

*Berke - R.S. - Restructuring*

# Task force consens

## Board opinions already divided on

Shannon Morgan

The Berkeley Unified School district moved one step closer to vamping its desegregation policies last week when it finally received the recommendations of the School Organization Task Force.

After meeting for nearly six months the task force, charged by the superintendent to develop alternative desegregation and grade configuration methodologies for the district, advised changing the assignment of students to schools, but left other district policies like grade configuration open for debate.

If implemented by the board, the most drastic change recommended by the task force would abolish the current system of assigning students to schools according to where they live and would be replaced by a system of parental choice.

Though the task force did not specify what type of choice system would be put in place, the most likely scenario would allow parents to choose which school their students attend, as long as each school remains within established desegregation standards.

Whether or not the proposal will be implemented will remain at the

center of debate for months while district staff develops implementation strategies and the Board of Education conducts further analysis and public hearings on the matter.

The issues around reorganizing schools are so nebulous at this point that board members have vastly different viewpoints on whether the recommendations are viable.

"I am delighted with choice. That was what I always wanted, but I don't know if the superintendent will recommend it," school board director Elizabeth Shaugnessy said.

Board president Pedro Noguera, however, said he is beginning to favor keeping the district's current system. He said task force recommendations are unclear about how such choice system would be managed, how new grade configurations would be implemented and how any change would affect the cost of busing in the district.

While the recommendation, if implemented, would mean an end to the district's current two-way busing system to achieve integration, the plan would require some form of busing.

"There would be a huge increase in cost if you have kids liv-

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## r school choice recommendation

ing next door to each other who are being bused all over town," Noguera said.

Other school board members, like Pamela Doolan and Miriam Topel, are reserving comment on the proposal until wider public input is attained and staff develops implementation strategies.

"I don't feel I have enough information yet, I haven't made any decisions. I want to get a sense of what the broad community wants and judge what level of dissatisfaction or satisfaction there is with our current system," Topel said.

Aside from moving to a system of choice, the SOTF also recommended last week that the district consider allowing individual schools to change their current grade configurations.

Most elementary schools are presently divided into K-3 and 4-6 grade levels, with K-3 students living in the flatlands bused to schools in the hills and 4-6 students living in the hills bused to schools in the flatlands.

At this point seven out of 12 elementary schools favor switching to a K-5 system.

In addition, the task force recommended that the district implement a system of site-based management as a priority and that any

reorganization efforts be paired by the need to improve educational programs throughout the district.

School superintendent Dr. Lavoneia Steele recognized that now that the SOTF recommendations are in her work has just begun.

"Now that we have the recommendations it's incumbent upon staff to put together some scenarios to figure out how something might be put in place that is consistent with this. There is a lot more work to be done," Steele said.

Regardless of what direction the board ultimately follows, most agree that the district's current policies, especially around desegregation, need improvement.

"We can't go with the exact status quo because a number of schools aren't in compliance with our current policy. Whatever we do we are going to have to improve our desegregation policies," Topel said.

If the board follows the task force recommendation for desegregation standards, which is virtually identical to the district's current policy, schools would have to assure that enrollment be made so that the student population is consistent with the district-wide racial balance of students.