



Findings & Recommendations from Community Conversations about Changing the Student Assignment System

June 2009

*“Access to educational opportunity is the biggest civil rights issue of our time.” SFUSD
Superintendent Carlos Garcia.*

Throughout the 2008-2009 school year, a committee of the San Francisco Board of Education has been reviewing data related to student enrollment and achievement as they work to design a new student assignment system. Many parents and community members attended the committee’s public meetings to express their desire for schools that meet their families’ needs.

Members of the Parent Advisory Council to the Board of Education and Parents for Public Schools participated in this process and noted that, overall, people speaking out at the meetings did not reflect the population of our city’s public schools. We decided to reach out to hear from the families of public school students who don’t typically attend school board meetings, to ensure their voices are included in developing this important district policy.

The PAC and PPS worked together to convene conversations about the Board of Education’s goals for a new student assignment system. During April and May 2009 **we heard from over 270 people**, most of them parents of students in the San Francisco Unified School District. **Participants reflected a broad diversity of families** across differences in language, ethnicity, geography, culture, types of schools their children attend, and socioeconomic background.

This was not the first time we’ve talked about these issues. 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.

In 2007 the SERR initiative engaged over 900 participants in broad discussions about declining enrollment, people’s hopes for schools, and the district’s goals for strategic planning. The SERR report focused on **what we heard in common** from many people about these issues.

This round of community engagement was smaller and more focused. We found that when we probed more deeply into issues related to the student assignment system, **we heard different things** from parents in different communities. This report notes what families agree on – but also describes the **perspectives of people from different communities** who participated in the conversations.

Findings: What We Heard about Student Assignment and Student Achievement

1. One thing was clear across the city: everyone wants their children to have a good education. Most parents would like a good school that's close to home or easy to get to – but **the vast majority of the families** we heard from feel that **choosing a school that works** for their children is **more important than having the school in their neighborhood**.
2. We found you can't discuss the student assignment process without hearing concerns about **access to good schools** – that have talented and caring **teachers** and **principals**, solid **academic** programs, ample **enrichment** opportunities and a **safe** environment.
3. Families from different neighborhoods, ethnicities, cultures, and socio-economic backgrounds pointed out that **if our schools were more equal in quality, we wouldn't spend so much time talking about student assignment**. Most parents support the district's goals for equity and ending the racial isolation of students, but also pointed out that **the student assignment system itself is not going to close the achievement gap**.
4. Parents agreed that the **current student assignment system** is **daunting**. Even though 76% of the participants got a school of their choice, a common feeling expressed is that the system is broken and “no one gets their choice.”
5. Another major concern was **lack of communication from the district** – about their children's schools, explaining changes to district policies, and how they can be involved. Parents who don't speak English face significant additional challenges trying to learn about schools and how to support their children's education.

Choosing a school that works for your family.

“Local children should be able to get into their neighborhood school.” Parent in the Sunset.

“Even if it would be easier [with a school] close to where we live, we don't want it to be a waste of time – we want them to learn the most.” Parent at a Marina elementary school.

“Kids need a better environment and education to grow. If the school has good teachers, even if it's farther away we would pick it.” Parent from Visitacion Valley, to applause from other parents.

At every conversation except one, in the Sunset district, the vast majority of parents **preferred a system of choice over automatic neighborhood assignment**.

Schools on the west side of San Francisco are perceived as “better” and more desirable by many people across the city. **People** who live **in neighborhoods with higher-performing schools** **want to be given priority to choose** those schools.

“If they go to a system of neighborhood schools, that is going in the absolute opposition direction of [the district's] goals. It means... it's about where you can afford to live.” Middle school parent.

“We don’t live in these neighborhoods because we want to – we can’t move to other communities. We’re behind. We’re not in the Sunset or Richmond or Pacific Heights, so we’re not going to get the selections.” Parent in Bayview.

On the other hand, **families** who live **in communities** where **lower-performing schools** are concentrated **don’t want** to be **locked** into those schools. They want the opportunity to **choose** schools and programs that are better suited to **their children’s needs**. These parents worried that **automatic neighborhood** assignment would leave them **without access** to good schools.

Some people emphasized the **benefits** of going to a school **close to home**. Children wouldn’t have to spend as much **time on buses**, more parents could **participate in school** events and activities, and schools could foster a **connection with the local community**. But in the end, most parents felt finding a school that meets their child’s **educational needs** is **more important than** the **convenience** of a neighborhood school.

“Why doesn’t the district do something to improve the quality of the school that is closer to where we live? Why is there a discrepancy between the programs? They should do something to improve the programs at all the schools, to have a ‘win – win’ situation.” Parent at a Marina elementary school.

“How can it be ‘predictable’ when the quality of schools is so varied, so individual? If all schools were great – if they had an afterschool program, language programs – then who cares about predictability? You’d know it would be fine.” Parent in the Marina.

In most of the conversations, the talk quickly shifted away from how the student assignment system functions to address what parents felt was a **more fundamental** question: **why** is the **quality of schools** in different communities **so different**?

Good schools have strong teachers and quality programs.

“Assignment itself isn’t really the problem – our problem is what’s going on in the classroom, and what needs to be happening. Is there a good environment for our children? Is the teacher qualified, and is the love there to teach my child?” Parent of a child in Special Education.

In every conversation about what makes a “good school,” parents talked about **teacher and principal quality**, the desire for **higher standards** and more **accountability**, and the importance of understanding how to meet the **individual needs of the students**.

“How do you put first-year teachers into lower-performing schools and then expect the schools and the students to do better? That makes no sense.” Middle school parent.

Families were concerned about data showing the relationship between less teacher experience, high staff turnover, and lower student success (measured by test scores, attendance, and suspension rates). To most people in the conversations, the solution was obvious: **stop concentrating novice teachers in lower-performing schools**, and provide **more training and support to teachers** so they are better able to address the different needs of their students.

Although most parents didn't use the expression "joyful learning," they do think it's important for children to enjoy school. Participants noted that a safe environment is necessary for children to learn, and identified several important qualities for good schools:

- Parent involvement and a strong parent community
- Participation in art, sports and music
- Afterschool programs
- Small class size, and an adequate staff/student ratio
- Bilingual and dual immersion language programs

Parents also noted that not all schools provide students with these opportunities.

Equity, access and the achievement gap.

"Equity doesn't mean giving everyone the exact same thing – it means you have to make more resources available for kids with higher needs." Middle school parent.

"I want to know, what do I have to do to get access to good schools? Who's there to hear our outrage about this? How should we advocate for ourselves, to be heard?" Parent in Bayview.

"I just want to say, as a Latino, I'm tired of being left behind. We trust in the schools, we say, 'Here, take our children' and we trust they'll educate them – and it's not happening." Parent in Silver Terrace.

"I come from Bayview/Hunter's Point and I'm proud of it. It's not that the kids over there are dumb – the youth are really intelligent. If you took the kids from MLK and put them in Hoover they'll do well – it's a better environment, there aren't all the liquor stores and problems around the school that get in the way." Middle school parent.

"We need somebody who is going to stick with us through the process so our needs are heard and our needs are met. ... If you come out here to talk with people you're gonna find a lot of chomping, because we're angry... but we need someone who is not going to perceive us as people who are just angry and aggressive. Most of us are San Francisco natives. Even though it's documented and the district is saying what they want to do, we have already experienced it. It's taken 20 years to see somebody talk about challenges we've always known. We've dealt with it all our lives." Community member in Bayview.

We found a lot in common when participants talked about what makes a good school, but there were clear **differences** in the actual **experiences of families** from different communities.

Although some white parents questioned the validity of the district's achievement data, in our conversations African American and Latino parents **expressed anger and sorrow** that their children are **living the district's achievement gap**. At the same time, many families in communities with lower-performing schools are **committed to supporting their children** to do better, and wanted to talk about ways to do that.

"Equal and fair access – does that imply there is going to be a limit on some other aspect? We always look at lower-achieving students – we need to pay more attention to high-achievers and GATE students, too." Parent in the Sunset.

“It’s not just about putting lower-achieving students first – it’s getting more families with resources into the schools, and higher-achieving students... schools will improve if we include folks from all different economic backgrounds.” Parent in West Portal.

Some families of **higher-achieving students** fear their children are being **used to improve test scores** at lower-performing schools, and are hurt by this. Others believe this practice can be **successful to improve schools**, and the district could do more to entice these families to enroll their children in schools with dual immersion language programs.

“Special Education is being used for kids who misbehave, not for what it’s supposed to be, to help people learn. ... They put them in Special Ed and they don’t get taught anything. They have a hard life, they need support, they don’t need Special Ed. They’re taking a good apple and making it a soft bruised apple.” Parent in Hunter’s Point.

Throughout the conversations we heard **serious concerns** about **Special Education**. On the one hand, some Latino and African American parents feel their children are being tracked into Special Education for behavioral or cultural reasons, and are not being taught to standards they are capable of achieving. At the same time, other parents found they couldn’t find or access services for their children who do have special learning needs.

Parents pointed out these concerns about the ways student assignment is particularly difficult for families of students in Special Education:

- The current student assignment system doesn’t take Individual Education Plans (IEPs) into account for placing students.
- It is extremely difficult for families to get information about which programs are available, and how many students can be served, at specific schools. The criteria and description of programs and classes aren’t clear or accurate.
- Families in Special Education have less choice and fewer opportunities to find a school that provides the services their children need.
- Inclusion choices narrow as students get older, because fewer middle and high schools provide inclusion options.

“Immersion is supposed to be a K-8 program but it’s not supported in middle school – there are not enough slots for all the kids. The students are getting dropped off a cliff.” Middle school parent.

Parents also described problems with **dual language immersion** programs. In general, families with children in dual immersion programs were happy with them, and encouraged the district to **expand those programs** to support both student achievement and decreasing the racial isolation of students. The problem is that dual immersion is designed to succeed as a K-8 program – but there **aren’t enough slots** for students moving into middle school.

Another concern was that parents **who don’t speak English** often are **not fully informed** about how dual immersion programs work, and are surprised to find the programs do not teach English

as quickly as they would like. They pointed out the district needs to do a better job informing English-learner parents about the language programs available for their children.

“If you’re on the bus for an hour and a half, you’re not a joyful learner – more like an exhausted learner.” Parent in the Sunset.

Parents in the Sunset, Silver Terrace and the Bayview mentioned concerns about school **transportation** and early start times. They pointed out that bussing costs the district a lot of money, that students spend too much time on the bus, and that children are forced to wait in the dark for a bus to early-start schools.

Suffering through the student assignment system.

“The problem with the word ‘choice’ is that you don’t actually get it.” Parent in the Sunset.

“I see a lot of parents don’t participate because the process is so complicated, it’s too daunting and they don’t understand it. For a lot of people it’s easier to just be assigned. How empowering is it to have a choice but you’re not given the tools to make that choice?” Preschool educator in Hunter’s Point.

“Childbirth was easier than this!” Parent in the Marina.

“I want to spend money on improving schools instead of comforting angry parents.” Parent in the Sunset.

Parents we heard from agreed that the **enrollment process is daunting**. Even families who got a school of their choice - 76% of the participants – didn’t feel the system worked well. Beyond the issues of choice versus automatic assignment, parents expressed concern about the **lack of adequate information** and **distrust** of the lottery that determines placement in many schools.

Most people said they agreed with the Board’s goals for changing the student assignment process, but questioned how the district would achieve these goals.

Parents with more **options** for educating their children (for example, who said they could choose private schools) wanted to talk more about **how** the student assignment **system functions** and how they want it to work, to ensure they get a school of their choice.

Families without those options focused on issues such as **access** to good schools and programs, **barriers** they’ve encountered in trying to support their children’s education, and the **inequity** between schools in different communities.

“If we can’t get our neighborhood school, we will go to private school.” Preschool parent from the Richmond, at a meeting of the Board’s Ad-Hoc Committee.

“I would have gone to private school if there had been an automatic attendance area assignment to a school within my zip code.” Public school parent from the Western Addition.

Everyone in the city “knows” how difficult it is to navigate our enrollment system, and the **district’s reputation** regarding student assignment sets the tone for people interacting with public schools. The enrollment process is usually the first contact that families have with the district. For some families, it may be their only contact.

The Board of Education has admitted they can’t please everyone, and we think that’s probably true. But the system they ultimately adopt needs to be clear, more reliable, and serve well the most important priority of the district: support **all children** to be high-achieving, joyful learners.

Improving communication with our communities.

“Why didn’t they communicate with us about [changes to the school year calendar]? It’s because they don’t think we’re capable of understanding or having an opinion about what’s going on – they need to inform people about what’s happening.” Parent in Silver Terrace.

Another major theme we heard from families across the city was the **desire for better communication** from the district and their children’s schools. Even among parents who spoke about their support for the district’s goals, many people **don’t trust the district** is doing what it says it means to. Other parents expressed frustration about how difficult it is to find out what is happening in schools.

“I have a daughter in high school and I’m paying attention, but I don’t go to meetings because most of them aren’t in my language.” Spanish-speaking parent.

Many people identified **parent involvement as key** to supporting their child’s success. Some parents spoke of feeling unwelcome at their children’s schools, and disconnected from what’s happening at the district level. And some Asian, Latino and African American parents said their communities don’t realize how important it is to be involved – and pointed out significant **barriers to being involved at schools**.

Despite district policies that prioritize language access, many schools don’t provide materials in **languages other than English**, and don’t have **interpreters** for school events or parent meetings. Most information provided through **websites** is available **only in English**, and school staff aren’t able to point their students’ families to information that might be available in different languages.

Conclusion

Through our history of working closely with the families of students in public schools, the PAC and PPS know that even parents who face enormous obstacles – including language barriers and economic hardship – are **dedicated to their children’s education**. During this community engagement process, many parents expressed a deep commitment to the success of all children, and want to know **what they can do** to support that success.

“If we don’t go to these meetings, they’re gonna make these decisions without us. It’s almost already done before we even know about it.” Parent in Bayview.

“If we don’t start talking now it’s gonna happen without us. I would want you to come back here and give this presentation again – we will get people here because this community needs to start talking before it all gets decided.” Community member in Hunter’s Point.

“Can I be really honest? Communities need to be part of the effort to develop the programs that are designed to serve them. It can’t just be ‘Oh so sad, this is happening.’ It has to include, ‘Here’s what you can do.’” Educator in Hunter’s Point.

Parents appreciated the opportunity to be heard, and shared with us their experiences, frustrations, and perspectives on key education issues. Many people didn’t realize the district intends to change the student assignment policy, and expressed concerns about how a new system would support their children’s education. 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.

Across our district, many students face barriers to their education based on their family’s income, primary language, need for Special Education services, or lack of transportation – and these need to be addressed whatever student assignment policy the district develops.

General Recommendations: What Needs to Happen in the SFUSD

- Adopt practices that promote teacher and principal quality, accountability, and support.
- Improve communication with families and the community.
- Improve program coherence for bilingual and dual immersion language programs, so that students moving from elementary school into middle school have access to those programs.
- Improve access to information about services for Special Education students.
- Ensure that Special Education students are placed in schools based on the needs defined by their IEPs, not through the regular district lottery.
- Make the student assignment system clear, reliable, and accessible to all our families.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

We have several specific recommendations that could be **implemented immediately**, to address issues without waiting for the adoption of a comprehensive, new student assignment system. We **urge the Board of Education** to change these district practices in ways that won't require extensive additional resources, but take advantage of existing systems and structures.

Teacher and Principal Quality, Accountability and Support

- Change the district's practices of teacher hiring and placement that concentrate novice teachers in lower-performing schools.
- Improve teacher recruitment, retention and support by adopting recommendations from The New Teacher Project (which was asked by the SFUSD and the teachers union to review the district's staffing rules and evaluation process):
 - **Earlier hiring.** Move up the hiring timeline and prioritize high-quality new teachers by allowing consideration of all teacher candidates – both external and internal – simultaneously for any vacancy. Facilitate speedier HR communication with applicants and transferring teachers.
 - **Mutual consent placements.** Establish a system of “mutual consent” hiring, in which principals and teachers must agree that each placement is a “fit.”
 - **Effective evaluations.** Overhaul the teacher evaluation system, building a new system around the primary goal of helping teachers to improve their instructional performance.
 - **Focus on retention.** Expand and improve communication and services from Human Resources, especially for teachers at high risk for attrition.

Communication with Families and the Community

- Use the *School Times* to **inform the community about policy issues & how to get involved**. Each issue should include an article about changing policies or issues the district is working on, and lets families know how they can participate in the process.
- Give parents, students, and educators the opportunity to **review and respond to specific proposals** for a new student assignment system before making a final decision. Most people support the district's goals for a more equitable enrollment process, and they have powerful insights into what works – and doesn't work – for families. Adopting a new policy without giving the community this opportunity would be a serious mistake.
- Ensure that principals, teachers and other school staff know how to find information about district policy initiatives – and can help families access this information.

Improving the Student Assignment System in the Short Term

- Include **more detailed information** about **specific school programs** and practices in the SFUSD **enrollment guide** – which is widely circulated and available in three languages. The enrollment guide should also include a description of school-based **afterschool program** availability, hours, curriculum, eligibility criteria, cost, and openings.
- Families need more time to find out about the enrollment process. Allow parents to begin the enrollment process sooner: hold the enrollment fair, distribute the enrollment guide, and make applications available earlier in the fall.

Appendix I: Who We Heard From in the Community Conversations

The PAC and Parents for Public Schools worked in consultation with SFUSD staff to develop a discussion guide for the conversations. They included a presentation of challenges expressed by student achievement and school placement data; a discussion of the district's priorities within the strategic plan and for a new student assignment system; and finally, some "forced-choice" questions to discuss participants' priorities for a new student assignment system.

The conversations took from an hour to 90 minutes, and for the most part were conducted in the primary language of participants rather than using an interpreter. Over 55% of the participants have a primary language other than English.

We also spoke with families at a few events where parents convened for other reasons also wanted to discuss student assignment, and we wanted to provide opportunity but were not able to follow the complete discussion guide format.

Overall, we heard from 270 people in 15 discussions:

- 139 people in formal conversations using the discussion guide
- 31 people at a meeting of the Community Advisory Committee for Special Education
- 100 people at meetings of the PPS school ambassadors and the PPS Annual General Meeting

Based on survey data (from 137 written surveys):

- 91% of participants were parents (the rest were community members & educators)
- 85% have kids in SFUSD schools
- 12% have children of pre-school age
- 76% of those in SFUSD schools did get one of the schools they chose

Participants lived in communities across the city, in 21 different zip codes and all 11 electoral districts. Their children attend these schools:

Preschool programs: Head Start, Jumpstart, and Wu Yee Children's Services.

Elementary and K-8 schools: Alvarado, Bret Harte, Bryant, Buena Vista, Carver, Fairmount, Glen Park, Gordon Lau, Harvey Milk, Hillcrest, John Yehall Chin, Lakeshore, Longfellow, LR Flynn, Malcolm X, Monroe, Paul Revere, Rooftop, Sherman, Stevenson, Ulloa, Vis Valley ES, West Portal, Willie Brown, and Yick Wo.

Middle schools: Aptos, Hoover, Kipp Academy, Presidio, and Vis Valley MS.

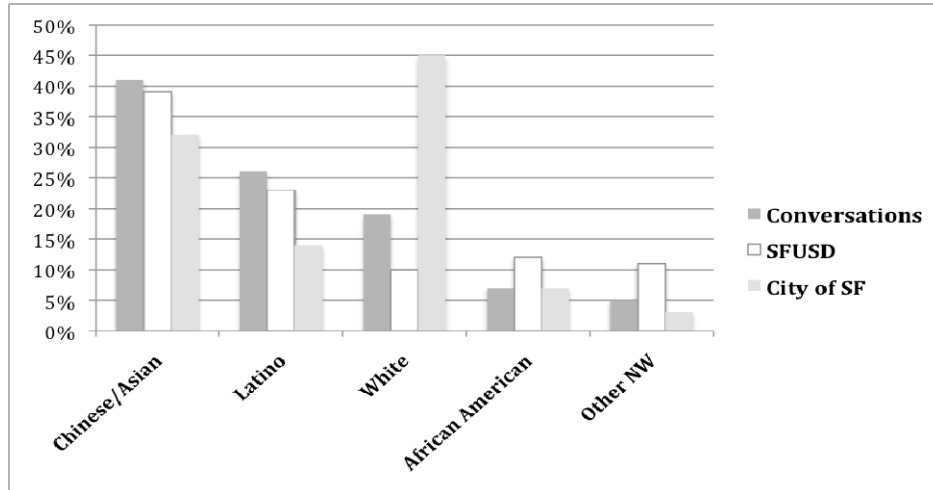
High schools: Burton, Gateway, Lincoln, Lowell, Marshall HS, and School of the Arts.

Participant Demographics

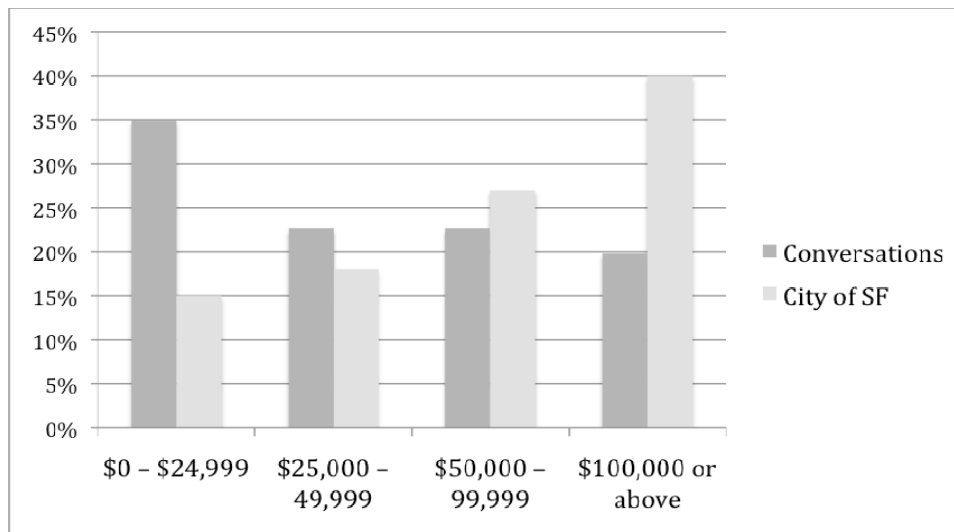
The ethnic composition of students in public schools differs from San Francisco as a whole. Participants in the conversations generally reflected the ethnic diversity of our communities, generally in the range of difference between the city and the district.

Participants slightly over-represented Latino and Asian families; over-represented white families in the district but not in the city; and represented African American families in the city, but not the district. “Other non-white” families were not as well represented.

Ethnicity of participants, compared to population of the SFUSD and of the city of San Francisco:



Compared to population of San Francisco, participants over-represented families with incomes under \$50,000, and under-represented families with incomes over \$100,000. We don't have data on SFUSD family incomes, but believe they are lower than the city on the whole.



Where Conversations Were Held

Convener/School Site	Participants
PPS Latino parents group – at the office of PPS	26
Buena Vista ES	11
Sherman ES	19
PPS Chinese parents group – at community center in Chinatown	19
Ulloa ES	17
PPS African American parents group – community center in Hunter’s Point	8
Hoover MS	10
Parent University – at Malcolm X Academy	7
Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy	9
Hillcrest ES	13
Total participants in formal conversations:	139

This map of San Francisco shows where conversations were held, and the locations of schools that the participants’ children attend.



Appendix II: Findings from Surveys

In a written survey that also gathered demographic information, we asked participants about how they choose schools.

Participants were asked to pick the top 3 out of 17 characteristics they consider most important in choosing a school. **Quality teachers and principals** and a **safe school climate** were the resounding priorities compared to other characteristics. This is how people ranked their priorities (the order is based on raw score; these percentages are rounded off):

Reputation for quality principals and teachers	19%	
Safe school climate	11%	
Achievement of all students	9%	
Language programs (Bilingual or dual-immersion)		9%
Safety of the neighborhood	8%	
Convenience of location	8%	
Academic reputation	8%	
Programs at the school	6%	
Cultural makeup is diverse	5%	
Afterschool	5%	
Well-maintained facility	3%	
Arts	3%	
Number of students at the school	2%	
School that has K-8th grade	2%	
Vocational/Trades	1%	
Technology	1%	
Cultural makeup is similar to my own family's	<1%	

People were also asked to rank their most trusted sources of information about schools. **Visiting schools** in person, and hearing about them through **word of mouth**, were the clear winners. Very few parents ranked internet sites as resources they used.

School visit/tour	24%	
Reputation of school in community	16%	
Other parents		13%
Friends	11%	
SFUSD enrollment guide	10%	
Principal	8%	
Community organization	7%	
Other	4%	
SFUSD website	2%	
Non-SFUSD website	2%	
Youth	1%	
Newspaper	<1%	