

SFUSD Enrollment & Reorganization Policy Analysis

Executive Summary & Introduction

This policy analysis evaluates the San Francisco Unified School District's (SFUSD) proposed elementary school assignment policy options—Option A (Small Zones + Citywide Programs), Option B (Neighborhood + All Schools / Open Choice), and Option C (Neighborhood + Citywide Programs / Single Local Default)—against the district's Strategic Equity Enrollment framework.

To provide an objective, methodologically rigorous comparison, this evaluation applies a symmetric analytical framework that explicitly separates Inherent Structural Guarantees (the capabilities built directly into a policy's design) from Potential Implementation Risks (operational failure points or secondary friction).

Crucially, this analysis incorporates *family agency* as a foundational equity consideration. For families in historically under-resourced neighborhoods, citywide choice is not merely a preference; it serves as an essential mechanism of self-determination to navigate systemic educational inequities when local neighborhood schools have lacked adequate investment.

Key Findings

- Option A (Small Zones + Citywide Programs) provides the closest alignment with Strategic Equity Enrollment by offering a predictable cluster of 2–4 zoned schools alongside citywide language pathways. It balances local proximity with structural integration without forcing families into an all-or-nothing choice.
- Option B (Open Choice) offers maximum theoretical mobility but heavily favors families with the time and resources to navigate complex lotteries, accelerating socioeconomic sorting and causing severe capacity volatility for district planning.
- Option C (Single Neighborhood Default) maximizes operational simplicity but severely deepens racial and socioeconomic segregation by directly mirroring San Francisco's residential housing divides, while constraining family agency in under-resourced areas.

Core Demographic Context ([California School Dashboard Data](#))

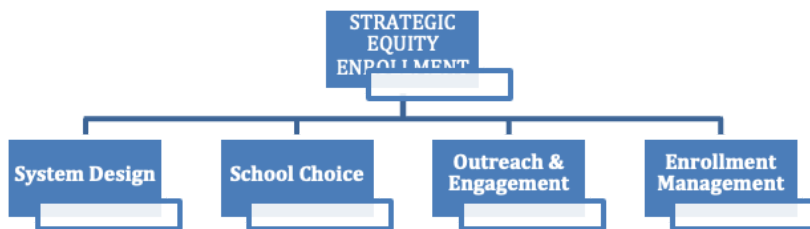
- **Student Population:** SFUSD serves over 50,000 students. Major demographic groups include Asian (~33%), Hispanic/Latino (~28%), White (~15%), African American/Black (~6%), and Multiracial/Filipino (~8%) communities.
- **High-Need Student Groups:** Over 50% of enrolled students are socioeconomically disadvantaged, and over 23% are English Learners (ELs) requiring specialized language pathways.

- **Geographic Reality:** Residential patterns in San Francisco remain socioeconomically and racially segregated. Historical reliance on citywide lotteries has often exacerbated socioeconomic sorting rather than eliminating isolation.

Integration of Strategic Equity Enrollment Framework

To address statewide trends of declining public-school enrollment—which directly impact instructional time, persistence, and district resources—partner organizations like Parents for Public Schools San Francisco (PPS-SF) emphasize **Strategic Equity Enrollment**. Rooted in foundational practices such as the *Handbook of Strategic Enrollment Management* (published by AACRAO), this framework uses system coherence to stabilize enrollment and advance public education's role in democracy.

Table 1.



1. **System Design:** Creating clear, coherent rules for school reorganization, program placement, and assignment boundaries to ensure long-term fiscal sustainability and equitable resource distribution.
2. **School Choice:** Structuring choice options so they protect access to specialized programs without exacerbating racial or socioeconomic segregation.
3. **Outreach & Engagement:** Fostering transparent, accessible communication with families across all neighborhoods, directly countering outreach confusion and building community trust.
4. **Enrollment Management:** Using data-informed practices to balance school capacities, improve student persistence, and strategically serve the most marginalized students.

Community Feedback: Key Themes & Outlying Factors

1. Communication Gaps, Transparency, & Outreach Confusion

- Misalignment of Outreach Channels (DCYF Listening Series): A significant point of confusion was that many parents were unaware that the Department of Children, Youth & Their Families (DCYF) Listening Series served as a venue for collecting community input on SFUSD's School Reorganization and Enrollment Policy. This disconnect highlights broader communication gaps between district initiative branding and city agency outreach.
- Technical Jargon & Accessibility: Stakeholders expressed strong frustration over complex policy jargon. Recommendations include creating plain-language visual aids (e.g., animated scenarios) to help families understand how policy changes affect individual students.
- Selection Suspicion: There is lingering skepticism regarding how SFUSD focus groups and study sessions are selected, alongside doubts that policy tweaks alone will dismantle historic segregation patterns.

2. Key Drivers of Family Enrollment Decisions

- Safety, Quality, & Proximity: Families prioritize educational quality, physical safety, and daily convenience/transit predictability.
- Specialized Program Access: Specialized offerings—such as Japanese bilingual and Chinese language immersion pathways—are primary factors in family retention. However, strict zone-based models risk creating systemic inequities by cutting off non-local families from accessing these unique models.
- Community Connection & Leadership: Education quality relies heavily on parental engagement, stable school leadership, and consistent staffing. Under-resourced areas face compounded structural barriers, including negative neighborhood perceptions, high administrative turnover, and historical underinvestment.

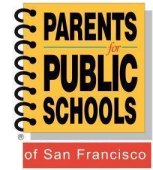
3. Systemic Concerns: Racism & Structural Barriers

- Distrust in District Commitment: Community members note a history of successful integration models (such as past consent decree programs) being dismantled over time. Addressing district-level racism, fear among marginalized parents, and uneven political power across neighborhoods are cited as prerequisites to true equity.
- Cross-District Precedents: Stakeholders emphasize drawing from lessons in neighboring cities (e.g., targeted integration programs in Sacramento) and empowering parent advocacy organizations to demand district accountability.

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Policy Evaluation & Structural Comparison

To achieve an objective evaluation across enrollment models, this analysis separates Inherent Structural Guarantees (what a policy natively guarantees by design) from Potential Implementation Risks (operational failure points or secondary friction).

Additionally, this framework incorporates family agency—recognizing that for families in historically underserved neighborhoods, citywide choice functions as a vital mechanism to navigate systemic under-resourcing rather than merely a preference mechanism.

Table 2

Policy Option	Inherent Structural Guarantees	Potential Implementation Risks	Systemic Equity & Family Agency Context
A. Small Zones + Citywide Programs (Small Zones / Neighborhood Assignment)	Guaranteed Proximity: Guarantees enrollment within a defined geographic zone. Operational Predictability: Guarantees predictable student assignment and stable, localized transportation patterns.	Segregation Lock-In: Mechanically reproduces existing residential segregation. Compounded Inequity: Automatically assigns families in under-resourced neighborhoods to local schools without providing a structural mechanism to exit.	Restrict Agency: Treats neighborhood proximity as inherently desirable, overlooking that families in historically under-resourced areas frequently value non-local options when local schools lack adequate investment.
B. Neighborhood + All Schools (Flexible Multi-Zone Choice)	Guaranteed Access Bounds: Guarantees a choice set across a broader, socioeconomically diverse zone. Structural Mobility: Decouples school assignment from residential housing wealth.	Transportation Demands: Requires robust transit infrastructure; failure to provide transit risks creating access barriers. Information Disparity: Requires proactive outreach so navigating options does not favor higher-resourced families.	Empowers Agency: Provides a structural safety valve, allowing families to exercise decision-making agency to seek specialized programs or better-resourced environments
C. Neighborhood + Citywide	Unbounded Access: Guarantees equal	Budget & Enrollment Instability: Unpredictable	Maximizes Agency: Directly addresses

(Controlled Citywide Choice)	eligibility to apply to any school district-wide. Maximized Flexibility: Ensures no family is structurally excluded based on geographic boundary lines.	demand can cause year-to-year enrollment swings, complicating staffing and facility planning. High Transit Friction: Creates complex district-wide transit logistics and longer commutes.	systemic inequities by treating citywide choice as an essential equity tool for families seeking high-quality educational settings outside their immediate neighborhood
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Policy Conclusion

To present an objective comparison across enrollment models, policy evaluations must apply symmetric analytical standards by explicitly separating Inherent Structural Guarantees (what a system natively provides by design) from Potential Implementation Risks (operational failure points or secondary friction).

Furthermore, an equitable evaluation must incorporate family agency. For families residing in historically under-resourced neighborhoods, citywide choice is not merely a preference; it serves as an essential mechanism of self-determination and agency to navigate systemic educational inequities when local neighborhood schools lack adequate investment or support.

Alignment with Strategic Equity Enrollment & Option Analysis

Option A aligns most closely with the Strategic Equity Enrollment framework, district demographics, and various community priorities:

- Inherent Structural Guarantees:
 - Balanced Access & Predictability: Guarantees predictable local assignments within a cluster of 2–4 schools to reduce daily transportation burdens for working-class families while maintaining citywide access to critical language pathways (e.g., Japanese and Chinese Biliteracy).
 - Structural Integration: Allows the district to strategically draw assignment zones across contiguous, diverse micro-neighborhoods to foster racial and socioeconomic integration.

Potential Implementation Risks:

- **Zone Boundary Friction & Communication Demands:** Requires precise boundary mapping to prevent localized demographic isolation. To succeed, implementation must operationalize the four Strategic Equity Enrollment pillars by streamlining inter-agency outreach (such as DCYF sessions) and using plain-language communications to build trust across all neighborhoods.

Family Agency & Equity Context: Provides families with localized predictability while preserving choice across a diverse zone cluster, balancing convenience with the ability to select programs that best fit their child's needs.

Critical Analysis: Option B (Neighborhood + All Schools / Open Choice)

Option B attempts to preserve wide-open citywide choices alongside a local neighborhood safety net, but presents several critical flaws when evaluated through structural and equity lenses:

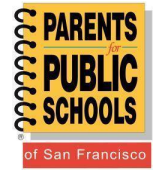
Inherent Structural Guarantees:

- **Unbounded Mobility:** Guarantees families the right to apply to any school district-wide alongside a local neighborhood safety net seat.

Potential Implementation Risks:

- **Disproportionately Harms Working-Class and Immigrant Families:** Wide-open choice systems heavily favor families with the time, social capital, and resources to research dozens of schools, visit campuses, navigate complex lottery rules, and organize cross-town transit. Working-class and non-English-speaking parents are statistically less likely to navigate open-choice lotteries effectively, often leaving them with default placements by default rather than by choice.
- **Re-Segregates Schools Through "Socioeconomic Sorting":** Higher-income families tend to cluster into a small group of highly sought-after campuses, creating an un-zoned sorting mechanism that leaves under-resourced neighborhood schools increasingly isolated.
- **Long Cross-Town Commutes & Transit Inequity:** Maintains heavy daily cross-town travel burdens, which are logistically unsustainable for families without private vehicles or flexible work schedules.

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- Undermines Strategic Equity Enrollment & System Coherence: Creates severe capacity volatility and resource instability, making it impossible for schools to reliably forecast enrollment, leading to fluctuating budgets and staffing unpredictability.

Family Agency & Equity Context: While Option B offers theoretical choice, navigating open-choice lotteries requires significant time and transit resources—meaning agency is unevenly realized, leaving resource-constrained families at a structural disadvantage.

Critical Analysis: Option C (Neighborhood + Citywide Programs / Single Local Default)

Option C is heavily criticized by equity advocates and district planners because of how it interacts with San Francisco's underlying residential segregation:

Inherent Structural Guarantees:

- Maximum Simplicity: Guarantees a direct, single-school neighborhood default, maximizing operational predictability and minimizing cross-town commutes for local assignees.

Potential Implementation Risks:

- Severe Escalation of Racial and Socioeconomic Segregation: Because San Francisco's neighborhoods are geographically and socioeconomically segregated, a single local default directly mirrors residential isolation without zone-based balancing across adjacent neighborhoods.
- Deprived Access to Specialized Programs: If specialized language immersion or pathways are designated strictly as "citywide programs," local families living near those campuses lose default proximity priority. Conversely, if a single school hosts a program as its default, families outside that immediate street boundary are entirely shut out.
- Creation of "Winner and Loser" Schools: High-demand neighborhood campuses become oversubscribed and insulated, while historically under-resourced campuses lose the ability to draw students from surrounding micro-neighborhoods, triggering funding cuts and teacher turnover.

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- Conflict with Strategic Equity Enrollment Goals: Relies on an all-or-nothing binary (single local default vs. citywide lottery) and lacks the structural flexibility of Option A's small zones to foster organic integration and fiscal sustainability.

Family Agency & Equity Context: Option C severely restricts agency for families in historically under-resourced neighborhoods by locking them into a single local school unless they possess the resources to successfully navigate competitive citywide lotteries.

Summary Comparison

Table 3

Policy Option	Inherent Structural Guarantees	Potential Implementation Risks	Alignment with Strategic Equity Enrollment & Family Agency
A. Small Zones + Citywide Programs (Small Zones / Neighborhood Assignment)	Localized Access: Predictable assignment within a cluster of 2–4 schools. • Specialized Pathways: Preserves citywide access to language immersion programs. .	Boundary Mapping: Requires careful contiguous zone mapping. • Outreach Needs: Depends on clear plain-language communication and inter-agency coordination.	High Alignment: Balances proximity and integration while providing structured, accessible choice for under-resourced families..
B. Neighborhood + All Schools (Flexible Multi-Zone Choice)	Unbounded Mobility: Freedom to apply to any campus district-wide. Safety Net: Guarantees local default seat availability.	Socioeconomic Sorting: Accelerates re-segregation as well-resourced families cluster. Planning Volatility: Causes fluctuating budgets, staffing shifts, and heavy transit burdens. .	Misaligned Equity: Choice is heavily resource-dependent; working-class families often receive default assignments by default rather than preference.

C. Neighborhood + Citywide (Controlled Citywide Choice)	Maximum Simplicity: Direct single-school default assignment. Transit Reduction: Minimizes cross-town commutes for local assignees.	Structural Segregation: Directly mirrors residential housing isolation. Binary Failure: Creates "winner and loser" schools without intermediate zone choices.	Constrained Agency: Restricts families in under-resourced neighborhoods to a single default unless they successfully compete in high-stakes citywide lotteries.
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Strategic Recommendations for Policy Implementation

To operationalize Option A (Small Zones + Citywide Programs) effectively while honoring family agency and mitigating structural risks, SFUSD should adopt the following recommendations:

1. Dynamic, Equity-Centered Zone Boundary Mapping

- **Design Contiguous, Socioeconomically Diverse Zones:** Rather than drawing boundaries strictly around neighborhood attendance areas, construct multi-neighborhood zones that deliberately merge contiguous micro-neighborhoods with distinct socioeconomic backgrounds to foster organic integration.
- **Incorporate Neighborhood Investment Metrics:** Continuously monitor resource allocation across zone schools so that families within a small zone are choosing between comparably resourced, high-quality options rather than choosing out of necessity to avoid under-supported campuses.

2. Robust Support Mechanisms for Family Agency & Access

- **Proactive "Choice Navigation" Infrastructure:** Expand personalized, multilingual enrollment support in historically under-resourced neighborhoods (e.g., through partnerships with community-based organizations and DCYF family hubs). Shift from passive information delivery to active assistance to ensure all families can navigate pathway options.
- **Targeted Transportation & Proximity Priority:** Provide dedicated municipal or district transit solutions for families choosing programs across their zone or accessing specialized citywide language pathways, eliminating transportation as a barrier to agency.

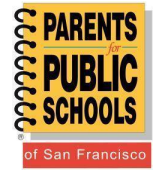
3. Protection of Specialized Citywide Pathways

- Preserve Access Pathways for Under-Reserved Students: Ensure citywide language immersion and specialized programs retain clear access pathways for heritage language learners and families from under-resourced areas, preventing high-demand citywide programs from becoming isolated or disproportionately populated by high-resource applicants.
- Balanced Neighborhood Priority Rules: For citywide programs physically hosted in neighborhood schools, implement balanced admissions rules that grant proximity access to nearby families while reserving dedicated seats for applicants citywide.

4. Symmetric Policy Evaluation & Iterative Monitoring

- Track Realized Choices vs. Default Assignments: Establish annual monitoring metrics to evaluate whether families in under-resourced neighborhoods are successfully accessing their preferred schools within their zone, distinguishing true preferences from forced default assignments.
- Transparent Multi-Year Implementation: Maintain a phased implementation timeline with multi-year feedback loops, allowing the district to adjust boundary lines, transit routes, and outreach strategies based on actual enrollment trends before final policies solidify.

Parents for Public Schools San Francisco's strong position that no policy be voted on by this Board until key implementation recommendations are fully in place—including equity-centered zone boundaries, robust navigation supports, equitable resources and reliable transit.



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