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Boundaries schools must cross

Elise Fillpot
Guest Opinion

A number of eloquent letters to the editor have appeared recently to address the boundary issues in the Iowa City school district. I'm hopeful we are on the verge of doing the essential work of re-drawing our elementary school boundaries to eliminate the concentration of student transience, poverty and wealth in certain schools.

I also hope, however, that as we seek new geographic school boundaries, we will dismantle a myriad of other boundaries that divide the children in our schools and community:

- The boundary between those who drive and those who take public transportation. When we schedule extracurricular programs, teacher-parent meetings and other non-school day events, do we consider how we will provide transportation for those who don't own cars?
- The boundary between students with Internet access in their homes and those without. While the \$30 a month or so that Internet connections cost may seem like nothing to a middle-income family, families trying to survive on \$10 hourly jobs cannot even secure necessities when they are paying local housing rents. When teachers require students to do homework that involves Internet access, it's no longer "home" work if some students don't own a computer or have Internet access in their homes.
- The boundaries around extracurricular activities. Do we offer varied music and dance options that appeal to students' various interests in those areas? Do we provide equal levels of participation in sports for all students, not just those with highly developed skills because their families can afford the financial and transportation resources required to participate in private club sports? Do we make available the equipment students need to participate in any extracurricular activity, and let students know that equipment is available for them to use?
- Social boundaries. Do we work to identify and break down harmful social boundaries between students? When a child is systematically ostracized, recess can be a hellish experience for that child every day. Do we intervene and implement rules that will both alleviate an individual child's suffering and teach fellow students empathy and consideration? Do we make sure our teachers don't utilize group-forming strategies that will humiliate students who are rejected by their peers?

Some of these barriers will most effectively be broken in small ways and moments. But those moments won't occur in any significant amount if we wait for them to happen out of the blue. From personal experience, I've found that it doesn't work to ask one child at a time to cross the barriers.

As a school community, we need to decide we won't tolerate the barriers. And then, with policies formed not only in the mind, but in the heart, begin to dismantle them.
