

## Recommendations for Changing the Student Assignment System

From January 2009 through January 2010 the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) and Parents for Public Schools (PPS) worked together to engage families and community members in the process to redesign the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) student assignment system. We developed our recommendations for a new system after considering many different factors, including:

- The Board of Education’s priorities for a new student assignment system
- What we heard from over 850 people in community conversations during the past year
- Data presented by Stanford researchers to the Board of Education
- The PAC’s role to represent parent perspectives in Board policy decisions, and the request by the Board of Education and SFUSD staff that the PAC and PPS provide community input and recommendations.

As part of their process to redesign student assignment, in spring 2009 the Board of Education set three priorities for a new system:

1. Reverse the trend of racial isolation and the concentration of underserved students in the same school.
2. Provide equitable access to the range of opportunities offered to students.
3. Provide transparency at every stage in the assignment process.

Our conversations with parents and members of the community framed the options for a new student assignment system in the context of these priorities. Our recommendations place great emphasis on the Board’s priorities for student assignment, as well as the SFUSD’s overall priorities expressed in the district’s Balanced Score Card (*Beyond the Talk*).

### What We Support in Changing Student Assignment

Based on what we have consistently heard from our communities, we urge the Board to:

- ➡ Adopt a STUDENT assignment system that values parent choice and equitable access
- ➡ Improve the quality of under-performing and under-enrolled schools by focusing on TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATOR assignment, support, and accountability.

## Student Assignment Options that We Oppose

Based on what we consistently heard from the community, simulation data comparing the different options being considered by the Board of Education<sup>1</sup>, and the Board's own priorities:

- ➔ **We oppose the Lottery with Local Preference** (Option #1) because this option limits equitable access to educational opportunities.
- ➔ **We oppose the Zones Option** (Option #4) because this option *eliminates* parent choice.
- ➔ **We oppose the option of Local School with Choice for City-Wide Programs** (Option #5) because this option limits choice, and data from simulations showed it limits access to educational opportunity.

## Concerns about the Student Assignment Options Presented to the Community

1. We reject Local School Option #6 (Local School with Choice for All Schools) as it was stated, because it implies a greater chance to receive a school of choice than would actually be true. We are deeply skeptical that the choice component would achieve as much choice as was presented, especially for families living in lower CST census tracts (the diversity measure used in the simulations).
2. If Academic Diversity Preference is used as a mechanism for assignment, we need to know how the district plans to close the achievement gap inside schools, because schools that are currently academically diverse have an achievement gap within them. The district needs to develop systems to support students in diverse school settings.
3. We are also concerned about the lack of transparency in all of the options presented for community discussion. People were frustrated they were not given complete information or the opportunity to weigh in on an actual proposal for a new system.
4. In looking at the simulations of the different options, we know that the models were based on actual SFUSD enrollment applications – based on non-diverse applicant pools. No data was available to project theoretical participation in a new process. Furthermore, there was no mention of how these models would achieve the board's priorities when it comes to families least likely to participate in the process.
5. We are concerned that no information related to the cost or complexity of successfully implementing these models has been made available to the public. At this time of financial crisis, the decision for adopting a new student assignment system must take into account the cost of implementing it.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix I, page 5, for a description of the six proposed options for student assignment; and Appendix II, page 6, for a summary of our findings from the community conversations.

## Recommendations for Student Assignment

**We cannot endorse any of the six proposed options as they stand** because we do not have sufficient information about the level of equitable access they would provide, or any details about how the actual enrollment process would be implemented.

There are two possible options that seem to have potential to meet the Board's first and second priorities for student assignment, as well as provide parents choice. While we are open to exploring these options, we do not currently endorse them for the reasons detailed above.

1. The recommendation by the research team<sup>2</sup> for the Lottery with Academic Diversity and Local Preference (Option #3) is compelling. This option provides parent choice, with a mechanism to support equitable access. Their model for Academic Diversity gave preference to families living in census tracts where students historically have low standardized test scores, who apply to high-performing schools.

Their research found that adding local preference to Option #2 did not diminish the success of supporting academic diversity, while making the enrollment process a little more predictable – a factor appreciated by families.

2. While we do not support Option # 6 (Local School with Choice for All Schools) as currently stated, we believe a **modified** version might work – only **if a percentage of seats in local schools were reserved for open enrollment**. This would support parents to choose and access all schools. It also gives preference for students from lower-scoring census tracts, ensuring equitable access to high-performing schools.

## Recommendations for School Quality, Improved Systems, and Community Engagement

Because so much of what we have heard – from both our community conversations and the Stanford research – speaks to issues not directly related to the proposed options for student assignment, **we strongly recommend that the Board of Education and SFUSD staff focus on addressing these issues, no matter which student assignment system is adopted.**

Parents perceive deep inequities between schools in different neighborhoods – related to teacher quality, the condition of school and community facilities, resources that families bring to schools, and enrichment opportunities available to children both inside and out of the classroom. In her comments to the Board on January 25, Dr. Darling-Hammond referred to the discrepancies that exist between schools based on *functional resources* – how things work at schools – rather than simply the money allocated to schools. The district needs to **address these functional resources** – especially given the current and projected crisis in funding.

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<sup>2</sup> Presented by Muriel Niederle (Stanford University) to the Board of Education on January 25, 2010. See Appendix III (page 7) for more details about their findings and recommendations.

The following recommendations flow from our findings from community conversations over the past year, as well as the district’s own strategic plan. They highlight urgent priorities the district needs to address to support its overall goals for supporting student achievement and keeping its promises to students and their families – no matter which student assignment system is adopted. The PAC and PPS are committed to providing more detailed and specific recommendations to address these issues.

**1. Strengthen Teacher and Administrator Standards, Support and Accountability.**

Parents emphasize the need for strong principals and skilled teachers, who are qualified for the subjects they teach and who care about their students. They recognize that educators need the tools and support to do their jobs. They also want principals, teachers and the district to be held accountable for educating their students, and wondered why “teacher assignment” was not being openly discussed.

**2. Support Student Achievement across Academic and Ethnic Diversity.**

Parents want to know how the district plans to close the achievement gap inside schools. They understand the problems associated with concentrating “under-served” students in the same schools, but noted that schools that are currently academically diverse have an achievement gap within them. They also want more equitable access to high-quality opportunities, such as language programs.

**3. Improve Systems for Student Enrollment and Assignment.**

Parents emphasized that much of what’s wrong with student assignment is how the system is managed: the difficulty in getting easy-to-understand information or answers to their questions, and the challenges with their experience at the Educational Placement Center (EPC). These systems need to be fixed no matter which system the Board adopts, and the process and cost of implementing a family friendly system should be considered when adopting a student assignment option.

**4. Inform, Engage and Empower Families and the Community.**

Parents and community members consistently demand better communication – from their children’s teachers and schools, and from the district itself. Many parents face barriers of language, teachers who fail to let them know when their children are struggling, and a persistent lack of timely information about school site and district issues.

## Appendix I: Proposed Options for Student Assignment

### LOTTERY OPTIONS

Students could apply to any school. Students who do not get one of their choices would be assigned to a school that has openings.

- Option 1.     **Lottery with Local School Preference.**
- Option 2.     **Lottery with Academic Diversity.**
- Option 3.     **Lottery with Academic Diversity and Local Preference.**

### ZONE OPTION

- Option 4.     Schools would be grouped together in a large attendance area, or “zone”, that maximizes diversity. Students would be assigned to a school within their zone, with a preference for academic diversity.

### LOCAL SCHOOL OPTIONS

Students would have a seat in their local school, but can apply to other schools. Choice assignments would give preference to academic diversity. Students who do not get one of their choices would be assigned to their local school.

- Option 5.     **Local School Assignments with choice for city-wide programs only.**
- Option 6.     **Local School Assignments with choice for all schools.**

## **Appendix II: Summary of Findings from Community Conversations about Student Assignment**

From November 2009 until mid-January 2010 the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) and Parents for Public Schools (PPS) worked together to convene community conversations about changes to the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) student assignment system, focused on the district's six proposed options for a new system.

**We heard from over 580 people** this fall, most of them parents of SFUSD students.

**Participants reflected a broad diversity of the district's families** across differences in language, ethnicity, geography, culture, types of schools their children attend, and socioeconomic background.

This report reflects our **findings from these community conversations**. Based on the Board's timeline for making a decision about student assignment, the PAC and PPS will present our **conclusions and recommendations** for student assignment **in a separate report**.

Over the past five years, several different initiatives have engaged our communities in discussions about student achievement, school assignment, and ways to improve our schools. This was the first time parents had the chance to weigh in on specific proposals for student assignment – and they had a lot to say.

- **Parents want the ability to choose a school** that meets their child's and their family's needs – **including those who want to choose their local school**.
- At the same time, most people would **prefer sending their children to a school close to home** or to their jobs – **but only if that school is going to meet their children's needs**. Parents **don't want to feel forced into something that won't work** for their family.
- **Parents want the schools in their community to be high quality**. They want access to quality schools, and don't want to have to send their children across town to have a good education.
- **Parents emphasized the need for strong principals and skilled teachers**. They also want **principals, teachers and the district to be accountable**, and wondered why "teacher assignment" was not being discussed instead of focusing on assigning students.
- Parents were clear that **to support student achievement** the district **needs to focus on empowering families to make choices**, rather than taking away their ability to choose.
- Parents also emphasized that **much of what's wrong** with student assignment is **how the system is managed** by the district, and that **these things need to be fixed no matter which system** the Board adopts.

**Appendix III: Summary of Data and Recommendations from Simulations of Options for Student Assignment**

On January 25, 2010, Muriel Niederle (Stanford University) presented to the Board of Education the findings and recommendations from a research team that included Clayton Featherstone (Stanford), Atila Abdulkadiroglu (Duke), Alvin Roth (Harvard) and Parag Pathak (MIT).

Included in the presentation were these three PowerPoint slides:

<p><b>How do the 5 options: 1,2,3,5,6 fare?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Options with an Academic Diversity Preference (ADP) increase the proportion of kids from low CST census tracts neighborhoods that are able to go to high API schools (8 or more) by a lot.</li> <li>Adding a Local Preference (LP) to ADP does not mitigate the results. It can be added on “for free”.</li> <li>Do kids receive a school of their choice? (Can this help with on-time participation?)</li> </ul>	<p><b>How do the 5 options: 1,2,3,5,6 fare?</b></p> <p><b>Equitable Access &amp; Achievement gap: Focus on underserved students</b> (students who live in historically low achievement census tracts):</p> <p>Schools they attend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adding an Academic Diversity Preference (ADP) increases their chance to go to a high API school by a lot.</li> <li>Adding a local preference (LP) on top of ADP does not have a big impact</li> </ul> <p>Choices they receive</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adding an ADP increases their chances to get a school of their choice by a lot</li> <li>Adding a local preference (LP) on top of ADP does not have a big impact</li> </ol>
<p align="center"><b>Conclusions (2)</b></p> <p>Important Factors to help achieve the Board’s goals of diversity and equitable access.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do not limit the schools students can rank: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helps to make schools more diverse</li> <li>Helps students to receive schools of their choice.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Adding an Academic Diversity Preference leads to (much) more equitable access</li> <li>Adding a Local Preference to an Academic Diversity Preference came at no cost. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local Preference makes a schools assignment process more predictable.</li> </ul> </li> </ol> <p><b>Short term plans:</b> Change the Assignment process.</p> <p><b>Long term plans:</b> A demand analysis to assist with placing resources strategically to increase diversity.</p>	