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Intersection Ahead

School Transportation, School Integration, and School Choice

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This is part of a series of publications on school transportation policy, including:

1. **From Yellow to Green: Reducing School Transportation's Impact on the Environment**
2. **Intersection Ahead: School Transportation, School Integration, and School Choice**
3. **School Crossing: Student Transportation Safety on the Bus and Beyond**

These policy briefs build on our 2019 slide deck "The Challenges and Opportunities in School Transportation Today" and our 2017 report "Miles to Go: Bringing School Transportation into the 21st Century."

Key Takeaways

This brief examines school integration and school choice through the lens of school transportation. It first provides a brief history of the role transportation has played in integration and choice policies. It then dives into three examples of initiatives that combine choice and integration, and the challenges they pose for transportation, including:

- Magnet schools, which bring students together across neighborhoods or districts, introducing challenges for equitable and efficient transportation services
- Diverse-by-design charter schools, which commit to student diversity in their mission or design, but face transportation barriers around funding, economies of scale, and logistics common to other charter schools
- Controlled choice district enrollment, which allows families to rank school choices while adjusting for school diversity in some way, and tries to make travel times and routes to school manageable for families and for buses

Often school transportation systems are an afterthought in policy conversations around complex topics like integration and choice, to the detriment of students and district budgets alike. Through smart policy choices and planning, it is possible for states, districts, and schools to tackle this challenge and focus on equity in school transportation.

Introduction

Without equitable and efficient school transportation systems, families will not have equitable access to schools beyond residentially segregated neighborhoods.

Although the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision unanimously declared that "separate but equal" educational facilities for racial minorities were unconstitutional in 1954, 65 years later school districts across the nation still struggle to create and maintain racially integrated schools. Today, more states and districts are attempting to address segregation and inequity among schools by expanding families' ability to choose from a variety of school options, regardless of where they live. School transportation should be a critical component of an effective integration or school choice policy. Without equitable and efficient school transportation systems, families will not have equitable access to schools beyond residentially segregated neighborhoods.

Examples from several communities across the country suggest that choice plans without integration considerations can deepen segregation, whereas integration plans without choices can produce family pushback, and neither choice nor integration plans can function without transportation solutions. School integration and school choice are both complex topics in their own right and deserving of thorough examination and analysis. It is important to note that families of color and advocates for educational equity have a range of diverging viewpoints around school choice and integration.[1]

However, this brief is limited in its scope. It does not attempt to debate the merits of integration and choice as individual policy approaches; rather, it focuses narrowly on how both topics intersect with school transportation. We believe that taking a transportation lens to efforts that combine integration and choice is an important contribution for school district leaders aiming to prioritize all three.

School transportation serves as an important tool to counteract the forces of residential segregation and give students access to schools they might not otherwise be able to reach.

School transportation serves as an important tool to counteract the forces of residential segregation and give students access to schools they might not otherwise be able to reach. Patterns of residential segregation often mean that students must travel farther from home to reach integrated schools. Recent analyses from the Urban Institute estimated that neighborhood segregation by race explains about 76% of the variation in school segregation by race across cities,[2] and found that black students travel farther to reach school than their white peers, even after controlling for income.[3] As a result, policies that do not offer families transportation support limit access to diverse schools.

But the relationship between school integration and transportation is logistically and legally complex. In the past, transporting students explicitly to desegregate schools was sometimes required by policies and court orders, as in the case of within- and cross-district "busing" programs in the 1960s and '70s. These programs were often effective at reducing racial isolation in schools, but they also produced fierce racist backlash, and ultimately, backlash in the courts that limited schools' ability to consider race in school assignment policies. Data suggest that school segregation has remained stagnant or worsened in recent decades.[4]

At the same time, school choice policies and programs have arisen as a way to decouple residence and school assignment. These policies, including magnet schools, charter schools, and other modes of choice, offer families the opportunity to affirmatively choose schools beyond their neighborhoods. School choice options have the potential to integrate schools by enrolling students from across otherwise segregated neighborhoods. But giving parents choices does not always encourage integration, and in some cases it has deepened existing patterns of segregation.[5] Yet, in some cases, specific choice models with the express goal of integration have emerged, and those choice models are the focus of this brief.

Choice models with integration-related goals experience the same transportation challenges observed in school choice models broadly. Notably, schools of choice have fewer guaranteed transportation supports than assigned district schools. This can create barriers to equitable choice: Families may not have the resources or capacity to transport students across town on their own, and some students may balk at commutes that could be twice as long as the neighborhood option.

As more students travel across town — rather than across the street — to attend school, providing students of all backgrounds with equitable access to schools often requires a more complex and expensive transportation system. Where integration is an explicit goal, the realities of residential segregation amplify the need for intentional thinking about

transportation options. Unfortunately, school transportation is often an afterthought in district decision-making processes and policy debates. So, how are schools approaching choice, integration, and transportation today, and what are the transportation implications of emerging models that combine choice and integration?

In this brief, we will:

- Provide a brief history of school transportation's role in integration and choice efforts
- Analyze school transportation's importance to current models aimed at providing both integration and choice, including:
    - Magnet schools – These schools enroll students from larger geographies than traditional public schools and typically offer unique curricular themes or instructional approaches designed to attract students across different racial and economic backgrounds
    - Diverse-by-design charter schools – These types of charter schools commit to student diversity in their mission or design and focus on achieving certain levels of diversity in their enrollment
    - District-controlled choice enrollment systems – These systems allow families to rank school choices while controlling for school diversity in some way, often by weighting student demographic information
- Present three case studies of schools and districts providing school transportation services to support integration and choice goals, including some that use innovative approaches to transportation to better enable equitable access to schools
- Make recommendations for state and local policymakers to better support transportation options as a means of increasing choice and reducing segregation

We hope this brief will help guide policies that affect transportation options for students, and elevate the role of school transportation in conversations about how to improve education for all students, particularly those without access to high-quality, integrated schools.

History of Transportation and Integration

Historical context continues to play a large role in today's conversations about educational access and equity, and it influences how families make decisions about where their children attend school.

School transportation, school integration, and school choice each have important histories that education leaders should keep in mind when designing school transportation solutions. This historical context continues to play a large role in today's conversations about educational access and equity, and it influences how families make decisions about where their children attend school.

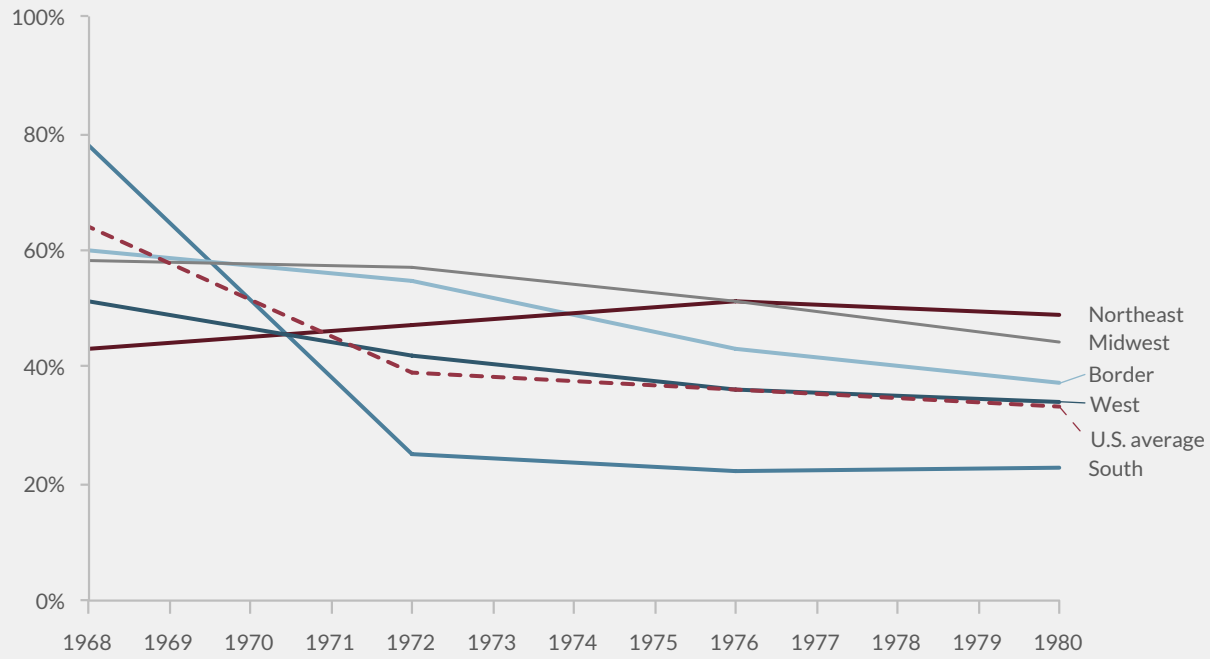
1954–1975: Busing as a Direct Desegregation Tool

After the 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* of Topeka, in which the Supreme Court overruled the principle of "separate but equal," early school desegregation efforts allowed black students to transfer to white schools and relied on parent choice. However, these approaches resulted in few black students enrolling in white schools.[6] In 1968, under *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County*, the court ruled that "to ensure racial balance in schools," desegregation plans should be judged by factors including the ratio of black and white students and faculty, as well as equality in facilities and transportation.[7]

Following the *Green* ruling, desegregation efforts became more deliberate and planned. Because court-ordered desegregation plans often necessitated longer rides to school, these policies are usually called "busing" programs. Some court orders mandated using school transportation as a way to desegregate schools. Others focused on accelerating voluntary desegregation through school choice policies. These approaches foreshadowed the models used by districts today.[8]

Aggressive desegregation efforts with transportation as a primary tool resulted in a drop in the percent of black students attending mostly black schools through the 1980s, particularly in the South. However, segregation in the Northeast actually increased during this time. Black students in this region were often concentrated in large, predominantly nonwhite school districts that were never ordered to implement major desegregation plans, and sometimes such orders came after many white families had already left the district.[9]

Figure 1 Percent of Black Students Attending 90 to 100% Minority Schools, 1965–1980



Note: "South" includes AL, AR, GA, FL, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, TX, and VA. "Border" includes DE, KY, MD, MO, OK, WV, and DC.

Source: Gary Orfield, *Public School Desegregation in the United States*, 1968–1980 (Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political Studies, 1983), p. 4, https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/public-school-desegregation-in-the-united-states-1968-1980/orfield_american-desegregation-1983.pdf.

Although many busing programs achieved their goals of reducing racial isolation, they were also controversial and unpopular in many places, both among white families continuing to resist integration, and for families and students of color who were subject to violence or ostracization at historically white schools. For example, when Boston implemented desegregation busing under a court-ordered plan in 1975,[10] hundreds of white families rioted in protest. Demonstrators insulted and spit at students, and even threw bricks at a caravan of 20 school buses transporting students from nearly all-black Roxbury to all-white South Boston.[11]

1975–Present: Wane of Busing and Rise of Choice-Based Desegregation Models

In 1974, the Supreme Court struck down a multi-district desegregation plan in Detroit in *Milliken v. Bradley*, which would have required the Detroit school board to acquire hundreds of buses to provide transportation.[12] The ruling concluded that states were not responsible for desegregation across district lines unless plaintiffs could show that they were responsible for between-district segregation patterns, a burden of proof difficult to meet.[13] This effectively eliminated cross-district integration through busing. Subsequent court decisions further weakened court-ordered desegregation decrees and limited schools' ability to consider race as a priority in school enrollment, undoing much of the earlier progress on integration.[14] (For more detail on Supreme Court cases that have affected school segregation, see the appendix on page 31.)

The ruling concluded that states were not responsible for desegregation across district lines.

After these rulings, more districts and states turned towards choice-based models for integration. The goal of these policies was to allow students to enroll in schools outside their neighborhoods, increase parents' say in determining enrollment decisions, and spur academic improvement through competition among more autonomous schools. Example policies include magnet schools, which aim to attract families from across neighborhoods or districts with specialized offerings or academic programming; inter-district and intra-district open enrollment in traditional public schools; and beginning in the 1990s, charter schools, which are autonomous public schools subject to outcomes-based accountability.[15]

The effectiveness of choice-based models for desegregation has been mixed. Some choice programs have created more integrated schools, but a growing body of evidence suggests that levels of school segregation by race have remained stagnant or worsened, while segregation by income has increased slightly between schools and grown substantially between districts.[16] And, despite the theoretical potential of school choice as an integration strategy, in some instances school choice policies have deepened patterns of segregation.[17] For example, charter schools display greater racial imbalances than traditional public schools and, on average, enroll shares of black students that are 6% higher than the populations of the neighborhoods in which they are located.[18]

Studies have shown that some school choice programs can successfully create more integrated schools, especially when transportation is provided, but these dynamics are complex.[19] For example, recent research by the Brookings Institution found that districts that allow for more choice in their assignment process, use a common application for all schools, and provide transportation for students to schools of choice tend to have high schools that under-enroll white students relative to their catchment area. However, high schools in these districts also tend to over-enroll black students relative to their catchment area, showing that these policies can provide families with the opportunity to both send their children to schools outside their neighborhoods and select schools serving students with backgrounds similar to their own children.[20]

One factor behind these mixed results may be inequitable access to transportation. In order for choice-based integration plans to succeed, schools usually need to enroll students across segregated communities. This means that parents must be willing to choose a school farther away from their homes.

How School Transportation Shapes Family Choices

Access to transportation, or lack thereof, shapes families' education choices, especially when considering schools far from home.

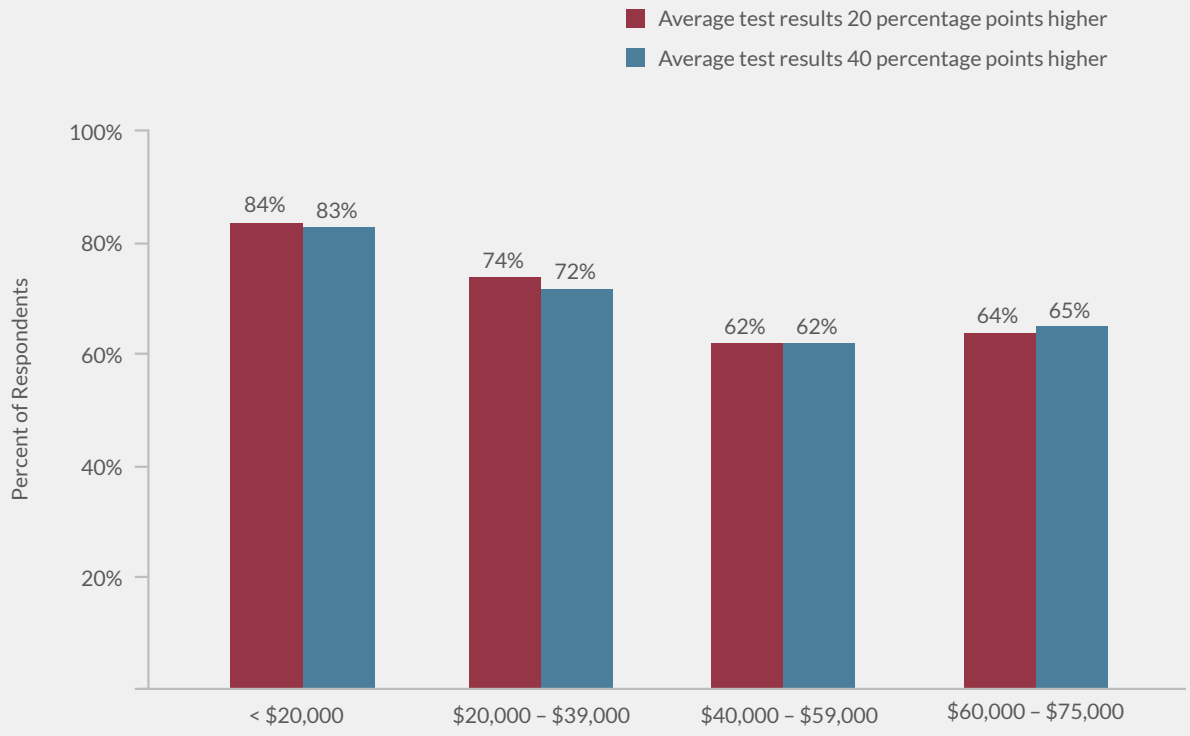
Research has shown that transportation and distance are important factors in how families weight school choice options.[21] Polling conducted by the Center on Reinventing Public Education found that lack of transportation is a common barrier to choice, particularly for low-income and minority parents. Thirty-eight percent of respondents reported that transportation influenced their school choice, and 73% of those respondents rated transportation as very or extremely important to their school choice.[22] In addition, 27% of respondents — and one-third of those with the lowest incomes — indicated that they set aside a more preferred school because of transportation challenges.[23]

Parents with the lowest incomes would be more willing to choose a higher-performing school farther from their home if transportation were provided.

As the chart below shows, parents with the lowest incomes would be more willing to choose a higher-performing school farther from their home if transportation were provided.

Figure 2

Parents' Willingness to Choose School Farther from Home with Better Average Test Results if Transportation Were Provided, by Income



Source: Paul Teske, Jody Fitzpatrick, and Tracey O'Brien, "Drivers of Choice," Center on Reinventing Public Education, July 2009, p. 28, https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/pub_dscr_teske_jul09_0.pdf.

School system policies that offer no transportation support to families are inherently inequitable as low-income, black, and Hispanic families are less likely to have access to an automobile, and less likely to have the scheduling flexibility to accommodate a lengthy school commute.[24]

Transportation barriers and preferences may limit families' likelihood of choosing a diverse school. According to recent polling from PDK, 70% of parents across racial groups would prefer to enroll their child in a racially diverse school. However, only one-quarter of parents would be willing to take on a longer commute to make that happen.[25]

Choice-Based Integration and Transportation Today

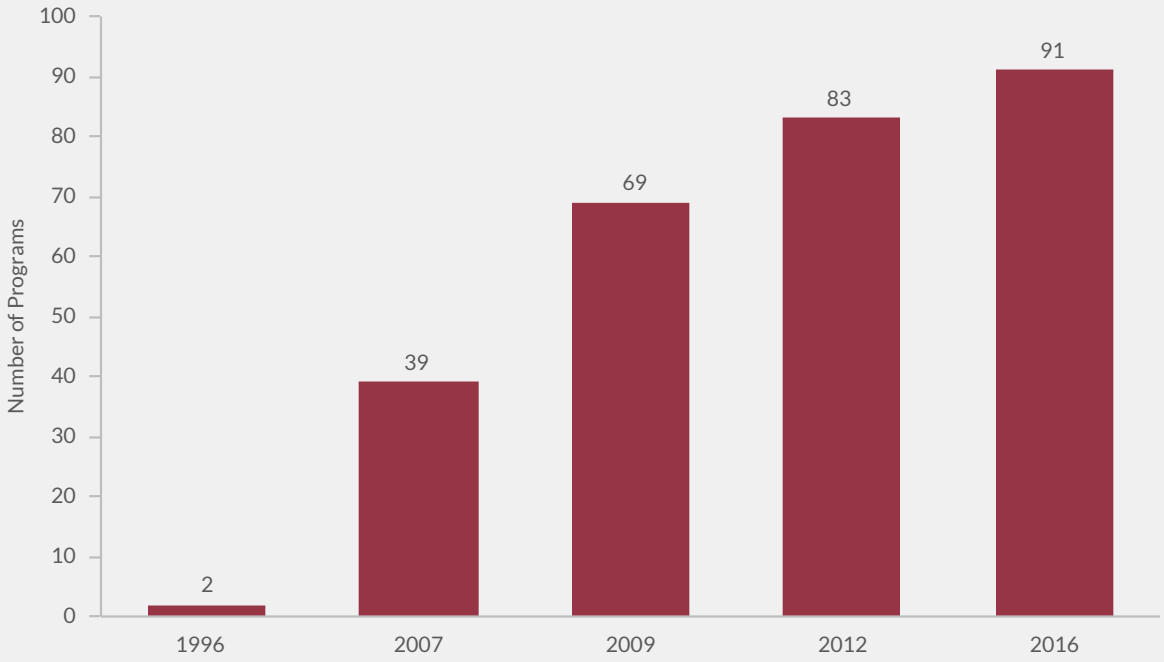
Today, more districts and states are considering ways to combine school choice and school integration goals, and are trying new variations on longstanding models. For example, an analysis from The Century Foundation found that the number of districts and charters with socioeconomic integration policies — including district-wide choice policies and magnet and charter school admissions — has more than doubled in the past decade.[26] The number of districts and charters overall may be small (fewer than 100 in total), but these efforts are picking up steam, and include some of the largest school districts in the country.

The growth of choice-based efforts to integrate schools has created new challenges for school transportation systems, which have traditionally been designed around neighborhood schools. For example, in nine states, charter schools now account for at least 10% of student enrollment. Similarly, more than 200 districts have at least 10% charter enrollment, and in 64 of those districts that figure is 20% or more.[27] Many districts do not provide transportation for students opting to attend schools of choice, such as charters or magnet schools. Those that do opt to keep transportation robust have had to develop more sophisticated approaches in order to support complicated enrollment systems, district boundaries, and zones.

States' funding for transportation has failed to keep pace with these changing transportation demands.

Meanwhile, states' funding for transportation has failed to keep pace with these changing transportation demands. Only three states provide full transportation funding as a matter of policy: Hawaii is a single-district state, Wyoming covers 100% of district transportation costs on a reimbursement basis, and South Carolina fully funds and monitors school transportation at the state level. In other states, districts share the cost of student transportation.[28]

Figure 3 Districts and Charters with Socioeconomic Integration Policies, 1996–2016



Source: Halley Potter, Kimberly Quick, and Elizabeth Davies, "A New Wave of School Integration," The Century Foundation, February 9, 2016, p. 9, https://production-tcf.imgix.net/app/uploads/2016/01/29103335/ANewWave_Potter.pdf.

And while the per-student cost of transportation has risen 73% since 1980,[29] funding levels are often subject to legislative appropriations, and in several states reimbursement rates have stagnated over time.

Because there are so many potential variations in schools that aim to provide families with choice while explicitly pursuing integration, it is useful to separately consider specific models.

School level:

- Magnet schools
- Diverse-by-design charter schools

District level:

- Controlled choice enrollment

All of these models depend on transportation in order to be most effective, but each also presents unique challenges for school transportation systems. Below, we describe the key features and transportation considerations associated with each model, and provide

case studies that highlight how the provision of transportation services affects schools' and districts' ability to provide equitable access to schools. Featured programs include the magnet program in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) in North Carolina; Crossroads Charter Schools, a group of diverse-by-design charter schools in Kansas City, Missouri; and one district using a controlled choice plan, Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Kentucky. These examples show that inadequate transportation can be a barrier to integration and choice goals, but innovative approaches that increase efficiency can allow schools and districts to serve more students across a larger number of communities.

Magnet Schools

Variations on the magnet model have been part of school integration efforts since the 1960s.

Magnet schools enroll students from larger geographies than traditional public schools, either serving entire districts or multiple districts. Variations on the magnet model have been part of school integration efforts since the 1960s. These schools offer unique curricular themes or instructional approaches designed to attract students across different racial and economic backgrounds.[30] Three out of four magnets admit students through lottery systems, but others admit students based on test scores, grades, and/or auditions.[31] Magnets can operate as a standalone school or as a program within a school. Roughly 2.6 million students nationwide attend magnet schools as of the 2015–16 school year.[32]

Transportation for students attending magnet schools is typically provided at no cost to families,[33] presenting unique transportation challenges. Magnet programs are often designed to pull students from many neighborhoods, and enrollment patterns can be unpredictable. There may be just one or two students coming from a single neighborhood to a magnet school across town. State laws and regulations often limit which vehicles are permissible for transporting students, and some states only allow school buses. This means longer, less efficient rides to school that are expensive for districts to operate.

The inter-district magnet schools in Hartford, Connecticut provide one example. There are about 45 of these schools, operated by multiple providers, including Hartford Public Schools.[34] Race and socioeconomic status are not weighted in Hartford's lottery, but neighborhood-level segregation means that the area's urban and suburban communities provide a reasonable proxy for socioeconomic and racial diversity. Most of Hartford's magnet schools reserve half of their seats for students living in the city, and half for students from the suburbs.[35]

To enable diverse enrollment, there are also policies in place that support transportation for families. The districts in which these magnet schools are located are obligated to provide transportation for their resident students. In addition, inter-district magnet schools and participating school districts can receive state grants if they choose to provide transportation to out-of-district students. This helps Hartford's magnet schools enroll student bodies that are far more racially and economically integrated than nearly every other school in the region.[36] Another approach involving magnet schools, from Charlotte, North Carolina, is described in detail below.

CASE STUDY

Magnet Schools: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

Location: Charlotte, NC

Geography: Urban

Area Served: 546 square miles

Model Type: Magnet Schools

Schools: 175 schools, including 62 magnet programs

Students: 148,299 students, including more than 25,000 enrolled in magnet programs

Summary

- CMS admits students to magnet schools using a lottery that accounts for socioeconomic status based on five factors.
- CMS provides transportation for magnet students who attend countywide schools or schools in their "transportation zone."

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) has a notable history of desegregating schools through mandatory busing in the 1970s. However, since 1999, when a federal district court judge ruled that race could no longer be considered in CMS school assignments,[37] the district's integration efforts have focused largely on indicators of socioeconomic status. Since all CMS students are guaranteed enrollment in their home school based on their address, creating more integrated schools is a challenge for the district.[38]

"We keep diversity in mind when drawing home school boundaries," says Akeshia Craven-Howell, associate superintendent for student assignment and school choice at CMS. "We avoid creating more high-poverty schools if possible, but, given the housing segregation in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, it is increasingly hard to do so."[39]

CMS uses magnet schools as one strategy to create learning environments with more socioeconomic diversity. The district operates 62 magnet programs, of which 18 are full-school programs and 44 are partial-school programs.[40] Together, these programs enroll more than 25,000 students[41] — roughly 17% of the district total.

CASE STUDY

Some magnet programs award all of their seats through the district's lottery system. Others reserve a share of their seats for students living nearby based on their home school address — typically 65 to 80% — and then award the remaining seats via lottery.[42] And some magnet options — like those offering International Baccalaureate or visual and performing arts programming — have additional admissions requirements.[43]

Rather than relying on a single measure of socioeconomic status, like eligibility for free- and reduced-price lunch, CMS considers five indicators for each census block in the county. The district then assigns a priority to students who are low-, medium-, or high-SES based on where they live. The indicators used are:

1. Household income
2. Educational attainment
3. English being spoken in the home
4. Homeownership
5. Single vs. multi-adult households[44]

For magnets enrolling all of their students via lottery, a third of the seats are reserved for each SES group. For those that set aside seats for nearby students, the remaining lottery seats are prioritized for SES groups that are underrepresented in the schools' attendance areas. For example, a magnet school located in a high-SES area would prioritize low- and medium-SES students in its lottery, while a magnet school located in a low-SES area would prioritize medium- and high-SES students.[45]

The district is organized into three "transportation zones" designed to balance socioeconomic integration with parent choice, transportation time, and cost.[46] Magnet students receive transportation services if they live in the same transportation zone as their school or attend one of the district's 10 countywide magnet programs.[47] These countywide programs typically offer unique programming or are cost-prohibitive to replicate.[48]

CMS assigns neighborhood stops based on students' residence. Generally, these stops are within 0.2 miles for elementary students and up to 0.4 miles for secondary students. Certain eligible families may also opt for shuttle stops, an assigned bus stop at specified CMS school sites for students attending selected magnet programs.[49]

CMS expanded magnet school busing options in 2017,[50] but has been largely able to offset the additional costs by using staggered bell schedules and designing more efficient routes.[51] However, like many other districts,[52] CMS has also faced a school bus driver shortage, struggling to hire and retain enough drivers. While CMS has not needed to curtail its transportation services, this shortage may result in needing to share more routes and longer ride times for students.[53]

To address this, CMS has stepped up its recruiting efforts and streamlined the path for driver training. Most importantly, the district raised school bus drivers' hourly wages. Finding drivers remains a challenge, but the increase in pay has made CMS more competitive with other employers in the area that employ drivers with similar qualifications.[54]

While the current method for enrolling magnet school students was only approved in 2016,[55] early data show that it has started to have some positive effect on integration goals, increasing the share of low-SES students admitted to primarily high-SES magnet schools, and lowering the share of low-SES students admitted to primarily low-SES magnet schools.[56] However, there are concerns about the accuracy of the data, and it remains to be seen what share of admitted students end up matriculating to their assigned magnet.[57]

CMS remains committed to increasing socioeconomic diversity in its schools, including through magnet options. According to Craven-Howell, "When we invest in new schools, we will continue to build out our school choice portfolio so that education options are located equitably across transportation zones and able to serve children closer to home."[58]

For example, CMS has one K–8 school offering immersion programs in multiple languages that currently enrolls students countywide. The school is located in the far southwest corner of the county, meaning some students must face long bus rides in order to attend. However, in the next two years, CMS is opening a similar school in the northern part of the county, providing students living there with a more accessible option.[59]

Diverse-by-Design Charter Schools

"Diverse-by-design" charter schools have emerged as another way to create integrated schools of choice. While there is no single definition of "diverse-by-design," a recent analysis by The Century Foundation defined them as schools that are committed to student diversity in their mission or design and have achieved a certain level of diversity within their actual enrollment. The analysis identified 125 schools meeting that definition.[60]

In order to attract and maintain a diverse student population, these types of charter schools often use lotteries that are weighted in some way to account for students' racial and socioeconomic demographics and aim to enroll students from various neighborhoods or towns. This can mean that transportation is critical to the success of the model.

Most of these challenges are common to charter schools, but are amplified for diverse-by-design charters aiming to draw students from a wider array of neighborhoods.

However, these schools face a number of transportation challenges. Most of these challenges are common to charter schools, but are amplified for diverse-by-design charters aiming to draw students from a wider array of neighborhoods. The first is funding. Unlike most school districts, state laws do not always require or fund charter schools to provide transportation. Only 16 states require transportation for charter school students.[61] Charter schools also tend to receive substantially less funding than their traditional district peers, in part because they often do not receive dedicated funding for certain expenditure categories such as transportation.[62]

When individual schools choose to bear the costs and provide their own transportation services, they suffer from diseconomies of scale. Because they are transporting small numbers of students compared to an entire district, it can be difficult to create an efficient transportation system that still meets the needs of families, meaning that transportation costs can grow to a significant portion of school budgets.

In addition, access to and location of facilities can also shape transportation needs. When schools are centrally located in densely populated areas with good public transit connectivity, more students can walk, bike, or take public transit to school. But charter schools rarely have the luxury of many options for school facilities, especially in expensive urban areas. Like transportation, facilities funding is a pain point in the charter sector.[63]

For example, Blackstone Valley Prep (BVP) — a six-school charter network in northeast Rhode Island — admits students from across four municipalities. Two of these communities are predominantly white and higher income, and two are lower income and predominantly

Hispanic.[64] In order to overcome residential segregation and create a diverse school, BVP offers some transportation to all students beyond a 1.5-mile radius. But even with $1.7 million spent on busing each year — more than 6% of BVP's total operating budget — service is not door-to-door. Students must be picked up and dropped off at central depot stops, and ride times can last up to one hour each way for suburban students.[65] Another diverse-by-design charter approach, from Kansas City, is described below.

To solve transportation and location challenges, charter schools — including those that are diverse by design — have used a variety of strategies, including:

- Paying to access district transportation services through individual agreements, including fee-for-service arrangements
- Providing their own bus service, including by forming cooperative agreements with other charter schools to share bus services and lower costs
- Subsidizing transit passes for students and families
- Organizing school-sponsored carpool arrangements

Currently, diverse-by-design charter schools make up a small share of the charter sector — only about 2%.

Currently, diverse-by-design charter schools make up a small share of the charter sector — only about 2%.[66] And an even smaller subset of those choose to provide transportation services if they are not required by law to do so. But if transportation systems are unavailable or ineffective, these schools' potential to reach and serve diverse families will continue to be limited.

CASE STUDY

Diverse-by-Design Charter Schools: Crossroads Charter Schools

Location: Kansas City, MO

Geography: Urban

Area Served: 67 square miles

Model Type: Diverse-by-Design Charter Schools

Schools: 3

Students: ~800

Summary

- Crossroads Charter Schools supports diversity by offering its own transportation, which the district does not provide for charter schools.
- To increase scale and efficiency, Crossroads partners with three other local charter schools to jointly contract for transportation services.

Crossroads Charter Schools operates three diverse-by-design charter schools in downtown Kansas City, Missouri. Like many charters, Crossroads enrolls students through a lottery, with preference given to students living near the school, children of school staff, and siblings of currently enrolled students. Crossroads does not have diversity considerations as part of the lottery process,[67] but its schools enroll more diverse student populations than the local district. For example, only 9% of Kansas City Public Schools' students are white,[68] while Crossroads' Quality Hill campus is nearly a third white,[69] and its Central Street campus is more than 40% white.[70]

Crossroads has other policies in place to help promote diversity outside of the lottery, including an emphasis on transportation. Crossroads tries to balance its demographics by adjusting recruitment and enrollment strategies on an ongoing basis. For example, last year, Crossroads joined the common application system available to charter schools in Kansas City. Because there are few housing options near Crossroads' downtown locations, less than 1% of Crossroads' students live within a mile of their school. Its geographic preference zones for enrollment span several miles in order to allow for a diverse student population. As a result, school transportation plays an important role in Crossroads' approach. It offers bus service to students who live one mile or more away from their designated school, transporting more than 60% of its student body.[71]

CASE STUDY

"Transportation goes hand in hand with our strategic design from the beginning. We had the choice on whether to provide transportation, but it wasn't a choice in our mind," says Courtney Hughley, chief operating officer at Crossroads. "We are in the most northwest end of the whole district and we serve students all the way on the opposite side of the district. We provide transportation so that there is more equal access."[72]

Despite Crossroads' commitment to transportation, there is a disparate burden on some students. "The reality is that the low-income student across town has to wake up earlier and catch the bus, whereas a more affluent student closer to our schools might have a parent drive them and get an extra hour of sleep," Hughley added.[73]

In order to lower the cost of bus service, Crossroads partners with three other local charter schools to share a bus service contract. The shared contract gives the schools greater negotiating power and allows for more efficient shared buses and routes.[74]

Crossroads has been able to reinvest those savings back into school staff. Next year, it plans to hire an additional nurse and security person, as well as increase staff salaries across the board. "Those are the kinds of things we're able to do with extra dollars," says Hughley.[75]

Sharing bus services with other schools has also limited Crossroads' autonomy in some ways. The schools in the partnership must stagger their school start times in order to share buses, as students from different schools do not ride the bus together. Additionally, schools needed to agree on common behavioral policies for when students are on the bus.[76]

Crossroads also experiences challenges common in school transportation, including driver shortages and high rates of driver turnover, leading to confusion with routes and less familiarity between students and the drivers who transport them to school each day. All three of Crossroads' campuses are located downtown, meaning that school buses and personal vehicles alike struggle with traffic and congestion.[77]

Controlled Choice

Controlled choice plans allow parents to rank their school choices, while also controlling for certain levels of school diversity.

Another model for balancing integration, choice, and transportation logistics is a "controlled choice" district enrollment system. Controlled choice plans allow parents to rank their school choices, while also controlling for certain levels of school diversity, often by weighting student demographic information in admissions, or incorporating that information into enrollment policies in some way. In order to abide by legal restrictions on the consideration of race in school assignment, controlled choice plans often include multiple indicators, including race-neutral considerations like household income and parents' or guardians' highest level of education.[78]

Because these plans often use complex policies to enroll students from various communities within a district, they typically take into account considerations that affect transportation. The geographic size of a district can influence the extent to which transportation is needed. Smaller, more compact districts may be able to operate controlled choice plans with a smaller transportation burden, but larger, more sprawling districts may require more robust transportation services. Similarly, the level of segregation in a district's communities, and the distance between these communities, affects what amount of service is needed to provide equitable access to families' school choices.

For example, the School District of Lee County, Florida has designed a controlled choice model that attempts to minimize the distance students must travel to school across its 1,200 square miles, while giving families a substantial degree of choice and maintaining socioeconomic integration. Lee County's enrollment plan divides the district into three large "Choice Zones," and these zones are each divided further into sub-zones. Because Lee County considers student demographics and transportation when drawing its Choice Zones and sub-zones, the district is able to support choice and integration while allowing students to attend school closer to home.[79]

Students are eligible to attend schools located in the sub-zone in which they reside, or in any contiguous sub-zone within the same Choice Zone, as well as some programs that enroll students from across one or more Choice Zones.[80] After families rank their preferences for available schools, seats are awarded through a lottery, which also includes other factors like school capacity, sibling preferences, and proximity preferences.[81] The district recently reduced the number of programs that enroll students across multiple Choice Zones or countywide, in favor of more single-zone programs, in order to control transportation costs.[82]

Like the other models described above, school transportation plays an important role in effectively implementing controlled choice plans. This is especially true when considering how transportation access influences the way that families make school choices, particularly for those with the lowest incomes.

CASE STUDY

Controlled Choice: Jefferson County Public Schools

Location: Louisville, KY

Geography: Urban

Area Served: 395 square miles

Model Type: Controlled Choice

Schools: 169

Students: 98,361

Summary

- At the elementary level, students can choose from schools within equitable "clusters." At all levels, enrollment policies are informed by a "school diversity index" that accounts for average household income, percentage of white residents, and educational attainment.
- JCPS provides transportation for students living a mile or farther from their school. JCPS uses a "depot" model, where some students transfer buses at certain stops.

Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS), located in Louisville, Kentucky, is the 29th largest school district in the country, enrolling nearly 100,000 students across more than 160 schools.[83] Louisville has a long history of redlining, zoning restrictions, and other forms of race-based housing discrimination,[84] which have led to segregated neighborhoods that still persist today.[85] Since 1974, when a federal desegregation order first merged the city and county school districts, JCPS has used an enrollment system designed to integrate its schools by race and socioeconomic status.[86] This plan has changed over the years in response to legal action; in fact, as recently as 2017, the Kentucky legislature considered a controversial bill that would have given families more authority to enroll in the school closest to their home.[87]

JCPS' current system includes controlled choice and magnet programs. The district uses a "school diversity index" to inform enrollment policies for both options. To create this index, JCPS takes the following steps:

1. Divides census blocks within its geographic boundaries into three categories based on three indicators of diversity: average household income, percentage of white residents, and educational attainment. Category 1 indicates a census block with the highest ratings on these indicators (i.e., higher income, more white, and more education), while Categories 2 and 3 have lower ratings.

CASE STUDY

2. Classifies students based on the category of the census block in which they reside.
3. Calculates a school's diversity index as a weighted average of the number of students who attend from each diversity category.

The goal of the index is to keep each school's enrollment within a certain index range (1.4 to 2.5) in order to ensure diversity.[88]

At the elementary level, JCPS groups elementary schools into 13 "clusters" — a group of five to eight schools located within a specific geographic area. The clusters are determined using the school diversity index, typically pairing schools in less affluent areas with those in more affluent areas, and some clusters are not contiguous. Students who live within the attendance area of a particular school have an enrollment priority — a challenge for diversifying more affluent, higher-demand schools — but all students are guaranteed a seat at one of the schools in their residential cluster.[89] During the application process, families rank school choices within their cluster, and may also apply for up to two districtwide magnet options.[90]

The cluster system is not used for middle and high school enrollment, but the attendance areas of these schools are drawn based on the diversity index. Middle school students can either attend the school assigned to them based on their residence or opt for a magnet program. At the high school level, schools are grouped into geographic "networks," allowing students to have more options. High school students are guaranteed enrollment at their assigned school, but can also apply to other high schools in their network or magnet options.[91]

Some of the district's magnet programs enroll students through a lottery process, while others have specific admissions requirements. For magnets using a lottery, seats are awarded using the diversity index, reserving equal shares of seats for each of the three categories described above. However, the applicant pool for each magnet plays a role in determining how diverse the school can be. For example, if a magnet school's applicant pool is mostly from Category 1, there may not be enough applicants from Categories 2 and 3 to ensure a balanced student body.[92]

JCPS' transportation system has adapted to carry out this complicated enrollment system. The district provides bus service to students who live more than one mile from their school and:

- Attend an elementary school within their cluster
- Attend the middle school assigned to them based on their residence
- Attend a high school within their network
- Attend magnet schools[93]

In total, JCPS operates 1,200 school buses covering roughly 2,100 routes and serving 70% of the student body.[94]

CASE STUDY

For students who live far from their schools, JCPS uses a "depot" model, where some students switch buses at depots, similar to public transit or airline hubs. The district currently has nine elementary depots, as well as eight depots for middle and high school. Roughly 9% of elementary school students and 21% of middle and high school students change buses at a depot. This allows JCPS to create a much more efficient transportation system.[95]

"The depot model is critical to our operations," says Randy Frantz, JCPS' director of transportation from 2016 to 2019. "Without that, we wouldn't be able to execute the current choice plan."[96]

However, one of the tradeoffs is that students switching at depot stops also experience substantially longer ride times than those who do not. The average ride time for all elementary students is 25 minutes, but depot students have an average ride time of 46 minutes. Similarly, at the middle and high school level, the average ride time is 31 minutes for all students, 53 minutes for depot students.[97]

"We run a very efficient system within our operational constraints. We have to be efficient to provide students with choice," says Frantz. "Would direct busing be easier and quicker? Yes. But it would take a lot more equipment and personnel."[98]

In part due to the efficiency gained through the depot model, JCPS is able to spend less on student transportation — roughly $880 per student — than other nearby districts. That has allowed the district to invest in its fleet by purchasing new buses, incorporating GPS on all buses, and increasing driver pay to more than $20 per hour.[99]

Despite the increase in pay, JCPS is still dealing with a driver shortage. While this is a national trend, Louisville also has many employers in the logistical and manufacturing sectors who need lots of drivers. "We're not out of the woods yet — there's still turnover — but it's gotten better," says Frantz.[100]

JCPS' continued efforts to create more diverse schools have been successful, as most of its schools have achieved a diversity index rating that meets the district's goal.[101]

JCPS' board is currently considering changes to its school assignment plan, recognizing that the goals of providing choice and ensuring diversity can be in tension with one another, as parents often want more diverse schools as well as the ability to choose schools close to home. According to Cassie Blausey, the district's executive administrator of school choice, "Our student assignment plan was initially built on the premise of diversity, but choice has become such a large component, and is what parents expect. Those two operate against each other sometimes. We are feeling growing pains from that."[102]

In spite of these challenges, JCPS remains committed to using transportation to support both choice and diversity. "Transportation is a big equity issue in Louisville. The city is not very walkable or accessible via public transit," says Blausey. "Is school choice a real choice if you don't have a bus?"[103]

Recommendations

School transportation services are a critical component of multiple models that seek to provide school choice while also increasing levels of integration — including magnet schools, diverse-by-design charter schools, and districts using controlled choice.

Transportation is one of the few tools that can sever the link between where students live and where they attend school. As a result, school transportation services are a critical component of multiple models that seek to provide school choice while also increasing levels of integration — including magnet schools, diverse-by-design charter schools, and districts using controlled choice. Based on our findings in this brief, we have several recommendations for policymakers and other education leaders.

States

As states continue to enact policies that expand choice, state leaders should consider how these policies, along with budget decisions, affect school transportation. When students travel further from home to access schools, it often places an additional transportation burden on schools, districts, and families. For many families, especially those who are low-income or from underserved groups, school choice without transportation is no choice at all.

To address these challenges, states should provide adequate overall funding to support school transportation systems, and ensure that transportation funding levels are comparable across school sectors.

In addition, states could factor school integration into their transportation funding formulas, which are usually based on inputs like number of students transported and miles traveled. States could support and incentivize integrated schools by providing additional transportation funding based on levels of socioeconomic diversity at the school or district

level relative to the broader community. Some states have used this type of approach to incentivize other system goals, like operational efficiency. For example, Florida includes a funding adjustment based on average bus occupancy.[104]

Similarly, states could reward schools and districts that are able to demonstrate that their transportation operations are supporting more integrated schools, or create grants or other funding streams for transportation services or investments specifically aimed at integrating schools.

Schools and Districts

Despite possible funding challenges, schools and districts can still find innovative ways to limit their costs while maintaining transportation services that are robust enough to support their goals around integration and choice.

For example, Jefferson County's controlled choice enrollment system assigns students to schools in equitable clusters throughout the city. This is a complicated undertaking, often requiring the district to transport students across Louisville. But by using a depot model where some students transfer buses at certain stops — as they would while using public transit — JCPS is able to create the level of efficiency needed. This model has even allowed JCPS to reinvest in its fleet and increase driver pay.

Crossroads Charter Schools serves as another example. Crossroads provides transportation services because it relies on enrolling students from segregated communities across Kansas City in order to serve its mission to create diverse schools. Crossroads partners with three other local charter schools in order to jointly contract for service, which has helped improve efficiency and reduce costs, allowing Crossroads to hire additional staff and raise salaries.

By improving efficiency, these types of models can better support the increasingly complex way that schools enroll students. This means that more students can access more schools — especially those who live in racially and economically segregated neighborhoods.

By improving efficiency, these types of models can better support the increasingly complex way that schools enroll students. This means that more students can access more schools — especially those who live in racially and economically segregated neighborhoods. In order to maximize the effectiveness of these innovative approaches, school transportation systems need stronger planning and analysis, and more resources.

One way to achieve this is through better coordination within districts. If district staff responsible for student assignment and enrollment operate separately from staff in charge of school transportation, a lack of communication and coordination can lead to poor system design that falls short of providing equitable access to schools for all students.

Similarly, coordination between districts could also help create more integrated schools — especially for smaller districts that serve relatively homogenous communities. Though the *Milliken* ruling effectively struck down mandatory cross-district desegregation, districts could work together voluntarily to provide students with access to more schools — beyond

those located in their district of residence — and support such efforts with cross-district transportation policies. Some states already have policies in place that enable multi-district partnerships for some kinds of school transportation. For example, Rhode Island's Statewide Student Transportation System provides shared transportation for schools of choice, students with disabilities, and students traveling out of their district. Michigan and Pennsylvania also have larger, "intermediate" education entities that can provide transportation services for students with disabilities.[105]

Multi-Sector Collaboration

In order to overcome neighborhood-level segregation, students are increasingly traveling farther from their homes to reach school. This creates a complicated dynamic that affects multiple sectors — including education, transportation, and housing. All of these sectors play important roles in determining where children live, how they travel, and what schools they can attend.

As a first step, simply sharing insights and information can prevent decisions about school transportation from being made in isolation.

As a first step, simply sharing insights and information can prevent decisions about school transportation from being made in isolation. For example, districts could share important information with transportation and housing agencies like students' demographics, achievement, and graduation rates. Districts could also consult with these sectors when planning for school siting to ensure that students from diverse populations have equitable access to schools.

Closer collaboration could also lead to agencies and organizations in these sectors pursuing more comprehensive approaches to mobility and integration. This could include working together to create equitable land use and planning strategies; including education and housing agencies in the development of mass transit plans; and aligning public transportation routes, sidewalk construction, and related infrastructure with education and housing needs.

To be sure, transportation alone is not a panacea. Even with intentional efforts to align choice, integration, and transportation, students may still experience substantial barriers to accessing diverse, high-quality schools that meet their needs. However, if states, districts, and schools want to balance the dual goals of school choice and school integration, furthering their commitment to and investment in school transportation is a necessary first step.

Appendix

Timeline of Key Supreme Court Cases Affecting School Segregation

Year	Case	Ruling
1954	*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*	Overruled the principle of "separate but equal"; a year later, the ruling in *Brown II* required school authorities to work toward school desegregation.
1968	*Green v. County School Board of New Kent County*	Ruled that New Kent's "freedom of choice" plan did not meet the school board's responsibility to desegregate the county's schools; shifted the court's concern "to ensure racial balance in schools."
1971	*Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*	Authorized mandatory busing of students to achieve racial integration and gave federal district courts more power to require school desegregation.
1973	*Keyes v. School Dist. No. 1*	Maintained that a finding of segregative intent by the school board involving one portion of the district meant the burden was on the district to prove the whole system was not affected by segregation.
1974	*Milliken v. Bradley*	Struck down a multi-district plan that would have brought together the Detroit school system with 53 outlying districts; ruled that school systems were not responsible for desegregation across district lines.
1991	*Board of Education of Oklahoma City Public Schools v. Dowell*	Ruled that desegregation decrees were not meant to operate in perpetuity and that district courts should determine whether a school district had complied with earlier decrees in good faith to the extent practicable.
1992	*Freeman v. Pitts*	Ruled that district courts may relinquish supervision of desegregation plans in incremental stages before full compliance has been achieved.
2007	*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*	Struck down a student-assignment plan that included the voluntary consideration of race for allocating slots in oversubscribed high schools; ruled that school districts may adopt integration strategies based on race in certain instances, but first must determine that race-neutral approaches would be unworkable to achieve their integration goals.

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