Student Assignment in Public Schools

Student assignment policy is a longstanding issue that has found its way to the U.S. Supreme Court multiple times. The 1954 Brown v Board of Education case is the most famous student assignment case. This ruling said it is no longer legal to assign students to schools according to their race. In the last few years, the Supreme Court reviewed student assignment policy in Seattle and Louisville. These combined cases (Parents Involved in Community Schools Inc. v. Seattle School District and Meredith v. Jefferson County (Ky.) Board of Education) reaffirmed that race could not be used in setting enrollment assignments. The U.S. Department of Education finally released guidance on these issues.

Many of these questions were re-visited at the May 17th National Conference on School Diversity at Georgetown Law School, participants discussed the issues affecting school diversity. Mary Filardo, Executive Director of the 21st Century School Fund, participated on the Panel It’s Complicated: Untangling the Discourse about Neighborhood Schools and Diversity. The panel explored the issues and complexity of maintaining healthy neighborhood schools while promoting integration and diversity.

It's clear from two recent City Council actions in the District of Columbia that the question of what rights students have to attend which public schools is ripe for discussion. First, Council member Mary Cheh and Council Chairman Kwame Brown introduced a bill in March that outlines a process for reviewing boundaries for DCPS schools (B19-0734 - School Boundary Review Act of 2012). If enacted it would set up a commission of representatives from the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education, DCPS, Office of Planning, Parents of DCPS students and the community to propose revisions in enrollment boundaries and feeder school assignments.

Second, the May 15th Draft Committee Report on the Budget Support Act for next year (pg. 60) provides for a taskforce to study whether there should be a student assignment policy that provides for a neighborhood preference in charter school admissions. It includes the Chairman of the Public Charter School Board (the committee chair), the Chairman of the Council, the State Superintendent of Education, the Deputy Mayor for Education, the DCPS Chancellor (or their designee), two representatives of charter support organizations, a representative from the education department of a national research organization, a representative from a national charter school organization, two charter school leaders selected by the Public Charter School Board Chair and a labor representative.

Council of Educational Facility Planners 2012 School of the Future Design Competition

Six middle school teams - five from across the United States and one team from the United Kingdom - were selected to present their School of the Future designs to a 22-person national jury. As one of the jurists, the 21st Century School Fund was delighted to listen to...
The enrollment capacity of schools is an important statistic for school districts. The school utilization rates, which compare actual enrollment and the capacity for enrollment, can be used as indicators of crowding or of low demand. Enrollment capacity and building utilization are key factors when school districts consider school closings, consolidation and attendance boundary changes. There is not a census on capacity standards for PK-12 schools.

Calculating school capacity involves defining what spaces will be assigned permanent capacity for student instruction and how many students will be assigned to each space. The individual capacity carrying instructional space is then added together to give the capacity of the school. The capacity will then be compared to the enrollment to determine the building utilization.

Some of the issues that are likely to arise, and need community and local school input are:

- What is the minimum space size that can be called a classroom? What other attributes (like daylight) might need to be present before a room can be assigned student capacity?
- What instructional spaces should be in an elementary school, but would not carry capacity, for example an art room, music room, library or gymnasium?
- What community spaces should be in a school--for example, might some schools have a family and community resource room or health clinic included as permissible, but non-capacity spaces?
- How will capacity be determined for special education spaces, including inclusion and self-contained spaces?
- How much administrative and student support administrative space will be considered appropriate in the schools?

School board members, community leaders, parents, and principals--find out the capacity of your schools and how your district determines the capacity. For a helpful overview, see "Calculating School Capacity: Local, State & National Perspectives" PowerPoint.
Community Discussion on the Future of Public Education in D.C.

Parents and community members came together in two meetings recently to consider a vision for what citizens want for public K-12 education in the District. Sponsored by the 21st Century School Fund, DC Voice, Empower DC, SHAPPE (Sr. High Alliance) and WeActRadio.com, a total of 150 people participated on March 27th at the Metropolitan Community Church near the Convention Center in Ward 6 and on May 3rd at the Benning Road Library in Ward 7.

The first meeting reviewed the complicated history of public education in DC, discussed the current situation, and heard a report of local efforts in Chicago where people are struggling to have a say in school planning, school closings and turnarounds. Discussion groups considered what priorities would be most effective in efforts here to support effective public schools that can anchor communities.

At the second meeting four presentations reviewed teacher and staff turn-over, the community schools strategy that provides multiple supports for students, the need for a civic voice in decisions about public education, and developing a civic vision for our public schools. Discussion groups considered a matrix of fundamental questions about public schools including:

- Who should be responsible for public education?
- How should public schools be organized?
- What enrollment rights should families have for their children?
- Who should operate public schools?
- Who should be held accountable for school quality, as different from student performance?
- Where should schools be located?

Programs and hand-out materials from the meetings can be found on the 21st Century School Fund website. If you want further information or want to be included in future meetings, please contact Nancy Huvendick at nhuvendick@21csf.org.

Featured 21CSF Publication

Memo on the Analysis of the Impact of DCPS School Closings for SY2008-2009

This memo examines the enrollment patterns resulting from the DCPS 2008-2009 school closings. Although it focuses on the impact of the closings on student enrollment, it also lays out key questions for the school system to consider as it evaluates the impact of the closings on educational program quality and on budget pressures.

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