

New 'choice' plan gets high marks

By William Brand
STAFF WRITER

BERKELEY — Two months into the school district's new integration plan, enrollment is up and schools are better balanced racially, pleased school district officials said Monday.

The long-debated "choice" plan began with the start of school in September, replacing a complicated voluntary integration plan in effect since 1968.

Now the district says more children are attending public schools, and racial and ethnic balance, school by school, has improved.

"Our overall enrollment is up quite dramatically, about 150 students above last year," said school board President Irene Hegarty. "There were so many new kindergarten students that we had to add two more kindergarten (classes)."

That's good bottom-line news for the Berkeley schools, since the bulk of school funding in California is allotted by the state on a per-pupil basis. The more students there are, the more state money comes in.

"The integration looks good, too," Hegarty said. "Most schools are well-balanced, and that's a real change."

For example, at Longfellow Elementary, one of the large grade schools in a working-class flatlands neighborhood, 62 percent of the students were African American under the 1968 plan.

At the other extreme, Oxford El-

ed 91 students over last year.

That's good news."

Roll call

Berkeley Unified School District enrollment

	1994-95	1995-96
K	619	667
1st	666	638
2nd	610	649
3rd	612	595
4th	509	600
5th	542	520
TOTAL	3,558	3,669

JEFF QUAN—Staff

ementary in upper-middle class North Berkeley had a 51 percent white student majority under the 1968 plan.

But this year, under Berkeley's new "choice" plan, things have changed.

At Longfellow, the percentage of African-American students has dropped to 48 percent and the percentage of white students has increased to about 25 percent from 20 percent last year.

At Oxford, the percentage of white students has dropped to about 37 percent, while the number of African-American students has climbed to more than 35 percent.

Berkeley's 1968 plan, the first voluntary school integration effort

Please see **Schools**, A-9

Schools: Rezoning allows new choices for parents

Continued from A-1

in the nation, converted smaller, mostly hills schools to kindergarten through third-grade schools. The larger flatlands schools like Longfellow became fourth- through sixth-grade schools.

Students — mostly African-American — were bused from the flats to the hills schools. Then in fourth grade, students — mostly white — were bused to the flatlands schools.

School officials have conceded that middle-class parents of every ethnic background — especially white parents — sent their kids to private and parochial schools to avoid the split grade school and complicated busing plan.

Berkeley's new choice plan converts all grade schools to kindergarten to fifth grade. It also changes the two junior highs to sixth-through eighth-grade middle schools and transforms Longfellow Elementary into a third middle school. Only students living a great distance from their school are bused.

The city is now divided into three zones running from the hills to the flatlands. Parents are allowed to enroll their children in any grade school in the zone in which they live.

Superintendent Jack McLaughlin said one of the most interesting enrollment numbers is fourth grade citywide. In the past there's been a big enrollment decline between third and fourth grades. But this year, with the end of the hills-flats busing, enrollment in fourth grade jumped 91 students over last year.

McLaughlin also pointed out that the district has allocated an initial \$100,000 to buy technology and performing arts equipment for Longfellow.

"The idea is to convert Longfellow into a school for technology and the performing arts, and it seems to be working," McLaughlin said. "We're very encouraged by parents' response."

Students were admitted to their school of first choice, unless there was a problem with ethnic balance at a particular school. The process was enormously complicated, but Nancy Greenman, the district's parent coordinator who handled enrollment, said schools reported less confusion and parent dissatisfaction than in recent memory.

"We've got a lot of new families this year, and mostly they're very pleased," said Susanna Ross, chairperson of the Emerson Elementary School PTA. "There were a couple of parents for whom Emerson wasn't the first choice, and they were unhappy initially.

"But they came here and saw our program, and now they're happy," Ross said of the school, located in the prosperous Elmwood district. "One of the good things about Emerson is we've got real diversity, and it really does work."

No one will say for sure that the middle class is returning to Berkeley schools, but Ross had an encouraging anecdote.

"I know of one family who pulled their child out of Emerson and put him in private school," Ross said. "Now their next child is in kindergarten, and he's here at Emerson. That's good news."