

# Finding a school for everybody

*Berkeley - Public School - Restructuring*

## Reconfiguration creates a major job for coordinator

By Whitney Woodward

If you have elementary or middle school children enrolled in the Berkeley Unified School District, Nancy Greenman knows it.

Last year, when BUSD decided to reconfigure, dividing the district into three zones and implementing "controlled choice" among schools, it was Greenman who filled the new position of Parent Access Coordinator. Along with assistant Joanna Graham and numerous school secretaries, Greenman has been responsible for gathering information and enrollment applications for 4,300 Berkeley students and placing those children in schools or on waiting lists for next fall.

Many parents, fearing that their children were going to get lost in the shuffle, were agitated at the onset. "There is a reason why hearsay is not allowed in courts of law...it is really

like that whispering game! It really distorts fast," said Greenman.

As it turns out, most parents' fears were allayed when 90 percent of the students who enrolled by the deadline got their first choices. Six percent reportedly got their second choice school and 2 percent their third.

Those who are unhappy with the results have been

**Parents comment**  
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streaming into Greenman's office since March 16, when the "first round" of children's names was posted. Her office is now the central point for appeals.

"Right now, the issues are three: appeals, second rounds and reassignment," said Greenman. "Second rounds will be for those students who did not apply by the Feb. 15 deadline, or who are inter-district transfers.

Last week Greenman was bent studiously over her desk, retabulating classroom lists. The school district had declared a fis-

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Chester King Vega

nancy Greenman handles school assignments for 4,300 pupils.

emergency and upped class sizes, more children could move off waiting lists and into newly created ones.

For Greenman, assignments are a matter of mathematics, and can be decided using the same computer program that placed them. Students are assigned numerals according to school zone, siblings, and race, (in order to promote a 25 percent racial balance for both white and black students). Children wanting to continue attending a school in their zone are automatically "grandfathered" in, and the rest of the students are randomly drawn by the computer from the pool of names.

Greenman said that while parents may have some emotional attachment to a school, they should focus on the procedural issues in their appeals. She said she has worked with a few hundred parents since the first assignment, and in the overwhelming majority of the cases has been able to solve the problems without having to go to appeals.

In other cases, if they are not within her mandate to resolve, Greenman will pass the request along to the Appeals Board comprising of people from the community including a minister, a home-school instructor, a child welfare advocate and two parents selected by the superintendent.

Parents are notified about the outcome 48 hours after a case is reviewed by the board.

"It's good to have an independent group of community people who will look at whatever we don't do or can't do, or parents who don't feel comfortable with what we've done. I think that's a very good control mechanism to have," she said.

In the meantime, Greenman said people are concerned that she's going to run the second round and give away the places for which they are appealing.

"That's not going to happen," she said. "We know what people are appealing for, and we're not giving those spaces away."

Those appealing are mostly kindergartners and displaced students who were out of zone and want to stay at their original schools, and sixth-graders who wanted to get into a certain middle school program.

In virtually every case, Greenman said people are appealing because there's a waiting list, "and if there's a waiting list, then we're not giving away spaces."

The reconfiguration process has brought the district some interesting results, said Greenman. "More kindergartners applied than we imagined would. More fourth-graders stayed than would normally stay."

She speculates that this is because the district is allowing children to go to their neighborhood schools, instead of bussing them across town. In the mid-'60s, Berkeley was one of the first school districts in the nation to commit to desegregation by matching up schools from different neighborhoods.

But in the last several decades, school enrollment has dwindled as parents have sent their fourth-through sixth-graders to private schools when it came time for them to attend their matching school.

## Good marketing

Despite the fact that the schools didn't have much time to make their presentations before the first round of choices this year, Greenman said that they did a good job marketing themselves.

"It's a very positive process, because it allows the schools to really tap into what their strengths are and speak with some pride about what they have," she said. She gave Malcolm X as an example of a school that they had been concerned about,

because it went from being a fourth-through sixth-grade program to a K through 6 this year, and had received extra funds to help it compete.

"Most of the grades at Malcolm X, including the new kindergarten and second grade are packed, completely balanced, and have waiting lists," Greenman said.

"And that's just the first year. They really got a hold of what this is about...they've defined themselves, they've defined their program, and they just went forward. Parents responded to that."