

Restructuring unanimously approved

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By Michelle Latimer

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Marking its first change in school groupings in more than 25 years, the Berkeley Unified School District Board unanimously approved a detailed plan to make its K-3, 4-6 school program into a K-5 arrangement that would allow parents some choice in where their kids attend school.

The decision puts the seal on a plan for school zones the board approved more than six months ago. Community and board members asked for a detailed plan from administrators several times but were given little in the way of information. Facing deadlines for notification of parents and a self-stated goal to implement the plan in the 1995-96 school year, the board and administration over the past several weeks hammered out a plan to phase in the changes over a two-year period.

Board members, BUSD Superintendent Jack McLaughlin and his staff met Saturday to hold a public discussion and vote on the reconfiguration package.

McLaughlin said that while the controlled choice plan forces the schools to market themselves — which public schools aren't in the habit of doing — he thought the outcome would be positive.

"I think (the reconfiguration) will be a good thing," he said, adding that the competition among schools would be healthy. "It makes education better," he said.

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But Berkeley parent Alvin Warwas said the new grade structurings wouldn't produce better students. In fact, Warwas said, the focus on education was precisely what was missing from the current discussions about the reconfiguration.

"When all of these (district-hired) experts came in 1987 and '88 to give their opinions on the various plans, they said 'Look, it really doesn't matter what grade configuration you have,' but rather 'Are you supporting your teachers, your programs, your kids?' That's what's really important," Warwas told the Voice. Similar sentiments were expressed by many of the parents attending Saturday's public comment period.

The zone structuring outlined earlier in the year was maintained with the caveat that the board would reexamine it after the new Columbus school is built. The plan cuts the district diagonally into three zones which stretch from the hills to the flatlands, to include in each a mix of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

For limited choice at the elementary school level, the Northwest Zone will consist of Jefferson, Thousand Oaks and Franklin school, which is transitional until Columbus is rebuilt. The Central Zone will include Oxford, Washington and Whittier (Arts Magnet) schools, pending the rebuilding of Cragmont school.

The Southwest Zone will consist of Emerson, LeConte, Malcolm X and John Muir schools.

For next year at least, those students who want to

remain at their current school will be able to, wherever possible and as long as they aren't "graduating" to the next level. Under a new state open admissions law, any student can apply to any local school housing his grade level, but those parents who select from within their zone will be given first priority.

As classes fill in at the schools, students not getting admission to a school of choice will be assigned a school via random computer selection. Adjustments will also be made to maintain the racial balance goals of the district.

At the middle school level, there will be no zone designations, and assignments will be made based on choice and racial balance. Parents will be able to list their choices in order from among King Junior High, Willard Junior High and Longfellow, which under the plan will change from a 4-6 into a 5-7 school with an emphasis on arts and science. Since this program is new, schools officials are encouraging all students who wish to apply to Longfellow to do so.

In terms of the grade makeup of the elementary schools next year: all K-3 schools will add fourth-grade classes; Whittier Arts Magnet will remain a K-6, with its fate for 1996-97 to be decided at a later date; and Malcolm X, now housing grades 4-6, will also take in K-3 students. Malcolm X had been scheduled to lose its sixth grade classes under the first reconfiguration proposal, and board members approved their plan Saturday with the contingency that they hear back from Malcolm X staffers that the new structure is workable.

The parent choice plan for most schools will start beginning at the kindergarten level for the 1995-96

school year. Families will be chures and asked to attend open in the coming month. They must their top three school preferences the school district by Feb. 15. Middle school assignments for all students out to parents by March 15.

The board approved the plan after accounting of the costs and funding plan; it is scheduled to receive a vote Wednesday. BUSD officials have approximately \$100,000 for the plan. McLaughlin said he anticipates the district will pay for nearly half of the tab.

The board also plans to get input next night from officials at Malcolm X whether adding the sixth grade school is "realistic," BUSD board member John Hegarty said.