

Research Brief

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Summary of: Designing School Choice for Diversity in the San Francisco Unified School District

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This brief summarizes the paper, *Designing School Choice for Diversity in the San Francisco Unified School District*¹ which describes a collaboration between Stanford University researchers and the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) to re-design the district's elementary student assignment system. The existing district-wide choice system replicates patterns of residential segregation at district schools and is difficult for families to understand and manage. Between 2018 and 2020, the collaboration worked to develop a system that would achieve the following goals: 1) diversity - schools that are socio-economically and racially representative of the district; 2) proximity - attending a school close to home; and 3) predictability - improving the experience for families by reducing complexity and uncertainty of district-wide choices. The district was aware that these goals require trade-offs; for example, the proximity and diversity goals are often in opposition due to residential segregation.

The researchers explored a Zone policy that captured initial policy concepts proposed by SFUSD, and reflected a middle ground between neighborhood assignment and district-wide choice.

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SFUSD decision-makers promoted zones as they were: more straightforward to communicate to families; easier to adapt to demographic shifts; and capable of aligning transportation needs. The Board also required that the zones be contiguous. The researchers used an optimization tool to generate the zones. They found that medium-sized zones (6-8 schools), which divide the city into roughly 9 sections, were the best balance between small zones (4-6 neighborhood schools) that did not overcome residential segregation patterns and larger zones (9-11 schools) that resulted in greater choice-driven re-segregation and longer travel distances.

The researchers built off the nine-zone policy and existing research to suggest alternative policies, and implemented an end-to-end simulation engine to estimate what student assignments might look like and what trade-offs between district goals might emerge under these policies. The simulations were based on data from the 2018-19 kindergarten applications for 4772 of the 5153 students applying for kindergarten placement (the remaining 381 were excluded as they were assigned their first choice program in SFUSD but did not enroll in any SFUSD program the following year). The assignment policies included:

- **Zones.** Students are restricted to choose from within one of nine contiguous zones, based on their home location. Students are also grouped into 3 groups and prioritized for schools in their zone according to their group.
- **Zones + Reserves.** This policy adds a reserve system to improve diversity. Based on their neighborhood, students are assigned to one of three diversity categories. Seats are reserved for students of each category proportional to their prevalence in that zone.
- **Priorities.** This policy groups students into 3 groups and prioritizes students at all schools according to their group. Families have access to all schools.

Findings

There are trade-offs among diversity, proximity, and choice based on the various policy options. The trade-offs differed across subgroups of students.

- **Diversity:** Zones + Reserves and Priorities improved diversity compared to the 2018-19 assignment system.
 - Compared to the 2018-2019 assignment, Zones + Reserves and Priorities decreased the percentage of African American, Latinx, and Pacific Islander (AALPI) students attending schools where the fraction of students eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) is greater than 15% above the district average from 20% to 11% and 9% respectively.
 - This reduction was driven primarily by Latinx students. Under Zones + Reserves, there was a smaller reduction of concentration of African American students in mid-to-high poverty schools (from 26% to 20%).
- **Choice:** Zones + Reserves limited choice compared to other systems.
 - Zones and Zones + Reserves reduced the percentage of students assigned to one of their top 3 programs from 80% in 2018-2019 to 64% and 59% respectively.
 - African American and Latinx students experienced a greater drop in choice than White or Asian students. The Rank Top 3 metric dropped from 94% to 57% for African American students, 85% to 55% for White students, 90% to 62% for Latinx students, and 83% to 65% for Asian students.
 - While Priorities allowed students to retain access to their top-ranked choices, it also increased the percentage of students assigned to schools low in their list.

- Proximity: On proximity measures, Zones + Reserves policy performed significantly better than other systems, while Priorities performed significantly worse.
 - The average distance of a student’s assigned program from their home location was significantly farther for Priorities at 1.91 miles compared to Zones + Reserves at 1.29 miles and compared to 2018-2019 assignment at 1.39 miles.
 - When compared to Zones + Reserves, Priorities significantly increased the percentage of students assigned to a school more than 3 miles away from 10% to 23%. Priorities also increased the percentage from the 2018-2019 assignment (14%).
 - All groups of students followed this pattern, except for White students, where the average distance for school was 1.18 for Zones and Reserves and 1.09 miles for the 2018-20019 assignment.

Implementing the New Reassignment Policy

The SFUSD Board approved the new student assignment system based on the Zones + Reserves policy. The Board determined that its main goals were diversity, proximity, and predictability, with diversity being the most important goal and choice not being a district goal.

- As the new assignment policy is a significant change to the current policy, the researchers emphasize the importance of the district’s efforts to engage with and communicate decisions and trade-offs clearly to families, and incorporate community feedback into the implementation of the student assignment policy. The researchers are working to support final implementation decisions, including selecting zone boundaries, which will be decided jointly with families and other stakeholders. They are also developing community engagement and informational tools that can help reduce disparities in families’ information about schools, school assignment, and involvement in implementation decisions.
- The researchers also support SFUSD’s commitment to regularly reevaluate the system. This allows for the adjustment of zone boundaries and reserves based on demographic changes to neighborhoods. The researchers also intend to work with the district to empirically evaluate the policy’s impact on residential sorting and gentrification
- The researchers note that diversity and representation are not equivalent to integration. Educational disparities often coincide with neighborhood and school segregation. SFUSD is hopeful that the new zone-based policy will enable community investment in all zone schools, rather than letting a small number of schools be perceived to be most desirable or of highest quality. Community engagement that builds trust in the system will also enable more families, teachers, and other stakeholders to see their role in enabling integration.
- The researchers are working with the district on allocating resources, and hope to provide cost-effective transportation routes within zones, and to ensure equitable allocation across the district.