

Le Conte P.T.A. Newsletter



January 1993

Measure A Process Threatens to Shuffle Entire Berkeley School System

LeConte Site Committee Seeks Your Input

Introduction

Berkeley Voters passed bond Measure A in the spring of 1992 to remedy seismic weaknesses in school buildings and to repair and improve school sites-work that has been neglected for many years.

Specific amounts of money were allotted to individual sites-some for mandatory repairs, and some for discretionary physical improvements. To determine how to use these discretionary funds, committees were formed at each site. These committees operate pretty much independently of one another, and report to a central, somewhat cumbersome, Task Force.

Since some schools in the district have to be re-built completely, members of those communities took the opportunity to reconsider school structure, grade configuration, methods of integration, and a return to the concept of the neighborhood school. Quite suddenly, these discussions mushroomed into a district-wide re-evaluation of grade configuration and educational philosophy, introducing concepts like school choice, magnet schools, etc.

In late November, the Superintendent of Berkeley Public Schools asked each school site to determine its stand on some of the following issues: 1) School size, 2) Grade configuration, and 3) integration. There is a tremendous amount at stake. Several schools want to change the present scheme from a K-3 to a K-5 configuration.

Unfortunately, these "decisions" are

being made by each site without consideration for the system as a whole. Individual schools are requesting to be a K-5 school, for instance, without regard to what that does to the populations of other schools and without regard for how that will disrupt the district-wide system of school integration.

The LeConte Measure A Site Committee was not formed until early December. The district has expected us somehow to form a committee, evaluate the many and complex issues, plan and hold a community forum to explain and discuss these issues, and create, distribute and evaluate a community survey on the subject. All this was to be completed by January 5th (recently postponed until January 24th)

Needless to say, this has been an impossible task. We feel that the entire process, district-wide, has been haphazard, rushed, and severely limited in outreach and range of participation. The LeConte "Measure A" Site Committee has prepared a preliminary position. We must now find out whether or not other LeConte parents agree with this position. Please let us hear from you, so that we can better represent LeConte.

Background of Current System

LeConte enjoys its high degree of integration by drawing students from one geographically connected area of Berkeley. Unlike some other K-3 schools in Berkeley,

*Dreams
by Langston
Hughes*

*Hold fast to
dreams
For if dreams
die
Life is a
broken-
winged bird
That cannot
fly.*

*Hold fast to
dreams
For when
dreams go
Life is a
barren field
Frozen with
snow.*

*-as told by
the first
graders in
Mara Pfund's
class*

More on Measure

A

*Parents!!
We want
your input!!
Please call
any member
of the Site
Committee,
or write
your ideas,
comments,
or concerns
and return
them to
school. We
will be
calling,
sending
home
fliers,
organizing
a
community
meeting—
somehow
drawing
more input
from you.
Let your
voices be
heard!!
Call us!*

*Call
your School
Board
members
and let
them know
what you
think!!*

we do not have a large portion of our students bussed in from a separated, far-removed portion of the city. Therefore, our community is spared the problems that the radical bussing arrangement can sometimes cause. This makes it easy for LeConte to identify with its community.

As a K-3 school, the LeConte school building allows room for three classes per grade level. The total student population is about 350. If LeConte were to change to a K-5 school, there could only be two classes (or perhaps even only 1 1/2) per grade level. While one or two classrooms might be added (at the expense of some other program, such as on-site childcare, WINGS, etc.), the total population could not increase by much. As a consequence, some families who are currently zoned into the LeConte district would necessarily be assigned to other schools. How this determination would be made is not yet resolved.

The present arrangement of grades—K-3 at LeConte and 4-6 at Malcolm X—was implemented in 1968 as a part of a district-wide strategy to integrate all schools in Berkeley. The arrangement also has an educational rationale: It provides small, intimate schools for younger students, and larger schools with more resources for older students. By grouping many 4 through 6 classrooms at one site it is possible to offer more programs for children in these grades than would be possible at individual K-6 sites where there would be no more than two classrooms per grade level.

LeConte Site Committee's Position

The LeConte Site Committee believes that for most LeConte children and families the current scheme is working well. LeConte and Malcolm X are excellent schools, and we look forward to sending our children from one to the next.

While some proponents of K-5 schools cite the transition from one school to another at 4th grade as a difficult problem, this has not been the experience of the Malcolm X parents who have responded to Measure A surveys. In fact, most cite the larger programs as a superior advantage for their children. We do recognize that the transition

can, however, be fine-tuned by providing more contact and communication between the two schools.

We believe that the excellence of these two schools is a result of years of concerted effort on the part of principals, teachers, staff, and parents. A district-wide change of grade configuration would be chaotic. Determining district lines and methods of assigning students to schools, implementing those assignments, physically re-locating classrooms and supplies, building new school communities and faculty/administration teams, and so on would take a tremendous amount of time, energy, resources and funds. Measure A, by law, provides neither funds nor administrative salaries for these purposes.

Such changes would be justified only if they would correct significant faults in the existing system. Because we do not find great fault, we recommend against this major change.

The LeConte Measure A Site Committee places foremost value on integration and diversity. We are concerned that in the course of implementing the considered changes, we will lose school integration in the shuffle. In addition, we fear that the disruption will divert constructive energy and diminish the overall quality of education and cause the integrity of the district to disintegrate.

We believe that the concern of the District should be the success of all children throughout the district. The District has spent several years studying causes and solutions to problems faced by students. We feel that our resources should instead be devoted to the implementation of the Strategic Plan, which was the outcome of that analysis.

—This is only a draft, formulated by some members of the LeConte Measure A Site Committee: Bruce Wicinas, Representative to Superintendent's Task Force, 846-1797; Dena Belzer, PTA President, 644-0342; Liz Brown, (also member of Malcolm X Site Committee) 841-4061; and Kalima Rose.

Other members of Site Committee who have not worked on this draft, but can be contacted for information: Barbara Penny-James, Principal; Louise Rosenkrantz, Teaching Staff; Parents: Susan Emerson; Diane Colburn; Sloane Thomas; Kalima Rose; Amy Ahern; Clia Tarazi; Nancy Wilcox; Denise James.