

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Sumner High's future depends on whether it can match its past

By Editorial Board

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St. Louis Schools Superintendent Kelvin Adams is weighing closure of a St. Louis cultural icon.

Sumner High School was founded 135 years ago as the first public high school west of the Mississippi for African-American students.

It is the alma mater of some of St. Louis' most accomplished sons and daughters. It is central to the history of the Ville neighborhood, one of the most storied and vibrant communities in St. Louis' history.

But today, Mr. Adams said, by every relevant measure except historic significance, Sumner is failing to justify its continued existence. "We cannot continue to operate a school in this way," Mr. Adams said.

He is expected to make a recommendation to the district's Special Administrative Board later this month. Among the options he has spelled out is permanently closing Sumner, perhaps as soon as the upcoming winter break.

Sumner High no longer serves many neighborhood children. Indeed, it does not serve many children at all. It has a capacity of nearly 1,500, but its current enrollment is only 600, of whom only about 450 routinely show up.

A rising tide of violence and disorder has brought the closure issue to a head. Each month, St. Louis

Police get dozens of calls for service at the school. Two uniformed officers were stationed full time at the school after trouble arose recently.

Meanwhile, the families of children who live nearby are choosing other options for high school.

According to a recent study by the Illinois Facilities Fund, in the 2007-2008 school year, 77 percent of the students in grades nine through 12 who live in the 63113 ZIP code attended a magnet high school, a public high school in another ZIP code, a charter school, a specialty school for dropouts or those with disciplinary problems or participate in the voluntary interdistrict school transfer program.

Five of every six students on the books at Sumner are bused in from out of the neighborhood to attend a school with an antiquated physical facility and unacceptable risk of violence.

THE ATTACK ON CHARLES E. SUMNER, 1856



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THE ATTACK ON CHARLES E. SUMNER, 2009

They're bused into a school where, in the last five years, the dropout rate has doubled to 40 percent and the graduation rate has dropped from 54 percent to 34 percent.

Should Sumner close, students would be disbursed among the city's other high schools — most of which, Mr. Adams acknowledges, also have serious problems. But the children would be safer and closer to home. And the move would send an unmistakable signal that the district will pull the plug on schools based on performance.

Mr. Adams emphasizes that Sumner's problems are not the fault of the children or alumni. "This is about our [the district's] failure," he said.

Mr. Adams has set a high bar for what must come next if Sumner is to be kept open. He wants systems in place to build an 80 percent to 90 percent graduation rate, adequate yearly progress in academic achievement and average ACT scores of 21 or higher.

The superintendent made this offer to alumni: He's willing to turn over control of the building if they are willing and able to "build the kind of culture" that Sumner had in its heyday.

Who among alumni and Sumner's other boosters can step up? Merit and achievement are Sumner High School's historic legacy. They should also be the principles that determine its future.