

Panel looks at school choice

Choice

Plan emphasizes neighborhoods for elementary

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After many months of study, a Rochester school board committee has released recommendations that would change the way children are assigned to elementary schools; putting more of an emphasis on neighborhood schools and potentially saving on transportation costs.

The current policy divides the city into South, Northeast and Northwest zones and requires children to attend a school in their zone. It

See **CHOICE**, Page [4A](#)



Liz Hallmark led the committee making the proposals.

Continued from Page 3A

was implemented about 15 years ago with the goal of providing choices for families, particularly when their neighborhood school was of poor quality.

In practice, the section boundaries are very porous. Two-thirds of students in grades K-6 go to schools outside their zone, for a variety of reasons. Some go to citywide schools like the Children's School of Rochester (School 15); some moved houses but not schools; some have been homeless and are allowed by federal law to remain in their school no matter where they're living; and some parents have prevailed on placement officials to override the rules for their children.

Individual schools vary in how many children they attract from the immediate neighborhood. School 34 on Lexington Avenue draws 35 percent of its students from nearby; at School 1 near Cobbs Hill Park, or School 3 in Corn Hill, it is 1 percent. What's more, about half of families don't

participate in the lottery at all, negating the benefits of choice and leading to haphazard placements.

“The intention to create more equity was a good one, but the secondary problems have become bigger than the original problem,” said Liz Hallmark, the school board member who led the committee. “Schools traditionally have served as anchors for neighborhoods. So when everyone’s leaving, you have not only very expensive transportation problems, but people don’t own their schools and neighborhoods tend to get thinner in terms of resources.”

The committee last month unveiled some recommendations. The highlights:

- » Guarantee every student a seat in the school closest to her house.
- » Eliminate the three zones, and instead allow a child to apply to any of the three schools nearest her house, or to the citywide schools.
- » Provide busing for students who live within

1.5 miles of a school. That last point is a critical one. The state only reimburses for transportation costs beyond 1.5 miles, so the district doesn’t provide busing for shorter distances. That has created a perverse incentive where parents send their children to a school across town rather than one a few blocks away, simply because it’s easier to put them on a bus in the morning. The recommendations do not, however, say who would pay for the closer busing. In theory, it would pay for itself, as the district would save money by not taking students on longer rides to more distant schools, but there is no way to know the actual costs without putting the plan into action.

The plans only affect elementary schools; all RCSD high schools are open to students from across the city, though some, particularly East High School, have expressed interest in drawing in more local students.

Another element that requires further consideration is choice in prekindergarten. It is entirely wide open right now to encourage parents to sign up, but the district would eventually like to introduce some kind of uniformity. For instance, children who attend prekindergarten at a given school are not guaranteed a kindergarten seat there, a quirk that has tripped up many families. The committee recommends those changes only be phased in with newly entering students, meaning no one would be forced to change schools to adhere to the new policy.

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