School of Choice and Diversity

Megan Taliaferro
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mcnair

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mcnair/vol12/iss1/9
In recent decades school of choice policies have become increasingly widespread and diverse (Henig 1994). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), between 1993 and 2003, the percentage of students attending their assigned public school district dropped from 80 percent to 74 percent. Private school enrollment in both religious and secular schools remained at 8 and 2 percent, respectively. Therefore, the change is due to the increase in public school choice, which rose from 11 to 15 percent in the ten-year period (NCES 2007).

Many advocates see increased choice policies as an important tool to empower parents, especially parents with limited resources, because it allows them to take an active role in their children’s education. Ideally, school of choice is the key to equality in educational opportunity because it would allow students and parents to escape “failing” school districts and receive a better quality education. Whether school of choice policies are actually increasing educational equality, however, is questionable, partly due to recent studies which have found that American schools are rapidly undergoing a trend toward resegregation (Orfield and Eaton 1996; Orfield 2001; Clotfelter, 2001; Hochschild and Scovroncick 2003).

This trend could suggest that school of choice simply replaces the old stratification system with a new one by allowing able and willing parents to leave undesirable districts but not addressing the needs of the districts themselves. Studies conducted to determine the success of school of choice policies have been inconsistent in their results. Many studies have determined that African Americans and Hispanics are more likely to take advantage of school of choice, thus increasing their opportunities to education (Chubb and Moe 1996; Coleman, Schiller, and Schneider 1993; Hoxby 1998; Wolf, Howell, and Peterson 2000). Other studies, however, conclude that school of choice is a conservative solution to the problem of education inequality because the policies may inherently benefit those with more resources and may contribute to increased segregation by race and class (Smith and Meier 1995; Henig 1996; Saporito and Lareau 1999; Witte 2000; Clotfelter, 2001; Saporito 2003; Tedin and Weiher 2004; Prins 2007; Mickelson, Bottia, and Southworth 2008).

In this case study, I analyze the demographic changes in districts as a result of interdistrict school of choice in a midsized city in Michigan. I also apply Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) frames of abstract liberalism and cultural racism to investigate how parents’ use of school of choice may contribute to trends in large-scale resegregation.

WHAT IS SCHOOL OF CHOICE?

School of choice can be defined as “the freedom for families to send their children to educational settings other than the one public school within their attendance zone” (Good and Braden 2000:5). A more complex explanation of school choice, given by Henig (1994), is:

Choice plans can be based on vouchers, tuition tax credits or administrative procedures. They may allow parents virtually unconstrained freedom to select the school of their choice, or they may impose a complicated regulatory framework on both parents and students to select a school. Choice plans may be limited to public schools, may include non parochial private schools, or may include all schools. They may be district wide or cross district boundaries. They may be locally initiated, encouraged by state incentives, mandated by state law, or stimulated by federal grants. (P. 4)

What Henig draws our attention to is the complexity of school of choice policies. There is incredible variation between states, counties, districts, and even indi-
vidual schools. In addition, as school of choice continues to expand, more nontraditional types of school choice continue to emerge, changing the way individuals and public schools relate to one another.

Types of Choice

Types of school choice can be divided into two broad categories: traditional and nontraditional (public). Traditional school choice has long coexisted with public schools and is not a direct function of the public school system. Traditional types of choice include residential selection (or residential relocation), home schooling, and private schools. Nontraditional types of choice are the types of choice that were largely introduced in the aftermath of Brown v. Board of Education and rapidly expanded in the choice movement of the 1980s and 1990s. Public school of choice can be divided into four broad types of plans: charter schools, magnet schools, intra- or interdistrict choice plans (also referred to as open enrollment), and vouchers (Mickelson et al. 2008).

Traditional Choice

Residential selection is the most common of all of the types of school choice (Godwin et al. 1998). Residential selection is the practice of buying a house in a neighborhood for the purpose of gaining access to a particular school or district. According to the United States Department of Education, one in four families nationwide buy a home in a specific neighborhood for the purpose of gaining access to the school district (NCES 2004). This practice alone likely plays an essential role in the level of school segregation, especially given the residential housing patterns, or “white flight” phenomena, that followed the desegregation plans in the 1960s and 1970s (Coleman, Kelly, and Moore 1975; Farley 1975; Giles 1978; Sly and Pol 1978). In the wake of desegregation attempts, many cities across the country experienced “white flight,” which is defined as the substantial out-migration of Whites into the suburbs (Renzulli and Evans 2005).

Private schools are schools that require families to pay tuition to gain access and can even have specific admissions policies. Private schools can be religious or secular. One-fourth of all private schools are secular schools that serve wealthy, elite families (Mickelson et al. 2008). In 2007, 8 percent of the student population attended a private religious school and 2 percent attended a private secular school (NCES 2007). White enrollment rates in private schools are highest in districts with a large percent of Black students, with 1 out of every 10 White children attend private schools, versus 1 out of every 25 Black children (Johnson 2006). In addition, 80 percent of private school students reside in urban areas and White enrollment in private schools is highest in districts that have the highest percent of Black enrollment (Mickelson et al. 2008). Thus, private schools may function, at least to some degree, as one way for White middle- and upper-class families to avoid largely poor and minority urban districts (Johnson 2006).

Finally, the last type of traditional choice is home schooling. Home schooling is a diverse practice with a wide range of curriculum, structure and test requirements, which varies greatly by state and individual (Rudner 1999). As of 2008, there was an estimated 1.35 million students (2.2 percent of the nation’s school population), being home schooled. Whites are twice as likely as African Americans and four times as likely as Hispanic students to be home schooled (Mickelson et al. 2008).

Traditional school of choice is primarily a middle- and upper-class option. Residential relocation is often expensive because most states rely heavily on property tax for school funding. The most desirable schools are often the schools with the most funding, which are located in the neighborhoods with the highest property values. Private schools often require heavy parental involvement, substantial tuition costs, and the additional cost of transportation arrangements, class trips, and other extracurricular activities. Home schooling requires a full-time parent or a hired tutor, plus the cost of necessary materials. Therefore, because traditional types of choice require a good amount of financial investment, time, and resources, families with an economic advantage have an inherent benefit. Many proponents for school choice argue that nontraditional school of choice (public school choice) is intended to level the playing field by allowing students of all social classes access to the same type of choices that have long been available to middle- and upper-class families (Mickelson et al. 2008).

Public School Choice

There are four main types of public school choice: magnet schools, inter- or intradistrict choice between traditional public schools, charter schools, and vouchers. Magnet schools were first introduced in the 1970s as a voluntary integration method (Wells 1993). Magnets can be schools within schools or separate buildings that are focused around a particular themed curriculum or field of study (such as arts and humanities or discovery learning) (Mickelson et al. 2008). Today, more than half of all states have either full or partial magnet programs that serve 3 percent of the total public school population in the United States (NCES 2007). Magnet schools are usually part of an intradistrict choice plan (choice of individual schools within a single district) and in rare occasions can be included in interdistrict choice plans (the choice to attend a school outside the resident district).

Inter- or intradistrict choice between traditional public schools allows students to attend another participating public school. Intradistrict choice restricts students’ choice to schools within the resident’s district. If the district is small then there often are very limited or sometimes no choices actually available. Interdistrict choice plans, or open enrollment plans, often offer more choices because they allow students to transfer to schools outside of their assigned district. In recent years, interdistrict open enrollment plans have continued to expand, and interdistrict desegregation plans have become increasingly rare (Mickelson et al. 2008). The first open enrollment plan was introduced in 1988 in Minnesota and allowed students to transfer to any district in the state as long as the school had space and it did not interfere with racial integration efforts (Cookson and Shroff 1997).
2007, forty-six states had passed varying degrees of interdistrict and/or intradistrict public choice plans (NCES 2007).

Minnesota was also home to the first charter school, which opened its doors in 1992 (Hassel 1999). By 2005, forty states and the District of Columbia permitted the operation of charter schools (NCES 2007). Charter schools are publicly funded schools that are created by universities, community colleges, intermediate school board districts, or local districts. Like magnet schools, many charter schools are themed schools, with more than 80 percent having a specific emphasis or curriculum (Mickelson et al. 2008).

Finally, publicly funded vouchers are the newest and most limited type of school choice (Mickelson et al. 2008). Public vouchers are public funds allotted to families to attend private institutions. Most statewide programs give vouchers only to low-income families in poorly performing schools. In 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court extended the use of vouchers to also include parochial schools. As of 2007, publicly funded voucher programs were permitted in seven states and the District of Columbia.

With the implementation and expansion of school of choice policies, American public schools are undergoing a transformation. Increased school choice is changing the education institution by changing the relationship between individuals and public schools and between communities and public schools (Plank and Sykes 1999). Along with the changes associated with increased choice, American public schools are also experiencing another change, namely a recent trend toward resegregation (Orfield and Eaton 1996; Orfield 2001; Clotfelter, 2001; Hochschild & Scovronick 2003). This trend persists even despite the increase in minority student enrollment in public schools. Since the 1960s the number of African American and Hispanic students in public schools increased by 5.8 million students. Conversely, the number of White students in the nation’s public schools declined by 5.6 million (Orfield 2001).

Racial segregation is also often strongly related to class segregation (Johnson 2006). Students who attend highly segregated minority schools are fourteen times more likely to attend a school that has a high percentage of students living in poverty than students who attend a school that is less than 10 percent Hispanic or African American (Godwin et al. 1998). Minority families are also disproportionately low-income; therefore, many schools that are segregated by race are also segregated by class. Because American public schools have been historically structured around neighborhoods and given that class (along with race) often characterizes residential housing patterns, school demographics often reflect the race and class segregation present in American neighborhoods (Johnson 2006).

Although American schools are segregated by both race and class, unlike class segregation, racial segregation in schools was once mandated by law. Legal segregation for African Americans in public schools was not officially ruled unconstitutional until the Brown v. Board of Education ruling in 1954. This ruling, although momentous, did not lead to the immediate desegregation of public schools. Many southern counties and districts put off the mandate or openly refused to adhere to it (Ryan 2004). Hispanic Americans were not granted the right to desegregate until 1973, and even then the ruling was not strongly enforced (Orfield 2001). Consequently, today, Hispanics are more segregated both by race and poverty than any other minority group.

In the case Millikin v. Bradley2, integration efforts encountered another obstacle when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that mandatory desegregation plans in Detroit, Michigan, that crossed city-suburban boundaries were unconstitutional. This greatly halted the efforts to desegregate schools in Michigan and in many urban areas around the country which were already highly segregated. After this ruling, urban areas became even more segregated by race and class. By 2000, these urban areas showed the highest levels of segregation (Orfield 2001).

In 2003, a report by the U.S. Department of Education revealed that 70 percent of White students attended schools that are at least 70 percent White (as cited in Johnson 2006). A study by Orfield and Yun (1999) also found that in industrial states over 50 percent of Black students attend schools that are over 90 percent non-White (Johnson 2006). Segregation in public schools is now more pronounced today than it was just 12 years ago and continues to worsen (Orfield 2001). Because school of choice policies increased during the same period, it is important to ask if a

---


SCHOOL SEGREGATION

Despite mounting evidence regarding the benefits of a diverse educational setting, levels of segregation in schools continue to rise. In 2006, research from the last fifty years was summarized in a statement submitted by 553 social scientists to the Supreme Court, which concluded that integrated schools offer better opportunities and produce significant benefits for all students. These benefits include higher academic achievement, the breakdown of the intergenerational transmission of racial prejudices and misunderstandings, and the preparation for students to work together and succeed in an increasingly pluralistic country and global economy (Mickelson et al. 2008).

Also, according to Frankenberg, Lee, and Orfield (2003) of the Harvard Civil Rights Project, research shows us:

Segregated schools have much higher concentrations of poverty and other problems and much lower average test scores, levels of student, teacher qualifications, and advanced courses. With few exceptions, separate schools are still unequal schools. (P. 11)

Nevertheless, researchers have found that American public schools, specifically those in large and midsized cities, are undergoing rapid resegregation (Orfield and Eaton 1996; Orfield 2001; Clotfelter, 2001; Hochschild & Scovronick 2003). This trend persists even despite the increase in minority student enrollment in public schools. Since the 1960s the number of African American and Hispanic students in public schools increased by 5.8 million students. Conversely, the number of White students in the nation’s public schools declined by 5.6 million (Orfield 2001).

Legal segregation for African Americans in public schools was not officially ruled unconstitutional until the Brown v. Board of Education ruling in 1954. This ruling, although momentous, did not lead to the immediate desegregation of public schools. Many southern counties and districts put off the mandate or openly refused to adhere to it (Ryan 2004). Hispanic Americans were not granted the right to desegregate until 1973, and even then the ruling was not strongly enforced (Orfield 2001). Consequently, today, Hispanics are more segregated both by race and poverty than any other minority group.

In the case Millikin v. Bradley, integration efforts encountered another obstacle when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that mandatory desegregation plans in Detroit, Michigan, that crossed city-suburban boundaries were unconstitutional. This greatly halted the efforts to desegregate schools in Michigan and in many urban areas around the country which were already highly segregated. After this ruling, urban areas became even more segregated by race and class. By 2000, these urban areas showed the highest levels of segregation (Orfield 2001).
relationship exists between increased school of choice and resegregation in public schools.

**HISTORY OF SCHOOL CHOICE AND RACIAL SEGREGATION**

Segregation and the historical development of school of choice policies have a paradoxical relationship. Historically, some choice policies were advocated and/or implemented as a way to avoid racial integration and others as a way to promote racial integration. Understanding the dichotomous role of segregation in the historical development of school choice is an important step toward analyzing the potential and current role of school of choice policies may have on integration patterns.

Strong support for choice programs first occurred during the decade following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, in the form of private school enrollment (Ryan 2004; Wraga 2006). Early school choice advocates in the South used traditional types of choice such as private schooling, home schooling, and even residential relocation as a way to resist mandatory desegregation plans. For example, between 1964 and 1969, private school enrollment in the South grew tenfold (Rabkin 1989). Ryan (2004) states that whether or not this enrollment trend is a response to desegregation mandates is sometimes disputed, “but the timing and location of the schools, as well as the candid admissions by those who created and attended them, all demonstrate quite clearly that avoiding integration was the main impetus for their creation” (1637).

This post-*Brown* era is also when inter- and intradistrict open enrollment plans, which White southerners rallied for under the phrase “freedom of choice,” were first advocated as a resistance strategy against mandatory integration (Ryan 2004). Under this type of choice White families were able to choose all-White schools, and through threats, intimidation, and even violence, African Americans were discouraged or even physically prevented from choosing White schools. These early open-enrollment plans did nothing to achieve integration because no White families enrolled in Black schools and only a handful of Black students enrolled in White schools (Mickelson et al. 2008). The U.S. Supreme Court later ruled that interdistrict choice plans alone were not a sufficient plan to achieve integration and more mandatory desegregation and busing plans were established to meet court orders to desegregate.

The first magnet programs were introduced in 1970 in response to the strong opposition by the White majority against mandatory busing and desegregation plans and as a result of decreasing White enrollment in public school. This decrease in White students enrolled in public schools was likely a result of traditional school choice among White families (specifically home schooling and private schooling) which was widely exercised to avoid integrated schools. By providing a unique theme and specialized curriculum, school administrators hoped to initiate voluntary desegregation by establishing a desirable alternative to traditional public schools that would attract students of every race and class group (Wells 1993). In addition, early magnet programs also practiced “controlled choice” to ensure that magnet schools would indeed create intended diversity (Mickelson et al. 2008).

Although race played an overt role in the school of choice policies in the decades following the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, when school of choice reemerged as a dominant social policy issue in the “politically correct” decades of the 1980s and 1990s, like many social policies, school of choice and race interacted on a more complex and covert level. According to Bonilla-Silva (1996), four elements of contemporary racial practices can further explain the societal transition. He states that racial practices: “1) are increasingly covert, 2) are embedded in the normal operations of institutions, 3) avoid direct racial terminology, and 4) are invisible to most Whites” (p. 476). Thus, like many social issues, race was rarely discussed in direct terms like in the Civil Rights and post-Civil Rights era, but often remained an underlying factor.

Support for school of choice has also shifted in recent decades to create an unlikely alliance between poor and minority families and conservative republicans (Ryan 2004). While conservatives support notions of school choice based on values rooted in individualism, free market principles, and less government control, minority and low-income families, who are largely concentrated in struggling, underfunded urban schools, supported choice as a last effort to access an equal education (Ryan 2004). The support of choice by African Americans is ironic because support for school of choice by African Americans would have been unheard of in earlier decades, considering the initial function of school choice as a tool to refuse integrated schools.

In addition to the shift in support for school of choice, choice policies themselves have also largely abandoned connections to race. Like many public policies in recent decades, school of choice has taken a seemingly “color-blind” approach and most policies lack any provisions to ensure racial integration. Newer types of choice policies such as charters and vouchers often do not have a direct tie to racial integration, and because of the diminished legal and political support for desegregation plans, many interdistrict choice policies and magnet schools have also abandoned racial provisions. In 2007, the Supreme Court declared voluntary desegregation plans in Louisville and Seattle unconstitutional because admissions relied too heavily on the race of the applicant (Mickelson et al.

---

3 Race has a much stronger historical tie to school of choice policies then class; therefore this section is focused primarily on the history of race and choice policies. However, it should be noted that because race is one of the primary (if not the primary) dimension associated with the unequal distribution of wealth (Johnson 2006), a history of racial segregation is also to a large extent also a history of class segregation.

4 Many voucher programs do target low-income families and this could in effect create a tie between race and choice, yet it is still not a direct connection as in previous types of school choice.

5 *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District #1*, et. al., 551 US. (2007).
This new “color-blind” approach may mean that issues that relate to racial inequality or resegregation may become normalized as part of the “natural order” or may be ignored because the language to talk about race is becoming increasingly outmoded.

Therefore, school of choice has served three separate historic functions in regards to race. First, school of choice functioned primarily as a direct resistance tool against racial integration. Second, school of choice has functioned as a direct means to promote racial integration. Finally, the present state of school of choice seems to function independent of race (at least outwardly) and ironically has garnered support from the two camps that were previously in strong opposition.

Many researchers predict that choice policies today will actually promote the integration of schools by both race and class by giving poor and minority families more educational opportunities (Chubb and Moe 1996; Coleman et al. 1993; Hoxby 1998; Wolf et al. 2000). Many theorists assert that school of choice and market principles will not only provide more opportunities to those disadvantaged but also improve diversity because they predict the majority of families will choose a school based on academic quality and not the race or class composition, thus reducing segregation caused by housing patterns (Coleman 1992).

**MARKET THEORY**

The recent trend toward increased public school choice gained tremendous support after Chubb and Moe published a landmark book in 1990 titled Politics, Markets and America’s Schools, which transitioned the choice discussion from a debate among policy makers and educational leaders to a mainstream public issue. Chubb and Moe (1990) argued that the problems facing American schools are due to the overall administrative structure of the institution, which is inhibited by bureaucracy and politics. One of their key assertions is that autonomous schools and increased choice, by way of competition and market forces, will bring the innovation, higher test scores, and even integration that were absent under the current system.

Rational choice is the key postulation of market theory (Walberg 2000). Proponents of market theory believe that parents will make rational decisions regarding where to send their children to school, and this will also lead to a greater sense of empowerment among parents who gain more control over their children’s education. The assumption is that parents will choose the schools that have high test scores, quality teachers, and high graduation rates. As parents choose high-performing schools, lower-performing schools will then be forced to raise their standards or shut down.

Market theory suggests that the result of rational choices and increased competition among districts will be the rise of overall standards and higher levels of parental satisfaction (Chubb and Moe 1990). School of choice could therefore promote equality because all individuals, regardless of race or class background, will have educational choices as a result of the competition. In addition, many believe that most parents will make decisions separate from race or class, which will in turn lead to more integration as all parents, regardless of race, choose schools based on quality (Chubb and Moe 1997; Coleman et al. 1993; Hoxby 1998; Wolf et al. 2000).

Despite potential equality, however, it is unclear whether market forces can adequately address problems facing schools that are struggling the most. According to Mickelson et al. (2008) from the Education Public Interest Center (EPIC), “because they [interdistrict open enrollment plans] are guided by competitive market forces, interdistrict open enrollment policies are not designed specifically to address the needs of students in failing urban schools” (p. 8).

Many researchers move beyond this and assert that school choice not only ignores the problems facing districts but could inevitably exacerbate the race and class inequalities entrenched in the current education system (Henig et al. 1999; Saporito and Lareau 1999; Renzulli and Evans 2005; Wells 1993). Because segregation patterns, like many large social patterns, are a result of many isolated individual decisions (e.g., the decision to use school of choice), if parents make decisions that are influenced by race and class bias, more educational choices could actually increase the level of segregation. According to Saporito (2003):

In the case of segregation, a number of isolated individuals can make a series of private choices for houses, schools, social clubs and churches that satisfy their personal preferences. These individual choices have the cumulative consequence of changing existing patterns of segregation. Individuals making such choices are not joined in a collective effort to sustain segregation. Nor do they necessarily desire social segregation.

(P. 182)

Thus, if policies do not include diversity provisions it is possible that individuals may employ abstract liberalism and cultural racism frames to make and validate decisions to use school of choice, which may contribute to the large-scale resegregation patterns in American schools.

**ABSTRACT LIBERALISM AND CULTURAL RACISM**

Abstract liberalism and cultural racism are two frames used by Bonilla-Silva (2006) in Racism Without Racists to explain colorblind racism, or more generally the covert role race still plays in our society. These frames were derived from patterns in individual responses to a survey regarding the persistence of racial inequality.

The frame of abstract liberalism involves using ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., ‘equal opportunity,’ the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g., choice, liberalism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters. (P. 28)

Bonilla-Silva employs the example of housing segregation to illustrate how an individual can use the abstract liberalism frame to simultaneously seem “moral” (both to themselves and others) and remain unconcerned about racial inequalities and segregation in housing and neighborhoods. Abstract liberals
regard each person “as an ‘individual’ with ‘choices’” (p. 28) and thus justify the “right” for people to choose to live in segregated neighborhoods. Therefore, traditional liberal ideals used in an abstract manner can validate negative outcomes of school of choice, such as increased segregation, because it is viewed as a result of individual “freedom” and “choice.”

Although Bonilla-Silva (2006) uses this frame to describe an individual’s attitudes, the abstract liberalism frame can also be applied to social policies such as school of choice. According to John Gray (1986), there are several core features behind the idea of liberalism: individualism, egalitarianism, freedom, and meliorism (the belief that institutions and people can be improved). These are precisely the ideals that bolster support for school of choice policies, however, often with paradoxical meanings. For some, egalitarianism may be interpreted as equality in educational opportunity, while others may desire equality in educational outcome. In the same respect, freedom can mean a free market, “freedom of choice,” or the freedom to access a quality education.

The institution of education seems to be an arena where differing interpretations of liberal ideals collide. Liberal ideas can be distorted to justify inequality and preserve White privilege. School of choice policies are favored by many as a means to grant equality in opportunity, while making no provisions to ensure equality in outcome. Therefore, as school of choice policies expand, they may contribute to unequal outcomes—by failing to address the longstanding effects of discrimination and ignoring decades of forced segregation that inherently disadvantages minority groups—but still be viewed as a way to ensure equal opportunity by granting equal choice without racial provisions. However, simply granting the freedom to choose may not lead to equal opportunity because choice alone may not create desirable and realistic choices, and it does not address patterns that may arise from race or class biases.

Race or class bias may be rooted in cultural racism, the second frame used by Bonilla-Silva (2006). Cultural racism “is a frame that relies on culturally based arguments such as ‘Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education’ or ‘Blacks have too many babies’ to explain the standing of minorities in society” (p. 28). Although Bonilla-Silva uses this frame to explain race, it can be extended to cultural classism, even claiming its roots in the “culture of poverty” frame (p. 40).

Despite a historical tie between race and government (i.e., years of legalized slavery, state-enforced segregation and miscegenation laws) most of the respondents in Bonilla-Silva’s study expressed abstract liberalism ideals in the belief that the government should not interfere with economic, social, or racial issues, but rather they should be motivated by individual desires. Many respondents in Bonilla-Silva’s study, however, acted under the cultural racism frame in their explanation of individual desires. It is possible that school of choice participants may act in a similar fashion. Parents who may be motivated by cultural racism might justify their actions through abstract liberal beliefs. In other words, school of choice grants parents the freedom to exit schools based on assumptions rooted in cultural racism and/or cultural classism. As a way to justify their decision to access Whiter, wealthier schools, parents may use abstract liberal beliefs in choice, individualism, and even equality to defend their actions as “moral.” However, the flaw in this view of equality is “how Whites apply the notion of individualism to our present racial conundrum” which still reflects a domination-subordination relationship (Bonilla Silva 2006:35). School of choice participants may, like Bonilla-Silva’s participants, use these frameworks to reproduce the dominate/subordinate relationship and inequality present in American public schools.

Parents’ Use of School Choice

One of the main assumptions of market theory in regards to school of choice is that parents will make rational decisions regarding where to send their children to school. Whether or not parents would rationalize this decision separate from cultural biases against race and class is questionable. Recall that in the past many White parents went to extreme lengths to prevent the integration of public schools. Therefore, it is unknown whether or not this blatant opposition to integrated classrooms has totally disappeared in only a few decades.

Academic quality is often the number one reason parents report using school choice. Parents report using school of choice to move their children into schools with higher test scores, smaller class sizes, and high graduation rates (Armor and Peiser 1998; Goldring 1997; Witte 2000). Studies on parental motives, however, often examine what parents say motivates them, rather than their actual behavior (Teske and Schneider 2001). Some studies that have looked at behavior have found distinct racial patterns even when controlling for test scores and academic quality. For example, in a study of magnet school requests, while controlling for test scores, White families requested transfers to schools with a greater White student majority. In addition, minority families requested transfers to schools that had a higher percentage minority enrollment (Henig 1990).

Similarly, Tedin and Weiher (2004) conducted an experimental study which asked parents how interested they were in a hypothetical charter school. Parents were given schools that had different racial compositions and test scores. They found that parents were influenced by both test scores and racial composition: Parents’ interest in schools dropped with lower test scores and with less of the student body matching their child’s race or ethnicity. They concluded that all races in their study were motivated by higher test scores; however, the “right” amount of diversity also played a significant role.

---

*For example, many respondents gave explanations such as “poor people may have different priorities” (Bonilla-Silva 2006:41).
Factors contributing to self-segregating patterns may be different among different racial groups. For example, while minority families often report wanting to avoid racial harassment or being the only minority, Whites may be motivated by the perception of “better” and “safer,” which is often associated with “Whiter” (Johnson 2006).

In Bonilla-Silva’s frames of abstract liberalism and cultural racism, even those who believe in notions of equality may act contrary to these notions based on a firm belief in individualism and/or cultural bias. This means parents may disagree with segregation and even be genuinely concerned with the condition of poor and minority students segregated in public schools, but still contribute to it by asserting their individual right to choose the “best quality” school. Negative stereotypes associated with cultural racism could influence how parents define and assess “quality.” For example, parents may associate a school with a high minority population with negative characteristics, such as violence, delinquency, teenage pregnancy, poor academic quality, and drop-out rates, even if these associations are unfounded. This means Whiter and richer translates into a proxy for safer, better quality, and more desirable schools (Johnson 2006).

The notion that parents’ decision to use school of choice may be to some extent influenced by cultural racism is supported by studies that have found that parents often make decisions without researching or visiting their assigned schools first. Johnson (2006) concluded in her extensive study of parent’s attitudes about school quality that even though parents claim specific reasons related to school quality such as test scores, teacher-student ratio, and innovation, rarely were those claims investigated. Prins (2007) reported similar findings in her case study on Hispanic school segregation. She found that the majority of White parents transferring out of non-White districts did so without ever enrolling their children in those districts. Instead, parents relied on outside secondary information, such as reputation and rumors about perceived quality and racial composition. Without investigating schools themselves, parents were more prone to judge a school based on hearsay or personal biases.

RACE, CLASS, AND STATUS AND THE REPRODUCTION OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Some theorists suggest that parents may determine what constitutes “quality” education based on the perceived status of the school, and students may distance themselves from groups they perceive to be of lower status in order to maintain their own status (Wells and Crain 1992). Status combines resources and social capital necessary to maintain a dominant position in society and is affirmed as others acknowledge it. As parents use their resources to access better schools through school of choice policies, they are insuring that their children will develop the cultural and material capital necessary to remain in a position of privilege. Therefore, “individuals family’s choices serve to perpetuate existing inequalities by passing along advantage (or disadvantage, as the case may be), to the next generation and thus contribute to the reproduction of social stratification” (Johnson & Shapiro 2000:174).

The reproduction of social stratification and social class, therefore, is much more complex than the passing along of wealth, income, and other material markers. As mentioned above, social class is also about social capital and cultural indicators. Social class is “about the sharing of identities and practices, the ways in which resources are mobilized across generations, and the norms and values that shape behavior” (Johnson 2006:5). Education is crucial to the reproduction of social class because it serves as a way to access both material and cultural capital. Access to homogenous middle/upper class, White schools can insure the transmission of middle class values and norms that maintain the common notions of status, as well as the material rewards and social connections associated with that status. Once out of school, these advantages will translate into further benefits and advantages as former students interact with other social institutions. Based on notions of cultural racism—the common belief that minority and poor families hold different values—middle- and upper-class families often view high concentrations of minorities and poor families in school districts as a threat to the status of their children and therefore a threat to the transmission of their middle- or upper-class position.

Moreover, as other members of the middle-/upper-class affirm this notion of status, families are able to transmit and maintain status and their position of privilege by avoiding poor and non-White schools (Blumer 1958; Bobo 1999; Bonilla-Silva 1996; Fairlie and Resch 2002; Levin 1999; Morgan and England 1984; Saporito and Lareau 1999). In other words, as individuals avoid schools out of race- or class-based motives, they are recognized and rewarded by others, specifically those in authority (employers or college admission boards). Because of the status associated with their educational institution, this behavior is affirmed, reproduced, and likely to continue.

Sikkink and Emerson (2008) delve further into how parents relate status to “quality” and conclude that “for White Americans, the higher the percentage African American [students], the lower the status of that school (and likely the greater the perceived competition for valued resources, such as types of classes and extracurricular activities offered)” (p. 271). For parents concerned with maintaining a level of status for their children, a high-quality school that will cultivate a social network with people of equal status is viewed as essential to increasing their life chances. Often middle- and upper-class Whites view poor and minority students as a sort of “pollution” to this status (Sikkink & Emerson 2008).

School of choice can act to maintain the process of stratification reproduction by allowing Whites and middle-/upper-class families even more viable options to access “quality” homogenous schools. On the other hand, school of choice may also have the potential outcome of reducing the effects of stratification reproduction by allowing all families equal access to high-status education institutions, and thus increasing integration and challenging the system of placing status on schools based on their race and class composition. This would depend mostly on who is using school of choice and
8 Vouchers were introduced to the state in 2002, but it was turned down by voters by a margin of two to one.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To further analyze whether or not a relationship exists between school of choice and integration, it is important to identify what, if any, role contemporary school of choice policies play in the documented resegregation. To address a possible relationship, this case study analyzes the effects of interdistrict choice on levels of diversity within nineteen school districts located in or near a midsized city in Michigan. The focus in this study is on interdistrict transfers for two main reasons. First, there is much more literature that analyzes school segregation in other types of choice schools, such as private schools and charter schools, and less literature in general that addresses the effects of interdistrict transfers on integration in public schools. Second, recent expansion of such policies, specifically in the area being studied, makes this a timely topic for study.

There are two general research questions this study seeks to address. First, what, if any, shifts in demographics occur between schools as a result of interdistrict transfers? Through this question, I seek to analyze whether patterns exist within interdistrict transfers that relate to race or class segregation. Specifically, due to the magnitude of students transferring out of urban districts, this study will focus on where students from between the race or class position of the student and the racial or class composition of each school district.

Second, what, if any, are the overall implications interdistrict transfers may have on the documented rapid resegregation occurring in American schools? To address this question I will use the information provided from the first analysis as well as past literature and historical knowledge to explain how or why issues of resegregation and choice may or may not be related. This question will also discuss what possible implications choice may be having on the districts being most affected.7

SCHOOL OF CHOICE IN MICHIGAN

School of choice in Michigan is unique because of the state’s funding system. The school finance system (Proposal A) was approved by voters in 1994 (Plank & Sykes 1999). This system shifts the principal funding away from property taxes and toward state sales tax. According to Plank and Sykes (1999), Proposal A resulted in three major changes in Michigan’s education system. First, it “shifted the primary responsibility for funding from local school districts to the state.” Second, “state funds [were] distributed to school districts according to a funding formula which is essentially driven by the number of pupils enrolled in district schools.” Third, “the effective ‘ownership’ of educational revenues has been shifted from school districts to individual students” (p. 391). Therefore, individual students that transfer districts through school of choice in Michigan, under Proposal A, are portable funding sources. The more students a district loses, the more funding is lost; conversely, the more students a district accepts, the more funding the district will receive. This means that as students transfer out of districts through school of choice, the school is not only losing students but also the money tied to them.

Michigan allows three types of public school choice: charter schools, interdistrict and intradistrict choice (open enrollment), and magnet schools.8 Michigan first enacted an interdistrict choice policy in 1996 in Public Act 180. Section 105 of the State School Aid Act allows students to transfer to schools in a district located within their Intermediate School District (ISD). Section 105c extends this choice to schools outside of the student’s home ISD. An ISD is a group of districts located near one another that operate separately but are subject to certain rules and regulations of a central administrative body. Each separate ISD has the right to opt in or out of both or either of these sections (Michigan Department of Education [MDE] 2008).

According to the MDE (2008), the districts participating in either of the interdistrict transfer policies have the following regulations:

1) Siblings of present choice participants get first preference;
2) A lottery must be used in case of more applicants than openings;
3) The number of openings must be published;
4) A student can be denied choice based on past suspensions or expulsions;
5) The district does not provide transportation.

Intermediate School District (ISD)

The Intermediate School District being studied has participated in school of choice since 1996. The ISD participates only in Section 105, which allows transfers within the ISD, but does not allow students from other ISDs to transfer into a district within the ISD. There are nineteen school districts within the Intermediate School District being studied. All of the districts participate in interdistrict transfers, yet have differing amounts of seats available each school year. The number of openings for school of choice in this ISD ranges from zero in one suburban district to 1,000 in the urban district. See Table 1.4 for a complete list of school of choice openings by district and grade level.

There is roughly a 12-week window in which applicants must apply for their school of choice. If there are more open-

---

7 In a subsequent research project, I will address a third research question: Are parent’s decisions to participate in interdistrict choice influenced on any level by the actual and/or perceived level of diversity at a given school? Through this additional research question I will seek to add crucial pieces of information regarding parental motives. Since parents’ decisions play a significant role in any demographic shifts that may be identified, this focus will be to attempt to deconstruct any relationship between parents’ use of interdistrict choice and race and class.

8 Vouchers were introduced to the state in 2002, but it was turned down by voters by a margin of two to one.
ings than applicants, all eligible applicants are accepted into the program. If the amount of eligible applicants exceeds the amount of seats available, a lottery system is employed. Applications not chosen in the lottery can be placed on a waiting list or can be referred to another district if they listed an alternative choice. If both districts are full, the student can then chose an area charter school or private school or remain in their residential district.

There are approximately 98,000 students enrolled in the nineteen districts located within the ISD. The total enrollment for each district ranges from approximately 1,450 in the smallest district to approximately 19,000 in the large urban district. See Table 1.1 for approximate enrollment size for all districts.

DATA AND METHODS

To analyze any relationship between racial and class segregation and interdistrict transfers in this case study, secondary quantitative analysis of the students using interdistrict transfers is employed to identify who is using school of choice and what effect that is having on individual districts.

In this portion of analysis, I use secondary records of student transfers in and out of the 19 districts that are located in or near the midsized city being studied. There are three different sets of data being analyzed in this study; the first was provided by the Intermediate School District being analyzed, the second was provided by the urban district being studied, and the third is information accessed from the Michigan Center for Educational Performance and Information Web site (CEPI). The information provided by the ISD shows the number of students leaving each district and where each student is transferring to through interdistrict choice. The sample size for this data, or the number of students using interdistrict school of choice in this ISD, is 8,100.

The second set of data is provided by the urban district being studied and gives descriptive information for all of the students transferring out of that district through school of choice. This information provides descriptive information which measures grade, gender, race/ethnicity, free/reduced lunch status, and disability status. The sample size for this data, the number of students transferring out of the urban district, is approximately 3,900.

The final data from the Center for Educational Performance and Information provided demographic information including the racial breakdown and number of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch for each individual district and the ISD as a whole.

To address the first research question, I created a figure to demonstrate the large movements in between districts in the ISD as a result of school of choice. I used the data from the ISD to assess which districts were being the most affected by school of choice transfers and which districts were gaining and losing students. I used the data provided from the urban district, along with information from CEPI, to study racial composition and free or reduced lunch percent of each district and the students transferring out of the urban district to other districts within the ISD.

RESULTS

Interdistrict Transfers in Intermediate School District

Each year, the number of students participating in interdistrict transfers continues to expand in this ISD. In 1999 there were roughly 2,000 students using school of choice to attend another traditional public school in this ISD. By 2007, this number increased to roughly 8,000. Out of the nineteen school districts that comprise this ISD, the urban district I, located in the center of the city, is losing the greatest number of students. District I experienced a loss of roughly 3,900 students due to interdistrict school of choice alone in 2007. Figure 1.1 shows the general patterns of student flows in between the nineteen districts during the 2007-2008 school year.

---

9 Students may be ineligible if they have ever been convicted of a felony, expelled, or suspended within those two years prior to applying.
10 Although interdistrict choice can include charter schools, this study is focusing only on the transfers between traditional public school districts. Charter schools are not used in this data.
11 A later study will combine qualitative interviews with the parents of school of choice participants and the quantitative methods used in this initial investigation. This dual approach is intended to provide breadth to the overall project. The second part of this project will shed light on the parental motives behind choice, which is a crucial aspect to understanding the overall patterns identified by quantitative analysis.
12 To protect the identity of the ISD being studied, the names of all of the districts have been abbreviated to one letter, A through S.
13 http://www.mi.gov/cepi/
14 I was unable to obtain descriptive information regarding choice students for the entire ISD, either because the ISD fails to collect this information or they do not want those statistics to be publicized.
15 All numbers are approximate in order to protect the identity of the districts.
16 The original sample size for this data was 7,100 and included transfers into charter schools through school of choice. However, for the purpose of this study on interdistrict choice, I have only included the number of students transferring out of the urban district into other traditional public schools.
17 Free or reduced lunch status was used as a general measurement of the general socioeconomic composition of each district.
18 This does not include the students who use school choice to attend charter or magnet schools.
Figure 1.1 Locations of Districts and Patterns in Interdistrict Transfers

<100 students not included
100-200 students
200-300 students
300-400 students
400-500 students
500-600 students
District I had the greatest percent increase (593%) in the number of students transferring out of the district between 1999 and 2007 and the lowest percent increase (3%) of students transferring into the district during the same time period. There was a 270 percent increase in students using interdistrict school of choice to transfer to a different school within one of the nineteen districts between 1999 and 2007.

On average, districts within the ISD are either gaining students through interdistrict transfers or are losing relatively few students. The graph below illustrates the variation in net change or loss for each school.19 There are only four districts—I, N, C, and A—that experienced a net loss of students in the 2007-2008 school year. District A and N are both located to the south of the urban district (District I), and District C is located in the rural area to the north of the urban district. Districts P and F both border District I to the north and are experiencing the greatest net gains. Generally, the districts that are located furthest away from the urban district are the districts that show very little net loss or gain, such as District M, which is experiencing zero net change.

19 The net gain or loss was calculated by subtracting the approximate number of students leaving the district through interdistrict choice from the approximate number of students coming into the district through interdistrict choice. This calculation is only for students transferring to and from one of the nineteen public schools in the Intermediate School District being studied.
The nineteen districts vary greatly in enrollment size, racial composition, free/reduced lunch enrollment and the number of students transferring in and out through school of choice each year. An important contributing factor to how many students a district has transferring in each year is the number of new students each district allows, which ranges from zero to 1,000 in the 2008-2009 school year.

District A, for example, is experiencing a net loss of students through interdistrict transfers, but this district had zero openings for school of choice students so loss could not be offset. Factors such as the race and class composition and the location of each district could also influence the number of interdistrict school of choice transfers.

Thirteen districts out of nineteen have a student population that is 80 percent White or greater, and eight of these districts have student populations that are 90 percent White or greater. The remaining six other districts have minority populations that range from 45 percent to 79 percent. This is particularly interesting because the average racial composition for the entire ISD is 67 percent White, 15 percent African American, 12 percent Hispanic, 3 percent Asian American, 3 percent multiracial, and less than 1 percent Native American. Despite a 67 percent average White enrollment for the entire ISD, none of the districts have a White student enrollment between 55 percent and 80 percent. (See Table 1.2 in Appendix for racial demographics for all districts.) Four of the districts with high minority populations, Districts H, N, G, and S, directly border the urban district to the south.

There are ten districts that border the urban district. Out of all of the districts that border District I, the only district that does not have a net gain is District N. This district has the second highest net loss and also the second highest percentage of African American students (31%), behind only the urban district (District I).

When accounting for enrollment size, the districts that are losing the greatest percentage of their total enrollment through interdistrict transfers are the five other districts with 45 percent minority enrollment or greater: districts G, H, I, K, and S. Interestingly, districts G and H are also gaining the greatest percentage of their total student enrollment through interdistrict transfers. This means that these schools are experiencing high “traffic,” meaning there are large numbers of students leaving and entering the district each year. This trend may be because of the location of each of these districts. Both schools are located between the urban area and large suburban areas. Districts P, K, and S have the third-, fourth-, and fifth-greatest percent gain of their total student enrollment, respectively. (See Table 1.3 in Appendix for percentage of students transferring in and out in relation to total enrollment.)

The two districts that are gaining the greatest number of students overall as well as the greatest number of students from District I are P and F. Both have high percentages of White student enrollment (91% and 88% respectively) and a high percentage of students that are not eligible for free or reduced lunch (72% and 93% respectively). Roughly 1,100 students are transferring to these two districts from District I; this is over one-fourth of the total students transferring out of the urban district. Eighty percent of the students transferring to these two districts from the District I are

---

20 To see a detailed table of these factors see Tables 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3.
21 See table 1.4.
22 Enrollment was accounted for by dividing the number of students transferring in or out of the district by that district’s approximate enrollment size. These numbers are approximate and descriptive.
White, 13 percent are African American, 3 percent are Hispanic, and 3 percent are Asian American. Seventy percent of the transfers to P and F from District I are not eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Graph 1.3 Racial Demographics of Students Transferring from District I to Districts F and P (2007-2008)

Total student enrollment in District I has the highest percentage of minority students, along with the highest percentage of students that are eligible for free or reduced lunch, with only 17 percent of the entire enrollment not eligible for free or reduced lunch. The five other districts that have the highest percentage of minority students—G, H, K, N, and S—are also the districts with the highest percentage of students that are eligible for free or reduced lunch. In general, these districts are also the ones that are losing the greatest percentage of their total enrollment, and in some cases gaining the greatest percentage of their total enrollment as well. The six districts that are characterized as having high numbers of minority and free/reduced lunch students seem to be among the districts most affected by interdistrict school of choice.

Although in most districts, the percentage of the student enrollment eligible for free or reduced lunch is roughly comparable to the percentage of minority students, District C offers an interesting anomaly. District C is one of the four districts experiencing a net loss of students as a result of interdistrict transfers. The district is 95 percent White, but 35 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Graph 1.4 illustrates the comparison of each district in terms of minority student enrollment and percent of total enrollment eligible for free or reduced lunch. Districts G, H, I, K, N, and S stand out as the six districts with high percentages of both; District C stands out, however, because of the low percentage of minority students and relatively high percent of students eligible for free/reduced lunch. Figure 1.1 illustrates the anomaly in student flows as well. While most districts experience a flow of students outward, District C is losing students toward the other direction.

---

23 To qualify for free lunch a family’s income must be 130% of the federal poverty line or less; to qualify for reduced lunch a family’s income must fall between 130% and 185% of the poverty line. For a more detailed description of the Income Eligibility Guidelines see citation (Income Eligibility Guidelines) on references page.

24 Refer back to Chart 1.1 for student flow trends.

104
Graph 1.4 Comparison of District Minority Enrollment and Free/Reduced Lunch Eligibility

Graph 1.5 Racial Demographics of Students Transferring Out and Remaining in District I (2007-2008)

Racial Demographics of Student Transfers Out of District I (N=3900)

Racial Demographics of Students Remaining in District I after Interdistrict Transfers (N=19,000)

This is graph illustrates a descriptive difference.
Analyzing separate data provided by the urban district which more closely identifies the school of choice students transferring out of the district provides a clearer picture of how race and class relate to school of choice. Out of the 3,900 students transferring out of the urban district through interdistrict choice, 52.7 percent are White, 24.1 percent are African American, and 18.7 percent are Hispanic. This is compared to the overall racial composition of the district (Table 1.2), which is 21 percent White, 41 percent African American, and 27 percent Hispanic. It is evident that the percentage of students leaving the district is not an accurate representation of the students remaining in the district. Seventy-nine percent of White students and 51 percent of Asian students who transferred out of the urban district transferred to a district that is 85 percent White or greater. Similarly, 64 percent of Hispanic students leaving District I transferred to either District G or H, which have Hispanic populations of 58 percent and 48 percent, respectively. Districts G and H were also the two districts experiencing the greatest percentage of students transferring both in and out, in relation to the size of their total enrollment. Twenty-seven percent of African Americans transferred to District H, which has the third-highest percentage of African American students of any district (24%), and 17 percent transferred to district N, which has the second-highest percentage of African American students (31%). Interestingly, none of the students who transferred to District N in 2007 were eligible for free or reduced lunch. Out of the six districts that have high minority student populations, District N has the lowest percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch (51%).

In 2007-08, 70 percent of all students transferring out of District I were not eligible for free/reduced lunch, 23 percent were eligible for free lunch, and 7 percent were eligible for reduced lunch. This is astounding considering that in the same year only 17 percent of all students in District I were not eligible for free/reduced lunch, 76 percent were eligible for free lunch, and 7 percent were eligible for reduced lunch.
Graph 1.6 Free/Reduced Lunch
Demographics for Students Remaining
in the Urban District (I) and Students
Transferring out of the Urban District (I)
in 2007-2008

Free/Reduced Lunch
Demographics of Students
Remaining in District I after
Interdistrict Transfers
(N=3900)

Free/Reduced Lunch
Demographics of Student
Transfers out of District I
(N=19,000)

If the students who transferred out of the urban district through interdistrict choice had remained, the district would be less segregated by race and class. Without the interdistrict transfers, the racial breakdown would be 39 percent African American, 26 percent White, 2 percent Asian, 25 percent Hispanic, and 7 percent multiracial. After the interdistrict transfer students left the district for another traditional public school, the racial composition became 41 percent African American, 21 percent White, 1 percent Asian, 27 percent Hispanic, and 9 percent multiracial. In addition, if the students leaving District I had remained in the district, the percentage of students who are not eligible for free lunch would be 67 percent instead of 76 percent, and the percentage of students not eligible for either would be 26 percent instead of 17 percent.

26 This is graph illustrates a descriptive difference.
Graph 1.7 Urban District Demographics by Race Before and After Interdistrict Transfers in 2007-08

Graph 1.8 Free/Reduced Lunch Statistics for the Urban District (I) Before and After Interdistrict Transfers in 2007-2008
Based on the net gain and loss of students in each district, it seems the majority of districts in this ISD are not being strongly affected by interdistrict school of choice. The Urban District I, however, is losing a substantial number of students to interdistrict transfers. The majority of students transferring out of the district are White and middle/upper class. When accounting for enrollment size, the two school systems that are gaining the heaviest “traffic”—meaning large percentages of their student enrollment remaining in the district are White and majority White, middle-/upper-class families view the institution will bestow. Because many parents make decisions that are motivated by race and/or class biases. In addition, the historical tie between school of choice policies and integration and Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) findings on contemporary racial attitudes suggest that race and class may still play a role in school of choice policies. Although parents may not directly say they are motivated by things such as cultural racism or classism, middle-/upper-class White parents in this case study are still fleeing the urban district in pursuit of wealthier, Whiter schools. The legacy of the historical relationship between choice and race may still be present, but on a more covert, complex level. As Plank and Sykes (1999) noted in another Michigan case study on school of choice: “Choice” is a profoundly conservative reform strategy in its failure to address the larger issues of social and economic context within which parents in fact make choices” (p. 412).

Although many parents are looking for the best possible education for their children, how they define “best” is different for everyone and could be affected by beliefs rooted in cultural racism or classism. As Johnson (2006) found in her extensive study on parents’ school decisions, parents may use Whiter and wealthier as proxies for “quality.” Because many parents make decisions without adequately investigating each school (Johnson 2006; Prins 2007), this proxy may become a primary motivator for parents.

Parents may also judge the quality of a school based on the expected status that institution will bestow. Because many White, middle-/upper-class families view districts with a large poor and minor-

**DISCUSSION**

In this ISD, the districts are already largely segregated, with no district having a White student population in between 45 percent and 80 percent, despite an average White enrollment in the ISD of 67 percent. Most districts are experiencing a net gain of student transfers, with only four districts experiencing a net loss—A, C, I, and N. Districts A, C, and N are experiencing a small net loss in comparison to District I. District A is a majority White, middle-/upper-class suburban district that does not accept any school of choice transfers. District C is a rural district with a relatively high percentage of students who qualify for free/reduced lunch, and District N has the second-highest percentage of African American student enrollment in the ISD behind District I.

The two school systems that are gaining the greatest number of students are majority White, middle-class suburban districts that are bordering the urban district. The districts with the highest percentage of minority students and students who qualify for free/reduced lunch seem to be the most affected by interdistrict school of choice transfers. When accounting for enrollment size, the districts with high minority and/or free/reduced lunch enrollment are experiencing the heaviest “traffic”—meaning large percentages of their student enrollment are both leaving and entering their districts through interdistrict school of choice.

Interdistrict transfers out of the urban district in this case study seem to be experiencing two main trends: 1) a substantial decrease in the enrollment size of the district and 2) further segregation of the urban district by both race and class. There is a general flow of students outward from the urban district, causing a substantial drop in enrollment size. In the 2007-2008 school year, nearly 4,000 students were leaving the urban district through interdistrict choice alone.

The race and class of the students who are transferring out of the urban district is also highly important to our discussion. The proportion of White students transferring out of District I is much higher than the proportion of White students enrolled in the district. Similarly, the proportion of students transferring out of the urban district who are not qualified for free or reduced lunch (70%) is substantially higher than the proportion of students remaining in the district who are not eligible (17%) (see graphs 1.5 and 1.6.). This outflow of students who are majority White and majority middle/upper class is increasing segregation by both race and class within the already segregating urban district. Increased segregation by race and class could have many potential outcomes that may be harmful to the district and students remaining in the district. Diverse schools offer better opportunities to all students, including higher academic achievement and the breakdown of intergenerational transmission of prejudices (Mickelson et al. 2008). Therefore, as the urban district becomes more segregated by race and class, there may be many problems associated with this demographic shift.

An obvious shortcoming with the interdistrict school of choice policy in this case study (as is the case with many school of choice policies) is the lack of transportation provided. Just like traditional school choice, this gives an inherent advantage to parents with resources. Since a parent becomes responsible for transporting their student back and forth, a certain degree of money, time, job flexibility, and a mode of transportation must be present. In addition, even if a child is close enough to walk to an adjacent district, this severely limits the choices actually available to them based on proximity. Because race and class are so closely intertwined, a policy that disadvantages those with fewer resources is also likely to produce racial outcomes.

While the policy itself is inherently more plausible for families with resources, which often correlates to race, the decisions made by individual families also play a role in the patterns leading to resegregation. Although this case study cannot explain directly the parental motives behind their choices, other studies that have looked at parents’ use of school choice (Saporito 2003; Johnson 2006; Tedin and Weiher 2004; Prins 2007; Mickelson et al. 2008) have found that families tend to make school of choice decisions that are motivated by race and/or class biases.

In addition, the historical tie between school of choice policies and integration and Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) findings on contemporary racial attitudes suggest that race and class may still play a role in school of choice policies. Although parents may not directly say they are motivated by things such as cultural racism or classism, middle-/upper-class White parents in this case study are still fleeing the urban district in pursuit of wealthier, Whiter schools. The legacy of the historical relationship between choice and race may still be present, but on a more covert, complex level. As Plank and Sykes (1999) noted in another Michigan case study on school of choice: “Choice” is a profoundly conservative reform strategy in its failure to address the larger issues of social and economic context within which parents in fact make choices” (p. 412).

Although many parents are looking for the best possible education for their children, how they define “best” is different for everyone and could be affected by beliefs rooted in cultural racism or classism. As Johnson (2006) found in her extensive study on parents’ school decisions, parents may use Whiter and wealthier as proxies for “quality.” Because many parents make decisions without adequately investigating each school (Johnson 2006; Prins 2007), this proxy may become a primary motivator for parents.

Parents may also judge the quality of a school based on the expected status that institution will bestow. Because many White, middle-/upper-class families view districts with a large poor and minor-
ity student population as being of lower social status, this may also influence parents to make decisions based on race and class to ensure the transmission of status (Sikkink and Emerson 2008). In addition, parents may justify these decisions using an abstract liberal frame, which is prevalent in contemporary opinions on racial matters (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Despite patterns of segregation, in applying the abstract liberalism frame interdistrict school of choice can be viewed as an inherently good policy because it provides “equality,” “freedom,” and “choice.” Therefore, it allows parents to leave districts with increasing levels of segregation, and still see their contribution to this trend as moral because others have an equal chance to utilize this “freedom of choice.”

However, simply granting parents “freedom” to choose does not provide them with viable choices (Plank and Sykes 1999). This form of public school of choice appears to be yet another option available to parents with resources to leave urban schools. Now, however, parents can access “quality” education through school choice without having to relocate or pay for costs of tuition. Thus, although to an extent interdistrict school of choice may be extending choice to middle-class families who may have found other types of choice somewhat difficult before, it is nevertheless excluding individuals that are really suffering from the effects of inequality and segregation.

Although proponents of interdistrict policies such as the one being analyzed in this case study believe equal opportunity will result from applying market theory to school choice, this case study suggests that interdistrict choice is yet another option available to majority middle-class, White families who historically have long had traditional types of choice available to them. In addition, because the state funds follow each child to their school of choice, the urban district is losing money with each student, forcing them to battle decreased funding and increased segregation by both race and class.

**CONCLUSION**

Despite the documented benefits of diverse educational settings, schools are undergoing rapid resegregation (Orfield 2001). In order to achieve equity and combat increased segregation in American schools, it is imperative for research in this area to continue. Although this case study is limited in scope it provides valuable findings regarding how interdistrict school of choice is affecting race and class segregation in the area being studied.

For choice policies to improve schools and offer more opportunities and parent satisfaction, policies must address the issue of parental preference and racial resegregation. According to a meta-analysis on school choice and segregation at the Education Policy Research Institute, to pursue diversity policies must redesign current choice policies to ensure diversity, provide transportation to choice students and enhance information to parents, increase and enforce accountability in choice schools, and redesign public/private sector relationships to ensure diversity (as cited in Mickelson et al. 2008).27

Future research should further analyze what factors motivate parents to use school of choice in order to address this issue adequately in future policies. Because segregation is a result of many isolated individual decisions, in order to fully delve into the relationship between school choice and segregation researchers should continue to uncover what motivates parents to use school of choice. In addition, research should more generally continue to study how race and class interact with different types of choice policies, so that policy makers can make the most informed recommendations to ensure equality in American schools.

---

27 For a further explanation of these policy recommendations see the full report at http://epsl.asu.edu/epru/documents/EPSL-0803-260-EPRU.pdf
Appendix

Table 1.1 District Approximate Enrollment and Amount of Interdistrict Transfers\textsuperscript{28}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>District Total Enrollment</th>
<th>Number of Students Transferring Into District in 2007</th>
<th>Number of Students Transferring Out of District in 2007</th>
<th>Net Growth or Loss of Students in 2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>3,100</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>-60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>3,800</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>3,400</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>920</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>1,600</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>2,400</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>19,000</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>3,860</td>
<td>-3,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>2,200</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>3,600</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>1,400</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>9,100</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>660</td>
<td>-230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>3,800</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>3,400</td>
<td>680</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q</td>
<td>7,800</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>2,900</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>5,600</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>440</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{28} Enrollment numbers are rounded to the nearest hundredth and transfer numbers are rounded to the nearest tenth.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>%African American</th>
<th>% Hispanic</th>
<th>% White</th>
<th>% Multiracial</th>
<th>% Asian American</th>
<th>% American Indian/Native Hawaiian or Alaskan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Percentage for All Students in ISD</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1.3 Percent of Total Enrollment that District is Gaining/Losing through Interdistrict School of Choice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Percent of Total Enrollment Leaving District through Interdistrict Transfers</th>
<th>Percent of Total Enrollment Who are Interdistrict Transfer Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>3.74%</td>
<td>1.82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>2.39%</td>
<td>9.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>5.21%</td>
<td>4.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>9.60%</td>
<td>13.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>0.55%</td>
<td>10.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>0.92%</td>
<td>9.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>12.97%</td>
<td>20.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>15.45%</td>
<td>29.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>15.21%</td>
<td>1.73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>2.58%</td>
<td>8.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>10.89%</td>
<td>18.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>5.11%</td>
<td>11.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>8.37%</td>
<td>8.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>7.20%</td>
<td>4.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>3.21%</td>
<td>9.02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>3.30%</td>
<td>20.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q</td>
<td>2.44%</td>
<td>3.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>4.84%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>9.91%</td>
<td>17.67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

29 These percents were calculated by dividing the number of students transferring in or out of the district by the total enrollment size.
Table 1.4 District Demographics by Free/Reduced Lunch Status (2007-08)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>% Free Lunch</th>
<th>% Reduced Lunch</th>
<th>% Not Eligible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>2nd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


