

# Neighborhood schools vs. integration

*Berkeley parents are finding these two concepts contradictory,*

small site to Malcolm X (4-6), which is huge. Whether it's right or wrong, many parents try to avoid Malcolm X because it swallows kids up and because it's in an unsafe neighborhood."

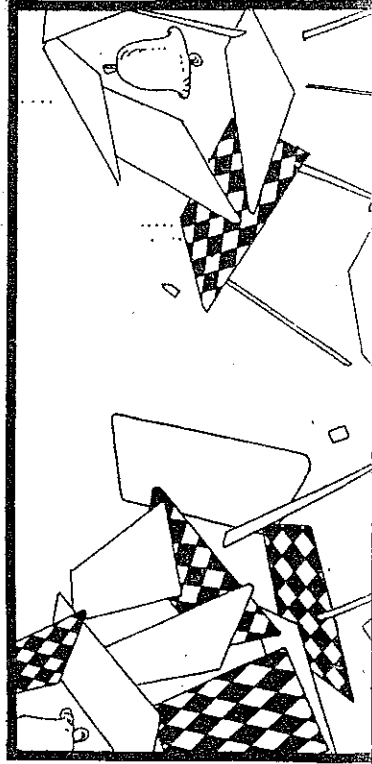
"We have to face up to the fact that there is fear in many people's hearts; a fear that at the 4-6 level, that's when their kids 'go bad,'" said parent Lloyd Lee at a meeting of Cragmont (K-3) parents.

Early results of another survey conducted by the Berkeley Federa-

was constituted, and that the purposes of the committee, as well as of the task force, are at this very moment not known to most of the parents of Cragmont," Graham wrote to the Superintendent's Task Force.

According to BUSD legislative liaison Arrietta Chakos, packets were sent to each school to help administrators select a site committee comprised of the principal, three teachers, three staff, six parents, and students, if possible. Committee meetings, she said, are widely publi-

GUARDIAN GRAPHIC BY MOLLY KEELY



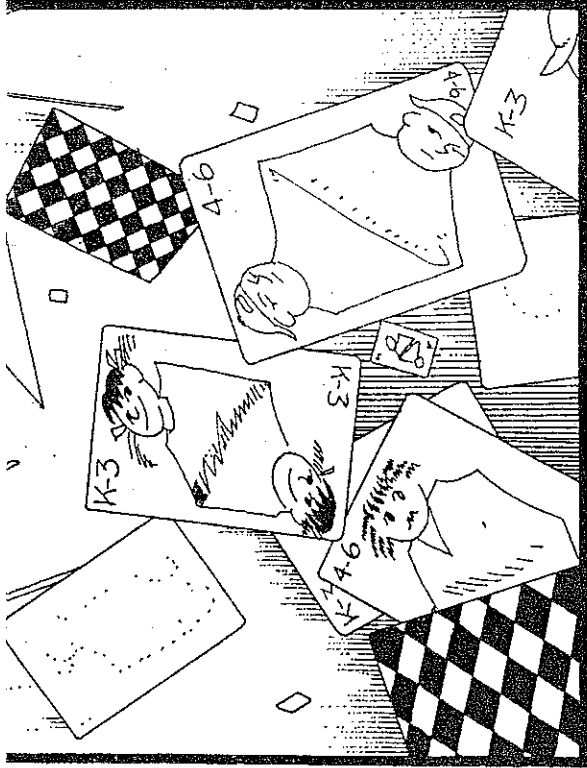
# and many just want their kids close to home

BY MEREDITH MAY

**U**NDER THE GUISE of repairing aging buildings, the Berkeley Unified School District (BUSD) is making plans to overhaul the city's entire educational structure. Committees from all 13 of Berkeley's elementary schools have been discussing ways to replace the current K-3 and 4-6 grade configurations, and most want to dump the current system in favor of a K-5 or K-6 "neighborhood school" plan.

The problem with tossing out the current system is that it means discarding the busing plans used to ensure desegregation in Berkeley schools since 1968. And given Berkeley's demographics, a return to neighborhood schools would mean a return to schools divided by race (see "Bye-Bye Busing?" 9/30/92).

The rethinking of Berkeley's schools moved from discussion to drawing board last June after city voters passed Measure A, a self-imposed tax that would generate \$158 million to upgrade disintegrating schools — some of which had to be closed when they didn't measure up to seismic safety standards. The school board had decided to look at reconditioning the system from the inside out when it realized that deciding what schools to refurbish, and how, meant setting new priorities for the schools. For example, should money be spent to retrofit and reopen the flatlands Columbus School as a 4-6 school, or could that money be better spent elsewhere? It



was a chance to redo the schools almost from the ground up, and the possibilities seemed limitless.

After six months of late-night school planning meetings, the Measure A euphoria has subsided considerably as parents and school administrators, like relatives bickering over a family member's lottery winnings, try to decide where and how to spend the money by Feb. 3 — when recommendations are due in Superintendent LaVoneta C. Steele's office.

Almost everyone agrees that Berkeley's schools are failing many students, and many critics believe the current grade configuration system is a key culprit. Berkeley is still operating on the two-way integration system devised in 1968, for grades K-3, minority children from the "flatlands" are bused to the predominantly white "hill schools." In reverse, hill children are bused down to the "flatlands" for grades 4-6. Since there are only two junior high schools for grades 7-8 and one high school for grades 9-12, all located in the flatlands, grades 7-12 are natu-

rally integrated.

But a documented white flight to private schools at the 4th-grade level has pulled the rug out from under busing's good intentions.

The move to return to neighborhood schools was given a big boost last year when school board member Pedro Noguera, the board's only black member, said he supported neighborhood schools. And Martha Acevedo, the most vocal opponent of the neighborhood schools plan, was narrowly defeated for re-election in November.

At a Jan. 5 meeting, representatives from seven of the 13 Berkeley elementary school "site committees" attending told the Superintendent's Task Force on School Organization that they wanted a pre-K-5/6 or a K-5/6 model.

"We sent every child home with a survey, and the main reason parents said they wanted a K-5 system was because it reduced the number of transitions for their children," said Emerson (K-3) site committee chair Marla Wilson. "It causes a lot of anxiety for kids to go from a

tion of Teachers shows that a "majority" of the 367 elementary school teachers who returned questionnaires "favored a K-5, 6-8, 9-12 grade configuration," said union president Jackie Fox Ruby.

## WHOSE COMMITTEE?

Critics argued that a return to neighborhood schools will create a more segregated setting for their children's education, because housing patterns in the city of Berkeley are still separated along racial lines. They also said that minority parents in South and West Berkeley are largely absent from the discussion over the fate of the schools, and therefore "consensus" statements reached by the 18 site committees don't represent the feelings of every community.

"I feel utterly betrayed," said West Berkeley resident and Cragmont parent Joanna Graham. "I went canvassing door to door for the first time in 10 years for Measure A. I thought I was gathering signatures to make our schools seismically safe, not to dismantle the busing system. Neighborhood schools are going to lead to an even more segregated Berkeley. It's horrible."

Now Graham is gathering signatures to prevent the Cragmont school site committee's recommendation to build a pre-K-5 language arts magnet school at its former location in the hills. The 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake damaged both Cragmont and Columbus schools, which joined together as a K-6 at the Franklin school site in the flatlands. The kindergarten structure was deemed safe and still operates at the old hill site. Graham said the Cragmont committee has not made a good-faith effort to include Cragmont parents who live in South and West Berkeley in its decision.

"We argue that insufficient outreach was done when the committee

cized in Measure A newsletters, notes sent home with students, PTA memos, and to some extent the media.

"Something as important as that, they should have done something to catch my attention, made it pink, yellow, bold letters, something," said West Berkeley resident and Cragmont parent Sharon Shaifer. "I went back through all my papers and all it says is, 'This meeting is to develop a school configuration model for BUSD to present to the school organization task force.'"

What does that mean? It should say that if you have a child such-and-such an age who will be attending Cragmont, we're discussing rebuilding the schools and changing integration, and you will be affected."

"I'd say our meetings at Emerson were 90 percent white; there were some blacks in the group, but I don't know where they lived," Marla Wilson said.

According to Measure A facilitator Jim Masters, "with a few exceptions," his review of the racial composition of the site committees' membership looks "pretty good."

"This is exactly the right kind of problem to have," Masters said. "Now that these important issues are coming up, some of the other parents are coming into the process for the first time and expanding the debate."

But will "other parents" be given enough time to expand the debate before the Feb. 3 deadline?

After the site committees make their reports to Superintendent Steele, she is expected to forward her report to the school board in February, Chakos said, which will then make the final decision.

"We'll be seeing bulldozers in '93 for sure," Chakos said. "And as far as changing the grade configurations, we expect to see a certain