

ARGUMENTS AGAINST OPEN CHOICE SCHOOL ASSIGNMENTS (with or without preferred neighborhood zones)

Free choice of school assignment implies substantial differences between schools, or else why wouldn't you automatically choose your closest school, leading to segregated schools? Big differences among schools bring up serious concerns:

a) A broad general curriculum is needed by elementary school children. Too early specialization is detrimental to their development. You could not offer major specialty programs without skewing the general offering, although minor variations are very possible, but would they be enough to make "choice" meaningful?

b) Since a choice assignment plan needs some way to lure children out of their racially unbalanced home areas it looks as if it would be tempting to go to a Magnet school plan.

It takes a lot of staff time and training, teacher and principal reassignment, and some money to gear up for a magnet school. Will we put that preparatory effort in across the district? (in the same half year when site committees and principals are also working on physical school planning). With a lot of effort one more magnet school might be doable by next year, as I see it.

c) Some of our schools are already working very well and articulating well with feeder schools. It would be a shame to do anything which might disrupt these well-functioning schools.

d) If present differences in attractiveness and safety of the physical plant are major negative factors, it would be fairer to bring those sites up to equality with others, rather than leaving them to be avoided.

If these differences are partly a matter of perception only, then a positive public relations campaign should be undertaken. We've had publicity about the need for fences, drug-free signs, and protection from women shouting slogans, but we need in-depth publicity about classroom projects and other good things going on at the schools.

e) Equality of resources among schools is the only fair thing to do. These include equality of teaching excellence, of personnel resources, of physical equipment and condition. Unequal quality should not provide a basis for choice.

f) Equality of access to schools by bus or walking would be the only fair way to really offer a choice program. Such a bussing program, criss-crossing the district to serve all families, would be far more expensive than the present paired school bussing program unless children did more walking to a limited number of safe pick-up points.

g) In a choice plan some parents are not going to get their first choice. How will they feel? What will they communicate to their children? Will they be an asset to the unchosen school community?

h) A choice plan also implies a staffed district office and much publicity and outreach to every family to make informed choice a reality for all. Do we have the money for this?

i) Limited choice plans which involve preference for children living close to schools strike me as inherently unfair.

In the light of the above considerations, we could make our peace with the present k-3/4-6 plan, providing two or three magnets, OR we could go to a K-5 configuration and make our peace with bussing some children six years and never bussing others.

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[This is a much revised version of the Cons for school choice which I originally wrote for the final Report of the Boundaries Group of the Master Plan Task Force of Dec.6,89.]

The K-3/ 4-6 grade configuration plan (now in place).

Educationally, a financially strapped school district can offer a better music program in three 4-6 schools than it could dream of for children in twelve K-5 schools. The same is true for concentration and breadth of library, computer, and other enrichment materials and instruction. These features are good for students and attractive to parents.

The shorter grade span means that at least 2, and often 3 or 4, teachers can be provided at every grade level without making the schools too big. There is also room for flex-space, libraries, special day classes, etc. at all schools except two, whose zones should be slightly reduced, or receive an added classroom.

There is an orderly progression increasing the size of school and variety of activities and larger playground space as the child grows older.

The district has needed rezoning for a number of years to improve racial balance. Ensured integration is easy with a rezoned paired zone plan.

Bussing for 4 years or 3 years is more evenly shared and cheaper than either a K-5 plan or a choice plan. (At present relatively few children are bussed for all 7 years).

Many of our schools are operating very well now. The needs for teacher training, etc. which we see now would also be so under any other plan. We should be careful not to blithely discard the good things we have developed.

The major disadvantage to the K-3/4-6 plan is the extra change of school. However, the educational enrichment, and bussing efficiency of the K-3/4-6 plan can out-weigh that disadvantage.