

SEPTEMBER 4, 2018

Common Practices in Changing School Attendance Zone Boundaries

By Susan M. McMillan, Ph.D.
Senior Researcher, Educational Data Systems

The primary goal of public school districts in the US is to provide the best possible education for all students. One ongoing challenge for many school district administrators is student distribution in school facilities to help achieve this goal. This challenge is especially strong when a school district determines that it needs to make attendance zone boundary (AZB) changes, a process often called “redistricting.”

Common Practices in Changing School Attendance Zone Boundaries

The primary goal of public school districts in the US is to provide the best possible education for all students. One ongoing challenge for many school district administrators is student distribution in school facilities to help achieve this goal. This challenge is especially strong when a school district determines that it needs to make attendance zone boundary (AZB) changes, a process often called “redistricting.”

School planning expert Kelley D. Carey noted that he has seen more superintendents get fired over redistricting than over educational programming or quality of instructional leadership (2011, p. 190–191). His comment is echoed in an article by WGLT public radio: “...only two things are guaranteed to get a school superintendent fired: trying to kill off a school mascot and school redistricting” (<http://www.wglt.org/post/unit-five-enters-emotional-minefield-redistricting#stream/0>).

Reasons for AZB Changes

The need for AZB changes is not restricted to large and growing school districts that have planners in multiple departments who sort through enrollment, facilities, transportation, budget, and strategic planning data. Small districts also experience the need for change, often with fewer internal resources for managing the process. Similarly, school districts in urban, suburban, and rural districts can all experience pressures for AZB changes at one time or another.

Sifting through a year’s worth of popular press articles reveals a set of common reasons school districts undertake AZB changes (see Table 1). These redistricting triggers are not mutually exclusive, and school districts often cite multiple motivating factors for change.

Table 1. Common Reasons for School Redistricting

School District Situation	Implications for AZB Change
Increasing enrollment	Overcrowded facilities
Decreasing enrollment	Underutilized facilities, budget inefficiencies
Uneven enrollment	Unbalanced facilities usage due to uneven geographic distribution of students
Aging facilities	Need for renovation or replacement
New facilities	Need to have students assigned, likely disrupting multiple attendance zones
Closing schools due to low enrollment, budget constraints, program “failures,” or natural disasters	Must accommodate students from the closed building(s)

School District Situation	Implications for AZB Change
Change in education regulations or policies (for example, mandatory Pre-K, all-day K, and class size requirements)	Changes in the associated facilities needs can necessitate AZB changes
Transportation issues	Redistricting could generate transportation efficiencies
Feeder pattern alignment	Keep neighborhood students together and/or reduce the number of school transitions for students
Educational programming change	May need to evaluate AZB to reconfigure grades or to ensure that the same educational programming is available to all students, regardless of location in the district, socio-economic status, or race/ethnic group

Even in the face of strong pressure for AZB changes, they are often difficult to implement. Schools are seen as the center of many communities, and families form strong emotional ties to schools, even if those schools are labelled as “failing” (<http://www.wbur.org/edify/2017/11/03/walsh-schools-balancing-act>). Sometimes a clash of goals contributes to high emotions. For example, school district administrators may wish to pursue demographic diversification, and this may conflict with community wishes to keep neighborhoods together and keep kids in schools that are geographically close (<https://tcf.org/content/report/eden-prairie-public-schools/?agreed=1>). Home purchase decisions are also closely tied to school attendance boundaries, which can produce resistance to change (http://www.wilmingtonbiz.com/real_estate_-_residential/2018/03/09/some_buyers_sellers_await_school_maps/17214). Creating and disseminating clear policies regarding the AZB change process can help temper the emotional reactions to change.

AZB Change Process

The process for making AZB changes varies tremendously among school districts. Some large or rapidly growing districts review their attendance zones on an annual basis and routinely make administrative adjustments as needed to accommodate enrollment shifts (e.g., Los Angeles USD). Some districts such as Durham County Public Schools (NC) make relatively rare changes when enrollment drops below or climbs above school capacity policies.

The process also varies by district with respect to whether community members form an advisory board, how many potential solutions are devised, and even who has final approval authority. Nevertheless, several components of the change process (summarized in Table 2) seem to be central to success. Community engagement strategies support all steps in the change process and are important enough to be discussed in the following section.

Table 2. Components of the AZB Change Process

Steps in the Change Process	Description
Gather and analyze relevant data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enrollment trends and projections • General demographic trends • Facility utilization/capacity • Budget capacity/constraints • Community preferences regarding objectives, often called “guiding principles” • Potential solutions (including those that do not involve AZB changes) with cost/benefit analysis
Communicate with the community	<p>An ongoing iterative process that includes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using data to make a strong case for change • Gathering and incorporating community feedback to refine potential solutions and boundary change scenarios; often involves a community committee • Answering questions from the community in a transparent manner
Finalize the solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The superintendent or committee recommends a plan, also called a scenario, and presents indicators for how it solves the identified problem(s) • Approval of the plan is often a school board action
Implement the changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create and communicate a detailed transition timeline • Hold an implementation meeting for families affected by AZB changes

Deviations from published AZB review and change processes, or even public perceptions of deviations, can contribute to community discontent with the redistricting outcome. Sometimes the new boundaries are challenged in court and the entire process is changed as a result (for example, http://www.tampabay.com/news/education/k12/School-district-changes-process-for-redrawing-school-boundaries_162375768). A clear and well-publicized boundary change process that includes understandable data analysis and community engagement can help to mitigate the strong emotions that go with redistricting decisions.

Community Engagement Strategies

Even when AZB changes are relatively frequent in large or rapidly growing districts, community engagement efforts and clear communication channels are crucial to successful change. Hanover Research, in a widely cited report for Portland Public Schools, describes multiple strategies for community engagement in the change process (2015, pp. 21–23). Additionally, our own research confirms the following common strategies for engaging the community and communicating boundary change needs, goals, and solutions:

- Convene advisory committee
- Form focus groups
- Hold open community meetings
- Survey families and other community members
- Disseminate information in multiple languages via letters, flyers, detailed Q&A websites, FAQ (in multiple formats), and interactive websites

Multiple strategies are often used together in efforts to communicate with as many community members as possible. Based on our research, the following list contains the most common questions that families ask about redistricting.

Why are changes necessary?

What other options have been considered or implemented?

What are the boundary change decision criteria?

What is the change process and who is included?

Who is affected by changes?

What do the new boundaries look like (on a map)?

What is the timing of the changes?

Are there opportunities for “grandfathering” and can siblings stay together?

How will transportation change?

How will school choice options work?

To improve transparency throughout the boundary change process, districts can provide specific data to answer these questions and others that may arise in local context. Often, districts create presentations for committee and board meetings and make those presentations available online. Infographics can be helpful to describe the district-specific boundary change process, options, outcomes, and implementation timeline.

Summary

Redistricting involves a set of complex relationships encompassing facilities usage, transportation, budgeting, and educational programming goals. This complexity creates the need for an internal coordination effort for school district administrators as well as the

need to coordinate and communicate with the community at large. Relying on clear and specific processes can help reduce the resistance to change and increase acceptance of outcomes, even when emotional and difficult decisions must be made.

References

Carey, Kelley D. (2011). *School District Master Planning: A Practical Guide to Demographics of Facilities Planning*, Rowman and Littlefield Education.

Hanover Research (2015). Best Practices in District Rezoning: Prepared for Portland Public Schools. Retrieved from https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/207/Best_Practices_in_District_Rezoning_-_Portland_Public_Schools.pdf.

About Educational Data Systems

For over 40 years, Educational Data Systems' focus has been on the collection, processing, and reporting of data for education. The assessment division prepares, manages, analyzes, and reports on data for small to very large survey projects, program evaluations, local benchmark testing programs, and statewide large-scale assessments. The planning division, Planware, provides geographical information system (GIS) services and software to school districts.