

Critical choice

Ted Heald

Potrero Hill Junior High School will open this September. We should consider ourselves fortunate to have a brand new school located within the neighborhood. Unfortunately, a new building by itself will not guarantee the Hill's beautiful young people a good education.

On one hand, our community is presented with a rare opportunity to play a major role in staffing, programming and running its school. It is easier for a community to influence a school when it is first opening than to change a school that has been run a certain way for years and years.

On the other hand, we are faced with the very gloomy prospect that Potrero will become just another dead-end junior high school--a school where students fall way behind in reading ability, where cutting classes and senseless violence become a way of life, where students learn little more than the destructive logic of drugs. ("Reds are great. I would have stopped coming to school long ago if I didn't have something to get me through the day.") A concerned and active community is the only force which can see to it that this does not happen.

At this time the most important concern should be finding a strong, progressive principal who would seek out good teachers and counselors and would work actively with parents and students. Although there is little doubt in administrators' circles that Pelton-reject Thomas Sammon has the job, it is important that people express their feelings to school officials while there is still a chance to change this unfortunate appointment. There is no chance if the people of the community do nothing at this time.

The problem with available San Francisco principals, and teachers, too, is that the school district is presently overflowing with people of proven incompetence. Superintendent Shaheen has "de-selected" many administrators but, because of tenure, they cannot be fired. Be-

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cause few of them die or quit, they must be shuffled around until they retire. And it's beginning to look like many of them are being shuffled over to Potrero Hill. These are the same individuals who have presided over the decline and fall of secondary schools all over the city. Getting a principal who is truly good enough for the job will be virtually impossible unless the school district can be forced to bypass its present moratorium on hiring from outside the school district.

Outside of demanding a competent principal (especially since prospects are so dismal), we should be insisting on several other things. We should demand a voice in selecting teachers and counselors who, above all else, love and understand the kids. We should see to it that every student who will graduate from Potrero knows how to read. In order to accomplish this we should demand, and do the recruiting ourselves if necessary, teachers' aids and community volunteers to work with teachers in special reading classes. Finally, we should demand a program where every kind of student activity is provided, where scheduling of classes is flexible enough to provide for many special assemblies, field trips, and doubling of classes. Our school must be an exciting place where students will go because they want to, not because they have to.

We must join together now and demand that our young people get the education they need and deserve. If we don't protest every move by the school district to use our school as a dumping ground for the system's rejects, within the first year our children will be protesting themselves. They will be protesting by cutting classes, raising hell and dropping reds. For our young people, for ourselves, we must get together now and work to prevent such a tragedy.

(Ted Heald, who is a Potrero Hill resident, teaches history and English at a Mission District High School.)