

Opinion: The difficulties of enrolling a kid in school

By Joe Mathews

“Is this the line for the U2 tickets?” a neighbor asked me.

Nope. The line extending down the block was just another group of California parents forced to prove that we actually live where we’re trying to send our kids to school.



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With a new school year comes another fraught season of student enrollment. After years of hearing political rhetoric about the centrality of educational access to California’s civic life, I’ve been surprised to discover, as a father, all the official hurdles to putting your kid in public school.

The long line I was standing in represented just one step in the process of making sure my 6-year-old had a seat in first grade. Mind you, I wasn’t signing up for a charter school or any special program, but merely re-enrolling him in the same neighborhood school where he completed kindergarten in June.

To do that, I first had to complete the online “student verification” process of our small San Gabriel Valley school district. It took me an hour to provide contact and demographic info and review 17 legal documents, whose 54 pages covered privacy, complaint procedures, media access to

students, and my responsibility to help with homework and regulate my son's TV watching.

With online registration complete, I searched for paper documents that I had to present in person at the district office to show I lived in the district. I would need one document from each of three categories. The first included a deed of trust, closing escrowing papers, a lease (which had to have children's names), a property tax bill, or a mortgage payment receipt from the last month. The second category covered utility, cable or phone bills (all had to be within last month). A third category consisted of car registration, health insurance, bank statements, pay stubs, or tax returns.

I have covered gubernatorial candidates who didn't disclose this much. And there were caveats. No online bills or direct deposit pay records would be accepted.

The district offered hours on three August weekdays to show documents. Fortunately, I had taken off the week in question, knowing that I'd have to deal not only with my 6-year-old's enrollment, but also with hundreds of pages of other forms to cover child-care arrangements for my two younger sons.

While navigating school enrollment requirements is time-consuming and frustrating, figuring out whom to blame is even harder.

My district is no outlier; school districts around the state have similar rules. And given the dysfunction of California school finance, it's hard to blame local districts for making sure they don't allow non-residents to slip into their schools. The state has often sent IOUs instead of cash to districts, and currently restricts how much school districts can save for rainy days. Local districts, including mine, have convinced voters to raise parcel taxes to fill state funding gaps, and must assure taxpayers that only local families are benefiting.

Even so, the zeal to make sure we all live within the right district lines is a form of statewide madness. Despite recent reforms, California's educational system remains so centralized in Sacramento – funding, curriculum, and regulations come from there – that all 38 million of us live, effectively, in one statewide school district.

That makes it especially frustrating that, even as parents are required to produce so much data on their kids, the state shirks its responsibilities to collect and utilize student data.

Specifically, the state has been slow to build and fund its system for K-12 data; Gov. Jerry Brown even vetoed an effort to compile attendance data statewide with the goal of reducing truancy. More crucially, California has failed to follow other states in building databases to link individual data from preschool, community college, universities, and employment.

Brown has portrayed the collection of such data as a state imposition on local communities. But such a database provides the best chance scholars and policymakers to judge how the state is preparing tomorrow's workers, and help teachers identify ways to improve. A good database might even relieve school districts of some hassles of pressing parents for information each fall.

In line at the district office, I waited nearly an hour before reaching the room for residency verification. First, I produced a driver's license, then my documents at a second table. After a few minutes, I was told my child was enrolled.

But three days later, I got a robo-call from the district saying my child wasn't enrolled. No one could help me at the district office, so I banged on the locked elementary school door. An administrator let me in, checked her computer, and said everything was in order.

The robo-call had been just another glitch in a system that

doesn't make much sense at all.

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