

CHAMPAIGN SCHOOLS

Judge chooses 13 residents to offer settlement opinions

Speakers have 5 minutes apiece to discuss decree

By JODI HECKEL
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URBANA — District Court Judge Joe Billy McDade has selected 13 community members to speak about the Champaign school district's consent decree settlement agreement at a Tuesday hearing.

McDade will hear what they have to say at a fairness hearing, scheduled for 10 a.m. Tuesday at the federal district courthouse, 201 S. Vine St., U.

The school district and the plaintiffs, representing the district's black families, reached a settlement in late July to resolve the remaining issues in the consent decree case.

Before approving the proposed settlement, the judge will hold the fairness hearing and hear comments from the public.

The judge asked for written comments from the public. He received 25 comments and selected the following 13 people to speak at the hearing: Evelyn Underwood, Pastor Jimmie Holmes, the Rev. Vanessa Buchanan, Artice James, Devin Chambers, Patrick Thompson, Phillip Van Ness, Danielle Chynoweth, Linda Grady, Carol Ammons, Sonya Lynch, Donna Kindle and Sharon Ford.

McDade also identified three additional people who will be able to speak at the hearing, but said they did not provide phone numbers for the court to contact them. They are Felicia Johnson, Nina Sibley and Lynn Stuckey.

Each person will have five minutes to make comments regarding the settlement agreement.

The two sides will have 20 minutes each at the start of the hearing for opening statements. Following the public comments, the district and the plaintiffs will each have 10 minutes for closing

remarks.

McDade said he intends for the hearing to last no longer than three hours.

Most of the seats in the Urbana courtroom are reserved for school district officials, plaintiffs' representatives and those who will be speaking. The remaining seats are open to the public on a first-come, first-served basis.

Overflow seating will be available in a jury room for those who want to hear the proceedings.

Anyone who plans to attend must bring a photo ID to enter the courthouse. Cell phones and other electronic devices are not allowed.

The consent decree, in place since early 2002, required the district to eliminate unwarranted disparities in achievement, discipline, attendance, assignment to special education and participation in gifted and honors classes, among other things.

The consent decree was to expire at the end of June, but the plaintiffs sought to extend it in three areas — special education, alternative education and additional elementary seats in north Champaign. The settlement agreement covers those areas.

LEONARD PITTS JR.

7/23/08

We know what works; why don't we just do it?



This will be the last What Works column.

I reserve the right to report occasionally on any

program I run across that shows results in saving the lives and futures of African-American kids. But this is the last in the series I started 19 months ago to spotlight such programs.

Let me begin by thanking readers for their overwhelming response to my request for nominations, and to thank everyone from every program who allowed me to peek behind the scenes.

From the Harlem Children's Zone in New York to SEI (Self-Enhancement, Inc.) in Portland, Ore., I have been privileged and uplifted to see dedicated people doing amazing work.

I am often asked whether I've found common denominators in all these successful programs, anything we can use in helping kids at risk. The short answer is, yes. You want to know what works?

Longer school days and longer school years work. Giving principals the power to hire good teachers and fire bad ones works. High expectations work. Giving a teacher freedom to hug a child who needs hugging works. Parental involvement works. Counseling for troubled students and families works. Consistency of effort works. Incentives work. Field trips

that expose kids to possibilities they can't see from their broken neighborhoods work.

Indeed, the most important thing I've learned is that none of this is rocket science. We already know what works. What we lack is the will to do it. Instead, we have a hit-and-miss patchwork of programs achieving stellar results out on the fringes of the larger, failing, system. Why are they the exception and not the rule?

If we know what works, why don't we simply do it?

Nineteen months ago when I started, I asked Geoffrey Canada of the Harlem Children's Zone why anyone should pay to help him help poor kids in crumbling neighborhoods. He told me, "Someone's yelling at me because I'm spending \$3,500 a year on 'Alfred.' Alfred is 8. OK, Alfred turns 18. No one thinks anything about locking him up for 10 years at \$60,000 a year."

Amen. Forget the notion of a moral obligation to uplift failing children. Consider the math instead. If that investment of \$3,500 per annum creates a functioning adult who pays taxes and otherwise contributes to the system, why would we pass that up in favor of creating, 10 years later, an adult who drains the system to the tune of \$60,000 a year for his incarceration alone, to say nothing of the other costs he foists upon society?

How does that make sense? Nineteen months later, I have yet to find a good answer.

Instead, I find passivity. "Save The Children," Marvin Gaye exhorted 27 years ago. But we are losing the children in obscene numbers. Losing them to jails, losing them to graves, losing them to illiteracy, teen parenthood, and other dead-ends and cul-de-sacs of life. But I have yet to hear America — or even African America — scream about it. Does no one else see a crisis here?

"I don't think that in America, especially in black America, we can arrest this problem unless we understand the urgency of it," says Tony Hopson Sr., founder of SEI. "When I say urgency, I'm talking 9/11 urgency, I'm talking Hurricane Katrina urgency, things that stop a nation. I don't think in black America this is urgent enough. Kids are dying every single day. I don't see where the NAACP, the Urban League, the Black Caucus, have decided that the fact that black boys are being locked up at alarming rates, means we need to stop the nation and have a discussion about how we're going to eradicate that as a problem. It has not become urgent enough. If black America don't see it as urgent enough, how dare us think white America is going to think it's urgent enough?"

In other words, stand up. Get angry. Stop accepting what is clearly unacceptable. I'll bet you that works, too.

Leonard Pitts Jr., a columnist for the Miami Herald, can be reached by e-mail at lpitts@miamiherald.com.

GUEST COMMENTARY

Washington School: Preserve or destroy?

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 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

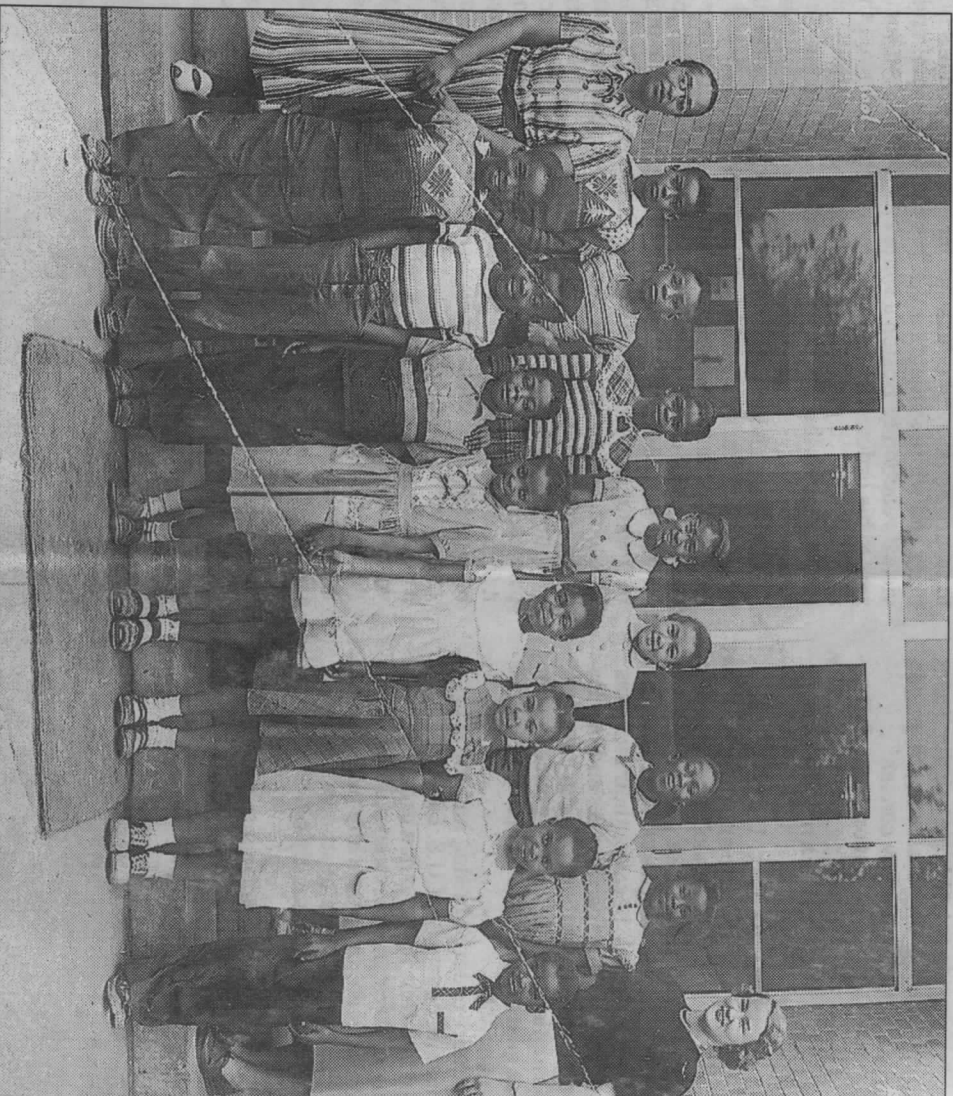


Photo provided by Alonzo Mitchell
Chisholm Johnson's second-grade class poses on the steps of Booker T. Washington School in Champaign in 1953. Johnson is at left in the top row. Standing next to her is Alonzo Mitchell. The other students are unidentified, as is the student teacher at right in the top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

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 Calhoun, McLenda Polard, Chisholm Johnson, Lizzie Johnson, Mary Walden, Bernice Pope, Esther Turley, Marion Johnson, Odella Wesley and Kenneth Stratton became the pillars of our community. Cecil

elves. 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 mixed 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 neighborhood needs or desires.

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 neighborhood 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 strand 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.

