



Summary of Findings & Recommendations 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.

During the 2008-2009 school year, the Parent Advisory Council and Parents for Public Schools closely followed the Board of Education’s process to change the student assignment system. We noted that people speaking out at Board meetings did not reflect the population of our public schools. We decided to reach out to hear from families who don’t typically attend school board meetings, to ensure their voices are included in developing this important district policy.

In community conversations 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 round of community engagement was more focused than other recent initiatives to discuss student enrollment. 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. 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. 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 backgrounds pointed out that **if our schools were more equal in quality, we would 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 noted the **student assignment system is not going to close the achievement gap**.
4. Parents agreed that the **current student assignment system is daunting**. Many people across the city feel 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.

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.

You can find the full report of these conversations – including quotes from participants, information about who we heard from, and results of a written survey – on our websites.

Visit us at www.pacsf.org or www.ppsf.org !