

Attn: Kalima
From: Bruce

forum_pm

LE CONTE FORUM ON SCHOOL CHOICE AND GRADE CONFIGURATION

On Saturday morning, February 28, about sixty-five Le Conte parents and staff attended the "Le Conte Forum on School Choice and Grade Configuration." The audience included Irene Hegarty, a school board member, and Jim Masters, a consultant to District senior staff.

Berkeley's grade configuration and method of assigning students to schools have recently been publicly reconsidered. This was carried on by the Superintendent's "Ad Hoc Task Force" which released its report on February 17. Le Conte's preferences on these two issues had been determined earlier via a phone survey of about 45 randomly-chosen Le Conte households. The results were submitted to the district. (For results of the survey, see...)

The purpose of the Le Conte forum was to acquaint parents with these issues.

Many Le Conte parents have questioned why the Superintendent committed money and energy to such a reconsideration. The answer is that most of the K-3 schools in Berkeley are unhappy with the current system. The frustrations have a long history.

The forum was conducted by Dena Beltzer of Le Conte. The panel consisted of Bruce Wicinas of Le Conte's Measure "A" site committee, and guests David Sheretz, of the Washington site committee, and Janet Huseby, member of the Task Force and Cragmont parent. Bruce presented the case for the current grade configuration (K-3/4-6) and method of student assignment (bussed plus neighborhood zones.) Guests David and Janet presented other views. They described the case for K-5, the preference of nearly all other Berkeley elementary schools. They presented a case for student assignment via district-wide school choice.

Most of the time was devoted to questions from the audience. The preference of the questioners for the current arrangement appeared unanimous. So vigorous seemed the loyalty to the status quo that school board member Irene Hegarty rose to remind parents that we cannot barricade ourselves from change. She argued that Berkeley will be affected by national educational and demographic trends as well as by local decisions. She reminded us that test scores show that Le Conte is not succeeding for all its students.

One reason for parent satisfaction at Le Conte relates simply to its location. Because the greater vicinity of Le Conte is naturally integrated, Le Conte does not have students bussed in from a far-away neighborhood that is disconnected from its vicinity. In this respect Le Conte is what every K-3 site committee in Berkeley has pleaded for: a neighborhood school.

The phone survey by the Le Conte Site Committee revealed that parent opinion is mixed. The survey showed a weak majority favoring K-3 over K-5. Some parents voiced frustrations with the current arrangement.

In the conversations following the forum mixed opinions were heard. Some people feel that too much energy is being diverted by this configuration debate from the immediate needs of education at Le Conte. Other people feel that the size and character of Malcolm X as well as the 3rd-to-4th grade transition remain problems. These are legitimate concerns probably shared by many parents.

Follow-up. Your "Measure A" Site committee is trying to determine its obligation. Should a meeting be arranged to allow discussion to go further? How about reaching out to the parent groups at Malcolm X and at the other feeder schools of Malcolm X to pursue a consensus about grade configuration? Should we reduce our committee's attention to the district's reorganization debate and focus our remaining time upon the child-centered

concerns that began to be addressed in our restructuring proposal of last spring? Are you willing to help with one of these projects?

What should we do? (Your name and phone number would be helpful.)

- Have another meeting. (How should it be similar or different?)
- Connect with parent groups at Malcolm X and its "feeder" schools Jefferson and Emerson to pursue a consensus about grade configuration and to improve the grade 3-to-4 transition.
- Drop the school configuration debate; Focus on improving Le Conte.
- Other - Please describe:

Are you willing to help?

Would you like follow-up information? (Furnish your name, child's name and Le Conte room number.)

- Packet of data and maps handed out at the 2/28 forum.
- Copy of articles on school choice.
- Copy of last year's Restructuring Grant Proposal.
- Copy of parents' restructuring ideas compiled from last spring's BSEP and restructuring questionnaires.
- Other - Please describe:

To register your response please return this to the Le Conte office. Thank you for your patience and commitment.

Le Conte "Measure A" Site Committee
Bruce Wicinas (848-1797) () ()