

# Berkeley Schools Go Door-to-Door

**"We just want to talk to people about the schools and get some ideas about how to improve them."**

By Dashka Slater

If people in West Berkeley were surprised to find the superintendent of the Berkeley Unified School District knocking on their doors last Saturday morning, they did a good job of keeping it to themselves. Most listened politely as Superintendent LaVoneia Steele explained that she was going door-to-door talking to Berkeley parents and community members about some changes that the school district is thinking about making in the way the schools are set up. "We just want to talk to people about the schools and get some ideas about how to improve them," Steele told each of the people that she met.

**T**he reactions were as varied as the West Berkeley community. Some were enthusiastic in their praise of the school system. Some said that they were impatiently awaiting the reopening of Columbus, the neighborhood

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school which has been closed since the Loma Prieta earthquake. Others admitted that they had already pulled their children out of the district altogether. "None of our children are attending Berkeley schools," explained one man who was picking up trash in his front yard when the superintendent came by. "They're at Bright Star Montessori in El Cerrito."

"Well, we'd love to have them back," Steele replied. "We do have a Montessori preschool." The man explained that he and his wife had liked the Berkeley schools, but they prefer the private school's smaller classes and the fact that their children stay with the same teacher for more than a year. "We didn't leave the Berkeley schools out of total dissatisfaction; we just like the idea of having all four of our kids in one school," he said.

The issues raised by these West Berkeley parents—rebuilding closed schools, alternative

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much people knew about the potential restructuring of the school district. "Quite honestly, it didn't take very long to find out that, except for a core of people who should be credited with participating, most people didn't know what was



**BUSD Superintendent LaVonela Steele and school board member Miriam**

teaching methods, the timing and frequency of transitions between schools—are some of the very issues that the Berkeley Unified School District is in the midst of threshing out as part of a wholesale reevaluation of both the physical and educational structure of the school district. Currently the district is primarily composed of a half dozen smaller hillside schools for kindergarten through the

third grade which feed into three larger flatland schools for grades four through six. As part of the desegregation plan the district passed in 1968, children from the flats are bused to the hills for the early grades and hills children are bused to the flats in the later grades.

But that may be changing. In June of 1992 Berkeley voters passed Measure A, a \$158 million bond measure for the

repair, rebuilding, and seismic upgrading of school buildings soon became obvious to school district officials that the bond measure provided the district with a rare opportunity to design school buildings that be able to meet the needs of Berkeley students well into the 21st century. The thinking was that if Measure A money were to be used wisely, it made sense to take a fresh look at nearly everything about the school system, from desegregation busing to the age children are when they change schools. Ideas about special programs like music, computers, and social services.

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to concentrate on what they wanted at the school their children currently attended, without thinking about the district as a whole, she adds. "People had very little capacity to even think about the school their child would go to next. But to ignore the district as a whole is to balkanize the city."

To bring the community up to speed, the district just did a citywide mailing of the first of four Measure A newsletters which explains the three options the city is considering. The first option is to keep the current K-three/four-six grade structure. The second is to go

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with the "controlled choice" option endorsed by the task force. A third option would allow some schools to change to a K-five or K-six model and others to stay the way they are (see "Cityside," July 9).

The district also sent a letter to every parent in the district, as well as to church and civic groups and neighborhood organizations, asking people to call a special hotline number if they wanted to host a house meeting. Between Saturday's door-knocking campaign and the districtwide letter, Tiger already has a list of about forty potential hosts. The response has been much larger and faster than she anticipated and Tiger says at this rate some house meetings may have to be combined. "Given this response, we may be totally overwhelmed," she says.

The house meetings are just the first step in a three-month community-planning process which will culminate in a December 15 decision by the Berkeley School Board about what the new Berkeley school district should look like. On October 9 the district will hold the first of three Saturday workshops, each of which will be followed a week later by a round-table meeting of the school board. Tiger hopes that this series of meetings will lead to a gradual refinement of the issues and options so that by the time December 15 rolls around, the community as a whole will have a better sense of what it wants to do. Although some parents feel that

Although some parents feel that this process is merely a repetition of the process the School Organization Task Force went through last winter, Tiger points out that the task force report recommended that its endorsement of the controlled-choice option be discussed by the community. While the discussion is under way, some Measure A-funded repairs have already been completed including roof repairs at twelve different sites. Fern Tiger's consulting services are being paid for out of the school district's general fund rather than from funds generated by Measure A.

**T**he first house meeting was held on Saturday afternoon at the house of Kristin Prentice, a West Berkeley parent who has been active in the restructuring discussion since last winter. With the squeals of playing children providing appropriate background noise, ten West Berkeley parents set about choosing their top five choices from among a stack of cards that listed various trends in education, things like site-based childcare, schools as community centers, racial balance, enrichment programs, and grade structures that allow children to progress at their own rate. Later the parents had the opportunity to choose among design characteristics for school buildings, like natural lighting, potential for schools within schools, buildings that create a sense of identity, and schools that are designed to double as community meeting places.

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It is the possibility of sweeping change that the school district was trying to publicize on Saturday as the superintendent, school board members, and other school officials walked through various Berkeley neighborhoods knocking on doors. After a brief introduction, those who answered their doors were asked if they were interested in hosting a "house meeting" for ten or fifteen friends and neighbors. At these meetings consultants hired by the school district will explain what the district is thinking about doing and will get people's reactions.

"We're trying to get people who have never been to a school board meeting," explains Fern Tiger, whose firm, Fern Tiger Associates, is coordinating the public participation process. "What we're doing is laying groundwork for a whole new

way of communicating in the district."

Tiger was brought on board last spring, after initial reports about the changes the district is considering were greeted with anger and frustration by parents who were hearing about them for the first time. The School Organization Task Force, a group of more than fifty parents, teachers, community members, and administrators, had spent several months looking at the school district's current structure and a host of alternatives and had ended up endorsing the idea of "controlled choice," a model which would allow parents to send their children to any school in the district as long as integration standards are met at each school. But many parents charged that the planning process had been dominated by white middle-class parents from the hills who had failed to consider how the new system might affect the poor and minority families who make up the majority of the district (see "The Integration Calypso," April 30).

**W**ithout faulting the people who dedicated months of their lives to attending task force meetings, Tiger agrees that the task force process was much less inclusive than it needed to be. Last spring Tiger's staff conducted more than eighty interviews of Berkeley parents and community members to see how much people knew about the potential restructuring of the school district. "Quite honestly, it didn't take very long to find out that, except for a core of people who should be credited with participating, most people didn't know what was happening," Tiger says. Those who were aware of the decision-making process had a tendency

busy intersections and street crime would keep them from letting their kids walk to school even if the school were quite close to home. From here the parents began talking about the schism they feel exists between hills parents and flatland parents and whether allowing parents to send their children to any school in the district would make this problem better or worse.

After the meeting, several parents expressed enthusiasm for the process. Except for the hosts, all of the participants were thinking about school configuration issues for the first time. "This is all brand-new to me," said Diane Shelton, who recently moved into the district with her eight-year-old son. "I think these in-house meetings are a good idea because you get a lot of feedback about how the parents feel."

The house meeting's hosts, Kristin Prentice and her neighbor Joanna Graham, were also pleased. Both had been critical of last winter's less-inclusive planning process and both had spent the previous week knocking on doors and asking their neighbors to come to Saturday's house meeting. "It's the way you have to organize people," Prentice said. "You have to go door-to-door."