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Berkeley School Board Defers Decision on Integration Plans

Will launch an ambitious outreach effort to reach flatlanders

By Bill O'Brien

School activists in Berkeley say that they are generally pleased with a report from Superintendent LaVoneia Steele outlining options for the district's future. The real problems, however, will come later this year, as the deadline nears for making a final decision on instituting major changes in the system. Steele's report is the latest development in the debate over how Berkeley is going to improve the quality of its schools while maintaining its commitment to integration.

After the passage in June 1992 of Proposition A, a \$158 million bond issue for school rebuilding and repair, the district convened the School Organization Task Force (SOTF), made up of a mix of administrators, teachers, community members, and parents. Each of the district's schools was also asked to form a "site committee," from which representatives were appointed to work with the district-wide task force. (See "The Integration Calypso," April 30, 1993.) The purpose of all this activity was to decide, before the rebuilding project began, whether the district's integration plan was working, or whether adjustments in the thirty-year-old scheme were necessary.

In February, the SOTF released a set of recommendations, a number of which were reflected in Steele's report. Task force member Burt Levy has concerns about some of the superintendent's conclusions,

Steele presents three options, giving the pros and cons of each one. The first is to continue with the current system, which has divided the city into zones running from the hills to the flats. Children in each zone go to a school in the hills from kindergarten through third grade, and transfer to one in the flats for grades four through six. This system, she notes, has achieved "some degree of social integration" and distributed the burden of busing among all students equally. Continuing with this plan could be cheaper than the alternatives, she notes, and would avoid the "chaos and expense of change."

An alternative would be to reconfigure the schools so that elementary schools would take students from kindergarten through the sixth grade, then transfer them to middle schools. With this option, a system of "controlled choice" would be instituted, under which parents would be able to indicate which school they would like their children to attend. This would allow for the introduction of different teaching styles to accommodate students' needs, and certain schools could concentrate on particular academic subjects. The problem, Steele says, is the application process could be "chaotic and

frustrating," resulting in better informed parents being the ones actually getting first choice, and those more unfamiliar with the process getting the leftovers. Administrative and possibly transportation costs would also go up.

The third option is something of a hybrid. Some schools would stay as they are now, while others would take students up through the fifth or sixth grade. This plan, says Steele, "supports the expressed desires of the majority of people" at the site committee meetings, and could allow parents to choose the grade configuration of their school. This would mean, however, that students would be entering middle school at different grade levels.

Steele's report diagrams an extensive outreach program that the district plans to use before choosing between these options. There have been complaints from parents, especially in the flatlands, that they didn't understand, or weren't informed about the process. The district has hired a consultant to help organize a series of small public meetings to be held during the summer and fall in churches, community centers, and homes throughout the city. The meetings will be conducted

by trained facilitators, and, Steele promises, materials that are "readable, concise, and informative" will be available. Late in September, there will also be three larger, "townhall" gatherings. The school board aims to make a decision in December.

Noguera calls this education effort "a bit ambitious," but he supports it, saying that the city needs to have "as many meetings and as many discussions in as many places as possible," to reach the broadest audience.

Victor Kley, a task force member representing Cragmont School, thinks that it will be a difficult task. "We had a hell of a time attracting anybody to the meetings in the flats." He says that, as a result, lower-income and minority communities weren't well enough represented.

But there's a lot of criticism that the process has been going too slowly. Burt Levy, for one,

of the breath of God,
unimaginable terrors whiz by
Berkeley tenants in the
darkness of the "Citizens for
Fair Rent Control"-dominated
Rent Board, sometimes missing,
sometimes circling for another
orbit and a chance at a more
direct hit. The latest near-miss
was the abolition of "just
cause" eviction procedures, the
thin bulwark allowing tenants to
exercise their rights without
fear of immediate homelessness.

Motorol

doesn't think the additional
meetings will do much good.
He believes that there was ade-
quate outreach. "You couldn't
open your mail or look at a wall
without seeing information
about the process. I think
everybody had every possible
opportunity to participate." Ac-
tivists caution that the meetings
must be well organized. Kley
says that the early task force
sessions were often "chaotic."
Noguera adds, "There are a lot
of people in the community
who don't realize the weight of
the implications [of the de-
cisions]."

Ultimately, it will be the school
board's call. No matter how