How Boston’s bold attempt to increase equity and reduce student travel time by giving families smarter options didn’t quite work — but could.

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“Good Schools Close to Home”
less experience, and higher teacher turnover, characteristics that make it difficult for children to receive an education that sparks creativity and critical thinking and prepares them for their future.

Like many districts, Boston Public Schools — after failed attempts to solve such segregation and inequities through busing policies — turned to “controlled” school choice policies to give parents the option to send their children to schools outside of their neighborhoods. Depending on how you look at it, this either put the onus on parents or it empowered them to select schools.

School choice policies are not new. They have been used as a means to provide families with school options that are not directly tied to their neighborhood of residence. At the individual family level, school choice policies enable all families to choose schools that match their interests and needs, especially providing lower-income families with options beyond the neighborhood school. At the district level, school choice policies can trigger market processes that help districts determine which schools are more or less attractive to families and to guide districts in replicating schools that work for families and that families want. With all school choice policies, parents make choices at the time of registration, often ranking several schools. When more parents choose a school for their child than there are seats available, a lottery system is employed to determine who gets desired seats.

In practice, in a given school district, it is rare that market pressures are triggered through school choice policies that result in opening new schools at the rate or of the type that the market pressures demand. In the end, all students are assigned to a school. However, it may not be the school the parents wanted either in quality or in curricular emphasis.

There are at least two trade-offs that must be maximized for school choice policies to efficiently ensure access to high-quality schools. The first is transportation costs. The more options families have outside of their neighborhood, the further children will travel to school, with significant costs to the district for buses and significant burden to children and families in commuting time. Second, districts must balance the number of choices they give families. Giving families more options, when not all of the options are considered high quality, actually increases the likelihood that families will pick lower-quality schools and that their children will be assigned to
One major barrier is the persistent racial and socioeconomic inequities and continued residential segregation today. And one of the primary drivers of inequities is the legacy of historic racial and economic segregation — and continued residential segregation today. Many families face in trying to access high-quality schools.
them, especially if these lower-quality schools are closer to home.

In Boston, the district’s original controlled choice policy, created in 1988, attempted to maximize choices for families. It divided the city into three large zones, and families could choose any school in their zone, plus any school that was within a mile of their home. While providing parents with many options beyond their neighborhood, it did not account for the costs of transportation, both as part of the district’s budget and in terms of the real burden for families. The costs and burdens of transportation were formidable. And even still, there remained significant racial and economic inequities in access to high-quality schools.

In 2012, Tom Menino, then mayor of Boston, expressed what many families were feeling — that families want “good schools close to home.” At Menino’s urging, Boston Public Schools set out, in a highly public process, to reengineer its school choice and assignment policy to maximize access to high-quality schools that are close to home. The new assignment policy, which went into effect in 2013 and is still in place today, was developed by researchers at MIT and was both a bold and clever attempt to increase equity and reduce traveling times. It created universal minimum access to high-quality schools based on quality rankings of schools on a four-tier system and proximity to families’ homes.

Simply, parents may choose from a list of schools that prioritizes quality and proximity. Based on a parents’ address, parents’ school options include the two closest Tier 1 (highest-quality) schools, the next four closest Tier 1 or Tier 2 schools, then the next six closest Tier 1, 2, or 3 schools. The list of school options is then rounded out with schools that are within a mile radius of the families’ home, schools with special programs, schools that siblings attend, and schools that the district calls “capacity” schools — schools that are larger, close to home, and often Tier 4 schools. These “capacity” schools can meet the district’s need to assign all students to a school. Each family’s list of school options is tailored to their address and to their students’ needs. This algorithm, called the Home-Based School Assignment Program (HBAP), is innovative; it attempts to maximize both shorter commute times and quality, with a goal of ensuring access to high-quality schools for everyone. By providing families with a smaller list of schools from which to choose and ensuring that high-quality schools are among the options, it assumed that families would pick the high-quality schools, and that students would be assigned to them more equitably. This policy was put into place in 2013 for the 2013–14 school year.

Four years later, Boston Public Schools invited my colleague, Northeastern University Associate Professor Daniel O’Brien, and me to conduct an independent evaluation through the Boston Area Re-

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**A View from Inside**

MEG CAMPBELL, C.A.S.’97, WAS A MEMBER OF THE BOSTON SCHOOL COMMITTEE WHEN THE REVAMPED ASSIGNMENT POLICY WAS PUT IN PLACE. SHE SHARES SOME OF THE COMMITTEE’S THINKING, AND HER HOPES, AT THE TIME.

**AS A LONGTIME BOSTON EDUCATOR,** school leader, former Boston Public Schools (BPS) parent, and member of the Boston School Committee facing a vote to change how children had been assigned to district schools for more than 20 years, I couldn’t help but consider the opportunity before us.

In 2013, the lottery-based assignment system in place — where more than 120 schools were divided among three zones — had not changed in 20 years. On average, families seeking kindergarten seats faced more than 20 options for elementary schools of varying quality levels, some located near their homes, and some not.

The task of crafting a more predictable assignment system for families was placed in the hands of the mayoral-appointed external advisory committee, a group comprising 27 BPS stakeholders — parents, principals, teachers, students, and community representatives, as well as current and former school committee members. A new policy would allow the rare opportunity to directly respond to feedback from families across every neighborhood.

This feedback was critical in shaping support for the proposal to alter the existing three-zone assignment plan into a different, algorithm-based system where families would have greater predictability and more students would have shorter bus rides to their respective schools. Transportation issues in the BPS pose significant challenges and come at personal and financial cost. Bus rides were up to 60 minutes each way and, on particularly bad days, extended to 90 minutes or more with traffic or foul weather. Ten percent of the BPS school budget — in excess of $100 million — was spent on transportation, among the highest in the nation.

These concerns carried great weight, as did the profound issue of variance in school quality across the district. In the midst of this process, a handful of community groups asked the school committee’s external advisory committee to postpone any assignment changes until all of the district’s schools were operating at comparable quality levels while others pushed us to move ahead with a system of assignment that would address the transportation and predictability issues first. To respond to these concerns, the new algorithm would provide each student with a “choice bucket” of schools ensuring that all students, regardless of neighborhood, would have access to schools rated at the top of a quality tiering system — regardless of distance — as well as schools closer to home. Nearly all members of the external advisory committee (20 out of 27) backed this proposal, which ultimately passed, but the charge to the district to improve schools lacking in quality was made clear by the external advisory committee and the school committee, which voted 6 to 1 to approve the new assignment plan on March 13, 2013.

Then-Mayor Thomas Menino joined with then-Superintendent Carol Johnson to ask the legislature for bold reform to jumpstart improvement in schools performing below optimal standards — granting principals greater autonomy, including hiring flexibility and longer school days. That legislation faced considerable resistance, including from the Boston Teachers Union, and it never came to fruition. As a result, our great hope for the schools to receive necessary interventions and support to make rapid improvement was not realized.

As Professor Nancy E. Hill notes in a recent interview on the Ed School’s website regarding her research on Boston’s school assignment plan, “The policy was successful in enrolling students closer to home. This was especially true for elementary school students. This improvement was largely driven by a reduction in the number of students who travel the farthest distances.” But, she added, “This inequitable distribution of quality schools existed prior to the policy, but the policy did not improve upon it.”

It will take a sense of moral urgency combined with bold and brave steps at the city and state level to ensure that every child in Boston receives a high-quality education. We owe every child and family nothing less.

MEG CAMPBELL IS THE FOUNDER AND HEAD OF THE CODMAN ACADEMY CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOL IN BOSTON. SHE WAS A MEMBER OF THE BOSTON SCHOOL COMMITTEE FROM 2012 TO 2016.
search Initiative on whether HBAP reduced inequities in access to high-quality schools and whether it achieved the goal of reducing travel times and distance for families compared to the former policy. That is, did it reach its goal of providing families with access to good schools close to home?

There were two main findings. First, HBAP shortened commutes for families. Gains in reducing distance traveled were largely achieved by shortening the longest commutes. However, despite the shorter distances, the policy did not recreate “neighborhood schools.” One might expect that shortening commutes means that children living in the same neighborhood are more likely to attend the same nearby schools. However, that was not the case. There were no reductions in the number of schools that neighborhoods sent their kids. This is likely due to several things. In one way, this is likely due to families picking schools that were closer to them, but not necessarily the same school as their neighbor. In another way, as competition for some neighborhood schools increased, students were assigned to schools further away. Lastly, because the benefits in commute times were largely due to reducing the longest commutes, rather than an overall benefit, only some students were attending schools that were closer to home or presumably in their neighborhood.

Second, and perhaps most important, HBAP did not increase equity in access to high-quality schools. In fact, in many cases, HBAP exacerbated existing inequities. In considering the number of high-quality schools families had access to across racial background and neighborhoods, blacks, Latinxs, and those living in predominantly low-income, ethnic minority neighborhoods had access to fewer high-quality schools among their options, compared to whites, Asian Americans, and those living in wealthier neighborhoods.

And not only were there fewer high-quality schools on the “choice lists” of blacks, Latinxs, and those living in low-income neighborhoods, but the high-quality schools that were on the lists tended to be smaller in size — they literally had fewer seats available.

What we found is that inequities in the number of high-quality schools and in the size of those schools among families’ choice options were only part of the problem.

Three characteristics of Boston neighborhoods also interacted to create the perfect storm of increased inequities under the new policy: 1) Boston neighborhoods are both racially and economically segregated; 2) Neighborhoods with higher concentrations of black and Latinx families have a higher concentration of school-age children; and 3) The locations of high-quality schools are not evenly distributed across Boston neighborhoods — that is, high-quality schools are more likely to be located in wealthier neighborhoods. Together, these factors — combined with a policy that provides families with school options based on their residential address and distances around their residential address (their neighborhood) — resulted in significantly higher levels of competition for seats in Tier 1 schools for families in historically marginalized neighborhoods.

The result? Because of residential segregation along racial and ethnic lines, blacks and Latinxs had a quarter or a third of the practical access to top tier seats as their white and Asian American counterparts. They had fewer top tier seats among the school options to start with, and they had more children competing with them for those seats.

More concretely, families were equally likely — across ethnicity and neighborhoods — to choose a high-quality school as their first choice. However, black students, especially, were far less likely to be assigned to their first choice and as a result were more likely to be administratively assigned to a school their parents did not pick and were ranked at the lowest-quality tier. Blacks are severely overrepresented in the lowest tier schools and underrepresented in the highest-quality schools.

TAKEN TOGETHER, the results are disturbing, especially for a policy designed to increase equity.

As we’ve found, a controlled school choice policy that was designed to provide all families with high-quality schools, based on an equitable number of schools from which families can choose, only makes sense in a city that is not segregated residentially and for which the distribution of high-quality schools is more equitable across neighborhoods. Unfortunately, this is not true in Boston — or in most urban centers. Whereas the new policy had the good intention of increasing equity in access to high-quality schools, it neglected to account for the realities of variations in school size, in concentrations of school-age children across neighborhoods, and in the uneven distribution of high-quality schools.

Whereas our policy evaluation examined issues at the school and neighborhood level, we cannot lose sight of what this means in the real world. Today, real children living in Boston do not have equal access to high-quality schools. Real parents are trying to navigate a school assignment system and get
the best school they can for their children. Black and Latinx children, many of whom are already disadvantaged in other ways, face greater competition to get into high-quality schools. The deck is already stacked against many of these children, and this policy has made it harder for them to get the educational foundation they need to succeed.

Our identification of the problems associated with the policy points to logical solutions, many of which are underway. The easiest of the solutions is to fix the math: adjust the policy to account for competition for seats as an indicator for equity, rather than number of schools. We are already pursuing options to help Boston Public Schools adjust the algorithm to account for competition.

The underlying problem, though, is that a school choice and assignment policy alone cannot make much progress in solving inequities in access to high-quality schools when there are too few high-quality schools in the neighborhoods that need them. Rearranging school assignments without increasing the number of high-quality schools merely rearranges who has access to high-quality schools and who is left out. The harder and more important solution is to focus intensely and purposefully on increasing the number of — and widening the distribution of — high-quality schools across the district.

While this is a harder problem to solve, it is ultimately a problem we know how to solve. We know what high-quality schools look like. We know the kinds of schools we want children across our nation to attend.

High-quality schools are schools that show improvement in learning and engagement with learning. High-quality schools help students who have fallen behind, and they challenge students who have mastered material.

High-quality schools have rich and engaging curricula and extracurricular activities that support students’ interests and identity development. They are encouraging youth to think creatively, critically, and synergistically, and to analyze and solve problems. High-quality schools have the ability to connect students and families to resources outside of school to help students come to school ready to learn.

High-quality schools have guidance counselors that help high school students not only plan for college, but also plan for meaningful careers that might not include college. They create spaces where students can make mistakes and learn from them — to fail a class and be able to take it again without closing doors to college opportunities based on GPA.

High-quality schools are places where students are empowered to take leadership responsibility, become civically aware and engaged, and practice decision making so they are prepared to make tough decisions outside of school and into adulthood.

It has been difficult for districts to quickly replicate their highest-quality schools. Private schools and charter schools often are more agile in their ability to experiment and replicate high-quality schools in urban neighborhoods. But, for charter schools especially, quality varies tremendously across schools, and it is difficult for parents to know how to navigate them, especially while they are also navigating the school choice process in a district like Boston.

And many charter schools serving lower-income black and Latinx youth engage in highly structured, often zero-tolerance behavioral polices that are not consistent with the kind of environment that promotes creative thinking and a restorative, redemptive orientation to behavior that we expect of high-quality schools. Although many of these highly structured schools may be able to produce higher grades, test scores, and graduation rates than their lower-quality public school counterparts, they are not providing independent, critical, and creative thinking skills and a sense of autonomy, as well as purpose-driven, goal-oriented thinking that will guide students through college and into a meaningful life.

The Boston Public School district implicitly and explicitly knows that high-quality schools are ones that have strong ties to their neighborhoods. This is why a key goal of the HBAP policy was to bring children closer to their homes and recreate neighborhood schools. Increasing the distribution of high-quality schools means that those schools can become embedded in the neighborhoods in which they are located, creating partnerships to support students and give them access to community service, internships, and valuable job training.

As the district is engaged in the BuildBPS initiative, where it is allocating significant resources to rebuild dilapidated schools and open newer schools with the goal of increasing the number of high-quality schools in the district, I hope the district will pay attention to the evaluation of the Home-Based School Assignment Policy and target those resources to the communities where there is greatest need, to create the kinds of schools where all of our children can thrive. I also hope districts across the country will re-double their efforts to increase the number of high-quality schools in the communities that need them. Doing so not only better serves the students in those communities, it better serves our nation, which needs our next generations of youth to be well educated and able to think globally, critically, creatively, and analytically — to solve the challenges that face us and to envision a better world.

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