

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 308 255

UD 026 800

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 TITLE Some Effects of Voluntary Transfer on Predominantly  
 Minority Sending Schools.  
 PUB DATE 89  
 NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the  
 American Educational Research Association (San  
 Francisco, CA, March, 1989).  
 PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports -  
 Research/Technical (143)  
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
 DESCRIPTORS \*Academic Achievement; \*Administrator Attitudes;  
 \*Desegregation Effects; Elementary Education;  
 Elementary School Students; Minority Group Children;  
 Principals; \*School Choice; \*Sex Differences;  
 \*Transfer Students; Urban Areas; Urban Schools  
 IDENTIFIERS \*Illinois (Chicago)

## ABSTRACT

The voluntary transfer policy that is part of the desegregation plan of the Chicago (Illinois) public schools appears to have negative effects on the "sending" schools that students elect to leave. Fourteen sending schools were selected for study from a population of 105 low-achieving, low-income, predominantly minority neighborhood elementary schools that participate in an effective schools project designed to improve achievement levels. Eleven of the schools are predominantly black; three are predominantly Hispanic. Data on the number and gender of the students who participated in voluntary transfer programs instead of attending the 14 schools were obtained from the school system's computer database. These students' individual scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) were compared to the school medians of the sending schools. Each sending school principal was also interviewed concerning his/her perceptions of the program. Summary findings included the following: (1) about 4.9 percent of the total enrollment of the sending schools took advantage of the transfer policy; (2) the majority (56 percent) of the transfer students were female; (3) most of the transfer students scored significantly higher on the ITBS than those who remained in the sending schools; (4) the majority of principals felt that the transfer program created a two-tiered system that engendered unfavorable comparisons between neighborhood schools and special schools and had a negative effect on teacher morale. A list of five references is appended. (FMW)

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Some Effects of Voluntary Transfer on  
Predominantly Minority Sending Schools

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The purpose of this study is to determine the effects of a voluntary transfer policy in the Chicago Public Schools on the "sending" schools that students elect to leave. Voluntary transfer is often employed as a desegregative technique, allowing minority students from predominantly minority schools to transfer to predominantly white schools, and white students from predominantly white schools to transfer to predominantly minority schools. Voluntary transfer is also used by many school systems to improve education by allowing parents choice to select schools and thereby foster competition among them (Fiske, 1988). To date, the research on this topic has focused on how voluntary transfer used for desegregation purposes affects the students who transfer and the schools to which they transfer.

The results of this research have been equivocal, with many studies showing positive achievement results and others finding negative or no effects. One important variable in the research is the age at which students enter a desegregated school (Crain, Mahard, and Narot, 1982), with more positive effects found when students enter a desegregated school at a younger age. Studies of the long-term effects of school desegregation have found more positive results. Braddock, Crain, and McPartland (1984) discuss several studies that show that minority students who attended integrated schools are more likely to participate in integrated environments as adults.

The limited research on desegregation and voluntary transfer in Chicago has also focused on achievement effects on the voluntary transfer students. In an early study of a small pilot program, Guskey, Nordstrom, and Wick (1980) reported that voluntary transfer students had significantly higher test scores than a comparable peer group of students who did not transfer to desegregated schools. More recently, Bennett and Easton (1988) found that minority students who attended desegregated schools for a period of at least three

years had lower achievement gains than minority students from the same sending schools who did not transfer to desegregated schools.

Critics of voluntary transfer plans are concerned with the consequences for the quality of education in the schools that students choose to leave for other schools. Bennett and Easton (1988) found that approximately two-thirds of a sample of voluntary transfer students scored above the 50th achievement percentile of their sending schools, indicating that students who left the sending schools tended to be higher performing students.

One of the two major goals of the Student Desegregation Plan for the Chicago Public Schools is to increase the number of students attending racially integrated schools. This goal is accomplished with magnet schools, which focus on a specific curricular topic and draw students citywide; and through integrated and desegregated schools, which serve attendance area students and students from outside the area. With very few exceptions, there are no entrance requirements to either magnet schools or to the integrated or desegregated schools. When the number of applicants to these schools exceeds space available, school policy stipulates that a lottery process determines who is accepted. The Department of Equal Educational Opportunity Programs has recently developed a computer data base to monitor this application process to insure that policy is properly implemented.

This research is focused on determining some of the effects of a desegregative voluntary transfer program in the Chicago Public Schools on a sample of low-income, predominantly minority sending schools. The research has three specific objectives: to determine the number and gender of transfer students; to determine the achievement levels of this sample of students; and to ascertain the perceptions of sending school principals on the effects of voluntary transfer on their schools.

## Method

This research selected 14 sending schools from a population of 105 low-achieving, low-income, predominantly minority elementary schools in Chicago that participate in an effective schools project designed to improve achievement levels. The sample was stratified geographically in order to ensure that all areas of the city were included. Eleven of the 14 schools are predominantly black and three are predominantly Hispanic. The average enrollment in the 14 schools is about 800.

The school system's computerized Comprehensive Student Information System provided the necessary information on the number and gender of students who participated in voluntary transfer programs instead of attending the 14 target schools in the sample. These students attend three different types of schools through the Desegregation Plan: magnet schools (schools with no attendance boundaries and special educational programs); neighborhood schools with specialty programs used to attract students from outside their attendance areas; and neighborhood schools that have no special programs, but recruit students to meet their desegregation goals.

Reading comprehension and mathematics test scores were collected from the Spring 1988 citywide Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) for the students identified in this study. These individual test scores are compared to the school medians of the 14 sending schools to determine the comparative achievement level of the voluntary transfer students in relation to the students remaining in the 14 sending schools. This differs from the previously discussed study by Bennett and Easton (1988) that used a sample of receiving schools to identify voluntary transfer students. This shift in focus permits us to ascertain effects of voluntary transfer on sending schools

rather than on a specific group of students.

The test scores will compare the achievement levels of the voluntary transfer students to the remaining students. Equally important to the sending schools is how the transfers affect attitudes and perceptions in the schools. The principals in these 14 schools were interviewed to determine the effects they perceive from the voluntary transfer program. They were asked how many students transfer from their school; whether they know who the students are; how the transfers affect the educational climate of the school; if the transfers affect the educational offerings of the school; and if the transfers affect teacher and student morale. The principals were also asked to estimate the effects of the transfer on the school budget.

## Results

### Number, Gender and Achievement Levels of Students

A total of 545 students from the 14 target schools (equal to about 4.9% of the total enrollment) attend one of the three categories of receiving schools instead of their home attendance area school. These students represent all students leaving the 14 schools through voluntary transfer. The rates of transfer students differ among the 14 schools, ranging from a low of 1.0% to a high of 17.3%. A majority--56%--of the transfer students are girls.

For the 481 students for whom ITBS scores were available from the 1988 spring testing, 74% scored higher than the majority of students remaining in the home attendance area sending school medians in reading, and 73% scored higher than the majority of sending school students in math. These statistics confirm the widely-held notion that higher scoring students, predominantly

Table 1  
Transfer Students by Sending School

School	# Transfers	% of Memb	% Girls	# with ITBS	% > than Reading	Schl Median Math
A	18	2.9	77.8	18	100.0	100.0
B	28	5.3	28.6	24	75.0	66.7
C	59	4.8	62.7	57	68.4	61.4
D	66	5.6	53.0	52	71.2	65.4
E	11	1.6	36.4	10	90.0	80.0
F	22	2.2	68.2	13	69.2	92.3
G	20	2.4	65.0	16	68.8	62.5
H	15	5.0	53.3	15	50.0	66.7
I	74	6.6	54.1	72	70.8	68.1
J	29	3.6	51.7	28	75.0	85.7
K	7	1.0	85.7	7	71.4	85.7
L	30	3.7	60.0	25	56.0	76.0
M	99	17.3	60.6	93	75.3	76.3
N	68	9.6	47.1	51	90.2	74.5
TOTAL	546	4.9	55.9	481	74.2	72.8

female, take advantage of the voluntary transfer program to attend schools outside of their own neighborhood.

### Principals' Perceptions

Because of the subject matter and the use of interview data, the responses from principals are not necessarily accurate or veridical in relation to school policy and practices. The responses are reported here, however, with the caution that they are opinions and perceptions, not all of which are substantiated by factual data.

At the beginning of the interview, the principal and interviewer discussed Chicago's voluntary transfer program and its effect on the school system as a whole. The principals were divided in terms of overall feelings about the program, but they were nearly unanimous in perceiving that the voluntary transfer programs selected higher-achieving and brighter students by

using test scores or entrance examinations. Some discussed these practices using terms like "unfair" and "discriminatory." As a group these principals seemed to agree that the good reputation of magnet schools and programs usually came at the expense of the poorer neighborhood schools that lost their best students.

The principals also agreed that the voluntary transfer program fostered unfair comparisons between choice schools (magnets and magnet programs) and neighborhood schools. The neighborhood schools almost always suffer in this comparison, because the choice schools have unfair advantages, specifically in terms of student selection, but also (mentioned less often) in terms of special resources. In addition, the comparison itself leads to lowered perceptions of the schools seen less favorably. Choice schools are provided additional resources for "good" students, yet the remaining "orphan" schools are expected to do as well.

Many principals noted that some degree of choice was beneficial for the school system as a whole. In addition, most of them agreed that the choice schools (especially magnet schools) did provide an advantageous program for the students who get into them. In discussing the concept of choice in schools, one principal observed that the act of choosing binds the parents to perceive the newly chosen schools as better. Parents, therefore, become more involved in school life and in their children's work. The chosen schools receive credit for the parents' work and involvement, which comes as a result of having made a choice to a school perceived to be better than the home attendance area school.

Some principals thought it reasonable that some schools would offer special educational alternatives that could not be made available in all neighborhood schools. However, they felt that all schools should be able to



provide a sound and challenging educational program that would retain all but a very few highly exceptional students. One principal suggested that choices be available for very special cases, for example, for extraordinary talent and for specialized interests like the performing arts, but that all neighborhood schools should have the resources to keep and teach good students. Another stated that choice should be available but that it should not be available disproportionately to bright, high-achieving children.

Three principals mentioned the topic of busing and spoke of the wasted time on buses. If children miss their bus they often miss school for the entire day. Time on the bus and tardiness and absence due to transportation difficulties have negative effects on student achievement. This aspect of the voluntary transfer program is problematic.

The relatively few principals who mentioned the achievement effects of voluntary transfer on the participating students were divided in their opinions. Some believed that the special, alternative programs raised student achievement, and others believed that the students would perform well under any conditions.

None of the principals indicated an "all bad" or "all good" attitude toward the voluntary transfer program. Those with favorable attitudes cited the positive aspects of providing choice to students and parents and agreed that the choice schools provided good programs. The negative attitudes noted the perceived discrimination inherent in selection of students, the inequitable distribution of resources, and the unfair comparisons engendered by a two-tier system.

Following the discussion of the principals' perceptions of the effects of the voluntary transfer program on the school system as a whole, the interview shifted to the effects of voluntary transfer on the schools in this sample.

Several of the principals (who tended to have few transfers) stated that the program had no effect on their school. Some said that they retained enough bright students so that the few transfers had little or no effect on the remaining students. Two principals noted that the program had a positive effect by relieving overcrowding; their schools would not be able to accommodate all of their attendance area students if special programs did not draw many students away.

The majority of principals discussed negative effects of voluntary transfer on teacher morale. Teachers become discouraged and demoralized when higher-achieving students leave the school. They feel that they have worked very hard with these students and have challenged them but that they don't reap the rewards of these achievements. When these students and their parents perceive another school as better and leave, the teachers are apt to "experience discomfort." One principal said that teachers prepare students to become accepted at magnet schools. These teachers feel that the core or strength of the school is taken away with these students and that the high scores at the receiving schools are a reflection of the hard work at the sending schools. The hard working teachers lose credit for the achievement levels of transferring students and at the same time are on the negative side of an unfair comparison between special and regular schools. Many teachers also believe that their schools offer good programs that become devalued.

The departure of higher-achieving students also has an impact on the remaining students. Their motivational level is affected, as they feel that they are left behind and are missing something and that if other students are leaving to better schools, their school must be less than good. One principal said that the average students are denied the opportunity to interact with top students. However, several principals noted that they were able to keep many

of their top students through their own gifted programs.

Two principals noted that their teachers encouraged bright students to apply to magnet schools and other programs through voluntary transfer. One principal cited an exceptional child who made a teacher's job difficult by demanding more extensive work in math than the teacher was willing to provide. This teacher assisted the child in transferring out.

Some principals stated that voluntary transfers affected their programs and curriculum by making increased remedial instruction necessary because of the lesser number of higher-achieving students. One principal said that the school had to "water down" its gifted curriculum because of the paucity of top students.

Some principals discussed their strategies to counter the voluntary transfer program. In one case, teachers and community leaders had conducted meetings to discuss what could be done to prevent voluntary transfer from taking top students away. One principal talked about using his school's gifted program to "bribe" parents to keep their children in the neighborhood school.

In concluding these interviews, the interviewer asked the principals to estimate the effects of voluntary transfers on their school budget. In fact, each low-income child generates approximately \$500 for poorer schools like these for discretionary, supplementary programs. None of the principals referred to this loss, probably because of the complex way that these funds are distributed and the regular ebb and flow of enrollment. The few who connected student enrollment to the school budget spoke of possible losses of classroom teachers because of declines in enrollment, but others said that another child entered the school for every child that left.

## Summary and Discussion

Two themes dominated these interviews: that voluntary transfer works to the advantage of the elite, that is, it accepts high-achieving students, creates a two-tier system, and engenders unfair comparisons between special schools and neighborhood schools; and that teacher morale is negatively affected by voluntary transfers. Although these themes occurred in many interviews, not all principals subscribed to them. Few principals expressed adamant or vociferous complaints about the voluntary transfer program and its impact on their own schools. Many attested to the need for choice and alternative opportunities for students and parents and to the positive impact of the specialty programs on students. However, most principals mentioned at least one negative aspect of the program in relation to the two themes.

A sub-theme dealing with the importance of perceptions ran through many of these interviews. Principals discussed how parents and students perceived some programs to be superior and that this comparison caused a devaluation of the neighborhood school. This perception, rather than any reality concerning program quality and outcomes, becomes responsible for choosing.

Even given some relatively negative impressions of the voluntary transfer program, few principals spoke of alternative plans to improve perceptions about the quality of their own schools, although some did mention using their gifted programs to attract or retain students. This apparent lack of plans is probably attributable to principals' sense that voluntary transfer is mandated through the student desegregation plan and that the "skimming" process was a natural by-product. Also few principals actually felt a major impact on their schools as a result of voluntary transfer because of the small numbers of students involved and have therefore not made a priority of countering this

trend.

This research is a first attempt to document evidence about a topic that has been discussed frequently but never studied. Follow-up work on this topic should include more detailed studies involving specific students and teachers and how the transfer process affects them. Additional studies could be designed to compare schools with similar demographic characteristics that differ in the number of students that transfer. A study such as this would provide more objective data about how schools are affected by voluntary transfer.

Because of the topic and subjective nature of this study and its focus on opinions, attitudes, and perceptions, the findings may be factually inaccurate. However, by tapping these attitudes, the school system, and the Department of Equal Educational Opportunity Programs in particular, can learn what course to take in countering possibly negative trends.

The first major implication of the study is the need to continue vigilant monitoring to ensure that magnet schools and other receiving schools adhere to policy regarding student selection procedures. The department maintains a citywide computer data base management system designed to provide equity of access for students applying to voluntary transfer schools. The data base also has the capacity to conduct lotteries. Because of training and continuous technical assistance, this system is being more widely accepted each year.

A second implication of this study is the need to provide sending schools with assistance in providing programs that will attract or retain students and in making the community aware of these programs. With increasing school-based management in the Chicago Public Schools, many schools are reallocating existing resources for these purposes. This study also reinforces the understanding of the importance of perceptions in education.

Sending schools need to improve their own images, through innovative programs and by communicating their positive aspects to their communities. This study supports the need for the school system to provide local schools with the assistance to reach these goals.

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