

On the Mack School Controversy

February 1998

Our children are not poker chips, interchangeable tokens distinguished only by color. Any dozen blue, or red, or white chips might be as good as any other, but that doesn't mean that any 73 white and 17 African-American and 10 Asian kids are interchangeable with any other. But the Board of Education seems to be basing its plans for the reorganization of Ann Arbor's public schools on this false premise. The most glaring example of this thinking is the proposal to uproot Mack School from its neighborhood and send the students and staff to Bach.

Much of the coverage of the redistricting issue has dismissed the arguments against this move as "emotional," as if only a sentimental attachment to old bricks had led a large majority of Mack parents to oppose the Board's proposal. In fact the reasons are rational and in line with the Ann Arbor Public Schools' expressed goals of diversity and quality in education.

The practice of changing school boundaries and busing children to achieve diversity may be of debatable merit. But that is not the issue here. Mack is a diverse school by any measure, in a diverse neighborhood. And it is not only diverse; it is a model of educational excellence. It is a success story for the Ann Arbor school district, one that should be encouraged.

When I first lived in the Mack neighborhood as a University of Michigan undergraduate 25 years ago, Mack had a very different and not at all desirable reputation. It is a tribute to the efforts of the Ann Arbor school system and its cooperation with the parents and the community that it now is a place where parents are proud to send their children. My daughter, like many of her classmates, is fiercely loyal to Mack and will not think of leaving.

But the board says the building is half-empty and we must go. Maybe all the children will go to Bach, or maybe some will be sent elsewhere. It's just a different facility, they say. It only goes to prove they don't live in the Mack neighborhood or send their children there. Moving the children would mean that the ones being bused would now be the least prosperous and most vulnerable segment of our community. It would mean losing the regular use of Mack's pool and playground for those who most need them. More intangibly it would mean for those on the north side of West Park that "our" children go to "their" school, rather than "their" children to "ours," a real loss to the community. [I should point out here in fairness that my daughter will be bused regardless of the outcome.]

A human community is like an old-growth forest. As long as its ecology is intact, it can survive fire, storm, flood, and earthquake; but uproot it, and it will not be the same for generations. Disrupt the Mack community, and you destroy the very kind of success the Board of Education claims to be seeking by its emphasis on diversity. What are they saying to us? That Mack's building and pool and playground are too good for the kind of people who send their kids there? That they don't care about the community? That diversity is just a game of numbers?

I say the building is half-full and we should welcome others. You cannot uproot a community, but you can add to it. Surely Ann Arbor contains enough brains to figure out ways of building on recent successes without destroying them. I don't expect hired guns from out of town to come up with ideas like that, though they may be good at statistics. But people who know the community and care about it should, once they understand what they're really doing. Bring more children to Mack to share in the rich life we have, based on real neighborhood support. Come up with new programs that continue the innovative ideas that the Mack staff have developed in recent years. Look at the faces of the children and consider.

The Board of Education plays with statistics. My daughter does not play with statistics. She plays with Ciara, Travis, Jessica: what the Board of Education calls diversity she calls friends and classmates. When she went to Brittainy's birthday party, I noticed that she was one of a small minority of white kids in a room full of African-American children; she noticed the cake and balloons and the games they played. That her best friend Jessica is Chinese is only one of her characteristics, lost in the sea of interests and activities they share. This is the success of Mack School, which the Board wants to jeopardize in the name of efficiency. No matter who is to be spared the pain in each new proposal, still the ax falls on Mack.

So welcome to the real world, kiddies. You don't have names, just colors. Your school is not a community; it's just a pile of poker chips.

On the Board of Education Election

May 1998

This year's contest for the Board of Education is a battle for the heart and soul of Ann Arbor. The recent redistricting controversy, especially the battle over Mack School, revealed a division between visions of the city. Is Ann Arbor going to continue to be a small city with varied neighborhoods where people can live, work, and shop—as well as go to school—or is it going to be a series of suburban tracts with a university in the middle, a decayed and dangerous downtown, and high-tech businesses around the outside?

Which Ann Arbor will greet the 21st century is not a matter of historical inevitability. It will be the result of political decisions, not only by the City Council or agencies of the state or the county, but also by the administration of the public schools and the Board of Education. To close Mack as a neighborhood school was a political decision; if keeping Mack open in order to help preserve the neighborhood would have been social engineering, then so is closing it in the belief that the neighborhood is in inevitable decline.

“Build it, and they will come”—tear it down, and they will leave. Without Mack as a neighborhood school, the West Park area will go the way that the former Jones and Perry school neighborhoods have gone—to commercial development and student rentals. A family neighborhood under stress needs to cultivate reasons to stay. No one can deny that the Mack neighborhood was under stress, but defeat was not a foregone conclusion. The neighborhood has endured and even rebounded in the last twenty years, in spite of the pressure, in

part because of the presence of a school into which the District has been willing to pour needed resources. Just when more and more influential elements in Ann Arbor are considering ways to arrest downtown decay and its counterpart, suburban sprawl, the District administration decides to abandon its role in neighborhood preservation. This decision points the way for the decline of other downtown neighborhoods through the abandonment of their schools

Those who have known Ann Arbor over the years may be distressed, but this is the new Ann Arbor, just another franchise of upscale suburban America. This is the Ann Arbor for whom suburban sprawl is not a blight upon the countryside and a denial of the best traditions of the community, but rather the sign of accomplishment and the meeting of a career goal. When the school district surveyed parents, their first priority was neighborhood schools, and the controversy over redistricting revealed that the majority of Ann Arbor parents still retain some attachment to the old Ann Arbor. But somehow the administration hasn't got a clue.

Why should they? How could anyone expect them to understand the unique values of the Ann Arbor community when they themselves are transients? For them, Ann Arbor is but a step on the career path. They are not committed to this city because it is their home. They were hired to do a job as they understand it, and the values they bring to it are first those of their profession and second those of their social class. Like most professionals today, they owe their primary loyalty not to their nominal superiors or the public, but to their profession and their peers in it, who are going to validate their actions and bring them the recognition and success they most value. Call me retrograde, but I do not think that is how it is supposed to work.

On the contrary, I contend that parents are the primary educators of their children. Our society has decided that it is conducive to the common good that education be provided at public expense for all children. The Board of Education are called "trustees" because they are entrusted by the citizens of the district with the delegated authority to order the public school system on behalf of the parents of the children who live within the district. The administrators and teachers are hired by the Board to execute the educational mission entrusted to the Board by the citizens and derive their authority (as distinguished from their functional competence) from them. They are answerable to the citizens through the Board, and it is to the citizens and their democratically elected representatives that they ought to feel primarily responsible.

The arrogance displayed by the administration during the recent redistricting controversy, however, demonstrates that they believe, like nobles of old, that they have a right to rule because of who they are. Therefore it is their duty to guide the Board of Education who are their nominal employers, and to resist the parents and citizens who are, after all, little more than ignorant children themselves. When parents presume to express an opinion about their children's education, or citizens point out the consequences to the community of the policies the administrators in their wisdom have chosen to adopt, they are dismissed (as the representatives of the Mack community were) with the simple observation that the experts know what is best for everyone. How the vision of school management currently in fashion among professionals was successfully

forced upon an unwilling community will make a great paper at the next professional meeting, a splendid article in the professional review, and the instrument of the next promotion to a bigger and better administrative job or even to the Valhalla of a university professorship. And our present Board, overawed, fell right into line.

But are administrators with great careers really the best for our children and our community? How do they really benefit from the stars on a superintendent's or assistant superintendent's resume earned in one scattered position after another? Do we want all the latest jargon written up in the journals or commitment to the welfare of our community, of our city, of our Ann Arbor with its unique and—given the pressures of modern society—fragile character? If we don't want Ann Arbor to turn into a high-tech Potterville, we need a Board of Education who understand the Ann Arbor we love. In this election, let's look for candidates who care about downtown schools, who want to put parents and citizens first in running our schools, who will balance the budget by cutting administrative positions, not teachers. We need a Board who, first of all, recognize that it is the public, not the professionals, who are in charge of public education.

Our children and our schools are the future of our city, not stepping-stones in someone's career. The Board of Education shapes that future. This time, let's vote as if it really mattered.