

Segregated and Unequal: The Public Elementary Schools of District 3 in New York City



Project to Challenge
Segregation in
OUR Public Schools

SUMMARY

More children in the United States attend segregated public schools today than they did over half a century ago. While it is true that we no longer have segregation that is required by law, it is segregation all the same. Today's segregation is just as pernicious and just as destructive as if it were mandated by law.

The Center for Immigrant Families' Project to Challenge Segregation in OVR Public Schools was initiated in 2003 by CIF members to address the segregation and inequality in the elementary schools of Community School Board District 3 (now part of Region 10). The total student population in District #3 is approximately 10,923 and breaks down racially as follows: Black 38.20%, Latino 33.52%, and white 22.84%.¹ However, the racial breakdown in individual elementary schools is very different from the District-wide figures, and reflects a clear pattern of racial concentration. A number of our District's elementary schools range from 38.61% to 64.42% white, while other schools are over 95% children of color.

Public school segregation in District 3 is no accident. Through our organizing and action-research, we have uncovered two mechanisms by which segregation is fostered in our District's schools:

1. Through the implementation of a variety of intentional practices and policies by school administrators that exclude low-income families of color from certain public elementary schools, and
2. Through the increased development of Gifted and Talented programs that largely serve white children.

The deafening silence that surrounds this inequality makes this project all the more urgent. Together, we are working to break the silence and "normalization" of segregation, that is, the way that it has become accepted as "just the way things are". We are committed to organizing together until things change in our community. We want decent and equitable education for all our children.

¹ Statistics obtained from the New York City Department of Education (2003-2004).

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Delsa Rosso, Parent leader,
CIF Parent Speak-Out and Press Conference, May 19, 2004

Who We Are & What We Do:

The Center for Immigrant Families (CIF) is a community-based organizing, education, and training center in uptown Manhattan that works for social, racial, and economic justice and to further the human rights of immigrants. Most of us are low-income women of color with children/grandchildren in NYC's public schools.

CIF's work is based on popular education and on understanding the importance of integrating the psychological, social, political, and economic challenges facing our communities. We believe that our voices, experiences, and leadership are critical to understanding the challenges we face and to furthering efforts for justice.

The foundation of our organizing is our "Culture, Migration, and Community Organizing" workshops and literacy workshops. Our campaigns and projects, which grow out of these workshops, focus on issues related to immigrants' rights, racial justice, and women's empowerment. We also facilitate "Organizing for Change" trainings, Women's Circles, and roundtable conversations.

Justice and equality in public education and parent-school-community partnership have consistently been identified as critical areas of concern in our workshops over the past years. Therefore, the majority of our organizing campaigns have been devoted to fighting for decent and equitable public education for ALL our kids.

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Introduction

The Center for Immigrant Families' Project to Challenge Segregation in OUR Public Schools was initiated by CIF members to address the segregation and inequality we have been experiencing in Community School Board District 3 (now part of Region 10) elementary schools. Our experiences are consistent with recent studies, which reveal that public school segregation is at higher rates now than it was during the time of Brown v. Board of Education. Our schools are not only segregated; they are also unequal.

Public education was identified as an area of concern by CIF members as we came together in our workshops to discuss, among other issues, our expectations of what life would be like in the U.S. We agreed that one of our primary expectations was access to a decent education for our children. Instead, we have experienced a very different reality from what we had anticipated, which has included limited access to our District's schools. We recognized that the problems we were having were not just happening to each of us individually, but rather reflected a pattern of systemic discrimination affecting our entire community.



CIF Parent Speak-Out/Press Conference, May 19, 2004

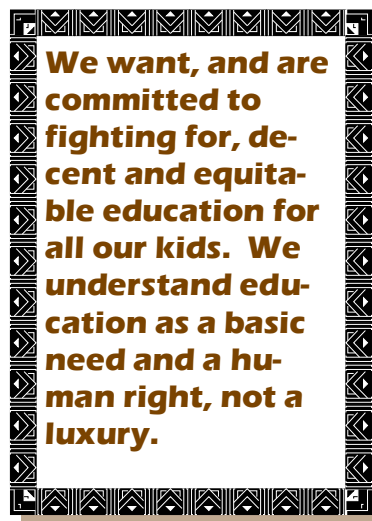
We were determined to break the silence and demand an end to the outright racism, exclusion, disrespect, and inequality that low-income families of color have been facing in our public schools. Our Project was created to address these injustices.

**

Project teams began with the documentation of parents' stories, which was central to building the foundation of our organizing. Documenting parents' stories provided the opportunity to learn about their experiences and, through this process, the mechanisms through which low-income families of color have been denied access to schools in our District.

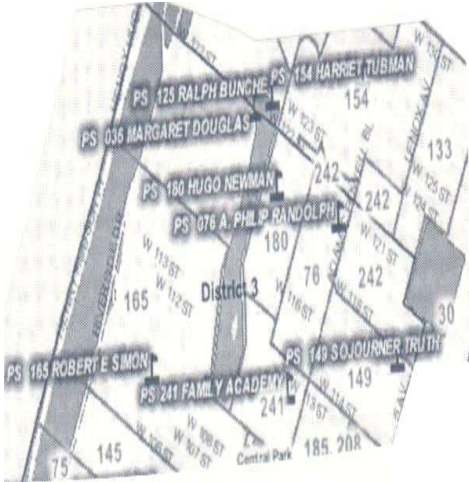
As part of our organizing, we wanted to break what we call the “normalization” of segregation, that is, the way that it has become accepted as “just the way things are”. To disrupt this “normalization”, we began doing street theatre in different schools and community centers. The scenes were based on our actual stories of exclusion and the dismissive and disrespectful treatment we encountered when trying to apply to different schools. In discussions that accompanied the street theatre, hundreds of parents told us how much they identified with the stories we were sharing. Many then shared their own stories and joined our project.

Together, we are working to challenge the systemic segregation of public elementary schools in District 3 and to build sustainable power, leadership, and organizing among low-income immigrant parents of color. Through our Project, a community has been created in which we find strength, empowerment, and affirmation that we can change what we’ve always known shouldn’t be. We’ve learned that the racism that was formerly paralyzing to us individually can be challenged collectively.



At a time when immigrant communities and communities of color are under increasing attack, we hope our project will provide an example and inspiration for community power and organizing among immigrant communities of color.

Our community

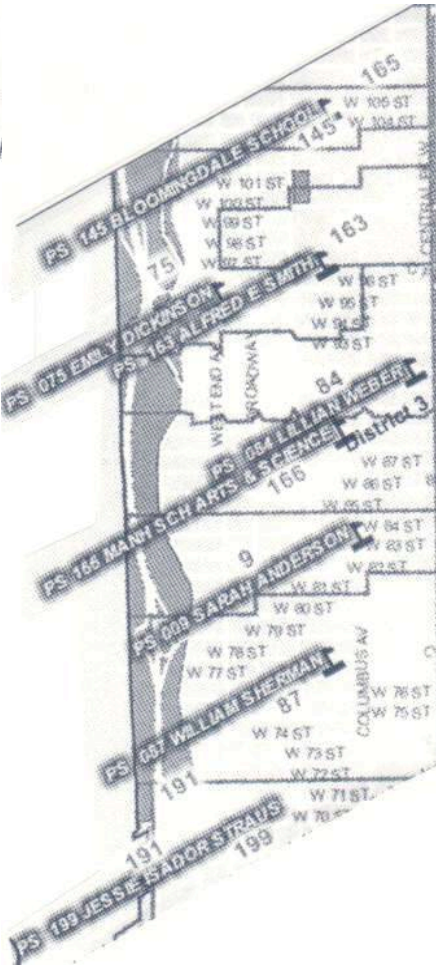


CIF's Project to Challenge Segregation in OUR Public Schools...

...is based in Manhattan Valley, a community in uptown Manhattan with a large African American and Latino community. Our community is part of Community School Board District 3, which runs along the West Side of Manhattan from 57th Street to 122nd Street.

Our methodology

All of CIF's work, including our Project to Challenge Segregation in OUR Public Schools, is based on popular education and participatory action research, which emphasizes the importance of peoples' histories, experiences, and cultures in their organizing. As part of a collective process, community members come together to identify and analyze the problems facing their communities and to develop strategies for change. The foundation for our action-



research has been the documentation of parent's stories of exclusion from public schools in our District. We have facilitated conversations, conducted interviews, and completed surveys with over 350 low-income parents of color who have children in District 3's elementary schools.² Additional research needs have been, and will continue to be, determined by parents throughout the course of the project.

Challenging Segregation: Continuing the Legacy

We know that the current challenges facing immigrant communities did not start on 9/11; we also know that the segregation facing our community and other communities across the country is not a new development. Poor communities and communities of color have fought long and hard for the human right to decent and equitable public education and to have schools that reflect, respect, and serve our communities.



1950s protest against segregation
Credit: National Archives and Records Administration

Unfortunately, we have seen an increase in segregation in our public schools. This is especially true in the North, and specifically in New York City—the most diverse city in the U.S.—which has one of the most deeply segregated public school systems in the country.

The movement to challenge segregation and inequality has a long history. We hope to carry forward the legacy of the struggle for decent and equitable education.

² We know that racism impacts all people of color regardless of income levels and that low-income people, both people of color and whites, face class-based discrimination. Our documentation has overwhelmingly been with low-income families of color who face both race-based and class-based discrimination.

The Problem: Public Elementary School Segregation in District 3

The total elementary student population in District #3 is approximately 10,923 and breaks down racially as follows: Black 38.20%, Latino 33.52%, and white 22.84%. However, the racial breakdown in individual elementary schools is very different from the District-wide figures, and reflects a clear pattern of racial concentration. As the chart below shows, a number of our District's schools range from 38.61% to 64.42% white.³ In many of these schools, there has been a significant increase in the percentages of white students entering kindergarten as compared to those in 5th grade. In contrast, some other schools in the District are over 95% children of color. In our next section, we present our key findings, which will shed some light on these figures.

| 2003-2004 | | | | |
|---|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| GRADE | SCHOOL | LATINO | BLACK | WHITE |
| Kindergarten | PS 199 | 11.43% | 9.52% | 71.43% |
| 5th grade | PS 199 | 17.20% | 15.05% | 61.29% |
| K-5 | PS 199 | 15.15% | 9.54% | 64.42% |
| Kindergarten | MSC* | 13.70% | 13.70% | 58.90% |
| 5th grade | MSC* | 12.07% | 24.14% | 50.00% |
| K-5 | MSC* | 14.69% | 20.36% | 53.88% |
| Kindergarten | PS 9 | 21.49% | 5.79% | 58.68% |
| 5th grade | PS 9 | 23.62% | 12.60% | 55.12% |
| K-5 | PS 9 | 23.33% | 12.23% | 53.16% |
| Kindergarten | PS 87 | 22.14% | 18.57% | 56.43% |
| 5th grade | PS 87 | 26.39% | 29.86% | 35.42% |
| K-5 | PS 87 | 24.89% | 21.88% | 45.14% |
| Kindergarten | PS 166 | 26.17% | 14.02% | 55.14% |
| 5th grade | PS 166 | 53.33% | 36.00% | 9.33% |
| K-5 | PS 166 | 34.98% | 22.98% | 38.61% |
| *Manhattan School for Children (PS 333) | | | | |

³ Op. Cit.

I represent all of those parents who have these unpleasant experiences daily, when we go to register our children in the public schools. We haven't even finished talking and already they're telling us that we don't belong, even if we live in the area, letting us know that we are not welcome in that school – immigrants, low-income families, people of color and those of us who don't speak English. They "suggest" that we go to schools Uptown, and the excuse they offer is that we may feel more comfortable in those schools because there are more people there who are like us... but we know that they are discriminating against us. This is even more obvious when we notice how differently they treat white people or people who have money to contribute to the school. And sometimes these people don't even live in the area and are accepted anyway! This is unfair for our children, all of our children, regardless of their social status or race!!!

**—Yandra Mordan, Parent leader,
CIF Parent Speak-Out and Press Conference,
May 19, 2004**

While it is true that we no longer have segregation that is required by law, it is segregation all the same. Segregation is segregation whether imposed by the law or whether the result of day-to-day decision-making, practices, programs, and policies of school administrators and politicians. The system of segregation that we encounter today is just as pernicious and just as destructive as if it were mandated by law.

Public school segregation in District 3 is no accident. Through our organizing and action research, we have uncovered two mechanisms by which segregation is fostered in our District's schools:

1. Through the implementation of a variety of intentional practices and policies by school administrators that exclude low-income families of color from certain public elementary schools, and
2. Through the increased development of Gifted and Talented programs that largely serve white children.

Practices and Policies

We have identified several practices and policies by school administrators that contribute to the exclusion of low-income families of color from public elementary schools in our District:

❖ The Use/Excuse of Catchment Area/Zone Lines

While students from a given school's catchment area⁴ are automatically allowed to go to that school, elementary schools in the District also admit students from outside their catchment area.

However, the majority of parents we surveyed and interviewed reported that, when trying to apply to the exclusionary⁵ schools, they were given the clear message that they "don't belong." They reported being treated dismissively and being abruptly informed that they do not come from the catchment area and, therefore, should not even apply to the school.⁶

There have even been documented instances in which school officials have come to knock on doors to confirm parents' place of residence and questioned their children about where they sleep at night.

In one school⁷ where there has not even been a catchment area policy, parents have reported that, when they have tried to gain information about the application process, they have been rudely turned away and told they should go to their neighborhood school.

In the interviews we have conducted with a number of principals and school officials to learn more about who they accept from outside the catchment area and what their policy is, responses have generally been vague. Some principals and school officials told us that they do not know

⁴ Commonly referred to as a "zone", catchment area is the official term used for the surrounding area of an institution, in this case, a public school.

⁵ That is, those schools to which low-income parents of color are most often denied access.

⁶ We know that in addition to accepting white families from outside the catchment area, these exclusionary schools also accept some children of color. However, the problem is that these schools actively discourage large numbers of low-income families of color from applying.

⁷ Manhattan School for Children (P.S. 333)

how many students they accept from outside the catchment area or the racial or ethnic breakdown of those students, and they did not articulate any policy for accepting non-catchment area students.

❖ Disrespectful Treatment and Referrals

Most of the parents we interviewed and surveyed commented on the disrespectful treatment they received when applying to schools with higher percentages of middle-class and white parents. The majority reported being immediately referred to schools with high concentrations of children of color. Further, over three quarters of those surveyed and interviewed reported that they had experienced dismissive and rude treatment on school tours. They often did not have their questions addressed and were ignored when trying to get information.

Most of the parents who were surveyed reported that in the same situations, they observed white parents being treated differently. They reported that the questions asked by white parents on schools tours were taken seriously and that it was obvious to them that these parents and families were being “courted” by the same schools that turned away parents of color. As part of our research, we had conversations with white parents who spoke about the warm and receptive treatment they received when visiting schools for their children.



CIF Block Party and Rally to Challenge Segregation, May 15, 2004

❖ Language Access

As mandated by Federal⁸ and State⁹ law, all schools are supposed to provide equal access to parents who do not speak, or are not comfortable speaking, English. However, parents' experiences have shown that this is not the case. The majority of the parents we interviewed who were not comfortable speaking English were told that there were no interpreters

⁸ Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 USC Section 2000D.

⁹ New York State Commissioner's Regulation Part 154.

available and were denied translation services. They also reported that they were made to feel that translation was “too much of a bother” and that the school didn’t want parents who didn’t speak English. One group of parents who had gone on a school tour together from a neighborhood Head Start Center were even asked to leave, being told that the translation they had coordinated was disruptive.

❖ Economics/Class

When applying to schools, many of the parents we interviewed and surveyed reported being asked how much they could “contribute” to the school, and it was made clear to them that they meant money and resources. Parents at one school were even given forms during the application process that listed out the monetary donations expected from all parents. Even though we express a sincere commitment to our children’s education, low-income parents of color have been given a clear message that monetary contributions are heavily favored.

❖ Networks, Connections, and Leisure Time

In our conversations with families who have gained access to our District’s public schools with high concentrations of white and middle-class students, we have found that additional factors in accessing these schools are the number of people you know “with connections” and the amount

Schools are required to provide translation so that parents and families who don’t speak English can always communicate with the school and the teachers. This does not always happen and they make us feel like we are bothering them. Let me give you an example: When I went on a school tour, they told me no one could translate. Thank God I found another parent in the group who was bilingual. I asked her questions and she translated what the tour person was saying. But this was short, because the tour person told us we were making noise and to please be quiet. I didn’t learn anything about the school and I had so many questions and so many things to share with the other parents in the group. This was very unfair! And my story is not unique; this has happened to many families I have talked to.

**- Carmen García,
Parent leader
CIF Parent Speak-Out and
Press Conference,
May 19, 2004**

of phone calls or visits to the school you can make. Public schools are supposed to be accessible to everyone regardless of who you do or do not know or how much time you can take off from your job to get “your foot in the door”.¹⁰

Almost all of the parents we interviewed spoke about the obstacles school officials placed before them when trying to obtain information or get questions answered about the application/admissions process. These obstacles have served to reinforce the racial and class-based segregation that we experience in many of the schools in our District.

Effects

According to our interviews and surveys, as a result of the above treatment, low-income parents of color understand:

- Ø They have NO real CHOICE about where our children go to school.
- Ø Middle/upper-class and white parents are treated differently by school administrators during the application and admissions process.

As a result of this treatment, low-income parents of color:

- Ø just give up and enroll their child where they know they’ll be accepted; and
- Ø are discouraged from applying, and are reluctant to apply, to different schools in the District.

One school administrator echoed the sentiment of many that “white flight” will take place if there is not a certain percentage of white families in a given school. Whether this is or is not true, we are opposed to any school admissions policy that excludes and discriminates against families of color in an attempt to keep white families in the public schools.

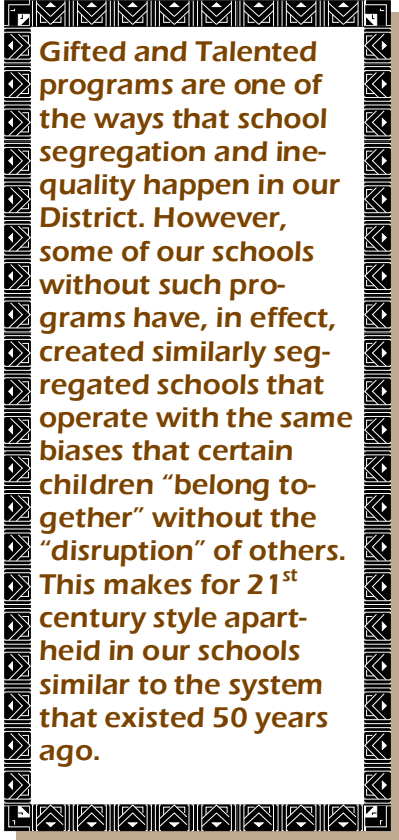
¹⁰ Some parents we interviewed either lost their jobs or had serious problems at work because of the time required trying to apply to different schools for their children.

Gifted and Talented Programs

There has been much written about how Gifted and Talented programs provide a mechanism for continued school segregation after *Brown v. Board of Education*. An increasing number of our District's schools have or are developing Gifted and Talented programs, which, as documented by several studies¹¹, have disproportionately high numbers of white students and receive a greater amount of resources as compared to the "general" programs within the same schools.

In some schools, the increase in white students in kindergarten as compared to 5th grade classes is a result of the expansion of Gifted and Talented programs in those schools.¹² These programs result in further segregation of District 3 students, in this case, within schools themselves. Having schools that reflect our communities is important; creating separate enclaves within schools for white parents and students is not.

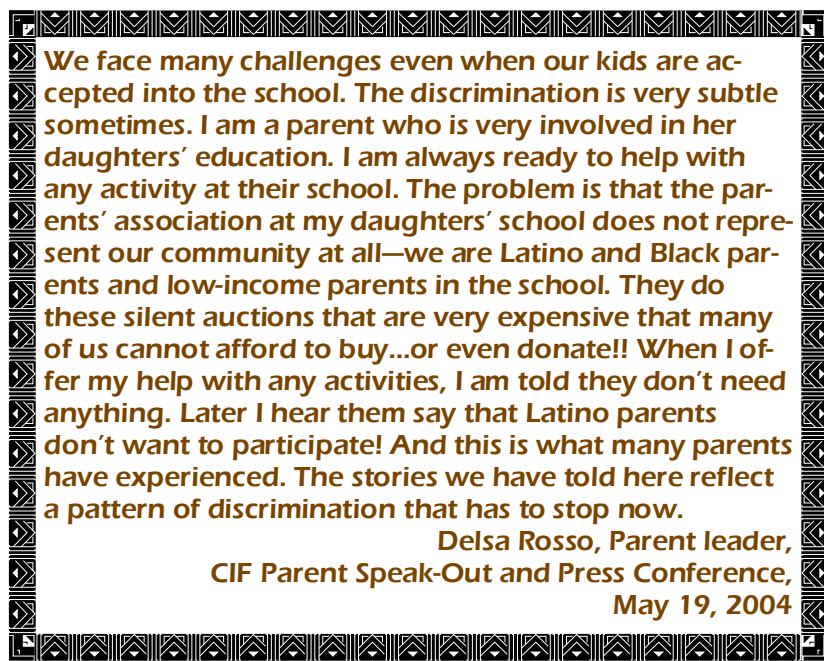
Finally, the validity of such standardized IQ tests in general, and for young children in particular, has been questioned by many educators, who find that these tests are inadequate measures of a child's ability or potential. The notion of sorting young children on the basis of suspect, culturally biased IQ tests, and maintaining them in racially segregated schools throughout the rest of their school careers, is fundamentally inconsistent with what should be the mission of public schools. Public schools should be striving to eliminate inequality, not promote it.



Gifted and Talented programs are one of the ways that school segregation and inequality happen in our District. However, some of our schools without such programs have, in effect, created similarly segregated schools that operate with the same biases that certain children "belong together" without the "disruption" of others. This makes for 21st century style apartheid in our schools similar to the system that existed 50 years ago.

¹¹ For example, see ACORN's Secret Apartheid series.

¹² This is most dramatically shown in the case of PS 166, as illustrated by the chart -page 6.



❖ Racism Within The Schools

While we did not begin our research looking specifically at racism within the schools, the majority of the parents we interviewed reported that they are treated differently from white parents by school administration and staff. They described dismissive treatment by school administrators when trying to discuss a problem and disregard for their opinions when there has been a problem with their child in the classroom. In several cases, parents reported being treated disrespectfully by school administrators and staff in front of their children. Many parents we interviewed reported wanting to leave the school they are at because of the racism their families have faced and the impact this has had on their children.

Next Steps: Recommendations

Our organizing has been in District 3 because this is where we live. We also know that District 3 is not unlike many other districts in this City and across the country.

While we have identified policies and practices by administrators that further segregation, we know they are operating in an overall climate, and as part of a system, that tolerates and even promotes segregation and disregard for children of color.

We see this happening on the city-level as a result of policies initiated by our Mayor, such as the third grade high stakes tests, under the new system of Mayoral control of our schools. We also see this happening on the national level with the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act that targets children of color and low-income children.

We are committed to organizing together until things change in our community. We will no longer be silent about the racism and segregation that are damaging our schools and communities. It's not only about our schools being segregated; it's that they are unequal. What we are demanding is basic: that all our children receive the same choices and access to a full, decent, and equitable education through which they are able to learn, develop, and flourish.

Specifically, over the coming months, we will continue our organizing and action-research, concentrating on the following areas:

There has been much written on the problems of long-distance busing to remedy segregation. However, District 3, like other New York City school districts, is not large, and the vast majority of students in our District already take public transportation to their schools. It would, in fact, take very little to de-segregate our schools and have them draw from the entire District without substantially increasing the amount of busing.¹³

¹³ DOE Office of Pupil Transport reports that over 14,000 public school children take public transportation in District 3.

- o continue to build a movement of concerned parents and community members;
- o engage in continued outreach and documentation of parents' stories of exclusion from District schools and racism within the schools;
- o closely monitor our schools' admissions and acceptances practices;
- o gather more data from the District and City regarding their application and acceptance practices and policies and about who they accept from outside the catchment areas;¹⁴
- o research the residential demographics of our District as well as the history of the ways in which our current catchment lines have been drawn and their subsequent impact on the racial make-up of our schools;¹⁵
- o explore the current possibilities for implementing the District of Choice Policy that allows for families within a District to have equal access to all schools within the District lines;
- o consider a legal strategy to challenge the segregation in our schools (together with the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund, which will help us explore possible legal remedies).

We hope that this project will build consciousness and make obvious that it's unfair practices—and not a child's intelligence or abilities—that are the cause of some communities, and not others, having more access to our schools. To understand the problem, all you need to do is to go inside our schools and witness the different and preferential treatment that is given to white and middle-class communities. All our communities deserve dignity and respect.

¹⁴ CIF and PRLDEF currently have a FOIL request pending with the DOE regarding the percentage of students coming from outside the catchment area for District 3 elementary schools broken down by race and ethnicity .

¹⁵ While many claim that housing segregation is the main cause of segregation in our schools, it seems clear that this does not adequately explain the increased segregation in public elementary schools in District 3. In fact, one thing that does appear to be happening is that white families who are moving farther uptown are still gaining access to schools located farther down in our District (the very same schools to which low-income parents of color are being denied access).

OUR SURVEY

(Sample Questions)

1. Did you apply to more than one school? If yes, which ones?
2. If you applied to just one school, please check the following reasons:
 - ? A friend recommended it
 - ? My other child(ren) is/are here
 - ? I was told it was my neighborhood school
 - ? My pre-school recommended it
 - ? I didn't know I could apply to more than one school
 - ? It was my first choice
 - ? Other _____
3. When you went to apply, what were you told to do?
(Interviews, School tours, etc.)
4. What stage of the application/interview process did you get to?
5. Were you asked how much money you could contribute to the school?
6. Is English your first language? If not, were you offered materials, interviews and schools tours in your own language?
7. Who did you talk to at the school or in the District about your application?
8. Was anyone else with you when these conversations/meetings took place?
9. How many different times did you have contact with the school?
10. If your child was not admitted, what reason(s) were you given for not getting into the school(s) you applied to?
11. Do you believe that you were treated fairly? Why or why not?
12. Do you know of other people who have had similar or different experiences to yourself? Would you be willing to ask this person if she/he would like to share their experience with us?
13. Would you be willing to meet with us and talk with us about your experience?

Center for Immigrant Families

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Segregation in OUR Public Schools!**

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