

BACK TO SCHOOL BATTLES IN BERKELEY

Angry Flatlanders Look to the Hills

Columbus School parents and neighbors believe they were robbed to pay for rebuilding Cragmont in the Berkeley Hills

By Dashka Slater

Perched at opposite poles of the city of Berkeley, Cragmont and Columbus elementary schools have long had a peculiar relationship. For more than two decades, ever since Berkeley schools were first desegregated in 1968, children from the flatlands neighborhood around Columbus were bussed up to Cragmont from kindergarten to third grade and children from the hills neighborhood surrounding Cragmont were bussed down to Columbus for grades four through six. Then, in 1991, both schools were found to be seismically unsafe and began sharing temporary quarters at the mothballed Franklin School site.

But whether the two schools were holding down the easternmost and westernmost edges of the school district or operating cheek by jowl at Franklin, Columbus parents have tended to see their massive, bunkerlike school as Cinderella and scenic, woodsy Cragmont as the more fortunate stepsister. "They use us down

here as a dumping ground and think we're going to take it," says Alice Frazier, a former instructional assistant at the Columbus Child Development Center. Now, as the Berkeley Unified School District finalizes its plans for spending a \$158 million bond issue for the repair, rehabilitation, and seismic upgrading of Berkeley schools, the relationship between Cragmont and Columbus has once again been thrown into sharp relief.

At the time the bond issue known as Measure A was drafted, the Cragmont site was considered to be unbuildable because of its proximity to the Hayward Fault. For that reason, no money for rebuilding the school was included in the measure. Since then engineers have come up with a plan for building on the site and last month, after more than a year of intensive lobbying by Cragmont parents, the Berkeley school board voted unanimously to pare down the allocations for various other rehabilitation projects in the district, thereby creating a \$9.5 million pot of

Buildings



Columbus CDC teachers Connie Murphy, Molly Martin, Joyce Archibald, and Jessica Mori

Measure A money for the rebuilding of Cragmont. At the same meeting, the board sharply abridged the amount of space that a rebuilt Columbus would have for special programs, whittling the school's construction budget from about \$9.7 million to roughly \$8.7 million.

"I know that the Columbus people feel that the decisions were connected, but I feel those decisions stand alone," says school board member Miriam Topel. "The money that was taken away from places to rebuild Cragmont did not come

from Columbus, it came from the high school and the non-K-12 schools and the administration building." Be that as it may, the timing of the two decisions has rankled Columbus parents. "People were just furious. They just couldn't believe it," says Kristin Prentice, chair of the Columbus site committee.

One reason Columbus parents felt so betrayed was that they were under the impression that the school board had promised them extra money for their new school. Last December, the school board endorsed a new integration plan for Berkeley elementary schools which divides the city into three zones and allows parents to send their children to any of the three or four K-5 schools in their zone (provided that their choice

new Columbus School will be something that the whole West Berkeley community can be proud of. Figuring that a top-notch science program would draw middle-class families into the school at the same time that it would provide working class children with solid employment skills, the committee decided to create a science and technology program with the help of local biotech firms like Miles Cutter. In addition, the site committee decided to make the new Columbus a resource for the entire neighborhood by providing social services like job training, English classes, welfare applications, and counseling on site. To accommodate the on-site services, the school's architect designed a building with an outer hub of social services

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ragmont

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cial services. "The basic state standard [for school size] does not include room for social services—that's icing on the cake," says Arturo Taboada, the district's director of capital projects. "As a K-5 school, Columbus would not be set up for [job-training programs like] carpentry classes or computer training. Because not far away they have the adult school."

The site committee had asked that the new school have an extra 1,500 square feet for the social services program, plus 500 square feet for an after-school program, 1,400 square feet for two half-sized science rooms, and 4,200 square feet for three preschool classrooms. What they got was one 960-square-foot science classroom plus an extra 500 square feet to use however they wish. "So now the architects are getting their erasers out and erasing about one-third of the building," says Prentice. "I think the school board really thinks they're going to have an after-school program and social services in the space they've given us, but there's just not enough room. We're going to have to make some tough choices."

School board member Pamela Doolan says that Columbus should be happy with what it has. "Extra space was allocated—it wasn't as much as they wanted, but there was extra space," she says. "I think [Columbus] is an excellent place for social services and I assume that's what they'll use their extra space for." Doolan says that when the board promised extra resources to the flatlands schools it never said anything

about Measure A money. "Extra resources, that could be all kinds of things—it could be teacher selection, number of students in the class," she says. "I don't think the Columbus site will be any less attractive than any other [school site]. Just by virtue of being a new school, that will be an attraction."

Space is a precious commodity in modern schools because they are being built so much smaller than the schools of the past. The new Columbus will house 450 kids, but it will be the same size as Berkeley's John Muir school, which only holds 300. Gone are the corridors where teachers used to hang bulletin boards to show off their students' work, and the cafeterias and auditoriums of old have been combined into a multipurpose "cafetorium." The idea, Taboada says, is to "maximize classroom space and minimize noneducational space," thus saving on construction and maintenance costs.

The district's desire to get the most bang for its facilities buck has led to a policy mandating that all new schools, including Cragmont, Columbus, and Thousand Oaks, be built for a minimum of 450 children. But since fewer hills children attend public schools, only about 300 children are slated for the new Cragmont—leaving the school with five or six empty classrooms that teachers and administrators can use how they like. Cragmont parents have argued that the empty classrooms will fill up quickly as wealthy parents are lured back into the public schools by the spanking new facilities and the ability to choose among a variety of school sites. But many flatlands parents say that the kids who will end up filling Cragmont's empty classrooms are more likely to be African Americans from the flats who

are bussed uphill to make sure that the school is racially integrated (see "The Integration Calypso," April 30, 1993). "I don't know if there are going to be enough new children to justify spending \$10 million," Prentice says.

Adding to the Columbus site committee's sense of unfairness is the school board's decision at the same July meeting to close the child-development centers at Columbus and LeConte Schools and consolidate them with the King, Hopkins, and Little Franklin child-development centers. No date has been set for the move, but the loss of the childcare center throws another wrench into the Columbus site committee's plans for a school that would bring farflung social services close to the people who need them most. The preschool stayed at the original Columbus site when the rest of the school moved to Franklin, and Columbus parents had hoped it would remain on site when the school was rebuilt. "I thought there was going to be some continuity between our preschool program and the elementary school," says Connie Murphy, a teacher at the Columbus CDC. "In addition to the convenience, that lays a better educational foundation for the child."

The district's five child-development centers provide daycare for low-income parents who are working, going to school, or receiving job training. Teachers at the school estimate that eighty percent of the parents whose children attend the Columbus CDC walk their kids to school and don't have a car. Under the new plan, the closest CDC will be Little Franklin at 8th and Cedar streets, three-quarters of a mile away. "It would be an inconvenience," says LaTonya Pruitt, a parent at the Columbus CDC. "Sometimes when you're working, your mother or your brother can pick up your kid after school and walk them home. But you might not trust your eight-year-old brother to take the 72 over [to Little Franklin] and pick up your kid."

Dr. Rebecca Wheat, the principal of the district's child-development program, says that without the savings provided by the consolidation plan, the child-development program might be lost altogether. "We have a chance to save our program and not lose it," she says. "It's never convenient for

place in South Berkeley, a place in North Berkeley, and a place in West Berkeley."

But for the parents in the Columbus neighborhood, this is slim comfort. "If you put all the children in one place, it's convenient for the administration, not for the parents," says Margaret Kanchong, a teacher at the Columbus CDC. "If you take the children's center out of the neighborhood, the neighborhood will go down."