OVERVIEW
On Tuesday, June 09, 2015, the San Francisco Unified School Board, voted 4-3 against the resolution titled “Supporting Equity in Student Assignment.” The resolution proposed changing the order of assignment tiebreakers placing Attendance Area above CTIP1 preference—census tract representing areas with the lowest average test scores. The resolution was proposed by Commissioners Rachel Norton and Sandra Lee Fewer in the spirit of supporting families’ ability to attend the schools within their residential area and, consequently encouraging families to invest and support their neighborhood’s schools.

The resolution was initially proposed a year earlier, after which the board voted to investigate the potential outcomes of such a change. On piece of evidence factored into the decision-making processes was a report by Matt Kasman, Stanford Doctoral student, summarizing three policy simulations based on current trends and behaviors projecting a range of potential affects on the student assignment policy based on possible adjustments. Additionally, Professors Prudence Carter from Stanford and Michal Kurlaender from UC Davis participated on a panel where the board engaged their expertise on the topic of diversity within schools.

Final Vote
All dissenting board members explicitly used the data analysis results from the simulations and some echoed ideas expressed from the discussion with the panel of experts.

Commissioner Jill Wynns was the first to deliver a no vote. She referred to the simulation results and stated, “This proposal actually disadvantages communities we are saying we want to advantage.” Wynns attributed the increasing segregation to language pathways, in her opinion. She expressed interest in moving to turn around the segregating trends they are observing.

Commissioner Matt Haney referenced the results of the data analysis for his vote against the resolution. He felt that the rationale which brought the resolution forward did not agree with the board’s goals. He encouraged the Board to continue the conversations around diversity and equity that the resolution inspired. On the question of whether or not the attendance area change will reduce the number of racially isolated schools, Haney referred to the simulation results: “Ranking the attendance area priority higher than the CTIP and/or eliminating low test score priority leads to a decrease of racially diverse schools and increases the achievement gap—translation: more segregation and expansion of the achievement gap.” He advises the board to not take the position against the research at hand as it shows that voting “no” will promote diverse schools. He continues to point out the few schools for which families in the attendance area are not able to attend at higher rates, Clarendon and Grattan. He suggests that the board should consider specific solutions for these cases. He explains that the attendance area switch will not guarantee these families a spot; instead, the potential change is relatively small where 20 less Black & Latino students and 18 more Asian and white students will be able to attend their preferred school.

Commissioner Shamann Walton voted no and provided rationale expressed in the panel a month prior. He stated that the simulations revealed that a change in tiebreaker order makes a negligible difference in outcomes. He argued that the board should prioritize increasing the quality of schools to drive choice rather than changing the assignment system itself. If the board wants to support and strengthen the notion of neighborhood schools, they should promote programs to attract families to their neighborhoods. Commissioner Walton used the simulation data to state that
the resolution does not solve the attendance area problem. He believes the resolution is not bold enough to resolve the concerns that the board shares with the families who are concerned with attending their area schools. Walton would rather work on bolder legislation that will allow the Board to increase opportunities for schools so that they are more attractive to all families.

Commissioner Sandra Lee Fewer emphasized a comment Professor Carter mentioned in the expert panel which expressed the idea that racial isolation adversely affects certain communities but does not adversely impact others. Fewer than pointed out the large number of Chinese students that the district serves. Along with this idea, Fewer also acknowledged that there other factors which make a great school that go beyond academics, and cited the language pathways as a great example. Fewer than brought in the fact that school commute contributes up to 25% of the morning traffic. She ended by explaining that the resolution was not crafted for just 9 or 10 students, but instead for the 57,000 students’ enrolled.

Commissioner Emily Murase supported the resolution. She recognized the simulation data, but drew attention to the five years of data illustrating the very little impact on increasing diversity through the current student assignment policy. She references specific data from the report that shows parents’ choices role in the decrease of potential diversity. The second reason that Murase supports the resolution is based on the reality that families who are eligible for CTIP do not take advantage of the policy, and other families who are not eligible have gamed the systems. Although the misuse of CTIP was not widespread, the existence of such instances undermine the whole system. The third reason comes from the Starr King and Rosa Parks Language Pathways influence on diversity. The pathways have shown clear success in creating diversity, whereas the CTIP preference has clearly not provided such strong effects. As a result of this, she places her vote in support of the resolution.

Commissioner Rachel Norton expressed her disappointment in the lack of consensus on the vote. Norton explains that she does not put much weight on the simulation because it is based off of existing behavior patterns and not on behavior patterns in the context of another system. She goes on to explain that the current system privileges families who have the time, education, and resources to take advantage of their choice. She shows interest in continuing the conversation on this topic.

Commissioner Hydra Mendoza-McDonnell voted against the resolution and did not provide any specific rationale.

The resolution fails to pass with a 4-3 vote, which means the current student assignment system stays in place.

Summarized by Ada Ocampo, June 2015