



local choice system works, according to a district survey last year. Other school districts have used active recruitment to increase diversity. But 4J's dizzying array of choices may remain daunting to poor and busy families regardless of how much reading material the district provides.

porters have long criticized the many special privileges of alternative schools. Alternative schools have enrollment caps that allow them to avoid the disruption of kids moving in and out of classes during the year. Researchers have closely linked high mobility rates to low school performance. Unlike alternative schools, some neighborhood schools that lack caps also suffer enrollment swells that pack classrooms, making it much harder to teach and learn.

The district has also given alternative schools the advantage of not having to accommodate special education and special needs children, almost all of whom are placed in neighborhood schools. Another advantage is not having to worry about school closure. Declining enrollment has recently closed several poorer district neigh-



Nancy Willard is an attorney and single mom with two children at Adams neighborhood school. One of her adopted children is from Guatemala and the other from India.

'It's not legal ... Either the district or a court will force a change.'

— Nancy Willard

Controlled choice. To increase income and racial diversity in schools and reduce achievement gaps, a growing number of cities have turned to systems of controlled choice. More than 400,000 students nationwide are involved in such economic integration efforts, according to a 2002 study by the Century Foundation. "There exists today a solid policy consensus that school segregation perpetuates failure," the foundation reported.

To integrate, districts commonly rezone school attendance boundaries and/or mix choice with a system of assignments or preferences designed to better blend poor and wealthy kids. Some districts collect information on parent

options to change choice. But the closures, mergers and alternative school moves and redirected funding that critics advocate have made some alternative school defenders bristle.

Time spent on the divisive choice issue would better be spent lobbying Salem for more school funding, reform opponents argue. Geography is more to blame for economic and racial school segregation in Eugene than choice, they say. If choice were eliminated, high quality alternative schools would be hurt, and the city would simply resegregate by neighborhood or private schools with poor kids unable to switch schools.

Eastside parent Joe Thornton, a UO biology professor, wrote to Russell with a lengthy statistical analysis that he says backs up claims that alternative schools don't hurt diversity. Thornton says Willard is "cherry-picking" data to make her case.

But Willard says Thornton's analysis improperly uses districtwide averages to dilute evidence of the severe impact on the few neighborhood schools in south Eugene and River Road that directly have their white and wealthier students creamed off by nearby alternative schools.

Choice critics also dispute that alternative

Critics of school choice say it's unfair to 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.

Transportation. The district doesn't provide bus service to alternative schools and many poor families may lack the time and means to drive their children to an alternative school. The state could cover up to 90 percent of the added cost of improved transportation through its funding equalization formula. But it's unclear how much real impact simply providing buses to poor kids would have. Only 9 percent of parents say they would choose a different school if transportation were provided.

Magnet schools. Unlike in Eugene, school choice in most cities was designed as a way to integrate schools voluntarily by placing desirable programs in low-income neighborhoods as magnets. Many of the Eugene alternative programs in greatest demand are in more affluent neighborhoods and the ones in poorer areas don't give preferential admissions to neighborhood kids. For example, Fox Hollow French immersion elementary is in the wealthy south hills. Fox Hollow has almost no poor, black, Latino and Native American students and ranks as one of the least diverse and wealthiest schools in the state.

Setting up new magnet neighborhood schools in poorer areas could attract diversity. But the effect would be limited if competition continued from existing alternative schools. If existing alternative schools were closed or moved and merged with poorer neighborhood schools, some alternative parents may fight the change as harming their high-scoring schools.

Fairness. Neighborhood school sup-

borhood schools with the threat of more to come, but so far alternative schools have been exempted from closure.

Spending. Recognizing that different kids require different amounts of money to educate, the state of Oregon adjusts the per pupil funding it gives to each district based on poverty, special education and other factors. Although the district gets 25 percent more money from the state for each poor kid, it doesn't directly pass that money on to its poorest schools. The district funds schools equally, largely on a per-pupil basis with some limited money available for literacy and other programs for struggling neighborhood schools.

The district could re-target spending to schools with more poverty where research shows teaching is often far more demanding. Schools in Cincinnati and Seattle have pursued such a policy and Superintendent Russell has advocated increased funding for poorer schools in Eugene to reduce the achievement gap. "Providing equal resources to address unequal situations will result in unequal outcomes," he told the school board two years ago.

Such targeted spending could have an impact if it were large enough. But with funding limited, large diversions to poorer neighborhood schools would mean less money for schools with wealthier students, and could draw opposition.

Another option would be to require wealthier schools to share a percentage of their larger fund-raising budgets with poorer schools to equalize funding.

education levels, for example. Successful controlled choice systems are coupled with increased spending to lure middle class parents to magnet schools in poorer neighborhoods, the Century Foundation reported.

Schools from Raleigh, N.C., to San Francisco have engaged in such economic integration efforts in the past four years. In La Crosse, Wis., which has the oldest integration plan, a busing system sparked a recall backlash but ultimately succeeded in increasing test scores and gaining public support.

The move to economic integration is backed by research from the Piton Foundation on Denver elementary schools showing that low income kids do much better in mixed-income schools and their presence doesn't hurt wealthier kids in schools with under 50 percent poverty. A recent investigation by *The Washington Post* and a study in Madison-Dane County, Wis., found similar results.

Such research indicates that Eugene could use integration to reduce its widening achievement gap without hurting wealthier kids. Over the past three years, the gap between the percentage of 4J Hispanic and white eighth graders who met state math test standards almost doubled. The black-white gap on the same test increased by a third. Last year, 74 percent of white eighth graders met the math standard, but only 22 percent of Hispanics and 35 percent of blacks scored high enough.

REFORM OPPOSITION

Reform advocates say the district should use a combination of many of the above

schools' testing success is due to any innovative teaching approach. The curriculum at most alternative schools is no longer that different, they argue. Widely accepted research shows that schools with the common alternative profile of higher income kids with dedicated, educated parents and classes with few children moving in and out almost always score higher on standardized tests.

Willard acknowledges that geographic and private school segregation is a problem. But she says the city and school district can control geographic segregation with controlled choice and magnet schools and with policies to disperse low-income housing.

Eugene has relatively few private schools, and Willard says massive white flight isn't likely. The fear of a few leaving shouldn't mean that Eugene should give up its values and "capitulate to the demands of rich parents who want a segregated, private-school-like environment in the public school system," she says.

LAWSUIT THREATENED

Without major reform, choice critics say they may sue for discrimination. "It's not legal," Willard says of 4J's policies. "Either the district or a court will force a change."

In 1954 the Supreme Court held that separate schools are inherently unequal and violate equal protection rights in the U.S. Constitution. Title VI of the 1964 U.S. Civil Rights Code prohibited racial discrimination in schools like 4J that receive federal funds. The Oregon Constitution and state laws have similar provisions. Eugene City Code bans discrimination based on both race and pover-