From Open Enrollment to Controlled Choice: How Choice-Based Assignment Replaced the Neighborhood School in Cambridge, Massachusetts

Hilary J. Moss

In 1981, Cambridge, Massachusetts, became the first school district in America to replace its neighborhood schools with a "controlled choice" assignment plan, which considered parental preference and racial balance. This article considers the history preceding this decision to explore how and why some Americans became enamored with choice-based assignment at the expense of the neighborhood school in the late twentieth century. It argues that Cambridge's problematic experience with open enrollment in the 1960s and 1970s created a vocal, consumer-oriented, and politically active class of parents who became accustomed to choice and, by the early 1980s, dependent on its benefits. Moreover, controlled choice proved especially attractive in this university community because Cambridge had a constituency of well-educated, middle-income parents who possessed the social capital to identify the best educational opportunities for their children, but lacked the economic capital to use real estate to gain access to their preferred schools.

Keywords: neighborhood school, controlled choice, northern school desegregation, open enrollment, Cambridge, Massachusetts, school choice

On March 3, 1981, the Cambridge School Committee radically altered its student assignment plan with a policy known as "controlled choice." The new program eliminated the district's long-standing tradition of neighborhood schools, which had been in place since the early nineteenth century, and replaced it with an assignment plan that considered parental and sibling preferences, classroom availability,

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and racial balance. A family's address would no longer guarantee access to the neighborhood school; instead, Cambridge parents now had the right to select any district school for their children. Upon entering kindergarten, a child's parents would submit ranked preferences, which the district would then consider in conversation with schools' racial demographics when placing students. The district would also provide free transportation for all eligible children.[1]

In less than a decade, several other urban districts, primarily in Massachusetts, but also in the South and West, had followed suit, similarly replacing their neighborhood-based assignment plans with districtwide mechanisms that ostensibly empowered parents and promoted diversity, thereby ushering in a new era of choice-based student assignment. Districts adopting policies inspired by the Cambridge model included Holyoke, Massachusetts (1981); Lynn, Massachusetts (1987); Lowell, Massachusetts (1987); Seattle, Washington (1988); Boston, Massachusetts (1989); Worcester, Massachusetts (1990); Jefferson County, Kentucky (1991); Brockton, Massachusetts (1995); Berkeley, California (1995); Pinellas County, Florida (2003); and Wake County, North Carolina (2011), among others.[2]

This essay considers the events preceding the implementation of controlled choice in Cambridge to explore how and why some Americans became enamored with public school choice assignment at the expense of attachment to the neighborhood school in the late twentieth century. First, it asks why Cambridge parents and school officials, accustomed to neighborhood schools, implemented a

[1]On "controlled choice" in Cambridge, see, for example, Edward B. Fiske, "Controlled Choice in Cambridge, Massachusetts," in *Divided We Fail: Coming Together through Public School Choice*, ed. Duncan D. Chaplin and Century Foundation Task Force on the Common School (New York: Century Foundation Press, 2002), 167–208; Christine Rossell, "Controlled-Choice Desegregation Plans: Not Enough Choice, Too Much Control?," *Urban Affairs Review* 31, no. 1 (Sept. 1995), 43–76; and Charles V. Willie and Michael J. Alves, *Controlled Choice: A New Approach to School Desegregation and School Improvement* (Providence, RI: Education Alliance Press and New England Desegregation Assistance Center, Brown University, 1996).

[2]Rossell, "Controlled-Choice Desegregation Plans," 54; Douglas Judge, "Housing, Race and Schooling in Seattle: Context for the Supreme Court Decision," *Journal of Educational Controversy* 2, no. 1 (2007), https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec/vol2/iss1/9; Willie and Alves, *Controlled Choice*, 25; Sarah Sloan Wilson, "Readin', Ritin', 'Rithmetic, and Responsibility: Advocating for the Development of Controlled-Choice Student-Assignment Plans after *Parents Involved*," *Kentucky Law Journal* 97, no. 1 (Fall 2008/2009), 199–228; "8.2% of Respondents Like 'Controlled Choice,'" *Tampa Tribune*, Sept. 4, 2001, 13; and Erica Frankenberg, "Assessing Segregation under a New Generation of Controlled Choice Policies," supplement, *American Educational Research Journal* 54, no. 1 (April 2017), S219-S250.

choice-based assignment plan that weakened the link between school attendance and geography. Second, it asks how the meaning of choice-based assignment evolved in Cambridge from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s. Third, it considers how one form of choice-based assignment—open enrollment—with limited desegregation capabilities, encouraged the implementation of another—controlled choice—with greater desegregation possibilities. Finally, it reflects on how Cambridge's experiences with public school choice can help contemporary students of education policy determine which plans might encourage stratification and inequality and which might promote integration and equity.

This essay concentrates on two forms of public school choice: open enrollment and controlled choice. The term *open enrollment* refers to a choice-based assignment policy that allows families to request a transfer from one school catchment area to another.[3] Today, most states permit some form of open enrollment, which allows parents to send their children to a school outside of their home district if the district "cannot meet specific needs."[4] In Cambridge, open enrollment in the 1960s and 1970s applied only to transfers within the district from one catchment area to another. The term *controlled choice* refers to a choice-based plan where a district requires all parents to declare school preferences, which it then considers alongside other factors, like race and socioeconomic status, when making assignment decisions.[5] Prior to 2007, when the US Supreme Court outlawed the use of race in assignment decisions in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (PICS), several other districts, including Seattle and Louisville, at the center of the PICS case, experimented with controlled choice as a desegregation mechanism.[6]

The history behind Cambridge's decision to replace its neighborhood school assignment plan with controlled choice is significant for several reasons. First, it reveals how and why choice began to compete with the neighborhood school as an indispensable part of how some Americans envisioned the public school experience in the later twentieth century. Specifically, the district's decision to experiment with open enrollment in the 1960s and 1970s helped create a vocal, consumer-oriented, and politically active class of parents accustomed

[3]Gary Orfield and Erica Frankenberg, *Educational Delusions: Why Choice Can Deepen Inequality and How to Make Schools Fair* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 11.

[4]Sigal R. Ben-Porath and Michael C. Johanek, *Making Up Our Mind: What School Choice Is Really About* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 3.

[5]Orfield and Frankenberg, *Educational Delusions,* 17.

[6]Frankenberg, "Assessing Segregation," S219, S224-S225.

to choice-based assignment and, by the early 1980s, dependent on its benefits. Even though open enrollment failed to promote school desegregation in the 1970s, it did introduce families and local officials to the enticing notion of choosing schools outside of neighborhoods. In this way, a policy that catered to middle-class prerogatives in the 1960s and 1970s encouraged desegregation in the early 1980s by severing attachment to an equally problematic assignment practice: neighborhood schools.

Second, the origins of controlled choice in Cambridge illustrate the importance of structural factors and local context in creating and implementing education policies. Choice-based assignment proved especially attractive in a university community like Cambridge because the city had high housing costs and a publicly engaged constituency of highly educated, middle-income parents who possessed the social capital necessary to identify the best educational opportunities for their children, but lacked the economic capital to utilize geography to secure a similar advantage in an extremely competitive real estate market. Thus when faced with the option between choice or neighborhood schools, Cambridge parents made decisions as most parents do. They began by asking what was best for their children.

Third, Cambridge's experiences with open enrollment and controlled choice show how policies can create politics which, in turn, work to create policies. In Cambridge, choice-based assignment began as a limited, largely unsuccessful, school-based response to a state-based desegregation directive in 1965. In 1972, the district expanded its use of open enrollment to address uneven demographic growth. In consequence, some parents learned to capitalize on choice-based assignment to secure what they perceived to be educational advantages, thereby creating a constituency dependent on the mechanism.

Because it was poorly monitored and inequitably managed, open enrollment in Cambridge increased school segregation in a district that had been well integrated. As a result, its usage triggered increased state intervention, which in turn made Cambridge vulnerable to threats of court-ordered desegregation. In response, in the late 1970s, Cambridge initiated more substantial desegregation planning. Responding to pressure from parents who had utilized open enrollment, the district agreed not to return these students to their neighborhood schools, even though such a move might have alleviated segregation and thus eliminated the need for greater desegregation planning. Later, desegregation planners proposed and introduced a more radical desegregation mechanism, controlled choice, that eliminated neighborhood-based student assignments entirely.

The "Neighborhood School," "Freedom of Choice," and Open Enrollment in the 1960s and 1970s

Because northern school segregation heavily depended on housing segregation, the neighborhood school occupied an outsized place in the region's struggle for desegregation.[7] By the early 1960s, northern whites regularly rallied around and reified the institution as an ostensibly race-neutral mechanism through which to protect and perpetuate segregation. Observers of the struggle over northern school desegregation called attention to the challenge posed by school districts' reliance on geographic student assignments. "Probably the biggest single obstacle facing any local school board determined to eliminate school segregation is the idea of the neighborhood school," noted Will Maslow and Richard Cohen in 1961. "This concept has become as deeply embedded in American tradition as turkey on Thanksgiving."[8] *Time Magazine*'s portrayal of the northern school desegregation struggle in 1962 echoed Cohen and Maslow's earlier observations. It similarly described the campaign for school desegregation as inseparable from the neighborhood school. "The U.S. has long cherished the 'neighborhood school,' a concept as American as apple pie," it observed. "It is the simple idea that children are best served by their own local school—a school they can walk to; a living symbol of local roots, pride, and progress. Now this idea is under sharp attack because it means that where neighborhoods are segregated by race, schools are too."[9] Although school officials regularly redrew catchment boundaries in response to population shifts, when desegregation planners called for similar adjustments to ameliorate segregated housing patterns, some white residents responded with nostalgic, if not ahistorical, claims that attempted to naturalize the neighborhood school as a right and not a privilege, an iconic part of a mythic American past where all children walked to an ethnically homogenous institution.[10]

In the lexicon of white resistance to court-ordered busing, calls to save neighborhood schools and the rhetoric of "freedom of choice" were often twinned and mutually reinforcing, according to Matthew

[7] Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008), 185.

[8] Will Maslow and Richard Cohen, *School Segregation, Northern Style* (New York: Public Affairs Committee, 1961), 10.

[9] "Should All Northern Schools Be Integrated?" *Time Magazine,* Sept. 7, 1962, 8.

[10] Jean D. Grambs and the Massachusetts State Board of Education, *A Sociological View of the Neighborhood School Concept* (Boston: Massachusetts State Board of Education, 1964), 2–4.

Lassiter.[11] During the 1960s and 1970s, many opponents of school desegregation invoked both concepts interchangeably, rarely seeing them in tension or competition. Both functioned as defenses against court-ordered busing, unmoored from their historical origins and deployed to persuade politicians and jurists that white resistance to court-ordered assignment plans stemmed not from a negative hostility toward integration or a positive desire to protect racial privilege, but rather from a defensive, racially neutral language of rights-based grievance, Lassiter observes.[12] In effect, "freedom of choice" rhetoric and the neighborhood school became conjoined stock responses in the national discourse over busing, lobbed by those who argued that an unrestrained judiciary's reach had exceeded its constitutional grasp when it deprived tax-paying citizens of their right to use real estate to purchase public education.

But if the neighborhood school and calls for choice functioned as symbiotic and mutually reinforcing concepts in the language of white resistance to court-ordered desegregation in the 1960s and 1970s, Cambridge's decision to sacrifice one for the other highlights how "seductive" choice had become by the early 1980s.[13] According to Sigal Ben-Porath and Michael Johanek, the term *school choice* in contemporary debates generally refers to two reforms: charters and vouchers.[14] Yet historically, the term *choice* has referred to a much wider array of education reforms, including magnet schools, inter-district urban-to-suburban transfers, and experiments with alternative education. As Ben-Porath and Johanek point out, many scholars also consider "residential mobility" to be a form of school choice, noting that parents who have "money and are not subject to housing discrimination" can exercise choice simply through home-buying decisions.[15]

Several policy-oriented scholars of school choice, including Martha Minow, Gary Orfield, Erica Frankenberg, and Janelle Scott, among others, have articulated the broad appeal of the concept to many Americans—white, black, conservative, liberal, Protestant, and Catholic—throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[16]

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[11] Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 13–14.

[12] Lassiter, *Silent Majority,* 13–14, 123–36.

[13] Martha Minow, "Confronting the Seduction of Choice: Law, Education, and American Pluralism," *Yale Law Journal* 120, no. 4 (Jan. 2011), 814–48.

[14] Ben-Porath and Johanek, *Making Up Our Mind,* 1.

[15] Ben-Porath and Johanek, *Making Up Our Mind*, 3.

[16] Orfield and Frankenberg, *Educational Delusions;* Minow, "Confronting the Seduction of Choice"; and Janelle M. Scott, "School Choice as a Civil Right: The Political Construction of a Claim and Its Implications for School Desegregation," in *Integrating Schools in a Changing Society: New Policies and Legal Options for a*

Minow observes that school choice, which she defines as "explicit policies granting parents and guardians the opportunity to select from among more than one option for complying with state compulsory school laws," has held a constant and "seductive" presence in American education since the nineteenth century. While the rhetoric of choice may appear to promote freedom by providing parents with more educational options, such language may also obscure how some forms of choice can promote inequality and exacerbate segregation. In this way, she notes, school choice "can involve 'seduction,'" which she defines as "powerful attraction and appeal that can also carry diversion, obfuscation, or deceit." As examples, Minow points to particular choice mechanisms, including vouchers, charter schools, and magnet schools, that can "easily undermine integration along lines of race, class, gender, and disability—unless the school choice arrangement includes deliberate integration dimensions." She argues that choice must be paired with constraints if it is to succeed as a positive social policy, where benefits to the collective good supersede those provided to individual families.[17]

But if policy-oriented scholars like Minow have deconstructed theories of choice into categories and separated them into discrete moments defined by specific social goals, such a wide-lens approach still leaves open questions about how and why particular choice policies advanced when they did. Such scholarship points to a larger need to understand the historical evolution of choice. How did experiments with certain forms of choice contribute to the development of others? To this end, Nicholas Kryczka demonstrates how magnet schools in 1960s and 1970s Chicago allowed "administrators, parents, and activists to imagine what a future without the neighborhood school might look like and opened an infant marketplace of school options in the previously closed system." And yet, Kryczka acknowledges that "linking these urban histories of school desegregation to intellectual histories of the choice and accountability movement that followed is a project in need of continued exploration."[18] In other words, he notes, historical work remains to better understand how past experiments with choice have contributed to the ubiquity of choice in the current reform moment. How do school districts engage with and remake theories of choice into policies to advance their own ends?

Multiracial Generation, ed. Erica Frankenberg and Elizabeth DeBray (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 32–52.

[17] Minow, "Confronting the Seduction of Choice," 816–17, 847–848.

[18] Nicholas Kryczka, "Building a Constituency for Racial Integration: Chicago's Magnet Schools and the Prehistory of School Choice," *History of Education Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (Feb. 2019), 1, 34.

Describing choice as "seductive," as Minow does, presupposes that theories drive policy; but for policies to be enacted—for ideas to make their way into systems—individuals and communities must be faced with particular exigencies and experiences that make ideas appear attractive, enticing, and useful. Understanding how one form of choice-based assignment—open enrollment—encouraged the development of another—controlled choice—goes to the heart of the Cambridge story.

In the decade after *Brown v. Board of Education*, in an effort to avoid court-ordered desegregation, many segregated school districts in the South experimented with choice-based plans that offered the appearance of compliance without substantive changes to racial attendance patterns.[19] In theory, these mechanisms offered all children the chance to exit segregated schools. Yet, in practice, most plans stalled and subverted federal pressure to desegregate. In many cities, they also extended the timeline for desegregation by providing those with means the time and opportunity to decamp to the suburbs.[20] In Richmond, Virginia, for example, under its 1966 freedom-of-choice plan, few, if any, whites enrolled their children in predominantly black schools, and "thus the burden of integration fell entirely on black students and their parents," according to James Ryan.[21] Few black parents transferred their children either, and those who did faced significant obstacles. Richmond provided no transportation, and the city's residentially segregated housing patterns ensured that black children usually did not live within walking distance of white schools.[22] Likewise, Greensboro and Charlotte, North Carolina; Chattanooga, Tennessee; and Louisville, Kentucky, similarly utilized freedom-of-choice plans that achieved little desegregation.[23]

By the mid-1960s, the federal government began to place limits on southern districts that wished to use freedom-of-choice plans to comply with court desegregation orders. In 1965, relying upon the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which empowered the federal government to initiate desegregation lawsuits and provided funding for school

[19] Orfield and Frankenberg, *Educational Delusions,* 9–10.

[20] James E. Ryan, *Five Miles Away, A World Apart: One City, Two Schools, and the Story of Educational Opportunity in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 50–55.

[21] Ryan, *Five Miles Away*, 50–51.

[22] Ryan, *Five Miles Away*, 50.

[23] William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 158–59; and Genevieve Siegel-Hawley, *When the Fences Come Down: Twenty-First Century Lessons from Metropolitan School Desegregation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 61.

desegregation, the federal government articulated a set of "minimum civil rights standards for choice," that included free transportation, fair treatment for transfer students, an equal chance to submit requests, a guarantee that districts would make good faith efforts to honor all requests, and the denial of transfers that increased segregation.[24] Finally, in 1968, in *Green vs. New Kent County,* the Supreme Court struck down the use of open enrollment and other choice-based transfer plans as desegregation mechanisms. While the Court did not prohibit using these plans to promote desegregation, it did conclude that absent evidence of effectiveness, they did not meet the mandate of *Brown.*[25]

But even after *Green,* in districts without judicial findings of de jure segregation and therefore not subject to the *Brown* decision, use of open enrollment persisted. In 1974, Gary Orfield wrote to Massachusetts governor Francis Sargent, imploring him to stop relying on freedom-of-choice plans like open enrollment to combat school segregation. "This plan has been tried in literally thousands of communities," he observed. "I am not aware of a single school district in which it is succeeding in disestablishing a dual school system or in producing any significant integration."[26] By 1978, Orfield had identified numerous examples of northern school boards that, according to federal courts, had adopted problematic voluntary transfer plans that empowered white children to leave predominately black schools without encouraging black children to enter predominately white institutions. Districts Orfield cited included Boston, Massachusetts; Buffalo, New York; Cincinnati and Cleveland, Ohio; Indianapolis, Indiana; Kalamazoo, Michigan; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Omaha, Nebraska; and Pasadena and Oxnard, California, among others.[27]

Residential Inequality in Cambridge

Narrative sources and spatial analysis suggest that Cambridge's experience with open enrollment differed from that of many communities in that it created segregation in a district that had been well integrated.[28] As Chris Rasmussen demonstrates in his study of New

[24] Orfield and Frankenberg, *Educational Delusions,* 10–11.

[25] *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County,* 391 U.S. 439 (1968).

[26] Gary Orfield to Francis Sargent, May 29, 1974, folder, "Statements on Gov. Sargent's Amendments," Massachusetts Black Legislative Caucus, Legislative Files, RG CT7/1148X, Massachusetts State Archives.

[27] Gary Orfield, *Must We Bus? Segregated Schools and National Policy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1978), 21.

[28] This paper utilizes block-level census information. Census data for 1960 and 1970 is available from the National Historic Geographic Information System but is primarily limited to the census tract scale, on average about 3,500 people and

Brunswick, New Jersey, Cambridge was not the only northern school district to become more segregated in the "so-called 'era of integration.'"[29] But where New Brunswick High School grew increasingly segregated because of efforts by white suburbanites in neighboring North Brunswick to separate and build their own high school, in Cambridge, segregation increased because of a poorly designed policy that allowed individual parents to pursue educational advantages while remaining in the district and retaining access to the amenities of urban living. Open enrollment did not appear to incentivize white flight from Cambridge, but it did provide savvy parents, many of whom were well-educated and white, with the means to escape schools that they perceived as inferior, thus encouraging segregation.

As was typical of a neighborhood assignment system, prior to the introduction of controlled choice in 1981, Cambridge used place of residence to determine school assignments. The School Committee partitioned the city into separate attendance zones or catchment areas, and altered the boundaries periodically to adjust for changes in population and enrollment. In the mid-1960s, about two-thirds of the city's children attended public schools while the remainder opted for private or parochial education.[30]

Like the majority of school systems that tied school attendance to home addresses, rents and home values fluctuated with perceptions of school quality. In the early 1960s, just over a hundred thousand people lived in the city, which occupied a 6.2 square mile area adjacent to the Charles River.[31] Cambridge operated two public high schools, two vocational schools, and fifteen neighborhood elementary schools (see Figure 1). As of 1960, the three districts with the highest average household incomes, Russell, Peabody, and Agassiz, respectively, lay in

comparable in size to the school attendance areas. But block-level data, describing an average of about 150 people, can be aggregated to provide more precise information about the demographic composition of each attendance area. The Census Bureau has published some of this data with a focus on housing, which Andy Anderson and Josephine Fisher digitized. By using block-level data, one can significantly increase the historical accuracy. While labor-intensive, this strategy provides a more exact sense of the demographic composition of both the city and its school districts and allows one to analyze school attendance changes at the level at which they occur: the city block.

[29] Chris Rasmussen, "Creating Segregation in the Era of Integration: School Consolidation and Local Control in New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1965–1976," *History of Education Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (Nov. 2017), 481.

[30] *Report of the Subcommittee on Cambridge Schools of the M.I.T. Faculty Environment Committee*, 1965, Cambridge Schools folder, box 60, ASC Series 4, Archives and Special Collections, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

[31] Cambridge Planning Board, *Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1965* (n.p.: Cambridge Planning Board, 1965).

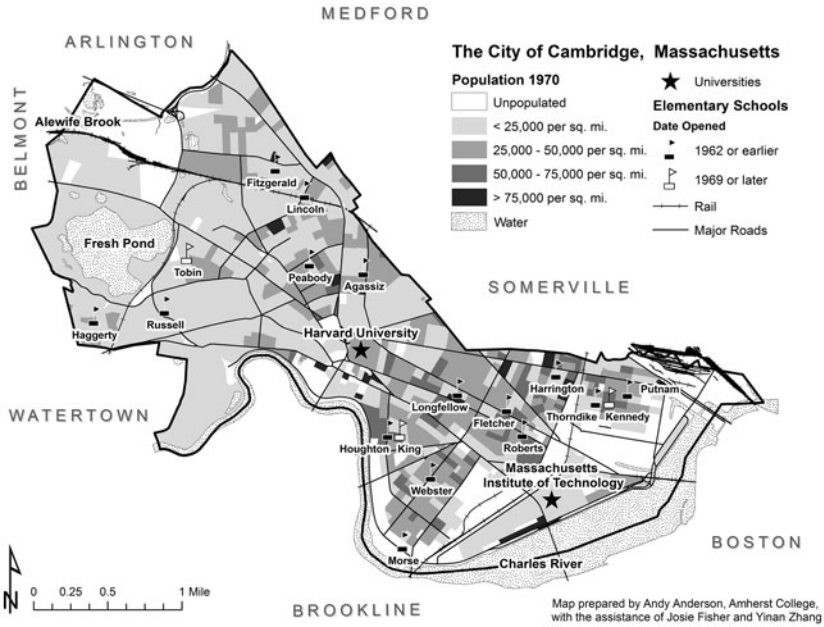

Figure 1. Cambridge elementary schools and population, circa 1970. Cambridge was first settled in 1630 near where Harvard would be established six years later. The southeast, near the Charles River, and the northwest, near Alewife Brook, became industrial centers in the nineteenth century; MIT, founded in 1861, moved to its current location on landfill in 1916.

Sources: Data from Cambridge Public School District; City of Cambridge Geographic Information System; and US Bureau of the Census, *Census of Housing: 1970, Block Statistics, Final Report HC(3)-108, Boston, Mass. Urbanized Area* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971).

the western part of the city (see table 1). The three districts with the lowest average household incomes, Harrington, Houghton, Thorndike, lay in the east.

Some Cambridge residents understood household income as a proxy for school quality. In 1965, individuals affiliated with Harvard and MIT prepared a guidebook to advise faculty, students, and staff about public schooling in Cambridge. It noted:

> Although the curriculum is basically the same in all schools, each individual school will necessarily reflect in some degree the character and population of its school district. Districts with a high percentage of stable homes are likely to have schools with few problems and more interested parents… The few districts of the city where there are many unstable

Table 1. Calculated average income by school district, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1965

School district	Average income
Russell	$14,339.69
Peabody	$12,250.89
Agassiz	$10,520.23
Haggerty	$8,881.98
Lincoln	$8,714.56
Longfellow	$8,337.93
Fitzgerald	$8,211.01
Webster	$7,613.17
Morse	$7,460.60
Putnam-Gore St.	$7,314.95
Roberts	$7,252.42
Fletcher	$7,239.24
Harrington	$6,960.14
Houghton	$6,959.93
Thorndike	$6,871.54

Source: Josephine Fisher, "Elementary School Construction in Cambridge, 1960–1979" (unpublished paper, 2011), 20.

> homes, high delinquency rates, etc., are likely to have schools with more culturally deprived children and children with special problems.[32]

The report used school facilities and the proportion of students labeled as "academically talented" as markers of educational quality. It then recommended parents purchase homes or rent in certain neighborhoods to secure the best education.

As was customary in districts with neighborhood assignment plans, many parents utilized real estate to secure access to particular schools. In the late 1970s, for example, Annemarie Bestor relocated out of the Tobin district and into the Peabody district so her youngest daughter could be close to friends and have access the Peabody's Academically Talented program.[33] Brendan and Patricia Sullivan

[32] *Report of the Subcommittee on Cambridge Schools*, 5.

[33] Annemarie Bestor, "Likes Tobin," *Cambridge Chronicle,* Sept. 30, 1976, 4; Annemarie Bestor to Project SPAN, May 1, 1980, Deseg Plan 80/History folder, in the Alice Wolf Papers, in possession of the author (hereafter cited as Wolf Papers).

purchased their home in the Peabody district in 1972, believing they were "buying not only a house but a neighborhood."[34] The Sullivans also believed the Cambridge School Department had decided to make the Peabody School the "showboat" of its system, perhaps because of its proximity to Harvard University.

Two schools in particular, Agassiz and Peabody, proved especially desirable. Not surprisingly, housing prices in these catchment areas remained some of the city's highest (see Figure 2). As of 1977, in East Cambridge, for example, home to the Harrington, the Putnam, and the Thorndike Schools, the average home price was $19,358. In the Agassiz neighborhood, the average home price, $66,475, was more than three times higher.[35] Parents attempting to use real estate to gain access to the Peabody or the Agassiz Schools clearly paid a premium. Not surprisingly, these districts also had some of the highest average incomes in the city (see table 1).

Open Enrollment and Desegregation in Cambridge

In the mid-1950s and early 1960s, Cambridge, like many northern districts, had largely avoided controversy over desegregation. At the federal level, administrators primarily concentrated on southern school districts with findings of de jure segregation. In 1965, however, officials in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare set out to capitalize on Title I in the recently passed Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Civil Rights Act (1964), which together promoted northern school desegregation. Title I attempted to bridge the achievement gap by funneling federal dollars into cash-starved districts with large numbers of low-income children.[36]

If Title I operated as a federal carrot in school desegregation policy, the Massachusetts Racial Imbalance Act (RIA), passed in 1965 and the most far-reaching school desegregation legislation in the nation, operated as a stick.[37] Like Title I, the RIA channeled money into districts pursuing desegregation. It also directed districts to conduct a racial census.[38] Under the RIA, any school with a student body more

[34]Irene Sege, "Families Respond to School Desegregation Plans," *Cambridge Chronicle,* March 27, 1980, 4.

[35]"Cambridge's Home Prices – up, up, up From East-West," *Cambridge Chronicle,* Dec. 7, 1978, 1.

[36]Adam Nelson, *The Elusive Ideal: Equal Educational Opportunity and the Federal Role in Boston's Public Schools, 1950–1985* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 61–62.

[37]Christine H. Rossell and Charles L. Glenn, "The Cambridge Controlled Choice Plan," *Urban Review* 20, no. 2 (June 1988), 80.

[38]"Racial Count to Be Taken in Public Schools," *Cambridge Chronicle,* Sept. 16, 1965, 18.

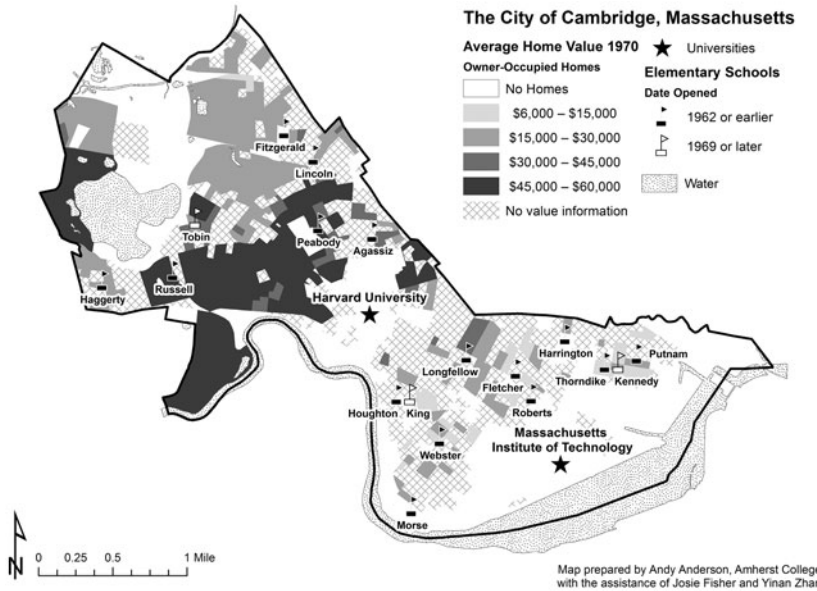

Figure 2. Cambridge elementary schools and home values, circa 1970. Closest to Harvard University, the Peabody and Agassiz districts attracted parents with the highest incomes and contained the city's highest housing costs.

Sources: Cambridge Public School District; City of Cambridge Geographic Information System; and US Bureau of the Census, *Census of Housing: 1970, Block Statistics, Final Report HC(3)-108, Boston, Mass, Urbanized Area* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971).

than 50 percent "non-white" became labeled as "racially imbalanced." Schools with student bodies less than 30 percent "non-white" were considered "racially isolated." The law relied on teachers to classify students and provided no formal definition of "*non-white*", although the term came to refer to students identified as "black, Asian American, Native American … Cape Verdean, and Hispanic."[39] The RIA empowered the Massachusetts Department of Education to require school districts with imbalanced schools to develop a desegregation plan or lose state aid. Districts could choose from a range of modest mechanisms, like open enrollment, as well as more far-reaching ones, like redrawing attendance boundaries, closing schools, or

[39]Charles Glenn to Commissioner, Dec. 5, 1978, folder "SPAN-Org. Documentation" Box 2, Glenn Koocher Papers in possession of the author (hereafter cited as Koocher Papers).

building new ones.[40] Districts that opted to construct new schools could receive state aid to do so.[41]

Information about the racial composition of Cambridge's school districts did not become publicly available until the mid-1960s, when the city began to investigate racial imbalance in accordance with the RIA. In 1965, Massachusetts identified four cities with racially imbalanced schools: Boston, Springfield, New Bedford, and Cambridge. Boston and Springfield, with forty-six and seven imbalanced schools, respectively, proved the most problematic. Cambridge, by contrast, contained just one imbalanced school, the Houghton School, and it just barely met the state criteria for imbalance with a "non-white" population of just 51 percent (see Figure 3).[42] Regardless, the state directed the district to desegregate.

In November 1965, the Cambridge School Committee complied with the RIA by submitting a three-tiered plan to the state. First, it observed that because school facilities at the Houghton School lagged behind those of other Cambridge elementary schools, it hoped to construct a new school for students in the Riverside neighborhood at the "earliest possible" date. Second, it agreed to redraw district boundaries lines to more evenly distribute "non-white" students as soon as it settled on a location for the new Houghton School. Finally, it agreed to adopt an "open enrollment" policy as an "interim measure" until the new Houghton School was built.[43] Cambridge's open enrollment policy applied only to the Houghton School. Parents of "non-white" students could request a transfer "in writing" to another school, contingent upon available space. Likewise, white students who attended another school in the district could request a transfer into the

[40] Rossell and Glenn, "The Cambridge Controlled Choice Plan," 80–81.

[41] Massachusetts Racial Imbalance Act of 1965, St. 1965, ch. 641. *Acts and Resolves Passed by the General Court of Massachusetts in the Year 1965* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1965), 414–16.

[42] "Cambridge Acts on Imbalance," *Boston Globe*, April 22, 1965, 2; and "Tobin Recommends Plan for Relieving Racial Imbalance," *Cambridge Chronicle,* Oct. 21, 1965, 1. Figure 3 shows the population demographics of the entire catchment area, not just demographics of the children who attend a particular elementary school. The population demographics of a catchment area could be different than the population demographics of a school as children attending private schools would not be included in a public school's demographics.

[43] Minutes of the Cambridge School Committee, "Policy Statement re: Report of the Advisory Committee on Racial Imbalance and Education," April 20, 1965, Cambridge School Committee Minutes, Cambridge Public Library (hereafter cited as Cambridge School Committee Minutes).

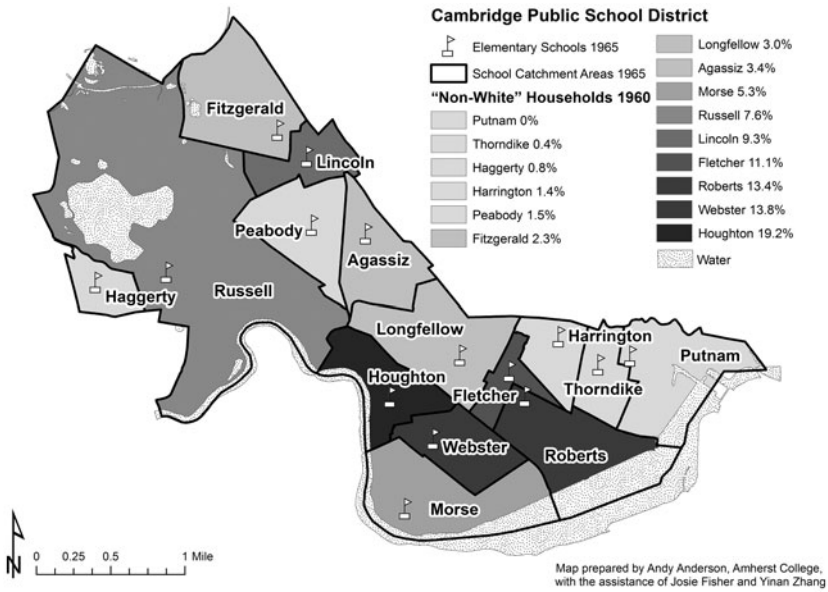

Figure 3. Total population residing in Cambridge public elementary school catchments and "non-white" household demographics, 1960–1965. Located in the Riverside neighborhood, the Houghton School's African American population remained the city's highest and violated Massachusetts' Racial Imbalance Act. The data for each catchment area is aggregated from block-level housing information, where only the race of the head of household is published.

Sources: Cambridge Public School District; City of Cambridge Geographic Information System; and US Bureau of the Census, *US Census of Housing 1960, Vol. III, City Blocks, Series HC(3), No. 183, Boston, Mass.* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1961).

Houghton School. The School Committee would transfer no student without parental consent.[44]

Although the School Committee agreed to follow the state directive to remedy statistical imbalance at the Houghton School, individual members rejected the premise that such a finding correlated with inferior educational opportunity. Rather than viewing the Houghton School as segregated, School Committee member Barbara Ackermann considered the school to be "an excellent example of

[44]"Plan for Relieving 'Racial Imbalance' Wins Speedy Okay," *Cambridge Chronicle,* Nov. 18, 1965, 1; Cambridge School Committee Minutes, Oct. 19, 1965; Robert L. Levey, "Cambridge School Balance Plan OK'd," *Boston Globe,* Nov. 24, 1965, 4; and John M. Tobin, "Open Enrollment," SPAN Org. Documentation folder, box 2, Koocher Papers.

integrated education at its best."[45] Gustave M. Solomons, the sole African American member of the School Committee, questioned whether statistical imbalance at Houghton even required remediation. He believed that few "Houghton children [would] want to change" and that the school might have to "bring in some white children to relieve the imbalance."[46]

Solomons's predictions proved correct. As of 1972, only three Houghton children had transferred into another school and only three or four white children had transferred into Houghton.[47] Apart from implementing a limited open enrollment measure, the School Committee did little else to address statistical imbalance at Houghton. For example, although it agreed to alter district boundary lines in 1965, it repeatedly postponed this decision. In 1965, members had stated that they would redistrict after the administration settled on a location for a new school in the Houghton district. Yet after the city selected a site, Superintendent John Tobin postponed any decision about redistricting.[48] In 1973, even after building a new facility, administrators still had not altered attendance boundaries.[49]

While School Committee members never spoke publicly about why the district did not follow through with its 1965 plans, it is clear at least some members did not feel compelled to do so. Neither state officials nor Houghton parents placed much pressure on the district to address statistical imbalance prior to the late 1970s. In the late 1960s, the Massachusetts Bureau of Equal Education Opportunity (BEEO), the body charged with enforcing the RIA, concentrated its efforts on Springfield and Boston, the two cities with the most severe segregation problems. BEEO representatives continued to send annual notices to the Cambridge School Committee advising members that the district remained in violation of the RIA.[50] The Cambridge School Committee continued to rely on open enrollment to address statistical imbalance at the Houghton School, despite the fact few parents utilized the policy. In December 1968, Cambridge school superintendent Edward Conley, who had replaced John Tobin in June 1968, assured Massachusetts Board of Education commissioner Owen B. Kiernan

[45] "Plan for Relieving 'Racial Imbalance'."

[46] "Plan for Relieving 'Racial Imbalance'."

[47] Harvard Center for Law and Education, *A Study of the Massachusetts Racial Imbalance Act* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Center for Law and Education, 1972), 519.

[48] Cambridge School Committee Minutes, Feb. 2, 1965; and Edward Conley to Owen B. Kiernan, Dec. 17, 1968, folder "SPAN Org. Documentation," Box 2, Koocher Papers.

[49] Ellen S. Jackson to Alflorence Cheatham, Nov. 30, 1973, folder "SPAN Org. Documentation," Box 2, Koocher Papers.

[50] Cambridge School Committee Minutes, Dec. 6, 1966.

that the district was "making every effort" to correct racial imbalance at the Houghton School and called attention to its "open enrollment policy."[51] In 1969, the state replied by "commend[ing]" the district for complying "with the letter and the spirit of the Racial Imbalance Act."[52]

Notably, residents of the Riverside neighborhood, which fed into the Houghton School and later the King School, also applied little, if any, pressure on the city to address racial imbalance. To the contrary, many parents understood the school's demography as positive evidence of diversity rather than as a negative problem necessitating intervention.[53] The Houghton School was located in the Riverside neighborhood, which housed a disproportionate number of Cambridge's small black population. As of 1960, just 5.3 percent of Cambridge residents citywide identified as black. By 1970, that number had increased modestly to just 6.8 percent.[54] In January 1966, members of the Riverside community assembled in response to state findings of imbalance at the Houghton School. Like School Committee members Ackermann and Solomons, they also described the school as a "model of integration. The people of the Houghton area are aware that many persons in Greater Boston, New England and across the nation believe that a successful, integrated school is an impossibility." And yet they maintained that "Houghton is not a minor embarrassment but a *national resource* [emphasis in original]."[55]

At the same time that few, if any, African Americans in Cambridge pressed the district to address racial imbalance at Houghton, others,

[51]Edward Conley to Owen B. Kiernan, Dec. 17, 1968, SPAN Org. Documentation folder, Koocher Papers.

[52]Cambridge School Committee Minutes, Jan. 21, 1969.

[53]The city did not begin to record the racial breakdown of its elementary school population until the mid-1960s, when the Racial Imbalance Act mandated this data collection. As of 1965, five schools - Putnam, Thorndike, Haggerty, Harrington, and Fitzgerald - were classified as "Racially Isolated." They had a "non-white" population of less than 5 percent. Houghton, the only school classified as "Racially Imbalanced," had a non-white population of 55.1 percent. Such numbers suggest that as of 1965, Cambridge's "non-white" elementary school population was unevenly distributed throughout the city, regardless of whether its individual schools violated the RIA. "Tobin Recommends Plan for Relieving Racial Imbalance," *Cambridge Chronicle*, Oct. 21, 1965, 1–2.

[54]*Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals By Race, 1790–1990, and By Hispanic Origin, 1790 to 1990, For Large Cities And Other Places in the United States* (Washington, D.C., U.S. Census Bureau, 2005), https://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0076/twps0076.html.

[55]John Herzog to Francis Duehay, Jan. 4, 1966, Francis Duehay Papers, School Committee folder 2/6, box 5, series III, Cambridge Public Library (cited hereafter as Duehay Papers).

including high school students and their parents, were calling on the district to address other evidence of educational inequality, particularly inequitable hiring practices and the absence of cultural diversity in the curriculum. In response to Martin Luther King's assassination, the School Committee renamed the Houghton School the Martin Luther King Jr. School in April 1968.[56] A few weeks later, on May 1, 1968, more than 150 members of an organization called the Cambridge Black Community marched to city hall and presented thirty-two demands, none of which referenced statistical imbalance in the elementary schools.[57] Likewise, on January 10, 1969, student members of the Afro American Club at Cambridge Latin High School sponsored a sit-in to protest a range of inequities, including cultural insensitivity in the curriculum.[58] To support their efforts, adults organized a group called Concerned Black Parents, which pressed the district to expand course offerings in African and African American history, to curb racially motivated violence at the high school, and to increase the number of black faculty and administrators.[59] Throughout 1970, parents and students continued to protest concerns relating to social justice, affirmative action, student safety, and curricular diversity and inclusion, particularly at the city's two high schools. They did not ask the School Committee to more aggressively implement elementary school desegregation.[60]

At the state level, Board of Education officials, primarily focused on efforts to stall and subvert desegregation in Boston, voted on October 27, 1970, to modify Massachusetts' open enrollment policy to ensure that school districts allowed only transfers that decreased

[56]"New Houghton School to Be Named for Doctor King," *Cambridge Chronicle-Sun,* April 11, 1968, 1.

[57]Barbara Hayes Buell, "Her Personal Reflections on the Grievances of the Black Community," *Cambridge Chronicle-Sun,* May 16, 1968, 7; "Black Community Group Meets with Council Tonite," *Cambridge Chronicle-Sun,* May 9, 1968, 1–2; and "Black Community, Council in Exchange of Views," *Cambridge Chronicle-Sun,* May 16, 1968-1-2.

[58]Committee to Study Means of Improving Race Understanding in Our Community, *Report of the Committee on Race and Culture*, May 12, 1969, Wolf Papers; and Ray Shurtleff, "Crisis Management in an Urban School District: A Case Study" (EdD diss., Northeastern University, 1985), 25.

[59]"Racial and Ethnic Issues Are Aired at School Board," *Cambridge Chronicle,* April 9, 1970, 1; and Cambridge School Committee Minutes, April 18, 1970.

[60]"Black Deputy School Supt. Asked of Board," *(Boston) Record American,* May 7, 1970, 28; "School Board Sit-In Take Over Averted," *(Boston) Record American,* June 3, 1970, 34; "Cambridge Appoints Black Teachers," *Bay State Banner* (Boston), June 11, 1970, 2; "Black History Courses Expanded in Cambridge Public Schools," *Bay State Banner* (Boston), Nov. 5, 1970, 12; and "Black Parents and Teachers Enjoy Buffet," *Cambridge Chronicle,* Dec. 3, 1970, 2.

racial imbalance.[61] One year later, on November 23, 1971, Massachusetts' commissioner of education, Neil Sullivan, wrote to the Cambridge mayor, Alfred Vellucci, informing him that the state Board of Education remained concerned about racial imbalance at the King School, whose "non-white" population was 50.7 percent as of 1970.[62] Frank Frisoli, superintendent of Cambridge Public Schools, responded by expressing his personal frustration that slight statistical imbalance, as defined by the state, connoted segregation. Nonetheless, he assured the state that Cambridge would consider including more "Academically Talented Classes," which he believed would encourage more parents to request transfers.[63]

On June 14, 1972, the Cambridge School Committee voted to replace Frisoli with the city's first black superintendent, Alflorence Cheatham, who had been deputy school superintendent of schools in Chicago.[64] Three weeks later, on July 5, 1972, the committee unanimously voted to expand its open enrollment policy. While the 1965 policy applied only to students transferring in or out of the Houghton School, now any district student could petition to attend any district school, provided space was available and the transfer did not increase segregation.[65]

From School Committee minutes and newspaper coverage, it is unclear exactly why Cambridge officials decided to expand open enrollment to the entire district. When announcing the new policy, School Committee member Donald A. Fantini declined to answer questions about the School Committee's rationale. Instead, he praised the new policy because it would offer "a great deal of flexibility among the schools."[66]

Most likely, School Committee members decided to expand open enrollment not in response to the RIA, but rather because it served as a low-cost, low-impact solution to another problem: uneven demographic growth, which had created overcrowding in some schools

[61] Neil V. Sullivan to Frank Frisoli, Nov. 16, 1970, SPAN Org. Documentation folder, box 2, Koocher Papers.

[62] Neil Sullivan to Alfred Velucci, Nov. 23, 1971, SPAN Org. Documentation folder, box 2, Koocher Papers.

[63] Frank J. Frisoli to Rae Cecilia Kipp, Dec. 6, 1971, SPAN Org. Documentation folder, box 2, Koocher Papers.

[64] Stephen Curwood, "Cambridge School Supt. Selected," *Bay State Banner* (Boston), June 22, 1972, 1.

[65] Cambridge School Committee Minutes, July 5, 1972; John R. McCarthy, "Open Enrollment Policy," Aug. 9, 1975, Superintendent's Recommendation #76-053, Cambridge School Committee, Cambridge Public Schools.

[66] "Change Allows Pupils to Attend City Schools Outside Their District," *Cambridge Chronicle,* Aug. 17, 1972, 3.

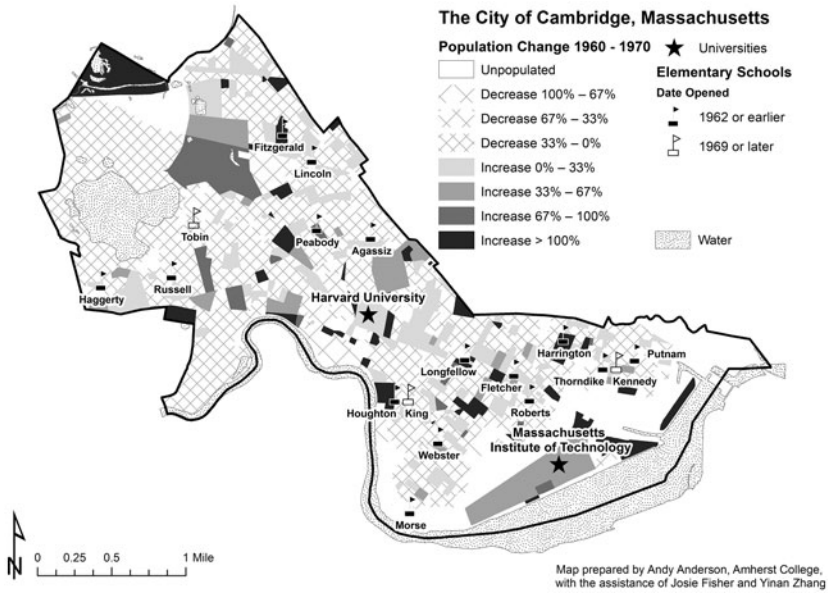

Figure 4. Cambridge elementary schools and population change, 1960–1970. Population changes occurred unevenly throughout the city and were often driven by the prerogatives of Harvard and MIT.

Sources: Cambridge Public School District; City of Cambridge Geographic Information System; US Bureau of the Census, *US Census of Housing 1960, Vol. III, City Blocks, Series HC(3), No. 180, Boston, Mass.* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1961; and US Bureau of the Census, *US Census of Housing 1970, Block Statistics, Final Report HC(3)-108, Boston, Mass. Urbanized Area* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971).

and under-enrollment in others (see Figure 4).[67] It is also possible that uneven demographic growth contributed to the problem of racial imbalance in the elementary schools. Thus the decision to expand open enrollment served several purposes: it provided the city with a mechanism to increase flexibility in student assignment without necessitating the development of a more focused integration policy.

Like many northern and midwestern cities, Cambridge's population had been shrinking steadily since the 1930s.[68] But population loss had not occurred uniformly. Many neighborhoods in the western section of the city had flourished, buoyed by an expanding science and

[67]Cambridge School Committee Minutes, "Task Force on School Overcrowding in North Cambridge," March 21, 1972.

[68]Cambridge (Mass) Planning Board, *Suggested Goals for a City Plan for Cambridge*, Nov. 1965, 3–7, folder 13, Box 34, ASC205-Series III – MIT. Planning Office, Archives and Special Collections, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

technology industry that attracted young professionals. By contrast, many neighborhoods in the east had lost residents as industrial work disappeared. While the city added nearly twelve thousand jobs between 1959 and 1964, many in science and technology, manufacturing jobs were vanishing. Rents also increased sharply during this period, leaving many long-standing working-class residents, particularly those residing in the east, feeling as if they were at the mercy of the city's two research universities, Harvard and MIT. In consequence, school enrollments in Cambridge also declined, but not uniformly.[69] In western Cambridge, the more affluent section of the city, they fell by just 4 percent between 1950 and 1960. But in eastern Cambridge, which was comparatively less well-off, they fell by almost 20 percent.[70] As a result, schools in the east often suffered from underenrollment, while those in the west struggled to accommodate every student.

Although desegregation pressures probably did not drive the School Committee to expand its use of open enrollment, in practice, the policy exacerbated racial imbalance. Open enrollment in Cambridge generally advantaged families with the means and the motivation to navigate the system. Because the School Committee did not adequately advertise the policy change, failed to explain how to take advantage of it, and did not provide transportation to open enrollment students, many middle- and upper-class parents exercised their freedom to choose far more—and sooner—than their low-income counterparts.

Despite a dramatic change to assignment procedures, just as it had in 1965, the School Committee did not do much to educate parents about their new privileges. In August 1972, just a month before the new school year was to start, school officials released a small announcement, only three sentences long, in the *Cambridge Chronicle,* which succinctly advised parents that "an open enrollment policy shall be instituted in all grammar schools."[71] In 1979, Gerald Kohn, an educational consultant hired to help the city create a new desegregation plan, estimated that upwards of 90 percent of parents were probably "not even aware" the transfer policy existed.[72]

For those who were aware of the policy, another obstacle remained. Parents who wished to enroll their children outside their

[69]Cambridge Planning Board, *Suggested Goals for a City Plan for Cambridge.*

[70]Cambridge Planning Board, *Suggested Goals for a City Plan for Cambridge.*

[71]"Change Allows Pupils to Attend City Schools Outside Their District."

[72]"Summary of Area Racial Balance Advisory Committee Meeting," May 21, 1979, Racial Balance folder, Wolf Papers.

home districts were required to arrange their own transportation.[73] Such a requirement placed added pressure on working parents, who lacked the time to transport their children, and on low-income parents, who could not afford the added costs. In recognition of this inequity, Massachusetts passed a law in 1975 that ordered districts with open enrollment plans to pay for transfer students' transportation. Cambridge did not comply.[74] In June 1976, Saundra Graham, the first African American woman elected to the Cambridge City Council, expressed her concern to state education secretary Paul Parks about Cambridge's use of open enrollment.[75] She alleged that "although the city has an open enrollment policy (freedom to attend the school of one's choice) students from poor families are often unable to take full advantage of this opportunity because the School Department does not provide transportation for them."[76] Cambridge's current school superintendent, William Lannon, acknowledged Graham's claim had merit, yet he declined to make any recommendation until he could hear from a task force created to study the problem.[77]

The school district also kept limited records of how the transfer policy affected racial balance, despite formal state requirements to do so. In 1973, Charles Glenn, commissioner of the Massachusetts BEEO, charged with enforcing the RIA, contacted the Cambridge Public Schools for information about the racial characteristics of open enrollment transfers. The assistant superintendent of elementary schools, Richard Woodward, replied simply, "We do not have any record of the information you seek concerning white and non-white participants in open enrollment."[78]

Moreover, School Committee members permitted hundreds of transfer requests that increased segregation. By the late 1970s, some parents began to protest the inequitable nature of open enrollment. In 1979, five Webster School families published an editorial in the *Cambridge Chronicle* that called attention to how the policy disproportionately benefited white and middle-class students. They observed:

[73]"Open Enrollment Begins," *Cambridge Chronicle,* Sept. 20, 1973, 11.

[74]Muriel Heiberger to Gerald Kohn, Jan. 30, 1979, "Summary of Meeting with State Department of Education Bureau of Equal Education Opportunity Jan. 26, 1979," Desegregation (SPAN) folder, Koocher Papers.

[75]Paul Richard, "Graham May Sue the City Over Affirmative Action Concerns," *Cambridge Chronicle,* June 24, 1976, 2.

[76]Richard, "Graham May Sue the City."

[77]Richard, "Graham May Sue the City."

[78]Richard G. Woodward to Charles Glenn, Jan. 8, 1974, SPAN Org. Documentation folder, Koocher Papers.

> For years white students have been allowed to open enroll out of the Webster district in defiance of the state's policies regarding desegregation of schools. The "few good spots" in our system have in the past been available only to students whose parents were aware of the school system's open enrollment policy. Many parents of minority and poor students were unable to use open enrollment either because they were not informed of the opportunities for open enrollment, because they were discouraged from applying, or because there was no transportation available for students who used open enrollment.[79]

As of 1978, according to the Cambridge Public Schools, it had signed off on more than a thousand transfers that violated the RIA.[80] In 1979, Glenn determined that more than 46 percent of open enrollment transfers in Cambridge—382 of 822—exacerbated racial imbalance.[81]

Not surprisingly, parents seeking to transfer vastly preferred two schools: Peabody and Agassiz.[82] Both schools demonstrated stellar academic achievement. Of all the city's elementary schools, they had the highest percentage of students in academically talented classes (58 percent at Agassiz and 45 percent at Peabody). They were also located in districts with the most highly educated populations. As of 1965, 44 percent and 37 percent of residents in the Agassiz and Peabody districts, respectively, had graduated from college, whereas only four of the other fourteen elementary schools had percentages above 20 percent.[83]

Because of their popularity, the Peabody and Agassiz Schools could not accommodate the large volume of transfer requests. Those who petitioned first had a better chance of obtaining a slot, while those who acted later earned a spot on the waiting list. In consequence, open enrollment left some African American parents, including Donna Freeman, who sought to improve her son Mark's educational opportunity, convinced that the transfer policy disadvantaged her child. In a classroom with almost all African American students, where he was

[79] Marjorie and Harold Bakken; Annie L. Cooper; Peggy Dotler; Rosa Foulker; and Janet and Jeff Murray, "Who Gets Shortchanged?" *Cambridge Chronicle,* July 19, 1979, 4.

[80] Michael Alves, "Cambridge Desegregation Succeeding," *Integrated Education* 21, no. 1 (1983), 180.

[81] Charles Glenn to Mike Alves, "Cambridge Open Enrollment Transfers," June 1, 1979, Enrollment and Racial Balance folder, Wolf Papers.

[82] Paul Richard, "No Imbalance Here, Says School Census," *Cambridge Chronicle,* Nov. 4, 1976, 1.

[83] *Report of the Subcommittee on Cambridge Schools of the M.I.T. Faculty Environment Committee*, 1965, Cambridge Schools folder, box 60, ASC Series 4, Archives and Special Collections, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; and Josephine Fisher, Yinan Zhang, Andy Anderson, and Hilary Moss, "School Construction in Cambridge: Reconstructing the Role of Space, Race, and Class in School Building Decisions," (unpublished paper, 2011), 9–10.

harassed daily by black and white students alike, Freeman believed Mark received a "lousy education" at the Tobin School. From 1974 to 1976, she wrote to the School Committee asking to transfer her son from the Tobin School, which had a high percentage of "non-white" students and low test scores, to the Peabody School.[84] Mark would have "a better chance" at the Peabody School, she believed.[85] The School Committee denied her request, pointing to the long line of students ahead of Mark hoping to attend Peabody and her failure to follow transfer protocol.[86] More than thirty children remained on the Peabody's waiting list for the 1977 academic year.[87] As of 1976, demand for the Agassiz School was so high that the School Committee enacted a moratorium on open enrollment transfers into the school entirely.[88]

When deciding which requests to grant, Cambridge city officials did not follow the RIA directive that all open enrollment transfers alleviate segregation. Despite state findings of racial isolation at the Peabody and Agassiz Schools, the School Committee approved more transfer requests from white students than from racial minorities. Cambridge's internal investigation revealed as much. In 1980, attorneys J. Harold Flannery and Robert D. Goldstein informed the School Committee:

> [A]t no time from 1974 to the present, and certainly not in 1979, have the racially isolated Peabody and Agassiz schools been able to accommodate minority student transfers. As such, the Cambridge School Committee has been and is under a duty to develop and implement a plan and is under a duty to develop and implement a plan and is out of compliance with the Act for not having done so.[89]

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[84]Cambridge School Committee Minutes, Sept. 7, 1976; and John M. Tobin, "Open Enrollment," April 26, 1965, SPAN Org. Documentation folder, Koocher Papers,

[85]"Board Hears Transfer Request," *Cambridge Chronicle,* Sept. 9, 1976, 1–2.

[86]"Board Hears Transfer Request"; and Richard Paul, "Tobin Racial Imbalance Denied by School Dept.," *Cambridge Chronicle,* Sept. 16, 1976, 1–2. As of 1976, 15.5 percent of students at the Peabody School were classified as "non-white" in contrast to 41.9 percent of students at the Tobin School. Richard Paul, "No Imbalance Here, Says School Census," *Cambridge Chronicle,* Nov. 4, 1976, 1–2.

[87]William Lannon to the Honorable Members of the School Committee, Oct. 12, 1978, "Report on Open Enrollment Requests and Placements as of Oct. 6, 1978," N8-114, Folder Enrollment and Racial Balance folder, Wolf Papers.

[88]Cambridge School Committee Minutes, Aug. 17, 1976; and Cambridge School Committee Minutes, "Report on the Classroom Spaces Available and the Existent Waiting List for Open Enrollment Transfers," Oct. 8, 1976.

[89]J. Harold Flannery and Robert D. Goldstein to William Lannon, "Memorandum: School Desegregation: Legal Obligations," June 6, 1980, Legal-Racial Balance folder, Wolf Papers.

Not only did open enrollment in Cambridge not alleviate racial imbalance, it increased segregation (see Figure 5). Throughout the 1970s, racial imbalance grew throughout the district, a trend that cannot be explained by Cambridge's rising minority population alone. Between 1965 and 1980, Cambridge's total "non-white" population increased from 6 percent to 20 percent.[90] On balance, the relative demographic composition of Cambridge neighborhoods remained fairly constant during this time. Theoretically, the "non-white" population in all school districts should have increased in proportion to changes in neighborhood demographics. However, from 1965 to 1975, the percentage of "non-white" students at the Peabody and Agassiz Schools rose little, if at all, while the "non-white" population increased in other districts with less stellar academic reputations and lower average household incomes, including the Roberts, Webster, and Fletcher Schools. Between 1965 and 1975, for example, the proportion of "non-white" students at the Peabody School remained constant at 14 percent. Similarly, the "non-white" population at the Agassiz School increased modestly, from 13.4 to 18 percent. In contrast, the "non-white" population at the Roberts School, which had lower test scores, increased from 26 percent to 60 percent during this time. Similarly, at the Webster School, the percentage of "non-white" students rose from 38 percent to 49 percent, while at the Fletcher School, the percentage of "non-white" students increased even more dramatically, from 19 percent to 48 percent. The Fletcher School finally tipped into imbalance, as defined by the RIA, in 1980.[91]

Distracted by events in Boston and Springfield, the state exerted little pressure on Cambridge to address increasing school segregation until 1978. At this point, Massachusetts' commissioner of education, Gregory Anrig, wrote to Superintendent Lannon to register his "concern" about "the threatened racial balance of the King, Webster, Tobin, and Roberts Schools."[92] Fearing a loss of local control and a potential introduction of court-ordered busing, the district agreed to develop a

[90]Cambridge Planning Board, *Suggested Goals for a City Plan for Cambridge*; and "Complaint of Intervenors—Civil Action No. 81-1436—Gloria Brown et al. vs. Cambridge School Committee (1981)," Koocher Papers.

[91]"Tobin Recommends Plan for Relieving 'Racial Imbalance,'" *Cambridge Chronicle,* Oct. 21, 1965, 1; Robert F. Cunha Jr. "No Deliberate Speed: The Failure of School Desegregationism in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1965–1978" (BA thesis., Harvard University, 1987), 23; and Irene Sege, "Racial Balance Plans Due Soon," *Cambridge Chronicle,* March 6, 1980, 1, 7.

[92]Gregory R. Anrig to William C. Lannon, Dec. 21, 1978, SPAN Org. Documentation folder, box 2, Koocher Papers.

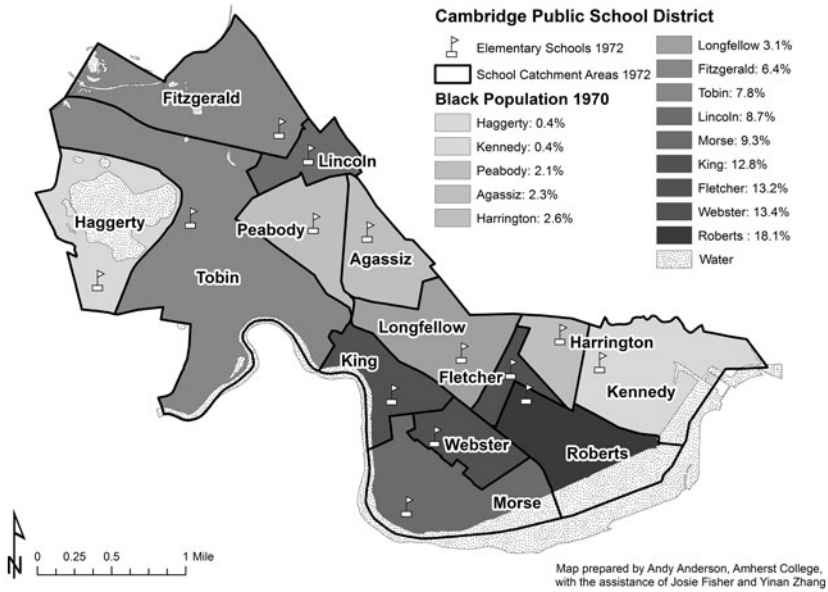

Figure 5. Total population residing in Cambridge elementary public school districts and black population demographics, 1972. Racial imbalance at the King, Roberts, Fletcher, and Webster Schools had all increased since 1965, while the Peabody and Agassiz Schools remained racially isolated.

Sources: Cambridge Public School District; City of Cambridge Geographic Information System; and US Bureau of the Census, *Census of Housing 1970, Block Statistics, Final Report HC(3)-108, Boston, Mass., Urbanized Area* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971).

racial balance plan. It launched Project SPAN to oversee desegregation planning and solicited parental input through racial balance advisory committees in all elementary schools.[93] It charged these subgroups with assessing several mechanisms for desegregation, including redistricting and school pairing. It also agreed to submit a long-range desegregation plan to the state no later than July 1979.[94]

[93] According to Gerald Kohn, Project "SPAN" stood for "System-wide Planning for a New High School" but became the name for the planning process tasked with supervising elementary school desegregation. Gerald Kohn, interview by author, Amherst, MA, 2011.

[94] Gerald W. Kohn, "Toward Balanced Schools," *Cambridge Chronicle,* May 17, 1979, 5; William Lannon to the Honorable Members of the School Committee," Dec. 13, 1979, N9-150, Cambridge School Department.

How Open Enrollment Promoted Controlled Choice in Cambridge

As desegregation planning advanced, Cambridge officials discovered they could resolve most of the district's RIA violations simply by returning open enrolled students to their neighborhood schools. Kohn, who directed Project SPAN, Cambridge's elementary school desegregation planning effort, recalled wondering what would happen if the city "eliminated all of the school choice and put all of the kids back into the schools in the neighborhoods where they live[ed]?" He concluded it was "actually the choices, of primarily moving white kids to Peabody and Agassiz, that imbalanced the district, that took white kids out of the other schools, and led to higher minority populations in those other schools."[95] By June 1980, the Cambridge School Department had identified 172 white students at the Agassiz School and 296 white students at the Peabody School who would have to return to their neighborhood schools should the district end open enrollment.[96]

But despite evidence that open enrollment increased segregation —in violation of state law—some parents who had been utilizing the policy proved unwilling to return their children to their neighborhood schools. Eventually, the fate of open enrolled students became the most controversial question in Cambridge's desegregation planning. To some parents, what had once been a privilege—to request a transfer for their child to a school outside their neighborhood—had now become a right, one which could not be revoked. To others, the neighborhood school became even more prized as the presence of open enrollees threatened to trigger larger-scale redistricting.

As word spread that both redistricting and eliminating open enrollment were on the table, parents and students began registering their opinions. Kohn described opposition to returning open enrolled students as "deafening." He recalled, "[W]hen people said, 'all you want to do is bus,'" school district officials responded by saying:

> [W]e'll eliminate the busing. But that'll mean that everybody who is in their school with school choice has to go back to their neighborhood school. Oh, the hue and cry from people who were really influential—like the professors at Harvard and MIT, and the graduate students …

[95] Gerald Kohn, interview by author, Amherst, MA, Aug. 31, 2011.

[96] Muriel Heiberger, "Racial and Ethnic Composition of Cambridge Public Schools after Impact of Pupils Leaving as a Result of the Return of Out of District Open Enrolled Who Would Not Qualify for Open Enrollment under the VCT Policy of 1979," June 5, 1980, NO-100, School Committee Discussion-Racial Balance folder, Wolf Papers.

folks who were sending their kids to Peabody and Agassiz, and King Open School.[97]

When Elaine Spatz-Rabinowitz and Morris Rabinowitz, who had used open enrollment to secure a place for their eleven-year-old daughter at the Peabody School, learned the district was considering returning transfers to neighborhood schools, they appealed to the School Committee. While they described themselves as "sympathetic with the need to racially balance the Cambridge schools," they did not believe the "benefits towards this end of reassigning open enrolled children" outweighed "the disruption such transfers will cause in the children's lives." Moreover, they believed, "The Cambridge School system has an obligation not to renege on the promise made to all open enrolled students that they would be entitled to complete their elementary education as open enrolled students, a promise upon which many family plans (including home ownership) were based."[98]

But for some parents who resided within the Peabody and Agassiz catchment zones, the prospect of redistricting made them unsympathetic to open enrolled families. Peabody parents Catherine B. Hughes and Susan Colannino found the "'promise' to open enrollees that they could remain *forever* in the school of their choice" to be "a completely invalid and infuriating one to redistricted families [emphasis in original]." They would prefer a return to the neighborhood school model, all things considered: "[W]hen neighborhood residents are being re-districted despite the implicit 'promise' or 'written contract' in their house deeds and rent checks that they are indeed a part of that particular neighborhood, then it is time to say that there are *no contracts for anyone,* but especially for people out of district! [emphasis in original]"[99]

Agassiz parent Stephen Hantman agreed. The former Peace Corps member and Head Start teacher had moved into the Agassiz district, by his account, because he valued the diversity of its neighborhood and school. Now, because open enrolled students had tipped the Agassiz School into imbalance, his third-grade daughter, Emily, might be redistricted. Even more galling to Hantman was the fact that "most of the eighty children from outside the neighborhood who are being

[97] Kohn, interview. King "Open" referred to a "school-within-a-school" magnet school located within the larger Martin Luther King School. It opened in 1976, was parent-run, and accepted students from throughout the city, not only from the King catchment area. "King School Opens Its Doors," April 15, 1976, *Cambridge Chronicle*, 4.

[98] Elaine Spatz-Rabinowitz and Morris Rabinowitz, "An Open Letter to the School Committee," May 27, 1980, SPAN Testimony folder, Koocher Papers.

[99] Catherine B. Hughes and Susan Colannino to William Lannon, April 2, 1980, SPAN folder, box 2, Koocher Papers.

bussed into Agassiz everyday are white. Even if only some of them were asked to attend a school that would further racial balance, Agassiz, which is almost racially balanced now, would not have to be redistricted." But because of resistance from open enrolled students to return to their neighborhood schools, his "eight year old child, who lives four blocks from our school," now faced "being redistricted to Lincoln, a half a mile away, because our school has become isolated as a result of white children being bussed in!"[100]

While some white parents continued to duel over redistricting and the fate of open enrolled students, some African American parents remained silent on both questions, noticeably disengaged with debates over racial imbalance. The district's local NAACP chapter, with a roster of some 250 members, "many of whom are parents of children in the Cambridge school system," worried less about statistical imbalance and more about structural inequalities, including inferior school facilities and the absence of African American school administrators, which they found "appalling."[101] Councilor Graham reported that many African Americans in Cambridge preferred to focus their attention on issues outside the schools, including rent control and access to quality, cost-effective housing.[102]

In 1979, representatives from the racial balance committee at the King School, whose student body violated the RIA, praised their school by calling attention to its diversity. In their estimation, racial imbalance did not necessarily impact children negatively, nor was it synonymous with segregation.[103] Other King parents concurred, similarly seeing diversity where the state saw segregation. Diane Sealey and Carla Petts, who both had daughters at the King School, considered themselves "strong advocates of integrated education." They saw little benefit in changing the school's population for their children, who they believed were "already getting an integrated education."[104]

While some families split over the fate of open enrolled students, redistricting, and questions of whether racial imbalance connoted segregation or diversity, most agreed that they preferred to choose where to enroll their children rather than leave such a decision to either school officials or racial balance planning committees. "The one

[100] Stephen Hantman to Alice Wolf, April 4, 1980, Wolf Papers.

[101] Cambridge School Committee Minutes, "Re: Desegregation and the Peabody," Nov. 5, 1980.

[102] Cunha, "No Deliberate Speed," 63.

[103] "Racial Balance Advisory Committee's Recommendation on Short and Long Range Issues," Racial Balancer folder, Wolf Papers.

[104] "Families Respond to School Desegregation Plans," *Cambridge Chronicle,* March 27, 1980, 4.

thing that parents kept saying was that they wanted to choose the school that their children were attending," recalled Eileen Bacci, registrar of Cambridge Public Schools.[105] Cambridge parent Eve Odiorne Sullivan concurred, advising the School Committee: "Whatever solution you must make to this absurd and artificial requirement of racial balance, let it be founded on freedom of choice. I might decide to send my sons to a school outside my neighborhood, if the program were attractive, but if someone told me where they must go, I would refuse to be coerced."[106]

In the end, more parents expressed a preference for choice-based assignment than for the neighborhood school. "Neighborhood schools have long been a sacred cow in Cambridge. Yet even now, halfway to the stockyard, no one is rising to their defense," commented one journalist chronicling desegregation planning.[107] Eventually, school officials found a way to table debates over open enrollment simply by "grandfathering in" transfer students, ensuring they would be unaffected by any desegregation plan. Nor did the final plan require redistricting. With controlled choice, selections would not begin until kindergarten. That way all children could remain in their current schools. According to Michael Alves, who helped to design Cambridge's controlled choice plan, the decision to "grandfather everybody in" was "controversial as hell," but he believed it "was an essential feature of controlled choice around the country."[108] It was just "too difficult to manage resistance from open enrolled students," Alves recalled, and such a decision was "huge because it meant that Cambridge could transition from an essentially attendance boundary school district to a choice system painlessly."[109]

Moreover, because Cambridge already had a well-established tradition of choice-based assignment, it was easier to persuade parents to accept a controlled choice assignment system, even one that eliminated neighborhood schools, according to Alves. During the 1970s, in addition to open enrollment, Cambridge had provided other public choice-based opportunities for parents to access non-neighborhood public schools, including the Cambridge Alternative Public School and King Open, the magnet school housed at the King School. Alves

[105] Heather M. Leslie, "Choosing Schools: Parents, Students and Administrators Balance Race, Class and Education," *Harvard Crimson,* April 14, 1993, https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1993/4/14/choosing-schools-pmore-than-a-decade.

[106] Eve Odiorne Sullivan, "Maintain Neighborhood School," *Cambridge Chronicle,* May 27, 1976, 4.

[107] Pamela Varley, "Deseg Plan Fair?," *Cambridge Chronicle,* Feb. 19, 1981, 1.

[108] Michael Alves, interview by Joseph Taff, Milton, MA, Aug. 24, 2011.

[109] Michael Alves, interview by Elysia Chandler, Milton, MA, Aug. 26, 2013.

believed Cambridge's culture of public school choice was essential when persuading local parents to accept controlled choice. He recalled that some planners had wanted to implement controlled choice first in Holyoke, a far less affluent district in western Massachusetts, "but it was not ready for controlled choice because they had no constituency for choice." By contrast, Alves observed, "Cambridge already had parents who liked choice."[110] Moreover, Cambridge's high rents and housing prices, particularly relative to other Massachusetts cities facing intervention, including Holyoke, Springfield, and Lynn, helped to convince some parents that controlled choice would be preferable to other desegregation alternatives, like busing, redistricting, or returning to neighborhood schools. "In the suburbs," Alves recalled, "if you liked a particular school you would find a house near there and buy it." But in Cambridge

> it was so difficult to find apartments or single-family homes … so there were a lot of … white middle-class families who loved controlled choice, because otherwise their attendance school would probably have been Roberts. … Now they were going to try and get into Peabody or Agassiz.[111]

Under controlled choice, the Cambridge School Committee believed, voluntary desegregation could proceed with haste and without animosity. In light of the uproar over court-ordered busing that had exploded in Boston during the first half of the 1970s, Cambridge's politicians and parents were particularly eager to avoid a similar outcome. Kohn recalled how events in Boston informed decision-making in Cambridge. "At that time," he remembered, "Boston was just self-destructing with busing … Nobody wanted that to happen in Cambridge, and Cambridge wasn't Boston, and we weren't going to subject ourselves to that kind of turmoil."[112]

According to its advocates, including Alves and sociologist and Harvard professor of education Charles Vert Willie, a policy-expert who helped advise the city as it designed Cambridge's controlled choice plan, the assignment policy offered families many benefits for the price of the neighborhood school. First, it weakened the link between geography and educational opportunity—albeit without disrupting other forms of spatial inequality, like those between states and between school districts. Second, it empowered parents to select from a range of institutions, often with different programs and educational

[110] Chandler, interview
[111] Chandler, interview.
[112] Kohn, interview.

philosophies. And third, it incentivized schools to respond to families' needs and prerogatives.[113]

Willie explained how the neighborhood school factored into the development of controlled choice: "First, we decided, based upon looking at schools all over the country, that neighborhood schools no longer had any relevance to education." By definition, Willie maintained, the "neighborhood school model" promoted inequality of opportunity. With this guiding principle, he and collaborator Alves determined "to turn [their] backs on looking at neighborhoods as the basis for … assigning people to school. People make decisions about their real estate, and they make decisions about education, and you should never let real estate trump education."[114]

Alves and Willie also argued that controlled choice assignment was a model mechanism to promote desegregation. By offering parents the freedom to select a school in exchange for allowing the district to racially balance all schools, the assignment plan could encourage desegregation without triggering flight from the city or its public schools. Presenting parents with a range of academic options would also entice some families who might otherwise have chosen private or parochial schools to select the public system. And because public schools no longer had a captive audience, controlled choice would incentivize schools to respond to the particular social, emotional, and curricular needs of Cambridge's families. If the neighborhood

[113]On controlled choice plans outside Cambridge, see, for example, Erica Frankenberg, "Assessing Segregation"; Olivia Herrington, "Choosing Classrooms: Controlled Choice Policies in NYC Public Schools," *Harvard Political Review*, Dec. 1, 2015, http://harvardpolitics.com/united-states/choosing-classrooms-controlled-choice-make-new-york-citys-education-system-equal/; Erica Frankenberg and Lisa Chavez, "Integration Defended: Berkeley Unified's Strategy to Maintain School Diversity" (Berkeley: UCLA Law School, Civil Rights Project, 2009), http://issuelab.org/permalink/resource/9870; and Richard Kahlenberg, *All Together Now: Creating Middle-Class Schools through Public School Choice* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2003).

[114]William C. Lannon, Francis H. Duchay, Alice Wolf, and Charles V. Willie, "Striving for Equality: Controlled Choice and School Desegregation in Cambridge, Massachusetts," panel discussion, History of Education Society 50th Annual Meeting, Cambridge, MA, Nov. 5, 2010. Audio recording of session in possession of author. For more of Willie's thinking on the development of controlled choice, including the limitations of the neighborhood school model and the importance of choice and competition, see also Michael J. Alves and Charles V. Willie, "Controlled Choice Assignments: A New and More Effective Approach to School Desegregation," *Urban Review* 19, no. 2 (1987), 75–76; Charles V. Willie, "The Evolution of Community Education: Content and Mission," *Harvard Educational Review,* vol. 70, no. 2 (Summer 2000), 199–200; and Charles V. Willie, "Controlled Choice Avoids the Pitfalls of Choice Plans: Response to John Chubb and Terry Moe," *Educational Leadership* 48, no. 4 (Dec.- Jan. 1990–1991), 62–64.

school model encouraged segregation, inequality, and insularity, controlled choice promoted diversity, equity, and academic improvement, they contended.[115]

Controlled choice, they further maintained, improved upon earlier efforts to promote voluntary desegregation, including school pairing and redistricting, because it offered parents a choice and targeted a root cause of educational inequality: housing segregation.[116] Reminiscent of an older, market-based critique of public education popularized in the 1950s by economist Milton Friedman, controlled choice theorists similarly predicted that empowering parents to select schools would encourage school improvement through competition.[117] But where Friedman had imagined a school system that allowed parents to select from private and public options, advocates of controlled choice like Alves and Willie believed one could reap the benefits of choice within the public system.[118] In contrast to Friedman, however, they understood government supervision not as problematic but essential. Because public schools, by definition, existed to promote democratic equality, market-based principles absent attention to structural inequality would do little to equalize educational opportunity. The primary challenge of American public education stemmed not from government monopoly or too much bureaucracy, in their estimation, but rather from school districts' reliance on the neighborhood school, which bred segregation and inequality.[119]

[115] Michael Alves, "Cambridge Desegregation Succeeding," *A Chronicle: Equal Education in Massachusetts* 4, no. 4 (Jan. 1983), 2–16; Cambridge School Department, "Cambridge School Desegregation Plan," May 1, 1980, box 1, Koocher Papers; and Cambridge School Department, "The Cambridge Controlled Choice School Desegregation Plan: A Decade of Success" (1990), Cambridge (MA) Public Schools.

[116] Alves and Willie, "Controlled Choice Assignments," 67–70.

[117] Willie and Alves note that, "it is the 'forced choice' dimension of policy that gives controlled choice its existential power. Just as parents must think about why they should enroll their children in certain schools, each school must face the question of how to become more attractive to students on a desegregative basis." Alves and Willie, "Controlled Choice Assignments," 79.

[118] Milton Friedman, "The Role of Government in Education," in *Economics and the Public Interest,* ed. R. A. Solo (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955).

[119] On how neighborhood school assignment plans can exacerbate segregation, see, for example, David G. Garcia, *Strategies of Segregation: Race, Residence, and the Struggle for Educational Equality* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Kimberly A. Goyette and Annette Lareau, *Choosing Homes, Choosing Schools* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2014); and Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2017).

In 1981, after three years of deliberations, Cambridge school administrators finally ended neighborhood school assignments by adopting a controlled choice desegregation plan. In the end, Cambridge's experience with open enrollment informed its deliberations, as many parents prioritized the ability to select a school for their child independent of their address. First, because Cambridge had improperly utilized open enrollment, it made itself highly vulnerable to state and federal intervention. By the late 1970s, the district had no choice but to change its assignment policy if it wanted to avoid court-ordered busing. Second, school administrators' casual approval of transfer requests in the mid-1960s and 1970s created a vocal community of parents unaccustomed to administrative interference and uneasy with assignment policies rooted in geography. Fearing court-ordered busing and a loss of parental prerogatives, Cambridge residents and school officials turned toward an assignment policy that prioritized choice over traditional catchment zones.

By offering parents choice, at the expense of neighborhood schools, Cambridge did, at least temporarily, advance desegregation without triggering an exodus into the suburbs or private institutions. When Willie and Alves reassessed the Cambridge policy in 1987, they found no evidence of "white flight" and that "no Cambridge school has drifted toward resegregation." Since 1981, they observed, the total number of white children attending public school in Cambridge had increased and, moreover, the academic performance of "minority students" surpassed that of their white counterparts in 60 percent of the schools.[120]

Other evaluations of the policy, however, were more mixed. In 1989, according to Cambridge superintendent Robert S. Peterkin and Dorothy Jones, who had helped oversee desegregation planning, certain schools remained "segregated by social class."[121] Income disparities continued to predict for academic achievement, they observed.[122] A 1990 state evaluation of Cambridge's controlled choice plan similarly found that socioeconomic diversity varied greatly among schools. Districtwide, nearly 50 percent of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, but at the Agassiz School, just 16.7 percent of students received free or reduced-price lunches, compared

[120] Diego Ribadeneira, "Cambridge Desegregation Plan Praised," *Boston Sunday Globe,* April 5, 1987, 42.

[121] Robert S. Peterkin and Dorothy S. Jones, "Schools of Choice in Cambridge, Massachusetts," in *Public Schools by Choice: Expanding Opportunities for Parents, Students, and Teachers,* ed. Joe Nathan (St. Paul, MN: Institute for Teaching and Learning, 1989), 136–37.

[122] Peterkin and Jones, "*Schools of Choice in Cambridge, Massachusetts,*" 138.

to 76.8 percent at the Kennedy School. And because the district classified students only as either "white" or "minority," African American and Hispanic students also continued to be unevenly distributed. Moreover, linguistic minorities, particularly Haitian students, tended to be concentrated in schools with bilingual programs.[123]

Despite these metrics, Cambridge's desegregation initiative earned it national attention. Journalists, academics, and politicians from across the political spectrum lauded Cambridge, noting that its assignment plan offered the benefits of choice, particularly accountability and parental investment, without siphoning public funds into private institutions. In 1988, as part of its White House Workshop on Choice in Education, the Reagan administration showcased Cambridge as one of its "notable cases from around the country" that demonstrated "how choice can improve education."[124] In 1993, *U.S. News & World Report* profiled Cambridge as one of "Nine Reforms to Revolutionize American Education." The "Cambridge model," it noted, offered school districts a "clear proposition: Offer strong programs or risk having disgruntled parents vote with their feet."[125]

Regardless of this national attention, however, by 2000 it had become clear that although controlled choice may have helped to improve racial diversity in Cambridge schools, it had not alleviated socioeconomic disparities.[126] Mindful of ongoing social science research about the importance of family income as a predictor of educational success and ongoing federal efforts to roll back race-based desegregation, in 2001, Cambridge joined a handful of other districts, including Wake County, North Carolina, and La Crosse, Wisconsin, that modified their choice-based assignment policies by utilizing socioeconomic status instead of race.[127] Perhaps unsurprisingly, when Cambridge abandoned attention to race when making

[123] Gia Kim, "Cambridge Schools Fail to Achieve Racial Balance," *Harvard Crimson,* Feb. 18, 1992, https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1992/2/18/cambridge-schools-fail-to-achieve-racial/.

[124] "Educational Choice Success," Oct. 11, 1988, White House Workshop on Choice folder, box 4, John Klenk Files, 1988–1989, White House Staff and Office Inventories, 1981–1989, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA.

[125] "The Perfect Storm: Nine Reforms to Revolutionize American Education," *U.S. News & World Report,* Jan. 11, 1993, 59.

[126] Scott S. Greenberger, "Cambridge Eyes Income, Not Race, for Desegregation," *Boston Sunday Globe,* Dec. 16, 2001, 1.

[127] Alan Richard, "Cambridge Becomes Latest District to Integrate by Income," *Education Week* 21, no. 16 (Jan. 9, 2002), 11. For a thorough evaluation of Cambridge's decision to implement socioeconomic integration, along with the implications of this policy, see Kahlenberg, *All Together Now.*

assignments, racial segregation increased. As of 2007, the year of the PICS decision, the state classified nearly two-thirds of Cambridge's elementary schools as racially imbalanced.[128]

The granular local history preceding the introduction of controlled choice in Cambridge highlights how particular educational policy ideas actually made their way into localities. It also provides insight into how future policymakers might bend citizens' private interests and attach them to the common good. While state—and to a much lesser extent federal—pressure to desegregate triggered desegregation planning, the decision to select controlled choice from an array of desegregation options belonged to local officials and community members alone. As historian Thomas Sugrue maintains, "Public policies and national politics shape and constrain the options available to activists." And yet, he observes, "social movements [also] have an impact on public policy."[129] In other words, the decision to introduce controlled choice in Cambridge—not in theory, but in practice—depended upon external factors, such as pressure from the state and input from education policy experts, and internal ones, particularly the lived experiences, values, and priorities of Cambridge residents themselves.

Finally, the history behind the decision to implement controlled choice in Cambridge, which involved a lengthy planning process that stressed community participation, provides a tangible example for contemporary policy makers who wish to continue the hard work of school desegregation. First, it highlights the quiet work of collaboration that occurred between desegregation policy planners and community members, efforts that often receive less historical attention than more spectacular episodes of white resistance to court-ordered busing. Second, it helps to offset narratives that see Boston as a synecdoche for this history and emphasize violence or coercion.[130]

Orfield observes how existing attempts to resist the re-segregation of America's public schools might be better served by reflecting on the

[128] Tracy Jan, "An Imbalance Grows in Cambridge Schools," *Boston Globe,* July 23, 2007, 1.

[129] Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty,* xxiii.

[130] On Boston's busing crisis see, for example, J. Anthony Lukas, *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986); Matthew Delmont and Jeanne Theoharis, eds., "Rethinking the Boston 'Busing Crisis' Special Section," *Journal of Urban History* 43, no. 2 (March 2017), 191–293; and Ronald P. Formisano, *Boston Against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991). On "busing" in the American imagination, see Matthew F. Delmont, *Why Busing Failed: Race, Media, and the National Resistance to School Desegregation* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

history of controlled choice in cities like Cambridge rather than the controversy over busing in cities like Boston. "Since the city of Boston had what was probably the worst leadership of any U.S. city during its school desegregation order," Orfield argues, "people have tended to conclude not that the city failed but that integration failed and could not be accomplished." At the same time, he maintains, "[t]hey tend to ignore the very different and far more successful history in Cambridge, right across the Charles River…" Because of this faulty historical selectivity, Orfield argues, many Americans have come to believe "that integration was a failure and that nothing could be done," which, in turn, has served as "a justification for doing nothing and ignoring the spreading segregation and inequality."[131] Thus, Orfield suggests, Cambridge's experience provides both a useful historiographical corrective, in that it offers a counter-narrative to stories of school desegregation that emphasize massive resistance, and an important policy corrective, in that it serves as a tangible example of peaceful, yet complicated, choice-based desegregation initiative. For historians and education policy makers, Cambridge's story takes on added importance during the current moment, when the federal and many state and local governments appear to have embraced choice and abandoned desegregation.[132]

[131] Gary Orfield, "Forward," in Jennifer B. Ayscue and Slyssa Greenberg with John Kucsera and Genevieve Siegel-Hawley, "Losing Ground: School Segregation in Massachusetts," (Los Angeles: The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles, May 2013), vi-vii, https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/losing-ground-school-segregation-in-massachusetts.

[132] On contemporary urban experiments with choice and re-segregation see, for example, Dana Goldstein, "San Francisco, A Hard Lesson on Integration," *New York Times,* April 25, 2019, 1; Michelle Chen, "New York's Separate and Unequal Schools," *The Nation,* Feb. 20, 2018, https://www.thenation.com/article/new-yorks-separate-and-unequal-schools/; and The Century Foundation, "The Benefits of Socioeconomically and Racially Integrated Schools and Classrooms," April 29, 2019, https://tcf.org/content/facts/the-benefits-of-socioeconomically-and-racially-integrated-schools-and-classrooms/.