FUTURE IN THE BALANCE

After a notoriously tumultuous past, the future is looking promising for the Woodland Hills School District

BY ANNE MICHAUD

Before the school year begins, before heavy doors click open and students' shoes scuff the polished floors of Woodland Hills schools, before the high school's Wolverines suit up for football practice and before textbooks give up their stale September smell, there is a changing of the guard at the eastern suburban school district.

Jacquelyn Webb, assistant superintendent, packs boxes with eight years' worth of bound reports on curriculum assessments, curriculum plans and interim reviews. Her job, like dozens of others, had been eliminated when the district proved to the courts that it had met the goals of a 30-year desegregation battle. Woodland Hills is the only school in Pennsylvania history to face a federal court desegregation order. The goal: making public education equal for blacks and whites. Webb is satisfied. Her work is done.

Stanley Herman, the district's departing superintendent, cleans out his office, too. From his narrow closet, he pulls blown-up photos of two expert witnesses in the long-running case. The photographs are a joke, a gift from the school district's lawyers, intended to ease the tension of the courtroom combat that consumed two days a week for seven of Herman's eight years as superintendent. Over the years, he had often cancelled vacations—lost deposits on them—when the court ordered a last-minute hearing or report.

"I remember my first faculty meeting—which the staff likes to remind me of," Herman says. "I said I was vaguely familiar with what we had to do, and I didn't see this taking more than two years.

"It took eight."

Taking his place is the new guard. Dr. Ronald Grimm, former superintendent of the Steel Valley School District, will oversee the 2000-2003 transition plan to wean Woodland Hills from nearly $5 million in annual state funding that pay for programs—often experimental—to remove racial barriers in the curriculum and boost opportunities for poor and African-American children.

Woodland Hills is at a crossroads. Even as he released the school district from its desegregation order in July 2000, setting in motion the three-year transition plan, U.S. District Judge Maurice B. Cohill Jr. acknowledges both success and failure. "Woodland Hills has been transformed," he wrote, "from a new district created by court order in a climate of much anger and bitterness, to a school district whose motto, appropriately, is 'All Children Can Learn.' Yet despite the implementation of these remedial programs ... a racial disparity remains glaringly evident in achievement test scores."

However, some of the reforms set in motion by the old guard may yet change those test scores. An innovative program of after-school tutoring and summer-school classes, based on research by Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, is already closing the racial achievement gap in the lower grades and promises good things as the students move into high school.

"We're not where we should be [on test scores], but we're greatly encouraged when we look at the work students are doing in class," Herman says as he finished packing. "I know if the district stays the course and continues to have high standards for all of its kids, the scores are going to turn around very, very quickly." The catch: Some of those programs, like Webb's job, rely on state funds and may be lost with the expiration of the transition plan, which includes some state money but less each year.

The challenges are as far-ranging as the district itself, which sprawls across 12 municipalities, from rusting former industrial towns to new country-club bedroom communities. The district is looking for input from these diverse constituencies to deal with this question: What form will the post-decree Woodland Hills take?

ILLUSTRATION BY AMY WASSERMAN

GETTING TIME ON THEIR SIDE Children's Hospital's earlier research demonstrates that students from Woodland Hills' poorest communities—Rankin, Braddock and North Braddock, all with significant African-American populations—are about 1.5 years behind kids from wealthy Edgewood, Churchill and Wilkins as the children enter kindergarten. Both groups learn over time, but the children that start out behind tend to stay behind by 1.5 years.

"What we are doing in public schools is nonsensical," says Herman. "We hold the amount of time constant, and we allow the amount kids learn as the variable. What I am proposing is: We hold constant what the kids are able to demonstrate, and we vary the amount of time to get that done."

Enter the Woodland Hills' summer-school program, which accepts children as young as 4 to bring students from poor communities to a better starting point.

It's not an easy time. On one summer school morning at the Dickson Intermediate School in Swissvale, there's no air conditioning for the 170 K-3 students and their 14 teachers despite the predicted 90° high. First-graders yawn in the heat. Two aides and two teachers work the room of 22 kids who are spelling words with paper letters: first "Al," then "pal," then "pals." Marcia Murello stops at Candace's desk. "Pals-s-s-s," the teacher hisses. "What letter do you suppose you need to add at the end? Sound it out." Candace pushes an "s" into place.

The teachers' faces and arms perspire in the stuffy room, but they persist, clear-eyed. They have decided to pretend it's not hot, because children take their cues from adults. Upstairs, a third-grader smiles as he learns how to check subtraction using addition.

"We take it very seriously," says Pam Lapczynski, the summer-school principal. "If our children aren't meeting the standards, this is going to help them get there sooner. Yes, it's hot, but there is energy in these halls."

TUTORING AFTER SCHOOL A second component of giving kids more time to learn is the after-school tutorial program in five public-housing and other community centers. Students can take the bus from school, and some stay until 8 or 8:30 p.m. doing homework and having it checked by a paid student tutor or volunteer teacher. About 308 students in all grade levels in a given month visit the centers in Braddock Carnegie Library, Braddock Salvation Army, Hawkins Village Knowledge Connection in Rankin, Prospect Terrace Knowledge Connection in East Pittsburgh and Rankin Christian Center.

On one morning, the Rankin Christian Center is buzzing with the food bank's midday distribution and an anniversary celebration on the back lawn. If the members look beyond the three simmering grills, they can just see a corner of the Rankin Intermediate School. About 100 kids show up for help with homework from three volunteer teachers and three paid high school students.

When Woodland Hills first tried offering the tutorials in its school buildings, the students didn't come. Somehow the Christian Center adds the magic ingredients of trust and familiarity. Parents and other relatives are in the building frequently for such programs as the Family Care Connection, a one-stop human-services site operated with Children's Hospital. A new job-readiness center is growing popular by word of mouth. The gymnasium and the girls' gospel group, Sisters in Motion, give people two more reasons to show up.

"What kids find here is a safe haven," says the Rev. Paul Sandusky, executive director. "Parents believe that, and they trust us with their kids."

Participation in many of the programs, such as the Sisters in Motion, is based on good grades. Because the center and the school district work together, they pool resources, such as funding for computers. During the school year, students come in, do their homework and have it checked by a tutor. Only then are they allowed on the computers, explains administrative assistant Yvonne Spencer, who grew up attending the center herself. The lure of the computer time is so powerful that "it's a mad dash to get your homework done," she says.

Krystal Coleman, who has just graduated from Woodland Hills High School and intends to study nursing, tutored at Hawkins Village last year. "It was my first job," she says. "It was exciting and something I liked to do." The kids all looked up to you. At 3:30, they'd be running off the bus into the center, and they'd drag me in."

THE HISTORICAL RECORD By what now seems to have been a glaring oversight, the state Department of Education ignored the need for racial and economic diversity when creating new districts in 1971. During the 1960s, the state enacted a series of laws intended to consolidate small single-municipality public schools into districts of a minimum size. Wilkins Township, Forest Hills, Churchill and Chalfant combined to form the Churchill Area School District, for example.

By the time the schools had paired off, the financially struggling Braddock, North Braddock and Rankin—the boroughs with the largest African-American populations—remained. The education department approved combining the three into the General Braddock Area School District. In a later opinion, U.S. District Judge Gerald L. Weber wrote, "This court found that the school districts in the vicinity of Braddock and Rankin continually sought to avoid being included in a school district with them due to the high concentration of blacks."

In June 1971, one month before the General Braddock district became official, several parents within the district filed suit. The suit would generate 10 years of battle

THE TERRITORY

The Woodland Hills School District (www.whsd.k12.pa.us) encompasses 13.5 miles in 12 municipalities: Braddock, Braddock Hills, Chalfant, Churchill, East Pittsburgh, Edgewood, Forest Hills, North Braddock, Rankin, Swissvale, Turtle Creek and Wilkins Township.

About 5,850 students, 48 percent of them African-American, attend its nine schools: K-3, Edgewood, Shaffer (in Churchill) and Wilkins primary schools; grades 4-6, Dickson (Swissvale), Fairless (North Braddock) and Rankin intermediate schools; grades 7-9, East and West junior high schools in Turtle Creek and Swissvale, respectively; and grades 10-12, Woodland Hills High School (Churchill).

The district also operates after-school tutoring programs in East Pittsburgh, Rankin and Braddock.

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under Judge Weber's supervision. He received threats on his life. School districts sought to disentangle themselves—fighting all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court (which declined to hear the case)—from Weber's growing conviction that the black and white schools should be combined.

In 1981, Weber ordered five districts to merge: Churchill Area, Edgewood, General Braddock Area, Swissvale Area (Swissvale and Braddock Hills) and Turtle Creek Area (Turtle Creek and East Pittsburgh). The new Woodland Hills district had about 9,100 students, about 17 percent of them black, though the actual percentage attending would appear higher, as many white parents sent their children to private schools. Within this new district (see "The Territory," page 88), home buyers can find a $400 house at the sheriff's auction or exclusive properties selling for more than $4 million. The judge's desire for diversity had been put into action.

The court next turned to other issues of equality. During the debate over remedies in 1989, Judge Weber died, and Judge Cohill took over. Cohill appointed a hearing officer, Mark Fatla, who reported to the court in 1990 that he had found vast disparities in discipline (blacks were punished more often and more harshly), activities (whites dominated swimming, tennis and golf), education (few blacks were found in high-level courses) and the number of black teachers and other staff.

Most alarming to Fatla, however, was the racial breakdown in "special education," from high-end gifted classes (mostly white) to those for children (mostly black) defined as mentally retarded, learning disabled or emotionally disturbed. "The result if this condition persists is a resegregated school district," Fatla wrote, "with a white enclave and a black dumping ground."

School administrators got busy. The district retrained teachers to offer multicultural instruction and to work in "heterogeneous" classrooms, which mix students with different levels of ability rather than "tracking" them. Black teachers and staff were hired. The district bought computers and required all students to spend at least 15 minutes a day at a terminal. Teachers were instructed in how to remove race bias from their discipline measures. The district even taught parents how to become involved in their children's education.

Today, each of the district's nine schools reflects very closely the proportion of minority students in the community, the court found, averaging 48.5 percent minority, from a low of 32 percent at the high school to a high of 58 percent at Shaffer Primary School. While nearly one-third of school building administrators are African-American, the overall percentage of minority professional staff is a "dismal" 7.7 percent, Judge Cohill wrote, though Herman attributed that low number on a low turnover rate. Nearly 45 percent of the teachers were working there when the school district was created in 1981.

WHAT'S AHEAD? As a social experiment, Woodland Hills is in good company. With scores of other districts across the U.S. emerging from desegregation orders, scholars are watching what lies ahead.

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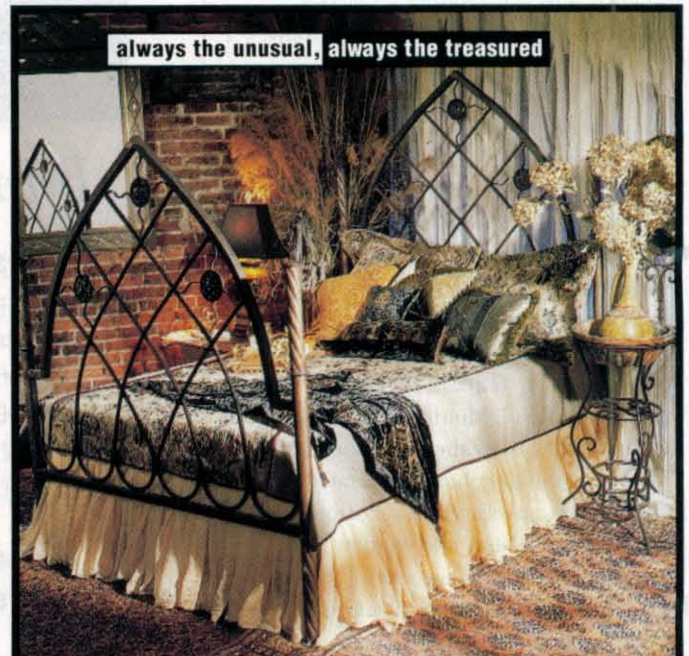

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Janet Schofield, a professor of psychology at the University of Pittsburgh and a senior scientist at the school's Learning Research and Development Center, has studied schools emerging from desegregation orders. She says mixing students from different backgrounds helps those who start out with less. "A problem arises if schools shift back to neighborhood schools; they can become more homogeneous.... Maintaining a variety of backgrounds is something districts need to do as they come out of these court orders."

While working on desegregation, school districts often pour resources into the worst-performing schools and students. "The question is whether that special effort is going to last over time," Schofield continues. "School boards are elected, and they must show a certain amount of responsiveness to the people who put them there."

Raymond Wolters, Thomas Muncy Keith professor of history at the University of Delaware, argues that desegregation has harmed public schools, and that a return to neighborhood schools is not only a possibility but likely for Woodland Hills. "My guess is that ... you've got a battle looming about five years down the road," says Wolters, who wrote an award-winning book, *The Burden of Brown: 30 Years of School Desegregation* (University of Tennessee Press, 1984). Integration is supposed to remedy past segregation. Once a school has undone past injustices, Wolters says, it is free to do as it wishes as long as it does not base decisions on race.

In other words, he says, "Some parents are going to sue for assigning their kid out of the neighborhood on the basis of race."

JUDGING WOODLAND HILLS Has it worked? The district's success has been so marked that Kansas City, which has spent $3 billion on a failed desegregation effort, has invited Herman to visit and offer his advice.

Yet many problems remain. Up to 60 percent of children (depending on community) in Edgewood, Churchill and Forest Hills still opt for private or parochial school. Public school officials say local families have a long tradition in the private schools, but critics contend that the numbers show a lack of faith in Woodland Hills. Last year, 5,850 students attended the public schools, roughly 52 percent of them white.

The most significant task ahead is to integrate math classes from junior high and above, as the court has ordered in the past.

Judge Cohill wrote that "tracking has a strong impact on minority students ... who generally make up a higher percentage of students in lower-level courses." The district has been offering pre-algebra in seventh through 11th grade, thereby allowing students to stay in a low-level course almost through graduation. The transition plan calls for eliminating pre-algebra, phasing in a new math program called Connected Math for sixth- and seventh-graders, and offering all students algebra beginning in eighth grade.

And resentment remains over a discipline program that leaves both black and white families claiming they've been unfairly targeted. The court simply failed to bring closure to this issue, some say, and the issue festers, leaving teachers open to charges of racism.

Robert Clanagan, an African-American parent and president of the Coalition for a Better Educational Environment, says black students make up the vast majority attending "Saturday School," an alternative to suspensions. They are there for "petty things" like talking back to a teacher, the Braddock resident says. Some must opt for harsher punishment because they have problems finding transportation on a weekend.

"Curriculum-wise, it's a good school," he says of the Saturday program. "But what does that quality of education do for students who can't learn because of their relationship with their classroom teachers?"

The district first identified in 1990 a disparity in discipline, which the court called "racially disproportionate and excessive." For example, in the 1988-89 school year, black students received 56 percent of out-of-school suspensions, but made up just 21 percent of the high school school population.

The district revised its code of conduct and set up an elaborate system of checkpoints: a discipline review committee at each school, a district-wide discipline review panel for students involved in five or more incidents, and "behavior-modification measures" including parent conferences, individual and group counseling, detention, referrals to the special education director and referrals to outside agencies.

One parent says the system has discouraged teachers from disciplining students with the most severe behavior problems. Teachers are required to report disciplinary measures by student race and ZIP code, says the parent, who is white and asked that her name not be used. Teachers with five or more disciplinary referrals in a particular month must meet with their principal. Some teachers find that demeaning, the parent says, "so they just stopped disciplining."

Judge Cohill found that the number of out-of-school suspensions has dropped significantly and that there is no racial bias or discrimination in the imposition of discipline. But, he added, it is undisputed that there's still racial disparity in the number of incident reports and in the severity of the discipline meted out. He concluded that while African-American parents blame continuing racial bias, the school district's explanation is more plausible, "that it is not a vestige of the constitutional violation but

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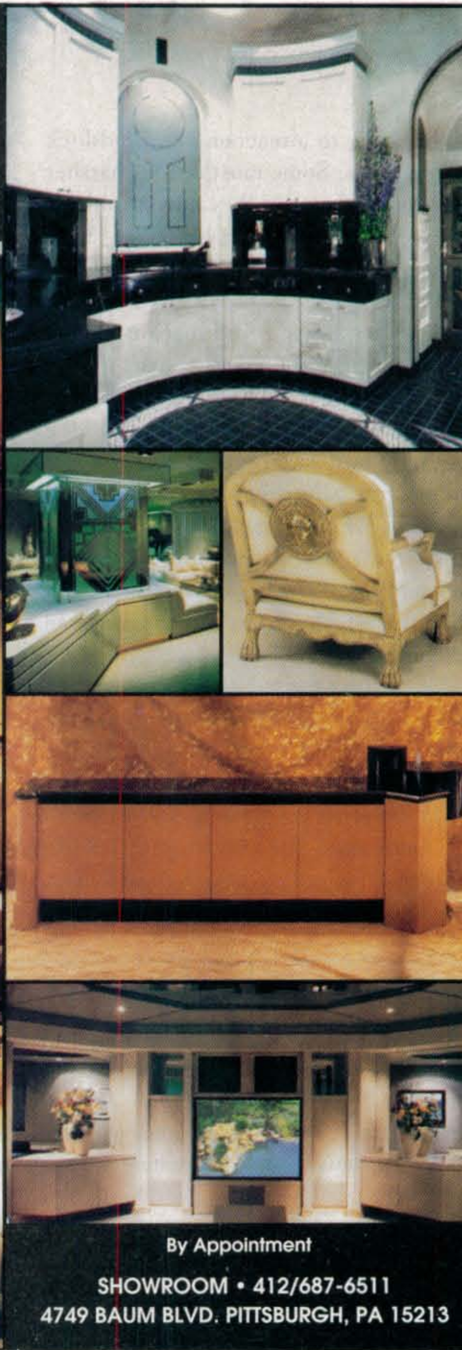

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may be explained by racial differences in socioeconomic status."

Clanagan interprets that as the judge blaming parents: "The school district painted a pretty picture and blamed discipline problems on the community and the family."

GIVING PUBLIC SCHOOLS A CHANCE

Participation by white parents is nothing to brag about, says Roseanne Shak, co-president of the Shaffer PTO. Often, the same 8-10 parents show up for meetings, she says. Many people don't give the public schools a chance, she adds.

Shak considers herself a true believer in public schools. She teaches third grade in the Wilkinsburg School District, and her father was Rocco Stio, the superintendent of General Braddock School District. Stio died this year.

"It stems from a long time ago, when the merger was created initially, that created concern for a lot of parents," says Shak, who is white and grew up in Rankin. "That became the word, and people can't get past that. They don't see that the opportunities and resources outweigh the private schools."

She has one son in junior high and another starting kindergarten. A bright child, the older boy has been as challenged as she could have hoped for, Shak says. "In English class, he was given project after project. The class really pleased me because it was so difficult." Her son has been exposed to some things that she wishes he hadn't been. He attends school with children who have a hard life. But the good outweighs the bad, she says.

"Not everybody has a car and a backyard with a sandbox," she says. "To see that is part of education. I want my children to be aware of that, and that's one thing I really appreciate about Woodland Hills.

"People are people. That's the attitude we have in this home," she continues. "It doesn't matter where you come from: It's what you are." As Woodland Hills moves forward, to judge a student by the content of his character may remain a dream. But for some, it is still a dream worth pursuing.

Anne Michaud, a free-lance writer based in Richland Township, has written for the Los Angeles Times, *the* Boston Globe, Newsweek *and* Cincinnati *magazine. This is her first story for* PITTSBURGH *magazine.*