

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 that four and eight (names) for violation of student discipline policy and procedures as presented at 11:30 a.m. Goetter advised that names of expelled from Decatur Public School District 61 for two years that started on Sept. 1, 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 Illinois Dept. 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 common absence from school? And that does not count the time they missed during the expulsions. There of us 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 Councilman Betsy Stockard. Stockard last week came out in support of the board's decision to expel students for two years and held her own, separate "Stop the Violence" march on Sunday at the same as the Jackson-led march.

Students hesitate

After the march reached Eisenhower High School, the group of seven expelled students stopped just short of coming onto the school's parking lot. That is, until Jackson went out onto 16th Street and told them 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 on 16th (Street, today) with myself, other school officials and city officials to update everyone on what's been done."

— 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."

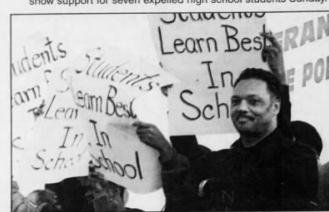
— The Rev. Jesse Jackson, urging the school board to reconsider its decision to expel seven high school students for two years.

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



JACKSON: Urges peers to back students' return

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Decatur police are estimating it was 1,200.

Jackson told the crowd to stand behind the expelled students because the day after the situation could face their children. He asked that parents keep their children out of school if the students are ever sent home.

"Tomorrow when the sun rises, we will rise and bring our children to school and stand here until the school board has said the crowd is over and 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 students for two years in connection with a Sept. 17 fight at Eisenhower. The school board has since been asked to be reviewed at the end of the school year and their reinstatements based upon participation in a community 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 that will be remedied, 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 probably encourage 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 place for them," Goetter said.

Decatur School Superintendent Kenneth Arndt said administrators and parents "every precaution" was taken to ensure that there was no notice of violation or a means for an immediate appeal. The board passed a zero-tolerance policy but it does not appear in the student handbook.

Goetter questions the merits of the result.

"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 campus of the Little Rock, Ark., Peabody High School, adding that a walk-out would not be in the best interest of the student body.

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

Spectator Jennifer Storn, 24, said that she had been asked to leave the march because she had been 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 look very bad.

"See my son," he said, pointing to a youngster in a stroller. "What's it going to be like for him when he gets to school? Some things are going to change."

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

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spoke of the "unrest" that occurred when the fight erupted.

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