

Involving Latino Parents in Education: Advocating for Children with Special Needs

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Educational Achievement Gap 2

Contributing Factors to Gap 2

Need for Parental Involvement 3

Latino Parental Involvement 4

Challenges to Parental Involvement 5

Special Education 5

Special Education Policy 6

Magnet Schools 7

Introduction

Based on extensive literary investigation as well as primary research conducted in the South Bend community, this brief seeks to call attention to the issues Latinos face in the education system and stress the importance of community outreach through parental involvement as a means to improve achievement of Hispanic students in South Bend, especially in the perplexing domain of special education.

Hispanics are the fastest growing ethnic group in the U.S.; the Census Bureau estimates that they will represent a quarter of the general population by 2050. The number of Hispanic students has tripled in the past 30 years and is predicted to increase to over 25% of kindergarten through 12th grade students by 2030 (Gibson 2002). South Bend, Indiana has witnessed a rapid immigration of Hispanics, primarily of Mexican descent, who are usually seeking better economic opportunities for themselves and their children. This influx is reflected in the drastically changing demographics of the city population from 3% Hispanic in 1990 to 11.4% in 2008 (U.S. Census Bureau). The west side of South Bend has emerged as the epicen-

ter of this community and evolved to address its unique language and cultural characteristics.

One institution forced to adapt to this rapid proliferation is the public school system. Education is a key determinant for available opportunities later in life. Within the South Bend School District, the Hispanic student population has increased from 13.8% in 2006 16.4% in 2010 (Indiana Department of Education). The South Bend Community School Corporation (SBCSC), has struggled to keep pace with the rising Hispanic

population, especially within the sphere of special education which encompasses 19% of the SBCSC student population (Indiana Department of Education). With tight budget constraints and limited resources, the personnel lack the specialized training to best serve this marginalized population. Education is not merely a state undertaking; extensive research has documented the critical role of parental involvement on achieving educational attainment goals. Parents' encouragement of educational attainment and formal involvement at their children's schools play crucial roles in keeping children on track for high school graduation. Nationally, as well as locally, Hispanic parents are underrepresented in their child's school. Encouraging and supporting parental involvement and advocacy among the Hispanic community can greatly benefit this marginalized population. ♦

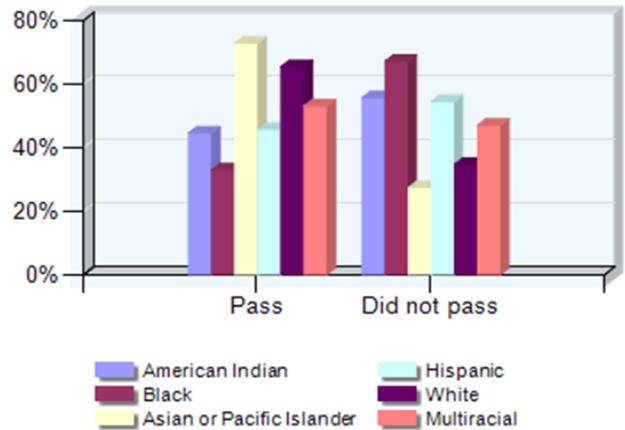


The Educational Achievement Gap

“Only 45.57% of Hispanic students in the South Bend School District passed the state standardized tests, compared with a 65.4% passing rate among white students.”

The educational experience for Hispanics in the United States is a story of accumulated disadvantage. Compared to White and Black children, Hispanics have lower levels of school readiness at the start of kindergarten (Duncan & Magnuson 2005, Fryer & Levitt 2004). Many Hispanic students begin formal education without the social and economic resources available to other groups. Relative to white children, Hispanic children are three times more likely to grow up in poverty and four times more likely to have parents who did not complete high school (Smith 2006). These initial socioeconomic disadvantages are often derived from parents’ immigrant status. Family background and

ISTEP+ 2010 Results by Ethnicity

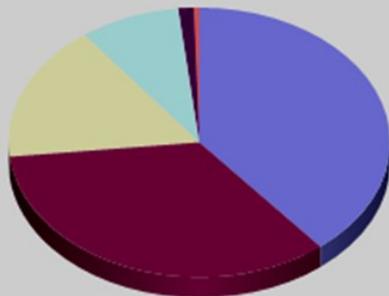


social and economic factors often set Hispanic students behind their peers from the first day of school, while they remain crucial throughout school age in encouraging schoolwork and establishing goals.

Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Using this data, Reardon & Galindo estimate that the Hispanic-White achievement gap in 2007 was about three quarters of a standard deviation in math and reading test scores in 4th and 8th grade (Reardon & Galindo 2009). As the graph above depicts, only 45.57% of Hispanic students in the South Bend School District passed the state standardized tests, compared with a 65.4% passing rate among white students. ♦

As Hispanic students proceed through school, there remains a stark contrast in achievement levels relative to White students. The best recent data on the magnitude of the Hispanic-White achievement gap for elementary school age children comes from the National

Ethnicity



White, Black, Hispanic, Multiracial, Asian or Pacific Islander, American Indian

South Bend Community School Corporation Demographics

- 39.1% White
- 34.2% Black
- 16.4% Hispanic



Factors Contributing to Achievement

Among Hispanic parents, a lack of knowledge about the U.S. education system often contributes to lower outcomes. Hispanic parents, particularly those who speak little English and did not attend school in the U.S., may be less familiar with the practices, expectations, and institutions of the U.S. school system than native-born and English-speaking parents (Reardon and Galindo 2009). Maneuvering within the public school system assumes a level of social

capital often lacking for immigrant populations. On page __, a further discussion is afforded to magnet schools in an effort to close the education gap, but understanding how these schools recruit students and how to apply requires an understanding of the public school system, a valuable skill in the South Bend School District.

Some have argued that the educational gap is attributable to a lower emphasis on education in the Latino culture. This assertion is empirically incorrect;

Factors Contributing to Achievement (cont.)

rather, high educational expectations are found among all racial and ethnic groups regardless of social and economic resources (Schneider et al. 2006). Hispanic parents are more likely to face a language barrier and lack critical social networks to understand public schooling and to advocate for their children.

A further factor contributing to the education gap is school environment. Hispanic students are more likely to attend schools with fewer experienced teachers and with high concentrations of poor students. Hispanics, particularly those of Mexican decent have a tendency

to live in areas with a high concentration of Hispanics, as we can see on the west side of South Bend. As cited before, Hispanic children are three times more likely to grow up in poverty than white children and because public schools are primarily funded by local property tax, the average tax bracket of the local community has a direct effect on the funding of the school. Compositional features of schools, like poverty and ethnic composition, are to some extent related to resources, quality of teachers, and academic culture. Thus Hispanic students may be particularly disadvan-



Reading at home improves learning in the classroom

Need for Parental Involvement

As the numbers of immigrants in the United States continues to increase, the education system remains behind in its ability to adapt to address the needs of this unique population. The mandates of No Child Left Behind place an increased strain on schools to accommodate the increase in diversity (Smith Stern & Shatrova, 2009). 20.5% of the school age population speaks a language other than English at home (Grieco, 2007). This large portion of the student popu-

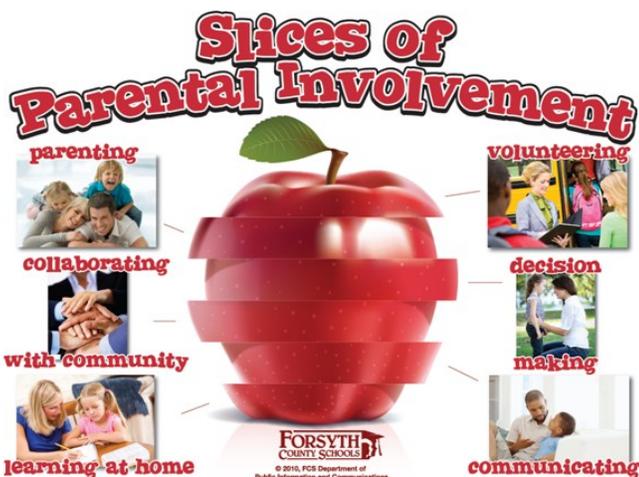
lation often comes into the classroom with a degree of cultural and lingual disconnect. The implications of this disconnect between home and school is particularly important when it comes to parent involvement.

Educators stress the importance of parental involvement, regardless of ethnicity, in the academic success of students (Smith Stern & Shatrova, 2009). Research finds that parental involvement in a child's education predicts academic

and behavioral success in elementary school (Domina, 2005) as well as adolescence (Jeynes, 2007). When parents are actively involved in their children's education, positive cognitive and affective changes can be observed in their children, regardless of economic, ethnic, or cultural background of the parents (Flaxman & Inger, 1991). In addition, research shows that children of immigrants also greatly benefit from parental involvement (Kao, 2004).

School-sponsored activities that engage parents' individual needs, such as workshops on computer or financial literacy, understanding the public school system, and ESL courses, all establish a direct relationship with their child's school. Encouragement of volunteer opportunities and consistent parent-teacher communication will improve parental involvement and responsibility in a child's education. Conversely, parents are equally responsible to respond to engagements and continue learning at home. ♦

“Parental Involvement in a child’s education is a predictor of academic and behavioral success in elementary school”



Left: A fun display of the tenants of parental involvement.

Latino Parental Involvement

Common Issues:

- Inability to understand English
- Estrangement
- Unfamiliar School System
- Cultural Differences

Despite the benefits of parental involvement, Hispanic immigrant parents are, however, consistently found to be less involved in their child's education (Carreon, Drake & Barton, 2005). Language minority parents may face a number of challenges when trying to communicate or become involved with their child's school. Inability to understand English, estrangement from educational institutions, unfamiliarity with the school community, and differences in cultural norms concerning appropriate levels of parent-school involvement can hinder parents from communicating or being involved with their child's school (Quezada, Diaz, & Sanchez 2003).

In 2006, the United States department of education published an issue brief titled "School and Parent Interaction by Household Language

and Poverty Status."

This brief examined the differences in home to school communication practices between English speaking households compared to Spanish speaking households. It found that the average parent from a Spanish speaking household was ten percent less likely to report receiving a personal note or correspondence about their child, as well as a newsletter, memo, or notice addressed to all parents (Enyeart, Diehl, Hampden-Thompson, & Scotchmer, 2006). This ten percentage difference held true across all socioeconomic levels (Enyeart,



Diehl, Hampden-Thompson, & Scotchmer, 2006).

Researchers recognize different aspects of parental involvement (Arias and Morillo-Campbell, 2008). One common division of the methods of parental involvement is the distinction between support and encouragement, and active involvement (Kauffman, Perry, and Prentiss, 2001). Supportive parental involvement is defined as encouraging children and sympathy, reassurance, and understanding. This support also implies that education is a high priority in the household (Kauffman, Perry, and Prentiss, 2001). Researchers from the University of Pennsylvania extended their definition of parental involvement as support to include social capital (Turney and Tao, 2009). They point out the importance of the child's socialization, emphasizing education in the home, promoting the value of education (Turney and Tao, 2009). There is also a social effect on the parents, granting them some form of social control as they get to know not only teachers and administrators but other parents as well (Turney and Tao, 2009). The most visible form of parental involvement is active involvement. This form includes the observable aspects of involvement, such as attendance at parent teacher conferences and school events and correspondence with teachers or administrators (Kauffman, Perry, and Prentiss, 2001). ♦

BEST PRACTICES CHECKLIST FOR PARENT INVOLVEMENT

- Does a greeter welcome parents?
- Are you accepting alternative forms of identification to enter the building such as the *matricula* or electoral card from another country?
- Has someone (staff/teacher) been identified to be the liaison between the parents and the school?
- Is there someone who speaks the parents' native language?
- Are bulletins multilingual?
- Is there a room where parents can meet with each other (Parent Resource Room)?
- Is there a consistent parent program?
- Is there a formal process to include parents in the planning of events, such as a mentoring or volunteer program?
- Have all teachers had training to help them use a student's family, language, and culture as a foundation for learning?
- Is there a parent calendar that meets the state/federal requirements but also includes the needs and interests of the parents?
- Does a baseline survey exist to capture the interest of the parents, their skills, and their potential for volunteering or becoming mentors?
- Can your program serve the whole family?

Alejo, B., Puente, S. (2007) Forging the Tools for Unity: A Report on Metro Chicago's Mayors Roundtables on Latino Integration. University of Notre Dame: Institute for Latino Studies <http://latinostudies.nd.edu/pubs/pubs/Roundtables_WEB.pdf>

Source: Villa 2007

Silvia Villa presented this checklist at the Latino Suburban Roundtable in May of 2007. It was then published in a report by Alejo and Puente

Challenges to Parental Involvement

Language minority parents face many challenges when trying to become involved in their child's education. Researchers have found that often there is a divide between the desire of Hispanic and minority parents to be involved and the reported involvement of those parents (Turney and Kao, 2009). The same research suggests that the encouraging behaviors exist in these households; however these parents are at a disadvantage when it comes to homework help and active involvement. The largest barrier to parental involvement among immigrant and Hispanic parents is limited English proficiency (Turney and Kao, 2009).

Hispanics and immigrant parents are underrepresented in schools (Carreon, Drake & Barton, 2005). In the effort to encourage the participa-

tion of parents in their child's education, research has taken a turn to establish the deterrents and or barriers preventing parental involvement, especially in the Hispanic communities. Some common barriers in research are scheduling conflicts including work, lack of child care, lack of transportation, lack of welcoming atmosphere in the school, and language problems (Turney and Tao, 2009). Researchers from Texas and Oklahoma confirmed the commonly reported inhibitors but stressed that the lack of English language skills in the home were an underlying reason for the limited involvement (Smith, Stern, Shatrova, 2009). If lines of communication could be opened between parents and schools, it may also have an effect on the cultural inhibitors that are commonly report-

ed (Smith, Stern, Shatrova, 2009).

In the U.S., Hispanic students are often achieving below average, and the Hispanic population in our nation continues to expand. As our schools struggle to accommodate this growing diverse population, we need to reach out to children and their families at a young a critical age to encourage high achievement and supportive behaviors. ♦



Further Consideration of Special Education

The problems affecting the education of those with special needs are often overlooked in the general criticism of the educational system. Parental involvement becomes increasingly important in the development of special needs children. Often special education teachers teach multiple subjects at a variety of cognition levels based on the needs of the learning disabled students in their classrooms. In addition, the urban aspects of the South Bend School Corporation have decreased the market for special education teachers and paraprofessionals (Foley). According to Frank Foley, the Special Needs and Abilities Preschool coordinator for the South Bend School Community School Corporation, the lack of sufficient numbers of teachers has been an effect that has taken its toll on the Special education programs in the local schools. With special education staff already stretched thin and in high demand, it is excessively difficult to find bilingual personnel.

Parental involvement has a great benefit for educators. The student's family provides keys to understanding these especially complex students and specific tools to motivate learning

within the classroom. Cross-cultural misunderstanding is likely in special education due to the culturally specific nature of the categorical disabilities system, such as mental retardation or learning disabilities. Even diagnosed diseases like autism often carry culturally diverse ramifications. In several conversations with families, we found home visits to be an apt environment for mothers to talk about fears and goals for their children. This suggests a strategy for bilingual special educators, as meeting with parents in the home

“With special education staff already stretched thin and in high demand, it is excessively difficult to find bilingual personnel.”

can strengthen understandings of special education programs. Home visits facilitate communication and further encourage parental involvement down the road as parents are more willing to attend meetings associated with special education and to volunteer in school.

Previous findings have been mixed. Some have perceived a lack of parental participation in parent programs and

lack of utilization of services (Heller et. al 1994). However, others have found Latino parents are involved in their child's education and supportive of special education (Hughes et al 1998, Hughes et al 2002). Generally Latinos desire involvement in educational decision-making for their children, but many feel marginalized by overt or covert messages that their opinions are not always welcomed (Salas 2004). Our conversations with mothers in the South Bend community often echoed this sentiment and desire to help. Two respondents, mothers of autistic children, emphasized frequent positive interactions with teachers and school therapists (Eva Interview, Maria Interview); however, Eva pointed to negative experiences with school administrators and Maria outlined consistent uncomfortable communication experiences due to language. Both mothers stressed the importance of learning outside the classroom, while just one was intent on active participation at school and the other cited language as the primary reason for infrequent interaction. ♦

Special Education Policy

Some argue that the No Child Left Behind Act's (NCLB) provisions for the inclusion of the scores of children with special needs is a step in the right direction (Bowen and Rude 2006), encouraging the mainstreaming of children with special needs out of self contained classrooms. The NCLB Act strongly pushes for the inclusion of students with special needs into the general education classrooms (Bowen and Rude 2006). Bowen and Rude claim that the integration of students would benefit both the special needs children and the general education students, teaching them to socialize in a diverse situation that mimics the "real world."

Conversely, the concept of inclusion creates two major issues with the learning disabled individual. The first is that including a disabled student into a general education class may be equivalent to taking a fish out of water. Some of these students require specific structure and guidance in the classroom without which the academic education of the student is a mute point. If a student is unable to perform to the expected standards of the classroom, the forced integration is working backwards and may in effect be decreasing their skill level. In reality a child may learn and develop more in a life skills classroom where a special education teacher can

work to advance the skills in the appropriate level of proficiency (Foley). Including a child in a general education classroom may not actually be improving their educational opportunities, especially if it is done prematurely. Parents should be involved in this choice and be aware of the benefits and consequences each may have on their child.

In addition, the drive to make Adequate Yearly Progress creates a conundrum in schools including students with learning disabilities. Often these students score lower on the state proficiency tests than the average student. Consequently these scores can lower the school's average. This issue is especially pertinent for



those schools that barely achieve AYP, or are not meeting the standards, which defines the majority of schools within the South Bend School District (Foley). It becomes a general feeling that special needs students should not be incorporated into the general curriculum in order to prevent their scores from being included in the school average. This has been argued to be for the benefit of the special needs student as well, because if the school does not achieve Adequate Yearly Progress then the school as a whole suffers (Bowen and Rude 25).

This issue of inclusion has created a sticky situation in the South Bend School System in particular. Locally, the first

standardized test is given to those entering the second grade (Foley). This means that at age seven it must be decided whether an individual will take the general assessment or the alternate assessment.

"It's not fair that at age seven... we can decide their future."

Respectively, the ISTEP (Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress) or the ISTAR (Indiana Standards Tool for Alternate Reporting) are used in South Bend. A student's educational track is decided in a case conference with the parents, special needs teachers, and general education teachers. This group de-

termines whether or not a seven-year-old will take the ISTEP, placing him or her on track to a high school diploma. Alternatively, if a child takes the ISTAR, he or she will be tracked into a Life Skills classroom, taking him or her off track for a High School diploma (Foley). "It's like playing God," said Frank Foley. "It's not fair that at age seven, when in some cases the child has only been in the [Public School] system for a year, that we can decide their future" (Foley). Parents need to be aware of this process in order to advocate for their child. In addition, this delicate decision and the precarious consequences are difficult to navigate as a language minority

Magnet Schools in South Bend

Magnet schools are public schools that have specialized curricula and are designed to draw students across school zones that normally feed into certain schools. If a student is drawn to the arts, for example, a particular magnet school may provide an exceptional program for that student. In this vein, magnet schools are increasingly regarded for their potential to improve school achievement for all students and provide for those with special needs. In South Bend, the following magnet schools are available.

Elementary

- Kennedy Primary
- Coquillard Traditional ✱
- Hamilton Traditional ✱
- Tarkington Traditional ✱
- Marquette Montessori Academy †
- Pearley Fine Arts Academy †

✱ Applicants accepted according to home school's region
 † Limited bussing available

Middle

- Dickensen Intermediate (Fine Arts) †
- Jefferson Intermediate Traditional
- LaSalle Intermediate (academic)

High

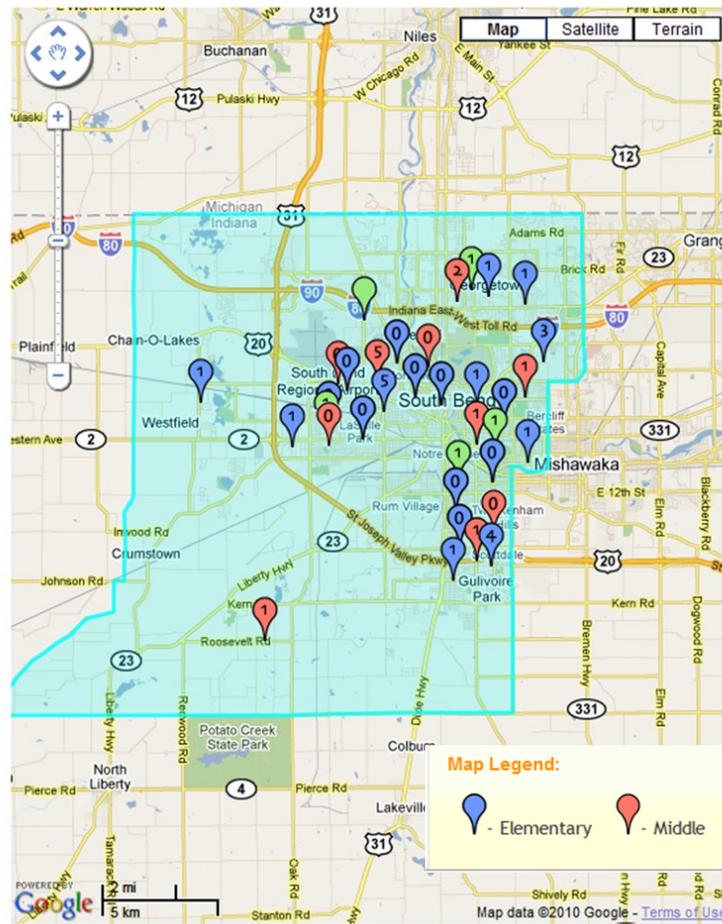
- Adams (Global Studies/IB)
- Clay (Art, Dance, Drama, Music)
- Riley (Tech, Engineering)
- Washington (Medical, Health Sciences)

The potential for magnet schools in South Bend special education can be seen through Eva's decision of where to send her autistic son for elementary school. When it came time to sign-up for Kindergarten, two elementary schools ran buses through her neighborhood, but Eva was unsatisfied by their disciplinary rules and activities that often kept children seated in class (Eva interview). She preferred a Montessori Academy, a magnet school with an upbeat, active curriculum that suited Carlos' special needs and personality. She has been pleased with the school's personal attentiveness to Carlos.

Eva's story speaks to the potential of these schools but is not an argument for a greater trend. Magnet schools may prove difficult to access for the socioeconomically disadvantaged. The ability to make an informed decision about what's

best for one's child assumes an understanding of different school options within an understanding of the economic framework and options available to the family. Eva encountered familiar barriers like transportation and language on her way to sending Carlos to a Montessori Academy. Because it does not run buses through her neighborhood, she was forced to get a driving license and now drives her son to and back from school every day (Eva interview). Eva elected away from a bilingual educational program and thus the language barrier became an issue when attempting to communicate with teachers about her son's progression. To solve this issue, she has taken to asking for written instructions and comments (Eva interview) because her husband is bilingual and thus anything that gets lost in translation the first time can get picked up by her husband at home.

Though Eva's family overcame these obstacles, they provide insight on national trends that Latino enrolment rates in magnet schools remain well below their representation within most urban populations (Haynes et al 2010). South Bend has made concrete efforts to make magnet schools accessible; for example, the online application is available in both English and Spanish and the magnet Lasalle Intermediate Academy offers a native-speakers class for Latino students. The full integration of Latinos through these outreach efforts is yet to materialize but with continued support and through innovative methods, more Latino students may realize their full potential in the classroom. ♦



A map of the South Bend School Corporation Schools. The numbers indicate the ranking of the corresponding school (5 representing the best, 0 representing the worst.)

Conclusion

According to literary research and examples from the South Bend community, the education system can be a bewildering maze of hindrances that impede the educational achievement of Hispanic students. The combination of atypical cultural tendencies, low socioeconomic status, and poor school quality that are often the emblematic context for a Hispanic household are compounded by a language disconnect that thwarts the involvement of even the most

invested parents. In households of children with special needs, where parental advocacy can have an even more drastic effect on a child's education, the labyrinth becomes more intricate still.

As the Hispanic population in our community continues to grow, the ethnic disparities in educational achievement are a pressing issue that should be urgently addressed. The parents of children who fall into these at risk categories should

be conscious of their weight as a vigilant presence in their child's education. The South Bend Community School Corporation and the supporting community should be sensitive to the unique needs of this population, and how best to serve both Hispanic students and parents in the education system. Through this collaboration of parents and educators South Bend can address the ardent educational needs of Hispanic population. ♦

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* Note: The names of interviewees have been changed to ensure privacy

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