

Discussion Questions for the Ad-Hoc Committee on Student Assignment

May 31, 2011

Introduction

Over the past month members of Parents for Public Schools and the Parent Advisory Council have presented several reports to the Board of Education, addressing our findings from community forums and recommendations related to proposed feeder patterns for assigning students to middle schools. During these presentations there hasn't been an opportunity to engage in discussion with Board commissioners or answer your questions about these reports.

We would like to respond to any questions you have for us, and we have a few questions that we would like Board members to respond to as well. Our goal for participating in this Committee meeting is to have genuine dialogue about these issues.

Our Questions for Board of Education Commissioners

1. The proposed feeder patterns don't seem to achieve your priority goals for student assignment: ending racial isolation and the concentration of under-served students in the same schools; having equitable access to the district's range of opportunities; and having systems that are transparent and work for families.

In fact, many of them seem like they would do the opposite. Some of the feeders would concentrate students from lower-performing elementary schools in the same middle school, and others would block most students from the east side of the city from gaining admission into higher-performing schools on the west side.

- Our question is, Are you seeing something we don't - or have your priorities changed?
2. In the recommendations presented on May 9, district staff stated they need more time to develop plans for the master schedule, expanding inclusion services for Special Education students, transportation, finance, and staffing. We think that plans to address these issues should be in place before you adopt this policy.

People asked a lot of questions at the community forums that we expected the district's proposal to address. We still have a lot of the same questions.

- Our main question is, Are you willing to adopt this system without knowing:
 - What resources are needed, and what would the trade-offs be, to expand the proposed language programs?
 - What are the criteria and priorities for which languages to expand?
 - What will it take to make sure all middle school students have access to high quality electives, including proposals to add a 7th or 8th period for each school?
 - Whether expanding language programs will result in dismantling arts and music programs already in place at middle schools, such as Aptos and Presidio?
3. We've been surprised to hear some Board commissioners believe that predictability is a major priority for most families. We know this is true for some people. However, in community conversations over the past five years we've found that most parents have ideas about the schools that will work for their families - and want to be able to choose among those schools.

In our experience, when parents express the desire for “predictability” they have linked this with two things: 1) wanting to be given a preference to attend their neighborhood school; and 2) perceiving their neighborhood school as meeting their needs.

We want to point out that the district's own analysis of this year's incoming kindergartner assignment process shows that the vast majority of families are choosing schools outside of their attendance area, where they would have been given a preference.

In other words: almost 80% of these families are not emphasizing predictability - and instead, are requesting schools they believe will be a better fit for their families.

- Our question is: Can you tell us why you believe predictability is the priority for parents that you're trying to meet by establishing feeder patterns?

Conclusion

We appreciate the opportunity to represent parent voices as the Board of Education discusses these important policy issues. We know parents might not be experts on education policy. At the same time, we share a profound commitment to the education and success of all the students in our district and see parents as partners in this vision. We believe that our district's policies and systems should reflect the Board's priorities and acknowledge input from parents, and that good policy relies on well-developed, detailed, and transparent plans for implementing these policies.