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.\textsuperscript{434}

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>San Diego Unified School District, 2010-11</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K-12 Enrollment = 131,541</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of Schools = 215</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elementary = 118</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle = 24</td>
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<tr>
<td>High = 28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Charter Schools = 45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Demographics</td>
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<tr>
<td>White = 24%</td>
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<tr>
<td>African American = 12%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic = 46%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other = 18%</td>
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<td>Low SES = 59%</td>
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*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 15\textsuperscript{th} 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. In 2006, 72 percent of
students that applied by the February 15, 2011
deadline received their first choice school
selection. 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.

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.” 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. 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. 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.

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.

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.

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.”\(^{xlvi}\) 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 used 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-measureable.