

Too much school choice can create chaos

C.W. Nevius

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A new report by a San Francisco grand jury looks into admission process for the city's public schools. It found that parents aren't happy.

Duh.

The hard part would be finding someone who is happy with it. For example, Lorraine Woodruff-Long, past president of Parents for Public Schools, an advocacy group that is generally a friend to the school district, may have some issues with the report, but she doesn't dispute the premise.

"The system is archaic," she said. "I will absolutely agree that it is time to revisit it. We need to have a real hard conversation about this."

What the city has now is free choice. Any student can apply to any school in the district. While choice is a good thing, too much choice can create chaos.

Supervisor Carmen Chu, whose Sunset District is ground zero for complaints about the system, has taken the lead in giving voice to the concerns, introducing a resolution last week before the Board of Supervisors that would encourage the district to take neighborhood interests into account.

Because if you want a formula that makes parents unhappy, suspicious, angry, disenfranchised, and ready to pack up and leave, it would be hard to do better than this.

And no wonder. For example, in January of each year parents are asked to list their seven top school preferences. Sounds simple, right?

But there's a catch. If a student has a sibling already in a school, he or she is automatically in, which is why the SFUSD says that 81 percent of all families get one of their seven choices. But when the grand jury drilled into the numbers, it found a problem.

A member of the Educational Placement Center told the grand jury that when siblings who receive automatic school admission are deleted from the process, the report said, "the real acceptance rate drops from 81 percent to 55 percent."

So 45 percent, nearly half of the applicants, not only don't get their first choice; they don't get any of their first seven choices (although some families do not put down seven choices). These are people like Helene and Mark Hilleary, who spent six months trying to get their son, Max, into a kindergarten near their Sunset home.

"We spent hours looking at the numbers and going through the lists," Helene Hilleary says. "We visited schools. We questioned principals. We followed instructions. They said as long as you do that, are honest, and complete the application on time, you will get what you want. We did all that, and we were still denied all seven. It was ridiculous."

There are lots of people like the Hillearys. They live in the Sunset District, where there a ton of really good schools. They're well-educated, motivated, middle-class folks with time to spend advocating for themselves.

The issue isn't just about kindergartners. The problem also affects students entering middle and high school.

Take Luc Ha. He is an auto mechanic. His wife works in a convalescent care home. English is not his first language. He says he and his wife work until 8 o'clock almost every night, and daughter Perri, 13, is in charge of her younger brother and sister.

They're low-income, ethnically diverse, and Perri - by the way - has a 4.0 grade point average at A.P. Giannini Middle School. So what high school did she get assigned to? John O'Connell in the Mission District, 5 miles away.

"I don't want my kids to turn out bad," Ha says. "They go far away, I don't know what they are doing. That's why I am so mad about this. My daughter, every day she is crying. Twenty years ago, they send you to neighborhood schools. It was easier for the parents. Now they send you far away."

The usual response to this is that there are a vocal few parents, most in the Richmond and Sunset districts, who are unhappy. Woodruff-Long says that their group found that "most people were pretty happy with where they ended up."

Maybe so, but how to explain the jury's point that 30 percent of school-age kids in San Francisco are not enrolled in public schools - four times the state average? The assumption is that those kids are being homeschooled or are attending private schools.

The hard part, of course, is finding a solution. The grand jury gets high marks for raising the issues, but its recommendation "to strengthen the role of neighborhood schools" isn't so popular.

Woodruff-Long calls it "simplistic and incomplete. Neighborhood schools are not a silver bullet." The grand jury was more likely to ask the district to look at systems like Sacramento or Seattle. In those cities, parents were assured that they'd get a school in a neighborhood "region," if they wished, but there is also a provision for the many families who would rather choose a school with alternative programs.

"I think that's a great idea," Woodruff-Long said. "I can name 10 districts that do something like that."

And how many can you name that have a chaotic, everybody-into-the pool system like San Francisco's?

"The jury can find no other urban districts anywhere else with the 'school choice' enrollment process," the report said.

It's probably not a coincidence no other school district has followed the San Francisco model. It doesn't work.

C.W. Nevius' column appears on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. E-mail him at cwnevius@sfbay.com.

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