

Board Blinks on Choice

District rejects segregation reforms that would affect wealthy schools.

The Eugene School Board dodged the thorny question of whether to close, move or merge alternative schools as part of the superintendent's proposed school choice reforms in a muddled March 9 meeting.

Superintendent George Russell had earlier issued a report finding that alternative schools had creamed off wealthy and white kids and left neighborhood schools struggling to teach "poorer and browner" children.

Russell recommended that the board consider the feasibility of in three years doing away with co-located alternative and neighborhood schools, merging the administration of remaining co-located schools, co-locating alternative schools together, and relocating some alternative schools out of the south region where they are concentrated.

Russell's recommendations on closing, merging or moving alternative schools met with fierce opposition from wealthy and/or higher educated alternative school parents. Hundreds flooded a hearing last month to speak for four hours against any changes that would affect their schools. But school principals, the teachers union, the Eugene Human Rights Commission and editorials in both local newspapers supported Russell's recommendations.

On March 9, the school board voted unanimously to amend the recommendation to add the word "consider" in front of each proposal, so each was left undecided. The motion passed was to consider considering the feasibility of the changes. That's about the same place the board was before the three-hour meeting.

The vote left Russell confused and without clear direction. "Could somebody just tell me what you did?" he asked.

A motion to adopt Russell's recommendation to encourage alternative schools to voluntarily discuss mergers with neighborhood schools was only supported by one board member, Virginia Thompson.

The board also rejected Russell's central recommendation of reviewing alternative schools for possible program modification or discontinuation if they fail to meet diversity goals, have insufficient enroll-

ment, or lack a distinctive curriculum. The board voted unanimously to review alternative schools, but left details up in the air regarding that review process and any consequences of failing a review.

Most board members have spoken against including closure or merger as an immediate possible outcome of a failed review. "If the possibility exists that we're going to close our own schools and not work with them, then I don't support this," board member Tom Hermann said.

The board voted 6-1 to give school lottery preferences to poor kids so they could have a good chance of getting into higher-income alternative and neighborhood schools.

The board did unanimously approve Russell's recommendations that the district strengthen struggling neighborhood schools with a little additional funding and staff. But two board members indicated the extra money was uncertain and would have to compete with their priorities in the budget process.

The board also unanimously agreed to hire someone to educate poor families about school choice. Other non-controversial reforms Russell recommended were also passed unanimously, including adjusting neighborhood school boundaries, providing transportation for moving kids so they can finish the year at their school, and reconsidering the placement of multiple special education programs in struggling neighborhood schools.

Russell had earlier proposed providing transportation to poor kids so they could attend alternative schools, but that recommendation was dropped without explanation from the meeting agenda and did not go to a vote. Some board members had earlier questioned whether such transportation would be effective or too costly, although the idea was widely supported in public hearings. The state would have paid at least 70 percent of the cost.

The board inaction on the review and move/closure recommendations raised important unanswered questions.

Russell recommended and the board agreed that the district continue to give alternative

schools the privilege of capping their class sizes. The caps provide a powerful advantage of stable, small classes with few new children during the year. Neighborhood schools aren't allowed to cap classes and must take whoever shows up. Many neighborhood schools suffer from crowded classrooms and/or struggle with high turnover during the year. As a result of caps at alternative schools, many neighborhood schools have larger class sizes and more of the difficult-to-teach kids who are frequently moving.

Russell told the board he struggled with deciding whether to continue to give alternative schools the capping advantage that neighborhood schools were denied. "This is such a significant advantage," he said.

Russell said keeping the capping advantage was integral to his proposal to review alternative schools to see if their programs justified being given the advantage. Without meaningful reviews, "I don't know" whether the alternative schools should keep their capping privilege, he said.

Another question is whether the board now wishes to hold alternative schools immune from district plans to start another phase of school closure and consolidation in a year and a half. In the past, the district has only considered closing and merging low-income neighborhood schools as part of efforts to increase efficiency and replace older buildings with new schools.

Russell said the board will soon have to decide whether to only consider closing/merging neighborhood schools. "Some of this may be on us much faster than we think."

After the meeting, Joe Thornton, a leader of an alternative school parent group, said he was pleased that the board "didn't take any action that damages alternative schools." But he said he wasn't happy that the board took the "political move" to defer a decision on the controversial issue of closing, moving or merging the alternative schools. The non-decision "perpetuates this climate of uncertainty and division" that is damaging to the community, Thornton said.

Nancy Willard, a neighborhood school parent and leading voice for reform, said that while she is concerned that some of the board members "didn't get" the problem, she is pleased that few reform proposals were outright rejected. She said she's concerned that the review process for alter-

native schools could lack meaningful change.

But Willard says that the reviews will likely reveal that many of the alternative schools don't mesh with district goals and policies around discrimination and efficiency and lack a distinctive curriculum. "The handwriting is on the wall for all the small alternative schools."

Willard says regardless of the board vote, two alternative schools are already discussing the possibility of merging with neighborhood schools. With plans to put more resources into neighborhood schools, "that's where the new energy is going," she said.

Betsy Boyd, a neighborhood school parent who supported Russell's recommendations, said she was disappointed but not discouraged by the board inaction.

"I'm deeply disappointed that the weakest children in our school district are still going to have to shoulder the greatest burden," said Boyd, describing the unstable class sizes, student mobility, special education students, and unstable funding that plague low-income neighborhood schools.

Alternative schools have less-crowded, wealthier, more stable classes because that instability and poverty have been concentrated in neighborhood schools, according to Boyd. The alternative schools "get significant privileges that are hurting other schools, and more importantly hurting disadvantaged kids."

Ironically, alternative parents complained about the disruption that moves and mergers would cause their children, but with the instability concentrated in neighborhood schools, kids at those schools "experience that kind of change and loss every year."

The board displayed "a real lack of leadership" in putting off reform, Boyd said. Boyd said neighborhood parents continue to consider a formal discrimination complaint in the courts or to state and federal regulators.

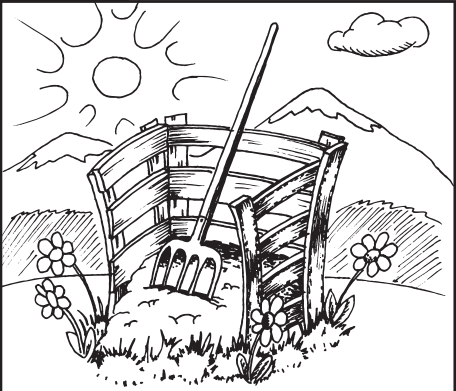
But Boyd said she was encouraged that the debate had educated the community. Russell "firmly embraced" reform, and "there was clear recognition on the part of the school board that there was a problem."

With the unfairness now recognized "the genie is out of the bottle" in terms of doing something about it, Boyd said. "While the district really blinked, they haven't closed the door." **EW**

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