School Board votes to disband clusters

Black board members oppose proposal

By LORI CHANDLER
Advocate staff writer

Despite pleas from a packed audience to make no changes, the School Board voted on Tuesday to send U.S. District Judge John V. Parker a proposal under which clustered schools would revert to geographic attendance districts.

The board voted 9-3 for the proposal. Only the black board members — board President Press Robinson, Frank Millican and Eva Legard — voted against the proposal.

The changes were presented at the last joint meeting between the NAACP and the School Board. The changes are an attempt to remove uncertainty in school assignments, to encourage students to return to the school system and to reduce transportation, officials said.

Although board member Robert Meador said that no board member objected to presenting the plan to the NAACP, Millican said he never voted to accept the plan.

Robinson said of the vote:
“'It's one thing to agree to put it on the table for discussion and another thing to send it to the court.'”

The board held a special meeting on the proposal Tuesday. Associate Superintendent Graydon Walker and NAACP representative Vicki Lott worked on the plan.

The board’s motion also invites the NAACP to seek court approval.

NAACP President George Eames, who canceled further negotiations with the board, attended the meeting and said afterward that the plan is not an NAACP proposal.

“They keep saying that it’s an NAACP plan, but this is Mr. Walker’s plan,” Eames said.

About 75 parents representing three clusters said that their cluster situation is working and that they did not want change. The audience frequently clapped and shouted “Amen” during the meeting.

“We have no stability,” Magnolia Woods Elementary School parent Marie Armstrong said. “Unless the public school system gets a plan and stays with it, we’re not going to get anyone back in here. We need to work with those who already are in the school system. We’re getting the raw end of the deal.”

Bill McDaniel of the Baton Rouge Board of Realtors said that his group is preparing literature for companies...
considering a move to Baton Rouge. “We feel that there needs to be a good positive movement for the school system,” McDaniel said. “Companies are not choosing to relocate here because of the present confusion in the school system. We’re for anything that will attract them here.”

Other parents saw the plan as a “quick fix” that will be changed from year to year and were concerned that the plan is geared primarily to attract students who left the public schools. “You have to stop moving our children like they are checkers on a checkerboard,” Teresa Bell said. “Stop changing it unless you have something better to offer.”

“If they want to come back, come on back,” Washington Cummings, a parent at Progress Elementary said of the students who left the system. “We sat down and worked things out together.”

Many of the parents were upset about a proposal that would move the gifted-talented program from Baker Heights Elementary School to Ryan Elementary.

Millican and Legard said they oppose the plan because it is unfair to students. “It’s not right to move children from one area to another and call it desegregation,” Millican said. “I don’t want to spend any more money on getting people in the school system. And I’m not concerned about the real estate people — they didn’t tell us how many children they have in our schools. If we treat the ones we have here right, we’ll be fine.”

Meador said that both the NAACP and the board acknowledged that the clustered schools are not working. “I’m not willing to let this die on the table,” Meador said. “I think that if the judge has been following this and gives it a lot of thought, he’ll think seriously about this proposal.”

Board member L.L. Hines said that the public needs to work with the school system. “We’re going to collapse if we don’t get help from the public to address the overall problems,” Hines said. “Let me tell you, it takes money to run this school system.”

Greater Baton Rouge Chamber of Commerce representative Harold Suire said that the action seemed appropriate.

“In light of the recent NAACP reference to the meetings, it seems appropriate that the board should present the plan after all the work that has gone into it, let the judge decide and continue to make an effort to solve the problems.”

The board and the NAACP had been meeting to identify problems within the school system and possibly end a 1981 federal desegregation court order and a lawsuit against the board.

Robinson said that a majority of board members requested the public meeting to vote on the proposal.

Some single-race schools, which were set up in the court order, are compensated by having a 27-to-1 pupil-teacher ratio and other special programs. While the changes desegregated some schools, others remained single-race schools.

For those schools that were added to the single-race school list — Merrydale, Dufrocq, Progress and Harding — classes will have no more than a 27-to-1 ratio, will have guaranteed first priority maintenance, will receive extra instructional materials and, for those students who qualify, priority admittance to the two middle magnet schools, officials said.

Board attorney John Ward said the proposal will be submitted to the court by next week.