

NEWS & VIEWS

Separate But Equal?

The Pittsburgh School Board elections are the next battleground in the debate over neighborhood schools.

By Darlene White Natale

Outside of South Vo-Tech High School, knots of kids, black and white, mill about the small school yard or cross Carson Street to snag a Pepsi at CoGo's. They come from different socioeconomic groups, different cultural backgrounds and different neighborhoods, brought together by a phenomenon called busing. Unlike residents of the 97 percent white neighborhood around them, the students rub elbows with a racially diverse population every day. The price for that experience is a long bus ride every morning and afternoon. Another cost, some say, may be a loss of cohesion in Pittsburgh's neighborhoods.

Though the voting is still three months away, the primary campaign for five of the nine seats on the Pittsburgh Board of Education is already focused sharply on neighborhood schools and the legal quagmire surrounding busing. Already one group, Citizens for Neighborhood Schools, has zeroed in on school board member Maggie Smith (Dist. 5, Hazelwood). Michele Balcer of Citizens for Neighborhood Schools says Smith is trying to straddle the fence about a return to neighborhood schools. "Either she's going to vote for neighborhood schools or we're going to vote her out," Balcer warns.

Balcer says a majority of Smith's constituents favor neighborhood schools and by supporting them, Smith could secure herself in her district. Smith is important to the Citizens for Neighborhood Schools because she would provide them with the decisive fifth vote out of the nine-member board. According to Balcer, four representatives are already in their camp: Phyllis Bianculli (Dist. 7, Carrick), Darlene Harris (Dist. 2, Brighton Heights), Evelyn Neiser (Dist. 9, West End) and Jean Wood (Dist. 6, Beechview). One more vote could spell the end to forced busing.

Eugene Beard, vice-president of the Pittsburgh chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and an opponent of what he believes would be segregated neighborhood schools, stakes a claim to board members Alex Matthews (Dist. 3, Mid-North Side) and Lou Venson (Dist. 1, East Liberty). Beard says Board President Ron Suber (Dist. 8, Manchester) may be on the fence. "There are other school board members besides these three who would be opposed to resegregating the schools," says Beard. "Hopefully, we can support them politically." Beard also speaks of taking the battle in support of busing to the home turfs of neighborhood schools supporters, in an effort to dislodge some of them and force groups like Balcer's to spend their money and time there.

It's a winner-take-all contest for Pittsburgh's educational future.

That's An Order! Sort Of

The busing plan which directs Pittsburgh

students to schools far from home came out of a 1982 court order long deemed inviolable. But the validity of that order is now in doubt. Last November, Thomas O. Schmitt, an attorney for Citizens for Neighborhood Schools, petitioned the court to dissolve the order. On Dec. 30, the court denied Schmitt's petition because they said the case had been withdrawn by both the school board and the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (PHRC) in March of 1983.

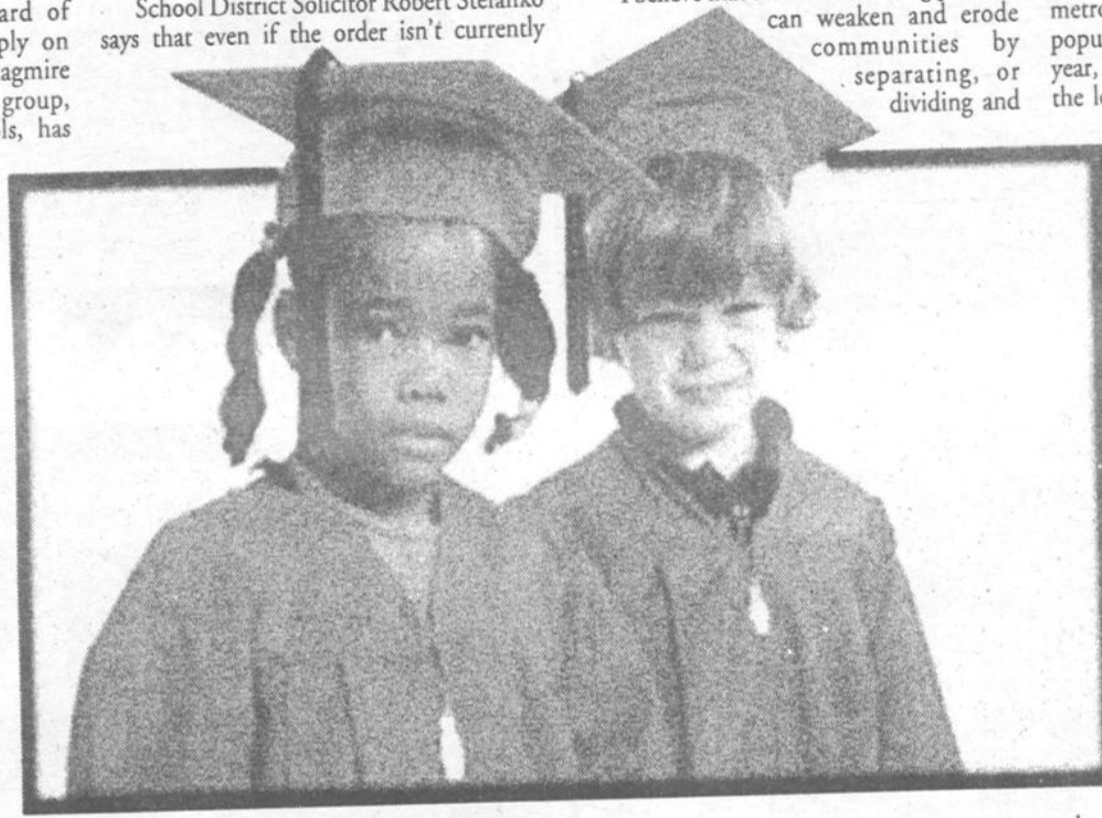
"It was kind of shocking. We've been deceived," says Balcer of the revelation. "We've been living a lie and people have had their rights taken away from them on no basis whatsoever. It's hard to even fathom that they've been complying with [an order] that doesn't even exist, and no one knew."

School District Solicitor Robert Stefanko says that even if the order isn't currently

not, [neighborhood schools] might not be a bad concept," Beard says. To him, the benefit of desegregation is not so much black kids sitting next to white students, as it is an equalization of resources like money, teachers and computers. Beard fears that schools which are predominately African-American won't receive the same resources as other schools in the district.

"The many African-American parents that I've spoken with who are in the school close to my house support the neighborhood school proposition," counters Mike Epitropoulos, a school board candidate for the 7th District. Epitropoulos says that parents of both races complain that they can't travel across town to attend Parent Teacher Organization meetings or participate in school programs.

"I believe that often times busing patterns can weaken and erode communities by separating, or dividing and



Busing parochial school children costs \$7 million annually, confirms Pat Crawford, spokesperson for the Board of Education.

Epitropoulos says there's more to it than budget crunching. He sees neighborhood schools as an attraction to families who left Pittsburgh during preceding decades. "More than white flight, as a sociologist, I look at it as middle class flight," he says. "I think class has been a more important factor than race. Again, what do we have? Lower tax-base cities with whatever racial composition trying to support large urban school districts." The inevitable result: poor schools.

Epitropoulos adds that the neighborhood school his child would attend would have a majority African-American population. For him, it's not a racial issue. He just wants his Greek-American children attending the school closest to home.

Beard characterizes white flight from urban schools as a myth. Most major metropolitan areas, he points out, have had a population decline of about three percent per year, mainly of whites, which he attributes to the loss of industrial jobs and shopping, as well as transportation and safety concerns. He believes it has nothing to do with school quality. Indeed, the Pittsburgh School District student body is now 55 percent African-American, a figure which is up only 5 percent from 1980.

Some argue that the current desegregation plan actually attracts middle-class parents, by way of popular magnet schools. "The final combination was: Magnet schools plus busing equals desegregation, or racial balance," Solicitor Stefanko says.

"There would certainly be a furor in the city if we were to destroy the magnets," adds Neiser, "so I don't think you can go back to complete neighborhood schools without destroying the magnets."

School Board's Last Stand

Regardless of the result, this may be the last Pittsburgh School Board election, if one city councilman has his way. Councilman Dan Onorato (D-North Side) has proposed a change to an appointed board. The school board has issued a strong response to Onorato saying, "Removing elected representatives is a retreat from a democratic form of government in which people voice their opinions through the officials they elect."

Citizens for Neighborhood Schools opposes the appointed school board, contending that a better idea might be paid, full-time board members. Beard of the NAACP agrees that it's an absurd idea, because board members "would be political hacks doing the bidding, the will and the pleasure of the mayor." If nothing else, Onorato's idea may have served some purpose in that it has provided some common ground for the feuding factions in the neighborhood schools debate. To bus or not to bus may still be a contentious question. But even foes agree that it should be decided democratically.

Darlene White Natale is a freelance writer from Middlesex.

INCOMING

More Schools Of Thought

After reading the article "Separate But Equal?" [Vol. 7, #7] I am more convinced than ever that the Citizens for Neighborhood Schools have provided the leadership needed to move us closer to neighborhood schools.

Those who claim their major concern is equity should visit the schools throughout the city and view first hand just how unequal the educational opportunities really are for all students. Students who are not lucky enough to have their names drawn in a lottery are forced to attend a school that may be half way across the city. This certainly is not fair or equitable.

Those of use who live in South Side are looking at the changes that are to occur in our community and we would like to know where all the students who will live in the 800-plus new units to be built will go to school. We need a high school right here in the community these children's parents will chose to make their home. ■

- Kathleen Hitz
South Side

The need for neighborhood schools can be seen better now that the verdict is in and programs and services to our children are being cut because of the Board of Education's problems with the 1997 budget.

Had the current Board members had the intelligence and foresight to vote for neighborhood schools in 1996, the school budgets would not have been cut because savings realized in decreased transportation costs would have covered other increases. Board members Maggie Schmidt, Liz Healey, Louis Venson and Alex Matthews should be held accountable for their actions and another vote should be taken to give them an

opportunity to rethink their prior negative votes in light of the current budget. The current redistricting plan that was tabled during budget negotiations has been revised to reflect all the input received and is now ready for a vote. The current school board members need to place this on the agenda and vote in favor of this plan immediately. ■

- Dolores Hanna
Greenfield

I am writing to thank Darlene White Natale for the well-written article, "Separate But Equal?" Michele Balcer is perfectly correct in saying that Citizens for Neighborhood Schools will target Maggie Schmidt as the fifth vote for neighborhood schools.

I want to say that Eugene Beard is more than welcome to come to our neighborhood schools communities. The School Board members who Mr. Beard states are opposed to the neighborhood schools concept have been invited to our communities many times. They have never responded to our invitations. There is good reason that they don't come. They don't want to see first hand that our children don't have updated computers with printers, updated software, or hallways paved with gold. We are in buildings like every child in this city minus Title 1 funding and all the resources that come with that funding.

I want to remind your readers that Mr. Beard is being paid for his view on neighborhood schools. The district has had many predominantly African-American schools for the past 17 years. These, the very schools that Mr. Beard feels will be unequal if not integrated, are getting hundreds of thousands of dollars in Title 1 funding. ■

— Frances Murray
Brookline

Dear Darlene:

I am writing to thank you for the objective balanced article you wrote concerning the issue of busing vs neighborhood schools. It is refreshing to see a journalist who does their very best to present the facts and lets the readers formulate their own opinions. We will put you on our mailing list to provide you with any updates on this continuing educational saga. Sincerely,
Michele Balcer