

Summary of Findings: Middle School Enrollment Policy Community Engagement Survey, June 2021

Introduction

In November 2020, the Berkeley Unified School District (BUSD) Board of Education directed the Superintendent to review the district’s middle school enrollment policy and provide a recommendation by November 2021 on potential changes, if any. The enrollment policy has not been reviewed since 1994. BUSD has partnered with SKS Consulting to develop a community engagement process between May and November 2021. The engagement process provides multiple opportunities for community input that will help to inform the Superintendent’s recommendation.

This report summarizes a June 2021 survey of BUSD TK through rising 8th Grade families that was one of the initial community engagement activities. Families were asked to share the factors they considered to be important when choosing a middle school. The survey also included an introduction to the middle school enrollment policy review process. Families were asked to choose their initial preference among the enrollment policy alternatives the district is considering and were also given the opportunity to write in their own suggested policy alternatives. The survey was available in Spanish and English and was sent directly to families via email. It was open for two weeks and was promoted through multiple channels including the BUSD website, A+ News, the BUSD newsfeed, bilingual flyers handed out at the food distribution site with QR codes that linked to the survey, and the REMIND system. School principals were also asked to promote the survey to their school communities. A reminder email sent to families a few days before the survey closed resulted in hundreds of additional responses.

Survey Respondents

A total of 1,928 responses were received, a high participation rate for the district. Respondents were asked to share the grade their student would be attending in Fall 2021 and could select multiple grades for multiple students. As Table 1 shows, respondents represented parents/guardians of students at all grade levels.

Table 1: What grade(s) will your student(s) be in next year -- the fall of 2021?

| Grade | Number of Responses | Percent of Total Responses |
|--------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|
| TK | 34 | 1.76% |
| K | 195 | 10.11% |
| 1 | 206 | 10.68% |
| 2 | 283 | 14.68% |
| 3 | 257 | 13.33% |
| 4 | 310 | 16.08% |
| 5 | 320 | 16.60% |
| 6 | 334 | 17.32% |
| 7 | 365 | 18.93% |
| 8 | 337 | 17.48% |
| High School | 362 | 18.78% |

Respondents were also asked to provide basic demographic information. Table 2 provides a breakdown of student(s) race/ethnicity.

Table 2: Please select your student(s) race/ethnicity.

| Student(s) Race/Ethnicity | Number of Responses | Percent of Total Responses | BUSD Student Population (2019-20) ¹ |
|--|---------------------|----------------------------|--|
| American Indian or Alaska Native | 3 | 0.16% | 0.10% |
| Asian | 117 | 6.07% | 7.00% |
| Black or African American | 116 | 6.02% | 13.00% |
| Filipino | 20 | 1.04% | 0.90% |
| Latinx or Hispanic | 136 | 7.05% | 22.00% |
| Middle Eastern | 9 | 0.47% | unavailable |
| Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander | 1 | 0.05% | 0.10% |
| Two or More Races | 390 | 20.23% | 15.00% |
| White | 914 | 47.41% | 41.00% |
| Prefer Not to Say | 222 | 11.51% | 0.10% |

Eighty-eight percent of respondents indicated English was the primary language spoken at home, 2.96% Spanish, .16% Arabic, and 3.42% chose “Other” and 5.45% chose not to respond. Approximately 5.5% of respondents indicated their student(s) were English Language Learners (ELL), slightly lower than the district-wide population of 8.8%. Roughly 8% of respondents declined to answer “Yes” or “No”. Respondents were asked if their student(s) had a Special Education Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Eleven percent answered “Yes” while 8% declined to answer “Yes” or “No”. BUSD’s Special Education population is approximately 12% of all students.

Important Factors When Choosing a Middle School

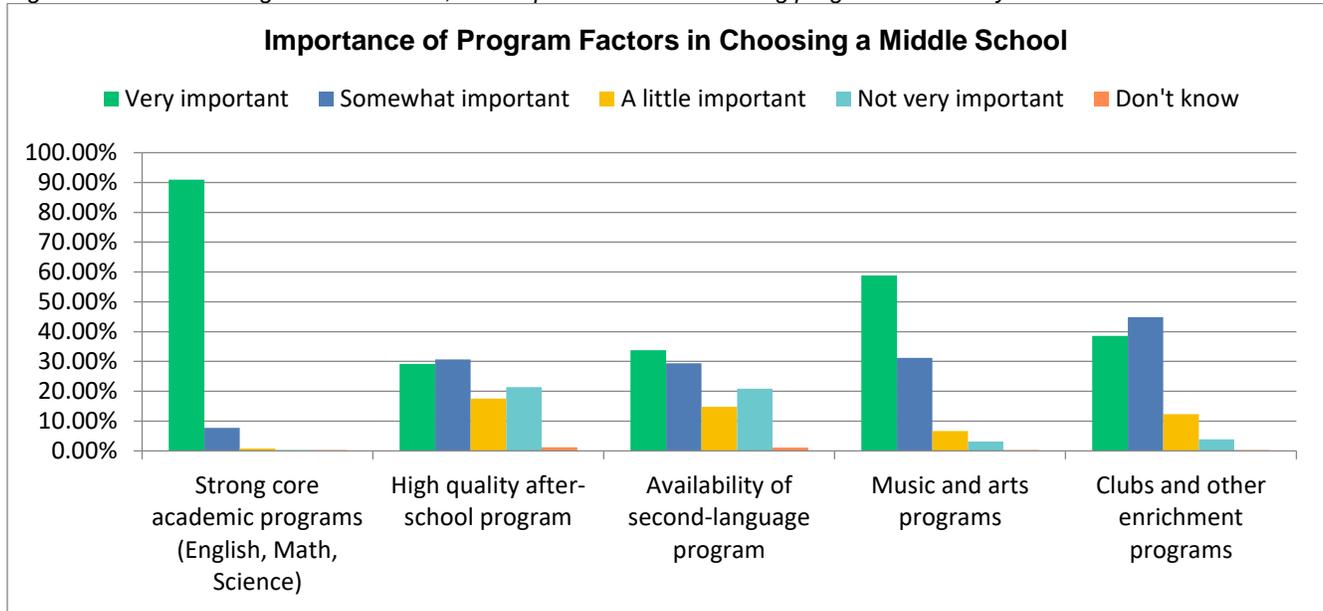
Families were asked to consider what was important to them when choosing a middle school and to rank a variety of program and non-program factors in order of importance. Figure 1 illustrates how respondents ranked middle school program factors. The two program factors listed as most important to respondents were strong core academic programs (91%) and music and arts programs (59%), followed by clubs and other enrichment programs (38.61%), availability of a second language program (33.80%), and a high-quality afterschool program (29.21%).

A breakdown of student populations yielded a few notable differences. For example, 59.57% of respondents with Latinx or Hispanic students felt that the availability of a second-language program was very important compared to 31-36% for respondents with students of other races/ethnicities. Families with students in grades 6-8 also ranked this factor approximately 10% higher than 4th and 5th grade families. In addition, a higher percentage of respondents with students of color ranked the availability of a high-quality after-school program to be very important compared to respondents with white students. The most significant difference was between respondents with white students (22.65%) and of respondents with Black or African American students (47.01%) and Latinx or Hispanic students (41.84%). Families of students who attend Longfellow also ranked this factor much higher (41.21%) than those attending King (23.55%) or Willard (18.12%). Finally, 65.52% of respondents with Black or

¹ Source: California Department of Education (www.cde.ca.gov)

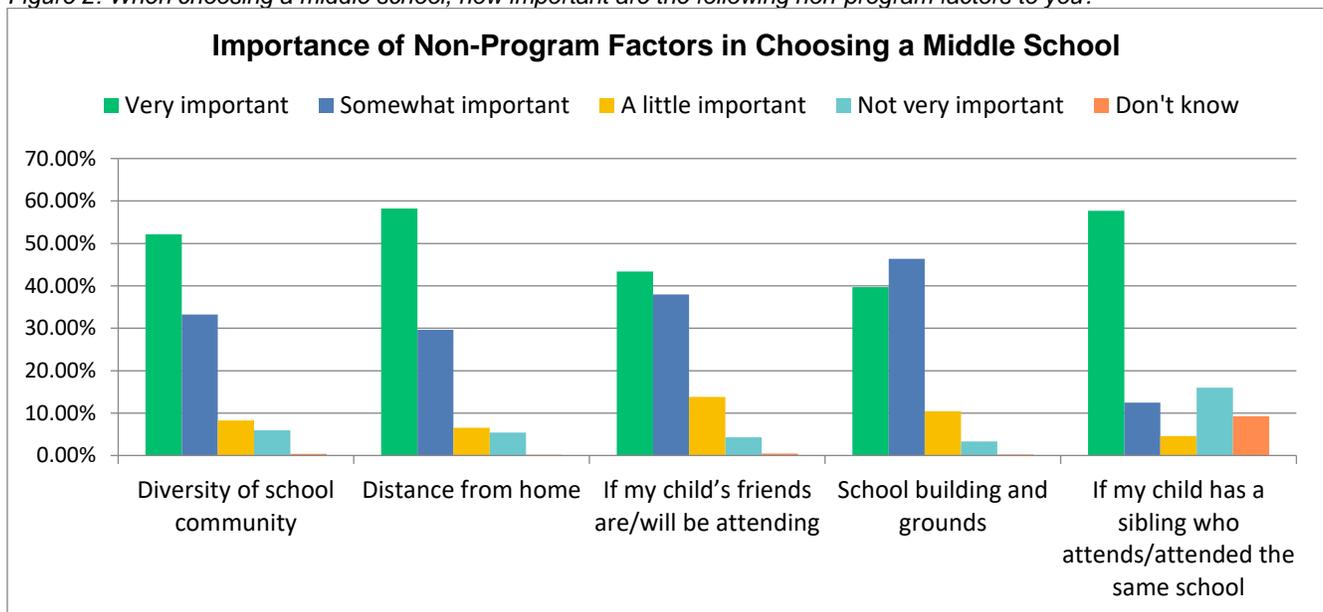
African American students ranked clubs and other enrichment programs as very important, a 20-30% higher percentage than respondents with students of other races/ethnicities.

Figure 1: When choosing a middle school, how important are the following program factors to you?



Respondents were also asked to rank non-program factors (Figure 2). The two most important non-program factors were distance from home (58.19%) and if a sibling attends/attended the same school (57.71%), followed by the diversity of the school community (52.13%), if a child's friends are/will be attending (43.36%), and the school building and grounds (39.69%).

Figure 2: When choosing a middle school, how important are the following non-program factors to you?



Once again, a breakdown of populations yielded many similarities but also some differences between populations. For example, 77.78% of respondents with Black or African American students ranked the diversity of the school community to be very important, much higher than respondents with students of two or more races (50.13%), Asian students (51.67%), White students (53.04%), and Latinx or Hispanic students (61.27%). A significantly higher percentage of families with students at Longfellow (75.76%) also ranked this factor as very important compared to those at King (49.89%) and Willard (58.20%).

Respondents were also asked to describe other factors that were important to them when choosing a middle school. Forty-five percent of respondents suggested that the availability of a bus to middle school would be an important factor. Additional other factors included staff diversity, anti-bullying programs, social-emotional supports, levels of funding to schools, and high-quality special education programs. The remaining responses were related to program and non-program factors listed in the survey.

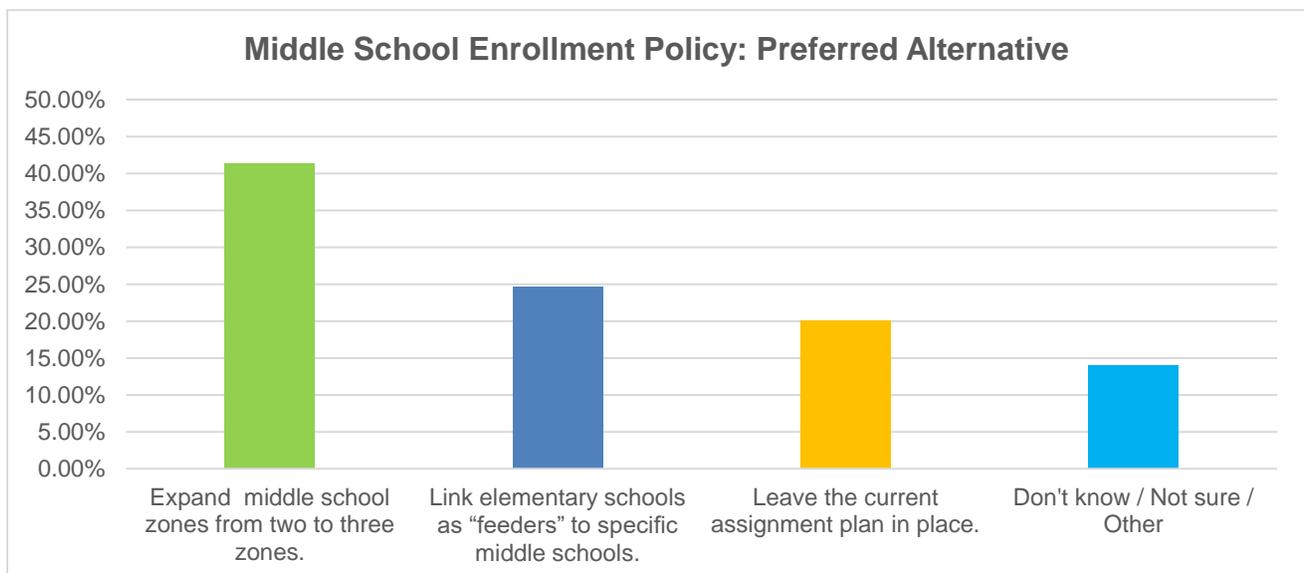
Middle School Enrollment Policy Review and Alternatives

Families were then asked to consider the current middle school enrollment policy alternatives being reviewed by the district and choose their current preferred option:

1. Expand the middle school zones from two to three zones, so each middle school falls into an enrollment zone. This option most closely matches BUSD enrollment policy for elementary schools. The middle school enrollment zones may slightly differ from elementary zones.
2. Link elementary schools as “feeders” to specific middle schools.
3. Leave the current assignment plan in place. If this option is chosen, enrollment at King and Willard will continue to be done by zone and Longfellow will continue to be a choice school. The current imbalances are expected to continue.
4. Don't know / Not sure / Other.

As shown in Figure 3, a significant majority of respondents (41.34%) chose to expand the middle school zones from two to three, with 24.59% of respondents choosing the feeder school option, 20.12% choosing to leave the current enrollment policy in place, and 13.95% saying “Don't know/not sure/other”.

Figure 3: Middle School Enrollment Policy: Preferred Alternative



An analysis of student populations revealed that while more families with students in grades 4-8 preferred expanding the middle school zones from two to three over the alternatives, the percentage of respondents choosing this increased slightly with each grade level. While 38.68% of families of 4th grade students chose this option, 48.70% of families with 8th graders chose this option. Additionally, while respondents with students at each middle school showed a preference for the three zone option, a lower percentage of families with students at King chose this option (36.58%) compared to families with students at Longfellow (53.94%) and Willard (50.16%).

Respondents were invited to provide their own suggestions for enrollment policy alternatives. Three hundred and seventy-one respondents commented, although not all comments included a suggested alternative. Many respondents took the opportunity to share opinions about the current alternatives or to voice concerns. A significant number of respondents indicated that they would be happy with either an expansion of zones or elementary “feeder” schools although they could only choose one option. A sampling of suggested alternatives for this report included:

- Creating a lottery
- Creating three middle school zones but allowing 10-15% of students from other zones
- Enrolling students based on physical distance from the school
- Have larger elementary schools feed into multiple middle schools
- Make all three middle schools choice schools.

Community Engagement Policy Questions and Comments

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked if there was anything else about the middle school enrollment policy engagement process that they wanted to ask or to share. There were 413 responses. A sampling of responses for this report included:

- Suggestions to pool PTA funds across schools
- Gratitude to the district for initiating the enrollment policy review process
- Concerns about transportation and proximity to schools
- A suggestion to offer similar curriculum/facilities at all middle school sites
- A question about Longfellow’s capacity to fund increased enrollment if the policy changes
- Requests to postpone the enrollment policy review to another year.

The district will incorporate questions into a Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) web page it will be developing on the BUSD website as a resource for the community throughout the review process.

Summary

The June 2021 survey provided BUSD with important insights into what factors are most important to families when considering a middle school. In general, survey responses were very similar across student population groups although, for certain key factors, there were significant differences. It is difficult to draw concrete conclusions about these differences as the demographics of survey respondents, including enrollment demographics, are not fully representative of the overall demographics of the school district. It may be worthwhile for BUSD to explore these areas further.

The survey also introduced the community to the middle school enrollment review process and captured an initial impression of the community’s preferred enrollment options. This report provides a summary overview of survey responses. Survey data will be further incorporated into the overall findings generated by the middle school enrollment policy community engagement process.