

BRUCE

Idea Exchange Workshop on the Future of BSEP

November 18, 1993

King Library

7:15 p.m.

A report on the house meetings...

Claudia Albano/Carolyn Doelling
Fern Tiger Associates

Since April of this year, Fern Tiger Associates has been working with the District to implement a community process on Measure A and school reorganization. (Process overhead)

This process included conducting more than 50 house meetings throughout the city between September 11 and November 15. Although these meetings were organized as a way to hear the community's views on grade configuration, and other issues related to Measure A ... we also discussed broad educational values or trends ... those things parents felt were most important in creating excellent schools... such as schools within walking distance, small schools, year round schools, etc.

Those of you who attended house meetings know that many of the things we talked about are relevant to BSEP ... and that is why I am here tonight; to give you an overview of some of the views, interests and concerns of the more than 400 people who attended house meetings. Their perception on selected issues may be of interest to you as you thinking about BSEP and its renewal next year.

Approximately 90 percent of those attending house meetings had not participated in any Measure A or school reorganization process prior, such as the Superintendent's Task Force or Measure A Site committees. This is important because one of the goals of house meetings was to outreach to parents and community members who were not previously involved in order to have a broader community review of these issues.

The average house meeting lasted 2 hours, with an average attendance of 8 people, these small-intimate settings afforded us the opportunity to really hear what people had to say.

The meetings were held throughout the City and were fairly evenly distributed (overhead of map) across town as you can see on this map. The number of participants that represent people of color was about 30%. Twenty-three of the fifty-three meeting were held at homes in South or West Berkeley. 14 meetings were held in the hills, and the remainder were located in the central area. 3 meetings were facilitated in Spanish so

FERN TIGER ASSOCIATES

parents with limited English speaking capability would be able to participate. We also had meetings with private school parents and parents of pre school children, to hear their concerns as well.

In summarizing the findings, I would like to acknowledge that they are qualitative rather than quantitative... but perhaps providing a "heart" that is difficult to portray with abstract numerical survey data. Quantitative data is obviously important, but this information, I believe, is also valuable... because it speaks to the interest and need people have to have a voice, to express their concerns, and to feel that their concerns and being heard, acknowledged and responded to...

I would like to introduce Carolyn Doelling, a member of our staff, and a parent at Emerson school, (who has facilitated more than 25 house meetings) who will give you a brief overview of a typical house meeting.

(Presentation by Carolyn.)

Now to the findings:

As Carolyn mentioned, participants were given 14 cardboard strips and were asked to select independently 5 trends or values they felt best reflected their educational priorities.

The items that ranked in the top five educational priorities most frequently were: **(overhead)**

- 1. Enrichment programs**
- 2. Racial and ethnic balance**
- 3. Site based before and after school child care**
- 4. Grade structures that allow students to progress at their own rate, and**
- 5. Schools as community centers with social services attached or adjacent**

But although these are the top-ranked characteristics parents most often chose, they also brought up--on their own--issues they feel even more strongly about. Those issues are quality education and safety. By quality education I mean high academic standards and challenging programs. Public school parents say they wrestle with these two issues almost on a daily basis. Their decision to stay in public schools hinges on their own child's experience...which often boils down to a particular teacher...and their perception of the learning environment. These same two issues--quality education and safety-- were cited most frequently as the reason private school parents either leave the public school system or never give it a chance.

Enrichment programs:

Enrichment programs were defined as those classes and programs that are not part of the core curriculum such as art, music, performing arts, computer labs, science labs, field trips....

FERN TIGER ASSOCIATES

At house meetings where there were more active parents present, the desire to maintain and increase enrichment programs was strong. Their knowledge of BSEP and enrichment programs, however, was generally limited to what they knew was going on at their school site. They were clear about wanting to keep the enrichment programs they have, if not increase them, and only a few were aware that BSEP funds go toward class size reduction..

Parents felt that classes and programs that they had as part of the core curriculum when they were in school were considered "enrichment" now. Parents who were familiar with BSEP felt BSEP was the only "hedge" Berkeley has against reducing its "core" program even more.

More active parents were concerned about the renewal of BSEP and felt voters may be disenchanted with public education and not vote for the renewal of the bond as a way to express their frustration. Both public and private school parents, voiced their concern about continuing to spending their tax dollars on a school system, which they believe, is not as effective as it could be.

At meetings with less involved parents, many participants were not aware that there were enrichment programs in Berkeley, or were **unclear** about **what** they were and **how they were offered**. This was also true of private school and pre school parents.

There was a lack of understanding across the board about the scope of enrichment programs offered in Berkeley and about what exactly BSEP pays for.

Racial and ethnic balance:

Here is a comment from a house meeting participant that I think best expresses their feeling on this issue:

"The District needs to figure out ways to get parents involved in education and address integration personally, programmatically...integration isn't just a matter of setting zones or having a structure, any structure can put people of different colors together, but without a real effort to get people to interact and learn about each other integration won't take place."

It was clear that parents in Berkeley have a commitment to racial and ethnic balance, however, they were less committed to a defined goal of +/-5%, or +/-10% for that matter. They were more concerned about academic parity across racial lines, understanding that there is a strong correlation between race and socio-economic levels .

Berkeley schools currently have some degree of desegregation which parents value, but what parents want more of, regardless of which system the District ultimately goes with, is a commitment to better integrating our children in the classrooms, on the playground, and at the school sites.

FERN TIGER ASSOCIATES

Parents felt that integration was one of the most important things we could address, ... as one parent put it **"Integration is important because it keeps the bottom of our society from falling out"**.

Site-based before and after school child care:

Participants acknowledged the increasing need for before and after school child care and their desire to have it at the school site. This addresses the need for both pre school care as well as before and after school programs for school age children. Given the complexity of their lives, with the increasing numbers of single parents or working parents, it is a necessary convenience and means one less transition for children each day if the services are offered consistently throughout the District and on site.

At a recent house meeting with pre school parents who are in the process of making a decision about sending their children to public or private school next year... they expressed concern that the public school to which they are zoned does not have any after school program or child care after the school day ends. Consequently, as working parents, this gives them little choice because many private schools offer child care until 6 pm. If BUSD had more and better publicized preschool programs it would motivate parents to continue to send their children to public schools.

Grade structures which allow students to progress at their own rate:

As one parent put it, **"Grade structures which allow students to progress at their own rate means everyone can have their educational needs met.. the fast kids and the slow kids, and everyone in between. There are such differences in achievement levels in the classroom that it's hard for all the kids to learn."**

The discussion around this value often evolved into a discussion of how teachers can effectively teach kids of various achievement levels in one classroom. Parents felt teachers have no choice but to teach to the lowest common denominator ... leaving many average and above average students less challenged. As tracking is eliminated (which many parents did not like), parents felt allowing students to progress at their own rate is the **only** way for all students' needs to be met.

The subject of disruptive children and the impact they have on the classroom also came up frequently... and parents feel frustrated at the public school's inability to deal effectively with this problem.

Schools as community centers with social services attached or adjacent:

As one participant said, **"Look...society is dysfunctional..that's why we need schools as community centers. If we don't address the social needs of families, the classroom will deteriorate too.. the classroom reflects the world outside, .. and to the extent children are having difficulties at home it comes into the classroom."**

FERN TIGER ASSOCIATES

Parents passionately about the changing needs of parents... and the complexities of our society and how schools, as institutions in the community, could be an incredible resource to help address some of the problems we are facing. Schools are being challenged to redefine what they are and the types of services they provide.. because it ultimately impacts their ability to deliver education. It is very difficult for a teacher to deal with a microcosm of society's ills in his/her classroom, and teach effectively at the same time.

With schools as community centers, providing child care, before and after school programs, adult education and social services the school becomes a focal point in neighborhood, bringing a variety of programs and services together in one place. Many participants felt if schools were open in the evening for classes or recreation programs it would also cut down on crime and vandalism of school buildings.

Parents also felt having social and community services on site is a way to get more parents involved. If social services, or adult education or recreation would bring parents to the school it would begin to positively effect their child's education.

Several other topics came up which I would like to mention: **Lower pupil/adult ratio in the classroom.**

"Classroom size is an issue. When classrooms are too large, teaching turns into nothing more than custodial or traffic control."

Parents at first talked about lower student/teacher ratio, but the longer discussion went on the more they spoke about the needs for more adults in the classroom to help free-up the teacher to work with different groups of kids. Parents wanted more aides, more volunteers, as a way for the teacher to get time to address the different ability levels in the classroom.

The importance of **parent participation** also came up frequently. Parents acknowledge that the more they are involved the better their children do... so coming up with strategies to increase parent participation and to communicate to parents about what is going on in the schools needs to be a priority. One parent said: **"The District needs to advise parents of parent involvement opportunities and how it helps to improve their child's education.. Not just going to PTA meetings, but actually getting involved in the education of their child at home."**

Other issues such as **building maintenance; clean, working bathrooms, and windows that open**, came up consistantly.

Parents also said the district needs to **market** to the community it serves, to communicate with parents about the programs the District has to offer, and to institute a program that reaches out to pre-school parents.

Parents absolutely **support** anything that will help teachers do a better job and meet the

FERN TIGER ASSOCIATES

challenges their jobs pose. They want to see teachers having the supplies, resources, and classroom help they need to make education work in Berkeley. They often spoke of how teachers spend their own money to pay for field trips or supplies, etc.

"If a teacher's needs are being met it will affect their attitude and the attitude of the kids. It's all related."

"The school is as good as the teacher is that year, so do everything you can to help the teachers."

"Teachers are the most important factor in a child's education. They need more training, and more support ."

Parents were also concerned about **teacher burn-out**, and how stress and lack of support can impact creativity and originality. Parents wanted programs that help teachers address these issues...

Berkeley parents are great, they are passionate and involved and care about quality education in Berkeley. They want direction and leadership about how to best use their time. They have high expectations from the Board and from the Administration, and they expect creative solutions to the complex problems we face. In planning for BSEP you have an excellent opportunity to shape the future, and help restore confidence in Berkeley's public schools.