

# CAMBRIDGE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

## CONTROLLED CHOICE PLAN

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Working Draft

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## CONTROLLED CHOICE PLAN

### I. INTRODUCTION

The Cambridge Public Schools' Controlled Choice Plan ("the Plan") was first implemented in 1980. The Plan was modified in 1981 and again in 1989. Adjustments were made to the operational procedures in the 1990s. The modifications in the 1990s included changes to the "walk zone" and the proximity provisions of the Plan.

In 2000, the Cambridge Public Schools ("the CPS" or "the District") began a review of how the Controlled Choice Plan was being implemented to determine whether any additional changes were necessary. This included a review of: data relating to the implementation of the Controlled Choice Plan, relevant case law and educational research.

In reviewing the implementation of the Plan, the CPS examined strategies used to recruit students and determining whether these recruitment strategies had been effective. In addition, the CPS analyzed whether there were schools that had been overchosen or underchosen, what strategies had been used to assist schools that were underchosen and whether these strategies were successful. The analysis of underchosen schools was particularly important because one of the major features of controlled choice is program improvement; an indicator that program improvement may be necessary is whether a school is consistently underchosen.

As part of its review of the Controlled Choice Plan, the CPS also looked at the growing body of research that shows that high concentrations of students of poverty in a school may have a negative impact on achievement of students of poverty within that school. For example, this research shows that many of the conditions accompanying poverty, particularly extreme poverty, present significant challenges for principals and teachers in developing high levels of achievement for students who are impacted by these conditions, as compared to students for whom these conditions are not present. As a result of its examination of the research, the CPS decided to determine whether there were schools in the CPS with high concentrations of poverty and, if so, whether there were any strategies that could be implemented to reduce high concentrations of poverty in these schools.

As a result of the review of the implementation of the current Controlled Choice Plan, the CPS has decided to modify its Controlled Choice Plan. The changes include improving the strategies that are used to recruit students to schools and expanding the factors that are used and those that are considered in assigning students to schools. For example, based on the research that was reviewed on the impact of poverty on achievement, the CPS has determined that it will use socioeconomic status, as measured by a student's eligibility for free and

reduced meals, as a factor in assigning students to schools. In addition, a key component of the revised Plan is to implement a program improvement process for those schools that are not meeting the District's student achievement goals and/or are not drawing diverse student enrollments. The CPS will implement these changes to the Plan for the 2002-03 school year. The revisions to the Controlled Choice Plan that are detailed in this document are designed to provide all students with equitable educational opportunities, improved achievement and the opportunity to attend school with students of diverse backgrounds.

Below are the five sections of the revised plan. Section II, "Student Recruitment," identifies student recruitment strategies that the CPS will implement at both the District and school level to attract diverse groups of students to each school within the District. Section III, "Program Improvement," discusses the process that will be used by CPS to improve achievement for students of all racial, ethnic and socio-economic groups and programmatic changes to address schools that are underchosen and those that do not attract diverse groups of students. Section IV, "Student Assignment Methodology," details the diversity factors, preferences and process that will be used to assign students to schools. Section V, "Hardship Appeals," describes the process by which parents/guardians may appeal a student assignment or a student transfer if the parents/guardians believe that such student assignment or student transfer constitutes a hardship for their child. Section VI, "Annual Review," explains how the CPS will monitor and review the implementation of the revised Plan.

## II. STUDENT RECRUITMENT

This section on student recruitment is divided into three parts – strategies to be implemented by the Family Resource Center, strategies to be implemented by each school and on-going monitoring of recruitment strategies. The goal of all of the student recruitment strategies is to increase access of parents/guardians to information and knowledge about all schools in the District and to provide opportunities for all schools, particularly those that are underchosen, <sup>1/</sup> to recruit students from throughout the CPS.

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<sup>1/</sup> A school is considered underchosen if the number of kindergarten applicants for a school is less than the number of seats available at that school. A school is considered overchosen if the number of kindergarten applicants for a school exceeds the number of seats available at that school. Also, a school may be underchosen by a particular diversity factor (e.g., socioeconomic status or race and ethnicity).

Finally, as described in the District's intervention policy, the Superintendent may determine what action in addition to assisting principals in developing, implementing and monitoring the revised School Improvement Plans is necessary.

#### **IV. STUDENT ASSIGNMENT METHODOLOGY**

This section outlines the methodology that will be used to assign students to schools. As discussed more fully below, this includes choice by parents/guardians, diversity factors, assignment preferences, the process to be used to assign students to schools and the appeals process.

##### **A. Choice**

Choice by parents/guardians will continue to be an important component of the Controlled Choice Plan. In addition, the CPS will continue to encourage parents/guardians to learn about all of the elementary schools in the District through a variety of methods, including visiting schools and reviewing information about the programs offered at each elementary school, and to select three schools that they would like their children to attend. The CPS also will continue to classify parents'/guardians' choices as "First Choice," "Second Choice" and "Third Choice" and will process these requests according to how parents/guardians have ranked their choices.

##### **B. Diversity Factors and Assignment Preferences**

The CPS will use a variety of diversity factors and assignment preferences in assigning students to school. The diversity factors and assignment preferences that the CPS will use are discussed below, but are not necessarily discussed in the order that they be considered in the assignment process. The CPS believes that the use of a range of diversity factors and assignment preferences will result in a multi-faceted diversity in each school that will provide all students with equitable educational opportunities and with improved achievement. As discussed in Section VI, the CPS annually will monitor the implementation of all of these diversity factors and assignment preferences in the assignment process to assess whether changes or adjustments need to be made in the future.

1. Socioeconomic Status. One of the diversity factors that CPS will use in assigning students to schools is socioeconomic status ("SES"). The CPS has determined that there are significant educational reasons for using SES in the student assignment process. For example, many of the conditions accompanying poverty, particularly extreme poverty, present significant challenges for educators in developing high levels of

achievement for students that are impacted by these conditions in comparison to children for whom these conditions are not present.

The CPS will determine the SES of students by using the free and reduced meals eligibility status of that student. The CPS has selected free and reduced meals as the indicator of poverty to be used because it is the most readily available indicator.

At the time that parents/guardians complete their application form requesting the schools that they would like their children to attend, parents/guardians will be asked to indicate voluntarily their eligibility for free and reduced meals by completing a free and reduced meals application form. There will be no obligation for any parent/guardian to release free and reduced meals information for assignment purposes. In addition to requesting information about whether students are eligible for free and reduced meals, the free and reduced meals application will contain the following information release authorization:

The Cambridge Public Schools' free and reduced meals officials may give information concerning my child's eligibility or non-eligibility for meal benefits to the Cambridge Public Schools Family Resource Center. The Cambridge Public Schools' Family Resource Center may use this information to help determine the placement for my child. I understand that the Cambridge Public Schools' free and reduced meals officials will be releasing eligibility information to the Family Resource Center from the Meal Benefit Form for my child. I give up my rights to confidentiality for this purpose only. I understand that I am not required to release this information. I have read this release and understand its terms and sign it voluntarily.

The goal is for each grade in each school to be within a range of plus or minus 10 percentage points of the District-wide kindergarten through grade 8 percentage of students who are eligible for free and reduced meals. As described more fully in Appendix C, seats may be held in an individual school based on free and reduced meals in order to achieve socioeconomic diversity.

The CPS will determine the District-wide kindergarten through grade 8 percentage of students who are eligible for free and reduced meals in January preceding the start of each school year. For example, in January of 2001, 48% of the students in CPS were eligible for free and reduced meals and 52% were not eligible for free and reduced meals. Therefore, if the CPS had used SES as a factor for assigning students to school for the 2001-02 school year, the range would have been between 33% and 63% for free and reduced meals and between 37% and 67% non-free and reduced meals. 2/

2. Siblings. The CPS will continue to assign siblings to the same school when requested by parents/guardians, to the extent that space is available and that the assignment does not negatively affect the diversity at the school being requested. The CPS will continue to use siblings as an assignment preference because many parents/guardians believe that assigning siblings to the same school allows them to be more involved in their children's education.
3. Proximity. The CPS will continue to assign students to one of the two schools closest to where students reside only when requested by parents/guardians, to the extent that space is available and that the assignment does not negatively affect the diversity at the school being requested. The CPS will continue to use proximity as an assignment preference because some parents/guardians believe that they are more likely to be involved at the school their child attends if the child attends a school near their home.
4. Race or Ethnicity. The CPS may use race or ethnicity as one of the diversity factors, but it will only use race or ethnicity in a narrowly tailored manner. The CPS believes that it is important to have the option to use race or ethnicity as one of the diversity factors in order to avoid the harms of racial/ethnic isolation and to provide students the benefits of learning from students who are of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. 3/

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2/ If this Plan is approved for the 2002-03 school year, the CPS will use the January 2002 District-wide kindergarten through grade 8 free and reduced meals percentage.

3/ A recent study conducted by Dr. Gary Orfield has found that students in Cambridge benefit from having the opportunity to attend school with students with



In determining whether to use race or ethnicity as one of the diversity factors, the CPS will determine, after using the other race neutral factors, whether the applicant pool at a grade at a school is within a range of plus or minus 10 percentage points of the District-wide kindergarten through grade 8 percentage of White, African American and Other Black, Asian and Latino racial/ethnic categories. If, after using the other race neutral factors, the applicant pool at a grade at a school is not within plus or minus 10 percentage points of the District-wide kindergarten through grade 8 percentage of White, African American and Other Black, Asian and Latino racial/ethnic categories, then race or ethnicity may be used as one of the diversity factors.

5. Special Education Status. The CPS has determined that there are educational reasons for considering special education status as a diversity factor. For example, CPS wants to make sure that special education students have equitable access to all schools in CPS, to the extent that the needs of special education students can be accommodated at a particular school. In addition, if there are large numbers of special education students in a school, the special education students will not have the same opportunity to be mainstreamed with students who have not been identified as in need of special education services. The goal is to have the percentage of special education students in each school approximate the percentage of special education students in the CPS. The CPS will not initially use Special Education Status as a diversity factor, but will monitor this diversity factor to determine whether it needs to be incorporated in the future into the student assignment process.
6. English Language Learner Status. The CPS has determined that there are educational reasons for considering English Language Learner ("ELL") status as a diversity factor. <sup>4/</sup> For example, in addition to specific language acquisition strategies, ELL students benefit from, and need interaction with, students who are native speakers of English as part of the language

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different backgrounds. Dr. Orfield's research is consistent with similar research that he has done in other school districts in the United States.

<sup>4/</sup> An ELL student is defined as a student who has limited English proficiency (i.e., a student who has no English proficiency or limited English proficiency or whose predominant language is not English).

acquisition process. The goal is to have the percentage of ELL students in each school approximate the percentage of ELL students in the CPS, except for those CPS schools with bilingual programs. It is expected that the schools with bilingual programs will exceed the District-wide percentages of ELL students. These schools will not be considered in computing the District-wide average. See Appendix B for list of CPS schools with bilingual programs for the school year 2001-02. The CPS will not initially use ELL Status as a diversity factor, but will monitor this diversity factor to determine whether it needs to be incorporated in the future into the student assignment process.

7. Gender. The CPS has determined that there are educational reasons for considering gender as a diversity factor. For example, students benefit from, and need interaction with, students of different genders as part of the educational process. The goal is to have the percentage of students in each school by gender approximate the percentage of students by gender in the CPS. The CPS will not initially use gender as a diversity factor, but will monitor this diversity factor to see whether it needs to be incorporated in the future into the student assignment process.

### C. Process for kindergarten assignment

The CPS' Family Resource Center will continue to be responsible for coordinating, administering and monitoring all aspects of the assignment process. Below is a summary of the assignment process that will be used for assigning kindergarten students for the 2002-03 school year.

1. CPS will determine the number of seats available for kindergarten students at each school. This determination will take into account the junior kindergarten students and "appeals" students continuing in kindergarten for a second year.
2. As discussed in Section II above, beginning in the fall of each school year, the CPS shall actively recruit students for the kindergarten class for the following school year. As part of the recruitment, CPS will encourage parents/guardians to submit three choices and to submit their applications by January 31. The CPS will stress the importance of parents/guardians submitting applications by the January 31<sup>st</sup> deadline in order to increase their chances of receiving one of their choices.

3. The Family Resource Center will process all applications received by January 31<sup>st</sup> of each school year (First Registration Cycle) and shall notify parents/guardians of the results no later than March 31. The applications received between February 1 and March 31 (Second Registration Cycle) will be processed in early April and parents/guardians will be notified by the end of April. For applications received between April 1 and May 31 (Third Registration Cycle), Family Resource Center will process applications in early June and parents/guardians will be notified by the end of June. The applications received between June 1 and July 31 (Fourth Registration Cycle) will be processed in early August and parents/guardians will be notified by the end of August. The Family Resource Center will process applications received after July 31 on a first-come, first-serve basis.
4. The procedures to be used for the assignment of kindergarten students for the school year 2002-03 are described in Appendix C.
5. Kindergarten Wait List
  - a. If the District is not able to accommodate any one of the parents/guardians' three choices, then the Family Resource Center will assign the student to another school, where there are seats available and consistent with the diversity factors in this Plan. Parents/guardians receiving such an assignment for their child will be contacted by telephone by the Family Resource Center, with a follow-up letter confirming the assignment. During the telephone conversation and in the follow-up letter, the Family Resource Center will tell parents/guardians the names of other schools where there are seats available, consistent with the diversity factors. Parents/guardians will have the option of requesting any school that the Family Resource Center has identified as having a seat available. The Family Resource Center will facilitate the process of parents/guardians contacting and/or visiting these schools that have seats available and will provide principals at the schools that have available seats with the contact information for the parents/guardians. If the parents/guardians request a school that has been identified by the Family Resource

Center, the Family Resource Center will assign the child to that school.

- b. A child who is not assigned to one of the parents/guardians' three choices will be placed automatically on the waiting list for his or her parents/guardians' three choices. If parents/guardians wish their child to be placed on a waiting list for a school other than their three choices, they may request the alternative waiting list and will then be removed from either the first, second or third choice waiting list. If parents/guardians are offered a seat for their child to attend the school for which their child is on the waiting list and if they decline to accept the seat, their child's name will be removed from the waiting list for that school. All waiting lists will expire by April 1 of each school year. After the waiting lists expire, parents/guardians must notify the Family Resource Center in writing if they wish for their child's name to continue on a waiting list for one school.
- c. Parents/guardians who are not satisfied with their child's assignment may appeal that assignment if they can show a hardship for their child. See Section V below for a definition of a hardship and the procedures for an appeal.

## 6. Special Education Placements

Except as described below, the CPS shall assign special education students in accordance with the process and procedures described above for assigning non-special education students. To assist the Family Resource Center in making assignments for special education students, the Office of Special Education will provide the Family Resource Center with information on special education programs, levels of inclusion and specialized services that are available in each school.

If the Office of Special Education determines that a special education student's needs may not be addressed by using

the process used for assigning non-special education students, the Office for Special Education will convene an Individual Education Program ("IEP") "planning meeting" with the parents/guardians and appropriate School Department personnel. At this meeting, parents/guardians will have an

opportunity to discuss their child's documented needs and to review the current programs, levels of inclusion and specialized services that are available at each school. The final determination of the services/support/program for the child will take place at the IEP "planning meeting," and the Family Resource Center will assign the child to one of the schools requested by the parents/guardians if the IEP Team determines that one of the schools requested by parents/guardians has adequate existing resources to meet the student's identified IEP needs and/or additional resources can be provided at one of those schools to meet the student's IEP needs. In the event that the student requires a specialized program that is not available in one of the schools requested by parents/guardians, then the Office of Special Education will designate a school to which the student will be assigned that will meet the student's IEP.

7. **Olà Program and Amigos School**

The CPS will assign students whose parents/guardians list the Olà program, which is housed at the Harrington School, and the Amigos School as one of their choices according to the guidelines adopted by the Cambridge School Committee. These guidelines, which are consistent with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Education's guidance on two-way bilingual programs, provide that students shall be assigned to the Amigos School and the Olà program at the Harrington School based on language dominance/proficiency. See Appendix D for the guidelines adopted by the Cambridge School Committee.

8. **Bilingual Program Placements**

In addition to the two-way bilingual immersion programs, students may be eligible for other bilingual program placements. Based on the language proficiency of students, students shall be assigned to such programs without being placed in the applicant pool.

**D. Process for transfer and waiting list for grades one through eight**

1. **Request for a transfer or to be placed on a waiting list for next school year.** Parents/guardians of a child in kindergarten through grade eight may request that their child transfer from his or her assigned school to another school in the Cambridge Public Schools or for their child's name to be placed on a waiting