



## Schools tackle plan for diversity

By THOMAS C. TOBIN

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The Pinellas School Board on Tuesday began to design a new student assignment system that, for the first time in more than 35 years, will not focus on race.

Board members said they wanted to try to keep Pinellas public schools diverse, but in a much different way than the public is accustomed to after more than three decades of busing.

Board members asked superintendent Clayton Wilcox to begin fashioning a plan that might encourage the mixing of students of different family incomes and ability levels.

The district's practice of grouping children in schools as "black" and "nonblack" will end in May as part of a settlement reached more than six years ago in a long-running desegregation case.

Using demographic information such as family income is one way some districts around the nation are trying to maintain diversity as courts have cooled on the idea of grouping kids by race.

The board also asked that the new plan have several other elements, including a simpler and friendlier process for selecting schools than the current school choice plan; an emphasis on students attending schools closer to home; a reduction in the district's soaring bus costs; and a system that allows families to better predict where their children will go to elementary, middle and high school.

The board and Wilcox plan to hammer out details of the plan over the spring and summer, then take it public in September.

Wilcox said he hopes the plan can be approved by late October or November so the district can be ready when families begin to apply for schools in early 2008.

Board members agreed they face some tough choices in the coming weeks and months, primarily as they try to balance the conflicting goals of aiming for diversity while trying to give families a school closer to home.

Working against the board are Pinellas housing patterns that generally break along racial and economic lines.

The more the district tries to engineer diversity by moving kids out of their neighborhoods, the more it gives up the notion of schools closer to home. The more it emphasizes a school close to home, the less diversity it can offer.

"I don't even know where to begin to tackle the problem," said board member Carol Cook.

Board members also are weighing a survey of Pinellas families commissioned by a task force that met for 18 months on the future of the student assignment plan and provided its report last month. In the survey, families put a premium on having a school close to home.

"We could sit here and make the case for an integrated school system ... but we have to listen to the community," said board member Peggy O'Shea.

Concerned about the changing dynamics, members of local groups representing the interests of black children sat in on Tuesday's board workshop.

One group circulated a strongly worded letter by St. Petersburg lawyer Enrique Escarraz, who represents the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund in the long-running federal lawsuit against Pinellas schools.

Escarraz wrote that the School Board has shown "no real interest" in integrating schools or improving education for black students.

He said the black community cannot trust the board and that its promises were "made to be broken."

The letter urged a legally binding commitment by the board that, if schools are to become segregated under the new plan, the district should ensure black students get the proper resources.

The board's only black member, chairwoman Mary Brown, echoed the point, touching off a retort by other members.

"I'm getting frustrated because we come to the table and we keep talking about the same things over and over and over again," board member Jane Gallucci said. She cited figures showing the district spends more per student in south Pinellas, where black students are concentrated, than in north county.

She also noted the rising numbers of Hispanic students in the system. Rather than race or ethnicity, she said, "The focus needs to be on what are we going to do in Pinellas County for kids who have needs and how are we going to do that."

Brown responded, saying she was frustrated, too. Despite the money the district pours into south Pinellas, she said, black students are showing only limited gains.

"I want to see greater results," Brown said. "Something is not happening."