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Inter-District School Choice: Transfer Policy and Practice in a Fragmented Metropolitan Region

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Abstract

Detrimental side effects of the politics of localism include socioeconomic and racial inequalities across fragmented contiguous school districts. Inequality follows patterns of neighborhood segregation and suburban expansion. Some regions approach these issues through collaborative models of cross-district school choice that focus shared resources toward reducing disparities. In Calderon County, California², however, districts have elected to use a non-collaborative, voluntary, and colorblind inter-district transfer plan, in which district administrators evaluate requests on a case-by-case basis. Interviews with these administrators and local citizens reveal a process plagued by a history of racial and socioeconomic division that may be exacerbating stratification. This study demonstrates that administrators, who often interact directly with families, wield extraordinary policy and decision-making power, significantly controlling inter-district mobility in the region. While exploratory in nature, this research reveals meaningful findings on fragmentation, community perceptions, and administrative decision-making within the context of school choice in one Northern California region.

Keywords: school choice, open enrollment, inter-district transfers, educational disparity, street-level bureaucracy

Theories of localism in education evolved out of campaigns to give control of public schools to the local community, which was assumed to best understand the needs of its student population. Although theoretically a sound idea, strict deference to local control has allowed for metropolitan fragmentation, benefitting predominantly White districts at the cost of low-income, urban, and high-minority school districts (Briffault, 1996; Orfield, 2005). A “highly fragmented local government system,” according to Goodman (2015), is a system consisting of many local governmental units (p. 3). The formation of autonomous fragmented districts has allowed for “opportunity hoarding,” or a closed network’s acquisition of resources that are “valuable, renewable, subject to monopoly, supportive of network activities, and enhanced by the network’s modus operandi” (Tilly,

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² All place names, including city names, street names, neighborhood names, and school names, have been changed throughout the study to preserve the anonymity of human subjects.

1998, p. 10). Fragmentation has led to opportunity hoarding of educational resources in suburban districts, furthering the achievement gap between suburban districts and their neighboring urban counterparts (Rury & Saatcioglu, 2011; Walters, 2007). In Calderon County, California, the unfortunate side effects of localism are all too clear. Residential borders drawn by local officials divide the area into fragmented contiguous districts, disparate in both wealth and school achievement.

As a solution to such inequalities, some regions have implemented regional inter-district desegregation plans, or “collaboratives” (Finnigan, et al., 2015, p. 4), in which districts coordinate across boundaries to facilitate mobility of students in segregated districts in order to address racial and socioeconomic disparities in education. While significant research has focused on these inter-district collaboratives and on numerous programs of intra-district school choice, few have explored “simple” systems of inter-district choice in which districts form agreements to allow transfers on a case-by-case basis, without formalized collaborative goals centered on combating inequalities (Finnigan, et al., 2015, p. 4). My research addresses how this critically understudied mechanism of choice is realized in practice in fragmented contiguous school districts that offer limited options for students within district boundaries. I focus on four neighboring school districts—East Point, San Vicente, San Felipe and Clover Hills³—which provide a case study of a fragmented region in which voluntary and “colorblind” inter-district transfers are used as a means of school choice by students wishing to cross from one district to another. The transfer application process is a “colorblind” process. Colorblindness is an ideology based on judgments of people as individuals, without consideration of race or ethnicity (Ryan, Hunt, Weible, Peterson, & Casas, 2007). Colorblind transfer policies are “not explicitly designed to promote racial integration and school diversity” (Wells & Roda, 2009, p. 2). The process studied addresses transfer requests on a case-by-case basis without consideration of their effects on racial or socioeconomic stratification in the region.

In order to understand the inter-district transfer process, the present study addresses two main research questions: (a) Are there indications that racial and socioeconomic factors play into the functioning of the inter-district transfer process in this fragmented region?; and (b) How do school district administrators process inter-district transfers in light of the legal, organizational, political, and personal pressures they experience in their jobs? Using background research on governmental localism, fragmentation in urban areas, and socioeconomic and racial disparities in education, I place inter-district transfers in this larger relational dynamic among theory, the law, and the reality of stratified school districts in a metropolitan region. I then study how administrative power affects the formation and implementation of transfer policy, and how families experience inter-district transfers in practice. My findings draw connections among street-level bureaucracy theory, educational disparities, and the dynamics of school choice in a fragmented metropolitan area of California.

³ Place names have been changed to preserve anonymity of human subjects.

Conceptual Framework

Localism, Fragmentation and District Disparity

A wealth of literature on general trends in public education over the past half-century traces how localism has resulted in community fragmentation and led to inequality between school districts. Critics point out the myth of equal opportunity in education and bemoan the stark disparities in the distribution of resources between stratified geographic communities (Orfield, 1994). A number of authors find that public schools have been re-segregated due to rhetoric favoring localism, which has led to renewed stratification by both race and economic class among districts (Orfield & Lee, 2007; Tatum, 2007; Wilson, 2011). Although in the past this stratification has been among schools within districts, it is now more often the case for racial and socioeconomic segregation to occur across district lines (Clotfelter, 2004). This new stratification has occurred most dramatically in fragmented metropolitan areas (Bischoff, 2008), where a partiality for district autonomy has resulted in the inequitable allocation of public education (Briffault, 1996). Such partiality is seen in California, where the Department of Education has stated its preference for the “local control for the management of school districts,” leaving the drawing of district boundaries to each local district governing board (California Department of Education, “District/School Boundaries,” 2015).

Localism is defined by Cashin (2000) as “the ideological commitment to decentralizing power to local government... premised on the normative values of promoting democratic citizen participation, efficiency, and community” (p. 1985). Supporters of localism claim that if power is decentralized to local government agencies, each community will decide to offer its own variety of public goods and services and citizens can then vote with their feet by moving to communities in which the local government offers the goods and services those citizens desire (Tiebout, 1956). Tiebout applauds municipal fragmentation, arguing that through the creation of more jurisdictions, it provides “consumer-voters” with a wider range of public goods and service options from which to choose. He argues that citizens will move to the jurisdiction that provides the level and type of goods and services they desire and be taxed accordingly. Among the goods and services discussed by Tiebout are local schools. The flaw in this theory is that many families cannot afford to move to neighborhoods or municipalities with more desirable schools due to higher residential property costs in those areas. Such residential segregation leaves low-income and often minority populations in central cities and inner-ring suburbs, while more affluent, and generally White populations settle in outer-ring suburbs (Orfield, 2005). Affluent suburban school districts can then hoard resources, using the authority of their separate government to affect zoning and code enforcement within their borders. Through these tactics, many suburbs have managed to exclude lower-income families and avoid redistributive measures (Henig, 2009, p. 654). Thus, many low-income and minority students attend schools lacking resources and exhibiting low academic achievement (Wang & Kovach, 1995).

Following a quantitative analysis of regional fragmentation and racial segregation, Bischoff (2008) found a “strong positive relationship between fragmentation and

between-district segregation” (p. 208). Bischoff agrees that Tiebout’s model may in fact partially explain why this increased segregation occurs in fragmented regions where parents use knowledge of district resources and school performance to guide residential decisions. However, Bischoff does not share Tiebout’s enthusiasm for a system of local control that allows unequal access to resources for low-income and minority populations. Among the possible solutions presented by Bischoff to the segregation seen in these regions are school district consolidation and inter-district transfer systems.

Regionalism and Inter-district Choice

Despite disparities created by systems of local control, the U.S. judiciary has not offered a definitive solution, repeatedly deferring control over finance and school assignment to local officials (Chemerinsky, 2004; Jenkins Robinson, 2007). This leaves policymaking up to legislators and district leaders, some of whom have offered a solution that allows students to transfer to their school of choice, even if that means stepping across district boundaries. This alternative to the tradition of attending neighborhood schools reflects a new theoretical preference for regionalism over localism (Wilson, 2011). When applied to education, regionalism, as opposed to localism, encourages the opening of district boundaries within a region to increase inter-district mobility and thus combat disparities caused by residential segregation along race and class lines (Cashin, 2000). Advocates of regionalism have gained strength over the past few decades, as the detrimental effects of political fragmentation in metropolitan areas have become an increasingly unavoidable problem in the United States (Mitchell-Weaver, Miller, & Deal, 2000).

Scholars refer to regionalism as an intellectual or political movement that addresses problems stemming from fragmentation and reflects, “the long-abiding faith in metropolitan consolidation and central city expansion” (Parks & Oakerson, 2000, p. 169). While regionalism often refers to the movement as it existed in the mid-20th century, its manifestations in recent decades have been dubbed “New Regionalism,” which addresses more modern metropolitan problems through “governance” rather than “government” (Parks & Oakerson, 2000; Spindler, 2002). Broadly, according to Bevir (2012), governance refers to “all processes of governing,” whether by central public governing agencies or by private and voluntary groups (p. 5). Moreover, governance focuses more on the “processes of rule” in a society as a whole rather than only on those of the official government and its institutions (Bevir, 2012, p. 11). Reynolds (2003) argues that “New Regionalist” scholars no longer debate whether, but instead how, to accomplish a more equitable distribution of communal resources, exploring “voluntary intergovernmental cooperation” as one potential solution to this goal (p. 95). Cashin (2000) argues that New Regionalism actually better supports localist values of “democratic participation, efficiency, and community” (p. 19). While it may seem that regionalism entails a top-down system of regional control, Wheeler (2002) argues that modern regional systems most commonly develop through cooperation between existing local government entities. Generally, the concept of regionalism has been applied to inter-governmental cooperation in housing, transportation, and occasionally tax-base sharing (powell, 2000; Reynolds,

2003; Weir, 2000), although it has also been extended to the educational realm through some inter-district transfer policies (Wilson, 2011).

Starting in the 1960s, regions began to experiment with regionalist models of inter-district open enrollment. Since that time, inter-district choice has generally operated under one of two very different assumptions. The more conservative assumption claims that giving students a choice of schools will create competitive market pressure resulting in the improvement of all schools involved (Welsch & Zimmer, 2012). Although many researchers have attempted to support this claim, critics of free market theories argue that such reasoning only applies in affluent areas because low-income districts lack the necessary resources to compete (Wilson, 2011). Studies have also shown that school choice systems based on free market theory can actually create segregation, particularly when those systems lack the explicit goal of racial integration (Mickelson, Bottia, & Southworth, 2008; Wells & Roda, 2009).

The more progressive theory asserts that offering choice will advance equal opportunity by helping socioeconomically disadvantaged students attain a better education than would be provided in their home district (Holme & Richards, 2009). Some researchers claim that the availability of inter-district transfers has provided opportunity to low-income and minority students by allowing them to exit failing neighborhood schools (Burke & Sheffield, 2011; Holme & Richards, 2009). This claim is supported by research on regions such as Boston where inter-district choice does seem to improve prospects of lower-income students. One study of Boston's inter-district desegregation plan found that the program—popular among families—has consistently provided inter-district transfer opportunity to minority students from inner-city to suburban school districts. Data on 3,200 families participating in the 1995–1996 school year exhibited high satisfaction rates with the academic opportunities provided and demonstrated that almost a fifth of participant families had annual incomes of under \$20,000 and the majority (57.1%) had annual incomes of under \$40,000 (Orfield et al., 1997).

However, critics argue that policies allowing districts too much discretion in accepting transfers can generate bias and limit access to the most desired schools (Holme & Richards, 2009, citing Fowler, 1996). Some studies also show that choice can further stratify districts by race and class as higher-income and White students tend to seek transfers more frequently than lower-income and minority students. Similarly, districts that gain students tend to serve more White and affluent students than the transfer students' home districts (Holme & Richards, 2009). Literature also suggests that government decision-making generally favors citizens with higher incomes and greater social status, which can greatly affect school choice policy and administration (Frankenberg, 2012, p. 34). Additionally, when choice programs are voluntary and colorblind, and thus lack the explicit goals of diversity and integration, racial and socioeconomic segregation are reinforced as affluent and White families gain or maintain access to the most desired schools (Wells & Roda, 2009). Holme and Richards (2009) also note that programs that failed to provide adequate information and free transportation options to low-income students saw low participation rates from that demographic.

Colorblind transfer programs can be contrasted with inter-district collaboratives that employ resource sharing and focus on integration across district lines through choice

programs. Collaborative programs use either student race or socioeconomic status as a factor in the application process and provide transportation to transfer students (Finnigan et al., 2015). The cooperative agreements on which such programs are founded are more complex than what Finnigan et al. call “simple student transfer plans” (p. 4), which do not account for student demographics in the application process and lack systemic policy goals. Less than 10 inter-district collaboratives exist at this time in the United States, all of which share the common policy goal of reducing racial or socioeconomic segregation across district lines (Wells, Holme, Revilla, & Atanda, 2009).

In the 1960s and 1970s, state- and court-mandated integration plans facilitated inter-district desegregation (Finnigan, et al., 2015). However, in 1974, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the judiciary could not mandate inter-district desegregation to address inner-city segregation when the autonomous suburban districts, proposed to be integrated with the urban districts, had not “committed acts that effected segregation in other districts” The court also stated that there was no evidence that boundaries were drawn with the intention of segregating the districts. This ruling employed rhetoric on the importance of localism and district autonomy and made it virtually impossible to combat inter-district segregation through judicial remedies (*Milliken v. Bradley*, 1974). For this reason inter-district collaboratives have arisen as a potential solution to the issues of cross-district racial segregation and disparities in performance and funding. The districts in Calderon County, however, have not engaged in inter-district collaboration, but instead allow district administrators to assess transfers on a case-by-case basis, without formalized integrative goals.

Administrative Decision-Making

The organizational aspect of my study focuses on the role of high-level district administrators responsible for processing inter-district transfer requests and is framed in the “street-level bureaucracy” literature originally introduced by Lipsky (2010). This literature offers insight into how school district employees interact with citizens and exercise decision-making power, and can be applied to the context of a simple transfer plan and the laws that govern its process. In his seminal 1980 work on individuals in public service, recently expanded in 2010, Michael Lipsky defined “street-level bureaucrats” as “public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work” (p. 3). Another critical component of the definition is that these bureaucrats work under the pressure of severe resource constraints (Lipsky, 2010, p. xvii). Lipsky describes street-level bureaucrats as “discretionary” decision-makers who “invoke the law selectively” and who exert control over clients, while experiencing subordination to higher government powers, rules, and the general public (p. 14). They must constantly search for a balance between the need to treat citizens as individuals experiencing unique circumstances and the pressures to systematically process clients with limited government resources (Lipsky, 2010). While Lipsky originally focused mainly on teachers, police officers and social workers as street-level bureaucrats, researchers have since expanded the definition to cover a wider pool of workers who interact with clients and practice discretion on the job (Guy, Newman, & Mastracci, 2014; Yngvesson, 1988).

I therefore treat the administrative subjects of my research as street-level bureaucrats who interact with citizens and wield power to make decisions under significant pressures and resource constraints. Although the administrators I interviewed are high-level, they function as frontline workers in processing applications and interacting with families to decide individual cases.

Literature on frontline workers has centered on people processing, discretion, and autonomy as characteristics of street-level work (Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010). The focus on how workers function in light of these characteristics, and in the context of state and agency norms, has led to the field's use of two theoretical frameworks to discuss frontline decision-making. The first, the state-agent narrative, describes Lipsky's school of thought in which workers function within laws and organizational rules. This perspective focuses on hierarchical conflict and control and emphasizes that workers are driven to routinize work and categorize clients in order to ensure a safe and efficient process (Lipsky, 2010). Prottas (1979) refers to this type of people-processing as client manufacturing and Lipsky (2010) asserts that workers psychologically simplify clients for their own self-interests. In this framework, worker decision-making is routine and categorical, but workers often struggle with higher powers to maintain autonomy in decision-making when their interests conflict with those of the organization (Lipsky, 2010, p. 17). Although Lipsky (2010) notes that street-level bureaucrats do at times help clients "work the system" (p. 64), they still do so within the confines of laws and organizational rules. Other scholars have discussed this street-level policy implementation in terms of mutual adaptation, or the adoption of policies to local environments and needs (McLaughlin, 1976; Odden, 1991).

More recently, a number of scholars offer empirical evidence that pushes beyond discretion as a sole framing of frontline work. In light of observations that workers pass judgment on clients as individuals and base decisions on moral standards and societal norms, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) suggest an expanded framework beyond the state-agent narrative. While discretion addresses "the notion of decision-making within the structure of rules" (Feldman 1992, p. 164), this new citizen-agent narrative does not limit worker decision making to the application of existing law and rules. Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2012) suggest that concepts of agency and pragmatic improvisation better describe worker decision-making. The citizen-agent narrative identifies cases of workers going above and beyond procedural guidelines to help or harm citizens based on judgments about identity, behavior, character, and worthiness (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). This new narrative takes into account the complex identities of workers who, beyond being professionals and agents of the state, are also citizens, "belonging to racial, class, gender and sexual groupings" (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003, p. 20). Maynard-Moody and Musheno argue that the state-agent and citizen-agent narratives are not contradictory but instead describe different elements, law abidance and cultural abidance, that are both present in frontline service work (p. 9). Some researchers have found that new public service workers are more likely to be rule-abiding state-agents, but that as they gain experience in the field, they learn to function outside the rules when necessary and begin to work as citizen-agents (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Oberfield, 2008).

The literature on street-level bureaucracy theory inevitably poses the question of what workers and agencies can do to ensure social justice given the nature of frontline work outlined above. Lipsky asserts that the best we can hope for is that workers invent coping mechanisms that align their work with organizational goals and promote fairness rather than “give in to favoritism, stereotyping, convenience, and routinizing” (Lipsky, 2010, p. xiv–xviii). Within the state-agent narrative, the traditional solution to concerns over worker discretion has been to increase bureaucratic controls such as laws, rules, procedures and supervision (Durant, 1995; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). However, many scholars advise against this route, insisting that it will only push decision-making into the shadows, thus preventing accountability and open discussion of social equity issues, and crippling the process with excessive regulation (Brown, 1981, p. 303; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012). And while there are undeniably risks associated with worker decision-making, it has also been identified as positive, and even necessary and desirable in some cases (Handler, 1990; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). So rather than try to eradicate worker decision-making with excessive control, scholars have suggested focusing on the culture and norms of an organization (Brehm & Gates, 1997; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012). Research suggests that open conversation about decision-making, fairness, and potential bias can promote awareness, limit negative impacts, and guide decisions toward greater social equity (Brodish & Devine, 2005; Frederickson, 1990, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012).

This literature guides a significant amount of my analysis in the organizational findings of this paper. I consider subjects at the organizational level of my research through the lens of street-level bureaucracy theory because of their direct interaction with citizens and the significant decision-making power they wield in the face of limited district resources. Past research on street-level bureaucrats in education has been centered on the role of teachers in policy implementation (see Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; McLaughlin, 1976). While some literature has discussed central office administrators in the framework of street-level bureaucracies, the focus has been more on their function as boundary spanners between districts, principals, and teachers (Honig, 2006). The present study contributes new analyses to the literature on frontline worker decision-making by identifying high-level school district administrators as street-level bureaucrats in their roles as application processors for simple transfer plans in fragmented metropolitan regions that lack collaborative inter-district transfer systems.

Legislative Solutions

The administrators discussed above must function within the bounds of existing laws, but often find themselves improvising where the courts and legislatures have not clearly defined requirements. While the power of the courts has been limited in mandating solutions to inter-district segregation, federal and state legislatures have taken some actions to mitigate inequalities and promote mobility for disadvantaged students. At the federal level, Title I, Part B of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is designed to provide intra-district mobility to struggling students in Program Improvement (PI) schools (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). PI schools are defined by the California Department of Education as “All Title I funded schools and local educational agencies

(LEAs) that do not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)” toward statewide proficiency goals (California Department of Education, “Program Improvement,” 2015). However, for students in districts with mostly PI schools, this statute leaves few options, since non-PI schools in those districts fill up quickly. Thus, inter-district transfers may be the only other available option for families seeking improved educational opportunities for their children.

The state of California adheres to a preference for localism, allowing autonomous districts to choose within which section of the Education Code to operate, either allowing collaborative open enrollment across borders or limiting transfers to those approved through a strict application process. The Calderon County districts currently operate under Section 46600, allowing districts to stipulate the terms and conditions under which they accept inter-district transfer students. The two districts involved in a transfer must sign an agreement in order for a student to attend a school in a non-resident district (Cal. Educ. Code § 46600(a)(1)), and if a request is denied, the district must notify the parents or guardians, within 30 days of the transfer request, of their ability to appeal to the County Office of Education (COE) (Cal. Educ. Code § 46601(a)).

Although it is optional for districts to enter into such an agreement, a student has the right to appeal a denial to the COE even if no agreement has been reached between the districts involved (Cal. Educ. Code §46601(b)). This indicates that a regional education office can supersede the power of local districts regarding inter-district transfer permits, and signals a shift toward regionalism for the purpose of ensuring provision of equal opportunity to students. If the transfer request is accepted, the term shall not exceed five years (Cal. Educ. Code § 46600(a)(1)), so transfer students are required to periodically re-apply and may face denial in those instances. However, a district may not rescind transfer permits of returning 11th or 12th grade students (Cal. Educ. Code § 46600(a)(4)). While this law offers some protection and assistance to transfer applicants, it still allows district discretion in determining acceptance or denial of transfer requests (Cal. Educ. Code § 46600(a)(2)). This absence of a mandated random process could potentially allow for bias in the acceptance and denial of permits at the district level. Additionally, although funding follows students to their new districts of attendance (Cal. Educ. Code §46607(a)), the Education Code does not specify that districts should provide transportation to students residing outside of their official boundaries (Cal. Educ. Code § 46600–46610).

A later section of the Education Code, amended most recently in 2009, gives districts the option to become “districts of choice,” which accept transfer students based on a “random, unbiased process” (Cal. Educ. Code § 48301(a)). Either the district of residence or the school district of choice may bar a transfer, or set a limit to the number of students who may transfer. Such denials and limits are acceptable if a transfer would negatively impact one of the following: “(1) The court-ordered desegregation plan of the district; (2) The voluntary desegregation plan of the district; or (3) The racial and ethnic balance of the district” (Cal. Educ. Code § 48301(b)). A district may not, however, deny a transfer request on the basis of the additional cost of educating the student beyond state funds received for the transfer. This addition to the code intends to prevent discrimination against pupils with special needs (Cal. Educ. Code § 48303). Additionally, information disseminated regarding districts of choice may not target certain parents, guardians, or

residential neighborhoods based on a student's academic or athletic performance or other traits (Cal. Educ. Code § 48301(d)). The selection process and communications must be subject to audit under this section of the Code (Cal. Educ. Code § 48301(e)). This statute provides for the creation of systems more in line with the inter-district "collaboratives" studied in other regions. It takes into account issues of segregation and bias and allows for potentially higher volumes of inter-district transfers. The districts in Calderon County, however, have not opted into this more expansive mechanism of regional choice.

Additional legislation that governs California school choice includes the Open Enrollment Act of 2010 and the Allen Bill. The Open Enrollment Act of 2010, also known as the Romero Bill, gives students in the state's 1,000 lowest performing schools the right to enroll in a higher achieving school outside their district of residence. This law requires that acceptance and assignment be done through a random and unbiased process facilitated by the admitting school district (Open Enrollment Act of 2010). The Allen Bill gives elementary school students grounds to enroll in the district of their parent's work, but with no guarantee of acceptance by that district. Under this law, a district may not refuse admission on the basis of "race, ethnicity, sex, parental income, scholastic achievement, or any other arbitrary consideration," except if the transfer would "negatively impact the court-ordered or voluntary desegregation plan of the district" (Allen Bill). A district may also deny entry if educating a transfer student would cost more than the funds provided by the state to do so. Additionally, the code places limits on the volume of students allowed to exit a district under this provision without the approval of the district of residence (Allen Bill).

Together, these laws make it possible for underprivileged students to pursue mobility through official processes. This legal apparatus for inter-district mobility suggests a new preference for regionalism over localism in the search for legislative solutions to issues of poverty and educational disparity. The existence of these laws challenges strict notions of district autonomy. However, California districts are still given significant autonomy in how they operate under these laws, and between-district inequalities have not yet been mitigated by these limited legal solutions. Additionally, research suggests that neighborhood and racial disparities exist in access to information (Bertot, McClure, & Jagger, 2008; Horrigan, 2009; Rosigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, & Crowley, 2006; Lorence, Park, & Fox, 2006; Sin, 2011), and thus many families may not be aware of their opportunities for mobility under existing laws.

Inter-District Mobility in California

How California regions implement inter-district transfer policy has been only partially addressed in the extant literature. Most literature on the practice of inter-district transfers, and in particular inter-district collaboratives, is concentrated on regions outside of California. However, some research on intra-district transfers within large districts in the state can be considered relevant here due to the sheer size of the districts studied (Koedel, Betts, Rice & Zau, 2009; Ledwith, 2010; Snell & Dalmia, 2007). One recent analysis of three transfer programs in San Diego found that the two programs which began during 1970s integration reforms and include transportation positively influenced

district integration. However, the third approach, which did not include transportation, actually contributed to further segregation (Koedel, Betts, Rice, & Zau, 2009).

Another study of the Los Angeles intra-district open enrollment program found that student mobility through open enrollment is a greater indicator of academic success than race, highlighting the importance of “socio-spatial” dynamics in addressing issues of racial achievement gaps in education. The study found that mobility “significantly influenced academic achievement, controlling for differences attributed to educational aspirations, gender, ethnoracial identity, and socioeconomic status” (Ledwith, 2010, p. 253). With its complex multicultural and racial diversity, and its vast area and various sub-districts (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2008), Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is in some ways comparable to Calderon County. However, the mobility studied here was technically contained within one district, leaving the phenomenon of inter-district mobility largely unstudied in metropolitan California. This gap in the current literature helped me identify the main goal of my research: to investigate the inter-district mobility of students in relatively smaller fragmented districts with no purposeful regional collaboration or resource sharing.

Only one study of non-collaborative cross-district student mobility has been completed to date in California. Prins (2007) focused mainly on the increase in segregation of Latino and White students as a result of mobility across district boundaries in one rural region of the state. Prins’ findings reiterate the conclusion found in other studies that parents participating in open enrollment tend to base choices on class and race of students in a school rather than academic performance (Holme & Richards, 2009, citing Fossey, 1994; Schneider & Buckley, 2002). Prins’s work addresses the process of inter-district transfers in a region with no collaborative regional transfer policy and identifies important social justice issues resulting from local control. Assigning culpability to both districts involved, Prins concludes that both policy and implementation promoted discrimination by allowing White students to transfer across districts out of a high-poverty, majority Latino school, while Latino/a students remained in that segregated school. She attributes this institutional racism to the reluctance of White parents to send their children to a majority Latino school and the unwillingness of school administrators to actively prevent segregating mobility (Prins, 2007).

Prins’ (2007) study provides some insight into how inter-district mobility is facilitated, and raises concerns about district decision-making power regarding inter-district transfers. However, because Prins focused on a rural area almost entirely comprised of White and Latino students, there remains a gap in the literature with regard to inter-district transfers in densely populated metropolitan regions of California with complex racial dynamics. I attempt to begin to address this gap with the present study.

Regional Context

Calderon County houses over 1.5 million residents in its cities and numerous unincorporated areas. The county boasts one of the most ethnically diverse regions in Northern California and in the nation. English language learners speak over 50 different languages in its primary and secondary schools (California Department of Education, “About Us,” 2012). This study focuses on the area of Calderon County containing the

cities of East Point and San Vicente and the unincorporated communities of San Felipe and Clover Hills. These areas reflect the diversity of the region as a whole, although some significant differences can be noted in the size and demographics of their populations. Table 1 summarizes the ethnic and racial makeup of the four districts studied.

Table 1
District Enrollment by Ethnicity 2013–2014

Race/Ethnicity	East Point	San Vicente	San Felipe	Clover Hills
Hispanic or Latino of Any Race	42.69%	47.99%	53.45%	23.41%
American Indian or Alaska Native, Not Hispanic	0.33%	0.29%	0.42%	0.31%
Asian, Not Hispanic	13.20%	14.61%	12.83%	28.82%
Pacific Islander, Not Hispanic	1.07%	1.29%	1.38%	0.55%
Filipino, Not Hispanic	0.82%	7.52%	7.03%	3.25%
African American, Not Hispanic	28.02%	14.93%	12.61%	6.43%
White, Not Hispanic	9.79%	10.12%	9.45%	31.48%
Two or More Races, Not Hispanic	2.58%	3.19%	1.66%	10.10%
Not Reported	1.50%	0.06%	1.16%	0.65%
Total Enrollment	47,194	8,673	12,288	9,317

Note. From California Department of Education. (2013). *Student Demographics* [Data file]. Retrieved from <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>; Percentages rounded to nearest hundredth

For the purposes of this study I have characterized the East Point Unified School District as an urban district serving a large and extremely ethnoracially and socioeconomically diverse student population. Because of their smaller size and relative location to the region's larger cities, I have classified San Vicente and San Felipe as inner-ring suburbs, which are more diverse and urban than conventional suburbs but less densely populated and less centrally located than urban areas. San Vicente, San Felipe, and Clover Hills have their own unified school districts, but each share parts of the region's "gray areas," which exist in the neighborhoods of overlap and discontinuity between city and school district boundaries. Finally, because of its location and demographics, I have characterized Clover Hills as a suburban school district. Although it

is more ethnically diverse than many conventional suburbs, it has significantly higher percentages of White and Asian-American student populations than the other districts studied.

Table 2 provides 2010 U.S. Census data on income, poverty levels, and percentage of foreign-born residents and those speaking languages other than English at home in each of the districts studied.

Table 2
Census Data on the Region (2008–2012)

Data Field	East Point	San Vincente	San Felipe	Clover Hills
Median Household Income	\$51,683	\$62,195	\$70,719	\$82,656
Per Capita Money Income in Past 12 Months (2012 dollars)	\$31,390	\$27,931	\$25,811	\$38,775
Persons Below Poverty Level, percent	20.3%	8.5%	9.2%	7.3%
Foreign Born Persons, percent	27.5%	32.6%	31.4%	22.5%
Language other than English Spoken at Home, pct age 5+	40.2%	47.6%	49.3%	32.3%

Note. From United States Census Bureau. State & County QuickFacts (n.d.). Retrieved September 4, 2014; School district lines do not coincide exactly with city and unincorporated area boundaries.

While there are demographic differences between these cities and unincorporated areas, the populations are all very diverse and none contain a majority ethnic or racial group. The most important difference drawn from the data in Table 2 is the steady increase in income levels from urban East Point toward suburban Clover Hills. Another notable difference is that poverty concentration is significantly greater in East Point than in the other districts studied. It is also important to note that school district lines do not always coincide with city or community boundaries. As mentioned above, there are a number of “gray areas” between San Vincente, San Felipe, Pittsfield (another neighboring district), and Clover Hills, where municipal and school district boundaries overlap and school district jurisdiction is ambiguous. These gray areas frequently create confusion and conflict over school district attendance.

In addition to variance in poverty concentration, the districts studied also exhibit differences in academic performance levels. Table 3 was created based on the average of

the four districts' 2013 Growth API Scores. The table shows each district's LEA (or district)-wide Growth API score, as a number above or below the four-district average.

Table 3
LEA-wide 2013 Growth API Scores in Relation to 4-District Average

Score Category	East Point	San Vincente	San Felipe	Clover Hills
Points	-45.75	-26.75	-27.75	+100.25
Difference from 4-District Average of 2013 Growth API				

Note. California Department of Education (2015, October 23). *API Reports*. Retrieved from <http://api.cde.ca.gov/reports/page2.asp?subject=API&level=District&submit1=submit>; Real scores and averages are not shown for purposes of anonymity.

It is clear from this comparative table that there are considerable differences in API scores between the districts studied. East Point scores are the furthest below the four-district average, but San Vincente and San Felipe scores are not much higher than East Point's. Suburban Clover Hills is the district that most significantly skews the 4-district average, with a district-wide 2013 Growth API score 100.25 points above the average of the 4-districts' scores. Clover Hills is also the only district studied with a 2013 Growth API score above the California overall state Growth API, which was 790 in 2013 (California Department of Education, "API Reports", 2015). Within each district, there is a wide range of API scores, which vary greatly from school to school. The district-wide scores, however, and their relation to the 4-district average, offer insight on the overall trend of each district's scores relative to the other districts studied.

Methodology

This study took an exploratory approach using qualitative methods to outline the functioning of the organizational processes that inform inter-district transfers in Calderon County. This approach allows analysis of the inter-district transfers from the perspective of its implementers, who form the focal point of transfer operations, where pressures that impact decision-making are exerted from various directions. A combination of institutional and field data ties together the analysis and illuminates the process of inter-district choice in the region.

Participants

At the organizational level, I interviewed one district administrator from each of the four districts in the following order: San Vincente, San Felipe, Clover Hills, and East Point. Each of the four district administrators interviewed managed all incoming and outgoing transfer requests in their districts, with the assistance of other administrators and staff. Doris, the administrator interviewed in San Vincente, is an African American woman with two master's degrees, who worked as a high school teacher before entering

administration. James, the administrator in San Felipe, is an African American man with a doctorate and a master's degree, who is a minister, former school counselor, psychotherapist and educational consultant. Joe, the administrator interviewed in Clover Hills, has a master's degree and doctorate, and experience as a middle school principal. Joe did not identify his race or ethnicity. Rita, the administrator in East Point, is a Latina woman with a bachelor's degree in psychology and experience in the financial services industry.

I chose to interview these four administrators because they hold decision-making power in granting and denying transfers, and interact on a regular basis with families, school administrators, and district and county elected officials. These administrators function at the cross-section of district and county organizations, schools, and students and families, and are thus in a unique position of experiencing both power and pressure from various sources. I also interviewed one Calderon County employee who filters inter-district transfer appeals to the County Board of Education. Finally, I interviewed one parent who was also a district employee and one student, identified through snowball sampling, or selecting prospective participants for the sample based on current interviews or informants (Schutt, 2012). These two interviewees had first-hand experience with cross-district mobility in the region. While I chose to focus my analysis on the organizational-level findings because of the breadth of information provided by administrators, these two interviews provided valuable insight through student and family perspectives.

Procedures

Administrators provided quantitative data on the volume and directionality of transfer requests in and out of their districts. I then followed up with questions regarding their perception of patterns in transfer requests, political pressures, and their own formation and implementation of district-specific transfer policies. The Calderon County employee provided information on volume of appeals, the resolution process used by just the County Offices of Education, administrator resistance to county supervision, and her own personal coping methods for handling emotionally-charged cases. I asked the two interview subjects who had participated in the transfer process to tell their own personal stories of mobility across district lines.

All interview subjects were informed at the beginning of the conversation that their responses would be kept anonymous through the use of pseudonyms. Each interview was conducted in person, except for the student, who was interviewed via Skype™ due to distance. Administrator interviews were scheduled for one-hour periods in February and March of 2013 and were conducted on-site at the district offices. I took detailed notes by hand in all administrative interviews, which I then transcribed digitally later the same day. The parent and student interviewed were informed that their responses were being recorded, and I later transcribed verbatim those responses. These two interviews were conducted in February and April of 2013 and lasted between thirty minutes and one hour.

Analysis

Initial interviews of participants led me to identify main themes that I explored as I continued through my research and analysis. I carefully reviewed the notes and transcripts from each interview and coded for a number of recurring themes. These themes include the persistence of localism and district autonomy, administrative power and decision-making, community perceptions and influence on transfer policy, and underlying dynamics and influence of racial and socio-economic divisions. Specific codes that I used in analyzing interview notes and transcripts to arrive at these themes were: Laws & Requirements; Policy-Making; Decision-Making Power; Application Process; Process Standardization; Improvisation; Workload & Job Pressures; District Autonomy; County Presence; Directionality of Transfers; School Rankings; Community Perceptions & Local Politics; Race & Socioeconomic Status; Bias; Judgments, re: Family/Applicant; and Reasons for Approval/Denial. Some sections of interview notes and transcripts were assigned multiple codes. Regarding quantitative analysis, although numerical data fields recorded and provided by administrators are inconsistent across districts, I identified points of comparison in volume and directionality of transfers, and used these to deepen my understanding of qualitative findings.

Findings

The findings of this study mainly address the policy and practice of local institutional actors in the districts and county. In order to apply for an inter-district public school transfer in Calderon County, a student must first be released by their district of residence and then accepted for entry into the desired school district. In all four of the districts studied, inter-district transfers are viewed as contracts between the two districts involved and transfer applications require reasons such as parent employment in the receiving district or health and safety issues in the district of residence. Districts are allowed to deny transfers for a variety of reasons, including discipline, academic record, poor attendance, and lack of space. District administrators receive applications, but the Calderon County Board of Education sets application standards and works to align district practice with state law. Thus, the same form is used by all districts in the county, and does not include items regarding race or ethnicity of the applicant. This inhibits tracking of mobility of ethnic or racial groups and eliminates the possibility for purposeful integration. Despite county oversight that indicates an inclination toward regionalism, administrators in each district seem to find space to construct their own processes for reviewing transfer applications based on local needs, values and political pressures.

Tables 4 and 5 present data collected from the four administrators on the volume of incoming and outgoing transfers to and from their districts. The numbers are dependent on the time of year that the data was collected, as transfers occur year-round. This data set was collected between February and April of 2013 and may vary from the final count at the end of the school year in June.

Table 4
Volume of Incoming Transfer Requests by District

Approval Status	East Point (2012–2013)	San Vincente (2012–2013)	San Felipe (2011–2012)	Clover Hills (2012–2013)
Approved, number	78	381	470	287
Approved, percent	60.00%	56.61%	76.55%	55.88%
Denied, number	30	227	144	212
Denied, percent	23.08%	33.73%	23.45%	40.54%
Total Requests	130	673	614	523

Note. Other categories for which there was not consistent data across districts include: revoked, rescinded, undetermined and pending.

As illustrated, East Point Unified receives substantially fewer incoming transfer requests than the other three districts studied, particularly when considering the district's total enrollment, which for the year 2012–2013 was 46,486 students. San Vincente, on the other hand, received a relatively high number of incoming requests compared to its total enrollment of 8,704 in the same year. Although it did not receive as many requests as either San Vincente or San Felipe, Clover Hills approved a lower percentage and denied a higher percentage of incoming transfer requests than any other district. East Point and San Felipe, on the other hand, denied fewer incoming transfer requests than did San Vincente and Clover Hills.

Table 5
Volume of Outgoing Transfer Requests by District

Approval Status	East Point (2012–2013)	San Vincente (2012–2013)	San Felipe (2011–2012)	Clover Hills (2012–2013)
Approved, number	1676	321	511	N/A ^a
Approved, percent	90.06%	56.72%	60.05%	N/A
Denied, number	98	62	340	N/A
Denied, percent	5.27%	10.95%	39.95%	N/A
Total Requests	1861	566	851	N/A

Note. Other categories for which there was not consistent data across districts include: undecided, rescinded and canceled.

^a The administrator interviewed in Clover Hills said the district saw approximately 40 outgoing inter-district transfers but the number is so small that they do not track those students.

With the greatest number of outgoing requests, East Point also approves 90.06% and denies only 5.27% of those requests. The other districts, particularly San Felipe, approve fewer and deny more outgoing transfer requests. Both San Vincente and San Felipe receive a larger number of requests relative to district enrollment. These totaled 8,704 students in San Vincente in 2012–2013 and 12,123 in San Felipe in 2011–2012, the year for which transfer volume data was available in that district. According to the Clover Hills administrator, very few outgoing requests were received and he, therefore, did not track those students. He did, however, state that the district always approves outgoing requests, and most of those students transfer to an independent study program in a nearby suburban district.

Directionality

Additionally, data on directionality of transfers were available for three districts: San Vincente, Clover Hills, and East Point. San Vincente received the most incoming transfer requests from San Felipe (44.71%), followed closely by East Point (38.86%) and Pittsfield (12.69%), each of which are nearby. The largest number of San Vincente's outgoing transfer requests went to San Felipe (27.74%), followed by East Point (16.78%), and Clover Hills (10.95%). Although Clover Hills does not maintain data on outgoing transfers, the majority of its incoming transfer requests are received from the Pittsfield District (51.82%), which shares one of the county's "gray areas" with Clover Hills. Clover Hills received 23.9% of its incoming transfer requests from San Felipe and 14.34% from San Vincente. Finally, East Point received 17.69% of incoming transfer requests from Pittsfield, 16.15% from West Sierra Negra (a district to the north of East Point), and 13.85% from San Vincente. A total of 16.82% of East Point's outgoing requests were to Grantsville, a relatively new bordering district. In addition, 16.07% requested San Vincente, 15.96% requested Addison and 13.86% requested Alvarado—the latter two being neighboring, less urban districts. Finally, 9.46% of East Point's outgoing transfer requests were to Kentwood, a neighboring district with a very high-income, significantly White population, which consistently scores well above other neighboring districts on standardized tests.

Reasons for Transfers

The administrator interviewed at the East Point Unified School District, Rita, explained that many of the East Point students of higher socioeconomic backgrounds leave the district for neighboring higher-performing and better-resourced districts. This observation reflects previous findings, i.e., wealthier families often benefit the most from voluntary and colorblind school choice programs (Holme & Richards, 2009; Wells & Roda, 2009). Joe, the district administrator in Clover Hills, explained that his district attracts many transfer students with its high API averages. He said that Clover Hills is perceived to be a safer district than others nearby, including East Point, San Vincente, and San Felipe, all of which have lower API averages, compared both to Clover Hills and state averages (California Department of Education, "State Report–Growth API," 2014). The student interviewed used his grandmother's address to attend Clover Hills schools

for these reasons. However, after he was forced to leave the district, he attended an East Point school near his mother's home. Reflecting on that change, he said it was "one of the best things that ever happened to me." He valued the life experiences gained in East Point through interactions with a diverse group of classmates and criticized what he recalled to be an isolated world of gated communities in Clover Hills. Although this story calls into question assumptions about districts based on reputation and achievement measures, according to administrators, these factors continue to influence family decisions regarding transfers.

According to Rita, while some students request transfer permits into East Point because of proximity or to take advantage of the charter and magnet schools available through the district's intra-district lottery system, a majority of East Point inter-district transfer requests are outgoing due to the negative reputation of district schools. James, the San Felipe district administrator, similarly observed that transfer students wishing to enter his district from East Point are primarily trying to escape a particular element, namely, violence or a negative reputation. Concerns about violence are checked as "health and safety" reasons on the inter-district transfer application. This negative perception of East Point schools was reiterated by the student and parent interviewed for this study.

James, administrator of the San Felipe District, also receives health and safety requests for students applying from San Vincente, but reported that such requests reflect boundary issues due to "gray areas" between the two districts. Joe, the district administrator in Clover Hills, also observed a number of requests from families who move into "gray area" neighborhoods in unincorporated Clover Hills and later realize they do not actually reside within district lines. The San Vincente district administrator, Doris, explained that her office actually receives the majority of its inter-district transfer requests from students residing in these "gray areas." According to Doris, the "gray areas" are the result of historical social stratification in the region. For example, residents of the Pinecrest neighborhood, which is technically in East Point but borders San Vincente, are allowed to attend San Vincente schools. Doris believes that this policy is rooted in the fact that Pinecrest comprises more affluent families with political influence who do not want their children attending East Point schools. She then explained that more "industrial" neighborhoods in south San Vincente were left outside of the district lines, possibly because of "higher poverty rates and lower parent education levels." Doris' observations are evidence of localism and fragmentation benefiting affluent neighborhoods and her interview alludes to the greater political influence of populations with higher income and social status (see Frankenberg, 2012).

History, Race and Class Matter

Doris's account demonstrates that acceptance rules and district zoning are structured across a backdrop of longstanding racial and socioeconomic issues. Because the transfer application used in Calderon County does not require students to identify their race or ethnicity, it is difficult to trace documented patterns beyond the observations of district administrators. However, administrator commentary and extant literature (see Wells & Roda, 2009), strongly suggest that the inter-district transfer process may exacerbate

already existing segregation and disparity of access to education based on race and class. The present study reveals that administrators have the power to reinforce the legacies of older policies or reject them through their own personal approaches to inter-district mobility.

According to Rita, her predecessor exercised bias to help more affluent families through the transfer process. His desk was apparently within hearing range of the front reception office and he would step out to offer assistance upon hearing “affluent-sounding” parents in the reception area. Rita identifies this prior administrator as an “affluent” man, who personally identified with affluent clients. Rita argues that this impacted the application process because as an administrator, her predecessor had the power to make decisions that favored these affluent families. This observation mirrors the citizen-agent narrative by which frontline workers act upon judgments of citizens based on their own personal identities (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). Recognizing the negative impact of her predecessor’s identity-based citizen-agent approach (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003), Rita purposely positions her desk away from reception in the back of the office and avoids interaction with families. She exemplifies Lipsky’s (2010) state-agent best-case scenario, in which “street-level bureaucrats invent modes of mass processing that more or less permit them to deal with the public fairly, appropriately, and thoughtfully” (Lipsky, 2010, p. xiv). Rita is relatively new to district administration and has less educational experience than her counterparts in the other districts analyzed. That she has taken this approach aligns with the findings of Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) and Oberfield (2008), who observe that new frontline workers are more likely to take on the role of the state agent who attempts to eliminate individual discretion. Although this approach is well-intentioned, it should be cautioned that greater institutional controls can push decision-making undercover and thus prevent meaningful conversation about its effect on social equity (Brown, 1981; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012).

James, the administrator in San Felipe, is also aware of social and racial dynamics in the inter-district transfer process. In San Felipe, James noted that some families who take advantage of the transfer process are better informed and “more savvy” than other parents in the district. He sees patterns of more affluent or “entitled” parents requesting transfers into Clover Hills but he also sees shrewd families requesting specific schools within the San Felipe district. Previous research suggests that more affluent families are more likely to take advantage of voluntary school choice to better their own educational opportunities (see Holme & Richards, 2009; Wells & Roda, 2009). James observes that the majority of high school transfer applicants request a particular school with higher test scores because they believe this indicates a better school. James observes that it is often Asian-American families who submit inter-district transfer requests to access this higher-scoring school.

Community Perceptions

The issue of perception is relevant in James’ commentary regarding the role of race and class in inter-district mobility. Despite the fact that San Felipe has no majority White schools, James says there is still a common misperception that certain schools are “White” schools and contends that “the perception of what is real can often be more

powerful than the actual truth.” San Felipe schools are, for the most part, schools of color and James has noticed patterns of “White Flight,” causing San Felipe’s White population to decline over time.

Doris describes a similar trend of families wanting to transfer into San Vincente because they view it as a suburban school district. But she quickly clarifies that San Vincente and the areas north and south are urban districts, “jockeying for more students.” Despite external perceptions of the district, Doris says she receives calls each spring semester from resident parents who are upset that San Vincente is a Program Improvement (PI) district. San Vincente currently has only three non-PI elementary schools. According to Doris, many parents are initially upset when they learn they cannot transfer their child into one of the three schools but eventually become satisfied with their neighborhood elementary school.

Issues of community perceptions came to light about 3 years ago in San Felipe in what James describes as “a sweeping notion” that the district’s test scores were falling because of inter-district transfer students. In response to this, James sent the GPAs of all inter-district transfer students—which averaged to about 3.5—to the district superintendent. According to James, families of transfer students often “know the game” and many of their children are straight-A students. This observation is supported by the parent interviewed in this study, who describes a family in which both the mother and the students were “exemplary” members of their new community. The storyteller in that interview also observed that families who transfer tend to be involved in the community of the receiving school, for example, volunteering and serving on the PTA. Despite these positive portrayals of transfer students, which show that they can contribute to their new schools, James stated that complaints by local parents still arise when children are required to move to another classroom or another school to accommodate overcrowding.

Community perceptions also present relevant policy concerns for the Clover Hills Unified School District. Joe describes the perception among some community members that 25–50% of district attendance is made up of students residing outside district boundaries. In an attempt to publicly disprove this misperception, he frequently publishes data demonstrating that 7% of Clover Hills students hold official inter-district transfer permits and that these students tend to have high GPAs and attendance records. Still, some parents complain that traffic around schools and campus congestion are signs that the district is accepting too many transfer students and they pressure the district to tighten its acceptance policy. One community member ran for the school board on a platform of ridding the district of inter-district transfers in order to reduce crowding. Although the candidate was not elected, this perception remains an issue in district politics. Opinions within the community that elects School Board members are a relevant factor in the inter-district transfer process because those elected officials ultimately make the policy decisions that guide the superintendent. The community in Clover Hills appears to want to limit educational access to residents. This type of exclusion has been recognized in the literature on the politics of suburban autonomy, in which communities use the guise of localism to deepen inter-district stratification by race and class (see Henig, 2009; Rury & Saatcioglu, 2011; Tilly, 1998; Walters, 2007). The interview with the San Vincente parent and district employee revealed similar sentiments, describing parents in a San Vincente school wanting to rid the district of inter-district transfer students. These parents

were concerned that transfer students from East Point were crowding their school and causing better-resourced families to acquire intra-district transfer permits to another higher-performing San Vicente school. As the interviewee stated, the situation became “very political” and the district actually took action to limit inter-district transfers as a result of this community pressure.

Another common perception that Joe identified is that Clover Hills is a majority White district with many of its students of color coming from outside of its boundaries. Facing a problem similar to San Felipe, Joe clarified that the district is becoming more diverse with time. As Joe points out, the district’s student population was majority White ten years ago, but is now less than 35% White (CA Department of Education, Student Demographics, 2013). Still, there remains a small group in the community that believes that students of color on campuses in Clover Hills must have entered from a neighboring district. Here again, issues of community perception and hostility toward inter-district transfer students play into the complicated task of transfer policymaking in an impacted district experiencing rapid demographic changes in its student population.

The “Balancing Act”

Like many of the surrounding districts, San Vicente Unified must perform what Doris refers to as “a balancing act,” examining incoming and outgoing transfer requests on a case-by-case basis, while considering district attendance levels and resources. Other administrators hinted at this same pressure to balance transfer permit requests in the context of internal district tensions and community sentiment. This directly traces to street-level bureaucracy theory that centers on the tension between treating clients as individuals and mass-processing under the various pressures and limitations of the frontline work environment (see Lipsky, 2010).

Joe admits that he does not have time to read all of the applications for transfers into Clover Hills Unified School District. Working within federal and state laws and district and county procedures, Joe functions as a state-agent, forming his own policy to process students efficiently under severe resource constraints (see Lipsky, 2010; Prottas, 1979). He has learned to identify what he calls extenuating circumstances, for which he will automatically allow a transfer. Extenuating circumstances include discrimination, bullying, sexual harassment, and any type of abuse experienced in the student’s home district. These circumstances fall under “health and safety” concerns on the transfer application, and the district requires proof, often gathered by calling the former school district to confirm the facts.

Because Joe does not have time to review carefully all the applications he receives, and often must deny requests due to lack of space, some parents file an appeal with the Calderon County Board of Education. Joe says he frequently interacts with the county on appeals. Although the district is technically not required to admit transfers when it lacks the space, it must make room if the county mandates acceptance. This reflects the hierarchical framework of the state-agent narrative (Lipsky, 2010), within which Joe views himself as subordinate to the County Board.

In his position, James must balance his district-level decisions with pressures from school administrators, knowing that it can be complicated to overrule school principal

requests to revoke the transfer permits of certain students. It is difficult to call a school administrator and inform her that he has overturned a revocation and that a student recommended for removal will return in the fall. Thus, pressure is exerted on district administrators not only from the county and the community, but also from other district employees, who struggle with their own unique needs and workplace pressures.

The delicate balance maintained by administrators between pressures from teachers, the School District and County Boards, and the community at-large, is indicative of a complicated regional dynamic wherein actors from different organizations with conflicting interests must coordinate to ensure that the inter-district transfer process functions in accordance with state and federal law and the assurance of justice. District administrators represent the frontline in a complex system of governance in which an array of public and non-government groups manage and inform a regional process. Administrators must balance community pressures, district needs, and county supervision to administer a simple transfer plan. Although Calderon County is not a collaborative, meaning a planned regional system with the goal of reducing disparities (Finnigan et al., 2015), administrators are in a position to address cross-district inequalities through cooperation with other actors and their own use of intersectional power.

Building Their Own Policy

In all districts studied, administrators creatively use power to craft their own versions of inter-district transfer policy to fit the specific needs of their district. This practice of adopting policies in ways that serve local environments and needs is referenced in the literature as mutual adaptation (McLaughlin, 1976; Odden, 1991). Although administrators must generally remain within the bounds of state and county policy due to the possibility of student appeals to the County Board of Education, they maintain considerable control over the policy-making and implementation processes of inter-district transfers.

Doris has made substantial changes to district transfer policy since she began her job 5 years ago. At the time of her arrival, she explains, San Vincente transfer policy was “very rigid,” accepting almost no transfers in from East Point and denying all requests by new kindergarteners wishing to be released to another district. She has since adapted the district policy to reflect her beliefs regarding equity and administrative feasibility. Doris ended the strict rejection of East Point students, seeing it as racially biased, and releases all kindergarteners requesting an exit permit, which she believes aligns her practice with county policy. Although some school board and community members desire stricter regulations on outgoing transfers, students can appeal a denial at the Calderon County Board of Education, which, according to Doris, will always side with a kindergartener wishing to exit a district. As a district administrator, Doris has the ability to make these policy changes. However, School Board approval is necessary for any broad changes and there are some conservative board members whom she describes as unsupportive of change. Nonetheless, Doris continues to devise what she believes are improvements to district policy.

In addition to policy-making power, Doris also exercises control in decisions of individual transfer cases brought to the district. She tells the story of a fifth grader

residing in the San Felipe Unified School District who attended a school in San Vincente for a number of years. When his request was denied due to lack of space, the student came to her office in tears because he had to leave his school and friends. Doris worked with the principal to allow the student to stay in the school. In that instance Doris acted as a citizen-agent, going above and beyond the requirements of her job to help an individual student (see Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). This story shows flexibility in process and demonstrates the ability of district administrators to use their power and connections to create solutions on a situational basis. However, as seen in Rita's interview regarding her predecessor's policy in East Point, this power can produce bias and should be considered through a critical lens.

Like Doris, James also forwards his own policy initiatives. He states that he will not deny any outgoing transfer requests because transferring students can appeal a denial to the County Board of Education. On incoming transfers, James identifies himself as an administrator willing to give students a chance. He further explains that if he believes a student's poor grades are a result of the prior school's environment, he will grant them a transfer. Here, James shows an understanding of individual circumstances and a desire to promote equity, exemplifying the positive aspects of frontline decision-making (see Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003).

For those cases in which a transfer into San Felipe is denied or revoked, James has created a new appeals process within the district, which enables parents to bring their case to him directly for a second review. He uses a form very similar to the original transfer application but focuses more on the nuances. James has heard that the County Board of Education is very "family-friendly," siding with the family over the district "nine times out of ten"; thus, it is beneficial for him to institute this process. He says the process is feasible unless parents bring in an elementary school-aged child to his office, which makes the appeal more "emotional" and difficult to review without bias. Although he recognizes there are flaws inherent in the process, James has not had a single case go to the Board during his 5-year tenure. His efforts to avoid the County Board appeals process reflect the hierarchical framework and struggle for autonomy described in the state-agent narrative on street-level work (see Lipsky, 2010). However, James plays a role as a citizen-agent, one who is affected by the behavior and character of his clients and is willing to spend additional time listening to their individual stories.

In order to handle incoming transfer demands, Clover Hills adopts a number of unique practices. According to Joe, Clover Hills Unified does not typically approve transfers after the school year begins and they have not approved any new inter-district transfers at the high school level for the past four years. Additionally, they have discussed cutting off new transfers into middle schools to ease crowding. Joe accepts Kindergarten requests based on space but also factors in location, favoring those who are "just down the street." Acceptance of students in other grade levels is based on report cards from prior districts that demonstrate positive records of behavior and attendance. Joe asserts that the low acceptance rate to Clover Hills causes him to interact quite frequently with the County Board of Education for appeals. Because of the significant pressure experienced due to the volume of requests, county board supervision, and community politics, Joe generally acts as a state-agent, creating ways to process requests efficiently within his administrative limitations and existing laws (see Lipsky, 2010). It seems that

as these pressures increase, administrators might have less control over the transfer policy because they must answer to outside voices and higher authorities.

For East Point policy decisions, Rita asserts that she refers directly to county guidelines. Because the East Point School Board policy on inter-district transfers is vague, administrators have room for flexibility. Deference to county policy generally helps Rita avoid appeals, which she does not encounter frequently. Rita stated that school board politics surrounding inter-district transfers are nonexistent in East Point. The district is so large that administrators do not have time to address community perceptions or individual cases. This frames East Point's transfer dynamics within Lipsky's (2010) state-agent narrative, in which efficient processing is necessitated by limited resources. Rita believes that this systematization due to volume makes East Point's practices fairer. In an effort to eliminate personal bias, Rita does not meet with individual applicant families and requires parents to deposit applications in a box at the district office. This exhibits the traditional state-agent approach to issues of discretion, by which control is used to minimize frontline decision-making (see Durant, 1995; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003).

Rita's standardized policy differs from the practices in surrounding districts in which administrators meet with families and students before making a final decision. Although systematization may help eliminate bias, it also removes the possibility for an individual case to be heard, and prevents open discussion about employing mobility to promote social equity (see Brown, 1981; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). East Point is unique in the region due to its larger size, system of intra-district mobility, and standardization of applicant review aimed at efficiency and the elimination of individual story-telling from the process. Although different from the practices of the other districts studied, Rita's approach is also facilitated by the autonomy allowed to district administrators.

This district autonomy, which leaves the inter-district transfer review process vulnerable to bias, signals that localism is still alive and strong in Calderon County. However, administrator interviews also point to the emergence of regional governing structures. The main indication of regionalism found in this organizational section lies in the existence of an overarching County Board of Education, the role of which is detailed in the following section. Administrators find themselves in a unique position to make informed decisions about what is best for their district, schools, and individual students. They hold clout in policy-making due to their unique positioning between higher levels of administration and students and families. They play a crucial role in regional coordination because they are familiar with the law but also have a connection to the individual students. Some administrators see it as their responsibility to mold district policy according to individual student needs. Others limit interaction with citizens in an attempt to eliminate discretionary decision-making. They act as both state-agents and citizen-agents to deal with varying needs, fitting the role of the street-level bureaucrat as discussed in street-level bureaucracy theory (see Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003).

Calderon County Board of Education

When parents of inter-district transfer applicants have exhausted all avenues at the local level, they may appeal their case to the Calderon County Board of Education where Marianne, a county employee, is the first to review each appeal. The majority of appeals she receives are filed by students denied entrance into Clover Hills Unified, which has enacted a blanket denial for incoming requests at the high school level. Safety issue appeals frequently come from students wishing to leave particular schools within the East Point district. The greatest number of appeals is submitted at the middle and high school levels.

If Marianne feels that a district administrator has overlooked an important aspect of a case, she will ask them to review the details again. The district will then often approve the request at this stage, precluding the need for a later hearing before the Board. The Board prefers to see such a “resolution prior,” and Marianne reports that 65% of appeals are resolved prior, the majority of which are resolved in favor of the family, mostly because they deal with transfer requests that should have been approved in the first place. If the case will be heard by the Board, Marianne helps the family prepare. She first goes on a “fact-finding mission” to accumulate all documentation that can be presented to the Board as proof. She also encourages parents and/or students to write a letter detailing their case. If the district denied the student a transfer permit because of a space issue, Marianne will confirm attendance numbers of the district in question. Once all the information is compiled, the family and district move forward to a hearing. Out of the approximately 225 inter-district transfer appeals filed during the 2012–2013 school year, only 57 went to the Board for a hearing.

At the hearing before the Board, parents advocate for the family and an administrator from the district argues the district’s case. Each party receives six minutes to present their case after which the Board votes. According to Marianne, the set of criteria that the Board uses to evaluate transfer cases is different from that employed by districts. The Board heavily weights issues of childcare in the district requested, medical necessity, and safety issues in the district of residence. While the Board gives serious consideration to safety issues, such cases are usually resolved prior. Marianne notes that in the last year, of the six safety cases appealed, all were resolved prior to a hearing. However, if the denial is based on the student’s discipline record, the Board is unlikely to overturn the district’s decision on appeal.

Because she has a unique position in which she is involved with both families and legal and administrative personnel, Marianne removes herself from the emotional aspects of her work. She sometimes feels that the Board does not fully grasp one side of the story and she realizes the profound effects a decision can have on the family. Marianne knows that ultimately it is the Board’s decision and she expressed that the county will work with families to secure an alternative choice, either within their district of residence or in a nearby district. She also claims that the Board takes appeals on a case-by-case basis and is not swayed by outside opinions or politics.

District administrators are required by the California Education Code to inform parents of their right to appeal within thirty working days of the request for a transfer permit (Cal. Educ. Code § 46601(a)). Marianne reported that district administrators

perceive that the Board overturns more denials than it actually does, and they become frustrated by high volumes of appeals. While some administrators believe that a majority of denials are overturned by the Board of Education, according to Marianne, only about 45% of appeals that reach the Board are decided in favor of the family. Marianne believes this frustration and misperception result from the thin jurisdictional line between the County Board of Education and the school district offices. In cases of revoked transfers, for example, some districts do not think students should be allowed an appeal. However, because the law is vague, families for whom transfer permits are revoked can reapply for a transfer and appeal upon denial. District administrators expressed frustration at the county's power to overturn a denial made due to lack of space because the district is then responsible to make room for the student, even if that means overburdening teachers with class enrollment beyond district and union allowance. District administrators clearly struggle for autonomy from the hierarchical power structure imposed on them by the county, further framing their position as street-level bureaucrats as envisioned by Lipsky (2010).

Although an appeal can be an excellent option for families whose cases were not fairly considered at the district level, it can also result in a further burden on school districts to both prepare their case and then comply with Board rulings. Additionally, the appeals process is designed for educated, well-informed parents who have the time and resources to spend on case preparation and board hearings, a trend that is noted in prior literature on voluntary open enrollment plans (Wells & Roda, 2009). It seems that inter-district transfers are intended as a vehicle for students in need of mobility, but that this mobility is only truly accessible if parents have the time and knowledge necessary to navigate the somewhat complicated processes.

The fact that an inter-district transfer appeals process exists at all is actually quite remarkable. It signifies that policy-makers recognize a need for inter-district mobility. However, this process also shifts power from the local level upward and thus can result in conflict between administrators, who believe they know best for their district, and elected county officials, who are responsible for ensuring justice for all students. In a way, this conflict represents the quintessential discord between localism and regionalism. The County Board of Education is an overarching regional authority that in many ways threatens the local autonomy of the districts. Districts must comply with County Board decisions, but they exhibit resistance in an attempt to maintain autonomy in the transfer process. What this process seems to lack is clear guidance on the goals of the process and horizontal intergovernmental collaboration with stakeholders working together to promote regional goals.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the often-overlooked simple inter-district transfer plans that exist in fragmented metropolitan regions in the United States. What is found in Calderon County is a voluntary and "colorblind" process of inter-district open enrollment that is non-collaborative in nature and lacks clear goals and uniformity in practice. The existence of the Calderon County Board of Education suggests an overarching regional scheme but this study otherwise identified very little organized

regional collaboration, and a significant pull at the district level for local autonomy. The Board of Education plays a supervisory role in the region, but scholars have suggested that New Regionalism will most often manifest itself not through top-down control but instead through the cooperation of existing governing entities (Wheeler, 2002). These findings indicate Calderon County is still very much attached to the rhetoric of localism supported by the U.S. Supreme Court and the state Department of Education.

In Calderon County, school district administrators who review transfer requests act as street-level bureaucrats, managing the tension between compelling individual cases and an administrative need to process applicants efficiently. These administrators form the focal point of inter-district transfer processes, where law, policy, community perceptions, and personal interactions inform practice. They act as both state-agents, processing clients within the bounds of law and policy to improve efficiency and reduce discretion, and as citizen-agents, going above and beyond the rules and procedures to act on judgments they make of individual clients. Administrative policy varies greatly across the districts, ranging from the administrator who refuses to meet face-to-face with families, to the administrator who created his own district appeals process to thoroughly understand the details of every transfer request. Some interviewees suggested that administrators' broad decision-making power allows for personal bias and submission to racially and socially charged community opinion. Others revealed conscious decisions to address perceived inequities and openly discuss topics of race and class in school choice. Without clear official policy guidance, administrators act in accordance with what they believe is right considering resource limitations, community pressure, county control, and regional stratification that inherently inhibits equal access to education.

The main issue identified within this disorganized "non-system" is that rather than serving as a mechanism of mobility for the most disadvantaged students, this voluntary transfer plan may be a vehicle of mobility for the already-advantaged families in the region. While state law offers regions the option to adopt more collaborative systems to combat racial and socioeconomic inequality in educational opportunity, Calderon County has instead opted to maintain a simple transfer plan favoring localism and district autonomy. Resistance to regionalist structures was revealed in administrator, student, and parent interviews. This study shows that inter-district choice in this region lacks the inter-governmental coordination and sense of purpose associated with cross-district desegregation plans and may in fact perpetuate rather than reduce inequalities. Interviews reveal that transfers may be a tool for wealthier, more knowledgeable families to gain access to desired schools and districts. Additionally, administrators are subject to community pressures that are often guided by racially and socioeconomically charged perceptions, signifying that the region has yet to transcend its complex history of racial discrimination and cross-district disparities. While the administrators interviewed in this study demonstrated dedication to values of fairness and social justice, this process is clearly vulnerable to the persistent politics and privileges that may perpetuate legacies of segregation in a voluntary and "colorblind" open enrollment plan. The fact that the application does not record race, ethnicity, or other demographic information makes it very difficult to study effects on existing racial stratification, which is a significant flaw from a social equity and accountability standpoint.

A transfer process that grants opportunity only to those with the knowledge and social capital to navigate the process cannot be a sustainable solution to educational disparities in fragmented metropolitan regions. The findings of this study suggest that simple transfer plans leave the assurance of justice to the judgment of local administrators who are subject to the pressures of limited resources and community politics. This process lacks clear objectives founded in social justice and although it is designed to be voluntary and “colorblind,” it may in fact exacerbate existing patterns of racial and socioeconomic segregation in the region.

The present research study is exploratory, but uncovers some significant findings that suggest further investigation of similar school choice programs. Future research of fragmented metropolitan regions with voluntary, “colorblind”, and non-collaborative inter-district choice is needed. In addition, future studies on the topic of race and socioeconomic status of transfer applicants, and perspectives of community and school board members, may help illuminate the issue. I also suggest that street-level bureaucracy theory is an important framework that should be considered in future study of district administrator decision-making. Overall, this study revealed key findings on inter-district school choice, metropolitan fragmentation and disparities, and street-level bureaucracy theory, which will hopefully lead to changes in practice.

Author Biography

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