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In the Battle Over Early Algebra, Parents Are Winning

After schools prevented students from taking algebra before high school to reduce racial inequities, parents in San Francisco and Cambridge, Mass., pushed back

By *Sara Randazzo* [Follow](#)

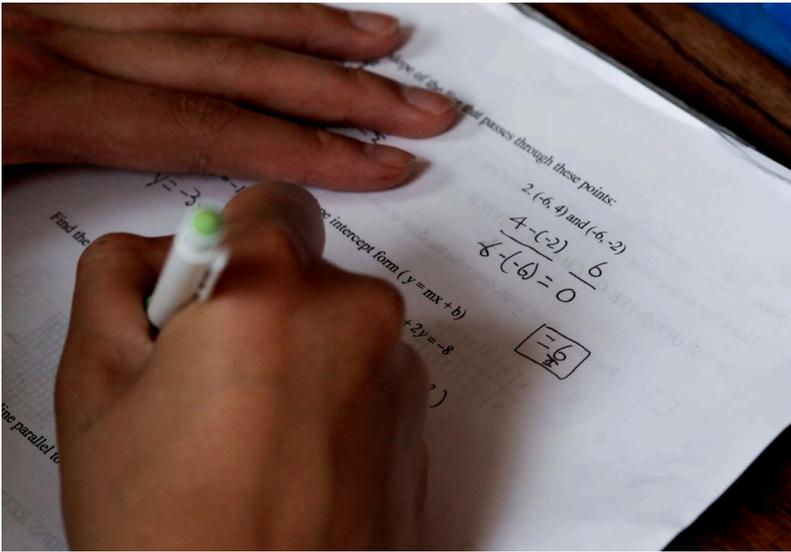
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San Francisco's public school district set off a yearslong fight with parents when it decided to prevent students from taking algebra until high school, an attempt to combat racial inequities in math by waiting until more students were ready.

Parents in favor of letting students start in middle school launched petitions, a ballot measure and a lawsuit, sparring with school officials over questions of equity and privilege.

Now, it appears the parents who are pushing for eighth-grade algebra are winning.

The San Francisco Unified School District said Friday that it would reverse its decade-old policy, a move that comes after a similar recent change by the school system in Cambridge, Mass., home to Harvard University.



San Francisco's school district is bringing back eighth-grade algebra after a decade of restricting the course to high school. PHOTO: MICHAEL MACOR/SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE/GETTY IMAGES

When to start students on algebra is a contentious topic because the subject is the gateway to a series of math classes culminating in calculus, which many see as crucial for STEM careers and selective college admissions. Students aspiring to take calculus before graduating have traditionally begun this sequence in eighth grade.

“A lot of the attention to eighth-grade algebra is based upon the feeling that that’s the point at which the race is won,” said Thurston Domina, an education professor at the University of North Carolina.

In San Francisco, the district long argued that the policy of restricting algebra to high school wasn’t done to hold children back, but to reduce the inequities that result from sorting students by math ability at too young an age.

Between a quarter and a third of eighth-graders across the U.S. take algebra, federal data shows. In most districts, students can choose when to enroll in algebra based on parent or teacher recommendations, a system that tends to result in fewer Black and Latino students on the fast track.

Nationally, 48% of Asian students reach calculus before graduation, compared with 22% of white students, 14% of Latino students and 11% of Black students.

Some districts try to solve the racial disparities by placing all eighth-graders in algebra. Proponents of that approach argue that it is a way to ensure equity across racial and socioeconomic groups. Access to algebra has been called a civil right.



The Fairfax County, Va., public schools under Superintendent Michelle Reid have set a goal for all students to finish algebra by eighth grade. PHOTO: CRAIG HUDSON FOR THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY IMAGES

In San Francisco, parents spent years trying to restore access to middle-school algebra after the district in 2014 concluded that starting students in ninth grade was the optimal way to achieve equity. Over the years the district stood by its decision, pointing to data showing fewer students of all races failed algebra after moving the subject to ninth grade.

“We do have a social-justice agenda,” Lizzy Hull Barnes, who oversees the San Francisco school district’s math department, said on a panel in 2021. She said “any time anyone tried to make the case that helping historically underserved children harms privileged children,” the district used data to disprove it.

Parents who pushed for eighth-grade algebra said it wasn’t fair to hold back those ready to advance and that the school district was creating new inequities because wealthier families could pay for students to take accelerated math outside school. Families took issue with the workarounds the district eventually offered to get to calculus, which include taking summer courses, two math classes in one year or a course that compresses Algebra II and precalculus.

“When you watch how this policy plays out, it is actually crushing the hopes and dreams of real children in our city, every single year,” said Annesa Flentje, a parent of three and a professor at the University of California, San Francisco, who in March 2023 became a plaintiff in a lawsuit seeking to reverse the San Francisco school district’s policy.

A parent group put out a report in 2021 arguing that the district vastly overstated the proportion of students who failed eighth-grade algebra and that there was no justification for holding children back.

A study by Stanford University researchers released in March 2023 found that San Francisco's policy largely failed in its equity goals, with the proportion of Black and Latino students enrolling in Advanced Placement math courses hardly moving.



The mother of Khalil Santa became a plaintiff in a lawsuit seeking to reverse the San Francisco school district's advanced-math policy. PHOTO: KHALIL SANTA

This school year, the district said it would study ways to reverse course. On Friday, officials posted a proposal that will go before the school board later this month. It lays out a path to return algebra to all middle schools by 2026-27, with pilot programs and online and summer options until then. Superintendent Matt Wayne said the vision is to “increase the number of underrepresented students in higher-level math.”

California, which has a significant influence on education politics because of its size, has been on both sides of the algebra-access debate. In the late 1990s it became one of the first states to push an “algebra for all” approach that strongly encouraged eighth-grade algebra.

Research by Domina, then at the University of California, Irvine, and others found that achievement on a 10th-grade high school exit exam didn't improve after a majority of California students took algebra in eighth grade. In some cases, the research showed achievement declines.

Last year, California passed a new math framework that de-emphasizes early algebra access. Earlier drafts discouraged any eighth-grade algebra, citing the San Francisco school district's policy as a more equitable approach. After hundreds of public comments and rounds of revisions, the final framework says students should accelerate in math if they are ready.

Many districts continue to follow the “algebra for all” approach, including Virginia’s Fairfax County Public Schools. That district has set a goal for all students to finish algebra by eighth grade, up from 51% currently.

“It’s a gateway course,” said Superintendent Michelle Reid. To tackle some of society’s challenges right now, she said, “Frankly, we need students that love, appreciate and are excited by mathematics.”

In Cambridge, some parents have pushed back on a shift in district policy that has left students in middle school without access to advanced math. The 7,025-student district decided in 2017 to stop tracking sixth- through eighth-graders into two tiers of math because “it was affecting their confidence,” said Siobahn Mulligan, head of the district’s math department. “Students were referring to being in the ‘smart’ class or the ‘dumb’ class,” she said.

Mulligan said the intention was always to replace tracking with accelerated math for all students, but the pandemic derailed plans. The district is in the process of moving all algebra units into eighth grade by the 2025-26 school year.

Joshua Goodman, an education and economics professor at Boston University with three children in the district, said that he has pushed to ensure his children can still accelerate but that not all families have the same resources. “I’m annoyed at the district for not doing the thing a good school should do,” he said, “which is design courses based on the skills children have.”

—*Matt Barnum contributed to this article.*

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