

**INSIDE:** Banda Mania: Chuy Varela checks out Oakland's hottest new music scene (p. 6)

# EXPRESS

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■ The East Bay's Free Weekly ■ April 30, 1993 ■ Volume 15, No. 29 ■

## The Integration Calypso

The fundamental pact of integration in Berkeley's schools was simple and elegant: You come to my school, and then I'll go to yours. Has that pact been broken? Can it be restored? Or should it be replaced?







Berkeley school board president Pedro Noguera

“**I** think at times there has been too much preoccupation in this district with how do we get the kids that we don't have, rather than how do we serve the kids that we do have and serve them well.”

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**BY DASHKA SLATER**

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**I**t was in November 1965 that a group of teachers working in West Berkeley elementary schools demanded that the school board listen to a description of the classrooms where they taught. “Forty percent of Berkeley's [elementary school] children are in the four southwest Berkeley schools, leaving roughly sixty percent in the other ten,” a school district social worker named Philip Dinsmore told the board. “The schools are crowded, noisy, cold in winter,

hot in summer, and the playgrounds are inadequate and run-down. The noise is overwhelming. Approximately fifty-five to sixty percent of the children are from one-parent families. Many of the children sleep two or three in a bed and come from homes with inadequate toilet facilities. The school nurses indicate many children are suffering from inadequate nutrition, hunger pains, tension, and inability to concentrate.” The children were surrounded by so much poverty

and ugliness that it was impossible for them to concentrate on a middle-class curriculum, Dinsmore said. Other teachers went on to describe children who were open and warm on the first day of kindergarten but had become hostile and withdrawn by the first grade.

Clearly these children needed more from the school district than they were getting, and the teachers argued that until Berkeley integrated its schools, the city's *(continued on page 10)*

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**PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALAIN McLAUGHLIN**



# Schools

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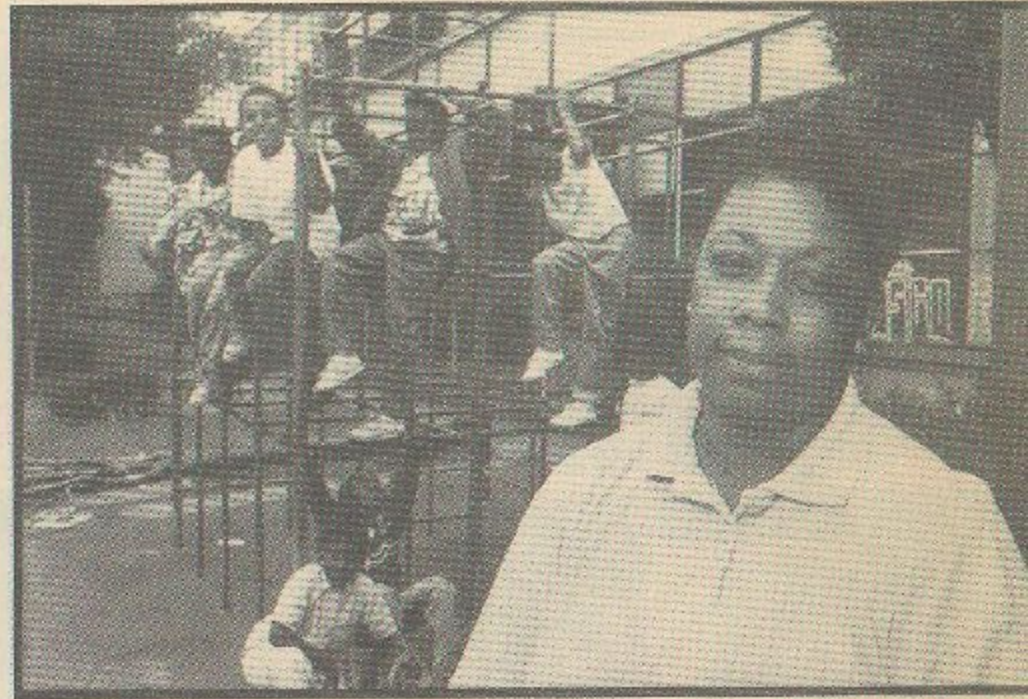
poor would be forever consigned to the educational margins. It took two years of intensive lobbying before the school board voted to completely desegregate the Berkeley schools, but at last, in 1967, people at school board meetings began singing a song that they called the Integration Calypso:

*We've made a date  
To integrate  
By '68!*

The school district considered two different plans for desegregating the schools. One plan would have kept the kindergarten-through-sixth-grade setup and allowed some children to stay at their neighborhood schools, busing in others to create a racial mix. But the superintendent felt this plan was unfair because it would require some kids to be bused for seven years while others would never be bused at all. Instead, the school board adopted the plan Berkeley has now. They divided the city up into zones that run from the hills to the bay. Each zone con-

calypso-singing days of 1968. Middle-class parents in general, and white middle-class parents in particular, have gradually drifted out of the Berkeley school system. According to school district consultant Jim Masters, fully one quarter of Berkeley's children are now attending private schools, compared to ten percent in surrounding cities. Traditionally there has been a drop in white student enrollment in the fourth through sixth grades when hills children begin to be bused down to the flatlands.

The result of this exodus is that the population of the Berkeley schools is much poorer and much darker-skinned than the population of Berkeley as a whole. In 1968, the school district was 48 percent white and 42 percent black. Now, the district is 32 percent white and 39 percent black, even though Berkeley's black population citywide has dropped from 35 percent to 19 percent. And the cycle is self-perpetuating. More than a few white Berkeleyans have discovered to their deep discomfort that they don't like being in the minority. As more white children leave the schools, the parents of those who remain have gotten increasingly anxious. "Everyone has a point where they pull out," one parent told me.



Edwina Perez-Santiago

the less money there is for quality education," says Burton Levy, a parent at Oxford, a "K-3" school. "So the more people turn their backs on the public school system, the more the quality goes down. It's a downward spiral. The more the quality goes down, the more people turn their backs."

Last September, the Berkeley Unified School District began reflecting on its current desegregation plan and alternatives to the K-3/4-6 grade configuration

million bond issue for the repair, rebuilding, and seismic upgrading of school buildings. The school administration argues that it's impossible to design a building if you don't know who's going to be in it, or what it's going to be used for. And so, thanks to some very mundane concerns about the height of bathroom fixtures and the placement of walls and windows, all the unanswered questions about Berkeley's elementary schools were dumped on the School Organization Task Force like a ton of bricks.

\* \* \*

**"I** just started to scream, 'Here we are sitting around talking about how to make the schoolyard prettier or whatever and we have a major problem here. We have discipline problems and nothing's being done about it. The same kids are just going to drop out and end

**T**he neighborhoods surrounding Cragmont and Columbus schools are about as different as any two neighborhoods in Berkeley. Tucked in the upper reaches of the North Berkeley hills, the brown-shingled structure of Cragmont School is encircled by steep, twisty streets and some of the best views in the East Bay. At the other end of town is Columbus School, a grim, putty-colored building surrounded by flat, unadorned streets, apartment buildings





Joanna Graham with son Michael and his chess club teammate Steven Waterman

tains several small hill schools for kindergarten through third grade. In fourth grade, the children from these small schools change to their zone's large flatland school, where they stay until transferring to one of the city's two junior high schools. Thus flatlands children are bused to the hills from kindergarten through third grade, and from fourth through sixth grade the hills children travel down to the flats.

**O**r at least some of them do. Things have not gone exactly the way people envisioned it back in those

"If it's 95 percent black, do you stay in?"

It seems that the fundamental pact of Berkeley-style integration—you come to my school and I'll go to yours—has been broken. And the cost of this broken treaty is enormous. Because the state gives money to school districts based on the number of students enrolled, every Berkeley child who goes to school outside of the district represents a loss of about \$3,000—and that's not counting the money and volunteer time that these parents are putting into private schools instead of Berkeley's public ones. "The more Berkeley students go elsewhere,

up in jail and why can't we deal with it here and now?"

of its elementary schools. The reflection came in the form of the "School Organization Task Force," an unwieldy collection of more than fifty parents, teachers, community members, and administrators. It was not the first time a task force had considered reorganizing the Berkeley schools—in fact, the identical issues were considered by the district's master plan task force in 1989. The difference is that this time recommendations aren't enough. This time the school district has to make a decision.

What forced the issue was the June passage of Berkeley's Measure A, a \$158

Columbus School on any given late afternoon, you might pass a cluster of young men drinking forty-ounce beers or a group of girls playing double dutch. The people you are most likely to see on an afternoon stroll through the Cragmont neighborhood are Vietnamese gardeners who tend to the homeowners' elaborate landscapes.

What the people in the two communities have in common is that their children go to the same schools. For more than twenty years, West Berkeley children were bused up to Cragmont for their first four years of school and northeast Berkeley children were bused down to Columbus for the next three. Three years ago both schools were shut down because of

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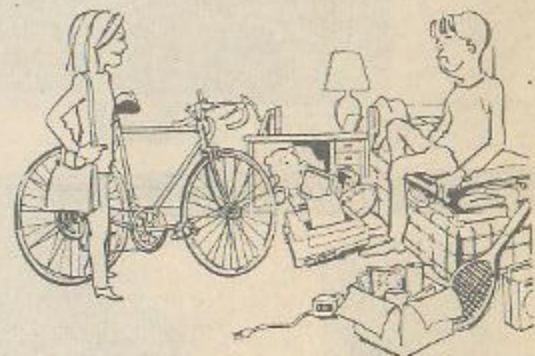
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**“Integration. What did it do? I don’t see it doing anything. We bus kids all over Berkeley and when I ask a kid what’s one and one, they don’t know. So what did we do by busing them?”**

concerns about seismic safety, and they now share the Franklin School site at the base of Virginia Street. But both the Cragmont and Columbus neighborhoods are committed to rebuilding their respective schools at their original sites. And parents from both neighborhoods have said, either overtly or obliquely, that once the schools are rebuilt they don’t want their children to ride the bus anymore. They want their kids to stay in the neighborhood, close to home.

“I’d like to see Columbus be a community school,” says the Reverend Edwina Perez-Santiago, a West Berkeley activist who helps run an after-school program in the old Columbus School building. “Because when my son finally got to Columbus and he could go from home and he didn’t have to be bused all over Berkeley anymore, his attitude changed. He became a better student. He participated in school in a way I thought he would never do.”

Perez-Santiago is a compact woman with a face that can switch from utter warmth to a drop-dead glare in a matter of seconds. We are sitting in her apartment on Ninth Street, in a sunny living room decorated with votive candles, religious statues, and photographs of children. When I ask her why she thinks her son didn’t do as well when he was going to school in the hills, she shrugs. “I

did it do?” she asks, her voice low. “I don’t see it doing anything. We bus kids all over Berkeley and when I ask a kid what’s one and one, they don’t know. So what did we do by busing them? It’s not where you send them, it’s how are we going to make sure that every child in Berkeley gets an equal education?”

**F**inding itself face to face with deep and vexing questions about how the district was to be reorganized, the school administration designed what it hoped would be a democratic decision-making process. Starting last fall, every school in the district was to form a “site committee” to consider both rebuilding and reorganization questions. Each site committee was then to send a representative to the School Organization Task Force bringing with them a report detailing what kind of school the site committee envisioned having when the district’s reorganization was complete. In February, the Columbus School site committee reported that it wanted to be a prekindergarten-through-fifth-grade school serving the children of the “traditional school neighborhood plus any others needed to achieve racial and ethnic balance.” The phrase was vague on purpose, says site committee member Kristin Prentice. “The school’s ‘traditional neighborhood’ is Columbus-Cragmont, but it could also be interpreted as meaning Columbus’s geographical neighborhood. Some people on the committee like the neighborhood option and don’t care too much about desegregation.” Zephyr Pruitt, a retired Oakland schoolteacher who represented Columbus School on the task force, puts it more bluntly: “I’m against busing because it hasn’t achieved too much,” she says. “I don’t see the need for a child to ride two hours just to sit by another child. To me, that’s not integration.”

When the Columbus site committee talks about a neighborhood school, they don’t just mean that neighborhood children would go there. They also mean

like the idea of having a school close by.”

The problem with rebuilding Cragmont School is that it sits fifty feet from an earthquake fault. State officials have said that the school probably cannot be rebuilt there, and for that reason no money for rebuilding Cragmont was included in Measure A. But members of the site committee are absolutely committed to rebuilding Cragmont, and they are eagerly awaiting the results of some trenching work that is now being done on the site to see how unstable the land really is. They are also keeping their eyes out for sources of money. Earlier this year, school board member Pamela Doo-

they’re trying to redesign a school for themselves,” says West Berkeley resident and former Cragmont parent Joanna Graham. “They just want their own private school that they don’t have to pay for. They’re not accepting the terms of public school.”

Graham is a small woman with a rosy face, curly hair, and the flat, elongated “a’s” of a native New Yorker. The daughter of a Rochester public school teacher, Graham has some very passionate ideas about what the terms of public education are. “That everybody gets educated,” she answers when I ask her to elaborate. “That you go to school with everybody.”



Janet Huseby with daughter Ellie and son Nat

**“People really crave a neighborhood school, and I can tell you, a neighborhood school is wonderful. It’s so wonderful to have the school right there and be able to drop in. But you can’t have a neighborhood school and have**

**G**raham is a member of the West Cragmont site committee—a group of Cragmont parents who live in the flatlands and feel that their interests have not been well represented by the East Cragmont site committee. The West Cragmont wing formed in December after the sole West Berkeley member of the Cragmont site committee grew frustrated with the fact that the commit-







# Schools

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ethnic mix the school had to offer. "I remember her saying very sweetly, 'We welcome the children from our other neighborhood,'" Graham says. "And I wanted to stand up and scream: 'Your "other" neighborhood is *my* neighborhood!' So right from kindergarten night you can see what the structure of Cragmont is. It's a liberal hills school which welcomes the presence of disadvantaged children of color because it enriches the mix and you know you're doing your social duty. But it has to be on their terms."

A walk through the Cragmont/Columbus classrooms, now held at Franklin School, perpetuates a sense of Cragmont being two separate schools. Some classes are much more white than others. The imbalance comes from the fact that parents have been allowed to request that their children be placed with certain teachers. But not every parent has known that choice is available, and many don't know enough about the teachers to choose. So the people who are used to choosing choose, and the people whose lives have communicated to them in a thousand different ways that they have no choice don't. The end result is that white children from the hills stay clustered together year after year, moving from popular teacher to popular teacher. "They have created a private school for privileged children with master teachers at each grade level," Graham says. "And then all the problems of public school—discipline problems and so on—are left for everyone else to deal with."

A few weeks ago, Cragmont/Columbus principal Beverly Smith Miller announced that the school would no longer be letting parents request their teachers because the system had led to low teacher morale and classrooms that were out

of balance in terms of race, gender, and ability level. Many of the hill parents are furious, but Graham says she thinks the change will be good for everyone in the long run. "Now, whatever problems there are will have to be dealt with *together*, by parents, teachers, and principals. It's pot luck. Everyone's stuck with it. Everyone will have to deal with it," she says.

**T**he pairing of the two vastly different neighborhoods that make up Cragmont and Columbus schools mean that the children who go to school together as alleged equals will return home to circumstances and futures that are in no way the same. These fundamental differences are no doubt obvious to every flatland child who was ever bused to the hills and to every hill child who was ever sent down to the flatlands. All the children have to do is look out the window of the bus to see how the other half lives. What has been frustrating to Graham is her sense that the parents from the hills are not willing to face up to the effect these social inequalities have on how the children fare in school. "I brought it up at a PTA meeting once," she says. "It was one of the few moments in my life when I felt I was not in control of what I was saying. I just started to scream, 'Here we are sitting around talking about how to make the yard prettier or whatever and we have a major problem here. We have discipline problems and nothing's being done about it. The same kids are just going to drop out and end up in jail and why can't we deal with it here and now?' And everybody sort of said, 'Be quiet, Joanna' in one way or another. But these are the same people you see standing around the schoolyard discussing taking their kids out of the school because it's too scary."

Lloyd Lee says that when he joined the East Cragmont site committee he didn't know that it was going to be discussing integration and school configuration any more than the West Cragmont people did. Like everyone else, he assumed the

**I**n 1968, the school district was 48 percent white and 42 percent black. Now, the district is 32 percent white and 39 percent black even though Berkeley's black population has dropped from 35 percent to 19 percent. And the cycle is self-perpetuating.

committee was going to focus on bricks and mortar. "It's a failure of communication," he says. "The Berkeley Unified School District really tries to put out information on lots of different colored handouts, but they're not very good at it." But while he understands why his flatland counterparts might have been angry to discover that the restructuring discussion had gone on without them, he feels that the site committee worked hard to develop a plan that would be equitable for everyone. "You know you go to eleven or twelve meetings, you arrange for babysitters for weeks, and then someone tells you what you've done is shit," he says, shaking his head.

Lee is a tall, slender man with woolly gray hair and round spectacles. A real estate lawyer for the University of California, he has three children in the Berkeley public schools: one in kindergarten, one in fourth grade, and one in sixth. On the day we spoke, he was getting ready to accompany his fourth grader on an overnight field trip to a Sonoma County adobe where the class would be learning about California's early settlers. "This is worth saving," he says when I tell him the trip sounds like fun. "Berkeley education isn't terrible, but it's not as good as it could be by a long shot. I want a school district that believes children can do better." His concern is the same as the concern of many middle-class parents—

that school curricula have been dumbed down. "Don't hold down the brightest in an effort to make the slower-progressing kids look better," he says. "There's clearly some levelling going on."

**I**n February, the School Organization Task Force issued its recommendations for the reorganization of the Berkeley schools. The report noted that all but four of the school site committees had said that they wanted to return to a K-5 or K-6 grade configuration. This meant that the task force needed to find a new method of integration. What they arrived at was the concept of "controlled choice."

When defining school choice, articles in educational magazines tend to reach for loopy free-market analogies, reminding us that we consider it our God-given right to choose between Nikes and Reeboks, so why shouldn't we be able to choose between, say, a Montessori School and a Back to Basics school? A choice system allows each school within a single school district to evolve in its own different direction and then encourages parents to send their children to whatever school they think is best. Cragmont, for instance, is interested in having a school that emphasizes parent involvement. Other possible choices could include language immersion programs, open classroom schools, and schools modeled after Japanese elementary schools.

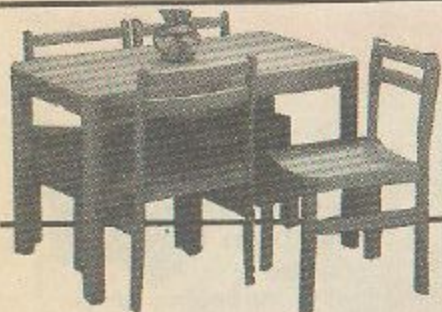
The "control" in "controlled" choice is racial balance. The task force has defined integration to mean that every school should have the same percentage of black and white students as exist in the school district as a whole, allowing a variation of five percent in either direction. Under the controlled choice system, then, students would be accepted into each school until that school's racial quotas were met, at which point the students who didn't make the cut would be redirected to their second-choice schools. In-



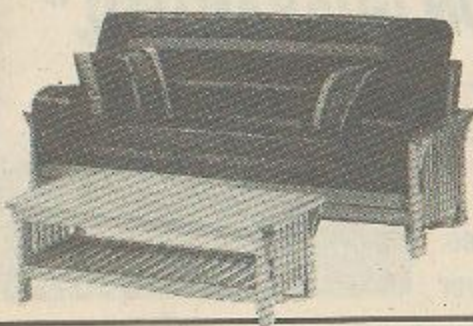
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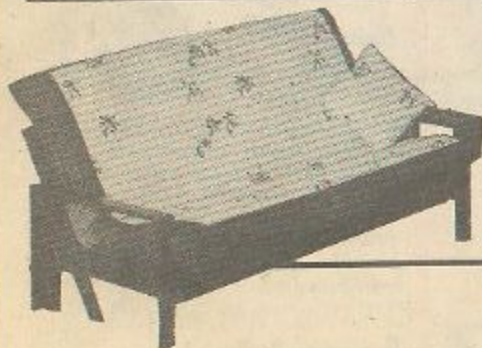
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# Schools

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tegration balances would thus be strictly maintained, something that is not true in Berkeley now. Because roughly a third of the students in the district have transferred to a school other than the one for their residential zones, there are now huge variations in the racial mixes of the different schools. "We have a choice system now but it's all hidden," Lee says. "You have to be persistent and a pain in the butt to get what you want. Why should it be that way?"

The key to controlled choice working is that people must be willing to choose schools outside of their neighborhoods. But it's not at all clear who is going to be willing (or, for that matter, how transportation would be provided). The task force did look at the idea of returning to a straightforward neighborhood school model, but found that Berkeley's residential patterns are so segregated that only two elementary schools in the district—LeConte and Washington—would even come close to being adequately integrated under such a scheme.

Many school site committees—including East Cragmont—have said that they want a choice system that gives people who live in the school neighborhood priority over those who don't (nationally many districts with controlled choice do allow for some degree of neighborhood preference). At a recent East Cragmont site committee meeting, Joanna Graham asked if people on the committee would still be in favor of controlled choice if living near a school didn't give you a better chance of going to it. There was a moment of silence and then everyone in the room nodded. "The answer is yes," Lloyd Lee explained. "And the reason is that we believe that in general people would rather have their kids close to home, so neighborhood preference is built in."

a neighborhood school is wonderful," she says. "I had my kids walking to Cragmont for years. It's so wonderful to have the school right there and be able to drop in. It's so easy to become involved in the school. But you can't have a neighborhood school and have integration. And I care desperately about integration."

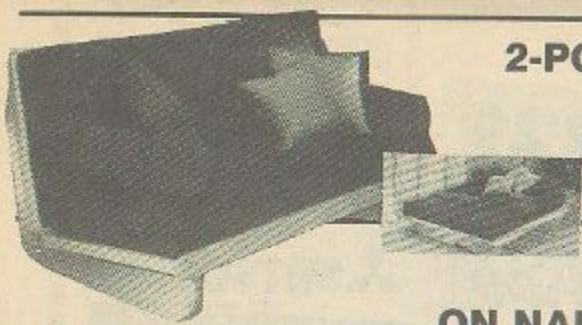
And yet, Huseby admits that her expectations of integration have been revised downward. "I know that as a parent, there are huge socioeconomic differences and your kids end up with kids like them," she says. "What I like is that my children are comfortable with children of all races and from all socioeconomic backgrounds. I used to think that you had to have friendships to make an integrated school successful. But now what I want is an appreciation of each other."

Part of what changed her mind about neighborhood schools, Huseby says, was the closing of the two elementary schools that children from her neighborhood attended—Cragmont and Columbus. "There's nothing like having one's schools get closed out from under one," Huseby says with a laugh. "Suddenly I think K though five is terrific and let's have all citywide schools."

The current situation at the combined Columbus/Cragmont school on Virginia Street illustrates the danger of being obsessed with your neighborhood school,

**“We have a choice system now but it's all hidden. You have to be persistent and a pain in the butt to get what you want. Why should it be that way?”**





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**B**ut if everyone chooses their own neighborhood, what happens to integration? "I can't see what it would take for white parents to choose flatland schools," school board president Pedro Noguera says flatly. And there's no guarantee that parents of either race will stay in the school system if they get their first-choice school. "If parents don't get their choice, they'll send their kids to private school just as they do now," predicts school board member Elizabeth Shaughnessy.

The model dearest to the hearts of people who endorse controlled choice is Cambridge, Massachusetts. Cambridge and Berkeley are sort of soul-mate cities anyway, both being university towns dominated by opinionated, over-educated people with leftist predilections. The Cambridge system has been in place since 1981, and 63 percent of the families now choose schools outside of their immediate neighborhoods. Last year 97 percent of the families in the district received one of their top three choices.

"What I like about the Cambridge plan is not only would it allow us to have K-through-five schools, and not only would it be a good method of integration, but I also think that if it's well implemented it will be a method of improving the schools," says task force member Janet Huseby. "Schools will know that they have to do something that will attract children who live in other neighborhoods, that they will be closed if they don't. It will motivate the schools to come up with programs that will make people want to come to them."

Huseby has four children in the Berkeley schools. The youngest is a kindergartener at Cragmont, the oldest is in eleventh grade at Berkeley High. We are sitting in the living room of her North Berkeley home, a room dominated by a grand piano, a somewhat threadbare Persian rug, and the Husebys' large, restless dog. The house is not far from Cragmont School and Huseby describes herself as someone who initially favored neighborhood schools. "People really crave a neighborhood school, and I can tell you,

Why should it be that way?"

she says, pulling one foot onto the seat of her rocking chair and hugging her knee for emphasis. Because both communities have put their energy into rebuilding their neighborhood schools at their original sites, the existing combined school at Franklin has received a minimum of attention. "It's just being allowed to drift," she says.

**W**ith her round open face and brown, chin-length hair, Huseby is a person who seems both resolutely sensible and unexpectedly passionate. The sensible side comes out when we talk about grade configuration. Huseby feels that a K-five set-up is simply a smarter, more efficient way to run things. Unlike the switch from elementary school to junior high, the switch from third to fourth grade doesn't come at any natural transition point in a child's development, she argues. And by unnecessarily inserting a transition where none would normally exist, the K-three/four-six setup forces parents with more than one child to split their attention between two schools. The end result, especially for single parents, is that they often don't get involved in the four-six school. "For my first daughter, the change at fourth grade was a very, very upsetting transition," Huseby says. "Now you will meet parents who say that's ridiculous. But in my experience it was hard. It's hard to be involved in more than one school and it's hard to get involved in a whole new school and meet all the teachers again."

Part of the reason the fourth-grade transition was hard for Huseby's daughter was that most of the kids from her neighborhood didn't make the transition with her. They went to private school instead. This fact is a source of enormous frustration for people like Huseby, who have made a commitment to the public schools. "It matters to me that public education works," she says. "I get very frustrated with people who won't even

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## Schools

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give it a try. There's a strong element of parents who feel that public school is a gamble and they can't gamble with their children's lives. But *life* is a gamble, all schools are a gamble, and I would rather gamble on something that's important to the community."

**H**useby feels that the Berkeley schools are suffering from a PR problem, and a visit to any one of them confirms that there are a lot of exciting things happening that people don't know about. "Do you play chess?" an African-American boy inquired when I visited Scott Wachenheim's third-grade class at Cragmont/Columbus. When I shook my head the boy's eyes widened in disbelief. Every kid in Wachenheim's class plays chess. They also do things like find prime numbers and square numbers, discuss the meaning of infinity, and write letters to public officials about things that are important to them, from the beating of Rodney King to the selling of dolphin-safe tuna. "This is a deep move," the boy said as I crouched down to watch the game he was playing with a classmate. "Do you see it? Isn't it deep?"

At LeConte and Emerson I watched first- and second-graders writing about important women in honor of International Women's Day. At Malcolm X I watched fourth-graders learning Japanese and then walked through the halls, listening to the sound of kids singing folk songs in a music class and reading essays about AIDS that had been pinned up on the wall. It was there that I struck up a conversation with the mother of a third-grader who was scouting out potential teachers for next year. "This one's supposed to be good. I was in the Peace Corps with this one. Everyone at Emerson likes that one," the woman said,

back nature fundamentally compatible with their own. But when their daughter Jackie reached school age, they resisted putting her in the public schools, even though they lived within walking distance of Cragmont. "We heard a lot of rumors and innuendo about the Berkeley schools—this business about out-of-control children," explains Jon, who works as a litigation attorney in San Francisco. "And we were concerned about busing. In the fourth grade she would have been bused to Columbus and we weren't particularly wild about that—although I'm not sure about the facts."

So the O'Donnells sent Jackie to a Berkeley private school that is actually only a few blocks away from Columbus. She hated it. A second private school also proved disappointing, and so the O'Donnells decided to move to the suburbs, where the schools were known to be good and safe. They traded their house in the Berkeley hills for one in Orinda, a school district with consistently high test scores. Once again, they were disappointed. They hated Orinda and they found that the school system wasn't everything it was cracked up to be.

"There were two kids in my daughter's class that were very disruptive and unruly," Jon says. "They weren't black but they were totally disruptive—therefore dispelling the myth that [only] urban

**“T**here's a strong element of parents who feel that public school's a gamble and they can't gamble with their children's lives. But *life* is a gamble, all schools are a gamble, and I would rather gamble on something that's important to the community."



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showing me the list of fourth grade teachers. Then she smiled. "You know, it looks like there are a lot more middle-class kids here now. For awhile, it was just the public school diehards and people who couldn't afford to leave."

People who leave the school system clearly have something that many of those who stay do not: choice. And for many advocates of controlled choice, that is the system's crucial selling point. Choice would extend the same privileges to working-class people that are now only enjoyed by those wealthy enough to spend several thousand dollars a year on private school tuition. At the same time, perhaps it would lure back some of the two thousand people who have opted out of the public school system altogether. As Cragmont site committee member Lloyd Lee argues: "If you were the parent of a prospective first-grader and you had a choice between a Montessori school that cost five thousand dollars a year and one that was integrated and free, which would you choose?"

The question, of course, is whether parents are sending their kids to private school because they want a Montessori program and they don't care what they have to do to get one, or if it's that they don't want their kids going to school with the hoi polloi. When you ask upper-income parents why they or their friends have opted for private schools, an interest in alternative educational programs is not one of the reasons usually cited. Instead you find two things. One is a concern that the public schools are not challenging enough. The other is an almost free-floating uneasiness, a sense that the public schools are generally unsafe. The fear is partly fed by rumors that upper-income people pass among themselves. "One little bad thing happens in the public schools and it gets told over and over and over again," one hill parent told me.

Jon and Susan O'Donnell have lived in Berkeley since 1973. They came here to go to college and like many people, they never left, finding the city's liberal, laid-

schools are dominated by unruly kids. I think schools in general are dominated by unruly kids."

It only took six months for the O'Donnells to realize that they would rather be in Berkeley. So they sold their house in Orinda and moved back to the Berkeley hills, losing a fair amount of money in the process. This time they enrolled Jackie at Cragmont; she's attending Columbus/Cragmont on Virginia Street, where they say she's thriving. "It's far and away her best experience, both academically and socially," Jon says.

The move to Orinda turned out to be a kind of conversion experience for the O'Donnells, and like many converts they have become proselytizers as well. Susan wrote a nine-page letter detailing the family's search for the perfect education which she combines with a pitch for public school and sends to prospective Cragmont parents. "When I came back to Berkeley it was like a 180-degree turn in my values," she says. "It all happened at the same time as the whole Rodney King thing and I felt I was participating in the creation of the haves and the have-nots. I felt like I was living in the Third World, where the haves have to move to the suburbs to wall ourselves off from the underclass. When I came back to Berkeley I didn't want to be part of the private school system and just be around the affluent people. I wanted to embrace all the children of Berkeley as our children."

But Susan says that when she calls prospective Cragmont parents to encourage them to give the Berkeley schools a chance, she doesn't find them to be particularly responsive. "It's a really hard sell," she says. "I don't know if I've convinced anybody."

Which makes one wonder what it is that parents are so afraid of. Part of the answer seems to be hidden in the phrase "disruptive kids"—which is, as Jon O'Donnell obliquely pointed out, a code for "rowdy black boys." It's amazing how much fear an eight-year-old can engender.



If you spend time in the Berkeley schools, it doesn't take long to figure out who these "disruptive kids" are. It's the kid who can't seem to get to work when the teacher announces that it's time for in-class writing; the one who keeps getting up to sharpen his pencil and get a drink of water; the one who seems anxious and fidgety and can't concentrate. The disruptive kid is the one I saw sitting on the floor outside a classroom door looking miserable and ashamed. He's the one whom a teacher sent to the back of the room because, she said, "You're bothering me." He's the one who has too much energy, or needs too much attention, or is so afraid of not being able to do the assignment that he can't bring himself to start. He is usually also the one whose parents can't afford to send him to a private school. But chances are his parents aren't any more enchanted with the public school system than the people who flee to private school to escape him.

"For some parents, integration is an obstacle to their kids learning," Pedro Noguera says. "They feel that certain kids are disruptive and deprive their kids of the attention that they need or deserve. For other parents, integration is an obstacle because their kids are not the priority in the classroom. The kids who are the priority are the kids who are the most involved, the kids who are the most prepared, and that's who the school is geared for. The kids who are perceived as less involved or less prepared or more troublesome or difficult to handle, even though they're the majority, get the least attention."

In addition to being a professor of education at UC, Noguera also works in an all-black junior high school in West Oakland. The experience, he says, has shown him that there are certain advantages to focusing on the needs of students of color. "I think at times there has been too much preoccupation in this district with how do we get the kids that we don't have, rather than how do we serve the

boards think that, if they offer the same printed information to all parents, they have made choice equally accessible," writes Jonathan Kozol in his book *Savage Inequalities*. "That is not true, of course, because the printed information won't be read, or certainly will not be scrutinized aggressively, by parents who can't read or who read very poorly. But even if a city could contrive a way to get the basic facts disseminated widely, can it disseminate audacity as well? Can it disseminate the limitless horizons of the middle class to those who have been trained to keep their eyes on the ground?"

**T**he danger with choice is that unless something is done to change the power imbalance that already exists in the Berkeley school system, the only people who will take advantage of it will be the people who are already used to choosing. Middle-class parents will be

the driving force in developing each school's curriculum and poor people will be consigned to filling out the racial quotas. So far, that is exactly what has happened. The discussion about how to reorganize the Berkeley school system has taken place almost entirely among people who are white and middle class. Neither the task force nor the site committees were in any way reflective of the racial and ethnic make-up of the Berkeley school system. Both the eastern and western wings of the Cragmont site committee are almost entirely white, for example, and the Columbus site committee has had little representation from that school's large Latino population.

This did not go unnoticed by the participants. Many of the site committee reports that were sent to the task force expressed anxiety about the lack of minority representation, but no one seemed to have much of an idea what to do about it. "We sent out about twenty

different notices," task force facilitator Jim Masters told me. "But if people don't read their mail, listen to their phone [messages], or read what their kids bring home from school, there's not much that can be done."

But if the school district really wants to serve all of Berkeley, it has an obligation to do more. "Jim Masters said to me, 'We'll open the door and if people want to walk through it they can,'" says task force member and West Berkeley parent Don Larkin. "That's not good enough. You have to walk around the neighborhoods and explain what the door is and why people should *want* to walk through it." Larkin points out that the guidelines for the site committees state quite clearly that each one must be representative of all ethnic groups and must undertake broad community outreach, including door-to-door leafletting in the school neighborhood. That has just not hap-

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well," he says. Last fall, Noguera floated the idea of switching back to neighborhood schools, arguing that integration didn't seem to be working and perhaps a new solution was needed.

Noguera says that he now thinks the best way to serve the district's children is to improve the current K-three/four-six busing system by providing more training in race relations and cultural sensitivity for students, teachers, and administrators, rather than flying willy-nilly into a new system that would not address the issues of race and class directly and might create more problems than it solves. "It's just not good enough to put kids together in a classroom and think that on their own they'll figure out how to relate to each other," he says. He cites Malcolm X, where his ten-year-old goes to school, as an example of a school that has shown dramatic improvement, both socially and academically, thanks to the hard work of its teachers and parents. "Why would we want to do anything to that school when they've come so far?" he says.

People who favor a controlled choice system argue that Malcolm X is an example of the kind of grass-roots solution that a choice system would encourage. By allowing each school site to develop in its own direction and by giving decision-making power to the individual schools, a choice system could make every school more responsive and democratic. In a school district where the needs and expectations of the children are so diverse, these seem like reasonable goals. Why not let parents choose a curriculum that seems right for their child? And, the argument continues, wouldn't parents be more likely to get involved in a school they had chosen rather than one they had simply been assigned?

"I think that if you go out and pick something, you have much more of a vested interest in whatever you have chosen," Janet Huseby argues. But the question is whether every parent is capable of taking advantage of choice. "School

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## Schools

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pened. Instead, outreach has mainly consisted of stuffy, bureaucratic notices from the district that talk about "grade configuration" and "school choice" without ever explaining what these phrases mean.

"I don't have any solutions because a lot of people down here haven't been asked," Edwina Perez-Santiago says when I ask her about her vision for the school district. "We don't know the terminology. It ain't plain English. I'm not saying that they did it deliberately, but it keeps people out."

And if working-class people were kept out of the decision-making process, it is not at all clear how a controlled choice system, or any other system for that matter, would meet their needs. And since minorities make up the majority of people in the school system, it seems insane for the school board to even contemplate restructuring the schools without finding out what they have to say.

Many people who participated in the task force discussions say that they found them to be unwieldy and rushed. "There was no continuity," Larkin says. "We'd get into something and then we'd come back next time and there would be something completely unrelated on the agenda." The vote to endorse controlled choice happened in the last fifteen minutes of the last task force meeting and was worded so vaguely that many saw it as an endorsement of the concept of flexibility rather than a recommendation to move forward with any particular system. "I would say that the vote for choice was a 'yes-if,'" Janet Huseby says. "Yes, if it doesn't cost too much; yes, if we can come up with a decent transportation plan; yes, if it really is an improvement; yes, if we do decent outreach."

The task force report is now on the desk of school superintendent LaVoneia

now credited with driving the district into bankruptcy. "The whole idea of choice fills me with horror, fills me with nausea," a Richmond schoolteacher said at a March Malcolm X PTA meeting where choice was discussed. "Not because it's a bad idea but because it was done poorly."

The consultants did have one suggestion of where money for choice might be found. If the school district were to close three elementary schools, they pointed out, it would save over a million dollars and there would still only be about four hundred students at each remaining school.

School closures have never gone over easily in Berkeley and there is no reason to suppose that they would now. But the question of whether people would be willing to close schools to pay for a system of controlled choice brings certain considerations into focus. How many advocates of a controlled choice system would be willing to give up their neighborhood school in order to have one? Given that money for school programs is limited, how would the citizens of Berkeley like to see any additional funding spent? Would they rather see it spent on a controlled choice system? On reducing class size? On developing magnet programs within the different four-six schools? On workshops on race relations? On revamping the busing system to make it faster and less burdensome?

Clearly, the school board has a lot of unanswered questions to reckon with. And these questions seem to be multiplying rather than diminishing. At the April 15 school board meeting, the outside educational consultants made a presentation that was supposed to narrow the number of school configuration options down to three. Instead, they sketched out a range of options that could be combined into 72 separate scenarios—leaving members of the school board looking dazed and paralyzed.

The night after the board meeting, I listened to members of the East Cragmont site committee rage that the board



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Steele, who will make a recommendation on school organization to the school board on June 2. The school board is scheduled to make its final decision by June 15. Whatever system is chosen will go into effect in the fall of 1994—if the schedule holds. But the timeline is already slipping, and rightly so, for the long series of discussions within the site committees and the task force may well have produced a plan the superintendent and the school board are not prepared to adopt. Indeed, both Superintendent Steele and the board have sent broad signals that they are still actively considering keeping the current system of grade configurations and busing relatively intact.

What makes the status quo an attractive option is the fact that the district already knows how much it costs. A choice system, on the other hand, will cost more—and no one can predict how much more. At the April 15 school board meeting, Management Analysis and Planning Associates, a team of educational planning consultants hired by the district, presented a range of figures so broad as to be completely meaningless; ongoing costs, for example, were estimated as ranging between nothing and \$2.7 million dollars. The latter figure is probably too high, but it is clear that a choice system will not come cheap. Successful choice programs invest heavily in parent outreach—Cambridge, for instance, has a part-time parent liaison at every school and a whole department dedicated to outreach at the district level. Add to that the cost of developing programs at the different schools that would be distinct enough to draw people out of their own neighborhood districts, and the cost of transporting students to the schools of their choice anywhere in the city, and you're looking at a sizable outlay of funds. Where is this money going to come from?

One only has to look as far as Richmond to be reminded of the price you pay for failing to think this question through; the Richmond district's celebrated attempt to build choice into its system is

was no closer to making a decision about reconfiguration than they were when the task force report came out in February. "The school board is not doing their job, they're not showing leadership," fumed Jon O'Donnell. The committee immediately got to work sending a letter to Noguera chastising the board for saying that it is willing to accept the status quo. "To criticize the process for failing to come to a consensus is to expect far too much from the process," they wrote.

But it seems likely that the Cragmont group will have to live with a little uncertainty. They know what they think, but many others do not. People who have not been part of the long series of site committee and task force meetings still have to be brought up to speed; some of the discussions that were never finished during the task force meetings will have to be completed now.

Chief among these is the discussion about integration itself. "The kind of frank discussion that needs to happen around integration has been difficult to have because of the kind of PC atmosphere where it's easy to be called a racist if you say the wrong thing or if it gets interpreted the wrong way," Noguera notes. But it seems clear that people of both races need to be won back over to the idea of integration if it is going to be successful, and that cannot happen if all of integration's hurts and failures are left smarting below the surface.

It turns out that working out the intricacies of making transportation fair and education equitable are not as easy as singing the Integration Calypso, but that doesn't mean it isn't worth trying to do. "Integration was important for two reasons," Noguera says. "One was to address inequalities in funding. But it was also hoped that integration would lead to an improvement in race relations. I think both of these still need to be addressed; neither has been solved. And while integration may not solve these problems, without integration we can't solve them either. But integration is only the first step."