

# Schools to rethink thorny busing issue

By Sam Green  
Tribune staff writer

BERKELEY — For years, parents and school officials have complained that Berkeley's system of busing students to integrate its elementary schools has inadvertently produced racial imbalance and driven students out of the district.

Now, change may be on the horizon.

After years of inaction, the school board is taking up the thorny issue of desegregation at a special meeting Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. at school district offices at 2134 Martin Luther King Jr. Way. And a growing number of parents are pushing for reform.

"I think we're finally going to do something about it," said board member Elizabeth Shaughnessy — the board's most vocal critic of the district's current system of busing. "I'm so frustrated. This item has been on the agenda of three different boards. No one is ever willing to bite the bullet and make a decision."

Oddly enough, the recently passed Measure A has pushed board members to finally tackle the issue. The board must decide on grade configuration before rebuilding several seismically unsafe elementary schools.

At issue is the district's 25-year-old system of desegregating by sending all kindergarten through third grade students to schools in the hills and then busing them to bigger schools in the flatlands for fourth through sixth grades.

School board members say they'll consider the idea of turning some or all the district's elementary schools into K-5 schools, but, at the same time, they are concerned about maintaining integration.

"I think that would be great," said board member Pedro Noguera, referring to a move to K-5 schools. "It would bring kids back from private schools, but it will create other problems."

Noguera and others are concerned that if new K-5 schools are created, students would flock to the ones in the hills, while leaving schools in the flatlands even more segregated. Some board members have suggested making magnet schools in the flatlands to attract students.

Originally, the system worked: racially diverse K-3 and 4-6 schools replaced the district's highly segregated neighborhood elementary schools.

But in recent years the trend has reversed, and several schools have become increasingly segregated, according to Shaughnessy and others. Longfellow, Malcolm X and Columbus — the grades 4-6 schools — are all racially unbalanced, with up to 70 percent black students, she said.

District administrators did not provide figures on the racial makeup of their schools.

Many blame Berkeley's changing neighborhood demographics segregation, but they also point a

finger at the district's busing system, which, they say, pushes white students into private schools.

"We have a lot of middle-class flight at the fourth grade," Shaughnessy said. "Many parents aren't sending their kids down," to Columbus, Longfellow and Malcolm X, "so those schools are very racially unbalanced."

For those parents who do keep their kids in Berkeley schools, the system of shuttling students back and forth between schools can cause headaches.

"My husband and I like to be involved," said Linda Leader-Picone, who has young children at three different schools. "But how can I belong to three PTA's?"

Leader-Picone is part of a group of parents who are pushing to expand their neighborhood school, Thousand Oaks, from K-3 to K-5.

"It's better for the children to stay longer in one school," Leader-Picone said. "The school gets to know students and can serve them better, and there's more of a sense of community because families are there longer."

## Officials dip into Measure A money

By Tribune staff

The Berkeley school board dipped into its new Measure A funds for the first time this week and approved what officials describe as a badly needed "face-lift" for district schools.

The board voted unanimously at its Wednesday meeting to approve close to \$350,000 worth of summer maintenance projects, including locker repair at Berkeley High and Willard Junior High schools, new carpeting in several buildings and a fresh coat of paint for schools around the district.

"This is great," said Anton Jungheer, assistant superintendent for business. "For years we've had lockers that don't work and graffiti everywhere."

The projects are the first work funded by Measure A, the \$158 million ballot initiative passed by Berkeley voters in June to raise money to repair and rebuild the district's rundown and seismically unsafe schools.

The board also voted to spend \$100,000 to replace the cracked blacktop yard surrounding Franklin School and \$15,000 to repair a folding partition in the King junior High School gym.

To pay for these Measure A projects and others during the upcoming school year, the board also voted Wednesday to approve the sale of \$13.9 million in general obligation bonds.