

Level the playing field for every kid in the school district

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Like a parent with children on opposing teams, my sympathies are divided; I can only hope for a fair contest. Having served on the Iowa City School Board for six years, three as its president, as well as having been an active Roosevelt parent for a decade, I have substantial empathy for each side of the ongoing debate regarding the future of Roosevelt Elementary.

I appreciate the board's dilemma: they are volunteers, they are constrained by a complex and daunting set of financial and legal formulations, they are trying to balance the needs of the past, present and future, and, no matter how many hours they devote and how hard they try to communicate, they are criticized for not doing enough of either.

At the same time, I have deep concerns over losing an historic, inner-city public school that has served our community for generations. Sending my kids to Roosevelt was like sending them to New York's United Nations School. Roosevelt's internationalism is its heart and soul; its unspoken credo is that as humans we come in a wide variation of color and language, but underneath we're basically the same. Our task is to learn to live well with one another. When Roosevelt families wear stickers reading, "We are Roosevelt," I believe this is what they mean.

At the last school board meeting, gleaning the anguish and frustration on both sides of this drama, I concluded that our community's decision-making process is broken. The board believes it's done due diligence in educating the community, yet Roosevelt parents feel they weren't given ample time to process and respond. The board took in lengthy community feedback at multiple forums, yet Roosevelt parents, who have staged a compelling campaign to "Save Roosevelt

School" fear they are up against a foregone conclusion.

Our faltering process reflects the critical fissure in our school district, namely the vast inequity in the socio-economic complexions of our elementaries. The district's 19 elementary schools range in free and reduced lunch populations from 3 percent to 75 percent with an average of 33 percent. The implications of this inequity run the gamut from grossly unequal educational opportunities to highly disparate levels of parental involvement, and by extension, to extreme variations in the volume of the voice representing any particular school.

In other words, it's politically easier to close a poor school than a rich one. Fewer parents protest, and, moreover, fewer parents with local power and influence protest. It's unfair. It hurts. But it's true. Roosevelt families know it's true. Ironically, it's a lesson in glaring opposition to the equity strived for every day at Roosevelt.

No single board or administration is to blame for these socio-economic discrepancies. Rather, they're a conglomeration of short-sighted choices made over time in conjunction with a zoning policy that clustered low-income housing in one section of town. However, until we correct it, this problem will rear its head over and over again in different guises. The Iowa Department of Education stated that our district's socioeconomic and racial integration should be one of the primary criteria utilized when making decisions related to new buildings, school closings and the drawing of boundaries. It remarked that decisions made in upcoming years will significantly impact how segregated/integrated our community (not just the district) will be in the future.

Unfortunately, re-drawing boundaries is considered the "third rail" of school board service. If you think closing a school is tempestuous, just try a district-wide boundary change affecting every household. We'll have to expand the boardroom to accommodate all the commotion!

But that's just the point, change affecting everyone, change made in the name of

fairness, change that will pave the way for a more equitable future for all kids, regardless of background, is action that board members can stand behind with pride. Convening a citizen's committee with the explicit charge of moving each elementary school toward the district average of 33 percent free and reduced lunch population would be a first step.

While we're considering the fairness of our system, it's worth noting that Iowa Code allows for a more direct form of representation on school boards. We could divide the district up with some board members representing sub-districts and others at-large. Roosevelt parents might have felt more enfranchised had they had a direct representative on the board. These are the issues that should be front and center when the next school board election rolls around.

If we must sacrifice Roosevelt -- it's complex, colorful history of children from around the block mixing with those from around the globe -- let's at least honor its legacy: that for all our differences, we're in this place together at this particular time and it's our obligation to make the best of it.

Level the playing field and give every kid a fair shot at the future.