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S.F. Schools Float New Diversity Plan

Some complain that race still used as one criterion

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 CHRONICLE SECTIONS

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San Francisco school officials, under a court order to create a race-neutral plan for enrolling students at the campus of their choice, are proposing a "diversity index" to rank children by poverty, English proficiency, test scores -- and race.

The idea is to keep the schools diverse but consider factors other than race when making school assignments, school officials said.

"You would get approved based on whether you can help affect the diversity of the school," said Jennie Horn of the district's Educational Placement Office.

Already, however, some community groups and attorneys say considering race in any form violates an agreement reached before a federal judge, and they will oppose the plan in court.

The proposal is a "blueprint to destroy the concept of neighborhood schools in the name of diversity," said the Chinese American Democratic Club, a group that speaks for families opposed to using race in school assignments.

San Francisco is being forced to change its admissions rules for the first time since 1983, when district officials programmed a computer to make race a central consideration. Under the old system, no school could have more than 45 percent of any one ethnicity, and each school had to have at least four ethnic groups represented.

INTENDED TO REMEDY BIAS

That system, brought about by an NAACP

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lawsuit, was intended to remedy past discrimination against black and Latino students. But it also led to a lawsuit filed in 1994 by several Chinese American families that said it unfairly excluded their children from prestigious schools such as Lowell High.

Now, if U.S. District Judge William Orrick approves the new plan at a November 5 hearing, the computer will be reprogrammed to include four selection criteria:

-- Socioeconomic status. Students' rankings would depend on whether they are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, live in public housing or receive public assistance.

-- Academic achievement. Students would be ranked according to whether they scored above or below the 25th percentile in reading and/or math on California's annual achievement test, the Stanford 9.

-- Language skill. Ranking would be based on whether a student speaks English fluently, partially, or not at all.

-- Race/ethnicity. Students would be broken into nine ethnic groups: black, white, Latino, Chinese American, Japanese American, Korean American, Filipino American, American Indian and "other nonwhite."

"Each student has a profile based on the four factors," says the proposal, which was developed by a 27-member committee of district employees that held five meetings this summer to hear suggestions from the public.

"A student whose individual profile will contribute to increasing the diversity of (a) school will have priority for assignment/admission to that school," the plan says.

FIVE CHOICES

Under the proposal, parents who want to choose a school other than the one the district has assigned to them could list five choices.

A child who is white and lives in public housing, for example, could win admission to all five schools under the new plan, even if the schools had a largely white enrollment. The child would then be assigned to the first school on the parents' list.

Another child who is white and wealthy might not get any of the five choices. In that case, the parent could appeal the verdict and hope for the best.

A child who speaks little English could be turned down from a school where there are many other non-English speakers, and assigned to a school where there are few such students.

And, all other factors being equal, a student with high test scores could theoretically lose out to an applicant with lower scores because of the district's goal of making a school's population diverse.

At Lowell, students would still be picked from among those who rate high academically and are accomplished in extracurricular activities. Admissions would then be determined according to the new system.

PARENTS' PRAISE

Many parents praised the proposal after hearing about it at the public meetings or through word-of-mouth.

Ramona Claiborne is an African American parent who spent two years arguing with district officials before they let her daughter attend an elementary school in the family's neighborhood, Bayview-Hunters Point. Claiborne was told that the school, Carver Elementary, already had enough black students.

Claiborne said she welcomes the new plan -- especially because her daughter will be applying to high schools this year.

"I don't want anyone to tell me that my kid can't go to Thurgood Marshall High School because they've met their quota of black students," she said.

But the families that sued the district to end its race-based admissions system are unhappy with the plan.

"The criteria are supposed to be race-neutral, but this proposal includes the use of race," said David Levine, an attorney representing the Chinese American families in their class-action suit.

RACIAL DIVERSITY A GOAL

A court settlement agreed to in February by the families, the district, the NAACP and the state Department of Education clearly says the district may keep racial diversity as a goal for city schools.

But none of the parties agrees on whether the settlement lets the district use race to help choose students for admission to a school.

It suggests that race can be used if other criteria are also considered: "Race or ethnicity may not be the primary or predominant consideration in determining . . . admissions criteria," the settlement reads.

But the next sentence says: "The (district) will not assign or admit any student to a particular school, class or program on the basis of the race or ethnicity of that student."

Levine said, "There's a difference of opinion. If we can't come to an agreement, the judge will decide."

FEAR ABOUT CONSEQUENCES

Defenders of ethnic diversity and affirmative action say that they are willing to expand the criteria for student admission but that they fear the consequences of eliminating race as a factor.

"Without the desegregation plan, schools like Carver in the Bayview- Hunters Point neighborhood wouldn't be worth fighting to get into," said Michael Harris, an attorney representing the San Francisco NAACP in the admissions lawsuit.

He also pointed to this year's freshman class at Lowell, the district's showcase academic high school.

Orrick forbade any school from using race as a factor in admissions while the district was drawing up its new proposal. In Lowell's freshman class, Latino enrollment dropped to just under 5 percent from last year's 11 percent. Enrollment of whites and Chinese Americans rose somewhat, while the proportion of most other ethnic groups changed little.

Harris said the numbers show why race is necessary in student admission. He also praised the district's new proposal.

"It's moving in the right direction," he said. "I have confidence in the leadership of the school district and don't think they'll go back to the unfair, dual schools of years ago."

CHART:

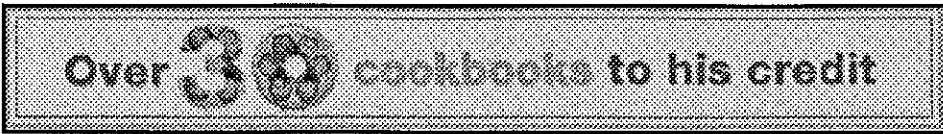
LOWELL ENROLLMENT

Freshman enrollment at San Francisco's Lowell High School for fall 1999 compared with last year. A federal judge forbade the district from using race as a consideration in admissions for the current school year.

	This year	Last year
This year (total: 694)		
Last year (total: 614)		
Latino	4.8%	11.1%
Black	3.9%	3.9%
White	19.7%	16%
Chinese American	51.7%	46.7%
Japanese American	1.3%	2.3%
Korean American	2.4%	2.1%
American Indian	0%	.5%
Filipino American	3.5%	4.4%
Other nonwhite	12.7%	13%

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