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Does Participation in a School Choice Program Impact Student Achievement and Attendance?

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Does Participation in a School Choice Program Impact Student Achievement and Attendance?

Abstract
Quantitative statistical methods are used to address two research questions about the connection between participation in a school choice program and students' attendance and achievement. These questions are of interest to large urban districts which use expensive school choice plans to desegregate on racial and ethnic or on socioeconomic descriptors of students, in the hope that the resulting voluntary desegregation will benefit student attendance and then achievement. Participants in the kindergarten Schools of Choice plan in the Rochester City School District in the second year of the plan’s implementation, who used the plan to choose a school away from their neighborhood school, did not experience improved attendance or academic performance over students who used the plan to choose their neighborhood school.

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Does Participation in a School Choice Program Impact

Student Achievement and Attendance?

By

Joseph C. Capezzuto

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Ed. D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

Dr. Michael Wischnowski

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Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher College

August 2009
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, father, and children Christopher and Megan.
Biographical Sketch

Joseph C. Capezzuto was educated in Catholic and public schools in Rochester, New York and its suburbs. He holds a Bachelor’s degree in Special and Elementary Education from Daemen College in Buffalo, and a Master’s degree in Educational Administration from the State University of New York at Brockport. He taught in the Rochester City School District as a Special Educator.

Mr. Capezzuto is currently the Director of the Department of Student Equity and Placement with the Rochester City School District in Rochester, New York. He began his doctoral studies at St. John Fisher College in 2007. His research was conducted under the supervision of Dr. Michael Wischnowski, and he received his Ed.D. Degree in 2009.
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My family, Christopher and Megan, were understanding and patient during the demanding parts of my journey. My mother and siblings generously provided support and willingness to help in every way possible, including giving me occasional construction projects that therapeutically required ferocious hammering.
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Abstract

Quantitative statistical methods are used to address two research questions about the connection between participation in a school choice program and students’ attendance and achievement. These questions are of interest to large urban districts which use expensive school choice plans to desegregate on racial and ethnic or on socioeconomic descriptors of students, in the hope that the resulting voluntary desegregation will benefit student attendance and then achievement. Participants in the kindergarten Schools of Choice plan in the Rochester City School District in the second year of the plan’s implementation, who used the plan to choose a school away from their neighborhood school, did not experience improved attendance or academic performance over students who used the plan to choose their neighborhood school.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Over the past 50 years, schools of choice plans have been created and implemented in large cities across our nation. The original schools of choice plans were designed to desegregate schools and thus, create equal opportunities regardless of color, race, or family background (Friedman and Friedman, 2004). The form of choice plans has evolved over the last five decades since desegregation efforts by race have become illegal (O’Neil, 2004). The definition of school choice varies widely around the country. The U.S. Department of Education recognizes and supports school choice as a process that will improve public education through competition (U.S. Department of Education, 2000) but does not specify what school choice means. For the purposes of this project, a school choice plan, or “school choice”, or “choice”, is one in which parents in an urban district have one or more options in addition to the nearest neighborhood school when they decide where to send their children to school.

There are vaguely defined schools of choice models because districts tailor these models to fit their needs and the needs of the communities they serve. The United States Federal Department of Education supports schools of choice as a tool to create equal opportunities for students, but one unified federal model has not emerged (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

There are many reasons that a choice is offered. In this writer’s seven years’ experience with choice in an urban district, choice is offered in most cities as a method of
voluntary racial or socioeconomic desegregation. For example, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a child who receives a free or reduced lunch is more likely than students who pay for lunch to gain placement via a lottery in a school in which a majority of students pay for lunch, a strategy that helps the district to diversify the student body in individual schools based on socioeconomic status. School choice is also a method of managing structural displacement. Structural displacement occurs when a home school does not have enough capacity to enroll all of the students who reside in its attendance area. Choice can assist districts in managing the number of staff and students assigned to each building to match the classroom capacity of each building and to control class size across a district. Another reason choice may be utilized is to provide equal opportunities for programs that have limited seats, that is, programs that are too expensive to duplicate in every school or too specific in scope to appeal to a large number of students, such as performing arts programs.

Schools of choice programs may provide families with a wide range of options, from choosing between two schools to choosing from among all of the schools in a county, ranging from urban, suburban, and rural to charter, and parochial schools. The two most common types of choice are magnet schools and voucher systems that fund charter schools. Magnet schools became popular in the 1980s while charter schools became popular in the 1990s. They are popular with families because they both offer non-traditional programs designed to attract students and motivate them to learn and to motivate parents to become involved in their child’s education (Schneider, Teske, Marschall, & Roch, 1998).
Magnet schools employ enriched courses of study around particular themes, such as law and government for future lawyers or the performing arts for future dancers and musicians. Their mission is to attract a diverse student population. The use of magnet schools came to prominence about 20 years ago to assist in desegregation efforts (Willie & Alves, 2002).

Voucher systems offer another type of school choice. Vouchers provide opportunities for students to attend private, parochial, or charter schools at the expense of the public school district in which the family resides (Kahlenberg, 2007). Charter schools are experimental schools that are created and organized by teachers, parents, and community leaders. They adhere to a particular theory for educating students. Charter schools are tuition-free for parents; however, they charge tuition to the district where each of their students resides. Charter schools usually share some services with their local public school district, such as transportation and special education services, which are then paid for by the taxpayers in the district in which the child resides (Hess & Finn, 2004). Because charter schools have the ability to prescreen students for acceptance and may be able to coax families to withdraw their child if the student is not meeting the academic or behavioral standards, they do not have the same populations as public schools. Charter schools are not obligated to report student achievement using the same assessments as public schools, and evaluations of these schools are not necessarily an evaluation of the effectiveness of a choice plan (Schneider, Teske, Marschall, & Roch, 1998). If a school does not report its performance or discipline data using a common tool, the school cannot be fairly compared to public schools in the district, and these practices
frequently make magnet and charter schools appear to be more successful than their public school counterparts (Hess & Finn, 2004).

The variety in choice programs and assignment to magnet or charter schools sometimes comes together in controlled choice plans. Controlled choice is an inter-district choice process designed to provide school opportunities for students within their district while also meeting some district goals, such as socioeconomic desegregation. Controlled choice traditionally occurs through magnet schools but has since come to include a variety of choice models, such as vouchers for private schools, charter schools, and inter-district choice (Willie & Alves, 2002).

Complicating the issue of models of school choice, assignment to a particular school of choice may be awarded based on merit, proximity, socioeconomic status, or sibling preference. These assignment preferences help the district to reach its goals, in some cases, and help families to reach their goals, in others. A child may receive four types of preferences:

1. Awarding preference is placement based on a child’s merit usually means the child has demonstrated either academic achievement or performing art talent. If the placement is based on academic abilities, the student frequently provides test scores, teacher recommendations, and/or writing samples. For placement in a performing arts school, students usually undergo an audition process.

2. Proximity preference might be given to a child based on how close the child lives to the school. This preference is created to provide students who live close to a school a better chance of attending that school. The school closest to home is typically referred to as the home or neighborhood school.
3. Low-income preference applies if the student comes from a family with a low income compared to the district norm. The student may be provided a better chance of being assigned to a higher performing school than peers with higher family income.

4. Sibling preference is designed to allow children from the same family to remain together in the same school.

There is not yet a consistent or standardized system designed to measure the results of school choice for any model. Evaluations of choice plans based on student performance are rare. Instead, plans are considered successful simply if families use them (Ravitch, 1989). A measurement strategy is needed that evaluates the academic effect that choice has on students who go through the process, no matter which model of choice is provided.

In conclusion, there is no one definition or model of school choice. Choice can be offered for reasons including achievement, of racial and socioeconomic desegregation, management of structural displacement, equality of access to programs, and/or management of resources. The characteristics of the district as well as the intended objective of the plan determine the model that will be used. In the next section, I will describe the history of school choice.

**History of School Choice**

School choice has a long history, dating back to the early days of desegregation efforts (Irons, 2004). Desegregation efforts in education have frequently taken the form of school choice programs, that is, allowing families to make decisions to send their children to schools other than the nearest neighborhood school. The following section will briefly trace the history of desegregation efforts as these efforts moved from publicly
provided services such as medical care, library access, and restroom availability to the school systems.

The Louisiana legislature passed a separate railroad cars law in 1890 Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896). The law required railroad companies to provide “equal but separate” facilities to those of different races, but it did not define race and gave train conductors the job of assigning passengers to the proper cars (Irons, 2004 p.4). A legal challenge to this 1890 Louisiana law began on June 7, 1892 when Homer Adolph Plessy, an African-American man, entered the New Orleans station of the East Louisiana Railway and bought a first-class ticket to Covington, LA., a town about 50 miles away. According to the Supreme Court’s later statement of facts, Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), Plessy “entered a passenger train and took possession of a vacant seat in a coach where passengers of the White race were accommodated.” His case is the first known attempt at mandating desegregation (Irons, 2004). The court found in favor of Judge John Ferguson, Louisiana, and the train companies in 1896, and “separate but equal” gained the additional force of court precedent (Plessy v. Ferguson, 1896).

The separate but equal doctrine that came out of the separate railroad cars laws gradually permeated many other aspects of the social and cultural fabric of life in the United States, including our public education system. Just as Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) was the first of many attempts to change separate but equal practices in transportation practices, many attempts would be made in the effort to ensure an equitable educational system for all students. In Plessy, it was argued that although the locations of the provided services – such as railcar accommodation – were different, Black people and White people had the same services in those different locations (Cottrol, Diamond, &
Ware, 2004b). Sixty years later, in Brown v. Board of Education, the concept of “separate but equal” would be eliminated from American government practices (Cottrol, Diamond, & Ware, 2004b).

Black families from the South began to migrate to the North during World War I for factory jobs associated with the war effort (Cottrol, Diamond & Ware, 2004a). This first Great Migration created racial tensions across the country. Civil rights organizations and chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) began sprouting up in major cities (Cottrol, Diamond & Ware, 2004a). Then, the United States stock market collapsed in 1929, and the economic Great Depression began. The Depression forced local governments to focus on education expenditures per pupil, which brought inequitable spending patterns to light (Irons, 2004).

In 1941, the American Council of Education (ACE) published a report which had studied segregated schools during the 1930s in the Deep South. The report, Growing up in the Black Belt (Johnson, 1941), included both quantitative and qualitative data on the state of education for Black people in the South. The ACE allowed Black parents and students to speak for themselves and share their experiences in schools, which the ACE said was both sad and sobering. Parents wanted their children to learn and succeed (Irons, 2004). However, expenditures for schools with mostly Black student populations were significantly inferior on a per-capita basis than schools that enrolled mostly White students (Cottrol, Diamond, and Ware, 2004b). Black students were being educated in inferior settings. They were provided with books after White students would no longer use them. The NAACP staff attorneys decided that, even with the evidence of the 1941 report (American Council of Education), it would be foolhardy to initiate an agenda to
equalize educational expenditures across racial lines, given how financially stressed families were during the Depression (Cottrol, Diamond & Ware, 2004a). Another 25 years would pass before the courts would hear a case that would rescind the myth of separate but equal (O’Neil, 2004).

The schools of choice concept that we recognize today evolved from that 1954 Supreme Court decision in Oliver L. Brown et al. v. The Board of Education of Topeka, or “Brown” (O’Neil, 2004). The original goals of the Brown litigators were equalization of resources and access to educational opportunities (Cottrol, Diamond, and Ware, 2004b). The separate public schools that Black students attended in 1954 were obviously inferior to the White schools in terms of buildings, books, and facilities (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954). Integration appeared to be the only way to ensure fair distribution of these resources. Many people assumed that these disparities would be eliminated only if Black families were given access to schools that had previously been for White students – schools that appeared to be far superior to those offered to Black families (Kohn, 1990).

The Brown case held that state and district policies segregating children based solely on their race violated the 14th amendment rights of Black people to equal protection under the law. The Supreme Court Justices mandated desegregation. The intended consequence was the provision of equal opportunity in education for all individuals (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954; Goodwin and Kemerer, 2002).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 (The Act) followed the Brown case ten years later and was first conceived to protect the rights of Black Americans. The Act was landmark legislation that outlawed segregation in U.S. schools and in public places. The bill
included a provision to ban discrimination in public accommodations thereby “giving all Americans” the right to be served in facilities that are open to the public (Public Law 88-352, 1964). It also formed the basis for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (Goodwin and Kemerer, 2002).

Once implemented, the effects of the Civil Rights Act were far reaching and had tremendous long-term impact on the whole country (Goodwin and Kemerer, 2002). The Act prohibited discrimination in the use of public facilities in government and in employment. It became illegal to compel segregation of the races in schools. Title III of The Act prohibited state and municipal governments from denying access to public facilities on grounds of race, religion, or ethnicity, while Title IV required the desegregation of public schools and authorized the U.S. Attorney General to file suits to enforce this law (Public Law 88-352, 1964). Both Brown and The Act provided ripe grounds for further innovations in the desegregation of public schools. A frequently utilized innovation that arose from Brown was the idea of a school of choice program, which was adopted in many districts.

Plessy v. Ferguson, the American Council of Education’s report published in 1941, and Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 established that there were gross inequities in American society, based on race. Until the early 1900’s, 90% of Black people lived in the former Confederate states in the South. Racial inequities in education became a nationwide issue as, throughout the 1900s, Black people moved throughout the North and West. These inequities required interventions that could only be accomplished through careful planning and systemic change.
These interventions include schools of choice policies, busing plans, equalized student expenditure goals, and career training or magnet programs offered in particular schools in a district. These policies and programs permit children of all races to apply to and attend resource-rich programs and schools. Over time, districts opened additional schools with unique themes or philosophies, and the charter school movement began, providing yet more choices for families. In the next section, I will describe the models of school choice and then the history of school choice as it unfolded in the subject district, Rochester, New York.

Choice Programs

Schools of choice plans have taken many forms, including magnet schools, private and parochial schools, voucher plans, charter schools, and open enrollment, including controlled choice systems. In all of these plans, parents can decide to choose schools for their children, and the local school remains the default option. Of all these options, most large urban districts offer some form of controlled choice (Clune & Witte, 1990). More recent and controversial choice models are vouchers and charter schools (Schneider & Teske, 2001). They are considered controversial because opponents of choice believe that these kinds of schools are selective and public schools are expected to be inclusive (Apple & Buras, 2005). In this section, each model is reviewed, ending with a controlled choice model, which has been used in Boston, Massachusetts since the early 1990s (Willie & Alves, 2002) and in Rochester, New York since 2004.

Magnet schools’ contribution to school choice. One form of choice is a controlled choice, intra-district school program. This is often called the magnet school. In the 1960s and 1970s, magnet schools emerged as an early form of choice. Many school
districts created magnet schools to attract students from across the district to a unique program and, thereby, achieve racially balanced schools while at the same time retaining students (mostly, White students) who might otherwise flee the public schools (Cullen, Jacob, & Levitt, 2005; Schneider, Teske, Marschall, & Roch, 1998).

Magnet schools have been promoted as opportunities to bring schools and parents closer together using the theory that when parents choose schools, parents will be more involved in the school that they choose (Smerkar and Goldring, 1999). The idea is that teachers and parents will have a shared purpose and mission for the children and that should result in closer, home-school ties. Smerkar noted that possible benefits of school choice cannot materialize without clear, concerted efforts to “bring the community back in” (p. 158). The rationale is that by creating interest in the parent and allowing the parent to become involved in their child’s education through a school choice process, the child will do better in school. The goal is for the parent and the child to review school choice materials and discuss the child’s educational future. With participation in this process, the parent begins to connect with the child’s education. If parents develop a relationship with their child’s school early on, hopefully, they will develop an educational partnership and will be interested in their child’s education.

According to a 1999 study, parents of children in magnet schools demonstrate a deeper level of commitment, caring, and trust in their school environment compared to parents of children attending neighborhood schools (Smerkar and Goldring). Parents of students in magnet schools portrayed neighborhood schools as places where parents have given in to complacency and teachers have given up on standards of academic excellence
and order (Smerkar and Goldring, 1999). This attitude is evidence that magnet school options may positively affect parent involvement.

As magnet schools and programs gained in popularity in the 1990s, critics charged that magnet schools exacerbate existing class or socioeconomic divisions, especially when the magnet schools academically select few numbers in districts (Smerkar and Goldring, 1999). Proponents of choice assert that middle-class parents are more motivated and more informed regarding the availability of educational options, while lower-income parents opt for conventional attendance area schools with no specialized offerings and fewer resources (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Smerkar and Goldring confirmed that magnet schools tend to attract more academically motivated and able students as well as more effective and innovative teachers (1999).

A study of magnet schools in the 1990s involved the positive impact of career academies. Kemble & Rock (1996) compared students randomly selected to enroll in a magnet school called a “career academy” and those who were scheduled for a 12th-grade, traditional academic year. The career academies provided courses that taught a particular set of skills that students needed for specific careers. They found that career academies increase outcomes for at-risk students, including reduced dropout rate, improved attendance, increased academic course taking, and the increased likelihood of earning enough credits to graduate on time (Kemble & Rock, 1996). They also found that low-risk students who attend career academies were more likely to graduate on time. While influencing attainment outcomes, career academies did not improve standardized math and reading achievement scores for any group (Kemble & Rock, 1996).
Magnet schools provided parents some choice other than their neighborhood schools. Assignment to a magnet school, particularly if the magnet school provided a career academy curriculum, had some measurable, positive outcomes for students compared to their peers in neighborhood schools. However, these positive outcomes did not include higher academic achievement compared to peers in neighborhood schools.

*Private and parochial schools.* Private and parochial schools are another way to provide school choice. These school choice options are available to parents who can afford to pay tuition. It should be noted that the number of existing private schools in the nation could handle only about 4% of the current public school population, so private and parochial school options cannot be a large-scale solution to problems of inequities in public school districts (Apple & Bracey, 2001). Parents feel involved with private schools through the application and acceptance process (Apple & Bracey, 2001). These schools require more parental involvement and have higher expectations of their students than public schools do (Apple & Bracey, 2001). This is often cited as a reason why students perform better academically at private schools (Apple & Bracey, 2001). These parents typically have the ability to provide a deposit and pay tuition and attend recruitment meetings or registration events.

*Vouchers providing school choice.* School vouchers are certificates from public funds that enable students to attend any school of their choice, public or private. According to most teachers' unions and other public service organizations, vouchers will destroy the public school system because they remove funds from public schools and allow the best students to opt out of the public school system (Apple & Bracey, 2001). Conversely, free-market theorists support vouchers because they believe in the
marketplace as a mechanism for reform and are committed to public policies that lessen the authority of the state (Apple & Bracey, 2001). A key issue is church and state relations, since most voucher plans could result in the expenditure of state money in private, religious schools (Cookson, 1994).

Charter schools providing school choice. Another form of school choice is the charter school. Charter schools are generally established by educational entrepreneurs in consultation with local school districts but are exempt from much of the regulatory burden imposed by the state on public schools (Brighouse, 2000). For example, public schools are required to use documented progressive discipline, such as providing additional direction and supports, and then consequences that escalate in severity as a child makes mistakes. Public schools may not take dramatic steps such as suspension or expulsion for a first offense, with rare exception. Charter schools do not have to follow these requirements and are free to exclude or expel students without using progressive discipline (Apple & Buras, 2005).

Charter schools began emerging in the United States in the early 1990s. These schools offer opportunities that are not typically available in traditional public schools. They offer incentives, such as a college preparatory mission, high standards for academics and character, a longer school day and longer school year than the traditional public school, a highly structured and safe learning environment, and faculty of committed and talented teachers and leaders (Brighouse, 2000). Charter schools may be similar to the magnet schools if they have a unique program or learning strategy offered to students, although the funding and administration of charter schools is independent of the host public school district. Charter schools break the traditional link between
neighborhood and schooling, as do magnet schools. Charter schools have the potential to increase the degree of competition faced by local public schools and, in the view of some, thereby improve school performance (Cullen, Jacob & Levitt, 2003).

Charter schools are sponsored by local, state, or other organizations that monitor their practices. As of 2004, 40 states and D.C. have charter schools law. Nationally, there are about 3,000 charter schools, serving over 750,000 students. Charter schools use money from the public school district(s) in which their students reside, and are paid based on the public school’s per-student rate (ED.gov, 2000).

Open enrollment and controlled choice. Although the current school choice debate centers on private school vouchers and charter schools, the most common form of choice available to students in urban areas is the open enrollment program (NCES, 1996). Under open enrollment, public school students can apply to gain access to public schools and programs outside of their neighborhood school but within their district (Cullen et al., 2003).

A common type of public school district open enrollment is a controlled choice program. A controlled choice program seeks to increase the participation of low-income and minority children while stimulating every school to be productive. Controlled choice is designed to recruit as many participants as possible into the process and then assign students based on their choices but at the same time, increase the chances of each student being placed in a school with peers of different backgrounds (Cookson, 1994). With these programs, the local Board of Education determines specific objectives for recruitment and enrollment across the district. Early in the discussion about controlled choice, these plans were described as generally having one or more of these defining objectives: (a) to
offer all students in a community equal access to all public schools regardless of geographical location, (b) to involve all parents in an informed decision-making process, (c) to create pressure for all schools to improve, and (d) to achieve racial or socioeconomic class desegregation of every school with a minimal amount of mandatory assignment (Armor & Peiser, 1997; Glenn, 1991).

Districts have determined that there is a direct correlation between performance on standardized testing and a child’s school attendance (Apple & Buras, 2001). If a child frequently misses school he/she will not perform as well on tests. This is important because districts throughout our nation are evaluated on their ability to educate children through standardized testing, most recently with the over 900 pages of regulations set forth in the No Child Left Behind legislation (Hess & Finn, 2004). Most districts have created attendance policies and even allocate staff to track attendance and assist families with attendance issues in the hope that higher attendance rates will result in better test scores to submit to evaluating agencies.

With that in mind, it makes sense to evaluate a program that is utilized in most urban districts across the nation, and some suburban districts, to determine its effectiveness in terms of how students perform when they have participated in a school choice program. This evaluation must include measures such as attendance and standardized testing results. In order to learn about the concept of controlled choice as it is implemented in the subject district, it is helpful to look first at the model for Rochester’s plan, which was Boston, Massachusetts. Boston is a district similarly sized to Rochester and experiences many of the same social challenges, such as a high level of family poverty, found in all large urban districts (Willie and Alves, 2002).
Theoretical Rationale

Libertarianism is a philosophy which seeks to maximize individual liberty and reduce the state’s role in individual’s lives. Nozick, in 1974, expressed a libertarian view when he declared that the rights of life, liberty and property were natural rights, worthy of protection as an end in themselves. Paternalism is an attitude that fathers in families (‘‘pater’’ means ‘‘father’’ in Latin) should make decisions for the rest of the family based on the father’s perceptions of what is best (Suber, in Gray (ed.), 1999). Paternalism implies a stronger, wiser person acting for those who are weaker and less experienced (Suber, in Gray (ed.), 1999). When considered together, the common terms of libertarianism and paternalism produce a philosophy which is often thought to guide the actions of policy-makers such as Boards of Education. Thaler and Sunstein (2008) recently defined libertarian paternalism as an approach that preserves freedom of choice but that authorizes both parties and public institutions to steer people in directions that will promote their welfare.

According to Thaler and Sunstein, libertarian paternalism is the philosophy utilized by public officials and urban planners who believe they are assisting the public in making the choices they would make for themselves if they had “strength of will and sharpness of mind” (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008, page176). According to Thaler and Sunstein, planners believing in libertarian paternalism intend to help families, from the point of view of the planners. Thaler and Sunstein raise questions about the rationality of judgments and decisions people make, citing the credit issue in America today: people routinely buy on credit what they can not afford (2008). These questions are used to
justify providing only limited information to people who have to make choices within a system.

Libertarian paternalism preserves some freedom of choice, while the philosophy accepts the practice of both private and public institutions to steer people’s decision-making in directions that will promote the individual’s welfare in the eyes of the institution. Libertarian paternalism is a relatively weak type of paternalism, because many choices seem to be freely offered. In its most cautious forms, libertarian paternalism imposes only trivial costs on those who depart from the planner’s preferred options. The assumption is that almost all people, almost all of the time, try to make choices that are in their best interest or at the very least are better, by their own insights, than the choices that they believe would be made by third parties (Thaler & Sunstein, 2003).

According to Wilkinson (2008), offering choices becomes complicated because of framing effects. Framing effects occur whenever choices are provided to people. The best planners might assume that, when people lack relevant information, the best practice response is to provide it. However, in order to be effective, any effort to inform people must be rooted in an understanding of how people actually think. Presentation makes a great deal of difference; the behavioral consequences of otherwise identical information depends on how it is framed (Wilkinson, 2008).

With regard to school choice, a libertarian paternalistic philosophy held by a school board suggests that a district might present families with a list of options identifying the qualities of each school which will attract the parent. The district may choose to omit the shortcomings of the schools. The assumption is that the parents do not
know the shortcomings of the schools in their district, and that the strengths of the schools are unique enough and attractive enough that parents could use limited positive information to make a good match for their children. In addition, libertarian paternalists may provide advertising or program support for some schools while not putting these resources in places for other schools in order to shift parents towards making choices that meet district goals for enrollment, rather than providing parents enough accurate information to make fully informed decisions (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008).

In districts which use school choice, Clune and Witte (1990) reported that districts assume that if they provide school descriptions, locations and performance on state testing, parents will select the school that will best meet their child’s needs (Clune & Witte, 1990). School choice plans assume this perfect world. However, in large urban school districts, parents’ choices can be based on life situations and challenges, not on what is best educationally for their children. For example, navigating through treacherous walk zones as opposed to riding a bus to school, especially during the cold winter months, concerns parents who may have to go to work before the child leaves for school. Sometimes parents accept a trusted family member’s opinion of a school in an urban district, as opposed to data about test scores, achievement and programs.

As a result, the choice process is frequently compromised and choices are made solely on opinion or parental need. The school board and district officials involved in researching choice models in the Rochester City School District believed that parents select schools based on program and performance, information which the district could vet and carefully provide (M. Alves, personal communication, March, 2007). School officials also believed that low performing schools which would be less often chosen
would be forced to develop a more rigorous curriculum and programs that would interest families in the community, and that therefore, a choice plan would raise overall district performance (Willie and Alves, 2002).

For the last 45 years schools of choice programs have sprung up in urban districts across the nation. These choice models were primarily the result of a libertarian paternalistic philosophy held by Boards of Education with good intentions (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008) and were an effort to end racial segregation and provide broader opportunities to more students. However, school choice has never been measured to determine if students’ achievement has been influenced if their families participate in school choice. Having reviewed the many forms of choice available throughout the country, we turn now to a consideration of the history of school choice in the public school district of Rochester, New York.

*History of Choice in Rochester, New York*

*The 1960s.* In 1963, the student population in each Rochester City School District (RCSD) school was predominately either Black or White. There were 21 schools out of 54 with less than 2% non-White children (a category that no longer exists, which consisted of children who were Black, Latino, Asian, and Native American). By 1968, there were no longer schools with fewer than 2% non-White children in the RCSD. This rapid change in the racial demographic of the district was linked to the first efforts in the late 1960’s to racially desegregate schools. The history of school choice in Rochester, New York is inextricably linked to the civil rights movement.

In 1964, shortly after the Los Angeles race riots, Rochester and Harlem, New York both began experiencing riots. The national press focused on Harlem first; the
Rochester riots gained national attention when the National Guard interceded to bring calm back to the city of Rochester (Toonari Corporation, 2009). Although the National Guard could police the city and slow down violent activities, they were unable to resolve the larger race issues, such as the frustration that there were few opportunities for racial minorities in Rochester and in the nation.

Many small business owners in Rochester were financially devastated by the riots, while business executives from Rochester’s major employers were meeting with representatives of the Black community and attempting a peacekeeping resolution (Hooper, 1969). This resolution included both providing job opportunities and on-the-job education for adults and equal educational opportunities for minority students attending city schools. However, the school district failed to immediately meet its commitment (Franco, in Goldberg, 1969), made as part of the riots’ resolution, to reach out to poor Black children and provide the same education for them that was provided to middle-class White children. As the sixties wore on, the RCSD Superintendent Goldberg, with a large citizen committee, began to develop a model to desegregate the Black children of the RCSD from the few schools to which they were routinely assigned (Hooper, 1969).

It is important to recall that Rochester was a school district that first began desegregation efforts as a result of the riots of 1964, not because of a court order. It may be that in responding only to a crisis situation with promises, and without the pressures of continuing court oversight, that Rochester did not move as quickly as they could have. In addition, not all of the events at the time helped the school district to move towards a more racially integrated system. People who lived in part of the suburb of Greece, New York were allowed to attend city school district schools for free. This privilege was part
of a trade where Rochester gained tax land by receiving land that Eastman Kodak Company owned (C. Lambert, personal communication, September 2001). This agreement had created an even more racially segregated district than one would expect based on the residence pattern, since the Greece students went to only a few schools. The state department of education charged the Rochester City School District Superintendent in 1969 with developing a new model of desegregation (Hooper, 1969).

By 1968, every school showed an increase in the non-White population, except for those two schools involved in reverse open enrollment, where White students had preference to the schools that previously had predominately non-White populations. Despite the fact that many non-White children had moved into schools that were predominately White before, the inner city schools remained virtually non-White. This was a result of the segregated housing and limited availability of housing alternatives to families from minority groups. In fact, the number of schools with more than 50% non-White students increased from 8 to 11 in the 5-year period, 1963-1968, with 6 over 90% non-White. At that time, the district had grown to 56 schools (Goldberg, 1969).

In the late 1960s, researchers were tracking (Franco, 1971) performance in racially balanced schools. The Superintendent Report stated research done locally on the impact of moving children to more racially balanced schools suggests children’s academic performance improves. The results on the New York State Pupil Evaluation Program indicated that inner city children, in dominantly non-White schools, were far below state norms in their achievement on tests; in dominantly White schools, they did better. That implied that one way to improve achievement was to integrate the schools (Goldberg, 1969).
However, Rochester was also experiencing a trend that was affecting other big-city school districts. There were fewer and fewer middle- and upper-class children attending the public schools and more and more children who were from working-class families. Children who qualified for free lunches numbered about 35% in the 1960s (Hooper, 1969), and only 12 of the 42 elementary schools provided hot lunches (Goldberg, 1969). For the most recent school year, 2008-09, 83% of the district’s children received a free or reduced price lunch, and all of the schools offered a hot lunch (RCSD Food Service, personal communication, December 8, 2008).

On December 30, 1969, Mr. Goldberg introduced Rochester’s first form of School of Choice (Hooper, 1969). According to Goldberg, as quoted in Hooper’s articles (1969), the proposal was developed to “provide better education for all children” (1969, p. 1). The 1969 plan was a racial desegregation model that, if carried out, would more than double the number of students taking a bus to school rather than walking to a school in their neighborhood. The plan established 11 enlarged home school zones. Each would contain one intermediate school and two or more primary schools (Hooper, 1969). With this reorganization into home school zones, the percentage of non-Whites in 1970 would supposedly reach targets of 18-29% at senior highs, 35-43% at junior highs, and 30-43% at the intermediate schools, compared to the mostly White or mostly non-White populations in most of the schools at the time. Most primary schools would be 30% non-White, but some inner-city schools would continue to be more than 50% non-White.

The reorganization would increase the number of students bused to school from 14% to 36% of all students. The plan would cost between 2.5 and 4.3 million dollars the first year (Hooper, 1969).
Twenty-one organizations were named to represent the community whose delegates would sit on a citizens’ advisory board, which would oversee implementation. The plan called for improvement with minimal costs, minimal construction, and minimal transportation. For instance, 90% of the primary students, 70% of the intermediate, 39% junior high school students, and 30% of high school students would still walk to school (Hooper, 1969).

At the same time, the New York State Board of Regents issued a restatement of its policy on integration and the public schools in early December 1969. In this restatement, the Board of Regents committed itself again to the elimination of racial segregation in the schools as follows:

We are convinced that the elimination of racial segregation in the schools can enhance the academic achievement of non-white children while maintaining achievement of white children and can effect positive changes in interracial understanding for all children. The latter consideration is paramount. If children of different races and economic and social groups have no opportunity to know each other and to live together in school, they cannot be expected to gain the understanding and mutual respect necessary for the cohesion of our society. The stability of our social order depends, in large measure, on the understanding and respect that is derived from a common educational experience among diverse racial, social, and economic groups-integrated education. The attainment of integrated education is dependent upon the elimination of racial segregation in the schools (NYS Board of Regents in Hooper, 1969).

On December 19, 1969, the New York State Commissioner of Education reprimanded the Rochester City School District (RCSD) for not desegregating in a more
aggressive way, citing Alexander v. Homes County Board of Education, 1969, in which the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the concept that school districts had an obligation to desegregate. The report that Goldberg produced (dated December 1969) listed the desegregation measures put into effect since 1963 and the programs that were currently operating to reduce racial imbalance in the future (Hooper, 1969).

1970s-1990s. Goldberg’s plan had some success in moving students out of their neighborhoods into schools in other neighborhoods. Schools buildings were renovated, reorganized, and enlarged to accommodate the desegregation efforts. However, over the next 25 years, there were two significant demographic shifts in Rochester: one racial and the other socioeconomic. A district that had been mostly a White, middle-class district had become mostly a Black poor district (New York State Education Department, 2009), as White, middle-class families moved to the suburbs.

In the late 1980s, the RCSD continued to try to address the racial segregation in its schools, which persisted. The district created magnet programs in grades 4-12, to which all students could apply, and many students did (L. Stone, personal communication, May 13, 2008). The RCSD redrew neighborhood boundaries using birthrate data from the census so that all children could attend an elementary school near home (E. Cicero, personal communication, June 2, 2008). However, this again created racially segregated schools, since families still tended to live in neighborhoods near other people who were like them.

The Boston plan. One school of choice model that was recognized as a success, and therefore duplicated in many large cities, was a model that was implemented in Boston beginning in 1989. Boston, Massachusetts is known for its Ivy League schools,
other universities, and associated wealth. However, in 1989 this northeastern American city was under a mandated U.S. district court desegregation order as a result of the poor performance of its children of color that resulted in a controlled choice program that was offered to parents (Abdulkadiroglu, Pathak & Rothe, 2006). The program divided the district into three zones and gave parents limited choices of schools in their geographic zone. This model of choice – one in which families are presented with a limited set of options – is termed controlled choice in the research and in this work.

The Boston controlled choice plan was developed by Alves and Willie; remnants of the plan are still being used today. The plan gave students the opportunity to attend the school closest to their home if they chose to do so, while still providing opportunities for students of different races and different economic backgrounds to apply to schools that were outside their neighborhood, yet still within a geographic zone around their residence.

Placement even at the school closest to home was not guaranteed. A geographic preference was established with an algorithm for a random-choice process that assigned a specific percentage of the seats at each school only to students who lived within one-half mile of the school. The remaining seats were held for students of races other than the dominant one in that school, no matter where they lived. If either set of seats were not filled, the seats remained empty until a student who met the qualifications for that group (within a half-mile or a different race from the dominant one) asked for the assignment.

Other preferences were also provided. Students who wished to attend an elementary school within their zone with an older brother or sister already attending that school received a preference. If a sibling attended a school in a different zone and the
parent wanted their children to attend school together, the older sibling was transferred to
the school in their zone of residence first, and then the incoming kindergarten child was
registered with this sibling preference. If twins (or other multiple siblings) from a family
were going through the lottery, they would both receive a preference for the school they
wished to attend so that they would be placed together. Families who wished their child
to attend a school that was less than a mile and a half from their residence, but not the
under a half-mile, closest-school-to-home category, also received a preference.

Preferences such as proximity, or sibling, or race were handled within the
computer algorithm that created assignments. First, every applicant received a random
number. Then, any student with a preference had a large number such as 100,000 added
to their random number. The algorithm then started to place children in seats at first-
choice schools in their zone, starting with the highest number and working down through
all of the numbers. When a school filled up, the next child whose number came up, who
wanted that school as a first choice, was assigned to the second choice. The child with the
lowest number, with no preferences, was assigned last. Some families did not register
during the registration window, and they were assigned to available seats once all of the
children whose families participated by registering during a specific time window were
assigned.

Preferences could be adjusted to meet various goals of the district. For example,
preferences could be provided for proximity (1-1/2 to 2 miles), or racial, or
socioeconomic characteristics of children in order to reduce transportation costs or
achieve integration goals. If a child did not receive a first choice, the child was placed on
a ranked waitlist for the first choice, and if a seat became available later in the year, the
family was contacted for placement. Waitlists remained in effect for one year, and families could request to be placed back on the waitlist the following September. This example of a controlled choice process met the goals of the district to desegregate the district and the goals of parents to exercise some limited choice.

It is hard to know exactly how many districts use the so-called Boston system, because districts do not always explain controlled-choice policies in detail, but some of the larger metropolitan districts that employed the algorithm or similar strategies included Denver, Tampa, Minneapolis, Louisville, and Seattle (Clune and Witte, 1990). If two students applied to a school with one open seat, Seattle and Louisville broke the tie on the basis of race, a practice the Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional in 2007 (National Public Radio, 2007).

Unfortunately, no placement was guaranteed with the Boston system. Parents ran the risk of requesting a school they could see from their homes, only to learn that so many people of their race and from their neighborhood had requested that school that the saved seats for the neighborhood (half-mile) were assigned before the computer got to their child’s number. The district began to publish acceptance rates, and parents started to gamble. Instead of using up their first choice with a highly requested school with a small chance of getting in, parents would select a first choice that was a slightly less-popular school where there were also fewer students getting preferences for the seat that their child could assume (N. Dorosin, personal communication, September 23, 2008).

In the Boston system, parents who ranked a school second or third lost out to everyone who ranked it first, unless the school did not fill with first choices. This made it risky to use a first choice on a highly sought-after school if a child had no preference and
a complete waste of a choice to list such a school as a second choice (Willie and Alves, 2002). Information about school demand was usually available from the district, through parent-to-parent conversations, and eventually the Internet, giving parents information and an incentive to tweak choices based on acceptance rates and on where their child had priority (N. Dorosin, personal communication, September 23, 2008).

When the Boston system was first developed, almost no parent thought to use some strategy to get their child into a public school kindergarten. Only a handful of people even knew how the new process and algorithm worked. Over time, parents figured out that they were almost certain to be placed in a school with 40 applicants like their child and 40 seats for children like their child the previous year. They were also much less likely to get into a school with 20 seats for children like their child and 40 applicants for those seats.

Not surprisingly, affluent, educated parents with large social networks (who volunteer at school with other affluent, educated parents and who work, go to church, and socialize with other affluent, educated parents) learned the tricks first. Their careful homework resulted in many more first-choice placements for affluent families than for less affluent, less-educated parents, who would make strategic mistakes such as requesting a school that filled with first choices as a second choice. It would be difficult to quantify how many children lost out on access to an opportunity to a better school because of the strategies of some parents (N. Dorosin, personal communication, September 23, 2008).

Advocates of the Boston program (Willie and Alves, 2002) billed it as a way of making school choice available to families who could not afford private school tuition,
could not afford to move into a better school district, and as a way to spur reform through competition among schools to try to be so successful that they would fill up with first choices. No measures were established to determine whether this program contributed to academic success or even school attendance rates (Toch, 2006).

Alves and Willie touted the success of this program in a book that they published in 2002. However, shortly after the book came out, Boston moved on to a new program. No one ever looked at the academic outcomes of the children who participated in the program but instead claimed success merely because the algorithm worked and because people participated in the plan (M. Alves, personal communication, March 2007).

Alves began to consult with the Rochester City School District (RCSD) in the late 1990s and brought in his colleague, Willie, for some informational sessions with the School Board. Alves continued to consult with the RCSD until 2007, which used his advice and eventually his algorithms to design their controlled choice plan.

**The 1990s until present day.** Rochester was influenced by Boston’s choice model because the two most recent superintendents in Rochester were previously assistant superintendents in Boston. They were experienced with Boston’s choice model and the consultant who implemented it. Boston and the RCSD also shared a problem common in urban districts of highly segregated schools with schools that were populated by either White, middle-class families or poor, Black families.

In 1996, the RCSD appointed a Schools of Choice committee comprised of RCSD School Board members, staff, parents, and community members to study the concept of controlled choice (Rochester City School District, 2009). Instead of limiting racial isolation, the Board wanted to address the problem of socioeconomic isolation of children
from lower socioeconomic status families whose enrollment was concentrated in some schools. The committee enlisted the help of Alves, the same advisor who helped Boston formulate their controlled choice plan in the early 1990s. The report from the committee recommending a controlled choice plan for Rochester was received by the Board in August of 1997 (Rochester City School District, 1997).

Rochester’s proposed controlled choice plan would desegregate based on socioeconomic status rather than race or ethnicity. Families who came in to register for kindergarten could choose placement with an older sibling (the sibling preference from the Boston plan) or placement at their former neighborhood school based on the old neighborhood boundaries. If parents wanted a choice, they could choose from among schools that had special curricula or programs and drew children from all over the city (city-wide schools) or schools in their own geographic zones (of three, also like Boston). Neighborhood schools, according to the boundaries from the 1980s, did not always have enough capacity to enroll all of the students who lived within those boundaries. Rochester’s plan was supposed to create competition among the schools for children who registered early for kindergarten, presumably children who would later do well in school; this competitive environment was supposed to be the “rising tide that floats all boats,” according to one School Board member (W. Powell, personal communication, November 8, 2008).

The success of this program has never been measured in terms of student attendance or achievement. Instead, its success was measured by how many families received their first-choice placement (which has become steady at about 2/3 of
kindergartners), and whether or not the families who registered early, and therefore, used
the system, were socioeconomically and racially diverse.

Statement of the Problem

As with all new initiatives, there ought to be an evaluation tool that measures the
success of the program. The Boston plan was never evaluated for its success other than
choice process participation data before a version of it was implemented in the Rochester
City School District. The effect of school choice on student attendance and achievement
at RCSD has also not been measured.

The current choice policy has been in effect in the Rochester City School District
for five years (2004-2009). The policy was designed to allow all students opportunities to
go to a school of their family’s choice rather than the one nearest home. The assumption
underlying the program is that if students are provided an opportunity to select a better
school as identified by academic performance, more students would select that better
school. Under-selected schools would receive additional resources and attention, and this
process would raise the performance of all schools. The assumption is that, over time,
this process would raise the performance of all schools since schools will have to
compete for their students.

In 2008, the RCSD School Board decided to solicit the services of a nonprofit
organization named Institute for Innovation in Public School Choice (IIPSC) to evaluate
the structure and implementation of the Parent Preference Choice Policy. The IIPSC
determined that the implementation was almost flawless, but that families were not
asking for the schools they really wanted their child to attend because the district was
forcing parents to limit their choices within their zones and provided a preference to only
first-choice requests. As a result, families were forced to strategize their choices. The RCSD School Board seemed to have a libertarian paternalistic (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008) philosophy in designing their choice plan.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to measure the effect of a school choice program in a large urban district on student achievement and attendance as measured by standardized assessments and district attendance data. This purpose can be achieved with the following research questions.

Research Questions

Do Rochester City School District (RCSD) students who started kindergarten in 2005-06, who completed 3rd grade in 2008-09, and whose families chose a school other than their neighborhood school have better attendance than their RCSD counterparts whose families chose their neighborhood schools?

Do RCSD students who started kindergarten in 2005-06, who completed 3rd grade in 2008-09, and whose families chose a school other than their neighborhood school have better developmental and academic achievement than their RCSD counterparts whose families chose their neighborhood schools?

Definition of Terms

Racial Imbalance. The condition of a public school in which more than 50% of the pupils attending such school are minority students as defined in the regulations promulgated under the Federal Emergency School Aid Act, Title VII of Public Law 92-318, as amended.
Racial Isolation. The condition of a public school in which more than thirty percent of the pupils attending such school are not minority students as defined in the regulations promulgated under the Federal Emergency School Aid Act, Title VIII of Public Law 92-318, as amended.

Magnet School or Program. Educational measures including, but not limited to, planning and special services, instruction or treatment of children, whether at the public school or other public or private facility or place and that provide children with a racially balanced educational experience in which not more than 50% nor less than 30% of the students involved are minority, except in special circumstances.

Parent Preference/Managed Choice. An elementary student-placement policy designed to: give parents greater choice in choosing the elementary school their children will attend; allow parents to choose from among all the schools in the zone in which they live, as well as from several “citywide” schools, instead of being limited to the school nearest their home; and increase the involvement of mothers, fathers, and legal guardians in their children’s education, beginning at kindergarten, by actively choosing their child’s school and working with the school of their choice.

City-wide Draw. Historically, some Rochester schools and programs have participated in a school choice process whereby they have accepted students from throughout the city.

Home-School Boundary. The existing boundary defining the “neighborhood” around each school, most recently described in the late 1980's.

Lottery. The district’s software generates a random number for each student who registered during the Early Registration Period. These numbers are adjusted with any
preferences the student may have and used to create individual registration numbers.

Students are then placed in schools in order of their individual registration number.

Neighborhood or Home School. The school that serves as the proximity preference for all students residing within the home-school boundary.

Proximity Preference. A priority applied to a student’s Individual Registration Number if the child lives within the current home-school attendance area (for Transition in 2004). Currently, 70% of the seats at each school are reserved for students living within this home-school area (again for Transition Year 2004).

Sibling Preference. A priority applied to a student’s random number if they have an older brother and/or sister in a given school. The priority is only valid for the particular school where the older sibling attends and different rules apply to siblings of grand fathered/ incumbent students who attend a school out of their zone.

Socioeconomic Fairness Guidelines. A priority applied to a student’s Individual Registration Number if the student’s parent(s) qualifies for a free or reduced lunch.

Waiting List. Students not receiving their first choice, either during the Early Registration Period or during the Walk-in Registration Period, may request to be placed on a waiting list. If and when a seat becomes available, students will be taken off the waiting list based on their individual registration number.

Charter Schools. Charter schools are public schools that operate with freedom from many of the local and state regulations that apply to traditional public schools. Charter schools allow parents, community leaders, educational entrepreneurs, and others the flexibility to innovate and provide students with increased educational options within the public school system.
Neighborhood School. An RCSD public school within a half mile of home or the school designated by the 1987 redistricting as the school connected to specific addresses within a sending zone.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB). A federal law designed to improve education for all students and to help close the achievement gap between disadvantaged/minority students and their peers.

Attendance Zones. Attendance Zones are geographical areas in the city of Rochester designed with major landmarks or intersections in mind. Rochester’s Main Street and the Genesee River divide the city into 3 sections. The number of grade level sections in each school is based on the population of students at that grade level residing in each specific zone.

Structural Displacement. Structural displacement is defined as a situation where there are more students living within a Home School boundary than there are available seats to accommodate said students. In the past, this potential problem was resolved by increasing the number of sections per school.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study can benefit the Rochester City School District, policy makers, students, and parents. The consensus by school boards, who continue to invent and implement choice plans, is that choice helps to improve all city schools. However, can overall improvement in academic performance within a district be attributed to the Schools of Choice program used by the RCSD? Or, are other supports or pressures such as the No Child Left Behind Act the cause of the increase in test scores? Proponents of choice across the nation see these programs as a successful intervention for failing urban
schools. The RCSD Parent Preference Choice Policy has been in existence in the Rochester City School District for five years, and implementation processes as well as the effects on our students have not yet been evaluated. Many researchers believe that school of choice accounts for students’ success, but few researchers have actually gauged the effects of choice or quantified the level of success with regard to its impact on children’s attendance and achievement.

A study of the attendance and academic performance of children who participated in a choice program will help to determine if such a program works to increase children’s developmental and academic achievement the attendance they need in order to academically achieve.
Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature

This chapter is a review of the literature concerning American public school choice programs in selected districts and evaluations of those programs. The first section describes the Boston plan on which the Rochester plan is based. Then, the research describes the Rochester plan. Next, the researcher describes three other districts’ plans and the consistent focus for the evaluations of these plans. Finally, I synthesize what has been learned from both reviewing the plans and the plans’ evaluations and suggest a gap in the literature concerning the achievement and attendance of children who participate in school choice plans.

Schools of choice models have been implemented in many American cities. Boston, Massachusetts uses both a state-designed, inter-district choice model where students can opt out of their current district and select a school in a neighboring district and a locally designed intra-district model for students who want to stay in Boston. Cambridge, Massachusetts uses an intra-district choice plan, reserving seats in every school for children of every socioeconomic class. The Milwaukee, Wisconsin school choice model allows students to attend private schools through a publicly funded voucher program. The Chicago, Illinois public schools district utilizes an intra-district magnet school choice program with lotteries at each participating school. These four models are all different, have all been in use for many years, and have all been the subject of studies to measure their success.
In the next sections, the Boston plan is presented, followed by a review of Rochester’s Schools of Choice model. These two models are connected and similarities between the programs are explored. Then, a review of the Cambridge, Milwaukee, and Chicago choice programs is provided, including comparisons among programs. The chapter concludes with a restatement of the research question.

**Boston**

A study conducted by Armor and Peiser (1997) reviewed a comprehensive, inter-district school choice law adopted by Massachusetts in order to test the market theory reason for school choice; that is, that choice plans improved poorly performing schools. Massachusetts’ inter-district choice was adopted as part of a fiscal recovery act. The Education Reform Act of 1993 required that districts vote yearly on whether to accept choice students. Districts may not prevent students from transferring out of a home district if the district has voted to participate that year. If a district agrees to accept students, they cannot use any type of selection criteria. The number of transfers in is limited by school capacity. The total number of students who are allowed to participate was capped at 2% (Armor and Peiser, 1997).

As a result of the Education Reform Act, school choice programs began small but grew steadily. In the first year, 1991-1992, about 1% of 80,000, (or 800) eligible students changed school districts. Then, Boston also adopted an intra-district school choice plan, designed by Willie and Alves (2002), to solve the problems of racial and socioeconomic isolation and accompanying academic failure. By the 1995-96 school year, nearly 6,800 Boston students participated in the combined programs (i.e., approximately 9%).
In Boston, the combined school choice plans maximized educational choice in that no student would be mandatorily assigned to a Boston Public School on the basis of his or her residential location. All parents would be given the opportunity of selecting the schools they wanted for their children and rank-ordering those choices. These could be schools near their homes, other schools and programs in the district, or even schools outside the district. As a result of these choice plans, all of Boston’s 76 elementary, 21 middle, and 17 high schools became desegregating schools of choice (Clune & Witte, 1990).

To ensure that participating, inter-district schools were forthcoming with available space to meet this initiative, all available instructional space was initially allocated to parallel the actual percentage of White, Black and other racial or ethnic minority students who were eligible to enroll in the school. New assignments were then controlled to drive the demographic profile in each school towards these target percentages. This ensured that the schools did not become segregated again as a result of assignment requests from new entrants. In fact, all new assignments for each school would be controlled so that the racial and ethnic balance in each school would vary no more than ten percentage points from the total proportion of White and minority students in the geographic zone who were eligible to enroll in a school (Clune & Witte, 1990).

**Evaluation**

A key evaluation of Boston’s school choice plan considered the concept of market-driven school improvement, using Boston’s implementation of Massachusetts’ inter-district choice in the school years 1992-3 through 1995-6 as the foundation for a case study of 20 districts. In their study, Armor and Peiser (1997) used mixed methods to
test the idea that a school choice program would cause schools to take action to increase their market share. They suggested that schools that were confronted with enrollment and revenue changes as a result of school choice would then follow one of three scenarios:

1) The district would perceive that choice was not having an effect on their district and, therefore, the district did not need to increase or decrease their market share with any overt action.

2) The district would want to increase their market share and would successfully change some aspects of their district in order to do this.

3) The district would want to increase their market share and would change the wrong things so their market share would continue to decrease.

Armor and Peiser (1997) used survey instruments, interviews, and quantitative data including enrollment, tuition payments, and expenditures to answer their questions (1997).

Armor and Peiser (1997) selected the ten largest sending and the ten largest receiving districts, based on out-of-district enrollment gains and losses, from among the 304 districts that either contributed students to the choice program or received students as a result of the choice program. These districts provided information for the 20-district case study. Armor and Peiser (1997) accomplished site visits to all 20 districts. While visiting, they interviewed 3-4 staff members in each district, chosen by convenience: each superintendent, a school committee member (i.e., parent or student active in school governance), and one or two principals for a total of 69 people. All 69 people also answered a survey instrument, which included open and closed questions.
The most important conclusion drawn by Armor and Peiser (1997) was that districts that set out to improve their market share of enrollment were successful in restoring some of their lost enrollment and accompanying revenue. Net losses in enrollment of 4% were enough to drive districts to create school-improvement efforts, which then brought new enrollment to the districts and began to reverse the negative trend. Net losses of 2% to 4% in enrollment did not drive districts to make helpful changes to their districts; these districts did not focus their efforts on school improvement and then did not see a reversal of their enrollment trend. Armor and Peiser established that market theory can drive school improvement if a district suffers enough of an enrollment and accompanying revenue loss, and they established a threshold of about 4% enrollment drop as the level at which districts take constructive action.

In a study in 2002 of Boston’s intra-district plan, the Boston school choice designers, Alves and Willie, recommended that the plan continue, although with some modifications. The evidence in its favor included the facts that many thousands of families were using it, they were very happy with it, and it led to significant program improvements in some of the most impacted sending districts. In recent years, Alves asserted that their model has been replicated in many districts across the United States (M. Alves, personal communication, 2007). A study by Willie and Alves (2002) asserted that 90% or more of the students who participated in the choice program receive their first choice.

Armor and Peiser (1997) and Willie and Alves (2002) did not measure the effects of the choice plan on participating students’ attendance or achievement. If the plan is supposed to benefit students, the success of a choice model should focus on student
outcomes: beyond the perceptions of staff and families about how choice affected their
district, beyond the number of families who receive their first choice, and the number and
demographics of participants in the plan.

*Rochester*

*Theory of Choice as Used in Rochester*

In their annual State of the District Report (2001), the Rochester City School
District (RCSD) Superintendent, Clifford Janey, acknowledged the Board-held belief that
there was an inequity in education throughout the RCSD. Students attending schools
located in more affluent areas received a better education than students attending schools
in lower income areas. They believed that a possible reason for this was that children
behaved better in higher income areas and, therefore, the most qualified teachers are
attracted to schools located in those areas. As a result, children in more desirable schools
performed better academically (Janey, 2001). They surmised that bringing children from
lower income areas to schools in more affluent neighborhoods would give those children
the opportunity to learn how to behave better, have better teachers, and excel while
bringing students from more affluent areas to schools in lower income neighborhoods
might alleviate some behavioral issues at those schools and create a safer, more enticing
work environment for the teachers there. The choice process appeared to offer a way to
move students voluntarily to schools outside their neighborhoods (Willie and Alves,
2002). This School of Choice program was based on the professional advice of Willie
and Alves, who evaluated the feasibility of a preference or choice plan for Rochester,
New York in the late 1990s (Rochester City School District, 2002).
Alves and Willie proposed a plan that they believed would advance the quality of education in all schools in Rochester. Their plan worked to address concentrations of poverty and of racial isolation in individual schools along with the poor student achievement that seemed to accompany these conditions. With respect to racial segregation, RCSD data showed that average student achievement scores seemed to correlate to racial and socio-economic isolation, which occurred in schools in which 80% or more of the student body consisted of low-income students or students of color. Students in a school with 100% free or reduced price lunch students, for example, scored 30 percentage points lower on average on state English language arts, mathematics, and social studies tests than students in a school in which the percentage of free and reduced price lunch was under 25% (Rochester City School District, 2002). The RCSD implemented this School of Choice program in 2003.

The introduction of the School of Choice model in 2003 included the further adoption of school improvement policies that were meant to ensure that all children entering kindergarten of RCSD were provided equal access to high-quality educational opportunities. A second purpose was to encourage all RCSD parents to choose a public school for their children and to consider magnet or special-focus schools that might meet their child’s individual needs. Third, the model promoted socioeconomic diversity in all student bodies and provided for monitoring that was designed to create continuous school improvement. The diversity goal was accomplished with the use of preferences given to students who were different from most of the other children in a selected, first-choice school with regard to their free, reduced, or paid-lunch status and was monitored using internal reporting. The continuous improvement plan called for monitoring committees,
which were supposed to direct additional resources to under-selected schools; this feature of the plan has not yet been implemented (Rochester City School District, 2002).

Implementation of School Choice in Rochester, New York

The Parent Preference/Managed Choice Policy 5153 (amended) was passed by the Rochester City School District (RCSD) Board of Education on February 12, 2004, and the first recruiting period was conducted in March through May of 2004 for the 2004-05 school year. This was an amendment to the original policy of the previous year. The policy reads, in part:

According to Willie and Alves, a major goal of Managed Choice is to increase student achievement, especially by reducing mobility and increasing diversity . . . Equity in school assignments is a major goal of this project. Equity would be achieved by using enrollment fairness guidelines based on socioeconomic status derived from data on record regarding the eligibility or ineligibility of students to participate in a free lunch program, to be fair to students in all socioeconomic and racial groups, they also proposed new assignment procedures that are tamper-proof, and prescribe ways of upgrading low-achieving schools annually (2002).

Willie and Alves recommended that the Rochester City School District should be subdivided into three student attendance zones consisting of a similar range of elementary schools that are available by choice to all students who reside in each zone. Parents would be allowed to select at least three schools of their choice from within their zone (Rochester City School District, 2004).
The Process

Parents are asked to register their child for kindergarten between the months of March through May if their child turned four years old prior to December 1st of the previous year. At the completion of the registration process, they complete a Schools of Choice application. Parents are interviewed to determine if a child is eligible for a weighting in the lottery; a weighting increases the chances that the child receives their first choice.

The interview process includes questions about socioeconomic status, sibling preference, and whether or not the parent wishes to opt for their neighborhood or home school (the one closest to home) or another school within a half-mile of their home. The answer to any of these questions may confer a weight to the random number assigned by the computerized lottery that creates the school assignments according to the Board policy’s guidelines. Parent and child’s interests also become part of the interview and can help the parent in making their choices.

Weighting is awarded if the child lives within the current home-school attendance area or within a half-mile of a school. Sibling preference also attaches weighting to a student’s random number if he/she has an older brother and/or sister in a given school. Finally, socio-economic status provides weighting to a student’s random number if the student’s family qualifies for a free or reduced lunch and the first-choice school has a smaller percentage of children with free and reduced-price lunches than the district average.
Evaluation

The RCSD school choice program has never been evaluated on the basis of whether it creates a change in student attendance or achievement. Information available includes the economic impact and student enrollment numbers.

As a result of the policy, almost 700 of the 1250 lottery participants in 2004-05 began attending a school other than their home school. Transportation cost increases for the program were in excess of $800,000 in the first year, representing a 3.5% increase in the $30 million budget. Transportation budget costs were in excess of $41 million by 2007-08 (Rochester City School District, 2009). The budget for the department charged with implementing the School of Choice process, the Department of Student Equity and Placement, increased by more than $1 million in order to pay for the Parent Center rent and increased staff. As the children began to move into higher grade levels at their newly chosen schools, the number of student suspensions increased (New York State Education Department, 2008). Also, attendance began to decrease. The decrease in attendance and the rise in suspensions were identified as possible negative effects of the plan (New York State Education Department, 2008).

In February 2008, The Institute for Innovation in Public School Choice (IIPSC) was hired by the School Board to evaluate the implementation of the Parent Preference Choice Policy for the Rochester City School District (2008). This was the first outside evaluation of the policy since its adoption. Internal evaluations had previously been conducted with regard to choice participation and choice results. The IIPSC analyzed the enrollment process and the algorithm used in the lottery process. The IIPSC published its report only to the RCSD Superintendent and School Board in October 2008.
The IIPSC first determined how many students received their first choice. They reviewed the reasons why students were given weightings in order to determine if the process was equitable. Next, they determined how many people selected the school closest to their home. They then checked to see how many families moved out of the geographical zone that they lived in after they participated in the lottery, allowing the families to use a clause in the policy guaranteeing that their children could stay in the school where they started kindergarten until they finished the final grade in the school, no matter where they moved in the city. They reviewed how many families asked for a transfer from the school that they originally selected. Finally they reviewed the demographic information of the families who participated in the lottery and compared those with district demographic data. Students currently in grades 1-3 were reviewed by the IIPSC.

The process was found to be equitably administered, once families came in to register; a few initial discrepancies (3 out of approximately 1800 assignments) were investigated and explained. However, the evaluation showed that the administration failed to reach the lowest income families in the district and, therefore, was providing choice to families whose neighborhood schools were the best in the district. They also found that many families moved from their zone into one of the other two zones after the child was in kindergarten, which resulted in an increase of school buses crossing the city and long bus rides for many students; almost 60% of students were no longer in their current home zone by grade 3. The IIPSC evaluation was very helpful in identifying which type of family to target when recruiting and suggested to the Board that they consider revising the policy to possibly save the district money while creating shorter bus
rides for children. The evaluation did not consider attendance or achievement for the students who participated in the choice process.

Previous internal studies had reviewed the socioeconomic status and race and ethnicity of participating families. Previous studies cited the number of students who received their first, second, and so on choices. Previous studies also reported on why families seemed to make choices. All of these studies were internal to the district, and were published only in the form of summary PowerPoint presentations, which were provided to the RCSD School Board (T. Hofer, personal communication, September, 2008). None of these internal studies considered the subsequent attendance or achievement of the children whose families participated in the choice process.

Cambridge

According to Thernstrom (1991), Cambridge, Massachusetts instituted one of the most successful controlled choice programs in the nation, with 90% of families obtaining a first choice. Implemented in 1981, the plan resulted from grassroots efforts like community meetings and school mergers (Cookson, 1994). Success was defined as the number of families who received a first choice; as in Boston and Rochester, success was not tied to student outcomes.

Demographically, in 1991, the student population in Cambridge was about 50% White, 33% Black, 14% Hispanic, and 7% Asian (Thernstrom, 1991). Currently, the student population in Cambridge is 50% White, 23% Black, 18% Asian, and 9% Hispanic (Cambridge Public Schools, 2009). Although in 2008-09, all of Cambridge’s schools achieved a racial balance that matches the district’s profile, poor, non-English speaking students continue to be isolated in only a few schools (L. O, personal communication,
2009). Students who are provided with transportation can choose any school in the system as long as the enrollment in every school, every grade, and every program reflects a White-to-minority ratio that is within five percentage points of the proportional racial composition of Cambridge (Thernstrom, 1991). The kindergarten registration period begins in January annually, and a monthly lottery is held each month thereafter for kindergarten seats in each school. The seats are apportioned based on the difference between the school’s socioeconomic profile and the district’s socioeconomic profile, with the goal of moving every school toward the district’s profile, which is a moving target as the reader can see from the changing demographics (L. O, personal communication, 2009).

The crux of the Cambridge program is the Parent Information Center. The Parent Information Center offers information in six different languages, provides information about each school in the community, involves parents in school improvement, reaches out to language minority and poor families who may be neglected by the traditional system, and serves as a community center (Cookson, 1994).

**Evaluation**

In 1994, Cookson conducted a study of the percentage of students who received one of their choices through the Cambridge lottery process. Over 90% of all students gained admission to a school of their choice in Cambridge. Racial minority students outperformed White students in math and reading citywide, and attendance rates rose 9% after implementation of the choice plan. Although there still existed inequities in resources and staffing, which are counter to the goal of equity in controlled choice, there
was an elaborate budgeting process established to assure appropriate funding for each school (Cookson, 1994).

Cambridge measures the success of its choice plan through the number of families who receive one of their top-three choices as well as their ability to attach siblings to the same school. For example, a phone call to Cambridge revealed that this past year, 72% of students received their first choice, and 6% received second or third choices (L. O, personal communication, May 21, 2009). Within the last few years, Cambridge began prioritizing placements based on socioeconomic status in the hopes of creating a more equalized socioeconomic status profile among schools, which also creates a metric that can be used to determine success or failure of the choice plan (M. Alves, personal communication, spring, 2007).

Only internal studies of the Cambridge plan have been conducted since the 1994 study. The internal studies reviewed each year’s participation and results data, including the race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status of the choice participants for each year and the number of students who receive their first, second, third, or fourth choice (Cambridge Public Schools, 2009).

**Milwaukee**

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) began in 1994-1995 and is a publicly funded voucher program that allows children to attend private schools at taxpayer expense. The students qualified by coming from households with income 1.75 times the poverty level or less. Of about 83,000 students, 1,450 (i.e., about 2%) participated in 1994-1995. The only schools eligible to receive transfer students with their vouchers were private, non-sectarian schools. The schools were also required to
accept $3,209 per pupil in lieu of tuition from families. The MPCP provided alternative educational opportunities for many low-income students while not removing the best students from the Milwaukee Public School system (Witte, 1994).

Evaluations

The MPCP has been studied extensively as a result of national attention placed on vouchers as a way for all parents to have more control over where their children attend school (e.g., see Carnegie Foundation, 1992; Gray, Lee and Foster, 1997; Witte, 1994; Wolf & Jensen, 2008). In 1992, the Carnegie Foundation issued a special report on school choice programs that singled out Milwaukee’s MPCP voucher plan as failing “to demonstrate that vouchers can, in and of themselves, spark school improvement. No evidence can be found from the participating students that the public or private schools have been revitalized by the transfers” (Carnegie Foundation, 1992, p. 73).

Witte reported that, after the implementation of MPCP, student attrition from the public school district declined as a result of students returning to the public school district from their voucher-supported, private-school placement. The reader will note that the private schools that received vouchers could control their enrollment and had the right to dismiss students at any time; this resulted in students returning to the district who took the place of students using vouchers, and an apparent decline in attrition. Attrition remained a problem for both the non-public choice schools and neighborhood schools (Witte, 1994) compared to more affluent communities. In addition, students who left the choice program and returned to their assigned school were more likely to have lower test scores, live farther away than continuing students, and express a lower degree of satisfaction (Witte, 1994).
However, when students moved in the other direction (from public school to a private, voucher-funded school in Milwaukee), the attitudes of choice parents were much more positive than their evaluations of their children's previous public schools regarding educational quality, instruction, and school administration (Gray, Wolf & Jensen, 2008; Witte, 1994). Also, parent involvement in school activities was greater in choice schools than in most other Milwaukee schools (Gray et al., 2008; Witte, 1994). This is important because parental involvement is consistently identified as a benefit in schools of choice models (Gray et al, 2008; Willie and Alves, 2002; Witte, 1994).

Researchers studying outcomes in achievement since vouchers became available in Milwaukee found that reading scores of low-income minority students using vouchers in grades 4, 8, and 10, the grades in which students take Wisconsin state-wide standardized tests, averaged 3 to 6 percentage points higher. In addition, math scores were 5 to 11 points higher, than those of comparable public school students (Lee & Foster, 1997). A new analysis in 2008 confirmed that modest or even mixed academic outcomes persisted (Gray, Wolf & Jensen). Gray et al. (2008) describe the results of student testing conducted by MPCP schools during the 2006-07 academic year in an annual report. Standardized test scores were collected from participating schools throughout the school year. The performance of the students who participated in the choice program was compared to that of students with the same socioeconomic status in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) who took the same tests (Gray et al., 2008). After four years of collecting data and comparing test results for the two groups of students, Gray et al. concluded that the difference in the test scores from choice schools and private schools was too small to be more than descriptive, and that a longitudinal study should be
considered (Gray et al., 2008). The researchers never analyzed student attendance and did not consider test results of any kind from children younger than Grade 4.

*Chicago*

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) introduced public school choice in September 1980 as a part of efforts to achieve racial desegregation to: (a) create integrated schools in their own district, and (b) provide compensatory programs to ensure equity of educational outcomes between White and racial minority students (Cullen, Jacob & Levitt, 2000). However, in Chicago, there is little evidence that school choice contributes to racially integrated schools (Cullen, Jacob & Levitt, 2003). Since 1988, CPS has been engaged in one of the most sustained reform efforts in the country. The 1988 School Reform Act established local control of schools through the election of parents, community members, and teachers to local school councils, in the hope that greater parent participation would lead to greater academic success for children (Cullen et al., 2003). By the 2000-01 school year, more than half of CPS high school students participated in a choice program and elected not to attend their neighborhood school. This intra-district plan is still in use in 2008-09, in which each student is guaranteed admission to an assigned neighborhood school and can also apply to any other CPS school.

Students submit a choice application in the spring for placement in September to every school they choose. Students can apply to as many schools as they want. Most schools use a randomized lottery to determine which students will be offered a seat. Some schools have admission criteria instead of a lottery, using such measures as test scores or auditions to determine which students qualify for their programs. Some schools
use both or even several, in combination, with admission criteria for a magnet program and lotteries for programs accessible to all students (Cullen, Jacob & Levitt, 2003).

Evaluation

A variety of measures were used by Cullen, Jacob and Levitt in 2000 to produce a comprehensive analysis of the 12-year-old CPS choice program. They found that 7.5% more of students who participated in choice programs in the CPS graduated than those who remained in their assigned schools, showing some positive gains for students who participated in the choice program (Cullen et al., 2000).

In another study of the Chicago Public School system, 19 schools using a total of 194 separate lotteries were considered. Students who participated and received their desired choice were 4% to 6% more likely to actually attend the CPS than to withdraw, which kept resources such as state aid in the district (Cullen, et al., 2003). This makes a choice program financially advantageous to the school district.

However, Cullen et al. (2003) also found no future academic benefit to students who won lotteries to attend high-achieving magnet schools within their district. Schools were ranked according to the students they attracted, using eighth-grade test score performance of students enrolling in ninth grade to designate low-, average-, and high-achieving schools. The study compared achievement levels of eighth-grade students who were awarded spots at high-achieving schools with eighth-grade students who won seats at average and low-achieving schools. Students who won lotteries to attend high-achieving schools did no better academically over time than those students who attended average- and low-achieving schools. In fact, students winning lotteries at schools with a math focus did not obtain higher math scores and had lower reading scores than their
peers who lost lotteries for those schools. Students who won lotteries at schools with a reading focus scored lower than lottery losers on reading exams and also performed worse on math exams. The students in high-achieving schools had better results on some non-observable, self-reported measures such as disciplinary incidences and arrest records, the only positive student outcomes that correlated to the choice process (Cullen et al., 2003).

Lastly, Cullen et al. (2003) found that school choice programs produced mixed gains in student outcomes. School choice, as practiced in CPS, was not effective in increasing students’ reading or math scores on standardized tests. However, students who won a seat at a desired school in a lottery did have fewer disciplinary incidents and arrests. The authors suggest that open enrollment in the CPS may confer other immeasurable benefits, including matching the tastes of parents to parents’ perceptions of desirable schools, and students’ improving social circumstances by attending schools with children whose families enjoy more money and more privilege. Cullen et al. only studied achievement of students in the high school grades; no studies were conducted with the early elementary grades (2000, 2003).

*Synthesis*

Inter-district choice programs allow students to attend public schools outside their home district and are limited by space constraints and the logistics of student transportation needs. In addition, restrictions on racial impact often exist. Intra-district choice programs allow parents and students to select any public school within their home district and are often designed to meet court-ordered, racial-balance requirements (Armor
and Peiser, 1997). The choice models were all voluntary for participants. In all cases, the districts had a back-up plan if the families did not participate.

Rochester, Cambridge and Boston all use inter-district public school choice plans. They also all gave some level of preference for families with sibling preference, socio-economic or neighborhood school status preference. These three districts attempted to measure the success of similar choice models designed by the same consultants, based on participation demographics and on how many students received their desired choice.

Rochester has self-evaluated since the inception of the parent preference policy, most recently in 2008 by hiring a private consulting firm on schools of choice, the Institute for Innovation in Public School Choice, or IIPSC. This evaluation was provided only to the Superintendent, the Board of Education, and some district administrators. The evaluation revealed how many students have transferred from their selected school since being placed there in the choice process and how many families moved from the zone and still had children who attended the school. The evaluation also reviewed the socioeconomic status of participants and how their placements dispersed children of different socioeconomic status across the district, instead of isolating them in a few schools.

The study also found that a proportionate number of students from each ethnic background participated in the process. Finally, the study disclosed how many families registering kindergartners who used the choice process received their first choice. No study of the Rochester plan has yet considered the attendance and achievement of children whose families use the choice plan.
The Cambridge evaluations measured the effects of a choice program for elementary school children involving only district schools by measuring parent participation in the process and the resulting redistribution of children with varying socioeconomic status across the district.

The evaluations of the three plans had similar results in that a large number of families received their requested school. In Boston, Cambridge, and Rochester, more than three out of every four families received one of their top three choices. These statistics made the programs very successful on paper. All three districts held a percentage of seats for students who selected their neighborhood school, or repeated a selection that they previously made for a sibling. Although these were generated placements and not a result of the random process, they were counted as families who received their first choice. This helped the districts to show a high first choice placement rate.

Milwaukee and Chicago used intra-district plans. Boston also used an additional Massachusetts state intra-district plan. These districts made attempts to measure student and family outcomes. Milwaukee evaluated a voucher plan that allowed a percentage of students to take their dollars with them to private schools (Gray et al., 2008). They evaluated the plan’s effects on parent attitudes, student attrition, and student test scores. Milwaukee did not analyze the effect of their plan on student attendance.

The researchers who studied Chicago, a plan for high school students, considered student test scores. They reviewed 8th grade test scores of students who participated in their selection process (lotteries at every school) and compared those with students who did not participate, not taking into account any demographic information such as socioeconomic status or gender. They found no difference in participation based on test
scores. They anticipated better resources, more selective students, and parental involvement in highly selected schools would equate to higher performance. However, they found that the students who used the process were 7.5% more likely to graduate but were unable to identify specifically what contributed to this increase (Cullen et al., 2003). Chicago found mixed student outcomes in a secondary school choice program: some positive and some negative, some benefiting the district, and some benefiting students. The researchers concluded that school choice at the secondary level works based on some measures. In this case, elementary students were not part of the plan and were not evaluated.

Boston evaluated their intra-district choice plan based on interviews with staff to determine if redistributed students resulted in a perception of redistributed resources. Boston was able to discern a greater amount of parental involvement in highly selected schools. In addition, studies initially showed that students who exercised their right to choice also performed better in both math and reading (Armor & Peiser, 1997). However, later results showed that if a gap exists, it is too minimal to show success.

Six models in all have been reviewed, in five cities, with Boston using two different models. Two cities measured student achievement, and did not show a significant difference in achievement among students whose families used choice. All of the models were evaluated in some way for participant demographics. None of the models were evaluated based on the subsequent attendance of the students who participated.

Table 2.1 summarizes all of the school choice models and evaluations of those school choice programs that have been reviewed in this chapter.
Table 2.1
Comparison of School Choice Plans and Evaluations of those Plans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Rochester</th>
<th>Boston</th>
<th>Cambridge</th>
<th>Milwaukee</th>
<th>Chicago</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>Intra-district</td>
<td>Inter- and intra-district</td>
<td>Inter-district</td>
<td>Inter-district</td>
<td>Intra-district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope of choice plan</td>
<td>Voluntary district-wide controlled choice</td>
<td>Voluntary statewide open enrollment plan and controlled choice within district</td>
<td>Voluntary district-wide controlled choice enrollment plan</td>
<td>Private voucher program</td>
<td>Voluntary district wide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family income restriction</td>
<td>No income requirement</td>
<td>No income requirement</td>
<td>No income eligibility but student placement based on income</td>
<td>Student must come from households with income 1.75 times the poverty line or less</td>
<td>No income-eligibility requirement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligible students</td>
<td>No restrictions</td>
<td>No restrictions</td>
<td>No restrictions</td>
<td>Enrolled in Milwaukee school the prior year</td>
<td>No restrictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated</td>
<td>80% of kindergarten students</td>
<td>9% of enrolled students participated</td>
<td>100% of kindergarten students</td>
<td>1.5% of enrolled students</td>
<td>50% of enrolled students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Available Seats</td>
<td>No restrictions</td>
<td>2% of the students</td>
<td>No limitations</td>
<td>Limited to 1.5% of the students in the city</td>
<td>No limitations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Funding</td>
<td>No funding</td>
<td>No funding</td>
<td>Private schools receive the Milwaukee Public School per-pupil state aid in lieu of tuition</td>
<td>No funding limitation</td>
<td></td>
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60
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Rochester</th>
<th>Boston</th>
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<td>Model</td>
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<td>Inter- and intra-district</td>
<td>Inter-district</td>
<td>Inter-district</td>
<td>Intra-district</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluation Measure</td>
<td>Number of students who participate in choice plan and who receive their first choice</td>
<td>First choice data; staff interviews</td>
<td>Number of students who receive their first choice; socioeconomic distribution in district</td>
<td>Test scores/student achievement</td>
<td>Test scores/student achievement and desegregation statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation Method</td>
<td>Internal district reports</td>
<td>Internal district reports cited in textbook</td>
<td>Internal district reports cited in textbook</td>
<td>Public report</td>
<td>Public report</td>
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<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>90% received first choice; about 80% participated</td>
<td>90% received first choice; qualitative data on staff perception</td>
<td>None reported publicly</td>
<td>Inconclusive</td>
<td>High school grades only; more participating students graduated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Significance of the Study**

Educators are inundated with arguments that choice plans will provide competition and that using a market supply and demand model to improve schools is the answer to most of the problems in public education (Goodwin & Kemerer, 2002; Klauke, 1998; Willie and Alves, 2002). A study of the attendance and academic performance of children who participated in a choice program will help to determine if such a program works to increase children’s academic achievement and the attendance they need to academically achieve.

Proponents of choice across the nation see these programs as a successful intervention for failing urban schools (Coons & Sugarman, 1978). The Rochester City School District (RCSD) Parent Preference Choice Policy has been in existence in the
RCSD for five years, and implementation processes as well as the effects on our students have not yet been evaluated. No researchers yet have actually gauged the effects of choice in the RCSD or quantified the level of success the choice program has with regard to its impact on children’s attendance and achievement.

The purpose of this study is to determine if there is any correlation between students who participated in the choice process, in order to request a school assignment at a school other than their neighborhood school, and student attendance and achievement. The findings may inform the RCSD Board, which may change the existing Parent Preference Policy. The findings also may have implications for the many other urban districts that use school choice plans to supposedly benefit their neediest students.

**Research Questions**

The studies in this review illustrate a gap in the literature to be filled by the research questions:

Do Rochester City School District (RCSD) students who started kindergarten in 2005-06, who completed 3rd grade in 2008-09, and whose families chose a school other than their neighborhood school have better attendance than their RCSD counterparts whose families chose their neighborhood schools?

Do RCSD students, who started kindergarten in 2005-06, who completed 3rd grade in 2008-09, and whose families chose a school other than their neighborhood school have better developmental and academic achievement than their RCSD counterparts whose families chose their neighborhood schools?

In the following chapter, I describe a method for answering these questions with regard to the effects of the Rochester City School District’s choice program.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This study used quantitative methods to answer the following research questions:

Did Rochester City School District (RCSD) students who started kindergarten in 2005-06, who completed 3rd grade in 2008-09, and whose families chose a school other than their neighborhood school have better attendance than their RCSD counterparts whose families chose their neighborhood schools?

Did RCSD students, who started kindergarten in 2005-06, completed 3rd grade in 2008-09, and whose families chose a school other than their neighborhood school have better developmental and academic achievement than their RCSD counterparts whose families chose their neighborhood schools?

In this chapter, I will describe the context of the study so the reader gains an appreciation for what preceded the time period of the study. Second, I will describe how participants were chosen for inclusion in the study. Third, I will describe the instruments used for data collection, the statistical procedures used for analysis, and the limitations of the study.

General Perspective

As with all new initiatives, there ought to be an evaluation tool that measures the success of the initiative. Most school choice plans are never evaluated for their success other than choice participation and choice results. This was the case with the choice plan in Boston, which had no student outcome evaluation before a version of the Boston plan was implemented in the RCSD. The RCSD also used choice participation and choice
results data, the same measures used by Boston, to evaluate their choice plan in the five years since the plan was implemented. The effect of school choice on student attendance and achievement in the RCSD has not been measured.

Research Context

This study took place in the Rochester City School District, in the City of Rochester, New York in order to determine if the school choice program used in Rochester had an impact on students’ attendance or achievement in the early grades.

The City of Rochester and the RCSD have the same boundaries, but each serves total population groups with different needs and interests. According to Census 2000, the City of Rochester is home to 219,773 people, of whom 19% are school-age youngsters from five to seventeen years old. Another 17% of the population are 55 years of age and older, most of whom are unlikely to have direct contact with elementary and secondary public schools. The city, therefore, has younger and older population groups with different needs. This is important to the context of the study because the group of older citizens is taxed in order to provide public education to an increasingly younger, poorer population, and programs such as school choice add to the tax burden. If the program does not work, in that it does not lead to increased attendance and accompanying increased academic achievement in children, then the funds currently used for choice could be put to work somewhere else. The number of city residents who have completed high school is 5% below the national average. The median income in the city of Rochester is $27,000 a year, which is $20,000 less than the average in the U.S. This trend is echoed in other large, urban public school districts in the United States, with the districts becoming increasingly poorer and decreasingly White (U.S. Census, 2001).
In 2003, when school choice in its newest form was first being considered, Rochester, New York was in the top 100 largest cities in the nation, and the RCSD was one of the five largest districts in New York State. In 2005-06, 33,380 children attended the RCSD in grades Pre-K through 12. Approximately 2200-2400 children enter kindergarten each year. The attendance rate in 2005-06 was 89% for all grades. On the district’s school report card on file with New York State, the district was in the “Improvement – Year 4” category at the elementary level for English language arts test scores in elementary and middle school grades that year and in “Good Standing” for math and science at the elementary and middle school grades (New York State Education Department, 2006).

Through the year 2003, the RCSD used the census birthrate to determine sending districts for each of its elementary schools. These patterns created what are now known as neighborhood schools. Neighborhoods were separated by school boundaries that equitably assumed that if the current representation of birthrates were a prediction of the future, the neighborhood school would be able to accommodate future enrollment. Experience proved that this process was flawed in that it worked only as long as the school age population stayed the same in every neighborhood. The neighborhood school model frequently split school attendance areas in the middle of a street, creating constant challenges to the system. This system also concentrated children from high-poverty neighborhoods into schools near home and resulted in racially segregated schools because race tracked with socioeconomic status in the RCSD (historical information captured in the report issued by the Children’s Institute, 2004). The district looked to school choice as a way to solve these problems.
One challenge to the school choice creators is that there was not as much student diversity to move around as there was in the 1960s, as previously described. No ethnic or racial group in the city of Rochester exceeded 50% of the population by the year 2000 (United States Census). The majority of the RCSD students, 81%, were identified by their parents as either Black or Hispanic at that same time (NYS Education Department, 2001). The reduced and free-lunch proportion is 87%, with only 13% of current students living in families who earn enough money that the federal government believes they can provide their own lunch (Rochester City School District, 2009).

The advent of choice proved to be a controversial time in the RCSD. It appeared at first that families who were preparing to enroll children in kindergarten may have been reluctant to participate in such a system. The effectiveness of the communication plan utilized in the first year of the school choice program was questionable because it seemed to cater to middle-class families. Billboards were the focus of the effort. Unfortunately, the billboards were only seen by people who owned vehicles and traveled main thoroughfares. Some additional money was spent on newspaper ads and television commercials. However, this initial attempt at reaching families resulted in only a 50% participation rate (Hernandez and Hofer, 2005). Also, the choice plan began about the same time as charter schools became established in the city of Rochester, and many middle-class families opted out of the RCSD process and into the charter schools.

The increasingly poorer, ethnic and racial minority district led the School Board to create a choice plan, which would hopefully spread fewer and fewer middle-class children and accompanying habits and resources across the district. That choice plan had
not been evaluated for its effectiveness at increasing children’s attendance or achievement.

Research Participants

The participants in this study were those RCSD students who entered kindergarten in the 2005-06 school year and whose families participated in the choice program. The choice program applies only to kindergartners; older students are placed based on space available. The students from the first school year in which choice was used was a relatively small number, as the choice plan was adopted only a month before the recruitment period started and the communications were poor that first year. The following year, the 2005-06 school year, offered the first opportunity for families to participate in a well-organized choice recruitment process. The 2005-06 kindergartners would be third graders at the time this study began, 2008-09, if they were promoted each year.

Some kindergartners were excluded from study in this project. These included students with Special Education services and students who spoke a primary language other than English; these children did not have a full menu of choices, like General Education students. I also excluded students who have since left the district, since follow-up data was not available for them.

In order to arrive at answers to the research questions, I first listed all students who participated in the School of Choice process during 2005-06, the second year of the Parent Preference Choice Policy. The policy was instituted in 2004 for the 2004-05 school year, and so this second year for the choice process was for the school year 2005-06. During that first year, some parents chose not to participate in the process as a sign of
their dissatisfaction with the adoption of the program. Many parents in higher income areas disagreed with the idea of not having a guaranteed seat at the school closest to their home. These higher-income parents felt that bussing lower-income students into their neighborhood school would negatively affect their school’s performance as well as affect their child’s education and showed their disapproval by not participating (confidential personal communication to researcher, 2005). To this day, parents report that they participate in the process with no intention of ever actually having their children attend an RCSD school, only to see how the district is conducting the process so they can critique it (confidential personal communication to researcher, 2008).

**Exclusions**

Each year, 2200-2400 students enter kindergarten in the RCSD. Most students participate in the choice process by registering during a particular time frame of two to three months, as determined annually by the Board. Registering families select from among schools within their geographic zone and the city-wide schools, which draw students from the whole district because of their unique programs of instruction or structure. Choice data is only gathered on students who participate in the choice process; this study did not consider the approximately 30% of students who do not participate in the choice process (Capezzuto, 2008).

Data that was provided to the district and its research partner, Children’s Institute, on the Parent Appraisal of Children’s Experience (PACE) form was added to the database in order to have a source of information that could answer additional questions that may have arisen from the initial analysis. For example, the PACE provides parent-reported information on chronic illness, which could have affected attendance.
Demographic Data

First, from the district’s student management system, I listed district ID numbers for each student who participated in the choice process. Then, for each student, I gathered: zone and citywide choices made by parent or guardian; choice lottery results; current school; date of birth; address; neighborhood school; distance school; district-provided transportation or not; attendance by year; free-, reduced-, paid lunch status; ethnicity; and race. The demographic data was gathered from the parent or guardian when a child was registered for school. Designations such as Special Education or English Language Learner occur when the child was identified with screening during registration or in class and was assigned by the RCSD after the child had gone through RCSD testing. Information such as attendance or suspensions was entered by school personnel as these events occur.

Instruments Used in Data Collection

This study gathered data from the three school years (2005-06, 2006-07, and 2007-08) that came from the following instruments: (a) demographic and school choice data from the Student Management System of the RCSD; (b) the fall, kindergarten screening Children’s Observation Record (COR test) (High/Scope Press, 2003); (c) the Terra Nova (2007); (d) the Parent Appraisal of Child’s Experiences (PACE) 2.1 (Children’s Institute Inc., 2003); and (e) the attendance data of the participants from that year. Comparison of the two groups relative to several variables was addressed with statistical methods.
Kindergarten COR Test

The Children’s Observation Record (COR) screening (High/Scope, 2003) measures students for fine motor skills, gross motor skills, cognitive abilities in math and reading, and behavioral and social skills. The screenings are required by New York State. The COR is administered by trained evaluators employed by the RCSD. Each child is tested at the kindergarten level first at the beginning of the year in September and then at the culmination of kindergarten in June. The COR provides individual percentiles indicating where a student ranks relative to his or her age-mates in the country; it is normed to a large U.S. population. The COR scores have been correlated to the Terra Nova, used to measure achievement in first and second grade in the district, which also provides percentile rank for each student in reading and math. The COR gave me a starting point for both math and reading skill levels.

Terra Nova

The Terra Nova (2007) is administered to each child in the classroom by the child’s teacher, once in the first grade and again in the second grade. The Terra Nova just tests mathematics and reading accomplishment, is normed nationally in the United States, and is widely used around the country. The resulting scores are expressed in a variety of ways, including a 1-2-3-4 system that references to the New York State standards, a percentile rank normed on age-mates in the United States, and stanines, which is a 1-9 scale measuring reading comprehension and math achievement, used in many districts around the country (CBT McGraw Hill, 2009). The Terra Nova test is used to group children for instruction and to provide a measure of the school’s effectiveness.
I collected the COR data from 2005-06, when the participants were entering kindergarten, and Terra Nova scores from second grade to compare students who used the choice process to attend a neighborhood school with students who used the choice process to attend a school that requires the children to take a bus to school. The scores were used to determine if there are significant differences in academic achievement between the two groups.

Parent Appraisal of Child’s Experiences

Additional data was collected from the Parent Appraisal of Child’s Experiences (PACE) form (Children’s Institute, Inc., 2003). The PACE is administered in the Rochester City School District and surrounding suburban districts when the parent registers the child for kindergarten. The PACE form is a questionnaire that asks parents a series of questions about the child’s and the family’s experiences before coming to school; it contains about 250 variables. Variables are too numerous to be listed here; the variables of interest to this study include the question about whether or not the child has a chronic illness such as asthma that would affect attendance. In my study, I used this data to answer questions I might have had about outliers when I reviewed attendance data, and if a child has a chronic illness that is likely to cause low attendance, I could have chosen to exclude that child as a participant from the study.

Attendance

I added each student’s attendance percentage by year to the database. Attendance is taken daily by classroom teachers and input from the classroom directly into the RCSD’s Student Management System. As state employees, teachers must certify at the end of each school year that their attendance recordkeeping was accurate for that school
year. I will take each student’s attendance for each of the three years and determine a percentage of days attended; for example, for three school years of 180 days apiece would equal 540 days. If a child missed 54 days, he/she would have 90% attendance. This is compared with the district’s benchmark, and for every student in the study, I identified whether or not the child met the district’s percentage benchmark for attendance.

Researcher’s Positionality

In September of 1999, I became an administrator in the Department of Student Equity and Placement for the RCSD. I was originally responsible for placing new and re-entering students with disabilities into appropriate programs in the RCSD schools and for placing students after Committees on Special Education met on children and changed their programs. Following that position, I became part of the team that implemented the Parent Preference Policy, although for the first year of implementation, I focused on special education enrollment. During the second year of implementation, I became responsible for the entire choice process. I have been asked to produce many reports on choice participation and choice results and have wondered why no one seemed interested in how the choice plan benefited students, if it did. Now that the policy has been in effect for five years, there was still no evaluation of the academic effects of the choice policy on children who participated. This project is an action research (Glanz, 2003) project for me since the results are expected to drive my recommendations to the Superintendent and the Board for potential refinements or even changes to current Board policy.
Data Analysis

Construction of Unique Database

The Rochester City School District’s (RCSD’s) Student Management System uses purchased software to collect and retain extensive data on every student. Data includes information such as demographic information, attendance and grades, schedules, historical assessment, and legal and medical alerts: everything a public school district should need to know in order to educate children safely and effectively, which can be recorded in a database. The data is provided by parents, teachers, administrators, and test instruments.

The data from the RCSD’s Student Management System, including demographic information, choice reports, test results for each participant, and the PACE data available from the Children’s Institute was collected in one unique spreadsheet using Microsoft Excel. This unique database allowed me to answer my research questions and to also answer additional questions arose from the initial results. The database was established on a laptop computer that was kept in a locked location when it was not being used by me and backed up on a thumb drive, which was also secured when not being used. I expect to share the database with Children’s Institute, a long-time and current RCSD partner, for analyses that could further benefit the district by providing data for grant proposals.

Initial Process

The data was analyzed using several strategies. I separated the students into two groups: students who participated in choice who attended their neighborhood schools (walkers) and students who participated in choice who took a bus to school (riders) and, therefore, chose a school that was not in their neighborhood. I described each of these
two groups with regard to race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status and gender. Then, I considered attendance and achievement data for each group, relative to district averages and relative to each other. This may have resulted in additional questions, and I was prepared for those questions with additional data collected such as transfer requests, suspension records, and PACE data. This additional data could be analyzed at any time in the next three years, per the Institutional Review Board’s approval, to further inform the findings of the initial comparison.

What Data Analysis Compares

First, I removed the students previously identified as exclusions from the database: children who did not use the choice process, children with disabilities, children who did not complete third grade in the district, and children who require English Language services. Then, I separated the study participants into two groups: students who selected their neighborhood school and students who selected a school other than their neighborhood school.

The data analysis compared two groups for their mean and standard deviation test scores from shortly after they entered kindergarten, as they tested on COR test in reading and math. I then compared the two groups in second grade, as they tested on the Terra Nova. Then, I will compare the two groups with regard to whether or not their average attendance met the district’s attendance benchmark over the three years.

Comparison strategies included t-tests, chi-square calculations, and regression analysis. The data was be screened to determine if there are outlying data points affecting results that can be explained: for example, poor attendance potentially explained with chronic health problems. If there were explainable outliers, I expected to report on this
preliminary result and rerun the tests, excluding the outliers. I did not need to take this second step as there were no outliers explainable by correlation to chronic health issues. The test results identified if students who selected their home school and, therefore, walked to school actually performed better or worse and/or attend school more often or less often than students who selected a school that required bus transportation, all other things being equal.

*Tables*

The first four tables will summarize demographic features for the participants in their two groups, walkers and riders, both of whom participated in choice. These features include: gender, socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, and parental reporting of asthma diagnosis.

Table 4.5 considers attendance for both walkers and riders, compared to the district benchmark for 2005-06, 91% (Andrew MacGowan, personal communication, May 29, 2009). Table 4.6 and 4.7 summarize the academic measures, the COR test and the Terra Nova test, for both walkers and riders.

*Confidentiality*

The identifying information about each child (i.e., name, parent or guardian’s name, and ID number) was stripped before analysis began. Each participant was assigned a study-specific ID, using an algorithm known only to the researcher that converted the ID number to the study-specific ID. This allowed for a check back to raw data should I have questions that could have arisen requiring this check. No such questions arose.
Limitations of the Study

The following limitations are acknowledged for this study. These limitations could affect the generalizability of the findings beyond the Rochester City School District.

The sample was limited to students entering kindergarten during the 2005-06 school year who participated in the school selection process. It is possible that students were assigned to a school outside their zone for a reason other than participation in the School Choice program, although the author of this study is the administrator who manages the execution of the program, and he is not aware of any such situations. The database that was used for the study is the combination of many sets of data mostly used by the district for state reporting, grant requesting, and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) reporting. However, some data from the PACE is parent-reported and may not be accurate. This data was used to, for example, surface reasons why attendance might have not met the district’s benchmark, such as a child’s chronic illness.

This project considered all of the lottery participants who did not receive a placement in a bilingual or special education program. The students were separated into two groups: those who participated in the schools of choice process and selected their home school (walkers) and those who selected a school other than their home school, who required transportation to get to school (riders). The attendance of each group and their performance on district and state testing was compared. Note that the students were first tested before they entered kindergarten, again at the end of their kindergarten year, and every year thereafter. 
When the RCSD choice process began, it received a lot of negative publicity because many parents did not want to lose their option for the school they could see from home. As a result, some people may have elected not to participate in the process but enrolled after the process was completed. It is not known if this effect continued into the second year and perhaps reduced the number of families who participated. Many families chose to have a baby born during the year millennium year of 2000, and this created a small (10% increase) population boom in the Rochester City School District when the first of these students entered kindergarten during the 2005-06 school year. This may have created a slightly larger number of children who participated in the choice process that year.

As one of the initial implementers of this plan, I feel partly responsible for the success or failure of the plan. However, as an educator, I realize how much money is spent on this policy every year, money that could be used in other ways to benefit children if these expenditures do not result in some benefit to children.  

**Summary of Method**

The method used for this dissertation is a quantitative ex post facto design for an action research project (Ary, Jacobs, and Razavieh, 2002; Glanz, 2003). The data was gathered from two organizations: the Rochester City School District and the Children’s Institute, a nonprofit research organization that frequently collaborates with the district. The process was to study attendance and achievement for two large groups of students who participated in a School Board-approved choice policy: those who took a bus to school as a result of choosing a school outside their neighborhoods (riders) and those who walked to a neighborhood school (walkers).
Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section summarizes the demographic data of the students who entered kindergarten for the 2005-06 school year. The next section compares the attendance of the students who attended their neighborhood school using the schools of choice process to those students who selected a school for which they had to take a bus. The third section summarizes and then analyzes the developmental and academic data for both groups.

Demographic Data Analysis

A database consisting of 1879 students who participated in the school of choice process was assembled from two sources: the Rochester City School District and the Children’s Institute Parent Appraisal of Child’s Experience (PACE) survey data. The students who were entitled to special programs because they spoke limited English were removed from the database because their required programs are not available in all schools, and so they did not have the same choices as English speakers. The students who were eligible for special education services also did not have access to every school for the same reason and, therefore, were removed from the process. Removing these populations brought the database down to 1081 students. Only students who stayed with the district through third grade were included. These students were divided into two subgroups: those who selected their home school and walked to school (i.e., walkers) and those students who selected a school other than their home school and received
transportation (i.e., riders). These groups were described by five characteristics: gender, socioeconomic status in second grade, race/ethnicity, diagnosis of asthma, and parental report of frequent hospital visits.

The academic analysis considered two different state and standardized tests: the Children’s Observation Readiness Assessment (COR) and the Terra Nova. The COR is administered in the beginning of the student’s kindergarten year in either September or October. This test is divided into three different sections to determine readiness for kindergarten and assists teachers in identifying areas of need as well as strengths. The COR measures social, motor, and cognitive abilities; within the cognitive section are literacy, math, and science subsections. The COR also provides a summary score that combines all three sections. This summary score will be the one used for analysis. The COR test is administered in the fall and again in the spring to measure the students’ growth throughout the school year. The fall scores were used in this analysis as the academic starting point for the students.

The Terra Nova assessment is administered in the spring of each school year. The Terra Nova is an English, math and reading comprehension tool. The Terra Nova scores referenced in this study are from the Spring of 2008 and are the second-grade scores for this group of students who entered kindergarten in 2005-06.

Students for whom there were no COR scores in the fall of their kindergarten year or Terra Nova scores for the spring of their second grade were removed from the database. When this final reduction was accomplished, 115 students remained who participated in school choice, chose their neighborhood school (walkers), did not qualify for special services, and took both the COR in kindergarten and the Terra Nova in second
grade. In addition, 217 students remained who chose a school for which they needed transportation (riders), did not qualify for special services, and took both the COR in kindergarten and the Terra Nova in second grade. These two groups became the test groups under study.

The percentage of attendance for each student in second grade was determined by dividing the days attended by the number of days in the 2005-06 school year, which was 180 days. This percentage was compared to the district’s benchmark for that year, 92%, and students were designated as meeting or not meeting the district’s attendance goal. Two additional, important data points collected included incidents of asthma and frequency of hospital visits as self-reported by parents on the PACE questionnaire. I included the asthma incidents in this study because 14% of students in the 2005-06 school year were identified as having asthma in the Rochester City School district (Andrew MacGowan, personal communication, July 22, 2009) compared to 6% nationwide (New York State Education Department, 2008). Since asthma and poor health signified by frequent hospital visits could cause excessive absences and subsequent academic struggles, they were chosen as possible variables that might provide an alternate explanation for children’s poor attendance or low test scores. In the study, “p” represents the Pearson Correlation Coefficient (Cronk, 2006).

Walkers and Riders by Gender

In Table 4.1 the students who participated in the school of choice program are separated by students who selected their home school and walk to school (walkers) and students who selected a school other than their home school and receive transportation
(riders). The groups are then separated by gender to consider if parents who prefer a school that requires transportation correlated with the gender of the child.

The Pearson R correlation was calculated to determine if significantly more females walk to school than attend a school that requires transportation. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient determines the strength of the relationship between two variables. The correlation range will be between -1.0 and +1.0. Coefficients close to 1.0 or -1.0 imply a strong positive or negative correlation. Table 4.1 provides a demographic description of walkers and riders by gender of students who participated in the school choice program when entering kindergarten in the Rochester City School District in 2005.

Table 4.1

Research Finding: Walkers and Riders by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Percent of walkers</th>
<th>Percent of riders</th>
<th>p = .147*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>68</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>61</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note, *p < .5

The data shows that almost the same percentage of females students ride the bus as male students. The Pearson R has a .147, which is a weak correlation between students by gender who walk and those who ride the bus. Therefore, the Pearson R shows that there is no significant difference by gender between walkers and bus riders.

In analyzing the data by gender, it was apparent that approximately two-thirds of all students who participated in the school of choice process ride the bus. The number of
females riding the bus to school each day is greater than the number of males riding the bus.

*Walkers and Riders by Socioeconomic Status*

In Table 4.2 the students who participated in the school of choice program are separated by students who selected their home school and walk to school (walkers) and students who selected a school other than their home school and receive transportation (riders). The groups are then separated by socio-economic status to determine if there is a relationship between the socioeconomic status of students and their choice of a neighborhood school or a school requiring transportation.

The Pearson R correlation was again used to determine if there is a significant relationship between socioeconomic status and the choice of a walking school or a school requiring transportation.

*Table 4.2*

*Walkers and Riders by Socioeconomic Status*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lunch status</th>
<th>Percent of walkers</th>
<th>Percent of riders</th>
<th>p = .350*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Free lunch</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>67.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced price lunch</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paid lunch</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>56.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. *p < .5

The data shows that almost the same percentage of students in each socioeconomic group walk or ride the bus. The Pearson has a .284, which is a weak correlation between students by socio-economic status of those who walk and those who
ride the bus. Therefore, the Pearson R shows that there is no significant difference by socio-economic status between walkers and riders.

*Walkers and Riders by Race and Ethnicity*

In Table 4.3 the students who participated in the school of choice program are separated by students who selected their home school and walk to school (walkers) and students who selected a school other than their home school and receive transportation (riders). The groups are then separated by race/ethnicity to determine if there is any relationship between race and ethnicity and the choice to walk or ride to school.

The Pearson R correlation was again used to determine if significantly more students from a particular racial/ethnic identification attend a school that requires transportation than other racial/ethnic backgrounds.

Table 4.3

*Walkers and Riders by Race and Ethnicity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percent of walkers</th>
<th>Percent of riders</th>
<th>p = .284*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>77.4</td>
<td>70.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p < .5

The data shows that a higher percentage of White students ride the bus rather than walk to school. In addition, fewer Black students ride the bus than walk to school; more
Black families choose a neighborhood school. Students of other races or ethnicities equally choose neighborhood schools or schools to which they will have transportation.

Walkers and Riders Who Have Asthma or Who Do Not Have Asthma

In Table 4.4 the students who participated in the school of choice program are separated by students who selected their home school and walk to school (walkers) and students who selected a school other than their home school and receive transportation (riders). The groups are then separated by those whose parents reported that they were diagnosed with asthma symptoms and those whose parents reported that they had not been diagnosed with asthma symptoms.

The Pearson R correlation was used to determine if significantly more students reported to have asthma symptoms walk to school or attend a school that requires transportation than students who are not reported to have asthma symptoms.

Table 4.4

Walkers and Riders by Asthma Diagnosis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status of asthma</th>
<th>Percent of walkers</th>
<th>Percent of riders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did have asthma</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not have asthma</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p = .157*

Note. *p < .5

The data shows that a higher percentage of students who have asthma selected a school other than their home school and received transportation to school. The Pearson R only shows a .157 which is a weak correlation between reported asthma and students who walk and those who ride the bus. Therefore, although there is a difference, the Pearson R
shows that there is no significant difference by asthma symptoms between students who walk to school and bus riders.

Findings

Walkers and Riders by Attendance

Table 4.5 answers the first research question. This table summarizes attendance data for walkers and riders who did and who did not meet district attendance goals for the 2005-06 school year. In Table 4.5 the students who participated in the school of choice program are separated by students who selected their home school and walk to school (walkers) and students who selected a school other than their home school and receive transportation (riders). The groups are then separated by those who met the district attendance benchmark and those who did not meet the benchmark.

The Pearson R correlation was used to determine if significantly more students who met the district benchmark walk to school or attend a school that requires transportation than those who did not meet the benchmark.

Table 4.5

Attendance for Walkers and Riders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District attendance goals</th>
<th>Percent of walkers</th>
<th>Percent of riders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not Meeting</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p < .5

The data shows that a greater percentage of students who rode a bus to school met the districts attending goals.
The Pearson R only shows a .233 which is a weak correlation between student attendance and students who walk and those who ride the bus. Therefore, although there is a difference, the Pearson R shows that there is no significant difference by attendance between students who walk to school and bus riders.

*Walkers and Riders by COR Scores*

In Table 4.6 the students who participated in the school of choice program are separated by students who selected their home school and walk to school and students who selected a school other than their home school and receive transportation. The groups were then compared by performance on the Children Observation of Readiness (COR) administered at the beginning of Kindergarten in 2005.

The T-Test correlation was used to determine if students who selected their home school and walk to school perform significantly better than students who selected a school other than their home school and ride a bus to school.

Table 4.6

*COR Results by Walkers and Riders*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Percent of walkers</th>
<th>Percent of riders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n      m       sd</td>
<td>n     m       sd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COR Tot 1</td>
<td>117    2.64 .66</td>
<td>217   2.56 .070</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data shows that to students entering kindergarten in the 2005-06 school year, based on performance on the COR test, the difference between students who selected their home school and students who selected a neighborhood school is .08. Students who
selected their neighborhood school and walked performed better than riders did by less than one percentage point. The two groups started kindergarten with almost the same entry scores on the COR. Therefore, the T-Test shows that there is no significant difference on the COR test between students who walk to school and student who ride the bus.

*Walkers and Riders By Terra Nova Results Three Years Later*

In Table 4.7 the students who participated in the school of choice program are separated by students who selected their home school and walk to school (walkers) and students who selected a school other than their home school and receive transportation (riders). The groups were then compared by performance on the Terra Nova administered at the end of 2nd grade.

The T-Test correlation was used to determine if students who selected their home school and walk to school perform significantly better than students who selected a school other than their home school and ride a bus to school.

Table 4.7

*Terra Nova Results, by Walkers and Riders*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Percent of walkers</th>
<th>Percent of riders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terra Nova</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>594.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data from students in the spring of their second-grade year show that, a performance difference did exist. The students who walked to their neighborhood school scored 8.5 percentage points higher on average on the Terra Nova. Therefore, the T-Test
shows that there is no significant difference on the Terra Nova test between students who walk to school and students who ride the bus.

*Lack of Significance*

The schools of choice model in the Rochester City School District was created to provide opportunities for disadvantaged families and create better opportunities for all of students as they entered kindergarten. The philosophy of the school board was that competition for students among schools would create higher performing schools. The theory also existed that if families chose a school they would be more invested and therefore their children would be more interested and attend school more often which in turn would raise the district’s attendance rate. The results of my evaluation clearly show that the plan is not showing significant increase in either academic performance or attendance. This lack of improvement questions whether the plan is a prudent investment of per pupil allocation.

*Summary*

Findings include a higher percentage of males who walked to school and conversely a higher number of females chose a school that necessitated transportation, although the difference was not statistically significant. A higher percentage of low socioeconomic status students (i.e., as designated by free or reduced federal lunch status) selected a school other than their neighborhood school, and students who paid for their lunch selected their neighborhood school more frequently, although the difference again is not statistically significant. The data based on ethnicity show that Black students were more likely to select their neighborhood school, while White students are more likely to select a school other than their neighborhood school. Students with asthma were more
likely to select a school other than their neighborhood school and, therefore, use transportation. I also found that although most students began at the same level according to the COR data, by the end of the second grade, students who attended their home school performed better on the Terra Nova than those that attended non-neighborhood schools. However, students who selected a school other than their neighborhood school and received transportation had slightly better attendance than students who walked to school.

In summary, this chapter describes the results of the statistical analysis used to answer the research questions. Descriptive statistics describe the study population and illustrate the similar demographics of the comparative groups. Non-parametric inferential statistics such as the Chi-squared test, resulting in a Pearson correlation coefficient, were used to assess relationships between variables. The final chapter will discuss the implications of these findings and make recommendations for further research.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the relationship between the school of choice program in the Rochester City School District (RCSD) and the student outcome measures of attendance and academic performance. The literature supports the use of school of choice programs as a form of desegregation and to create educational opportunities for disadvantaged students.

The focus of this study was to examine student performance in two groups of students whose families participated in a school choice program: students whose families chose their neighborhood school (walkers) and students whose families clearly chose a school other than their neighborhood (riders), so-called because they chose a school far enough from home that they qualified for transportation. The study also examined the difference in attendance between students who selected their neighborhood school as compared to students who did not select their neighborhood schools.

In this chapter, the research questions are stated and findings described. Then I discuss the implications of the study and describe its limitations. Next I make recommendations for both policy-makers and for future research and finally, summarize the study based on the analysis of the findings.

Research Questions

Do Rochester City School District (RCSD) students who started kindergarten in 2005-06, who completed third grade in 2008-09, and whose families chose a school other
than their neighborhood school have better attendance than their RCSD counterparts whose families chose their neighborhood schools?

Do RCSD students who started kindergarten in 2005-06, completed third grade in 2008-09, and whose families chose a school other than their neighborhood school have better developmental and academic achievement than their RCSD counterparts whose families chose their neighborhood schools?

*Findings*

I selected the Children Observation Readiness Assessment (COR) for students who entered Kindergarten and participated in the choice process as the academic baseline for my study. The COR test results show that both groups of students, walker and riders, start school at approximately the same levels, with less than a one percentage point difference in performance. Walkers performed on the COR at .08% higher than riders. However, this is not statistically significant and, therefore, students are considered academically equal.

The Terra Nova, administered three years later, shows a difference in academic performance between walkers and riders. The COR demonstrates that all students started at the same point, but the Terra Nova illustrated that the walkers exhibited an academic gain of over eight percentage points. These results could be attributed to such things as more parental involvement, more accessibility to before and after school education programs, more opportunity for the teacher to become familiar with the neighborhood and make home visits more likely, or the ability of the child to have more instructional time. Attendance data indicates that students who ride a bus to school attend school more frequently. Specifically, 73% of students who rode the bus met district attendance goals,
while 67% of students who walk to school met the district goal. This could be explained through a myriad of reasons. For example, if the weather is bad, a parent is more likely to keep a child home who has to walk than a child who rides the bus. Parents in struggling neighborhoods who are accustomed to escorting their children to and from school while pushing a younger sibling in a stroller are less likely to want to expose the younger child to bad weather. An ill child might be more easily returned home if the child walks compared to an ill child who has to be transported.

To determine if there was a connection between the attendance of students with asthma that may have affected the attendance data, I compared the attendance of students with asthma for both walkers and riders. I did not find any students with asthma who had significant attendance issues, although parents of children who had asthma were more likely to request a school which provided transportation for their child.

**Implications of the Study**

When considering the implications of the study, note that the policy which was studied was never fully implemented. The Parent Preference choice policy has a number of components implemented during the first year. However, one important component of the policy was the development of zone improvement committees. These committees were designed to assist schools that were not seen as desirable to parents to become schools with compelling opportunities for all children. The zone committee team consisted of parents, community members, representatives from Central Office, and school building personnel. The theory was that if the under-selected neighborhood schools had this attention and related resources, perhaps students who opted to go to a different school might have selected their neighborhood school instead. This part of the
policy was not implemented in the Rochester schools, and the under-selected schools have not received any special upgrades to their programs or any special attention; the zone committees were never convened. This may explain why some students selected a school other than their neighborhood school: simply because their school was not measuring up to the New York State Standards. The most densely populated areas of the city do not have the highest-performing schools. In fact, many of the higher-performing schools are on the fringes or outlying areas of the district boundaries. Combined with the availability of transportation if a child lives more than a mile and a half from school, this may explain why schools which are close to the borders of the city have more students requesting an opportunity to attend than the inner-most city schools, which have many vacancies.

Implications for the Rochester City School District

The next step for the Rochester City School District would be to evaluate the plan to determine what parts of the policy have not yet been implemented. This would help them to decide if the implementation of all of the parts would in fact be worth revisiting. Perhaps the plan should be redesigned taking into consideration that distributing students by socio-economic background in a district with almost 90% free and reduced lunch students may not be the best option.

According to Cookson and Schoroff (1997), improving schools is not only accomplished through the creation of an equal distribution of racial and ethnic minority students or children from various socioeconomic status, but by improving instruction for students across the district. Successful choice models are not designed to shuffle lower performing or lower-socioeconomic status students into higher-performing schools and
higher-performing students into lower-performing schools, but rather to create higher-performing schools across the district.

The RCSD has proven success for some of its nationally known magnet schools at the secondary level. School of the Arts, a 7th through 12th grade school requiring an audition to enroll, receives applications for families as far away as California who wish to audition for entry into the performing arts high school. Wilson High School was ranked the 40th best high school in the nation a few years ago and offers students free tuition to the University of Rochester who successfully complete their International Baccalaureate program. School without Walls was founded on the open curriculum model, with students designing and executing their own learning experiences, and attracts students from many different countries through their foreign exchange model. These are just some examples of the secondary magnet schools in Rochester. Rochester elementary schools lack distinctive and appealing types of programs for parents to connect with. Parents do not have anything to base their choices on other than location and test scores; the school choice booklets are filled with lingo about school improvement plans and reform models which do not mean anything to parents. Each school needs to develop a signature program or model which will attract families. It could be as simple as a successful reading or math program, or a community partnership providing quality before and after-school care for children whose parents work for pay. Creating enticing school programs which more accurately meet the community’s needs could revitalize the choice policy and create the competition that will spark parents’ interest in their child’s education.

Another option would be to go back to neighborhood schools if parents are only using the model to prevent their children from walking to school in bad weather or to
provide child care via a long bus ride. Neighborhood schools are widely believed to assist in building strong neighborhoods and community feelings among the residents of the neighborhood, and provide opportunities for children who live near each other to get to know each other in school and play with each other at home. Currently, the choice policy with its promise that children can continue at their current school until the final grade, even if parents move, has created a maze of crossing bus routes around the city. Buses pick up for many schools in every neighborhood; some street corners have four or five buses which arrive within a few moments of each other. Per district policy, children who live under a mile and a half from school have to walk. In the winter cold, this can cause considerable worry to families. Instead, each school could develop a nested circle of transportation routes which could provide busing for all students regardless of distance. Returning to the neighborhood school policy and putting the saved money into quality before- and after-school programs in each school might better meet the needs of the community.

*Implications for Parents Who Participate in a Choice Plan*

Parents who select a neighborhood (walk) school have benefits to their choice that may explain the academic differences. If a child is attending their neighborhood school, the parent has an opportunity to build a relationship with their child’s teacher and administrative staff and more easily participate in school activities, and therefore provide more effective help and support to the child.

Under-selected schools are mostly in some level of improvement plan, under No Child Left Behind regulations. Frequently a part of this plan includes supplemental educational services such as after school tutoring. Parents who select one of these schools
will receive free additional help for their child if they meet socioeconomic guidelines. The relationship with school staff and free SES tutoring services may have a much more positive effect on children’s achievement than a choice to transport the child far from home.

*Implications for Schools Whose Enrollment Depends on a Choice Plan.*

Under-subscribed schools would benefit from stronger recruitment efforts in Rochester. There are neighborhood organizations, government entities, community-based agencies, and religious communities which host public events such as concerts and picnics. Schools should use these neighborhood recruitment opportunities to build positive relationships with families. Families choose schools when they have the feeling that the school actually wants the child to attend that school. School staff could also reach out to businesses around the community to distribute information about the school to families.

Each school could develop its own theme or signature. For example, a performing arts elementary school would attract students if they partner with the School of the Arts. A full sports program might attract parents who want their children to grow up active and healthy. Themes could also be academic themes such as reading or math. Elementary schools in the Rochester City School District could refine their recruitment process to attract students for reasons other than transportation.

*Implications for Districts Considering Implementation of a Choice Plan*

Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1, 551 U.S. 05-908 (2007) decided together with Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education is a landmark decision of the U.S. Supreme Court that prohibited assigning students to
public schools solely for the purpose of achieving racial integration and declined to recognize racial balancing as a compelling state interest.

During the past sixty years, the public schools were often the only institutions attempting to address racial segregation and the resulting inherent inequities in society (Cottrol, Diamond, & Ware, 2004b). The public schools started to grant poor parents some degree of control over their children’s education with school choice plans, many based on racial classifications that, logically, created the separation and inequality in the first place. Some legal analysts state that the U.S. Constitution should be colorblind (Brighouse, 2000). For schools, this means that once state-imposed segregation has been remedied, the government must stop using racial classifications. A colorblind Constitution suggests that any effort to classify people by race for any reason, including assuring educational opportunities for children, would be unconstitutional. School choice plans of the future have to use some quality other than race if districts want to provide choices for families which will integrate schools.

With this in mind the Rochester City School District and urban districts across the United States need to incorporate or revamp choice policy and models with careful thought. In 2007, urban districts across the United States quickly changed to socio-economic status preference as a tie-breaker, replacing race and ethnicity identification, in their school choice plans (M. Alves, personal communication, March 2008). These changes are still to correct the injustice perceived by many families whose children attend schools in poor neighborhoods in urban districts. However, the result of desegregating based on socio-economic status of students has never been measured. This quick policy
change kept school choice plans alive in urban districts. However, we do not know if it works to improve achievement in districts which are more poor than not.

Programs such as inter-district voucher programs for elementary school age students and charter schools with unique programs should still be considered as possible choice options for parents, providing the receiving schools do not use race or ethnicity as a qualifier or disqualifier. Additional studies need to occur in order to evaluate which choice plans with which circumstances result in increased achievement for children, so that districts can prepare adopt effective policies.

**NCLB Implications**

The choice model was implemented in Rochester around the same time as the adoption of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The NCLB offers parents the opportunity to transfer to a higher performing school if their child is assigned to a school that the state has put on their list as in need academic improvement. This law requires the state to identify these schools in early fall. The district then must offer families the option of either transferring schools if seats are available, or receiving free tutoring after school hours if their family meets socioeconomic guideline requirements.

NCLB, therefore, mandates some school choice. The government also provides the district with funding for these transfers. NCLB even prioritizes socio-economic status in the same manner that the district choice model does. It would seem that if the district recognized NCLB as the only transfer option, then the process could be utilized more effectively and recognized as the district’s schools of choice plan. This would allow the district to still be recognized as an urban district that utilizes choice but also use its money for other efforts, such as increased quality of instruction and resources. The
RCSD would be able to claim success for its choice model in part because of higher academic achievement.

Limitations of the Study

The study evaluated one cohort of students who participated in the selection process during its second year of implementation. Many of the parents did not have an opportunity to gauge its success and, therefore, may have based decisions on very limited information.

The Rochester City School District is very ethnically and socioeconomically unbalanced. Choice models in the other cities have successfully impacted the racial and ethnic mix of students to create diverse learning environments and socioeconomically to create more predominantly middle-class environments in more of their schools than was possible without a choice plan. In a district with 87% racial and ethnic minority students and 90% free or reduced-paid lunch students, creating an equal balance of different racial/ethnic background and socioeconomic status is not possible.

An additional limitation of the study is that we do not fully understand why parents made the school selections that they did. The policy expects that families make the selection because they have researched each school and choose a best school for their child, based solely on programs available and the school’s performance, and that children who are so matched to a school will go to school more routinely and enjoy greater academic success. The policy expected that since the parents selected the school, they would be more involved and more interested in improving their child’s performance. In reality, some families make the choice only to receive before- and after-school care in the form of a lengthy bus ride or to prevent their child from navigating through bad
neighborhoods in inclement weather. If parents are making choices for reasons other than what the district intended, the outcomes will likely vary from what the district anticipated.

The final limitation is that this is a one-year study based on performance in the second year of implementation. Although it covered three years of growth, it may have produced different results if it followed two or three cohort groups.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This first question in evaluating the effects of a school of choice model would be what the intention of the policy was. The main goal of this policy was to create more opportunities for students who previously had only one school choice option in their neighborhood. The theory was that students who lived in economically depressed areas did not have the same opportunities as students in the city who resided in more affluent areas of the city. Presumably, teacher expectations of students are lower in the depressed area schools, and instruction is limited because of classroom-management issues. In fact, the theory exists that, over time, better teachers transfer to higher-performing schools, thus perpetuating higher performing schools performance. Goodwin and Kemerer (2002) explain the need for school of choice with this example: to see how increased choice can affect equality of opportunity either positively or negatively, imagine two schools in contiguous attendance zones. The majorities of students in Zone A are upper-middle class and produce positive spillovers for their classmates. The majority of students in Zone B come from low-income families and create negative spillovers. To the extent that better classmates (i.e., those who create positive academic spillovers) increase learning, then a student who attends school in Zone A will learn more than an identical student enrolled
in the Zone B school. However, it is not known if moving students around a district when most of the schools have students who fit the “Zone B” profile has an advantage when it comes to student achievement. These preliminary findings indicate that there is no corresponding increase in achievement when children attend a school other than their neighborhood school.

The goals of the Rochester City School District (RCSD) policy were to create equal opportunities, increase performance, and reduce student mobility by guaranteeing that students who began in a particular school could stay there until the final grade, using busing if needed, no matter where their parents moved in the city. This goal was to be accomplished primarily through a desegregation effort, but, when desegregation plans began being overturned in cities across America, the plan evolved into the desegregation model not by race but rather by socioeconomic status. Although the plan may not have been successful in raising the performance of the students who selected a school other than their neighborhood school, it may have created a decrease in the socioeconomic segregation that also occurred in some schools in the RCSD. Further study could consider the actual change in demographics in each school and correlate that to student achievement.

The PACE form has over 100 questions concerning children’s early life experiences. Combined with the database I created of the COR scores, the Terra Nova scores, and attendance, the PACE database could provide insight into the early life experiences which negatively and positively correlate to student attendance and achievement. For example, children who experienced a traumatic family experience, such as witnessing violence at home, could be studied to determine if their attendance or
achievement is different compared to students in the same district who did not endure such an experience. In addition, the complete database could be analyzed in order to suggest targeted interventions for students who have had highly stressful early life experiences.

One future study I plan to conduct with this database is a comparison of the academic gains of students from a low socio-economic status, who selected schools from higher socio-economic status schools. I plan to determine if the lower socio-economic status student’s academic performance increases over lower socioeconomic status students who attend a neighborhood school, and also to determine if both groups eventually become equal in performance.

An additional study which I plan to conduct using the combined database with the PACE form data is connected to a child’s performance. I would like to determine if there is a correlation between a child’s observation of frequent violent activity in their neighborhood and academic achievement. The results of this study could be used to advocate for additional resources for the students.

**Conclusion: School Choice Promises**

As noted above, schools of choice programs are often designed to shift power to parents, empowering them to shop throughout their own and sometimes neighboring districts for the schools their children will attend. The theory suggests that schools are very different in ways that parents can measure and compare. The theory suggests that parents have the experience and knowledge to know what to look for in a school for their children and what preferences their actions will realize. Examples of parent preferences might include academics, athletics, arts and music programs, before- and after-school
programs, proximity to other family members, and safety. The expectation of choice theory is that a choice plan will equitably distribute students by academics, race, and poverty level and that this will help student achievement. Schools of choice programs are meant to complement this process, not direct it. Parents participating in such programs stress that the first step in a successful school of choice plan is the development of schools that are more appealing.

Former East Harlem school administrator Fliegel (1996) explained that some critics fear that choice will strand poor youngsters in disadvantaged schools. Choice proponents would argue just the opposite – requiring schools to compete for students encourages those providing substandard education to be more accountable for their educational programs. Ultimately, Fliegel (1996) said that this may force schools to either to make needed improvements or to risk closing.

Proponents of school choice believe that empowering families with educational options will promote a positive change because they assume that schools will reform to increase their attractiveness. They note that school choice has been widely adopted. that most states in the United States have some type of choice plan in some of their districts, and most major urban areas have at least a limited choice plan. This broad acceptance of choice theory is an indication that it works (Cookson & Schoroff, 2000).

Kohn (1996) suggested that court-ordered busing to racially desegregate large districts failed to achieve its goals because busing takes the parent out of the child’s education. With court-ordered busing, children are taken out of their neighborhood schools and bused across the city to a school in another neighborhood that is predominantly a different race from the race of the bused children. This causes the
parents to be disengaged from their children’s educational activities and makes it virtually impossible for them to regain their involvement. According to Kohn (1996), “the decline in achievement…is primarily the result of removing two or more of the key adults from involvement in the child’s education” (p. 39). Extrapolating this theory into voluntary school choice programs, it could be argued that the same solution, busing children to schools away from home, might have the same result: that is, children whose families are emotionally disconnected from their education.

The Rochester City School District has utilized a magnet school program for middle- and high-school-age students since the 1980s in an attempt to desegregate students by ethnicity and racial status. In the late 1990s, the school board requested that the district investigate creating a school of choice program for elementary students by providing a model that will give the students choice but also maintain the option for families to attend their home school.

In 2003, the Rochester City School District (RCSD) Board of Education adopted a policy called the Parent Preference Choice Policy for children entering kindergarten. The policy gave students a preference or boost in the lottery if they selected their home school but also provided a variety of schools from which to choose. Students would also have a preference if they selected a school with a majority socioeconomic status different from their own.

The model was implemented for the 2004-2005 school year and has been in effect since. In the five years of its existence, the plan has never been evaluated except by measuring how many students participated, how many students received their first choice, and recently, how well the district implemented the plan. Studies around the
nation analyze choice using different methods, but no one has measured the impact on attendance and achievement for elementary students.

This research study examined data collected on students who entered kindergarten in the RCSD for the 2005-2006 school year after participating in the school of choice process. The study considered performance and attendance over a three-year span. Attendance and academic performance were compared on students who selected their neighborhood school and those students who selected a school other than their neighborhood school. The results of my study clearly show choosing to attend a school different from the neighborhood option does not correlate to an increase in student performance or attendance. It may create a more balanced distribution of students based on race or socioeconomic status, if there is a range of students to be distributed. In the case of the RCSD, the children in the district are more alike than different with almost 90% of students qualifying for free and reduced price lunch, a common indicator of socioeconomic status.

As noted earlier, according to Schneider, Teske & Marschall (2000), school choice is not a single reform but comes in many varieties that differ based on important characteristics. It is also important to remember that choice is not new; many families have long exercised it through residential location decisions. A quality education, however, is a purchased commodity. The caliber of the education is dependent upon the purchasing power one has. A quality education can be purchased either through higher mortgages and property taxes in neighborhoods with high-performing public schools or by paying tuition to private schools (Gant, 2006). Unfortunately, many poor families do not have either option and are forced to send their children to public schools regardless of
the schools’ effectiveness. School choice provides options to families who do not want their neighborhood school for their children’s education.

As a result of this study, a final question surfaces: What is the best use of the millions of dollars spent implementing a school choice program if the outcomes for children are so minimally different? Evaluating school choice for participation is not sufficient to justify such expenditures. The district needs to conduct a comprehensive study to evaluate what the policy has accomplished and, more importantly, to consider the future of the policy.

The consultants who designed the Rochester Parent Preference policy were also the designers of school choice plans in many cities across the United States. Most of these plans have been discarded or rewritten because of thoughtful evaluations designed to improve education.

However, before giving any consideration to updating the policy, the district first needs to evaluate its usefulness. Is a policy that was designed to first desegregate schools by race and then by socioeconomic status still relevant to a district that is no longer diverse in either way? Again, perhaps the money spent on school choice could be better used providing direct services for an increasingly poor student body.

I have been involved in implementing the school choice program in Rochester for the past four years, among other responsibilities. I recognize that my results may effectively eliminate the need for part of my position. If Rochester can solve the problem of effectively educating children who are socioeconomically poor, it will be well worth my potential job search.
References


Norwood, MA: Christopher Gordon Publishers, Inc.


*Plessy v. Ferguson* 163 U.S. 537 (1896).


## Appendix A

Comparison of Tests Given to Kindergarten, First, and Second Graders in the RCSD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test Type</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Math</th>
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<th>Social</th>
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<th>Teacher evaluator</th>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terra Nova</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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Appendix B

Example of raw data for each student in cells in spreadsheet

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