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Thursday, Oct. 9, 1997

Time to toss student-assignment plan, Stanford says

by *Dick Lilly*
Seattle Times staff reporter

Superintendent John Stanford hates the Seattle School District's system for assigning students to schools and busing them around town. It produces neither desegregation, as it was supposed to do when implemented in 1988, nor academic achievement among schoolchildren, particularly minorities, he says.

"It's an absolute farce that we should call what we have a desegregation plan," Stanford said yesterday, summing up a 3 1/2-hour School Board discussion of a proposed new student-assignment system.

The complex rules now used to assign children to the district's 60 elementary and nine alternative schools force people to "work around" the system and to "falsify addresses, change their children's ethnicity or do whatever they have to do in the absence of a plan that makes sense," Stanford said.

The new plan, written primarily by Joseph Olchefske, the district's chief financial officer, is supposed to end all that with a simpler, "universal assignment rule" that would let more children go to their neighborhood schools and result in much less cross-town busing for desegregation.

Here's the plan:

-- Families would be able to choose any school in the district.

-- But bus transportation would be provided only within a student's home cluster, a contiguous group of schools including the student's neighborhood school and at least one alternative or kindergarten through eighth-grade (K-8) school. There are nine clusters in the city, averaging seven or eight schools each.

-- First preference would be given to students who want to enroll in their neighborhood school.

When more students want into a school than space allows, those who get in would be chosen in order according to the following "tiebreakers": first, neighborhood residents; second, siblings of children already in the school; third, "integration positive," that is, the child's enrollment would help racial balance.

The system would take effect for new school enrollments, kindergarten and transfers, beginning next fall. Students now enrolled can stay in their present schools through the highest grade their schools offer. District officials have said that continuing students with the same home addresses would get transportation to those schools, too, through the 1999-2000 school year.

Board members, who have final say on the student assignment and desegregation policy, had questions about the proposal that they want answered before a vote scheduled for Nov. 5.

Among the most controversial changes is the proposal to provide school buses only within each cluster, eliminating cross-town desegregation busing. It also eliminates busing for students attending alternative schools outside their cluster.

That could hurt alternative schools because they often are based on unique educational philosophies, said board member Barbara Schaad-Lamphere.

The reason for the proposed change is equity, Olchefske said. The cost of busing long distances to alternative schools is often much higher than busing to regular schools.

Another problem is the order of the so-called tiebreakers. Board members Michael Preston and Ellen Roe both said "integration positive" should be the top tiebreaker if the district is to continue to strive for desegregation.

For the sake of desegregation, the plan contains one feature strikingly similar to the present "controlled choice" student-assignment plan. Children from some neighborhoods deemed "racially isolated" would be permitted to choose schools from clusters at opposite ends of the city and they would get transportation.

Yesterday, Mark Green, the district's general counsel, outlined legal issues that might arise because the new student-assignment plan replaces a plan whose stated goal was desegregation.

As long as the board's purpose now is not resegregation and as long as the district "provide(s) equality of educational opportunity regardless of the location or racial mix of the school" there should be no legal problem, he said.

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