

Carpe diem

Editor:

It's good to have the public involved in a dialogue about implementation of Measure A, but I hope the "terms of debate" can be focused on the big issues and not the small ones. It's understandable why attention is focused on what has happened with the money spent so far. When the big picture is missing what catches our eye are the nails and wires behind the empty frame.

BUSD needs help in inventing its future; that is a different process from looking at the past through a microscope. At this point in the developmental process, we should be more worried about their potential for a big act of omission rather than acts of commission. But first, a few words about the past.

In June 1992 Berkeley voters approved a \$158 million bond measure to upgrade Berkeley schools. In September 1993, BUSD reported that \$3.4 million had been spent to date to repair Berkeley Schools and \$6 million had been spent to retire Certificates of Participation. These COPs had been issued before the bond measure to pay for facility repair work. It makes good business sense to refinance that debt by using money from the bond at the bond's lower-interest rate. The School Building Advisory Committee had discussed this. The superintendent proposed this in "The Green Book" that detailed how the bond money would be used. The board approved it. It was included in the informational material before the election. The voters approved it. This was planned and now it has now been done. This is a dead horse.

The recent BUSD report _ also described on a school-by-school basis — repairs to roofs, bathrooms, playgrounds and other improvements. The School Building Advisory Committee had recommended that, in addition to working on the bricks-and-mortar of each building, repairs should be made to the playgrounds, athletic fields, fencing, parking lots and landscaping. We wanted BUSD to fix up the entire property and not just the buildings. All this fits within the intent of Measure A. I am delighted they are doing it.

BUSD knows how to manage repair work. They have many capable people who can improve the pipes and playgrounds. The important issue is not that BUSD has committed some egregious act. I don't believe they have.

The big issue is a possible act of omission. Can BUSD seize the opportunity to remake both the facilities and the programs throughout the district? Can BUSD learn how to develop and manage dramatic, large-scale improvements? The jury is still out on this. Here's an example of the kind of report I hope BUSD is able to issue in two or three years.

School A. "Teachers and their representatives say that the new technologies and organizational concepts planned for School A provide everything they need to use the latest in teaching techniques and to explore new ideas. They say that this year-round school will meet the needs of many Berkeley children and parents."

School B. "Seismologists said 'Because of the materials and techniques used here, this is one of the safest buildings in Berkeley. When the Big One hits, you will wish you were here.'"

School C. "Award-winning architects battle it out in presentations to the parent/staff/community committee that will make a recommendation to the BUSD on selection of the team that will build what BUSD calls 'a school for the 21st century.'"

School D. "The architects and contractors selected for School D jointly thanked the BUSD Board of Education '...for challenging us and encouraging us to renovate a worn-out building into the best possible facility for use by this community. The community loves this facilities capacity for 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. child care.'"

School E. "The BUSD Associate Superintendent for Instruction announced that this innovative school-without-ceilings received the Innovative Educational Program Award made by the State Association

School F. "Local business groups toured the newly

renovated School F today. The president of the Chamber of Commerce said that BUSD is on track in improvements both to facilities and programs. The variety of educational strategies offered by BUSD enable it to compete with any educational provider."

School G. "Parents, neighbors and BUSD employees were all 'wowed' by the reconstruction of School G. The BUSD Superintendent said that 'Measure A has helped us to expand the variety of educational approaches offered in BUSD. Parents can learn about our variety of educational programs from the BUSD Parent Information Center.'"

School H. "The Associate Superintendent for Business said today that 'There will be no problem in getting social service agencies here. Many of them were involved in the planning process and have already requested space. Others are hoping to get into this facility because it is the new focal point for this community.'"

I think the most effective way to achieve those kinds of outcomes is for parents and teachers together to work on a school-by-school basis, shaping a program for the children in each school. As each school refines its programs and enhances its distinctive competence, parents who like that approach will move their children to that school and will help continue that developmental process. This will take years to accomplish, and it has to be done school by school. That process is in and of itself a major part of the big picture and that process will fill in the rest of the blank spots.

There are no instantaneous, city-wide answers. The real answers are in the hearts and minds of the people who will make the new system work on a day-to-day basis. BUSD should be empowering the parents, teachers and communities around each school to engage in a developmental process. Thousand Oaks, Washington and to some extent Columbus have made some progress in creating involvement by parents and community people. It is a sad that they have had to fight tooth-and-nail to get as far as they have. BUSD should be assisting their efforts, not resisting them. However, as Professor Theodore Sizer of Brown University said "Almost all educational innovation happens in spite of the system. It happens because a group of parents and teachers and sometimes a principal get together and won't take 'no' for an answer."

There is no way to fill that empty frame except by creating a big picture that shows what will happen at each school. There is no way to know what should happen at each school except by doing a planning process at each school that involves the principal, teachers, parents, classified staff and community members.

It's *carpe diem* time, folks. BUSD has an opportunity to seize the day — and the future — and catapult BUSD into the 21st century with a world-class educational system. Will they do it? They may — if you encourage them. Go Team BUSD!

Jim Masters

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