

# Berkeley Schools Plan an Overhaul

*Berk - P.S. - Restructuring*

## 25% of families have deserted city's faltering educational system

By Elaine Herscher  
Chronicle East Bay Bureau

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Berkeley is a city where people care fiercely about the public schools but don't necessarily trust them.

It is a painful paradox for a city that prides itself on embracing all things progressive: Although Berkeley voters consistently support raising taxes for the school district, one quarter of them — more than twice the state average — enroll their children in private schools.

That was not the expectation in 1968, when Berkeley became the first large city in the nation to desegregate voluntarily, with the school superintendent declaring that the city was "doing the right thing, finally."

Twenty-five years later, Berkeley residents still regard racial diversity as an essential ingredient in good schools, but the city's busing program is now widely viewed as a failure. Most elementary schools are not racially balanced, and middle-class white and minority parents are steadily abandoning public schools.

"There is a paradox. You do have behavior that doesn't seem to correlate with the politics," said Marge Plecki, at the University of California at Berkeley's Policy Analysis for California Education. "Most people want their kids in heterogeneous settings, but when it comes down to where they're going to send their kids to school, there seems to be some type of disparity between what people say they want and their behavior."

To try to lure those people back and improve the schools for those who never left, the Berkeley Unified School District has embarked on an ambitious plan to redesign the schools both physically and structurally — and integration is a key goal.

"What we finally end up with will fit Berkeley," said Superintendent LaVoneia Steele. "It won't fit any other place in the world."

One option being discussed is parental choice. Under that proposal, Berkeley parents would be required to list three schools in order of preference. Children would be matched with the first school on the list that comes within 5 percent of the city's racial mix.

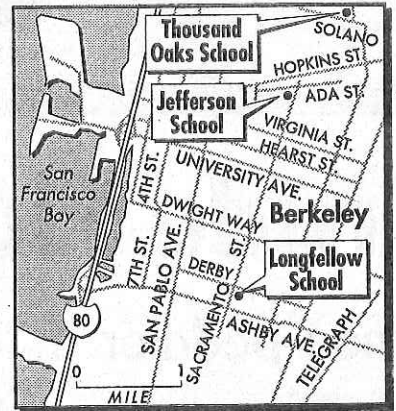
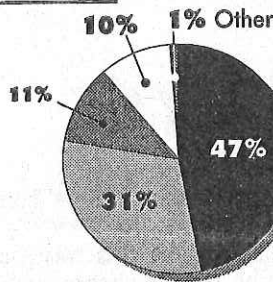
Other possibilities include everything from keeping the current

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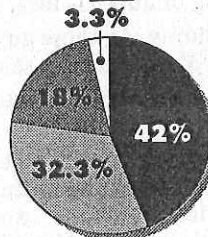
## RACIAL BREAKDOWN OF BERKELEY ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

White Asian  
Black Hispanic

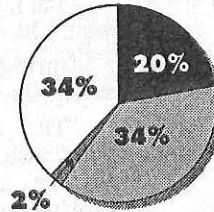
City of Berkeley



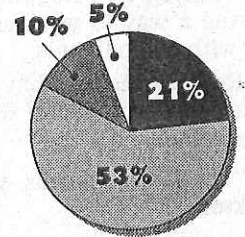
Jefferson School  
(K-3)



Thousand Oaks School  
(K-3)



Longfellow School  
(Grades 4-6)



Sources: City of Berkeley and Berkeley Unified School District

CHRONICLE GRAPHIC

## BERKELEY: Families Deserting

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busing system to adding or subtracting grades in the elementary and junior high schools.

All of this soul-searching came about through Measure A, a \$158 million bond measure passed in June 1992. The money is to be used solely for repairs and seismic improvements to aging schools during the next decade.

Before the school board spends the money, it wants to decide how each of the schools can best be used, and that inevitably leads to the question of integration.

For the most part, children in kindergarten through third grade are sent to schools close to the hills, where the population is predominantly white. Children from south and west Berkeley — which have a high concentration of minority families — are bused to these schools.

From fourth through sixth grades, the pattern is reversed, and children from the hills and the eastern part of the city are bused to the flatlands.

This was supposed to be a way

The district has already weathered an Alameda County grand jury probe sought by parents in which it was cleared of any wrongdoing for paying half an administrator's salary from Measure A funds.

Parents such as Liz Brown, who serves on site committees at LeConte and Malcolm X elementary schools, feel that an overhaul of the system would just relocate the problems to different schools.

Although parents in south Berkeley — where Brown lives — agree that there are problems, people there tend to be satisfied with the current system. Their children stay relatively close to home throughout elementary school, and from fourth to sixth grades attend Malcolm X School, which has several innovative programs that parents support.

### School Closures in Hills

But many parents in west Berkeley, where students are bused far from home, are unhappy. So are many families in the hills, where a cluster of schools were closed in the early 1980s. Af-

school in the fourth grade when it is time to go to the flatlands. Some of those children return in junior high or high school.

### **24 Percent in Private Schools**

The goal of having each school reflect the demographics of Berkeley within 5 percent has gone seriously awry: 24 percent are not in the public schools at all; an additional 30 percent get transfers into schools of their choice.

No elementary school reflects the actual population of Berkeley's school-age children, and some are wildly divergent.

Steele said 40 percent of Berkeley's students are below the 50th percentile in standardized tests, with black and Latino children representing a disproportionate share of the low scores. "The achievement of minority kids in this district is not what it should be," Steele said.

Lloyd Lee, a black parent with three children in public schools, supports a schools of choice approach.

"We have problems with access and fairness. We have problems with lack of parental confidence in our schools, and we have too many needs and too little money," Lee said.

### **School Board Politics**

The district's struggle with integration is intertwined with the legacy of Berkeley's notorious political squabbling.

For a time in the 1970s and early 1980s, Berkeley Citizens Action — the farthest left-leaning of the established Berkeley political organizations — held a majority on the Berkeley School Board. During that time, the birth rate declined, and several schools were closed to make way for low-income housing. Some never reopened. The political fights and the school closures led to middle-class flight, from which the district has never recovered.

Some parents remain suspicious of the district's intentions. They fear the repair money will be diverted toward ill-conceived reform, even though the schools are bound by law to spend the money only on design and construction. Any expenditure for changing busing has to come from the general fund. Those parents say they voted for their tax money to go toward seismic repairs and leaky roofs.

closed to all but kindergarten, which is still in a seismically safe building. Columbus School, the feeder school for Cragmont students, was also closed. The result was that students in first through fifth grades are bused to Franklin School, 10 blocks from the bay, a section of town with a relatively high crime rate.

Some of the hill parents are opting to pay the \$1,200 to \$10,000 it takes each year to put one child in private school.

### **Luring Back Families**

Supporters of choice say their plan will lure those parents back and make classrooms more equitable for all.

Janet Huseby, who is white and has four children in public school, favors choice.

"I went through a phase of not being able to talk to parents who put their kids in private school, I was so angry at them," said Huseby. "(But) it feels different when your children are going to a school that you don't have confidence in. Cragmont/Columbus were marvelous. I would put my child on a bus to go to Columbus if that school were (available). . . . (But) we have schools that are inferior. It's not fair to expect a parent to say, 'I will sacrifice my child and send him there.'

### **Concerns Over Choice**

Critics of choice say that many minority parents who do not get the information or have the time to invest in researching schools will not make informed choices or will not choose at all and will be sent to schools to "fill in" the racial quotas.

"It will not happen that there will be an equal sharing of the power, an equal sharing of getting first choices," said George Perry, vice president of the Berkeley branch of the NAACP. "This is the experience of the black community. There is not a lot of trust that there will be fairness."

Kristin Prentice, who is white, lives in west Berkeley and has two sons in public school, agrees. "It will be choice for the few, based on illusion. . . . Choice will balkanize Berkeley schools. Some schools will become the good schools, some will be less desirable."

The school board is conducting hearings and town meetings through the fall and is expected to reach a decision on school reform by December 15.