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Berkeley Unified School District

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A Review of The Student Assignment Program from January to July of 1995

Introduction

On December 10 & 14, 1994 the Board of Education voted to implement a twenty-one point program of reintegration, reconfiguration and controlled choice for grades K-7 -- a program that would see virtually every elementary school changing its grade configuration during the next two years, while changes in attendance zones would redefine which schools Berkeley students could -- and would -- attend. Finally, instead of being assigned to a single school in whose zone one lived, now parents would have the opportunity to express their first, second and third preferences as to which school their children would attend. All these changes would be incorporated into a random selection computer program that would rank students according to the Board's published priorities, and would assign them to schools.

According to the timetable adopted, parents would have until February 15 to gather information about the new system and to submit forms indicating their preferences. For the next several weeks, the District staff would process that information, and by March 15 parents would be informed of their children's assignments for September, 1995. On December 14 the District had neither the program to make these assignments, nor the procedures by which the Board's policies and guidelines would be implemented. It did have a print-ready draft of the *Guide to the Berkeley Public Schools*, an attractive thirty-two page booklet describing the new system, including deadlines, zones and school configurations, as well as providing parents with lively and informative descriptions of each elementary and soon-to-be middle school.

Over the course of the next six months staff worked to meet deadlines and to implement the system envisioned by the Board. Given the time limitations and the scope of what had to be accomplished, and given the results, both statistical and in human terms, those efforts must be deemed successful. This is not to say that errors were not made and procedures created that are in need of review and improvement. This report chronicles both the achievements and the shortcomings of process from January through July 1995 and offers a brief critique that can be used as a focus for discussion that will allow us to benefit from this experience.

**Part One:
The Controlled Choice Assignment Program,
January - July, 1995**

I. The Public is Educated and Parents Choose (January - February 15)

The December 14th decision saw staff with a great deal to accomplish in a very short time. Because no existing staff had the time to devote to the tasks at hand, a position of Parent Access Coordinator had been created and posted. Again due to time constraints, the position was filled provisionally on January 9 -- by two Coordinators through January, and thereafter by one. The Coordinators worked swiftly to secure office space, telephone lines and supplies, and to begin a campaign of public education whose goal was to give the parent community the information it needed to choose well and wisely on February 15.

A. Public Education took many forms, both oral and written.

1. Distribution of *Guide to the Berkeley Public Schools*. Some ten thousand copies were distributed throughout the city. *Guides* were sent home with students, delivered to preschools, churches, libraries and Realtors. *Guides* were also available at each Kindergarten and School Information night.

2. Kindergarten Information Nights were held at every elementary school during January. These were advertised in the media, including the *Berkeley Voice* and *Tri-City Post*. Additionally, some two thousand copies of a letter from the Superintendent, and accompanying informational night schedules and maps to every school were distributed to preschool parents throughout the city. The Parent Access Coordinators were present at each Night to outline the new system and answer questions.

3. PTA Meetings, Workshops and School Information Nights. The Parent Access Coordinators also addressed a number of PTA's -- primarily those in schools whose downsizing created concerns about students possibly being displaced. They also spoke and answered questions at Information Nights at each of the middle schools. Finally, they held several workshops in the South and West Berkeley neighborhoods -- neighborhoods whose residents typically are low in attendance at Kindergarten and School Information Nights -- to answer questions and assist parents in filling out preference forms.

4. Media. The local media was extremely helpful in keeping the community informed of the various dates and deadlines in the choice and assignment process. The *Chronicle* did one very thorough informational article and also published a map detailing schools and zones.

5. Zone maps and directories. In order to assist parents in knowing their zones, enlarged maps with the zones delimited were distributed to each elementary and middle school, to be hung in a place where parents and secretaries could have access to them.

Street listings were also made available to the secretaries, first for the three primary school zones and subsequently for the King and Willard (middle school) zones.

B. Creation, Distribution and Collection of Preference Forms.

1. Creation. The "Parent Preference Forms," on which parents indicated their first, second and third choice of school, were designed by staff from various examples used by other districts. The forms were printed in three colors, one for K-5, one for sixth grade, and one for seventh, and were translated into Spanish, and Mandarin/Cantonese. Forms were distributed through the schools, as well as through libraries, and preschools. In all, some ten thousand forms were distributed. Each form had instructions, as well as the Board's list of six priorities printed on the back.

For grades K - 5, where the process was fairly uniform from school to school, these instructions sufficed. But the Board had established specific grandfathering rights for each current fifth grade, and other rights for current sixth graders, all of which required additional instructions. These instructions took the form of question and answer sheets for each school housing fifth graders, as well as one for fifth graders coming into the district from other systems. Staff also developed a question and answer sheet for current sixth graders, whether BUSD or non-BUSD.

2. Distribution. Forms were sent home with students (in some cases several times). They were also available at every school office, through the libraries, at preschools and at the District Office.

3. Collection. The forms included the instruction that they could be returned to any school or to the District Office. In most cases BUSD students received their forms from their teachers with instructions to return the forms to the teachers, who would then pass them on to the office, where a record would be kept of who had -- and had not -- turned in a form. Prior to the new system's inception there had been a great deal of concern that participation might be limited among certain neighborhoods or ethnic groups, and a great effort was made to encourage all parents to complete and return their forms in a timely way. In most schools room parents and secretaries contacted virtually all students who had not returned their forms by the week before the February 15 deadline, with the result that by the deadline all the schools reported at least a 90% participation rate, with some reporting that 99% of their students had turned in preference forms.

New students turned in forms both at the schools and at the District Office. Certain preschool programs, such as Headstart and the District's Parent Nurseries and CDC's collected forms from their parents and passed them on.

With one unfortunate exception that will be discussed below, very few forms (perhaps no more than a dozen) were lost in transmission. Several forms turned in at the preschools were misplaced, and others came without the required proof of residence, but that was due to a lack of instruction on staff's part. Next year, with more time to plan ahead, staff can work more closely with the various preschools to make them part of the process, as the school secretaries were.

II. Data is Entered and The Program Run (February 16 - March 16)

A. Entry of Data

1. At the School Sites/Continuing Students. One early issue that staff faced and resolved with input from the school secretaries was how and where the data collected on continuing students would be entered into SASI, the District's student information data base. Because there is no network connecting the schools sites with the District Office, any data entered at one site has to be manually transmitted to another, and any uploading from another system will completely overwrite existing data. The ultimate goal was to have all choice information completely and correctly entered at the District Office, from where it could be transferred to the assignment program. Thus the question became whether to enter data at the individual school sites and then collect it, or whether to enter it all centrally.

The benefit of entering data from the preference forms at the school sites was that the secretaries, being familiar with most of the students, would have a chance to review their choices, check their addresses and generally serve as a screening board -- a function that a data clerk working at the District Office could not possibly serve. The burden was that the secretaries' day allows neither sufficient time for such entry, nor the uninterrupted environment that would assure greatest accuracy.

The possibility of having a data entry clerk moving from school to school was briefly discussed and then rejected, both because of physical awkwardness (secretaries' workspaces generally do not permit for another person working simultaneously), and because of the secretaries' unwillingness to have another person working on their data base. The resolution reached was for the District to use the funds available to pay the secretaries for one weekend day on which they would enter data for all of their continuing students who had turned in preference forms. This was done the week after the deadline, from February 16 to 23.

2. At the District Office.

a. New and Incoming Students. Data on all incoming students was entered in the Attendance Office by a data entry clerk.

b. Continuing Students. From the week of February 20 on, the data entered by the secretaries at the school sites was collected by staff and brought to the District Office, where it was uploaded then checked for accuracy against the original forms. Lists of corrections were then sent back to the schools, to be entered into their systems. As the data began to be run through the assignment program and inaccuracies in addresses and zone specification were picked up, these, too, were sent back to the schools to be changed.

(Note: this going back and forth went on for several weeks. At a certain point, however, time prevented this. After the first week in March, the District files became the only files used for compiling data to pass on to the assignment program, and all subsequent changes received from the schools were entered manually. At the present time the District probably has the cleanest information on K-7 students, but there is no simple way to pass corrections onto the schools without also overwriting all the information they have in their systems.)

B. Data Checked and Corrected (February 23 - March 16).

1. Interfacing with the Student Assignment Program. Because the assignment program had the ability to match street address to zone, running the SASI data through the program allowed staff to pick up both errors in address and also situations in which choices made raised the suspicion that the parent choosing had been mistaken about zone (i.e. all three choices outside of zone). Address error information was passed on to the school sites so that it could be corrected in SASI, and staff called dozens of parents who seemed to be unclear about zone. This process was far more time-consuming than staff had anticipated, and continued to absorb staff time as the March 15 deadline neared.

C. The Assignment Program.

Intensive work on writing the program did not commence until after December 14. This meant that as staff was refining the Board's guidelines into specific processes, the programmer was attempting to implement those processes into the program. While this ultimately led to the program being remarkably responsive to and reflective of the Board's vision, commitments and aims, in the short run it meant that staff was speaking publicly and answering parents' questions without knowing exactly what the program would do, and certainly without having ever seen it run. The ramifications of this lack of knowledge will be discussed below. Lest the reader suffer from the same disadvantage, we will now explain the logic behind the program and the way in which it runs.

1. The program/background and origins.

Bruce writes a brief background on what the program was based upon.

2. How the Program Works (A Beginner's Guide)

a. Running in "Rounds." To put an extremely complex system simply, the program assigns students in a series of "rounds," whose numbers correspond to the Board's set "priorities." Thus the first round of assignment, Round One, concerns Priority One students -- students choosing to remain at the school they are currently attending, and living in that school's attendance zone. Round Two assigns Priority Two students -- those choosing their current school but not living in that school's zone. Round Three is for siblings, Round Four for students new to a school but living in that school's zone, and Round Five for students new to a school and living in another attendance zone. Round Six is for the assignment of all students whom the computer is unable to assign to any of their three choices. In Round Six those unassigned students are placed in a school in their own zone, according to the Board's guaranty that students who are not granted their actual choices will be assured of a placement within their own zone. (Note: Round 6 does not correspond to the Priority Six, which concerns students attending BUSD schools on interdistrict permits, and whose assignment is discussed on p.13)

b. Creating Capacities. The program assigns students according to capacities it has been given for each grade at each school. First, it is given a total of

students for each grade level. For example, it was given 52 slots (two classes with a student:teacher ratio of 26:1) for the second grade at John Muir. Secondly, those slots were divided according to the racial makeup of the student population in grades K-5, according to the major ethnic classifications of white, African American and all other ethnicities. Thus John Muir's second grade was given 17 white slots, 21 black slots and 14 slots for students of all other ethnicities. As the computer ran through the "rounds" of students seeking assignment to John Muir's second grade, it would fill the allotted spaces until they were full. If more students of any of the three groups wanted to go to John Muir's second grade than spaces had been allotted, the computer would assign the excess to a waiting list.

c. Adjusting Capacities. In many cases grade capacities thus set had to be adjusted based upon one or more of the factors described below.

(1) Grandfathering. The Board's priorities reflected a commitment to "grandfathering" current students choosing to remain at their schools -- so far as space availability and racial integration criteria would allow. While the Board had made it clear that it did not want to *improve* racial balance at existing grade levels by displacing students who wished to be grandfathered, nor did it intend to allow racial imbalance to increase. In implementing and reconciling these two goals of grandfathering and racial balance, staff used choice statistics compiled by the assignment program from data entered to do the following:

1. To set capacities at existing grade levels that would accommodate every *in-zone* student choosing to remain at his or her current school.

2. To accommodate as far as possible the *out-of-zone* students wishing to remain. The two situations in which out-of-zone students were displaced were:

(a) Where reduction of the number of sections at a grade level simply did not allow for space, regardless of ethnic identity, and

(b) Where the assignment of in-zone students had so skewed the racial balance of that down-sized grade that the addition of out-of-zone students would allow racial balance for that grade to worsen significantly from what it presently was.

(2) Adjusting for Bilingual Programs. Because all of the District's bilingual programs are concentrated in the three Northwest Zone schools, capacities set for those schools had to allow for an increase in "all other ethnicities," and a corresponding decrease in the percentages of both white and African American students. Again, staff used choice statistics to set these capacities. It also used lists compiled by the English as a Second Language Office to determine the numbers of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students who had exercised their right to attend a bilingual program, regardless of attendance zone. In order to assure proper placement of these children, they were manually assigned before the main program was run.

(3) Setting Capacities for Kindergarten. As of February 15, some 533 applications had been received from prospective kindergartners, of which 206, (38.6 %) were white, 127 (23.8 %) African American, and 190 (35.6%) "all other ethnicities." A comparison of these numbers to current and historical District kindergarten

numbers suggested that it was very likely that the white applicants included a certain number of families whose submission of a preference form was not an indication of a firm commitment to attend BUSD schools. It was equally likely that the numbers did not include a number of African American children who would come into the system at some later point between February 15 and the first day of school. Taking into account these likelihoods, and balancing them against the need to give the computer enough capacity to assign each of the actual applicants -- and to assign them to racially balanced grades -- staff did the following:

(a) Using current (1994-95) kindergarten numbers as baseline racial percentages, staff first set capacities at 33% white, 38% black, and 29% "all other ethnicities."

(b) In order to accommodate the large number of white applicants, staff then created extra white capacity at most schools -- on the assumption that attrition would bring the grades down to size.

(c) As with existing grades, staff adjusted to accommodate the Hispanic and Chinese bilingual programs in the Northwest Zone.

(d) Finally, staff had to create new sections in the Central and Northwest zones in order to accommodate the volume of applicants. Two sections were added to Franklin, bringing it's total to five, which still left two more sections to be created before the program could be run. Limited space at smaller schools ruled out adding sections to Oxford, Thousand Oaks or Jefferson. Washington, which had been closed for renovation for two years, had been scheduled to reopen in September, but on the eve of running the program it was discovered that inclement weather had so delayed construction that a more realistic opening day would be September, 1996. This meant that only Whittier -- also about to reopen after renovation -- could house the extra two kindergartens. (Given the Washington delay, it was also necessary to move a half section each of second and third grade to Whittier). This decision, made at the last minute and driven by the need to run the assignment program, caused a reaction of upset and resentment in the Whittier community.

Note: At the time the decision was made, it was assumed that one each of the Franklin and Whittier kindergartens would disappear from attrition, but as of this writing both extra sections are still full.

D. Running the Program.

For all the reasons described above, March 15 -- the targeted date for announcing assignments -- saw the program almost, but not quite ready to run. It was ready the following day. That is, it was able to assign all students (some 3,900) in the appropriate rounds. At this point, and given the newness of the system as well as its complexity, staff would have preferred to make a trial run and to spend time scrutinizing the output -- a wise, if not a standard practice in any new system. However, the community's very strongly expressed need to have the information, combined with staff's equally strong desire to meet its commitment, led to the decision to publish the program's results immediately. Timing was also a factor, as March 16 was a Thursday, and to have taken even one extra day to review the output would have delayed posting the results until after the weekend -- to Monday, March 20. The program was run late in the afternoon of

March 16, and staff worked until late at night printing and binding the lists of assignments so that they could be distributed to the schools the following morning.

III. Assignment Results are Published and the Public Reacts (March 17-April 3)

A. Publishing the Results.

1. Public Posting. On the morning of March 17 staff distributed to each of the schools several bound copies of the All District List of Assignments, arranged alphabetically, as well as bound lists of assignments by school. Each school was also given a loose-leaf listing of assignments to that school to be posted for parents to read. The assignment lists were posted in the downstairs hall of the District Office, and copies of the bound lists were distributed to the various departments. Several copies were available to the public at the Attendance Office.

2. Mailing to Families. Using a mail-merge program created from the assignment program, a mailing was also sent out to each assigned student. Grandfathered students received a letter informing them of their reassignment to their current school. Students new to a school received a letter of assignment from the Superintendent that included information on registration, waiting lists and appeals, as well as a Pre-Registration card to be returned to the Attendance Office specifying whether or not the student would attend next year. New students also received a letter of welcome from the principal of the assigned school, specifying one or more events designed by that school to welcome new families -- an addition staff felt would be effective in drawing in new families, particularly those who had not received their first choice. The letters were sent out several days after the lists were published and were generally received by the end of the week -- one week after the program had been run.

3. Media. A press release was distributed the morning that the results were released, and was published in virtually every area newspaper, including the Chronicle, Examiner, Oakland Tribune and Berkeley Voice. At that time it was stated that 89% of all applicants had received their first choice, 6% their second and 2 % their third choice. Subsequently that first number was revised downward to 85%.

B. Public Reaction

While the overwhelming majority of families had received their first choice, a number of families had not. Some, especially out-of-zone students who had been displaced from their current schools, were quite upset. Beyond this, the program had made several errors, which became apparent as parents affected by those errors began to call.

The calls began almost immediately after the lists were posted, and escalated throughout the following two weeks. Although staff worked long and hard in responding to the calls (to most within twenty-four hours), parents not receiving immediate response often called back several times, and sometimes called other numbers, with the result that

staff had to devote some energy to weeding out duplicate complaints and also complaints made by two parents of the same student using two different names. Beyond this, the need to respond to the volume of calls made staff largely reactive and slowed the process of analyzing the data and making a comprehensive survey of errors that needed to be corrected.

Even so, within a week of the program being run, staff had a definite, if not yet comprehensive, picture of where errors had been made and what needed to be addressed.

C. Errors in the First Round

1. Computer error. There were two programmatic errors, affecting some 100 students. First, while the computer had done an excellent job at placing an incoming sibling at a continuing sibling's school, it had not fared so well in bringing two siblings together into a new school. As a result, some fifteen sets of siblings had been assigned to two different schools.

The second error occurred in the program's "Sixth Round" -- that is, the round in which all those students not assigned to one of their three choices are then assigned to a school in their zone. At this point the computer made an error in reading zone, which resulted in seventy-three Northwest Zone students being assigned to schools in the Southeast Zone, most notably John Muir. Unfortunately, included in this group were a number of incoming kindergarten parents who -- not having received any of their choices -- were doubly shocked and dismayed to find themselves assigned to a school they had neither chosen nor heard of and which was at the extreme opposite end of town.

2. Human Error. In addition to the computer errors, staff had made errors affecting some sixty students.

a. LEP/Special Education Misassignment. For a number of reasons, including change of status and incomplete lists, staff had failed to label some two dozen ESL and Special Education students, who were assigned away from their programs -- to their parents' puzzlement and distress.

b. Misplaced Applications. Soon after the results were published and parents began to call in, it was discovered that some forty applications handed in at Emerson School -- including virtually every incoming kindergartner in that entire neighborhood -- had been misplaced and had not been entered in the program. Thus Northwest Zone students choosing Emerson as their third choice had been accepted, filling spaces which should have gone to those Southeast Zone students whose applications had been misplaced. After an intensive search, those applications were found commingled with late applications that had been collected at the school secretaries' meeting on March 16, the date the program had been run.

3. Problems Not Resulting from Error. Other problems reported were the result of the newness of the system, of misunderstandings, or simply of the inability to anticipate how the program would run.

a. Incoming students making first choice out of zone and receiving none of three choices. One question frequently asked by parents prior to February 15th was "Can I choose a school outside my zone, and what will happen if I do?" After some initial confusion, staff agreed that it was indeed permitted to choose outside of one's zone. The wisdom of such a choice was far more difficult to gauge, since staff had never seen the program run, and had no experience with patterns of choice. In the end, staff concluded that parents should be reminded of two provisos -- that there would be no transportation out of one's zone, and that one would have a lower priority (Five as opposed to Four) at an out-of-zone school -- but beyond that they should be advised to make their choice based upon their observations and their child's needs.

After the program had been run, it became apparent that in many cases choosing a non-zone school -- and especially choosing it first -- resulted in giving up one's in-zone priority for one's other choices as well. This was because a student who made a first choice out of zone was put aside by the computer while all the in-zone students were assigned in Round Four, and run for the first time in Round Five (the out-of-zone round). By that time most of the schools had been filled -- not only the out-of-zone school, but his own in-zone choices as well -- so that when the computer tried to place the student, it found no space at any choice.

Exacerbating this situation was the fact that, when parents were filling out preference forms it was assumed that Washington would have plenty of space in its new facility, but when the capacities were set the extra space in fact was allotted to Whittier. This meant that parents who had felt fairly secure in putting Washington second and choosing a very competitive school such as Oxford, or an out-of-zone school such as Jefferson first, found Washington full by the time they arrived with their second choice.

These situations affected a number of incoming kindergarten parents in the Central and Northwest zones, and for some this result was made even more upsetting when, having missed all three of their choices, the computer then accidentally assigned them to a school in the Southeast zone.

b. Displaced Students Try Without Success to Move Laterally. A similar result occurred to some out-of-zone students who were displaced from their current schools. Often, when a student was denied his first choice, his second and third choices might also be schools who were downsizing, and which had no space for him. For example, a second grader displaced from Jefferson because he lived in the Central zone, might find no space available at Oxford, his second (in-zone) choice, or Washington, his third, because Oxford and Washington were filled with their own second graders choosing to stay. In this case, the hardship of being displaced from one's own school is magnified by the sense of there being "no room at the inn."

c. Incoming neighborhood people assigned away from their neighborhood school. While using geographic proximity to a school as a priority for assignment was discussed in the course of creating guidelines, it was never accepted, so that -- in assigning incoming students to a given school -- the computer would be equally likely to assign a student living at the opposite end of the zone as it would be to assign a student living across the street. Parents to whom this happened were almost uniformly dissatisfied and expressed the feeling that the system hadn't worked for them.

d. The Oxford/Jefferson anomaly. Another source of great displeasure were families of incoming Central Zone kindergartners who had chosen Oxford as their first choice and not gotten in. Oxford had a waiting list of fifty-three white Central zone students who had all chosen Oxford first -- numbers vastly exceeding (if not defying) all past enrollment experience. To a slightly lesser extent this also happened at Jefferson, where twenty-eight white and twelve "other," in-zone students choosing Jefferson first found themselves on a waiting list. In Jefferson's case there was additional frustration, as Jefferson was seen as the only Northwest Zone non-Spanish-bilingual school.

D. Correcting the First Round Errors.

1. Computer Errors were addressed and resolved within the two weeks following March 17, and by April 3 all students wrongly placed in the Southeast Zone had been reassigned to Northwest and Central zone schools; all siblings had been reunited, and LEP and Special Education students had been returned to their required schools. These reassignments involved close to two hundred students, but because the students affected were spread out across zones and grades the changes were possible without any significant impact on racial balance, or without pushing any grade more than one or two students over its allotted capacity.

2. Human Error. After a great deal of thought and discussion, staff determined to resolve the Emerson situation by reassigning all out-of-zone students assigned to the Emerson kindergarten in order to create as many vacancies as possible for the pool of in-zone students whose applications had been misplaced. Staff then held a mini-random selection with the applications, assigning them in the order in which they were chosen, and forming the remainder onto a waiting list. Staff contacted each parent involved personally to explain the situation and the results. Some parents were extremely upset, others philosophical. A number of the parents who were not assigned to Emerson chose to appeal.

In all, including both the Emerson and the computer error-generated reassignments, 232 students were reassigned.

III. The Waiting Lists and Appeals (April 10-May 25)

A. Waiting Lists.

1. Creating the Lists. It was the parent community that first raised the possibility of keeping waiting lists, and by February 15 they had become a commitment. Staff had assumed that waiting lists would be published simultaneously with assignment lists but, given the need for the above-described reassignments, they were held back until the reassignments had been made and staff had verified that the information contained on the lists was correct. The lists were posted at the District Office and at the individual schools on April 10, the day following spring vacation.

The lists were divided into the three ethnic categories for which capacities had been set. Although staff discussed the visual awkwardness of this presentation and the possibility of creating a single list in which names would be staggered by ethnicity (white, black, other), such a presentation would have caused confusion and upset when students were not taken from the lists in the order in which they appeared, but rather according to the ethnicity of the space available.

The lists were arranged according to Priority and then to Choice. Thus a displaced student who had chosen the school as his first choice would come ahead of a sibling, who would come ahead of a new, in-zone student attempting to come into the school. If there were more than one student in the same priority they would be listed in the order in which the computer had randomly selected them. An example of that ranking is set forth below:

Oxford Grade 1:

Priority2	Choice1	--	Out-of-zone	Oxford	student	
Priority3	Choice1	--	Sibling	of Oxford	student	
Priority4	Choice1	--	Central	Zone	non-Oxford	student
Priority4	Choice1	--	"	"	"	"
Priority4	Choice2	--	"	"	"	"
Priority5	Choice1	--	Out-of-zone	non-Oxford	student	

Although some parents and staff expressed displeasure as to the three separate lists, in general parents were grateful to have the information the lists afforded, and some - especially those with displaced students -- watched the lists very closely.

2. Placing Students from the Lists. The first significant movement from the lists came just before the second round of assignment at the end of May (see below for a description), in order to create spaces for the late and non-resident applications received. There was further movement through June and July, as secretaries reported students who would not return next year, as well as incoming students who had elected to stay at their current schools. One interesting note is that, of the forty misplaced "Emerson" applications, at this time only six of the students remain on the Emerson waiting list. All the others have been offered a place at Emerson.

B. Appeals

Appeals are taken through a three-step process. First, the parents speak or meet with the Access Coordinator in an effort to resolve the problem. If resolution is not possible, the parent completes and submits an appeal form. Finally, the Student Assignments Appeals Board reviews the appeal. All students except for those being grandfathered were advised of the appeals process in their assignment letter. Appeals were accepted on and after April 15, a date selected to give staff time to design the process and the form.

Perhaps a hundred families expressed a desire to commence an appeal. The majority of these problems were resolved by the Parent Access Office (e.g. parents wanted placements which were possible, errors had been made by staff which were corrected; misunderstandings were resolved). Some four dozen appeals went to the Appeals Board, a panel of five community members appointed by the Superintendent who, along with the Parent Access Coordinator, served *ex officio*.

Although appeals were to be made only on procedural grounds, most of those received were based upon subjective causes, such as childcare needs or special affinity for a school. Of those four dozen, the majority were displaced students wanting to be reassigned to their schools and kindergartners who had not been given any of their three choices, or who did not like the choice they had been given. Two procedural issues on which the Board took action were in the case of students who wanted to alter their designated ethnicities (generally from "other," to African American), and in the case of the misplaced applications. In the former case, the Board allowed for the change of ethnic designation, so long as the change was permanent. In the latter the Board ordered an adjustment of capacity in order to accommodate a greater number of the excluded students. The Board's recommendations for changes in the program are attached hereto as Appendix

IV. The Second Round of Assignment (May 25)

The District's initial commitment was that a "second round" of assignments -- for Berkeley residents who had turned in their forms late, and for students currently attending BUSD schools on interdistrict permits ("continuing interdistrict students") -- would be made on or before April 15. However, it soon became apparent to staff that this date was not feasible because of time needed both to resolve the first round errors and to prepare the data for the second round. Beyond this, and also because it made sense not to run the second round until the first round appeals had been resolved. At first staff announced that the second round would be run on May 15, then moved the date back to May 25. These delays caused anxiety and displeasure among parents who were waiting for assignments -- and also among school staff, who were anxious to begin planning their classes for the following year. That anxiety was somewhat exacerbated by staff's failure to take the initiative in keeping parents informed as to the delay. A letter was sent home with all K-7 students on May 15, apologizing for the delay and promising assignments by the end of the month. This promise was kept.

The second round was run on May 25. In it, 334 Berkeley residents and 167 interdistrict students were assigned. In order to place these students, staff was compelled to choose between either filling classes above the 26:1 ratio or creating new (and unprojected) sections with no assurance that the students assigned to those sections would materialize. In the end, staff decided to over-fill existing sections in the expectation that attrition would bring them down to size. In order to allow for some adjustment from school to school, all interdistrict assignments were made provisional so that these students could be moved as late as the second week of school, if actual enrollment required.

In the second round fewer than 50% of all students received their first choice of school. There were a dozen appeals, a number of which involved forms having been submitted in the first round but allegedly lost, and the balance based upon affinity for a particular school.

V. The Third Round (July 12)

After the second round was run, there still remained some two hundred continuing students who had never turned in preference forms and who had to be assigned. Staff had discussed assigning them in the second round, but decided instead to wait in order to see how many of them had not turned in forms because they intended to leave the district. In late May, several days of outreach done by Mr. Earl Bill yielded forms from a good percentage of those students. In the meantime, with the school year ending secretaries began reporting non-returnees and incoming students who were not planning to enter the district. The result of these "deassignments," was that the classes that had swelled beyond capacity after the second round once again subsided so that the remaining students could be assigned without pushing the numbers higher than they had been set in the preceding round.

As had been done in the second round, staff spent several days moving children off waiting lists before running the round. The third round of assignment was run on July 12, and some 200 students were placed. At that time a decision was made to hold applications received between July 13 and late August -- until the secretaries returned and submitted new "deassignment" data, so that applicants could be assigned to schools with available space.

VI. The Transportation Component:

This year, in addition to the other changes described above, the District is converting to a new computerized system of assigning students to transportation routes. In the past bus routes were designed and publicized and students in the area simply went to the nearest bus stop if they wanted a ride to school. Under the new system, each student is assigned to a specific bus stop based upon the distance s/he lives from the school. Then, taking all children assigned to a school and requiring bussing as well as bus capacities and maximum time of routes, the system can then draw routes for each school automatically.

While in the long run this system will certainly save time and increase accuracy, in the first year of implementation it requires staff to create yet another data base and one which must be kept current with SASI and the assignment program. Thus, if a student's address or school assignment changes, that change must be entered into the transportation system (and entered manually), or the student will find himself assigned to a bus going to the wrong school.

Staff at the District Office and Transportation are collaborating in order to assure the smooth transmission of information and the maximum accuracy of information entered. As part of this collaboration, there will be one back-to-school mailing including information on transportation, reconfiguration, as well as the BSEP-driven A-Plus News. District Staff also plans to recruit and train volunteers to ride the buses during the first two weeks of school to help keep track of both children who appear at bus stops and names on the driver's list.

**Part Two:
Critique of The Student Assignment Program
& Recommendations for Next Year**

I. Public Education: Given the time constraints, staff was able to accomplish a great deal this year. It goes without saying that next year, with this year's experience and familiarity with the program to guide us, we will be able to be far more informative. As to specific recommendations, they are as follows:

1. To clear up zone confusion, **make zone maps more widely available.** Perhaps we should do the same with the street directories. They could be at libraries, preschools, even churches. At \$1 a piece, we could perhaps distribute 40 maps throughout the community.

2. **Do more and earlier outreach to preschools.** If possible we could hold a kindergarten fair in the fall, we could also make ourselves available for meetings at various schools. As to the content of the message we deliver, it should stress the vital importance of parent participation, both for the individual child and for the school. We should encourage parents to view our system as interactive; when they visit a classroom, or a school site they should ask, "What could I add to this situation?" and "What role could I play here?" Our outreach should reflect the belief that each parent -- and each child -- has something unique and valuable to contribute to each school.

3. **Workshops in the South and West Berkeley** communities could be planned earlier and better advertised to offer parents assistance in making choices and completing forms.

4. **Translation.** While many, if not most of the materials used in this process had to be translated into Spanish (and some into Mandarin/Cantonese), since there is no regular translation service, each document had to be arranged for by staff, usually causing a delay of several days. In some cases this caused staff to skip translation and add a note giving a number to call for translation. It would be wonderful to have translation services more readily available, although this year, with more planning time, it will also be easier to plan in the time for translation.

II. Creation, Distribution & Collection of Forms.

While the form worked very well in some ways, in others it was lacking -- as in designating Limited English Proficiency and Special Education status. That might be better resolved between Attendance staff and the ESL and SE Offices, and left off the forms. **A general review of the form**, with input from those who worked with them (school secretaries and District staff) will be invaluable.

The misplacing of the "Emerson," forms created a very difficult situation and prompted staff to discuss possible preventive measures that might be taken next year, such as having all forms turned in at the District Office, or giving receipts for forms. Certainly there will be fewer participants next year, so turning all forms in at the District Office might be a possibility. As to issuing receipts, of the five thousand forms received only about fifty (1%, including the Emerson group), were reported misplaced. Staff will have

to determine whether issuing receipts is worth the work with a 1% error rate (especially if forms are all handed in at the D.O).

III. Entering Data

Overall, and given the number of people involved and the unwieldiness of the process, the accuracy with which data was entered was impressive. Next year, because we will have fewer applicants, it may make sense to enter all data at the District Office. This would depend upon how we handle schools that have to downsize again (do we need to hold all-school lotteries? If so, we may want to involve the secretaries at those schools). This should be discussed and resolved by January in order to alert the secretaries to what their role will be.

Secondly, staff needs to work together for a clearer accord on how Special Education students will be placed. The same is true for keeping accurate records of who is LEP.

Finally, it goes without saying that had we had a network between schools and the district office, the process of data entry and collection would have been much easier, and the benefits more widely felt. On the other hand, once we have a network, we will have to grapple with the issue of "too many cooks."

IV. The Program:

Given it's complexity, the program worked very well, and we were extremely fortunate to have a programmer who was willing to be so responsive to our needs. Perhaps the greatest shortcoming in the program was staff's need to rely upon the programmer for small functions, such as reassignments and late-round statistical data. This should be resolved for next year, as the programmer is working to make those and other functions accessible to staff.

As to the program function, two areas should be scrutinized. The first is the impact that falls upon students making their first choice out of zone, which is described above on page . It has been suggested by one of the Appeals Board members, that the program should incorporate a function whereby the first round should be run first to see who doesn't get their first choice because it is out of zone. Then the round should be rerun, making those people's second choice their first, in an effort to give them the best that the program can. The programmer is considering possibilities for resolving this situation and, in the very least, next year staff will be able to explain the ramifications of making such a choice.

Another area of general dissatisfaction was out-of-zone students displaced from current schools, and who felt themselves failed by the program at every turn. In the first place, by working so hard to grandfather the maximum number of students possible, we made those displaced so few as to feel very unpleasantly singled out. Whether or not this can be avoided next year is something we must discuss. In the very least we should be able to spare them the shock of hearing the news first in the middle of the school hall, as they read the assignment list. Perhaps principals could pass on the news, and principals of assigned schools could sent a special note of welcome -- this wouldn't take much effort,

as so few students are involved. Beyond this, we might make a special effort to assign displaced students from the same grade to the same school, so at least they would have a peer group, small as it might be. Finally, the Appeals Board also recommends that staff make an effort to make the program more responsive to students in this situation, so they aren't simply bumped from school to school.

Note: Next year we will face a compounded displacement situation in which, if we don't guard against it, students who were displaced, say to Whittier this year, may find themselves displaced again. This should certainly be considered and avoided if at all possible. In general, staff should be as specific and clear as possible with numbers, so that out-of-zone students in a downsizing grade know very clearly who they are and what may happen to them.

VI. Wait Lists.

While desirable to parents, the wait lists became quite burdensome to staff, especially when calling through numbers of students with bad telephones and who -- having been placed on the lists automatically -- refused the offer of reassignment when it was offered.

This could be remedied by making the lists voluntary. That is, students who wished to be on the list would be added, in the order of their priority. We would also make it clear that the lists would be maintained only through the first or second week of school.

VIII. Other Issues.

- **Impact of Downsizing.** One issue which will be of vital interest to current parents at the smaller elementary schools is where and to what extent downsizing will occur next year. This year, for a number of reasons outlined above, a number of parents of displaced students were not only upset but also shocked to find their children out of their schools. Although the possibility of having to leave one's school is never pleasant, it can be softened to some extent by being accurately predicted, so that parents and students can be prepared for what is ahead. If possible, both the families and the current schools of displaced students should be given the assignment information before it becomes public knowledge, to allow for the parents and schools to work with students on this issue. If possible, the school of assignment should also be involved. Wherever possible, students should be given the opportunity to transfer with a friend. Finally, in a situation such as Whittier's, students should be given the opportunity of choosing to go to Washington in a group, perhaps even with a teacher. Although these solutions may take extra time to work out, in the end they will save the time staff has taken this year to deal with the individual parents in this situation -- beyond which they seem more likely to serve those parents' needs.

- **The Oxford/Jefferson Kindergarten Waiting lists.** As described above, a huge number of white families put in preference forms choosing Oxford first -- enough to form two extra sections just on their own. At Jefferson, the waiting list would have formed a section and a half. While some of these families will accept their assignment to other schools, a great number of them will not. Part of the problem is that they were assigned to Franklin, which they find unacceptable for a host of reasons including distance, neighborhood, size and future insecurity. Part of the problem is that they want to go to school in their own neighborhood. Certainly a number of them probably wouldn't have gone to Oxford even if they had been assigned there, but it is possible that a number of them would have gone, and the challenge to staff is to examine what strategies could be used for holding them next year.

- **The limitations of choice in the Northwest Zone.** There was a great deal of dissatisfaction among Northwest zone parents, especially kindergarten parents, as to the inequities in their choice as compared to choices given to families in other zones. Families who did not specifically want a Spanish language immersion school (Thousand Oaks), and who objected to Franklin's location, size, and bilingual focus, saw themselves as having only one real choice -- Jefferson -- while they saw families in other zones having three or four attractive schools from which to choose. Staff should consider possible resolutions to this situation -- or at least to this perception -- of inequity.

- **Neighborhood Proximity as a Priority.** This issue has a narrower and a broader focus. At its narrowest, it is the complaint of parents living within view of a school that they were not given a priority that would have assured their children of assignment, at least in kindergarten. The arguments in favor of this include the fact that a school's neighbors are its best after-hours guardians, and if they are disenfranchised the school as well as the neighborhood suffers an important loss. The arguments against involved the difficulty in delimiting what constitutes preferential proximity and whether that could be standardized from school to school.

The broader issue, which this last point opens into is the conflict between integration and neighborhood schools. If a family living across the street from a school are assured admission, why not the family living around the block. And certainly the family two blocks away feels a greater natural affinity for the school than they do for another school on the opposite side of their zone -- a geographical entity they view as artificial and against their best, if not natural, interests.

Staff's fairly consistent experience with this issue was that all parents who had wanted their neighborhood school and not gotten it were disappointed, but that parents who did get a school they felt was as good (or even better) than their neighborhood school, and whose only disadvantage was distance, were generally able to overcome their disappointment quite quickly and accept their assignment. On the other hand, parents who felt that they'd been barred from their neighborhood school and shunted to an inferior school with the added burden of transportation, felt that the system hadn't served their interests. Even a cursory review of other districts' experience with controlled choice

indicates that this is by no means a novel conclusion: this system's success will rest to a good degree on parents' perception of each school as truly and uniquely desirable. To the extent possible, staff needs to work to combat the perception that any one school is inferior to the others in its zone.

- **The Significance of "Other," as One of Our Three Categories.** One result of this process which becomes obvious from the numbers, is that, while the percentages of both white and African American dropped, even in existing grades, the percentage of "other" increased -- generally correspondingly. In other words, people who formerly called themselves black or white, are now calling themselves other -- along with Asian, Hispanic, Native American children, and children who are any combination of the above.

In the system as we ran it, clearly "other" is the wild card, and it may be a good thing for us to examine whether this system of classification is achieving what we mean to achieve.

In staff's experience, many parents are uncomfortable with this means of classification. Many parents have questioned whether their classification of their child may not have kept him or her out of a desired school. In a number of cases this has created some bitterness. Other parents have determined that their classification has indeed excluded their child and, through appealing and being granted the right to change ethnicity, the same child who was once excluded as "other," is not accepted as African American.

Finally, some parents have expressed a deep uneasiness at being categorized as "other." One Asian couple complained of feeling invisible. Despite the fact that the capacity created for this group matches its existence as closely as does the capacity for white and black, this couple felt very strongly that being lumped with other groups had actually lessened their chances for getting the school they wanted. They felt betrayed and ignored.

- **Separating in Order to Combine.** More than one frustrated parent commented that in seeking to teach children that they were all alike, our system of categorizing by ethnic code had in fact made them all the more conscious of their differences. While the Board's intent was never to deny the differences among children, the comment does raise the issue of whether it is possible to create and maintain diversity unselfconsciously, and if so, how. Obviously these are issues that cannot be resolved either swiftly, nor clearly, but both staff and the system might benefit from considering them.

- **The Middle Schools.** Another volatile and problematic issue this year involved the middle schools, specifically Longfellow's disadvantage versus King and Willard. Although Longfellow's sixth grade is as large as King's, the Board has promised that any Berkeley resident in that sixth grade who wants to transfer to King or Willard for seventh grade will be assured of assignment to the school in whose zone s/he lives. This raises the issue of Longfellow's seventh -- and eighth -- grades, and what can be done to make them viable.

- **Commitment to Interdistrict Students.** This year the Board assured all continuing interdistrict students that not only would they be placed for next year, but they would know that placement in the spring. As mentioned above, when it came time for the assignment of these students, most projected sections in the District were full, so that a decision had to be made whether to open new sections or overfill the existing ones. The situation was resolved by overfilling and making interdistrict assignments provisional, but even so, reassigning these students will add an extra complication to the already complex situation that will face us the first two weeks of school. Furthermore, many interdistrict students were bitterly disappointed to be assigned away from their schools, while in some cases siblings were separated (because of the impossibility of finding space for both siblings at any one school). Given this experience, the Board may want to reexamine the District's commitment to interdistrict students and what special assurances -- if any -- they should be given next year.

- **Mind Changers.** A smaller problem is posed by parents who change their minds and want their children to be reassigned. This year we were quite liberal, in the understanding that the system was new and people might have been confused when they made their first choice. On the other hand, there has been a great deal of mind-changing (between five and ten percent), which creates work for staff and confusion at the schools. It has been suggested that mind changers should have to fill out a new preference form and go through the process again. This is something staff will want to discuss before next March.