

Greenlee: Envisioning education

By Bob Greenlee

Sunday, February 22, 2009

On Tuesday the Boulder Valley School Board will begin discussing ways to "close the achievement gap" for "second language" learners at Columbine Elementary School. Those second-language learners are mostly Hispanic kids and some of their parents think their kids are victims of intentional discrimination. It's easy to declare nearly anything as discrimination because people immediately respond to such an emotionally charged term.

Because the charge has been made, it appears that a handful of local malcontents have successfully managed to make a federal case out of it. The United States Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights even got involved, though its investigation is now on hold according to the district. What the world doesn't need is a bunch of federal bureaucrats looking into every nook and cranny seeking out evildoing discriminators. Parents and citizens of Boulder Valley are entirely capable of addressing the fundamental issues related to student achievement at Columbine and certainly don't need confrontational intervention by the Feds.

The entire flap began when

Colorado's Department of Education made a comprehensive review of Columbine's performance and provided a number of recommendations on how to improve student performance for second-language learners. The school board was obviously concerned and is engaged in helping identify ways to increase student achievement even encouraging King to take "bold steps to close the gap." Christopher King, BVSD's Superintendent, did make one misstep in addressing issues related to the achievement gap although he quickly admitted his mistake and is taking appropriate action to address concerns. King established both an "envisioning" process along with a "revisioning" procedure to address all issues. Unfortunately, the chairman of the Boulder Valley Multi-Ethnic Action Community Committee wasn't satisfied. Acting as both judge and jury, Richard Garcia thinks a federal case will "confirm discrimination." This unfortunate conclusion needs some "revisioning."

Boulder Valley, like nearly every other school district in the nation, has struggled with closing the very real achievement gap that affects students living in poverty or

those who are struggling to learn English. And then there are those who blame mandated student achievement testing for creating the gap. A number of educators, parents, and teachers' unions don't seem to believe in accountability or testing of any kind and always seek ways to kill any messengers bold enough to identify things that are not working as hoped.

In addition, precious resources are often lavished on this or that scheme trying to help a handful of students while sacrificing the quality of education for the majority of students. These issues haven't gone away and hopefully the upcoming series of public meetings and various visioning processes will help address these concerns.

Perhaps one vision to consider for schools like Columbine would be to enact what has become known as Standards-Based Education. Individual schools, and even some entire districts, are experimenting with this new concept where the needs of individual students are being monitored and addressed in nontraditional ways. Here in Colorado, the Adams County School District 50 is the latest to adopt SBE. According to Superintendent Roberta Selleck, the system "is a way of delivering education

in a totally different way and engaging the student as an active learner in the process." The program puts students in groups according to academic performance, not into classrooms based on age.

It also eliminates grading on an A through F scale and instead attaches a student score of 1 to 4 simply based on proficiency. Sometimes kindergarten-aged kids learn along side 6- and 7-year-olds. Students don't "pass" or "fail" they simply are allowed to learn at their own pace.

It's certainly worth a try at Columbine because having a bunch of federal educators hanging around will likely solve absolutely nothing.

Bob Greenlee was a member of Boulder City Council for 16 years and served his last 2 years as mayor.