

A magnet school with no magnetism

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Since the late 60s, the Martin Luther King Middle School in Dorchester has had a reputation as a violent, dangerous place for kids and adults to be. The reputation still clings to the school, yet just about everyone who has visited the school recently knows that there has been a steady improvement in the climate and the quality of learning over the past six years.

When it was announced more than a year ago that white students would be bused to the King School, there were many predictions of the terrible things that would happen to them, if they even went. Yet the last school year was the best the King has had in a long time, and there are many parents of white students who feel their children got a first-rate education. For those of us who worked so hard to bring that year about, there was the additional satisfaction that our supposedly substandard and dangerous school functioned much more smoothly than many schools in other parts of the city.

Buoyed by our success last year and further encouraged by the school's designation as a magnet school for Phase 2, several teachers started meeting in the spring to discuss ways of revamping the entire program and making changes to use more teacher talents (minicourses and electives), to teach reading more effectively (daily reading classes with home room teachers and specialists), to humanize the school (breaks between classes and a recess after lunch), and to set up accountability among students and teachers for certain basic skills at all three grade levels. After several exciting meetings in which these and many other innovations bubbled up, the group submitted a proposal to the state for a month of meetings this summer and the use of outside consultants.

The proposal was accepted and the meetings began in high spirits, but then we learned that few white students had applied to the King School. Since the school must be racially balanced by order of Judge Garrity, this means that many black students who made the King School their first choice were assigned elsewhere in Dorchester and South Boston, and the total enrollment of the school (capacity 1000) is now 297. There's been a lot of scratching of heads and wondering what went wrong, but so far nobody has found a way to solve the embarrassing problem of the magnet school with no magnetism.

If the school opens in September with only 297 students, it won't be long before more than half of the teachers are transferred to other schools, and the first to go will be most of the group of teachers who have been planning the magnet program to be implemented in the fall. The next thing out the door would be much of the careful planning and programming itself. It's a bitter irony that the King School, which struggled for years as a neglected all-black ghetto school and pulled itself up from the nether reaches of chaos, which now has a grass-roots attempt to put together an exceptional program in progress, which operated as one of the quietest and most effective integrated schools in the city last year and stands a chance (if given a chance) to attract many more white students in the future, should now be dismembered.

Clearly it was a miscalculation to make the King School a magnet school in the first place — the experts must have been misled by our success last year when under the surface the school's old reputation still hovered over it. But what can be done now? There are several possibilities, each of which has problems:

1 — We could make a concerted effort to recruit more white students to come to the King School and then reassign an equal number of black students who originally applied to the King but were assigned elsewhere. The problem here is that the present controlled transfer policy makes these moves complicated, and there is a real question as to how many white parents would be willing to change horses at this late date. This might be true even after many of these white parents in Dorchester find out that their children are going to grossly overcrowded schools this year — while 700 vacant seats and a genuine magnet program beckon from the King.

2 — Judge Garrity might make the school back into a district school and require a full complement of white students to attend, as he did last year with such good results. The problem here is that parents have already been informed of an assignment, and a last-minute change would be upsetting, even inflammatory.

3 — Judge Garrity could keep the King School as a magnet school but assign more white students to it with the understanding that if the school didn't exhibit more drawing power next year, it would become a district school again. There is already precedent for this approach in the high schools, where some magnet schools were also under-applied by white students and many have been assigned anyway. But this has the same drawback — that of angering hundreds of parents who had already been told of a definite assignment for the fall.

4 — The judge could order the school department to keep the staff at its present level, or keep cuts to a bare minimum so as not to damage the magnet program, and let overstaffing be one of the main attractions of the school. This would certainly help the magnet program get off to a stunning start, but seems an unlikely extravagance in a city where the mayor is wielding a meat cleaver.

5 — Finally, the judge could allow a variance to the school for one year which would allow it to be disproportionately black. This would be strictly limited to the 1975-76 school year, the imbalanced situation would be terminated by changing the school back to a balanced district school.

Having an innovative, integrated King School operating successfully at full capacity, even at 70 or 80 percent black, is in the best interests of the whole city, not only because it gives an exciting program a chance to get off the ground, and not only because it relieves overcrowding in other schools, but also because of the important symbolic value of the King School, once a blot on the name of the man it honors, emerging as a visible, successful example of quality integrated education.

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