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Sad, unsafe school once was mighty

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They're talking about closing Banks Middle School, imagine that. A school board member called it unsafe and depressing, with the look of "a ratty old hotel."

Superintendent Stan Mims won't actually use the word "closing." He just doesn't want to put students there anymore. He's had nightmares about it, he said. The design is inexplicable, the condition "disgraceful."

As a graduate of what was Banks High, I should take offense. But I don't. I just have one question.

Where in the heck have you guys been?

Banks has been unsafe and depressing for years. Unsafe forever, maybe.

Don't get me wrong, Banks was something back in the day, before Cleveland Hammonds made it a middle school in a touchy-feely 1980s re-organization that was supposed to "meet the emotional and physical needs" of 12-, 13- and 14-year-olds. It's suffered a series of safety and academic embarrassments since.

Hard to believe it was a nationally known football factory three decades ago. Take note, Hoover. Things change fast.

Banks was home to the Rutledge brothers, to Johnny Musso and a string of Bama stars. It was alma mater to Auburn great Jimmy Sidle, where David Cutcliffe cut his coaching teeth and Shorty White's team held the nation's top spot as it tried to go undefeated three years straight.

The team's success made National Geographic, in a sort of '70s substitute for MTV. In 1974, when quarterback Jeff Rutledge faced Woodlawn star Tony Nathan at Legion Field, 42,000 people showed up. Only one gate was open, so people still filed in at halftime.

I'm sure Banks nurtured great minds. I just didn't know any.

In truth Banks has been a nightmare for years. It's a quarter-mile string of buildings linked by covered sidewalks. In the old days you could hop a rail and disappear into the woods. They later built prison-like fences, but it was still tough to patrol, defend, and pay for.

And that's the bottom line. School officials say it costs \$250,000 a year just to keep the lights on. That explains the sudden interest in safety and happiness. That, and the fact Banks has failed to meet academic goals for three years. Bye-bye Banks, bye-bye problem.

And then there's Mims' desire to turn schools into K-8s. He says they create a "community of learning" and improve student performance and behavior.

Funny that such a plan should be the end for Banks. Current studies fly in the face of the 1980s research that led to the middle school fad. At the time school consultants said middle schools would solve our educational ills and reverse "moral decay."

Now there are more studies, fads, and reorganization. The board's gotta do what it's gotta do. But there must be good, committed teachers, competent administrators and principals who offer both reason and authority. And there must be parents who demand excellence of their school and their kids. Fads and reorganizations aside, that's the only way Birmingham can compete. John Archibald's column appears Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Write him at jarchibald@bhamnews.com.

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