

Decatur, Ill. • Tuesday, November 16, 1999 CENTRAL ILLINOIS A5

EXPULSIONS: Board members standing firm

Continued from A1
president, said Monday that the board may meet in special session this week to discuss a proposal for returning the expelled students to school.

Some of the key points of the proposal, worked out last week by Jackson and Illinois State Superintendent of Schools Glenn W. McGee, include holding the expulsions in abeyance, and if the students make strides in alternative school and receive the blessing of a review panel, they would be enrolled in the regular school program for the beginning of the second semester in January.

The school board voted last month to expel seven students for their involvement in a Sept. 17 fight at an Eisenhower High School football game.

Board member Phil Wilhelm said he doesn't see anything new in the proposal, copies of which the school board received over the weekend.

"We're done moving. It's time for Jesse Jackson to move. He's walking picket lines and crossing the line to get in the schools. It's detrimental to the health, life and safety of people. I think Jackson needs to work through the system and do it more quietly behind the lines, instead in front of cameras. If he did that, I think he'd get a lot more cooperation from us."

"We're holding our ground."

Wilhelm was asked if he was feeling the pressure from Springfield to give in even more. Jackson has attempted to solicit support from lawmakers, the governor, Illinois Attorney General Jim Ryan and McGee. Jackson has said more than once that U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno and President Bill Clinton have been consulted.

"We're being pressured, but it doesn't bother me," he said. "They have no control over us. Unless the school attorney tells me differently, all they can do is make recommendations. They're doing a real disservice to the whole system — putting their noses in places they don't belong. I'd advise everyone to work through the system."

Board member Jan Mandernach agreed that a special meeting is not warranted.

"The board is pretty firm that what we have done is the right thing," she said. "There is plenty of room for conversation about the deeper issues — about what education should be for Decatur students."

Board member Dan Oakes, who took his seat on the board Nov. 9, said he spent three hours one evening last week on the telephone with people who wanted to express their support for the board.

As a courtesy to McGee, Oakes said he will listen to the settlement proposals.

"It's still a local issue, and we have to make the decision," Oakes said. "We owe it to the community to make that decision. They elected us."

McGee, who told the Associated Press on Sunday that he is removing himself from the issue and planned to let Jackson and the school board work it out on their own, could not be reached for comment Monday.

Meanwhile, the Illinois Association of School Boards, the Illinois Association of School Administrators and the Illinois Principals Association on Monday all affirmed "the statutory authority of local school boards in matters pertaining to student discipline."

At a Monday morning prayer vigil outside MacArthur High



IT'S WHAT'S COOKING: Marilyn Jarrett, left, and Cynthia Howell prepare food in Howell's kitchen for the Rev. Jesse Jackson and other guests. The menu included beef ribs, turkey and dressing, fried chicken, sweet potato pie, apple pie, caramel cake and cornbread.

School, Jackson confirmed he personally was willing to risk arrest to "intensify our efforts to get the school's attention."

By dusk, Jackson confirmed the expelled students were willing to join him in crossing police lines.

"If that (crossing police lines) is the route to illuminate the darkness, if that's the route to a heightened sense of urgency to end the injustice, we will put our bodies on the line," Jackson said.

"We would rather take the youths to school than us go to jail," he said. "But in our struggle to make America better, Dr. (Martin Luther King Jr.) had to put his body on the line, (former South Africa President Nelson) Mandela had to put his body on the line. We're in that tradition, we must be willing to sacrifice to make life better for them."

During a dinner with Jackson on Monday evening, expelled student Gregory Howell said he was willing to be arrested.

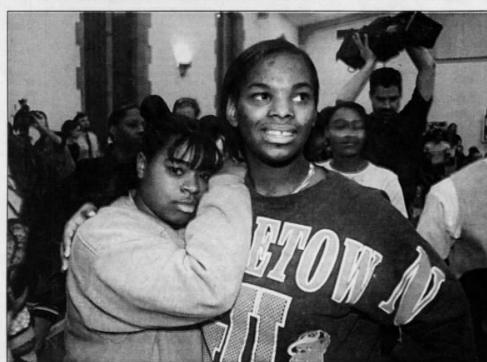
"I just want to go back to school," Howell said. Jackson scuttled plans last week to lead expelled students back to school in defiance of school and law enforcement officials. Jail, he said, would keep him from meeting with school board members at a critical point in negotiations.

Now, negotiations are at a standstill and Jackson's patience has worn thin.

A confrontation with authorities followed a weekend that saw demonstrations in the city by Rainbow/PUSH anti-violence marchers, and the Indiana-based American Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.

Matt Hale, leader of the white supremacist group World Church of the Creator, said Monday he plans to have a meeting in Decatur on Wednesday night to protest Jackson's involvement in the expulsion controversy. Hale also said his group plans an outdoor rally for this Sunday.

Attendance at Decatur's high schools rose to normal levels Monday for their first full day of school in more than a week,



MAKING A STAND: James Willis, right, and Waleeta Neal, both 15, wait their turn on Monday at the Church of the Living God, PGT Temple 3, as volunteers pledge their support for today's march on Eisenhower High School.

standing at 88.3 percent overall. This compares to an attendance rate of 87.7 percent Wednesday, a half-day of school that came after the school district closed the high schools Nov. 8 and 9 because of threats against demonstrators.

School by school, Stephen Decatur High School had 91.6 percent attendance Monday, while Eisenhower had 88.1 percent and MacArthur 86.3 percent.

But the community remains divided over the expulsion issue, evidenced by reactions from returning MacArthur students and the small crowd on Jackson supporters on hand Monday.

Jennifer Tyus of Decatur said she supports Jackson and accused the school board of over-reacting, perhaps with other school violence instances in mind.

"I can understand the zero-tolerance policy, but what happened at the football game had nothing to do what happened at Columbine (High School in Littleton, Colo.)," Tyus said. "There were no weapons, no blood, nobody got hurt. It was a fight that lasted no time."

Curry said the statement stemmed from several other legislators joining Jackson in Sunday's march to MacArthur High School. She said another of her House colleagues has been contacted by Jackson to hold hearings statewide on the use of expulsion by school boards.

"I spent the entire day on the phone and off talking to people who wanted to know our position," Curry said. "People are frustrated with what is happening in our community. They resent people coming into town and telling us what to do."

Mitchell echoed that, noting the presence Sunday of state Sen. Donnie Trotter, D-Chicago, and state Rep. Harold Murphy, D-Markham, in the Rainbow/PUSH march focused Decatur residents' attention on the local legislative delegation.

"That really burned a lot of people up locally," Mitchell said. "Asked if inviting arrest would be an act of desperation, Jackson readily allowed 'it indeed is a desperate move.'"

"The protest will continue until these youths are in alternative schools and on a track to return to school so they can graduate and get on with their educational development."

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Church calls community to come together

By VALERIE WELLS
H&R Staff Writer

DECATUR — A service will be held Thursday to bring residents together to pray for the city, which is embroiled in a controversy over seven expelled high school students.

Members of Antioch Missionary Baptist Church South, 561 N. Church St., will host the event. Decatur's United Methodist churches are co-sponsoring the service, which is set for 6:30 p.m.

"It's an expression of faith," said the Rev. Jeffrey Kelley, pastor of First United Methodist Church. "The intent is simply to recognize that all of us have friends of diverse ethnic differences. We want to be supportive regardless of our different viewpoints. Our faith ties can help and sustain us through this time and provide for renewal."

Kelley noted that his church is predominantly white, while Antioch, which is led by the Rev. C.D. Stuart, has a predominantly African-American congregation. Though the host churches are Christian, Kelley said he hopes people of all faiths will attend.

"Prayers will be said and support and guidance for all of those in positions of leadership and all those involved in the school situation, from the young boys to Jesse Jackson and the school board people," Kelley said. "It's an opportunity to lift the present situation above the level of separatist politics. It will not be a forum for debate."

Invitations were sent Monday to about 200 churches in and around Decatur, but organizers have no idea how many people will turn up.

"It could be 20 or 200, who knows?" Kelley said. "But even if there is only two of us, we are still going to go ahead and have it. Our concern is for building bridges for learning and adjustment in the future. We don't want ourselves to get so polarized that we lose our friendships and move into our individual churches with out talking to one another."

Stuart could not be reached for comment.

—H&R Staff Writer Tony Reichel contributed to this story.

Notes & quotes

"Sometimes we are surrounded by hate and the only option is love. It's hard to stand together in the heat of battle when we don't sit together in the warmth of fellowship. We need to get to know one another better."

—The Rev. B.G. Newitt at Glad Tidings Assembly of God at church services Sunday morning

"We have an amazing hostility; it seems, toward our children. We're impatient with them, we don't want to tolerate them, we're quick to jail them. These are our children. And even school board members must know that somewhere in the midst of things, love fits and mercy fits and care must be part of the formula that puts confidence in youth and shapes their lives in the formative years."

—The Rev. Jesse Jackson

"The board is pretty firm that what we have done is the right thing. But there is plenty of room for conversation about the deeper issues — about what education should be for Decatur students."

"The NAACP has asked some hard questions, too, not just the people with the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition. The NAACP deserves some credit for that."

—Decatur school board member Jan Mandernach

DEREGULATION: 6,400 Illinois Power customers are eligible to switch

Continued from A1
said. "It's what's going to happen in a competitive market."

Since Oct. 1, nonresidential customers with large power demands and others selected through a lottery have been eligible to choose a power supplier. Customers representing as much as 33 percent of each Illinois utility's capacity were given the choice.

On Dec. 31, 2000, all remaining nonresidential customers will be able to choose, and on May 1, 2002, all residential customers will be allowed to choose.

Utility providers began marketing their services at luncheons and through direct mailings before customers were eligible to

switch. The companies also have offered additional services to maintain existing customers and entice new ones.

About 6,400 of Illinois Power's customers were eligible to switch at the beginning of October, said spokesman Mike Monahan. A handful of customers have told Illinois Power they intend to switch, Monahan said, adding it's likely others are actively looking or planning to switch.

However, before those customers can get power from another provider, that provider must register with Illinois Power. No investor-owned utilities or power marketing firms have finished the process, but three are close and three to

four others are working on it, Monahan said.

Illinois Power has picked up some customers from other utility companies, he said. The only business willing to make its switch public was BOC Gases, a Commonwealth Edison customer in Joliet.

The company uses electricity to separate air into its component parts.

AmericanCIPS hasn't lost any of its 11,000 customers who are eligible to choose, said Ed McDowall, spokesman for the company.

"We're still in a learning curve," McDowall said. "People have been aware the opportunity was coming, but some provisions and rules have evolved just

recently. The concept of switching an electric supplier requires a lot of thought and analysis."

Five companies have started registering with AmerenCIPS to provide electricity in its service area, Gallagher said. ADM is the only contract the company has announced, but Gallagher said they are "negotiating with a range of customers on a lot of different approaches."

Aside from the ComEd service area in Chicago and northern Illinois where about 1,400 eligible customers say they will switch, not many eligible customers have changed or said they intend to change providers.

"There's not been any great swarm

leaving. The number is likely to grow, especially if those who switch have a positive experience," said Martin Cohen, executive director of the Citizens Utility Board. "It's going to take a while before customers feel comfortable enough to dip their feet in the market."

Customers are wary of the market and making mistakes, Cohen said. The concept of searching for a new electric supplier is foreign and complicated, he said.

Byus said many big industrial customers already have attractive contracts in place, but as those come up for renewal in the next few years, many might start switching.