Controlled Choice Team Co-Chairs Opening Statement

First, we want to thank the team members for their hard work and time spent on this important issue. Our team was the only team with parents serving and several volunteers who do not work for the school department or the city. In fact, our team had a majority of people who volunteered outside of their regular jobs. We are grateful and appreciative of their work. We also recognize and appreciate the work of the members from the school district. In addition to team members, several people provided information and support for the team, for which we are grateful. Together, we accomplished a great deal and we all benefitted from having many views and voices at the table.

The team mission was to review and improve system of school assignment. The history of Controlled Choice [CC] & Cambridge Public Schools [CPS] is that the policy came about as a plan for desegregation. The goal was to keep Cambridge middle class families in public schools. Across the river, Boston’s desegregation had led to a loss of confidence and flight from the city. Cambridge wanted to avoid that. The plan, while done with the best of intentions, has not led to balanced schools or high achievement across the board.

The report is a synthesis of much information on choices, parents preferences, enrollment trends. The lessons are that the district did the right thing in looking at the controlled choice policy. The CC team worked hard to cover a lot of ground, and has come up with a report, some recommendations, and some commitment to finish the partially finished work on some key issues.

The policy starts from the premise that it is a worthy goal to ensure balanced schools in terms of diversity: socio-economic status [SES], race/ethnicity. The goal of diversity comes out of a belief that there is educational value to such balancing, and that balanced schools give students better preparation for future in diverse global economy. To achieve this goal, parents must believe all schools are good choices.

Our schools are not balanced and there is concern among many about the overall quality of our offerings. This fact means the policy has failed to achieve its main goal.

Comments from our public forums over the years, from the World Café this year, and from the years of data we reviewed lead to a very clear conclusion: school quality is the single most important factor for parents, and many parents do not believe that CPS is delivering uniformly excellent choices.

Our review shows that our elementary schools are not in balance by socio-economic status [SES] or race/ethnicity, that school choices are not even: by
school or by SES, that waitlists also vary by school and SES, as do parent withdrawals. These differences have persisted for many years.

Our district’s information and educational research show that, not surprisingly, parents choose schools based on perception of school quality.

From the choices made and the strong findings of perceived school quality as the most important determinant of choice, we can infer that many families do not perceive all schools as equally good choices. We can also infer that for some families, neighborhood matters a lot and figures into their equation of choice of school.

The reasons for this perception are not entirely clear. Some of it is likely based on old perceptions which are no longer applicable due to recent programmatic changes in schools. However, some perception is real, in that it is based on direct experience or reviewing achievement data which shows very uneven results for all groups and by subgroups. The CC team recommends that as a high priority the administration and educational leaders work intentionally to understand how parents define quality and how to address the perception that not all schools are viewed as excellent.

If the issue of uneven choices is not addressed, every other change made to the policy will not address the main issue. We understand that this issue is sensitive, but we cannot ignore the clarion call for improvements. The conclusion from the data is overwhelming.

The public forum and the World Café underscored the need to address unevenly chosen schools and to directly confront the question of school quality. Both also identified the Family Resource Center and overall communication as major concerns to be addressed.

We also note that there is an urgent need to develop a metric that defines a good, high quality school. Parents have their own definitions, which the district has never assessed or reviewed. For perceptions not to dominate the discussion of school quality, the district must state a metric – MCAS, portfolio, other – and communicate it clearly. Every school should publish its relative success with meeting the metrics the district establishes. That alone would be revolutionary and would go a long way to building confidence among all stakeholders – those in our schools, those who left, and those who will enter in the future.

Richard Harding & Patricia Nolan
School Committee co-chairs of the Controlled Choice Team
Project Goals

- Review and improve system of school assignment
- Recommend changes in current district policies
- Work in conjunction with Education Plan Team and Facilities team
Team & Summary of work

- Team members: Administration, School Committee, Principal, Family Liaison, Parents, CTA, Community & Educators (Harvard, BU, NAACP) and Business (Realtor)

- In a series of public meetings, the team met to review data, current practice, existing policies and concerns. Discussed key issues and made some recommendations.

- Report summarizes work, findings, recommendations, and future work
Controlled Choice Policy Summary

- **Goal** is to ensure balanced schools in terms of diversity: SES, race/ethnicity
  - Educational value to balancing
  - Better preparation for future in diverse global economy
- **To achieve goal, parents must believe all schools are good choices**
- **To achieve balance, district was to use feedback from choices to generate improvements in programs**
Why was controlled choice policy implemented?

- Cambridge had segregated schools with uneven performance
- Controlled choice was in response to the concerns over seeing Boston schools lose many people as a result of their desegregation plan.
- Policy was a direct appeal to white and middle class residents to stay in the public schools by introducing a system of school choice while desegregating the school district.
- Central idea was that pressure of competition would be placed on all the schools, resulting in all being equally attractive.
- Explicit goal of ensuring a balance of students, first by race, then in 2001 by class.
- Based on assumption that achievement would go up for all.
Why review policy?

- Goal of balanced schools has not been met
- Goal of equally high achievement for all has not been met
- Policy assigns based on capacity, which can lead to imbalances in actual enrollment
- Many in our community don’t perceive all schools as “good choices” (academically excellent)
- Constituent frustration over the policy contributes to widespread concern (dissatisfaction) -- on specific logistics, communication, implementation, transparency.
Key Information Reviewed

- Demographics by school
  - SES, Race/ethnicity, ELL, SPED
- Kindergarten registration data
  - Over many years with detailed examination of past year
  - January (Cycle I) lottery, also full applicant pool
- Other sources of information
  - Waitlist, transfer discussion, etc.
- Market Study
  - Overarching message clear: school quality matters and school climate a concern
School Demographics
Elementary schools by socio-economic status [SES - based on qualifying for free/reduced lunch]*

- Based on capacity all schools are balanced, but based on enrollment, only 6 of 12 elementary schools are within + or - 10% of the district average for Socioeconomic Status (SES)

*SES % reflects Current Enrollment, not capacity

Source: CPSD Oct. 1, 2010 enrollment  
CC Team Report
Based on capacity all schools are balanced, but based on enrollment one or more grades in every school are outside target range of + or - 10% of district average.

In the table below, “lo” indicates that the % of F/R lunch students in that grade in that school is LOWER than 35%. “hi” indicates that the % of F/R lunch students in that grade in that school is HIGHER than 55%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GRADE</th>
<th>Amigos</th>
<th>Baldwin</th>
<th>C’port</th>
<th>FMA</th>
<th>G&amp;P</th>
<th>Haggerty</th>
<th>K-Lo</th>
<th>King Open</th>
<th>King</th>
<th>Morse</th>
<th>Peabody</th>
<th>Tobin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>lo</td>
<td>lo</td>
<td></td>
<td>hi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>hi</td>
<td></td>
<td>hi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>02</td>
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<td>lo</td>
<td>lo</td>
<td>hi</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>lo</td>
<td>lo</td>
<td>hi</td>
<td></td>
<td>lo</td>
<td></td>
<td>hi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td></td>
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<td>hi</td>
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<td>hi</td>
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<td>hi</td>
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<tr>
<td>05</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>hi</td>
<td></td>
<td>hi</td>
<td>hi</td>
<td></td>
<td>hi</td>
<td>hi</td>
<td>hi</td>
<td>hi</td>
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<tr>
<td>06</td>
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<td>hi</td>
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<td>07</td>
<td>hi</td>
<td>hi</td>
<td>hi</td>
<td>lo</td>
<td>lo</td>
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<td>hi</td>
<td></td>
<td>hi</td>
<td>hi</td>
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<td>hi</td>
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<tr>
<td>08</td>
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<td>hi</td>
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<td></td>
<td>hi</td>
<td></td>
<td>hi</td>
<td>hi</td>
<td>hi</td>
<td>hi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CPSD Oct. 1, 2010 enrollment

CC Team Report
Balance of CPS elementary schools by race/ethnicity

CPS elementary school demographics

8 of 12 elementary schools are within + or - 10% of the district average for race/ethnicity

Source: CPSD Oct. 1, 2010 enrollment
Kindergarten Lottery Choice Data
# 1 choices - 2010 Jan. K registration

- F/R lunch families' choices are more evenly spread among schools. Paid lunch families' choices are more concentrated than F/R lunch families' choices.

Source: CPS FRC Kindergarten First Cycle Registration, SY 2010-2011
The standard deviation of CPS #1 K choices, a measure of how concentrated or even points of data are spread out, is informative.

The standard deviation is much larger for paid lunch families.

It hasn’t changed a lot for either group over the last decade. But there has been an increase the last three years.

Source: CPS FRC Kindergarten First Cycle Registration
More paid lunch families tend to register for K during first cycle in January. More F/R lunch families register later in the year.

**Distribution of Families by SES**

Source: FRC Data, Oct. 1 Enrollment & First Cycle K Registration, SY 2010-2011, Amigos excluded from K Cycle 1 data due to lack of SES data
Parents’ First Choice varies according to Socioeconomic category

Percentage of First Choices Among Non-FRL Families by School

Percent of First Choices Among FRL Families by School

Source: CPS FRC, First Cycle 2010 Kindergarten Registration, Amigos excluded because choice information not broken out by SES. Tobin data includes 3 and 4 year olds applying to the Montessori, who are not eligible for Kindergarten.
With the exception of Tobin Montessori, the top four #1 chosen schools are quite different by socio-economic status

# 1 choices as % of total for category -- of Paid and F/R lunch families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>% of Total First Choice, Non-FRL</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tobin</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graham &amp; Parks</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baldwin</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haggerty</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>% of Total First Choice, FRL</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tobin</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fletcher-Maynard</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morse</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peabody</td>
<td>08</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CPS FRC, First Cycle 2010 Kindergarten Registration, Amigos excluded because choice information not broken out by SES
The concentration of choices overall, especially among paid lunch families, has persisted for many years.

- Over time the spread of choices is consistently high.
- Standard deviation of choices shows relatively small change over 8 years.
- The concentration of #1 choices affects assignments, since not all applicants can get into the schools which are oversubscribed.

### Kindergarten #1 choice by school Cycle I total

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Revised 03-04</th>
<th>year 04-05</th>
<th>year 05-06</th>
<th>year 06-07</th>
<th>year 07-08</th>
<th>year 08-09</th>
<th>year 09-10</th>
<th>year 10-11</th>
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<tr>
<td>Amigos</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>51</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baldwin</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>78</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cambridgeport</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fletcher/Maynard</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Graham and Parks</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>91</td>
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<tr>
<td>Haggerty</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KennedyLongfellow</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Open (inc. OLA*)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>King</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morse</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>41</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peabody</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobin *</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobin SEI</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>437</td>
<td>412</td>
<td>433</td>
<td>397</td>
<td>456</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>535</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| standard deviation      | 16.5         | 15.8       | 16.8       | 17.4       | 18.0       | 17.5       | 23.0       | 21.9       |
| average                 | 36           | 34         | 36         | 33         | 38         | 36         | 42         | 44         |

* OLA at King Open: 5 5 5 5 7 5

* Tobin numbers do not include the 3-4 year olds not eligible for K at other schools -- which is > 100.

Source: Data from CPSD K Cycle I reports
Parent withdrawals occur regularly from schools selected in lottery and schools not selected. More paid lunch families withdraw than F/R.

- Some parents withdraw if assigned to schools not selected, with the percent withdrawing increasing the last three years.
- Some parents withdraw even if they are assigned to a school they selected. Still to be analyzed: how many withdraw from a school listed as # 1, versus # 2 or # 3.

### Kindergarten Applicants & Withdrawals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SY2005-2010</th>
<th>School Year 2010-11</th>
<th>School Year 2009-10</th>
<th>School Year 2008-09</th>
<th>School Year 2007-08</th>
<th>School Year 2006-07</th>
<th>School Year 2005-06</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Applicants:</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Cycle</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>472</td>
<td>677</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>583</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cycles 2-6 (Feb-June)</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>118</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 1st Day of School</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>78</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Applicants</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>558</td>
<td>847</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>477</td>
<td>779</td>
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<tr>
<td>Withdrawals:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total New Kindergarteners attending CPS on the First Day of School</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>460</td>
<td>725</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>630</td>
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<tr>
<td>Additional Withdrawing:</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CPS, FRC data on full cycle K

CC Team Report
Combination of unevenness in choices by Paid lunch families and later registration by F/R lunch families leads to very different mandatory assignment picture.

- In the first cycle, almost all families who get **none** of their top three choices are paid lunch.
- For later cycles, there are far fewer choices for all families.
- In 2010, with 8 of 12 schools filled only 4 schools had more than a few available seats.
- Most of the 78 F/R and 75 paid lunch families registering after January have few choices and are effectively mandatorily assigned.

*Source: CPS FRC, First Cycle 2010 Kindergarten Registration, Amigos excluded because choice data by SES not available*
Imbalance starts in K and continues

- After the first cycle, K classrooms are balanced based on capacity but not based on enrollment
- The K classrooms are even more imbalanced as of Oct. 1

Source: CPS FRC Kindergarten First Cycle Registration, SY 2010-2011 and unofficial Oct. 1 enrollment data
Waitlist Data and Attrition
Waitlists vary by school and SES

Distribution of Waitlist, by School and SES

Note: most people are on the maximum allowed, three waitlists, so actual # of students seeking to transfer is approx. 35-40% of the total on waitlists

Source: CPS, Oct. 1, 2010 Waitlist Data
## Waitlist by SES - Top 4 schools

The Majority of Paid Lunch Students are Waitlisted at:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graham &amp; Parks</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baldwin</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Open</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peabody</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-total Paid Lunch Wait List</strong></td>
<td><strong>415</strong></td>
<td><strong>86%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Paid Lunch Wait List</strong></td>
<td><strong>484</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Majority of Free/Reduced Lunch Students are Waitlisted at:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peabody</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graham &amp; Parks</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fletcher-Maynard</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kennedy-Longfellow</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-total F/R Lunch Wait List</strong></td>
<td><strong>94</strong></td>
<td><strong>57%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total F/R Lunch Wait List</strong></td>
<td><strong>165</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: most people are on the maximum allowed, three waitlists, so actual # of students seeking to transfer is approx. 35-40% of the total # on waitlists*

Source: CPS, Oct. 1, 2010 Waitlist Data
Waitlist data raise many questions and suggest that a thorough review should be conducted.

Ideas worth considering: have waitlist (no names) online, in real time. Seek out double or triple moves which are win-win. (E.g. Susie Third Grader wants to transfer to Main St. School from Mass. Ave. School. Sally Third Grader wants to transfer from Mass. Ave. School to Main St. School. Under current system, neither moves.) The more transparent the waitlist process is, the greater the confidence people will have. And the sooner students seeking to transfer do so, the better for all -- the sending school, the receiving school, the student, the family.

From a review, it appears some waitlists are very long with little movement. Yet many schools have room and waitlists. Why? For example, why haven’t transfers occurred in these schools with space and within SES balance?

Peabody has 14 students waitlisted in each 1st, 2nd and 3rd grade. Each grade has 12 or more students on waitlist. Grades are within SES range and students waiting are from both SES categories.

Baldwin has 17 empty seats in 7th grade and 12 students on waitlist. If both F/R lunch are assigned, 2 Paid lunch could transfer, and grade would still be within SES range.

Cambridgeport has 5 students on waitlist for 4th grade, SES range fine, Haggerty has 11 on waitlist for 3rd grade, 19 empty seats, SES range fine.

Source: CPS, Oct. 1, 2010 Waitlist Data
Parent withdrawals occur consistently over time throughout elementary years, resulting in smaller middle grades cohorts -- about one-third fewer 8th graders. This likely exacerbates imbalances in the district.

Source: enrollment data from CPS budget books and DOE website
Other Resources Consulted

- World Café, 20 October, 2010
- Controlled Choice Policy Public Forum, 26 October, 2010
- Market Study conducted by Opinion Dynamics Corporation, May 2007
- Informal Polling of Cambridge Realtors
- Comparative Data from Regional Educational Laboratories
Key findings from market study

Academic Quality and School Diversity cited as very important factors in choosing Cambridge Public Schools, however, Academic Quality and School Climate were consistently top reasons for leaving or considering leaving a school. Message: As much as parents desire their children to be in diverse environment, they will not compromise quality or climate for diversity and will go elsewhere if they have the means/options.
The World Café participants stated a consistent desire for balanced schools, “real” choices and improved registration.

The district could develop a coherent overall vision to include the varieties of models available in a way that balances the unique aspects of schools with the need for overall coherence.

The district could create a clear, transparent choice procedure with active outreach ensure that the system is user-friendly for all parents; especially those who misunderstand the process and have difficulty navigating the system.

Attendees coalesced around a few themes: Academic performance is not considered equal amongst the schools; Neighborhood schools should be a good/desired choice for all children (regardless of neighborhood); School diversity is a very important value, but in the end, “Academic excellence trumps diversity every time.”
At the team’s request, the Regional Education Laboratories of EDC did some background research into other choice districts. Their report pointed to some contrasting examples of district communication on school choice policies.

Both the CPS FRC home page and FAQ on school registration do not state benefits of the policy, repeat each other, doesn’t emphasize choice and has outdated information.

Introduction

Students register, and are assigned to school in Cambridge, under a Controlled Choice Plan which uses a variety of diversity factors and assignment preferences, including socio-economic status (determined by free and reduced price meal eligibility), siblings, proximity, and race or ethnicity in a narrowly tailored manner. When parents or guardians complete their application forms at the Family Resource Center they have the option of identifying up to three choices of schools. At that time they will be asked to voluntarily indicate eligibility for free and reduced price meals.

Frequently Asked Questions About School Registration AND THE WAITLIST PROCESS

What is the Controlled Choice Plan?

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For the school year beginning in Sept. 2004, 94% of all families received one of their first three choices of schools after the first registration cycle.

Screenshots of CPSD Family Resource Center home page & Registration FAQ page as of Dec. 18, 2010
Montclair, NJ school district communication on its choice system sends a very different message from CPS’.

The Montclair district emphasizes choice by families, values of the district and benefits to students.

A pioneer in the magnet school concept, Montclair has, for over 30 years, offered parents a choice of school best suited to their child's individual talents and needs. Some, for instance, emphasize arts and science; others feature science and technology or visual and performing arts. (See links to programs in individual schools in the navigation bar, at left.) Yet all Montclair schools follow the same basic curriculum, a rigorous educational program that not only meets, but exceeds, the New Jersey core content standards.

Montclair children do not necessarily attend the school closest to their homes. There are no "neighborhood" schools. Provided there is space available and that racial balance is maintained, the magnet schools provide wide flexibility of educational choice, and ensure that the entire township is the "neighborhood."

What is Montclair’s magnet system all about?

Montclair’s magnet system exists for two reasons: to ensure racial balance in its schools and to provide what is called "parental choice." That means that parents and students can choose which magnet theme they are most interested in, and apply for enrollment in the school that specializes in that theme. In most cases, parents' first or second school choice is honored.

Source: Montclair, NJ Magnet System home page & FAQ page as of Dec. 18, 2010

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Summary Findings
Parent choices imbalanced by various measures: initial K choices, # seats open after lottery, withdrawn students and waitlist data

- K choices suggest that not all 12 elementary schools across the city are viewed as good choices.
- Waitlist data reinforce the sense that some schools are not viewed as meeting their educational needs.
- Some of those who are not offered a seat in a school they feel offers good education opt out of the district.
Key finding from 2007 market study: school quality is top of mind for overwhelming majority of respondents.

For all groups -- incoming parents, current CPS parents and former CPS parents -- school quality most importance in choice of school. For both current and withdrawn parents the biggest gap between importance & performance were about the quality of the schools: teachers, challenging students, etc.

Decisive findings -- although how parents define school quality was not asked.

About half of families who were enrolled in CPS but left did so due to lack of quality (47% combined for lack of quality academics, poor teaching and no challenge).
From the choices made and the strong findings of perceived school quality as the most important determinant of choice, we can infer that many paid lunch families do not perceive all schools as equally good choices.

“When people look at scores, you can’t convince them a school is good by saying ignore the overall -- some subanalysis of the scores shows kids are doing better than expected. People are too smart for that. They are thinking about how their own kid will do and whether they’ll have academic peers.”
The choice spread is clear, the focus on quality is clear, the decline by 8th grade is clear. What is not clear is why.

- Need for in-depth research on reasons for choices, withdrawals, and opting out.
- Need data on whether those leaving -- net -- are greater proportions of paid lunch families or F/R or neither.
- Overall, Cambridge Schools retain a high level of trust, yet there is concern among many families who express concern for their children's future in the public schools. There is a clear need to know how much of recent programmatic changes have alleviated this concern.
If the concentration of choices in schools continues, without additional seats in desired schools, parents will continue to be frustrated. Change is possible.

Case Study in Successful Turnaround in School Choice by Programmatic Change:

Cambridge has seen one recent successful change in appeal of a school, and is likely to see another this year. Both involve broad, name-brand programmatic changes. The Tobin Montessori #1 K choices tripled the year it introduced the Montessori program. The King School is likely to have a similar increase in its #1 K choices with the start of the Mandarin Chinese Immersion Program. By contrast, the introduction of Extended Day or a Science Magnet did not lead to dramatic increase in broad appeal.
Poll of a group of Cambridge based realtors confirms that many families are concerned about school choice and quality, most pointedly before Kindergarten and when entering middle grades.

Realtors confirm that the issues identified by the team around school choice and quality contribute to some concern about moving into Cambridge. And those same issues lead some families to move out.

For many families, the experience and sense are that CPS is acceptable in elementary school grades, but the middle school options are not good enough.

Thus, to address the attrition of middle class/homeowner families, it is critical that CPS address the perceptions and realities about middle school and develop a higher quality offering for these grades.
The public forum identified the FRC & overall communication as major concerns to be addressed.

"We call the FRC the 'Family Road-Block Center' because information is not accessible and staff are not readily available."

"A lot of communication by the FRC appears biased and does not extol the virtues of a range of schools."

“Family Liaisons can be cheerleaders without denigrating other schools. They need to be careful with language, such as ‘we’re the best,’ since there is no best school."

Source: Controlled Choice Team Public Forum on Oct. 26, 2010
The public forum underscored the need to address issue of unevenly chosen schools

“The system of choice is empowering to parents so long as the choices are real.”

"Some schools are more popular than others. The district needs to replicate what works at the popular schools."

"We are willing to consider things other than proximity so long as other choices are logistically viable."

“The choices in my neighborhood resulted in not much choice as there were no openings in the kindergarten in the Tobin and the Haggerty is small. It is very stressful for my child to be picked up by bus every morning in front of the Haggerty to attend a school across the district that is not balanced."

"There is an illusion of choice and a total lack of communication on how the waitlist is managed."

Source: Controlled Choice Team Public Forum on Oct. 26, 2010 and public comments
Recommendations
In response to this background, team reviewed many issues related to CC, came to some consensus for recommendations, is reviewing some items, and identified yet others.

- Some issues reviewed led to recommendations -- arrived at with consensus
  - E.g. equal access to unique educational programs, communication overhaul, FRC operations, etc.

- Some issues still being reviewed and discussed
  - E.g. SES policy parameters, proximity policy definitions

- Some issues still need review
  - E.g. Special Start, school start time
Recommendations

- Completely overhaul communications
  - District needs to communicate that every school holds high standards and teaches the comprehensive curricular frameworks set by the state
  - District needs to celebrate diversity, school choice and communicate the relationship between controlled choice and better educational outcomes
  - Develop communications strategy to better articulate the values which underlie the Controlled Choice Policy
  - Communication needs to be improved for all stakeholders:
    - Parents -- current and prospective
    - Community members
    - Staff
    - Students
  - Need for clarity, transparency, consistency, accessibility to all
  - Standards of communication should be adopted district-wide
  - Policy itself needs a complete rewrite
    - Current is mix of policy and practice and action plan
  - Areas for improvement
    - Website & Written materials
    - Online capabilities for registration, tour appointments, waitlist status, etc.
Recommendations, cont.

- **Improve FRC**  [see attached recommendations]
  - Greater transparency and clearer communication
  - Make better use of technology
  - Assess need for temporary staffing

- **Include and train family liaisons’** -- their role central to successful controlled choice policy implementation [see attached recommendations]

- **Change SEI practice to encourage waitlist at current school** [administrative decision already made]

- **Give all residents equal access to unique educational programs** [policy change already made]
  - Tobin Montessori
  - Bilingual schools & programs

- **Apply SES balance policy to Amigos and bilingual programs** -- work with community on how to phase in change

- **Explore use of Asymmetric Range for first cycle K** (Sprengnether model, see attachments for explanation)
Recommendations, cont.

- **Effect changes to transfer policy** [see attached recommendations and summary of discussion]
  - Improve waitlist and transfer process
    - Conduct thorough review of process and practice
    - Make better use of technology
    - Speed up transfers
    - Greater transparency and clearer communication
- **Keep sibling preference**
- **Conduct standardized exit interviews, done anonymously, written or online or in person (by outside group)**
  - Families who transfer in-district
  - Families who leave district
  - Families who register for K then withdraw
- **Continue, enforce and review gender policy**
- **Consider having registrants rank 4 or 5 schools**
Topics partially reviewed and possible recommendations still under discussion

- Continue review of choices by parents - go in-depth
  - Identify what works for parents, what might be replicated, and therefore what program changes could be recommended to the Educational leadership
  - Understand how parents define “quality” of schools: is it test scores, program, school climate, projects, teacher reputation, etc.
- SES balancing: confirm target and review ideas to achieve more balanced schools
- Achievement as it relates to balance in schools
- Race/ethnicity: should it be elevated as factor?
- Proximity preference analysis and further recommendations
  - Need proximity map to further discussion
Topics partially reviewed and possible recommendations still under discussion

- Transfers - consensus that date should be earlier, but how much earlier needs to be discussed, based on further review of data & discussion
- Transfers: should SES of current school be considered? Current policy leads to further imbalances
- New students entering for grades 1-8: should the district save seats?
- Approach to achieving balanced schools: should policy fill by enrollment or by capacity?
- Timing of lottery: should current January 31 registration deadline/March 1 notification be changed?
Topics partially reviewed and possible recommendations still under discussion

- Further market research needs: clarify questions to be answered
- SEI: are further changes warranted in light of the change in practice of encouraging families to get on waitlist of SEI school?
- Siblings: should assignment override SES?
- Open seats: 22 v. 25 in schools with waitlist, and leaving seats open even if fewer than 22, for SES
- District should develop and own algorithm, for ease of data use, for transparency and for cost
Team wants to finish work on some issues partially reviewed, to build on our knowledge

For example: The team did not have sufficient time/data to thoroughly review the PROXIMITY PREFERENCE issue, which is a major component of the Controlled Choice Policy. It takes a long time to understand how CC works. Any new group would take time to understand the nuances. Issues surrounding proximity were prominent in the public forums and world cafe. Understanding how proximity fits into the psychology of parents choices or feelings of empowerment/entitlement, frustration at not getting a school they have preference for, or not seeing that as a viable option is key towards understanding consumer satisfaction. Equally critical is the understanding of distribution of proximity preferences. Do some neighborhood schools have a greater pool of students with proximity preference? Does the proximity algorithm in the lottery exacerbate or alleviate schools’ SES imbalances?
Many issues are important, but not yet reviewed and therefore no recommendations

- Impact on school choice of ELT
- Impact on school choice of start times
- Hardships process
- Special Start students entering K lottery
- Allow Montessori withdrawals to re-enter lottery if leave within X months
- Junior K separate lottery
Future workplan

- Continue reviews to develop comprehensive recommendations
  - Build on previous work

- Review REL report and make use of REL’s offer of additional free services to get more detailed information on other choice districts
Open Issues & Questions

- Education Plan
  - If changes occur, would likely affect controlled choice policy

- Family liaisons: to whom they should report? Dotted line? This issue is not the team’s responsibility, but it is important, since the role of liaisons is both to work in school, and advocate for families. By reporting solely to the school principal, family advocacy role can be compromised.

- Other issues still open, but not tied directly to controlled choice include choice of educational program to reform a school, and large scale market study with questions beyond those identified by CC team.
Attachments

- Background note on Controlled Choice Policy
- Communication recommendations
- Family Resource Center recommendations
- Family liaisons recommendations
- Transfer issue: recommendations and summary of discussion
- Key findings from market study
- Explanation of a new approach to assignments: why an asymmetric band might yield more balanced schools
- REL background paper on choice research and other choice districts
- REL research questions for additional help on other districts’ experience with choice
- Cambridge NAACP statement
- Team members
Additional or more information on data received

- Kindergarten lottery
- Kindergarten full cycle
- Oct. 1 enrollment by school by demographic groups
- Waitlist analysis
- Report on Cambridge residents in non-CPS schools summary by grade