

Don't abandon desegregation

THE BERKELEY UNIFIED School District seems poised to reconfigure the grade structure of its elementary schools, abandoning its K-3, 4-6 structure in favor of a K-5 or K-6 neighborhood school plan. But what the BUSD is really doing is abandoning the desegregation (i.e., busing) plan that's been in place since 1968 — a plan many parents from the hills never liked anyway.

By moving away from busing and back to the neighborhood schools of the '50s, Berkeley school officials are saying that integration is no longer a goal, no longer a priority, in the school system. That is a tragic miscalculation.

If the experiences of the past few years — the Rodney King rebellion, the clashes in Bensonhurst and Crown Heights, the Tawana Brawley affair — have taught us anything, it is that race relations is at least as important as any of the three other R's (reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic) for the world of the 21st century.

In a country that is increasingly multicultural and multiracial, in a state where there will be no majority population very soon, learning to get along with people who look different will be crucial to getting along in society, and to society getting along.

To put children into classrooms segregated artificially by neighborhood will put them at a disadvantage in a world where their parents won't get to pick who they'll work with or live next door to. Instead of teaching children to avoid people different from themselves, parents — and school board members — should be teaching them that differences are to be welcomed, cherished, accepted, and, most of all, are inevitable.

Even though site committees have been

meeting for six months, we think the school system isn't really thinking through the long-term consequences of its actions. Most of the plans being generated by the committees don't squarely address the question of desegregation, as if it is not important enough to take into account or will somehow take care of itself.

People who strongly oppose reconfiguring the schools believe they have already lost that fight, and that the real battle is to make sure that, no matter how the grades are reconfigured, desegregation is not one of the casualties.

But it's not really surprising that these committees have decided to scrap the mandatory busing plan. Many busing plans have been court-ordered anyway, and Berkeley has been somewhat unique in having voluntarily desegregated. If busing in Berkeley is dismantled, the city may ironically be one of the last to be sued to force it to desegregate.

Besides lots of grumbling, not much has been done to change the plan since 1968 because it meant rethinking Berkeley's entire educational system. When Measure A was passed last year, providing \$168 million to repair school structures, the opportunity for that rethinking finally presented itself. It meant the school board had the chance to decide which schools would be repaired, what new facilities would be in each school, and, in the end, what students would be in each school.

This is an opportunity that is not likely to present itself again any time soon, and the school board had better make sure it comes up with a plan that is going to work — our children will be stuck with it for many years to come.