

Policy Committee Meeting
February 2, 2004

Present: Board President Shirley Thompson; Commissioner Robert Brown (Chair); Commissioner Darryl Porter; Board Vice President Willa Powell; Superintendent Dr. Manuel J. Rivera; Michael Looby; Kimberly Rohring. Minutes recorded by Judith Rutalis.

Agenda: Parent Preference/Managed Choice in RCSD

Meeting commenced at approximately 5:45 p.m.

Parent Preference/Managed Choice in RCSD

Commissioner Brown began the meeting by stating that the District's choice policy has been in place since 2002. The choice policy is based on studies conducted since 1997, with public input. Questions are being raised now close to the implementation phase. As a result of Dr. Rivera's meetings with parents, the policy committee has been asked to convene a meeting to discuss possible changes. Commissioner Brown advised that there would be no public commentary at this meeting; any comments can be made at the Board meeting scheduled for next week. The choices to be made by the Policy Committee at today's meeting are to recommend adoption of the policy in its present form; adopt it with modifications; or make no recommendation to the Board.

This topic will be an item on the agenda at next week's Board meeting. If there are more than 20 speakers, speakers will be limited to two minutes to speak; if there are less than 20 speakers, speakers will be allowed three minutes to speak. Those wishing to speak at the Board meeting must call the Board office by noon on the meeting date.

After public comment, the Board will vote, either to adopt any changes, keep it the same, or adopt the recommended changes with modifications.

Commissioner Brown then asked for a vote on the minutes from the November 20, 2003, Policy Committee meeting. Vice President Powell moved to adopt, but Commissioner Porter asked that the vote be reserved as he wanted a chance to review them first.

Dr. Rivera then made his presentation:

He began with a brief history. Recommendations for expansion of the elementary schools of choice policy began in 1996 when the Board convened a team to review the policy, seeking to expand elementary school choice options. A report was presented to the Board in 1997 and was formally adopted in 1998. In 2000, the Board convened a Parent Preference Team to explore controlled choice; the Team came to the conclusion that parents should be able to choose a school that is best suited for their child's education, based on five concepts of managed choice:

1. Not everyone has the ability or right to choose their schools in Rochester;
2. Not all schools are performing well – they were committed to continue the improvement of public schools;
3. Not everyone receives adequate or timely information about school choices;
4. Not everyone gets the same opportunity to select a school and some home schools don't have adequate space
5. Our system of elementary student assignment has not been regularly reviewed or adjusted to reflect fairness, effectiveness, satisfaction, or adaptability to populate trends and needs.

In 2000, the Board directed the Superintendent to convene a planning team. The research was done by nationally recognized experts Michael Alves and Charles Willie and a preliminary report was submitted to the Board in September, 2001; a final report was presented in December, 2001; and the Board formally adopted the policy in November, 2002.

Dr. Rivera indicated that the rationale for the elementary managed choice plan was the commitment to (1) educate students in a way that is fair for all students; (2) allow students in under-performing schools the choice to attend a more successful school; (3) improve the lowest achieving and least chosen schools; (4) ensure equal access to high quality educational opportunities; (5) empower all District parents and their children to make an informed choice; (6) promote socioeconomic and student performance diversity.

The components of the managed choice plan would address the following: (1) zone schools (reorganizing the elementary schools into three student attendance zones; broadens the home school attendance area boundaries; identifies the location and number of seats available, etc.); (2) student enrollment (providing an orderly and equitable assignment of all elementary students enrolled in public schools, including low-income and affluent families); (3) student assignment (computerized lottery to assign students in zone schools of choice, requiring assignment to first-choice school in accordance with: [a] sibling preference when there is one child enrolled at the school already; [b] proximity preference for percentage of the available seats; and [c] socioeconomic fairness guidelines); (4) school improvement (making improvements in

the quality of education in all RCSD schools); (5) mobility (allows students to stay in the school they start in until and unless the parent initiates a voluntary transfer, minimizing the impact of transience on a child's education); (6) transportation (enlarged attendance zones designed to minimize unnecessary transportation costs); and (7) parent information and student registration centers (establishes centers that are, among other things, accessible in each of the three student attendance zones).

Dr. Rivera indicated that based on feedback from parents and the community, there is a perception that the policy will have an adverse effect on neighborhood schools; property values; the neighborhoods themselves; and parent involvement. He's received anywhere from 5-10 e-mails and phone calls per day from people raising questions.

Specific concerns center around: (1) the 60% dedication of seats to those living within a ½ mile radius of the school – some that currently have home school rights, would now only have proximity preference to that school; (2) some areas in the city would have no proximity preference to a school, while others would have multiple proximity preference to schools; (3) lack of a neighborhood guarantee – some that have moved into a neighborhood based on the school and with the assumption that their child would attend that home school, may now not have a guarantee of a spot in that school; (4) the length, process and communication regarding the kindergarten registration period – registration to start 3/1/04, but concerns about registration rights granted to new residents to zone or neighborhood schools after the registration period ends 4/16/04; (5) the ½ mile radius around each school – redistricting based on the ½ mile radius have caused some streets to be removed from the current neighborhood zone, while others are cut in half, resulting in some families not having the same proximity preference as others, and still other streets may be broken up so that either end of the street lies within a proximity preference area, but the middle does not.

Dr. Rivera stated that there are also concerns about the District's communication of the policy. People have expressed frustration that the information about the policy is being given out too close to the 3/1 registration date. Parents would like more time and opportunity for input prior to implementation. They want to better understand the impact of the policy as it relates to their individual situations.

He stated that as we go forward with any significant changes, there needs to be a transition period so people are made aware of the implications.

Dr. Rivera then gave his recommendations for implementation of the policy. There would be a transition year incorporating two amendments and two administrative guidelines.

Amendments:

- (1) Guarantee of 75% of seats reserved for students in the proximity area of a school, as early as the fall of this year, then prior to the second year, evaluate the impact of the proposal;
- (2) Honor the current home school boundaries; in the second year, phase in the ½ mile radius as the proximity area.

Administrative Guidelines:

- (1) Develop, over time, specific plans for flexibility to the policy, i.e. adding a teacher to a classroom if appropriate or adding students to a class;
- (2) Change the registration period to 4/1 – 5/30, instead of the start time of 3/1 – prior to year 2, evaluate the impact of the changes, and allow more time for communication, community understanding of the policy, and community understanding of the registration process.

Dr. Rivera concluded his presentation and deferred to the Policy Committee for any questions.

Commissioner Porter made a motion to discuss the proposed recommendations; Vice President Powell seconded the motion – motion passed unanimously.

Vice President Powell began by asking if the District is ready to communicate to parents what is or isn't the ½ mile radius.

Dr. Rivera stated no, that the radius has been completed for 25 schools, but for the rest of the District, each area needs to be addressed; there's a possibility of attaching particular areas to a certain school. He stated that it's easier to use the current boundaries.

Vice President Powell stated she's inclined to support the recommendations, but feels some areas are drawn tightly around a particular school and if some circles are very tight, some areas could stake a claim to a school boundary. She feels more work needs to be done to understand the exact intent.

Dr. Rivera advised that it might be helpful to revisit the policy at future committee meetings to clarify the intent.

Commissioner Porter commented that neighborhood schools have been around a long time. They present a better opportunity for parents to visit and participate in their child's school and it's also easier for students who get sick to get home. Neighbors buy into the school. His concept of a neighborhood school is the 1 ½ mile radius set by the Transportation Department. Commissioner Porter stated that he understands the

concept of the three zones and that parents can pick one or another school within the zone; but if they don't get their first choice, then they are stuck with another. He asked about any other schools on the list for possible closing. He agreed that something needs to be done with the policy, but the issues surrounding maximizing the schools still need to be addressed.

Dr. Rivera stated that six months from now, he believes parent involvement will be strengthened.

Commissioner Porter feels the proximity areas need to be explained to the public. It needs to be done now, not wait until the second year.

Dr. Rivera agreed that this is clearly a challenge, but there is consideration being given to different approaches to getting the word out.

President Thompson asked Dr. Rivera what the timeline is to clear up the home school boundaries.

Dr. Rivera stated he needed to defer that question to Andy Wheatcraft.

Terrence Hofer then responded that there are copies of maps around each ½ mile radius and corresponding addresses within the ½ mile radius. There are a couple of unusual circumstances, i.e. dead end streets, a couple of houses that don't fall within a radius.

Dr. Rivera asked what the timeline is and about the assignment of streets outside a radius.

Andrew Wheatcraft advised that the timeline is a couple of weeks and the issue of street assignments hasn't been addressed yet.

Jana Carlisle stated that circle maps need to be prepared as multiple proximities for some addresses and none for others need to be looked at. There are three or four ways to approach those addresses with no proximity, but it would call for more discussion with the Board.

President Thompson asked if that meant more time is needed.

Dr. Rivera stated yes.

Commissioner Porter asked if it was possible to set up a first run of random selection for those 2-3 houses on a street not in a proximity zone.

Ms. Carlisle stated that it would be fairer to get all the addresses inputted first to be more thorough. Those outside the ½ mile radius are more complicated.

Maurice Bell stated that if the Board chooses to approve the honoring of the existing home school boundaries, it gives the District more time. For the process to be fair, we need one system to make sure all addresses are covered.

President Thompson asked Dr. Rivera about recommendation #1. What is the reason and how did he arrive at 75%.

Dr. Rivera stated that on average, 60% of students are now attending their home school. We are not guaranteeing all students get into their home school. He said there's no science behind the 75% figure; it could have been 70%.

Ms. Carlisle stated that the hope is to maximize home school seats, but we cannot guarantee a spot.

President Thompson asked about families next year wanting their kindergartners to go to their home school.

Dr. Rivera said that the policy would need to be evaluated and assessed; it could be revisited by the Policy Committee in the fall to review the first wave of implementation, and possibly change the recommendation to 70% or whatever percentage going forward.

President Thompson asked if we would be saying the same thing at 60%.

Dr. Rivera stated that we wouldn't be maximizing the available seats.

Vice President Powell stated the reason the Board came up with the 60% figure was because it's the District wide average. We don't want to take away neighborhood schools. Looking at a school with two strengths, i.e. two kindergarten classes with a class size of 20 students, if 28 apply, that would bring the class size up to 23 children. We make room for the neighborhood children and two additional children and keep the percentage at 60%.

Dr. Rivera stated that that is an example; we would have administrative guidelines if this scenario occurs.

Ms. Carlisle stated that K-2 class sizes are 20:1 now. The flexibility will be there where warranted, but it wouldn't be changing the policy.

Vice President Powell stated that by holding fast to the 60% figure, if placements are going to a parent's second choice or if there would be additional children in a kindergarten class, she would choose the latter.

Commissioner Porter stated follow-up would be needed to see if an increase in class size would have an impact on academic achievement in the classroom. He is not in favor of a class size increase. If we set the mark at 75%, parents would have to come into the school to register; it leaves it up to the parents to sign their children up.

Ms. Carlisle stated that that would be only for the registration period; then the lottery would occur.

Commissioner Porter said he's looking for clarification for the day after the registration period. We need to be clear on how it's going to work. There's no guarantee of a spot after the registration period.

Ms. Carlisle stated that the administrative guidelines would address that.

President Thompson stated that regardless of 60% or 75% or anywhere in between, there should be an opportunity to admit a couple of additional students which would thereby increase the percentage.

Vice President Powell said that proportionate numbers need always be maintained. As one of the tenets of the choice policy, Willie & Alves said to establish a process before a lottery is drawn.

Vice President Powell then made a motion to change the percentage to 65%.

Commissioner Porter indicated he prefers to support the policy as written.

Commissioner Brown asked if they could split the difference.

Vice President Powell asked if it would be changed again later.

Commissioner Brown asked if they could send the policy to the Board or not. We will need to come up with some resolution and by-laws. He asked if the percentage could be changed to 70%.

Vice President Powell stated she has no problem with the administrative guidelines; but a meeting of the minds is needed.

Commissioner Brown stated that if the registration period is changed to 4/1, then that's two months to work things out.

Commissioner Porter asked if an agreement could be reached. He recommended to send the policy as is and let the Board make the determination of what the final number will be.

President Thompson stated that the Board members are looking to this committee to advance the policy. There could be more discussion though.

Commissioner Brown stated that we are looking at a range of 60-70%.

Commissioner Porter recommended a compromise of 70%.

Commissioner Brown asked Vice President Powell if she accepts the compromise.

Vice President Powell stated she accepts the amendment to her motion, but doesn't want to be bound by the 70%.

Commissioner Brown accepted that she is reserving her right.

Vice President Powell made a motion to amend to 70%; Commissioner Porter seconded the motion – vote unanimous.

Vice President Powell then moved to adjourn the meeting; Commissioner Porter seconded. Meeting adjourned at 6:42 p.m.