



Case Studies of School Choice and Open Enrollment in Four Cities

While New Orleans is at the vanguard of a number of public education innovations, it was not the first public school system to put into place an open enrollment policy. School districts in Cambridge, San Diego, and New York City, among others, have instituted district-wide open enrollment systems, mandatory and/or voluntary, for elementary and/or high school grades. The following case studies review the open enrollment policies and systems in New Orleans, Cambridge, San Diego, and New York City, examining how the systems operate and the impact they have on students and families.

New Orleans' policy of open enrollment for public schools was a necessity as the city rebuilt itself after Hurricane Katrina. Because of the patchwork nature of both the flood damage and the return of residents to their neighborhoods, attendance zones were eliminated. The system of citywide open enrollment continues to exist today. Orleans Parish students can apply to attend any public school, regardless of where in New Orleans the students live.

The effectiveness and efficiency of open enrollment that defines school choice in New Orleans is complicated by the multi-district governing model that exists. Public school governance in New Orleans includes the locally elected Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), the state-run Recovery School District (RSD), and over 40 different charter school operators. In this decentralized system, no single entity is responsible for managing the enrollment process, assigning students to schools, managing lotteries and waitlists, or providing information to parents. As a result, there is a lack of transparency, equitable access, and oversight.

The effectiveness of open enrollment in New Orleans should be assessed and adjusted on the basis of equity for students and accountability for schools. National

education policy think tank Education Sector writes about New Orleans' enrollment system:

...schools are trusted to recruit and enroll students independently, while parents are left to navigate the choice process alone, circumstances that increase the likelihood of only the most active and knowledgeable parents getting their child placed in one of their top choice schools. Such conditions resemble Boston and New York before they changed their choice matching systems. Importantly, the replication of the New York and Boston choice models in other cities would strengthen public education's relationship with a constituency that gets short shrift in policy debates – parents.ⁱ

In each open enrollment system examined, it is apparent that parents, students, and school counselors need support in navigating a complex system. Additionally, even sophisticated systems of matching students with schools leave some students without their preferred assignment. In Cambridge, San Diego, and New York City, between 10 to 28 percent of students each year are not assigned to one of their top choice schools. Finally, the existence of neighborhood schools can impact the extent to which parents and students exercise their choice to go elsewhere. In San Diego where open enrollment program is voluntary, students are assigned to a neighborhood school unless they opt-in to a choice program. A 2006 study found that about 28 percent of students attended a choice school, the majority of whom were black, Asian, or Hispanic.

As stakeholders in New Orleans discuss modifications to the open enrollment policies currently in place, including centralizing an enrollment process, it is important to examine and learn from the successes and failures of the districts that have already instituted these systems. These case studies highlight some important lessons for education stakeholders in New Orleans to consider.



School Choice and Open Enrollment: New Orleans, Louisiana

The public school system in New Orleans changed dramatically following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Today public schools in New Orleans are governed by a complicated multi-district model. In the 2010-11 school year, the locally elected Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) had jurisdiction over 16 schools: five direct-run and 11 charter schools. The state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) took over the majority of schools in the city after Katrina and placed them under the jurisdiction of the Recovery School District (RSD). In 2010-11, the RSD oversaw 69 schools: 23 direct-run and 46 charter schools. In addition, there were three charter schools authorized by and under the jurisdiction of BESE. During the 2010-11 school year public schools in New Orleans enrolled 39,877 students; 71 percent of students were enrolled in a charter school.

Following Katrina, given the nature of both the flood damage and the sporadic return of residents to their neighborhoods following the storm, public schools in New Orleans abolished their attendance zones, creating a system of citywide school choice. In addition, the majority of schools opened as charter schools. Because Louisiana's charter law explicitly states that students cannot be required by their local school district or the state to enroll in a charter school, with few exceptions,ⁱⁱ charter schools are schools of choice. As a result, all public schools, both charter and direct-run, became citywide access schools.

Public Schools in New Orleans, 2010-11

K-12 Enrollment = 39,877
Number of Schools = 88
 District-run = 28
 Charter Schools = 60
Students in charter schools = 71%
Student Demographics
 White = 6%
 African American = 89%
 Hispanic = 3%
 Asian = 2%
 Other = 1%
 Low SES = 84%

Source: Louisiana Department of Education

School Choice and Open Enrollment

All public schools in New Orleans are citywide access schools today. Every RSD public school, charter or direct-run, can be attended by any Orleans Parish student, regardless of where in New Orleans they live, provided the school has capacity. Some OPSB direct-run schools and OPSB charter schools have additional admission requirements, but they are also available to qualifying students on a citywide basis. BESE charters can enroll students from anywhere in the state and can also have admissions requirements.

The Application Process

The public school application process in New Orleans varies by school and school type. Although state laws and BESE policies guide the process under New Orleans' system of citywide choice, much is also left up to school or district discretion. RSD charter schools are required by BESE policy to comply with any unified application period set by the RSD, as approved by BESE. All RSD direct-run and charter schools, which include the majority (69 of 88 in 2010-11) of public schools in New Orleans, share the same application period.

Prior to October 2011, BESE policy required all other charter schools (those not under the RSD) to establish their own designated student application period between one and three months long, beginning no sooner than January 1st. In October 2011, BESE approved changes to policies for charter school recruitment and enrollment. The amended policy strikes the language requiring the application period to begin no sooner than January 1st.

According to the RSD's website, applications to RSD direct-run and charter schools for the 2011-12 school year were due April 11, 2011. Applications to the five OPSB direct-run schools were due December 17, 2010. The 11 OPSB charter schools each established their own deadlines which ranged from December to April. It is unclear why some OPSB charter school application deadlines were before the January 1st deadline, as stipulated by BESE policy during that school year.

All RSD charter and direct-run schools and OPSB direct-run schools have, since February 2008, opted to use a common application, though there is no law or

policy that requires it. Though many schools have chosen to use this common application, some schools require additional materials. OPSB charter schools, many of which are high-performing schools with selective admissions policies, use their own applications.

Prior to the October 2011 BESE policy revisions, parents were required to submit a separate application for each RSD school, direct-run and charter, and each OPSB charter school. A single application in which parents could check boxes to apply to multiple schools was available for OPSB direct-run schools only. Parents submitted completed applications to the appropriate district central office (OPSB or RSD) or directly to the individual schools during the times specified.

The October 2011 revisions to BESE policy require all RSD direct-run and charter schools to participate in a unified enrollment system established by the RSD. The new policy also permits other schools located in Orleans Parish to participate in the unified enrollment system upon approval of their governing boards: OPSB for direct-run schools and the charter board for charter schools. The new unified enrollment system will require parents to submit one application for all schools participating in the system; for the first time, parents will select and rank schools by order of preference.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Student Assignment Process

Until the implementation of the new centralized system for the 2011-12 school year, student assignment took place at the individual school level and the school districts (OPSB and RSD) were not directly involved in the process. Individual schools were responsible for offering admission to students from their pool of applicants. Schools waited until the end of the application period to offer admission to students. All schools were required to admit every student that met admissions requirements so long as there was sufficient capacity.

All children who are residents of New Orleans are guaranteed a place in a public school in the city, and charter schools in particular are required to enroll all eligible applicants unless the total number exceeds the capacity of a program, class, grade level, or school. Any student who submits an application on time, meets residency and admissions requirements is eligible to enroll in a charter school. Selective

residency and admissions requirements are only permissible at OPSB and BESE charter schools, which make up less than 20 percent of all public schools in New Orleans.

Lotteries and Waitlists

All public schools in New Orleans, regardless of type or district, must have a process in place should the total number of applicants exceed the school's capacity for that program, class, or grade level. Capacity at each school is determined by the school board or charter authorizer (either the OPSB or BESE), and charter law specifies that charter schools cannot enroll more than 120 percent of the total number of students approved in their charter.

BESE policy on charter school enrollment specifies guidelines for the enrollment, lottery, and waitlist process. The October 2011 policy changes make these guidelines applicable only to charter schools that are not participating in the RSD's unified enrollment system in New Orleans. The RSD will be responsible for determining student assignments under the new system.

OPSB and BESE charter schools that choose not to participate in the RSD's new unified enrollment system are subject to BESE policy regarding the enrollment, lottery, and waitlist process. The policy stipulates that if a charter school receives fewer eligible applicants than maximum capacity, it should admit all students and may then continue to accept applications and admit eligible students in the order in which the applications are received until maximum capacity is reached. If the number of eligible applicants exceeds the capacity of a program, a grade level, or the school, applicants must be admitted based on an admissions lottery from among the total number of eligible applicants. The lottery will select students with the intention that the school will reach its maximum capacity, and then to determine the order of the waitlist.

Applicants must be placed on the waitlist in the order in which they were selected in the charter school's lottery or in the order in which they applied if the application was submitted following the school's application deadline. When there is an opening, selection must begin at the top of the waitlist. The waitlist must be maintained for the entire school year, and anyone who is admitted to the school must be

from the waitlist until all students from the waitlist have been offered the chance to enroll.

According to the BESE policy as amended in October 2011, direct-run and charter schools that participate in the RSD's unified enrollment system are subject to the enrollment policies and procedures established by the RSD. The RSD may conduct one or more central lotteries to enroll students at participating schools, and may enroll students requesting transfers or entering the public school system at any time. Additionally, the RSD will work with the schools to determine the number of students assigned to each grade level.

Charter schools are permitted by BESE policy to create a weighted lottery in order to ensure they are serving at-risk students. Additionally, certain students may be exempt from a lottery:

- Students already enrolled are exempt from the lottery and maintain enrollment following the charter school's application period.
- Siblings of current students are exempt from the lottery and are automatically enrolled following the charter school's application period.
- When a district-run school converts to a charter school, students who want to stay in the newly converted charter school are exempt from the lottery and will be automatically admitted following the charter school's application period.
- When an RSD charter school opens in a building formerly occupied by a pre-existing public school, students who attended school in that building may be exempt from a lottery and may be automatically admitted following the charter school's application period, if authorized in the school's charter.

Charter schools outline their specific enrollment and admissions procedures, including how they will communicate with parents and potential applicants, in their charter applications. The RSD and the OPSB each set a timeline by which schools will notify parents of their students' acceptance or non-acceptance, as well as a deadline by which parents must accept admission. During the application period for the 201-12 school year, RSD charter and direct-run schools were permitted to begin contacting parents on April 30, 2011 and were required to notify all parents of acceptance or non-acceptance by May 6, 2011. Parents were then asked to choose a school and to enroll by May 30, 2011. There has not been a

formal mechanism for parents to notify schools that were not chosen. OPSB direct-run schools issued letters of acceptance or non-acceptance by April 15, 2011 and parents were required to accept admission by April 21, 2011. OPSB charter schools each set their own timeline.

Other Considerations

No public school can exclude students based on race, religion, gender, ethnicity, national origin, intelligence level as ascertained by an intelligence quotient examination, or identification as a child with an exceptionality. However, pursuant to Louisiana's charter law, OPSB and BESE charter schools may have admission requirements consistent with the school's role, scope, and mission. Examples of admissions requirements at these schools include: prior grades (GPA); attendance; standardized test scores; grade-level readiness assessments; foreign language proficiency; artistic talent; parental involvement; student's home address.^{iv} RSD charter schools cannot have selective admissions requirements.

Additionally, Louisiana's charter law specifies different requirements for the different types of charter schools regarding geographic attendance boundaries. All OPSB and RSD charter schools can enroll students from anywhere in the district, while BESE charter schools can enroll students from anywhere in the state. Both OPSB and BESE charter schools can set more narrow attendance boundaries as well, if allowed for in the school's charter.

RSD charter schools have not had geographic attendance zones through the 2011-12 school year. Legislation and subsequent BESE policy approved in April 2011 allowed RSD charter schools to preference students from a neighborhood zone; no school requested to do so by the deadline.^v At that time, BESE stated that charter schools would be ineligible to receive federal start-up funding in the first three years of operations if they implemented geographic boundaries.^{vi} According to the October 2011 revisions to BESE policy, the RSD may grant or assign preference in its unified enrollment process to students residing in geographic boundaries immediately surrounding each school, as determined by the RSD.

Finally, BESE policy and Louisiana's charter law provide guidelines for an at-risk student population

that must be maintained at charter schools depending on their type and whether or not they are conversions. Except for RSD charter schools, charter schools must maintain an at-risk student population percentage that is equal to the percentage of students eligible for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program in: (a) the district in which the school is located; (b) the average of districts from which students served by the charter school reside (BESE charter schools only); or (c) the school prior to conversion (BESE and OPSB conversions).

Impact of School Choice and Open Enrollment

While the citywide choice system has increased the number of options for parents and students, it has also created a more complex application and enrollment process. Public schools in New Orleans lack a unified application or enrollment process. In addition, there is no single entity or organization with the power to ensure all schools are following their stated enrollment policies, state law, or BESE policies fairly. The existence of multiple school operators and governing bodies with varying enrollment and admissions processes, some more stringent or complicated than others, can make the process of selecting and enrolling in a school difficult.

Furthermore, there is no formal official entity tasked with disseminating information on all public schools to parents, which has made it particularly difficult for parents of students with special needs to find appropriate services within the public school system.

Citywide access to all schools and the absence of neighborhood catchment zones has financial implications for schools as well. One of the most significant is the cost of transportation, with bus routes often spanning the boundaries of the entire city. A recent study found that only 13 percent of students attended school in their neighborhood in the 2010-11 school year.^{vii} Busing students from areas across the city has led to a vast increase in the cost of transportation overall, from less than four percent before Hurricane Katrina to approximately seven percent of expenditures in recent years. Indeed, some schools reported spending as much as 13 percent of total expenditures on transportation in 2009-10.

The problems with the current mix of policies and processes have been recognized by the RSD and the OPSB. The RSD is in the process of developing a unified system for application and enrollment for all of its direct-run and charter schools. Revisions approved in October 2011 to BESE policy allow the RSD to create a unified enrollment system and for participating schools to be required to grant preference in enrollment based on neighborhood geographic boundaries. Striking the right balance between citywide choice and neighborhood preferences could be logistically difficult, but a good balance could better optimize parent and student preferences while saving schools money on transportation.

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.

Voluntary Choice: San Diego, California

The San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) is the second largest district in California, and eighth largest urban district in the United States, with 131,541 students enrolled in pre-K through grade 12. The district encompasses 118 elementary schools, 24 middle schools, 28 high schools, and 45 charter schools.^{xxxiv}

San Diego offers a voluntary choice program. Students in this district are still assigned neighborhood schools, but they may apply to alternative schools outside of their residence zones through the open enrollment program. SDUSD developed this school choice program in compliance with California State's bill AB 1114, *School Districts: Intra-district Attendance* in July 1993, which required public school districts to adopt rules and regulations establishing a policy of open enrollment. The intent of this legislation was to give low-achieving and low-income students the opportunity to attend schools outside of their residence zones.

San Diego Unified School District, 2010-11

K-12 Enrollment = 131,541
Number of Schools = 215
Elementary = 118
Middle = 24
High = 28
Charter Schools = 45
Student Demographics
White = 24%
African American = 12%
Hispanic = 46%
Other = 18%
Low SES = 59%

Source: San Diego Unified School District

Voluntary Choice

Public school students in San Diego have numerous enrollment options in addition to intra-district open enrollment. The district also offers thematic programs at magnet schools, the Voluntary Enrollment Exchange Program (VEEP) for low-income student transfers, charter schools, the Program Improvement School Choice (PISC) as mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) as well as the ability to apply to

any school in the district with availability under the School Choice/Open Enrollment Act. Open enrollment is considered the lowest-priority choice mechanism by SDUSD, and operates on a lottery system to fill vacancies left after all of the other enrollment options have placed students. Charter schools are not subject to the enrollment process used for district-operated schools, though they are authorized by the local school board.

The Application Process

Parents interested in participating in the school choice process fill out one application per child regardless of which enrollment option they are interested in, and may indicate up to five school choices. Applications are due by February 15. Beginning in November 2011, all applications must be submitted online.

In order to provide parents with information to make informed decisions about choice, the district publishes the Enrollment Options Catalog and distributes it to parents in mid-November. The catalog contains information on all enrollment options offered, as well as school feeder patterns and a school choice application. The SDUSD holds enrollment fairs in January, giving parents the opportunity to research school options before the February 15th application deadline. Further, the district offers a *Facts for Parents* brochure with enrollment information, which is available in six languages. They also publish a brochure called *Benefits of Attending your Neighborhood School*, which highlights benefits including first priority enrollment, community ownership of the school, convenience, and parent volunteer opportunities.

The Assignment Process

Applications are processed into the highest possible priority program (Magnet, PISC, VEEP, open enrollment) for each of the five selected schools. Open enrollment applications at each school are given a random number by grade level. Then priority is applied for continuity and siblings. Applicants may also be given priority if they qualify for the Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program, or if they want to take a special high school course not offered at their neighborhood school. A lottery is then held to fill the vacant slots at each grade level, and winning

students receive an offer for one alternative option other than their neighborhood school. Filling out a school choice application does not guarantee that students will be offered an alternative placement, as space is often limited.^{xxxv} However, 72 percent of students that applied by the February 15, 2011 deadline received their first choice school selection.^{xxxvi}

After the February 15th deadline, applications for school choice are no longer accepted and there are no mid-year transfers to schools other than a student's neighborhood school. The SDUSD encourages students to remain in their choice school for the entire school year. A student may return to their neighborhood school within the first four weeks of the school year. After that time, if a student wishes to return to their neighborhood school must complete a transfer form and be subject to approval by the school's administrator.

Other Considerations

District-provided transportation availability varies according to the type of choice program a student is enrolled through. Open Enrollment/School Choice students are not provided with transportation. Bus transportation is not guaranteed for magnet, PISC or VEEP students. Those students may be subject to fees for transportation, a minimum ridership guarantee, or must reside a certain distance from the school to be eligible for transportation.^{xxxvii}

Anecdotally, it seems that there is discontent among parents with the open enrollment system. Although applications are due February 15th for the following school year, parents may not find out if their student has been selected in the lottery until after school has already begun. A local newspaper article described the lottery as "a complicated process that lasts 10 days into the school year, a waiting period that is agonizing for families."^{xxxviii} Another drawback to open enrollment is that busing is not provided to students attending non-neighborhood schools, and parents are not reimbursed for transportation costs, potentially restricting choice to those with greater resources.

Impact of Voluntary Choice

The Public Policy Institute of California conducted a study on School Choice in San Diego, published in 2006. They focused on three issues: the decision to leave the local neighborhood school, the effects on integration, and the effects on achievement for those

who switch schools.^{xxxix} The study reported that 28 percent of SDUSD students attended a choice school, including about seven percent who used open enrollment as their choice mechanism. Of eligible students, 2.8 percent of elementary students applied for open enrollment each year, as did 3.1 percent of middle school students and 3.5 percent of high school students.^{xl} In general, black, Asian, and Hispanic students were more likely than white students to apply to choice schools, but black students were the only group significantly more likely to use open enrollment as their choice mechanism.^{xli}

As San Diego's open enrollment program is voluntary, students are assigned to a neighborhood school unless they opt-in to a choice program. There are numerous factors that contribute to the choice to leave a neighborhood school for a choice school. Students whose parents are educated beyond high school were more likely to apply to choice schools, but the magnitude of the difference was small. As noted above, black students were more likely than white students to apply to a choice school through open enrollment. This may indicate that black families were less satisfied with their neighborhood schools. The Public Policy Institute report suggests that white families in San Diego may have more financial freedom than black families, and therefore can make their school choices by choosing where to live.^{xlii}

An often-cited argument for school choice is that it improves achievement in the district by creating competition among schools for students. This argument rests on the assumption that students will choose schools based on performance. In San Diego, there is no overwhelming evidence that this is the case. Among elementary and middle school students, there was no statistically significant data showing that students were leaving low-performing schools to apply to higher-performing schools. However, there was some evidence of such a pattern among high school students, indicating that academic performance may be a more important factor to older students and their parents when selecting a school.^{xliii}

In terms of integration outcomes, the Public Policy Institute study found that all choice applicants applied to schools with a higher percentage of white students than their local school. They reported, "integration caused by nonwhites applying to choice schools with more white students is occurring, but this pattern is somewhat offset by whites who are also choosing to

apply to schools with more white students.” However, because nonwhite students apply in greater numbers, the overall effect is one of increasing integration.

Among the choice mechanisms available to SDUSD students, open enrollment does the least to improve integration outcomes. Although California’s Proposition 209 prohibited the use of race in admissions decisions, the Public Policy Institute study notes that both VEEP and magnet programs still “have features intended to give priority to exchanges between groups of schools that should increase integration along racial/ethnic and socioeconomic lines.” Open enrollment does not give priority for any racial or socioeconomic factors. It is also the only choice mechanism that does not provide transportation, which may discourage participation among disadvantaged students.^{xliv}

Improved student achievement is another goal of school choice programs. The PPIC reports “Overall, lottery winners and lottery losers typically have no significant differences in math or reading achievement one, two, or three years after the lottery takes

place.”^{xlv} On the whole, open enrollment in San Diego has led to minor improvements in terms of district integration, but has not been effective at improving student achievement.

A 2010 study on the integration effects of school choice in San Diego made similar conclusions. Students use choice programs to attend schools with more advantaged peers, more white students, and higher test-score performers.^{xlvi} For this reason, when non-disadvantaged students use school choice programs, segregation increases. Of magnet schools, VEEP, and open enrollment, only open enrollment segregates the district further. The researchers attempted to use information on expenditures to promote integration at the district to estimate the social costs of these segregating effects as measured only by race/ethnicity. Their estimate ranged from a conservative \$387,000 to a high of \$10.5 million. They conclude that the open enrollment program may actually undo some of the integration accomplished by busing programs like VEEP, making its true social cost un-measurable.

Mandatory High School Choice: New York City, New York

The New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE), part of city government, operates the largest school district in the country with about 1,600 schools and 1.1 million students. There are 400 high schools housing 600 different programs.^{xlvii} In 2010-11, 74 percent of students in NYC public schools (excluding charter schools) were eligible for free or reduced price lunch.^{xlviii}

New York City public schools have a history of school choice options at the high school level. Specialized high schools were first opened in 1904, a city-wide transfer policy was instituted in 1963, and in 1998, the first charter schools were opened. This is in addition to career magnet high schools, small schools, and experiments with voucher programs in the 1990s.^{xlix} These programs, however, were all voluntary. Since 2004, the NYC DOE has required all 8th graders to participate in a system of high school choice.¹

New York City Department of Education, 2010-2011

K-12 Enrollment = 1.1 million
Number of Schools = 1,600
 High School = 400
 HS Programs = 600
Student Demographics
 White = 15%
 African American = 29%
 Hispanic = 40%
 Asian = 16%
 Low SES = 74% (excludes charter schools)

Source: New York State Department of Education

Mandatory High School Choice

There are five types of high schools. The types of high schools include career and technical education schools, charter schools, small learning communities, small schools, specialized high schools, and transfer schools (for students who have previously dropped out or fallen behind.) All high schools, including charter schools, must participate in this centralized enrollment process.

There are seven different admissions methods varying according to the type of evaluation given to the student applicant. Priority admission for siblings is

available only at some charter schools. Admission methods include:

- Auditions – A student is required to demonstrate proficiency in a performing or visual art.
- Educational Option – These programs are intended to attract a wide range of student performance. Half of students are selected randomly and half are selected based on their standardized test scores.
- Limited Unscreened – Priority is given to students that express interest by attending an information session or open house.
- Screened – Student are ranked according to test and report card grades, attendance, and other factors such as interviews or essays.
- Test – Eligibility is determined solely by a student's score on the Specialized High Schools Admissions Test.
- Unscreened – Students are selected randomly to attend these programs.
- Zoned – Students that live in the geographic zones area of the high school are given priority in admissions.

Assignment decisions are made using a formula or algorithm similar to that which is used to match medical residents to hospitals.ⁱⁱ The matching system for NYC high schools, developed in 2003, was designed to address three major concerns: stability, efficiency, and equitable.

A lack of stability in the old system gave schools the incentive to withhold positions to fill later. Also, it was important that the system be efficient for students. The previous system was considered inefficient, where up to 45 percent of students were rejected by all of their choices and were assigned to a neighborhood school. Lastly, it was critical that the gaming that occurred under the old system be eliminated.ⁱⁱⁱ Prior to 2004, schools were allowed to see how students ranked them, which could potentially work against students if a school took into account how it was ranked compared to its competitor schools. The system put into place when choice became mandatory in 2004 addressed these concerns in its design.

The Application Process

Every incoming freshman, as well as any 9th graders who wishes to transfer schools for 10th grade, must fill out an application in the early fall of their 8th or 9th grade year and return it to their school's guidance counselor by the early December deadline. The NYC DOE advises that students begin to think about their high school choices in the 6th grade. Students are able to select and rank up to 12 programs from the High School Directory they receive at the end of 7th grade. Additionally, each school ranks the applicants according to the order in which they would admit those students, without seeing where the applicants have ranked them.^{lviii}

The Assignment Process

Three admissions rounds are held each year after the application deadline of early December. In the first round, all students are included and an attempt is made to match each student with one of their high schools of choice. If a match cannot be made by the algorithm in the first round, students are allowed to select 12 more schools in the supplementary round and another attempt at matching is made. After this round, every student will have received a high school match. Lastly, parents may appeal the final match through a process instigated with their child's guidance counselor.^{liv} The appeals process can last through the end of June.^{lv}

Mid-year transfers (and, seemingly, transfers after the 10th grade) are only allowed in cases where the student has been injured in a fight documented by a police report, has a doctor's note stating that their health is threatened in some way, or has a commute of more than 90 minutes, per NYC DOE policy. Principals cannot admit a student mid-year and all transfers must be routed through and approved by the central office. There are no waiting lists for any high schools.^{lvi}

Other Considerations

Like any school choice model, to fully take advantage of the NYC DOE system requires that a student have a parent that is engaged, available, and able to read and understand key documents to assist in the process of choosing and ranking schools. Even parents who were involved in the process found it "overwhelming, stressful, or confusing," according to a 2009 study conducted by the Center for New York City Affairs at the New School.^{lvii}

In addition, feelings of being overwhelmed were echoed by the middle school guidance counselors interviewed by researchers in 2009. Middle school guidance counselors reported that they had been required to handle up to 300 to 400 student applications. They professed having little time to adequately review the applications.^{lviii} Researchers recorded that guidance counselors felt ill-equipped to advise parents; one said that they know no more about high schools than what is published in the annual guide. Most problematically, however, was guidance counselors' belief that there is a lack of good options for average or low achieving students. One counselor said, "In Manhattan, there are only a handful of schools [for average or below-average students] that I would send my own children to. The rest, you take your chances."^{lix}

Impact of Mandatory High School Choice

In 2011, 83 percent of students were matched to one of their top five choices and an additional seven percent were matched to other schools on their list. About 10 percent of the city's 8th graders did not receive admission to any of their choices in the initial round. They were given an additional two weeks to select and apply to 12 different schools that still had remaining spots. There has been a small but steady increase in the number of students who are not matched with any of the schools on their lists.^{lx}

Part of the high school choice strategy has been to identify under-chosen and under-performing schools and to target these for closure. Through 2009, officials closed more than 20 large, poorly-performing comprehensive high schools and introduced a number of new smaller high schools and programs. The competition for students is expected to encourage high school principals and staff to make themselves more attractive to students by increasing their course offerings or instituting specialized programs.^{lxi} However, the Center for New York City Affairs study found that the introduction of these new schools and the closure of the larger schools has led to overcrowding and declining attendance and graduation rates at some of the remaining large high schools.^{lxii}

That same study, conducted in 2009, focused on the implementation of both school choice and the small schools movement in NYC high schools.^{lxiii} The review of the choice system was based on 165 interviews and identified elements of the design and execution of the

system that appeared flawed. The study asserts that the NYC DOE did not have a formal mechanism for assigning students with special needs to schools that had the capacity to serve them. A survey conducted by the DOE found that 35 percent of principals that responded said they did not have the special education services in their schools to meet their students' needs.^{lxiv}

The 2009 study also found fault with the policies for student transfers and assigning latecomers to schools. The policy of denying transfers to students without a doctor's note, police report, or 90 minute commute, they claim, had the effect of trapping students in poor-performing schools, contrary to the stated purpose of school choice. Researchers found anecdotal evidence through their interviews that troubled students, those at risk of dropping out, and students with special medical accommodations were denied transfers by the NTC DOE, or experienced significant difficulty in obtaining them, even in cases where the principal of the new school welcomed the student.^{lxv}

Overall, however, the 2009 study found an increase in positive academic outcomes and achievement after the introduction of mandatory high school choice. The graduation rate climbed from 41 percent in 2004 to 56 percent in 2008. Additionally, the achievement gap between white and African-American and white and Latino students narrowed over the same four years.^{lxvi}

A 2011 study by researchers at New York and Columbia Universities analyzed four years of student-level administrative data, from 2004 to 2008, to gain insight about who is participating, how students are ranking schools, and where students are placed, and how these answers vary according to race, poverty, and other student characteristics.^{lxvii} They found that about 21 percent of 8th graders rank 12 schools while 7 percent rank only one. However, 82 percent of the students listing one school were matched to that

school. This is probably because the students were applying to their zoned school or to continue to 9th grade at their current school. The study also found that economically and academically disadvantaged students tended to rank more schools.

In May 2011, the New York Times in an article titled "Lost in the School Choice Maze," cited the above study, analyzes the choice process for students who participated in the supplemental round. A department spokesperson quoted in the article said it was unclear why so many students went unmatched, but that it could be a combination of factors such as, "listing too few choices, overconfidence at reaching the choices for which they might not have qualified, the information available based on their record." Parents quoted in the piece, titled "Lost in the School Choice Maze," described the difficulty of navigating the process. The problem, summed up by one expert, is that there are simply not enough "good" schools for the average student. Even students with good grades, high test scores, and reasonable school selections went unmatched, a problem also found by researchers at the Center for New York City Affairs.^{lxviii}

Students generally tended to rank high schools that had student bodies similar to their own, academically as well as according to race and socioeconomic status. While they often ranked more advantaged schools as their first choice, they were most likely to be placed in schools that looked similar to their middle school. Students with low academic achievement were more likely to rank schools with poor academic outcomes and largely low-income student bodies. Interestingly, white students and English language learners were more likely to rank the school closest to their home as first on their lists. The study concludes that school choice has become more equitable and transparent under the system instituted in 2004, but that transparency has not reduced its complexity.^{lxix}

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