

# SOS Reporter

" Save Our Schools by Supporting Our Schools "

June 26, 2004

EDUCATIONAL ISSUES NEWSLETTER

Vol. 1 Num. 1

## What Is SOS?

Our Save Our Schools (SOS) campaign began on May 31, 2005 when the Des Moines Public School (DMPS) District released proposed changes to the Schools First-Mid-Project Proposal Review. While many parents, neighborhood leaders, and community activists had worked in school site-committees for years in an effort they believed to be mutual planning with school district officials toward what was best for their children, suddenly the DMPS Board announced drastic changes, few if any of which had been discussed with those involved. These changes would close five schools and impact the lives of many children and their families. In some cases, these drastic changes could impact entire neighborhoods.



Linda  
Westergaard  
SOS Chair

Goals of Save Our Schools (SOS) include the following:

- a moratorium on all major building projects,
- working committees to explore alternatives to closing schools,
- a citizen's oversight committee to review DMPS policies and spending practices, and
- SOS support to independent well-qualified candidates for school board.

As Save Our Schools (SOS), we plan to accomplish certain necessary reforms quickly and then to become Support Our Schools. As Support Our Schools (SOS), we will grow into a city-wide league working with PTA groups, with teachers, and with a new administration to return the Des Moines public schools to a high state of excellence.

"money talks...but does it tell the truth"  
—— anonymous

"Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe."

--- H.G. Wells: The Outline of History XV

## COORDINATOR'S Comments

### A NOTE ABOUT THE SOS NEWSLETTER



The SOS NEWSLETTER will appear weekly. This first issue begins where the SOS team began: with the sudden school closings announced over the Memorial Day weekend. Updates on the SOS legal response to DMPS Board action will be weekly, beginning next week.

Additionally:

Bricks & Mortar & Fiscal Accountability,  
Stellar over Baseline Educational Standards,  
Working Conditions for DMPS Teachers and  
Other Employees,  
Standards for Decision-making  
Pros & Cons of Site-based Planning  
Policy Issues

will be subjects in the coming months. (If you do not see your concern on the list, contact us.)

Of immediate SOS interest is the final slate of candidates for DM School Board, announcements of public forums, and other news

pertaining to the important upcoming School Board Election on Tuesday Sept 13, 2005. Deadline for filing as a candidate is August 5, 2005. To date, seven candidates have committed to the campaign.

Let us hear from you, either at our email addresses:

coordinator@DM-SOS.org or  
issues@DM-SOS.org

or at the SaveOurSchools mailing address: SOS, P.O. Box 1358, DM, IA, 50305-1358.

Thanks for being involved, if only by becoming informed.

Nancy Stillians  
SOS Coordinator

### This Week's SOS Reporter ...

- What Is SOS?
- Coordinator's Comments
- School News - East Side
- School News - West Side

- SOS Goes Online
- Truthful Tidbits

Chair: • Linda Westergaard • Coordinator: • Nancy Stillians  
S.O.S. - Save Our Schools •  
P.O. Box 1358 • WebSite: www.DM-SOS.org  
Des Moines, Ia 50305-1358 • Email: issues@DM-SOS.org

## SCHOOL NEWS - EAST

### Perspective of a Parent by Gayle J. Murray

I am a parent who became concerned with the current leadership in the DMPS

District at their request. In Autumn 2003, I was invited to meetings to listen to the District's plan to merge Adams and Garton Elementary Schools.

Facilities Manager, Mr. Van Hemert reported they were "exploring the Community's interest in a merger". After a year of meetings, it was clear the District was not interested in any of our opinions but, instead, was trying to persuade us to accept what the Board had already decided.

When the District released the plan to close Adams over a holiday weekend, I began probing this plan to close several neighborhood schools. Because of clear and abundant research in support of small schools as the preferred setting for educating children, I questioned the District's shocking plan.

It now has become a political battle. And I am in it and am supported by people who are passionate about education and are reaching out to more citizens like you because it has become a bigger and broader issue than saving Adams School, or Edmunds, or Howe, or Moore.

Our mission is to Save Our Schools by Supporting Our Schools. We are challenging the status quo to improve our schools in Des Moines because this administration must be accountable; must be called to task by citizens, businesses, and leaders of the entire community.

If you live in the District you have a vested interest in the quality of education. The blatant disregard of the DMPS Board for the community input they pretended to have aggressively sought has destroyed the faith and trust to which public servants are bound. This is an educational crisis, not just the financial one the DMPS expects us to believe motivates their action.

It is time for new leadership and full community involvement in the Des Moines PUBLIC School System.

**Editors Note:** Gayle Murray is a mother of 4, is a Co-President of Adams PTA, and currently serves on the S.O.S. Steering Committee.

## SCHOOL NEWS - West

### Smaller Schools Are Superior by West Side Parent

Des Moines Public School administrators talk about how well they implement best practices research in the classroom, yet they completely disregard sound, comprehensive, national research about school size.

Five years ago, west side parents on school site-committees came under heavy pressure to merge.

Instead of accepting the school administrators pitch that merged schools were better, parents studied the issue. We collected and read the huge body of available research. We learned that benefits of small, neighborhood schools far outweighed advantages of merged schools.

The Kathleen Cotton report titled School Size, School Climate, and School Performance is a comprehensive summary of the total body of research. This report was the basis of our argument to save our historic, attractive, neighborhood schools.

Summarizing all small-schools research, the Cotton Report states that in smaller schools student achievement and student attitudes are equal to and often superior to those of large, merged schools. Attendance in small schools is better, dropout percentages are lower, social behavior is more positive, interpersonal relationships between students and teachers are stronger, teacher morale is higher and students feel more connected to their school community and learning.

The administration claims the existence of research refuting the small schools argument. However, they have yet to show parents and the general public anything as comprehensive and persuasive as the Cotton report.

As a parent, I know that smaller is better. An elementary school with 325 students where everyone knows my child's name offers a better learning experience than a generic warehouse-school resulting from mergers. A smaller, well-built neighborhood school creates a community-culture that benefits the broader community.

Parents across Des Moines 'get it.' Why does the DMPS board reject the concept of small school effectiveness? Because board decisions do not focus on what is best for students, parents and teachers. Board decisions result from external pressures to spend money on construction.

My experience suggests this district is now driven by

*Continued on Page 4 ...*

## School News - West

*Continued From Page 2 ...*

bricks and mortar issues which totally eclipse educational issues.

Priorities are money-driven, but, unfortunately, not economy driven. Repairing older, well-built schools is cost-effective but DM Administrators argue to the contrary because they are paid to do so.

The board voted to close certain buildings, but these are not yet empty, sold or bulldozed. Parents and community leaders can question, protest, join SOS, and seek alternate solutions to closing their neighborhood schools. We had to fight, and we fought for two years.

We threatened legal action if we were forced to merge, and finally the Administration backed off.

Children are being used as pawns in a Schools First chess game that has nothing to do with their education but everything to do with school politics. I urge parents to read documents like the Cotton Report and the National Trust for Historic Preservation report titled Why Johnny Can't Walk to School.

Everyone has much to lose; money, quality schools, neighborhood viability by not becoming directly involved. West side parents joined the growing resistance to School board decisions. United we can rescue surviving schools from merger mania. Join SOS.

-West side Parent

## SOS Goes Online

With the huge response and requests from parents and citizens, we determined it was necessary to establish a web presence. We are now setting up a new web site. It will have information, opinions, news, and other features. We know that it will be a catalyst for contact for people who want to communicate with us. Although the site is currently under construction, our web address will be [www.DM-SOS.org](http://www.DM-SOS.org). In a week, please check out our new web site.

Is there an issue you want to make us aware of? Do you have a topic you would like us to address?

e-Mail us at [issues@DM-SOS.org](mailto:issues@DM-SOS.org)

or drop us a line at;

SOS

P.O. Box 1358

DM, IA, 50305-1358

***Confidentially will be respected and honored.***

***Please Register To Vote  
- and on Tuesday,  
September 13 make  
your vote count - vote to  
make better schools.***

