

Integration Phase-Out In Berkeley

Schools, neighborhoods
prepare for end of system

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Berkeley, a pioneer when it integrated its classrooms 26 years ago, is embarking on another landmark overhaul of its schools that has highlighted the perpetual rivalry between the city's flatlands and the hills.

Next year, Berkeley will scrap the integration plan that garnered the city national attention in 1968 because of its innovative solution to busing. Then, Berkeley chose to share the busing burden between the races and their neighborhoods — between the hills and the flats. In the early days of integration, busing typically consisted of sending black children on long bus rides to strange, white neighborhoods.

Next school year, Berkeley's two-way busing will be phased out. Parents for the first time will be allowed some choice in where their children go to school. Students also will no longer automatically change schools after third grade, a technique used to help the racial balance. Eventually, all elementary schools will be K-5, rather than K-3 and grades 4-6.

"Yes, the new plan is risky," said school board member Miriam Topel. "Its success is based on the idea that some people voluntarily will choose schools outside their immediate neighborhood."

Already, some people in the neighborhoods say they feel cheated, that their schools are being treated as stepchildren. They claim that their children will face more chaos and disruption during the transition. The school board is asking the community to give the new plan a chance.

"We are trying to make this as fair as possible," said board member Lloyd Lee. "I am personally committed to creating a system where people with the inside track no longer can easily manipulate the system as they have in the past."

The schools have been divided into three elementary attendance zones that each encompass hills and flatlands neighborhoods. Parents will be asked to pick an elementary school from the zone where they live by February 15, but not everyone will receive their first choice. Unhappy families could result when some inevitably are assigned schools by March because of space limitations and to achieve racial balance.

Eventually, the city will have

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three middle schools, grades 6-8, instead of two junior highs, grades 7-8, as it does now.

However, the middle school change is being phased in more slowly because of the severe disruption to Longfellow, a grade 4-6 school that must create a new arts and technology middle school in less than a year. Next year, Longfellow will serve grades 5-7, and the existing junior highs, King and Willard, will serve students in grades 6-8.

"Our challenge is to make sure the schools some perceive as less desirable because of their location will have something special to offer," Topel said. "They will each have to be distinctive enough to motivate people to leave their neighborhood."

In the past, many of Berkeley's white residents have been reluctant to do that.

Under the dying system, Berkeley divided its schools into a K-3 and grade 4-6 system with paired attendance zones. That meant every school had both flatlands and hills children. In the early years, children from minority neighborhoods were bused into schools located in white neighborhoods. At fourth grade, the situation reversed, and it was the white children's turn to spend time on a bus for the next three years.

The problem was that many of the white families pulled out of public schools at fourth grade. The white exodus destroyed racial balance in many grade 4-6 classrooms.

The historical dip in white enrollment at the fourth grade has diminished in recent years. In the 1989-90 school year, 83 percent of the district's third-graders went on to fourth grade and the majority who left the schools were white. By 1993-94, 95 percent of the previous year's third-graders stayed in the public schools when it was their turn to go to the flatlands.

"I don't think people have been paying enough attention to this turnaround in the last three years or so," said Bruce Wicinas, a south Berkeley parent who has done extensive demographics analysis for the school district. "I really hope the fear of white flight is not driving these decisions."

The school board contends its primary motivation is to create a uniform K-5 elementary and a grade 6-8 middle school organization for educational reasons, they say.

Most of the community agrees the old organization was disruptive for students because of the mandatory elementary school transfer at third grade. It also discouraged parent participation, which is tied to academic success.

Parents with more than one child in elementary school often had to juggle PTA meetings and other volunteer duties among different schools. This was especially hard on low-income parents without cars. For example, some southwest Berkeley parents have to change buses three times and still face a steep walk before they reach Oxford School in the hills.

"There's that old attitude of telling the minority people we'll force you to come up the hill if you want integration," said Joe Brulenski, a second- and third-grade teacher at Oxford. Despite Berkeley's reputation for political correctness, racial prejudice and class divisions persist.

"I have seen it firsthand," said Anita Baker, a kindergarten teacher at Oxford.

Baker, who is black, said she has been stopped as she walked to her car at night in the hills near Oxford and asked by a white resident, "Whose house do you work in?"

"That shows how some people think," said Baker. "We are all cleaning ladies."

A vocal pocket of opposition to

the new plan has developed in the community associated with Longfellow School, a grade 4-6 school in the flatlands. The opposition group includes hills parents whose children go to Oxford, a K-3 school that fed into Longfellow under the old system.

The Longfellow parents had lobbied to make their school an elementary school or a K-8 school under the new plan. They pointed to the huge concentration of children in the southwest Berkeley neighborhood surrounding their school.

Instead, Longfellow was chosen as the site of the city's third middle school. The Longfellow parents believe they lost because the school board voted to rebuild Cragmont Elementary School next to the Hayward fault in the hills, which has been closed since after the earthquake. Cragmont parents, too, heavily lobbied the school board. They pointed out that their neighborhood had received more than its fair share of school closings over the years.

"I call this new plan the white hills power plan," said Peggy Seals, a white mother who lives in the hills by Oxford, but who is co-chairman of the Longfellow PTA. Her husband, Michael Seals, who is black, unsuccessfully ran for the school board last month on a platform that criticized the new plan. "You have a school board from the hills now."

Topel, one of the candidates who defeated Seals, pointed out that she carried an overwhelming percentage of precincts.

"I was elected by the whole city," Topel said. "I am leery of district elections because then there is a tendency to be concerned just about that area. I think a school board has to look at the big picture for all the city and that is what I try to do."

"In Berkeley, there is no answer that will make everyone happy."