

Seattle Public Schools' Proposed Student Assignment Plan: the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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Except where otherwise indicated, the text of this document refers to:

- the June 3, 2009 draft of the Student Assignment Plan, (http://www.seattleschools.org/area/newassign/Intro_NSAP_Board_June3.pdf)
- as it will work once fully implemented,
- for families most interested in traditional schools, and
- having typically developing students.

I use the term *attendance area* school for both the new plan's and the old plan's "neighborhood" school. Strictly speaking the old plan's neighborhood school is best called a *reference* school but since I find the distinctions between the terms less important than the basic concept, I use the new term for simplicity's sake.

A *service area* is a region of Seattle made up of several elementary attendance area schools which feed into a single middle school.

I have chosen, in a few places, to describe the SAP with less than complete detail. Please don't make decisions affecting your family without first reading the final approved SAP and conferring with district staff where appropriate.

I use the terms “good” and “bad” not to mean I support or oppose a plan feature, but to identify groups who will benefit or be harmed by the plan point. The term “ugly” is intended to highlight plan features that are likely to result in chaos, confusion, and general unpleasantness.

Disclaimer: I’m a careful reader and have been paying a lot of attention to these topics. I have substantial experience and training in the design and evaluation of algorithms similar to the current and proposed choice scheme. However, I do make mistakes. If Tracy Libros says I’ve made an error here, you should probably believe her.

Acknowledgments: Everything in this document is my own words, but many of the questions raised and ideas discussed have been voiced by others. I’m particularly thankful for what I’ve learned from conversations carried out in the comments on school board member Harium Martin-Morris’s blog

<http://harium.blogspot.com/>

and on the *Seattle Public Schools Community Blog*

<http://saveattleschools.blogspot.com>

My thanks to these blog maintainers for providing an appropriate and lively place to discuss these topics.

1 Families are guaranteed¹ a place at their attendance area school

The good:

- Families will know the default school their child(ren) will attend farther in advance, giving them time to explore whatever other options they feel they should.
- For those families who prefer their attendance area school, there will be no requirement to go through a lengthy or confusing school choice process. As long as they get their enrollment forms in on time, they should be set.
- There will be no more families living in “dead zones” from which they cannot get into any among the schools surrounding them.
- Since far fewer families are likely to participate in the choice process, it will take less work for the enrollment department to process choice applications.

The bad:

- If your attendance area school is a failing school, or simply not one where your child is likely to fit in, having a guaranteed placement there will be of little value to you.

The ugly:

- Attendance area school boundaries will be changing. Many families will be surprised and disappointed when they discover what their new school will be.²

¹after the transition period

²At the public question and answer session on June 13, 2009, Tracy Libros mentioned that should it be decided to open or close a school, every effort will be made to announce both eventual and interim boundary plans in order to provide some sense of continuity.

- Guaranteeing every child a place at her attendance area school is a substantial departure from the current plan. This means that historical data will be of limited usefulness. During the transition period things may be a little bumpy.
- There is no such thing as a permanent boundary redraw. If, after the boundaries are re-drawn, you purchase a house expecting to know where your children who have not yet been born will go to high school, you are very likely to be disappointed.
- Schools will be within their attendance area boundaries,³ however, they may be just on the edge of their boundaries. It will be possible to live within sight of a school but not be in its attendance area.

2 There are no more distance-based tiebreakers

The good:

- Families will have priority for exactly one attendance area school. This means where a family lives in the district does not diminish their ability to compete for open seats via the choice process. Families who are willing and able to make an atypical commute work for their child(ren) will now have better chances of getting the assignment they want.

The bad:

- If you do not want your child to attend his attendance area school, you no longer have priority to get another assignment which includes transportation or is close enough to walk.
- Any family not realizing they are forgoing transportation can get burned.

³This is not in the June 3 version of the SAP, but was related verbally by Tracy Libros at a public question and answer session on June 13, 2009.

3 Typically developing siblings can always be placed together

The good:

- Both during transition and when the final SAP is implemented, there is always a way to keep typically developing siblings together at appropriate grade levels.

The bad:

- If an older sibling attends an attendance area school other than the family's default attendance area school and a younger sibling is entering school, the school at which the children will be placed together will not be known before the choice phase of enrollment is complete. They may be placed together at the older sibling's current school, the new attendance area school, or one from a list of other schools a family is willing to consider.
- The above option is not automatic. It must be requested.

The ugly:

- During the transition period, many families' assignment area school will change between the time an older and a younger child begins an entry grade. These families will need to decide which is more important: keeping the older child(ren) at their established school or keeping children together. Many parents want both so keenly that they cannot contemplate making this choice.

4 Special education placements become more local

The new plan provides a tiered system of special education placement. It moves most special education services into the attendance area schools, fewer into programs serving children from a single service area,⁴ and fewer still into programs having a single location serving the entire district.

The good:

- Students requiring special services and their typically developing siblings will have more opportunities to be placed together.
- Many special education students do better in attendance area schools. This will give more of them that opportunity.

The bad:

- There is no guarantee to keep together typically developing siblings and students requiring special services at the “service area” level even though this should be possible to accommodate.⁵

The ugly:

- Some families without students requiring additional services have expressed fear and uneasiness about how bringing more students with special needs into the mainstream public schools might affect their children. It would be nice to see the district make some effort to educate and reassure parents on this point.

⁴or a small number of adjacent service areas

⁵At the public question and answer session on June 13, 2009, Tracy Libros expressed interest in addressing this problem, so a solution could be forthcoming.

5 Spectrum seats will be assigned by lottery within service area

Attendance as a general education student at a school providing the Spectrum program does not provide priority for placement in Spectrum. As students become eligible for Spectrum, they have equal chance for a Spectrum seat in their service area.

The good:

- Students whose parents didn't know they might be qualified have no less chance of participating than those whose parents placed them in Spectrum schools with hopes they'd test in.

The bad:

- During the transition period this is likely to present families with a choice between maximizing the chance that their children get into or stay in Spectrum, or keeping their children together.

6 Option schools may have small areas of enhanced priority

Option schools may be associated with a *geographic area* conferring higher assignment priority (after siblings) to the program.

The good:

- Families who want to attend a specific option school may have the opportunity to move to a neighborhood that gives them priority.
- The geographic area can be placed to draw students from an area that does not have enough attendance area school capacity. This can be used to put off re-drawing of boundaries.

- The SAP indicates the geographic area may be placed to increase economic diversity at the option school. This is something many families at option schools desire.

The bad:

- This might encourage families to attend their local option school even if its philosophies aren't a good match for them.

The ugly:

- Many option school communities will resent having this decision made for them from "the outside".

7 Participating in the choice process cannot cost you your assignment area seat.

The good:

- If you choose to participate in the choice process and cannot be assigned any school on your list, your child's assignment will default to your attendance area school.⁶ This was implied in the wording of the June 3rd presentation to the board and confirmed by Tracy Libros at the June 13 public question and answer session.

⁶assuming no special needs that keep him from being served there.

8 If you move, your assignment may change

The good:

- If you use the choice process to apply for an open seat at an attendance area or option school, your child may stay there until she completes the last grade offered, regardless of where you move, as long as you stay within the district.

The bad:

- If you are placed in your attendance area school and move to a different attendance area within the district, you may transfer to the new attendance area school or finish out the year in place. If you wish to remain at your old school longer, you must use the choice process to do so, and are not guaranteed a spot.

The ugly:

- No matter how clearly and unequivocally this is explained, once families go through the move-and-then-try-choice process and fail, there will be complaints of unfairness.
- Families who move between the deadline for applying for choice for the next year and the end of the current school year won't have the chance to apply for a choice seat.

9 The new choice algorithm is simpler to implement and easier to understand but increases inequity

The description of the choice algorithm given in the SAP is not precise. Below is my best guess as to how the algorithm will work. If you have more information, please let me know.

- During the first round of choice, only first choices are examined. Applications are ranked and assignments are made for each program, starting with the highest ranked applications and ending when either all students are assigned or all available slots are filled.
- Anyone who fits into the available seats at this round has a firm assignment which cannot be preempted in later rounds of the procedure.
- The process then continues similarly, using the second choices of applicants who didn't make it into their first choice.
- The process continues similarly through third, fourth, etc. choices until, for each program, there are no more available seats or no more applications.
- Students who are not assigned to any choice on their application are assigned to their attendance area school.
- Students who do not get their first choice are placed on the wait list for their first choice.

The good:

- The new choice algorithm is simpler than the current procedure. More parents will be able to understand it.
- Popular option schools will be populated by the folks who choose them first, not folks who listed them seventh on the list hoping against hope that things would never go so far.

The bad:

- The new choice algorithm can punish naive players. The best strategy for listing school choices for the old algorithm has been to list them in your true order of preference. You did not need to know how likely you were to get into a school to know the right order to list them.⁷

⁷You did have to use strategy to pick your wait list school, but that's a discussion for a different day...

The best strategy for listing school choices for the new algorithm is listing a school you prefer to your attendance area school but which you also have a good chance of gaining entrance to. This requires substantially more information gathering and deliberation.

- The proposed scheme increases inequity in the schools families have a chance to attend.

If a school is popular enough to get more first choices than it has seats, you cannot be assigned to it if you don't list it first. Thus you have only one chance to get a highly popular school.

Families whose default (attendance area) assignment is satisfactory but not exactly what they want have the luxury of putting their first choice first, even if it is a very popular program. They can “shoot-for-the-moon” knowing they're going to land somewhere safe.

Families in schools that are failing or a very poor match for their child(ren) may be forced to choose between listing the highly popular program they truly prefer or listing a middle-of-the-road school first in hopes they get something better than their default assignment.

The ugly:

- Since the algorithm is no longer blind to strategy, many people will use strategy when listing schools. The district will therefore no longer have accurate information about which programs families prefer. The most popular option programs will tend to look less popular if families don't think they can get in.
- Access to good historical data on number of choices and number of available seats will become a valuable commodity during the choice process. If the district does not release this data to the public, those who can get it will be at a substantial advantage in making their choice rankings.
- During the first few years of the new plan it is likely that many families will still be repeating the previously correct advice to list schools in the actual order you prefer them. Timely, clear, and repeated communication about the difference is essential.

10 The specification of the choice algorithm for siblings applying simultaneously is not complete

The ugly:

- The current proposal does not adequately specify how siblings applying for choice as an indivisible group will be handled. There are many ways to do this, most of which don't do a good job of balancing the chances of singleton applicants against siblings applying as a group. The fairness of different methods is most easily reasoned about when you consider siblings competing for seats at a popular option school where attendance is largely determined by lottery.

Some methods give siblings an unfair advantage. An example is placing all siblings at their first choice option school so long as at least one gets a lottery number that would be good enough to gain a singleton entrance. This class of method would give triplets an unfair advantage to get into a highly popular option program. This is my understanding of how the *linkage* property worked for first choices in the old plan.

Some give siblings too small a chance of being placed in their chosen schools. An example is placing all siblings at their first choice option school only if all get a lottery number that would be good enough for a singleton to gain entrance. Such a method would mean triplets could almost never get into a highly popular option program.

Before the plan is implemented the method to be used should be made public.