Research Brief

Regional Educational Equity Policies: Learning from Inter-district Integration Programs

By Kara S. Finnigan and Jennifer Jellison Holme[1]

Across the U.S., urban school districts are in a deepening state of crisis. Problems of academic failure, financial debt, and enrollment loss have been reported in many of the nation's largest cities, including Buffalo, Chicago, St. Louis, Washington, DC, Newark, and Philadelphia. Such problems prompted Education Secretary Arne Duncan to label the Detroit Public Schools a "national disgrace," and Kansas City's schools as "among the worst in the nation."[2]

In local and national policy debates, there are two distinct explanations about the reasons for these crises. One explanation—for which there is some consensus on both the political left and right—attributes these problems primarily to the failings of the districts and schools themselves, particularly a lack of fiscal and academic accountability. The solution, according to this narrative, is to inject the system with competitive market forces; raise standards; improve accountability systems; tie teacher pay to student achievement; re-staff and "turnaround" schools; or pool failing schools into a state-run school district. This narrative, therefore, treats the educational crises as a technical problem—and the solution, the narrative goes, should come in the form of a "technical fix," through an improved mixture of incentives, sanctions, and supports for schools.

Another, largely different, explanation for school failure comes from outside the mainstream education policy discourse. This narrative attributes the struggles faced by urban districts to decades of discriminatory policy decisions that created deep inequities between urban school districts and their surrounding suburbs. Such policies include discriminatory government and banking policies and real estate practices that promoted white flight to suburbs while locking families of color into urban cores, or into isolated inner ring suburbs. The damaging effects of these practices were compounded by the powers state legislatures delegated to suburban municipalities to incorporate into autonomous legal entities, with their own tax bases, school systems, and land use policies. Together, these policies and practices promoted economic competition between cities and suburbs that fueled residential racial segregation, tax base inequalities, and—for those districts on the "losing" end—poor educational performance. Policy solutions emerging from this diagnosis focus on addressing the inequality and inefficiency created by multiple jurisdictions within metropolitan areas through "regional" policies that aim to connect cities and suburbs on issues such as transit, housing, air quality, and land use. These policies include strategies to reduce racial and economic segregation between jurisdictions, such as housing vouchers and strategic siting of affordable housing that move people

across city and suburban lines. Unfortunately, these policies have rarely been implemented at any significant scale.

Educational policies have also been adopted to address these same issues: for over five decades, there has been a long-standing yet little known type of school choice policy designed to promote racial and economic integration across district lines. These policies are commonly referred to as inter-district school integration policies and have been adopted in 13 metropolitan areas in ten states in the US, beginning in the 1960s through the 2000s. They are premised upon the idea that segregation and racial isolation between school districts are a fundamental cause of educational inequality. They seek to address this root cause of failure by allowing students to move across the boundaries of districts both to create more integrated learning environments and to provide students the opportunity to access greater resources, academic and social opportunities, and networks. Over the past five decades, tens of thousands of students have participated in, and graduated from, these programs. Research has found these programs yield significant academic and social benefits for participants. These are the types of policies recently pointed to by a *New York Times* editorial as a way to address growing segregation in New York State's schools.[3] Based on our study of these programs, we take a closer look at these long-standing inter-district integration policies in eight metropolitan areas: St. Louis, MO; Hartford, CT; Minneapolis, MN; East Palo Alto (and the surrounding region), CA; Rochester, NY; Boston, MA; Omaha, NE; and Milwaukee, WI.

Description of Programs

Inter-district integration programs, while less well-known than other types of choice policies like charters and vouchers, are voluntary school choice programs that have been adopted and implemented in metropolitan areas in the U.S. over the last six decades. The first policy was adopted in the 1960s in Rochester, NY during a difficult time of race riots, with the most recent policy enacted by the Nebraska state legislature in 2007 during controversial discussions about how to solve metropolitan inequities in the area. Unfortunately, no reliable numbers exist as to the number of students who have participated in or graduated from inter-district integration programs. Even current enrollment and retention in these programs can be difficult to determine, as many programs do not track these numbers or report them annually. We estimate based upon most recent numbers from each program collected through our study that approximately 40,000 students participate each year across these eight metropolitan areas in either urban-suburban transfer programs, or inter-district magnet schools.

These programs vary in size and structure from nearly 600 students in Rochester (the oldest program) to more than 6,000 in Omaha (the newest) to nearly 19,000 in Hartford (the largest).[4] In some programs, enrollment targets have been established via court settlements, while in other programs, students are accepted into districts based upon projections of "space available" each year. Enrollment goals also vary across programs, with some focusing on race and others on socioeconomic status (SES); admissions processes vary as

3   Dan Verbeck, "Schools' 'Among Worse In Nation' Tag gets Softpedal" KCUR Radio, January 5, 2012, Accessed March 2, 2015, http://kcur.org/post/schools-among-worst-nation-tag-gets-softpedal.

3   "Racial Isolation in Schools," New York Times, January 9, 2015.

4   The Learning Community is at present unable to collect data to ascertain what proportion of students who transfer between districts are making moves that are increasing building level diversity (see Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties, *Annual Evaluation Report 2013-14* (Omaha, NE: Author, 2015) The report estimates that about 35% of participating students (nearly 2,000) are making school choices that improves the diversity level (in terms of poverty level) of the receiving school.

well, with some using a lottery and others using a complex interview process. All of the programs provide students with transportation and many provide additional resources to suburban schools that participate. Some also provide "hold harmless funding" to schools that send students under these programs. Several plans incorporate regional magnet schools, and some incorporate counseling and student supports.

Overall, these programs are highly sought after by parents, and many have long waitlists of families vying for seats.[5] In 2011, approximately 900 students were on the waitlist for kindergarten for METCO, with an additional 1200 for first or second grade.[6] The Milwaukee Chapter 220 program has had to turn down between 800 and 900 students per year.[7] In Rochester, there is no waiting list but only approximately 10% of applicants are placed each year.[8]

Research on Outcomes

While features of these specific programs vary, research on integration programs more broadly have found consistently positive benefits for students. Some of the benefits from these studies (which are listed in the "Resources" section at the end of this brief) include improved achievement scores; reduced dropout rates; increased graduation rates, and improved racial attitudes.[9] School integration has also been found to yield long-term educational and social benefits, such as increased college going, employment, and earnings.[10] Similar benefits have also been found in studies specifically focusing on inter-district integration programs.[11] Quantitative studies have found positive test-score gains for participants in math, reading, social studies, and science, as well as long-term benefits such as improved occupational attainment. Qualitative studies have found that students who participated in these programs often experienced short-term social and academic challenges, but they benefitted

5   See, for example: Aspen Associates, *Minnesota Voluntary Public School Choice: Multi-Year Evaluation Summary* (Minneapolis: Author, 2009); Massachusetts Executive Office of Education, *METCO Report to the Massachusetts State Legislature*. (Boston, MA: Author, 2013); Harold M. Rose and Dianne Pollard, *Interdistrict Chapter 220: Changing Goals and Perspectives* (Milwaukee, WI: Public Policy Forum, 2000).

6   Susan Eaton and Gina Chirichigno, *METCO Merits More: The History and Status of METCO*. (Boston: Pioneer Institute, 2011).

7   Erin Richards, "As School Options Expand, Landmark Chapter 220 Program Fades," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, December 24, 2013.

8   Kara Finnigan and Burke Scarbrough, "Defining (and Denying) Diversity Through Interdistrict Choice," *Journal of School Choice* 7 (2013).

9   See Jonathan Guryan, "Desegregation and Black Dropout rates," *The American Economic Review* 94, no. 4 (2004); Rucker Johnson, *Long-Run Impacts of School Desegregation and School Quality on Adult Attainments*, Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research (2011); Sean Reardon and Ann Owens, "60 years after Brown: Trends and Consequences of School Segregation," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 40 (2014); Heather Schwartz, *Housing Policy is School Policy: Economically Integrative Housing Promotes Academic Success in Montgomery County, Maryland*. (New York: The Century Foundation, 2010); Amy Stuart Wells, Jennifer Jellison Holme, Anita Revilla, and Awo Korantemaa Atanda, *Both Sides Now: The Story of Desegregation's Graduates* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2009).

10   See Robert L. Crain, R. L., and Rita Mahard, "Desegregation and Black Achievement: A Review of the Research. *Law and Contemporary Problems* 42, no. 3 (1978), 17–56.; Reardon and Owens, "60 Years After *Brown*."

11   See Joshua D. Angrist and Kevin Lang. "Does School Integration Generate Peer Effects? Evidence From Boston." *The American Economic Review* 94, no. 5 (2004): 1613-1634; Aspen Associates, *Minnesota Voluntary Public School Choice*; Robert Bifulco, Casey Cobb and Courtney Bell, "Can Interdistrict Choice Boost Student Achievement? The Case of Connecticut's Interdistrict Magnet School Program," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 31 no. 4. (2009); Robert L. Crain and Jack Strauss, *School Desegregation and Black Occupational Attainment: Results from a Long-Term Experiment*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1985). Harold M. Rose and Diane Pollard, *Interdistrict Chapter 220;* Kendra Bischoff, "Negotiating Disparate Social Contexts: Evidence from an Interdistrict School Desegregation Program" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 2011).

from significant long-term gains, including better preparation for college, and improved comfort in diverse settings.[12] Thus, although research on educational reforms often yields mixed and contradictory evidence, the research evidence on inter-district integration programs consistently finds that such programs yield significant academic, employment, and social benefits for participants.

Promoting Educational Opportunity Across Metropolitan Areas: Regional Educational Equity Policies

Our research has suggested that to promote greater equity between school districts and to reduce economic and racial isolation, these policies must evolve to focus more comprehensively on regional equity. In essence, these inter-district integration policies should be expanded and incorporated within a broader strategy to promote greater equity and reduced inequality across metropolitan areas through a combination of choice and place-based investment in high poverty schools. We have identified three core policy components of what we call Regional Educational Equity Policies that, in combination, have the likelihood of enhancing educational equity and academic achievement for all students across metropolitan areas. Most current equity strategies focus on **either** improving urban districts through urban renewal approaches **or** increasing mobility across boundaries but do not pay attention to the interconnections between these approaches. We briefly describe these areas, drawing attention to the places in our study that illustrate the different components.

1) *Regional equity choice programs.* As discussed above, inter-district integration policies have been one of the only policies to successfully tackle regional inequity in education. These

programs offer important lessons for crafting school choice policies that are designed to promote diversity across districts in a region: First, it is critical that students are able to participate in a **lottery** and are placed for the **duration** of their educational career, as occurs in the Tinsley program in CA. This ensures fairness of treatment both in access and upon entry similar to any resident child. Second, **transportation** must be provided both for regular schooling and for extra-curricular activities to ensure students are able to access the wide-ranging opportunities in their schools. In Rochester, NY transportation is provided for all students and some districts have worked to provide buses before and after school. Third, it is important that programs provide additional **supports** to transfer students whether academic or social-emotional. For example, the METCO program provides counselors in receiving schools. Additional supports could be provided through reading or math specialists and social workers, as needed. Fourth, **professional development** is critical as many schools do not have experience with the diverse populations or may not understand the challenges students face crossing racial and economic barriers. Both Minneapolis and Hartford's programs provide professional development to educators across the region to help them teach with cultural competency. Finally, determination of **available seats** should be set according to equity targets rather than "space available" each year.

2) *Place-based reforms.* To ensure viability and metropolitan equity, it is important to develop regional strategies comprised of place-based (urban) investment. One promising strategy is to invest in a handful of the most challenged

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12   Kendra Bischoff, "Negotiating Disparate Social Contexts," 22; Amy Stuart Wells and Robert L. Crain, *Steppin' Over the Color Line: African American Students in White Suburban Schools.* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999); Susan E. Eaton, *The Other Boston Busing Story: What's Won and Lost Across the Boundary Line.* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

neighborhoods – e.g., as Omaha has done through its Elementary Learning Centers, or through comprehensive strategies in targeted neighborhoods involving housing, education, and health. Another is to (re)invest in urban districts by targeting funds, including school turnaround funds as was recently proposed in New York state, toward redesign of failing schools with specific educational approaches, e.g., through STEM, early college, pathways to technology (P-Tech), or other approaches, and requiring that seats are set aside to serve students from other districts to increase racial and socioeconomic integration within urban districts. Funding for outreach and recruitment would also be needed to ensure schools would serve diverse populations.

3) *Regional governance.* With respect to either school choice or place-based reforms, it is important to have programs overseen by a regional governing body that includes representatives from across the region, to ensure that decisions about programs are made with regional equity goals in mind and with the input of all stakeholders. This group may be either appointed or elected, and must determine an equitable voting process, e.g., by weighting voting by numbers of students involved or resident population of the district to ensure that urban district priorities are not overlooked. The regional governance board should administer the school choice programs, including outreach or processing applications as in Hartford, or marketing/advertising and evaluating programs as in Omaha. In our study, county or intermediary offices of education, such as the BOCES system in NY and county-wide offices in CA, were also serving in this role given the infrastructure that already existed that could be built upon for these regional equity purposes. The governance board should also oversee place based reforms and investments. These governing bodies should also coordinate with other entities working to address inequities across regions, including housing authorities, transit authorities, workforce development agencies, and non-profits, in order to build cross-sector strategies to promote and sustain integration across communities.

State and Federal Policy Targets and Resources

In this section, we share recommendations for policymakers who are interested in creating Regional Educational Equity Policies that encompass these three critical areas. Given the competing political and educational pressures within metropolitan communities, state and federal action is more critical than ever before to increase the likelihood that such policies are adopted, and sustained.

Funding:

A primary barrier to the creation of these types of policies is funding. State and federal policymakers must consider reallocating resources or using existing resources in the following ways:

- Regional equity school choice programs: Several key financial supports should be in place to support these programs:

  - To create an inter-district choice program to foster diversity in today's policy context, funding is necessary to incentivize districts to enroll students from other districts– whether urban or suburban. In some places, e.g., CT, legislation provides additional per pupil funding once certain thresholds are met and at additional levels. These financial incentives for inter-district transfers have had a positive impact on the budgets of many suburban schools.

  - Targeted funding is also needed for additional costs, e.g., for transportation costs, capital improvements, professional development, and student supports. These funds could be allocated on a per pupil basis or in

grant allocations for participating districts to ensure that the key features described above are met.

- In at least the first few years of policy implementation, sending districts, particularly urban districts, should be "held harmless" on current funding levels as the system begins to be put in place to promote regional equity. This require financial set asides to maintain state funding levels.

○ Place-based investments. Targeted funding – aligned with regional equity goals – is needed to strengthen and support urban districts. For example, in Omaha, a small regional tax is levied across all property in the metro area to fund targeted programming and early childhood services in the highest poverty areas of the city. Furthermore, for regional equity choice policies to be most successful they should be two-way, meaning both urban and suburban districts send and receive students. Since most urban districts have a number of schools that have been targeted under sanctions for years this is the opportunity to truly invest in "turnaround" by changing some of these into high priority inter-district magnets (this approach is now being piloted in New York State). Funding stipulations relating to diversity targets would be necessary to ensure these magnets are aligned with regional equity goals and can attract families from outside the city. For example, by setting enrollment goals linked to metropolitan area demographics and withholding funding if these goals are not met.

○ Beyond state funding allocations, legislation could allow for (or require) a small regional tax to support these efforts as has occurred in Omaha, which as noted funnels a small tax from across all districts in the metropolitan area into regional and place-based programming. In essence, Omaha has been at the forefront in recognizing that since the whole region gains from reduced inequality the whole region must pay into these efforts.

Accountability.

Beyond funding, an additional barrier relates to accountability for both schools and teachers, which has the potential to undermine regional educational equity given the high-stakes involved for districts and educators.

○ A number of suburban educators told us that the accountability systems created disincentives for diversity transfers, as educators were reluctant to enroll students who count as a "subgroup" or would be perceived as having greater academic needs thereby subjecting their schools (or themselves) to lowered ratings. To reduce this barrier, schools and teachers could be "held harmless" if they open seats to students who change the demographics of the classroom or school. This concern could also be diminished if NCLB requirements continue to be weakened or if the ESEA reauthorization focused more attention on diversity goals.

○ Rather than the current punitive labels, accountability systems could reward districts and schools for taking steps to becoming more diverse and improving regional equity. This may mean providing some reprieve for districts and schools who receive students in terms of labeling and sanctions or it could mean providing schools that have intentionally targeted attracting diverse populations with a special designation as a "Diversity School." Providing this designation on students' high school transcripts may provide an advantage in an increasingly competitive college admissions environment and could potentially attract both urban and suburban families.

Concluding Thoughts

The programs that we studied have worked hard, often against strong political and educational pressures, to reduce inequities related to educational access and opportunity in their metropolitan areas, though none have been able to stem the tide of growing racial and socio-economic inequality. As a

result, at this point in time, state or federal policy action is critical to not only support these policies across the country but also to foster the creation of similar efforts in other metropolitan areas. Importantly, it is only with the intentional focus on policies that foster regional educational equity both through schooling as well as through broader policies to reduce racial and socio-economic isolation of families (i.e., through affordable housing, equitable transit, and workforce development) that the urban school "crisis" can be addressed, and that opportunity can be improved for all youth.

Resources

Robert Bifulco, Casey Cobb and Courtney Bell, "Can Interdistrict Choice Boost Student Achievement? The Case of Connecticut's Interdistrict Magnet School Program," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 31 no. 4. (2009).

Susan Eaton and Gina Chirichigno, *METCO Merits More: The History and Status of METCO*. (Boston: Pioneer Institute, 2011).

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Amy Stuart Wells and Robert L. Crain, Steppin' *Over the Color Line: African American Students in White Suburban Schools*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

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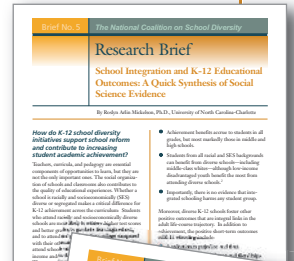By Genevieve Siegel-Hawley and Erica Frankenberg

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