



Research Brief – June 2019

The *History of the K-5 Student Assignment System*<sup>1</sup> by Kyle Beckham and Leah Gordon analyzed over two thousand pages of San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) documents related to student assignment policies. The documents dated from the late 1990's through 2014, with the most extensive analysis focusing on the 2009-2010 school year. This was the year SFUSD implemented a major redesign of the student assignment process. The findings were presented to the San Francisco Board of Education in 2016, as it began re-thinking the District's student assignment policies. As newly elected Board members had not been present during the 2009/10 re-design, the researchers believed that *knowing the history of any given issue, and what has been tried before is an indispensable piece of making fully informed policy choices today.*

These findings are situated in a long history of changes to SFUSD's student assignment process based on legal actions and changing policies. This timeline summarizes the key events related to changes in the student assignment system starting from 1978 to current day.

### *History of SFUSD Student Assignment Policies*

**1978:** The San Francisco NAACP sued the SFUSD and the State of California for discriminatory practices, stating that a segregated school system is in violation of the U.S. Constitution, federal statutes, and the California Constitution

**1983:**

- U.S. District Court approved a Consent Decree to continue and accelerate efforts to achieve academic excellence for all students with a particular focus on African American and Latino students and eliminate racial/ethnic segregation or identifiability in any school, program or classroom to the extent practicable.
- SFUSD creates a student assignment plan and transportation system to support desegregation. The plan used a combinations of contiguous and noncontiguous attendance areas, alternative schools, and optional enrollment requests. Race and ethnicity were factors in student assignments as schools were required to enroll students from at least four ethnic groups and no racial/ethnic group could constitute more than 40 percent of students at attendance area schools and 40 percent at alternative schools.

**1994:** A group of San Francisco parents sued the SFUSD for using race as a factor in student assignment.

**1999:** The Court prohibited the SFUSD from using race or ethnicity as a factor in student assignment. A lottery plan was rejected by the Court.

**2001 - 2003:** In 2001, the Court approved the SFUSD's new student assignment plan, the Diversity Index, which was implemented in 2002-2003 school year. The Index was designed to give parents choice; ensure equitable access and promote diversity without using race/ethnicity.

**2005:** The Consent Decree expired

**2009-2010:** The San Francisco Board of Education re-designs the student assignment process.

**2014:** Rachel Norton proposed prioritizing neighborhood preference in the assignment algorithm which was voted down the other school board members at the time.

**2016:** SFUSD begin considering re-design again

**2009 –2019:** 10 years of research on SFUSD student assignment policy

### **FINDINGS**

1. ***The Board of Education had three priorities for the 2009-2010 redesign of the student assignment process:***
  - Reverse the trend of racial isolation and the concentration of underserved students in the same school,
  - Provide equitable access to the range of opportunities offered to students, and
  - Provide transparency at every stage of the assignment process.
2. ***The Board of Education encountered structural constraints to meeting these priorities. These constraints have continued through 2016, and in some cases may have intensified.***

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<sup>1</sup> Beckham, K., & Gordon, L. (2016). Discussion Summary: History of K-5 Student Assignment System, 2009-2010. Stanford University.

- **Poverty:** Students in low-performing schools are the most likely to be low-income, live in public housing, or on the south and southeast sides of the city. SFUSD does not have the resources to solve the problems faced by students who are experiencing poverty.
  - **Housing:** Segregated housing patterns currently exist in San Francisco, a legacy of racially restrictive housing covenants established during World War II. In addition to living in segregated neighborhoods, low-income African American and Latino families are leaving SFUSD as housing costs in San Francisco continue to rise.
  - **Competing Political Interests:** High achieving schools typically exist in neighborhoods with high property values. Parents living in these neighborhood tend to favor neighborhood schools. Low-performing schools are prevalent in the City’s low-income, southeastern neighborhoods. Families in these neighborhoods tend to favor school-choice policies that provide access to better schools in other areas of San Francisco.
  - **Judicial Decisions:** Supreme Court decisions from the late 1970s through the early 2000s, have prevented school districts from using race in its school assignment policies. In San Francisco, the more vague concept of “diversity” has replaced race, making it more difficult for the school district to communicate the rationale behind student assignment policies. Moreover, schools were no longer permitted to establish a minimum threshold for student diversity, allowing San Francisco’s housing patterns to *accelerate the re-segregation of the schools*.
  - **Parental/Community Concerns:** Parents want the school assignment process to be predictable and information about the process to be accessible, comprehensible and useful in helping them select the best school for their child. Moreover, although parents want to participate in the enrollment process, they face barriers, including language capacity, lack of time, and lack of information. Finally, parents want their school communities to reflect San Francisco’s socioeconomic and cultural diversity, however, other school characteristics such as school location, academic quality and feelings of belonging often take priority over diversity.
3. ***Different students assignment policies considered by the Board of Education in 2009/2010 do not dramatically reduce racial concentrations given racially concentrated applicant pools.***  
 The Board of Education, with the assistance of Stanford University economists, considered six policy options and selected: *Lottery with Academic Diversity and Local School Preference*. For their historical analysis, Kyle and Beckham analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of all six options based on the following factors: parental/familial choice; racial isolation, racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity, transparency, predictability, equitable access to programs, neighborhood vs “best fit”; and political, economic, and cultural costs. They found that, overall, achieving more diversity would require SFUSD to assign students to schools that they had not requested and/or were located in neighborhoods geographically distant from their homes. However, this option would run counter to strong community preferences for both neighborhood schools and school choice.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE BOARD OF EDUCATION

The researchers made the following recommendations to the Board of Education as it began re-thinking the student assignment process:

1. **SFUSD should spend significant time and resources on improving the ways that information is disseminated to the public about the choice system.** The information provided to parents should explain the complexities of the student assignment system in a way that is comprehensible, allowing them to make informed choices. These communication materials should also counter parents’ perceptions that the system is arbitrary.
2. **SFUSD should develop parent-friendly procedures that ensure parents complete their assignment applications on time, based on reliable qualitative data on schools.**
3. **SFUSD should create a searchable database of historic documents, with topic summaries, that is accessible to newly elected Board of Education members and newly hired school district administrators.** There is frequent turnover among both Board members and district administrative staff. Without historical knowledge, this can lead to decisions being made without knowledge of previous related policy iterations. It is essential that as individuals leave SFUSD, there is a systematic process for retaining institutional knowledge.