

RAVENSWOOD HIGH SCHOOL AND DE FACTO SEGREGATION IN THE
SEQUOIA UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

May 1955 to April 1966

In May, 1955, the voters of the Sequoia Union High School District in San Mateo County approved a bond issue providing for the building of two new high schools in the district. The so-called "fifth high school" (now known as Ravenswood) was to be located in the extreme southeast corner of the district and county, east of the Bayshore Highway. Since 1949 the area east of Bayshore had experienced an influx of Negro and lower-income white residents.

That the board of the Sequoia Union District had chosen the fifth high school site to serve the changing community east of Bayshore became apparent in the Spring of 1957 when consideration was given to the setting of school boundaries. In all proposals considered by the board, the basic attendance dividing line was Bayshore Highway. Only the northern boundary for the attendance area was a matter open for discussion. In fact, one of the first proposals suggested a northern boundary of Second Avenue in Redwood City. However, the board decided to terminate the attendance area along the northern boundaries of Belle Haven City (East Menlo Park).

Leaders of the East Palo Alto and Belle Haven communities protested the decision of the board and urged that socio-economic and racial factors be considered in setting the boundary. These leaders contended that by ignoring socio-economic-racial factors the board would be contributing to a worsening of the situation existing in Belle Haven and East Palo Alto; that, in effect, the new high school would be stigmatized as the place where the poor and the Negroes go.

During the summer of 1957, the board reopened consideration of the school boundaries as a result of the "discovery" of a pedestrian overpass to Ringwood Avenue which connected the Belle Haven area directly to the area of Menlo-Athernton High School. When the boundary question was reopened, a group of citizens from East Palo Alto and Belle Haven circulated a petition among area residents. The petition, signed by 3,669 people in the area, asked that Willow Road rather than Bayshore Highway be adopted as the basic attendance dividing line between Menlo-Athernton and the proposed fifth high school. The petition was presented to the Sequoia Union High School District Board on July 24, 1957, and was denied. A proposal by Superintendent Rex Turner to change the boundary line so that the section of Belle Haven north of Henderson Avenue would attend Menlo-Athernton was accepted. This decision to split Belle Haven was made despite the fact that the board had cited as one of its criteria in drawing up boundaries the "keeping together of as many students who have gone through grammar school together as possible." A plea to send all of Belle Haven to Menlo-Athernton was rejected. The board's action was wholeheartedly supported at this time by the residents of the Willows area (the area between Willow Road and Menalto, west of Bayshore to Middlefield Road).

The boundary objectors formed into the Ravenswood Civic Council, in hopes of taking further action to establish equitable boundary lines as well as to deal with area problems as a whole. But the Council eventually fell apart as more and more concerned parents, discouraged by the boundary decision and other such rebuffs to the community, moved out of the area. The prediction by community leaders that the boundary would have an erosive effect on the community was beginning to be fulfilled.

The bond issue authorizing the construction of Ravenswood High School called for a plant which would accommodate 2000 students. The school was actually constructed to house 1500 students with some funds held in reserve for possible future expansion. At the end of the 1961-1962 school year, there were 833 students enrolled at Ravenswood, while the other high schools in the district were uncomfortably overcrowded. The need to reassess the boundary of the Ravenswood attendance area was apparent. The Sequoia Union High School District Board wrangled from early Spring 1962 until March 1963.

In its first attempt to deal with the problem, the board suggested that the Willows area be included in the Ravenswood attendance area. Changes in boundaries of other district high schools were also proposed. Six hundred indignant citizens attended the board meeting on April 25, 1962, to take issue with those proposals. As a result of this demonstration of community displeasure from west of Bayshore, the board decided to postpone a decision on the boundaries for the time being and appointed a committee representing various sections of the Sequoia District to try to find a solution to the problem.

In November 1962 the Lay Committee submitted their report which recommended that a section of Menlo Park, including but slightly larger than the Willows area, be added to the Ravenswood attendance area. Meanwhile, the residents of the Willows area formed their own group which made two alternate proposals to the board. Their first proposal was that Ravenswood be expanded to accommodate 2000 students and that major portions of Menlo Park be included in the school boundaries. As an alternative, the Willows Residents' Association suggested building an additional high school west of Menlo Park and maintaining Ravenswood's boundaries as they were.

Because the first Willows Plan would have had the effect of bringing a desirable socio-economic balance to Ravenswood and Menlo-Athernton, it found support in the communities east of Bayshore. Throughout the long and often confusing period of discussion on the boundary issue, the residents of East Palo Alto and Belle Haven remained united with the Willows area in support of the Willows Plan #1 for redrawing the Ravenswood boundary. The plan had to be slightly modified when the board voted to limit the capacity of Ravenswood to 1400, but the revised plan kept a fairly good socio-economic and ethnic balance with the capacity revised down to 1400-1500.

At the same time that the Willows residents and the Lay Committee were formulating plans, several other groups of individuals offered alternate solutions to the boundary dispute. Most of these groups represented various small communities west of Bayshore which were determined not to be included in the Ravenswood attendance area.

During this period, a group of Ravenswood High School teachers who had been concerned about the increasing minority percentage at Ravenswood since 1961 also presented a statement to the superintendent, asking for substantial boundary changes to check the growth of segregation. The existence of this group was unknown to most of the anti-segregation groups east of Bayshore until 1965.

Because of the splintering of community opinion over the issue of the Ravenswood boundary, the board again postponed a decision. On January 17, 1963, the board suggested that the conflicting groups get together and attempt to formulate a compromise plan for redrawing the school boundary. At the same meeting (after the majority of the audience had left) the board voted to limit the capacity of Ravenswood to 1400 students.

After the sixty days allotted for planning, the Committee on Sequoia Union High School District Attendance Areas was unable to reach a mutually satisfactory agreement. There was hope by the Ravenswood and Willows groups that the Committee would

agree that Willow Road east of Bayshore should be the dividing line between Ravenswood and Menlo-Atherton, but this hope was not fulfilled. The board was left in exactly the same position it had been in a year previously.

Finally, on March 23, 1963, the board in a 3-2 vote accepted still another plan which had been suggested the previous week by Superintendent Rex Turner. This plan was one which added the Willows area plus a small section north of Willow Road to the Ravenswood attendance area. Two members of the board had tried on March 14 to pass a motion to put all of Belle Haven into Menlo-Atherton by using Willow Road east of Bayshore as the dividing line, but they were voted down at that time.

To analyze the difference between the decisions of '62-'63 and those of 1957, one might note that in 1963 there was a State Board of Education policy which required that the school board consider socio-economic and ethnic compositions of student bodies in setting boundaries--no such policy existed in 1957. Because of the failure of the final boundary decision to equalize ethnic or socio-economic groups between Menlo-Atherton and Ravenswood, two members of the board voted against the decision--the board was unanimously against considering this factor in 1957. Also, a sizeable portion of the community west of Bayshore for the first time became really aware and concerned about the situation at Ravenswood High School, recognizing the problem as being a community responsibility, not just the concern of those east of Bayshore. Not that their solutions were all acceptable to those east of Bayshore, far from it; but at least they were aware of the problem.

When the 1963-1964 school term opened, it was found that about half of the white students transferred to Ravenswood did not show up, and there was a fresh influx of Negro students. As many more concerned parents, white and Negro, again left the east of Bayshore area, this influx was principally from the lower socio-economic group moving into the area. For the first time the minority percentage was above 50%--the school had opened in 1958 with 21% minorities. Civil rights and community leaders had labelled Ravenswood as de facto segregated from the very start, since over 90% of all Negro students in the district attended it, and the board had laid the foundation for an increasing minority percentage each year. The 1963 boundary change, they felt might have worked in 1958, but in 1963 it was too little and too late to do anything but aggravate the situation.

In the summer of 1963 demonstrations were staged against the district board by the local NAACP and CORE, along with other concerned citizens. The issue was kept before the public and pressure continued to be exerted on the board. In March of 1964 the NAACP filed a lawsuit against the district. Later that Spring, the school board appointed a Citizens' Advisory Committee on Ethnic Problems to come up with a final solution to the problem of de facto segregation and resulting educational problems in the district. In the Fall of 1964 there were indications that this broadly-represented committee might come up with a satisfactory solution, and the board said it would have a moral commitment to accept whatever proposal this Ethnic Committee presented to them. The NAACP withdrew the lawsuit on this basis, making it clear that it might be reinstated if the expected solution were not satisfactory. The Negro percentage at Ravenswood in the 1964-1965 school year was between 60% and 70%.

In February 1965 the Ethnic Problems Committee presented a proposal to phase out Ravenswood High School as now constituted within a period of three years or less, and distribute the students among the other district schools. This proposal was formulated and worked on with the assistance of Sequoia Union High School District teachers and administrators and presented as the only feasible way to end de facto segregation in the district. Since racially segregated education has been determined to be

inherently inferior education, this plan was also presented by its supporters as being the only feasible way to assure students at all district schools an equally good education. Many teachers at all district schools favored it; 66% of Ravenswood High School teachers later signed a petition supporting the phaseout proposal. The principals of the six district high schools expressed support for the proposal. The Bureau of Intergroup Relations, a unit of the California State Board of Education, told the district board that this proposal was the only feasible solution to the problem. The president of the State Board of Education, Mr. Thomas Braden, publicly praised the phaseout proposal.

The only other proposal that would really have eliminated de facto segregation, two-way bussing on a non-voluntary basis to equalize socio-economic-ethnic-percentages at all six schools, was rejected by the Ethnic Committee as something that would cause an impossible amount of violent resentment in the white areas. Supporters of phaseout feel that it would be unrealistic to expect parents whose children now go to educationally and socially acceptable schools to accept sending their children to a school like Ravenswood, which is so strongly stigmatized that parents living near it are moving or using any other means they can to get their children out of this school.

Shortly before the Ethnic Committee was to present the phase-out proposal, the news that the idea of closing Ravenswood was being considered leaked out, and the local newspaper ran front-page articles with such headlines as "RAVENSWOOD DOOMED?" A bond issue to build two new high schools to relieve overcrowding in the district was defeated soon afterwards. The school board election came up in April 1965 and the two members who had expressed the desire to end de facto segregation by any means necessary were up for election. The East Palo Alto and Belle Haven areas put up a strongfight to re-elect them, but were outvoted by the upper-income white areas. The new board members both favor the "neighborhood school" concept and other theories associated with the growth of de facto segregation. This school of thought denounces de facto segregation, but rejects any significant measure to eliminate it in the name of "fairness" to all the students and to the quality of education. The composition of the school board is now more unfavorable in regards to the correction of socio-economic-racial imbalance than it was in 1957. There was reason to believe that if Trustees Sears and Price had been re-elected, the other members of the board would have been inclined to join them in supporting phaseout--at least one more anyway, giving supporters of phaseout the necessary majority on the five-member board. Now, the board claims a popular mandate against closing Ravenswood High School or taking any other really meaningful measures to end segregation. The local press also uses this argument--one that has been increasingly popular since the passage of Proposition 14 repealing California fair housing laws.

On October 6, 1965, after putting off a final decision on the phase-out proposal for several months (and rejecting it for the 1965-1966 school year) the board rejected the phase-out proposal in the face of pleas by educators, administrators, parents and students, claiming financial consideration as the principal factor (lack of room to place students, lack of funds to build other schools, protection of taxpayers' investment in Ravenswood until definite use is provided for it, etc.). They adopted a proposal by the new superintendent, Dr. George Chaffey, which aimed to solve de facto segregation by voluntary transfers on a one-to-one basis, except the the first 100 Ravenswood students would be allowed to transfer to other schools (25 per school) without students coming over to take their places. Local leaders pointed out that not only was the proposal tokenism, but that when concerned parents move out of the Ravenswood attendance area in order to avoid sending their children to Ravenswood, no parent from across the highway is going to volunteer to send his children to Ravenswood to make room for Ravenswood High School students over there. The State Bureau of Intergroup Relations had repeatedly pointed out to the district

board that voluntary transfers would not solve the problem. Nevertheless, the board tried the plan. Ironically, the board and white community had expressed dismay in 1963 when the Ravenswood area civic leaders suggested that a voluntary transfer plan between Ravenswood and the all-white district schools be added to the Willows proposal equalizing socio-economic-ethnic composition between Menlo-Atherton and Ravenswood.

Parents of 9th, 10th, and 11th graders at Ravenswood were circularized, as were parents of 8th graders in the Ravenswood feeder schools. Of the 136 who responded that they would like to see their children in other schools, 70 were Negro. Parents of 9th, 10th, 11th graders at Woodside, Sequoia, Carlmont, and San Carlos were also circularized, as were parents of 8th graders in feeder schools for these high schools. Fourteen parents volunteered to send their children to Ravenswood High School; two of these were Negro. Dr. Chaffey said that if all transfer requests were honored, the racial imbalance at Ravenswood would increase.

On March 16, 1966, the school board discarded the voluntary transfer plan as being no solution to the problem of de facto segregation. As one point during the meeting the board seemed ready to put it into effect despite the fact that it would increase the racial imbalance at Ravenswood, but in the face of vocal opposition from the many Ravenswood attendance area residents and their friends in the audience, (who insisted that the plan as it now stood was worse than doing nothing, and strongly questioned screening methods suggested for cutting the number of transfers down to 100 out of Ravenswood), the board dropped the plan--and also the segregation issue for the time being. Before the issue was dropped, however, Trustee Helen Kerwin, previously strongly opposed to phase-out, stated that the board must eventually find a solution for the problem of de facto segregation in the district even if it meant phasing out Ravenswood--and stated that it was up to the district community to make the board bring about the day when a solution could be achieved. She again stressed the need of funds.

The Negro percentage at Ravenswood in the 1965-1966 school year is estimated by local observers to be between 70% and 80%, although the board claims it is 61%. The Ethnic Committee has projected a near-100% enrollment within the next few years unless something significant is done now.

That it is now too late for boundary changes to have any significance can be illustrated by the fact that a boundary change in the summer of 1965 put all high school students in Belle Haven into Menlo-Atherton, except for the few between Carlton and Willow Road. In 1963, such a transfer might have had some meaning. Now, it has significantly increased the Negro percentage at Ravenswood. These students have in many cases been met with open hostility at Menlo-Atherton from students, faculty, and administration. Apparently Menlo-Atherton fears it will become a second Ravenswood, while Carlmont, San Carlos, and Woodside remain all-white, and even Sequoia has a very low Negro percentage now. Community leaders have pointed out that this hostility would be much less likely if Ravenswood students were distributed equally among all other district schools.

Before the 1963-1964 school year, limited enrollment at Ravenswood had created problems in scheduling classes and had resulted in program conflicts--there were many single-section courses, especially in college prep or advanced courses. Some such courses, offered at other district schools, were not offered at Ravenswood. Elective opportunities were also limited, and those offered might conflict with basic courses in single-section. When student leaders at Ravenswood were given a questionnaire relative to course availability, they all said that there were subjects that they would like to take that they had been unable to take at Ravenswood.

Arrangements were made before the 1963-1964 school year opened to allow Ravenswood classes to be smaller than the legal minimum at other schools, but now the problem changed--the enrollment grew and soon was no longer below existing capacity to a significant degree, but there were fewer college-oriented students left to take advanced or college prep courses. In 1965-1966 the problem of not enough students signing up to make it possible to offer a class is again posing a problem to students who want to go on to higher learning.

In response to a questionnaire answered by 54% of the student body in 1962-1963, 50% of the students rated Ravenswood as average or below, compared with other high schools in the immediate area. The students who did show school pride felt that they must defend Ravenswood High School against the stigma associated with it by the rest of the district.

The academic climate was already recognized to be poor at Ravenswood in 1962-1963 due to the high number of remedial classes and of dropouts in comparison with other district schools. The academically-oriented student then had a hard fight against a less academically-oriented atmosphere, and at that time the Negro percentage was 45%. Now there is a Negro percentage from 70% to 80%, and the majority of these (and of the other 20% to 30%) come from so-called culturally-deprived homes. The departure from the area of an ever-increasing number of Negro and white community leaders after each unfavorable School Board decision left a void that was mostly filled by Negro families of a lower socio-economic level. The families remaining tended to be of the same type as those moving in. It was inevitable that the percentage of non-academically oriented students would grow under these conditions. Today the non-academic atmosphere is so strong that even students, parents, and teachers most dedicated to learning feel that there is no real hope for the Ravenswood student to acquire a quality education--only a good social life. The instruction is available; the proper encouragement and school spirit conducive to learning is not. Students and parents have commented on the great difference in academic orientation between Ravenswood and other district schools. The few students that do make it to college are usually white; students transferring from Ravenswood to other schools need tutors to catch up to class level, even if they were making A's and B's at Ravenswood. Parents from "culturally-deprived" homes expect the school to make up the education the child misses at home, but some of the teachers admit that they don't know how to teach these students, and some counselors often don't seem to care about their future. The teachers and counselors who fight the "have fun--don't bother with work" attitude find they are losing the battle to the general trend. The "mass psychosis" of the ghetto affects all--students, parents, teachers, administrators. Students who enjoy the relaxed atmosphere without realizing the education they are missing wake up as graduates to the realization that they are not prepared to go to college or to hold a decent job. Over 50% of the students who try junior college can't make it through the first six weeks. In June 1965 the four commencement speakers all pleaded for the phasing-out of Ravenswood so that their younger brothers and sisters might be spared this fate. Some of these students had been ardent Ravenswood boosters a few months before.

Money is spent at Ravenswood High School for compensatory education--\$150.00 more for each Ravenswood student than for students at other district schools. The Ravenswood High School principal last Fall listed ten special things done at Ravenswood and not at the other schools, then when asked why Ravenswood graduates often could not fill out job applications, he answered that they could not read. East Palo Alto's wonder how spending extra money to graduate students onto welfare rolls is "protecting the taxpayer's interest," as the board claimed it was doing when it stated that Ravenswood closing would not even be considered until a definite use for the buildings was already decided upon. The fact that it is unlikely that anyone or any group would definitely commit themselves to

take over Ravenswood until the board decided to phase it out was ignored.

In reference to special programs for "culturally-derived" students, it might be noted that the Ravenswood students who lect the school to go to other high schools (some of them were not getting very good grades at Ravenswood, in spite of relaxed standards by some teachers) have done very well without special treatment. They had a hard time at first, but in an academically-oriented atmosphere were able to make it and earn good grades by hard work. Treating these students like every other student worked well. The important thing seems to be who the "every one else" is--if they are students who are naturally assumed to have at least the possibility of potential for academic achievement, then the treatment of the class will be different that when the majority are assumed to be too "culturally-deprived" to be able to learn in the normal manner. Not that every student can make without special help; many need it; but at least students in an academically-oriented atmosphere have the chance to realize potential if it is there.

The relation of grammar school conditions to high school conditions should be mentioned. A majority of the population of Ravenswood Elementary School District is Negro; a majority is from the lower socio-economic group, from which the "culturally-deprived" children come. It cannot be denied that the educational problem starts there--the same "mass psychosis" affects the segregated grammar schools. The tremendous mobility of the area population means that only a small percentage of eighth grade graduating class started and finished in the elementary school district, and that a large percentage have lived there a year or less. The same tendency exists to treat these newcomers from "culturally-deprived" backgrounds as though they cannot be expected to achieve academic excellence. East Palo Alto community leaders, however, feel that the high school situation must be taken care of first because it will do little good to provide children with a decent elementary education if they are to be de-educated at Ravenswood, and that when the high school situation is corrected elementary school teachers will stop "training kids for Ravenswood"--a process especially apparent in 7th and 8th grades. Providing a good high school will be an incentive for concerned parents also to put additional pressure on the elementary district administration. It might be noted that communication between East Palo Alto community leaders and the elementary school administration is far better than that with the high school administration. There seems to be a genuine desire on the part of the elementary school administration to cooperate with parents in attempting to create conditions conducive to a good education in the elementary school district. Without Ravenswood High School, there will be more hope in the elementary schools. If unification passes, there may also be hope for decreasing the minority percentage in the elementary district. Meanwhile, concerned parents feel that even those children who have been cheated in their elementary school education will have a chance to catch up if Ravenswood is closed, instead of drowning once and for all.

During the summer of 1965, the group that now deals most directly with action against segregation in the high school district was organized. This group, the Mothers for Equal Education, has the support of several local ministers and the local civil rights groups and community groups representing the poor people of the area. Before school opened in September of 1965, the Mothers and their supporters picketed the high school board demanding that significant action be taken to end segregation, pointing out that they felt the only feasible course left to pursue was the closing of Ravenswood. The Mothers went to Sacramento and met with the Bureau of Intergroup Relations, receiving their full support, but they were told that from a legal standpoint there is little the State Board of Education can do unless the local board requests state aid. They were told that the state provided some funds for the elimination of school seg-

regation, but that the local board would have to ask for state help first. The Mothers have contacted an ever-growing number of parents to make them aware of the situation facing their children. They have made demands on the high school board-- demands seen as temporary relief measures until the school can be closed, since closing cannot be done immediately. Only closing, however, can really eliminate the segregation that breeds inferior education. These demands aim to improve the academic climate at Ravenswood the way some drugs relieve disease symptoms and discomfort, making it possible for the individual to survive until the sickness can be cured. The goal remains the curing of the disease that will eventually prove fatal to the human being if unchecked. The points are listed on a separate sheet.

More and more people are becoming involved in the anti-segregation fight. The Mothers now have two groups. The teachers for Equal Education have sprung up from the same group that petitioned the superintendent for boundary changes in 1963. Like the Mothers, they now favor phase-out. Other groups include South San Mateo County NAACP, Mid-Peninsula CORW, Committee of the Poor, Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, Community House, and others. There is unity among the groups on this issue. Since none have money for further legal action, some form of direct action is deemed to be necessary as the next step in the battle. One form of action undertaken by the MEE has been to attend all high school board meetings dressed in mourning black--sitting in the front row to demonstrate to board members that they are mourning for the death of hope for a quality education of Ravenswood High School students, and that they will not let the board forget their responsibility to the east of Bayshore community. Other action is in the planning stage. The board will try again to pass a bond issue soon, and there can be no doubt that the East Palo Alto area residents will not support it unless phase-out is started, or at least an unequivocal commitment is received from the board to phase out the high school. On the other hand, funds to construct school buildings and space to put students is desperately needed.

The job of all concerned anti-segregationists would seem to make more and more people aware of the problem, and to solicit active support for their program. Perhaps the board can be pressured into calling to Sacramento for help and funds to solve the problem. The goal is to make the school district "let the children go."