



RESEGREGATION STILL BIG ISSUE IN NEW PLAN

[SOUTH PINELLAS Edition]

St. Petersburg Times - St. Petersburg, Fla.

By Donna Winchester

Many voice concern that the school district is going backward.

For the second time in less than two weeks, a predominantly African-American group of parents, grandparents and teachers turned out at a public meeting to protest the Pinellas school district's proposed student assignment plan.

This time, high profile community members amplified their voices.

"I'm here tonight to tell you we're not happy with the current proposed plan," said Norm Brown, president of the St. Petersburg NAACP. "Neighborhood schools will lead to resegregation, and the NAACP does not stand for resegregation."

Trenia Cox, co-chair of the NAACP's education committee, blasted the board. She said they disregarded the recommendations of a 47-member task force that met for 18 months and presented its report in February.

"You get an F," said Cox, who was a member of the task force. "You get an F, because the best you could do was take us backward."

The Rev. Wayne Thompson, pastor of First Baptist Institutional Church, charged that the district hasn't made any progress in the 40 years since he attended Pinellas schools.

"It seems to me," Thompson said, "we've just turned the steering wheel back to where it was."

About 280 people attended the "listening tour" Monday night at Gibbs High School, the first of three forums designed to give families a chance to speak directly to School Board members about the plan. District administrators held three "community input meetings" in recent weeks to hear what the public thinks of a system that would replace the 4-year-old choice system, which followed 32 years of busing for desegregation.

Two more meetings are scheduled this week, one at Oak Grove Middle School today and one Wednesday at Countryside High School, both in Clearwater. The board is scheduled to take its initial vote on the plan next week.

More than 40 people spoke at Monday's meeting. Cindy Fletcher, who has an eighth-grader at Southside Fundamental, said she thinks the board is more concerned about saving money on transportation than in educating students.

Dawn Smith, whose son attends Bay Point Elementary, urged board members to limit attendance at the school to children who apply through the magnet application process. Several parents pleaded with board members to reconsider closing Clearview Avenue Elementary and Riviera Middle School.

But the main topic of the evening was resegregation. A recent St. Petersburg Times analysis suggests the number of well-integrated schools would drop to 25, down from 50 under the current plan. While more than 40,000 students attended such schools under the choice plan, the new plan would cut that number in half.

Ray Tampa, a former principal at Lakewood Elementary School who ran for School Board last year, urged the board to consider holding off on making a final decision.

He praised Mary Brown, the board member he ran against, for saying she will not approve the plan in its current form.

"I would like to ask the rest of the School Board members to look at your position," Tampa said. "Is this good for all kids?"

IF YOU GO

Still time to speak out

Here is the schedule of remaining public forums on the proposed Pinellas student assignment plan:

Today: 6:30-8:30 p.m. at Oak Grove Middle School, 1370 S Belcher Road, Clearwater

Wednesday: 6:30-8:30 p.m. at Countryside High, 3000 State Road 580, Clearwater

Thursday: Board holds workshop to finalize plan, 9 a.m.-noon at school district headquarters, 301 Fourth St. SW, Largo

Oct. 16: Board takes initial vote on new plan

Nov. 13: Final vote

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