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PLOTTING SCHOOL CHOICE:

The Challenges of Crossing District Lines

By Erin Dillon

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Allowing students to transfer to schools across district lines is gaining more attention as a strategy for reformers looking to reduce economic and racial segregation in public education and give students in failing schools a better chance to achieve. A number of organizations, including the nonpartisan Century Foundation and the Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights have endorsed the idea.¹ Interdistrict choice, they argue, would allow students in low-performing schools—schools that often have high concentrations of low-income and minority students—to move to higher-performing schools with very different economic and racial profiles.

Many of these same organizations have pushed for including interdistrict choice in the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The law requires that students in low-performing schools be allowed to transfer voluntarily to higher-performing schools *within* their school system. But because there are so few higher-performing-school options for such students, only a tiny fraction of them have been able to take advantage of the intradistrict transfer opportunity.

But permitting students to move further, beyond school system boundaries, is unlikely to increase most students' educational opportunities significantly. A new Education Sector analysis of school performance information suggests that only a limited number of students in a limited number of locations are likely to benefit from interdistrict choice—and even then only if carefully crafted policies succeed where many past programs have failed.

Using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping technology of school performance information in California, Texas, and Florida, Education Sector has found that factors such as long distances to higher-achieving schools and limited capacity in such schools can sharply limit the ability of students to take advantage of interdistrict opportunities.

Studies of existing multidistrict choice programs have found that a lack of information for parents and inadequate transportation subsidies for disadvantaged families also limit the scope of many interdistrict choice

programs. And there is little research evidence to support the premise that moving students to a higher-performing school alone will result in improved student achievement. In fact, many interdistrict choice programs have failed to produce the improved student performance and socioeconomic integration that interdistrict choice advocates envision. Some may have actually increased racial segregation.

Permitting students to seek out higher-performing schools in other school systems would enhance the educational opportunities of some students. But even under the best-designed interdistrict choice programs, the number of such students would be, in most localities, limited. The majority of students—80 percent to 90 percent—will remain in the same low-performing schools. Ultimately, policymakers will have to pursue additional solutions to the isolation of disadvantaged students and students of color in highly segregated underperforming schools.

CALLING FOR INTERDISTRICT CHOICE

Open-enrollment policies, the general term used to describe plans that allow students to transfer schools across designated school attendance boundaries, are nearly everywhere; 46 states currently have some type of open-enrollment law on the books, and 42 have an interdistrict choice provision.²

Open-enrollment policies date to desegregation efforts in the 1960s. Such policies were proposed as a way to integrate segregated school districts following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision outlawing de jure segregation. In practice, however, many of these plans were enacted by those seeking to preserve a segregated school system, by allowing white students to choose to continue to attend their all-white schools and leaving black students to either face attending a potentially hostile all-white school or remain in their segregated school.³

Over the years, however, civil rights advocates have embraced school choice—from proposals to integrate schools by busing students from urban to suburban schools, to current efforts to build new schools of choice with the hope of better serving students in their own neighborhoods. And the goal has not just been to promote integration but also to improve student achievement.

An effective open-enrollment policy allows students to cross the invisible lines—school attendance zones and school district boundaries—that often reinforce neighborhood segregation by race and income. It is this integration—mixing minority and white students, upper income and low-income students, and low-achieving and high-achieving students—that open-enrollment advocates believe will improve student achievement.

The goal is to alleviate the detrimental effects of concentrations of poor, minority, and low-achieving students by moving these students into primarily middle-class, higher-performing schools, which already contain the resources—“high standards, good teachers, active parents, adequate resources, a safe and orderly environment, a stable student and teacher population”—needed to raise student achievement.⁴ Indeed, many advocates of public school choice argue that even with a heavy investment of financial resources, high-poverty schools will never achieve at the levels possible in an economically integrated school, because the less-tangible resources, such as active parents and high-achieving peers, are absent.

Research on the influence—both positive and negative—of one’s peers on academic achievement suggests that students can benefit from being exposed to higher-achieving peers and can suffer when in an overwhelmingly low-achieving school.⁵ And some long-standing desegregation programs have shown evidence of a positive impact on college-going rates, graduation rates, and occupational attainment among urban students

transferring into suburban schools.⁶ In fact, much of the evidence supporting the academic benefits of integration through public school choice comes from data on the positive impact of racial integration programs after *Brown*. Those who advocate using choice to achieve desegregation goals often note the rise in test scores and graduation rates for African-American students between 1970 and 1990, which coincided with the desegregation of public schools.⁷

But recent research showing that school segregation is increasing has led to concern among civil rights activists that these gains may begin to erode, leading some activists to propose open enrollment, and interdistrict school choice in particular, as a way to move students out of their racially isolated neighborhood schools. Evidence from existing open-enrollment programs indicates, however, that if these programs are to improve integration, choice must be controlled. Essentially, students may choose their school, but ultimate decisions over where students are allowed to attend school are made with an eye toward ensuring integration. Otherwise, students may move into even more homogenous schools, thereby increasing segregation.

Thus, when the United States Supreme Court ruled in a 5-to-4 decision in June 2007 that the school desegregation plans in Seattle, Wash., and Louisville, Ky., which used race as a factor in assigning students to schools, were unconstitutional, civil rights leaders were appalled. Julian Bond, chairman of the NAACP National Board of Directors stated, “At a time when school segregation is increasing ... the current court has condemned minority children to a back seat in the race for life’s chances.”⁸ By eliminating the mechanism to promote racially integrated schools, Bond and others argued, the Supreme Court denied students the social and educational benefits of such settings and the promise of the *Brown* decision, to give each student a quality education.

Justice Anthony Kennedy, however, as longtime public school advocate Jonathan Kozol noted, “opened up a new avenue” for integration by allowing school districts to assign students to schools according to criteria other than race, such as achievement or income. With its strong emphasis on student achievement and an existing provision allowing students to transfer to higher-performing schools, NCLB appeared, for some activists, to be the perfect vehicle to advance both integration and student achievement goals.

Kozol, for instance, suggested using the law to circumvent the limitations imposed by the Supreme Court’s decision: If school districts could no longer use race to integrate schools, Congress should amend NCLB to better allow students in low-performing schools to voluntarily transfer across school district lines into a higher-performing school. Kozol, a well-known critic of NCLB, argued that the law’s current provision allowing students to transfer to higher-performing schools within their school district was too limited to be effective, but by extending the option across district boundaries, Congress could, “deal a mighty blow to resurgent racial concentration—without introducing racial terminology into the debate.”⁹

Allowing interdistrict choice is key to Kozol’s and others’ proposals.¹⁰ Choice policies that only allow transfers within a district’s boundaries, like NCLB’s school choice provision, are less likely to be effective because many students in low-performing schools have few, if any, higher-performing schools available in the same school district—often, entire school districts are low-performing. Only a small percentage of eligible students have used NCLB’s current choice provision, partly because in some districts there simply aren’t enough seats available in higher-performing schools. A U.S. Department of Education report released in June 2007 found, among the nine large, urban districts examined, a mere half-percent of eligible students participated in school choice under NCLB.¹¹

The limited use of NCLB’s choice provision, combined with pressure to find new ways to integrate schools following the 2007 Supreme Court decision, has led to calls for more interdistrict choice, both through NCLB and through other state and federal policies. But it would be a mistake to think that interdistrict choice policies will be easy to implement or that interdistrict choice alone can give poor, minority, or low-achieving students a high-quality education. Achievement gains have been inconsistent among existing interdistrict choice programs, and programs are often hindered by a lack of resources and political barriers, resulting in underfunded and poorly designed policies that can actually exacerbate school segregation.

And, as Education Sector’s analysis shows, even if these barriers are overcome, only a small percentage of students are likely to benefit, making it critical that interdistrict choice policies be targeted to those students who could benefit the most from increased access to higher-performing public schools. Moreover, in school

districts with a high percentage of low-income and low-achieving students, even targeted choice will not reach the majority of students who need access to higher-achieving schools—in these districts, the best strategy may be to build new, better neighborhood schools.

MAPPING SCHOOL CHOICE

Who Will Benefit

America has over 14,000 school districts, according to the latest U.S. Department of Education Survey.¹² Historically, this is low—in 1940 there were over 100,000 local districts, despite the fact that there were only 25 million students, compared with nearly 50 million public school students today. These districts come in all shapes and sizes, ranging from the 1.1-million students in New York City public school system to the Horse Creek Public School District in North Dakota, which enrolled six students in 2005. School districts also reflect the nation’s geographic diversity. Some students live in dense, urban areas with numerous schools nearby. Others live so far from other schools that school-based choice will do them no good.

To determine just how many students could potentially benefit from more choice among public schools, both within districts (intradistrict choice) and between them (interdistrict choice), Education Sector analyzed school performance data and school locations in three of the country’s most populous states—California, Texas, and Florida. We identified 8,000 California schools, nearly 7,000 Texas schools, and 2,600 Florida schools; categorized them as serving grade three, grade seven, and/or grade 10; and used state test scores to determine which schools were “lower-” and “higher-performing.” For our analysis, lower-performing schools are those schools scoring in the bottom two fifths (or quintiles) of performance of all schools in the state serving the same grade level; higher-performing schools are those schools scoring in the top three quintiles.

We used Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping technology to estimate approximate drive times from each lower-performing school to all higher-performing schools located within a 60-minute drive.¹³ For a higher-performing school to be a viable option for students to transfer to, it had to be at least two quintiles above the lower-performing school. For instance, a school scoring in the

The Impact of Our Assumptions

In order to estimate the potential of interdistrict choice to offer students better schooling options, we needed to make several assumptions about students' choice of schools, driving distances, and the capacity of higher-performing schools to accept students. Each of these assumptions impacts the final results.

Driving Time: We chose a 20-minute driving distance to represent the time most students spend commuting to school—according to data from the 2001 National Household Travel Survey, the average commute to school is 18 minutes. While there are examples of programs in which students are bused long distances from city to suburban schools, often riding the bus for an hour each way, using such a long driving distance could overstate the potential impact of choice. Since we're estimating the potential of choice to operate on a statewide basis and for more than a select number of students, we chose a commuting distance that would likely be considered reasonable to most parents. In addition, because the driving-time estimates do not take into account additional drive times due to rush-hour traffic or indirect bus routes, the 20-minute limit underestimates actual driving times.

Moreover, expanding travel time beyond 20 minutes does not necessarily expand choice substantially (see sidebar, *More Miles to Go*, Page 17). While increasing the maximum drive time does increase the number of potential higher-performing schools for any given student, it also increases the number of other students who have access to those same schools. Because of this “competition effect,” more travel time does not necessarily equal more choice. Indeed, our analysis suggests that increasing the maximum drive time assumption beyond 20 minutes has a negligible effect on the percentage of students with additional options. Beyond that point, the benefit of additional accessible schools is, for the most part, cancelled out by increased competition for limited spots from other students.

Capacity: Higher-performing schools cannot infinitely expand to accommodate students transferring from lower-performing schools. Therefore, we needed to include some measure of school capacity that would neither artificially limit nor overstate the impact of interdistrict choice. We chose a 10-percent increase in enrollments, an amount we estimate schools could reasonably accommodate. In their recommendations for NCLB's school transfer provision, which allows students in low-performing schools to attend higher-performing schools, the Aspen Commission on No Child Left Behind supports this assumption, proposing that higher-performing schools be required to make at least 10 percent of their seats available to transferring students. We found no research suggesting that any assumption other than 10 percent is more empirically justified as the best estimate of maximum increased capacity. An analysis that did not assume some limitation on capacity—one that only counted the number of higher-performing schools within range of a given school, for example—would in many cases overstate the true potential of interdistrict choice. For an example illustrating this, see Map 4, *The Piedmont Bubble* (Oakland, Calif.), Page 8.

To estimate how our results might differ if this capacity assumption were changed only requires some basic math. If

12 percent of California students enrolled in lower-performing grade three schools could transfer under interdistrict choice with a 10-percent capacity assumption, 24 percent could transfer if we increased our capacity assumption to 20 percent.

Choice of Schools: We also made an assumption about who would be offered the choice to transfer schools and which schools they would transfer into. Rather than assume that all students would have the option to transfer to any school, no matter how much better or worse that school was performing, we limited choice only to students in the bottom 40 percent of schools and limited their choices to schools that were substantially better performing—at least two quintiles above in student performance rankings. We ranked schools from 1, the lowest quintile of performance, to 5, the highest quintile. In our analysis, a higher-performing school, ranking a 3, 4, or 5, was only considered a viable transfer option if it was at least two quintiles above a lower-performing school, ranking a 1 or 2. A school ranked a 3, for example, is only considered a viable option for students in a school ranked a 1. These limitations follow with good interdistrict choice policy design—policies that target choice to students who attend the lowest-performing schools and ensure transferring students move into substantially higher-performing schools.

If we remove this restriction and allow students in schools ranking 2 to attend schools ranking a 3, for instance, the number of students who could benefit from increased choice will increase by a few percentage points. Combined interdistrict and intradistrict choice among students in California grade three schools, for example, would increase from 11.9 percent to 12.1 percent under this changed assumption. Similarly, if students in schools ranking a 1 are allowed to attend schools ranking a 2, choice would expand further. Alternately, if students in higher-ranking schools were also allowed to choose, the competition for space in higher-performing schools would increase, thereby decreasing the number of spots available to each school and decreasing the percent of students in low-performing schools with available choice.

Impact of Assumptions: Our assumptions—limiting choice to a 20-minute driving radius, assuming higher-performing schools can expand their capacity by 10 percent, and limiting choice to schools with at least two quintiles difference in performance—necessarily limit the percent of students who can transfer, in addition to any limitations due to the geographic distribution of schools. To isolate the impact of geography, we calculated the percent of students in each state who could transfer, without using the GIS analysis, by simply taking 10 percent of the enrollments in higher-performing schools and calculating those slots as a percent of total enrollment in lower-performing schools. This allowed us to determine the impact on choice of driving distance and other geographic limitations that were included in the GIS analysis.

For California schools, geography only slightly lowers the percent of students with the option to transfer among grade three and grade seven schools. Among grade 10 schools, geography has a greater impact, lowering available choice by several percentage points. In both Texas and Florida, geography lowers the percent of students who could transfer by an average of 4.5 percent. (See chart on Page 25.)

third quintile is a viable transfer option only for students at schools scoring in the first quintile. Throughout this report, we limit our focus to options available to students within a 20-minute driving time, which is what we determined to be a realistic traveling distance. (See Appendix for full discussion of methods.)

Population density and the geographic distribution of lower- and higher-performing schools can have a powerful impact on whether school choice offers real solutions to students. The following three maps illustrate the range of settings that can affect students looking to benefit from more choice among public schools.

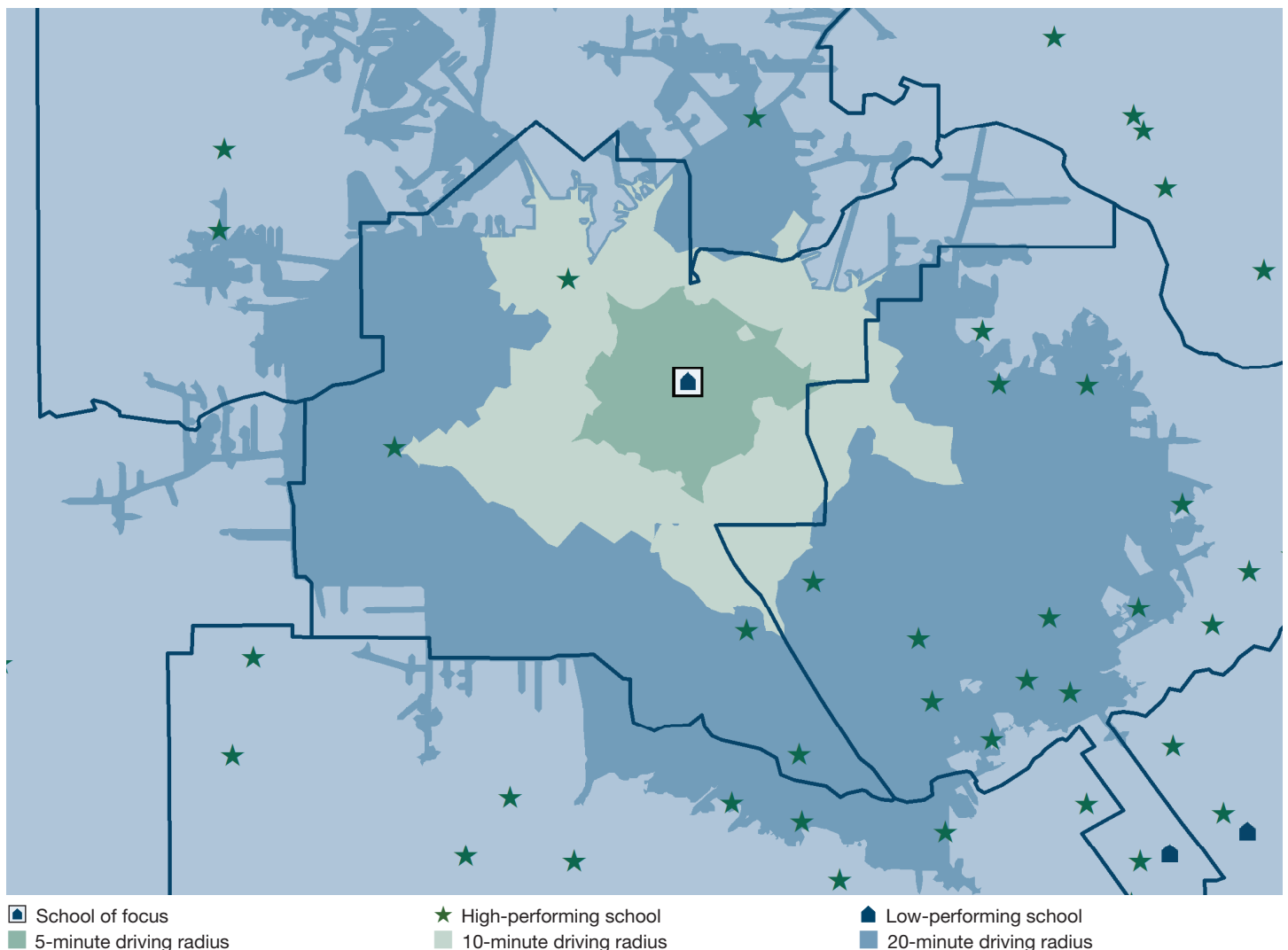
Students at the lower-performing elementary school in Tomball, Texas, highlighted on **Map 1**, have many choices.

Within a 20-minute drive of this school, which ranks in the bottom 40 percent of Texas schools in student achievement, there are four higher-performing schools within the school district and 17 higher-performing schools in neighboring districts.

But for students in remote, rural areas, the choices are much more limited. Students at the lower-performing elementary school in Rocksprings, Texas, highlighted on **Map 2**, have no higher-performing school options to choose from within a 20-minute driving radius. These students would need to drive at least an hour to reach a higher-performing school.

Lack of choice is not always a function of population density; sometimes the geographic distribution of lower-

Map 1. Twenty-Minute Drive Time and Many Options (Tomball, Texas)



and higher-performing schools can make a difference. There may be many schools nearby, but very few higher-performing schools to choose from. The lower-performing Los Angeles school highlighted on **Map 3**, for instance, is surrounded by a number of other schools within its school district, but only one in a five-minute driving radius, and just another two within a 10-minute driving radius are higher-performing. These students live in a dense, urban area, but they would need to travel a long distance to get a seat in a higher-performing school. And, in this case, crossing district boundaries may be critical to offering these students more choices.

Considering School Capacity

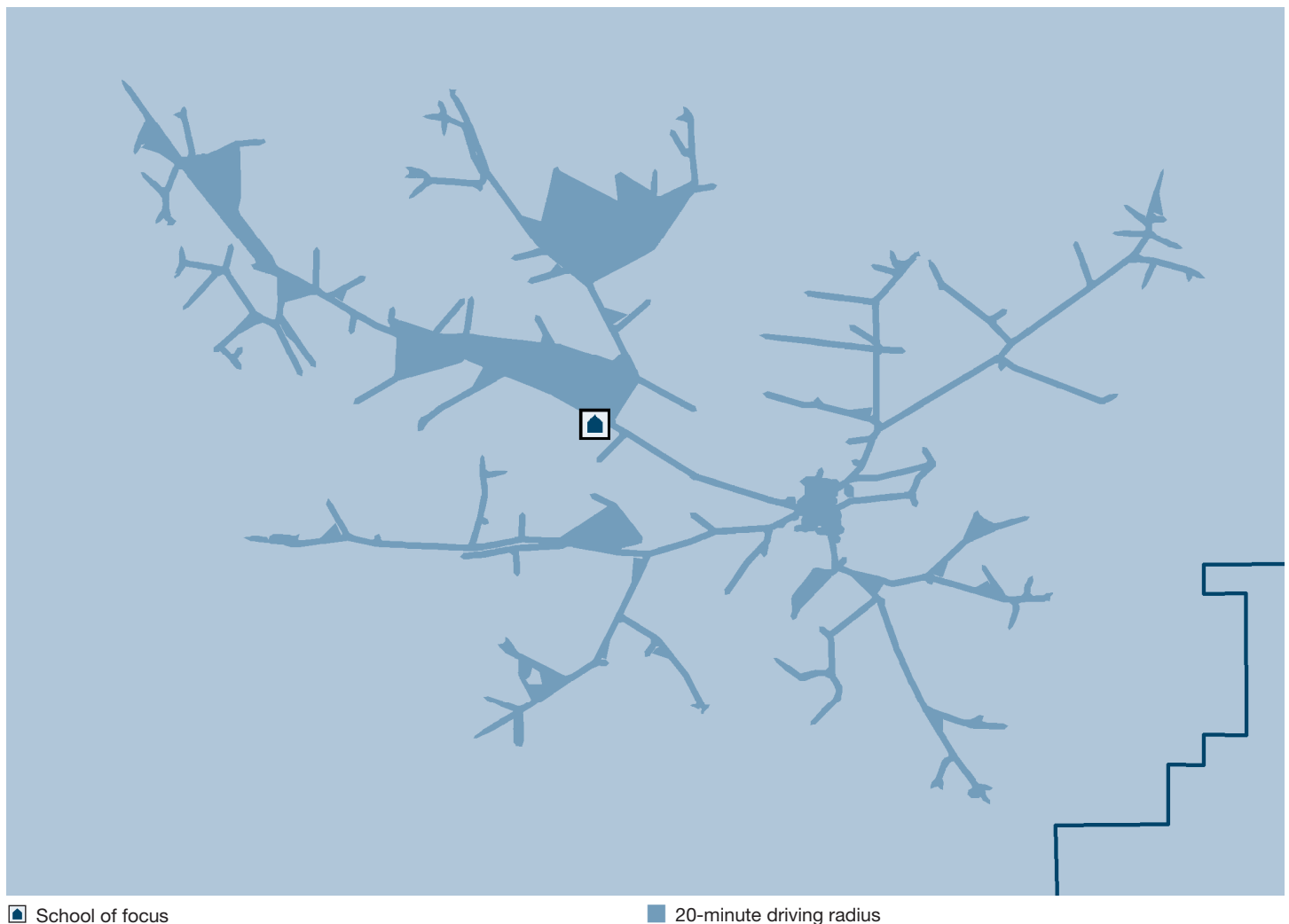
Advocates of interdistrict and intradistrict choice argue that many students in lower-performing schools have

A Note on the Maps

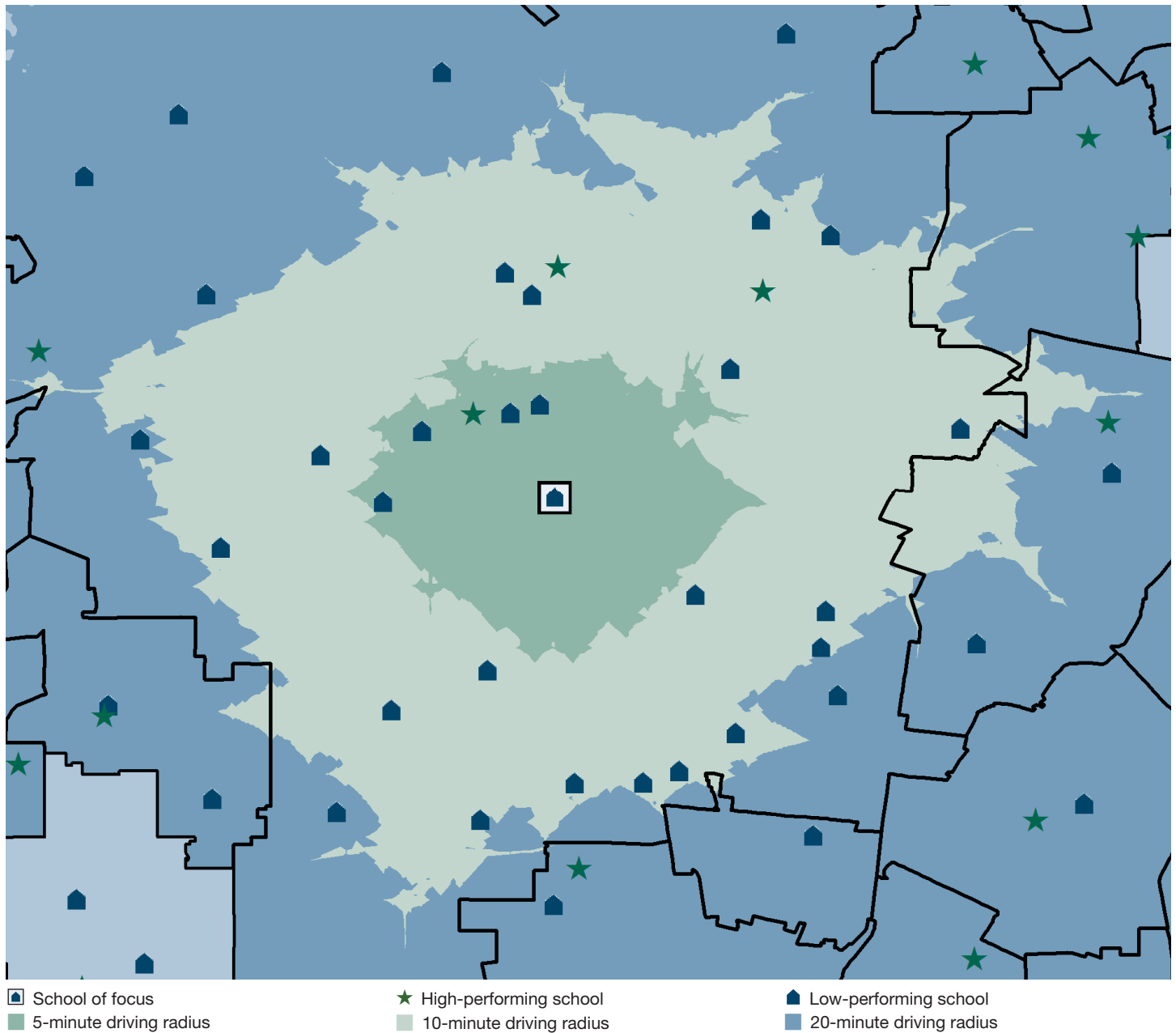
We used Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software to calculate drive-time distances between all lower-performing and higher-performing schools within each grade level for each state. While in our analysis we rely on our student achievement rankings to determine viable transfer options for students at lower-performing schools, on the maps, we show all the schools serving the same grade level regardless of student achievement ranking. See Appendix for full discussion of drive-time calculations and measures used to distinguish higher-performing and lower-performing schools.

another, higher-performing school within a short drive.¹⁴ But to estimate how many students could benefit from school choice, we can't assume that every higher-performing school within a short drive—or, for our analysis, a 20-minute drive—has enough space to take in all students who are interested in transferring

Map 2. Twenty-Minute Drive Time and No Options (Rocksprings, Texas)



Map 3. Lots of Schools, But Few Real Choices (Los Angeles, California)



from nearby lower-performing schools. A single higher-performing school that is surrounded by a number of lower-performing schools logically would be unable to be a destination for all interested students.

Map 4, for example, shows the high-performing Piedmont Unified School District, which sits in the middle of the Oakland Unified School District in California—separated only by school district boundary lines. If interdistrict choice were allowed, students from lower-performing Oakland schools would have the option to attend Piedmont’s one,

higher-performing high school, highlighted on the map. But Piedmont School District and all other nearby higher-performing schools would need to expand by at least 25 percent to accommodate all students enrolled in Oakland’s lower-performing high schools.

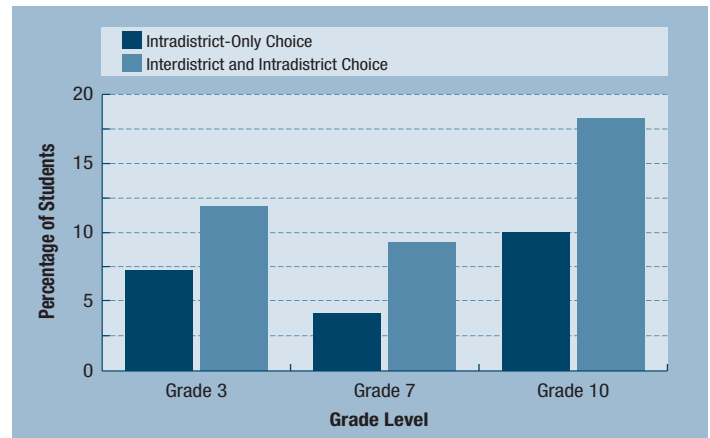
Schools have a finite capacity to enroll new students. State-mandated limits on class size can hinder high-performing schools’ ability to expand, and, particularly in large urban areas such as Los Angeles, the few higher-performing schools are already filled to capacity. And

since it is unlikely that large numbers of students will voluntarily leave *higher-performing* schools to attend lower-performing schools, there will be a limited number of seats available for transferring students.

To account for school capacity restraints and for potential “competition” from students in nearby lower-performing schools, we assumed, for our analysis, that each nearby higher-performing school could increase enrollment by 10 percent to create available seats for students in lower-performing schools. We then distributed these available seats across all lower-performing schools within a 20-minute drive. (See Appendix for full discussion of methods.)

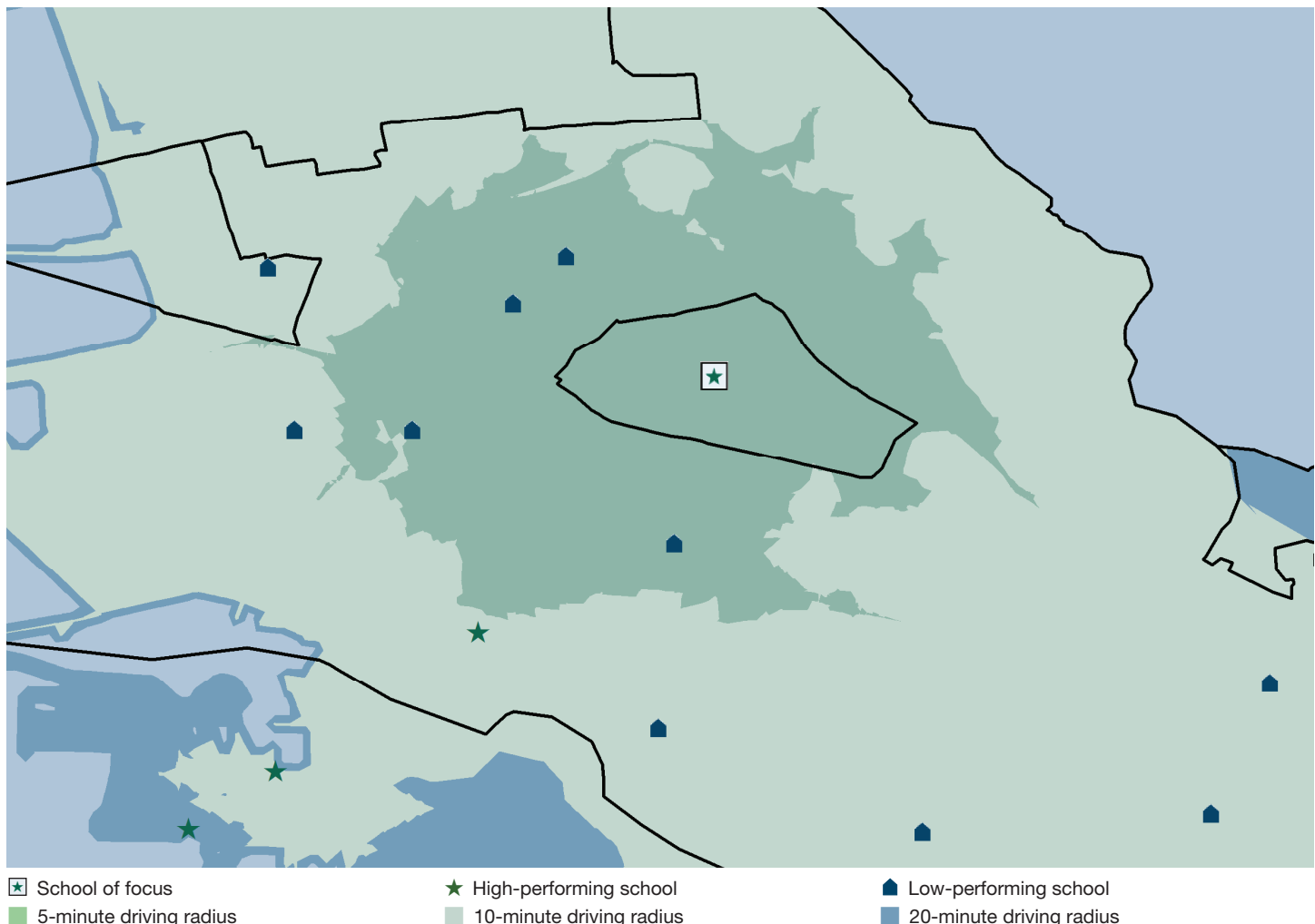
Figure 1 shows the percentage of students at lower-performing California schools serving grade three, grade seven, and grade 10, who could potentially transfer to a

Figure 1. Students With Choice Among Low-Performing California Schools



Source: Author analysis of available choice within a 20-minute driving distance of low-performing schools. Drive time calculated using Geographic Information Systems software.

Map 4. The Piedmont Bubble (Oakland, California)



higher-performing school. Slightly more than 7 percent of students at schools serving grade three could transfer to a higher-performing school when choice is limited to schools within the student’s home district. This percentage increases to nearly 12 percent when choice is expanded to include schools in other school districts, indicating that interdistrict choice would benefit these students. Choice is lower overall for students in schools serving grade 7, with just 4 percent being able to transfer under an intradistrict-only choice policy and just over 9 percent when expanded to include interdistrict choice. The percentage of students who could potentially transfer schools is higher among schools serving grade 10, with 10 percent of students transferring with intradistrict-only choice and over 18 percent with both intradistrict and interdistrict choice.¹⁵ In Texas schools, when space constraints are taken into account, 13 percent of students in grade three schools, 10 percent in grade seven schools, and 12 percent in grade 10 schools could potentially transfer to a higher-performing school with combined intradistrict and interdistrict choice.

Interdistrict choice increases the percentage of students with the option to transfer schools, despite the fact that by extending boundaries, it also potentially expands competition for space in higher-performing schools. The students in the Modesto, Calif., lower-performing elementary school highlighted in **Map 5**, for example, have seven higher-performing options within their district. But the students also face competition for space at these seven schools from the 12 other lower-performing schools in their district. As a result, only 5 percent of students in Modesto could get an available seat at a higher-performing school. Allowing interdistrict choice expands this to nearly 17 percent of students by increasing students’ access to higher-performing schools without proportionally increasing the number of competing lower-performing schools. In this situation, interdistrict choice can be an important outlet for those students who cannot get one of the limited seats at higher-performing schools within their school district.

Location, Location, Location

The availability of choice, however, is not consistent across all schools. Choice varies depending on the location of a school—whether it is in a city, suburb, town, or rural area. It also varies depending on the race and economic status of students—those students in the

most racially and economically isolated schools may be least likely to get a seat at a nearby higher-performing school.

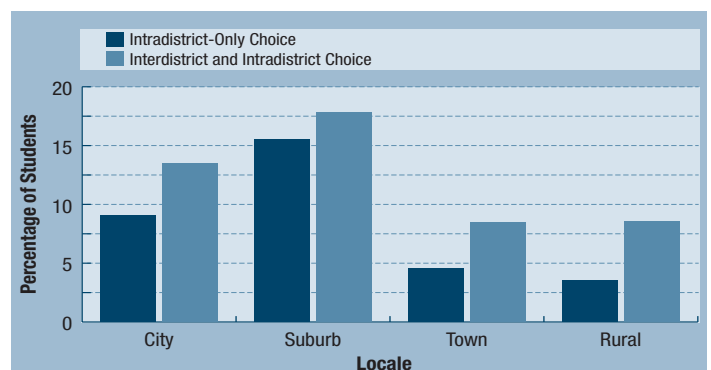
As **Figure 2** shows, suburban students are the most likely to benefit from choice in Texas—nearly 18 percent of students in the Texas suburban schools we looked at could potentially transfer to a higher-performing school within a 20-minute drive.¹⁶

Map 6 illustrates a five, 10, and 20-minute driving radius for two lower-performing suburban elementary schools in Plano, Texas. As the map shows, these schools have access to a large number of higher-performing schools, both within their school district and in neighboring districts, and with little competition from other lower-performing schools. As a result, over 90 percent of students could transfer to a higher-performing school, without even leaving their home district.

Unlike the suburban district highlighted in **Map 6**, city school districts in Texas often have high numbers of lower-performing schools within their district boundaries and few higher-performing options. But these districts also often have higher-performing suburban districts nearby, making interdistrict choice a potentially important outlet for allowing students to attend a higher-performing school. **Map 7** of elementary schools in the San Antonio Independent School District in Texas illustrates the limits of within-district choice for urban school districts.

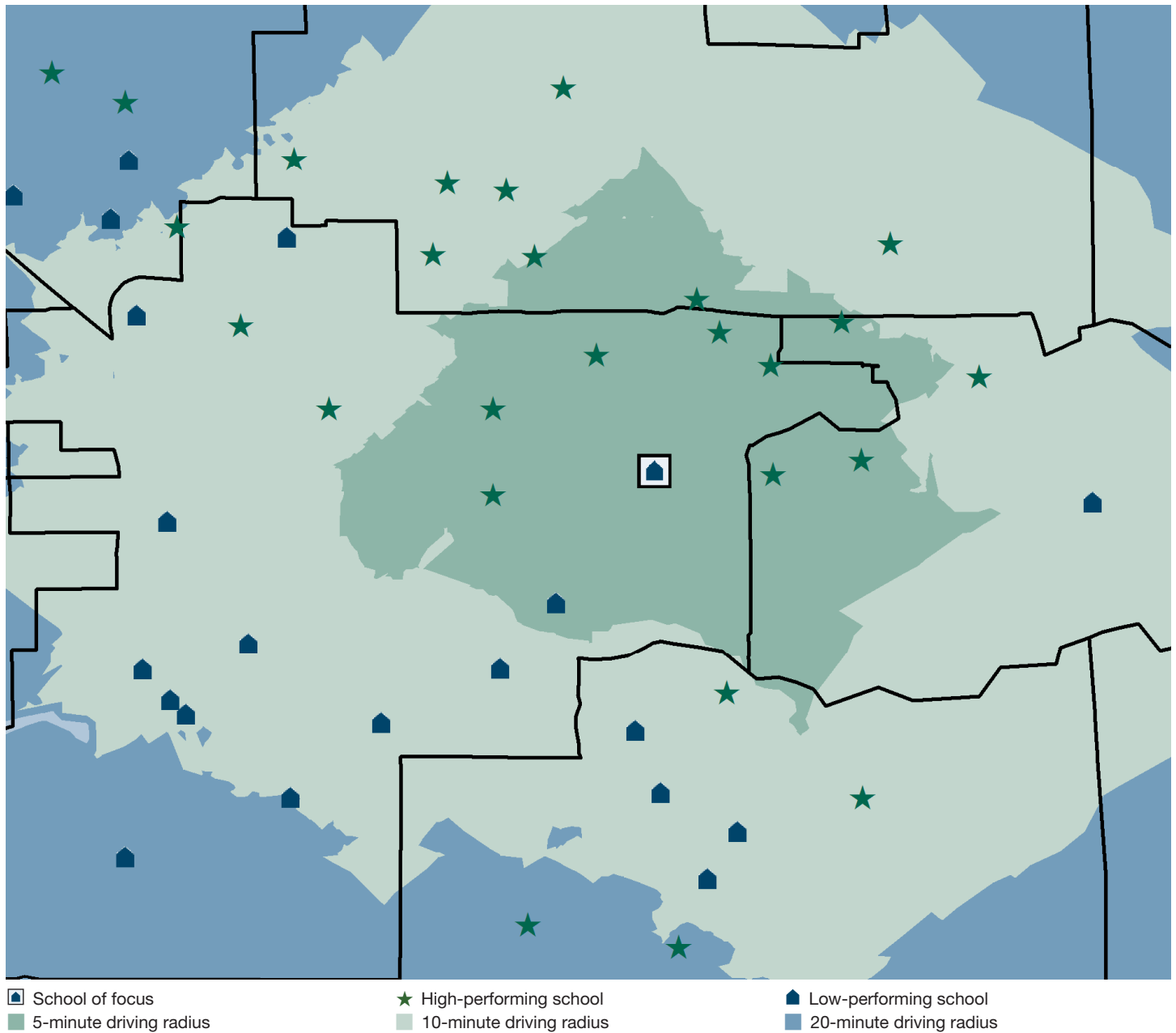
In San Antonio only 3 percent of students in the 51 lower-performing, grade three schools could get a seat in

Figure 2. Students With Choice Among Low-Performing Texas Schools, by Locale (Grade 3)



Source: Author analysis of available choice within a 20-minute driving distance of low-performing schools. Drive time calculated using geographic information systems software.

Map 5. Competition From Within (Modesto, California)



one of the 15 higher-performing schools. But if choice is expanded into the nearby suburbs, 17 percent of students could find an available seat within a 20-minute drive.

In Texas, lower-performing schools are heavily concentrated in cities—60 percent of the students in lower-performing Texas schools were in a school located in a city, whereas only 17 percent were in a suburban school. This disparity in achievement levels between city and suburban schools helps to explain the low amount

of choice available to students in Texas city schools—there are few higher-performing schools and a lot of competition for space in these schools. But this isn't the case in all three states we looked at—in both California and Florida, students enrolled in city schools actually have more choice than students enrolled in suburban schools.

Lower-performing schools in both California and Florida were more evenly divided between city and suburban

areas. In California, 50 percent of the students in lower-performing schools were in a city, and 36 percent were in a suburban area. In Florida, 31 percent were in city schools and 51 percent in suburban schools. In these two states, lower-performing suburban schools faced just as much, if not more, competition for space in higher-performing schools as their city neighbors.

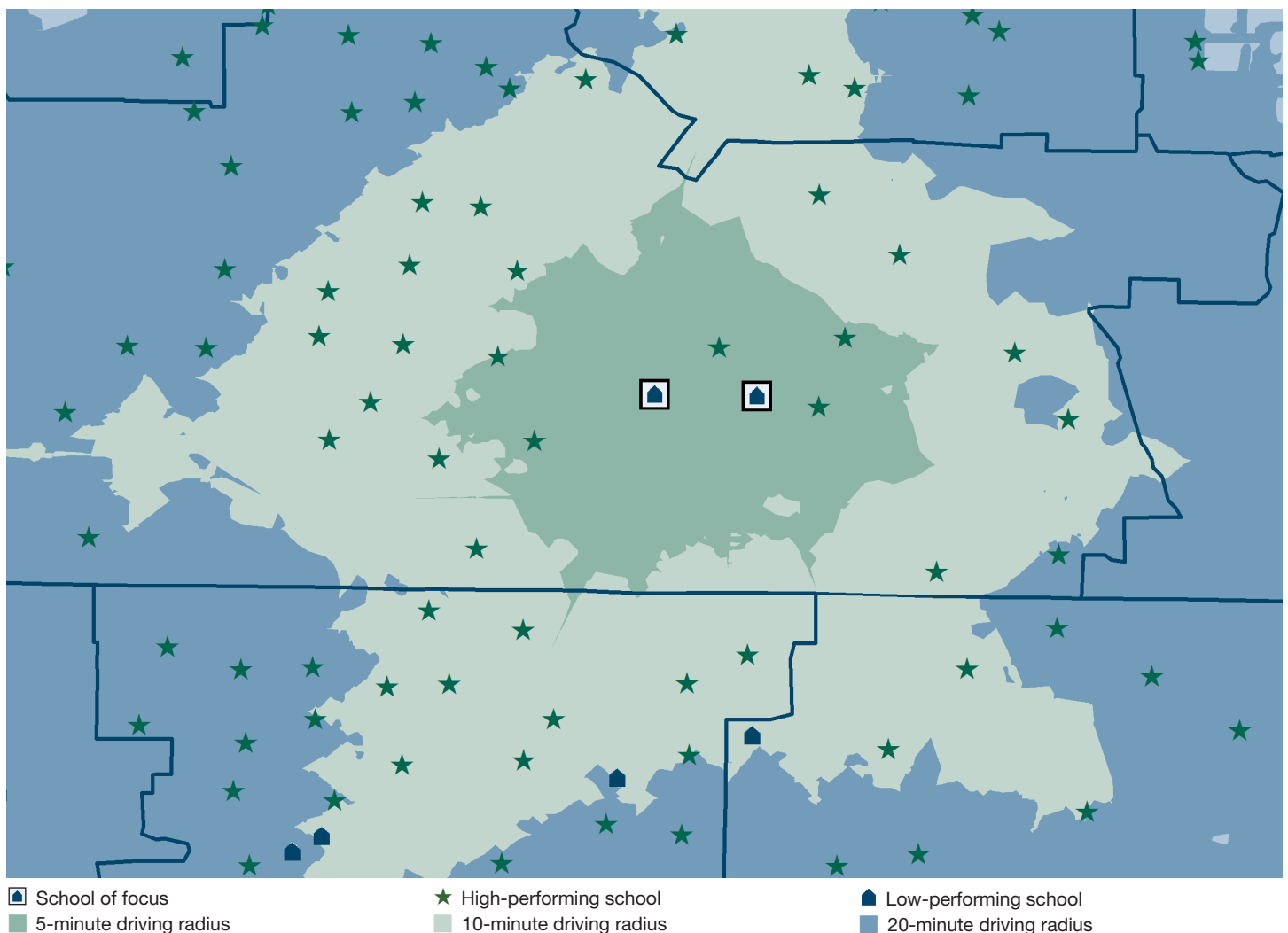
Across all three states, students in rural and town-based schools saw some of the biggest percentage increases in available choice with the addition of interdistrict choice. Rural and town-based schools generally have few other schools—higher- or lower-performing—within district boundaries. Often, only one or two schools at each grade level serve the entire school district, making interdistrict choice necessary for students in these schools to have any available options.

But even when interdistrict choice is allowed, the number of seats available at higher-performing schools is limited—overall, only 13 percent of students in grade three schools in Texas have the option to transfer to a higher-performing school.

Factoring In Race and Income

Public school choice policies often aim to increase choice among low-income and minority students, particularly students in urban areas surrounded by higher-performing, suburban schools. Those students attending the most racially and economically isolated schools are the students choice advocates claim will benefit most from the opportunity to attend a more integrated school. Our analysis shows that expanding

Map 6. Suburban District With Many Choices (Plano, Texas)



policies to include interdistrict choice can be an important outlet for minority and low-income students enrolled in lower-performing schools, but choice may also be more limited for these students because they often attend more racially and economically isolated schools and face more competition for space from other nearby low-performing schools.

To examine whether low-income and minority students would see the same benefit from public school choice as their middle-income, white peers, we calculated, for each school, the number of students within each ethnic group who could potentially transfer, and also the number of students who could transfer among those qualifying for the free or reduced-price lunch program. We focused on grade three schools in Texas and used a 20-minute driving radius.¹⁷ We compared the availability of choice by student characteristics among city and suburban schools only, in order to avoid conflating the effects of racial and

economic isolation with the effect of more remote school locations.¹⁸

As shown in **Figure 3**, in Texas city and suburban schools, the percent of students who could potentially transfer to a higher-performing school is highest among white students, lower among African-American students, and lowest among Hispanic students, indicating that minority students in Texas have the least opportunity to take advantage of a public school choice program.

Recent research on increased segregation among public schools helps to explain these results—African-American and Hispanic students are often in more racially isolated schools and school districts, and as our results indicate, students in such schools face more competition for space in higher-performing schools from students in other nearby low-performing schools.¹⁹ Civil rights advocates frequently cite this increased segregation as a reason

Map 7. Limits of Intradistrict Choice for Urban Areas (San Antonio, Texas)

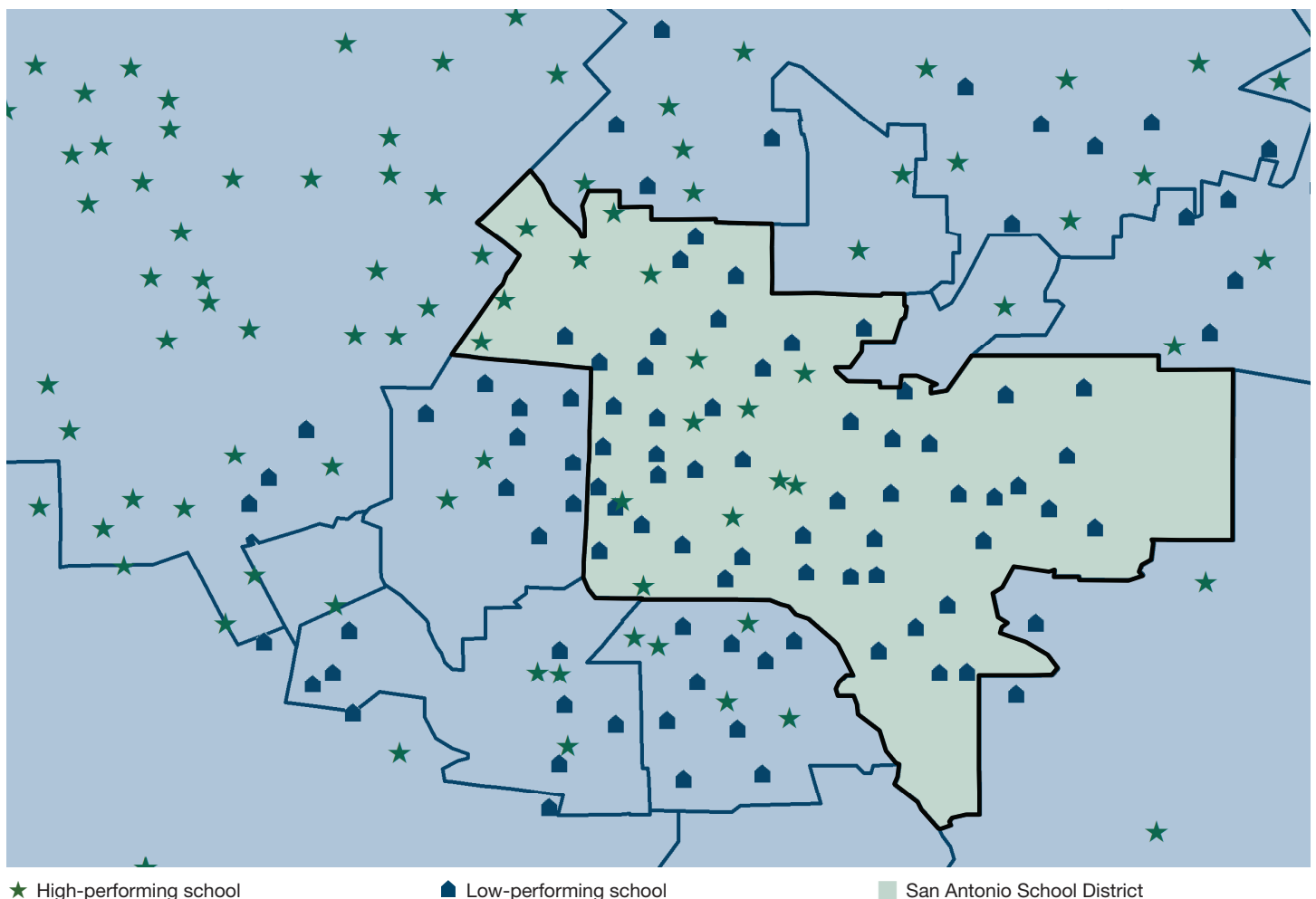
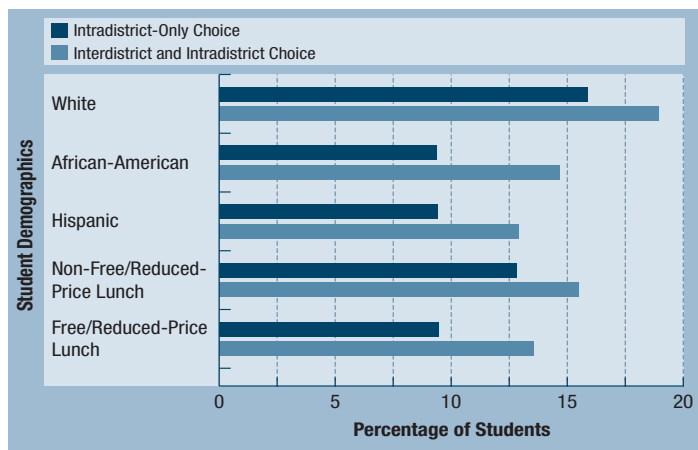


Figure 3. Students With Choice Among Low-Performing Texas Schools*, by Race and Free/Reduced Lunch Status (Grade 3)



Source: Author analysis of available choice within a 20-minute driving distance of low-performing schools. Drive time calculated using geographic information systems software.

*City and suburban schools.

for expanding choice across school district boundaries, where students are more likely to have access to an integrated school.

There is a similar pattern when looking at students' free or reduced-price lunch status. A slightly lower percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch—the lowest income students—have access to a seat in a higher-performing school.

Map 8 illustrates how the geographic distribution of schools with high concentrations of low-income students can impact the options available to those students. Here, the lower-performing elementary schools that are the most economically isolated are the furthest from the higher-performing schools students could potentially transfer into. This effect is exacerbated if choice is limited to schools within district boundaries.

Bound by County Lines

In some states, because of the way school district boundaries are drawn, interdistrict choice is simply not a realistic option.

Both California and Texas have hundreds of school districts, some very small. In these municipal-based districts, boundaries are generally drawn around smaller administrative areas, including towns and city centers. In

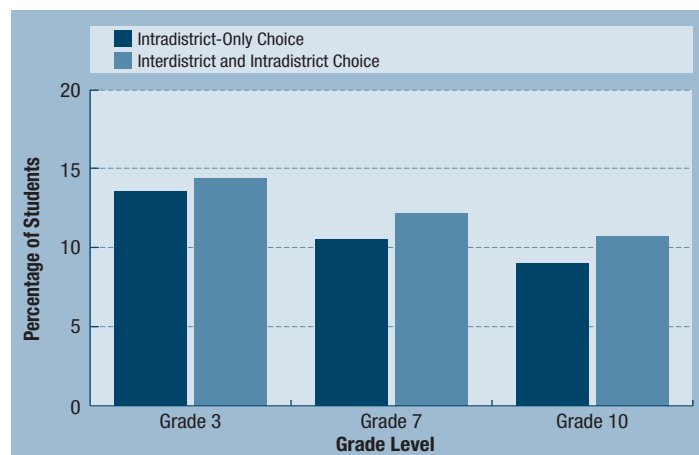
areas with high population density, these types of districts increase the likelihood that interdistrict choice will create new school options.

Other states, primarily in the South and West, have fewer districts, but they are much larger and often share the same boundaries as the county. Florida, for example, has a county-based system that weighs in with only 67 school districts, in contrast to the nearly 1,000 districts in California. This county-based structure reduces the potential for interdistrict choice to benefit students. Often, in these states, the only feasible school choice is within school district boundaries.

Map 9 is an example of this type of school district in Florida. A 20-minute drive from the highlighted lower-performing high school in the Polk County Public School District doesn't even reach the school district boundaries. Students in this school would need to travel over 45 minutes to reach a higher-performing school in a neighboring district.

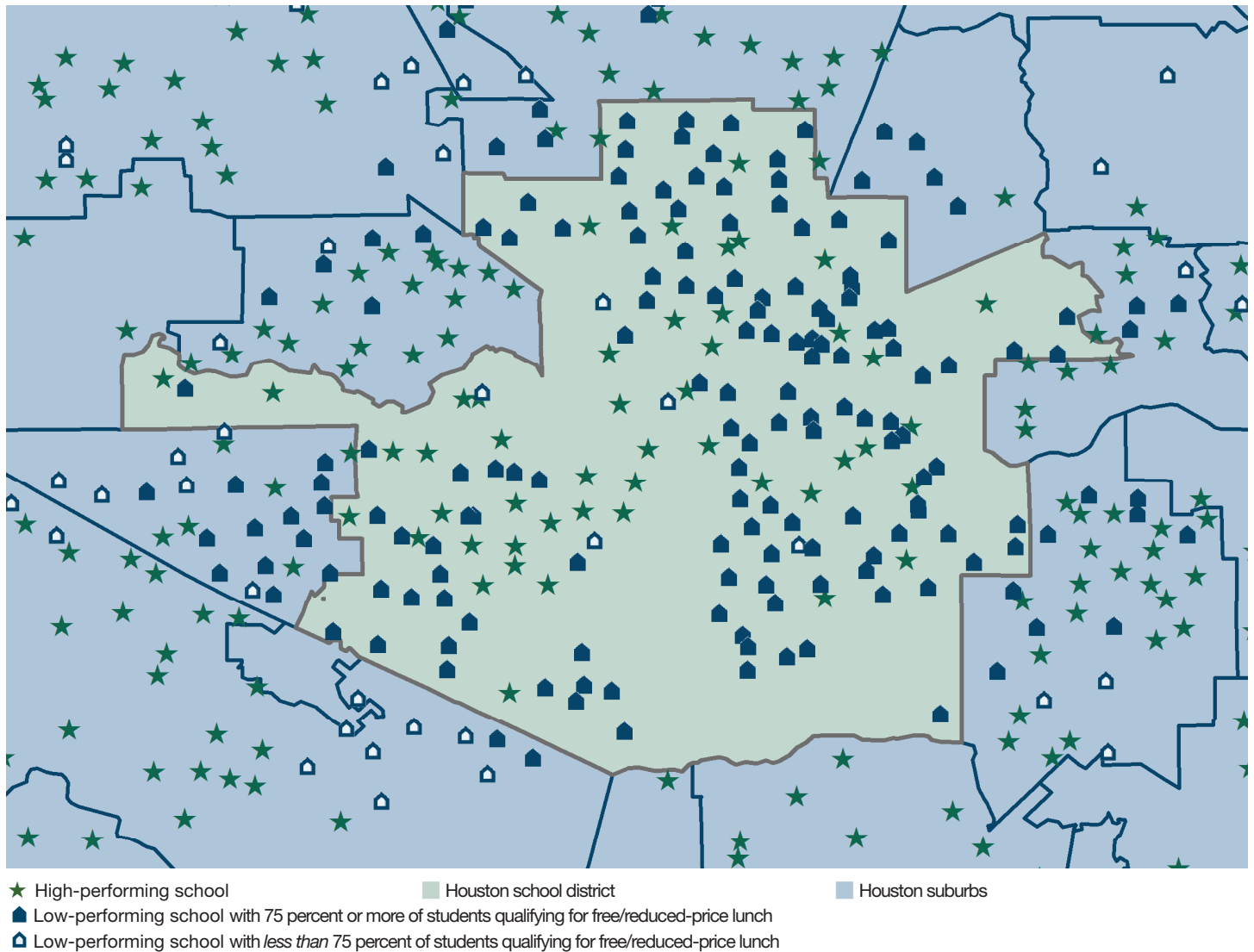
Interdistrict choice is unlikely to substantially increase the percentage of Florida students with a higher-performing school option, according to our analysis. **Figure 4** shows the percentage of students in Florida schools who could potentially transfer to a higher-performing school, with both intradistrict choice and combined intradistrict and interdistrict choice. As the chart demonstrates, interdistrict choice has almost no impact, providing less than a 1 percent increase in the percentage of students

Figure 4. Students With Choice Among Low-Performing Florida Schools



Source: Author analysis of available choice within a 20-minute driving distance of low-performing schools. Drive time calculated using geographic information systems software.

Map 8. The Income Factor (Houston, Texas and Surrounding Suburbs)



who could transfer among schools serving grade three and less than a 2 percent increase in schools serving grades seven and grade 10.

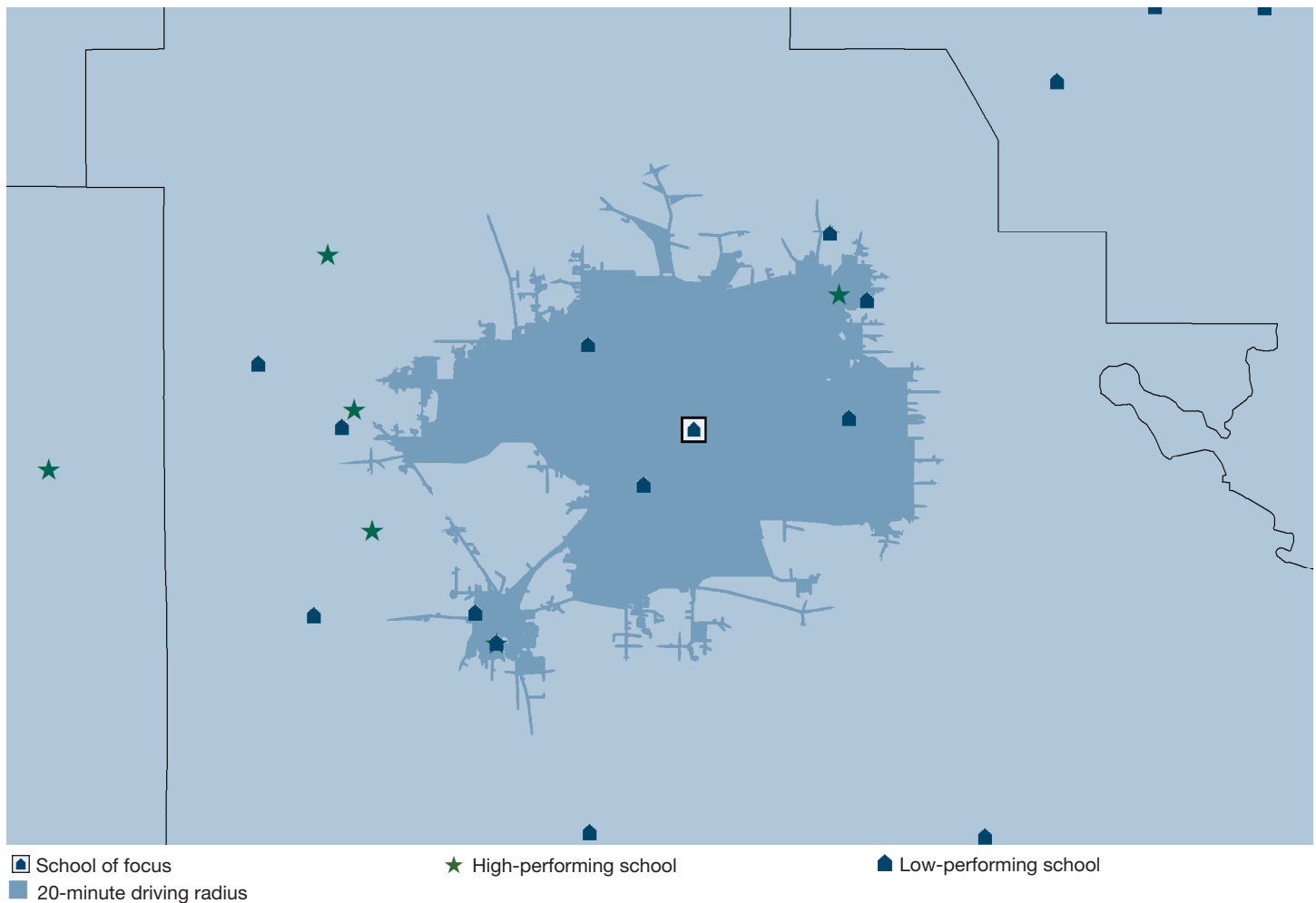
But that does not mean school choice, particularly intradistrict choice, doesn't have potential in Florida. The percent of students who could potentially transfer, using both intradistrict and interdistrict choice, is similar to the percent of students able to transfer in California and Texas—almost 14 percent of students in grade three schools, 12 percent in grade seven schools, and over 10 percent in grade 10 schools could transfer into a higher-performing school if they are willing to drive up to 20 minutes. And intradistrict choice often faces fewer administrative barriers than interdistrict policies, since funding formulas, transportation management, and school

records management are the same for schools in the same district.

LEARNING FROM EXISTING PROGRAMS

According to our analysis, students in schools with the highest concentrations of low-income and minority students—the very students that advocates of interdistrict choice seek to help—are the least likely to have a seat available in a nearby higher-performing school. Thus, with a limited number of seats available to students in lower-performing schools, it is important that open-enrollment policies target those seats to the students who need them most.

Map 9. Limits of Interdistrict Choice in States With Larger Districts (Polk County, Florida)



Many existing open-enrollment programs, however, do not effectively target such students, and as a result these policies have not achieved the racial and economic integration and student achievement gains that public school choice advocates envision.

The failure of these programs to be effective is often partly due to a lack of resources. Evaluations of student movement under interdistrict school choice have consistently found that interdistrict policies that do not provide sufficient resources in the form of transportation or outreach to parents—“cheap choice” as one researcher termed it—are unlikely to see any benefit to school integration or student achievement.²⁰ Disadvantaged students often don’t know that options are even available or don’t have the transportation to get to a higher-performing school.

Under these “cheap choice” programs, therefore, those with the resources to find out about their choice options

and transport their children to higher-performing schools are the most likely to take advantage of choice. The result is that the remaining students are concentrated in schools with an even higher low-income and low-achieving student population, essentially increasing segregation.

Massachusetts’ interdistrict choice program demonstrates how unregulated choice can exacerbate existing problems of segregation. According to a 2003 review of Massachusetts’ school choice policies, nearly 90 percent of students participating in interdistrict choice were white, compared with 75 percent of the states’ total public school population.²¹ Researchers also found that students participating in interdistrict choice in Massachusetts tended to move to districts that were more affluent and with higher test scores than their sending district, resulting in white students moving into schools with already high concentrations of white students.

Several aspects of the design of Massachusetts' program contribute to this outcome. For instance, while no school district may prevent a student from leaving, school districts can opt-out of the program by not allowing students to transfer in. Interdistrict choice in Massachusetts was signed into law in March 1991, and in 1993 it was reformed to allow school districts to decide annually whether they would accept students from other districts through the program.²² Currently, only 47 percent of school districts participate, which limits the options available to students in the state. Students in Boston, for example, are nearly prevented from exercising interdistrict choice through the state program, because only one of the school districts surrounding Boston participates.

Boston does, however, have its own interdistrict choice program, which targets low-income and minority students. METCO began in 1966 and was borne out of efforts to desegregate Boston's public schools.²³ Currently, 32 suburban communities surrounding Boston accept approximately 3,150 students through the METCO program. METCO is often held up as an example of a successful interdistrict choice program—it has been in operation for many years, targets minority students, and there is some evidence of its success in improving student outcomes.²⁴ But considering that 12,000 students remain on the waiting list for METCO—approximately 20 percent of Boston Public Schools' enrollment—it is apparent that demand is much higher than the supply of seats at surrounding suburban schools. And if these suburban districts agreed to participate in Massachusetts' open-enrollment program, they would likely see more Boston students enrolling in their schools.

Unlike METCO, however, Massachusetts' interdistrict choice program does not encourage racial or economic balance in schools, nor does it provide preference to students whose moves would further integrate schools by race, income, or student achievement. It is not surprising that Massachusetts' program does not promote integration. Boston was the site of some of the most forceful protests in the mid-1970s against court-ordered busing programs to desegregate schools. The protests alone illustrate the difficulty inherent in controlling student movements in an effort to achieve greater integration. Still, with a policy that allows school districts to opt-out of the program and also does not encourage integration in schools, it is no surprise that evidence shows Massachusetts' program may be increasing segregation.

Massachusetts' program is not unique in this regard. Open-enrollment policies in other states mirror this suburban/urban divide and its potential to increase segregation. An evaluation of Ohio's interdistrict choice program found that nearly all of the suburban districts surrounding large urban areas did not participate in interdistrict choice (similar to the suburban districts surrounding Boston), essentially eliminating choice for students in these urban districts.²⁵ A University of Michigan evaluation of Michigan's interdistrict choice program found that the suburban areas surrounding larger urban areas, such as Detroit, mostly shut themselves off from interdistrict choice transfers and that school choice patterns tended to “reinforce patterns of growth and decline in the residential housing market.”²⁶ Essentially, those Michigan districts already seeing growth in student enrollments saw the biggest increases due to interdistrict choice, and those districts already losing student enrollments saw further losses. And a review of the long-standing open-enrollment system in Boulder Valley, Colo., found that schools became more stratified with the introduction of open enrollment, primarily due to self-selection among students—those students with higher test scores disproportionately applied to higher-performing schools.²⁷

This pattern is the result of both a lack of interest among suburban districts in accepting large numbers of students from lower-income districts, and also pressure from urban districts concerned about losing large numbers of students. Financial incentives to enroll out-of-district students are one tool states have used to encourage suburban districts to participate in interdistrict choice programs. Also, in the current era of school accountability, suburban participation may hinge on whether schools are held accountable for transferring students' achievement for the first year or two. An open-enrollment policy that does not ensure that students in these large urban districts have access to choice is unlikely to serve the types of students it is intended to help—low income and minority students attending schools with a high concentration of poverty.

Benefits of Targeting Students

San Diego's Voluntary Ethnic Enrollment Program (VEEP), a voluntary busing program that was initiated after a 1970s court desegregation order, best illustrates how an open-enrollment program that targets low-

More Miles to Go

Distance traveled is often mentioned in discussions of public school choice, but is rarely studied as a factor that could effect whether students exercise choice, as well as the availability of choice. Logically, expanding driving distances will increase the percentage of students who can choose a higher-performing school, because it will increase the number of higher-performing schools available. But, in our analysis, we also account for the increased competition that distance brings from other low-performing schools.

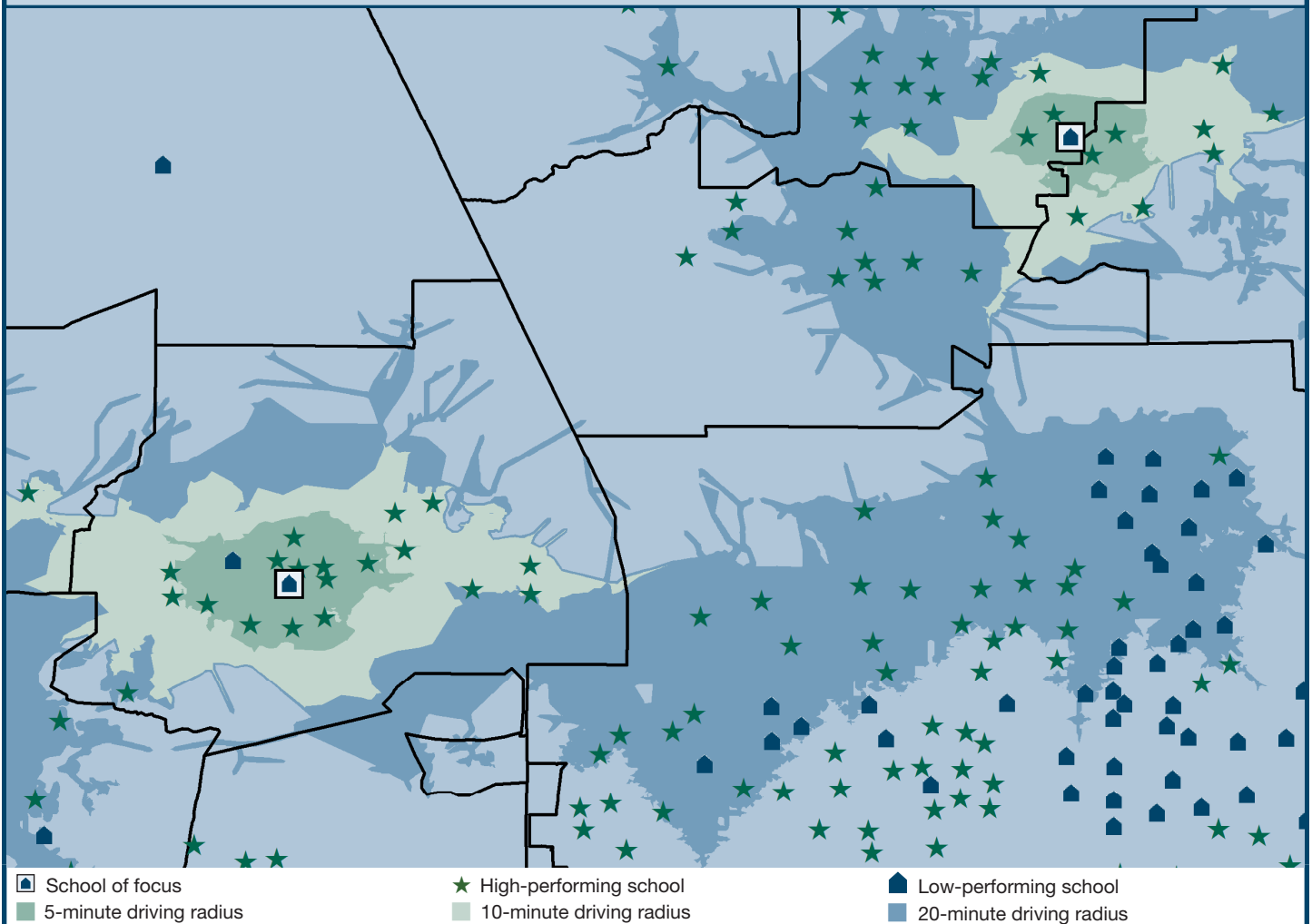
The map below shows increasing drive times—five minutes, 10 minutes, 20 minutes—for two low-performing elementary schools in two districts outside of Los Angeles. At a 10-minute drive time, these two schools have access to a lot of additional higher-performing schools and little competition from other lower-performing schools. As the driving distance increases, these two schools continue to see an increase in the number of higher-performing schools available, but they also see more competition from nearby lower-performing schools.

Below we show the impact of a range of driving times on the percentage of students in California schools serving grade

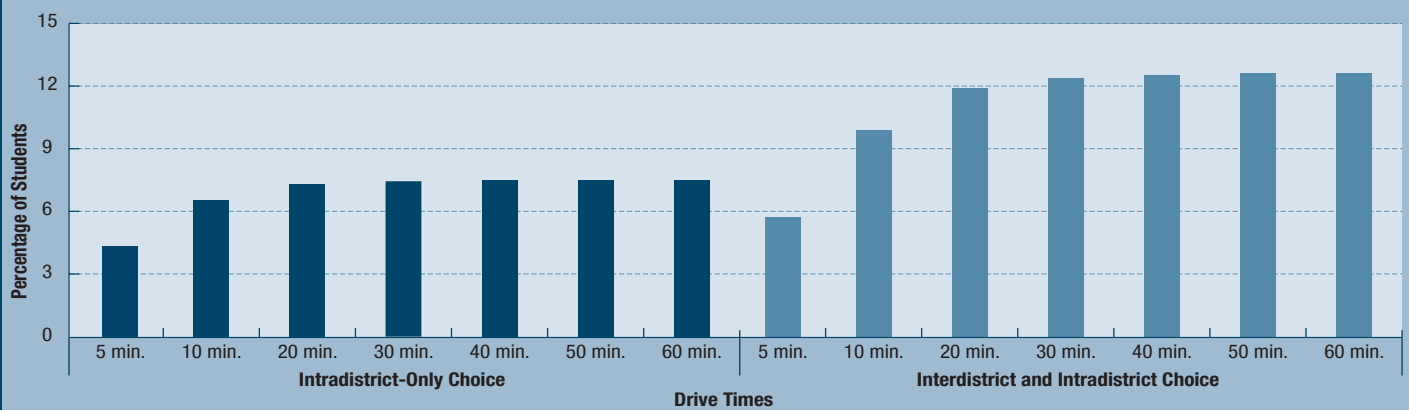
three who could potentially transfer to a higher-performing school. (See figure on Page 18.)

The relationship between driving time and available choice is non-linear, partly because our assumptions about school capacity and available higher-performing schools limit the seats available to students, but also because of increased competition for those limited seats. Increasing the driving time from five minutes to 10 minutes and from 10 minutes to 20 minutes produces visible increases in the percent of students who could potentially transfer schools.

Choice appears to be most limited if students are only willing to travel within their community—this is likely because lower-performing schools tend to be located near other lower-performing schools, with few higher-performing options nearby. Once students are willing to travel outside of their neighborhood, they see an increase in the seats available to them at higher-performing schools. But these increases level off after a 20-minute drive, as students from other low-performing schools begin to compete for those same spots.



Students With Choice Among Low-Performing California Schools, by Drive Time (Grade 3)



Source: Author analysis of available choice within varying driving distances of low-performing schools. Drive time calculated using geographic information systems software.

achieving students and students in economically and racially isolated schools can help to improve integration in schools. Under VEEP, schools are grouped such that student movement from “sending” schools, which have higher concentrations of minority students, to “receiving” schools, which tend to be higher income with high percentages of white students, encourages integration. Students also are provided with transportation to the new school.

The Public Policy Institute of California conducted a wide-ranging analysis of the multiple choice options available to students in San Diego, including the VEEP program and a statewide open-enrollment program.²⁸ The open-enrollment program allows students to transfer to a school in another school district or to another school within their school district, subject to space availability. But unlike VEEP, there are no controls over which schools students move from or into, and students under the open-enrollment program must provide their own transportation.

Overall, researchers found that school choice, including VEEP and the statewide program, improved integration in schools, with minority students moving to primarily white schools. But this effect was most pronounced under VEEP and least pronounced under the state’s open-enrollment program, with researchers concluding that “VEEP does the most to integrate and the open-enrollment choice program does the least.”

The researchers also examined whether the choice programs integrated students by achievement levels. They found that most VEEP applicants had below-average student achievement and used choice to attend

schools with a higher percentage of above-average students—thereby increasing the exposure of low-performing students to high-performing students. But in the statewide open-enrollment program the demand was highest among students already performing above average, with those students choosing to attend schools with a higher percentage of above-average students. The state’s program, therefore, had a segregating effect, strongly reducing the exposure of low-scoring students to high-scoring students. In fact, the statewide program’s segregating effect was strong enough that researchers determined the overall impact of all choice policies was negative—choice decreased below-average students’ exposure to above-average students. This is despite the integrating effect of the VEEP program, which provided precisely the type of student mixing that open-enrollment proponents argue will be most successful.

Tracking Student Achievement

Even a well-designed choice policy, however, will not necessarily result in improved student achievement. While the VEEP program increased integration by race and by achievement levels, researchers found no significant effect from the VEEP program on reading and math achievement.

Researchers also have yet to see improvements in student achievement from NCLB’s choice provision, which has been unsuccessful in getting large numbers of students to transfer schools. A U.S. Department of Education study found that those students who transferred moved from schools with below-average achievement to schools with

above-average achievement. Yet, despite this difference in achievement, the study found no evidence of improved student achievement among students transferring schools.²⁹

Similarly, some question the educational benefits of the socioeconomic integration policies implemented in approximately 40 school districts across the country. Advocates often point to Wake County, N.C., as an example of a successful program. The goal of Wake County's choice plan is for no school to have more than 40 percent of its students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (a measure of poverty) and no more than 25 percent of its student body reading below grade level. Richard Kahlenberg, senior fellow with the Century Foundation and a leading proponent of socioeconomic integration, emphasized in a recent review of 12 districts implementing socioeconomic integration, that low-income students in Wake County performed better than low-income students in other North Carolina districts not implementing such policies and that Wake County's pass rates on the High School End of Course exam are higher than many similar districts.³⁰

But skeptics of Wake County's success point out that the county's test scores for minority students have not risen any faster than test scores of minority students across North Carolina.³¹ And test scores for economically disadvantaged students in the most recent year, 2006–07, show Wake County students on par with economically disadvantaged students in the rest of North Carolina.³²

Mixed results from integration programs are not uncommon, despite a substantial body of evidence on the benefits of low-income students attending a middle class school. James Coleman's 1966 report, "Equality of Educational Opportunity," found that "a pupil's achievement is strongly related to the educational backgrounds and aspirations of the other students in the school."³³ Subsequent research, including a re-analysis of Coleman's data and new research that controls for prior achievement and other student characteristics, supports the claim that the socioeconomic status of a student's classmates can have a significant impact on individual student achievement, particularly when long-term achievement results are studied.³⁴

Indeed, research on some long-standing desegregation programs have found evidence of a significant, positive impact on long-term outcomes. For example, research on

Hartford's Project Concern (now Project Choice) and St. Louis' Voluntary Interdistrict Choice program, which move students from inner-city schools into suburban schools, has shown that suburban transfer students, in comparison with their peers that remain in inner-city schools, are less likely to drop out of high school, are more likely to attend college, have better job prospects, and have some evidence of improved student achievement as measured by standardized tests.³⁵

But there is a limited amount of research on the short-term impacts of moving students to middle-income or higher-performing schools, and the results from research that does exist is mixed. This lack of research is problematic given the current focus on closing achievement gaps between low-income and higher-income students, as measured by test scores over a relatively short timeframe. NCLB's first remedy for students in low-performing schools is to provide them with the option to transfer to another, higher-performing school—implicit in this is the assumption that attending a higher-performing school will raise transferring students' achievement. But there is little evidence to indicate that transferring into a higher-performing school alone will substantially raise student achievement.

Researchers examining Chicago's intradistrict choice program, for instance, found no benefit to students who won lotteries to attend high-achieving schools within their district. The study, published by The National Bureau of Economic Research, took advantage of the randomized lottery used in Chicago's high school assignment process and compared achievement levels of eighth-grade students who were awarded spots at high-achieving schools with eighth-grade students who won seats at average and low-achieving schools.³⁶ Students who won lotteries to attend high-achieving schools—schools with higher tests scores, lower poverty rates, and higher graduation rates—did no better than those students who attended average and low-achieving schools. Researchers concluded that "the most sought after schools in our sample do have higher outputs, but apparently due to better inputs, rather than extra value added." The students applying to the higher achieving schools—the inputs—were already higher achieving, and the school they ultimately attended did not have a significant impact on their achievement.

Similar results came out of a study by researchers at Vanderbilt University, who looked at growth in math achievement among Idaho students moving from schools

designated as low-performing under NCLB to schools designated as higher-performing.³⁷ This study found no benefit to student achievement for students moving from a low-performing school to a high-performing school. In light of the improved resources higher-performing, middle-class schools often provide—academically motivated classmates, more parental involvement, higher teacher quality—these results are disappointing.

Sustained Academic Support

Can interdistrict choice policies be better designed to improve student achievement? Evidence from an open-enrollment program that targets low-income students in Minneapolis suggests so. The program, “The Choice Is Yours,” is part of Minnesota’s statewide open-enrollment policy that permits students to attend schools across public school district borders. Minnesota passed one of the nation’s first interdistrict choice laws in 1988.

The Choice Is Yours program is a voluntary desegregation program that supplies Minneapolis students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch with transportation to suburban schools. The program, which started in 2001, grew out of the settlement for a 1995 lawsuit, where the Minneapolis branch of the NAACP sued the State of Minnesota, arguing that it did not provide Minneapolis students with the same educational opportunities as students in nearby suburbs.³⁸ While the legal settlement has expired, The Choice Is Yours program continues to operate in eight participating suburban districts.

The program has been effective in increasing transfers to suburban schools among African-American students in Minneapolis. Prior to the program, 56 percent of all open-enrollment applications out of Minneapolis were from white students, and 29 percent were from African-American students. After the program was implemented, the African-American share of applications jumped to 49 percent of all applications, and white students accounted for 34 percent.³⁹

But the program provides more than just transportation to suburban schools; it also provides additional academic and social support to students and their parents through a multitude of programs. The Minneapolis Parent Information Centers, in addition to reaching out to parents during the school choice process, provide students with homework help and tutoring. And the participating

suburban districts offer choice students new-student orientation, student support specialists, instructional materials, and additional tutoring and in-school academic support.

Researchers evaluating the program for the 2004–05 school year offered encouraging news, finding that suburban choice students—those who moved from Minneapolis to a suburban school—made significantly greater gains in reading and math than a matched sample of non-participating students.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, subsequent evaluations of the program haven’t found similar gains. An evaluation of the 2005–06 school year found that suburban choice students performed worse than a matched sample of non-participating students. And an evaluation of the 2006–07 school year landed right in the middle, finding no difference between suburban choice students and their matched peers.⁴¹

Why these mixed results? The primary factor is that only 50 percent of students in the suburban choice program remained in the program for a full year, and of those who did stay, only two-thirds remained until the next year. This high rate of attrition in the program essentially means that each year’s evaluation assessed a different group of students, who likely may differ substantially from previous or following years. And this attrition may be hurting student outcomes—the 2005–06 evaluation found that those students who *did* return outperformed new choice students.

The Choice Is Yours is rare in the amount of academic support it provides to transferring students. Open-enrollment programs often assume that students will benefit simply from being in a higher-performing school—that the improved teaching, higher-performing peers, and overall better learning environment will be sufficient to raise student achievement. But the research to date does not support this assumption. Programs like Minnesota’s The Choice Is Yours indicate that it takes intense and sustained academic supports in addition to choice to improve student achievement.

REACHING FULL POTENTIAL

Geography, school capacity, and the way district boundaries are drawn all have an impact on the potential of interdistrict choice. A large school district with a concentration of lower-performing schools in the center

would have a harder time moving students potentially long distances to higher-performing schools in other districts. On the other hand, a state with many smaller districts could offer students multiple options a stone's throw from their current school.

Yet, even in those districts where interdistrict choice has the most potential, policies must be carefully designed for that potential to be fully realized. The lesson from states like Massachusetts, Ohio, and Michigan, and cities like San Diego and Minneapolis, is clear: Choice comes at a cost. It requires money to ensure students have transportation and adequate information about schooling options, it requires proper targeting to ensure that disadvantaged students

have the first opportunity to choose, and it requires states to mandate that all districts, particularly those surrounding low-income areas, participate in the choice program.

But even policies that do all of those things will face the reality that only 10 percent to 20 percent of students will actually have the opportunity to choose, and that choice may be most limited for low-income and minority students. A truly successful choice program will combine targeting choice to the most disadvantaged students with a commitment from districts and states to provide the resources that students—both those who choose another school and those who remain in their home school—need to be successful.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Building New Schools:

In some communities, interdistrict choice can provide a large percentage of students with the option to transfer to a new school. The community of East Palo Alto, Calif., for instance, neighbors Palo Alto—one of the wealthiest, highest-performing school districts in California—and 35 percent of students in low-performing East Palo Alto elementary schools could find a seat in a nearby, higher-performing school.

But in the large, sprawling urban district of Los Angeles, only 9 percent of students would have the option to transfer schools even if they could cross district boundaries and if higher-performing schools offered 10 percent of their seats to transferring students. In school districts like Los Angeles, investing in improving existing schools and building new, better schools is likely the best strategy for providing students with better school choices.

Some large, urban districts are pursuing that option. In 2004, Chicago's mayor launched the Renaissance 2010 initiative, which promises to create 100 new schools in Chicago by the year 2010. Under the initiative, Chicago Public Schools is building new, more autonomous district public schools; turning around existing low-performing schools; and replicating existing, successful charter schools—autonomous public schools operated by private, nonprofit providers. The goal with initiatives like Renaissance 2010 is to invest in developing high-quality, neighborhood schools, as opposed to transporting students to higher-performing schools in other communities.

Avoiding “Cheap Choice”:

In order to achieve the intended goals of interdistrict choice policy—increased economic and racial integration and improved student achievement—there are key features that need to be a part of the policy design, including a way to inform parents of their choices, transportation to higher-performing schools, incentives to higher-performing schools to participate, academic supports for students who transfer schools, and targeting participation to those students who can benefit most from attending a higher-performing school. As research shows, without these features, interdistrict choice policies can exacerbate existing disparities.

Transportation: Transportation can be the great equalizer—or un-equalizer—in an interdistrict choice program. Programs that see the greatest problems with increased social stratification and increased segregation, such as San Diego's statewide open-enrollment policy, generally do not provide transportation to transferring students, thereby leaving those with the time and money to cross district lines with the most options.

Limiting transportation to targeted groups of students can both keep costs manageable and also encourage choice among low-income and low-performing students. States can also cluster schools by student performance, pairing low-performing with high-performing schools, similar to San Diego's VEEP program. Clustering schools limits the distance students have to travel and also ensures that students choose higher-performing schools.

But even if transportation is targeted, it is expensive. The state of Massachusetts, for example, provides an average transportation allotment of \$1,828 per pupil for the METCO program, in which students often spend an hour or more riding a bus from Boston to 32 participating suburban school districts.⁴² Under Minnesota's The Choice Is Yours program, in which students are transported to one of eight suburban communities, the state reimburses a median amount of \$2,700 per student for transportation costs.⁴³ And Connecticut sets a maximum reimbursement of \$3,250 per student for transportation expenses associated with its Open Choice interdistrict choice program.⁴⁴

Equal Access to Choice: Another common problem among interdistrict choice programs is unequal access to information about school options. Many parents hear about and make decisions on school choice based on their social networks, which works well if they have a well-informed network. But parents without those networks, or parents who do not speak English, for instance, are left without the information they need to make the best choice. As a result, those with the most resources have the most opportunity to choose schools, replicating the very problem interdistrict choice programs are trying to resolve.

There are multiple ways states can give parents information about their options. They can utilize media outlets, such as radio and television or newspaper inserts; distribute materials at schools or sponsor school fairs to allow parents to meet with representatives from area districts and schools. Minnesota, for example, informs parents about school choice through media campaigns, community outreach events, and partnerships with

community organizations. And Minneapolis' Parent Information Centers provide parents with information on their choice options. States should also ensure that all materials are available in the different languages represented in the community.

Centralizing the application process to allow parents to apply in one place for all school options, including within-district schools, schools in other districts, and any available charter or magnet schools, can also ensure a more equal playing field for parents. Some communities, most notably Cambridge, Mass., have extended the centralized application process into mandated choice. Under these plans, all parents must choose a school for their child—either the neighborhood school or any one of the other schooling options available. Parents rank their selections, and a centralized lottery system assigns students to area schools, ensuring that no one school has too great a concentration of low-income students. This “controlled choice” system also avoids the difficulties of moving students out of higher-performing schools in an effort to make room for transferring students. If everyone must choose, then all students have equal access to space in the most popular schools.

Funding/Incentives: It is critical that schools not be penalized for enrolling out-of-district students, particularly if those students need remediation or special services that add to a school's expenses. Interdistrict choice policies should compensate schools according to the cost of educating each student. Students who need special services should bring with them the additional resources for those services, removing the disincentive many schools face in enrolling high-needs students.

High-performing districts can also be encouraged to admit students by receiving incentive funds for admitting a certain percentage of low-performing students. This additional funding could be targeted toward providing additional services to these students, and it would also encourage districts to open their boundaries and make space available to low-performing students. The state of Massachusetts provides an instructional allotment of \$4,000 per pupil to suburban districts participating in the METCO program.⁴⁵ Similarly, Missouri provides a per-pupil tuition payment capped at \$7,000 to suburban districts participating in the voluntary interdistrict choice program that transports St. Louis students to surrounding suburban schools.⁴⁶ Connecticut provides a \$2,500 per-pupil grant as an incentive for suburban schools to enroll out-of-district students. It also provides a \$1,000

per student bonus grant to districts that enroll 10 or more transferring students.⁴⁷ But these payments may still not cover the actual costs of educating transferring students.

States should also be prepared to cover any funding differences between districts for transferring students. Often, students transfer into a district with a higher per-pupil spending amount. And asking either the sending or receiving district to lose money for a transferring student only encourages those districts to stop participating or otherwise discourage interdistrict transfers. While compensating districts at the higher spending level increases the cost of the program, it ensures that all students have equal access to choice.

Targeting Participation: Even if all higher-performing schools opened 10 percent of their seats to students in low-performing schools, at most 20 percent of these students would be able to transfer schools. Without mechanisms to target open-enrollment policies, research indicates that the highest-income, best-performing students will move into this limited number of seats. And as our research shows, these students will likely be in the best geographic location to benefit from choice. States should target interdistrict choice to ensure those students considered most in need of better options have the first choice to transfer to higher-performing schools. States can do this by limiting participation only to the lowest-performing or lowest-income students, or by giving preference to those students and allowing other students to transfer through an open lottery.

Supporting Students: The disappointing student achievement results from existing open-enrollment programs indicate that it will take more than just moving students into new schools to improve academic performance. States that are looking to use open enrollment to improve student achievement should include sustained academic supports, like those used in Minnesota's The Choice Is Yours program. Officials should not only provide students with the supports they need, but they should also work to equip higher-performing schools with the knowledge and resources to help all lower-performing students boost their academic achievement.

Our research has primarily focused on the approximately 10 percent to 20 percent of students who could potentially benefit from open-enrollment programs, but the majority of students—80 percent to 90 percent—will remain in the same low-performing schools. Public school choice does these students no good unless states and districts work to improve overall student achievement.

APPENDIX: Methods

Identifying Lower-Performing and Higher-Performing Schools

We used state test scores to rank schools and determine which schools were “lower-performing” and which were “higher-performing” for our analysis. Standard and Poor’s School Evaluation Services collects and makes available data files for each state that include measures for reading proficiency, math proficiency, and a combined measure they term “RAMP” (Reading and Math Proficiency) for all schools in the state. The RAMP measure is the average of proficiency rates in reading and math assessments, weighted by the number of test takers. Standard and Pooors has found high correlations among reading, math and RAMP scores across states.

Before ranking schools, we categorized them according to grade levels to ensure we compared schools serving similar grades. Because grade configurations vary widely both within and between states, we categorized schools as serving grade 3, grade 7, and/or grade 10. All schools serving grade 3 were compared with each other, all schools serving grade 7 were compared, and all schools serving grade 10 were compared. Some schools were included in multiple comparisons because they served two of the three grade levels. By choosing those grades, we were able to reliably group schools into elementary, middle, and high school categories.

After grouping schools according to the grades served, we created a distribution of all schools serving each grade within a state. We then ranked schools as 1 through 5, with schools labeled “1” scoring in the bottom 20 percent of all schools serving the same grade in the state, and schools labeled “5” scored in the top 20 percent. In the analysis, all schools ranking 1 or 2 are considered “lower-performing” and all schools ranking 3, 4, or 5 are considered “higher-performing.”

To ensure the RAMP measure accurately described school performance in both reading and math, we conducted our own analysis of a sample of schools in California. We found that rankings using the RAMP measure correlated highly (78–96 percent) with rankings using just math proficiency or the state Academic Performance Index (API) score. In addition, less than 1 percent of schools had rankings that differed by two or more levels between the math proficiency score and the RAMP score, and 80 percent of schools would see no change.

Mapping Schools and Calculating Drive Times

We used latitude and longitude data available through the National Center for Education Statistics to map all schools in a state, and we labeled schools with their ranking level. We then used geographic information system (GIS) software to calculate drive-time distances between all lower-performing and higher-performing schools within each grade level for each state.⁴⁸

Because charter schools have different limitations on attendance boundaries than traditional public schools, we excluded them from the drive-time analysis. This also allowed us to focus on choice possibilities within the traditional public school sector.

Drive times given are approximate. The drive-time analysis can accommodate street patterns, traffic regulations, and speed

limits, but it does not take into account traffic or other factors that may change the drive time between two schools.

Calculating the Space Available to Each School

Using our list of all schools in each state, we determined for each school the number of higher-performing school options available. We limited “available” higher-performing schools to those that were at least two rankings above the lower-performing schools—schools ranked 2 only had schools ranked as 4 or 5 as available options. This allowed us to only look at choice between schools with substantially different test-score performance.

We then used the following steps to calculate the “space” available to each lower-performing school:

First, we assumed each higher-performing school could increase enrollment by 10 percent to accept transfer students, and then we calculated the number of “seats” yielded by increasing enrollment in the school by that percentage. For instance, if a higher-performing school had an enrollment of 100 students, and we assumed it could increase enrollment by 10 percent, that would yield 10 available seats.

Second, we counted the total number of lower-performing schools within a specified driving radius of the higher-performing school, and we divided the total “available seats” from step one by that number to calculate a “seats per school” number for each higher-performing school. If the school mentioned above has five lower-performing schools within a 20-minute drive, then there are two seats available per lower-performing school.

Third, we calculated the total number of seats available to each low-performing school by summing the “available per-school seats” of all higher-performing schools that were a potential transfer site. Thus, if a lower-performing school were within the driving radius of the above mentioned higher-performing school, it would get two seats from that school. But if it were also within the driving radius of three other higher-performing schools, each with two per-school seats available, the lower-performing school would have a total of eight available seats.

After calculating the space available to each lower-performing school, we determined the potential impact of those seats by calculating the percent of students in the lower-performing school that could potentially use those seats. We did this by dividing the total available seats by the total enrollment in the lower-performing school.

Summarizing Results by Locale, Race, and Income

To summarize the percent of students able to transfer schools, we calculated a weighted average to account for the variation in school size. For results summarized by locale, we grouped schools based on their census area designation and totaled all seats available to the lower-performing schools in each census area—city, suburban, town, and rural—and divided those totals by the total enrollment in all schools in each census area.

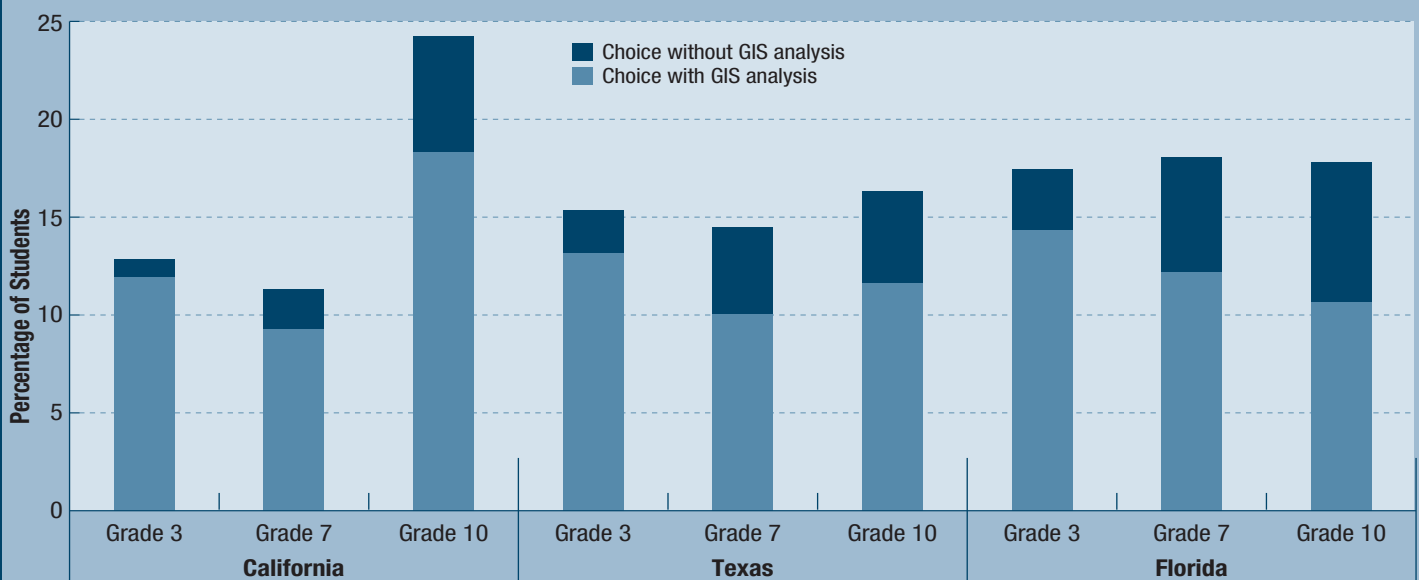
To determine the percentage of students in each racial category and the percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch who could potentially transfer, we

APPENDIX: Methods (continued)

calculated the number of seats available to students in each category within each school. We did this by multiplying the overall percentage of students in each school who could potentially transfer to a higher-performing school by the total enrollment within each category. This yielded a total number of seats per race or income category for each school. We then totaled all of the seats available to students in each category and divided that number by the total enrollment in schools in each category.

Where we present data on only intradistrict school choice, we are only calculating the total seats available in higher-performing schools *within* the same school district and only taking into account potential “competition” from other lower-performing schools within that same district. When we present data on combined interdistrict and intradistrict choice, this incorporates all potentially available seats, both within and outside the district, and also includes all schools that could compete for those seats, without regard to district boundaries.

The Impact of Our Assumptions: Students With Choice Among Low-Performing California Schools, by Drive Time (Grade 3)



Source: Author analysis of available choice within varying driving distances of low-performing schools. Drive time calculated using geographic information systems software.

Endnotes

- ¹ See, for example, Richard Kahlenberg, “Helping Children Move From Bad Schools to Good Ones,” *Security & Opportunity Agenda* (Washington, DC: The Century Foundation, June 15, 2006), and Cynthia Brown, *Choosing Better Schools: A Report on Student Transfers Under the No Child Left Behind Act*, (Washington, DC: Citizens’ Commission on Civil Rights, May 2004).
- ² *State Education Reforms, Table 4.1 Number and Types of Open-Enrollment Policies, by State: 2005* (Washington, DC: 2005, National Center for Education Statistics, 2005).
- ³ Goodwin Liu and William Taylor, “School Choice to Achieve Desegregation,” *Fordham Law Review* 74, no. 2 (2005).
- ⁴ Richard Kahlenberg, “Helping Children Move From Bad Schools to Good Ones.
- ⁵ See Richard Kahlenberg, *All Together Now* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2001): 48 – 58.
- ⁶ Michael Brandmeyer et al., *The METCO Program* (Roxbury, MA: Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity, January 19, 2007), available at http://www.metcoinc.org/METCO_Policy_Initiatives_Updated_1-19-07.pdf.; Amy Stuart Wells, “Re-examining Social Science Research on School Desegregation: Long- Versus Short-Term Effects,” *Teachers College Record* 96, no. 4, (1995); “Study Finds Desegregation Is an Effective Social Tool,” *New York Times*, September 17, 1985; Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation, “Historical Background,” available at <http://www.choicecorp.org/HistBack.htm>.
- ⁷ Goodwin Liu and William Taylor, “School Choice to Achieve Desegregation.”
- ⁸ “NAACP Organizes in Response to Supreme Court Decisions That Strike Down Public School Diversity Plans,” National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Press Release, June 28, 2007, available at: <http://www.naacp.org/news/press/2007-06-28-2/index.htm>.
- ⁹ Jonathan Kozol, “Transferring Up,” *New York Times*, July 11, 2007.
- ¹⁰ See also Goodwin Liu, “Real Options for School Choice,” *New York Times*, December 4, 2002 and Richard Kahlenberg, “Helping Children Move From Bad Schools to Good Ones.”
- ¹¹ Zimmer, R., Gill, B., Razquin, P., Booker, K., and Lockwood, J.R., “State and Local Implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act: Volume 1 – Title I School Choice, Supplemental Education Services, and Student Achievement” (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, June 2007).
- ¹² Table 83, *Digest of Education Statistics 2007* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, August 2007), available at: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d07/tables/dt07_083.asp?referrer=list.
- ¹³ Driving-time estimates incorporate road rules, such as one-way streets, barriers, and speed limits. The driving-time estimates, do not, however, include adjustments for traffic congestion and therefore tend to underestimate travel time between schools. Because traffic is likely to extend the actual driving time to schools and our drive-time calculations do not account for indirect bus routes, we used a maximum 20-minute driving time to encompass the majority of school options within a realistic traveling distance.
- ¹⁴ Our analysis supports this overall claim. In all three states, we looked at the percentage of students who have at least one higher-performing school available within a 20-minute drive, and, conversely, the percentage of students who have no choices available. We found that in suburban and city schools, the vast majority of students in schools serving grade three—over 90 percent in California, Texas, and Florida—have at least one higher-performing school within a 20-minute drive. Among schools serving grade seven and grade 10, this percentage was still high, ranging between 77 percent and 92 percent in all three states.
- ¹⁵ See, “The Impact of Our Assumptions,” on Page 4 of this report for a full discussion.
- ¹⁶ In the analysis here we focus on Texas schools serving grade three. We found similar differences by locale for Texas schools serving grades seven and 10.
- ¹⁷ We repeated the analysis by race and income for grades seven and 10 in Texas and found similar patterns. We found a similar, though less pronounced, pattern among California schools serving grades three and seven, and found a very pronounced pattern favoring non-free/reduced lunch students and white students among California schools serving grade 10. Florida schools showed a different pattern, in which students not qualifying for free/reduced lunch and white students overall had less choice than minority students across all three grades. We found, though, that this was primarily due to the fact that minority and low-income students were heavily concentrated in schools ranking 1—the schools with the most transfer options under our assumptions. If we allowed students in schools ranking 1 or 2 to transfer to all higher performing schools, regardless of the difference in ranking, we see a similar pattern by race and income among Florida schools as exists in Texas and California.
- ¹⁸ Rural and town-based low-performing schools in Texas have a much higher percentage of white students—an average of 34 percent in rural and town-based schools compared with an average of 8 percent in city and suburban schools. Because rural and town-based schools have less choice due to their remote locations, including these schools in the analysis distorted the results for white students.
- ¹⁹ Richard Fry, *The Changing Racial and Ethnic Composition of U.S. Public Schools* (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, August 30, 2007).
- ²⁰ Frances Fowler, “Meaningful Competition? A Study of Student Movement Under Interdistrict Open Enrollment in Ohio,” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 1996).
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- ²³ METCO history available at www.metcoinc.org.
- ²⁴ See Michael Brandmeyer et al., *The METCO Program*, available at http://www.metcoinc.org/METCO_Policy_Initiatives_Updated_1-19-07.pdf.

- ²⁵ *An Overview of Open Enrollment* (Columbus, Ohio: Legislative Office of Education Oversight, December 1998).
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- ²⁹ Zimmer, R. et al., "State and Local Implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act: Volume 1—Title I School Choice, Supplemental Education Services, and Student Achievement." These results should be interpreted with caution—due to low sample sizes, it would be difficult to detect a significant effect. The results, however, showed no clear pattern of positive or negative effects.
- ³⁰ Richard Kahlenberg, *Rescuing Brown v. Board of Education: Profiles of Twelve School Districts Pursuing Socioeconomic School Integration* (Washington, DC: The Century Foundation, June 2007): 13. Kahlenberg is an Education Sector nonresident senior fellow.
- ³¹ Liam Julian, "There They Go Again," *National Review Online*, July 24, 2007.
- ³² Wake County School District performance data available at <http://www.ncreportcards.org/>. In 2006–07, 48.1 percent of economically disadvantaged students in Wake County passed both the math and reading state assessments, compared with 48.5 percent statewide.
- ³³ James Coleman, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Washington, DC: Office of Education, 1966).
- ³⁴ Richard Kahlenberg, *All Together Now*.
- ³⁵ Crain, R., Miller, R., Hawes, J., and Peichert, J., *Finding Niches: Desegregated Students Sixteen Years Later* (New York: Institute for Urban and Minority Education Teachers College, Columbia University, June 1992); Erica Frankenberg, *Improving and Expanding Hartford's Project Choice Program*, Project Choice Campaign (Washington, DC: Poverty & Race Research Action Council, September 2007); William H. Freivogel, "St. Louis: Desegregation and School Choice in the Land of Dred Scott" in *Divided We Fail: Coming Together Through Public School Choice* (Washington, DC: The Century Foundation, 2002).
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- ³⁹ ASPEN Associates, *Minnesota Voluntary Public School Choice 2004-2005 Evaluation Report* (Roseville, MN: Minnesota Department of Education, March 27, 2006).
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- ⁴³ Data from Fiscal Year 2006–07 provided by the Minnesota Department of Education, Program Finance.
- ⁴⁴ Erica Frankenberg, *Improving and Expanding Hartford's Project Choice Program*, Project Choice Campaign (Washington, DC: Poverty & Race Research Action Council, September 2007).
- ⁴⁵ Massachusetts Department of Education, Grants and Other Financial Assistance Programs, FY 2009, METCO.
- ⁴⁶ *The St. Louis Student Transfer Program: Historical Background* (St. Louis, MO: Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation, October 2007).
- ⁴⁷ 2007 Office of Fiscal Analysis Budget Book, Connecticut State Budget 2007-2009, Department of Education.
- ⁴⁸ We used ESRI's ArcGIS 9.2 ArcView with Network Analyst.

