

A12 CENTRAL ILLINOIS Decatur, Illinois • Monday, November 8, 1999

Notes and quotes

The resolution

The Decatur school board voted on this resolution for the expulsions of the seven students:

"Superintendent Arndt recommended the board expel (name) for violation of student discipline policy and procedures as presented. President Goetter moved that (name) be expelled from Decatur Public School District 61 for two years (that is Sept. 17, 1999 to Sept. 17, 2001) with a review of the students attendance and participation in a community program (to be named later) at the end of the 1999-2000 school year, at which time the Board of Education may consider abating the remaining period of the expulsion."

"These students claim to be interested in education, but why is it that they have a combined 393 absences from school? And that does not count the time they missed during the expulsions. Three of them are third-year freshmen, one is a second-year freshman, one is a sophomore and two are seniors. That's a lot of school to miss."

— Decatur Superintendent Kenneth Arndt

"It looks like we're going to have to replace someone on the city council."

— Outgoing Decatur school board member Jeffrey Perkins, speaking about Decatur City Councilwoman Betsy Stockard. Stockard last week came out in support of the board's decision to expel the students for two years and held her own, separate "Stop The Violence" march on Sunday at the same time as the Jackson-led march.

Students hesitate

After the march reached Eisenhower High School, the group of seven expelled students initially stopped short of coming onto the school's parking lot. That is, until Jackson went out onto 16th Street — where they were being counseled by Chicago Attorney Lewis Myers — and led them onto school grounds.

School district policy bars students who have been expelled from school property.

"You've already been kicked out," Jackson told the students. "That's what we're fighting about."

"We are going to have a press conference at 3 p.m. (today) with myself, other school officials and city officials to update everyone on how we stand."

— Kenneth Arndt

Shared experience

For Rick Tomlinson, president of the Decatur chapter of the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, the effort to have the students reinstated is personal.

While a student at Eisenhower High School, Tomlinson was kicked out of school. After several months out of school, he was prosecuted and convicted of assault and battery. He later went to earn his college degree.

"I have some real personal echoes with these seven students," he said. "We want these kids to have the right kinds of colors; we want them to have academic colors."

"This is not Columbine High, this is Decatur. Be fair."

— The Rev. Jesse Jackson, urging the Decatur school board to reconsider its decision to expel seven high school students for two years.

'People have showed a lot by taking a stand on this issue.'

— The Rev. Thomas Walker, march participant



WARM WELCOME: Decatur residents welcome the convoy of buses from Chicago that were full of Rainbow/PUSH Coalition members who arrived in Decatur to show support for seven expelled high school students Sunday.



WATCHING: The Rev. Jesse Jackson, shown here from atop the stage at Eisenhower High School said, 'This is the beginning of a struggle to challenge the abuse of power.'

STOP THE VIOLENCE: Decatur City Council member Betsy Stockard, center, leads marchers along Eldorado Street on Sunday. An estimated crowd of about 50 participated in the march.



JACKSON: Urges peers to back students' return

Continued from A1

Decatur police are estimating it was 1,200.

Jackson told the crowd to stand behind the expelled students because one day a similar situation could face their children. He asked that parents keep their children out of school if the students aren't allowed to return.

"Tomorrow when the sun rises, we will rise and bring our children to school and stand here until a change comes," he told the crowd. "We will meet here at 7:30 and stand here until it closes if we have to."

"Have your children behind you."

The Decatur school board voted in early October to expel the students for two years in connection with a Sept. 17 fight at Eisenhower. The school board has said the expulsions could be reviewed at the end of the school year and their reinstatement based upon participation in a community-based tutoring and service program.

Board members said they were enforcing their "zero-tolerance" policy toward violence in the district when issuing the expulsions.

School board president Jackie Goetter said if the expelled students show up they will be asked to leave.

If the students do not leave when asked they will be arrested, Goetter said, adding that a walk-out would not be in the best interest of the student body.

"If he's suggesting a walkout, it will possibly endanger more students," she said. "That would be

an awful thing to suggest to students."

"Schools belong to them and they're there to learn (and) it needs to be a normal day for them," Goetter said.

Decatur School Superintendent Kenneth Arndt said administrators are taking "every precaution" at the district's three high schools this morning.

Jackson acknowledges that the students' fighting was wrong but also argued that the school board's decision is excessive and represents "an abuse of power."

"If there is some hell in the students," he said. "Let's teach the hell out of them."

Chicago Attorney Lewis Myers said he expects to file a lawsuit today against the board on grounds that there is no written "zero tolerance" policy, and that there was no notice of violation or a means for an immediate appeal. The board passed a zero-tolerance resolution but it does not appear in the student handbook.

Goetter questions the merits of the lawsuit.

"We followed state law and board policy," she said. "The students were all afforded due process."

Prior to the march a local crowd milled about the Church of the Living God, PGT Temple 3 for about an hour before "reinforcements" appeared in the form of 11 charter buses from Chicago filled with marchers.

Ad Jackson, whose son played football for MacArthur this past

season, said she was at the MacArthur-Eisenhower football game when the fight erupted.

"These kids should be in school," she said. "And, it's not right that just because they're boys and they're black that people assume they're in gangs. It's not so."

Joan Pettyjohn, 57, sat on the steps to her porch and watched the crowd pass in front of her home in the 1700 block of East Wood Street.

"This is something, isn't it," she said, admitting it makes her think of the 1960s. "But, what right has Jackson got coming here? It's not his problem."

Spectator Jennifer Stern, 24, said the whole issue has been blown out of proportion.

"This is a school issue, not something that is all of this," she said.

Leland Jones, 46, of Decatur said this past week has made the school board look very bad.

"See my son there," he said pointing to a youngster in a stroller. "What's it going to be like for him when he gets in school? Some things need to change. Two years is too long."

Despite the church-like atmosphere, security for the march was as tight as local law enforcement officials could make it because of concern for the safety of Jackson and the marchers.

In a news release faxed to area media Saturday, Decatur police

Chief Richard Ryan said the police department had received unconfirmed information that a counter-demonstration by a white supremacist group would be mounted or some form of extreme violence would occur at the rally. He said an investigation could not eliminate either threat.

Involved in Sunday's security operation were more than 100 officers from the Decatur Police Department, Macon County Sheriff's Office, Illinois State Police, Illinois Secretary of State Police, and U.S. Department of Treasury Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, Ryan said.

Bomb squads were on hand but were not needed.

The biggest problem encountered early Sunday was parking violations by people trying to get to the march, Ryan said.

Meanwhile, Jackson led the group in prayer and rallied their support for change.

The Rev. Thomas Walker said he was proud of Decatur.

"People have showed a lot by taking a stand on this issue," he said.

Goetter said she saw parts of news reports and was called down to Eisenhower after the rally to do a television interview.

"The Rev. Jackson still doesn't have all the facts," she said.

"He's making his decisions and plans with erroneous information — it wasn't a schoolyard fight."

Two board members, Jeffrey

Perkins, who voted against the expulsions on Oct. 1 and 4, and Terry Robinson, who has said the term of the expulsions is too long, each joined Jackson on the stage for the rally.

"That's unfortunate," Goetter said. "We take an oath at the beginning of our (school board) terms that once the majority of the board has decided something, we all stick by it. That's not happening now."

A few blocks away, about 50 people joined Decatur City Councilwoman Betsy Stockard in a separate march against violence.

After seeing a video of the fight, Stockard reversed her opinion and began supporting the school board's decision to expel the students.

Stockard's group walked Eldorado Street from Martin Luther King Jr. Drive to 16th Street and back.

Howard Colebar of Decatur brought a number of homemade signs proclaiming, "Peace," "Love" and "Jesus."

"I came for healing in our community," he said. "It hurts to see us fall apart."

"I am surprised by all the people here," Stockard said.

O'Neke Reed, 10, helped convince Stockard to march. "We're marching to stop the violence," she said.

— Ron Ingram and Scott Perry contributed to this story.

A SEA OF SUPPORT: Marchers filled the Eisenhower High School parking lot on Sunday to hear the Rev. Jesse Jackson speak.

EYEWITNESS: Watching from 16th Street, Carol Hoagland clings to her American flag in support of people exercising their right to march.