STANFORD SFUSD | 2017 - BRIEF

Historical Analysis of SFUSD Student Assignment Redesign

By Kyle Beckham, Doctoral Student - *Stanford Graduate School of Education*

Introduction

Given the nature of public school districts, institutional memory is often unevenly distributed and can be disrupted with the departure of specific holders of parts of that memory. Policymakers at the school board and district administration levels often exit and take with them important pieces of institutional memory that greatly reduce the knowledge base for those who replace them. These periods of transition have significant ramifications for how long-standing issues are understood by contemporary decision makers. Knowing the history of any given issue, and what has been tried before is an indispensable piece of making fully informed policy choices today. Though this seems self-evident, transferring that memory presents a significant practical challenge given the scale of the data used in the past, and constraints on policymaker time and capacity.

The history of student assignment in San Francisco represents a microcosm of larger sociological forces that impact the lives of the city's residents: segregation, inequality of opportunity and outcome, and racial and economic disparities. The schools are often central battlegrounds in attempts to rectify these issues and student assignment is the prime component in how the board implements changes.

Historical Analysis

Our investigation looked specifically at the recent history of student assignment in SFUSD to more efficiently collect and share the options available to previous policymakers with members of the current school board. Over two thousand pages of student assignment documents from the late 1990s to 2014 were examined to identify continuities, divergences, and major themes that informed the policy choices offered by administrative staff to the school board. 2009-2010 was the school year in which the deepest level of document analysis ensued, since this was the year in which the last major re-design of the student assignment process took place.

Structural Forces and Goals

It became quickly apparent that larger structural forces significantly constrained the options available to past and current policymakers, of which we focused on four: poverty, housing, competing political interests, and judicial decisions. Within these constraints SFUSD completed a three-year redesign process, beginning in the 2006 school year, which generated the following expected outcomes:

1. Achievement: Reduce achievement gap for Latino, African American, and ELL students
2. Equity: Ensure access to higher quality educational opportunities for low-achieving and/or poor and disadvantaged kids
3. Integration/Diversity: Reduce segregation of schools, programs, and classrooms
4. Enrollment: Attract back to SFUSD students from private schools, charter schools, and other school districts

Student Assignment Models

In order to meet these expected outcomes six specific options, designed by SFUSD

administrative staff with consultation from a team of Stanford economists, emerged:

1. Lottery with Local School Preference
2. Lottery with Academic Diversity Preference
3. Lottery with Academic Diversity and Local School Preference
4. Zone Assignments
5. Local School Assignments with Limited Choice for City-Wide Programs Only
6. Local School Assignments with Choice for All Schools

We examined the strengths and weaknesses of each of these options and summarized them in a way that would be easily understood by the sitting school board. Currently, SFUSD is working under the third option, but board members wish to embark on another rethink given that this option has not significantly improved school integration or narrowed the achievement gap.

Ultimately, we found that the same policy constraints that faced the previous generation of school board members and district administrators remain, and in some ways have intensified. The potential political costs of a radical redesign remain high, and the outcomes are anything but guaranteed. However, our project helped bridge the knowledge gap between generations of SFUSD policymakers and made clear the importance of historical document maintenance and accessibility in helping create a more informed policy arena for today's decision makers.