

Parents want to see action on A

Margaret Brentano

A group of Berkeley parents, frustrated by the school district's slow progress in deciding how to allocate Measure A funds, has begun meeting to try to resolve some of the controversies surrounding school reform themselves.

"The district and board are terribly frightened of saying 'This is what we're going to do,'" said Washington School parent David Sheretz, leading off the group's meeting last Tuesday night in the Washington library.

The group, calling itself the Measure A Site Committee Forum, is composed of representatives of site committees set up at each of Berkeley's schools to help decide how best to spend the Measure A bond money voters approved last June. The committees, composed of administrators, teachers and parents, sent representatives to the superintendent's task force, which issued its report in February. Included were recommendations from each school and an overall recommendation for continued emphasis on desegregation, but with parent choice taking the place of the split elementary schools (now K-3 and 4-6, with kids bused half that span) to ensure a racial mix.

After the report was released some of the site committees fell dormant, while others are still actively working for specific changes at their schools.

It is not clear what effect the overall recommendations had on the board and district's plans for the future of Berkeley's schools, because the district has yet to reply with specific recommendations of its own.

This unresponsiveness is the major source of these parent's frustration, many of whom believe that the district is ignoring their reports because it doesn't agree with their recommendations.

Mimi Roberts, a Thousand Oaks parent, said the district "created the task force and site committees, then they weren't happy with

the outcome." And now, after months of work, she said, "we feel like the decisions are all being made elsewhere."

The superintendent has complained that the site committee process was "not inclusive enough," according to those at the meeting, and at least one participant agreed with that assessment.

Looking around at the almost entirely white group of about 20, Kristin Prentice, who represents the Cragmont-Columbus site committee, said "Look at this group, we're not representative of Berkeley parents. I really think for things to improve in Berkeley there has to be much more discussion, working with groups who weren't on the site committees."

Other members of the group disagreed with Prentice. Two Jefferson school parents described how members of their group went door-to-door soliciting opinions from parents who had not attended the measure A meetings in an attempt to make their decisions more inclusive. And Roberts of Thousand Oaks distilled the group majority's anger at the superintendent's objection: "The district set up the process, now they have to respect the decisions of the site committees. We don't want to be window dressing."

Malcolm Leader-Picone, also from the Thousand Oaks committee, lays the blame for narrow community response at the feet of the district, commenting on the most recent district-sponsored development — the report from the MAP consultants which suggested a multitude of possible futures for the Berkeley schools.

"People don't respond to 72 options (the number arrived at by the MAP group). People respond to a proposal. Someone should put up a plan and have people react to it," Leader-Picone said. "Are we from the sites going to push things to happen? Right now it's a bunch of mush."

The site committees have their own problem with pushing things to happen — the lack of unity, sometimes competition between the various schools.

For instance, the Cragmont-Columbus group will not necessarily support Thousand Oaks in its efforts to acquire site based management and become a K through 5 school, because Thousand Oaks now as a K-3, along with Cragmont K-3, feeds into Columbus 4-5 (Columbus' sixth grade has been housed at King Jr. High since the Columbus building was closed). If Thousand Oaks became a K-6 school, Columbus would lose half its students, and by default would blend in with Cragmont, making one school.

Many Cragmont and Columbus parents are not in favor of this change, which would result in the loss of one of their schools.

The MASC parents were optimistic about resolving this and similar problems, however, and believe that a mosaic of grade plans as described in the February task report can resolve some of these conflicts.

The Thousand Oaks and Columbus site committees were scheduled to meet May 3 to discuss this issue, and the MASC forum is now working to set up meetings between the site committees of the other schools that feed into the same 4-6 and junior highs — the schools that are most likely to offer each other competition.

Said Leader-Picone, "We all get isolated and see our agendas being threatened by everyone else — they're not. This group has got to provide mutual support — a united front."

What the MASC forum has agreed to so far is that, in David Sheretz's words, "We want things to get rolling. The district has to respect the process it set up. The site committees must have a real function, and maybe some changes will be ready in September."

The group also agreed to meet every other week, the second and fourth Tuesdays of the month. Their next meeting will be held at 7:30 p.m. on May 11 in the library at Washington School, 2300 MLK Way in Berkeley. New participants are welcome.