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The Schools and Integration

There are a couple of hard facts about the school integration plan in San Francisco. One: It is the law. The Courts ordered it. Two: The School Board chose an extended-neighborhood concept in implementing the Court order.

There is no mystery about the extended neighborhood idea. We've already tried it in the Richmond Complex. How did it work out? A survey of parents by the Project Evaluator, Mrs. Elliot Feigenbaum, found that while 41 per cent of the parents felt "positive" about the Complex before it started, 58 per cent felt positive at the close of the school year. One parent whose opinions shifted was Mrs. Jerrod Harris, who said:

"I was very much against the complex in the beginning. Once it started I was surprisingly very happy. The complex has been fantastic. Each child has had much more in their new schools. They have learned more, and have made more friends."

There were some parents, of course, who felt negatively about the complex, but that percentage shrunk from 45 at the beginning of the year to 32 at the end of the year.

One of the main reasons for the favorable shift of opinion - above and beyond integration itself - was the increased opportunity for parents to become involved in the education of their children. This extended neighborhood concept opens up new possibilities for real parental participation in shaping the activities and curriculum in their children's schools. The reason is that there is a very limited amount of policy that parents can make for one isolated school. A different pattern for each individual school would be administratively impossible. But it is possible for parents to make policy for an extended

neighborhood cluster of schools. In the survey, 40 per cent of the parents said that they felt meaningfully involved in school activities - a phenomenally high figure. And there's a bonus. One sharp fact that emerges from educational research in the past decade is that the single most important factor in academic achievement for children is the involvement of their parents.

So, what the School Board proposes, under its mandate from the Federal Court, are seven extended neighborhoods like the Richmond Complex. It will not be as easy as apple pie. Change never is. But it's up to the parents. Only the most mindless can try to scapegoat the School Board for this one. Under Court Order and all kinds of pressure, the School Board could have gone into political panic - as an elected Board probably would have - and our children would have had shambles instead of schools. Instead, the School Board handled a difficult situation in a way designed to bring most benefit to children and parents. If the parents take a hand. Parents who are interested in the education of their children will seize this unusual opportunity for involvement. They will write the School Board urging that strong extended-neighborhood parental councils be established as a first priority. And they will become involved in their council. That way, the Neighborhood Schools will for the first time come to have some real educational as well as geographical meaning.