



# HILL RAG

JUNE 2006



## Chasing the Spirit of **BROWN V. BOARD**

### Breaking Gentrification Pattern, Professional Parents Embrace Public Schools On The Hill

by: *Gabriel Pacyniak*

In the kindergarten class at Tyler Elementary School, all of the students are black, not unlike most of the kindergarten classes in the District of Columbia. Most of these students also receive free- and reduced-lunch, meaning that they come from families that make 185 percent or less of the federal poverty guideline, or less than \$29,766 for a family of three. Tyler's students, most of who live in the nearby Potomac Gardens public housing, have scored relatively poorly on standardized tests; by fifth grade, fewer than 10 percent read at academic grade level. And in the past five years, Tyler's enrollment has dropped by almost 50 percent, from 333 to 238.

Yet there are some very exciting things happening at Tyler. The school has a new Spanish-language immersion program, beginning with a new pre-kindergarten (pre-k) program. Last year, the school formed a Parent Teacher Association (PTA) - although the school had a history of parent involvement, it lacked a formal organization. This year the school held a book fair and a fundraiser for the first time in recent memory. In 2007, Tyler is slated to receive a new library through a neighborhood effort that has raised \$1.5 million to build new libraries for eight Hill elementary schools. The school also has a new principal, Michelle Pierre, one of the young graduates from the New Leaders for New Schools program touted by Superintendent Clifford Janey.

There will be one more major change. For decades Tyler has stood as a stark illustration of the racial and economic segregation in DCPS schools. It has been a school where few, if any, professional or white families have been willing to send their children. This year, however, Tyler welcomed a racially- and socio-economically mixed three-year-old class in its new pre-kindergarten (pre-k) program of 13 students, and it is expected to do the same this coming year, as will five other

Capitol Hill DCPS schools.

"You look around [near Tyler], and the area is diverse. But Tyler has not been diverse," says Michael Tibbs, who is black and a parent of a three-year old at Tyler along with his partner, Tanara Hogan. Tibbs says he is thrilled with both the pre-k program and the new diversity in the classroom. "A lot of things are not going so well [at DCPS], but this program is beautiful, it is a blessing. And I think that diversity is a good thing in everything we do."

After years of gentrification, Capitol Hill is now experiencing at a boom of relatively affluent young parents, most of them white. In years past, these parents would have moved off the Hill when their children reached school age, heading for public schools in the suburbs. Or they might have paid pricey tuitions for private school. But the success of the Capitol Hill Cluster School, a District of Columbia Public School (DCPS) that has attracted well-off parents for years, combined with new pre-k programs and some dedicated organizing has convinced many of these parents to consider their neighborhood public schools as a viable option.

In his Master Education Plan, DCPS Superintendent Clifford Janey has made it clear that in order for DCPS schools to improve, they must make changes to attract a wider variety of families. On the Hill, at least when it comes to pre-kindergarten, something has changed already.

### **Segregation Survives Brown**

Fifty-two years ago on May 17, 1954, just blocks away from Capitol Hill's Peabody Elementary School, US Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren read the court's unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* and its eight companion cases that segregation of public schools was illegal. After the ruling, the District immediately desegregated its schools. Sadly, the legacy of the court's historic decision in the District of Columbia is a failed one.

"A half-century after *Brown*, African-American children attending the schools in and around Washington, D.C. are largely segregated *de facto* and have far more limited educational opportunities than their white counterparts in affluent suburban districts next door," attests "Separate and Unequal," a study released in 2004 by advocacy group Parents United for the DC Schools. DCPS schools are 95 percent minority, and the small numbers of white students mostly attend a few

high-performing schools west of Rock Creek park.

Washington-area schools are segregated not only by race, but also by class. The majority of DCPS students, 64 percent, qualify as low-income. In contrast, none of the suburban school systems in Maryland or Virginia count more than 46 percent of their students as low income, and Fairfax counts as few as 19 percent of its public school students as low income.

"I think many [Washingtonians] look at DCPS as another entitlement service, like Medicare or [welfare], a service that only serves low-income and minority people," says Iris Toyer, an author of the study and education advocate with the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights.

The segregation comes at a price for DCPS students. Studies have shown that racially- and economically-integrated schools improve academic outcomes for minority and low-income students without any change in the performance of affluent students.

"The pattern has been whenever a service only affects low-income or minority people, the quality of service deteriorates immeasurably," Toyer continues. "It is not because low-income parents don't want the same thing [as affluent parents]. It really is about people's capacity to make demands on the system. It is no secret that well-educated folks with higher incomes and skill level, understand the system, and make higher level demands on their schools, and are listened to."

### **Breaking Ground: The Cluster School**

For years the premier public elementary school on Capitol Hill has been the Capitol Hill Cluster School, actually four academic programs wrapped into one administration. The school got its start in the 1970s, when there were two elementary schools, one predominantly black and one predominantly white, tied together as feeder schools to an integrated middle school. The first principal of the Cluster School, Viola Jackson, made a decision to integrate the elementary schools. Mathew Cregor, a recent graduate of Georgetown Law Center who has been preparing a journal article on a related issue, writes: "Although some families left, many were too surprised, respectful of, and intimidated by Viola Jackson to remove their children."

According to staff members, the school did lose some, but not all, middle class and white families in the late 1980s and 1990s, when the

crack epidemic swept the District and Capitol Hill.

Over time, the Cluster School began to take advantage of its unique combination of separate campuses to institute specialized programs. In the Peabody Early Childhood Center, parents of three and four year olds can choose from a more traditional, literacy-centered program or from the collaborative, art-focused Reggio Emilia "School Within A School" (SWS). A Montessori program takes over from 1st to 4th grades at Watkins Elementary School, and Stuart Hobson Middle School uses a museum-based curriculum in partnership with the Smithsonian Institution.

But perhaps even more important to the success of the school than the special programs is the history of parent involvement. "When I came here, I noticed right away that there was a different environment for working with parents," says Principal Brandon Eatman, who took over leadership of the school last year after serving as a vice principal for three years. Eatman previously taught at Scott Montgomery Elementary School in Ward 2. "It is not that the parents at Montgomery didn't want the same thing, but they weren't able to work on it the same way. They weren't as willing to get their hands dirty in what it takes to accomplish improvements, like writing letters to the school board or volunteering for the PTSA committees."

According to its former president, the racially- and economically-integrated Cluster School has had the highest total PTA enrollment in the District going back decades. The accomplishments of the active parent body speak for themselves. Parents volunteer in each classroom daily, serve as substitute teachers, sew costumes for musicals and tutor students after school. They also do some heavy lifting; parents lobbied successfully to receive a line-item grant from Congress for auditorium renovations, and then they provided critical coordination to actually make the renovation happen. Moreover, through established fundraisers such as the Capitol Hill Classic 10K and the Capitol Hill Renovators House Tour, the PTA raised over \$150,000 this year. A large chunk of that money goes to pay for things that DCPS either doesn't pay for, or doesn't pay for in a timely fashion, such as the \$500 each teacher gets for supplies in the beginning of the year.

At two different parent events, one of which included a preview of a stunning musical put on by students, parents, many of whom were white, were very enthusiastic about the school and especially about the atmosphere that welcomes and encourages parent involvement.

"It's really something," says Omar Saibou, the current PTA president. "Parents really feel that this is a unique community."

Suzanne Wells, who is the past president of the Cluster School PTA and who helped found a partnership with PTAs across the Hill, said that she believes the atmosphere of an active and welcoming parent community is what has continued to attract professional, white parents to the Cluster School even when they would not consider other schools.

When she and her husband were deciding where to send their son, now a 12-year-old in 7th grade at Stuart Hobson, they were convinced to try the Cluster School by the enthusiastic comments from another family. "We had a family with a 3-year-old over for a dinner, a white family we had met at a neighborhood recycling project. We liked what they had to say about the school," she recalls. Wells, who speaks frankly about why she believes that racially- and economically-integrated schools benefit all students, says that in her experience, a strong parent community is key. "I think that when white families have made a decision about sending their child to the public schools, they look for something that they can be a part of and join."

When Wells' son entered the Cluster School seven years ago, he had no problem getting in even though the family lived outside of the boundary that would have made it her neighborhood school. At the time there were more spaces than applicants. Today, out-of-boundary students have to compete through a lottery, and the chances of getting in are slim. "Oh my, is there demand. The waiting list, over a hundred" says Eatman.

### **Localized Baby Boom**

In the process of revitalization and gentrification, Capitol Hill is one of the most mature neighborhoods in the District, especially in its core. Beginning in the late '90s, however, that process gained a new momentum as commutes into the city became ever longer and young professionals put a priority on urban amenities. Soaring housing demand and a willingness to pay high prices has seen neighborhoods turn from predominantly black and working class to professional and largely white. Dedicated attention to economic development has turned retail strips, like Barracks Row on 8th Street SE, into thriving restaurant districts. And newcomers discovering the Hill have embraced the warm, village-within-a-city atmosphere. Significantly, hundreds of young couples made the decision to start families while

living on the Hill. Take a stroll around Lincoln Park or Eastern Market on a Saturday - babies and toddlers are everywhere.

"This year and next year, you are going to see 3-year olds coming out of the woodwork," says Ward 5 and 6 School Board Member Tommy Wells, also the frontrunner in the race for Ward 6 Councilmember. As Wells is quick to point out, this baby boom is very significant for a city --and a public school system --that has been losing families for over a decade.

As their children began to reach schooling age, young Capitol Hill families started to look for schooling options. Demand for all of the elementary schools with Pre-Kindergarten (Pre K) programs, such as the private Capitol Hill Day School, St. Peters Catholic School, and the Cluster School, began to grow. No parent could be sure of getting their child into any of the schools, even if they were able to pay the \$17,340 annual tuition at the Day School.

Throughout this time, this new group of parents was coming together through a new tool, the email listserv Moms On The Hill, called MOTH. Started by Jen DeMayo and a couple of friends in 2000, the invitation-only list has become a place for young parents, mostly mothers, to share advice on every aspect of child rearing. Mayo estimated the list now counts 1,300 participants. By 2003, education was becoming a substantial topic, says DeMayo, with parents eagerly discussing different school options.

Out of those conversations, at least two movements emerged: one group of parents wanted to try to integrate other Capitol Hill Schools, all of which were nearly completely minority student schools, and another group began planning to apply for a charter to start a Capitol Hill-based public charter school.

### **Charter School Rift**

The Two Rivers Charter School received a charter in August of 2003, opening its doors a year later to students pre-k through 3rd grade, The school will continue to add a grade each year until it reaches 8th grade. The school is currently co-located at the Elliot Elementary School, located at 1830 Constitution Ave. SE. By law, charter schools are public schools: they are funded by the government, are free to all District students, and all District-resident children are eligible.

By the accounts of parents who send their students to Two Rivers and

those who have considered sending their children to Two Rivers, the school is a wonderful institution. It uses an expeditionary-learning model, based on the wilderness-program Outward Bound. Students learn through a discovery-based process structured around character building and independent investigation.

According to Wells and other parents at the Cluster School, when the school opened in 2004, it drew a substantial number of white students who had been enrolled in the Cluster School, though no precise numbers are available. "When parents left us, it made us feel like we were being abandoned," says Wells, in this case not specifically addressing Two Rivers.

The creation of Two Rivers caused a rift among at least some Capitol Hill parents, though many will not speak on the record about it. A common sentiment of the white public school parents interviewed for this article was one of lost opportunity. "Just imagine, if those Two Rivers families had stayed in public schools, we could have filled up all the [under-enrolled] Capitol Hill Schools," said one mother.

Some parents went further. Gina Arlotto and Lee Glazer, two Cluster School parents, went on to start Save Our Schools, an advocacy group critical of charter schools. Save Our Schools gathered a group to file a lawsuit against Two Rivers, alleging that the school was set up specifically not to be "too black." The wide-ranging lawsuit also challenges the equality of public charter schools in general.

Two Rivers is not a predominantly white school. The majority of its students are from minority households, and one third of its students receive free and reduced lunch. In fact, by the standards of the country at large, Two Rivers might seem a perfectly integrated school. In the District, however, the school's demographics differ starkly from charter schools at-large or DCPS schools. As a whole, the charter school population is only two percent white; according to the lawsuit, Two Rivers estimated its initial entering class to be 45 percent white.

Significantly, some DCPS advocates have been critical of the merits of the lawsuit. "A lot of the things recited as fact [in the complaint], are not, in my mind, fact," says Mary Levy, also with the Washington Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights. "All depends on whether [the plaintiffs] could prove those things." Levy also points out that the Cluster School, which is 22 percent white, also has a lot higher percentage of white students than DCPS in general (only five percent of DCPS students are white). A hearing on a motion to dismiss was

held on May 19. A ruling on that motion is likely several months away. If the judge does not dismiss the case, a final decision could take a year or longer.

What is clear is that Two Rivers has become a very popular school, and it also receives hundreds more applications than it has slots open, both from families on the Hill and from around the city. As a result, while the lawsuit against Two Rivers has greatly exacerbated tensions between public school advocates and charter school advocates on the Hill, for newer parents, the issue may be moot as Two Rivers may not even be an option.

At the same time, for the past several years, a number of dedicated parents and teachers have been working with PTAs and administrators at local schools, as well as School Board Member Tommy Wells, to build community support for their neighborhood schools. With the intention of enrolling their children in these schools, the parents lobbied DCPS to start pre-k programs in these schools. School Board Member Tommy Wells was an eager supporter of the programs, and DCPS started three-year-old programs last year at Maury, Brent and Tyler elementary schools. This year, Janey has extended the programs throughout DCPS.

### **Between Gentrification and Integration**

The public schools on the Hill all have their own stories. Alecia Houghton is a teacher at Ludlow-Taylor Elementary School, located at 659 G St. NE, just a block away from the H Street corridor. She is also a nearby resident, and a parent of a 3-year-old daughter, currently at Watkins Elementary, who will be attending Ludlow-Taylor's 4-year old program next year. Houghton, a black woman originally from Jamaica, doesn't feel part of the baby boom on the Hill. "The Hill has changed a lot," she says, talking about the influx of professional, predominantly-white families. "But the white families tend to stay with white families and the black families tend to stay with black families."

Ludlow Taylor, she says, is a good school, even though the SAT-9 Test Scores show that Ludlow-Taylor 6th graders are well below national standards (they are in the middle of the pack for DCPS students). "Having [taught] here for seven years, I know that the staff here really cares about the students and works well together," she says. But Houghton also wants to see improvements - she wants to see more specialized programming, and for that, she knows that the school needs more students. She also wants to see a more integrated school.

"This school ... does not look like the rest of the country - we need the rest of the community," she adds.

Of all the schools on the Hill, Ludlow-Taylor has one of the toughest sells for new parents. According to parents and teachers, Principal Donald Presswood has not warmly embraced the idea of getting more new students from the community, instead proposing a merger with the Hamilton Center for Special Education. Ludlow-Taylor is also an all-minority school where 78% of the students receive free- and reduced-price lunch.

"One [white] parent told me, 'I don't want to be the guinea pig.'" recounts Haughton. "And it kind of offended me, because the school is good enough for my child. But at the same time, I was happy, because people are interested."

Once a magnet school, Brent Elementary is a successful school that draws most of its students from out-of-boundary. Last year, almost 80 percent of its students scored at grade level for reading in fifth grade. It has long been popular with professional and working class black families, many of whom work on the Hill but live elsewhere. Like many DCPS schools, Brent is struggling with low enrollment figures. "The challenge we had was keeping all of our teachers," explains Arienne Clark, the youthful, poised principal of Brent Elementary School, speaking to a handful of teachers and parents at the meeting of the Local School Restructuring Council (LSRT). "I went to the first roundtable, I was told that given our enrollment, we would lose five positions. I was ready to cry."

Brent has also become the first public school beyond the Cluster School that new Capitol Hill parents have rallied around. A few young parents who lived in-boundary, including Tessa Muehllehner, Sally James, and Denise Diggs, leafleted all of the doors in the neighborhood to gauge community interest. "We held a meeting at the park, and the former principal, Ms. Cowley came out with the violin teacher, and Tommy Wells came to the meeting, and we felt very welcomed."

Though most of their children were not yet school age, the parents began working with the PTA and then-principal Connie Cowley. Calling themselves Brent Neighbors, the group worked to improve the school garden and launched a "greening" effort for the schoolyard. They also helped to incorporate the PTA, allowing them to then to successfully apply for grants, such as the \$2,500 early enrichment grant from the

Capitol Hill Community Foundation for teacher seminars at the Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center. Muehllehner also joined the LSRT as a community member, where she took part with the rest of the PTA in selecting a new principal.

The work of the Brent Neighbors paid dividends. When the three-year-old program opened last year, all of the slots were filled, and about half the class was in-boundary, a radical change from the entering kindergarten class.

The new interest in the school from the community did not go unnoticed. Clark explains how she found additional funding to keep her teachers. "Part of the strategy was looking at the huge number of families interested in our pre-k program. With that data - we have 70 people on our wait list - we need more money to bring these people in the school." Her pitch to the central administration worked. The school received an extra \$200,000, allowing Clark to save four of the five threatened positions.

"By getting the extra money," she adds, "we were able to keep our music teacher, hire a full time art and media teacher and keep our technology teacher."

The day after the LSRT meeting, about 30 parents attended an open house to hear about the Pre-K program. Andrea Hill, a young mother from Kenilworth in Ward 7, is not new to Brent. "I already have a 6th grader and a 3rd grader, and I have found Brent to be a great school," she says. "I was so excited when, after I had another baby, I found out that Brent was going to have a three-year-old program." Hill says she was attracted to Brent by its partnership with the Smithsonian, and her husband, who works at the Smithsonian, is close by.

Similarly, Kelvin Garrett, who already has one child in 4th grade, says he is happy to have some white families coming in. "It is good to have a diverse environment, good to have Indians, Asians, Caucasians. Sooner or later everybody is going to bump heads anyway. Better to do it sooner, because to kids, color doesn't matter."

Clark admits "that there have been some tensions," between the black parents who have sent their children to Brent for years and the new white families that are only beginning to send their children to the school, but she says that "people have seen that the families truly have had an interest in contributing to the school. There is no feeling from the community that this is a takeover by any means."

Brent has been the easiest case. Clark came from a year at the Cluster School, where she was exposed to what could be the District's model for both parent involvement and a trend towards integration. The PTA welcomed the neighborhood parents, and the neighborhood parents worked for several years to show that they were interested not only in a good education for their own children, but in supporting the school as a whole.

Other schools have had a more difficult time balancing the traditional populations and interested newcomers. Some principals are less used to, and in some cases, less open to, working with parents. In other cases, newcomers have made demands that have seemed overbearing. One commonly related anecdote, by parents and teachers alike, is about a crew of parents that made appointments with principals for tours and came bearing clipboards. After the tour they sent letters enumerating changes that would need to be made for them to enroll their children.

Often the process of voluntary reintegration is full of the challenges of negotiating race and class differences. At Maury, one white newcomer to the neighborhood offered herself to be PTA president, but other parents asked her not to run because "they wanted someone with more history with the school."

Heather Schoell, who has enrolled her four year old for the Pre-K program next year at Maury, relates her own experiences. "Maury has always been a black school, and I am not black. A lot of people moving into the area are not black. I think that was a challenge for everyone at first. I don't know if [Maury parents and staff] were prepared to see a bunch of white people coming in. They probably felt challenged, because [new parents] were questioning [Maury's] viability as a good school. And most people who go there, who are familiar with the school, feel it is a good school."

Like many other people both black and white who were interviewed for this article, Maury's Principal, Michael Wilson, was not eager to discuss race and class issues. To Wilson, the issue is gaining more active parents, regardless of race or income level. "The more active, involved, supportive parents we have, the better our schools will be," he said. "The change I see, is that we are becoming a more community-based school, which is one of the goals set down in the Master Education Plan. And the school will reflect the community."

Among many changes in the public school community in the past couple of years, one stands out as tremendous example of bridging differences: The Schools Library Project. When Suzanne Wells was PTA president at the Cluster School, she decided to arrange a meeting with PTA presidents of all of the eight Capitol Hill DCPS schools. The PTA presidents identified several areas that they could all work together on, and one of the top priorities was improving library resources. Working with the Capitol Hill Community Foundation, the library project has raised \$1.5 million dollars to create fully-stocked world-class school libraries, designed pro bono by local architectural firms, in each of the eight buildings. Construction will start on three libraries this summer; the rest will be constructed in the summer of 2007.

"This has really been an incredible experience," explains George Blackmon, the PTA president of Maury. "It is just amazing what we have been able to do working together."

In an April interview, Janey himself brought up the libraries project. "It is a welcome development, to see a community taking on its own initiative to invest in public schools."

### **After Kindergarten**

When groups that have traditionally shunned DCPS begin enrolling their children, it is hard not to be hopeful that the integrated and equal education promised by Brown vs. Board of Education might someday be achieved voluntarily. Yet many questions remain. Wells tells the story of how her own son started in a racially- and economically-diverse classroom in the Cluster School Pre K program. "I can show you the class photo from this year," she says. "He is one of two white children in the class. The others have left - as have many of his black classmates." DCPS schools still see enrollment fall at the middle school age. Anecdotally, teachers report that it is often children of college-educated parents, of all colors, who leave, as concerns about competitive college admissions become more pronounced. Likewise, the assumption that DCPS schools may expose adolescents to more dangerous experimentation also makes parents wary.

At the same time, while it seems a far-fetched worry today, there is the possibility that as Capitol Hill becomes an increasingly white community, the Capitol Hill DCPS schools will also become majority white. Like the west-of-the-park schools, they may end up enclaves of academic success that are exclusive because of the economic segregation that housing costs perpetuate.

At the end of the day, however, what is happening is nothing less than a sea change in attitudes towards DCPS schools among middle class parents on the Hill.

“Good public schools are schools where there is a substantial portion of the population that cares about what goes on in them,” concludes Levy. “We need more middle class parents making demands of the school system throughout the city.”