

Restructuring of the BUSD focuses on local control

By Julie Freestone

As the Berkeley Unified School District continues to ponder how to best restructure its system, much of the discussion seems to be focusing on models that provide greater control to individual schools.

The restructuring process, currently centering around a series of board workshops and community forums that will culminate in January recommendations for change, was stimulated by the passage of Measure A last June, a bond measure providing funds to improve district schools.

At a recent forum, UC-Berkeley education experts Dr. James Guthrie and Dr. Julia Koppich outlined a number of alternate ways to provide education.

Praising the discussion process, Guthrie said, "If this were a conventional American school system, there wouldn't be a conversation like this. The architects would be out there with plans."

School models

Nearly 200 attentive parents, teachers and administrators listened to Koppich and Guthrie describe features of specialized magnet schools, independent charter schools, schools within schools and other choices.

One option, school-based management, gives a school site a substantial amount of decision-making authority, including control over the budget, said Koppich.

"It also implies there is some organization by which parents and teachers can participate in decision making," Koppich said, adding that in some school-based management models the principal's contract may be subject to approval by a parent-teacher committee.

"It is a way to empower those professional educators and parents to make decisions based on the belief that they are more informed,"

she said.

But Guthrie pointed out to make those models work, school officials needed control over their budgets or the arrangement would be "hollow."

Other possibilities that interested the audience were choice plans, where parents are allowed to select which district school children would attend, and charter schools, a new, limited state approach that cuts individual schools lose from state mandates, freeing them to operate under a charter from the school district.

Choice plans

Referring to the choice plan, which he called "extraordinarily popular," Guthrie said California already has a little known choice option which allows parents to place their children in school either where they live or where they work.

Within one school district, the choice plans use open enrollment. "In effect, district attendance boundaries no longer have any meaning," Guthrie said, adding choice can be either "extraordinarily attractive or extraordinarily destructive," depending on how carefully it is planned.

One important element of a choice plan is to keep track of which schools parents prefer, analyze what the more popular ones offer and restructure the programs at the less desirable locations.

Community values

"A choice plan cuts across so many issues it requires careful tailoring," he said, pointing out that all of the decisions involving restructuring affect Berkeley's values.

"There is no easy answer to these value-laden questions," he said. "There is no empirical research evidence that will answer these questions. They come very close to a core of values, not

science."

Guthrie and Koppich also discussed neighborhood schools, a model most districts traditionally used for public education. Saying the old-fashioned approach was premised on the belief that parental participation and a sense of community are enhanced, Koppich warned, "The risk, in a community with a lot of diversity (and segregated housing patterns), is that you limit the ability of children to learn from other cultures."

In the question and answer period, BUSD officials indicated statistics they have collected indicate some neighborhood schools would be integrated enough by drawing from the local community so that busing would be unnecessary.

But insuring parental involvement might be an equally important issue. Guthrie said studies analyzing what factors impact on academic achievement show parents' concern is particularly important.

"One of the powerful (factors is parental concern, a nurturing environment set by parents," Guthrie said, indicating that one of the questions in choosing a mode has to be whether there is a way to encourage the involvement or remove impediments to it.

Money issues

Parents raised questions about the costs associated with a choice program, which Guthrie said were minimal, and staff development for teachers.

"In almost every one of these (models), you cannot achieve the goals without making some provision for staff members to gain access to systematic training," Guthrie said, while acknowledging that money for staff development was being cut out of budgets.