

COMMENTARY

GUEST COMMENTARY

Washington School: Preserve or des

By ALONZO MITCHELL

The Unit 4 school district has publicized its intent to demolish Booker T. Washington School in Champaign. I'd like to take issue with this decision. Here's why.

Take a look around the city at the buildings that started as public schools and serviced our communities for many decades until closure, you'll see what happened to them. Let's look.

Marquette Grade School still stands, still serving in a useful capacity providing needed services. The Gregory School building survives providing substantial residential housing to its community. Lottie Switzer School, now Judah Christian, still stands functioning as a faith-based learning institution.

Colonel Wolfe School, despite its old age, still serves its neighborhood usefully. The same is true for Dr. Howard elementary. In our sister city, the pattern holds true. The old grade school buildings in Urbana have also been spared the wrecking ball. They still stand functioning in some other capacity as useful facilities for their surrounding communities. They have survived.

Each school mentioned heretofore stands in predominately white neighborhoods, but in the historically black community of our city a drastically different picture emerges.

There the bulldozer has



Photo provided by Alonzo Mitchell

Chisholm Johnson's second-grade class poses on the steps of Booker T. Washington School in Champaign in 1953. Johnson is at left in the top row. Standing next to her is Alonzo Mitchell. The other students are unidentified, as is the student teacher at right in the top row.

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selves. After being allowed to stand empty and decay for sometime, the final solution for them was the wrecking ball. Unlike their twins in white neighborhoods, no one saw the need to save them, so they fell in a cloud of dust. Both sites are now parking lots, nearly erased from our collective memory. Since those days, no black student/staff majority school has arisen again.

So here we are again, an all-white school board far too smug to remember yesterday and another well-paid superintendent far too removed to understand our social history, fully focused on the old Booker T. Washington School, seeing it only as a relic of the past, and easily slating it for demolition. To them, it's old, tired and has outlived its usefulness. Forced by the "consent decree" to build a school in our neighborhood, not unlike yesterday's decision makers, they obviously seek the cheapest solution.

The neighborhood is old, a mix of low- to moderate-income families, and many houses are in need of upgrading and seen by the elite only as blight. This "problem" has persisted for some years. With the park district having nixed any use of park space for the project, the push to demolish BTW and gobble up its nearby properties has shifted into high gear. The thinking here does not include any consideration of the neigh-

hood's future. In the end, we should be asking for all available and potential levels of tuition for school 116, t

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the requirements of the consent decree. Everybody wins. I'm saying preserve BTW in the neighborhood where it stands. Give the people in that neighborhood an opportunity to benefit in its closing in the same way other neighborhoods benefited when their neighborhood schools were decommissioned. Here's why.

Ours is a struggling poor community that needs just about everything: improved streets, new job opportunities, better housing, job training, adult education, alternative schooling, medical services, computer access and training, meeting space, policing services, venue space, community research, archives and museum space, etc.

It's just mind-boggling to think demolishing its last substantial building is sound planning. With the cost of commercial space construction through the roof, it's irresponsible to do such a thing. The opportunity to have BTW's

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Each school mentioned heretofore stands in predominately white neighborhoods, but in the historically black community of our city a drastically different picture emerges.

There the bulldozer has reigned. Four schools served black children, one in Urbana (J.W. Hayes) renamed M.L. King still stands. In Champaign, Lawhead, Willard and Washington schools served the so-called black community.

On the northwest corner of Fifth and Grove stood Lawhead Elementary, a massive limestone building. Hardwood floors and dual staircases surrounded a huge open bay going up three stories, a classic of early 20th-century architecture. A vast playground took up half the block. Until Washington School was built in 1951, Lawhead was the primary elementary school (first to fourth grade) for nearly all children in the black neighborhoods of northeast Champaign, with the exception of a handful that attended St. Mary's Catholic School, Marquette and



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Chisholm Johnson's second-grade class poses on the steps of Booker T. Washington School in Champaign in 1953. Johnson is at left in the top row. Standing next to her is Alonzo Mitchell. The other students are unidentified, as is the student teacher at right in the top row.

Gregory.

Willard School was a two-story red brick building housing four large classrooms, standing on the southeast corner of Fifth and Church. Their fifth- and sixth-graders went for two years of training. It had a full sports program for sixth-grade boys in basketball. From there we went on to junior high school and our first school experience with white teachers and classmates.

Until the early 1940s, every teacher at these institutions was white. This all changed when a scandal involving drunkenness among certain teachers and janitors and the rape of a young black girl at Lawhead School caused a mass firing of all the white teachers and janitors. For the first time, an all-black teaching staff and black janitors came to Willard and Lawhead schools. Because our neighborhood schools served the poorest of the poor,

prior to hiring our black teachers, they also had the worst teachers in the system. They were given worn out textbooks, used desks and outdated lesson plans. But things changed in the aftermath of the scandal. Dynamic black teachers would now teach black children in Champaign. Kenneth Stratton, for whom the Stratton School is named, was one of those teachers.

For the next several decades we thrived in a special learning environment. And it was wonderful! Those teachers became our heroes; they were our neighbors and friends, they knew our parents personally and invited us to their homes; Wilbur McMurray, Ruth Calimeese, McLenda Polard, Chisholm Johnson, Lizzie Johnson, Mary Walden, Bernice Pope, Esther Turley, Marion Johnson, Odelia Wesley and Kenneth Stratton became the pillars of our community. Cecil

Nelson, Clarence Jackson and Will Bracey were the janitors who protected us like family. Collectively, they made our learning experience both interesting and challenging. We were their children, not victims to be feared.

During their tenure, those aging schools with outdated textbooks and old lesson plans produced excellence in education despite a school district that was at best indifferent. Poorly funded, last on the list for everything, both buildings were dreadfully neglected for years and allowed to fall into disrepair. Only BTW was valued by the district. It was new, good enough for any color teacher or student. Not long after the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision in 1954, it too was taken, becoming a majority white school of mostly bused-in students and white teachers.

When "Brown" took full effect, our beloved black teachers were dispersed into the system at large and our greatest special asset, loving, caring teachers, was lost forever. Our second great loss was those old buildings them-

Stay healthy



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Photo provided by Alonzo Mitchell

poses on the steps of Booker T. Washington School in the top row. Standing next to her is Alonzo Mitchell, the student teacher at right in the top row.

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In the next several decades we were placed in a special learning environment. And it was terrible! Those teachers were our heroes; they were neighbors and friends, and we saw our parents and were invited to their homes. Wilbur McMurray, Lillie Meese, McLenda Polsholm Johnson, Lizzie, Mary Walden, Berne, Esther Turley, Marion, Odelia Wesley and Kenneth Stratton became the backbone of our community. Cecil

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It's cheap, and completely self-serving. How could it be otherwise when only the affluent are calling all the shots? Who speaks for the residents? Who protects our interests? Since the super school seems to be a done deal, here's a win/win solution worth consideration.

Build the new school off east Bradley Avenue either south or east of Mount Olive Church. There are several large parcels of undeveloped land at Bradley and Goodwin that could easily accommodate the new building. A special use annexation deal could be worked out with Urbana as was done with Mount Olive Baptist.

There is undeveloped land in this area on both sides of Bradley offering several options for a better building site. Building here saves BTW and eliminates the many problems associated with a Grove Street at Wright rebuild. Traffic issues, neighbor disruption, blight abatement and parking issues are all brushed aside. The area is still black, meeting

the requirements of the consent decree. Everybody wins. I'm saying preserve BTW in the neighborhood where it stands. Give the people in that neighborhood an opportunity to benefit in its closing in the same way other neighborhoods benefited when their neighborhood schools were decommissioned. Here's why.

Ours is a struggling poor community that needs just about everything: improved streets, new job opportunities, better housing, job training, adult education, alternative schooling, medical services, computer access and training, meeting space, policing services, venue space, community research, archives and museum space, etc.

It's just mind-boggling to think demolishing its last substantial building is sound planning. With the cost of commercial space construction through the roof, it's irresponsible to do such a thing. The opportunity to have BTW's facility available for new comprehensive use and service for the residents of the neighborhood is both wise and thoughtful. Instead of destroying it, we should stand it up by seeking funding and expertise from all available sources, public and private, government (all levels), local educational institutions, UIUC, Parkland, both school districts, Unit 4 and 116, to join us in the underserved communities of C-U in a new effort to create a new and vigorous brick and mortar institution serving residents of northeast Champaign.

Why repeat the same mistakes of the past? We can find ways to take the old school building to new and even more productive usage than ever before. Why not a multipurpose learning center in northeast Champaign? Is there any question that such a place is needed? Or do we just need another parking lot?

I was in the first class to ever go to Washington School in 1951 and I sent my children there many years later; they are both quite successful today due to early training under Suggs, Session, Foster, Keith, Stoner, Hunt and others. Ours is just one story in hundreds. We love that building, its history and what it has meant to so many of us. Let's save it, preserve it and build on it.

Al Mitchell, 64, is retired and lives in northeast Champaign near Booker T. Washington School.