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’ homes, 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-

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.

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