

Must Be Meticulously Planned

Berkeley - Public Schools restructuring

MAR 3 1989

By JoAnn Mar

The Berkeley Board of Education held its first public workshop last Wednesday on the possibility of switching to a school choice system. Several board directors and parents asked probing questions and expressed skepticism about the Superintendent's Task Force's recent recommendation to adopt a "controlled system of choice"



Dr. Pedro Noguera

that adheres to desegregation guidelines.

"It sounds like to do this would cost a lot of money, which we don't presently have in our budget," said Board President Pedro Noguera, "There would (have to) be some office created to control this process to determine where kids go to school."

Evans Clinchy, a desegregation consultant with

the Institute for Responsive Education in Boston, told the board that a combination of controlled choice and magnet schools is a popular way of achieving integration.

However, Clinchy cautioned that a change to a choice system could not be completed in a few short years. "It takes an enormous amount of planning to do it properly," he said, "If you are going to have every school become a magnet school, you have to find out what kinds of magnet schools, what kinds of educational programs parents want and teachers are going to supply."

In a 1989 article he wrote on school choice, Clinchy warned that "choice instituted in a hasty, ill-conceived fashion can easily turn out to be no choice at all: a charade and even a hoax, a pseudo-innovation that produces no significant change."

In his presentation to the board, Clinchy cited public schools in Lowell, Massachusetts and East Harlem as having successful choice systems in place. He said that there was enormous parent and teacher satisfaction. "People returned to the public school system from the private and parochial schools," said Clinchy, "People from the suburbs came into the city schools, which reversed the white flight that had gone on. Academic achievement has gone up."

Board President Noguera said that he envisions widespread parental dissatisfaction, if Berkeley adopts a choice system. "To have integrated schools, we won't be able to give everybody their choice," he said, "Instead of satisfied people, we could end up with a lot of dissatisfied people. I'm imagining a case where a whole lot of people would be unhappy and want to leave (the public schools)."

Clinchy assured Noguera that parents have not fled en masse



Supt. LaVoneia Steele

put money into anything, we ought to put most of the money into the curriculum."

Board Director Miriam Topel suggested that the goals of racial balance and school autonomy could be accomplished without changing to a choice system. "If you give power to the site to develop the program that it's most interested in, that would make people as happy as they could be," said Topel.

School Superintendent LaVoneia Steele attempted to allay fears that school reorganization would take place any time soon. "I know there might be some anxiety about what's going to happen in September," said Steele, "I do not plan to make recommendations that this be put in place for September. It's impossible."

Steele added that in the end, she might not endorse all of the task force's recommendations. "How much is it going to cost? How long is it going to take? How many kids do we have to transport?" she asked, "There are hundreds of questions that have to be answered first."

Steele invited the public to respond with its comments, criticisms, and suggestions. "I want you to help us," she said, "After we've had a month of public discussion, my staff and I need to listen and make some recommendations for the board

because of choice. "About 85 percent get their first or second choice," he said. Parent Toni McCoy that you have. We need to get the word out and have a lot of reorganization. "We're going to discussion and dialogue."