


*[Image description: Three young students of different ethnic/racial backgrounds, doing arithmetic on a chalkboard.]*

MIDWEST & PLAINS EQUITY ASSISTANCE CENTER

# Integration and School Choice:

## Challenges and Opportunities for School Leaders

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# Integration and School Choice: Challenges and Opportunities for School Leaders

Demands for school choice have led to a substantial increase in the educational options available to families in the United States (Stanford, 2023). In major cities, school choice has become nearly universal with growing numbers of students commuting outside of their neighborhoods to district, charter, and private schools of choice (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021a). School choice is also becoming prevalent outside of cities. Rural and suburban areas have experienced post-pandemic expansions of school choice through micro-schools, virtual schools, and other non-traditional school models (Hamlin et al., 2023). These developments raise questions about how school leaders can support school integration as families are presented with expanding school options. On the one hand, emerging forms of school choice could help to strengthen voluntary integration by allowing families to choose schools outside of segregated neighborhoods, but new forms of choice could also amplify segregation if families of similar racial and socioeconomic backgrounds congregate in the same schools. Previous research paints a complicated picture offering evidence that school choice can unleash both segregating and desegregating forces (McCallum et al., 2019; Monarrez et al., 2022).

In this *Equity by Design* brief, I describe new approaches to school choice and consider how they might influence school integration. Transformations brought about by emerging models of school choice could shape the future of school integration. As such, developing an understanding of emerging models of school choice is important to the Equity Assistance Center Program's mission of school integration and equal educational opportunities for all students.

## Voluntary Integration through School Choice

Following the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, the Supreme Court directed schools to desegregate "with all deliberate speed" (*Brown v. Board of Education,* 1955). One initial response to this decision was to seek racial balance by busing Black students to schools in predominantly white neighborhoods (Rivkin & Welch, 2006). Race-conscious busing programs, especially those there were court-ordered, often had political repercussions and were met with resistance from both Black and white families (Billings et al., 2014). While research finds some long-term benefits for students who directly participated in busing programs (Johnson, 2011), scholars have maintained that race-conscious busing was detrimental to schools and teachers in Black communities (Thompson, 2022). Few race-conscious busing programs remain today (Billings et al., 2014). The nation's largest operational program, METCO, is a voluntary one in Boston that buses predominantly Black and Latine students from the city to affluent schools in the surrounding suburbs (Brooks, 2022).

In the 1960s, policymakers began turning to school choice as a way of promoting voluntary integration. The main rationale for this change was that the prevailing system of school assignment based on a student's residence invariably led to segregated schools because neighborhoods themselves were segregated (McCallum et al., 2019). Proponents felt that school choice policies would weaken the link between segregated neighborhoods and schools by encouraging families to choose schools beyond their neighborhoods (Hamlin et al., 2023). This form of school choice was the original plan for magnet schools, which first opened in the state of Washington in the late 1960s (George et al, 2023). Typically located in predominantly Black neighborhoods, magnet schools were established to be academically exceptional schools that would attract white students to them because of their excellence (Goldring & Smrekar, 2000).

Being part of initial attempts to desegregate through school choice, magnet schools have steadily expanded, and in many cases, have become hubs for experimentation (George & Darling-Hammond, 2021). Today, the U.S. Department of Education reports that nearly 3,000 magnet schools serve more than 2.7 million students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b). Many magnet schools aim to attract diverse student bodies by offering special programs in STEM, fine arts, international studies, and career and technical education (Diem & Pinto, 2017). To support integration, some states give incentives to magnet schools that include cost reimbursements for reducing school segregation in an area (Finnigan et al., 2015). For high-demand magnet schools, school districts employ weighted lottery systems to allocate seats to students within and outside of districts (Ayscue et al., 2017). Despite the promise of magnet schools, heir overall contribution to racial and socioeconomic integration has been disappointing according to some scholars while the integration mission of magnet schools has arguably dissipated (George & Darling-Hammond, 2021).



***[Image description: Aerial POV of looking down at a person's shoes, with arrows pointing in different directions on asphalt ground, representing making a choice.]***

For magnet schools to advance integration, a combination of strategies that are responsive to local conditions may be needed (Diem & Pinto, 2017). For example, Booker T. Washington High School is a district-run magnet school in Tulsa, Oklahoma that has been part of the city's desegregation efforts since the early 1970s (Tulsa Public Schools, 2023). The school is regularly ranked as one of the highest performing high schools in Oklahoma. To attract students, it has an International Baccalaureate program, 25 Advanced Placement courses, and numerous

enrichment clubs and athletic activities. The school has also cultivated a diverse student body, being 28% Black; 22% Latine; 32% White; 9% multiracial; and 5% Native American (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022c). As part of achieving this balance, the district allots seats to students residing in four quadrants (comprising different sociographic compositions) of the city. The school retains 5% of seats for students based on a staff discretion process, and it conducts regular outreach to recruit families from different parts of the city (Tulsa Public Schools, 2023).



***[Image description: Young male-presenting student of Color in a wheelchair in a classroom, at a desk looking at a tablet.]***

### *Diverse-by-Design Charter Schools*

Diverse-by-design schools are a relatively new type of charter model that makes voluntary integration central to the school's mission (Seifert et al., 2022). These schools constitute a growing segment of the charter school sector with over 200 diverse-by-design charter schools now enrolling approximately 80,000 students in 27 states (Park, 2022). In the 13-state Midwest and Plains region, diverse-by-design charter schools are operating in Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin (Park, 2022).

To be considered diverse-by-design, schools typically have the following characteristics:

- A stated commitment to intentional racial and socioeconomic diversity in the school's mission
- A less than 70% majority of students of any one race/ethnicity
- Students of low-income backgrounds comprising 30-70% of total enrollment in the school

Because charter schools have a degree of operational autonomy, diverse-by-design charter schools may have the flexibility to foster diverse student populations. For example, they can establish in segregated areas or locate on the dividing boundaries of segregated neighborhoods (Potter, 2019). As a school of choice, they can recruit within and between school districts to attract a diverse student body. They often highlight the use of special pedagogical approaches (e.g., progressive pedagogy) although their strongest conceivable recruiting factor is that they market themselves as intentionally diverse (Park, 2022). As a result, families of different backgrounds who desire the opportunity for their children to attend a diverse school may naturally gravitate to diverse-by-design schools (Potter, 2019). Some of these schools have been able to produce diverse student bodies. In St. Louis, Missouri, Lafayette Preparatory is a high-performing diverse-by-design charter school that is 38% Black and 47% White within the boundaries of a school district that is 77% Black and 12% White (National

Center for Education Statistics, 2022b). The school is popular with families, having more applicants than available seats each year.



***[Image description: Five high school aged students of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds and gender expressions, standing in outside checking homework.]***

Rigorous research on diverse-by-design charter schools is lacking. Descriptive reports indicate that students who attend diverse-by-design charter schools have higher achievement, fewer absences, and higher graduation rates (Teachers College, 2021). However, this research does not account for the characteristics of families who ultimately opt for these schools, so it is difficult to determine whether the diverse-by-design model or families themselves are truly responsible for the positive outcomes of students attending these schools. Furthermore, it is unclear how far reaching these schools can be in addressing racial and socioeconomic school segregation. Diverse-by-design charter schools likely attract a particular type of family who places importance on racial and socioeconomic integration. Studies on the integration potential of these schools are mixed thus far (Jabbar & Wilson, 2018; Seifert et al, 2022). In one key study of five cities, diverse-by-design charter schools were more racially and socioeconomically diverse than comparison schools in three cities (Potter, 2019).

When reflecting on the conditions that might ultimately produce integration through diverse-by-design, magnet, and district-run specialized schools of choice, scholars offer the following recommendations (Bifulco et al., 2009; Potter, 2019; Rossell, 2003):

- New schools should locate in predominantly Black and Latine neighborhoods, but in doing so, should ideally straddle geographic lines between segregated communities.
- Academic excellence, resources, and staff should be a priority so that families have multiple reasons to select these schools.
- To avoid spreading any one group too thinly, leaders should take stock of local sociodemographic characteristics, and according to local data, establish magnet and diverse-by-design schools judiciously.
- Leaders, counselors, and staff should directly engage families by extending personalized guidance, information, and resources to them.

### *Schools of Choice Serving Specific Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Groups*

Schools of choice present families with different school models, pedagogical approaches, and missions. In the public-school sector, international, language immersion, and International Baccalaureate schools have been found to be among the most promising models for attracting a

diverse mix of families (Kotok & DeMatthews, 2018). However, there are popular public schools of choice that exist to serve a single racial or cultural group (Hamlin, 2018b). These types of schools can create somewhat homogenous student populations. Afrocentric schools are a longstanding model focused on serving a single group. More recently, Latine-serving charter schools have also seen growth nationally (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022a). Families who opt for these schools tend to report being satisfied with the educational experiences that these schools offer (Teasley et al., 2016). When overseeing complex high-choice systems, leaders may need to monitor how they are balancing opportunities for integration through voluntary choice.

Public charter schools with religious or cultural affiliation are another type of school serving a particular group. Sometimes referred to as "religious-based," "values-oriented," or "ethnocentric" schools, some of these schools take on the cultural undertones of Christianity, but others are affiliated with different religious traditions (Hamlin, 2018b). Schools with Islamic affiliation may work to be sensitive to Islamic norms by offering Arabic language courses, Islamic dress codes, gender-segregated classes, and prayer rooms (Fox et al., 2012). Aiming to instill Jewish culture, Ben Gamla, a charter school network in Florida, provides Kosher food and Hebrew language courses to students (Horning, 2013). The Sacramento Valley Charter School in California has been touted as the United States' first Punjabi School, teaching the language and traditions of Sikhism while attempting not to endorse religious practice outright (Hamlin, 2018b).

Religiously affiliated charter schools have generated considerable legal controversy, in part, because of the Establishment Clause to the Constitution (Hamlin, 2018b). The Supreme Court has generally held that public schools must not endorse a religious tradition (*Abington School District v. Schempp*, 1963; *Engel v. Vitale*, 1962). Religiously affiliated charter schools attempt to circumvent these rulings by purporting to infuse cultural values and identities as opposed to endorsing religious ones (Hamlin, 2018b). In 2023, Oklahoma approved the nation's first expressly religious charter school by allowing St. Isidore of Seville Catholic Virtual School to operate with public funding (Walsh, 2023). The legality of this publicly funded Catholic school as well as charter schools with religious undertones are likely to be tested in the courts in the near future.

### *Post-Pandemic Personalized Learning Schools*

During the pandemic, nearly two-million students left district-run public schools (Houston et al., 2023). Many migrated to schools that provide personalized learning models, including micro-schools, hybrid homeschools, and virtual schools. Increasingly, districts are offering these personalized options to families, but these types of schools could end up providing less exposure among students of different backgrounds. Full-time virtual schools are an important example. Even though full-time virtual schools have existed for 25 years, they have experienced substantial enrollment growth recently. During the pandemic, full-time virtual charter schools showed drastic enrollment gains while many school districts established

permanent virtual academies that now run parallel to their in-person classes (Dee & Murphy, 2021). Nationally, full-time virtual school students are more likely to be white, and less likely to be free- and reduced priced lunch status (Molnar et al., 2021), so virtual school growth could reduce racial and socioeconomic exposure among students. Researchers have yet to test this possibility empirically though. Rigorous studies are mostly limited to analyses of academic outcomes that consistently show student learning in full-time virtual schools is poor (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020; Hamlin et al., 2022).



***[Image description: Three middle-school aged students of Color, with different gender expressions, sitting at a table with medical masks on. Two are touching elbows in greeting.]***

Micro-schools are another model that burst onto the mainstream as families scrambled to educate their children during the height of the pandemic. Prior to this time, micro-schools had only been gradually popping up in major US cities since the late 2000s (Horn, 2015). These early micro-schools often comprised multi-age personalized learning environments of 15 or fewer students (McShane & DiPerna, 2022). This model of personalized learning in small groups has since spread to 250 schools in 31 US states (McDonald, 2022). Micro-schools charge between $4,500-10,000 per student each year, but tuition-free micro-schools are rising in number through partnerships with state departments of education and school districts (McDonald, 2022). How these schools are influencing school integration is uncertain. Very little information exists on the sociodemographic profiles of these schools.

Along with micro-schools, new forms of homeschooling are expanding. Once considered a practice restricted to white, rural, and Christian families, homeschooling now constitutes a highly diverse student population (Wang et al., 2019). Federal estimates indicate that the broader homeschool population may have doubled coming off the pandemic, reaching between 3.5 to 4 million students nationally (Hamlin & Peterson, 2022). Within this population, hybrid homeschooling is a subgroup that refers to families who educate their children at home for 2-3 days a week and send their children to a brick-and-mortar school for the remainder of the school week. Data from the US Department of Education suggests that as many as 28% of homeschoolers are hybrid homeschoolers (Cheng & Hamlin, 2023). Even if a student only attends a brick-and-mortar school part-time, hybrid homeschooling possibly generates certain types of interactions among students that conventional full-time homeschooling may not. In Texas, the nation's first public hybrid homeschool was established by Dallas Independent Public Schools in 2021 (Dallas Independent School District, 2023). Other districts may begin establishing similar

hybrid homeschool options given their increasing popularity.

If personalized school models continue to expand, activities outside of the school day have the potential to facilitate relationships and social exposure among students who might otherwise have little contact with one another. District sports teams, clubs, and extracurricular activities offer opportunities for virtual, micro-school, and homeschooled students to interact with their peers. When designing such opportunities, there are legal issues for leaders to consider. In the Midwest and Plains region, for example, Michigan, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin prohibit homeschooled students from participating in public school athletics (Coalition for Responsible Homeschooling, 2023).

## Integration in High-Choice Systems

The U.S. Department of Education places the percentage of students attending public schools of choice at 17%, of which 49% are located in cities (Wang et al., 2019). In large urban districts, school leaders are increasingly managing large portfolios of schools. These include International Baccalaureate, math and science, performing arts, aeronautical, magnet, language immersion, and career and technical schools. In the Midwest and Plains region, district leaders in cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Indianapolis, and Milwaukee manage such diverse sets of schools in high choice school systems (sometimes referred to as portfolio districts). But ensuring equal access to different schools in these types of districts can be challenging. Researchers find that racial and socioeconomic background factors are associated with how families engage in school choice (Yettick, 2016). Transportation, social networks, information, and time can become considerable constraints for families that reduce access to schools (Bulkley et al., 2022; Singer, 2022).

To mitigate this problem, common enrollment systems (also referred to as universal or unified enrollment systems) aim to streamline school selection processes in high choice public school systems. Common enrollment systems use a single application for all neighborhood, charter, magnet, specialized, and selective enrollment public schools (Gross et al., 2015). An online guide is used to give parents information on school performance data and special programs available at each school. When applying to schools, families often rank 3 to 5 of their preferred schools, whereupon officials use an algorithm to assign students to schools (Angrist, 2022). Districts also use these algorithms to introduce other factors when making school assignments.

### *Race-conscious School Assignment*

When making school assignments, more than 200 school districts have policies that consider student background characteristics in their enrollment policies (Diem, 2021; Potter & Burris, 2020). In the case of race-conscious school assignment, many states prohibit school assignment policies that are solely based on an individual's race. At the federal level, in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District*, the Supreme Court ruled that school assignment policies could not explicitly use race (e.g., racial quotas)

to assign students to schools, but suggested that districts could apply socioeconomic and other race-neutral measures that address racial imbalances indirectly (Diem & Smotherson, 2022). Guidance from the US Department of Education (2021) further states that school assignment policies can consider the racial composition of a geographic area rather than an individual student's race. A district might draw attendance boundaries according to neighborhood racial composition and race-neutral factors, such as the average household income or parental education level in a neighborhood. For legal purposes, districts may need to avoid using student race as the only defining feature of common enrollment systems, and instead, rely on a mix of non-racial and racial factors for school assignments.



***[Image description: Five backpacks in line on a race track, representing students and their different placements/competition in the schooling process.]***

### *Integration and School Assignment in School Choice Systems*

Controlled choice systems set school-level socioeconomic status (SES) targets when making school assignments (Diem & Ransford, 2017). The intention of these school-level targets is to produce equal distributions of students by race and socioeconomic status across schools (Diem, 2021). Twenty-two school districts operate controlled choice systems, in which school assignments are made according to both socioeconomic factors and parents' preferred schools. Key features of controlled choice are typically as follows:

- Seats are allocated to promote diversity across schools by using socioeconomic indicators (e.g., a common SES target for each school).
- All district-operated schools are to be schools of choice.
- Parent resource centers help families make informed decisions when ranking schools.
- Transportation services are offered to students who wish to attend schools beyond their neighborhoods.

Like controlled choice systems, districts can use weighted lotteries, combining socioeconomic factors and parent preferences when assigning students to schools. In Los Angeles, the district has previously created Zones of Choice – small geographic areas within the city that have multiple options within them (Campos & Kearns, 2023). Studies demonstrate that these controlled choice systems increase socioeconomic integration but show only modest rises in racial integration (Carlson et al., 2020; Reardon et al., 2006).

The greatest integration effects of these systems appear to be on schools that have large majorities of a single racial group (Carlson et al., 2020).

In high-choice systems, leaders conceivably need to provide multiple supports to families. Application requirements, distances to schools, and a lack of information on school programs can be barriers that might limit school access for families. Randomized controlled trials find that offering detailed information facilitates school selections among low-income and Black and Latine students participating in common enrollment systems (Cohodes et al., 2022). High-quality personalized information through family resource centers, school counselors, teachers, and district staff are likely to help. When it can be made available, transportation appears to have a great deal of influence on the integration capability of school choice (Sattin-Bajaj, 2018). In high choice systems, studies routinely find that transportation challenges are a significant impediment to school access – a barrier that is linked to socioeconomic and racial background factors (Hamlin, 2018a; Singer, 2022).

Within districts, there could be structural limitations to school integration depending on local demographic features. Even with key supports, district policies affect students who reside within districts, but national data indicate that most racial and socioeconomic segregation exists between districts rather than within them (Rivkin, 2016). Forty-three states have provisions for inter-district choice provisions in place, and 24 states mandate school districts to admit students who live within the boundaries of other school districts when seats are available (Erwin et al., 2022). Few rigorous studies have explored the effects of inter-district choice policies. The evidence that does exist suggests that inter-district choice programs have modestly increased integration between districts (Bifulco et al., 2009).

## Considerations for Leaders

School choice presents leaders with opportunities to promote voluntary integration. Creating safe, high-quality schools is an obvious approach that can attract families of different backgrounds. High-performing magnet schools are a longstanding example of how this strategy can work. Yet, leaders can appeal to multiple preferences that draw interest across racial and socioeconomic lines. Diverse-by-design or specialized school models have shown an ability to facilitate voluntary integration. When establishing these types of schools, location, accessibility, and overall academic quality could determine whether these schools increase integration or not. Other initiatives may require attention outside of the school day. If personalized school models (e.g., micro-schools, virtual schools, and hybrid homeschools) continue to grow within and outside of school districts, leaders may need new strategies to foster relationships and interactions among students in their communities. Making extracurricular activities and school facilities available to students is a strategy that districts are beginning to use toward this end.

In high choice public school systems, leaders are attempting to foster integration through common enrollment systems that account for sociodemographic background factors when making school assignments. However, to improve school access for all families, leaders may need a multi-pronged engagement strategy that includes transportation, personalized information, and consistent outreach to families. While research on emerging approaches school choice and integration is starting to provide valuable insights, it is important to consider that what makes sense in one district may not necessarily work in another. Leaders still need to understand what integration means in their communities, and subsequently, to determine what strategies are workable based on local sociodemographic factors, family preferences, and relationships in the local community. The Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center is available to guide school leaders who need relevant resources and information for their school communities.



***[Image description: Collage of seven smiling high school aged youth of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds and gender expressions.]***

# About the Author



***[Image description: Dr. Daniel Hamlin***

**Dr. Daniel Hamlin** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Oklahoma, and the MAP Center Equity Fellow for Oklahoma. His research examines the effects of school governance on non-tested measures of school performance with an emphasis on school climate, parental involvement and student safety. Hamlin's work appears in a number of scholarly journals, including the *American Educational Research Journal*, *Educational Policy*, and *Urban Education*. He has written research reports for organizations, such as *People for Education* and *Education Next*, that have received extensive coverage in the media. Hamlin has received grants from the National Science Foundation, the Ontario Ministry of Education, and the Mathematics of Information Technology and Complex Systems research organization. He has also served as a grant reviewer for the US Department of Justice. Hamlin earned his Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Policy from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto where he received the Ken Leithwood Outstanding Thesis of the Year award for his dissertation examining charter schools on non-tested outcomes in Detroit, Michigan. In the classroom, Hamlin has been recognized for instructional excellence, receiving the Derek Bok Award for Excellence in Teaching from Harvard University as well as six teaching awards from Sejong University.



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