

PARENTS ADVISORY COMMITTEE USES GIS TO REDRAW SCHOOL ATTENDANCE BOUNDARIES



By Eugene Mueller



Changing student enrollment populations and the availability of public school funding lead school districts to reevaluate the use of school facilities and the boundaries that determine where resident children will attend school. The redrawing of boundary lines though is a highly sensitive issue that confronts school administrators and their boards since it involves the relocation of significant numbers of children. Recognizing this reality, school districts have sought to maximize community participation in the redistricting process in order to reach consensus on new boundary lines.

When residents in the Vista Unified School District (VUSD) in San Diego County, California approved a local elementary school facilities bond in the autumn of 2001, the problem of school overcrowding that had existed for many years could now be addressed with the acquisition and construction of four school sites to be completed over the next two years. The new schools would enable the district to transition from a multi-track school calendar to a conventional single-track calendar that would result in substantial savings in operational cost. The increased classroom capacity would necessitate redrawing school boundaries in order to evenly distribute school enrollment throughout the district and allow for efficient use of facilities.

While passage of the bond measure showed that parents supported school construction, it did not mean they supported unilateral boundary changes by the district. As Gail Ryan, Assistant Superintendent explained, "We have about 25,000 children in the district with parents who were willing to voice their opinions about how proposed changes would impact them personally." Therefore, the district knew that parental representatives from the different schools throughout the district needed to be directly involved in the redistricting process. Consequently, the district authorized the formation of a school boundary committee to determine how to best change the boundaries. With the facilitation of district administrators, the committee was comprised mostly of parents representing each of the district's elementary schools and the meetings were open to the public. Parents were notified through school newsletters about the work of the committee and contacted their school's committee representative to express specific concerns or ask questions. The committee met ten times between July and December of 2002.

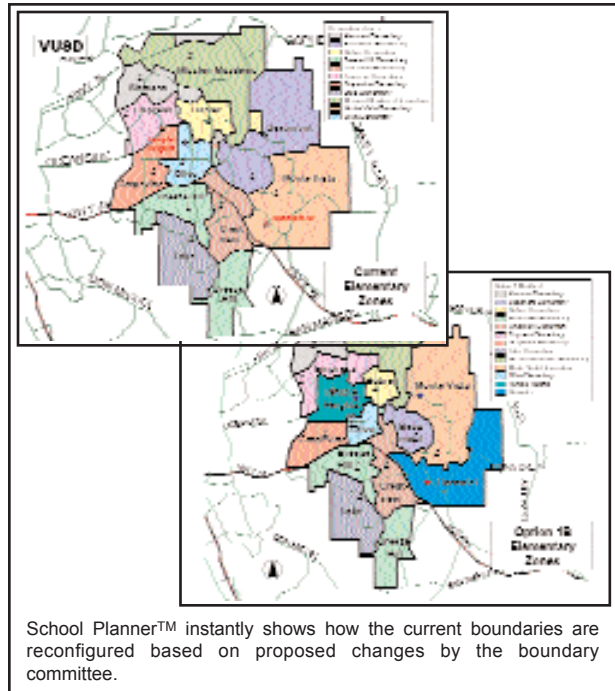
Community involvement in the redistricting process provided parents the opportunity to play an integral part in the creation of new boundaries. The difficulty was that parents via their representatives took on a task that is inherently complex even for the professional school facilities planner given that it requires the balancing of a range of objectives. Along with improving the quality of education for all the children, these objectives include devising boundaries that promote the creation of neighborhood schools, increase transportation efficiency, capture walk zones, relieve overcrowding, reflect ethnic balance, accommodate future growth, and address specific community concerns. If the boundary committee were to be truly effective, it needed technical support in order to be proficient in dealing with these objectives at a sophisticated level, in light of the fact that parents on the committee did not have any background in planning.

The committee found that help from The Omega Group, Inc., a San Diego, CA based GIS consultant with over ten years experience in school redistricting and facilities planning, and ESRI's 2002 Foundation Business Partner Award recipient. VUSD had worked with The Omega Group on previous redistricting projects and was a long time user of Omega's School Planner™ software application for enrollment analysis and facility planning. School Planner™ is a custom interface for ArcView GIS, a desktop software from ESRI. VUSD knew from using School Planner™ that it had the analytical tools needed by the committee and that it could produce reports and color-coded maps that would be readily understood by the parents on the committee. Based on the discussions of each committee meeting, the scenarios of different boundary configurations would be created by The Omega Group using School Planner™ and then presented to the committee at the next meeting through a slide presentation.

According to Assistant Supt. Ryan, "These presentations were indispensable and we would not have been able to operate as a committee without them."

The Omega Group initiated the analysis of boundary redrawing by providing two sample scenarios to demonstrate the capability of the School Planner™ software. The committee then began to request new scenarios for each meeting as it grappled with trying to reach a compromise among the objectives. With each new scenario, the committee saw that tradeoffs were inevitable and that not all of the objectives were simultaneously attainable. For instance, when trying to focus on creating neighborhood schools through uniform boundaries, the members discovered from School Planner™ that the percentage of students moved was very high.

Again, when trying to adjust for ethnicity, they saw this resulted in transportation difficulties. As Assistant Supt. Ryan explains, "The School Planner™ maps, reports and charts shown by slide presentation allowed the members to make the connection between what they imagined or perceived could be done to what was realistic."



The School Planner™ scenarios kept the committee focused on the objectives. As Ryan recalled, "The scenarios caused the members to ask numerous "what if" questions rather than to propose solutions." The committee members had gained confidence in their work to test the scenarios against the various objectives and proceeded to develop consensus by narrowing the scenarios down to one or two for recommendation to the board. The committee created a rating survey consisting of assigning points to each scenario based on how well it satisfied each of the objectives. From there, they agreed to eliminate scenarios for further consideration. This consensus was the natural outcome of members coming to understand together through GIS technology what could be achieved and what was not feasible. As Gail Ryan told the members, "The community sees that the committee tried hard to make the best choice and it was a group decision, and that the process was fair, detailed and rational."

The last presentation featuring School Planner™ made by The Omega Group was before the school board with all the representatives of the school boundary committee. In fact, Assistant Supt. Ryan noted that the attendance of the committee members was the first time a parent planning or advisory committee had appeared before the board along with district staff to explain its recommendation. However, the committee members had developed such an expertise that they were prepared to be held fully accountable. Indeed, prior to the board meeting, one parent committee member had even conducted her own presentation to the parents from the school she represented about the work of the committee. Her ability to do this illustrated the rapid learning that the members had undergone in their planning abilities gained from The Omega Group and School Planner™. Not surprisingly, the board made its decision without any objections from the community. The VUSD boundary committee had navigated a difficult path using GIS to an improvement in the use of school facilities and the quality of education for all of the children.

For more information on School Planner™, please contact The Omega Group, Inc.



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