

Controlled Choice: Cambridge, Massachusetts

Cambridge is a small, racially and socioeconomically diverse urban community outside of Boston, Massachusetts. During the 2010-11 academic year, the Cambridge Public School District (CPSD) had a total of 6,019 students enrolled in twelve traditional elementary schools, one high school, and two charter schools.^{viii}

In 1979, the CPSD became the first district in the nation to institute a policy of complete open enrollment, called the Controlled Choice Plan. The program was developed in response to pressure from the community to take steps to desegregate the district. CPSD was not yet under court order to desegregate but designed Controlled Choice as a preemptive move to integrate schools through voluntary parental choice rather than through the court-ordered busing that was presenting severe challenges in nearby Boston.^{ix}

Cambridge Public School District, 2010-11

K-12 Enrollment = 6,019
Number of Schools = 15
Elementary = 12
High School = 1
Charter Schools = 2
Student Demographics
White = 37%
African American = 33%
Hispanic = 14%
Asian = 11%
Other = 5%
Low SES = 44%
ELL = 27%

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education

Controlled Choice

Controlled Choice was introduced in three distinct stages. First, in 1979, parents were allowed to transfer their child from a “racially identifiable” school to another school in the district if the transfer would promote racial balance. In 1980, school neighborhood boundaries were redrawn to homogenize the ratio of minority to nonminority students assigned to each school. Finally, in 1981, school neighborhood

boundaries were removed completely and parents were required to register incoming students at a central location in the district. Parents were asked to list their top three school choices, and the district assigned students to schools based on parental preferences and the maintenance of racial balance.^x The plan was revised in 2001 to replace race with socioeconomic status (SES) as the primary factor in assigning students to schools, and to implement an improvement process for underperforming and under-chosen schools. Additionally, the plan provided a rationale behind each of the other diversity factors and criteria used to place students in schools.^{xi}

The shift to integrating by SES rather than race was proposed by Superintendent Bobbie D’Alessandro, in part because she was advised that the racially-based system would not withstand any legal challenges.^{xii} Further, there is support in the literature that integration by income is a more effective way to close the achievement gap than integration by race. Research indicates that schools with high concentrations of low-income students are more likely to have low parental involvement, high teacher turnover rates, and disruptive behavior problems, all hindering student achievement.^{xiii} In a 2005 study, researchers found that the SES of a school has as much impact on achievement as the SES of the individual student.^{xiv} Cambridge’s revised Controlled Choice policy aimed to redistribute low-income students in order to provide them with a more positive academic environment.

The Application Process

Parents of incoming students must register their children for school at the CPSD-run Family Resource Center (FRC). The FRC’s purpose is to guide families through the application and registration process by providing parents with information about schools in the district, arranging school visits and tours, and assisting with the application process. Parents can also access the CPSD and FRC websites for information, including the current Controlled Choice Policy, school profiles, and contact information for Parent Liaisons at each school.

A single application must be completed and submitted per student. For each child, parents may indicate three school choices. Because there are no longer

neighborhood schools in Cambridge, all students interested in attending traditional public schools must participate in Controlled Choice. Charter schools have separate application processes. Students who wish to enroll or transfer in the middle of the school year must visit the FRC to fill out appropriate forms and get information about the process. Registration cycles occur monthly throughout the year.

The Student Assignment Process

In addition to parental choice, the district considers several diversity factors and assignment preferences when placing students in schools. SES has been considered the primary diversity factor since September 2002. The district determines SES by free and reduced price lunch eligibility. The CPSD reported, "There are significant educational reasons for using SES in the student assignment process. For example, many of the conditions accompanying poverty, particularly extreme poverty, present significant challenges for educators in developing high levels of achievement for students that are impacted by these conditions in comparison to children for whom these conditions are not present."^{xv} The goal for the first school year of Controlled Choice (2002-03) was for each grade in each school to be within a range of plus or minus 15 percentage points of the district-wide percentage of low-SES students. In the second year the goal was within 10 percent, and in all following years, within 5 percent. However, as of the 2010-11 school year, the target percentage had been raised back up to a range of plus or minus 15 percent of the district average.^{xvi}

Siblings and proximity are the next two assignment preferences. When requested, students are assigned to the same school as their siblings and/or to one of the two schools closest to their home, as long as there is space and the assignment does not negatively affect the diversity at the school. The educational rationale for these assignment preferences is that parents are more likely to be involved if all of their children attend the same school, and if the school is close to their home.

There are also a number of diversity factors that are not actively used in every application cycle, but rather are monitored and applied as necessary. These include: race/ethnicity, special education status, English language learner status, and gender. The targeted percentage of students by race/ethnicity in each grade at each school is to be within 10

percentage points of the district-wide percentage. However, this is only used as a diversity factor if, after using other race-neutral factors, the applicant pool at a school is not racially balanced. The remaining factors are not currently used, but are monitored by the district and will be incorporated into the assignment process if disparities between schools begin to show.^{xvii}

The FRC administers all applications and determines school assignments. Data from 2010 showed that 90 percent of students reported attending one of their top three choices.^{xviii} Since 2000, mandatory assignments of students to schools not on their list of choices in the first round of registration have been reduced by half, to approximately 6 percent.^{xix} In the event that the district cannot accommodate any of the parents' choices, the FRC contacts the family to discuss their options. In this case, the parents may choose any school that the FRC has identified as having space, consistent with the identified diversity factors. Additionally, the student is placed on the waiting lists for all three of their school choices.

If a student is not assigned to one of the three choices indicated on the application and the parents feel the school assignment will cause a hardship, they may appeal the decision. To show a hardship, parents must show "that the child has extraordinary educational needs that cannot be met at the assigned school and can only be met at the requested school, or that requiring the child to attend the assigned school will subject the child to an unsafe learning environment."^{xx}

Other Considerations

Transportation to and from school is provided by the district. All kindergarten through sixth grade students who live more than one mile from school are eligible for transportation, as are all 7th and 8th grade students who live more than 1.5 miles from school. Additionally, students who must cross busy or unsafe streets in order to walk to school may take the school bus.^{xxi} Transportation costs have accounted for an increasing proportion of the CPSD budget, totaling 3.5 percent of the total budget in the 2008-09 school year and 4.3 percent in the 2011-12 school year.^{xxii}

In 2000, the CPSD undertook a thorough review of Controlled Choice. In particular, they studied how parents chose schools, whether there were over- and under-chosen schools, and what could be done to assist the schools which parents found less appealing.

As a result of this research, the district implemented an improvement plan in 2002.

According to the plan, the district identifies schools in need of improvement based on the following criteria: (a) schools that are rarely among the top choices of parents/guardians of incoming kindergarten students, (b) schools that have a consistently declining enrollment, and (c) schools that have a student enrollment below 300. Schools that meet one or more of these criteria are given the opportunity to propose the addition of new educational programs to make them more attractive to parents. They may also propose a merger with another school. The superintendent determines which types of educational programs may be implemented based on feedback from parent surveys. If approved by the superintendent, schools receive additional funding from the district for up to three years in order to execute their proposed program.^{xxiii}

In addition, the frequency with which each school is chosen by parents is used by the district as an indicator of the desirability of that school. That information is made available to the community in a yearly Controlled Choice Policy Report. Parents are encouraged by the CPSD and the FRC to make informed choices about where they send their children to school. The district recommends that parents tour schools before they apply, and the FRC provides a list of questions to keep in mind during school visits (i.e. “What is the philosophy of the program?” and “How do teachers manage their classrooms?”). Parents may also find information on academic achievement, as measured by standardized test scores at each school, on the CPSD website.

Impact of Controlled Choice

As Cambridge’s Controlled Choice Plan is the first of its kind, it has garnered a great deal of commentary over the years. The most recent comprehensive review of the program was a 2002 study by Edward Fiske. This study examined the effects of Controlled Choice on the district, both in terms of integration and achievement. (Unfortunately, this was published before the effects of the 2002-03 switch from race to SES as the primary diversity factor could be seen, so these results may not accurately reflect the current state of the CPSD.)

The first effect noted was an increase in enrollment in public schools during the 1980s. From 1978 to 1987,

the percentage of kindergarten-aged children in Cambridge enrolled in public schools rose from 78 percent to 89 percent, as fewer high-income white families opted for private schools.^{xxiv} Enrollment in grades K-8 peaked at 6,083 in 1994-95^{xxv} and while it declined for many years, recent increases in enrollment have the student population nearing that high again.

The plan was initially implemented to desegregate the schools, and to that end, it has been largely successful. In 2000-01, 40 percent of students enrolled in CPSD were white, and the proportions of white students in individual schools ranged from 24 to 50 percent. Only two schools were out of compliance. For minority students, at least twelve of the fifteen schools complied with the ten percent guideline in each case.^{xxvi} This was seen as a success, especially since before 1979, there were five schools with an almost entirely white enrollment, and six schools comprised mostly of minorities.^{xxvii} However, critics of Controlled Choice pointed out the lack of full compliance with current racial guidelines, and noted that a margin of plus or minus ten percent is still quite large. The initial margin was set at five percent, and expanded to ten percent over the years for reasons that are unclear. Recent data show there is slightly more variation in the percentage of white students at each school, reflecting the removal of race as a diversity factor in the assignment process since September 2002.^{xxviii}

In 2000-01, two years before the change in Controlled Choice SES policy, the distribution of low-SES students among schools was very unequal. District-wide, forty-eight percent of students qualified for free or reduced meals. However, the proportion of these students in each school varied from 19 to 79 percent. It was noted that three of the four “most desirable” schools had the lowest proportions of low-SES students, and three of the four “least desirable” schools had the highest proportions.^{xxix} These findings encouraged the revision of Controlled Choice policy, and low-SES students are now more equally distributed among Cambridge schools. The percentage of students eligible for free or reduced meals now ranges from 30.2 percent to 66.1 percent, and eleven of the thirteen currently operating schools are within 15 percentage points of the district average.^{xxx} However, only four schools are within the five-point margin initially described in the revised 2001 Controlled Choice Plan.

Controlled Choice was designed to integrate the school district, but it also aimed to improve school performance by creating market competition among individual schools. An early study found that the achievement gap between the highest- and lowest-performing schools had been significantly reduced after the implementation of Controlled Choice. The difference between the highest and lowest passing rates on an elementary basic skills exam dropped from 39.5 percentage points in 1981-82 to 13.1 percentage points in 1985-86. In 1986, CPSD changed their standardized testing procedures from a district-developed test to a state-developed test. The results from the new test showed that Cambridge elementary students performed lower than the Massachusetts average, but higher than students in similar urban districts in the state. The study concluded that achievement had improved in both lower and upper grade levels, the achievement gap between low- and high-performing schools in the district had been narrowed, and the CPSD, despite performing below average, was superior to similar urban districts.^{xxxii}

A more recent review of the district's achievement found mixed results. In line with the conclusion above, the 2002 Fiske review noted that Cambridge does "relatively well" compared to similar districts, but still had substantially lower scores on standardized exams than the rest of the state and country. However, in contrast to the earlier study, Fiske found that there were still significant achievement gaps between high-

and low-performing schools and groups of students. Among the elementary schools, there were wide disparities in the number of students achieving proficiency on the Stanford 9 reading test. These disparities were most pronounced in low-SES students. Further, results of the 2000 Stanford 9 test showed strong racial discrepancies. Sixty-seven percent of whites and 63 percent of Asians achieved proficiency on the exam, but only 28 percent of African Americans, 25 percent of Hispanics, and 21 percent of students of other races did so.^{xxxiii} These results imply that although Controlled Choice has succeeded in desegregating schools, integration has not had the desired academic effects on all students.

Additionally, some parents have found that the Controlled Choice system has not operated to their satisfaction. A recent meeting held by the Cambridge School Committee's task force found parents upset because they were unable to get into one of their top three schools or had difficulty communicating with the FRC. Additionally, one parent complained about the competition between schools, feeling that it creates a "them-and-us mentality." Task force members described the system as offering the "illusion of choice" with a "history of suffering" and attempting to understand it as "terrible, mind-boggling, overwhelming, stressful."^{xxxiii} The public meeting signified the beginnings of a controlled choice makeover that is still currently underway.