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Exclusion and Access in San Francisco Unified School District

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Interdisciplinary Studies

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The city of San Francisco rests on 49 square miles of land, and is shaped by a unique and complex geography. Surrounded on three sides by water, it is the second most densely populated city in the United States. City blocks fill its valleys, sprawl to the water's edge, cover the hillsides and crown the hilltops. Steep, narrow streets and wide thoroughfares clogged with traffic make cross-town commutes lengthy and limit mobility between districts. As in other cities that have matured to the point of congestion, urban families in San Francisco utilize the services and institutions that are local to their neighborhoods: the nearest post office, the local market, the nearby place of worship. Yet their relationship to the institution of public education defies this logic. On every weekday of the last school year, 3,658 children rode a school bus through the city for up to an hour each morning and afternoon to reach schools in neighborhoods removed from their own. Countless more travelled in cars or used public transportation to reach San Francisco public schools. This movement is not random. The city's urban geography, built through generations of neighborhood formation, shaped by swelling pockets of wealth and poverty, and fractured along the shifting lines of race and class, dispenses mobility as a privilege. In San Francisco's public schools, the result for urban families is a pattern of exclusion and access—of immobility and mobility—that is intimately bound up with a family's address and means.

In this paper I will argue that three of San Francisco Unified School District's recent policy shifts will exacerbate the riddle of exclusion and access rooted in the city's urban geography. These policies are: 1) new elementary to middle school feeder patterns, 2) choice-based student assignments, and 3) reduction in school-provided transportation.

To build an understanding of the district's policies, I spent time in the History Center at the San Francisco public library studying the SFUSD archives, which document the school district's history from 1854 to 2005. I focused on two decades—the 1960's and 1970's—because during this time the complex issues of desegregation, integration, and student transportation came to the fore of the School Board's agenda as the city became conscious of its ethnic diversity.

In order to experience first-hand the problem of pupil transportation in San Francisco, I rode MUNI buses from the Mission/outer Mission districts to elementary schools in Twin Peaks and North Beach. I timed the routes and noted walking distances from drop off points to the schools.

To understand SFUSD's student assignment system, I attended and recorded a lunchtime forum hosted at the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association [6]. At the meeting, a District representative described both the policy and the rationale behind it, which strengthened my understanding of the District's policy struggles and goals.

I will briefly describe some terms that are used in education policy discourse. *Educational trajectory* is a term used to describe a student's pathway through the school system, from Pre-K through senior high school and perhaps to higher education. SFUSD uses the term *feeder patterns* to denote pathways that lead from specific elementary schools to specific middle schools. All high schools in SFUSD are "city-wide"; in other words, students living anywhere in the city may attempt to attend any high school.

Racial isolation is a term I will use to describe the phenomena of high concentrations of a single ethnic group in a school, city district, or trajectory through the school district. Racial isolation works against the District's aspirations for diversity and equity in schools. I found that in the 1960's and 70's, the District became extremely concerned with what they called *racial balance*. By their definition, a school that contained a concentration of a single ethnic group that deviated by more than 15% from the city average was considered "out of balance." In 1966, 30 schools contained a population of 80% or more of a single race and 26 of those schools were elementary schools, which points to a relationship between segregated neighborhoods and segregated schools [3]. Bear in mind that 1966 was twelve years after the Brown v. Board Supreme Court decision mandated the desegregation of schools. During this time the district ran an extensive and controversial busing system to achieve "racial balance" at the middle and high school levels. Though the District continues to bus pupils, albeit to a lessening extent in each year, in 2009 a quarter of SFUSD's 105 schools still contained over 60% of a single ethnic group [6]. The root of the problem remains intact: how can you integrate schools before you integrate neighborhoods?

The *achievement gap* is a term educators use to describe the wide discrepancies in performance on standardized testing that persist between ethnic groups. In San Francisco, the Latino, African American, and Samoan populations fare worse on state tests and drop out at higher rates than other groups. My review of superintendent's reports revealed that the District has been aware of this achievement gap for the greater part of the 20th century. Today, SFUSD uses test scores and census data to designate areas of the city that are chronically underachieving, and empowers families living in these areas to enroll in elementary schools that are sometimes very far from their place of residence, dispensing mobility as a privilege. However, given the problems with transportation in San Francisco, housing still plays a large role in shaping access to the city's schools by pre-sorting elementary school students based on the neighborhood in which

their parents can afford to live. Paired with the familiar notion that higher-income neighborhoods foster higher-quality schools [5], one could conclude that school systems inevitably perpetuate social inequalities or, in the words of Lisa Delpit, “ensure that power, the culture of power, remains in the hands of those who already have it” [1].

In the 1960’s, scholars, community groups, parents, and educators alike began to point urgently to what they called the “de facto segregation” of the San Francisco school district, stemming from the “interrelationship of education with many community arrangements and forces” that shape access to and exclusion from schools in San Francisco [2]. “De facto segregation” endures in San Francisco schools today. So, what is going on here, and to what extent are the District’s policies ameliorating or exacerbating these problems? I will focus on three SFUSD policies that are perpetuating racial isolation in San Francisco public schools: new elementary to middle school feeder patterns, choice-based student assignment, and a drastic reduction in school-provided pupil transportation.

The new elementary school to middle school feeder patterns, which make the transition between schools more “predictable” for parents, will magnify the role of elementary school attendance areas in shaping educational trajectories. Focusing on two elementary schools that straddle Twin Peaks illuminates the powerful effect of urban geography on educational trajectory. As the crow flies, Clarendon and Alvarado elementary schools are one mile apart. Though their respective districts are physically close, they are separated by the steep, affluent Twin Peaks neighborhood, through which public transportation is infrequent. As the new feeder patterns are implemented, students of Alvarado will matriculate to James Lick middle school. Clarendon students will matriculate to Presidio, where suspension rates are notably lower and student aptitude in every subject is higher. Relatively small differences in place of residence within San Francisco’s urban geography translate to relatively large differences in learning environment within SFUSD. Furthermore, the new feeder patterns will increase racial isolation at the middle school level by reinforcing pathways between specific elementary schools like Clarendon—which tend to be the most “racially imbalanced”—and specific middle schools.

SFUSD’s student assignment system, which incorporates parental choice, will similarly increase racial isolation. Choice-based student assignment implicitly gives priority to families with the time and resources to investigate school options, and with means of transportation to access their preferred schools. Here is a quote from a District representative regarding choice-based assignment:

So choice actually only works if you get your choice, right, and a choice system only works if everyone participates in choice, and choice is only fair if everyone has access to the same amount of information. There are a lot of inequities with choice, and it’s not just because families don’t get their choice, but not every parent has an opportunity to tour fifteen schools, right? That’s a significant investment of time and energy that is not a luxury that’s afforded

to everybody in the city. . . now we still have choice because we recognize that parents want choice. [6]

However, those parents who actually take advantage of choice and those who don't are divided along strikingly racial lines. The district representative further explained:

Of all the African-American children who are enrolled in kindergarten, 51% had not even participated in the choice process. . . Chinese and White families were far more likely to participate in the choice process than any other racial/ethnic group. So we saw that 92% of all the Chinese children that were enrolled in schools had participated in choice and 90% of the White families had. [6]

This system does more than produce racially isolated schools. Some schools are populated with students who received their first preference, and who have means to travel out of their attendance area if they choose to do so, while others are populated with students who neglected to participate the choice process. In light of these statistics, supporting "choice as a tactic for creating diversity" sounds a little facetious.

When the District says, "we listened to parents' input in constructing our new student assignment policy and feeder patterns," or "parents are willing to travel further to enroll their children in better schools—they value quality over proximity," I ask: Which parents are contacting the district to give their input? Which parents have access to the information that allows them to discern quality, and which have the time, English language ability, or mobility to tour schools? Who is left out?

The District is facing hefty budget cuts and is looking for ways to reduce spending. Officials have decided to cut school bus services in half in the next few years. In the 2013–14 school year, SFUSD will operate only 25 school buses. By contrast, in 1972, a research firm contracted by the District estimated that 131 buses would be required to meet the District's goals for racial balance, and cautioned "there is no practical reason to pursue the idea that some form of public transportation can, or will, provide the District with the complete bus service desired" [4]. Reduction in school-provided transportation will increase reliance on public transportation and decisively limit the school-choice options of families without means of transportation. This will have an adverse effect on the families living in areas that the district identifies as low test-scoring, historically underserved neighborhoods (CTIP-1 designation), which, in the District's efforts to increase equity, are given top priority in the choice system. These parents will be discouraged from enrolling their children in schools outside of their neighborhoods if they lack the means of transportation and are uncomfortable with their children riding MUNI across the city to school.

As part of my research, I rode the bus from a CTIP-1 area in the Mission district to North Beach. The kids traveling this route to school will no longer have a school bus next year. After a forty-minute ride, I had a fifteen-minute walk uphill to Garfield Elementary, a California Distinguished School.

If CTIP-1 families, discouraged by unreasonably difficult commutes to school, are compelled to seek enrollment in closer schools in light of the discontinuation of yellow school bus services, their trajectories through SFUSD could be altered unfavorably. As elementary schools become less accessible, the reduction in school-provided transportation will magnify the role that housing plays in producing pockets of exclusion and access by pre-sorting student bodies based on the neighborhood in which families can afford to live.

Reducing school bus service will have a longer-term adverse effect on access to SFUSD schools as well. Already, 37% of SFUSD students are enrolled from the South East area of San Francisco [6]. Meanwhile, schools are located throughout the city without regard for the uneven distribution of enrolled students. South East San Francisco is the same region where numerous “redevelopment” projects are underway that will create a large stock of affordable housing, bringing thousands more students and intensifying the need for transportation options from these areas to the city’s schools.

The “de facto segregation of schools,” owing to the constructed separation of ethnic groups in the city of San Francisco (due in part to racial restrictions on housing in the 20th century) could help explain the achievement gap in San Francisco’s public school district. While SFUSD’s policies strive for equity and social justice, they are often revised or retracted as the school years wear on. The silver bullet has proved elusive, as the pattern of exclusion and access imposed on the city’s educational landscape by factors such as transportation—over which the district is relinquishing control—drives a student sorting process that defies the District’s intentions for equity and access. This process can be likened to the tracking systems that operate within the schools themselves, through which students from privileged backgrounds are traditionally organized along more intellectual, college-bound trajectories while others attend schools that discourage students in their aspirations for higher learning. In San Francisco, achievement within the school system—and the ease with which a student travels along her educational trajectory towards university and beyond—mirrors mobility within the city itself. The web of exclusion and access, rendered visible in this instance through the lens of urban education, and through which students make their way to school each morning and home each evening, and each year, is spun across generations and simultaneously produces the social structures from which it stems.

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