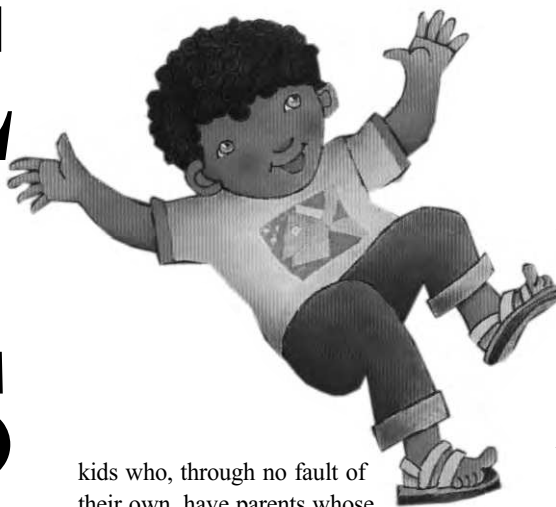


CHOICE AND LAWYERS

Does 4J's school-picking game leave too many losers?

BY ALAN PITTMAN



kids who, through no fault of their own, have parents whose poverty, lack of transportation, lack of education or lack of information leave them unlikely to take advantage of school choice.

Reformers want 4J to change the system to better mix schools and close the racial achievement gap. They point to widely accepted research on programs in a growing number of other cities showing that mixing poor and more wealthy kids in schools helps the poor kids while not hurting the upper class kids. As an added benefit, desegregation mixes classes and races to create a school system that truly teaches kids to honor diversity.

But some alternative school parents don't want their successful schools messed with. Geography causes more segregation in schools than alternative schools, and choice helps, not hurts diversity, they argue.

Judging from the past, the district isn't likely to change its policy much. Critics have been saying choice unfairly discriminates since its inception 30 years ago, with little change. In the past four years, two district committees have held months of meetings and put forward lists of recommendations, with no results.

But both sides of the argument smell change in the air. The district now has a black superintendent, George Russell, who is talking about reforming the choice system to help reduce a widening racial achievement gap in a school system growing more diverse.

"Choice is a factor in how some of our schools look, clearly," Russell says. "There's sure room for some change."

Supporters and opponents of change are nervously awaiting Russell's planned Feb. 7 announcement of what reforms he will recommend to the 4J School Board. If Russell and the board don't integrate the schools, reformers say they may sue for violating the civil rights of minorities and the poor.

DECADES OF CRITICISM

In America, where all kids are supposedly created equal, public schools were first envisioned as a backbone of democracy, open to all, a melting pot of race and class where all kids learned tolerance and mutual understanding and were given an equal shot at the American dream. But that common school vision has been troubled. Schools were deeply segregated until the Brown v. Board of Education decision 50 years ago. After that, desegregation was resisted with riots, bombings and murders in the 1960s. To this day, busing to mix kids remains highly controversial.

Eugene largely skipped this part of American history. In 1973, when segregation

was a major fight in other cities and Eugene first introduced its school choice system, Eugene didn't worry much about race and schools because it had almost no minorities. Eugene was only about 1 percent black and 1 percent Hispanic. Today, Eugene is about the same proportion black, but the Hispanic population has grown to 5 percent with much more growth predicted.

Even without the segregation problems in other cities, school choice was controversial from the beginning in Eugene. In 1973 *The Register-Guard* reported that some School Board members and administrators worried that "open enrollment could breed student and staff populations that are very much alike, losing the diversity that exists in most neighborhood schools."

Arguments that choice would improve schools with competition and better meet parent demands won the day, but choice remained controversial. The district reviewed the policy in 1986, apparently without major changes. Margaret Nichols, the superintendent before Russell, was an early booster of choice. But by the 1990s, she was troubled by a system that she admitted had helped to so concentrate poor and minority kids that the former Whiteaker Elementary was ranked as the poorest elementary school in the state. School choice "does have its downsides, and I think of those often," she told *Eugene Weekly* in 1996.

With concern intensifying in the late 1990s, 4J formed a School Choice Task Group to examine the future of choice in 4J schools. The task group found that the inequities in the district's school choice program have created the "perception and reality" that Eugene has a "two-tiered" school district divided by race and class. The committee recommended reforms.

But some School Board members balked at taking action, citing opposition to busing and quotas and arguing the district should focus on higher priorities. Two years later the district again formed a committee to study the problem. The board and Russell told the committee they didn't want to abolish school choice, but wanted to reform it so that it would contribute to reducing the achievement gap.

The Access and Options Committee met for more than a year and reached largely the same conclusions as the previous committee, acknowledging that inequities in the school choice system contributed to the achievement gap and calling for reform.

After 30 years, reformers have grown impatient. "Generations of children are passing through our elementary schools" under the current inequitable system, says Betsy Boyd, an Adams parent and member of the 4J Budget Committee. "The district just needs to move more quickly."

REFORM OPTIONS

If the district decides to move on reform, it has a lot of options, based on experience from other cities and education research. Here's a rundown of leading reform ideas.

Information. Getting more information out to poor and minority parents could mean more diverse kids in alternative schools. Right now, 55 percent of 4J elementary parents say they don't know how the

This school has capped, stable class sizes, higher test scores and a host of satisfied well-off parents who donate time and money to make sure their kids share their dedication to education.

That school has a whirl of kids moving in and out throughout the year, too often crowded classes, threats of closure and the most challenging kids to teach, with many parents focused more on making ends meet than on education.

Not much of a choice, but that too often is 4J's system of open enrollment, critics charge. They say school choice has concentrated the haves in alternative schools while leaving the have-nots, often Hispanics and blacks, in struggling neighborhood schools on the losing side of a widening achievement gap.

District 4J's school lottery system is supposed to give every kid an equal shot at a slot in the best schools. But 4J data show the results are far from equal in the south Eugene and River Road areas where neighborhood and alternative elementary schools compete for the same kids.

Adams Elementary is one of the top victims of school choice, critics say. Adams loses 71 percent of the students in its neighborhood enrollment area to parents choosing other schools, according to district data. The school is located in a middle class area, but is left with 69 percent of its students poor enough to qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program. Adams is 25 percent black, Latino or Native American. One in five kids at Adams comes or goes during the school year. Poorer parents at Adams fund-raise only \$65 per child.

A lot of Adams' more wealthy and white families choose to send their kids to nearby alternative schools. Hillside alternative, which shares the same building as Adams, draws 44 percent of its kids from Adams' neighborhood. By the same measures, Hillside has less than half as many poor kids and only a third as many minorities. Almost no kids come and go during the year and parents fund-raise about six times more money per child.

Nearby Eastside alternative draws another 27 percent of Adams' kids. Eastside has a 10th as many poor kids and only a sixth as many minorities as Adams. Almost no kids come and go during the year and parents there also fund-raise about six times more money per child.

River Road neighborhood elementary shows a similar pattern to Adams in losing white and wealthier kids to school choice. River Road loses 54 percent of the students in its neighborhood enrollment area to parents choosing other schools, according to district data. The school is located in a largely middle class area, but 84 percent of its kids are poor. Nearly half of River Road's students are black, Latino or Native American. One in four kids at River Road comes or goes during the school year. Poorer parents at River Road fund-raise only \$47 per child.

Nearby, Corridor alternative draws a quarter of its students from River Road. The contrast between the two schools is stark. Corridor has a quarter as many poor kids and is almost entirely white. Very few kids come and go during the year and parents fund-raise almost three times more money per child.

"The data is crystal clear, no question," says Nancy Willard an attorney with two kids at Adams. The current alternative school policy has had a discriminatory impact based on race and class."

Critics of school choice say it's unfair to