

History of Omaha Public School Benson Attendance Area and Open Enrollment Policy

Report generated and provided by Casey Hughes, Omaha Public Schools October 17, 2014

School Boundary

Prior to 1964, the Benson high school attendance area grew west as the district and city expanded. At one point in the 1960s, the Benson attendance boundary extended all the way to what is now 156th street. In 1964, students west of about 96th street and south of Fort street were assigned to a yet to be built Burke High that would open in 1967. Benson still maintained some portions of the western part of the school district until Northwest High opened in the 1971-72 moving Benson's western boundary to 72nd St. The boundary for Benson stayed the same over the next 40 years with the exception of adding portions of Kennedy Elementary in the early 1990s. Most of Harrison, half of Western Hills and Wakonda and all of the Walnut Hill, King Elementary (Cliffton Hill), Benson West, Fontenelle, and Mount View elementary schools have always been in the Benson boundary dating back at least to the 1950s.

Benson Enrollment History and Trends

Prior to the Desegregation plan instituted in 1976-77, there was little movement between high schools. What movement that did occur was the result of special needs transfers or choice to Tech high school that was open, to some extent, to every student in the district. In 1970, Benson had 2,249 students and was 97% white. By the implementation of the desegregation plan in 1976-77 it was just under 75% white and had a population 1,352. The desegregation plan attempted to achieve racial balance at all high school through voluntary transfers. Black students in the Benson area were allowed to make application to Bryan, Burke, Northwest, and South. White students in the Bryan, Burke, Northwest, and South areas were allowed to make choice to Benson, Central, North or Tech. No Students in the Benson area were allowed to apply at Central. Black enrollment was not to exceed 25% at Benson in an attempt to stabilize the racial makeup of the School. The years that followed the desegregation plan saw a decline in the black enrollment at Benson but an even steeper decline in white enrollment at the school. By 1986-87, the school was 67% white and had an enrollment of only 884 students in grades 10-12, its lowest enrollment in at least the last 50 years.

There are four major reasons for these demographic changes seen at Benson between 1970 and 1987. First, the end of the Baby Boom generation was causing declines in enrollment across the school district and the country in general. The district lost about 24% of high school student over this period while Benson declined by 61%. Second, boundary changes to Benson in the 1963 and 1971 moved the suburbanizing portion of Omaha and the school district to two newly built high schools, Burke and Northwest. Third, "White Flight" the result of many factors, pushed white families from core urban areas like Benson resulting in a decline in the white population. Finally, the desegregation plan that attempted to control the racial makeup of the Benson capped black enrollment but apparently failed to stem the flow of white students from the school.

In 1987-88, the 9th grade students from Monroe were transitioned to Benson as a part of the district wide movement of 9th grade students to High Schools. At this point, Black students in the Benson Home Attendance Area (HAA) could still apply to attend Bryan, Burke, and South and were now allowed to choose Central after 9th grade because Central did not have 9th grade. White non-black students in the Benson HAA could only apply to North and Central. Only non-black students were allowed to choose

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Benson from the all of the other high school attendance areas except for Central. Enrollment steadily increased for 15 years growing from 1,116 in 87-88 to 1,517 in 2001-02. A report from 1992 suggests that about 68% of all Benson HAA students attended Benson. In 1999-2000, about 57% of all Benson HAA students attended Benson. In 2000-01, the district instituted a Student Assignment Plan (SAP) in high schools to replace the voluntary desegregation plan in place since the 1976-77 school year. In general, this plan allowed Benson students to choose any high school but only receive transportation to South, Northwest, Burke and Bryan depending on what elementary attendance area the student resided in. By the 2002-03 school year, only about 50% of all Benson HAA students stayed at their home school and about 951 students were making choice to another high school. Students were generally choosing schools where they received transportation like North (22%) and Northwest (23%) but also Central (38%), where transportation was not provided.

By 2009-10, the option out trend, in terms of total students leaving Benson, had remained relatively stable but in conjunction with population declines in the HAA in general. In 09-10, only 39% of Benson's students stayed home but a similar number of students (1,010) chose other district high schools. Again, students were generally choosing schools where they received transportation like North (25%) and Northwest (14%) but also Central (38%), where transportation was not provided. In 2010-11, the district made changes to the student assignment plan to align to the new Learning Community. This new plan provided more transportation at the high school level essentially transporting every student making school choice unless they were a full pay lunch student applying to attend Burke, Bryan, or Northwest. In 2013-14, only about 35% of Benson's students stayed home but surprisingly almost the same number of students (1,007) chose other district high schools. The schools these students are choosing are slightly more diverse with Burke and South getting more students than in the past. However, Central (33%) and North (25%) still have the bulk of the outflow of students. This student loss is in conjunction with a declining HAA population that as of now sits at 1,548 students attending regular OPS high schools.