

48 CENTRAL ILLINOIS Decatur, Illinois Tuesday, November 9, 1999



**KEEPING HIS PROMISE:** The Rev. Jesse Jackson repeats his intention of getting the seven expelled Decatur high school students back in class after walking six of them arm in arm to the Eisenhower marquee Monday morning. An estimated 150 supporters attended the rally.

## REJECTED

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"At best they get credit and graduate, but it will not make them better students and it will not make them better people." The school board's decision, arrived at during an emergency meeting, came after marathon talks among 20 people including Jackson and members of the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, Ryan and other community leaders and officials from the school district, including school board President Jackie Goetter.

Following the board's vote, Ryan spokesman Dave Urbanek said, "We spent all day talking between the two sides and it was the governor's goal to bring them together. There has been some movement on both sides and this is something that the school board and the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition will have to work out."

Ryan recommended providing an alternative school setting to the students — which he said will become available to all expelled students in the state in January. Ryan said state school Superintendent Glenn W. McGee would provide a letter today authorizing the students to begin classes in a Decatur alternative school and "hopefully have it reviewed" and the students could "be back into the mainstream of schools in due time."

And while commending the board for its work in serving residents of Decatur, Ryan stopped short of supporting the board's decision to expel the students for two years.

"It's two years too long," he said. "A lot of people think it is a punishment, but it's a punishment that may be a little severe."

Goetter said she is glad the governor became involved. "He waived some laws to allow the students into an alternative program. That solved one of the big problems that the board was struggling with," she said. "Our hands were tied (because they were expelled)."

Goetter said the youths have a choice among four alternative school programs in Decatur. "I'm very disappointed. The board acted tonight to clear the way for the students to return to school with credit, but Rev. Jackson insisted we accept his recommendation," Goetter said. "Anything less than that was unacceptable to him."

Jackson's proposal revolved around seven points, including the students going back to school immediately. He recommended the district review its zero-tolerance policy toward violence, six months of probation for the students, five hours of community service per week, board-sponsored tutoring with the students maintaining passing grades, the establishment of peer counseling in Decatur schools to address school violence and conflict resolution and the establishment of a panel to review disciplinary decisions.

Jackson has argued this week that the district's zero-tolerance policy lacks mercy and unfairly punishes students. He has called for a conference with legislators on the policy in hopes of having it defined to better address individual student issues.

"While the matter of zero tolerance is being discussed and a



**NO SCHOOL:** Eisenhower principal Walt Scott waves off another student Monday morning attempting to go to class without knowing all three Decatur High Schools remained closed.

definition is dealt with, we want them back in school," he said. "Even if there is alternative school with credits, it must be on a track towards their being re-entered into the school process and participating this year in graduation."

Ryan also agreed with the coalition's contention that the zero-tolerance policy is vague. "I told him that without question I was going to work with him on zero tolerance and was going to do whatever I can to get a definition of what zero tolerance means and what penalties go along with zero tolerance," he said.

Monday began with students learning that Decatur high schools had been shut down. District officials hoped to diffuse a confrontation between the district and Jackson, who vowed Sunday at a march and rally to return the students to school and urged parents and students to turn out in protest.

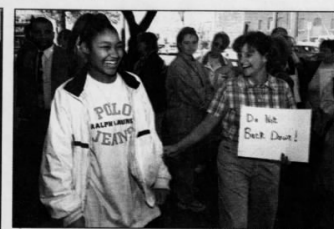
Still running on the energy produced from the rally, about 150 people gathered at the school Monday morning. Jackson thanked those who came and then summoned the expelled students, who were with parents across 16th Street.

"The school board has a policy of zero tolerance," Jackson said. "The school board is using this policy in a capricious and arbitrary manner. It needs to be challenged."

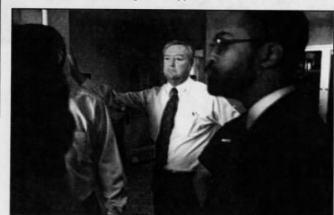
"This is not about race, about black and white. It's about wrong or right." Jackson said the school does not have a right to punish children beyond the law. He pointed out the state's attorney has not filed charges against the youths. Each of them has been arrested on a preliminary charge of mob action.

The board president refers to the "fight as mob action and gang activity," Jackson said. "There's no evidence of that."

Jackson accompanied the stu-



**BOTH SIDES:** "Wouldn't you rather be in school learning something," asks Suzanne Kreps, right, of student Letaeh Pender. Kreps is a Spanish teacher at MacArthur High School and was among a group of teachers showing their support for the school board.



**NO ENTRY:** James Hendren, director of business affairs for the Decatur School District, blocks the doorway to the Keil Building as members of the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition arrive Monday morning.

## McGEE: Safe School would need alterations

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"This is precisely what they are designed for. I don't understand why there would be expulsions when there is an alternative school available," said state Rep. Rick Winkel, R-Champaign.

"Rather than expelled to the streets, keep them in a school setting."

"There is a way to solve this and it's already on the books and funded, too," Winkel said.

The Mac-Patt Regional Education Office operates two alternative school programs. Futures Unlimited is a truancy program. The Mac-Patt Regional Safe School is for disruptive students.

Linda Hasenmyer, director of the Safe School, said 27 students were enrolled as of Monday. She said the program can handle 30 students and was unsure how to handle an increase to 34 if all seven expelled students are directed to her program.

"Our facility is very small," Hasenmyer said. "We would have

### School expulsion stats

This is the number of high school students expelled at various school districts throughout Illinois during the 1997-98 school year.

School	Enrollment	Expelled	Percent
Bloomington	1,529	2	0.13%
Normal	2,421	0	0%
Carbondale	1,166	1	0.08%
Champaign	2,685	9	0.34%
Urbana	1,191	0	0%
Chicago	98,010	495	0.50%
Decatur	3,038	13	0.43%
Peoria	4,464	67	1.55%
Springfield	4,278	39	0.91%
Quad-Cities:			
Moline	2,573	4	0.16%
Rock Island	1,759	4	0.23%
United Township High School	1,923	0	0%

Source: Illinois State Board of Education

to make some concessions."

Hasenmyer also said attending the Safe School isn't as simple as showing up for classes at the 363 N. Water St. location. First, students who have been expelled are not eligible. The seven students would have to be reinstated. The students and their parents then would be required to sign contracts dealing with student behavior and other issues before starting classes.

## Timeline

Sept. 17: A fight breaks out at a football game between Eisenhower and MacArthur high schools.

The fight in the Eisenhower stands lasts several minutes; the game is stopped for about 10 minutes. Approximately 10 people are involved and three arrests are made. A spectator captures part of the fight on videotape.

Sept. 21: Security at the Staley Day doubleheader football games is increased. Eight students are suspended for 10 days, awaiting expulsion hearings; one was not recommended for expulsion.

Oct. 1: Three students are expelled for two years. Board members Mike Setina, D.R. Roberts and Phil Wilhelm vote to expel. Jeffrey Perkins votes no. Board president Jackie Goetter, members Jan Mandernach and Terry Robinson and Superintendent Kenneth Arndt are absent.

Members of Decatur chapter of Rainbow/PUSH Coalition address the board and ask for alternative punishment of 30 days' suspension, attendance at Homework Hangout and 12 hours per week of community service for duration of school year.

Oct. 4: Four more students are expelled for two years. Goetter, Mandernach, Setina, Roberts and Wilhelm vote yes; Perkins no. Robinson absent. The resolution includes a provision to review the decision at the end of this school year. Rainbow/PUSH spokesman Julius Bailey begins a hunger strike in protest.

Oct. 6: Mason County Sheriff Roger Walker says he opposes the expulsions. Valerie Johnson, education director of Rainbow/PUSH Coalition headquarters in Chicago, says she'll meet with the students, parents, Arndt, Goetter, and school district attorney Jeffrey Taylor on Oct. 7.

Oct. 8: Expelled students get OK to have textbooks; students Roosevelt Fuller, Errol Bond and Shawn Honorable, and their parents meet with Arndt, Goetter, Taylor, members of the community, clergy and Rainbow/PUSH.

Oct. 18: Bailey ends hunger strike.

Oct. 28: Nine people are arrested on preliminary charges of felony mob action, battery and disorderly conduct. Seven statements by Decatur police characterize the fight as a continuation of a dispute between members of the Gangster Disciples and the Vice Lords.

Oct. 31: The Rev. Jesse Jackson calls the fight "a schoolyard fight" and "something silly like children do," and says he will go to Decatur on behalf of the expelled students. Goetter says the board's decision stands but agrees to a meeting.

Nov. 2: About 1,000 people attend a town hall meeting in Decatur to hear Jackson say there will be a rally Sunday if a compromise isn't reached. Goetter and Arndt say the board's decision will not change.

Nov. 3: Jackson addresses a leadership breakfast urging support of the expelled students. Attendees also urged to join Rainbow/PUSH. Jackson, Johnson and Keith Anderson meet with Goetter, Arndt, Perkins and Taylor in a closed-door session to discuss expulsions. Jackson later says he will seek a court order against the school board. He tells local Rainbow/PUSH representatives to escort the students to school on Monday and be prepared to be arrested.

Nov. 4: Mac County State's Attorney Larry Fichter asks the community to obey the law and not to take the expelled students onto school property.

Nov. 5: Decatur City Council member Betsy Stockard and Mayor Terry Howley announce their support for the school board. Stockard says she's changed her stance since viewing the videotape and urges everyone not directly and personally involved in the incident to stay home from the march and rally.

Nov. 7: Jackson leads a march from Temple 3 to Eisenhower High School, where supporters rally in support of the expelled students. Rainbow/PUSH organizers estimate the turnout to be 3,000. Decatur police estimate 1,200. Supporters come from Chicago, St. Louis and elsewhere. Stockard draws 30 people to a "Stop the Violence" march at the same time as the Rainbow/PUSH march.

Nov. 8: Arndt cancels classes at all three high schools. Gov. George H. Ryan comes to Decatur to meet with Rainbow/PUSH and school district representatives.

The three sides meet for more than seven hours and the school board votes to hold an emergency session to vote on a compromise. Following a closed session that lasts more than two hours, the school board votes to limit the expulsions to the remainder of the school year. Ryan clears hurdles so students can enroll in an alternative school program immediately. Jackson rejects the compromise, saying the students must be placed in their regular schools immediately.