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# Tough decisions debated as reconfiguration deadline nears

By Shannon Morgan

With more questions than answers to choose from, members of the Berkeley School Board last week began the contentious task of sifting through options for a redesigned school system in preparation. A final decision is expected April 20.

Though Superintendent LaVoneia Steele put forward seven different scenarios for consideration (see related story, page 4), board members ruled out possibilities that would require King Jr. High School's population to grow beyond 1,000 students.

"I don't think the administration should spend too much time developing it, because I don't think any of us want it," School Board President Elizabeth Shaughnessy said.

The tradeoff is that coming up with a plan to implement a K-5, 6-8 school system seems to necessitate creating a third middle school serving 450 sixth through eighth graders at Longfellow, allowing certain schools the option of serving K-8 students or closing one or more schools.

Longfellow parents and neighbors are opposed to plans to transform their location into a middle

school and seem to have sympathy, if not support, from a number of board members.

"The only plan that calls for no schools being closed is (turning Longfellow into a middle school. The problem is the site's inequity to other middle schools. In order for me to approve it I'd need to see a concept for a middle school there," Director Pedro Noguera said.

"It's hard to imagine it as something that will attract parents and not be something students are assigned to. I think a lot of parents are scared that's where they are going to end up."

Under the new three-zone system, parents are permitted to choose which K-5 school they want their children attend within their zone, as well as which middle school they prefer district-wide.

But the district will assign students, based on their first, second and third choice, to various schools in order to assure racial balance.

It is envisioned that strong and distinctive programs at each site will draw parents and students from across social and racial boundaries, but there is fear that the district lacks resources and/or committed personnel to bring the

vision to life.

"I think it involves a combination of staff and resources. We're going to have to figure out which of these possibilities is going to be realistic. I keep thinking about targeting site enrichment funds and wonder if we can use the Berkeley Schools Enrichment Project to create our own restructuring grant situation," Director Miriam Topel said.

As for changing Longfellow from its current 4-6 grade configuration to one serving 6-8 grades, Associate Superintendent Nancy Spaeth said administrators developed a school of the arts and

technology as a possible model.

The site would be the smallest of the district's middle schools, with three acres available, compared to Willard with more than five acres and King with 17 acres.

That most obvious inequity

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# Schools

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could be overcome by a school that already has one of the best auditoriums in the district and would serve a smaller population of students more interested in the arts than foreign language or other electives.

Though fewer classes would be offered, administrators suggest combining math with set design or computer programming, history and reading with theatrical productions could bridge the gap and offer an alternative, hands-on learning approach.

"The performing arts has an

enormous appeal in Berkeley. The strategy would be to put the technology of performance and drama in the history, science and math classes. Maybe we could also put the cable television station at the middle school instead of the high school. It seemed like an interesting idea that would attract a lot of students," Spaeth said.

Some seemed swayed by the idea.

"I'd be willing to support it if I felt confident we could put in an attractive program. I for one, being the parent of a sixth-grade boy, would like it if there were an alternative available," Topel said.

But proposals to allow a K-8 school in each zone or the combination of a K-5 Arts Magnet school with a new 6-8 Arts and Technology school at Longfellow are also possible, with split support on the school board so far.

The main concern with developing three K-8 schools is that there may not be schools ready to do so and there may not be enough students to fill three separate sites.

"The only school that has the potential of becoming a K-8 is Arts Magnet because they want to become one. I don't think anyone else is ready for that," Noguera said.

Director Pamela Doolan put forward an amended proposal that would place the third middle school at Longfellow, create a K-8 school at Malcolm X, which would allow that site to retain its 4-6 grade programming, and include Cragmont in the central zone, instead of the north zone, to allow more choice to parents in that area.

Noguera and Longfellow parents seem to favor allowing the creation of a K-8 school at Longfellow and the creation of several K-6 schools through the district that would nullify the need for a third middle school.