

# Chicago Tribune

## **Suburban school districts, police working out protest logistics Officials say they will welcome Chicago students**

August 28, 2008

By Tara Malone and Lisa Black, TRIBUNE REPORTERS and Tribune reporters Carlos Sadovi and Rick Pearson contributed to this report.

They don't know how many children will report for school Tuesday, when they will arrive, who will accompany them or what they'll do.

But educators, police and New Trier Township residents are preparing for what could be an unprecedented influx of city students Tuesday in an effort to highlight the financial inequities that divide Illinois schools.

With an eye toward everything from traffic to toilets, school administrators in Winnetka and Northfield said they want to plan for "every contingency" and use the occasion as a lesson for their students. They know there's little room for missteps given the legal and racial pressures that entangle the issue.

"We do see this as an educational opportunity," New Trier Township High School Supt. Linda Yonke said.

State Sen. James Meeks (D-Chicago) has called for city students to boycott their own schools on what is to be the first day and get on one of 125 buses he has reserved to transport them from Chicago's South Side to New Trier High School and Sunset Ridge School. He has said the students will attempt to enroll in the suburban schools.

Meeks pledged to cancel the plan if by Friday, Gov. Rod Blagojevich, Senate President Emil Jones and House Speaker Michael Madigan endorse a three-year, \$120 million project to prove that more money and resources would strengthen the academic standing of low-performing schools. The lawmakers, all in Denver for the Democratic National Convention, had not met by Wednesday afternoon. Meeks blamed Blagojevich.

"[Blagojevich] is the only one who doesn't have the time. I would think the priorities of the school kids of Illinois outweigh anything else," Meeks said.

In Chicago Wednesday, Board of Education President Rufus Williams urged students and parents to not boycott and questioned the logic of Meeks' plan. More than 100 people made a similar plea during a rally outside the Chicago Public Schools headquarters while the board was meeting.

Keith McFall said he plans to accompany his son Tuesday to Hope College Prep High School. "A child should not miss one day of school."

Meanwhile, Winnetka and Northfield police are working to prevent traffic jams around the three affected campuses: Sunset Ridge School and New Trier High School's freshman campus, both in Northfield, and New Trier's east campus in Winnetka. School administrators are discussing crowd control and how to ensure classes continue as planned.

State law prevents schools from enrolling students who live elsewhere unless they pay tuition. Families looking to register students typically must show a birth certificate, school transcript, medical paperwork and proof of residency in accord with Illinois law.

Details about when students will arrive and where they will go remain unclear, said school officials, police and Meeks' spokeswoman.

While some parents may fret about disruptions to the school day, at least one community group hopes to welcome visitors with doughnuts, water and posters.

"We've had parental reactions from 'I'm not sending my kids to school' to 'Let's have a big tent and throw a big party,'" said Peter Fischer, president of the Sunset Ridge School District 29 Board. He said visitors to that school, which serves Grades 4 through 8, will be ushered into the gym -- the only place big enough to hold a large crowd. "We plan to set out chairs and we'll have water and cookies. I don't want the kids to be uncomfortable," Fischer said.

Sunset Ridge PTO President Sue Siegel of Northfield said parents initially asked her whether they should send their kids to school Tuesday. "I reiterate the value of a school day and that I see no reason to keep them home," Siegel said.

At New Trier, teachers have been given a primer on school funding to help field questions from students, Yonke said.

On Wednesday, nearly two dozen parents, clergy and residents met to plan for the students "in a welcoming capacity," said Katie Seigenthaler of Winnetka, a New Trier parent and spokeswoman for a new initiative called United We Learn.

"We are aware there are many ways to look at this situation. We choose to see this as an opportunity to open discussion," she said.

For some, the scene poised to unfold next week may be reminiscent of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech on housing segregation in Winnetka Village Green more than four decades ago. The civil rights leader drew nearly 10,000 people to the North Shore in July 1965. That Winnetka and Northfield -- two affluent, overwhelmingly white towns -- may again host a crowd campaigning for equity resonates with many residents.

"There are absolutely parallels in the sense that, for us, this is about civil rights," said Gail Schechter, executive director of the Interfaith Housing Center of the Northern Suburbs.

At issue is how much money schools spend per student. In a funding system largely fueled by local property taxes, New Trier Township spent nearly \$17,000 per student in 2005-06 and Sunset Ridge spent about \$16,000, while Chicago Public Schools spent an estimated \$10,400 per pupil.

Todd Townsend experienced both school systems when he transferred from Chicago's Morgan Park High School to New Trier as a teen. Townsend, a basketball standout, left his West Englewood neighborhood as a senior when a Kenilworth couple became his legal guardians. He credits his Chicago teachers with giving him a solid academic foundation. But, he said, New Trier's well-funded programs and college emphasis kept him on track. "It's not that the kids in the city don't have dreams," he said. "It's that the kids [at New Trier] know what they want."

-----

tmalone@tribune.com

[lblack@tribune.com](mailto:lblack@tribune.com)

Copyright © 2008, [Chicago Tribune](#)