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Parent challenges admission policies

By Marc Breindel

Lily McNeil is the daughter of an immigrant, but that didn't help her beat the racial quotas at Oxford School, where her parents hoped she would enter kindergarten this year.

Joanna Salska, Lily's Polish-born mother, said she and her husband moved to North Berkeley five years ago — at high financial cost — so that their daughter could attend the neighborhood school. Last year Lily rose as high as number two on the Oxford waiting list, but then Salska heard that more students of color were needed, and Lily was assigned to Wash-

ington School.

"From my point of view, it should not have happened what happened," Salska said in her thick Polish accent. "It made me feel very bad."

She said it wasn't the quota system that bothered her, but rather the perception that the school district misled her. As she understood in the spring, her daughter was virtually assured of admission to Oxford after waiting in three separate lists, and now Lily is being bused across town while her parents prepare for an appeals process they know nothing about.

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"I accepted the system, we didn't get into the school we hoped to, we got on the waiting list, the waiting list got bypassed," Salska summarized. "If you know how things work, you believe in the system. But the system was not used."

Parent access officer Nancy Greenman would not discuss Lily's individual case, but she acknowledged that last-minute assignment changes to accommodate the new state class size reduction program may have upset some parents.

Greenman insisted, however, that everything has been done by the book. Since reconfiguration, elementary students have been assigned to schools by a hierarchical lottery; priority derives from proximity to a site, attendance of siblings there, and other factors including race.

Because each school has ethnic quotas, black students only compete for slots with other black students, white students with whites, and so on. Thus, a low number of children on a white waiting list means nothing if a school only needs more Asians or Latinos.

The larger system is anything but simple. Once one takes into account first and second lotteries, multiple waiting lists and reconfiguration, the computer-aided assignment process becomes impenetrable to the outside observer. Greenman recognizes this, and said she tries to help families cut through the fog.

"I think that for parents, to understand something makes it less frustrating," Greenman said. "I think we all have that experience in the world."

The situation is particularly stressful for Salska because it recalls unpleasant memories of the Communist bureaucracy she left behind. Like many other immigrants, Salska hoped American administrators would be more readily accountable.

But Salska quickly learned that yankee voice mail can be every bit as daunting as the queues of Eastern Europe. Oxford principal Kathleen Lewis was too busy to return her calls ("I'm very sympathetic ... there just aren't enough hours in a day," Lewis told *The Voice*), and Superintendent Jack McLaughlin never directly acknowledged her letters. Still, she kept trying.

"I've seen it all the time," Salska said. "I had no democratic way to change my situation (in Poland), and I hope I have a way to do it here."

Ironically, the same class size reduction program that may have kept Lily out of Oxford is also causing trouble for those who got in. Fourteen classes of 20 students each have replaced 12 classes of up to 30, forcing conversion of the library, music room and storage space into additional classrooms.

There's also another, unanticipated problem: Increased new students are literally squeezing the school out of its

small lot. Before reconfiguration, Oxford ended at third grade, whereas now there are fast-growing fourth- and fifth-graders there as well.

"It's one of those things that you really don't think about," Lewis remarked.

Now an ad hoc Oxford Parents and Staff Space Committee is lobbying for new portable buildings to house kindergartners, perhaps at Live Oak Park. They and parents at similarly impacted John Muir and Emerson Schools are happy to see their children in smaller classes, but they're concerned that there's no room for non-academic activities.

"The parents, along with the staff of this school and others, must find ways of creating schools which not merely meet the letter of reduced class sizes," said Oxford parent Susan Brand, "but their intent as well: a quality education in a setting where all students can thrive, learn and grow."

That may be difficult at some sites. Parents at Jefferson already have the kind of portable buildings Brand wants for Oxford, and they've recently discovered that their campus is dangerously congested as a result. Still, some parents are willing to take risks.

"I'm sure the people at Oxford School would be envious," said Jefferson parent Larry Billock at last week's school board meeting.

"We are!" another parent called back.

Parents also hope the district can quickly integrate all the new instructors who were hired just a week and a half before the first day of school. About a third of the 25 new recruits, like Lily's kindergarten teacher, have never taught full-time before.

Associate Superintendent of Personnel Frank Brunetti said parents can rest assured that his new hires are all highly qualified.

"I don't have any concern about any of our new teachers," Brunetti said, "since they've all gone through excellent programs and they all have excellent support within their schools."

All Berkeley teachers also went through a three-day staff development program before school began, along with orientation for those new to the district. Further training will be offered throughout the fall.

PTA Council representative Susan O'Donnell reported to the School Board that most parents are excited about reduced class sizes. Overall, she said, the first month of school seems to have gone smoothly.

But there are also those like Salska, still working to make the public school experience even smoother in the future.

"At least maybe they'll change (assignment procedures) for next year," Salska said, "so other parents won't be in the same situation that we are."

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