

DRAFT CONCEPT PAPER
Public School Choice:
Improving Student Achievement by Pursuing Economic Diversity

“The classroom is where poor and middle-class kids should meet -- to the benefit of both.”

– Richard Kahlenberg

By the year 2020, Dallas ISD seeks to launch 35 new choice schools that reflect community demand. Future choice schools will offer a variety of instructional approaches and content/themes, such as Montessori schools, International Baccalaureate (IB) schools, visual and performing arts schools, and STEM schools. Several of these new choice schools will be called **Transformation Schools**, which will be new, start-up campuses that open in previously vacant school buildings, new school buildings, or non-traditional spaces. Unlike existing magnet schools, none will have academic entry requirements. Launching new campuses from scratch will require substantial work in many areas, from staffing to professional development to budgeting to facilities. And it also presents an opportunity to be creative and innovative with the design of these elements, all in an effort to boost student achievement to new heights. When thinking about new Transformation School campuses, one element that begs for creativity and innovation is student enrollment, which will be the focus of this memo.

The Importance of Student Enrollment Practices

Student enrollment practices, while often overlooked, can have a huge impact on student achievement because they can shape the socio-economic makeup of the student body. In 1966, the influential Coleman Report found that the largest predictor of academic achievement is the socio-economic status (SES) of the student’s family and that the second largest predictor is the **socio-economic makeup of the student body** in the school itself.¹ Close to a half-century of research supports this claim, some of which goes even further to argue that the socio-economic makeup of the school matters more to student achievement than does the SES of the family.²

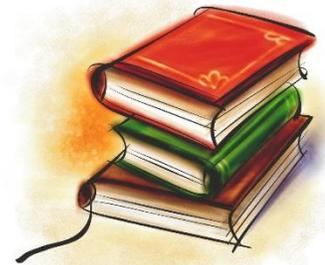
Currently in Dallas ISD, the vast majority of students are assigned to a neighborhood school based on the attendance zone of their street address. Dallas also consistently has some of the highest levels of residential segregation by income in the entire country, which, by extension, often means school segregation by income.³ Coupled with decades of middle-class flight from the district, this means that the lion’s share of Dallas ISD schools have high levels of concentrated poverty in their student bodies. In fact, approximately 85% of Dallas ISD schools have student bodies that are 80% low-income or more. Unfortunately, there is a great body of research demonstrating that concentrating poverty in a school building creates serious challenges in terms of student achievement.⁴ Undoubtedly, a student living in poverty brings challenges into the classroom, but when a school building is comprised of a majority of low-income students, the challenges compound. In fact, research shows that the likelihood of a school’s overall success is considerably reduced when the student body exceeds 50% low-income.⁵

This is not to say that high-poverty schools cannot be successful with great administrators and great teachers. There are many shining examples of high-poverty schools across the nation, including several Dallas ISD schools.⁶ And it goes without saying that Dallas ISD has many initiatives in place which will continue to prove that high-poverty schools can achieve at high levels, such as Imagine 2020 and the Accelerating Campus Excellence (ACE) initiative. But there is also no doubt that high-poverty environments present more serious obstacles to student achievement. Therefore, as it continues to tackle the challenges associated with high-poverty schools, the district should also be exploring ways to breakup concentrations of poverty in the first place and reduce their overall prevalence.

Research Supporting Economically Diverse Student Bodies

Substantial bodies of research show that economically diverse schools are more ideal education settings. Consider the following benefits for all students who learn in economically diverse settings:

- The performance of low-income students rises dramatically in economically mixed schools. Low-income students who attend economically diverse schools perform better than low-income students who attend high-poverty schools.⁷ For example, when examining 4th grade math results from the 2007 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), low-income students in schools that had between 35-50% of its students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch scored 13 points higher than low-income students in schools that had 76-99% of its students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. This amounted to a difference of *one full year of learning growth*.⁸ This trend generally holds true on other NAEP assessments, as well.⁹ There are three main reasons for this:
 - First, in economically diverse schools, low-income students are more likely to be surrounded by academically engaged peers, and research shows that the power of peer effect is huge. For example, research shows that it is advantageous to be around students with larger vocabularies because it is shared informally amongst classmates throughout the day. Unfortunately, economically disadvantaged (ED) students arrive at school with less than half of the vocabulary of more affluent peers, which means that ED students are less likely to enlarge their vocabulary in a high-poverty school.¹⁰ This phenomenon is often referred to as the “hidden curriculum.”
 - Second, research shows that economically diverse schools tend to attract more effective, experienced teachers than high-poverty schools.¹¹
 - Third, research shows that economically diverse schools are more likely to have greater levels of community involvement (i.e., tutoring, PTA involvement, fundraising, etc.).¹²
- Low-income students in economically mixed schools **can outperform or perform on par with** middle-class students who attend high-poverty schools, which is in line with the research that the economic composition of the student body is of paramount importance.¹³ For example, when examining 4th grade math results on the 2007 NAEP, low-income students in schools that had between 35-50% of its students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch scored 2 points higher than middle-class students in high-poverty schools (76-99% free or reduced-price lunch).¹⁴ This gap-closing trend generally holds true on other NAEP assessments, as well.¹⁵
- Some research suggests that attending an economically diverse school reduces the likelihood of adult poverty by two-thirds, even after controlling for individual aptitude and family SES.¹⁶
- When it comes to middle-class student achievement in economically mixed schools, the research is also promising. According to Richard Kahlenberg, a large number of studies “consistently find that integration is not a zero-sum game: low-income students can benefit from economically integrated schools, and middle-class achievement does not decline so long as a strong core of middle-class children is present.”¹⁷ The research has coalesced around the idea that there is, in fact, a “tipping point” of low-income students above which middle-class student performance does begin to significantly decline. Although the exact “tipping point” is contested and the research is still developing, many researchers posit that 50% low-income is the maximum.¹⁸
 - Research suggests that there are two reasons that middle-class students are not hurt by economic integration, so long as the “tipping point” is not surpassed. First, studies consistently find that



middle-class children are less impacted by school influences than low-income children, which is likely attributable to stronger family backgrounds and spending more time under adult supervision. Second, as Richard Kahlenberg states, “the numerical majority sets the tone in a school: the negative effects of concentrated poverty tend to kick in only where a clear majority of students are low-income.”¹⁹

Given all of these benefits, it is not surprising that economic diversity initiatives are growing at the local level. To date, 80 school districts are, in some fashion, using SES as a factor in student assignment and the results thus far are promising.²⁰ Other places have taken a different approach. For example, Montgomery County, MD, created more economically diverse student bodies through an inclusionary housing program that placed low-income families in public housing units located in more affluent neighborhoods, which essentially diversified their traditional school attendance zones. But no matter the lever which creates the SES diversity in schools, the positive student results remain the same.²¹ The takeaway is that economic diversity matters a great deal and more districts are taking note.

The Need for Economic Diversity in Dallas ISD

As mentioned earlier, schools in Dallas ISD are heavily segregated by SES. The number of economically diverse campuses – that is, campuses with student bodies between 40-60% low-income – are few and far between. In fact, there are only four (4) campuses which could be considered to have economically diverse student bodies, two of which are magnet schools with academic entry requirements. At the other two schools, DeGolyer Elementary and Withers Elementary, the results for ED students are promising, which is in line with the national research.²² However, this is admittedly a small sample size and can fluctuate from year to year. The reality is that, for all intents and purposes, economic diversity is virtually non-existent in Dallas ISD.²³ That said, our Public School Choice initiative presents a tremendous opportunity to attract middle-class families back to Dallas ISD, which means that we could actually begin to implement legitimate economic diversity pilots in some of our new choice schools. We would be remiss if we did not pursue these pilots, which, at the end of the day, could help unlock many answers and help us identify scalable best practices going forward.

Economic Diversity Pilots: Aiming for a 50/50 Mix

It is no secret that the vast majority of Dallas ISD students are low-income. It is, of course, critically important that we serve as many low-income students as possible with our new Transformation Schools – after all, a big part of the Public School Choice initiative is about bringing more options to families and students, particularly those families and students that have not had many options in the past. At the same time, though, the research supporting economic diversity is overwhelming and cannot be ignored. Our challenge with these economic diversity pilots is to balance the desire to serve as many low-income students as possible with the desire to implement the pilots with fidelity to the research. Therefore, the optimal enrollment strategy for our economic diversity pilots is to work towards a 50/50 enrollment mix. In these pilots, 50% of the student body would be classified as “Economically Disadvantaged” and 50% would not. This mix would allow us to serve as many low-income students as possible while at the same time creating an economically diverse environment in which all students will thrive.



Transformation School economic diversity pilots will be open enrollment for all students across the district, with a priority application window for students living within the immediate vicinity. This way, students from all types of neighborhoods can learn together in one school building. **To ensure a 50/50 mix, the application process will utilize a lottery with preferential weights based on a student’s SES.** It is also important to remember that Transformation Schools will be open to all students, regardless of academic ability, and that transportation will be provided within certain parameters.

Transformation Schools will be designated as economic diversity pilots when two conditions are met:

- The Transformation School would be surrounded by a diversity of neighborhoods by income. This would mitigate the need for extensive transportation to achieve economic diversity goals.
- The choice school model (i.e., Montessori, STEM) would be attractive to families of all economic backgrounds.

Controlling enrollment to ensure a 50/50 mix will also likely help Dallas ISD learn how to avoid what some other districts have experienced with their attractive choice programs – that is, an exceptionally disproportionate enrollment of affluent students, whose families are often more likely to be aware of specialized opportunities and are more likely to know how to navigate the enrollment processes.

Attracting Middle-Class Families

Some critics might argue that a 50/50 mix would actually hinder our goal of attracting more middle-class families to Dallas ISD. More affluent families, they might say, often intentionally send their child(ren) to very low-poverty private or public schools and thus would be deterred from a school with 50% poverty levels. However, it must be said that:

- The research does not substantiate a fear of declined academic performance by middle-class students in economically diverse settings, so long as there remains a strong core of middle-class students in the school;
- Middle-class families will have the opportunity to voluntarily opt-in to a “best-fit” choice school for their child – more specifically, a school that “taps into” their child’s particular interests, preferred learning styles, and aspirations, which, in and of itself, has the potential to dramatically improve learning;
- Middle-class families currently sending their child(ren) to a private school would save thousands of dollars per year by opting-in to the public school system;
- In addition to academics, there is a growing body of research demonstrating that there are also social and moral benefits for all students who learn in diverse environments (i.e., getting along with and respecting people from different backgrounds, which is essential for a 21st Century employee; working to find creative solutions by incorporating input and feedback from all walks of life, etc.)²⁴ In an increasingly diverse country, many parents today are specifically seeking public schools that teach their children how to cut across boundaries of socio-economic class.

“The Great Equalizer”

The idea of economically diverse public schools is fairly engrained in American history. Public schools were meant to be, in the words of Horace Mann, “the great equalizer”²⁵ – common places where “children of all classes, rich and poor, should partake as equally as possible.”²⁶ Fast forward to today and it is clear that the distance between this ideal and our current reality is quite far, and it appears that it will worsen in the future.²⁷ Here in Dallas ISD, it is time to begin piloting solutions. And the Public School Choice initiative is, in our view, the best place to start this work. Education advocates on both sides of the political aisle are increasingly supportive of creating economically diverse student bodies, especially through voluntary programs like Public School Choice. All students deserve to learn in an environment which prepares them for the diverse world that lies ahead of them.

For questions, please contact Mike Koprowski at mkoprowski@dallasisd.org.

Endnotes

¹ James Coleman et al., *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, Washington DC, US Government Printing Office, 1966.

² For summaries of studies conducted from 1960-2000, see Richard Kahlenberg, *All Together Now*, p. 25-42; Geoffrey Borman and Maritza Dowling, "Schools and Inequality: A Multilevel Analysis of Coleman's Equality of Educational Opportunity Data," *Teachers College Record* 112, No. 5, 2010; Richard Kahlenberg, "Turnaround Schools That Work," *The Century Foundation*, <https://tcf.org/assets/downloads/tcf-turnaround.pdf>

³ Richard Fry and Paul Taylor, "The Rise of Residential Segregation by Income," *PewResearch Social & Demographic Trends*, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/08/01/the-rise-of-residential-segregation-by-income/>

⁴ For summaries of research, see Richard Kahlenberg, *All Together Now*.

⁵ Manchester Board of Education, "Elementary School Choice and Improvement Plan," December 1996; Richard Kahlenberg, *All Together Now*, pp. 39-41, 110-112.

⁶ "Four District Schools Ranked in Top 24 Urban Schools in Country," *Dallas ISD HUB*, April 1, 2015, <https://thehub.dallasisd.org/2015/04/01/four-district-schools-ranked-in-top-24-urban-schools-in-country-2/>

⁷ Heather Schwartz, "Housing Policy is School Policy," *The Century Foundation*, 2010, <https://tcf.org/assets/downloads/tcf-Schwartz.pdf>

⁸ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessments of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2007 Math Assessment, Grade 4. On NAEP, 10 points is considered a year's worth of growth.

⁹ 2011 NAEP; 2000 NAEP

¹⁰ Richard Kahlenberg, "Turnaround Schools That Work," p. 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-5.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 3

¹³ Richard Kahlenberg, *All Together Now*, p. xiv.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessments of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2007 Math Assessment, Grade 4.

¹⁵ 2011 NAEP, 2000 NAEP

¹⁶ Claude S. Fischer et al., *Inequality by Design: Cracking the Bell Curve Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

¹⁷ Richard Kahlenberg, "From All Walks of Life," *American Educator*, Winter 2012-13, American Federation of Teachers, <http://www.aft.org/periodical/american-educator/winter-2012-2013/all-walks-life>.

¹⁸ Potter, Halley, "Boosting Achievement by Pursuing Diversity," *Faces of Poverty*, May 2013, Vol. 70 No. 8, pp. 38-43. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/may13/vol70/num08/Boosting-Achievement-by-Pursuing-Diversity.aspx>; Kahlenberg, *All Together Now*.

¹⁹ Richard Kahlenberg, "From All Walks of Life."

²⁰ Richard Kahlenberg, “Turnaround Schools That Work;” Richard Kahlenberg, “From All Walks of Life.”

²¹ Heather Schwartz, “Housing Policy is School Policy.” In her study of Montgomery County, MD, Schwartz found that low-income students academically benefited in schools up to 35% poverty. Some wrongly interpret these results to mean that 35% is the actual “tipping point” above which low-income students will stop benefiting academically. Schwartz herself explicitly states that this is not the case. The reality is that the overwhelming majority of the schools in her sample were 0-60% low-income. Less than 5% of schools in the district had poverty percentages in excess of 60% and only one school had a poverty percentage above 80%. Schwartz says: “Given the lack of truly high poverty schools in this sample, this study does not suggest that 35 percent school poverty is a tipping point, after which low-income students no longer benefit from socioeconomic integration. We cannot know from this study, for example, how students in 35 percent to 60 percent low-income schools perform compared with students in 60 percent to 100 percent low-income schools.” As Richard Kahlenberg writes about Schwartz’s study: “Because other research has found that the negative effects of concentrated poverty are compounded in very-high-poverty schools, it may well be that low-income students in, say, 30 percent to 50 percent low-income schools perform better than students in 60 percent to 100 percent low-income schools, but Montgomery County does not have enough truly high-poverty schools to test the hypothesis” (see Kahlenberg “From All Walks of Life.”).

²² We looked at STAAR scores for “Economically Disadvantaged” students districtwide and then compared them to the STAAR scores for “Economically Disadvantaged” students at DeGolyer and Withers.

²³ We examined the “Economically Disadvantaged” (ED) percentages at each campus in Dallas ISD for the 2013-14 school year. One (1) campus had between 0-20% ED students (Lakewood Elementary). Four (4) campuses had between 21-40% ED students, of which three (3) were magnets and one (1) was a neighborhood school (Stonewall Jackson Elementary). Four (4) campuses were between 41-60% ED students, of which two (2) were magnets and two (2) were neighborhood schools (DeGolyer and Withers Elementary). Twenty-one (21) campuses had between 61-80% ED students. One-hundred ninety-five (195) campuses had between 81-100% ED students.

²⁴ Talk given by Richard Kahlenberg, “Education Justice and the Integration of American Schools,” *Albert Shanker Institute*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldsr5_nnETQ.

²⁵ Horace Mann, as quoted in David Rohde et al., “The Decline of the ‘The Great Equalizer,’” *The Atlantic*, 9 December 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/12/the-decline-of-the-great-equalizer/266455/>

²⁶ Horace Mann, as quoted in Richard Kahlenberg, “Mixing Classes,” *Washington Monthly*, December 2000, <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2000/0012.kahlenberg.html>.

²⁷ David Rusk, “Trends in School Segregation,” *The Century Foundation Task Force on the Common School*, “*Divided We Fail: Coming Together through Public School Choice*,” New York, Century Foundation Press, 2002.