

PPS Middle School meeting

January 8, 2011

[Notes by Beth Weise, a Starr King Elementary school parent]

The San Francisco Unified School District is working on a new way to assign middle school slots. It will replace the poorly-received and now rescinded middle school assignment plan the District announced in the fall of 2011.

This system will affect students currently in the 4th grade. Students currently in 5th grade won't be affected.

The new Kindergarten-through-8th-grade pathway will begin for the 2012-2013 school year. That means the District has to get a preliminary plan (or plans) out to the parent community by spring so that it can be voted on by the School Board in time to be implemented for the Fall of 2012.

The time line:

Early Feb. 2011 -

District releases information about its proposed middle school plan(s)

Feb. and March 2011 -

Community forums to get feedback on the proposed plan(s).

Late May 2011 -

School Board adopts new system for middle school assignment.

Aug. 2012 -

New middle school assignment plan in place

In the District's words: "The San Francisco Unified School District is refining a plan to develop K-8 school pathways, which will be implemented in time for the 2012-2013 school year. The K-8 pathways will have assignment patterns where certain elementary schools will feed into specific middle schools. More importantly, these pathways will create continuity for academic programs, support positive school climates, and build a bridge from elementary to middle school."

The community meetings are meant to

- * Inform the community about plans for creating K-8 Pathways
- * Help shape the new systems through community discussions
- * Increase middle school quality for all students
- * Strengthen implementation of the new student assignment system

Parents For Public Schools held a meeting on Friday, Jan. 7, 2011 at the Women's Building in the Mission to talk to parents and parent groups about the timeline and how to get involved in the feedback process. There will be a lot more meetings coming.

Deputy Superintendent, Richard Carranza told the parents in attendance that the idea behind the new pathway is to create 'virtual Kindergarten through 8th grade' schools. He said that the idea is to help capture some of the connection and ownership that families feel for their elementary school communities and bring it into middle school.

"So if a group of parents at X Elementary School know that they'll be going to X middle school, they're planning and visioning, so you're building on this continuum."

Carranza did acknowledge that "there are lots of moving pieces to the student assignment system." Middle school is a crucial time because "we know through research that we lose our students in middle school, that's where they disengage." The hope is that the new program will allow us "to support our most fragile and also our most talented students in K-8."

Also, he acknowledged, budget issues are going to be a huge issue. If we had "an infinite checkbook we could build whatever we dream of. But we won't have that," he said. But in spite of that, "we're tasked with this vision of bringing our communities together for accelerated academic achievement. It's not an easy task."

He said that last time around, the District just dictated what was going to happen for middle school assignment without involving families. That won't happen this time, he says. Though he noted that while the District wants to hear parents' suggestions and thoughts, "at some point we're going to have to make some hard decisions about what can we support, what can we realistically make happen."

He said there will be no more game playing as with the previous plan. "Our commitment is that we're not going to play games with this." For example, he said there's a rumor out there that we've already decided what's going to happen at Horace Mann, [one rumor is moving Buena Vista there and making it a K-8 Spanish immersion program.] "That has not been decided," he told the roomful of parents.

Project Manager, Laura Moran for the middle school pathway project at SFUSD said: "We want a quality middle school option in every area of the city, but we're not there yet. Our middle schools are improving but they need to get better."

"One thing to know is that there's going to be a big increase in the middle school population in the next three to five years, because of a baby boom that began in 2002. So we're going to need every single seat in every single middle school then. So we've got to insure that there's good programs at all the schools because there won't be as many seats available for people to move around."

And we have "to make sure that the middle school is great not just for the school your child is going to but all the schools."

Carranza said that it's quite possible the suggestion he made to the Board of Education "may not be the most politically acceptable one, but what it will have is

our bottom line is going to be -- whatever we recommend has educational value and makes sense educationally."

Ruth Grabowski of the Parent Advisory Council said that she and Parents for Public Schools met with principals of middle schools Jan 6th and got some interesting comments. Middle School principals are the voice of practical implementation, bringing to light realities of hiring teachers and program tradeoffs, given tight economic resources.

As this all plays itself out, there will be multiple meetings around specific areas of concern, including but not limited to:

- Language pathways, which isn't only immersion but also bilingual
- School climate (presumably this means safety.)
- Special education
- GATE, honors or enrichment and class size, parity issues
- The student assignment process
- Resources

Other topics suggested at the meeting for discussion included :

- Sibling preference
- Diversity
- Transportation issues

Immersion issues

One sticking point about virtual K-8 pathways is that immersion elementary school programs won't always be able to feed to a middle school with an immersion program in place, so at least some immersion students will need to feed to a different school than their elementary school feeds to.

Also, changes are coming at the middle school level for how immersion and bilingual programs are treated - they will soon begin to merge at middle school, said Christina Wong, also on the SFUSD middle school implementation team.

Immersion programs start out with both native speakers of the target language (Spanish, Cantonese, Korean or Mandarin currently) and native English speakers. Instead of using the target language to teach English, they use it to teach subjects such as math, social studies and science. So the students learn the target language as part of their instruction

Bilingual programs are meant to take students who speak Spanish or Cantonese and support their native language while they're learning English so they can transition into an all-English program in either third grade (called early-release) or after 5th grade (called late release.)

Now the District plans to merge immersion and bilingual students at 6th grade, presumably so bilingual students could take advantage of the opportunities offered by higher target language standards in immersion courses while the immersion programs would benefit by having an influx of native speakers of the target languages.

Note that currently only Spanish and Cantonese immersion exists in middle school. The Korean immersion program at Lilienthal ends at 5th grade and Mandarin immersion won't have its first 6th graders until 2012 - just in time for the new middle school pathways to take affect.

Wong acknowledged that "You can't just make an immersion program happen overnight. There's training, recruitment of staff, alignment of curriculum, there's a complex web of things that have to happen to establish program.

"We're actually putting on a map where does it make sense to establish programs. Once we've established where it makes sense to establish programs, what will it cost? Right now we can't afford to establish the number of programs that we probably need.

Also, she said that "it's an issue that many students in Spanish and Cantonese bilingual do not have sufficient proficiency in those languages to do middle school level course work."

For this, the District is aware that at some elementary schools, the bilingual programs are used for support and not necessarily for providing instruction. So they plan on looking at the current Spanish and Cantonese bilingual Kindergarten and 1st grade classes to see how those students are being in structure.

"Right now there are very few bilingual programs that are the same level as the immersion programs, we're hoping that the merge will happen as soon as possible, because in effect it's basically the same course work. We just want to make sure that any student who goes into that [bilingual] program is properly prepared.

Ways to learn more about what the District is doing about Middle school:

- * Follow the Board of Education's Ad-Hoc Committee on Student Assignment. The committee meets monthly - the schedule will be posted on the district's website.
- * Visit the websites for the Parent Advisory Council at www.pacsf.org and Parents for Public Schools-SF at www.ppsf.org to learn more about the process.

