Weiss promotes local deseg, redesign plan

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Educational institutions around the country have dealt in cliches and paid only lip service to the problems in their field for many years, but the redesign and desegregation plan is a local attempt to meet those problems head-on, Superintendent Bernard Weiss said Wednesday.

Weiss told local members of the country's oldest black service fraternity that redesign has an added advantage in that it will cause the school system to desegregate itself and the 35-year-old federal desegregation suit that is still pending.

Weiss told members of the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., Xi Nu Lambda Chapter, that redesign students average slightly lower academically than non-redesign students, that initial gains in pupil and teacher attendance in the program have not lasted and that the program has had little effect on desegregating high schools.

Overall, the changes in racial balances of the redesign schools have mapped the changes of the rest of the system — about a third are better, a third have stayed the same and about a third are worse.

However, he said desegregation can be improved as more schools are included in the plan and it is given more time to work. Also, he said student achievement can be improved with greater support for teachers and principals, and the dropout rate can be improved as redesign focuses more attention on students and parents and less on the convenience of administrators.

Weiss said redesign's most significant impact has been in the education of at-risk students. An outside evaluator concluded that the at-risk students in the redesign plan improved at a greater rate than those outside the plan.

Redesign is an attempt to desegregate schools by establishing enhanced programs that are intended to attract students to schools in which their race is in the minority. It also has introduced site-based management to the system, in which principals, teachers and parents are supposed to have more authority over the operation of individual schools.

"School redesign in the minds of some people is up for grabs," Weiss said. "Is the superintendent blindly leading people down the primrose path? I don't think so."

Weiss said the oversight system installed as part of the redesign plan — consisting of school audit teams and a central Redesign Oversight Committee — has functioned well to ensure schools tailor their programs to the needs of their students.

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However, before the meeting Wednesday, board member Jim Talbot blasted Weiss for appointing G. Washington Eames, the president of the local branch of the NAACP, to the oversight committee.

"He's a litigant in the (desegregation) suit and he's telling us how to run our business," Talbot said of Eames.

Talbot said that action by Weiss has become the 11th item on his list of faults with the school system that he claims Weiss either caused or has failed to address. Talbot has said Weiss must address those points or face a call for his ouster.

Weiss has said Talbot's first 10 accusations are false. After the meeting Wednesday, he acknowledged appointing Eames to the committee, but said:

"I think Mr. Eames has functioned very well as a member of the oversight committee. I know his basic interest is in supporting the needs of the children of the parish."

When told of Talbot's comments, Eames said:

"I'm a king. I don't respond to criminals," a reference to Talbot's position as a member of a board that has been found at fault in the federal desegregation case.

Weiss also addressed two areas of the school system that have resulted in much criticism of his administration — busing and the budget.

Board members, including Talbot, have complained of long-distance bus rides under the redesign program and blamed redesign for an impending $5 million to $7 million budget shortfall during the 1991-1992 fiscal year.

However, Weiss said redesign has cost only $1.8 million — $800,000 of it salaries for teachers and aides — and that redesign program bus rides to school average 35 minutes, only 10 minutes longer than regular bus rides.