

Voluntary Choice: San Diego, California

The San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) is the second largest district in California, and eighth largest urban district in the United States, with 131,541 students enrolled in pre-K through grade 12. The district encompasses 118 elementary schools, 24 middle schools, 28 high schools, and 45 charter schools.^{xxxiv}

San Diego offers a voluntary choice program. Students in this district are still assigned neighborhood schools, but they may apply to alternative schools outside of their residence zones through the open enrollment program. SDUSD developed this school choice program in compliance with California State's bill AB 1114, *School Districts: Intra-district Attendance* in July 1993, which required public school districts to adopt rules and regulations establishing a policy of open enrollment. The intent of this legislation was to give low-achieving and low-income students the opportunity to attend schools outside of their residence zones.

San Diego Unified School District, 2010-11

K-12 Enrollment = 131,541
Number of Schools = 215
Elementary = 118
Middle = 24
High = 28
Charter Schools = 45
Student Demographics
White = 24%
African American = 12%
Hispanic = 46%
Other = 18%
Low SES = 59%

Source: San Diego Unified School District

Voluntary Choice

Public school students in San Diego have numerous enrollment options in addition to intra-district open enrollment. The district also offers thematic programs at magnet schools, the Voluntary Enrollment Exchange Program (VEEP) for low-income student transfers, charter schools, the Program Improvement School Choice (PISC) as mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) as well as the ability to apply to

any school in the district with availability under the School Choice/Open Enrollment Act. Open enrollment is considered the lowest-priority choice mechanism by SDUSD, and operates on a lottery system to fill vacancies left after all of the other enrollment options have placed students. Charter schools are not subject to the enrollment process used for district-operated schools, though they are authorized by the local school board.

The Application Process

Parents interested in participating in the school choice process fill out one application per child regardless of which enrollment option they are interested in, and may indicate up to five school choices. Applications are due by February 15. Beginning in November 2011, all applications must be submitted online.

In order to provide parents with information to make informed decisions about choice, the district publishes the Enrollment Options Catalog and distributes it to parents in mid-November. The catalog contains information on all enrollment options offered, as well as school feeder patterns and a school choice application. The SDUSD holds enrollment fairs in January, giving parents the opportunity to research school options before the February 15th application deadline. Further, the district offers a *Facts for Parents* brochure with enrollment information, which is available in six languages. They also publish a brochure called *Benefits of Attending your Neighborhood School*, which highlights benefits including first priority enrollment, community ownership of the school, convenience, and parent volunteer opportunities.

The Assignment Process

Applications are processed into the highest possible priority program (Magnet, PISC, VEEP, open enrollment) for each of the five selected schools. Open enrollment applications at each school are given a random number by grade level. Then priority is applied for continuity and siblings. Applicants may also be given priority if they qualify for the Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program, or if they want to take a special high school course not offered at their neighborhood school. A lottery is then held to fill the vacant slots at each grade level, and winning

students receive an offer for one alternative option other than their neighborhood school. Filling out a school choice application does not guarantee that students will be offered an alternative placement, as space is often limited.^{xxxv} However, 72 percent of students that applied by the February 15, 2011 deadline received their first choice school selection.^{xxxvi}

After the February 15th deadline, applications for school choice are no longer accepted and there are no mid-year transfers to schools other than a student's neighborhood school. The SDUSD encourages students to remain in their choice school for the entire school year. A student may return to their neighborhood school within the first four weeks of the school year. After that time, if a student wishes to return to their neighborhood school must complete a transfer form and be subject to approval by the school's administrator.

Other Considerations

District-provided transportation availability varies according to the type of choice program a student is enrolled through. Open Enrollment/School Choice students are not provided with transportation. Bus transportation is not guaranteed for magnet, PISC or VEEP students. Those students may be subject to fees for transportation, a minimum ridership guarantee, or must reside a certain distance from the school to be eligible for transportation.^{xxxvii}

Anecdotally, it seems that there is discontent among parents with the open enrollment system. Although applications are due February 15th for the following school year, parents may not find out if their student has been selected in the lottery until after school has already begun. A local newspaper article described the lottery as "a complicated process that lasts 10 days into the school year, a waiting period that is agonizing for families."^{xxxviii} Another drawback to open enrollment is that busing is not provided to students attending non-neighborhood schools, and parents are not reimbursed for transportation costs, potentially restricting choice to those with greater resources.

Impact of Voluntary Choice

The Public Policy Institute of California conducted a study on School Choice in San Diego, published in 2006. They focused on three issues: the decision to leave the local neighborhood school, the effects on integration, and the effects on achievement for those

who switch schools.^{xxxix} The study reported that 28 percent of SDUSD students attended a choice school, including about seven percent who used open enrollment as their choice mechanism. Of eligible students, 2.8 percent of elementary students applied for open enrollment each year, as did 3.1 percent of middle school students and 3.5 percent of high school students.^{xl} In general, black, Asian, and Hispanic students were more likely than white students to apply to choice schools, but black students were the only group significantly more likely to use open enrollment as their choice mechanism.^{xli}

As San Diego's open enrollment program is voluntary, students are assigned to a neighborhood school unless they opt-in to a choice program. There are numerous factors that contribute to the choice to leave a neighborhood school for a choice school. Students whose parents are educated beyond high school were more likely to apply to choice schools, but the magnitude of the difference was small. As noted above, black students were more likely than white students to apply to a choice school through open enrollment. This may indicate that black families were less satisfied with their neighborhood schools. The Public Policy Institute report suggests that white families in San Diego may have more financial freedom than black families, and therefore can make their school choices by choosing where to live.^{xlii}

An often-cited argument for school choice is that it improves achievement in the district by creating competition among schools for students. This argument rests on the assumption that students will choose schools based on performance. In San Diego, there is no overwhelming evidence that this is the case. Among elementary and middle school students, there was no statistically significant data showing that students were leaving low-performing schools to apply to higher-performing schools. However, there was some evidence of such a pattern among high school students, indicating that academic performance may be a more important factor to older students and their parents when selecting a school.^{xliii}

In terms of integration outcomes, the Public Policy Institute study found that all choice applicants applied to schools with a higher percentage of white students than their local school. They reported, "integration caused by nonwhites applying to choice schools with more white students is occurring, but this pattern is somewhat offset by whites who are also choosing to

apply to schools with more white students.” However, because nonwhite students apply in greater numbers, the overall effect is one of increasing integration.

Among the choice mechanisms available to SDUSD students, open enrollment does the least to improve integration outcomes. Although California’s Proposition 209 prohibited the use of race in admissions decisions, the Public Policy Institute study notes that both VEEP and magnet programs still “have features intended to give priority to exchanges between groups of schools that should increase integration along racial/ethnic and socioeconomic lines.” Open enrollment does not give priority for any racial or socioeconomic factors. It is also the only choice mechanism that does not provide transportation, which may discourage participation among disadvantaged students.^{xliv}

Improved student achievement is another goal of school choice programs. The PPIC reports “Overall, lottery winners and lottery losers typically have no significant differences in math or reading achievement one, two, or three years after the lottery takes

place.”^{xlv} On the whole, open enrollment in San Diego has led to minor improvements in terms of district integration, but has not been effective at improving student achievement.

A 2010 study on the integration effects of school choice in San Diego made similar conclusions. Students use choice programs to attend schools with more advantaged peers, more white students, and higher test-score performers.^{xlvi} For this reason, when non-disadvantaged students use school choice programs, segregation increases. Of magnet schools, VEEP, and open enrollment, only open enrollment segregates the district further. The researchers attempted to use information on expenditures to promote integration at the district to estimate the social costs of these segregating effects as measured only by race/ethnicity. Their estimate ranged from a conservative \$387,000 to a high of \$10.5 million. They conclude that the open enrollment program may actually undo some of the integration accomplished by busing programs like VEEP, making its true social cost un-measurable.