

Major changes for city schools unlikely in '93

Board hears presentation on 'controlled choice' option

By Shannon Morgan

While the Berkeley Unified School District grapples with the idea of changing desegregation and school organization policies, Superintendent LaVoneia Steele vowed last week that district-wide modification will not be recommended for the upcoming school year.

"I am not recommending that this be done for September. It's impossible. Also I'm not sure every recommendation (by the School Organization Task Force) is something I can recommend. There are hundreds of questions that need to be answered for various scenarios," Steele said at the Board of Education's special meeting last week.

The meeting was called to hear further discussion of a controlled choice policy that would allow parents to decide which schools their children attend, as long as attendance levels reflect district-wide racial levels.

Steele said that given the complexity of shifting to a school choice model, it is unlikely that her office will offer any recommendations on the plan until later this spring.

"After one or two months of public and staff discussion, my staff and I need to come to a place where we can make recommendations that the board can take some action on. I don't see that happening until sometime this spring," she said.

In the meantime, the board is calling in experts like Evans Clinchy, an associate at the Institute for Responsive Education in Boston, to offer advice on how controlled choice school systems have fared across the country and how the model might be applied in Berkeley.

"One of the things we've done is assisted several school districts across the country in developing this concept of controlled choice," Clinchy said, noting that it has become a popular means toward desegregation in other school populations.

The controlled choice model basically necessitates a shift to magnet schools or schools differenti-

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ated to the degree that regardless of geographic location, they will attract a variety of students.

Clinchy warned that in some instances it can 10 to 15 years before magnet schools to establish themselves in the district. He maintained, however, that once accomplished controlled choice has resulted in greater academic achievement among students, "enormous" parent satisfaction, a return of students to the district from private schools, and higher teacher satisfaction.

"One of the most interesting things that goes on is that more and more you begin to get a school system where everyone is there because they want to be there and they don't have to waste time and

energy arguing with each other," Clinchy said.

But in addressing a concern expressed by Board President Pedro Noguera, Clinchy admitted that a major pitfall of the model is its cost.

"It does take an enormous amount of money to make it work properly. But schools of choice need to be different from each other only to the extent that parents and teachers want them to be," he said.

Clinchy said that in his experience, about 85 percent of parents usually get their first choice when choosing a school.

SOTF facilitator Jim Masters noted that by his projections between 60 and 70 percent of parents

would likely get their first choice of schools under the new model.

Noguera later expressed doubt that parents' desires could be met to a sufficient level under the plan.

"What I am envisioning is a lot of unsatisfied people because people won't get their choice — some would want to stay at the schools they are in now and will want to go somewhere else and we can't let everybody do what they want," he said.

Superintendent Steele also noted that the district currently cannot afford the proposed changes.

"When we look at our budget right now, we don't have the money to do a lot of what (Clinchy) is talking about," she said.

Phillins
