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Race tilts middle school debate

Albany -- Some say difficulty in securing location tied to segregated housing patterns

By **RICK KARLIN**, Staff writer
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For more than two years, the Albany Board of Education has struggled to find a location for a new middle school, only to be confronted by neighbors who are saying Not in My Back Yard.

The NIMBY syndrome is nothing new. But beyond the usual neighborhood objections about traffic, noise and congestion, some members of the city's African-American community say the middle school battle raises a deeper, more troubling issue: fears in predominantly white neighborhoods about playing host to a school that will be attended mostly by black and other minority students.

That's not to paint individuals who have protested middle school plans as racially biased. Nor is it to say that middle schools, filled with naturally rambunctious adolescents, don't offer challenges.

But the difficulty in finding a home for what would be the city's third middle school comes amid a demographic reality facing Albany and many cities nationwide: the growing level of racial and economic segregation in the education system.

"A lot of people just don't want children around, and then it gets to the other issue that they don't want black children around," said Anne Pope, president of the NAACP's Albany branch.

It's becoming more of a concern in light of what demographers describe as the re-segregation of American schools.

In the three decades or so after the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision against segregation, the nation's schools became more racially integrated.

But recent studies show that trend is reversing. Spurred by court decisions voiding desegregation orders in several states as well as housing patterns and income stratification nationwide,



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resegregation has gained steam since the 1990s.

According to The Civil Rights Project, a Harvard-based group that surveyed educational segregation nationwide, the average white student attends a school that is 80 percent white while the average minority student is in a school that is less than 33 percent white.

"This is not an isolated phenomenon," said Chungmei Lee, a researcher at the project.

Albany's demographics are equally split -- 63 percent of the city's 94,000 residents are white but 75 percent of the public schools' 10,000 students are minorities, with most being African-American.

This racial divide raises a raft of questions about how to improve the schools and rally public support behind this cause.

The search for a middle school site in Albany is an example. Each time the school board has eyed a location, neighborhood residents have raised heated protests. Two years ago, an initial plan to build on Kelton Court off Whitehall Road became a school board election issue. More recently, plans to build in Westland Hills Park bogged down in red tape after an outcry by nearby residents.

Now the board, with no upcoming election, is once again looking at Kelton Court as a possible location. The board last week purchased an option that would, with voter approval, allow it to buy the site for \$1.35 million.

As was the case with Westland Hills, "There will be opposition and I think it will be strident," said board member Scott Wexler.

The extent to which the opposition is perceived as racially motivated differs depending on is talking.

Certainly, there are valid concerns about having a middle school in one's neighborhood. Residents around Westland Hills Park, for instance, said they feared a school would ruin the park's flavor and noted there was oil, asbestos and other contamination from the days when the area around the school was a dump site.

"I don't believe we are racists up here," said Joe Cunniff, one of numerous neighborhood residents who opposed a new school at Westland Hills. Residents, he said, do have concerns about the noise that would come from a nearby middle school. "Lots of times, the kids are up to mischief," he said of adolescents.

"Is race an issue in this? Absolutely. Am I prepared to say that's the reason that people don't want a middle school in their community? I'm not prepared to say that," said Bill Barnette, who, with Paul

Webster, is one of two African-Americans on the seven member board.

Barnette says the district should rethink the need for a third middle school entirely and look instead at building more K-8 schools, but so far he has been in the minority on this.

Still, others view racial bias as part and parcel of the NIMBY protests as well as any discussion of city schools. The city's segregation is so apparent, they say, that it's hard to ignore.

"It's a lot of the story," Pope said.

"There is, absolutely, a race aspect to this," said Aaron Mair, an African-American activist who served on a committee in the early 1990s to look at desegregating city schools.

That Albany is geographically segregated is obvious from a census map developed for the Times Union by the Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research at the University at Albany.

The map shows clearly defined sections of the city -- Arbor Hill and the South End -- where the minority population is concentrated.

Also, economic stratification goes hand-in-hand with racial segregation. "They are very closely linked," said John Logan, a sociology professor and director of Mumford Center.

Among the Capital Region cities of Albany, Schenectady and Troy, the median household income for whites in 2000 was \$45,243, compared with \$24,544, for blacks, Logan noted. In that regard, the segregation is about income as much as race.

"In my view that is even more of an issue. Cities around the country are becoming economically segregated," said school board member Pat Fahy.

The Civil Rights Project's Lee sees the resegregation of schools as "the canary in the mine ... They are telling us what's happening in our society."

"People are wary of junior high kids because they are at a kooky age. Then factor in that you've got children of color as well from stigmatized neighborhoods, and it adds to the fear," noted Webster.

Even middle school students know that they have a reputation for being noisy and a bit wild.

Standing amid a throng of kids racing along the sidewalk at 3 p.m. dismissal from Hackett middle school, seventh-grader Shandu West said he understands why residents may not want a noisy middle school in their neighborhood. "They don't want people in their yards," said West, 13.

The city's other middle school, Livingston, can be just as boisterous.

Livingston is in the predominantly black Arbor Hill neighborhood. Hackett is across from Lincoln Park, which is near the Mansion and South End neighborhoods, which also are enclaves for African-American, and largely poor, families.

By contrast, the two available building sites -- Kelton Court and Westland Hills are farther away from the minority neighborhoods, which only adds to the complication.

When considering a racial equation there are no easy choices. Were a third middle school to go in the South End or Arbor Hill, the school district could be criticized for isolating schools in minority neighborhoods.

And during past discussions, some white residents have said they wouldn't send their kids to schools in black neighborhoods, Mair recalled. "You had some very strong comments from the white side of town," he said. "We've never seriously dealt with the racial isolation issue here."

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