

Grade configuration dominates school debate

by Shannon Morgan

BUSD Board of Directors agreed on one thing last week: They're not ready to rule out any of the four options under consideration.

Board members, staff and a handful of parents met Saturday to further consider grade configuration options as part of an effort to improve facilities and academic achievement levels.

As it stands now the board will decide Dec. 15 from the following options.

• The Mosaic plan would allow each school its chosen grade configuration, as reported last spring, and would result in three different school zones with myriad options. At this time it is unclear if parents would be able to choose which schools their children attend in the zone in which they live.

The first zone, if implemented as is, includes Emerson, LeConte and Jefferson as k-3 schools feeding into Malcolm X, which would remain 4-6. After sixth grade students would attend Willard, which also remains 7-8. In this zone there would be more students at Malcolm X than at Willard.

The second zone would include Cragmont and Columbus as k-4 feeding into Thousand Oaks as a 5-8. Washington, Oxford, Arts Magnet, John Muir and Longfellow would round out the third zone as k-5 schools feeding into King. As proposed last week King would need to accommodate more than 1,000 students under this plan (it currently serves 800).

• Under a k-3 Choice parents would be able to choose their children's schools, with the caveat that the district would cut off enrollment at a school once integra-

tion maximums are achieved, with black and white students at each school equal to the total percentage of black and white students district-wide, plus or minus 5 percent.

• The Crescent Plan would also work under a three zone system, but would call for k-3 and 4-6 schools district-wide. The new zones would include Cragmont, Jefferson and Columbus as k-3 schools feeding into Thousand Oaks in the Northwest zone. A Middle zone would incorporate Oxford, Washington and Whittier feeding into Longfellow and LeConte, Emerson and John Muir would feed into Malcolm X in a Southeast zone.

• The K-4, 5-8 Two Zone plan is another under consideration. If implemented Malcolm X, Thousand Oaks, King and Willard would become 5-8 schools, while all other elementary schools switch to a k-4 format. The zones, at this point, would divide the northeast and west portions of the city from southeast and central campus areas.

While various school board members see merits in all the plans presented, unease over choosing which to implement is growing as the deadline for action looms closer.

In addition, school principals are reportedly far from consensus on what direction the district should take.

"We had an intense meeting with principals on this subject, the feeling among k-3 schools was going toward new zones or a k-4, 5-8 system. The feeling at the meeting of principals with 4-8 grades was uneasiness about any change at all," BUSD Associate Superintendent Nancy Spaeth said.

Emerson principal Laura Monroe, as the only principal in attendance, agreed that many are ner-

vous.

"Most of us feel we have to have a well thought out plan. We can't go with a mosaic and let people do their own thing and k-3 didn't seem as workable. We have to think about what's going on in the class room, not just grade configuration," she said.

"Both of the remaining plans have advantages. I have very mixed feelings about which I'd like to see at Emerson. Principals agree we need to decide on a consistent grade configuration for the school system. We can no longer flounder," she added.

One advantage to a K-4, 5-8 plan would be that students would transfer to a new school at a more appropriate age, board members and administrators say.

"What we know about grade levels is that students break better after 4th grade. We break them at probably one of the most vulnerable stages," Monroe said, noting that academic achievement tests take place in the fourth grade.

But School Board Director Pamela Doolan echoed concerns felt by many parents about mixing fifth- and sixth-graders with older children, citing her sixth-grader's interest in junior high school dances as an example.

"I realize it's really inappropriate for her to be interested in that and would like her to be sheltered," Doolan said.

Administrators agree it's an issue and say the two groups could have separate classrooms and lunches.

But the plan would also mean difficult changes.

"If Emerson were k-4 we would lose everybody south of Ashby Avenue. That's a substantial change in something that's been going on for 12 years, but for the greater good I see we need to look at those things," Monroe said.

Other principals may agree.

"I think some that were particu-

larly strong for k-5 felt k-4 comes close to doing that. It was a kind of compromise to say we can at least add an extra year at those schools with new zones," Spaeth said.

"The concern about 5-8 is that it's a new concept and it's hard to imagine how it would work without staff committed to make it work. If there were principals and teachers who feel they could make a go of it" it may be acceptable, Director Irene Hegarty said.

The k-3, 4-6 model would keep current grade configurations but readjust city zones to better integration and shorten student bus rides.

"What we know is the average distance per child is less than our current zones, it's about 20 percent less," said Bruce Wicinas, a parent who worked with the district to map different scenarios.

Another consideration is whether feeder schools would necessarily retain their current relationship.

"The demographics have changed a great deal. A high number of school children are in West Berkeley and they have been reducing in Northeast Berkeley. Common sense tells us there can't be a greater distance than that between Cragmont and Columbus — you may wish to look at these areas and move students to a school that is closer," said Monica Thyberg, Berkeley Schools Enrichment Program manager.

There is also concern about distribution of the city's special education programs, which have yet to be determined under any model, as well as the desire to make schools smaller.

The mosaic and choice plan, which would satisfy the greatest number of desires voiced, are likely to be implemented according to Saturday's discussion.

School Board Director Elizabeth Shaughnessy seemed the only o-

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willing to voice support for the mosaic plan.

"The advantage of this is it gives people what they want. Malcolm has a program that's getting better and better. It seems we ought to respect that but I don't think they should be allowed to say the rest of the district should be like them," Shaugnessy said.

Others, however, see it as close to impossible to implement.

"There's the temptation to try to figure out a mosaic plan that respects legitimate desires, but we don't want to compromise and have an overall system that just satisfies current parents in the schools. In a couple years we'll have a whole different group of parents — what if they want something different," School Board Director Miriam Topel said.

The problem with k-5 choice the integration pattern across the city.

"I talked to the superintendent of Seattle schools (which is a choice system). He said they achieved more integration with 85 percent of parents satisfied, but they only have 15 percent white students in the schools where 75 percent in the city are white. They're still not buying into it," School Board President Pedro Noguera said.

Mainly, there is concern that school will not adequately draw students from across town to racially balance each site.

"It boils down to if integration is a value and is a prerequisite in working toward improved student achievement, can we have integration and k-5 schools. We would have to feel that choice is conceivable in order to consider it," Topel said.

Noguera is one who vocally doubts whether such a system would work.

"The only kind of choice I could see would be coercive," he said, adding that parents would be forced to attend certain schools to balance

racess and would likely not get their first choice.

Director Pamela Doolan is also one not likely to vote for the plan because she "has trouble with the competition" between schools that would be necessitated.