



Research Brief

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Fifteen Years of Research about San Francisco's Student Assignment Policy

Since 2009, there have been a number of research projects involving Stanford University and other research organizations working with San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) to examine San Francisco's student assignment policy. This brief outlines the three themes stemming from research findings and implications from four studies by researchers about SFUSD's student assignment policy.

1. **A number of factors influence whether schools effectively serve a diverse student body.** When schools are not diverse and have high concentrations of racial or low-socio-economic groups, the schools are less effective. A number of systemic factors influence whether schools are effective:¹
 - Teacher experience and turnover
 - Quality of school leadership
 - Student engagement and sense of belonging among their social groups
 - School staff cultural sensitivity
 - Level of expectations for students and staff
 - Disparate resources across schools
 - Coherence and quality of curriculum

¹ Carter, P. (2010). Tales of Two Contexts: Achieving Equity Between and Within San Francisco Public Schools. Stanford Center for Opportunity and Policy in Education. Stanford University. Produced on behalf of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund and the Council of Great City Schools; Darling-Hammond, L. & Newton, S. (2009). Racial Concentration and School Effectiveness in San Francisco. School Redesign Network. Stanford University.

2. School diversity could increase when family participation in the school choice program increases, and there are ways to increase family participation in the choice process.

- The current student assignment system (citywide choice) does support the goal of diversity, but the diversity of schools is reduced through the current patterns of family participation in the student assignment system.²
 - To achieve more diversity through student assignment alone, the SFUSD would have to assign students to schools they did not request and to schools that are far from where they live.
- However, school diversity could increase when family participation in the school choice program increases. There are ways to improve family participation in the choice process and family choices that support diversity in schools.³
 - Summarize the system’s complexity in a simple way.
 - Information dissemination to families about the choice system must improve.
- When families face a local school that is unpopular, those that choose the local school tend to prioritize practical considerations, while families that choose schools further away opt for schools with better academic performance and more socioeconomically advantaged peers.⁴ (*“Unpopular” is defined as the school receiving fewer than 5 requests per seat; based on this definition, 26% of schools are “unpopular”.*)
 - Applicants who do apply to “unpopular” schools close to home tend to rate practical factors as important considerations for their school choices: close to home, has special education services, school’s start and end times.
 - Among families who do not apply to “unpopular” schools close to home, they tend to apply to schools that have a higher percentage of students meeting grade-level academic requirements, higher 5th grade test scores, lower perceived percentage of Free or Reduced- Price Lunch (FRPL), and more students of their same race.
- The importance of information from family and friends suggests that informal word-of-mouth discussions are a key way in which families form perceptions of schools. School reputations based on these discussions may be a pivotal driver of choices.⁵
 - Families rate good instructional quality, safe schools and welcoming staff as ‘very important’ reasons for choosing an elementary school.
 - Characteristics considered ‘somewhat important’ by most parents include neighborhood safety, good academic performance, proximity to home, good parent community, start and end times, extracurricular activities, and racial diversity. Also, factors such as after-school programs, special needs programs, and language programs can impact parents’ choices.
 - For all races except African American, families are choosing schools with more racial similarity than their neighborhood schools.⁶

² Kasman, M. (2013). Summary of Student Assignment Simulations. Stanford University; Beckham, K. and Gordon, L. (2016) Summary Discussion: History of K-5 Student Assignment System, 2009-2010. Stanford University.

³ Kasman, M. (2013); Beckham, K. and Gordon, L. (2016).

⁴ Clark, D., Martorell, P, & Li, P. Survey of Kindergarten applications to SFUSD: Preliminary findings (2022) [Power Point Slides].

⁵ Clark, D., & Martorell, P. (2023). Choosing an elementary school in San Francisco. California Education Lab, UC Davis School of Education.

⁶ Survey of Kindergarten applications to SFUSD: Preliminary findings (2022)

3. **There are recommendations to strengthen the current school assignment algorithm by assigning students in pods to schools and strengthening CTIP1 by adjusting qualifications, but neighborhood schools alone do not increase school diversity.**
- **There are other ways to support diversity in schools through student assignment policy changes:**
 - Assign students in “pods” or “posses” across schools to facilitate community building.⁷
 - Consider strengthening Census Tract Integration Preference, CTIP1, by adjusting qualifications, incorporating public housing, or including other socioeconomic status indicators, or increasing monitoring.^{8,9}
 - Reserve seats in each school for applicants who live in neighborhoods that have different Socioeconomic Status (SES) levels. A number of seats in a school could be reserved for students living in high-income areas, and some seats for students living in low-income areas. If there are remaining open seats in other diversity categories, students will be assigned to these open seats.¹⁰ (This is named “Diversity Categories” in [BP 5101.2](#).)
 - **Neighborhood schools alone do not increase school diversity.**
 - While this is true, a policy focused on neighborhood schools may make some schools less racially concentrated than they are today, and many schools would be operating at a higher capacity.¹¹
 - Although less than the current system of citywide choice, the simple neighborhood model still has meaningful racial segregation and considerable socioeconomic segregation. This simple neighborhood model cannot be deployed as is because of the mismatch between assignment and actual capacity.¹²

⁷ Carter, P. (2010). Tales of Two Contexts: Achieving Equity Between and Within San Francisco Public Schools. Stanford Center for Opportunity and Policy in Education. Stanford University. Produced on behalf of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund and the Council of Great City Schools.

⁸ Kasman, M. (2013).

⁹ Berg, C., Li, C., & Parikh, K. (2023). *Designing the Equity Tiebreaker for the San Francisco Unified School District* [Power Point Slides]. Stanford University.

¹⁰ Lo, I. (2022). *Designing School Choice for Diversity in the San Francisco Unified School District* [Power Point Slides]. Stanford University.

¹¹ Kasman, M. (2013); Beckham, K. and Gordon, L. (2016).

¹² Kim, M., & Ming, N. (2016). *Diversity Characteristics under Different Models of K-5 Assignment* [Power Point Slides]. San Francisco Unified School District.