

# BERKELEY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

Office of the Superintendent

November 6, 1996

## REPORT ON THE 1996-97 RECONFIGURATION PLAN

### INTRODUCTION

This September, 1996, marked the second year of the Controlled Choice Reconfiguration Plan approved by the Board of Education in December, 1994. In this second year, most elementary schools added a fifth and final grade, while Malcolm X graduated and did not replace its sixth grade, thus completing its transition to a K-5 school. In the middle grades, King and Willard increased their sixth grade enrollment, while Longfellow added an eighth grade to become a true third middle school.

For the second year, the Board's +/- 5% criteria was approached in existing grades by filling voluntarily vacated spaces to maintain or improve racial balance. Kindergartens were filled using racial capacities so that each school's population would reflect as nearly as possible the racial balance for the District's kindergartens as a whole. In all assignments students were given preference when applying to a school within their attendance zone, and siblings were allowed to enroll in the same school as a sibling to the extent that space allowed. Finally, students currently attending BUSD schools on permit from other districts were placed according to space availability and in such a way as to improve racial balance at any given school.

In making assignments, staff continued to follow the Board's six enrollment priorities. The first and largest round of assignments was made by computer program in March, with subsequent rounds made in May and August, after which assignments were made manually as students arrived.

The remainder of this report contains a review of the statistical results of the 1996-97 assignments, and a discussion of specific issues that arose during implementation of the program. As will be discussed in detail below, by far the most significant issue was the decision made by the district in August of this year to participate in the state funded Class Size Reduction Program. Altering the student:teacher ratio in three primary grades had, and will continue to have, a major impact upon the way in which capacities are set and students are assigned to schools in all six elementary grades.

## 1996-97 STATISTICAL REVIEW

### Elementary Schools:

Staff's goal in making assignments for the 1996-97 school year was to balance each grade level from school to school as nearly as possible. However, because assignments were made over the course of six months, and because staff could not predict with certainty which assignees would attend or not attend any given school, it was not possible to assure that the students -- and thus the balance -- assigned to a given school would remain. Kindergarten, where all children were newly assigned, was the most difficult to predict. At the upper, established, grades, balance was largely determined by the identity of the continuing student population, and only adjusted by filling spaces vacated voluntarily.

A complete statistical report is contained in Appendices A & B<sup>1</sup>. The elementary school data is arranged by grade and by zone, as are the deviations from the average. This is because the population of the Northwest schools is quite markedly different from the population in the other zones, due to the presence of bilingual programs which serve the entire district -- and thus disproportionately high populations of "all other ethnicities" -- at those schools. In the first year of reconfiguration, staff noted a general percentage decrease in the first two racial groups, and a corresponding percentage increase in "all other ethnicities." That shift was not so pronounced in this second year, though whether this is a matter of self-classification or population shift, staff cannot be sure.

Once again, and considering all the factors involved, overall the system worked well. For the second year, Malcolm X, one of the flatlands schools where concern existed that the lower grades might not be balanced, attracted an ethnically diverse population. The fourth grade, which increased from one to two sections, improved in balance. As noted above, the discrepancy within the Northwest Zone between Franklin and Thousand Oaks on the one hand, and Jefferson on the other, is at least partially a result of bilingual programs. In comparing these schools, it should be noted that in the lower grades the proportion of African American to White students in Franklin and Thousand Oaks does generally reflect the overall district balance.

The first grade class remains an anomaly, both in size and in growth, continuing to grow throughout both last year and this. Not only has it increased at an unprecedented six per cent since last year, but that growth has been almost entirely African-American, while the white and "all other ethnicities" population has remained fairly constant. A comparison between this year and last indicates that this year's kindergarten is already larger than last year's was at this time, though whether the pattern of growth will continue only time will tell.

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<sup>1</sup> Data for school year 1995-96 is included in Appendix Y for comparison.

As noted above, one significant -- if unforeseen -- factor in determining balance at the lower grades was the Board of Education's (district's?) decision to participate in the state's Class Size Reduction Program. In August, when the decision was made, students had been assigned and schools filled according to the 26:1 student:teacher ratio. Because the decision was also made that students already assigned would not be shifted from their school of assignment, it was incumbent upon staff to work with current assigned populations in making a transition to the 20:1 ratio. As described above, the process of assignment matches attrition to new arrivals from March through the beginning of school; at any given moment racial balance may shift as students notify the district that they will not attend, whereupon staff works to replace these departing students in a manner to maintain balance within the Board's +/- 5% criteria. The decision to fill sections at 20:1 was made in the midst of this process and in some cases resulted in freezing enrollment at lower numbers than had initially been planned. In some instances this meant that balance was not what it would have been had staff been able to assign additional students. In other cases, where new sections had to be opened and filled with latecomers, balance also shifted, as students enrolling in late August and September tend to be more predominantly African-American. Throughout this process, staff made every effort to maintain balance within the newly defined parameters.

#### **Middle Schools:**

Last year grandfathering was a major determinant in the composition of sixth grade throughout the district. This year sixth graders were guaranteed placement at their zone school, King or Willard, or could choose Longfellow, where their acceptance would depend upon space availability and racial integration criteria. As a result of this process, King and Longfellow are very close in balance, while Willard has a higher African-American, and correspondingly lower white and "all other ethnicities" populations. Whether this is the result of shifting demographics or of Willard zone students choosing to attend non-BUSD schools is difficult to know. Finally, because the twenty-five students at Whittier are almost entirely continuing, the balance of that single section was not affected by controlled choice.

In the past, when BUSD had only junior high schools, students traditionally entered or reentered BUSD from non-BUSD schools in seventh grade. Although a number of students did enter in sixth grade, a greater number continued to enter in seventh, both Willard zone students coming to Willard, and King Zone students to King.

At Longfellow, where new students were assigned according to space availability and racial integration criteria, the eighth grade remained small and seventh decreased somewhat, while the sixth experienced significant growth -- a growth which should be credited largely to the school's energetic campaign to inform the community of its developing program. The growth of King and Willard's upper grades should be ameliorated over the next two years, as Longfellow continues to take in more sizable entering sixth grade classes.

### **General:**

The data presented in this report profiles racial distribution for this school year. Because the goal and mandate of this process was to improve racial balance wherever possible, it would naturally be instructive to compare these numbers with comparable numbers from the year or years just prior to the implementation of the Controlled Choice Reconfiguration Plan. Unfortunately, the vehicle for that comparison, the California Basic Educational Data System (CBEDS) report is not available at this time. And, CBEDS classification does not include children our assignment counts as "interracial." Instead, these children are merged into other ethnic categories thus decreasing out "other ethnicities" designation and increasing "white" and "African American."

In adopting this new system of assignment, the Board acknowledged that bringing the district as a whole into balance would be achieved gradually and not in the course of two years. This has allowed both staff and the school communities necessary leeway in adjusting to a new pattern of school assignment. Beyond this, the shift to a new assignment model required by the Class Size Reduction Program has brought its own unique challenges. Even so, as the statistical report indicates, overall and throughout the district, the Board's mandate was successfully implemented in the 1996-97 school year.

### **1996-97 IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES**

Until a system is tested, it is not possible to judge with certainty what its practical strengths and weaknesses will be. Last year's experience raised a number of issues, which guided staff's work for the 1996-97 school year. Certain weaknesses in the program were addressed and improved. Other issues, such as neighborhood proximity, remain. The following is a brief overview of some of those issues and areas.

- 1. Displacement of students caused by downsizing.** Having learned from last year's experience, this year staff worked closely with families of students who were facing the possibility of being involuntarily displaced. These families were informed of the possibility well before the choice process began and their choices were considered before the program was run in order to give them their highest choice possible. For the small number of students who were involuntarily displaced, all element of surprise was removed.
- 2. Neighborhood Proximity.** Again, a certain percentage of families participating in the program expressed a strong desire to attend what they consider their neighborhood school. For some families, becoming familiar with the school to which their students were assigned ameliorated this concern; for others the concern remained.
- 3. Lack of Non-Bilingual Choice in the Northwest Zone.** Once again a number of parents in the Northwest Zone expressed dissatisfaction with what they perceived as a limitation of their in-zone choices, as compared with choices available to families residing in other zones. As compared to last year, this dissatisfaction was somewhat ameliorated

by the anticipation of the opening of Columbus and Cragmont (which Franklin students will have priority to attend). Nevertheless, the sense of limited choice remained.

**4. Placement of Students Attending on Interdistrict Permits.** In January when the choice cycle began, continuing students attending on interdistrict permits were informed that they would be assigned to schools after Berkeley residents, perhaps as late as August, and that assignment would be according to space availability and racial integration guidelines. Although staff's intention was to assign these students as soon as possible, the shift to the Class Size Reduction Program delayed these assignments until late August for most continuing students. Beyond this, while most continuing middle school students were returned to their former schools, many elementary students were reassigned. This was difficult for students who had attended the same school for a number of years, and for parents whose childcare was arranged with regard to a former school. While staff acknowledges and sympathizes with these problems, the circumstances described above often left few alternatives for the assignment of non-Berkeley residents.

**5. Waiting Lists.** For the second year, the Parent Access Office maintained waiting lists for students who had not received their first choice of school. From May onward, students were placed from the lists as spaces became available and as racial integration guidelines allowed. In many cases this process resulted in great parental satisfaction. In others it led to equally great disappointment. In some cases when enrollment was frozen in order to comply with the Class Size Reduction Program, spaces which might have otherwise been available were eliminated; thus the possibility of students being placed from the waiting list disappeared. Staff will have to evaluate this year's experience to further refine waiting list procedure and policy.

### **The Student Assignment Appeals Board**

The number of appeals heard by the Board this year dropped very substantially from that of the preceding year. This was very largely due to the existence of clearer information during the choice process: perhaps as many families were disappointed this year as last, but far fewer were surprised.

### **CONCLUSION**

With the single exception of the one section of sixth grade at Whittier, this year marks the completion of our transition to a K-5, 6-8 configuration of our schools. Last year this review included a recommendation for school capacities for the following year. This year, because the impact of the Class Size Reduction Program upon our long-term facilities plan will determine capacities, this issue will be presented separately. Once school capacities are set, staff will be able to formulate any special or additional program guidelines for the student assignments for the 1997-98 school year.