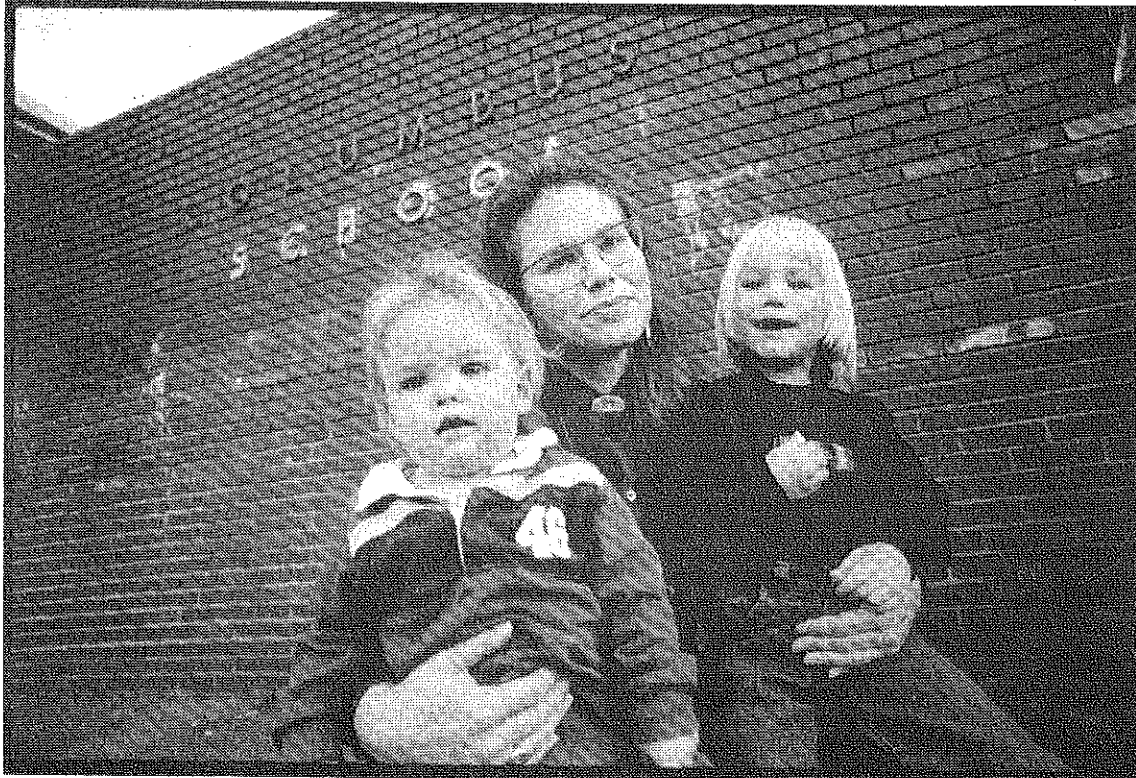


CITYSIDE



Kristin Prentice with Rowan (l) and Alexander (r)

By Chris Duffey

children to the schools based on both parental preference and racial balance. In theory the computer will ensure that every school reflects the district's overall racial makeup.

The plan is a departure from the current integration strategy in which schools in the predominantly white hills areas are paired with ones in the flatlands. Children from the flats are now bused to the hills for kindergarten through third grade and children from the hills are bused to the flats for grades four through six. The chief rationale for switching to the new system has been that a majority of parents, teachers, and administrators feel that it is better for children to stay in one school for grades K through five than to switch schools after third grade. School principals have argued that fewer transitions mean more stability for children and more involvement from parents.

Parents have said that under the current system, they find themselves torn between the school attended by an older child and the one attended by a younger one. "It's hard to have an emotional commitment to two different groups of teachers," Cragmont parent Susan O'Donnell commented at the December 15 public hearing.

Once it became clear that most people wanted to switch to K-through-five schools, the trick was to figure out how such schools could be integrated. The computerized choice system was the only fair integration method anyone could come up with. Some parents have argued that they feel the new choice system will offer more educational variety and promote more of a commitment or "buy-in" from parents, but others worry that that choice will end up being divisive. "It's going to be a beauty contest among schools," says Clío Terazi, co-chair of the Malcolm X PTA. "There will be winners and losers, good schools and bad schools, and it will be based on hearsay, rumors, and prejudice, which is

Berkeley Decides on a School Reconfiguration Plan (Maybe)

"I think it's important that we send a message to the community that we are in fact leaning in a direction."

By Dashka Slater

Two weeks ago, as the final public hearing on the reconfiguration of the Berkeley schools was winding up, City Councilmember Maudelle Shirek took over the microphone to give a stirring speech about her girlhood attending segregated schools in Arkansas. Like many of Shirek's speeches, this one was long on principles and short on particulars, but it ended on an unexpectedly salient note. "Take some leadership!" Shirek shouted to the board. "Somebody up there, please: Take some leadership!"

Shirek was admonishing the board not to make a decision that she felt would reverse the district's 25-year commitment to integrated schools, but her

plea for a show of some kind of leadership from the School Board would probably have been endorsed by just about everybody in the audience, whether or not they shared Shirek's distrust of the new school-organization plan the board ended up endorsing. Leadership has been conspicuously absent from the entire school reorganizing planning process and although the board has finally made what could technically be called a decision, it was one so riddled with caveats and qualifiers that it barely merits the term. "I think it's important that we send a message to the community that we are in fact leaning in a direction," School Boardmember Pamela Doolan commented shortly before the December 15 vote. After a year

and three months of meetings, workshops, and discussions, the fact that "leaning in a direction" was seen as a forceful move shows just how badly leadership was needed.

The plan that the board tentatively endorsed was the one put forward by school superintendent LaVoneia Steele the week before. Scheduled to start in September 1995, the superintendent's plan divides the city into three zones that run from the hills to the bay. Each zone will contain three elementary schools for grades K through five and one middle school for grades six through eight. Parents will be asked to choose which of the schools in their zone they want their children to attend and a district computer will then assign

Schools

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how people choose their schools."

Berkeley first began considering a choice system in September 1992, when the school district convened a School Organization Task Force made up of parents, teachers, administrators, and community members (see "The Integration Calypso," April 30, 1993). The passage of Measure A, a \$158-million-dollar bond measure, meant that the school district had the money to rebuild or repair most of its schools and it seemed like a good idea to figure out what kids would be in which schools before the construction began. In February, the task force recommended converting to a K-through-five grade configuration with citywide (rather than zoned) controlled choice.

The recommendation was greeted with cries of alarm from parents who had not known that changes were even being contemplated, and in June the district decided to start the decision-making process all over again, this time with participation from a greater cross-section of the community. The district hired Fern Tiger Associates, a community-relations consulting firm, to conduct some sixty neighborhood "house meetings," in addition to three citywide workshops and two round-table discussions with School Board members. All of this was supposed to lead to a gradual refinement of the options, and a communitywide discussion of the pros and cons of each.

The catch was that meaningful discussion was impossible without some information about what the different plans would cost and how they would actually work. In June, Superintendent Steele

promised the School Board that over the summer her staff would come up with "quantifiable impacts of adjustment to school assignment zones... actual implementation cost figures, anticipated transportation, and other resource needs for any of these models that we examine." This data would be available for the communitywide discussions in the fall, she promised.

But most of this information never materialized. "We've had so many scenarios, we simply didn't have the staff time to get into that level of detail," Steele says now. As a result, the discussion about what to do has been conducted in an atmosphere of amorphous conjecture. There are still no concrete cost figures for the new zoned choice arrangement, aside from the superintendent's assurance that it won't be much more expensive than the current system. No one knows how many parents will get their first choice of schools, or how much it will cost to create the special programs necessary to entice parents out of their immediate neighborhoods. There are no estimates of the cost of the transition, nor is there any sense of how the new busing system will work. "You cannot make a decision without knowing all the facts," South Berkeley resident Jerry Wiggins admonished the board before its December 15 vote. "I make grants for the federal government and I don't tell people, 'Here's the money, get me the application later.'"

Boardmembers Pedro Noguera, Irene Hegarty, and Miriam Topel seemed to agree that they didn't have enough information, and each one prefaced his or her vote with a list of unanswered questions. But it seemed that the only way to get any more information was to plunge ahead, and so the boardmembers gritted their teeth and voted unanimously to go ahead with the superintendent's plan. The only ones who seemed sanguine about their decision were Pamela Doolan and Elizabeth Shaughnessy, both of whom have liked the idea of choice from the start. "We know in Berkeley you're never going to please everyone. We have to make a decision and move on," Shaughnessy said, noting that the superintendent's zoned choice proposal was itself a compromised version of the school organization task force's original citywide choice proposal. (Superintendent Steele has argued that zoned choice will cost less and be easier to manage than citywide choice.) But if Shaughnessy and Doolan seemed happy to have made a decision at last, the other boardmembers looked as if they had just finished a very unpleasant and possibly undercooked meal. "I know there are some people who are eager to get started, but where we're not absolutely sure, let's give it some time and give it some planning," a still doubtful Irene Hegarty warned.

Probably the most important unanswered question about the new system is whether West Berkeley schools like Malcolm X and Columbus will be able to attract white students from the hills. Currently many hills parents pull their kids out of the system when it's time for them to start attending flatlands schools; altogether, an estimated forty to sixty percent of hills children attend private schools, compared to about fifteen percent in the flatlands. "The whole point of choice is so that white people never have to go to school in the ghetto," says Kristin Prentice, a West Berkeley parent and the chair

of the Columbus school site committee. Prentice and many others have argued that, under the new system, hills parents will request hills schools and if they are assigned to the flatlands they will simply opt for private schools instead. "Schools in so-called undesirable or unattractive neighborhoods need to be one hundred percent better to even be considered a choice for those living in other parts of town," she says. And if white parents refuse to send their kids to the flatlands schools, integration will become a pipe dream.

Superintendent Steele has said that the new plan will be more equitable because both hills and flatlands children will share the burden of being bused during the early grades. With two new elementary schools in the flatlands (Columbus and Malcolm X), more African-American students will be able to go to school close to home, he argues, estimating that fifty percent of flatlands kids will not be bused at all under the new system. But Prentice and other flatlands parents are skeptical, and their skepticism can be summed up in one word: pragmatism. Although the board is yet to make an official

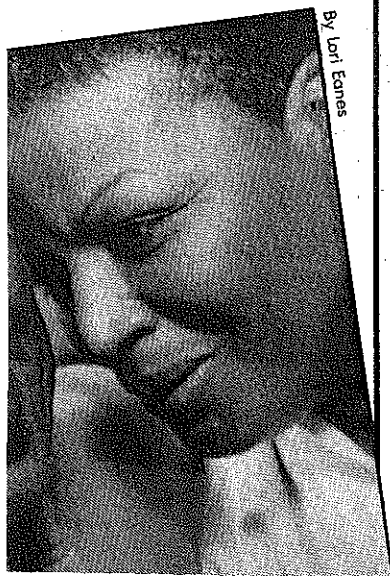
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decision, the new plan assumes that the earthquake-damaged Cragmont elementary school will be rebuilt. Located in the outer reaches of the North Berkeley hills, Cragmont is so close to the Hayward Fault that it was originally thought to be an unbuildable site, so the Measure A bond did not include any funds to rebuild it. During the past year Cragmont parents have waged a vigorous campaign to get the school rebuilt and now it seems they will get their way—at a cost of about \$8.5 million.

Hills parents have portrayed the plan as one of fairness, arguing that their region pays the bulk of the city's property tax and deserves a school at its altitude. If fairness is the issue as quid pro quo, the Cragmont parents have a point. Considering that many hills parents don't even send their children to Berkeley public

schools, they have been remarkably willing to support special public-school tax initiatives like Measure A and the Berkeley Schools Enrichment Project (BSEP), which pays for smaller class sizes as well as arts, computer, and sports programs. It could

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ches CONNECTION.



By Lori Eanes

configuration. They argue that the district should build on what is already working instead of throwing the entire system into upheaval. An oft-cited example of what's currently working is Malcolm X, a fourth-through-sixth-grade school that has become the pride of the flatlands. The school's music and theater programs are well known throughout the district, and parents are afraid that the school's programs and cohesion will be destroyed when it becomes a K-through-five school. "Can't we keep what is working well in our zone?" Malcolm X parent Rosemary Richie DeSerio pleaded before the board. "Our programs at Malcolm X... are bringing

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be argued that they deserve something in return. On the other hand, if fairness means the greatest good for the greatest number, rebuilding Cragmont is almost certainly not fair. Two thirds of the children who attend Berkeley schools live west of Martin Luther King Jr. Way, as do the vast majority of black and Latino kids. That these children will have to be bused up to the hills to integrate Cragmont is what flatlands parents find so galling. "They're building the school in the hills that we need in the flatlands and then they're going to bus us up there to fill it up," Prentice says.

Because funding for the Berkeley Schools Enrichment Project is up for renewal in the next election, hills parents will almost certainly get their school. The tax needs a two-thirds majority to pass, and since hills precincts vote in higher numbers than any other district in the city, School Board members are unwilling to annoy hillside voters. But the rebuilding of Cragmont is a bitter pill for many in the flatlands to swallow. The teachers at LeConte school, for instance, voted to endorse the concept of zoned choice only on the condition that Cragmont not be rebuilt.

Feared that the new system will only compound existing inequities, many flatlands parents have advocated staying with a modified version of the current paired schools

meeting and attached her support of the superintendent's plan to a long list of provisos, including a commitment to preserve Malcolm X's programs and a provision that the plan would only be implemented to the extent that the district could afford it. "I would be willing tonight to support a plan that keeps the current configuration, but I haven't been able to convince any of my colleagues," she said before voting.

Topel's provisos joined an already long list of caveats and contingencies from Hegarty and Noguera, including a requirement that the new system be implemented in phases and evaluated at every

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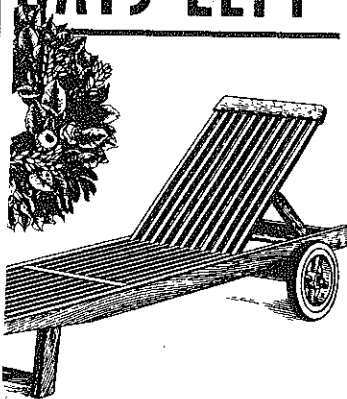
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