

Viewpoint

Spending Measure A funds: proceed with caution

Berkeley voters passed bond Measure A in the spring of 1992 to remedy seismic weaknesses in school buildings and to otherwise repair and improve school sites — work that has been neglected for many years.

Specific amounts of money were allotted to individual sites, some for mandatory repairs and some for discretionary physical improvements. What has instead emerged is the prospect of a total restructuring of the Berkeley School District by changing the grade configuration, methods of assigning students to schools, and busing plans that have been in place since they were instituted in 1968 to integrate our schools.

As a parent member of the Measure A Site Committees that were formed both at Malcolm X and LeConte Schools, I can report on the in-depth discussions and findings regarding both the specific issues involved and the process by which these decisions are being assessed district-wide.

We place foremost value on school integration and diversity and are concerned that in the course of implementing the considered changes, despite intentions to the contrary, integration will be lost in the shuffle. In addition, we fear that the disruption will divert constructive energy and funds, diminish the overall quality of education and cause the integrity of the district to disintegrate.

A district-wide change of grade configuration will be chaotic. The process of determining district lines and methods of assigning students to schools, implementing those assignments, physically relocating classrooms and supplies, and everything else that such changes would entail will take a tremendous amount of time, energy, resources and funds. LeConte and Malcolm X, for example, have become excellent schools as a result of years of concerted effort on the part of principals, teachers, staff and parents. Reconfiguration of grades would necessarily dismantle these teams and require the establishment of entire new communities.

The Measure A bond, by law and intent, provides neither funds nor administrative salaries for these purposes. Thus the required money and energy must necessarily come from other sources. These resources are already in dangerously short demand and should instead be directly applied to improving programs, improving schools, increasing teacher's salaries, decreasing class size, and on and on.

Each dramatic variation and expense is only justified if it corrects significant fault in the existing system. We do not find such great fault. We further feel that a mass-rearrangement would not address the current problems but would merely relocate them to new sites.

Furthermore, we feel that, in fact, the current grade configuration has an educational rationale and is working well for our children. It provides small, intimate schools for younger

students and larger schools with more resources for older students. By grouping many 4 through 6 classrooms at one site, it is possible to offer a wider range of programs for children in these grades than would be possible at individual K-5 or K-6 sites in which there are only two or three classes per grade level.

While some proponents of the K-5 model site the transition from one school to another at 4th grade as a difficult problem, this has not been the experience of the Malcolm X parents who have responded to a school-wide survey.

Of equal importance we feel that the process and the structure of the process by which we are to devise this new plan is inappropriate to the task and has been haphazard, rushed, severely limited in outreach and range of participation and discriminatory. Decisions that will take up to 10 years to implement and will remain in effect for decades to follow are being decided in the course of 2 to 3 months. The issues are unbelievably complex and both the format and the time frame do not possibly allow full consideration of their long-term and far-reaching ramifications.

Since the initial goal was to determine how to orchestrate the repairs of individual school buildings, separate "site" committees were formed. These committees have operated pretty much independently of one another, each sending a representative to the central and somewhat cumbersome Superintendent's Task Force on School Organization.

Sites that were most badly in need of this kind of work were considered top priority and those committees were launched by the school district early in the fall. The task force began meeting at this time, with members from these sites as well as individuals appointed by some principals and school board members. However, representation from Malcolm X, LeConte and several other schools did not begin until much later.

The discussions soon mushroomed into the total reevaluation of school structure, grade configuration, methods of assigning children to schools, methods of integration, etc. Concepts such as school choice, magnet schools, and others have received much discussion.

The format that was originally set in place to address physical concerns at individual school sites is not suitable to the exploration and evaluation of the broad community-wide and district-wide changes that are currently being looked at.

In late November, the Superintendent Task Force asked each school site committee to report its stand on desired school size, grade configuration and methods of integration along with some less-immediate ideas regarding "school themes," school-year calendar and several others. These discussions have taken place at each separate site without consideration for the system as a whole.

In a very brief period of time the committees were supposed to evaluate the many complex issues, make long-term decisions, develop significant outreach to the community, produce some sort of survey or means for discovering the feelings of the community and participate in the Task Force. In order to be considered in the final decision-making, the results were to be reported to the Task Force by January 5, 1993. (Only recently, this date was changed to Jan. 26).

The formation of the Malcolm X and LeConte School site committees was not encouraged or facilitated until late November, and (due to the Thanksgiving holidays) they held their first meetings in early December not long before Christmas break. By this time there already was a tremendous head of steam pushing for grade re-configuration and possibly for neighborhood schools.

We feel that throughout Berkeley there has not been adequate outreach to many sectors of the communities or involvement by those groups. The notion that "change is in the wind" is limited to the relatively small numbers of parents who have heard about and been able to participate in this process.

Some school site committees who have only recently begun a more extensive kind of outreach are finding that their ideas are not necessarily shared by the broader community. They are further finding that as parents become more informed about the complexity of the issues, many are changing their original perceptions and conclusions.

While the school board and the task force have held some community-wide workshops, these have mostly presented general educational theory and have not afforded the opportunity to evaluate how the implementation of various models will actually work here in Berkeley, California and what their effects will be.

Each time the question arises of how all this will, in fact, be funded the response is "We haven't even considered that yet." Berkeley parents are being led on a wild goose chase. Many people feel that, in the worst case, the administration has had a pre-designed agenda which it hopes to railroad via this process or, at best, that levels of expectation and entitlement have been unrealistically elevated. This kind of whirlwind often leads to imprudent conclusions.

The decisions that the school board expects to make in the next month or two are extremely premature. The input that has been received to date is not representative of many sectors of the community and this planning process must take place in a more studied and deliberate manner. We hope that all members of the community will think seriously about the issues and that the school board and superintendent not act hastily.

Liz Brown
Co-Chair Malcolm X "Measure A Site Committee"
Member, LeConte "Measure A Site Committee"