

Letter to the Editor

Supports Warrant Article 20

To The Editor

At Birch Meadow School our children are being taught that everyone needs to speak up when bullying takes place. That is what Warrant Article 20 is asking Town meeting members to do. If you were not a part of the redistricting process then it is probably impossible for you to conceive of how it was handled. Even having experienced it personally I am having difficulty grasping it. What began as concern that the town was not placing enough value on students walking to school became a concern that the school committee is unresponsive and says it is listening when in fact it is not.

First I was told by the Principal at a PTO meeting that there would be three proposals put forth and we would have an opportunity to give input before a final plan was devised. When only one proposal was put forth in November, I was told by Lisa Gibbs that the plan was not definitive and was truly open to input. Feeling somewhat reassured, I participated in the process. However, my emails of 12/3/04, 12/10/04, and 1/2/05 requesting information such as the numbers of students north of Franklin Street and the numbers of students bussed currently vs. under the new plan were not responded to. The four meetings I attended at each of the elementary schools all rang of the same theme to the school committee. No matter what neighborhood people came from, the consensus was that the administration's own guidelines as posted on their website were not followed in their present proposal- only numbers of students were taken into account, not natural boundaries, not keeping neighborhoods intact, not student safety and proximity to "neighborhood" schools. On January 27th, with little discussion and no opportunity for anyone to correct misinformation presented by school committee members, a decision was made that did not respond to either the common sense of those who requested reconsideration or the outpouring of frustration with how the process was conceived.

Sometime after the fact, I learned that Eaton East had indeed taken the school committee at its word and had provided a redistricting plan that looked better than that conceived by the administration. While true that different families were effected and also bound to take issue with it, unlike in the adopted plan, the promises of keeping neighborhoods intact, using major boundaries, reducing bussing, and even balancing and reducing class sizes and number of students moved were a part. Administration and school committee conveniently ignored this plan in their discussion and vote of January 27th. At the school committee meeting on February 28th I asked for an explanation of why the plan was rejected. After my request, the meeting continued and I have yet to get a response to my inquiry.

We were told that this process was open to our input and that redistricting could be revisited at any time- instead emails went without even the courtesy of a reply, there were no opportunities to correct misconceptions, and in truth we were misleadingly reassured, condescended to, and in my case, even lied to. It all took place during our holidays and will give that the school committee, being only human, may also have had too much to deal with in such a short span of time. If town meeting can not attempt to fix a process that claimed to be but was not responsive to those effected, what will? And what is the process when a town body does not represent the interests of those who voted them into office? There is no reason why people in a small community such as Reading need to be treated with such disrespect. If there truly was no better solution to the redistricting of the new school than administration and the school committee have no reason to withhold information or for that matter to work against Warrant Article 20 going to town meeting for consideration. As has been said by others, while our argument began being about the many values of children walking to school, now it is also about trust and also about honesty. If Reading truly believes in the values that its voters and schools espouse to, then it will support Warrant Article 20 and provide public answers to our questions. And, the best avenue to teach our children is by our own example. If we do not want them to grow up with bullying than we need to stand up for each other as adults as well.

Christine Derse