

# Reclaiming our Humanity by Reclaiming Our Schools: Lessons from the Campaign

Marcy Clark

Cheryl Distaso



# Goals for the Workshop

- Share the experience of working on a successful campaign to keep 5 low income schools open
- Use critical race theory to explore the dynamics of the district's efforts to close the schools
- Be reflective about the process
  - Did our own campaign structure duplicate the hegemony in the school district?
- Break into groups to examine ways that we can become more aware of the ways we act and the spaces we are creating
  - How do we “change the music?”

# Definitions

- Prejudice
  - Preconceived judgment or opinion, based on limited information
  - We all have them because we are continually exposed to misinformation about others
- Racism
  - System of advantage based on race
  - Prejudice plus power
- White Privilege
  - Systematic advantage of being White  
(Tatum, 1997)

# Critical Race Theory

- 1) Racism is the usual way society operates, and the everyday experience of most people of color in this society
  - Color-blind notions of equality
- 2) Racism serves a useful purpose for large segments of society, and thus it's difficult to remedy
- 3) Race is a socially constructed concept
- 4) Intersectionality—no person has a single, easily stated identity
- 5) Hegemony is the domination of the ruling class and unconscious acceptance of that state of affairs
  - Keeps system of racism in place

(Delgado & Stefancic, 2001)

# Underutilized Schools

- Citing Budgetary shortfalls, the Poudre School District came up with an underutilization plan.
- The criteria for underutilization was the following:
  - 65% capacity or less (2005-2006 data)
  - 40% choice out rate
  - 20% projected drop in enrollment (from 2005-2012)
  - Middle schools with less than 600 students or Elementary schools with less than 325 students
  - Compensation of 3% or more due to low enrollment



# Underutilized Schools--Timeline



- June 11, 2010-PSD Board adopted a resolution directing District to develop a plan that may include closing schools.
- August 24—PSD Board adopted the actual plan
- September 20-November 12
  - 16 schools had to develop innovation/efficiency plans
    - 5 of those schools ALSO had to develop closure/consolidation plans
      - Lincoln, Irish, Putnam, Beattie, Lopez
- January 11, 2011—District presents recommendation to Board (which, if any schools to close)
- January 25<sup>th</sup>—Board takes action

# Demographics of the 5 Schools

- Lopez, Beattie, Putnam, Irish, and Lincoln all had the highest rate of free in reduced lunch of their respective feeders.
  - Of the elementary schools, Irish is the poorest (ranked 30<sup>th</sup>, 85.5% free and reduced lunch), Putnam 29<sup>th</sup> (80.8%), Beattie 24<sup>th</sup> (48.5%) and Lopez 20<sup>th</sup> (39.7%).
- Lincoln, Irish and Putnam had the highest Latin@ population in the district.
  - Irish has 50% English Language Learners  
(PSD Website)

# Demographics of the School Board and Administration

- School Board comprised of 7 white middle class to upper middle class people.
  - 2 Women
  - 5 men
- Administration comprised of one white upper middle class male superintendent and one white upper middle class assistant superintendent.

# Coalition to Save our Neighborhood Schools

- First meeting October 9, 2010 (30 people came)
- Community organizers, University Professors, Parents
- We provided child care, food, interpretation equipment, translated materials
- Core/decision-making body became seven people
  - 4 women (4 white, one Latina)
  - 3 men (two white, one Latino)
  - Predominately middle class.
  - No low income monolingual Spanish speaking parents were in our core group.
- From October 9, 2010, through January 25, 2011 we worked from 15-30 hours a week. Only one of us was a paid organizer.

# Evidence of Racism in the Process

- None of the materials for innovation or closure plans were translated into Spanish
- One letter was sent home to parents translated into Spanish, but it was written at the 2<sup>nd</sup> year college level
- Students letters were silenced
- “Underutilized” never clearly defined
  - The 5 schools were not the ones with the least students
  - Choice out rates were considered, but not choice in rates

# Evidence of Racism in the Process (2)

Questions/statements by school board members:

- Do you think low income Spanish Speaking students would benefit from going to schools with middle class children?
- Irish is getting too many resources. They have too many teachers, and their class sizes are too small. They get extra Title One funding, and it's not fair to other students.
- Parents at the south side schools made it clear they don't want their schools closed.
- The \$ saved by closing schools can be used to implement specials (art and music) to benefit ALL students.

## CSONS' Arguments to Keep Schools Open

- Long term solution is a bad approach for a short term problem
- Development projects in the works on the north side of Fort Collins
- District will save \$350,000 per school by closing them, but that doesn't include transportation offsets, maintenance or the loss of 21<sup>st</sup> century grants
  - \$5 million over 5 years
- Property values around schools that are closed go down as much as 20%
- Schools are pivotal to building community in a neighborhood

# CSONS' TACTICS

- Letter to the Editor Campaign
- Creative Public Outreach
- Finding Allies in the School District and City
- Moving the Lens from the Low Income Schools to a Community Challenge
- Meetings with School Board Members
- Insisting on a meeting with School Board Meetings and City Officials

# January 11<sup>th</sup> District Recommendations to the Board—CSONS Press Conference



# January 11<sup>th</sup> School Board Meeting



# PSD super recommends the closure of Beattie

Students would attend either Lopez, Johnson under plan

BY LINDSEY LARSON

LindseyLarson  
@coloradoan.com

Poudre School District Superintendent Jerry Wilson recommended Tuesday night that Beattie Elementary be closed. Students attending the school would be sent to Johnson and Lopez elementaries if the school board approves the plan.

Wilson gave his recommendation Tuesday night as part of the district's study of underutilized schools. Last fall, PSD asked five schools to develop school closure plans; other schools were asked to prepare innovation/

Wilson said the increasing scarcity of resources affects smaller schools the most, and pressures on the district budget led to the administration's recommendation.

"Conclusions were not predetermined," Wilson said. "(This process) has been extremely challenging and difficult work for everyone involved."

Other schools considered for closure were Putnam, Lopez and Irish elementaries and Lincoln Middle School.

Jon Runge, a parent with students at Beattie, said he was not surprised at the recommendation due to a note in Beattie's pro/con list for possible closure that stated, "(The) general impression is

that the majority of listed cons could be mitigated."

"That indicated that they already decided to close (Beattie)," Runge said.

The community will have three opportunities to voice opinions about the recommendation with meetings held at Beattie and Jan. 20 at Lopez, as well as an online survey that will be conducted Friday through Jan. 20. The final vote on all the closure/consolidation and innovations and efficiencies plans developed by 16 PSD schools will be made by the school board at its Jan. 25 meeting.

The parents of Beattie are looking forward to meeting with the school board at the Jan. 18 meeting to voice their concerns in a more direct way, Runge said.

"I think we have a very good case to present to keep our school open," he said.

In the recommendation summary, the district administration said Beattie students will still receive high-quality education at both Lopez and Johnson, which are comparable schools in terms of academic achievement. Also, the summary stated educational programs, such as early childhood, will be well maintained at one of the other schools.

As far as relocating faculty  
**See PSD/Page A2**

## PSD

Continued from Page A1

and staff, the recommendation summary contends that a majority of Beattie staff will transition into Lopez, with all nonprobationary staff and classified staff with at least six years of service being guaranteed positions.

Board member Patrick Albright thanked the PSD administrators, staff and teachers who put together the plans and devised the pro/con lists that guided the recommendation.

"We gave them a monumental task," Albright said, adding, "We still have a lot of work to do before we come to a

decision."

Conversely, the recommendation was met with opposition from both parents and school board members. Board member M.L. Johnson said he was surprised that the recommendation did not discuss any of the proposed innovations and efficiencies plans that the 16 schools were asked to develop.

"These schools were asked to write their obituaries as well as their hopes and dreams," Johnson said. "We aren't seeing any of those hopes and dreams tonight."

Since the closure plans were announced in November, parents from the five schools up for possible closure have raised their voices to demand



WILSON

# Closure of Beattie protested

By Coloradoan staff

Parents of Beattie Elementary School students and graduates are mobilizing to protest the planned closure of the Fort Collins school.

Hundreds of parents and students marched in the annual Martin Luther King Jr. parade Monday morning, chanting "Save our school" and distributing informational fliers about plans to shutter the central Fort Collins school.

Organizers are asking Beattie parents to attend an informational meeting from 7 to 9 p.m. tonight at the school, 3000 Meadowlark Ave.; attend a Wednesday Poudre School District board meeting; complete an online survey at [www.psdschools.org](http://www.psdschools.org); and join their new Facebook group.

They also are asking supporters to help physically encircle the school Saturday when an airplane will fly over to take pictures.

"Save Beattie. We've got to save Beattie," chanted Kura Booker and Jade Grisby, both 11 and Beattie graduates, as they marched along College Avenue in the parade. Other parents and students carried orange signs and banners asking the community to help save an endangered species — the Beattie Bighorn.

Poudre School District officials last week recommended closing the neighborhood elementary school to help the district save \$363,391 annually. The district says it stands to save more than \$1 million in three years if the school is closed.



V. Richard Haro/The Coloradoan

Beattie Elementary School third-grader Cella Force, 8, rides on her uncle Scott Parker's shoulders in the Martin Luther King Jr. March on Monday.

ch  
eat

nizers told

was reward-  
in Old Town  
ith people  
e the annual  
e CSU cam-

beautiful,"  
king at the  
before the  
speaks vol-  
far America  
whole event  
e and gen-

Page A2



Richard Haro/The Coloradoan  
ore the start of the  
started in Old Town



Hands Around Beattie

# Beattie to stay open

PSD board rejects administration recommendation to close school

BY LINDSEY LARSON

LindseyLarson  
@coloradoan.com

The Poudre School District Board of Education voted no Tuesday night on a motion to close Beattie Elementary School.

The board split 4-3 on its decision to keep Beattie open. The recommendation for closure came from the PSD administration at a Jan. 11 school board meeting.

Board members M.L. Johnson, James Ross, Tom Balchak and Nancy Tellez voted against Beattie's closure, while members Patrick Albright, Jim Hayes and Barbara Schwerin voted in favor of the recommendation.

Ross said he felt closing a school at this point would be shortsighted given that the population of Fort Collins is projected to increase during the next decade.

"We're investing in future growth," Ross said, adding

that having to build a new school down the road could be very costly.

Albright said his decision to vote in favor of closure stemmed from the board's responsibility not only to the students at PSD schools but also to the taxpayers who support the district. He said he felt closure was just one cost-cutting measure the board could look into.

"Many small pieces add up to a big number, and (closure) is one of those pieces," Albright said.

Other members of the board who voted to keep Beattie open said they were hoping to give the proposed innovations and efficiencies plans that 16 schools, including Beattie, were asked to develop more time to make improvements.

Prior to the vote, members of the community got one last chance to plead their case to



Dawn Madura/The Coloradoan

**Beattie Elementary Principal Sam Aldren** shares a joyful moment with his wife, Sandy, after learning Tuesday that the school will not be closed. Around them, the crowd cheers after members of the Poudre School District Board of Education voted to keep Beattie open during a meeting at Johannsen Support Services Center in Fort Collins.

## Beattie

Continued from Page A1

the board to keep Beattie open.

Hans Rasmussen, a local pastor with a third-grader at Beattie, said he feels the school is the perfect place for his daughter, Sarah, who has epilepsy that has affected her ability to learn in a normal environment. Frank Gibson, who has grandchildren at Beattie, said the district should put closure on the back burner and "keep looking for the win-win."

The reaction to the decision to keep Beattie open was joyous as members of the school's community and their supporters stood up and applauded the announcement.

Denise Rush, a parent with a fourth-grader at Beattie, said now that the

## In Your Voice

Join the conversation at  
[www.coloradoan.com/](http://www.coloradoan.com/)  
forums.

to get behind this decision. We're not out of the woods yet."

Beattie Principal Sam Aldren said he's relieved at the board's decision and is looking forward to working on the innovations and efficiencies plan the school was asked to develop along with a plan for possible closure and consolidation.

"I'm so appreciative of the board's efforts, and I congratulate them on taking the long-term view of things," Aldren said. "Now, we can get started talking about specifics on our innovations and efficiencies."

Prior to the recommenda-

# CSONS Campaign Debrief

- Successful campaign to keep schools open
- Our decision making body did not include the people most effected – Low income Spanish speaking parents
- Rinku Sen 19:25
  - Social Justice Organizer
  - Speaking about the Occupy Movement and Diversity
    - Same ideas can be applied to other organizations

(Democracy Now, 2011)

# Group Questions

- What areas of your life are you privileged because of your skin color?
- When have you been in situations where you feel as though you “can’t change the music?”
- What ways can you think of where you could “change the music?”

# References

Delgado, R. & Stefancic. (2001). *Critical race theory: an introduction*. New York University Press. New York.

Democracy Now! November 25, 2011.

[http://www.democracynow.org/2011/11/25/occupy\\_everywhere\\_michael\\_moore\\_naomi\\_klein](http://www.democracynow.org/2011/11/25/occupy_everywhere_michael_moore_naomi_klein). Accessed March 25, 2013.

Hands Around Beattie. You Tube Video.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3pJrDIGRLY> (Accessed March 25, 2013).

Poudre School District Website.

(<http://www.psdschools.org/news/2010/09/psd announces-16-schools-asked-develop-closure-consolidation-and-or-innovation-efficienc>). Accessed

March 22, 2013.

Tatum, B. (1997). *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?* Basic Books. New York.