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What happened to the great ideas? please

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Guest Opinion

An Iowa City School Board planning document from April 2000 states that the board "would like to maintain the concept of neighborhood schools, keep attendance areas contiguous, keep families together, and limit students to one forced transfer during their elementary years." The document spoke of "input from the community," "back and forth dialogue" and "regular revision." It spoke of "full utilization of existing buildings" and the board's preference that "all buildings continue in use." It stated that the board wanted "to maintain the equivalency of educational opportunity between buildings."

What happened to all these great ideas?

From my point of view, almost all of it seems to have been empty rhetoric. None of the major ideas discussed in the 2000 planning document were ever codified into written district policy. In fact, with flagrant disregard for the concept of "equivalency of educational opportunity between buildings," the board and district administration drew lines and maintained previously drawn lines around three low income areas and transported the students living in these areas to schools with lower average family incomes thereby increasing the economic disparity between some of our schools.

Despite how this 2000 district roadmap called for significant and frequent interaction with the Iowa City community, the structure of the regular school board meetings and the reluctance of board members to comment individually about school-related matters serve to limit public inquiry and argument about the conduct of the board's policies.

At the March 23 board meeting, the liveliest conversation I heard among the board members concerned the specific means by which individuals would be limited to four minutes of time at the podium. As a native of New England -- where the concept of the "town hall" meeting is still venerated and where no public authority would dare to suggest that their time is too precious for real democracy -- I was shocked.

It is time for this educated, progressive and relatively affluent community to codify fairness. Let's make our two existing high schools more equal in size and demographics, and then make it written policy that they remain so. Such a policy will serve as a firm guide for the district when it builds a new high school in the future. With such a policy in place, boundaries will change from time to time -- maybe even frequently -- but our schools will remain the same.

Currently, we are allowing our schools to change rapidly so that our boundaries can remain the same. Our kids don't attend our boundaries, they attend our schools.
