grew up knowing about the politics, but not really fully aware of it until I was an adult and had an appreciation that really all meant from a student perspective.

Julie Speer: Let’s go back in time then. Talk about what you remember and explain this tension because people did not want to integrate.

Theresa Pena: What do we call from the meetings my parents would host at our house with other DPS educators and really trying to figure out how to create an equitable system. It felt so different from my experience and my brother’s experience growing up in a very middle class, very integrated neighborhood. The experience that they were talking about, about the students on the West Side, or the students on the North Side, or students even in the near Northeast was very different than the experience my brother and I were having. There was some disconnect I would say as a child because my experiences were so affirming and so positive from an educational perspective.

Great teachers, really involved parents, very active community. Park Hill has historically had a very involved parent community, strong academics, strong teachers. The experiences that my parents were fighting for all children in Denver were not the same experience that he and I were having. I think that because they were educators, and because they had children in the district, and could fully appreciate what really high quality looked like. That wasn't the case across the district was something that I didn't fully appreciate as a child, until there was this disconnect in hearing, "How could that possibly not be the same situation and positive experience from an academic place that my brother and I were having."

There were lots of kids throughout the city that weren't having the same happy elementary, junior high, and high school experiences that we were having.

Julie Speer: Were your parents the administrators, or were they teachers? If they were teachers, where did they teach?

Theresa Pena: My mother was a business teacher at Emily Griffith. Originally, she started off part time working in the evenings. Eventually, she went [inaudible] of Education and was a business ed teacher in alternative education high school throughout Denver. She eventually retired as the business coordinator for the district. She was the person who introduced
computers into DPS. My father was a social worker and he started off at Fairview with his first assignment which is still one of my very favorite schools. We actually lived in the Sun Valley Projects while he finished getting his master's in social work. He got his MSW at DU. He started off at Fairview. He had several assignments in elementary school, so primarily he was a social worker in elementary schools.

He became a principal at Smedley. That was not a favorite experience for him. He really is a social worker by training and by soul, I would say. He decided to leave being a principal and eventually retire from the district. Working at a school like Florence Crittenton, it no longer exists, but it was for young mothers and pregnant teens. It was over across the street from the old children's hospital and he retired as a social worker.

Julie Speer: Why did you run for school board?

Theresa Pena: Why did I run for school board? Growing up in the family that I did with parents who were educators by training and really passionate about equity for low income students I would say is just something that was a core value in my house. I think all my experiences professionally, I would do volunteer activities in the educational realm. When my husband and I moved back to Denver, it was really important for me, for my children to go through the Denver Public School because I had such a positive experience and not just from an academic, but from a social education piece. I wanted my children to have a very similar experience.

Running for school board felt like a culmination of both professional and personal experiences around social ... Not so much equity, but I would say it's the opportunity. I wouldn't consider myself a very patriotic person, but I really believe in the democratic values of our country. If we don't have a high performing public education system, you can't have informed citizens who participate in an informed way in our democratic government. In some way, it's an equity issue. If we believe in the government that exists here, then you need to perpetuate that and you do that through the public education. As I was looking at my kind of professional career and my personal interest it kind of collided in running for school board.

I love Denver. For me, I just felt like my foundation of who I was as an individual, that's why I brought my kids back to Denver because I want them to have that same experience and ensuring that all children could
have that experience not just because our parents were educated, but because we had a system that was really worthy of the kids that live in Denver.

Julie Speer: Where did your kids go to school?

Theresa Pena: That's a really interesting question. My brother and I both moved back to Denver because we just love Denver. I intentionally looked in Southeast Denver. Knowing Denver and knowing were high performing schools were. My husband and I made a very conscious decision. One, that we're going to send our kids to Denver Public Schools, but I didn't feel like I wanted to compromise our education. We moved in Southeast Denver which is a place where historically DPS' had high performing schools through kinder through 12th grade.

My brother married a Latino woman from Texas. It was very important for my brother to live in a predominantly Latino part of Denver. He moved to North Denver. My brother and I have had very different experiences with our children because North Denver at the time when he moved there, the schools were still very struggling. It was more important to him that his children had the cultural kind of focus on neighborhoods. My nephew's I felt got a much more inferior education than my children did growing up in Southeast Denver. Both coming from very similar experiences that both my brother and me. Both highly educated and yet his kids were not nearly successful in DPS as mine were. The quality of schools, the quality of teachers, ultimately their graduation.

Julie Speer: Southeast Denver. Tell me exactly which schools they went to?

Theresa Pena: My kids, my daughter is still in DPS actually, but they went to University Park which is our neighborhood school for elementary school. Then they went to Hamilton has IB middle school program. They were actually bust it would have been our home school then we choiced into East High school which I had mixed feelings about because I'm an East High graduate. Serving on the school board, I kind of knew the dirty little secret about all of our schools, but particular a school like East which was really segregated into the haves and have not. I didn't understand and appreciate that as a student. I fully knew about that when I was on the board. I didn't feel like I wanted my children to be in that environment
perpetuating the haves and have not. South high schools our home school.

Of course because I said, "I'd love for you to go to South. It's an amazing school. It's a very special school." They of course wouldn't even consider it. They visited several schools and then they chose East. It's been a great program actually for them in the same way that it was for my brother and me. I think that the principals we've had at East have really tried to close that challenge, that divide between the students and have and have not differently than when I was there.

**Julie Speer:** What do you think is the legacy of busing?

**Theresa Pena:** The legacy of busing I think is a really conflicted story for people in Denver. For people like me and my brother, and we were never bused, I think we benefited greatly from the integration of the schools that we attended. Not so much at the elementary level because since Park Hill was a rather integrated neighborhood different than most neighborhoods then and now. At middle school at junior high and high school certainly there was a lot of busing. My brother did the East Manual complex. Clearly, I think that other people our age and in that generation had very different experiences both because they were put on a bus and also because of the challenges of the racial dynamics that were going on in some of these schools that we were just very fortunate to not have experienced in a Black/White environment at Gove and East.

I think that the districts suffered greatly after busing where we lost such a huge amount of enrollment and basically white middle class flight. I think it took decades for the school district to recover from that. I think when I started on the school board in 2003 and Dr. Warco as our superintendent. I joined the board after he had been hired. My sense was that there had been such turnover and such contentious debate over the legacy and the after effects of busing. Then busing stopped in the late 1990’s and I joined in the early 2000. I think Dr. Warco really was trying to just set a foundation of stability.

I think that because of his leadership and his ability to basically recreate a new school district that said, "We can be a different kind of school district that we're not going to be this failing urban school district that is suffering from all the after effects of busing and integration and reintegration. Really how do we create a high performing academic
system that is worthy of students throughout the city. By then, the
demographics of DPS had changed dramatically. Not only was he trying to
kind of establish a stable foundation, but he was also struggling with how
we recruit people into the teaching profession and how we retain them.

Then we had a very different kind of demographic profile. 60% of our
students were Latino and 40% were second language learners. That was a
very different challenge that we faced during the segregation and
integration and the end of busing.

Julie Speer: Now, after busing we find ourselves very much in a segregated system
again where our neighborhoods are segregated and a lot of the schools
are segregated. Largely by class but it ends up being racial segregation as
well. Talk about the re-segregation of DPS.

Theresa Pena: The reason I wanted to comeback to Denver and have my kids go through
Denver Public Schools was because the DPS I attended was very
integrated. While my view of DPS at that time was very small, it was
three schools over 100 that I'm sure existed at the time. That integration
was something that was very important that I felt like I wanted my
children to have. When I joined the school board in 2003, I'll never forget
it was my first year on the school board and I went back to school at
South Marlem Elementary which is in far Southeast Denver. It was all
lovely little white children. After that back to school night, I went to
Smith. Smith is on the edge of the Stapleton Ring. It's not in the new
Stapleton, it's in the old Stapleton.

There were two different communities. There was a black community
sitting on one side and there was a Spanish speaking Latino community
sitting on the other. I remember going to my board meeting the following
week after that and talking with Dr. Warco and saying, "I was really
troubled that we can live in a city that had children that were so isolated
from one another. Yet the beauty I think of growing up in a city like
Denver is that there's so many different cultures. Variety of people and
our schools didn't reflect that. How did we as the leadership of this
district really create a place that looked a lot more like our city looked
like, not like how our schools were reflecting the neighborhoods.

Now, with that said. I would say as a Denver native, I have some very
strong issues that this is a problem that's put on the school district to
solve because I think it's as much a housing challenge which is a city. It's
not that it's a silo that the district has intentionally created these segregated schools, but it is a reflection of the housing demographics and how we have isolated people by income, and race, and ethnicity. Because the population in Denver has decided that they really want neighborhood schools which is a very reasonable, not a high bar to set one would think that a neighborhood school should have quality academic programs and yet that's not the reality of Denver in 2003 nor is it today.

Julie Speer: Where are you at with the transparency of the district in terms of achievement?

Theresa Pena: I think I'm a data geek. For me, my experience at East, I knew that there were children who were not being adequately educated. I could just look around and there are a lot of white kids in my classes and then maybe one or two black kids. We knew that but we didn't have the data to support that. Actually, even before the SPF and DPS, under I believe it was Governor Owens when we started the CSAT. They were rating schools. My children whom we started in DPS were at an average school and it was bordering between average and almost dropping to below average.

We were able to use the data from, "No Child Left Behind," and from CSAT to start becoming more transparent about who was really being successful in DPS and who wasn't. I actually found that to be a really good thing because then the dirty little secret was out. We didn't have to work so hard to keep it a secret. We had to really start working hard on solving the problem. Once with CSAT and then with the ratings that Governor Owens and the CDE established probably in the early 2000. By the time I was on the school board, the next iteration of that was, "How did we recreate a more robust report card to evaluate schools?"

We had actually started doing that for charter schools and we decided, "Well, we shouldn't treat charter schools any different than we should treat DPS schools. I think we went under kind of a continuum of, "These are all Denver students regardless of what schools they're serving in. How we look and evaluate schools should be the same regardless of what we call them." When we were able to start doing that with our charter schools, it was a pretty easy extension to extend that to all DPS schools. The board felt really strongly and this was working with Michael Bennett and Tom Boasberg at the time to really create a much wider variety.
It wasn't just based on test scores, but a variety of indicators to give parents I would say more than anybody a real sense of, "Once they had the data, they could at least make informed choices." At least they had the information so that there was no more dirty little secrets. We were really trying to solve the quality issue, not keeping bad schools a secret from parents.

Julie Speer: What are those different indicators? It's not just the test scores?

Theresa Pena: As I recall, the school performed a framework, the initial iteration. 60% of it was based on CSAT at the time. Then 40% was based on things like, "Enrollment." How many students were enrolling from the boundary area. How many students were coming back, a retention because we know if a student stays in school for three years or longer. They generally are doing better academically. We're looking I believe at student and parent surveys so that we could see how satisfied our customers were from a student and from a parent perspective. There was a teacher component to that as well. 60% of it was based on test scores and primarily it was CSAT. There was a conversation between how much of it was growth in CSAT and how much of it was actual status of the actual rating. It was a much more nuanced evaluation than the original score card that Governor Owens and the CDE did at the time.

We really want it to still reflect the academic achievement that's why it was 60%. There's that 40% that's subjective as well. That says, "People might go to a school that's not a green, or blue, or not highly rated, or excellent. There's other qualitative factors that could influence a family's choice about why they would send their child to a school." Perfect and is it kind of still the same?

Julie Speer: These indicators and this SPF, the way they do it, is it still the same today?

Theresa Pena: More or less, and they are talking now about updating it like version 2.0. I would say we had version 1 and like maybe ABC and D. Now, we're going to version 2. It has not substantially changed since we first introduced it probably like in 05 or 06. I think it will this next year.

Julie Speer: Do you still live in Southeast?

Theresa Pena: We do.
Julie Speer: I know GW has made some changes. I know there's traditionally been criticism on the segregation within the school and the IB program and the non-IB program. I understand they're making changes to that now. Are you aware of the current philosophies behind that or the changes that they're making?

Theresa Pena: The changes that have been proposed in the beginning phases at George Washington. George Washington has for 30 years had this incredible IB program. When I would go to graduation, the students that were graduating from the IB program were going to amazing schools across the country like any family would be thrilled if their kids could go to those kind of colleges. George has historically have been a very popular school for African-American students. Historically, the African-American students at George were not in the IB program. It was very segregated. What was proposed about three years ago was to integrate the program and so the IB program you had to apply, you had some transcripts, and do recommendations, and then you had to start in 9th grade. You were in or out starting at 9th grade, and kind of there was very little movement. People would leave but people can go in.

The new proposal is that they're going to make it an open enrollment, so it will no longer require an application to get in. All students will have the opportunity to go in or out. By junior year, students would have to make a choice whether they want to stay in the IB program, the AP program, follow a CTE, do current enrollment. They have much more choices I would say. I think that's really hard to ask students to do at 9th grade to decide that you're going to commit. I know for my kids they actually did go visit George. They had been at a pre-IB program. What they didn't like about George was that the student population in the IB program didn't look like they're friend group that they had at Hamilton. It was less, the academic piece that they chose not to do. More, the students didn't look like them. I think that's probably historically been the case for non-English students at George.

I think that opening the pathways up, so there's multiple pathways and you don't have to pick until your junior year is actually going to give all students a better option to find the right path that makes the most sense for them and their academic goals and outcomes.

Julie Speer: When the Keyes case was happening, the desegregation was really a black and white issue. Now, we find ourselves with a very segregated
district, but it's primarily a brown and white issue. Talk about that reality and how you think we can fix that.

Theresa Pena: One of the really big challenges DPS has right now is that we have very segregated schools by neighborhood. Because Denver has a very large Latino population and a large part of the African-American population that has strictly been in Denver has started to move to the suburbs and into the ring outside of Denver. We have schools that are very ethnically segregated whether it's brown, or black, or white. Very little integration. I think a couple of phenomenon are starting to happen that I hope will change that. Because I think that's very challenging both from an academic perspective, as well as this is not the life lesson we want to teach children who live in a great city like Denver to go to such racially and ethnically isolated schools.

A couple of things are happening, mostly good, some are challenging. With the housing prices in Denver. We're getting much more more affluent families coming into Denver which is a challenge because it's pushing out families who’ve lived in this city for generations. As these affluent families are coming into Denver, they are committing to the local public school systems, so Denver is the largest urban school district. Denver has the largest growth of any urban school district in the country. What that means is that historically we have not had people choosing to enroll in DPS at the rate that we do today. Because of the families that are moving into Denver are relatively more affluent than we’re seeing more families with means coming into the public schools.

That's a good thing because we know nationally where you have a much better mix around 60, 40 frame reduced lunch and non-framed reduced lunch. The academic achievement rises for all students. That's a really good thing for all students in Denver Public Schools. The challenge is one, the housing prices are really pricing. Families have lived in these neighborhoods for a long time out, that's not a good thing. That's something we're going to have to solve. That these families are coming into Denver, they're demanding better schools, and they're committing their kids and their resources and their time, so we're starting to see that.

I think as kind of this phenomenon is starting to take place over the next decade, one of the other things that we've seen is that we do have high performing neighborhood schools, we call them, "90, 90, 90 schools."
90% free and reduced lunch. 90% ethnic minority. I forgot what the other one is.

Why am I forgetting that? It's a demographic characteristic. I don't think it's language, but it could be. The 90, 90, 90 schools that we have, and we're seeing great success where they're actually closing the gap with the students and getting them on grade levels, so that by the time they go to high school they're on grade level for high school, so that they really can go down whatever college or career path that they want. I think that this is a great opportunity for the district. There's no more excuses, we can't say, "Those kids come from families that." What we could see now is that we have high performing schools in these high needs neighborhoods and the kids are doing great. It's a very intentional culture. It's a very intentional training around how the teachers work with students. It's a very intentional way of interacting with parents. The outcome for kids is great.

I think that as we slowly move out of such a segregated city by income. What we're seeing is more affluent families coming in which is pushing some families out and that's a bad thing. The achievement level is going to improve for all kids as we get a better economic mix of students in our schools. At the same time, we're also seeing schools that are still very racially, or ethnically isolated, but they're doing also great work with their kids from an achievement perspective.

Julie Speer: How do you define the achievement gap personally?

Theresa Pena: From a pure definition perspective, it's really the difference between black and brown students versus their white counterparts in the academic difference that exist, it's also by income. In Denver, we know that income and ethnicity are highly correlated. It's that gap that exist from achievement that starts at kindergarten, and doesn't involve we're doing a better job as a school district, it doesn't ever really close. I think that's the biggest challenge that the district faces still that we faced 40 years ago when we started busing.

Julie Speer: What has changed though, I won't say the achievement levels have gone up, but the gap is still there. The white kids are just achieving higher levels.
Theresa Pena: Exactly. Yeah, so that rate like you said, "That kind of delta difference has stayed the same. Everybody is improving." This is true nationally. This isn't just in Denver, but I think what we've seen is that there are isolated examples of schools that have been able to close that gap. In fact, with some of our subgroups, we actually are doing a much better job in terms of the rate of closing that gap, but it's not enough across the entire school district that we're seeing the change at the subgroup level.

Julie Speer: How would you fix it? What's the solution?

Theresa Pena: How would I fix the achievement gap in Denver? I think that there's been several initiatives that we've put into play that will have a long term pipeline effect on closing the gap in Denver. One I would say, the very robust early childhood programming because we know particularly for low income students that they start kindergarten years behind and then we play 12 years of trying to catch those students up, doing heroic work in our classroom, spending lots and lots of money trying to do that, and not having enough of an impact to really fully close that gap. I think the early childhood programming that we're starting with three and four year olds.

I also said on the Denver preschool program, and one of our big ideas is that some point in the future that we would do zero to three programming because that's where we know we can make the biggest difference. I think even doing the programming, we're doing now in DPS with three and four year olds is going to have a long term pipeline effect. I think that's one of the ways to do it. I think the other way is really looking at models that are having real, sustainable success and how we start replicating that. What we know is that where we have an integration from an income perspective, an integrated system at a school level that all students are doing much better and you see much fewer gaps than you see.

Julie Speer: Are you talking about a conscious integration like DSST?

Theresa Pena: Right. Like a DSST or even like a McAuliffe right now I would say. You're starting to see some great results from schools that have just created a strong academic program. I hesitate to call them, "Magnet Programs." Because they're not really magnet programs.
Julie Speer: There is some conscious integration on the ratio of free and reduced lunch.

Theresa Pena: Yes, exactly. There are schools in the district that are creating opportunities for kids that have a much more integrated free and reduced lunch and non-free and reduced lunch income. The programming is the same for all students, but they put a cap on the number of either free and reduce lunch or non-free and reduced lunch students that they would enter. I think nationally we kind of know that figures about 60, 40. In Denver, we’ve taken it up to 75, 25. Those schools are actually showing some really strong academic results for all the students and they’re closing the gap for all kids regardless of their income or their ethnic background.

DSST didn’t want to go above the 60, 40 split, but in Green Valley there's about 75, 25 and they're having some great results. That's about the district percentage where 70% FRL. If we could start creating schools that by programming are creating this opportunity to mix income groups then we're going to see better outcomes for all the kids that go to that school. There's no harm done to the non-free and reduced lunch, and there's great success for kids whether you're free and reduced lunch or non-free and reduced lunch.

The magic wand, going back to your question about what would I do if we could do that? I would do robust ECE programming across the entire district and I think DPS has done that for the most part. We have incredible participation at the ECE level. It's a little bit late, but it's still much better than nothing. I think ensuring that we have a really strong literacy programming from ECE through third grade, the district is getting better. I still think that there are some opportunity for improvement, but if we could ensure that 995 of our third graders could read and write at a third grade proficiency level. I know that we would close the gap. We wouldn't spend the next 12 years with all the money, time, and resources trying to remediate those young people.

It's a real challenge though in a district like Denver where we take any child at any point in that pipeline regardless of where their family is coming from. We have immigrant families coming from countries where they've not even been in an academic environment and we're asking teachers in three years by the time that child is eight or nine years old to have got them to a literate place. That is going to take a little bit more
adult interaction with kids and more money. I think Denver is on that path towards making that investment. Because we know if we can catch a kid up and get them out of third grade, reading it and writing at third grade that they really have a fighting chance to be successful and we know that if you don't have a child reading and writing by third grade that the chances are less than 10% that they will ever catch up to grade level. Then they keep falling further and further behind.

Julie Speer: Is there anything else, as you were thinking about this that you thought would be important to mention? In terms of segregation, achievement and growth

Theresa Pena: It goes back kind of to this article I was telling you about that I read. When the original busing started and then when it ended. There was a reality, the word was, "gerrymandering" that was going on. The district was intentionally creating schools by neighborhood boundaries that would isolate and segregate kids, but not only were they gerrymandering the neighborhood boundaries, they were not providing resources nor were they providing the quality of teachers. There was this very intentional work by the school district to really create different academic outcomes for kids by their ethnic background.

I would say that while we still have the problem of this big achievement gap that exist between economic groups at the district at least during my tenure in DPS. I can't speak to what people were doing before that. At least since the early 2000, we have spent more money in our lower performing schools. We have made every effort through pro-comp to try and get our best teachers to go to our hardest to serve schools. I think that if everything that led to busing was a lack of resources, lack of quality teachers, neighborhood boundaries that really isolated people. I think we've gotten those very objective factors out of the way. We're trying to put our best teachers there. We are definitely pouring more money into our hard to serve schools. We're looking at neighborhood boundaries that are much more open that don't create the segregated environment.

The next piece thought is what's going on in the classroom. How you're very intentional about creating high performing teachers and adults surrounding students that regards to where they're starting that you're accelerating their catch up so that they really can leave a grade level on time. I think for me, that's the $64,000 question because it's no longer
the resources or the quality of teachers. I feel like we've tried to level the playing field on that.

Now, it's, "What are the best instructional practices, that if you're teaching a fourth grader who's two grade levels behind, how does that teacher, and whoever else the adults are in that classroom working with that child, how do we accelerate their growth so they catch up and they could leave fourth grade, reading at fourth grade level." That's the secret sauce. That's the magic of teaching. That's the $64,000 question that I think we're working really hard on now as a district with kind of what are the best instructional practices. How do you take a teacher who's taught for 20 years a certain way or just got out of school and learned a certain way, but give them the tools so that they know how to do that work with kids.

There are certain teachers who are going to be better with special ed and better with GT, but you still have to do the same thing which is to get kids who maybe haven't had the best academic pipeline caught up. That's where I think the district is right now, is really figuring out that best instructional practice and how do we do that professional development with every adult in the system, not just the teachers. It's like every adult who touches a child whether it's the bus driver, or the lunch lady, or the principal, or the para, and the parents. I think maybe that's how I would end it, is that I think DPS has tried very hard to include parents in helping to solve the problem. We will not solve this problem if parents aren't at the table with us. That's how we're going to get this done in Denver.

Julie Speer: As you mentioned the GT program. There are some that have criticized the GT program in DPS and that it's a way to keep white, affluent families in the district. We've heard that from both white families and families of color. What's your experience with that and the reality of that and if that's going to be fixed or changed?

Theresa Pena: My experience with the gifted and talented program has a little bit of data because I haven't been in the school district for a couple of years. I would say that we were making really good faith efforts at trying to have a much more culturally responsive testing environment to be able to identify gifted and talented children across the district. You could identify gifted and talented through very robust testing, but we also know that for low income students that testing may not be the best way to identify their giftedness. I think that it is absolutely the responsibility of the
district because we are a public school system that needs to meet the needs of all children whether they're on the very low end of that bell curve or on the very high end of that bell curve.

I think we do have responsibility to meet the needs of gifted and talented children. I think we offer different kinds of programming when I was on the school board to meet those needs. Some people felt like it was best to isolate GT kids. We have gifted and talented programs that they could just go to school with other GT kids just like them. We also had programs that integrated the GT kids. I think that's kind of the philosophy of the district and has been for a long time. It's all about choice and what are the unique needs of your student and how do we identify different programming opportunity, so that you as a parent or you as a student can find the best programming and path that's right for you.

Gifted and talented kids could be very unique and some of them needed to be isolated and that was going to be the best academic environment for them, but some also felt that there was great benefit to be with other non-GT kids. I think that we had some really great programs and the one that I recall best was Diana Howard who started Crofton. Was very intentional about creating an opportunity for all children in that Northeast corridor. Her school when she was a leader looked very much like the kids in that neighborhood. It was an exclusively GT program, but it had a very good mix I would say of all different ethnicities and income levels. That was the magic of Dr. Howard in being able to help parents identify who the gifted and talented kids were. It was a very popular school.
Julie Speer: Did you grow up in Denver?

Tom Boasberg: I didn’t, I grew up in Washington DC.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about the district as it is today. Talk to me about the levels of enrollment and the demographics of the student body of Denver public schools.

Tom Boasberg: The Denver public schools is now the fastest growing school district of any city in this country and it’s been remarkable to see the growth. We’ve grown by over 25% in the last seven or eight years. Parents and families are seeing the dramatic gains in improvement and in quality in the Denver public schools and it’s wonderful to see so many families who used to not choose the Denver public schools now choosing the Denver public schools.

We’ve gone from 72,000 students to over 90,000 students. Our students were roughly about 60% Latino, about 14% African American, about 22% white with the remainder being American-Indian-Asian mixed race. I think what's striking about the extraordinary increase in enrolment in the Denver public schools is in many ways as taking a paradigm and turning it on its head.

Four decades of common wisdom or received wisdom has been if you want the best education for your kids, go to the suburbs. Whether you’re affluent or not affluent, the perceived wisdom has been you could get a better education for your kids in the suburbs.
When you look today at the rate of progress of students in the Denver public schools, whether low income, middle income, white, students of color, make more academic growth each year that students in any district in the state and I think parents and families are seeing that and that’s what’s driving this extraordinary rate of enrollment increase in the Denver public schools.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about segregation or the value or priority of integration within Denver public schools. Your own personal lens and just your philosophies there and how you see segregation or integration as a priority.

Tom Boasberg: We care deeply about integration, about economic integration, about racial integration in our schools and our classrooms. Study after study has shown that all kids benefit when classrooms are integrated, that all kids learn more. That’s the academic research.

We also hear it very loud and clear from our kids. Our kids want to be in integrated classrooms, they want to be in classrooms with kids from across the spectrum of racial and ethnic and economic boundaries. They care deeply about being in integrated classrooms.

We care very deeply about our classrooms in our schools being integrated. Study after study has shown that all kids learn better when their classrooms are integrated, learn better academically and learn about the world and community in which they live in today and will live in tomorrow. We hear that very strongly from our kids. We hear from our students how much they value being in integrated classrooms with opportunities to learn life experiences of the students from across the city, from across different races, different economic groups.

They care deeply about that and also on a personal basis. I was someone who grew up in the 60s and 70s in a newly integrated neighborhood in Washington DC in a newly integrated school and I value that experience deeply personally. At all levels we care deeply about pushing hard to further the integration of our schools and our classrooms.

Julie Speer: Talk about the year that you became a superintendent. It feels to me at least from the outside that you’ve been very open, very caring in terms of the whole SPF and school performance and achievement levels and integration.
Tom Boasberg: I became superintendent in January 2009 and from the beginning I’ve believed very strongly how important it is that we be very honest both about our progress and our gaps because our gaps are striking and I don’t think you can solve a problem until you acknowledge it, until you talk about it candidly, acknowledge what your shortcomings are should we celebrate your progress.

Clearly we have very high gaps in Denver Colorado. We see them across the state and we see them across the country. It’s extraordinarily important that we speak candidly and openly about those gaps, about what’s working and about what’s not working.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about the gaps. How do you define the achievement gap and how do you tie achievement to race? In your own mind how does all that work out?

Tom Boasberg: We look at our gaps across multiple measures because it’s not just one gap to look at. We look at it across different racial and ethnic groups. We look at it across income groups. We look at it across our students with disabilities compared to our students without disabilities. It’s important that we look at each and every one of them to see where things are working, where they’re not working and that we be very open and public and transparent about those gaps.

It’s important for the community to know and it’s very important for all of us together, the community, Denver public schools to acknowledge those gaps and say, “Okay, what’s next? What are we doing in order to try and raise the bar for all of our kids and to close those gaps?” We need to do both. Closing the gaps is not about bringing your high performing kids down. We continually want to raise that bar for all kids and we need to close the gaps. To do that, the data on how our kids are doing is very important.

Julie Speer: How do we close the gaps? What’s the answer?

Tom Boasberg: I think we all wish there was one silver bullet that if you just had that silver bullet, all of these gaps would close. There is no one silver bullet. These gaps are the result of decades if not centuries of inequities in this country based on race and based on income and they will take time to close. There is not one single silver bullet fix but I think the things that we look at both in Denver and nationally that are working are four things.
The first is the extraordinary importance believes and high expectations among all adults in all our kids. We start from the profound belief that every kid comes to us with ability and talent and potential and a set of gifts that has nothing to do with how much money their mom or dad makes or the color of the skin or where they live. Those gifts are what kids have. It starts with a profound set of beliefs in every kid and the belief that every kid can learn and a set of high expectations for our kids learning.

Secondly, the quality of our teaching, the quality of our school leadership is critical. What helps kids learn is great teachers and great school leaders. Finding the best teachers and school leaders, giving them the training in professional development for extraordinary complex task in the profession of teaching is our absolute top priority.

Thirdly is more time, that when our kids come in behind, they need great teaching and more of it. More time for our learners who come in behind, starting with pre-school to give them the opportunity to have the same kind of early childhood learning that their more affluent peers have in private pre-school but also more time in terms of a longer school day, a longer school year, summer school opportunity. Kids who come in behind need the time.

Then fourthly it’s individualized attention. If a student is really struggling to be able to find individualized attention, tutoring, after-school programs, individualized instructions to help that kid catch up is very important. It is a set of beliefs and expectations, it’s the quality of our teaching in our schools, it’s more learning time for our kids and it’s the opportunity for individualized, personalized instruction for our kids.

Julie Speer: There are folks who say there’s racism in Denver public schools. Talk about the bias awareness program. Is there institutional racism in Denver public schools?

Tom Boasberg: I tremendously admire the commitment to social justice among educators in the Denver public schools. We have an enormously passionate, motivated group of teachers and educators who are deeply committed to social justice and ending racial inequity.

At the same time, we all live in a society with significant biases and these biases have been built up over generations and over years and I think it
would be foolish for all of us to say we have no biases. We all do and it’s extraordinarily important that we acknowledge those biases, we understand what they are both subconscious bias and conscious bias.

It’s one reason that we put a tremendous emphasis on education and awareness and discussion starting with our senior leadership team about our own biases both belief systems, how do those biases reflect themselves in some of our systems and practices within schools. It’s very important that we all acknowledge those biases and we confront those biases.

Julie Speer: The achievement gap has pretty much stayed consistent. Levels have gone up, achievement has gone up but white students are still out performing. Talk about why you think that is.

Tom Boasberg: We have seen and particularly in the recent decade very strong gains among our students of color but gains among white students have been equally great in some cases even greater. Certainly we want to see all kids rise and all kids increase but there needs to be a particular focus on closing the gaps that we have. I think what we’ve seen is we’ve dramatically improved the quality of our schools.

Sometimes the students with the most privilege have benefited the most from that and clearly we want to make sure that the Denver public schools are great schools for our kids whether you’re rich or poor or in the middle, whether you’re black or brown or white, the schools are great schools for you. Again when we see the lack of gap closing in the Denver public schools it brings to the forefront the importance of the attention and resources and focus we need to have on our students where the greatest gaps are.

Julie Speer: Choice is great if we can get into the choices. Just talk about how choice works. At least on the outside it seems that there is not enough high performing schools. Not every choice is a great choice.

Tom Boasberg: Our strategic plan, our Denver plan, is very clear. The overarching goal is to have great schools in every neighborhood. We want to make sure that in every neighborhood in the city there are great schools for families to go to and we say to our families, first look at the schools in your
neighborhood. We’ve got good schools but we also want to have the opportunity for choice for families if they want a choice out of their neighborhood in order to go to a different school.

Clearly the most important element, a set of not great choices doesn’t do much for anyone. The most important thing is to have great schools in every neighborhood, high quality schools where students learn and grow and are nurtured and supported both academically and as whole children in order for families in every neighborhood and every corner of the city to have both great choices very close to home and choices across the city in for example the arts or sciences or technology or global studies where a student may have particular interests or talents, where a school that really focusses in those areas can be a great school for that student.

Clearly overarching emphasis needs to be and is on having great schools in every neighborhood.

Julie Speer: We live in South-west Denver. We know Lincoln is our high school and right now it seems that there are more great schools in certain neighborhoods than others. Is that your perception?

Tom Boasberg: I do but I also want to challenge one of the assumptions that often underlies that question which is looking at status which is for example how many kids are at a particular grade level? I strongly encourage parents to look at growth, which is how much progress students are making every year. I’ll give an example, South high school, South high school is a wonderful high school, South high school is a school where we have a new comer center, we welcome refugee kids from all over the world who often come in with interrupted or limited schooling.

If you look at for example the overall average of South how many kids are at grade level, it may be lower than certain schools but if you look at the kids in south high school, all kids there whether affluent or not affluent, black, brown, white, they make more progress in South high school than in almost any high school throughout this city and state.

If you’re a parent I strongly urge you to look at how much growth is my child making in a school, how much growth are children in that school making because that’s what you want. If your child is a high achieving child, you want your kid to grow and to go to a school where maybe many other children are high achieving but frankly kids don’t grow very
much. That doesn’t do your child nearly as much good as to go to a school where even if the average maybe a little bit lower, high achieving children are growing a lot faster.

I think that’s why it’s so striking that when we started our Denver plan reforms 10 years ago, if you looked at the 10, 20 biggest school districts in the state, that year on the progress of our kids, the growth of our kids was the lowest among any major district in the state. Demographics would have predicted that because state-wide, one of the great crises we faced in the state is lower income kids each year grow less academically than their more affluent kids. When they come in lower, they grow less every year.

What’s striking is for the last three years running, Denver public schools has flipped that on its head. We have seen the most academic growth year and year by our students of any of the 20 biggest school districts in Colorado. I encourage all parents, look at that growth because that’s what matters. How much is your child going to learn and grow and I think that should be the key factor in the choices they make.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about DSST. Talk about the DSST strategy.

Tom Boasberg: I think DSST is one of several schools in Denver public schools where we’re very consciously looking to promote integration of student bodies. We focus on enrollment patterns and boundaries. For example in many places throughout the city in fact the majority of middle school boundaries throughout the city, we thought to widen the boundaries to have boundaries encompass a greater diversity of kids so our schools will be more diverse.

I think that’s critical. There is a real tension here that is important in public discussion which is the smaller your boundary is around your school, the more likely that school is to be more segregated because the schools will then mimic historical patterns of housing segregation, housing separation in our city.

We consciously saw at both the middle school and the high school level to draw wider boundaries because as we draw wider boundaries in Denver we’ll often have an opportunity to draw in neighborhoods that are very diverse and encompass students of all races and ethnicities and
income levels. I think that’s a real priority for us and we’ve seen increased integration as a result of that.

Julie Speer: What would you say to the folks who, I don’t want to say that they are against charter management, but they see it as outsourcing schools?

Tom Boasberg: We’re committed to great public schools in the Denver public schools. Those public schools can be run by the district, they can be run by non-profit charters.

We’re committed to great public schools in the Denver public schools and those schools can be district-run schools, those schools can be charter schools. What we care about are the schools are great schools that kids learn and grow, that each of those public schools be it district-run or a charter, serves all kids. That’s a fundamental principle of American public education. That’s what we’re committed to in the Denver public schools.

When we talk to parents across the city, that’s what parents care about. They want their kids in a great school in a public school that serves all kids. They’re much less fussed about the governance type, is it a district-run school or a charter school? They want great public schools.

Julie Speer: Talk about Strive because there’s also the perception that Strive is a great school and they’re achieving really well. But then if you look at what’s happening with Sunny side, there’s a perception from maybe the white affluent families that it’s not an integrated school. It’s a very segregated school and yet achievement is through the roof, it’s doing really well. Some neighborhoods now are having problems choosing that for those students. Talk a little bit about the tension there.

Tom Boasberg: Strive has seen great student growth among its students and if you look at Strive student demographics, they mirror almost exactly the demographics of neighboring district-run schools and they mirror the demographics of the communities that they’re in and I think what we’re seeing for example in the Strive that’s in the northern part of North-west Denver is that community gentrifies.

We see the exact same tensions there, we see gentrification with district-run schools that had been overwhelmingly low income students and students of color. The importance of breaking down the barriers and breaking down the biases that we often see among more affluent families.
around “should I send my kid to this school which is overwhelmingly made up of low income students and students of color?” I think that speaks again to some of the historical fears and some of the historical biases we have in our society.

What we’ve seen is that being twisted by some into a really fictitious district charter conflict. This has absolutely nothing to do whatsoever with the fact that Strive is a charter school. We see the exact same set of issues and concerns and conflicts where we have district-run schools. That’s why it’s so important that we openly acknowledge the concerns, that we openly talk about issues of race, that we openly acknowledge our biases.

I know that Strive just as district-runs schools welcome all families and I think it’s been sad to see what a really important conversation around equity and breaking down racial barriers and racial stereotypes be used by some to create a fictitious district charter conflict.

Julie Speer: Do you think that the curriculum is the best? Strive is an excellent school, I wouldn’t argue with that but is that curriculum the right curriculum for a student who started reading when they were two? When you have privilege you might not need the rigid curriculum that Strive has that works for those kids.

Tom Boasberg: I really would challenge underlying promise of that question which is I think if Strive were a district-run school, the same people who are criticizing it now because they don’t like the fact that it’s a charter would be lauding it as a great school with high standards and great education and I think if these parents go into the Strive’s classroom, they don’t find rigidity at all. Their classrooms are very joyous classrooms. There’s tons of student talk and student voice and student discussion in those classrooms.

Are there strong expectations for kids and strong disciplined classes? Yes there are but you see that in many successful district-run schools as well. This claim that has been made that somehow their curriculum is different or unsuitable for kids I think is completely bogus, I think it’s everything to do with political ideology rather than what’s actually going on with a very joyous student-centered inquisitive classrooms that I see in the dozens and dozens of Strive classrooms that I have visited.
Julie Speer: Talk about the vision of Northfield and your own projections five years from now because as the Stapleton population grows and could potentially fill the school, are you going to maintain the reduced lunch percentages in deploying students from other neighborhoods?

Tom Boasberg: Thank you, we will. The original design of the Stapleton community when they were building on a blank slate of a closed airport was very courageous and very bold and said from the outset that our Stapleton community will integrate with and will be part of the broader community in which we’re located.

That’s been at the root of for example having at the middle school level of combined greater Park Hill Stapleton enrollment zone and that exact same philosophy has animated the design of the high school and the commitment from the community to make sure that that high school will stay integrated both economically and racially as the number of kids in Stapleton grows.

That school is built to a size to be able to accommodate significant numbers of choice to allow students from the immediately surrounding neighborhoods, a much higher percentage of whom are students of color and low income students than we see within the boundaries of Stapleton proper.

If we look out five years from now absolutely, that Northville high school on a stand of all campus will continue to serve significant numbers of low income students and students of color and will continue to be a diverse high school. That’s a fundamental commitment that we have and the community has for that high school.

Julie Speer: Is it a set ratio?

Tom Boasberg: It’s not a set ratio but if we look at choice in, the campus is built at a size that will accommodate students not just from the immediate neighborhood but from the broader neighborhood. There is a preference from students who live in the nearby areas if those students are free and reduced lunch students. That school will continue to see a significant number of students who choose in from the immediately adjacent areas and those students if they are low income students will have a preference to get in. That will ensure that the diversity of that school is maintained well into the future.
Julie Speer: Is that social engineering?

Tom Boasberg: It’s a very conscious attempt and a conscious effort to provide whatever we can for greater integration in our schools, in our classrooms. We hear that very strongly from our kids and from our parents. There’re lots of labels that one could put on it. Again I think we care deeply about promoting integration in our schools and classrooms and this is a conscious effort as we think about boundaries and enrollment patterns to draw those in such a way will promote greater integration rather than greater segregation in our schools, in our classrooms.

Julie Speer: How much is this achievement gap in integration? Are they one and the same, the gap and the racist issue? Is it two sides of the same coin?

Tom Boasberg: The two are closely linked but they’re not inseparable. In other words, just having the school that’s racially integrated doesn’t mean the gap goes away. Absolutely having a school that is integrated economically and racially is a good thing for all kids but it’s only one piece of a set of efforts that needs to go onto closing our gaps, eliminating and confronting the biases of all adults whether in that school or beyond, really focusing on attracting and keeping the very best teachers and school leaders in that school, making sure kids who are behind get more learning time and individualized attention.

All of that goes into closing achievement gaps. So absolutely promoting integrated schools is an important piece but in and of itself is not a silver bullet and it’s not a complete solution. It needs more than that.

Julie Speer: You brought up teachers, let’s talk about that. In general do you have a sense of the ratio of teachers of color in the district? Talk about that as a priority.

Tom Boasberg: We track the demographic composition of our teachers very closely and we care deeply about recruiting and retaining our teachers of color to provide a more diverse teaching force for our kids, more teachers who look like the kids whom they serve. We have great teachers of every race and ethnicity but clearly it is important that we put effort into expanding the diversity of our teaching force and attracting and retaining the very best teachers we can.
Julie Speer: The other thing with Northfield is the commitment that it’s an all IB curriculum. How is that going to be possible if you’re pulling kids from Commerce City who have had zero exposure to IB? How are they possibly going to catch up?

Tom Boasberg: One of the key commitments in closing achievement gap is to make sure that we’re offering the most rigorous and challenging courses for our kids of color and our low income kids to close those gaps. One of the things we’re proud of, if you look at the last several years, we’ve tripled the number of our kids of color who are taking and succeeding in advanced placement courses.

It’s breaking down these barriers to access and there is no question when a student who is behind is in our most challenging courses, they’re going to need more support whether those are targeted summer school opportunities, after-school opportunities, tutoring opportunities. It’s extraordinarily important that we provide the support but our solution is not to deny access to those courses, to those kids but rather as to provide the support to those kids so they can succeed in the courses.

Julie Speer: There’s a really high percentage of white students in the Gifted and Talented program. One might say the Gifted and Talented was a way to keep white affluent students in the district. What would you say to that and are there just smarter white kids at Denver public schools?

Tom Boasberg: Again we believe incredibly deeply that all kids regardless of race, income are born with a set of talent and potential and gifts. As our kids come to us, the privileges that they have as young children matter, having two college-educated parents, having a chance to go to pre-school, those all matter.

We see for example more affluent kids coming to kindergarten with twice the number of words, with twice the size of vocabulary of the less affluent kids. They weren’t born that way but the privileges they grew up with matter. That’s why pre-school is so important, that’s why targeting resources and efforts towards kids who don’t have those privileges are so important and those numbers show up on our Gifted and Talented numbers.

Our Gifted and Talented program is way too highly skewed towards our white students as opposed to our students of color. That’s true here,
that’s true we see in cities and areas across the country and it’s a result both frankly of some systemic biases that we had and it’s a result of the privileges that students of different races grew up with and bring with them when they first for example have the opportunity to be assessed for those programs at age five.

Julie Speer: Talk about Denver’s perception nationwide as a district. What are we known for? The good and the bad.

Tom Boasberg: I think nationwide, Denver is seen as a real innovator and a real leader and that’s true in many ways. For example our work to really prepare and develop our teachers, our work around teacher leadership opportunities to dramatically improve collaboration and teacher learning and often offer greater career opportunities for teachers is a real national leader.

We’re seen as a national leader in our efforts to integrate our schools and to use opportunities like enrollment systems and broader boundaries and choice as a way to promote greater integration and break through the historical patterns of housing segregation and housing separation.

We’re seen as a real leader nationally in creating a system of public schools both district-run and charter where all schools participate around the same rules of serving all kids and serving all kids well and getting away from I think the pointless political battles we see elsewhere between district-run schools and charter schools.

Denver is seen as a real innovator nationally. For example the United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan when he was out here a couple of months said, “You’ve seen me a lot in Denver. That’s no coincidence that Denver is one of the main cities that I go to national to see the innovations, to see the progress being made so I can learn and help share those stories with other districts whom I work with nationally.

Julie Speer: As we’re growing, being one of the fastest-growing districts and cities, how we build education, what’s your projection in the future in terms of the population growth and why is it so important that we do this right now?

Tom Boasberg: I think Denver’s growth offers us a wonderful opportunity as we for example create new schools and new areas of town build up to make sure that everything that we do with those new schools whether it’s
enrollment systems or boundaries, [inaudible] programs promotes greater integration economically and racially as opposed to greater segregation.

I think it’s a wonderful opportunity for us to essentially break free and to break down some of the historical barriers, some historical barriers around housing separation and school boundaries and to use this opportunity to offer the greatest possible access for all of our kids and to the most challenging schools, the most challenging programs to really lift up all kids.

As we see that growth, it’s just a wonderful opportunity to challenge some of our historical patterns, some of our historical ways of doing things and as ourselves are we doing everything that we can, everything that we need to to promote greater integration in our schools, to close the achievement gaps that we see and to have the Denver public schools be great schools for every kid and every neighborhood in the city.

Julie Speer: Why is education so important?

Tom Boasberg: Education is the absolute cornerstone of the future of our society. Our ability as a country to compete in this global economy depends entirely on the quality of education of our kids and I think we see again and again that kids in Denver are not just competing against kids in the suburbs or kids in Kansas or kids in New Jersey.

They’re competing against kids in Canada or China or Singapore and India and our ability to innovate in our economy to be a global leader in terms of the quality of our companies, the quality of our jobs which is such a dramatic impact in the quality of our life depends entirely on our quality of education.

Equally important, our civic society, the fabric of our civic society and our democracy rests on the quality of our education. When we have strong schools and strong education, we produce a much stronger democracy and a much stronger civic society.

Julie Speer: DSST and Strive. There are those who say that the reason that the achievement levels are so high in those schools is because they’re not taking the specials needs or the special aids kids or the ESL kids. It’s not a
fair representation. Or because they choice in, they’re already at a higher level. What do you say about that?

Tom Boasberg: The statements completely ignore the reality and completely ignore the facts that one of our principle efforts, and this has been done very much in collaboration with the charter school community, is to ensure that our charter schools, like our district-run schools serve all kids.

The overwhelming majority of our charter schools in Denver Colorado serve neighborhoods where they give preference to neighborhood kids. They serve all kids with disabilities. If you look at for example the proportion of students with disabilities of English language or of students of color in our charter schools and low income students, they look exactly like our district-run schools. In every case what we have established are the exact same rules and systems around enrollment for our charters as we see for our district-run schools.

Julie Speer: What’s the district’s role in transportation? Once you go with choice and you have a bigger enrolment zone, is the Success Express a model for the rest of the district?

Tom Boasberg: Transportation does play a very important role in enabling families without transportation to be able to access a school that’s too far away for a kid to get to on his own. We do try and promote transportation to promote greater equity and greater choice among our families.

We have schools on a regional basis to be able to attract kids from across that region. At the same time we’re very conscious of the cost that for every school bus we put on the road is a teacher we don’t have in a classroom. In a time where our funding in Colorado continues to rank in the botBoasberg 10 of all states in the country, our funding for K12 education, these budget challenges are enormous and we’re acutely conscious of these extraordinarily painful choices we need to make.

Julie Speer: Is partnering with the city a big priority in terms of transportation or other facilities use and things like that?

Tom Boasberg: Yes, we partner very closely with the city in a whole number of areas in the city under mayor Hancock is a terrific partner for us. At the end of the day the critical issue for us is to have great schools in every neighborhood
so that no child in the city ever feels that he or she has to get on a bust in order to be able to go to a great school.

Julie Speer: In terms of the other districts, Cherry Creek has done some really great things to decrease the gap. Are you looking at what the other districts are doing and learning from them? Is there anything that surprised you in terms of the comparison data?

Tom Boasberg: Yes. We do look very closely at neighboring school districts and we look nationally at high quality school districts, high quality charters. We have much that we can learn from schools and school districts that are succeeding both locally and nationally.

For example Harrison school district in Colorado Springs, their illiteracy program for their elementary school students is an extraordinary literacy program. We’re had our people go down to Harrison and talk to their teachers and school leaders to bring back some of their learnings about their illiteracy program. I do think we look nationally at successful models.

Again those models don’t have a single silver bullet. Those models are based on systems that seek to attract diverse students and enrolment systems that promote greater integration. They’re about having very high expectations and the belief I each and every kid in that school and they’re about a commitment to having the absolute best teachers and school leaders in those schools.

Julie Speer: The School to Prison pipeline is very real. Those students are suspended and then turned over to the law enforcement and it’s highly almost all kids of color. Is there anything about school discipline or about this historic reality that you’re either aware of or fighting? How does that fit into the priorities of DPS?

Tom Boasberg: We are very committed to keeping our kids in school. Our kids need to be safe schools where all kids respect each other and we have very clear rules around behaviors and around discipline.

At the same time we’re deeply committed to reducing our number of suspensions and expulsions. We’ve reduced those faster than any school district in the state, among the fastest in the country. We reduced our suspensions and expulsions by over two thirds in the last eight years and
that is critical. If you look at for example suspension and expulsion numbers, they’re among the lowest in the Denver public schools of any school district in the state. That is critically important.

The same time we continue to see a significant disparity in discipline rates between our white students and our students of color. I think some of that does have to do with some of the biases that we have in our schools and breaking down those biases and that also has to do with providing supports for our students. Some of our students come from neighborhoods with significant challenges and households with significant challenges.

It’s extraordinarily important that we provide the social and emotional, mental health support for those kids and their families to help them deal with some of the challenges and issues that often manifest themselves in behavior problems or discipline problems in our schools.

Julie Speer: Are you aware of what happened at Forest middle school in the 90s? They did a blanket expulsion of like a hundred kids in one day, “You’re all expelled.”

Tom Boasberg: For example last year we had 50 kids out of 90,000 kids at Denver public schools were expelled. It’s one of the lowest rates of expulsion in the entire state.

If a student brings a weapon into a school and is a threat, that child will be expelled but some of the things where we see in the past around mouthing off or bad behavior that restored of justice to help a student confront how he or she harmed another student or adult to make right what they did wrong is a far more effective way of helping that student learn and grow and correct their discipline issues than just say, “You’re out of school, go home and watch TV for five days.”

Julie Speer: Are you working to decrease the students via the Student to Prison pipeline?

Tom Boasberg: We care deeply about making sure that our kids don’t get on what has been called the School to Prison pipeline by the acts they do as young people. It’s critical that we provide the support for those students, that we have a very strong emphasis on restorative justice so that if a student
does something wrong, the answer is not to ship them off into the juvenile justice system.

It’s a restorative justice support where they have to make right what they made wrong, where they have to make whole where they injured another person or their property, where they didn’t behave appropriately and to learn from that experience.

Certainly there are instances where a student commits for example an assault with a weapon and if that is the case, that is a matter for the criminal justice system. What we’ve seen in the past was too often routine issues of kids acting up a little bit, acting out, that are not and should not be matters for the criminal justice system. Those should be matters for restorative justice system in which kids are forced to confront what they did wrong, make whole to people whom they’ve harmed. Those situations are handled by our schools.

We have a tremendous partnership with the Denver police department. Our police department is very supportive of that. They don’t want to be bugged down in handling what should be minor discipline issues that should be handled in schools. Taking the restorative justice approach in our schools has resulted in a dramatic decrease in our suspensions and expulsions and dramatic decrease in referrals of our students to law enforcement. I think that’s very important.

Julie Speer: What would be your final thoughts in terms of race in education and addressing the achievement gap?

Tom Boasberg: I think too often in this country we think of issues of race or economics in an “either-or” context. If this personal or group wins, that person or group loses. What we see at our most successful schools and communities is both in, that all kids benefit, that the entire community benefits when we close our achievement gaps and really openly and candidly talk about issues of race, issues of bias and address those issues head-on.

Here we are in America in the 21st century where the majority of young people in this country born today are kids of color. These whole notions of what is majority and minority are losing meaning and are being flipped on its head in the society we live in today. That only becomes more pronounced as our kids grow up.
We have this wonderful opportunity in this city to take these issues head-on, to talk about them openly, to talk about them candidly, to commit ourselves to both raising the bar for our kids and closing the achievement gaps and having this truly be a win-win for all members of our community no matter your economic status, your race and ethnicity. That above all is the vision our kids have of the future and it’s a vision we’re deeply committed to.
Talk to me about how you first got involved with Manual High School?

I first got involved with Manual High School after the school had closed, it had been shut down for low performance and Theresa Peña who was the board president at the time and councilwoman Elbra Wedgeworth who was the councilwoman for district 8, called me, I was a senior pastor of a church, Kinship Church off of 28th and York, just down the street from Manual. Walk the 28th block everyday so I was very familiar with Manual and the struggles that it’d been through. They called me and they said "Hey, we want to get the school reopen. We don't want to shut it, we really want to get it going in a positive direction again." They asked me to serve on a oversight committee to select who might be the group that was brought in to reopen Manual and to get it moving in the right direction. That was in 2005 and then a lot of our work started in 2006 and then the school reopened in 2007.

When the school reopened, I joined the friends of Manual which still remains the alumni group and really those who are concerned about the school joined that and so was able to help Rob Stein, Dr. Rob Stein who was the principal at the time get things moving in a good direction from that vantage point. In 2008, I joined Rob's team as a community instructor and brought music back to Manual. I was able to teach vocal music for a year there.
From what I saw at Manual, we continue to see what needed to be done for kids there. Rob and I developed a great friendship and we brought in another guy Rodney Douglas to take on the music stuff and by that time, we started talking about Denver School Board. In 2009, took a little break and ran for DPS School Board based on the things that I had seen at Manual.

Based on some of the things that from 2005 to 2009, some of the struggles that I had saw taking place and the promises made to a neighborhood about how support was going to look for the school and then the reality of what support look like. That really started me to say "Okay, we're saying one thing and we're delivering another." Like in me, back to thinking about things like Dr. King once said about this country.

Is that we just want you to be true to what you said on paper. If on paper you said that Manual was going to receive these supports and the principal was going to receive these type of freedoms after we had done the innovation act which we did in 2008, that's how we want it, we wanted the freedom to self-determine and it became a struggle.

It was a very big struggle for Dr. Stein, for the staff there, and so my run for school board in 2009 was really driven by the struggles that I saw Dr. Stein and the staff at Manual doing and the inconsistencies of what was promised and what was delivered. Then in 2010, I actually joined the staff, the leadership team of Manual. Rob brought me on innovation schools act, allowed me to come on and work at the school, so I joined the administrative team.

Rob then surprised us and told us that he was leaving and so then I got to serve there with Joe Sandoval, who became our interim principal after we ran into a stalemate with the district about who would be Rob's replacement. We had one candidate that the school and the community felt good about. The district candidate they felt good about and there was no budge either way and so that's how we ended up with Joe Sandoval, not to minimize him but he was an interim placement that was placed there by the district.

This neighborhood school had not received the promises that it was supposed to and not received the power that it was supposed to through the innovation act, and now it was in a leadership change and it was stuck there with an interim principal who being an interim principal is
different than being an actual principal. Your commitment to it is different.

It was a different year with Joe and there's some great things that happened at the school and that we saw some great supports the team that we had there, we're really committed to kids making sure that we serve them well. We saw some good games and academic outcomes. We went through the principal search again and brought in a new principal, Brian Dale came in.

I stayed on the staff there and worked with Brian up until January of 2014, when he was let go for reasons that are not known to us. There's always a spin about how that happen, and then in June of 2014 my contract was not renewed by the new guy that Don Roy who they brought in. That's an overview of it, and there's all these other, all these details in it that I can tell you more about. Why Manual is still struggling to this day?

They're bringing in a new principal, Nick Dawkins who's a great young man, who's a leader in the district at Hamilton Middle School and he's coming to Manual next year. It's been a constant turnover in leadership at Manual. It has been, people will say that Manual struggled because when busing ended, you no longer had affluent white students coming in.

Now you had just black and brown students that were coming from North City Park, Whittier, Swansea, Globeville, Clayton communities and those kids were just not at the same level academically, here's some people say that, and I always cringe when I hear people say that, because what you're really saying to that community is that you are only successful when we were able to bring the white kids in.

When the white kids were taken out, this school that had been and it still is an iconic school that had produced folks like Mr. Cousins, people like Corky Gonzales, people like Wellington Webb, Mayor Michael Hancock, this schooled Elbra Wedgeworth. All of these giants within our community, this school that have produced it, you are now telling us that we're sorry that you're not producing and the reason you're not is because we took away the white kids.

That is frustrating and it goes back to what I said about be true to what you said on paper, the whole premise of busing was, we're bringing,
we're talking about integration because there was concern that schools were segregated and therefore separate and not equal. We say we have a commitment to these schools being equal, we have a commitment to these schools serving all kids well.

Then when you take the white kids out, the service and the supports to these black and brown kids all of a sudden it becomes it defaulted back to segregated and unequal. Part of the frustration when I worked at Manual was the lack of resources that the school had. That we were constantly trying to pinch pennies here when we're doing the budget.

Okay, we know we need a social worker. We know we need this resources. We know we need that and we know we want to do this. We know our kids need to do that. You really were struggling with getting the district to be 100% behind a school that they said they were 100% behind. Today, the Manual that we look at, my daughter is a sophomore, she'll be a junior next year at Manual.

When I look at the world in which she's been educated in and there's some great teachers there and she's doing great, has a GPA over 4.0, and she's on her way to college and doing well. That's only to the credit of those hardworking teachers that are there with her. I know that they are still not getting what they need.

They're still not getting the consistent resources that have been promised to that school since we reopened. What worries me is that the neighborhood is going through justification. Here come the white kids and so now all of a sudden the resources matter. Now all of a sudden the image of the school matters again. Now all of a sudden, we need to make sure that people see us 100% behind this place because we are now catering to a different group and we want them to choose this school.

From all you can go all the way back to the late 90s, you can go back to when it was divided up into three different schools. You can go back to current iteration and you can say well what about the black and brown kids that were there. Aren't they deserving at the same resources, aren't they deserving of the same quality instruction? Aren't they deserving of consistent leadership? What have you done or haven't done to ensure those things at the district level?
It's been frustrating from a community leaders standpoint. It's been frustrating from someone who's worked in the trenches there and really committed the last 9 years, 10 years of my life to that work. As a parent to have my daughter in the game there, it's frustrating to see just the continued inconsistencies of be true to what you said on paper.

I think that resonates most at me when I think about Manual, even when I think about just education reform across our district is be true to what you said on paper. If all kids matter then all kids should have the resource, all kids should have the same quality instruction. All kids should have stability of leadership in their building. Community should all be equally empowered and so yeah, that's probably Manual in a nutshell for me.

Julie Speer: Let's talk about school choice first.

Vernon Jones: When I consider school choice. I call it chance because it's still a system where in so many places you have a limit of how many students can get in and so it's really a roll of the dice and you give people false hope by saying it's choice because if they don't get their first choice. This is what we do, it looks like choice, what we do is we say "Okay, you're going to be at five choices and if you don't get your first choice, you'll get your second choice. If you don't get your second choice, you'll get your third choice. If you don't get your fourth choice, you'll get your fifth choice." We make people.

It not only is a false choice, it undermines the quality of the neighborhood school too. You present the neighborhood school as that's your last resort. When I hear people talk about the corporatization of public schools. Practices like that make people say that because it feels like you're intentionally trying to undermine the neighborhood school by saying hey you didn't get into the top innovation school or the top charter schools. Now you're stuck with your neighborhood school which we know is not positioned to serve you well because we've under-resourced it, because we have not been again true to what we said on paper to them.

Then you've got parents who are frustrated and they really don't engage in that school that they default into because they're just waiting for the next round of choice to choice out of that school, to see if they can get into the school they really wanted to in the first place. When I heard guys
like Bill Kurtz and Chris Givens talk about school culture and I agree with them 100%.

School culture is very important. It's hard to build a school culture when people are from the jump told that your school is not as good as ABC and you're defaulted in here so you're stuck here until you serve your time here in your neighborhood school until you can be set free and go to X school that people have said that's the better school.

I think that when we talk about choice, I think we have to really say are we really creating a choice system. For me, to really be a fan of choice is when we have all schools operating at the same level, that all schools are equally great, that all schools are equally resourced, that all schools have the great leadership and all schools have the great instruction in every classroom, then it's a fair choice, it's a fair game.

As long as there is this default to sorry you're stuck there kind of part to choice. I just, I can't get behind the system that continues to have winners and losers, I think that all schools should be a winning choice. Especially in your neighborhood, you should be able to look across your street, and say hey that's a great school in my neighborhood, if that's going to be my first choice, one because its proximity to my home, but also because of its performance and what it's going to provide for my kid.

I think it's we weaken community when we start to talk down about the neighborhood school and are not ready to come in and help support that neighborhood school to being a number one or number two choice. A real choice system to me is when 100% of the schools at the same level and then everybody can say hey wherever I go is great. There's not a, I'm defaulted into that one.

It's like hey wherever I end up, top five, top six, seven, eight, nine, wherever I end up, that's going to be great. I think that's what we have to aspire to when we talk about choice being something that's going to work for this district. If we can't ensure that, I think we have to go, we have to then say okay, well, we've got to then invest in all of these schools equally.

You look at some schools that have not only for people funding but then to a point that was made in a conversation is that you have some affluent parents, they can come in and bring their resources, their corporate
connections. If you're a charter school, you have a fund raising goal and so you don't have that, most neighborhood schools don't have it, they got the PTA doing the butter bread fund raisers or the cookie fund raisers to fund the winner dance.

They're not talking about fund raisers of 100, and 200,000 or getting million dollar checks from Oprah or $7 million from Liberty. You got to, how do we level the playing field and how do we make sure that all schools are equal, that all schools are equitable and that all schools are doing excellent things for kids, that to me is when I'll be okay with choices, because then I'll know wherever kids end up, it's going to be good.

Julie Speer: Talk about the proficiency of the kids who enter a STRIVE or a DSST. That gives me the false sense of their achievement level because they are working with kids who are already achievers in the first place because they've selected that school.

Vernon Jones: When you talk about incoming proficiency into a high score, incoming proficiency into a middle school. We can't disconnect those from the outcomes that you get at the end. ACT has been telling us forever that if a person enters 9th grade and they are not at grade level, they have about a 10% chance of being college ready by the time they graduate.

Anyone who says that it doesn't matter the incoming proficiency, they don't understand education, they don't understand the work that we do because it does matter. When kids come in two and three grade levels behind, schools have to adjust, they have to adjust their, what might have been their standard plan for kids who's at grade level, they now have to have great intervention, great investment into the lives of those kids.

They have to have great social emotional supports. They have to figure out okay why is that kid two or three grade levels behind. Is it because of poor instruction the kid received? Is it life trauma that was, that took by on the life of this child? You have to have a different approach. If 85% of my kids are coming in at grade level, they're coming in to 9th grade at 9th grade level or beyond then not saying the work is easy because educating kids and preparing them to be ready for college is hard no matter where they come in but it's easier.
You can actually stay on track with where you want to be in those four years. You're asking the school for Manual for example, or North or Bruce Randolph. If you're asking them to stay okay, these kids are coming in two grade levels, three grade levels behind and in four years, we want you to do seven years worth of work. You're asking them to do double the work as a DSST, double the work as a STRIVE, double the work as a KIP and then you are mad at them and you showed on an SPF when their outcomes do not equal what a DSST, STRIVE and KIP has.

It's like running the four laps around the track and you're saying, okay, DSST, KIP, STRIVE, you guys go ahead and start and then when they get three laps completed, you're now telling a Manual, a North, a Bruce Randolph, okay now you guys start and we want you to finish the four laps at the same time they do.

They only have one lap left and you're asking these guys to start and get their four laps done in the times these people are doing one lap. How kids enter your school, it does matter. That's why I think this disconnect approach of, okay, we got our K5s and that work is disconnected from our 6-8 and that work is disconnected from our 9-12s, anybody who knows anything about education should understand that what happens in kindergarten or even what happens in early childhood education.

That drives a lot of the things that 12th grade year looks like. We have to be very intentional about saying if they arrive to 6th grade not at grade level, we need to investigate our ECE5 pipeline. If they arrive to 9th grade and they're not at grade level, we need to assess what's going on in our 6th, 7th and 9th grade and we need to fix that.

If they arrive at college without at grade level, not college-ready. Well, we got a solution for that and that's called remediation and so then you got poor families who are now in debt, kids who are taking college courses are not getting credit because the system failed them. I think that's another injustices that doesn't get talked about.

We failed them easy through 12th grade. We put them on the campus of community college of Denver. They're taking remedial courses. They have to pay for them and they're getting no college credit when the reason why they're in those remedial classes is because the system was supposed to do right by them failed them. You want to talk about justice,
the district should probably be in debt because the district should have to pay for the remediation.

I know students that were at Manual with me and they had to go and they had to take remedial courses. Because of the financial burden on the family, that's as far as they got because they couldn't afford anything else. Financial weight wasn't an option because of different situations that the family was in.

We have to quit education children in silos. We can't keep, the K5 world is independent from the 9-12 world. The 9th or the district has been DPS and other districts have been working to get more of the collaboration going, more the backwards planning going between the different schools and the different networks and all that.

That's something that should have been going on a long time ago. Because our kids, it's a progression. The child development will let you know, it's all connected. When we disconnect it and we act like K5 has no responsibility to 6th-8th and 6th-8th has no responsibility to 9-12. We get the system that we get today. We get kids who've been socially promoted with the skills to achieve at the next grade level.

They get socially promoted without the skills to achieve the next level and then they end up again in college remediation. They end up back in the neighborhoods that they live in, struggling, doing some of the same things, trying to find employment, that's not there and the cycle continues. All because we don't want to do things differently and that's ... It gets frustrating and something that has to change.

Julie Speer: You were talking about Manual and that you get upset when they say well, kids left and then our school started going down. Is it because they were white or is it because they were affluent?

Vernon Jones: When we think about school that go down because their demographics change because they go from white kids were bused in, or affluent kids were bused in and now those kids are gone. Now the performance of the school goes down and so you say okay, is that why? Did it go down because the white kids left. I think one of the best things that came out, I think Chuck Beat did a story sometime ago about East High School and the false positive for lack of a better term that you got when you have such an influx of affluence and students.
Those scores masked what your problem is, that the overall scores look good but when you get down deep, you see that okay, we're failing black and brown students. There's some data that you can go back and look and say even in school like Manual when affluent students were in the school, the overall scores would look good because of the affluent students that were there.

It's not to say that you didn't have black and brown students who weren't achieving at the same levels because you did and that's always something that gets lost in the shuffle. Sometimes when we look at the big score, and the big scores tells us 70% of kids are proficient because we have a low bar and we say, oh, that's good enough. We forget that there's 30% of kids who are not proficient. 30% of kids who are not ready and we rest on the fact that 70% of kids are doing good.

We don't dig deep into the reality that, okay, what's going on with those 30% of the kids that were failing. I think when you take affluent kids out and be they white, be they black, be they brown kids who have the mobility to leave and then choose other options, what you discover then is what you've chosen to ignore because the data that you were getting when it was like this, you could still feel comfortable with it. You could still feel comfortable like at East.

Hey, X percent of our kids are doing great. X percent of our kids are doing great. You could quietly ignore the fact that you have kids that are in the back of classrooms who are being failed. You can ignore that you don't have a diverse honors program or AP program and that or an IB program, if you think about other schools in our district.

You can ignore that because the performance of other students has made you feel like we're doing our job. I think when you see the performance go down, I think it's not, it's an indication that there's probably somethings that we were ignoring because we thought oh 60%. Okay. That 60% good enough and you compare it, like they used to do to us and they still do it today.

They compare you to schools in your cohort, or like schools and so you get that data as the school leader and you see, wow, compared to everybody else, we're doing pretty good. You see school ABC in your cohort and they're at 47% proficiency and you look at your school and you say oh I'm at 51%. Then as a school leader, if you're not pushing that
bar higher for yourself, you then start to compare yourself to mediocrity, you start to say well, look, well, I'm better than them so really why do we got to push.

You ignore the fact that even though you're at 51%, you've got 49% of your kids that are not there. I think that's what when busing stopped and schools like Manual went back to, well, defaulted back to a segregated school. It was just letting us know, well, these are the kids that we have forgotten about. That we had ignored, that we had pushed into special education programs that we had not really been concerned about them because we were resting on the fact that the other kids really making us look good.

I think there's that underlying message that we get is that if we mean all kids, we need to mean all kids. When you take certain kids out and it exposes it or we've ignored them or gentrification or whatever happens to community, I think school leaders, I think district leaders, I think folks have to, when you say all kids, it has to mean that, and it has to mean that until it says 100% no one is satisfied. Until there's no such thing as college remediation, no one is satisfied.

Until special education students are getting all the services and the supports that they need until they're getting the hours that their IPs legally require, no one should be satisfied. I think we, Dr. King again and I quote Dr. King. He says we can be tranquilized by gradualism and I think that is probably one of the biggest sicknesses I think in education is that we are tranquilized by gradualism. We are tranquilized by the 4% gain.

We're tranquilized by a 7% increase in graduation. We're tranquilized by these small things and we celebrate them which is great but the gradualism can also paralyze us. That to the point that we're ignoring that we're still failing 30, 40, 50% of our kids. We have to do better. We have to do better and all of us have to give ourselves to this work that says 100% of children, not 60, not 70, not 80, not 99. 100% of kids.

Julie Speer: Let’s talk about race. If you were to look at race in America and then race in Colorado, race in Denver, race in DPS, the whole spectrum, everywhere, racism is a problem. It’s not something we’ve solved. Talk about the reality of this and how what’s going on nationally is really playing out in your schools, if you think it is.
Vernon Jones: Yeah. We'll look at the issue of race, and we look at it nationally, and we go all the way down to the school level, the community level. I think that what we are dealing with is we've never dealt with the root problem, okay. We've had a lot of chopping of the weeds. My dad when I was a kid, he told us to get outside and pull the weeds. We'd always think that we did a good job because we pulled the tops of the weeds.

My dad will come out there and he would tell us, no, your job is not done because you see that root? If you don't deal with that root, the weed is going to come back. I think we've not dealt with the root problem of race in our country. We have documents again in our country that said we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and we know that at that time of that writing it meant white male property owners is who that was talking about.

We have since as a country matured or grown up a bit to where we've expand at that but the original text did not include a lot of folks. The original laws that were made, the original practices that were established didn't include a lot of people. There were still a lot of segregationist, southernist mentalities that were influencing the laws that were created in our country.

Then therefore, driving the practices. We haven't gotten at the root yet. We still do not consider all people equal and you can tell that by our practices. If we considered all people equal then we would give them equity and there would be excellence in every school. Those are my things is that there's equality that yields us equity and that yields us excellence.

If those things were true, if I believe that, if people really believe that all students were equal, then equity would not be a problem. Then if equity was not a problem, excellence would not be a problem, but the root of it all is we still don't believe that everyone is equal. We still have this mentality of greater than and less than.

Even in our labeling of free and reduced lunch. Even in our labeling of poor and affluent. We create these system of that person is better than you because their zip code is 80238 but yours is 80239, so you're not as good as them. Your mom just went to career, technical education school. My mom has a master's degree. We create these systems of inequality.
and then we are shocked when our outcomes in our communities show that people are not equal, but that's what we do.

We don't black lives matters, every lives matter. We say that and I think what we see in our country and what we see even locally, even when you see students in DPS with their protest. I think they are frustrated with the fact that again what we say on paper is not what we practice. We say that people are equal but they know. We live that.

My mother and I told myself I wasn't going to talk about my mom because I get choked up. My mother lived through busing and DPS and there's many stories that she's told me of growing up. There's many stories she's told me she was growing up and how she was treated poorly because she was a black student. That there were teachers who just said horrible things to her and this was when she was in elementary school.

She still remembers the story vividly. She experienced this less than treatment and she would tell you that this was not something that stopped when she got to middle school, when she got bused out of TJ from Montbello. It wasn't, busing didn't change that, busing didn't make people all of a sudden see my mom as an equal, didn't see this young black girl as just as equal as her white counterpart or her rich counterpart.

That didn't change and to this day, my mom has been in DPS for over 30 years. Teaching and serving our community and serving children through the lens that all kids are equal. There are black families, white families. My mom started teaching, she started student teaching at Brown but she started teaching at Valdez on the north side.

My sister and I we were in a rural school, and we would go to work with her when we had time off. My mom treated those Latino students who were speaking Spanish as if she would treat us, they were her kids. She was concerned about their lives as she was concerned about my life and my sister's life. You saw no difference.

That's not the reality in our schools today. There are people who's standing in front of our kids to educate them who don't believe in that. Who would teach differently if they were in a classroom that looked differently and that's not okay. There are people who lead in schools
today who would lead differently if they had a different demographic on their PTA.

That's not okay. I told somebody did you know, would you teach that way if the room was full of rich white kid, would you teach that way if these were Stapleton moms and you knew that they had the time off to come to the school and challenge you. Would you change your practices because you knew that you would be held accountable and sadly there's a lot of people who would.

Because they don't believe in their heart that all kids are equal, that all communities are equal, that everybody deserves the right to a high quality education that prepares them for success in college and to transform their community, they don't believe it. We don't call that out. We window-dress cultural competency.

We window-dress, we're going to have these diversity fairs and these equity events, we window-dress all of that because it looks good, it makes us look good but it doesn't change anything because when we talk about equality, when talk about do you believe that every life matters? That's a condition of the soul, the condition of the heart.

That gets it who are you as a human being. We don't want to confess that some of us are just some nasty folks who hold to hate that has been placed there by family experience, has been placed there by generations of brokenness. We don't want to embrace that. Again, Dr. King says hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that. Doctors cannot drive out doctors, only love can do that. I think the reality that we need to get to is that, that's a good one.

The reality that we need to get to is we need to challenge people about the hate that is in their heart. We need to challenge them about the darkness that exist in their thinking. If we're not going to have transparent conversations about that, and not just transparent conversations because I'll tell you, as a black man in America, I'm tired of the conversations.

I'm tired of the fact that my grandfather who's in his 80s and my grandmother who is approaching her 80s. I'm tired of the fact that I'm having the same conversations about am I a man or am I not a man. That my grandfather was having in his generation. I'm tired of the fact that my
teenage daughter had to deal with some of the same kind of racism and prejudices that my mother had to deal with.

I’m tired of my two year old daughter is going to have to go through some of the same experiences that my grandmother did, that her grandmother did. That’s not okay with me. People who, they talk about status quo and educational practices but there is status quo in our disposition. There are some folks who are just not disposition for educational work because they don’t believe that all kids are equal.

They do not believe that all communities are equal and they can say it all they want. They can give you the rhetoric, they can preach the sermon but until you show it, talk is cheap. When Manual stays underfunded, undersupported. When you choose to build a new $45 million high school like North Field instead of saying nope, as a district we are committed to diversity, we are committed to integration.

The only high school choice you have is Manual and guess what, they got 700 seats. Drive down MLK. Who are really committed to those things, there’d be a lot of practices, there’d be a lot of things we wouldn’t do. We’d say no, this is who we are as a city, this is who we are as a district and so we’re going to make sure that the decisions that we make align with who we want to be.

Where there’s no vision, this is my pastoral side, where there’s no vision, the people perish and I think we have been struggling for vision in DPS. We have been struggling for true vision at the city level and so we’ve been doing things just random. Somebody wants to give us a grant, we do that for a couple of months.

You can talk to teachers, teachers were talking on the front line that so many things are pushed down their throats, here’s the new agenda, here’s the new thing of the day, here’s the new flavor of the day. Because we’re not being driven by vision, we’re not being challenged to do something great. We’re just saying hey, the money talks and so we do this, the money talk, so we do that. Disconnected from what a community wants to achieve. Disconnected from the transformation that we need to realize in our society. Yeah.

Julie Speer: How do we fix it? What is the vision? Yeah. Let’s integrate our schools, how do you do it? How do you do it when Denver is one of the fastest
growing cities. Okay, we have a problem now, we're going to have a big problem in 10 years.

Vernon Jones: What is our solution? We can talk about these problems and we can talk about these things that have existed for generations. I think the solution is giving the right people with the right disposition in leadership, for me everything rises and falls on leadership. If you have leaders that are allowing things to happen that don't align again with the values of a community, that don't align with who we want to be.

You have to change leadership and it begins there, so you have to say, okay. Even before that, I think a community has to decide what it wants. This whole doing two communities, rather than doing with communities is a very archaic approach and we need to start saying, okay, communities, what is your vision? What do you want to be? What do you want to do? What do you want your children prepared for?

Instead of coming in and saying hey we're going to drop these schools in your neighborhood because we believe this is what your kid should become. We need to have an approach that says those parents care about their kids, and yeah, they might not be able to come to the school board meeting because they're working two jobs, or they're working the third shift. They do care about their kids.

Every evening they tuck them in the bed. Every morning they feed them. Mothers are praying over their kids, you can't dismiss any community about their concern for their kids. You have to figure out ways to sit down with them, to break bread with them and to hear from them about the hopes for their children. I remember when I was running for school board, there was not one community that I walked in and I had coffee with somebody, had a doughnut with somebody, or was at a picnic.

I didn't hear one person no matter what their color was, no matter what their socioeconomic status was. I didn't hear one parent say I don't care what happens to my kid. I don't care what the school does, nobody says that. Every parent cares, and so therefore every parent deserves to have the right to speak to the vision for their children.

No parent deserves to have something dictated to them. No parent deserves to feel less than because they can't come to a board meeting or they can't come to a superintendents forum. There are parents who are
working, like I said they're working two jobs, picking up some part time gig because they care about their children, because they want to provide the school uniform, because they want to make sure that their kids has some good things in life.

They want to make sure their kids has food on the table, that they can make the rent. We've got this antiquated idea of what parent engagement looks like. For lack of better term, it's the leave it to beaver parent engagement model that June and Warren Cleaver that words out working out and June is at home. Any time the school calls, June can get up there and do whatever she needs to do.

We have this antiquated model that that is what parent engagement looks like. We forget, hey Mr. Principal, you didn't wake that kid up this morning. You didn't rock that kid to sleep when he was feeling sick last night. You didn't make sure that there was corn flakes on the table for that kid to eat. You didn't drive them across town, you didn't provide the money for them to get on that bus for an hour and a half.

If you look at the big picture, our parents are engaged across this city and it is just a scapegoat, excuse for people to say, we're struggling because parents aren't engaged, 100% of parents are engaged every day in our city, concerned about their kids. They may not 100% be at the school, and we may want more parent engagement in the school, but I think it is an insult to parents for any one to ignore how complex parenting is and how complex the financial conditions are for some of our parents.

You can tout that you have a school that's 90 plus percent free and reduced lunch. Well, if you have kids into the position of 90% free and reduced lunch, that tells you something about the reality that their parents are living in. Them for you to have your parent teacher conference at 3:00 in the afternoon or 4:00 in the afternoon or even in the morning.

That is a slap in the face to the parents that you serve because if you really cared about them, thought they were equal, didn't want to scapegoat them, you would adjust and say, you know what most of our parents work until 7:00 at night. If we've got to have parent conferences from 8 to 10 on Friday and from 8AM to 12PM on Saturday, that's what we do because we're responding to our parent community.
We're not making them feel less than because they can't afford to take off from their job than maybe our more affluent parents can. We're saying, look, we recognize, we applaud the fact that you're doing what you're doing as parents and so, we're adjusting. Because if your voice really matters, again this goes back to equality.

If those parents are equal to you as a stay at home mom is, then just like you make it convenient for her than you make it convenient for this parent over here, but if it's not equal, you blow this parent off, and then you cater to this parent because this parent is the one she can show up all the time. Well, let that parent over here stop feeding that kid. Let that parent over there stop waking that kid up every morning. Let that parent over there stop driving that kid to school and you'll see what a disengaged parent really looks like.

Julie Speer: Where do you live now?

Vernon Jones: Where I live now, I live in Green Valley Ranch and we've lived in Northeast Denver. My family and I, my wife and our five kids, we've lived in Northeast Denver since 2000, so over 15 years in Northeast Denver. If you go back, my family's lived in Montbello since the 60s and so my grandparents have been out there forever.

My grandfather's founded a church in the near northeast part of town in 1979. Northeast Denver has been where my family has put our roots and so Northeast Denver is very near to my heart, and that's why Manual's been near to my heart. That's why, all of the schools and the kids in the Northeast quadrant of Denver have meant a lot to me because I've seen so much because of my grandparents.

Where they live, where I've raised my kids at, where my mother grew up. My grandparents started 34th in Saint Paul and then gentrification moved them to Park Hill, then gentrification moved them out to Montbello. Our family has been through all of these cycles that our city has gone through, and so yeah, that's where we are.

Julie Speer: I know you have one daughter in Manual but where did you send your other children?

Vernon Jones: That's a great question. I have five children and so when we choose to send my daughter Savana goes to Manual High School. Part of that
decision to send here to Manual was I was working there at the time for her freshman year. I really want to be an example to the community about I'm not, I didn't. When they talk about put your money where your mouth is.

I did something better than that, I put my daughter where my mouth was. I said look I believe in this and where we're going so much that I'm going to put my heart literally in this school, so that's why she's there. She's striving, she's doing a great job there. My son Nathan goes out to Rangeview High School. He leaves our neighborhood, Green Valley Ranch and he goes out to Rangeview High School.

Part of that was because he had some, some of his bestfriends that he went to middle school with out at Omar D Blair Charter School. They chose to go out there and as a family we talked about that and that's a whole other topic about the difference between what my son is receiving at Rangeview and what my daughter is receiving at Manual.

It is just eye opening. The differences that her freshman year was versus his freshman year, the resources that he has versus the resources that are available to her. The AP classes, how they're delivered at his school versus how the AP school are delivered at her school. There's so much there. My two other children came up and Lily.

They go to Omar D Blair Charter School which is in Green Valley Ranch which has been a neighborhood charter for the last 12 years and we're really proud of that and I like to say that we serve our neighborhood at Omar D Blair, about 800 plus kids who live in Green Valley Ranch in Montbello. My youngest is two. She's just a toddler, gee, guess we're getting her ready for pre-school.

Julie Speer: Is there anything you want to say about Montbello and the state of Montbello back in the day before turning around?

Vernon Jones: When I think about Montbello, the neighborhood and the high school. My aunt was, I think she was the second graduating class of Montbello. Montbello again has been another part of our family for a long time and then all of my cousins on my father's side went to Montbello high school and played basketball in Montbello high school.
They were in the Theodore program at Montbello high school. My youngest cousins all went through Montbello high school, they were on the drum line, and they were in the drummer program. Montbello has been near and dear to our heart. I think again, it is another one of those programs that was promised, support and it didn't necessarily get all that it needed.

I think from a historical standpoint, it's just like what we see at Manual and what we see at other neighborhood high schools. If we really want them to thrive then we would really invest heavily. We would make sure. Montbello same thing at Manual or the parallels. This constant turnover in leadership therefore this constant overturning of instructional staff and then program shifts and all of this.

We blame it on the community, we say, well, the school failed because you all failed. I can't buy that. Because if we're the educational professionals, if we are the superintendent, if we are the board, if we are the instructional superintendent and we know what makes a great school then our job every day is to ensure that those things are in place in a great school.

If we know that a school can't be great, changing principles every other year and we know it can't be great changing teachers every other year, some mid-year and we know it can't be great. If we create the instability, I think we owe it to a community to come back, apologize and then help them to stabilize because they trusted us as their professionals to do right by them.

When right is not by them instead of taking the ownership, what has happened is folks have washed their hands of it, and blame the community and make again majority black and brown communities, majority poor communities make them feel like it's your fault, you don't know how to raise your kids. They're all gangbangers and thugs destined for prison.

That's why we had to dismantle your neighborhood school because you guys are just out of control. No ownership of the instability that was created by constant leadership turnover. No ownership of under-resourcing. No ownership of how the educational professionals who were trusted violated that trust. I think that's historically when we look back on all of it, I think when there's a shift in leadership and folks can really have
a transparent conversation about what is happening in DPS and the truth comes out.

I think that's what we'll see. We'll see a consistent from northwest Denver what the struggles they have, to the southwest, and the struggles they're having now. If you compare northwest, southwest, northeast Denver to what's gone in central and southeast Denver. You see a huge difference. You see in southeast or central Denver, you have the George Washington instability that started to take place.

Before the George Washington instability, you really had stability in southeast Denver. You really had stability in central Denver and therefore you had pretty solid results from those neighborhoods. Then when you see all of these leadership changes in northwest, in southwest, in northeast. When you see teacher turnover in northwest, southeast, southwest. You see an influx of students who are behind grade level and it's not been address at the K5 level.

It's not been addressed at the 6th-8th level. Where is the ownership from leadership? Where is the ownership from those who serve the superintendent staff, the superintendent himself or herself. Where's the ownership from elected board officials who have allowed this dismantling to take place on their watch for somewhat say are hidden agendas, corporate agendas.

When what we're really need to get back to is the community agenda. How do we make sure that we do not create instability in schools, because for so many of us, the school is the epicenter of our identity. The school is the epicenter of our strength as a community. When you attack the school, when you tear it apart, to some degree you weaken the community.

There's got to be ownership for that breakdown and then take the ownership and then take the responsibility to build it up. I'm liking it to the fact that United States will go to war with someone and after we've gone to war with them and things have been settled and somewhat resolved, we passed lots of legislations that sends money then over to these places to rebuild them.

There's some ownership, okay we've got into, and we still want to see you survive so we will rebuild our enemies, but we'll go in and dismantle
black and brown communities, poor communities and do nothing to rebuild them until we can profit from them through things like gentrification. When it becomes profitable because all those people from California are now moving here and it's now profitable to rehab the five points.

It's now profitable to rehab these areas that we've allowed to be blighted, and we've allowed to allow some poverty just take root. Now that that's profitable, now we do it. That again is only an indication that we are still in the system that does not see all people as equal because if we did, we would have fixed that area long time ago because there were people there, not rich people but just people, people who deserve to walk down the street and not see blighted buildings and vandalism.

People who deserve to walk down their street and see vibrant buildings. People who deserve to walk their dogs in their neighborhoods and see great schools. That's if we see everybody as equal and the reality is that, that's not the case, that's not where we're at and any of the great civil rights pioneers of the past will tell you that's what they dream, that's what they hope for, and I think that when you talk about the separate but equal, when you talk about keys versus different public schools.

I think all of those instruments for people just demanding equality maybe if we integrate, they'll see that we are equal. Maybe if they'll learn side by side my son, my daughter. Maybe if they do these things. They'll embrace us as equals. It hasn't worked like it was planned and so we're still where we are today, a lot of work to be done. A lot of transformation of our hearts.

A lot of transformations of our thinking before we get to where we need to be. The solution still remain that we got to start with leadership and it's got to start with this leadership acknowledging that I don't care if I'm talking to 80238, I don't care if I'm talking to 80216, I don't care if I'm talking to 80239. I approach all of those communities with the same belief that all of these parents care about their kids, all of these parents want the best things for their kids.

We're going to support them, we're going to stand with them and we're going to make it happen. That's only if you believe, that's only if you believe that the folks in 80239 are just as concerned and just as able as the folks at 80238, you got to start there. Leadership got to start there
and they've got to get in the trenches with people, they've got to connect with them.

One thing again about the solution too is my mom used to tell me about a time and it wasn't too long ago. That teachers had to live in Denver to teach in Denver. You had to live in Denver to lead in Denver. There was this different level of stakeholder concern because these weren't just kids but those kids in front of you were community.

You run into those kids at King Soopers, you run into them at Safeway, in Howardsons, you see their parents and there was this different level of concern and this different level of accountability because I couldn't just as I say drive through teaching. I couldn't just come in and leave and be disconnected from the happenings.

Because when it happened, it was happening to me as well because I live in the neighborhood. I think we also need to look at that and say did that make things better when teachers and leaders had to be a part of the communities. I know when look at, we talk about race and when we look at some of the solutions that they're talking about, with policing across the country.

They're looking at does it make a difference when a police officer is policing his or her own neighborhood. Are they different when they've already had an established relationship with folks? Are they able to approach them without such hostility because there is a relationship. I think the same thing is true about education.

When you have established relationship, you're able to connect to students. When you have an established relationship you're able to say some things that some challenging things that you might not have been able to say if you didn't have that relationship capital with those parents or with those students. We really need to look at that too, so there's a lot to be done.

I will tell you too is that one of the things that I said to folks is that one of the other frustrations that I have is a black right in America is I feel like I'm on a highway, and I'm driving 65 miles per hour, I'm driving the speed limit, I'm doing what I'm supposed to do. You have folks that are merging into this conversation and if you're on I believe it's the I-10 in California
that you know that you have to merge at the rate of speed or you're going to cause a problem.

I think the frustrating thing for me is that here I am on the highway, 65 miles per hour, fighting for social justice, fighting for equality, fighting for equity and excellence for all children and then now someone who, it's profitable to them or whatever, it's a new thing to do, they merge onto the highway but they're not merging at 65.

They're merging on it 40, they're merging on at 50 and so they're merging on then causes me to slow down. It causes the whole flow of traffic to be disrupted. I think folks who, we talk about starting the conversation. My grandfather would tell you, we've been talking about this too long. Just because now privilege, now wants to talk about it, privilege now wants to insert itself into the conversation.

Privilege needs to jump in at the flow of traffic and catch up. There's some things that folks have been demanding and desiring for years, for decades since you look at 1964. All of these things that have happened, folks have been saying we've had this conversation and again you come in and instead of going at the flow and catching up, you slow us down and then you want to appease us by saying here we're at the table, we're talking.

Folks were saying yeah, that's all it's been for the last 50 years is talk and little gradual gains. Here we are going 65 miles per hour because we want justice for our children, I want justice for my daughter, Brooklyn. I don't want her having the same conversations that we're having today. I don't want her going to the same experiences that my mother went through or my grandparents went through.

Folks who want to engage, I tell them to speed up, okay. Jump on it but don't slow us down. Keep moving at the rate of speed and get your learning going quickly. Learn your history, learn the battles that we already won. Don't re-hash things that we've already won. Look at the stuff that we put on paper and when you see that there's not consistency in practice, demand immediately that we stop what we're doing and we do what we promise and I think that's what people are hungry for.

Because we're tired of marches on Washington. We're tired of marches down the Civic Center. We're tired of all of these marches. Folks want
deliberate action that aligns with what has already been promised. I think that is where we started. If you declared it, if you put it on paper, give it to folks and step back and let the promise just work itself out. You tell folks to when you merge in, please merge at the rate of traffic.
Julie Speer: Start off by telling me how old you are, what grade you're in and where you go to school.

Wilber Zavala: How old am I? I'm 13. I'm in 7th grade. I go to Strive Prep Middle School.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about Strive Prep. Tell me about your school, describe it to me, your teachers, your friends, your favorite classes.

Wilber Zavala: My classes are pretty good. I have nice teachers. They try to do everything to teach us more. The students are pretty good too. I have friends. My favorite class would be probably science. It's more interesting and less harder than the other ones.

Julie Speer: What's your least favorite class?

Wilber Zavala: My least favorite class would probably be reading or writing.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about getting into Strive Lake? Did you know that you guys were even going to try to get into that school?

Wilber Zavala: When I found out that I was going to go to Strive, I was pretty excited. I didn't know how it was going to be and am I going to react to it. I was 6th grade when I started Strive. It was pretty good.

Julie Speer: Describe the school to me. Mostly like the uniforms and the rules and then describe the school to me.
Wilber Zavala: My uniform is red. All of us have to wear it. To represent our school and that at Strive. Our rules are you can't talk in lines or else you'll get consequences. Or if you do good, you will get good stuff.

Julie Speer: What about the rewards and acknowledgements?

Wilber Zavala: Rewards. We get bonus plus if we do good stuff. We could buy stuff like candy, toys and pencils and stuff we need.

Julie Speer: Talk about the snapping.

Wilber Zavala: The snapping is like clapping but less louder. So a student doesn't get nervous and stuff, we just snap instead of clapping. Makes it more exciting. It feels good. It means that you did something good. You were doing nice.

Julie Speer: Do you think your school is strict?

Wilber Zavala: Well, it could be strict. But they have the reasons why. The reason is probably like they want to be strict so we can learn more and follow the rules so it could be a safer school.

Julie Speer: Have you ever gotten in trouble or had any consequences?

Wilber Zavala: Yeah, I had gotten in trouble sometimes. This kid pushed me and I pushed him back. The teacher saw I didn't see. They saw and then I left. When I came back, she said that I was going to go to detention for doing this thing. I felt kind of it was like unfair because the kid pushed me first and I pushed him back because I was mad or unhappy for it.

Julie Speer: Did the detention work? Did you ever get in any fights again after that?

Wilber Zavala: No, I don't think so because I learned my lesson and didn't do that again.

Julie Speer: Talk about your future. What are your plans for your own academics and college and career?

Wilber Zavala: My future is going to be more try to stay in school and get a job that will help me more in the future. Try to be pretty good so I don't lose so much stuff.

Julie Speer: Tell me what job, what you'd like to do as a job when you grow up?
Wilber Zavala: As a job, I would probably like to be a doctor. I don't know which kind of doctor but someone that helps people, I guess.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about colleges because I see that in the wall of your school, there are colleges all over the walls and there's college groups and colleges for the teachers.

Wilber Zavala: In our school, we have a lot of banners and stuff of colleges. Our classrooms are also named by colleges. Mine is APU, Azusa Pacific University. Mostly, Strive is like colleges, they try to make you ... or like which kind of college you want to go to. Probably the college I would want to go to, I'm not sure yet because I still have a while to go. When I choose, I will probably choose something that I want.

Julie Speer: Explain to me about your building that your school is in. Because the whole building is not Strive.

Wilber Zavala: Our school is divided into two schools. One Strive Prep and is Lake. Lake is in the other side. Strive is in the other side. It's different. They have different rules. We have different rules. It's like different schools but together.

Julie Speer: What is that like? Do you have friends in the other school? Do you wish you were in the other school? Do people wish they were in Strive? Is there competition?

Wilber Zavala: No, I don't think there's much of a competition. But I probably sometimes want to be in Lake but then change my mind afterwards. Lake is different. We don't really seem them. We don't see them at all. They're different. We don't see them so we don't make friends with them that much.

Julie Speer: Let's talk about you a little bit. You're bilingual, right? Explain that to me and then tell me your story, how you got here.

Wilber Zavala: When I came here, the only thing I knew was Spanish. I was having trouble when I went to school, like trying to learn English. It was hard for me. But then, through the years, I started learning English more and more.

Julie Speer: What grade were you when you first came?

Wilber Zavala: It was probably like in 2nd grade when I came.
Julie Speer: Why did you come here?

Wilber Zavala: I came here because I thought it is going to be a better place. Over there, there's really a lot of gangs and wars and stuff. Here is better because there's better schools, there's better people that can help me out and other stuff.

Julie Speer: Explain who Oscar and Rosie are. Where do you live?

Wilber Zavala: I live here. It's like close to my school so it's good. Oscar is my uncle and Rosie is my auntie. They take care of me while my parents are in another country to try to get better situated and stuff like that.

Julie Speer: Do you remember anything about El Salvador?

Wilber Zavala: I kind of remember El Salvador. Probably, I see a lot trees and forests. It's kind of poor. It's a beautiful place but really a scary place too.

Julie Speer: Are you in touch with your mom and dad?

Wilber Zavala: My mom and dad call me once in a while. But I think they try to call me more often so they could talk to me.

Julie Speer: How is that for you not living with your mom and dad but living with your aunts and uncle?

Wilber Zavala: Without me being with my mom and dad, it's pretty, I'd say difficult because they're in a different place and I'm here pretty far away from them. Probably, I guess, sometimes sad and probably miss them.

Julie Speer: Are you used to living here now?

Wilber Zavala: Yeah, I'm used to living here. I don't get that sad anymore and stuff because I still have contact with them.

Julie Speer: Do you think you'll go back to El Salvador someday or will your parents come here? What do you think? Will you ever be reunited?

Wilber Zavala: I think probably I will go back one day when I'm older and I have more stuff. Probably, we will be reunited, be together one day.
Julie Speer: When you're not studying, what else do you do? What do you do with your free time?

Wilber Zavala: Probably on my free time, my favorite sport is soccer so I go probably with my friends or outside by myself and play soccer. I probably watch a lot TV and play a lot of games. Probably sport games or Minecraft, build stuff. I also like kick ball. Soccer and kick ball and probably some other sports are pretty good.

Julie Speer: Talk to me about your grades?

Wilber Zavala: My grades, I think they're pretty good. I have no F's. I got two A's, two different classes and mostly are B's.

Julie Speer: Do you have any C's or D's?

Wilber Zavala: I think I have a C in math but I'm going to try to increase it more to B.

Julie Speer: Is school pretty easy for you or is it pretty hard?

Wilber Zavala: School can be easy, can be hard, can be medium. But I think when I was in my other schools, probably, I think they were easier. But now in Strive, I think it's pretty hard but I think I'm learning more stuff than I learn in the other ones.

Julie Speer: What are the things that you like in school? I mean, you talked about your favorite subjects but the ways the teacher teaches or the activities or what is it that makes a class a good class?

Wilber Zavala: What makes a class a good class is probably teachers. Without teachers, we wouldn't be learning. They make stuff fun. Also, they could make stuff hard for us.

Julie Speer: Do the teachers push you?

Wilber Zavala: Yeah, they push us to try to finish our tasks and try to do great.

Julie Speer: Talk about your teachers and the race. The ones I saw today, there was a lot of white teachers. Are they mostly white?

Wilber Zavala: I know that my teachers, they're from many different places. There's a teacher that knew Spanish. There's probably a lot of teachers that more
are like from here. They're white. But I think, I see there's some teachers that are African American. There's probably mixed up.

Julie Speer: Talk about the kids in your school. If you were to do a ratio. Are most of them Latino? Are they white, black, Asian? Describe the students at your school. Where are they from?

Wilber Zavala: Probably, the students, they're most probably white and Latino. Some can be African Americans but there's not much of Chinese or from different other places that we know more of.

Julie Speer: Do you know what racism is?

Wilber Zavala: Yeah, I know what racism means. It's when different people that are from different places, different color and people would talk about them. It could also be mean and it also can be nice.

Julie Speer: Have you ever experienced racism in your life, in your school or in your neighborhood?

Wilber Zavala: I have experienced racism, probably in my old school at Cheltenham. Probably many kids probably say that my skin color or where I'm from is pretty silly or something like that.

Julie Speer: What do you do or say when that happens?

Wilber Zavala: What I do is probably ignore them or tell the teacher. Try to not make it more.

Julie Speer: Do you take tests every year, those academic tests like the CSAP or now it's PARK? Do you do all those academic tests? Talk about those academic tests and what do you think they're for?

Wilber Zavala: We do do a lot of tests. The one that we do like every rep is RAB test. We do them probably like we have RAB 1, RAB 2. We do everyone. There's also this test that we've been doing probably a month or something. They're in a computer. There's a lot of we have to do and there's so much. Sometimes I get tired. Other people get tired, frustrated, because they're always doing it and it's too much probably.

Julie Speer: Do you talk to your parents about your school?
Wilber Zavala: Yeah, I would talk to my parents about my school. They probably ask me how I'm doing in school, what are my grades. I say it's good.

Julie Speer: Do they say they're proud of you?

Wilber Zavala: They probably, yeah. But I don't think they might use that word, probably. My mom says how am I doing, how I got sick and talk about school too.

Julie Speer: Did your parents go to school or did they finish school?

Wilber Zavala: I don't think they finished school but they probably go to school but not finish it all the way to college.

Julie Speer: Tell me where your parents live and tell me what they do.

Wilber Zavala: My parents live in El Salvador where I was born. My mom works in, she sells papusas and food. I think my dad, I'm not pretty sure, but I think he also does construction, fix stuff.

Julie Speer: Tell me what Rosie and Oscar do here, your aunt and uncle. Explain what the link is. Is it that your dad's brothers?

Wilber Zavala: Oscar, my uncle, he works in construction. My auntie works in cleaning houses. My uncle Oscar is brothers with my dad. He knows him good.

Julie Speer: Why do you think education is so important or do you think it's important at all?

Wilber Zavala: I think education is important because it could give you a better job. It could probably make you more better and knowledged so you can know more and so you could have a good life.

Julie Speer: What's your biggest, biggest dream?

Wilber Zavala: I would say that my biggest, biggest dream probably is to have a good life and to enjoy and have good friends and stuff.