

Proposed Organization and Desegregation Plan for the Berkeley Unified School District
 Kristin Prentice/841-9231
 November 6, 1993-Washington School Roundtable

Zoned Choice

The premise of this reorganization/desegregation proposal is to build on the strengths of the district, while addressing some of the short comings with the minimal amount of disruption and cost, so that the most time, energy and money can be spent improving the quality of education for all children in BUSD.

Strengths of current system:

- shared busing
- long-term relationships between paired (zoned) neighborhoods
- strong programs and connectedness between some of the paired schools (LeConte, Emerson, Jefferson, Malcolm X as an example)
- all children go to a "neighborhood" school some of the time.
- magnet and attraction programs (bilingual and bicultural) which provide some choice.
- K-3 are small intimate schools, 4-6's are larger more divers schools
- everyone knows where they will go to school based on where they live.
- integrates the city economically and culturally.

Weaknesses of current system:

- intradistrict transfers are not clear, only parents "in the know" figure it out.
- parents need an "excuse" to transfer, or just leave the system.
- many schools are not close to the desegregation targets because of demographic shifts in the last 25 years.
- no K-3 schools in west or south Berkeley where the highest densities of children reside. this makes it more difficult to get parent participation from families less familiar or trusting of institutions.
- difficult registration, on site rather than centralized.

Proposal

The district keep the basic structure of the current zoned busing system. Adding at least one magnet or theme school. Primary education remains through the sixth grade. King and Willard remain Junior Highs.

One of the main components of this new zoned/choice system would be the institution of a no-fault transfer system. Every child would have the option of going to their zoned school. Every child would also be given the choice of attending a magnet school, having the same chance at attending as all the other children who choose that magnet program (of course using the desegregation targets as a guide). Every child would also be given the option of transferring to any school in Berkeley if there is room available and if the desegregation targets can be met. Children in need of special programs would get preference in transfers (to the bilingual program for example).

To implement this the district would need to set up a central parent information/registration center where each school would have its information available in all languages needed. The District would also need to notify incoming kindergarten parents of the system and clearly spell out the deadlines and transfer policies regarding integration targets. This office would be computer linked with every site. Schools could be notified immediately of late transfers or new students immediately. Information on racial balance would be available at all times so it would be clear where space was available for late incoming kids.

One of the benefits of combining the zone system with a no-fault transfer policy is that it eliminates the need to redraw the zones in a radical way, every time the new census data comes out. We do not have to worry about gerrymandering Berkeley attendance zones to fit our desegregation targets. We could use the intradistrict transfers to balance the schools. Since everyone would be entered into the computer database when they registered, information on the number of students at each school, how many per class, what space is available in each school for any given racial group would be up-to-date and accessible by central registration at any time (or even posted on a daily or weekly basis). For schools that have more requests than space, waiting lists could be used (as Arts Magnet does now).

We would need to set up timelines each year for when new incoming students register and when those that want transfers apply, so that students and their families would know ahead of time where they were going to start school in the coming fall. Students registering after that date, or requesting transfers after that date would then have the option of attending only those schools that still had space. No class or school would be over enrolled eliminating over crowded classrooms. No school should be that far off our desegregation targets.

Below are two possible (but not the only) ways this proposal could work. These two ideas are meant to be starting points for discussion. I do not claim that I have spoken to all schools or know all the various concerns, desires and components at each site that should be taken into consideration when making a final decision on an overall plan.

Plan A

Everything stays the way it is except:

- T.O. becomes a K-6 immersion bilingual school along the lines of its restructuring grant. It could either remain a zoned school (T.O neighborhood and west Berkeley north of University). Or simply be a magnet program that gave preference to Spanish speaking students. The aim would be to have a 50/50 ratio of English and Spanish speaking students. The English speaking students should be balanced between white and African American with "other" rounding out the whole. To accommodate all the students who need bilingual classes and keep the 50/50 ratio, TO may need to be larger than some of the other elementary schools.

- Cragmont is rebuilt and is paired only with Columbus. Columbus becomes the K-3 and has integrated social services supporting the families of all children attending both schools. The schools adopts a Montessori theme (as is currently being investigated by Columbus site now). The school would be an attraction program with regular zones like Jefferson has (Asian bicultural). The zones would be the current Cragmont and Columbus attendance areas. Students from other attendance zones could transfer in as space is available. And students in Cragmont/Columbus area could of course, apply to transfer out if they wanted.

Plan B

- Add one magnet school (K-6). Washington would be a good candidate because it is centrally located and currently the staff and parents have a strong desire for expanded grade configuration. Longfellow should also be considered.

- Thousand Oaks and Columbus become linked schools that provide an immersion bilingual program based on the restructuring model currently being developed at TO (with a possible Montessori component as per the desires of west Berkeley). Columbus would become the pre K-3 school with integrated social services provided on-site for the families of children attending Columbus and T.O. Thousand Oaks becomes a 4-6. Zones for these schools would remain in west Berkeley and T.O. neighborhood.

If Cragmont is rebuilt, Cragmont could either be linked with TO and Columbus as it is currently or become the "neighborhood" school for the Washington School area and then feed into Longfellow. (Since Washington would become a magnet the surrounding neighborhood would need to be provided its own zoned school as well, like the neighborhoods around Whittier/Arts Magnet and John Muir).

If Cragmont is not rebuilt, then the current hills areas zoned for Cragmont would have to be merged with surrounding zones in consultation with the area's parents.

Arts Magnet and John Muir would remain magnet programs. The LeConte, Jefferson (bi-cultural), Emerson, and Malcolm X family (with Gilbert & Sullivan) would remain intact. Longfellow and Oxford remain linked. The Washington neighborhood also remains in the Longfellow sphere. But this trio loses Washington as a feeder school. It may gain Cragmont if it is rebuilt. Children would still go to King or Willard based on where they live.

Strengths of a plan such as A or B

- Disruption the district is minimal.
- The strong links already forged between the Malcolm X family are not broken.
- Washington can expand its grade configuration as desired in one option, TO expands its grade configuration in the other.
- The TO immersion program is actually expanded to include more children and another grade.
- West Berkeley gains a K-3 school with integrated social services.
- There is no need to build another middle or junior high school (as would be needed in a K-5 plan, and there is no money for this in Measure A).
- Teaching staff (for the most part) is not disrupted or broken apart.
- Plans accommodates Cragmont whether it is rebuilt or not.
- Expands choice and offers all parents equal information and access.
- Maintains "neighborhood" feeling to schools and links different areas of the city together (as in the past).
- Maintains small size of K-3 schools.
- Minimal cost to implement.
- Improves our ability to have schools within our desegregation targets by giving parents the choice to move around to schools based on openings.
- Computer model would have to be run to determine change in busing costs, but it seems like on the surface that there would not be that much difference in busing.

Ease of Implementation

The plan can be implemented as soon as the district can set up the parent information center and start the outreach.

For plan A: TO continues on as it is until the new school is completed and then expands one grade at a time until the school have all 7 grades. Cragmont and Columbus are mostly hosed at Franklin site currently. They would remain there and the staffs would begin writing and implementing the new educational plan and transfer to the new Columbus when it is opened in the fall of 96. The 4-6 would remain at Franklin until the new Cragmont was completed.

For plan B: Since both TO and Columbus are in transition for the next few years while their facilities are being rebuilt, the new educational program can be worked on collectively and launched full scale in the fall of 1996 when both schools are scheduled to be opened. During this transition period the children would remain where they are (TO and Franklin).

Washington could transition to a K-6 one grade at a time (first year add fourth grade, the second year add fifth, and the third year become a full K-6). Transition could begin as soon as the renovations are completed.

Once the decision is made about whether Cragmont will be rebuilt or not the discussion about who the Cragmont children are linked with could begin (stay with TO/Columbus, switch to Oxford/Longfellow) or if it is not rebuilt how that areas will be merged with existing zones. Working this part out may be the trickiest part of the whole plan. Whatever happens at Cragmont, this area must be part of the decision making process on where the children will go to school so they feel a full part of the wider Berkeley School community.

Discussion:

If a plan based on a zoned choice idea is to work it must involve discussion between all the schools in the district. It is not always clear who wants what and why, and if the stated desires of a few are reflective of the wider community, the teachers, staff, and parents. I think all schools must approach these discussions with an open mind and a sense of how the whole district can be made into an integral, working whole.

What do you think?