

Downsizing schools, increasing segregation?

Reducing busing and closing some schools were meant to help integrate schools. Such cuts will save money but could isolate schools and limit choices.

By [EMILY JOHNS](#), Star Tribune

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The Minneapolis School District's much-debated downsizing plan may exacerbate a problem that has plagued its schools for decades -- segregation.

Approved by the school board in September as a way to save money, the plan calls for closing schools and reducing busing to keep students close to home. But some say it will trap families of color in struggling schools.

The plan divides the city into three zones by which it will assign kids to schools. In the northern zone, only 15 percent of students are white. In the southwest zone, almost half are white.

It "will result in deeply isolated schools," said Myron Orfield, director of the University of Minnesota's Institute on Race & Poverty, who says school segregation is pervasive in the metro area. "It will get worse."

Administrators promise to improve schools in areas with large numbers of students of color. But board member Chris Stewart, who voted for the plan despite reservations, called it a step back for integration.

"Doing things like restricting access [to better schools] and closing off doors with the promise that we're going to make the ghetto better is not what parents want to hear," he said.

Busing's budget bite

The district conceived the "Changing School Options" plan to deal with years of declining enrollment. It is predicted to save more than \$6 million a year.

Four schools will close, four magnet programs will become neighborhood schools, and parents will have fewer school choices, unless they want to drive their children to school.

It's a departure from the citywide school choice system that developed over decades of dealing with various state and federal integration laws. Currently, students from some neighborhoods are bused to more than 30 schools all over the city. The new plan limits

students to a community school option, at least three magnet schools in their zone and several citywide options.

Currently, the district buses 74 percent of its students at a cost of \$33 million a year.

Parents have called for keeping kids closer to home, said Bernadeia Johnson, the district's deputy superintendent. Neighborhood schools offer families stability, and money saved on busing can go to classrooms, she said.

But in Minneapolis, race is often a predictor of where people live.

"Neighborhoods are somewhat racially segregated," said Mary Maddox of Minneapolis, who has a daughter at Patrick Henry High School on the North Side. "It's hard for the district to address all of the [city's] needs, but I think they had an opportunity to consider something completely different, to diversify the schools, and they didn't."

The vote to approve the plan was unanimous, but since then board members have pressured administrators to correct inequities among high schools. They say that if families get fewer choices, the choices must be adequate.

For example, Southwest, the district's highest performing high school, offers 38 advanced courses, while North, the district's lowest performing school, offers 12.

Board chairman Tom Madden recently complained that the plan's strategy is, "'Force them to come, then we'll build it,' instead of, 'If you build it, they will come.'"

And Minneapolis parents have an arguably justified history of skepticism of school board promises.

"People can remember many broken promises over time, and they can remember many inequitable outcomes based upon decisions just like this one," Stewart said.

Not integrated now

Board member Jill Davis said recently that integration efforts haven't worked. She said 70 percent of the district's children are students of color, and "the choice system that we did have wasn't performing that function anymore."

Take Lake Harriet Lower Campus, for example. In a district where only 30 percent of students are white, the southwest Minneapolis school is 87 percent white. Or look at Lucy Laney community school in north Minneapolis. There, 88 percent of students are black, while only 40 percent of district's students are black.

"What it comes down to," Davis said, "is that Minneapolis public schools alone can't do the integration piece. It's no longer feasible."

With a system that bused students everywhere, "we saw schools becoming very disconnected from the communities they were in," Davis said. "And you really need that [connection] for schools to be successful."

Washburn High School, for example, is in an affluent neighborhood. Recently, the neighborhood has started to embrace the school more as it has improved. But in 2008, only a third of its students came from the surrounding area.

'Mini Choice' offered

Minneapolis is taking steps to mitigate the problem. It has established a "Mini Choice is Yours" program, modeled after the program Minneapolis runs with suburban districts, to give students from the poorest neighborhoods the option to attend affluent schools.

North High will be a magnet school for science, technology, engineering and math, in hopes of drawing students from across the city. South will keep its "Open" program, with spots for 500 students, available to all parts of the city.

Some northeast Minneapolis parents are encouraged by the plan because it could force skeptical parents to take a closer look at schools they might have dismissed in the rush to head south.

Northeast's Edison High School, like Washburn, has improved recently and seen more neighborhood support.

Laura McQuiston, whose son attends Edison, laughed when she described her hopes: "Possibly people will kind of be forced into going, but at the same time they'll realize what a wonderful school it is, and then it will become even better."

Don't force us

But parents don't want to be forced into options they feel are inferior, regardless of whether their fears are justified.

Jenn Bennington, the mother of an Edison student, also hoped families who may have dismissed Edison might take a second look.

"But my friend is running for school board," she said, "and when we were at a party for her, Marcy [Open School] parents came in and started yelling at her, saying, 'You're trying to force me to send my kid to Edison, and I won't.' There seems to be a fear that they're going to be grouped with a less desirable part of town."

Of course, in Minnesota, no one is ever forced to go to a school. Charter schools have popped up quickly in urban areas, and the state's open enrollment program means students can switch to another school district if they're unsatisfied, as long as they have a ride.

But discontent has driven thousands of Minneapolis parents away in recent years, causing instability and financial problems for the district. District officials want to avoid another exodus.

"I'm willing to go with anything and try anything," said Maddox, the Patrick Henry mom. "But I think what gets most frustrating is the instability. It's just like, 'What's the plan this time?' Or, 'Who is the superintendent this time?' It has made it really hard for families to feel invested in the schools."

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