Proximity pondered in school assignment

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As school district leaders prepare to overhaul the controversial student-assignment system, the majority of candidates for Board of Education seats say the distance between home and school needs to be a bigger piece of the puzzle.

The complex process used to assign students to San Francisco public schools has long vexed parents — and has gone through a number of changes, though none were made in the 2007-08 school year. Both the civil grand jury and **Supervisor Carmen Chu** have recently called for the district to put more emphasis on placing students in schools close to where they live.

Although some parents, especially in Chu's Sunset district, would like a better shot at getting their students into high-demand schools in their neighborhoods, 82 percent of parents do not pick the closest school as first choice, according to district data.

"Neighborhood-based enrollment increases the likelihood that parents will band together to invest their time and energy into a local school," candidate Emily Murase said.

Murase, along with candidates Marigrace Cohen, Kimberly Wicoff, Rachel Norton, Jaynry Mak and James Calloway, support using proximity as one criterion of school assignment. Jill Wynns said the board should explore the idea, although she was less committed to it.

In the November race, 13 candidates, including incumbents Wynns and Norman Yee, are actively competing for four open seats. Two candidates that appear on the ballot, Glenn Davis and Kelly Wallace, are no longer running.

Most candidates said geography should not be the only factor in the new school-assignment system.

"An element of choice is vital," Wicoff said. "To preserve equity and diversity and enable parents to make the best choices, we would allow students to opt out of their neighborhood school."

Geography is not a consideration under the current system. Students are assigned to schools based on socioeconomic status, home language, academic performance of their current school and the students' own academic performance.

Although one aim of the assignment process is to create diverse schools, many — including the grand jury — have criticized the results: 30 of The City's 71 elementary schools have classrooms where 60 percent or more of the students belong to a single race, according to the grand jury's June report.

"I believe we can devise a new school-assignment system that strengthens diversity," said candidate Sandra Fewer.

San Francisco Unified School District is now developing block-by-block demographic models, the first step in understanding how to alter school assignments without sacrificing diversity, said Superintendent Carlos Garcia. He aims to have a new system in place by April.

What they're thinking

The Examiner asked Board of Education candidates what changes they would suggest making to the assignment system. Here's how they responded:

Harold Brown, 64, former special-education teacher: Stop busing students to schools in other neighborhoods

James Calloway, 63, retired educator: 60-40 split between neighborhood schools and parent choice

Marigrace Cohen, 66, retired teacher: Make neighborhood schools a priority

Sandra Fewer, 51, parent organizer: Get parents more involved, strengthen diversity

Omar Khalif, 46, juvenile probation ombudsman: Give parents choice among several nearby schools

Jaynry Mak, 31, attorney and youth director: Make proximity a priority, but preserve choice

Emily Murase, 43, director of the San Francisco Department on the Status of Women: 50-50 split between neighborhood schools and parent choice

Rachel Norton, 42, editorial director: Give parents choice among several nearby schools

Kimberly Wicoff, 34, nonprofit project director: Make neighborhood schools a priority

Jill Wynns, 60, incumbent: Consider using proximity as a factor

No response: Alex Lee, Barbara Lopez, Kelly Wallace and incumbent Norman Yee

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