

EDUCATION • May. 17, 2004

Tackling Local Resistance to Public Schools

Pasadena's Superintendent Reaches Out to Middle-Class Families

By John Ryan

Daily Journal Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES - A civil rights activist from the 1960s, Percy Clark enjoys borrowing the oratorical styles of his heroes, Martin Luther King Jr. and Frederick Douglass, to muse on the importance of public schools in America.

But when he addresses the biggest challenge facing the Pasadena Unified School District, Clark, the school superintendent since 2001, falls back on the cold, hard numbers.

"No district in the United States has more private schools per square mile - a total of 63 - than we do," Clark said recently from his office. "This district leads the nation by having 11,000 kids - that's one-third of all school-aged children - going to private schools. In most districts, it's 10 to 15 percent or less."

Clark was aware of these statistics before he took the job. But the cultural resistance to public schools among those who can afford alternatives has shocked him.

"There is a real culture here that, if you're middle class, you don't subject your children to the public schools," Clark explained. "We're like the bogeyman. And you don't subject your children to the bogeyman."

In 1970, the Pasadena school district became the first outside the Southern states, after *Brown v. Board of Education*, to be ordered by a federal judge to desegregate.

U.S. District Judge Manuel Real chastised the school district for intentional, segregationist policies that flagrantly flouted the principles of the monumental Supreme Court decision outlawing "separate but equal" schools.

The district adopted busing to comply with Real's order, which jump-started an unprecedented exodus of middle-class families to other educational pastures.

Now Clark, who is African-American, has set the city on its head with an aggressive and controversial strategy to bring these middle-class families back.

In a sweeping reform effort, Clark first slashed student busing in favor of having children assigned to neighborhood schools. Despite overcrowding in minority sections, he is opening a new middle school in one of the district's wealthiest and whitest areas.

And he has devoted a slick marketing campaign, in Spanish and English, to wooing middle-class families.

"Explore your school options," the campaign urges parents.

"If I'd have been here in 1970, I would have been a champion of the court order," Clark said. "I think it did make a statement that we would not segregate within the school district."

"But what happened is that white people just left."

Needless to say, Clark's approach has enraged some in the African-American community, particularly the generation for whom busing was a rallying cry in the fight for equal opportunity.

Joe Hopkins, publisher of the African-American-focused Pasadena/San Gabriel Journal, called Clark a "total disaster" and said that local schools do not work in cities like Pasadena, where neighborhoods are divided by race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

"We don't live in an integrated community," Hopkins said. "So when you stop the buses, you re-segregate. That's what it means."

Clark, however, responds that the white flight created an equally dangerous and deplorable segregation: a community with two school districts. That's the harsh reality he has to deal with, Clark said.

"As long as this community says that the Pasadena Unified School District represents the poor kids and that private schools are for the middle class and rich, it is unacceptable," Clark said. "And it borders on being immoral."

The Pasadena Unified School District, which also covers the neighboring towns of Altadena and Sierra Madre, does not reflect the region itself. The city of Pasadena is 53 percent white, but only 16 percent of the students in public schools are white. The percentage of white students in the district was 54 percent before Real's order.

Clark's plan to lure some of that population back has launched a new chapter in the school district's complicated racial history. The reduced-busing policy was part of Clark's Creating Quality Schools Initiative, approved by the seven-member Board of Education in 2002.

It was a bold plan for an outsider. Clark came to Pasadena from Edison Schools Inc., the controversial for-profit school-management company. Founded in 1992, the company boasts the virtues of capitalist education and claims that it has raised test scores of the 132,000 students in the schools it manages, on average, faster than the norm.

But the company has hit road bumps along the way, including financial difficulties, and last year the once-publicly traded business went private.

The definitive achievement of Clark's career, however, was not his time at Edison. It was his 14-year stint, between 1982 and 1996, as superintendent of schools in Lawrence Township, Ind., where he oversaw the federally mandated busing of black children to white schools.

Clark said he made busing there work and raised test scores.

"But there, my middle class didn't leave me," he said.

As Clark pursued his quality-schools initiative in Pasadena, Hopkins and others blasted him for catering to rich white families while poor black and Hispanic children suffer in overcrowded schools in Pasadena's overwhelmingly minority northwest section.

Still, many African-American leaders in Pasadena share Clark's belief that the district's busing plans were outdated, given the "white flight" and the rapid growth of the district's Hispanic population, which now makes up 54 percent of the public-school student body.

Busing was not going to lead to integration in a school district that is 85 percent minority, Clark and his supporters say.

"We found ourselves busing just for the sake of busing, and that in and of itself was not accomplishing the goal we need to achieve," Joe Brown, the president of the Pasadena chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, said.

Clark's supporters also approve of his attempts to bring back the middle-class, as a means to both re-diversify the district and bring greater economic clout to the population as a whole.

For Clark, "the new ballgame of segregation," as he terms the division between the public-and private-school worlds, is more than a moral issue. It's an economic one that could very well ruin the Pasadena Unified School District.

Since Real's 1970 order, white and middle-class flight has shrunk the district's school enrollment from 30,000 to 22,500. Now, because of soaring home prices and gentrification, the black population is shrinking, and the Hispanic population boom has leveled off. These trends will continue as affordable housing dries up, Clark said.

He fears that, if he cannot lure wealthier families back to public schools, the district will enter a cycle of decline from which it may never escape.

As Clark has settled into his role, much of the busing controversy has died down. Many observers of the district's goings-on believe that the issue was overdramatized and not terribly important to the future of the region's children.

William Bibbiani, a former school administrator who worked on Clark's plan, said the busing reduction was not that significant. The number of elementary-school students in the program dropped only from 2,300 to 1,400. Busing still is used to alleviate overcrowding in the city's northwest area, which in 1 square mile contains 20 percent of the entire school-age population, Bibbiani said.

Bibbiani, who was elected to the Board of Education after his retirement, noted that the trend toward neighborhood schools began in 1991, long before Clark arrived, when eight were created. Clark's plan merely continued the trend with addition of several more neighborhood schools.

Bibbiani added that school boundaries in Clark's plan were drawn to maintain the racial composition of the schools, in light of the dip in busing. He said the racial proportions of the schools

have held steady, indicating that no re-segregation has occurred.

In fact, Bibbiani said he proudly based his campaign for the school board on the leading role he played in drafting the quality-schools initiative.

Bibbiani nevertheless expressed his admiration for Hopkins, as well, and said he considers the vocal critic an asset to the community. He also understands why Clark's public campaign to win support for the initiative was so controversial.

"I think it raised red flags in front of the legitimate old-line civil rights community here," Bibbiani said.

This is a common view. In a way, Clark was repackaging some of the policies that were once designed to keep the races apart.

Pasadena City Councilwoman Joyce Streator, whose district covers part of the northwest area, said that Clark used "emotional trigger words."

"Those who were at the forefront of the civil rights movement in Pasadena didn't really understand what his basic principle was," Brown added. "To some extent, maybe Dr. Clark did not get the word out exactly about what he was trying to accomplish."

Brown said the wounds ran deep because segregation before Real's decision was both purposeful and extensive and reflected a troubling, stubborn racism in the city itself.

In his 1970 order, Real criticized the district for failing to comply both with *Brown* and a 1963 state Supreme Court ruling in *Jackson v. Pasadena School District*, 59 Cal.2d 876 (1963).

The *Jackson* lawsuit arose when the district refused to let a black student in Pasadena transfer out of a minority junior high school.

The court ruled in *Jackson* that the school district could take racial imbalances into consideration when revising school boundaries, as a means to further integration. District officials, however, continued to take the legal stance that race could not be a factor in drawing up school boundaries.

In 1968, a group of minority students filed the federal desegregation action against board members.

Real found that board officials had failed to take any steps to improve racial balances in the schools, especially at the elementary-school level. *Spangler v. Pasadena City Board of Education*, 311 F. Supp. 501 (C.D. Cal., Jan. 22, 1970).

A long history of housing discrimination had created widespread segregation in the city, Real explained in his ruling, and the board's policy against cross-town busing made school segregation even worse.

Segregation was so pervasive, Real said, that the Board of Education used busing only when it suited them - to keep the races apart.

"Defendants have used transportation provided at school district expense to make it possible for white children to avoid attending schools with greater percentages of black students," Real wrote. "Defendants have placed transportable classrooms at Negro schools to accommodate over-enrollment at those schools while adjoining white schools had either fewer transportables or no transportables in the same school years."

Even at the more-diverse schools, Real said, the board perpetuated segregation by placing whites in the more advanced classes, while blacks were relegated to the slower classes.

Real also found that the faculty and staffs were segregated, with few black teachers at the mostly white schools.

He ordered the district to come up with a plan that left no school with a majority of minority students.

The board, in a highly controversial decision, voted not to appeal Real's order. But the subsequent white flight made it increasingly difficult to comply with the judge's requirement to have no majority-minority campuses. Each year, school officials were forced to redraw district attendance zones to juggle the racial numbers.

White flight was more pronounced in Pasadena than in most other cities and towns across the United States, observers have suggested, because of the indignation residents felt at being labeled the first non-Southern district ordered by a federal court to desegregate.

Bibbiani said that, like many affluent communities, Pasadena had a large number of children in private schools.

This affluence, Hopkins added, made it easy for white families to leave the district.

"People here could afford the private schools," Hopkins said. "When you talk about a place like Mississippi, a white family may not have much more money than a black family."

Successors to the 1970 school board filed a court action in 1974 seeking relief from the "no majority" requirement. Real denied the request. But the U.S. Supreme Court in 1976 found that Real had exceeded his authority and ruled that the district should not have to alter its attendance zones annually to keep pace with demographic shifts. *Pasadena City Board of Education v. Spangler*, 427 U.S. 424 (1976).

The following year, school officials filed another *Spangler* action. They claimed that they were doing the best they could to remedy segregation and should be released from Real's federal oversight.

Real denied the request. But the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals agreed with district officials and ordered Real to terminate the case.

"The district court's conclusion that it should continue to supervise the integration efforts of the Board ignored both the Board's present compliance and its representations that it would continue to engage in affirmative action in the future in support of integration," the appeals court ruled.

Spangler v. Pasadena City Board of Education, 611 F.2d 1239 (9th Cir. June 6, 1979).

In his 1979 decree complying with the appellate court order, Real warned that the dismissal of the *Spangler* case was "subject to be reopened on proper application by any party, or on the Court's own motion, should it appear that further proceedings are necessary."

Real's parting words were not taken lightly by school officials, Bibbiani said. However, by then, the school administration was mostly liberal and sincerely supportive of voluntary integration.

Still, continued white flight and the rapid growth of the city's Hispanic population guaranteed a mostly minority district. As the 1980s concluded, Bibbiani explained, most of the busing was of minority students from the northwest section to the more-affluent and white residential areas on the city's periphery.

By the mid-1990s, district rules were to keep white, black or Hispanic enrollment at any individual school below a ceiling indexed to the group's percentage in the district population. White enrollment could not exceed 40 percent at any school.

Like many school districts around the country, an emphasis also was placed on promoting magnet schools to students of all races and ethnic groups. To prevent magnets from becoming racially isolated, the district adopted a system in which race could be used as a factor in admissions.

In 1999, a group of parents sued the district in the U.S. District Court for the Central District, claiming that the system violated the U.S. Constitution and state Proposition 209, the anti-affirmative-action initiative.

U.S. District Judge Dickran Tevrizian found a violation and enjoined the district from using race, ethnicity or gender in assigning students at the magnets.

In his 2000 ruling, Tevrizian criticized the district for perpetuating class conflict and for its "abysmally" low test scores compared to neighboring areas like South Pasadena and San Marino.

The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals reversed Tevrizian two years later, however, noting that the plaintiff parents didn't have standing because the district had never used the system, which was to be invoked only if too many students applied to the magnets.

Many Pasadena school boosters thought Tevrizian's criticisms were unfair, given that the higher-performing districts nearby don't have to deal with the complexities facing Pasadena.

Bibbiani, who is white, said that kids always have been able to get a good education in the district. One of his sons was valedictorian at Muir High School in the northwest, which Bibbiani called "allegedly one the most troubled schools."

Clark said that, by the time of his arrival, the rift between the private- and public-school worlds in Pasadena had become an ingrained part of the area's culture, a way of life handed down through generations.

"It got passed on from the people who were parents in the 1970s whose children are now the parents," Clark said. "And we haven't been able to break it."

The hot education debate today, in Pasadena and elsewhere, is whether school officials should focus on winning back the middle class or devote all their energies to improving the lot of their existing, mostly minority population.

Clark believes he can do both.

Tonja Torres, a Sierra Madre parent with two children at her local elementary school, agreed that the two goals are not mutually exclusive.

"I think the criticism for trying to bring the middle-class students back is unfair because he's not doing it at expense of the kids currently enrolled," said Torres, who is also an attorney. "He's not ignoring them. His concern is that every child in the district succeed, and I think it's better for everyone to have a socioeconomically diverse environment."

Phasing out the voluntary busing program, which Clark called "busing for show," was not just to mollify middle-class parents who want their neighborhood schools. Poorer children were largely the ones who had to take the bus.

Most parents, regardless of race, prefer to keep their children in the neighborhood, Clark said.

He also reopened a closed junior high school in the center of Pasadena as a K-8 campus that offered an arts-focused education. Later reforms added full-day kindergarten in every elementary school and expanded elementary schools to include grade 6. The percentage of credentialed teachers has jumped from 72 percent to 83 percent under Clark's watch, according to numbers kept by the school district.

Clark also raised awareness of and facilitated the application process for the district's open-enrollment program, which allows parents to transfer their children out of failing neighborhood schools.

All of these improvements helped the existing student population while making the district more attractive to outsiders, Clark said.

Test scores have risen at the elementary-school level. However, even Clark's supporters concede that reflects a statewide trend. The real test is whether the students continue to score well in the upper grades.

Above all, Clark said, he has put the Pasadena Unified School District on the map and placed an important idea in the minds of wealthy parents: Maybe it's worth looking into a public school instead of spending \$10,000 to \$20,000 per year on private education.

Many of the private schools in the Pasadena area are superb, Clark said, but others are mediocre or worse.

"Even Joe Hopkins would have to admit that we've elevated the debate," Clark said.

The debate has gone multimedia. Clark has been sending glossy open-enrollment brochures and application forms to families of all school-age children.

The magazine-style packet has a photo of a diverse group of smiling children on the front. The cover is stamped "Urgent - Open Immediately!" and "Explore Your School Options."

Inside, a letter from Clark explains neighborhood schools and the school-choice program, which allows parents to apply to up to five district schools outside of their neighborhood.

"From arts education to computer lessons to Advanced Placement calculus, Pasadena Unified has the right classroom for your child," Clark writes to parents.

Subsequent pages provide the facts and figures for all 37 public schools, including test scores, percentage of credentialed teachers, academic programs, clubs, sports, Advanced Placement classes and college preparatory programs offered, and whether child care and after-school services are provided.

Pictures of a multicultural selection of kids, families, teachers and principals are sprinkled around text such as "The Pasadena Unified School District - You Have an Option."

Similar photos adorn ads for the schools at bus stops and on movie screens before filmed entertainment begins.

"We think it's a plus," Erik Nasarenko, the district's director of communications, said of the student population's diversity.

"The whole concept is that people are consumers," Nasarenko said. "They want to take tours, shop around and make informed decisions."

Clark's advertising campaign seems to be hitting home. Gretchen Seager, a Pasadena parent and a real estate agent, said she was impressed when Clark came to her office to pitch the district.

"He was the most passionate and enthusiastic person," Seager said.

Although she is happy with the small, diverse Episcopalian school her children attend, Seager said she knows other mothers who are considering switching back to public school.

"They met with the teachers and administrators and realized they are dedicated and committed to making the schools really viable for middle-class families," Seager said.

Though the district's enrollment continues to decline, Clark said that is because gentrification is leveling off minority-population growth. Middle-class families are trickling back, he said, preventing enrollment from dropping further.

Robert Stockly, mayor of the mostly white and affluent Sierra Madre, confirmed Clark's contention that wealthier families are starting to look into public schools. But don't expect overnight success, Stockly added.

"It's an issue that has been out there for 30 years," he explained. "I think the realistic expectation is that this is going to be a methodical, gradual process."

"It's unrealistic to expect a great influx of families that have left the school district to come suddenly back. But I think it can happen over time."

Torres, who has a 1st-grader and a 3rd-grader at Sierra Madre Elementary School, said she finds it frustrating when many parents in the area won't even consider public schools.

"They'll just reject it out of hand, without going to look at any of the schools," explained Torres, who with her husband runs a criminal defense law practice focusing on appellate work. "If they went and took some of the tours, they would see what a wonderful array of options are available to people."

Clark acknowledged that the Sierra Madre school has an especially good reputation and that the perception for schools in other areas can be much different.

Quite bluntly, he said that many parents think their kids' throats will get slit at public schools. The district has to devote resources to marketing, given the prevalence of such beliefs, he added.

Racial tensions flared late last year when the school board approved Clark's plan to open a middle school in Sierra Madre. To his critics, the move was a perfect example of Clark's overeagerness to please white and wealthy families at the expense of the existing student population. A new school has been needed in the northwest section for decades.

Clark defended the plan, noting that the new school will be housed in an existing campus building. The expansion plan approved by the board included building primary centers in the northwest; it will just take longer to find space in the crowded neighborhood and go through construction, he said.

Chris Holden, an African-American councilman who serves part of the northwest section, said that the issue is complicated and that Clark can't be held to blame for failing to find easy answers.

"If there was an easy solution that had been bypassed, a lot more people would have been highly upset," Holden said.

Streator, who also is African-American, said the failure to open a new school in the northwest is a sore spot for her constituency, which has suffered from decades of neglect.

"That's something that the school board hasn't come to grips with until now," she said. "It's a real issue for any school district that built based on a population from 50 years ago and never made a shift based on adjustments."

Both Holden and Streator said that Clark has done a good job raising the district's profile in the community.

Holden expressed ambivalence about Clark's efforts to reach out to the middle-class, however. He said that more families will come to the district of their own accord if they see the school district improving than because of a shiny brochure.

"To some degree, it might be form over substance, and maybe Dr. Clark hasn't phrased it correctly," Holden said. "I would suggest that the focus be not so much on rolling out the red carpet for any particular group but on making sure that everybody throughout this entire city is paying attention and recognizing the improvements that are being made."

Bibbiani agrees with Clark that broadening public-school appeal is essential to the district's survival, given how middle- and upper-class families, which typically have fewer children, are taking over an increasing percentage of the region's housing.

"It is self-defeating and isolationist to assume that a district such as Pasadena can continue to serve an ever-smaller group of poorer, almost exclusively minority students," Bibbiani said.

He noted that a 1997 school bond for \$240 million Measure Y was vital to the improvement of all schools in the district. The measure passed easily, but Bibbiani said future bonds could be in jeopardy if the district's role in the community continues to decline.

"We didn't only ask the parents of the kids we served to vote for that bond issue," he said.

Bibbiani added that, clearly, all students will be better served if the population served is larger

and more diverse.

Clark also pointed out that declining enrollment means less state and federal funds and further cutbacks.

Both Bibbiani and Clark stressed how ugly it gets when different parts of a district fight for pieces of a reduced funding pie, while operating costs, such as salaries, continue to rise.

In fact, Clark insists that he sees his challenge in socioeconomic rather than racial terms. Clark doesn't believe in a central *Brown* tenet: Black children need white kids around to learn better.

Though he sometimes uses the terms "white" and "middle class" interchangeably, Clark is aware that middle-class flight in Pasadena includes blacks, Asians and Latinos.

Clark said he doesn't care what color his students are. He just wants the power that comes with serving middle-class and rich families.

"Frederick Douglas said, 'Power concedes nothing without a demand,'" Clark said. "I want the middle class back in this school district because I understand politics in America. Poor people demanding doesn't mean crap in a capitalist country."

In fact, Clark said, poor people generally are passive. Middle- and upper-class families, in contrast, tend to have active PTAs as well as strong opinions about the performance of schools, teachers and city council members.

"As an administrator, that's what I want," Clark said.

The alternative, Clark said, is to watch a shrinking school district become increasingly powerless and eventually waste away.

"Maybe, if my critics would come up with another solution like a court order, one saying the private schools can't just have middle-class kids," Clark said, "maybe Judge Real will come back on the case."

© 2004 Daily Journal Corporation. All rights reserved.