

BUSD's Steele faces the need for change

By Shannon Morgan

Leading the redesign of a major public school system isn't a matter of personal preference; it's more like driving a bus. You take the route that will get the most people to the place they need to go.

For Berkeley School Superintendent LaVoneia Steele the distinction is paramount.

"The thing I keep saying is it would be possible for someone to come in as an administrator with strong feelings one way or another and make a decision based on that. But (the redesign) shouldn't fit a person, it should fit this town and its values," Steele said, during an in-depth interview last week.

As the district simultaneously implements a \$158 million bond to rehabilitate crumbling schools while moving forward with Strategic Plan goals to improve the quality of education in Berkeley, Steele faces a monumental task in directing the district's evolution.

As plans move forward to replace or refurbish decrepit school facilities, the district also is grappling with the pledge to increase academic achievement levels among students of all races and social backgrounds.

To achieve the goal, the district is considering plans that would alter the current desegregation policy of busing students between schools to achieve a balance at all locations.

"We have opinions and feelings about what we should do that run the gamut. We try to plot a course by doing some checking with various segments of the community in various neighborhoods," Steele said, asserting that she has not taken a position on which plan the district should adopt.

"I see possible strengths and weakness to all (the plans under consideration).

"There is flexibility for people to suggest something that is not on the table, but whatever ends up at the end of the process needs to fit Berkeley and be something that will enhance education for our children," she said.

Sitting in her sweltering second

floor office in the BUSD building on Martin Luther King Jr. Way, Steele strained to make her point of view heard over the roar of diesel buses and hot wind blasting through the windows.

"I'm not sure there is another district that is doing what we are trying to do. I don't know that there



is a model (to base the process on). That's why we're picking lots of people's brains to figure out how to do it," Steel said.

Exactly how drastically district schools should change is a matter hotly contested by those involved in debate on the subject.

While an overwhelming number of voters turned out to support Measure A last summer with the promise of building better schools for children's futures, perhaps few anticipated the complexities involved.

"We've not done a good job making the connection between Measure A and the Strategic Plan. We need to do a better job so people understand" what is involved, Steele said.

"I think Berkeley is able to handle this (challenge). I don't think any other place could, because I see a set of values in this community that I think is only found here," she added.

In effort to tap public input, the district hired the communications firm Tiger and Associates (and is paying \$130,000) to concentrate

resources on the process. But the district has also drawn criticism for the decision to hire an outside contractor rather than hire full-time public information staff.

"We need some help from someone who knows how to explain things in a manner that people understand. The kind of expertise this firm has is of a level and quality we

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could not have instantly found in an individual.

"This is a critical time and we need expertise we don't have on staff. That is why I am committed to having this firm," Steele said, pledging an attempt to fill the district's vacant PR office by the start of the new school year.

In the meantime, Tiger and Associates is working with the district to set up neighborhood and house meetings later this summer in an effort to involve more people in deciding the fate of Berkeley schools.

"I've met with a group of ministers and said I want to get the word out and want to sit down and talk to people," Steele said, emphasizing that the district is relying on word of mouth and community support to foster participation.

As it stands now, those entering the debate have three scenarios to pick from.

One scenario would allow parents to choose what school their children attend, would virtually eliminate the K-3, 4-6 model and relies on strong academic programs to balance ethnic and social population.

Another option closely mirrors the above, but would allow school sites to decide what grade configuration they maintain, while the third scenario would retain the status quo system of school organization and busing practices.

The Berkeley chapter of the NAACP in a recent newsletter threatened the district with a lawsuit if it moved forward with the so-called "choice" system because

members feel it will result in a resegregation of city schools.

Steele called the charge premature.

"We can evolve into something that the NAACP and other groups can be happy with. (The NAACP) has focused on a widely held perception of what choice meant to other districts in this state. That is not what we are talking about.

"I'm certainly not willing to go backwards in time in terms of desegregation," she said.

As to how far the district has come over the last year, Steele admitted the process is slow but thinks it's on track.

"I think we've gone through a period of euphoria, where we have been ecstatic because the voters have said again they will support us.

"There has been disillusionment on the part of some people because some want this done yesterday and they want it done well in a fashion that everyone will be happy with," she said, noting that the district has to consider every possible action it takes because "this is a chance that Berkeley will never have again."

Steele hopes that one way to help the process run smoother this fall is through better staff training.

"We will have a number of days when all of us stop and learn how to work better with each other. We need to spend some time doing that, because we are role models for our children," she said.

If we have students who don't know how to learn one way we need to find another way to teach them, the superintendent said adding that she also wants to make sure that teachers learn to teach in a method that reaches students.

Overall, Steele said the importance of improving city schools is a duty unlike any other.

"Public schools offer an opportunity for all children to learn to live, work and achieve together in a setting where they are all on equal footing, whether they are academically gifted or in compensatory education.

"To me that is a beautiful value and strength you don't get in a private school.

"Our schools offer a variety of teaching methods and teachers with different strengths. I think that is important because the world doesn't always give you a person to work with that perfectly matches you. We need to work in the world as it is," Steele said.