

Unfinished business on school assignments

By Susan Naimark | November 28, 2004

THE RECENT debate over student assignment in the Boston Public Schools marks both how far we have come -- and how far we have still to go as a city.

An extensive public process over the past eight months engaged hundreds of parents and community members in dialogue about how students are assigned to our public schools. The debate was both passionate and civil.

This alone was significant in a city where politics -- school politics not withstanding -- has historically been a blood sport. The process of engagement showed that the School Committee was willing to hear from and respond to the interests of the people served by our schools.

It also showed that we as a city are capable of disagreeing and still respecting divergent points of view. And it showed the students that adults can engage constructively and talk out their differences even if they don't "win."

The importance of all these things should not be underestimated in a city that has not completely gotten over the battle scars of court-ordered desegregation 30 years ago. One South End resident who attended a recent School Committee meeting called the process a sea change.

And now the unfinished business. Some parents who came forward were children themselves when our schools were forced by the courts to desegregate in the 1970s. Others did not live in Boston during that era. Yet, the positions this time became polarized, and, once again, along racial lines.

Two groups emerged during the current debate, the "Walk-2-School" group which is predominantly white, and the "Work-4-Quality" group, a racially diverse coalition led by people of color.

Both groups willingly acknowledge that they are committed to working toward the same goal: high quality public schools for all children in Boston. However, there is a vast difference of opinion about what it will take to get us there.

The unfinished business is about this difference of opinion, which continues to be about race. What unfolded were different analyses by each group, based on different experiences.

The "Walk-2-School" group is confident about their ability to go into any school -- preferably in the neighborhood in which they live -- and make it work. The "Work-4-Quality" group does not have this confidence, and wants to first know that they have access to high quality schools before having their options narrowed to neighborhood schools. The unspoken assumptions are about how members of each group understand and experience their access to the institutions of power in this city.

The unfinished business is about naming this difference, then making sure that the school staff treat *all* families with respect. It is about ensuring that all families fully understand how decisions are made and that they have full and equal access to the vehicles for input to those decisions. They must understand the mechanisms for holding the schools accountable and be confident that they can use them and get results.

As long as there are extreme differences in perceptions about one's ability to influence the system, there is unfinished business about race and the impact of racism in this city. It is incumbent on us to take this disparate impact seriously and address it.

The recent dialogue about student assignment in the Boston Public Schools demonstrates a shared commitment to racially diverse, high quality public schools for all children. It did not get us to a better understanding of the continuing discrepancies based on race. Yet we have, this time around, built a foundation of constructive engagement on which to build this understanding and a new way of doing business.

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