



# Working Toward Integrated Schools: Relationships Matter

*Tina Schuster Chavez  
High Tech High North County*

**H**ey, white girl. Move out the way!”

Without looking up, I knew two things: I was being spoken to, and I should move out of the way. At Thompson Middle School in Richmond, VA, there were less than 10 white girls in our entire school, and I knew that when it was time to change classes and walk through the halls, the faster I moved and the more I looked at the ground, the less likely I was to run into any trouble. The halls were tough, but riding the bus was the worst for me. Once my older brother moved on to high school, I was the only white student on the bus, and I was the last to get picked up. By the time I climbed onto the bus, everyone was sitting two or three to a seat already. I would have to be someone’s third on a seat. I would walk down the aisle while the bus pulled away, not making eye contact, asking if I could sit down. Eventually, after being refused by everyone, the bus driver would yell into his mirror that somehow could see all of us, that someone better let ‘that white girl sit down’ or he was going to pull over the bus. Someone would always begrudgingly give me a few inches, and I would balance my way to school for the rest of the trip.

This was Richmond, VA in the late 1980s, but if you look at the data from that middle school today, the racial makeup is the same. Today's racial profile of my middle school, Fred D. Thompson Middle School, is 97% black, 2% white and 1% Hispanic. In a city where 44% of the population is white, 50% is black and approximately 5% is Hispanic, there is something not lining up in the schools. Since leaving Richmond, I have taken this imbalance with me, and I am especially sensitized to race in schools.

In the U.S. school system, the federal and state governments have tried different methods of integrating our schools. They have tried involuntary integration such as forced busing, and they have tried voluntary methods such as having parents apply to schools of choice like charter schools. Yet, today many public schools continue to be segregated institutions. In 2010, US schools were more segregated than they were in the late 1960s. Lockette (2010) offers the following data on new segregation: one-third of black students attend school in places where the black population is more than 90 percent. A little less than half of white students attend schools that are more than 90 percent white. One-third of all black and Latino students attend high-poverty schools (where more than 75 percent of students receive free or reduced lunch); only 4 percent of white children do.

### **One Creative Solution**

When I moved to California three years ago, I was struck immediately by the number of smaller charter school options for students. In San Diego, I started working at one of these options—High Tech Middle Media Arts. One of the things that initially drew me to this school was the way that students were selected. I kept saying to my friends back East that this was how it was supposed to be. Students from all economic and cultural backgrounds were working together in groups on projects. These students would never have been in a schooling situation in which their varied backgrounds would put them in a classroom together, and here they were discussing books together and crafting projects together. In Virginia, I had seen the imbalance as a student, and I had been frustrated by it as a teacher. At High Tech High (HTH) schools, the academically and economically blind lottery system brings in a diverse mix and represents the city in which it exists. This plan attempts to expose students to different types of students and provides a place for them to work together in groups.

This integration of students in a school seemed initially to be too good to be true. I kept waiting for people to throw in the ‘but’ as they discussed the design principles or showed some of the student work, but the ‘but’ never came.

After a year on the San Diego campus, I moved about 40 minutes north to the North County campus. One thing that immediately struck me was that the student body did not seem as diverse. The school is designed to reflect the community that it serves. Yet the High Tech High North County (HTHNC) numbers reflected an under-enrollment in students qualifying for free or reduced lunch and in Latino and Asian students in relation to their numbers in community. Since the founding of HTHNC in 2007, there had been a lot of focus on how to diversify the current student body to make our zip code lottery reflect our community. I also wanted to delve into this issue and find out why our school was struggling with becoming more representative of the community. With the help of my 12th grade students, we went into one of the communities, Escondido, to attempt to increase enrollment in our school from the underrepresented socioeconomic areas.

### **Initial Assumptions**

As part of this attempt I had to make a few assumptions about why certain groups of students might be hesitant to apply to HTHNC. After speaking with our former Director, as well as other staff who have looked at ways to increase our diversity, I narrowed down on some of these and began working off of these assumptions.

#### ***Assumption 1: They don’t know about HTHNC.***

When initial recruiting efforts began in 2007, the new staff went out in the community to recruit students. They handed out flyers at swap meets, stood in front of Wal-Mart, put advertising on NPR, and tried other similar methods of canvassing and getting out into the community to make students aware of HTHNC. In 2010-11 as well, there was a group of Latino HTHNC students led by two teachers at the school that went out in the community to specifically target Latino communities to make them aware of the charter school in San Marcos. The former director reported that she didn’t think her initial efforts in front of random stores or other venues in the communities made much of a difference. She said that although there isn’t data to report how families heard about the school, she “never had a family

come up to her at an information night and report that they had heard about the school from a flyer.” Additionally, I spoke with an assistant to the Chief Operating Officer upon opening the schools. She tried similar recruiting efforts when the High Tech High Schools opened in the Point Loma campus. She explained that they also stood out front of stores in low income neighborhoods and passed out flyers at Swap Meets. Although her evidence is also anecdotal, she claimed that “these methods were not as effective as making partnerships in elementary and middle schools with the student body that High Tech High needed.”

***Assumption 2: Parents don’t understand what a charter school is.***

In addition to being unaware of HTHNC, I also speculated that parents might not understand charter schools because these schools can look very different from what school looked like when these parents were students. According to a 2010 national survey, 60% of Americans are confused as to what a charter school is. They often mistake it for a tuition-charging private school or think that there are strict academic requirements to get into the schools (Cavanaugh, 2010).

The 12th grade math class at HTHNC conducted community surveys in 2011-12 about common misconceptions of charter schools. The students went out in groups of three with different hypotheses centered on these misconceptions. In each study, the students were instructed to have a random sample size of 50 or higher. All students used age and gender as further factors and tried to balance age groups as well as gender. The only exception was students who were looking to see if particular age groups knew more about charter schools and who therefore targeted smaller age ranges. The students used an online survey as well as in-person surveys in Carlsbad, San Marcos, Escondido and Oceanside, which are areas that HTHNC serves. As a result of these surveys, the students noticed certain trends regarding misconceptions about charter schools:

- 19% of the adult North County population surveyed thought that charter schools charge tuition
- 66% believed that charter schools are more similar to a private school than a traditional public school (other options were given such as home schooling or write-in options)
- 43% believed that there was an academic requirement to get into charter schools

Judging from these surveys, it seems important that misconceptions

are addressed among the families interested in attending HTHNC.

***Assumption 3: Transportation***

When I met with a counselor at one of the middle schools we worked with, she suggested that the students may see the distance of a school in a different city as making it an unrealistic school to attend. Public transportation does not frequently run directly to the school. A student who lives 8 miles away may have to ride both a bus and train and walk to the campus, a journey that currently takes some of our students over an hour in each direction. Although HTHNC provides free public transportation passes to students who qualify for free or reduced lunch, the distance to travel and the time it takes may seem daunting.

***Assumption 4: People don't have a reason to trust HTHNC.***

If people in the community don't know about HTHNC or understand the charter school system entirely, they have no reason to trust people they don't know with their children. At a district school that a student is programmed to attend, families know that other people in their community have gone to that school. Whether it is perceived as the best option or not, it is a known entity to parents. I feel that this is the biggest factor limiting the diversity at HTHNC.

When the original High Tech High was founded, there were similar issues with the demographics of enrollment. The assistant to the Chief Operating Officer noticed the discrepancies in the free/reduced populations. They were under-enrolled as compared to San Diego Schools as a whole. She said that although they tried targeting different neighborhoods with flyers, it wasn't until they started working with organizations already in the communities that people started to trust people from HTH. So she decided to partner with San Diego elementary and middle Schools in the areas with the student body that HTH was lacking. After making a connection with a counselor on the staff at these schools, parents began to trust the HTH staff as well since they were working with someone familiar, and the community started to warm to the idea of High Tech High for their children. The assistant claimed that as word of mouth traveled, the diversity of applications increased relatively quickly. My conversations with this assistant and others led me to design a project with my 12th grade students where we would go into area middle schools so as to gain the understanding and trust from students and their families.

## Testing the Assumptions

In an effort to build authentic relationships with students in underrepresented areas, I created a Government class project focused around the education system. The HTHNC students were able to make connections and forge relationships with two middle schools that have not had students apply to the High Tech High Schools. We established one-on-one relationships between the students and hosted some of these students for a Shadow Day on our campus.

This process highlighted the issue of trust mainly. However, I also learned from the middle school students that feeling safe in a school was at the forefront of students' minds. I hadn't thought about that in my initial assumptions. For the students coming from middle schools, they aren't as concerned about the types of courses offered or perhaps even the structure of the teaching. They want a place where they feel safe and where they know they can develop a positive relationship with their teachers. There were gang presences at the middle schools we worked with as well as bullying and fighting taking place on the campus. Seeing a campus during the Shadow day in which they felt safe opened up the possibility for students to apply and take a risk. Since it is rare that middle school students seek out a different high school than the one prescribed by their school districts, having students take ownership of where they wanted to go to high school was also a big deal. Some of the students who shadowed at HTHNC felt comfortable enough to apply to HTHNC themselves and tell their parents after applying.

Ultimately, I don't think that what parents want and what students want are different things. I still think that parents look for people or a place that is known to them or that they can trust. Parents entrust a school to work with their children for 6-8 hours, five days a week. It is not a simple decision for parents or students to apply to a new school that they haven't learned to trust yet. Trust is not established from simply handing out a flyer to a student or a parent at a store in which they are shopping. This technique could certainly pique someone's interest, but it takes an entirely different level of understanding of a school to entrust a child to it.

## Thinking Ahead

Throughout this process, I got a glimpse into the difficulties of trying to simply enroll a diverse student body. Current neighborhoods and school districting policies set up a major barrier to truly integrated schools. Gary Orfield (2009), Director of the Civil Rights Project at UCLA, even claims that the money spent on busing and different forced types of integration could have been more used more effectively if spent on in mixing up housing patterns. However, since we are operating with the housing patterns that exist today, I used the enrollment flexibility of charter schools to try and address the other barriers to integrated schools that go much deeper than geographic restrictions. Through our partnership with one local middle school we had 11 applications from students for our 2012-13 school year. The previous year, we had zero applications from this same school. Of these 11 students, nine were admitted, and five chose to enroll as freshmen.

Five students out of a class of 150 freshmen may seem like an insignificant number at first, but it isn't. Change that happens on the small scale in schools can often be the most sustainable. These five students represent a year of partnerships in a new community. They represent a year working with a school and new families to earn trust. And most importantly, they represent a small step towards becoming a truly representative body of students of North County San Diego. It is the person-to-person outreach that has produced results. Now it is the job of High Tech High North County to work with all 9th grade students to make sure we are providing support to sustain a truly integrated school. After my 19 years of schooling and 12 years of teaching, on the other side of the US, I am finally getting closer to working a school that is reflective of the community in which it exists.

## References

Cavanagh, S. (2011). On Rhetorical Battleground, 'Reform' Proves Potent Weapon. *Education Week*, 30, 1-25.

Kleinfield, N.R. (2012, May 11). A System Divided: Why Don't We Have Any White Kids? *The New York Times*. Retrieved from [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/13/education/at-explore-charter-school-a-portrait-of-segregated-education.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/13/education/at-explore-charter-school-a-portrait-of-segregated-education.html?_r=1)



Lockette, T. (2010, February 10). The New Racial Segregation at Public Schools. *Teaching Tolerance*. Retrieved from [http://www.alternet.org/rights/145553/the\\_new\\_racial\\_segregation\\_at\\_public\\_schools](http://www.alternet.org/rights/145553/the_new_racial_segregation_at_public_schools)

Orfield, G. (2009). The Long Road: (Re)Segregation in America. *UnBoxed A Journal of Adult Learning in Schools*, Spring 2009. Retrieved from [http://www.hightechhigh.org/unboxed/issue3/the\\_long\\_road/](http://www.hightechhigh.org/unboxed/issue3/the_long_road/)

*To learn more about Tina's Action Research Project, visit: <http://tchavezgsedp.weebly.com/>*