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## Looking at the big picture

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*Guest Opinion*

Over the next few weeks, the Iowa City School Board will consider the future of school attendance areas in our community.

Citizens for Outstanding Public Education in Iowa is circulating a petition that seeks to focus the upcoming debate on facts: The catastrophic effect that preserving existing attendance areas and policies would have on our schools and our community. In short, they would lead to:

- Socioeconomic divisions,
- Disparities in educational opportunities between "haves" and "have-nots,"
- Overcrowding of West High,
- Underutilization of City High and
- The creation of incentives to increase the capacity of West High, thereby delaying construction of a new neighborhood high school in North Liberty.

The board's new plan will address these looming challenges and send ripples through the lives of our citizens and the life and character of our community itself.

Who are we? Are we like other cities throughout the country, where citizens have meekly allowed school boards to stage meetings that are little more than boring public theater, where attendance areas are gerrymandered and where educational opportunities available to less economically advantaged populations erode? Will the upcoming debate be poisoned by the fallacy that we are fighting each other over limited resources, instead of designing a long-term plan that maximizes educational opportunity by creating conditions in which overall excellence thrives in the entire educational system?

I hope this will not happen. Too many of us are mobilized to prevent this outcome. To believe it cannot happen here, however, would be criminally naive. Unequal education is the national norm. How can we make sure we do not drift into catastrophe?

- First, the board must include in its citizen task force representatives of all the activist groups that have studied the challenges in the district.
- Second, we must commit as a community to deal with each other openly and with intellectual honesty. If parents fear the effects of boundary change, they must say why, so that the administration can address their legitimate concerns aggressively.
- Third, the board must be prepared to tune out morally illegitimate arguments based on division, fear and the special interests of individuals or small groups.

If we do these things, we will succeed, and the board and school administration will create a lasting, positive legacy of leadership.

COPE believes that our community wants and needs two (and eventually three) equally excellent comprehensive high schools, basically equivalent in course offerings, numbers of National Merit

Scholars and the other objective indicia of excellence that new residents will consider in making housing choices. To do less is to discriminate against those in the attendance area of an inferior school.

If we fight against each other without agreement on core principles of parity and long-term community interest until a bloody victor emerges, we will end up with a community we scarcely recognize. Let's look at the big picture, respect one another and make the right choices.

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