

INTERDISTRICT CHOICE AS A POLICY  
SOLUTION:  
EXAMINING ROCHESTER'S URBAN-SUBURBAN  
INTERDISTRICT TRANSFER PROGRAM (USITP)

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Most students today attend public schools that are segregated by race and class (Orfield, Frankenberg, & Lee, 2003) with the majority of segregation occurring *between* districts (Lankford & Wyckoff, 2005). To make matters worse, urban districts continue to face extreme challenges including high dropout rates and low achievement. Given these trends, some have called for increased attention to school choice options and school integration (Ryan & Heise, 2002). While organizations, such as the Century Foundation (see Kahlenberg, 2008) and Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights (see Francisco, 2008), advocate interdistrict choice to combat this segregation, other voices have called for a return to neighborhood schools (Dillion, 2008).<sup>1</sup> Recent research by Goldring, Cohen-Vogel, Smrekar, and Taylor (2005), however, suggests that returns to neighborhood schooling are least likely to benefit the poorest members of urban districts as their neighborhoods do not have the necessary supports.

School choice policies—both mandated and voluntary—have been used for more than 40 years in the United States educational system to address segregation and school failure. Choice policies have taken on a variety of forms from open enrollment to magnet schools, charter schools, and vouchers, yet have an underlying theme that parents should have the opportunity to select their child's school. Some types of choice, especially charter schools, have had longstanding bipartisan and U.S. Department of Education support across the last few administrations. High level governmental support is important to the sustainability of choice policies according to Morken and Formicola (1999). While the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 calls for *within* district choice, limited options exists in many urban contexts and thus

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the idea that neighborhood schooling constitutes a form of school choice see Brighthouse (2008).

interdistrict (i.e., *between* district) choice remains an intriguing policy solution to combat low school performance and address the increasing segregation occurring across the country.

Interdistrict choice programs exist in a handful of locales, including metropolitan areas in New York, Massachusetts, Missouri, California, Connecticut, Indiana, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Nebraska. Currently approximately 500,000 students participate in these types of programs (Kahlenberg, 2006). Although interdistrict choice has not had the same momentum as other choice policies in recent years, a national summit was convened at Harvard University Law School in 2009 to pull together policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and advocates to discuss the past, present, and future of interdistrict school desegregation. In addition Omaha, Nebraska recently made headlines with a regional schooling solution to counteract segregated schooling (Holme, Diem, & Mansfield, 2009).

The few studies that have examined interdistrict choice indicate that participants, both whites and students of color, have an increased level of comfort with people of other races (Holme, Wells, Revilla, 2005; Orfield & Lee, 2005; Wells & Crain, 2005; Wells, Holme, Atanda, & Revilla, 2005; Wells, Holme, Revilla, & Atanda, 2009). Additionally, minority participants not only achieve at higher levels once enrolled, but also build upon the social networks they develop in suburban (majority white) schools (Wells & Crain, 1994). African American participants have reported greater professional aspirations, including an increased likelihood of attending primarily white colleges, and improved entry into occupations with high prestige and incomes (Holme, et al, 2005; Wells & Crain, 1994; 2005; Wells, et al, 2009). The benefits for students of color come not from sitting next to white students but rather because of a reduction in the social isolation that exists in their own communities and schools (Piliawsky, 1998; Orfield, Frankenburg, and Garces, 2008) as well as the networks and relationships that

they develop in integrated settings (Wells & Crain, 1994). While the few studies that exist have examined the short and long-term benefits of this type of choice, there has been less attention paid to the processes and practices that limit the participation in these programs and affect implementation across sites. Furthermore, there has been limited attention to the political dynamics of interdistrict choice.

Our study examined one of the longest standing interdistrict choice programs in the country: Rochester, New York's Urban-Suburban Interdistrict Transfer Program (USITP). Based upon quantitative and qualitative data, including analysis of approximately forty years of program records, review of program documents and newspaper articles, and interviews with key stakeholders, our paper examines the following:

- What is the political context of USITP and to what extent has this changed over time?
- Who participates in USITP and what are the driving forces affecting enrollment?
- How is USITP implemented at the school and district level and what obstacles exist with regard to program expansion?

The information that can be gleaned from our longitudinal data set is invaluable as it is the only known database that tracks an interdistrict transfer policy from the program's inception to the present. In combination with our other data sources, we provide insight into both the political dynamics around choice and the larger issues affecting enrollment, implementation, and expansion. This type of analysis is critical to understanding the viability of interdistrict choice in terms of improving educational options for students of color in our current educational system.

## Study Context

The RCSD serves 33,000 students and is approximately 88 percent nonwhite, with 88 percent of students receiving free and reduced price lunches (Rochester City School District, 2009). The district has a 4-year graduation rate of 48 percent and is currently a district in need of improvement under NCLB (Rochester City School District, 2008). This urban district is located within Monroe County, which is home to 18 suburban school districts. Monroe county holds the distinction of being the state's 11<sup>th</sup> wealthiest county yet is host to the nation's 11<sup>th</sup> poorest metropolitan area in per-capita child poverty, ahead of many larger cities including New York City, Washington DC, Chicago, and Los Angeles (MacGowan, 2003). City demographics have changed remarkably over the past 25 years. The number of minority students in RCSD rose from 69 percent in 1980 (Caputo, 2003) to 88 percent today (RCSD, 2009), and the number of students eligible for a free and reduced price lunch rose from 22 percent in 1980 (Caputo, 2003) to 88 percent today (RCSD, 2009). This contrasts greatly with Monroe County's overall wealth and 81 percent white population (U.S. Census 2000).

The USITP began in 1965 when one suburban district, the West Irondequoit School District, allowed 25 minority students from the inner city (24 of whom were African American) to transfer to its suburban schools (Heinrich, 1969). This development was in response to a directive of the Commissioner of Education asking every district to answer two questions: What is the status of the racial imbalance in your school? What are you going to do about it? (USITP, 2005). Forty years later, approximately 450 students from RCSD attend 42 schools in seven suburban school districts in Monroe County.

## **Data Sources and Analysis**

Our mixed method study involved approximately forty years of program records,<sup>2</sup> which allowed us to examine key issues around participation in USITP, including issues relating to student mobility and retention in this program. Using program records, we created a database that includes student-level information, such as the year they entered the program and other descriptive characteristics including addresses and prior schools. Each student has a record for every year they participated in the program, resulting in more than 21,500 student records. A subset of these records involve students who attended private and Catholic schools or students from the suburbs who participated in the two-way transfer program, attending schools in the city as we discuss below. The focus of this paper, however, is on enrollment patterns for minority students who attended suburban public schools; therefore these other students are only included in overall counts regarding program participation, while more detailed analyses focus on students who transferred to suburban public schools.

In addition to student records, we compiled program documents and newspaper articles for key analyses regarding the political context of USITP. Materials were acquired through two collections housed in Rare Books at the University of Rochester, as well as articles from local newspapers which helped to provide rich details and a foundation from which to base further explore through interviews. Additional monological data are included in these analyses, such as personal communications, transportation logs, fund-raising efforts, program celebrations, professional development training records, and district-program communications.

Finally, our study involved interviews/focus groupss with key stakeholders (n=11) and suburban school principals (n=13) to examine additional issues around the selection process and

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<sup>2</sup> The program records for students enrolled during the 1968-69 school year were missing from the original set yet some information from these years can be gleaned from student enrollment information found in other years.

the operation of USITP in various contexts. These interviews allow us to explore the ways in which formal and informal policies around USITP affect implementation of the program across various school and district contexts. Our interviews with stakeholders included people who were involved at the program's inception or important points in USITP's history and were able to speak to the program's overarching purpose, initial challenges, and perceived impact. These stakeholders include two past (including the administrator from 1965-1982 and the administrator from 1982-1995) and two current administrators of the program (including one who took over in 1995 and has served in that role through the present). We interviewed one current and one former superintendent whose districts participated in the program and the head of the local urban teacher's union. In addition, four other stakeholders participated in a focus group including a student organizer from the 1960s who helped set up the first interdistrict student exchange program in the area. The focus group focused on the grassroots involvement of suburban and city students who were interested in ending segregation pre-USITP and ways that these efforts helped to support suburban participation in the USITP. We also conducted interviews with suburban school principals, including six elementary, four middle level, and three high school principals. We only selected principals from the schools that had more than five USITP students enrolled, resulting in our interviewing 13 of the 28 principals who met this criterion. USITP students represented 1 to 4% of total student population in each of these schools (from 6 to 38 USITP students were enrolled in each school). All of the interviews were conducted in person between October and July, 2009, except in the case of one stakeholder who was interviewed by phone. Using a semi-structured interview protocol, we asked questions relating participation in the program, the selection process, and USITP implementation in their school. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The focus group was not recorded; instead detailed

note-taking was utilized and an in-depth memo was created by the moderator immediately following the focus group.

Our analyses of the quantitative data set involved an examination of enrollment over time including: where participating students have lived in the city, whether specific urban schools became feeders to specific suburban schools, how student transiency impacted retention and graduation rates, and other related areas. Descriptive data along with geographic mapping was utilized to understand enrollment patterns across decades and to supplement the qualitative data. Data were analyzed using SPSS 16.0. All qualitative data were coded using QSR International's NVivo 8 software to identify references to the political context, enrollment, and implementation of the USITP program. The coding process was iterative and involved codes and subcodes that were derived from our review of the literature and those that emerged from the data during analysis.

The qualitative data offers a rich understanding of the nuances of implementing a voluntary school choice program and the variety of ways that this plays out in the participating districts and schools. The quantitative data helps to better understand who has participated in the program and ways that the program has expanded and contracted over time; including at one time being a two-way transfer program, and one that involved both private and parochial schools as members. In combination, these data sources provide important details regarding interdistrict choice.

## **Results**

Although these areas are clearly interrelated, we discuss our research findings according to our three question areas: 1) political context, 2) participation/enrollment, 3) implementation/expansion.



## **USITP Historical-Political Context**

The concept of choice continues to be widely embraced by some and rejected by others to the point where diverse groups come together and form coalitions to support or combat it (Fusarelli, 2003) from civil rights activists to parent groups (Elmore, Fuller, & Orfield, 1996; Dillion, 2008). Fusarelli (2003) argues that school choice coalitions are “more fluid and less stable than existing models of advocacy coalitions” (p.143). This fluidity is likely linked to the varying types of policies with different theoretical and philosophical underpinnings that fall under the broad category of “school choice.” As discussed in this section, our findings indicate that advocacy coalitions played a key role in the development and implementation of the USITP. In particular, buy-in from suburban school districts (both administrators and parents), students, local and state officials, and the media were critical. Finally, the grass-roots advocacy of program administrators in the early period spurred the development and growth of this program, as discussed in the pages that follow regarding the historical context and political dynamics surrounding interdistrict choice in Rochester.

The USITP was established to “voluntarily reduce racial isolation in the elementary and secondary schools of New York State in order to enhance racial/ethnic awareness and sensitivity between and among students, teachers, and parents in the elementary and secondary schools of the State” (The History of Project U-S, 2005). The program originally involved a two-way transfer program between the city and suburbs. However, this was met with resistance in the city by both African American families and white families and the two-way transfer component ended in 1984. While budgetary cuts and the withdrawal of federal funds appear closely linked to the demise of the two-way component, it also stemmed from suburban families’ only wanting

to enroll in a few select schools, including an arts-based school and an alternative school that was project-based with a reputation for allowing students high levels of autonomy. According to a former program administrator, “the city told us they’d have to place all of their kids who applied and if there was any room they’d place suburban kids, and slowly that dried up and they just dropped it.” In addition, for a number of years the Catholic schools in the area were heavily involved in the USITP. However, their participation ended by the early 1980s as funding became more limited and the Catholic schools became more diverse.

As is often the case in educational policy, the early history involved key players at the state and local level. As mentioned above, USITP developed as a result of a call in 1963 by New York’s Education Commissioner for districts to consider what could be done to reduce the racial imbalance and improve the educational opportunities for disadvantaged students (Project US-History, 1977). Between the time in which the New York State Department of Education put forth the call to action and the first suburban school district enrolled minority students from the city through USITP, however, Rochester experienced racial turmoil that culminated in what became known as the Rochester Race Riots. This was significant because it made prominent the de facto segregation that was occurring in Rochester. Historically, it was also significant because it was the first time that the National Guard was called to a Northern city during the Civil Rights Era (Christopher & Eison, 2006) While more minorities were moving into Rochester in the 1960s, they still formed only 25 percent of the RCSD (Caputo, 2003). In 1962, just prior to the Race Riots, the New York NAACP brought forth a school segregation case on behalf of city parents (Rucker, 2007). The tensions that existed in the Rochester community led to the formation of an organization called FIGHT which joined the Rochester Area Council of

Churches to campaign to pressure suburban schools to begin taking African American students from the city (Street, 1964).

Interviews with key stakeholders and newspaper articles point out that several politicians at the state and federal level, many of whom were Republicans, lent key support to the program in these early years, particularly when it faced opposition groups or funding problems. At the local level, the Superintendents of the RCSD, the West Irondequoit Central School District (the first suburban district to participate), and the Brighton Central School District (the second to join) were key to the program's inception. Prior to USITP, RCSD had already begun operating an intra-district program to address the racial imbalance within the school district which was comprised of a student exchange between the social studies classes of Madison High School (50% African American), and Marshall High School (only one student of color) (Project US-History, 1977). In addition, West Irondequoit and Brighton had developed summer school programs that brought city school children into the suburbs for enrichment activities (Foley, 1970). In Brighton's case the city and suburban Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) joined together to raise scholarship money that could "break patterns of separateness by providing their children with integrated educational experiences" (Hart, 1965). These early programs paved the way for the USITP as these were the same superintendents who began initial discussions with the RCSD regarding enrolling African American students in their suburban schools (Street, 1964).

In 1965, West Irondequoit's Board of Education unanimously voted in support for a resolution that was the beginning of the USITP. The language of this resolution is important as it provides a clear indication of the purpose and driving force behind USITP, as indicated in bold:

**WHEREAS, An educational program with the highest ideals cannot be static in the face of changing educational needs and methods, expanding areas of knowledge, and social values; and**

WHEREAS, Such an educational program must fulfill its obligation to prepare children for life in a democratic society and to enable them to meet one of the great needs of that society, improvement in inter-racial and intercultural relations; and

WHEREAS, The racial and cultural make-up of West Irondequoit, which is generally of white families with above-average economic background, does not provide the environment and opportunities for such intercultural experiences.

BE IT RESOLVED THAT, The Board of Education of Central School District No. 3, Town of Irondequoit, **accepts an obligation to provide for our children opportunities to become better acquainted with several races and cultures of the greater Rochester community** (West Irondequoit, 1965).

This program is somewhat unique in that the initial stated goal was to decrease racial isolation in the participating suburban districts, focusing on the benefits of integration to their residents rather than the benefits for participants regarding educational access. This resolution was significant because it served as the model that other participating suburban school boards used for creating and passing their own policies. In addition, it had unanimous board support at a controversial time in Rochester's history.

In the beginning (1965-66), West Irondequoit agreed to accept 25 students. Interestingly, some parents immediately began a campaign against the program (Donovan, 1965; Mullins, 1965). As one opposing parent organizer said, "If I had wanted a racial [sic] balanced school district I would have moved into one" (Donovan, 1965). Another group emerged called SPICE, Supporters of Policy for Inter-Cultural Education, whose members went door-to-door asking for citizen support of the program ("Open Rolls Pushed in West Irondequoit," 1965). SPICE was later joined by religious groups, the PTA, and the local teacher's association. As one stakeholder who was a parent and later administrator of the program described, "we fought for three or four months, meetings and sit-ins, even students got involved...they did sit-ins, they came to board

meetings, you know, the white students, because they thought this was great to have the opportunity to be educated with other kids.” The group opposed to the program came to be called the Citizen’s Education Committee and filed a lawsuit claiming the open enrollment plan was unconstitutional, however the program was upheld in state court (Street, 1966).

The West Irondequoit Newsletter (Number 37, April 1965) that introduced the program spoke to the importance of civil rights issues and the need for integration as. “...no suburb exists in a vacuum. It is part of a metropolitan whole. The daily life of each citizen, whether urban or suburban, is closely intertwined, and the awareness of this inter-dependency should be a part of our educational structure.” In this early time period several other districts responded to pressure to open their doors to city students (Jolidon, 1966a; 1966c), a campus school was set up on the SUNY-Brockport campus and accepted 20 students<sup>3</sup> and the Brighton Central School District which accepted 56 students in the first year. Soon after Brighton joined, however, they had to delay the plan due to opposition from the community (Jolidon, 1966b), and this became a board election issue as community members expressed concerns about funding and school overcrowding (Williams, 1966).

The Penfield School District was next to join and a new and important group became critical to the decision: students. Some students spearheaded a countywide student union to address issues regarding school integration. This group, the Student Union for Integrated Education, was comprised of 115 students in high schools and the local community college and its primary goal was “to establish communication between city and suburban schools” (“Students Fight for School Integration,” 1968). In addition, a Penfield High School student organized an exchange program for students from Madison High School, a low income school in the city, to

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<sup>3</sup> This became the mechanism that was used to enroll students in the Brockport School District as they joined the public schools after aging out of this campus school; when the campus school closed down student enrolled directly in the district.

live with students from Penfield High School and attend classes with them for a week and then the city students would live with Madison students and attend their high school for a week (24 Madisonites 'Live' in Penfield, 1967). Pittsford Central School District and Wheatland-Chili Central School District began participating in 1967-68. From that time until 2003, no new school district was to enter the USITP until the Fairport Central School District (Urban-Suburban Parent-Student Handbook, 2005). What prompted Fairport to join were concerns in the district regarding the isolation of minority students which was exacerbated by interactions between some white students and students of color. The Urban-Suburban program was viewed as the only "tool" at their disposal to deal with this situation.

A key player in the development of the USITP was the initial program administrator, a community activist who relentlessly lobbied districts to join, contacted politicians for their support, and wrote proposals to acquire additional funding for the program. The program administrator was known for saying, "the only way you're going to get black and white together is with green," referring to the monetary incentives that were necessary to confront the inequities in the area. He described his work during this time as "almost a religious thing" as he pushed community members to confront the racial segregation in their community. As he described it, "that was my job. I went out and I would speak to the boards. We had moral support from the media, so I'd get on the agendas and I'd make my pitch on behalf of it." He described the negative response he got from some communities, as one community board member told him publicly at a board meeting, "look, we've got to face it, that people stay with their own kind. Just like in the animal kingdom, blackbirds stay with blackbirds." He noted that they were able to "break down" a number of districts' board members but many of the county's districts still did not join. While this first program administrator was most focused on acquiring district and

community support and funding for the program, the second administrator emphasized providing supports to the families in the program. “We would pick up parents that didn’t have cars and take them out to meetings.” She added, “We always made home visits, especially when there were concerns or problems.” During both time periods the USITP faced continuous battles for funding, though as time went on there were fewer calls to dismantle it.

Another key player in the early years of the program was the media. According to a program administrator, “they kept running articles supporting the program and giving it the moral support and indicating that this was the right thing to do.” Several reporters at the time, as well as the editorial staff, underwent a concerted effort to raise political awareness through newspaper articles, using the editorial pages to sway school board and community opinion.

Even with the broader community advocates calling for more districts to participate many districts were approached over the years and chose not to join (the majority of suburban districts in the county still do not participate). Some of the pressure to participate came from a variety of groups, including university leaders and local politicians.<sup>4</sup> District superintendents believed that diversity would come to their schools when people moved to the suburbs (“Integration Not a Priority in Suburbs,” 1977). In speaking with key stakeholders about what enabled the program to be approved successfully in some districts while it failed in others, it became clear that community support was a crucial component in both the late 1960s and in 2003. While school district officials were responsible for suggesting and ensuring participation in some districts, others relied on community votes. Likewise, key politicians lent their support both in terms of vocalizing the need for such programs and then fighting for funding that would support them. The need for continued political support and pressure on the State Department of Education in

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<sup>4</sup> Additional plans were offered including a campus school in the city that all of the suburban schools would support (Wilson, 1967a; 1968) and the abolition of the city school district and either development of a countywide system or redrawing of district boundaries (Wilson, 1967b)

Albany would be a recurrent theme as funding cuts frequently threatened the program's existence.

From the beginning, the participating suburban districts maintained that the program reduces the taxes of suburban families because of the state aid that follows the students to the suburban schools (O'Toole, 1969). The program was originally funded through the Emergency School Aid Act, the Department of Health Education and Welfare, the Emergency School Assistance Act, but concerns had already begun in the mid 1970s that the funding would be cut (Burke, 1975). In 1984 the program lost all Federal funding and the individual suburban districts made a commitment to continue to the program with only New York State funding. Currently, districts receive the RCSD per pupil funding which results in greater state aid for suburban districts. As one stakeholder pointed out, "it's a financial benefit because let's say we have 100 kids, we pick up state aid on those kids and maybe we pick up somewhere around \$400,000 and because the kids are spread across grade levels it's not like I could cut teachers to save the salaries of teachers and save \$400,000....So I probably wouldn't be able to cut anything and it's just a good revenue." This is important because the idea that participation in the program would be a money maker, rather than a drain upon the district's resources, was used to garner support in the district that most recently began participating. "I'd send out e-mail newsletters and they'd be able to respond to them and people would say 'oh, well, you know what, this is going to cost us money', and I'd say 'no it's not going to cost us money, we're actually going to make money on the deal because we get the city school district's aid.'"

Once the program became established and as the social and political climate changed from the 1980s to now, the USITP has not maintained the high level of support from politicians, local activists, and key stakeholders that initially benefit it, instead it is operating "under the



radar” according to one administrator. The program rarely gets press coverage in the local paper. During extensive recent coverage of students crossing district boundaries illegally (Add D&C, 2008 articles), there was no mention of this program which involves the legal crossing of district lines. This lack of dialogue around the program is intriguing given its longstanding existence in the community. Some have argued that Monroe County is more segregated than ever but the political will to integrate does not exist (Caputo, 2003). This was demonstrated when a former mayor’s attempts to begin conversations about a county-wide school district in 2002 were met with fierce opposition (Armon, 2002; Armon and Liu, 2002; Kohlstrand and Armon, 2002; Liu, 2002), which is a common response of suburban residents (Kozol, 2005; Wells & Crain, 2005).

### **Participation/Enrollment**

While studies relating to selection and participation in interdistrict choice are limited, Wells and Crain (2005) found that more actively involved parents were more likely to acquire information about their options. This is supported by research on choice, generally, which suggests unequal access to information and a greater likelihood that the more active and knowledgeable parents, those who are able to successfully navigate the public education system, will participate in choice programs (see, for example, Fuller & Elmore, 1996). In one interdistrict choice program in Massachusetts, this resulted in an underrepresentation of poor and minority families (Armor & Peiser, 1997). Our study examined not only whether there were differential patterns of participation across the city, but also whether feeder patterns existed and the extent to which school, district, or program practices and processes limited participation. As discussed in this section, our findings suggest that participation is limited by both the application process itself and by program and school-level decisions about students’ “fit” with the school. In

addition, we found high levels of attrition in the program with only 1/3 of students remaining through high school graduation.

At the current time, the USITP program is not advertised to students or families through print or other media, but rather families find out about it by word of mouth – either from other participants, graduates, guidance counselors, or teachers. One stakeholder expressed concern that the truly disadvantaged were least likely to participate “because their families are not knowledgeable enough to even know what the questions are, let alone the answers.” In spite of this limit on information, annually more than 1,000 requests for application packets are sent out to families with about half returned as formal applications that are then reviewed to make sure all of the required information is provided. No records are kept on the actual number of applications that move forward once this step is completed; however our data in Table 1 suggests that only approximately half of those move forward to the next stage. From the initial 1,000 that are sent out only 10-15 percent at the most are placed into the program each year. Table 1 shows the number and percentage placed from each zip code for one year of data (2001) of those who applied. As illustrated below, there does not appear to be clear “creaming” going on by income (neighborhood income is used as a proxy for personal income). While higher proportions of students were admitted from the top income zip codes, these zips also had lower overall numbers of applicants. In addition, the next highest percentage by zip was for the lowest income area.

The formal policies regarding selection and eligibility in the USITP include that the student must be a resident of the city of Rochester and enrolled in grades K-8. The student must also be a minority as defined by the State of New York Education Department--“Minority pupils

Table 1: Placement by Zip Code (2001)

|       | Median<br>Income* | Placed (% of<br>total for zip) | Total Applied |
|-------|-------------------|--------------------------------|---------------|
| 14605 | \$16,695          | 5 (28%)                        | 18            |
| 14608 | \$18,358          | 3 (25%)                        | 12            |
| 14611 | \$20,582          | 7 (17%)                        | 42            |
| 14621 | \$22,107          | 10 (19%)                       | 53            |
| 14613 | \$27,668          | 2 (10%)                        | 21            |
| 14607 | \$30,732          | 0 (0%)                         | 1             |
| 14620 | \$30,776          | 0 (0%)                         | 4             |
| 14609 | \$35,216          | 7 (25%)                        | 46            |
| 14615 | \$36,580          | 2 (22%)                        | 9             |
| 14606 | \$37,707          | 2 (14%)                        | 14            |
| 14619 | \$39,195          | 11 (19%)                       | 59            |
| 14610 | \$44,814          | 2 (67%)                        | 3             |
| 14612 | \$51,888          | 1 (33%)                        | 3             |
|       |                   | 52 (18%)                       | 285           |

\*Source: 2000 Census

are Black, Hispanic (non-white)/Latino, Native American, Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander Origin” (Section 3603 (36); SED 8 NYCRR Section 175.24). After meeting these eligibility criteria, including until recently a signed affidavit regarding the student’s race,<sup>5</sup> the student submits a formal application to the USITP program, which currently includes an application, letters of support from teachers, and a copy of his or her student file. Students may request a particular district, but our interviews suggest that this can decrease their chances of getting into a school, as it removes them from the larger selection process and thus reduces the likelihood that they will be selected. Parents must commit to attend mandatory parent meetings

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<sup>5</sup> The USITP Governing Board has recently altered this process by removing this affidavit, which resulted from a prior court case involving a white student who tried to enroll in the program, from the application, although the eligibility criteria have not yet changed.

with program administrators (two a year) and must pay \$15 dues into a scholarship fund for USITP graduates.

After this formal process, there is a more informal pre-screening that occurs by program administrators. Many of the principals alluded to a process that occurred before they reviewed the applications and nearly all said that they were not quite sure what happened at this stage. Some of the screening is to ensure applications are complete, as incomplete applications were problematic several years ago. Along with this, a more subjective scanning of the applications also appears to be happening at this point in the process. Principals described getting a specific pile of applications that were given to them based upon the program administrators' knowledge of their district and what would be a "good fit." In fact, administrators in four districts used this language to describe the prescreening that happened, relying heavily on the program administrators' decisions about which students to move forward to their school. As one described, "They know our district and our community, so they do a little pre-screening on their part. They go through and they know I'm kind of a stickler for academics and they'll look and if their academics are really low they kind of weed them out. Whether it's right or wrong I don't know but this is how we do it." Another hinted at the priorities of the program administrators when she said, "when they get all the materials in [they make sure] that the parents have the right reasons of why they want their child to come into one of the other suburban schools." The prescreening process in these four districts involved program administrators actually selecting the students that would attend these districts because they only provided a very select group of applications for principals to review. Administrators in three other districts reviewed all of the files and did their own filtering of the applications to consider more closely. For example, one principal noted that she looked at 75-100 applications for one available space. These differences

illustrate the ways in which the pre-screening process varies across districts and the larger USITP program.

Our data suggests, however, that common selection criteria exist across all of the suburban districts. All of the districts mentioned screening based upon academics and behavior as they looked for students who would be a “good fit,” meaning those who would make an easy transition into their district. Administrators focused first on whether the students were academically successful, including performing at their developmental level. This did not necessarily mean only the highest achievers would be admitted, but administrators in three districts specifically mentioned only taking students with 3s and 4s on the New York State performance standards (with 3 indicating “meeting standards” and 4 indicating “exceeding standards”). Furthermore, one administrator noted that students must exceed grade level norms. One of the reasons that these scores are emphasized is that the majority of Rochester City School District students are far behind their suburban peers as shows in Table 2 on the following page. The decision to focus on academic achievement, however, has implications not only for the students that are chosen but also those students who remain in the RCSD.

Beyond academics, nearly all of the principals discussed examining behaviors, as well, in terms of both good attendance and comments from teachers regarding social interactions with peers, disciplinary problems, and related types of comments. A few principals also looked for

Table 2: Percentage of Students Scoring at Proficiency (3 or 4) on NY State Assessments:

|             | NY State | RCSD      | Suburban Participating Districts |            |            |            |            |            |            |
|-------------|----------|-----------|----------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
|             |          |           | District 1                       | District 2 | District 3 | District 4 | District 5 | District 6 | District 7 |
| ELA scores  |          |           |                                  |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| Grade 3     | 70       | <b>44</b> | 91                               | 77         | 82         | 83         | 92         | 84         | 84         |
| Grade 4     | 71       | <b>52</b> | 90                               | 82         | 82         | 92         | 95         | 85         | 74         |
| Grade 5     | 78       | <b>58</b> | 93                               | 83         | 89         | 94         | 96         | 93         | 94         |
| Grade 6     | 67       | <b>56</b> | 88                               | 71         | 87         | 87         | 93         | 87         | 70         |
| Grade 7     | 70       | <b>40</b> | 93                               | 81         | 85         | 85         | 94         | 87         | 87         |
| Grade 8     | 56       | <b>31</b> | 84                               | 69         | 75         | 75         | 88         | 76         | 71         |
|             |          |           |                                  |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| Math scores |          |           |                                  |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| Grade 3     | 90       | <b>71</b> | 98                               | 91         | 95         | 94         | 98         | 91         | 100        |
| Grade 4     | 84       | <b>62</b> | 95                               | 91         | 91         | 95         | 98         | 92         | 80         |
| Grade 5     | 83       | <b>59</b> | 96                               | 82         | 88         | 95         | 97         | 97         | 94         |
| Grade 6     | 79       | <b>56</b> | 93                               | 86         | 93         | 93         | 96         | 92         | 89         |
| Grade 7     | 79       | <b>48</b> | 92                               | 88         | 91         | 91         | 96         | 93         | 83         |
| Grade 8     | 70       | <b>33</b> | 89                               | 88         | 85         | 92         | 96         | 89         | 55         |

Source: 2007-2008 New York State Testing and Accountability Report

positive work ethics and study habits. Several principals discussed additional criteria having to do with parental support and student enthusiasm about the new school, while one principal even discussed the importance of having a “stable” family situation, defined as a two-parent family:

I look for a stable family. Is there a husband and a wife and do they live together? You just look for some of those stable forces because knowing that the reality of coming here and how difficult it is sometimes just to communicate with our split families in the same community, you want to make sure you’re stacking the student for success. So, I’m not going to say those are absolutes, but we do look for as much stability as we can.

Finally, administrators were very clear that someone who was designated as receiving special education services was a “red flag” because of the “cost” to the district. As one administrator said, “It’s a philosophical understanding that we will co-exist with Urban Suburban as long as it can benefit us with our cultural diversity as well as our fiscal responsibility to the taxpayer here.” Three districts include reading specialists, school counselors, or speech pathologists as part of the interview process to ensure that students are developmentally on target. While an administrator in one of the districts stated that they were assessing the students for academic placement and that they would continue to accept the students regardless of the result, an administrator from another district pointed out that the screening process provided additional details on which they based their decision:

What we were finding, being completely honest, is that the paperwork description of some of the students academically they’d get into [district] and they’d struggle...trying to avoid putting kids into your district that, and this is brutally honest, that are going to require special education services or extensive AIS [Academic Intervention Services]...we implemented the screening process so we can get a better picture. What we were finding is we were taking these kids in, we thought they were bright shining stars, they get in and they struggle their rear-ends off and at that point you’re like ‘why am I doing this?’ I’m not adding kids that can function highly, they’re soaking up all of our resources, trying to be cognizant of the [district] taxpayer as well. So screening is a safeguard to see if we could get a better understanding of the student as a learner before we committed.

In all cases the principals contended that if they were not identified ahead of time but were later classified as requiring special education services once admitted to the program they always allowed the student to continue.<sup>6</sup> In one instance, the principal described the process that took place in order to help a student receive a special education classification, which included working closely with the city school district for testing and initial writing of the student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

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<sup>6</sup> Although recent court case in one of the districts suggests otherwise. The case was settled for an undisclosed amount.

The number of spaces available to USITP students were determined at the building or district level (or a combination of the two) depending on the district. Two of the seven participating districts had informal policies regarding the grades that students enter into the program in the district, which coincided with the natural transitions to new school buildings for example, at 6<sup>th</sup> grade for a 6-8 school. Some districts had additional criteria, for example, only enrolling students from certain zip codes; only enrolling students in their elementary school; giving priority to people who requested their district; or trying to keep siblings together. In one district a principal noted a requirement that both parents be a minority.<sup>7</sup> The general theme that ran through all districts was a concern about taking a “risk” on a student. As one person said, “I guess I’m sort of saying, ‘well, this seems like a risk.’ Not that I don’t want to help the student out, but we want kids who are going to be a good fit.” Once selected at this level, the last step of the application process consists of student and parent interviews. During the interviews, principals again expected to find that the students demonstrated high academic potential or previous success, exhibited social-emotional “good” behavior, and had high levels of parental support. Administrators were also interested in sharing with the potential student and family the culture and expectations of their district. A few talked about how it was important that it was seen as two-way (or as a few described it was more of a three-way process, involving the program administrators) so that the parents had a chance to decide if it was a good fit for them, particularly regarding the school’s size and distance from their home. We were provided no examples, however, of when a student or parent decided not to enroll once being accepted into the program.

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<sup>7</sup> Given a subsequent discussion regarding a mixed race student not considered a minority but an adopted student of white parents considered a minority, the program may benefit from additional formal guidelines to clarify this for program and school administrators.



While most administrators felt that once a student and parent got to this point the student would be admitted to their school, several gave examples of times when the interview resulted in the student's not being admitted because of additional "red flags" that became evident during the interview. These "red flags" included a student who said they didn't want to leave their school, a parent who did not seem as enthusiastic as their spouse about the program, a parent who expressed concerns about what supports would be in place for African American students at the new school, a family who shared that the student had gotten accepted into another school, and a parent who was viewed as potentially unsupportive. During the interview, the program administrators once again played a large role in the process and often the principals deferred to their judgment about such decisions, such as whether or not a parent would potentially be supportive or if a student "really wanted it." This complicated selection process, as opposed to a lottery system, appears to be the result from an early desire that participants "would be chosen carefully for the ability and achievement qualifications which would enable him to fit easily into our class situations" (West Irondequoit News Letter, 1965).

The enrollment policy from the perspective of the USITP Administrators is that once students are admitted to a school they are guaranteed a space in the district through high school graduation, unless they are removed for a specific incident related to their individual status. Given this policy, one would expect little program attrition, however attrition seems quite high. Since 1965, we have record of 5821 students who have participated. Upon deeper analysis we found that 27% (1,571 students) who participated in the program attended private, secular or religious schools only. Another 5% (310 students) attended city schools during the two-way program period. Our study focuses on the 3,941 minority students<sup>8</sup> who attended suburban

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<sup>8</sup> Approximately 80 of these students who started in the Catholic schools and moved to the public schools are included in these analyses.

public schools through USITP since the program’s inception. Between 1975, which was when the first class of USITP students graduated, and 2001, 1,267 students graduated from suburban schools through the USITP (Woodson, 2007), indicating that approximately one-third of participating students are retained through twelfth grade.

Students have entered the program across all grade levels over time. However, as Table 3 indicates, 21% of all participating students entered the program in grade 1 and another 15% entered at grade 2. As seen in the table, most students enroll prior to 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

Table 3: Student Entry by Grade Level (All Years)

| Entry Grade | Number | Percent |
|-------------|--------|---------|
| K           | 219    | 6       |
| 1           | 800    | 21      |
| 2           | 559    | 15      |
| 3           | 366    | 10      |
| 4           | 328    | 9       |
| 5           | 255    | 7       |
| 6           | 317    | 8       |
| 7           | 323    | 8       |
| 8           | 189    | 5       |
| 9           | 237    | 6       |
| 10          | 119    | 3       |
| 11          | 77     | 2       |
| 12+         | 36     | 1       |

We found no clear pattern of feeder schools into the program with students coming from a variety of schools in the city school district. Since the late-1990s, less than 100 have entered the program each year but in earlier years as many as 200 entered annually at times. Table 4 summarizes our data regarding overall enrollment patterns by decade, showing the tapering off of program enrollment in the last decades.

Table 4: Enrollment by Decade

|         | Number        | Percent of Total |
|---------|---------------|------------------|
| 1965-69 | 341 students  | 9                |
| 1970-79 | 1036 students | 28               |
| 1980-89 | 1029 students | 28               |
| 1990-99 | 852 students  | 23               |
| 2000-07 | 466 students  | 13               |
| Total   | 3724          | 100              |

Note: missing data on year entered for 217 students.

While students attend from all parts of the city, the majority of students who have participated in the program have come from 6 city zip codes: 14608 (n=364; 9%), 14609 (n=322; 9%), 14605 (n=494; 13%), 14619 (n=624; 16%), 14611 (n=670; 17%), and 14621 (n=672). One of the reasons for this is that in the first few years the program was in existence it consisted of only two city schools sending their students out to the suburbs. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the communication around the program by word of mouth or guidance counselors likely limits access to information about the program. As Table 5 illustrates, while there are not clear patterns of unequal participation, there is some evidence of shifts away from the lower income zip codes and toward the higher income zips over time.

Table 5: Enrollment Patterns by Zip Code and Years

|           |                | Years   |         |         |         |         | Total  |
|-----------|----------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|
|           |                | 1965-69 | 1970-79 | 1980-89 | 1990-99 | 2000-07 |        |
| 14605     | Count          | 90      | 187     | 107     | 79      | 29      | 492    |
| \$16,695* | % within Zip   | 18.3%   | 38.0%   | 21.7%   | 16.1%   | 5.9%    | 100.0% |
|           | % within Years | 26.4%   | 18.1%   | 10.4%   | 9.3%    | 6.2%    | 13.2%  |
| 14606     | Count          | 0       | 3       | 24      | 35      | 28      | 90     |
| \$37,707  | % within Zip   | .0%     | 3.3%    | 26.7%   | 38.9%   | 31.1%   | 100.0% |
|           | % within Years | .0%     | .3%     | 2.3%    | 4.1%    | 6.0%    | 2.4%   |
| 14608     | Count          | 65      | 131     | 91      | 57      | 17      | 361    |
| \$18,358  | % within Zip   | 18.0%   | 36.3%   | 25.2%   | 15.8%   | 4.7%    | 100.0% |
|           | % within Years | 19.1%   | 12.6%   | 8.8%    | 6.7%    | 3.6%    | 9.7%   |
| 14609     | Count          | 10      | 28      | 108     | 105     | 69      | 320    |
| \$35,216  | % within Zip   | 3.1%    | 8.8%    | 33.8%   | 32.8%   | 21.6%   | 100.0% |
|           | % within Years | 2.9%    | 2.7%    | 10.5%   | 12.3%   | 14.8%   | 8.6%   |
| 14611     | Count          | 85      | 242     | 191     | 103     | 48      | 669    |
| \$20,582  | % within Zip   | 12.7%   | 36.2%   | 28.6%   | 15.4%   | 7.2%    | 100.0% |
|           | % within Years | 24.9%   | 23.4%   | 18.6%   | 12.1%   | 10.3%   | 18.0%  |
| 14613     | Count          | 0       | 2       | 13      | 35      | 40      | 90     |
| \$27,668  | % within Zip   | .0%     | 2.2%    | 14.4%   | 38.9%   | 44.4%   | 100.0% |
|           | % within Years | .0%     | .2%     | 1.3%    | 4.1%    | 8.6%    | 2.4%   |
| 14615     | Count          | 1       | 2       | 9       | 19      | 25      | 56     |
| \$36,580  | % within Zip   | 1.8%    | 3.6%    | 16.1%   | 33.9%   | 44.6%   | 100.0% |
|           | % within Years | .3%     | .2%     | .9%     | 2.2%    | 5.4%    | 1.5%   |
| 14619     | Count          | 32      | 193     | 175     | 138     | 82      | 620    |
| \$39,195  | % within Zip   | 5.2%    | 31.1%   | 28.2%   | 22.3%   | 13.2%   | 100.0% |
|           | % within Years | 9.4%    | 18.6%   | 17.0%   | 16.2%   | 17.6%   | 16.6%  |
| 14620     | Count          | 6       | 28      | 42      | 31      | 12      | 119    |
| \$30,776  | % within Zip   | 5.0%    | 23.5%   | 35.3%   | 26.1%   | 10.1%   | 100.0% |
|           | % within Years | 1.8%    | 2.7%    | 4.1%    | 3.6%    | 2.6%    | 3.2%   |
| 14621     | Count          | 6       | 133     | 240     | 205     | 82      | 666    |
| \$22,107  | % within Zip   | .9%     | 20.0%   | 36.0%   | 30.8%   | 12.3%   | 100.0% |
|           | % within Years | 1.8%    | 12.8%   | 23.3%   | 24.1%   | 17.6%   | 17.9%  |

\*Note: While median income changes occur per decade, we use the 2000 Census data as a point of reference. The lowest income zip codes are shaded for comparison purposes.

As seen in Table 5, based on an examination of the students resident zip codes by census data we find that most of the participating families come from the middle to higher income parts of the city. Even with this, there is quite a bit of mobility for some students. Our data indicate that a small proportion of students have stable living situations over the course of their programs. In

fact, some students moved multiple times in one year (up to four!) and multiple times across their enrollment in the program.

One thing that became clear through interviews and our database is that there is a high level of attrition from USITP, with students frequently moving back to their home school or out to the suburbs. Students remain in the program from 1 to 14 years with nearly  $\frac{3}{4}$  participating for five years or less and nearly  $\frac{1}{2}$  participating for less than 2 years. Approximately 38 students left in the 2008-09 school year – of these 34% moved to the suburbs, 21% moved out of the area, 16% voluntarily went back to RCSD, 13% voluntarily left for private school, and 11% were removed from the program at the district/school's request (an additional 5% were voluntary transfers without indication of where they went).

While the school administrators provided a great deal of details about how they screened applicants based upon student and family characteristics, many of them expressed concerns about this process and the impact that it had on the city school district (and even other suburban districts' selection process). One administrator thought that it might work better if they just admitted the students randomly, but shared with us that this “was not viable in [his district].” They were very aware of the perception of community members and knew that they were operating within a gray area of what it meant to have an impact on the district. For example, one administrator mentioned that you could not have a larger class size because of USITP –the implication being that the community expects small class sizes for all their students. The political tensions around taxpayer money and acceptance of the program seemed to influence the way in which administrators selected students.

There's a perception that the students we bring in are bad or there are behavioral problems and they're adding a negativity to our district and that is absolutely 100% untrue, false. It's actually quite the opposite. The students we bring out here couldn't be

better behaved to be honest with you...because they've been so diligently selected to come here.

However, as one administrator described, a sense of guilt seemed deeply intertwined with this need to have only kids who would be a "good fit." Several administrators captured this sentiment:

I often thought about how I feel like we're kind of stealing from the City. It's an application process and we're going in and we're choosing the best and brightest. I mean when I go through those applications, I'm not picking kids with borderline test scores and abilities, so you know, good for us, good for kids, and rough on the city.

I sometimes wish we'd have access to more kids or even more of a diverse group in a sense that sometimes I feel like we're taking the cream of the crop, but I think that's by virtue of the fact that these are the parents that have accessed the program.

We have this wonderful opportunity to skim the crème de la crème and we bring them out here...it's a win-win for this district and any other participating district because we get a chance to inflate, artificially so, our minority numbers. We get good quality kids coming from supportive family backgrounds that value education and the people that lose are the City of Rochester...I will admit about having pangs of guilt about that.

One of the key stakeholders expressed concern over the prescreening done by program administrators, stating, "We don't have much control over that, but I think they could in many ways be less selective....Some of the rules of the game, you know, they have to be on grade level, they have to not have this, not have that, so in other words they have to be an okay student." As one stakeholder pointed out, this may be important in the first year or two of implementation to ensure that the program will continue to be supported by the community, but after that initial time period the selectivity should decrease.

## **Implementation and Expansion**

Studies of the implementation of choice have found that students were marginalized and faced resegregation (Fennimore, 2005; Holme, Wells and Revilla, 2005). Beyond these issues relating to the opportunities students have once enrolled in their chosen school, Hovart and Lewis (2003) suggest that maintaining a healthy racial identity in mostly white environments can be a difficult challenge for students of color in their new school settings, particularly as a result of the racial discrimination students of color faced from students and school officials in suburban, mostly white schools (Orfield, 1998), as well as high levels of cultural insensitivity (Wells, 2001). Students in these programs often face both long rides and fewer opportunities to socialize with school peers during the evening and on the weekends (Wells & Crain, 2005). Our study found that in its current operation, USITP functions more as a mechanism that allows students to cross district boundaries than a program that enables them to cross cultural lines. In essence, students are plunged into the suburban context, expected to navigate the new school environment and expectations on their own and often held to a higher standard of behavior and academics. Expansion within the participating districts and to additional districts will likely require a broad spectrum of stakeholders forming a critical mass and advocating for the original goal to be realized—reduced racial isolation in the area’s schools and communities.

As the times and administrators have changed so has the focus and resources available to the USITP. Initially, there was a concerted effort to provide an enriched multi-cultural curriculum as well as professional development for teachers both to help them meet the needs of the urban students and to enrich the educational experiences of the suburban students (Gross, 1972). In its current form, there is a one night orientation for USITP students provided at the suburban school (Urban-Suburban Parent-Student Handbook, 2005), but most districts combine

this with their orientation for all of their new students. We found designated supports for USITP students. Instead, as one principal described, “it’s more of an immersion, like here you are.” This is interesting given that a few principals mentioned the difficulty of the students’ having to navigate between their worlds – in the city and suburbs. This was viewed as something that the students had to be able to take on and was good for “character development” according to one principal, not something that the school would directly attend to. Only one administrator mentioned that the counselors, grade level administrators, and teachers do a lot of “checking in..to make sure the person is feeling their way through and helping them navigate.” However, even in this instance there was no specific attention given to a USITP student’s classroom placement or assignment of counselors or other scheduling issues. While one administrator told us that she tried to place more than one student of color in a classroom to help support the USITP students, two USITP students would not be placed in the same elementary school classroom.

An interesting program-wide phenomenon was that administrators in every district commented that nobody would know which students were USITP students—that they were like any other student in the district. As one superintendent explained,

I once said to the principal, “I need the names of the Urban-Suburban kids. I need them for something.” And he said, “well, I don’t know who they are.” It was near the end of the year, he had no idea who is in the program. And that just shows you that the kids are treated exactly the same. There’s no difference the way they’re treated than my kid or anybody else who happens to walk through those doors over there. The principal doesn’t even know who they are.

He continued to explain that there may be five USITP students of the 40 kids per grade level who were students of color and the principal did not know which five they were. This was repeated by nearly every principal we interviewed. There was a sense of pride in that they were “our students” and that there was no list or i.d. badge that would separate these students out. Several



districts told us that they tried hard not to single the students out because they did not want this to be a program within their school, but rather that once they were admitted they were just like any other student in the school. These good intentions may have made it more challenging for the participating USITP 1<sup>st</sup> grade through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students as they tried to find their way in their new environments without any clearly delineated social and emotional supports to help them with this transition. There also did not appear to be a feedback loop for difficulties students were having that did not rise to the level of a disciplinary or academic issue. Additionally, although a few people hinted at racial or socio-economic tensions that existed between the USITP students and suburban students, in part because of misconceptions of what city life was like, most people felt that the USITP students were widely accepted and somewhat quickly became active members of their new schools.

The primary challenge students faced, according to administrators, was transportation. New York state policy requires that the student's resident district provide transportation in all cases for students not matter what school they attend (including private schools). As such, the city school district is solely responsible for transporting students through the USITP program to their suburban schools. In all of the suburban districts there were reports that students had to get up early, transfer in an unsafe area, miss out on after school opportunities, including clubs, sports, and meeting with teachers, and travel long rides (particularly for students in the outer ring suburbs). The perceived transportation difficulties were exacerbated by the need for parents to transport students themselves if they participated in activities before or after school because there were no early or late buses available for these students (except in the case of one district which had recently added an after school bus for USITP students). In order to address the challenges for USITP students who were not able to go home between the end of school and after school

activities that occurred late in the evening, one school began leaving the library open until 8 p.m. Transportation also became controversial for the city school district when, in a recent year, it tried to cut the USITP transportation from its budget (even though transporting resident students is required by the state). One administrator believed that these transportation issues were one of the main reasons why USITP families ended up eventually moving to the suburbs.

Community support for the USITP in its current form overall seems favorable. Many administrators told us about the positive response of community members. However, they were able to give more specific examples of the negative reactions to the program of individual community members. In some instances, assumptions about the urban students affected the acceptance of USITP students and the program, generally, within these communities. This was then complicated by the changing demographics of many of the districts leading to greater numbers of students of color attending their schools. As one principal noted,

Sometimes I've had community members make judgments about students because of the color of their skin—if they're involved in the program or not involved in the program. That can be a challenge...because if a student is Black they might make the assumption that they're in the Urban-Suburban program.

In two different districts we were told about suburban parents' complaints regarding their student's not making a sports team or inability to enroll in an advanced placement class because the USITP students were taking spots that should have been reserved for district residents. A few people also mentioned when a problem arose with a USITP student, parents would question why they had to "put up with this" referring to the USITP program and city school kids. Ironically, from the perspective of most school administrators, the USITP students sometimes had the exact same infraction as other students, but were held to a higher standard and their behavior was looked at differently than it was for residents. For example, what would result in a

suspension for a resident would likely result in dismissal from the program for a USITP student. Many administrators told us about the reasons why students could be removed, which ranged from serious infractions like drugs and weapons to behavioral issues or failure to achieve academically. While we do not have records of involuntary removals over time, maintaining a certain academic level and conduct was considered a requirement of program and school administrators as it was viewed as a ‘privilege’ to attend the suburban districts. Several administrators had personally experienced or knew of students who had been asked to leave the program because the prior steps, e.g., meeting with their parents, meeting with the program administrators, and developing a behavioral or academic contract, had not been successful.

The USITP continues to operate in seven suburban districts because of a widespread view—at least on the part of administrators—that it provides a benefit to both the suburban students and the urban participants. Nearly all of the administrators discussed the benefits to the urban students, including the additional resources and supports in their schools, the high quality teachers, and the programs. As one person noted, “it’s designed to give a different opportunity,” while another pointed out,

the program is great for the kids who participate in it because they have access to our wonderful teachers, our resources...you think of a rising tide lifting all boats, I mean the academic and behavioral expectations are very high here...and I think that kids live up to your expectations, and we expect our kids to do well and to achieve. So it’s good for kids.

A few pointed out that they did not think there was anything wrong with the city schools, placing the emphasis on the parents’ decision for their children.

I’m always impressed because I think that these must be families that they believe they want something better for their child. I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with the City of Rochester School District, but obviously these families say, ‘hey, if I could get them in a different setting, a new suburban setting, maybe their chances for success will be a little bit greater’.

Additionally, most of the principals and stakeholders emphasized the benefit to the suburban students in terms of having more diverse students in the school. One principal highlighted the importance for the adults, as well, saying, “with a predominantly white staff we’re trying to become more culturally competent.” A principal noted that it was a nice support group for the suburban minority students in the district, although in the first few years he noted that the biggest tensions were between the African American students from the city and from the suburbs. Yet only a few administrators suggested that the overall number of students who participate in their district should be increased or that students should be accepted in additional grade levels, and no one commented on the fact that acquiring a critical mass of students (more than the current 1 to 4 percent of their population) may have a bigger impact on the ultimate goal of bringing about greater integration in the community. To expand this program the suburban districts in this community (both participating and non-participating) would need to come together and re-consider the original goal of this program: to reduce racial isolation. While greater regional options, such as is being developed in Omaha, Nebraska may more directly target this problem, calls for regional or metropolitan choice solutions elsewhere have been met with concerns by community members about their loss of local control and the detriment to their own children’s educational opportunities (Kozol, 2005; Wells & Crain, 2005). In Rochester, expansion of the program appears unlikely unless a strong advocacy coalition were to join together again, as discussed in the following pages.

In the early years, the purpose of integrating the community and reducing isolation was kept at the forefront by community activists and others. One city school principal developed panels of parents, clergy, educators, and others who would “try to convince other districts to join

the program.” A program administrator who participated in these panels conveyed how challenging it was to be confronted by the views of the suburban residents:

I'll tell you, I went on about four or five of those parents panels, and when we got to [one district] I told [principal], “pick somebody else. I've tried and they don't want to go and this is my last panel.” It's wearing, you know, to listen to some of the stuff that comes back at you.

She continued, commenting that she knew some of the suburban residents from her workplace,

I saw a couple of familiar faces at that meeting, and I knew who they were, and the next day, a couple of scientists and a couple of other folks, never spoke to me again. That's how deep racism can be. They never spoke to me again.

One view of a current stakeholder was that the program would only expand to include additional suburban districts if people involved in the program became more vocal in their support. For example, if superintendents of the participating USITP districts made statements in support of USITP it would then create more dialogue around the program and spark the interest of other communities. As one principal said, “it's all how you sell it to the community...because there are people in the community who dislike it.” He continued,

If the people perceive that the kids are coming here and in their mind, not my words but their words, leeching off of the system, leeching off the taxpayers, it won't have a good perception. But if it's a situation where the kids come here, they contribute, they're a positive part of the community, then people won't have a problem with it.

However, another principal addressed the racial prejudices that would need to be addressed before more communities would provide support,

It's a dicey conversation to have and it's a dicey topic and it brings out the ugliness in people because inevitably there will be people who want to talk about race and make it a race issue, ‘I pay taxes in this district and you're taking resources that I pay and giving them for free to somebody else—those Black kids or those Hispanic kids. And so I understand that it's an uncomfortable topic for people to approach, but I think it's a discussion that maybe we can have now with a Black president.. maybe we can get all that stuff out on the table and just forget color and start talking about what's best for kids.

Another administrator was a bit stronger in his views regarding expanding to other districts. “I would say if it’s 25 more years before the next school [joins] then shame on every district for not participating.” He and another stakeholder viewed the program as limited in its scope and not truly tackling the larger issue of segregation in the Rochester community because while having a few African American students in the suburban districts breaks the color line, it does not result in integration. Both of these individuals believe that the only solution is a metropolitan or regional school system that involves a formula or general guidelines for each school’s racial composition based upon the composition of the entire county.

Even while limited in scope and impact there was a sense that the USITP could act as a starting point in addressing the larger problems. As one stakeholder pointed out, “it doesn’t mean that you can’t have this and also look for something that’s going to move the whole system.” However, there was frustration that it was so difficult to get more districts to join.

Two stakeholders were more direct in their views:

Okay, here’s your aid, it’s going to be more aid than you get if this kid came in [as a resident]. The transportation is going to be taken care of. You’re going to be able to interview your kids and pick the kids you want, so you could literally say, “I don’t want this kid.” And you’re only going to use space that you have if you have an underenrolled class. So it’s not going to cost you anything and you could actually make some money on the deal. Why wouldn’t you do it? Why wouldn’t you involve yourself if it weren’t racially motivated?

To be very blunt, racism and ignorance are the two main reasons why we don’t have a countywide system, plus economic self interest.

The general view of administrators regarding why more districts did not join was because of either a lack of information or concerns that their communities would not support a “controversial” program. To address these issues, several suggestions were offered, including that the program administrators attend the monthly countywide superintendents meetings to

encourage additional districts to join and that superintendents contact the districts that were participants to ask about their experiences with USITP. An additional recommendation to begin to conquer improve the understanding and dialogue around diverse cultures and contexts was to have student, teacher, or administrator exchanges (or even transfer programs) between the urban and suburban districts, harkening back to the exchanges of the 1960s that preceded USITP. By providing opportunities for diverse groups to share ideas and practices and reducing the misperceptions of people from other communities more people would potentially become supportive of the policy changes necessary to reduce the segregation and inequities that continues to exist in this metropolitan area.

### **Conclusion**

Our study of the more than 40 years of the USITP program in Rochester suggests the importance of understanding the political dynamics and formal and informal processes and practices that facilitate or limit participation in interdistrict choice. Perhaps the most important aspect of this story has to do with the political underpinnings of selection, implementation, and expansion. Key support was necessary in the early stages of development from a variety of interest groups, including the media, politicians, school board members, district administrators, parent groups, and community organizers. This type of mobilization may be necessary for the program to expand both within the current districts and to a larger proportion of the suburban communities located in this region. However, as clearly illustrated throughout this paper, a constant tension exists between the benefits of integration and the self interests of the taxpayer in allowing students to cross district boundaries, particularly in a program that only involves city residents enrolling in the suburbs. The Rochester community may benefit from the experiences

of other communities that required two-way programs and greater numbers of students to address the longstanding segregation in these communities. While this mobilization would need to involve both urban and suburban community members, additional support from local and state politicians and policymakers, as well as the media, is critical.

Although the study is not generalizable it provides important insights into the ways in which interdistrict choice is limited during implementation. Given the size of the program it was not likely having the “creaming” effect that many administrators were concerned about, as only 1% of the current city school population participate. However, the subjective and highly selective application process may be worth revisiting as it would provide greater legitimacy to the process and be more likely to withstand legal challenges. Interdistrict choice policies, such as the USITP, would benefit from more widespread advertising as well as looser restrictions on participation. State policymakers should consider additional incentives for suburban districts to take students that are performing at a variety of levels and have a variety of backgrounds to provide more equitable opportunities to a larger number of city students.

Additional research is necessary to better understand the implementation challenges facing participating students given the lack of supports in their new schools and difficulty engaging in extracurricular and other activities because of logistical issues relating to transportation. The desire to have students viewed as the same as the resident students, so as not to single them out, may unintentionally place additional burdens on these students as they navigate their different worlds without a clear understanding within these new contexts of their cultural background and the challenge they face as “outsiders.” This may also serve to create, rather than lessen, the tensions between urban and suburban students of color, as well as the parents who continue to question their involvement in the schools. Interdistrict policies should



consider incorporating funds to provide additional supports at the school site for students to help them become successful in their new school environments, particularly as they face racial prejudices and especially if they have unstable home environments. In addition, additional attention to professional development to provide suburban school teachers with greater understanding of the city students' backgrounds and cultures and engage school staff in dialogue about ways that these students are actually different from (rather than the same as) every other suburban student they serve.

Finally, a key finding from this study is that the broader community in Rochester and elsewhere should develop a greater understanding of the negative effects of segregation on the larger community. The USITP governing board (made up of the participating district superintendents) could consider sponsoring events to not only share information about the program but to encourage additional districts to join in its efforts. While this may prompt the program to expand, any broader regional solution will likely require mandates or incentives from state or local policymakers. There is much to learn from 40 years of implementation in Rochester but additional work remains to allow interdistrict choice to meet its full potential.

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