



San Francisco Board of Education
Parent Advisory Council

2005-2006 Community Outreach Campaign
Summary of Findings

The mission of the Parent Advisory Council is to ensure that parent voices are included in the San Francisco Board of Education's policy discussions and decisions. From January to May 2006 the PAC conducted an outreach campaign focused on communities that are not usually heard from in education policy debates. The PAC emphasized questions relating to school assignment, to inform Board of Education members and SFUSD staff as they shape a new assignment policy. This report documents the findings of the PAC's outreach, and identifies concerns heard widely among parents and guardians on this and other policy issues.

This report contains information about the PAC's outreach goals and strategies, who the PAC spoke with, questions parents were asked, and the results of a written survey focused on student assignment issues. The PAC's key findings include:

1. **Parents want good schools with good programs close to their homes.** If high quality schools are not available in their neighborhood, they want the right to send their children to other schools in the city. Parents articulated that "good schools" have skilled and experienced staff; access to language, art, PE, and after-school programs; and a safe and nurturing environment, as well as high test scores.
2. **Effective communication between the school, school district, and families is critical.** Where that communication happens parents actively identified it as positive, and specifically noted the importance of school staff being able to speak the parents' languages. Where this didn't happen parents identified it as a problem, and an obstacle to being involved in their children's education.
3. **Families need access to after-school programs.** At every school site meeting parents noted the importance of after-school programs, and many pointed out problems with the lack of consistency, availability, and quality of these programs.
4. **Schools must provide a curriculum and environment that reflects and supports students' culture, race and language,** which nurture children and help them to thrive. Some parents chose schools that were better able to support their child's culture and identity, despite having a lower API ranking.
5. **Parents perceive that resources are distributed unequally across the school district.** There is significant misunderstanding of how resources are allocated, and a sense that the system is unfair. Parents want their children to have equitable access to academic and enrichment programs that help them succeed in school.



GOALS OF THE PAC'S OUTREACH CAMPAIGN

- Talk to parents in communities historically not involved in policy issues, whose voices are less often heard by the Board of Education.
- Find out what parents think about key issues – including student assignment, student achievement, services for students learning English, and the district's overall priorities.
- Identify parent concerns that the PAC is not currently addressing.
- Provide information and support to parents, and promote a sense of ownership in school district policies.

METHODOLOGY

The PAC's outreach efforts were guided by its stated mission: to ensure parent voices are included in Board of Education policy discussions. Throughout the school year, PAC members conducted general outreach through city-wide events such as the city's Family Fest, the SFUSD Enrollment Fair, the School Site Council Summit, and the Annual Meeting of Parents for Public Schools. From February through May, the PAC focused its outreach on communities that generally do not participate in education policy discussions, yet represent large sectors of the city's public school student population, including low-income and immigrant families.

We took a sampling of parents through a variety of outreach approaches, but acknowledge that the families who participated were self-selecting, and reflect parents and guardians who are already more likely to be involved in their children's education. At the same time, the information gathered was powerful – and included perspectives, experiences, and concerns we had not anticipated finding.

During these focused outreach efforts, PAC members and staff met with parents, guardians, and caregivers at school site meetings, community events organized by the PAC, and community group events. The general format was to hold small group discussions, usually in the parents' primary language (sometimes translated between English, Spanish and/or Chinese). At most school sites the principal welcomed families and PAC members and then withdrew from the meeting, so that parents could feel comfortable expressing themselves.

PAC members used a script of questions to generate conversation, which often led to issues that were most important to the parents participating in the event. PAC members facilitated the meetings, sometimes with the help of school site parent liaisons. Active facilitation ensured the participation of everyone in attendance.

During parent meetings in May, following conversations about student assignment and other issues, the PAC conducted a written survey focused on student assignment, which was distributed at several outreach meetings. This outreach was focused on parents in the Mission and Bayview/Hunter's Point communities.

WHO WE HEARD FROM

Through two community events, meetings at nine school sites, and a focus group in Visitacion Valley, PAC members spoke with over 200 parents whose children attend SFUSD schools. Neighborhoods included Chinatown, Bayview/Hunter's Point, Bernal Heights, the Excelsior, the Mission, and Visitacion Valley. Participants were mainly Latino, Chinese, and African American, with some white and Samoan parents.

Schools / Groups	Date	# People	Languages	Notes
Sanchez Elementary School	2/2/06	25	Spanish	Meeting conducted in Spanish
Chinese Education Center	2/21	10	Mandarin, Cantonese	Meeting conducted in Mandarin
Monroe Elementary School	2/24	30	English, Spanish, Cantonese	Met in 3 language groups
Gordon Lau Elementary School	3/13	10	English, Spanish, Cantonese	Meeting conducted with translation between all 3 languages
G.W. Carver Elementary School	3/14	10	English	
John O'Connell High School	4/5	6	English, Spanish	Meeting conducted mostly in English with Spanish translation
Paul Revere Elementary School	5/10	11	English, Spanish	Meeting conducted mostly in Spanish with English translation
Cesar Chavez Elementary School	5/18 & 5/26	27	English, Spanish	Two separate parent meetings; both conducted in Spanish
Everett Middle School	5/26	5	English, Spanish	In English with translation
Focus group with Chinese parents in Visitacion Valley	2/26	18	Cantonese	Parents with children in Chinese language school, who attend SF public schools
Mission Community Encuentro	5/4	10	English, Spanish, Cantonese	Met in two groups: Spanish & Eng./Chinese
BVHP Community Fish Fry	5/12	40	English	Had small group discussions
Neighborhoods represented: Mission, Excelsior, Chinatown, Visitacion Valley, Bernal Heights, Bayview/Hunter's Point		Total: 202	English, Spanish, Cantonese, Mandarin	

WHAT WE ASKED

PAC members asked parents a number of general questions and then, depending on their interests or concerns, or the specific context of their school experience, conversations became more focused. Typical questions included:

- How did your family end up at your children's schools? What do you look for?
- What is working at your child's school? What helps students do well?
- What are challenges at your child's school? What could be different, or improved?
- Does your child feel safe at school? What would make the school feel safer?
- What are your concerns about school assignment, thinking ahead to the next level?
- How do you think the student assignment system should work?
- What type of diversity at your child's school, if any, is important to you?
- If you had to choose between sending your child to a school in your neighborhood that wasn't very strong, or sending them across town to a higher-performing school, what would be your priority?

WHAT WE FOUND

During meetings held at school sites, parents often expressed satisfaction with their schools and appreciation for the principals, teachers, and other staff at their children's schools. Away from the schools, parents' opinions about school staff were more mixed. Parents also expressed frustration and anger at the lack of communication from their children's schools, unequal distribution of resources throughout the school district, and low expectations or standards for African American and Latino students. Other common themes included:

- Parents want clear expectations on student conduct, and consistent disciplinary procedures at schools. Most of these parents felt their child was safe at school, although some expressed concern about bullying.
- Many parents weren't sure what their children were supposed to be learning, or how to compare what their children were learning with students at other schools.
- Many parents talked about the importance of presenting options to meet the needs of the schools' diverse student populations.
- Parents at many schools pointed out that families need to be more involved at the school and at home, to support their children to succeed. Some schools were better at reaching out to welcome and encourage parents to play this role.

Parents who were not fluent in English pointed out communication barriers are obstacles to participating in their children's education. Many parents highlighted the importance of having people on schools' staff who speak their language, as well as translation of school documents (such as report cards and school newsletters) and interpretation at meetings – especially during parent-teacher conferences – which many schools do not provide.

- Many parents expressed strong support for bilingual programs and chose schools because of these programs. Parents with children in bilingual programs were generally more satisfied with their child's school experience, and monolingual parents who do not speak English felt more included in schools with bilingual programs.
- Parents who did not speak English and whose children attended schools without bilingual staff found it difficult to be involved in the school, and felt isolated.
- English-speaking parents also expressed an interest in having language programs at their children's schools, and suggested these programs would bring more students into schools with low enrollment.

Most parents were concerned about programs their children's schools don't have, even those who felt generally positive about their children's schools, and identified some they see in other schools, such as language, art, music and science programs.

- They questioned why some schools are allowed to be low-performing, when there are successful schools in other parts of town.
- Parents at many elementary schools are concerned that their children don't have physical education teachers, that the schoolyards are too small and children don't have room to run around.
- Parents wonder what needs to be done to get additional resources, both for their own children's schools and for the district in general.
- Parents also expressed a need to provide options for students who may not pursue college, such as skilled trade courses, auto shop, carpentry, and engineering.

Many parents mentioned school-site after-school programs as something they need and wish were more available, less expensive, or of better quality. The PAC did not raise this issue with parents, but they brought it up at every school-site meeting.

- After-school programs often do not serve all students, and parents noted they cannot choose schools if they can't determine in advance if their children qualify for that care. Because criteria, programming, and eligibility for after-school programs differ from school to school, it isn't possible to rely on after-school options at some schools.
- Parents whose children were enrolled in their school's after-school program relied on that program to provide academic support and help with homework, in addition to art, sports, and other enrichment activities. Parents who had children enrolled in after-school programs had varying levels of satisfaction with the care.

TALKING ABOUT STUDENT ASSIGNMENT POLICIES

During conversations at school sites and in community meetings, many parents were confused by the student assignment process, and did not understand the "diversity index" or how the district applied it. At the same time, many of the parents had actively sought information about schools they chose for their children (through the EPC, visiting schools, from other

parents, the enrollment fair, etc.). Latino parents at one Mission district school said it looked to them that the district was using race to assign schools, because none of them could get into the “white” schools and there were almost no white students at their children’s school.

Some parents in every setting expressed a strong desire for their children to be in schools with a diverse population – because they want their children to have the experience to be successful in a multicultural world.

SURVEY FINDINGS

The PAC developed a survey addressing student assignment policy issues and options, modeled on an assessment conducted by the SFUSD’s Community Advisory Committee on Student Assignment, but including additional questions as requested by Board of Education members. The PAC’s surveys were distributed at a small community meeting in the Mission district, a community Fish Fry in the Bayview/Hunter’s Point, and school-site meetings at Paul Revere and Cesar Chavez elementary schools. More than 88 people participated in small-group discussions at these events, and we collected 54 surveys from meeting participants.

The survey asked for demographic information including the respondent’s home zip code, schools their children attend, and their ethnic background. It also asked parents about their experience enrolling their children in school, the research they did to select a school and whether they were assigned a school of their choice, and their satisfaction with the support they received from the SFUSD’s Education Placement Center. Finally, the survey asked respondents to show their priorities when choosing a school for their child, and to identify the most important issues that a new student assignment should address.

This is a summary of the survey data. For more complete information, see the appendix.

Respondents’ Ethnicity	Number	Percent
Latino	31	57%
African American	11	20%
Asian/Pacific Islander	4	7%
White	3	6%
Other, or didn’t answer	5	9%

Qualify for free or reduced lunch	Number	Percent
Yes	35	65%
No	13	24%
Don’t know or didn’t answer	6	11%

Did you receive a school you requested?	Number	Percent
Yes	30	56%
No	13	24%
Some yes, some no	6	11%

Parents' priorities about schools and student assignment.

The survey included 13 factors that parents might consider when choosing a school for their child, and asked respondents to indicate their top five priorities. The people who completed the survey resoundingly identified these priorities in choosing a school:

1. Access to special programs such as art, language, technology, etc.
2. Skilled and experienced teachers and staff.
3. A safe environment in and around the school.
4. Students from diverse ethnic/racial and language backgrounds.
5. The school's performance on standardized tests.

The survey then addressed district priorities, and included six factors that the district might consider when setting a new student assignment policy. It asked parents to indicate their top three priorities. Again, the responses showed strong agreement on their priorities:

1. Being able to choose a school anywhere in the city.
2. Ensuring schools reflect the cultural and economic diversity of the district and are not segregated by ethnicity or other socio-economic factors.
3. Giving preference for students to have a place in neighborhood school, but keeping some spaces open for students from other parts of the city.

Concerns and Common Themes

In addition to the general conclusions listed above, the PAC identified common themes that emerged from school-site and community meetings in some areas. These were themes we heard from families in the Bayview/Hunter's Point community:

- Strong concerns about addressing children's need to be in schools where their culture and identities are respected and nurtured – in their community – and the problem that the "good" middle schools outside of this community don't understand or serve their children's academic, social or emotional needs.
- Parents expressed concern that African American children get lost in middle school – especially the boys.
- Some parents expressed desire for their children to be close to home, in their community, and learn about African American culture but to also learn how to be with, and get along with, people from other backgrounds.

- Other parents voiced the desire to have more diversity in the schools, and fear that a move toward neighborhood-based school assignment would mean less multicultural opportunities for students/families.
- Many parents voiced strong concerns and questions about schools in their community not having programs or services that other schools have, such as music, art, gardens, and language.
- Parents expressed a desire for more teachers and administrators that reflect their community's populations (African American, Latino, Chinese, Samoan, etc.).
- Strong concerns that many problems arise because the community is falling apart – families are leaving the city, and at the same time the number of African American students has fallen so much the district isn't going to prioritize their needs.

These were themes we heard from families in the Mission and Bernal Heights:

- Parents expressed respect and even affection for their children's teachers and other school staff, but were concerned about the overall low achievement in their children's schools, and worried that their children's future opportunities were being limited.
- Parents voiced a strong desire and support for bilingual education – they want their children to learn English and to learn in their first language.
- Parents also voiced strong concerns about why schools in some neighborhoods are allowed to be academically unsuccessful, when schools in other neighborhoods are good – and asked, Why don't they do the same things in our communities?

CONCLUSIONS

Through its work of actively reaching out to families, PAC members found that even parents who face enormous obstacles – including language barriers and economic hardship – are dedicated to their children's education. Many parents expressed a deep commitment to the success of all children, and want to know what they can do to support that success.

Parents greatly appreciated the opportunity to be heard, and contributed important perspectives on key education issues. At the same time, we found significant confusion among families about important district policies. The school district needs to provide families with more information about district policies in a way that parents can understand it, and to expand its efforts to meaningfully engage parents in addressing these issues.

The PAC realizes the Board of Education is faced with the challenges of addressing critical issues and providing solutions to problems that are beyond their control, including a city with a shortage of housing and high cost of living, which is economically and racially segregated. The PAC respectfully offers its assistance for these crucial endeavors, and looks forward to supporting the achievement of all children in the San Francisco Unified School District.