

Pop quiz: what's the difference between being a host of a party or being a guest; being the invitee versus the invited?

For the guest, the first step is to decide whether to accept the invitation, asking themselves, "will the event be worth all the effort needed to attend?" If the answer is in the affirmative, then the invitee must consider a number of factors. Who else will be going? What will I wear? How long will it take to get there? Will there be parking once I arrive? (authors note: You may have recognized by now that I do not get out much.)

Now the more cynical and suspicious amongst us might additionally ask, "Was I invited because they wanted me to be there, or did I receive the invitation out of obligation and courtesy?" (Anyone who has been invited to the wedding of their 2nd cousins' sister-in-law has likely considered this as a possibility). Still – because of appearances and social norms – the invitation is typically accepted irrespective of potential reservations, and all (good) guests accept to attend the party according to parameters set by the host. Further, like all good guests do (or do not do, in this case), they never, ever bring anyone who has not been extended an invitation. That would be rude.

On the other side of the spectrum, there is the host who has all decision making authority. They plan what food will be served, what games will be played, and where the gathering will be held. Most importantly, the host determines who and who will not be invited. The host can even control when the guests can arrive and when it is time for them to leave. This latter condition is the core of the host-guest relationship; no matter how nice or fun the party might be (or not), or how welcoming the host and other attendees are, the guests must return from whence they came. The presence of the guest is conditional; the presence of the host is not. So all the power resides with the invitee, and the invited are to politely receive whatever is provided. And upon close examination, the host-guest relationship is not much different than that between Palo Alto Unified School District (PAUSD) and the students that are a part of the Voluntary Transfer Program (VTP).

Now, the comparison is not strictly apples-to-apples. An essential difference is that the students who are part of VTP are court-ordered guests. PAUSD is legally obligated to invite and accept 60 East Palo Alto students annually whether the staff, administration, or residents of Palo Alto want them there or not. Of course, those invitations come with conditions. Those 60 students must begin attending PAUSD between Kindergarten and the 2nd grade. Also, there can be no gaps in their attendance. If a student leaves PAUSD for any reason, they cannot return. Thus, this is the condition of any VTP student: they are guests, conditionally present in a community that is obligated to extend an invitation. So the question must be asked: why have transfer students at all? But in order to understand why the Voluntary Transfer Program exists, it is necessary to acknowledge systems and methods used to marginalize and oppress people of color throughout American history.

For historical context, the Voluntary Transfer Program was the result of the *Tinsley Case*, a 1976 class action lawsuit filed on the behalf of the parents of East Palo Alto – who were both Black and White – against their neighboring, mostly White schools districts (e.g. Palo Alto, Menlo Park, Redwood City, etc.) The plaintiffs charged that the *de facto* segregation of those communities – primarily the result of racist housing practices dating back to WWII – had deprived the children of East Palo Alto from the rich educational experiences enjoyed by their White counterparts. The case was fought over for 10 years until the plaintiffs finally settled in 1986. And from that settlement, the Voluntary Transfer Program was born.

The *Tinsley case* was not the first choice of action for the parents of East Palo Alto, but the final effort of a community that had run out of options. For the decades preceding the case, those parents – the majority of whom were Black – had sought to create a sustainable, local and, most importantly, high-achieving public education system. And they did not toil alone, as the East Palo Alto community did gain some support from

their neighboring communities' residents, board members, teachers and staff. Yet, not enough people in positions of power could work to a sustainable solution. So the efforts to create a strong, equitable educational community within the boundaries of East Palo Alto fell short. So the parents fought and won some measure of restitution, some measure of hope, but only to a fraction of their community – with conditions.

Pop quiz: Can a guest ever have the powers and privileges of a host? If not, how can the power structure be equalized?

A guest, by definition, can never be equal to a host. The conditional status of all guests creates an innate inequality with respect to the host, and I have found no evidence to indicate otherwise. So if this power dynamic is true, then all VTP students and families exist in a similarly inequitable - yet far more problematic – relationship with PAUSD. Still, the solution to create a more just and fair union between the two communities is a simple - albeit, imperfect and challenging – decision. Remove the conditions, and make PAUSD home to those who choose to attend.

When I hear people shout “Black Lives Matter”, I am filled with hope. It is a call to action, and recognizes the societal inequities do not simply harm the oppressed. Instead, they tear at the very fabric that binds us together, gives us hope, and brings lasting peace. The Palo Alto community – specifically PAUSD – has a unique opportunity to answer the call with a decisive, thoughtful and just action. By changing the status of all students who reside within the boundaries of East Palo Alto from guests to hosts, we acknowledge that not only do their lives matter, but that we want to share our lives with them.

This action would be historic and unprecedented. If taken, there would undoubtedly be a cascade of effects – known and unknown – that would push both communities to collaborate and share in ways that have never been done before. The children of East Palo Alto and Palo Alto would have to see themselves as one community, as the neighbors that could have been if not by the chance of birth. This is possible, but only if those with power willingly cede their control and open their doors to their neighbors to the north.

A court order cannot open a persons' heart, or change their mind. A lawsuit might grant someone access to a school, but it does not mean that school and community welcomes them as they would one of their own. And while Palo Alto cannot undo the trauma and injustice inflicted in the past, PAUSD can ensure a more just and bright future for all students, disrupting a system of inequity for one that values the lives of anyone willing to walk through the door.

With Peace & Love,
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