

School choice frustrates some BUSD families

By Marc Breindel

Advance planning could mitigate two potential disasters at the Berkeley Unified School District. The School Board heard a plan last week to minimize student displacement due to school reconfiguration; and discussed a city-wide earthquake drill involving "wounded" students in fake blood and bandages.

Complaints about last spring's reconfiguration were addressed by Parent Access Coordinator Nancy Greenman, who summed up nine sore points with the school assignment system and offered corresponding plans for fine tuning.

One problem apparently resulted from confusion over the new rules. Some parents believed their children would receive higher priority in admission at schools previously attended by siblings. In fact, such preference is granted only when a sibling is still attending the same school. Last week's appointment of BUSD Information Officer Karen Sarro should help forestall similar miscommunication next year.

Some parents disapproved of the BUSD's decision to disregard proximity as a factor in school assignment. Others resented consignment of all non-white and non-black students to the category "all other ethnicities," which made them feel "invisible."

Several problems stemmed from the concentration of all bilingual programs in the Northwest Zone. That configuration left scores of limited-English proficient students without a bilingual program in their own zones. Conversely, students in the Northwest Zone complained of the absence of a local campus free of a bilingual program.

As a result, a number of students applied to campuses outside their home zones, where they were not considered until local students had been admitted. When some students were then rejected at their first-choice, foreign-zone schools in favor of locals, they also found that their second-choice schools had been filled even when their second-choice schools were in their own home zones. Thus, some children ended up at third-choice schools outside their home zones.

As Greenman put it, some students got "two fuzzy ends of the lollipop."

Director Doolan asked how many of those students had been displaced by youths from other cities.

"The vast and overwhelming majority (of inter-district transfer students) we turned away because we didn't have space," Greenman answered.

"This will be our base year in having really clear data about this," she said. "Next year we'll ... know more."