

School Closing Stirs Emotions In E. Meadow

Most school districts in Nassau and Suffolk will be voting on their school boards and budgets in May and June. This is the first of a number of stories in which Newsday will examine significant issues in district elections.

By Michael Unger

East Meadow—"It's true," the high school girl was saying, "Hempstead Turnpike is the 'Mason-Dixon Line'—that's the way the district is dividing."

She sat in the comfortable living room of her home on Hyacinth Court in the Westbury portion of the East Meadow school district and listened to her father tell why he believed the district was right to propose closing the Salisbury Elementary School. The father just wanted to save tax dollars, he said. The enrollment was declining, and the school was not needed. There was nothing personal about it, it was just that some people insisted there was more to the closing than meets the eye. "They're worried their real estate values will drop if the school is closed," he said.

But his daughter was insistent. "Salisbury has more money; they're considered richer and the southerners are generally poorer." She added, "That's why they call the Salisbury School the 'country club.' The children from Salisbury do better in school than the other kids. There's a snobbishness associated with going to Salisbury."

Across Hyacinth, at No. 2600, Mrs. Lois Korf came to the door. "I want the school open," Mrs. Korf said. "It keeps the house and property values up, and taxes are not going to go down, anyway. The classes are smaller, so why not be able to get a better education? For \$12.50 a year, [on the average tax bill], why not?"

Other school districts, such as Huntington in Suffolk County and Plainview in Nassau County, have planned to close as many as four schools. Their school boards have met with strong opposition, and the Plainview plans have been scrapped for the present. But nowhere on Long Island has a proposal to close a school had a more divisive effect on the community than in East Meadow.

East Meadow is a middle-class, working community of about 60,000 residents, many of them holding blue-collar jobs. Like most Long Island communities, it is made up of individual housing developments that form neighborhoods. And like many older Long Island communities, East Meadow was forced to build more schools as its population mushroomed in the 1950s. One of them was Salisbury.

But, also as in many other communities, the movement into East Meadow of families with young school children has slowed while the children of the population boom have moved on to high school and college. Enrollment in all eight East Meadow elementary schools has declined. Total enrollment dropped to 13,902 this year from a peak of 18,500 in 1964, and will decline to 11,575 by 1976, according to East Meadow School Superintendent Martin T. Walsh. "This whole situation has been on the minds of the board for the last three years," Walsh said.

This year, the board announced that

it was looking at all district schools to see where it could cut costs. It hinted that it might close the Newbridge Road Elementary School, the oldest school in the district. No more was heard about closing Newbridge after angry parents jammed a crowded meeting with administrators in the school. Salisbury parents now charge that the board is deliberately using the support of relieved Newbridge parents as "divide-and-conquer tactics to ram the Salisbury closing down our throats," as one said.

Some of them have also charged that anti-Semitism is involved, because the Salisbury area is largely Jewish. That charge nearly led to a fist fight at a recent school board meeting.

Anti-Semitic feeling has become part of the controversy, Mrs. Korf said, "but it's not a primary cause; it's just a thing that happens when people get angry. Tax money is the real issue."

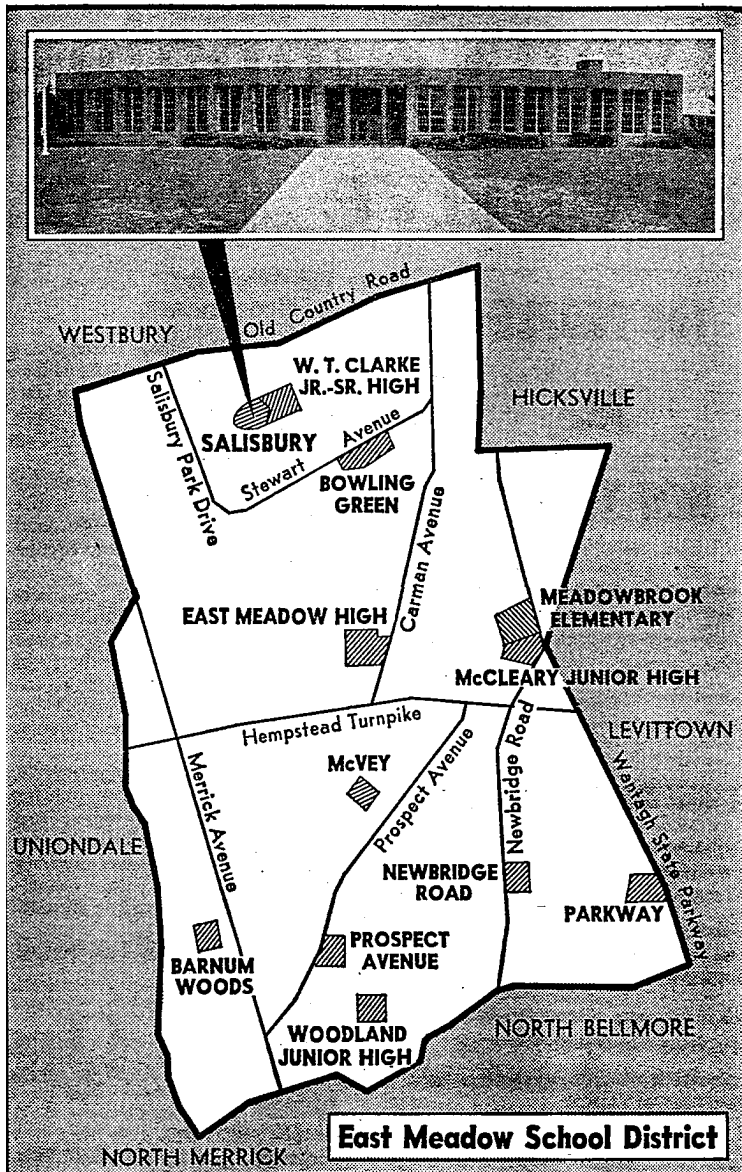
"Anti-Semitism was brought up at the last school board meeting, but I can't buy that," said Chester Tuchman, a Salisbury resident and lawyer who is representing the residents protesting the school closing. "But there may be resentment over going to the school. Salisbury students come out consistently tops in the district and part of it is due to the good educational environment. The Salisbury School is small enough so that every teacher knows every student by name. I think there is some amount of jealousy on the part of other residents because of the impression Salisbury gives, but I don't believe it's justified. We live in the Westbury postal district, and there's a certain snob appeal. If you look at the newspaper ads, they'll say, 'Westbury, house for sale—East Meadow School District' to attract more buyers, because the blacks go to Westbury schools and East Meadow is all white for the most part."

As is usual with generalizations, there is a lot wrong with the one that says the residents who live south of Hempstead Turnpike are poorer than those who live north of it. But there is just enough truth in it to inflame tempers and bring simmering resentments to the boiling point. Most of the commercialized strip zoning along East Meadow highways is "south of the border." Residents there feel they are the last in the district to get their roads fixed, their potholes filled. The farther south one goes from the Salisbury area, the stronger the resentment.

"I feel very badly about it. The district is being split," said one school board member, Mrs. Beatrice Bryson. "I can feel for the people of Salisbury. I realize it's [the closing] a difficult and emotional thing to accept, but the board is acting for the best interests of the districts as a whole."

Mrs. Bryson found herself in the middle of the controversy after she and a district resident called each other "fathead" at a board meeting. She was

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The Salisbury Elementary School—in an embattled district

Newsday Graphic by Ron Zembko

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also criticized for allegedly saying **Salisbury** children would benefit from "mingling" with children from other district **schools**. Mrs. Bryson said she meant there should be more than one or two classes in each grade level in a particular school. But she did say in an interview that she believed **Salisbury** children would benefit from "seeing how the other half lives," if they were transferred to the nearby **Bowling Green School**, only half a mile from **Salisbury School**.

Even neighbors on the same block may find they are on different sides of the controversy, and some friends of many years avoid talking to each other about the situation. Two such families, both of them Jewish but living on opposite sides of Hempstead Turnpike, are Joel and Barbara Dinhoff of 378 Wellington Rd., whose two daughters go to the **Newbridge School**, and Diane and Albert Werther of 908 Westbury Rd., whose son and daughter go to **Salisbury**.

"We're not discussing it anymore," Mrs. Dinhoff said recently. "I get the feeling that they resent the fact that it's their **school**, since our **school** was originally the one that was supposed to be closed." The two wives went to high **school** together, both teach, and their husbands have also become friendly. "I speak to her an average of two or three times a week and we see them socially often," Mrs. Dinhoff said. "I wasn't going to let it come between us; it would be stupid to let a budget come between us." Joel Dinhoff, a pharmacist, said, "It was an undercurrent that was felt when we were together . . . it's not the 26 cents difference on the tax rate, it's . . . where does it all end?"

Mrs. Werther said, "It was getting sticky. I spoke to her one day and said I'd rather not discuss it. She had said, well, where was I when she needed me to give their **school** support? I never knew about the Newbridge meetings until it was over. If we had continued discussing it, it might have resulted in a strain."

The seven-member **school** board stands 6-1 in favor of closing **Salisbury** and has deleted funds to operate the **school** from a proposed budget, to be voted on in June. It claims it will save nearly \$250,000, or 26 cents for each \$100 of assessed valuation on the tax rate. "The basic reason [for the closing] is a matter of economy," Superintendent Walsh said. "The board is sensitive to the financial plight of the taxpayers [and] has been concerned with the submission of **school** budgets—the last two have been knocked down. The board had to become more involved in closing schools. From the standpoint of declining enrollment and causing the fewest problems, **Salisbury** seems to be it." **Salisbury** has 402 students; **Newbridge school** has 800.

The tension in the community continues to mount. It showed up on one recent afternoon in the casual talk at a nearby barbershop.

There was an angry, emotional tightness in the voice of the man sitting in Rocco's chair. "Do you know what's going on in **East Meadow** right now?" His hands tightened on the armrests. "They're trying to close down our neighborhood **school**." A frown crossed the face of the manicurist, Evelina Adjami. She glanced up at the man in the chair but said nothing.

"Okay, doc," said Rocco Romano, the Island Inn's barber, combing the last lock into place on the back of the man's neck. "Dr. Marvin Grossman, a dentist who lives in the **Salisbury** area, got out of the chair. When he left, Mrs. Adjami, who lives south of Hempstead Turnpike, was steaming. "I couldn't say anything while he was here, but I've lived in **East Meadow** all my life and they've got to close that **school**," she said. "That **school** is run like a private **school**—I'd like to send my son there."