

## CHANGING SCHOOL

# Hamilton High Seeks Answers in Black, White

The teacher, one of the few black faculty members at Hamilton High, leaned back in her chair.

"We have got to be realistic," she said. "You and I know integration is a myth. I don't get upset or disillusioned because they are not eating off the same sandwich."

Hamilton High is learning to live with black and white students under the same roof.

Hamilton in the mid-1960s was almost 90% white. It had only a sprinkling of minority students, a few blacks and even fewer Mexican-Americans and Asian-Americans.

But in the latter half of the 1960s, amid the new push for civil rights, black parents anxious to find a bet-

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This is the third in a five-part series of articles on life in a Los Angeles high school by Times education writers Noel Greenwood and Jack McCurdy and Times staff writer Celeste Durant.

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ter school for their children began transferring their youngsters from nearby predominantly black high schools to Hamilton.

These were the permit children—so named because they attended Hamilton on a space-available permit but still lived in largely segregated neighborhoods outside Hamilton's regular attendance area.

At the same time, some black families managed to make further dents in the housing barrier and began moving into neighborhoods within Hamilton's attendance area.

By the fall of 1971, the combination—together with some white flight—had driven white enrollment down to 57% and black enrollment up to 34%.

In early 1972, at the demand of the Hamilton administration and parent advisory council, the Los Angeles Board of Education reacted. It allowed Hamilton to clamp—for the first time in city school history—a racial freeze on student transfer permits.

That closed the then-major avenue used by blacks to enter Hamilton and one escape route for uneasy whites.

### **Basis of Defense**

The freeze was defended on the basis it could prevent Hamilton from following the path of other city high schools that turned from white to black.

"The problem," said one white parent active in the move, "is to draw the line and hold Hamilton as an integrated school."

But it also was hoped the freeze would have a calming effect on the community itself. Said the same parent: "When the school goes all black, then the neighborhood goes all black."

The freeze had supporters among both black and white parents of youngsters at Hamilton.

But it also generated some ill feeling, particularly among some blacks who saw it as a move mainly to preserve Hamilton for the whites.

"The freeze is working," one black parent said bitterly. "It is working for the white community."

Today, the freeze is having its intended effect. White students account for 55% of Hamilton enrollment and blacks 35%.

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# School Seeks Answers to Black, White Issues

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Although that represents a further slight decrease in the percentage of white enrollment, it is nothing like the large and accelerating percentage shifts of past years.

The balance of Hamilton's enrollment is spread between Mexican-Americans and immigrants from Cuba or other Latin American countries (6%), Asian-Americans (4%) and a tiny scattering of other minorities.

But when the subject of race comes up at Hamilton, it is nearly always in terms of black and white.

*"It's fine to be integrated, but 50% of our student body doesn't accept it."*

—A white student

Black and white students coexist at Hamilton. Most students do not find this a particularly alarming situation. It is, they will say, just the way things are.

The surface signs are all there. Blacks cluster in one part of the campus for lunch while whites are together in another. Blacks show up for a school dance but whites do not. "I guess," says one black student, "it's really because they don't have anything in common."

That may be part of the answer. Another part is the social pressure, stronger now than in past years, that discourages interracial friendships.

"Lots of whites and blacks don't want to be friends once they are outside because people are afraid of what their friends might say," one white student said.

"When people see blacks with whites, there is just a question mark on their face that asks you, 'Why?'" a black student said.

Despite all this, there are students who take an essentially optimistic view.

"There are some moments," says one white student, "when race doesn't matter, when it doesn't matter whether you are white or black, and it's worth that moment (going to an integrated school). You are just human beings."

A black student says: "One of the things I think helps me get through life is the fact that Hamilton is racially mixed, so you learn that basically people are the same. You can live with them knowing that."

There are also students who are bothered that race relations are not better.

Says one white girl, who was told by a black that he hated whites: "When it happens to you, you think,

"Why should I try to like them?" People can't think of it as an individual thing. I just cried when he said that, but I didn't understand it. It doesn't make sense to me."

"It's a big racial hang-up," a black student said. "No need to try and cover it up. There is too much prejudice here."

If the school has not succeeded in erasing prejudice, neither has it satisfactorily resolved two other lingering difficulties: black alienation and white fear.

Still, the consensus of students and faculty is that race relations are no worse than in past years—and probably better.

The number of incidents between blacks and whites has fallen considerably, neither blacks nor whites see violence as a serious problem, and a majority of both say they are satisfied with the racial makeup of the school.

"I think," one teacher says cautiously, "that it's settling down."

*"A lot of blacks cannot relate to the school. They think it's working against them. It isn't that they don't care."*

—A black student

Black students at Hamilton are not that far from their white classmates when it comes to likes and dislikes about their school.

But their feelings are more intense in some key areas, and they have some concerns about the schools that are uniquely theirs.

There are blacks who are convinced they are better off at Hamilton.

"For me as a black person, I feel I'm getting a better education here than if I were to go to an all-black school," one student said.

"If I have to get up at 6 a.m. or 7 a.m., I want to learn something," said another. "I don't want to watch somebody get their brains kicked out. If this school were all black there would be a lot of cliques and gangs."

## Feelings of Persecution

But a good many blacks also have the feeling that Hamilton is not really their school, that they are isolated and even, in some cases, persecuted. "Hami," says one black student, "don't want blacks to go here."

There is a tendency for these blacks to see school policies like the freeze, tight security and stern discipline as essentially antiblack. They tend also to have a lower regard for the school's teachers and classes.

How deeply does this feeling of estrangement run? It is hard to say. It is not shared by all blacks. "The



UNDER THE SAME ROOF—White students, accounting for 55% of the enrollment, and blacks, with 35%, coexist at Hamilton High School. Times photos by Joe Kennedy

people are great and the teachers are not bad," says one enthused black student. "The whole atmosphere is good."

But it exists with enough persistence so that it would be dangerous to dismiss it as having no importance.

In part, it may be tied to black students intimidated by Hamilton's academic reputation.

"Blacks come from junior high schools where they get away with doing less," says one black student who is getting nearly all As at Hamilton.

"They don't want to compete when they get to high school because they feel afraid. They think whites have had more opportunity."

A good deal of the school's black absenteeism is a symptom of this, Leonard George, the boys' vice principal, believes.

"I've had black kids tell me a course is too hard," he says. "I check up and find out they're just not attending. They've heard it will be hard and they stay away."

Black estrangement also is fed by the conviction of some blacks that Hamilton, regardless of their presence, is a school run by whites for whites.

"The teachers are prejudiced and feel that if you are a minority, you must have grades like a minority—poor," one black student complains.

## Disciplinary Matters

Black students account for more of the school's disciplinary problems than whites. George, the boys' vice principal, himself black, thinks the youngsters and the school must share the blame.

There is, George says, the black youngster not held to tough standards in chiefly black schools "thinking he can come here and knock someone in the head."

But there also are white teachers and administrators, he adds, "who allow the black kid to get away with stuff because they think it's his normal behavior." (George is held in disfavor by a fair number of black students who see him as doubly tough on them because they are black. George, who spent 14 years at predominantly black Gompers Junior High, says:

"I'm doing the same thing here I was doing at Gompers. I haven't done anything differently since I've been a teacher."

Socially, black students look for more from their school than Hamilton is providing.

An overriding complaint from blacks is that Hamilton is a "dead school" because it does not stage

enough dances or noontime entertainment or after-school activities—a complaint heard much less frequently from whites.

Finally, blacks bring with them a strong sense of racial pride and a determination not to lose their identity in this predominantly white school.

Natural and intricately braided hair styles flourish among Hamilton's black students, and there is great care taken to dress stylishly (in contrast to the studied casualness of white students).

Some black students (or their parents) balk at school tasks that stir old images of blacks filling menial jobs.

"If you assign a white student to the cafeteria, no problem," says a counselor. "If you assign a black stu-

dent to the cafeteria, you sometimes get a kickback from the parents."

*"What this school needs is more interracial discussions, raps, doing creative things together—instead of this white passive/black aggressive trip the school's on."*

—A white student

For years, Hamilton's students were chiefly white youngsters from middle to upper-middle class Jewish families.

Their numbers are fewer today, but they probably still represent the largest single segment of whites at the school.

Changes in the community around Hamilton (including the construction of many apartment houses) have altered the white student mix somewhat, introducing youngsters from less affluent families.

Some of these clearly feel estranged from the more affluent whites.

## 'No One Would Understand'

(In a human relations class, one white girl whose family was not financially well off, explained why she had kept silent during a discussion: "I just don't have anything to say. No one in this class would understand my problems.")

If blacks, bring with them black pride, there also is an evident sense of Jewish pride among the whites. But there is another, more troublesome sense among many Hamilton white students (and their parents) as well. It is fearfulness of, or at least uneasiness about, the black presence at Hamilton.

Like black alienation, the depth and breadth of this feeling is hard to measure. It may not even be shared by a majority of whites.

But it is there, and its souring effect on race relations is undeniable.

White apprehension surfaced when the black influx picked up momentum at Hamilton. Some white families moved out. Others transferred their youngsters on permits from Hamilton to nearby high schools that seemed likely to remain white. Some went into private schools.

The worst year was 1970, when Hamilton's white enrollment fell by 521—a 22% decline from the year before.

The school today is still losing white enrollment, but at a lesser rate. How much of it is solely the result of white flight is uncertain.

School authorities know that there are white parents now evading the

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DRESS STYLE—There is studied casualness among the whites.



CONTRAST—Colorful dress and hair styles flourish among the school's black students.

# HAMILTON HIGH

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black schools they came from.)

"When I first came, the few blacks we had were passive and they would begin to assimilate with the other youngsters. Now there are more blacks and they don't have to assimilate. They act the way they are all the time and you have to be black to realize it. It's not noisier—it's a different kind of noise."

—A black teacher

Misperceptions — they are a fascinating side of the race relations picture at Hamilton High.

Black students will

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permitted freeze by declaring false addresses or even renting empty apartments (the cost sometimes shared by two or more families) in other neighborhoods so their youngsters can attend another school.

So there is a hopeful feeling that the worst of white flight is over, but there also is the plain fact that nobody knows with precision the extent to which it is continuing.

White uneasiness feeds on a combination of rumor and actual instances of white students victimized by blacks. Some of this uneasiness also seems a hold-over from the days when racial incidents were much more frequent.

On campus, it surfaces when whites talk in apprehensive tones about being jostled in the halls or not using the bathrooms because they might be beaten up or extorted for loose change by blacks.

## Sporting Events

Sparse white attendance at sports events is blamed chiefly on student or parental fears that there may be trouble during or after the game from blacks.

When such incidents do occur, it fuels the cycle. After one football game, two black girls were transferred out of Hamilton for singeing with matches the hair of two white girls seated in front of them.

Versions of that incident grew more sensational with each telling. "The rumors fly hot and heavy," says one coach, "and the mummies are scared to have their kids come to the game."

To some, the situation has aspects of a psychodrama, the "white passive/black aggressive trip."

"They (black students) like to start trouble to see if you are scared," says one white student. "They will do more if they see you are afraid."

## Some Give Money

Comments a black student:

"Some of them (white students) let blacks walk all over them just because they are black. They give them money just because they ask for it and blacks feel they can walk all over them and they can."

There are white students who say they stay away from school dances because blacks laugh at the way they dance.

One coach, lamenting the problems he has getting some white boys to go out for sports, thinks the youngsters are not only unsure they can measure up to blacks athletically, but also are fearful of them.

Whites, of course, are not the only ones concerned about the potential for trouble, and it would be simplistic to suppose that they are.

"It's an issue that bothers both white and black parents," says one teacher.

## Tells of Fear

"I've seen some rough girls here," says a black female student. "They make me think twice about going in the bathroom."

"The few (black students) that go around fighting and things like that—that presents a bad picture of all blacks," another black student says.

(In fact, one ironic side of the situation showed clearly in student responses to The Times survey at Hamilton. While a strain of white concern over the potential for violence was evident, so was a strain of black relief at attending what they consider a safe school—safe, apparently, compared with the predominantly

# RACIAL ISSUES

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swear there are more whites at Hamilton than the school admits; white students will just as firmly insist the same about blacks.

White students who are upset about the black presence will talk about "stopping the busing." In fact, only 40 of the approximately 800 blacks at the school are being bused to Hamilton.

Whites will talk about blacks whose families care little about education. In fact, a higher percentage of black students at Hamilton feel pressured by their parents to get better grades than white students.

"I think," says a black administrator, "that some black kids are getting from their parents the feeling they are behind and they may never catch up."

## Economic Status

A good many whites, including a surprising number of teachers, see Hamilton's blacks as economically deprived, essentially lower class. In fact, about half live within the Hamilton attendance area and the majority of the others (who attend on permit) are from middle-to upper-middle-class black neighborhoods immediately adjacent to the Hamilton area.

It is not uncommon to be told by black students that blacks attending Hamilton on permit are being pushed out of the school in large numbers, their permits canceled for the slightest infraction.

School records do not hear this out, however. The school this year canceled permits for just 23 of the 423 students attending on permit.

In the community itself, there is a tendency to read racial overtones into virtually every incident. Trouble after a football game with University High was seen as racial conflict.

"But," says Principal Josephine C. Jimenez, "basically we haven't been able to establish it was. There were many factors. Our kids were pretty uptight because they had lost to Uni. Uni kids felt pretty elated about winning. They hung around to gloat over their victory.

"But with us it became a big thing . . . A week later, Palisades and Westchester went at it and people called it a fight. Here, you're very vulnerable because of the manner in which the school is viewed by its constituents."

Hamilton is also caught in the collision of two cul-

tures, black and Jewish.

"When you get these two cultures on the same ground and the groundwork hasn't been laid for the differences, clashes arise," says one white teacher.

"It all goes along," says a white student, "with being afraid of what you don't know about."

## Special Classes

The school has tried to smooth the way by offering human relations classes for students.

(No such effort has yet been made with teachers. It is needed, the principal concedes, but "the staff has to recognize the need for it.")

These classes are scorned by some students and their parents as too timid and too few. But they have managed to get out in the open some of the things that bother students.

The school's principal concedes that more must be done, and intends to intensify the effort next year.

Mrs. Jimenez says: "You could not expect these kids to come to Hamilton and make all the natural adjustments to high school itself, and make the racial adjustments and integration, too, without help to do it."

## Outside Factors

In the end, whether Hamilton makes it as an integrated school depends on some important factors essentially outside its control—especially, what happens to the surrounding neighborhood.

"I moved on 20th St. a year ago and it was all white," says a black student, "now it's practically all black. Every day you will see a moving truck and it's either some blacks coming or some Jews moving. People keep running away."

But a lot also depends on what happens inside Hamilton.

One black teacher says:

"We've given lip service to integration and it won't work until we really get on it. While there are a lot of people working hard on it, I think we have people who are dragging their feet, who maybe don't want it to be successful."

**Next: Law and order at Hamilton High.**