

## **Report of Findings from Community Forums about Proposed K-8 Pathways and Building Quality Middle Schools**

May 2011

Over the past two years the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) and Parents for Public Schools (PPS) have held community conversations with over 1,700 parents about student assignment, school quality, and equitable access to education opportunities. This year, working with SFUSD staff to conduct 19 community forums over about six weeks, **we heard from over 850 people** in conversations about district proposals to create K-8 pathways and build quality middle schools.

This report presents our findings from these community forums, and our recommendations for actions the district should take to strengthen middle schools and support student success in these critical years.

We were not surprised to find **the main messages we heard during these most recent community conversations are the same as what we've heard** families and community members say repeatedly **over the past several years - and what we've repeatedly reported to the Board of Education and district staff:**

- More than anything else, **parents want quality schools** - and they don't perceive all schools as quality schools. Because all schools are different, **most parents want to be able to choose a school that will meet their children's needs.**
- **Most parents questioned whether student assignment** - specifically, the proposed feeder patterns - **has any direct relationship to building quality middle schools.**
- **Many parents challenged the feeder patterns as unfair and inequitable. They don't want to feel forced into something that won't work for their children.**
- **Even parents who supported feeder patterns**, as a way to address the challenges of increasing student enrollment and to support better planning, **had questions about how feeder patterns would meet the individual needs of different students.**
- Most **parents would like their children to attend a school that's easy to get to**, but they also care about special programs, school culture and size. **Many parents would be willing to send their child to a school farther away if it meets their family's needs.**
- Many **parents wanted** the results of the district's quality assessment inventory to be reflected in a **plan to assess and improve middle schools in all communities** before the district moves to change how student assignment works.
- Most **people support expanding language programs** - the only academic plan presented during the forums - but many **wonder whether the district has the resources** to implement these programs well, especially given the budget crisis.

## **New Issues That Emerged from these Conversations**

*It scares me to think of how much the district has spent on this process so far. Why aren't we spending the money to fix the schools instead of on changing the student assignment system?*

It's tempting to simply repeat what we've said in our reports over the past two years - including parents' frustration with talking about student assignment and desire to focus instead on what needs to be done to actually achieve high quality schools in every community. But in addition to reinforcing many themes we've heard before, some new issues and ideas emerged in these forums. **We want to highlight two issues that stood out during this focus on middle schools:**

1. **The widespread desire to address the language needs of all students in the district, including:**
  - Newcomer students who speak languages in addition to Cantonese, Spanish or Mandarin, as well as students who speak those primary languages
  - Students who need bilingual support to develop academic English skills, as well as recognition of their bicultural identity
  - Students coming out of K-5 language immersion and bilingual programs, and
  - General education students, who should have access to learning a language before reaching high school.
  
2. **Fundamental questions about how to meet students' different needs, from Special Education to GATE - especially in the context of a policy of open enrollment in honors and advanced placement courses in high school. Questions include:**
  - How do we best meet students' different learning styles, needs and abilities - through differentiated instruction, classes that group students with similar abilities, or a more clearly-defined combination of these different approaches?
  - How can the district support teachers to provide differentiated instruction that's effective in challenging and supporting all students to achieve their potential?
  - Access to elective classes is a high priority for most families, as a part of a holistic education and an important way to engage middle school students. Why is access to high-quality elective courses so uneven from school to school, and how can English Learner and Special Education students have access to electives?
  - What's in place now, what can be put in place, what's the impact of budget cuts, and how does all this fit with current efforts to align the district's standards and curriculum across schools?

## What We Heard: Findings from Community Forums

Through all our community engagement initiatives the PAC and PPS work hard to ensure that we hear from a diverse and representative group of parents. In addition to forums at all the middle schools, we also conducted meetings at elementary schools and focus groups in target communities, to make sure we heard from parents with diverse experiences and perspectives.

As we analyzed the transcripts and thought about the dynamics of the different forums, we confirmed that **we heard a wide range of reactions to the district's proposals**. We also found that we heard many **questions, concerns and suggestions in common** across many **differences in the ethnicity, primary language, neighborhood - or mood - of participants**.

While many parents at the forums focused on reacting to the proposed student assignment feeder patterns, we also asked participants to address issues related to middle school quality, including curriculum issues and access to language programs. As in previous community conversations, parents - and this time, educators - had a lot to say about these issues.

### Building Quality Middle Schools

*Where is the plan to increase quality middle schools? We need to see something specific with money and resources. Right now there's nothing specific. We don't believe that feeders are addressing the real issues of building quality middle schools.*

*Why don't we start with the inventory of middle schools that work rather than have the language pathway be the driving force?*

*What's going to be done at this school to improve things, what's going to be done here? To improve scores, to help [students]. It's a lot more than just a language program. There needs to be more action and less paper.*

*The fact is not all middle schools are the same - they don't all have all the lovely things we heard the principal talk about being at this school and it just made me more mad that my kids' school doesn't have these things.*

*This pathway plan seems more about feeding parents into the schools so that they'll fix the schools, rather than actually fixing the schools.*

*Where is the research... on what is effective? Why do people choose the top-requested schools? What are they doing? Can we replicate that? Let that drive our decisions....*

Throughout the forums parents spoke up clearly about the things they consider essential to a quality middle school. For most parents, "quality" is not limited to test scores - although academic rigor is important. While people had different priorities, there was a common desire for schools where the principal, teachers, and staff have a clear vision for how to meet the different needs of diverse student populations.

Parents were frustrated that while the district described a list of factors related to “quality schools,” no real information was presented about what the challenges are, what’s working, or specific plans for improving schools based on this information. Parents and educators also wondered how the district’s current K-8 schools fit into this process.

*Special Education is not being addressed. We need teachers, resources. There is not a lot of talk here about Special Education.*

*How do Special Ed kids get assigned to middle schools?*

*Do we have enough resources for the inclusion program? What happens to those kids? What does Special Ed look like in middle school in terms of inclusion?*

Parents also noted there was no mention of Special Education in the district’s presentation. This was a huge gap - because the district is changing how these services will be provided, but didn’t talk about that, or **how feeder patterns could meet the specific needs of students in Special Education.**

*I’m not a big advocate for tracking - but I want the district to have a plan. If they don’t have a GATE program, how are they going to engage those kids?*

*I like the fact that the current system allows choice not to have honors tracking; lots of people prefer differentiation.*

*Teach to everyone’s ability in one place at one time – I find it hard to imagine that a teacher could do that in a large classroom. Tracking is a loaded word, but we should provide honors opportunities for those who want to be in that type of environment.*

*If it happens, differentiated learning is great but if it doesn’t, then it doesn’t. For the teacher to be capable of doing it takes training and support.*

Parents have different feelings about how to meet the needs of both struggling and high-achieving students, whether through honors courses or differentiation, and we found that middle schools approach these issues very differently. **The overall question became, What’s the district’s position or theory about this?** It’s up to each school to decide how to handle it - but **what resources are provided to help schools and teachers be effective at meeting their students’ different needs** - whether there are honors classes, or not?

*Sometimes that elective is going to be the “joyful” piece - it’s what keeps them engaged.*

*My child is in the band and that’s why we chose Aptos. So is the District willing to offer music and arts in all the middle schools?*

*Why can certain schools offer programs, like language programs, that others can't? If they aren't magnet schools, then why are there any differences at all?*

*What if we looked at the whole budget, all the different initiatives and the impact of these initiatives on which students? We need to do a cost analysis of all the programs we have. \$6 million sounds like a lot of money but we spend a lot of money on a lot of things.*

Parents and educators are interested in having more electives and hands-on learning that kids are excited about - and which is not accessible at all schools. The Superintendent has pointed to project-based learning as part of a 21<sup>st</sup> century curriculum, but where are the plans to make these ideas a reality at all the middle schools?

There were a lot of questions and comments about the \$6 million it would take for every middle school to have a 7<sup>th</sup> period, in order to expand language programs and still provide an elective period to most students (though not for English Learners). Most parents felt that electives are important. Some were skeptical that the district could find the resources to make this possible, while others felt it is such a clear priority that funds should be prioritized to make it work.

### **Expanding Language Pathways**

Across differences in schools, neighborhoods, ethnicity, and primary language, **most people generally support** - and many are excited about - the idea of **expanding language programs for middle school students**. At the same time, many **parents, educators and community members raised questions and concerns** about the proposed language pathways discussed at the forums.

*I think it's really good to have more language programs - it's a sacrifice but it's important and will help our kids.*

*We'd like to see a definition of what the language pathway would be in 6,7, 8 and further continuing K through 12. We believe in it. We've invested in it. We want to go all the way. What does it take to make it happen?*

*But that brings up the question - are all students going to have access to language? It seems like the resources are being put to smaller group of students - I would want all kids to have access to language.*

*We wanted an immersion program, but didn't get it. Will there be a way for our kids to "catch up" language-wise?*

*We have a general concern about how expanding immersion and language programs would work. How would the district ensure existing programs are not disrupted by new feeders and language expansion?*

*Great idea to expand language – \$6 million does not sound like a huge percentage of the budget for our students to be international citizens.*

*How are they going to pay for that? The district doesn't have the resources to expand immersion into middle school let alone language for all.*

*Let's overcome the obstacles and make it happen. Language acquisition is so important that it should be prioritized. Find the funds to make it happen.*

At a few of the early forums some people felt that “immersion” and “general education” families were being pitted against each other by the feeder patterns - where assignment for all students was based on pathways designed primarily to meet the needs of students in language immersion programs.

Many parents want all middle schoolers to have access to language classes - not just those who “won the immersion lottery starting in kindergarten.” Some felt it wasn't fair to concentrate so many resources to serve a limited number of the district's students.

Many parents asked about data related to student achievement, and some wondered whether immersion programs are helping to close the achievement gap. Others were confused about how language pathways and new biliteracy programs would work, what the “Lau Plan” is, and how the pathways would serve English Learner students.

Even people who were enthusiastic about expanding language programs raised concerns about the challenges of finding qualified teachers, and the lack of funding and resources to implement the proposed programs.

*[Despite] the language pathways commitment and this seal [of bilingualism], only the Lau Plan is a legal mandate, and as we try to do all of this warm fuzzy stuff, why don't we serve the Pacific Islander students? There aren't any biliteracy programs for them. If we're having budget issues, what do we do first – fully implement Lau, or create trilingual paths? What takes precedence?*

*Will there be something in place for newcomers, for English Learners? Kids are losing electives to stay with immersion - it doesn't seem fair or equitable.*

In forums at schools serving large populations of immigrant and English Learner students, including Francisco and Visitation Valley middle schools, people wondered how to improve services for English Learners in general, as well as those who don't speak the major languages in the district (Cantonese, Spanish and Mandarin).

Some parents and educators questioned why the district is expanding “foreign language” or immersion programs (for example in Russian) rather than providing biliteracy or English Language Development programs for Samoan students - who are one of the district’s most under-served populations, and are a larger student population.

Parents also wondered whether students in Special Education would have access to language programs, and if middle schools will have staff with the language ability to communicate with Special Education students who are also English Learners.

*Adding new language programs [to Aptos] would also create consolidation issues because most teachers don’t have BCLADs right now, and we would have to find teachers who could do it. The current staff would be replaced.*

*People love [Aptos] - why are they basically gutting it to do Mandarin immersion?*

*I just want to have it written down: unless you have the 7<sup>th</sup> period, the language program will dismantle the VAPA program we’ve built here [at Presidio].*

In forums at Aptos and Presidio middle schools, the school communities were concerned that expanding the language programs will mean dismantling their Visual and Performing Arts programs. There was a lot of confusion about whether this would actually happen - whether their concern is based on misinformation or if the district is being honest about it. Deputy Superintendent Carranza stated definitively at the forum at A.P. Giannini that this would not happen - is that a commitment the district is prepared to honor?

Finally, some elementary school parents are concerned that the immersion program at the middle school level isn’t robust (that two periods a day in the target language is not sufficient), while others felt that if the overall quality of a proposed feeder school wasn’t strong, expanding a language program within that school wouldn’t be successful.

### **Student Assignment Revisited: Proposed Feeder Patterns**

*The correlation between feeder patterns creating quality schools doesn’t make sense - it’s the structure of the schools that matter, not the students who are assigned to them.*

*The feeder pattern is a part of the puzzle, but just a small part of the puzzle. The overall concept is good but I’m eager to talk about after the feeder pattern – class size is huge, the budget challenges, preserving a safe community will be harder with budget cuts...*

*This is my fourth forum - I come to these to try and hear what people are saying and understand what they’re doing. Why are they forcing this if people don’t want it?*

*The district is looking at feeder patterns to make schools better and they are missing a step of making each and every middle school as good as it possibly can be. It seems backwards to go to feeders to develop quality.*

*This is the wrong conversation.*

**The proposed feeder patterns were usually the most controversial topic of the forums. Most parents questioned whether student assignment in general - or feeder patterns, specifically - has any direct relationship to building quality middle schools.**

*Is this what the parents want? What was their basis for this? (Asked by a teacher.)*

*This is a very flawed plan.*

*I think this is a good plan.*

*This system is a strange bandage.*

*It looks really nice if you're feeding into the top six requested schools, and doesn't feel as good if you're in the bottom seven.*

*Maybe I'd be in favor if my daughter were being sent to a high achieving school that can help her do better.*

*The concept of feeders is great, but the devil is in the details. I feel like the district treats all the schools the same and doesn't appreciate the differences among the schools in terms of dollars and resources.*

*My understanding is that language pathways are driving the feeders... I heard that 38% of parents are choosing language programs, but what about the rest of the parents? - That's not equitable.*

*Feeders have a lot of positive implications for middle school PTAs because middle school is a short amount of time. It's hard to build continuity of parent leadership when people are in and out.*

*I like the idea of the feeder system. But the problem is that if we had all known that the elementary school we'd go into would determine the middle school, we'd probably have changed our mind with the elementary school we're in. I don't like the way this is changing mid-stream but I like the idea of the feeder system.*

*I'm being funneled into a school because of a language pathway. General ed. kids [in an immersion school] are being fed into a middle school because of the language pathway but we don't get the language and the school may not have access to honors, band, or art and no opportunity for a second language. It just seems unfair.*



Many people were very critical of the feeder patterns - some completely against the concept, while others were more concerned about the specific feeders being proposed.

Some parents - and many educators - strongly supported the concept of feeder patterns because they felt the program planning and community-building opportunities would help strengthen the middle schools' ability to better meet the needs of incoming students.

However, many **people challenged the feeder patterns as unfair to students unless all schools have all the same range and quality of programs** - which isn't always practical, and isn't what most parents or school administrators say they want. Beyond location, electives, approaches to honors courses and test scores, **schools are different** in terms of size, afterschool and enrichment programming, and accessibility to other services that different families need.

*This plan is the worst of all worlds. I'm coming from elementary schools we don't live near, a middle school I haven't chosen and might not live close to - let me choose where I want to go.*

*I like the way middle schools develop that are so different, and you can choose the kind of school that works for you - having the feeder system takes that away.*

*With a choice system you can choose music & art, math & science, and/or proximity. With a feeder program there is a heavier burden on the district to maintain every program at every school.*

*I want to be close to home but for me it's about choice. Not every school works for every kid right now.... What is being done in the meantime to bring all schools to the same level?*

*I think put an extra star by the "wide variety of choice" - like for me, I chose Alice Fong Yu strictly for language, so when my son is an adult he can go out into the world and compete. For some kids it's going to be technology or science, or for some it could be sports.*

*We've chosen the school that we like even if it is far away - it doesn't matter if there's no school bus, we'll go on public transportation.*

*Wait - but for all you people saying proximity, what if you lived next door to one of the lowest-performing middle schools? If you look at the map you see all the people who live in the SE part of the city - and they choose to send their kids to a school way out here, no matter how much it costs or how hard it is for their families - they're not choosing proximity.*

*I have two children in middle school with really different needs - How are you going to serve their different needs if you take away my choice about where they can go?*

As in previous conversations about student assignment, **many parents completely rejected the district's plan to take away their ability to choose a school**. While some parents want to choose a school their child can get to on their own, many others prioritize special programs, school culture, or school size, over location. **Parents want to be able to select more than one option that works for them, and not be constrained or forced into a designated school.**

Across differences in size and mood of the forums, as well as different demographics of people participating in the conversations, **even people who were open to the overall idea of feeder patterns raised many of the same questions about how feeder patterns would meet the individual needs of students.** Parents felt there should be real, viable opt-out mechanisms for families, such as city-wide choice schools.

*I like the idea of taking groups of kids and sending them to middle school together.*

*It doesn't always make sense for kids to follow the same group of students they attended elementary school with - they may need a change.*

*I'm very much in favor of feeders. The community going together is a reason we might stay in the city.*

*I'm excited about the concept of K-8 pathway this creates, I like the idea that kids can go to the same school. My concern is about how feeder schools have been chosen.*

*I want to put out something different. My elementary school is feeding into one of the top schools, to this one – but I'd be really happy moving with my cohort. Send us wherever – we don't have to go to the top school, we'll make any school we go to a top school.*

*Another rationalization is that it creates a community. So many middle schools have a great community, and those communities exist because people with like values seek them out.*

Ironically, although the district framed community-building as a specific benefit of a feeder system based on previous conversations where parents identified this as a priority, many parents had mixed feelings about the notion of elementary school communities sticking together. Some parents recognized this as a strength of proposed feeder patterns, and during the forum at Roosevelt middle school parent leaders began reaching out during the event itself to engage families from the feeder elementary schools.

Some parents, however, felt there were other, more effective ways to build community within the schools. In addition, many families see middle school as a time to re-assess their children's needs and interests, and look for a school that will meet those needs.

*I understand we have a long way to go to achieve equity, but the number of what are considered quality middle schools has increased in the last few years. Why can't the "pull people" model work? Don't we already have success in this? Language programs have increased options in elementary schools and should work in middle school.*

*This is kind of out there - but since Presidio is one of those schools that people want to go to - can't you do like a "Presidio East" - get teacher leaders and programs - and bring them to the eastern part of the city? Put Rooftop in the Bayview - you'll have a lot of people who'll want to go there.*

*Create another K-8 immersion school - like Buena Vista/Horace Mann.*

*There should be patterns that offer continuity for people in programs, but choice for everyone else. Then you could make quality schools for those programs instead of halfway-done programs all over the district.*

*The district should create magnet schools to make people want to travel so we can mix up quality. Create a choice to travel instead of being forced.*

*Why not copy the elementary school attendance plan for middle schools? That provides middle school neighborhood proximity attendance and ways for kids from low-performing neighborhoods to get access to other schools.*

We asked participants to describe other ideas for student assignment they felt would do a better job of addressing the challenges of increasing student enrollment and meeting the district's overall goal of strengthening school quality.

Some parents pointed out the priorities of feeder patterns were not made explicit (for example, the relative priorities of diversity, proximity, or new language programs) - so it was impossible to comment on whether the proposed patterns will meet the goals. They asked, "How do you measure success if you don't know what the specific objectives or goals are?"

Many parents suggested ways to attract families to under-enrolled schools and accommodate an increasing numbers of students while maintaining - and strengthening - mechanisms for school choice.

Some parents suggested developing feeder patterns over time while building the quality of middle schools in every community. One specific idea that came up in multiple conversations was creating "magnet schools" to provide high-quality programs that students and parents are interested in, such as arts, science & technology, or a focus on language.

## Different Issues for Some Communities

*I'm upset that there will not be a middle school in my neighborhood (Bayview).*

*I'm curious about what's our larger plan as I look at the proposed feeder pattern. It just feels like in some middle schools, some kids will feel comfortable, but in other schools, some kids will feel left out and isolated. Why do we have to work so hard in our elementary schools to help our students feel as prepared as possible for entering middle school, but other schools will not? For example, here at Drew, we'll have to prepare our kids to travel clear across town.*

*So are we going to be consistently shipped out of here? That's why we need a K-8 school here.*

*Here in the Bayview we're almost in the bay, but if our kids go to Giannini, they'll be almost in the ocean!*

*We want a quality middle school that is exactly the same as all the other neighborhoods but here in our community. Because if we can't have that here and we have to go to another neighborhood, how do you expect people to react when they come to this part of the town? We are concerned about how our kids will be treated on that side of town.*

*There aren't enough middle schools in the east side of the city. Why aren't we trying to create something great in that neighborhood? Why not reopen Burbank? Our kids could walk there if we did.*

*Why does this neighborhood have the most students and the fewest schools?*

*It doesn't make sense to have 8 elementary schools and no middle schools - we need to have more middle schools here [in the Excelsior].*

In community meetings in the Mission, Excelsior and Bayview communities, for the most part participants expressed the same range of interests, questions and concerns that came up in the other forums - with a few notable additions.

Parents, educators and community members in the Bayview and Excelsior neighborhoods expressed specific questions and concerns about the fact that despite having the highest concentration of children of the city, the southeast has the fewest middle schools. With the closure of Willie Brown Academy the Bayview will no longer have a middle school. As a result, students will be sent to middle schools across the city, including Giannini, Aptos and Hoover.

Families in the Excelsior shared the concern that proposed feeder patterns would send their children to schools that are very difficult to reach on public transportation. **We heard many questions about whether transportation would be provided** for students being fed to schools far away. Everyone understands the district is scaling back school bus service - and wondered how their children would get to school on time.

Consistent with community conversations over the past several years, parents and educators in these neighborhoods felt their students don't received the same level of support as families on the west side of the city, and don't have access to the same quality of programs (such as language, music, rigorous academics, and teacher stability). They're also concerned about their children being a small minority within a school, a lack of cultural competency in some schools their children will attend - and whether their children will be made to feel welcome in those schools.

For many Latino parents in the Mission District safety continues to be a major concern - not necessarily inside particular middle schools, but in the streets and neighborhood around those schools. The district's presentation did not address issues of school climate or safety, other than to say that most families believe their children's schools are safe. They wondered how the school district could work more closely with the city to address school and community safety.

### **How People Feel about the Process**

*Is this a done deal? Is the district really listening?*

*The district is not giving parents the complete picture. We're being led into a trap – there's something fishy with this picture.*

*I'm saying that most parents do not know about the District's feeder pattern proposal. The District should get the message across better to our families.*

*One of the problems here is that this process has really pitted general ed families against language immersion families. I feel that promises were made to immersion families that were decided by lottery. To consider offering considerable development to programs that parents were denied access to - it really compounds the unfairness.*

*The initial feeders were arbitrary. What's the rationale behind the new ones? Will you change it again? Are there objective criteria we can understand or is it just that people objected last time?*

*They made one decision last year and now they're making another one - are they going to change it every year?*

*The "phased in" proposal doesn't say when it will really be "in," it only talks about tie-breakers - what is the timeline?*

*I am concerned looking at this, that maybe I don't completely understand what's being proposed. I'm a district employee who is supposed to be running the programs here, and it would be nice if I didn't have to come to a community meeting to learn what the plan is.*

Throughout the forums many parents, teachers and community members expressed questions and concerns about the district's planning and decision-making approach to the initiatives to support quality middle schools, and its process in conducting the forums themselves.

From the start of this series of community forums we found a lot of doubt and questions about the district's intentions, capacity or resources to implement these proposals. Many parents asked directly, ***"Is this a done deal? Is the district even listening to what we say?"***

Some of this frustration - and sense that the district and Board of Education are not listening to the community - is because **much of what we heard during these forums reflects the same questions, concerns, and priorities that we have already reported following our community conversations over the past two years.**

As organizations who have been working for years to engage parents in education policy discussions, **we are especially frustrated that this community engagement process failed to achieve the goal of building trust among parents**, and that the district actually may have lost ground in its relationship with the community.

### *Dynamics at the forums*

From March 1 through April 21 we conducted a total of 19 community meetings - including forums at 12 middle and five elementary schools, and two focus groups with parents from about ten different schools. Over 850 people participated in the conversations, including a few people who attended more than one forum. Attendance at the forums ranged from a dozen to 200 people, with an average of about 50. All the meetings included interpretation or the ability to facilitate breakout discussions in English, Spanish and Cantonese.

At a few forums the dynamic was very difficult. When district staff canceled "Q & A" sessions at Aptos and Lick, parents were outraged. On the other hand, when district staff offered to take questions informally at Denman and International Studies Academy, instead of keeping to the format of answering two or three questions identified by the small groups as priorities, it seemed to elicit an enraged outburst instead of actual questions.

Most of the forums were much calmer for a variety of reasons, including simply having fewer people in one room, people who came without an organized set of talking points, parents feeling happier about the middle school their children would be assigned to, or school communities feeling less anxious about how their schools might be impacted by new programs.

### *Communication and outreach challenges*

Unfortunately, we know that many parents left the first few forums (which had the largest attendance) confused and upset rather than informed and engaged - for several reasons.

The survey we distributed at each meeting included an evaluation of the forum itself. Surveys from forums during the first two weeks of March indicated the majority of people felt they were able to participate and to make their concerns known, and would recommend other parents attend a forum. However, many people rated negatively the statements, “The presentation of information was clear” and “My questions were answered.”

Some of this lack of clarity was a result of incomplete or confusing information that was provided by the district, as well as inaccuracies perpetuated through informal communication among families and school communities that was not addressed clearly by the district at the forums themselves (for example, about how language pathways might be implemented).

One major challenge was that the slide show presented by district staff was still being revised and was different at nearly every forum between March 1 and March 16. The original materials didn’t align with information presented in the slide show, were not in parent-friendly language, and were not translated. Later forums did have handouts in multiple languages, but during the first two weeks little information was provided for parents to take away with them.

Even once the materials were finalized, however, during the discussions we found that for most parents **the district didn’t make a compelling case** for the benefits of feeder patterns - or **what student assignment has to do with building quality middle schools**.

For example, there was not a clear, consistent message about how the projected increase in the middle school student population would make a choice process work less effectively. On the whole, the district missed the opportunity to make their case: to share important information and educate parents about what’s working and what the challenges are, and describe the problems, priorities, and their strategies to address those challenges.

Many parents were anxious about the prospect of their elementary school-aged child being sent to a middle school they didn’t believe would meet their child’s needs, and **the absence of detailed information** about plans to ensure every school could meet the needs of its students **simply escalated that anxiety**.

**One of the biggest challenges was getting the word out to families** about the forums, especially to reach parents who weren’t already engaged in conversations through school-site or community blogs and list-servs. To support outreach and publicity, district staff designed a flyer template for us to use, and facilitated PAC and PPS staff to attend meetings with all the middle and elementary school principals so we could describe the process and ask for their help in distributing flyers to their school communities.

**Some sites did a great job to inform and encourage their families to participate**, including parent liaisons at STAR schools - **but it didn’t work at many schools**, where some families (who learned about the forums through other ways) said they never received the flyer. District staff also activated the auto-dialer telephone system to inform families about the forums, but again this didn’t seem to work for every forum, especially those held after spring break.

### Lack of transparency

One of the reasons some parents attended multiple forums (and spoke out during public comment at regular meetings of the Board of Education) is there was nowhere else to go to express their concerns. For example, the Board's Ad-Hoc Committee on Student Assignment did not meet between February 1 and May 9, 2011. These public discussions among Board commissioners and district staff are an important way for people to learn more about complex proposals, and to see how district leaders are working to develop effective policy. They're also an important opportunity for parents to express their concerns directly to the Board of Education.

Despite announcing there would be an online survey for people to express their responses to the proposals (especially parents who weren't able to attend a forum), this survey was not provided on the district's website until two weeks after the forums began.

During this process, the PAC and PPS heard (and received) a lot of criticism about the lack of transparency and accountability from the district, and some people in the community questioned our credibility for working so closely with the district on this initiative. This was a difficult and painful situation, which we worked hard to address.

**More transparency and better communication about the district's plans for improving schools would win back people who have lost trust in the district.** Towards that end, parents want to see a concrete plan for strengthening middle schools that:

- Describes specific strategies and timelines for improving schools - including challenges at specific schools, and plans to address those challenges
- Identifies clear priorities, goals and resources for implementing these strategies.

### Conclusion

Through our years of experience conducting community conversations and listening closely to the families of students in public schools, the PAC and PPS have found that even parents who face enormous obstacles – including language barriers and economic hardship – are dedicated to their children's education and have a lot of ideas about how to improve schools.

Middle school is a critical time for students - and this is a critical time for our school district. Given the budget crisis it's even more important that the district's priorities and plans are clear. We agree with the current focus on strengthening middle schools and supporting students to be prepared for high school and beyond. Improved communication about this work is part of making real the district's commitment to "keep its promises to students and their families."



## **Recommendations about Building Quality Middle Schools and K-8 Pathways**

We recognize the district needs to address the real challenges of student assignment and enrollment, as well as the projected increase in middle school student population in the near future. To address those challenges, we need to talk honestly about why some schools are under-enrolled, including those in communities with a high concentration of students and few schools. Simply put, **many parents don't choose schools they believe are lower in quality or dangerous** - because of the location or the school's reputation.

In making our recommendations we believe it is important to identify specific challenges the district is facing. We realize the most urgent challenge right now is the state budget crisis. However, **lack of funding is not the only issue.**

**The district needs to develop and communicate clear plans for strengthening middle schools, and to support all our students to achieve at their potential.** Our recommendations address specific elements that these plans need to include.

**Building Quality Schools: Parents want to see an explicit plan for improving middle school quality that is based on data, supports best practices, and prepares students for success in high school and beyond.**

### **Challenges:**

- We're losing students during middle school years - many are not engaged at school, fall behind, and drop out.
- Increasing class size is impacting students' ability to learn.
- The more inclusive model for Special Education means more differentiation is required in classrooms - it's hard to do and teachers need support.
- Schools have very different approaches to differentiation; some schools have honor tracks and many schools don't.
- There's uneven academic achievement across SFUSD's middle schools.
- An engaging curriculum and electives are important to families, but there's uneven access to high quality programs among different schools.

### **Recommendations:**

- Address issues related to differentiation and honors programs.
- Hold principals and teachers accountable to high standards, and support them to meet these standards.
- Place highly-effective, culturally competent principals and teachers in schools that are struggling.
- Develop an engaging, hands-on and rigorous curriculum for all students.
- Ensure all students have access to high quality electives at all middle schools - including English Learner and Special Education students.

**Expanding Language Pathways: We know the district is working on this plan - and here are some issues that the plan needs to include.**

**Challenges:**

- There’s a legal and moral obligation to serve the needs of English Learner students, who speak many different languages.
- The district has invested in immersion programs in grades K-5, and needs more capacity to serve students in grades 6-8.
- All parents want their kids to have access to a multilingual education.
- In addition to the cost of adding a 7<sup>th</sup> period and providing additional materials to accommodate expanding language programs, there’s a shortage of qualified multilingual teachers.

**Recommendations:**

- Establish clear criteria and priorities for meeting needs of students who speak languages besides Spanish, Cantonese & Mandarin (for example, Samoan).
- Incorporate serving general education and Special Education students in plans for expanding language programs.
- Identify needs and strategies related to resources and trade-offs.

**Student Assignment: We don’t want to talk about student assignment again next year.**

**Challenges:**

- “Feeder patterns” were added to the student assignment policy at the last minute in 2010, and adopted with no community discussion or input.
- There’s a projected increase in the middle school student population.
- Uneven enrollment means we now have some over-subscribed and some under-enrolled middle schools.
- There’s no middle school in Bayview and not enough middle school capacity in the southeast part of the city - which has the highest concentration of students.
- When schools are under-enrolled it’s usually because parents believe they are not high quality.

**Recommendations:**

- Do not implement feeder patterns. Retain the choice system, while strengthening the quality of all schools.
- Strengthen the mechanisms for choice in middle schools, and improve communication to families about ways different schools can address students’ academic and enrichment needs.
- Create “magnet schools” with high-quality programs that attract families, like arts, science & technology, or language. Place these schools strategically to support diversity and meet program demand.
- Establish coherent pathways for programs that serve specific student populations with special needs, including English Learner and Special Education students.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Unless the district shares a concrete plan for opening a new school in the Bayview - and involves the community in shaping that plan - people won't trust that it's going to happen.</li> <li>▪ It's complicated to implement language pathways in the context of a choice system.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Focus on these tie-breakers for middle school assignment: siblings, an equity mechanism, and attendance area.</li> <li>▪ Open a high-quality middle school in the Bayview. Communicate details about this plan right away (including action steps and the timeline).</li> <li>▪ Create more actual K-8 schools.</li> <li>▪ Stop bringing up student assignment instead of addressing school quality.</li> </ul>
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<p><b>SFUSD Process: The district needs to communicate better with families and the community - and among its own staff.</b></p>	
<p><b>Challenges:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Parents don't trust that the district is listening to them, or is honest about its plans.</li> <li>▪ Information related to important district initiatives is often missing altogether, is not presented in parent-friendly format, and/or is not translated.</li> <li>▪ Lessons learned from previous community engagement efforts were not transferred to district staff working on this initiative.</li> <li>▪ No one in the district is being held accountable for communication with families - especially parents who don't speak English.</li> <li>▪ The district has systems for improving communication with families, for example School Loop, but many parents don't know how to access them.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Recommendations:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Provide a parent-friendly report of results from the middle school quality assessment inventory that highlights the challenges and strengths of each school.</li> <li>▪ Develop and share detailed plans for action steps to strengthen middle schools, including measureable objectives, timelines and deadlines.</li> <li>▪ Ensure there is a communications point person, as well as a communications plan, for all district initiatives.</li> <li>▪ Provide parent-friendly information to students and families about middle school academic benchmarks, and how to assess their students' progress.</li> <li>▪ Each school needs to have staff who are responsible for communication with parents who don't speak English.</li> <li>▪ Implement and communicate with families about plans for expanding tools such as School Loop, including training for parents on how to use them.</li> </ul>

## **Appendix I: Conducting Community Forums about K-8 Pathways**

### **Organizing the community meetings**

In the late summer of 2010 the SFUSD released information about new school attendance area boundaries, including elementary-to-middle-school assignment patterns. Many parents responded to the proposed feeder patterns with confusion and anger.

In September Deputy Superintendent Richard Carranza asked the Board of Education to postpone implementation of the proposal while district staff developed detailed plans for new initiatives related to strengthening school quality - including major reforms to how Special Education services are provided, a new emphasis on “restorative practices” to improve school climate, and efforts to align standards and curriculum across the district.

In the late fall, PPS and the PAC began working with SFUSD staff to develop a joint plan for community forums about the new initiatives. We agreed it made sense to hold forums in middle schools across the city, and envisioned conducting breakout groups at each forum that would focus on different issues related to middle school quality. As we began to organize the forums, however, we realized that for many parents the proposed feeder patterns had become the predominant concern.

We wanted to hear from middle school families and educators - the experts on the strengths and challenges of those schools - as well as parents of students in elementary school. At the same time, we know from experience that people who attend large, centralized events don't tend to reflect the demographics of the district's student and family population.

For that reason, in addition to the forums at all the middle schools we also conducted meetings at several elementary schools and focus groups with targeted communities, to make sure we heard from parents with diverse experiences and backgrounds.

During the winter PPS and the PAC conducted several community workshops to update parents and educators on plans for the forums, as well as ask participants what their questions were - to be sure the forums would answer, or at least address, these questions. We shared these questions and perspectives with district staff developing the presentation for the forums.

### **How the forums worked**

**At the middle school forums** everyone started out together, usually in the school auditorium.

- The principal highlighted what's special about the school, then district staff presented a slide show describing proposals for feeder patterns and expanding language programs.
- In forums where there were more than 15 or 20 people, we then broke into smaller groups to talk about the proposals. These conversations were facilitated by PPS and PAC

staff and volunteers using a scripted discussion guide. During these conversations each group identified their top two or three priority questions or concerns.

- In most, but not all forums, we then got back together for a Q & A session, where district staff addressed each group's priority issues.

**In most meetings at elementary schools** PAC and PPS members used the district's slide show to explain the proposals and then facilitated conversations with the same discussion guide we used at the middle school forums. (At a few meetings, district staff presented the proposals.)

Each group had a transcriber to take careful notes of the conversation. We also distributed a short paper survey to capture data about parent priorities related to school choice, demographic information about the participants, and an evaluation of the forums themselves.

### **Where conversations were held**

**Middle school forums:** Aptos, James Denman, Everett, Francisco, AP Giannini, International Studies Academy, James Lick, Marina, ML King Jr., Presidio, Roosevelt, Visitacion Valley

**Elementary school & community meetings:** GW Carver, Charles Drew Academy, Starr King, Marshall, Monroe; Spanish-language focus group at the Women's Building; focus group of PAC members.

### **Who we heard from**

Over 850 people attended the community forums. The first two forums were very large (100 and 200 people) - and during the first two weeks organized groups of parents, representing different points of view about the proposals, attended multiple forums and came with prepared talking points. These groups included both elementary and middle school parents from general education and immersion programs, and sometimes teachers and other school staff.

Many of the people who came to the large middle school forums tended to be informed and engaged through school or community list-serves and blogs. Parents who participated in the conversations at elementary schools, on the other hand, tended not to know as much about the proposals, and came with more questions than specific recommendations.

While we were successful in reaching parents who don't often attend school board meetings, or may not usually have the opportunity to share their thoughts about district policy issues, we know that **participants** were parents and community members who **are engaged enough to attend meetings** at schools or community centers.

We found **different levels of capacity at school sites to convene families to participate** in these conversations. Some of the forums at middle schools were actually very small, despite the

schools' efforts to publicize them. On the other hand, meetings at the elementary schools had more participants than many of the middle school forums, because parent and staff leaders at those schools made a special effort to engage their community in the conversation.

We received **594 written surveys**. We know that some parents participated in more than one forum, and turned in more than one survey. That number is relatively small, however, and while it may impact the findings we think these results are still of interest.

Based on the **survey data**:

- **91% of participants were parents**; 6% were educators and 3% were other members of the community.
- Many had children in more than one school and grade level.

Participants lived in communities across the city, in **25 different zip codes** and **all 11 electoral districts**. (People in three zip codes made up more than 40% of the survey respondents; they were: 94112, 94110, and 94127).

**Their children attend these SFUSD schools:**

*Elementary and K-8 schools:* Alvarado, Argonne, Bryant, George Washington Carver, Cesar Chavez, John Yehall Chin, Clarendon, Cleveland, Chinese Immersion School/DeAvila, Charles Drew, Fairmount, Dianne Feinstein, LR Flynn, Glen Park, Grattan, Guadalupe, Key, Gordon Lau, Claire Lillienthal, Harvey Milk, Jean Parker, Jefferson, John Muir, Lafayette, Longfellow, Marshall ES, McKinley, Miraloma, Mission Education Center, Monroe, Moscone, New Traditions, Jose Ortega, Rooftop, Rosa Parks, Sherman, Commodore Sloat, Starr King, Sunnyside, Sunset, E.R. Taylor, Ulloa, Visitacion Valley ES, Daniel Webster, West Portal, Yick Wo, Alice Fong Yu

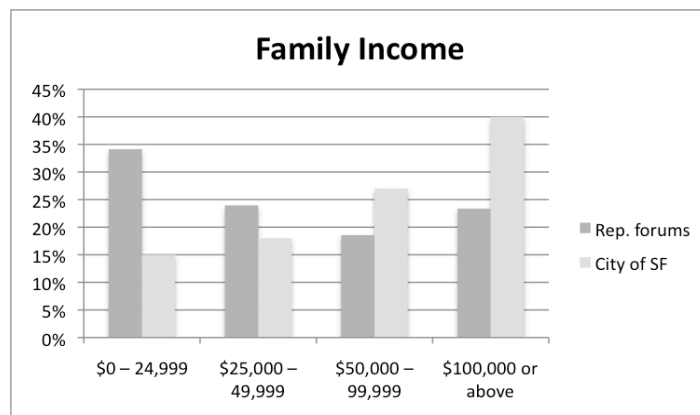
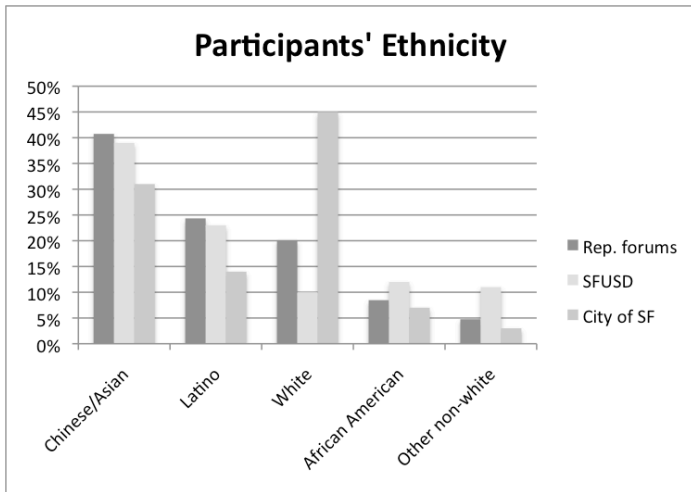
*Middle and 6-12 schools:* Aptos, James Denman, Everett, Francisco, A.P. Giannini, Hoover, International Studies Academy, Horace Mann, James Lick, ML King, Jr., Presidio, Roosevelt, Visitacion Valley MS

*High schools:* Academy of Arts and Science, Balboa, Galileo, Gateway, Lincoln, Lowell, Marshall HS, O'Connell, School of the Arts, Wallenberg, Washington

### **Participant Demographics**

We know that parents who attended the large forums at middle schools did not reflect the ethnic, socio-economic or language diversity of our student population. However, parents who participated in the smaller middle school forums, most of the elementary school conversations, and the focus groups, did more closely represent the demographic diversity of our public schools - so we paid close attention to what we heard from those forums that was different, and what was in common across the differences in parents' backgrounds. These common themes, as well as some different concerns, were described in the narrative report.

The following chart illustrates information about participants in the more representative forums (compared to the SFUSD and the city on the whole). These conversations were at Roosevelt, ML King, and Francisco middle schools; Carver, Charles Drew, Marshall and Monroe elementary schools; and two focus groups (with Spanish-speaking parents, and PAC members).



**Who Conducted the Conversations: Logistics, Facilitators and Transcribers**

**Facilitators:** Cindy Choy, Eos de Feminis, Nancy Gapsin-Gnass, Ruth Grabowski, Daisy Hernandez, Michelle Jacques-Menegaz, Mandy Johnson, Natasha LaVine, Carol Lei, Mollie Matull, Michelle Parker, Ellie Rossiter, Maribel Sainez, Chablis Scott, Vicki Symonds

**Transcribers:** Annie Bauccio, Yolanda Chan, Vicente Cortez, Anne Crawford, Carla Cuevas, Lorena De La Rosa, Kellyn Dong, Ruth Grabowski, Karen Lai, Daphne Magnawa, Mollie Matull, Michelle Parker, Lucia Perez-Barrow, Ellie Rossiter

**Forum logistics:** Susie Balenzuela, Yolanda Chan, Kellyn Dong, Carol Lei, Daphne Magnawa

**Survey data entry:** Mollie Matull (of nearly 600 surveys!)

**Appendix II: What Parents Look For**  
**Results from the written survey conducted at all community conversations**

Participants at all the forums were given a brief written survey, which asked them to rank the top 3 out of 14 characteristics they consider most important in choosing a school.

***A reputation for having quality teachers and principal was the resounding priority*** in surveys from all the forums, including the set of conversations where participants more closely reflected the demographics of the district’s student population.<sup>1</sup>

The chart below illustrates the similarities of the priorities chosen in conversations among different communities. In addition to quality principals and teachers, participants from all the forums included three key factors among their top five priorities, in slightly different order: **enrichment, dual-immersion language programs, and a strong academic reputation.**

The key difference relates to safety and honors tracks. Overall, forum participants ranked having an ***Honors or GATE track*** as third among their top five priorities (with safety as the seventh). However, participants who more closely reflected the SFUSD’s student population ranked ***neighborhood safety*** as third (with an *Honors or GATE track* as eighth).

Result of surveys overall		Among representative set of forums	
<b>Reputation for quality principal and teachers</b>	16%	21%	<b>Reputation for quality principal and teachers</b>
<b>Enrichment (music, art, etc)</b>	13%	13%	<b>Dual-immersion language</b>
<b><u>Honors or GATE track</u></b>	10%	11%	<b><u>Safety of neighborhood</u></b>
<b>Dual-immersion language</b>	10%	10%	<b>Enrichment (music, art, etc)</b>
<b>Academic reputation</b>	10%	8%	<b>Academic reputation</b>
Convenience of location	9%	8%	Being able to choose
Being able to choose	9%	7%	Safe school climate
Safety of neighborhood	7%	6%	Honors or GATE track
Safe school climate	7%	6%	Small size/fewer students
Small size/fewer students	3%	5%	Convenience of location
Language as an elective	3%	4%	Afterschool Program
Afterschool Program	3%	1%	Language as an elective
Does not track students	0%	1%	Large size/more students
Large size/more students	0%	0%	Does not track students

*(Note: the ranked order is based on raw score; these percentages are rounded off.)*

<sup>1</sup> We know that participants in the large forums at middle schools did not reflect the diversity of our student population. However, the people who attended the smaller middle school forums, conversations at elementary schools, and the focus groups, did more closely represent the SFUSD’s demographics. These were at Roosevelt, ML King, and Francisco middle schools; Carver, Drew, Marshall and Monroe elementary schools; and two focus groups (with Spanish-speaking parents, and PAC members). A total of 183 people participated in this set of conversations.