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“Mr. Taylor, you’re suggesting that these kids here aren’t getting a good education. Is that correct?”

“What I am saying, not just suggesting, is that this is a segregated school. A segregated education is inherently an inferior education, be the segregation white or black.”

In a 1968 news broadcast, Malcolm Taylor, the principal of Ravenswood High School in the unincorporated area of East Palo Alto, California, shared his thoughts on the outcry from his student body to improve the school’s curriculum. Ravenswood’s student body became majority-Black in the decade since its opening in 1958, going from 60 percent Black in 1965 to 94 percent Black in 1970.¹ More than 300 students staged a sit-in on September 11, 1968, to demand the resignations of Taylor and four white staff members, the hiring of full-time Black counselors, classes in Black history, Swahili and “soul music,” and improvements in the English and math curriculums.² Taylor eventually resigned in response to these demands, a move that underscored the Ravenswood community’s support for a curriculum and school that reflected their student body.

Conversations such as the one above around the status and quality of education at Ravenswood High School in its short existence from 1958 to 1976 reflected the central role desegregation played in defining educational policy. Nestled in the extreme south of San Mateo County, a suburban region below San Francisco, East Palo Alto and the neighboring area of Belle Haven (a neighborhood in Menlo Park) came to include nearly the entire Black population of the county due to discriminatory housing practices. As a result, when the Sequoia Union High School District decided to build a high school in East Palo Alto in 1958, concerns immediately arose as to whether the school would become segregated. The school’s majority-Black student

¹ *Dreams of a City: Creating East Palo Alto*, directed by Michael Levin (1996).

² “Sit-in Shuts Ravenswood,” *Ravenswood Post*, September 11, 1968.

population and the community met efforts to desegregate the school through transfers and closure of the school with varied responses. While some parents agreed with the district that the school should go from 94 percent to 40 percent Black through mandatory student transfers in 1971, or they supported the school's closure in 1976 so their students could attend integrated high schools, other parents did not agree with the district's aim to desegregate the district by altering Ravenswood rather than the other five district high schools. Community activist Gertrude Wilks rejected the efforts of the Sequoia district after finding Ravenswood to be academically deficient and integrated high schools to be antagonistic towards Black students; she founded Nairobi High School and Nairobi Day School, independent institutions with robust Afro-centric curriculums, in 1968 and 1969 respectively.

I argue that Black students, parents, and leaders in East Palo Alto did not see integration as the necessary step to improving educational opportunity for Black students, putting them at odds with a school district that envisioned racially balanced schools as paramount. As community members became disillusioned with desegregated education, particularly when students faced racial hostility at other schools, they rejected the premise that a majority-minority school could not provide Black children with excellent educations. Leaders formed institutions like the East Palo Alto Municipal Council and the Ravenswood School-Community Council, which became crucial outlets for voicing community opinions to the Sequoia district board of trustees. For many in the East Palo Alto community, losing or changing Ravenswood meant losing an important community institution and placing the burden of desegregation on minority students. Denise Womack, a student at Ravenswood in 1976, expressed such a sentiment on Ravenswood's closure: "I don't think it's fair for our black community to be forced to hold the burden of desegregation, which is catering to the white community's demands."³

³ Greg Gavin, Rosan Gomperts and Carole Hall, *Ravenswood* (Woodside, CA: Pressed for Time Press, 1976), 59.

I begin this thesis with an overview of the historical context and a short history of East Palo Alto and Belle Haven. I refer to this area as “east of the Bayshore,” because these two communities are separated from neighboring areas by the Bayshore Highway. Second, I chronicle “de facto” segregation east of the Bayshore and efforts by the Sequoia Union district to achieve integration across attendance boundaries that adhered to segregated housing patterns. Third, I analyze the advent of local control through the municipal council and the school-community council. Fourth, I dissect the conditions for the founding of the Nairobi Schools. Fifth, I dissect the circumstances and consequences of Ravenswood’s closure for the East Palo Alto community. In my conclusion, I note the efforts to desegregate the Ravenswood City Elementary School District, contiguous with East Palo Alto and Belle Haven, through voluntary interdistrict transfers.

Historical context:

I contextualize my research in the specific circumstances that shaped school desegregation in California while contributing a suburban history that does not rely on a perspective which centers white and suburban resistance against a metropolitan existence. School districts in California pursued remedies unique to the state’s demographic and political circumstances. Racial diversity in California established unique forms of school segregation, namely the de jure segregation of Spanish-speaking students and conflicts over the impact of desegregation on bilingual education. Segregated housing patterns resulted in segregated schools, rather than segregated schools being established through explicit state and local legislation. Rapid growth and demographic change, particularly in the post-World War II area, led to suburbanization that cemented segregated housing patterns.

I adopt an approach that differs from works that study school desegregation as shaped by white communities who relocate to the suburbs, erecting financial and demographic barriers to overcoming school segregation — examples include Ansley Erickson's *Making the Unequal Metropolis* and Kevin Kruse's *White Flight. American Babylon*, Robert Self's study of postwar Oakland and the surrounding suburbs, provides a compelling discussion of how Black communities shaped the creation of East Bay suburbia. However, East Palo Alto's history can mark an important contribution to Self's argument that the postwar suburban population "came to expect and rationalize racial segregation."⁴ Self briefly refers to East Palo Alto as one of the only localities where working-class Black individuals could find housing.⁵ The history of East Palo Alto can be analyzed to understand what local control meant for minority communities that existed beyond the metropolis, deep in the segregated suburbs. The debate over Ravenswood's future reflected the unequal power dynamic between East Palo Alto and surrounding communities, who dictated the terms of how desegregation proceeded, and yet underscored the robust local institutions that developed to support those in East Palo Alto who felt unsatisfied with public education.

Minority community members' drive to assert local control over their schools did not originate east of the Bayshore, but the pursuit of community control to influence desegregation efforts is understudied in the suburban context. Tensions between assertions of local control and existing power structures in education arose as Black activists turned from integration to community control in the 1960s, arguing that achieving racially balanced schools did not necessarily translate into educational achievement for Black students and chafing at the

⁴ Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 99.

⁵ Self, *American Babylon*, 116.

presumption that Black students needed to attend white schools to receive a good education.⁶ Fittingly, David Kirp wrote that advocates of local control “come into conflict with traditional conceptions of governance and power.”⁷ Community control has been studied as an urban phenomenon, where minority students and parents strived to assert community priorities within a large school district. Community control first sprung into the public consciousness with the 1968 establishment of an experimental district under local control in Ocean Hill–Brownsville, Brooklyn, where advocates sought to increase the quality of schooling for Black and Latinx students by providing neighborhoods with broad control over school administration, curriculum, and teacher evaluations.⁸ Black students protested for similar demands in Chicago in 1968. Examining community control in a solely suburban context transcends the urban-suburban dichotomy that seems to necessitate a metropolitan remedy to equalize resources. In East Palo Alto, the unincorporated community sought to assert control through existing and new forms of local governance, including the Municipal Council and a school-community council at Ravenswood.

Asserting local control over education could also be a strategy to assert community preferences on how desegregation remedies should be implemented. While white resistance to desegregation is well-documented in books on white flight and suburban development, Black opposition to desegregation remedies because of their impact on majority-Black schools has received little attention. Alvis Adair, one scholar to examine the opposition to desegregation in Black communities, wrote in *Desegregation: The Illusion of Black Progress* that desegregation

⁶ Elizabeth Todd-Breland, *A Political Education: Black Politics and Education Reform in Chicago since the 1960s* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 51.

⁷ David Kirp, “Community Control, Public Policy, and the Limits of Law,” *Michigan Law Review* 68, no. 7 (1970), 1357.

⁸ Stephen Brier, “The Ideological and Organizational Origins of the United Federation of Teachers' Opposition to the Community Control Movement in the New York City Public Schools, 1960-1968,” *Labour/Le Travail* 73 (Spring 2014), 180.

efforts should cease immediately because, as he argued, Black students had shouldered the burden of desegregation and in the process had ceded control of their educational institutions.

Adair wrote that:

“The dismantling of Black institutions is tantamount to Black community dismantlement. No nation, community or group can survive without institutional structures... Unfortunately Blacks too often become instruments of their own destruction when they ignore this basic reality and shift the bulk of their support to non-Black controlled institutions and systems.”⁹

My thesis emphasizes the experiences of many Black individuals in East Palo Alto who, in their efforts to ensure their children received a quality education, did not find the Sequoia district efforts satisfactory. Understanding historical Black resistance to desegregation underscores that the issue is not the idea of desegregation itself — closing Black schools, busing Black students, and using enrollment ratios that define successful desegregation as minimum minority enrollment in formerly all-white schools contribute to an unequal burden on Black students to desegregate. Faced with busing to reduce the minority enrollment at Ravenswood and later closure, many minority students in East Palo Alto felt disillusioned with the idea that their community high school had to close for them to receive a “quality” education.

I build my argument around the widely studied phenomenon that school segregation is upheld through school boundaries that cleave to pre-existing segregated housing patterns. Residential segregation has traditionally been referred to as “de facto” segregation because it exists “in fact” rather than by law (referred to as “de jure” segregation). However, Richard Rothstein and others now highlight the government’s active role in keeping residential areas segregated, eroding the notion that “de facto” segregation was not sponsored by government

⁹ Alvis Adair, *Desegregation: The Illusion of Black Progress* (University Press of America, 1984), 134.

authorities. Professor of Education Genevieve Siegel-Hawley fittingly stated that school boundaries “balkanize” regions, creating entities that assume seemingly innate characteristics.¹⁰ Public school students in America attend schools based on geographic proximity to their assigned schools, with the exact boundaries determined through attendance zones; as a result, residential segregation can naturally lead to school segregation if students attend schools in districts contiguous with town or neighborhood boundaries that adhere to segregated housing patterns.¹¹ While “de jure” school segregation can be dismantled through mandatory legal means, school segregation established through school lines based on residential patterns is notoriously difficult to overcome because it adheres to residential patterns, which in turn are the defining characteristic for deciding how school district boundaries should be drawn.

Since *Milliken v. Bradley* (1973), which limited districts from implementing mandatory interdistrict desegregation programs unless, in specific cases of state discriminatory action, desegregation efforts have been nearly completely dependent on the student population within a single district.¹² If a district has a segregated student population, they are limited in the mandatory remedies they can employ to attempt to avoid segregated schooling. Even after California outlawed school segregation in 1947 as a result of *Mendez v. Westminster*, “de facto” segregation persisted.¹³ A 1966 survey of public school racial and ethnic demographics by the California Department of Education found that 85 percent of Black students and 57 percent of students attended “minority schools,” which were defined as schools with a minority population

¹⁰ Genevieve Siegel-Hawley, *When the Fences Come Down: Twenty-First-Century Lessons from Metropolitan School Desegregation* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 11.

¹¹ Ingrid Gould Ellen and Justin Steil, *The Dream Revisited: Contemporary Debates About Housing, Segregation, and Opportunity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 77.

¹² Charles Clotfelter, *After Brown: The Rise and Retreat of School Desegregation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 77

¹³ Mark Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed: How Racial Diversity Shaped Civil Rights Reform in California, 1941-1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 234.

15 percentage points above the community average.¹⁴ The Sequoia Union High School District was both restricted and not restricted by *Milliken v. Bradley* in its quest to integrate its schools. The district was restricted because it could not mandatorily enforce transfers from neighboring districts in its efforts. However, the district was not restricted because while East Palo Alto and Belle Haven were majority-minority communities due to discriminatory housing practices, the other communities in the district were majority-white.

Segregation East of the Bayshore:

Segregation at Ravenswood was the direct result of state and local actions that physically restricted Black residents to East Palo Alto and Belle Haven, an eastern section of Menlo Park.

The construction and widening of Bayshore Highway, also known as State Highway 101, separated East Palo Alto and Belle Haven from its neighbors. In 1932, the Bayshore Highway was extended from San Francisco to Palo Alto and, in 1937, the highway further extended to San Jose.¹⁵ It followed the direction of the Southern Pacific Railroad but was built closer to the Bay, so it bisected East Palo Alto.¹⁶ The Ravenswood Chamber of Commerce issued resolutions in 1923 and 1926 insisting that the highway should be constructed along the bay shore; despite their protests, the highway was built straight through the community, becoming the only densely populated area to be split by the Bayshore highway.¹⁷ The section of the original highway, which was a four-lane road with one median divider, drove commercial development but came to be known as the “Bloody Bayshore” after multiple traffic fatalities.¹⁸ In 1940, the California Highway Commission decided to expand the highway to increase road capacity and to curb

¹⁴ Charles Wollenberg, “Mendez v. Westminster: Race, Nationality and Segregation in California Schools,” *California Historical Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (1974): 330; Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed*, 234.

¹⁵ “Bayshore Highway mixed blessing to East Palo Alto,” *Palo Alto Times*, September 4, 1958.

¹⁶ Kendra Bischoff, “Negotiating Disparate Social Contexts: Evidence from an Interdistrict School Desegregation Program” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2011), 45.

¹⁷ “City of East Palo Alto Historic Resources Inventory Report,” 60-61.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

accidents.¹⁹ During negotiations over the widening of the highway, East Palo Altans clamored for a thoroughfare that would have gone east from San Carlos Avenue in San Carlos to run alongside the Bay rather than bisecting the area. The Ravenswood City School District organized the Bayshore Freeway Committee to advocate for a highway that would bypass the community and create a less dangerous route.²⁰ However, Col. John Skeggs, an assistant state highway engineer, and other state officials argued that building a route to run along the Bay shore would have been more expensive. The expanded highway removed most of Whiskey Gulch, the area's business district, and forced more than 50 firms to relocate — only five firms decided to return to East Palo Alto.²¹

Neighboring towns annexed economically productive areas, further undermining business in East Palo Alto. For example, the Hiller Aircraft Company, which moved to East Palo Alto in 1947 and was one of only four companies producing helicopters at that time, was annexed by Menlo Park as part of the Belle Haven area.²² Histories on this period credited the annexations with stripping the community of crucial tax revenue and establishing dependency on surrounding communities. The City of East Palo Alto stated that the annexations “denied the future city of East Palo Alto vital corporate tax revenue,” while Rhonda Rigenhagen argued that the Menlo Park annexations of Belle Haven and Newbridge reduced the area's property values by one-fourth.²³

As East Palo Alto struggled to maintain its political and economic cohesion, massive population shifts, which in turn led to a housing boom, drove further development in the region while leading to a concentration of Black families in East Palo Alto and Belle Haven. After

¹⁹ "Detail of proposed Bayshore involvement," *San Mateo Times*, July 26, 1940.

²⁰ "Bayshore Highway mixed blessing to East Palo Alto," *Palo Alto Times*, September 4, 1958.

²¹ "A History of East Palo Alto," 11.

²² "A History of East Palo Alto," 10-11.

²³ "A History of East Palo Alto," 11; "City of East Palo Alto Historic Resources Inventory Report," 72.

World War II, the population of San Mateo County increased rapidly. The population swelled from 115,000 in 1940 to 235,000 in 1950. In 1960, the population totaled 450,000.²⁴ Despite this boom in population, the Black population of the Mid-Peninsula remained small and geographically concentrated. While most of the Bay Area's population growth occurred in San Mateo, Santa Clara, and Alameda Counties during this period, in 1960 there were only 10,486 Black residents in all of San Mateo County. According to Leda Rothman of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, these individuals lived "for the most part" in Menlo Park and East Palo Alto.²⁵

Segregation increased in Belle Haven and East Palo Alto because realtors employed blockbusting practices to encourage white families to sell their homes and subsequently advertised these properties to Black families. In November 1954, William A. Bailey and his family became the first Black residents of the formerly all-white Palo Alto Gardens tract in East Palo Alto. They may have been the first Black family to move to East Palo Alto after World War II.²⁶ According to Adele Lempert, a resident of the Gardens who had moved in a week before the news, members of the community became immediately concerned with the possible devaluation of their property. Members of the Palo Alto Gardens Association sought to draft a "gentleman's agreement" which would require prospective buyers in Palo Alto Gardens to receive the association's approval.²⁷ Some residents offered Bailey \$3,750 to move out of the community, but with the support of local groups, Bailey and his family stayed put. Soon, the community began to receive letters from Floyd Lowe, president of the California Real Estate Board, which offered special inducements and exclusive listings to sell their homes through Lowe's office in East Palo Alto.²⁸ Other realtors knocked on doors and convinced many to sell their homes.²⁹

²⁴ "County of San Mateo 2017-2019 Profile."

²⁵ U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Hearings before the United States Commission on Civil Rights*, 1967, 17.

²⁶ "City of East Palo Alto Historic Resources Inventory Report," 70.

²⁷ Mary Madison, "Interracial Community," *Palo Alto Times*, August 1958 (date unknown).

²⁸ U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Hearings before the United States Commission on Civil Rights*, 1960, 657.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

According to the Palo Alto Times, these realtors “warned” residents that “soon it [the area] would become all Negro” to prompt them to sell.³⁰ Realtors employed similar blockbusting tactics in majority-white Belle Haven. Lowe then advertised Belle Haven homes for sale in the San Francisco Sun-Reporter, a newspaper published for the city’s Black community.³¹ By 1960, the population of East Palo Alto was 82 percent Black.³² Menlo Park remained majority-white, but the neighborhood of Belle Haven did not, underscoring how effective the Bayshore was at isolating Black residents. Menlo Park had only 349 non-white residents in 1950, but by 1957, the city had 2,949 non-white residents who were concentrated in Belle Haven.³³

De facto segregation:

This section documents the Sequoia Union district’s attempts to institute racial balance at Ravenswood by drawing and changing certain school attendance boundaries. Concerns of de facto segregation arising from Ravenswood attendance boundaries existed within the school district long before the successful push to close the high school. Community members viewed school attendance boundaries as a corrective to de facto desegregation, while district officials repeatedly did not take decisive action to “break” segregated housing patterns that would ensure Ravenswood became a segregated school. Community members east of the Bayshore were persistent in placing pressure on the school district to restore racial balance in their schools but were repeatedly disappointed with the district.

In May 1955, voters in the Sequoia Union High School District passed a bond to construct two new schools, including one in East Palo Alto.³⁴ Students in East Palo Alto attended Sequoia High School in Redwood City until Menlo-Atherton High School opened in 1951 in

³⁰ U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Hearings before the United States Commission on Civil Rights*, 1960, 722.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law* (New York: Liveright, 2017), 13.

³³ “City of East Palo Alto Historic Resources Inventory Report,” 70.

³⁴ U.S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee on Equal Educational Opportunity: Hearings before the Select Committee on Equal Educational Opportunity, 92nd Cong., 1st sess., 1971, 4783.

neighboring Atherton.³⁵ In 1957, two years after district voters approved this bond to open Ravenswood, the district trustees met to determine what Ravenswood's boundaries would look like. The board initially sought to include the entirety of neighboring Belle Haven and East Palo Alto in the attendance zone for Ravenswood, which would have zoned every Black student in both areas to attend Ravenswood, creating a segregated school.³⁶ The backlash was fierce to the district's suggested demarcations. Norman Howard, an East Palo Alto resident and a representative for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (the NAACP), stated at a June board meeting: "It is the board's obligation to see that it (the fifth school) does not become a segregated school."³⁷ Donald Barr, another East Palo Alto resident, referred to the area as a "suburban ghetto." Barr added: "Teachers are faced with the social and economic problem from the first grade on, and this also has to be applied to consideration of attendance boundaries." Barr, in other words, argued that just as the district acknowledged the inequities that children faced in the classroom, they had to account for the "socio-economic" factors that could lead to segregated schooling. Community members from East Palo Alto and Belle Haven presented a petition to the board with 3,668 names that asked to establish Willows Road as the school attendance boundary rather than the Bayshore highway.³⁸

The district resisted the perception that their decision was based on more than considerations of how students would come to school. At the same meeting, board member John Cost stated that "the school board has no province to consider social-economic factors in considering boundary lines"; however, the district did ultimately decide to institute a boundary that would split Belle Haven, supposedly for reasons that did not hinge on the creation of a

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Robert Eric Lowe, "Ravenswood High School and the struggle for racial justice in the Sequoia Union High School District" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1989), 58.

³⁷ "High School Segregation Charge Made," *San Mateo Times*, June 27, 1957.

³⁸ Hearings before the Select Committee on Equal Educational Opportunity, 92nd Cong., 1st sess., 1971, 4783.

segregated pocket east of the Bayshore Belle Haven lay across Willow Road, a major thoroughfare, and once the district confirmed that the city was constructing a pedestrian overpass that would make it easier for Belle Haven students to attend Menlo-Atherton High School, the district decided to accept Superintendent Rex Turner's recommendation to include the north portion of Belle Haven, which amounted to one-third of the area, in the attendance zone for Menlo-Atherton.³⁹ The district's initial effort to avoid a segregated school seemed to be successful.

While the student bodies at Ravenswood and Menlo-Atherton appeared to be racially balanced when Ravenswood opened in 1958, by the mid-1960s, the schools were clearly segregated. Turner stated in July 1957 that after the new boundary was put in place, the student population in East Palo Alto would be 15 percent Black and the student population attending Menlo-Atherton would be 9 or 10 percent Black.⁴⁰ In 1964, the *Stanford Daily* reported that Ravenswood's student body was 49 percent Black and Menlo-Atherton's student body was 4 percent Black. Woodside was 4 percent Black and San Carlos, Sequoia, and Carlmont High School had "virtually no" Black students. The efforts to create school boundaries that would prevent de facto segregation had failed. This could not have come as a surprise to district officials. In a 1971 report which found the district in violation of Title VI, the San Francisco Regional Office for Civil Rights stated that "the District recognized that the school would be identified as a minority school" because they had maintained data on the racial composition of Ravenswood since 1958; the district only began to track student body demographics at the other schools in the 1964-1965 school year.⁴¹ To ameliorate the situation at Ravenswood, and resolve issues of overcrowding at other schools in the district, the district decided in March 1963 to

³⁹ Pell Fender, "Fight Continues over Ravenswood Boundaries," *Stanford Daily*, January 31, 1964.

⁴⁰ "Racial Issue is Rejected by Sequoia," *San Mateo Times*, July 25, 1957.

⁴¹ Jack Robertson, *The Conscience of a Community: Integrating Mid Peninsula Schools, 1969-1986* (2002), 43.

transfer 239 students residing in the Willows area of Menlo Park from the Menlo-Atherton attendance zone to Ravenswood by the beginning of the 1964-1965 school year.⁴² In 1957, when the district trustees met to determine the Ravenswood attendance boundaries, they decided not to include the Willows area, which was majority-white, in the Ravenswood attendance zone. The OCR would later state that this decision was “made in response to strong community concern over blockbusting, property values, and race”; in the lead-up to the boundary decision, the board received 223 letters predominately from residents of the Willows area who implored the district to keep their neighborhood in the Menlo-Atherton attendance zone.⁴³ Ed Becks, former president of the South San Mateo County NAACP, argued that the boundary shift in 1964 actually contributed to increased segregation at Ravenswood. Becks argued that the percentage of Black students at Ravenswood increased from 45 percent in the 1962-1963 school year to 49 percent in the 1963-1964 school year because more Black families had previously moved to the Willows area.⁴⁴

In 1965, the district-appointed Citizens Advisory Committee on Ethnic Problems recommended that, in response to the increasingly segregated situation at Ravenswood, the district should close the high school and transfer students who chose to attend Ravenswood should return to the high schools they originally attended. The report stated that the Ravenswood student population was 60 percent Black, estimated it would increase to become 70 percent Black the following year, and estimated further that the student population could become 90 percent Black in the next three to five years.⁴⁵ Elliot C. Levinthal, chairman of the committee, stated that the only real alternative to Ravenswood’s closure would be to institute two-way

⁴² “Sequoia Boundary Lines Changed by Split Vote, 3-2,” *San Mateo Times*, March 22, 1963.

⁴³ Robertson, *The Conscience of a Community: Integrating Mid Peninsula Schools, 1969-1986*: 45.

⁴⁴ Fender, “Fight Continues over Ravenswood Boundaries.”

⁴⁵ “Timetable Told on Ravenswood Plan,” *San Mateo Times*, March 11, 1965.

busing; however, he added that doing so would require delineating new attendance boundaries and “the effects on real estate sales in a ‘Ravenswood’ area in San Carlos, for instance, would not be good.”⁴⁶ Despite the objections of civil rights groups in East Palo Alto and district students, the district board decided against a phase-out of Ravenswood in 1965.⁴⁷

Calls to close Ravenswood arose again in 1969 after outside studies determined that a phase-out would be the best solution to desegregating the district. However, with community support for efforts to improve services at Ravenswood,⁴⁸ the district board determined that they would keep the school open. At the July 2, 1969 board meeting, the trustees adopted a resolution that they would keep Ravenswood open, achieve racially balanced schools by September 1971, and develop a plan to achieve this racial balance by June 1, 1970.⁴⁹

While community members generally accepted voluntary desegregation, several residents emphasized their opposition to a plan that would require mandatory busing. As the district sought community feedback before the June 1970 deadline, more than 600 residents asserted at a board meeting in April that they wanted no part of “forced, two-way busing.”⁵⁰ George Kerska, president of the Parents for Neighborhood Schools group, voiced opposition to what he thought would be “the crushing additional tax burden the plans would impose on all of us” for “an almost fanatical dedication on the part of a couple of school board members to achieve a meaningless mathematical racial balance not required by any court or government agency.”⁵¹ In response to Kerska’s suggestion that “forced” busing would increase taxation rates, Jerry Allen, president of the San Carlos-Belmont Human Relations Commission, retorted: “I pay taxes, as much as some of you and maybe a little more than some of you. To own property seems to be a prerequisite for

⁴⁶ “Ravenswood ‘Phase-Out’ Draws 350: Ethnic Plan Told to Crowd,” *San Mateo Times*, February 26, 1965.

⁴⁷ “‘Phase-Out’ Dropped at Sequoia,” *San Mateo Times*, July 7, 1965.

⁴⁸ “Ravenswood Decision on July 2,” *Redwood City Tribune*, June 27, 1969.

⁴⁹ Robertson, *The Conscience of a Community: Integrating Mid Peninsula Schools, 1969-1986*: 19.

⁵⁰ “600 Protest Sequoia Dist. Busing Plans,” *San Mateo Times*, April 8, 1970.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

this meeting...” Opposition to busing based on financial concerns stood with opposition to busing based on perceptions of Ravenswood students themselves. One speaker remarked that her daughter was “beat up” by Black students at Carlmont High School: “I have to teach my daughter the art of fisticuffs. It’s too bad we have to take these kids in.”⁵² Against the protests of these residents, the board adopted a plan in June for the 1971-1972 school year that would establish a voluntary transfer program with a mandatory backup component that would allow the district to randomly select students for transferring.⁵³ However, in the 1971 school board elections, two candidates who ran on platforms to oppose mandatory busing won. Trustees William Jordan and Percy Roberts voted with two other trustees to suspend the mandatory part of the program in July.

The district board’s rejection of mandatory busing triggered legal action from community members who sought to restore the program on the basis that the state had taken actions to make East Palo Alto into a segregated community. Robert Gomperts, a local parent, recruited four attorneys to file a complaint in the United States District Court for the Northern District of California. In the case, *Gomperts v. Chase*, the attorneys argued that the state took four actions to foster segregation: the construction of the Bayshore Highway through East Palo Alto, licensing realtors who sold houses exclusively to Black families east of the Bayshore in East Palo Alto, discriminatory loan policies by state-chartered banks, and restrictive covenant deeds. The plaintiffs also presented the June 1970 letter from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), which found the district in violation of Title VI, as evidence of purposeful segregation.⁵⁴ The case was ultimately unsuccessful, primarily because the distinction between de jure and de facto segregation was still ambiguous; while the Sequoia Union district was

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Robertson, *The Conscience of a Community: Integrating Mid Peninsula Schools, 1969-1986*: 40.

⁵⁴ Robertson, *The Conscience of a Community: Integrating Mid Peninsula Schools, 1969-1986*: 72.

clearly segregated based on the racial imbalances in enrollment, the case did not fit into the expectations for “classical de jure school segregation.” After they lost in district court, the plaintiffs’ attorneys filed an appeal to the Circuit Court of Appeals and, after the appellate court denied temporary relief without a hearing, they decided to file for certiorari at the Supreme Court. In a short opinion, Justice William O. Douglas ruled that while, based on the HEW letter, there was clear evidence that Ravenswood was an “inferior school,” and the amended voluntary transfer program “takes, at most, only minimal steps toward equalizing the educational opportunities at the district’s high schools,”⁵⁵ he would defer to his colleagues, writing that “the precise contours of de jure segregation have not been drawn by the court.”⁵⁶

Without the option to enforce mandatory busing if an inadequate number of people would choose to transfer to Ravenswood, the district struggled to maintain sufficient enrollment at the school.⁵⁷ Voluntary desegregation could not restore racial balance at Ravenswood. Furthermore, no law or case decision prevented the district trustees from assigning students to schools based on achieving racial balance. In attempting to compromise on how desegregation would take place, the trustees implemented a program with no guarantee that it would actually restore racial balance to Ravenswood.

The advent of local control

As the district began taking action to desegregate Ravenswood, members of the East Palo Alto community began to mobilize to increase their role in Ravenswood affairs. Community leaders saw increased local control as a way not just to increase their input in desegregation efforts, but to improve the educational experience at Ravenswood by bringing control over school affairs closer to the community.

⁵⁵ Robertson, *The Conscience of a Community: Integrating Mid Peninsula Schools, 1969-1986*: 74.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Bill Shilstone, “43-teacher cutback faces Sequoia district next fall,” *Redwood City Tribune*, March 11, 1976.

On June 6, 1969, a panel from the Personnel Standards and Ethics Commission of the California Teachers' Association released a report on Ravenswood High School that lambasted the quality of education at Ravenswood and insisted that the work of improving Ravenswood required "expert, hard, sincere work in human relations." The report recommended that the district close the high school at the end of the school year, reassign all students and staff to other schools within the district and open a new, "high-quality" school that all students could attend. These drastic measures were based on uncompromising observations that the panel members recounted in their report — students at Ravenswood were "aimless and undirected," the "prevailing mood is one of distrust, hostility and fear" and according to the group, they had "never encountered a sorrier example of low faculty morale." While the panel's observations were severe, the report also stated that Ravenswood students needed "attention, concern, respect and discipline" rather than money. In other words, the district would have to make a concerted effort to engage and involve Ravenswood staff, students, and parents in the management of their educational institution.

In deciding how integration and improved education at Ravenswood should be achieved, community stakeholders drove conversations that emphasized the importance of increased local control in East Palo Alto over proceedings at Ravenswood. The rhetoric on local control took two paths. Some sought to increase the say that East Palo Alto community members had in the operation of Ravenswood. Others wanted to provide schooling outside of the district altogether, unconvinced that the district, even with a deadline to desegregate within a year, could improve conditions at Ravenswood.

The board sought to establish a community council that would provide East Palo Alto residents with some advisory influence over operations at Ravenswood. At the Sequoia Union

District board of trustees meeting on July 2, 1969, the trustees determined that Ravenswood would remain open despite the report's insistence that the school be closed. At the meeting, Trustee Charles Chase acknowledged the stakes of community involvement: "I feel we must keep Ravenswood open, but we can only do that if there is a complete change of attitude on the part of the community."⁵⁸ Trustee Jack Robertson stated: "It's essential here that we have a local educational council in the Ravenswood area, and we must give it some power. If we don't, we will insult the East Palo Alto community."⁵⁹ This emphasis on community needs led the board to agree on appointing a local school council by "September 15 or as rapidly as possible." Community members agreed that the community should be involved. At a public forum in June that logged 140 attendees, eight discussion groups discussed the future of Ravenswood. All eight groups favored opening Ravenswood, while six groups stated that the East Palo Alto community should receive local control through a "mini-board" that would receive jurisdiction over Ravenswood.⁶⁰ The forum released a "consensus" report and a "minority report" published by a "black caucus" — while the "consensus" report left the question of how local control should be established to the school board, the "minority" report emphasized that the effort to establish local control should be led by those in the East Palo Alto community.

Herbert Rhodes, chairman of the East Palo Alto Municipal Council, took the initiative to negotiate the formation of the council with the school district. This was despite the council's refusal to take a decisive stance in favor of keeping Ravenswood open — Jean Fassler, a council member, stated that "it hasn't been the policy of the board to involve itself in school matters."⁶¹ The original proposal aimed to establish a school-community council that included five members

⁵⁸ "East P.A. HS Will Stay Open," *San Mateo Times*, July 3, 1969.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Leo Handley, "Forum Expresses Its View: Functional School at Ravenswood," *Redwood City Tribune*, June 30, 1969.

⁶¹ "Ravenswood Not Backed," *San Mateo Times*, July 2, 1969.

of the student body, five citizens that live within the Ravenswood attendance area, and five school staff members. The council would interview and screen applicants for teaching and non-teaching jobs at school, as well as make recommendations to trustees.⁶² However, questions over the board's functions soon turned into broader disagreements. The school district did not approve of giving the committee access to confidential information on applicants who applied for teaching positions at Ravenswood. In a letter, Ralph Keller, president-elect of the California Educational Placement Association, wrote that the organization's policy "specifically states that school districts "should make the placement papers available to no one but their own school district employers.'" The board still sought to provide the council with hiring information, requesting that Superintendent George Chaffey ask the association if the council could examine hiring information if the applicant approved of them doing so.⁶³ The board ultimately established an interim council that would guide the creation of the permanent council.

The board envisioned that each high school in the district would maintain a council similar to that for Ravenswood. However, residents of East Palo Alto contended that the board did not provide them with enough autonomy over affairs at Ravenswood considering the deficient education they felt the school provided. Controversy arose over the structure of the permanent council — while the board maintained the 15-person composition from the original proposal, they replaced the five school staff members with five Ravenswood parents, added two faculty members selected by fellow teachers, and designated Principal Earl Meneweather an ex-officio member and secretary of the council.⁶⁴ At the school board meeting on March 4, 1970, where the board established a permanent council, seven members of the interim council submitted their resignations after the council rejected proposals to elect members of the council

⁶² "226 Seek to Transfer from EPA," *San Mateo Times*, August 21, 1969.

⁶³ "Sequoia Meets on Mini Team," *San Mateo Times*, August 14, 1969.

⁶⁴ "School Board Is Told It Is 'White, Wealthy and Racist,'" *San Mateo Times*, March 19, 1970.

directly by April 1 and to afford the council more control over selecting school personnel.⁶⁵ The council also objected to Meneweather's position on the council. Outgoing chairman Elbert E. Mitchell objected to the presence of "management" on what the *San Mateo Times* reported he called a "citizens committee."⁶⁶ The council's demands echoed the language of the California Teachers Association report – one point called for "more community involvement and greater respect for dignity of community people by members of the staff." Not only did council members feel that the trustees were unwilling to take decisive action, they felt that their recommendations were not being considered *despite* the board's willingness to accept the proposals from other community councils in the district.

At the March 4 meeting, council member Betty Maxwell voiced the council's dissatisfaction with the district and on March 17, the district received a letter from the South San Mateo County NAACP chapter criticizing the board for rejecting the interim council's proposals. In the letter, branch presidents James Haugabook and branch secretary Gelsomina Becks wrote that the board's rejection of the proposals "reinforces our branch position that it is impossible for black students to get a relevant, meaningful education within the Sequoia district."⁶⁷ Becks and Haugabook also wrote that because the district had accepted the recommendations at other interim councils in the district, "the board represents the majority of the district — which is white, wealthy middle class and racist." They called for "complete autonomy," and until such autonomy could be achieved, they called for the district to establish a council with "de facto autonomy." Community members like Becks and Haugabook did not hold faith in the school district to provide an adequate education at Ravenswood.

⁶⁵ "Sequoia Trustees Hooted," *San Mateo Times*, March 5, 1970.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ "School Board Is Told It Is 'White, Wealthy and Racist,'" *San Mateo Times*, March 19, 1970.

As attempts to strengthen local control failed to satisfy their demands, members of the East Palo Alto community began to doubt the effectiveness of integration for creating tangible improvements in education at Ravenswood. In April 1969, the district approved a voluntary transfer program, where any student at Ravenswood could transfer to another high school in the district and any student at another high school in the district could transfer to Ravenswood.⁶⁸ The plan was introduced not purely as a means to desegregate the district; according to the *San Mateo Times*, Chaffey introduced the plan to equalize minority enrollment at the schools and eventually phase out Ravenswood. The East Palo Alto community doubted that the voluntary program would adequately desegregate the school. The *San Mateo Times* noted that at the April 2nd board meeting where the plan was introduced that within the East Palo Alto community, there seemed to be a shift in opinion towards maintaining local control versus transferring students from the majority-Black high school. Israel Harris, quoted in the article as an East Palo Alto “civic leader,” stated at the meeting that the “problem at Ravenswood is not education, ‘it’s congenital American racism.’”⁶⁹ Henry Organ, a board trustee, declared that, in his opinion, the district feared “all these black students being together at one time.” Organ also reported a fear of white flight as a result of the transfer program: “It could be all the white students will go out. You’re being fooled.”⁷⁰ Organ, appointed in 1968 as the first Black trustee on the district board, doubted that the transfer program would address the district’s segregation.

Similar feelings of dissatisfaction in the East Palo Alto community arose in 1970, when the district sought to create a “new school” at Ravenswood in fall 1971 and implement what they hoped would be a progressive curriculum. The plan would also transfer most Ravenswood students to ensure that each high school was racially balanced, with no more than a 25 minority

⁶⁸ “Voluntary Transfer Plan OK’d,” *San Mateo Times*, April 3, 1969.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

student enrollment at each school; according to the *Palo Alto Times*, in 1970, the student body at Ravenswood was “95 percent black.”⁷¹ The board stated that minority enrollment at Ravenswood would be around 40 percent; however, trustee Jack Robertson later wrote that because the 25 percent minority limit was for grades 9 through 11, the other 15 percent of the minority population would be seniors, and they were not required to participate in the voluntary transfer program.⁷² Therefore, the “increased” minority enrollment at Ravenswood was actually equivalent to that at the other high schools. Meneweather, who applied to serve as principal of the “new” high school, reported to the newspaper that students were forming a Black student union because “they are reluctant to have the school broken up.” He added: “They have developed a dignity and pride — they’re aware of a new unity. They like what they have done for themselves.” The school-community council held similar reservations and the Municipal Council passed a resolution 4-0 to hold all actions towards remaking Ravenswood “in abeyance” until the board addressed and resolved the council’s objections. In their resolution, the council stated that the desegregation plan “deals unfairly with this community.” The resolution criticized the district for enforcing a complete reorganization at Ravenswood while keeping the structures of the other schools the same. The council wrote: “The action will eliminate all vestiges of ‘community control’ at Ravenswood High School while retaining such ‘community control’ in the other schools of the district.”⁷³

Some Ravenswood students grew increasingly opposed to the idea that they would not just have to transfer out of their school, but that their school’s identity would become irreversibly changed as the result of non-minority transfers. At a meeting between board members and representatives of the district-wide Student Advisory Council in November, several Ravenswood

⁷¹ “Strong black resistance to desegregation building,” *Palo Alto Times*, October 23, 1970.

⁷² Robertson, *The Conscience of a Community: Integrating Mid Peninsula Schools, 1969-1986*, 58.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

students voiced their resistance to a mandatory transfer program. Andre Lavalley, the student body president, told the board that “they [the students] don’t want to leave their community.” He stressed that the students understood that segregation was not the ideal: “We understand what it’s about. We are not against desegregation. But we are against the program adopted by this board.”⁷⁴ The students emphasized that they preferred a voluntary program, questioning why the district sought to desegregate the district by changing the demographic composition at Ravenswood. Trustee Helen Kerwin stated at the meeting that the transfer plan could also relieve overcrowding at other schools and bring enrollment numbers at Ravenswood up to a sufficient standard. Student Ramona Mastifull was dubious of this premise, asking why the school could not transfer white students one way to Ravenswood and Menlo-Atherton. She emphasized that she felt the district was deliberately undermining the school’s connection to its community: “Why can’t you keep Ravenswood 50 percent white and 50 percent black? What you’re trying to do is to make Ravenswood an all-white school so it will lose its identity.” Ravenswood students hesitated at the suggestion that the Black student body at Ravenswood had to be reduced to desegregate the district as a whole.

This sentiment that the district could not appropriately deal with affairs at Ravenswood was not uncommon east of the Bayshore. Community leader and parent Gertrude Wilks told the *Stanford Daily* in 1977: “I felt that Ravenswood could have worked but it was controlled by the Sequoia Board of Trustees. The community had no control or say in the program.”⁷⁵ This deepening sense of alienation from the public school system, which seemed to be failing Black students, drove Wilks to open the Nairobi Schools in 1968.

Nairobi Schools

⁷⁴ “Ravenswood Students Defiant — They Won’t Move,” *San Mateo Times*, November 25, 1970.

⁷⁵ “A Fashionable Way to Help E.P.A. Schools,” *Stanford Daily*, November 18, 1977.

Nairobi High School, an independent school that offered state-required subjects and classes on Black literature, government, and community control, was founded as the result of Ravenswood’s inadequacies. The school, along with Nairobi Elementary School, grew out of the Nairobi Day School, which served over 300 students.⁷⁶ Nairobi High School opened on April 4, 1968, and the San Mateo County Planning Commission granted a use permit for the school in late May. At the meeting in May, according to the *San Mateo Times*, the commissioners praised Wilks “for her leadership in developing a school for Black youths who have the skills but cannot pass academic examinations and interviews for jobs.”⁷⁷ In 1967, Bob Hoover, then a candidate for the Ravenswood elementary school district board, argued that Ravenswood had to provide a better education for its students regardless of the racial composition of the high school, stating: “My position is that the school can’t evade the responsibility of education, whether the school is all-black, half-black or one-quarter-black.”⁷⁸

To understand community control in East Palo Alto, and to understand what leaders felt the “responsibility of education” was, requires understanding the ethos of Wilks, a passionate community activist who passed away in 2019 at 91. Wilks co-founded the Mothers for Equal Education, the organization which founded the Nairobi Schools. Wilks was initially a deeply committed participant in organizations designed to improve education at Ravenswood — in a 1970 book published by the Nairobi Day School, Wilks listed how she served as vice president of the PTA at Ravenswood, served as chairman of an entity called the Community School Relationship Group and organized a Spring Concert with over 650 participants.⁷⁹ In her memoir, Wilks stated that when her family moved to the area in the mid-1950s, she “liked what she saw”

⁷⁶ Rigenhagen, “A History of East Palo Alto”: 19.

⁷⁷ “County Go-Ahead for Nairobi High,” *Redwood City Tribune*, May 31, 1968.

⁷⁸ Michael Palmer. “EPA Leader Demands Tougher Attitudes.” *Redwood City Tribune*, August 10, 1967.

⁷⁹ *Day School E.P.A by Day School People* (East Palo Alto, CA: M.E.E. Bookstore, 1970), 11.

in terms of public education: “Nice looking schools were within walking distance and a brand new modern high school, Ravenswood, was being constructed.”⁸⁰ However, Wilks became increasingly critical of the school when her oldest son, OJ, received a substandard education. Wilks decried that OJ would “graduate hardly able to read,” “wasn’t prepared for anything, let alone college,” and “had been badly destroyed along with hundreds of others.”⁸¹ In 1980, she stated that she was propelled to activism when OJ told her while job hunting that he could not read well enough to complete an application for a job position at Lockheed Martin.⁸² Wilks began to contact other mothers who were “familiar with the problem of de-education” and held initial meetings in June 1965. This group decided to call themselves “the Mothers.”

Wilks immediately mobilized other members of the Ravenswood community to create a workable solution for their children. She sought urgent community action to create change at Ravenswood, staging protests with members of the NAACP and the Congress of Racial Equality outside of offices in Redwood City throughout the summer of 1965. The group rallied in support of the report from Eliot Levinthal and the Citizens Advisory Committee on Ethnic Problems, which as previously mentioned, called for Ravenswood to be phased out, but Wilks grew increasingly frustrated with the district’s refusal to accept the proposal and to implement a workable solution. Wilks felt attached to the community, but she saw the lack of adequate education for her children as a decisive flaw: “Either something had to be done about the school, or I would have to give my property away and leave East Palo Alto, seeking better educational opportunities for my other two children.”⁸³ Wilks did not want to send her child to Ravenswood; seeking an immediate solution, she pioneered the Sneak Out program, an organized effort to

⁸⁰ Gertrude Wilks, *Gathering Together: Born to be a Leader* (N.d., Xlibris Corporation: 2010), 107.

⁸¹ *Day School E.P.A.*, 11; Wilks, *Gathering Together*, 111.

⁸² “Nairobi School celebrates its 14th birthday,” *San Jose Mercury News*, October 22, 1980.

⁸³ *Day School E.P.A.*, 12.

place Black students with white families in neighboring schools so they could attend these schools and receive a higher quality of education, by sending her son to a woman who could enroll him at Cubberley High School in Palo Alto.⁸⁴ The Sneak Out program placed fifty students from the Ravenswood attendance zone in other high schools, but Wilks and the Mothers sought a solution “on a wider scale,” especially considering that there were not enough houses for students to go to. The Sneak Out was not considered a permanent solution for the Mothers, even when the district “pre-empted” the Sneak Out program in 1968 by authorizing 100 Black students to transfer from Ravenswood to schools in Palo Alto or Menlo Park.⁸⁵

The Mothers did not just seek a sustainable solution that would ensure their children were receiving an education — they wanted a solution that was led by community members. Wilks wrote that “so many attempts had been made in our community that had failed,” citing Upward Bound and “pilot programs” which were “planned from outside.” Wilks summed up the desire for a community-based program in writing: “Other folks had made them. And none of them had worked. Finally we decided that if our kids were going to be educated, we had to do the educating ourselves.”⁸⁶ Wilks believed that the best education for the community’s Black students, considering the experiences they had at majority-white high schools, would come from schools fully based in the Black community outside of the existing public school system. Speaking to *Ebony* in 1971, Wilks emphasized the urgency for educational change in East Palo Alto: “We had to do it. Black folks were learning neither in our black public schools run by white folks nor in the white ones, also run by white folks. We had to start it and so we did.”⁸⁷ The sustainable solution emerged in October 1966, when Wilks and the Mothers opened the Day

⁸⁴ Tracy Jan, “Ravenswood revisited, reunited,” *Palo Alto Weekly*, September 11, 1996.; *Day School E.P.A.*, 13.

⁸⁵ Lowe, “Ravenswood High School,” 194-195.

⁸⁶ *Day School E.P.A.*, 16.

⁸⁷ “Learning is an All-Black Thing,” *Ebony Magazine*, September 1971.

School to provide reading support on Saturdays for public school students, with community leaders as administrators and teachers who “came from all over the Bay Area.”⁸⁸

In 1968, the Mothers decided to expand their program by starting Nairobi Elementary School, with Nairobi High School to follow in 1969. Both schools opened as full-time enterprises and received accreditation from state authorities.⁸⁹ The term “Nairobi” had a deep political significance for the East Palo Alto community — in spring 1968, community resident Donald Reid introduced the idea to rename East Palo Alto as “Nairobi.” “Nairobi” would affirm the community’s Black heritage by using an indisputably African name and would distinguish it from neighboring Palo Alto.⁹⁰ The measure failed in November, but the name “Nairobi” was assumed by other public services in the area. For example, the local shopping center was renamed Nairobi Village Shopping Center.⁹¹ The name Nairobi was not only fitting for its connection to the African continent, but for its connection to the community’s desire to affirm its Black identity.

The Nairobi Schools experience was geared towards a holistic and positive view of the students, whose education was steeped in Black history and culture. Mary Hoover, the Day School’s curriculum coordinator and a reading specialist, planned out a curriculum that would center a “skills-oriented” education.⁹² Hoover later wrote that the school sought to maintain a balance between skills-based instruction and political education, distinct from other Black independent schools at the time which were more narrowly focused on political awareness.⁹³ The curriculum included classes that conformed to and diverted from the public school norm. The

⁸⁸ Wilks, *Gathering Together*, 117.

⁸⁹ “Nairobi Named Accreditation List,” *Ravenswood Post*, July 8, 1970.

⁹⁰ Russell Rickford, *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 102.

⁹¹ Rickford, *We Are an African People*, 103.

⁹² *Day School E.P.A.*, 40.

⁹³ Mary Eleanor Rhodes Hoover, “The Nairobi Day School: An African American Independent School, 1966-1984,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 61, no. 2 (1992), 201-10.

school had classes in traditional subjects like U.S. history, physics, and mathematics. Wilks also taught a class titled “N*****ology,” which centered the struggle for Black nationalism around local problems facing the community.⁹⁴ This skills-oriented education was delivered in a context meant to be supportive to students who, according to Wilks, had not been adequately supported in the public school system, both through their education and through their emotional development. Wilks wrote in 1990:

“We do not buy the idea that because we are teaching children from one-parent families and our community is 99.5 percent Black that it is hard for our children to learn. We tell the children they are smart enough to do anything. And you can see the pride and dignity build up in them when we tell them that they are smart, that they are good looking.”⁹⁵

Through positive reinforcement, instructors were expected to remove the impediments that came from being labeled as “difficult” in public school. Teachers were instructed to “teach, not diagnose.”⁹⁶

The school stressed the importance of service to the East Palo Alto community. Day School principal Robert Hoover wrote that “part of the purpose of Day School is to develop young people who think, who care about their community.”⁹⁷ For example, as part of the “N*****ology” course, students were instructed to identify issues like broken traffic lights and report them to the East Palo Alto Municipal Council. Throughout their individual reflections in Nairobi High’s 1970 yearbook, students repeatedly emphasized their commitment to creating community-level change, much like the Mothers who had established the Nairobi Schools. Carol Holloway wrote that “she wanted to become a leader after I finish college and help our black communities like Gertrude Wilks...”⁹⁸ Nonie Mouton already felt like a leader, writing: “I feel

⁹⁴ Rickford, *We Are an African People*, 113.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ *Day School E.P.A.*, 43.

⁹⁸ *Nairobi High, 1970*.

very proud of being able to help the brothers and sisters in the community.” Nonie, like Carol, envisioned a career in which she would deepen the connection others had to their community: “I also want to be a teacher of my community... So then people will get the feeling that they can do something for their community, and they won’t have to be a bump on a log all of their life.”⁹⁹

The Nairobi Schools received direct endorsement from the State Superintendent of Schools Max Rafferty. On March 28, 1969, 75 community members from East Palo Alto attended a meeting with Rafferty, who, according to the *Redwood City Tribune*, provided major points for how he would provide support for Nairobi’s use of facilities at Ravenswood in East Palo Alto. Rafferty also noted that the demand for local control would “set a brand new pattern” in the state: “It’s never been done in California. I see no reason why it couldn’t be done.”¹⁰⁰

Rafferty, in his support of the school’s bid for local control, even voiced his support for a unified school district that would be formed by withdrawing Ravenswood and combining it with the elementary school district. Community control did not face explicit criticism from other stakeholders in local education; however, those leading the effort for independent education with Black-centered curricula did not evade critical attention. At the meeting, Rafferty noted with surprise that the group was composed of “the least militant folks I’ve seen in some time.”¹⁰¹

As Nairobi established itself as a new educational institution in East Palo Alto, Ravenswood became increasingly segregated. In October 1969, the student population was 93.7 percent Black,¹⁰² an increase of 44 percent from 1964. Community members became increasingly frustrated with the inadequate education available at the school and increased local control over school proceedings seemed like the best means of creating concrete change. Community leaders

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ron Gobin, “Rafferty to Back Ravenswood,” *Redwood City Tribune*, March 29, 1969.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² “Ravenswood Is 93.7 Pct. Black,” *San Mateo Times*, October 30, 1969.

like Wilks, however, believed that an independent school would provide a better education for students in East Palo Alto than the district could. The decision to open Nairobi came as Wilks and others were disillusioned with efforts to integrate the district. Wilks, who started one of the most ambitious integrationist operations in the region by pioneering the Sneak Out program in the mid-1960s, stated in March 1969 that she was “not optimistic about integration at present” and added that she believed “racism is at its peak.”¹⁰³ Despite the board’s effort to keep the school open, many no longer believed that the district could do right by Ravenswood’s students.

A New School:

In fall 1971, a new Ravenswood High School opened, and it shouldered all the hopes of the district for a successful desegregation effort. When the district board agreed to implement the voluntary desegregation program (before the removal of the mandatory component), the trustees decided that Ravenswood would become a “model school.” According to the district, this school would be innovative in its curriculum, give its students ample opportunities to pursue their individual academic goals and, most importantly, achieve a racial balance that had eluded the school. The district implemented a redistribution in financial and human resources. Reporter John Horgan made a sharp distinction between the “old” Ravenswood and the “new” Ravenswood. He wrote in the *San Mateo Times* that “all of the evils of the big-city ghetto high schools seemed to be thrust upon Ravenswood as it moved into the Seventies.”¹⁰⁴ Cryer wrote that after conditions became “ungovernable,” students took advantage of the transfer program and chronic truancy became even more prevalent. Now, however, Cryer cited that there was “change in the air.”

¹⁰³ Mary Madison, “Crisis Looming Over Ravenswood,” *The San Francisco Examiner*, March 24, 1969.

¹⁰⁴ John Horgan, “Ravenswood — Winds of Change,” *San Mateo Times*, November 10, 1971.

“Change” was certainly in the air at Ravenswood, but the district’s mission to desegregate the school had intended and unintended consequences. As a “model” school, Ravenswood was intended to maintain a steady stream of transfer students from the other high schools. Yet a desegregated school did not mean a school where students sat in integrated classrooms, participated in integrated extracurriculars, and even spent their time in similar parts of the school. When students came to Ravenswood, they were sorted into “houses,” diversified by grade and race. Each house included 100 students and four to six teachers who would supervise. These houses, named after zodiac signs, would provide weekly opportunities to students to exercise “democratic behaviors” in shaping the direction of their education by sharing personal and school-related problems, participating in activities with peers, and receiving private counseling.¹⁰⁵ However, when the school opened, neither teachers nor students knew how the houses should function and the experiment was quickly dissolved. *Harabi Gani*, the school newspaper, published in an editorial piece that “teachers would sit around looking at students blankly and vice-versa.”¹⁰⁶ The real importance of the houses was that they could encourage interracial contact. *Harabi Gani* staffers lamented that they “lost a vital avenue for human relations.”¹⁰⁷ They stressed that without the houses, it was easy to avoid actual integration:

“It is relatively easy to avoid relations with anyone outside of a group of friends. By taking classes that have little interest to another ethnic group and spending free time secluded among close friends a student can effectively avoid any realistic meeting with students of another color. Whether it is subconscious or not the fact is this hiding is taking place. With all its problems the house did bring students together. Regardless of how effective the houses were the contact between students they initiated was a healthy and necessary part of the success of this school.”

While the *Harabi Gani* staffers may have been particularly attentive to school affairs, their observations signal a greater problem: both in the classroom and outside of it, students were

¹⁰⁵ Lowe, “Ravenswood High School,” 252.

¹⁰⁶ “Commentary: House improvement?” *Harabi Gani*, February 4, 1972.

¹⁰⁷ “Commentary: Houses needed,” *Harabi Gani*, December 15, 1972.

not integrated within Ravenswood. Alumni Linda Lipinski wrote that “most of [her] classes were close to 100% white.”¹⁰⁸ She credited this to the subject matter: “... they were experimental literature and historical material geared to advanced students.” Lipinski argued that “the different degree of preparation was the largest contributor to ‘two schools’ within Ravenswood.” Lipinski and the *Harabi Gani* staff both argued that certain ethnic groups attended certain classes, underscoring the internal persistence of segregated schooling at Ravenswood. Even a teacher, Nelson Dake, echoed these sentiments; according to Cryer, Dake told the principal in November 1971 that “although there is desegregation in the school as a whole, the patterns of cultural differences still exist in some courses.” Dake continued: “As expected, whites predominate in such courses as mathematics and the sciences while many Blacks are still attempting to master reading skills.”¹⁰⁹ These observations in separate classrooms reflected the data. In fall 1973, Ravenswood had a “minority” enrollment of 56 percent. 13 percent of classes were less than 20 percent minority and 18 percent were 80 percent or more minority. In fall 1974, when the minority enrollment was 65 percent, 8 percent of classes were less than 20 percent minority and 37 percent of classes were 80 percent or more minority.¹¹⁰ Desegregation within the school would prove to be more elusive than desegregation based on the school’s racial composition. For the community east of the Bayshore, the “new” Ravenswood did not yield the same dividends that it might have for white transfers.

Closure:

At a board meeting on August 19, 1975, Chaffey announced his recommendation to close Ravenswood in 1976. Financial problems and decreasing enrollment numbers (which led to an increase in the minority student population) at Ravenswood were cited as central to his guidance.

¹⁰⁸ Robertson, *The Conscience of a Community: Integrating Mid Peninsula Schools, 1969-1986*: 104.

¹⁰⁹ John Horgan, “Ravenswood — Winds of Change.”

¹¹⁰ Lowe, “Ravenswood High School,” 303.

Chaffey stated that the “negative image of the East Palo Alto community as a depressed area... has worked against the success of the school,” with the transfer rate serving as the metric of success. Chaffey also argued that closing Ravenswood could break the “pattern of low achievement of the students entering the district from the Ravenswood elementary district.”¹¹¹ To achieve racial balance, Chaffey recommended that the district redraw district lines and adopt a policy of open enrollment, which would permit students to attend any of the five remaining schools in the district granted that ceiling limits on minority enrollment and total enrollment at each school were not exceeded.¹¹² With the closure, Chaffey stated that “effective July 1, 1976, the district can be fully integrated for the first time in the past 13 years.”¹¹³ After a series of community hearings, the district ultimately decided to close Ravenswood with a 4-1 vote (Robertson voted against the motion) on October 27, 1975.

In coming to this decision, the district appointed a task force to assess which school the district should close. The district task force that recommended the closure of Ravenswood included a summary of the district’s financial difficulties in their final report that pointed to larger economic and social trends. In the report, the committee members stated that because of declining enrollment numbers, state limits on district income, and lack of voter support for bond measures, the district was no longer able to sustain the costs of operating one or more of its high schools.¹¹⁴ Ultimately, the task force determined that closing Ravenswood would yield net savings of \$8.6 million over 10 years, the highest savings that would result from closing any of the district schools.

¹¹¹ “Why Ravenswood was chosen for closure,” *Palo Alto Times*, August 20, 1975.

¹¹² “Chaffey picks Ravenswood Hi for closure,” *Palo Alto Times*, August 20, 1975.

¹¹³ “East P.A. leader favors suit on closure,” *Palo Alto Times*, August 20, 1975.

¹¹⁴ Sequoia Union High School District, *Sequoia Union High School District on School Closure*, 1975.

The report also included a rationale that pointed directly to desegregation efforts at Ravenswood as a reason for the school's closure. The report stated, in its summary of the various criteria the schools were evaluated under, that because only 450 out of the 1,350 students that lived in the Ravenswood attendance area would actually attend Ravenswood in the 1975-1976 school year, the school did not meet an "efficient enrollment" standard. More importantly, because most students living in the Ravenswood attendance area already attended other schools, the district would only have to re-assign the 450 students at Ravenswood to other schools and return 240 transfer students to their original high schools. The report stated that the need to redraw the attendance boundaries would be "held to a minimum." Under a criterion titled "Community Relationships," the report stated that students in East Palo Alto would benefit from receiving "excellent educational opportunities" in other district schools. The report specifically mentioned that because the voluntary desegregation program had redistributed so many students from Ravenswood to other high schools in the district, the district would be saved the hassle of busing students who had remained in the attendance areas of the other five high schools to achieve a racially balanced district.

The district trustees had gone from denying their concern with "socio-economic factors" to attempting to curb segregation with particular attention paid to the concerns of those who opposed mandatory busing. Discriminatory housing practices created an isolated and majority-minority community even as Ravenswood opened in the late 1950s, leaving little room for disbelief regarding the consequences of opening Ravenswood while drawing school attendance boundaries that would adhere to pre-existing housing patterns. The situation was even more predictable considering that students from East Palo Alto attended Menlo-Atherton High School, which was integrated, before they had to withdraw and enroll in Ravenswood. East Palo

Alto residents understood that their children would have to attend a segregated high school and they fought to provide opportunities for students to attend other high schools in the district. However, after facing hostilities at other schools, some argued that the school district could not effectively educate their children and others sought to keep Ravenswood open, arguing that the district unfairly sought to dissolve the only school that was majority-Black. The district trustees thought that busing would have a decreased impact on students in East Palo Alto because many students had opted to transfer from Ravenswood. While some community members opposed what they described as “forced” attendance at Ravenswood, the students zoned to Ravenswood had to attend other schools because of its closure regardless of whether they supported the closure or not.

Initial reactions to the closure in the district community were varied. Robertson, who would go on to be the only trustee to vote against closure, stated that he would reserve his comments until a further study of the recommendations. Jordan, who previously voted against the mandatory transfer program, stated that Ravenswood was the “most logical choice [for closure] because of the financial constraints.” According to the *Palo Alto Times*, Jordan also noted that the cost per student and the cost of repair were highest at Ravenswood. Trustee William Harrington stated that he supported the closure of Ravenswood “if the East Palo Alto community is left with at least as good an educational facility as it has now — such as a community college program.”¹¹⁵

Conversely, members of the East Palo Alto community immediately voiced their displeasure with the board’s selection of Ravenswood. Henry Anthony, chairman of the East Palo Alto Municipal Council, stated that the recommendation “shows the racism in the district.” He also protested the move by voicing his resistance to “forced busing”: “The neighborhood school

¹¹⁵ “Chaffey picks Ravenswood Hi for closure,” *Palo Alto Times*, August 20, 1975.

concept is valid. This community doesn't pay taxes to the district for forced busing of its children out of the community. It ought to be two-way."¹¹⁶ Anthony also mentioned his willingness to bring the matter to court; the Committee on the Ravenswood Issue, an advocacy group for Ravenswood and the Ravenswood City district, would file suit in December against the district. The group, represented by Ravenswood City Superintendent Warren Hayman, spoke at the first community hearing on September 25 to express their strong criticism of the closure. Hayman stated: "When an all white school board closes the only high school in an all black community, that's tantamount to genocide. It's criminal."¹¹⁷ Representatives of the Ravenswood student community also voiced their displeasure to a lesser extent with the decision to close the school. Foster Curry, a Ravenswood student who attended the community hearings, noted that contrary to what he saw as the district's claim that the community did not support Ravenswood. He told the *Palo Alto Times*: "The Board voted to close down our school and one of the reasons given was lack of local support. It's kind of ironic that only Ravenswood was represented at all the hearings."¹¹⁸ Annette Lamoreaux, student body vice president and a member of the student advisory council, stated in a meeting with trustees that even though they "understand declining enrollment and financial problems," there was a "sense of disbelief among the students."¹¹⁹ Lamoreaux also stated that Ravenswood's closure would result in "forced busing of blacks to white schools": "The main complaint is that it puts the greatest burden on the black community (East Palo Alto). I live in San Carlos and I chose to go to Ravenswood, but East Palo Alto kids wouldn't have a chance if Ravenswood closed." A strong metric for opposition to Ravenswood's closure came from the students who decided to graduate early. *Harabi Gani* found that 66 juniors

¹¹⁶ "East P.A. leader favors suit on closure," *Palo Alto Times*, August 20, 1975.

¹¹⁷ "Hearings examine school closure issue," *Harabi Gani*, October 27, 1975.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ "Ravenswood students feel frustrated by closure," *Palo Alto Times*, September 25, 1975.

were planning to graduate at the end of the school year, which was double the average (because of Ravenswood's individualized curriculum, students could plan their schedules to graduate early).¹²⁰

On October 27, the board met to vote on closure. Before the board took their vote, Robertson stood to provide his rationale for standing against Ravenswood's closure. He addressed the high transfer rate of Black students from the Ravenswood attendance zone to the other high schools as a rationale for closure by retorting, "we are fortunate so many go to hill schools or we couldn't have kidded ourselves so long that the voluntary program is working."¹²¹ The school board did not specify that they would close Carlmont after Ravenswood. The district report identified Carlmont as the next candidate for closure at the end of the 1980 to 1981 school year. However, at the meeting, Trustee Ted Wellings moved to remove Carlmont's name from the recommendations; Robertson responded that naming Carlmont would display "some good faith" for residents in the Ravenswood.¹²² This motion failed 3-2, and the board voted 4-1 to close Ravenswood and "a second unnamed school."

On December 17, Clinton Stanton and Beverly Stanton filed suit on their behalf and on behalf of several plaintiffs against the Sequoia Union district in United States district court. The same day, Judge Samuel Conti rejected a temporary restraining order to prevent the district from taking administrative steps towards Ravenswood's closure after receiving assurances from the district that they would cease negotiations to sell or lease the property.¹²³ The plaintiffs, represented by attorney W. James Ware, argued in their suit that the closure of Ravenswood would create an unequal burden on the predominantly Black student body to desegregate the

¹²⁰ Jackie Armijo, "Closure sparks early grads," *Harabi Gani*, December 18, 1975.

¹²¹ "Board votes 4-1 for closure," *Harabi Gani*, October 27, 1975.

¹²² Nita Spangler, "Ravenswood closure confirmed," *The Country Almanac*, October 22, 1975.

¹²³ *Stanton v. Sequoia Union High School Dist.*, 408 F. Supp. 502 (N.D. Cal. 1976).

district.¹²⁴ The plaintiffs sought to achieve a court order that would cease the plan for Ravenswood's closure and prompt the district to develop a desegregation plan that would not place the complete burden of desegregation on the Ravenswood student community.¹²⁵ Ware also wrote in the suit:

“There are and were no sound educational reasons which compelled the closure of Ravenswood. The impact of the closure and one-way busing will be harmful to the achievement, aspiration, self-esteem, race relations and opportunity for higher education for blacks. The black students of the district will be cast as second-class citizens, unable to attend their own neighborhood school while all of their white contemporaries are permitted to attend their neighborhood schools. The closure of Ravenswood and one-way busing of black students to white schools in order to eliminate racial imbalance only serves to replace one discriminatory procedure with another.”¹²⁶

In arguing that closing and busing students from Ravenswood would be a “discriminatory procedure,” Ware targeted the district's claim that the effects of desegregation would be minimal on Black students. It is important to note that the plaintiffs did not argue that the Black students would receive an inferior education by attending the other high schools;¹²⁷ they argued that the methods of desegregation versus the consequences of desegregation would create a negative impact on the students. Ware also argued that the district eroded the success of the Ravenswood desegregation program by lifting the mandatory enrollment ceiling.¹²⁸ Deputy District Attorney George Camerlengo brought district officials, including Chaffey, to provide testimony which would prove that since 900 Black students zoned to attend Ravenswood had already transferred to other schools in the district (with 375 students still attending Ravenswood), distributing the remaining 300 students who would require reassignment to three high schools would be the least burdensome option. Marion McDowell, Chaffey's administrative assistant, argued in her

¹²⁴ “Lawsuit filed on Ravenswood closing,” *San Mateo Times*, December 18, 1975.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ “Quick Ravenswood Ruling Promised,” *San Mateo Times*, January 28, 1976.

¹²⁷ Lowe, “Ravenswood High School,” 344.

¹²⁸ Bill Shilstone, “Parents fight Ravenswood closure in court,” *Palo Alto Times*, December 19, 1975.

testimony that if Carlmont (the other popular candidate for closure) was closed, 300 students or more would have to be bused to Ravenswood alone.¹²⁹ Since so many students had chosen to leave Ravenswood, the district felt it would be less impactful to distribute the remaining students.

On February 10, Conti released his ruling. He stated that the court would not determine whether the district made the appropriate decision to facilitate desegregation, but rather was responsible for ruling on whether the district violated the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment by closing Ravenswood.¹³⁰ Conti ruled that the district was not in violation of the Constitution. First, he wrote that no evidence showed that the district had taken a discriminatory decision in closing Ravenswood and the defendants provided extensive evidence to show that their decision depended on “the District’s financial problems, enrollment considerations, cost savings, and impact on students throughout the district” rather than racial factors (for example, a fear of community resistance if white students were bused to Ravenswood). Second, in conceding that the court might have to examine evidence beyond statistical information, Conti wrote that the district did not have a choice they could take which was so preferable as to cast suspicion on the choice to close Ravenswood. He found that because the district did not act in a manner that was “constitutionally suspect,” the case could not be subjected to the “most rigid scrutiny.” Conti concluded by writing that the record supported “the court’s finding that the Board, in determining that Ravenswood was to be closed, acted in the utmost good faith, in a deliberate and non arbitrary manner, without improper racial motivation or arbitrary disregard of the rights of a minority group, in order both to insure racial balance and to provide high quality

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ *Stanton v. Sequoia Union High School Dist.*, 408 F. Supp. 502 (N.D. Cal. 1976).

education.” After Conti published his opinion, Chaffey commented his approval on the decision: “We expected that decision. It bears out further that our study was done with great care.”¹³¹

The East Palo Alto community’s effort to prevent the closure of Ravenswood had failed. Integration would be achieved but at the expense of a school that many came to see as a crucial community institution. After 1976, Ravenswood students either returned to their original attendance zones (if they were voluntary transfers) or, if they lived in the Ravenswood attendance zone, went to Menlo-Atherton. Officials lauded that the district could declare itself conclusively integrated. John Gomez, the district’s director of human relations, told the district Human Relations Commission that school would start in September 1976 with “racial balance in a way that did not exist before.” The district projected that because of Ravenswood’s closure, each school would maintain a minority enrollment between 18 and 28 percent. While desegregation had been achieved based on racial balance, the actions of leaders east of the Bayshore signified that the decision did not occur without serious dissent from the community whose students would be distributed through the remaining schools. The Nairobi Schools stayed open until 1984, a bastion of community action. The circumstances set in 1976 continue to this day — Ravenswood remains the only public high school to operate east of the Bayshore.

Conclusion

This thesis told the history of how a small, majority-minority community in the Bay Area sought to desegregate its schools. While there is an extensive scholarship on the history of desegregation, East Palo Alto is a unique case for studying how a community sought to guide and measure the effects of desegregation through local control. Moreover, the East Palo Alto experience underscores how for some Black communities, achieving integrated schools did not suffice for ensuring that Black students received an equal education. In East Palo Alto,

¹³¹ Tobey Roland, “Closure ruled legal,” *Harabi Gani*, February 27, 1976.

community leaders and students were not unilaterally opposed to or supportive of efforts to desegregate Ravenswood. Parents like Gertrude Wilks wanted their children to receive the best education they possibly could, whether that meant living with families in neighboring districts or opening independent primary and secondary schools to provide a robust curriculum centered on the Black experience.

The Ravenswood City School District, the elementary school district which was contiguous with the area east of the Bayshore, faced a greater hurdle in providing an integrated education — because the district had a distinct minority population compared to the surrounding communities, it took a legal order to provide elementary school children in East Palo Alto with access to integrated education. In 1976, the same year Ravenswood closed, 34 parents in East Palo Alto and surrounding districts filed suit in superior court against seven neighboring and predominantly white districts that widely outperformed the Ravenswood City School District.¹³² After ten years of litigation, the case was finally settled in 1986. The settlement ordered that five neighboring elementary school districts had to permit a total of 166 transfers from the Ravenswood City district.¹³³ The Tinsley program, as it is known, was the first voluntary interdistrict desegregation program to cross county lines in the United States.

The East Palo Alto case provides a perfect example of how school attendance and school district boundaries, despite the law's recognition that they do not represent concrete divisions, can assume salient political characteristics. By rescinding the mandatory transfer requirement in 1971, the district enforced their attendance boundaries as only surmountable through choice. The district's actions strengthened the drive among leaders in East Palo Alto to strengthen institutions which would grant them an increased level of local control over affairs at Ravenswood.

¹³² "Peninsula Suit for School Integration," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 6, 1976.

¹³³ "Tinsley settlement was a decade in the making," *Palo Alto Weekly*, October 7, 1998.

Community leaders did not intrinsically oppose desegregation. Rather, they saw the need to change Ravenswood's demographic composition, either through transfers or through closure, to ensure racial balance in the other district schools as insufficient to guaranteeing that students east of the Bayshore were receiving the same quality of education as other students in the district.