

Viewpoint

Status quo may be the most reasonable option

By Pedro Noguera

As the deliberations of the School Organization Task Force come to a close, the wisdom of those who designed the present configuration back in 1968 becomes increasingly evident.

With few exceptions, none of the schemes that are presently under consideration offer answers to the most important questions confronting BUSD:

1) How do we address the racial imbalances, both with respect to enrollment and student achievement, that currently exist within our schools?; and 2) What do we do to prevent the continued loss of students to private schools and to attract some of those who have already left the system?

Both of these questions lie at the heart of the district's primary mission, and must for that reason take precedent over other considerations as plans for reorganization are considered.

In my role on the board, I entered the discussion on school organization hoping to instigate debate and soul-searching over issues that had become taboo in public discourse over the future of public education in Berkeley. Knowing how parental choices had produced significant declines in white student enrollment, I raised questions about the community's commitment to integrated schools.

To the surprise of many I also suggested that the district should consider the concept of neighborhood schools even as I acknowledged that it might mean accepting even greater imbalances in the racial composition of district schools.

Part of me wanted to see these issues raised and discussed because I knew that even though they were already a part of the private discussions parents had been having for years, Berkeley's politically correct environment had rendered them untouchable in public.

At the time I felt that forcing a

discussion on integration seemed to be the only way to create the opportunity for frank and honest debate over issues related to race in our school organization proceeded new ways for delivering educational services to children might be seriously considered. Looking into ways of breaking down the barriers that exist between our schools and the neighborhoods that they are located in was just one idea I hoped would be discussed.

As the process draws to a close and the pressure mounts for the board to make a decision on the organization and configuration of the schools, divisions within the community over how to resolve these issues are wide. We may all know a little more about the various ways in which the district could be organized, but we also know that for every plan that will be proposed there are incompatible counter plans, each of which has its own proponents and detractors.

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and in its eighth year, the trade show includes about 100

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Already there is talk of lawsuits if the district adopts a plan which deliberately reduces the degree of integration. It is now clear to me that no matter what the final plan looks like, the possibility that we could come out of this having achieved consensus over a new school organization plan, and confident that it will be an improvement over what we presently have is remote at best.

Hence, my appreciation for those who took up these questions back in 1968 has grown. That plan, combined with subsequent policies pertaining to enrollment, intradistrict transfers and racial balance, has enabled Berkeley to sustain a level of integration not found in most other urban districts. And, while the status quo is far from acceptable given the degree of racial imbalance that presently exists at certain schools (i.e. East

Campus, Washington, Columbus and Longfellow) and which is reinforced by tracking at the high school and both junior high schools, none of the proposals that I have seen guarantees any improvement in racial balance.

It is noteworthy that after considering a vast array of proposals, the Task Force ended up recommending some fairly conservative changes with respect to school organization. With the exception of its support for school choice, most of the other recommendations merely reaffirm or slightly improve existing district policies. Their unwillingness to recommend much more sweeping changes may be due to the involvement of too many people with conflicting agendas, and the inability of district staff to prevent the process from becoming unwieldy and chaotic. However, it is also true that within this community there are sharp differences of

opinion on the issues that were discussed, and perhaps there is no amount of time or skilled facilitation that could have produced more acceptable results.

Focusing our energies on how to improve the quality of interaction between students of different ethnic backgrounds is by far one of the most important things that we could do at the present time. By now it should be clear to all that simply placing students from different backgrounds in the same

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classrooms or school buildings will not guarantee that they will learn how to get along. The fact that some do should not delude us into thinking that progress is inevitable given that racial tension, particularly at Berkeley High School, continues to be such a major problem.

We need to find ways to address the race problem at all grade levels, both inside and outside the classroom. When the time comes for the board to vote and make a final decision on school organization, mine

will be based on my belief that there should be no retreat from Berkeley's experiment with voluntary integration. This district still has a long way to go in figuring out how to best meet the educational needs of its students. I remain deeply troubled knowing that instead of reducing the disparities that exist between kids of different races and socio-economic status, our schools generally reinforce and add stigma to these distinctions.

I also know that the sooner we

realize that the answers to these problems will not be found through realigning configuration plan, the sooner we can concentrate our energy on the goal of making our schools work for all of our students.

Sometimes the best thing that can be done in a difficult situation is to do no harm and leave well enough alone. That may be the reason why the work of the district's architects of '68 looks more and more appealing to me.

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