

Berkeley School Choice Draws Big Response

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When Berkeley first proposed a choice program for its public schools, many critics said the system would favor the white and the wealthy because they have the time and resources to shop for an education.

There were widespread predictions that the program would exclude poor or minority children whose parents speak only Spanish or who are intimidated by forms and school bureaucracies. The skeptics said those parents would never fill out their choice program paperwork and their children would then be assigned leftover spaces in schools the savvy did not pick.

Preliminary response numbers tabulated by the district show the critics were wrong.

Citywide, between 90 and 100 percent of parents of current students honored a February 15 deadline to submit the form stating where they want their children to go to school next year. About 4,200 students currently in kindergarten through sixth grade were involved. Parents of incoming kindergartners are also choosing schools for the first time.

"On the face of it, it doesn't look like any one group has been left out," said school board President Irene Hegarty. "I was worried, but we've made it over the first hurdle."

The numbers come as a relief to those who noticed that school information nights had attracted more white parents than parents from other ethnic groups.

"We really tried to get the mes-

SCHOOLS: Page A16 Col. 1

SCHOOLS

From Page A15

sage out," said Nancy Greenman, who has been hired as the parent access coordinator for the schools. "We went to ministers and out to library and senior centers, to the preschools and Head Start. We even had the crossing guards reminding people to get their forms in."

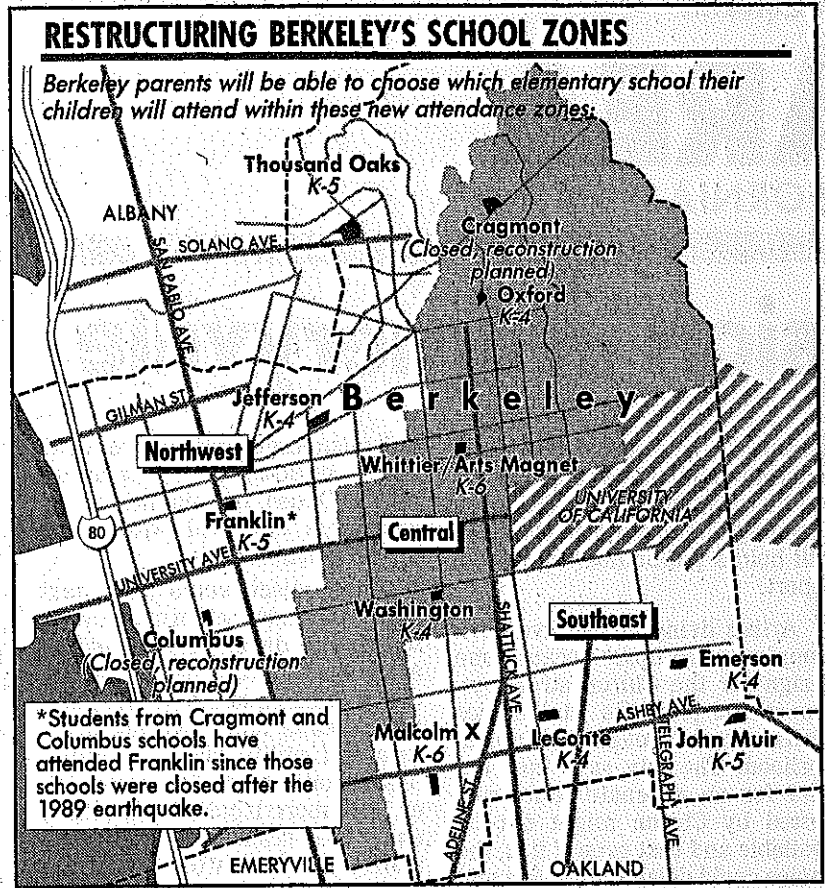
Under the system, the city has been divided into three elementary zones, which each include some hill and flatland areas. Parents may choose from any school within their zone, but not all will receive their first choice. Space limitations and the attempt to keep the schools racially balanced will mean that some families will be turned away from their first choice. At present, none of the forms have been analyzed to determine how specific schools did in attracting students.

The next key deadline will be March 15, when Berkeley families are notified as to whether they got their choice.

Meanwhile, school employees are checking the forms for typographical errors and other mistakes that could confuse the computer software program that will randomly match students and schools based on their choices and racial identities.

The high response rate in Berkeley was the result of an unprecedented school marketing program in which everyone from school bus drivers to office secretaries became ambassadors for the change.

Berkeley school principals who were used to an automatic client



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list got into the selling business for the first time last month. They dazzled parents and showed off their programs and their teachers at open houses and tours. Some principals even recruited popular teachers away from competing schools in the hope of attracting more students.

To some, the image of educator as salesperson is distasteful. But it also is a sign of what may be ahead as more and more education reform proposals call for the introduction of competition into the public school scene.

A statewide law that became

effective last year, AB 1114, requires all school districts to have a system that allows any student in the district to choose a school outside his or her usual attendance boundaries as long as there is room in the school. The key exception is that the district can consider racial and ethnic balances when it grants such transfers.

The California Department of Education sent a memo to school superintendents across the state last year that said the department "considers public school choice to be a significant component of education improvement efforts."