

Mixed message: Jesse Jackson in Decatur

From the Editors in the [December 8, 1999](#) issue

Whether he is taking up the cause of unions, minorities, immigrants or the poor, Jesse Jackson is always on the lookout for dramatic points of conflict that can attract public attention the way that marches and sit-ins did during the civil rights movement. Jackson knows that by organizing people against a particular act of injustice he can mobilize communities for long-term action and put pressure on authorities to respond. And such demonstrations can serve as powerful symbolic events in the struggle for justice.

But activists who use such a strategy have to pick their battles carefully. They need to attack a dramatic case of wrongdoing that is clearly emblematic of a larger pattern of injustice. That wasn't the case in Decatur, Illinois, where Jackson rallied support for six black youths who were expelled from school for their part in a brawl that broke out in the stands at a high school football game and that put scores of people in significant danger.

The students were originally expelled for two years, and Jackson argued that the punishment was excessive: the students needed another chance within the system. This was a reasonable point, one that the Decatur school board eventually accepted. The board agreed to allow the students to return in one year, after first attending an alternative school. But that wasn't enough for Jackson, who insisted that the students be allowed to return to school in January.

Jackson's strategy was to make the plight of these six students symbolic of an uncaring school system, a system allegedly "without mercy," more interested in punishing students than in educating them. ("Leave no child behind," pleaded the banners of Jackson's Rainbow/PUSH organization.) But Jackson failed to acknowledge that taking a strong stand against violence is a crucial task for any school system. Students—black or white, rich or poor—cannot learn if they and their teachers are worried about safety. Though punishments obviously need to fit the nature of the

violation, a "zero tolerance" policy on violence is necessary for any viable school system. That message got lost in Decatur.

Jackson is right to worry about what will happen to the youths expelled from school. What is most likely to help these students, however, is precisely a school with lots of structure and discipline. Indeed, such a setting is needed in whatever alternative programs are offered to violence-prone youths. If the alternative programs are inadequate in Decatur, then that issue, not the school board, should be the focus of concern.